Aantrekkelijke politiek? : een onderzoek naar jongeren en popularisering van politiek

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Dutch youth seems to have little interest in politics: they do not have much political knowledge and are rarely politically active. Political observers and parties, societal organizations and the media regularly address the question how young people can become more politically engaged. A specific means to make politics more attractive to young people is 'popularization': politicians, for instance, make an appearance in entertainment programmes, pop artists speak about political subjects and politics is the setting of movies and television drama. These examples suggest that popularization may be important for young people to give meaning to politics. Although there is much debate on the appropriateness and the effects of popularization, not much research has been done on this issue. In addition, while many studies have shown that young people are not interested in politics, most of them ignore the question how they interpret politics. However, young people's interpretations of politics are essential to understand popularization. Therefore, the research question in this thesis is: how do young people give meaning to politics and to popularized politics?

A model of informed citizenship has often inspired research on young people's political engagement. This model poses high demands on citizens in general, and therefore also on young people: citizens should be politically interested, have political knowledge and participate frequently. However, many studies have shown that young people do not live up to these demands. This makes it less useful to study young people's political engagement from this perspective. In addition, the Netherlands seems to move towards what Manin (1997) calls an 'audience democracy'. In this conception of democracy it is impossible and unnecessary to be fully informed about politics. There is so much political information that citizens should concentrate on the most important issues, and more specifically, on issues that touch their own lives. Because the positions of political parties have become more similar, it is argued that criteria such as image and presentation become more important. However, the model of informed citizenship asserts that only knowledge of political views is appro-
appropriate for making political decisions. Popularization is considered harmful to democracy because it focuses on different kinds of information, such as presentation, entertainment and the personal lives of politicians.

In this thesis, an alternative model to informed citizenship is used, based on the idea of the 'monitorial citizen' of Michael Schudson (1998). This approach maintains that citizens pay attention to their own interests and scan their environment whether these interests are endangered; hence the notion of the 'monitorial citizen'. People are often not aware of this activity because it does not cost them much time or trouble. These citizens are passive as long as their interests are not in danger. This model was used in this PhD-project as a framework to examine specifically youth citizenship. The first question is which (popularized) political signals young people observe. These signals could serve as a sign that their interests are endangered. The second question is how young people view (popularized) politics. Young people's political activities are highly dependent on these interpretations. The third question is what young people do with (popularized) politics.

Studies on popularization have shown that politics is a regular subject in popular culture. Through popularization, young people can be confronted with traditional political signals such as political issues and political views, but also with non-traditional signals such as the personalities, the charisma and the private lives of politicians. This can lead to positive and negative views on politics. It is expected that (politically) active youths and (politically) inactive youths interpret popularized politics in different ways. Studies on political socialisation have shown great differences between these groups. In the case of active youths, there is a 'virtuous circle' (Norris, 2000). These youths are politically interested and live in an environment in which many people find politics important. As a result of this, these youths are frequently confronted with political signals, they develop positive views on politics and are encouraged to become politically active. This in turn leads to new political signals, more political interest and new political activities. It is expected that popularization of politics is relatively unimportant to them, because they have many other sources of political information at their disposal. Popularization, though, can still inform these youths in new ways about non-traditional aspects of politics. For inactive youths, on the other hand, there is a vicious circle. These youths are often not interested in politics and live in an environment where many people generally ignore politics or have negative views on politics. Because of this, they are less frequently confronted with political signals, and when they are confronted with these signals, they are likely to develop negative or indifferent views. This makes it unlikely that they become politically active and that they are confronted with non-popularized political signals in the future. Popularization is expected to be more important for them, than for the active
group because inactive youths are not active information seekers. They do not expect to be confronted with political information through popular culture, but they still are. It is expected that they can develop positive views on politics through popular culture and are confronted with several kinds of political information.

The aim of this project was to develop theory from the data using a grounded theory approach. 47 in depth interviews and 37 focus groups were conducted with young people aged fourteen to twenty-five. These respondents differ in respect of gender, ethnicity, educational backgrounds, age and political activities. They were confronted with examples of popularization by reading texts or watching television programmes. The project focused on three types of popularization: politicians who appear in entertainment programmes, pop artists speaking out on political subjects, and television drama about politics. The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed using the constant comparative method, which is central to the grounded theory approach.

The result showed that inactive youths use two frames to talk about politics: 'politics is important' and 'politics is boring'. They say that politics is important, that politics has a major influence on society and on their own lives, that they want to vote in elections, that votes should be based on informed opinions, and that they want to be informed about the main political issues. They make these remarks not only in the in-depth interviews, but also in the focus groups in the presence of other youths. This shows that the idea that 'politics is important' is a standard: inactive youths think that it is self-evident. Young people who say that politics is unimportant or that they do not want to vote, are criticised by others. Active youths use this frame as well, but give it a broader meaning. They want to be politically well-informed and participate in many political activities. These youths make negative remarks about their inactive counterparts, because they do not live up to ideals of political interest, knowledge and participation.

The second frame that inactive youths use is that politics is 'boring'. They maintain that everything related to politics is boring and uninteresting. The style and presentation of politics does not attract them: politicians are ugly, wear boring and formal clothes, are old and use difficult language. Also this frame is a social standard: inactive youths say that it is strange to be politically active or interested. In the focus groups, they are hesitant to present themselves as being interested in politics because that will raise eyebrows among the others. These youths try to be interested to a certain extent, as politics is important, but they do not want to come across as too interested because politics is supposed to be boring. They provide neutral explanations for the fact that they are not active; there are practical problems and they do not have any
influence on politics. They use two apparently contradictory frames and come up with conflicting views. They criticize politicians for being too formal, but also criticize politicians who create a youthful image for themselves. Their active counterparts do not make these contradictory remarks, because they only use the frame that politics is important. They ignore the question whether politics is boring and say that the style of politics is irrelevant. For them, this is a social norm as well. They only touch upon these issues in passing and say that only bad citizens would take note of such issues.

The first question is which (popularized) political signals young people observe. Inactive youths observe political signals in several sources, of which popularized politics is one. However, they have problems admitting this, as it can indicate that they are politically engaged. These youths tend to prefer to discuss political topics in an apolitical way. In contrast, active youths do not have problems to talk about the political signals they are confronted with and they talk about political issues in political terms. They are also confronted with popularized political signals, but they suggest that these signals are unimportant to them because popularization is harmful to democracy.

The second question is how young people view (popularized) politics. Inactive youths regard popularization as something negative. They develop their views through the frames that politics is important and that politics is boring. Politics should have a journalistic format; it should be objective, serious and informative. Popular culture should not focus on politics as popular culture serves entertainment purposes only. Inactive youths’ interest in popularization would furthermore indicate to other inactive young persons that they are politically interested and thus ‘weird’. Active youths agree that popularization is a negative development since it does not live up to journalistic standards. Their interest in popularization would indicate to others that they do not understand how politics should should present itself. Still, both groups expect that ‘others’ become more interested in politics through popularization.

The third question is: what do young people do with (popularized) politics? Again, inactive youths are reluctant to talk about this when other youths are present, because it is considered ‘strange’ to be interested in politics. Inactive youths claim that their only political act is their electoral vote. In this way, they live up to their views that politics is important. However, politics is also too boring to become more active. In this way, these youths can be confronted with many political signals, without it affecting their participation. Their political actions seem to be unrelated to the political signals they are confronted with. Popularization of politics does not seem to change this pattern. Active youths, on the contrary, do not feel that it is problematic to talk about political activities. But they are not the ones that might need popularized poli-
tics to become active. In addition, they would never admit to be affected by popularization as they view it as a negative phenomenon.

This study shows that young people use a frame that politics is important. This frame is very similar to a model of informed citizenship. Young people have internalized these norms, but this does not guarantee that they will live up to them. Only the behaviour of active youths is in accordance with this model. Young people state, in accordance with views on informed citizenship, that popularization is a negative development. The main difference between inactive and active youths is that the first group thinks of politics as being important and boring whereas the second group only views politics as important. These youths can be described neither as informed citizens, nor as monitory citizens. As a result of their view that political engagement is ‘strange’, they equally ignore politics and popularized politics. In this way, the political signals they were confronted with do not lead to political activities. Active and inactive youths interpret politics and popularized politics in the same way: by using a model of informed citizenship. This makes the role of popularization a limited one: popularized politics only informs young people on how politics should not be presented, is important for issues covered by the news media and during periods of high political interest. The proponents and opponents of popularization are both wrong: popularization is often irrelevant and plays neither a positive nor a negative role. It is still an important source for discussion because many people think that it can bridge the divide between young people and politics. However, this expectation could not be confirmed in this project.