

Young blood: needed or discarded?

Untangling party strategies for the selection of young candidates

First draft: all comments very welcome

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Young people are underrepresented in parliaments around the world, while the biggest number of MPs is middle-aged. Research indicates that the young are three times more present in the population than in elected assemblies (Sundström & Stockemer, 2021), demonstrating the existing marginalization of young people in politics, much more than women's underrepresentation which has so far received most attention in representation studies. Political parties as gatekeepers to the elected offices are usually pointed as those who can make a difference in terms of group representation in politics. As it arguably seems that the younger generation is not granted equal opportunities to represent citizens, we investigate in this paper the reasons why parties do (not) select young people for parliamentary elections. In-depth interviews have been conducted with 32 key informants from six Belgian parties (Groen, CD&V, Vlaams Belang, MR, Ecolo, PS) responsible for candidate selection in the Belgian PR electoral system. Their insights allow us to assess young candidates' assets and flaws as regards to electoral popularity, political skills and ticket-balancing value. Our study also sheds light on parties' strategic candidate selection decisions regarding long-term people's management and openness to youth wings' lobbying efforts.

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Introduction

Parliaments all over the world are dominated by middle-aged people, leaving little room for the youth, that face barriers on the road towards an elected office, starting from the candidacy stage. Although there is evidence that the percentage of young people in parliaments is increasing, the considerable underrepresentation of the youth remains in practice (Belschner, 2022; Freire, Pedrazzani, Tsatsanis, Coller, & Segatti, 2021; Krook & Nugent, 2018). Research indicates that the young are three times more present in the population than in the country's parliaments (Sundström & Stockemer, 2021). By comparison, whereas women are also underrepresented, they are 'only' one to two times more present in the population than in parliament. The young have thus been marginalized in politics at an even higher rate than women. In particular, young women are undersold in political mandates (Belschner, 2022; Stockemer & Sundström, 2019).

Many scholars rightly focus on the lack of women in politics (Celis, Eelbode, & Wauters, 2013; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Lühiste & Kenny, 2016; Matland, 2005; Matland & Taylor, 1997), and increasingly also on the shortage of ethnic minorities in political institutions (Bird, 2014; Casellas & Wallace, 2015; Celis et al., 2013; Pantoja & Segura, 2003). At the same time, the underrepresentation of the younger generation has less frequently been investigated (Sundström & Stockemer, 2021), just like the representation of the older generation. This latter underrepresentation falls out of the scope of this research as this likely stems from other causes and produces other empirical realities (Freire et al., 2021).

It has been demonstrated that the descriptive representation of various social groups in politics yields positive effects on a system's legitimacy (Arnesen & Peters, 2018; Childs & Cowley, 2011; Pontusson, 2015; Williams, 2000). Seeing similar people in the parliament boosts the quality perceptions of democracy. Representing different social groups in decision-making enhances the stability and the democratic character of a state (Lafont, 2019; Moser, 2008). It has been empirically stated that the more diversity in a legislative body, the better the chance to be heard and the more authority and legitimacy these bodies possess (Pantoja & Segura, 2003; Phillips, 1996; Pontusson, 2015; Williams, 2000). In addition, descriptive representation might be conducive to substantive representation, i.e. how ideas are represented in parliament (Celis et al., 2013; Childs & Cowley, 2011; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Since young people have politically different interests than older generations (Sevi, 2021; Tremmel, Mason, Godli, & Dimitrijoski, 2015), their descriptive and possibly substantive underrepresentation in representative bodies can be seen as a democratic deficit. Further than that, not adequately representing the youth (and its interests) even

contains a risk of them becoming indifferent to politics (Sundström & Stockemer, 2021), what is problematic as they are by definition a country's future. Therefore, we need to uncover why young people are these days less present in politics than their middle-aged counterparts.

A candidacy is the unmissable step for someone willing to take the political plunge. In most systems, political parties are in charge of candidate selection (Rahat, 2007). This is however no easy task for them, as interest and ambition to enter politics is waning. Considering that a great deal of the candidates are usually selected among the party members (Abramson & Claggett, 2001; Dalton, McAllister, & Wattenberg, 2000; Devroe, de Vet, Van de Voorde, & Wauters, 2019), fluctuating party membership figures (Dalton et al., 2000; Kölln, 2016) make that parties have more and more to recruit instead of selecting. Selectors have to stimulate candidacies in order to attract a desired specific profile rather than making a choice among a plethora of interested aspirants (Vandeleene & Sandri, 2019). Parties may wish to recruit young faces next to the (older) politicians in place (Praino & Stockemer, 2019). Age definitely plays an important role in candidate selection (Cogels, 2020b), but we do not know how. In their search for young profiles, political parties may ponder aspirants' electoral potential, skills or democratic values (Devroe et al., 2019; Vandeleene, Forthcoming). Those criteria used by selectors for selecting candidates constitute our interest for this paper. What are selectors looking for and what makes young people (not) good candidates to be selected in the run-up to legislative elections?

We investigate this question in Belgium, a PR flexible list electoral system with preferential voting, implying that parties have to select a group of candidates to fill in electoral lists, and that voters get the chance to express a preference for one or several of them, although being highly ranked on the list remains the best way to get into parliament. Young people are underrepresented in Belgian parliaments. Cogels (2020b) showed that on candidate lists for the Belgian federal elections in 2019, in all parties, the 18 to 22 population was underrepresented. The 22 to 32 age group was in most, but not all, parties underrepresented as well.

To uncover the rationale behind candidate selection, one best adopts a neo-institutionalist perspective. In this research, we thus rely on 32 in-depth interviews with party selectors. We study six culturally, ideologically and organisationally different Belgian political parties (Groen, CD&V, Vlaams Belang, MR, Ecolo, PS). These parties also differ in terms of youth representation on lists (from 16,8% for Vlaams Belang to 32,3% for Ecolo).

This research focusses on the way that parties understand political equality of the citizens, in terms of candidate selection. Specifically we attempt to understand the way that the younger generation is treated before the election takes place. Power relations are shown by parties commitment to realise diversity in politics (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). Through the composition of the political elites the mechanisms of representation can possibly be uncovered (Celis, Meier, Wauters, Devos, & Mus, 2010; Crowther & Matonyte, 2007; Reynaert, 2000). Our study additionally enhances the understanding of the quality and range of democracy (Celis et al., 2010; Crowther & Matonyte, 2007; Fiers & Reynaert, 2006; Put, 2015).

Theoretical approach: Representing the youth

Group representation

Representative democratic processes imply that citizens are involved into political decision-making through representatives (Celis et al., 2010; Pitkin, 1967). Members of parliament act on behalf of the absent citizens. Pitkin (1967) distinguishes four dimensions of representation: (1) descriptive, (2) symbolic, (3) substantive and (4) formal representation. The first dimension is particularly relevant for this research, namely descriptive representation brings up the normative ideal that parliaments should resemble the citizenry. Much of the current literature assumes that representatives that belong to a certain group are believed to share its experiences and viewpoints and motivated to defend the group interests in policy-making (Mansbridge, 2003; Sobolewska, McKee, & Campbell, 2018). This was outlined by the *politics of presence* theory of Phillips (1998). A large and growing body of literature on descriptive representation in terms of age pays particular attention to trends in age groups presence in parliaments (Belschner, 2022; Cogels, 2020b; Sundström & Stockemer, 2021). Secondly, symbolic representation refers to feelings and actions of the ones being represented but not present in the elected bodies. This dimension refers to the acceptance of citizens towards representatives. The third dimension, substantive representation, focusses on the representatives' behaviour that should be in line with a social group's interests, needs and wishes (Pitkin, 1967, 2004). For instance a 75-year-old can also protect the interests of a 25-year-old. Fourth, and finally, formal representation states that elected politicians have been given a binding mandate from citizens through casting their vote. So, whenever elected democratically, representatives formally have the assignment to represent the community.

Of course all these dimensions are related to one another. Descriptive representation and interaction with peers generates some sort of mutual trust, which can enhance substantive and symbolic representation. Many scholars (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Childs & Cowley, 2011; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995) believe that descriptive representation is useful because of its symbolic dimension. Right because of this power it is important for young people to feel represented and recognized. Role models are crucial when a group is being underrepresented, since it enhances the legitimacy of the representation (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011; Janssen, Chiru, & De Winter, 2019). Earlier research concludes that when youngsters become more present in policy-making bodies, young citizens also have more positive attitudes regarding government and politics in general (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018a). Therefore symbolic representation seems to be a crucial element in our democracy.

However, critiques on the convenience of descriptive representation are common (Mansbridge, 1999; Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000). First it can possibly ignore certain groups in society because other groups' voices sound louder (Dovi, 2009; Young, 2002). These opponents consider substantive representation as more pivotal. They contend that there is too few empirical evidence showing a direct link between social characteristics of electoral candidates and their political actions (Burrell, 1996; Reingold & Harrell, 2010; Swers, 2002). These scholars suggest that it may be true that the youth shares common experiences, however that does not define their opinions (Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000). In sum, elected politicians' identity is not necessarily related to their behaviour in the elected body. As an illustration, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a thirty-something year old US Member of the House of Representatives) does not represent the interests of all thirty-year old people in America. This leads us to the critical aspect of representational barriers that obstruct representation (Hughes, 2011). This could be particularly true for young politicians, since they have to compete against older generations who are believed to have more (life) experience and thus the qualities for holding a political mandate.

As noted by Put and Maddens (2013, p. 49), "important determinants of the bias in the composition of parliaments are the electoral system and the candidate selection procedures in the parties". In this research, we therefore focus on the way parties select candidates, while keeping the electoral system variations constant. We already made clear how the four dimensions of representation are crucial to understand the patterns of candidate selection. It is now necessary to explain the course of candidate selection procedures.

Youngsters' opportunities in the candidate selection process

Norris, Katz, and Crotty (2006) describe the candidate selection process in three stages: 1) certification, 2) nomination and 3) election. In the first certification stage, the political context of an election determines who is 'eligible', so who is entitled to run for office. In the nomination stage, the game of supply and demand generates the effective candidates. In the election stage finally, voters choose who may effectively represent them. Age requirements and expectations about the election will determine how party selectorates value candidates' age.

Important to note is that candidate selection cannot be understood without considering its informal dimension. The formal dimension is registered in party rules and electoral laws, but it only displays one part of the reality. The informal dimension with for example informal values, norms and habits, also influences chances of selection. These might be more difficult to grasp for new aspirants (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015a), among which likely younger candidates and therefore could be a major hinder to their inclusion in politics.

(1) The **certification stage** covers factors facilitating or preventing individuals from becoming candidates. Legal requirements, electoral system and laws, but also informal norms and values mould the structure of opportunities wherein young aspirants contemplate becoming candidates (Norris et al., 2006; Seligman, 1961).

First, minimal age requirements obviously block too young people to run for office. When age thresholds are low (such as 18 years old in Belgium), we observe a lower average age in parliaments (IPU, 2021), because more young people start a public mandate (Sundström & Stockemer, 2021). Higher thresholds are therefore seen as a barrier for younger generations to become represented (Krook & Nugent, 2018).

Second, features of the electoral system might stimulate or hinder diversity in candidates. PR list systems, in use for all elections in Belgium, are believed to enhance ticket-balancing (Hennl & Kaiser, 2008; Matland, 2005), meaning that parties tend to compose diverse candidate lists to appeal to a bigger electoral audience (Mair, 2013; Sipinen & Seikkula, 2022). More and various social groups can be involved when several candidates have to be selected, compared to single candidates' systems for which selectors tend to favour the less risky choice of a candidate from the majority group (typically, not a young but rather a middle-aged candidate). A diverse candidate list signals citizens that their interests will be taken into

account by the party, allow them to identify more easily with the candidates (Sipinen & Seikkula, 2022) and therefore could increase the list's democratic legitimacy (Celis et al., 2010).

Third, beyond formal rules, informal norms play a role. Research found a *contagion effect* for the recruitment of social groups; political parties seem to challenge each other with actions to draft more diverse electoral lists (Meier, 2004). For instance if a party promotes more equal gender representation, other parties will be inclined to follow their example (Lamprinakou, Morucci, Campbell, & van Heerde-Hudson, 2017; Meier, 2004). Such a mechanism works even when legal minimal requirements are in place and that parties outdo these rules, in turn securing the existing legal thresholds for diversity. Empirical evidence on this effect was mainly observed for the selection of ethnic minorities and women (Lamprinakou et al., 2017), but the *contagion effect*-reasoning could also be applied to diversity in age groups. Above party practices, candidacies might be constrained by normative ideals that live in society (Celis et al., 2013; Dittmar, 2015). People from underrepresented groups in politics face numerous social and political barriers, preventing them from ambitioning a political career (Celis et al., 2013).

(2) In the **nomination stage**, candidates are eventually chosen (Norris et al., 2006) by the party bodies responsible for selecting candidates, called the selectorate (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). Selectorates, varying in form and place in party hierarchy (Rahat & Cross, 2018) can be seen as the staff recruiters who determine who gets what position on an electoral list. Candidate selection works like a labour market, with the supply side consisting of people with resources to participate in elections, like ambition, time, money or popularity (Fiers & Reynaert, 2006; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993; Norris, 1997), and the demand side referring to parties most desired profiles to fill vacancies on the list. That is where selection criteria come into play and that parties could pursue ticket-balancing (Matland, 2005). Selectors might be willing to recruit candidates with certain capacities (i.e. electoral attractiveness, debate strength and persuasiveness) and socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, place of residence) (Sipinen & Seikkula, 2022).

Partisan dealignment – the fact that citizens are less automatically linked to a certain political party (Bille, 2001; Dalton et al., 2000) – and the resulting fluctuations in party membership levels are vital in this respect. In addition, membership base not only becomes smaller, but also less diverse, and so rank and file tend to resemble the political elite and not the society. The smaller fishing ponds sustain political careers and thereby puts representativity at stake (Devroe et al., 2019). So if traditionally party members were the main pool of candidates, parties felt recently the need to recruit from society at large (Mair,

2013, pp. 45-73). If seeking representation ideals, selectors should thus fuel the political ambition of the less represented groups (Cogels, 2020b; Dittmar, 2015; Fox & Lawless, 2010). It is established that when selectors ask people to become a candidate, these are more likely to effectively apply. Young, politically interested males with lower income are most prone to encouragements by political elites (Broockman, 2014; Pruyzers & Blais, 2019). In modern representative democracies these recruitment efforts are crucial, since elections require many candidates who dare to take the plunge (Lawless & Fox, 2015).

Recruiting young people is a challenge for selectors, partly because they are in general less attracted to and interested in politics (Hooghe & Kern, 2017). Youth wings in parties see even a faster decline in their membership compared to the parties in general (Hooghe, Stolle, & Stouthuysen, 2004). This translates in the selection outcome as Cogels (2020b) showed that the youth is underrepresented on all lists. But selectors might also hold a responsibility as Cogels (2020a) demonstrated at the same time that parties mostly offer non-eligible list positions to young candidates. In short, both supply by and demand for young candidates might lead to youth underrepresentation in politics.

(3) In the **election** stage, citizens eventually cast their vote (Pitkin, 2004; Urbinati, 2006). Some electoral systems empower voters with the right to favour one or several candidates, thereby directly influencing who receives the opportunity to become a representative among the group of nominated candidates. Voters might rely on socio-demographic characteristics of candidates to estimate their quality (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). Via this cognitive shortcut, the electorate allocates certain viewpoints to candidates merely based on their personal characteristics, for the better or the worse. Research indicates that the age of candidates is to some extent used as a voting heuristic (Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015; Sevi, 2021; Webster & Pierce, 2019). For example, a 26-year old candidate can be perceived as unexperienced and therefore incompetent in some voters' eyes, or invigorating for some others. Campbell and Cowley (2014) indeed show that despite the fact that young candidates are seen as less experienced, this does not always restrain voters to cast preference votes for them. These dynamics happen after the selection has been made by parties, but nonetheless influence party selection choices, as the expected voter behaviour determines which candidates are granted which spot on the electoral list (Banducci, Karp, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2008; Ecevit & Kocapinar, 2018).

In all three main stages of the candidate selection process, the literature points to factors influencing the representation of the youth. We focus in this paper on the nomination stage, and in particular the demand side, by surveying selectors' motivations to select young candidates.

Research question and hypotheses

Unlike research investigating why young people would (not) become a candidate (Fjellman & Rosén Sundström, 2021) – the supply side, we turn the focus in this paper to the demand and ask why parties would like young people (not) to become a candidate. Our aim is to unravel the rationale of political parties' selection choices regarding young candidates. Our overarching research question is: **'What makes parties (not) select young candidates?'**. We want to uncover what drives parties select young candidates on their list, but also what prevents them from doing so. Our research is designed on two levels. First, we detail how candidates' age can play a role at the individual level and second, we consider the age factor at the aggregate (list) level. Both levels are likely to be intricately intertwined in practice but we make the choice to treat them separately both in the theory and in our empirical analysis. The reasons why selectorates would select, or not, a young candidate individually may indeed differ from the rationale for balancing a list in terms of age groups.

Starting at the **candidate level**, we infer from the literature two main streams of arguments selectors might ponder when considering a young aspirant, related respectively to votes potential and to party work. First, young candidates can be assessed on their **electoral assets**. In-group favouritism mechanisms, implying in our case that voters are more inclined to vote for their age peers, seem to particularly work for younger voters, and not so much for older voters (McClellan & Ono, 2022). Hence, it is especially relevant for parties targeting a young electorate to select young candidates (Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015; Webster & Pierce, 2019), but young faces on the list may even convince the entire electorate as older voters tend to prefer younger candidates over their age peers (McClellan & Ono, 2022). Young candidates might also enjoy a younger personal social network, forming a strong and complementary electoral basis to older candidates (Sipinen & Seikkula, 2022).

Conversely, parties may discard young candidates against which voters might hold negative stereotypes preventing them from supporting these candidates on Election day, and in turn selectors to select them. Of course, selectors themselves might also hold these stereotypes. Young candidates can be thought to foremost lack interest in politics (Rallings, Thrasher, Borisjuk, & Shears, 2010) and further to lack the necessary political capital to properly function as a politician (Wattenberg, 2020). Voters might also discriminate against candidates with a shorter life experience because they believe "that the "optimal" age for a politician is significantly older" (McClellan & Ono, 2022, p. 6), supporting research results

indicating that middle-aged candidates are voters' favourites (Arnesen, Duell, & Johannesson, 2019), namely candidates with sufficient life experience but not too extensive.

These differences in parties' views on their electorate's preferences and individual candidates' electoral potential might explain divergences in selectors' priorities in selecting young candidates. Consequently, we suggest a twofold alternative hypothesis:

H1a: Selectors value young candidates' electoral potential.

H1b: Selectors are apprehensive of young candidates' electoral liabilities.

Beyond candidates' electoral appraisal, we know that selectors value other candidates' assets, which young candidates could specifically demonstrate, but can again work in favour or against their selection. Selectors may value young candidates because of the different kinds of **skills** they can bring to the party, both during campaign times and later in parliament or for the party in general. For instance, young candidates are known to make a more intensive use of new digital media channels (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). Moreover, young candidates political preferences might differ from other candidates (Sundström & Stockemer, 2020). These candidates' new perspectives on policy issues and politics might be valued by selectors, in view of increasing the diversity of ideas and boosting the substantive representation of young citizens (McClean, 2021).

On the contrary, selectors might consider that young candidates lack both political and non-political skills to work efficiently in the campaign and possibly in parliament, and prefer to reward more experienced candidates. This relates to the widely tested incumbency advantage (Papp & Russo, 2018; Smrek, 2020), but not only, as useful experience to function in politics can be acquired without a seat in an elected assembly. The shorter life experience of young candidates can be detrimental to their attainment of the skills selectors consider to be necessary, e.g. negotiation or networking skills. In most parties, selectors would not belong to the youngest age groups, what might negatively affect selectors' assessment of young candidates' skills, as one (even subconsciously) tends to prefer people who look like oneself, following the homophily theory or ingroup effect (Niven, 1998). We present two alternative hypotheses related to the role of candidates' competences in the selection of young candidates.

H2a: Selectors value young candidates' specific competences.

H2b: Selectors are apprehensive of young candidates' lack of competences.

Nevertheless, despite their potential lack of electoral potential and/or political competences, the selection of younger candidates can be seen as a long-term investment for the party as such. Their selection likely boosts young candidates' involvement in the party, and over the course of the legislature, even if not elected, these might follow a learning process leading them to be stronger at the eve of the next election (Fjellman & Rosén Sundström, 2021). In this view, selectors could choose some young aspirants with high potential despite their current lack of experience and skills and have them serve an 'apprenticeship' as candidate before trying to enter parliament (Seyd & Whiteley, 1992). Parties may even foresee skill-building courses for young candidates (Scarrow, 2014). On top of our alternative hypotheses on electoral potential and skills, we add this hypothesis on the long-term investment in young candidates.

H3: Selectors strategically invest in young candidates to grow their competences.

Our second level considers selectors' choices at the **aggregate level**. Selectors might not only assess candidates individually, but also gauge the balance of profiles within the group of candidates to be selected in view of descriptive representation or to foster intraparty cohesion. First, parties might be willing to fulfil the normative democratic ideal of ensuring the **descriptive representation** of underrepresented social groups in politics (van de Wardt, van Witteloostuijn, Chambers, & Wauters, 2020). The complementary advantage theory (Celis & Erzeel, 2017) would support that the intersection of being young and belonging to another politically underrepresented group might stimulate an aspirant's selection, as selectors kill two birds with one stone by selecting one profile representing several minority groups (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018b). Pragmatically, parties will compose lists with candidates covering a wide array of characteristics (individually or across candidates) to attract a broader electorate (Bille, 2001, Put, 2016; Valdini, 2012), but also to sketch a modern image for the party (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018b). This potentially electorally fruitful strategy, called *ticket-balancing*, could entail that young candidates are selected as diversity tokens (Sipinen & Seikkula, 2022) as part of a balancing endeavour, rather than for their own qualities.

We could however consider reasons why selectors would not support descriptive representation of the youth on their lists. Age is obviously not the only demographic feature for which parties possibly try to balance their ticket, so the building of an equilibrium in the candidates' profiles might collide with the normative objective of descriptive representation of the youth as such. When having to make hard choices between several good profiles, the young candidates might not be preferred if they do not display other sought-after characteristics, providing here a counter-argument to the complementary advantage thesis

(Celis & Erzeel, 2017): not all minority groups would be equally relevant to be considered when striving for intersectional representation. Gender or ethnicity might for instance be deemed as more salient than age, because, even if the youth is to be discriminated, being young is a temporary state in a life, unlike other ascriptive characteristics that mostly do not vary in the course of the life. Consequently, one could consider gender or ethnicity to require more affirmative support than the youth (Sundström & Stockemer, 2020). On top of this pragmatic argument, selectors might simply not consider that young people deserve or need descriptive representation on the electoral lists, as there is evidence that even when low represented in elected assemblies in descriptive terms, substantive interests of the youth can be represented (Kissau, Lutz, & Rosset, 2012). As a consequence, selectors would not proactively try to balance their slates in terms of age. We will empirically test two alternative hypotheses on the importance of descriptive representation for selectors.

H4a: Selectors value descriptive representation of young candidates.

H4b: Selectors neglect the need for youth's descriptive representation.

Second, the ticket-balancing strategy might be employed to avoid internal turmoil (Put, 2016). It is established that **youth wings** within parties can play an important role in attracting young people to the party (Hooghe et al., 2004). The youth wing can possibly feel offended when young people are poorly represented among the candidates. It might lobby party selectors to secure youth's representation, formally via their involvement in the selection process or even informally when they are not granted a formal say in the decision-making (Ashiagbor, 2008; Fjellman & Rosén Sundström, 2021). Even in parties without an organized youth wing, young party members, formally active or not in the selectorates, might play this lobbying role. Of course, lobbying is only effective when decision-makers pay attention to it. We thus suggest two alternative hypotheses depending on the openness of selectors towards these lobbying efforts.

H5a: Selectors adhere to young party members' lobbying for the selection of young candidates.

H5b: Selectors neglect young party members' lobbying for the selection of young candidates.

Empirical approach

Case selection

We investigate the selection of young candidates in the Belgian case, a PR flexible list system. Belgium is a likely case to uncover the reasons why the youth is underrepresented in politics since young people are underrepresented in Belgian parliamentary elections (Cogels, 2020b; Fiers & Reynaert, 2006). Party selectorates draft electoral lists, allowing them to strive for some balance of profiles, what is less easily done in single-district systems and is thought to stimulate the representation of minority groups in politics (Valdini, 2012). In addition, even if only a handful of candidates usually manage to break the list order through their preference votes (Cogels, 2020a), research has shown that selectors value candidates' individual electoral potential when casting aspirants (André, Depauw, Shugart, & Chytilek, 2017; Vandeleene, Forthcoming). As we test in this research, the age factor might play a role in selectors' evaluation of a candidate's electoral popularity.

To broaden our understanding of rationales for candidate selection, we include parties from the whole ideological spectrum, different language regions and various party types (mainstream and niche parties). We examine six parties: the French-speaking Social Democratic party PS (*Parti Socialiste*), the Green parties Ecolo (French-speaking) and Groen (Dutch-speaking), the Dutch-speaking Christian democratic party CD&V (*Christen-democratisch en Vlaams*), the French-speaking right-wing liberal party MR (*Mouvement Réformateur*), and the Dutch-speaking Flemish nationalist party *Vlaams Belang*. As displayed in table 1, these six parties also differ in how they organize candidate selection, with various levels of institutionalisation, different kinds of selectorates in charge and with an outcome with regards to candidates' age that varies.

Table 1: Main characteristics of the six political parties under analysis

Party	Language	Candidate selection			Youth representation (18-35y)
		<i>Institutionalization</i>	<i>Centralization</i>	<i>Inclusiveness</i>	
Social Democratic party PS	French-speaking	Intermediate	Low	Intermediate	25,56%
Green party Ecolo	French-speaking	High	Low	High	32,30%
Green party Groen	Dutch-speaking	High	High	High	29,48%
Christian democratic party CD&V	Dutch-speaking	Intermediate	Low	Intermediate	27,2%
Right-wing liberal party MR	French-speaking	Low	High	Low	21,91%
Flemish nationalist party <i>Vlaams Belang</i>	Dutch-speaking	Low	High	Low	16,80%

Note: Values for candidate selection's variables are retrieved from Vandeleene (2016) and Vandeleene and van Haute (2021). Figures from youth representation refer to the share of young people on the lists for federal elections and are retrieved from Cogels (2020a).

This research is mostly based on insights from 32 in-depth interviews with party selectors. Conducting interviews with key informants made it possible to unravel the critical informal dimension of candidate selection, relying on personal experiences of our respondents. That lead us to draw an image of the party strategies for candidate selection (Stephens, 2007). All respondents were responsible for candidate selection in their own party. We can count on a diversity of profiles in terms of age but also gender and experience with candidate selection. In the appendix, we summarize the main characteristics of our interviewees and in which capacity they were involved in the selection process.

The interviews took place in the respondent's language (French or Dutch), either online or in-person, in a period from February 2020 until July 2021. All interviews have been transcribed by the authors or job students. In total, we rely on about 22 hours of interview. The transcripts have been qualitatively analysed by the authors thanks to a coding tree constructed based on insights from the literature (reflecting our hypotheses). A code-and-retrieve method helped us develop our findings in a systematic and reliable manner.

Results: why (not) young candidates?

Candidate level

Young candidates' electoral potential

We first expected selectors to assess young aspirants based on their electoral potential, but wondered whether it would be favourable or detrimental for young people's selection. Selectors particularly question the electoral attractiveness of young candidates. Do parties need young candidates to seduce their age peers? Selectors consider that young candidates can potentially appeal to a broad electorate as old voters might support young candidates, just like young voters do. Selectors in general point to the need to be electorally attractive for candidates, but they reckon that young candidates are often also new candidates who cannot rely on previous electoral scores to reflect their electoral potential. Thus selectors may then use age as one of the many heuristics to bet on young aspirants' electoral potential.

We find in our interviews evidence for **both a positive and a negative electoral potential** of young candidates. On the one hand, some selectors are convinced that young candidates can charm a broad electorate, broader than their age peers only. Voters would want to vote for "the future" (C4). All kinds of voters could also be willing to rejuvenate candidate lists, and parliaments. Selectors stress that it may also simply be thanks to the supposedly sharper physical attractiveness of young candidates. The electoral success of young candidates might come from young candidates' greater motivation to campaign hard, what could eventually be electorally fruitful. Selectors report that some young candidates have indeed proven to score (they tell, even surprisingly) reasonably good despite their young(er) age.

"We put young people on all the lists [...] who had not necessarily been candidates before, and we often had good surprises." (P6)

Additionally, the personal embeddedness of young candidates in a social network can constitute a strong and complementary electoral basis for the party (e.g. via students' networks, youth movements or sports clubs). This in-group favouritism mechanism is valued by selectors since the belief remains that the youth votes for their peers.

"If for the hobbies, the guy says 'I'm a leader in youth movements or I'm a football player and I see 100 or 200 or 300 people all weekend in my football club', these are things that in the selection process obviously speak to those who choose the candidates." (M5)

On the other hand, selectors point out that a lack of electoral potential of young aspirants can be a reason not to select them. Young candidates are not yet known by voters as it takes time to build a network. Even for young candidates who already participated in elections, selectors doubt that they can be as electorally attractive as older experienced candidates. Considering Belgium's electoral system, being able to gather many votes is especially critical on some list positions, for which selectors would not favour young candidates.

“Of course, as a young person, getting those votes very quickly is not obvious. You are not yet well-known across the entire province. So that's a bit more difficult.” (C1)

“That has also been witnessed, even with candidates who have ran before, but still young people, having a harder time electorally.” (C5)

In sum, selectors do have some doubts about young candidates' electoral potential, and in particular how to anticipate their popularity. Yet, many point to a willingness from voters to support young candidates, and from young candidates to invest in effective electoral campaigns, relying also on their specific (young) networks. We thus have to qualify our first hypothesis: Selectors carefully value young candidates' electoral potential.

Young skills

We now examine whether the specific competences of young candidates might be a factor positively or negatively impacting their selection. Selectors reckon that **a young age is not per se disqualifying** but a lack of skills and experience would be.

“If you don't have the right DNA, loyalty, commitment, capabilities,... that is more decisive than whether you are young or not.” (V4)

Even early in life, aspirants might have developed skills useful to function in politics, for instance in trade unions, youth movements, sports clubs or their family life. Youngsters might also be selected because of their good communication skills, especially regarding social media. Young aspirants are portrayed by selectors as more ambitious, enthusiastic and full of energy. They also usually have more time to spend for the party and the campaign than older candidates, what constitutes a crucial resource. Lastly, selectors point to young candidates' strong convictions and lifestyle that is different from older politicians. Young candidates could bring new ideas to the table and therefore enrich the party.

“As a young politician, I am glad that there are other young people in parliament along with me, because I often notice in practice, [...] that we certainly have a different feeling. I think there is a big generational conflict in society at the moment.” (V3)

“Everyone, including the more senior ones, are going to want to make sure that we put young people on the list because they have a different view of things and fortunately, there is not only the view of people who have been around longer in politics most of the time.” (E2)

However, as campaigning still relies in most parties on – at least partly – candidates’ personal means, younger people might lack the financial resources useful to campaign. To cope with this problem, selectors point to specific support provided by either some party elites or the party itself.

“The party always contributes a bit, but that costs money. You have to pay for your campaign. Those posters have to be paid for, you have to travel, you have to go to meetings. It all costs money, and especially with young people it can be a problem.” (C3)

More critically, finding suitable young candidates remains a challenge for selectors, pointing to a general lack of political interest among the youth. Facing these recruitment problems, selectors can easily make the safe choice of older aspirants, perceived as more reliable than younger ones. Many selectors equal experience to reliability.

“But getting young people enthusiast about politics remains a challenge. That is not very easy anyway.” (C1)

“It's almost an exclusionary criterion. ‘Too young’, ‘don't know’, for a position where you need a little bit of experience and reliability. So excluded. It's a selection criterion.” (E1)

Our interviewees concede that despite the relative lack of experience, and related skills and reliability, might play against young aspirants who would have to be **extremely talented** to be valued on equal foot with older aspirants. For most young aspirants, the comparison with older contenders would work in their disfavor. We conclude that selectors do value young candidates’ competences like their energy, time and convictions but they remain apprehensive of taking the risk to select them if other, older, aspirants are more skilled. We confirm therefore H2b.

“Of course, it's harder for someone young to break in that high right away. So those will be exceptional profiles.” (C4)

Long-term investment

Selectors widely acknowledge that not all young candidates are directly effective and popular, but they highlight that it should not work against them as selecting young candidates now might be rewarding for the party on the long term. It is important to rejuvenate candidate lists in order to be **future-proof**: a mix between older and younger candidates is thus the ideal road to future successes. Yet, that entails for selectors the difficult decision not to pick out popular or skilful candidates to make room for younger candidates.

“There is a vicious circle that is very difficult to get out of. If you are known, you become head of list and have a high position. And because you have a high position, you become well-known. So you have to be able to break that vicious circle at some point.” (V4)

“They say: ‘This one hasn't proven anything electorally yet, what are you going to put her first, there are lots of people who have been involved with the party for years and they have more rights.’ So that's going to be very delicate.” (C3)

Selecting young candidates may arise from the own strategy and preferences of individual selectors, but may also be linked to a more entrenched party culture. Yet, the importance to rejuvenate the lists has been recognized in all six parties under investigation. However strategies differ in how to implement the necessary rejuvenation. Various selectors therefore “play it safe” by selecting young aspirants for substitute lists or less eligible positions. Others strived to select a bunch of youth in the large top of the list to give them a fair chance of election.

“‘Make way for the young’ (...) There is really this culture that you can feel very, very strongly in Ecolo to say: we must prepare the succession.” (E3)

Granting young candidates a list position evidently allows them getting visibility to be more popular at the next elections and let them learn how to function as a politician. Interestingly, several selectors mentioned that it can also strengthen young politicians within the party, for instance at the local level. So it is the party at large that can benefit from the long term investment in young candidates.

“By saying that she will be a parliamentary candidate, this will give her a more important basis for the next municipal elections.” (P6)

Our findings clearly point to a long term concern in party selectors’ mind. They are willing to anticipate on the future challenges and strive to rejuvenate the lists as much as possible even if this is at the cost of letting down good -older- candidates and taking on board less directly suitable -younger- ones.

Aggregate level

A ticket-balancing strategy

Beyond the selection of candidates individually, selectors, especially in a PR list system, consider candidate selection at the aggregate level. Age is mentioned among the many characteristics of candidates on which lists are balanced. Selectors depict a good list as a list with an “alchemy of generations” (P1) but are at the same time afraid of so-called *jeunisme*, that is having young people on the list just for the sake of their young age without any other good reason. While many link descriptive to substantive representation, i.e. by selecting younger and older people, all kinds of interests will be represented, some highlight that substantive representation of young people’s policy preferences might be performed by older candidates, and conversely.

“It's when you have a multitude of candidates from different backgrounds, different origins, different age groups. That's how you have a list that is coherent, that is diverse, but at the same time that is united. That's how we have a good list.” (E5)

“What [another party elite] also once called, I think, 'jeunisme'. Like 'the younger, the better'. And I don't think so.” (C2)

“Age, by the way, says absolutely nothing about whether someone is young at heart. I know octogenarians who are still very young at heart and I know eighteen-year-olds who think they are already retired.” (V4)

So why would selectors still want a diverse list in terms of age? First, there is the normative democratic ideal that politics should mirror society, and so the youth should be empowered to work as role models for their age peers. Young people could also represent a segment of the youth, like students. Second, selectors bring in the objectives of rejuvenation and renewal that would be beneficial to the party as such and its electoral success, but both do not per se go hand in hand. Most recognize the absolute need for elites renewal, and hereby the challenge for selectors to recruit new candidates, and who are

complementary to the incumbents. Yet this does not automatically mean selecting young candidates, as older aspirants might also be new to politics.

“Not because it has to, but because I think that is important to get young people in that place. Because a parliament should have representation from an entire society, from your community. So I think young people should also be in it.” (C1)

“I think we are facing the difficult balancing exercise: evolve in terms of MPs and still put in new blood, because I think it would be a mistake if we submit virtually the same lists as in [the last elections].” (V4)

All in all, there is clearly a ticket-balancing strategy at stake, with selectors trying to find the best combination of candidates’ profiles to draft a balanced list. Young people descriptive, and even substantive, representation is a concern for selectors, but again they would not want to select young aspirants as diversity tokens only. Young candidates can be selected if they nicely fit in an electorally attractive group picture. This includes taking into account the many characteristics of candidates, among which age is only one. For the sake of the balance of profiles at the aggregate level, young people might be discarded, or at least young people not displaying another minority characteristic. This brings us to the intersectionality challenge: young female aspirants seem to be more valued than their male counterparts, because their selection allows to simultaneously tick two boxes.

“We stimulate, because some people might be good candidates but don't dare. In particular, young women who are mothers or who are going to move, or thinking of moving. Well, for a number of reasons. ‘I don't have enough experience.’ ‘I'm new.’ and so on. In general, men less, but women more.” (E1)

Internal lobbying

The literature points to a last key reason why selectors would (not) select young candidates, namely party cohesion. The selection of young candidates can happen to avoid discontent from young party members, who would pressure selectors to take young aspirants on board either from their own initiative or more formally through the party youth wing. But party selectors can pay more or less attention to these lobbying efforts.

The most straightforward way to lobby selectors is to be part of the selectorate. Some youth wings manage to have a formal say in the selection process, e.g. via a seat in the selection committee or through the

formal nomination or support of some young candidates by the party wing, as fast track to the list. Youth wings' representatives feel that they have the mandate to care for the selection, in good positions, of some young candidates, and may even foresee strategies to have generational peers campaign together and stimulate *en bloc* voting. However, even without a formal role in candidate selection, youth wings might be influential.

“The [youth wing] will say: ‘Yes, we need young people, we need young people, we're fed up, it's always the old people.’”(P7)

“With young and old, you do sometimes get a discussion of 'Should we put the young people in a block somewhere?' For example, in the first column at the bottom 5 or 6 young people together and then they can also campaign together [and say] 'This is the youth block and please also tick all the names.’” (C2)

“They may not sit on the list-making committee, but they can then, when lists are being discussed or in the run-up to list-making, already hit the table clearly with 'We want that and that at least to be there or we don't approve the model list.’” (C3)

Youth wings may also help with the recruitment of young aspirants, what we earlier already highlighted as a potential issue. This happens both at selection time but also in-between elections to have more young people involved in the party who can later become candidates. In addition, selectors mentioned that an active involvement in the youth wing could be rewarded by a list position. Some selectors are attentive to youth wing's lobbying and select in priority youth wing's candidates. Yet some others are cautious towards this lobbying, pointing at their impatient behaviour and too high expectations. These may even favor candidates not active in the youth wing to break free from the youth wing control.

“So I am expected, as youth wing's leader, to be able to put forward at least two-three names in each province by [the next elections] anyway.” (V3)

“I served there, of course, as a youth representative. So my aim was to get young people in an eligible position.” (C1)

“In list-making, we must dare to make choices for people who are not encapsulated in their own structures but who can credibly and strongly represent young people, women, seniors, men, or I don't know who.” (C2)

Interestingly, our interviews revealed that lobbying efforts do not always come from the youth wings, but may originate from other party bodies, like the leadership. The central party headquarters may enact guidelines for youth representation, and that especially when the party leadership is young, as several selectors reported. The in-group effect might be at play, as young party elites specifically support their age peers.

“Of course, this is also due to the rejuvenation of the party leadership and a new young party chairman Tom Van Grieken, who is surely trying to commit more to young people.”

(V1)

Conclusion

Witnessing a critical underrepresentation of the youth in politics, and the absence of legal requirements for young people’s representation unlike what exists in the Belgian case for women representation, we were left with the conclusion that it is up to political parties to care for the representation of the younger generation in parliaments. This endeavour actually starts before Election day, when parties select candidates. The purpose of our study was to investigate reasons that make parties (not) select young candidates on electoral lists. We interviewed 32 selectors in six Belgian political parties and conclude that the rationales for the selection of young candidates are surprisingly not so dissimilar across parties and selectors. Our study was meant to draw a general picture and not to dig into party differences. Obviously, as shown by the figures of youth representation on lists (see table 1 above), young candidates get more chances in some parties than others. One could thus wonder why with a similar set of arguments, some final selectors’ decisions (dis)favour younger candidates at selection time. We let this avenue for follow-up studies of ours.

Our main finding is that selectors are cautious with young candidates for a series of reasons. First of all, they are afraid of young people’s unreliability both in terms of involvement but also more pragmatically, with regard to electoral popularity. It is hard to anticipate how popular a young candidate will be, and what kind of electoral audience it might attract (or put off). Their unreliability also flows from often a lack of experience, both in and outside politics, preventing selectors from choosing young aspirants over more experienced ones.

Second, selectors are concerned with the democratic need for descriptive representation but are at the same time frightened by *jeunisme* mechanisms involving that ‘the younger, the better’. They do not want young candidates to be selected as diversity tokens just for the sake of rejuvenating the lists. Elites renewal is a major concern in all parties, but not per se with young people. Selectors are aware of the vicious circle of experienced candidates gaining even more popularity thanks to a good list position; and conversely new candidates with no chance to enter the race on equal foot. Parties’ doors seem thus to be open for novices. If young aspirants want to be these novice candidates in which parties invest to build future-proof electoral lists, they have to be extremely talented to be able to concur with candidates enjoying a longer life experience. Yet, some specific personal characteristics of young people might seduce selectors, in particular the energy and time they can invest in the campaign, or their different life style.

On the other hand, we also conclude that the electoral attractiveness of a list balanced on several key characteristics, among which age, stimulates young candidates’ selection. Selectors even point to the recruitment challenge of young people due to the youth’s lack of interest in formal politics. There would be a shortage of (good) young candidates. Party youth wings, but also the (young) party leadership itself, do recall selectors that the youth deserve a (good) place on the list, and if needed help recruit young talents. In that respect, the combination of several political minority characteristics, like being young but also female or from an ethnic minority can give a fast track to the list, thanks to selectors’ intersectional strategy.

While we are confident that our findings on selectors’ cautiousness about youngsters could travel to almost all contexts, the ticket-balancing strategies that we highlight in this paper are especially relevant in a PR-list system, but might also work in single-member districts if decisions are made across districts’ boundaries. Selectors might be willing to foresee a balanced group in parliament in terms of age and hereby vary the age categories across districts.

We were busy in this paper with the youngest age cohorts, but future research could wisely shift the focus towards the mechanisms behind senior candidates’ selection. Several selectors mentioned a serious senior underrepresentation and even a competitive mechanism at work between young and old people, with the former being preferred. Rejuvenation strategies would be seen as more appealing than ensuring older people’s involvement in politics. Senior representation as such, but also the balance of powers between several party wings definitely constitute a fruitful basis for future works.

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Appendix

Table 2: Respondents' characteristics (N= 32)

CODE	Party	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Function
E1	Ecolo	February 2020	45-64y	Male	Member of selection committee
E2	Ecolo	March 2020	45-64y	Female	Member of selection committee
E3	Ecolo	March 2020	45-64y	Male	Member of selection committee
E5	Ecolo	February 2020	31-44y	Male	Member of campaign board
E6	Ecolo	February 2020	31-44y	Male	Member of selection committee
E7	Ecolo	March 2020	45-64y	Female	Member of selection committee and former party leader
C1	CD&V	April 2021	31-44y	Male	Chair of party section
C2	CD&V	April 2021	45-64y	Male	Chair of party section
C3	CD&V	April 2021	65+ y	Male	Chair of party section
C4	CD&V	April 2021	45-64y	Female	Secretary of provincial party section
C5	CD&V	April 2021	65+ y	Male	Chair of party section
G1	Groen	March 2021	45-64y	Male	Member of selection committee
G2	Groen	April 2021	65+ y	Female	Member of selection committee
G3	Groen	April 2021	45-64y	Female	Member of selection committee
G4	Groen	April 2021	65+ y	Female	Member of selection committee
V1	Vlaams Belang	April 2021	45-64y	Male	Member of parliament
V2	Vlaams Belang	April 2021	45-64y	Female	Member of parliament
V3	Vlaams Belang	April 2021	18-30y	Male	Member of parliament
V4	Vlaams Belang	April 2021	45-64y	Male	Member of parliament

M1	MR	May 2021	45-64y	Female	Head of list
M3	MR	June 2021	45-64y	Female	Head of list
M4	MR	June 2021	65+ y	Male	Chair of provincial party section
M5	MR	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Head of list and chair of provincial party section
M6	MR	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Head of list and chair of provincial party section
P1	PS	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Chair of provincial party section
P2	PS	June 2021	45-64y	Female	Chair of provincial party section
P3	PS	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Chair of provincial party section
P4	PS	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Chair of provincial party section
P6	PS	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Chair of provincial party section
P7	PS	June 2021	45-64y	Male	Former chair of regional party section
P8	PS	July 2021	31-44y	Male	Chair of provincial party section
P9	PS	July 2021	45-64y	Male	Chair of provincial party section