

# Repairing Urban Youth’s Political Disengagement: Why Not Just Any Representative Will Do

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## Abstract

This article investigates the experiences with and expectations towards politics of Brussels-based youngsters living in socio-economically disadvantaged and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Drawing on six focus groups, we detail how young people understand political representation—whether, how, when, and by whom they feel represented. The analysis centres on youth’s lived experiences with politics, analyses their conceptions of political representation, and unpacks the normative beliefs and expectations that underpin their accounts. Specific attention is paid to how Brussels youth articulate the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, and whom they conceive as preferable descriptive representatives. In response to widespread feelings of misrepresentation, young people frequently put forward the figure of a “cultural broker”: a locally rooted intermediary expected to translate everyday community experiences of precarity and discrimination into political voice. Conceived as an alternative to conventional political actors—widely perceived as socially distant and insufficiently attuned to their lived realities—this figure nonetheless reproduces enduring dilemmas of representation related to selection, accountability, and legitimacy. Its appeal thus signals not participants’ rejection of representative democracy as such, but a demand for representatives who are socially proximate and experientially knowledgeable and can correct epistemic injustices.

## Keywords

cultural brokers; democratic attitudes; descriptive representation; misrepresentation; political representation; representative democracy; urban youth; youth and politics

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, scholars and policymakers have become increasingly concerned with young people's relationship to contemporary politics, and especially formal processes of decision-making (Farthing, 2010). Whilst general levels of political participation, in particular voting and party membership, have declined in most European countries (Norris, 2011), young people are regarded as one of the most disengaged groups in politics, putting them at the centre of the so-called crisis of representative democracy (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Levels of voter turnout and party membership are the lowest among 18- to 30-year-olds (Pontes et al., 2018; Wattenberg, 2024). Young people are also less likely to run for and be elected to office than older age groups, which exacerbates their descriptive under-representation in parliaments and executives (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025). Compared to older age cohorts, young people also display lower levels of political interest and are less politically knowledgeable (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Quintelier, 2007).

Despite extensive documentation of young people's low levels of political engagement, there is a lack of scholarly consensus on its causes and implications. Some scholars attribute the decrease in youth political engagement to changes in the lifecycle, more specifically young people's delayed transition to adulthood (Arnett et al., 2014). Acquiring key milestones of adulthood, such as graduating, settling down, and getting a job, are known to have a positive effect on levels of political participation (Stoker & Jennings, 1995). Other scholars, then again, speak of a generational change. They argue that the cumulative effects of delayed adulthood are irreversible and that younger generations are becoming progressively more alienated from democratic politics (Quintelier, 2007; Ross, 2018). Together with findings on young people's lower commitment to liberal democratic values and institutions (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Ross, 2018), youth disengagement is often interpreted as evidencing a growing democratic antipathy, which may jeopardise the future of representative democracy (Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al., 2024, p. 584).

Whilst the evidence on youth's disengagement from electoral politics is incontrovertible, scholars also caution against alarmism. Research, for instance, shows that younger generations increasingly participate through non-conventional forms of participation (e.g., protesting, boycotting), are more interested in single-issue politics (Earl et al., 2017; Pickard, 2019), and have turned to "do it ourselves" political behaviours (e.g., volunteering, staging public actions; Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al., 2024, p. 584). Challenging the notion of political apathy, scholars (Bessant et al., 2017; Kitanova, 2020) view youth disengagement from formal politics as a rational response to exclusion and feeling unheard. Rather than rejecting representative politics, young people's engagement has shifted towards more individualised, informal, and everyday activities (e.g., consumer politics, and "doing their part" through community engagement or assistance of fellow citizens), reflecting broader changes in contemporary citizenship practices.

Young people are also known to hold idealist notions about what popular sovereignty and democratic participation should be like (Bruter & Harrison, 2009) and, thus, hold high democratic standards. Cammaerts et al. (2014, p. 645), for instance, find that young people "are turned off by the focus and nature of existing mainstream political discourse and practice, which many believe excludes them and ignores their needs and interests." The strong appeal of radical-right parties to young people may, in part, reflect youth's dissatisfaction with the offer of traditional parties (Mitteregger, 2025). These findings nuance the idea that young people are retreating from politics or are less principally attached to democratic ideals.

This article seeks to contribute to these ongoing scholarly debates on whether an optimistic reading (i.e., young people as critical supporters of democracy) or an alarmist reading (i.e., young people as becoming more sympathetic to authoritarian alternatives to democracy) is called for. Drawing on six focus groups (FGs) with Brussels-based young people (18 to 30 years old) from socio-economically vulnerable and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (the so-called “Croissant Pauvre”), we detail how young citizens understand political representation—whether, how, when, and by whom they feel represented. The analysis centres on young people’s lived experiences with politics, analyses their conceptions of political representation, and unpacks the normative beliefs and expectations that underpin their accounts. Specific attention is paid to how research participants articulate the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, and whom they conceive as preferable descriptive representatives. This focus is informed by research that suggests that a heightened presence of young people in key political institutions may be crucial to countering young people’s perception of politics (as not being about or for them), potentially repairing the disconnect between young people and formal politics (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025, pp. 276–277).

Our findings are mixed. On the one hand, they highlight the profound representative disconnection experienced by young people in the Croissant Pauvre. Participants criticise political parties’ perceived failure and lack of will to prioritise urgent problems, such as housing precarity, wealth inequality, unequal access to quality education, and economic insecurity, which disproportionately affect their communities. Participants express a strong sense of epistemic injustice, pointing at the knowledge failures of mainstream political parties, and the strained capacity of white, middle-class politicians to *understand* their lived realities. On the other hand, the solutions proposed by participants indicate continuing belief in political representation. Their call for a “cultural broker”—a community-rooted intermediary with a formal mandate to convey and translate neighbourhood perspectives to mainstream political actors (cf. Severs & de Jong, 2018)—suggests that young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods view representative democracy as redeemable, provided that key epistemic injustices are addressed and that politicians engage more closely and authentically with citizens’ lived experiences and viewpoints.

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the extant literature on youth and political representation, expand on the nature of youth interests, and review arguments in favour of descriptive representation. Next, we elaborate on our research methods and present our main findings. The article concludes by reflecting on the limitations of the study and by identifying avenues for future research.

## 2. Enhancing Youth Engagement Through Descriptive Representation

Whilst young people are a highly intersectional group (marked by the intersections of, among others, ethnicity, gender, education, sexuality, ability, and class), they are believed to hold some interests in common. This is the case, especially, for issues that reflect their place in the life cycle (e.g., the organisation of education, entering the labour market), and issues by which they are disproportionately affected, such as climate change (Jocker et al., 2025, p. 920). Also, macro-economic changes and insecurities may affect generations differently. Millennials and GenZ’s are, for instance, the most highly educated age cohort but often suffer insecure work situations and high housing prices. Additionally, research suggests that young people are more receptive to “new” political parties, as well as to parties at the more radical ends of the political spectrum (Mitteregger, 2025).

Although we can reasonably assume that young people hold different political preferences and interests compared to older age groups, they are virtually absent in legislative and executive bodies (Belschner & Garcia de Paredes, 2021; Krook & Nugent, 2018). Across the globe, people under 30 years of age represent around half of the world's population. Meanwhile, they only amount for 2.6% of global legislatures (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021, p. 7). According to Stockemer and Sundström (2025, p. 272), young adults (18 to 35 years old) “face under-representation in legislatures by a factor of three, relative to their share in the population, and by a factor of ten in cabinets.” The numeric under-representation of young people raises concerns regarding the adequate representation of their interests in parliaments. Evidence on whether young politicians advance the substantive representation of young people, however, remains scarce and inconclusive, partly due to their low numbers in national parliaments (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025).

Insights from research on women's and ethnic minority representation suggest that the link between descriptive and substantive representation is contingent rather than automatic: A shared social background does not necessarily translate into sustained advocacy for group interests (Bailer et al., 2022). This is captured by the concept of “critical actor” (Childs & Krook, 2009) that shifts attention from presence to behaviour, highlighting that substantive representation depends on legislators' willingness (and capacity, bearing in mind, for instance, the stage in their political career) to act. Women, for instance, often play a key role in advancing women's interests—especially through agenda-setting, initiating proposals, and persistent advocacy even in hostile institutional environments. But men may also act as critical actors when they support gender equality proposals (Celis et al., 2008). Substantive representation is also shaped by intersectional power relations as descriptive representatives may primarily advance the interests of more privileged sub-groups (for example, white women), thereby reproducing inequalities within social groups (Severs et al., 2016; Siow, 2023).

At the level of role-model effects, the presence of young politicians may enhance youth political engagement. Studies show that young candidates can increase voter turnout among young people (Angelucci et al., 2025; Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015), and that the latter are also more inclined to support candidates who are close to them in age (Sevi, 2021). A greater presence of young people in key political institutions may therefore help counter perceptions among young people that politics is “not about” or “not for” them, reducing feelings of alienation and helping to repair the disconnect between young people and formal political institutions (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025, pp. 276–277). These symbolic benefits may be especially important for groups of young people who participate less, including lower-educated youngsters, and those with migration backgrounds (Grasso & Giugni, 2022). However, role-model effects are not automatic. Meier and Severs (2018) argue that simply having a “like” candidate is insufficient: Symbolic and mobilising effects depend on context and on how candidates are perceived. Effects are more likely when the candidacy of descriptive representatives is seen as non-tokenistic, such as, for instance, when they run in competitive elections (Atkeson, 2003) or in viable campaigns for high-profile offices (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006).

The fact that descriptive representation has conditional effects on political engagement and substantive outcomes raises the question of which descriptive representatives are most effective, and for whom. Originally introduced by Dovi (2002, p. 735), the concept of preferable descriptive representatives refers to representatives who maintain strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups. Dovi (2002, p. 736) argues that such representatives are more likely to possess a sense of “linked fate”—the belief that what

happens to the group as a whole affects their own life. The perception of a shared experience can make representatives more attentive to the diverse needs of their ascribed social group and can foster greater agreement on the appropriate goals or direction of policy. Whilst mutuality does not eliminate the possibility of disagreement—either within the group or between representatives and constituents—the undergirding logic of mutual recognition is that it increases the likelihood that group members see these representatives as acting to improve the group's linked fate (Dovi, 2002, p. 738).

Dovi's (2002) concept focuses primarily on relations *within* historically disadvantaged groups and anchors representativeness on intersectional relationships. Severs and de Jong (2018) complement this approach by shifting attention to the representational labour that descriptive representatives must perform in contexts marked by unequal power relations. Drawing on the notion of the “cultural broker”—a concept originally rooted in colonial practices—they highlight that minority representatives are structurally positioned *between* minority and majority groups and must navigate the power asymmetries that characterise this relationship. As insiders-outsiders within political institutions, minority representatives are expected to fulfil multiple roles, acting as spokespersons for their ascribed social group, translating minority perspectives to majority groups, and mediating when minority and majority interests come into conflict. Their ascribed role as broker or “go between” renders minority representatives particularly vulnerable to accusations of disloyalty or betrayal: They simultaneously face pressures to advocate special group interests and to conform to dominant norms and interests (standing in for an “un-marked” member of parliament). Because of their heightened visibility, the actions and self-presentations of minority representatives play a powerful role in shaping how majority groups perceive minorities (Salkin, 2024). As Severs and de Jong (2018, pp. 347–348) argue, this symbolic power enables minority representatives either to reproduce existing social boundaries and hierarchies or to contribute to their reworking and destabilisation. Building on this understanding, Severs and de Jong (2018, p. 347) argue that criteria for identifying preferable descriptive representatives must extend beyond Dovi's (2002) emphasis on strong mutual relations, and consider the extent to which representatives contribute to reconstituting inter-group relationships in more equitable terms.

Akachar et al. (2017) indeed show that Muslim youth in Belgium critically evaluate descriptive representatives against the demanding task of balancing between identity essentialism and assimilationist denial of their bicultural identity. While they expect “their” representatives to articulate Muslim perspectives, they fear that narrowly framed minority advocacy risks marking both the representative and the community as irrevocably “different” from dominant groups. At the same time, representatives' efforts to perform full belonging to Belgian politics (e.g., drinking alcohol at political receptions) are closely scrutinised for signs of distancing or disavowal. This suggests that minority groups do not desire descriptive similarity per se, but representatives' capacity to effectively perform—and in this sense establish rather than merely claim—minority groups' belonging.

Amara-Hammou et al. (2026), relatedly, find that citizens living in socio-economically difficult situations prioritise epistemic justice over descriptive representation: They want representatives who treat them as knowledgeable political actors capable of articulating their own problems and solutions. Epistemic equality is key to establishing knowledge partnerships that deepen and enrich representatives' practical knowledge of society with first-hand, lived experiences of dispossessed groups.

Together, these findings underscore the affective and symbolic dimensions of political representation and suggest that inclusive representation is not only a question of *who* represents and *what* is represented, but also of *how* representation is *performed* (Meier & Severs, 2018; Severs & de Jong, 2018, p. 347). In contexts of pervasive distrust and entrenched power asymmetries, this performative dimension may be especially relevant for political engagement: Young people's willingness to (re)engage with formal politics may depend on whether they feel recognised as epistemic equals and legitimate political actors, rather than as passive subjects spoken for by distant representatives.

### 3. Youth FGs and Methodology

To understand how intersectional groups of young people articulate the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, and whom they conceive as preferable (descriptive) representatives, we conducted six FGs with Brussels-based youngsters living in the Croissant Pauvre area. This section describes the rationale for focusing on urban youth in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the process of recruiting and sampling participants, and the organisation and analysis of our FGs.

#### 3.1. Youth FGs in the Brussels Croissant Pauvre

FGs are an ideal method to study how young people experience and relate to representative politics. Group discussions are particularly well-suited for young adults, whose opinions often take shape through peer interaction and the sharing of lived experiences. Because of their group dynamic, FGs also lower the threshold for participation, which is crucial when studying young people who are seldom heard in decision-making.

Interactive by nature, FGs allow young adults to collaboratively give meaning to abstract concepts like "representation" and "democracy." We used open-ended prompts to encourage participants to articulate, in their own words, their representational needs, to discuss the extent to which these needs are met, and to reflect on what it would take for them to be adequately represented. By keeping the discussion prompts minimal, we could devote time to unearthing participants' underpinning beliefs and assumptions (e.g., "can you tell me more?", "why do you think this is the case?", "does everyone feel the same about this?"). Although FGs are primarily used to study collective processes of meaning-making (and, in this sense, counter the methodological individualism of survey research), the moderation style sought to counter uncritical groupthink, inviting participants to pause and reflect and consider alternative viewpoints (e.g., "does everyone agree?", "can I get someone else's thoughts on this?").

Our FG research was set in the Brussels-Capital Region, and targeted youngsters aged 18 to 30 years living in the Croissant Pauvre, a crescent-shaped zone spanning across the municipalities of Anderlecht, Molenbeek, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Brussels-City, Saint-Gilles, and a small part of Forest. The Brussels-Capital Region (comprising 19 municipalities) is home to 184 nationalities, and 46% of its residents are foreign-born. Except for other large cities in Belgium (e.g., Antwerp, Liège), this percentage drops to 14 to 15% in the rest of the country ("La population belge," 2025). Within Brussels, the Croissant Pauvre is known for its high concentrations of foreign-born residents (mainly from Maghreb and African countries), and low median net income levels. Compared to other Brussels municipalities, a higher proportion of residents receive social welfare aid or are long-term unemployed ("Chiffres communaux de la pauvreté 2023," 2026).

The neighbourhoods of the Croissant Pauvre frequently appear in mediated debates on drugs, criminality, and gang violence.

In such settings, feelings of exclusion, institutional neglect, and social stigma are often collectively experienced and internalised, leading to a generalised reduced sense of political efficacy and participation, even among individuals who do not face socio-economic challenges themselves (Maxwell, 2010, p. 439; Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008, p. 575). This is known to influence citizens' political behaviours (e.g., voter turnout) and attitudes independently of their own level of educational attainment or socio-economic status (Slee & Desmond, 2023, p. 22).

The Brussels-Capital Region operates within a highly complex institutional setting, which may further shape young people's views on politics. The regional parliament consists of 89 members elected through proportional representation in a single electoral district using semi-open party lists. Representation is formally structured along linguistic lines: 72 seats are allocated to French-language parties, while 17 seats are constitutionally reserved for Dutch-language parties to protect their minority status in the Belgian capital. Our study primarily targeted French-speaking youth. Throughout the FGs, participants referred to the complex federal state structure and the split of policy-making responsibilities across institutional levels, but did not elaborate on communitarian issues—which aligns with the local anchoring of participants' discussions on politics (see *infra*).

The broad focus on adults aged 18 to 30 years reflects our understanding of “youth” as a liminal life stage situated between (parental) dependence and autonomy. It is a period that is typically characterised by forms of change, uncertainty, and questioning as youngsters undergo transitions related to, for instance, education, employment, and housing (Arnett et al., 2014). Conceived as a situational category, our conception of “youth” is inevitably heterogeneous and marked by intersectional experiences of class, gender, migration background, educational attainment, and residential context.

### **3.2. FG Organisation and Recruitment**

To recruit participants, we invested in a sustained presence in local youth centers (*Maison des Jeunes*) and municipal services (like municipal youth departments and the Brussels Youth Coalition for the 2030 European Capital of Culture candidature) tailored towards young people in the Croissant Pauvre area. As key intermediaries, these organisations facilitated access to and helped build trust with young people who would typically be described as hard-to-reach. Recruitment took place in the run-up to the European, federal, and regional elections in Belgium (May 2024).

To select participants and compose the FGs, we asked interested youngsters to complete a short survey on their socio-demographic background and levels of political interest and participation. The short survey helped ensure a sufficient level of diversity within our sample whilst also maintaining a high enough level of homogeneity per FG. We allocated participants to FGs based on their self-reported levels of political engagement, resulting in four groups of “disengaged” youth, one group of politically interested but non-partisan youth (FG4), and one group of politically interested youth engaged in political parties (FG3). Unless participants explicitly asked to be assigned to an FG together, we assigned acquaintances to separate groups.

We organised six FGs of six to seven participants each, a size that ensured both depth of discussion and equitable participation. Across the FGs, the median age was 23 years. We sampled participants to ensure that they had lived at least five years in the Croissant Pauvre before turning 18 years old. We strived for gender balance, but because of some no-shows (especially young men), a gender balance was not ensured for all FGs. Of the 37 participants, 19 were enrolled in secondary or higher education, 14 were employed, and four were unemployed. Most participants came from households where the mother only held secondary-level education. Most participants held Belgian nationality but with Maghreb or sub-Saharan African backgrounds (see Supplementary File).

The discussions lasted around two and a half hours, were moderated in French by the second author (a white man in his late 20s), and took place in public venues, such as a public library and a non-profit organisation. The interaction benefitted from the moderator's Brussels-based identity, and familiarity with local colloquialisms (mixing French with Arabic loanwords). To facilitate the analysis of (non-)verbal interactions, the discussions were video-recorded and attended by an observer. Following translation to English and pseudonymisation of transcripts, the recordings were destroyed. Participants received prior information on the research objectives and data processing, and their informed consent was obtained.

The FGs were structured around three main parts: probing young people's conceptions of Belgian politics, their feelings of (not) being politically represented, and their views on the future of democracy. Participants were sometimes instructed to use post-its to structure their answers before the discussion. This helped create an atmosphere in which everyone's viewpoints were considered relevant. It equally helped level the playing field as the moderator could also invite more introverted participants to articulate their ideas. The discussions typically made a slow start, with participants sometimes questioning their capacity to contribute to debates on politics. But once the discussion was underway, most participants abandoned their initial caution, contributed respectfully, and displayed enthusiasm for the opportunity to discuss politics. Across the FGs, "Politics" was deliberately introduced as an open concept, without reference to specific institutional levels (local, regional, federal, or European). Participants seldom referred explicitly to concrete levels of governance. Instead, their shared lived experiences oriented the discussions towards an understanding of politics that was locally anchored. The discussions, organised between December 2023 and June 2024, were held against the background of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Israeli war in Gaza. The situation in Gaza was only mentioned explicitly, and very briefly, in FG1, FG2, and FG6.

### 3.3. Method of Analysis

Our analysis followed an iterative, interpretative approach combining multiple rounds of abductive coding. We iteratively built our coding scheme around three key analytical dimensions:

- Themes: recurring ideas and identity-based references (e.g., ethnicity, gender, class, neighbourhood), along with normative ideas of how democracy should function;
- Evaluations: participants' assessments of political actors and institutions, including perceptions of elite self-interest ("they only care about themselves"), inefficiency ("nothing ever changes"), lack of responsiveness ("they don't listen to us," "they make decisions without us"), and lack of knowledge ("they don't understand what it means to be us");

- Solutions: participants' views for addressing representational shortcomings, including calls for descriptive representatives, substantive reforms (e.g., better education, more direct democracy), and enhancing democratic control.

This threefold analysis enabled us to trace how experiences of political exclusion translate into specific representational demands—both regarding who is seen as a legitimate representative and how representation should be enacted.

## 4. Findings

In this section, we first unpack participants' attitudes towards politics and identify recurring tropes in their critiques of Belgian politics. We show how participants' lived experiences with structural forms of (racial and socio-economic) marginalisation feed into their evaluations of the political system and its functioning. We, second, detail how young participants put their faith in “cultural brokers” who can mediate between mainstream political institutions and the everyday realities of their neighbourhoods. Finally, we discuss how participants' political pessimism adds to the appeal of populist “quick fix” solutions.

### 4.1. On Not Feeling Represented

At the start of each FG, we invited participants to share their general feelings toward politics and to rate the extent to which they felt represented (on a 0–10 scale). Across all six FGs, self-reported scores of feeling represented were low. Only the group composed of politically interested, partisan-engaged youth passed the halfway mark (32/60). The scoring exercise was sometimes met with cynicism (“Can we put minuses?” [FG1]). In other instances, participants compared their representatives to students who fail a test and should feel embarrassed (“*Va te cacher*” [FG1]).

Consistent with our geographical focus on the Croissant Pauvre, participants' disaffection with politics does not appear to stem primarily from their age, but rather from a perception of place-based inequality. Participants expressed a strong sense of neighbourhood neglect and spatial inequality and delivered adamant critiques on economic under-investment in their neighbourhoods, and politicians' failure to understand the needs of, and care for, vulnerable societal groups. Participants often testified on their working-class and migration backgrounds, and the struggles for social and political recognition which they experience.

In FG4, Idan, for instance, shares her experiences with living in the Croissant Pauvre, and how this makes her more attentive to the socio-economic precarities, and day-to-day struggles experienced by its inhabitants (cf. Maxwell, 2010; Slee & Desmond, 2023). Idan contrasts her experiential knowledge with decision-makers' perceived lack of knowledge and sensibility:

I have the feeling that the decisions that are taken at the political level consider some of the people of Brussels, but not another part. For example, I live in the Lemonnier district [area that holds a bad reputation] [laughs]....I will take the example that Bryan gave with the firefighters. There's a restaurant next to my building, and in September, the restaurant burned down. The firefighters couldn't access the building because of ongoing construction works in front of the restaurant. [As a

result,] the fire truck had to park on the other side of the boulevard. With the little material they could carry, they walked across the construction site, and I thought, “*The people who made those decisions* [to plan construction sites without guaranteeing access for emergency services] *didn’t think about us*”....Most, for example, who have made this decision are people who come from beautiful neighbourhoods where there is not necessarily work to be done or redone, but we, on our side, well, are suffering. (Idan, FG4, emphasis added)

In the same FG, Bryan testifies on his high school experiences, and how this set him back for higher education. “In a private school, there will never be a lack of math teachers, but in Anderlecht, of course, there will be a lack of math teachers,” Bryan (FG4) stated, “We’re even going to tell you that it’s normal and you know...and it’s ultra paradoxical.” By evoking an outsider group (“we”) that talks down to the communities of the Croissant Pauvre and that seeks to promote inhabitants’ acquiescence, Bryan suggests that the problem is not simply one of unequal political influence but of outright power conflict. Across the FGs, participants consistently conceive of political parties as tied up in a power game, in which parties align with privileged groups in society, and use all means at their disposal to maintain the status quo—to the disadvantage of dispossessed groups.

Participants frequently align their individual experiences to broader societal struggles and underscore a sense of “linked fate.” Whilst doing so, they remain attentive to their own privileges, and the difficulty of generalising their perspectives to all inhabitants of Brussels, especially the most disadvantaged. In a discussion among politically engaged youth, Imen pushes back against the rating exercise and critiques the moderator’s question (i.e., “how well do you feel represented?”) for being too individualistic. Averaging out the individual scores of the FG participants, Imen argues, fails to do justice to the experiences and needs of the most dispossessed groups in Brussels.

When you look at the Brussels population, it’s very, very heterogeneous....We can’t count on this handful [the FG participants] who all put a six or a seven [score, expressing that they feel relatively well represented]....I don’t really agree with what has been said so far....This question is quite perverse, if I may say so, because, as has been said, *democracy is not there to represent individuals*. It’s really there to represent a society....It [the sum of individual scores] doesn’t say anything about that, because we’re going to each, of course...respond with our own personal baggage. So, if we answer seven or five, it’s because we feel somewhat represented in relation to what we want for ourselves, for our lives, for our loved ones. (Imen, FG3, emphasis added)

Besides the lack of attention to the needs of their community (and the most disadvantaged within these communities), participants strongly criticise the inertia and inefficiency of democracy and Belgian politics. The process of decision-making is considered slow, indecisive, and full of talk without action. “I’ve got the impression that it’s mostly about being controversial,” Ibrahim (FG1) puts it, “Like, sometimes they fight, but nothing changes.” Participants who are engaged in partisan politics (FG3) mainly attribute the slowness of decision-making to Belgium’s federal state structure and its complex distribution of policy powers. Across the non-engaged FGs, participants more readily accuse politicians of a lack of political will to take action to solve their communities’ pressing problems, ranging from housing precarity to unequal schooling or lack of public services. The slow pace and complexity of decision-making, in their view, fail to capture the sense of urgency experienced by inhabitants of the Croissant Pauvre. The result is not only frustration, but a profound disidentification with formal politics, which appears too distant, too abstract, and fundamentally unsuited to address pressing problems in disadvantaged contexts.

Across the FGs, politicians were routinely vilified. Rim (FG2) comments, “We are surprised when they do a good job. And then we’re celebrating them, while they are simply doing their well-paid job.” Many express the view that politicians show little genuine concern for their communities and visit their neighbourhoods only during electoral campaigns to rally support. This strengthens their belief that politicians are an elitist, self-serving, and socially disconnected caste who look down on people from working-class or immigrant-dense areas and excel in making hollow promises. “It’s sad and it’s a shame,” Imane (FG6) commented, “Afterwards, uh, they are surprised that there is mistrust and that people don’t want to show themselves [when politicians visit], for example, or that they [politicians] are not welcomed, for example, in certain neighbourhoods.” “Like all politicians, in fact,” Reine (FG1, emphasis added) states, “they all *demagogy* us, ‘yeah, vote for me and then we’ll do this, that,’ but then there’s nothing else [they do].” Politicians are conceived as wrapped up in political games, “living on their little planet,” trying to outdo each other electorally (FG2) and with little efforts invested in consulting the people affected by their decisions.

#### 4.2. *The Good Representative: In Search of a Cultural Broker*

Across the FGs, participants conveyed strong feelings of under-representation. An outcome which they attribute to (predominantly white) politicians’ lack of knowledge and their perceived lack of political will to act. Participants regret the low number, visibility, and influence of politicians who come from neighbourhoods like theirs and who are believed capable of transmitting the lived reality of these neighbourhoods to decision-making. “There’s a difference between hearing the problem that a person is experiencing,” Alex (FG4) states, “and understanding the problem.” Whilst some white politicians were described as well-intentioned, they were ultimately found unable to genuinely represent or address participants’ lived experiences. “He’s only got one ear! [cups her ear with her hand],” Fayza (FG1) exclaims laughingly when commenting on a politician’s limited capacity to genuinely understand the people of the Croissant Pauvre.

In FG4, Alex shares how politicians’ impaired knowledge requires people like him to step up and advocate for themselves. Politicians’ privileged status and the taken-for-granted nature of their worldview are seen to put differently situated citizens in a subordinate relationship, reducing them to begging for the services they feel they deserve:

And finally, we realise that the people in power, they are preoccupied with their own objectives, they don’t understand reality, and that we must therefore come and kneel, ask for forgiveness, ask [and state]: “Here! That’s what we’re going through, that’s what we’re suffering from, we need you to unblock the situation, we need you to, because you’re living—you’re not living these realities, you’re not living this.” (Alex, FG4)

Alex’s perception that he must “ask for forgiveness” points at the internalisation of public discourse that depicts welfare recipients as profiteers, forcing them to account for themselves and ask forgiveness for the dire circumstances they find themselves in.

Whilst expressing a need for politicians “like themselves,” participants also remain critical of the limitations of descriptive representation. Some participants invoked notions of tokenism and betrayal, referring to politicians who came from similar backgrounds but, upon entering institutional politics, had lost touch with

their roots and were now perceived as acting against the interests of their own communities. Pleas for descriptive representation were most outspokenly made by female participants who argued that a female perspective improves the quality of decision-making. “In my street, there are works, and due to that, there are no lights, and it feels completely unsafe,” Idan (FG4) remarked, “If a woman had taken that decision, she would have considered this.” Compared to female participants, men more frequently problematised politicians’ university schooling, which markedly stands out from “ordinary” citizens’ levels of educational attainment. Overarchingly, participants expressed a need for politicians “like them,” referring to an intersectional identity, cutting across dimensions of gender, ethnicity, and class. Explaining how she could never truly feel represented by politicians who do not resemble her, Hasina (FG5) states, “So, so, not seeing people of your social class or skin colour, or even, uh, who have the same experiences as you, et cetera, ...well, it’s kind of frustrating.” Hasina may here be referencing national politics: Although the parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region is the most diverse parliament of Belgium (with 44% of MPs having a migration background [own data]), the federal-level institutions in Belgium and parties’ national figureheads (who dominate public debates) remain predominantly white.

Across the FGs, participants engaged in lively discussions on the meaning and importance of descriptive representation. The risk of tokenism was sometimes countered by participants’ appreciation of the symbolic importance of descriptive representatives. “I think physical representation in a parliament is still important,” Jean (FG4) argues, “because it proves that every person who is part of this society can also access positions to be able to influence this society.” Overall, however, participants agreed that representing others is a matter not of “looking similar” but “being similar,” in the sense of sharing in distinct lived experiences, and articulating perspectives that are rooted in these experiences. It fundamentally boils down to a form of connection, as Ludivine (FG5) comments:

Uh yes, I kind of agree with, everything, well, what everybody is saying, but I think...for me, you don’t have to be, well, [it’s not] because I see a black person, [that] I’m going to be like, “Ah, she’s representing me, she’s black.” Finally, and I see this a lot in politics, where it becomes a little bit of a, a way of, uh, to win votes, like, “go ahead, we’re going to include the black guy in our game”....So, I think that, ultimately, the connection, it comes from the fact of really, well, it’s [in] the words actually. It’s the way people express themselves....Nobody really understands your “specific” case, because the person has not necessarily been through the same thing, grew up in the same neighbourhood as you. But I think, uh, empathy—well, I’m talking about a connection with a person, it comes from the person actually. (Ludivine, FG5)

For Ludivine (FG5), good descriptive representation is not about characteristics, like gender, class, or ethnicity, to which descriptive representation is typically reduced. Neither is it about having lived through the same things as others. Instead, good descriptive representation boils down to a capacity to “connect” with others through sharing in a broader experience with systems of domination, like racism, sexism, and classism. Whilst these systems may affect group members differently, they bring forth a form of “social situatedness,” or embedding within a broader fabric of social relations, that facilitates politicians’ capacity to perceive society through the eyes of disadvantaged citizens, and to genuinely *understand* their social perspective and the future direction of society (Dovi, 2002).

The identification of a distinct social perspective prompts participants in FG1 to advocate for a “neighbourhood captain” (“chef de quartier”), or someone capable of testifying on behalf of their communities and relaying lived experiences back to white, mainstream politicians:

Moderator: What do you mean by “neighbourhood captain”?

Ibrahim: He’s like a village chief. He’s the one you complain to and....He’s a bit like the neighbourhood.

Moderator: Yes, so what are the key characteristics?

Fayza: Basically, the neighbourhood leader is like he said. In fact, we’ll say he’s like a kind of delegate.

Hamza: A spokesperson!

Fayza: It’s someone who will be closer, not someone who will think directly politically. It’s someone who will also have a feeling for...emotions in relation to any problem that may arise, or who will be a “normal” person.

Raina: That’s what I was going to say.

Fayza: Who’s not going to have some sort of...what do you call it?

Ibrahim: He’s from the neighbourhood. But—

Fayza: But more like us. Who doesn’t put on a disguise as a kind of president or politician. He’s someone who really lives with people. Who sees things and feels things through um...

Hamza: They’re like Mr and Mrs Everybody.

Participants’ references to actors who “do not think politically,” and “do not disguise as a politician” convey their felt need for an alternative political actor who simultaneously transcends politics (and the games associated with it) and is able to transfer and render tangible neighbourhood viewpoints to mainstream political actors. Reminiscent of the colonial practice of cultural brokers (Severs & de Jong, 2018), participants call for an intermediary, who has a formal mandate (a “real job” as participants argued) to broker relationships on behalf of their communities. Importantly, the right to broker on behalf of the Croissant Pauvre communities must be recognised by mainstream political actors and citizens alike. The “chef de quartier” is not a delegate who “comes out of work and says, ‘tell us what you want’ and then says half of what we’ve said,” Fayza (FG1) passionately argues. Instead, participants want someone who brings people together to collectively draft ideas and then pitch them to politicians.

Descriptive representation here requires a go-between, someone capable of brokering, and, potentially, repairing the damaged relationships between disadvantaged communities and politics. The need for such a broker, capable of translating community perspectives to politics, underscores the extent to which young people conceive of politicians as disconnected from them. This shows also from the discomfort Reine and Fayza (FG1) associate with being around “bobo” (shorthand for bohemian-bourgeois) politicians who “arrive

in their suit, their little Rolex. We are not really going to tell them things,” they continue, “because they can’t really feel these things, because they haven’t experienced them.”

### 4.3. High Hopes, Low Expectations

As mentioned, participants often started the discussions somewhat hesitantly. However, once the conversations unfolded, their enthusiasm grew. Participants actively engaged with one another’s views—amplifying, nuancing, or challenging ideas. At the end, many reported feeling heard, and expressed a sense of pride over their capacity to engage in political discussions. “I thought it wasn’t going to be interesting,” one participant (Safia, FG2) stated, “but this was really interesting!” The FGs’ open-ended format allowed participants to connect politics to their lived experiences and identify commonalities across their political critiques. This clearly emboldened participants and inspired some to explicitly hold their politicians accountable. “Where are the politicians?” Raina (FG1) joked, “They should be here at this table, there’s plenty of space left!”

Participants nonetheless remained largely pessimistic about the future of representative democracy. In FG5, participants discussed the need for a major disruptive event to trigger systemic change: “I feel like in general, for things to really change, you need an event that turns the whole thing upside down. So that everybody asks, ‘Why do we have these systems?’” (Ludivine, FG5). In FG2, some participants suggested that “something extreme” like the ascent of anti-system and radical fringe parties might be necessary to break the political status quo. Participants’ openness to anti-system and disruptive alternatives is strongly wed to their understanding of politicians as a closed-off, self-serving class. “A class has emerged,” Bryan (FG4) states, “a political class that arrogates power to itself, and that has put measures in place to always keep itself in power.”

Participants’ understanding of politicians as a distinct class of people that “all know each other” (FG4), that are “super homogenous” (FG2), “nepo babies” (FG2, FG3), “not in tune with reality” (FG5), and “who only work [out policies] among themselves” (FG4) increases their receptivity to populist anti-system messaging, especially when topped with promises for greater political effectiveness and equal political influence. Especially among the un-engaged FGs, any change seems preferable to the status quo. Whilst confessing to know that a *shock to the system* would be a “bit worse,” Kasia (FG2) explains that “we don’t really want to stay in the centre because, well, that’s it, nothing [of the current system and its flaws] is abandoned.”

Participants’ longing for a *shock to the system* should, however, not be interpreted as evidencing their willingness to do away with liberal democracy. Participants in FG1 were aware of the potentially undemocratic features of their “chef de quartier” solution and discussed the need to balance out the captain’s power by organising some kind of elections and giving mandates to more than one person:

Fayza: But we must...that’s the only risk we...that’s why we must vote well.

Hamza: It’s the human nature itself. At some point it’s [self-interest and potential power abuse] going to go through his head.

Moderator: OK, so how do we choose this neighbourhood leader? Do we elect him? How do you do it in a democracy?

Fayza: Actually, I think that only one neighbourhood leader sucks!

Reine: Except that if there are two of them, they'll go to war.

Fayza: It will be war, but at least there will be two opinions. There will be two opinions.

Reine: At worst three then, like that there are...

Fayza: Four? Hahaha

Reine: No, because two is like "yes" or "no." If there are three, then the third will automatically lean more towards one...

As shown from the above discussion, participants' exchanges are infused with and prompted by concerns for political pluralism and seek to restrain the power of the "neighbourhood captain." In their efforts to advance quality benchmarks, participants replicate some of the familiar challenges of democratic representation, such as selection, accountability, and democratic control. The insight that participants' political alternatives are infused by concerns for political pluralism and democratic control nuances alarmist views on young people's uptake of anti-democratic attitudes. Whilst it may be the case that young people hold ambivalent attitudes towards liberal democracy, participants in our study do not reject it wholesale. They primarily want politicians to be less disconnected from people like themselves and engage more extensively and authentically with them (Amara-Hammou et al., 2026), valorising also their positional knowledge and recognising their belonging.

Young people's longing for a *shock to the system* may, in part, reflect the brazenness of young age (speaking in hyperboles), and their lack of experience of living in totalitarian regimes. In our study, participants' openness to anti-system thinking and anti-establishment actors appears to be primarily motivated by their lived experiences with social stratification and unequal political power and access (cf. De Simone et al., in press). This sets no small challenge to the agenda of representative reconnection. Countering the sentiment that politics is status quo-oriented and primarily serves the interests of privileged groups will take more than symbolic action or diversifying political parties' candidate recruitment. Similarly, and because political elites are conceived as culturally and politically distant from people living in socio-economically disadvantaged and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods like the Croissant Pauvre (constituting an "other"), investments in civic education are likely to fall short if not supported by broader reforms. For young people living in these neighbourhoods, repairing the current disconnect will require paying greater attention to "the social question," along with greater efforts invested in recognising as valuable and harnessing minority groups' perspectives, lived experiences, and the distinct knowledges rooted within them.

## 5. Conclusion

This article set out to explore how young people in Brussels' socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods conceive of political representation and the types of representatives they prefer. Drawing on six FGs with young adults, we unpacked how lived experiences of (racial and socio-economic) marginalisation, a sense of collective deprivation, and institutional distrust shape their political expectations, critiques, and hopes for the future. In response to widespread feelings of misrepresentation, young people

frequently put forward the figure of a “cultural broker”: a locally rooted intermediary expected to translate everyday community experiences of precarity and discrimination into political voice. Conceived as an alternative to conventional political actors—widely perceived as socially distant and insufficiently attuned to their lived realities—this figure nonetheless reproduces enduring dilemmas of representation related to selection, accountability, and legitimacy.

Our findings underscore that representative democracy is redeemable, provided that key epistemic injustices, such as the unequal recognition of dispossessed groups’ knowledge and lived experiences, are addressed, and that politicians engage more closely and authentically with these groups. Our findings also suggest that in contexts of pervasive distrust and power asymmetries, improved levels of descriptive representation may increase young people’s willingness to (re)engage with formal politics. However, being perceived as socially proximate and experientially knowledgeable requires more than descriptive likeness. For youth in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods to feel recognised as epistemic equals and legitimate political actors, representatives must actively demonstrate both engagement with citizens and how their knowledges is taken seriously. This presents a key challenge—and responsibility—for political parties to rethink how they engage with citizens, and organise key functions like political candidate selection, agenda setting, and interest mediation.

Brussels’ distinct socio-cultural and political terrain, together with the specific characteristics of the young people we studied, limits straightforward generalisation of our findings to differently situated youth. Notably, participants’ concerns were not confined to or dominated by a single identity marker such as age. Instead, place—particularly the neighbourhood—emerged as a central reference point, layered with intersectional meanings related to class, education, and ethnicity. At the same time, participants’ deeply felt lack of recognition allows for cautious theoretical extrapolation to other disadvantaged groups (e.g., households below the poverty line, blue-collar workers), who may share similar experiences with misrepresentation and epistemic injustice. In this sense, our findings extend beyond the Brussels context and the specific case of urban youth.

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### Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by John Erik Fossum (University of Oslo).

### Data Availability

The dataset is publicly registered via OSF: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XTYW2>. The dataset is embargoed until 01/02/2027. Data re-use is conditional on the project managers' approval (Eline Severs, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and Magdalena Góra, Jagiellonian University).

### LLMs Disclosure

To translate transcripts from French to English, the authors used Microsoft Translator. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Microsoft Editor to improve grammar and readability. The authors reviewed and revised all outputs from these GDPR-compliant tools and take full responsibility for the final content.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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