# How do Youth Parliamentarians Experience the Core Functions of Youth Parliaments? A Case Study of the Belgian Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse and Vlaams Jeugd Parlement.


## Abstract

Research shows that the relationship between young people and formal democratic politics is under pressure. In response to this, political institutions increasingly seek ways to (re)connect with youngsters. One of the most common initiatives are youth parliaments, i.e. parliamentary simulations trying to familiarize youngsters with the workings of representative democracy. Although youth parliaments have been developed all over the world, very few studies have examined the outcome of these initiatives. To assess whether youth parliaments can politically (re-)engage youngsters, we must look at their core functions. The core functions which have been identified are the parliamentary function, educative function, democratic function, and legal function. However, no study so far has looked at participants' subjective experiences of these functions. To contribute to the current state of the art, this paper looks at participants' subjective experiences of youth parliaments' core functions based on the case studies of the Vlaams Jeugd Parlement (VJP) and Belgian Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse (JPJ). Using original survey data collected among participants in both youth parliaments in 2022, we find that participants experience the parliamentary function and the (internal) democratic function the strongest. Moreover, differences are found between groups of participants and between youth parliaments: the JPJ participants experience the core functions stronger than their VJP counterparts, organizers solely experience the parliamentary function stronger, first-time participants generally experience the functions less strong, and the minority position of women did not lead to significantly lesser experiences of the core functions. Hence, while these youth parliaments objectively claim to fulfill these core functions, not all participants subjectively experience them as such. The latter is important because participants' subjective experiences matter for narrowing the gap between youngsters and formal politics.

## 1. Introduction

Political decision-makers in Western Europe have grown more concerned about young people's disengagement with institutionalized forms of politics. Studies signal a growing indifference with formal politics, declining levels of electoral participation and diminishing support for political institutions among youngsters (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2001; Henn, 2011; Matthieu, Vrydagh, Caluwaerts, & Erzeel, 2020). Simultaneously, young people seem more attached to unconventional political participation, such as rioting and ethical consumption (O'Toole, 2015; Sloam, 2007). Although scholars disagree on whether these trends are alarming and/or indicative of youngsters' withdrawal from democratic politics more generally, young people's disengagement with institutionalized politics is concerning as young people's (dis)engagement at an early age is likely to influence their future (dis)engagement during adulthood (McFarland & Thomas 2006; Plutzer 2002).

Considering these negative trends, formal political institutions such as parliaments increasingly seek ways to promote young people's interest in and engagement with democratic politics (Leston-Bandeira, 2014). A prominent example of these attempts is the creation of youth parliaments (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). Youth parliaments are parliamentary simulations which try to reconnect youngsters with democratic politics through the performance of four core functions: a parliamentary, democratic, legal, and educative function (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). First, youth parliaments have a *parliamentary function*, as they familiarize youngsters with the workings and culture of parliament (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). Second, youth parliaments perform a *democratic function*, where they offer youngsters the possibility to voice their concerns and express their ideas and needs (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013; Inter-Parliamentary Union, s.d.). As such, participation in youth parliaments may offer youngsters the opportunity to give policy input and influence the political agenda (Shephard & Patrikios, 2014; Matthieu et al., 2020). Thirdly, youth parliaments have a *legal function*. According to Shephard and Patrikios (2013) they allow governments to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12.1 which stipulates that youngsters have the right to participate in the political process. Finally, youth parliaments perform an *educative function* where through training, socialization, and political education they positively engage youngsters with the political system (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013).

Research revealed that not all youth parliaments within the European Union (EU) equally address these core functions (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013; Patrikios & Shephard, 2014). Responsible for this are the institutional variations, organizational rules, and political context within which youth parliaments operate (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). However, what is missing from the current state of the art is research on participants' *subjective experiences* with youth parliaments' core functions. The importance of participants' subjective experiences is twofold. On the one hand, this subjective measure moves beyond the institutional presence of the core functions as it focuses on how participants experience them. As such, it provides us with an alternative way to evaluate the success of youth parliaments in meeting these core functions. On the other hand, this subjective measure allows us to assess the potential of youth parliaments in narrowing the gap between young people and politics. When participants do not experience the core functions, we cannot expect youth parliaments to play a crucial role in politically reengaging youngsters.

Hence this paper will analyze youth parliamentarians' subjective experiences with youth parliaments' core functions. Doing so, this research aims to answer the following research questions: "To what extent do Belgian youth parliamentarians experience and perceive youth parliaments' core functions, and how does this vary between participants and between youth parliaments?". To answer this, I study two youth parliaments in Belgium: the *Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse* (JPJ) which is organized annually in the Belgian Senate and the *Vlaams Jeugd Parlement* (VJP) which is organized annually in the Flemish Parliament. Besides analyzing the different experiences of participants based on the role they occupy in the organization, their seniority and gender, this case selection also allows to assess the impact of the institutional context. Even though both youth parliaments operate in the Belgian political context and show great similarities, they also differ in their institutional emphasis and organization. For instance, the VJP indicates to have a stronger policy focus than the JPJ and operates in a unilingual context versus the multilingualism of the JPJ, both of which shape the experiences of participants.

The research is based on an original survey conducted among organizers and participants of the JPJ and VJP in 2022. The results of the survey show that participants' experiences do not 100% line up with the youth parliaments' objective claims. While both youth parliaments claim to successfully fulfill the core functions, participants experience the parliamentary function and the internal democratic function the strongest. Besides these, the educative function is also

experienced rather strongly. This indicates that both youth parliaments have the potential to politically reengage youngsters, yet there is still some room for improvements. However, different experiences have been found between youth parliaments and between participants. While the multilingualism of the JPJ contributes to stronger experiences of the core functions, the VJP fails to deliver its promise of policy output to the Flemish Parliament. Furthermore, besides the parliamentary function organizers did not experience the core functions stronger than sole participants. Additionally, as first-time participants need to familiarize themselves with their role expectations and the parliamentary environment, they generally experience the functions less strong than non-first-time participants. Lastly, despite parliament being a gendered environment, the different experiences between men and women are not that big. However, we must remain cautious of women's lower experiences of the internal democratic function.

In what follows, this paper will first offer an overview of the literature on youth political disengagement and youth parliaments, followed by the description of the two cases and the formulation of the hypotheses. Next, the paper will discuss the collection of survey data and the ensuing statistical analysis. Finally, the paper will present the empirical findings, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Youth parliaments as a means to reconnect youngsters with politics

'Public engagement initiatives' have been developed by parliament to increase their connection to 'ordinary' citizens (Leston-Bandeira, 2014). One of these initiatives are youth parliaments.

Youth parliaments are parliamentary simulations that try to familiarize youngsters with representative democracy. According to Shephard and Patrikios (2013), political elites especially focus on the development of youth parliaments because they go beyond the "symbolic act of voting" and motivate young people "to develop their political literacy and engage with the political system as informed citizenry" (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013, p.754). As policy actors like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) list the creation of youth parliaments as a key priority to promote young people's political engagement (Matthieu et al., 2020.), it is relevant to investigate the ways in which youth parliaments are expected to do so. There are several ways in which youth parliaments can be expected to reconnect young people with politics, one of which is the performance of certain functions. According to Shephard and

Patrikios (2013), youth parliaments perform four key functions: a parliamentary, democratic, legal, and educative function. However, not all youth parliaments equally perform these functions due to their institutional variation in for example: age range, duration, size, impact, partisanship, etc. (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). This diversity offers an opportunity as youth parliaments are highly adaptable and eager to learn from each other's institutional make-up to realize these core functions (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013).

First of all, youth parliaments have a *parliamentary function,* as they develop a direct connection to parliament and allow youngsters to participate in a simulation of the 'adult' parliament. Hence, they familiarize those who often lack descriptive representation to give them a feel of the procedures and workings of parliament (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). Through this, parliamentary public engagement strategies aim to move beyond merely informing about democratic politics and to "develop a sense of ownership of the institution among the public" (Leston-Bandeira, 2016, p. 511). This in turn could contribute to developing powerful connections between parliament and participants (Leston-Bandeira, 2016), such as increased trust in parliament and support for representative institutions (Leston-Bandeira, 2012).

Second, youth parliaments perform a *democratic function* where they grant young people a forum to aggregate and articulate their interests and needs (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013; Inter-Parliamentary Union, s.d.). As such, this includes two dimensions. Firstly, this means that participants can freely share their opinion within the simulation itself (internal democratic function). Secondly, participation in youth parliaments may offer youngsters an opportunity to influence the political agenda and give policy input outside the simulation (external democratic function) (Patrikios & Shephard, 2014; Matthieu et al., 2020). This influence on the policy-making process can play a crucial role in politically empowering youngsters as they feel that their voice is being heard and matters (Milliken, 2008).

Thirdly, youth parliaments have a *legal function*. According to Shephard and Patrikios (2013) they allow governments to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12.1 which requires that youngsters have the right to participate in politics. In line with this right, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (s.d.) has also stressed the importance of freely expressing your views as a child or adolescent. As the experience of this function overlaps with the democratic function, this function will be integrated within the democratic function.

Finally, youth parliaments have an *educative function* as they create a sphere of positive engagement with the political system through several mechanisms such as training, socialization, and political education. As such, participation in youth parliaments can contribute to youngsters' self-development and their understanding of, and support for, democratic values (Patrikios & Shephard, 2014; Matthieu et al 2020). It can also incite young people to engage in in civic and political life, in the near or far future (Rajani, 2001; Matthieu et al., 2020; Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). Hence, youth parliaments can be seen as learning schools for democracy (Matthieu et al., 2020). Civic education plays a crucial role in reinforcing a connection between the citizens and democracy (Thomas, 1997; Finkel, Sabatini, & Bevis, 2000; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). More specifically, as the process of self-governance in representative democracies is based on educated citizens (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008), civic education provides citizens with the necessary values, skills, and knowledge.

Despite the importance attributed to these core functions, research concerning participants' experiences of them is largely lacking. Some explorative case studies do inquire into some aspects of these functions, but not in an extensive manner. Matthieu et al. (2020), discovered that JPJ participants experienced the democratic function in a two-fold manner. First of all, participants felt included and able to express their voices (internal democratic function). However, almost a third of participants did experience a feeling of hesitancy to share their views due to the possibility of being mocked (Matthieu et al., 2020). Secondly, their research revealed that most participants did not believe that their discussions would influence political action (external democratic function). Furthermore, a case study on the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) revealed that participants experienced the educative function strongly as they reported that they experienced skill development during the conference (Patrikios & Shephard, 2014). When broadening our scope outside Europe, Fuks and Casalecchi (2012) revealed that members of the Brazilian youth parliament developed a more confident attitude towards their parliament (parliamentary function) (Fuks & Casalecchi, 2012). However, as these strands of research do not compare experiences across participants and cases, it is not possible to indicate whether certain participants of certain youth parliaments experience or perceive certain functions stronger than others. What it does point towards is the presence and focus of youth parliaments on (some of) the core functions.

Building on these insights, this paper compares the experiences of participants in two youth parliaments in Belgium (JPJ and VJP) in relation to three core functions: *the parliamentary*

*function, the democratic function,* and *the educative function*. While these functions have been recognized as institutional mechanisms to narrow the gap between youngsters and formal politics, we must question whether participants truly experience them as such. If this is not the case, youth parliaments may not sufficiently succeed in narrowing the gap between young people and formal politics. The next section offers a description of the two youth parliaments, paying attention to their main institutional similarities and differences.

## 3. Youth Parliaments in Belgium: The Vlaams Jeugd Parlement (VJP) and Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse (JPJ)

International trends indicating changes in the political engagement of young people in Europe are also present within Belgium. Belgian youngsters are more inclined to engage in short-term informal political activities rather than long-term formal ones (Quintelier, 2010). Furthermore, there is a low level of trust in political institutions among Belgian youngsters (Waeterloos, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2021). These lower levels of trust among youngsters are in line with the patterns of the Belgian population more generally. While Belgians still had average levels of trust in their political institutions in 2014 (with regional variations between Wallonia and Flanders) (Hooghe & Van Haute, 2014), the Eurobarometer (2021) finds that currently 6 out of 10 Belgians does not trust the federal institutions. While trends in political trust fluctuate, the results remain worrisome.

The change in political engagement contributes to Belgium ranking 36th on the Global Democracy Index in 2021 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022). This index indicates that Belgium is the lowest-ranked Western European country (Lodewijckx, 2020), therefore it is classified as a failing democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022; Lodewijckx, 2020). Hence, it seems highly important that the Belgian political system invests in initiatives that support political engagement. As participation from a young age onwards incites participation later in life (Quintelier, 2010), we look at the potential of two Belgian youth parliaments: the VJP and JPJ.

In their comparative study of youth parliaments in the EU, Shephard and Patrikios (2013) identify several institutional similarities and differences. Comparably, within the EU most youth parliaments are organized in the key democratic institution, parliament (Shephard &

Patrikios, 2013). Following this design, the simulations of the VJP take place in the Flemish parliament and last for four days, while the sessions of the JPJ are organized in the Belgian senate for five days (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). Furthermore, most European youth parliaments develop a deeper link to government or parliament through being organized or overseen by them (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). While the VJP and JPJ are independent non-politically affiliated non-profit organizations, and as such not organized or overseen by government or parliament, they do receive funding from governmental and academic partners. For the VJP these sponsors include the Flemish government as well as the Flemish parliament, while the JPJ is sponsored by the Belgian senate (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). Similarly, the number of participants is close to the number of parliamentarians in the National legislative chamber, with the VJP allowing up to 140 participants and the JPJ allowing up to 120 (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013; VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.).

Contrarily to most European youth parliaments, which focus on teenagers, the VJP and JPJ focus on a somewhat older age range (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013). Within the VJP, participants between 17 and 27 years can participate while in the JPJ participants between 18 and 25 years old are selected (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). Furthermore, Shephard & Patrikios (2013) point out that selection procedures greatly vary within the EU. For the JPJ and VJP, potential candidates must write a motivation letter to explain why they would be a suited candidate for one of the functions. These functions entail being a senator, journalist, or state council member. Afterwards, members of the organization review the applications anonymously. Important to note is that these organizers can also apply for participatory roles. However, the application procedure remains the same. When applicants are accepted and assigned a role, they can partake in the simulations (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). Once the VJP and JPJ simulations start, they evolve in three consecutive phases. First, a plenary session is organized to introduce the bills. Afterwards, participants deliberate and propose amendments to the bills. Lastly, during the plenary session the bills get voted on with majority rule (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). While the goals of youth parliaments vary (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013), the VJP and JPJ have a clear reference to the core functions within their mission statements (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). First of all, they want to familiarize participants with the workings of parliament (parliamentary function). Secondly, they want to educate youth parliamentarians on political skills and principles (educative function). Thirdly, they aim to emphasize that participants' voices matter (internal democratic function).

Besides these similarities and differences to most youth parliaments in the EU, there is also some institutional variation within the Belgian cases. First of all, the VJP is regionally focused on the Flemish parliament while the JPJ adopts a federal organizational culture (VJP s.d.: JPJ, s.d.). The federal focus of the JPJ is in line with their goal to bring together the different Belgian communities (JPJ, s.d.). As such, participants can speak Dutch, French, or German during the simulations and translators facilitate the deliberative process (JPJ, s.d.). Furthermore, the VJP goes further in mentioning the democratic function in its mission statement as it emphasizes its direct link with formal politics through the facilitation of formal policy output (external democratic function). After the simulation, amended bills are passed onto the Flemish Parliament (VJP, s.d.). I expect that these institutional differences, as well as differences between individual participants, will shape participants' experiences and perceptions of the core functions.

Below, I present six different hypotheses that will be tested empirically in this paper, starting with a general 'baseline' hypothesis, followed by two hypotheses concerning institutional differences between the VJP and JPJ and three hypotheses concerning the individual characteristics of participants.

*1) General Hypothesis*

In their comparative study, Shephard and Patrikios (2013) find that youth parliaments vary in the extent to which meet all the functions at once. They are most optimistic about the educative function of youth parliaments, and they see its added value in the promotion of civic skills and the socialization of young people in the workings of democracy. Generally, they indicate that youth parliaments' activities within the EU are concentrated on socializing members in democratic politics. This is, in turn, confirmed by their separate study of the Scottish Youth Parliament, where they found that participation in the youth parliament fostered youths' associational participation later in life as well as their skill development (Patrikios & Shephard, 2014). While participants' expressions on the VJP website and social media emphasize its educative role, research by Matthieu et al. (2020) indicated that the focus of the JPJ is on politically socializing participants. Based on this, I expect that the simulations will be organized in such a way that participants will recognize the presence and as such experience the educative function more than the others. As such, I hypothesize that:

*H1: Participants in the Belgian VJP and JPJ experience the educative function to a greater extent than the other two functions.*

2) *Hypotheses concerning institutional differences between the VJP and JPJ*

While the VJP and JPJ share a similar political culture, there is a difference between the language(s) used during the simulations. Considering the multilingual nature of the JPJ simulations, we can expect participants to encounter additional difficulties. This is the case as the fluency level necessary to deliberate is high (Fiket, Olsen, & Trenz, 2011). However, Doerr (2012) argues that translators have an equalizing effect during the debates. This equalizing effect can incite participants to raise their voice and deliberate to a higher extent. However, translators solely translate words and are not able to capture the entire communicative process (O'Leary, 2005). Hence, it can be assumed that translators will narrow the differences in experiences, yet JPJ experiences will still be less strong. So, I hypothesize that:

*H2: Participants in the VJP experience the core functions of youth parliaments to a greater extent than the participants in the JPJ.*

Additionally, the two youth parliaments differ concerning their link to formal politics. While the VJP emphasizes the transfer of its policy proposals to the Flemish parliament, the JPJ does not state this. This is exemplified by the research of Matthieu et al. (2020), which indicates that the design of the JPJ is not focused on generating policy impact. Hence, I hypothesize that:

*H3: Participants in the VJP experience the external democratic function to a greater extent than the participants in the JPJ.*

3) *Hypotheses concerning characteristics of participants: institutional position, seniority, and gender*

In addition to the institutional differences, I expect to find individual-level differences in the perceptions of participants, particularly according to their institutional position, seniority, and gender. Institutional position refers to whether a participant is 'merely' a participant in the parliamentary simulation or whether (s)he is also part of the organizing team of the youth parliament. Indeed, in both youth parliaments, (some) organizers participate in the parliamentary simulations as participants, in addition to being actively involved in several organizational tasks. We can expect differences between the experiences of those who solely participate and those who (also) organize the event. In their study on deliberative innovations,

Button and Mattson (1999) discovered that organizers engage in deliberative events in manners consistent with their organizational aims and needs. As the mission statements of both the VJP and JPJ refer to the parliamentary, educative, and democratic function, I expect organizers to experience the events in a manner consistent with these missions. Furthermore, organizers are socialized within a particular organizational role which influences their behavior and attitude (Sluss & van Dick, 2011). Hence, I hypothesize that:

*H4: Organizers of the VJP and JPJ experience the core functions to a greater extent than those who solely participate.*

Additionally, Matthieu et al. (2020) discovered that first-time participants in the JPJ were more hesitant to fully participate compared to non-first-time participants. Similarly to adult parliaments, newly elected participants need to become familiar with the institutional rules, informal and formal agreements as well as their role expectations (Lindstädt, Slapin & Wielen, 2012). This hesitancy to participate might make the experiences of first-time participants less strong. Due to this, I hypothesize that:

*H5: First-time participants of the JPJ and VJP experience the core functions to a lesser extent than non-first-time participants.*

Despite the importance of equality and inclusion during participatory and deliberative events (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, & Shaker, 2012; Beauvais & Bachtiger, 2016), critics often point towards the domination of men (Sanders, 1997; Williams, 2000). More specifically, research has revealed that the parliamentary institution is highly gendered (Verge 2021). On the one hand, certain parliamentary tasks are seen as either feminine or masculine, with the feminine tasks being devalued (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). On the other hand, the normative behavior in the parliamentary institution itself is seen as masculine (Rosenthal, 1998). Women are more likely than men to encounter situations where they are silenced, interrupted, or disrespected during parliamentary debates and deliberations (Hawkesworth, 2003; Siu, 2017). This gendered environment might hamper the experiences of the core functions of women. As such, I hypothesize that:

*H6: Female participants in the JPJ and VJP experience the core functions of youth parliaments to a lesser extent than their male colleagues.*

## 4. Data and methods

To grasp participants' experiences with the core functions of youth parliaments, this study adopts a survey design for which online questionnaires were distributed among all participants in the 2021-2022 simulations of the JPJ and VJP.

In this particular case, online surveys have several benefits. First of all, the characteristics of the population made it easy to access them through the internet. As the Facebook and Messenger groups of the VJP and JPJ are gathering places for the youth parliamentarians, I could easily target and reach out to them (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). Second, the online environment seemed suited because the research dealt with participants between the age of 17 and 27 years old. For this age group, computers are more attractive to fill out questionnaires (Bech & Kristensen, 2009). At the same time, the online survey design also had some drawbacks. As respondents and the researcher do not meet in real life with online surveys, it is difficult for the respondents to ask for clarifications or instructions (Rice, Winter, Doherty, & Milner, 2017). To deal with this, questions were formulated in a clear and unambiguous manner, using validated survey questions from the European Social survey where possible. Additionally, respondents were given the contact details of the lead researcher in case things were not clear (yet, none of the respondents used this option).

The questionnaires were created through Qualtrics and were sent in the language of the youth parliaments. In the case of the VJP, participants received the survey in Dutch. For the JPJ, respondents could choose between responding in Dutch or French. Before participants could fill out the survey, they had to give their informed consent. Afterwards, questions consisted of closed questions and Likert scales. The closed questions asked about the socio-demographic background of the respondents. Furthermore, questions in the form of Likert scales questioned the experiences of the core functions of youth parliaments (on a 5-point scale, except the internal democratic function on a 4-point scale). However, additional scale questions from the viewpoint of the organization have been posed to the organizers.

Surveys were distributed through e-mails sent by the youth parliaments' organizational team. The organizers distributed the surveys to participants within their Facebook and Messenger groups. However, to send reminders, the organizers added the lead researcher to these social media groups. Three reminders have been sent with one week in between each. Although online

surveys are sometimes known to generate lower response rates (Evans & Mathur, 2005), this was not a problem here. Thanks to several efforts, the survey of the VJP yielded a response rate of 42,5% (51 out of 120 participants) and the survey of the JPJ has a response rate of 35% (42 out of 120 participants).

The dependent variables measure the core functions (parliamentary, democratic, and educative).[1]

The *parliamentary function* consists of items about the experiences of parliamentary knowledge increases. For the multivariate analysis, a scale was composed of:

- Knowledge on parliamentary workings
- Understanding of how parliament functions

The *internal democratic function* consists of items referring to the ability to verbally express oneself. For the multivariate analysis, a scale was composed of:

- Ability to voice demands and concerns
- Possibility to intervene
- Being interrupted
- Being silenced

The *external democratic function* entails items questioning the experiences of participants having their voices heard by the media and politicians. For the multivariate analysis, a scale was composed of:

- Voice heard by media
- Voice heard by politicians

The *educative function* consists of items about the experiences of changes in participants' political education. For the multivariate analysis, a scale was composed of:

- Politically educated citizen
- Connection to democracy
- Support democratic values

To explain different experiences, the impact of several independent variables (IV) was tested. The nominal independent variables of seniority (first-time participant vs. non-first-time participant), positions (sole participant vs. organizer), and gender (male vs. female) were used

[1] For more information on the dependent variables, please consult the online technical appendix.

for the different hypotheses. For the multivariate analysis, the control variables of external political efficacy (5-point scale), political trust (5-point scale), and participant of VJP/JPJ (dummy) were used.[2]

To test the first three hypotheses (H1-3), univariate and bivariate statistics, one-sample t-tests and independent samples t-tests[3] have been conducted (see Table 1 and Table 2). Doing so, I follow previous research by Matthieu et al. (2020) within the field of youth parliaments which also applied t-tests to similar survey items. For the last three hypotheses (H4-6), independent samples t-tests and multiple regression have been conducted (see Table 3 and Table 4). The multiple regression analysis is based on a model composed of all the independent variables: (1) participants' position (dummy; organizer=1), (2) seniority (dummy; first-time participant=1) and (3) gender (dummy; women=1)) and control variables: (1) the specific youth parliament (dummy; VJP=1), (2) external political efficacy (5-point scale), (3) political trust (5-point scale).

## 5. Empirical findings

### 5.1 The Subjective Experiences of the Core Functions and Differences between Youth Parliaments

Within this section, hypotheses will be tested about the general subjective experiences of participants and differences which can be found between the VJP and JPJ (H1, H2, H3).

[2] For the exact phrasing of the independent variables and control variables, please consult the online appendix.

[3] While t-tests require the measurement level of the dependent variable to be continuous, t-tests were carried out among the ordinal dependent variables (Likert scales). While there is a lot of discussion about whether t-tests can be carried out for ordinal data, I've chosen to do so for one main reason. Following Norman (2010), t-tests can be used for ordinal data due to their robustness. This is the case as for sample sizes above 5 the skewness of ordinal data is irrelevant for t-tests (Norman, 2010).

*Table 1. Participants' experiences of the three functions of youth parliaments (except the internal democratic function)*

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean score on a 5-point scale | Mean VJP on a 5-point scale | Mean JPJ on a 5-point scale | Sig. (difference JPJ and VJP) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Parliamentary function** | | | | | | | | | |
| Knowledge parliament | 0% | 1.1% | 3.2% | 49.5% | 46.2% | 4.41 | 4.35 | 4.48 | p=0.34 |
| Indication functioning parliament | 1.1% | 1.1% | 17.2% | 53.8% | 26.9% | 4.04 | 4.08 | 4.00 | p=0.64 |
| **Democratic function (*external)*** | | | | | | | | | |
| Voice heard by media | 22.6% | 40.9% | 22.6% | 9.7% | 4.3% | 2.32 | 2.25 | 2.40 | p=0.50 |
| Voice heard by politicians | 21.5% | 37.6% | 25.8% | 11.8% | 3.2% | 2.38 | 2.35 | 2.40 | p=0.82 |
| **Educative function** | | | | | | | | | |
| Support democratic values | 2.2% | 7.6% | 22.8% | 35.9% | 31.5% | 3.87 | 3.70 | 4.07 | p=0.081 |
| Connection to democracy | / | 5,4% | 29.3% | 41.3% | 23.9% | 3.84 | 3.70 | 4.00 | p=0.089 |
| Politically educated citizen | 1.1% | 3.3% | 26.4% | 59.3% | 9.9% | 3.74 | 3.56 | 3.95 | p=0.008 |

*Table 2. Participants' experiences of the internal democratic function of youth parliaments*

| | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Mean score on a 4-point scale | Mean VJP on a 4-point scale | Mean JPJ on a 4-point scale | Sig. (difference JPJ and VJP) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Democratic function (*internal)*** | | | | | | | | |
| Voice demands and concerns | 5.4% | 7.5% | 19.4% | 67.7% | 3.49 | 3.39 | 3.62 | p=1.88 |
| Possibility to intervene | 8.6% | 7.5% | 22.6% | 61.3% | 3.37 | 3.14 | 3.64 | p=0.01 |
| Arguments heard | 7.5% | 6.5% | 33.3% | 51.6% | 3.30 | 3.14 | 3.50 | p=0.55 |
| Interrupted | 39.8% | 38.8% | 18.3% | 2.2% | 3.46 | 3.25 | 3.07 | p=0.28 |
| Silenced | 59.1% | 29.0% | 10.8% | 1.1% | 3.17 | 3.57 | 3.33 | p=0.14 |

As the results in Table 1 and Table 2 indicate, participants most strongly agree with the statements regarding the *parliamentary* function: 49.5% agreed and 46.2% strongly agreed that the simulations increased their knowledge about the workings of the Belgian parliaments. Furthermore, 53.8% agreed and 26.9% strongly agreed that they felt that the simulations gave them a good indication of how Belgian parliaments function. This is also reflected in the high means of 4.41 and 4.04 (on a 5-point scale) for the parliamentary function.

Looking at the *democratic* function, strong experiences have also been found for the 'internal' democratic function in Table 2. Participants felt able to express their voice and have it heard. 67.7% often experienced the ability to express their demands and concerns and 61.3% often perceived the ability to intervene during the simulation. At the same time, 51.6% often felt that their arguments were being heard by the others. On a 4-point scale, these variables were experienced strongly (means of 3.49, 3.37 and 3.30). However, 18.3% of participants sometimes felt interrupted and 10.8% sometimes experienced being silenced. Additionally,

Table 1 presents lower scores for the experience of the 'external' democratic function in Table 1. On a 5-point scale, participants generally perceived that their voice was heard by the media with a mean of 2.32, while participants generally perceived that their voice was heard by politicians with a mean of 2.38.

For the *educative* function, we still find rather strong experiences in Table 1. 35.9% agreed that they experienced an increase in their support for democratic values and 41.3% agreed that the simulation led to experiencing a stronger connection to democracy. Furthermore, 59.3% agreed that the simulation turned them into a politically educated citizen. These scores are reflected in the means of 3.87, 3.84, and 3.74 (on a 5-point scale) for the educative function.

Overall, participants experienced the parliamentary function and the internal democratic function the strongest. This is contradictory to the expectations of Shephard and Patrikios (2013) as they were most optimistic about the educative function within EU youth parliaments. While the results for the educative function were still rather strong, the function was not experienced the strongest. A possible explanation for the less outstanding results in the Belgian cases can be drawn from the research of Matthieu et al. (2020) on the JPJ. They find that the JPJ mainly attracts the already politically educated youngsters. As the JPJ and VJP share selection procedures, we can assume the same for the VJP. Given the higher scores for the parliamentary function and internal democratic function, we reject the first hypothesis.

The results of Table 1 and Table 2 also allow us to test the second hypothesis, namely that participants in the VJP experience the core functions to a greater extent than the JPJ participants because the bilingual/multilingual nature of the JPJ is assumed to hamper the experiences of the core functions. The results, however, indicate that the opposite might be true.

As Table 1 and Table 2 show, participants in the JPJ had higher experiences for 9 out of 12 variables including two significant differences. For the parliamentary function, participants in the JPJ experienced the increase in parliamentary knowledge to a greater extent (mean 4.48 on a 5-point scale) than VJP participants (4.35 on a 5-point scale). Furthermore, for the internal democratic function JPJ youth parliamentarians experienced the ability to voice their demands and concerns, having the possibility to intervene, and having their arguments heard stronger (on a 4-point scale means of 3.62, 3.64, and 3.50) than their VJP counterparts (on a 4-point scale means of 3.39, 3.14, and 3.14). Additionally, JPJ youth parliamentarians' experiences of

the external democratic function is again higher (on a 5-point scale means of 2.40 and 2.40) than those of the VJP (on a 5-point scale means of 2.25 and 2.35). The significant differences are to be found for becoming a more politically educated citizen of the educative function and the possibility to intervene during discussions of the internal democratic function. There was a significant difference in the experiences of becoming a more politically educated citizen after t-test ($t(88) = -2.709$, $p < .05$) where JPJ participants (on a 5-point scale mean of 3.95) had stronger experiences than their VJP colleagues (on a 5-point scale mean of 3.56). Lastly, there was a significant difference after t-test ($t(91) = -2.626$, $p < .05$) with VJP participants (on a 4-point scale mean of 3.14) having less strong experiences concerning the possibility to intervene than JPJ participants (on a 4-point scale mean of 3.64).

As these stronger experiences of JPJ participants suggest, we must reject the second hypothesis. This might indicate that the presence of translators is more important than expected during the JPJ simulations. As Doerr (2012) has indicated, translators can have an equalizing effect during the debates. However, as the results move beyond equalizing effects, we must question whether these translators also play a role in moderating and contributing to the equality of participation. A possible explanation for the less strong experiences in the VJP is that certain participants might have had a different mother tongue than Dutch. Following Kymlicka (2001) political debates require a high level of language fluency. As participants with a different mother tongue than Dutch in the VJP might not have had this level of fluency, these participants might be submitted to latent exclusionary effects (Doerr, 2012). These exclusionary effects then contribute to lower experiences and perceptions of the core functions. However, additional research concerning the linguistic composition of the VJP and JPJ is necessary.

The third hypothesis states that participants in the VJP experience the external democratic function to a greater extent than JPJ participants. The reason for this is that to politically empower youngsters, the possibility to give formal policy input is considered crucial (Milliken, 2008). While the VJP emphasizes the transmission of its policy proposals to the Flemish parliament, participants did not perceive or experience these opportunities for input strongly. Looking at the experiences of VJP participants of having their voices heard by the media and by politicians, the results are non-significant and less strong than for the JPJ participants. Considering this, we must also reject the third hypothesis. A possible explanation which emerged out of a conversation with the VJP chairman is that this transmission towards the Flemish Parliament is often forgotten and not communicated towards participants. Even if the

VJP did not forget to transmit their policy proposals, participants still need to be made aware of their influence to produce empowering individual results (Laine & Gretschel, 2009).

### 5.2. Individual Differences in the Subjective Experiences of the Core Functions

We now turn to the empirical tests of hypotheses 4, 5 and 6, which focus on individual-level differences between participants based on their institutional position, seniority, and gender. The first analysis in Table 3 is bivariate but will afterwards be complemented with a multivariate analysis in Table 4.

*Table 3. Differences in the experiences of the three functions, according to respondents' position, seniority, and gender (after t-tests)*

| | **Parliamentary function** (Mean 5-point scale) | **Democratic function: internal** (Mean 4-point scale) | **Democratic function: external** (Mean 5-point scale) | **Educative function** (Mean 5-point scale) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organizer | 4.34 | 2.80 | 2.23 | 3.78 |
| Participant | 4.00 | 3.07 | 2.58 | 3.90 |
| Sig. level | 0.007 | 0.87 | 0.099 | 0.361 |
| First-time participant | 4.09 | 2.81 | 2.45 | 3.75 |
| Non-first-time participant | 4.40 | 3.00 | 2.22 | 3.91 |
| Sig. level | .009 | .193 | .252 | .273 |
| Male | 4.23 | 3.02 | 2.29 | 3.82 |
| Female | 4.22 | 2.71 | 2.43 | 3.81 |
| Sig. level | .899 | .064 | .504 | .951 |
| Total n | 93 | 93 | 93 | 91 |

While research suggests that the position of participants in the organization influences their actions and attitudes (Sluss, Thompson, & van Dick, 2011), the results in Table 3 are more ambiguous. Organizers only had significantly stronger experiences of the parliamentary function after t-test ($t(91) = -2.781$, $p = < .05$) (with a mean of 4.34 on a 5-point scale in comparison to participants' 4.00 mean). However, for the democratic functions and the educative function, we find higher mean scores for participants (means of 3.07 on a 4-point scale, 3.90 on a 5-point scale) than for organizers (means of 2.80 on a 4-point scale, 3.78 on a 5-point scale). These differences are non-significant.

Additionally, the results in Table 3 allow us to interpret to what extent first-time participants experience the core functions. As first-time participants still need to familiarize themselves with the organization (Lindstädt, Slapin & Wielen, 2012), we expect lower levels of experiences compared to non-first-time participants. The bivariate analysis reveals that first-time participants experienced three out of four items to a lesser extent, and one of these differences was significant. There was a significant difference after t-test ($t(91) = -2.658 < 0.05$), with first-time participants (on a 5-point scale mean of 4.09) having less strong experiences of the parliamentary function than non-first-time participants (on a 5-point scale mean of 4.40). Furthermore, first-time participants had less strong experiences for the internal democratic function (mean of 2.81 on a 4-point scale) and the educative function (mean of 3.75 on a 5-point scale) than non-first-time participants (means of 3.00 on a 4-point scale and 3.91 on a 5-point scale. Concerning the external democratic function, first-time participants had stronger experiences (means of 2.45 on a 5-point scale) than non-first-time participants (means of 2.22 on a 5-point scale).

Next, looking at gender differences in the experiences of female and male participants, the results are again not that straightforward. Three out of four elements have been experienced less strongly by women, with no significant differences. Women had less strong experiences for the parliamentary function (mean of 4.22 on a 5-point scale), the internal democratic function (mean of 2.71 on a 4-point scale) and the educative function (mean of 3.81 on a 5-point scale) compared to male participants (means of 4.23 on a 5-point scale, 3.02 on a 4-point sale, 3.82 on a 5-point scale. On the contrary, women experienced the external democratic function (mean of 2.43 on a 5-point scale) stronger than their male colleagues (means of 2.29 on a 5-point scale).

*Table 4. OLS regression predicting participants' experiences of the three functions*

| | | **Parliamentary function** | **Internal democratic function** | **External democratic function** | **Educative function** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | | 4.006 | 3.599 | 2.705 | 3.718 |
| Position | Participant | REF | REF | REF | REF |
| | Organizer | .345 (.085) | -.529 (.023) | -.542 (.083) | -.192 (.420) |
| Seniority | Non-first time | REF | REF | REF | REF |
| | First-time | -.091 (.597) | -.447 (.027) | -.225 (.405) | -.276 (.184) |
| Gender | Male | REF | REF | REF | REF |
| | Female | -.007 (.956) | -.222 (.128) | -.032 (.869) | -.034 (.820) |
| **Controls** | | | | | |
| Participants YP | JPJ | REF | REF | REF | REF |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | VJP | -.130 (.383) | -.025 (.883) | -.096 (.680) | -.275 (.127) |
| External political efficacy | | -.085 (.369) | -.180 (.100) | .417 (.006) | .057 (.612) |
| Political trust | | .102 (.190) | .145 (.107) | -.283 (.021) | .117 (.214) |
| N | | 92 | 92 | 92 | 91 |
| $R^2$ | | .126 | .182 | .139 | .125 |
| | | | | | |

To give further ground to the previous explanations, Table 4 considers the results of the multivariate analysis including the scales of the core functions, the independent variables (seniority, position, gender), and control variables (participant VJP/JPJ, external political efficacy, and political trust).

Looking at the experiences of the organizers in comparison to participants, the previous picture of the bivariate analysis is reinforced. On the one hand, there is an expected unit increase of .345 (non-significant) for organizers' experiences of the parliamentary function. On the other hand, participants have stronger experiences than organizers for the internal democratic function, external democratic function, and educative function (organizers' non-significant B of -.529, -.542, -.192). Due to these ambiguous results, the fourth hypothesis must be rejected. A potential explanation could be that not all organizers have been equally exposed to the socialization effects. Within the youth parliaments, a certain hierarchy exists among the organizers. Some organizers engage in key organizational roles while others perform more latent tasks (VJP, s.d.; JPJ, s.d.). As such, it is possible that not all organizers experienced the core functions equally strongly. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the stronger experiences for

organizers were to be found within the parliamentary function. Following conversations with the JPJ and VJP chairmen, it became clear that the biggest focus of their organization was on the parliamentary function. This suggests that the socialization effects might be the strongest concerning the parliamentary function, even for the more latent organizers.

Comparing the experiences of non-first time and first-time participants in Table 4, we find that first-time participants experience all functions to a lesser extent with a significantly less strong experience of the internal democratic function (B of -.447). Due to the general lower experiences of first-time participants compared to non-first-time participants, the fifth hypothesis can be accepted.

To further assess whether women experience the core functions to a lesser extent than men, we look at Table 4. We find that women have lower experiences for all core functions (no significant differences). Women have less strong experiences for the parliamentary function (B=-.007), internal democratic function (B= -.222), external democratic function (B= -.032) and educative function (B=-.034). However, as no significant results were found and as most expected unit decreases in the unstandardized regression coefficients were rather small, the last hypothesis (H6) must be rejected. This is the case as the only somewhat larger difference (yet, not significant) was found for the internal democratic function (B= -.222)). The lower experiences of the internal democratic function are similar to the findings of Karpowitz, Mendelberg & Shaker (2012) who revealed that women have lower speech participation levels compared to men. On the one hand, women are more likely than men to encounter situations where they are silenced, interrupted, or disrespected during parliamentary debates and deliberations (Hawkesworth, 2003; Siu, 2017). On the other hand, it is possible that the masculine environment forced women to take up more silent feminine gender roles (Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014). Additionally, the institutional design of the voting procedures of the VJP and JPJ might reinforce the latter. As Karpowitz, Mendelberg and Oliphant argue, “Groups with more women and majority rule, and groups with few women and unanimous rule, produce a more positive interaction style among the members.” (Mendelberg, Karpowitz, & Oliphant, 2014, p. 16). However, the low levels of female participants, in combination with the majority voting rules might further influence the speech participation levels of women. Furthermore, the youth parliaments themselves have indicated to actively work against the exclusion of women. This can help explain why some of the other differences remain small.

Additional tests for diagnosing collinearity have been conducted to check for high intercorrelations between the independent and control variables. However, these tests indicated that there was no multicollinearity as the highest VIF scores were below value 10, and the Tolerance rates were above 0.1 (Senaviratna & Cooray, 2019).

## Conclusion

While youth parliaments are parliamentary simulations, created and supported by democratic institutions to encourage youth political engagement (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013; Smith, 2009), not all youth parliaments are equally able to do so. This article looked at the case studies of the Belgian Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse and the Vlaams Jeugd Parlement to assess participants' experiences with youth parliaments' core functions (which are necessary to deepen political engagement). I argue that while both youth parliaments emphasize the core functions within their mission statements, participants do not experience them all to the same extent.

Following the analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. First of all, participants in the VJP and JPJ generally experience the parliamentary function and the internal democratic function the strongest *(H1)*. While connections with adult parliaments are drawn and politicians are present, youngsters' do not experience the transmission of their discussions to formal political institutions strongly. To change this, both youth parliaments can follow the example of the SYP which has been rather successful in this regard. Additionally, and contradictory to most European youth parliaments (Shephard & Patrikios, 2013), the educative function was not experienced the strongest. To promote the experience of the educative function, the youth parliaments can tweak their selection procedures, so they attract the youngsters who are not as politically educated yet.

When we look at the institutional differences between the case studies, different experiences come to the foreground. As JPJ participants experience the core functions stronger than VJP participants *(H2, H3)*, we must reckon that the multilingualism of the JPJ does not pose significant problems and that translators might play a mediating role to the equality of participation. As such, it might be beneficiary for the VJP to invest in official mediators. Furthermore, while the VJP's website emphasizes its external output, youth policies have not been transmitted to the Flemish Parliament in 2022. As such, we cannot expect participants to experience this function (external democratic function) strongly.

When looking at individual differences in the subjective experiences of the core functions (H4, H5, H6), we see different effects. Concerning the position of participants (sole participant vs. organizer) *(H4)*, besides the parliamentary function, organizers did not significantly experience the other functions stronger than sole participants. The stronger experiences of the parliamentary function can be attributed to the organizational culture where the prime focus is on familiarizing youngsters with parliament (parliamentary function). However, the same cannot be said for first-time vs. non-first-time participants *(H5)*. First-time participants generally experience the functions less strongly. The need to become familiarized with the parliamentary environment and role conceptions can be expected to have contributed to these lesser experiences (Lindstädt, Slapin & Wielen, 2012). Lastly, the minority position of women *(H6)* did not contribute to significantly lesser experiences of the core functions. However, the biggest difference in experiences is to be found for the internal democratic function. To counter the lower experiences of the internal democratic function, the case studies need to continue actively investing in attracting female participants and reducing the perception of a masculine environment (Mendelberg, Karpowitz, & Oliphant, 2014).

This leads me to the general conclusion that while youth parliaments often objectively claim to fulfill the functions necessary to politically reengage youngsters, (not all) participants subjectively experience them as such. The (small) differences between both case studies indicate that institutional design matters. This article can raise awareness and indicate points of improvement. Making sure that subjective experiences line up with objective statements is crucial to counter the increasing disengagement. Especially in a 'failing democracy' such as Belgium (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022; Lodewijckx, 2020), youth parliaments need to align their mission statements with participants' experiences.

This study offered a first attempt to subjectively map participants' experiences of the core functions. Due to this, the article has an exploratory character based on quantitative results of two case studies. As this article reveals different conclusions, future research could engage in a qualitative or mixed-method design to further develop certain experiences. Qualitative methods could contribute to this study through the addition of individual descriptions and perceptions allowing for a deeper understanding of certain conclusions. Additionally, to fully grasp the Belgian context, additional research could add the case study of the Belgian Wallonie-Bruxelles Parlement Jeunesse. Furthermore, the decline in youngsters' formal political

engagement combined with the potential of youth parliaments' core functions, makes it highly relevant to replicate this study beyond the Belgian borders. Future research could engage in a cross-National comparative design to identify good cases. As the example of the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) and the differences between the VJP and JPJ show, institutional design matters (Patrikios & Shephard, 2014). So, future studies could investigate which institutional design features make a difference and as such provide opportunities for youth parliaments to learn from one another.

While youth parliaments' core functions have the capacity to bring youngsters closer to politics, this research shows that subjectively fulfilling them does not come from objective statements alone and that institutional design matters. Within the Belgian cases we do see certain positive experiences and we've identified points of improvement. The positive experiences indicate that the Belgian cases are on the right path to narrow the gap between youngsters and formal politics, but they do not fully realize their potential yet. At the same time, the Belgian cases are constantly reevaluating their workings, so altering (some of) their institutional design features for the democratic good is as much achievable as beneficial.

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