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Youth Participation and Representation

The Case of 2024 European Parliament Elections

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Historically, young people have been underrepresented in the European Parliament (EP) elections, both as voters and elected representatives. The breaking point was reached on the former in 2019, when after declining since 1994, the overall voter turnout across the EU has increased, reaching 50.6 per cent. This increase was attributed mostly to a surge in youth participation.¹ Indeed, young people up to 35 years of age represent a sizable 'power' group that makes up some 25 per cent of the EU population.²

Recognizing the importance of sustaining youth participation and to capitalize on the positive trend of 2019, there has been much focus ahead of the 2024 European elections on involving young people. European institutions and European political parties have all doubled on outreach efforts, involving young people in a variety of collaborative formats, and pledging to integrate youth perspectives both through representation and policy.

Youth Outreach and Education Efforts

European institutions have launched several initiatives to boost youth engagement, including the [European Year of Youth](#), [Youth Ambassador School Programme](#), [European Youth Hearing](#), [Youth Hub](#), [European Youth Event](#) and its [Local EYEs](#) events, [European Charlemagne Youth Prize](#), as well as the integration of youth-related outcomes into the conclusions of the 2022 Conference on the Future of Europe. As a follow-up to several of these initiatives, a comprehensive [Youth Ideas Report 2023](#) was developed with the aim of guiding further youth-related efforts. Ahead of the 2024 elections, the EP has set up the [together.eu](#) platform, enabling young people to connect, debate, and access resources such as e-learning. A special [digital toolkit](#) was introduced for educators to incorporate democratic participation and electoral topics into school curricula.

However, there is no uniform European strategy on democracy and citizenship education. Consequently, national approaches to increasing youth electoral involvement vary widely.³ While some Member States (MS) have embraced innovative digital tools and vote match applications to engage youth,⁴ others have been less proactive. Examples of successful practices include youth elections such as a cross-country [Junior Election](#) exercise in Germany, which involved 4,500 secondary schools.

Civil society and youth-led organizations have also played a critical role in awareness-raising and voter education. Their efforts not only targeted young people as beneficiaries but also empowered them as active contributors to democratic processes. Some of the most notable initiatives ahead of the 2024 elections included:

- [EU Youth Test](#), a tool aimed at ensuring that EU policies consider the impact of policies on young people, as endorsed by several European institutions;

¹ [2019 European elections: Record turnout driven by young people](#), EP, September 2019.

² [Youth participation in European elections](#), EPRS, December 2023.

³ Final Report, Election Assessment Mission to 2024 EP elections, Election-Watch.EU, September 2024.

⁴ For instance, German [Wahl-o-Mat](#), which was designed to be used generally by all voters groups, was used by 14 mln people. The Austrian [Wahlrechner](#) was used over 500,000 times. Slovakia has the experience of developing effective youth-tailored [tools](#) in national elections.

- [Joint Statement](#) by youth party wings and the European Youth Forum addressed to all European political parties to include young candidates in electable spots, to commit to lower voting age in manifestos, and to focus on first time voters;
- [Youth Manifesto](#)
- Youth [Level Up Event](#), bringing together 1,300 European youth to encourage exchange of ideas and generate youth demands ahead of the elections;
- Voter education campaign [Your Voice, Your Power, Your Vote](#).

Youth Participation and Representation in 2024 elections

Despite extensive outreach and publicity efforts, the impact on youth electoral participation and representation appears to have been rather modest. While EU-wide turnout data disaggregated by age was not yet available as of September 2024, preliminary figures from select MS and the marginal EU-wide turnout increase to 50.74% suggest no major shifts in trends from earlier elections. Youth participation is unlikely to have risen significantly, with voters under 35 likely remaining one of the highest abstaining electorate segments.⁵ Interestingly, this appears to hold true also in Germany and Belgium, where recent reductions in voting age to 16 years expanded the overall electorate.⁶ Before the elections, a May 2024 [Eurobarometer](#) survey had shown optimism, with 64% of young people indicating intent to vote.

Youth representation has seen no significant breakthrough either. The average MEP age remained around 50 years, similar to the previous term's 53. Young people gained only 10% of the 720 seats in the EP. Representation is also highly uneven across MS, with zero young MEPs in 5 countries (Belgium, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Romania) and only 1 in 8 others (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania). Only a few countries have achieved over 20% youth representation, with Malta (33% of MEPs it is entitled to elect), Netherlands (23%), and Slovenia (22%) boasting the highest representation.

Factors Impacting Youth Inclusion

Research suggests that various factors can hamper youth electoral inclusion, including:

- lack of youth-targeted information and civic education
- disillusionment in politics and political forces
- lack of issues of interest or relevance to young people
- abstention as conscious choice
- legal barriers
- lack of access to funds for candidacy
- intra-party barriers
- perception of inexperience

⁵ See 2019 post-election [Eurobarometer](#) and [Review of European and National Election Results](#), p. 39.

⁶ In [Germany](#), the reduction of the voting age increased the overall electorate, 64.9 mln, by about 4.8 mln young voters. In [Belgium](#), this meant the inclusion of additional 270,000 young voters.

Regarding EP elections, although the analysis of youth voter participation will only be possible once related data becomes available, some analysis has already been done on the factors that might have hampered greater representation of young people in the new EP composition. The following potential barriers have been highlighted:

Voting and Candidacy Age: One key factor is the minimum voting and candidacy age. While most MS have set the voting age at 18, only four (Belgium, Germany, Austria, Malta) allow voting at 16, with Greece permitting it at 17. The minimum candidacy age varies more widely: while it is 18 in many countries, nine Member States require candidates to be at least 21, Romania sets it at 23, and Greece and Italy at 25.⁷ These age requirements are increasingly seen as obstacles to greater electoral inclusion and representation of young people, spurring further debate and research.

Insufficient Inclusion as Candidates: Young people have not been given a good chance of being elected from the outset. Candidate list analysis indicates that national political parties were generally reluctant or inconsistent in including young candidates on their lists.⁸ This stood in contrast with earlier pledges by some parties to embrace the ‘fresh’ perspectives that young people could bring and to better connect with a new generation of voters. Many parties also missed the opportunity to attract youth votes by not fielding more young candidates, despite evidence suggesting a strong correlation between youth representation on candidate lists and the mobilization of young voters.⁹

Limited Placement on Electable Positions: Although only 6 EU MS use closed candidate lists (without preferential voting), the positioning of candidates on the lists still significantly impacts their chances of being elected. In these elections, candidates under 35 were often relegated to unattractive positions, low down on party lists, with less than a 50% chance of securing a seat. In contrast, older candidates dominated the higher, more electable spots, making it far easier for them to be elected. As a result, one had a higher chance of being elected in the age group of 55-75.

Three Measures in Spotlight: What Could Help Make a Difference?

The following solutions focused on addressing the gaps in youth participation and representation are typically at the forefront of awareness raising and advocacy efforts:

1. Reducing minimum age for voting and candidacy

Although 18 remains the most common voting age worldwide,¹⁰ debates on lowering the voting age to 16 have gained momentum among policymakers and practitioners seeking to

⁷ [2024 European elections: National rules](#), EPRS, April 2024.

⁸ [European Elections 2024: Young People Never Had a Chance](#), European Youth Forum, July 2024.

⁹ Analysis by the European Youth Forum (provided in hand copy) noted that in France, 'La France Insoumise,' with 44% young MEPs, garnered the highest support from voters aged 18-24. Similarly, Italy's Alleanza Verdi-Sinistra (33% young MEPs) won a majority of student votes, securing their return to the hemicycle.

¹⁰ [Youth Participation in National Parliaments](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, p. 15.

enhance youth participation.¹¹ Advocates argue that such reforms can boost youth turnout, bring new perspectives to policy discussions, and encourage politicians to prioritize younger voters as a key constituency. It is also seen as a means to promote intergenerational justice by including a demographic significantly impacted by political decisions, yet often excluded from the process.¹² Malta's experience, where reduced voting age increased the electorate by 1.9%, illustrates its potential impact. Studies from [Germany](#) and [Scotland](#), where 16- and 17-year-olds have been allowed to vote, show that early enfranchisement fosters long-term electoral participation, particularly when combined with civic education in schools.¹³ Despite some countries opting not to adopt the change, evidence suggests that lowering the voting age positively influences voter turnout without adverse effects.¹⁴

Globally, there has been a trend toward lowering the minimum candidacy age, reflecting a broader push to enhance youth representation in governance. The global average age for candidacy in lower houses now stands at 21.9 years. Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union indicates that countries permitting candidacy under 21 see an average of 33.4% of parliamentarians under 45, compared to only 27.3% in countries with higher age requirements. This trend demonstrates the positive effect of reducing the candidacy age on increasing political representation for younger generations.¹⁵

2. Youth Quotas

Quotas have been proposed as a tool to improve youth representation. Recommendations encouraging the consideration and adoption of youth quotas have emerged in a number of publications in recent years.¹⁶ For EP elections, one of the recommendations made was to introduce a flexible percentage target for MEPs under 35, reflecting their share in the EU population.¹⁷ While few countries have adopted youth quotas, they have been successfully implemented across Africa (e.g., Morocco, Rwanda), Asia (e.g., Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka), and Europe (e.g., Sweden, Cyprus - voluntary). Quotas can vary in form, including reserved seats, legislated candidate quotas, or voluntary party quotas. Studies show that countries with reserved seats or legislated quotas tend to have higher levels of youth representation compared to those with voluntary party quotas, although reserved seats are often more contentious. The success of youth quotas also depends on factors such as rank order rules and sanctions for non-compliance, to ensure meaningful representation. As an alternative approach, voluntary party quotas, used in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sweden, and

¹¹ Among international bodies, Council of Europe and EP both endorsed lowering of the voting age to 16 years. See Council of Europe Resolution 387: Voting at 16 — Consequences on youth participation at local and regional level, 2015; EP Resolution 2015/2035 (INL) on the reform of the European electoral law, 2015, as well as the latest 2022 EP proposal for reforming the European Electoral Act.

¹² [Raising Their Voices: How effective are pro-youth laws and policies?](#), USAID, IRI, NDI, IFES, 2019.

¹³ See [study](#) on the positive effects of reduced voting age when combined with civic education from Austria.

¹⁴ For instance, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Norway piloted voting for under 18 but decided not to lower the voting age, while Iran has increased it back after having originally lowered. *Op.cit.*, fn 12.

¹⁵ *Op.cit.*, fn. 12, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Op.cit.*, fn 10; [Youth Participation in Electoral Processes - Handbook for Electoral Management Bodies](#), UNDP, 2017; [Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide](#), UNDP, 2013; [The distressing dichotomy between the potential of youth and their actual possibilities to meaningfully participate in decision-making and leadership](#), OSCE PA, July 2022.

¹⁷ See [This time I've voted", but am I represented? Addressing the underrepresentation of young Europeans through the adoption of youth quotas](#), Jacques Delors Centre.

Croatia, rely on party initiative and may take longer to deliver results.¹⁸ Overall, it is recognized that while legal reforms can increase the descriptive representation of youth, broader success in youth political inclusion depends on parallel efforts to empower young politicians as effective and representative voices in governance.¹⁹

3. Increased and Systematic Civic Education

Efforts to increase youth participation increasingly place systematic democracy and citizenship education into spotlight. Such education is seen as vital for preparing young voters to engage meaningfully in elections and is promoted as a core element of civic training in schools across the EU.²⁰ In addition to nurturing informed electoral participation, civic education fosters a sense of identification with European democratic values.²¹ This is particularly important in the context of debates around lowering the voting age. Younger voters need knowledge and skills to make informed choices, and civic education fills this gap by enhancing political awareness and understanding, enabling youth to engage as active citizens. The absence of a unified strategy for civic education across MS has been a point of concern, and a more structured, EU-wide approach could help harmonize electoral participation and improve youth engagement.

Austria's experience demonstrates the benefits of integrating civic education with electoral reforms. When the country lowered its voting age to 16, it implemented a comprehensive democratic education initiative for 14- and 15-year-olds, ensuring that young voters were well-prepared before participating in elections. This approach contributed to the success of the reform, enabling young people to engage more fully in the political process. The European Parliament recognized the importance of such efforts in its 2022 resolution, calling for a comprehensive European strategy to strengthen citizenship education and promote democratic engagement.

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¹⁸ *Op.cit*, fn. 10.

¹⁹ *Op.cit*, fn. 12.

²⁰ See [Citizenship education in national curricula](#), EPRS Briefing, November 2023, for examples of national approaches to integration of citizenship education.

²¹ [Engaging Young People and Women in European Parliament Elections](#), Discussion Paper 3/2019, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019.