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Addressing Migrant Inequality in Youth Political Engagement: The Role of Parental Influences

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Abstract

While citizenship acquisition varies across the EU, children of immigrants are expected to comprise a growing share of the voting-age population in the coming years. Consequently, understanding the factors influencing their political integration has garnered increasing attention from researchers and policymakers. Existing studies highlight the complex and context-dependent interplay of structural, cultural, and policy-related factors that shape immigrant political engagement. Additionally, some scholars have noted that the standard model of youth political socialisation—where political learning is transmitted from parent to child—may be "disrupted" in immigrant families. Against this backdrop, this article investigates the critical role of family political discussions and parent–child political alignment in (re)producing ethnic inequalities in political engagement among late adolescents, using Lombardy (Italy) as a case study. The project MAYBE—Moving into Adulthood in uncertain times: Youth Beliefs, future Expectations, and life choices (University of Milan) collected survey data from 2,756 final-year high school students (aged 18–19) between February 2023 and March 2024, including 620 students with migrant backgrounds. The study applied a multilevel regression model—spanning 81 schools, 165 classes—to investigate individual and contextual factors, such as the classroom political climate and municipal electoral competitiveness. Migrant parents navigate the host country's political environment with varying levels of familiarity, shaped by their connections to the political culture of their country of origin. Findings suggest that these dynamics create unique pathways for the political socialisation of their children, in which the influence of socioeconomic status and intergenerational social learning on political engagement differs significantly from the patterns observed among native-born youth.

Keywords

family political discussions; Italy; parent–child political alignment; political socialisation; second-generation migrants; youth political engagement

1. Introduction

While the regulations on the acquisition of citizenship by children of immigrants vary across the EU (Goodman, 2023; Weil, 2010), it is reasonable to anticipate that this group will constitute an increasingly significant proportion of the voting-age population in the forthcoming years. According to Eurostat, between January 2014 and January 2023, the population of non-national children grew by 52.6%, almost offsetting the 4.4% decline in national children. Fostering the active participation of all young individuals, regardless of ethnic origin, is an ongoing challenge of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (Council of the European Union, 2018) that is closely linked to an additional, related concern: the declining participation of young people in institutional politics, such as voter turnout and party membership (Tsatsanis et al., 2021), or signing petitions, participating in legal demonstrations, and joining unofficial strikes (Deželan, 2023; Kitanova, 2020).

Levels and modes of youth political involvement are significantly shaped by social stratification (Giugni & Grasso, 2021; Hooghe & Boonen, 2015; Lello & Bazzoli, 2023). Young people of migrant origin face the dual challenge of being young and having a foreign background. These disadvantages, which intersect with other factors such as gender and socioeconomic status (SES), can negatively impact their active participation in democratic life (Collins, 2021; Gatti et al., 2024; Harris & Roose, 2014). In addition, the lower levels of political engagement among immigrant parents (Ortensi & Riniolo, 2020; Terriquez & Kwon, 2015) and their adherence to the political culture of the country of origin (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024; Dinesen & Andersen, 2022) can have a detrimental effect on the political involvement of their children. Accordingly, researchers and policymakers have shown increasing interest in understanding the factors influencing the social and political integration in the EU of immigrants and their descendants (e.g., De Rooij, 2012; Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2022; Monforte & Morales, 2018; Vintila & Martiniello, 2021). Although methodological challenges remain, data collection is increasing to enable quantitative analyses of life outcomes for children of immigrants, in terms of health, education, social exclusion, labour market participation, and family transitions (Lessard-Phillips et al., 2017).

Despite this growing interest, relatively few studies have specifically explored the political engagement of children of immigrants and the extent to which it differs from that of their native-born peers in European democracies. Existing research on the political engagement of children of immigrants often draws on the extensive American literature on assimilation and youth political socialisation and employs both comparative (e.g., Hochman & García-Albacete, 2019) and country-specific approaches (e.g., Jungkunz & Marx, 2024; Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021). Research findings reveal a complex and mixed pattern that is highly context-dependent and shaped by a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and policy-related factors. Furthermore, some studies seem to downplay the social relevance of the topic, suggesting that differences in political engagement and participation between children of immigrants and native-born peers could disappear as a result of intergenerational assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2003; Finseraas et al., 2022; Hochman & García-Albacete, 2019; Li & Jones, 2020; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). While immigrant parents often face structural challenges such as limited legal rights, language barriers, and lower familiarity with the host country's political system, their children typically have greater access to these resources. Born or raised in the host country, the second generation often holds citizenship and benefits from education systems that facilitate political socialisation and exposure to the political norms of the "receiving" country (Heath & Brinbaum, 2014; Quintelier, 2009, 2015). Although the gap in political involvement between second-generation immigrants and natives is generally narrower compared to the gap between natives and

first-generation migrants, several studies highlight that the political integration of children of immigrants is shaped by distinct challenges (Elodie, 2022). These include negotiating dual identities (Fischer-Neumann, 2014; Hochman & García-Albacete, 2019; Rapp, 2020) and experiencing discrimination (Quintelier, 2009), often compounded by the disadvantages inherited from their families' immigrant backgrounds (Alba & Foner, 2015; Bevelander & Hutcheson, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this article sets out to study the political incorporation of children of immigrants in European democracies. Specifically, it examines whether the influence of family factors—such as SES and political socialisation—on political engagement varies between children of immigrants and their native-born peers. We adopt the concept of migrant political incorporation (Bueker, 2005; Laubenthal, 2023; Martiniello & Rath, 2014) to describe the process through which immigrants and their descendants engage with and integrate into the political systems of their host countries. This process includes both formal aspects, such as obtaining citizenship and voting rights, and informal dimensions like political participation, representation, and influence. A crucial aspect of this process consists of comprehending and navigating the foundational coordinates of the political space in Western democracies. These include party identification, the meaningfulness of ideological self-placement, and political interest. In this article, we focus on differences between children of immigrants in alignment with these traditional, party-related anchors of political systems. We will refer to this as "political engagement" to stress the cognitive and motivational dimensions necessary to foster meaningful participation in structured political contexts (Carreras, 2016; Pontes et al., 2018). Political engagement and political participation are often treated as synonymous, but they should be analytically distinguished. Carreras (2016) differentiates between active and cognitive engagement, while others (Barrett, 2012; Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014) view engagement as a psychological condition and a prerequisite for participation, encompassing interest, attention, knowledge, and emotions vis-à-vis politics without necessarily involving action. Emler (2011) describes political engagement as a developmental process driven by motivation, with political interest being key to attentiveness and knowledge, which in turn shape opinions and political identities or ideologies necessary for active participation. Pontes et al. (2018) echo this distinction, emphasising that for young people, "engagement" means having an interest in, being attentive to, or having awareness, opinions, or emotions regarding political matters or objects, while "participation" involves actions or behaviours related to political and civic involvement.

The central thesis of this article is that while family political socialisation plays a crucial role in shaping youth political engagement, the processes within migrant families are often distinct and segmented. These dynamics create unique pathways for the children's political socialisation, in which the influence of SES and intergenerational social learning on political engagement differs significantly from the patterns observed among native-born youth. This argument aligns with recent studies pointing out that the parent-to-child influences described in the standard model of youth political socialisation (Jennings et al., 2009) are thus likely to be "disrupted" in most immigrant families (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024) and impacted by the political culture of the country of origin (Chaudhary, 2018; Dinesen & Andersen, 2022).

Empirically, the study employs data from a survey carried out between February 2023 and March 2024 on 2,756 students in the final year of high school in the region of Lombardy (Italy), using a probabilistic multistage sampling design (165 classes from 81 schools located in 55 municipalities). Lombardy serves as a significant, strategic case study within Europe, as it is the second most populous region in the EU and ranks high in nominal GDP. There are two key reasons it is particularly relevant to our research. First, it has a significant

foreign population, with 1,176,169 foreign residents (11.8% of the region's total) and 231,819 foreign pupils (17.1% of the student population) in the 2022/2023 school year. Lombardy hosts 24% of all students with migrant backgrounds in Italy. Second, the right-leaning political tradition in the region has greatly politicised the immigration and citizenship issue, ever since the establishment of the Northern League in the 1990s.

More in general, Italy provides a compelling case study, having undergone a transformation in the 1980s and 1990s from a country characterised by emigration to a major destination for immigration. Based on Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) data (Buonomo et al., 2023), in the 2001 census there were fewer than 365,000 residents under the age of 20 who were either foreign nationals or Italians by acquisition. Of this number, approximately 140,000 were born in Italy. As of the beginning of 2020, the number of those born in Italy had risen to nearly 1.1 million individuals (73% of the total). Until recent years, this demographic shift caused a gap in comprehensive data on second-generation immigrants, limiting the scope of research on their political integration (Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2022; Gabrielli et al., 2013; Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021). Nevertheless, it is crucial to address this gap as Italy, alongside Germany, France, and Spain, host nearly 75% of the EU's non-national minors, with Italy alone accounting for 13.9% of this population (Eurostat, 2023).

To the best of our knowledge, while numerous studies have examined educational inequalities among young migrants in Italy, this is the first to investigate the role of parental influences among children of immigrants and their native-born peers, using a large probabilistic sample of late adolescents. Previous noteworthy research has primarily examined individuals aged 14–35 who were still living with their family of origin, comparing the political activism of Italian natives with that of first- and second-generation migrant peers. These analyses relied on two national household surveys conducted by ISTAT in 2011–2012 (Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021). In contrast, ISTAT surveys conducted in school contexts—such as Identity and Pathways of Integration of Second Generations in Italy (ISTAT, 2016), or the survey targeting boys and girls aged 11 to 19 living in Italy in 2021 and 2023—did not include questions related to political engagement (ISTAT, 2024).

The article begins by outlining the theoretical framework that underpins its central arguments and hypotheses. The methods section provides a detailed account of the dataset, the operationalisation of key variables, and the analytical strategy employed in the study. The results section then presents findings derived from multilevel models, offering insights into the research questions. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the main findings, highlighting the study's contributions, reflecting on its limitations, and suggesting avenues for future research.

2. The Political Engagement of Children of Immigrants: How Family Matters

Since the influential studies of Jennings and Niemi (1968), the literature has consistently shown that the roots of political inequalities go back a long way: People tend to form predispositions towards politics during adolescence and early adulthood. These formative years, often called the "impressionable years" (Dinas, 2010), are characterised by increased cognitive openness and receptiveness to social influences, making it a crucial period for developing long-lasting political attitudes and inequalities. Social class, gender, and migratory background still impact youth political socialisation, despite it becoming more individualised and influenced by a broader range of agents beyond family and schools, including peers, media, and digital platforms (Dalton, 2021). Parental SES and family political socialisation remain key factors in explaining inequalities in youth political engagement (Jennings et al., 2009), although the process of intergenerational

political transmission is complex and dynamic (Boonen, 2017; Durmuşoğlu et al., 2023; Mayer et al., 2024; van Ditmars, 2023).

Parents influence children's political engagement in both direct and indirect ways (Jennings et al., 2009). As regards indirect influence, families shape political engagement by creating an environment that fosters or hinders civic awareness. This is mediated through SES (Verba & Nie, 1972). Young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds typically benefit from greater access to socialisation agents, such as high-quality educational institutions, extracurricular activities, and digital resources, all of which significantly impact civic and political development (Giugni & Grasso, 2021; Janmaat & Hoskins, 2022; Jungkunz & Marx, 2024). As far as direct influences are concerned, consistently with social learning theory, parents act as primary role models, transmitting political values, beliefs, and behaviours through mechanisms such as family discussions, participation in political activities, and explicit encouragement. Extensive evidence highlights the relevance of two key microprocesses: family political discussions and parent–child political ideology similarity. Studies have shown that adolescents who engage in political discussions with their parents are more likely to be involved in politics (e.g., Andolina et al., 2003; Cornejo et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2009; McIntosh et al., 2007). Additionally, research indicates that children raised by politically engaged parents are more likely to adopt their family's political views or party preferences (Macfarlane, 2022; Ojeda & Hatemi, 2015), at least in the short term (for opposite effects, in the long run, see Dinas, 2014). This direct influence helps explain disparities in key dimensions of political engagement, including gender differences in social and civic participation (Cicognani et al., 2012), political ideology (van Ditmars, 2023), political interest (Pensiero & Janmaat, 2024), and political ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Direct and indirect parental influences reinforce each other. While much of the research has focused on the US, similar patterns emerge in the few studies examining these forms of intergenerational reproduction in European countries (e.g., Janmaat & Hoskins, 2022; Kroh & Selb, 2009; Lahtinen et al., 2019; Neundorf & Niemi, 2014).

2.1. Hypotheses

Given these insights, how does family matter in shaping the differences in political engagement between children of immigrants and their native-born peers?

Research on the political socialisation of adolescent children of immigrants, particularly in Europe, remains scarce. Nevertheless, existing studies suggest that traditional models of parental influence may be less applicable to this group, particularly concerning the effects of SES and intergenerational learning (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024; Humphries et al., 2013). As outlined in the introduction, we argue that the political socialisation process within migrant families differs due to parents' limited familiarity with the host country's political system and their "bicultural" experiences (Berry, 1997). These differences in parental political socialisation may hinder children's ability to comprehend and engage with the political environment in the receiving country. Moreover, migrants are more likely to face labour and social discrimination, which can exacerbate the challenges in translating available resources into political opportunities.

Accordingly, we expect that even in a country like Italy, where migrants face systemic social and economic disadvantages (Panichella et al., 2021), the negative effect of a migrant background on youth political engagement is only partially attributable to parental socioeconomic resources while it is highly mediated by political socialisation. Therefore, our first general hypothesis is:

> H1: Political socialisation variables have a greater influence on youth political engagement than structural variables, including migratory background.

However, within this broader framework, we anticipate that certain family resources will exert a distinct influence on the political engagement of children of immigrants compared to their native-born counterparts. Specifically, we propose a hypothesis regarding the role of parental education in the political engagement of youth from a migrant background. We contend that, unlike in native families, education in migrant families may not be a reliable indicator of SES, particularly in contexts where social mobility opportunities are frequently limited for migrants. Humphries et al. (2013), for example, using longitudinal data from the US, found that while higher levels of parental education strongly correlated with voter registration and party identification among third-generation and white individuals, this relationship did not hold for Latino and Asian children of immigrants. They argued that, unlike native-born adults, parental education levels among immigrant families may not be a reliable reflection of SES. While for native-born adults, higher education levels often signified familiarity with and acceptance of the US political and civic culture, in their argument, immigrant parents with comparable educational attainment—often acquired abroad—may not demonstrate similar patterns of political engagement, such as voter registration or party identification. A similar argument was proposed more recently by Borkowska and Luthra (2024) who examined the political socialisation process in immigrant families based on the UK Household Longitudinal Study. Their findings suggested that parental education did not affect the political engagement of second-generation individuals in the same way it did for those with UK-born parents. However, the direct transmission of political engagement remained consistent across both groups.

Accordingly, our second hypothesis is as follows:

> H2: The effect of parents' education on political engagement is weaker for students with a foreign background compared to their native counterparts.

Given the unique characteristics of migrant families, we anticipate that another common predictor of youth political engagement—gender—may have a diminished influence among children of immigrants. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the need to move beyond examining women's disadvantages in politics and instead focus on the advantages that men enjoy, particularly how norms of masculinity shape gendered patterns of political participation (Bjarnegård & Murray, 2018). Both families and schools play pivotal roles in reinforcing these gendered socialisation processes (Cicognani et al., 2012; Fox & Lawless, 2014; Hoskins et al., 2017; Pensiero & Janmaat, 2024). In addition, in the Italian context, many children of migrants, male and female, face additional barriers to formal political participation due to their lack of citizenship. This exclusion often fosters feelings of underrepresentation (Farini, 2019; Riniolo, 2023). Given these circumstances, we hypothesise that:

> H3: The "male advantage" in political engagement is likely to be significantly reduced among children of immigrants.

Shifting the focus to the two primary microprocesses involved in family political socialisation—political discussions at home and the similarity of political views between parents and children—we expect that only the former will have a consistent effect on young people's political engagement, irrespective of their family background.

The literature on political socialisation suggests that political discussions at home are one of the most significant socialising agents (Jennings et al., 2009) influencing young people's political engagement. Although family background may influence the content of discussions, it is plausible that the mere presence of political discussions at home, regardless of migratory context, acts as a factor stimulating political engagement, as supported by studies suggesting that the quality and frequency of political discussions is positively correlated with youth political engagement (McIntosh et al., 2007; Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021). Therefore, we propose that open dialogue and discussions on political issues within the family can have a uniform impact, regardless of migratory background:

> H4a: "Homogeneous effect"—Political discussion at home has an impact on political engagement regardless of migratory background, with similar effects for both children of immigrants and native-born individuals.

In contrast, the effect of political similarity between parents and children may be more pronounced for natives compared to children of immigrants. This could be due to differences in the political socialisation processes between the two groups. Among children of native families, political opinion alignment between parents and children may be stronger. Specifically, the perception of political child–parent similarity in native families may be more fluid and direct, based on a shared understanding of the national political system and its dynamics (Dinas, 2014; McIntosh et al., 2007). For children of immigrants, political views may be more influenced by intercultural experiences, reducing the direct effect of political similarity between parents and children. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

> H4b: "Heterogeneous effect"—Parent–child political similarity is particularly relevant for native-born youth, with a weaker or absent effect for children of immigrants.

Additionally, we anticipate an interaction effect between these two parental socialisation variables and migratory background: When the frequency of political discussions is high, disagreeing with parents should have the same positive effect as having similar opinions, particularly for Italian youth. For native Italian youth, who are more integrated into the national political system, both agreement and disagreement with parents could stimulate critical thinking and the adoption of an independent political stance and, consequently, higher political engagement (Dinas, 2014; Graham et al., 2020). For children of immigrants, however, the effect may be less evident, as experiences of political disagreement might be mediated by the difficulty of negotiating between different political and cultural norms. This hypothesis resonates with studies indicating that young people are less likely to engage in political discussions with parents or friends whom they feel hold distant political views from themselves (e.g., Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015) and those stressing the key role of social learning mechanisms in explaining differences in parent–child similarity (e.g., Meeusen & Boonen, 2022). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

> H4c: "Interaction effect"—When the frequency of political discussion is high, disagreeing with parents should have the same positive effect on political engagement as sharing similar political views, but only among native-born individuals.

To further investigate this issue, we argue that the larger the gap between a family's cultural/political background and Italian political culture—defined by democratic values and a Catholic tradition—the more

likely it is that family political discussions, parent–child political alignment, and political engagement will be disconnected. Therefore, our final hypothesis is:

> H5: The effect of a "foreign background" on political engagement is likely to weaken once we control for the religious affiliation and political regime of the parents' country of origin.

3. Data

The empirical investigation is based on survey data from the project MAYBE—Moving into Adulthood in uncertain times: Youth Beliefs, future Expectations, and life choices (University of Milan). This study interviewed 2,756 students in the final year of high school in Lombardy (Italy), between February 2023 and March 2024, employing a probabilistic multistage sampling design (81 schools, 165 classes). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan.

3.1. Sample

The sample was selected using a multistage probability sampling approach. First, 81 schools were drawn from the population of all public secondary schools in Lombardy (n = 710) using systematic sampling with stratification by school type (lyceum, vocational, technical) and province. The original list of schools was obtained from the Ministry of Education and Merit's School Data Portal. School principals were contacted via email and telephone to invite them to participate. If a school declined, a replacement school was randomly selected from the same stratum of school type and/or province. Next, in each school, one to three final-year classes were chosen based on school size (and the school's effective ability to participate in the requested number of classes). The survey was administered during school hours. Computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) was conducted in computer labs whenever possible. Where computer labs were unavailable, paper-and-pencil interviews (PAPI) were used (352 students). All students within a selected class completed the survey simultaneously. The average number of respondents per class was 20.3. Given the notable difficulties in obtaining availability from schools, the data collection took place between March 2023 and March 2024: During the 2022/2023 academic year, 39 schools were interviewed, and 42 schools were interviewed in the following academic year.

In terms of ethnic origin, 2,135 students had both parents with an Italian background (77.4%), 401 were children of immigrants (14.5%), and 208 were of mixed origin (7.5%). Among the latter, a small group included students with at least one parent from a Western country, the largest subgroup being those with a Swiss mother (23) or father (22). Among the students with mixed backgrounds, 92.3% were born in Italy, and 90.4% held Italian citizenship. In contrast, among those with both parents of foreign origin, 67.6% were born in Italy, and 70.3% were Italian citizens. The data were consistent with official statistics (Buonomo et al., 2023). The sample included 1,510 male and 1,226 female students (30 respondents who identified as "other" were excluded from the analysis). The respondents' average age was 18.6: 44% were 18, 45% were 19, and the remaining respondents, primarily from vocational schools, were over 19 due to irregular educational trajectories (see Table A9 in the Supplementary File for more details).

3.2. Concepts and Measures

The operationalisation process was carried out as described below.

Regarding the dependent variable, students' political engagement (as discussed in the introduction), we created an additive index based on key items that are commonly used in the literature. The index included three components: interest in politics (1–4 scale), awareness of key political ideologies (0 = not self-placed on the left–right scale; 1 = self-placed on the scale), and party closeness (0 = not close to any party; 1 = close to a party). These items are widely employed in political science to capture general political interest and attachment to the partisan and ideological aspects of the political system, specifically concerning traditional, party-related politics. They address the cognitive, ideational, and emotional dimensions of engagement (Barrett, 2012; Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Emler, 2011; Pontes et al., 2018). Furthermore, to ensure that this measure was reliable and that the three items measured a single latent dimension, we conducted a hybrid item response theory (IRT) analysis combining a two-parameter logistic model for binary variables (left–right awareness and party closeness) and a graded response model for an ordinal variable (political interest). The results confirmed that these variables were related to the latent (see Section 1 in the Supplementary File). For robustness checks, we also ran a factor analysis with both a principal factor method and a principal component factor method with an orthogonal oblimin rotation after rescaling the political interest item through min-max normalisation. Again, the results confirmed that the items belonged to a single factor (see Section 2 in the Supplementary File).

To test the hypotheses, a multilevel regression model was employed. The model included parental SES, family political socialisation variables, and a range of control variables, drawing on literature on youth political engagement that highlights the broad spectrum of socialisation agents and contextual facilitators (school and municipality level). Peer/classroom climate can influence political attitudes through shared discussions, habits, and practices (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). Schools provide civic education (Campbell, 2008, 2013), offering a "compensation effect" (Deimel et al., 2021; Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019; Neundorf et al., 2016) for missing or poor parental political socialisation. Additionally, research from political geography has pointed out the importance of considering the role of places where social/political action and interactions occur in influencing how youth approach politics (Adolfsson & Coe, 2024), in line with the "political context matters" argument (Kitanova, 2020; Vráblíková, 2014).

Accordingly, Table 1 provides the list and operationalisation of the independent and conditioning/control variables, along with their measurement. The original wording of the items in the questionnaire is presented in Table A8 in the Supplementary File.

Beyond what is presented in Table 1, some additional clarification is needed regarding the political regime and right–left margin variables. To define the political regime of the parent's country of birth, we relied on the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the V-Dem's expert estimates for 2023 (Coppedge et al., 2024). Our final variable also considered the geopolitical area of the parent's country of birth. By "West" we meant Western Europe, North America (US and Canada), and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand). To be classified in a category, both parents (or just one if the response for the other was missing) had to come from a specific regime/area. The only exceptions were the "Western + other democracies" category (the regime had to be democratic for both parents, but one could come from a non-Western area) and the "Mixed

Table 1. Independent and conditioning/control variables.

Label	Concept	Measure
	Independent variables	
Migratory Background	Respondent's family migratory background	Italian = 0 (both parents are Italian) Mixed = 1 (one of the two parents was born in Italy) Foreign = 2 (both parents of foreign birth)
Family Political Discussion	Frequency with which political topics are discussed within the family setting	Measured on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = *There are never arguments/discussions about political issues*; 10 = *We very often have arguments/discussions about political issues*)
Perceived Parent–Child Political Similarity	Degree of alignment or difference between the individual's political opinions and those of their parents	Different = 0 (political opinions different from those of the parents) Partially/totally similar = 1 (political opinions similar to those of both or at least one parent) DK = 2 (don't know)
	Individual-level conditioning/control variables	
Gender	Binary gender	Male = 0 Female = 1
Parents' Education	Parents' level of education	Low = 0 (both parents have a low level of education, or one has a low level and the other completed upper secondary education) Medium = 1 (both parents completed upper secondary education) High = 2 (both parents completed tertiary education, or one completed tertiary education and the other upper secondary education) *Note*: A low level of education corresponds to lower secondary school at most. For the original six educational attainment levels, see Table A8 in the Supplementary File
Family's Economic Well-being	Subjective evaluation of the economic situation of the family	Difficult situation = 0 (it is very difficult or difficult for the family to make ends meet at the end of the month) Not difficult = 1 (it is easy for the family…) Wealthy = 2 (it is very easy for the family…) DK = 3 (don't know)
Religion	Respondent's religious denomination	Atheist = 0 Christian = 1 Muslim = 2 Other = 3
Regime in Parents' Countries	Political regime of the parents' reported countries	Western democracies = 0 Eastern European democracies = 1 Non-Western/European democracies = 2 Western + other democracies = 3 Mixed regimes = 4 Electoral/closed autocracies = 5

Table 1. (Cont.) Independent and conditioning/control variables.

Label	Concept	Measure
	Contextual control variables	
Classroom Political Involvement	Political climate and involvement in the classroom	Mean of non-electoral political participation in protests/demonstrations (see Table A8 in the Supplementary File) and political engagement index (excluding the respondent) in the respondent's class
School	Type of school	Lyceum = 0 Technical = 1 Vocational = 2
Turnout	Turnout in the 2022 general election	Turnout in percentages (municipality)
Right–Left Margin	Degree of centre-right political predominance at the school municipal level	Difference in percentage points between votes for the centre-right and centre-left coalitions in the 2022 general election

regimes" category (one parent's country was a democracy and the other's an autocracy). The right–left margin could also be considered as a proxy for the degree of electoral competitiveness of each municipality, given the traditional and long-lasting predominance of centre-right parties in Lombardy. Franklin (2004) empirically demonstrated that the closeness of an electoral race, measured by the margin of victory, along with turnout in previous elections, were strong predictors of electoral participation. Given that these variables could also impact political engagement, we included them in our model to control for the effects of the political context.

Before running the multivariate multilevel regression analysis, all municipal-level variables were centred to obtain a zero sample mean. Then, all the non-categorical variables were normalised by adjusting those values measured on different scales to a common scale between 0 and 1 according to the formula: $X' = (X - X_{min})/(X_{max} - X_{min})$. All categorical non-binary variables were transformed into sets of dummies. In this way, all variables could be analysed on a comparable basis.

4. Findings

Before examining whether political socialisation processes differed for children of immigrants, we first analysed the variations in political engagement, parental political socialisation, and main conditioning/control variables by family migration background (Table A9, Supplementary File). Children of immigrants showed lower political engagement (mean = 0.37) compared to native-born Italians (mean = 0.46) and mixed-background youth (mean = 0.44). They also faced significant socioeconomic and educational disadvantages. Their political involvement in the classroom was also lower (mean = 0.41 vs. 0.50 for native-born Italians), and they reported fewer family political discussions (mean = 0.18 vs. 0.26). Only 31.0% of children of immigrants aligned with their parents' political views, compared to 51.8% of native-born Italians and 50.0% of mixed-background youth. Additionally, 49.9% of children of immigrants were unsure about their political alignment with their parents, a significantly higher proportion than native-born Italians (30.3%).

Beyond this overview, to test our hypotheses, we conducted a multilevel mixed-effects regression analysis with robust standard errors at the highest level. There were three levels: students, schools, and municipalities. Random intercepts were specified at both the municipal and school levels, ensuring that our analysis accurately reflected the hierarchical structure of the data. We followed a multistage analytical strategy to test the first hypothesis on the greater relevance of variables measuring political socialisation compared to structural ones, including migration background. Specifically, we first ran the model with only socio-demographic variables and variables related to individual resources (Model A). Then, we introduced interactions between migration background and, respectively, parental education level (to test H2) and gender (to test H3). We also interacted migration background with family economic well-being to control for an additional resource that could be transmitted by parents, although in this instance we did not hypothesise a differentiated effect based on migratory background. Subsequently, we introduced variables related to family political socialisation (Model C). Finally, we included variables measuring the influence of the political context, both electoral turnout/competitiveness at the municipal level and peer groups in classes (Model D). The results of these four models are reported in Table 2.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to note that the likelihood ratio test of the null model with only random intercepts for level 2 (school) and level 3 (municipality) indicated that the multilevel structure was appropriate (see Section 3 in the Supplementary File), whereas the residual intraclass correlation (ICC) analysis for both the null model (Table A4 in the Supplementary File) and the initial resources model (Table A5 in the Supplementary File) showed that the majority of the residual variance appeared to be at the individual level, as the ICCs for the higher levels (municipalities and schools) were relatively small, with schools contributing more to the variance than municipalities. Furthermore, it is worth reporting that we re-ran the analyses including the missing party closeness values ($N = 214$), which were recoded as 0 in the political engagement index, to assess the robustness of the results. The results remained largely consistent. Ultimately, we chose to retain the models excluding the missing values, as they provided a more conservative and reliable estimate.

The predictive models of political engagement in Table 2 indicate that our H1 was not falsified: As the variables were progressively included in the models, family-transmitted individual resources—including migrant background—became less relevant compared to the political socialisation variables. Concerning the goodness-of-fit statistics, the AIC and BIC values improved significantly from the resources model (AIC = 344.76, BIC = 424.41) to the full model (AIC = −295.92, BIC = −182.16), indicating a better model fit. The log pseudolikelihood also improved notably, confirming that adding socialisation and contextual variables enhanced the explanatory power.

In the resources model (A), higher parental education was a significant predictor ($p < 0.01$) with a positive coefficient (0.037). However, as more variables were added, this effect weakened, becoming not significant in the full model. Being in a "wealthy" family was significant across all models but showed decreasing coefficients (from 0.080 in the resources model to 0.058 in the full model D). As expected, foreign background showed a significant negative impact on political engagement across all models, but the coefficient weakened (from −0.077 in the resources model to −0.029 in the full model) and the statistical significance also decreased from $p < 0.001$ to $p < 0.05$. This indicates that the inclusion of variables related to political socialisation and contextual factors partially mediated the influence of family-transmitted individual resources on political engagement. Nevertheless, these variables do not fully explain the disparities in political engagement between children of immigrants and their native-born peers. Conversely, the negative effect of being female remained

Table 2. Different predictive models of political engagement.

	Resources model (A)	Resources + interactions (B)	Parental political socialisation model (C)	Full model—political socialisation + political context (D)
Fixed effects				
Background (reference: Italian)				
mixed	−0.012 (0.018)	−0.066 (0.049)	0.003 (0.017)	0.005 (0.018)
foreign	−0.077 *** (0.015)	−0.062 (0.041)	−0.034 * (0.014)	−0.029 * (0.013)
Gender (female)	−0.104 *** (0.014)	−0.111 *** (0.015)	−0.106 *** (0.012)	−0.093 *** (0.010)
Parents' education (reference: low)				
medium	0.018 (0.013)	0.025 (0.014)	0.014 (0.014)	0.010 (0.013)
high	0.037 ** (0.012)	0.044 ** (0.014)	0.022 (0.012)	0.011 (0.013)
Family well-being (reference: difficult situation)				
not difficult	0.012 (0.018)	0.009 (0.025)	0.007 (0.017)	0.002 (0.017)
wealthy	0.080 *** (0.022)	0.071 * (0.028)	0.064 ** (0.021)	0.058 ** (0.021)
DK	−0.057 * (0.022)	−0.052 (0.027)	−0.029 (0.022)	−0.028 (0.021)
Type of school (reference: lyceum)				
technical	−0.039 (0.022)	−0.038 (0.022)	−0.025 (0.015)	−0.010 (0.010)
vocational	−0.056 * (0.022)	−0.054 * (0.022)	−0.042 * (0.018)	0.009 (0.015)
Background * gender				
mixed * female		0.013 (0.036)		
foreign * female		0.045 (0.033)		
Background * parents' education				
mixed * medium		0.017 (0.051)		
mixed * high		−0.014 (0.059)		
foreign * medium		−0.056 (0.030)		
foreign * high		−0.042 (0.035)		

Table 2. (Cont.) Different predictive models of political engagement.

	Resources model (A)	Resources + interactions (B)	Parental political socialisation model (C)	Full model—political socialisation + political context (D)
Fixed effects				
Background * family well-being				
mixed * not difficult		0.061 (0.056)		
mixed * wealthy		0.114 (0.092)		
mixed * DK		−0.008 (0.073)		
foreign * not difficult		−0.013 (0.042)		
foreign * wealthy		0.005 (0.061)		
foreign * DK		−0.034 (0.064)		
Political discussion at home			0.212 *** (0.019)	0.201 *** (0.019)
Parent–child similarity (reference: different)				
partially/totally similar			0.057 *** (0.015)	0.054 *** (0.014)
DK			−0.174 *** (0.018)	−0.162 *** (0.017)
Classroom political involvement				0.252 *** (0.022)
Turnout 2022				0.008 (0.030)
Right–left margin				−0.018 (0.022)
Intercept	0.504 *** (0.026)	0.505 *** (0.032)	0.474 *** (0.023)	0.344 *** (0.033)
Random effects				
Municipality: *SD* (intercept)	0.038 (0.016)	0.038 (0.017)	0.019 (0.018)	0.000 (0.000)
School: *SD* (intercept)	0.043 (0.012)	0.044 (0.012)	0.026 (0.014)	0.000 (0.000)
SD (residual)	0.256 (0.003)	0.256 (0.003)	0.228 (0.003)	0.224 (0.003)
Number of observations	2,184	2,184	2,182	2,182
AIC	344.76	360.71	−193.60	−295.92
BIC	424.41	508.63	−96.90	−182.16
Log pseudolikelihood	−158.38	−154.36	113.80	167.96

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; significant at *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

significant and relatively stable across models, although the coefficient slightly decreased in magnitude (from −0.104 in the resources model to −0.093 in the full model D). Among the control variables, the type of school attended, specifically vocational schools, showed a diminishing negative effect on political engagement, and in the full model, the coefficient became not significant (and even changed sign).

Political discussion at home and classroom political involvement were the most significant drivers of political engagement in the full model, with a strong positive coefficient (0.201 and 0.252, respectively, with $p < 0.001$). Additionally, having partially or totally similar political views to parents significantly increased political engagement ($p < 0.001$). Respondents who were unable to identify whether their views aligned with their parents' exhibited significantly lower levels of political engagement compared to those who reported "different" views. The large magnitude (−0.162) compared to the "partially/totally similar" coefficient suggests a stronger disengagement effect, potentially due to uncertainty, ambiguity, or lack of family discussion about political issues.

By contrast, contextual factors like turnout rates and right–left political margins in the municipalities were not significant.

To assess whether the impact of parental SES on political engagement differed for children of immigrants (H2 and H3), we examined the interaction terms between family background and, respectively, parental education, family economic well-being, and gender (Model B). As regards the interactions of background with parental resources (parents' education and family well-being) and gender, we did not detect any significant interaction terms. Nonetheless, the statistical significance of the coefficient of a multiplicative interaction term is considered neither necessary nor sufficient to determine whether X has an important or statistically distinguishable relationship with Y dependent on the values of a third variable Z (Brambor et al., 2006). Therefore, we plotted the adjusted predictions of student political engagement based on migratory background and parents' education level (Figure 1, upper panel). The chart shows that the positive effect of medium and high parental educational levels was significantly higher among native-born Italians than among children of immigrants. This supports H2, suggesting that while parental education positively influences political engagement for both groups, its effect is attenuated among second-generation youth. This divergence may reflect systemic or cultural barriers limiting the translation of parental resources into political engagement for children of immigrants. Conversely, there are no significant differences in terms of background regarding the effect of a wealthy family condition (see Figure A4 in the Supplementary File).

To test H3, we plotted the adjusted predictions of political engagement based on gender and migratory background (Figure 1, lower panel). As anticipated, the gender gap in political engagement was only evident among natives and disappeared for individuals with a foreign origin. Specifically, males with foreign-born parents demonstrated the most pronounced decline in political engagement, with their predicted engagement levels significantly lower than those of males with Italian origins. This finding suggests that the gender gap observed in the overall models (Table 2) was primarily driven by differences among natives. For individuals with a foreign origin, the disadvantage associated with their migratory background offset the typical advantage associated with being male in traditional political engagement in the Italian context. This pattern was further confirmed by interactions between gender and parental origin categories in the full model D (results not shown here, available on request).

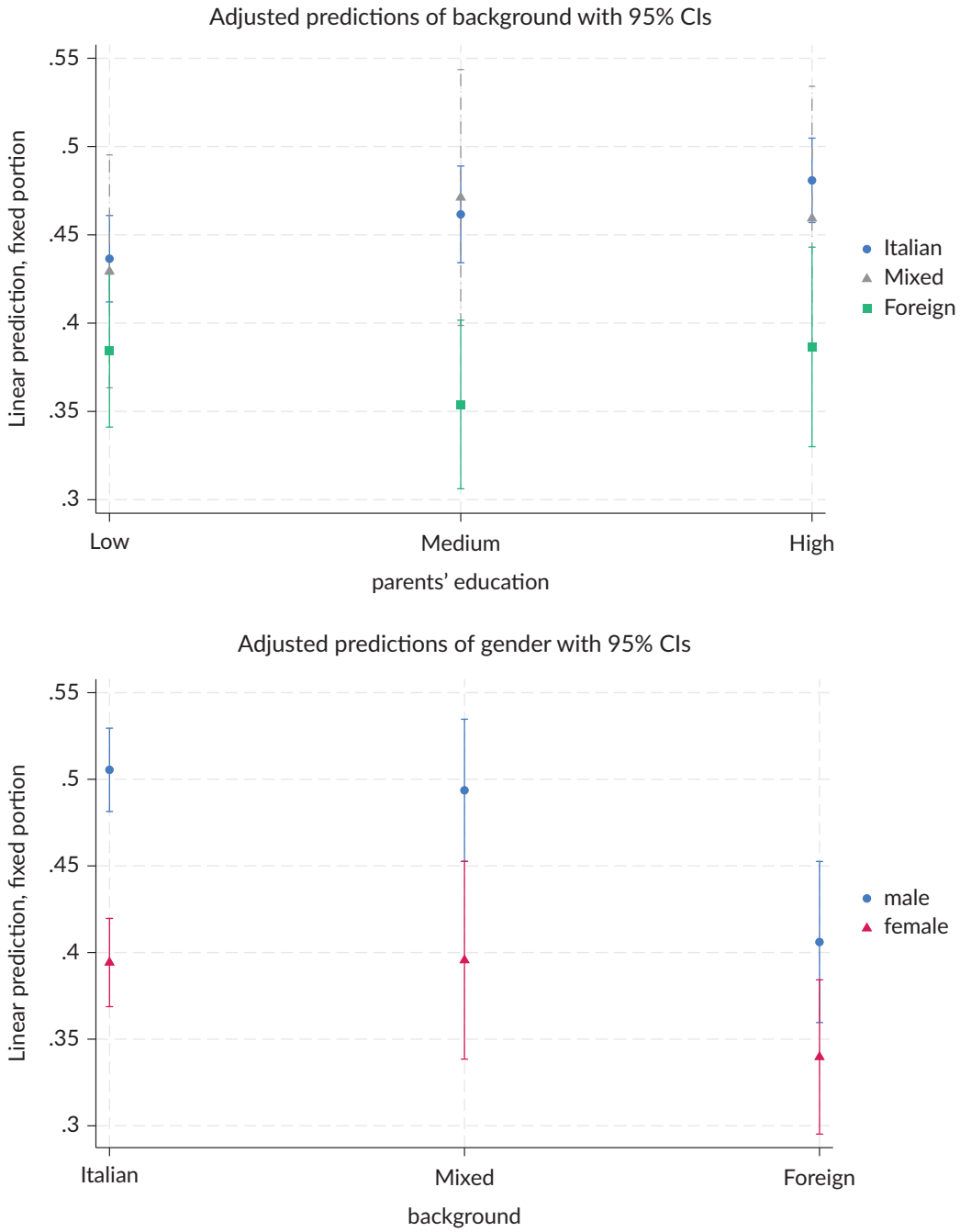

Figure 1. Adjusted predictions of student political engagement based on migratory background by parents' education (upper panel) and gender by migratory background (lower panel).

The following hypotheses concern the role played by parental political socialisation and how it unfolds across groups. We hypothesised a homogenous positive effect across all background categories as regards the frequency of political discussions at home (H4a), whereas we postulated a differentiated effect concerning the influence of the political content and cues transmitted by parents, with parent–child political agreement being relevant only among Italians (H4b). Furthermore, we hypothesised an interaction effect between the frequency of political discussions at home and parent–child political similarity by background (H4c). Table A6 in the Supplementary File shows the results of the full model with interactions between

parental political socialisation and background. Figure 2 shows the adjusted predictions of political engagement based on migratory background by frequency of political discussions at home (upper panel) and by parent–child political similarity (lower panel).

Consistently with H4a, political discussion at home had a positive effect on political engagement, regardless of the migratory background. Conversely, in line with H4b, sharing political views with their parents only significantly boosted political engagement among students with Italian parents, whereas among children of immigrants, the effect of having partially/totally similar opinions was significantly lower, being practically the same as having different opinions. Of course, the lowest effect was recorded among those who did not know their parents' political opinions, regardless of their background.

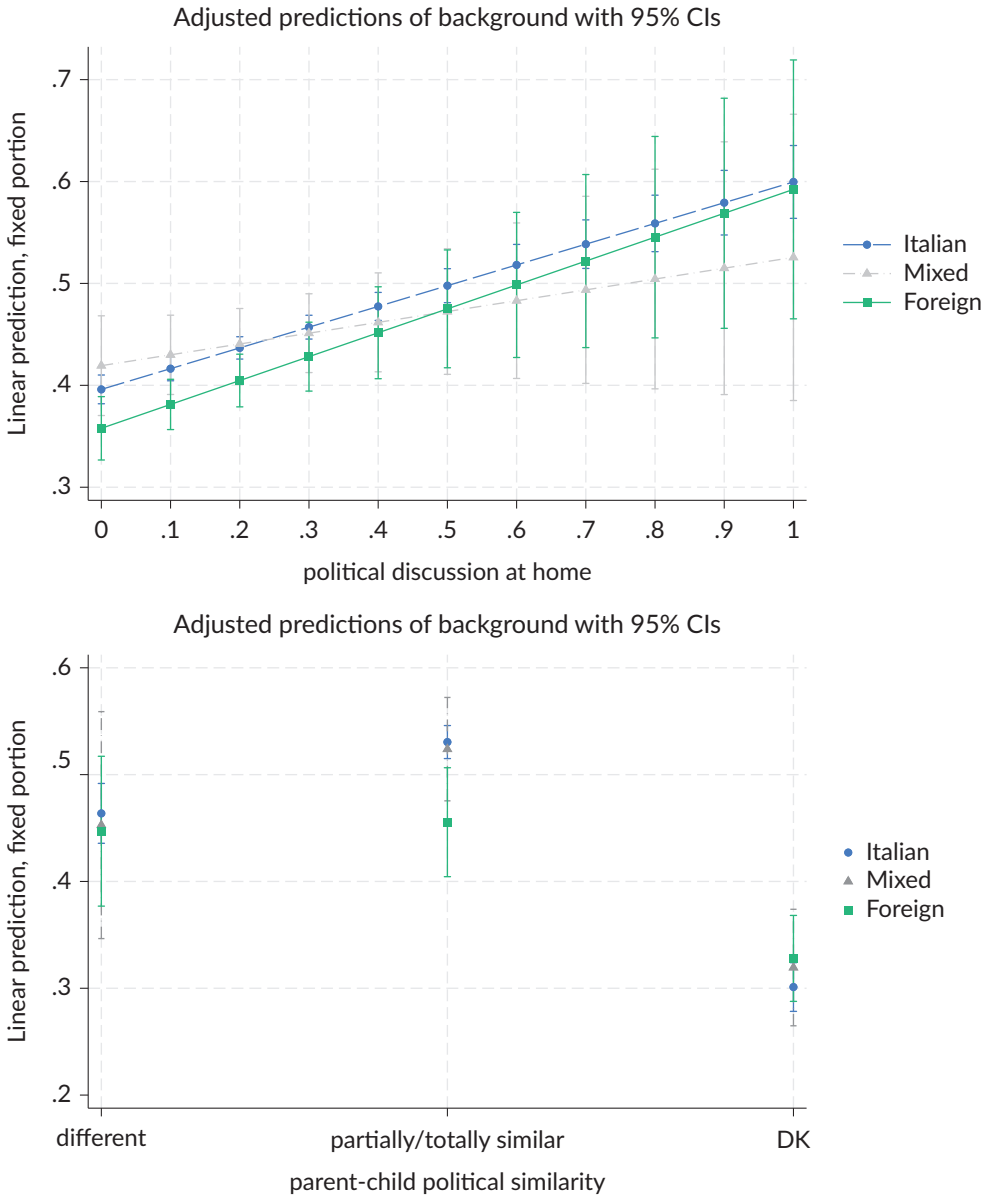

Figure 2. Adjusted predictions of student political engagement based on migratory background by frequency of political discussions at home (upper panel) and by parent–child political similarity (lower panel). Note: DK = "don't know."

To explore how parental socialisation interacts with background, we plotted the adjusted predictions of parent–child political similarity against both background and the frequency of political discussions at home (Figure 3). The findings supported our hypothesis (H4c): The frequency of political discussions at home moderated the effect of parent–child political similarity, but only among children with two Italian-born parents. In this group, as the frequency of political discussions increased, the positive impact of sharing political views with parents no longer significantly exceeded the effect of having differing views. This shift occurred starting from the midpoint of the political discussion scale, suggesting that in families where politics is frequently discussed, even divergent political opinions can still promote political engagement. However, this dynamic did not apply to children of foreign-born parents. These children engaged in fewer political discussions at home (as evidenced by the larger confidence intervals for higher levels of political discussion) and often struggled to fully understand or communicate the political views of their parents. In these families, the frequency of political discussions only slightly affected those who were unaware of their parents' opinions, helping to close the gap with those who were aware of them. Among children of Italian parents, however, this gap persisted, despite showing a similar trend. For a robustness check, we re-ran the analysis using a different operationalisation of parent–child political similarity, categorising responses into four groups: "different opinions," "opinions similar to those of one parent," "opinions similar to those of both parents," and "don't know." The results were very similar to those from the initial analysis.

Our interpretation, as outlined in the theoretical section, was that children of immigrants face significant challenges in developing an interest in Italian politics and in forming attachments to its partisan and ideological frameworks due to the parents' socialisation in a foreign political context. This issue is particularly pronounced for those whose parents come from political and cultural backgrounds that differ significantly from the Italian context. Based on this reasoning, our final hypothesis (H5) suggests that when

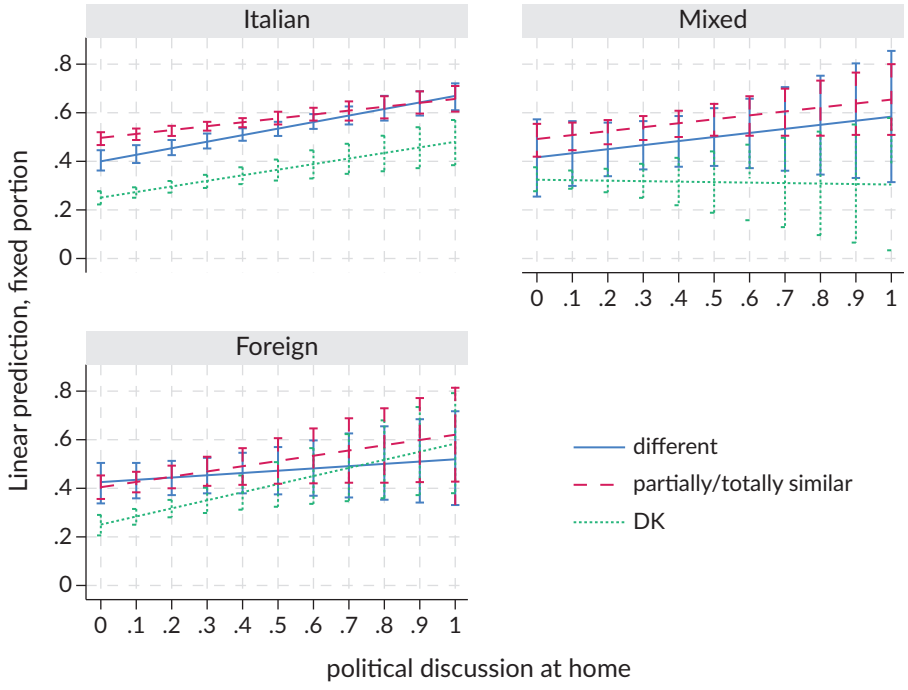

Figure 3. Political engagement: adjusted predictions of difference/similarity to parents' political opinions by background and frequency of political discussions at home (95% CIs). Note: DK = "don't know."

controlling for certain proxies of the political-cultural context of the parents' country of origin—such as religion and political regime—alongside other previously identified predictors, the effect of the broader "foreign background" category should diminish or disappear. The findings (Table A7 in the Supplementary File) supported this hypothesis: In both models, one including the respondent's religion and the other incorporating the political regime of the parents' country of origin, the variable for migratory background—although still negatively correlated—lost its statistical significance as a predictor.

Hence, we replicated the interactions shown in Figure 3 by replacing migratory background first with religion and then with the political regime of the parents' country. The results confirmed that these variables, despite their limitations, were valid proxies for the political-cultural context of the parents. The (non) pattern previously observed in Figure 3 for children of immigrants was very similar to that observed for students of Muslim faith (see Figure A5 in the Supplementary File), who are predominantly children of immigrants from very different political-cultural contexts from the Italian one. This finding was further confirmed when religion was replaced with the political regime of the parents' country (Figure 4). It is worth noting that the Western democracies category is composed mainly of students with an Italian background (95.4% of the total in this category). In contrast, those with a mixed background showed a more varied distribution, falling particularly under the Western + other democracies (30.8%) and mixed regimes (22.1%) categories, suggesting broader engagement across different political systems. Individuals with a foreign background were predominantly found in electoral/closed autocracies (50.1%) and Eastern European democracies (28.2%), reflecting a distinct alignment with non-Western regimes. Focusing on the most populated

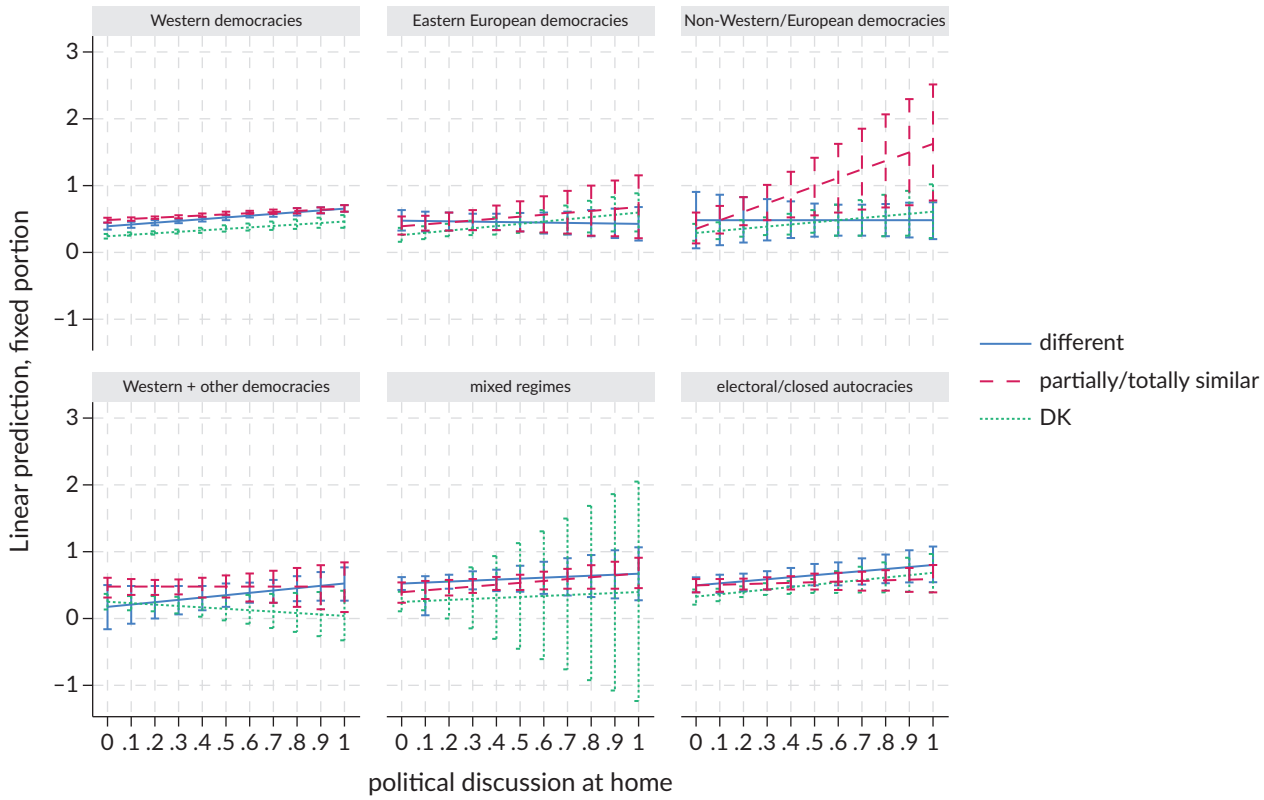

Figure 4. Political engagement: adjusted predictions of difference/similarity to parents' political opinions by political regime in parents' country and frequency of political discussions at home (95% CIs). Note: DK = "don't know."

categories—Western democracies (n = 2,238), Eastern European democracies (n = 114), and closed/electoral autocracies (n = 203)—it becomes evident that the moderating effect of political discussion on the parent–child variable was only significant for those with parents from Western democracies (including Italy, of course). In contrast, it was not significant when the parents' country was non-democratic, or an Eastern European democracy. The political regime variable proved more discriminating than religion, with some interaction terms also showing significance (see Table A7 in the Supplementary File). We recognise that regime classification depends on the data source. However, the V-Dem project classification, favoured by many scholars (e.g., Boese, 2019), is generally considered reliable and has been used to assess the impact of country of origin on immigrants' political participation (Lazarova et al., 2024). To test the robustness of our results, we re-ran the analysis using the 2023 Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit (2024), and the main findings remained consistent.

5. Conclusion

While much of the rhetoric around youth political disengagement tends to treat young people as a homogenous group, in actual fact they make up a fragmented population. These divisions, and in particular the intersection of various inequalities that amplify disadvantages, contribute to shaping youth participation in democratic life. In this context, this article has sought to explore the critical role of parental influences in (re)producing ethnic inequalities in political engagement among late adolescents, using Lombardy (Italy) as a case study.

This article makes several contributions to the literature. First, it helps to address the knowledge gap on the experiences of immigrant descendants in Italy, a key EU host country for non-national children. While research on the ethnic penalty in areas like education, labour, and health has mainly focused on North and Western Europe, studies on Southern European countries, including Italy, remain limited. This is due to the relatively recent influx of immigrant families, with their descendants still young, having arrived mainly in the past three decades (Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2022).

Second, it provides original probabilistic survey data on the political incorporation of children of immigrants in Italy, a topic that remains underresearched, especially using quantitative methods (Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021). Despite the growing activism among the second generation in Italy (Daher & Nicolosi, 2023; Milan, 2022; Riniolo, 2023), there is a significant lack of reliable statistical data, particularly on late adolescence and early adulthood, critical periods for the emergence of political engagement inequalities (Janmaat & Hoskins, 2022). By using multistage sampling (classes, schools), we were able to consider parental influences alongside contextual factors such as the political climate in the classroom and municipal electoral competitiveness. This approach addresses a key challenge in political socialisation research, especially in the absence of longitudinal or experimental designs, by isolating the family effect from other influences (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2015; Quintelier, 2015; Riniolo & Ortensi, 2021).

Third, this article points out how measures of SES, especially parents' education level, are associated with political engagement in specific ways for children of immigrants. Several studies on youth political engagement have highlighted the key role of social stratification (Grasso & Giugni, 2022). Based on these general patterns, it could be argued that the lower level of political engagement among children of immigrants is primarily due to the multiple SES disadvantages they face, which indirectly affect the political

socialisation process. However, the data presented here indicate that the positive relationship between parental education and political engagement only holds for native-born Italians. This may be because many highly qualified immigrants in Italy, particularly from non-EU countries, are employed in low-skilled sectors such as agriculture, family caregiving, or maintenance (Panichella et al., 2021). This phenomenon of "overqualification" or "underemployment" is driven by factors such as the non-recognition of foreign qualifications, labour market discrimination, and language barriers. As a result, education does not serve as a status booster for immigrants. Moreover, many immigrants obtain their educational qualifications in countries other than Italy, which means they often lack exposure to the civic education component of the Italian curriculum. This finding aligns with similar results in the US where parental education seems to be unrelated to political interest and voting for Latino and Asian children of immigrants (Humphries et al., 2013). Similarly, parental education has no association with second-generation voting and political interest in the UK (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024). Further research, using larger samples of children of immigrants in Italy, is needed to determine whether the lack of an effect of parental education on children's political engagement is consistent across the main immigrant groups in Italy, such as those of Romanian, Albanian, Moroccan, and Chinese origin.

Finally, our study has confirmed the key role of family political discussions for both native-born Italians and children of immigrants, even though parental SES influences political engagement differently across these groups. This finding aligns with extensive literature highlighting family discussions as a vital socialising factor that fosters political interest and participation, regardless of the family's migration background. However, the study has also shown a difference in the impact of parent–child political alignment. While the political agreement between parents and children strongly influences the political engagement of native-born Italian youth, it has a weaker effect on children of immigrants.

To further explore this issue, we categorised migrant families based on both religion and the political regime of their country of origin. The analysis revealed that the political regime variable, more than religion, plays a significant role in shaping the relationship between child–parent political alignment, political discussion at home, and children's political engagement. The gap between native-born children and children of immigrants was found to be larger when parents come from countries with political systems that differ markedly from Italy's. This pattern, however, is not necessarily linked to the non-democratic nature of the regime but rather to differences in party systems and ideological frameworks. For instance, the political meanings of terms like "left" and "right" can differ substantially between Eastern and Western European contexts. These findings align with existing research suggesting that the transmission of political knowledge from parents to children, as outlined in the traditional model of youth political socialisation (Jennings et al., 2009), is often "disrupted" in immigrant families due to international influences (Borkowska & Luthra, 2024) and may be shaped by the political culture of the parents' country of origin (Dinesen & Andersen, 2022; Lazarova et al., 2024).

While the results are consistent with our hypotheses, further research is required to explore these dynamics in greater depth. A key limitation of this study is that the parental information was gathered indirectly through their children. Consequently, the religion reflected in the analysis corresponds to that of the child, and we lack important information (Li & Jones, 2020) on when the parents migrated to Italy. A more detailed classification of political regimes would benefit from considering the regime type in place in the country of origin before emigration.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into political transmission in Italy, highlighting differences between native-born and immigrant children, while acknowledging the limitations of cross-sectional data. While we proposed a unidirectional influence from parents to children, in which family discussions promote political engagement, a converse interpretation is possible. The politically active children of immigrants, whose schools may compensate for limited family socialisation (Riniolo, 2023; Terriquez & Lin, 2020), might initiate political discussions at home and influence their parents' political engagement (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002; Pedraza & Perry, 2020). These alternative findings emphasise the need for further research, particularly through longitudinal and experimental studies, to better understand the complex interactions between family, school, and individual agency in shaping political engagement across different backgrounds.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset used is available at the UNIMI Dataverse for replication purposes: https://doi.org/10.13130/RD_UNIMI/2UN0UZ

Supplementary Material

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

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