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Becoming a democratic citizen: A study among adolescents in different educational tracks

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Adult Citizens' Views on Democracy

Democracy is often seen as the most preferable way of ruling a country and dealing with conflicts of interest. For a democracy to flourish it is important that citizens are positively oriented towards its institutions and their underlying principles. This means that citizens should hold generally positive views towards the parliament and rule of law, and towards principles such as freedom of expression, equality between citizens, and minority rights. Moreover, the will to decide political issues collectively and to contribute to the common good is paramount for democratic citizenship (Dahl, 1998; Galston, 1991; Held, 2006; Kymlicka, 2001; Shils, 1991).

Research shows that differences exist in the way people interpret democracy and how they value democratic principles and the actual working of democracy. Studies conducted across various global regions show that although a vast majority of adult citizens can provide a relevant description of democracy (Dalton, Sin, & Jou, 2007), they have different interpretations of the meaning of democracy. In diverse global regions, the largest group of people define democracy in terms of freedom (such as freedom rights or freedom of speech), while others focus on procedural aspects (such as elections or the parliamentary system) or refer to equality or social justice (Dalton et al., 2007; Thomassen, 1995, 2007). A study involving Dutch citizens shows that this strong emphasis on freedom has been present for decades, but since the seventies an increasing number of people, and especially younger adults, have referred to procedural aspects when describing democracy (Den Ridder & Dekker, 2015). Such differences between citizens' interpretations of democracy are similar to those formulated in political theory, thereby further underlying the contested nature of the concept (Held, 2006; Pennock, 1979; Thomassen, 1995, 2007).

In general, people have positive views on democracy and a willingness to support democratic principles. Studies have found that a vast majority of people from all over the world argue that democracy is a good way of governing their country (Diamond & Plattner, 2008; Norris, 2011; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003; Thomassen, 1995, 2007). In west-European countries, including the Netherlands, the levels of support for democracy have increased since the sixties (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Norris, 2011). Moreover, most citizens also support democratic values, such as freedom of speech and tolerance, as people tend to feel that such values are of great importance for the functioning of an orderly society (Thomassen, 2007). However, the level of support for democracy and democratic values differs between agegroups. Some studies show that young citizens adhere to a larger extent to democratic values such as tolerance

and gender equality, and reject hierarchical institutions to a larger extent than their parents did when they were young (Inglehart, 2003; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Other studies find that older citizens have higher expectations of democracy than younger citizens (Norris, 2011).

While citizens' views on democracy are generally positive, a somewhat different picture emerges when the institutions that accompany democracy in the political domain are taken into account. Some groups of citizens are just not interested in politics. Many would rather avoid talking about politics altogether, preferring to leave politics to politicians, and only participate when things 'really go wrong' (Den Ridder & Dekker, 2015; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Moreover, research in recent decades shows that many adults have limited knowledge of political institutions. Adults nowadays have, for example, problems with naming politicians, knowing which political parties are in power, or explaining the content of constitutional rights (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001, 2008; Norris, 2011). For instance, a study of Dutch citizens shows that a substantial group of people find it difficult to decipher the difference between parliament and government (Dekker & Steenvoorden, 2008). People differentiate in how they evaluate the workings of democracy in everyday politics, with substantial variations between groups of citizens in the extent to which they trust the parliament, the government, and political parties. While some citizens are positive about the possibilities for making themselves heard, others feel they are not able to make a difference in politics or that politicians are not listening to them (Bernauer & Vatter, 2012; Newton, 2007; Norris, 2011; Van der Meer, 2010). There are also differences in the views of people of different ages on the functioning of political institutions. In many countries, young people display more cynicism, have lower levels of political partisanship, and are less willing to participate in politics than older people are (Dalton, 2004; Hooghe, 2004; Bovens & Wille, 2008).

The Importance of Educational Level

It is a long-established fact that educational level is one of the most important factors in explaining differences in people's views on aspects of democratic citizenship. For example, in 1963, Almond and Verba showed that the political views of those with less education differed from those with higher educational attainment. The more highly educated citizens were more willing to participate in politics, more willing to follow politics, more likely to be active in political discussion, and placed greater value on his or her political skills. These outcomes were often replicated in the subsequent decades (Converse, 1972; Lijphart, 1997; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Dolezal, Bornschie, & Frey, 2006; Norris, 2011; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1989; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Verba, 1996).

Educational level also relates to adults' perception of democracy itself. The less educated have a stronger preference for direct democracy than those with higher education, and associate democracy less frequently with decision-making. A substantial number of them have no association with democracy at all. The lower educated define democracy more in terms of freedom and equality, while more educated citizens define democracy more often in procedural terms, such as majority rule or elections (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Den Ridder & Dekker, 2015; Webb, 2013). Moreover, education is negatively associated with adults' attitudes that are contradictory to democracy, such as intolerance, authoritarianism, and cynicism. More people with a lower education level believe in treating individuals with a migration background less favorably than those with the same nationality as themselves, believe children should be taught how to behave, and believe people in general cannot be trusted (Carvacho, Zick, Hays, González, Manzi, Kocik, & Bertl, 2013; Gesthuizen, 2006; Napier & Jost, 2008; Simpson, 1972).

Although ample studies have identified strong relations between educational level and political and democratic attitudes, there is only a basic understanding of why the level of education is such an important factor in explaining differences between citizens. In particular, it is unclear whether the differences found are a direct effect of schooling or a proxy for prior existing differences or underlying characteristics, such as social milieu. Therefore, more research is required on how adolescents from different educational levels develop views towards democracy, and what they learn about democracy inside and outside of school.

People are not born with democratic DNA; they have to develop the views, attitudes, and skills of democratic citizens. To achieve this they need space and stimuli to practice and experience democracy, and in acquiring democratic citizenship, adolescence is known to be a crucial period (Jennings, 2007; Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Levy, 2003). Despite this, the views of adolescents regarding democracy are unclear, and so is how they develop such views over time and the contexts that play an important role in this. These topics are the focus of this research.

The Focus of This Study

This research focuses on the development of adolescents in terms of being a democratic citizen, and investigates the aspects of citizenship that are building blocks for holding democratic views. The primary focus is on democracy itself and decision-making. With this study, I investigate what kinds of views adolescents develop toward democracy. The research concentrates on how young people, at different age, evaluate democracy, democratic values, and the political institutions that accompany it. Because democratic citizenship involves more than decision-making, this research broadens the scope by investigating other central aspects of citizenship,

specifically, social and political engagement, degree of focus on collectivity, and reflexive support for the freedom of speech. Next to investigating the adolescents' views on democratic citizenship, I also examine what kind of experiences adolescents have with democracy inside and outside of school. Finally, this dissertation investigates if the adolescents' views toward and experiences with democracy relate to their educational level.

Most research on adolescents' democratic views and attitudes focuses on political democracy (political institutions associated with democracy). In these studies, adolescents are asked about their views on national parliaments, political parties, the rule of law, or even the European parliament (Hooghe & Dassonville, 2011; Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy, & Lopes, 2010; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014). Yet, to most adolescents, these political actors and political institutions carry little meaning as only some of them follow politics, and for many politics is something abstract and far-fetched (Schulz et al., 2010; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003). To develop a fuller image of how adolescents view democracy, I investigate democratic issues in situations of which they can make sense. Therefore, the focus of the research is primarily on the adolescents' views of democracy in everyday life.

Studies on adolescent democratic citizenship usually employ a quantitative and cross-sectional design. In this research, I adopt a longitudinal, qualitative approach. Because of this design, I hope to provide more in-depth insights into how adolescents view democracy and how they develop these views over time.

The Netherlands, the site of this study, is an interesting case for investigating potential differences between adolescents' views on, and experiences with, democracy related to education. At a relatively early age, Dutch students are selected for an educational track (a pre-vocational track, a higher general educational track, and a pre-academic track).¹ Because the education for students in different tracks is highly

¹ In the Netherlands, students are formally selected for an educational track at the end of the second grade of secondary education. Because only a minority of schools offer education for all tracks during the first two years of secondary education, in everyday practice the selection is often made before the start of secondary education (Inspectorate of Education, 2013). About sixty percent of the students in Dutch secondary education go to a pre-vocational track. This track is subdivided into four sub-tracks, and about 25 percent of the students go to the lowest two sub-tracks. Some twenty percent of the students are in the general educational track, and twenty percent follow education in the pre-academic track (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). Moving up from the lowest pre-vocational tracks to higher tracks is rather rare. Some twenty percent move up from the highest pre-vocational tracks to the higher general education track, but this number has been decreasing in recent years (Inspectorate of Education, 2013). The students selected for this research were in pre-academic education (PA) or generally in the lowest two tracks of pre-vocational education (PV).

externally differentiated (organized often in various buildings at different locations), this study can shed light on varying educational practices related to track. In this research, I investigate the views and experiences of adolescents in the pre-vocational and pre-academic tracks.

Research Aim and Questions

With this study, I aim to contribute to the understanding of adolescent political socialization, specifically with regard to democracy and democratic citizenship. The central research question reads as follows:

What are the views and experiences of adolescents regarding democracy and decision-making, and how do these develop over time?

This research question is divided into five sub-questions:

1. What possibilities do school, associational life, family life, and peers offer adolescents to develop positive attitudes concerning democratic decision-making? What are the differences between adolescents in terms of their educational track?
2. Which types of decision-making do adolescents from different educational tracks prefer in everyday situations in comparison with their views on decision-making in political democracy and their interpretation of the concept of democracy?
3. Do adolescents, with age, become more familiar with the political domain, and do they develop more complex views regarding democratic decision-making?
4. How do adolescents from different educational tracks view important aspects of citizenship, and how do these develop over time?
5. What are the experiences of adolescents from different educational tracks with democracy in everyday life, and do schools provide opportunities for those who have less experience of democracy in other settings?

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 sets the stage by investigating adolescents' experiences with one central aspect of democracy, namely decision-making, in various settings of daily life (research question 1). In this chapter I concentrate on the kinds of experiences adolescents have regarding decision-making at home, with peers, in associational life, and in school, and search for adolescents' experiences of making their voices heard and making collective decisions. I differentiate between students from various educational tracks to see if educational background plays a role in having experiences with democracy and decision-making.

Thereafter, I shift the focus to how adolescents view democracy and decision-making. Chapter 3 investigates the kinds of preferences adolescents in different edu-

cational tracks have regarding decision-making in both everyday life and political democracy (research question 2). The focus is on the preferences of adolescents regarding collective decision-making procedures (majoritarian, consensual, and deliberative). Thereby, I investigate whether their preferences depend on the situation at hand, and whether differences exist in their views regarding decision-making in everyday life and within parliament.

In Chapter 4, I take this a step further by focusing on how views on decision-making develop over time (research question 3). By taking a longitudinal approach, I investigate the trajectories of adolescents regarding the development of their views on democracy. Thereby, this chapter concentrates on their familiarity with political democracy and the complexity evident in their views regarding democratic issues. Again, by comparing adolescents in pre-vocational and pre-academic educational tracks, I aim to see if different development trajectories exist for these adolescents.

In Chapter 5, the perspective is broadened by focusing on how young people, with age, develop views regarding three central aspects of citizenship (research question 4). Here, I investigate adolescents' views on social and political engagement, collectivity, and freedom of speech. Together with democratic decision-making, I consider these aspects as the building blocks of democratic views. These elements of citizenship are studied in different social contexts, such as the school and political democracy, in order to investigate whether adolescents' preferences vary depending on these contexts.

In the final empirical chapter of this dissertation (Chapter 6), I return to adolescents' experiences in everyday life (research question 5). Here, I focus on the possibilities adolescents have to develop democratic attitudes at home, with friends, and in associational life, and explore if school can compensate for differences that exist between students. In this chapter, the opportunities for those in pre-vocational education are compared with those in pre-academic education with regard to having discussions, making decisions collectively, and being encouraged to become socially and politically engaged.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I summarize the outcomes of these five chapters and interpret the main results in the light of previous studies. Moreover, I discuss how the central components of this dissertation can be of value for schools in providing students with opportunities to develop democratic attitudes, such as through having a curriculum better fitted to the preconceptions of adolescents regarding democratic citizenship. In dealing with these implications, I hope to provide some useful 'evidence-based' considerations for the development of citizenship education in schools.