Voter turnout has been steadily declining for years in Germany for federal, state and municipal elections. That harms the democracy because elections are less and less representative and feature more and more social division. Lowering the voting age could halt this trend in the long run.

The earlier and more frequently first-time and young voters cast their ballots, the higher general voter turnout will be over time. By allowing voting beginning at the age of 16, voter participation could be raised from 71.5 percent for the 2013 Bundestag elections to up to 80 percent by 2049. This is the conclusion reached by the "Wählen ab 16" ("Voting from 16") study conducted by the
Bertelsmann Stiftung. In three scenarios, it forecasts the future levels of voter turnout at the federal level – with and without 16-year-old first-time voters.

The baseline scenario calculates future voter participation based on the current voting behavior of all age groups: While young and first-time voters are on average going to the polls less often, voter turnout is almost continuously climbing as voters get older. If this age effect persists, the study forecasts that voter turnout will drop to 68 percent by the 2049 federal elections. Lowering the voting age to 16 could prevent this from happening.

“If we can manage to motivate young people to go to the polls earlier and more frequently, overall voter participation could also rise over the long term.”

Robert Vehrkamp, Director of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program

Young and Active: Possible Consequences of Lowering the Voting Age to 16

Lowing the voting age plays a decisive role in bringing about a long-term rise in voter turnout. As 16-year-olds are still firmly anchored in the structures of their schools and families, educational measures can be used to make them more interested in politics.

The study’s mobilization scenario shows the concrete effects of lowering the voting age to 16. If doing so manages to raise first-time voter participation by roughly a third compared to what it was for the 2013 Bundestag election, overall voter turnout could climb to nearly 80 percent by 2049. In contrast, the demobilization scenario anticipates that first-time voter participation will decrease by roughly a third if the voting age is not lowered to 16. As a result, overall voter turnout in the same time frame would drop to almost 58 percent.

In addition to positively affecting the number of people who go to the polls, having younger voters would also reduce the social division of election results. “Young people from socially disadvantaged and less educated milieus are voting less and less often,” said Vehrkamp. “The social division of voter turnout among young people between the ages of 18 and 29 is three times as pronounced as it is with all other eligible voters in the other age groups. A higher turnout of first-time voters could mitigate political inequality in Germany.”
Voting Should Be Part of Everyday School Life

However, lowering the voting age is not simply about flipping a switch. As has been shown in Austria and three federal states of Germany (Hamburg, Brandenburg and Bremen), lowering the voting age to 16 can only be a success if it is accompanied by measures that specifically target first-time voters. Educational measures in schools are particularly required for this, as they can reach over 90 percent of all 16- and 17-year-olds in Germany. The fact that young people can be motivated to vote can be inferred from experiences from Austria’s 2008 federal parliamentary elections. In this case, the estimated voter turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds (77 percent) almost exactly corresponded with overall voter turnout (78.8 percent).

Germans are in favor of having these kinds of motivational measures in schools. A representative survey conducted by the Allenbach Institute, a prominent opinion-research organization in Germany, found that more than 8 in 10 young people and more than 6 in 10 of all people in Germany are in favor of integrating voting more strongly into everyday school life.

You can download the complete "Wählen ab 16" study on the right side (in German only; English summary pp. 90-91).
Additional Information

Additional Information

The study is based on election analyses and representative statistics from Germany’s Federal Returning Officer and three state-level statistical offices: that of Bremen and the combined offices of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein as well as Berlin and Brandenburg. The data for Austria came from academic studies and especially from publications that appeared in the context of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES). Statements regarding the social selectivity among young people are based on an empirical analysis of the database of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). Information on age structure is based on data from Germany’s Federal Statistical Office (Destatis). Forecasts on demographic trends from the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) in Berlin were used when estimating social aging processes in Germany.

Furthermore, the study also considered the results of a representative survey of the population on the issue of lowering the legal voting age to 16. The survey was conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in September 2015 by the Allensbach Institute (IfD Allensbach), one of Germany’s most respected opinion and market research institutes.

PROJECTS

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