Mr Gut, are 16-year-olds ready for the right to vote?

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The voting age of 16 has often been discussed in Swiss politics at cantonal and national level. What role do teenagers and young adults actually play in Swiss politics and how could their participation be encouraged? Robin Gut talks about the voting age and the political participation of young people.



What are the arguments in favour of and against lowering the voting age to 16?

Robin Gut:

- Those in favour want young people to have a say in political decisions that will affect them the longest and most. This applies, for example, to climate protection or pension provision. This need has been given greater weight with the protests of the climate youth. Another argument is demographics: the Swiss voting population is getting older and older, and towards the end of the decade the median voter will be over 60 years old. The voting age of 16 would slow down this trend, but not stop it.

  Furthermore, from the point of view of political education, there are some arguments in favour of the voting age of 16: if pupils are allowed to apply in practice what they have learned towards the end of

compulsory schooling, this can increase political interest and political participation. However, this effect only applies to young people with Swiss citizenship. In contrast, dissatisfaction could increase among non-Swiss young people because they are not allowed to have a say in politics.

- Opponents are particularly bothered by the fact that citizens should have a say in politics even though they are not yet of legal age. This means, for example, that they do not yet have to pay taxes, are not yet subject to compulsory military service or are not yet fully legally capable of acting. The argument of being of legal age and the associated rights and obligations is used in particular against the right to be elected from the age of 16. From a political science perspective, however, there is no compelling reason not to grant the right to vote until the age of majority. If there is the political will to do so, the right to stand for election from the age of 16 can also be realised, as the example of Baden-Württemberg shows.

  A further argument put forward by opponents is the accusation of low political interest, low participation and mental immaturity among young people. However, scientific evidence contradicts this argument, and political interest or mental maturity are no reason to exclude adult citizens from voting. Furthermore, right-wing parties fear that young people tend to vote to the left and would therefore lose voter share. Post-election surveys in Switzerland support this argument. However, those parties that best represent the opinions and interests of young citizens and the zeitgeist would primarily benefit from the voting age of 16 – as experience from other European countries shows, these do not necessarily have to be left-wing parties. In general, 16- and 17-year-old citizens are a very heterogeneous population group with diverse opinions and interests.

From an empirical point of view, 16- and 17-year-olds are therefore capable of making political decisions. The voting age of 16 also shows no or positive effects on the political interest and political participation of young people. Ultimately, it is therefore a normative judgement for the current electorate to decide whether they want 16- and 17-year-olds to have a say in politics.

Why is the implementation of the voting age of 16 failing in so many cantons and at federal level?

The issue of the voting age of 16 is a low priority at both federal and cantonal level. The population perceives other policy areas such as climate policy, immigration and health policy as more urgent and important. This is probably also due to the low political weight of young people, their low financial power and their low level of political organisation. Furthermore, the party-political divide on this issue is likely to mean that the voting age of 16 will not be a cross-party issue for the time being. Youth movements such as the Climate Youth, which from an electoral point of view belong to a particular political camp, are likely to accentuate this trend.

Beyond the low priority and the political divide, the electorate is generally very sceptical about extending the right to vote. Historically, the Swiss electorate has extended the right to vote to other population groups slowly and in small steps. As has been shown with women's suffrage or the voting age of 18, it often takes several attempts and many years of political debate, which is mainly due to the context of federalism and direct democratic popular rights. The cantons and municipalities served as political test laboratories. Some cantons took on pioneering roles, while others acted hesitantly. At federal and cantonal level, it often took several attempts to convince the electorate to extend voting rights. These patterns are repeated with the voting age of 16.

At federal and cantonal level, the majority of initiatives were initiated by members of parliament, not by collecting signatures. This suggests that elected politicians are more open to the issue than the electorate. At federal level, the voting age of 16 has so far failed primarily because no canton apart from Glarus voted in favour of the issue in 2007. Outside of Glarus, the electorate in the cantons has so far voted eight times on the voting age of 16, each time with a two-thirds or greater majority in favour. The acceptance of the voting age of 16 at the cantonal assembly in Glarus is therefore not representative of the rest of Switzerland and has not triggered a general trend.

What role does the age of voters play in the Swiss political landscape?

Age is not the primary political cleavage in Switzerland. Party political differences, differences between the language regions or the urban-rural divide are more important. Nevertheless, we have noticed that younger voters are outvoted by older voters on issues that are relevant to them, such as pension provision or environmental protection. The most recent example of this is the popular initiative on the 13th AHV pension, which was rejected by a majority of those under 40. Another example is the failed referendum on the CO2 Act of 2021, which was accepted by a majority of under 40-year-olds. As the electorate continues to age, young people will more often lose votes on issues relevant to them in the future. As things stand today, we assume that age will become more relevant as a political cleavage. However, the role of age as a political cleavage needs to be analysed more systematically.

To what extent would lowering the voting age change young people's participation in voting?

In general, the political participation of young citizens is lower than that of older citizens. Based on scientific findings from Germany, Austria and the UK, we assume that lowering the voting age would increase political participation among young people. This is partly because young people are more firmly anchored in their social environment at the age of 16 than at 18. In particular, dealing with political issues at school could increase participation in the long term. For example, school classes could discuss political issues in greater depth in the run-up to a vote or an election. Pupils with Swiss citizenship could then immediately convert the knowledge they have acquired into a political decision. As they could influence the political process, this would automatically increase young people's interest

in politics.

What obstacles and hurdles prevent young people from participating in politics?

Teenagers and young adults often have other priorities than politics. They have their first romantic relationships, finish school, decide on a career and break away from their parents. In this situation, politics is often not a priority.

In addition, studies have shown that young adults are more unconventionally or selectively involved in politics. This means that they attend demonstrations more often or express their views on political issues online. In contrast, they do not routinely take part in votes, but only if the issue is important to them. In Switzerland, it can also be seen that interest in voting is far higher than interest in elections. In countries without direct democratic instruments, this aversion to representative democracy could represent a potential hurdle to young people's participation.

How can young people be motivated to participate more in politics?

In our view, it would be important not only to focus on political participation, but also to make young people's everyday lives more participatory in general and give them responsibility. This could mean living and promoting more participative democratic structures at school, at work or in clubs. Democracy and participation should not be limited to political processes, but should be promoted in all areas of life.

In addition, a Yes to the voting age of 16 could be a signal from society to young people that we take them seriously and value their opinions. This signal could also include the right to vote from the age of 16. Should the electorate one day elect a 17-year-old teenager as mayor, this would send a clear signal to young people that they are part of the political process and that they are taken seriously.

How would increased participation of young people in voting change the political agenda and political outcomes in Switzerland?

We estimate that 16- and 17-year-olds would make up around 2.4% of an enlarged electorate. Based purely on demographics, their direct political influence would therefore be limited and not quantitatively comparable to the introduction of women's suffrage in 1971. Like women, young citizens are a very heterogeneous population group with a wide range of interests and opinions. Major political shifts would therefore not be expected following a lowering of the voting age. In elections, experience from other European countries has shown that it depends very much on the context which party can benefit from the voting age of 16. In the Swiss context of direct democratic referendums, the votes of young people could well tip the balance in very close votes with a pronounced age-specific conflict line.

However, increased participation by young people in votes and elections should above all result in political parties focussing more strongly on this new voter segment. This could contribute to a greater balance of interests

between the generations. In our view, this balancing of interests is crucial because it is already foreseeable today that the electorate will continue to age and the age-specific lines of political conflict will increase. We should therefore generally work towards giving more weight to the political interests of the younger generations in the longer term.

In addition to the voting age of 16, it would be conceivable, for example, to take greater account of the interests of young people with a “cantonal vote”, analogous to the consideration of cantonal interests with the current majority of the cantons. Possible further developments would also be the right to vote from an earlier age or family voting rights. It would also be conceivable to give greater political consideration to the interests of unborn generations. Sweden and Wales, for example, have developed initial approaches in this area that could also be pursued and tested in Switzerland.

Robin Gut

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Born 1989 in Zurich, 2009-2014 Bachelor’s degree in Political Science and Modern History at the University of Zurich. Subsequently 2015-2018 Monomaster in Political Science with the track “Democracy, Development and International Relations” at the University of Zurich. In addition, he conducted research as an assistant to Prof. Daniel Bochsler at the Centre for Democracy Aarau as part of the Swiss National Science Foundation project “the Genesis of Consociational Oligarchies”. From 2018-2021, Robin worked as a security policy advisor in the Federal Administration.

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