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Old enough to vote at 16?

Young Swiss are clamouring for the voting age to be lowered from 18 to 16. A number of cantons are debating the matter, as are the politicians in Berne. Is this a watershed moment?

JÜRGEN STEINER

Michael Pesaballe remembers 6 May 2007 very well. The Glarus Lands-gemeinde (open-air assembly) was taking place under a torrential down-pour. Pesaballe, then aged 20 and a member of the Young Socialists, walked up to the microphone on the podium and started to speak. His motion? To lower the voting age to 16. “Honestly, I did not expect to win a majority,” he recounts. But the debate in the ring below became quite heated. “I suddenly realised there was something in the air.”

It was a moment for the history books. According to Pesaballe, the then cantonal government member Marianne Dürst gave a “stirring endorsement”, after which the open-air assembly narrowly approved the young man’s compromise motion. The age at which people were entitled to stand for election to political office was left at 18. However, Glarus became the first-ever Swiss canton to lower the voting age to 16. “Naturally, I hoped other cantons would follow suit,” says Pesaballe. Yet nothing happened. In 2021, Glarus remains the only canton in which 16-year-olds can vote.

Motion approved at federal level

Pesaballe firmly believes he owed the narrow victory in 2007 both to the innovative spirit in his home canton and to the gut reaction of the crowd that day. He himself says that he would vote in favour of the motion with the same conviction now as he did back then. For example, the climate movement shows that young

people, contrary to what many people might think, are interested and getting involved in political debate, he points out. In his opinion, young people should be entitled to have their own say and learn to take responsibility, given that they are the ones who will have to live with the legacy of the votes.

In the last two to three years, there has been movement on the issue in the cantons of Vaud, Basel-Stadt, Geneva, Valais, Neuchâtel, Zurich, Berne, Uri, Zug and Lucerne. Developments at national level have been particularly noteworthy. In 2008 and 2017, voting at age 16 had no chance in parliament. Yet this changed in 2020, when the National Council surprisingly approved a motion from the Green National Councillor for Basel-Stadt, Sibel Arslan, with the preliminary consultation committee of the Council of States subsequently endorsing the motion a few months later. This now paves the way towards the drafting of a constitutional amendment that would give voting rights to around 130,000 teenagers – including young Swiss Abroad.

But before crossing the finishing line, the proposal would have to survive a popular vote at the polls – which is where it has always foundered until now. The canton of Neuchâtel rejected it last year, with 60 per cent of the electorate voting no.

Zurich in favour, Berne against

Switzerland gave women the vote in 1971 after a long struggle. In 1991, it lowered the voting age from 20 to 18.



The Glarus open-air assembly is an ancient form of direct democracy. On a rainy 6 May 2007, the assembly turned progressive by deciding to give 16-year-olds the vote.

Photo: Keystone

Foreign nationals only have the right to vote at local level in a small number of municipalities and cantons, while 16-year-olds can only vote at municipal and cantonal level in Glarus. Switzerland is always prepared to reassess who is entitled to participate in democracy, but the process always takes a long time.

In terms of lowering the voting age to 16, it is helpful to cast a glance at Switzerland’s two most populous cantons, Berne and Zurich. Zurich’s government is in favour, Berne’s is against. Both for quite different reasons.

In Zurich’s view, the “generational balance” in Swiss politics is out of kilter. The median age of voters is currently 57. According to calculations by the liberal think tank Avenir Suisse, it will rise to well over 60 by 2035. In other words, the influence of the over-60s at the polls is becoming ever greater due to higher life expectancy and will soon be the same as that of the under-60s.

Zurich’s cantonal government believes that the median age needs to be lower – and that this justifies revitalising the voting pool with



the introduction of a younger demographic. If 16- and 17-year-olds are given a say on political matters immediately after they have finished compulsory schooling, while everything that they have learned in class is still fresh in their minds, the idea is that in the long term this will increase the likelihood of them getting into the habit of voting.

The ability to make reasoned decisions

The Berne cantonal government, on the other hand, points to the discrepancy that would arise between the ages from which young people could exercise civil and political rights. In Switzerland, you must be at least 18 years old to sign legal papers. If the voting age was 16, it would mean that you would not be allowed to sign petitions for referendums and popular initiatives – but you could vote on them. There would also be a disconnect between the right to vote in elections and the right to stand for election: you could do the former now but would have to wait for two years to do the latter.

Such an argument is a red herring that prevents us from creating a sys-

tem that is truly geared to young people, says 20-year-old Philippe Kramer from the politically unaffiliated pressure group Stimmrechtsalter 16 (Voting Age at 16). In his view, playing one thing off against the other like that misses the point. What matters, he says, is the ability to make reasoned decisions, i.e. to know what you are voting for or against. “You can certainly do that when you are 16.” According to psychologists, our ability to think coolly and calmly without time pressure or influence from friends is fully developed by the time we are 16, he notes.

Harnessing Instagram

But where do young people get the information they need to vote? According to a survey, 70 per cent of

Teenagers react with delight at the Glarus open-air assembly on 6 May 2007, after the electorate decides to lower the cantonal voting age to 16.

Photo: Keystone

Thanks to the efforts of National Councillor Sibel Arslan (canton of Basel-Stadt), the campaign to lower the voting age to 16 is up and running at federal level.

Photo: Keystone



15- to 25-year-olds consume political news no more than once a week. However, a number of initiatives are trying to correct this. For several years, the Easyvote programme has been producing brochures and video clips that provide easy-to-understand information on elections and popular votes. And a few months ago, a collective of young journalists went online with @tauch.station – a social media project that researches political issues and explains them to young people on the popular, easily digestible photo- and video-sharing platform Instagram. It is not that young people have no interest in politics per se: “But we believe democracy should also be about accessibility,” says Alice Grosjean, 29, one of the co-founders of @tauch.station. The online world in which young people often spend their time is particularly bereft of political coverage, she adds. Or its political content is too complicated. @tauch.station aims to rectify this.

One could argue that the young demographic is ready for the voting age to be lowered to 16. Adult voters still need time to get used to the idea.