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# Growing into politics? The development of adolescents' views on democracy over time

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## Abstract

This study focuses on how views on democracy develop during adolescence. A total of 40 Dutch adolescents were interviewed in their second and fourth year of secondary education. The study shows that the interviewed adolescents do become more familiar with politics but do not develop more nuanced views towards democracy. As the adolescents age, a one-dimensional perspective on democracy becomes more apparent. In the interviewees' perspective, democracy increasingly equals majority rule. Other aspects, such as minority interests and finding consensus, are increasingly neglected. This study, therefore, suggests that adolescents do not 'naturally' develop more complex views on democracy when they age.

## Keywords

adolescents, decision-making preferences, models of democracy, perceptions of politics, political socialization

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It is often acknowledged that adolescence is a formative period for acquiring democratic orientations. Young people become better acquainted with, and more interested in, the political world. During adolescence, people are expected to develop an interest in social and political issues, to be ready to discuss politics, and to become more strongly aware of the complexity of social interactions in civil society. Even though

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people may keep developing their attitudes towards politics and democracy throughout their lifetime, the foundation for these attitudes is laid during adolescence and young adulthood (Abendschön, 2013; Flanagan, 2013; Jennings et al., 2009; Prior, 2010; Sapiro, 2004; Sears and Levy, 2003). However, in the academic literature, two fundamental issues regarding adolescents' views on democracy are relatively unexplored. Because most studies (e.g. Helwig et al., 2003; Keating et al. 2010; Schulz et al., 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002) use a quantitative approach, insights into the reasoning of adolescents regarding democracy are lacking. Furthermore, the focus of most studies on age groups, rather than comparing individuals at different points in time (Amnå, 2012), hampers reaching a more in-depth perspective on potential trajectories in adolescents' views towards democracy.

With this article, we aim to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which adolescents' views on democracy develop over time. We focus on decision-making as an important aspect of democracy that young people experience in their daily lives. We explore how adolescents themselves make sense of democratic decision-making and how they prefer to deal with democratic issues. Our central research question is, 'How are changes in familiarity with politics and in views on democratic decision-making related as adolescents age?'

By interviewing adolescents, we try to find out whether young people become familiar with politics as they age and how this is related both to the way that these adolescents make sense of democratic decision-making and to how they prefer to deal with democratic issues. These issues involve multiple perspectives on the best way to find solutions for a problem and aspects of democracy such as collective decision-making. Re-interviewing them 2 years later makes it possible to observe potential trajectories in their views towards democracy. In our interviews, we focus on real-life situations where democratic issues are at stake and which are meaningful for adolescents.

## Adolescents' views on democratic citizenship

Currently, much debate exists about the nature of adolescent citizenship. Studies show that the political knowledge of young generations is declining. Young people are less informed about politics and democracy than previous generations were *at the same age* (e.g. Galston, 2001; Niemi, 2012). Civic engagement also seems to be declining among youth. Young people are less likely to be involved in the electoral process than older generations (Macedo et al., 2005). However, other scholars show that young people do participate in politics, but the means through which they participate have changed (Dalton, 2011, 2015). This suggests that adolescents are still engaged with society and politics. Furthermore, many studies across different parts of the world have shown that young people are positively oriented towards democracy. Overwhelming numbers of adolescents agree with democracy and democratic values, such as tolerance, equality, and free speech (Helwig et al., 2007; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2006; Nieuwelink et al., 2016; Schulz et al., 2010). Thus, it seems that adolescents are not very knowledgeable about politics and democracy, but at the same time are positively oriented towards democracy.

## Developing democratic views during adolescence

Political socialization research shows two developments in how adolescents gain a fuller perspective on the political world: increasing *familiarity* with politics and increasing

*complexity* in reasoning about democratic issues. As to the first development, it is suggested that adolescents grow into politics by becoming more familiar with abstract institutions and principles, such as government, parliament, and the concept of democracy (Greenstein, 1965; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2011; Husfeldt and Nikolova, 2003; Sapiro, 2004). While children develop views and attitudes towards aspects of everyday situations such as choice of friends, bullying, and boundaries of parental control over the preferences of their children (Helwig and Turiel, 2002), adolescents usually also develop democratic orientations (Adelson, 1971; Husfeldt and Nikolova, 2003). The outcomes of their learning experiences appear to be transferred from everyday situations to more distant social and political domains, such as civil society, political institutions, and political actors, with which adolescents gradually familiarize themselves (Abendschön, 2013). Studies show that at age 16 adolescents possess more knowledge of politics and democracy than at an earlier age (Greenstein, 1965; Husfeldt and Nikolova, 2003) and that they are more strongly oriented towards, and interested in, political issues (Adelson and O'Neill, 1966; Neundorf et al., 2013). With age, adolescents also tend to use more abstract notions in their moral and democratic reasoning. While children and younger adolescents formulate objections to infringements of freedom rights in psychological terms, older adolescents tend to use democratic principles to formulate their objections (Gallatin and Adelson, 1971; Galston, 2001; Helwig, 1998; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Sigel and Hoskins, 1981).

Another development in their political socialization is that adolescents tend to grow into politics by becoming more aware of the complexity of the social and political world. A first aspect of complex reasoning is multidimensionality in the sense that people take a plurality of democratic principles (such as freedom and equality) into account when arguing about a democratic issue. Ambivalence is part of this complexity. People feel that values compete and that there is no easy way of dealing with the tension between them (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Pennock, 1979). A second aspect concerns being able to distinguish between different situations and contexts when reasoning about an issue. In this respect, complex reasoning implies that people base their assessment of the topic at issue or on the context in which the issue is situated (Helwig and Turiel, 2002). Empirical research shows that while younger children tend to take a relatively naïve perspective on the organization of social and political life, adolescents develop a more complex understanding of what the concept of democracy entails. They develop more multi-layered perspectives on moral and democratic issues that encompass different moral or democratic principles as well as considerations about the feasibility of solutions (Adelson, 1971; Flanagan et al., 2005; Greenstein, 1965; Helwig et al., 2007; Helwig and Turiel, 2002). Older adolescents more often take several, contradictory principles into account (Adelson, 1971; Kinoshita, 2006; Mann et al., 1984; Moessinger, 1981; Sigel and Hoskins, 1981). They also tend to argue that a decision about what is fair depends both on the issue at stake and on the social context in which the decision is made (Flanagan, 2013; Helwig, 1998; Helwig and Turiel, 2002). Thus, studies find that with age adolescents are more inclined to use more complex reasoning with regard to democratic issues.

It can be argued that the two trends in adolescents' political socialization are related. By becoming more familiar, and thus more knowledgeable about politics, it can be assumed that adolescents are more aware of the complexity of the social and political world and more inclined to take several perspectives into account when reasoning about a democratic issue. However, to our knowledge, there are no studies that have empirically investigated the relationship between becoming more familiar with politics and the development of multidimensional views on democracy.

Studying adolescent reasoning on democracy is especially relevant because attitudes acquired during adolescence can have a lasting impact (Jennings et al., 2009; Prior, 2010; Sears and Levy, 2003). Recent studies have shown that certain adolescent political attitudes (e.g. political interest and willingness to participate in politics), acquired from the age of 14, are more or less persistent, whereas other attitudes (e.g. voting intention, political confidence) fluctuate during adolescence and early adulthood (Eckstein et al., 2012; Hooghe et al., 2014; Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, 2008; Prior, 2010; Quintelier and Van Deth, 2014).

That the period in life from 14 years onwards is a formative phase in the political socialization of young people can be explained by both their cognitive development and the role of socializing agents. When adolescents grow older, their cognitive abilities increase and this enables them to take different principles into account when arguing about a moral or democratic issue. It also enables them to understand the meaning of formal structures of democracy (Rest et al., 2000). At the same time, adolescents are introduced to social and political issues by parents, teachers, peers, voluntary organizations, and media (Amnå, 2012; Quintelier, 2015). Parents can have an important impact on their children's political socialization because they can influence their children directly by discussing political or social issues and more indirectly by having an authoritative parenting style where the reasoning behind parental policies and opinions is open to discussion (Chan and Koo, 2011; Jennings et al., 2009; Neundorf et al., 2013). A myriad of studies have shown that schools can also be important for the development of adolescent citizenship. Discussing citizenship topics, on a structural basis, in class has a positive effect on both knowledge and attitudes (Keating et al., 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Furthermore, an open pedagogical climate, where students can voice their opinions and have influence on school policies, also has positive effects on student citizenship (Geboers et al., 2015; Torney-Purta, 2002).

Studies thus show that by talking about the news and discussing political events with peers, family, and others, adolescents not only can become more familiar with politics but as a result thereof probably develop more complex views on democratic issues as well. Nevertheless, many adolescents seldom discuss political events (e.g. elections, impactful debates in parliament, formation of a new cabinet, political crises) with others (e.g. Gimpel et al., 2003; Manning and Edwards, 2014). But also everyday experiences can be venues to learn about democracy and decision-making processes (Flanagan, 2013; Greenstein, 1965; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Hess and Torney, 1967; Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, 2008; Sapiro, 2004). For example, encounters with school management have been shown to impact adolescents' external political efficacy (Gimpel et al., 2003).

## **Adolescents' views on decision-making**

The focus of this study is on one particular aspect of democracy, namely, decision-making. Democratic decision-making can take different forms and reasoning about it is generally multidimensional and complex. Political theory distinguishes at least three different models: a majoritarian democracy, which is typified by competition among citizens' preferences and voting as a decision-making mechanism; a consensual democracy, in which citizens try to achieve agreement through negotiation about their fixed preferences; and a deliberative democracy, in which rational dialogue is intended to lead to agreement among citizens about the best solutions to social and political issues (Dahl, 1956; Held, 2006; Hendriks, 2010; Keane, 2009; Pennock, 1979). In the three models of

democracy, no fixed balance can be found between potentially conflicting democratic principles, such as freedom and equality (Pennock, 1979; Thomassen, 2007). In all these models, contradictory principles of democracy are taken into account (such as majority vote, minority interests, power of arguments, finding agreement), which tends to make these models multidimensional and complex in nature (e.g., majoritarian democracy also takes freedom rights of minorities into account). In line with this, democratic reasoning about decision-making is generally complex in the sense that several contradictory or competing principles are taken into account when arguing about collective choices and decisions.

Only a few studies have studied the development of adolescents' attitudes and views regarding democratic decision-making, all using a cross-sectional quantitative approach. In some of these studies, adolescents were asked to compare majoritarian and consensual models of decision-making (e.g. Helwig, 1998), whereas other studies have focused solely on majoritarian decision-making (e.g. Kinoshita, 2006; Mann et al., 1984). To our knowledge, no study has taken deliberative modes of democratic decision-making into account. Participants in the studies of Helwig and colleagues (Helwig, 1998; Helwig et al., 2007; Helwig and Turiel, 2002) preferred democratic decisions (e.g. majoritarian, consensual) to authoritarian or oligarchical-based decisions, and this preference increased with age. These studies also show an age effect for the preferred decision-making model: younger adolescents tended to prefer consensual democracy or direct democracy, whereas older adolescents more often preferred representative democracy (Helwig et al., 2003). With regard to majority decisions, older adolescents tended to see more problematic aspects than younger adolescents (e.g. Kinoshita, 2006; Mann et al., 1984). Yet, these studies provide us limited insight into how adolescents reason in their own words about democracy and individual trajectories regarding the development of democratic views.

As evidenced from the above studies about adolescents' views on democratic decision-making, adolescents across different global regions are positively oriented towards democracy and older adolescents have acquired more multidimensional perspectives on decision-making. Therefore, these results indicate that with regard to democratic decision-making adolescents grow into politics: older adolescents seem to a larger extent aware of the contradictory character of democratic principles and more inclined to take the multidimensionality of democracy into account when reasoning about democratic issues. But because of the dearth of longitudinal studies on adolescents' democratic views, we do not have much knowledge about the development of these views over time. Furthermore, because most studies have a quantitative orientation, we lack thorough insight into the development of adolescents' reasoning with regard to democratic issues where several principles are at stake.

In this study, we therefore aim to gain insight into the ways in which adolescents grow into politics with regard to their views on various ways of democratic decision-making. We investigate how possible changes in the familiarity with politics and in the views on democratic decision-making are related as adolescents age. In exploring the development of adolescents' views on decision-making, we utilized a qualitative approach applying repeated interviews. This enabled us to deepen our understanding of adolescents' views on this aspect of democracy from their own point of reference and their ways of reasoning. In contrast to previous research, the participants in our study were able to formulate their own preferences regarding democratic decision-making, including majoritarian, deliberative, or undemocratic ones. Given that adolescents tend to entertain limited perspectives on the political domain (e.g. parliament, political parties, and government) and

to relate their attitudes towards democracy, political institutions and political actors to their everyday experiences (Flanagan, 2013; Gimpel et al., 2003; Sapiro, 2004), the starting point of our research lies precisely with these everyday situations, which will be related to situations of parliamentary democracy.

This study has been conducted in the Netherlands. Both the political culture and the educational system in a specific country are relevant contextual factors for the development of adolescents' views regarding democracy. Historically, Dutch political culture is consensual (Hendriks, 2010). Dutch cabinets consist of several political parties that form a coalition, and there is therefore a tradition of finding compromises between parties. However, there are indications that the political culture in the Netherlands has recently become harsher and less concerned with minority rights, as is also the case in other European countries (Hendriks and Michels, 2011). An expression of this development that is most visible for adolescents is the recent rise of right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands that have an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-elite agenda and demand that the will of 'the people' should be translated into government policy through simple majority rule. This (changing) political environment probably influences adolescents' views on democratic decision-making.

Regarding the educational system, it should be noted that citizenship education is compulsory for all schools in the Netherlands. At the same time, the relatively large degree of school autonomy allows schools to formulate their own goals and teaching approaches. One of the few central guidelines is the mandatory civics course in the third or fourth year of secondary education, when students are approximately 15 years of age. This course focuses on the Dutch political system, political parties, and political institutions.

## Method

For this study, we interviewed 40 Dutch adolescents twice: once when they were in their second year of secondary education (aged 13–15; 2011) and then 2 years later (2013). We chose to interview adolescents in this period of life because studies indicate that this period is pivotal for the political socialization of adolescents (see above). We also chose to interview the adolescents while they were in second and fourth grade for two additional reasons. First, the first round of interviews took place before, and the second round after, the students received a mandatory course on citizenship. While not aspiring to decipher the influence of citizenship education on the adolescents' views, we are able to see how they develop their views in a period in which explicit attention is being paid to citizenship in the curriculum. Second, we wanted adolescents with different educational backgrounds to participate in the study. After year 4, those in the pre-vocational (PV) educational track leave secondary education and change over to tertiary vocational education. This hampers a comparison with students in the pre-academic (PA) track of secondary education (continuing until the 12th grade).

As to the selection of participants, a well-balanced dispersion was aimed at with regard to gender, socio-economic status, ethnic background, and religious orientation. The 20 boys and 20 girls were equally distributed between PV and PA education tracks, with 13 adolescents from an ethnic minority. These students attended one of the four following schools in the Netherlands: an orthodox Protestant school providing both PV and PA education for a homogeneous population of non-minority students in the northeast of the Netherlands, a public school that only provides PV education for a mixed urban/rural population of both migrant and non-migrant students in the middle of the country, a public

**Table 1.** Themes in interviews.

Case about rescheduling a class	Interviewees were asked to discuss their preferred way to deal with a situation in which some students objected to rescheduling the class.
Case about the abolishing freedom rights	Interviewees had to pick a group they objected to (e.g. atheists, religious fundamentalists, nationalists) from the list. Then it was discussed whether this group – if it were to constitute a majority group – could abolish the freedom rights of other groups.
Statements about national political system	Interviewees were asked to respond to statements such as the following: ‘When making a decision it is important to find agreement even though it takes more time’, and ‘Politicians do not care about my opinion or that of my relatives’, leading up to a discussion about their views on decision-making in the national political system.

school that only provides PA education for a mixed population of students in Amsterdam, and a Roman Catholic school providing both PV and PA education for a predominantly non-migrant population in the northwest of the country. By selecting participants with different backgrounds and varying characteristics, we established a diversity in our sample which helped us to find perspectives on democracy from many walks of life.

### *Interview and procedure*

The semi-structured interviews were organized in the same way in both rounds of interviews and lasted approximately 90 minutes (see Table 1). They were conducted by the first author. The interview structure was piloted in six interviews (for the final interview structure, please refer to Online Appendix). During the interview, several cases and statements were discussed.

The structure of the interview involved answering a few introductory questions followed by the presentation of two cases about issues of democratic decision-making. These cases were intended to let the interviewees formulate their own perspectives towards situations where democratic decision-making is at stake. In the first case, participants were asked how they would deal with disagreement among students about the rescheduling of a class. During the discussion of this case, interviewees were asked to explain their views in more detail and whether they would change their preferences whenever the situation in the case would be different (e.g. ‘Does it matter how many students object to rescheduling the class?’ ‘Does it matter what kind of argument is being used?’). In order to prevent the use of certain terms (e.g. decision-making, democracy) influencing the ways these adolescents interpret the case, we used politically neutral terms (e.g. choosing, solving the problem). This case builds upon the research of Helwig and Kim (1999) showing that substantial groups of respondents follow significantly different decision-making strategies in a classroom context. The presentation of this case was intended to gain an understanding of how interviewees deal with decision-making. As we used open-ended questions, unlike Helwig and colleagues, adolescents were able to formulate their own perspectives on fair decision-making.

In the second case, students were asked to select a group they objected to (e.g. atheists, religious fundamentalists, nationalists) from a list and then give their views on whether or not that group – if it were to constitute a majority group – should be allowed to abolish the freedom rights of other groups. This case draws upon research showing that people make different judgements when it comes to abstract versus concrete situations (e.g.



Helwig and Turiel, 2002). This case was meant to provide an insight into the reasoning of adolescents with regard to the boundaries of collective decision-making.

The interviewer next asked the adolescents explicitly about the meaning of 'democracy' and their evaluation of it. The concept was deliberately not mentioned by the interviewer earlier in the interview in order to allow students to give their own interpretation of democracy and decision-making.

Finally, interviewees were asked to respond to 14 statements. Two statements gave them an opportunity to sum up their views with regard to decision-making and explicitly formulate these ('When making a decision it is important to find agreement even though it takes more time', 'When making a decision it is important that the majority decides'). With other statements, we tried to gain an insight into the adolescents' perspectives with regard to the political domain. This enabled us to relate their views on everyday situations to their perspective on formal politics, which has not been done before.

In a panel study, repeated interviews can have an impact on the results. We have tried to minimize such undesirable effects by ensuring during the first interview that the adolescents were unaware that a re-interview was also planned. The interviewees were asked whether they were willing to participate in the second round of interviews only *after* the first round had taken place. Furthermore, in order to find out whether the adolescents were trying to remain consistent in their views in both rounds of interviews, they were asked at the beginning of the second interview whether they remembered the contents of the prior interview. Most interviewees (25 of the 40) remembered that they had been interviewed, but did not recall what the interview was about. Only 15 interviewees roughly remembered the topic of the interview. That is, they could broadly refer to the concept of the interview but did not recall the answers given 2 years earlier.

### *Coding and analysis of the data*

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. With the help of ATLAS.ti, the interviews were analysed with a focus on similarities and dissimilarities in response patterns (cf. Miles and Huberman, 1994). The transcribed interviews were coded using the following categories and subcategories:

Decision-making: majoritarian decision-making, consensual decision-making, deliberative decision-making, changing viewpoint according to size of minority, changing viewpoint because of minority argument;

Decision-making in parliament: no perspective, some perspective, elaborated perspective;

Meaning of democracy: decision-making procedure, liberty, equality, other subcategories.

To determine the reliability of the coding, an independent judge coded the fragments of the transcribed interviews for comparison with the original coding. Next, Cohen's kappa reliability coefficient was calculated. For 'decision-making', the kappa was 0.82; for 'decision-making in parliament', 0.83; and for 'meaning of democracy', 0.86 which is acceptable for all three according to the rule of thumb of Landis and Koch (1977): 0.4–0.6 = 'moderate', 0.6–0.8 = 'substantial', and 0.8–1 = 'almost perfect'. In order to interpret the views of participants with respect to the three models of democracy (majoritarian, consensual, or deliberative), these views were classified in the following manner. They were classified as referring to 'majoritarian decision-making' whenever it was primarily argued that the majority should decide; as referring to 'consensual decision-making' whenever negotiation was chosen to find agreement, on the presumption that

people have fixed preferences; and as referring to ‘deliberative decision-making’ whenever a preference was expressed for coming to an agreement through rational dialogue in which all participants can put forward their viewpoints and collectively search for the most preferable outcome in the public sphere. When an interviewee was found to consistently argue in favour of a specific model of democracy, the interview was labelled as such. When an interviewee was found to provide responses that were compatible with more than one model, the expressed views were labelled in accordance with the model of democracy chosen as the most important one in his or her response to the statements about decision-making.

## Results

This study focuses on the relationship between changes in familiarity with politics and changes in views on democratic decision-making. First, we focus on changes in familiarity, and then we look at various interpretations of democratic decision-making and how these are related to perceptions of decision-making in politics.

### *Becoming more familiar with politics*

Previous cross-sectional studies showed that older adolescents have more elaborate views on democracy than younger ones. The results of this study show that as the interviewed adolescents aged, they became more familiar with the political domain and politicians, such as Geert Wilders (a right-wing populist politician who has dominated Dutch politics in recent years). However, discussing politics remained a difficult task. Some adolescents were unable to discuss politics and to give their interpretation of democracy in the first round of interviews. At the later age, all interviewees were able to formulate at least some basic ideas about the workings of Dutch politics and to give their perspective on topics, such as the responsiveness of politicians.

As the adolescents became more familiar with politics, their ability to formulate their preferences regarding decision-making in parliament increased. In the first round of interviews, about half of the interviewees were unable to describe their preferred way of coming to a decision in parliament. The other interviewees were able to formulate some basic preferences. Two years later, all interviewees formulated at least some basic ideas about decision-making in parliament. They expressed views that are related to the three models of democracy (see below).

Becoming more familiar with politics would suggest that adolescents also become more familiar with the concept of democracy. However, this seemed not to be the case for all interviewees. In both rounds of interviews, a substantial number of adolescents were unable to provide a description of democracy and, thus, did not show increased familiarity with the concept of democracy with age. Those interviewees who were able to provide a description of democracy mentioned majority rule as a central component. At both points in time, most adolescents regarded majority rule as playing some part in democracy. With increasing age, other interviewees stuck to their strictly majoritarian interpretation of democracy while other adolescents developed such views.

### *Increasing complexity in reasoning?*

Previous cross-sectional studies showed that older adolescents have in relation to younger ones more complex views on democracy and decision-making by taking into account

**Table 2.** Examples of preferences for decision making.

	First round	Second round
Adolescent with stable views related to majority decision-making	'More people want to reschedule the class, so it is fair to do so. Just vote ... Those three can give their arguments but then we vote'.	'I would ask them about their arguments ... They are not in a majority, so they have to deal with it ... If the class will not be rescheduled it will be undemocratic'.
Adolescent with stable views related to deliberative decision-making	'It does not matter that you are with more persons ... You should try to convince the others and come to an agreement'.	'Many people should be able to have a say ... You have to take a lot of things into account ... and we should take our time and in the end we will find an agreement'.

several principles and differentiating between contexts. The results of this study are not in line with this expectation. When growing older, our adolescents tended to base their democratic decision-making more strongly and sometimes even exclusively on the preferences of the majority. With age, a significant group of these adolescents more often applied this principle rather straightforwardly to decisions about freedom rights and decision-making in parliament. The results for the aspects of complex reasoning mentioned above will be discussed in turn using the interview themes (see Table 1).

### *Stronger focus on majority rule*

Because adolescents' experiences with politics and formal democracy are limited, we started discussing decision-making with the interviewees with regard to day-to-day situations, predominantly classroom situations (see Table 1). In these situations, their views regarding decision-making were related to one of the three models of democratic decision-making. In both rounds of the interviews, most adolescents expressed views that were consistent with the same model. The largest group clung to preferences related to majoritarian decision-making or developed views towards that model. They claimed that all preferences should be voiced and discussed. After that, a vote can be taken (see Table 2 for exemplary quotation). Some interviewees had or developed preferences related to deliberative decision-making or consensual decision-making. These interviewees formulated that it is important to come to a solution that all or most participants can agree with (see Table 2).

Whereas it might be expected that the number of adolescents who would take multiple principles into account when reasoning about a democratic issue would increase, the opposite was predominantly the case: in the second round of interviews, more adolescents focused on one single principle. A stronger focus on majority rule was observable in the second round of interviews. Among interviewees with a majoritarian perspective, a developmental trajectory towards focusing on one single democratic principle became observable. These young people argued in the first round of interviews that argumentation, finding agreement, and interests of minorities were also relevant, but 2 years later they stated that in decision-making only the preferences of the majority count (see the exemplary quotation of an interviewee in Table 3). Thus, they developed views that are strictly focused on one democratic principle.

**Table 3.** Stronger focus on majority rule.

	First round	Second round
From including several principles to focusing on one aspect	'First of all, what matters is the arguments that are put forward. But if the arguments from both sides are of equal weight, the majority will decide'.	'Those three students will have no say, because the others are with more people ... I would want to know why they object, but even if they have a good reason, we will still reschedule the class'.

*Voting about freedom rights*

The views discussed above were formulated regarding a case of decision-making in everyday life where no high stakes were involved. In order to identify whether the adolescents applied principles of democratic decision-making to situations in which the freedom rights of minorities are at stake, interviewees were also presented with a second case (see Table 1). In both rounds of interviews, the majority of interviewees argued at both points in time that a collective decision could not be made in such a situation. For them, the fundamental rights of people outweigh collective decision-making.

However, the number of those arguing that simple majority decisions can be made in such situations became more popular with age. All of these adolescents strictly focused on majority rule in a classroom context, and with regard to the case concerning freedom rights, although certain members gave counterarguments, they also considered majority decisions to be democratic and fair. For these interviewees, democracy amounts to majority decisions and the fundamental rights of minority groups do not represent an essential part of it. The reasoning of one interviewee, in the second round of interviews, is exemplary. When reasoning about the abolishment of freedom of religion, he stated:

What they want is very extreme, but you would have to do it the same way as with other topics: the majority has to decide ... But if they change all the conflicting legislation, and follow correct procedures, as a majority they should have the permission to [abolish these rights].

*Similar reasoning across contexts*

Differentiating between contexts regarding the preferred model of decision-making can also be regarded as an aspect of complex reasoning. Interviewees were questioned about their perspective on decision-making in everyday situations and in the political domain. While many were unable to provide a perspective about decision-making in the first round of interviews, in the second round all interviews were able to do so. Two types of responses were observable. First, a substantial and increasing group of adolescents stuck to their arguments or developed arguments that focused on the idea that the same decision-making procedure is applicable with regard to everyday situations and politics (see Table 4 for exemplary quotations). As these interviewees became more familiar with politics, their preferences for decision-making in parliament did not become more complex with regard to the differences between contexts and to the role of such aspects as the will of the majority, minority interests, or the power of argumentation.

Some students had a different type of reasoning. These young people argued that different types of decision-making should be applied because of the varying characteristics of the contexts (see Table 4 for quotations). These interviewees differentiated between contexts, which is an indication of complex views of decision-making.

**Table 4.** Different reasoning between contexts?

	Second interview
Similar reasoning between contexts	In the classroom: 'The majority has to decide. You can't take into account the arguments of all students'. In parliament: 'The majority has to decide. In politics there are so many different opinions and if you have to convince everyone it can take years'.
Differentiation between contexts	In the classroom: 'I do not think that majorities are important ... The best arguments should be decisive'. In parliament: 'I prefer everyone to agree, but I think that voting is the best procedure, because otherwise it would take a year to come to a decision... That is because people have different opinions'.

### *'This is how it works in politics'*

According to many interviewees, voting is the best decision-making procedure in a parliamentary democracy. A substantial and increasing group of adolescents stuck to or gave only in the second interview an explanation for their stronger emphasis on this majority rule. From their point of view, the majority simply makes the decisions in parliament. When discussing the case about rescheduling a class, these interviewees more often referred to decision-making in parliament to underpin their views. The reasoning of one adolescent is exemplary. In the 2013 interview, he formulated his views on decision-making in school:

Majorities will always come first. It is the same as with elections. [Last time] the liberal party won more votes than the labor party. It is the same in this situation [in school] ... You simply have to vote: in favor or not.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

This study aims to gain more in-depth insight into the development of adolescents' views on democracy. Previous cross-sectional studies have shown that older adolescents are more familiar with politics and possess more complex views (e.g. Adelson and Beall, 1970; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Sapiro, 2004; Schulz et al., 2010). Our study shows that the interviewed adolescents do become more familiar with politics but do not simultaneously develop more complex views on decision-making. Many interviewees claimed that decisions in parliament are simply made by a majority, and the largest group of the adolescents endorsed this notion of coming to a decision in some form. As a consequence, they adjusted their preferences regarding decision-making in everyday situations to how they perceived the workings of Dutch politics. The initial complexity in their views made room for a one-dimensional majority perspective on democratic decision-making. Our study also diverges from previous studies which have shown that adolescents base their attitudes towards democracy and political institutions on everyday experiences (e.g. Flanagan, 2013; Gimpel et al., 2003; Helwig and Turiel, 2002; Sapiro, 2004). Our findings suggest more or less the opposite: adolescents do not gradually grow into politics, but (their image of) politics is colonizing their social life preferences towards decision-making.

That the results of our study deviate from those of previous studies can be explained by changes in the political culture and characteristics of the Netherlands, which we discuss below, but might partly also be the consequence of differences in research design.

Contrary to other studies focusing on democratic views in the context of formal democracy or studies concentrating on everyday situations, we adopted a longitudinal design in which we asked participants about both these contexts and explicitly asked them to relate these to each other. This enabled us to show that adolescents' perspectives on the workings of formal democracy influence their initial preferences regarding democratic issues in everyday life instead of the other way around.

Before elaborating further on possible explanations for the strong focus on majority rule, we mention some limitations of our approach. One limitation concerns the interviewees' young age (13–17 years) and the limited time span between the interviews (2 years). During young adulthood, the interviewees can further develop or change their views. Perhaps at a later age, the interviewees would have more multidimensional views. However, studies show that, at least for some attitudes, there is stability between the ages of 14 and 30 (Jennings et al., 2009; Prior, 2010). This is an indication that the development found in our study towards more and stricter focus on majority rule can have a lasting impact for adolescents. Another limitation concerns the small scale of the study. Large-scale and cross-national comparative research is needed to investigate whether the developments we observed apply to adolescents in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

The development of one-dimensional perspectives on democracy among a group of adolescents in the Netherlands can, in our view, be interpreted by the state of citizenship education in the Netherlands as well as changes in the political and media landscape that are also observable in other countries. While studies have shown that schools can contribute to the development of multidimensional perspectives of students on democracy (see above), other studies indicate that in the Netherlands citizenship education is not fostering complex views on democracy. In the curriculum concerning citizenship education, democracy does not have an important place. Citizenship education is primarily focused on social cohesion and mutual respect (Inspectorate of Education, 2017; Schulz et al., 2010). Textbooks for citizenship education do not offer students a multidimensional perspective on democracy (Nieuwelink, 2008). Furthermore, the pedagogical climate in schools does not seem to offer many opportunities to develop multidimensional perspectives on democracy. A study on adolescent experiences with democracy at school shows that students have limited experiences with democracy at school. Whenever the possibility of collective decision-making arose, they usually simply cast a vote without having much debate or taking into account the perspectives of minorities. In the student experiences at school, collective decision-making equalled simple majority rule (Nieuwelink et al., 2016). All in all, there are indications that students are not offered many opportunities to develop multidimensional perspectives on democracy at school. Education can even be contributing to the idea that democratic decision-making is only concerned with voting.

Another explanation for the development of one-dimensional views on democracy can lie in the changing role of media in the political socialization of adolescents (Abendschön, 2013; Manning and Edwards, 2014; Sapiro, 2004). Current generations of adolescents generally use interactive social media as sources of political news (e.g. Stoker and Bass, 2011). What people learn from social media about politics, democracy, and the importance of dealing with different perspectives can be different from what people learn from traditional media. However, this issue has, to our knowledge, not been investigated.

In addition, changes in the political culture in the Netherlands can be explanatory for the development we have found among the group of adolescents. As has been described above, a harsher political climate seems to be emerging with the rise of right-wing populist parties as its most visible symptom. From the perspective of these parties, democracy means that the 'popular will' must find its way into legislation. The barriers that

counteract the translation of the popular will into legislation are unwarranted and should be removed (Taggart, 2000). This populist perspective largely corresponds to the development that we have found among the adolescents in our study. Even on issues that they largely oppose, such as the abolishment of freedom of religion, adolescents argued that democracy means that even a small majority of people should be able to decide what is right. In their view, democracy is defined by the majority will, which is in line with the populist version of democracy. It is therefore likely that populist parties have substantial influence on how adolescents view democracy, in the Netherlands and also in other countries with strong populist parties such as the United States, France, Belgium and Germany. Because adolescence is a formative period for political socialization and the development of one-dimensional views on democracy that can have a lasting impact on how people view democracy, this deserves serious attention.

On one hand, it may be regarded as positive that adolescents at different ages possess a by and large democratic way of reasoning, whether populist-inspired or not. But we regard the stronger focus on majoritarian rule at the same time as problematic. First, an increasing number of adolescents applied majority rule to situations in which fundamental freedom rights were at stake and neglected other democratic principles, such as respecting minority interests. These views can therefore be understood as reflecting a tyranny of the majority (Held, 2006; Keane, 2009; Maletz, 2002). For example, the view that freedom rights can be abolished by a single majority can hardly be seen as an indication of a correct understanding of the functioning of the Dutch democracy. Second, the fact that decision-making processes in Dutch democracy are complex holding elements of negotiation to come to consensus and deliberation about given arguments appears to be overlooked by these adolescents. They do not seem to develop a sophisticated account of the functioning of (Dutch) democracy, which limits their ability to judge the functioning of its actors and institutions on its actual merits.

All in all, this study shows how adolescents adjust their beliefs about just ways of dealing with collective decision-making problems to their perceptions of how formal democracy works. If this result also holds for larger numbers of adolescents in the Netherlands and elsewhere, it implies that the present-day experiences of young people with politics are rather one-sided and have a restricting influence on their views on democracy. This holds an important challenge for socializing agents. They should explore ways to both show adolescents the problematic aspects of a strict implementation of majority rule and help them to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of the workings of formal democracy. This can be a strong impetus for the development of richer perspectives on politics and democracy.

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