

KATARZYNA GELLES
Wrocław

TEEN VOTERS: THE AUSTRIAN EXPERIENCE

For a democratic country general elections are a process of a fundamental nature. They enable all eligible citizens to participate on equal terms in shaping their country's politics. Therefore, in the analysis of a selected party system it is not only the actors on the political stage (primarily the political parties) that are important but also the support they enjoy in society. After all, their electoral success and ability to exercise power are dependent on the electorate's decision. Of equal merit is the issue of voter turnout, which is defined as "the ratio of votes cast to registered voters".¹ Whether the turnout is high or low, it always provokes questions about the reasons for this state of affairs as in a democratic system it is always indicative of civic maturity.

In recent years in Europe there has been increasing talk of the crisis of democracy. One of its most noticeable syndromes is decreased voter turnout, which fell below 70% after 1990.² This phenomenon occurs on a broad scale and its reasons have been analysed by political scientists and sociologists. Among the most oft-cited causes is "politics fatigue", i.e. a lack of interest in political life displayed by citizens, for whom the differences between political groups and factions are becoming less and less clear. Voters are also losing faith in their effectiveness, often assuming that election results do not exert a visible impact on the surrounding reality. People resignedly say: "those at the top will do what they want to". Based on their previous experiences, election participants often feel disappointed with the candidates they have voted for, who, following victorious elections, do not deliver on campaign promises. As a result, public trust in a well-functioning democracy is dwindling, and people do not identify with any specific political group; nor do they feel represented by any party or politician. Voter absence also happens to be a form of protest and disapproval. To demonstrate the scale of this phenomenon, analysts estimate the size of the group who do not turn out to vote. Had they cast their votes for a non-existent "party of non-voters", it would appear that in many elections this party's result would put it among the strongest po-

¹ O. Pettersson, *Rola instytucji publicznych i organizacji pozarządowych w przekazywaniu obywatelom informacji o wyborach*, 19.06.2009, <http://www.isp.org.pl/files/4596192640876725001246613774.pdf> (accessed 22 December 2016).

² B. Michalak, *Frekwencja wyborcza*, in: B. Michalak, A. Sokala, P. Uziębło, *Leksykon prawa wyborczego i referendalnego oraz systemów wyborczych*, Warsaw 2013, pp. 58-60.

litical groups.³ It has also been noted that people who did not vote in several elections are rather unwilling to become involved again.

Weariness with politics is also ascribed to generational changes: compared to their parents and grandparents, young people are less likely to show up at the polls. This trend has led to the situation that older voters, who were raised in the sense of civic duty, decide on issues that are key to younger voters, who do not vote. Because of this, firstly, their interests will not be sufficiently represented or taken into consideration in essential decision-making; secondly, young people deprive themselves of the impact they could have on issues that concern them in the first place. Hence, as it seems now, the greatest future challenge and task that politicians and parties will be faced with is the effective mobilisation and involvement of the ever-increasing group of undecided voters as well as capitalising on the potential that teen voters have. So far, the first and only European country to have introduced appropriate regulations in all types of elections is Austria.

This paper presents and analyses the main arguments that were raised in the discussion that preceded the aforementioned changes in Austrian election law. It also examines the factors that finally led to voting age reform. Based on the Austrian experiences, this contribution also seeks to answer the question how earlier speculations as to teen voters' political preferences were revised by election results. Researchers have primarily focused on the preferences of the youngest voters in the 2008 parliamentary election. The subsequent elections did not arouse such interest: assessments and comments were made with regard to a more broadly defined group of voters – below 30 years of age.

For the purposes of this paper, it has been assumed that teenagers are people who have turned 16 years of age. It needs to be added that the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most relevant document addressing these points on a global scale, defines a “child” as any human being under the age of eighteen “unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”⁴. Due to the topicality of the subject matter, this paper is primarily based on statistical materials, research analyses, researchers' and politicians' statements, opinions and comments as well as articles in the press.

³ This situation occurred in the 2010 Austrian presidential election, when nearly half of the voters did not show up at the polls. According to estimates, the non-voters constituted a 44% share of the electorate and would rank as the strongest “political group”. *Wählerstromanalyse: FPÖ-Wähler blieben daheim*, http://diepresse.com/home/politik/hofburgwahl/560796/Waehlerstromanalyse_FPoeWaehler-blieben-daheim (accessed 23 December 2016). In 1998, in Germany, Werner Peters established the Party of Non-Voters (*Die Partei der Nichtwähler*), which was reactivated in May of 2011. The party aims to represent people who do not show up at the polls and, based on the reasons for voter absence, it seeks to make them politically involved (again); after: *Grundsätze*, <http://www.parteidernichtwaehler.de/grundsaeetze.php> (accessed 23 December 2016). F. Gasser, J. Riedl, *Wahl in Österreich. Keine Stimme für niemand!*, “Die Zeit” 28 September 2013.

⁴ *Convention on the Rights of the Child Adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (accessed 1 August 2018) [Polish translation: *Konwencja o prawach dziecka przyjęta przez Zgromadzenie Ogólne Narodów Zjednoczonych dnia 20 listopada 1989 r.*, Dz.U. 1991 nr 120 poz. 526]. *Article 1: For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier*. For more on the definitions of majority see K. Prokop, *Prawa wyborcze młodzieży*, “Studia Wyborcze” 9, 2010, pp. 99-115.

The relevance of these issues lies in the fact that the solutions adopted in Vienna coupled with the experiences of their implementation may prove helpful in other EU countries (and possibly some others), which have recently been debating whether or not to pursue similar reforms and lower the legal voting age to 16. In Europe, one of the pioneers of this reform is the Federal Republic of Germany, which introduced voting rights for 16-year-olds in the mid-1990s at the municipal level. The first such elections were held on 15 September 1996 in Lower Saxony.⁵ Elsewhere in Europe, teenagers were allowed to vote in the local elections in the Swiss canton of Glarus (from 2007).⁶ In Norway, they were granted voting rights in some of the municipal council elections in 2011 and 2015.⁷ A lowered voting age has also been introduced in local elections in Estonia⁸ and Britain's crown dependencies: Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.⁹

In the Scottish independence referendum, which took place on 18 September 2014, 16 and 17-year-olds were eligible to vote. This age group accounted for ca. 3% of the four million eligible voters in Scotland. This arrangement was made permanent, as a result of which in May of 2016, teenagers were for the first time allowed to vote in the Scottish parliamentary elections.

Outside Europe, there are several countries whose electoral law grants voting rights to people under 18 years of age. These are: Argentina (with nearly 600 thousand 16 and 17-year-olds who were for the first time eligible to vote in the October 2013 parliamentary elections), Brazil, Ecuador, Indonesia, North Korea, Nicaragua, Sudan and East Timor.¹⁰ In Europe, Austria remains a forerunner to this day.¹¹ However, public debate is ongoing in some countries (e.g. in Denmark or the United Kingdom) on this issue.¹² In Poland, a reduced voting age as an amendment to Article 62 of the Constitution was postulated by the Freedom Union (*Unia Wolności*) party already before the 2004 EU accession referendum.¹³ In the following years, similar proposals were put forward

⁵ B. Hauser, *Kommunales Wahlrecht ab 16*, "Kommunalpolitik. Materialien für die Arbeit vor Ort" 8, 1999.

⁶ *Glarus gewährt Stimmrecht ab 16 Jahren*, "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" 6 May 2007.

⁷ *About the right to vote*, 27 August 2015, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/portal/election-portal/right-to-vote-and-the-electoral-register/about-the-right-to-vote-and-the-electoral/id457098/> (accessed 6 October 2016).

⁸ A. Michalak, *Estonia: Obniżono z 18 do 16 lat wiek wyborców w wyborach lokalnych*, "Rzeczpospolita" 6 May 2015.

⁹ J. Adetunji, *Jersey 16-year-olds to vote in island elections*, "The Guardian" 13 October 2008.

¹⁰ See the Council of Europe's explanatory memorandum: L. Ansala, *Voting at 16 – Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level*, 20 October 2015, <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=2365317&direct=true> (accessed 6 October 2016).

¹¹ Citizens that are 16 and 17 years old acquire the right to vote upon starting their first job or getting married in some Balkan states. M. Waszak, J. Zbieranek, *Propozycja obniżenia wieku czynnego prawa wyborczego do lat 16. Wybrane zagadnienia*, "Badania-ekspertyzy-rekomendacje", Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw 2010.

¹² P. Toynbee, *Giving 16-year-olds the vote can be Labour's Great Reform Act*, "The Guardian" 31 January 2014.

¹³ *Unia Wolności apeluje o prawo 16-stolatków do głosowania w referendum*, 13 February 2003, <http://www.uw.org.pl/main/archiwum.php?id=266> (accessed 6 October 2015)

by politicians from other parties or groups: the Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*), Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*) or Palikot Movement (*Ruch Palikota*).¹⁴ However, they did not meet with social approval. In a 2014 opinion poll conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) in collaboration with the Centre of Electoral Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University (*Centrum Studiów Wyborczych UMK*) in Toruń, Polish respondents were asked about “the proposal to lower the voting age from 18 to 16”. An overwhelming majority (84%) were opposed to this change. Interestingly, as emphasised by the researchers, criticism was voiced by a comparable proportion of the youngest respondents (aged 18-24), who were themselves not long ago in the 16-18 age group.¹⁵

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The Republic of Austria is a country in which a predominant role is played by representative democracy. Two of Austria’s governing bodies come from general and direct elections: the National Council (*Nationalrat* - the lower house of the Parliament elected for a five-year term and endowed with more power than the upper house) and the Federal President (*Bundespräsident*), who is elected for a six-year term.¹⁶

Originally, voting rights were granted to Austrian teens at the regional level (*Gemeinderatswahlen, Bürgermeisterwahlen*) in five states: Burgenland (2002)¹⁷, Carinthia (2002)¹⁸, Vienna (2003)¹⁹, Salzburg (2004)²⁰ and Styria (2004)²¹. In Vienna²²

¹⁴ *Oddajmy głos młodzieży*, 28 September 2015, <http://www.uml.lodz.pl/miasto/aktualnosci/?news=29300> (accessed 6 October 2016).

¹⁵ *Polacy o proponowanych zmianach prawa wyborczego*, Komunikat z badań CBOS, May 2014, Warsaw. See also D. Batorski, M. Drabek, M. Gałązka J. Zbieranek, (ed.), *Wyborca 2.0. Młode pokolenie wobec procedur demokratycznych*, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw 2012.

In May 2015, Luxembourg was the first country in the world to organize a consultative referendum in which one of the questions concerned a proposal to lower the voting age to 16. A vast majority (over 80% of the voters) were opposed to this step.

¹⁶ The Constitution provides for other kinds of direct democracy: popular legislative initiatives as well as legislative, constitutional and consultative referenda. *Federalna Ustawa Konstytucyjna Republiki Austrii*, P. Czarny and B. Naleziński (translation and preface), Warsaw 2004, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Artikel 1. Gesetz vom 18. April 2002 mit dem die Gemeindevahlordnung 1992 geändert wird (Gemeindevahlordnungsnovelle 2002)*, “Landesgesetzblatt [henceforth: LGBl.] für das Burgenland” No. 65/2002.

¹⁸ *3. Abschnitt § 17 Gemeinderats- und Bürgermeisterwahlordnung 2002 – Kärntner-GBWO*, LGBl No. 32/2002.

¹⁹ Since the Gemeinderat of Vienna (the governing body of the city) is at the same time the state legislature (*Landtag*), the electoral system for both bodies is the same. *Artikel II §16 Wiener Stadtverfassung und Wiener Gemeindevahlordnung 1996; Änderung*, “LGBl. für Wien” No. 22/2003.

²⁰ *Artikel 52a Gesetz vom 10. November 2004, mit dem das Landes-Verfassungsgesetz 1999 und die Salzburger Gemeindevahlordnung 1998 geändert werden*, LGBl. No. 97/2004.

²¹ *3. Abschnitt § 20. Gesetz vom 27. April 2004 über die Gemeindevahlordnung 2004 – GWO, Das Land Steiermark*, LGBl. No. 48/2004.

²² See fn. 19.

and Burgenland²³, teenagers could vote in the 2005 elections to the state legislatures (*Landtagswahlen*).

As a result of electoral law reform, negotiated as part of the coalition agreement between the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, *SPÖ*) and the Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, *ÖVP*), since 2007 active suffrage has been granted to people over 16 years of age whereas passive suffrage has been available to 18-year-olds and older (previously to 19-year-olds; the exception being candidates for federal president, who must be at least 35 years of age).²⁴ According to estimates, the number of eligible voters in subsequent parliamentary elections was to increase by 140-200 thousand.²⁵ Since then there have been two parliamentary (2008, 2013) and two presidential elections (2010, 2016).

These changes were a message sent by the legislators to young Austrians, who were granted civic maturity that allowed them to have a say in the country's important decisions. Hence, the view expressed by an Austrian politician that "never in the history of democracy has a [social – K.G.] group been given the right to vote without a struggle"²⁶ seems right.

It should be borne in mind that for decades in Europe universal suffrage was not taken for granted. For example, it took women a long time to gain, or actually struggle for, the right to vote. In Austria, it was not until the end of World War I that they could join political groups or vote. Only in the late 19th century were the first political postulates formulated. Earlier on, there had been other priorities, such as gaining the right to schooling, education, work and financial independence. At that time women themselves thought that changes for the better should be implemented gradually.²⁷ In 1907, in the wake of revolutionary events in Russia and to prevent similar developments in the empire, Austria-Hungary decided to grant men the general and equal right to vote. When World War I ended with the defeat of the empire, on 12 November 1918, Austrian women, as one of the first in Europe, received full voting rights.²⁸ Under the

²³ *Artikel 10. Landesverfassungsgesetz vom 31. März 2005, mit dem das Landes-Verfassungsgesetz über die Verfassung des Burgenlandes geändert wird*, LGBl. No. 44/2005.

²⁴ As a result of the coalition agreement, the *ÖVP* consented to reducing the voting age whereas the *SPÖ* approved postal voting. Moreover, the National Council's term was extended from 4 to 5 years (BGBl. I No. 2/2008). *Wahlrechtsänderungsgesetz 2007*, BGBl. I No. 28/2007. For commentary on Austria's electoral reform see F. Karhofer, *Wählen mit 16: Erwartungen und Perspektiven*, in: *Der WählerInnenwille*, "Informationen zur Politischen Bildung" No. 27, 2007, pp. 37-42.

²⁵ *Erläuterungen*, https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXIII/I/I_00088/fname_077080.pdf, p. 1 (accessed 20 December 2016).

²⁶ *Wählen ab 16*, http://www.becker-europa.eu/waehlen_ab_16.htm (accessed 20 December 2016).

²⁷ B. Bader-Zaar, *Frauenbewegungen und Frauenwahlrecht*, in: H. Rumpler et al., (ed.), *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918*, Bd. 8/1, Vienna 2006, pp. 1005-1027.

²⁸ The right to direct, proportional, universal, equal and secret suffrage was granted to all citizens regardless of gender. *Artikel 9. Gesetz vom 12. November 1918 über die Staats- und Regierungsform*, Staatsgesetzblatt [henceforth: StGBL.] für den Staat Deutschösterreich No. 5/1918.

Federal Constitutional Law, the first Austrian constitution²⁹, the minimum voting age was set at 20³⁰ but following a 1929 constitutional amendment it was raised to 21.³¹ It was only after World War II that the voting age gradually came to be reduced: in 1949 to 20³², in 1968 to 19³³, and in 1992 to 18³⁴.

The changes in the electoral law were designed to make young people take greater responsibility for their future as the effects of elections and of the decisions made in the voting process have a long-term impact, primarily on the future of today's teenagers.

The legal, political and socio-psychological arguments for and against lowering the voting age that are put forward in ongoing debates are in fact two sides of the same coin. Both followers and opponents cite the results of surveys and regularly conducted studies to define the competences of today's teenagers and their knowledge of politics. The most frequently mentioned points, i.e. young age, curiosity of the world or spontaneity in decision-making, can be viewed at the same time as arguments for and against the solution under discussion.

For sceptics, the starting point is the assumption that young age should not be regarded as an asset because at this life stage people do not have a sufficiently developed sense of duty; nor are they conscious of the consequences of their choices for which they do not want to take full responsibility. Besides, at this age, knowledge of how politics works is scarce. In other words, few people in their teens are interested in politics; hence, it is unrealistic to assume that the lowering of the minimum voting age will translate into increased maturity and election turnout. Another factor at play is the fear that once young people become interested in politics, they will be likely to vote for parties which come across well in the media but are not concerned about their political agenda (colloquially referred to as *Spaßparteien* – “joke parties”). Youngsters may also be prone to opt for extremist groups, which may pursue unpredictable systemic changes. Teenagers who want to become politically engaged and gain relevant experience can do so by joining parties' youth factions or other organisations.

²⁹ The full name of the law was *Gesetz vom 1. Oktober 1920, womit die Republik Österreich als Bundesstaat eingerichtet wird, Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz*, “StGBI. für die Republik Österreich” No. 450/1920.

³⁰ Artikel 26. “StGBI. für die Republik Österreich” No. 450/1920.

³¹ *Bundesverfassungsgesetz vom 7. Dezember 1929, betreffend einige Abänderungen des Bundes Verfassungsgesetzes vom 1. Oktober 1920 in der Fassung des B.G.BI. Nr. 367 von 1925 (Zweite Bundes Verfassungsnovelle)*, BGBl. No. 392/1929. It should be added that after Austria was annexed to the Third Reich (*Anschluss*) in March of 1938, the rules of the Nazi state were enforced in the former Austrian territory. At the end of World War II, on 27 April 1945, the Provisional Government published a Declaration of Independence which established the Democratic Republic of Austria (*Proklamation über die Selbständigkeit Österreichs*, “StGBI. für die Republik Österreich” 1/1945). The 1920 constitution was reinstated (with the 1929 amendments). The Second Republic ensured legal continuity from the First Republic of Austria. *Związkowa Ustawa Konstytucyjna Republiki Austrii*, S. Sagan (translation and editorship), in: R. Grabowski (ed.), *Geneza i ewolucja systemu politycznego Austrii*, Częstochowa 2002; P. Sarnecki, *System konstytucyjny Austrii*, Warsaw 1999.

³² Bundesgesetz: Nationalrats-Wahlordnung, 27 June 1949, BGBl. No. 129/1949 § 22.

³³ Nationalrats-Wahlordnungs-Novelle 1968, BGBl. No. 413/1968.

³⁴ Nationalrats-Wahlordnung 1992 – NRWO, BGBl. No. 471/1992.

From the perspective of mental development it is assumed that adolescence is a life stage marked by personality formation, when young people establish their own hierarchies of values and seek new role models and authority figures, abandoning the old ones. They are thus affected by various influences and are often susceptible to manipulation. It is a natural time of “trial and error”, which teenagers have the right to make; hence it has been argued that young people should not be burdened with excessive responsibility and should be allowed to live carefree lives.

Finally, the age of 18 has been widely accepted as the threshold of adulthood. Even if this arrangement is conventional in nature, as most 18-year-olds still go to school and are financially supported by their parents, in most contemporary countries the legal age of majority is actually 18.³⁵ By law, an 18-year-old can decide for themselves but they can also take full responsibility for themselves and their actions.³⁶

As opponents argued, there was a need for a separate regulation that would upset the balance between the rights and duties of teenagers. Opinions were also voiced that granting different voting rights, depending on the level of elections, might lead to their gradation and value judgements (elections with a lowered voting age would enjoy lower status).

We will now look at the arguments for granting 16-year-olds the right to vote, as this line of reasoning finally prevailed in the Austrian debate. According to its followers, the previously established minimum voting age should be regarded as a flexible value, which can be revised to meet the demands of a democratic and civic society. Teenagers are engaged in many fields that used to be solely reserved to older people. Moreover, they are doing better and better in a globalised world and they become independent earlier than in the past. Granting 16-year-olds voting rights would be a natural course of events in this process as this change would enable young people to become engaged in politics, to take an interest in how the state works and to participate in creating the future in which they want to live. After all, co-decision rights are among the underlying principles of democracy. It was also hoped that this group of voters would feel more appreciated having a say-so in decision-making.

According to the followers of the reduced voting age, another advantage is young people’s sensitivity to current social issues affecting them now or in the near future (unemployment, job prospects, the educational system, family policy, etc.). This agenda should make them participate actively in resolving these problems. Of importance

³⁵ It should be recalled that after World War II active suffrage was generally granted to people who had turned 20 or 21 years of age and it was not until the 1970s that the minimum voting age was lowered to 18. In Austria 18-year-olds received the right to vote in 1992.

³⁶ This age is indicated in the guidelines adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 17 November 2010 along with justification: *Monograph 5. Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice*, <https://rm.coe.int/16804b2cf3> (accessed 3 August 2018) [Polish translation: *Monografia nr 5. Wytoczne Komitetu Ministrów Rady Europy w sprawie wymiaru sprawiedliwości przyjaznego dzieciom*, <http://fdcs.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Wytoczne-Komite-tu-Ministr%C3%B3w-Rady-Europy-dot.-wymiaru-sprawiedliwo%C5%9Bci-przyjaznego-dla-dzieci.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2016)].

to the Austrian political decision-makers was also the fact that Austria, just like other western democracies, had been struggling with the issue of an ageing population. To ensure the proper dynamics of the political system, it was necessary to try to capitalise on the potential of younger voters.

The first time 16 and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote was in the 2005 local elections; however, the first real test for the new electoral law came during the 2008 National Council election, the first parliamentary election under the new system. Commenting on its results, the Austrian press highlighted the fact that the reduced voting age benefited the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ*).

The analysis of the electoral behaviour of new voters and their attitude to politics, democracy and state institutions was conducted by the Vienna-based SORA Institute (the Institute for Social Research and Consulting). Shortly and simply, the key question was: who was right: the sceptics or the proponents of the lowered voting age.

The basic conclusion was that, contrary to previous arguments against the change, young people were interested in politics, were aware of their own deficits and were eager to learn more.³⁷ Teenagers favourably assessed the way the democratic system worked; however, they also expressed criticism of the politicians, notably of what they represent. The respondents held the view that politicians often dealt with irrelevant issues and were unable to propose solutions to key problems (e.g. in education or effective prevention of youth unemployment). Interestingly, the study did not confirm “the right turn” of teen voters, which had so strongly been exposed by the media. In this group, the share of votes for the *FPÖ* was 18% with the majority of Austrian teenagers voting for non-extremist parties. They most frequently supported the *ÖVP* (22%), and – to a smaller extent – the Greens (14%) and the *SPÖ* (12%).³⁸

In September 2013, Austria held another parliamentary election. Its results could be compared with the previous ones, providing an opportunity to review the experiences with teen voters. Drawing on the opinions voiced by the opponents and proponents of the lowered voting age, researchers at the University of Vienna conducted studies that were designed to revise the arguments raised by both sides. Their results provide interesting insights. First of all, it was indicated that teen voter turnout was lower than five years earlier. While in 2008, 77% of the eligible 16 and 17-year-old voters showed up at the polls (the effect referred to in the subject literature as *first time voter boost*), with the overall turnout of 78.81%, in 2013, turnout, at 74%, was the lowest since 1945, reaching 63% among the youngest voters. This state of af-

³⁷ According to B. Heinzlmaier, who conducts research on young people, the problem is not young people’s lack of interest in politics but politics itself. Youngsters find it cynical and callous and do not see a place for themselves in politics. See B. Heinzlmaier, *Jugend ohne politische Perspektive?*, in: “Kommunaler Zukunftsbericht 2014”, Österreichischer Gemeindebund 2014, pp. 37-39.

³⁸ The respondents were aged 16-18. The quoted data are average values. *Junge Wählerinnen und Wähler bei der Nationalratswahl 2008*, April 2009, <http://www.vol.at/2009/05/Jungwaehler.pdf> (accessed: 16 October 2016); “Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl” – wichtigste Ergebnisse auf einem Blick, www.sora.at/fileadmin/downloads/wahlen/2009_waehlen-mit-16_zusammenfassung.pdf (accessed 16 October 2016).

fairs was attributed to smaller media and political attention to this group of voters. To give a complete picture of the situation, it should be added that first-time voters (*Erstwähler*) made up 5% of all eligible voters. There was also a swing in party support: young people most often voted for *SPÖ* (26%), the Greens (15%)³⁹ and the *ÖVP* (14%). Compared to 2008, support for the *FPÖ* was down (to 12%).⁴⁰

In terms of their knowledge of politics, teen voters do not differ from the slightly older age group (18-21) but fall significantly behind people aged 30 or more. The studies also found that the youngest voters had shown a markedly increased interest in politics just ahead of the election. Thus, it all seems to come down to maturity, experience and a generational gap, rather than to problems specific to this age group. Overall, it can be concluded that the teenagers with a better knowledge of politics are more likely to be interested in it on a daily basis, which, in turn, translates into their willingness to participate in politics by voting. In other words, those who have knowledge are more eager to vote in elections, which are perceived as a privilege, and not a duty. For this reason, the team of researchers sought to determine where teen voters get information on political issues, and which of these sources are the most effective. There is no doubt that central to civic education is not only the closest environment, i.e. home and school (including such factors as parents and relatives' education, the kind of school and curriculum comprising political education) but also financial potential, media access and effective use of the media. The researchers find it disturbing that already at this age significant differences regarding social status arise, which in turn translates into attitudes to elections and evaluations of what elections mean to a democratic state. With respect to political education in Austrian schools, there are noticeable differences between general secondary school students and vocational school students. Attention was also drawn to the considerable gender gap in the group of first-time voters: girls, more often than boys, declared a lack of interest in politics.⁴¹ As the experts in the field emphasise, political participation is dependent on the self-evaluation of one's competences. While young men and young women display comparable knowledge of politics, the latter are more critical in the assessment of what they know.⁴²

It might seem that the above analyses and conclusions should provide an impetus for political parties, which should reach out to all voters, adjusting their election platforms and campaigns to the needs and expectations of various electorates. However,

³⁹ In the 2013 election, this party recorded its best result ever: 11.5%.

⁴⁰ Quoted after: *Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013*. The studies were conducted and analysed by the Department of Methods in the Social Sciences at the University of Vienna (*MeSoS Vienna*). The researchers, Sylvia Kritzinger, Eva Zeglovits and Patricia Oberluggauer, stressed, however, that the quoted estimates are approximate; http://www.parlament.gv.at/ZUSD/PDF/Wahlstudie_Waehlen_mit_16.pdf (accessed 16 October 2016).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² S. Kritzinger, E. Zeglovits, *Wählen mit 16 – Chance oder Risiko?*, in: J. Tremmel, M. Rutsche, (ed.), *Politische Beteiligung junger Menschen: Grundlagen – Perspektiven – Fallstudien*, Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 185-199, here: p. 192.

this is not the case. Even the largest parties, such as *SPÖ* and *ÖVP*, which in their declarations emphasize the role of the youngest voters⁴³, do not boast long-term strategies aimed at winning the support of teenagers, who might in the future constitute the party's electorate. In practice, they take actions on an ad hoc basis (in the context of elections), which fail to bring about the desired results, even in the eyes of teenagers. As a result, it is no wonder that if politicians do not take young people seriously, they should not hope for warm reception from younger voters.⁴⁴

In view of the above conclusions, the main task for political decision-makers, who have granted 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote, is to ensure that teenagers receive comprehensive civic education. The parties, in turn, should take this group of voters into account in their political programmes and try to meet their expectations as in actuality there is often not ample time, imagination or financial resources for this action. Moreover, given the diversification of this age group in terms of social factors (home and social background), the kind of school and gender, these policies should be adjusted to specific addressees. Besides the political education class taught in schools, students and teachers have access to a variety of information portals.⁴⁵ Sample initiatives that should succeed could include meetings with politicians, involvement in school and class self-governments, workshops, class discussions on election campaign issues or visits to political institutions. Women who have succeeded in politics or economy can serve as role models for teenage girls to encourage them to become interested in politics.⁴⁶

Austrian media researcher Matthias Karmasin stressed the need for creating effective communication channels between politicians and the youngest generation, which relies on social media rather than on traditional media, such as television or the press. Young people live almost parallel lives in virtual space. In trying to reach out to them, it is necessary to move online, remain open to innovations and use teen language.⁴⁷

⁴³ Out of all political groups that were voted into the National Council for the current term, four parties outline the principles of their youth policies on their websites: *SPÖ* <https://spoe.at/positionen-jugend>, *ÖVP* <https://www.oevp.at/themen/Fuer-die-Jugend-erreicht.psp>, the Greens <https://www.gruene.at/themen/jugend>, and *Team Stronach für Österreich*, <http://www.teamstronach.at/themen/themen-a-z/jugend>; the other two, *FPÖ* <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/pariteipogramm/> and *Neos – Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum* <http://ichtwas.neos.eu/start>, focus only on selected issues (e.g. education) (accessed 18 March 2017).

⁴⁴ J. Winter, *Wahlkampf: Wie die Wiener Jungwähler von den Parteien genarrt werden*, 8 October 2015, <http://www.profil.at/oesterreich/wahlkampf-wie-wiener-jungwaehler-parteien-5902734> (accessed 16 October 2016); P. Mayr, *Jugendliche fühlen sich von Parteien ignoriert*, 3 September 2013, <http://derstandard.at/1376535476676/Eine-Regierungspartei-hat-wenig-Revolutzerhaftes> (accessed 18 March 2017).

⁴⁵ Examples include *Zentrum Polis. Politik Lernen in der Schule*, <http://www.politik-lernen.at/>; *Politische Bildung. Österreichisches Schulportal*, <https://www.schule.at/portale/politische-bildung/>; *Wählen mit 16*, Bundesministerium für Familien und Jugend, <https://www.bmfj.gv.at/jugend/beteiligung-engagement/waehlen-mit-16.html> (accessed 4 January 2017).

⁴⁶ S. Kritzinger, E. Zeglovits, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-198; *Abschlussbericht der ExpertInnengruppe "Innovative Demokratie" im Rahmen der Demokratie-Initiative "Entscheidend bist Du"*, Demokratiezentrum Wien, 2008.

⁴⁷ U. Maier-Rabler, Ch. Neumayer, *Jugend und eParticipation – Analyse und Strategien*, in: *Abschlussbericht der ExpertInnengruppe "Innovative Demokratie"...*, pp. 31-73.

Expert recommendations should be taken into account both in developing political education syllabi and during election campaigns targeting the youngest group of voters.

It seems, however, that politicians are not too keen to follow the experts' advice: they do things that they themselves consider effective, albeit with varying results. Some political groups use unconventional ideas to win teen votes. For example, FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache (born 1969)⁴⁸, who recruited fans on Facebook, produced a video along with rapper MC Blue. The video, a remix of "By the Beautiful Blue Danube" by Johann Strauss, also featured the party's young supporters chanting "HC" [the politician's initials – K.G.].⁴⁹ Even though the performance itself is far from artistic, this is not key to its success. According to Gertraud Diendofer, head of the Democracy Centre Vienna, such simple and easy-to-grasp messages are appealing to young people, especially men. Moreover, the FPÖ promises "easy solutions to complex problems". The program itself plays a minor role.⁵⁰

Some of these ideas came up against criticism from the parties' youth organizations. For example, the Young Greens (*Junge Grüne*) disapproved of a free girls' magazine entitled EVA, issued and distributed by the Greens in September of 2013, arguing that it was "deprived of content". Besides advice on cosmetics, fashion and dating, the magazine featured an interview with Eva Glawischnig, the party's spokeswoman.⁵¹

How difficult it is to predict the course of events, and consequently the electorate's reaction was demonstrated in the aforementioned 2015 local elections. The preceding months saw the surging migration crisis that was linked with a massive influx of refugees from Africa and the Middle East who, heading for Germany, stopped in Austria's transit centres. The need to face this problem topped the country's domestic agenda. Of key importance to the federal government's migration policy was the outcome of the October election in Vienna. Out of 1.14 million eligible voters, 20% were below 30 years of age including 60 thousand first-time teen voters.⁵² However, the political groups did not target the youngest voters in any special way.⁵³ It did not come as a surprise that in their campaign the Freedom Party of Austria, whose

⁴⁸ M. Bandar, *Österreichs Jungwähler: Fremdschämen für den Polit-Rapper*, 24 September 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/schulspiegel/ausland/oesterreichs-jungwaehler-fremdschaemen-fuer-den-polit-rapper-a-580156.html> (accessed 16 October 2014).

⁴⁹ The video „Good Men[Sch]Rap” is available on the FPÖ's official website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9pMh3Aipv4> (accessed 12 November 2016).

⁵⁰ C. Bleiker, *Junge Europäer rücken nach rechts*, 16 December 2015, <http://www.dw.com/de/junge-europ%C3%A4er-r%C3%BCcken-nach-rechts/a-18918854> (accessed 12 November 2016); *Warum wählen junge Männer so gerne rechts? Interview von F. Karig [mit B. Heinzlmaier]*, 23 May 2016, <http://www.jetzt.de/was-ist-rechts/warum-waehlen-junge-maenner-so-gerne-rechts> (accessed 12 November 2016).

⁵¹ *Kampf um Jugendliche: in Österreich wählen schon die 16-Jährigen*, „Handelsblatt” 27 September 2013; *Jugendwahlkampf: Diskotour, Picknick und 112 Fragen*, 2 May 2014, www.salzburg.com/nachrichten/spezial/eu-wahl/wahlkampf-in-oesterreich/sn/artikel/jugendwahlkampf-diskotour-picknick-und-112-fragen-105059/ (accessed 1 December 2016); M. Bandar, *op. cit.*

⁵² J. Winter, *op. cit.*

⁵³ M. Marits, *Wien-Wahl: Der Wahlkampf kam ohne die Jugend aus*, „Die Presse” 8 October 2015.

leader ran for mayor of Vienna, strongly played the refugee and asylum-seeker card, exploiting the emotions and fears of confused voters, including the youngest group. As Bartosz T. Wieliński of the Polish “Gazeta Wyborcza” daily commented, H.-Ch. Strache “avoids being labelled as Nazi, and is posing as a defender of Europe against Islamisation”⁵⁴. Unlike his opponents, “he is not a stuffed shirt and can reach out to young people. He offers them simple and quick fixes: stop immigration and give jobs to youngsters. This is catching on”.⁵⁵ This rhetoric appealed to nearly every third eligible voter. As a result, the *FPÖ*, with 30.79% of the vote, won 34 seats (out of 100) in the *Gemeinderat* of Vienna, which is also the State Legislature, becoming the second largest group after the Social Democrats.⁵⁶

Political scientist Reinhard Heinisch, who investigates populism in Austria, analyses the reasons for the *FPÖ*’s election successes. He claims that the party’s popularity stems from the weakness of the remaining political groups, which have lost their appeal. “Besides the Greens, who are trying to target well-educated city dwellers, the *FPÖ* is the only party which seeks to reach out to young people. The other parties focus on the traditional and ageing electorate [...]”⁵⁷. The 2016 presidential election seems to have confirmed these points.⁵⁸

Under the constitution, the election winner is the candidate with an absolute majority of votes⁵⁹ so in this particular case it was necessary to win the support of more than a half of the 6.4 eligible voters. The conduct of the election resembled a “tragi-

⁵⁴ Quoted after: B. T. Wieliński, *Kto w niedzielę zdobędzie Wiedeń?*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 10 October 2015.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Wiener Gemeinderats- und Bezirksvertretungswahlen 2015*, <https://www.wien.gv.at/politik/wahlen/grbv/2015/index.html> (accessed 3 January 2017).

⁵⁷ J. Meier, *Wien: Die österreichische Jugend blickt nach rechts*, 27 October 2014, <http://www.cafebabel.de/politik/artikel/wien-die-osterreichische-jugend-blickt-nach-rechts.html> (accessed 12 November 2016).

⁵⁸ The unquestionable winner of the 2010 presidential election was Social Democrat Heinz Fischer, who was re-elected for a second term. The election drew the lowest turnout (53.57%) in Austria’s history. *Bundespräsidentenwahl vom 25. April 2010*, http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_wahlen/bundespraes/bpw_2010/Ergebnis.aspx (accessed 20 December 2016). The main reason for this situation was that H. Fischer did not have a real contender in the presidential race, which led many people to believe that the election outcome was a foregone conclusion. This contributed to a decreased interest in voting, which could especially be observed in the group of the youngest voters (under 30). However, most of them voted for the Social Democrat (74%). Voters in this age group more frequently than older people supported Barbara Rosenkratz of the *FPÖ* (22%). According to researchers from the SORA Institute, these people did not constitute the core electorate of the Freedom Party but they voted in protest against the governing elite. The third candidate, Rudolf Gehring of the Christian Party of Austria (*Christliche Partei Österreichs, CPÖ*) scored 5% of the vote. Quoted after: *BundespräsidentInnenwahl 2010*, <http://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen/bpw10.html> (accessed 20 December 2016). For the first time in history, the group of new voters consisted of 900 thousand teenagers (14% of all eligible voters). However, in view of the above, their election behaviour was not as thoroughly analysed as after the National Council election.

⁵⁹ This is defined by article 60 of the constitution.

comedy in three acts”.⁶⁰ The first round, held on 24 April 2016, did not produce an outright winner: none of the six contenders won an absolute majority. The top two candidates, who proceeded to the second round were Norbert Hofer (35.1%) of the *FPÖ* and Greens-backed independent Alexander Van der Bellen (21.3%). The 22 May run-off was won by Van der Bellen (50.3%) with a margin of only 31 thousand votes. The Austrian Constitutional Court recognised the complaints made by Hofer’s party and cancelled the results due to a wide range of irregularities reported in connection with postal voting.⁶¹ The re-vote was scheduled to be held on 2 October; however, the date was missed because of ... glue, which proved to be of poor quality causing envelopes for postal voting cards to come off.⁶²

As the election process came to include an additional round, the electoral roll needed to be updated. The Austrian parliament decided to award the right to vote to people who turned 16 after 24 April.⁶³

It was not until 4 December 2015, the date of the re-vote, that the winner eventually came to be known: 72-year-old A. Van der Bellen, who had won 53.8% of the vote, became the new president of the Republic of Austria.⁶⁴ He owed his victory primarily to young voters, people with tertiary education and women.⁶⁵ According to press commentaries and SORA opinion polls, he was also more effective in mobilising his electorate, having won the support of undecided voters and of those who voted for other candidates in the first round.⁶⁶

When asked about their election preferences, young Austrians (aged 16-29) opted more frequently for Van der Bellen. The surveys conducted by Bernhard Heinzlmaier of the Austrian Institute for Youth Culture Research (*Österreichisches Institut für*

⁶⁰ K. M. Zalewski, *Wybory prezydenckie w Austrii, czyli tragikomedia w trzech aktach*, 13 October 2016, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykul/swiat/20161012/wybory-prezydenckie-w-austrii-hofer-bellen> (accessed 20 December 2016).

⁶¹ The Constitutional Court’s ruling of 1 July 2016: *Bundespräsidenten-Stichwahl muss in ganz Österreich und komplett wiederholt werden*, https://www.vfgh.gv.at/downloads/verkuendung_w_presseinformation.pdf (accessed 20 December 2016).

⁶² B. T. Wieliński, *W Austrii trwa wyborczy chaos*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 12 September 2016.

⁶³ According to the Austrian Statistical Office, this decision concerned over 45 thousand young voters, who were added to the electoral roll. However, meanwhile around 49 thousand people died. Changes to the electoral roll can also involve the acquisitions or losses of citizenship and registration of people who failed to enrol before the first round of elections. M. Sterkl, *Wer am 4. Dezember erstmals mit wählen darf*, 12 September 2016 <http://derstandard.at/2000044250864/Wer-am-4-Dezember-erstmal-mitwaehlen-darf> (accessed 20 December 2016); J. Hager, *47.000 Erstwähler & Nichtwähler entscheiden*, 13 September 2016, <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/47-000-erstwaehler-nichtwaehler-entscheiden/220.810.230> (accessed 20 December 2016).

⁶⁴ The final results are available on the website of the Austrian Ministry of Interior: *Stimmenstärkste Kandidaten pro Bundesland*, <http://wahl16.bmi.gv.at/> (accessed 10 December 2016). In the subsequent rounds, turnout was on the increase: 68.5% (24 April), 72.7% (22 May), 74.2% (4 December).

⁶⁵ N. Kommenda, *Wahlgrafiken: Wer wählte wen warum*, 4 December 2016, http://diepresse.com/home/politik/bpwahl/5128276/Wahlgrafiken_Wer-waehlte-wen-warum (accessed 20 December 2016).

⁶⁶ *Wahlanalysen*, <http://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen.html> (accessed 20 December 2016).

Jugendkulturforschung) indicate that A. Van der Bellen and N. Hofer embody two opposing approaches that prevail in contemporary society. The first one embraces open-mindedness, tolerance, liberalism and social responsibility while the other one rests on nationalism, isolationism, anti-foreigner sentiments, and nostalgic attachment to the past and tradition. Young Austrian voters can be assigned to either of these opposing camps. Interestingly, Van der Bellen's mature age was not a key issue. For teen voters, this is actually an asset as, in view of the omnipresent "cult of youth", young people find adults they interact with to be "infantilised" and seek authority figures they could emulate. They also emphasise the importance of the president's office. In their eyes, the president should inspire trust, boast experience and behave with dignity. In other words, this person should embody the features that come with age. Thus, the candidate with the greatest recognition among young people, eccentric multimillionaire Richard Lugner (*Spaßkandidat*), albeit aged 80, did not have any chances in this group of voters.⁶⁷

The largest two parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, performed very poorly in the campaign, and failed to mobilise their electorates.⁶⁸ Both of their candidates scored a little more than 11% of the vote. The political commentators spoke openly about the demise of the Second Republic.⁶⁹

* * *

The overall conclusion is that the issue of a lowered voting age is becoming increasingly discussed in many countries with intersecting arguments for and against this solution. It is hard to dispute the fact that the right to vote allows teenagers to be involved in decisions that will affect them in the near future. However, what needs to be considered are the opinions of some commentators and researchers, who explicitly point to young people's lack of social competences with respect to such an important civic privilege as the right to vote. This largely stems from a restricted knowledge of the problems related to the workings of political life.

These discussions are becoming topical, especially in the context of challenges faced by the European Union and non-EU countries in and outside Europe. They in-

⁶⁷ See B. Heinzlmaier, *Bundespräsidentchaftswahl 2016. Wie die jungen ÖsterreicherInnen wählen werden*, Institut für Jugendkulturforschung, Vienna 2016; *idem*, *Bundespräsidentchaftswahl 2016. Wie die jungen Österreicher und Österreicherinnen im zweiten Wahlgang wählen werden*, Vienna 2016; *Analyse: Warum die jungen Österreicher Van der Bellen und Hofer wählen*, 18.04.2016, <http://www.profil.at/oesterreich/analyse-junge-maenner-wahl-bundespraesident-6322799> (accessed 10 December 2016).

⁶⁸ M. Łuniewski, *Norbert Hofer i austriackie tsunami*, „Rzeczpospolita” 22 May 2016; J. M. Marchart, *Bundespräsidentenwahl 2016: "Wer ist dieser Hundstorfer?"*, 7 April 2016, http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/oesterreich/politik/811279_Wer-ist-dieser-Hundstorfer.html (accessed 2 January 2017).

⁶⁹ R. Nowak, *Das war sie dann, die Zweite Republik*, "Die Presse" 25 April 2016, P. Filzmaier, *Vertrauensverlust: Das Ende der Parteien?*, 8 May 2016, <http://www.krone.at/oesterreich/vertrauensverlust-das-ende-der-parteien-filzmaier-analyse-story-509044> (accessed 2 January 2017); *Blauer Jubel. ÖVP und SPÖ enttäuscht*, 24 April 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000035637705/OeVP-und-SPOe-enttaeuscht-Griss-Team-will-Wahlkarten-abwarten> (accessed 2 January 2017).

clude a worsening demographic decline, ageing populations and such phenomena as: voter absence and a substantially decreased interest in politics (this trend is sometimes referred to as “Politikfasten”, which in free translation can be rendered as “abstinence from politics”), and their negative impact on the way a democratic country works. Individual countries are introducing the changes in question gradually, beginning with local elections.

So far Austria remains the only country in Europe to have implemented a fundamental reform of the electoral law in 2007, granting all people who are at least 16 years of age the right to vote in all kinds of elections. The pre-election fears that teenagers would vote for right-wing parties did not materialise in practice. The voting turnout in this age group was comparable to the overall turnout. However, based on the above analyses and studies, several conclusions can be drawn. First of all, it has been found that it is possible to make young people interested in politics; yet it needs to be done in a comprehensive and long-term manner. Considering that the formation of young people’s social identities takes place mainly at home and school, the first thing to do is to provide adequate instruction and ensure comprehensive and responsible civic education. Of importance is not only the content of teaching but also the method of transferring knowledge, which should be adjusted to the reality in which young people live. This postulate is also addressed to politicians and governing elites, who should do their utmost to seek the support of the youngest voters. The Austrian example shows that the ways in which election campaigns have been conducted so far end in failure, with the mainstream parties suffering defeats. It was the populist *FPÖ* that made the best use of modern communication channels (social media and websites). However, such practices cannot involve short-term actions aimed at specific immediate goals, such as an election victory. Parties should include the needs of teenagers in their programs as well as in real actions and initiatives; in other words, they should prove that they treat young people seriously.

Dr hab. Prof. Katarzyna Gelles, Department of German Studies, University of Wrocław (katarzyna.gelles@uwr.edu.pl)

Keywords: Austria, voter turnout, voting rights from 16, young people, young people’s voting rights, teen voters

ABSTRACT

In a democratic country, participation in elections is indicative of civic maturity. Thus, the governing elites should strive to ensure broad social mobilisation. Faced with the challenges of ageing populations, demographic decline, voter absence, and a decreased interest in politics, various European countries have considered lowering the minimum voting age to 16. So far Austria is the first and only country in Europe to have introduced such regulations in all kinds of elections. This paper presents and analyses the main arguments raised in the discussion that preceded the changes in Austrian election law and their results in parliamentary (2008, 2013) and presidential elections (2010, 2016). Based on systematic surveys

conducted in Austria, it can be concluded that it is possible to make young people interested in politics; however, it needs to be done in a comprehensive manner by ensuring thorough and responsible civic education and adequate channels of communication. The governing elites should also prove that they really care about this group of voters. Due to the topicality of the subject matter, the paper is primarily based on statistical materials, research analyses, researchers' and politicians' statements, opinions and comments as well as articles in the press.