

**" PROMOTING THE VOTE AMONGST FIRST TIME VOTERS:
PREVENTING FUTURE DECREASINGS OF TURN OUT?"
THE SPANISH CASE STUDY.**

1. - YOUTH AND TURN OUT IN SPAIN.

1.1 Voting age.

Spanish citizens acquire the capacity to vote on attaining 18 years of age, and are automatically included on the electoral census lists. Those who have attained 17 years of age are included on an attached list, so that they can vote if they have reached 18 years on polling day.

1.2 2002 Spanish Youth Institute survey on values and attitudes of young people.

The Spanish Youth Institute in 2002 made a survey on values and attitudes of the young people aged 15 to 29 years old. This survey pointed out that Spanish youth were not quite interested in politics.

Only a 4% considered politics as a topic of their concern. 43% of the young people asked said that politics were of little importance in their lives and for 33% politics were not important at all. Besides this, 98% of the young people that participated in the survey said that they had never joined nor planned to join a political party.

1.3 2003 – electoral year - Center for Sociologic Research survey on Young people, constitution and political culture.

In may 25 2003 local and regional elections were called in Spain. Two months later the Center for Sociologic Research made a survey on Young people, constitution and political culture that showed some interesting figures: 6.3 % of the 15 to 29 years old youngsters answered that were very much interested in politics, 25.9 % considered that they were quite interested, 45% said that they were interested very little, and 21% nothing at all.

The general perception of politics in an election year, 2003, seemed to have improved compared to the perception in a non-electoral year as the 2002 was.

The Center for Sociologic Research also asked, “ If an election is called, what do you think you should do?” 58.9% expressed that voting is a moral obligation in any democracy and that one should always vote. 30.9 % affirmed that electors should only vote when the different voting options are appealing, and 8% considered that it is possible to live in a democracy without ever going to the polling station in order to vote.

First voters were asked first if they knew in detail the political parties platforms and electoral promises: only 13.6 of them knew them well, 56% scarcely knew some of the proposals made by political parties and 29% knew almost nothing of those platforms. This point is relevant because first voters were questioned about how much the platform of a political party could influence their voting choice: 34% answered that the promises made by political parties were quite influencing for them and 33% manifested that that influence was very weak on them.

When asked about their participation on the recent elections of may 25 2003 **73.7% said that they had gone to the polling station to vote**; 11% did not go to vote but would have liked to do so, and 13% had rather liked not to vote.

As regards first voters and political parties electoral campaigns for the local and regional elections of may 25 2003, only 11% followed these campaigns with much interest, and **more than 41% were believed that political parties’ propaganda had never been useful for them when choosing which party to vote for.**

35% of the young voters asked had voted to left winged parties.

1.4 Spanish Youth turn out analysis.

1.4.1 The general trend of decreasing turn out in General Elections.

Spain, compared with the other EU countries, is the fourth state in which the difference between the electoral turn out of young people and that of adults is bigger.

The general turn out percentage is roughly 70%. The average Spanish voter is aged 30 to 50 years old. This group, sociologist Enrique Montoliú says, represents the years of highest birth rates of the XX century, and right now they are the most active population, politically and sociologically speaking. They participate the most and abstentionism is very low in this group aged 30 to 50.

This group of people, 12.399.542, is the most numerous amongst all electors and for the General Elections March 14 2004 it increased its number in 579.633 if we compare it with the General Elections of the year 2000.

1.4.2 An apparent turning point: turn out increase at the General Elections March 14 2004.

The March 14 general elections' electorate was the oldest one of the Spanish democracy, because even though almost 2 million **18 year old voters could vote for the first time in a general election**, the total amount of voters **aged 18 to 29 years old decreased in 730.556 electors** compared to the last General Elections held in 2000.

The repercussion of this fact in the electoral results is usually considered to be minor because the young people and the old people are the group of the electorate with more abstentions.

According to the **information given by the Spanish Youth Institute about electoral turn out and youngsters**, during the last years the decrease of this turn out has been remarkable: it represented a difference of 15% compared to the adults turn out in the General Elections of the year 2000.

On the other hand, the percentage of active abstention, the attitude of those that expressly show that they have not voted because they did not want to do so, increased from a 13% in the General Elections of the year 1996 to the 20% in the 2000 Elections, more than twice the increase of active abstention of the adults.

This notwithstanding in the General Elections of March 14 2004, the turn out stopped decreasing and this was both because many apathic adult voters went to vote, and, of course, because first voters played a relevant role.

The terrorist attack of Atocha transformed Spain's political landscape three days before general elections. As soon as the attacks were made public all of the political parties decided to end the electoral campaign and a national three-day period of mourning was declared across the country. **First voters participated in the massive demonstrations against the attack that took place all over the country.**

The participation rate was particularly high at 77.21% i.e. seven points more than during the previous election on 12th March 2000. This high participation rate was to the Socialist's advantage. We should indicate that nearly 2,000,000 young people were called to vote for the first time during these general elections; **the first-time voters possibly tilted the balance** in favor of the Socialists.

1.4.3 European Parliament Elections.

But in this year, besides the General Elections march 14 2004, the European Parliament elections took place. From the last EP elections held in Spain in June of the year 1999, 2.474.403 new electors were able to vote in order to choose their representatives in Europe. But the electoral exhaust altogether with the traditional lower turn out in EP elections, brought out instead of a 70% of turn out of 45,14%: that is, more than 54% of the electorate did not vote.

Political parties in their campaigns had appealed to the young voters to go to the polling stations as massively as they had done in the General Elections.

2.- INSTITUTIONAL CAMPAIGNS OF THE SPANISH ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODY: THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR.

2.1 Institutional campaigns legislation in force: What the Ministry of Interior cannot do.

In the Section dedicated to the General rules about the electoral campaign, Article 50 of the current Spanish Electoral Law establishes that “ the authorities that had called for an electoral process can undertake an institutional campaign during the electoral period in order to inform citizens about the election day, the voting procedures and the requirements and different steps to be taken when voting by mail. This so called institutional campaign cannot influence politically the electorate. Institutional campaigns have to be diffused through free spots offered by the public social communication media of the territory linked to the election called.

The Spanish Central Electoral Committee, in charge of the tasks of control and supervision of the electoral process, according to article 50 of the Electoral Law, establishes that article 50 of the Electoral Law does not allow the government to make institutional campaigns in order to promote voting, because abstention is a legitimate option.

Thus, the Ministry of Interior cannot create campaigns promoting the vote amongst the electorate in general, or campaigns fostering participation specifically addressed to young voters.

But the Ministry of Interior, through the Deputy Directorate General of Internal Policy and Electoral Processes, is empowered to assume the co-ordination of the actions undertaken on electoral issues, as well as the international representation of the Ministry of Interior in its electoral co-operation activities.

Thanks to this empowerment and the kind invitation of the ACEEEO, Orsolya Naggy and Kinga, to participate in the seminar devoted to the WWW.FIRSTVOTER.EU project – Budapest, 28 April, 2 may 2004 – the Ministry of Interior organized the Spanish youth delegation in co-operation with the Spanish Youth Council.

The exchange of experiences on the methods and campaigns used in the field of first time voter information and voter education in the different countries was very fruitful and established a basis for the future creation of a web-based informative forum for the widening of knowledge among the youths of Europe around the importance of electoral participation in the form of voting.

3.- CAMPAIGNS ALREADY DONE IN SPAIN TO FOSTER FIRSTVOTERS' AND YOUNG VOTERS' PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS.

3.1 Autonomous Regions. (Comunidades Autónomas).

According to the First Additional Disposition of the Electoral Law, that article 50 is not directly applicable to the Elections of the Legislative Assemblies of the Autonomous Communities, and, therefore, Autonomous Communities' electoral laws can make

reference to the possibility of making campaigns to foster electoral participation, without interfering with the voters' orientation of the vote.

The 1978 Spanish constitution established regional governments and a process of profound political decentralization. Seventeen autonomous regions were formed. Each region has its own cultural, socioeconomic, and historical identity, some regions (Catalonia, the Basque country, and Galicia) have their own languages, and all of them have Legislative Assemblies and can approve laws on electoral matters for the election of the members of these Assemblies.

I.e. The Autonomous Regions of La Rioja and Madrid designed two campaigns to promote participation in the 1999 and 2003 local and regional elections respectively.

3.2 Youth Councils and the promotion of youth participation.

3.2.1 Autonomous Communities Youth Councils.

The different Youth Councils of the 17 Spanish autonomous regions usually promote the vote of the first time voters creating specific campaigns.

I.e. The Youth Council of Aragon for the General Elections campaigns used the motto “Vote. On March 14 it is your say”. The goals of this campaign were:

- To stimulate young people to participate in elections.
- To communicate that voting is a formula for democratic participation and freedom of expression.
- To make understandable that voting is a fundamental way of participation, but not the only one.
- To foster youth associationism.
- To take the first steps in order to create a School for Active Citizenship.

In this campaign, 2500 posters, 20.000 stickers, and 10.000 postal free cards were distributed through schools, youth associations and young people meeting points.

The president of the Youth Council of Valencia in the presentation of the campaign addressed in 2004 to first time voters, that if the fact that young people vote is important, it is even more relevant that those voters participate in the democratic life and not only in elections. Young people have to be able to demand the implementation of authentic youth policies to the politicians.

The vote is not a synonym for participation. The Youth Council of Valencia's campaign did not focus exclusively on promoting participation through the right to vote: young people can also participate by saying they do not want to vote, or by voting blank.

The Youth Council of Extremadura promoted the vote of the young in the local elections of 2003 because one of the biggest problems linked to youngsters voting is apathy. The main idea this Council wanted to give diffusion to was that every citizen, young or adult, is responsible for using its constitutional right to vote.

3.2.2 The Spanish Youth Council – national level public establishment. -

The Spanish Youth Council is a co-ordination platform for youth organizations created by Law in 1983. Its constitution, in December 1984, was the end of a long period starting in 1977 when over 100 Spanish youth organizations decided to set the basis to create the Spanish Youth Council. The main goal was to build an organisation to defend and channel the proposals and demands of youth before the Administration and the civil society.

Currently, the Spanish Youth Council is a Public Establishment as regards financing and legal status – it depends of the Spanish Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and is an independent platform of youth organizations made up of 76 members (Regional Youth Councils from the different Spanish Autonomous Regions, and national youth organisations) which cover a wide variety of ideologies, opinions, goals and beliefs.

The Spanish Youth Council developed a web site www.democraciajoven.org whose motto is “ You have an opinion. Use it to vote”, whose initial goal was to promote youngsters participation in the Local and Regional Elections held on May 25 2003.

But it finally kept on working and became a permanent tool to inform firsttime voters about their role in democracy and to give special support to young people during the General Elections called for March 14 and the EP elections on June 13 2004.

The Spanish Youth Council created, by bringing to life to this web site, a virtual forum about democracy and the young, an instrument to form and inform about the democratic procedures and a place to celebrate the XXV Anniversary of the Spanish Constitution of 1978. **The reason that compelled the Youth Council to have this initiative was, mainly, its concern about the low turn out percentages amongst young people in elections.**

Nowadays in www.democraciajoven.org you can find information about all the elections held in Spain since May 2003, and also general information about voting by mail, blank votes, what does abstention mean. You can also find a chat, a forum, a section called “ Ask the expert” where an University Professor on Political Science will answer any question related with elections and democracy.

The President of the Spanish Youth Council has said that “ it is important that young people get to realize that voting, besides being a constitutional right that had to be fought for in our country, is a huge civic responsibility that allows citizens to choose and to be critic and demanding with the government”.

4.- THE FUTURE: EVENTUAL LEGISLATIVE REFORMS TO ALLOW CENTRAL GOVERNMENT’S CAMPAIGNS TO PROMOTE VOTERS’ PARTICIPATION.

4.1 Central Electoral Committee and the Youth Council campaign.

On June 2 2004, the Central Electoral Committee, accorded that the Spanish Youth Council should stop the electoral campaign addressed to the 8 million youngsters that can vote in the EP elections. This campaign consisted of 300.000 brochures, a video shown at the web site, a spot on the radio and via e mails.

More than 36.000 e mails were sent to e mail addresses of young people aged 18 to 30.

The Director of the European Parliament Office in Spain attended to the inauguration of this campaign and said that fostering the vote was an excellent idea because after the Local, regional and General elections, the electorate was exhausted and this could drastically affect the turn out.

The Secretary of State for the relations with Europe said that the young people’s involvement in this electoral process is fundamental because of its links with the future of the EU: these EP elections were the first ones to be called in the enlarged EU.

This campaign had been reported to the Central Electoral Committee by two political parties that formed a Coalition for the EP elections.

4.2 European Parliament Elections Turn out and the future referendum on the European Constitution.

After the low turnout in the EP elections, and with an eye on the Referendum about the European Constitution that will be called by the Spanish government on February or March 2005, the President of the Government has recently announced that the Electoral law will be modified in order to allow the executive to assume campaigns to foster the vote so that turnout stops decreasing.