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The functioning of Dutch party youth wings: a comparison of the 1980s and 2010s

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1. Introduction

1.1 A widespread but understudied phenomenon

In the run-up to the 2017 elections for the House of Representatives in the Netherlands (in Dutch: *Tweede Kamer*), the chairpersons of ten youth wings of political parties prepared and signed a climate manifesto.¹ Regardless of their political colour, they agreed upon five measures that would make the Netherlands a worldwide front-runner in sustainability. The party youth wings² insisted that these measures should be included in the government coalition agreement to be closed after the elections. The much-discussed manifesto was written after a call from author and former politician Jan Terlouw, who emphasized that young people should unite on themes and issues that concern them the most.

For those who saw these young people advocating a political cause on TV and in newspapers, this was perhaps a notable event. Politics is often seen as an ‘old men’s game’. Indeed, young people vote for and join political parties less frequently than older voters (e.g. Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Norris, 2003). There are also concerns that young people are decreasingly connected to the traditional political process in general, and to political parties in particular (e.g. Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Smets, 2012; Whiteley, 2007). Yet, the ten politically engaged young chairs in the media show us that there is still a group of young people that is involved in party politics. In particular, they are involved through the youth organizations of their respective political parties. The present study deals with these party youth wings. What political functions do party youth wings fulfil in our representative democracy? Has this changed over time?

Youth wings of political parties exist in democracies all around the world, uniting millions of young people. This is already apparent from the manifold international umbrella organizations in which party youth wings unite.³ Research shows that the large majority of Western European parties indeed have a youth wing, and that more parties have a youth wing now than ever before (Allern & Verge, 2017). Alongside political parties, party youth wings can thus be considered a ubiquitous part of a democratic society. It is therefore surprising that this widespread phenomenon has received scant attention in the literature, despite the alleged importance of political youth participation and the proximity of youth wings to political parties, the latter of which are generally characterized as central to our representative democracies. The few existing empirical studies on party youth wings predominantly focus on one specific aspect of their organization (e.g. Bruter & Harrison, 2009a; Hooghe et al., 2004;

¹ See, for instance: NOS Nieuws. (2017, 22 February). Jonge politici tekenen manifest voor duurzaamheid. Via <https://nos.nl/artikel/2159551-jonge-politici-tekenen-manifest-voor-duurzaamheid>.

² In some countries, party youth wings are called ‘political youth organizations’. Other commonly used terms are ‘youth sections’, ‘youth branches’, ‘political youth wings’ or ‘youth factions’. For clarity reasons, I chose to use the term ‘party youth wing’ throughout this thesis.

³ As can be derived from their websites, the International Federation of Liberal Youth has around 70 member organizations, about 150 socialist youth wings are represented by the International Union of Socialist Youth, the umbrella organization Global Young Greens unites over 70 youth wings worldwide and the International Young Democrat Union reports on representing around 125 centre-right party youth wings.

Lamb, 2002; Rainsford, 2017). Although each of these studies provides useful insights, the overarching question of what role party youth wings play in our contemporary democracies has until now been largely ignored. The present study aims to address this question by exploring the relatively unknown world of party youth wings.

Before turning to the main goal of this study in more detail, an understanding is required of what a party youth wing is. It is defined here as *a long-term, visible, voluntarily organized group of young persons that forms a sub-organization of a political party and pursues common purposes concerning collective goods and candidate selections for which certain methods are agreed upon in order to influence decision-making processes*. There are four key features included in this definition that help us distinguish party youth wings from other associations. First and foremost, party youth wings have a *partisan* character, as they are either formally or informally connected to a political party. Both the party and the youth wing propagate that their organizations are linked. Secondly, party youth wings emphasize *political* objectives and their aim at political action, without seeking public office or competing in elections. Following Warren (2001, p. 111), political organizations concern groups that are oriented toward or embedded within the medium of state power. Because of their efforts to assert influence on behalf of a certain constituency or political idea (Beyers et al., 2008), political organizations can be characterized as future-oriented, thus distinguishing them from hobby clubs (Gordon & Babchuk, 1959). A third key feature is that party youth wings comprise *organized and voluntary* political behaviour. A youth wing can be labelled as an association, i.e. “a formally organized named group, most of whose members – whether persons or organizations – are not financially recompensed for their participation” (Knoke, 1986, p. 2). Although the level of organizational formalization may vary across party youth wings, it concerns a group of persons that has agreed upon a common purpose and certain methods of actions which extend beyond a single act (Cole, 1920). The fourth key feature of party youth wings is that associational involvement is open to *people of a young age*. The youth wing itself determines what is defined as young, although the age range generally lies between 14 and 30 years old.⁴

1.2 Studying party youth wing functioning

In our current understanding of political dynamics, young people are on average less likely than adults to be involved in conventional politics.⁵ This lack of participation poses a risk to a political system that aims to represent all parts of society. Ample research is therefore conducted on the levels, forms and determinants of young people’s engagement in politics. In

⁴ The term ‘youth’ or ‘young’ is socially constructed and its definition is therefore not clear-cut. Scholars and societal actors use different definitions, varying from specific age categories to ‘being young’ as a transition phase. Appendix 5.2 provides an overview of the membership criteria and conditions of Dutch party youth wings in the late 1980s and 2010s, which includes the adopted age range for membership.

⁵ Scholars use various terms to distinguish between conventional and unconventional political participation. Some prefer to use terms as electoral-based, institutionalized or traditional participation to indicate the participation that takes place within formal politics. In this thesis, I chose to follow textbooks and other contemporary literature by using the term conventional.

this thesis, I focus on the youth wings of political parties, which have traditionally been created to bridge the gap between political parties and young citizens. Despite the limited amount of empirical research on party youth wings, plenty of statements can be found about their role and functioning. Scholars, news outlets, political actors and public institutions make – often unsubstantiated – remarks about the role of youth wings in political life. On the one hand, this is often done in a positive way. For instance, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte highlights the importance of youth wings as “(...) places where young people can express their social interest. Political youth organizations bring substance and fun together, that's a good combination” (Van Eijdsden, 2015).⁶ The United Nations good practice guide *Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle* is also illustrative. It promotes the development of strong political party youth wings because of their ability to connect young people to politics “by providing a powerbase for young members, retaining and grooming them, and reaching out to young voters” (United Nations Development Programme, 2013, p. 6). In addition, several national governments have recognized the importance of youth wings, as is apparent from public funding opportunities for these youth organizations (Van Klingereren et al., 2015). Such subsidy schemes are often based on the assumption that youth wings promote the political participation of young people.

On the other hand, there are some who question the relevance of party youth wings. For instance, it is written in an opinion piece in a nationwide British newspaper that “young people are (...) annexed to youth wings, where their policy interests are often compartmentalised or banished to the periphery” (Mycock, 2014). Similarly, in an article from 2007 from the Dutch quality newspaper NRC Handelsblad, the size and relevance of party youth wings are claimed to be waning (Willems, 2007). Researcher Chris Aalberts is even quoted in this article as arguing that youth wings are “small, pathetic clubs in which nobody is interested”.⁷ Although this implies that party youth wings have become less relevant over time, which may indeed be expected amidst scholarly concerns on both political party and youth participation decline, statements like these are unsupported by scientific evidence.

I would argue that it is high time that we move from assumptions and ideas on what party youth wings do or not, to a proper understanding of what they actually do. In order to do so, the current study has adopted the functioning of party youth wings as its central theme. A functional analysis is especially appropriate for investigating party youth wings because they have been repeatedly considered as instrumental, or as a means to a certain end: to enhance the political participation of the young in society (United Nations Development Programme, 2013), to ensure a representative link with young people (Poguntke, 2002), to socialize the young into future political engagement (Rainsford, 2017), and so forth. Alternatively, we may choose to study their organizational design, ideological profile, finances or relationship with the mother party. But such structural aspects in the end can only be understood in the context of the (political) functions that are performed by party youth wings. Particularly in the case of

⁶ In Dutch: “Het is erg belangrijk dat er plekken zijn waar jonge mensen hun maatschappelijke interesse kwijt kunnen. Politieke jongerenorganisaties brengen inhoud en gezelligheid samen, dat is een goede combinatie”.

⁷ In Dutch: “(...) het zijn kleine, zielige clubjes waar niemand in is geïnteresseerd”.

an understudied political phenomenon, a systematic empirical analysis of functions is a logical starting point in gaining insight in the position and meaning of that phenomenon in the political system at large.

In this thesis, I develop a functional framework of party youth wings consisting of three key functions: the mobilization function, the representation function and the socialization function. Firstly, party youth wings may promote the participation of young people in the political system, and hence their function as ‘mobilizing vehicles’. Not only can such exclusive youth-specific organizations be an attractive entry point to politics for young people, we also know that being asked is one of the crucial factors that determine an individual’s political participation (Verba et al., 1995). Secondly, party youth wings may make an effort to represent the interests of young individuals, i.e. act as ‘representation channels’ between the young generation on the one hand and the political system on the other. Situated closely to the mother party, a party youth wing can be typified as an “internal interest group” (Poguntke, 1998, p. 144). Such groups have the potential to exert influence on policy development and the selection of political leaders. Thirdly, party youth wings can be perceived as potential ‘socializing agents’: contexts in which young adults develop the political knowledge and skills and engage in discussions and social networks needed for future political engagement. Generally, voluntary associations are found to play a significant role in the process of political socialization of young people (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Quintelier, 2008). They would advance the skills, attitudes and capacities needed for political engagement (Flanagan, 2009; Verba et al., 1995). The political character of party youth wings makes them ideally suited for this.

The aim of this study is to empirically assess the degree in which party youth wings perform these key functions. Based on the findings, a picture can be painted of the role that party youth wings play in a democratic society. To what extent this role may subsequently be valued for its contribution to democracy is another question and depends on normative standpoint more so than on description. There is no single conception of the ideal democratic society (Cunningham, 2002; Held, 2006). As a result, the functional performance and relevance of political organizations, such as parties and their youth wings, can be valued differently depending on the adhered perspective of democracy. Several publications show that different perspectives on democracy lead to different emphasis on what tasks and features of political parties are deemed important for the well-functioning of the democratic process. For instance, from the perspective of participatory democracy, the promotion of mass participation is a key function of parties (Allern & Pedersen, 2007). For pluralist democrats, parties act as brokers between civil society and the state by being “facilitators of compromise and guarantors against unreasonable exploitation of one group by another” (Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 14). In the same way, varying degrees of importance can be attributed to the various functions of party youth wings. I will address this in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

1.3 Has the functioning of Dutch party youth wings changed over time?

While party youth wings are largely ignored in the literature, the functioning of their mother parties has been a major issue of concern for multiple decades. Consistent empirical evidence suggests that party membership, party activism, partisan attachments and electoral turnout are decreasing in advanced democracies (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000a; Van Biezen et al., 2012; Whiteley, 2011). This leads to concerns about the connection between parties and society at large (e.g. Mair, 2013). In fact, a ‘crisis of political parties’ is now a commonly held notion (e.g. Montero et al., 2002). At the same time, however, parties have persevered. They continue to play a central role in the governing process in European democracies. Multiple scholars have stressed that political parties transform over time and adapt to circumstances (e.g. Harmel & Janda, 1994; Katz & Mair, 1995; Kölln, 2014a). The role and character of political parties in Western democracies have been argued to change as result of economic, social and political developments, including the rise of mass communication, higher educational levels, and loosened social and religious ties, to name a few (e.g. Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000c).

A study of the functioning of party youth wings cannot ignore this dynamic context. It is likely that the described trends and developments have affected the functioning of party youth wings. Youth wings are becoming more common, but at the same time have to face the challenges of party-related political change and youth disenchantment with party politics. The question then is not only whether party youth wings are able to uphold a link between young people and party politics at this moment in time, but also whether their ability to do so has changed compared to several decades ago. Some argue that, amidst all changes, “there remain important areas of linkage between political parties and citizens” (Dalton et al., 2011, p. 4). It is not clear whether this applies to party youth wings. The only way to assess this is by understanding how party youth wings once functioned versus how they do so today. This study therefore employs a longitudinal design by comparing party youth wing functioning in two time periods within a single country.

In particular, party youth wing functioning will be studied in the Netherlands in the mid-late 1980s and compared to the mid-late 2010s. The Netherlands is very suitable for the longitudinal analysis to be reported in this study. The country is characterized by institutional stability. Party youth wings have a long tradition in this country; their existence goes back to the founding of the first nationwide political party. The Netherlands has had a state subsidy for party youth wings since 1976, which ensures the availability of public records on party youth wings. During the 1980s, we see the number of party youth wings stabilizing, making this a suitable time period for study. Moreover, major political change took place in the Netherlands shortly after the 1980s. This is therefore an appropriate period to include in a study on the functioning of party youth wings in a context of party-related political change. I will specify the rationale behind this selection in more detail in Chapter 3.

In sum, this study attempts to answer the following main research question: *To what extent has the ability of Dutch party youth wings to mobilize, represent and socialize young people into the political system changed between the late 1980s and the late 2010s?* It will do

so by combining qualitative and quantitative data, collected through archival research, interviews and surveys.

1.4 The relevance of this study

Democracy without organization is inconceivable (...) direct democracy falls down in the face of increasing numbers. The individual plain man, swallowed up in a sea of highly differentiated human beings, finds it necessary to organize with others of a like mind so that by concerted action they may bend the state to their will (Odegard, 1966, Preface).

Why should we care about the functioning of party youth wings and the way this functioning may have changed over time? Simply put: youth wings are closely tied to political parties, which in their turn are closely linked to the political process in the vast majority of representative democracies today. However, we still know little of these organizations and their young members. This section describes the various reasons why this study is relevant from a scientific and societal perspective.

Scientific relevance

This study contributes to the literature on the political participation of young people. The dominant focus is often on the young individual, who is either presented as disengaged from conventional politics (e.g. Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Spanning, 2008b; Wattenberg, 2007), or as engaged in new, more informal and short-term forms of political participation (e.g. Dalton, 2014; Norris, 2003; Sloam, 2013). In contrast, this study sheds light on an understudied type of political participation, namely party youth wing membership, and by doing so focuses on those young people who *are* active in the sphere of conventional politics. Moreover, this study expands our understanding of those organizational structures in which young people unite politically and which partly determine how young people relate to (party) politics. Although social contexts are more and more taken into account in the political participation literature, they are often included as a determinant of a young individual's political behaviour (e.g. Campbell, 2013; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Quintelier, 2008). Less is known about how young people, when united in a political youth association, jointly participate in the political process, and what opportunities such associations may provide for political involvement and education.

Secondly and related to this, this study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between political parties and young people. Political parties are widely recognized as a main linkage mechanism between society and the political system, which comes in many forms and evolves over time. In this regard, there is still a lot to learn about the link between political parties and young people. Surely, there are studies that focus on a specific aspect of this link, such as young voter turnout and young party membership (Bruter & Harrison, 2009a; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010; Smets, 2012; Whiteley, 2007). Nevertheless, the outreach strategies and institutional structures of political parties that either deter or encourage young people's engagement have received little attention. Hooghe & Stolle (2003,

pp. 44-45) rightly notice that, “(...) instead of asking whether young people are still interested in party politics, we might as well turn the question around: are parties still interested in young people?”. One key strategy of parties to connect to young people has traditionally been to offer them a more or less independent youth section. Particularly within the context of alleged party decline (Kölln, 2014a), it is important to reflect on this specific strategy as it might contribute to political parties’ fulfilment of their essential representative functions. The approach taken here offers a systematic evaluation of the functioning of such youth sections in two time periods, allowing us to dig deeper into the evolving relationship between political parties and the young.

Thirdly, this study provides relevant insights for the fields of intra-party politics and party organizations. It is widely acknowledged that political parties consist of different subgroups or factions that compete with each other in their attempts to achieve certain objectives (Boucek, 2009; Ceron, 2019). As such, intra-party groups influence the direction of the party and can fuel intra-party conflicts. Although often ignored in this body of literature, party youth wings may pre-eminently act as an intra-party group that directs its articulation efforts towards the internal decisional bodies. They can be considered as highly organized factions that are “not fully integrated into the political party nor fully independent” (Rainsford, 2017, p. 4). This makes party youth wings a unique case to study.

Lastly, this study is not only innovative because it explores a relatively underexposed phenomenon, but also because of its research approach. It is – to my best knowledge – one of the few studies that empirically assess the functioning of a political organization by means of a systematic analysis of a functional framework. The literature is replete with lists of functions of political parties and similar political organizations which, more often than not, lack a systematic operationalization and empirical assessment. The framework and the accompanying operationalization that I present in this study may therefore be useful for other studies of similar political organizations.

Societal relevance

From a societal perspective, it is important to learn how the connection between young people and party politics can be improved. At the heart of any democratic system is the involvement of citizens: “Democracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely in the government process” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 1). Through participatory acts, citizens are able to influence the decisions that affect their everyday lives, and decision-makers are provided with the information needed to make such decisions. Within this dynamic, political parties act as the primary representative agents that link citizens to government policy (Dalton et al., 2011; Poguntke, 2002). Young people are found to participate less in formal (party) political processes than their older counterparts (Spanring, 2008b). Their political engagement has therefore received a lot of scholarly attention. Two underlying concerns seem to be the key drivers hereof: concerns about the current and the future quality of our democracies.

Today, it is widely accepted that an engaged citizenry is a core component of a healthy

democracy. A low engagement of young people in conventional politics may put the quality of democratic governance under pressure, as it challenges the representativeness and responsiveness of the political system. For instance, considering the low participation of young people in elections, one might ask: “If politicians know that young people are far less likely to vote than the elderly, why should they care about young people?” (Wattenberg, 2007, p. 140). This becomes even more pressing when it is taken into account that legislatures “worldwide include more of the affluent than the less well-off, more men than women, more middle-aged than young, and more white-collar professionals than blue-collar workers” (Norris, 1997, p. 6). Only 1.7% of parliamentarians in the world are in their twenties and 11.9% are in their thirties (Power, 2012). The underrepresentation of the young in formal politics may result in a lower response to their social needs as well a larger gap between young people and conventional politics. Moreover, societies and political organizations may be less able to benefit from the potential of young people. They are often portrayed as important “change-makers” or as a “positive force for transformative social change” (United Nations Development Programme, 2013, p. 28). In the specific case of political parties, young people may help them improve and rejuvenate their image (Bruter & Harrison, 2009a, p. 224).

In addition, it is often (implicitly) assumed that a declining engagement of young people in conventional politics puts the future functioning of our democracies at risk. While there are widespread concerns about the declining levels of citizen engagement in conventional politics (Mair, 2005), these concerns are most pertinent in the case of young people as the decline in their partisan engagement seems to be most striking (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000a, p. 31). There is indication that voter turnout has fallen most sharply among young people in some countries (Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Phelps, 2004; Smets, 2012) and that the membership base of political parties in established democracies has been increasingly ageing (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). This is particularly problematic when one considers 1) young people to be the ones most susceptible to new conditions (Franklin et al., 2004, p. 216) and 2) the prolonged period between childhood and adulthood as a politically definitive period (Flanagan, 2009). Political attitudes and behaviours seem to take shape at a relatively young age (Hooghe & Stolle, 2002); “joiners in youth become joiners in adulthood” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 297). Following this line of argument, the political behaviour and attitudes of young people today offer us a glimpse into the future of our political parties and systems (but see Hooghe, 2004). In short, in the words of Bruter and Harrison (2009b, p. 1260), “young people are the future of old-style politics, and without their participation, some fear that our current model of governance might reach a point of no return”.

It is against this background that the current study on party youth wings is conducted. As mentioned before, youth wings traditionally aim at accommodating young people in conventional politics. The reported growing disconnect between young people and party politics leads to the question whether party youth wings have become less effective in doing so. A weakening of party youth wings would be yet another indication of a decreasing engagement of young people and presence of parties in society. Yet we also know that a small proportion of young people still becomes involved in politics by joining a political party (Bruter

& Harrison, 2009a; Weber, 2017b). Considering that politicians often start their career in the youth wing of the party (Hooghe et al., 2004), it is likely that within these organizational contexts we find tomorrow's political leaders. For these reasons, we need a better understanding of the functioning of party youth wings within our democracies.

1.5 Plan of the thesis

This study will set out the functioning of Dutch party youth wings in the mid-late 1980s and 2010s in eight chapters. After this introductory chapter, the second chapter will elaborate on the three key functions that party youth wings are expected to fulfil within a democracy. In order to do so, it will place the current research in the context of the prevailing scholarly views on political parties, party sub-organizations and political youth participation. The second chapter culminates in a tripartite functional framework that lays the basis for the study at hand: the mobilization, representation and socialization function. Based on that framework and the societal and party-related trends, I form expectations on changes in the functioning of party youth wings over time. The third chapter, the methodological chapter, defines the accompanying empirical features that point to a party youth wing's compliance with such functions. It will also elaborate on the single-country design, case selection, the methodological issues and the data sources. Chapter 4 introduces the Dutch context by presenting a concise history of party youth wings based on secondary sources and by elaborating on their legal context.

The three chapters that follow present the empirical results of the study. Each discusses and compares the performance of Dutch party youth wings within one of the three key assessment functions in the mid-late 1980s and 2010s. Chapter 5 focuses on the *mobilization* function by examining the extent to which party youth wings fulfil three sub-functions of mobilization in both time periods: 1) the recruitment of members, 2) the facilitation of internal participation and 3) the encouragement of members to participate in politics in other forms beyond youth wing membership. In Chapter 6, I discuss the *representation* function by examining to what extent Dutch party youth wings aggregated and articulated political interests and enhanced descriptive representation in the second half of both the 1980s and the 2010s. Chapter 7 presents a detailed exploration of the third key function of party youth wings: the *socialization* function. Although it is not possible to measure direct socializing effects, the chapter provides insight into the ways in which Dutch party youth wings provide political education and training and facilitate social interaction in their attempt to integrate young people into the political system. The concluding chapter, Chapter 8, will combine these results into an overall conclusion on the changing contribution that party youth wings make to the democratic society of the Netherlands. Moreover, it will outline the limitations, contributions and applications of the findings, and explore avenues for further research.

