

# The Formation of Party Preference in Adolescence and Early Adulthood: How and When Does It Occur in the Multiparty Context of the Netherlands?

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## Abstract

This cohort-sequential panel study on Dutch youths ( $N = 3394$ ) and their parents examined the formation of party preference between age 12 and 25. Specifically, it aimed to pinpoint the most formative component and age in a multiparty context. Opinionation, stability and correlates were examined for three components of party preference: party identification, voting intention and left-right identification. Results revealed that most youths formed a preference at some point during their early life. The 6-year stability of party preference was already substantial during early adolescence and increased until early adulthood. Party preference became increasingly related to youths' social characteristics and issue attitudes with age, but parents remained important. Whereas studies from two-party systems emphasized the importance of party identification, this study suggested that left-right identification may instead predominate the early formation, intergenerational transmission and life-course stability of party preference in the Netherlands. The most formative period was around age 18.

## Keywords

Adolescence, party identification, left-right identification, intergenerational transmission, political socialization

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It is commonly believed that party preference can be traced back to a formative period during voters' adolescent and early adult years (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960). As an adolescent, voters first learn about many political issues and develop attitudes that may characterize them throughout their adult lifespan (e.g., Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Sears & Funk, 1999). Voters' early formation of party preference can therefore provide an explanation for stability and change in the adult electorate. For example, how and when beliefs were formed can help explain why some attitudes persist over time, while others change profoundly (e.g., Kroh & Selb, 2009; Rekker et al., 2015, 2017). Moreover, historical circumstances that affect voters during their 'impressionable years' have the potential to bring about political change through generational replacement (e.g., Mannheim, 1964; Rekker, 2016, 2018). Despite this presumed importance of adolescence, there are only few studies on party preference among underage youths, since most election surveys only include respondents above the legal voting age. Furthermore, the limited number of comprehensive studies on the adolescent formation of party preference was conducted mostly in countries with a two-party system (Sapiro, 2004). As such, relatively little is known about how this process unfolds in multiparty systems.

The present study was conducted on 3,394 Dutch youths between age 12 and 25 and featured both follow-up waves across 6 years and parent interviews. This design made it possible to thoroughly examine the formation of party preference during adolescence and early adulthood in the multiparty context of the Netherlands. Specifically, this study aimed to pinpoint the strongest component and the most formative age for party preference in a multiparty context. Research from countries with a two-party system has consistently indicated that party identification predominates the early formation, intergenerational transmission and life-course stability of voters' party preference (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960). However, this finding may not generalize well to a multiparty context, where voters are less likely to identify with a single political party (Holmberg, 1994: 100).

## The Formation of Party Preference

How do youths develop from not having a party preference to having one? When can a party preference be considered acquired? A suitable framework for this process was outlined by Sears and Valentino (1997), who distinguished three aspects of formation. First, formation may be characterized by *increases in opinionation*: Youths may develop an increasing ability to indicate a party preference as they grow older. Second, formation may feature *increases in stability*: As youths grow older, they may become less likely to change their preference. A third aspect of formation is the *maturation of correlates*: At an early age, youths' party preference may reflect their parents' views more than their own, but as they grow older, these preferences may gradually become associated with their adult correlates such as social characteristics and issue attitudes.

For many 12-year olds, survey questions on politics may be quite complex. They may not yet have an understanding of which political parties exist, what they stand for, or which party their parents vote for. As such, they may not yet have a preference for one or several parties over others. Nonetheless, early studies from the USA revealed that many children and adolescents could already indicate a party preference

at a remarkably young age (Greenstein, 1965: 73; Hess & Torney, 1967: 90; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). This opinionation has also been found to increase as youths grow older (e.g., Sears & Valentino, 1997). Therefore, the present study examined how youths' opinionation on party preference increases between age 12 and 25.

Even if youths are already opinionated at a young age, their preference may still be subject to change in years to come. For example, some youths may prefer their parents' party at a younger age but later change this preference as they develop their own views. Likewise, early party preferences may be based on a limited amount of knowledge and reflection, leaving them susceptible to new influences. However, this openness to change is believed to decrease as youths grow older (e.g., Sears & Funk, 1999). Consistently, longitudinal studies on adults have revealed that core political attitudes are highly stable across the adult lifespan. For example, left-right identification was found to possess a 17-year stability (i.e., over-time correlation) of  $r = 0.66$  among adult voters (Sears & Funk, 1999). However, relatively little is known about exactly at what age party preference reaches its adult stability, since this can only be determined with cohort-sequential panel data that follows youths of various ages across an extended period of time. Using this type of data, the present study investigated if youths still have the same party preference after 6 years. Specifically, we examined how this over-time stability increases between age 12 and 25.

Besides high levels of opinionation and stability, a third indication that youths' party preferences are becoming fully developed is that they correlate with those factors that adults' political views are typically associated with. At an early age, youths' party preference may reflect their parents' views more than their own. The phenomenon that youths commonly adopt their parents' views is known as *parental transmission*. Over the past few decades, research has consistently revealed strong similarities between voters' party preferences and those of their parents (e.g., Hooghe & Boonen, 2015; Jennings & Niemi, 1968; Nieuwbeerta & Wittebrood, 1995). Youths may additionally be shaped by the social environment that they grow up in due to their parents' social status, which is known as *status inheritance* (Glass et al., 1986). For example, research demonstrated that youths' views on income redistribution depend primarily on their parents' socioeconomic status (SES) (Rekker et al., 2015) and that such effects partly account for intergenerational attitude similarity (Glass et al., 1986). However, the role of parents may decrease with age as youths become increasingly independent. Although research shows that the party preference of young children nearly always corresponds with that of their parents (Boonen, 2015; Greenstein, 1965: 72; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), it has also been demonstrated that this similarity diminishes as youths grow older (Hess & Torney, 1967: 85; Lyons, 2017; Vollebergh et al., 2001). This growing independence from parents may indicate that youths are developing their own autonomous views. The present study therefore examined if youths' party preference becomes decreasingly associated with their parents' party preference and social structural characteristics between age 12 and 25. As parents' social structural characteristics, we examined SES and religious affiliation.

Maturation of correlates does not only imply that youths' party preference becomes decreasingly dependent on parents, but also that it becomes increasingly associated with youths' own characteristics. During adolescence and early adulthood, youths gradually develop their own social status as they progress in their educational

and professional careers. This *status acquisition* may increasingly affect youths' attitudes with age. For example, the association between educational level and issue attitudes on the multicultural society was found to emerge gradually with age as youths go through education (Rekker et al., 2015). Perhaps more importantly, the relevance of issue attitudes for party preference may likewise increase with age. Adolescence and early adulthood are believed to constitute a formative phase not only for party preference but also for *issue attitudes* (e.g., Rekker et al., 2015, 2017). Indicating the increasing relevance of issue attitudes, research shows that the association between issue attitudes and voting propensities is weaker among adolescents than among adults (Boonen et al., 2014). This growing association between party preference and its adult correlates may indicate that party preferences are becoming fully developed during adolescence and early adulthood. Therefore, the present study examined if party preference becomes increasingly associated with youths' own social structural characteristics and issue attitudes between age 12 and 25. As social structural characteristics, we examined youths' educational level and religious affiliation. As issue attitudes, we investigated youths' views on economic redistribution and the multicultural society, which are core ideological correlates of party preference in the Netherlands (e.g., Rekker, 2016). In sum, the first general hypothesis of this study was as follows:

- H1:** Party preference in adolescence and early adulthood will be characterized by increases in opinionation (H1a) and stability (H1b), as well as by a maturation of correlates (H1c).

## The Strongest Component in a Multiparty Context

Relatively little is known about the early formation of party preference in a multiparty context, since previous research has focused mainly on the two-party context of the USA (e.g., Sears & Valentino, 1997; Wolak, 2009). The literature on political socialization in two-party systems has for long emphasized the central role of party identification (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960), which is defined as 'the sense of personal attachment which the individual feels toward the party of his choice'. This attachment is believed to be a part of voters' identity, which defines who they are and whom they belong to in society (Green et al., 2002). Party identification plays such an important role in the socialization of American voters because it has three interrelated characteristics. First, party identification has a high *early opinionation*: Even many young American children already have some idea about whether they belong to the Democrats or the Republicans (Greenstein, 1965: 73; Wolak, 2009). Second, party identification has a high *intergenerational transmission*: For most American voters, their party identification resembles that of their parents (Jennings & Niemi, 1968). Third, party identification has a high *life-course stability*: Most American voters stick with their party identification during their entire adult lifespan (Sears & Funk, 1999).

Crucially, a strong interconnection exists between the three aspects, early opinionation, intergenerational transmission and life-course stability. Research shows that attitudes are more often adopted from parents at a young age (Greenstein, 1965: 72;

Hess & Torney, 1967: 85; Vollebergh et al., 2001). Similarly, attitudes that develop at an earlier age tend to reach a stronger adult stability than attitudes that develop at a later age (Rekker et al., 2015). Furthermore, party preference is more stable for those voters who adopted it from their parents than for other voters who do not resemble their parents (Boonen, 2015; Jennings et al., 2009; Kroh & Selb, 2009).

Although party identification thus appears to be driving the formation of party preference in the two-party context of the USA, its role might be less significant in multiparty systems, where voters are less likely to identify with a single political party (Holmberg, 1994: 100). This applies in particular to the Netherlands, which is characterized by exceptionally weak levels of party identification, even compared to other countries with a multiparty system (e.g., Bankert et al., 2016; Thomassen, 1976). This raises the question which component of party preference could instead predominate the formation of party preference for Dutch voters. A first candidate would be voting intention. If Dutch voters rarely identify with political parties, they could instead be socialized with the party that their parents vote for. However, this possibility does not seem particularly plausible. The Netherlands has the most volatile elections in Western Europe (Mair, 2008; Van der Meer et al., 2015), which implies that it is very common for Dutch voters to change their vote from one election to the next. Assuming that political socialization requires continued exposure to an attitude, parents may be less likely to transmit their voting intention to their children if they change it often. Moreover, the fact that Dutch voters change their voting intention so frequently makes it unlikely that they adopted it from their parents, since inherited attitudes tend to be more stable (e.g., Jennings et al., 2009).

However, the fact that Dutch voters often change their vote from one election to the next does not mean that they lack stable preferences that may be transmitted from parents to children. Although it is very common for Dutch voters to change their vote from one election to the next, they typically choose a party from the same block in every subsequent election (Van der Meer et al., 2015). Since Dutch parties are strongly aligned along a single left-right continuum, these blocks mainly correspond with either left or right (Van der Meer et al., 2015). In other words, most Dutch voters have a stable pattern of voting either for leftist or for rightist parties in every subsequent election. These stable preferences for the left or right are largely captured by voters' left-right identification. Consequently, left-right identification is the primary long-term determinant of voting behaviour in the Netherlands (Tillie & Fennema, 1998). Indeed, party preference has been identified as the dominant component of left-right identification in the Netherlands, preceding a social and a value component (Freire, 2008; Knutsen, 1997). Unlike instable voting intentions, stable preferences for either leftist or rightist parties may well be transmitted from parents to children. Supporting this idea, previous research demonstrated that the intergenerational transmission of party preference takes place largely via left-right identification in multiparty systems where parties are strongly aligned on a left-right dimension, such as France and the Netherlands (Jennings, 1984; Percheron & Jennings, 1981; Rico & Jennings, 2015; Ventura, 2001; Westholm & Niemi, 1992). The present study therefore examined if left-right identification plays a central role in the formation of party preference among Dutch youths, comparable to the role of party identification in the USA. Specifically, we compared levels of early opinionation, intergenerational transmission and life-course stability between party

identification, voting intention and left-right identification. In sum, our second hypothesis was as follows:

**H2:** Left-right identification will predominate the formation of party preference among Dutch youths, as indicated by a stronger early opinionation (H2a), intergenerational transmission (H2b) and life-course stability (H2c) compared to party identification and voting intention.

## The Most Formative Age

Although the idea of a crucial period for political attitudes during early life is widely accepted (e.g., Krosnick & Alwin, 1989), there has been disagreement in the literature about what age exactly should be considered most formative (Delli Carpini, 1989; Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Theory generally emphasizes the period around age 20, at which youths first step out into the world as independent adults (Dassonneville, 2016; Mannheim, 1964; Smets, 2012). However, the precise formative period varies substantially between different accounts. Providing some clarification, a few recent studies on cohort effects in adult samples have shown that the strongest generational patterns arise when the formative period is defined around age 18 (Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Schuman & Rodgers, 2004).

By examining adult samples, these cohort studies however provided only indirect evidence on what age should be considered most formative. The present study instead aimed to determine the most formative age directly from developmental patterns among youths. By following youths between age 12 and 25 during a period of 6 years, our cohort-sequential panel study was uniquely suited to compare these patterns across various ages. Specifically, we examined at what age the formation process occurs at the fastest pace. For instance, the age of 18 would be most crucial if the strongest developmental gains are observed at this age. Based on early theories and empirical results from cohort studies, we expected that the most formative period would be around age 18. An additional ground for this hypothesis was that 18 constitutes the legal voting age in the Netherlands. Being eligible to vote may provide a motivation for youths to form an opinion about political parties (Wagner et al., 2012). In sum, our third hypothesis was as follows:

**H3:** The most formative period for party preference will be around age 18.

## Method

### *Sample*

This study was conducted on the ‘Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development (USAD) 1991–1997’ (‘t Hart et al., 1993). The USAD is a multipurpose cohort-sequential longitudinal study that started in 1991 by interviewing 3394 Dutch youths between age 12 and 25. Respondents were randomly drawn from an existing representative panel of 10,000 households. A comparison between USAD and Dutch population

figures shows that the study can be considered nationally representative, but only for native Dutch youths since almost no immigrants participated ('t Hart et al., 1993). Respondents' age was about evenly distributed.

For analyses on parental transmission, this study added a parent sample. For 2777 of the 3394 youths, at least one parent was available: both parents for 1264 youths, only the mother for 820 youths and only the father for 693 youths. For analyses on over-time stability, this study additionally used a longitudinal sample. Of the respondents who participated in the first wave in 1991, 1302 were selected to participate in a second wave in 1994 and a third wave in 1997.

## Measures

This study examined three components that may capture party preference in a multiparty context. *Party identification* was measured using two items. The first item was phrased: 'Many people consider themselves a supporter of a particular political party, but there are also people who do not consider themselves a supporter of any political party. Do you consider yourself a supporter or even a strong supporter of a political party or not?' Respondents were given the choice between the following responses: 'strong supporter', 'supporter, but not strong', 'no supporter' or 'don't know'. If this item was answered affirmatively, a second item asked respondents to indicate which party they supported. Comparable measures are commonly used in research on party identification in Western Europe and validation studies have confirmed their validity (e.g., Schmitt-Beck et al., 2006). *Voting intention* was similarly assessed using two items. The first item asked: 'If there would be elections for the second chamber today (and you would be allowed to vote), would you vote?' If answered positively, respondents indicated in a second item which party they intended to vote for. Finally, *left-right identification* was measured using a single item: 'Where would you place your own political views?' Respondents indicated their position on a left-right dimension ranging from 1 (left) to 10 (right). Correlations between all constructs in this study are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Correlations between Constructs (Pearson's *r*) and Sample Size

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	N
1. Party identification	0.98***	0.49***	0.33***	0.42***	.34***	0.71***	502
2. Voting intention		0.43***	0.27***	0.33***	0.15***	0.61***	1581
3. Left-right identification			0.22***	0.23***	0.33***	0.52***	2844
4. Parents' social status and religion				0.55***	0.21***	0.37***	1609
5. Youth's education and religion					0.30***	0.35***	1216
6. Youth's issue attitudes						0.24***	2688
7. Mother's voting intention and left-right identification							1581

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

**Notes:** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Correlations between categorical variables are the square root of a multinomial logistic regression analysis' pseudo  $R^2$  (row variable regressed on column variable). When the construct consisted of two variables (e.g., education and religion), the coefficient depicts the average of both variables.

This study investigated three social structural characteristics: parents' SES, youths' educational level and the religious affiliation of both parents and youths. Parental SES was measured on a five-point scale based on both parents' occupational status and educational level as reported by the parents. Youths' educational level was based on their educational track. Because not all respondents had already been divided in tracks at the first wave, youths were assigned the highest educational level they were presently enrolled in or had already completed at the third wave: lower vocational (VBO), higher vocational (MAVO/MBO), general (HAVO/HBO) or pre-academic (VWO/University). Religious affiliation was based on youths' and parents' reports of which religion they adhered to. We distinguished between respondents who adhered to any religion and those who did not.

As issue attitudes, we examined youths' views on economic redistribution and the multicultural society. Issue attitudes on economic redistribution were measured using five items with a five-point scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). An example of an item is 'Differences between low and high incomes should be smaller'. Issue attitudes on the multicultural society were measured using four items with a five-point scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). An example of an item is 'Foreigners pose a threat to our culture.'

### *Overall Analytic Approach*

This study's analyses consisted of five parts: increases in opinionation (H1a), increases in stability (H1b), maturation of correlates (H1c), a comparison between components (H2) and a comparison between different ages (H3). We approached each distinct research question with a tailored statistical approach. One thing that all analyses had in common was that respondents were divided in four age groups: 12 through 14 (mean age: 13.5), 15 through 17 (mean age: 16.5), 18 through 20 (mean age: 19.5) and 21 through 24 (mean age: 23). Comparisons that are depicted throughout this study are therefore based on the mean ages of these four groups.

### *Analysis for Increases in Opinionation*

For the analyses on opinionation (H1a), we created dummy variables that indicated whether or not respondents were opinionated. For party identification, the dummy variable was positive if the respondent indicated support for a political party, either as a 'supporter' or as a 'strong supporter'. Likewise, the opinionation dummy for voting intention was positive if the respondent had the intention to vote, and could furthermore indicate which party he or she would vote for. The opinionation dummy for left-right identification was positive if the respondent could indicate a position on the left-right scale, as opposed to leaving the item blank.

After creating an opinionation dummy for each component, we calculated the proportion of positive scores in each age group to determine the level of opinionation at different ages. To examine if levels of opinionation indeed increased with age, we subsequently specified regular regression models (i.e., linear probability models) with heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors, in which the opinionation dummies featured as the dependent variable and age (as a linear term between age 12 and 25) was the independent variable.



### *Analysis for Increases in Stability*

For the analyses on stability (H1b), we created dummy variables that indicated whether respondents still had the same preference 6 years later. Stability dummies were positive at the first wave if a respondents' preference resembled his or her preference at the third wave. For voting intention, the stability dummy was positive if the respondent still indicated the same voting intention at the third wave. The stability of party identification had to be estimated indirectly, since this item was not administered at follow-up waves. We therefore coded the stability dummy of party identification as positive if a respondent still intended to vote for the party at the third wave that he or she identified with at the first wave. This approach has likely resulted in a fairly accurate estimate of the stability of party identification, since voting intention and party identification were strongly correlated ( $r = 0.98$ ).

As for opinionation, determining the stability of left-right identification required some additional steps. Since left-right identification was measured on a 10-point scale, small over-time shifts may not indicate genuine shifts in preferences. We therefore coded the stability dummy for left-right identification such that it was positive if a respondent had either a leftist score (4 or lower) or a rightist score (7 or higher) on both the first and the third wave. For example, a respondent who shifted from a score of 2 to 1 was considered stable, because both scores indicate a leftist position. Respondents with centrist scores (5 or 6) were excluded from analyses on the stability of left-right identification, because their score may indicate a centrist position as well as a moderate leftist or rightist position. We subsequently estimated levels of stability at different ages, as well as age-related increases, using the same statistical analyses that were described for opinionation.

### *Analysis for the Maturation of Correlates*

Analyses on the maturation of correlates (H1c) were conducted using regression models, in which sets of predictors featured as predictors of party preference. For party identification and voting intention, these models were multinomial logistic (with maximum likelihood estimation) with the various political parties as outcome categories. For left-right identification, we used regular regression models with scores on the 10-point left-right scale as outcome variable. We specified separate models for parental transmission (i.e., mothers' voting intention and left-right identification), status inheritance (i.e., parents' SES and religious affiliation), status acquisition (i.e., youths' educational level and religious affiliation) and issue attitudes (i.e., on redistribution and multiculturalism). For each set of predictors, we calculated the explained variance in party preference in each age group. This explained variance was indicated by a McFadden's Pseudo  $R^2$  for party identification and voting intention and by a regular adjusted  $R^2$  for left-right identification. By comparing these explained variances across age groups, we could examine our hypothesis that the role of parental transmission and status inheritance would decrease with age, whereas the role of status acquisition and issue attitudes would increase. To provide a statistical test for these changes, we

subsequently specified regression models with interactions between the predictors and age (as a linear term between age 12 and 25), on which we conducted joint significance tests.

Because party identification and voting intention are categorical variables, they required a large number of parameters to capture effects. For each analysis, we required that the amount of observations equalled at least five times the number of estimated parameters (Jackson, 2003). We took three steps to meet this requirement. First, we reduced the amount of missing values by analysing the four sets of indicators separately, rather than in a single model. Second, we could use a larger sample by including only mothers' preferences in this particular analysis instead of using both parents. In the present sample, there was a strong correlation of  $r = 0.58$  between mothers' and fathers' left-right identification, which indicates that the effect of parents can be captured fairly well by mothers only. Moreover, mothers have frequently been found to play a larger role in political socialization than fathers (e.g., Coffé & Voorpostel, 2010). Third, we limited the amount of model parameters by reducing the amount of political parties to five categories: CDA, VVD, D66, leftist parties (PvdA, GroenLinks and SP) and small Christian parties (GPV, SGP and RPF).

### *Analysis to Identify the Strongest Component*

As outlined in the introduction (H2), we aimed to pinpoint which component predominates the formation of party preference in the Netherlands, by comparing components on three criteria. For *early opinionation*, we examined which component had the highest levels of opinionation in the youngest age group (12 through 14). We compared *intergenerational transmission* by examining for which component the percentage of youths that had at least one parent with the same preference was highest. For this purpose, we used the part of our sample ( $N = 1264$ ) for which both parents were interviewed. For left-right identification, we used the same dichotomy of leftist (4 or lower) and rightists (7 or higher) youths as in the analysis on stability. For parents, we contrarily included the centre categories in the operationalization of leftist (1 through 5) and rightist (6 through 10). Finally, we compared life-course stability by investigating which component reached the strongest stability in the oldest age group (21 through 24). These comparisons were tested statistically using a formula for the comparison of regression coefficients (Paternoster et al., 1998).

### *Analysis to Identify the Most Formative Age*

To examine what age is most formative for party preference (H3), we estimated yearly change rates of opinionation and stability for the three intervals between the four age groups: between age 13.5 and 16.5, between age 16.5 and 19.5 and between age 19.5 and 23. We calculated these yearly change rates by comparing opinionation and stability between two age groups using a *t*-test for proportions and then dividing the difference by the number of years between both groups. These yearly change rates therefore indicated the magnitude of developmental gains during specific ages. We subsequently compared these change rates among the three intervals (formula: Paternoster et al., 1998). For instance, the age of 18 would be most crucial if we

observe stronger gains at the interval between age 16.5 and 19.5, compared to the other two intervals. We additionally inspected at what intervals a maturation of correlates could be observed, albeit without formal statistical testing.

## Results

### *The Formation of Party Preference*

As expected (H1a), we observed profound age-related increases in opinionation for all three components. For party identification, opinionation increased from 5.9 per cent at age 13.5 to 23.9 per cent at age 23. Likewise, opinionation surged from 25.6 to 61.2 per cent for voting intention. For left-right identification, opinionation increased from 61.9 per cent at age 13.5 to 93.7 per cent at age 23. Opinionation at different ages is displayed in Table 2 and depicted graphically in Figure 1.

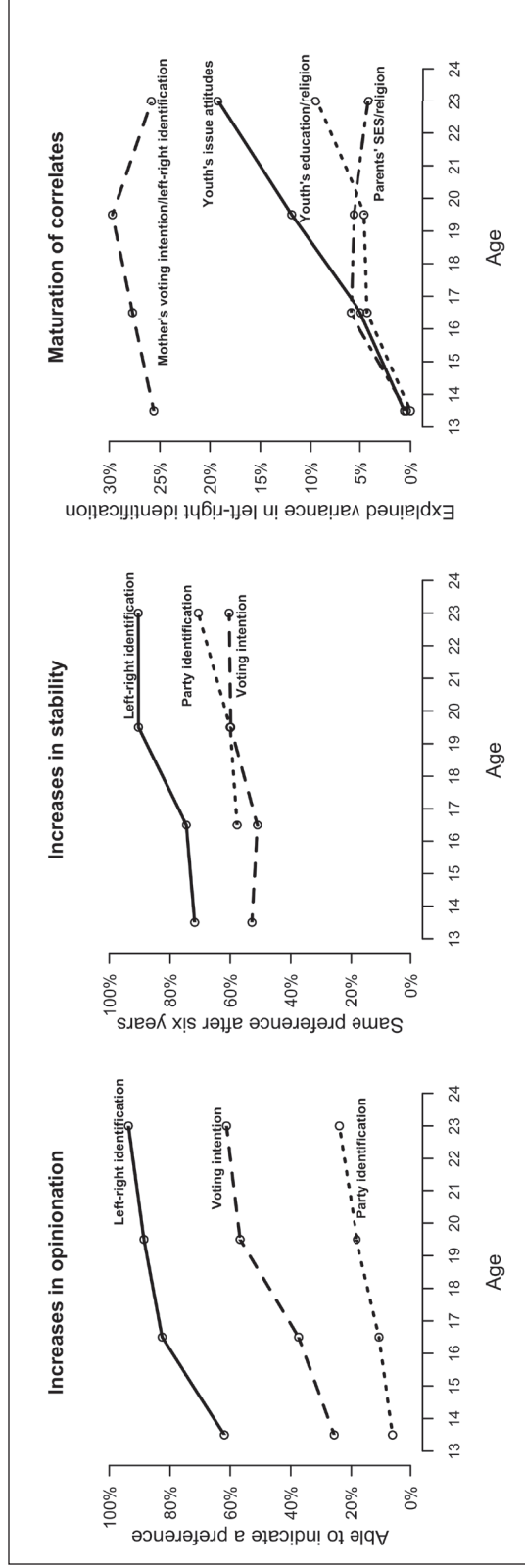
Support for our hypothesis (H1b) that the stability of party preference would increase with age was mixed. As expected, the stability of left-right identification increased from 71.7 per cent at age 13.5 to 90.5 per cent at age 23. Because left-right identification is a continuous variable, we could additionally calculate the correlation between scores on wave 1 and scores on wave 3 as a 6-year rank-order stability. This rank-order stability similarly increased from  $r = 0.21$  at age 13.5 to  $r = 0.59$  at age 23 ( $\Delta = 0.38, p < 0.001$ ). However, similar age-related increases in stability were not significant for either party identification or voting intention. Stability at different ages is displayed in Table 3 and depicted in Figure 1.

**Table 2.** Opinionation at Different Ages: Percentage of Youths Able to Indicate a Preference

	From	To	Yearly Change	N
Party Identification				
12.0–25.0			+1.9% (0.2) <sup>***</sup>	3394
13.5–16.5	5.9% (0.9) <sup>***</sup>	10.4% (1.0) <sup>***</sup>	+1.5% (0.5) <sup>***a</sup>	1501
16.5–19.5	10.4% (1.0) <sup>***</sup>	18.0% (1.4) <sup>***</sup>	+2.5% (0.6) <sup>***ab</sup>	1651
19.5–23.0	18.0% (1.4) <sup>***</sup>	23.9% (1.3) <sup>***</sup>	+1.7% (0.5) <sup>***a</sup>	1893
Voting Intention				
12.0–25.0			+3.8% (0.2) <sup>***</sup>	3394
13.5–16.5	25.6% (1.7) <sup>***</sup>	37.4% (1.6) <sup>***</sup>	+3.9% (0.8) <sup>***ab</sup>	1501
16.5–19.5	37.4% (1.6) <sup>***</sup>	56.7% (1.8) <sup>***</sup>	+6.4% (0.8) <sup>***bc</sup>	1651
19.5–23.0	56.7% (1.8) <sup>***</sup>	61.2% (1.5) <sup>***</sup>	+1.3% (0.7) <sup>c</sup>	1893
Left-right Identification				
12.0–25.0			+2.9% (0.2) <sup>***</sup>	3394
13.5–16.5	61.9% (1.9) <sup>***</sup>	82.6% (1.3) <sup>***</sup>	+6.9% (0.8) <sup>***ab</sup>	1501
16.5–19.5	82.6% (1.3) <sup>***</sup>	88.6% (1.1) <sup>***</sup>	+2.0% (0.6) <sup>***bc</sup>	1651
19.5–23.0	88.6% (1.1) <sup>***</sup>	93.7% (0.7) <sup>***</sup>	+1.4% (0.4) <sup>***bc</sup>	1839

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

**Notes:** Percentage of opinionated youths with standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Coefficients that do not differ significantly share a letter in superscript.



**Figure 1.** Opinionation, Stability, and Correlates at Different Ages.

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

**Note:** Correlates are depicted only for left-right identification, patterns for voting intention and party identification are displayed in Table 4.

**Table 3.** Stability at Different Ages: Percentage of Youths with the Same Preference after 6 Years

	From	To	Yearly Change	N
<b>Party Identification</b>				
12.0–25.0			+0.2% (1.0)	150
16.5–19.5	57.7% (9.9)***	60.0% (8.4)***	+0.8% (4.3) <sup>a</sup>	61
19.5–23.0	60.0% (8.4)***	70.5% (5.2)***	+3.0% (2.8) <sup>a</sup>	113
<b>Voting Intention</b>				
12.0–25.0			+1.0% (0.7)	431
13.5–16.5	52.8% (6.9)***	51.0% (5.0)***	-0.6% (2.8) <sup>a</sup>	155
16.5–19.5	51.0% (5.0)***	59.8% (4.9)***	+2.9% (2.3) <sup>a</sup>	204
19.5–23.0	59.8% (4.9)***	60.3% (3.7)***	+0.2% (1.8) <sup>a</sup>	276
<b>Left-right Identification</b>				
12.0–25.0			+2.0% (0.5)***	360
13.5–16.5	71.7% (6.7)***	74.5% (4.5)***	+0.9% (2.7) <sup>ab</sup>	140
16.5–19.5	74.5% (4.5)***	90.4% (3.5)***	+5.3% (1.9)*** <sup>b</sup>	167
19.5–23.0	90.4% (3.5)***	90.5% (2.4)***	+0.0% (1.4) <sup>a</sup>	220

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

**Notes:** Percentage of youths with stable preference with standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Coefficients that do not differ significantly share a letter in superscript. Party identification at age 13.5 was omitted due to a lack of observations.

We also found mixed support for our hypothesis (H1c) that the correlates of party preference would mature. The expected age-related decrease in the role of parental transmission was significant only for voting intention: The explained variance of mothers' voting intention and left-right identification in youths voting intention decreased from 43.3 per cent at age 16.5 to 41.1 per cent at age 23. However, the hypothesized age-related decrease in the contribution of status inheritance (i.e., parents' SES and religion) was not found for any of the three components. An increasing role of status acquisition was found only for left-right identification, for which the explained variance of youths' educational level and religious affiliation increased from 4.3 per cent at age 13.5 to 9.5 per cent at age 23. The expected increase in the role of youths' issue attitudes was also only significant for left-right identification, but its effect size was impressive. The explained variance in left-right identification of youths' issue attitudes on redistribution and multiculturalism surged dramatically from 0.6 per cent at age 13.5 to 19.2 per cent at age 23. When taken together, these findings indicate that the relevance of status acquisition and issue attitudes for party preference indeed increases with age, but that the role of parents continues to be important. The lack of significant age-related changes in the correlates of party identification can be attributed to its lack of opinionation. Because very few youths identified with a party, the sample size in this analysis was limited. Age-related changes in explained variances are displayed in Table 4 and depicted graphically in Figure 1 for left-right identification.

**Table 4.** Correlates at Different Ages: Percentage Explained Variance of Core Predictors

	Party Identification	Voting Intention	Left-right Identification
<b>Mother's Voting Intention and L/R</b>			
13.5	N/A	N/A	25.6%***
16.5	N/A	43.3%***	27.7%***
19.5	N/A	38.0%***	29.7%***
23.0	N/A	41.1%***	25.8%***
Yearly change (12–25)	N/A	–0.3%***	+0.1%
<i>N</i>	230	767	1317
<b>Parents' Social Status and Religion</b>			
13.5	N/A	14.8%**	0.4%
16.5	N/A	6.5%***	6.0%***
19.5	17.1%***	8.6%***	5.7%***
23.0	12.2%**	7.4%***	4.2%**
Yearly change (12–25)	–1.4%	–0.6%	+0.3%
<i>N</i>	216	740	1332
<b>Youth's Education and Religion</b>			
13.5	N/A	16.1%***	0.0%
16.5	N/A	12.0%***	4.3%***
19.5	N/A	10.1%***	4.6%**
23.0	16.4%***	12.7%***	9.5%***
Yearly change (12–25)	N/A	–0.4%	+0.9%**
<i>N</i>	182	566	1012
<b>Youth's Issue Attitudes</b>			
13.5	N/A	4.7%	0.6%
16.5	18.9%***	6.0%***	5.0%***
19.5	19.2%***	7.8%***	11.9%***
23.0	11.1%***	8.0%***	19.2%***
Yearly change (12–25)	–1.2%	+0.4%	+2.0%***
<i>N</i>	440	1365	2344

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

**Notes:** \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . N/A indicates a lack of available data. L/R: Left-right identification.

### *The Strongest Component*

Our hypothesis (H2) that left-right identification would predominate the formation of party preference in the Netherlands was consistently confirmed. Left-right identification featured an opinionation of 61.9 per cent in the youngest age group (age 12 through 14), which was stronger than both the 25.6 per cent early opinionation of voting intention ( $\Delta = 36.2\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the remarkably weak 5.9 per cent of party identification ( $\Delta = 55.9\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). To check if this result was affected by

the absence of an 'I don't know' option for the left-right scale, we repeated this analysis with half of all centrist scores recoded as non-opinionated, after which the early opinionation of left-right identification was still 42.9 per cent. Left-right identification was also characterized by high levels of life-course stability, as indicated by an over-time stability of 90.5 per cent in the oldest age group (age 21 through 24), which was stronger than the 60.3 per cent stability of voting intention ( $\Delta = 30.1\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the 70.5 per cent of party identification ( $\Delta = 20.0\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, 88.3 per cent of youths with a preference for the left or the right had at least one parent with the same preference, which was higher than both the 70.7 per cent intergenerational transmission of voting intention ( $\Delta = 17.6\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the 72.3 per cent of party identification ( $\Delta = 15.9\%$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The intergenerational transmission of preferences is depicted in Figure 2.

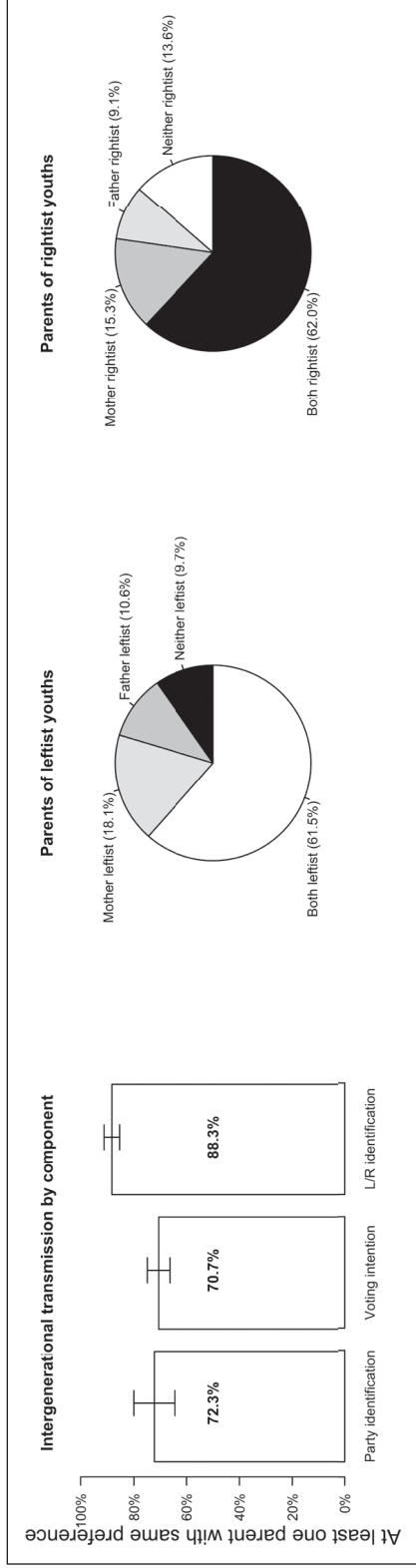
### *The Most Formative Age*

We also found support for our hypothesis (H3) that the most formative period for party preference would be around age 18. We compared increases in opinionation and stability among the three intervals to determine at what age developmental gains were strongest. These comparisons are indicated by superscripts in Tables 2 and 3. For four out of the six comparisons, developmental gains were strongest at the interval between age 16.5 and 19.5, although this difference was only significant from both other intervals for the opinionation of voting intention.

## **Discussion**

This cohort-sequential panel study on Dutch youths and their parents examined the formation of party preference between age 12 and 25. By revealing strong age-related increases in opinionation, this study provided unambiguous support for the well-established idea that adolescence and early adulthood constitute a formative life phase for party preference (e.g., Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). Likewise, the stability of left-right identification was found to increase during adolescence. Further emphasizing the significance of adolescence and early adulthood as a formative period, we found a substantial maturation of correlates. Most noticeably, the explained variance of issue attitudes in left-right identification increased dramatically as youths grew older, from 0.6 to 19.2 per cent in a period of just 10 years. However, we found little support for the idea that the role of parents diminishes as youths grow older. Together, these findings indicate that even though party preference becomes more autonomous as youths grow older, the role of parents remains profound.

As one of the few comprehensive studies on the formation of party preference during adolescence and early adulthood in a multiparty system, a core aim of this study was to pinpoint what specific component may predominate this formation in this context. The literature on political socialization in two-party systems has for long emphasized the central role of party identification, which is characterized by the three related properties of high early opinionation, life-course stability and intergenerational transmission (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960). The present study



**Figure 2. Parental Transmission by Component and, for Left-right Identification, by Parent**

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

**Notes:** Error bars depict a 95% confidence interval. For parents, leftist refers to a score of 1 through 5 on the 10-point scale, whereas rightist refers to a score of 6 through 10. For youths, center positions were omitted (because these are more likely to indicate non-identification for this group), such that leftist indicates a score of 1 through 4 and rightist refers to a score of 7 through 10.



clearly revealed that this pattern does not generalize to the multiparty context of the Netherlands. In fact, the early opinionation of party identification was found to be remarkably weak, since only 5.9 per cent of Dutch early adolescents identified with a political party. Instead, results consistently supported our hypothesis that the formation of party preference in the Netherlands would be dominated by left-right identification. Left-right identification featured a substantially stronger early opinionation (61.9%), life-course stability (90.5%) and intergenerational transmission (88.3%) compared to both party identification and voting intention. Importantly, theory and research (e.g., Jennings et al., 2009) suggest that it is not a coincidence that the same component was found to predominate on all these three facets. Attitudes are more likely to be influenced by parents if they are formed at an early age (e.g., Vollebergh et al., 2001) and attitudes that were adopted from parents are more likely to remain stable across the lifespan (e.g., Kroh & Selb, 2009).

Some important implications follow from the finding that left-right identification, rather than party identification, predominates the political socialization of Dutch youths. It appears that for Dutch voters, an identification with either the left or the right in general is the aspect of their political identity that they adopted from their parents at a young age and that they stick with over time. Voting intentions for specific parties contrarily appeared to be formed at a later age and remained less stable. Interestingly, this pattern offers an explanation for the fact that Dutch voters so commonly change their vote from one election to the next (e.g., Mair, 2008). If Dutch voters would instead have been socialized with strong loyalties to individual parties, this volatility might not have been equally strong. Reversely, the strong electoral volatility in the Netherlands also offers an explanation for the comparatively weak intergenerational transmission of party identification and voting intention. Political socialization of children may require a prolonged exposure to an attitude that may not occur for voting intention if parents often change their vote from one election to the next. As such, the changeability of voting intentions in the Netherlands may maintain itself across generations. At the same time, the predominance of left-right identification in the political socialization of Dutch youths also offers an explanation for the phenomenon that most Dutch voters have a stable pattern of voting either for leftist or for rightist parties in every subsequent election (Van der Meer et al., 2015). A comparison between the American case as described in earlier literature and the Dutch case as observed in this study is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Comparison of Components

	Early Opinionation	Life-course Stability	Intergenerational Transmission
Unites States (previous research)			
Party identification	Strong	Strong	Strong
The Netherlands (present study)			
Party identification	Weak	Moderate	Moderate
Voting intention	Moderate	Weak	Moderate
Left-right identification	Strong	Strong	Strong

**Source:** Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development.

Another aim of this study was to determine what constitutes the most formative age for party preference, which is a topic of disagreement in the literature (e.g., Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Findings provided support for our hypothesis that the most formative period would be around age 18. Speculatively, the importance of this period may be attributed to the fact that 18 constitutes the legal voting age in the Netherlands, thereby providing a motivation for youths to form an opinion about political parties. This study may additionally contribute to the ongoing debate about lowering the legal voting age from 18 to 16 (e.g., Wagner et al., 2012). On the one hand, this study revealed that the strongest developmental gains in party preference have yet to occur at this age. On the other hand, this study also revealed that even most 16-year-olds already have a general preference for leftist or rightist parties, that is highly predictive of their future adult preference.

An important limitation of this study was that data were collected in the 1990s, well before this article's time of writing. There are three reasons why these findings may nonetheless be relevant in the context of the 2010s. First, many developmental processes may generalize fairly well across different periods. Although the political context has changed since the 1990s, the psychological mechanisms through which youths acquire their party preference (e.g., increasing role of issue attitudes) may well have stayed the same. Second, this study was administered before and after the Dutch parliamentary elections of 1994, which was characterized by extraordinary levels of volatility for its time. This strong volatility has however become the norm in Dutch elections since the 2000s with the rise of new parties (Mair, 2008), which may make this study's findings on stability somewhat more similar to what may be observed in the 2010s. Third, this study examined the formative period of voters who were in their forties at this article's time of writing, as such constituting the centre of the Dutch electorate in terms of age and generation. Paradoxically, this is therefore a strength of this study when it comes to tracing the behaviour of Dutch voters in the 2010s (e.g., stable patterns of voting either for leftist or for rightist parties) back to their formative years.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the life phase between age 12 and 25 constitutes a formative phase for the party preference of Dutch voters. It also revealed that this formation unfolds differently in the multiparty context of the Netherlands than in the two-party context of the USA. Whereas the formation of party preference is characterized by an emerging identification with either the Democrats or the Republicans in the American context, Dutch youths instead appear to develop primarily through attachments with either the political left or right in general. As such, we found that 4 out of 10 early adolescents already had a preference for the left or the right, that 9 out of 10 youths resembled a parent in this preference, and that 9 out of 10 young adults eventually stuck with this preference across a period of 6 years. The classic view that emerged from American studies can be summarized by a quote from a 10-year girl who participated in a study of Greenstein (1965, 23): 'All I know is we're not Republicans. My father isn't'. This study revealed that an imaginary Dutch child of the same age might instead have said: 'All I know is we're not rightist. My mother isn't'.

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