

Slovenia

Politics is Back: Explaining the Recent Political Re-engagement and Rightward Drift among Slovene Youth

2024



5 KEY POINTS ON THE STATE OF POLITICS AMONG SLOVENE YOUTH

1 While still remaining modest, interest in and subjective knowledge of politics have increased across almost all youth groups between 2018 and 2024. Both interest and knowledge have been especially pronounced among the far-right youth, even in 2018, while the politically unaffiliated, albeit improving, have remained the least interested and knowledgeable.

2 Slovenian youth have become much more politically conscious, realising how to place themselves on the political spectrum with greater clarity since 2018. At the same time, their former asymmetric left-wing alignment has been almost completely reversed and replaced with an asymmetric right-wing alignment. On average, young people in Slovenia today lean centre-right.

3 With some notable exceptions, the left-right youth divide is still characterized by the standard left-right demographic, attitudinal, and normative predictors. Nationalist, chauvinist, and authoritarian youth are more likely to identify with the right, while the more tolerant, economically egalitarian, and environmentally inclined hew to the left. The female gender is also more aligned with the left.

4 A significant gender gap has opened up with respect to certain crucial political attitudes, which was previously non-existent. Overall, boys have become less tolerant, and more chauvinist compared to the girls. This change occurred not because girls became more liberal, but because boys became less so.

5 Certain political issues stereotypically associated with young people are not particularly (or even at all) pronounced among Slovene youth. Fewer than 4 out of 10 support lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, and roughly half support the introduction of e-elections, universal basic income, and the legalisation of cannabis.



Introduction

Quite some time ahead of the EU elections, the Parliament Magazine presciently reported that the “surge in youth turnout in 2019 will likely be repeated in June – but this time it could bolster the far right” (Spirlet, 2024). The byline from a different May report reads, “Across Europe, younger voters are increasingly choosing political parties based on their gender politics – and the right is winning the battle for young men’s votes” (Velázquez, 2024). Politico likewise warned, “It’s not just boomers, young people are voting far right too” (Cokelaere, 2024).

These projections and predictions turned out to have been correct. Actual election results, exit polls, and post-election surveys show the right and far-right gaining ground, especially so amongst the youth. In Germany, for example, “16% of youths voted for the AfD, tripling the party’s share in this demographic” (Pfeifer, 2024). In France, “32 per cent of 18–34 year-olds voted for the RN, more than double the total of the 2019 European election” (Samuel, 2024).

All of these summaries capture the two most salient recent developments in youth politics observed not only across Europe but also in Slovenia specifically. Once depicted as almost completely politically apathetic, the youth have shown clear signs of re-engaging with politics. However, if young people’s political attitudes had usually been thought of as near-unequivocally liberal or even progressive, this too has changed in recent years. Data from several countries in Europe, as well as our own Slovene sample, mostly gesture towards youth, and especially certain sections of young voters, turning rightward. What might be especially concerning is the fact that a significant politics gender gap has opened up, with boys embracing conservative values, while girls are mostly sticking with liberalism.

1st key point: The increase in interest and subjective knowledge of politics

For decades, young people had been reported as being politically apathetic and disillusioned (Zhang, 2022). Both in terms of formal and informal channels of participation, as well as the sheer interest in and knowledge of politics, youth had mostly been seen as sitting on the sidelines of political life. This has been changing, if only modestly, in recent years in countries across the European Union. Slovenia is no different in this regard. As Figure 1 shows, interest in politics has grown in 2024 in virtually every self-identified political group, albeit from a low base. It has risen the most among those who cannot clearly place themselves on the spectrum, although this group also remains the least interested in politics. Otherwise, those identifying with the

far right currently evince the most interest, while the reverse can be said of far-left youth¹.

A similar trend can be observed with respect to the youth’s subjective knowledge about politics. It rose significantly between 2018 and 2024 across the spectrum (including the don’t-knows), but it remains the highest on the far right and the lowest on the far left². Note, however, that subjective knowledge can diverge significantly from more grounded, objective, knowledge. It might thus be more apposite to refer to this item as “political self-confidence”. In any case, these increases notwithstanding, it also remains true that overall and in absolute terms, both interest and knowledge remain relatively modest, below a value of 3, which represents an in-between position. This is probably not surprising in light of the fact that slightly more than 50% of young people say they feel politically alienated (“poorly” or “not at all” represented in politics), and only 13% say the opposite.

Figure 1
Interest in politics across the political spectrum (1–5 scale).



¹ Note also that even though we found both young men and women to have become more interested in politics, the increase is much more pronounced among young men.

² Regression analyses confirm that both interest and subjective knowledge (or self-confidence), by themselves, act as moderately strong predictors of right-wing self-identification.

What explains youth’s re-engagement with politics? It partly has to do with unforeseen yet notable recent events, such as the social upheavals and general negative changes triggered by the Covid pandemic, lockdowns, and school closures, which all helped youth realize the importance of political power and having one’s voice heard. The outbreak in 2022 of a major interstate war on European soil with Russia invading Ukraine, and the late-2023 war between Hamas and Israel, which has already triggered a slew of youth protests and activism, also contributed. However, part of the explanation – the part accounting for the fact that interest in politics is strongest on the right – might have to do with the more structural, slow-moving cultural shifts across societies that had already to an extent been felt before the 2020s. Certain sections of the younger generations are feeling threatened, left behind, excluded, or misunderstood by the progressive normative changes that have been especially prominent, both in society and on social media, since the early 2010s. More will be said about this later in the report.

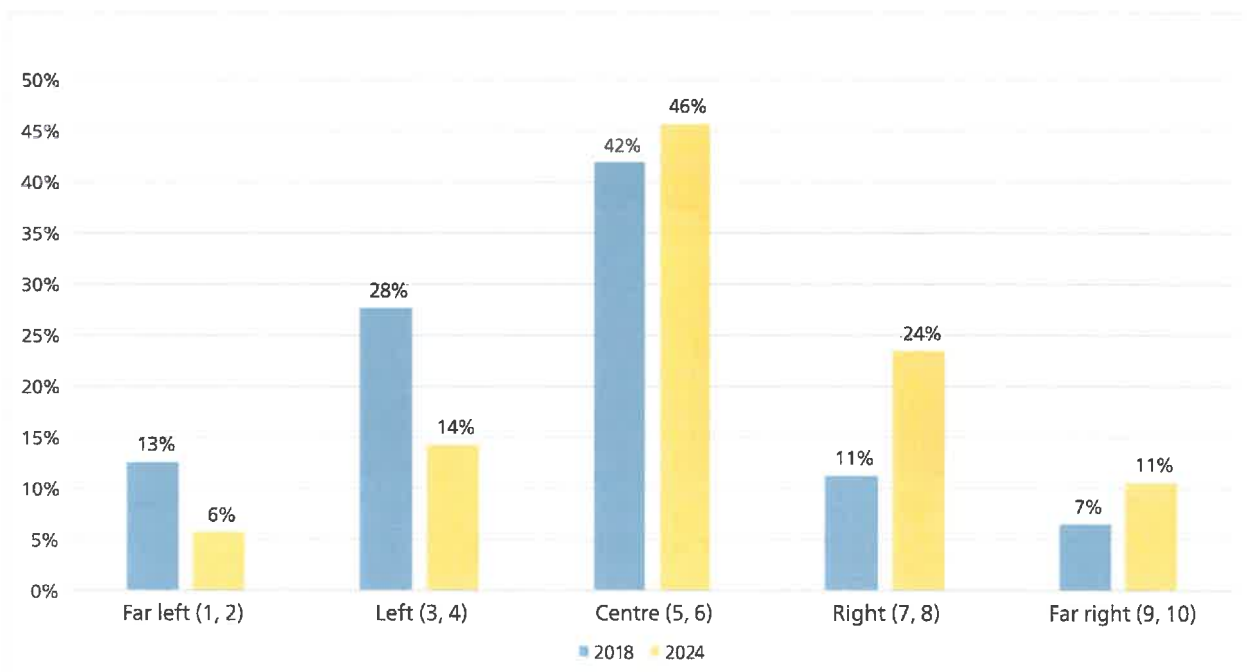
2nd key point: Clearer left-right alignment, and the turn towards the right

Another ostensible failing of youth politics has been the (unclear) left-right self-identification of young people. For instance, in 2018, 43% of Slovene youth were unable to place themselves on the left-right spectrum. As of 2024, however, this has drastically changed, with the share of don’t-knows falling from 43% to 19%, which goes hand-in-hand with the increase in subjective political knowledge. A large majority of young people are now willing and able to politically self-identify.

Interestingly, however, the overall structure of Slovene youth’s political self-identification has also drastically shifted. It is true, as Figure 2 shows, that a large plurality has been of a centrist persuasion both in 2018 and 2024. However, 2018 evinces a clear skew of the

Figure 2
Political orientation of youth, 2018 and 2024.

When people talk about their political beliefs, they mostly speak about left-wing and right-wing. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking? (1–10 scale)



spectrum towards the left. In 2024, this leftward skew is gone and has been replaced by a rightward tilt. Something similar is revealed when comparing means. In 2018, the total sample mean value on a scale from 1 and 10, was 4.8, indicating a slight left-of-centre bias. In 2024, the mean value has increased to 5.9, hinting at a right-of-centre tilt.

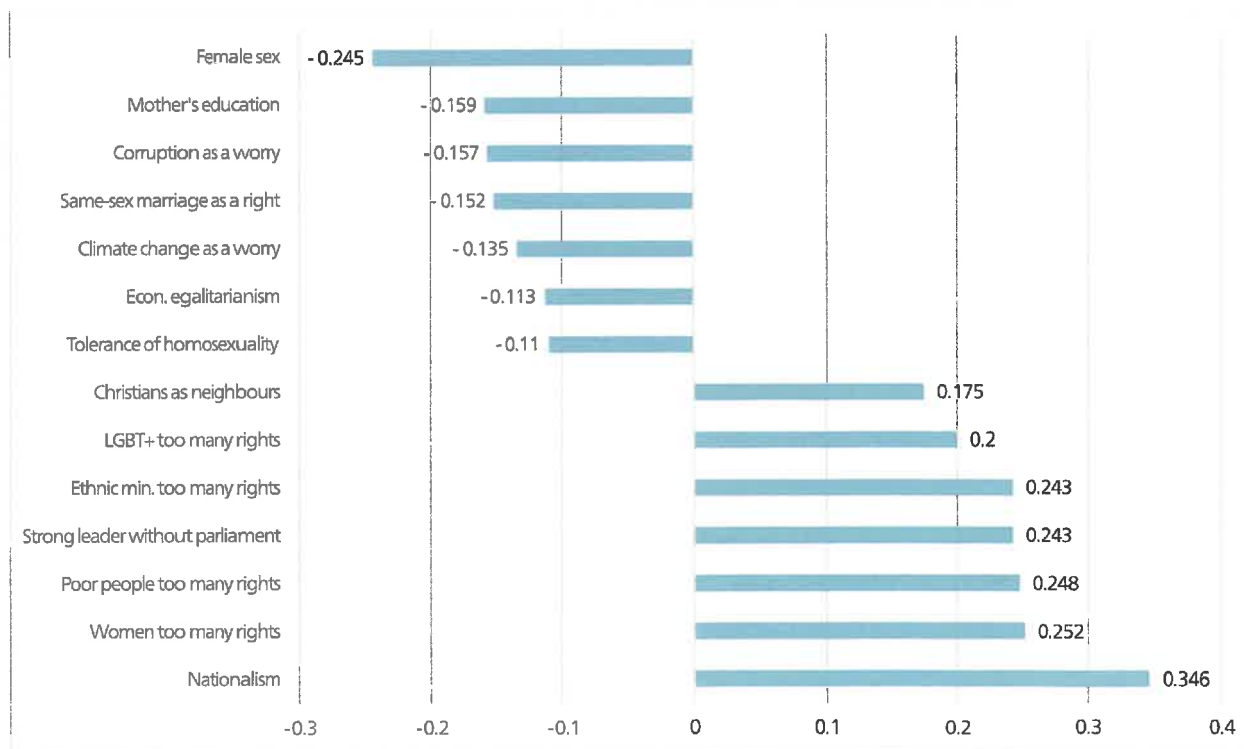
What do these changes mean for young people's support of liberal democracy? In the past, some have worryingly suggested that the youth are becoming increasingly tired of democracy and are therefore turning away from it to instead support illiberal populists bent on destroying it (see, for example, Foa et al., 2020). This seems not to be the case, at least not in Slovenia. None of the three standard measures of attitudinal support for (or against) democracy show any statistically significant difference in mean values between 2018 and 2024³. Comparing the shifts in shares of those either supporting it or opposing it likewise shows virtually no change.

3rd key point: The overall profile of left- and right-wing youth remains mostly unchanged

Traditionally, the left-right divide has been relatively well predicted by a large set of demographic and attitudinal characteristics (Brown and Ernesto, 2008; Furnham and Fenton-O'Creivy). For instance, those belonging to the female sex, residing in urban areas, having a better educational background, seeing economic equality as a strong value, tolerant of homosexuality, believing in and worrying about anthropogenic climate change, trusting of formal institutions, anti-authoritarian in disposition, etc., have been more likely to also self-identify as left-wing.

In our 2024 youth sample, most of these

Figure 3
Predictors of the left-right divide (negative coefficients predict left-wing orientation).



³ The three measures are: "Democracy is a good form of government in general", "Under certain circumstances, dictatorship is a better form of government than democracy", "We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament or elections". Note, however, that the wording of the last measure was slightly changed between 2018 and 2024, so valid comparability is not guaranteed.

predictors turn out to be statistically significant and of small-to-moderate size. Chauvinist attitudes and the female sex, but especially nationalist attitudes, are salient for their predictive strength⁴. However, three complications of the standard model should be noted.

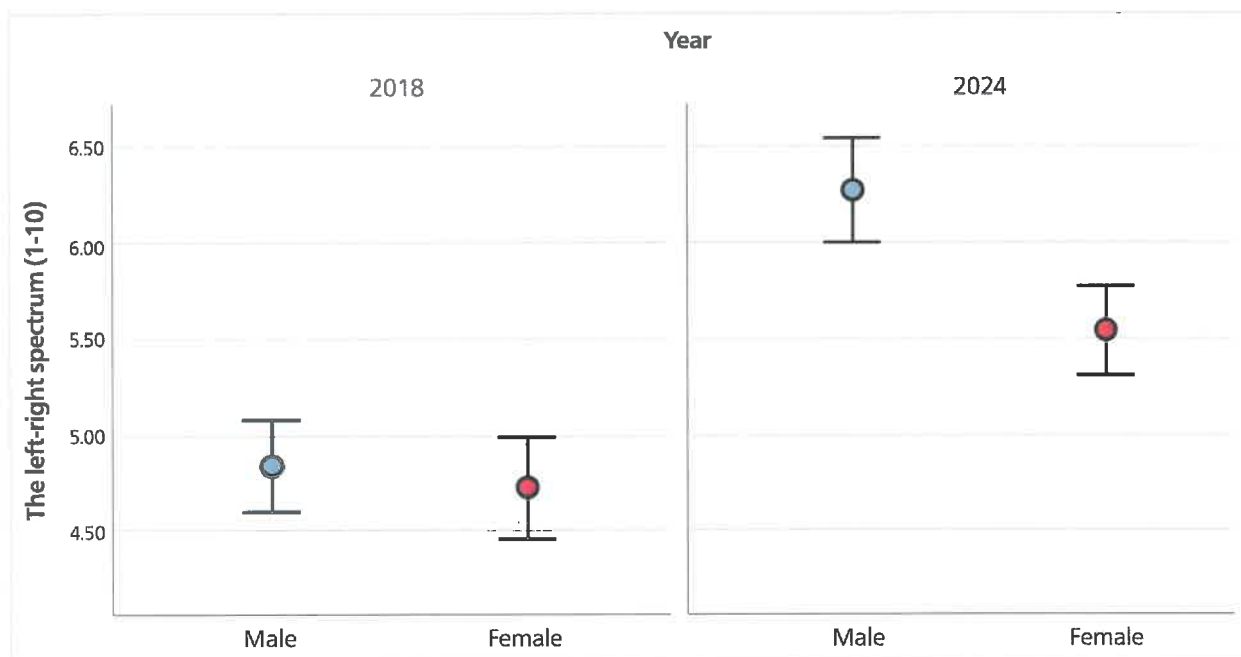
First, some of the expected predictors turned out not to be statistically significant; these were, most importantly, rural/urban residence, but also attitudes on abortion, immigration, and government involvement in the economy/society. Second, some of the significant predictors did not consistently maintain their significance under more rigorous statistical analyses which seek to isolate specific relationships between the independent and dependent variables. Among these, the most notable are tolerance of homosexuality and authoritarianism, which turned non-significant when we held other demographic and political predictors constant. Third, trust in institutions was expected to be correlated with left-wing orientation but turned out to be connected positively with right-wing self-identification. This means that right-wing youth are more trusting of institutions.

4th key point: Boys have turned to the right, girls (largely) stayed put

In contrast to the stereotypical notion that each subsequent generation becomes overall more liberally progressive (or, left-wing) at least on cultural issues, some scholars have recently posited that Gen Z bucks the usual trend (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). As one summary puts it, "In countries on every continent, an ideological gap has opened up between young men and women. Tens of millions of people who occupy the same cities, workplaces, classrooms and even homes no longer see eye-to-eye" (Burn-Murdoch, 2024).

The mentioned ideological division between the sexes has to do with liberal and conservative outlooks. Boys, it seems, have stopped trending towards the left over the past 5–10 years, and have instead sharply moved to the right. At the same time, girls have continued turning towards the left or have even done so with a faster pace than in prior years. This is the (newly formed)

Figure 4
Mean values of political self-identification (1–10 scale, 10 being far-right) by gender in 2018 and 2024.



⁴ Chauvinism is measured by asking whether historically marginalized or minority groups (such as women, members of the LGBT+ community, and ethnic minorities) are enjoying too many rights. Nationalism is measured by asking whether "It would be the best if Slovenia was inhabited only by 'real' Slovenes". Authoritarianism is measured by asking whether "We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament or elections"

ideological or politics gender gap.

The case of Slovenian youth is no exception to this general occurrence, although the particular pattern is somewhat different. In 2018, both boys and girls were, on average, positioning themselves slightly left of centre. By 2024, two notable shifts have happened. First, both girls and boys have drifted rightward, abandoning their former left-of-centre positioning. Second, boys are now aligning themselves slightly right of centre, while the girls are almost perfectly centrist. In other words, a gender gap in terms of political identification has happened, mostly on account of boys moving relatively notably towards the right. Figure 4 shows the shifts and the opening up of the gap.

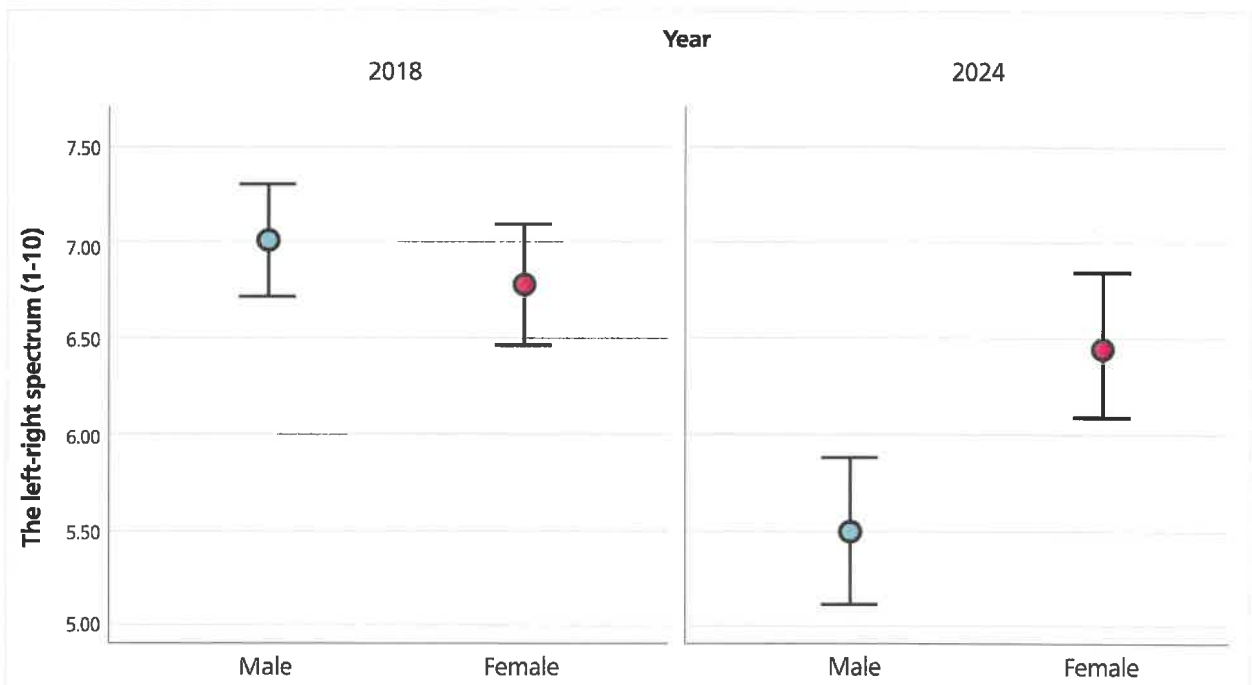
We can observe this same newly-created gap when looking at the data more granularly. Instead of focusing merely on self-identification, we can examine particular attitudes traditionally associated with either the left or right. Figure 5 presents one particularly salient instance of the politics gender gap, the sharply reduced tolerance of homosexuality on the part of boys as compared to girls in 2024. The same trend, albeit not as pronounced, can be observed with respect to chauvinistic attitudes (“Do members of the historically marginalized or

minority group X have too many rights?”), and some measures of nationalism and authoritarianism. In all of these cases, the gap was non-existent in 2018, and in most of the cases, it opened up in 2024 on account of boys becoming less liberal. Note, however, that some measures of both nationalism and authoritarianism evince no gender gap either in 2018 or 2024.

We reason that roughly the same causes are responsible for the gap in Slovenia as elsewhere. As Burn-Murdoch (2024) outlines one key condition, “The #MeToo movement was the key trigger, giving rise to fiercely feminist values among young women who felt empowered to speak out against long-running injustice”.

The #MeToo movement and the general climate of increasing activism for all kinds of social justice causes during the 2010s, augmented and distorted by social media algorithms and online virality, has probably had at least two types of effects on attitudes. First, it made young women (and other historically marginalized groups) realise how necessary, possible, and powerful speaking up for one’s rights is. As a consequence, a feedback-loop was likely created, with rising instances of activism spurring on even more activism, and so on.

Figure 5
How justified is homosexuality (1–10 scale, 10 being completely tolerant) by gender in 2018 and 2024.



Second, the whole dynamic might have caused a form of cultural backlash on the part of social groups least involved in and encompassed by the new social justice activism – namely, men. Rapid change, reflected either in structural or normative shifts, can be jarring to some, making them feel threatened and excluded, especially when shifts in social status and power are involved. In turn, those experiencing such feelings can lash out, staking attitudinal and behavioural positions opposite to those encountered both with the effort to stem the rising tide and to justify their status and position in society against the critique.

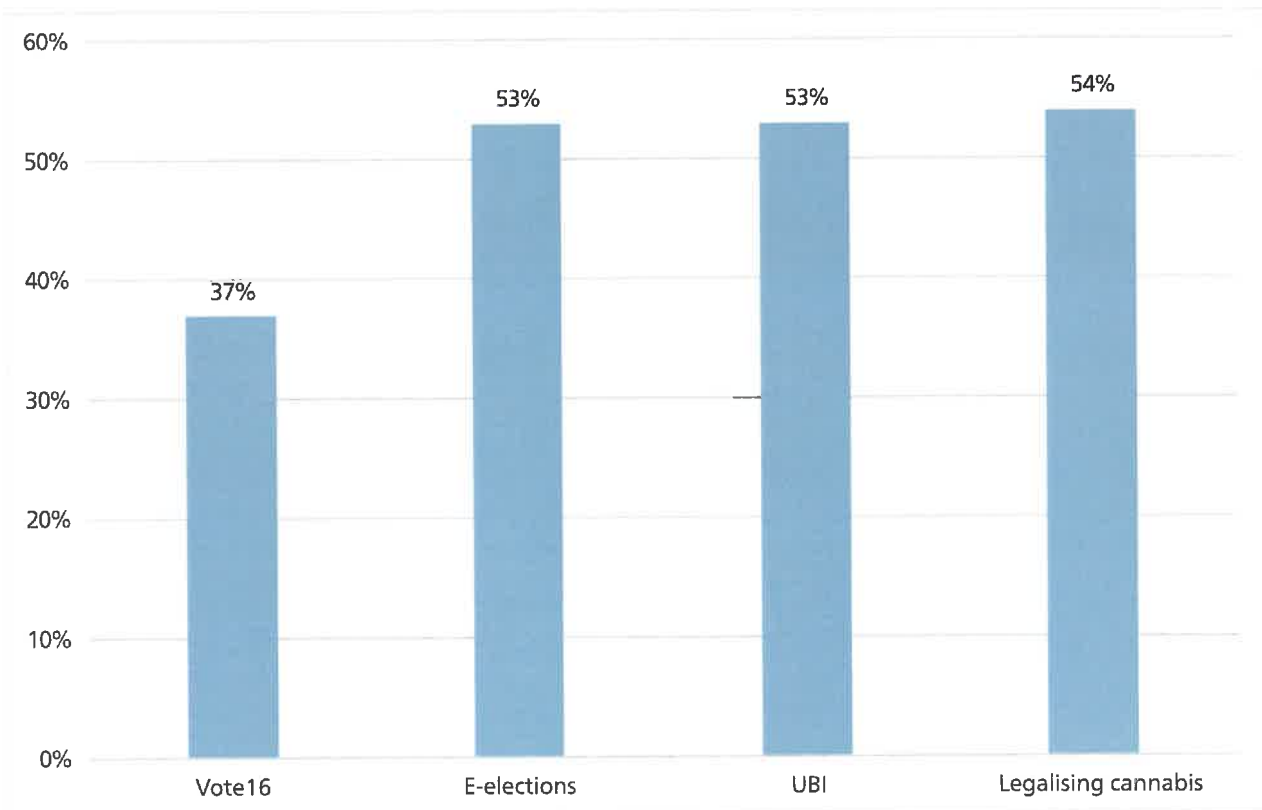
5th key point: Beware of stereotyping youth issues

Somewhat counter-intuitively, only slightly more than a third of Slovenian youth favour lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 (see Figure 6). Additionally, only around half are in

favour of introducing the option of electronic elections, instituting a universal basic income, and legalising the personal use of psychoactive substances, such as cannabis.

Additionally, analyses show that there are significant differences in terms of support according to party alignment. For instance, almost 9 out of 10 Levica voters, which is the only clearly left-wing party in our sample, are in favour of legalising cannabis. At the same time, less than half of SD and SDS voters, which are centrist and right-wing, respectively, say the same. The "Vote16" idea is likewise most popular among Levica voters (59%), while it is not at all liked among the "don't-knows" (24%). Lastly, UBI is again relatively attractive to Levica voters (55% strongly or somewhat agree with the idea), while it is least liked among SD (38%) and NSi (32%) voters, who are centrist and centre-right, respectively.

Figure 6
Attitudes of youth towards selected policy priorities, shares answering "yes" or strongly and somewhat agreeing.



Conclusion and recommendations

Although the youth remain only weakly politically engaged, their interest in politics has been increasing, particularly among the unaffiliated. Overall, political engagement is higher on the right side of the spectrum, especially on the far-right. At the same time, young people in Slovenia are becoming more and more politically conscious, with a notable share placing themselves right of centre. Young men, or boys, are particularly likely to identify with the right and its political causes, while women remain centrist and more liberal.

Because political polarization and the rise of the far-right in general, and emerging politics gender gaps in particular, are socially dangerous phenomena, policy makers should

strive to ameliorate them. This can be done in at least two general ways. First, whoever is the ruling coalition in power, they should more consistently deliver on their election-time promises (or refrain from making them), especially with regards to the main issues worrying Slovene youth, such as housing and the healthcare system, so as to prevent widespread feelings of popular discontent. Second, if it turns out that boys are indeed drifting rightward at least partly on account of official policies addressing the discrimination of historical marginalized and minority groups without taking into account the possibility of backlash of the historically privileged group(s), these issues should be tackled in more strategic ways.

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About FES Youth Studies

What are young people afraid of or hopeful about? In a rapidly changing world that is challenged by the climate crisis and inequalities, and in many parts aging societies and democratic decline, FES Youth Studies investigate how young generations perceive the development of their societies and their personal future. Our aim is to foster informed debate about young people's views on politics and democracy against the background of their life circumstances and values. This includes key issues such as education, employment and mobility, family and friends, and their overall attitudes and perceptions. We focus on young people aged 14 to 29 to understand their perspectives on these critical topics.

FES has conducted numerous youth studies around the world since 2009. In 2024, youth in Slovenia was surveyed along with youth in other Southeastern European and Central Eastern European countries.

Methodology

"FES Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024" is an international youth research project carried out simultaneously in twelve countries of Southeast Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece and Turkey. The main objective of the surveys has been to analyze attitudes of young people towards politics and democracy. The research project is based on a quota-based nationally representative sample of young people from selected countries. The structure of the sample was determined based on age, gender and statistical regions. The data was collected in early 2024 from almost 9,000 respondents aged 14–29 in the above-mentioned countries. The sample size varied from N = 501 in Montenegro to N = 1,233 in Turkey. The sample for Slovenia included 602 respondents, of whom 49.6 % were women, 49 % were men and 1.4 % identified with a third gender or did not answer the question. The average age of the Slovenian respondents was 22.2 years.

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Tibor Rutar is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Maribor in Slovenia. His most recent research on democracy, globalization, neoliberalism, and war has been published in outlets such as *Theory and Society*, *International Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Social Science Information*, and *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics*. He is the author of *Capitalism for Realists: Virtues and Vices of the Modern Economy* (Routledge, 2023).