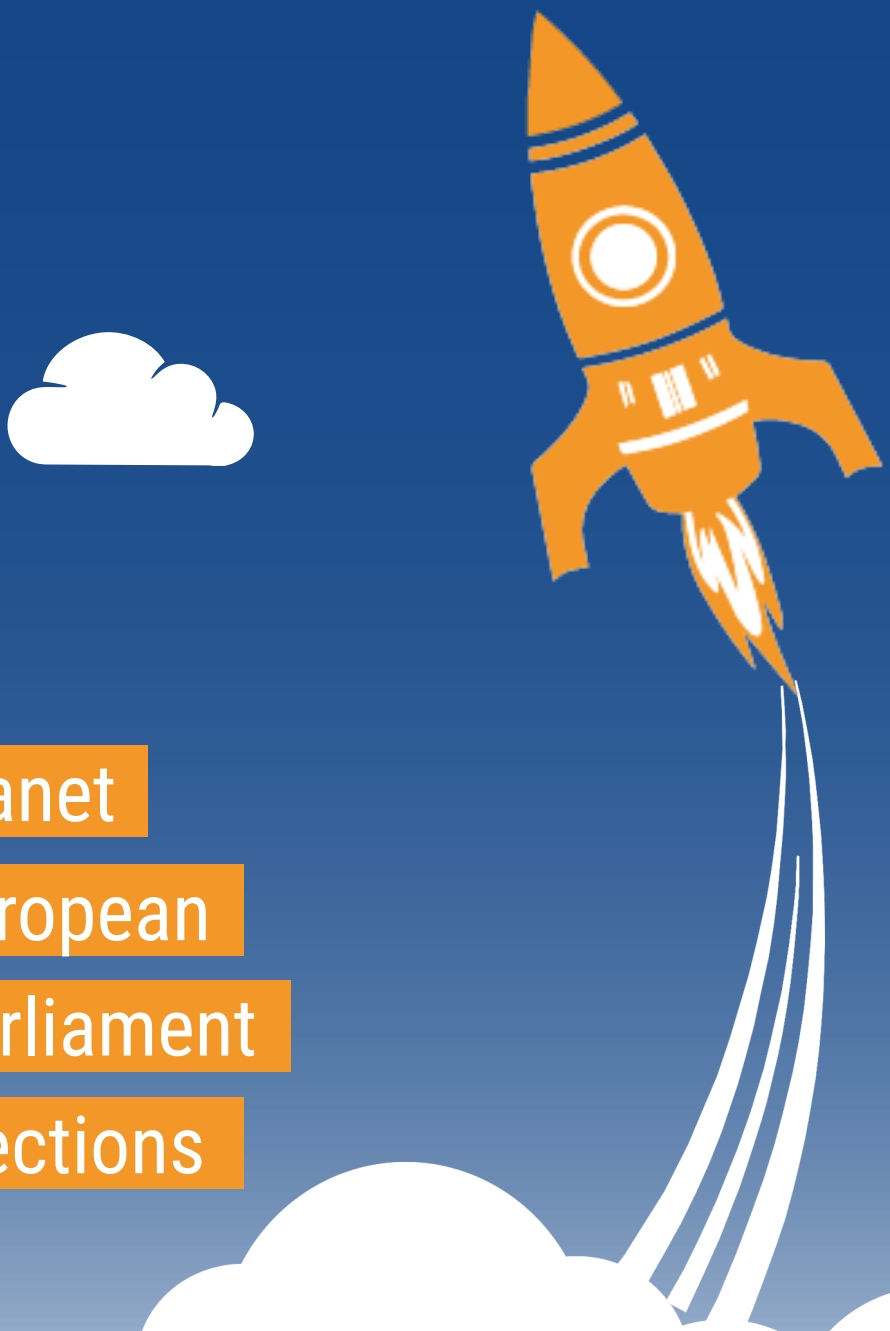
THE SCHOOL STUDENT GUIDE TO THE UNIVERSE OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION



Planet

European

Parliament

Elections

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Introduction

In May 2019 the elections for the European Parliament will take place, however, they are still not accessible to all young people either due to their age or their citizenship status. Moreover, considering low turnouts in many EU countries it seems that interest in the EP elections is low, not only amongst young people, as shown in the turnout drop from an EU average of 61.99% in 1979 to 42.61% in 2014[1]. Reasons, which can vary between lack of knowledge of the EU policy and decision making, lack of understanding of what impact EU has on one's life or on national and local policies. Feeling that the EU is far from you might discourage people from engaging. For some, however, engagement is not possible even if they would like to, due to social, economic and geographical barriers.

People with migrant or refugee status cannot take part in elections, including the EP elections. This excludes them from participation in a process which has a direct impact on their life, very often in a critical aspect of lives such as residency status, access to education and labour market or social rights.

With this guide, we would like to provide some opportunities and give ideas to young people who cannot take part in democratic processes on different levels, and especially on the EU level as the elections are approaching, by suggesting some activities that can be organised to familiarise oneself more with the EU election process or just a general democratic processes that exist. These activities can be adapted and adjusted to feet the needs of the group or to fit to a specific process (eg local elections).

We also believe these activities should not replace opportunities of young people or people with migrant status to actively participate in life, but these examples can provide opportunities which can help understand democratic and participatory processes and can encourage people to take part when possible.

1 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html

Some notes and background reading before we start

Before we start, it's worth taking a look at the EU, its structure and decision-making process through the school students eyes, having a look at our publication "**European School Students Cooperation**", which is the result of one of OBESSU's capacity building activities and is an important background reading, as well as our publication on the **EU and its education policy**. In fact, one of the reasons why the EU is seen as distant from the local level is for sure the lack of information on what the EU really does, who sits in the Parliament, what can the EU actually do and what is just the result of the narrative that we receive from mainstream media.

We truly believe that school students and learners at all ages are perfectly able to take decisions that concern their lives and understand what happens around them when they are given the necessary tools. This is why, since its foundation, OBESSU has produced several toolkits and supported young people in implementing policy and advocacy actions, working already on European Parliament Elections in the past.

Speaking of toolkits, you might want to refer to some other publications we wrote with European school students over the past years:

- **The Manual for School Students**
  This Manual gives an overview on school student participation, giving the tools to local organisations, or even single school students, to set up different structures, activities and actions. It can be interesting in its focus on campaigning, fundraising and engaging with your peers in the context of the European Parliament Elections.

- **EP Elections 2014 Toolkit #1**
  This small toolkit for actions we produced for the EU elections back in 2014 focuses specifically on campaigning for the elections and walks you step by step in the organisation of a campaign.

- **EP Elections 2014 Toolkit #2**
  This other small toolkit will help you preparing, setting up and following up a meeting with a decision maker, politician or candidate to the elections.

- **The All Included toolkit**
  The main focus of this toolkit is the empowerment of young migrants and refugees. In fact, as they are often excluded from voting at any level, they are only passive characters of decision making. With this toolkit, you can learn a bit more about making sure that you involve young migrant and refugee learners in your activities towards the elections, making sure they also have a voice and that you build that voice together, in the real spirit of participation.

What can you do to engage with the elections?

In this section of the toolkit we focus on sharing some possible actions, initiatives or activities you can organise as part of your campaign. You can read more about how to influence decision making processes in the "Floating in Space" chapter of our Manual for School Students referenced above, but for now let's recap.

Before you pick one of the activities we mention hereafter, or decide to adapt one of them, or run a completely different one, we suggest you ask yourself some questions:

- What is the context you are acting in?
- What do you want to achieve?
- Who do you want to target? Who do you want to influence?
- Who do you want to involve in the organisation of your small campaign or action?
- Do you know someone who is already working on this matter? If yes, are you interested in partnering up?
- What means and resources do you already have?
- What means and resources do you have to look for? Do you know someone that can help you in finding them?

Once you have your objectives and analysis of means ready, you can now decide which activity best suits your needs.

EXAMPLE

David, Maria and Sidonia want to organise a debate with a young candidate to the European Parliament to discuss the situation of young migrants and refugees in their school. In fact, many of them are often threatened to be deported and live in a situation of extreme exclusion. They want to push for this candidate that - if she is elected - she will lobby for the right to education regardless of citizenship status. They know that there is a small NGO working on migration in their small village, so they invite them to join actions. Maria, who is a refugee herself, and David, who is the son of migrants, wants to also make sure to involve the rest of migrant and refugee students in their class. Unfortunately, they don't have resources, but they will check with the NGO if they can support. Now that they know the context, which activity will they pick?

To explain some of the activities we give you as inspiration, we also used toolkits from other European organisations, like the **YVote.eu** project by AEGEE, a European student organisations, striving for a democratic, diverse and borderless Europe with several antennas all over Europe, or the **This Time I'm Voting** campaign by the European Parliament.

To organise these activities - particularly those that you build with young migrant and refugees and target to work on the issue of inclusion of displaced youth - you can also ask for our support through the **Seeds for Integration programme**, of which we launched **a specific call** on the participation of migrant and refugee learners in the European elections.

We hope you find the following activities useful, once you have adapted them to your context and the answers to the questions presented above. If you need any support, we would be happy to try help you, so don't hesitate to contact us at **secretariat@obessu.org** and **board@obessu.org**!

Engage with candidates, politicians and voters

Debate with politicians or candidates!

Do you know what candidates or already elected politicians in your country, city or region do for education, young people, immigration or other issues that you care about? Are you unsure who to support or are you unable to vote but want to get to know people who make policies that are having an impact on your life? Organise a debate! How to do so?

You can have a look at the yvote.eu where they explain **how to invite a speaker** or which **discussion formats** you can use.

Find out what your candidate/party works on or will work on!

Sometimes, manifestos or programmes of parties and candidates might not explain what they are planning to do in the field you are interested in and which affects you, such as education or migration.

How can you gather information? Well, there are numerous ways of gathering information but here are a few of them. You can ask your candidate/party directly what they're up to! But, are you unsure how to approach them?

You can try do send an email or a letter as an individual, but try to make a group with your friends/ class/ school and send them a letter to show that more people want answers. You should be able to find contacts on their websites or social media. Most politicians nowadays are quite active on social media, so you can try there!

To give you an idea of how you can form questions or what you can ask, consider the following examples but feel free to adjust them to whatever you want to know. Make sure that the questions are not too long and are understandable. One questions should focus on one topic, do not try to combine too many issues in one question as you could risk getting a partial answer.

SUGGESTIONS

- What are the most important positions on education and youth your party stands for?
- Do you have a position when it comes to school students' rights and social inclusion in education?
- Where does your party stand when it comes to inclusion of immigrants and refugees in education and related activities?
- What does your party propose to foster citizenship education and ensure active participation of school students from local to European level?
- Do you think that Mental Health education should be a part of the national school curricula of member states?

Pledges to the constituency/party/candidate

Do you want to make sure that the candidates you vote for (or you would like to work for) keep their promises? Do you want to keep them accountable? Or you want to talk to them to make sure they add something on their agenda?

One initiative you can take is to discuss this with your candidates and create pledges that they sign to confirm their promise to work on a certain topic.This will create an opportunity for you to present your case as well as have them commit informally to something you can later question, in case they do not deliver.

How do you create a pledge?

1 - Think of areas you want your ideal candidate or a party to commit to. Be realistic, make sure what you are asking for is within their powers. For example, members of the European Parliament might have limited powers in the field of education. If you ask for something that is not within their reach, it is clear that it will not be supported.

2 - Write down the topics and create a few points for each topic which explain your views and what you would like them to commit to. For example:

EXAMPLE

Access to education:

The Candidate will focus on making education accessible for students with migrant and refugee status.
The Candidate will work towards ensuring that free language classes are provided to students with a different mother tongue and different language abilities.

3 - Decide whether you want them to sign individual points of the pledge or the whole document.

4 - Voila, you have the document signed. Now you can follow their work and keep them accountable in case they do not try to accomplish what they initially promised they would try to achieve!

Adopt my vote

Do you feel frustrated about your inability to vote(eg. your age or legal status)? Do you think your opinion is important and want to raise the awareness of policy makers on the repercussions of your lack of participation? “Adopt my vote” campaigns are visibility actions in which a core organiser invites several people to ask someone to “adopt” their vote. Keep in mind that this is a visibility campaign and you can by no means exchange your vote for something with other people. Your aim is to raise awareness of your needs and beliefs which you would be voting for if you could and highlighting how elections and results can impact you, no matter whether you can vote or not and to create a discussion about elections and representation.

To organise this kind of visibility action you need a wide community of supporters and a clear message. Once you have these, you can take inspiration from the following steps and ideas to organise your campaign:

1. Create a message. In this case it could be something as simple as “If only I could vote I would vote for free education for all. But I am only 15”
2. Organise a facebook event or facebook group for your “Adopt my vote” campaign. Make sure to translate “Adopt my vote” in your own language
3. Create a set of designs such as facebook covers, facebook badges for profile pictures, banners and some A4 papers with the slogan and maybe some space for personal thoughts (like speech bubbles)

4. Create targeted message. You can create for example designs and messages targeted at your parents, you relatives, your friends, your local policy makers, general public, your teachers etc. You can adapt your original message to the target group. For example, you can target your parents saying “If only you had me X years before I could vote now and improve education! Adopt my vote and let me participate” or you could target your friends saying “If you didn’t want to vote, do it for me!”.
5. Run the buzz, discuss, share photos of the community of votes to be adopted and votes that have been adopted!

Learn more about elections and structures

Model EU

Do you know how the EU works? Who makes the decisions? What is the role of an MEP? Why should you care about who gets elected? And mainly, do you want to learn about all this in an interactive way in which you can include your peers? How about organising a model EU? Simulations can make you understand processes in a fun way, and having to take a role of someone else can make you reflect on your own thoughts and opinions about the EU, its institutions and its role. If you think like the model EU is something big and inaccessible, do not worry, you do not need 751 participants to cover all MEPs. What you need, how to do it and how to prepare? Have a look at another great **manual from yvote.eu**. Moreover, you can adapt it and make it local, regional or national, whatever fits your needs!

TIP: If you do not want to organise your own model EU but you want to take part, there are many organised across Europe open to participants from everywhere, such as one in **Strasbourg** before the elections this year. You can also have a look at the website of **BETA Europe**, an independent non-profit organisation organising simulations of different European processes.

Shadow elections

Can you, your friends or classmates vote? If your answer is no because of your or the age or your legal status, yet you want to understand how the elections work and you want to show what the group that cannot vote would want and expect from the elections, you can organise shadow elections!

Thanks to shadow elections you do not only familiarize yourself with the election as a process itself, but also with the candidates, their manifestos or depending on what election it is, with the political parties or political situation in your country. Not only you as an organiser, but also everyone who will vote should prepare themselves to make informed decisions.

Your presentation of the results can make people aware of the fact that young people have opinions, they understand their needs and that their vote could have an impact on the results, if their votes were counted in. In the case of a conflicting result compared to the actual election, you can highlight the differences and see why the results do not match. Do the elected candidates work for issues that concern you? Do they support young people, education or immigration?

How to?

Step 1 Establish a group of people that want to carry out the shadow elections.

Step 2 Make sure that the shadow elections are legal and establish some “Electoral rules“

Step 3 Map out where you want the shadow elections to take place, deciding if you want them to be limited to one school or many is very important when you’re deciding the scale of the shadow elections.

Step 4.1 **If you hold elections only in one school**: Establish a school electoral commission (ECO) consisting of neutral delegates in your school.These are the people that are in charge of carrying out the elections, counting the votes and making sure everything is in order, so make sure that they are informed of their role and understand that they should be impartial! People from the ECO should sit in the election room and make sure that the procedures are correct.

Step 4.2 **If you hold elections in more than one school:** What is the difference here? You establish a school ECO for each participating school AND you establish a governing ECO. The responsibilities of the school ECO are the same except that the governing ECO is in charge of counting the votes. People from the ECO should sit in the election room and make sure that the procedures are correct.

Step 5 Choose an accessible election place, people want to be able to vote so it’s your responsibility to make sure that they can! Make sure the place is visible, well indicated and that people won’t have problems entering it (e.g. too many steps).

Step 6 Advertise Advertise Advertise! It’s important that people know when, where and how they can vote.

Step 7 Ballots are a major key, make sure that the ballots are easy to read and contain all the political parties/candidates that are running for the “real” elections in your country.

On Election Day

Step 8 Make sure to establish a room or a booth where people can anonymously vote. Don't forget to check that the voters have everything they need to cast their vote (pens, ballots) as they can't bring other things in the booth and make sure that the ballot box/es is visible outside of the dedicated voting booth.

Step 9 Make sure to keep track on the number of votes that have been casted and the number of people that have voted, consistency is key when it comes to carrying out shadow elections and transparency is as important as in real elections!

Step 10 After a long day of voting, it's important that the ballot box/es are sealed (to avoid sabotaging the elections) and handed over to the school- or governing ECO.

Step 11 Count those votes and see what your fellow young people are rooting for in the upcoming elections!

Optional Step: You want people to take an informed decision, so what do you do? Create space for people to learn! You can carry out activities from this toolkit (e.g. the debates with politicians or candidates) to create space for people to learn more about their political realities.

Optional Step (if there are more than one school taking part): You can award the school, with the highest voter turnout, the "Most Democratic School". This could encourage more schools to take part in your shadow elections!

Some things to keep in mind when carrying out shadow elections:

- Always aim towards making the shadow elections reflect the actual elections
- Make them as accessible as possible
- This is an activity that puts democratic actions into practice, enjoy learning about them!
- Make sure to comply with Data Protection laws in your country and don't disclose any of the personal data people gave consent to use. You should never share the names of those who voted, it is only important to share the numbers and demographic percentages!
- To make your shadow elections as legitimate as possible, try to gather a group of diverse or neutral people
- Try to make the electoral rules as realistic and youth friendly as possible!
- If you want people to bring their identification documents with them, then it's important to inform them ahead!
- You can usually request a fac simile of the voting ballot that will be used in the real elections, that can help you building your own ballot!

Want to know more about how shadow elections are done? You can contact our Member Organisation SÍF to find out more! They've already done them a few times! You can reach them at neminn@neminn.is or browse www.egkys.is to see what they did during municipality and national elections. (Yes, the website is in an Icelandic, but google translate can help you as much as our Member SÍF!)

Join external campaigns

Join the 'This Time I'm Voting' Campaign

The platform **thistimeimvoting.eu** and campaign was launched by the European Parliament in 2018. Thistimeimvoting.eu is a community committed to persuading people to vote in the European elections on 23-26 May 2019. Its main objective is to create a community of supporters, voters, Europeans who are willing to spread the spread the message of participation, engage and bring people to the voting booths, to stand up for the idea of democracy. You can register on their website via **this dedicated link** and become a "recruiter", you can receive invitations to local events or join the team of the campaign. You can also access the campaing's download centre **here** and have a set of ready made campaign materials including social media graphics, posters etc!
bit.ly/thistimeimvotingOBESSU

To engage on a local and national level directly with institutions, you can also contact your European Union National Office and cooperate with them more. You can find a list of offices **here**.

Join us in our social media campaign

If you do no want to plan anything yourself but you want to take some action, you can join us! We are running a small campaign where we will ask candidates, running for the European Parliament elections, to take a picture with #IVoteForSchoolStudentRights which we will ask them to post on social media and we will post it as well. This way, they can show their support for School Students and education in a simple and fun way and finding out who supports our mission can make it easier for us to know where to lobby in the next 5 years! Find more information on www.obessu.org!

- Find a candidate
- Make sure they know who you are, what you are doing and what it is that you are asking them to take part in.
- Ask them if they want to take a picture and this way commit to supporting school student rights and participation of young people in European Politics
- Take a picture and post it on social media (or let them take a picture and ask them to post it on social media with the hashtag #IVoteForSchoolStudentRights

Conclusion

We hope you enjoyed reading this toolkit and will take some actions, with specific regards to school students that do not have the right to vote because of citizenship status or age. Don't forget that these actions are not set in stone, you can change them, mix them, adapt them to your context and you can always do it with our support, contacting us at secretariat@obessu.org

If you decide to work in cooperation with migrant and refugee school students, you can also request some funding to run your activities for the specific Seeds for Integration call on the European Parliament elections. Check out the call on **www.obessu.org** and **www.seedsforintegration.org**!

Good luck with your initiatives!