

**YOUTH,
DEMOCRACY,
AND
DEMOCRATIC
EXCLUSION IN
THE NORDIC
COUNTRIES**



Nordic Council
of Ministers

Youth, democracy, and democratic exclusion in the Nordic countries

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Introduction

Young people in the Nordic countries¹ generally participate less in elections than the overall population. The turnout is lowest among youth in their early twenties. Meanwhile, Nordic youth participate just as much and in some cases even more than the rest of the population when it comes to other forms of democratic participation, for instance attending demonstrations and involvement in organisations. Why is the turnout of youth so low? And what can be done to improve it and strengthen democracy?

Youth are a very heterogeneous group, and while some parts of the youth population have participation rates that are at the level of the total population, other groups participate considerably less. Young people with non-western or Eastern European immigrant background, with low levels of education, low income, that have parents with low educational levels, who are children of non-voters, and those of a lower social background have strikingly lower turnouts.

Several successful and partly successful measures to increase youth turnout have been carried out in the Nordic countries. Important measures that are proven effective in mobilising young voters are for instance mock elections and "remember to vote" text messages.

It is essential that Nordic politicians and policymakers prioritise the work towards increasing youth turnout. If not, we may risk the permanent de facto exclusion from democracy of certain groups.

The importance of youth participation in elections

The fact that young people in general, and certain groups of youth in particular, participate less in elections is a democratic problem. Voting is the most accessible way in which citizens directly participate in and influence politics and decision making. The unique thing about voting, compared to other forms of democratic participation, is that everybody gets an equal

¹ We were unfortunately unable to find sufficient statistics to include the Nordic territories Greenland, Åland, and the Faroe Islands in this report. Therefore, this report only concerns the five Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, and Norway).

say; one person, one vote. Therefore, the electoral result truly reflects the will of the people. At least in theory. In reality, it merely reflects the will of the part of the population who actually voted. When the turnout among youth is low, the electoral results reflect the will of a distorted part of the population where youth are not sufficiently represented. Consequently, youth are not participating in decision making at the same level as the rest of the population. Thus, increasing turnout among youth means strengthening democracy.

A dominant idea in the research and theory on electoral participation is that voting is a matter of habit; the more times you have participated in previous elections, the more likely you are to participate in the next one.² Following this idea, if youth do not acquire the habit of voting early on, they miss out on the necessary political socialisation and will participate less in the future. They could even be at risk of becoming permanent non-voters. This implies that a high turnout among youth today is essential to secure a high overall turnout in the future. It should however be noted that several findings³ partly contradict this. Although political socialisation is important, the theory of "the habit of voting" might not be entirely correct.

When youth participate less, politicians have fewer incentives to implement policies that benefit youth. Young people as a group have certain common interests. It may be increasing student loans and scholarships, the existence of free and accessible after-school programmes, or other issues entirely. But as long as young people continue to vote less than the overall population, and as long as youth as a group are not prioritised by politicians, these interests are not met by sufficient political action. Of course, youth are also interested in and have opinions on a great spectrum of other political issues, just like the rest of the population. Likewise, it is problematic if youth do not get an equal say in these matters. The bottom line is this: Those who do not vote are simply not heard. In order for young voices to be heard, we need to increase youth turnout.

² Franklin 2004.

³ Such as Bergh 2016, Bhatti, Hansen & Wass 2016.

Youth turnout in the Nordic countries

Denmark

Denmark has, together with Sweden, the smallest gap between the voter turnout among young people and the total turnout in the Nordic countries. Even so, Danish youth between the ages of 18 and 29 still participate considerably less in elections than the rest of the population.

Only 57.7%⁴ of Danish citizens between 19 and 21 participated in the local elections of 2013. In the parliamentary elections of 2015, only 77.1%⁵ of citizens in the same age group voted. This means that young Danes between 19 and 21, who are part of the age group that generally has the lowest turnout, had a participation level of 8.7 percent points less than the average population in the parliamentary elections of 2015 and 14.4 percent points less in the local elections two years earlier.

During the past local elections, the voter turnout among youth in Denmark has increased slightly.⁶ This might indicate that the trend of decreased electoral participation among Danish youth has turned. When it comes to parliamentary elections, there is no clear trend of neither decrease nor increase. The gap between the participation of youth and the average population is also rather stable.⁷

Finland

Finland, on the other hand, has the largest gap between the turnout among youth and the average population. They also have the lowest total voter turnout in the Nordic region.

Until 1999, there was a stable decline in the turnouts of Finnish elections. Not only did the general turnout decrease, youth were also less likely to vote than before. This might be due to

both a generational and period effect, meaning that both the youngest generation has a lower turnout than previous generations and that overall, Finnish citizens today have a lower tendency to vote.⁸ Today however, the decrease seems to have levelled off, and while approximately 30% of 18–24-year-old Finns cast their votes in the local elections of 2012,⁹ about 5 percentage points more did the same in 2017.¹⁰ 47% of Finns between 18 and 24 voted in the parliamentary elections of 2015.¹¹ Compared to the total turnout, this implies an age gap of 27 percentage points in 2012,¹² about 22.6 in 2017,¹³ and 19.9 in 2015.¹⁴

Sweden

Sweden has also experienced a decrease in voter turnout, but the trend has now been reversed. Participation among young voters, as well as average participation in the rest of the population, is increasing. While only 69.9% of young Swedes between 18 and 24 participated in the parliamentary elections of 2002, 81.3% did the same in 2014.¹⁵ The increase among young voters is actually largest among those groups that participate the least.¹⁶

Among the Nordic countries, Sweden has the smallest gap between the total voter turnout and turnout among young voters. In the parliamentary elections of 2010, the gap between voters of 18–24 and the total population was 5.6 percentage points and in 2014 it was 4.5 percentage points.¹⁷ In the local elections of 2014, 77.1% of 18–24-year-olds participated and the age gap in turnout was 5.7 percentage points.¹⁸ The age gap in parliamentary elections has since 1991 varied between 5 and 10 percentage points. It was at its highest when the overall participation was at its lowest, and vice versa.¹⁹

⁴ Bhatti, Dahlgard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b.

⁵ Bhatti, Dahlgard, Hansen & Hansen 2016.

⁶ Bhatti, Dahlgard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b.

⁷ Bhatti, Dahlgard, Hansen & Hansen 2016.

⁸ Wass 2007.

⁹ Borg & Pikkala 2017.

¹⁰ OSF2017a.

¹¹ Borg & Pikkala 2017.

¹² OSF2017b.

¹³ OSF2017a.

¹⁴ OSF2017b.

¹⁵ SCB 2015.

¹⁶ Olofsson 2013.

¹⁷ SCB 2015.

¹⁸ SCB 2015.

¹⁹ SCB 2012.

Iceland

For Iceland, there only exists statistics of voter turnout by age for the past three years. Therefore, one cannot really look at the development during time. It is also hard to compare the two elections, as the election of 2016 was a parliamentary election and the one of 2014 a local election. What can be said, however, is that as of today Iceland is the country that has the third smallest and third largest gap between the turnout of youth and total voter turnout. In the parliamentary elections of 2016, 67.7% of youth at the age of 18–29 voted in Iceland. In contrast, the total voter turnout was 79.2%, which makes a difference of 11.5 percentage points. The difference in voter turnout in the local elections of 2014 was 19 percentage points (the youth turnout being 47.5%).²⁰

The total voter turnout in Iceland has decreased the past decades, the turnout of 66.5% in the local elections of 2014 being the lowest voter turnout since before the Second World War. However, one should keep in mind that quite a few aspects of the situation of Iceland differs from the situations of the other Nordic countries. Iceland recently experienced an economic crisis, and the Icelander's levels of political trust has declined the past years and are at a relatively low level.²¹

Norway

In Norway, voter turnout among youth increased greatly in 2011 and the level of youth participation has been stable since. Many researchers claim that this increase is a reaction to the terrorist attacks on Utøya and the executive government quarter in Oslo the summer of 2011. Young people were affected by the extreme right-wing terrorist attack, and their response was a greater trust in democracy and a higher electoral participation.²²

The gap between the voter turnout of Norwegian youth and the rest of the population has stayed quite stable since 2011.²³ In the parliamentary elections of 2013, the age gap between the total turnout and that among youth aged 22–25 was 15.7 percentage points. In comparison, the age gap for the same group before 2011, in 2009, was 21.6 percentage point.²⁴ In the local elections of 2015 only 36.4% of 20–24-year-olds in Norway cast their vote, while for the total population, the turnout was 23.8 percentage points higher.²⁵ Despite the increase, Norway is still the country with the second largest voter turnout age gap in the Nordic region.

²⁰ Statistics Iceland 2016a.

²¹ Eyþórsson & Önnudóttir 2017.

²² Bergh 2015, Bergh & Ødegaard 2013, Ødegaard 2012.

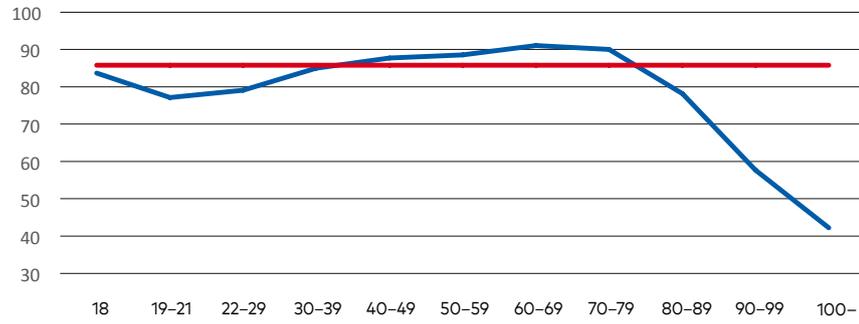
²³ Bergh 2015.

²⁴ Bergh 2015.

²⁵ SSB 2015.

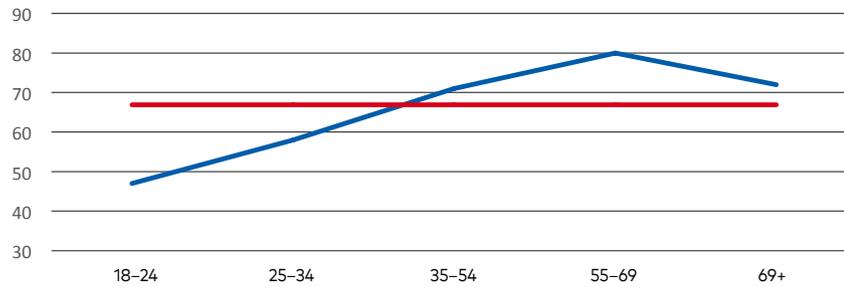
**Voter turnout by age
Denmark 2015**

Source:
Bhatti, Dahlgaard,
Hansen & Hansen 2016



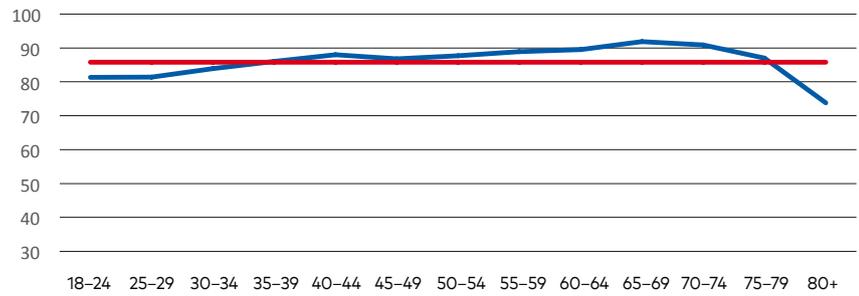
**Voter turnout by age
Finland 2015**

Source:
Borg & Pikkala 2017



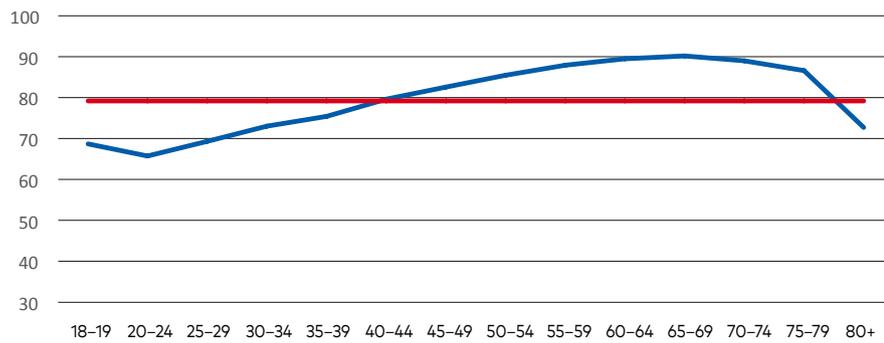
**Voter turnout by age
Sweden 2014**

Source:
Statistiska Centralbyrån
2015



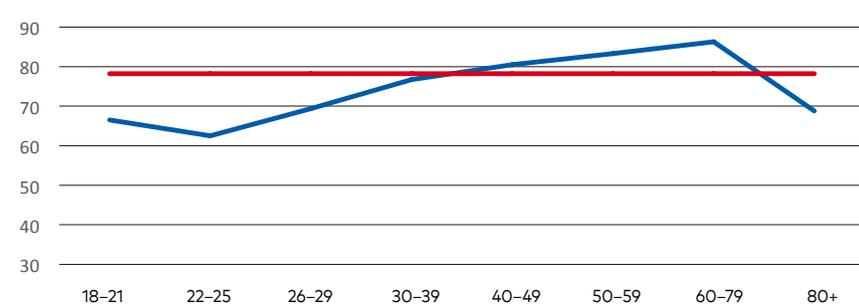
**Voter turnout by age
Iceland 2016**

Source:
Statistics Iceland 2016a



**Voter turnout by age
Norway 2013**

Source:
Statistisk Sentralbyrå
2015



Differences and similarities between the Nordic countries

High average participation goes hand in hand with high youth participation

As described above, Sweden and Denmark both have the highest overall turnouts in the Nordic region, the highest turnouts among youth, and the smallest gaps between the participation of young people and the total population. Opposite, the two countries with the lowest total turnouts of the Nordic countries, Norway and Finland, also have the lowest turnouts among youth and the largest age gaps. In other words, the turnout among youth and the age gap in turnout seems to depend on the total voter turnout. Research on voter turnout among European youth supports this.²⁶

This connection might be due to the norm of participating in elections being stronger and more widespread in some countries, and thus affecting a greater part of the population.²⁷ Voting is social, and as research has shown, political socialisation plays a great role in determining voter turnout. Political socialisation at home proves to be important, as it turns out that children of voters have a much higher tendency to vote than children of non-voters.²⁸ Furthermore, the relation between the overall turnout, the age gap, and the turnout of youth might show that youth are more easily affected by the factors that influence voter turnout.²⁹

The gap is largest in local elections

A trend that can be seen in all the Nordic countries is that the gap between the turnout of youth and the overall turnout is greater when it comes to local elections. For instance, the overall turnout in Iceland was 19 percentage points higher than the turnout among youth in the local elections of 2014, compared to 11.5 percentage points higher in the parliamentary elections two years later.³⁰ This is

perhaps not surprising, as one would expect voters who have low interest in participating to be more easily mobilised by "more important elections" such as parliamentary elections.³¹ The relation between total turnout, the age turnout gap, and the turnout of youth mentioned earlier also seems to be present here, as the overall turnout is lower and the age gap greater in local elections. Another explanation might be that a fair amount of young people do not live in the district where they are registered and have voting rights. Hence, they may not feel the need to vote and influence the politics of a municipality or region they do not live in.

Youth in their early twenties have the lowest turnout

Another interesting fact is that while first time voters have a relatively high turnout, their turnout decreases as they enter their early twenties. It then increases again around the age of 25. Many have explained this as being the result of the life stage in which youth in their early twenties find themselves. While first time voters usually live at home and attend school, youth in their early twenties are in a less stable situation, both financially and socially. This life stage is often characterised by many of the same factors that are generally connected to a low turnout. Being single and unmarried, not having attained a higher education, and having a low income are typically features of the life of people in their early twenties. In addition, when youth enter their twenties they are less affected by their parents, who usually are voters, and therefore have a positive effect on their children's voting habits. Instead, they are now more affected by their friends and new social circles, who to a larger extent are non-voters. In sum, this makes them less likely to vote than 18- and 19-year-olds.³²

²⁶ Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russle 2007.

²⁷ Franklin 2004.

²⁸ Bhatti & Hansen 2011, Gidengil, Wass & Valaste 2016.

²⁹ Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russle 2007.

³⁰ Statistics Iceland 2016a.

³¹ Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2016.

³² Bhatti & Hansen 2012, Bergh 2015.

Trust and voter turnout

Trust in political institutions and in democracy has been shown to have a positive effect on voter turnout.³³ In Iceland, trust in political institutions has declined sharply since the economic crisis of 2008. Youth's trust in political institutions has also declined, and studies show that youth who had less trust in the political institutions of their municipality also had a lower tendency to vote in the local elections of 2014.³⁴ However, when asked, only 3.2% of Icelandic youth stated "Discontent and distrust in politics" as a personal reason for not voting.³⁵ Likewise, in Denmark, youth have less trust in democracy, parliament, and the government than the rest of the population.³⁶ In Norway, on the other hand, youth have slightly higher levels of trust than the rest of the population. This has been the case since 2011.³⁷ The population of the Nordic countries, except for Iceland, generally have high levels of political and social trust.³⁸

We can observe that an increase in youth's levels of trust went hand in hand with an increased voter turnout among youth in Norway. It is however difficult to see a clear pattern when it comes to turnout among youth and trust in the Nordic countries. We do not know, for instance, how youth turnout has developed in Iceland.

Turnout is not necessarily declining

The overall impression one might get from media coverage on youth participation is that both the turnout of youth and that of the population as a whole is decreasing. However, this is not completely true for the situation in the Nordic countries.

Neither the general turnout nor the turnout among youth have been declining during the past years in Denmark, Sweden, or Norway. In Denmark and Sweden, it even seems to be increasing, if only slightly. Norway has also seen a great increase in other types of democratic participation among youth, such as organisations and political activism. The situation is a bit more unclear in Iceland and Finland. Wass concluded in 2007 that both the total turnout and the turnout among youth in Finland declined between 1975 and 2003.³⁹ However, since 2003, the turnout does not seem to have declined further, but stayed rather stable.⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, one cannot really say anything about the development of youth turnout in Iceland. The total turnout in Iceland, however, is decreasing.⁴¹

Youth participate in democracy in other ways than voting

Although youth have a lower voter turnout, they seem to be participating in democracy through other channels just as much as the overall population. For example, when it comes to attending demonstrations, participating in political organisations or parties, and signing petitions, youth are generally at an equal level as other age groups. At least this is the case in Norway,⁴² Sweden,⁴³ and Denmark.⁴⁴ The participation of youth varies by type, but in some kinds of political activities, youth even participate more than the overall population. This tells us that although youth tend to participate less in elections, they are not politically passive or non-participating.

³³ For instance in Grönlund & Setälä 2007.

³⁴ Sigmundsdóttir 2015.

³⁵ Eypósson & Önnudóttir 2017.

³⁶ However, the gap is smaller when it comes to distrust, meaning that more or less the same amount of youth as the overall population stated that they distrust democracy and the democratic institutions. This is because more youth answered "I don't know" in the survey.

³⁷ Bergh 2015.

³⁸ Kleven 2016.

³⁹ Wass 2007.

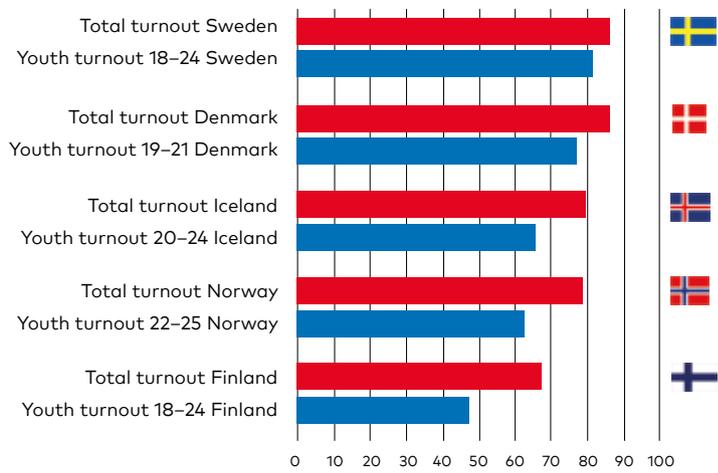
⁴⁰ OSF 2017b.

⁴¹ Statistics Iceland 2015, Statistics Iceland 2016b.

⁴² Bergh 2015.

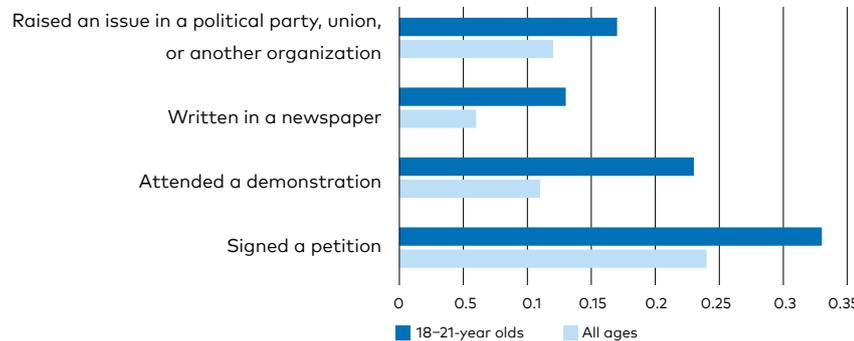
⁴³ SCB 2015.

⁴⁴ DUF 2014.



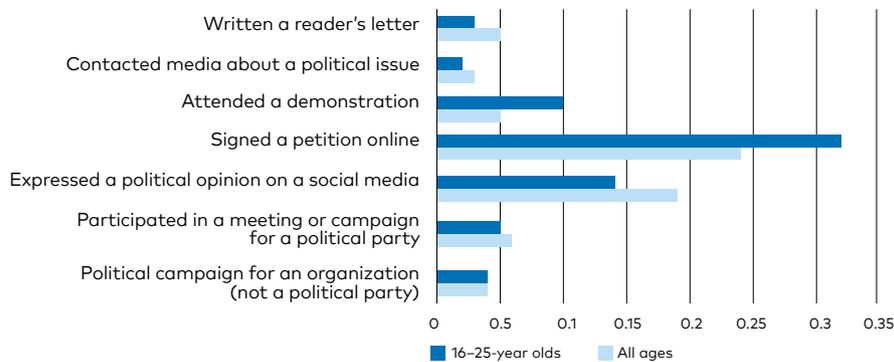
Differences and similarities between the Nordic countries

Source: Borg & Pikkala 2017, OSF 2017b, Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2016, Statistics Iceland 2016a



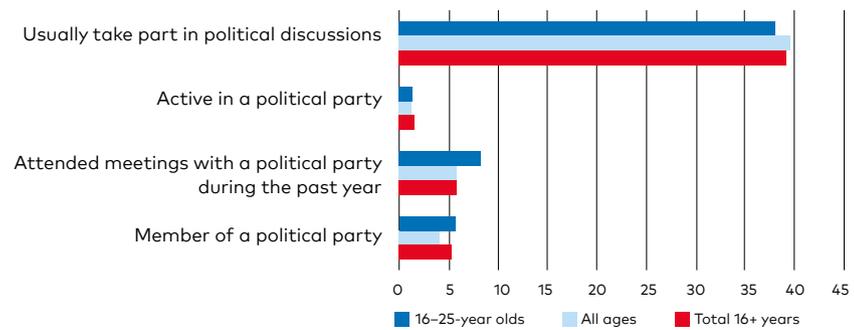
Participation in political activities Norway 2013

Source: Bergh 2015



Participation in political activities Denmark 2017

Source: DUF 2017



Participation in political activities Sweden 2014-2015

Source: SCB 2015

At risk groups

Variation among youth with immigrant background

In the Nordic countries, certain groups of young immigrants and youth born to immigrants have lower voter turnout than the native population. In both Norway and Denmark, youth with immigrant backgrounds⁴⁵ from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe have a lower tendency to vote than the rest of the population.⁴⁶ However, there are a few exceptions here, such as youth with immigrant background from Somalia and Sri Lanka. These groups seem to have high participation rates in most countries.⁴⁷ In other words, although it is true that youth with immigrant background from Non-Western countries and Eastern Europe tend to vote less than the native population, the image is complex and there are variations between the different immigrant groups.

In the Danish parliamentary elections of 2015, the gap between Danes with immigrant background and the native population was quite large. Extraordinarily, the turnout of Danish youth born to immigrants (second generation) was lower than the turnout of immigrant youth. This is surprising, as one might expect young Danes born to immigrants, who were born in and have grown up in Denmark and have gone to school there, to be more likely to participate in elections.⁴⁸

For some immigrant groups, the turnout of immigrants and those born to immigrant parents is below half of that of the native youth population. This is for instance true for 18-19-year-old Norwegians born to immigrants from Eastern EU countries. This group only had a participation percentage of 15% in the local elections of 2015.⁴⁹

Statistics from Sweden⁵⁰ show that when it comes to other types of democratic participation, youth with immigrant background seem to participate just as much as youth that belong to the native population. This is also the case for young Norwegian women with immigrant background. Young Norwegian men with immigrant background on the other hand, participate less than native Norwegian youth.⁵¹

Level of education, income, and class matters

There is a strong correlation between educational level and turnout for all age groups. The higher the level of education, the higher tendency a person has to vote in elections. One possible explanation is that those who have an interest in politics, and therefore are more likely to vote in the first place, also seek higher education. Hence, it is not the education itself that contributes to a higher turnout. Another explanation is that one attains certain resources through higher education that makes participating in elections easier. Furthermore, there might be stronger participation norms in the educational field and the social circles of the higher educated.⁵²

Regardless of what explanation or combination of explanations that is correct, Nordic studies show that education has a strong influence on a young person's tendency to vote.⁵³ One study showed that in Finland, educational level has even more to say for youth's turnout than it does for the turnout of other age groups.⁵⁴ Furthermore, apprenticeship students had lower turnouts in the mock elections of Iceland.⁵⁵ Statistics from Norway,⁵⁶ Denmark⁵⁷ and Sweden⁵⁸ also show that those who attended or are attending vocational training generally have a lower turnout. Norwegian statistics show that

⁴⁵ Meaning both immigrants and youth born to two immigrant parents.

⁴⁶ Bergh 2015, SSB 2014, Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b, Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2016.

⁴⁷ SSB 2014, Pirkkalainen, Wass, & Weide 2016, Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b, Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2016.

⁴⁸ Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2016.

⁴⁹ Kleven 2017.

⁵⁰ MUCF 2015a.

⁵¹ Ødegård & Fladmoe 2017.

⁵² Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b.

⁵³ For instance: Martikainen, Martikainen & Wass 2005, Bergh 2015, SCB 2015, SSB 2015.

⁵⁴ Martikainen, Martikainen & Wass 2005.

⁵⁵ Isebarn & Björgvinsdóttir 2017.

⁵⁶ Bergh 2016, Ødegaard Borge 2017.

⁵⁷ Bhatti & Hansen 2011.

⁵⁸ SCB 2012.

these students also tend to be less interested in politics and participate less in democracy through other channels such as being member of a party or attending demonstrations.⁵⁹

Another socioeconomic factor that is relevant here is income, which has a very similar effect on electoral participation as that of education.⁶⁰ Income is of course partly an outcome of educational level and other socioeconomic factors, and many studies have attributed its effect to these underlying factors.⁶¹

These two socioeconomic factors, educational level and income, are proven to be highly determined by social background, in other words by parents' class position.⁶² Nordic studies have also shown that there is a strong direct correlation between parents' voting habits and one's own.⁶³ Children of parents who vote have a much higher tendency to participate in elections themselves. Parents voting habits also affect adult children that no longer live with their parents.⁶⁴ Furthermore, these studies also show that parents' educational level independently affects the voting habits of their offspring. When parents have low educational attainments, their children have a lower probability to vote.⁶⁵ Considering the fact that both of these two socioeconomic factors are to a very large degree inheritable, one can say that a young person's voting habits are partly an outcome of her social background.

Young men participate less

Young men participate less in elections than young women in all five Nordic countries. Historically it

has been the other way around, and in the oldest generations men still have higher turnouts than women.⁶⁶ As shown earlier, level of education is a factor that influences a person's tendency to vote, another factor is relationship status. While being single contributes to a lower tendency to vote, being married is an integrating factor that contributes to a higher tendency. Part of the explanation for why young men participate less is that they have a lower educational level and are more often single than young women. However, it does not explain the total gap in turnout between the genders.⁶⁷

Young Norwegian men also participate less when it comes to other forms of democratic participation.⁶⁸ In Sweden, young men and women on average participate equally, but young women participate more in certain activities, and young men more in others.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ NSD 2015.

⁶⁰ Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b, Martikainen, Martikainen & Wass 2005, Bergh 2015, SCB 2015, SSB 2015, Bergh 2015.

⁶¹ Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b.

⁶² Harrits 2013.

⁶³ Bhatti & Hansen 2011, Gidengil, Wass & Valaste 2016.

⁶⁴ Gidengil, Wass & Valaste 2016.

⁶⁵ Gidengil, Wass & Valaste 2016, Ødegaard Borge 2017.

⁶⁶ Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014b, Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2016, Bergh 2015, Martikainen, Martikainen & Wass 2005, Statistics Iceland 2016a, 2016b & 2014, SCB 2012.

⁶⁷ Bergh 2015.

⁶⁸ Ødegård & Flandmoe 2017.

⁶⁹ MUCF2015a.



Why didn't they vote?

When young Norwegians were asked why they did not vote, the most commonly stated reasons were not having sufficient knowledge about the different political parties, being out of town on Election Day, and being too busy to vote. Not having an interest in politics, not believing that one's vote would make a difference, and simply forgetting to vote were also common reasons.⁷⁰ Likewise, Danish youth replied that they did not possess sufficient knowledge, were not interested in politics, and did not think their vote would make a difference.⁷¹ The most common reasons stated by Icelandic youth were that they were not interested, forgot or did not bother to vote, and lacked knowledge about politics.⁷²

Common reasons for not voting stated by Nordic youth:

- Did not have sufficient knowledge about the political parties/politics
- Out of town on Election Day
- Too busy to vote
- Not interested in politics
- Not believing that one's vote would make a difference
- Forgot to vote
- Did not bother to vote
- Did not find any of the political parties appealing.

⁷⁰ SSB 2015.

⁷¹ DUF 2014.

⁷² Eyþórsson & Önnudóttir 2017.

The electoral system, the role played by media and political focus

Turnout can be affected by more than individual reasons such as socioeconomic status; the way the electoral system is organised also plays a role. Considering that so many young Norwegians replied that they did not vote because they were out of town or too busy, it seems likely that accessible advance voting or even the ability to vote in another district on election day could increase turnout among youth. Stationing voting booths in places where youth normally spend their time, such as schools and universities, may also make it easier for youth to participate in elections.⁷³

Furthermore, many young people find it difficult to find a suitable candidate or do not find politics interesting or relevant. It is highly important that politicians and the media help change this by talking more directly to youth, rather than talking a lot about youth. It is also important that politicians raise issues that are important for young people.⁷⁴ Youth also stated that they lacked knowledge, which again shows the need for proper information about the political parties and for politicians to target their campaigns at young voters.

Not really a question of age?

Considering that young people in the Nordic countries to a larger degree have immigrant background, lower income, and/or lower education than the rest of the population, it seems logical to ask if the lacking turnout among youth really is a question of age.

A Finnish study from 2005 showed that age had an independent effect on turnout. Even when other socioeconomic factors were held constant, age continued to influence turnout.⁷⁵ However, in his data analysis from 2015, Bergh finds that the effect of age almost disappears when he controlled for marital status, immigrant background, education, and income. In other words, it is not as much the fact that youth in Norway are young that make them participate

less, but the fact that youth to a larger degree belong to the socioeconomic groups with the lowest turnouts.⁷⁶ This suggests that the low participation of youth is not really a question of age, but of life situation and socioeconomic factors.⁷⁷ One cannot simply conclude that Bergh's findings apply to all five Nordic countries, as for instance, the Finnish study from 2005 had different results. However, it does seem plausible that Bergh's findings also apply in some of the other Nordic countries, as the factors that influence youth turnout are so similar.

Exclusion, a challenge for democracy

Nordic youth with immigrant background from certain areas and countries, low levels of education, low income, low social background, or parents who are non-voters have a lower tendency to vote. As initially mentioned, it constitutes a democratic problem when certain groups have considerably lower turnouts than the majority. The electoral results are supposed to reflect the will of the whole population, but this is not the case when certain groups tend to participate less in elections. Another consequence is that these groups are not prioritised in decision making by politicians.

When it comes to participating in democracy through other channels, the image is neither clearly negative nor positive. For instance, while Norwegian pupils attending vocational training and Norwegian boys with immigrant background tend to participate less through these channels, Swedish youth with immigrant background participate significantly more than native youth.

We know that the groups of young people who have lower tendencies to vote are to a large degree also excluded in other areas. Young men with immigrant background and low-class origin are for instance overrepresented on the statistics of school dropouts.⁷⁸ The fact that these groups in addition participate less in elections is a serious problem. It is essential that the Nordic countries act to mobilise youth, and these groups of youth in particular.

⁷³ Gjerdset & Borud 2017.

⁷⁴ Lahn 2013.

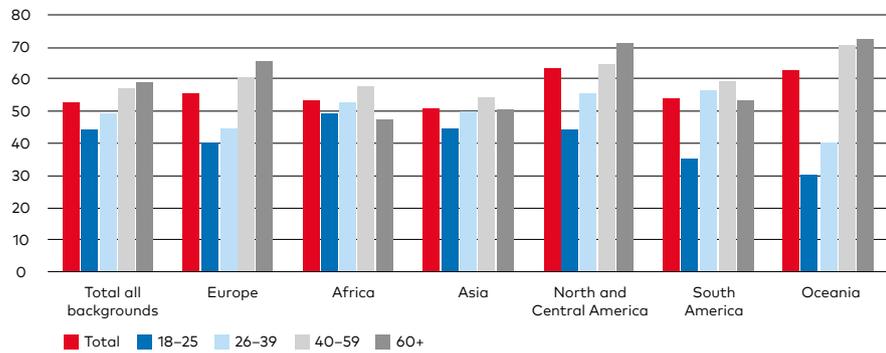
⁷⁵ Martikainen, Martikainen & Wass 2005.

⁷⁶ Bergh 2015.

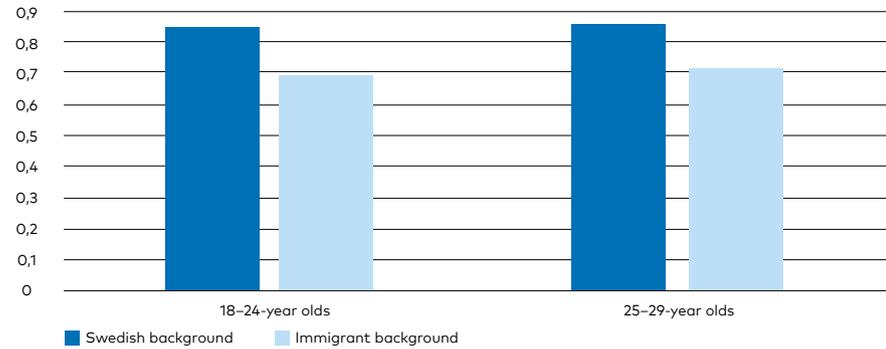
⁷⁷ Gjerdset & Borud 2017.

⁷⁸ Balci 2015.

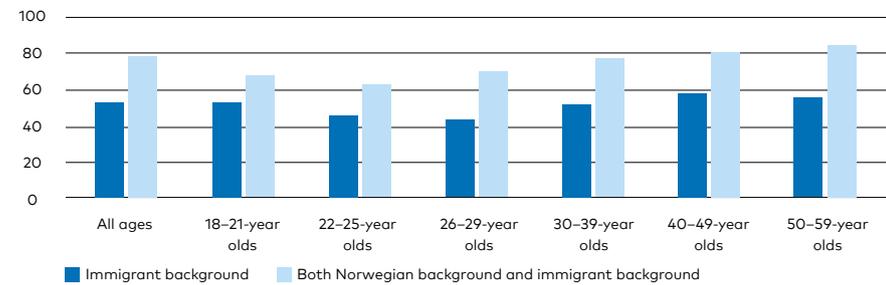
Turnout among Norwegians with immigrant background 2013



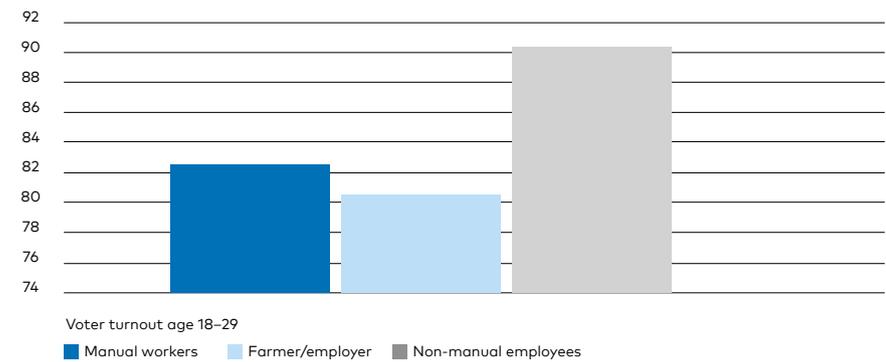
Turnout among Swedish youth 2014



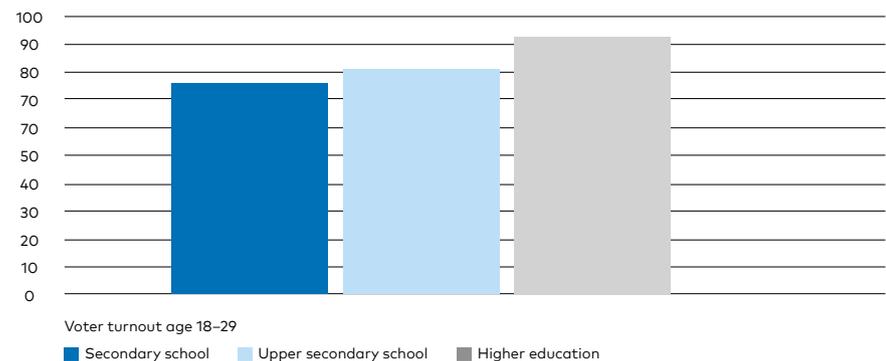
Turnout immigrant background and total turnout Norway 2013



Voter turnout by socio-economic group, Swedish youth



Voter turnout by education, Swedish youth



Studies from Norway show that students who are old enough to vote and that participate in the mock elections are far more willing to participate in the real elections afterwards.



How to increase turnout among Nordic youth

Mock elections and democratic education in school

Turnout

Mock elections, or shadow elections, are organised in all five Nordic countries, although the institutionalisation and extensiveness of these elections varies from country to country. The mock elections are held in the upper secondary, and sometimes lower secondary schools, just before the real elections. In this way the students get to practice and learn by going through a realistic electoral process.

Studies from Norway show that students who are old enough to vote and that participate in the mock elections are far more willing to participate in the real elections afterwards. This effect persists even after having controlled for other background factors that also have an influence, such as parents' educational level.⁷⁹ The experiences of Iceland's first mock elections show the same trend.⁸⁰ Mock elections promote the norm of participating in elections in general, and by doing so have a positive effect on youths voting habit.⁸¹ In other words, mock elections work in the way that they make it more likely that youth participate in real elections.

Mock elections are a practical lesson in voting, and often the opportunity is used to further educate youth in democracy. In Iceland, the mock elections were accompanied by a "Democracy Week" and an information campaign targeted at young voters. Likewise, in Sweden, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society also supplied educational material and teaching methods on democracy and politics to be used in the schools close to the mock elections.⁸²

Mock elections do not only entail the practical experience of voting and education in democracy, they also let young people learn about the

different political parties and their politics. In many countries, the mock elections are accompanied by political debates arranged at the different schools and/or electoral squares where youth can meet and talk to representatives from the different parties. Youth often state lack of interest as a reason for not voting. Mock elections might help increase young people's interest for politics by bringing politics and political debates into the schools. Swedish studies show that youth who get the chance to discuss politics in school to a larger degree begin to take interest in politics than others.⁸³ As mentioned earlier, another reason for not voting among both Danish, Icelandic, and Norwegian youth was lack of knowledge. Again, mock elections can be important, because they make information about politics available to young people. This shows the need to keep on with mock elections and political education.

However, mock elections still have potential for improvement when so many young people after having attended school and mock elections still feel that they lack information. In her doctorate, Ødegaard Borge finds that mock elections are too focused on teaching the students that voting is a duty, instead of presenting voting as a rational thing to do in order to influence politics. Another weakness is that actual politics and the results of the mock elections are not given sufficient attention.⁸⁴

Not all schools arrange mock elections. In Sweden, there are huge differences between the schools that offer programmes within vocational training and those that offer general studies. Fewer of the schools that offer vocational training programmes arrange mock elections, the result being that the students who already have a lower tendency to vote miss out on the opportunity to benefit from mock elections.⁸⁵ In Norway, these students also

⁷⁹ Ødegaard Borge 2017.

⁸⁰ Isebarn & Björgvinsdóttir 2017.

⁸¹ Ødegaard Borge 2017.

⁸² Ungdomsstyrelsen 2015b.

⁸³ Ungdomsstyrelsen 2007.

⁸⁴ Ødegaard Borge 2017.

tend to take less interest in politics and participate less in democracy through other channels.⁸⁶ If it is also the case in the other Nordic countries that schools that offer vocational training to a lesser degree arrange mock elections, this constitutes a serious issue that must be addressed.

Mock elections and political education in school is important, but not sufficient. Students do not vote in real elections simply because they have participated in mock elections, there is more to it than that.⁸⁷ Even more importantly, the age group that we know have the lowest turnout, youth in their early twenties, have already left school and can therefore not be reached by mock elections.

Role play as a method to learn and increase interest

Close to the national elections and the European parliamentary elections of 2014, role plays developed by Sweden's student councils and Svearok (a gamer's association) were used as a method to teach youth about democracy and to increase their interest in elections. The role plays were very popular, were carried out in a lot of Swedish schools, and received positive feedback.⁸⁸ The effect of the role plays was not measured, but considering that learning by participation generally is acknowledged as an effective learning method, there is a chance that creative methods such as role plays could help increase youth turnout.

Voting at sixteen has positive consequences

During the elections of 2011 and 2015, experiments with lowering the voting age to 16 were carried out in certain Norwegian municipalities. The results were positive. Admittedly, lowering the voting age did not seem to result in a long time increase of overall turnouts. In other words, those who voted at 16 and 17 were not more likely to vote in later elections than others, hence they had not acquired "a habit of voting".⁸⁹ However, the participation of the 16- and 17-year olds who were given the opportunity to vote was relatively high. In fact, the turnout of the under-aged voters was even higher than that of "normal" first time voters (18- and 19-year olds) and 20–25-year olds.⁹⁰ An important result of the temporary lowering of

the voting age was an increase of the political representation of youth. More young people were elected as members of the local councils in 2011 than in previous elections. This is important because youth are underrepresented in both local councils and parliament.⁹¹

The experiences with lowering the voting age in Austria, Germany, and Scotland have been very similar to the experiences of the Norwegian experiments. 16- and 17- year olds had higher rates of participation than other first-time-voters, their turnout was only slightly below that of the total population, and the new voters did not vote significantly different than the rest of the electorate.⁹²

One might argue that 16-year olds are not mature enough to vote or that the voting age should be equal to the age of majority. It also seems illogical that 16- and 17-year olds should be able to vote, while not being eligible for office themselves. Nevertheless, these European experiences show us that giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote has many positive effects. These under-aged voters have high voter turnouts. In addition, more young deputies are elected when 16- and 17-year olds vote. It is true that Norwegian youth did not acquire the habit of voting. However, one can still argue that they gained important experience and political socialisation. Furthermore, politicians are to a larger degree forced to prioritise youth when 16- and 17-year olds can vote, as youth now form a bigger part of the electorate. Lowering the voting age to 16 could be an important way to expand democracy.

Information campaigns

The Nordic youth councils have arranged several "get-out-the-vote" informative mobilising campaigns in their respective countries. The Icelandic campaign #ÉGKÝS, which was organised by The Icelandic Youth Council (LUF) and The Icelandic Upper Secondary School Student Union (SÍF), is a good example here. #ÉGKÝS included, among other things, different public events such as meetings with political candidates, film clips spread through social media, a hashtag, and a website with information about the different parties and how to vote. Iceland's

⁸⁵ Ungdomsstyrelsen 2007.

⁸⁶ NSD 2015.

⁸⁷ Ødegaard Borge 2017.

⁸⁸ Ungdomsstyrelsen 2015b.

⁸⁹ Bergh 2016b.

⁹⁰ Bergh & Ødegaard 2013.

⁹¹ Winsvold, Ødegaard & Bergh 2016.

⁹² Fjeldavli 2015.

first mock elections were an integrated part of the campaign. #ÉGKÝS was highly successful. Not only was the turnout of the mock elections high, but those who participated were more likely to vote in the actual elections afterwards.⁹³

As part of get out the vote campaigns, several of the Nordic youth councils have created information websites where one can learn about the different political parties and get practical information on how and where to vote. The web sites have varied in form and content, but they have all had the purpose of making information concerning the election and politics accessible to young voters. For instance, in Finland the website also included, apart from information, a list of young candidates. The Icelandic website included an election quiz people could take to find out which party they should vote for.

It is of course hard to measure the direct impact of media campaigns such as #ÉGKÝS and the campaigns of the other youth councils. However, we do know that many young people in the Nordic countries do not vote because they feel they lack knowledge, and these campaigns have a great ability to spread information. Moreover, these websites have the ability of reaching a larger portion of the youth population, including those who do not attend school. They also remind youth about the upcoming elections, which is important, as many young people say they simply forget to vote. Researchers also argue that such campaigns can be an important way to mobilise young voters.⁹⁴

Through campaign work, the Youth Councils have an important role in pushing politicians to talk more directly to and target their campaigns at young voters. Young people often feel that it is difficult to find a suitable political candidate,⁹⁵ and politicians have a great potential for improvement when it comes to adapting their campaigns to young voters.⁹⁶

Influence through the social networks of youth

As part of their campaign "Unge Stemmer", The Norwegian Children and Youth Council encouraged youth to join in to mobilise other young people to vote.⁹⁷ By doing so, they were trying to affect

youth through their social networks. This is relevant, because research shows that a young person's social network is central in determining her tendency to vote.⁹⁸ Youth can successfully be affected to vote by personal contact, especially personal contact with someone they know who talks to them about voting.⁹⁹ This is why also the Danish Youth Council recommends measures to increase voter turnout among youth that reach youth through their social networks.¹⁰⁰

Mail and postcards can mobilise youth

Another possible measure to mobilise young voters is sending out letters or postcards. This has been carried out in several Nordic countries. In Silkeborg municipality in Denmark, the participation of young voters who had received postcards or letters was 3 percentage points higher than among those who did not. Postcards and letters sent out to young voters can increase turnout, especially if they have an adequate design and content that appeals to youth.¹⁰¹

Effective text message alerts

In 2015, the Institute for Social Research in Norway experimented with voter mobilisation by sending out a text message reminder to a random sample of voters under the age of 30. The text message reminder led to an increase in turnout among those who received it by nearly 5 percentage points. Text message alerts also had a huge positive impact on the turnout of youth with immigrant background.¹⁰² A similar experiment was carried out in Denmark in 2014, before the European Parliamentary election. The Danish researchers sent out several types of text message reminders to young voters. One of the text messages that was sent out three days before polling day showed an effect of nearly 2 percentage points. Interestingly, the text message had a greater ability to mobilise those groups of youth that have a low average turnout.¹⁰³

Sending a text message reminder is an easy, relatively cheap, and efficient way to mobilise voters. Simply sending all young voters a text message a few days before the election has the potential to bring thousands of more young voters to the ballot boxes.

⁹³ Isebarn & Björgvinsdóttir 2017.

⁹⁴ Mjelde 2014.

⁹⁵ SSB 2015, DUF 2014 & Eypórssón & Önnudóttir 2017.

⁹⁶ Lahn 2013.

⁹⁷ LNU 2017b.

⁹⁸ DUF 2013.

⁹⁹ Green & Gerber 2015.

¹⁰⁰ DUF 2017.

¹⁰¹ Bhatti, Dahlgaard, Hansen & Hansen 2014a.

¹⁰² Bergh, Christensen & Matland 2016.



Experiment with calling first-time voters

During September of 2017, the Norwegian Children and Youth Council reached more than 7.000 first-time voters by calling them and talking about the upcoming election and the importance of voting. The volunteers making the calls were first-time voters themselves who simply offered information about the election and arguments for why the call receivers should use their vote.¹⁰⁴

The effect of this experiment is yet to be analysed, but research has shown that making phone calls such as this can be an effective way to mobilise voters. It can even be the cheapest way to get out the vote, if one looks at votes attained per krone spent.¹⁰⁵

10 measures to mobilise young voters:

1. Text message alerts
2. Campaigns that affect youth through their social networks
3. Mock elections and democratic education in school
4. Lowering the voting age to sixteen
5. Calling young voters
6. Adapting the electoral system – making it easier for youth to vote
7. Information campaigns
8. Mailing young voters
9. Politicians target their campaigns at young voters
10. Information websites

¹⁰³ Bhatti, Dahlgard, Hansen & Hansen 2014d.

¹⁰⁴ LNU 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Gerber & Green 2015.

Get out the vote!

The biggest and most important challenge lies in mobilising youth belonging to the groups that we know tend to participate less; youth with immigrant background from Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa, youth with low educational levels and low income, youth that come from low-class backgrounds, and youth with parents who are non-voters. A disadvantage of some of the get-out-the-vote measures that are being used is that they are not sufficiently able to reach these groups. For instance, mock elections and democratic education in school only have a positive influence on pupils who are attending upper secondary school. It does not even influence all pupils, as it turns out that many of the schools that offer vocational training do not arrange mock elections. Information campaigns might have an ability to reach a larger part of the youth population. However, one might argue that these campaigns to a larger degree reaches youth who already have an interest in politics. Measures that reach youth through their social networks are proven to be especially effective in getting out the vote. Reaching groups of youth that tend to participate less through their social

networks requires hard work, but it is likely to be a very effective way to mobilise them. Text messages and mail alerts have also been proven effective in mobilising these groups. In some cases, text message reminders even had a greater impact on youth with immigrant background than on native youth. When working towards increasing youth turnout, it is highly important to use research based get-out-the-vote measures that are known to work.

To prevent the democratic exclusion of young people, the Nordic countries need to act. Carrying out measures to increase youth turnout requires political willingness. The youth councils and other actors that work to mobilise youth to participate in elections need proper funding to be able to do so. It is crucial to democracy that politicians and policy makers prioritise the work to increase youth turnout, and in particular the work to increase the turnout of those that today tend to participate least. In that way we can get out the vote of youth and by doing so both strengthen democracy and increase the influence of young people.

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Youth, democracy, and democratic exclusion in the Nordic countries

Young people in the Nordic countries participate less in elections than the overall population. The turnout is lowest among youth in their early twenties. Meanwhile, Nordic youth have high rates of participation when it comes to other forms of democratic participation.

Certain groups of Nordic youth in particular have low turnouts. Youth with non-western or Eastern European immigrant background, with low levels of education, low income, that have parents with low educational levels, and who are children of non-voters have strikingly lower turnouts.

Several successful and partly successful measures to increase youth turnout have been carried out in the Nordic countries. It is essential that Nordic politicians and policymakers prioritise the work towards increasing the turnout of youth. If not, we may risk the permanent de facto exclusion from democracy of certain groups.