





YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES

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Changes to electoral legislation have been frequent in Greece and the electoral system has been adjusted to the preferences and interests of governing parties.

Almost all governments since the establishment of the Third Hellenic Republic in 1974 have modified the electoral system while in office. The voting age has, however, changed only once, in 2016. Equal access to the vote, particularly for young people, has often been an issue of public controversy and a persistent criticism of right-wing governments by the left-wing opposition.

Voter registration processes are fairly straightforward and inclusive from an administrative point of view. Registration is passive, automatic and ongoing. Citizens do not need to take any action in order to be included on the voter register. Reforms have enabled voting at the place of temporary residence, however the frequency of snap elections with short deadlines for absentee voter registration make it difficult for many citizens, particularly young people, to exercise this right.

In 2016, in line with a Europe-wide trend[1], the voting age was lowered from 18 to 17, but not to 16 as in some other EU member states. As this provision has survived successive changes to the electoral law, it appears to have been integrated in the political and electoral practices of the country. Given that Greece is not noted for pro-youth policies, as reflected in the massive brain drain and high youth unemployment, such an interest in the political participation of adolescents is striking.

This 2016 reform aimed to increase youth participation and sought to counterbalance the overrepresentation of older age groups. The results, however, have not been particularly impressive. The Greek experience shows that lowering the voting age to increase youth participation cannot compensate for negative demographic developments. In the 2001 census, the "youth" age group (18-34 years) made up 32% of the country's adult resident population. This figure dropped to 27% in 2011 and is estimated at around 22% in the 2021 census. The percentage for registered voters over 55 is more than double than those aged 18 to 34.[2]

Simply lowering the voting age also does not necessarily result in increased participation, especially if not accompanied by information and awareness-raising campaigns. According to high schools from various parts of Greece,[3] neither the Ministry of the Interior nor the Ministry of Education conducted campaigns for first-time voters for the 2023 parliamentary elections. This half-hearted approach contrasts with the sophisticated awareness-raising campaign put in place for the registration of Greeks residing abroad.[4] In the absence of funding from the state, youth-serving organisations were unable to run large-scale campaigns. This reflects the reality of Greek civil society, which suffers from fragmentation, lack of access to educational institutions, limited specialisation and precarious funding.

The overall challenge for youth participation, be it strictly electoral or political in the wider sense, is an acute lack of trust. Young people increasingly distrust political institutions – political parties in particular.[5]

It is often claimed that the relatively small number of young people who are active in student politics see the parties as stepping-stones for their careers rather than a space for engagement and belonging. The youth experience en masse is of a sense of powerlessness which leads to apathy or cynicism.

The main barrier to voter registration is the restriction on voting rights based on intellectual or psychosocial disabilities. This is not in compliance with international human rights standards and needs to be addressed.[6]

The timing of administrative procedures makes voting at a place of temporary residence difficult, especially in the case of early elections. This particularly affects seasonal workers and students, which are two important categories of young potential voters. Postal voting, which was introduced for the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, if extended to national elections, would alleviate this administrative barrier and greatly facilitate the participation of voters with mobility issues.

It is noteworthy that neither the recent extension of voting rights to Greek citizens residing abroad nor the introduction of postal voting in 2024 increased voter turnout. The fact that electoral participation slumped in the second 2023 early parliamentary elections and the 2024 EP elections underlines both the gravity of the situation and the need for concerted engagement in support of participation.

1 Austria lowered the voting age to 16 in 2007 and Malta in 2018 while Belgium and Germany allow 16-year-olds to vote in European elections. Various initiatives have been taken or are underway across the EU to lower the voting age to 16.

2 Eteron – Institute for Research and Social Change, I psifos ton neoteron ilikion stin Ellada 1990-2023 [The Vote of Younger Age Cohorts in Greece 1990-2023] (Athens: Eteron, 2023),

3 According to interviews conducted with six high-school principals in different parts of Greece.

4 On the basis of the changes introduced by Law no. 4648/2019, Greek citizens residing abroad could vote out-of-country for the first time in the 2023 national elections.

5 According to Flash Eurobarometer 522, the level of trust of Greek youth in political parties and politicians is the second lowest among measured institutions (18%), after trust in media (15%). Ipsos European Public Affairs, Flash Eurobarometer 522 Democracy Report (Brussels: European Commission, 2023)

6 OSCE/ODIHR, Election Assessment Mission Final Report, Greece Early Parliamentary Elections 21 May 2023 (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2023), 22

Background

In accordance with the Law N. 4406/2016 on "Proportional Representation of Political Parties, Expansion of the Right to Vote and Other Provisions on the Election of Members of Parliament", voting is compulsory for all Greek citizens from the age of 17, although penalties for abstention are not enforced. Those who turn 17 in an election year have the right to vote regardless of their exact birth date. Technically, 1 January is considered the date of birth of all those turning 17 during an election year. No one is left behind and the voter register is updated automatically. Voter registration is passive.

Greek citizens who are eligible to vote and have reached the age of 25 on the day of the elections (or turn 25 during the year of the elections) have the right to stand for election to parliament. Candidacy for election as mayors or regional governors is open to all Greek citizens who have reached the age of 21 on the day of elections, according to Law no. 4555/2018 on "Reform of the Institutional Framework of Local Government" Art.10 (2). For candidates for election to municipal and regional councils, the minimum age is 18 (including those who turn 18 during the election year). However, the legal framework continues to restrict the candidacy rights of certain professions and public positions, including all salaried public employees, members of the armed forces, governors and mayors as well as chairpersons of boards of public corporations.[7]

The legal basis for voter registration and the digitalisation of the Greek voting system is Law no. 2623/1998 on "Reorganisation of the Registries, Organisation and Exercise of the Right to Vote of Non-residents, Modernisation of the Electoral Process and Other Provisions" and successive amendments as well as Presidential Decree 26/201, which codified several aspects of voter registration.

Municipalities are responsible for drafting and updating the voter register. Every year, from 1 to 30 November, mayors are required to prepare, ex officio, information on those who will obtain the right to vote in the following year and are legally liable if the information is not submitted by the municipality in accordance with the deadlines. The Department of Electoral Registers and Results of the Ministry of the Interior accesses and draws updated information from municipal citizens' registers every two months. It has no competence to intervene in the register.

The national budget defines the allocation of funds to municipalities with a regular annual percentage destined for the electoral process – regardless of whether there are elections that year or not. The municipal authorities carry out the process automatically under the regular budget of the municipality.

According to the 2021 census, the number of registered voters represents around 93.6% of the resident population. This disproportionately high percentage of registered voters is due to the number of Greek citizens living abroad and because deceased voters are not automatically deleted from the electoral register – only the records of 116-year-olds. Records are only deleted when relatives of the deceased make the required declaration at the relevant municipal civil registration office. Not surprisingly, the failure to comply with this requirement contributes to an inflated voter register. In 2023, there were approximately 179,000 registered voters over the age of 100, while those over 110 are estimated at 65,000 and those over 115 are close to 10,000.

While voter registration is inclusive, there are certain legal barriers and administrative residency requirements affecting some groups of voters – including young voters. The Election Code restricts the voting rights of persons who have been found mentally incompetent by a court decision. According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), this contravenes the principles of universal and equal suffrage as provided for in the UN treaties, 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document and other international obligations.[8] As for residency requirements, it is necessary to apply more than two months in advance in order to be able to vote in a location that is different from the voter's habitual residence. As elections are often called at short notice, this makes absentee voting challenging.

7 Ibid., 10. OSCE/ODIHR reiterated its previous recommendation that any limitations on the right to stand for office should be minimal.

8 Ibid.,9.

Additionally, absentee polling stations are only constituted when the required number of registered voters is reached. Voters may have to travel to another voting centre where the threshold of registered absentee voters has been met. This often results in travel costs and inconvenience for the voter.

In accordance with Law no. 4648/2019 on "Facilitating the Exercise of the Right to Vote for Voters Who are Outside the Greek Territory and Modification of the Electoral Procedure", Greek citizens resident abroad could vote for the first time in the May 2023 parliamentary elections. The on-line registration procedure is relatively simple and a total of 99 polling stations in 82 cities in 35 countries were constituted. To qualify, it is necessary to have lived in Greece for at least two years in the past 35 years and have submitted a tax declaration to the Greek authorities during the two years prior the elections – even with zero income. Young people under 30 living or working abroad have the right to register as voters without having submitted a tax declaration, provided that a first-degree relative has done so during the current or previous year.[9]



9 All Greek citizens are obliged to submit a tax declaration each year. If they do not, they face administrative fines and do not have access to public services and benefits. Citizens living in Greece do not, however, have to present this document in order to be eligible to vote.

Voter Registration Costs

There are no direct costs for the citizen associated with voter registration. The municipal authorities carry out the process automatically for all citizens coming of age.

In order to change residence from one municipality to another, and consequentially their voting address as well, citizens need to provide municipal authorities with: proof of residence within the new municipality (for example, a utility bill), annual tax declarations for the past two years and a formal request. There are various indirect costs related to the change of residence such as transportation costs, the collection and printing of required documents and the "working hours" dedicated to the process.

In case of temporary change of address, citizens are not obliged to inform the municipality nor to make changes in the civil registry, however there is an online application required for absentee voters.

Budget and administrative supervision

The national budget defines the allocation of funding to municipalities and a regular annual percentage designated for the electoral process regardless of whether it is an election year or not. As a regular part of their duties, the municipalities (under the authority of the mayor) are responsible for approving the yearly budget. They are also responsible for budget allocations and for drafting and updating the voter register every two months.

Municipal councils monitor and scrutinise expenses in connection with voter registration, which are allocated under the regular budget of the municipality. Additionally, each municipality has an internal financial control system (Observatory of Financial Autonomy of Municipalities) under the Department of Municipal Finances at the Ministry of the Interior.[10]

This body was established to monitor the design and execution of local government budgets, conduct long-term monitoring of their financial data, deal with problems of local government indebtedness and submit proposals regarding fiscal policies for implementation by national or local government bodies and their legal entities. The observatories are operationally supported by the Directorate General of Local Government Finance and Development Policy.[11]

Election costs

Funds for running elections are part of the regular budget assigned to the Ministry of the Interior. Electoral costs include remuneration of members of election commissions, travel expenses, remuneration of court officials, secretarial support, replacement of old or damaged ballot boxes and the purchase of electoral materials.

Parliamentary Elections	Costs
June 2023	85 million euro
May 2023	85 million euro
July 2019	60 million euro
September 2015	33 million euro
January 2015	55 million euro
June 2012	60 million euro
May 2012	60 million euro
2009	68 million euro

Figure 1. Costs per Elections (Source: Ministry of Finance)

10 The Observatory of Financial Autonomy of Municipalities is a collective body established at the Ministry of the Interior (Law N. 4111/2013 (4), subsequently amended by Law N. 4555/2018).

11 The Interoperability Node is the basic information system of the Ministry of the Interior for the extraction and processing of the fiscal data of the Observatory of Financial Autonomy of Municipalities (such as revenue expenditure data, commitment register, balance sheet (available, loans, liabilities), general accounting balance and intra-governmental transactions). The data is submitted, in accordance with the provisions of Circular 9/2018 (par. B and D), either automatically through two web services, or by uploading .xml or .xls files to the online application http://komvos.ypes.gr/stats. A special website (https://aftodioikisi.ypes.gr) has been created for the collection of financial and other data of the local government entities by the relevant departments of the Ministry of the Interior. With this system, the Ministry facilitates the agencies in providing data that cannot be collected by the Interoperability Node.

These figures show a significant increase in the costs of the two elections in 2023. This was mainly due to increases is the number of public servants involved and their remuneration (from €50 million in 2019 to €60 million in 2023) as well as higher costs related to police officers (from €10 million in 2019 to €15 million in 2023). The higher costs are also due to an increase in the number of polling stations as well as cost increases for materials and stationery. It is, however, striking that there were no savings from the May to the June elections. This suggests that all materials such as stationery and ballot boxes were purchased anew at a cost of €8 million. The reduction of the cost of elections in September 2015 is attributed to capital controls in force at the time, requiring severe economies in human and materials costs throughout the process.[12]

Parliamentary Elections	Costs
June 2023	7,8 euro per registered voter
May 2023	7,8 euro per registered voter
2019	6 euro per registered voter
September 2015	3.35 euro per registered voter
January 2015	5,52 euro per registered voter
June 2012	6 euro per registered voter
May 2012	6 euro per registered voter
2009	6,84 euro per registered voter

Figure 2. Costs per Registered Voter (Source: Ministry of Finance)

Vendor contracts span only one electoral cycle. New contracts are stipulated for each new cycle given that, in the case of parliamentary elections, it cannot be foreseen whether a government will be formed or a new election called and, if so, when. In the case of municipal and regional elections, which are carried out in two rounds of voting, contracts are stipulated for both rounds. Although this results in unnecessary expenditures if the election is decided in the first round, it ensures that the necessary materials and services are available for both election days.



12 The capital controls were introduced by the Greek government after the European Central Bank decided to withdraw support from the Greek banking system as a reaction to the proclamation of a referendum in June 2015.

Barriers to Youth Voter Registration

While voter registration is passive, continuous and generally inclusive, there are certain legal barriers and administrative residency requirements affecting some groups of voters, including young people.

The barriers to youth voter registration are similar to those faced by other age cohorts with one exception: the lack of information for first-time voters. No official communications are sent to first-time voters when they reach voting age, neither direct personalised information (such as a letter addressed to the voter or a message via telephone or social media) nor through a public information campaign to explain the automatic registration process and voter eligibility. Nor is information on the registration process provided by schools or in civic education textbooks. There are no state campaigns targeting students, first-time voters or seasonal workers (many of whom are young people) by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour or the Ministry of Education.

Such an oversight on the part of the relevant institutions indicates, at best, a general disregard for young voters. Some interlocutors consider this lack of information a deliberate choice by the parties on the right who consider young voters more volatile and generally favourable to the left. The failure to promote youth participation has made the law lowering the voter age a dead letter in terms of youth participation.

Basic registration provisions

Greece does not have voter cards, but eligible voters have a unique voter number, which cannot be used for any purpose other than voting. On election day, voters identify themselves with their ID card, passport, driver's licence or temporary ID. The standard process for issuing a passport costs €82. ID cards, driver's license and temporary IDs are issued free of charge. The making and printing of the photographs for identification documents is the responsibility of the citizen and costs a minimum of €12. The information website "Learn where you vote", created and run by the Elections Department of the Ministry of the Interior, provides information on voter registration and on how to rectify errors.

All municipal registers are interconnected through the integrated voter register of the Ministry of the Interior under a single digital umbrella. Searching for data is fast, simple and clear. The Ministry of the Interior owns the source code of the database for voter registration, which is stored at the Department for Digital Governance. The municipal authorities are responsible for co-operating with the national census services in order to avoid duplicates in the census and in the voter register.[13]

Persons in pre-trial detention enjoy the right to vote and are registered according to the same procedure as other voters.

Legal barriers to voting rights of some groups of voters

Greek citizens who were found mentally incompetent by a court decision are deprived of the right to vote. The same applies for citizens who were convicted for certain categories of serious crimes where the punishment is irrevocable. These crimes are listed under Chapters 1 to 6 of the Penal Code and include attacks on democracy, crimes against other states, crimes against state and political bodies, crimes against the president of the republic, parliament, government and local government bodies, crimes against public order, high treason, involvement in criminal organizations and terrorist attacks. Restriction of voter rights also applies to offences under the Military Penal Code punishable by life imprisonment or to life imprisonment for any other offence.

Administrative residency requirements

In case of temporary residence outside of citizen's constituency, an application can be made in order to vote at specially-designated absentee polling stations in the municipalities of temporary residence. There is, however, a timing problem. As stated above, the municipalities submit updated voter register data every two months, therefore, in practice, a voter needs to apply at least two months in advance

13 In case of double registration, judicial representatives call on the voter to sign a declaration that they are knowingly double registered and that they have not voted and will not vote elsewhere. These statements are gathered at the Ministry of the Interior and forwarded to the judiciary after being cross-referenced during the count of all election ballots. Double voting is prohibited by law and violators are punished.

of the elections. Election dates are, however, not predefined and can be decreed as late as 30 days before the elections take place. This creates difficulties, sometimes insurmountable, for those seeking to register as absentee voters and can negatively impact voter turnout, especially for young people who may be away from their place of permanent residence either for study or for seasonal work. There are also some "invisible" barriers such as the online application for absentee voters which requires an e-mail address and basic digital skills, but these are less relevant to the younger cohorts.

The voter can change the details of their address of temporary residence for absentee voting (regional unit, municipality, municipal unit, region-city, street, number and postal code) at any time. This change is made after submitting a request to correct or update the voter's address via an online application to the gov.gr platform of the Ministry of Interior.

In order for an absentee polling station to be formed, there have to be at least 40 registered absentee voters. If this quorum is not reached, absentee voters are registered at the nearest location (municipality, city, country) where the absentee voter threshold is met. In these circumstances, voters incur additional travel costs.

Seasonal workers as well as other people who are living away from their habitual place of residence often end up voting in the nearest prefecture capital. This is not necessarily the closest polling station to a voter's temporary residence. In the case of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese islands, this entails the costs of travel by boat (often with limited travel options) and further costs related to the travel time involved. As summer work in the tourist sector is intense, taking time off work is not always possible.

There is no absentee voting at municipal and regional elections due to the requirement for a minimum of 40 voters per polling station, which makes it impractical to constitute a separate absentee polling station for each municipality of origin. Hence, voting in municipal and regional elections can involve significant indirect costs for voters living outside their permanent place of residence: travel costs, food and refreshment costs and often accommodation. This contributes to lower voter participation in the second round of municipal elections. Second-round turnout in the recent election was 40%, compared with the average turnout for the first round of 52%.



37 Based on a consultation with a group of junior high school students, January 9, 2024.

38 Based on a series of interviews with youth registrants from Maguindanao and Tawi-Tawi, January 23-26, 2024.

Youth Voter Registration Initiatives

First-time voters

In 2016, following the entry into force of Law no. 4406/2016, the voting age was lowered to include 17-year-olds and all those turning 17 during the election year (1 January taken as the birthday for this cohort). Parliament passed the law with 180 votes in favour out of 300 members of parliament. Fruit of a political calculation by the then left-wing government, it extended voting rights to approximately 100,000 17-year-olds per year. This was envisaged as a counterbalance to the preponderant representation of (more conservative) older age groups.[14]

Prior to the recent elections in May 2023, the Ministry of the Interior published the following cumulative data on first-time voters. In the May 2023 parliamentary elections, 438,595 young people between the ages of 17 and 21 had the right to vote for the first-time. One in five of this cohort (between 90,000 and 100,000) are still attending school. Specifically:

Year of birth	Number of voters	Age
2006	112,097	17 years old
2005	109,719	18 years old
2004	108,762	19 years old
2003	108,017	20 years old

Figure 3. Number of first-time voters per election (Source: Ministry of Interior)

Voter registration and turnout

Since 2002, dependable information on turnout rates and voter registration has been available from official sources. The data presented below for elections between 1974 and 2002 was collected from the archive of the Ministry of the Interior and crosschecked with various scholarly and media sources.

Elections	Year	Registered	Turnout
European Parliament	2024	9,796,330	41.39%
Parliamentary	June 2023	9,813,595	53.74%
Parliamentary	May 2023	9,813,595	61.10%
Parliamentary	2019	9,903,864	57.78%
European Parliament	2019	9,922,294	58.69%
Parliamentary	Sep 2015	9,836,997	56.16%
Parliamentary	Jan 2015	9,808,760	63.94%
European Parliament	2014	9,871,933	59.33%
Parliamentary	June 2012	9,850,802	62.47%
Parliamentary	May 2012	9,850,802	65.10%
Parliamentary	2009	9,929,065	70.95%
European Parliament	2009	9.866.913	52.6%
Parliamentary	2007	9,918,917	74.15%
Parliamentary	2004	9,899,472	76.59%
European Parliament	2004	9.777.873	63.22%
Parliamentary	2000	9,373,439	74.97%
European Parliament	1999	9.555.326	72.5%
Parliamentary	1996	9,140,742	76.35%
European Parliament	1994	9.550.596	73.36%
Parliamentary	1993	8,972,360	79.22%
Parliamentary	1990	8,453,695	79.50%
Parliamentary	Nov 1989	8,425,212	80.63%
European Parliament	1989	8.377.904	81.6%
Parliamentary	Jun 1989	8,302,412	80.90%
Parliamentary	1985	8,010,627	79.10%
European Parliament	1984	7.790.309	78,1%
Parliamentary	1981	7,059,808	78.61%
Parliamentary	1977	6,402,738	77.76%
Parliamentary	1974	6,240,166	79.53%

Figure 4. Turnout in parliamentary and European Parliament elections (Main Source: Ministry of Interior)

14 In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the voting system did not formally change. Still, as the elections took place on January 25 and the compilation of the voter register takes place in February of each year, in accordance with the relevant Presidential Decree, that year's 18-year-olds (the cohort of 2015) were not eligible to vote. The opposition parties, based on an opinion by the Greek Ombudsman, asked for the introduction of a decree to resolve this issue. Their proposal was not accepted by the government. Legal action to regulate such cases is recommended.

Youth electoral participation

There is no official data on turnout disaggregated by age groups. As a result of the inflated numbers of registered voters (see above), official turnout data is inaccurate. The only data on youth participation is provided by exit polls. For instance, according to data of the Research University Institute of the University of Macedonia (2022), 25% of 17- to 24-year-olds voted in the 2019 elections while over 60% said that they would not vote in the next elections.[15] Research by the non-profit Eteron,[16] on the other hand, reported that 77.5 % of young voters said they would take part in the elections of June 2024. This massive level of participation did not materialise and abstention hit record levels, especially for younger voters.

In the exit polls for the 2023 elections, 8% of respondents were between 17 and 24 years old while 12% were in the 25-34 age cohort.[17] Based on the exit poll participation rates of each age group in the two consecutive early parliamentary elections, the increased abstention in June seems to have affected younger voters to a much greater extent.

Their turnout in June is estimated to be 25% lower than in May, when the corresponding decrease for voters aged between 35 and 54 was 17%. The participation of older age groups (55+), on the other hand, seems not to have varied greatly (minus 2%).[18] This data is consistent with that from previous exit polls: younger cohorts show the most consistently negative trend of all age groups (see below). According to the Elections Department of the Ministry of the Interior,[19] for both the 2019 and 2023 elections approximately 400,000 citizens were registered as first-time voters (90,000-100,000 per year). Despite the extension of the franchise, the percentage of young voters continued to decline according to the exit polls.

This experience suggests that lowering the voting age cannot be expected to compensate for demographic trends. In the 2001 census, the 18-34 age group made up 32% of the country's adult resident population. This figure dropped to 27% in 2011 and is estimated to be around 22% in the recent 2021 census, while the corresponding rate for voters over 55 is more than double those aged 18 to 34.[21] According to the August 2023 Eurobarometer survey, the 15-29 age group represents only 15.25% of the electorate.[22]

When the SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left)-led government presented and voted in favour the reduction in the voting age, it resulted in controversy and was criticised by much of the media and most influencers. SYRIZA was accused of attempting to manipulate young people and, through them, the elections. It is worth noting that, by the time of the 2023 elections, the issue was no longer controversial – indeed it was hardly mentioned. This suggests that the reform has been generally accepted by both the public and the political class. Little else has been done to improve the electoral participation of young people, but clearly the place to start is with better and more consistent data collection.

State

The main tool for voter information is the Ministry of the Interior's official website "Learn where you vote", with its telephone helpline. By entering a person's name, surname, father's name and date of birth, the user has access to all relevant information on the polling station where the voter is registered. A campaign introducing the website and the helpline was given wide coverage on traditional and social media as well as news portals. It has not been possible to establish accurate costs for the "Learn where you vote" initiative, as those registered on the portal for all public contracts (Diavgeia), relate only to the hosting and maintenance of the website and the hotline and are less than €30,000.

State voter information campaigns for national elections have not targeted youth inclusion.[23] Public transport is provided for political party campaigns, but there are no parallel initiatives to facilitate electoral participation.

Age Group	% of adult population 2011	Active voters based on exit poll data					Adult population 2021
		2012a	2012b	2015a	2015b	2019	
17/18-34	27%	25%	24	24	23	20	21.5%
35-54	35%	40	40	42	38	37	36%
55+	38%	35	36	34	39	43	43%

Figure 5. Electoral participation per age group (Source: Panagiotis Koustenis based on Ministry of Interior data)[20]

15 Nikolaos Stephakis, [Youth abstention from elections: a worrying issue and solutions to address it], Research University Institute - University of Macedonia, (Thessalonica: RUI, 2022),

16 Eteron, "I psifos ton neoteron ilikion stin Ellada 1990-2023" [The Vote of Younger Age Cohorts in Greece 1990-2023].

17 Metron Analysis, Exit poll (Athens: Metron Analysis, 2023).

18 Eteron, "I psifos ton neoteron ilikion stin Ellada 1990-2023" [The Vote of Younger ages in Greece 1990-2023].

19 See statistics provided by the Ministry of the Interior

20 Panagiotis Koustenis, "Eklogiki simmetohi, apohi kai orofi" [Electoral participation, abstention and threshold], Epohi, October 23, 2022

21 Eteron, I psifos ton neoteron ilikion stin Ellada 1990-2023 [The Vote of Younger ages in Greece 1990-2023].

22 European Parliament, European Parliament Eurobarometer - Autumn 2023: Graphics and Figures (Brussels: European Parliament, 2023)

23 No information was found about relevant campaigns on the online portal guaranteeing transparency on public spending.

by the governing coalition of SYRIZA and ANEL (Independent Greeks)[24] as a means of extending the involvement of youth in decision-making. Despite this, the initiative itself was very top-down and civil society involvement was not sought.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) campaign for the electoral participation of young and first-time voters through their social media and by organising awareness-raising activities such as public discussions, debates and workshops. Civil society interlocutors, however, were not aware of any state-funded campaigns to promote youth participation in national elections. During the most recent elections, the transparency and accountability CSO Vouliwatch ran an online campaign ("The end of abstention - this year we vote!") targeting youth and the non-voting population generally.[25] Vouliwatch received private funding for this campaign.

The civic action non-profit organisation Inter Alia hosted a series of activities on youth participation for the European Parliament (EP) elections in 2024, using an operational fund provided by the European Commission.[26] Activities included workshops, debates and presentations as well as exchanges with young candidates. Of these, the most successful were the activities involving young candidates, however overall participation was limited. As in the rest of the EU, young Greeks are detached from representative politics in general and from EP elections in particular. With just over 40% participation, these elections set a new record for low turnout.

The representation of the EP in Greece participates in the EU "together.eu for democracy" programme, which invites CSOs to co-operate with the EP in promoting participation in the EP elections, however, civil society engagement has so far been limited as no funding is available.

There are large number of youth-serving and youth-led CSOs registered in Greece. As there is no official registration process for CSOs, only a general State Register, which includes companies, businesses and other entities , it is impossible to know the exact number of active youth organisations, but clearly many formerly active youth CSOs are no longer operating.[27] Without proper mapping of the youth sector, it is not possible to ascertain exactly how many organisations are active, especially as many organisations operate at the local or neighbourhood level and are informal or volunteer-based. The lack of a formal definition of the youth sector and of youth organisations and of the profile of youth workers adds the difficulty of determining how many of CSOs are active in promoting youth participation in elections.

Many organisations work in the field of youth civic education with varying levels of specialisation. Voter registration, as it is passive, is not a target of campaigns or large-scale activities, despite the need for better information for first-time voters. Many CSOs provide information to support youth participation in elections or organise campaigns, especially for EP elections, but most of these activities are small-scale and self-funded. Some limited small-scale funding is provided on a project basis in response to calls for proposals.

Schools

According to the recent report of EURYCIDE on citizenship education in European schools,[28] general high schools in Greece provide civic education classes during the first and second year for a total of 31 hours each year. In lower secondary education, civic education classes are only foreseen in one of the three years, with 20 hours per year. In the fifth and sixth grades of primary school there is one hour of civic education per week. The citizenship curriculum, however, does not touch on voter registration or the extended franchise and there are no other state-funded, educational or information campaigns on voter registration or electoral participation addressed to young people. Moreover, according to the Cross-sectoral Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education, two or three teaching hours per week are devoted to interdisciplinary project-based activities related to a range of topics relevant to citizenship education.[29] It used to be a standard practice for the Ministry of Education to send out an instruction calling on educational institutions to inform pupils of their voting rights and the voter registration process. However, school principals from various parts of the country interviewed during field research confirmed that no such communication had been issued for recent elections.

Political parties

Political parties have youth groups at universities and within their own CSOs, which are responsible for providing information about voting as well as organising peer-group discussions. During the 2023 elections, several of these youth groups promoted electoral participation. The opposition party SYRIZA ran a campaign ("Going to the ballot"), while the Greek Communist Party ran a campaign entitled "This is who we are!" alluding to a trademark phrase of their secretary general. Another smaller party on the left, DiEM25, ran the campaign "It's worth voting". Other political parties and party youth groups held similar campaigns. These campaigns mainly aimed at promoting their own political agendas rather than raising youth participation rates as such. For instance, the Panhellenic Social Movement (PASOK) in its campaign (#mePASOK) addressed youth-related issues by means of a video, but did not explicitly encourage young people to participate in elections. The ruling party, New Democracy, like other parties on the right, was also somewhat tepid on youth participation. Voter lists in the polling stations contain no age identifiers and voter registers are not shared with political parties.

In the recent national parliamentary elections, support for SYRIZA collapsed. As Greece's main opposition party, it traditionally appealed to young people and campaigned explicitly targeting youth. In

24 ANEL was a junior government partner, a relatively small conservative party.

25 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uk7j5-JAB5Y

26 https://interaliaproject.com/project/i-vote-for-myself/

27 There is no obligation to deregister from the State Register. In 2023, a general and special register was introduced but there are only a few dozens of organisations registered there.

28 European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice Brief: Citizenship education at school in Europe, 2017 (Brussels: Publications Office, 2018),

29 For instance: participating in school and out-of-school activities, using the media, gender equality, intercultural communication and interaction and environmental themes.

line with the trend of declining popularity, the exit polls showed support for SYRIZA among 17- to 24-year-old voters slipping from 38% in 2019 to 24.1% and 19.2%[30] in the elections of May and June 2023.[31] The Communist Party, despite being traditionally linked with an older electorate, also ran a targeted campaign to attract young voters and saw a significant increase from 4.3% of the youth vote in 2019 to 7.3% and 8.2% in May and June 2023 respectively.

Left-wing parties, with the exception of the Greek Communist Party, have long enjoyed support from young people[32] and hence have targeted the youth vote in their campaigns. In 2022, one year before the national elections, the right-wing government introduced the Youth Pass, a €150 per annum allowance for young people to be spent on tourism, sports or cultural activities. The allowance is available to all tax residents of Greece who reach the age of 18 or 19 in the year preceding their application. This measure is credited with increasing the government's appeal to young people and was heavily criticised by the opposition as a manipulation of the electorate.

Out-of-country voters

In implementation of Law N. 4648/2019, the Ministry of the Interior assigned the design and delivery of a €3 million-per-year campaign to promote out-of-country voter registration (2021-2022) to the Greek advertising agency Frank and Fame. The reach of the campaign was extensive, involving television time on the stations watched by the Greek diaspora, radio and internet radio stations as well as in expatriate publications (newspapers and magazines) and other means such as Internet banners. The results in terms of registered voters was, however, disappointing: for the May 2023 parliamentary elections, only 22,825 people registered, out of which 20,970 voted.

Persons living with disabilities

As registration is passive, there are no special registration provisions for voters with disabilities. On election day, disabled persons have priority at polling stations and, if requested, a member of the electoral commission assists the voter. For the recent parliamentary elections (May and June 2023), a provision was put in place for a special point in polling stations to ensure access for those with mobility difficulties.[33] Precise data is not available, but most polling stations did not activate this service. The Greek state does not provide financial support to persons with disabilities in exercising the right to vote. All costs of transport to and from the polling station are covered by the voter.

Postal voting for the 2024 European Parliament elections

The government's introduction of postal voting in May 2024 for the 6-9 June EP elections was seen by many as a harbinger of postal voting in national elections. This is undoubtedly one of the most effective means of alleviating the administrative barriers to electoral participation, but such a reform would require a qualified majority. This could well prove a challenge: an initial consensus on the principle of postal voting in the EP elections broke down and all opposition parties either refrained from endorsing the bill or directly opposed it.

Currently, applications for postal voting may be submitted online up to forty days prior to the election. The voter enters the online application with their personal credential codes and the request is confirmed using a one-time password (OTP) on a mobile phone or e-mail. Political parties or candidates are not involved in any part of the process and severe penalties are envisaged for distributing a voting file or opening one without fulfilling the provisions of the law. Special mention is made of the fact that the voter submits a declaration in which they confirm that they filled out the ballot paper themselves and that they expressed their personal will only.

The law also supports the rights of disabled persons to vote at polling stations and facilitates their access to the pre-election dialogue. The Ministry of the Interior conducted a two-week long consultation and claims to have taken the comments received into account in the final formulation of the law.[34]

In addition to the postal vote, the law introduces a procedure for updating the voter register by deleting all those born before 1 January 1944 who have not submitted (or are not listed as dependents in) a 2022 tax return, do not have a Greek passport or do not receive a pension.

The Result

Despite the introduction of the postal vote and the lower voting age, the EP elections set a new negative record for voter abstention: almost 60% chose not to vote, underlining that this crisis of confidence in representative democracy cannot be resolved simply by technical or administrative measures. According to a recent survey by the Greek statistical authority, only 17% of respondents stated that they trust political parties with the wellbeing of the country. In line with Europe-wide trends, trust in the parliament and state institutions is also low, at 27% and 26%, respectively.[35] This distrust was further aggravated by a data leak of out-of-country voters' e-mail addresses and a break-in at the Elections Department of the Ministry of the Interior in the lead-up to the EP elections. Postal voting, while not a panacea for this disaffection with politics, remains an important means of facilitating electoral participation and the full inclusion of all groups within society. It should remain an important reform objective.

30 Kostas Gousis, [Youth Vote. Exit Polls and the Day After], Eteron, (Athens: Eteron, 2023)

31 Vicky Katechaki, [Elections 2023: How did voters vote based on their age, gender and ideological affiliation], Kathimerini.gr, June 6, 2023,

32 Official data is not disaggregated by age. This estimation is based on exit poll data.

33 Municipal employees are assigned to welcome the voters and notify the judicial representative in case a voter is unable to vote in the assigned polling station. In that case, the judicial representative comes to the ground floor of the polling centre. There, the voter put the ballot in an envelope after voting in a booth. The judicial representative places the envelop in the ballot box upon returning to the polling station.

34 According to the Ministry of the Interior, a provision was incorporated for the transmission of pre-election messages with subtitles, in response to a proposal from the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities (ESAmeA). In response to another proposal, a provision was incorporated that identification for completing the ballot should be carried out either through gov.gr or by sending proof of identity. A ban on sending the return envelope by a third party was also adopted (except in case of express authorisation).

35 Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT), [Citizens trust ELSTAT and rank it consistently among the top institutions that contribute to the progress and prosperity of our country]

Lessons Learned

Apart from obvious advantages of passive over active registration in removing most of the traditional barriers to youth voter registration, there are key lessons learned from the Greek experience with regard to the electoral participation of young people. It goes without saying that, in Greece, extensions to the franchise were initiated by those political parties who saw electoral advantage in the electoral participation of one group or another.

The first lesson learned is that there is no such thing as a quick fix to the diminishing involvement of young people in the political life of the country and elections in particular. Procedural and administrative measures, on their own, have proven insufficient: simply lowering the voter age in 2016 did not result in the anticipated rise in youth participation.

The widening of the franchise to 17-year-olds was very much a top-down process without the systematic involvement of the direct beneficiaries – young people themselves. There was no process, no consultations with stakeholders, as a result of which the demand for change was not given time to emerge. This made ownership of the measure problematic and partisan and is probably one of the reasons for the disappointing results. Another was the lack-lustre implementation of the reform: there was no institutional campaign to inform first-time voters of the changes to the law and how it affects them and their age cohort.

This approach to implementation contrasts with the huge government investment in raising awareness on out-of-country voting for Greeks residing abroad. This was also essentially a top-down intervention that failed to deliver the anticipated results: only 22,855 Greek citizens living abroad registered to vote. The 2019 law was approved by a large parliamentary majority, but the timing was criticised by the opposition as a short-term approach to diaspora voting. In this case, the costly awareness-raising campaign was conducted by a private contractor, but the problem was essentially the same: the lack of pre-existing demand for the extension of the franchise and the lack of a process to allow that demand to emerge.

The above-mentioned failure of the state-of-the-art awareness campaign for out-of-country voting suggests that more and better communication, while important, is no panacea, especially where the target voters have limited interest in voting, as is often the case for citizens resident abroad.

The other main lesson learned is closely related. Voter apathy and abstention have deep roots that touch on the core values of representative democracy. Youth (non)participation needs to be better understood if it is to be addressed effectively.

Political party and civil society messaging suggests that young people are viewed as ignorant or apathetic: a group that needs to "get off the couch and take part in decision-making". Not only is this a self-defeating approach, but the basic premise is incorrect. There are a variety of reasons why young voters decide to abstain from voting, some of which are political in nature, including distrust of the political class and dissatisfaction with the economic situation.[36] Interestingly, a Flash Eurobarometer focusing on youth, found that the vast majority of young Greeks said they had participated in some form of civic or political activity in the previous year, including voting, posting political content on social media, boycotting or taking part in demonstrations. However, less than a third believe that their political engagement can affect the overall social and political situation locally, nationally or at the level of the European Union.[37]

Young people chose not to vote because they feel that voting achieves nothing. This deep-seated conviction is not only common to most democracies, but is shared by other age cohorts, which, however, still maintain "the voting habit". As first-time voters have not yet developed this habit, the impact of the distrust and disillusion has particularly serious consequences for them. This suggests there may be two main directions for invention. First, establish the voting habit in first-time voters through a wide variety of activities, campaigns and school-based actions, and second, start meeting young people where they are in order to understand the crisis of trust in representative democracy at the core of abstention.

36 Ipsos European Public Affairs, Flash Eurobarometer 522 Democracy Report.

37 European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication, Flash Eurobarometer European Parliament youth survey – Report (Brussels: European Parliament, 2021)

Recommendations

In the light of the above lessons learned, the authorities should consider the following legislative, administrative and procedural measures to facilitate the electoral participation of young people and other categories, such as voters with limited mobility. Engagement and advocacy on these fronts should not, however, preclude working with youth to understand their needs and perceptions.

- Priority should be given to data collection and improving the accuracy and availability of data on electoral participation. Consideration should be given to making disaggregated data on voter turnout available, for example, by including age identifiers in the voter register. In this regard, there is a need for formal definitions of what constitutes the youth sector, youth organisations and the profile of youth workers. Such definitions would assist in determining how many CSOs are active in promoting youth participation in elections.
- Remaining barriers registration in places of temporary residence should be removed. In particular, it should always be possible to register as an absentee voter during the period between the decree of an election date and polling day.
- Consideration should be given to introducing postal voting for all elections, not just EP elections. Advocacy by youth-led and youth-supporting organisations as well as organisations representing the various categories of persons with mobility problems should be encouraged.
- The Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education should cooperate on coordinated voter registration information and participation campaigns for high school pupils and first-time voters. In order to integrate civil society into these initiatives, decision-making should be decentralised and formal requirements should be minimised to enable access to schools by CSOs. In addition to enhancing the effectiveness of the campaigns, CSO engagement with school students would make it possible for youth-led and youth-serving organisations to hear student views on their rights and needs and take these views into account in future programming.
- The practice of issuing an instruction calling on educational institutions to inform pupils of their voting rights and voter registration should be resumed and the Ministry of Education should ensure it is properly implemented.
- Key information for first-time voters should be integrated into the high school civic education curriculum and should be incorporated into textbooks.
- Administrative communication regarding elections should be provided directly to voters who have come of age since the last election (by mail and/or SMS, email and possibly social media) to inform them of their voting rights and to explain passive registration and voting procedures.
- The practice of listening to youth and their needs should be prioritised in order to develop not only a better understanding of their views but also to develop tools for more effective voter participation campaigns. Targeted research on Gen Z is a source of increasingly rich and comprehensive data which can be used by political parties and civil society organisations to tailor their awareness-raising campaigns to the real needs, perceptions and preferences of young and first-time voters. An example of this approach is the Inter Alia research project "Hidden Tribes" which aims to capture not the political views or affiliations of young people, but rather their value systems – the basis for their social and political attitudes. This approach would make available diversified and disaggregated data on the motives behind the political and electoral behaviour of young people.

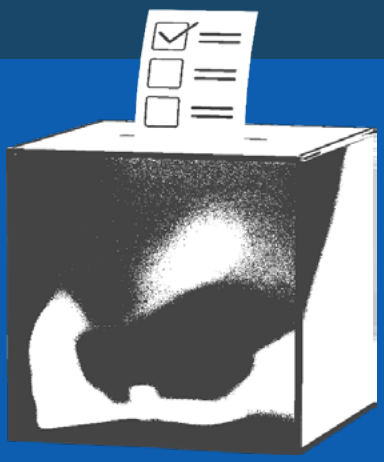
In conclusion, while legislative reforms such as the lowering of the voting age and the introduction of postal voting for all elections are positive and necessary for facilitating the electoral participation of young people (as well as other groups), the challenges facing representative democracy, in Greece as elsewhere, need to be addressed in a more comprehensive manner. Procedural and administrative measures are, on their own, insufficient.

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This case study was conducted by Inter Alia, bringing in-depth local expertise and insight into the analysis. Inter Alia means among others in Latin. Based on a philosophy of cooperation and reciprocity, Inter Alia works to advance political education, social transformation and collective action. It expresses the intention to willingly and joyfully stand among others, co-create, make concessions, and enable common progress and collective intelligence.

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YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES

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