

## **Education for First time voters in Hungary**

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Following the trend across the EU, the disinterest for public life, politics and elections is widespread among the young. An exemption were the 2002 parliamentary elections, which were guided by intense campaign activity in a burning hot atmosphere. The participation itself is unlike Belgium not compulsory, so the youngsters have to made aware of the importance of voting.

Exploring the reason for the young peoples disinterest in elections should remain a task for the science of sociology, fact is, that this negative situation is given and something has to be done against it. In our opinion the best cure is to prepare this specific voter group in the right way and the right time, embedded in the standard informational activity.

There many ways of doing so in the international practice. In the USA not only parties but the candidates themselves run their own first voter campaign to get an as heavy poll as possible. There are even specialized companies researching the expected participation level of young voters in the different states as a business activity.

But on the whole, most countries do not have any specific governmental strategy for preparing and informing the young voters.

The national Election Office of Hungary (hereafter: NEO) has many tasks obliged by law, one of them is the informational activity. The NEO has the following duties in this field:

- Public announcements
- Publishing candidates and parties names
- Publishing names of election committee's and offices members
- Training of election officials
- Voter's information free from party bias
- Running election IT services
- Provide information upon citizen's request

The importance of this cannot be underestimated. Hungary is one of the central European countries, which have transformed again or for the first time in their history into western type democracies after decades of a one party system. This historical background in central Europe has is own advantages and disadvantages while fulfilling our tasks. Without real democratic traditions a large number of the

adults has to be introduced with the basic elements of democracy just like the young and made aware of the importance of the power that lies in their votes.

So I'd like to approach the issue of first time voters embedded in the informational activity of the NEO.

The usual way of getting peoples attention are posters and advertisements in the press, bulletins in television broadcast. Beside these basic means the voters get also leaflets containing the most crucial information about he given election by mail. The NEO publishes so called election booklets. Their content covers the whole field of elections. The information given by us ranges from guides for parties, candidates to electoral codes and scientific law analyses. This all is for free. For further enhancement of our activity we run a Election Information Service. Its support center is accessible personally, by mail, by a green number hotline and by e-mail.

In the sign of modern times there is an official website dedicated to elections since the 1997 NATO referendum. It can be seen on [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu) or [www.elections.hu](http://www.elections.hu). The site has undergone many changes from the moderate beginning to the enhanced state it has nowadays, making it the most complex of the available info-tools. Multilingual access was important right from the start, in 2003 the site provided info in almost all of the officially used languages of the EU's old and new members.

However, these are ways of reaching the average voter. There is a NGO in Hungary, the Foundation for Elections", many members of it are Hungary's best legal experts. They have urged us to implement a specific approach to inform first time voters, with heavy emphasis on the internet. There have been previous steps to motivate first time voters. One of these is traditionally to honor them with some symbolic gift when they vote for the first time. The gift itself varies each year, we had medallions, pencils etc. Obviously this is not enough.

Much more useful proved to be the information pack set up for educational institutions. From elementary schools to universities gets the pedagogically adequate background of the given election. The students are introduced with the material in the lessons, mostly embedded in or instead of history lessons.

As I have already mentioned, the reintroducing of democracy is specific to this part of Europe. This has the advantage that most of the democratic institutions are quite new to the whole of the public regardless of age. Making democracy and elections understandable was very successfully implemented by using the cartoon-style posters and leaflets you have seen in the slideshow.

This way of easy understanding was our main goal when we were creating the first voter website. Without any doubt, the previously introduced election website covered all needs of information well structured and in many languages, but for the

youngsters the legal material is too dull, boring and overcomplicated. The first version of the young voters internet focused therefore primarily on vital information, all formulated in as simple and clear texts as possible. This first attempt was nevertheless unsuccessful, mainly because the website was introduced too short before the 2002 parliamentary elections, it did not get enough attention. It became clear, that we have to advertise the site, not only the elections.

But we have gained also positive experience. Internet access in Hungary is below the EU average and at that time, it's quality was also substandard, so we put the content of the first voter site on CD-Rom and distributed it freely for the public. This way many educational institutions without any internet access could install the website off-line.

With all this experience, we introduced major changes in informing young voters at the 2004 EU referendum.

Firstly, we published an election booklet especially designed for the young. The major part of it's content is introducing the EU itself. This phrase, the EU, is widespread in the public. Unfortunately most people and also the young who will have the greatest benefit of it, are not familiar with the institution behind these two letters. To their excuse, "native" EU citizens have also problems in understanding Brussels bureaucracy...

The first voters website was redesigned as well. The content was restructured by election type and the Frequently Asked Question menu received more importance. The average internet user, especially the young one, will never read though endless pages on a glaring screen until he or she finds answers to a question. So it is much better to group the info into such menus, because most of the users are unclear about basic EU knowledge. Moreover, a search engine has been integrated. By typing in the key words, one can find easily all relevant text parts.

The user interface has been simplified too, making it less attractive but in exchange easier to overview. We have to keep in mind, it is an information forum and not some multimedia focused gamesite.

Another change was the heavy promotion of the website. As much governmental websites and major portals as possible were used to put out a link to the first voter web. To enlarge interest further, an on-line EU-Quiz was organized. It consisted of a series of questions about EU and elections, with mobile phones as a first prize. All the answers could be found on the first voter website. This method proved to be very successful, the website got rapidly more and more visitors.

I have to talk about some technical aspects as well. The quantity of internet access in Hungary is quite low, but the quality got to these days even a bit better than the EU average. Approximately 50 percent of the users have fast broadband

connections, the other half old fashioned dial up access by modems. Dial up connections number is luckily decreasing steadily, mainly because of the high phone costs in Hungary. Remaining modem users can visit the page in a simplified mode, without the multimedia content while ADSL users are able to access the full impact and also text to speech conversion. The lastly mentioned feature aims to help deaf citizens, which makes the site practically to the EU's most user friendly election web.

Users can put their remarks in the guestbook feature – much of the changes bases on the feedback by this feature that was present in the first version of the site too.

We can as ourselves, is all that enough to inform first time voters? We hope the answer is yes, nevertheless we don't expect miracles. Enlarging and mobilizing the masses of voters remains a duty of the political parties, we cannot do more than providing impartial information about the given elections parameters, the how and the when. The decision of "who or what" is a matter of politics, of private choice. We do not chase dreams of young people reading electoral codes instead of looking up the weekly cinema shows.

But we can and have to do everything to keep them informed as well as possible about their country's election system, it is them after all, who shape the future by casting their ballots. We have to make them clear, what power lies in their vote so they can influence the nations fate with responsibility.

The first step to this is coming up with the appropriate package of information.

(Closing remarks)