

# “If you have a grandpa, send him to Europe”.

## Attitudes of young Austrians towards the EU elections

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**“If you have a grandpa, send him to Europe”. Attitudes of young Austrians towards the EU elections.** With EU-elections coming up in 2004 this article focuses on young Austrians' willingness to take part in elections at a EU-level. On the basis of an international survey among young Europeans it will show how many young people in Austria express their intention to vote, how this compares with other European young people and how important EU-elections are considered relative to elections on other political levels. It will also analyse which factors influence interest in European politics. Further, an analysis of a focus group interview in Vienna will reveal the young people's attitudes towards the EU-elections. The results show that a substantial part of the respondents are willing to vote. However, there are a number of problems associated with democracy on a EU-level impairing people's motivation to get involved and active.

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### Introduction

With European integration well under way and EU parliamentary elections coming up in June 2004 it is timely to ask what young Europeans think about the democratic system and political processes in the European Union.

In many European countries, active citizenship and political participation have decreased and there is a widespread anxiety that this development might have a negative effect on the legitimacy and efficacy of democracy. Young people, in particular, are said to be disinterested in party politics or even alienated from representative democracy. If this is the case on national level one wonders what is happening on the European level where political decisions seem even less relevant for everyday life and information less available through the media.

This article draws together quantitative and qualitative data in order to illustrate young people's willingness to take part in the EU-elections and their attitudes toward the democratic structures and processes in the European Union.

### Theoretical background

Young people in Western European societies often have a negative image. They are either seen as a source of problems or as the carrier of problems. More specifically they are often regarded as apathetic, lazy, egocentric and uninterested in the needs of others. A considerable part of the debate in the social sciences focuses on the lack of integration and participation of young people in their communities and the alienation from social and political issues. A number of authors have voiced the view that young people in Europe are dissatisfied with politics (Banks, J. S., 1993; Bernie, L. G. – Rudig, W., 1993; Szagun, G. – Pavlov, V., 1995; Rogers, S. W. - Rogers, S. R. - Vyrost, J. – Lovds, L., 1997). Some researchers even speak about a “potentially explosive alienation“ and a “completely apathetic generation” with regard to young people (Wilkinson, H. –Mulgan, G., 1995). It has been suggested that young people see politics as something boring and irrelevant for their lives. They know nothing about political processes and have no access to political institutions and decision-making bodies. They have no opportunities to get politically engaged and they mistrust politicians (White, C. - Bruce, S. – Ritchie, J., 2000).

A completely different image is produced by the results of a consultation process, which was initiated by the European Commission in 2000. There, it is stressed that young people would, in fact, like to be involved in community life, that they wish to be consulted on a broad range of topics and that they require space to express their political views (European Commission, 2001, 11-12). Some youth researchers draw attention to the numerous forms of social and political participation of young people (e.g. Roker, D. - Player, K. – Coleman, J., 1999). On the one hand, young people are members of the youth organisations of the political parties, and on the other hand, many young people are actively involved in specific political issues such as

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animal protection, education and health (Wilkinson, H., 1996; Weixler, M. – Zuba, R., 2002). Activities connected to single issue campaigns, especially when oriented to young people and operating on a community level, appeal to young people because they can see a clear connection between their input and the result (Wintersberger, H., et al, 1999). Direct actions such as collecting signatures for petitions, collecting donations, possibly fit better into the life styles and aspirations of young people than voting in a polling booth. New forms of political protest such as the “street-party-protest”<sup>4</sup> show how young people integrate their political engagement as part of their world view into their life style (Brünzel, S., 2000). Political participation also takes place through local activities, self-help groups and voluntary work (Hackett, S. C., 1997). Even individualistic actions, such as ecologically sustainable behaviour like conscious purchase decisions or reduction of consumption can be an expression of political convictions (Haerpfer, Ch. - Wallace, C. – Spannring, R., 2002).

In this patchwork of empirical findings, two dimensions emerge which seem relevant for the question of youth participation on EU level: first, the level of political decision making and second the prevailing form of democracy.

The former relates to the local, regional, national and international political units where political processes, such as elections, take place. Drawing on some of the empirical findings one might hypothesise that young people are more interested and involved in local politics since they deal with issues on a community level. Young people are probably better informed about what is going on in their neighbourhood and more likely to have contact to local politicians than to members of parliament. Local politics also encompasses a territorial and social unit which has an important meaning for people in terms of identity construction, belonging and social integration as opposed to national or even European politics which operate at a more abstract level. However, there are also factors which make the counter hypothesis realistic, namely that national and European politics is seen as more relevant by people. Communities and in many cases regions do not have much legislative power so that it is clear that most problems can only be dealt with on a national level. Moreover, in the age of globalisation, young people are aware that not all problems are “home-made” and that they can only be solved on an international level. This post-nationalist orientation is expressed in the various political activities of young people on the international floor, the most prominent example being the anti-globalisation demonstrations. A post-nationalist attitude is certainly influenced by the exposure to problems such as environmental pollution, xenophobia or unemployment which are not confined by national boundaries. Additionally, individual resources such as education and mobility will strengthen a post-nationalist attitude and interest in EU politics, while the potential losers of the European integration process, will tend to retain a nationalist outlook and a negative attitude towards politics on European level. In this latter group we may find, for example, young people with a low educational level who are replaced in the labour market by better qualified people from other EU-countries or might be forced to migrate against their will.

The second dimension refers to the relationship between representative and participative democracy (Sudulich, M., 2003). Empirical findings of research on political participation can be interpreted as the result of enormous frustration with representative democracy. Participation in all institutions which are part of representative democracy such as elections, political parties and unions has declined in almost all Western European countries, while participatory forms, such as demonstrations and petitions have increased (Spannring, R., 2003). One could argue that there are more opportunities for participatory forms of democracy on local level than on the European level. Indeed, it is often stressed by politicians dealing with youth issues and by youth councils that it is easier to implement youth participation schemes on local levels. The European level, on the other hand, is commonly associated with all the shortcomings of a representative democracy. People do not have the feeling that politicians know about their problems or care about them, that democratic processes are effective and that their vote is able to make a difference. Furthermore, the participatory elements of politics are not developed on the European level.

## Research questions and data

In the following section some of the hypotheses formulated above will be followed up empirically. More explicitly, we will test the hypotheses that voting on a European Union level is far less attractive to young people than voting in elections seemingly more immediate to everyday life ; that so-called winners, i.e. young people with a high level of education, a comfortable social background, language skills and

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<sup>4</sup> “Street-party-protests” use parties or cultural events to communicate political messages. The first group to do this was “Reclaim the streets” a loose organisation protesting against the traffic. They organised a party in the streets of London, thereby blocking the traffic and re-appropriating the public space for pedestrians.

experiences with other countries, of the European integration are more likely to be interested in the EU-elections; that young people in countries with more cross-border activities are more aware of the relevance of the European Union and therefore more likely to vote; and lastly, that young people are very critical of the democratic development of the European Union.

The findings reported in this article are based on Austrian data from both the international survey detailed at the beginning of this special edition of the journal and the analysis of a focus group interview.

The survey question, which is the basis for this article, was worded as follows:

*„If there were the following elections next week would you vote in them?“*

- A) local elections
- B) regional elections
- C) national elections
- D) elections for the European Parliament

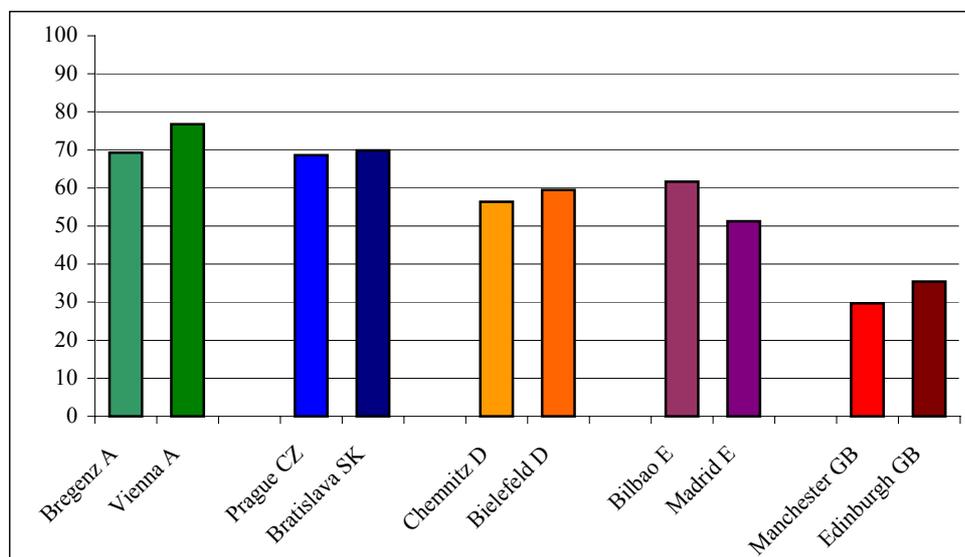
The qualitative data were gathered in the course of a focus group interview with young people in Vienna in November 2003<sup>5</sup>. 10 young people aged 18 to 24 (5 women, 5 men) took part in this discussion. Most participants are at university or in higher professional training<sup>6</sup>. One participant is doing his civil service<sup>7</sup> and one is employed. Most participants have been abroad several times and some for lengthy periods of time. With one exception, all participants work for (political) youth organisations either as employees or on a voluntary basis. The participants thus represent a "European elite" being highly educated, very mobile and politically active.

## Findings

### Voting on the European level

Starting with the highest level, the European Union parliamentary elections, we find enormous differences in the rates of potential participation amongst the 10 research locations. 77% of the young people in Vienna expressed their intention to take part in the European election.

Figure 1: **Intended participation in EU-elections (in percent)**



This is by far the highest percentage among the ten European sites. Bregenz has the second highest rate with 69% saying they would vote, closely followed by Prague (69%) and Bratislava (68%). Bilbao (62%), Bielefeld (59%) and Chemnitz (56%) have average rates. While slightly more than half of the young people in Madrid (51%) express their intent to vote, the percentage in Edinburgh is down to 35% and in Manchester it is less than a third (30%).

<sup>5</sup> This focus group discussion was funded by the Umbrella Organisation of Austrian Youth Organisations (Bundesjugend-vertretung)

<sup>6</sup> The courses/training the participants took part in were the following: history, political science, international development, media, computer programming, photography.

<sup>7</sup> In case of conscientious objection a young man can do civil service which means voluntary work for a welfare or health organisation (e.g. the Red Cross) instead of military service.

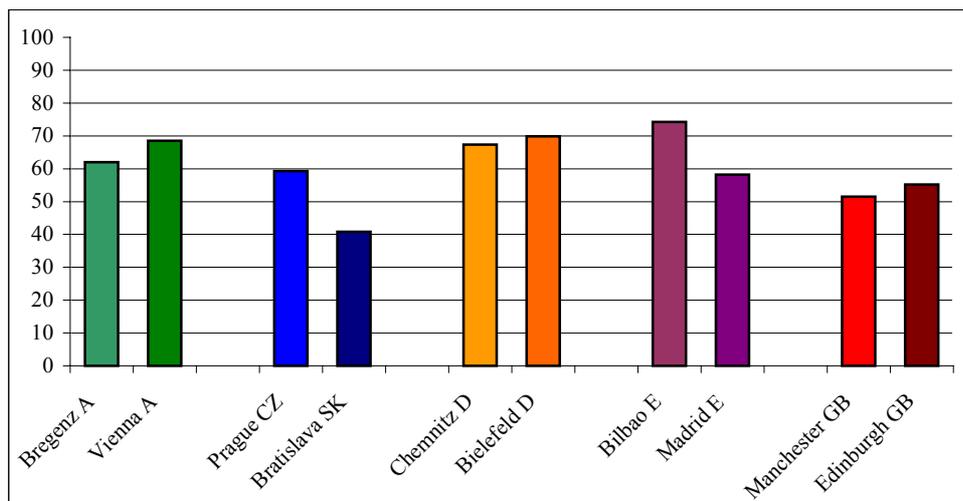
Despite considerable differences between cities within a nation, there are clear variances in European voting intentions which can be ranked from strong intended participation in Austria, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic to moderate intended participation in Germany and Spain, to low intended participation in Great Britain.

## Comparison with other political levels

### Local elections

Data on the intended participation in elections at a local level finds that young people in Vienna (69%) and Bregenz (62%) vote less in local elections than their peers in Bielefeld (70%) and Bilbao (74%).

Figure 2: **Intended participation in local elections (in percent)**

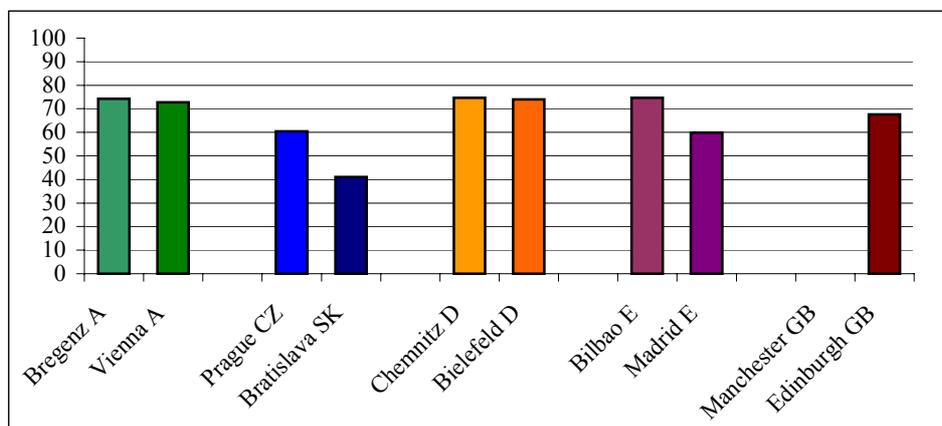


The lowest rates of intended participation are found in Edinburgh (55%) and Manchester (52%). The differences between regions within one country are striking in Austria and in Spain. There is also a big gap between Prague (59%) and Bratislava (40%), two cities which used to belong to one nation.

### Regional level

The rate of intended participation in regional elections is similar in Bregenz (74%), Vienna (73%), Chemnitz (75%), Bielefeld (74%) and Bilbao (75%). Striking regional differences within one country remain between Bilbao and Madrid (60%) in Spain. The difference between Bregenz and Vienna, which had been significant on the local level, disappears on the regional level. The rate of intended participation in Bratislava (41%) is again much lower than in Prague (61%). Edinburgh ranks in the middle with 68%. In the UK, the question of voting in regional elections was only asked in Scotland with reference to the Scottish Parliament. There is no equivalent in Manchester, England.

Figure 3: **Intended participation in regional elections (in percent)**

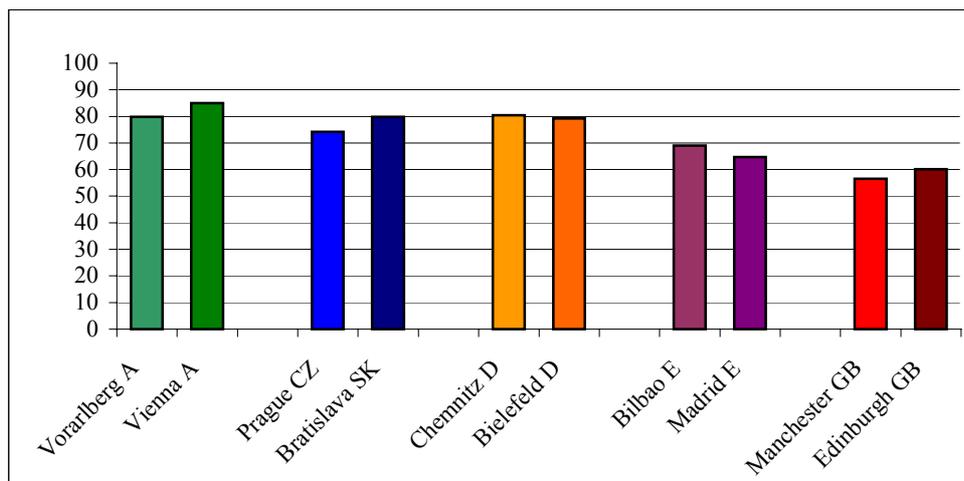


## National level

The rate of intended voting in national elections is by far the highest in Vienna (86%). Chemnitz (80%), Bregenz (80%), Bratislava (80%) and Bielefeld (79%) show very similar rates. Young people in Prague are somewhat less motivated to vote (74%). The least interest in national elections is found in Bilbao (69%), Madrid (65%), Edinburgh (60%) and Manchester (57%). Bratislava, which had the lowest levels of participation in the local and regional elections, has a surprisingly high rate for the national elections.

The regional differences within one country exist also with respect to national elections but to a far lesser extent. The difference between Bregenz and Vienna, for example, is only 5%, while the differences between Austria and Germany as well as between Austria and Great Britain amount to more than 20%.

Figure 4: **Intended participation in national elections** (in percent)



## The relative importance of the various political levels

Table 1 compares the percentages of young people who are willing to vote on the various political levels. The participation rate on the local level being the reference point the differences in participation rates go beyond a comparison of the regional participation structures and reveals the relative importance of the various levels of elections.

As mentioned above, Bilbao, Bielefeld, Vienna and Chemnitz have the highest rates of participation in local elections. However, young people obviously attach more importance to the regional level than to the local level. This can be readily seen by the positive sign of the figures in row 2 of table 1. While in Prague, Bratislava, Bilbao and Madrid the difference is of no significance, it is very pronounced in Bregenz and Edinburgh where the difference between the local and the regional election is 12%.

In most cities, as can be seen in row 3 of table, national elections are the ones most frequently voted in. The difference in participation rates is most marked in Bratislava, where the local level only attracts 41% and the national level 38 additional percent.

The difference is also clear in Bregenz (+18%), Vienna, Prague and Chemnitz. It is somewhat smaller in Bielefeld, Madrid, Manchester and Edinburgh (+ 5%). Interestingly, national elections are less important than local ones for young people in Bilbao (- 5%).

The importance of European elections is rated differently in the various cities. In six out of the ten cities, the European level is less important than local elections and therefore comes last in the hierarchy of political levels. In Vienna, Bregenz, Prague and Bratislava, on the other hand, European elections are significantly more important than local elections. In Bregenz, European elections are more important than local elections but less important than regional elections. In Vienna, Prague and Bratislava, European elections are more important than regional elections but less important than national elections.

Table 1: **Differences in rates of voting in local, regional, national and European elections**

	Austria	CZ, SK	Germany	Spain	Great Britain

	Bregenz	Vienna	Prague	Bratislava	Chemnitz	Bielefeld	Bilbao	Madrid	Manchester	Edinburgh
Local	62.0	68.5	59.3	40.8	67.3	69.9	74.2	58.2	51.5	55.2
Regional – local	+12.3	+4.3	+1.2	+0.2	+7.4	+4.1	+0.4	+1.7	- <sup>8</sup>	+12.4
National – local	+17.8	+16.5	+14.9	+38	+13.1	+9.3	-5.2	+6.5	+5.0	+4.9
Europe - local	+7.3	+8.0	+9.3	+29.1	-10.9	-10.4	-12.5	-6.9	-21.8	-19.8

Overall, we find that compared to other countries Austrian young people are very conscious of the importance of voting and willing to exercise their right to take part in this form of decision-making. This result is also confirmed by other international data on voter turnout at elections (Haerpfer, Ch., 1991). Voting has a strong tradition in Austria. Until fairly recently voting was obligatory in Austria and still is in some Federal Regions. Especially in smaller communities, there is still considerable social pressure to vote. The reason for a relatively strong involvement in regional elections lies in the fact that Austria, like Germany, is a federation, which gives the Federal Regions considerable autonomy and legislative power.

The high rate of intended participation in the EU elections comes partly from the strong voting tradition but also mirrors attitudes toward the EU and exposure to trans-national problems. Young people in Austria have a very positive attitude towards being members of the European Union seeing advantages for both the nation and the people. Austrians have been strongly involved in the conflict around the tollage for heavy traffic between the European Union and Austrian ministers<sup>9</sup>. But other issues such as the agricultural policy, gene technology, nuclear power plants and the Iraq war have been debated in the context of the European Union as well. Thus, there is an acute awareness of the significance of the European Union and the need for problem solving institutions at this level and this increases a willingness to vote at the EU level. This explanation is supported by findings in our qualitative interviews where many young Austrians expressed their hope that the European Union will solve these problems and guarantee a just distribution of resources among all member states (Wallace, C. - Spannring, R. – Datler, G., 2004).

### Who would vote on the European level in Austria?

Of course, not all young people are equally likely to vote on a EU-level. As is the case in national elections we expect those young people who are well educated to vote. However, participation in EU-elections is probably also influenced by other factors which could be called “exposure to Europe”. By this we mean the extent to which young people are able to speak foreign languages, have been to other European countries and are familiar with the structures of the EU. Moreover, we assume that a general interest in politics increases the likelihood of voting at EU-level.

Table 2 below shows the percentage of respondents in various subgroups who expressed the intention to vote on EU-level. The results for two samples in Vienna and Bregenz are shown separately, since they are representative of the region but not of Austria as a whole. The age of the respondents has a clear effect in that older (22-24 year old) respondents are more likely to participate in EU-elections: 82% of the respondents in Vienna and 70% in Bregenz expressed this intention in contrast to the younger group (18-21 year old): 73% in Vienna and 69% in Bregenz. The main features of Bregenz compared to Vienna which help explain this difference are, on the one hand, that Bregenz is only a town and not a city and secondly, and on the other hand, that the educational structure is slightly different with young people in Bregenz having completed an apprenticeship or professional school rather than embarking on an academic career. Higher education leads to more interest in participation: among those young people who have an upper secondary education 78% in Vienna and 85% in Bregenz are willing to participate, compared to roughly 66% with a lower secondary education only. Since many young people are still in the process of acquiring their upper secondary education, it is also important to look at their occupational status. The results show that 18 to 25 year olds who are still in education (i.e. upper secondary and tertiary education) are more likely to participate in EU-elections. The results are especially striking in Vienna where 84% of those who are still

<sup>8</sup> In Manchester this question did not apply because there are no regional elections.

<sup>9</sup> Austria is an important transit country for heavy traffic. The Austrian population is very sensitive to the fact that this heavy traffic damages the health of people and the environment. Especially with respect to the transit route Brenner/Brennero (connecting Austria and Italy) there have been many road blockages to protest against the traffic. Austrian ministers have been trying to intervene in Brussels to enforce a special regulation (road tollage) in order to reduce the heavy traffic.

engaged in (higher) education expressed their willingness to vote whereas only 73% of the employed respondents did so. In Vorarlberg the difference was less pronounced (77% and 64% respectively). Social background is always an important factor for political participation. The higher the social class the more interested and active people are in politics. In our data social background seems to have an illogical effect in Vienna. Here, young people with a working class background who have a higher education level are more likely to vote at a EU-level than their peers from the middle or upper classes. This points to an interaction between social class and education which has a stronger effect than social background on its own. Thus, young people who are upwardly mobile, i.e. have a low social class background but are highly educated, are most likely to be interested and active in European politics.

A general interest in politics is, of course, also conducive to participation in EU-elections. Our research found that more than 80% of respondents who discuss political and social issues ‘often’ or ‘very often’ with friends or family express their intention to vote compared to less than 60% of those who never or rarely discuss politics. Similarly, more than 75% of those respondents who are interested in European integration but less than 65% of those who are not interested, would vote. The general assumption that knowledgeable citizens are more interested and active in politics also applies here. Having been taught about the EU at school increases the likelihood of participation in EU-elections by 10% in both regions.

The “exposure to Europe” proves important for the involvement in European politics. Young people who have been abroad are more likely to participate in EU-elections than young people who have not been in other countries. However, there is no strictly linear relationship. The effect of visiting many countries reaches a saturation point at six countries after which the curve flattens. The other variable measuring “exposure to Europe”, knowledge of foreign languages, also has a supportive effect. Young people who speak two additional languages would vote in European elections in greater numbers than those young people who only speak one foreign language; this inclination increases with the ability to speak more than two foreign languages.

Table 2: **Intended participation in voting by sub-group**

	Vienna	Vorarlberg	Level of Significance (Chi-Square, 2-tailed) Vienna/Vorarlberg
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	74.4	72.8	.038/.317
Male	79.2	65.9	
<i>Age</i>			
18-21	73.1	68.9	.053/.898
22-24	81.5	70.0	
<i>Highest educational level</i>			
lower secondary ed.	65.6	66.8	.000/.030
upper secondary ed.	77.7	85.2	
<i>Socio-economic status</i>			
in education or training	84.4	76.8	.002/.477
Employed	73.3	64.3	
<i>Occupational status of father</i>			
upper class	73.4	75.2	.474/.132
middle class	78.7	65.8	
working class	80.6	65.1	
<i>Discussion of political and social issues</i>			
never/rarely	59.8	51.5	.000/.000
often/very often	83.7	80.7	
<i>Personal interest in the issue of European integration</i>			
not interested	64.7	50.7	.000/.000
Interested	85.2	77.8	
<i>Taught about the EU in school</i>			
nothing/little	72.9	66.1	.019/.170
much/very much	83.0	75.9	
<i>Number of countries visited</i>			
no country	58.6	61.1	.196/.774
1-3 countries	73.6	69.2	
4-6 countries	81.0	71.9	
more than 6 countries	79.0	67.6	
<i>Knowledge of foreign languages</i>			

1 additional language	74.9	63.5	
2 additional languages	80.0	75.2	.031/.082
more than 2 additional languages	82.8	75.5	

Summarising these findings, education and social class play an important role in relation to an active interest in EU-politics. General political interest and knowledge about the EU increases willingness to participate in EU-elections as does experience of other European cultures and languages.

### Young people's views on participation on European level

The focus group participants were very much in favour of being a member of the European Union and of the European integration process. They also expressed their intention to vote in the EU elections. However, at the same time most of the participants were highly critical of the political structures and processes in the European Union<sup>10</sup>.

Judith: *The question is not whether we take part in the election, the question is only what meaning we attach to the elections.*

Alexandra: *I can only agree. I think, O.K.. I vote, I would not forgoe this right. For me this is terribly important because I think this is really the only thing I can do. It gives me the feeling that I have contributed at least a little bit. But it always turns out that you are not satisfied with the way they put the results into action in the end. But it is the only thing that can be done.*

One of the criticisms was the lacking clarity of the election issues and which party favours which solutions.

Karin: *... I cannot remember that there were ever campaign pledges in EU election campaigns. EU election campaigns are exclusively about people and faces. Their main concern is to put up enough posters with faces.*

Natascha: *.... in principle it is already ridiculous. Last time it was Ursula Stenzel<sup>11</sup>. You chose her because you knew her from television<sup>12</sup>. Or the Social Democrats with Hans-Peter Martin... They try to find people who are known and get elected because of that ... there is no content in these campaigns.*

Tina: *... that you get the right information, so that you know what it is really all about. What has been said about the personalised election campaign – I totally agree with that. There are faces which are associated with parties, but there is no content.. And I think that this is a significant problem ... Because theoretically, the particular party should get the same messages across in all member states of the EU. But in reality, it's only faces laughing at you from the campaign posters. I think this is a great problem.*

The lack of clarity with respect to concrete political strategies is aggravated by the fact that promises are not fulfilled and changes not visible.

Natascha: *If only you had the feeling that your involvement really made the difference... I mean, I can vote for a party, which is closest to my political conviction – I myself have always voted for the same party, but I have never had the feeling that it makes sense, that this party really does what I expect them to do. I mean I will always take part in elections because I do not want to give up hope. But I imagine that many voters, especially the young would be motivated if there was really a point in voting. I miss this a bit.*

Another point of criticism relates to the political power of the European Parliament.

Karin: *We elect the [national.] governments and they go the meetings of the ministers. And then there is the Commission which is somehow there and decides on pretty much everything. But we have very little say in it. Apart from electing the EU-Parliament every four years, which in principle has very few competences. They*

<sup>10</sup> The attitudes of the participants tend to be left-wing and anti-capitalist because of the types of youth organisations they come from: members of the Trade Union Youth, Socialist Youth and Catholic Youth predominate.

<sup>11</sup> Candidate of the Austrian Conservative Party (ÖVP)

<sup>12</sup> Ursula Stenzel was news reader in the Austrian national broadcasting company before she ran for the EU-election.

can only talk a little bit. There is a nasty saying that the EU-parliament functions as a Kindergarten or a retirement arrangement for politicians. It goes, "if you have a grandpa, send him to Europe"<sup>13</sup>. I often have the feeling that there are people in the EU parliament who have fucked up something and must disappear from the national scene for four years before reappearing in "normal" politics. Or people are put on the list of candidates who are slowly shunted sideways, a farm annuity, or people who do not yet know their way about in politics. The EU-parliament does not decide on so many important things, so they are allowed to play around a little.

Decision-making does not take place in parliament.

Karin: *Participation is an illusion. We have the illusion of participating by taking part in the election. And I think that members of parliament share this illusion. They have the illusion that they take part in decision making by sitting in parliament. But in principle it is decided by a few. This is not going to change so soon and easily because these few decision-makers do not want that and under the present conditions and circumstances there is no wish nor will to change anything.*

Simon: *And above all it is the lobbyists who have a lot of influence. ... The big companies all have well-paid lobbyists who simply have a little chat with the politicians, like "we give you 1000 jobs; let's talk". Well, it's clear which interests influence politics there.*

As an example, the influence of a globalised economy is mentioned which makes real changes in favour of employees, consumers or the environment, difficult.

Simon: *They all accept the frame (i.e. the capitalist system.). The Austrian Social Democrats would also destroy the social model if they were in power or the Communist Party. It really does not matter which party is in government, I mean look at the red-green coalition in Germany. In fact, all the parties you can vote for in Europe. No matter how hard you work for a party in a constituency, if the frame is accepted, if companies decide to let villages die, as it happened in Traiskirchen<sup>14</sup> or with the VOEST company<sup>15</sup>, there is nothing you can do. ... they have the power over societal decisions.*

Judith: *I think the question is, what kind of change do I want. Of course I can make progress within the existing structures, sometimes it's a step forward, sometimes a step backward. If that is the question there are, indeed, possibilities. But within the capitalist logic there are not really possibilities for profound changes. That does not mean that I would not vote, but I have no hope that much would change.*

No wonder that the participants did not see much point in the ceremonies of representative democracy.

Julia: *... I have heard many say that. ... at some point they give up. We young people say, no, we have to change this and that, we have to vote. But I have the feeling that among my acquaintances there is increasingly the attitude "I go to the election, but what is it good for?"*

However, the participants are strongly interested in politics.

Simon: *I find it outrageous when adults say young people are apathetic. The point is, I am not apathetic. I expect politics but I do not see politics anywhere, that's no reason to say I am apathetic. Because if the election campaign is only about faces and everybody accepts the framework and nobody dares [to initiate changes], then I am not fed up with politics but fed up with what is happening. This is such an abstract notion that suggests that young people are generally dull and apolitical.*

Young people long for more direct political participation and visible results with voting being just one form of political action.

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<sup>13</sup> „Hast Du 'nen Opa, schick ihn nach Europa“.

<sup>14</sup> An international company closed its location and dismissed all its employees.

<sup>15</sup> The state owned steel-company was privatised.

Natascha: *I used to be politically active, but was never able to move anything. However, even now, just casting a ballot is not enough for me.*

Fabian: *A real participation, ... yes, not just voting. Being actively involved in such processes.*

Dieter: *... that you can feel the changes, especially after the election.*

Karin: *Because this illusion of participation is so much more comfortable. They say, well, you have participated, you have voted for us, you are part of Europe. My favourite saying is: "Youth is the future of Europe, but please not the present". [Voting is] the only thing that I can do in this treadmill. Apart from voting I do things on my own and outside the given structures, so that I have at least the feeling that I make a change. ... I lobby, like almost all others here [i.e. in this focus group]. I am member of a political youth organisation.*

It is seen as imperative that existing democratic structures are strengthened and additional political institutions be developed in Europe such as an influential European Trade Union.

Simon: *Well, it would also be important to organise the trade unions on the international level. That would be a real opportunity to participate. If the European Trade Union had the power to intervene. But as long as the national trade unions are too nationalistic to come together nothing will evolve. But that would be something important to strive for: participation.*

However, there is also an awareness that European citizens have to learn to form pressure groups and grassroots movements on a European level as they used to do on national level.

Simon: *I do not believe that it makes much sense to expect too much from the European Union and the European Parliament. I do not think that we can make claims. I do not think that there are moral reasons that they do not do what I expect them to do but that there are structural constraints. I do hope that, if for example there is a massive loss of jobs, people start networking more, I mean a real European network, so that people learn to fight together for their rights and thereby develop a political consciousness, that this is their story. But that can only happen bottom up. This is why I cannot claim these things from the top.*

The European Social Forum is recognised as one possibility to cooperate on a trans-national level.

Natascha: *I mean, I do think that something can be done. There is this „European Social Forum“ and I believe that one can at least try a lot on a much broader level to effect changes.*

Katharina: *The ESF [European Social Forum] is also a network of partly local projects, where people meet Europe wide and discuss what they are doing. ESF is not just a meeting of those who are further up the hierarchy and try to enforce something top down. There are little groups and tiny groups which have a limited scope of action and still accomplish something at home because having talked to other groups they realise they are not alone.*

Tina: *I think that these networking things will support people from different countries who have the same interests and aims. They can come together. In how far they are taken seriously is another question. But at least they are a number of people. I think it's a good thing.*

Despite the criticism and the frustration with politics on a EU-level some participants expressed their enthusiasm for more citizens' engagement which goes beyond local and national concerns.

Simon: *I also think that it is extremely important that people learn from this economic process in Europe, and boost their self-confidence. You see, I can do a whole range of things with people who have similar interests. It simply makes you flourish personally if you find out that you have a lot of power together with other people. So I think this is ever so important, it goes beyond all existing structures. But this is where the real processes of learning take place.*

Thus, it can be said that these young people were not at all alienated or apathetic. However, they do see the conditions and processes of European democracy rather critically. They call for more content in the EU election campaigns, a clearer profile of the European political parties, more power for the European Parliament and various forms of counter-power to the influence of the economy. The development of European networks and citizens' movements is seen as an important task and learning process of European citizens. The interviews provide evidence that young Austrians not only support the development of a representative democracy at EU level but also call for a more lively participative democracy to make sure that the people's needs and visions are taken care of vis a vis an all-determining economy and a growing European bureaucracy.

## Summary and discussion

The article shows that the intention to vote varies greatly between different regions and between the various political levels. Young people in Vienna and Bregenz are particularly interested in voting compared to the other regions in the survey. National elections are the most important for them, but EU-elections are at least more important than local and regional elections.

The older (22-24 years old) end of the age group we interviewed, those with a higher educational level and middle class background as well as upwardly mobile young people who are inclined to participate in EU-elections. Knowledge of the European Union, language skills and experience with foreign countries is conducive to interest in European politics. The latter are certainly factors which can be supported by national school curricula and EU-exchange programmes.

Young people criticise the lack of information about the issues of the election campaign and the absence of a clear attitude of the parties towards them. They are rather sceptical of the power of the European Parliament vis-à-vis the European Commission and see the influence of the economy as problematic. There is clearly a demand for a more participative democracy which involves citizens and for the de-nationalisation of politics.

From the Austrian perspective, at least, there is not much to fuel the anxiety about the future of democracy in Europe. On the contrary, in our research we found high hopes and expectations towards a democratic Europe. This, of course, can be seen as support for the politicians on a national and European level, but also as a threat that this hope can easily transform into apathy if not realised. However, young people do not want to wait and see what is happening, they want to be informed and actively involved. To rephrase one of our discussant's statements, youth must be the present of Europe and not only its future.

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