

Are 16-year-Olds Able to Cast a Congruent Vote?

Evidence from a “Voting at 16” initiative in the city of Ghent (Belgium)

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Abstract

An often used argument against lowering the voting age to the age of 16 is that this age group would lack a sufficiently high level of “political maturity” and therefore would not be able to cast a vote that is in line with their political opinions. In this paper, we use a unique initiative set up by the city of Ghent (Belgium) to invite 16- and 17-year-olds to take part in a mock election to investigate whether adolescents are able to cast an ideologically congruent or “correct” vote. Our results do not show differences in proximity voting between adolescents and adult respondents. Furthermore, we find no evidence of socio-economic stratification in the extent to which adolescents cast a congruent vote. Our conclusion, therefore, is that this recurrent argument against lowering the voting age lacks empirical validity.

Keywords: voting age, adolescence, proximity voting, Ghent, correct voting, youth enfranchisement, quality of democracy

In various countries, there is an ongoing debate about the question whether the voting age should be lowered to the age of 16. Since this innovation was introduced in Austria in 2007, some countries have implemented the same reform, while in other countries the political debate is still being pursued. Historically, it has to be noted that there is a secular trend to lower the voting age: when French citizens were granted the right to vote in 1791, the minimum voting age was still fixed at 25. An often used argument against lowering the voting age is that adolescents at this age lack the proper “political maturity” to cast a meaningful vote (Folkes, 2004; Cowley & Denver, 2004). It is stated that they lack political interest, do not have sufficient information, and will be easily misled by various political campaign efforts (Bergh, 2013). The concept of “political maturity”, is undeniably difficult to operationalise, as there is no generally accepted definition of maturity. Furthermore, the argument is to some extent self-defeating, as it has been argued that citizens acquire political skills and competences, exactly because of the fact that they have become enfranchised (Shineman, 2018).

The concept of “political maturity”, therefore, inevitably leads to the question what exactly can be required from a “competent” citizen. Centuries of philosophical debate have been conducted on this question, and there is no consensus on the exact set of requirements in order to be considered a competent citizen (Manin, 1995). A minimum requirement, however, is that of the ability to cast a well-informed vote. The basic idea is that citizens should use their vote to choose those politicians that are most likely to agree with the citizen on the basic political questions facing the country (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). While this seems like a rather straightforward, and very basic requirement, it should be noted that casting a well-informed vote implies quite some skills. First, the citizen needs some ideological awareness, or a preference for some options on how to structure society. If a citizen is totally alienated from, or indifferent to, the various political choices that can be made, the notion of a well-informed vote becomes meaningless. Second, the citizen needs at least some knowledge about the parties and candidates that are available within a specific election (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Third, and finally, the voter has to be able to identify in a correct manner the political parties that best represent her/his preferences. It is clear, therefore, that even a rather minimal requirement like being able to cast a well-informed vote already requires skills and competences. Indeed, previous studies have observed quite some stratification in the ability to cast a well-informed vote. Political knowledge, experience, and motivation, as well as citizens’ level of education, typically lead to a stronger ideological congruence between voters and the parties they vote for (Boonen, Falk Pedersen & Hooghe, 2017; Lau, Patel, Fahmy & Kaufman, 2013).

In this paper, we argue that the litmus test of whether or not adolescents are sufficiently “politically mature” is to test whether they cast a vote that is in line with their own political preferences. To conduct this test, we rely on the concept of a well-informed, “correct”, or “ideologically congruent” vote (Joesten & Stone, 2014). As ideologically congruent voting, or proximity voting, even has been referred to as the ultimate yardstick for the “quality of the vote” (Dassonneville, Hooghe & Miller, 2017; Stiers & Dassonneville, 2019), it is a reasonable assumption that groups that cast an ideologically congruent vote pass the minimum requirement for being considered a sufficiently competent citizen to be allowed to vote. We use this concept in a large-scale survey study that we conducted in the city of Ghent (Belgium) in autumn 2018, where all 16- and 17-year-olds were invited to take part in a mock election organised by the city government, to ascertain whether adolescents in that age group are capable to take part in elections in an informed way. Our normative assumption is that if there are no significant differences in the capability of 16-year-olds to cast an ideologically congruent vote in comparison to adult voters, this often invoked argument against lowering the vote age lacks empirical credibility.

Literature

When the French *Constituante* established the Constitution of 3 September 1791, there was hardly any discussion about establishing a minimum voting age. Rather, there was a concern that voters should be sufficiently independent, had an interest in safeguarding the prosperity of the state, and were capable of making a discerned choice on the future of the realm. It seemed almost self-evident for the lawmakers that a discerning voter only reached this required level of maturity by the age of 25. However, in a wave of democratic fervour, the minimum voting age was already lowered to 21 in the 1792 Constitution (Vovelle, 1994). It is kind of striking to observe that more than 200 years later, discussions on further lowering the voting age, still are based on the same set of arguments. While proponents of lowering the voting age consider this to be a move toward further democratisation, opponents wonder how old one has to be to be able to make a discerning political choice.¹

¹ An important distinction needs to be made between these historical examples and the debate addressed in this paper. The process of lowering the voting age to 18 meant bringing the legal voting age in line with the age on which adolescents officially enter adulthood in most countries. Hence, the right to vote at 18 years old coincides with a full set of legal rights and duties. Lowering the voting age to 16 years old would imply to give the right to vote to citizens that are not yet considered as fully mature in other areas of life. Therefore, it becomes all the more interesting to ascertain to what extent these adolescents are sufficiently “mature” to cast an informed vote.

Concern about the consequences of lowering the voting age mostly originates from a structural doubt about the political maturity of the age group. As Chan and Clayton (2006, 542) state it: ‘Political maturity is the pivotal issue in the debate over the voting age’. In study they argue that adolescents of 16 and 17 years old lack the required level of maturity to cast a meaningful vote. However, in their analysis, they rely on very traditional indicators to ascertain whether individuals can be considered as politically mature. As an example, they investigate whether young people identify with one of the major political parties in the United Kingdom (Chan & Clayton, 2006, p. 545). As we know that both major parties in that country increasingly appeal to an older audience (Whiteley, 2011), it is not very surprising that young people tend to identify less strongly with Labour or the Conservatives.

It is clear from this example that the concept of political maturity should be operationalised in an age-neutral manner, as it should not be taken for granted that young age groups will develop exactly the same partisan understanding of politics as older age groups. This argument is corroborated by the findings of Johann and Mayer (2017). They find that 16- and 17-year-olds seem to know less about names, facts, and figures with regard to politics. It is important to note that their study was conducted in Austria in 2013, at a moment this age group already had the right to vote for six years. So, lowering the voting age to 16 apparently does not lead to a significant rise in the level of political knowledge among this age group. However, they also show that young voters were clearly capable of defining the ideological position of the political parties in Austria. They assume, therefore, that this age group will indeed be able to cast an ideologically congruent vote.

These Austrian findings are in line with the classic distinction Converse (1964) made between factual political knowledge and ideological understanding. Factual political knowledge refers to technical information about names of politicians or institutions within a political system. Converse already assumed that this kind of information would be appealing mainly for those who tend to specialise in political news, and this is a rather limited group within society. He considered “ideological understanding” as a much more crucial resource for the ability to make sense of elections and the ideological positions of the various political parties. More recently, comparative research has indeed suggested that while women, on average, have lower levels of factual political knowledge than men have, this does not limit their capacity to cast an ideologically congruent vote, because of the fact that there are no significant differences in the level of ideological understanding (Dassonneville, Nugent, Hooghe, & Lau, forthcoming). This kind of research, of course, does not diminish the value of political knowledge, as having a sufficiently high level of knowledge still is a major

prerequisite to achieve a more tolerant and enlightened form of citizenship (Nie, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). However, building on the insights of Converse, there is no inherent need to demand unrealistically high levels of factual political knowledge from citizens. As there is no direct connection between factual political knowledge and the capacity to cast an ideologically congruent vote, we will focus on the ideologically congruent vote as the main criterion for political maturity. While it can be assumed that first-time voters lack the level of accumulated political knowledge of their more experienced counterparts, the real and most valid test is whether they can still cast a meaningful vote.

Ideological congruence: “Correct voting”

In order to conceptualise the idea of ideologically congruent voting we build mainly on the work of Lau and Redlawsk (1997). For them, a “correct vote” is the vote that offers the closest possible match between the preferences of a citizen and the party s/he votes for. A voter casts a correct vote, if this vote best reflects the fully informed individual preferences and attitudes of that voter. This kind of ideologically congruent voting provides an empirically solid insight in the “quality” of the vote of these adolescents (Dassonneville et al., 2019). While the “quality” of elections is often investigated in terms of turnout numbers, and the political “maturity” of adolescent voters is often operationalised in terms of factual political knowledge, we follow Lau et al. (2014, p. 258), arguing that of most central importance is that votes accurately reflect a citizen’s true preference:

“We would argue that voting correctly is a higher normative standard than turnout by which to judge democracies (...). If voting is the primary way that citizens influence their government, and election returns provide the most immediate feedback to government officials about how well they are doing their jobs, then correct voting at its very heart is about the accuracy of the signals that are sent to elites, and thus the quality of democratic representation provided by an electoral system”.

Hence, in this study we investigate whether adolescents that are granted the right to vote are able to identify and vote for the party that best represents their political opinions.

In this paper, we opt therefore for a pragmatic approach. Our main question is whether 16- and 17-year-olds succeed in casting a vote that best represents their political opinions. Of course,

not every voter will match her preferences fully with one party, and hence we need a benchmark with which to compare the levels of congruence between adolescents and parties. As a comparison, we use adults' levels of congruent voting. While it is up for debate to which extent a vote should be grounded in political opinions, comparing adolescents with adults allows for a clear answer to the normative debates: apart from some categories of citizens that lost their legal rights, in most democracies, all adults are allowed to cast a vote on Election Day. Hence, we use levels of congruent voting among adults as a yardstick to compare whether or not adolescents cast an informed vote to an acceptable level, with the assumption that if they do so to a similar extent as adults, we can safely assume that this age group has a sufficiently high level of political maturity to live up to the normative democratic ideal.

With this argument, we mainly build on the study of Wagner, Johann, and Kritzinger (2012). Investigating the Austrian case, they conduct an analysis of the quality of the votes of young voters as well. While we add to their research by investigating this research question in the Belgian context, our design also allows to take some steps further than that of Wagner et al. (2012). First, and most importantly, we investigate the congruence of the vote using questions about several issue domains. While Wagner et al. (2012) rely on the commonly used and reliable measure of ideological proximity as an indicator of the quality of the vote, our data allow to take other dimensions into account as well. Second, rather than having close attention for the comparison between 16- and 17-year-olds and the age groups just above these, we choose one main benchmark as a yardstick for the amount of "correct" voting: the votes of the generation of the adolescents' parents.

Third, while Wagner et al. (2012) provide a graphical presentation of the quality of the vote for different age groups in the context of a broader study on the effects of youth enfranchisement, we aim to provide more detailed insights in the quality of the vote of enfranchised adolescents, and how this compares to their parents' generation. To allow for this more detailed investigation, we also test whether there are signs of socio-economic stratification in correct voting among this age group. More specifically, we include information on the social and economic capital of the family of the adolescents and investigate whether more well-off adolescents are more able to vote correctly. Unequal political participation, knowledge, and influence, are important and well-documented political challenges for Western democracies. The rich and the higher educated typically score higher on both political knowledge and political participation (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Gilens, 2014; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). It is unclear, however, whether these unequal patterns of political behaviour extend to the area of correct voting, as most previous studies on

correct voting did not include a measurement of household income – while previous research findings regarding the effects of educational level are mixed (Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, Lau & Stiers, 2019; Lau, Andersen, & Redlawsk, 2008; Lau, Patel, Fahmy & Kaufman, 2013). In this study, we test whether adolescents with a higher socio-economic background are more knowledgeable about politics, and hence are better equipped to cast a correct vote than what holds for adolescents from more deprived backgrounds. Hence, while Wagner et al. (2012) investigate direct effect of an adolescent's level of education, we take our study a step further by examining indirect effects of socio-economic background on correct voting through the political knowledge of the respondent as well.

Data: The Ghent Study

Since Austria lowered the voting age in 2007, the political debate about following this example has been going on in several countries. Within Europe, thus far, only Malta, Estonia, and Scotland have followed the Austrian example for some elections. In the Belgian Parliament, too, various proposals have already been tabled to grant the right to vote to 16-year-olds. As these proposals have not yet been successful, the city of Ghent decided in 2018 to organise a mock-election for its 16- and 17-year-old citizens on the occasion of the local elections being held in the country in October 2018. The Ghent case is quite unique, and it offers a number of distinct characteristics. Ghent is a main city in Belgium, with some 260,000 inhabitants, and it has a history of serving as a kind of political innovation centre. Back in the 19th century it was home to one of the first modern trade unions, and the “Ghent model” still is being used as an expression in studies on trade unions and cooperatives (Ebbinghaus, Gobel & Koos, 2011). The city administration decided to send an official invitation to all its young citizens, asking them to cast a vote, which could be easily done by mobile phone or any other electronic device. Although it was clear from the start this was a mock election, the fact that this was an official letter from the city government meant that conditions were seen as rather credible, as local authorities in Belgium also send out the invitations for the official elections. The mock election also coincided with the real elections, that received quite some media attention. Adolescents also received exactly the same voting ballot as their adult counterparts. Subsequently, they received a number of questions on specific policy domains for the city of Ghent (mobility, education, youth services, ...). It is important to note that the vote process was situated before these policy questions, so there could not be any priming effects. The results of the mock-election did not vary all that much from the real elections, although the adolescents, on average

have a more left-wing preference. The Christian-Democrats, who typically cater to an older audience, are clearly less popular among the Ghent young voters (Table 1).

Table 1. Election Results in Ghent and the Ghent Study

Party	All Voters	Mock Elections	Ghent Study Respondents	Parents in Ghent Study
Socialists/Greens	33.5	46.3	50.99	42.86
Liberals	25.2	16.4	17.88	21.32
Christian Democrats	8.8	5.3	4.30	8.09
Nationalists	12.1	10.1	8.94	9.15
Extreme Right	7.8	7.7	5.63	5.43
Extreme Left	7.1	7.2	9.27	7.58
Others	5.5	5.1	2.98	3.43

Source: Official results: Ministry of the Interior; Mock-Elections: City of Ghent; Ghent Study: Own figures from Ghent Study.

Immediately following the local elections of October 2018, the *Ghent Study* was conducted. We received access to the addresses and day of birth of all citizens of Ghent between the ages of 15 and 20. They received a first questionnaire and two reminder letters, resulting in a response rate of 21.62 per cent. Although this is lower than is average for postal surveys, it has to be remembered that this is a very specific sample, in a large urban area, with a young and mobile research population, and a very high degree of cultural and linguistic diversity. A special feature of the Ghent Study is that young adolescents were also asked to pass on an additional copy of the questionnaire to their parents, thus constructing a comparison sample of adult Ghent voters. In total 1,375 parents returned their questionnaire.

These parents will constitute our comparison group, and this has a number of important consequences for our research design. First of all, it has to be noted that they do not constitute a real “control group”, in the strict meaning of the term as they were not sampled directly but rather in a snowball sampling strategy. Parents were recruited by their own children, and in practice it was clear there was a strong correlation between the willingness to respond among adolescents and parents. The main advantage of this recruitment strategy is that children and parents automatically share the same socio-economic status, as they were recruited as members of the same household. A disadvantage is that this cannot be considered as an independent sample of the entire adult Ghent population. Strictly speaking, our comparison group is composed of those Ghent adults that happen to have a child between the ages of 15 and 20. The age of the adult respondents ranged between 31 and 78 with a mean age of 48.42. A positive element is that the mere fact of having a child can hardly be considered as a very

distinguishing feature with regard to politics. It is estimated that only seven per cent of ever married women in Belgium never had a child (Hoge Gezondheidsraad, 2010).² To express it differently: a very vast majority of the Belgian adult population has at least one child, so we can assume that a population of parents resembles the adult population quite closely. While this might not be a perfect control, it serves quite adequately as a comparison group. When looking at their electoral preferences (final column of Table 1), it can be noted that the parents that make up our comparison group are, on average, more supportive of the left-wing socialist and green parties. However, apart from this, the distribution of self-reported voting behaviour mirrors the official results quite well.

While it can be observed that the adolescent voters and their parents tend to be more left wing than the general voting population, for the purpose of the current analysis, the main finding is that all major political parties are well represented in the sample. A specific feature for Ghent local politics is that the dominant party is formed of a cartel between Socialists and Greens. As this cartel was already present in the 2012 elections, it has become a kind of standard feature for Ghent local politics. As such, it was not possible to ask for separate preferences or ideological positions for both parties, and we only ask one assessment for the entire cartel. The coalition between Socialists and Greens can be considered as a “natural” cartel, as both parties are seen as ideologically close. Results from the 2014 Belgian Election Study, e.g., show that while voters, on average, placed the Socialists on a score of 3.56 on 0-10 left-right scale, the score for the Greens was 3.76. For all practical purposes, therefore, in the context of the Ghent elections, Socialists/Greens will be considered as one political party.

Methodology

In our empirical strategy, we follow a step-by-step approach. First, we analyse whether voters of the same parties hold similar political opinions about which issues are most important in the city of Ghent. We do so by relying on the Ghent survey data, as well as on the actual election results. Second, we investigate whether there are significant differences in congruent voting between adolescents and their parents. Third, we use causal mediation analysis for investigating the potential stratification in correct voting and the determinants of correct voting more.

² As is standard in this kind of demographic research, percentages are only calculated for women, and not for men.

First, we examine the association between party choice and the issues the adolescent voters deem most important. As an initial, and rather crude test, we can rely on the official (fully anonymised) election results, which the city of Ghent shared with the authors.³ As mentioned in the previous section, after adolescents casted a vote in the mock election, the city of Ghent asked them to indicate the three most important issues that guided their electoral choice from a list of options.⁴ If adolescents are capable to cast a congruent vote, it could be expected that the issues they indicated as important, are issues that can be associated with specific parties. For instance, sustainability issues, like concern with the environment, should be more prevalent among left-wing voters, whereas security and migration issues should probably be dominant among right-wing voters.

A more fine-grained test of issue-congruence is based on the Ghent study. To do so, we look at the average opinion on several issue questions for the voters of the different parties respectively, as this indicates whether voters with a specific profile are drawn to the matching party. While this gives a first insight in the types of voters among adolescents and whether they match their preferences with their party choice, it also allows to examine whether adolescents with certain opinions vote for the same parties as adults with similar opinions.

In this test, we rely on three issue questions. We start by using the general ideological left-right-scale as it has been shown that this is an appropriate measure for voters' general ideological preferences (Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1998). This approach is in line with Wagner et al. (2012), thus allowing for a comparison between Belgium and Austria. All respondents of the Ghent Study were asked where they would position themselves on a scale on which a score of 0 denotes the ideological left, and 10 the ideological right.

The second issue under investigation is a question tapping the traditional socio-economic left-right dimension. All respondents were asked to which extent they agreed with the statement that the government should intervene to reduce income differences. As we expect voters that disagree with the statement to be more likely to vote for a right-wing party, we rescale the answers so that higher values denote a higher level of disagreement with the statement. Finally, our third issue dimension is anti-immigrant attitudes. Respondents were asked to which extent they agreed with three statements concerning immigrants in Belgium.⁵

³ The turnout rate in the mock election was 17.77%. This is rather low, and it could hence be expected that the sample of adolescent voters consists of the most politically interested part of the citizens of Ghent. As no additional data about the voters were collected, we cannot test this assumption.

⁴ Respondents could choose from 14 issues: Living conditions, public space, diversity, participation, employment, environment, social contact, education, security, leisure, poverty, wellbeing, economy, and mobility

⁵ The items on anti-immigrant sentiments are identical to the battery used in the European Social Survey:

1) Immigrants are good for the Belgian economy [reversed]; 2) Immigrants increase crime rates in Belgium;

As the answers to these questions are highly correlated (with correlation coefficients between 0.44 and 0.72), we create one index, in which higher values denote stronger anti-immigration attitudes (Cronbach Alpha of 0.78). More details of the variables are included in Appendix A.

In the second step, we provide a more detailed examination of congruence voting. In line with previous studies, congruent voting will be operationalised in this study as ideological proximity voting (Dassonneville et al., 2019; Hooghe & Stiers, 2017). We opt for this model as it is in line with the design of Wagner et al. (2012), allowing us to build on their analyses. Hence, in this analysis, we first need the ideological position of the respondent and information about the ideological position of the major political parties, and subsequently we can verify whether the respondent did cast a vote for the party that is closest to her/his own opinion. If this task is performed in an adequate manner, it can be said that the respondent voted “correctly” (Lau et al., 2014). For ideological position, we rely on a left-right ideological self-placement. Although it has been argued that other value dimensions have become more important in recent decades, in practice it can be assumed that left-right divisions still form a valid, comprehensive measurement of overall ideological positions (Knutsen, 1998). In order to arrive at an ideological placement of the political parties, we cannot rely on expert assessments, since these are local elections, and the local party chapters can have a rather distinct profile compared to the national party position. Therefore, we rely on a judgement of all respondents, that were asked to assign an ideological position to each one of the parties at offer (Hooghe & Stiers, 2017). In line with previous research, we can use the average score of all adolescent and adult participants, but also from the adult respondents with a higher education level (Dassonneville et al., 2019).

3) Belgian culture is threatened by immigrants.

Table 2. Ideological Position of the Political Parties in Belgium

Party	National Parties		Ghent Study			
	Chapel Hill Survey (2014)	Belgian Election Survey (2014)	Belgian Election Survey: Ghent respondents*	Adolescents	Parents	Highly Educated Parents
Socialists/Green Liberals	2.60	3.66	3.32	2.73	2.72	2.43
Christian Nationalists	7.00	5.72	6.24	5.42	6.06	6.42
Extreme Right	5.40	5.48	5.39	5.06	5.23	5.35
Extreme Left	7.80	6.83	7.55	7.02	7.61	8.07
	9.20	7.03	7.51	8.40	8.88	9.59
	0.40	2.90	1.57	1.80	1.55	0.92

Source: Chapel Hill Survey CHES and PartiRep Election Study 2014. These two sources refer to the national political parties, not to the local chapters in Ghent. For Socialists/Greens the average score of both parties was used.

*: Note that these means are based on a low number of observations (n=39), so they should be interpreted with caution.

The results in Table 2 show that, overall, experts (whether Chapel Hill experts or highly educated respondents) tend to be more extreme in assigning party positions compared to the sample as a whole. However, looking at the relative position of the parties between the different groups, there are no substantial differences. Furthermore, comparing the results of the Ghent Study with those of an earlier Belgian election study – either the whole sample, or only the respondents from Ghent respectively – it seems like differences in parties' positions are due to context-related factors rather than factors related to the survey. Hence, in line with previous research, it does seem to make little difference which measure is used, and therefore we rely on the measure based on the perceptions of all respondents (Dassonneville et al., 2019).

Having created a measure of each party's position, we calculate the congruence of the vote as the distance between the voter's own position on the ideological left-right axis and the position of the party this voter voted for (Hooghe & Stiers, 2017). Hence, theoretically, this variable ranges from 0 (the voter has the same position as the party) to 10 (the voter has an extreme right (left) position, while the party she voted for has the opposite extreme left (right) position), and the observed range is 0.091 to 8.591, with a mean value of 1.27. This mean value implies that most voters, indeed, tend to vote for a political party that is ideologically close to their own position.

To formally test the difference in congruence voting between adolescents and adults, we estimate a linear regression model with the congruence of the vote as dependent variable, and a dummy variable distinguishing adolescents from parents as independent variable. In a second step, we add several covariates to test whether any revealed differences are spurious.

More specifically, following previous research (Hooghe & Stiers, 2017), we include socio-demographic controls and basic political attitudes. First, we include sex (1=female) and the age of the respondent. We also include a self-reported assessment of the financial situation at home and the number of books the respondents have at home as measures of social class (Torney-Purta, 2002). Second, as it can be expected that voters with more expertise will be better able to identify ideologically close parties (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), we include education level and political knowledge. Education level indicates whether a voter is lowly (primary education only), middle (secondary education) or highly educated (tertiary education).⁶ The measure of political knowledge indicates the number of correct responses on five factual questions (see Appendix A for more details about the variables). Third, we also include some controls for the respondent's motivation to detect the ideologically closest party. To do so, we include political interest as a motivational variable (Lau et al., 2014) as well as internal and external political efficacy, as it can be expected that voters will only be motivated to link their opinions to their vote if they believe that their vote will make a difference.

After testing the difference in congruence voting between adolescents and parents, we also go a step further by investigating the factors that contribute to congruent voting. To do so, we estimate separate proximity regression models for adolescents and parents respectively. In the model for adults, we include the same variables as described above. In the model for adolescents, we add two additional variables that could contribute to explaining congruent voting. First, we asked adolescents how often they discuss politics with their parents. Second, adolescents were asked whether they learned about political topics at school (see Appendix A).

Finally, we go more in-depth in the causal mechanism by investigating potential forms of stratification in correct voting. To do so, we test whether the number of books at home and the financial situation of the family have an indirect effect on correct voting, through the respondent's level of political knowledge. To this aim, we use causal mediation analysis (Hicks & Tingley, 2011), which allows us to distinguish both direct and indirect effects (mediated by political knowledge) of socio-economic background, that we expect to be partially mediated by political knowledge.

Before turning to the results, an important note needs to be made about the sample composition. As explained above, surveys were sent to all citizens of Ghent between 15 and 20 years old.

⁶ Note that the adolescent voters are still in school. Hence, we follow the standard approach in adolescence studies and include for adolescents a measure of expected education (Andrew & Hauser, 2011).

With a response rate of 21.62%, however, it could be expected that there is a bias in sample composition. As we do not have official population statistics as a benchmark to assess the representativeness of the sample, we look at the distribution of our key variables (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptives of the variables in the analyses

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
16-17-year-olds				
Sex	0.574	0.495	0	1
Age	16.597	0.493	16	17
Books at home	3.470	1.348	1	5
Financial situation	3.727	0.819	1	5
Educational level	1.669	0.581	0	2
Political knowledge	2.917	1.406	0	5
Political interest	5.518	2.639	0	10
Internal efficacy	1.375	0.616	0	3
External efficacy	1.505	0.546	0	3
Adults				
Sex	0.631	0.483	0	1
Age	48.416	5.706	31	78
Books at home	3.498	1.337	1	5
Financial situation	3.541	0.905	1	5
Educational level	1.547	0.652	0	2
Political knowledge	3.973	1.227	0	5
Political interest	6.779	2.306	0	10
Internal efficacy	1.585	0.603	0	3
External efficacy	1.528	0.648	0	3

The results in Table 3 indicate that mostly the higher educated and financially well-off part of the citizens of Ghent answered our survey.⁷ Furthermore, it seems like levels of political interest and political knowledge are rather high as well. Hence, when interpreting the results below, it is important to take into account that these are derived from a sample consisting of rather well-off respondents, who might find it easier to cast an informed vote.⁸

⁷ When it comes to the educational level of the adult sample, we have an official benchmark: the 2011 census. The comparison with this benchmark, included in Appendix B, indeed shows that the adult respondents seem to be substantially higher educated than the population.

⁸ An alternative argument that could be made, however, is that it is also mostly these well-off adolescents that would turn out to vote if they would be eligible to do so.

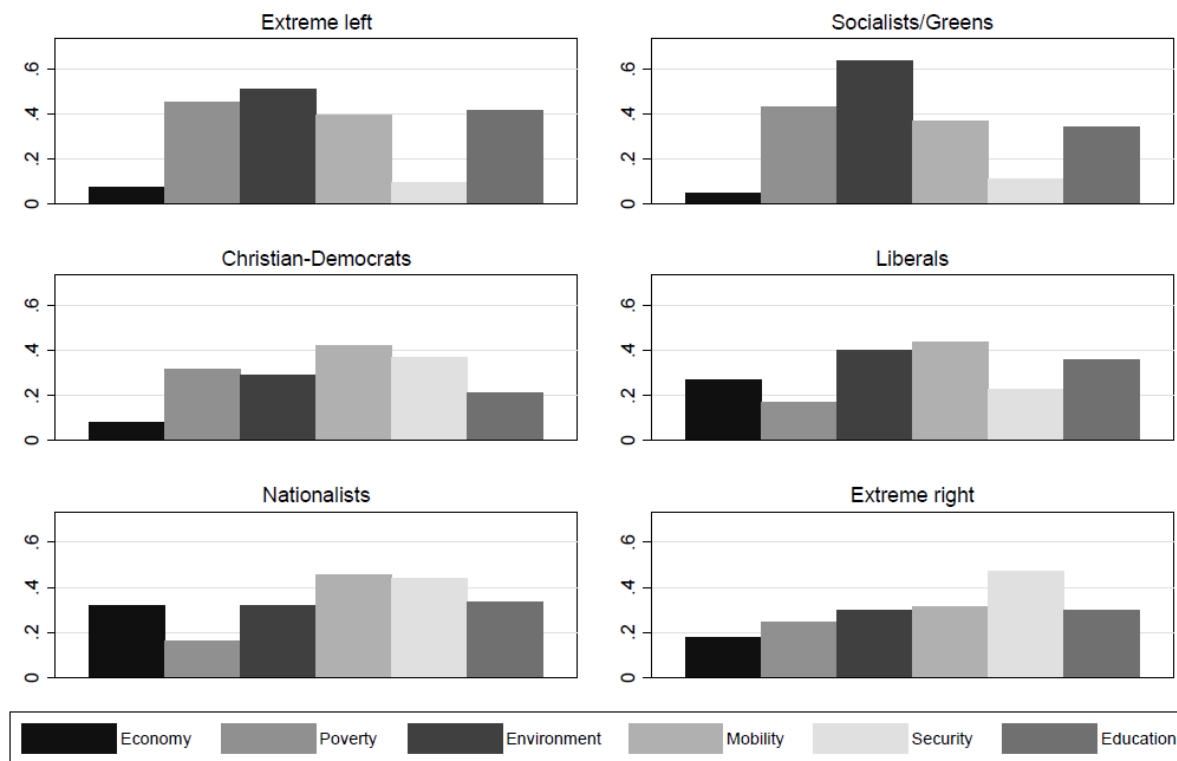
Results

Issue opinions and the vote

As already explained, we investigate the “quality” of the vote of young first-time voters in three steps: first, we look at the actual official election results that were recorded by the city of Ghent. Second, we use our survey data to look at the average position of voters of the respective parties on several issue dimensions, and third we investigate the congruence of the vote of adolescents and older voters more in-depth. This analysis will show whether voters with similar sets of opinions are voting for the same party.

First, we investigate whether adolescent voters were concerned with a specific set of issues, depending on the party they voted for. The results are summarised in Figure 1, which displays the proportion of voters of the main parties choosing each of the domains respectively. Note that for reasons of clarity we only present the six most commonly chosen domains, while the figure including all domains is included in Appendix C. In Figure 1, we observe clear indications for ideological congruence. Voters of right-wing parties (Liberals and Nationalists) are mainly concerned about the efforts of the municipality to reduce the number of cars, and to a lesser extent the opportunities for shops and small business in the city. Extreme right and nationalist voters highlight their concern about crime, as these parties stress the fact that police should be more “tough on crime”, with more emphasis on law and order. Left-wing voters, in contrast, are predominantly driven by challenges such as protecting the environment and reducing poverty and social exclusion. The Christian-Democratic voters do not have a clear ideological profile, which is in line with this party’s traditional centrist position in Belgium, where the party tends to avoid explicit or extreme policy stands (Deschouwer, 2012).

Figure 1. Issue salience and vote choice for adolescents

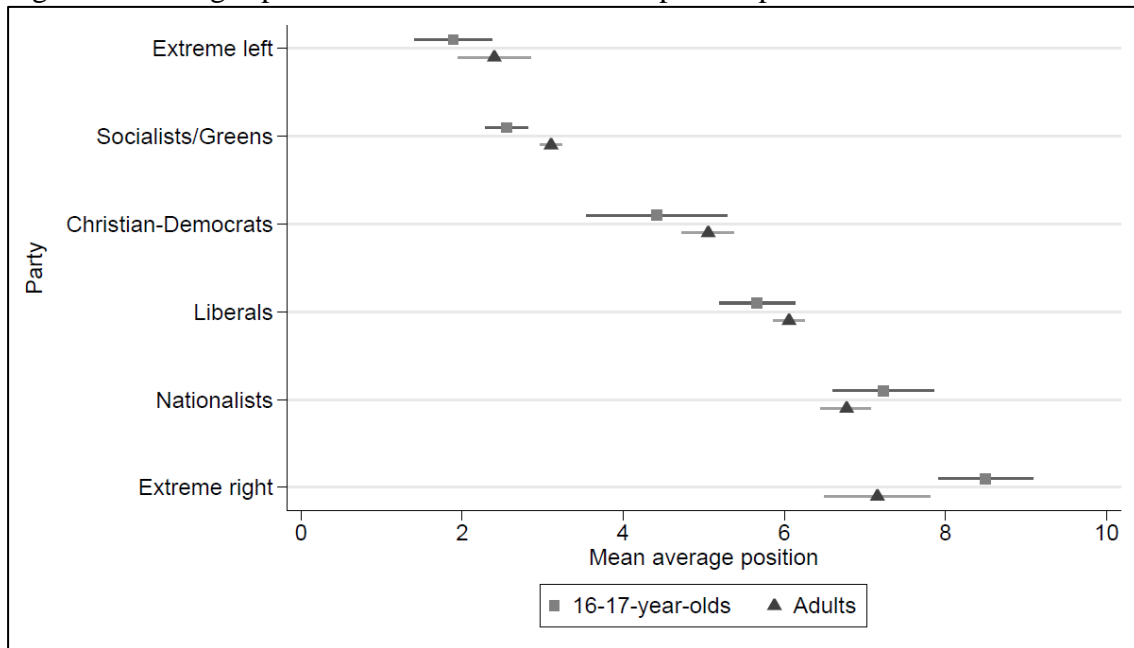


Note: Figure depicts the proportion of voters for the respective parties that indicated these domains as very important issues (voters could indicate three domains). Source: Election Results, city of Ghent.

Second, we look at the general left-right position of the voters of the respective parties, and now we turn to the survey results of the Ghent Study. The results are displayed in Figure 2 and they confirm the ranking order between the parties. Looking at the average scores of the adolescent voters of the different parties, the voters of the extreme left party score lowest on the scale, while the extreme right voters score highest (i.e., most right wing). The voters for the Christian-Democratic party position themselves in the middle of the scale.

Furthermore, the results in Figure 2 show that the positions of the adolescent voters are very close to those of adult voters. Not only is the ranking of the different parties the same, the mean scores are very close to each other, and only for the socialists/greens and the radical right the confidence intervals do not overlap. This indicates that there are no large differences between adolescents and adults in the extent to which they link their ideological position to their vote. One remarkable finding is that adolescents seem to be a bit more extreme in their opinions, with left-wing young voters scoring lower and right-wing young voters scoring higher than adult voters.

Figure 2. Left-right position of the voters of the respective parties

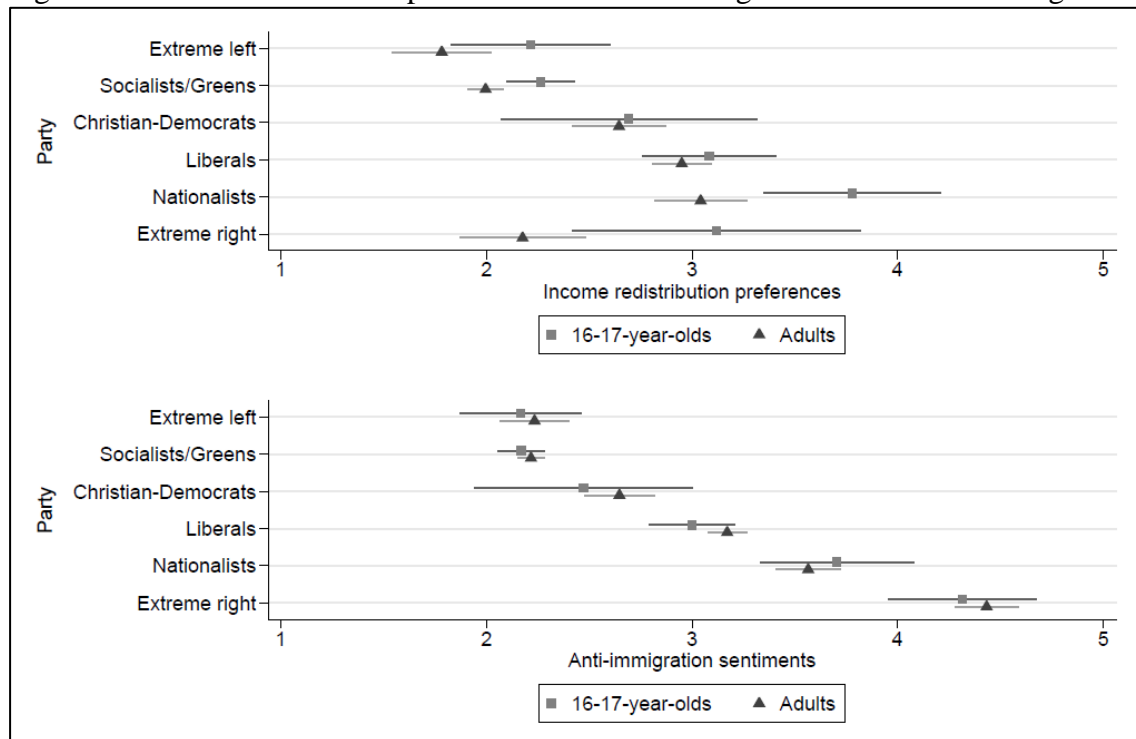


Note: The Figure displays the average position on a 0-10 left-right scale of the different parties respectively, and 95% confidence intervals. Data: The Ghent Study. N=282 for adolescents and N=1121 for parents.

These first results seem to indicate that adolescent voters are able to relate their ideological preferences to their vote choice. Does this pattern also hold for more specific issue domains? To test this, we repeat the analysis of Figure 2 including preferences regarding income redistribution and anti-immigrant attitudes. The results are summarised in Figure 3.

The results displayed in Figure 3 are largely in line with those presented in Figure 2: while we observe the expected ranking between different parties, the difference between adolescent and adult voters is very small for most parties. The only exceptions seem to be the nationalist and extreme right parties, and more specifically with regard to income redistribution preferences. However, with regard to the extreme right, it needs to be noted that this party campaigns mostly on the issue of immigration, and hence it is not surprising that the voters of this party have less coherent views on socio-economic topics, that are less salient for their vote choice. In anti-immigrant attitudes, all parties have a clear programme, and for this issue it can be observed that young and adult voters are very close in their opinions that lead them to vote for the respective parties.

Figure 3. Income redistribution preferences and anti-immigration sentiments among electorates



Note: The Figure displays the average position on a 0-10 left-right scale of the different parties respectively, and 95% confidence intervals. Data: The Ghent Study.

Proximity voting

These first results do not give any indication that adolescents would vote less congruently than adults. To conduct a more formal test of this assumption, we estimate regression models with the congruence of the vote as dependent variable. The results are summarised in Table 4. Note that smaller ideological distances indicate more congruence, and negative effects hence show an increase in congruence.

Table 4. The difference in congruence voting between adolescents and adults

	Model 1	Model 2
	B	B
	(s.e.)	(s.e.)
Parent	0.018 (0.075)	0.145 (0.220)
Female		0.102 (0.065)
Age		-0.005 (0.006)
Books at home		-0.049 (0.029)
Financial situation family		-0.012 (0.038)
Education: Low		
Education: Middle		-0.113 (0.166)
Education: High		-0.371* (0.166)
Political knowledge		-0.085** (0.031)
Political interest		-0.029 (0.021)
Internal efficacy		0.135* (0.064)
External efficacy		-0.157** (0.058)
Constant	1.182*** (0.067)	2.331*** (0.254)
<i>N</i>	1184	1184
<i>R</i> ²	0.000	0.073

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Data: Ghent Study. Significance levels: +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

First, in Model 1 in Table 4, we only include a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was an adolescent or a parent. The coefficient is very small and not statistically significant. Hence, we do not find evidence for a significant difference in congruence voting between adolescents and adults. In Model 2 in Table 4, we subsequently include several control variables. The conclusion remains that there is no evidence for a significant difference in the congruence of the vote between adolescents and adults. In terms of the control variables, we find significant effects of being highly educated, political knowledge, and internal and external efficacy. The results seem to support the important role of political expertise, as the higher educated and more knowledgeable voters span a significantly lower ideological distance between themselves and the party they vote for. Also a feeling of external efficacy seems to be

important for voters to identify the “correct” party. Rather surprisingly, the effect of internal efficacy is positive, indicating that voters with a stronger belief in their own political abilities seem to vote less congruently. High levels of political self-confidence could thus be associated with a rather idiosyncratic understanding of the party system.

However, the main conclusion is that there does not seem to be a substantial difference in the congruence of the vote of adolescents and parents.⁹ In a second step, we investigate the factors contributing to congruent voting for both groups respectively, and whether this congruence can be connected to socio-economic stratification patterns. The results are summarised in Table 5.¹⁰

The results summarised in Table 5 are largely in line with those presented in Model 2 of Table 4. Political knowledge is negatively related with ideological distance and hence positively related with congruent voting. While the coefficient does not reach common thresholds of statistical significance, if we take into account the small number of observations, we can conclude that there are some indications of a significant correlation (i.e., $p < 0.10$). Talking about politics with parents and learning about politics in school are also positively related to congruent voting, but also these coefficients are not statistically significant.

Also the results for the parents are in line with those presented in Table 4. External efficacy and being highly educated are significantly associated with congruent voting. Furthermore, political knowledge and interest show the same relationship, with some borderline significance. The fact that the results for the two groups are very similar – and similar to the results when taking the groups together (Table 4) – further supports the conclusion that there are no strong differences in congruence voting between adolescents and adults.

⁹ As a test, we also estimated models including interactions between the adolescent/adult-dummy, and political knowledge and external political efficacy respectively. The results, reported in Appendix D, show no difference in the effect of these two determinants of congruent voting between adolescents and adults.

¹⁰ Note that, in the model for adolescents, age is included as a dummy variable distinguishing 17-year-olds (code 1) from 16-year-olds (code 0).

Table 5. Explaining congruence voting for adolescents and adults respectively

	Adolescents	Adults
	B	B
	(s.e.)	(s.e.)
Gender (1= female)	0.176 (0.129)	0.083 (0.075)
Age	-0.130 (0.123)	-0.004 (0.007)
Books at home	-0.060 (0.059)	-0.034 (0.034)
Financial situation family	-0.080 (0.081)	0.006 (0.043)
Education: Low		
Education: Middle	0.078 (0.439)	-0.151 (0.183)
Education: High	0.127 (0.390)	-0.473* (0.187)
Political knowledge	-0.110 ⁺ (0.058)	-0.070 ⁺ (0.037)
Political interest	0.003 (0.045)	-0.042 ⁺ (0.024)
Internal efficacy	0.251 ⁺ (0.142)	0.125 ⁺ (0.072)
External efficacy	-0.148 (0.136)	-0.150* (0.065)
Talking about politics with parents	-0.130 (0.101)	
Learned about politics in school	-0.030 (0.084)	
Constant	1.815*** (0.544)	2.492*** (0.381)
<i>N</i>	242	939
<i>R</i> ²	0.069	0.082

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Data: Ghent Study. Significance levels: ⁺: p<0.10; *: p<0.05; **: p<0.01; ***: p<0.001.

At first sight, hardly any stratification can be observed in correct voting: neither the number of books at home nor the financial situation of the family has a direct effect on casting a congruent vote. As a further test of whether there is a form of stratified participation, we rely on causal mediation models in which we regress the social background of the respondents on political knowledge, and the social background and political knowledge on congruent voting. The advantage of this type of analysis is that both equations are estimated simultaneously, allowing for the possibility to test indirect effects. Here, we are interested in testing whether the effect of socio-economic background is mediated by the respondent's political knowledge. We

estimated separate models for parents and adolescents respectively. Each regression equation included the same covariates as in Table 5. The results for the number of books at home are reported in Table 6 and Table 7, while the results for financial situation of the family are reported in Appendix E.

The results in Table 6 show that the number of books at home has a positive impact on the political knowledge of both adolescents and adults. The financial situation only matters for parents' level of political knowledge. Political knowledge contributes to congruent voting. However, political knowledge does not seem to serve as a mediator for the effect of socio-economic background. Even though 10 (for parents) to 19 (for adolescents) per cent of the total effect of the number of books at home is mediated by political knowledge, this effect can hardly be called robust given the wide confidence intervals. A similar interpretation is valid for the potential indirect effect of the financial background of the family. In other words, also in these causal mediation models, there is no evidence for stratification in correct voting to be at play. To express it differently: among adolescents too, "correct voting" is not just a privilege for the happy few. An important caveat that needs to be taken into account however, is the limited variation in these key variables in the sample under investigation (Table 3). Hence, while we do not find any indications of stratification in congruent voting in the data at hand, more research is necessary to anchor this conclusion.

Table 6. Causal mediation analysis of "books at home" on congruence voting

	Adolescents Knowledge B (s.e.)	Adolescents Congruence B (s.e.)	Adults Knowledge B (s.e.)	Adults Congruence B (s.e.)
Books at home	0.160* (0.065)	-0.056 (0.058)	0.080** (0.029)	-0.037 (0.034)
Financial situation family	0.074 (0.093)	-0.079 (0.081)	0.075** (0.038)	0.004 (0.043)
Political Knowledge		-0.107+ (0.058)		-0.070+ (0.037)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i>	242	242	939	941
<i>R</i> ²	0.191	0.073	0.275	0.082

Note: Entries are regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. The models of adolescents and adults respectively are estimated as simultaneous regressions. Treatment effect of going from the minimum to the maximum value of number of books. Data: Ghent Study. Significance levels: +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table 7. Total, direct and indirect effect of “books at home”

Effect	Mean	95% Confidence Interval	
16-17-year-olds			
ACME	-0.069	-0.191	.004
Direct Effect	-0.233	-0.678	0.222
Total Effect	-0.301	-.738	0.156
% of Total Effect mediated	0.193	-1.879	1.826
Adults			
ACME	0.023	-0.055	0.001
Direct Effect	-0.148	-0.399	0.123
Total Effect	-0.170	-0.421	0.107
% of Total Effect mediated	0.105	-1.366	1.309

Note: Entries are expected effects. The models of adolescents and adults respectively are estimated as simultaneous regressions. Treatment effect of going from the minimum to the maximum value of number of books. Data: Ghent Study. Significance levels: ⁺: p<0.10; *: p<0.05; **: p<0.01; ***: p<0.001.

Conclusion

The debate about whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 is theoretically relevant, as it basically relates to the question what should be considered a competent citizen. In part of the literature, the model is upheld of a fully “rational” voter, that has full knowledge about all available options and party manifestos. A long series of studies, however, has demonstrated that this ideal in practice is never met (Zaller, 1992). Furthermore, other studies have just as adequately shown that this kind of lofty ideal is not even called for, as various heuristic shortcuts are available to voters, that allow them to cast their vote in a meaningful and effective manner (Dassonneville et al., 2019). Given these considerations, we opted for a rather pragmatic test, by ascertaining whether adolescents are indeed able to cast an ideologically congruent vote (Lau et al., 2014).

Our results show that most voters in the Ghent Study succeed in casting a vote that is ideologically close, and thus could be considered as a “correct” vote. In fact, using a strict test, we do not observe any significant difference at all in this regard between the adult and the adolescent respondents in our sample. To express it differently: the adolescents are just as successful in identifying the ideologically closest party as their own parents. The idea that adolescent voters would tend to fall victim to a Pied Piper of Hamelin, when they are allowed to vote, is clearly not supported in this study. The results of this Belgian initiative therefore allow us to repeat what Wagner, Johann and Kritzing (2012, 381) already wrote about the young voters in their Austrian sample: ‘To conclude, our findings show that a key criticism of

lowering the voting age to 16 does not hold: there is little evidence that these citizens are less able or less motivated to participate effectively in politics.’ It has to be noted that in contrast to the Wagner et al. study, the Ghent Study was specifically designed to allow for a comparison between adolescents and parents, thus giving us more confidence in the results of our analysis. While the results indicate that adolescents tend to be a bit more extreme (both to the left as to the right), the basic pattern of ideologically congruent voting is exactly the same for both generations, and furthermore we did not find any evidence for strong patterns of socio-economic stratification.

Some caveats are in order before we draw any grand conclusions based on these results. First of all, it has to be remembered that this was a mock election, so that it was clear for all those concerned that the vote would not have any effect whatsoever on the final composition of the city council. Nevertheless, it seems that the adolescents did take the initiative seriously and actually made a well-considered vote decision. We also have to take into account that this was a specific local election. On the one hand, this might mean that there could be less interest than in a national election, that usually receives more attention in the mass media. As previous studies have indicated that adolescents tend to be rather lowly interested in politics, this could even be more so for local elections specifically. On the other hand, this local election focused on very specific issues like road safety and the environment, and maybe these kind of topics are more easy to understand for adolescents, and therefore they might find it easier to identify the party that fits their opinions best. In the current state of knowledge, we do not know what the effects might be of the fact that these were local elections, and so we hope that we can repeat this kind of study in the framework of national elections. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that our study focuses on an election in one Belgian city only. While we do not see strong reasons to assume that this city population is different from that in other major cities – at least in Belgium – we cannot rule out that context-specific elements influence our results. Future similar initiatives by other cities could provide grounds for fruitful further investigation into this topic. Furthermore, as research on this topic progresses, studies with more diverse samples could look into heterogeneity in congruent voting among adolescents – both on the individual and the contextual level. Nevertheless, as our results are in line with those of Wagner et al. (2012) in the Austrian case, evidence seems to be somewhat accumulating that adolescents are indeed able to cast an informed vote.

It also has to be mentioned that in the weeks leading to the election, all schools in the city of Ghent were committed to providing information about the initiative to their pupils. This effort might have strengthened the capacity of adolescent pupils to seek and process political

information, and thus enabling them to cast a correct vote. Even in that case, however, the conclusion has to be that adolescents are indeed able to cast a meaningful vote that is in line with their ideological preferences. How exactly they arrive at this congruent vote is a topic that falls outside the scope of the current analysis. However, one aspect that is important to take into account, is the direction between issue opinions and the vote. Investigating the congruence between voters' opinions and their votes, we assume that voters choose which party to vote for based on their political opinions. Other research, however, has argued that the causal arrow might be reversed – i.e., that 'politicians lead and the public follows' (Lenz, 2012, 212). It is indeed possible that respondents decided which party to vote for, and subsequently voice opinions that are in line with that choice. Furthermore, investigating adolescents specifically, both their vote choice and the issue opinions are likely to be strongly influenced by their parents, and this could be one explanation for the strong congruence in opinions and vote choices. While we cannot rule out this possibility with the data at hand and in the limited space available here, it has to be noted that the amount of discussions within the household was not significantly related to the level of correct voting. While this somewhat suggests that the adolescents arrive at least partly to an independent congruent voting decision, a part of this conclusion could be explained by the alternative mechanism as well.

A final and important caveat is that even though we did not find any stratification in correct voting along socio-economic lines, this does not mean that participation was fully equal. Our focus was on voting, so we only have information on the vote choice of adolescents that decided to cast a vote in the mock election organised by the municipality. Participation in these elections was unequal, with mainly those adolescents that were interested in politics and from more well-to do families taking part in the initiative. Perhaps adolescents that did not participate in this initiative are less able to vote correctly, which might be caused by their more deprived socio-economic background. Furthermore, as with much survey research, an important limitation of the current study is that our sample is most likely biased towards the most interested respondents, and it is these respondents that could be expected to vote most congruently. Hence, the relation between (unequal) turnout and correct voting should be further investigated in a broader sample.

Self-evidently, our findings should not necessarily be taken as a strong support for lowering the voting age to 16. We have only shown that one of the most-often invoked arguments against this electoral reform lacks empirical validity. Various other empirical and normative arguments can be brought forward against lowering the voting age, but these fall outside the scope of the current article. The only conclusion we can draw from the current

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analysis is that with regard to correct, well-informed voting, 16 year olds do not perform any better, or any worse, than their parents do.

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Appendix A: Variables used in the analyses

-*Ideological position*: Respondents were asked to position themselves on an ideological scale ranging from 0 (“left”) to 10 (“right”).

-*Opposing income redistribution*: Respondents were asked to which extent they agreed with the statement “the government should take measures to reduce income differences”. They could indicate whether they “fully agreed”, “rather agreed”, “agreed nor disagreed”, “rather disagreed”, or “fully disagreed”.

-*Anti-immigrant attitudes*: Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with the following three statements:

- “Immigrants are good for the Belgian economy in general”
- “Our country’s culture is threatened by immigrants”
- “Immigrants increase the criminality rate in Belgium”

For each item, respondents could indicate whether they “fully agreed”, “rather agreed”, “agreed nor disagreed”, “rather disagreed”, or “fully disagreed”. They have been coded so that higher values indicate more negative sentiments in all items. We expect that these separate items measure one latent anti-immigrants sentiment. To test for this, we include the items in a factor analysis:

Item	Loading
Good for economy [reversed]	0.535
Culture threatened	0.803
Increase criminality rate	0.793
Eigenvalue	1.560
Cronbach’s Alpha	0.781

All items have a reasonable to strong loading, and hence we create one index “anti-immigration sentiments” by adding the answers to the different items and dividing by three.

-*Gender*: Indicates whether the respondent was male (0) or female (1).

-*Age*: Age of the respondent in the election year. For the adolescent voters, this amounts to 16 or 17 years old.

-Education level: For adult respondents, this indicates the highest achieved level of education: lowly educated, having primary education only (code 0 – reference category); middle educated, with secondary education (code 1); highly educated, with tertiary education (code 2). The adolescent respondents are still in school, and hence, their educational level is still developing. Hence, following previous research, we asked the adolescent respondents which educational level they expect to achieve. These categories were coded in the same way as for the adult respondents.

-Books at home: Respondents were asked how many books they have at home. They could choose between five options: none or very few (0-10 books); one shelf (11-25 books); one bookcase (26-100 books); two bookcases (101-200 books); three or more bookcases (more than 200 books).

-Financial situation of family: respondents were asked how easy or difficult the financial situation was in their family. They could indicate whether this was: 1 (very difficult), 2 (difficult), 3 (neither difficult nor easy), 4 (easy), or 5 (very easy).

-Political knowledge: respondents were asked two types of knowledge questions. First, they were asked to connect two pictures of well-known politicians to the correct party name. Subsequently, they were asked three factual questions:

-“Who was the alderman of education in the city council of Ghent before the elections of 14 October 2018?”

-“Which parties were part of the city council of Ghent before the elections of 14 October 2018?”

-“The national Parliament exists of...”

For each question, respondents could choose from four different options, or indicate not to know the answer. The variable indicates the number of correct answers.

-Political interest: Answer to the question: “How interested are you in political and social issues in general?” on a scale ranging from 0 (not interested at all) to 10 (very much interested).

-Internal efficacy: Respondents were asked to which extent they agreed with the following statements:

- “I consider myself to be able to participate in politics”
- “I think I would do as good of a job as most politicians we elect”
- “I think I am better informed about politics than most people”
- “I think I understand the current issues facing our society today quite well”

For each statement, they could indicate whether they “fully agreed”, “agreed” “did not agree”, or “did not agree at all”. They have been recoded so that higher values indicate more positive evaluations in all items. We expect these items to load onto one latent factor “internal efficacy”. To test for this, we include the items in a factor analysis:

Item	Loading
Able to participate	0.709
Would do good job	0.582
Better informed	0.649
Understand issues	0.509
Eigenvalue	1.521
Cronbach's Alpha	0.730

The answers to all items seem to load on one latent attitude. Hence, we construct the variable internal political efficacy by adding the answers to the different questions and dividing this by four.

- External efficacy: Respondents were asked to which extent they agreed with the following statements:

- “At election time, some parties promise more than others, but in the end they don't do much”
- “A normal citizen has an impact on politics and what the government does”
- “Turning out to vote does not matter, the parties do what they want anyway”

For each statement, they could indicate whether they “fully agreed”, “agreed” “did not agree”, or “did not agree at all”. They have been recoded so that higher values indicate more positive evaluations in all items. We expect these items to load onto one latent factor “external efficacy”. To test for this, we include the items in a factor analysis:

Item	Loading
Not keep promises	0.525
Citizen has impact	0.453
Parties do what they want	0.646
Eigenvalue	0.897
Cronbach's Alpha	0.606

While the measure does not seem to be very solid, there are strong indications that the answers to all items seem to load on one latent attitude. Hence, we construct the variable external political efficacy by adding the answers to the different questions and dividing this by three.

-Talking about politics with parents: Answer of adolescent respondents on the questions whether they discuss political and social issues with their parents “often”, “sometimes”, “rarely”, or “never”.

-Learned about politics in school: Respondents were asked whether, in the current year of school, they learned about the following topics:

- How citizens can vote in local elections
- How citizens can vote in national elections
- How laws are implemented and adjusted in Belgium
- How civil rights are protected in Belgium

For each of these topics, respondents could indicate whether they learned about it “a lot”, “a little”, “few”, or “nothing”. As we are interested in the total learning about democracy in school, we create an index by adding the answers to the different items and dividing this by four.

Appendix B: Comparison educational level census – Ghent Study

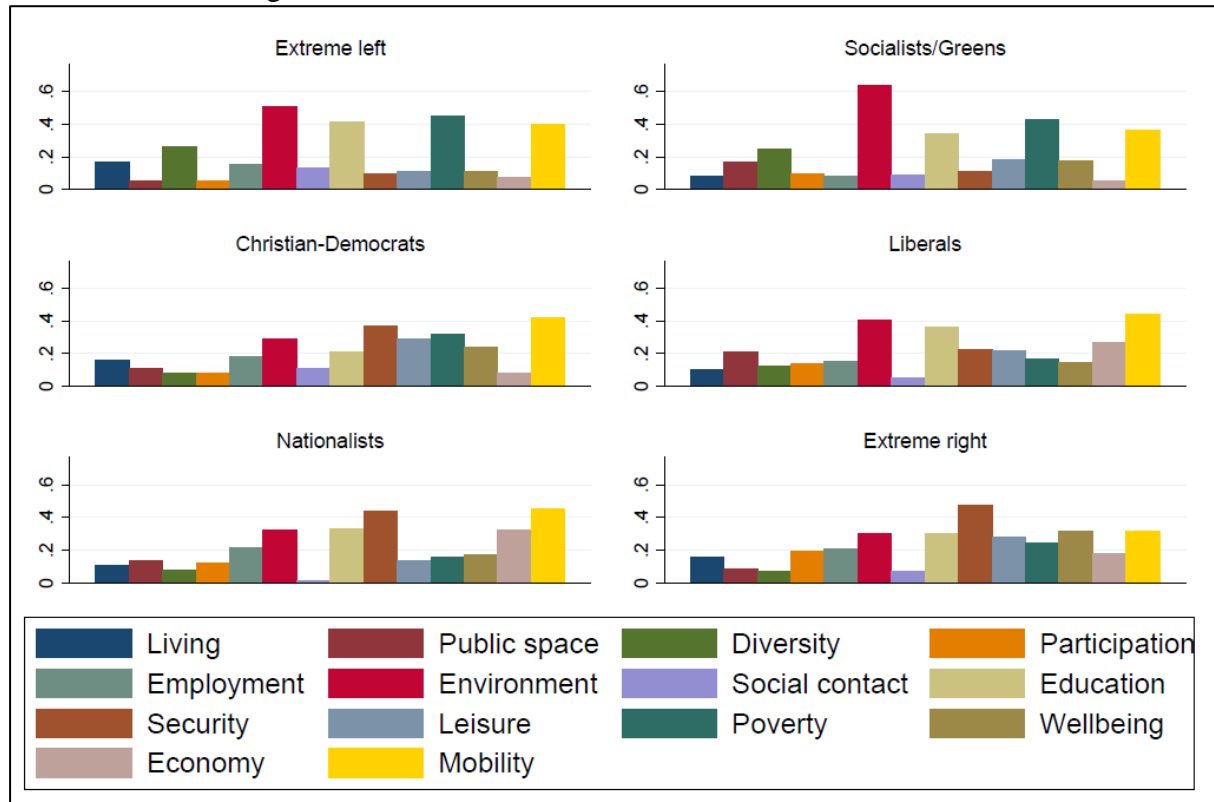
Table B.1. Educational level in the 2011 census and the Ghent Study data

	2011 census (%)	Adults Ghent Study (%)
No education	2.7	8.52
Primary education	18.7	
Lower secondary education	18.7	26.69
Higher secondary education	27.1	
Tertiary education	36.0	61.23

Source: City of Ghent, Population Statistics.

Appendix C: Full figure issue salience

Figure C.1. Issue salience and vote choice for adolescents



Note: Figure depicts the proportion of voters for the respective parties that indicated the respective domains to be among the three most important issues to them. Source: Election Results, City of Ghent.

Appendix D: Models including interaction effects

Table D.1: Replication of Table 3 including interactions

	Model 1	Model 2
	B	B
	(s.e.)	(s.e.)
Adult	0.107 (0.316)	0.226 (0.322)
Female	0.102 (0.065)	0.101 (0.065)
Age	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.005 (0.006)
Books at home	-0.049 (0.029)	-0.049 (0.029)
Financial situation family	-0.012 (0.038)	-0.012 (0.038)
Education: Low		
Education: Middle	-0.115 (0.166)	-0.111 (0.166)
Education: High	-0.375* (0.168)	-0.369* (0.166)
Political knowledge	-0.093 (0.057)	-0.085** (0.031)
Political interest	-0.029 (0.021)	-0.029 (0.021)
Internal efficacy	0.135* (0.064)	0.136* (0.064)
External efficacy	-0.158** (0.058)	-0.116 (0.134)
Adult X knowledge	0.011 (0.066)	
Adult X efficacy		-0.050 (0.144)
Constant	2.590*** (0.241)	2.512*** (0.238)
<i>N</i>	1791	1791
<i>R</i> ²	0.078	0.078

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Date: Ghent Study. Significance levels: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Appendix E. Causal mediation analysis of “financial situation family” on congruence voting

Table E.1 Replication of Figure 5 with financial situation family as treatment variable

	Adolescents Knowledge B (s.e.)	Adolescents Congruence B (s.e.)	Adults Knowledge B (s.e.)	Adults Congruence B (s.e.)
Books at home	0.160* (0.065)	-0.056 (0.058)	0.080** (0.030)	-0.037 (0.034)
Financial situation family	0.074 (0.093)	-0.079 (0.081)	0.075** (0.038)	0.004 (0.043)
Political Knowledge		-0.107+ (0.058)		-0.070+ (0.037)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i>	242	242	939	939
<i>R</i> ²	0.19	0.07	0.28	0.07

Note: Entries are regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. The models of adolescents and adults respectively are estimated as simultaneous regressions. Treatment effect of going from the minimum to the maximum value of financial situation of the family. Data: Ghent Study. Significance levels: +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table E.2 Replication of Figure 6 with financial situation family as treatment variable: total, direct and indirect effect of the financial situation of the family

Effect	Mean	95% Confidence Interval	
Adolescents			
ACME	-0.032	-0.150	0.055
Direct Effect	-0.326	-0.950	0.311
Total Effect	-0.358	-0.987	0.295
% of Total Effect mediated	0.068	-0.839	1.008
Parents			
ACME	-0.022	-0.060	0.003
Direct Effect	0.013	-0.319	0.336
Total Effect	-0.009	-0.034	0.316
% of Total Effect mediated	0.061	-1.624	1.706

Note: Entries are expected effects. The models of adolescents and adults respectively are estimated as simultaneous regressions. Treatment effect of going from the minimum to the maximum value of financial situation of the family. Data: Ghent Study. Significance levels: +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.