

„Post election study – voting with 16” – main results for the national elections in Austria 2008

By lowering voting age from 18 to 16, Austria took the lead in a widely discussed democratic reform process regarding the political participation of young people. Besides general discussions regarding democratic reforms, it is and was unclear how first time voters would reflect on this new situation and how first time voters would use this new opportunity to participate in democratic processes on the national level.

The Institute for Social Research and Analysis, the Institute for Strategic Analysis and Ulrike Kozeluh, PhD prepared a post election study focusing on first time voters between 16 and 18, which aimed at political attitudes, values and behaviours of the youngest group of voters in Austria.

Young people are interested in politics!

Young people clearly show interest in politics and political participation. More than three fourths of the first time voters follow political issues more than one time a week. More than two third of the electorate between 16 and 18 stated that they were interested in the election campaign.

They are reflective and self-critical and articulate concerns about their knowledge about politics, elections and procedures. On the other hand, in the same time they ask for more information and briefing regarding political processes, issues and systems.

Young people are not naive and aware of differences between information on the one hand and election campaigns and election claims. They are more interested in discussing content-related concepts instead of hearing simple slogans and buzzwords.

First time voters are very satisfied with the democratic system in Austria (two out of three). They also show high levels of trust in the political institutions, especially in the so called social partners and the Austrian parliament. European institutions are trustworthy as well, but at a lower level.

Looking more into the details, they are dissatisfied with the performance of political actors – political parties as well as politicians. Only 20 percent of the respondents trust the main political actors.

Distance, but not querulousness!

First time voters criticize that political parties do not reflect youth-specific issues within their election campaigns. Additionally, young people do not feel noticed by politicians as separate group and with their special needs, concerns and perspectives on societal developments, their individual fears and aspirations.

More than 50 percent of respondents say that politicians pay no attention to the important issues in society. The youngest group of voters place great importance on education, vocational training, youth unemployment, equality of sexes and poverty.

First time voters ask politicians for more credible efforts to find out about problems and concerns of young people and additionally, they clearly call for more authenticity in discussions.

Decision making

Regarding the declaration in the data set, the 16 to 18 years old show the same participation rate in the national elections 2008 – around 73 percent. Participating in elections is seen rather as right than as a duty.

Young voters are critical with regard to the contents, but not to the importance of the election itself.

First time voters did not vote significant more for rightist parties than other groups of the electorate. Regarding the political spectrum from right to left, more than a half of the respondents classify themselves to the middle. In the data, we cannot find a meaningful trend to the extreme poles left or right.

The conservative party (OeVP) was most successful among first time voters, especially outside cities and in ruralised areas. The opposition parties, freedom party (FPÖ) and the Greens show relatively stronger results than in the overall electorate. The social democrats (SPÖ) show results below average. The freedom party was in particular successful among young employees.

Europe

Young people generally have positive attitudes towards Europe. Especially the basic values - like the freedom of travelling and the freedom to work and study in every member state in Europe - are very popular among the youngest.

Nevertheless, young voters see the cultural identity in danger due to membership in the European Union – additionally, young people believe Austria as too small to affect the general policy making in the European Union.

Most of the young voters know about the upcoming European elections. But they have the feeling to know only little about the European Union and request more information on the institutions, the political processes and the upcoming elections.

Learning politics is doing politics – the influences of the school environment

Beside the parents, school is an important arena for discussing political issues and learn about political processes, institutions and political parties.

Especially for students, schools are an anchor in the complex field of political participation. The first time voters would like to discuss politics in school and would also like to learn about party programmes and ideological positions. Schools are seen as neutral institutions for knowledge transfer regarding political issues and party politics. Discussions in school are statistically significant for participation in elections.

Project related information

Project consortium:

SORA - Institute for Social Research and Analysis (project management and survey), <http://www.sora.at>

Institute for Strategic Analysis (ISA) (focus groups),
<http://www.strategieanalysen.at>

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Survey:

Representative for Austria, 16 till 18 years old first time voters

Sample size:

survey, n=1.000, data collected by IFES

focus groups, n= 19, arranged by OGM

indepth interviews, n=15

Timing:

november and december 2008, january 2009

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