Youth's underrepresentation in the European Parliament: Insights from interviews with young Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)

by Daniel Stockemer and Aksel Sundström

Abstract: Why do political parties elect so few young deputies? Given that the quantitative literature has at best only partially answered this question, we decided to conduct a qualitative investigation. Taking the European Parliament as a case for study, we examined this question through interview research with some of the young MEPs who served between 2014 and 2019. Our respondents, who answered various open-ended questions, suggest that the young are so few in number both because they lack contacts within the party and are seen as lacking experience. In addition, it appears that few parties have established pro-active measures to promote young candidates.

Keywords: *Youth, Parliamentary representation, Parties*

Introduction

Young people are starkly underrepresented in parliaments. Despite the fact that they make up over 20%, and in some countries 30, 40 or even 50% of the eligible voting age population, young legislators only make up less than 10% of the elected members in national parliaments across the globe (Stockemer/Sundström 2018). The empirical referent for this study, the European Parliament (EP), is no exception to this rule. In the current 2014-2019 parliament, youth representation – that is, the presence of MEPs aged 18 to 35 at the time of election – stands at a rather pitiful 11.4% (Stockemer/Sundström 2019).

Contrary to the representation of other groups, such as women, the presence of young deputies has also not increased over time. Indeed, the EP saw its female presence more than double from 16.6% for the first elected parliament in 1979 to more than a third of members in the 2014 parliament election (European Parliament 2018). Yet there was no meaningful increase over the same period in the representation among MEPs of the age cohort of 18 to 35 years old. In that first parliament, young deputies made up 9.1% of the deputies.[1]

What explains this consistent underrepresentation? Since the predominantly quantitative literature has not offered any convincing explanation to this question, we decided to ask those young deputies that have been elected to Brussels and Strasbourg, why they think so few of their young colleagues have succeeded and what role different party characteristics might play in this. The answers to our open-ended questions suggest three hurdles. First, young parliamentarians think that they are so few in number because they lack both the necessary contacts within the party leadership and experience. Second, many of the elderly party elites seem reluctant to hand over their seat to a young colleague. Third, and contrary to other groups such as women, respondents suggest that few proactive measures are currently employed to boost young candidates.

This short article is structured as follows: in the next section, we very briefly situate our study in the budding literature on youth representation and present our methods. Next, we explain our results. Finally, we summarise our main findings and offer some avenues for further reflection.

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The existing literature on youth representation

There is agreement in the empirical literature that men aged 50 to 65 still dominate national parliaments (Murray 2008; Kissau et al. 2012). Several studies also explicitly confirm that the age group 18 to 35 is the least represented of all age groups in legislatures, and the most underrepresented compared to its share in the population. For example, Stockemer and Sundström (2018) not only show that the average parliamentarian is eight years older than the average citizen, but also that young deputies are largely absent from our legislatures. For instance, in the world's parliaments (lower houses where applicable) young adults aged 35 and below at the time of election still make up fewer than one in ten parliamentarians. An IPU (2014) report further highlights that the percentage of young legislators aged 30 years and under at the time of election stands at a miniscule 2%.[2]

There is also agreement in the literature that this flagrant underrepresentation of the young is problematic both from a normative and policy perspective (Tremmel et al. 2015). Normatively, it is problematic if the political system systematically denies a group access to the decision-making bodies (Henn/Ford 2012). As such, young people's underrepresentation goes against the ideal of a fully democratic society, where ideally all members have equal rights, responsibilities and duties (Ottaway 2003). More practically, research has established that young people in aggregate hold different views to older generations in the realms of environmental protection, spending priorities and social questions such as abortion or same sex marriage (McEvoy 2016). If young people are not given adequate representation, their views on these important topics would likely be silenced. This, in turn, might have dire consequences on young people's support for democracy and their interest in participating in the political process (Wattenberg 2015).

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Given the negative repercussions of the low representation of young people, it is of utmost importance for research to further understand what are the beneficial and harmful conditions for

young people's (under) representation. Yet, existing research has so far struggled to propose the determinants that could achieve a higher legislative presence of the young. Aside from some consensus that proportional representation electoral systems moderately boost the representation of young legislators (see Joshi 2013; 2015; Stockemer/Sundström 2018), the literature lacks a deeper understanding of what the favourable conditions are that boost the presence of young people in parliament. Most macro-level country factors – including youth quotas, economic development or the age distribution in the population – do not turn out to be either statistically significant or substantively relevant in models that seek to explain young people's representation (e.g. Reynolds 2011; Joshi 2013; Stockemer/Sundström 2018). The same applies to party characteristics such as the age of the party leader, the age of the party, the size of the electoral party support, and the political ideology of the party. While the different features of a party organisation should matter for the type of candidates that become successful, they too have no systematic bearing on the age of parliamentarians in the EP (see Sundström/Stockemer 2018).

What then explains a party's reluctance, or in some cases the lack thereof, to nominate and elect young deputies? We think that a qualitative setting is best suited to answer this question as the literature is in need of developing further explanations for why parties do not nominate more young deputies. As a first step, we thought it a good idea to explore the perceptions of young MEPs about the underrepresentation of their age group and focused on the role played by political party organisations. In detail, we contacted young current MEPs and interviewed them, using open-ended questions related to two larger themes: (1) perceptions about the reasons for young politicians' underrepresentation in the EP, and (2) perceptions about discrimination against young candidates in their party. We reached out to a sample of 130 MEPs that were 40 years of age and below at the time of the 2014 EP election in May and June 2017, with three reminders (the latest in November 2017). In total, 23 MEPs responded, either by email or by telephone. While this amounts to a relatively low response rate, we nevertheless believe that their replies are valuable. Our respondents come from a variety of backgrounds; they are broadly dispersed, coming from a wide variety of countries across the EU, and they are from small as well as very large parties. We also note that they represent parties of various ideological spectra and are roughly split into men and women. Despite these characteristics of our sample, we are aware that our relatively small sample might not be 100% representative of the population of young deputies, neither might it represent the views of candidates that did not get elected. However, what these interviews can do is to provide us with some (alternative) explanations about why there are still so few young politicians in the European Parliament and elsewhere.

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Results

Three themes stick out the most from the interview data: (1) a general reluctance within parties to nominate young candidates, (2) young candidates lacking the necessary contacts in parties to get elected, and (3) young candidates having too little experience to gain nomination for an electable seat.

The reluctance to include young people

The finding that stands out the most is that some respondents mention that there is an insensitivity towards young individuals in their parties. While only a few people openly stated that they, or young individuals in general, are discriminated against in their party, our respondents made subtle complaints with regards to the party's tendency to favour older individuals' nominations. For example, one of the respondents from a party in Eastern Europe stated that: "I believe that many people in the party still have to understand that there is place in party politics for new ideas and the exchange of views between generations." Another young MEP from a former Communist country admitted that the situation is complicated for young individuals within their party. Another respondent stated in a more straightforward way that her party has a poor record of bringing young people to elected seats: "It is de facto more difficult for a person in their 20s than for an older one. Sure, it is." Similarly, a respondent from a party in Southern Europe expressed the view that the rather old elites in her party do not feel any need to nominate young individuals. A final illustrative example is a respondent from a larger social democratic party who mentioned that the party's youth organisation is working towards introducing quotas for young people on lists for the EP, but that this proposal has been met with "reluctance" from the party leadership.

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The disadvantage of lacking contacts

Another reoccurring theme among respondents is a reference to specific recruitment mechanisms for candidate lists, which might directly disfavour young candidates. For example, one of the respondents reported that in order to be considered for the lists, candidates have to collect 30 signatures from party officials, a task that is easier to fulfil for experienced politicians, who have been in the party for decades and thus have a large network from which they can draw support. In contrast, younger individuals might lack this network and thus might have a much harder time to fulfil this requirement. Similarly, a respondent from one of the largest parties in the EP stated that connections in the party are tremendously important: "If you run against elderly candidates who have worked in the party for longer, that is an issue. They are more known. They know more about how to do politics." Another MEP mentions that even in her organisation – which in fact is a green party, often assumed in the literature to be more beneficial to young politicians – contacts among members in the party are important if you seek nomination for an electable position: "I think that people often underestimate that you have to spend several years to build up trust in the party." Altogether, what these responses point to is that party hierarchies are still difficult to penetrate for young individuals. In other words, formal and informal connections and networks within parties still seem to matter in many parties; as long as these hierarchies remain important, young candidates might have problems gaining nominations and elections.

The obstacle of having too little experience

Another related theme in the interviews is that of political experience – a factor that can easily be used by party elites to disqua-

lify young politicians. For example, a respondent from a smaller party explained: "Young people often meet the prejudice that if you are young you have less competence. …if a new member enters a meeting and that person is very young, of course there is a difference in treatment." Similarly, an interviewee voiced such perceptions about young people being described as less suitable for advancement in her party: "Yes. Because you have not been engaged for long, you have not held assignments, you are not known in the party and are you are considered inexperienced." Another respondent, from a left-wing party, stated that "you are not experienced enough" is like hearing a mantra for young candidates. Finally, one of the respondents, coming from one of the EU founding countries, describes the difficult road towards candidacy as follows: "I am convinced that young members are at a disadvantage in [party x], because it is a very old organisation with well-established power structures, which means that members are usually expected to work their way up from the municipal to the state level and then to the national or European level. This takes time."

This quote summarises the dilemma mentioned in several accounts facing young individuals: in order to be nominated for a potentially successful candidacy to the EP, they must have occupied some important positions in the party before being a viable contender. Yet, gaining all these experiences at an early age is naturally difficult to achieve for young individuals. From a theoretical perspective, the observation that experience is a necessary condition to gain a seat in Strasbourg and Brussels is important, in that it invalidates the assumption of the second order election model that a seat in the EP can be a good training ground for young MPs (cf. Meserve et al. 2009). Rather, the interviews underline that a seat in the EP is quite attractive for senior politicians, even if they have not held elected office in Strasbourg and Brussels before. Some quantitative calculation confirms that the median age of a freshman MEP is 49, less than two years younger than the average age of all MEPs.

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In fact, those young individuals who have made it to Brussels and Strasbourg have frequently already had impressive political careers before being elected to the EP. To highlight this, one of the respondents, from a Southern European party, was elected to the regional council at the age of 23, president of the national youth wing of party at the same age, a member of the party's national board at the age 24 and then elected to the European Parliament when he was 28 years old. Of course, such careers are the exception rather than the norm and very few individuals will ever have such impressive political résumés at the end of their 20s or in their 30s. As described by a respondent: "To get any elected position in my party you have to have had membership for a decade or more…You cannot renew politics, if you only give chances to people having been in politics there is only a type of people that can be elected and not young people." This quote indicates that as long as requirements for nomination for electable positions remain as extensive – or merits are valued in this way – youth representation will probably also stall at current levels. Several interviewees mentioned that there needs to be a "shift in mentality" among party elites, towards recognising that the new perspectives which the young may bring to the table are needed.

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Parties' youth organisations: one way forward to break the vicious cycle of young people's underrepresentation?

The interviewees point to a vicious cycle of youth representation. Parties of all colours are reluctant to nominate young candidates; these young politicians lack the necessary experience as well as party- and political capital to be strong contenders for a seat in Strasbourg and Brussels. It will be difficult to break this vicious cycle of youth underrepresentation. One way to do so might be via parties' youth organisations. As mentioned before, these groups often lobby the leadership by proposing policies – such as youth quotas on lists – and try to promote candidates from their ranks. Yet such strategies are seldom successful and there is considerable variation across parties on how well the youth wing is organised or how big it is, in relation to other groups or members in the party. But these youth organisations can be an important push factor to overcome the hurdles of nomination. For example, one respondent, who is a member of a conservative party in West Europe, largely attributes his successful nomination to the relative strength of his party's youth organisation: "It does not surprise me that, generally, many of the candidates that are active in this wing often fare well…Despite the lack of formal experience, they have still done many years in the youth organisation…It has a stronger standing and identity among members than other groups, such as the women's group, and can help youths get nominated."

Another respondent provides insight in why certain youth organisations are successful in supporting young candidates. Importantly, she describes how there is a vote in the youth wing's annual congress coordinating which candidates to support formally when approaching the mother party that constructs the lists for EP elections: "This joint support has made the organisation much more influential and without this it would be even more difficult to be elected as a young candidate."

Future comparative research on youth representation would therefore benefit from focusing further on the role of youth organisations. Appropriate questions would be: What is the relative standing and strength of the youth organisation in relation to the mother party? What kind of strategies for influence exist and which ones are more successful than others? Under what circumstances are party elites willing to include demands from youth organisations to include young candidates for electable positions?

Some (more) signs of improvement in youth representation

There are some budding signs that youth representation might be improving, albeit slowly. For example, several interviewees see two potentially positive developments in this regard. First, in the 2014 election some new parties – such as the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain – entered the European Parliamentary arena. As noted by one of the respondents, these parties not

only have a radically different political agenda than the traditional mainstream parties, they have also been created by young citizens. The parliamentary caucuses of these parties also consist, to a large part, of members in their 20s and 30s.[3] In fact, according to one of these parties' young members, his low age was more of an advantage than a disadvantage to get elected.

Second, some of the established parties have apparently adopted some pro-active measures to support young party members. For example, several of the interviewees report that their parties offer workshops for young party members to prepare them for political office. Probably most promising, two of the respondents report that their party has adopted quotas on their lists to promote young individuals. According to them, their parties have a quota of 10% and 30% youths respectively. Since we could not independently verify this information, it suggests that this might be an informal procedure.

Conclusion

Judged from the hair colour of most members, the European Parliament – like many other parliaments across the globe – is a "silver" parliament.[4] The majority of MEPs are aged 50 and above, and the young cohorts have a limited representation. Over the past 40 years of the parliament's existence, this picture of a largely grey parliament has not changed. Despite some positive signs, such as the adoption of proactive measures by some parties, as well as the emergence of new and younger parties (e.g. Podemos and the Five Star Movement), this dominance of elderly politicians is unlikely to change dramatically in the near future. It seems from the interviews that recruitment practices in favour of experienced politicians with a broad network are entrenched. Young politicians will continue to face hurdles to break into these networks, even more so because youth do not have a sufficiently large voting power to pressure parties to include an adequate number of young adults on electoral lists (Prainsack/Vodanovic 2013).

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A possible force that might help young politicians to gain more representation is youth organisations within parties. It appears that, if tightly organised, these youth organisations can successfully pressure some parties to select certain young candidates for electable positions. Yet neither this pressure, nor the aforementioned emergence of new parties, nor some lukewarm proactive measures by the parties themselves, will guarantee that young adults are as highly represented as their share in the population would demand. We think that the only quick fix to resolve the flagrant underrepresentation of youth is through the use quotas. Quota schemes have helped other disadvantaged groups, including women and ethnic minorities, to increase their shares in parliament (Bird 2014; O'Brien/Rickne 2016), and they could also help young candidates. Not only would a youth quota of 10 or 20% directly boost youth representation, it would also signal to young people in general that they have a place in politics. Yet the political will in Europe and elsewhere does not seem to be there.

Research on youth underrepresentation should also continue, at an even faster pace. Through interview research, we have confirmed that recruitment to political office has remained very traditional. Candidates must have the necessary political and party capital to be considered for a seat. Despite other qualities, such as ever increasing education, more often than not, young candidates do not have this political capital. There might yet be more to discover and we encourage others to expand this discussion. Qualitative research could for example focus on young candidates who unsuccessfully ran for a seat, to explore their experiences as well. Other quantitative and qualitative studies could look at the representation of young adults at different levels, including at the regional and the local level. Future research should also focus on the supply side, and ask prospective candidates what they think parties can do to help persuade them to run.

Notes

1 The representation of the 35 years old and below cohort at the time of election was as follows for the seven elected parliaments so far: 9.1% (1979-1984), 9.9% (1984-1989), 6.2%(1989-1994), 7.1% (1999-2004), 12% (2004-2009), 9.1% (2009-2014), 11.4% (2014-2019) (see Stockemer/Sundström 2019).

2 See also IPU 2016.

3 E.g. the average age of incoming MEPs in Podemos and the Five Star Movement in 2014 was 37 and 38 years respectively.

4 See Sota 2018.

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