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“Political World Is Just Not My World” – Results from discussions about electoral participation in Liege

Bernard Fournier (*Political Scientist and Researcher*)

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 to measure the changes in opinion. But those changes are not the most interesting ones in this research. When we analysed the discussions of the young people during the focus groups, it was possible to bring out real *patterns of political reasoning* in the discourses. The first results presented here open interesting research paths, particularly for the study of political socialization.

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. Un même questionnaire a été distribué avant et après la rencontre pour mesurer les changements d'opinions. Ces derniers ne sont pas les résultats les plus intéressants. En analysant plus en détails les discussions des jeunes dans les focus groups qui ont eu lieu à la mi-journée, il a été possible de dégager de véritables *structures de raisonnement* dans les discours des jeunes. Les premiers résultats présentés ici ouvrent des voies de recherche intéressantes, surtout dans l'étude dans le champ de la socialisation politique.

For several years, probably under the dominant influence of the rational choice theory in political science, political socialization 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

· Until recently, Bernard Fournier was 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, Stéphanie Meuleman et Quentin Genard who assist us in this research. We also would like to thank Geoffrey Grandjean, *Aspirant du Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique-FNRS*, for his support. We are thankful of the principals and the teachers of the schools for their enthusiastic involvement in this project, the 200 students who spent a whole day discussing politics, as well as the Athénée Maurice Destenay of Liège and particularly its vice-principal. About 60 animators also helped to make our project come true. First versions of this paper were discussed during the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the ECPR in Münster (Germany) on March 2010, at the Canadian Political

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Bernard Fournier [Bernard.Fournier@me.com]

people seems interested in politics these days. For example, our research team has supervised in the beginning of 2009 an important survey which indicates that only one third of the 16- to 21-year-old young people, in Wallonia and in the Brussels Region, are very or rather interested in politics¹. These results will not surprise specialists of the issue². Beyond this observation, frequently repeated, the main question remains how to understand, even to *explain* such attitudes and behaviours. This is why a careful thought on the socialization process to politics is such important.

Our research concern about how to illustrate the *plurality of attitudes* among young people towards politics – a concern we have since our first research in the beginning of the nineties – leads us to appreciate carefully the various theoretical perspectives in the field of political socialization. Indeed, when discussing the relationship between youth and politics, it is so tempting to present “youth” as a kind of homogeneous reality. Of course, scholars *know* that gross generalizations never constitute an adequate synthesis of reality and we tend to avoid them. However, we are more easily 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). We think this comparison is broadly accepted because many scholars share a deterministic approach towards socialization: basically, those scholars accept the views that the environment, various external factors *shape* the attitudes and behaviours of individuals. When a statistical relationship is noticed between

Science Association Annual Conference in Montreal on June 2010, and at a seminar on lowering the age to Vote to 16, held in Brussels in September 23-24, 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 Declaire, 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 »*, Brussels, 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

such an *external variable* (as the social situations represented by the concept of “gender”) and an attitude (“political interest”, for example), it likes if they have *revealed* the result of a specific mechanism of socialization. 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. The problem of 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 socialization. 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 behavior? According to another conception of socialization processes suggested by Jean Piaget, among others⁵, we put

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 socialization. However, we think that for many scholars who work in political socialization, the main concern is only to show a *reproduction* of attitudes and behaviors 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 socialization 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 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

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 plurality 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 idea we would like to introduce in the present discussion — because we do not see it in the image that simply compares *boys* and *girls* — is the *mosaic of possibilities*. Because this theoretical perspective of the political socialization processes does not consider this plurality, 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 (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. According

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.

to Rosenberg, there are three structures of reasoning: the sequential thought (when people only track the world as it appears before them), the linear thought (when people analyze the activity they observe in placing one action in relation to another), and the systematic thought (when they juxtapose the relationships that exist between actions, considering each of them in its context)⁸. We will introduce them more in details later.

Trying to study those mechanisms of socialization was the idea behind a large research project we have conducted in Liège 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 so long ago – where the 16-year threshold was finally adopted⁹ – this question has not been really debated in most of Western democracies¹⁰. 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 age, for example¹¹). 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 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

⁸ Rosenberg. “The Structure of Political Thinking”, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 32 (3), 1988, pp. 539-566.

⁹ « L’Autriche instaure le vote à 16 ans », *Le Monde*, March 20th, 2007.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ V. Rocour, “Les jeunes ne veulent pas voter à 16 ans”, *La Libre Belgique*, November 3rd, 2007, p. 8.

young people of the same age?

For years, specialists of surveys had to face practical and theoretical problems related to public opinion polls¹² and developed several research protocols which create room for debate on diverse social and political questions and following which better *informed* opinions could be gathered¹³. 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 our research project.

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* could be an interesting method to identify some patterns of “political reasoning” among participants.

Two specific methods structure this large research project. We will not refer to all of them in this paper, but it is important to identify them: first, a classic survey, executed by an independent firm (*Dedicated Research*); second, a whole day of debates and discussions inspired by the method of « citizen conferences »¹⁴ gathering around 200 young people in Liège. This day was structured between two surveys (one distributed in the beginning of the day and the same one, at the end, to measure the evolution) and a 90-minute focus groups in the beginning of the afternoon, after a panel with experts presenting both sides of the issue in the morning. For the purpose of this paper, only a small part of the focus groups was

¹² And particularly James S. Fishkin (*The Voice of the People : Public Opinion and Democracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995).

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ This term seems here more suitable, but several concepts cover similar methods, like the method of

analysed. Thus, it is more the *potential* of such analysis we would like to discuss during this panel, and to see if it would be possible to open a different subfield of research in political socialization based on the research on political reasoning.

So, on October 28th, 2009, an event gathering 182 young people took place in Liège. The whole day was organized to fit as close as possible to the initial design¹⁵. 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 in favour and two against the lowering of the right to vote at 16 and exchanged their opinion with the young people present¹⁶. 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

Deliberative Polling®.

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 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 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

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 groups¹⁷.

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: only 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 would not really make young people more responsible.

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.

¹⁷ 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.

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 very 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 socialization framework here, in a country where voting is compulsory? 85% of the respondents thinks this obligation should be kept. Those results clearly surprised us.

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

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.

(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 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”.

Globally speaking, the 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 clearly *irrelevant* to think in terms of numbers here) are only a few. 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. Finally, other people are more “middle of the road”: they present an interest, develop some arguments, but there is nothing “specific” in their intervention.

Of course, we realize how those “attitudes” during the discussion provide only the beginning of a typology. We read three focus groups on the light of Shawn W. Rosenberg’s typology of individual structures of reasoning. For him, as we said before, the structures of reasoning reveal “the interplay between social environments and subjectivity in the development of cognition”¹⁹.

¹⁹ Shawn W. Rosenberg, *Reason, Ideology, and Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 2.

Five young people took part in the first focus group²⁰, three girls and two boys. They came from 3 different schools²¹; nine young people took part in the second focus group (all girls coming from the same schools than the previous focus group); finally, 11 young people took part in the last focus group (7 girls and 4 boys). In the beginning of the day, all of them were against lowering the right to vote from 18 to 16; at the end, 3 of them agreed (all from the second focus group).

First of all, the definition of Rosenberg's structure of reasoning as to be remembered:

1. ***Sequential political reasoning***: “the sequential thinker reasons by tracking the world which appears before him”²². He asks to himself: “What do I see in from of me?” and *describe* this reality. This reality is not conceptualised nor generalized to new circumstances: this type of thought is characterised by the description of the present. Rosenberg use a metaphor to describe it: the stars in the sky:

In sequential thought, the night sky is comprehended as its appears. It is a blackness punctuated by a host of stars. The stars themselves are simply there and do nothing. Occasionally, there may be a shooting star. This will be noticed and the trajectory of this unusual event may be remembered. Whatever happens up there, however, is never really a part of the immediate events of daily life. The night sky is thus a remote world, one that is rarely a matter of any particular consideration²³.

2. ***Linear political reasoning***: “linear thinkers analyze the sequence of activity they observe. They do so by focusing on specific actions and then placing one in relation to another”²⁴. For Rosenberg, this type of thought is the most common one. The individual asks to himself: “What causes this observation?”. Rosenberg use the example of the play at the theatre to explain it:

²⁰ As we said before, this is only a first analysis of the data. We have more than twenty focus groups to analyse.

²¹ We tend to make sure that the schools respect the sociocultural diversity in the French Community of Belgium. Students came from private and public schools, in Liège, Namur and Brussels, from general, professional or technical programs of study.

²² Rosenberg, *Reason, Ideology, and Politics, op. cit.*, p. 102.

²³ Rosenberg, *The Not So Common Sense. Differences in How People Judge Social and Political Life*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 242-243.

²⁴ Rosenberg, *Reason, Ideology, and Politics, op. cit.*, p. 116.

As reconstructed in linear terms, politics is something of a play, one already written by gods, fate, or nature herself. [...] The action unfolds in several rooms simultaneously, but a member of the audience can observe only what is in one room at a time. From the perspective of linear reasoning, the action occurring in the different rooms is not integrated. Rather the play is a collage of fragments; each room has its own space and time. The events in a given room are understood relative to one another. They are related to events in other rooms only when the observer can actually watch how action in one room leads to or from action occurring in another²⁵.

3. ***Systematic political reasoning***: “Systematic thinkers juxtapose relationships among actions and beliefs”²⁶. In political terms, an individual who analyse a political event with systematic reasoning will have a very elaborated conception of politics. In this case, the individual will ask to himself: “What are the conditions under which the relation I observe takes place? Which function does an activity or an interaction play in a system?” This type of thought exists without any temporal dimension.

It is important to note that, according to Rosenberg, there is no hierarchy between those three types of thought and the same individual could develop all of them regarding the different issues, for example.

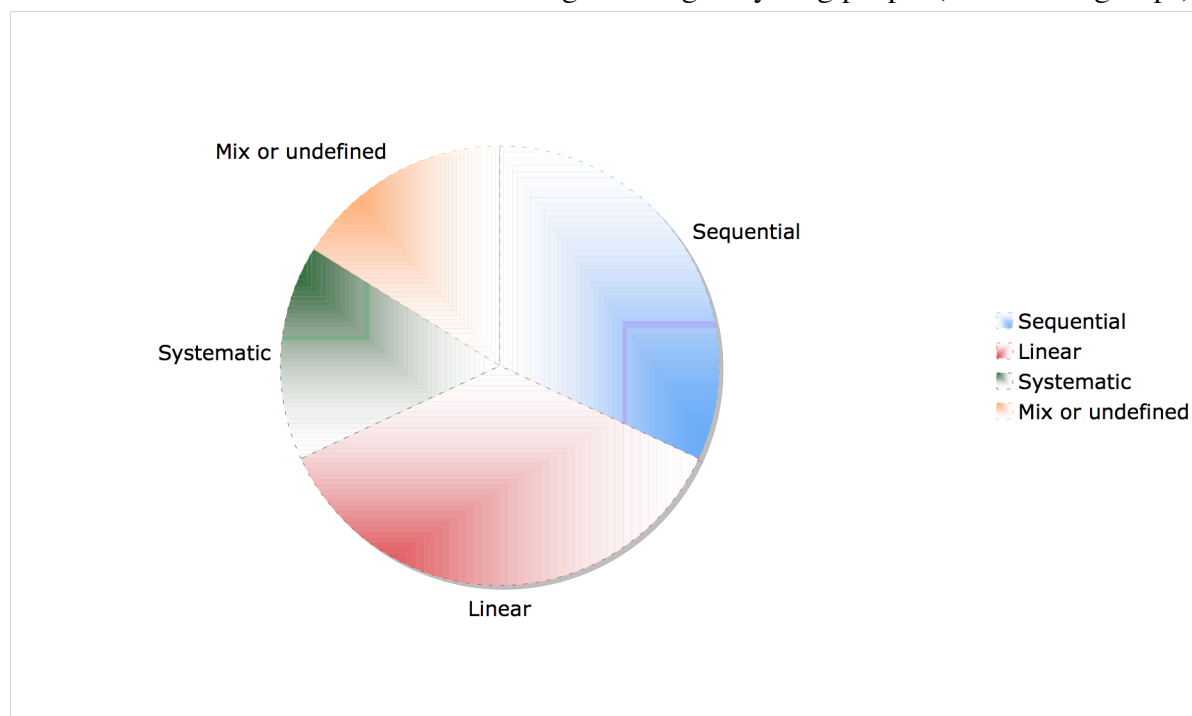
As several focus groups were held at the same time, this activity had to be structured and a framework of discussion was given to the leader of the group. After the event, we realise how this organisation of the discussion prevented to produce more interaction between young people and open their discourses to reveal more “structures of thought”. However, we have to keep in mind that the topic of lowering the right to vote at 16 year-old is a difficult topic. So, the discussion was divided in four large topics: first, we has them to give their first impression after the general discussion with the “experts”; second, we ask them how they see their place in the society as young people today. The idea was to open a broader discussion on politics issues, political involvement, and so on and to open to the third topic: in their vision of politics, how the idea of voting at 16 takes place. Finally, in a fourth section, we asked them if their opinion about the right to vote had changed and why.

²⁵ Rosenberg, *The Not So Common Sense. op. cit.*, pp. 117.

In this first analysis, it appears that the second and third sections were the most interesting: there were large enough to give the opportunity for many participant to develop some arguments. And we finally decided not to consider the last part of the discussion – the question was to oriented.

Generally speaking, an individual will be constant during the 90-minute of discussion. He will develop a linear structure of thought for the three topics, for example. We decided to bring all of them in a single figure – although some interesting differences will be analysed later.

Figure 1
Distribution of the three structures of thought among the young people (three focus groups)



This figure is blurred on purpose: we do not want to give a *quantitative* impression during the analysis of the results. Also, in some cases (and it was reflected in the “mix or undefined” segment), it is not always easy to characterise young people’s discourses. It is important to precise that the division between sequential, linear, and systematic, according to

²⁶ Rosenberg, *Reason, Ideology, and Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Rosenberg's definition, was the result of an independent review by four persons who analysed the three focus groups with the same criteria²⁷.

However, when a person was characterised as *sequential*, it was clear that he only thought each topic as if he only *notice* something. He will *record*, for example, that his friends will be against the right to vote at 16, or that the majority was against it, and that was all: "For me, personally, politics and I are two things. I was against the right to vote at 16 in the beginning and I think I will still be against at the end. That's all".

When a person was characterised as *linear*, two concepts (sometimes a clear chain of events) were proposed in the discussion by the young people. One of the most frequent, for example, was the relationship between the lack of information, the interest in politics and the vote. A close analysis of those discourses is really interesting: the non-involvement of the young people appears easily explained, without seeing the social consequences of the actions – or the reasons why young people in general act this way: "Frankly, I think it is more a question... not a question of interest, but a question of information. It is really at the basis of everything. We cannot be interested in politics if we do not have good information. It is like if we had done nothing".

Finally, a young people will be characterised as *systematic* when his or her thought will be developed, when several examples will be mentioned, when those examples will not concern him or her directly and when those example will show a large knowledge. This is not always easy to detect and we did not necessary expect a lot of systematic thinking in the rigid scheme we adopted. Politics is not a very popular topic either and a lot of young people do not have a lot to say. However, some discourses were clearly systematic: "Yes, for example, when we listen to some teachers who talk very well. Last year, I preferred to assist to the

²⁷ For this analysis, we are sincerely grateful to Stéphanie Meuleman, Quentin Genard et Geoffrey Grandjean.

ethics class instead of the religion one. The teacher argued very well.” Then, he explained that the class asked her why she did not want to be involved in politics. She explained it and argued about the role of movements and associations instead. He also talked about the politics of Nicolas Sarkozy: “If Sarkozy will run the next elections again, look for the different aspects of his personality, the different ways he exerts his power...”. This kind of discourse was not read often in the focus groups.

Several other excerpts can be given to show the interest of the scheme of analysis. Of course, other variables have to be taken into account: 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? Is the discussion revealed only personal experiences on the issue or a more structured mode of thinking?

Finally, let’s say that interestingly, the three young people who change their mind during the discussion were not only people who developed a *systematic* thought. On the contrary, and perhaps surprisingly, one was *sequential*, one was *linear* and the last one *systematic*. This is an interesting finding: it is not because you tend to compare ideas, to analyse systematically the pros and the cons that you will change your mind during a day like that. Let’s resume our findings with their discourses:

- *sequential*: “Yes, me, I also found the debate interesting and as number 089, I was against when I arrived here, but with the arguments I heard, people were convincing, so I think I am changing for... It was interesting”.

- *linear*: “When I arrived here I was against and the arguments changed my mind. I am in

favour now, but only if it is not an obligation²⁸. Like that, young people will have a stronger voice and decisions will be taken for a longer term, for the future. And I will gain more maturity somewhere regarding politics and our future”.

- *systematic*: “Being mature, it is an individual issue because some people can be mature at 16 and feeling themselves as citizen when others are not like that at all. It is a question of information, of education for the development of different tools and keeping, having a critical mind... to be able to compare the information we receive, otherwise, it is useless.. We are not able to judge this information”.

Those three structures of thought, 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.

²⁸ Voting is mandatory in Belgium.

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 18²⁹. 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 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

²⁹ “La majorité politique: étude des débats parlementaires sur la fixation d’un seuil”, with Franck Pépratx, *Âge et politique*, Annick Percheron and René Rémond (dir.), Paris, Economica, 1991, “La vie politique”, pp. 85-110.

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 socialization.

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 Jean 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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