Youth Participation

Posted by: European Youth Forum

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Though youth participation is not a core competence of the European Union, the EU institutions (including the European Parliament) are nonetheless tasked with 'supporting, coordinating or supplementing the actions of the member states'. They are mandated by Article 165 of the treaties to 'encourage the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe'. So, while the EP cannot pass binding legislation in this area like national parliaments, it must instead support initiatives, make recommendations to the Member States and look to improve how young people engage with the EU institutions themselves.

During the current mandate, the European Parliament has made certain progress on youth participation, but needs to keep pushing this topic in the

progress on youth participation, but needs to keep pushing this topic in the lead up to the 2019 elections. The 2016 European Youth Event (EYE) provided young people with an opportunity to discuss directly the Parliament's work, but the overall buy-in from MEPs was low and must improve. In a positive step, the EP officially backed a voting age of 16 for the first time ever, recommending that Member States trial the measure to engage young voters. It also adopted two important positions emphasising the importance of comprehensive, well-funded education systems, and affirmed the importance of critical skills as a precursor to active citizenship and participation from young people.

Reform of the electoral law of the EU - Amendment to remove vote at 16

Vote Breakdown

276
For

323
Against

26
Abstain

125
Absent

300 votes required to pass.

In November 2015, the European Parliament voted on a legislative initiative resolution to reform EU elections. The overall report recommended that EU Member States consider a voting age of 16, but an amendment (Am. 44) sought to remove this recommendation. Am. 44 was defeated by a narrow margin of 323-276 votes, and thus the European Parliament officially supported vote at 16 for the first time.

Interestingly, while the overall report was drafted by co-rapporteurs Hübner (EPP, PL) and Leinen (S&D, GE), MEP Hübner later submitted Am. 44 that would have removed the vote at 16 recommendation. Given that MEP Hübner co-authored the report (backing V16) and voted in plenary to keep the V16 recommendation in place, it is likely that this amendment was somewhat of a compromise within her own political group – the European People's Party (EPP) largely do not support a lower voting age, and it enabled her colleagues to vote to remove it from the report if they wished. While a small number of EPP MEPs (26 including MEP Hübner) voted to support vote at 16, the vast majority of their party colleagues (158) attempted to remove

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'Ward Report' on intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education

Vote Breakdown

👤554
For

👤147
Against

👤12
Abstain

👤37
Absent

351 votes required to pass.

The 'Ward Report' on intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education (submitted by MEP Julie Ward, S&D, UK) was supported by a majority of MEPs, passing by a strong margin of 554-147 votes. The report was largely backed by the European Parliament's biggest groups: EPP, S&D, Greens/EFA, ALDE, and GUE-NGL. The smaller ECR, ENF and EFDD groups were mostly against the motion.

Key Processes

Direct Dialogue

In terms of **direct dialogue with young people,** the European Youth Event (EYE) brought thousands of young people together in Strasbourg to debate Europe's future.

Though the initiative represents a positive step from the EP to engage directly with young people and provide them with an opportunity for input, the buy-in from MEPs was quite low. Only a select few MEPs, such as EP Vice-President Mairead McGuinness (EPP, Ireland) and Julie Ward (S&D, UK) made the effort to travel to Strasbourg. The recommendations from the EYE were brought directly to the EP committees, giving MEPs a chance to engage more seriously with the initiative.

-Read the final report from the EYE here

Lower voting age

The EP also strongly backed a **voting age of 16** for the first time. In a joint report authored by MEPs Huebner (EPP, Poland) & Leinen (S&D, Germany) to amend the EP's own electoral system, a recommendation was included that all Member States trial a voting age of 16 for European Parliament elections.

This measure was included as a potentially effective means of boosting youth participation – paired with comprehensive citizenship education in schools, vote at 16 could help instill a habit of voting at a younger age and raise lifelong participation rates. The vote at 16 recommendation was supported with 323 votes in favour to 276 against, and passed primarily due to strong support from the S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL groups. The majority of the EPP and ECR MEPs voted to remove the recommendation but were unsuccessful. Similarly, a report from MEP Schöpflin (EPP, Hungary) on reforming the European Citizens Initiative (ECI), which allows citizens to demand EU action on specific topics, recommended lowering the participation age to 16. This again provided the EP with an opportunity to affirm its faith in the political capacity of younger citizens, and the report passed with 527 votes in favour to 39 votes against.

-View the voting data for the vote at 16 section of the Leinen/Huebner report here, via VoteWatch.eu. See a response from the European Youth Forum here

-View the voting data for the Schöpflin report here, via VoteWatch.eu

Citizenship education

The EP also made two particularly strong statements recognizing that a lack of **education** is a significant barrier to **democratic participation**, and emphasised that inclusive, well-funded educational systems are vital to tackling youth abstention at elections and participation in civic life more broadly. Non-binding reports from MEPs Ward (S&D, UK) and Drâghici (S&D, Romania) addressed the importance of 'intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education in promoting fundamental EU values' and 'learning EU at school', respectively. Both documents asserted the importance of critical skills and competences in engaging meaningfully in political life, especially at

the European level, and were supported by a strong majority of MEPs.

-View the voting data for the Ward report on intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education'here, via VoteWatch.eu.

-View the voting data for the Drâghici report on 'learning EU at school' here, via VoteWatch.eu.

e-Democracy

The European Parliament adopted a report on '**e-Democracy** in the European Union: potential and challenges'. The Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO) led this process, calling on the Commission to develop and implement specific pilot projects as part of the Digital Agenda, on the basis that ICT tools can be used to increase digital inclusion and literacy, stimulate a critical understanding of (and debate on) the EU, boost life-long learning, disseminate reliable information, and enable participatory and direct democracy mechanisms, particularly amongst young people.

-View how MEPs voted on this report here.

Towards 2019

Over the next two and a half years, particularly in light of the upcoming 2019 European elections, MEPs must continue to push these topics at the EU level – to emphasise the importance of youth participation for European democracy.

Within the European Parliament, MEPs should:

- **Demonstrate leadership** by making the case for strategies to boost youth participation, such as renewed citizenship education (with a focus on media literacy and critical thinking) or innovative mechanisms for including young people in policy-making. MEPs should support specific projects and ensure these claims are front-and-centre in the EP's work.
- **Support research** into youth abstention and how this could be impacted by newer methods of democratic participation, such as citizens assembles or participatory budgeting.
- **Be intersectional** in their thinking: realise that youth participation is influenced by factors beyond just elections and candidates – when the EP

works on employment, education and social protection, it is working on participation too. The stability of your wages or your educational attainment can affect your capacity and willingness to engage with political life.

- **Engage with young people directly**, wherever possible. At the European level, the Youth Forum's European Youth Event will again bring thousands more to Strasbourg in 2018 to give further input on the issues that matter to them. MEPs should engage meaningfully with these processes.
- **Reflect their concerns in policy**: when young people give input, MEPs should look to incorporate it in their work. For example, the EU already has an established system for consulting young people (the 'Structured Dialogue'). Most recently, it has provided recommendations on citizenship education and youth-led media directly to the EP's CULT committee – the relevant MEPs should ensure these ideas are taken on board and debated.

Ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections, MEPs should push their parties to:

- **Back young candidates** by encouraging them to run, placing them prominently on electoral lists and supporting them with training and resources
- **Involve youth wings** in electoral planning and campaigning, as well as in the parties more broadly. MEPs should work to ensure that party-political youth organisations (PPYOs) have influence and ownership over the parties' work and campaigns.
- **Use youth-friendly language** when campaigning – appeal to young people on their own terms, on issues they care about. Younger demographics should not be an afterthought when it comes to messaging and outreach.
- **Prioritise issues young people care about**: most importantly, MEPs must ensure their parties engage genuinely with young constituents, take their concerns on board, and make these issue prominent parts of their electoral platforms. Certain issues that are crucial for young people (such as sustainable development, education, and access to decent work) need to be prioritised, along with credible proposals to tackle them. Similarly, MEPs need to reach out to young voters specifically and see what they want Europe do to better on, and how – for the environment to our treatment of refugees, it's vital that young people's perspectives on key issues are reflected in MEPs' work and campaigns.

Standout MEPS

Julie Ward

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

In the current parliament, MEP Julie Ward has continually demonstrated strong leadership on youth participation. Through authoring or contributing to reports, engaging directly with youth organisations, involvement in the European Youth Event, and votes in plenary, she has consistently sought to make youth participation a priority. This has included an emphasis citizenship education and critical thinking, as well as an important focus on the impact that poverty, social inclusion and gender can have on participation.