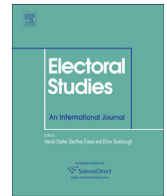




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## The link between social attitudes and voting propensities: Attitude-vote consistency among adolescents in Belgium



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### ABSTRACT

Research on the political development of adolescents is mainly focused on political engagement and attitudes. The more complex relationship between attitudes and voting behavior is less studied among citizens under the legal voting age. We investigate whether there is a link between social attitudes and voting propensities among Flemish adolescents, using data from the Parent–Child Socialization Study 2012. We observe attitude-vote consistency for three Flemish parties with a clear-cut ideological profile – the Green, radical rightist and Flemish Nationalist party. Findings show that adolescents' attitude-vote consistency is reinforced by their level of political sophistication. The correspondence between social attitudes and vote choice, however, is not impressive and significantly lower than among experienced adults, leaving room for other influential factors.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, considerable research attention has been devoted to the political development of young people. Within this field, the main focus has been on the political interest, knowledge, political participation and attitude-development of the young (Sherrod et al., 2010). Broadly speaking, this research domain can be approached from different perspectives. A first research line includes adolescents in the larger debate on *inequality* in political engagement and participation. On the one hand, it is argued that young citizens are less interested, have less knowledge, and participate less (or differently) in politics than older citizens, causing representational inequality (Schlozman et al., 2012). On the other hand, inequality due to social stratification patterns appears to be already present in early adolescence (Cicognani et al., 2012; Hooghe and Stolle, 2004). A second line of research focusses more

on *intergenerational differences* in political engagement and participation and stresses the importance of socio-political and historical factors in the political development of the young (Flanagan and Sherrod, 1998; Van der Brug and Kritzinger, 2012). This 'generational perspective' focusses more on processes of social change and stability. A third research domain departs from a *political socialization* perspective on the adolescents' political development. Substantial research interest has been devoted to the influence of – among others – school, friends, and parents on the development of political preferences and behavior. A final way in which young people have been subject of political research can be found in the recently re-lived debate on lowering the legal voting age to sixteen. The main point of discussion is whether adolescents are *politically mature enough* to be included in the electorate, a question which is mainly answered by comparing the levels of interest, factual knowledge and attitudinal consistency between sixteen and eighteen-year olds (Hart and Atkins, 2010).

Generally speaking, in the four above-mentioned research domains, the dominant focus has been on political engagement and on the development of social and

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political attitudes: are young people interested in traditional politics, do adolescents have the ability and motivation to participate, how do their participation patterns and social attitudes develop, and are their political and social preferences stable throughout life? We argue that, while these are all very relevant and therefore frequently studied research questions, the more complex *link* between attitudes and political behavior is an understudied topic in research on the political development of adolescents. While this link has been thoroughly studied over the past decades within electoral studies, adolescents are traditionally left out of the sample, and are only included when they have the legal voting age of 18 (Coffé and Voorpostel, 2010; Plutzer, 2002; Walczak et al., 2012). Although this voting age is an institutional reality, it seems to be an empirical, rather than a theoretical argument to exclude adolescents from electoral research. Moreover, it has frequently been demonstrated that basic political attitudes and behavioral patterns are shaped before the age of eighteen and tend to be rather stable throughout the lifespan (Sears and Funk, 1999). The same goes for party preferences, which are also found to be shaped early in life, before the legal voting age (Campbell et al., 1960; Zuckerman et al., 2007).

We argue that, as is the case for other political preferences, the age of eighteen is too late in life to start investigating the attitudinal association with vote choice. Eighteen might be the legal starting point to actually cast a vote in most countries, but there has been a formation process going on several years before people go to the polling station, which we believe is essential to grasp. There are indeed only a few studies that have investigated the link between social attitudes and vote choice among adolescents, and these analyses are mostly embedded in a general analysis on the *political maturity* of adolescents. In this article, we investigate the link between social attitudes and vote choice among adolescents for three political parties with a clear-cut profile. We embed this research question in the general debate on voting age, as one of the main arguments *against* allowing young people to vote is the remained inability of this age group to vote for a party which resembles their own preferences (Bergh, 2013). As such, we can provide a theoretical contribution to the literature on political maturity and voting age. Empirically, we contribute to this strand of literature by investigating the link between social attitudes and vote intention in the multiparty system of Belgium and by focusing on party preferences instead of candidate selection. We make use of a recent representative survey among 3426 15-year old adolescents and their parents in the Flemish region of Belgium (Parent–Child Socialization Study, 2012).

## 2. Attitude-vote consistency among adolescents

Although research on the link between attitudes and political preferences among adolescents is still quite scarce, some scholars integrated this research question in the literature on the voting age. Since 2007, initiatives in countries such as Austria, Germany and Switzerland to partially or fully allow sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to vote, have fed the academic discussion in other European

countries as well. Opponents of lowering the voting age argue that including adolescents in the electorate will lower the quality of democratic decisions and, as a consequence, the input legitimacy of the democratic system (Chan and Clayton, 2006). To achieve this input legitimacy, citizens are required to cast reasoned and motivated votes that are linked to their political and social attitudes (Bergh, 2013; Wagner et al., 2012). In this debate on voting age, a consistent link between attitudes and vote choice has been employed as an indicator of ‘political maturity’, a concept that has been put forward by the UK electoral commission as one of the fundamental issues in determining the appropriate vote age (Electoral Commission, 2004).

Political maturity is very broadly conceptualized as a necessary level of *social awareness* and *responsibility*, which makes ‘formal testing’ of maturity very difficult (Electoral Commission, 2004, p. 25). Due to this limited conceptualization, political maturity has been empirically operationalized in different ways, leading to different interpretations. Chan and Clayton (2006), for instance, use political interest, party identification, political knowledge, attitude stability and attitudinal consistency to make judgments on the level of political maturity of adolescents, claiming that these measures indicate the willingness and ability to participate in politics. Bergh (2013) defines political maturity as ‘a set of qualities or tools that are useful when getting involved in politics’ (p. 3) and uses measures of political interest, political efficacy, attitudinal strength and consistency between attitudes and vote choice as indicators for the concept. Hart and Atkins (2010) even include neurological maturation to demonstrate the capacities of sixteen-year-olds to vote. While political maturity is indeed a very interesting theoretical concept, it seems to be difficult to operationalize in a uniform manner. The concept seems to be somewhat of a ‘catch-all term’, in which a broad set of indicators can be embedded. However, one specific indicator of this maturity that has been quite frequently put forward by researchers is the consistency between one’s own attitudes and one’s vote choice (Bergh, 2013; Wagner et al., 2012). While the other above mentioned indicators can be useful and informative measures of political maturity as well, we will focus our research specifically on this consistency between attitudes and vote choice, which has also been referred to as ‘correct voting’. In this respect, a ‘correct’ vote is based on the values, beliefs and attitudes of the individual voter, i.e. a vote that would have been made under conditions of full information (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997, p. 586). Recent research has shown that correct voting levels are higher when there are fewer candidates and when these candidates are more ideologically distinct. On an individual level, caring about election outcomes, political knowledge and interest, experience, and strength of party identification all showed to have a positive effect on correct voting (Lau et al., 2008). We could expect that the mechanisms that facilitate a ‘correct vote’ in the American two-party setting, would also be applicable in a broader multi-party setting. Transforming the experimental based concept of ‘correct voting’ to a broader, party-based logic, we could expect that the link between attitudes and vote choice will be more likely to occur among more politically experienced and

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