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## Press Release

### **Lowering the Voting Age Does Not Help against the Rise of Right-Wing Populist Parties**

**Lowering the voting age to 16 is only an option but not a guarantee of support for democracy and democratic parties. This is the finding of a new study by political scientist Thomas König and his co-author Stefan Eschenwecker from the University of Mannheim.**

Can a lower voting age strengthen democracy and support for democratic parties? Based on the assumption that the voting experience of young voters will strengthen democracy and support for democratic parties, the voting age for European and local elections has been lowered to the age of 16 in many German Länder. The “Jugend in Deutschland” (Youth in Germany) study presented at the beginning of May has cast initial doubt on this thesis. According to the study, more and more young people under 30 are tending to vote for the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) – a trend that can be measured not only in Germany but in many European countries. However, no empirical study has yet been able to prove the connection between voting experience and voting preference, so that the consequences of lowering the voting age have been answered rather speculatively.

In a new study, Professor Dr. Thomas König, holder of the Chair of Political Science, European Politics, at the University of Mannheim, and his colleague Stefan Eschenwecker have now succeeded for the first time in demonstrating a causal relationship between electoral experience and the voting behavior of young voters. In the Europe-wide study on the 2019 European elections with almost 45,000 respondents, the authors analyzed the voting behavior of 3,340 young voters. They differentiated between first-time and second-time voters, i.e., young voters who voted for the first or second time. Compared to older voters, young voters have higher expectations of the consequences of their voting act, so that positive or negative experiences are more likely to have an impact on their future democratic behavior.

The results clearly show that both groups differ in terms of their voting experience and that the more experienced group of second-time voters has a significantly different voting preference: young voters with voting experience are on average 11 percent more likely to vote for a populist party than young voters voting for the first time. Voting experience thus leans more clearly to the right than in the comparable age group, while no effect is discernible in older age groups with even more voting experience.

“There are many good reasons to lower the voting age and introduce young people to democratic behavior,” König says. “However, we should not be guided by speculation but by

evidence-based insights.” A higher voter turnout therefore does not necessarily strengthen democracy by producing a well-informed and pro-democratic electorate. What seems more important is whether the expectations of the electorate are met. If this is not the case, populist parties could benefit from the lowering of the voting age in the upcoming 2024 elections compared to 2019.

To be able to determine the effect of voting experience, the study first identified the two voter groups using their voting age to check the turnout of the “experienced” group of second-time voters. In a second step, experience from other elections and attitudes towards socio-political issues and democracy were controlled for to determine the clear effect of electoral experience on voting for a populist or democratic party.

Interestingly, populist attitudes do not play a role in the increased intention of experienced young voters to vote for populist parties. Obviously, the reasons for their support of populist parties lie deeper and can probably be traced back to their expectations being disappointed after participating in an election, according to the authors.

The study is available [here](#) as *working paper*.

König, T., Eschenwecker, S. *The transformative implications of Electoral Participation for the Vote Choice of Populist Parties*. Political Science Research and Methods (xxx).

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