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## “Am I a politics person?” A Qualitative Study of Students’ Perspectives on Mock Elections as Political Education

- The study explores how students interpret themselves as parts of a democratic community through the political identities they interact with in school.
- The findings reveal limits of political education efforts with regards to active learning experiences in school as a means of stimulating political participation among youth.
- Based on fieldwork in schools, three different analytical categories of identities of political participation are developed: *‘the politician’*, *‘the party member’* and *‘the voter’*.
- The findings in this study call for further research into political awareness among young people, their motivations for political participation, and political education classroom practices.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine mock elections as political education in school, taking the Norwegian case as an empirical example.

**Methodology:** This study’s qualitative content analysis is based on data collected through fieldwork in five upper secondary schools in the Western region of Norway, through observations and in 18 ordinary language interviews with 18-year-old students in the 3rd grade.

**Findings and implications:** In the mock elections at Norwegian schools, the students meet and interact with three different identities of political participation: *‘the politician’*, *‘the party member’* and *‘the voter’*. How do the students use the mock election (ME) to shape their conceptions of their political selves? The interview data shows that the students who are active members of political parties accept the three analytical categories of political identities, and the students who are not members of political parties, reject *‘the politician’*, but accept *‘the party member’* as part of their peer group. Finally, the MEs simulate an ordinary election and offer a norm of voting which the students accept as a school assignment. The students vote in the mock election because they are told to do so and generally do not view voting in the mock elections as a way of expressing the voice of their generation.

### Keywords:

Political education- mock elections- political participation- youth- active learning

### 1 Introduction

The idea that political education is important for the whole of the political system is not new. Every political regime seeks to instill in young people values, beliefs, and behaviors consistent with the continuance of its own political order (Greenberg, 1970, p. 4). In political science research, this process is often referred to as part of political socialization (Hyman, 1959; Sigel, 1970), with the primary function of enabling system persistence (Easton, 1965). In this perspective, sustaining democratic traditions is key to upholding democratic regimes, and voter turnout is often considered as an indication of how “well” a democracy is doing. Thus, a sharp decline in voter turnout in Western established democracies in the last decades, especially among young people (Sloam, 2016), has encouraged broader attention from the media, scholars and politicians concerning what can be done to stimulate political participation among young people.

One of the education efforts that aim to promote political participation is holding mock elections at schools, an activity with varying policies and practices in

schools around the world. Although the scarce research that exists about mock elections at school has been dominated by an interest in young people’s political preferences (Aardal, 2011), motivated by predicting the future electorate or forthcoming election results, there is nevertheless a growing scholarly interest in mock elections as a form of political education. Lo (2015) analyses why mock elections and political simulations are effective democratic teaching tools, and argues that both simulation frequency and situational interest predict students’ commitment to vote in the future. In line with this, Borge’s (2016) quantitative study of mock elections as political education in Norwegian upper secondary schools revealed a strong and positive connection between voting in mock elections at school and students’ willingness to vote in the Norwegian parliamentary election of 2013. In a recent study by De Groot (2017) based on semi-structured interviews with teachers from eight schools in the Netherlands, she argues that mock election (ME) related education in the participating schools puts limited emphasis on advancing elements of critical democratic citizenship (CDC). De Groot (2017) further questions whether political simulations are primarily organized to stimulate meaningful learning about key objectives, or whether they merely function as a “side dish” (Parker and Lo, 2016) in the Dutch civics curriculum.

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The MEs are active learning experiences that tap into some of the “best practice” (Gibson and Levine, 2003) forms of project-based learning, either directly or indirectly. Mock elections in Norway provide an excellent case study of political education efforts in school because there is a long tradition of schools organizing mock elections and inviting youth politicians and party members to the school. The mock elections contain three elements of active learning (Borge, 2016b). First, a school debate, where members of political youth organizations visit the school and debate current issues, second, the election square, where the students can meet and interact with party members, and third, the ballot casting, where students vote for their party of preference.

This qualitative study sets out to explore students’ perspectives on mock elections as political education. The main research question is “Whether and how do mock elections as political education at school contribute to the creation of democratic citizens?” The role the school plays in creating democratic citizens is a main concern as schooling is a component of democratization. James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (2000) state that:

“During the twentieth century, political democracy and mass school-based education have attained extraordinary success. Democracy is virtually unchallenged as a legitimate form of governance, and formal schooling is widely recognized as an indispensable component of democratization and economic development” (p. 149).

The institutional perspective frames the current analysis, which evaluates how and whether mock elections at school as an institution of political education contribute to the creation of democratic citizens. The theoretical argument is based on March and Olsen (1995) and their concept of “democratic governance”. Democratic states are dependent on creating democratic citizens, and the institutions define and give meaning to participation. They are particularly concerned with the development of identities as an element that gives meaning to participation. March and Olsen (1995) argue that institutions “build and support identities, preferences and resources that make a polity possible” (p. 28). Moreover, they state that “individuals come to define themselves in terms of their identities and to accept the rules of appropriate behavior associated with those identities” (ibid., p. 50). Institutions give meaning to participation by building and supporting identities. There are limits to what can be accomplished by institutions in the creation of democratic citizens, because, from a constructivist perspective, young people approach political education in different ways based on their previous individual experiences. March and Olsen (1995) are vague about the individuals’ interpretations, and the institutional perspective is thus expanded with analytical tools found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990).

The data was collected through fieldwork in five upper secondary schools in the western region of Norway during the 2013 Parliamentary election in Norway, and mainly consists of interviews with ten female students

and eight male students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, each participating in general study programs with varying degrees of self-reported political interest.

In the following paragraphs, I will explain the context of the research, before I further define the concept of mock elections in Norwegian schools and show why the Norwegian case is an important research contribution to the currently limited knowledge on mock elections as political education. Further theoretical perspectives, methods, analysis and discussion follow the background sections.

## 2 Political education in school and the case of Norwegian mock elections

Political education may be defined as “the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for citizens to participate in the political process” (Borge, 2016a). This definition is distinct from citizenship education, which is treated in the literature in a broader manner; as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable students “to participate in the communities of which they are a part, locally, nationally, and globally” (Arthur et al., 2008, p. 5). Whereas research on citizenship education can address a wide array of issues concerning how people live together in a community, political education is concerned with the relationship of individuals to the political system or their influence on governing. This distinction is a significant one. Lo (2015) argues that if the goal [of education] is to “create politically engaged citizens, it is important to gauge whether students would actually engage with the governmental system in the future, [or whether they would] skirt traditional political actions” (p. 245).

MEs at school are standard educational practices in many countries and are primarily designed to advance electoral participation. In Norway they have been integrated in school curricula since the Second World War as a way of promoting democratic participation, values and attitudes for the future (Storstein, 1946). MEs have expanded geographically throughout the country over the last 70 years and are now conducted in all Norwegian upper secondary schools every election year, i.e., every second year. Mock elections at school can be considered an institution in Norwegian political education (Børhaug, 2010a). The curriculum for compulsory school in Norway stresses the role school has played in the political education of young citizens since 1939 (Normalplanen, 1957). This emphasis has been further developed in the objective of social studies in the Norwegian curriculum: “The purpose of the social studies subject is to help create understanding and belief in fundamental human rights, democratic values and equality and to encourage the idea of active citizenship and democratic participation” (Udir, 2013).

The concept of mock elections at school in Norway encompasses three elements of political education: the school debate, the election square and the ballot casting.

First, the mock elections at school involve youth organizations from Norwegian political parties; these youth organizations visit schools and take part in political debates. Which parties are represented in the debate

can vary between school districts and counties, but the largest parties are generally present. As of the Parliamentary election of 2017 these are: The Progress Party [Fremskrittspartiet], The Conservative Party [Høyre], The Liberal Party [Venstre], The Christian Democratic Party [Kristelig Folkeparti], The Green Party [Miljøpartiet de Grønne], The Center Party [Senterpartiet], The Labor Party [Arbeiderpartiet], The Socialist Left Party [Sosialistisk Venstreparti], and Red [Rødt]. The debate usually lasts for about one and a half hours. The school debate has often been referred to in the media and these news stories typically report content that concerns humor, sexual issues and unrealistic political promises<sup>1</sup>.

Second, since 2011 the mock elections have involved an election square. An election square is a market place where the students can meet and interact with party members from the political youth organizations. The youth party representatives set up party booths for the students to visit and the students can ask questions and pick up brochures and campaign material along with assorted merchandise such as balloons, candy and condoms<sup>2</sup>. The election square takes place for a few hours following the debate.

Third, the students can vote in the mock election, which is conducted on either the same day or a few days after the politicians have visited the school. The ballots in the mock election do not elect politicians, but the results of the mock election are collected and presented in the news (such as VG, Aftenposten and Dagbladet<sup>3</sup>). These results are covered in the national newspapers and on television with the aim of revealing how local - and national election results might look, because mock election results have been shown to predict voting tendencies for the whole electorate (Aardal, 2011). Since the mock election is conducted about a week before Norway's official Election Day, it gives an indication of the outcome of the official election at a time when all eyes are directed towards the turnout and opinion polls. However, in general, the results of mock elections have been more radical than those of the official election. For example, according to the national mock elections result, the Pirate Party, advocating personal data protection, amongst other issues, would have gained eight representatives in the Norwegian Parliament in 2013, compared to none in the Parliamentary election<sup>4</sup>. Despite such irregularities, the results often predict the general tendencies of the outcome of the ordinary election.

### 3 Theoretical background

In order to study how students interpret the mock elections as political education, the institutional perspective is taken as a starting point. March and Olsen (2000) argue that identities can motivate action if the rules of political identity match the situation. According to their institutional perspective, individuals approach a situation by interpreting the situation in the light of their unique identity. In doing so, they ask questions such as "Who am I?" "What are appropriate actions for me to take?" before selecting the option that appears to be the most

appropriate to the situation. The assumption is that most of the time a political actor acts by asking "what does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?" Action requires matching the rules of that identity to a definition of a situation (p. 152). Thus, individuals define themselves as political subjects, "am I a politics person?", and construct their political identities through interaction with their environments.

A political identity may be broadly defined as "the extent to which being politically engaged is experienced as central to one's sense of self" (Beaumont et al., 2006, p. 255). Political identity has a double sense, both a social and a personal construction. At an individual level, the question becomes whether the *individual defines themselves as a political actor*. In this case, identity is defined by the individual, and identity construction is a personal matter attributed to oneself by the actor (Snow, 2001). At a collective level, political identities are tied to *joining a collective* or belonging to a group (Melucci, 1996). Identity may refer to a social category or a group with certain characteristics, fairly fixed by the institutions in which they are embedded, such as the political identities defined by the labor movement or other political movements that gradually mobilized the main groups of society politically (Rokkan, 1987), or else may be more fluid. The actions appropriate to the individual can be defined by the group and can vary according to the situation (March and Olsen, 2008).

Although March and Olsen (2000) observe that there are limits to what can be accomplished by influencing identities, and that there are variations in how identities are interpreted, they are vague about these restrictions. Pierre Bourdieu (2000) offers an approach through the concept of *habitus*, which can give insight into students' interpretations of mock elections as political education. Bourdieu defines habitus as "a product of a history, the instruments of construction of the social that it invests in practical knowledge of the world and in action are socially constructed, in other words structured by the world that they structure" (ibid., p. 148). Put differently, people construct their identities and selves through dynamic interactions with their environment based on the embodied dispositions, skills and ways of thinking about and acting in the world, that are constituted early in life. This set of socially learned dispositions is acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life and are often taken for granted. When entering the different fields, the individual always brings their habitus along with resources (the capital). These resources can be economic capital, social capital and cultural capital, all of which are automatically transformed into symbolic capital when the individual enters the field (Bourdieu, 1997). Following this argument, the student comes to school with a habitus – or certain dispositions – that unconsciously or consciously make some choices more acceptable than others. It is a concept for revealing how the diversity in the dispositions the students bring to the school field generates a wide repertoire of possible action when shaping their conceptions of their political selves. As Crossley (2004) further explains (p. 108):

"The perceptual and linguistic schemas of the habitus shape the ways in which agents make sense or fail to make sense of each other's communications. This may mean that they find different meaning in communication to those that the authors of those communications identify in them. It may mean that they "miss the point" or just fail to make any sense of what is communicated."

Many researchers have argued that young people's political identities do not include formal politics such as voting, but rather other forms of political participation, such as demonstrations and social media campaigns, typically described as unconventional or informal modes of participation (Dalton, 2008; Ødegård, 2010; White, 2000; Taft, 2006). Consistent with this notion, Gordon and Taft (2011) find that young political activists criticize adult-led socialization because adults are more interested in socializing youth for the future rather than actually engaging youth in activism that matters in the present. From a top-down perspective, the mock election is a simulation of an ordinary election. From a bottom-up perspective, the students can express their political identities, which merge to form the current voice of youth. Thus, the students are faced with identities related to *future* and *present* political participation. In both cases, it is important to analyze how the students interpret and use the MEs to shape their conceptions of their political selves.

According to March and Olsen (1995), institutions give meaning to participation and provide a motivation to act by presenting political identities. Thus, political identity may motivate participation, but we do not know the role mock elections play in this process. The research question concerns whether and how mock elections as political education at school present identities that contribute to the creation of democratic citizens. To analyze this, the study focuses on the following questions:

- Which political identities do the MEs introduce to students?
- How do students interpret and use the MEs to shape their conceptions of their political selves?

#### 4 Method and data

Data on the mock elections as political education was collected through fieldwork in schools, which included observation and interviews. In this way, it was possible to not only ask a respondent to talk about an issue, event, or set of behaviors but also directly observe the dynamics or behaviors of interest (MacLean, Kapiszewski and Read, 2015, p. 230). I attended and took extensive field notes at various school activities, including (1) the school debate, where young politicians visit the school and debate current issues onstage in an auditorium, (2) the election square, where the students can converse with the youth party representatives and visit the party booths, and (3) the mock election itself, where students cast a ballot. In order to organize my notes from the observations and interviews, I used a toolbox separating descriptive, analytical and personal reflections. In 2011, the field notes consisted of 120 A5 pages and 40 pages

on a journalist pad in handwriting. The field notes from 2013 consist of 97 A4 pages transcribed to the computer using Calibri 11 font and 18 photos. In addition to these field notes, there were a couple of notebooks filled with jottings from classroom visits that were not transcribed into extensive field notes as they were jotted down more for contextual rather than analytical purposes. In addition, party programs, flyers and merchandise handed out by the political parties were all collected to gain a deeper understanding of the issue. Finally, I recorded short videos and made several drawings (Emerson et al., 2011).

The fieldwork was conducted in five upper secondary schools in the western part of Norway, during the mock elections of 2011 and 2013<sup>5</sup>. The schools could choose between only two sequential dates when conducting mock elections, making it difficult to attend more than five schools, and also decreasing the possibility of extending the analysis to more than one regional area. I conducted fieldwork in both rural and urban areas. Schools were selected based on diversity of geography, size, private/public, education programs and turnout in mock elections. In 2009, there was a wide variety in turnout in the mock elections, ranging from 40% to over 80%, making it important to include schools with both a high and low turnout in the study. Schools A and D were chosen as examples of schools where turnout was lower than the other schools in the region.

In order to analyze how students interpret and shape their conceptions of their political selves in relation to (A) the debate, in which youth politicians discuss political issues; (B) the election square, in which the party members are available for questions; and finally (C) the casting of ballots by students, interviews with students were conducted. The sample is presented in the table below and consists of eight male students and ten female students, all of whom were 18 years old and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in general studies in four upper secondary schools in rural and urban areas in the western region of Norway, except one who was an apprentice in fishing and forestry.

According to constructivism, individuals may interpret things differently based on their various previous experiences; therefore, it was important to include a variety of students with a range of experiences. School students are an identifiable group of people, but they are not homogenous. Therefore, I wanted to explore how students might relate to the identities in different ways. In addition to including students who attended vocational education programs or general education programs, it was important to interview politically active and non-politically active students, along with outgoing students and less talkative students. The principal at each school helped facilitate contact with relevant teachers, and the teachers helped in coordinating the interviews to ensure variation of these aspects. In one case, the students were selected randomly by drawing lots. All of the students also filled in a questionnaire developed by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), consisting of 58 items.

The investigated topics cover political attitudes and behavior, and very little on the mock election experience as political education. The students' responses on the item of "political interest", however, are reported in Table 1. The sample of students shows the diversity of the group in how they self-report on political interest. Political interest is one of the variables commonly included in research to explain variation in political participation. Based on national data from the School Election Surveys (SES) provided by the NSD in relation to the Norwegian local election of 2015, most young people are not very interested in politics and overall report a lower interest in politics than the rest of the population<sup>6</sup>.

6.8% reported being very interested compared to 18% in the rest of the population (NSD 2015). Three of the students interviewed in my study reported being very interested in politics; Kåre, William and Ingeborg.

According to data from the School Election Surveys (SES), 12.5% of students who are eligible to vote are members of political parties (NSD 2013, own analysis). Thus, I wanted to ensure that a part of the sample included students who were members of political parties. Two of the 18 students in the study were active members of a rightwing political party, Kåre and William. One of the students, Ingeborg, was a passive member of a political party on the left.

Table 1: Participating students in four upper secondary schools (N=18)

| Student name | Gender | Education program                 | Self-reported political interest in survey | Party Member               | School |
|--------------|--------|-----------------------------------|--|----------------------------|--------|
| Svein        | Male   | Music                             | Medium                                     | No                         | E      |
| Karianne     | Female | Music                             | Low  | No                         | E      |
| Rune         | Male   | General – science                 | Medium                                     | No                         | B      |
| Amalie       | Female | General – science                 | Low  | No                         | B      |
| Miriam       | Female | General – science                 | Medium                                     | No                         | B      |
| Fridtjof     | Male   | General                           | Medium                                     | No                         | E      |
| Ingeborg     | Female | General                           | High                                       | <i>Sosialistisk Ungdom</i> | E      |
| Kari         | Female | General                           | Medium                                     | No                         | E      |
| William      | Male   | General                           | High                                       | <i>Høyre</i>               | A      |
| Per Mikal    | Male   | Vocational (Fishing and forestry) | Medium                                     | No                         | A      |
| Peter        | Male   | General                           | Medium                                     | No                         | C      |
| Margrethe    | Female | General                           | Medium                                     | No                         | C      |
| Hanna        | Female | General – science                 | Medium                                     | No                         | B      |
| Knut         | Male   | General                           | Medium                                     | No                         | B      |
| Ada          | Female | General                           | Medium                                     | No                         | C      |
| Kåre         | Male   | General                           | High                                       | <i>Høyre</i>               | C      |
| Lise         | Female | Music                             | Low  | No                         | C      |
| Lykke        | Female | Music                             | Medium                                     | No                         | C      |

The data analyzed here is part of a larger study on mock elections as political education in school. In 2011, students taking both general studies (including sports and physical education, music, dance and drama) and vocational education (building and construction, design, arts and crafts, electricity and electronics, agriculture, fishing and forestry, and technical and industrial production) participated in the study, but the data presented here is from 2013 because the school debate was not organized in 2011. After the 2011 Norway terror attacks in Oslo and at Utøya, where the Labor Party's youth organization, AUF, was having a summer camp, the debates were canceled out of respect for the loss of the lives of many young politicians. Instead, the politicians agreed to replace the school debate with an election square where the politicians would be available for questions. At the time of the second interviews in 2013, when the debate

returned, almost all the students from the vocational programs and school D (in 2011) had left school/started work/moved/or could not participate for other reasons.

Choosing to involve a broad variety of students at the outset is a bigger challenge when it comes to second interviews than, for instance, involving only people attending educational programs where they plan to stay put throughout school. What we see from the sample is that there was a high dropout rate for participants attending vocational school. There were no participants left from school D in 2013. A student from school D agreed on the phone to meet me, and I set up a meeting three times, but he never appeared. Second interviews, especially after an interval of two years, are always a risk when it comes to participant dropout rates (Bhavnani, 1991). What became apparent was that, once the students had left school to begin work, the school lost

contact with them and it became increasingly difficult for the researcher to conduct a second interview.

The approach was an ordinary language interview (Schaffer, 2013). I started out by drafting a list of questions, with many follow-up questions on hand to help elaborate the initial answers. This is a preferred method of ensuring the validity of the researcher's interpretations during the interview. Although none of the findings will be generalizable to the whole student population, this in-depth study offers a unique opportunity to explore themes that derive from an understanding of the variations in students' perspectives on political identities.

One way of ensuring validity in qualitative data is to allow the participants to read the transcripts or the quotes to be used in the text or even the whole analysis in the finished work. This process is called member checking (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). The participants in the study received the article draft and were encouraged to comment on the accuracy of the direct quotes used. How the material is used, however, is entirely up to the author. For this purpose, the participants chose their own alias names so that they could identify themselves when reading the text. Using an alias name is favorable for this type of work for three reasons. First, the participants usually enjoy selecting an alias name, and it creates a good atmosphere in the interview setting. Second, the participants feel a sense of ownership of the project, and when they receive the text for perusal, they feel they are more than just a statistic. Third, the data presentation benefits from the use of aliases because aliases make it easier to tell a story rather than report numbers.

Reliability issues were addressed by a good-quality recording device. Transcriptions of the semi-structured, ordinary language interviews lasting between 35 minutes and 90 minutes, and of the field notes, were organized into descriptive, analytical and personal reflections that were all processed and structured using NVivo 10. The research was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD).

## 5 Findings

The students met youth politicians at school through a political debate, interacted with young party members at an election square, and cast a ballot in a ballot box. Thus, findings from the fieldwork show that there are at least three identities of a "politics" person which the students can engage with in the mock elections: (1) the politician, (2) the party member and (3) the voter. See Table 2. These identities are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, and the following identities of political participation will serve as analytical categories.

Table 2: Political identities at the mock elections in school

|                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| THE SCHOOL DEBATE   | The politician   |
| THE ELECTION SQUARE | The party member |
| THE MOCK ELECTION   | The voter        |

The identities of (1) "the politician" at the school debate, (2) "the party member" at the election square and (3) "the voter" will be discussed in turn, along with the students' perspectives on the three analytical categories.

### 5.1 The politician

The politicians in the school debate are sent from the youth party to represent each party's politics. The parties represented at the school debates at the four schools that conducted debates in 2013 were *Høyre*, *Sosialistisk Venstreparti*, *Fremskrittspartiet*, *Kristelig Folkeparti*, *Venstre*, *Arbeiderpartiet*, *Senterpartiet*, *Rødt* and *Miljøpartiet de Grønne*. With the exception of the two latter parties, these parties were all represented in the Norwegian Parliament, *Stortinget*, prior to the election. In the election of 2013, one representative of *Miljøpartiet de Grønne (MDG)* was elected to *Stortinget*. As a rule, the smaller parties have fewer resources in terms of people and training. Thus, while some of the youth politicians are recruited after a process of training at the youth organization's summer camps, others are chosen more randomly based on availability. The politicians in the four debates had an average age of 22.3 years. The youngest representatives were two girls representing *MDG* and *Rødt*, both of whom were 18 years old. The oldest, 33 years old, was from the Progress Party and was a municipal mayor. The age gap between the representatives and the students, however, was one factor the students commented on repeatedly. Svein, a music student from a rural area, said the following:

"I think they were a little older than me. The center people, [referring to *Senterungdommens Landsforbund*, the *Senterpartiet* youth organization] were even older than that. I don't know, I don't think there was anyone my age. I think they were all older than me."

This age difference matters because it affects the ability of students to identify with the politicians in the debate. Students in upper secondary school in Norway are mostly 16-18 years old. The youth politicians are students or workers and even though they are young, the interviewees actively distanced themselves from the "older" politicians in the debate. The students noticed and commented on the age differences. The students perceived themselves as younger in relation to the political identities presented in the debate, and an implication from this might be that the debate reinforces the image of politicians and formal politics as something that "older" people engage in.

Another main theme was that the politicians in the debate were more politically interested than the students themselves and were interested in different political issues to those the students considered themselves interested in. Karianne, a music student and active member of a Christian youth organization, said, "They don't really speak to me. I am not interested enough to participate in great debates. So I feel they are more devoted to their issues and activities [than I am]." She

argues that the politicians in the debate were more interested in politics than she was, and consequently she could not identify with them. Kari, an opinionated and talkative 18-year-old girl from a rural area, helped shed light on this issue: "And then they talked about things that don't engage us or matter to us, for instance, they talked for around half an hour about whether Norway should be a part of Schengen. And those are things we really don't think about, so they should know their audience better". Because the youth politicians talked about issues which she considered irrelevant to her, she could not identify with them. In her eyes, the politicians in the debate had no idea about what engages young people, what types of issues matter to them, and, as Kari says, continue talking for a long time about international agreements that are far removed from the everyday lives of the teenagers. The students did not share political interests with the politicians.

Many of the students also stated that the politicians in the school debate did not fit the *image* they had of politicians. Ada states: "those who debated were kind of against each other" or "It was like a duel. All the time they tried to say something negative about each other". Adding to this, Ingeborg, who is a party member, but not an active member, said: "The ones debating were kind of against each other, in a way. They were speaking to each other, not to us. It was like they all knew each other from before." Karianne argues: "In politics I think people should behave more professionally and address issues and not people, and in the debate I felt like it was about people, not politics." In the students' eyes, the way the politicians behaved in the school debate was both unprofessional and personal and, according to them, not the correct behavior of a politician. The teenagers in this study have a clear picture of what a politician should be; Kari describes politicians as "Men in gray suits and a tie". The politicians who visited the school, however, were not representative of this image. The students' rejection of the politicians in the debate is thus twofold. The politicians were neither like the students, nor like politicians. The school debate presented an identity of "the politician" that the students distanced themselves from.

However, young people, like other age groups, are not homogeneous and may experience politicians differently. Kåre is one of the few students who is a member of a political party. He is an active member of *Unge Høyre* [the Norwegian Young Conservatives], the second largest youth political party in Norway in 2011, with more than 4,000 registered members (Ødegård, 2014). "Active" in this context refers to being active in relation to the mock election. Kåre spent every day working on the school campaign and travelling from school to school, visiting more than ten schools and spending hours, days and weeks at election squares and debates. Kåre was opinionated and had been so since he started reading about party programs as a part of a school project during the local election in 2007 at the age of twelve: "I've been walking around with an opinion ever since seventh grade". He explains:

"If we can show youth that they [the politicians in the debate] are ordinary young people who just have a burning devotion for politics. They are just like you, they don't feel like they are better than you, they just want to make a change in society. I think that's important, that teenagers think that this is just someone like me, who just wants to do something. It is not a pompous guy in the Parliament thinking he is much better than everyone else [...] they think it's pretty neat that we bring the Parliament candidates with us. They think it's kind of neat that its people in their 20s; you can identify with a student [at the university level] even if you're in upper secondary school (2013)."

In the quote above, Kåre refers to one of the candidates who, in addition to participating in the school debate, was also a candidate for the parliamentary election. This candidate was young, a 23-year-old man from his local area. Kåre argues that it is a strategy to send young politicians to the debate. As an active party member, Kåre strongly identifies with the politicians in the debate who are people in their 20s and in college. They are equal; the age difference does not matter. Kåre is like them, the politicians in the debate, thus leading to acceptance of the identities presented. All of the other students, who were not active members of political parties, rejected the identity of the politician present at the debate.

## 5.2 The party member

The interviewees overall shared a strong sense of their own ability to be like the young party representatives at the election square. The people at the election square were not the same as the ones present at the debate, but were younger members of a political party, often recruited to visit the schools they themselves had attended. Rune says about the party members at the election square in 2013:

"I thought "that could be me". I would like to join a political party, but I just haven't found the time. I promoted my sports club from a stand myself; why become a member and be active in sports. It's clear I could have done the same myself."

The party members at the election square were considered the same age as the students and spoke the same language and cared about the same issues as the students. Svein says: "the party members were the same age as me. I met someone who used to go to my class in the music program". Amalie emphasizes: "the people standing there were mostly young people; some of them were my friends". The students were able to *relate to* the political identities at the election square in school, in part because the party representatives were peers; they were students themselves. Thus, they spoke the same language as the other teenagers. As Knut describes: "They talk like buddies [...] we speak the same language and understand each other". Lise adds: "We could ask about issues [we care about]". Asking the students about the issues they care about is an important way of getting to "know their audience better", as Kari highlighted in her criticism of the political debate.

The two active party members, Kåre and William, said they were eager to join the collective when they saw the party representatives at the election square. They both joined after the mock election in 2011. Kåre says:

"I felt [it was] missing in my life. [...] They were part of a small community. It was fun to talk to other youth politicians whom I don't agree with, but talk with them and not just the people in my class who do not care about politics. Most people are like yeah. Whatever. Don't talk about that [politics]."

At the election square in 2011 Kåre met people he could have a discussion with. The young people at the election square presented identities corresponding with how he viewed himself, and he wanted to become a part of that community of likeminded people. He makes a distinction between himself and the other students in his class. He signals his wish to belong to a community of people he can discuss politics with while simultaneously signaling his distinction from the others who "don't talk about that". The rejection of others as "not interested", not like him, contributes to the separation of "them" and "me".

William received the right to vote at the age of 16 as part of a trial project in twenty municipalities in Norway, but even at a younger age he already knew he wanted to be involved.

"I knew in tenth grade. [...] I joined *Unge Høyre* (The Conservatives youth organization) at the election square [...]. Of course it can't be a hundred percent after talking to them for only half an hour, but it turned out to be right for me to choose *Høyre*, because it only fits me better and better. I am a *Høyre* person."

Both Kåre and William saw the party members at the election square and were eager to join. They had both decided that they wanted to join parties before they were presented with the 'party member' identity at the election square.

### 5.3 The voter

The main finding when it comes to the casting of ballots is that the students accepted voting as a school assignment. In Ingeborg's school, the students went to the gym, where the student inspector and some older students in third grade had set up voting booths and there was a registration area to present their IDs before placing their ballots in a box. Ingeborg says "it is a school thing. The teacher (Norwegian subject teacher) says ok, let's go and vote for ten minutes. So then there are a few people who choose to stay in the classroom".

Knut, a science student at the private school, voted in his own classroom and other students were in charge of organizing the election. Talking about the election he explains:

"You have to stand there. If you go away then you are suddenly alone. However, I think everyone felt like they had to follow the group. It seemed like it. They called your

name so... you kind of had to go in when you had your name called."

In the students' view, they did not feel they had any alternative to voting. Rune explains:

"I was just supposed to do it. [...] It was mostly because I had to. That's what was going on that day; we were supposed to vote. The day started out as usual, and then later that day, we were to go downstairs to our classroom, and then we got ballots, and then we each chose a party. Then, we put them in a box."

However, there is one exception. In one of the five schools, the election was less of a mandatory activity. The organizing teacher had placed voting booths together with a few students in the hall, and the students were able to drop by during recess or mid break to cast a ballot. They were not followed to the ballot box by the teacher, and they were not given time off from class to vote. This was not the case for the other mock election activities, the school debate and the election square. The "less mandatory" school was also the school with the lowest turnout in the mock election, 60% in 2011 compared to 80-90% in the other schools. Two of the six students interviewed at this school, Ada and Peter, reported that they did not even know the election had occurred until after it was conducted. Ada says: "There was no notice about it, or at least I wasn't aware of it [the mock election]. Many people didn't go. I think approximately 7 people voted [in her class]." When not considered a school assignment, the turnout rate decreases.

Overall, the students did not pay attention to the results of the mock elections. The results were published online ([itslearning.no](http://itslearning.no)), but the students did not talk with their friends or in class about the results. However, again there was a difference between the students who were active party members and the students who were not. The two party members expressed the importance of the results of the mock election because, as Kåre explains, "[the result] gives us an indication of what youth want [their future] to be like". He further argues that a win in the mock elections at school fuels the rest of the Parliamentary election campaign.

"[It] is all about motivation, both for the youth parties and the parties in general. The result comes out 3-4 days before Election Day [...] I used that to show how important voting in the mock election is... [We can] do a better job campaigning after the mock election in the last days before the Parliamentary election."

For him, winning the mock elections at school is about showing the voice of youth and it provides motivation to get the votes that count in the Parliamentary election.

### 6 Discussion

In the MEs at Norwegian schools, the students meet and interact with three different identities of political participation: 1) *the politician*, 2) *the party member* and



3) *the voter*. How do students interpret and use the MEs to shape their conceptions of their political selves?

In summary, the students who were active members of political parties accepted the three analytical categories of identities. However, the students who were not members of political parties, as is the case for most young people, rejected the identity of “the politician”, but accepted “the party members” as peers. Overall, the students accepted “the voter” as a school assignment.

When interviewing the students it became evident that the politicians in the debate were considered older than the youth themselves, more engaged, talking a different language and addressing issues other than those the students were interested in. A quantitative study on the impact of mock elections revealed that participating in the school debate or the election square had no significant effect on students’ willingness to vote in the Parliamentary elections (Borge, 2016a). The findings presented here may shed light on this lack of effect. When the politicians in the debate were considered older than the students themselves, more engaged, talking a different language and addressing uninteresting issues, this is important because it influenced the students’ ability to identify with the identities presented – it resulted in a rejection of the political identities presented during the debate, both because the politicians were different from the students and because they were not what the students described as “real politicians”. They were unprofessional, and an image unfit for what the students thought of what politicians *should* be like and how they *should* behave.

The interview data indicated that, in many ways, the election square communicated better with the students than the school debate; and a possible explanation might be that the students and the party members at the election square shared a common language and interest in issues (Crossley, 2004). However, the party members are accepted more as “peers” than party members. The students did not share the party-members range of political engagement.

The meaning students found in political identities differed. Both of the two active party members described a craving to join a fellowship in order to discuss politics when introduced to the “party member” identity at the mock election. In a Bourdieuan light, individuals will participate if participation has become internalized as a part of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu writes, “He feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of habitus” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.143). Put differently, if the world presented to him is the world *in* him, it will lead to immediate adoption. According to Bourdieu, these dispositions may remain unnoticed until they appear in action (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 140). In the interview referred to above, Kåre explained how he wanted to become part of a community of likeminded people, and that his classmates “didn’t care about politics” as opposed to himself and the party members. William said that he had known for a while that he wanted to be involved in a political party and during the election square he spent his time deciding which party he

should join, not whether he should join or not. We can perhaps relate these findings to a “political habitus” since the teenagers who were already political, were the ones who accepted the political identities of the MEs. Habitus describes who you are today, through embodied dispositions, based on the people and situations that have influenced you while growing up. Further studies may benefit from exploring in greater detail the effects of political education at home, as the family is one institution in which such a “political habitus” might originate.

The findings strongly indicate support for mock elections as top-down political education. They simulate an ordinary election in order to socialize youth for the future and promote political participation by simulating an election in school in order to ensure that all students have the practical skills to participate in elections. The findings add to the limits of socialization for the future rather than engaging youth in activism that matters in the present (Gordon and Taft, 2011). The students accept “the voter” identity as an assignment in school. Albeit with a few exceptions, the students do not view voting in the mock elections as a way of expressing the voice of youth today, a trait of bottom-up political education. Comparing the findings to other studies of Norwegian civic education classes, an overall trend in political education is a strong focus on voting or what Børhaug (2005) has labeled “voter education”. He further states that (2014):

“There is only one discourse to be found about the political system, and within it only one understanding of the system is articulated: the political system is a flawless representative democracy. [...] Those who are being criticized are those who do not endorse the Norwegian political system, i.e., those who do not vote” (p. 437, p. 439).

The textbooks present the Norwegian political system as fully democratic, and one way the citizens can show support of the democratic system is by voting. As a simulation, mock elections become a part of the “curriculum”, a school assignment for the students, but also for the teachers who interrupt the classroom routine to make time for voting. When the students partake in the election, they observe other students casting ballots and the teachers encouraging them to do so. Thus, voting at school becomes a means of promoting voting as the norm. In this regard, the findings indicate that mock elections offer norms as a motivation where voting is about participating, and not political preferences. The students generally do not view voting in the mock elections as a way of expressing the voice of youth today, or pay attention to the outcome of the mock elections. Rather the students I interviewed described voting in the mock election as a school assignment. Previous studies (Borge, 2016a) show a strong and positive connection between voting in mock elections at school and students’ willingness to vote in Parliamentary elections. This might indicate that they accept the norm of voting presented to them in the mock election. It is an activity, which

interrupts the daily routine, and “everyone” participates in it. Political education can nurture norms as a motivation for participation, by presenting all students with a voter identity. However, norms do not in themselves necessarily justify participation. It is not a given that the students will actually participate even if they say they are willing to do so. In addition, norms operate at a collective level and motivate action in part because there might be sanctions from society, school, friends, and family etc. if the norms are violated. Will the young people who have participated in MEs in school also vote in the Parliamentary elections where there might be no sanctions or where the fear of being sanctioned disappears? There is always a struggle between “laissez faire” and comprehensive political indoctrination (March and Olsen, 2000, p.149). The mock elections convey to teenagers that they should vote because they are told to do so. If getting more young voters to the voting booth on Election Day is a democratic goal, somehow, students must be taught how such participation is meaningful and worthwhile (Børhaug, 2010a), and what motivates political participation may vary (Børhaug, 2010b). Further research should examine whether promoting these norms in school has a lasting impact on actual turnout in national and local elections.

### 7 Conclusive remarks

The question of how MEs contribute in creating democratic citizens is underscored by increasing concerns that the youth of today are withdrawing from traditional forms of political participation. The MEs in upper secondary schools in Norway erase the conventional divisions between “the ordinary world” and “the school world” by inviting politicians and political parties to school for a few days each election year. This in-depth study explores mock elections as a form of political education, as well as examining the active learning experience in school when youth political parties and students meet and interact. Further studies should explore these findings in other international and social contexts.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, it is not my intention to generalize the behavior and attitudes of Norwegian students or youth in general. This fieldwork lays the foundation for conducting further quantitative research into mock elections in school and students’ perspectives on political education. Qualitative studies are also needed to explore general daily political education at all school levels. Further studies would benefit from exploring in particular how the teachers perceive the mock elections as political education.

Whether and how school contributes to the creation of democratic citizens are questions that may be applied to political education as a whole and not just mock elections. Thus, educators, curriculum developers and school stakeholders in general may benefit from a deeper awareness of the political identities made available for students to interact and engage with. Also, the school is but one institution that young people construct their political identities in relation to. Individuals define

themselves as political subjects and construct their political identities through interaction with their environments while engaging with various identities and alternatives. Youth organizations, the family, sports clubs and pop culture icons are some political socialization arenas promoting identities and alternatives that may contribute to the creation of democratic citizens.

Creating democratic citizens is a balance between supporting democratic values and encouraging critical perspectives. At any time, the majority of school students do not yet have the right to vote. Through political education, the school is an arena that justifies political participation for students. Like age groups in the rest of the population, however, youth are not necessarily a homogenous group where the same justifications may motivate voting. Scholars should explore what motivates young people to participate in politics, in order to create meaningful political education programs for the citizens still in school.

### Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the young people who participated in this research.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Romerike Blad, August 31, 2015.  
Bergensavisen, September 2, 2015.  
Nordlys, August 26, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Østlendingen, August 28, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> VG, September 8, 2015.

Aftenposten, September 8, 2015.

Dagbladet, September 8, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> NRK, September 4, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Every four years in September, the Parliament, *Stortinget*, is elected through a proportional system (2013). There is also a local election for the 428 municipalities and 19 counties of Norway every fourth year, occurring between the Storting elections (2011).

<sup>6</sup> The following question was asked: “How interested would you say you are in politics?”