



The Shadow Elections – what are they?

A handbook based on the Estonian, Danish and Finnish experience

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Introduction

The Shadow Elections handbook is an informational booklet created by the Shadow Elections 2011 team in cooperation with the Estonian Youth Council office. Input was also gathered from the Danish Youth Council (DUF) and the Finnish Youth Council (Allianssi). These two organizations have been the main role models for the Estonian Shadow Elections both in 2009 and 2011.

This booklet does not analyse the processes nor the results of the elections in-depth, it is created mainly to inform those who have never participated in the project of Shadow Elections about the essence and the various experiences of the project.

We hope the readers of this booklet will find the three success stories inspiring and will either start the project (in countries where Shadow Elections have not yet been organized) or come participate in an already running project. It is very important to spread the word and educate the young people about their possibilities in the society.

With all the best wishes,

The office and Shadow Elections team at ENL



A foreword from the European Youth Forum (YFJ)

Vote at 16

A European Debate

The debate around lowering the voting age to the age of 16 is crucial for Europe today. European society is subject to constant change, evolution and debates that bring new challenges, needs and opportunities, especially for young people. These changes need a common - pan-European, cross-sectoral, intercultural and intergenerational – sustainable democratic response.

The key message put forward by the European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations is that youth must be taken seriously and be offered real influence in order to strengthen our democracy in Europe – therefore the YFJ is calling for Lowering the voting age to the age of 16.

With the unanimous adoption of the Resolution on lowering the voting age to the age of 16 by the Council of Members in 2006, the Youth Forum has the mandate to advocate for lowering the electoral age and coordinate the efforts of participatory youth organisations all over Europe in this realm. The bases of this efforts are the arguments developed by several working and expert groups and the findings of studies and surveys on vote at 16, gathered in cooperation with young people from all over Europe:

- **RIGHT vs RESPONSIBILITY:** In most countries young people below the age of 18 pay taxes when they get a job and can be convicted. At the same time they are not allowed to vote at elections. This injustice needs to be tackled - young people should have rights that fit their duties.
- **DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION:** Studies show the importance of being socialised in a culture of democratic participation from an early age¹, outlining the correlation between early and life long participation and commitment. ²
- **DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE:** In general life expectancy is increasing and the proportion of young people in the population is declining. Therefore it is obviously that there is a high need to improve intergenerational dialogue and lowering the voting age would contribute to maintaining a demographic balance between generations.
- **MATURITY:** 16 year old European Citizens are mature enough to participate in the political decision-making process, by casting their vote for legal parties of their choice.

It is also crucial to elaborate on the needed measures to accompany vote at 16.

¹ 0057-10 YFJ Policy Paper on Democracy and Youth Organisations

² Kozeluh, Ulrike; Vienna (2009), Post election study - Austrian Elections 2008 – First time voters aged between 16-18. Vienna: SORA (Institute for Social Research and Analysis, the Institute for Strategic Analysis) and Franklin, Mark N. (2003), The Generational Basis of Turnout Decline in Established Democracies. Durban: Trinity College Connecticut and University of Amsterdam



Building on these arguments and success in Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Slovenia participatory youth organisations in Europe and young people themselves will continue to lead the dialogue on and campaign for lowering the voting age. Depending on the national context active National Youth Councils in Denmark, Ireland, UK, Catalonia, Finland, Estonia, Moldova and beyond, will continue to develop knowledge, hold dialogue with political parties, researchers, educational multipliers, media and other stakeholders, run shadow elections and organise seminars, debates and conferences, until the right for 16 years old to participate in local, regional, national and European democratic elections is guaranteed.

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is an independent, democratic, youth-led platform, representing about 100 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations from across Europe. The YFJ works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives, by representing and advocating their needs and interests and those of their organisations towards the European Institutions, the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

The Danish trial elections 2009

In 2009 the 16 – 17 year olds in 31 Danish municipalities were given the opportunity to vote in a trial election parallel to the local municipality elections. The trial election was set up by the Danish Youth Council in cooperation with the organization Local Government Denmark. The project was first and foremost initiated as a 'democracy project' to raise political awareness among the 16 – 17 year olds in the participating municipalities and providing the participating schools with a solid frame to conduct the democracy education. Also lobbying of lowering the suffrage age from 18 to 16 years, which is a key issue for the Danish Youth Council, played a role in the Council's engagement to the project.

The trial election was initiated as a pilot project between the municipality of Koege, the Danish Youth Council and Local Government Denmark. Due to political interest and general awareness to the issue of involving young people in local politics the project expanded to involve 31 of Denmark's 98 municipalities.

Planning the project was basically creating a concept focusing on three topics:

- 1) developing materials such as pamphlets
- 2) designing an election system
- 3) forming a network to share knowledge and information.

The election also faced challenges in terms of getting all schools equally involved and committed to the project. There were many reasons to the different approaches among the participating schools; not all schools shared the same resources and some schools only had a small minority of students actually being able to participate in the election; e.g. if the student lived in a municipality not offering the election.

Another challenge was the fact that the election was a trial election – hence meaning that the votes did not count for real. Obviously that matters when you decide whether to vote or not.

A lot can be learned from the Danish trial elections. The elections clearly had an impact on the 16 – 17 year olds; a lot of voters took part in political debates and were engaged in political discussions.

Also the importance of the schools must be stressed – the commitments of the schools are invaluable when making a trial election. The most successful elections, in terms of voting percentages, were elections that took place during school time compared to elections where the students voted after school.

The trial election has formed a solid base wherefrom the Danish Youth Council will work for the establishment of a national Danish school election like the Swedish and Norwegian school elections.

Conclusively it must be stated that the trial election has been a success; over 50.000 16 – 17 year olds engaged in lots of political debates, the election created massive media attention being mentioned almost 2000 times in Danish media and also causing a political focus on the youth.



The Finnish (Allianssi) Experience



The Finnish Shadow Election experience

The aims of the Finnish Shadow elections were to:

- Activate young people to vote in the parliamentary election
- Offer information about the election and candidates understandably
- Improve the cooperation with political youth organizations and schools
- Increase especially vocational school students knowledge, interest and skills on active citizenship
- Highlight themes concerning young people in public discussion

Finland has had shadow elections several times already (since the 1990's) and it is a well planned concept, that is already known by the schools and media. Project papers were written over a year before the elections and the project secretary started to work a year before the elections.

The Shadow elections are targeted especially for young people up from 13 years, i.e. junior high school students, upper secondary school students, vocational school students.

First-time voters were considered a challenging target group, since many of first-time voters do not study. Another challenging target group were vocational school students, since they are passive in social matters. Therefore these two groups were given special attention when planning the targeting.

The project consists of Valtikka-tour, candidate panels, shadow election, information campaign and web-based Candidate matcher.

The course of the shadow-elections:

- schools sign up for the shadow election
- schools may decide the date of their election freely between 21.3. - 8.4.2011
- results are delivered to Allianssi
- Allianssi gathers national results and publishes them before the actual parliamentary election (12.4.2011)
- point is to get media visibility for youth matters before the actual election and make acting in democratic system natural for young people
- materials: instructions and other usable material for schools, vote calculating software

Brief description of the biggest challenges:

- Biggest challenge was to get schools to participate. We had over 300 schools from all over Finland, but this is over 100 less than last time – which was also 100 less than the elections in 2003. There is an alarming tendency, that schools are not interested and not participating. This is something, we have to take into considerations seriously!

How will they continue?

- We will learn again from these experiences and improve our concept. I think the biggest changes have to make in marketing, in order to get schools activated again.
- The organizers were happy with the good media coverage for the shadow elections – they reached many front pages and TV news, so they will try to capitalize on that.



The Estonian (ENL) Experience

The Shadow Elections in Estonia

In 2009, the Estonian Youth Council arranged the first Shadow Elections, preceding the local municipality elections. The idea for the Shadow Elections came while working on a youth participation and the 'participation subway' projects, with inspiration from our Finnish partners, Allianssi.

In cooperation with the Tartu Youth Council young people from the age of 14 were given a chance to cast a vote for their favourite candidate in Tallinn and Tartu. A ballot election was conducted with Shadow Election offices set up in various schools in Tartu, meanwhile a Shadow Election bus rode around Tallinn. In Tartu the participation reached 42%, yet the project failed in Tallinn mainly due to the city government not believing the Shadow Elections were politically unbiased and thus banning Shadow Elections from schools.

The next time around, in 2011 when the Parliament was elected, we had learned many lessons from the previous attempt.

We knew that:

- Young people are capable and interested
- Young people need more information
- Schools have the key role in giving civic education
- Society is sometimes skeptical, even against such initiatives
- There are several problems, stereotypes, accusations for ENL being incompetent and politically manipulated

We took care that the project would be funded and partnered by a wide variety of institutions, that we would have a strong apolitical patron, in addition we attracted different pressure groups and organizations to the preparatory phase of the project. We also communicated with the youth cells in political parties, who helped spread the idea of Shadow Elections in their respective parties. Furthermore, with every announcement we emphasized that the project's idea is civic education, not the spread of party politics.

In 2011 we managed to avoid resentment from each and every party, which made holding the Shadow Elections substantially easier. Yet we had to face the lack of interest from school principals, which we considered to be the greatest challenge.

In 2009 the elections were held only in Tallinn and Tartu, but in 2011 the scope was broader – Shadow Elections were held nationwide. Since it is very difficult to hold a ballot election nationwide, we decided to go with e-voting. The rules and principles of e-voting were exactly the same as they were for the rest of the country during the actual voting. Unlike the last time, in 2011 over 50 debates were held across Estonia, where candidates and young people met. We also had a competition for making political advertising, where more than 100 young people participated. In addition we held many simulations about forming political opinions and took part of every fair, conference and youth organization meeting to spread information about the Shadow Elections. Despite the hard work the voting percentage of the 14-17 age group was only 5,5%. For the project leaders, the greatest win was knowing that during the second Shadow Elections more than 10 000 Estonian young people were affected by the elections.

The results were not considered a part of the actual voting, yet they were published widely. The purpose of the Shadow Elections was to give the young people a chance to get in touch with what was going on in the government and give their contribution to make the future voters more knowledgeable





about their votes, and to increase civic activity overall. Through a relatively high voter turnout we can bust the myth of the youth being „depraved“ and never doing anything useful.

The average young person does care about what is happening around them, especially in their locality. The priority should be giving the youth simple, yet attractive ways of participating at their local centres. Bringing out their political preference was a secondary goal.

With the shadow elections we wished to raise the youth's civic activity. During the course of our project the young people get the courage to become an active citizen, learn what is really going on in the country, become more aware, helpful and involved, be it on a local, national or international level.

Estonian Youth Council is an umbrella organization established in 2002 and unites 58 youth organizations throughout Estonia. ENL promotes cooperation between youth associations and active participation of young people in society. ENL is working for recognition and participation of young people.



Useful links

Below You can find links to all parties involved

Estonian National Youth Council (ENL) – <http://www.enl.ee>

Finnish Youth Cooperation (Allianssi) – <http://www.alli.fi>

Danish Youth Council (DUF) – <http://www.duf.dk>

European Youth Forum (YFJ) – <http://www.youthforum.org>