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VOTING AGE 16+ IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA: IMPACT ON ELECTION RESULTS  
AND PARTY CAMPAIGN ISSUES IN EUROPEAN ELECTIONS.

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the impact of lowering the voting age to 16 on electoral outcomes and campaign issues in the European elections in Austria (2009) and Germany (2024). A qualitative analysis examined party communication in print media (2009) and on TikTok (2024). The FPÖ and die Grünen in Austria and the AfD and BSW in Germany made significant gains among first-time voters by clearly addressing issues relevant to young people and using channels relevant to them. In contrast, parties that addressed these issues only superficially or not at all were less successful among first-time voters.

## **Keywords**

Austria

Germany

First time voters

European elections

Voting age

Please note, some of the quotes were translated from German to English.

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## 1 Introduction

*"We should not expect revolutions, the group is too small for that. Nevertheless, it can be worthwhile for the parties to target first-time voters because they are not yet so fixed in their views" (Faas 2024).*

The advice of Thorsten Fraas to the parties regarding the new group of voters in the 2024 European elections, as in Germany, Belgium and Greece, people of 16 years old were allowed to vote for the first time in the 2024 European elections (Grobe and McMahon 2023). In Austria, since the 2007 electoral law reform, people aged 16 and over have been eligible to vote in elections at European level, and in Malta this has been applied since 2018 (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.; Pleschberger 2018). Compared to the entire electorate in Germany / Austria, the group of new voters is relatively small in both countries. In the 2024 European elections, a total of 65 million people were eligible to vote in Germany, 3.5 million of whom were in the 16-18 age group (NDR 2024). In Austria, only 155,000 of 6.4 million eligible voters belonged in this voter group in 2024, compared to 180,000 in 2009 (VIENNA ONLINE 2023; Musik 2008). Despite the small size of the voter group, it is crucial for parties to appeal to young voters at an early stage to ensure their relevance (Sacharov 2024). Because "Electoral shifts among young voters [...] predicted similar changes among older citizens in the subsequent election" (Rekker 2022, 1). Another advantage for parties is that first-time voters cannot draw on experience from previous elections. They are therefore more open to vote for new parties than older voters (Jahn 2024). But how can parties win over this undecided group of voters? In the 2021 federal election in Germany, 88% of young voters selected parties based on policy positions (Döbele et al. 2023, 50). Education researcher Klaus Hurrelmann also confirms: "We are observing a strong focus on issues without ideological preconceptions among first-time voters. Parties are assessed soberly according to what they stand for, and which issues they prioritize" (Hurrelmann 2024). In addition, they want to be addressed directly by politicians,

for example via social media (Döbele et al. 2023, 4). But what issues moved first-time voters in their first European elections in Austria and Germany and which parties did they vote for? Did the parties take the relevant issues of the new electoral group into account in their campaigns, as happened after the introduction of women's voting rights in 1918? (Von Hindenburg 2018). These questions are the focus of this thesis.

## **2 Theoretical part**

### **2.1.1 Generation 16+: Voters profile**

The lowering of the voting age to 16 in some European countries shows the increasing importance of the political voice of young people. The younger generation has less fixed political views than older, more experienced voters. They are more receptive to change and more influenced by current events (Eckstein 2019, 4). According to the impressionable-years-hypothesis, late stage of adolescence at the age of 16-21 is a particularly defining phase. During these years, the age group is receptive to changes in opinion and is therefore easier to influence (Green 2021, 32; FAMILIE Heute 2004). The generational model used by Ghitza, Gelman and Auerbach to analyse past US presidential elections supports this thesis. According to this model, the influential years of political socialization are between the ages of 14-24. The study also shows that events around the age of 18 have three times more influence than at the age of 40 (Ghitza, Gelman, and Auerbach 2022, 8). The susceptibility of young voters to short-term political influences and trends leads to low party loyalty in this life cycle phase and thus to higher fluctuation in voting behaviour. Older generations, on the other hand, have usually developed strong party loyalty over many years. In the Eurobarometer post-election survey for the 2024 EU elections, only 22% of young participants stated that they generally always vote for the same party, compared to 41% of all other voters (Shively 1979; Rekker 2022, 10; Dressler 2024). This phenomenon makes it attractive for all parties to target the younger generation.

### **2.1.2 Political opinion-forming in social networks**

Alongside the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government, the media are considered the fourth estate in democracies and have an information and control function vis-à-vis politics and business (Dittmar, 2011, 111). Traditional media used to dominate the formation of political opinion, but social media have changed this. It is an additional source of information and offers political actors the opportunity to bypass the gatekeeper function of traditional media and communicate directly with voters (Feiler 2013; Stark, Magin, and Geiß 2020, 1; Sahly, Shao, and Kwon 2019). The reach of social media is enormous: in January 2023, social networks had around 4.76 billion users worldwide (Meltwalter 2023, 10). In Germany alone, half of the population aged 14 and above use social media weekly or more often (Koch 2022, 471-472). Younger people use them particularly frequently as a source of information; in 2023, around 59% of 15-24-year-olds in Europe consumed news via social media (European Parliament 2023, 8 & 11).

Politicians are also aware of social media's growing importance as a source of information. In 2016, for example, "The Trump campaign was transformative in relying on social media as the primary communication channel" (Hendricks and Schill 2017). The targeted and emotional appeal of social media, particularly on Twitter, is seen by election analysts as a key factor in Trump's election victory (Zihn 2016). Parties also use social networks to appeal to voters in the European elections. Populist parties in particular used new media early on to take control of information themselves. This puts them ahead of the established parties, as they recognized the way social media works and its systematic use in election campaigns early on. In a recent study, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung examined the use of social media by Austrian and German parties ahead of the 2019 European elections. Right-wing populist parties such as the AfD in Germany and the FPÖ in Austria were particularly successful, as they achieved high reach and engagement with targeted, understandable and emotional content. However, the

election results of the 2019 European elections show that high reach and engagement do not automatically lead to the best election results (Brodnig et al. 2019, 2-3). In the 2019 European elections, the AfD came fourth with around 11% of the vote, an increase of around 4% compared to 2014 (European Parliament 2024a). The FPÖ came third with around 17% of the vote but lost 3% compared to 2014 (European Parliament 2024b). However, this can also be attributed to the Ibiza affair that came to light shortly before the election (Verenkotte 2024). This shows that although social media can be an important building block for electoral success, this success also depends on other factors (Brodnig et al. 2019, 2-3). Although the study on the 2019 European elections mainly examined Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube and devoted less attention to TikTok; the latter is now becoming increasingly important in election campaigns (Brodnig et al. 2019, 4). This is due to the fact that more and more politicians are using TikTok for election campaigns (Newman et al 2024, 12). The platform focuses on short, creative videos, often accompanied by music or challenges (Ausat 2024, 37). While only 7% of 14-29-year-olds in Germany used the platform daily in 2020, this figure rose to 29% by 2022. In comparison, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram recorded maximum growth of 7% in the same period (Koch 2022, 473). The overall European trend illustrates the growing popularity of TikTok. Usage among 15-24-year-olds increased by 7% between 2022 and 2023, while other networks did not record an increase (European Parliament 2023, 29). There is a large discrepancy in user numbers in Europe: only 11% of over 55-year-olds use TikTok, compared to 55% of 15-24-year-olds (European Parliament 2023, 26). These figures illustrate how crucial it is for politicians and parties to have a presence on social media platforms such as TikTok to reach first-time voters with their positions. In Germany, all parties have been active on TikTok: the FDP since November 2020, the CDU since February 2024 and the CSU since March 2021. They have also had an additional CDU/CSU Europe account since November 2023. In addition, die Grünen party has been active since April 2024, the AfD since January 2022, Die Linke since

August 2023, the SPD since January 2024 and BSW since November 2023 (FDP 2024; CSU 2024; CDU 2024; CDU/CSU 2024; Die Grünen 2024; AfD 2024; Die Linke 2024; SPD 2024; BSW 2024).

Based on this information, the analysis examines the content of the parties on TikTok to determine how election campaigns are targeting first-time voters. Austria is not included in the analysis of TikTok, as the voting age was lowered before TikTok was established. Instead, in 2009, 16-18-year-olds primarily used television (41%) and newspapers (37%) as sources of information on political events (Kozeluh 2009, 25). Since there is no access to the television recordings from that time, the news reports on the first European election after the lowering of the voting age are examined to identify youth-relevant topics that were addressed by politicians in the media.

### **2.1.3 What topics are relevant to young voters?**

Only a small proportion of young voters in Germany report voting out of protest (Höra and Meisik 2024; Aardal and van Wijnen 2005). Instead, they vote primarily on specific issues – a behaviour known as issue voting (Hurrelmann 2024). It is therefore crucial to identify the issues that particularly motivated first-time voters in their first election. To analyse which parties benefited from the lowering of the voting age and whether they were successful by integrating youth-relevant issues into their campaigns. In Austria, the 2009 European election year is considered, and in Germany, the 2024 European election year.

The pessimism of 14-29-year-olds has increased in recent years. Financial worries lead to a high level of dissatisfaction. With 65%, inflation is the biggest challenge – a significant increase compared to 2022, when it only concerned 46% in the same age group. In second place, 54% mention expensive and scarce living space. Another key issue is old-age poverty: 48% of respondents fear falling into old-age poverty, compared to 40% in 2023. In addition, 44% worry about a possible "collapse of the pension system". The issue of migration and asylum also

played a central role among first-time voters in the 2024 European elections. A survey in six European countries showed that migration and asylum were the most pressing issue, with the highest proportion of young people in Germany seeing it that way. Also, world political events are weighing on the young generation in Germany: 60% express concern about the wars in Europe and Israel/Palestine. Meanwhile, concerns about climate change are on the decline. In 2024, 49% said they were concerned about the issue, compared to 52% in 2023 and 55% in 2022 (Wundersee 2024; Marwin 2024; ps 2024; Ruppert 2024). The concerns of the young generation are largely in line with those of the German population (Tagesschau 2024a).

For Austria, the first European elections after the lowering of the voting age took place in 2009, one year after the early national elections in 2008, which caused the end of the grand coalition due to a dispute over European policy. Nevertheless, according to youth researcher Manfred Zentner, young people's interest in Europe was low in 2008. For young voters, national issues such as immigration and asylum, education, climate and youth unemployment were particularly relevant (Bundesministerium Inneres n.d.; Musik 2008). 98% rate the topic "good education for young people" and 95% the topic "measures against youth unemployment" as important (Kozeluh 2009, 36). The topics of integration and immigration were also the overarching issues for many young people in the national elections. For 73% the integration of foreigners and for 68% stricter immigration regulations were very important (Kozeluh 2009, 20 & 36). In addition, 70% of young adults aged between 14 and 18 in Austria in 2009 considered climate change and environmental degradation to be the greatest challenges. In contrast, topics such as wars and the general economic and financial crisis, which were of central importance to young Germans in 2024, played a subordinate role for young Austrians (Boecker 2009).

## 2.2 Election results in Austria and Germany

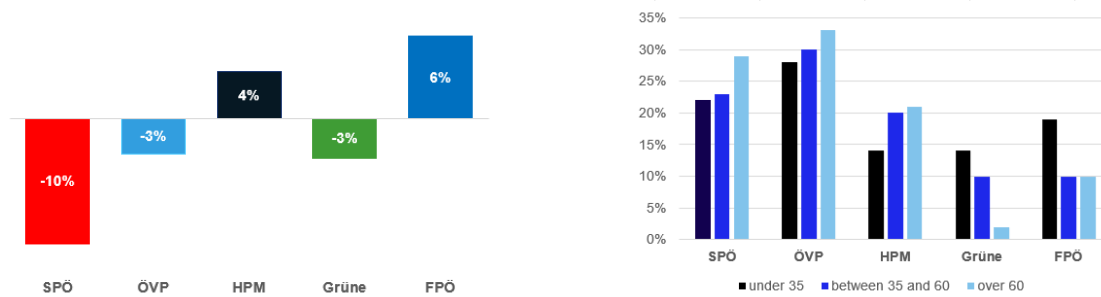


Figure I (left): Development of votes in European elections in Austria – comparison of 2004 and 2009 (European Parliament 2009b)

Figure II (right): Party preferences in different age groups in the 2009 European elections (Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 3)

The left-hand chart shows the change in the parties' vote shares in the 2009 European election compared to 2004 in Austria. The SPÖ suffered a significant loss of 10%, while the ÖVP and the Greens each lost 3% of their votes. The FPÖ, on the other hand, was able to increase its vote share by 6%, possibly due to its successful appeal to people under 35 years of age. Although die Grünen also had a strong presence in this age group, it was not enough to compensate for the low vote shares in the other age groups. The right-hand chart shows a detailed analysis of voting behaviour by age group in the 2009 European elections in Austria. The preferences of under-35s are particularly striking. Although the established parties SPÖ and ÖVP, which traditionally have a broad base of voters, were able to attract the most votes at this young age group (ÖVP 28%, SPÖ 22%); however, their performance in this group was much weaker than the results in older voter groups. The SPÖ, for example, received 23% of the vote from the 35- to under-60-year-olds and 29% from the over-60s, while the ÖVP received 30% and 33% respectively in these age groups. The FPÖ and the Greens, on the other hand, performed above average among the under-35s. The FPÖ achieved a significantly higher share among the 35-year-olds (19 %) than in the older voter groups (10 % among the 35- to under-

60-year-olds and 7 % among the over-60s), while die Grünen, with 14 % among younger people also did better than average (10% among 35- to under 60-year-olds and 2% among those over 60) (Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 3; European Parliament 2009b, 218). Although the age range of 16–35 years is wide, conclusions can be drawn. At 55%, voter turnout among students was significantly higher than among other groups (Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 11). In addition, the FPÖ and die Grünen also received above-average support among first-time voters in national elections. Similar to the European elections, most 16–18-year-olds voted for the ÖVP, but their share of young voters remained below the overall average of 26%. The FPÖ received 18% of the vote from young people and 17.5% overall. Die Grünen performed slightly better with 14% than the average of 10.4% (Die Presse 2009).

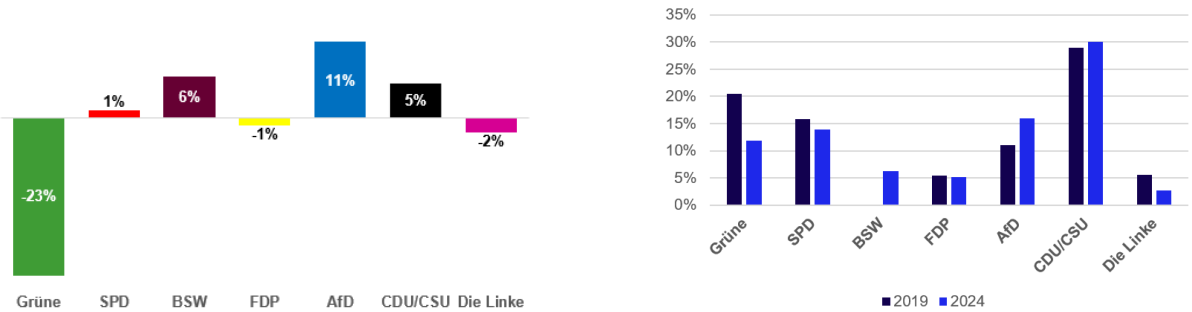


Figure I (left): Development of votes among 16-24 year-olds in Germany between 2019 and 2024 (Tagesschau 2024b)  
 Figure II (right): Development of votes in European elections in Germany- comparison of 2019 and 2024 (European Parliament 2024c; European Parliament 2024d).

The left-hand chart shows the changes in voting behaviour among 16-24-year-olds in Germany between 2019 and 2024. Here, new or conservative parties were able to make significant gains in the age group. Die Grünen lost 23% of their votes and have suffered significant losses since 2019. In contrast, the AfD gained 11% and the CDU/CSU 5%. The BSW gained 6%. However, it should be noted that this was the first time the party had stood in a European election, so every vote counted as a gain (Tagesschau 2024b). Nevertheless, the 16-

24 age group is their second strongest group (Tagesschau 2024c). The right-hand chart shows the general election trend over the same period. This shows the CDU/CSU, AfD and BSW as clear winners. However, the 16-24 age group is by far the weakest voter group for the CDU/CSU; they are particularly strong among the over-70s (Tagesschau 2024d). Although the figures refer to the age range 16-25 years, infratest dimap also shows that only BSW and AfD were able to gain votes from the group of "first-time voters / deceased" (Schläger et al. 2024, 19).

### **2.3 Defining the research question and hypotheses**

The state of research shows that the young generation is less influenced by party affiliation but prefers parties that address relevant issues. And although first-time voters make up only a small proportion of the total electorate, it is worthwhile for parties to address them, as their preferences often influence later voting trends. Election results show that in the 2024 European elections in Germany, the AfD and BSW were successful among young voters, as were the FPÖ and the Greens in Austria in 2009. However, it remains unclear why these parties are popular or more popular among first-time voters than in other age groups. This is where the presented thesis comes in. It examines whether the aforementioned parties specifically addressed youth-relevant issues in their election campaigns by analysing their strategies in youth-oriented media. The methodological part is based on the following question: *Did political parties in Germany (2024) and Austria (2009) achieve higher shares of first-time voters (16–18-year-olds) by addressing youth-relevant issues?* Based on this research question, the following hypothesis arises:

H1: Parties that addressed youth-relevant issues such as asylum/immigration, inflation, residential space, security, old age poverty, war in Europe and Israel/Palestine in their 2024 election campaigns on TikTok in Germany had their strongest voter group in the group of first-time voters.

H0: Parties that addressed youth-relevant topics such as asylum/immigration, inflation, residential space, security, old age poverty, war in Europe and Israel/Palestine in their 2024 election campaigns on TikTok in Germany did not have their strongest voter group in the group of first-time voters.

H1: Parties that addressed youth-relevant topics such as asylum/immigration, education, the environment, and youth unemployment in their 2009 election campaigns in print media in Austria had their strongest voter group in the group of first-time voters.

H0: Parties that addressed youth-relevant topics such as asylum/immigration, education, the environment, and youth unemployment in their 2009 election campaigns in print media in Austria did not have their strongest voter group in the group of first-time voters.

### **3 Empirical part**

#### **3.1 Qualitative research**

This study is based on empirical social research. In view of the characteristics of the qualitative approach, it is used to examine the hypothesis and research questions in this study (see appendix).

#### **3.2 Data collection**

##### **3.2.1 Determination of the data**

Although the election campaign usually begins six weeks prior to the election, reporting on the 2009 European elections in Austria began as early as January with the nomination of the lead candidates (European University Institute 2010, 57). To ensure a consistent starting point for all analyses, data from the beginning of January until the day of the European elections was considered for Germany and Austria. The study examines whether the parties had adopted a more youth-oriented approach following the lowering of the voting age, as identified in the previous chapters. Data was collected using the FACTIVA news database, which includes international newspapers, news agencies, industry and corporate publications (McNae 2023).

Furthermore, it is possible to search for articles from previous years and keywords. Search strings were used on FACTIVA combined with the party and youth-relevant topics (see appendix). The news databases before the European elections in Austria (01.01.–13.06.2004 and 01.01.–07.06.2009) and in Germany (01.01.–26.05.2019 and 01.01.–07.06.2024) were scanned. Only party-political content such as press releases, direct or indirect party statements and interviews with party members were considered, while general reporting and statements about parties were excluded. Thus, the study covers the parties' content and not media coverage. Additionally, articles were checked to exclude false inclusions (e.g., Climate as a surname). The following data were used for the analysis of how the parties addressed the relevant subjects after the lowering of the voting age:

For Austria, the relevant newspaper articles from FACTIVA were used for the election campaign period in 2009. Randomly selected articles were used from the more than 20,000 reports from January 1 to June 7, 2009, to avoid a selective choice. The articles in FACTIVA were numbered and 12 per party were randomly selected. Due to limited availability, only 9 articles could be included for HPM. In Germany, the official TikTok channels of the parties were analysed from January to Election Day. A systematic sample was used, with one out of four TikTok posts from the respective main channels included in the analysis (see appendix). This approach ensures that there is an even distribution over the entire period under review.

### **3.2.2 Analysing the situation of origin**

The material analysed for the German parties comes from their official TikTok accounts. The accounts of the following parties were considered: FDP (@fdpimbundestag), CDU/CSU (@cducsueuropa; @csuauftiktok; @insidcedu), die Grünen (@diegruenen), AfD (@afdfraktionimbundestag), Die Linke (@die.linke), SPD (@deinespd) and BSW (@bsw.bund) (FDP 2024; CSU 2024; CDU 2024; CDU/CSU 2024; Die Grünen 2024; AfD 2024; die Linke 2024; SPD 2024; BSW 2024). For the analysis, the main accounts of the parties

were used, not their lead candidates, as the latter often share personal views or individual priorities. For the CDU and CSU, both their own accounts and the joint European election account were analysed since the election campaign was covered on all of them. It cannot be ruled out that employees or third parties wrote the posts, but the leading politicians are presumably mainly responsible. Due to the large number of 218 TikToks, the conditions under which they were created cannot be reconstructed in detail. All TikToks were created in the context of the upcoming European elections. They are aimed primarily at the German followers eligible to vote in the European elections and secondarily at a broader, global TikTok audience.

The analysed material for Austrian parties contains material from leading politicians of the ÖVP, FPÖ, HPM, SPÖ and Die Grünen party. A total of 58 articles were analysed. The primary responsibility for the content resides with the parties, their leading politicians and the journalists of the media organizations; other agents are possible. The contributions in the Austrian media on the party platforms are primarily directed at the recipients of these news formats, and thus especially at the Austrian population of eligible voters.

### **3.2.3 Formal characteristics of the data**

The 58 Austrian FACTIVA articles were already available as written texts in German and were therefore directly applicable for the analysis. The 218 TikTok posts consisted of audiovisual content in German. For the qualitative content analysis, it was necessary to transcribe these posts using the tool TokScript to enable a structured and systematic evaluation. The transcripts were manually reviewed to correct errors or incompleteness.

## **3.3 Data analysis according to Mayring**

### **3.3.1 Analytical approach**

After determining the material, it is important, according to Mayring, to determine the direction of the analysis and to classify the material into a communication model (Mayring 2012, 28). This approach makes it possible to draw targeted conclusions about various

dimensions (communicator, text content, effect on the target group) (Mayring 2015, 58). In this paper, the parties and their leading politicians are regarded as communicators, the campaign content is analysed as texts, and first-time voters are defined as the target group. Based on the content analysis of the material, conclusions are drawn about the intention of the communicator (party or leading politician). The question is whether the parties have adapted their election campaigns to suit this new group of voters.

### **3.3.2 Analysis technique**

The present study uses a structuring / deductive category application, which analyses the material based on a theoretically derived category system (Mayring 2015, 68 & 97). Since youth-related topics have already been identified, this method is suitable for examining whether and how the parties in Austria / Germany address these topics in their election campaigns. In addition, content structuring was chosen to extract and summarize material according to thematic priorities (youth-relevant categories) (Mayring 2015, 99).

### **3.3.3 Unit of analysis**

The 58 articles from FACTIVA and the 218 TikToks from the parties each correspond to one analysis unit. They were sorted by date and analysed according to this chronology. The unit of coding corresponds to a single word. The preceding and following paragraphs were used as context units.

### **3.3.4 Evaluation of the data**

The categories were based on the relevant topics for first-time voters in Austria in 2009 and Germany in 2024. For Germany: asylum/immigration, inflation, residential space, security, old-age poverty, war in Europe and Israel/Palestine and Other issues. For Austria: asylum/immigration, education, environment, youth unemployment and other issues. In the next step, the categories were defined. The MAXQDA program was used for the evaluation as it enables a structured review of the material and the assignment of text passages to categories.

First, the categories and codes for Germany / Austria were created in the program and the research material was added. In a first test run, text passages were assigned to the categories, anchor examples were defined, and coding rules were created to avoid multiple allocations of individual text passages. After revising the coding guide, the primary data was analysed, assigning all relevant text passages to the appropriate categories. No paraphrasing of the text passages was done, as literal quotations preserve the specific wording, tonality, and intention of the communicators. Furthermore, youth-relevant key terms such as "climate crisis" should be presented in the correct context.

### **3.4 Presentation and interpretation of the results**

#### **3.4.1 Change of topics**

In Austria, only the FPÖ and Die Grünen increased the proportion of their statements on youth-relevant topics from 2004 to 2009. Overall, the proportion of youth-related statements made by Die Grünen rose from 4% to 10%, and from 6% to 9% for the FPÖ. The SPÖ and the ÖVP each lost 3% across all youth-related topics, while the HPM party remained unchanged. In 2004, HPM addressed the environment and youth unemployment, but reduced this share in 2009 and no longer addressed these issues at all. The ÖVP addressed issues related to the environment, asylum/immigration and education, but neglected youth unemployment. Similarly, the SPÖ no longer addressed youth unemployment in 2009 (see appendix).\*

In Germany, the new party BSW shows no change in the main topics. All other parties (die Linke, CDU/CSU, FDP, die Grünen, AfD, SPD) made more statements in 2024 than in 2019 on the youth-relevant topics of security, war in Israel/Palestine and Europe, asylum/immigration and inflation. At the same time, the topics of old-age poverty and residential space were either discussed as often or less frequently, so that the proportion of other

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\* The proportion of topics in the 'Other' category is so high because it includes statements on all political topics.

issues topics fell by at least 5 %. The BSW devoted 30 % of its statements to topics relevant to young people, and thus more than any other party (see appendix).

### 3.4.2 Germany 2024 (see appendix for definition)

**Asylum/immigration** is a key focus of the AfD, which has taken a clear position on the issue and offers straightforward solutions. The AfD seeks to implement a more restrictive migration policy: "Anyone who comes to Germany and receives social benefits here, then [...] goes to a presumed war zone, is not entitled to protection" and "people who have no residence permit here [...] must be deported" (AfD 2024a; AfD 2024b). The CDU/CSU is calling for a comprehensive, controlled and regulatory solution, demanding stricter compliance with the rules and stating, "We have a massive problem with Islamism in Germany. Those [...] who do not follow the norms [...], simply have no business being here" but remains less polarizing (CDU 2024a). The BSW does not offer any solutions but recognizes that "[...] integration will not work if so, many immigrate" (BSW 2024a). Die Grünen, FDP, and die Linke position themselves much weaker in this category. Die Grünen do not address the topic in the TikToks analysed, which significantly limits their relevance for voters who are concerned about migration issues. Die Linke criticizes the AfD and calls for the defence of the right of asylum but remains superficial (Die Linke 2024a). The FDP addresses the reform of Germany's citizenship law and remains pragmatic (FDP 2024a). The SPD is the only party to call for a Europe-wide asylum policy, with "We want a common European asylum policy [...]", which seems more abstract (SPD 2024a). It is the only party to highlight that Germany requires skilled workers from abroad and must therefore create attractive working conditions for them (SPD 2024b; SPD 2024c).

The AfD uses emotive language about **inflation** with terms such as "galloping inflation" and "horror inflation" (AfD, 2024c; AfD 2024d). The party criticizes the financial stress caused by high energy prices and taxes, while blaming the coalition government (AfD 2024d; AfD

2024e). In doing so, it addresses the concerns of young people and presents itself as an alternative to the existing political system. The BSW does not mention inflation directly but calls for relief for the working population (BSW 2024b). The absence of the other parties in this category is striking. Neither die Grünen, die Linke, SPD, nor the FDP and the CDU/CSU address inflation or its effects in the analysed articles.

In the area of **residential space**, die Linke can score points with solutions and radical proposals such as "[...] a nationwide rent freeze, a ban on index-linked rents and the socialization of large real estate companies such as Vonovia". And with statements such as "We want to pull the teeth of the rent sharks", it can create an antagonistic image and mobilize emotions (Die Linke 2024b). The AfD also recognizes the issue as a problem, but compared to die Linke, remains rather superficial. With their question "How many apartments could be built instead?", they criticize the government's budget spending without offering an alternative solution (AfD 2024f). The BSW also remains superficial and only demands more living space (BSW 2024c). The FDP, die Grünen, the SPD and the CDU/CSU do not address the issue.

Regarding **security**, the AfD uses strong messages. It links the topics of security and migration and uses polarizing rhetoric: "[...] uncontrolled mass immigration [...] that costs human lives [...] plays with the lives and health of citizens" or "Germany has been transformed into a multicultural laboratory where women are unfortunately increasingly seen as prey" (AfD 2024g; AfD 2024h). The party presents migration as the main cause of security problems and proposes stronger border controls as a solution (AfD 2024i). Specific incidents, such as the group rape in Hamburg, are also highlighted to create a sense of urgency and to underpin the demand for tougher measures (AfD 2024h). Die Grünen consider security to be a European issue and claim: "The EU gives us security; the EU creates a community" (Die Grünen 2024a). However, they fail to directly address acute threats or specific national security measures, which could come across as too abstract for many voters. The SPD takes a general approach to

security. With the statement "We will fight terror [...] whether it comes from the far right or the far left [...]", the party emphasizes the equivalence of all threats, regardless of their political or ideological origin (SPD 2024d). No specific security measures or problem areas are mentioned. CDU/CSU, die Linke, BSW, and FDP completely omit this topic in the TikToks analysed.

In the area of **old age poverty**, the CDU/CSU, BSW, AfD and FDP are visible. The AfD and BSW both criticize the low pensions and remain purely problem-oriented, without offering tangible solutions. (AfD 2024j; BSW 2024c). The CDU/CSU and FDP provide solutions: the FDP calls for a pension based on the Swedish model (FDP 2024b). The CDU/CSU want an active pension and propose relief for working pensioners with "If you are of pensionable age and want to continue working, why shouldn't you be able to do so for €2,000 tax-free" (CDU 2024b).

Concerning the subject of **war in Europe and Israel/Palestine**, the parties take a clear position, but with different approaches. Die Linke, AfD and BSW reject weapon deliveries and rely on diplomacy (AfD 2024k; BSW 2024b; Die Linke 2024c). AfD says: "Instead of escalating the situation by warmongering and delivering weapons, [...] Germany must do everything it can to act as a negotiator in the Ukraine war [...]" (AfD 2024k). The BSW also adopts a critical stance towards Germany's role in international conflicts. In the Israel/Palestine conflict, the party criticizes arms deliveries to Israel and the government's support for Israel (BSW 2024d; BSW 2024e). These diplomatically oriented positions appeal to young people, who, according to Klaus Hurrelmann, could feel more affected by the possible effects of war than older generations (Casper 2023). In contrast, the CDU/CSU defend Germany's role in NATO and call for more support as it is " [...] the most important safeguard for our life in peace and freedom" (CDU/CSU 2024a; CDU 2024c). The SPD also emphasizes the importance of European responsibility. With statements such as "Germany is leading the way in supporting Ukraine" and "Europe will have to assume more responsibility for its own security", it combines

solidarity with Ukraine with a clear appeal for Europe to act independently (SPD 2024e). This approach appears effective and forward-looking. Die Grünen only touch on the topic superficially, they focus on long-term peace through cooperation but omit the topic of military action (Die Grünen 2024b).

When it comes to **other issues**, the parties focus on different priorities. Die Grünen emphasize the Green Deal and innovation in green technology, while the AfD criticizes the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. The BSW and the die Linke focus on social justice, while the FDP highlights topics of progress such as digitization. The CDU/CSU focuses on Europe as a location for innovation and the SPD criticizes the AfD in particular.

### **3.4.3 Austria 2009 (see appendix for definition)**

On the issue of **asylum/immigration**, all parties except HPM take a strong position in their reporting. The FPÖ takes a critical stance on migration and sees the issue of asylum law as an important EU election campaign topic, due to the "[...] planned EU asylum directive, which [...] is an invitation to further pseudo-asylum seekers [...]" (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009b). The party demands that in the future, only those persecuted for political, religious or racist reasons should be granted asylum (Parragh 2009). The ÖVP shares the strict line of the FPÖ, rejects a loosening of the asylum law and emphasizes clear European regulations. (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009c; Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009d). Die Grünen, on the other hand, are focusing on a humane and integrative perspective. They want a European solution, which they do not define in more detail (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009e). The party is also calling for increased funding for German language courses (Die Presse 2009b). The SPÖ emphasizes the need to secure European borders but remains imprecise in its proposed solutions (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009f).

The FPÖ dominates the topic of **education**, with demands for increased investments in education and criticism of language deficits and a lack of integration in schools. The lead

candidate demands that "[...] children should no longer be allowed to attend regular classes [...] until they have sufficient knowledge of German" (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009g). The SPÖ focuses on more political education in schools (Die Presse 2009c). Die Grünen would also like to see the introduction of political education as a school subject and criticise the lack of educational opportunities: "In Austria, there are too many students who leave school at the age of 15 without being able to read properly"(Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009h; Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009i). ÖVP and HPM do not address the topic at all.

In the area of **environment**, die Grünen position themselves strongly with clear concepts. They promise jobs in the green energy sector through investments such as the "New Deal" (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009j). They also emphasize the need to make Austria an environmental leader in the EU again by having an independent federal ministry of the environment (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009k). The FPÖ takes a clear opposing position to the EU's energy and environmental policy. With statements such as, "Unfortunately, environmentally friendly products are not among them [...]", the FPÖ expresses its disappointment with the EU Council's decisions to apply a reduced VAT rate to some goods (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS. 2009l). Criticism is directed at the expansion of the Temelin nuclear power plant in the Czech Republic: "The Czech Republic is riding roughshod over the European Union". They therefore call for legal action against the Czech government and emphasize the risks of nuclear power (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009m). This criticism is highly polarized and addresses safety concerns. The ÖVP addresses the topic only in general terms but does address the younger generation with "It is a European challenge to protect our quality of life, because we want to pass this standard of living on to our children" (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009n.). The SPÖ focuses on concrete infrastructure measures, such as the expansion of rail transport, to combine environmental and economic goals (Austria Presse

Agentur-OTS 2009o). HPM does not make use of this category, which significantly reduces its attractiveness for environmentally conscious first-time voters.

Addressing the issue of **youth unemployment**, only die Grünen and the FPÖ position themselves. The FPÖ criticizes that "the unemployment rate among 15–24-year-olds has risen by 26.1%" (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009p). They are calling for youth unemployment to be combated by expanding apprenticeships and improving wages in training centres (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS. 2009q). These proposals appeal to young people who are looking for concrete solutions. Die Grünen Party views education as the best protection against unemployment and demands an education guarantee for all youths up to the age of 18. This proposal appeals to first-time voters under the age of 18 (Austria Presse Agentur-OTS 2009h.).

In the category **other issues**, die Grünen focus on social justice and a sustainable economy. All parties except the SPÖ criticize Turkey's possible admission to the EU. HPM positions itself as an EU-critical party. The ÖVP focuses on the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises and the regulation of EU financial markets. The SPÖ demands a social Europe and the fight against discrimination of minorities.

#### **3.4.4 Interpretation of the results**

The parties in Austria / Germany used different communication strategies in the European elections. In Austria, all parties relied on established print to disseminate their content via statements, interviews and press releases (Statista 2024). These were the second most common source of information for 16–18-year-olds (Kozeluh 2009, 25). However, this medium is relevant across all age groups, so by itself does not constitute a targeted adaptation. Only the FPÖ, which performed best among the under-35s, specifically adapted its message to young voters in the 2009 European elections (Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 3). Heinz-Christian Strache, the national party leader, created the music video "HC's EU-Rap 09" with phrases like "if you are hearing these lines, then you know, Austria first" (Henckel 2009; Austria Presse Agentur-

OTS 2009). In the video, he is depicted as a youth, wearing sunglasses and using casual language (Glück 2010, 120). This sets him apart from traditional political communication to establish a connection with the younger generation. In addition, the FPÖ 2009 used creative means of communication such as personal letters and a comic book (see appendix). The personal letter, written in casual language such as "No stress and no boredom", is supposed to attract the attention of the target group. The comic "The Blue Planet – HC's Fight for Freedom against a Central EU" portrays Strache as a muscular hero fighting against bureaucrats in Brussels. Complex terms are explained in simple footnotes, such as "bureaucrats" as "highly paid officials in Brussels" (Der Standard 2009). These measures enable the FPÖ to place its political content with first-time voters using appealing means of communication.

In Germany, the parties took different approaches on TikTok. Some parties address young people directly: Die Linke is addressing the fact that 16-year-olds are allowed to vote for the first time and publishes TikToks in which young people express their concerns (Die Linke 2024c; Brodnig et al. 2019, 2). Die Grünen also address young people directly and present European initiatives such as Interrail (Die Grünen 2024c; Die Grünen 2024d). In contrast, the AfD does not address this group directly, but it still has the TikTok channel with the widest reach and the most "likes" (Schläger et al. 2024, 14). Despite adapting their approach, die Link and die Grünen lost support among young voters, while the AfD was able to increase its support in this group. A comparison between Austria and Germany shows that adapting the address does not automatically lead to more votes from first-time voters. While the FPÖ in Austria took targeted, creative measures, the AfD on TikTok did not adapt to first-time voters. This suggests that policy content in youth-relevant media was crucial for the parties' electoral success.

Qualitative analysis indicates that in 2009 in Austria only the FPÖ and die Grünen addressed youth-related issues. The FPÖ offered simple, pragmatic solutions and focused on youth unemployment, environment, education and asylum/immigration. At the same time, in

the European elections, they received 12% more votes from under-35s than over-60s (Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 3). Likewise, die Grünen emphasized all youth-related issues more strongly than in 2004 and provided solutions in the areas of youth unemployment and environment, which also helped them to perform above average in the under-35 age group compared to other age groups (Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 3). These results highlight the importance for parties to address the specific concerns of young voters to gain their support. The ability of the FPÖ and die Grünen to incorporate youth-relevant issues into their platforms created a strong connection with first-time voters, who may have felt less considered by other parties. All other parties failed to reinforce the issues important to first-time voters; some even positioned themselves less strongly than in 2004 (see appendix). The analysis also shows that many parties only superficially address issues relevant to young people, for example the ÖVP on the environment. As a result, Austrian first-time voters failed to become their strongest voting group, since young voters (16-24 years) in Austria place particular emphasis on their party loyalty. Instead, the SPÖ, ÖVP and HPM parties received most of their votes from over-60s (European Parliament 2009c, 19; Perlot and Zeglovits 2009, 3).

If compared to Germany, there is also a coherence between the positioning of youth-relevant topics and the share of votes among first-time voters. Similarly, the most popular parties among first-time voters, AfD and BSW, covered all youth-relevant content on TikTok in the 2024 European elections (European Parliament 2023, 26). Although they do not always offer solutions, they recognize the important issues for young people and focus on one of the topics in particular: the AfD on immigration and BSW on peacekeeping. In addition, both parties are sending clear messages that directly address uncertainties and concerns and offer specific solutions such as border protection, relief in the event of inflation or a peace-oriented foreign policy. All other parties only address a few of the issues relevant to young people and sometimes even set their priorities on topics outside of them, as the analysis of other issues

shows. For example, the FDP's core issue is digitization and die Grünen's core issue is climate change, which allowed them to score points among the under-30s in the 2021 German federal election (Razum 2024). Now, the shift towards issues such as asylum/immigration and inflation are enabling the AfD and BSW to appeal more strongly to young voters on TikTok.

In summary, the analysis shows that successful communication strategies for first-time voters must not only address young people, but also, and above all, target them with relevant content. Parties that specifically tailored their topics to the concerns and interests of young people and conveyed clear messages achieved significant success in Austria and Germany. This allows us to verify the two H1 hypothesis.

#### **4 Limitation**

The limitations of the work relate above all to the representativeness of the data of the demographic groups studied. Although many studies provide insights into the perspectives of young people, these often relate to broad age groups (e.g., 14-17- or 16–25-year-olds). It is therefore difficult to draw specific conclusions about the group of 16–17-year-old first-time voters. While it can be assumed that their views are considered in the studies, it would be of interest for future research to look at this age group isolated to provide differentiated conclusions. Another limitation is the lack of data on first-time voters in the 2004 European elections in Austria. This makes it difficult to analyse the development of vote shares, so the focus was placed on identifying the parties' strongest voter groups in 2009. Furthermore, the topics identified as youth-relevant did not exclusively concern the age group of 16- to 17-year-old first-time voters but were also important for many other age groups. Issues such as immigration and securing peace were general key topics in the 2024 European elections in Germany that addressed broad sections of the electorate (Tagesschau 2024a). Thus, the parties may have taken up these topics on TikTok or in Austrian reporting as they are also highly relevant to all voters. In conclusion, it can be said that political communication is subject to

constant change. Changes in the content and strategies of the parties cannot therefore be attributed exclusively to the lowering of the voting age but are also due to general social and political developments.

## **5 Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to examine whether parties in Germany (2024) and Austria (2009) achieved higher vote shares among first-time voters (16- to 18-year-olds) by addressing youth-relevant issues. Therefore, the statements, interviews and press releases of the Austrian parties for the 2009 European elections were analysed on FACTIVA, as were the TikTok posts of the German parties before the 2024 European elections, using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring. The analysis shows that parties that address youth-relevant topics on important platforms of first-time voters achieved significant increases in votes from this group. In Germany, the AfD and the BSW were the only parties that covered all relevant topics on TikTok, such as asylum/immigration, inflation, residential space, security, old age poverty, and war in Palestine/Israel and Europe, which contributed to their success among young voters. Other German parties focused only occasionally on youth-relevant topics or emphasized less relevant areas such as climate protection (die Grünen) or digitalization (FDP). In Austria, the FPÖ and die Grünen positioned themselves as the leading parties in addressing youth-relevant issues such as asylum/immigration, education, the environment, and youth unemployment. Both parties were able to achieve higher shares of the vote among first-time voters, especially compared to their competitors, who focused less on named topics. These results suggest that addressing youth-relevant matters via suitable communication channels such as TikTok or established print media is crucial for electoral success among first-time voters. The study provides a basis for further research on the voting behaviour of first-time voters, particularly regarding the differences between younger (16-17 years old) and older first-time voters (18-21 years old), to gain a more nuanced understanding of voting behaviour.

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