



D8.2: Young politicians: Interview topic guide, pilot and coding scheme

WP8 Redirect: Reimagining Representative Democracy

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1 Introduction

The analytical framework adopted in the REDIRECT project posits that there are three different aspects and causes of the representative disconnect: (i) those directly regarding the institutions and practices of intermediation (*intermediation disconnect*); (ii) those involving practices of governance and accountability (*governance disconnect*); (iii) and those related to the political behaviour and attitudes towards politics/democracy by citizens and political elites (*affective disconnect*). Working package 8 (WP8) seeks to promote a more fine-grained understanding **of the affective (dis)connect between citizens and institutional politics**. More precisely, **the aims of WP8 are to:**

1. identify (mis)alignments between long-standing discourses on representative democracy and politicians' and citizens' sentiments towards, beliefs and experiential knowledge on representative democracy.
2. diagnose the nature and causes of the affective (dis)connect at both ends of the citizen-politician spectrum.
3. conceptualise the affective (dis)connect between citizens and politicians, including the identification of opportunities and avenues for rectification.

WP8 focuses on youth and analyses young people's experiences and understanding of the representative disconnect (understood broadly, as the gap between citizens and politics), the type of causes they attribute to it and the type of solutions or remedies they advance ('redirect'). To this end, WP8 conducts interviews with young politicians across various Europe countries and organises focus groups with young people (18 to 30 years) in Brussels and Krakow.

This document is the **deliverable achieved within the Work Package 8, Task 8.1: Interviews with Young Politicians** within the REDIRECT project, and it explains the **rationale for organising semi-structured interviews with young politicians, elaborates on the research design and reports on a first series of pilot interviews**. The pilot is conducted by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel with support from the WP8 partners (Jagiellonian University Krakow, University of Siena, University of Salento, University of Oslo, and Social Sciences Research Centre Hungary).

In addition to this introduction, this document consists of 6 main parts. In section 2, we clarify our approach to political affect and political imaginary and elaborate on the study's focus on young politicians. In section 3, we briefly elaborate on the 8 European countries in which the study takes place. In section 4, we elaborate on the methodological design of Task 8.1: Interviews with Young Politicians. We provide greater details on the pilot interviews we conducted in Belgium and share the preliminary coding scheme that will be refined based on a first sample of data. In sections 5 and 6, we elaborate on the project's ethical considerations, risk mitigation strategies. The bibliographic references conclude the document.

2 Rationale of Conducting Youth Interviews

2.1 The Affective Components of Politics of (Dis)connect

As explained already in deliverable D 8.1. Youth Focus Groups Pilot, Script and Coding Scheme (February 2024), WP8 takes the high emotional load of contemporary politics and political language as its starting point and analyses the affective components of politics of (dis)connect. We draw inspiration from Coleman's (2013) work and hypothesise that contemporary democracies are characterized by an affective disconnect or misalignment between, on the one hand, official discourses on representative democracy (e.g., democratic self-government, the popular will) and, on the other hand, how citizens and politicians experience, interpret and attribute meaning to central political practices and processes (e.g., voting, representing, decision-making). Stated differently, we build on the assumption that there may exist gaps between, on the one hand, long-standing, quasi-official discourses on democracy and, on the other hand, how both citizens and politicians, in their everyday lives and practices, understand and experience politics and representative democracy. By 'quasi-official' discourses we refer to those discourses or beliefs on democracy that have acquired a taken-for-granted status because of their re-iterations over time in a specific context, and their embedding in formal political institutions and practices (i.e. their institutionalisation). As the product of reiterative processes of collective meaning-making, these discourses or 'imaginaries' of representative democracy depend on citizens and politicians' continued engagement with them.

In keeping with REDIRECT's understanding of representative disconnect as a **multi-dimensional phenomenon** (see WP1), WP8 hypothesises that the political imaginary characteristic of advanced democracies is undergoing change (cf. Tormey 2014; Martinelli 2016; Wike & Fetterolf 2021). Building on the work of Castoriadis (1987), we argue that the contemporary challenges that representative democracy is confronted with do not only shape citizens' and politicians' interaction with and expectations towards central political institutions, it also and profoundly so, affect the collective processes of meaning-making by which specific representations of the political world/system become ontological points of reference that inform and shape citizens' and politicians' understandings of 'what democracy is or ought to be,' its related norms (e.g., of inclusion, freedom, and equality) and political practices (e.g., voting, deliberation, representation, decision-making) (Diehl 2019; Bottici 2010, Castoriadis 1987).

To verify our working hypothesis that the political imaginary characteristic of advanced democracies is undergoing change, WP8 conducts focus groups with youth in Belgium and Poland (Task 8.2.) and interviews young politicians in 8 European countries (Task 8.1.). **It asks both sets of research participants how they make sense of contemporary politics and what they believe the model of representative democracy is/should be.** Our joint focus on both citizens and **politicians improves our capacity to theorize both ends of the representative disconnect.** It allows us to verify how citizens and politicians situate themselves vis-à-vis the model of representative democracy and its core principles (e.g., popular sovereignty, equality, inclusion, voice...) and how they, potentially, redefine some of these principles and/or their inter-relation. It equally allows for detecting divergences in citizens' and politicians' understandings. **Our analyses will facilitate scholarly exchanges within (and beyond) the REDI-**

RECT consortium in various ways, most noteworthy:

- (1) Our study of the imaginaries of representative democracy and the time and context-specific processes of meaning-making that support, challenge or otherwise alter these imaginaries will contribute to ongoing theorising of the notion of representative disconnect as affecting **the wider canvas of the representative ecology** (see WP1).
- (2) The interviews with young politicians will provide a **relevant background to studying and interpreting the political discourse of young members of parliament (MPs)** (see WP3).
- (3) The **qualitative methodologies** used for studying how citizens and politicians make sense of contemporary politics and understand the model of representative democracy complement the quantitative data-collections (surveys and experiments) and has the capacity to provide new insights on the affective underpinnings of representative disconnect (see WP2 and WP5).

Whilst invoking the notion of **an ‘affective disconnect,’** we do not mean to say that the representative disconnect is a matter of feelings only (and can be repaired by simply attending to these feelings). Instead, the concept of political affect helps us transcend reductive tendencies to divorce political rationality/reason-giving from political affect/emotions when discussing and researching the contemporary disconnect between citizens and institutional politics. Emotions are still too readily cast aside as irrelevant or as clouding citizens’ political judgment (Elkin & Soltan 1999; Haidt 2012) and processes of decision-making (Krouse & Marcus 1984; Lodge et al. 1995). Increasingly, however, scholars (Gerbaudo 2017; Capelos & Demertzis 2018; Knops 2021) are recognizing the advantages of political affect to studying politics. **As an analytical concept, political affect recognises the embodied ways in which people are affected by politics** and the emotive elements that move them into action, that make them personally invested and allow them to form political judgment (Marcus 2002, 76-7; Knops, Mercenier & Severs 2024).

By unpacking how young citizens and politicians conceive of contemporary politics, their role as citizens/representatives, we recognize that emotions (as a mental state that involves cognitive processing of physiological sensations or affects) and reason-giving are inextricably bound up. **An interaction that also helps us understand ambivalences and paradoxes in both citizens’ and politicians’ views on contemporary politics and representative disconnect** (cf. Crociani-Windland & Hoggett 2012, 164; Marcus 2002, 76-7; Knops, Sanhueza, Severs & Deschouwer 2024).

2.2 To Be Young (and a Politician) in Today’s Day and Age

WP8 Task 8.1 complements the youth focus groups (Task 8.2) and turns its attention towards young politicians (18 to 40 years old) and **the challenges of being a politician in today’s age of increasingly polarised politics, media scrutiny, and citizen dissatisfaction**. Our focus on (also) politicians allows for studying both ends of the representative disconnect and **corrects for the demand-side bias in the existing literature** (Hay 2007, 55-56). An important body of literature has provided sociological explanations for trends in political participation and atti-

tudinal patterns (highlighting the role of socio-economic and demographic determinants, such as gender, age, income level and migration background) (for youth, see among others: Grasso & Giugni 2022; Grasso & Smith 2022; Angelucci et al. 2025). **Less attention is given to supply-side factors**, such as changes in the institutional context in which politicians function (e.g., the balance between the executive and legislative, the growing influence of party leaders), changes in the capacity of national-level governments to effectively respond to global challenges (such as war, climate change, refugee crises, health pandemics) and provide genuine political choice to voters, changes in the character of electoral competition (e.g., as the result also of social media, and changes in the offer that political parties make to citizens, and how they communicate these appeals (cf. Hay 2007 55-56).

WP8's focus on young politicians is motivated by two additional strands of empirical evidence.

The study is, first, motivated by the large body of literature evidencing youth's political disengagement (understood broadly, as political knowledge, interest, and participation). Voter turnout in European democracies has been declining steadily for every new generation since the 1980s (Blais & Rubenson 2013; Franklin 2004). This shows most outspokenly in party membership and voter turnout: levels of political disengagement are highest for 17 to 30 years old people (Wattenberg 2020; Mycock & Tonge 2012). Young people are also less likely to run for and be elected to office than older generations; resulting in a starker descriptive under-representation in parliament (Tremel 2008; IPU 2023). Importantly, young people should not be conceived as politically apathic. Compared to older generations, young people participate more frequently in non-electoral forms of political participation (e.g., manifestations, opinion writing, lifestyle politics, consumer boycotts) (Norris, 2004, 2009; Quintelier, 2007, 2010; Pickard 2019) and are more interested in single-issue politics (White et al., 2000; European Parliament, 2021).

However, the erosion of the 'institutional connection' between citizens and the state (Topf 1995) is cause for concern: it erodes the legitimacy of political decision-making. Young people tend to hold specific preferences on policy areas by which they are disproportionately affected, such as climate change, unemployment, and gender issues (OECD 2021; Parker et al., 2019). The younger generations (i.e. Millennials and Gen Zs), Mitteregger argues (2025, 4):

"do not necessarily experience more material well-being than older cohorts: with climate change affecting material circumstances dramatically, decreasingly unequal amount of inherited wealth, and increasing house prices in large cities, more recent age cohorts should – according to a simplistic adaption of the theory of 'hierarchy of needs' – become less post-materialist and might care less for socio-cultural issues."

However, this does not seem to be the case. **Newer age cohorts are consistently found to be more progressive on the aggregate** (Rekker 2018; O'Grady 2023, Caughey et al. 2019 in Mitteregger 2025, 4). Newer age cohorts are, in turn, more open to 'new' parties and **favour political parties on the radical ends of the political spectrum**. The greater propensity to support 'radical' parties is often explained by pointing at the heterogeneity among youth. The higher tendency among younger age cohorts to favour green parties over other left-wing parties may be attributed to higher levels of educational attainment among some cross-sections of youth.

Meanwhile, the tendency to favour radical-right parties over other right-wing parties may be due to economic deprivation experienced by especially lower-educated youth (Mitteregger 202, 4, 5; on the age divide in the most recent German elections, see Mitteregger 2025).

These intersectional patterns signal that we cannot treat youth as a monolithic group: the political engagement of youth is also impacted by their socio-demographic background (in particular, class, educational attainment levels, gender, and migration background) (Grasso & Giugni 2022; Grasso & Smith 2022). Youth participation also diverges across European countries, revealing the impact of countries' distinct democratic cultures (Kitanova 2020). Additionally, youth engagement is also contingent on time and context: we must carefully consider the temporality of geo-political contexts and look at people's political engagement more through the lens of 'structural stories' (Barnett 2023) or 'entanglements' of crises, 'moments of possibility,' and change (Clark 2023, 117) rather than a static view of 'what is.' There are cases of noticeable changes, just like the October 2023 elections in Poland with a record-high electoral turnout among youth. Whether such increases in youth turnout mark the specificities of a particular election or can produce more durable 'shifts' remains to be seen.

The focus on young politicians in WP8 Task 8.1 is, second, motivated by low levels of youth representation in European parliaments (see section 3.2). Across the globe, people under 30 years of age represent around 50% of the world's population. Meanwhile, they only amount for 2% of global legislatures. According to Stockemer and Sundström (2025, 272), young adults (18 to 35 years old) "faces under-representation in legislatures by a factor of three, relative to their share in the population, and by a factor of ten in cabinets (IPU 2021; Magni-Berton & Panel 2021; Sundström & Stockemer 2021)." Senior citizens almost exclusively occupy positions of political power, which is why many of today's parliaments (and especially in the Global South, with a younger population) can be rightly labelled, what Maddox (1987, 287) calls "a gerontocracy," a system ruled by leaders who are older than most of the population.

Research on the relationship between young people's descriptive and substantive representation remains scarce and evidence on the difference that young politicians make to the substantive representation of youth in national assemblies is inconclusive (for a recent review, see Stockemer and Sundström 2025). However, young people's low levels of participation in formal politics raises concerns regarding the adequate representation of their interests and policy preferences in parliament (i.e. their substantive representation). In addition, research suggests that parliamentary bodies that better reflect the socio-demographic makeup of society (i.e. including also young people) promote more judicious political decisions that serve the collective welfare of society (Kingdon 2014). Also, there is an "important tension that arises when assemblies populated by older generations decide on laws that inflict costs primarily on younger generations, including policies for conscription to military service or policies on student loans" (Stockemer and Sundström 2025, 274). Whilst **an enhanced youth presence in parliaments** may positively impact the substantive representation of youth, this **may require fundamental changes at the level of political parties and their candidate selection.** Research points to biases at the level of political parties and parties' unwillingness to put young politicians in winnable list-positions or competitive seats (in proportional representation, respectively, single-member district systems) (Stockemer and Sundström 2025, 279; Gélis and Chassé 2024).

Additionally, there is evidence (e.g., Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2023; Van Bavel et al. 2024) that sexism in politics, the increase of violence towards politicians, rising anti-political populism, the vilification of mainstream political actors ('the establishment') and **the general lack of attention to how the job of MP needs to be modernised** (e.g., attention to the extra-parliamentary demands on the time of MPs who are care-takers (still predominantly women), efforts to help departing MPs navigate and re-enter the labour market after an electoral term, and protection against tabloid press) is preventing a more diverse group of people with valuable real-world experience, including youth, from considering politics a viable career path (cf. Byrne & Theakston 2016, 705-6; Lawless & Fox 2015). This background makes it even more relevant to speak with young politicians and inquire after their understanding of the gap between (young) citizens and their political institutions, and research their views on how to repair, improve and enhance representative relationships. **Young politicians are ideally situated to help us shed more light on the challenges and opportunities for reconnecting youth to electoral politics.** Research, for instance, confirms that, at the start of their legislative career, parliamentarians consciously decide which activities to focus on. Their choice of legislative expertise (policy domains and related interest groups) is influenced by prior knowledge and expertise, but also strategic considerations related to their public persona, and considerations regarding whom they can credibly claim to stand for based on both personal experiences and ascribed identity (Bailer et al. 2022, 538).

3 Youth Interviews in 8 European Countries

The aim of qualitative interview methodology is not probabilistic generalisation (on the pattern and empirical co-occurrence of variables) but theoretical generalisation on young politicians' experiences with and understandings of the model and practices of representative democracy. To aid theoretical generalisation (i.e. extrapolation), we conduct **interviews in eight European countries** (in analogy to the citizens and elite survey in WP2). We interview participants from **18 to 40 years old and primarily, but not exclusively, target young politicians in the national or regional parliament or the executive**. As part of our risk mitigation strategy, and to ensure sufficiently high response rates across countries (see section 6 on risk mitigation strategies), we include additional categories of young politicians, such as those serving in youth wings of political parties, or local-level politicians (with a preference for the larger cities).

In this section, we provide **further details on the political-institutional context of the countries included in this REDIRECT study** and the main country differences/similarities. In addition, **we present data on the socio-demographic composition of the Lower Houses** in these eight European countries and give further insights into the socio-demographic composition of our target population (i.e. MPs from 18 to 40 years old). This overview gives further insights into the limited presence of youth in the national parliaments of these 8 countries and **helps contextualise our decision to diversify recruitment strategies in view of possible low response rates** from young politicians elected at the national level (see section 6, risk mitigation strategy).

3.1 Country Contexts

WP8 mirrors the country selection of WP2 (citizen and elite survey) and studies young politicians in 8 European countries, more specifically: **Belgium, France, Germany, Norway, Italy, Poland, Hungary and the United Kingdom**. Below, these countries are briefly discussed. Particular attention is attributed to the features of each country's political system, its history, as well as a discussion of recent socio-economic trends. A more in-depth review of country's historical, political, cultural and socio-economic context (considering, for instance, also voting age limits, turnout levels, voter volatility, political trust levels, more detailed descriptions of countries' electoral and party systems, and most recent government coalitions) are subject of an ongoing collective REDIRECT effort.

Here, we primarily focus on the main differences and similarities at the level of political institutions, measures for inclusion (i.e. gender and youth quota) and the protection of political rights and freedoms (see Table 1).

On the most general level:

- **Except for Norway and the United Kingdom, all countries are member states of the European Union.**
 - As a result of the June 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom voted to leave the Union. The UK formally left the European Union on 31 January 2020.
 - Norway had considered joining both the European Economic Community and the European Union but opted to decline following referendums in 1972 and 1994. Over the past months, and in the context of increased geopolitical tensions on the European continent, support for EU membership has risen considerably in Norway over the past months, reaching 41% in a recent poll. In 2023, only 27% of the population was in favour of joining the EU (Ålander 2025).
- **Except for Belgium and Germany, all countries are unitary states.**
 - Only Belgium and Germany feature as federal states. The German federal structure has longstanding historical roots (dating back to the founding of the Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages, the reforms brought about by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, the 1871 constitution of the German Empire, and the 1949 foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany). Belgium instead was founded in 1830 as a unitary state but growing tensions between Dutch- and French speaking communities resulted from the 1970s onwards in a series of constitutional reforms that define the current architecture of the Belgian federal state.
 - The United Kingdom, in turn, is a devolved unitary state, comprised of England and three countries with devolved governments: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although the UK Parliament retains absolute sovereignty, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly have acquired varying degrees of legislative powers since devolution in 1999. However, under the UK con-

stitutional tradition of parliamentary sovereignty devolution is, in theory, reversible, and the devolved institutions remain products of UK statute.

- **Except for France, all countries are parliamentary systems. Together with the United Kingdom, France has a majoritarian electoral system.** We know from the literature that proportional systems are more favourable to the presence of historically disadvantaged groups (like women) and youth in parliament (cf. Stockemer and Sundström 2025).
- **Except for Hungary, all countries rank high on the Freedom House 2024 Index and are considered consolidated democratic regimes.**
 - Since the 2010 elections, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Alliance of Young Democrats–Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) party pushed through constitutional and legal changes that have allowed it to consolidate control over the country’s independent institutions. The Fidesz government has passed antimigrant and anti-LGBT+ policies, as well as laws that hamper the operations of opposition groups, journalists, universities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that are critical of the ruling party. Hungary is considered a hybrid or illiberal democracy.
 - Since the 2015 elections, the populist, socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party similarly exerted significant political influence over state institutions and damaged Poland’s democratic progress. It was defeated by an opposition coalition in the 2023 elections that featured the highest voter turnout in the history of Polish democracy. The centrist coalition led by Donald Tusk, the former prime minister and president of the European Council, has initiated a process of democratic reform to restore rule of law and individual rights and freedoms.

When it comes to inclusionary measures, none of the countries apply youth quota. When it comes to **gender quota**, the image is more mixed. France, Belgium, Germany, Poland and Italy have legislated candidate quotas that regulate political parties’ composition of electoral lists, with enforceable sanctions for non-compliance. Hungary, Norway, and the United Kingdom, in turn, have constitutional clauses that allow political parties to include voluntary gender quotas in their party statutes (IDEA 2025). As shows from Table 1, the countries have diverse histories when it comes to the introduction of universal male suffrage and female suffrage, with some countries (i.e., Belgium, France, Italy, and Hungary) only extending women the right to vote after the Second World War.

Table 1: Brief country overview

	GDP/capita (USD) ¹	Freedom House Index 2024 ²	Political System	Party/electoral system	Gender quota	Youth quota	Universal male suffrage	Female Suffrage
Belgium	54,700.9	96	Parliamentary	Multi-party; proportional	LCQ ³	No	1918	1948
France	44,690.9	89	Semi-Presidential	Multi-party, two-round majoritarian	LCQ	No	1848	1944
Germany	54,343.2	95	Parliamentary	Multi-party, proportional	LCQ	No	1871	1918
United Kingdom	49,463.9	92	Parliamentary	Two-party, majoritarian	VPP ⁴	No	1918	1928
Norway	87,925.1	99	Parliamentary	Multi-party, proportional	VPP	No	1898	1913
Italy	39,003.3	89	Parliamentary	Multi-party, mixed proportional and majoritarian	LCQ	No	1912	1945
Poland	22,056.7	82	Parliamentary	Multi-party, proportional	LCQ	No	1918	1918
Hungary	22,141.9	65	Parliamentary	Multi-party, Mixed Member Proportional System	VPP	No	1918	1945

¹ World Bank (2025), "GDP per capita, World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>, accessed 30 April 2025.

² Freedom House (2024), "Freedom in the World, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/germany/freedom-world/2024>, accessed 30 April 2025.

³ LCQ stands for legislated candidate quotas.

⁴ VPP stands for voluntary political party quotas.

3.2 The Socio-Demographic Composition of National Parliaments

In this section, we provide greater details on the current socio-demographic composition of the national parliaments (Lower House) of the eight countries in the REDIRECT study. As mentioned, **this overview evidences the limited presence of youth in the national parliaments of these countries and helps contextualise our decision to diversify recruitment strategies in view of possible low response rates** from young politicians elected at the national level (see section 6, risk mitigation strategy).

We do not present a historical overview of the socio-demographic composition of parliaments. This is an important element to consider when reviewing the findings for the current legislature. **The socio-demographic composition of parliaments is known to fluctuate over time, reflecting also the commitment to gender and diversity issues of the ruling party or coalition parties.** This underscores the fact that **gains in political presence for historically disadvantaged groups (like women) and youth are not a given and can be both reversed and improved over time.**

Recent data from the IPU (2025) for instance, shows that from 2000 to 2015, the proportion of women in parliament has risen steadily. However, in recent years, this progress has slowed. Gender issues, particularly abortion rights and issues of gender identity, had a polarizing effect on many of the 2024 elections, in some cases spurring an anti-feminist backlash and in others serving to mobilize female voters. To date, none of the parliaments in Europe has attained gender parity, and women continue to be under-represented in politics. Similarly, and as discussed in section 2.2, youth participation in national parliaments has steadily grown over time. However, young people remain severely under-represented. Furthermore, age limits at the level of voting and standing for elections de facto exclude the youngest age cohorts from participating in parliamentary politics.

Against this background, it is important to stress that the data discussed here (for the current legislatures) does not allow to draw strong conclusions on cross country differences or trends over time. **The objective here is to produce insights into the context of the 2025 field research.**

Table 2 draws on the Inter-University Parline data (2025) and presents findings on the presence of women in the parliaments (Lower House) of the eight countries, and the average age of parliamentarians. For most countries the presence of women ranges between 30 and 45%, consistent with broader geographical trends. The presence of women in the Hungarian parliament, in contrast, is remarkably lower (15,23%). Similarly, we observe that the average age of Hungarian parliamentarians is the highest in our country set.

When we consider the percentage of 18 to 40 years old (our target population), we observe greater differences across parliaments, ranging from 11% in Italy and Hungary to 28.4% in Norway. France and Belgian approach the Norwegian result (with respectively 25.48% and 22%), followed by Germany (18.64%), Poland (16.09%) and the United Kingdom (13.85%). Except for Belgium, most parliamentarians aged 18 to 40 years old are male. Especially in Italy, Hungary and Poland, women are under-represented in this parliamentary age cohort. This will likely affect REDIRECT's Task 8.1 ability to obtain a gender balanced sample of research partic-

ipants.

Table 2: Overview of Lower Houses per Country (after IPU Parline 2025).

	Percentage of Women	Average Age	Percentage of 18 to 40 Years Old	
			(Male/Female)	
			M	F
Belgium (N = 150)	41,3%	47,4	10%	12%
France (N = 577)	36,17%	49,3	18.37%	7.11%
Germany (N = 762)	32,38%	47,3	10.89%	7.74%
United Kingdom (N = 650)	40,46%	49,2	8.62%	5.23%
Norway (N = 169)	44,38%	46,1	15.38%	13.02%
Italy (N = 400)	32,75%	49,9	5.25%	5.75%
Poland (N = 460)	31,30%	51	11.30%	4.78%
Hungary (N = 199)	15,23%	53,5	8.04%	3.02%

Note: The IPU Parline data measure MPs' age at the beginning of their parliamentary term. As a result, by the end of a parliamentary term MPs are typically four or five years older. Consequently, the share of MPs aged 18–40 is systematically lower midway through or at the end of a parliamentary term than at its beginning (Stockemer & Sundström, 2025, p. 273).

To facilitate the field research and identification of politicians aged 18 to 40 years old, REDIRECT collected data on the composition of national parliaments. **Table 3 presents an overview of our target population at the time of the recruitment and conducting the interviews (Spring 2025).** We cluster our potential research participants in three age groups: 18 to 30 years old, 31 to 35 years old, and 36 to 40 years old. This method of clustering is motivated by the fact that most politicians, upon entering parliament, are aged 25 or older. Breaking up the youngest age cohort in two smaller age groups would result in a low N and make re-identification of research participants easier (on research ethics, see section 5).

Age, of course, is a malleable and fluid concept that acquires definition and meaning by its socio-cultural, political, institutional, governmental, and economic contexts (White, Wyn & Ro-

bards 2017). Scholars lack an objective threshold to separate young from middle-aged or old individuals: individuals may self-identify as young regardless their biological age, what it means to be (considered) young may diverge across contexts, as life expectancy is rising also the upper and lower boundaries of the age span that defines 'youth' or other age categories are undergoing change. Because of the lack of scholarly consensus on the most appropriate age delineation, research on youth representation has defined young politicians as those below the age of 35 years, 40 years as well as 45 years (Stockemer & Sundström 2025, 272-3). **Our categorisation, stated differently, aligns with extant research.**

Table 3 gives a more detailed overview of the parliamentary presence of the three youth age cohorts (expressed as their % of overall parliamentary seats). Except for France, the N is highest for the oldest age category (i.e. 36 to 40 years old). The parliamentary presence of the youngest age category (i.e. 18 to 30 years old) is lowest in Hungary (0.50%), Italy (0.75%), and Poland (0.84%) and highest in Belgium (5.33%). When it comes to gender, we observe that within our pool of potential research participants women are under-represented (compared to men), suggesting that it may be more challenging for women to enter parliament at a young age. As mentioned already, this may have an impact on REDIRECT Task 8.1 recruitment efforts and capacity to produce a gender balanced dataset.

Table 3: Target Population – Age at Time of Recruitment (Spring 2025)

	Percentage of 18 to 40 Years Old (By Age Cohort)			Number of 18-30 Years Old (Male/Female)		Number of 31-35 Years Old (Male/Female)		Number of 36-40 Years Old (Male/Female)	
	18-30	31-35	36-40	M	F	M	F	M	F
Belgium (N = 29/150)	5.33%	3.33%	10.67%	4	4	0	5	11	5
France (N = 147/577)	4.68%	10.92%	9.88%	20	7	47	16	39	18
Germany (N = 142/762)	3.54%	8.01%	7.09%	14	13	39	22	30	24
United Kingdom¹ (N = 90/650)	2.31%	5.23%	6.31%	10	5	23	11	23	18
Norway (N = 48/169)	4.14%	10.06%	14.20%	4	3	8	9	14	10
Italy (N = 44/400)	0.75%	2.25%	8.00%	0	3	6	3	15	17
Poland (N = 74/460)	0.87%	5.87%	9.35%	2	2	21	6	29	14
Hungary (N = 22/199)	0.50%	5.53%	5.03%	1	0	7	4	8	2
Absolute N Youth:	-	-	-	55	37	151	76	169	108

¹The United Kingdom has proved to be difficult to map by age, with many MPs not displaying their age on parliamentary and party websites. For 178 MPs, we could not account for their age. They are not included in this overview.

4 Methodological Design

In this section, we provide more detailed information on the methodology of conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews, the pilot interviews that were conducted in Brussels (December 2024-January 2025), and how these informed the final interview protocols (presented to REDIRECT partners during an online info session on February 5th, 2025), and coding scheme.

4.1 Semi-Structured Interview Methodology

The REDIRECT young politicians interviews align with the **focus on qualitative methodology in WP8**. The interviews are semi-structured and conducted with the use of a topic guide. **Semi-structured interviewing** is an appropriate method to achieve scientific rigour and consistency whilst centring the participant's perspective (Greenstein & Mosley 2020, 1169). This guides the research toward new insights whilst also validating pre-existing knowledges. **The topic guide of WP8 Task 8.1 zooms in on the 'state of flux' in which young politicians (18 to 40 years old) find themselves** and seeks to understand how politicians themselves conceive of political representation, and how representative relationships with citizens (including youth) may be repaired, nurtured and improved. Besides asking them to define what political representation means to them, participants are asked to consider why citizens may feel unrepresented (diagnosis), and what strategies may be developed to restore the representative disconnect between citizens and politicians (prognosis). The topic guide probes participants' views on their individual scope for action (according to them, what defines a 'good representative?'), political parties' responsibilities and scope for action, avenues for rectification at the level of institutions (e.g., the balance between the legislative and the executive, the socio-demographic composition of parliaments, ...). Corollary to the Task 8.2 Youth Focus Groups, we also ask young politicians about their views on and expectations regarding the future of representative democracy (i.e. scenarios).

By speaking with politicians and asking them after the challenges they experience when striving to represent others, WP8 Task 8.1, among others:

- Asks how politicians deal with low levels of citizens' trust, growing levels of citizen dissatisfaction (Norris 2011; Harrison 2020), and deep-seated resentment towards politicians, especially those belonging to traditional or mainstream political parties (e.g., Dalton & Welzel 2015; Kimberlee 2002; Hay 2007; Gerbaudo 2017)
- Inquires after the inflation of citizens' demands and expectations, and tendencies to conceive of politics as a power game (related to a broader trend towards consumer politics) (e.g., Streeck 2012);
- Asks about changing expectations and norm shifts among the population (especially among youth) (e.g., Dalton 2021);
- Asks how politicians respond to a variety of citizen-level pathologies, ranging from system withdrawal (voter abstention, leaving the country), anger (protest/radical voting, demonstration), to outright aggression (political violence) towards public officials and

other-regarded citizens (e.g., Harrison 2020);

- Promotes reflections on pathologies situated at the level of the representative ecology, including heightened (social) media scrutiny, and the ensuing personalization and spectacularizing of politics, as a result of which “politicians need to ‘show’ more than do” (Ezrahi 2012, ix; see also Severs & Meier 2024 on authenticity as a political currency);
- Invites politicians to clarify any unmet expectations they may have towards the praxis of representative politics (that is highly restrained by the available time, resources and coalitions of the willing), their fears and hopes for the future.

The interviewees will be recruited through **purposive sampling** to obtain a diverse set of representatives from political parties/parliamentary groups, and with close attention for intersectionality (age, class, gender-identity, sexuality, ethnicity). To this end, **REDIRECT has compiled list of young MPs and MEPs (18 to 40 years old) from Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, and the United Kingdom (N =8 countries)**. We will contact each of these MPs and MEPs individually. We will, in addition, use snowball sampling (i.e. asking participants for a referral to another MP/MEP); an appropriate method for studying politicians with tight work schedules and limited availabilities (Naderifar et al. 2017). On the reasons for delimiting the age range to 40 years, see the discussion in section 3.2.

We plan to **conduct up to 15 interviews in each country (120 interviews total)**. Guest et al. (2006) suggest this an appropriate sample size for data saturation: their meta-review of interview-based research signals that approximately 90% of all themes were identified in the first 12 interviews. Depending on the extent of within-group diversity or heterogeneity (i.e. diversity within the population of politicians aged 18 to 40 years), a smaller number of interviews may suffice, respectively, a higher number of interviews (going up to 15) may be required. Because the number of young MPs and MEPS varies across countries, the number of interviews per country may vary somewhat. To improve response rate, we have designed various risk mitigation strategies, such as including also regional and local-level politicians and/or inviting all young MEPs (see section 6).

The interviews will, to **the extent possible, be conducted face-to-face and in participants’ language to create trust and maximise opportunities for non-intrusive probes**. They will be audio recorded (and video recorded in the case of online interviews), transcribed verbatim, translated to English, and pseudonymised.

Thematic analysis (see section 4.3) will be applied to the transcripts. We will code and analyse patterns of meaning as they emerge from underlying themes and motives of representation/resistance strategies. Thematic analysis enables a ‘constant moving back and forth’ between the problem identification, literature, data, codebook, and analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86). The coding will be iterative and abductive, alternating phases of deductive and inductive coding to facilitates both theory-affirming and theory-building analysis (Vila-Henninger et al. 2024).

4.2 Description of Pilot Interviews

To prepare for the cross-country data-gathering effort (February – June 2025), VUB conducted several pilot interviews in Brussels (December 2024—January 2025). The pilot interviews aimed to assess the feasibility and acceptability of an approach and the tools to be used in the main phase of the empirical study.

VUB developed the interview protocols with continuous input from the REDIRECT partners (June – November 2024). These protocols include ethical considerations, recruitment strategies, interviewer styles, data management and processing protocols, and risk mitigation strategies. The topic guide refers to the set of questions and exercises used during the interviews². We conducted four interviews to test and review the in-depth interview protocols and topic guide. Table 4 describes the main instruments used as part of the pilot.

Table 4: Pilot Instruments

Communication scripts	To aid the recruitment of national and European-level politicians, we developed several scripts for emailing and calling members of parliaments, parliamentary assistants, parties, etc.
Interview topic guide	The interview topic guide contains three overarching themes. The first topic contains 10 (main and follow up) questions regarding politicians' concept of political representation. The second topic contains 19 (main and follow up) questions on the interaction between individual representation and political institutions with special attention to political parties, parliaments and civil society. The third topic contains two questions regarding the future of representative democracy.
Informed consent forms	We developed English templates for both oral and written informed consent forms. These were shared with WP8 partners to be translated in national languages.
Oral information giving and consent obtaining script	We drafted a script in case research participants fail to send us their signed written informed consent before the interviews and when the interview setting (i.e. online interview) does not allow to sign the document on the spot. The oral information giving and consent seeking script was validated by the VUB ethics committee and requires researchers to inform the research participant of the REDIRECT data collection and processing actions and thereafter sign a declaration stating that they have duly informed the research participant. After the interview, a copy of this declaration is emailed to the research participant.

²Given the public nature of this deliverable and the ongoing nature of our field research, we refrained from including the final topic guide in this document. By not including the interview topic guide, we avoid that research participants can consult the specific questions prior to their participation in an interview. This helps safeguard the impromptu and unrehearsed nature of our interviews. Scholars and practitioners who are interested in the topic guide, can contact the Work Package 8 leaders at VUB and JUK, respectively: Professor Eline Severs (Eline.Severs@vub.be) and Professor Magdalena Góra (mm.gora@uj.edu.pl).

Table 4: Pilot Instruments

Communication scripts	To aid the recruitment of national and European-level politicians, we developed several scripts for emailing and calling members of parliaments, parliamentary assistants, parties, etc.
Data storage and management protocols	We developed DMP guidelines at the level of the WP8.1 data collection (consistent with the general REDIRECT DMP) and shared these with WP8 partners.

The pilot interviews were conducted by Elly Mansoury, the main coordinator of Task 8.2. The interviews were conducted in participants' native language (i.e. Dutch). After pseudonymisation, the transcripts were translated into English and critically reviewed by the VUB team (i.e., Eline Severs, Kevin Meyvaert, Hannah Oorts, Dimokritos Kavadias, and Elly Mansoury). Table 5 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the interviews. To test and review the functionality of our topic guide, we successfully applied purposive sampling (Clark et al., 2021) in terms of age, incumbency, and migration background but were unable to achieve a balanced gender representation (resulting in an over-representation of women in our pilot sample). Despite this limitation, the selected participants provided valuable insights into their understanding of frayed representative relationships, and the causes and consequences of the disconnect between citizens and politicians/central political institutions.

Table 5: Overview of pilot interviews

	MP1	MP2	MP3	MP4
Date	10 December 2024	13 December 2024	13 December 2024	20 January 2025
Method of Recruitment	Via email	Via email	Via phone	Snowball recruitment
Location	MP's office in parliament	Online	Online	MP's office in parliament
Duration	1h30min	1h15min	1h	1h15min
Gender	woman	woman	man	woman
Age	36-40	31-35	31-35	18-30
Incumbency³	Incumbent	Incumbent	Incumbent	First time elect
Migration background	No	No	No	Yes
Political Ideology⁴	Left	Right	Centre	Left

Effectiveness of the Interview Topic Guide: Based on the pilot interviews, we adjusted the

³To minimize participants' identifiability, we do not list here the number of years participants have been in parliament.

⁴To minimize participants' identifiability, we include here only very broad ideological categories.

interview topic guide slightly to improve the overall accessibility and clarity to research participants. Some questions were rephrased to ensure participants understood them better, while others were refined to elicit more detailed responses. To compensate for the ‘abstract’ character of some questions (e.g., ‘what does it mean to represent well?’), we reorganized sections to give participants room to first discuss and reflect on their personal experiences before initiating higher-order, abstract questions. Additionally, certain topics were rearranged to improve transitions between sections, resulting in more structured interviews. We also added specific prompts and follow-up questions to obtain more detailed answers. These modifications enhanced the topic guide's effectiveness, ensuring it aligned well with the study's objectives.

We observed no differences between the accounts of representative democracy and conceptions of political representation between **male and female legislators**, nor between those with and without migration background. Admittedly, the low N of male legislators and MPs with a migration background in the pilot sample do not allow for testing identity-related patterns of difference. We will monitor and report on identity-related patterns should they arise, and to this end seek to ensure that a sufficiently diverse set of politicians participates in the cross-country data collection effort. If necessary to obtain a balanced sample (in terms of gender and migration background) of politicians, we will also recruit non-elected representatives, or representatives elected in regional level parliaments (see section 6 on risk mitigation).

4.3 Preliminary Coding Scheme

WP8 Taks 8.1 applies **an abductive approach to coding** (i.e. the creation of conceptual categories that allow for comparing interview data). Abductive approaches combine deductive coding (i.e. the application of prior defined conceptual categories to the data) with inductive coding (i.e. when codes are defined as condensed descriptions of a phenomena that is accessed through the data). In deductive coding, established codes feature as data containers that help identify patterns (of similarity and difference) across the dataset. In inductive coding, conceptual categories are created and defined in reaction to patterns and newly revealed information that emerge from the data.

In keeping with the abductive logic of the project, the method of analysis consists of **an iterative process of clustering interview data**. A first phase of ‘open coding’ will be used to generate initial concepts which structure one of more ideas related to the (mal)functioning of representative systems. In a second phase of ‘axial coding,’ the relationships (of similarity, difference, and causality) between these concepts are researched, and concepts are grouped together into conceptual families. In a third, and final, stage, these concepts and categories are drawn together and woven into a theoretical framework (Glaser 1992). Throughout the distinct phases of analysis, a close iteration between data and theory will take place. This iterative logic will also allow the WP8 study to benefit from research conducted in other work packages within the REDIRECT consortium, in particular WP1 that invests in developing a theoretical framework for better understanding the transformations which advanced democracies are undergoing, and WP8 Task 8.2 Youth Focus Groups.

Below, we present **a preliminary coding scheme** that will guide the first stages of our coding, and that will facilitate scholarly exchange and reflection; both among the WP8 partner uni-

versities and across the boundaries of REDIRECT working packages. The preliminary coding scheme is informed by prior knowledge on the (mal)functioning of representative democracy (deductive logic). They reflect the insight that the political imaginary characteristic of advanced democracies is undergoing change (Tormey 2014; Martinelli 2016; Wike & Fetterolf 2021). The exact causes (and consequences) of these changes remain, however, subject for empirical inquiry. To generate in-depth understanding on contemporary transformations in the imaginary and affective fabric of representative democracies, WP8 Task 8.1 asks young politicians (18 to 40 years old candidates, and elected representatives) to define the meaning of political representation, why citizens may feel unrepresented (diagnosis), and what strategies may be developed to restore the representative disconnect between citizens and politicians (prognosis). The topic guide probes participants' views on their individual scope for action (according to them, what defines a "good representative"), political parties' responsibilities and scope for action, avenues for rectification at the level of institutions (e.g., the balance between the legislative and the executive, the socio-demographic composition of parliaments, ...). Corollary to the Task 8.2 Youth Focus Groups, we also ask young politicians about their views on and expectations regarding the future of representative democracy (i.e. scenarios). As mentioned, the (deductive) coding scheme (see Table 6), is but a point of departure. After a first series of systematic coding performed on a sub-set of data, we will extend the coding scheme with inductively created codes. This work will feed the codebook that can be applied to the full dataset. The abductive approach is necessary to capture cross-country variation and remain attentive to the contextual contingencies. Additionally, it will allow us to capture the impact of (inter)national events and trends (e.g., the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, the recent German elections, the Trump presidency in the United States) on participants' answers. Starting from the preliminary thematic scheme presented above, we identify **the following next steps that will allow for further development of the codebook and that will facilitate systematic analysis of the data-set:**

- Transcribe and translate into English the interview recordings (Deliverable D8.4);
- Review researchers' notes from the interviews (i.e., their experiences with conducting interviews in their country and specific elements that came up during these interviews) and collaboratively work on a refinement of the coding scheme with REDIRECT partners;
- Invite REDIRECT partners to work on joint publications and, in view thereof, pool expertise on topics emerging from the dataset (inductive phase) and update thematic coding scheme;
- Develop an extended codebook with conceptualisation of first- and second-order codes and their operationalisation (i.e. how, and when to apply a specific code to text);
- Test and refine the thematic codes based on a sample of interview transcripts (preferably spanning across national contexts to improve the codebook's applicability to the whole dataset);
- Finalise codebook;
- Organise training for job students to assist in systematic coding.

Table 6: Preliminary Coding Scheme

Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
1. Conception of Democracy (how politicians define democracy throughout their responses)	<i>Democratic regime</i>	• Constitutional (rule of law) • Procedural (process oriented) • Substantive (outcome oriented)
	<i>Decision-making model</i>	• Majoritarian • Consensual • Deliberative
2. Political Representation (a form of re-praesentare)	<i>Standing for</i>	• Formal representation • Symbolic representation • Descriptive representation
	<i>Acting for</i>	• Substantive representation
	<i>Role conception</i>	• Mandate (follow judgment of constituents, listen more closely to citizens) • Autonomy (follow own judgment over that of constituents, give priority to deliberative aspects of representation) • Mix • ...
	(whose judgment to follow)	

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Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
3. Those represented	<i>Orientation</i> (input, throughput, output)	• Static – Input-oriented (electoral mandate, authorisation) – Output-oriented (legislation, law, benefits accrued) • Dynamic – Process-oriented (listening, showing-doing, townhall meetings, presentism, ...)
	<i>Representation challenges</i> (what politicians state to find most challenging)	• ...
	<i>Core constituents</i> (whom politicians claim to represent)	• Youth • Farmers • Educators • ...
	<i>Under-represented groups</i>	• Women • Lower-income groups • ...
	<i>Over-represented groups</i> (if any mentioned or invoked)	• Middle-aged people • Middle-income groups • ...

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Table continued

Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
4. The Good Representative (what makes for a good representative? what are the three most important traits of a good representative?)	<i>Character traits^a</i>	• People-skills • Being level-headed • Being a good communicator • Being a team-player • ...
	<i>Moral virtues^b</i>	• Responsiveness • Honesty • Integrity • ...
	<i>Political role-models</i>	• Barack Obama • Donald Tusk • Margaret Thatcher • Greta Thunberg • Do not know / prefer not to say • ...
	<i>Normative-empirical match</i> (extent to which peers meet the identified criteria of being a 'good representative')	• Exceptional / rare • Particular individuals / some • Frequent / standard • Do not know / prefer not to say

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Table continued

Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
	<i>Traits valued by citizens</i> (what politicians believe citizens value)	• People-skills • Being level-headed • Being a good communicator • Being a team-player • ...
	<i>Moral virtues valued by citizens</i> (what politicians believe citizens value)	• Responsiveness • Honesty • Integrity • ...
	<i>Norm discrepancies</i> (discrepancies between the politician's views and the views held by others)	• Discrepancy with citizens (if so, which type of citizens?) • Discrepancy with other politicians (if so, which type of politicians?)
	<i>Strategies for dealing with discrepancies in norm expectations</i> (how politicians deal with possible discrepancies)	• Ignore • Confront • Mediate • Educate • ...
5. Representative disconnect	<i>Those disconnected</i> (types of citizens that are referred to as feeling un-represented or being dissatisfied)	• Youth • Lower-income groups • 'Ordinary' citizens • ...

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Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
	<i>Manifestation of representative disconnect</i> (citizens' political attitudes and behaviour)	• System withdrawal (voter abstention, avoiding political talk) • Anger (protest, radical voting, demonstration) • Aggression (political violence towards public officials and other-regarded citizens) • ...
	<i>Nature of representative disconnect</i>	• Governance disconnect (institutions and practices of governance and accountability) • Intermediary disconnect (institutions and practices of intermediation) • Affective disconnect (related to political behaviour and attitudes of citizens and politicians)

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Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
	<i>Causes of disconnect</i>	● Citizen-level – Holding unrealistic expectations – Dissatisfied – Affectively polarised – ... ● Elite-level – Unresponsive – Out-of-touch (general or specific groups, which?) – Self-serving – Descriptively unrepresentative – ... ● Institutional level – Centralisation of power (e.g., participacy) – Imbalance between legislative and executive powers – Ineffective decision-making (e.g., globalisation, capitalism, ...) – Inefficient elections – Lack of democratic control – ... ● Ecology – Biased media – Social media – Fake news – Decay of moral values – ...

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Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
6. Strategies for rectification (measures needed to reinvigorate democracy)	<i>Reconnect</i>	• Quota for historically marginalised and minoritised people (e.g., women, citizens with migration background, youth, ...) • Improve intra-party democracy • Strengthen citizens' engagement • ...
	<i>Redirect</i>	• Democratic innovations • Movement parties • ...
7. Democratic futures (what the future of representative democracy will look like)	<i>Future scenarios</i>	• Democratic deconsolidation • Democratic revival • Democratic ambivalence • ...
	<i>Fixers of democracy</i>	• Political actors • Political institutions • Rule of Law • International actors/institutions • ...

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Table continued

Topic Guide Themes	High-Order Concepts	Second-Order Concepts
	<i>Threats to democracy</i>	• Political actors • Political institutions • Other-minded citizens • Socio-cultural trends / civil society movements • ...

^a Character traits and moral virtues must be distinguished from each other. Value refers to what it is for “a state of affairs to be a good, all things considered, and for one situation to be better, all things considered, than another” (Harman 2001, 117). It allows for a gradation of desirable traits (e.g., being a good to excellent communicator).

^b Moral virtues refer to “what agents ought morally to do on various occasions, what they have to do or are morally required to do, what they may do or are morally permitted to do, and what is morally right or wrong for them to do” (Harman 2001, 117). Virtues can be opposed by moral vices and/or descriptions of occasions or incidents when actors transgress their moral duties towards their party, fellow politicians, parliamentary group, citizens, constituents, etc.

5 Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, we obtained **ethical approval from the VUB (4th of July 2024)** and shared all documentation, including proof of the ethics review with UNISI, the coordinating partner. The full documentation was also shared with all REDIRECT partners in September 2024, allowing for timely institutional review of the VUB approved procedures and informed consent forms.

We signalled the following risks to the university ethical committees:

- Working with public figures: Because we are researching public figures, it will be more difficult to impossible to guarantee full anonymity. We will need to take additional measures to report findings at the level of groups (not individuals) and to ensure adequate pseudonymization of the interview transcripts.
- Audio/video recording of the focus group discussions: For analytical purposes, the interviews will be audio-recorded. When physical meetings are impossible, interviews may be conducted via GDPR-proof remote conferencing software. These interviews will be video recorded.
 - Participants may experience (cognitive/emotional) discomfort when asked questions they might not have a prior or immediate answer to.
 - Participants may feel uncomfortable when questions challenge their prior beliefs and/or attitudes and invite them to (re)consider their loyalties (e.g., to party, parliament, political institutions, democratic ideals).
 - Data storage and processing of the audio/video recordings will require particular attention to guarantee participants' anonymity and privacy.
- Collection of personal data for selection purposes: The research, in addition, involves the collection, through prior consultation of parliamentary and party websites, of a minimum of participants' personal data (age, gender, nationality) and information on their prior political engagement (party ideology, incumbency, political mandate). This information will be used to compare the representativeness of our sample of participants to publicly available datasets on young politicians (such as, the Inter-Parliamentary Union database). The information may also be used in our analysis; for instance, when comparing the answers of age cohorts (18 to 30 years old, 31 to 35 years old, and 36 to 40 years old) or when documenting (if any) gender-related differences in participants' answers.
 - This raises concerns for guaranteeing privacy and anonymity, as well as to be compliant with GDPR regulations.

These concerns were addressed within our ethics application and measures were set in place to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of participants and to minimise risks (i.e. risk mitigation strategies)⁵.

⁵The approved VUB ethics applications was shared with the REDIRECT coordinating university, University of Siena, and REDIRECT partners in September 2024. In February 2025, and in view of the infosession VUB organised for all involved partners, VUB re-shared the approved ethics application.

Within REDIRECT we consider ethical considerations an ongoing activity that requires ongoing monitoring and reflexivity by researchers: regular assessment of the impact of the research process on participants and adaptation of methodologies may improve the ethical quality of the conducted research. During a semi-structured interview, participants can feel a certain unease regarding a specific question or situation (Sim & Waterfield, 2019, p.3019).

The pilot interviews signal that the participants experienced no harm and only minimal discomfort.

- At the initial contact and start of the interview, some participants appeared nervous, likely due to their limited experience with research interviews, which differ significantly from media interviews. However, once the interview began, they showed no difficulty answering the questions and showed no signs of discomfort throughout the process. This can be attributed to MPs' familiarity with speaking in public and answering questions from, for example, journalists.
- As the interview progressed, participants seemed to feel increasingly at ease and willing to share their personal views on contemporary politics and representation. This suggests that a feeling of trust was established with the participants. This was aided by mentions at the start but also throughout the interview that participants could signal when they found a question too abstract, challenging or convoluted. We found that participants easily pointed out when a question needed to be reformulated or when they needed a bit more time to answer a question. This signals their overall comfort and openness during the interview.
- At the end of the interview, participants were asked about their experience with being interviewed. We did not receive any negative comments or critiques. Participants also gave no visible cues of discomfort or discontent. To the contrary, many reacted positively and expressed to have been positively surprised by the pleasant character of the interview and its room for an open-ended conversation on the challenges of doing representation.
- Regarding research ethics and GDPR compliance: When conducting research, ethical considerations are always paramount to ensure the integrity of the study and the protection of participants. In this case, we obtained prior informed consent from the research participants, ensuring that all participants were fully aware of the research's purpose, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was another key consideration, and steps were taken to maximally remove identifiers to minimize re-identification based on the pseudonymized interview transcripts and reporting on findings (where identity traits are discussed at group level only).
 - Politicians participated voluntarily: Politicians obtained no immediate benefit from accepting to participate in the pilot study (see supra). However, we strived to make the process maximally rewarding by setting up a critical conversation with participants in which there was adequate room for self-reflection. We cultivated an atmosphere in which both interviewee and interviewer could feel (as) comfortable (as possible), where the first expresses their views without fear of judgment and the latter could ask questions without experiencing too strong of a hierarchical power

difference with the interviewee. We informed participants on the possibilities for remaining informed on the study's findings.

- The camera and audio recording posed no discomfort to participants. None of the participants expressed reservations on being audio/videorecorded.
- At the start of the interview, participants primarily inquired whether their names would be used in quotes. This was especially the case for participants with an intersectional identity. We re-assured them this would not be the case, and explained our policy on data collection and processing, that is: (1) maximal removal of data identifiers from interview transcripts; (2) pseudonymization of interview transcripts, and at the level of dissemination of findings, (3) that identity traits would be discussed at a group level only, and (4) that participation could be withdrawn at any stage. In general, participants displayed a great level of trust in us, and our outlined protocols for data processing.

6 Risk Mitigation Strategies

The **VUB ethics committee agreed with our risk assessment**. The project has a minimal risk to cause physical, psychological, legal, social, and economic harm. The mitigation strategies put in place (see Ethics application and procedures for data collection and processing) will help to further minimise any possibility of harm. The procedures that we have set in place for minimizing **the risk of data breaches and re-identification of research participants** have been approved by the ethics committees and data protection officers of both VUB (lead of Task 8.1) and the WP8 partners. These procedures refer, among others, to (1) REDIRECT Data Management Plan, and the herein specified guidelines for data collection and processing set out for partner universities (2) the instructions on collecting and processing of GDPR-sensitive data and the use of GDPR-compliant software (e.g., recording, data storage and sharing) provided (orally and in writing) during the WP8 Task 8.1 Info session of February 5th, 2025.

It is difficult to estimate **the impact of our study on the political attitudes and behaviour of politicians**. Young politicians taking part in the study will not have an immediate benefit beyond gaining experience and having the opportunity to express their views on politics and the potential avenues to rectifying the representative disconnect. By doing so, participants may become more aware of their views and expectations towards politics. This may help them better articulate their views in future exchanges. The impact on participants' political self-efficacy and/or democratic attitudes is uncertain: whilst the interviews may promote civic attitudes, help bring about political empowerment, and boost adherence to democratic principles (e.g., pluralism, political freedoms), the opposite may equally hold. The exchange of negative experiences, the voicing of political frustration and antagonistic stances towards other political actors/institutions may undermine participants' feelings of political efficacy. The pilot study (and the ongoing field research) is re-assuring: participants predominantly express their satisfaction with how the interviews are conducted. There is, at present, no reason to assume that our intervention in the field has a negative impact on participants' democratic attitudes and/or behaviour.

The most important risk for the project consists in our dependence on politicians' willingness to participate in the study. Already in the project application, we identified **low response rates from MPs and MEPs as a high risk with a severe impact on the project's feasibility.** We already outlined various strategies to improve response rate in the application. **In the preparation of our field research, we identified additional risk mitigation strategies, such as:**

- Extending the age limit from 35 years to 40 years (already implemented in the current design);
- Inviting also MPs from regional parliaments (already implemented in Belgium);
- Inviting also MPs from the previous legislature (in view of the national elections that take place throughout the REDIRECT research period);
- Inviting also electoral candidates who unsuccessfully ran in the last elections;
- Inviting also young leaders of parties' youth wings);
- Inviting young politicians with an elected mandate at the local level (large cities);
- For the European parliament, extending the scope beyond the 8 countries researched in WP2, and inviting all young MEPS (18 to 40 years) in the European parliament.

During the online info-session (February 5th, 2025), we discussed the feasibility of data-collection with the REDIRECT consortium partners and reflected on best strategies for each country. We also exchanged experiences and strategies on identifying potential go-betweens, and people who might help REDIRECT gain access to elected politicians. Working with/through a local contact appears especially pertinent for the larger, and typically more hierarchically organised parliaments, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom (on the difficulties in recruiting British MPs for participating in scientific research, see Cowley 2021).

- For **Belgium**, we include the regional parliamentary level for two reasons mainly: (1) we learnt that another international research consortium is also targeting national MPs in Spring 2025, and (2) we want to compare the WP8 Task 2 Youth Focus Group data from Brussels with the WP8 Task 1 Young politicians' interviews. Because of the socio-demographic specificities of Brussels (see Deliverable D8.1), we considered it good to include regional-level, and especially Brussels parliamentarians. The field research in Belgium is close to completion, and a higher than set out range of interviews has been conducted.
- In **Germany**, due to the recent federal elections held on 23rd February 2025, we decided to postpone outreach to newly elected national MPs. Instead, we initially focused on German MEPs, which currently appears to be an adequate and pragmatic strategy for moving forward with WP8 Task 8.1.
- In **Poland**, the study overlaps with the presidential election campaign (the first round of the elections to be held in mid-May 2025). This limits the readiness of MPs to speak to researchers (they are either busy with the campaign or see the research theme as intertwined with the highly polarised political scene and reluctant).

- For the **United Kingdom and France**, we extend invitations to the categories listed above due to the very low response rate from national MPs and MEPs, and the limited success of snowball referrals. This adjustment aims to ensure sufficient data collection for the young politicians' interviews.
- Also, for **Norway, Italy and Hungary**, a combination of recruitment strategies is used to obtain the target of 15 interviews per country.
- For the **European Parliament**, we identified all young MEPs, allowing us – if needed, to also interview MEPs from countries that fall outside the scope of the countries selected in the REDIRECT study.

The diversification of our recruitment strategy has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, our continuous efforts to reach the target of 15 interviews per country (despite low responsiveness of some national parliaments), ensures the involvement of relevant stakeholders and enlarges our pool of stakeholders beyond the specific profile of young politicians elected at the national level. On the other hand, the inclusion of a wider range of participant profiles may impact the comparability of the interview transcripts. However, we believe that this challenge may be mitigated by closer attention to context and the positionality of research participants when interpreting the results. If anything, the diversity of profiles may help us detect convergences and divergences across the dataset and help call into question taken-for-granted ideas or assumptions.

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