

Report on the Academic Symposium: Youth Quotas – The Answer to Changes in Age Demographics?

25/26 October 2013, Stuttgart (Germany)

by Igor Dimitrijoski

Summary

The aim of this academic symposium was to provide an answer to the question whether “youth quotas” offer a solution to changes in age demographics and a looming gerontocracy. Based on the premise that young people have the potential to act as change agents, especially with regard to ecological sustainability, it was the aim to stimulate a societal discussion and to raise public awareness on the topic of youth quotas, whilst providing the discussion with a scientific basis.

The question of a power shift between generations is already discussed in many facets in the literature. Many commentators state that a shift is already visible and that the problem requires careful political management. In light of this, the implementation of youth quotas could be a possible method of protecting the interests of younger generations in politics and beyond. The symposium was investigating a topic that is greatly under-researched.

Some key questions to be addressed at the symposium were: Should youth quotas be limited to the political arena (political parties, parliaments, etc.) or should they also be implemented in other fields (economic activity, companies, associations, organisations, etc.)? Can youth quotas ensure that a greater sense of urgency is applied to the problem-solving process of future concerns like global warming? Can young people really be relied upon to represent the interests of the young generation as a whole, or will they just follow their own individual interests? Are youth quotas in general an effective instrument to strengthen the rights of the young generation

or do we need other and more effective instruments?

Intense debates arose on the question of whether or not youth quotas are an effective means to strengthen the rights of future generations. Some junior researchers suggested that young people can be thought of as the “trustees of posterity” as they tend to be fiercer defenders of long-termist policies especially regarding the environment, since the environmental crisis will have a more concrete impact on their lifespan. But other speakers rejected the inference that young people will have a stronger determination to solve future problems, or will necessarily add a new “young” perspective in the epistemic process of finding solutions to future problems. The inclination of these latter speakers was that environmental issues are not the top priority of young people.

Regarding the composition of party lists, one

speaker pointed to the problem of legitimacy in the outcome of an election. The positive discrimination of youth within a societal group has to be justified because other groups could feel disadvantaged by the implementation of such a strong instrument. Some speakers challenged the analogy of youth quotas to quotas for women or ethnic minorities, because women and ethnic minorities can't change their status whereas today's young people, in the normal course of life, will be old in the future. This means that the disadvantage of a person in his or her young age is just temporal. Generational effects were pitted against age effects in this context.

Some experts pointed to alternatives to youth quotas. In their view, lowering the voting age and having better political education in schools, in particular, would produce better results. Another proposed strategy was the implementation of proxy votes for the parents.



A vote at the end of the symposium sparked interesting results. Although several reservations were noted, most of the speakers voted in favour of the implementation of youth quotas. All speakers voted for lowering the voting age. The conclusion reached by this academic symposium was that a package of measures is required to give adequate answers to demographic change. Youth quotas could be part of this package. The organisers have collected the outcomes of the symposium in a recently published anthology (*Youth Quotas and other Efficient Forms of Youth Participation in Ageing Societies*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer 2015; see book review in this issue).

The debates in brief

It was a major challenge for the participating researchers to find a viable approach to the topic, given that, up until then, the issue of youth quotas had remained completely un-researched. However, during the symposium this circumstance proved to be advantageous because the different approaches and priorities illustrated the manifold aspects of youth quotas.

A presentation by Dieter Birnbacher, of Düsseldorf University, opened the symposium. He focused on youth quotas in parliaments. Professor Birnbacher is of the opinion that youth quotas within parliaments are insufficient to incorporate and represent the interests of young people. He doubts that young representatives (representatives of the young generation) would represent the interests of their age group thoroughly, which is the strongest argument in favour of youth quotas. Therefore, Birnbacher advocated for a larger package of measures. As a first step, the voting age should be lowered; furthermore, parents should get a proxy vote for their children. According to Birnbacher, a parental proxy vote would enable parents to represent the interests of their children. In the ensuing discussion, the assumption that young representatives of the young generation do not necessarily represent the interests of their generation was affirmed, but at the same time it was questioned that parents would use their additional voting right to vote in the interests of their children. Some participants stated that the proxy vote would rather strengthen the parents' interests than their children's (and those of youth generally). Nevertheless, lowering the voting age was considered necessary by all participants of the workshop.

Alexander Bagattini, also from Düsseldorf University, introduced the >concept of

"ageism" into the discussion. The term defines the unequal treatment of people because of their age (age discrimination). In a first step, he compared "ageism" with other negatively-charged "-isms", such as sexism and racism. Dr Bagattini holds that "ageism" carries a similarly negative connotation and thus should be rejected. From his point of view, youth quotas have to be classified as ageism because a certain population group will be privileged (in this case young people). This should be rejected in our liberal-democratic society. Furthermore, he thinks that lowering the voting age is not necessary. In the following discussion, doubts were raised that the introduction of youth quotas or the lowering of the voting age – which privileges young people at the cost of older population groups – counts, in fact, as "ageism". It was suggested, rather, that these measures reduced the existing inequalities between young and old society members.

In the next presentation, Jörg Tremmel, of Tübingen University, the history of democracy and the extension of suffrage. He focused on the exclusion of minors from elections. Professor Tremmel argued that the inclusion of more and more previously excluded groups (women, dependent people, people aged 18–25) has made it possible that nearly all societal groups are allowed to vote nowadays. But there is one big exception: minors are still not allowed to vote. According to Tremmel, the main argument for the exclusion of the minors is their alleged "lack of maturity" or the "lack of political judgement". Tremmel argued that this is epistocratic and contradicts the normative foundations of the very concept of democracy, that is, the rule of the (entire) demos. In order to overcome this deficiency, he suggested a "voting right by registration". Every person should be allowed to vote; minors interested in voting, however, should first be required to register as official voters. An age limit is thus replaced by an expression of will, but this model would not imply a voting age from zero years onwards.

In her presentation, Dr Anja Karnein (Frankfurt University) focused on the notion that today's young people, being more affected by climate change than previous generations, have a greater interest in curbing its potential impact. The assumption is that an increased participation of young people in politics, for example guaranteed by youth quotas, will produce a better framework for climate and environmental politics. Dr Karnein doubts these notions. Just because today's young

people will be affected by the effects of climate change for longer, they are not per se more interested in a solution to this negative process. In addition, future "climate-friendly" behaviour cannot be assumed. And although in the U18 elections (recording how young people in Germany might have voted if they had the vote) the Green Party got a higher percentage of votes than in the "real" federal elections, these votes also clearly showed that the established parties (CDU/CSU and SPD) received the vast majority of votes, just like they did in the real elections. Although youth quotas for other areas could be useful, they are not helpful in the context of environmental policy; and although young people, admittedly, are more idealistic than older generations, Karnein does not see any evidence that environmental policy is the top priority of young people. Politicians tend to make snap decisions, the impacts of which will be felt in the near or distant future. They also tend to reflect the concerns of the older population more than the concerns of youth. But politics must also take into account the problems of the distant future, e.g. climate change, when decisions are made.

In the following presentation, Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (University of Zurich) discussed three possible measures designed to encourage politicians to adopt more far-sighted policies. (1) The question whether the votes of higher-educated people should be given a greater weight than the votes of less-educated people. (2) The question whether young people should be given more influence in the elections. (3) The question whether elderly people should be excluded from the elections. Dr Wallimann-Helmer rejects all three proposals because they undermine the normative fundament of democracy. In his view, young people need more help regarding their self-organisation, so as to ensure that they can better articulate and represent their interests. Currently, they lack self-organisation and thus influence. Like Dr Karnein, Wallimann-Helmer does not believe that youth quotas or lowering the voting age will produce greener policies.

During the discussion, it became clear that the other participants agreed with Ivo Wallimann-Helmer's concerns about democratic theory in respect of his three proposals. But by the same token, some participants made it clear that the exclusion of minors from the elections is equally problematic. The same arguments for excluding the young could also be taken as arguments for excluding elderly

people from elections. Young people are said to be politically immature but on the other hand the mental abilities of older people might also decrease the older they get. But none of the participants recommended excluding older people from the suffrage. What is clear is the unequal treatment of young and old regarding the right to vote.

Dominic Roser, of Oxford University, dealt with the question of whether youth quotas could lead to a better climate policy. Central to his argument is the assumption that young people are particularly affected by climate change, and thus particularly keen to miti-

Like Anja Karnein and Ivo Wallimann-Helmer before him, Dominic Roser also did not share the optimistic view that youth quotas would produce a better environmental policy. Most of the participants held a similar position regarding 'green' policies. In return, Roser presented a risk-model which was well received by the participants. Most of them could see the danger that future generations' living standards might not continue to rise, or – in the worst case – might even decline. The main risks were expected within today's environmental, economic and global financial policy as well as the regularly recur-

democracy as well as fiscal regulations such as debt limits, Burret argued.

The participants shared Burret's doubt concerning the possible effects of youth quotas. However, they also questioned the proposed alternatives. Increased direct democracy does not imply that youth will be less marginalised; older voters would still represent their own interests and cast their votes correspondingly. Introducing measures such as debt limits does not guarantee policies that take special care of the interests of youth. Although national debt would not rise, which is in general good regarding intergenerational justice, one cannot predict how the available money will be spent. It could happen that spending for the young would be cut in favour of the old.

Dr Rafael Ziegler, of Greifswald University, discussed whether or not the youth can act as change agents for a sustainable development. In conjunction with his discussion, he presented one of his own projects, the youth campaign "Big Jump Challenge" (www.bigjumpchallenge.net). Children and young people all over Germany organised "bathing activities" in rivers and lakes in order to raise awareness of themes such as water protection and the prevention of water pollution. Ziegler then applied the experiences of this project to a possible introduction of youth quotas. He argued that such quotas are not sufficient and effective enough to achieve more sustainable environmental policies.

Radostin Kaloianov was especially concerned with the ubiquity of quotas (that is, that quotas can be found everywhere). "What can quotas do?" was his key question. Dr Kaloianov attempted to answer this question in two ways. First, he investigated the development and modernisation of Western societies from a modernisation-theoretical approach. He argued that in modern capitalistic societies such as the Western countries of today, quotas are present everywhere, particularly in the labour market. Life as a whole, he maintained, is regulated by invisible quotas. Kaloianov sees quotas as a means to control the occupation of jobs, especially jobs that demand explicit requirements because they are rewarding particular merits and capabilities. Kaloianov was skeptical towards the introduction of quotas for disadvantaged groups, e.g. the youth. He emphasised how everyone in a modern society is already benefitting from the existing quota-policy and existing quotas. Second, Kaloianov discussed the justice of quotas.



gate the consequences of climate change. But this argument is not as strong as it might seem, or so Roser suggests. He argues that young people today have to endure only a small part of climate change; future and yet unborn generations will be rather more seriously affected. Therefore, he altogether rejects the idea of justifying youth quotas on the grounds that they, allegedly, lead to better environmental policy for the young.

Another emphasis of Dr Roser's presentation was on the general quality of life in the future. In the past, the standard of living and the quality of life have both risen steadily. However, there is a serious risk that the standard of living will decline in the foreseeable future. Dominic Roser underscored this view by arguing that there are too many high risks involved in the creation of the future and future policies (environment, economy, etc.). Even though these same risks could provide big improvements for humanity, there is also a real risk that a failure will bring a sharp downturn in the overall quality of life. Therefore, Roser calls for action so as to significantly reduce the risk brought by humanity itself and the way in which shapes its own future.

ring crises. Most participants supported the impulse to limit these risks, even though – as Roser pointed out – this limitation should not tend to zero, because even stagnation can in some way mean a step backwards. A certain degree of risk remains necessary in order to foster certain innovations and developments.

Heiko Burret focused on the consequences of demographic changes, where older generations are "taking over" control of society at the expense of younger generations. He emphasised how politicians, as a rule, first and foremost tend to focus on the interests of voters. Older people nowadays represent the largest group of voters. As a result, politicians are paying more attention to their interests than to those of other voting groups. For the politicians, the consequence of ignoring the interests of large voting groups is not being reelected, or not being elected at all in the first place. Young politicians also have to keep this fact in mind; thus youth quotas in parliaments and political parties will have only a marginal effect. What should be introduced to prevent the strong marginalisation of youth are measures linked to direct

He was critical towards policies where people are favoured in the labour market on the basis of sex, skin colour, ethnic origins, age etc., compared to better-qualified applicants who are not favoured because they do not belong to one of the privileged quota-groups. Rather, he emphasised how quotas are already regulating spheres such as the labour market, because merits and capabilities in the end are rewarded, which, again, also takes the form of a quota.

In the discussion that followed, the arguments of Kaloianov were assessed critically. His argument that specific requirements in a job description are equivalent to a quota was disputed. It was emphasised that explicit knowledge and capabilities are often necessary in certain jobs and positions, but that these can hardly be identified with quotas. Likewise, the argument that quotas are necessarily unfair, and that they ultimately do no bring much to the table, was contested. Several examples have shown that quotas and positive discrimination of certain groups (woman, minorities) unquestionably have led to fairer outcomes. The groups in question have, through quotas, been enabled to compete e.g. in the labour market on equal terms to other groups. However, that youth quotas will have the same effect as gender quotas was disputed.

Pieter Vanhuyse, of the Vienna-based European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, presented the “Intergenerational Justice Index” (IJI) and addressed the question of proxy votes (that is, giving parents the right to vote on behalf of their child/children). First, Dr Vanhuyse presented his study conducted for the Bertelsmann-Foundation. The Intergenerational Justice Index which he created is based on four criteria and compares all OECD-countries with one another. Several of the countries scored low on the IJI-index, depicting profound intergenerational challenges. To counterbalance this trend, Vanhuyse argued for the introduction of proxy votes. He emphasised that a proxy vote system will not only ensure a shift in the power balance between old and young generations in favour of youth, in addition it will also demand more just policies, seen from an intergenerational point of view. Through their parents, children and youth will be given influence in elections.

Several of the participants were skeptical regarding the introduction of proxy votes to improve intergenerational justice. The objections that were already raised against

Birnbacher’s arguments in favour of proxy votes were repeated.

Juliana Bidadanure argued in favour of an implementation of youth quotas and provided an instrumental justification. She claimed that youth quotas in parliaments could contribute to bringing about intergenerationally fairer outcomes. She first presented two core challenges of intergenerational justice: (1) the challenge of justice between non-overlapping generations – or the long-term challenge of treating future generations fairly; and (2) the overlapping challenge of justice between current birth cohorts – or the shorter-term challenge of treating young people fairly. She argued that the environmental and economic prospects of younger and future generations were so dangerously threatened that it was a requirement of intergenerational justice to implement any policies that may increase our chances to improve their set of opportunities.

Bidadanure argued that there are strong reasons to believe that youth quotas can improve the chances to meet both objectives. Young people are keener to implement long-term policies like environmental policies, and they are also more innovative in solving problems. On the other hand, she also rejected the assumption that young people are necessarily “greener” and more prone to promoting the interests of future generations. But youth quotas surely will increase the chance to promote youth interests. And second, a youth presence in parliaments would make it more unlikely for policy-makers to be driven by false representations and prejudices. Finally, Bidadanure claimed that the involvement of each age group in social and political decision-making constituted a crucial aspect of relational equality and that youth quotas could contribute to a symbolic acknowledgement of the equal political value of young people, as members of a community of equals. Beside the introduction of youth quotas, Bidadanure also proposed the introduction of an ombudsman for future generations. The implementation of youth quotas will produce fairer outcomes – that was the final conclusion drawn by Bidadanure. But even regardless of such outcomes, there are strong reasons to find the underrepresentation of young people in politics worrying from the point of view of social cohesion and political equality.

At the end of the workshop, Ashley Seager from the Intergenerational Foundation (IF)

and Bernhard Winkler from the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG) organised a role-play session. All participants took part in a simulated cabinet-meeting. In this session, the different measures presented during the weekend (youth quotas, lowering the voting age to 16, voting age without age limitations, proxy votes etc.) were subjected to a vote. Before each voting procedure, the benefits and disadvantages of each measure were discussed. Despite the numerous objections to youth quotas throughout the workshop, the majority at the end voted in favour of introducing them. Lowering the voting age to 16 was unanimously agreed upon, while half of the group voted against abolishing all voting age limitations. The introduction of proxy votes was rejected.



In his dinner speech, Professor Marcel Wisenbourg, of Nijmegen University, analysed youth quotas from a libertarian perspective and eventually opted for a more pragmatic take on quotas. He suggested that quotas for the young could be tolerable in the context of justice among existing generations, since they may, under the right circumstances, limit abuse of negotiation power, thus guaranteeing a fair representation of interests, and preventing the construction of exploitative (oppressive) institutions. Where justice towards future, non-existing generations is concerned, however, at the very least quotas protecting minimum representation of the elderly, and perhaps even exclusion of the middle-aged and young, would be more appropriate. If the aim of a quota rule is to impartially represent the interests of absentees, the most sensible candidate for representation is, after all, the person whose personal interests are least likely to be hurt by those represented. Finally, he suggested that even in a representative, deliberative democracy, a better instrument than a quota

was available and far more urgently needed: veto rights.

Results and future directions

The numerous presentations and different approaches showed that “youth quotas” are a highly under-researched topic. In contrast to other forms of quotas such as gender quotas and immigration/minority quotas, the challenge with youth quotas is that the characteristic upon which the quota is based (being young) actually changes throughout the course of a lifetime. Thus, a person never remains within the allegedly disadvantaged group (here, young people) for her entire life, as one does when groups are separated on the basis of sex and ethnic origins. This also illustrates the legitimacy problem with youth quotas. To what extent are youth actually a marginalised and disadvantaged group? And is it really necessary to introduce strong measures such as quotas to empower them and enhance their rights? An important question that also needs to be answered is: in what areas should youth quotas be introduced? Would it suffice to introduce quotas in the political sphere – namely in political parties and in parliaments – or should they also be introduced in business, public companies, organisations and associations?

A noteworthy fact is that most of the presenters looked upon youth quotas skeptically, because they questioned whether such quotas would have any real impact. However, this does not imply that they rejected the idea of youth quotas as a possible measure altogether (with some exceptions), but rather that they favoured introducing other measures to strengthening the rights of younger and future generations. Lowering the voting age to 16, or even a voting age without age limitations, were two other measures identified. It was also suggested that organisational activity amongst youth should be stimulated more vigorously. The low participation rate of young people in political organisations was acknowledged as a profound challenge that needs to be addressed in the near future. Another question that was disputed was whether or not youth can be said to have common interests? Several of the presenters doubted that one could hold that all youth shared a common interest. Even though it can be reasonable to assume that the youth take a particular interest in themes such as environmental protection and climate protection (because these themes generally are perceived as especially important for future generations), it was disputed whether youth

actually see this as a top priority. This led to the conclusion that stronger youth participation in politics does not necessarily produce more ambitious environmental politics. This was seen as a strong argument against the introduction of youth quotas.

An important part of the discussion involved further measures to strengthen the rights of youth. Particularly suffrage (and suffrage regulations) was identified as a central instrument. Two changes within suffrage regulations were suggested: on the one hand altering the voting age (lowering the voting age, or even introducing voting without age limitations), and on the other hand the introduction of proxy votes for parents (granting parents extra votes by giving them the right to vote on behalf of their children). Even though everyone agreed that introducing proxy votes would certainly raise the awareness of family- and children-related policies, numerous presenters doubted that parents would use their extra votes with the interest of their children in mind. Rather, it was pointed out that parents might be expected to cast their additional votes for the same party as with their original vote, regardless of the preferences of their children. Consequently, the effectiveness of proxy votes in terms strengthening the political rights of children and youth was considered low. Ultimately, parents would be rewarded, not children and youth.

Lowering the voting age was perceived as a better and more effective measure. It was emphasised that a change in voting age should be accompanied by a greater focus on political issues in schools and the educational sector. Through an extension of the suffrage, youth and children will have increased political power and influence. In addition, politicians would also have to take the interests of young voters into account when they run for election and form policies. Today, the exclusion of youth from the suffrage leads to a situation where politicians do not need to take their interests into account, because the youth do not have any significant influence in elections. If more youth are allowed to vote, their significance will also increase. The most extensive proposal was for voting without any age limitations (that is, everyone is allowed to vote if they want to, regardless of age). The suggestion does not imply that babies and small children would vote, because they do not take any interest in doing so. However, children and older young people would be given a strong incentive to take part in politics and elections, especially if the

educational sector puts more focus on politics and participation in the school system. At the end of the symposium, several of the presenters stated that it had been difficult to define youth quotas as a concept for scientific investigation. After the discussions at the symposium, the concept was more comprehensible. Amongst other issues, the discussions had clarified what areas youth quotas encompass, the complexity of the concept and the fact that it is a highly under-researched topic demanding thorough investigation. A number of the participants indicated that they would continue conducting research connected to the topic in the future. They also announced that they would make contributions for the anthology *Youth Quotas and other Efficient Forms of Youth Participation in Ageing Societies*. One of the main aims of the anthology is to provide the first systematic contribution to a topic that seems to be greatly under-researched. As mentioned above, topics such as gender quotas and immigration/racial quotas have been investigated extensively in recent years, while youth quotas have not. No earlier projects, anthologies or books relate directly to youth quotas, hence there is no other academic work that is in direct competition with this project. The anthology will sum up the findings and experiences of the symposium and present them to a broader academic audience, and will hence be important in reaching one of the main goals of the symposium: providing the first firm academic contribution to youth quotas as a topic of scientific investigation.

The demographic changes and the ageing of societies currently taking place in many European countries demand measures to prevent a political and societal marginalisation of youth and future generations. Youth quotas as an instrument have the potential to become one of these measures – but the topic needs to be carefully investigated in the coming years.

This symposium was financially supported by the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung and by ENRI (European Network - Rights to a Green Future) which is financed by the European Science Foundation.