

Junior Elections

An all-rounder tool to stabilize
democracy through active education

Jessica Jahn
Elen Antapyan

IYTT WORKING PAPER No. 6
APRIL 2025

In connection with IYTT's INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE 2023

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The **IYTT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK** is a think tank in which youth take the lead for democracy-strengthening activities with the aim to inspire decision-makers to democratic renewal and people to become more active citizens. Youth Fellows recruited via open calls for annual four-day conferences with 24 participants run the IYTT activities. To inspire decision-makers, Youth Fellows develop democracy-renewing proposals that are published in a user-friendly democracy handbook, in reports, working papers, and in policy briefs. To inspire people to be active citizens, Youth Fellows take to the streets and engage in conversations with passers-by using a method they developed themselves called Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDT). Since its inception in Athens in September 2021, Youth Fellows have conducted OCDT in over 50 locations and four continents. The IYTT's early international advance is shown by an article in *The New York Times*, in October 2022, and that applications for the fifth anniversary conference come from 540 youth from 68 countries, including 13 African countries.

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YOUTH
THINK TANK

Junior Elections: An all-rounder tool to stabilise democracy through active education

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of representative elections for children and teenagers along with proper elections as a civics education tool. With Junior Elections we propose a long-term policy tool to internalise civic engagement from a young age and inspire civics promoting dialogues within families. This way we aim to instil democratic values and support active participation in society. The proposal originates from the 5th IYTT International Youth Conference in Barcelona in November 2023, in which both of us took part. As elections are the simplest institutionalised participation opportunity citizens have, we want to close information gaps, reduce fears and therefore stabilise democracy.

KEYWORDS

Youth participation, elections, education, breeding civics

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IYTT.

CONTENT

Introduction

1. Early Habits Last a Lifetime

1.1. The Formation of Habits

1.2. The Benefits of Shaping this Habit

2. Language as an Enabling Factor not a Barrier

2.1. The Idea of Simple Language

2.2. The Benefit of Critical Thinking

3. Mutual Encouragement to vote - Children and their Legal Guardians

3.1. Challenges for Legal Guardians during Junior Elections

3.2. Solutions within the Junior Elections

4. The Involvement of Schools in Democratic Engagement

4.1. Case Study

5. Youth Involvement Strengthens Democracy

5.1. Some Reasons Youth is not involved

5.2. The Benefits of Involving youth in Politics

Conclusion

About the authors

References

Introduction

In 2023, researchers classified approximately 42 of the world's countries as autocratizing; they are gradually becoming less democratic (Democracy Without Borders: 2024). Political and economic instability, a worsening climate crisis and the erosion of civil liberties appear increasingly common for individuals across the globe. When considering possible drivers for this phenomenon, it is apparent that citizens of democratic societies often lack meaningful opportunities to engage with civic activities, which naturally results in a public that grows increasingly disillusioned with democratic systems. The public lacks touchpoints with democracy.

Besides elections, most people cannot think of other ways to actively shape their lives. Yet, voter turnouts have been comparatively low. It seems paradoxical that the only institutional participation possibility most people are aware of is not used and tends to be used less. In 2008, the global average voter turnout was 65.2%, but by 2023, it had decreased to 55.5% (Ahlander: 2024).

Especially in young people researchers have found a tendency to rely on non-institutional manners of participating in civil society. These include organizing protests and demonstrations as well as civil resistance. While these are important tools to shape democracies, they also risk disenfranchising the youth completely (Bayat: 2017; Sloam: 2012). Youth engagement in elections is shrinking.

The disinterest and inaccessibility in civic participation is growing. While we agree that other ways of institutional civil participation, such as petitioning or even running for office, are important, they are often less accessible to a lot of people and require a higher time commitment. Voting poses the most accessible and known form of participation. That is why we are highlighting it in our proposal.

Democracies are based on the fact that everyone has a right and the possibility to participate in the elections. That is one of the major contributing factors to why democratic countries tend to thrive. Democracies' economies are more stable and growing, there are less security risks and people are happier (Halperin et al., 2005). Democracies bring forth confident citizens who take their life in their own hands and participate in civic life. Engaged citizens means that civic institutions are more likely to represent people and give institutional decisions legitimacy. It is becoming increasingly evident across multiple countries in the 21st century how distrust in the democratic process and its fairness will dismantle the democratic structures and institutions everyone knows.

Often, a lack of trustable information about the representative system, the choices and what to do are cited as reasons why people choose to not vote. These issues came apparent to the Youth Fellows of the International Youth Think Tank (IYTT) during the 5th IYTT Youth Conference, held in Barcelona in November 2023. Drawing from a similarly existing project in Germany, the participants established that voting can be grown like every other habit and habits are strongest when developed young. This is why we propose the Junior Elections to enable children from the age of six until the legal voting age to participate in elections, parallel to the official ones. The results of the Junior Elections will not affect the result of the actual election but rather be representative of the juniors' opinions and stands. Children and teenagers will go through the same election process as adults - receiving a voting notification or registering to vote, informing themselves about the voting system and the parties and going to the polling station to cast their vote alongside their legal guardians. They will receive the same ballot and same experience to cast their vote. The entire process from receiving the voting notification or registering to vote to casting a vote will be supported by informational campaigns to tackle possible hurdles in the process.

Junior Elections can be a powerful tool to introduce people to the possibility of civic engagement from a young age. It can strengthen democracies by establishing civil engagement and participation as a habit. Additionally, it will have a double-sided impact where children encourage their legal guardians to go vote with them; possibly creating new civicness promoting family traditions.

To make this proposal accessible to every age group, the informational campaigns should be written in different versions which are age appropriate, inclusive, simple and multiple in languages. This will not only benefit the participating youth but everyone around them and opens the chance for intergenerational exchanges on new levels. "The growing understanding of the democratic system provided with this proposal will enable citizens to learn about politics independently of the education system and eliminate barriers as educational material will be provided in different versions. Within a long-term perspective, higher election turnouts are to be expected as a result of the implementation of this proposal" (IYC: 2023, p. 12).

Another potential result of Junior Elections will be the enhancement of representation of the voices of the youth. This is important as the age group makes up to a quarter of the world's population, yet their participation possibilities are more limited than for any other age group. These elections are a chance for representation and including an overlooked age group of society. Our proposal is thus an additional idea on how to give youth a platform, not a replacement of the potential lowering of the voting age. This is also an IYTT proposal of "The Handbook of Innovative Democracy" and would add active executive power to the representation and learning opportunity we are proposing.

This paper will address the mechanisms behind the proposal of Junior Elections, to make it a well-thought-out tool to strengthen democracy. Relying on existing literature, the paper will address how children's endless curiosity and willingness to understand the world around them can be used to promote civic engagement early on: "Things that captivate us early can often continue to hold a special place in our hearts as we age" (IYC: 2023, p. 12). The paper will address how habits creation can be used to strengthen civic commitment and why inclusive language is a contributing factor to make voting more accessible. The importance of giving youth a platform will be focused on as well.

1. Early Habits Last a Lifetime

Reasons why people choose to not participate in elections are, among other things, lacking knowledge of how to vote. While a lot of information in voting preparation is published everywhere on the internet and in the media, it can be overwhelming and be seen as another task on the endless to-do list of life. However, if more and more people are familiar with the system of voting, what is voted on and how, from an early age, this extra stressor will vanish. Voting will not be an addition to the mental load but a habit. This will leave more energy to choose who to vote for instead of how and what (House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee: 2014).

Elections are a special event which happens every few years. Therefore, it can be difficult to see voting as a habit. Habits happen regularly in the daily life. Habits, by the definition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, are "behaviour pattern[s] acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that show itself in regularity or increased facility of performance" (2025). Habits take their time and often need a support environment to develop. Brushing your teeth, making the perfect cup of coffee, or the road you take to work - these are all established habits humans create to make life easier for themselves.

Especially early established habits, such as your way of holding a fork and knife or covering your mouth when coughing and sneezing, are done unconsciously. These are things no one even thinks about when they are doing them. In this paper we hypothesize that the same logic can be applied to voting. If the behaviour itself of informing oneself, filling out the ballot and voting in the different ways that are legal in the respective country (mail-in voting, in-person, digital etc.) become second nature to citizens, that leaves more mental energy for other things and are less agitating.

In the following paragraphs, we will elaborate on the different ways habits are formed, focusing on the power of repetition and (social) cognitive learning theory, and the benefits created by it.

1.1 The Formation of Habits

Habits Are Developed at a Young Age

There is an endless list of skills and behaviours learned in childhood. The ways to tie shoelaces, the order of putting on clothes in the morning, urinating before going to bed - all habits taught to individuals during their formative years by their caregivers and legal guardians; some things through repetition, some through observation.

While we will more thoroughly explain these psychological theories as we go on, we will focus on the neuroplasticity of children's brains for now. Often, also called heightened plasticity, this phenomenon refers to the brain's flexibility in childhood which makes it more adaptable and capable of absorbing new information, picking up patterns and understanding casual relationships from experiences in their daily life. Therefore, children are constantly picking up social cues and forming basic concepts to learn more on how to behave in their life. It is an on-going subconscious process. The concept is called inductive learning (Whitebread, Bingham: 2013).

Early exposure to healthy behaviours, such as reading, regular exercise, and even civic responsibilities like voting, can help young people form healthy lifelong habits that carry over into adulthood. When children are exposed to voting from the young age of six in school, in the media and at home, they will also form the idea of the concept of voting early on and continuously develop that. The positive associations and causal relationships formed at that age are a strong influence on people's behaviour when they are adults. Voting should be one of them.

Junior Elections would establish voting as a familiar activity, which is the psychology of consistency; everything individuals do is a result of consistent repetition. Repetition has long been recognised as one of the most effective ways to instil behaviours, whether they are simple daily routines or complex actions. Research in behavioural psychology shows that consistent repetition of an action in similar contexts can lead to automaticity, where the behaviour becomes second nature and is performed with little to no conscious thought (Lally et al: 2010). This is evident in all these small habits listed before. These actions are not questioned or consciously debated. They just are.

Consistency, which is needed for habit establishment through repetition, not only refers to the frequency of an action but also the stability of the context which it occurs in. Therefore, introducing them to the adult procedure right away makes the polling station, the voting booth and all these environments familiar already, not associated with extra stress but rather with excitement and self-importance (Gawronski & Strack: 2012).

When the behaviour is consistently repeated, it not only becomes more comfortable but also more likely to persist into adulthood. By the time they reach legal voting age, voting will no longer be a novel or intimidating task; it will be a behaviour that feels natural, almost reflexive, much like other ingrained habits formed during childhood (Lilly et al: 2010).

Social pressure and social cognitive learning theory

Junior Elections would not only be helpful in learning about the electoral process through repetition but also through social reinforcement. One type of learning that is especially relevant to the formation of habits is observational learning, or the ability to learn from watching others. This theory has been coined by Bandura. To further emphasize social reinforcement, it is important to note that habits are not developed in isolation. They are developed within the context of the environments and the behaviours around us. Especially at a young age, children tend to imitate the behaviours and actions of people important to them, such as parents, teachers or older siblings. The brain is most sensitive to learning and copying behaviours at a young age, even before it learns why certain actions are taken. This is relevant for Junior Elections, so it cannot be assumed that every household should be open and have the resources for civic participation. By implementing the program for Junior Elections, facilitators would take advantage of the mirroring while ensuring to create an environment where the imitating of behaviours and the usage of civic engagement is given (Bandura: 1977).

At this point, children may not fully understand the meaning of the behaviours they are copying, but through repetition, the actions become habitual. As they grow older, they gain insight into the reasons behind these behaviours and may enhance or change them in light of that insight. Over time, as they mature, they begin to comprehend the importance of these behaviours and may even refine or alter them based on their ages. To support habit creation - one could even call it automation - and build an interest in participating in elections or civic life in general, the topics covered in the Junior Elections will respond to typical interests of the age group. To say children have no political interest is out-right wrong. While they may have no interest in adult politics, they have matters that are close to their hearts. Design of playgrounds, accessibility of the streets, staffing of kindergartens and pre-schools, the temperature in cities are just a few examples that can be tackled by adult politics through taking a look at funding for playgrounds and kindergartens, lowering curbs for better accessibility of bikes, strollers and wheelchairs, more trees and shadow areas to lower temperatures in cities. Children have opinions. The adult world just needs to meet them where they are to get them interested and involved. Junior Elections do that by not only giving a platform to youth, but maybe even starting a chain of events that motivates politicians to

consider juniors' ideas in their campaigns as well. In which ways that would be done will be elaborated in detail in chapter 2.

Therefore, it can be seen that various theories of learning, may it be inductive learning or (social) cognitive learning or the theory of consistency, support our hypothesis that early established habits are strong and will have a lasting effect on an individual's adulthood decisions. While there is no empirical evidence yet, the theories suggest that habit creation translates to creating voting as habit as well. This promising prospect gives validity to the underlying concept of Junior Elections and holds great potential for long term success.

1.2 The Benefits of Shaping this Habit

Junior Elections provide a unique opportunity to leverage this natural tendency for imitation. As children grow up in this environment, they are likely to internalise not only the act of voting but also the broader values of responsibility and accountability. By participating in elections alongside their caretakers, children observe voting not just as an individual task but as a meaningful societal or community ritual. In this way, voting becomes a shared social experience, reinforcing its significance through both observation and participation. When children engage with this process regularly and, in a way from an age onwards, they're more inclined to see voting as a crucial aspect of their future roles in society. This helps them develop the habit of voting and encourages them to uphold it within a social environment. By observing how individual efforts impact the community's voice they learn to value integrity in fulfilling their responsibilities. Bandura's cognitive learning theory builds upon the earlier learning theory and highlights that forming habits is not about external observation but also involves internal cognitive processes at play as well. Simply put, if children experience a sense of success in completing the observed task with the anticipated outcome, this additionally strengthens the habit creation. This is why the evaluation and public presentation of the junior election results is a crucial part of the tool (Bandura: 1977, pp.15f).

Voting becoming a part of family and community routines lays the groundwork for a society that values active citizenship and views democratic participation as crucial to the well-being and unity of the community. Participating in elections does not only instil habits but also fosters a sense of community where engaging in democracy is considered a fundamental aspect of life that is passed down through generations.

However, not everyone starts out with the privilege of having time for civic engagement. A study by Lauglo, J. and T. Øia has shown that students from resource-scarce socio-economic backgrounds are less interested in civic engagement and politics (2007, p. 28 f.). and education, greater time and energy constraints, and a lack of political socialization at home. By implementing a support system that ensures equitable access to informed and less

stressful voting—regardless of family background, economic situation, or social environment—we take steps toward a more just and accessible civil society. Furthermore, by reducing stress and establishing voting as a habit, we can foster greater civic engagement and inclusivity. In this paper we hypothesize that Junior Elections can create a chain reaction, getting juniors' families and communities involved too. That will be analysed further in chapter 4.

2. Language as an Enabling Factor not a Barrier

Civic participation should be for everyone. Yet, a lot of people do not feel empowered to participate. A lack of information about the electoral system and parties are quoted as one reason for civic passivity (Kurzleben, 2018). Civic education and knowledge cannot be regarded as a given everywhere for everyone. In fact, some western countries reported a decline in understanding of national democracy and political system as their students mature in upper high school classes (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority: 2024). Additionally, political campaigns are not only often flooded with complicated language, full of specialised vocabulary and long sentences, but also most of the time only published in the country's official language. The lack of simple language and language exclusion, which makes it harder for a variety of people; minorities, immigrants, people with limited formal education or other restrictions; to make use of their privilege to vote. The process of acquiring knowledge and education can be more time- and energy-intensive for some than others. Invisible barriers hold people back.

A comparative study of the University of Hohenheim found that the party programmes in the recent 2025 German federal parliamentary election have been phrased quite unintelligible. The scholars compared the usage of loanwords, technical terms and sentence length in comparison to a political dissertation from a scale of 0 (unintelligible) to 20 (easily understandable). The political dissertation ranked at 1,6 while the parties ranked between 5,1 to 10,5 (Brettschneider & Thoms: 2025). In comparison, the majority of party programmes or campaigns did not reach even a semi-understandable comprehension level for the average adult. This raises the question, are elections where a majority of the people cannot comprehend the ideas behind the political campaigns properly, how can we expect them to vote informed, let alone children?

To combat these fundamental, yet often invisible problems, comprehensible informational campaigns are essential. Using practical and understandable language, Junior Elections aims to demystify the democratic process and make it more accessible. Publishing information about the electoral system in different languages and simple language for different age groups will be the aim. Execution should depend on the target group and aim. Leaflets, (social) media

campaigns or modern political personality tests like Germany's Wahl-O-Mat (Election automaton). Latter is an online test which poses simple yes and no questions to the user and aligns them with parties based on their statements they made about them prior to the publication of the website (Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb): 2025).

An additional information campaign during the Junior Elections will provide children, adults and even teachers with useful information, comprehensible for different age groups, reading levels and language speakers. For one, this will take away the feeling of overwhelm and emotional overload that comes with the time before elections. It will possibly create an additional opportunity for intergenerational exchange which will be further explored in chapter 4.

2.1 The Idea of Simple Language

Hansen-Schirra and Gutermuth define simple language "as controlled language variations used to ensure accessibility and understanding for people with cognitive impairments or limited literacy" (Jekat, Kappus, Schubert: 2018). Every human can comprehend a difference in media literacy for multiple reasons. Serving a wider range of them will make it possible for not only six-year-olds to understand what civic engagement is but for everyone else as well. Simplified texts have many benefits, such as the inclusion of people of all educational and comprehension levels and quicker reading levels. By breaking down complicated systems and processes, children and adults not only learn how to explain them better but also create an environment in which everyone has enough understanding of the democratic system to participate successfully.

The execution matters

When it comes to the facilitation of Junior Elections, language is crucial. It would have a profound impact on the accessibility and inclusiveness of the proposal. The electoral system and voting parties, all of them must be framed in a way that resonates with all participants, particularly young children and those with limited literacy or cognitive skills. Therefore, the goal is simple: while it won't lose its core, re-write the subject matters with the use of simple language to reduce the complexity associated with civic procedures, making voting seem less intimidating and more approachable.

To achieve this, instructional materials, ballots, and all forms of communication used in Junior Elections should be crafted using concise and direct language. Depending on the age or comprehension level different levels of complexity of the same text will be available. This reduces any potential confusion or intimidation surrounding the voting process, particularly for first-time voters or those unfamiliar with political terminology. While research hasn't found

a directly applicable instruction surrounding methodology yet, direct speech, short sentences with simple grammar structures, visuals or even just using bullet points have been proven effective in creating simple texts (Jekat, Kappus, Schubert: 2018).

The use of language in Junior Elections reflects the values we aim to promote with the proposal - fairness and accessibility for everyone involved in the process. It's important to be aware of our language when discussing civic participation and voting. The way we talk and educate about it changes the perception of it. Instead of an intimidating responsibility, it can be full of fun and self-fulfilment. Simple language plays a big part in ensuring that everyone understands and can embrace civic participation. It is a long-term learning goal for the youth. At the same time, it creates the possibility for the general public to get in touch with civic life again in a simple, accessible and low-effort manner.

The relevance to simplify

Keeping language simple is not about making information more readable but about ensuring that democracy is more reachable for all individuals in society. By simplifying education and election processes we can help a range of people. From youngsters engaging in Junior Elections to adults who may otherwise feel distant from the voting system. Simplicity guarantees that key democratic values such as representation, equality and participation are comprehensible and absorbed by everyone irrespective of their age, education level or cognitive capacity.

Simplifying procedures also helps voters concentrate on the topics and candidates without getting stuck, in confusing technical terms or official procedures. This is especially crucial, for children as it allows them to link voting with a sense of duty and happiness of annoyance. For adults using language makes it easier for them to participate in voting and civic activities, which in turn promotes greater involvement overall.

Simple language makes information more accessible. As an example, in trials, where medical texts have been translated into simple language, it has been proven that patients were able to make more confident and informed decisions about their well-being due to the new form of the given information (Jekat, Kappus, Schubert: 2018). At the same time, it is widely accepted that in politics, facts are more subjective than in medicine. That is why the informational campaigns will highlight false information when given and correct it. An example for that would be if a party during a local election promises tariffs if elected even though they do not have that power on the respective level. It is simpler to break down the voting process or how a government works in different age-appropriate phrasings. More difficult is to simplify the campaigns of parties which is a vital part of creating an informed decision as well. That is why

a close collaboration with parties, academics and NGOs is encouraged. The Junior Elections should aim to not discriminate against democratic political parties or favour them.

2.2 The benefit of Critical Thinking

Another significant benefit of Junior Elections is their potential to foster critical thinking skills from a young age. While at a young age juniors may not fully grasp the complexities of the political landscape, the act of participating in elections encourages curiosity and critical thinking. These are skills that are essential not only for informed voting but also for lifelong active citizenship.

Providing educational materials tailored to different age groups will guarantee assistance for children as they go through the steps of learning, evaluating their options and trying to understand the consequences of their actions. Truly emphasizing that every vote counts. It will give them the informational foundation to think of their role as a civic participation and voter in the society. A 2023 study by Zhetpisbayeva et al. examined whether early exposure to problem-solving and decision-making tasks supports the development of cognitive skills as children grow up. In particular, they explored the impact of Problem-Based Learning on the development of critical thinking and reasoning. Problem-Based Learning is an educational approach where students are tasked to solve real-life problems instead of just learning about them passively. It is a collaborative approach in which students exchange ideas and opinions based on material they were given or researched themselves. The findings of the study revealed not only significant improvements of critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and reasoning among students, but students reported that this approach gave them deep and long-lasting knowledge about issues. With this background, we think that Junior Elections can be classified as an out-of-classroom Problem-Based-Learning technique. At the same time, support inside classrooms is highly welcomed but not needed as the aim is to establish education that is not necessarily dependent on the school system.

Additionally, studies by Lang have proven that teenagers of the age of 16 already have gained the cognitive maturity to make informed voting decisions which are comparable to adults (Lang, 2024, p.5f). We want to support that cognitive development even earlier. Engaging in the voting process, even in a simulated environment, encourages children to think critically about the candidates, policies, and broader societal issues at stake. As 16 and 17-year-olds might have the maturity to vote as competent as adults, their political opinions are less stable and are often less decisive (Lang: 2024, p.16f.). This can be related to our Junior Elections proposal by highlighting a study by the University of Sheffield. In one of their 2023 studies they found that Scots who started voting at 16 are more likely to continue voting regularly as they grow older. Not only that but also a continuously higher voting turnout. Therefore, if children

and teenagers are supported from a young age with knowledge and the experience of voting, it can be hypothesised that the overtime gained knowledge will support decisiveness and critical thinking, which is why Junior Elections can serve as an essential tool for preparing children to become not only habitual voters but also responsible and informed citizens who approach the voting process with a reflective mindset.

In addition to fostering critical thinking, Junior Elections have the potential to create a long-lasting effect on children. As children grow into adulthood, their early exposure to assess and re-thinking choices can shape their general approach to decision-making in other areas of life - from personal choices to broader societal participation. Encouraging children to think critically about elections helps them further the skills needed to evaluate information, recognise bias, and make informed decisions—benefits that extend far beyond the voting booth (Guyton: 1988).

3. Mutual Encouragement to vote - Children and their Legal Guardians

One of the primary goals of Junior Elections is to encourage not only the participation of children but also that of their caregivers, who play a key role in supporting their children to engage in voting and hold the responsibility for ensuring their children's active participation in society. Junior Elections seek to strengthen ties across generations by actively incorporating caregivers in the election process, which taps into the natural dynamics of family life, where children and adults influence one another. When children start showing interest in a voting process through Junior Elections, school programmes, or family discussions, they motivate their caregivers to participate, too. Similarly, when caregivers model responsible voting behaviour, they showcase the importance of civic duty in their children and foster a culture of active participation. In this way, such a bidirectional influence supports continuous democratic engagement and can significantly impact voter turnout across generations. This intergenerational involvement is crucial in building a more inclusive and participatory democracy, as familial influence plays a vital role in instilling civic virtues and democratic principles. In the end, democracy is a collective procedure. This part of the paper discusses how caregivers and children motivate each other to vote by examining different social dynamics in each section.

3.1. Fostering Cognitive Learning and Family Rituals Through Mutual Participation to Increase Voter Turnout

As previously outlined in the proposal, social cognitive learning has a profound and enduring impact on individuals' development and behaviour. This framework emphasizes the

importance of observational learning, imitation, and modelling, which can significantly influence one's ability to acquire new skills and adapt to different environments. This, in turn, fosters resilience and adaptability in the face of challenges. To maximize the impact of this approach, it is essential to integrate opportunities for collaboration and collective learning, allowing participants to benefit from diverse perspectives and experiences. Caregivers and voting juniors, who can belong to different generations themselves, will create that collaborative environment in order to not only enrich the learning experience but also promote a culture with new approaches and decrease cognitive dissonance in voting habits. "The Parent-Child Link in Turnout" study (E. Gidengil, et al, 2016) showed that family has a more influential role in shaping a habit for children and their turnout to vote is higher among those who grew up with both of their parents voting or at least mother voting, as mother usually is considered to be more connected to children.

Beyond theoretical models, empirical studies provide compelling evidence of the influence that children's civic engagement has on adult voter participation. One of the most significant case studies in this area is the Kids Voting USA programme, an initiative designed to introduce schoolchildren to the electoral process through simulated voting experiences. A landmark study conducted by Simon & Merrill (1998) found that in areas where the Kids Voting programme was implemented, adult voter turnout increased by approximately 1.7% to 3.9% compared to regions without the programme. The study revealed that children's participation in mock elections stimulated political discussions at home, prompting their caregivers to engage more actively in electoral decision-making.

A similar effect was observed in the Netherlands, where mock elections in secondary schools led to increased parental discussions on voting. Research by De Groot and others (2022) indicated that when students engaged in structured civic learning, their caregivers demonstrated higher levels of political interest and were more likely to vote. These findings suggest that children's exposure to democratic participation not only cultivates their long-term civic engagement but also triggers immediate increases in voter turnout among adults, reinforcing the notion that voting is a socially reinforced habit rather than an isolated individual act.

However the same study showed various factors that influenced positively or negatively on the turnout, which introduce the challenges that will also be addressed further later on.

3.2. Challenges for Legal Guardians during Junior Elections

The Junior Elections proposal, while promising, faces several challenges. These obstacles primarily stem from the need to educate both caregivers and children, ensuring the election process is engaging and accessible for all. Additionally, certain risks, such as the influence of non-participating caregivers on children, must be carefully addressed to maintain the integrity of the proposal.

Parents need to be educated to be able to cover questions kids might have regarding elections

One of the primary challenges is ensuring that both caregivers and children are adequately informed about the electoral process. Children may be eager to participate for various reasons, however they will still look up to their caregivers and naturally seek guidance from them. If caregivers are not well-informed in explaining election-related topics or answering children's questions, this could discourage both parties from fully engaging. Therefore, providing educational resources that are accessible, easy to understand, and engaging is very important. Without proper education, there's a risk that the initiative could fail to achieve its goal of motivating both generations to participate in elections. The research discussed above showed that low education Parents are less likely to vote which has its negative impact on the child's turnout probability (E. Gidengil, et al, 2016).

Accessibility of the Process

Ensuring the Junior Elections process is easy to follow for everyone is another potential challenge. This includes making sure that language barriers, physical barriers, technological challenges, or a lack of knowledge about the electoral system do not hinder participation. Any complexities in the voting process could demotivate juniors or their caregivers from engaging in the elections. That is why the informational campaign is a pivotal part of this tool.

There can be the reverse effect: the influence of non-participating caregivers

Another challenge is addressing the impact of caregivers who choose not to participate in elections. When a caregiver withholds from voting or does not express interest in the election, this can negatively affect the child's perception of voting as an important civic duty. For children, the lack of motivation from their role models could reduce their enthusiasm about the process. Overcoming this challenge requires efforts to engage all caregivers, emphasizing their crucial role in motivating children and influencing their civic attitudes. In the same study results (E. Gidengil, et al, 2016) showed that children growing up with parents who don't vote have the lowest turnout.

A similar issue that could arise with Junior Elections is the potential for children to refuse participation, which could inadvertently affect their caregivers' decision to vote. Children, for various reasons, might not always be enthusiastic about going to electoral stations. Whether due to discomfort with the process, disinterest, or fear of unfamiliar environments, a child's refusal to participate could create tension for caregivers. This poses a unique dilemma: parents who prioritise their children's emotional well-being may decide to stay home themselves to avoid causing distress or conflict.

Children's hesitation can create a chain reaction, especially if caregivers feel uncertain about exposing them to a setting that might lead to anxiety or resistance. The emotional welfare of their child might outweigh the caregiver's sense of civic responsibility, leading to a lower voter turnout among adults who prioritise their children's comfort. This challenge underlines the importance of making the voting experience as positive and engaging as possible for children to prevent any aversion to the process.

3.2. Solutions within the Junior Elections

We can identify many risks which are attributed to social behaviour based on many features, such as education level among caregivers, habits, collective social responsibility and ownership over public resources, decision-making processes, or institutions, etc. In order to achieve this goal, Junior Elections need to ensure that they design the experience in a way that is both exciting and comfortable for young people. This could be achieved through the incorporation of age-specific voting props, games at the voting booths, or other fun decorative elements. When children perceive the process as enjoyable, the odds of their participation increases, thus minimizing the worries that parents have surrounding their children's wellbeing. Hence, caregiver participation will be more, which means it will be productive for both the ends of the spectrum. Implementing a simple system for the Junior Elections is one of the fundamental aspects of it; keep it simple. The whole process must be easy for kids to understand (referencing the previous argument; “Language should not be a barrier”), easy to complete all steps, must be engaging and draw their attention to what they are voting for which will make them excited to follow the news and see the results.

A proactive way to prevent caregivers from being unprepared or uninformed about their role in educating their children about elections is to ensure they have access to comprehensive resources. Junior Elections focuses on canvassing caregivers through different channels like media, information desks, guiding handbooks, and advertisements to ensure they have everything they need to know at hand. These materials would assist in preparing caregivers with the necessary information concerning elections and how to explain the importance of voting to their children.

Along with these resources, tools that are easy to use and quick to comprehend should also be developed, helping caregivers rest assured that they are able to deal with any queries or concerns that children may bring forth when it comes to voting. Engaging caregivers at the onset and providing them with detailed information make these caregivers more active participants in enabling civic learning for their children. This will specially make this process easier for caregivers because the sudden task of educating children does not have to be

overwhelming but instead, something that can be jointly done by caregivers and children helps make the task seem simpler.

4. The Involvement of Schools in Democratic Engagement

Junior elections are not just about children and their caregivers, they involve a broader network of influence. In the scopes of preventing risks, let's consider one and maybe even the biggest network they belong to, school environment. Schools form one of the largest communities in a child's life, and they play a pivotal role in shaping democratic understanding. Schools could include government structure education in the curriculum and include the principles and procedures of popular elections and political representation. Through Junior Elections, familiarity with government structure and representative democracy could be reinforced as students learn about their right and responsibility to engage in societal change. Teachers and school administrators can actively contribute by encouraging participation, helping to create a supportive environment for civic engagement. In this way, educators step into the loop, acting as key figures who help bridge any gaps in engagement that may exist at home. By doing so, they ensure that children understand the value of participating in elections, laying the groundwork for lifelong democratic involvement. This collaborative effort between schools, caregivers, and the community strengthens the junior election initiative, making it not just a singular event but a broader educational experience. By addressing these potential challenges, the election process becomes more effective in promoting democratic participation from a young age, even among students who may not receive such encouragement from their families.

4.1. Case study: Cultivating student participation in the context of mock elections in schools: Practices and constraints in secondary education in the Netherlands.

The study, titled *"Cultivating Student Participation in the Context of Mock Elections in Schools: Practices and Constraints in Secondary Education in the Netherlands"* by De Groot and others (2022), investigates how mock elections in Dutch high schools contribute to democratic learning and civic participation. Mock elections, a long-standing tradition in several European and U.S. contexts, serve as an experiential learning tool to familiarize students with the electoral process. The researchers conducted a survey involving one-fourth of Dutch high schools participating in a national mock election programme. The goal of their study was to investigate the level of student participation in staging mock elections, uncover challenges encountered by educators, and analyse the relationship of these activities with citizenship education goals. Key findings highlighted discrepancies between teachers' aspirations for

student involvement and the existing practices, as well as systemic challenges, such as insufficient resources, unclear school policies on citizenship education, and limited teacher training on participatory competences.

The study concluded that mock elections could foster political engagement and participatory competences, but their implementation remains constrained by institutional and logistical limitations. For instance, while 73% of surveyed teachers invited students to participate in the elections' design or planning, a significant gap remained between the current and desired levels of involvement. Teachers expressed a strong preference for broader student participation, envisioning mock elections as opportunities for students to assume co-organizer roles and contribute to deliberative planning processes. However, systemic barriers, including inadequate compensation for curriculum development and fragmented citizenship education policies, hindered these goals. The authors emphasized the need for clearer institutional support, enhanced teacher training, and dedicated curriculum space for citizenship education to fully leverage the potential of mock elections.

These findings underscore the importance of experiential democratic practices in nurturing civic engagement, offering valuable insights for designing Junior Elections beyond school settings. The lessons from this study can inform the larger-scale junior election initiative proposed in this paper. While the study focuses on school-based elections, the parallels are evident: both initiatives aim to immerse young participants in democratic processes, instill a sense of civic responsibility, and encourage future participation. The junior election proposal could benefit from adapting the study's methodologies, such as surveying participants and stakeholders, to assess outcomes and refine implementation strategies. Additionally, by situating Junior Elections within official voting stations, the initiative could circumvent many of the logistical challenges identified in the study, such as reliance on individual schools' resources or constrained teacher competencies.

Moreover, the study's findings on the impact of mock elections provide a strong rationale for extending such practices to a community-wide context. Mock elections were found to improve students' understanding of electoral processes and their willingness to participate in democratic activities immediately after the experience. Similarly, Junior Elections, conducted alongside actual elections, could enhance children's familiarity with voting, foster their interest in political engagement, and create a tangible link between their actions and societal outcomes. Unlike the school-focused model, Junior Elections would integrate young participants into a broader civic environment, potentially amplifying their sense of inclusion and long-term commitment to democratic participation.

Finally, the study's emphasis on addressing systemic barriers serves as a cautionary framework for implementing Junior Elections. Efforts should be made to ensure adequate institutional support, clear policy guidelines, and comprehensive training for those facilitating the initiative. These measures will be critical to achieving the elections' objectives of fostering a democratic culture and increasing political participation among future generations. By drawing on the study's insights, the junior election initiative can position itself as a transformative model for civic education and engagement.

Reflection: Civic education varies across countries, shaped by political systems, cultural contexts, and available resources. While some countries emphasize practical learning, like mock elections, others incorporate democratic ideas into formal curricula. Despite these variations, proposals such as Junior Elections have one thing in common: encouraging early democratic engagement to create knowledgeable and engaged citizens.

Elections are an important tool to guarantee accountability in civic engagement, which is vital to democracy. Participation in democracy can still be learned. Understanding and appreciating democracy takes real-world experience, just like habits are formed through repetition. Mock elections, as studied by De Groot (2022), illustrate how student involvement in organizing and participating in elections strengthens their grasp of democratic processes and increases future political engagement.

For Junior Elections to be effective, they must be accessible, age-appropriate, and relevant. Young participants have a sense of ownership when voting subjects speak to them, which increases the impact of the experience. But exposure to education is not the only factor that contributes to involvement. Another difficulty, as noted by Gidengil et al. (2016), is parental influence. It demonstrated that less educated parents are less likely to prioritise voting or have political conversations with their children. That can lead to an early gap in civic engagement. This emphasizes the necessity of proposals like Junior Elections, which can aid in closing gaps by giving all youth, regardless of background, firsthand experience with democratic engagement.

By addressing both systemic constraints in schools and broader social influences, Junior Elections have the potential to not only educate but also instil long-term civic habits, fostering a more inclusive democratic culture.

5. Youth Involvement Strengthens Democracy

To incorporate young people into decision-making processes is essential for fostering a robust and resistant democratic system. By providing opportunities for youth to actively take part ensures their perspectives and concerns are acknowledged within the civic society. Initiatives

like the Junior Elections make engagement and the integration of the voices of youth a priority and introduce them to decision-making frameworks early on. It not only empowers youth but also enriches democratic practices by adding new, innovative and diverse viewpoints. Efforts like this are indispensable for strengthening a dynamic democracy that benefits from active contributions of all its citizens.

5.1. Some Reasons Youth is not Involved

While they may have a different or joint background, all of the generally named arguments why people do not vote, also apply to youth disinterest in the institutional political process. In the past decades, the divide between young people and democratic institutions is widening day by day. Yet, it cannot be said that youth are not involved at all; just differently. According to two studies, youth actively play significant roles in political movements like the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter but face more and more difficulties to get involved in formal institutionalised democratic processes. Numerous young people express feelings of being sidelined or ineffective when dealing with government frameworks (Bayat: 2017; Sloam: 2012). Junior Elections tackle these issues by developing channels that boost the presence of people and encourage communication. By promoting conversations and providing chances for involvement these proposals aim to connect youth with the system lowering suspicion and promoting active participation. This supports distrust widely felt in modern societies against “the establishment”. To sustain the democratic system, the young voters need to be won back, and future voters introduced to the power of voting. Failing to do so will increase the risk of political instability.

Inequality is not a new problem in this field. Access to education, varying financial situations and different support environments shape how youth experience unequal access and treatments. That is no different in politics. Children with disadvantaged backgrounds or from minority communities often lack civic education which lays ground for growing inaccessibility in adulthood. A study has found that these communities especially benefit from additional education proposals like these.

5.2. The Benefits of Involving Youth in Politics

In the beginning, we stated that democracies are the safest and most prosperous states that exist in our world. They will only be kept alive if people keep appreciation, participation and involvement in civic life as well as those values of responsibility, Nächstenliebe and solidarity. Junior Elections can help with that.

Increasing representation

When kids take part in Junior Elections it helps them see the importance of their voices. How everyone plays a part in building their community's future with people from different backgrounds. They learn early that they have a say in their own future and actively shape it

and that it can lead to better representation. It encourages a mindset where individuals of all kinds feel included and aim to create the same environment for others. This can prevent future alienation from politics. Numerous adults report to feel exhausted and angry in relation to politics. In addition to lowering voter turn-outs, it is clear that numerous adults feel alienated in relation to politics (Nadeem & Nadeem: 2024; Ahlander: 2024). By showcasing and letting people feel the impact of democracy from a young age, we can prevent a growing feeling of alienation and can hypothesise even a shrinking of such. Juniors are ready to engage in democratic activities. When children know that their views matter, they tend to become adults who value their vote and take part in shaping democracy.

Increasing voter turnout through vote multiplying

Junior Elections serve as a way to boost voting participation, among families by involving children in the voting process at polling stations with their caregivers' support. It has been shown that when kids join in voting activities with their guardians it increases the chances of these caretakers casting their votes as well. This collective involvement does not enhance engagement but also promotes a sense of civic duty in both present and upcoming generations of voters.

Increasing voter turnout through vote multiplying

Believing in democracy usually begins with grasping how things work around voting and governance processes, like the Junior Elections proposal does for kids at an age – it simplifies voting, introducing it to the children in an accessible way and highlighting the significance of voting in everyday life. When children have experiences engaging in activities early on, they tend to trust that democracy works well and support the idea of fair representation – a key factor for keeping democratic systems strong and effective, for the long haul.

Trust in systems is usually built through interactions with civic processes from an early age. Junior Elections make voting more understandable by incorporating it into our lives and help in building trust in structures. Research such as Bouliannes examination of gatherings shows that organized engagement boosts trust and effectiveness. Essential elements for a robust and efficient democracy.

Stabilizing active citizenship and legitimizing governance

Getting individuals involved in activities helps create a well informed and analytical voting population, which in turn supports the legitimacy of governing bodies by nurturing trust and incorporating a variety of viewpoints into decision making processes as highlighted in Almond and Verba's influential "Civic Culture" research, that underscores the significance of civic skills and loyalty developed through regular and significant participation.

Conclusion

“Another contributory to the failure of democracy in many countries is the centralized government system when power seems increasingly remote from [the] majority or common people’s life” (Kiynai: 2013).

In democracies, the people hold the greatest power with their vote. Yet especially the younger people opt-out of this influential participation chance. Instead, they favour non-institutional participation forms such as protesting. We believe that the fundamental problems behind the issue need to be addressed to keep the democracies stable and alive. Political distrust, underrepresentation and misinformation push young people to take their political will to the streets instead of inside the parliament. They are not to blame for this. Rather it is necessary to look at the system that led to this trend.

Lack of education, lack of trust, lack of understanding - Junior Elections aim to fight the fundamental issues at its core. By introducing civic engagement at an early age, the Junior Elections aims to take away the feeling of being overwhelmed and replace it with familiarity, a habit of voting. Additional age-appropriate informational campaigns will help fill the knowledge void not only for the youth but also for adults. The proposal equips young individuals with the tools and an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to civic life, be involved and represented in their communities without affecting the integrity of the election itself.

This proposal presents a multi-faceted approach to strengthening the relationship between citizens and democracy in a sustainable and meaningful way. Encouraging individuals to engage in society as informed, independent thinkers will help build their confidence. Critical thinking is a valuable skill not only in politics but in all aspects of life. Additionally, by actively participating in democratic processes, people develop essential values such as responsibility, equity, community, diversity, and justice from an early age. At the same time, it empowers disadvantaged and marginalized groups and ensures that in the future no one will be excluded from sharing representative civil society. Crucially, it provides a platform for the least politically represented age group of all and lays the groundwork for research into youth civic attitudes and behaviours. Potentially, we hope that politicians start viewing youth as potential voters and tailor their political programmes more towards their needs as well. The representation and political power the youth gains from this might very well be an incentive for political parties to revitalise their organisations and political programmes to be more accessible outside of the Junior Elections as well.

Political knowledge and education vary from country to country, from school to school, from individual to individual. As does their attitude towards participation in civil society; if it is encouraged or frowned upon. Challenges, such as unequal caregiver involvement, disengagement of families or the misinterpretation of party programmes could be

successfully managed and mitigated by implementing Junior Elections. Their priority is accessibility, inclusivity and positive reinforcement from which children and adults mutually benefit. With the usage of simple language, the Junior Elections can be tailored to the diverse needs and backgrounds represented in society. It bridges generational gaps and while aiming at minors, everyone will profit from it.

Civic participation can become a habit, reinforcing democratic values and ensuring that democracy remains the most stable form of governance. This is possible as long as inclusion, representation, and continuous work to expand are prioritised, and access to participation opportunities is improved. Junior Elections will do just that. That is why it is worth trying.

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Efforts to foster a democratic education from an early age could be more effective by adopting strategies to internalise civic engagement from a young age and inspire civicism promoting dialogues within families. As elections are the simplest institutionalised participation opportunity citizens have, this working paper elaborates a proposal to bring this essential democratic institution closer to families and young generations.

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