Young people as voters

Voting age limit

Since 1981, every Belgian from 18 years of age has the right to vote at all levels, including for the - European Parliament elections. Belgium is one of the few countries where voting is compulsory. A first unauthorized abstention is punished with a reprimand or a fine of 40 to 80 euros, in the case of repetition, the fine is 80 to 200 euros. Belgian citizens are automatically registered in the electoral polls. However, the Belgian citizens are not required to cast a vote on a list or a candidate. Belgians can vote blank or invalid.

On February 20, 2004 the House of Representatives decided to also give voting rights to non-EU citizens in municipal elections. Migrants residing 5 years or more in Belgium, are eligible to vote in municipal elections.

Imminent plans to lower the voting age limit

The lowering of the voting age is strongly debated in Flanders (See 5.10 Current Debates).

Special provisions for young people

There are no special provisions for young people in particular, but there exist a general legislation for persons who cannot attend the elections. For instance, in the following situations persons can vote by proxy (meaning that this person can delegate his or her voting power to a representative, to enable a vote in absence):

- students for study reasons (e.g. because of exams or studies abroad)
- voters who are unable to go to the elections because of illness or disabilities
• persons who are abroad for professional or official business or who have to work at the moment of elections
• persons who are staying in jail or in a closed institution at the time of elections
• voters who for reasons relating to their belief are not able to go to the elections

Anyone who wishes to vote by proxy for the above reasons must prove the need with a written proof or authorisation from an accredited body (e.g. an educational institution in the case of exams or studies abroad, a doctor in the case of illness ...).

The turnout of young people

About 90 percent of the population takes part in the elections. In the elections of 2019, 92,16% of the (automatically) registered voters took part in the regional elections (Flemish parliament) and 90,41% in the European elections (Flemish districts). Age-specific information about voter turnout is not available.

Since voting is compulsory, it makes however not so much sense to look at voter turnout in Belgium since it cannot be interpreted as an expression of political interest (Vanhoutte, 2009). The intention to cast a valid vote is often used instead, since people are not obliged to actually cast a vote, they can also decide not to vote, by voting blank or invalid. In 2019 86,04% of the voters casted a valid vote for the regional elections of the Flemish Parliament. Because the ballots are anonymous, the proportion of valid votes according to age can only be measured by means of surveys.

A post-electoral study on the Flemish population about their voting behaviour in the elections for the House of representatives in 2014 indicated that invalid voting behaviour (not attending the elections, vote blanco or invalid) is the lowest among the youngest age groups (Abts, Swyngedouw & Meuleman, 2015). Invalid voting behaviour is significantly lower in the age group 18 to 24 year old: while in general 13,7% over the Flemish population at voting age casts an invalid vote, this is only 5,8% among the 18 to 24 year olds (percentages for the other age groups: 14,6% for age group 25-34; 19,4% for age group 35-44; 16,0% for age group 45-54; 17% for age group 55-64; 27,1% for age 65-100).

In a representative survey of young people (age 14-25, n=1326) in Flanders, called the Youth Monitor, carried out by the Youth Research Platform (jeugdonderzoekplatform [1]; analyses on political behaviour are also reported in Spruyt, Mastari & Van Droogenbroeck, 2018) in 2018 54,8% of the respondents indicated that they would turn out a vote if voting would not be compulsory. The intention to bring out a vote in case of non-mandatory voting increases by age (Spruyt & Van Droogenbroeck, 2014): 41,8% of the adolescents who are 14-15 year old would cast a vote, when young people reach the voting age (age group 18 to 19 year old) this is already 56,6% and the intention to vote augments further until the age of 24-25 where not less than 65,2% of the respondents indicate that they would vote even it voting wouldn’t be compulsory. When asked for which party they would cast a vote if there were be elections for the House of Representatives the next day, 66,7% would bring out a valid vote, 17,3% would vote blanco or invalid and 16% indicates that they would not go to vote (although it is compulsory). Again there are strong differences according to age. The youngest age group (14-15) who are not yet at voting age indicate significantly less than the other age groups that they would cast a valid vote (48,6%). At the age of 18-19 year 68,1% would cast a valid vote and at the age of 24-25 even 81,2% would cast a valid vote.
Young people as political representatives

Young people as members of political parties

The most recent survey data indicate that the membership of political parties in Flanders fluctuates around 5% (Bral et al., 2011). This survey data can be compared with the member numbers reported by the parties themselves. The self-reported member numbers clearly indicate a decrease in the number of party members in Flanders since the late 1980s: Approximately 373,000 members in 1987 to 214,000 in 2008 (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2010), but due to the success of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA- this number has increased slightly in the period 2009 to 2014 (Hooghe & Boonen, 2014). In 2012, the Flemish political parties counted together nearly 240.894 members. However, in 2017 this number dropped again to 217.679. Disposed relative to the population this is about 4% of the respondents aged 18 and older.

Membership of political parties (including youth divisions) increases with age. A representative survey on participation (participatiesurvey [2]) which was carried out in 2014 among 3965 Flemish people aged 14 to 85, indicates that 4,7% of the Flemish population is a member of a political party. Among the youngest age group 14 to 18 only 0,4% is a member of a political party. Among the young who have already reached the voting age (19 to 30 year olds) 3,1% is member of a political party or a political youth organisation.

Young people as candidates in federal/national, regional, local and European elections

For the Belgian and Flemish elections, the age limits for standing as a candidate are lower than for the European elections To be able to stand as a candidate one has to have reached the following ages at the day of the elections:

- European Parliament : 21
- House of Representatives (Belgium): 18
- Regional, provincial and municipal elections in Flanders: 18

There are no quota of seats reserved for young people and there exist no special provisions to facilitate young people to stand as political candidate.

Young people as elected candidates

The average age of the Flemish elected representatives for the House of Representatives at the time of the elections in 2019 was 44,2 years (Put & Maddens, 2019). The male elected representatives are on average 2,1 years older than their female colleagues. Groen, the green party, is by far the youngest Flemish faction in the House of Representatives with an average age of 40,1 years. The average age of the Flemish elected representatives dropped over the past 27 years by 2,7 years (Put & Maddens, 2019). In 1987 the average elected was 47 years old. Especially between 1995 and 2007 there was a clear trend for rejuvenation; since 2007 this trend seemed to stagnate. However in 2019 we notice again a rejuvenation (from 45 in 2014 to 44,2 in 2019). This gradual decline in the age can be strongly attributed to the elected females. There is a striking curvilinear pattern in the age of female elected representatives: between 1995 and 2007, a thorough rejuvenation took place, but in 2010 and 2014 the group of female elected became gradually older.

The average age of the members of the Flemish Parliament is 45 in 2019. 6,5% (or 8 of the 124 elected) of the parliamentarians were younger than 31 years old at the moment of the elections in 2019, the youngest member was 21. With regard to the European Parliament the youngest of the
representatives of the Flemish Community was born in 1980.