

Youth participation in European elections

SUMMARY

Between 6 and 9 June 2024, the 10th European elections will take place in the 27 EU Member States, and around 366 million EU citizens will be called to the polling stations. The elections to the European Parliament represent a crucial moment in EU democracy: they give citizens a say in the EU's political direction. After declining ever since the first European elections in 1979, electoral turnout in the 2019 elections reached an unprecedented 50.6 % (up 8 percentage points compared with 2014). This increase was largely the result of greater youth participation, demonstrating young people's desire for active political participation, including by casting their vote. This desire was also repeatedly expressed during the Conference on the Future of Europe, a major innovative exercise in participatory democracy.

In 2024, four Member States (Belgium, Germany, Malta and Austria) will allow their citizens to vote from the age of 16, and in Greece the voting age is 17. Lowering the voting age is one way to increase youth participation in elections; other instruments include introducing youth quotas, providing for online or postal voting, decreasing the age to stand as candidate, or promoting civic education in school curricula. Some also argue that a higher eligibility age to stand as a candidate may be a key impediment to young people's participation.

European democracy is about much more than just voting – it is also about civic engagement and participation in the democratic process. Over the years, what political participation looks like has evolved, especially among young people. Large-scale protests and rallies, engagement in the digital sphere, and the rise of non-conventional forms of activism – such as 'clicktivism', grassroots activities and boycotts – have become commonplace.



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Introduction

The European elections are a crucial moment in European continental democracy. They give citizens an opportunity to steer the EU's political direction. After declining ever since the first European elections in 1979, electoral [turnout](#) increased in the 2019 elections, reaching an **unprecedented 50.6 %** (up 8 percentage points (pp) compared with 2014). According to a Eurobarometer [survey](#) requested by the European Parliament, this was **largely the result of youth participation**. The survey showed younger voters' impact on turnout: it increased by 14 pp among those aged under 25, and by 12 pp among 25 to 39 year-olds. Among the main reasons for voting, 52 % of respondents mentioned a **sense of civic duty**. A large majority of respondents (68 %) across the EU-28 (then still including the United Kingdom, which has since left the EU) [considered](#) that their country had benefited from EU membership, while (56 %) considered that their voice counted in the EU. Political trust is indeed one of the factors influencing people's willingness to vote. A positive image of the EU is closely related to trust in the EU institutions and policies, and it is an indicator of engagement in the European project. It is nevertheless too soon to assess whether the 2019 increase was the beginning of a long-term positive trend.

Several reasons might explain why the European elections saw this unprecedented turnout, including the combining of simultaneous European and national elections (i.e. multiple electoral campaigns are expected to increase civic mobilisation and voter turnout); the use of alternative forms of voting at home and abroad; the perception that voting is a [civic duty](#), coupled with an increasingly positive perception of the EU; and the possibility to vote over several days or at weekends.

As for youth participation in the 2019 elections, [one observer](#) acknowledged the positive impact of the European Parliament's '[This time I'm voting](#)' campaign and [Snapchat](#) account. The 'This time I'm voting' community gathered more than 300 000 people actively promoting European elections. The Snapchat account aimed to generate engagement and to promote a better understanding of the issues most of interest to young Europeans. According to the same author, one of the most successful elements was the 'ground game' action, i.e. 'young people taking to the street in EU hoodies and engaging their peers through the issues they care about. Using the same language and serving as role models are the very building blocks of mobilising youth and making participation less intimidating'. In an attempt to promote a more emotional message about the need to vote and choose the future we want for future generations, Parliament promoted the '[Choose your Future](#)' video, which in a way departed from traditional communication campaigns by showing couples of parents around Europe just before and after witnessing the birth of their child.

In addition to specific election-related communication activities, Parliament awards the [European Charlemagne Youth Prize](#) to projects run by young EU citizens that promote European and international understanding. Every two years, Parliament also organises the European Youth Event ([EYE](#)) in the Parliament building in Strasbourg, to encourage youth participation in European democratic life. Young people from all across the EU between the ages of 16 and 30, keen to engage in politics, take this opportunity to interact and exchange their views, including with decision-makers. In June 2023, the EYE brought together thousands of young people to share ideas about the future of Europe. On that occasion, the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, [encouraged](#) the young crowd to take an active role in shaping the European project and not to 'retreat to the comfort of easy cynicism or indifference'. Along similar lines, during the [European Youth Forum Level Up](#) event in October 2022, President Metsola welcomed the 'generation of change-makers' and invited them to stand up for the European values.

Ahead of the 2024 European elections, Parliament has set up the [together.eu](#) platform. The idea is to get as many people as possible together, enable them to share their ideas, promote debates and events, complete e-learning modules, and receive [news](#) about youth opportunities. The Parliament's campaign towards the 2024 elections will develop around two key messages: 'delivery' and 'democracy'. Regarding the former, EU citizens will find out more about [what Europe](#) – and in

particular, what the European Parliament – does for them, and how the EU affects their daily life. The campaign's 'democracy' leg will focus on the importance of democratic engagement, which includes, but it is not limited to, voting.

These activities seek not only to increase election turnout but also to promote political participation among young generations more broadly. [Political participation](#) is understood as 'any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere'. Although political participation involves a wide variety of actions, pundits have identified four common features: individual action (as opposed to passive consumption); the voluntary nature of the action (as opposed to legally binding actions); individuals in their capacity as citizens (not as policymakers, for instance); and politics, policies and the political system being the target of the voluntary citizen action.

Myth or reality: Are young European disengaged from politics?

Some pundits argue that young people are far from being apolitical: not only are young people voting, but other [forms](#) of unconventional political activism are surging in the digital sphere (such as mass tweets and email campaigns), as well as on the streets (e.g. grassroots activism, petitions and school strikes). Along similar lines, a 2023 European Parliament [study](#) reports that 'a growing body of data suggests that young people have never withdrawn from politics or become inactive, but engage in various forms'. Social media offers the possibility to mobilise a massive number of people, at an incredible speed, across borders. In the online sphere (e.g. posting on blogs and/or social media), young people inform themselves about politics and current affairs that are relevant to them. This was confirmed by the 2021 [European Parliament Youth Survey](#), which reported that respondents rely mostly on social media (41 %) and news websites (41 %) to find information about politics and social issues.

A 2015 Commission [study](#) found that 42 % of young people (aged between 16 and 24) declare having an interest in politics. According to the same study, 70 % of those eligible to vote went to the polls in the last national elections and considered that the **prime form of political action was voting**. Similarly, the 2021 European Parliament Youth Survey reported that 87 % of the approximately 18 000 people consulted had engaged in at least one political or civic activity. Almost half of them (46 %) had voted in elections either at local, national or EU level, and 42 % had signed a petition. Other forms of civic activities included boycotting or buying certain products on political, ethical or environmental grounds (25 %), and taking part in street protests or demonstrations (24 %). Nevertheless, the political action perceived as being the most effective way to make one's voice heard was reported to be voting in elections (mentioned by 41 %), followed by taking part in protests (33 %) and signing petitions (30 %).

Over the years, the forms taken by political participation have evolved. Large-scale protests and rallies – calling, for instance, for racial equality, environmental protection or social justice – have become commonplace. Street protests have become an unexceptional feature of political life, often amplifying calls for policy reforms. For example, according to [Pew Research](#), 41 % of the 'Black Lives Matter' protesters in 2020 were under the age of 30, while those aged 50 and older were under-represented. Young people are increasingly becoming politically active by demonstrating, protesting, volunteering in associations, and expressing their political opinions via the digital and social media. Regarding the latter, young people also take also the opportunity offered by alternative forms of political engagement initiatives such as smartphone apps, vlogging and social media campaigns. It remains to be seen if these new forms of political activism also work for disengaged citizens, or only for those who were already politically engaged. Therefore, young Europeans do not seem as politically disengaged as might have been assumed. They are [willing](#) to take the future 'in their own hands', as opposed to waiting for policymakers to act, and engage in what some authors define as '[do-it-ourselves politics](#)'. To do so, they take advantage of new opportunities that are non-exclusionary and compatible with traditional forms of engagement.

Facts and figures: Online political engagement

According to 18 156 young people aged 16 to 30 who took part in the 2021 [European Parliament Youth Survey](#), their primary sources of information on political and social issues are social media (41 %) and news websites (41 %). Facebook (54 %), Instagram (48 %), YouTube (35 %) and 'X' (formerly Twitter) (29 %) were reported as being the most consulted social media platforms, although TikTok (14 %) and WhatsApp (10 %) were mentioned too. Use of social media varies across ages, with Facebook more common (69 %) among 26 to 30 year-olds, while the youngest reported using Instagram (64 %) and TikTok (25 %) more frequently.

According to the 2022 [Eurobarometer Media & News Survey](#), around 57 % of more than 52 000 respondents had heard of the European Parliament. The most common sources of information were television, online news platforms, radio, and social media. Together with blogs, social media were the primary source for young respondents. In particular, 15 to 24 year-old respondents mentioned Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. Social media platforms are used not only to communicate with family and friends but also to stay up to date on current events, to share opinions and to interact with larger communities. The most recent [Eurobarometer Media & News Survey](#), requested by the European Parliament in November 2023, confirmed that younger respondents (59 % of 15 to 24 year-olds) are much more likely to use social media platforms than people aged 55 and above; that they are more likely to read articles or posts that appear in their online social networks (41 %); and that 79 % of young Europeans follow influencers or content creators, compared with only 14 % of people aged over 55.

Fostering youth participation

A 2019 [study](#) by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) looked at two pitfalls of European elections, namely **voter absenteeism among young people** and the under-representation of women in the European Parliament. Concerning the former, the study stressed that in the 2014 elections, the average rate of voter absenteeism was 72.2 % for young people between 16 and 24 years, with a voter turnout of less than 25 % in 15 Member States. By way of example, fewer than 6 % of young people in Slovakia voted in the 2014 European elections, compared with 10 % in Finland. The result was a gap in electoral participation of 20 pp in 16 Member States between young voters and older ones (55+). In Ireland, the gap reached 54.5 pp. In only 2 Member States did more young voters go to the polls than older voters: Belgium (where voting is compulsory) and Sweden. The study stressed the importance of involving young people in the European elections, especially those who 'perceive themselves as being socially excluded or disadvantaged', in particular to avoid electing a European Parliament that is relatively 'old'. The average age of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) at the constitutive session in July 2014 was 53; in 14 Member States, no MEP was younger than 35. In only 8 Member States (Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania and the Netherlands) were more than 10 % of the national delegation under 35. After the 2019 elections, the average age of MEPs was [50](#).

Academics and political scientists have suggested many different ways to foster youth participation in elections. The IDEA study, for instance, underlines the role of national parties in **promoting issues that are of particular concern for young people** and in **promoting young candidates**, but also stresses the importance of **civic training and education** in EU-related matters. Experts [argue](#) for **civic and political education** in schools across the EU, and stress the benefits that 'an educated electorate brings to civil society'. Inviting young people to get involved in politics (not only at the time of elections) and informing them about their civic rights could also empower them and help address their disengagement and disillusionment with politics. A recent EPRS [briefing](#) looks at selected examples of national curricula on citizenship education, and underlines how citizenship education programmes help to teach values such as democracy and tolerance. It stresses how citizenship education¹ has become an education policy priority at EU level. In [November 2023](#), EU ministers of education and youth once again stressed the importance of promoting European values and [democratic citizenship](#), not least in view of the 2024 European elections, while democracy is perceived as being under pressure.

Other possibilities to foster young people's engagement include: **lowering the age for voting and standing for election; introducing alternative voting methods such as online or postal voting**; or even **making the vote compulsory**. The IDEA study suggested involving young people in the **drafting of party manifestos**, or in the development of separate party manifestos specifically addressed to young voters. Improving the conditions for accessibility to the ballot box so as to include young [people with disabilities](#), or else providing e-voting alternatives, is also considered important. The possibility to vote from anywhere via the internet would be particularly attractive to tech-savvy (younger) generations.

A gap in representation?

A 'gap in descriptive representation' is [defined](#) as the incongruence between the EU population and the MEPS, which might have important policy implications. While female MEPs' representation has [increased](#) over time since the first European election in 1979, the presence of young MEPs (aged 35 and under) has not seen a meaningful increase (it was 9.1 % in 1979), hence the [risk](#) of over-representation for the older generation, with 'the younger generation having little to say'. The under-representation of the European Parliament with respect to young population is not new – it was already pointed out following the [2014](#) elections. At that time, young people aged between 18 and 35 made up over 20 % of the eligible voting population, in some Member States reaching 30 %, 40 % or even 50 %; in the European Parliament meanwhile, MEPs aged between 18 to 35 at the time of the election represented only 11.4 % of the total.

Multiple reasons might explain this 'gap', including a lack of contact with the party leadership; the idea that [competence](#) among politicians may come with age;² a possible reluctance of well-established politicians to hand over leadership positions to young colleagues; or the lack of proactive measures to boost young people's representation. To bridge this gap, some have suggested introducing '[youth quotas](#)' in the form of legislated candidate quotas. The idea would be to establish quotas in order to achieve a certain percentage of young MEPs (i.e. who have not yet turned 35 on the day of the European elections) to reflect the share of the EU population who are under 35 more effectively. The youth quotas would be applicable together with [gender quotas](#), where those are in place, as quotas can mutually reinforce each other. According to the authors, youth quotas would bring about many positive effects, from the promotion of values such as inclusion and solidarity between generations, to better understanding and increased acceptance of policies in favour of the young generations. It will promote a Parliament that is more socially representative and 'responsive to the demands of young' people. Ultimately, more active democratic participation, and ultimately a higher turnout at the next elections can reasonably be expected if a certain portion of the population feels better represented.

Along similar lines, a 2021 [study](#) by the Inter-Parliamentary Union confirms that the **percentage of young members of parliament remains low** in the 148 parliaments surveyed (only 2.6 % are under 30, and 17.5 % are under 40), with some 25 % of the world's single and lower chambers having no members aged under 30. Europe and America have the highest share of young members. The study found that lower eligibility ages lead to a younger average age in the chambers, and that youth quotas in their different forms (reserved seats, legislated quotas and party quotas) speed up the process of youth representation and are usually combined with gender quotas. The study also found also a correlation between age and gender; indeed, a more equal gender balance is observed among young members.

In addition to youth quotas, the study looked at other ways to enhance youth representation in parliaments, including setting up **networks of young members** (present in 16 % of the 148 parliaments), **caucuses** dedicated to youth issues, and **parliamentary committees** on youth issues (present in 64 % of the 148 parliaments). In this latter case, the committee often covers other policies in addition to youth, including education, culture, science and/or sport. In 2010, the Inter-Parliamentary Union adopted a [resolution](#) stressing the need to involve young people and youth organisations fully in democratic life. The resolution called, in particular: for the setting up of

specialised bodies in parliaments entrusted to work on youth issues; promoting youth participation in the decision-making process; increased participation of young people in parliaments; and the alignment of the minimum voting age with the minimum age to stand as candidate in parliaments.

Young people's attitudes and expectations

A 2019 [Eurobarometer survey](#) asked around 11 000 young people what should be the priorities for future EU action. A large majority of respondents (67 %) answered that protecting the environment and fighting climate change should be the main priority, followed by education and training (56 %) and fighting poverty, economic and social inequalities (56 %). Moreover, 72 % of them declared having voted in local, national or EU elections. This is certainly good news compared with some years earlier, when according to the 2014 [Eurobarometer survey](#), the youngest Europeans (18 to 24 years) were more positive about the EU than the oldest (55+), but far fewer of them turned out to vote.

The June 2021 European Parliament Youth Survey mentioned above found that young people are interested and engaged in politics – almost 9 in 10 respondents (85 %) reporting discussing politics with friends and relatives; 46 % had voted in the most recent elections (local, national or European); 42 % had signed or created a petition; 26 % were active online about politics and social issues; and 24 % had taken part in a demonstration. When asked what they perceived as the most effective action to make their voice heard, respondents indicated elections (41 %) followed by street demonstrations (33 %) and petitions (30 %). Nevertheless, a majority of respondents (70 %) felt they had very little say in matters affecting the EU, and that decision-makers did not pay much attention to young people. Social and environmental matters remained the priorities for young people, together with poverty and social exclusion, unemployment and climate change. Attitudes towards the EU were positive (62 %); 21 % were sceptical and only 5 % were opposed to the European project. The positive attitude increased for those who had enjoyed the opportunity to join activities organised by the EU institutions, including Parliament, as they felt they contributed to the debate or could influence the decision-making process.

In 2022, the [Flash Eurobarometer 502](#) enquired about youth expectations also in relation to the [European Year of Youth](#). It found that the most common expectation was that 'society and decision-makers listen more to youth's opinions and needs' (33 %), and that more efforts are made 'to better integrate young people in the job market' (30 %) and to include disadvantaged young people (28 %). Young people also expressed the will to be more involved in exchanges with their peers in other EU countries, to participate in opportunities to engage directly with politicians at local national and European levels, and to engage with representatives of the EU institutions. Voting in local, national and European elections was considered the most effective action to make the young people's voice heard (39 %), followed by active engagement in social media (30 %), and participation in political movements (26 %) and youth/students organisations (25 %). In terms of expectations from the EU, the respondents referred to preserving peace and security (37 %), increasing job opportunities (33 %), fighting poverty (32 %) and climate change (31 %), and promoting EU values, democracy and human rights (27 %). The 2020 Special Eurobarometer survey on the [Future of Europe](#) confirmed that voting in European elections was considered the best way of ensuring citizens' voices were heard. The European Parliament's [Spring Survey](#) – released in June 2023, just one year before the forthcoming European elections – revealed that a large majority of respondents (71 %) consider that the EU has an impact on their daily lives. While respondents are worried about the economic situation, the cost of living and geopolitical instability, they nevertheless remain optimistic (64 %) as to the EU's future, even more so than in the 2022 Autumn Survey (57 %). **Democracy was the key word in terms of assessing Europe's delivery**, and respondents were particularly satisfied with the EU action to support Ukraine (69 %) and to uphold democratic rights and the rule of law.

Conference on the Future of Europe

The [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) was considered a true exercise of [participatory democracy](#) aiming to involve a diverse panel of actors (institutional actors, civil society representatives, social partners and randomly selected citizens) in a debate over the possible way forward for the European project.

The [Joint Declaration](#) on the Conference on the Future of Europe expressly recognised the contribution of 'young Europeans playing a central role in shaping the future of the European project', requested that specific events be dedicated to young people. In its 2020 [resolution](#) on the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Parliament proposed the creation of two '**Youth Agoras**', to provide young people with their own forum. However, this proposal was eventually rejected. Nevertheless, of the 800 citizens invited to debate and put forward recommendations on the future of Europe, one third was between 16 and 25 years old. The result of this exercise of direct democracy was a set of around 200 citizens' recommendations, many of which suggested strengthening youth engagement in democratic processes (see in particular [Panel 1](#) and [Panel 2](#)). The Conference, which concluded its work in May 2022, resulted in [326 specific measures](#) that also covered youth and youth engagement.

This gave a clear indication on how citizens and institutional actors see the role and impact of the EU in meeting the challenges ahead. In particular, one proposal stressed that the EU and its Member States should '**focus on the specific needs of young people across all relevant policies**', and to achieve this objective, the conference proposed a set of [measures](#) touching on: increased youth participation in the democratic and decision-making processes at all levels; organisation of citizens' panels also with children (e.g. 10 to 16 year-olds) in schools; and development of an EU 'Youth Test' so that all new legislation and policy is subject to a youth-focused impact assessment. Other measures concerned more specifically young people and European elections; for instance, they suggested lowering the voting age to 16 years, introducing EU citizenship education in schools, and requesting national political parties to ensure that younger candidates are on their lists for European elections. Yet other measures pointed to need of developing a 'full civic experience' for young Europeans, to ensure that their voice is also heard beyond elections.

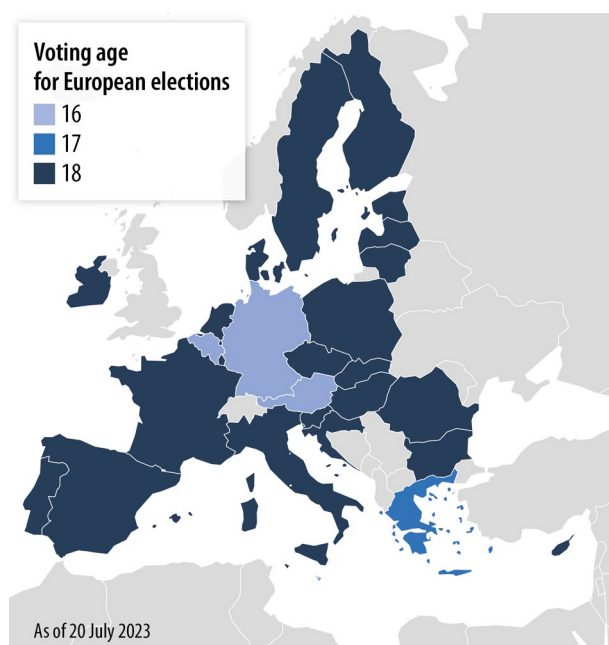
Lowering voting age

[Article 10\(3\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) recognises EU citizens' right to participate in the EU's democratic life, while [Article 20\(2\)\(b\)](#) on the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) recognises the right to vote but also to stand as candidates in both European elections and municipal elections in the Member State of residence, even for those who are not nationals of that Member State. EU mobile citizens enjoy these rights under the same conditions as the nationals of the host Member State ([Article 22](#) TFEU and [Article 39](#) – Right to vote and to stand as a candidate in European elections – of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights), based on the principle of non-discrimination on grounds of nationality within the scope of application of the Treaties. The rules applicable to European Parliament elections are a combination of the common principles established in the [European Electoral Act of 1976](#), as amended by [Council Decision 2002/772](#), and the different national legal acts implementing those principles.

In line with Article 8 of the European Elections Act, Member States can set the **minimum voting age** in their domestic legislation. As of December 2023, the [voting age](#) is set at **16 in Belgium, Germany, Malta and Austria**, at **17 in Greece**, and at 18 in the remaining Member States. Germany changed its electoral law most recently in 2023, Belgium did so in 2022, and Malta in 2018 (see Figure 1). The voting age was lowered in Austria from 18 to 16 as part of the 2007 electoral law reform. This means that around 1 760 000 young voters (16 and 17 years old) will vote for the first time in the 2024 European elections (around 260 000 in Belgium and 1.5 million in Germany), while in total, the population of young voters will amount to 2 million, also including Malta (8 500), Greece (105 000) and Austria (174 000).³ In May 2022, Parliament tabled a [proposal](#) for a Council regulation aiming to

replace the European Electoral Act of 1976 (Council Decision (EU, Euratom) [2018/994](#)). According to recital 17 of the proposal, 'a single harmonised age for voting and for standing as a candidate should be introduced across the Union in order to ensure equality and to avoid discrimination'. Article 4(1) of the proposal sets the age at 16, but allows for exceptions for 'existing constitutional orders establishing a minimum voting age of 18 or 17 years of age'. Should the voting age for European elections be lowered to 16 years in all 27 Member States, the electorate would increase from 366 million to 375 million citizens, representing an increase of 2.5%.⁴ The [proposal](#) is currently being analysed by the Council, with hardly any prospect of being unanimously approved by the Council and by all the Member States in accordance with their constitutional requirements ahead of the 2024 European elections.

Figure 1 – Voting in the Member States



Source: Compiled by EPRS, May 2023, updated August 2023. Graphic by Samy Chahri.

Whether lowering the voting age leads to a higher turnout in the long term as well remains to be seen, although there is a growing body of evidence that corroborates this idea. Researchers have been trying to understand whether 16 year-old first-time voters could change the well-known lifecycle pattern for political engagement, with the decline in voter participation during early adulthood years, i.e. during the mid-twenties. A number of countries in Europe and around the world have lowered the voting age for certain elections, commonly local elections, or all type of elections (local, national, referendums, etc.). One of the first countries was Brazil, which in 1988 lowered the voting age to 16 years for all elections, including presidential elections. In Europe, reforms along these lines are relatively recent, although some studies have been conducted on elections in Austria, the United Kingdom (Scotland) and Germany. In Scotland, 16 year-olds were called to the

ballot boxes in 2014 for the independence referendum, and then in 2015, the new franchise was extended to all types of Scottish elections. The voting age in Austria was lowered from 18 to 16 years as part of the 2007 electoral law reform, and [included](#): municipal council elections (*Gemeinderatswahlen*); provincial council elections (*Landtagswahlen*); National Council elections (*Nationalratswahlen*); the federal presidential election (*Wahl zum Bundespräsidenten*); European Parliament elections (*Wahlen zum Europäischen Parlament*); and referendums, petitions for referendums and popular consultations (*Volksabstimmungen, Volksbegehren und Volksbefragungen*). A 2020 [analysis](#) of five elections in Austria revealed that 16 and 17 year old voters were more likely to vote than older first-time voters, meaning that voter turnout tends to decrease for 18 year old voters when 'young people leave the nest'. Moreover, 16 and 17 year old voters tend to have a more optimistic vision of politics and higher level of trust in the government. The same analysis argued that awareness-raising campaigns and compulsory civic education contributed to the higher turnout.

A recent [study](#), following the 2021 German general elections, argues that early enfranchisement may have a positive lasting impact on electoral turnout. The study, which compared turnout rates of young people who could vote at age 16 with those who could not vote, argued that, under certain conditions, early voting 'may provide opportunities for youth political [engagement](#)'. In particular, turnout immediately increases when young voters still live with their parents, while young people who move out of their parents' homes are often likely to stop voting for several years. In other [words](#),

young voters may develop a habit of voting lifelong if they start voting while 16 or 17 years old and still living with their parents. However, when the right to vote at 16 or 17 years old is recognised for some but not all types of election, 'temporary disenfranchisement' may occur. Indeed, in some countries, 16 year-olds can vote in local elections while the voting age remains 18 for national elections. For example, a 2022 [article](#) reports that 'temporary disenfranchisement' had occurred in 46 elections in Germany since 1996, when the first state had lowered the voting age. Being barred from voting after having voted for certain elections may generate a sense of frustration, negatively impacting citizens' satisfaction with the democratic system. Young citizens may wonder why a political system that considers them capable of voting disenfranchises them on the occasion of another election. This is why a more consistent approach to voting age regulations might have a longer and lasting effect in voters' turnout. The European Parliament's [resolution](#) of 3 May 2022, for instance, called on the Member States to introduce a single, harmonised age for both passive and active voting rights.

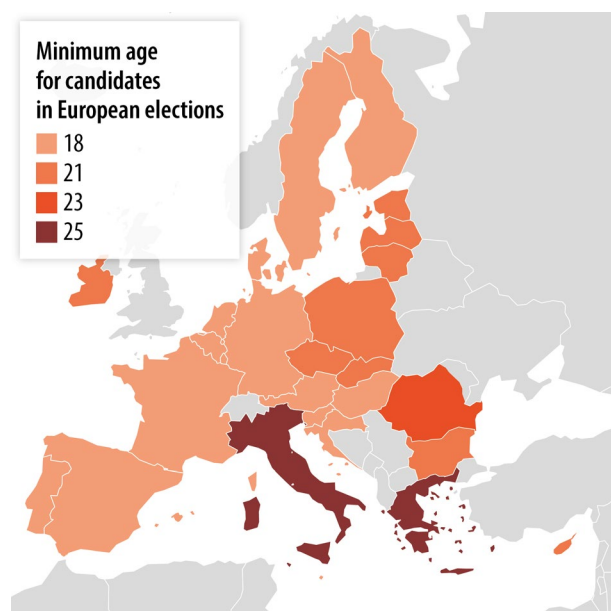
Along similar lines, another [study](#) looked at the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary elections and distinguished two categories of voters: those who were first enfranchised at ages 16 or 17 and those who were aged 18 years or older when they were allowed to vote. It concluded that, lowering the voting age overall had a 'positive long-term consequences for turnout', in particular if voters had attended civic education classes at school. Nevertheless, according to the same report, lowering the voting age had no effect on non-electoral forms of political engagement such as taking part in demonstrations or signing a petition. The report put forward several recommendations, including strengthening civic education classes in schools, providing young people with opportunities to discuss political issues, and improving data collection so as to understand more clearly the impact of voting age reform. A 2018 [study](#) focusing on elections in Denmark even argued that young voters would have a 'trickle-up' effect on their parents' voting behaviour, as parents will be more likely to vote in order to set the example and boost children's civic engagement. The study looked at groups of parents of eligible and non-eligible young voters across four elections in Denmark, comparing their turnout levels. On average, parents of young voters were more likely to vote by 2.7 pp, but only when parents lived with their children.

While these and other studies stress the [link](#) between early voting and acquiring the habit of voting, they also argue that not voting at the first eligible election may lead to 'a lifetime of abstention or just sporadic voter participation'. This would be confirmed by the constant decline in turnout since 1945 in the vast majority of established democracies, in particular after the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in the 1960s and 1970s. However, commentators have [pointed out](#) that the voting behaviour of those aged 16 to 17 is not necessarily the same as that of 18 to 19 year-olds. Young people aged 16 to 17 usually still live with their parents, are in high school and know their community very well. Several subsequent [studies](#) have also shown that lowering the voting age overall to 16 or 17 has a positive impact on political engagement and civic attitude. However, it must be recognised that the data cover a relatively short period and a limited number of countries; nevertheless, pundits could not find any negative effects in any of the countries analysed.⁵

Age to stand as a candidate

The minimum [age for standing as a candidate](#) in European Parliament elections is also determined by the domestic legislation of each Member State. Across the EU, this age currently varies as follows: the rules in 15 Member States provide for 18 years of age, 9 for 21 years (Bulgaria, Czechia, Ireland, Estonia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia), 1 (Romania) for 23 years, and 2 (Greece and Italy) for 25 years. In 2021, Belgium [lowered](#) the minimum age from 21 to 18, and those new rules will apply for the 2024 elections (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Age to stand as a candidate for the European Parliament



Source: Compiled by EPRS, May 2023. Graphic by Samy Chahri.

Article 5(1) of Parliament's [proposal](#) for a Council regulation aiming to replace the European Electoral Act of 1976 (Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2018/994) sets the age to stand as candidate at 18, and – in contrast to the voting age – does not provide for exceptions.

The above-mentioned study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union argued that the eligibility age to stand as candidate is a 'key impediment' to youth turnout. In 69 % of the surveyed countries, the voting age was lower than the age to stand as a candidate; moreover, the eligibility age increases for upper chambers. The report therefore suggested aligning the ages to vote and to be elected in order 'to promote the political empowerment' of young people and their representatives in parliaments. A 1995 [recommendation](#) and two resolutions from [2008](#) and [2011](#) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) stressed the need to tackle the low turnout in elections of young people between

16 and 24, and the need to create the conditions to enhance young people's active participation in civil and institutional life. Lowering the voting age and the age to stand as a candidate in all types of election was one of the points specifically mentioned in the 2011 PACE resolution in order to tackle the progressive marginalisation of young people from political life.

European Parliament position

In its September 2023 [resolution](#) on parliamentarism, European citizenship and democracy, Parliament stressed once again the importance of youth participation in the EU's democratic life. Parliament proposed the creation of a 'European Agora', a structured participation mechanism that should discuss the EU priorities and provide input to the consultation process on the European Commission's annual work programme. Parliament suggested that a youth component of the agora should form a 'European Youth Assembly, which may monitor the application of a "youth check" throughout the EU's legislative process as requested by the [Conference on the Future of Europe]'. In addition, Parliament proposed the establishment, together with the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, of a 'mechanism with representatives such as young local elected politicians, representatives of youth civil society and of social partners, which should cooperate closely with the Youth Assembly to implement the youth check; underlines in this regard the need to engage with young people in particular in a political debate on the future of Europe'.

Parliament's [resolution](#) of 3 May 2022 on European elections recalled that the minimum age for eligibility to stand as a candidate across the 27 Member States varies between 18 and 25, and that the minimum age for eligibility to vote varies between 16 to 18; it called for the introduction of a single, harmonised age for, respectively, passive and active voting rights across Member States, and recommended Member States to introduce a minimum voting age of 16, without prejudice to existing constitutional provisions. In its [resolution](#) of 6 April 2022, Parliament stated that it was important to focus on developing curricula and national assessments in citizenship education, and called for a comprehensive European strategy on European civic and citizenship education.

Parliament praised the [Ambassador Schools Programme](#), which increases students' awareness of European parliamentary democracy and of European values, as well as the [Euroscola initiative](#), which offers a practical experience in the Chamber of the European Parliament to secondary school students. Parliament also highlighted the need to increase participation of young generations in the electoral processes in its [resolution](#) of 26 November 2020. In the same resolution, Parliament welcomed the high turnout of the 2019 European elections, also thanks to the increased participation of young people, and called on the Commission and Council to consider young people's concerns, 'which are critical for the lives of the next generations'. In its resolution of 14 December 2021 on a [European Year of Youth 2022](#), Parliament mentioned the need for the Commission to establish strong links with the Council of Europe's '[Youth for Democracy](#) – Democracy for Youth'. Parliament's [resolution](#) of 18 May 2021 on the Erasmus+ programme called for the recognition of the need to enhance youth participation in democratic life. Finally, in a 2018 [resolution](#) on the implementation of the EU youth strategy, Parliament recommended that young people, in particular those with fewer possibilities, should be able to play an active role in public life and participate in the decision-making process at EU level. Moreover, Member States should encourage the participation of national, regional and local decision-makers in the structured dialogue with young people.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The EPRS document uses the concept of [citizenship education](#) as 'the subject area promoted in schools with the aim of fostering the harmonious co-existence and mutually beneficial development of individuals and of their communities. In democratic societies, citizenship education supports students in becoming active, informed and responsible citizens, who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and for their communities at the local, regional, national and international level'.
- ² It is worth mentioning that the idea of political competence coming at a later age has been [refuted](#). In the 21st century, thanks to globalisation and digitalisation, young people are increasingly involved in the political debate.
- ³ EPRS own calculation based on Eurostat data ([DEMO_PJAN](#)) on EU population in 2022.
- ⁴ EPRS own calculation based on Eurostat data ([DEMO_PJAN](#)) on EU population in 2022.
- ⁵ A completely different question is whether or not 16 year old voters are mature enough to vote responsibly. [Supporters](#) and opponents have both put forward arguments to substantiate their positions.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

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