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Casting a Vote – Complexities and Strategies among “First-Time Voters” in their Approach to Elections

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Abstract: When asked directly, most young people show a relatively low level of political interest. Despite this, Scandinavian youth exhibit reasonable voter turnout compared to most countries. In this study of young Danish first-time voters, we elaborate the peculiarities of their political reasoning and orientations. We approach our analysis on the basis of rationalistic theories of voting as well as the use of heuristics in voting decisions. We also build on the theory of political socialization and voters' loyalties to family in their decisions. Methodologically, we use the oral stories of ten students from upper secondary school on how they arrived at a voting decision. The article elaborates the decisions, paradoxes, and ambivalences which these young people display in the process of casting a vote. We claim that the individuals in our study handled this discrepancy by the active use of different strategies. Students particularly tried to simplify their choice of party by focusing on one or two important issues. They used strategic rationalism as well as value rationalism and idealistic approaches to decision-making. Above all, students used cognitive heuristics extensively. Generally, first-time voters often find themselves in complex decisions facing an overload of information and sometimes trapped between loyalties, particularly to their families, but rarely to their social class. Based on our findings, we suggest that teachers should sometimes provide meaningful heuristics to guide students' complex choices as first-time voters.

KEYWORDS; POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION/LEARNING, VOTING, HEURISTICS, RATIONALITIES, DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

Background and research question

The casting of votes is the institutionalized system for challenging power in democracies. Although most people abstain from many forms of political participation, the majority of electorates visit the ballot box. However, first-time voters find themselves, bluntly put, in a process where they have to identify differences and similarities between different political parties. They must prioritize the given opportunities in relation to what they find most important to themselves or to society, and obviously they also need to be given time to cast a ballot, so that their voices are heard. Apparently, voting is regarded as a civic obligation, and choosing between possible candidates and parties is an important part of political identity formation. It appears that voting in elections is a strongly integrated part of young people's political identity. Despite this, there is, according to a European social survey, lower voter turnout among young people (66%) versus 88% in the Danish electorate. When looking at the situation for first-time electors, there are some paradoxes between political disinterest and willingness to vote. There are also complexities between different sources of influence like media, school, and social/political expectations from the community. Young voters are further influenced by their family background as well as their school or social environment, which may affect their voting decision. In this context, school is supposed to teach young citizens about society, the political landscape, and voting in particular. In this article, we would like to explore how young people find their way to decisions made at the ballot box. We believe that it is important to reveal these decision-making processes to reach a better understanding of the situation and the socialization of young voters.

Our research question therefore is: How do young people decide on voting? To what extent do they use heuristics in coping with difficult choices and ambiguities?

We respond to this question by analyzing the stories of how ten young Danish citizens arrived at their choice of political parties. We motivated our study using a number of arguments. The first one is epistemological. Almost all research on elections and voting behavior uses quantitative methodology. We acknowledge that there are good reasons for this. However, quantitative methodology has its limits when exploring individuals' specific motives and reasoning behind various actions or non-actions. We believe that our qualitative approach is able to address some of these shortcomings and may also feed further quantitative research. Second, the majority of literature in this field is predominantly focused on rational choice models or theories of economic voting behavior. Nevertheless, such approaches have been met by criticism and opposing arguments stating that people generally lack the interest, the time, the energy, and the effort needed to vote in this way. Nor do they seek the information necessary to make rational decisions. Often voters behave in ways that are not characterized by self-interest. Finally, our last argument is analytical, because we

wish to focus on how first-time voters manage the complex voting process and their loyalties to sources of influence. Voting research could be argued to have a blind spot here. In particular, we are interested in the possible conflicts and loyalties which these adolescents experience between the prescriptions of political values in their families and their personal processes of political emancipation and development.

Previous research

The relevant body of literature covers adolescents’ participation and civic engagement as well as more specific cognitive approaches to elections and party choice. From these large research fields, we would like to mention Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan (2010), a volume which in a comprehensive way covers new theoretical as well as empirical approaches to civic engagement. Research on voting and its procedures has been approached from a number of angles, of which we mention: first, the classic paradoxes of voting; why is it rational to do this because the chance of influencing the outcome is so small (Olson 1965)? Second, why do people care who they vote for and how do they vote (Dhillon & Peralta 2002; Duffy & Tavits 2008)? Third, due to the costs of obtaining information, the voter presumably needs to take some shortcuts, thereby ignoring much relevant information (Sniderman *et al.* 1991). The present article is particularly situated in this third group of studies, where we also would like to mention the following works: Schoen (2006), O’Hara, Walter, & Christopher (2009), Rudolph & Popp (2007), and Lau (2003). These articles focus on cognitive approaches to opinion formation, the relationship between cognition and political interest, and cognitive styles of ambivalence. The present article approaches adolescents’ political interests, their sources of political influence, and their ambivalence in making political choices by focusing on how first-time electors reason about their role in an election. We believe that our elaboration of the complexities in students’ voting decisions adds important value to previous research.

Theory

Political development and socialization of youth

Research and theories of political socialization build on a long tradition dating from the classic work of Hyman (1959), Greenstein (1965), and Easton and Dennis (1969) among others, who saw political socialization as a means to provide support to the political system. Political socialization was here seen as a process of induction into the political culture (Almond & Verba 1963) and as a process through which knowledge about the system as well as beliefs, attitudes, and values was transmitted to individuals. This tradition of political socialization research generally sees the individual as a passive recipient of external influences. Later studies placed greater emphasis on adolescents’ cognitive development through their civic practices (Torney-Purta 1990) (Niemi & Hepburn 1995) (Biesta 2011), consequently seeing the process of political learning as a series of interactions in different arenas, for example

with those who are regarded as significant others by the individual, such as family, peers, media, school, organizations, etc. In line with the political learning perspective, Flanagan convincingly argued for treating politics and socialization as a domain of experience and knowledge, as opposed to political socialization accounts in which children become citizens largely through a transmission process passed down from older to younger generations. She maintained that adolescents’ ideals of the world are constructed and internalized from their actions with others and that individual political theories are built up through memberships in groups and institutions like peer groups, schools, and community-based institutions—spaces where young people enact what it means to be part of a group (Flanagan 2013).

In our study, it is important to identify the sources of influence on voting reflections because these are all part of the complex decisions that students have to make. Although students’ practices are important in their stories, our analysis takes a rather exploratory and cognitive approach. We assume that what they tell us at least indicates some of the most important aspects of their cognitive reflections on voting, and especially the ways in which political heuristics are “handed over” through political socialization and thereby work to facilitate the voting process.

The hypothesis of social class, party identification, and loyalties

The hypothesis of social class voting argues that belonging to a social class is the key determinant in voting behavior. Historically, political parties grew out of political positions in class societies and thereby institutionalized one of the most important cleavages in industrial society (Rokkan 1987). However, in recent decades, voters in general have taken a more individualistic orientation to voting. In his overview, Knutsen points out that “class voting” has declined in postindustrial society, but that there still exist class orientations and loyalties (Knutsen 2008).

As societies change, so does voting behavior, and so do the theoretical tools provided to explain such behavior. Voters have increasingly become “swing” voters who float from party to party in various elections. However, the possible influence from social groups on first-time electors’ decisions should not be ignored. Consequently, an exploratory micro-focus is needed to understand voter behavior.

Rational choice theory and issue voting

Rational choice theory has such a micro-focus and is the common framework for understanding (and even modeling) political and economic behavior. Still, it may not be possible to confirm or falsify the underlying rationality assumption empirically because there is generally no effort to explain individual goals. Hence, the theory leans heavily toward being a tautology (true by definition). This has caused increased criticism over time and has encouraged social scientists to use concepts of bounded rationality to replace the “absolute” rationality of rational choice theory (Simon 1972). Anyhow, in theories of voting behavior, issue voting has become predominant (Borre 2001). In such models, it is assumed that voters follow their rational self-interest. This resembles, to the extent that it involves operating with given and preset interests, the

social class hypothesis, except for the fact that issue voting theory is atomistic and pretty much analogous to the individualized consumer making rational choices on a market. If you have, for instance, a high income, it is in your self-interest that the pressure of taxation (the marginal rate of tax) be not too high. Therefore, you will vote for a party arguing for lower taxes. If you have many children, you will want low fees for child-care centers, etc.

The Michigan Model, which represents some of the earlier research on issue voting, is a theory of voter choice based primarily on sociological and party identification factors. It was originally proposed by political scientists in the 1950s at the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center, and the model most famously appeared in *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.* 1960). It aimed to explain voting behavior in terms of a voter's psychological attachment to a political party. According to this model, party attachment is generally stable and is formulated by outside social influences, including parents, family members, and others in one’s sociological environment. However, in recent years, the model has been challenged by spatial and valence models, forcing proponents to reconsider the long-term implications of party attachment. Critics claim that the Michigan model exaggerates the assumption that party identification is cemented by various circumstances and that party identification can change in the light of a party’s performance or other circumstances. Political parties have become more elitist, it is argued, and ideological differences between parties have been reduced. For the catch-all party, the top priority is vote maximization (Kirchheimer 1966). Voters, on the other hand, have become more utility-maximizing and less loyal to specific parties. It is not uncommon for people who are “blue” voters in one election to become “red” voters in the next election (and vice versa) if they feel that certain parties or politicians deserve their vote. In this line of thinking, voters choose between parties on the basis of policy preferences, like consumers in a market (Särilvik & Crewe 1983).

The *economic voting* approach to voting behavior assumes that voters are self-interested individuals who cast their votes on the basis of their estimations of the economic situation in society as well as their personal economic conditions (Alvarez *et al.* 2000). Rational choice and issue-voting models presume some political literacy among adolescents. These theories also presume some information-seeking and cognitive processing which can easily become very complex. We believe that neither adolescents’ political literacy nor their information-processing capacities can be taken for granted. Rational choice theories are important, but we think that they are too simplistic and fail to capture the complexities of the situation or adolescents’ shortcomings. Political behavior is influenced by various other factors such as emotions (Elster 2007), loyalties, and information at hand, as well as socially constructed meanings reflected in identities and institutions. Consequently, voting is a very dynamic and complex action in which a number of factors need to be considered because they also contribute to the basically ambiguous nature of the choice at the ballot box. In particular, we believe that this complexity is very real for young people and first-time voters because they have little political experience.

In a broader learning perspective, our motivation for studying political voting and heuristics is also related to young people’s interactions within spheres that can only very broadly be characterized as political, like family, schools, and civil society. Our everyday practices and understandings of political self and fellow citizens may be even more important to political interest and democratic engagement than “political literacy”, which is built up during elections to formal political institutions or during a formal course of social studies. The future democrat is also constituted in meetings and in grappling with everyday communities and dialogues (McIntosh & Youniss 2010). Living in a democratic society also means asking the critical questions in the public spheres of everyday meeting places (real or virtual), for example in schools, on Facebook, or in sports or residential areas. It means being part of collaborative communities with a “flat” and democratic culture and a living civil society, or taking part in a formal institution such as the upper secondary school (Papacharissi 2010). Considerations in everyday social life also have consequences for political decision-making and voting. Some scholars claim that new individualized forms of citizenship and voting behavior are emerging and that more temporary and elite-challenging forms of participation are becoming more widespread in western societies (Norris 1999, Inglehart 1997, Dalton 2004, Hooghe and Dejaeghere 2007). The traditional collective model of citizenship is losing ground together with party allegiance in favor of voting by personal “choice” rather than by “attachment” and social class. A new type of postmodern citizenship is developing, various scholars claim, building partly on Inglehart’s concept of post-materialism and post-modernization and often stressing the preference for freedom, self-expression, and spontaneous solidarity among younger generations.

Dalton has argued that young people have a much broader notion of democracy and participation through which experiences from personal life take on a political dimension (Dalton 2004). Several studies have shown decreasing involvement, particularly among younger people, who tend to abstain from societal engagement and participation in elections (Putnam 2000, Blais 2006). Young people participate less and are less interested. However, other authors have argued that we might see less active participation in formal and traditional political institutions, but on the other hand, we see more engaged citizens showing high levels of political efficacy and high levels of political preparedness and readiness (Norris 1999). The authors upholding this general line of thinking also hold that these new forms of citizenship will emerge most strongly among the young and the more highly educated groups within society. Schudson (1998), taking Inglehart’s argument a step further, has introduced the concept of a “monitorial citizen”, who scans the public sphere for relevant information about the political process, but will actually take action only if this is imperative. In consideration of available time and energy, the monitorial citizen watches over the political system, but intervenes only if absolutely necessary. The days of the “informed citizen”, says Schudson, are over. The world is complex and changes so fast that nobody can ever hope to be “fully informed”. We can no longer justify our political choices by claiming that we “fully understand” a policy program or a

proposed solution. How, then, can we act if we cannot base our actions on informed choices or decisions?

The role of heuristics

Most voters consider different political questions and issues in a process in which considerations and reflections are related to the knowledge and information available to the individual. The question is how such reflection processes actually take place at the individual level. For young people, especially, it seems relevant to ask how they make sense of their political environment. The weighing of voting choices for some is a fairly manageable process, while others take pride in acquainting oneself with all the necessary preconditions. The ability to differentiate in politics is crucial. For many voters, this constitutes a real challenge, especially among first-time electors, who do not have liberating or comforting traditions or long-lasting habits to rely on. They cannot rest on the basics and “do the usual”. Downs, who in his classic study tried to determine political behavior from economic notions and terms, stated that it is not rational for the individual to try to be politically informed because the profit from such an effort is not commensurate with the effort needed (Downs 1957). Some of the pioneers in theories of political psychology (Sniderman *et al.* 1991) likewise take as a starting point the fact that several empirical studies have shown that most people generally know very little about politics (Converse 1964, Luskin 1987, Zukin *et al.* 2006, Lupia *et al.* 1998).

Sniderman *et al.* built on Herbert Simon’s classic work on “bounded rationality” (Simon 1957, 1972) in relation to voting. The “bounded” rationality thesis says that decision-makers will rarely or ever be in a position to have complete knowledge of the questions to be decided. Therefore, decision-making processes are not (or rarely are) perfectly rational, but rather they are limited by circumstances and conditions which reduce the possibility of optimizing preferences. Decision-makers will in consequence, Simon claims, choose the most “satisfying” option rather than the “optimal” solution. Sniderman *et al.* extend Simons’ theory to voting and propose “Simon’s puzzle”. They ask: if people have limited knowledge about politics and only occasionally direct their attention to political matters (they are, in other words, hardly even “boundedly” rational), how are they able to make political choices? The answer given is that people use *heuristics*, i.e., mental shortcuts and a form of “minimalism”, when they create political attitudes. A heuristic can be understood as a perceptual tool to be used when the world is complex and ambiguous, but when a choice has to be made, and when it is useful or necessary to economize on the mental resources and cognitive investments needed for making the choice. One example of a political heuristic could be drawing conclusions about political character from personal looks or characteristics. Others might be the hypothesis that government controls the economy, or the use of personal votes as evidence for a politician’s specific effort (Kuklinski & Quirk 1998). In addition, class voting could be seen as a heuristic.

Because people know little of politics, their attitudes are not ordered or consistent, and people change their attitudes, meaning that their attitudes towards one issue can

be contradicted by their attitudes towards another (Sniderman *et al.* 1991, p. 16). The interplay between social identity and political preferences is typically manifested in political markings and stereotypes. The right/left scale is probably the most commonly used distinction and heuristic in modern politics. Even though, paradoxically, almost no political parties still use more or less “pure” ideological indications, this scale is the main basis for presentations about politics. It is rather evidently used by almost everyone: theorists, commentators, and lay people. The reason for this is perhaps that it very much resembles Laclau & Mouffe’s notion of an “empty signifier” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In a Danish parliamentary context with many political parties and coalition building, this complexity is further reduced into “red bloc versus blue bloc”. Heuristics like, for instance, the right/left scale or the “red vs. blue bloc” dichotomy can be seen as reductions of complexity and as cognitive shortcuts, that is, as a tool to be used if the world is ambiguous and perhaps even contradictory. It should be noted here that everyone uses heuristics, and that the use of heuristics does not stand in any kind of linear relation to political knowledge or sophistication. Therefore, summarizing political heuristics will be central to our analysis. In our analysis, we particularly look for the kind of heuristics which can be derived from our data and how they can be used as decision tools to understand and navigate voting decisions.

Methodology

Selection

We have previously studied selections of immigrant students in Norway and Denmark (Solhaug & Kristensen 2011), (Kristensen & Solhaug 2011). In this study, we selected both ethnic Danish and minority students who had all applied for “social studies” specialization courses in their upper secondary school education. In upper secondary school, students choose their specialization at the age of 16/17. They continue to study these subjects for the last two out of a total of three years, usually with 5–10 lesson hours per week. An appointment was made with a school, and we selected 10 students (6 immigrants and 4 ethnic Danish students) from various origins (countries), religions, genders, and cultural orientations. This variety of students enabled us to explore possible differences across national and cultural factors in students’ approach to political decision-making.

Choice of school subject by students has been used as a criterion to select a group which we can assume has a certain degree of political interest. We also assume that these students might be better informed politically than the average first-time voter. It is therefore particularly interesting to see to what extent these informed students reason rationally or use heuristics about their choice of political parties as first-time electors. Data collection was done through oral history interviews in school. Oral history interviews are close to life history and sometimes interchangeable (Bornat 2007). We assumed that students were at least partially able to reconstruct how they reasoned about their choices. However, despite our efforts to help students to recall

their approach, we realize that our data must be carefully interpreted as reconstructions. We also realize that this is a small sample with limited generalizability. A challenge to this approach is that the stories are “researched” and constructed by the research process and not naturally lived (Bornat 2007). Despite this, we believe that an oral history approach is the best way to illuminate our exploratory research questions.

Analytical approach

The interviews were transcribed and used as sources in the N-vivo program. All interviews were coded in this program, which enabled us to expand the material. The coding procedure (in N-vivo, “codes” are called “nodes”) started out with codes from previous research and a theory of electoral choices. Throughout the coding process, however, we established new codes based on interpretation of our interviews. In this way, parts of text were selected for different nodes (Gibbs 2002). A particular node is called an election decision. These parts were carefully selected as meaningful sequences in interviews. The selection also included statements showing the complexity of students’ reasoning. An attempt was also made to reveal possible mechanisms in students’ political reasoning and voting behavior (Elster 2007). After a first reading, it became apparent that students approached their voting decisions quite differently. The analysis focused on how students described how they arrived at their preferred choice of party, with a particular emphasis on rationalisms and the use of heuristics.

Empirical analysis

The analysis started with Jill (all names have been changed for anonymity, ed.), a young woman aged 18, who was born in Afghanistan, and who illustrates the situation of many young voters. She claimed not to be politically interested, and she did not know whom to vote for. Still, she knew the different Danish political parties and their names and navigated in the political landscape without much difficulty. Moreover, she was very much aware that certain factors in her immediate surroundings influenced her political opinions. Decision-making for young voters seems rather complex, however, as is clear in the following conversation (I=interviewer, R=respondent);

I: Do you know your parents’ political stand? R: Yes, they are Social Democrats. I: Has that affected you? R: Yes. I think so. I considered the “Unity List” (coalition of left-wing groups, ed.) and also other (parties) have been added. I: Would you know who to vote for, if there was an election tomorrow? R: I really don’t know. Also, because you’re influenced by the media and you can change your mind.

She claims that her parents are a major influence on her political orientation, but she instantly goes on to say that there are other sources, like the “Unity List” political party and the media. She confirms that her parents influence her, but the fact that other sources are mentioned in the same sentence supports the conclusion that she feels

somewhat trapped between contradictory influences, like family loyalty and independent choices, which make decisions difficult. She even seems to perceive her undecided status as a problem, particularly because it only may result in changing her mind once more. Jill here readily illustrates the tension field in which she is placed, and “economic voting”, issue voting, or other decision-making strategies clearly seem to fall short as descriptions. To put it illustratively, she finds herself in a cross-fire of different and perhaps even contradictory impacts, and “economic voting” becomes meaningless, possibly due to the lack of a clear outcome. Looking closer at this triangle of family, media, and political parties, family is always an object of loyalty and feelings, eliciting either copying or independence in young people. The fact that political actors as well as media also provide possible new and important information may be an expression of how the “information overload and complexity” may overwhelm her.

Mij is a young man aged 21 who comes from Iraq and who exhibits this dilemma. He has been living in Denmark for six years. He claims that he: “...*only discusses politics when the debate is on foreigners and immigration policy and when I find something very discriminating or not fair*”. When asked about he arrived at his voting decision, he explains:

Most foreigners think of immigration politics, but actually, I didn't do that. I thought of how to beat the crisis, economically. And at the same time you must respect immigration laws. And you should not discriminate the minority. We don't want a dictatorship of the majority. I looked at it and considered the Liberals, but I ended up voting for the Unity List. I: Okay, that was a giant leap from the Liberals to the Unity List, don't you think? R: It wasn't so much because of the immigration policy, I haven't thought so much about that.

Despite his choice of school subject, Mij claims to be a non-political person who generally does not discuss politics. This claim, however, contradicts the fact that immigration politics (an issue) seem to be very important to him and easily gets his attention. Unlike many other respondents, he does not voice the right/left scale as an incorporated feature or heuristic of his political repertoire because he leaps from considering a political party at one end of the political spectrum to voting for another party at the other end of the spectrum. Strategically, Mij chooses to focus his reflections on only two *issues*, economic crises and immigration, as issues of importance. By doing so, he reduces some of the complexity and avoids being trapped among large numbers of contradictory concerns. His reflections on beating the crisis economically may show some strategic voting or concern for societal problems. However, considering his great political leap from the Liberals to the Unity List, he points in the direction of putting his concern for immigration politics first. Such a great political leap between Unity List and Liberals seems to be no problem for him, either because he does not feel loyalty to the parties, or precisely because he was not brought up in the discussion about class divides which the parties reflect. Mij in general resembles a respondent who tends to understate his political interest and engagement. His main strategy is to focus on an issue and thereby simplify his choice.

His use of heuristics is based on his immigrant position and on the loyalties and feelings that go with this immigrant position.

Moha, who came from Afghanistan, was one of the respondents who claimed to be interested in politics and continued to elaborate;

“Some DSU’s (youth organization of the Social Democrats, ed.) at this school told me last year: Even though you cannot vote, you can still turn two others into voting like you would have done. And then I thought: that’s right. If I can’t do it, there still might be two others who can. All I need to do is to tell them how and why. So, now I do my best”.

Moha continues to elaborate on his party preference:

In the end, you think of your own advantages. And on what is good for you. I have read about laws and regulations on the net. And especially the Liberals have tightened so much, that I - who attend a school and go to work and learn Danish language and did everything right, then I could not even achieve a permanent residence permit or a Danish passport. It wouldn’t be to my advantage. Then I look to the other side – to the red bloc. They want to get rid of the new point system for having a permanent residence permit. I would support that. Even if it doesn’t matter much to me. I will get a permanent permit, anyway in perhaps ten years. But it would annoy me every time I had to sign a paper. And they would control me. That was one of the main reasons why I ended up signing for the youth section of the Social Democratic Party. Even though they have fine ideas economically, you have to look for human sympathy. I can take it – even if it takes one or ten years to get a passport. Others don’t stand a chance to take the test or learning to speak Danish perfectly. Try to imagine coming from Afghanistan. Do you think you could learn enough being an Afghan boy or girl aged 12-13 years? You can’t do that.

Mohammed shows a high level of political engagement. He primarily seems to be driven by idealism, even though he, rather paradoxically, points to self-interest and his “own advantages” himself. He simplifies his voting choice by focusing on immigrant *issues* and prefers political parties which favor his most important immigrant issues. At the same time, he points to language as a main difficulty for minorities in their political orientation. The main heuristic he uses is based on the right/left scale. This heuristic, unlike other types of heuristics formed on behalf on individual and everyday experiences, is very much handed down and induced on us all in a modern mediatized reality. Quite another type of heuristic relates to the specific kind of policy programs typically launched by the political alliances. The red bloc is commonly perceived as taking care of the weaker groups in society, while on the other hand being weak at running the national economy. The blue bloc, for their part, is commonly perceived as being strict on welfare programs and budgets, while on the other hand being good at controlling state expenditures.

In summary, Moha combines strategic as well as value rationalities, simplification (issue voting), and heuristics in his voting strategy.

Sus, an 18-year-old majority woman, is certainly one of the respondents who subscribes to both kinds of heuristics, even though she claims not to follow politics in

newspapers but votes for the Liberals. However, her story of family and school influence is interesting and illustrates the particularly complex political reasoning of young voters:

We didn't discuss much politics in my home. But if we did, I was a Social Democrat (like my sister).... But, I have also grown up with the idea that you should be able to take care of yourself. This has influenced my present opinions. My whole family has provided for themselves.... So, earlier I liked the idea of taking care of the weak. But, now I believe that you have to fight for things... I: So, the political is gradually starting to give meaning in relation to the test elections at school? R: Yes, exactly....I vote for the Liberals. The Liberals are part of the blue bloc.... They have the idea that every man is the architect of his own fortune, so you have to fight in order to get a good position in society, get a good education and all that. I do like this view of life they have, because it motivates people to make an extra effort. So, that's the outlook on life I like.

Sus' story is about how political values transmitted from her mother's self-reliance have led to the choice of a political party which also emphasizes the same values. Sus very much votes on behalf of her idealism, which perhaps is a youthful characteristic and somewhat typical for adolescents' political identity. She certainly favors specific liberal political values, and she lets her consideration for these values be the determinant of her voting decisions. Her reasoning seems (value) rational where the liberal value of the self-made man seems to work as a guide to the political landscape. This ideological type of voting behavior also stands in contrast to the dictum of economic voting and to putting individual interests before political ideological values. Having said this, Sus' reasoning is also very much about a sense of belonging, community, and the building of a shared ideological identity. Her political identification works to a high degree on us-versus-them relations and on red/blue bloc heuristics, which all serve as effective premises for voting choice.

In her story of party choice, a complex mix of family relations, school influences, personal preferences, and heuristics are in play. Family values may be fundamental, but it is her interpretation of them (self-reliance) which seems decisive in her focus. In her decision-making, she deals with these complexities by focusing on an important issue (self-reliance) combined with the use of simple heuristics. Her story illustrates that political orientations are very much linked to everyday experiences and to the immediate surroundings, like family, school, and here also virtual and social media. This means that political awareness is situated and socially constructed rather than being simply tied to individual preferences as proclaimed in the economic voting approach.

The next respondent is a young man aged 18, born in Denmark to parents from Vietnam. Asked if he is interested in politics, he explains:

Well, a little...I intended to get to learn more about it. From the beginning, I had chosen music. But then I realized that wasn't me. So, I knew some people at the social science direction, and then I found out what was going on, and how the government works, and what society ought to be like... Yes. If I could have voted, I would have voted for the government. That is, the

Liberals...mostly, because of my parents. But, also because I didn't find the policies of the red bloc to be realistic.... My father supports them.

At first glance, this student appears to rely more or less solely on his father's political party preferences. Voting like the parents is the obvious choice of many young people and works as a “family heuristic”. Family attitudes and loyalty to transmitted values play the decisive role in many cases. However, he continues by telling us that his reasoning is more independent.

...it (my voting decision) is from what I have read and what I feel is right and what is the most realistic in relation to the red bloc. My oldest sister would probably vote for the red bloc, because she is on parental leave. But her husband has got a job now, so he would probably vote for the blue bloc. My other sister, I think she would probably vote for the red bloc. So, it's a little different here at home.

This respondent's prime heuristic in use is the red/blue bloc distinction which also seems to be a family discourse. He very much argues from an economic voting approach: if you are out of a job or receive public benefits, you will vote for the red bloc. If you have a job and don't receive welfare payments (and therefore pay higher taxes), you will vote for the blue bloc.

Hos is a young woman, aged 18, who was born and raised in Denmark by Afghan parents. One is a teacher and the other studies medicine. She is in her third year of upper secondary school, and she has social studies at the A- level. She is one of the respondents who keep themselves informed about politics.

I guess we discuss politics. I turned 18 years after the election. So, I didn't vote. But my parents do. My mother is a pedagogue, so I guess she is “red”, and so is my father... You are very much under the influence of the things (parents) they say, like if the red government is doing well. So, I am inspired by that... I think I have been influenced by the fact that since I was little, my mother has voted for the socialists. My father has, too. And I have been influenced, because if that is how your parents vote, then it must be the best. So I haven't even thought about it. At the last election, I thought more about it – instead of just thinking the socialists are the best. There are other parties who have good points on your views. Next time, I might not vote for the socialists. But you are surely influenced by home, especially when you are younger.

Elections seem to bring up issues that trigger discussion within the family. In this way, parents transmit their opinions and values, which may lead children to vote like their parents and to copy their parents' political stands and values. Once more, family values and political orientations are working as important heuristics. Besides this, Hos is gradually giving politics more independent analytical attention. She primarily looks at what her parents do, but gradually she becomes more independent. Elections may also work as wake-up calls for young people's political attitudes. Media and family debates have triggered some kind of involvement for most of those who were interviewed. The call initiates an effort to choose a party and a search for a political self. Gradually, young people identify themselves as members of a political community or political grouping, for example on social media, where their societal

interactions deepen and their political interests are affected. We here see processes of liberation and independence, and we also witness a development from copying to individual political engagement.

Discussion and conclusions

What stories about their voting decisions do these informed students tell us? First, these are stories of personal and political ambiguity and development, where voting might be a small milestone in the development of the civic and political life of young people. Second, these are stories of first-time voters, who find themselves in particularly complex decisions due to overwhelming and sometimes contradictory information, including political values and family loyalties. For some of the students, this complexity may lead to frustration and indecisiveness in the cross-fire of ambiguity, processes of identification, and copying and demarcation. Although family seems to play an important role, there is little evidence of class loyalties and voting. However, processes of seeking and trying out are evident, along with “irrationality”, at least in the sense that some of the respondents apparently jump without hesitation from one end of the political spectrum to the other. Elster tried to incorporate the notion of “irrationality” in political analyses, for example the emotions that inspire political life. He argues that emotions most often matter in their impact on behavior, and consequently it is desirable to incorporate emotions (such as contempt, indignation, liking, anger, pride, envy, or admiration) into an analysis of political rationality (Elster 2007, p. 227).

However, when facing complexity, most students combine strategic or value rationalism, simplification or information reduction, and heuristics. Looking more closely at these strategies, we find that students, surprisingly, seldom use the “economic voting” approach. By this, we mean that students rarely seek information about the full political spectrum and have a list of personal priorities in their decision-making approach. However, we find that students pursue personal interests when they vote, or intend to vote, but they simplify their choice to one or two key issues. We also find that students pursue important values and reason idealistically. Sometimes students’ approaches take the form of issue voting on questions such as immigration and economic crises, but this is not at all predominant.

Furthermore, we find that heuristics are used extensively and are very important for orienting students in the political landscape. The main heuristics that we found in our analysis are the left/right heuristics and the red/blue bloc heuristics, which are the predominant frames of reference articulating the essence of mainstream binary political dynamics. However, we also consider the way that students voice and rely on their parents’ political orientation as an important heuristic.

The family has a political influence and is often one of the most important starting points for political interest and orientation in life. This is also the case for the students in this study, but the influence of family is, however, quite different. Parents are models for their children and are powerful in transmitting values, attitudes, and

patterns of behavior (Bandura 1997). In daily communication at home, parents provide a reservoir of experience, which may be latently present in the sense that children are not conscious of it. However, it may be effective when issues come up or in other situations. We believe also that there is a possible link between heuristics and political socialization in the sense that heuristics may be transmitted between generations. Often certain values are being transmitted, like liberalism or solidarity with the poor.

The answer to our research question, how do young people decide on voting, is then that they rely on their current political knowledge, which is derived from various sources: family, school, friends, media, etc. To what extent do they use heuristics in coping with difficult choices and ambiguities? They use them quite extensively. Heuristics are a major guideline in their process of becoming political. Economic voting is surprisingly absent considering how central this theoretical phenomenon is in guiding a huge amount of literature on voting behavior.

A few implications for citizenship education

Much citizenship education is about the political system, its institutions and procedures. In particular, teachers devote time to mapping the political landscape and to explaining the similarities and differences between parties (Børhaug 2007). Teaching often emphasizes facts, formal procedures, and system descriptions. Torney-Purta and other researchers have emphasized that students find much of the strictly formal approach to education irrelevant to their lives. They therefore recommend that students “wrestle” with important life issues (Torney-Purta 2007).

We believe that formal education rests on an assumption that students reason strategically or (economically) rationally about their choices in elections. The findings among these students with a particular school interest are that strategic and economic rationality is not prevalent. Rather, students are emotional, they try to focus the political landscape, and they also use heuristics of various kinds to reduce complexity and handle contradictions. Based on these findings, we have a few suggestions for teaching citizenship.

Teaching needs to build on students’ experiences. A first suggestion may therefore be that for the age group of young voters, we simply recommend that students write about their party choice or the reason for their abstention from political participation. Based on these writings, they may be invited to share their opinions and stories publicly in class and thus reveal what matters to them. These stories may be like some of the ones presented here or may be different. The aim of this exercise should simply be to inform students (who volunteer to participate) to share their stories to reveal their reasoning, loyalties, and heuristics, but above all what matters to them in politics. These local stories may be fruitful when discussing elections, parties, and issues in class to make teaching and learning relevant to the students.

Second, an important finding here is that students use heuristics to a great extent. The question is, therefore, to what extent teachers should provide and use heuristics as tools and means for students in their political orientation and decisions. In our view, heuristics are situated between the need to simplify political education and to provide

reliable information about politically contested fields of knowledge. We suggest that teachers should consider providing meaningful heuristics in their teaching of the political landscape. The students interviewed here had chosen social studies and therefore had shown some political interest and might have been more knowledgeable than many other students. We therefore suggest that meaningful heuristics and simplification may be useful to many young voters who find the political landscape overwhelming, complex, and confusing.

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