

Young councillors - influential politicians or youth alibi?

Introduction

Throughout the world, few young people are elected into representative assemblies (IPU 2014), and young representatives tend to have a higher dropout rate than their elder colleagues (Berglund and Winsvold 2005, MUCF 2017). The dropout rate of young representatives may have several reasons; the most commonly suggested being that formal political assignments take too much time in this busy phase of life (Berglund and Winsvold 2005). Some studies indicate, however, that young elected representatives are less happy in their role than elder politicians (Baldersheim 2011, Bergh and Tjerbo 2013). In this paper we study how young councillors experience their term in the council, and how this experience affects their motivation to continue with politics.

Representative democracy hinges on the representatives. When young politicians are elected for office, the hope is that they will last beyond their first term. Whether they decide to continue with or drop out of politics is likely to depend on their experience, and their experience may also affect whether they encourage or discourage other young people to take on similar assignments. Young councillors experiencing their term as meaningful and rewarding may therefore be important for recruitment, and thereby also for representation. The mere presence of young people in elected assemblies can motivate other young people to become politically involved, by demonstrating that politics includes youth perspectives and by providing role models (Bouza 2014). Young people are systematically underrepresented in democratically elected assemblies at the national and local level (IPU 2014). This underrepresentation is assumed to have consequences for the content of policies as the absence of young people may exclude policy issues of particular concern to this group as well as the perspective of people in this phase of life (IPU 2014). Specially designated bodies such as youth councils and youth parliaments have been proposed to ensure the presence of young voices in decision-making processes (Knudtson and Tjerbo 2009). Normally, however, these bodies have only consultative

status. Participation therefore gives no formal power over decision-making, and the degree to which they are paid attention to vary a lot (Knudtzon and Tjerbo 2009). Moreover, part of the reason for establishing specifically designated bodies for youth representation is that youth cannot be formally represented. As soon as youth cross the voting age limit, however, they can. From a principled point of view, there is no reason to accept a certain group being underrepresented in formal political institutions simply because the group may be heard also through consultative mechanisms.

The experiences of young councillors are not only important to avoid dropout and ensure recruitment and representation, but also have fundamental implications for the functioning of democracy. Whether or not young councillors thrive in their role as elected representatives tells us something about the quality of the representative democratic system. At elections all votes count the same, and shall the representative system function according to democratic principles all councillors must have equal opportunities to perform their duty on behalf of those who elected them. If representatives experience some sort of discrimination or differential treatment due to descriptive traits such as age, then all representatives are not equal and consequently all voters are not equal either. Groups of representatives systematically feeling mistreated or being unhappy in their role, would hence indicate a serious flaw in the representative democratic system.

Formal representation of young people is an understudied topic. The bulk of studies on youth political participation have focused on young people's voting habits and participation in social movements (Carroll 2011; Desrues 2012; Diuk 2013). Some studies have focused on mechanisms of policy consultation, such as youth parliaments or youth councils (Knudtzon and Tjerbo 2009; Matthews 2010; Patrikios and Shephard 2014; Ødegård 2007). The representation of young people in elected assemblies, however, has received little scholarly attention (Lisi and Freire 2012), and an even lesser amount of attention has been given to how those few elected experience their term.

This article aims at filling this gap. We explore how young councillors between the age of 18 and 25 in twenty Norwegian municipalities experience their term in the local council and how their experience

affects their motivation to continue with politics within the formal representative system. The municipalities all participated in a trial in the local election of 2011, in which the voting age was lowered to 16. Partly as a result of the voting age trial, more young councillors were elected in the trial municipalities than in other municipalities (Saglie et al. 2015). The particular situation in which these young councillors entered the local councils represents a sort of best case scenario: They were elected in a context of goodwill in which young people were generally encouraged to take part in politics. Conditions should therefore be ripe for them thriving and being satisfied as elected representatives. Any problems or challenges that these representatives encounter in this positive context are likely to be prevalent in other contexts as well.

Based on a survey questionnaire to all councillors aged 18 to 25 in the twenty trial municipalities, we try to answer the following questions: Do the young councillors feel influential and reckoned with or do they feel they have been given a seat in the council just because of their age - that they serve as some sort of “youth alibi”? And how does their perceived influence and role perception impact on their motivation to continue with politics? Answering these questions may help us understand what makes young councillors stay and what makes them go.

Perceived influence and representational role

Motivation for political participation has been shown to be affected by the degree to which people feel influential. Research on perceived influence often refers to the concept of ‘political efficacy’, which denotes the belief that one can understand and influence political affairs. In their much-cited article, Campbell and colleagues define political efficacy as ‘feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change’ (Campbell et al. 1954: 187). The concept of political efficacy is frequently referred to when explaining political apathy and non-voting among youth (Quintelier and van Deth 2014). The literature on elected representatives, however, tends to take motivation for granted: To be able to fight ones way through the nomination process, strong

motivation is seen as a premise. However, research shows that not all councillors are satisfied with their tenure (Bergh and Tjerbo 2013), and the dropout rate is high (Berglund and Winsvold 2005, MUCF 2017). Successful recruitment requires that representatives stay motivated throughout their period. We assume that motivation will profit from some degree of political efficacy, in this context denoting ‘a representative’s sense of effectiveness in his or her political roles’ (IESS 2016). We argue, moreover, that an aspect of perceived political efficacy specific for settings of collective action, such as in a local council, is the sense of inclusion—the sense of being acknowledged as a legitimate actor. In party politics and within councils, established politicians possess the key to such acknowledgement. Feeling included or excluded in different political arenas within the council, such as their own party group or in council meetings, is therefore, we argue, an integral part of politicians’ political efficacy. In line with this argument politicians’ political efficacy would require both a sense of influence and a sense of inclusion.

The councillors’ representational orientation is suggested as a factor affecting perceived influence. In her study of the relationship between representational orientation and perceived influence among local Danish councillors, Pedersen (2014) looks at what motivates the councillors in their political work. She discerns between those who are mainly motivated by a commitment to the public interest and those who are motivated by a commitment to specific groups of voters (‘user orientation’ in Pedersen’s wording). She finds that councillors who are mainly motivated by a commitment to public interest feel more influential than representatives with a group- or user orientation. Pedersen (2014) suggests, in other words, that there is a relationship between political efficacy and role perception. She explains this finding by pointing to the fit between the motivations of the public interest oriented councillors and the expectations of the environment: Since the mandate of councils is to define the public interest in their community, those with a public interest orientation will experience a higher legitimacy for their concerns than those favouring a specific group, such as for example youth. Interestingly, councillors with a group orientation do not only feel less influential than those with a public interest orientation, they are also considered significantly less influential by

their fellow councillors. Pedersen suggests that those with a public interest orientation are assessed as more influential and those with a group orientation as less, because there is a legitimacy pertaining to denying particular interests in favour of the common good in local councils (Pedersen 2014). In line with this argument, we would expect young councillors being perceived as “youth representatives” to feel less influential than councillors encountering no such expectations.

Important to remember, however, is that the call for youth representation in politics is related to the idea that young people should be represented by someone who will plead their cause – the assumption being that young people will speak for young voters. This assumption is coined in the concepts of ‘descriptive and substantive representation’, originally forged by Pitkin (1967). While descriptive representation denotes the extent to which a representative resembles those being represented, substantive representation describes the extent to which the representative advocates the policy preferences of the represented, without regard for shared characteristics (Dovi 2014; Pitkin 1967). Because representatives are assumed to advance the interests of those resembling themselves, descriptive representation is expected to result in substantive representation. Research on female and minority representatives show that, at least partially, it does. For example, female representatives have been shown to assign more importance to problems faced by women as a social group, compared with male representatives (Allern et al. 2014) and minority representatives in the US propose minority legislation more often than their white colleagues (Fowler et al. 2014). Whether this is the case with young representatives is unclear. A study of members of the Norwegian Parliament actually indicates that those aged between 40 and 50 are more concerned with youth issues than younger representatives (Allern et al. 2014). To our knowledge there are no conclusive studies of youth representatives’ inclination to favour youth issues.

Mansbridge (1999) argues that descriptive representation may enhance substantive representation because the personal quality of being a member of a certain group gives representatives moral force in making an argument on issues important to that group. Marginalized groups therefore need a critical mass to convince the majority that the perspectives they are advancing are widely shared within their own

group. Another reason for favouring descriptive representation is that representatives and voters who share common experiences more easily can forge bonds of trust based on the shared experience (Mansbridge, 1999). In this vein of reasoning, young elected representative can serve as role models to other young people, showing that politics is an arena open to youth (Bühlmann and Schädel 2012). The idea of descriptive representation, however, also comes with the inherent and potentially problematic assumption that members of a certain group have an essential identity and that others cannot adequately represent them. Assuming that a single trait (for example age) binds individuals together and gives them a common interest, may induce people to see themselves as members of a group at the expense of being members of a community, and this may be ‘tearing at the connected fabric of the whole’ (Mansbridge, 1999: 639). It may also lead to distrust towards representatives who are not descriptively alike and undermine the belief that representatives in general want the best for all. Moreover, the norm of descriptive representation may make other representatives expect for example youth to represent youth and it may make representatives feel obliged to represent the group with which they are associated. The concept of ‘tokenism’ provides an explanation for this expectation. If young representatives are treated as tokens, youth representation is merely a symbolic representation which creates an impression of inclusiveness, while in reality the young representatives have no actual power. If young council members are reduced to symbolic representatives, tokens of, their social category, they are compelled to either relinquish their identity as young and conform to the dominant (adult, in this case) group’s ways of doing things, or to adopt and practice a stereotyped version of what it means to be a young representative (Childs and Krook 2008: 727). Either way, they would feel disempowered and restrained in their ways.

However, while such expectations can make the young councillors feel unfree and bounded, it can also give them a legitimate place in the party group or in the council and make them feel that their particular view is needed. Consequently, being expected to represent young people in particular can make young councillors feel reckoned with and empowered; or it can make them feel marginalized, disempowered, and confined to address only a fragment of the vast landscape of political

issues. In the analysis of young Norwegian councillors' sense of efficacy we study whether being expected to represent youth enhance the young councillors' perceived political efficacy or impede it. We refer to expectations of youth representation as 'ascribed' youth representation. Ascribed youth orientation denotes that the young councillors feel they are expected to act as descriptive representatives, advocating youth issues. Important to mention is that those being expected to represent youth may also actually want to represent youth. In this paper, however, we focus on the association between ascribed youth orientation and sense of influence.

Based on this theoretical discussion, we go on to explore the relationship between political efficacy, ascribed youth orientation, and motivation to continue with politics among young councillors. First, we describe the data used to analyse this relationship and context information about the Norwegian electoral system and youth representation in Norwegian elected assemblies.

Data and methods

In May 2015, a web-based survey questionnaire was sent to all elected representatives who were between the ages of 18 and 25 when they were elected, in the 20 Norwegian municipalities that had participated in a trial with lowered voting age. At the time the survey was conducted, the councillors had almost finished their four-year term, starting in 2011. There are two reasons why we set the upper age-limit to 25. First, the group between 18 and 25 represent the very youngest group of councillors, and these have also traditionally been the most underrepresented. We were interested in how representatives who were unquestionably identified as young experienced their term. Second, nationwide, Norwegian council representatives aged between 18 and 25 increased their representation substantially between 2007 and 2011—by 46 percent (from 450 to 659 candidates)—whereas the same was not the case for those aged between 26 and 30. This group, although still a little better represented in relative terms, actually decreased their representation by three percent between the two elections. This makes the age group between 18 and 25 stand out as a cohort that differs from the group of relatively young representatives aged between 26 and 30.

The trial municipalities provide a sort of best case for youth representation: Youth issues were high on the local agenda during the election campaign of 2011, and the young councillors were voted into the council in a climate favourable for youth representation and youth issues. Moreover, since youth representation went up, many of the young representatives in these municipalities were accompanied by other young councillors, which is likely to have made the work in the council easier. Theoretical arguments for the size of a group being important to perceived efficacy may be found in the theory of critical mass (Childs and Krook 2008), which holds that with an increase in relative numbers, minority members, such as youth, can form coalitions. Moreover, an increase in numbers may make it easier for individuals to become differentiated from each other. Together, these two mechanisms make it possible for the minority group to evade performance pressures and escape role entrapment so that they can pursue interests that may not conform with youth stereotypes (Childs and Krook 2008:728). This again, may increase the likeliness of young representatives thriving in their role. The municipalities participating in the voting age trial represent cases where a critical mass of young representatives was likely to be obtained. One may argue, therefore, that the conditions for young councillors to experience their term as positive are present in the trial municipalities and that they therefore, in some respect, represent critical cases: If young councillors do not thrive in these councils, they are not likely to thrive anywhere.

An objection to the best-case argument is that in the trial municipalities several young candidates were not prioritized by their party, but were elected due to personal votes. These councillors may have a low standing in the party group, which may give them fewer positions and less influence. We still deem the positive effect of being brought into the council on a tide of favourable attitudes towards youth representation as important, and think that it might counterbalance the eventual negative effect of being voted in by the voters.

In total, 79 young councillors from eighteen different municipalities were elected (in two of the trial municipalities, no young councillors were elected). These 79 councillors represent the entire universe of young councillors in the Norwegian trial municipalities. Of these, 42 councillors (53%) responded to the survey. Two reminders were sent

by email, as well as one through Facebook. The survey was closed in mid-November 2015.

The potential for generalizing the results from the survey must be addressed at two levels. First, there may be a bias in the net sample; those who choose to respond to the survey may differ systematically from those who did not respond. Possible biases in the survey are likely to affect some of our core research variables such as sense of influence, inclusion, and motivation; those feeling little involvement, inclusion, and motivation are less likely to answer the questionnaire than those who feel influential, included, and motivated. If so, the average sense of influence, inclusion, and motivation among the respondents is probably higher in the sample than in the universe. The relation between these variables, however, should not be affected by the skew of the sample. Since our gross sample (the 79 young councillors) represent the universe of young councillors in the trial municipalities, significance testing is not as relevant as with representative samples. The significance level is still an indication of the strength of the correlation between variables.

Second, the sample is too small to make generalizations about young councillors in the entire universe of the 428 Norwegian municipalities that existed in 2015. However, the trial municipalities were chosen by the government to ensure diversity with regard to size, geography, demography, and the political composition of the council. They therefore resemble the entire municipality population in some respects. Still, given the small size of the sample, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of young councillors, and the paper's main contribution is to generate hypotheses about the relations between young councillors' sense of influence, ascribed youth orientation and motivation to continue with politics. When possible, we compare the results from the survey in the trial municipalities with official statistics and other surveys conducted among Norwegian councillors.

The Norwegian electoral system and youth representation in local councils

Norwegian municipalities are run by a municipal council, elected every fourth year by the inhabitants of the municipality. The general voting age is 18, and in 2011 it was lowered to 16 in 20 municipalities selected by the government. The age of candidacy remained at 18 in the trial municipalities (as well as in the rest of the country).

The municipal council is the highest municipal body, and being elected as a councillor entails responsibilities for important public assets and dispositions. The municipal council is, among other things, in charge of primary and lower secondary school, elderly care, and primary health care; they dispose of approximately 18 percent of the GDP and employ 19 percent of the workforce.

Within the council, some executive power is delegated to a proportionally elected executive board, which forms a sub-group of the council. The executive board includes the most prominent politicians in the council, often the party leaders, and is led by the mayor. Compared to their older counterparts, young councillors rarely sit in the executive board or get other important assignments (Baldersheim 2011). Although few young councillors are elected, young politicians still have a relatively strong position within political parties at the local level. The largest parties often have local youth chapters, and special positions are designated for members of the youth chapters in important strategic forums such as the program committees. The existence of youth chapters may entail a division of labour between youth and adults, increasing the expectation that young politicians shall indeed represent the young voters.

Elections for local municipal councils in Norway are conducted using a proportional open list system. On Election Day, voters choose ballots to vote for, but they can also provide preferential votes for individual candidates. An unusual feature of the local electoral system in Norway is that voters can give preferential votes to any number of candidates on their ballot of choice, as well as voting for (a more limited number of) individual candidates on other ballots. Political parties can limit the impact of preferential votes and thus keep some say over the selection of council members, by giving priority to some candidates. These

prioritized candidates have an advantage over other candidates that, in most cases, cannot be overcome. In practice, parties are therefore able to secure the election of some of their preferred candidates. Voters are increasingly making use of the preferential voting system. In the 2015 local elections, 47 percent of voters cast at least one preferential vote. As noted earlier, the high number of young representatives in the trial municipalities in 2011 can be explained in part by preferential votes for young candidates. The preferential votes might be the result of the addition of a new and young voter group, but it may also be that older voters have given preferential votes to young candidates. In July 2011, two and a half months before the election, a terrorist shot and killed 69 young politicians at a political youth summer camp for the Norwegian Labour party. This incident unleashed a wave of good will towards young politicians. Both the election result and the experiences of the young elected representatives must be analysed in light of this event.

A study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union showed that as of 2013, young people between the ages of 18 and 30 were heavily underrepresented in national parliaments throughout the world (IPU, 2014). The Norwegian national parliament was at the better end of the scale, with 5.9 percent of the delegates being between the age of 18 and 29, and 2.3 percent between the age of 18 and 25. Still, as this youngest population group (18-25) made up about 13 percent of the eligible population in 2013, young people were significantly underrepresented also in Norway, with a representation ratio in the Parliament of 0.17.

One might suspect youth to be better represented at the local level, where the competition for electoral seats is less fierce, and this is in fact the case. As shown in Table 1, local youth representation in Norway is somewhat higher than national youth representation, with the representation ratio varying between 0.33 and 0.36 in the elections of 2003, 2007, and 2011.¹ In contrast, youth between the age of 18 and 25

¹ For the election of 2015, the age cut in the statistics was different, and data was only gathered on the number of representatives aged between 18- and 29-years-old: In 2015, 9.3 percent of councillors were under 30 when elected, the same percentage as in 2011, and an increase from 7.3 percent in 2007. However, for 2015, we do not know the distribution of representatives within the youngest group.

in the trial municipalities were actually represented with a representation ratio nearly equalling their proportion of the population.

[Table 1 near here]

The very youngest representatives (18- and 19-years-olds) were better represented than those in their early twenties, with a representation ratio of 0.57 nationwide and of 1.51 in the trial municipalities. One plausible reason for the better representation of those two age groups may be that they are more available than those in their twenties, who have often moved away from their original municipality to study (Berglund and Winsvold, 2005). Furthermore, the very youngest may have been preferred by the nomination committees since they are so visibly and obviously young. Whereas a 25-year-old can be mistaken for an adult, in representative terms, an 18-year-old representative is more likely to be perceived as fulfilling the presumed norm of youth representation.

The gender distribution among the young councillors deserves a comment. As found in a study of representatives in national assemblies (IPU 2014), female representatives are generally younger than male representatives. This is also the case in Norwegian municipalities. More than half of the representatives 25 years or younger were women (58 percent in the trial municipalities and 52 percent nationwide). National data reveal that gender distribution becomes increasingly unequal with age, slightly tipping in favour of male representatives after the age of 30, and then increasing steadily towards old age. However, during the past five elections, the ratio between male and female representatives has gradually changed in favour of female representation in all age groups, implying that younger generations of women in Norway are increasingly integrated in formal political structures.

The relationship between influence, ascribed orientation and motivation

To investigate the relationship between young councillors' perceived influence, ascribed youth orientation and motivation to continue with politics, we first mapped how the councillors thought of themselves along these lines.

As for perceived influence, we measured this through questions about the councillors' sense of influence in the council, in committees, and in their own parties, and whether they felt that they had set the agenda in areas important to them. Perceived influence is also measured through the question of whether the councillors felt they had achieved something during their term. An aspect of political efficacy is the extent to which the young councillors feel included and reckoned with. A sense of inclusion is measured through the councillors' feeling of being taken seriously by other politicians and through a question of whether they felt excluded by established politicians.

As we see from Table 2, the sense of perceived influence varies a great deal in the sample, and so does the sense of inclusion.

[Table 2 near here]

The councillors felt most influential in their party group and least in the council. This should come as no surprise, as both the party group and the committees are smaller arenas with fewer participants and more frequent meetings. More than half of respondents felt they had succeeded in setting the agenda for one or more issues important to them. The majority of young councillors felt they had been taken seriously as politicians, and nearly half of the young councillors did not feel excluded by established politicians. As we see from Figure 1, however, nineteen percent did not feel they had been taken seriously, or only to a certain extent. Figure 2 shows that although 45 percent did not feel excluded by established politicians, 29 percent said they did, while the remaining 26 percent felt somewhat excluded.

[Figure 1 and 2 near here]

When comparing the municipalities with a relatively high number of young councillors (four or more) to the municipalities with fewer young councillors (three or less), we see that councillors in municipalities with a relatively large group of young councillors feel somewhat more influential in their party group and in the committees, but not in the council, compared to those elected in municipalities with few young councillors. They also feel more influential in setting the agenda and they feel that they are taken more seriously, whereas the feeling of

exclusion does not differ with the number of young representatives. The comparison lends some support to the theory of a critical mass, indicating that being part of a group may enhance the sense of efficacy. The differences are however not significant, and an analysis with a larger N would be necessary to establish whether there is a real effect of the size of the group. Formal political power obtained through being a member of the executive board (26 percent of respondents) seemed to have an impact on most items measuring political efficacy, with the exception of influence in committee and sense of exclusion. The clearest effect of being a member of the executive board was on the sense of having achieved something. This indicates formal positions affect sense of influence. The results are displayed in table 3.

[Table 3 near here]

Next, we are interested in how ascribed youth orientation is related to the sense of political efficacy. Two questions in the survey indicate ascribed youth orientation. The first is the councillors' assessment of whether other politicians in the council expect them to front youth issues. On a five-point scale, the majority (67 percent) of young councillors somewhat or totally agreed that other politicians did. The second is their reporting of whether they were nominated by their party because of their age, which was the case for half of the sample (50 percent). Combined into an index, we say these two items measure the degree of ascribed youth orientation. Table 4 displays the correlation between different aspects of political efficacy and ascribed youth orientation. Because of the low N, only bivariate correlations are estimated.

[Table 4 near here]

Ascribed youth orientation is negatively correlated with several aspects of political efficacy: Those feeling that it is expected of them to be youth advocates feel less influential in their party groups, less successful in setting agenda in issues important to them, and have a higher sense of exclusion both in terms of being taken seriously and in terms of feeling excluded by established politicians.

Next, we wanted to assess how sense of efficacy correlated with motivation to continue with politics. Motivation is measured through the councillors' assessment of whether the term in the council has given them a taste for more political work. Fifty-five percent fully agreed that the term in a council had given them a taste for more political work, and 12 percent somewhat agree. The remaining 33 percent, a third of respondents, partially or fully disagreed, which means their experience in the council had not motivated them to continue with politics. In table 5, the correlation between motivation to continue with politics on the one hand and the sense of political efficacy and ascribed youth orientation on the other, is displayed

[Table 5 near here]

Table 5 shows that whereas influence in the party group is correlated with motivation, influence in the council or in committees are not (or at least the coefficient is not significant). A sense of having achieved something is correlated to further motivation, as is the sense of being taken seriously. Ascribed youth orientation, although correlated to perceived influence, is not significantly correlated to motivation to continue with politics. There may however be an indirect effect; through the impact ascribed youth orientation has on perceived influence (table 4).

Discussion

The voting age trial conducted in twenty Norwegian municipalities resulted in increased representation of young councillors. The majority of these young councillors experienced their term as rewarding: Many of them felt they had achieved something, they felt influential in their party group, and the majority wanted to continue with politics. We supposed the trial municipalities to represent a best scenario for young representatives to thrive both because the attitude towards young politicians was especially friendly in the trial municipalities and because the number of young councillors was likely to reach a critical mass. The friendly ambiance argument, we cannot test with the present data. The critical mass, argument, however, is partly tested by comparing the experiences of young councillors from municipalities with few and more young councillors. The results lend some support to

the critical mass argument, but the results are somewhat ambiguous, and the low N makes it difficult to conclude.

The level of perceived influence and inclusion among the young councillors indicate that there is no cause for immediate alarm on behalf of the representative democratic system. Still, results do not draw an altogether positive picture of the experiences of young representatives. Although most young councillors participating in the study showed high levels of political efficacy, 60 percent reported that they had little or no influence in the council, and more than half of the sample said that they felt somewhat excluded by established politicians. The picture, in other words, of how young councillors experience their term in the council is nuanced; for a number of the young councillors, serving the term as elected appear to have evoked feelings of powerlessness and impotence. This experience may be offset where there is a youth faction established in the council; however, with the exception of the large municipalities, young councillors in most municipalities are the only one of their kind in the council.

The study also showed that ascribed youth orientation is negatively correlated with the sense of political efficacy. We cannot conclude on the causal direction of this correlation. It may be that those with low sense of efficacy are more prone to interpret their nomination as being about their age, due for example to low levels of self-confidence; or that they are especially aware of the expectations of the established, “grown-up” politicians. Or, the causality may have the opposite direction: Being nominated because of one’s age and being expected to represent youth as a group may induce a sense of exclusion and ineffectiveness. As suggested by Pedersen (2014), councillors representing specific groups may have lower status within the council due to the council’s obligation to look out for the local community as a whole. Moreover, being expected to act in a certain way is likely to make the young councillors feel restricted in their ways. Being ascribed an identity as a group representative may furthermore have repercussions on the councillors’ sense of who they are as politicians. When recruited as a group representative, it is perhaps difficult to make the transition to a full-fledged, broadly oriented politician, once youth as a descriptive category has stopped being relevant, as it eventually will, when the young councillors come of age.

Ascribed youth orientation did not, however, have a direct effect on motivation to continue with politics. There may still be an indirect effect, through sense of political efficacy as the sense of influence and inclusion is significantly correlated with the motivation to continue with politics after the four-year term in the council.

To establish the causal direction between ascribed youth orientation, political efficacy, and motivation we would need panel data. Until such a relation can be established, this study still has some empirical and theoretical implications. The study indicates that the group of young councillors feeling they have to represent youth comes forth as a youth alibi. They are placed in a role they would not necessarily have chosen themselves, and they feel uninfluential and less included than the young politicians not sensing this kind of expectation. Feeling as a youth alibi may suffocate the inspiration and motivation to continue with politics. A possible practical lesson to learn from this is that it is important to let young councillors define their own roles as politicians; the expectations of group representation seem to hamper this possibility.

Theoretically, this study suggests a causal association between ascribed role orientation, the sense of political efficacy and the motivation to continue with politics. The exact relationship between these entities and the mechanisms relating them to each other should be further specified and tested through studies with a larger N, and preferably through longitudinal data. To uncover the mechanisms causing the correlation between ascribed youth orientation and political efficacy qualitative data would be needed.

Our study indicates that young councillors are confronted with a number of dilemmas in their representational role. For young politicians to experience the influence and respect necessary for continuous motivation, it is important to do as the established politicians do. Fronting youth issues is associated with a lower sense of influence and a lower motivation to continue with politics. However, if young elected representatives do not front youth issues, youth policy will not profit from youth being represented. Moreover, if these young representatives do not front youth issues, their legitimacy as representatives will perhaps decrease in the eyes of young voters.

We have only scraped the surface of the question of how role conception is related to motivation and a sense of influence. The results have given us occasion to speculate on how different mechanisms may be at play and how these mechanisms, in different ways, affect the sense of influence and motivation of young councillors. To confirm the indicatory results, studies of larger, representative samples of councillors are needed. The contribution of this paper is first and foremost to point to possible mechanisms for motivation and dropout.

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