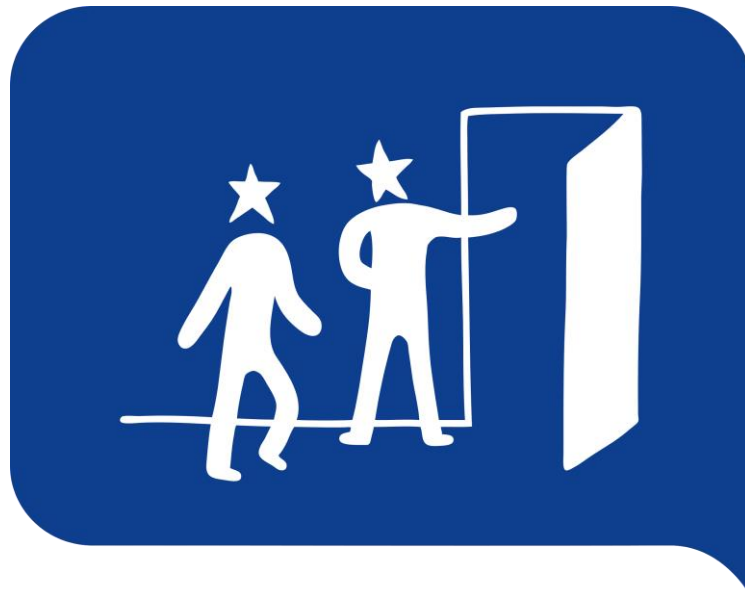# Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 3

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation

Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them, although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development.

> **YG#9 Target 3:** Increase youth participation and thus equal representation in the electoral process as well as in elected bodies and other decision-making organs at all levels of society.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What measures/actions can be implemented to increase young people's representation in electoral bodies?

Key topics in this report: Elections, voting, politicians, political parties, votes at 16, quotas, representation

Note: The findings in this report overlap with Report 1. Both reports should be read together.

Report by Dr. Dan Moxon - Director, People Dialogue and Change,
Member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth.

Target 3: Participation in elections and representation in elected bodies

Wider context: Creating youth friendly politics

Many participants reported a view that the adult generation's prejudices affected young people's participation in electoral systems. Parts of the electoral system are seen as 'old-established' and not treating young people's views seriously and with respect.

> *There is a lot of prejudice against young people in decision-making roles. Young people are considered inexperienced and lack credibility. Thus, they face a lot of barriers not only inside political structures to be in an electing position but also from society in general, that does not consider them competent and capable of holding office.*
>
> Portuguese National Working Group Report

> *Young people often face problems in elected local policy bodies. They are considered too young; they are not respected. There is a need to change the understanding of politics. Moreover, participants felt that the opinions of young people need to be taken more seriously. This would definitely motivate young people to consider participating in electoral processes more.*
>
> Maltese National Working Group Report

There was a perception that politics serves the interests of the older generations and does not represent young people or focus on youth issues.

> *Political contents seem to be made for elder people and that's why parents and grand-parents are more interested in politics. Young people's topics should be more addressed in politics to motivate youngsters to participate.*
>
> Luxembourgish Working Group Report

Not 'feeling represented' was linked to the **low trust in political systems**, and **feeling of distance from decision making**, especially at EU level. These issues are discussed more in Report 1.

Some working groups highlighted that the 'choice not to participate' in elections was an important part of democracy. For some young people **not voting was a way of showing discontent**.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

One of the major barriers to engaging young people in democratic elections is the quality of politicians and political parties.

> *When asked what prevents young people from running in elections or being elected to representative bodies, [young people] answered that it is a stereotype*

about politics that they are there for the sake of party or personal interest before the interests of the community.

<div align="right">Croatian National Working Group Report</div>

Young people do not understand politics as current politicians present it. They also consider most of the election spots of individual political parties to be bizarre and not attractive to them. They feel that they are not yet affected by politics, they do not know why they should address the presented topics.

<div align="right">The Czech Republic National Working Group Report</div>

Politicians should act more in line with the reality and needs of young people and take appropriate measures for them.

<div align="right">Belgian Working Group Report - French Speaking Community</div>

Participants reported that Parliaments and other elected bodies have too few young people within them. Young people were also concerned about lack of diversity among politicians.

Young people do not feel that existing political parties represent them and their ideas... the majority of elected MPs are either lawyers or doctors, therefore there is no representation of all people in the Parliament [and] they don't feel represented by current politicians.

<div align="right">Cypriot National Working Group Report</div>

In addition, it was suggested there was a need for better quality, objective information about electoral candidates, and electoral processes, particularly in the lead up to elections.

When it came to standing for election, the general context that political parties and bodies are often not welcoming and respectful of young people was a barrier. Some specific barriers were also identified:

- The cost of running as a candidate.
- The length of terms of office may not fit well with education or work.
- High minimum ages to stand for elections in some countries.
- The need to be involved with a political party when you may not support all causes.

Possible actions and measures:

Across the consultation there was a general belief that increasing young people's involvement in the electoral processes and bodies required creating **a new form of politics that is youth friendly** and more **inclusive of young people** and their concerns. This linked to the issue of building trust and reducing distance from public bodies discussed in Report 1.

Many suggestions made through the consultation were circular. It was said that in order to engage more young people in representative politics, politics needed to become more representative of young people.

Being 'represented' meant a range of things. It included
- Younger electoral candidates/politicians.

- Candidates/politicians from more diverse social backgrounds.
- More political discussion of issues relevant to young people.
- Candidates/politicians who will take on board young people's views and communicate with young people well in public.

Concrete steps to achieve representation and engagement were not always clearly defined. Although many ideas were suggested, **there did not seem to be a strong consensus for one or two specific measures** that would be the key to solving the issues.The general tone of recommendations, indicated many young people believe the solutions are based on **changing political systems, politicians and parties**, as much as, if not more than, on **educating and informing young people** about politics. Within this context, a range of measures and actions were proposed across the working group reports.

Calls for improving **political and civic education** (see Report 1 for a full discussion) and increasing access to youth friendly, trustworthy, **objective information on elections, political candidates and their positions** (see Reports 1 and 7).

Strengthening youth participation structures and youth civil society. This was said by some to encourage wider electoral engagement (see Report 1 for a discussion on *how* these structures might be strengthened). One theme was the development of structures which closely modelled or shadowed existing electoral structures such as simulation or shadow Parliaments.

> *[One solution is] the involvement and participation of young people not only in the Youth Council – Youth Committee of the municipality but also in a number of similar committees of the municipalities like the culture, environment, development, accessibility and others.*
>
> Greek National Working Group Report

Increasing opportunities for **direct contact between politicians and young people was** suggested (see Report 1 for details of *how* this might be implemented). This was partly connected to the need to promote political role models and relatable political figures.

> *A good measure is when another young person is active or running for council and publishing/disseminating their stories and experiences. It is important to point out the value that the young person gets from it. Think about whether and how young people will benefit… There must be a reward or strong intrinsic motivation (e.g. in the form of role models).*
>
> Estonian National Working Group Report

Some groups suggested ensuring **politicians could communicate effectively and authentically with young people**, particularly through **social media**.

> *The most important thing is that politicians communicate clearly, take young people seriously, listen to their input and provide follow up. Only a few young people could name politicians who they saw as role models and who knew how to communicate with young people. Politicians that were mentioned either shared the same religion as them or were really good at explaining what they did and why. Organise*

campaigns targeted at young people and improve social media presence of those active in electoral bodies.

<div align="right">The Netherlands National Working Group Report</div>

The Austrian National Working Group warned about **'Boomer-Cringe'** when politicians use social media poorly (see Report 5 for more on the cultural competences young people expect in digital communication).

It is not enough for politicians to think they can get a Tik-Tok account and communicate there in their old way. New platforms are developing new patterns of language and expression, and specific skills are needed to express themselves on these platforms without making fools of themselves. Moreover, authenticity in online spaces is important.

Related suggestions also included **job shadowing schemes** where young people could work alongside politicians for a day and build up connections.

Lowering voting age to 16 was a topic that divided the opinions of young participants. Some working groups reported only support for lowering the voting age. Others, particularly those who explored the topic extensively reported mixed opinions amongst young people. Denmark, who explored it extensively, concluded the majority of their participants were against votes at 16. A key debate seemed to be ensuring 16 year olds had enough political knowledge and education.

If it were lowered, there should be a lot of information campaigns, more political education at schools, support for media literacy skills and more information of candidates and parties beforehand.

<div align="right">Finnish National Working Group Report</div>

The EUYD8 *qualitative* consultation cannot provide an accurate estimation of how much support exists for votes at 16 when opinions are divided. However, the upcoming survey may do. The 2018 youth dialogue survey showed only a slight majority toward votes at 16, with much greater support among younger age groups.[1]

The topic of age quotas or some form of age regulation within parties or electoral bodies was discussed by few working groups. When discussed, this **generally divided opinions** among young people and did not enjoy widespread support.There were suggestions made about the need to **strengthen or improve the youth wings of political parties**, though what that would mean in practice was not described in detail. Other suggestions described the need for **political parties to conduct outreach** and communication activities targeted at young people.

A small number of working groups reported suggestions around **making the process of voting more accessible**, such as through online voting for transport in rural areas. There

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[1] See section 3.16, Bárta, O & Moxon, D. (2018). Structured Dialogue VI Cycle Consultations: Quantitative Data Analyses. Zenodo. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3716297

were also suggestions to r**emove some of the barriers to standing for election**, such as lower minimum ages or providing financial support.