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16.10.2018, ANALYSIS

Youth and the European Citizens' Initiative: an opportunity for the EU

Brussels wants to improve the European Citizens' Initiative. The Parliament, the Commission and the Council are on board, though not fully in agreement. Not lowering the minimum age from 18 to 16 would be a missed opportunity for the EU. But there is still resistance from the Council.

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The European Union likes to talk of a "Europe of Citizens", though it struggles with directly involving citizens in policy-making. The current negotiations demonstrate that the Parliament, the Commission and the Council want to improve the citizens' initiative. Otherwise there is a risk that citizens may use it less and less and that it will become obsolete.

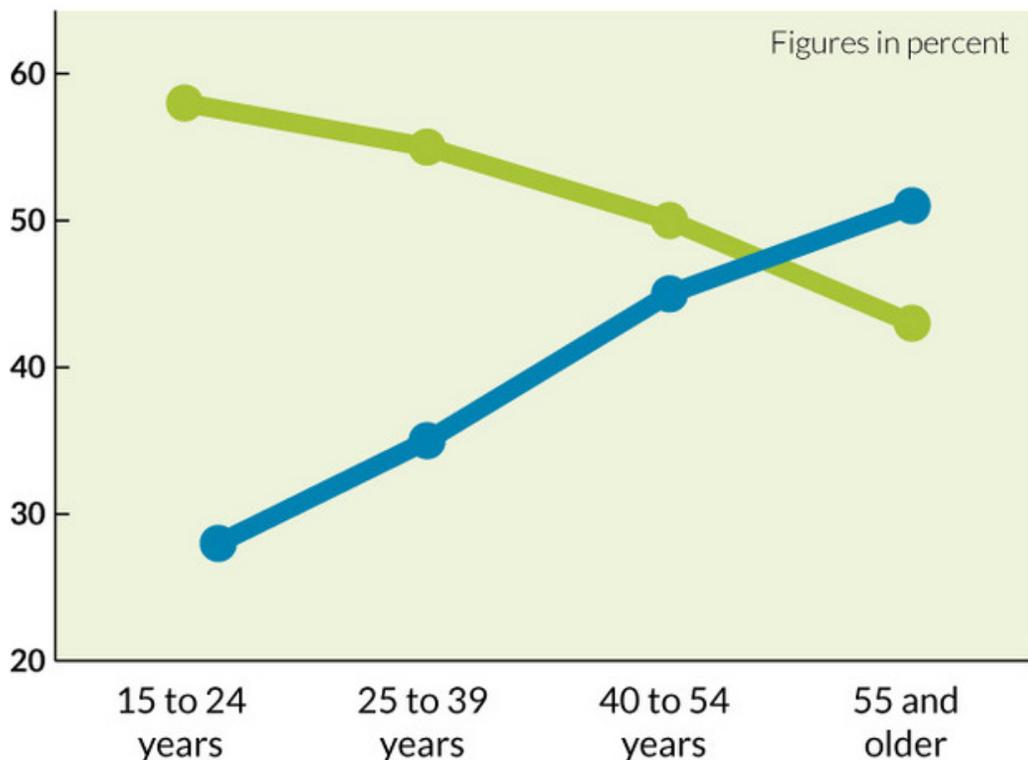
Importantly: the Commission, supported by the European Parliament and many civil society organisations, proposed lowering the minimum age for supporting citizens' initiatives from 18 to 16 years. This seemingly small step could make a big difference. However, the Council still shows resistance. This is because the ECI regulation links the minimum age for supporters to the active voting-age in European elections. This is not a binding principle though. There is a lot to be said in favour of extending the ECI to people not yet allowed to vote.

The citizens' initiative from the age of 16 - an opportunity for the EU

If you want to make the European Union more citizen-friendly and counteract EU scepticism, you should increase youth-involvement. EU surveys show that young EU citizens are firm supporters of the European idea. On the other hand, voter turnout among young people has declined dramatically in European elections. This makes it all the more important that the EU addresses this challenge. Reducing the ECI's age of support from 18 to 16 could be a first step.

The EU and its youth

High approval but low voter participation



● Approval of EU-democracy

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 89. Spring 2018.

● **Voter participation**
(starting at 18 in all countries except Austria)

Source: European Commission: Post-election survey 2014.

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The EU enjoys broad approval among the younger generation, but cannot turn it into real political support.

Not voting but getting involved. A gateway towards political participation

Research shows that the ECI fulfils the participation needs of young EU citizens. Traditional, long-term practices of political participation, for example through party membership and associations, are less and less appealing to young people.

Online initiatives are trendy

Top 3 forms of participation among EU youths



Interviewed were young people in the UK, France, Spain, Poland, Hungary and Finland.

Source: Cammaerts et al. (2015): Youth Participation in Democratic Life: Stories of Hope and Disillusion, p. 119

The ECI fulfils the participation needs of the younger EU citizens. It is digital, accessible, and provides the opportunity to support a specific political cause.

Young people are not apolitical; they get involved on their own terms. Hence, the European Citizens' Initiative is a perfect fit. It is digital, accessible, and provides the opportunity to support a specific political cause.

As a democratic instrument, the ECI is one of a kind. It has a low threshold and provides a non-binding form of participation for putting an issue on the political agenda. It can broaden the public dialogue and raise interest in politics and political participation.

Raising interest in politics early on pays off

In general, an increased interest in politics leads to greater political participation. Vice-versa: the right to participate can generate political interest. Furthermore, people who participated once are much more likely to get involved again. The right to participate in a European Citizens' Initiative has the potential to increase interest in European politics as a whole as well as in European parliamentary elections in the long run.

"From several examples we know: The opportunity to actively participate can turn indifferent observers into active participants. The EU can and should learn from this," says Dominik Hierlemann, participation expert of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and co-author of the study.

Publication



PUBLICATION

EINWURF 5 / 2018 - The Reform of the European Citizens' Initiative: Not for the Youth?

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