

2023

Voting age 16

Report on a futile attempt to raise the voice of youth in
Liechtenstein.

For the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child by the young leaders of the
initiative to lowering the voting age

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This report is submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Children (CRC Committee) to inform the review of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) implementation in Liechtenstein. The Government of Liechtenstein is asked by the CRC Committee to provide information about the results of the initiative to reduce the voting age to 16 ([link](#), page 4). We would like to share our perspective, since we are leading this initiative and we know that the Committee would like to hear from children and young people as well ([link](#)).

We, the «Junge Liste» are a political youth party. We originated in a group of young people between the age of 16 and 24 years which brought a petition for lowering the voting age to 16 years in front of parliament in 2021. In the meantime, have grown to 60 people. Our members are all different. We are committed to diversity and to being able to lead one's own life in a self-determined way from different perspectives. We are very interested in actively participating in Liechtenstein's political processes. For this reason, we took on the topic of voting age 16 about 2 years ago. The following report describes how we tried unsuccessfully to give children and young people a voice while we too were not listened to.

How did it start?

Initially, we spent hours and hours researching lowering the voting age. It was only after long discussions in our group and a very intensive examination of the issue that it became clear that we were aiming to lower the voting age to 16. With this project, we then turned to our affiliated party. We sat down with them, debated for a long time and then agreed to launch an initiative.

Now we knew it was up to us to collect signatures. It was about doing awareness raising bringing the idea to people and getting as much attention as possible. So, we started writing articles, giving interviews, talking to people from Liechtenstein about the idea and presenting it at events. We also produced a video about our concern and published it on YouTube (https://youtu.be/I_OrDIE6V34). The young people talk about their responsibilities in everyday life and how they perceive them. This is intended to underline how young people are also able to inform themselves, to reflect and to make important decisions, such as election and voting decisions.



In this picture you can see members of the Junge Liste, who presented the topic of voting age 16 at the general assembly of our mother party.

First trial: petition, positive reaction of the parliament, no response from the Government

In spring 2021, we started collecting signatures. Members met on many weekends, stood in public places and talked to passers-by. So, we were able to collect good 1000 signature over many weeks. Finally, we were able to hand over our initiative to the President of the Parliament.



This photo shows the moment of handover.

Now it was up to the parliament to discuss the content of the petition and then vote on it. And they did. With mostly positive speeches, the parliament passed the petition and thus passed it on to the government for processing. Many members of the parliament stressed their appreciation of our commitment, which led us to believe in the short term that we had been successful. We thought

the elected representatives would see our sacrifice as proof of the will and competence of the youth to vote. So, we hoped for a similar assessment of the government and a corresponding reaction.

Almost a year later, when the government had still not taken any further action, we decided to act again. During this, we spoke again with our mother party and decided to bring the topic back to the state parliament by means of a motion.¹



Two members of the JL and a member of parliament from the mother party held a press conference on the upcoming motion.

Second trial: motion, disappointment despite great efforts

After the press conference, we started again with raising awareness. So, we gave interviews, wrote texts and diligently recorded our social media. Our main focus, however, was on the members of the parliament.

We knew that a motion would inevitably lead to further steps. In the knowledge that the present decision carries more weight than last year's, all Members would probably reconsider their assessment. That was our guess. So we wrote a personalized e-mail to all elected representatives with our argument for the voting age of 16. We were referring specifically to the values for which they publicly stand. We also offered everyone a personal interview. On the basis of the sparse answers, we could already guess that our assumption was probably correct. Many of those who praised us last year now expressed doubts. However, only a few agreed to a one-on-one

¹ To understand this point, the following must be clear:

Initiatives enable people in Liechtenstein to submit their wishes and concerns to the parliament. The parliament then decides on a possible transfer to the government. If this happens, the government is not obliged to take measures to comply with the will of the initiates.

Motions are brought to the table by members of the parliament. They will also be discussed and put to the vote. In the case of a referral to the government, it must work out a suitable amendment to the law and in turn submit it to the state parliament.

conversation with a member of the Junge Liste. Most affirmed that their decision-making had already been completed.

So, we decided to take further steps to convince them. We organized an information event. In the hope that the public presence could attract some members of the Parliament, we gave everything to put together a successful event.



Two members of the JL presented the active voting age of 16 at our information evening. They responded to counterarguments that had come to us and - refuted them.

Finally, we sent a document to all members of the Parliament. The document explained our reasons for calling for the voting age of 16, all the counterarguments we heard, and the appropriate scientific refutations (see Annex 1). Of course, we added all the sources. We urged elected officials to use them in order to be able to discuss on a scientific basis.

We followed the relevant parliament session. It turned out that some have probably not read our document and the attached sources. A disillusionment that hit us very hard in view of our great effort. Many arguments, which we were previously able to refute in the document, were carried into the debate to shatter our interests. Many of the arguments we preemptively tried to show were empirically disproven or speculative and emotional at most were explicitly used as reasons to not vote yes on the motion by parties of different political positions. One MP stated, that with the existence of Youth Parties and Youth Clubs in Liechtenstein would be enough for young people to make their voices heard, knowing, that the only three Youth Parties that exist in Liechtenstein are those of the government-parties and the Junge Liste which tried to make their voices heard through the motion in question. Other MP' used some already debunked arguments against the motion. One for example talked about the supposed divide of the active vs. the passive suffrage.

The biggest surprise however was, that the youngest MP of the parliament and youth worker relied on anecdotal evidence to state in parliament that young people don't even *want* to have the vote. Something, that our petition with more than 1000 signatures had disproved months before. All of these statements – and many more – proved to us that we weren't being taken seriously and that our contribution to the discussion was ignored by many MPs.

The government can still act

We really hope that Liechtenstein's government – along with our help if needed – will take this matter seriously. There is still a petition in the governments hand which they can handle as they deem fit. We really hope that our hours, days, weeks of work aren't spent in vain. Especially in Liechtenstein it isn't everyday that a movement of young people emerges through a particular policy they want to be enacted. Not to listen to the many people who support our cause would be to ignore almost an entire generation of potentially politically active youths. This comes at a time when recruiting people to run for office seems to become a bigger problem with every election cycle. If Liechtenstein's government, parliament and monarchy don't want an entire generation of youths who are alienated from the political process they ought to act, now.

Annex: Handout for MPs

Ladies and Gentlemen Members of the State Parliament

Shortly before the May state parliament session, in which among other things the **voting age of 16** will be debated, we - the Junge Liste - would like to respond to all collected concerns regarding this issue in one document for the last time. The argumentation below has been carefully collected in intensive work over the last two years and compiled for you. We are confident that we have summarized most, if not all, of the discussion taking place in the country. Since at the end of all this we can still stand behind our cause 100%, we hope that you will take a moment to consult our document in your opinion-forming process.

We have heard that some members of the parliament have already made their mind, and hence no longer need or want to deal with our argumentation. We ask these members to think carefully about whether their opinion is based on democratic theory and empirical facts, or whether they have a queasy gut feeling that tells them not to say "yes" to the voting age of 16. The following pages can help take the latter away.

Elsewhere, we have heard of isolated experiences with young people that lead to generalizing assumptions such as "(These) young people do not want to vote at all". It should be pointed out here that it is precisely the lowering of the voting age that leads to increasing interest in politics i.e. public decision making by young people - but more on this below. However, what is more important at this point is that such assumptions can be dangerous, especially in the arena of institutionalized politics. Therefore, we ask the members of parliament to critically reflect on their attitude towards the youth of Liechtenstein.

Finally, since a detailed argumentation for the voting age of 16 can be found in the motion text, it will only be briefly outlined in the first part of the document below. We will address the alleged problems more in depth in a second part. We implore you to read our responses regarding these issues. It would be a pity if these concerns were to find their way into the parliamentary debate without being reflected upon, even though we have already discussed them in detail.

Thank you very much for your attention. We are sure that together with you we will achieve a great democratic gain for Liechtenstein.

Confident,

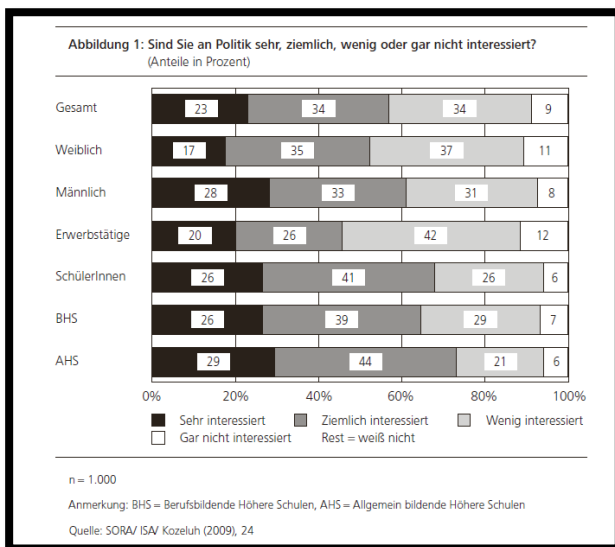
Junge Liste

0. Summary

Young people can and want to vote. A voting age from 16 onwards makes young people politically active in the long term and motivates them to encourage their peers to do the same. Inequities caused by demographic change can be at least partially counteracted. Contrary to what some people think, young people are capable of a high-quality opinion forming process. In short, lowering the voting age would be a win-win situation for all generations and a great enrichment for Liechtenstein's democracy.

1. What speaks for an active voting age of 16

An almost sufficient justification for lowering the active voting age to 16 is the following: **young people can and want to vote!** This can be seen, for example, in the representative study by Perlot & Zandonella (2009).



Regarding political interest, also outside of elections and votes, we refer to the graph of their survey findings in Figure 1. It shows that the opinion forming of young people is qualitatively similar to older age groups. Other studies are supporting this.

The fact that 16- and 17-year-olds, just like older cohorts, are part of our society and that they have both the intellectual and the social skills as well as media competence to form an informed political opinion should be reason enough to allow them to participate in political decision making.

Moreover, by ratifying the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, Liechtenstein has committed itself to listening to children and young people under 18. Therefore, we would also like to point out that **the Liechtenstein government has to report to the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child this year on its efforts for children's rights and that, among other things, their efforts for the voting age of 16 have been included in the List of Issues.**

It would therefore be a win-win situation for all sides - both the government (parties) and Liechtenstein's youth - if this bill were to pass through parliament at the beginning of May.

Democracy is a matter of habit (cf. *ibid.*: 425, Plutzer 2002: 42). The earlier - and more often I vote, the more likely it is not only that I will vote in the future, but also that I will make myself



candidate for elections. An advantage that is especially relevant for Liechtenstein! A sustained

interest in politics after the introduction of youth suffrage was also noted in Austria (cf. Zeglovits & Zandonella 2011). Another important and interesting side-effect noted by the two researchers is: politically active youth had a positive influence on those who were previously less interested, which in turn reinforces the effect.

We do not want to devote too much more space to **demographic change** at this point, since this has been widely discussed and the members of the Parliament are well acquainted with this topic. However, since many problems resulting from this development can only be solved with forward-looking approaches, we ask you to grant young people the right of co-decision for their future. The older generations have long been overrepresented, and the young voices are all too rarely heard.

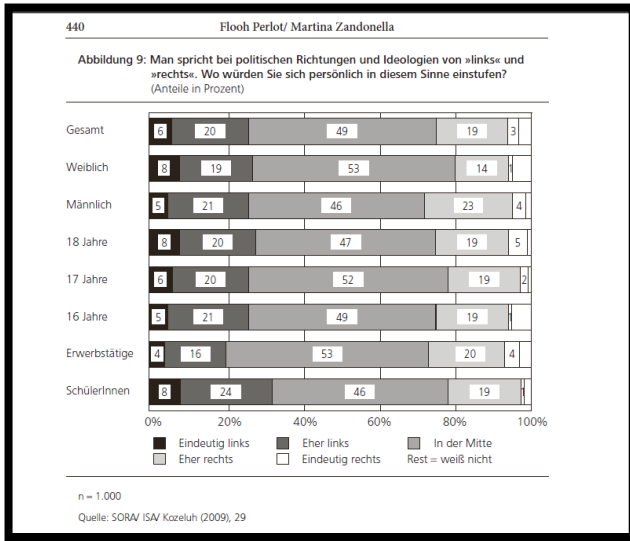
A policy that gives our youth a future that they are not allowed to help shape, a policy that is told by the youth: "We know what we want, we want to vote, we want to elect." and which nevertheless denies them that, sooner or later will see the youth turning their backs on. **You don't put your trust in a politics that ignores you.** Future generations will thank you if you pass the motion for the active voting age of 16 to the government on 4 May.

2. Concerns of the population

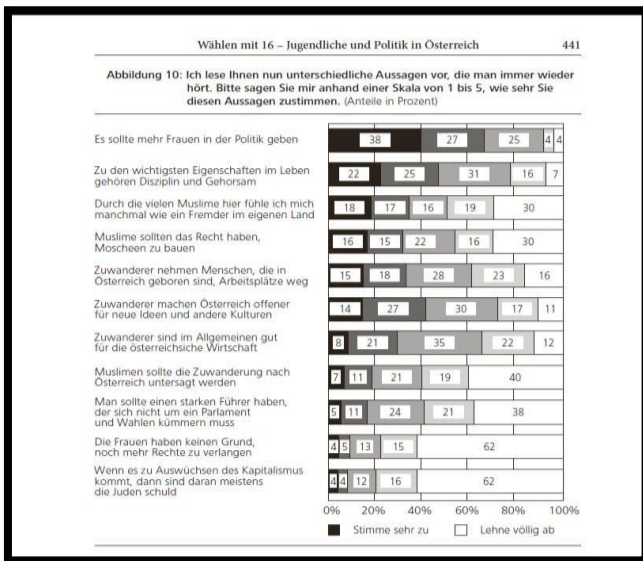
We do not take a constitutional amendment and a lowering of the voting age lightly. But what we noticed when collecting signatures for our petition was that people who initially expressed reservations became more and more sympathetic to our idea the longer they discussed it with us. In the following, we will list all the concerns of the population - together with the response we give to each. To make it easier to read, these statements are listed together with the response. In order to avoid repetition, only those arguments will be listed which are not listed under point 3 ("Concerns of the members of parliament").

a. "Young people are left-wing(-radical), you just want votes".

Answer: As much as we - the JL - would like this to be the case, the statement is not true. And that's a good thing, because this is about democracy, not populism. Again, we can look at the study by Perlot & Zandonella. Figures 9 & 10 of the study clearly show that the more extreme positions tend to be less popular among the two relevant age groups than among 18-year-olds. You are welcome to take a closer look at the study. You will notice that young people by no means have more radical opinions.



Unfortunately, there is no similar empirical study for Liechtenstein. However, we can look at the analysis of the post-election survey by Christian Frommelt et al. (2021)



Look at Table 4. The best results among the youngest voters are achieved by the governing parties. This is followed by the Freie Liste, with an average of 10%. However, it is not important which group votes which way. It would be undemocratic to deny a population group the right to participate on the basis of its political opinion.

Tabelle 4: Wahlentscheid nach soziodemografischen Merkmalen (in % der Teilnehmenden (gewichtete Resultate))

Merkmale	Wahlentscheid					n
	FBP	VU	FL	DU	DpL	
Total	36	36	13	4	11	1'888
Geschlecht						Cramers V = .10*
Männer	35	35	12	6	12	1'165
Frauen	36	37	14	3	10	723
Alter						Cramers V = .09*
18–24 Jahre	36	31	23	4	5	170
25–34 Jahre	33	35	19	3	10	330
35–49 Jahre	36	38	12	4	10	575
50–64 Jahre	38	32	11	5	15	546
65+ Jahre	35	41	8	5	12	267
Bildungsgrad (Schulabschluss)						Cramers V = .12***
obligatorische Schule	37	34	16	6	6	47
berufliche Grundausbildung	33	40	9	5	13	522
höhere Fach- und Berufsschule	40	32	11	4	13	474
Maturität, Fachhochschule, Uni	41	28	23	2	6	845

Bemerkungen: Angegeben sind die ungewichteten Fallzahlen (n). Um die Signifikanz zu ermitteln, wurde Pearsons Chi-Quadrat-Test ermittelt. *** stehen dabei für eine Irrtumswahrscheinlichkeit von weniger als einem Promille, ** für eine solche unter einem Prozent und * für eine solche unter 5%. Cramers V wiederum gibt die Stärke eines Zusammenhangs an, wobei 0 für keinen Zusammenhang steht, während ein Wert von 1 für den höchst unwahrscheinlichen Fall eines perfekten Zusammenhangs steht.

Quelle: Wahlumfrage Liechtenstein-Institut 2021, gewichtete Resultate.

b. "Young people are easily influenced (by the internet)".

Answer: We are talking here about the generation of digital natives, who learn how to use the internet extensively in school. Older generations, who are similarly or more susceptible to such fake news or opinion-forming content, did not have this instruction.

Populist institutions - media, parties, etc. - are a general problem, but their influence on opinion-forming is usually strongest in their respective target groups.

c. "Young people want to vote but do not have to live with the consequences of their actions".

Answer: This statement is wrong on several levels. Of course, young people must live with the consequences of their own actions. In addition to social consequences that affect everyone in relation to criminal offences, young offenders can face legal consequences as well. In the political arena, especially, young people obviously have to live with the consequences of their decisions. The current situation however poses a much greater injustice: Young people, who have the interest and competence to vote, have to live with the consequences of decisions made by others - a society that excludes them from the key decision making processes.

d. "They will anyway vote what their parents vote for."

Answer: Let us briefly resolve this argument: If the point here is that children are influenced by their parents and family, this probably happens regardless of age. The social environment is just as much a part of the opinion-forming process as the news and school lessons.

When it comes to parents filling in the ballot paper for their children - in violation of the law - we are dealing with a different problem: The parent in question is liable to prosecution.

e. "Young people have too little life experience."

Answer: Here, of course, it is debatable whether "life experience" is reflected on the ballot paper. However, the options on the ballot paper are limited. For parliamentary elections, life experience is less important than a high-quality opinion-forming process. The fact that young people differ little or not at all from older generations in this respect can be read in several scientific papers (cf. Perlot & Zandonella 2009). The lack of life time is also compensated by the fact that they are affected by today's decisions for a longer period of time. This is why it is so important to let young people vote.

f. "When I think about how I was...", "When I think about my children..."

It is almost unbelievable how often we encountered this argument on the street. Often it came from parents who had their children with them and pointed at them while talking about how they couldn't be trusted to do something like that.

Answer: Most young people inform themselves about politics when they have a say in the decision-making process. People who made such statements, belong to the generations that at 16 were often still 5 years away from their first election. It stands to reason that they were not interested in politics at that time. Moreover - and this is probably what the concerned parents are alluding to here – so called "youthful ease" must be separated from political participation. The first ballot paper will not be filled out in the first night out or during the first heartbreak.

g. "Don't take them their youth away."

Answer: It is not fair that young people are expected to spend several hours learning about Liechtenstein's political context and parties in the school - which is not the case for those 18-20-year-olds – and being deprived of the right to vote. Furthermore, young people who are not interested in politics will not vote. This is the same as in all other age groups. It is also unfair to young people to suddenly depict political participation as a burden, now when younger generations want to vote.

h. Why 16? Why not 14? Or 12? Or 0?

Answer: A lot of data has already been collected and scientifically evaluated for 16-year-olds. Whether 14-year-olds have similar aspirations as well as competences will be seen in the (distant) future. A further reduction is not an intention of the JL. It is obvious that 16-year-olds have a better chance of voting because of their contribution to society. Statements like "then you want it at 14 or 12 tomorrow" are unfounded and not helpful for this discussion.

3. Concerns of the parliament members

The concerns of the MPs, which have not already been listed under 2, can be summarized as follows: (a) "Separating the voting age from the age of majority is pointless and costly", (b) "The right to vote should not be separated from the right to stand for election" and (c) "The voting age should not be lowered to 16 without expanding political education". These points will be addressed in the following.

a. Age of majority

Answer: The fact that the age of majority and the voting age are connected is, to put it bluntly, a coincidence. If we want to list examples that are associated with the age of majority, things like the driving license, the consumption of intoxicants or the age of criminal responsibility come to mind. However, if we take a closer look at these three points, it becomes clear that none of them is related to the age of majority. Some types/categories of driving licenses can be obtained at 14, others only at 21. Cigarettes, wine and beer can be purchased in Liechtenstein at the age of 16. And even the age of criminal responsibility is not per se dependent on the age of majority. We do not want to turn young people into adults, we just want to grant them a right that they can and want to exercise as it is proven empirically.

Moreover, the right to vote and to be elected is not linked to the age of majority in the constitution either, but only to the age of 18 (see Art. 29, 2.). Thus, lowering the voting age would not only be politically correct, but also legally easy to implement, as the age of majority and all concepts associated with it do not have to be touched.

b. Right to vote and stand for election

We have always asked where the problem lies and without exception, we could not get any justification for this. Therefore, we want to emphasize here that it makes sense to treat these two concepts separately.

Apart from the fact that young people in this phase of life will hardly find the time and means to undergo a lengthy (nomination and) election campaign, and apart from the probably microscopic chances of success of a 16-year-old as a parliamentary candidate, we would come to legal problems with the lowering of the passive voting age. A 16-year-old cannot sign any documents, as a representative in parliament, government or municipal council must be able to do. Our neighboring country Austria shows us that a separation of active and passive voting rights does not pose any problems.



c. Political education

Answer: We would welcome an expansion of political education as an accompanying measure. However, civic education is already taught in schools. This provides the minimum requirements to understand the institutional and philosophical cornerstones of Liechtenstein politics. However, since today's voters did not get any more political education in their schooling, this argument can no longer be used as a requirement for political participation in Liechtenstein.

4. Closing words

Thank you for taking up this cause to the best of your ability. We have spent a lot of time and resources on this campaign because we are convinced that by lowering the voting age, we will achieve great gains for all generations. 16- and 17-year-olds want the right to vote, and they deserve it. Believe them when they say: Let's have a say! We are ready!

Confident

Junge Liste

Sources and further reading

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