

The suffrage age – in Europe

The suffrage age is a cause for debate all over Europe, and a number of countries have already lowered their suffrage age to 16 years .

Austria

Austria lowered its suffrage age in 1992 from 19 to 18 and the Green Party tried unsuccessfully to lower it to 16. In 1996, the coalition government between SPÖ and ÖVP announced that it wanted to lower the suffrage age to 16, but was yet again unsuccessful.

In the period between 2000-2005, five of Austria's federal states experimented by lowering the suffrage age to 16 for municipal elections and three of them also for regional elections.

This proved a positive experience and it was therefore decided in 2006 to make it a permanent rule on a national scale. Hence in 2007, Austria was the first country in the world to lower the suffrage age to 16 for all elections: Local, regional, national and European Parliament elections.

Germany

Since 1996, seven German federal states have had a 16 year suffrage age for local elections. The seven federal states are: Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Sachsen-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, Sachsen, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Bremen and Berlin. The 16 year suffrage age also applies to the federal elections in Bremen. Over 700,000 young people can therefore vote in municipal – and regional elections.

Switzerland

In 2007, the federal state of Glarus decided to give sixteen year olds suffrage for municipal and regional elections. The reduction in the suffrage age is further discussed on a federal level. The suffrage age is 18 in Switzerland.

Sweden

Since 2000, sixteen year olds have been able to vote in parochial church council elections in Sweden. The so-called "Ungdomar-

nas demokratikommission" has proposed that the suffrage age should be lowered to 16 years.

Norway

In the spring of 2008, the Norwegian Parliament Storting decided to lower the suffrage age to 16 in certain municipalities for the municipal elections in 2011.

The desire for a suffrage age of 16 in Norway is supported by a number of parties, as well as the Ombudsman for children and young people, based on a rights perspective.

Finland

In 2010 Finland lowered its suffrage age to 16 at parochial church council elections. Based on a desire to increase the number of voters amongst young people, the Finnish government agreed to study the possibility of lowering the suffrage age to 16 as part of their initiatives for children and youth.

England

1999 saw the first proposal to lower the suffrage age to 16, which was rejected in the ballot in the British House of Commons. This led to the coalition 'Votes at 16' being formed in 2003.

A youth commission formed in 2007-2009 by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown researched the possibility of a 16 year suffrage age with positive results, and Great Britain is expected to lower the suffrage age to 16 by 2015. Both the Liberal Democrats and Labour Party together with the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments all support a change in the suffrage age to 16.

The suffrage age has already been lowered on the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. This took place in 2006 and 2007 respectively.

Ireland

The Irish government will – as part of its government programme – lower the suffrage age to 16 by 2010. As a first step, the government has asked the Irish Election commission to analyse how the suffrage age for 16 and 17 year olds can be implemented for municipal elections.

Malta

Several parties, including PES, has a 16 year suffrage age as part of their political programme.

Hungary

Young 16-17 year olds, who marry, automatically get suffrage.

Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Young 16-17 year olds can vote – and have full suffrage – if they have a job.

Moldova

Has begun a constitutional reform, which includes lowering of the suffrage age to 16.

DEVELOPMENT OF SUFFRAGE IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

The Nordic countries have in general been slow to follow the trend of lowering the suffrage age – and in the Nordic countries it is typically Denmark that tends to be the furthest behind.

	23 years	21 years	18 years	16 years
Denmark	1953	1961	1978	–
Norway	1921	1956	1979	2011*
Sweden	1937	1946	1974	2000**
Finland		1944	1972	2010**
Iceland		1934	1970	–

* Norway will give 16 year olds the opportunity to vote in municipal elections in 2011.

** Sweden and Finland has since 2000 and 2010 respectively given 16-17 year olds the opportunity to vote in parochial church council elections.