

# The Ethical Dilemma of Youth Politics

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## ABSTRACT

Youth politics is celebrated locally, nationally and internationally. In this paper, I argue that such celebration must be deemed unethical. First, I assert that the vitality and sustainability of any democracy is contingent upon the people's ability to reason and think critically. Second, I make the case that youth politics exerts negative effects on the members' ability to reason and think critically. Then I approach Norway as a case study, exemplifying how these negative effects may play out. Thus one is faced with the following dilemma: It is regarded ethically imperative to promote political engagement amongst youth, but it is unethical to promote youth politics.



The West in general, and perhaps Europe in particular, tends to celebrate youth politics as a vital force of democracy. This is reflected in the current literature on youth politics, which appears to be almost exclusively descriptive (e.g. 'What is the level of youth politics in country x?') or positively normative (e.g. 'How can country x heighten engagement in youth politics?'). Various youth councils and parliaments are encouraged and empowered by government as well as civil society, both at local and national level. This is also the case internationally. The UN, for instance, demands that youth politics be stimulated: "[Such] engagement and participation is central to

achieving sustainable human development.”<sup>1</sup> I will approach the rationale of this collective celebration as a syllogism, defining ‘youth politics’ as organized political engagement of people aged 13—25:

- P<sub>1</sub> Youth politics increases the level of political engagement;
- P<sub>2</sub> Political engagement promotes democratic vitality and sustainability; *thus*
- C<sub>1</sub> Youth politics promotes democratic vitality and sustainability.

In this paper I am interested in challenging P<sub>2</sub>. Does the increased political engagement due to youth politics promote democratic vitality and sustainability? For the sake of argument, I will posit the trueness of P<sub>1</sub>. When it comes to P<sub>2</sub>: It would be difficult to argue that all forms of political engagement promote democratic vitality and sustainability (e.g. authoritarian neo-Nazism or revolutionary Communism). Hence, I shall take it for granted that P<sub>2</sub> is constrained to activities and policies compatible with democracy.

I intend to demonstrate that youth politics exerts a negative influence on democratic vitality and sustainability, and thus, that it is unethical to continue the current celebration of youth politics. This requires doing four things: In section one, I will develop a methodology for evaluating whether something promotes democratic vitality and sustainability or not. In section two, I will apply this methodology to youth politics. In section three, I will present empirical indicators from Norway, highlighting some evident problems of youth politics. Finally, in section four, I will sketch solutions to these problems.

## I. METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATING EFFECTS ON DEMOCRATIC VITALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY.

How does one evaluate effects on democratic vitality and sustainability (henceforth simply ‘DVS’)? First, I will assume that there exists some objective theory of DVS, though I will not attempt to detail any such theory here. Second, I will assume that any normally functioning person is able to rank a selection of democracies according to their DVS, given that he or she is provided with sufficient data (e.g. crime and corruption rates): even though one might not agree on the exact details of the

1. One of UNDP’s “strategic entry points to enhance youth engagement and participation” is to strengthen “youth political participation at all levels.” Bureau for Development Policy. (2014).

objective theory of DVS, shared intuitions enable different persons to identify vital and sustainable democracies. Third, I will assume that any given democracy seeks to maximize its potential DVS.

My method is simply to focus on the moment of election, these critical junctures of democracies. To a significant extent, the DVS is determined at such junctures. And here, at the junctures, the democracy faces the problem of maximizing DVS. I assert that maximizing DVS is contingent on rationality *qua* reason and critical thinking. Thus, in order to evaluate the effects on DVS, I shall isolate the mechanisms of rationality. In any given election, there are two such mechanisms at work. First, the more reasonable and critically thinking the *voters* are, the more likely they are to choose the candidate who produces maximum DVS, given the set of electable candidates. In short, reasonable and critically thinking voters will be better equipped to identify the most suitable of the electable candidates. Second, the more reasonable and critically thinking the *candidates* are, the more DVS they will produce. In short, the candidates will be better equipped to govern in a way that promotes democratic vitality and sustainability.

Any method must simplify reality in order to isolate significant factors, but why isolate reason and critical thinking? Reason enables the voters and candidates to move consistently from a set of premises to their conclusions. Reason also captures general comprehension as well as the aptitude for orderly thinking. Some of the premises that reason builds upon will be grounded in ideological axioms. Critical thinking enables voters and candidates to assess such ideological axioms and their application in the current context. A critically thinking person must be open to adjust axioms according to new knowledge. It does not imply, however, that his or her convictions move towards some fictitious notion of the ‘perfect set axioms.’

Perhaps the emphasis on reason and critical thinking is justifiable for the voter, whose problem is to identify the most suitable candidate. But surely, some might infer, political virtues like compassion or prudence must, at least to *some* degree, affect the DVS that the candidate is likely to achieve? Most definitely—but the efficacy of all such virtues is contingent on reason and critical thinking. For instance, for a political candidate, it is never enough simply to exhibit compassionate intentions. To be of political value, compassionate intentions must materialize in the form of actions and policies that exert real impact on the relevant people. And the movement from ‘compassionate intentions’ to ‘real impact’ is to a large extent determined by reason

and critical thinking. The candidate must ask and answer questions such as: What effects ought to be realized? What measures do actually realize these effects?

For P<sub>2</sub> to be true, then, one of two conditions must befall. Either youth politics exerts a net positive effect on the reason and critical thinking of voters and candidates, or there is a massive benefit to political virtues, such that DVS increases despite reduction in reason and critical thinking. In the next section I will argue that neither befalls.

## II. EFFECTS OF YOUTH POLITICS ON REASON AND CRITICAL THINKING.

It is quite likely that persons affiliated with youth politics experience an increased level of political engagement. But how does the increased political engagement due to youth politics affect reason and critical thinking? To this I now turn: I will argue that youth politics exerts two negative interrelated effects on DVS, those of *camaraderie* and *conformity*.

The first negative effect is related to camaraderie. When youths are introduced to politics, this usually happens through the youth wing of a political party. Which party one gets involved with is determined by the preferences held at that particular age, naturally heavily influenced by parents and friends.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is arbitrary what political community the youth gets engaged with. I use ‘arbitrary’ in the sense that it is not a choice based on reason and critical thinking. It obtains, however, that reason and critical thinking cannot be achieved in a vacuum. Therefore, if the person does not engage in youth politics, he or she will certainly be influenced by other normative forces. Why should this be more desirable? The profound problem with youth politics is that the members develop relationships which inevitably depend on loyalty to a particular ideology and set of policies—the very fabric of the political community is political loyalty. In such a community, it seems challenging to pursue reason and critical thinking. This can be illustrated by the way in which parties tend to equate certain policies with the political ideology itself. I believe, for instance, this explains why some parties are so slow to re-evaluate their policies on drug criminalization. A simplified account of their rationale might be: people suffer from drug abuse; there is less drug abuse if drugs are criminalized; therefore drugs should stay criminal-

2. A Norwegian report suggests that the influence of parents might be particularly strong: “Det vi vet er at den politiske sosialisering i hjemmet har stor betydning for de unges deltakelsesmønster.” Ødegård & Bergh (2011).

ized. But an accumulating body of empirical evidence demonstrates that the second premise is unjustified. That is, it is not necessarily the case that there will be less drug abuse if drugs are criminalized.<sup>3</sup> Why do not the parties adjust their conclusion? Perhaps they simply do not believe that the empirical evidence refutes the second premise. However, the lack of willingness to properly re-evaluate their conclusion suggest that the parties do not seriously take into account the new evidence. Why? One reason might be that the parties have made policies on drug criminalization an integrated aspect of their ideological core. This would imply that the members of the party do not only have to accept such irrationality, but must also internalize it: members might argue and disagree on the party's peripheral policies, but it is difficult to challenge the very core of the party's ideology if one is to remain in good standing within the party. Challenges against the core of the party's ideology inevitably pose an existential threat to the community. Furthermore, because of camaraderie, there are also barriers to leaving the community, as it entails leaving a social community that partakes in identity formation.

The second negative effect is related to conformity, and comes as a consequence of camaraderie. The fabric of the political community is, as already mentioned, political loyalty. Hence, a political community naturally develops mechanisms for defending its ideology against challenging arguments, rather than evaluating the counter arguments on their own merit. This is a problem related to all sorts of party politics. Some might even argue that youth wings are able to initiate changes in the parties (e.g. on drug policies), and thus acts against conformity. And this might indeed be true, to some very limited extent. But this misses the most important point: in order to progress within the party, one has to conform to the party line. That is, members desiring political careers within the party must conform to certain views and adopt them as their own, which is a process that is initiated in the youth wing. After all, if the person does not conform, why should he or she progress to represent the party at large? Those who hold and favor views in line with the community as a whole rise through the ranks, gain more influence over the community, and thus strengthen the effect of conformity. The negative effects on reason and critical thinking are obvious.

I cannot think of any massive gain in political virtues that might justify the negative effects of camaraderie and conformity. Thus, one is faced with the following dilemma: A vital and sustainable democracy requires the engagement of youth,

3. See for instance the following summary of empirical evidence accumulated after Portugal decriminalized the possession of all drugs in personal use: Transform (2014).

but youth politics acts negatively on the democratic vitality and sustainability. Accordingly, it might be regarded as ethically imperative to promote political engagement amongst youth, but to promote youth politics must be regarded as unethical. I will now present some empirical indicators from Norway, highlighting the problems.

### III. NORWAY AS CASE STUDY.

In this section, I will present empirical indicators from Norway.<sup>4</sup> With regards to Norwegians in general, only a small fraction have been involved in youth politics (ca 3%)<sup>5</sup>, implying that the effects on voters are negligible, interesting only from a theoretical perspective. With regards to the candidates, however, the story is quite another.

There is a massive overrepresentation of ministers with a background in youth politics (ca 63%) compared with the population in general. From this point on, I will therefore focus on the negative effects of youth politics on the set of electable candidates. In section one, I argued that one way of increasing DVS is by increasing the suitability of the candidates that constitute the set of electable candidates. And it seems unreasonable to assume that Norway cannot achieve a more suitable set of electable candidates. That is to say, it seems unreasonable to assume that the most suitable candidates signal *de facto* superiority by engaging in youth politics.

One can therefore distinguish between two negative effects of youth politics. First, the direct effect: Elected candidates will be influenced negatively by camaraderie and conformity, as explained in the previous section. Second, the indirect effect: There appears to be some undesirable selection barriers which disincentivize potentially more suitable candidates to partake in politics. An example of such a barrier might be the network required to rise in the ranks; people that have not engaged in youth politics will be at a substantial disadvantage compared to those who have. How can one resolve these problems? That is what I will address in the final section.

4. I characterize the findings as empirical 'indicators' as the data set is too small to amount to that which is commonly understood by empirical 'evidence.'

5. The data on 'Norwegians in general' is extracted from The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (2015).



#### IV. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS TO THE DEMOCRATIC DILEMMA AND CONCLUDING REMARKS.

One thing is clear: The current celebration of youth politics must be regarded as unethical, as it enforces negative effects on DVS. This implies that society in general needs to make youth politics less attractive, for instance by paying less attention to the opinions of youth politicians. Other things are less clear, like what policies can be implemented in order to reduce youth politics? The most obvious policy would be to forbid youth from organizing politically. This would naturally be highly objectionable, as it gravely violates fundamental democratic principles such as freedom of speech and organization.

It seems like camaraderie and conformity become problems mainly because there is a career continuum from ‘engaged in youth politics’ to ‘elected minister.’ And in order to move along this continuum—that is, for the career-minded youth to rise through the ranks—negative effects kick in. A solution needs to create some sort of discontinuum. This may be done by setting a minimum age limit to holding any sort of public office. One might also require non-party work experience for eligibility in order to create a similar effect. By creating such discontinuums, one can potentially counter both the direct and indirect negative effects of youth politics. First, one might break down some of the deep relational commitments the members have to their political communities. Second, one might break down some of the barriers preventing potentially better candidates from getting involved with politics, that is candidates who have not been involved in youth politics.

It goes without saying that the effect of youth politics on democratic vitality and sustainability must be explored by further empirical research and philosophical inquiry. So must potential solutions. This paper has sought to initiate such research and discussion by challenging the collective celebration of youth politics.

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