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U18 youth election project

Getting young people into politics

A year of preparation and learning leads up to the U18 elections, a simulated vote nine days ahead of real 'adult' elections, either local or national. The project is designed to generate an interest in politics amongst young people and supplement their political education.

Stepping into politics

The project provides young people from all nationalities and backgrounds with an accessible channel into politics, given that political education in schools is not always sufficient to get them really interested in politics.

U18 began in 1996 at a Berlin youth club in the district of Berlin-Mitte, but now takes place in various locations around the city and across the country. Schools, youth clubs and other organisations connected with young people, such as libraries, can register with the U18 website as a polling station. Mobile polling stations are placed on streets and squares to ensure the project reaches a wide range of young people. As an element of competition, each polling station then designs its own ballot box or booth used at the U18-election, with the best winning a prize after voting has taken place.

Background knowledge

The organisations registered as polling stations and other individuals can access a range of teaching materials available on the U18 website, which are used as a basis for the preparation in the year running up to the election. Throughout this year, young people take part in a range of activities. These include studying manifestos, forming parties, carrying out voluntary and charitable activities and debating with politicians.



U18 provided me with plenty of experiences and opportunities. I got to know other people interested in politics, we created our own political projects together and got in touch with politicians. The best thing about U18 is that it does not exclude anyone – everyone [under 18] can take part no matter their age or background.

Kristin Langen, pupil, Siemens Grammar School, Berlin Zehlendorf

cities in action

July 2013

where: Berlin, Germany
what: cooperation, social affairs
when: 1996+

Many politicians back the project by meeting young people, coordinating tours of the House of Representatives or acting as patrons of the initiative. The project is also supported by the senate department and Berlin's borough offices, by providing rooms, funding and educational materials. A steering group, comprised of representatives from the numerous youth organisations behind the project, is responsible for overseeing its management.

Then, nine days before the real elections, these activities culminate in an election for children and youngsters, which is conducted just like a real ballot vote – the parties and candidates are the same. The registered organisations download ballots from the U18 website and provide a voting booth which, like the real ones, closes at 18:00. Once closed, voters can follow the results projections online and a two-hour election broadcast is also put together by the young people.

A growing success

Since the first polling booth opened in 1996, participation has continued to increase steadily. In 2001, 5,000 young people voted in the U18 elections ahead of the Berlin House of Representatives elections and by 2011 that number had risen to 26,705. A survey carried out to gauge the impact of the project revealed that U18 voters are very interested in political issues and that their decisions are usually based on facts and made more confidently than those without the preliminary education provided by the project.

Interestingly, the results recorded from the U18 elections in 2011 differed somewhat from the real results, with the young people favouring the green party overall, which was placed third in the real elections, where the young people's second choice, the social democratic party gained the most votes.

Support

Financed mainly by the department for education and a number of other organisations*, U18 operated on a budget of €48,461 for the 2011 Berlin House of Representatives election. Some boroughs also allocated funding from their own budgets,

as well as resources such as staff and rooms. Communications services to a value of around €30,000 were also donated to the project, which has received broad coverage in the media. It has received widespread support, locally, nationally and on a European level and was awarded the EUROCITIES prize for participation in 2012. Young people are now preparing for the next round of elections, to the German Bundestag, in September 2013.



When we started to set up the U18-elections in 1996, we wanted to show the public that youngsters and children are very interested in politics and therefore should have a voice. Giving them the opportunity at a young age to get involved in political and public issues feeds their continuing interest in society.



Marcus Lehmann,
founder of the U18 project

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