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Studying Political Reasoning Among Young French-speaking Belgians

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Abstract

The question of lowering the voting age to 16 has long been debated in university circles. In the last Austrian elections, young people aged 16 and older were invited to vote, even if young people themselves are divided over this issue, even hostile to the idea. Nevertheless, isn't such a question, which is rarely discussed by the larger public and touches on several dimensions of a person's life, an ideal topic for a debate, where the confrontation of ideas may change opinions and reveal – or even modify – young people's global attitudes towards political interest and participation? A non-random sample of nearly two hundred 16- to 22-year-old youth in French-speaking Belgium was selected to discuss the possibility of lowering the voting age to 16, as well as political interest and political participation, during one day with four experts. The same questionnaire was filled in in the beginning and at the end of the day. These first results are presented here. They show little evolution during the discussion, in a sample already largely against the idea of lowering the voting age. However, these are the consequences for political socialisation we would like to discuss with this research project based on political reasoning.

Résumé

La question de l'abaissement du droit de vote à 16 ans a toujours fait l'objet de débats dans certains cercles universitaires. Lors des dernières élections autrichiennes, les jeunes de 16 ans et plus ont été invités à voter même si les jeunes eux-mêmes sont souvent partagés, voire hostiles à l'idée. Or, une question comme le droit de vote à 16 ans, peu discutée publiquement et engageant plusieurs dimensions de la vie d'un individu, n'est-elle pas une question de débat idéale, où la confrontation des idées peut amener à modifier les points de vue et révéler – et même modifier – les attitudes plus globales des jeunes envers l'intérêt politique et la participation? Un échantillon non aléatoire de 182 jeunes de 16-22 ans en Belgique francophone a été retenu pour discuter du vote à 16 ans, de l'intérêt et de leur participation politique lors d'une journée avec 4 experts. Le même questionnaire a été distribué avant et après la rencontre. Ces premiers résultats sont présentés, qui montrent que peu d'évolutions ont été enregistrées dans un échantillon peu favorable à l'idée. Cependant, ce sont les enseignements pour la socialisation politique que nous souhaitons mettre en évidence dans cette recherche basée sur le raisonnement politique.

For several years, probably under the dominant influence of the rational choice theory in political science, political socialisation was not studied but in restricted specialised circles. However, this research field seems to gain more attention recently, particularly among those working on youth and politics. As several studies have shown, only a minority of young people seems interested in politics these days. For example, our research team has supervised lately an important survey which indicates that only one third of the 16- to 21-year-old young people, in Wallonia and in Brussels Region, are very or rather interested in politics¹. These results will not surprise specialists of the issue². Beyond this observation, frequently repeated,

¹ Professor at the Department of Political Science of the University of Liège. This paper presents the first results of a research financed by the University of Liège. Raphaël Darquenne was responsible for the collection of the data and we would like to thank him, as well as Élodie Flaba, who assists us in this research. We also would like to thank Geoffrey Grandjean, *Aspirant du Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique-FNRS*, for his support, as well as the principals and the teachers of the schools for their enthusiastic involvement in this project, and of course the 200 students who spent a whole day discussing politics. The collaboration of the Athénée Maurice Destenay of Liège was essential in the realisation of this experiment, and we would particularly like to thank their vice-principal. About 60 animators also helped to make our project come true. A first version of this paper was discussed during the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the ECPR, in Münster (Germany), on March 2010.

¹ Hugues Dorzée, « Le jeune vote, sans passion », *Le Soir*, May 19th, 2009, p. 4.

² Among recent works, we will note this important investigation on young people which was held by the political scientists of the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, in collaboration with McGill University (Ellen Claes, Céline

the main question remains how to understand, even to *explain* such attitudes and behaviours. This is why a careful thought on the socialisation process to politics is such important.

Our research concern about how to illustrate the *diversity of attitudes* among young people towards politics leads us to appreciate carefully the various theoretical perspectives in the field of political socialisation. Indeed, when discussing the relationship between youth and politics, it is so tempting to present “youth” as a kind of homogeneous reality. Scholars *know* that gross generalizations never constitute an adequate synthesis of reality and we tend to avoid them. However, we are more inclined to compare *boys* and *girls* without too much reservation, even though we *know* that all boys are not interested in politics and some girls are (beyond the statistical significance of any crosstabs). This comparison is broadly accepted because many scholars share a deterministic approach towards socialisation: basically, we accept the views that the environment, various external factors *shape* the attitudes and behaviours of individuals. When a statistical relationship is noticed between such an *external variable* (as the social situations represented by the concept of “gender”) and an attitude (“political interest”, for example), it likes if we have *revealed* the result of a specific mechanism of socialisation. Even though it is not always expressed so harshly, gender – the social conditions attached to this reality – determines the behaviour³. It is the same with other variables like age, family background, education... all of them are global social realities that *determine* behaviours. This deterministic perspective has been adequately pointed out by some scholars, like Stanley Allen Renshon, for example:

The impact of these assumptions can be seen in the way in which political socialization research has conceptualized both implicitly and explicitly the relationship between “agencies” and individuals. The dominant model is agency --> individuals. Thus we talk about persons being socialized by the family (and other agencies) as if the child were a passive recipient of every environmental cue. Implicit in this conceptualization is the assumption of cue homogeneity and continuity. The first suggests that the actors or structures emit the same messages, while the latter requires message continuity across time⁴.

As Renshon suggested, we also have several reservations about this approach. If we go beyond the single image suggesting that *boys are more interested in politics*, we see a *mosaic of possibilities* (boys who are interested and who are not, girls who are not interested and who are) that oblige us to consider a different theoretical perspective towards socialisation. What about a more dialectic perspective where the individual, and not the sole environment, would be an integral part of the process of sharing an attitude or a specific behaviour? According to another conception of socialisation processes suggested by Jean Piaget, among others⁵, we put

Decleire, Yves Dejaeghere, Stefaan Fiers, Marc Hooghe and Ellen Quintelier. *Étude Jeunesse 2006: Un premier portrait des opinions des jeunes de seize ans*, Louvain, Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, 2006, 22 pages). In 2005, a colloquium on participation on young people in Europe was organised by the Confédération des organisations de jeunesse (COJ) de Belgique whose contributions were published (COJ, *Actes du séminaire sur « L'Engagement des jeunes en Europe »*, Bruxelles, 2006, 45 p). Moreover, several books of Anne Muxel give a good introduction to the question of political interest of young people (*Les jeunes et la politique*, suivi d'un débat avec Pascal Perrineau, Paris, Hachette, 1996, coll. « Questions de politique »). Finally, the Web site of the Observatoire Jeunes et Société is a good source of information (<http://www.obsjeunes.qc.ca>).

³ This seems true if we consider explicitly the mechanism of socialisation. However, we think that for many scholars who work in political socialisation, the main concern is only to show a *reproduction* of attitudes and behaviours from one generation to another. When children share the same pattern of attitudes than their parents, they identify this reality as the result of the political socialisation process – without discussing the implications of such a conception about how opinions and attitudes are “built”.

⁴ Stanley Allen Renshon, « Assumptive Frameworks in Political Socialization Theory », *Handbook of Political Socialization*, Stanley Allen Renshon (ed.), New York, The Free Press, 1977, p. 27.

⁵ Discussions of socialization processes have been adapted to discussion of political socialization by Annick

that each individual, beyond his/her concrete membership to groups, also creates his/her vision of the world and shapes a frame of reference with realities that to him/her seem to be more important than others, in a dialectical process (from the circumstances which confront him/her to the assimilation of these circumstances to his/her interior schemata). In this regard, for young people — as for adults, indeed —, there exists different “worlds of reference” and these are not necessarily shaped along usual sociological categories. In fact, apparent similarities within groups may actually show inappropriate homogenization. Individuals incorporate from the surrounding world and articulate it to formerly acquired perceptions and this dialectical process creates that *mosaic of possibilities* the scholar must try to respect.

For scholars sharing this perspective, the challenge is to represent the diversity of attitudes among a population with another framework than the traditional socio-economical variables (without neglect them, however, when the reality they cover is relevant). The worlds of reference, the reality they cover include, according to Piaget, the interaction with the environment. The only concept we would like to introduce in the discussion — because we do not see it in the image that simply compares *boys* and *girls* — is the *mosaic of possibilities*. How can we approach the study of youth and politics in a different perspective, then? One possibility is to work on the patterns of political reasoning. This idea, developed by Shawn W. Rosenberg, for example (who was clearly influenced by Piaget)⁶, is a psychological approach which operationalizes in part the dialectic process we are interested in. Working on the “structures of the thought” allows Rosenberg to develop several types of political reasoning, the “medium of exchange between the individual and the political environment”⁷

Trying to study those mechanisms of socialisation was the idea behind a large research project we have conducted in Liege last year. We wanted to put in place a research protocol where we could collect the *evolution of the opinion* on a specific issue, largely non-debated among the young people but with some relevance for them. The idea of lowering the right to vote to the age of 16 seemed an interesting option for us.

Even if an important public debate took place in Austria not long ago — where the 16-year threshold was finally adopted⁸ — this question has not been really debated in most of Western democracies⁹. Even among young people, no majority appears in favour of lowering the age to vote (in a previous survey done in Liège in 2007 among 16- to 18-year-old people, only 25% of the respondents agreed with the idea of voting at 16 years of age¹⁰). However, is it really surprising to obtain such results, even among young people with political interest, when such a question is asked, on the phone or even in a written questionnaire, in the absence

Percheron (*L'univers politique des enfants*, Paris, Fondation nationale des sciences politiques/Armand Colin, 1974. “Travaux et recherches de science politique”; “La socialisation politique: défense et illustration”, in Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca (eds.), *Traité de science politique*, vol. III: *L'action politique*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1985, pp. 165-235; and, in English, “The influence of the socio-political context on political socialization”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 10, 1982, pp. 53-59). Socialization processes are interestingly discussed by Shawn W. Rosenberg (*Reason, Ideology and Politics*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1988); also, with Dana Ward and Stephen Chilton (*Political Reasoning and Cognition. A Piagetian View*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1988).

⁶ Shawn W. Rosenberg, Dana Ward and Stephen Chilton, *Political Reasoning and Cognition. A Piagetian View*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1988, 204 p.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ « L'Autriche instaure le vote à 16 ans », *Le Monde*, March 20th, 2007.

⁹ Raymond Hudon and Bernard Fournier, “How Old Is Old Enough to Vote. Youth Participation in Society” *Perspectives électorales/Electoral Insight*, vol. 5, no 2, July 2003, pp. 38-43.

¹⁰ V. Rocour, “Les jeunes ne veulent pas voter à 16 ans”, *La Libre Belgique*, November 3rd, 2007, p. 8.

of any kind of preparation on the side of the respondent? When such a question – which touches on several dimensions of a person’s life – is not *debated*, what value can we give to those answers? Would their answers be different if all the arguments had been presented to them and if they had had the possibility to discuss with specialists or with other young people of the same age?

For years, specialists of surveys had to face practical and theoretical problems related to public opinion polls¹¹ and developed several research protocols which create room for debate on diverse social and political questions and following which better *informed* opinions could be gathered¹². In our opinion, the question of voting at 16 is particularly appropriate for this exercise. To start a research proceeding giving the possibility to *discuss* the question – and more widely, the political interest and the political participation of young French-speaking Belgians – constitutes indeed the aim of the two-year research project we started last January.

We were interested in this framework not because of the question of voting at 16 for itself – indeed, it is merely a pretext, as nobody is really militating for it in Belgium and our aim is not to promote it. In our mind, the *discussion* and *confrontation of opinions* can lead to identify some patterns of “political reasoning” among participants.

Three specific methods structure this large research project: a classic survey, executed by an independent firm (*Dedicated Research*); a whole day of debates and discussions inspired by the method of « citizen conferences »¹³ gathering around 200 young people in Liège; a qualitative research by conducting deeper interviews among some young people participating in this discussion day. This paper could only presents the *potential* of the first analyses, since the whole set of interviews – even if they have been all transcribed – still have to be processed¹⁴. It is more the potential of such analysis we would like to discuss during this panel, and to see it would be possible to open a different subfield of research in political socialisation based on the research on political reasoning.

So, on October 28th, 2009, an event gathering 182 young people took place in Liège¹⁵.

¹¹ And particularly James S. Fishkin (*The Voice of the People : Public Opinion and Democracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995).

¹² Mutz, Diana Carole. *Hearing the other side: deliberative versus participatory democracy*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006. See also Janice Elliott, “Méthodes participatives. Un guide pour l'utilisateur. Deliberative Polling®”, Brigitte Duvieusart, Hervé Lisoir, Gerrit Rauws and An Van Campenhout (dir.). Bruxelles, Fondation Roi Baudouin and Vlaams Instituut voor Wetenschappelijk en Technologisch Aspectenonderzoek (viWTA), 2005.

¹³ This term seems here more suitable, but several concepts cover similar methods, like the method of *Deliberative Polling®*.

¹⁴ For the qualitative analysis, we are using HyperResearch.

¹⁵ The initially planned research project was rather ambitious, considering the financials limits and the calendar constraints. The heart of the project lies in the organisation of a day of discussions and exchanges where, to insure some statistic representation – as we will explain later on –, it seemed important to us to gather 400 young people. Originally, these had to be selected from the people surveyed in the first instance, as in the *Deliberative Polling®* proposed by Fishkin. However, it appeared very quickly that to convince as many young people to participate in our event, even with a financial stimulus, the survey firm should have surveyed much more people than the 1600 which were planned in the initial budget (and furthermore nothing guaranteed that the so-constituted sample would have been representative). It was then decided to do a classical survey to measure the opinion of young people on the questions of the survey (which was realised by *Dedicated Research* in April) and to constitute another sample for the discussion day in Liège with classes from 8 to 10 schools in Wallonia and in the Brussels Region. However, we had to face several logistic problems again (one of them was finding a place where so many young people could gather in small groups to discuss) and as we wanted first to organise this discussion day on April 1st, we ran out of time to convince enough school principals to let their classes

The whole day was precisely organized, with two similar questionnaires “framing” two discussion periods, which allowed to observe the effects of the discussion on young people’s opinions, before the discussion (and even before getting any information on the topic), and after¹⁶.

After a short time used to fill in the first questionnaire, the day was divided into two discussion periods : the first one was the discussion of the issue of voting at 16 with four panellists: two had to develop a coherent argumentation for or and two against the lowering of the right to vote at 16 and exchanged their opinion with the young people present¹⁷.

The second period was devoted to discussions in small groups – which can be compared to *focus groups*. The 182 students were divided into 27 groups containing about 8-10 young people each to discuss with facilitators who had been trained to do this kind of task. The groups had been constituted in order to insure a certain social and school diversity and encourage confidence in the discussions. The facilitators had been instructed to show a “kind neutrality” while making the young people discuss the different arguments in favour or opposed to the right to vote at 16. The whole content of the discussion groups was recorded. Then the second questionnaire was distributed, after the young people had been confronted with the different arguments and had discussed the question in the groups.

Opinions before and after the day

Even though it is not the purpose of this paper, it is interesting to compare some opinions “before” and “after” the discussions on the issue of lowering the right to vote at 16. On this matter, it seems that the discussions changed the opinion of *some* young people. On the beginning of the day, roughly no participant agreed on the idea: 6% thought young people should vote at 16 (however, 11% said they would have been ready to do so). *At the end of the day*, 22% of the participants thought young people should vote at 16. Of course, the “success” of the experiment is *not* in this increase; as a matter of fact, on an individual level, a change of mind measured in the second questionnaire is as important as a strengthening of a previous opinion. What really matters here is that the opinions gathered after the discussions are supposed to be *better informed*, and therefore more relevant in the study of opinions, first, and secondly, for the identification of political reasoning during the debate.

This increase of interest is “confirmed” by other questions to specify the reasons which will bring the respondent to advocate or not the right to vote for 16-year-old young people. As Table 1 shows, several variables related to maturity, interest in politics for 16 years old and so on increased (or decreased accordingly) at the end of the day. Two significant exceptions: first; it seems that knowledge on politics is still considered low at 16; second, voting at 16

participate. As our sample was not satisfactory, we used the experiment of April 1st as a test. We organized the large event on October 28th, with the ambition to gather 400 students. Unfortunately, for several technical reasons, it was not possible, but we were quite satisfied with the sample that time. See appendix I for a description of the sample.

¹⁶ In fact, the questions in T1 (at the beginning of the day) and in T2 (at the end of the day) were not identical. Both questionnaires contained a group of questions on the problematic of lowering the right to vote to 16 but also some questions about political interest, participation and political representations which did not lend themselves to a comparison T1 – T2.

¹⁷ For this part of the day, we have learnt for the experiment of April 1st. At that time, we asked politicians to expose their views on the topic. To our surprise, on the whole, a fairly *negative* picture of the lowering of the right to vote emerged following the debate. Only one intervener clearly advocated the lowering of the right to vote at 16. In order to have a better equilibrium among opinions, two people had a “scenario” to play in front of the young people. With a more directed presentation, it helps to have a fair perspective on *all* arguments.

would not really make young people more responsible.

Table 1
Opinions on the issue of voting at the age of 16 (at T1 and T2)
(Liège, October 2009)

	T1 Strongly agree/agree	T2 Strongly agree/agree	Difference
Young people are mature enough to vote at 16	8	26	+18
At 16, young people would vote like their parents	66	49	-17
Maturity of a person does not depend on his/her age	72	91	+19
Young people would be more interested in politics if they could vote at 16	27	47	+20
At 16, young people do not know enough about politics to vote	90	86	-4
A lot of adults do not have more interest in politics than a 16-year-old	72	82	+10
Voting at 16 would make young people more responsible	44	49	+5
At 16, we are less responsible than at 18	69	57	-12
Political parties would give more consideration to youth interests if these would vote earlier	48	59	+11

Source : *Research on the right to vote at 16*, second experiment, phase 2 : day of discussions (N = ±180).

Several questions were asked in the two questionnaires to measure the level of interest in politics of those students (which is related in a way, of course, to the opinion about lowering the right to vote – although it would be hazardous to believe that a young people who is interested in politics is necessarily in favour of the right to vote at 16). In our sample, the interest in politics is lower compared to our previous survey, but nothing exceptional either. Three out of 5 young people acknowledge to be a lot or rather interested in politics, but half feel concerned by the decisions taken by the government. It is not surprising, either, that only 12% have often or several times actively participated in an activity which could be considered as political (such as a march, a boycott, a demonstration, a strike, a blockade or a petition). Thus, the variables do not reveal anything specific on the interest in politics.

However, there is a fairly important attachment to the vote in general. Thus, 80% of the respondents consider voting useful or fairly useful. Almost 70% do not think that “In the elections, there are so many people who vote that their vote does not count”. And when we ask them if voting is a right, a duty, a chance or a burden, only 9% choose the last option. Should we see a specific socialisation framework here, in a country where voting is compulsory? 85% of the respondents thinks this obligation should be kept.

Arguments in favour and against the vote at 16 with the experts

The whole point behind the discussion process is to challenge the individual opinions with the larger range of arguments or opinions on a specific topic, namely here, the right to vote at 16. As those arguments were not necessarily taken into account in forming the first opinion, the discussion process reveals a *better informed* opinion. In the debate, some arguments are taken, others are rejected: a reasoning appears in the discussion process and this is what we would like to illustrate.

As it was explained before, this discussion process was set up in two steps during our

experiment: first, four panellists presented the position on the issue, two developing the arguments in favour, and two, the arguments against it. It was a two-hour debate, with interactions with the students (this debate, incidentally, was surprisingly very active). Second, after lunch, students continued the discussion in small groups, with a group facilitator (a second person was also with them: he or she took notes and did not interrupt the discussion). The discussions were recorded and transcribed.

As the debate with the panellists challenged the participants for the first time, it is important to keep in mind how the issue of voting at the age of 16 was presented. It was significant to present *all the positions* in favour and against the feasibility of the option¹⁸.

Generally speaking, three main arguments were developed by the panellists, all against the idea of lowering the age to vote to 16. **First**, many students were very concerned (according to the reactions in the audience) by the possibility that lowering the voting age could mean (or even *will mean*) the lowering of *penal majority for crime issues*; **second**, one noticed that the only European country where the voting age is lowered to 16 is also a country – Austria – where right-wing extremists are strong; **third**, the speakers often insisted (and students themselves) on the lack of political knowledge, even political maturity at the age of 16. But this perspective was not always a reason for inaction. Some of the students called for more information, even for the introduction of a course on politics during the last high-school years (such a course is not in the present curriculum). Those three arguments, constantly repeated during the debate in the morning, tended to reinforce the opinion against the right to vote at 16.

Among the arguments developed by the panellists in favour of the lowering, the **first** one was related to the place of young people in society: the society gets older and older and according the right to vote at 16 could be a way to rebalance the age pyramid. The **second** argument was based on several examples showing that young people have the right to participate in the public debate because they are concerned by the laws and political decisions. One of the panellist was particularly enthusiastic about his ideas – in favour of the lowering – and his intervention impressed a lot of participants – not always in favour of his arguments, however.

Then, with this range of opinions in mind, students gathered in small groups to discuss. Even a quick analysis of those discussions easily shows how the main debate was structured against the right to vote at 16: “I do not know. I am not mature enough to take such decisions on political issues” was an opinion often relayed. It does not seem relevant to us to reproduce more elements of those debates. When all the small groups will be properly analysed, though, a systematic description of the arguments (the issue of maturity, for example, the lack of information, the impressionable character of a 16-year-old, the lack of political interest in general, the difficulty to manage your life at the end of adolescence, the lack of feeling concerned about politics, the relation between vote and penal majority) will be done.

Towards three forms of “political reasoning”

The first analyses of some transcriptions show quickly that students reacted differently during the discussions in small groups. Of course, the arguments were influenced by their own opinions and by what they have heard in the morning, but it was obvious that the way

¹⁸ Indeed, the experiment in April 1st showed us how crucial this first contact was for the discussion in small groups later in the day: in these groups, many of the students took up the positions voiced by the politicians earlier, often as an endorsement or, otherwise, to contradict them.

they interacted during the 90-minute discussion, their global *attitude* was not the same. The identification of various key words in those attitudes would lead us to different forms of “political reasoning”.

The 71 individuals we studied could fall in three categories: at one end, we would have young people who developed almost no arguments during the discussion, or who tended to reject the whole process. Those individuals (even though this is irrelevant to think in terms of numbers here) are only a few. To have any idea of the kind of interventions, we can follow the participant number 8 in those extracts (female, does not support the right to vote in the beginning and at the end)¹⁹:

*Facilitator*²⁰: So, what we will be doing now is that I will ask you a question, and it would be interesting if you answer to it and explain your opinions. If two political parties compete during elections, one support the right to vote at 16, the other one not, for which one would you vote?

5²¹: For the one which doesn't support it.

[...] ²²

8: Against, because first when I went to vote at 18, **I found this boring**²³, was not willing to go. Now at 20, it's because I study that I get interested, but however politics, huh? I have a lots of friends who don't study which have been working since they were 18, what they did, they draw on the voting ballot. So at 16...

F: It's too young, and we are not interested?

8: Right

[...]

F: We are almost done. We still need to have a small talk, a small debriefing of this day. So how interesting was the day for you? Productive? Did you learn anything in general?

[...]

7: The morning activity was too long

F: The morning activity was too long

8: **Too long.**

F: And to come back to the central question, that I discussed some minutes ago, did some of you change your mind on the right to vote at 16?

[...]

6: Totally against.

F: Against, you were already against at the beginning?

6: I was already against

F: And you 8?

8: Well, **before, I was against at the beginning, but no matter what the arguments are**, I know how I was at 16 and only because of this, **I know I'm against.**

[...]

F: And among the different speakers, which was the most convincing?

Everybody: Bouchez²⁴

9: I think it's clear.

F: Everybody the same?

11: We see that he wants it and he is...

F: 8, you look sceptic?

8: **Well for me, I was almost falling asleep for the 4 of them...** I got awake when the young participants in the hall started to speak. I think that we were feeling more concerned when the young participates, at least for me it's the young.

¹⁹ Those extracts were translated from the French to the English. It was not always easy, as it was spontaneous exchanges.

²⁰ Person who facilitates the exchange between young people.

²¹ Participant number (here, 5: male, does not support the right to vote in the beginning and at the end).

²² Several extracts were cut to keep only the relevant dimensions of the discourse for our demonstration.

²³ We put some key words in bold to define the “attitudes”.

²⁴ This panellist who defended very enthusiastically the lowering of the right to vote from 18 to 16 in the morning.

[...]

9: Of course from the moment or somebody teaches you something, maths, we learn to do it, you know how to do it.

6: It's not the same to be able to do maths than to be able to do...

9: It's simply the fact, it's part of the class, it's to educate people to be aware and to try to get informed...

8: I don't know, you may be interested in politics, me, at 16, I didn't get classes about politics in school, but **I wouldn't have shown up there anyway.**

9: It's part of the education, at a start, because I have parents which suggested to me...

8: But... no... even the education, I went to school, people around, people... If you think, we are going to be into politics all our life, but at 16, we are not going to watch the news on TV directly.

At the other extreme, you have young people who were very interested in the process and develop a long and structured argumentation, using a lot of examples. This extract, quoting participant 93, is very relevant (male, does not support the right to vote in the beginning and at the end):

Facilitator: So we are going to talk about the topic for which you are here, we really want to ask you what you have thought of the discussion this morning. Does somebody have an opinion?

93: I personally think it was really really good, **now we have to see if something is going to take place after**, because it's nice to discuss for 2 hours, I liked it very much, I got the opportunity to talk and so on, but I could have stayed at home. The question is: was it worth it? **Will something take place after or is it just wind?** It's nice, really **I hope something will follow this.**

[...]

F: And considering the penal majority, isn't it the same thing?

93: I personally think that we are a bit mixing stuff together: to vote is a right but also a duty, it's something we are allowed to do but that we have to do, **we shouldn't forget people which fought for this.** They [the morning panellists] reminded us but if we would have been here in 1936, you 4, 5 6, the majority here you wouldn't have taken part in this discussion, because it was not even possible to think that you could vote. **If a women was coming to the voting office "What the hell are you doing here" it was really the question she was asked.** I think this is at the same time a right and a duty and it's simply a choice about **"What do I want for the society of tomorrow, what do I want to give it, what do I want to wait in exchange?"**, while when we speak about penal, civic majority and so on, all the taxations it's simply I would say a contract between the State and ourselves which is " I give you a bit of money and therefore you give me a nice pension" and like this we exchange a bit of money.

[...]

F: We will come to the third phase of the debate, it concerns the place of young people in the society. First of all, some questions to ask you: what would you change in our society? What are the place of young people in the society nowadays? What are your place today?

93: **I don't know if somebody knows Martin Duba, no? It's a philosopher** which told that every generation of young people which come into the society is there to introduce change, to make a sort of revolution of the society and to change it. Ok the conclusion is a bit more pessimistic and tells that when growing up they loose their idealism and finally not so many things can be implemented because of old people which prevent young people to do things, but **I personally think that the place of young people in the society is to bring controversies**, polemic and try to make things change because people which are already in are not going to make things change, they installed the system like they wanted it, they feel good there, at least I think, and therefore they won't try to make things change and it's really a duty not only to take the things which are given to us but also try to change it.

[...]

F: What are your preoccupations, the preoccupations of young people? Personally I also have preoccupations because I'm only 2 years older than you. In the society? There are still things you feel concerned at the society level?

93: **For me, it's the inequalities, people that don't have money which are in really complicated situation and that we don't specially help**, which have problems to live because they don't even earn enough to pay, rent a flat or, and then next to these there are people which have 5-6 flats and live really good without any conscience problems, I think it's something which needs to be changed. And also the fact that for example we absolutely don't realise that if the African countries are in such misery it's because of us, I mean when I say "us" it's European countries and without [the guy which colonised Congo] and the King which wanted to extend his empire, Belgium wouldn't be like this today, it wouldn't be a part of the EU and nothing else, we will be screwed among these rich countries [...].

Finally, other people are more “middle of the road”: they present an interest, develop some arguments, but there is nothing specific in their intervention. Participant 114 is a good example of this category (female, does not support the right to vote in the beginning and at the end):

Facilitator: Ok, maybe we will have the opportunity to speak about this again. So tell us what you have thought, did you expect this or not? So, you 114?

114: **Well me, at the beginning, I wasn't sure.** And then I like the person who told us we shouldn't vote at 16 but we need to talk about it at 18, like this they are informed and then they can vote with 18. It was it.

[...]

F: [...] Do you think the vote should be coupled with the majority?

114: **Well no, not specially.** It's not because we vote that it has to mean that we are major.

[...]

114: Well, I agree. It's normal that parents will vote for things which are good for their kids.

[...]

114: But this depends on the values of everybody. If someone put their family first, well they will vote for things which favour families. And if someone value is money... **So it depends on the persons.**

[...]

114: Well I don't know, me in fact I think the preoccupation of the young people when they are about 16 it's school because it's where they spend almost the most of the time. [...]

[...]

114: I think it's better to defend causes or associations, than parties. It's more useful I think.

[...]

F: Do you think that if we would finally lower the right to vote to 16, would it make them participate earlier?

114: But no! No! **Once again, I think it depends on the persons.** There are some maybe yes, but some other maybe no. It won't change anything. Even for the 18-year-old too! Some go to vote but don't care and some other will get involved and so on²⁵.

[...]

F: [...] 114! Yes, your opinion about the day...

114: Me at the beginning I didn't really agree. And it's true that when you hear the others talk we realise that there are lots of arguments which made that it would be good if they could vote. Even if, it's not for this that they will be more responsible and they will be more interested about it. Once again, I think it's for some but not for everybody. It depends really of the person. **So I don't really have an opinion, it depends on the persons. There it is!**

F: And did you change your opinion comparing to this morning? Or it just made you richer, with the information on the topic?

114: Yeah, it made me richer.

[...]

Of course, we realize how those “attitudes” during the discussion provide only the beginning of a typology. Each argument has to be strictly analysed: how many arguments are used by a participant; how they are mobilised in favour or against the arguments of another participant; do they only react or defend their own perspective? Or, to go back to Shawn W. Rosenberg's scheme, is the discussion revealed only personal experiences on the issue or a more structure mode of thinking²⁶? At the moment, we are in the process of building those categories – as we are in the early stages of this project – but the three extracts reproduced above show some promises already.

The participant 93 is a very good example of that. First, for him, this discussion must be a starting point, not an end. Even though he thinks action is important, he has a lot of things to

²⁵ Vote is mandatory in Belgium.

²⁶ According to Rosenberg, there are three structures of reasoning: sequential thought (they track the world which appear before them), linear thought (analyse the activity they observe and place one action in relation to another), and systematic thought (they juxtapose the relationships that exist between actions, considering each of them in its context) (Rosenberg. “The Structure of Political Thinking”. *American Journal of Political Science* (1988) vol. 32 (3) pp. 539-566).

say and he reuses several arguments and uses new ones: the vote is a duty, it is a way to influence tomorrow's society, the role of youth is to bring controversies in society... It is easy to see he has a coherent view of the political world and the discussion about the lowering the age to vote *fits* in it²⁷. Perhaps this individual shows the “systematic” conceptualize by Rosenberg during the debate. Further analyses have to be done to compare Rosenberg's results with our interpretation of young participants discourses.

Those three “attitudes”, even though they are only a temporary construct, show an interesting coherence when the results given in the questionnaires are compared. At the end of the second questionnaire, seven questions tried to measure the impact of the day for the young participants. Obviously, it is a limited self-measurement, but it is indicative. According to that, nearly a third believe that “today's discussion changed their opinion about the right to vote at the age of 16”. However, 80% of the participants agree that a day like this was useful... 51% think that the arguments in favour of the lowering were more convincing than those against it (but they did not necessarily change their opinion accordingly). A quarter think that some people had too strong opinions during the discussion in the afternoon. However, if 93% think they could express their opinion during the discussion, it was not the same for the people in each category: only 60% of the young people who were not very involved in the debate agreed with that. Does this reflect their position in their group? Another interesting finding: among the panellists of the morning, it was clear that the one very enthusiastic in favour of lowering the right to vote was very popular among this category (91% considered him the more convincing), while only 53% agreed with that.

Conclusion

In a previous research, we compiled a list of the different (and numerous) arguments used in France from the French Revolution until the lowering of the voting age to 18²⁸. With so many changes in legislation during this period, it was easy to conclude that the determination of the electoral and eligibility threshold is arbitrary indeed. Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen? No social or electoral necessity calls for a change of this threshold today, and therefore it seemed to us that the choice of this issue was useful for the study of stability of aggregated opinions after a process of discussion.

In the experiment outlined above, despite all the imperfections it contains, we wanted to check if a full day of discussions and exchanges plays a part in the construction of an informed opinion on the discussed topic, and therefore, contributes to the construction of a *better informed* opinion on the right to vote at 16. The analysis of the answers to the questionnaires before and after the debate with the political representatives, as well as the discussion in small groups, showed reinforcements and changes. And it is important for us to stress these two dynamics: the success of the experiment is not to find huge discrepancies between the answers in the first and second questionnaire. It would even be worrying concerning the value of traditional surveys. The process obviously brings a *reinforcement* of opinions – which is good. Is this reinforcement more frequent for certain types of individuals? The homogeneity of our population does not give us an answer to this question, which is why we did not pursue this aspect any further in this paper.

In fact, when we analyse the data collected on the issue of lowering the right to vote at

²⁷ An opinion *against* the lowering could have fitted in another universe, of course.

²⁸ “La majorité politique: étude des débats parlementaires sur la fixation d'un seuil”, with Franck Péprax, *Âge et politique*, Annick Percheron and René Rémond (dir.), Paris, Economica, 1991, “La vie politique”, pp. 85-110.

16, one option seems to emerge: 82% would accept the idea of lowering the vote at 16 *if it was not obligatory*. This option covers a variety of opinions, but represents well the ambiguity of the participants. And clearly, it represents the position of our first category of young people. All of them are in favour of this option. People who have a more developed form of argumentation, on the contrary, only agree at 68%.

In our opinion, those results show the interest of the perspective developed in this large research protocol. Of course, we are aware that several analyses have to be done. The forms of “political reasoning”, roughly presented here, need to be more defined, with the help of Rosenberg’s framework. Qualitative and quantitative analyses must also work together. And the challenge will be to transpose those patterns of arguments to the issue of political interest in general, and more importantly, to the understanding of political socialisation.

However, we are convinced – and we hope this paper shows our point – that the dialectical process of the worlds of reference, as conceptualized by scholars like Jan Piaget, has to be approached in a different perspective. The study of political reasoning is a path in this direction.

Appendix I

Description of the sample

For this paper, we have only considered the 182 young people who filled the first and the second version of the questionnaire, in the beginning and at the end of the day. This “sample” has not been selected randomly and our results cannot be generalised to the whole population of the 16-22 year-olds in Wallonia and in Brussels. As only 300 young people among the 400 initially selected in various schools came for the first part of the day, the “self-selection” is a factor that cannot be neglected. However, for the purpose of the present analysis, the effect is marginal.

Among the 182 young people, 62% are female; 44% are under 18 year-old; 92% are Belgian (the father of 77% of them is born in Belgium); 60% are in the regular high school program).

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