

# Unequal Participation Among Youth and Immigrants: An Overview

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## Abstract

This thematic issue covers the political participation of youth and immigrants in contemporary democracies. The articles in this issue advance knowledge in youth studies, migration studies, and political behavior, theoretically and empirically. They do so by proposing innovative perspectives on voter turnout, political efficacy, protest behavior, representation preferences, and intersectional dynamics among young and immigrant-origin voters. Utilizing diverse methodological approaches, including quantitative analyses, qualitative interviews, and intersectional studies, the contributions highlight significant participation gaps and the factors that influence these disparities. The findings underscore the importance of addressing inequalities to strengthen democratic representation and stability.

## Keywords

immigrants; minorities; political participation; representation; voting; youth

## 1. Introduction

Among all forms of political participation, voting has a crucial position: It has the highest usage rates (compared to other participation forms such as demonstrations or support party organizations) and promises the highest level of political equality as every eligible citizen’s vote counts equally and disparities in turnout, along levels of income, education, or other characteristics, are less pronounced than for other forms of political participation. However, even though “[v]oting is less unequal than other forms of participation [...] it is far from unbiased” (Lijphart, 1997, p. 1). Not all social groups participate at the same rates in elections (e.g., Gallego, 2010; Schäfer et al., 2016).

This pattern is problematic as unequal participation can have detrimental consequences for the representation of societal subgroups, democratic satisfaction, or regime stability more broadly (Diehl & Blohm, 2001). The lower the political involvement of social groups, the lower the incentives for political actors to consider their interests in the political process, which might reinforce itself and lead to societal disintegration in the long run. Previous research has shown considerable participation gaps—for turnout as well as other forms of participation—based on age (Rossteutscher et al., 2022; Smets, 2012), ethnicity, immigrant origin (Rapp, 2020; Spies et al., 2020), or education (Gallego, 2010).

In this thematic issue, we focus on particularly pronounced and societally relevant participation gaps among immigrant-origin/non-ethnic voters and young citizens, as well as their intersection. The political participation of youths and immigrants are becoming increasingly important in the context of transnational migration and demographic change, as well as in light of many initiatives and developments about lowering the voting age and extending the right to vote to foreigners. However, due to their relatively small shares in the population and as many group members are (still) barred from voting, they do not constitute a pertinent political constituency and are often not considered relevant subjects for academic research on political behavior.

Due to demographic change, electorates in most established democracies are growing older and older, fueling discussions around voting age reductions (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020; Leininger & Faas, 2020; Stiers et al., 2021). Given that turnout in one's first election strongly affects turnout in future elections (e.g., Dinas, 2012), it is essential to understand what can motivate youths to vote. Considering that a good deal of political socialization happens in childhood and adolescence—the so-called “impressionable years” (Neundorf & Smets, 2017)—it is crucial to study youths and perhaps even children directly rather than making inferences about adult respondents' childhood.

Similarly, immigrants and their descendants are marginalized in politics. Although the number of immigrants and naturalized citizens is increasing in most Western European democracies, previous research has largely overlooked this group. It is well established that turnout among immigrants is usually lower than among native-born populations. However, while classical theories on individual differences in voter turnout apply similarly to immigrant and native voters, they do not fully account for the turnout differential between the two groups (Spies et al., 2020). Moreover, the electoral choices of immigrants and ethnic minorities often display distinct patterns (Bird et al., 2011; Goerres et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential to gain deeper insight into this heterogeneous group's political attitudes and beliefs and understand how various factors—such as identities or experiences of discrimination—may influence their political participation (Schildkraut, 2005).

Despite their differences, both groups share one important feature: They are too often overlooked by politics and political science. Both groups include members eligible to participate fully in the political system and those who are not. Those who are eligible—young adults and naturalized immigrants—form a small part of the electorate. While other group members lack the right to participate in formalized political representation, the latter will, over time, integrate into the political system. Furthermore, the two groups we focus on, youths and immigrants, offer opportunities for intersectional research on young immigrants that merit more attention from empirical social science.

## 2. Introducing the Articles in This Issue

The contributions to our thematic issue address the political participation of youths, immigrants, and ethnic minorities from various angles. They include articles dealing with youths (with varying age definitions), immigrant-origin/ethnic minority voters, or the intersection of both and focus on key outcomes, such as turnout, other forms of participation, and political attitudes. The first four articles focus on youths among the general population, examining voter turnout, political efficacy, protest behavior, and representation preferences across different European countries.

Eichhorn and Huebner (2025) study whether lowering the voting age to 16 and the resulting early voter boost observed in other countries persist over time. Using survey data from Scotland—seven years after the voting age was lowered there—they provide a quantitative analysis of various measures of political engagement, including voting in the 2021 Scottish parliament elections. Their findings suggest that lowering the voting age may have a lasting positive effect on voter turnout but does not influence non-electoral political engagement.

Garrizmann et al. (2025) examine the role of internal political efficacy in explaining unequal voter turnout among newly enfranchised young citizens. Using original longitudinal survey data from three German federal states, they quantitatively analyze voter turnout in first and subsequent elections. Their findings indicate that while internal efficacy significantly predicts electoral participation among all young voters, its effect is stronger for individuals from lower-class backgrounds. Once lower-class individuals participate in their first election, their likelihood of voting again aligns closely with their higher-class peers, suggesting that strengthening political efficacy among disadvantaged youth could reduce long-term inequalities in political participation.

Portos (2025) examines protest behavior among youth in Greece, Italy, and Spain, analyzing whether the determinants are similar across these three countries, which have often been grouped together in previous studies. Drawing on the EURYKA survey (2018), which includes oversamples of 18–24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds, the author conducts a quantitative cross-sectional analysis. His findings highlight the heterogeneity of these three national cases, offering a cautionary perspective on treating them as a single entity—Southern Europe—when studying social movements and protests.

Kurz et al. (2025) focus on the age of political representatives. They analyze whether the age of representatives matters to voters using online survey data collected in Germany (2023). Their findings reveal strong in-group preferences for candidates from one's own age group among both younger (up to 30 years old) and older citizens (60 years and older). However, out-group bias differs between the two groups: while elderly citizens are not averse to young representatives, younger citizens exhibit a different pattern, favoring younger representatives.

The next five articles focus on immigrant-origin voters and racialized minorities, examining key aspects of political participation and representation. These studies utilize diverse methodological approaches—including quantitative analyses based on electoral data and large-scale surveys and qualitative insights drawn from interviews and focus groups—to explore voter turnout, group-based voting behavior, and perceptions of political representation. The articles span various contexts, covering Europe and North and South America.

Liang and Harell (2025) focus on voter turnout in Canada among the White majority and racialized minority groups. They rely on data from several surveys conducted in Canada (2020–2023), examining voter turnout and self-reported racial identity. Their findings suggest a significant turnout gap for almost all racialized minority groups. In explaining these disparities, they show that socio-economic and psychological factors may offer some insights; however, a substantial portion of the gap remains unexplained.

Morales et al. (2025) focus their quantitative study on voter turnout in Chile, relying on data from Chile's electoral census for elections from 2012 to 2023. Relying on Chile's unique voting regulations—non-citizens can vote in national elections after five years of residence—they analyze the impact of introducing compulsory voting in 2021. Their findings show that while compulsory voting significantly increased turnout among citizens and non-citizens, a substantial gap remains between the two groups.

Oshri and Itzkovitch-Malka (2025) focus in their quantitative analysis on Muslims' voting behavior in Western Europe. They argue that exclusion and perceived discrimination heighten the saliency of group interests among Muslims, making them more likely to vote as a group for left-wing parties. They begin by analyzing pooled data from the European Social Survey spanning 2002–2020 across various Western European democracies before narrowing their focus to the British case, incorporating regional-level indicators of social exclusion. Their findings indicate that feelings of discrimination relate positively to supporting left-wing parties.

Vermeulen et al. (2025) provide a qualitative analysis of perceptions of descriptive and substantive representation among Dutch citizens of immigrant origin. The Dutch case is particularly interesting due to the presence of several parties focusing on immigrants and a significant number of immigrant-origin candidates. Drawing on data from six focus groups (2022) among different country-of-origin groups, their findings reveal that while descriptive representation matters as a starting point, it is insufficient, as participants consistently emphasized the importance of having their interests meaningfully represented.

Stünzi et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative study on the political involvement of immigrants' descendants in Switzerland as elected members of local parliaments. They draw on more than 30 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 with elected young politicians of both immigrant origin and Swiss descent. By examining the trajectories that led to the political involvement of immigrant descendants, they highlight the crucial role of local schools in political socialization and the influence of cantonal institutional and discursive contexts.

Intersectional approaches have gained increasing prominence in research on political participation, highlighting the nuanced dynamics within different demographic groups. The final four contributions in this thematic issue adopt this perspective, explicitly focusing on the intersection of youth and immigrant-origin voters. These studies explore how perceived discrimination, national identity, parental influences, and gender shape political attitudes, participation, and engagement among young immigrant-origin individuals.

Hoffmann and Benoit (2025) provide a quantitative cross-sectional analysis based on the German sample of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU), wave 5, conducted in 2015. They focus on conventional and unconventional political participation of young adults (ages 18–30) by examining the moderating effect of perceived discrimination and national identification on indicators from the civic voluntarism model. Their findings show that moderating relationships with the civic voluntarism model vary. For example, they find contrary effects of perceived discrimination on recruitment networks and

unconventional participation, which are positive for individuals with a migration background and negative for individuals without a migration background.

Kleer et al. (2025) focus on political interest as an essential determinant of political participation. Relying on data from the CILS4EU (waves 1-3 2010-2013; ages about 15-17), they provide an analysis of the direct relationship of discrimination experiences as well as the moderating effect of discrimination on the relationship between social participation and political interest among young adults without and with migration background. Their findings show a positive relationship between discrimination and political interest but no amplification of the link between social participation and political interest through discrimination.

Guglielmi and Maggini (2025) focus on the role of parental influences for political engagement, measured by an additive index including political interest and partisan attachment, among late adolescents. Their quantitative cross-sectional analysis is based on data from the MAYBE project (2023-2024; ages 18-19) conducted in Italy's Lombardy region. They show that immigrant and native-born adolescents differ regarding the relationship between socioeconomic status and intergenerational social learning (political discussions at home or parent-child political similarity) with political engagement.

García-Albacete et al. (2025) add an additional facet by including gender in their analysis of political interest among adolescents with and without immigrant backgrounds. Relying on the CILS4EU data set (wave 2, 2011-2012; ages about 15-16), they show that immigrant-origin girls have the highest levels of political interest. However, there are no differences between those who migrated themselves (first generation) or are descendants of parents who migrated to the respective host countries (second generation).

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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