Learn before you vote: how to organise a political debate marathon and watchdogging?

Name of the organisation
Žinau, ką renku

Website of the organisation
https://www.zinaukarenku.lt/

Location of the organisation
Islandijos g. 2-20, LT-01402 Vilnius, Lithuania

E-mail address of the organisation
info@zinaukarenku.lt

Good practice aspect(s)/themes of youth work
- Active citizenship/activism
- Community work
- Volunteering/voluntarism

Good practice category
A practice of processes and methods

Good practice aim & purpose
The turnout of different elections in Lithuania usually is near 40-50%, however, young people are least likely to vote in elections compared to other age groups (only about 30% in different elections). Also, only 2 out of 10 young people (18-29 y.o) in Lithuania say that they are interested in politics (OECD data shows). Thus, young people tend to not participate in political activities and most of them do not vote. “Learn before you vote” main purpose is to help young people get interested and involved in politics and make politicians accountable by organising political debates between all candidates who want to be elected in various elections (municipal, national parliament, EP, presidential) and watchdogging. The activities aim to support democratic engagement among citizens by providing platforms to directly discuss issues that citizens are facing. To help young people gain different skills and knowledge (like public speaking, time management, how politics works at different levels, know the difference between institutions, etc.), and society to gain an understanding of candidates and then make a conscious decision when voting.

Good practice description

“Learn before you vote” is an impartial political monitoring network that started in 2014. This idea arose among the participants of the Model European Parliament (MEU) in Lithuania, which has been running for a decade, mobilizing active young people aged 16-29 and encouraging them to act in public life. For that purpose, in 2014, a virtual platform for monitoring the elections of the European Parliament and the President of the Republic of Lithuania was created. Every year “Learn before you vote” gathers young people from every Lithuanian municipality who organise debates with candidates for different political posts, informal educational sessions for their peers, and watchdog politicians and their pledges. “Learn before you vote” operates on the principle of horizontal management when every volunteer takes the same level of responsibility as others. Volunteers who gain more experience become mentors and help newcomers to get acquainted with everything. Mainly, our organisation is funded by projects such as: ERASMUS+, etc.

Young people can join our organisation by completing an online survey or contacting us directly on our social media accounts. Moreover, a lot of our volunteers bring their friends to our events and they join “Learn before you vote” network.

Since 2015 during every election young people (most of them underaged to even vote) organise political debates. During the local elections of 2019, there were 84 debates organised by youth with candidates for the mayor’s posts gathering 12 000 live participants and 260 000 online. In the parliamentary elections of 2020, there were 86 debates with 3000 live participants (despite the COVID) and 190 000 online. In 2023, we organised 86 debates with candidates for the mayor position, which gathered more than half a million online and 10 000 live viewers.

The debates are very important for many reasons. Firstly, it helps to bridge the gap between politicians and voters. Voters can ask questions that are important to them and get direct answers from politicians. Politicians can directly present their ideas to the public, get reactions, and sometimes even defend themselves when controversy happens. Secondly, our surveys show that a lot of voters who come to our debates make a decision for whom they will vote for. Lastly, during the debates, we ask politicians to make 3 pledges that they will implement if they are elected. These pledges are used for watchdogging.

The network, fully led by young people gained prominence as the main electoral debating platform in the country, partnering with all major media channels as their journalists voluntarily moderate the debates, together preparing for them thus becoming mentors of young volunteers.

Watchdogging is an activity when people observe if pledges are implemented. This activity is led by our volunteers who with the help of methodology check what the mayor does to implement their promises. The watchdogging results are shown on our website. Because of publicity, voters hold politicians accountable and remember the pre-election pledges.

Good practice result & concrete effects

Before the recent OECD data, only 1 out of 10 young people in Lithuania were interested in politics (now it is 2 out of 10). Furthermore, more young people participate in elections – every election this age group's turnout is higher by 1-2 %. Also, we see a qualitative change – more politicians believe that young people are valuable voters. Thus, more candidates come to the debates (almost 80%) as they see the debates as a platform to express their ideas. Every election our organisation becomes more recognizable as it gains more views and live participants in the events, and people are asking if we will organise debates in their municipality because they feel the need to bring out issues they want attention to. Journalists voluntarily moderate the debates and become mentors for the volunteers as they together prepare for the debates. Journalists give more prominence to the action and also help spread the word (inviting people to their hosted radio or TV shows, promoting on social media, publishing press releases and interviews, and so on). Most importantly, our volunteers become leaders in their area, get involved in other activities, and gain or develop their skills and knowledge about politics.

Good practice chapter of the European Charter on Local Youth Work

Organisation and practice