

Age and representation styles: Are young candidates more likely to prioritize their voters over their own opinion or their party?

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Abstract

How do young politicians perceive their function as representatives? Do they prioritize their own, their party's or their voters' views? I argue that young politicians should be more genuinely motivated to prioritize the views of voters due to their experience of belonging to an underrepresented group. I use data from a candidate survey in Germany 2021 to estimate the probability that politicians report prioritizing their voters' views across different candidate ages. I find that, while all candidates are most likely to focus on their own views, young candidates are more likely than their older colleagues to prioritize the views of voters over their own or their party's. Variation in incumbency and prior political experience explains parts of this effect. This finding advances our understanding of how young politicians perceive their function as representatives and the role young politicians play in substantive youth representation.

Keywords

representation styles, youth representation, political careers, party discipline

Introduction

Across western democracies there is a mismatch between the representation priorities of voters and politicians. While voters want politicians to focus on voter demands over their own views or their party position (Bøggild, 2020; Mongrain et al., 2024), politicians tend to value their own views and/or the party line (Mongrain et al., 2024; Sudulich et al., 2020; Trumm and Barclay, 2023). Understanding the representation styles of young candidates is highly important for youth representation. Young voters have a clear preference for being represented by someone their age (Kurz et al., 2025), like other social groups (Dinnebier et al., 2025). This manifests in higher youth turnout when descriptive youth representation is higher (Angelucci et al., 2024). It is therefore important that young politicians act according to the interests of their constituents to achieve a long-lasting positive effect on young voters, avoiding disillusionment. Additionally, politicians focusing on their voters also favor citizen participation in decision processes (De Smedt et al., 2024), increasing the likelihood that young people feel heard in political decisions. I thus ask: Are young politicians more likely to prioritize the views of voters over their own or the party line?

I argue that younger politicians are more likely than their older colleagues to prioritize their voters' views over their

own or their party's due to their experience of belonging to an underrepresented social group. When politicians belong to a group underrepresented in politics descriptively and substantively, like young people (Helliesen, 2022; Kolltveit and Karlsen, 2025; Stockemer and Kolodziejczyk, 2024; Stockemer and Sundström, 2025), they may have a genuine motivation to tackle this issue by prioritizing their voters more in their own political activity. This is supported by female politicians, another underrepresented group, being more likely to focus on their voters' over their own opinion (Trumm and Barclay, 2023), female and young politicians wanting to focus more on representing specific social groups (Dudzinska et al., 2014) and lower-class politicians being more congruent with the representation priorities of voters (Mongrain et al., 2024). While the age of politicians has been included in some prior work on representation styles of politicians (Dudzinska et al., 2014; Sudulich et al., 2020; Trumm and Barclay, 2023), it has (to my best knowledge) never been used to investigate the choice

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between their own views, those of their voters and that of their party.

I use data from the GLES candidate study accompanying the German federal election 2021 (GLES, 2023). I simultaneously estimate the probability that a politician chooses one of these three views as their priority for representation in relationship with their age. I additionally investigate whether the effect of age on representation priorities is driven by variation in incumbency or prior political experience.

I find that younger politicians are indeed more likely than their older colleagues to report the views of their voters as their main priority for their activity as representatives. Across all age groups, politicians do however have the highest likelihood of wanting to prioritize their own views over their voters' or their party's should they conflict. I find that age-based variation in incumbency and prior political experience account for parts of this relationship without fully explaining it. These results reveal important information about the role perceptions of young politicians and their relevance for youth representation. In addition to better descriptive representation, an increase in young legislators may therefore increase the focus on youth's interests, translating into substantive representation, and their feelings of being heard by political candidates.

Expectations

Research into representation distinguishes three ideal styles (or focuses) of representation that politicians can adopt. Politicians following the delegate style prioritize the opinions of their constituents whereas politicians of the trustee style prioritize their own views. Additionally, partisan style politicians prioritize the views of their party in their political activities (Blomgren and Rozenberg, 2012; Dudzinska et al., 2014). Normative debates over which style of representation politicians should adopt have been going on for centuries, especially whether politicians should be delegates or trustees. Already during the early years of the United States of America, James Madison and Edmund Burke argued for different representational styles with Madison favoring delegates while Burke advocated for trustees (see Dovi, 2018 for more).

While politicians generally prefer the trustee style, prioritizing their own views (Mongrain et al., 2024; Sudulich et al., 2020; Trumm and Barclay, 2023), voters like delegates who focus on voters' views (Bøggild, 2020; Dassonneville et al., 2021; Mongrain et al., 2024) and dislike partisans who follow the party line (Blumenau et al., 2024; Bøggild 2020). When distinguishing politicians who focus on their voters or their constituency, a constituency focus seems especially popular among voters (Bengtsson and Wass, 2011). While not all prior studies consider all three

representation styles, they have identified several factors explaining preferences for certain representation styles among both politicians and voters.

A major pattern among both politicians and voters seems to be that individuals from politically underrepresented groups hold different preferences for representation styles than those groups that are adequately represented. This dynamic is likely driven by the experience of marginalization by mainstream politics increasing the awareness that certain social groups are less likely to be adequately represented without increased attention by politicians. So far, this has especially been established empirically for women. Female politicians are less likely than male politicians to report that they prefer politicians to focus on their own views (Sudulich et al., 2020; Trumm and Barclay, 2023). Similarly, female and young politicians attach a higher importance to representing the interests of certain social groups (Dudzinska et al., 2014). Also, politicians from lower social classes are more congruent with voters' preferences for representation styles (Mongrain et al., 2024). Similarly, female and young voters express a stronger preference for delegates (Carman, 2007). More generally, voters from underrepresented groups like women, lower social classes, migrants and the young (Blumenau et al., 2024; Dinnebier et al., 2025; Kurz et al., 2025) express a stronger desire for descriptive representation, i.e. politicians with the same demographic characteristics, although politicians who advocate for their interests are still preferred most (Blumenau et al., 2024).

I argue that this dynamic should extend to young politicians, with them being more likely to prioritize the views of their voters, although toeing the party line may be more advantageous for their careers. Young citizens are underrepresented in politics in many ways. They are descriptively underrepresented in legislatures and cabinets (Stockemer and Kolodziejczyk, 2024; Stockemer and Sundström, 2018) and are less congruent with politics on issues relevant to them, like climate issues (Helliesen, 2022; Kolltveit and Karlsen, 2025). Even after acquiring political office, many young politicians report being belittled by their colleagues due to their age (Stockemer and Sundström, 2024). I expect that these experiences of underrepresentation and exclusion from politics create awareness of underrepresentation and a sense of solidarity with other members of underrepresented groups. In turn, this creates a dynamic of gyroscopic representation (Mansbridge, 2003) with genuine commitment from young politicians to decrease these experiences of underrepresentation by focusing more on the views of their voters, without external enforcement. Thus, having been underrepresented translates into wanting to address underrepresentation, irrespective of career incentives. This could also explain the focus of younger politicians on issues important to young voters, like climate change (Debus and Himmelfrath, 2022).

While [Sudulich et al. \(2020\)](#) find that younger candidates are less likely to state that politicians should follow an external authority (voters or party) over their own views, they do not distinguish between party's and voters' positions at this stage. I argue that this is an important distinction. The party line is often seen as least favorable among voters ([Blumenau et al., 2024](#); [Bøggild, 2020](#)) whereas the position of voters is preferred ([Mongrain et al., 2024](#)). Thus, young politicians aiming to increase perceptions of being represented in the population should specifically prefer the delegate style.

H1: Young candidates are more likely to favor the delegate representation style compared to older candidates.

There is a possibility that the relationship between a candidate's age and their preferred style of representation is (partially) driven by limited political/institutional experience or incumbency status. Incumbents are more likely than challengers to state that politicians should focus on their own views if they conflict with their voters' views ([Trumm and Barclay, 2023](#)). Similarly, politicians who previously held a party or political office are more likely to prioritize the position of their party compared to that of their voters ([Sudulich et al., 2020](#)). This is likely due to experienced politicians being more confident in their own abilities and attaching higher value to their independence after operating as a politician. Further, MPs from disadvantaged groups show group-specific efforts in their legislative activities mostly during their first term in parliament ([Bailer et al., 2022](#)). Young political candidates are less likely to be incumbents or have held other offices prior to their candidacy by having had less time to achieve one of these positions. Therefore, a part of the difference between younger and older candidates regarding their preferred style of representation may be driven by differences in their political experience.

H2: The difference between young and older candidates regarding preferences for models of representation is driven by their incumbency and previously held offices.

Data and methods

To test my expectations, I utilize data from the GLES Candidate Study accompanying the German federal election of 2021 ([GLES, 2023](#)). This survey was sent out to all candidates running in the election with a total of 735 respondents. While candidates from left and liberal parties and candidates below the age of 30 are slightly overrepresented, all groups are represented in sufficient numbers to draw inferences about their attitudes¹. Germany has a lower level of youth underrepresentation compared to other

advanced democracies. Therefore, if the effect is found in Germany, it is likely to also hold in similar countries where youth underrepresentation is more severe. Still, the age of politicians is salient enough in public debates so that candidates and voters are likely aware of this underrepresentation (see [Kurz et al., 2025](#)). Germany also has many candidates from multiple parties across the ideological spectrum and a high-quality candidate survey, containing relevant measures and providing enough variation.

As the dependent variable I use a categorical variable indicating whether a candidate reported that politicians should prioritize their own, their party's or their voters' views when voting in parliament. This extends prior work only studying the trade-off between a politician's own views and the views of their voters ([Mongrain et al., 2024](#); [Trumm and Barclay, 2023](#)) by also considering the possibility of focusing on one's party position. I also model the trade-off between all three possible priorities in a single step, rather than a two-step process (compare [Sudulich et al., 2020](#)), because voters hold preferences for each comparison ([Bøggild, 2020](#)). In the survey, this measure was split into three questions, each comparing two of the three possible views to prioritize. From these three questions I construct a variable indicating which of the three views was chosen over the other two. It is technically possible for candidates to report circular priorities without a clear winner. Removing candidates who either did not respond to at least one of the questions or who reported circular preferences leaves 649 candidates with clear preference for a representation style.

I utilize the continuous age of candidates as the explanatory variable. Many studies on youth representation use a certain cut-off point to distinguish young and older politicians, usually for practical reasons and/or ease of interpretation. A continuous measure of age provides more nuance to this analysis. As the exact date of birth of candidates is not given in the survey, due to privacy protection, I approximate their age based on their year of birth.

I construct two dummy variables indicating whether a candidate is an incumbent and whether they have previously held another public office. I consider all candidates who were MPs in the Bundestag during the previous electoral period as incumbents. For previously held offices, I consider whether a candidate has been mayor, member of a local assembly, member of a state parliament, member of a state or national government or member of the European Parliament.

As no variable is causally prior to age, no variable would constitute a confounder of the relationship between age and representation style needing to be controlled for to avoid biased estimates of the relationship. I do however include party dummies in the analysis, as young candidates may select into different parties and because party ideology affects representation styles ([Mongrain et al., 2024](#)). I also

include a dummy for a politician's sex to account for imbalances of female politicians between younger and older cohorts. Lastly, I include a dummy for whether the candidate was successful in being elected. My analysis thus compares younger and older candidates of the same party, sex and electoral success regarding their preferred representation style. A second model then includes dummies for incumbency and prior office to investigate whether the relationship of age and representational styles is driven by them.

As the dependent variable is an unordered categorical variable, I employ multinomial logistic regression models, estimating the probability that a candidate chose a specific representation style over the two. Descriptive statistics and full regression outputs can be found in the [appendix](#).

Results

Figure 1 shows predicted probabilities of representation styles varying by age, based on observed value simulations. As in previous studies, most candidates of all ages believe that politicians should prioritize their own views (Mongrain et al., 2024; Trumm and Barclay, 2023), with probabilities between 57% and 69%. This corroborates our knowledge that politicians generally value their independence and own opinion.

Younger candidates are significantly more likely than their older colleagues to believe that politicians should

prioritize the views of voters, supporting my expectations. Candidates who are between 20 and 35 years old have a predicted probability of 20% or more to respond that politicians should prioritize their voters' views. This decreases to about 10% for the oldest candidates. This increased probability of wanting politicians to focus on the views of voters among young candidates comes with young candidates having a lower predicted probability for the other two representation styles. Young candidates being twice as likely to want politicians to prioritize the views of voters, compared to the oldest candidates is a meaningful difference.

Although the trustee style is most popular across all ages, the balance between trustees and delegates varies substantially across age groups. For candidates at the age of 30, the predicted probability of choosing the trustee style is 3 times larger than choosing the delegate style (60% vs 20%). At the age of 70, this difference grows substantially and the probability of choosing the trustee style is 7 times larger than choosing the delegate style (70% vs 10%). Although politicians preferring trustees are the majority in all age groups, the minority choosing the delegate style is substantially larger among younger compared to older candidates.

Including measures of incumbency and prior political experience to the models weakens the estimated relationship between age and representation priorities but does not eliminate it. After accounting for incumbency and prior

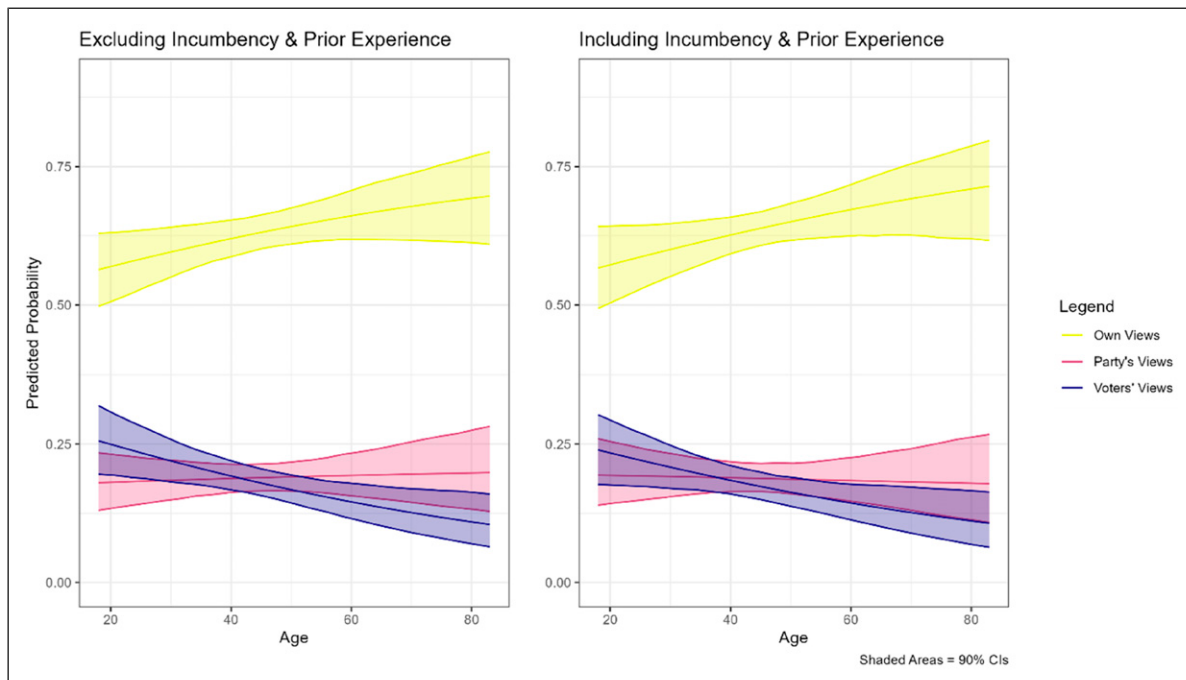


Figure 1. Predicted probability of representation styles based on candidate age, excluding and including incumbency and prior political experience.

experience, the youngest candidates are estimated to be about 2 percentage points less likely to report wanting to prioritize the opinions of their voters, compared to the model without these variables. The substantive finding that the share of candidates who prioritize their voters' compared to their own opinion is higher for younger than for older candidates does remain after accounting for incumbency and prior political experience. This suggests that young politicians may in fact be genuinely motivated to focus more on their voters due to their experience of underrepresentation and not simply because of a lack of political experience.

Another interesting observation is the overall low share of politicians reporting a partisan style of representation, prioritizing the views of their party. Despite high levels of party discipline observed in the German Bundestag (Sieberer, 2020), the majority of politicians report that they should prioritize their own views over those of their party. Politicians may have a stronger desire to deviate from their party than observable and likely refrain from deviating due to fear of punishment by their party leadership (Baumann et al., 2017).

Conclusion

In this paper, I investigate whether the age of political candidates affects their choice of representation styles, i.e. whether they prioritize their own, their voters' or their party's views, and whether this is driven by their political experience. I argue that young politicians should be more genuinely motivated than older politicians to prioritize the views of their voters based on their own experience of belonging to an underrepresented group. I use data from the GLES candidate survey accompanying the German federal election of 2021. I find that younger politicians are more likely than their older colleagues to report that politicians should prioritize the views of their voters over their own or their party's, even after accounting for political experience. However, politicians do have the highest likelihood of wanting to prioritize their own views across all age groups.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of young politicians for representing youth interests. While young voters show a preference for being represented by young politicians (Kurz et al., 2025) it is imperative that young politicians also represent the interests of their young constituents to avoid them being disappointed and in the long-term disaffected with politics. Although prioritizing one's own views is still the most prevalent answer among young politicians, they are substantially more likely to report prioritizing their voters' views, compared to their older colleagues. This means that an increase in young legislators may indeed increase the share of politicians that seek to put a stronger priority on listening to the views of voters, prioritizing them over their own, and include young citizens in decision-making (De

Smedt et al., 2024). This increases the likelihood that representation preferences of many citizens (Mongrain et al., 2024) and young citizens particularly (Kurz et al., 2025) are fulfilled. The fact that this effect remains, albeit slightly weakened, after accounting for differences in incumbency and political experience also suggests that this difference between young and older politicians also remains once young politicians achieve office. It also indicates a genuine commitment of young candidates to more closely represent their voters, beyond a lack of political experience, potentially suggesting a dynamic of gyroscopic representation (Mansbridge, 2003).

Building on these findings, future research should investigate potential heterogeneities based on party and candidate sex and probe explanatory mechanisms further. In addition, studying how these differences in representation styles translate into representation behavior should be studied in the future. For example, whether young politicians that report a delegate style of representation are especially likely to also substantively represent young people's voices more concretely by working on issues important to them, like climate change (see Debus and Himmelrath, 2022).

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Data Availability Statement

The code needed to reproduce all analyses can be found in the Harvard Dataverse under the following link <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WESEBY>, Diener, 2025. I am unable to share the data from the candidate surveys due to data protection. Interested readers can acquire the dataset themselves from GESIS after

signing a data protection agreement and then replicate the analyses using my code.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. For more information see search.gesis.org/research/_data/ZA7704.

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