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Climate Youth to Power: Coalition Strategy as Social Movement Response to Youth Power Deficits

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Abstract: Based on semi-structured interviews, this article analyzes how activists in the Swiss climate movement deal with their youthfulness. The interviewees associate their youthfulness with institutional, discursive, and economic power deficits that reduce their political assertiveness. They respond to this with a strategy that relies on coalitions with "adult" organizations that compensate for these power deficits. These alliances, in turn, shape and are shaped by the political orientation of the movement.

Keywords: Climate movement, coalitions, power, social movements, youth

Klimajugend an die Macht: Bündnisstrategien als Antwort auf die Machtdefizite von Jugendbewegungen

Zusammenfassung: Auf Grundlage qualitativer Interviews analysiert dieser Artikel, wie Aktivist:innen der Schweizer Klimabewegung mit ihrer Jugendlichkeit umgehen. Die Befragten assoziieren mit ihrer Jugendlichkeit institutionelle, diskursive und ökonomische Machtdefizite, die ihre politische Durchsetzungsfähigkeit mindern. Darauf reagieren sie mit einer Strategie, die auf Bündnisse mit «erwachsenen» Organisationen setzt, die diese Machtdefizite kompensieren. Diese Bündnisse wiederum prägen und werden geprägt von der politischen Ausrichtung der Bewegung.

Schlüsselwörter: Klimabewegung, Koalitionen, Macht, soziale Bewegungen, Jugend

La jeunesse pour le climat au pouvoir : stratégies de coalition en réponse au déficit de pouvoir des mouvements de jeunesse

Résumé : Sur la base d'entretiens qualitatifs, cet article analyse la manière dont des activist·e·s du mouvement climatique suisse reflètent leur jeunesse. Les personnes interrogées associent la position des jeunes à un déficit de pouvoir institutionnel, discursif et économique qui entrave leur assertivité politique. Cela influence leur stratégie, qui met l'accent sur les coalitions avec des organisations « adultes », pour compenser ces déficits de pouvoir. Ces coalitions, à leur tour, façonnent et sont façonnées par l'orientation politique du mouvement.

Mots-clés : mouvement climatique, coalitions, pouvoir, mouvement social, jeunesse

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1 Introduction

«Klimajugend» – climate youth – was voted word of the year in 2019 for the German-speaking areas of Switzerland (NZZ 2019). While the self-designation for the movement is "climate strike," it is the most common Swiss German label for the movement against climate change – known in other parts of the world as Fridays For Future. The label underscores the youthful character of the movement, yet the movement itself rejects this ascription in part. This ambiguity is the object of the present study: On the one hand, the protesters endorse the youthfulness of their movement as the brand core of their movement. On the other hand, they perceive various power deficits that go along with the ascription of youth and develop various strategies to overcome these deficits, mainly in the form of coalitions.

A multitude of recent studies have focused on the new international climate movement. It emerged with the global spread of so-called climate strikes under the slogan "Fridays for Future" (FFF) in late 2018, modeled on Greta Thunberg's school strikes (de Moor et al. 2020). These were followed by intensified protest activities in 2019, culminating in internationally coordinated mass demonstrations. As several studies emphasize, the social composition of the FFF movement in the global north is characterized primarily by a strong presence of youth who are politically active for the first time (de Moor et al. 2020). Other research indicates an overrepresentation of the upper middle class which positions itself on the left (Emilsson et al. 2020; Neuber et al. 2020). In Switzerland, surveys conducted in 2019 at demonstrations and in 2021 within internal communication channels suggest that the social composition of mobilized protesters and active climate strikers coincides with these findings (Giugni and Lorenzini 2020; Schaupp et al. 2022). Both moderate and radical political demands are present in the climate movement (Marquardt 2020; Giugni and Lorenzini 2020) Within its large mobilizations for demonstrations and unconventional types of action such as the school strike – the new climate movement represents a new wave of environmental protests in Switzerland (Lorenzini et al. 2021; cf. Balsiger 2016).

While most of the above-mentioned studies emphasize the youthful character of the climate movement,[1] there are few insights on the internal political effects of this composition. Our study seeks to address this gap. Basing ourselves on semi-structured interviews with activists from the Swiss climate strike, we analyze how the topic of "youth"[2] is conceptualized. Our study asks how the activists themselves

1 While emphasizing the youthful character of the movement, these studies do not provide a concrete age range because of legal problems in surveying minors.

2 Rather than drawing a definite age line to define the category of youth, we use this term with regard to the social position of the respondents as "non-adults". This includes not only pupils, who constitute the majority of our respondents, but also apprentices and young university students who might be adult in the juridical sense but do not take on adult social roles and are not attributed to such roles.

consider the position of youth within society and how this is reflected in their political strategies. Our findings show that on the one hand the activists identify the originality resulting from the youthful character of the movement as one of its central strengths. On the other hand, activists perceive youthfulness as a primary source of various power deficits. We argue that this assessment is crucial to the formation of their strategies. The perception of a power deficit is a general characteristic of most social movements which leads them toward extra-parliamentary forms of political articulation (della Porta and Diani 2006, 166–167). However, as we explain in the following sections, young people are faced with additional power deficits when compared with adults. Our interviewees name these power deficits as the reason for acting outside institutional politics and to increasingly pursue strategies of civil disobedience (Schaupp et al. 2022). Still, the primary conclusion they draw from their assessment of the political position of youth is that it is worthwhile to form coalitions with "adult" organizations.

Forming coalitions is central to most social movements (cf. van Dyke and McCammon 2010), including the climate movement (Rucht and Fink 2020; de Moor et al. 2021). While cross-movement coalitions are rare, various studies have documented examples of "social-ecological coalitions" consisting of mainly local environmental movements with, for example, trade unions (Mayer et al. 2010; Hultgren and Stevis 2020); these studies emphasize the potential for such coalitions to be a transformative force (Soder et al. 2018). Fisher and Nasrin (2021) have shown how coalitions with "adult organizations" have changed the youth FFF movement in the US, but the authors were unable to determine any concrete outcomes. Thus, the specific perspective of the youth movement toward coalition building mostly remains obscure. Our article contributes to closing that gap.

The article is structured as follows: In the second section, we briefly sketch relevant literature on social movement coalitions as well as the various ways in which youth are politically disadvantaged in modern societies, and how institutional, discursive, and economic power deficits are identified. In section three, we explain the methods used to collect the data. The fourth section reconstructs how the interviewed activists perceive their position in society in relation to political power. Section five elaborates the strategy of coalition building that the respondents name as a central strategy in dealing with their power deficits. Section six brings these findings into dialogue with existing literature on coalitions in social movements. Section seven concludes the analysis by emphasizing the importance of youth as a social position as well as the political learning processes of the activists in strategy building. Our findings thus contribute to the literature on the new climate movement and to research on coalitions in social movements. In particular, we address the understudied relevance and negotiation of coalition formation in youth movements.

2 Youth as Power Deficit

While the climate strike movement has a strong moral legitimacy in political discourse (Han and Ahn 2020), it lacks the power resources necessary for achieving substantial political influence. This relative powerlessness in the face of institutional politics and economic power is true for many social movements. As suggested by resource mobilization theory, social movement actors seek access to different resources in order to overcome such power deficits (McCarthy and Zald 1977). In this context, as pointed out by Staggenborg (1986), the forging of coalitions is a central means of gaining access to power.

As an integral part of every movement, coalitions increase the mobilizational capacity of a group or movement and extend their goals and strategies on other social groups (van Dyke and Amos 2017). Furthermore, as highlighted by Lauby (2021) regarding undocumented youth, coalitions represent a major opportunity for groups with a low social status. However, forging coalitions may pose some risk for social movements. A central dilemma for actors in multi-issue coalitions is the dilution of a characteristic identity and political profile (Beamish and Luebbers 2009). Moreover, power asymmetries in coalitions can lead to a subordination of members with a lower social status, which is relevant for youth movements (Taft and Gordon 2015; Gawerc 2020; Lauby 2021). While there is an abundance of research into diverse social movement coalitions and the mechanisms of their formation, the specific role of coalitions for youth movements in the climate strike movement is poorly understood. We argue that for these movements coalitions function as means to bridge a specific power deficit that stems from the relative structural powerlessness of youth and allow the negotiation of their agency and identity.

Lesko (2012) emphasizes that adolescence represents the relational other of adulthood and in this sense it is an important factor in the social construction of both adulthood and youth. This difference-based construction of adolescence thereby occurs in a hierarchical social space in which adolescence not only represents the other of adulthood but is also subordinate to it. Accordingly, existing research offers various accounts of the power deficits of youth in modern societies. These can be differentiated into three categories: institutional, discursive, and economic.

The age restriction on voting is the most obvious obstacle for youth participation in state politics. This, in turn, disincentivizes politicians from pursuing the political interests of young people (Farthing 2010). Even beyond suffrage, most modern states grant only restricted citizenship rights to youth. Examples of such restrictions include laws against status crimes such as "loitering" by young people or youth curfews. Economic citizenship rights are also restricted, for example, by exempting youth from minimum wage rules (Bessant 2004). Several studies lament a "disenchantment with politics" among youth (e. g. Pickel 2002; Oser and Biedermann 2003) which could be a consequence of the aforementioned restrictions.

Other studies emphasize the central role of youth in various social movements or the idea that the new climate movement represents the current pinnacle of youth activism (Hurrelmann and Albrecht 2020; de Moor et al. 2021).

The discursive power deficit of youth is caused primarily by the fact that young people are consistently disregarded in political debates. This fact builds on various discursive devices of delegitimation. Côté and Allahar (2006), for example, describe an "ideology of youth" consisting mainly of medical and pedagogical justifications for their political marginalization, such as alleged deficiencies in the adolescent brain. Males (1996) even speaks of a "war on youth," in which various discursive devaluations hold young people responsible for social problems such as poverty, drug use, and violence. In the aforementioned public and scholarly discourse on an alleged "disenchantment with politics," youth are regularly chastised as the cause of a "crisis of democracy" (Farthing 2010). This discursive delegitimation is also mobilized by opponents of the climate strike. A discourse analysis of the media portrayal of the international FFF movement documents a paternalistic narrative by politicians and large parts of the media framing young climate activists as ignorant students violating their legal obligation to attend school (Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; Goldenbaum and Thompson 2020). A similar paternalistic "adult gaze" in media is also observed for other youth movements (Gordon 2009, 162). This shows that the subordinate social position of youth is not only present in their own assessment but also in the perspective of other political actors.

The social position of youth differs from other disadvantaged groups like migrants or poor people in important ways. Youth lies across other social categories as people from all social backgrounds begin their lives as children. As we have seen above, most activists of the climate movement come from relatively affluent families. Yet, in comparison to their parents, children generally have restricted access to economic power. This power comes either from capital, which gives the owner power over investment, or from labor, on which others depend and whose retention can consequently exert economic pressure (Wright 2000). Côté (2014) even argues that, from a political-economic perspective, youth should be understood as an exploited class because of their dispossession and status on the lowest ends of labor markets. This status of youth as surplus labor has also led governments "to expand mass higher educational systems as places to 'park' young people for longer periods until their (cheap) labor is needed" (Côté 2014, 530–531).

Overall, children and adolescents have severely restricted access to institutional, discursive, and economic power resources. However, unlike the disadvantages resulting from other subordinate social positions, these are inherently temporary deficits. Most studies on youth disadvantages uphold this critical diagnosis, but we attempt to extend it. We follow Gordon's (2007) call for a focus on the agency of youth in interpreting their political positions and forging strategies to overcome their power deficits and how this is reflected in coalition formation.

3 Methods

This article is based on twenty-seven qualitative, problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000). Twenty-two interviews were conducted with active climate strikers in the Swiss-German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. Fifteen of these interviews stem from a prior study of the Swiss climate movement (Schaupp et al. 2022). Seven additional interviews were conducted for the purpose of this article. Additionally, we interviewed three officials of a Swiss trade union and two activists of the feminist strike,[3] as these proved to be the most important coalition partners of the climate movement. Based on a guideline that roughly structured the interviews, they contained open, narrative-generating questions as well as more problem-centered follow-up questions. These questions did not address the topic of youth, which was brought up spontaneously by all interviewed activists.

The interviews were conducted between August 2019 and October 2021, in either German or English, and averaged one hour in duration. The aim of the interviews with the climate strikers was to discern their political positions, particularly within Switzerland, and to develop an understanding of their reflections on activism and strategy for the movement. The participants were recruited in two ways. First, participants could leave their contact details for an interview via an open call on an online survey conducted as part of the prior study on the Swiss climate strike (Schaupp et al. 2022). As a second strategy, recruiting was done through "snowball sampling" (Noy 2008), in which interview partners and personal contacts were asked for recommendations for interview partners. Through these two types of sampling, a large and diverse pool of potential interviewees could be compiled. By means of predefined categories (see Schaupp et al 2022, 17), a heterogeneous sample of highly active climate strikers, regarding different forms of activism as well as different campaign and geographical contexts, was created for this study. The union officials were also recruited through snowball sampling, with a focus on including different internal positions.

The age of activist respondents ranges from seventeen to thirty; with most around twenty years old (see table 1). The gender ratio is balanced across the sample, with fourteen men and thirteen women. The majority of interviewees come from large and medium-sized Swiss cities, with five coming from the French-speaking and the rest from the German-speaking part of the country. The sample covers the main climate strike campaigns and includes those active at both the national and local levels. It was important for sampling to only recruit activists that were highly engaged in the movement in order to avoid misrepresenting the movement based on marginal voices. A small portion of the activists is also engaged at the international level.

3 The Swiss feminist strike is a movement mobilizing around feminist issues. It organizes strike demonstrations similar to the climate strikes. On 14 June 2019, they mobilized about 500 000 people for demonstrations in various Swiss cities.

Table 1 Principal Characteristics of Participants

# Interview	Affiliation	Age	Gender	Location	Context of Activism	Entry into Activism*
1	Climate strike	21	M	German-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning
2	Climate strike	30	W	French-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning
3	Climate strike	18	W	German-speaking city	Local	during pandemic
4	Climate strike	21	W	German-speaking town	Local and national	during pandemic
5	Climate strike	26	M	German-speaking town	Local	during pandemic
6	Climate strike	17	W	German-speaking city	Local	pre-pandemic
7	Climate strike	18	M	German-speaking countryside	Local	during pandemic
8	Climate strike	17	W	German-speaking countryside	Local, national, international	since beginning
9	Climate strike	20	M	French-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning
10	Climate strike	18	M	German-speaking city	Local	since beginning
11	Climate strike	22	W	French-speaking city	Local	since beginning
12	Climate strike	17	W	German-speaking agglomeration	Local	since beginning
13	Climate strike	21	M	German-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning
14	Climate strike	22	M	German-speaking town	Local	during pandemic
15	Climate strike	20	M	French-speaking town	Local, national, international	pre-pandemic
16	Union	39	M	German-speaking city	Branch union-official	–
17	Union	42	W	German-speaking city	National union bureau	–
19	Union	49	M	German-speaking city	National union leadership	–
19	Climate strike	20	M	German-speaking city	Local, national, international	since beginning
20	Climate strike	18	W	German-speaking countryside	Local and national	during pandemic
21	Climate strike	27	M	French-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning
22	Climate strike	18	W	German-speaking city	Local, national, international	since beginning
23	Climate strike / Party	21	M	German-speaking town	Local	since beginning
24	Climate strike / Party	19	M	German-speaking city	Local	since beginning
25	Climate strike / Party	19	W	German-speaking town	Local and national	since beginning
26	Feminist strike / Climate strike	23	W	German-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning
27	Feminist strike	29	W	German-speaking city	Local and national	since beginning

* Since beginning: 12/2018–12/2019; pre-pandemic: 03/2019–01/2020; during pandemic: 02/2020–10/2021.

Interviews were inductively coded and analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). Coding was done by all three authors. While the analysis in the primary study (Schaupp et al. 2022) aimed at identifying general characteristics of the movement, the focus of the secondary analysis for this article was on the topic of youth.

4 Climate Activists' Reflections on Youth in Society

Almost all respondents spontaneously raised the topic of youth in the interviews. One participant even names "organizing youth together" as the central goal of the mobilization (I#19). In a quantitative survey of the Swiss Climate Strike, the respondents named "defending the interests of the younger generation" their second most important concern, right after a general "raising awareness" (Schaupp et al. 2022, 36).

The interviewees explain the youthful character of the movement through the temporal logic of the climate crisis. As one interviewee explains, "I have the feeling that overall we are already representative [of Swiss youth], because all young people want to have a future." (I#6) Nevertheless, it is striking that none of the interviewees describes the issue as a generational conflict. Instead, all address the issue of youth primarily as a problem of power. As one interviewee says, "the climate strike has nothing, no leverage. So we're school pupils and college students standing up for the climate. And the oil lobby says, 'You don't even have any capital, you can't give me anything back, I don't care'" (I#3). Thus, this subject sees the economic power deficit in the fact that most activists are in school or university and cannot use their labor power or capital as leverage.

Many climate activists feel excluded from institutional politics. Some are too young to vote and some feel that the parliamentary system is unresponsive in any case. The activists cite their lack of access to institutional politics as an important reason for their involvement in an extra-parliamentary movement: "I didn't have the right forum, because I was still far from being an adult and could never have done anything in institutional politics" (I#6). This institutional power deficit in the form of a lack of access to parliament is contextualized by one interviewee through the situation of additional social inequalities:

> *In parliament you have to fulfill certain criteria to participate, so you have to be a citizen, a citizen of Switzerland. You can't if you are from Ethiopia. And the age. You can't participate as a young person […] Who gets elected? It's mostly old white men*. (I#25)

This interviewee sees the composition and organization of the movement as a consequence of social inequality, specifically the discrimination against young people and non-Swiss nationals.

With regard to the discursive power deficit, one interviewee states that climate activists are not taken seriously in general political discourse because of their youth: "We are just the kids who are on the street, who don't really exist, who scream a bit, but you just don't see or people don't talk about why we scream like that" (I#8). Another person reports: "at the beginning there was still the issue, ah the children, they actually just want to skip school" (I#27). This open delegitimization of the movement on account of the age of its protagonists is documented by other research (e. g. Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020). Various interviewees also described a seemingly friendlier form of non-acceptance. One participant explains, for example, that: "Either we are the sweet climate strikers, or we are the climate youth. We are not taken seriously" (I#3). However, another interviewee also sees advantages of this image for the movement: "It's not only bad, because that also brings you somewhere, just, the open doors that I talked about" (I#1). Other interviewees also state that the climate strike's appearance as a youth movement partly saves it from being sorted into the common camps of "adult politics." This partly means broader social acceptance and less open hostility. "But of course it can't stop there" (ibid.), because ultimately one has to be taken seriously in order to make a political difference.

In this context, it is also relevant that the interviewees associate the successes of the movement with overcoming the youthful character of the climate strike. One person puts it as follows: "We are really a movement not just the climate youth or climate children, but it is really a movement that has power" (I#27). Another person summed up the various actions that she considered successful, which have shown her "that the climate strike is becoming broader, it's including more older people, it's including more working people, university students, and apprentices" (I#25). Nonetheless, the interviewees largely agree on their self-image as a youth movement and they deal with this strategically.

5 Coalition Building

For almost all interviewees, the central answer to the power deficits of the climate strike is the forging of coalitions with other political actors. This is a central element of the nationwide campaign "Strike for Future," which was initiated in 2019 and forms the context for most of the efforts described here (cf. Schaupp et al. 2022). One person argues: "The power balance is not on our side. So, we have to work with others to be stronger" (I#15). Another person describes how this conclusion is the result of a learning process from activists' experiences: "Why do we need them? That was a question that was always here and many people believed that just as

climate strike we were able to move everything […] and it's only progressively that we acknowledged that what we are doing was not sufficient" (I#21). Corresponding to the three power deficits, there are three groups of potential allies that are consistently referred to in the interviews: scientists, other movements and economic actors.

5.1 Science

First, the interviewees regularly emphasize the need for networking with scientists. One interviewee even goes so far as to claim that "the climate strike is a bit of a mouthpiece between society and science" (I#14). An important reason for this strong orientation toward the natural sciences is the discursive power deficit of the movement. For example, one person reports that "in the climate strike, we're not experts in anything, so it's worth working with others who have a certain knowledge or have certain know-hows that we don't have because we're quite young" (I#15). This means that networking with scientists serves the function of counteracting the power deficit resulting from its youthful character. The goal is to gain legitimacy in the debate or to be taken seriously in the first place. The most practical result of the cooperation between the Swiss climate strike and the scientific community has been the so-called Climate Action Plan, a catalog of measures several hundred pages long, which, as several interviewees emphasize, "was worked out with quite a few scientists" (I#7). Besides this big project, which could be characterized as an informal "event coalition" (van Dyke and Amos 2017, 1), exchange with individual scientists is the dominant form of direct cooperation. However, organizations like "Scientist for Future" or "Scientist Rebellion" show that scientists also take an activist role in the larger climate movement. While the strong trust of the climate movement in the authority of science might seem politically naive at the first glance, these results demonstrate a rather strategic stance on the part of the activists, who use the authority of science to compensate for their own discursive power deficit. Accordingly a mutual discursive reference or coalition between climate activists and scientist is observed as a structural characteristic of the movement (cf. Kern and Opitz 2021).

5.2 Movements and Associations

With regard to the institutional power deficit of the "climate youth," most respondents rely on coalitions with other movements and associations. One person explains that "we should also build different links with other struggles, like feminist struggles and antiracist and everything and try to build bridges between the climate and social struggles, because everything is linked" (I#11). The activists justify the necessity of coalitions with other political movements not only strategically but also in terms of political orientation. This connection is derived particularly from the demand for climate justice. As one participant comments:

> *The climate crisis cannot be solved simply by going to net zero, but rather that in order to go to net zero, social injustices must also be addressed, and that it therefore makes a lot of sense to join forces, for example with the feminist movement or with trade unions.* (I#4)

In the wish to "combine struggles" (I#20), some activists also envision the climate strike as part of a greater societal movement for a just and ecologically sustainable future – a "web of change" (I#21), as one person puts it. As a consequence, these activists also call for a general stance of solidarity toward other actors that are seen as progressive. For the interviewees, however, the main reason for alliances with other actors is the hope of jointly exerting more pressure on institutional powers.

An alliance partner appearing in almost all interviews is "obviously the feminist strike" (I#2). Here too, the cooperation is justified both in terms of content and strategy. One interviewee formulates it in the following manner: "If you have certain patriarchal patterns, that often also has an impact on ecology and vice versa. And I think if you can do that, bring it more together and point out, it's not just about climate, it's actually about the whole system, where patriarchy also takes a big role" (I#1). In terms of strategy, the interviewees hope that networking with the feminist movement will give them easier access to segments of the population that they would not otherwise reach: "Because there are really more people there who are already in there themselves and the climate strike as a young movement is not yet in many of these milieus at all" (I#2). Here again, an important concern is overcoming the purely youthful nature of the climate strike to gain majorities that can exert pressure on institutional politics. The cooperation with feminist strike groups is based mainly on social ties in urban (youth) milieus facilitating exchange. Shared organizational structures and cultures in decentralized grassroots collectives allow for a straightforward practical and informal collaboration, mainly around demonstrations, of both movements (I#27). Coalition activity was particularly high in 2019, when both movements had their largest mobilizations, and has decreased since.

5.3 Economic Actors

All interviewees report that the climate strike does not accept money from for-profit corporations because to do so would be "greenwashing" (I#6). Instead, the movement mobilizes monetary resources primarily through environmental NGOs. The relationship is a rather instrumental one: "We just ask ourselves if with this cooperation we get closer to the goals or not. Most of the time it just comes down to that" (I#15). The activists' most important source of hope in overcoming the economic power deficit, however, is cooperation with trade unions, as one participant pointed out: "I think the best and optimal combination is Strike for Future together with the unions" (I#8). By networking with trade unions, the activists hope for a more credible link between climate protection and social justice. They assume that

this will lead to stronger support for their concerns among the wage-dependent population: "We [need] the support of a wide variety of actors, the trade unions are especially important in this regard, so that the measures are also supported by the working class. Because this is a movement that struggles with similar problems in the current system" (I#14). This assessment also informs the general emphasis in the Swiss climate strike on social justice. This quality manifests itself not only in political articulation but also in the fact that 26 percent of the Swiss climate strike activists state that they are union members (Schaupp et al. 2022), a proportion high above the average of 17.4 percent of unionized Swiss employees (Statista 2021) – especially considering that most of the activists are students. Consequently, some of the respondents are also interested in direct contact with workers in sectors that would be particularly affected by a social-ecological transformation:

> *It's not like those people in construction work, they somehow all hate the climate […] And I think there you would have to be able to create a lot more synergies between the working people and also these climate demands, bring them together like that.* (I#1)

This approach also reflects the previously mentioned call for cross-movement solidarity and joining forces. For the activists, the main stated reason for coalitions with unions, however, lies in the (potential) economic power of the latter. The activists locate this power primarily in the capacity for labor strikes: "That you actually have the lever, you make an economic strike and through that you try to exert pressure […] Which is of course somehow an idea and a lever that exists in history or that is actually there, simply the strike as a form of refusal of work and refusal of the continuation of the status quo" (I#4). The goal of these activists is thus to expand the climate strike. While it is currently mainly carried out by pupils and students – whose strike has hardly any economic impact and thus generates little pressure – they aim to extend it to large sections of the working population.

The coalition with unions is the most formalized one as most of the collaboration took place in the long-term "Strike for Future" campaign. Coordination attempts are strongly channeled through institutionalized trade union bodies, with few resources freed up for this purpose, instead of rank-and-file member involvement.[4] "They didn't like the idea of us going into the workplaces though, I think", one activist reports (I#22). The climate strikers emphasize the few good relationships that have been built up with like-minded "allies" within the unions (I#21) who express a desire for closer collaboration. The union apparatus and leadership are approached more instrumentally, as "a means to an end" (I#20). The "Strike for Future" campaign resulted in three national action days from 2020. The involvement

4 This hesitation might be better understood by reading it in the context of the close historical entanglement between the welfare state, institutions of social partnership, and fossil fuel-based regimes of economic growth (Schaupp 2021).

of the unions, on the national as well as on the local level has intensified since, most prominently in the campaign for a work time reduction in spring 2022. Overall, our study reveals that coalition building is the central strategy of the climate youth for overcoming their power deficits. These coalitions in turn influenced the climate strike's own political development through processes of political learning.

6 Youthful Coalitions and Political Learning

While the coalitions described above are an important factor of hope for the climate activists for overcoming their power deficits, they also pose numerous challenges. Several respondents see a danger that the political identity and originality of the climate strike will be lost through its coalitions. They argue that originality is the greatest strength of the movement: "I think the climate strike was successful because they did it differently. It was completely new images, new things, and so on. And that's why I'm a little bit cautious about how that image is changed" (I#10). A danger of losing originality exists with respect to coalitions specifically: "Often you are somehow absorbed in the alliance and forget a bit who you are," reports one of the participants (I#1). Another participant says that her efforts to form an alliance with the feminist strike have come under criticism due to similar fears within the movement:

> *We were attacked from all sides, that it wouldn't work, that it would fragment the movement, well not the movement, but the goals, so like, you have to focus on one goal, climate, and if you start supporting everything, then that dilutes the core message.* (I#2)

While the network analysis of the US movement by Fisher and Nasrin (2021) does not show coalitional bonds beyond the climate movement, our empirical data clearly show the presence of coalitions with other movements. Such coalitions are especially important for youth movements like the climate strike, as they are a strategic means of accessing power resources that are only available to adults. Meanwhile, this strategy poses problems concerning the youth-adult relation of the coalitions themselves.

In the activists' contact with the trade unions, the topic of youth was of central importance. On the one hand, the topic of youth played a positive role: "[The trade union official] just emphasized quite strongly in these meetings how great it was that there was cooperation between the trade unions and youth movements, because that just didn't work out somehow since 1968" (I#19). On the other hand, climate strikers describe difficulties of facing a "hierarchical" and "tough" (I#22) trade union apparatus organized according to a very different institutional logic (I#19), which stands in contrast to the facilitating effect of "cultural congruence" (van Dyke and Amos 2017) with the feminist strike. The strongly institutionalized and "adult"

character of the trade unions made it difficult for the activists to establish initial contact. The activists responded to this problem strategically by: "first approaching the youth sections of the trade unions, because we thought […] it is probably easier to approach them" (I#22).

Partly in order to prevent a paternalistic domination of their movement by their coalition partners, the activists established the principle of "one-sided support" (I#6) for coalitions with institutional actors. This means that other organizations are allowed to support the movement, but the movement does not officially commit to them. "You can't let them take the helm," one activist explains. "It must not get to the point where they set the tone" (I#1). In practice, however, most interviewees report that the principle of one-sidedness has proven unrealistic. As one respondent indicates, a shift away from this principle is the result of a learning process within the movement:

> *At some point we all develop further and realize, it's so complex, everything is connected. And that's why it's no problem to be together with other movements. In the beginning we were always afraid of being taken over.* (I#27)

In most cases of collaboration, there has been mutual influence. To a particular extent, this had been the case with unions. One activist even thinks that "it was not [that] the unions support us, but that we support the unions" (I#8).

While the coalitions generally represent a means of addressing youth powerlessness, the instrumental approach to coalition partners seems to speak to a strategic awareness on the part of activists. The activists carefully assess the usefulness and risks of cooperation and partnership in terms of mobilization capacity and political outcomes. As also indicated by Eide and Kunelius (2021), the activists aim for an independent profile and are alert to potentials of paternalism and appropriation. This form of instrumental resource mobilization corresponds to the fact that relatively weak actors often assess their partnerships regarding the potential of influencing power relations to their advantage (cf. Gawerc 2020). Yet the forging of alliances and demarcation from other actors or opponents out of value-based motives plays a role in the climate strike's internal negotiations about its foundations of action and its political profile. Most respondents describe a learning process wherein they developed a "strategic sense" (Carvallo 2020) of orienting their actions. This led them to the realization that the climate crisis cannot be solved without attending to social issues. Consequently, the movement developed towards an "environmentalism from below" (Schaupp 2020), characterized by the desire to mobilize subaltern actors. This quality is especially conspicuous in collaborations with the feminist strike and unions. In this sense, beyond the instrumental relationship, cross-movement coalitions also function as a tactical and symbolic "statement" (Gawerc 2020) which reflects these political learning processes. As indicated by our data, such developments influence the climate strike's self-image and identity as a youth movement. The

activists describe the climate strike either as an autonomous movement or as a part of a bigger "web of change" (I#21) in which societal conflict lines are negotiated – as discussed by Zajak and Haunss (2021).[5] Coalition formation thus catalyzes the attenuation or transcendence of the movement's youthful character as its common features with other (adult) actors are emphasized.

Our data indicate that shared social contexts and organizational principles between the youth movement and its partners have facilitated coalition building (c.f. van Dyke and Amos 2017). The challenges faced by the climate strike coalitions, as illustrated above, also index the internal factors of coalition formation. As our material shows, the danger of diluting actions and identity also presents participants with an opportunity for negotiating movement identity. Coalitions therefore open up possibilities for internal political differentiation, as illustrated, for example, in the discussion about the turn towards the feminist strike mentioned above. We argue that this dilemma is not only an obstacle, but also a productive discursive site for activists to negotiate different aspects of their agency, political orientation, and identity as a (youth) movement. Our research thereby underscores changes in identity, frameworks, and tactics which are the outcomes of coalitions, though we focus on the effects of internal learning processes and strategic discussions *about* the forging of the coalitions. Finally, the climate strikers' strategic action undertaken to prevent the appropriation of their aims or to defend against the paternalism of other actors – as is for example evident in the negotiation of the one-sided-support principle – showcases the problem of power asymmetries in the formation of intergenerational coalitions (Taft and Gordon 2015). Besides being a strategic answer to youth powerlessness, forging coalitions poses new problems for the youth movement, and demands a strategic response that includes a negotiation of adult power *in* coalitions (cf. Gordon 2009).

7 Conclusion

Since 2019, the climate movement has become the largest global social movement, mobilizing millions of people around the world. The movement's youthful character and its resulting originality was from the start an important component of its success in agenda setting. However, the activists interviewed here perceive the primary political effects of adolescence as institutional, discursive, and economic power deficits. Our data show that such deficits carry important implications for the movement's strategies and tactics. As in other movements, participants cite a lack of access to institutional power as a central motivation for organizing as a movement in the first

5 With the potential outcome of transforming political discourse and power relations, this process should not be seen as a simple alignment or adaptation into the political system, as implied by many models of youth movements as "citizens-in-the-making" (Gordon 2007, 635).

place. The primary strategy for countering these deficits is coalition formation with carefully chosen adult actors. Activists describe collaboration with scientists as a means of overcoming their discursive positioning as unserious "kids." They also ally themselves with other movements in order to extend their organizing beyond their own age cohort and social milieu. Importantly, activists also attempt to compensate for their lack of economic power by aligning themselves with trade unions, whose strike capacity they identify as an important resource. Nevertheless, these coalitions are not purely instrumental in character, but emerge from the political view that the climate crisis cannot be isolated from broader questions of social justice. The strategic development of the movement as it builds power through coalitions has elicited political debates and thereby a broader assessment of the environmental problem.

The category of youth also structured the internal dynamics of the coalitions themselves. Respondents describe how they were able to forge coalitions easily with feminist and anti-racist movements, which were close in cultural terms to their own activist youth circles. Respondents however report greater difficulty in dealing with trade unions, which they perceived as hierarchical and "adult." In order to prevent paternalistic appropriations of their movement by their adult allies, the movement initially upheld a strict principle of "one-sided-support" for coalitions, which was later softened.

Our findings contribute to the literature on coalitions in social movements and to youth politics. Where most previous studies have remarked on the youthful character of the climate movement, our findings show that youth is not just a demographic characteristic of the climate movement, but a substantial influence on its politics. As della Porta and Portos (2021) have argued, social structures like class do influence strategic choices within movements. Our data show that the social position of youth and the power deficit that goes along with this position are also important variables, especially in explaining movements' coalition strategies. While most movements over the course of their development often seek coalitions, the tactic appears to be especially important for youth groups because they must compensate for their power deficits. Moreover, the alliances of youth movements take on highly specific forms wherein the youth-adult relationship plays an important role, e. g. as a response to (or fear of) paternalism.

Our findings show that young activists have a keen understanding of the power deficits resulting from their social status as adolescents. More importantly, our results emphasize the agency of young activists not only in reflecting on their social position but also in developing strategies in response, such as those coalitions described above. These coalitions, in turn, shape and are shaped by the political orientation of the movement. Because the social position of youth and youth-adult political interactions are not unique to the climate movement, it should be assumed that dynamics similar to those identified by our study also occur within other youth movements. However, further research – designed specifically to address the political

agency of young people and relations between youth and adults in political coalitions – is still needed to evaluate whether the results of this study apply generally.

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