

Voices in the Margins: Exploring the Link Between Discrimination and Adolescents' Political Involvement

Philipp Kleer¹ , Simone Abendschön¹ , Gema García-Albacete^{2,3} , Lidia Núñez^{2,3} ,
and David Sánchez^{2,3} 

¹ Department of Political Science, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany

² Department of Social Sciences, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain

³ Carlos III-Juan March Institute, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain

Correspondence: Philipp Kleer (philipp.kleer@sowi.uni-giessen.de)

Submitted: 14 September 2024 **Accepted:** 26 December 2024 **Published:** in press

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Unequal Participation Among Youth and Immigrants: Analyzing Political Attitudes and Behavior in Societal Subgroups” edited by Arndt Leininger (Chemnitz University of Technology) and Sabrina Mayer (University of Bamberg), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i426>

Abstract

Political interest is one of the main determinants of political participation. Understanding the development and the mechanisms involved in forming this crucial cognitive orientation is necessary for an enhanced understanding and a successful political integration of young people. We know that political interest starts forming at an early age and that this process depends on several social characteristics, i.e., socioeconomic and immigration background have proven to be a significant element. However, the direction of the differences in the political interest of adolescents with an immigrant background compared to native adolescents is disputed. At the same time, some studies present lower political interest levels for immigrant youth, and others found higher political interest levels. Our article explores whether these inconsistent findings are related to (a) different discrimination experiences and (b) the moderation effects of these discrimination experiences on one important correlate of political interest—social participation. We expect that experiences of discrimination represent an important determinant of political interest. Despite its importance, little attention has been paid to the mechanisms by which discrimination fosters political interest. We rely on data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU), allowing us to account for a wide range of discrimination experiences of youth. We use linear regression models to examine the effect of discrimination experience on political interest. From our results, both discrimination experience and social participation positively affect youth's political interest, but neither amplifies the other effect through suggested moderation.

Keywords

discrimination; immigration background; political interest; political involvement; youth

1. Introduction

From a normative democratic point of view, political involvement is crucial for successful democratic citizenship (van Deth et al., 2011; Verba et al., 1995). Galston (2001, p. 217) emphasized that “good citizens are made, not born,” highlighting the significant role of political socialization. Political socialization experiences within different contexts are responsible for developing individual political orientations during childhood and youth. Some of these orientations are understood to have a lasting effect on the political personality (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965; Hess & Torney, 1967; Moore et al., 1985). Family background plays a vital role in framing political socialization. Studies repeatedly have shown lower levels of political involvement among low socioeconomic status youth, youth of immigration backgrounds, or youth of marginalized racial groups (Alozie et al., 2003; Wray-Lake et al., 2020).

It is also well known that certain attitudes such as political interest positively impact political participation (Galston, 2001; Milbrath, 1965; Verba et al., 1995). While some studies have explored the role of positive and negative experiences with society and the political system during adolescence, this area still needs to be explored within political socialization research. It is plausible to assume that positive experiences raise political and democratic support and, in general, have positive effects on citizens’ political belief systems. Negative experiences within different institutions or contexts such as discrimination can have the opposite effect regarding political support; however, they could also motivate people to try to make a political change (Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024).

While schools, families, and societal groups can provide positive socialization environments, youth can also encounter negative experiences. The chances for this are not equally distributed; negative experiences within sociopolitical institutions might especially affect youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or immigration history. Research on minority groups among youth has shown lower levels of political interest in race and socioeconomic status (Alozie et al., 2003; Wray-Lake et al., 2020), which discriminatory experiences might cause. Discrimination against minority groups represents a major source of early experiences, potentially affecting youth’s attitudes, involvement, and dedication toward the societal and political system. Early experiences of non-acceptance or maltreatment from institutions, actors within institutions, or fellow citizens might profoundly affect youth’s political attitudes and civic engagement (see Flanagan et al., 2007; Jungkunz & Weiß, 2024; Weiß & Parth, 2022) and could even result in political apathy. The negative experiences of discrimination faced by marginalized youth could be a drawback in nurturing their political involvement (Arikan & Turkoglu, 2023; Just & Anderson, 2014).

Against this backdrop, we investigate to what extent perceived discrimination experiences impact young people’s political involvement. We focus on political interest as the dependent variable because, first, it has been shown that it is crucial for other political orientations and behavior and, second, the relationship between social marginalization and political interest could either be a negative one (as described above) or a positive one in motivating people to get politically involved and work towards political change. Third, there is a research lacuna in political opinion studies that consider the formation of political interest. Although this develops during the formative years and remains relatively stable throughout the lifetime (Neundorf et al., 2013), research has yet to examine some essential determinants for developing political interest during the political socialization process. We argue that discrimination experiences and social participation in adolescence have a share in interest formation.

Therefore, this article assesses how discrimination experiences influence young citizens' political involvement. We propose one potential mechanism by which experiencing discrimination can result in increased levels of political interest: through social participation. Our main research questions for this article are as follows: To what extent and how do discrimination experiences affect the political interest of young citizens? Does social participation moderate the relationship between experiences of discrimination and political interest? By investigating these questions, we contribute to research focusing on the development and socialization of political interest at a young age.

2. The Relationship Between Discrimination Experiences, Social Participation, and Political Interest in Adolescence

“Good” democratic citizens are not only supposed to support democracy but also to care about politics and take an active interest in it. This normative claim lies at the core of discussions about civic virtues. However, political interest is not only a democratic virtue. It is a well-known fact in political behavior research that political interest fosters political participation by delivering an informed background to political decisions and facilitating people to express their political preferences (Delli Carpini et al., 1996; Milbrath, 1965, p. 44; Milner, 2002; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Verba et al., 1995, pp. 356–363). Therefore, it must be learned early on. Political socialization studies showed that exposure to political issues in childhood and adolescence can augment levels of political interest (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965; Hess & Torney, 1967). Russo and Stattin (2017) demonstrated that the level of political interest persists over time, rendering it relatively stable in late adolescence (see also Prior, 2010; Sheata & Amna, 2019). Therefore, to understand the mechanisms fostering political interest, it is necessary to understand what influences its development at a young age since from late adolescence, political interest remains stable (Neundorf et al., 2013; Prior, 2010).

Our dependent variable, political interest, is considered a form of cognitive political involvement and defined as “the degree to which politics arouses a citizen’s curiosity” (van Deth, 1990, p. 278), or, to recall Lupia and Philpot (2005, p. 1122), it reflects a “citizen’s willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other topics.” This degree of curiosity is considered a comprehensive orientation toward politics in general, also for adolescents (Abendschön & Tausendpfund, 2017; Haug, 2017; van Deth et al., 2011).

So far, several precursors of youth’s political interest have been identified. First, sociocultural characteristics such as parents’ socioeconomic and educational status have been found to be influential. Higher resources and education positively impact children’s political interest. Gender and migration background are negatively connected with political interest levels (for an overview see Ferrín et al., 2020; Fraile & Sánchez-Vítores, 2020; Kleer et al., 2023), although migration background and gender might imply a positive intersectional effect (García-Albacete et al., 2025). Second, whereas in political behavior research, political interest is usually studied as a predecessor of forms of political participation, Quintelier and van Deth (2014) showed in a panel study that political behavior indeed positively influenced the levels of political interest among adolescents—stronger than political behavior was influenced by political attitudes such as political interest.

Concerning adolescents and this finding of behavioral effects, the interest-generating role of activities can be stressed: Taking part in voluntary activities, associations, and clubs inside and outside of schools can serve as a “school of democracy” and raise youth’s political interest (Cicognani et al., 2012; Dahl & Abdelzadeh, 2017). In the same way, participating in political discussions in families, schools, or with friends

can nurture political interest as several studies show (García-Albacete, 2013; Hochman & García-Albacete, 2019; Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019; Jennings et al., 2009; Quintelier, 2015; Roßteutscher et al., 2022; Sheata & Amna, 2019). This argument especially makes sense from a political socialization perspective. In adolescence, a specific formative phase in the individual biography, political interest is not yet fully stabilized, and, therefore, activities within socialization institutions can further nurture political interest. Hence, detecting possible links between political involvement, behavior, and other factors in developing and stabilizing political interest is imperative.

Whereas interactions within socialization contexts have been studied regularly in socialization research, the role of experiences within the “public sphere,” or the sociopolitical institutional structure, has only been looked at more recently. Experiencing discrimination has been shown to affect political involvement since it represents a direct interaction with fellow citizens or societal and political institutions. While schools, families, and societal groups can provide positive experiences, the reality of discrimination faced by (minority) youth presents a significant obstacle in nurturing political involvement (Arikan & Turkoglu, 2023; Jungkunz & Weiß, 2024; Just & Anderson, 2014; Weiß & Parth, 2022). Discrimination can include harmful treatment, and the outcome of discrimination is often oppression (Thompson, 2003). Furthermore, it affects how young adolescents perceive society and politics (see Flanagan et al., 2007). This effect is especially important in the phase of political socialization during adolescence, when young citizens build and maintain this political involvement later. Interactions within society could affect political involvement in this crucial phase more severely than after establishing political involvement.

In this sense, encounters with bias and prejudice from institutions, authority figures, or peers can foster feelings of non-acceptance and marginalization related to the political sphere. These negative experiences during formative years can lead to disillusionment and decreased political involvement, as affected youth may feel alienated from a system they perceive as unjust or unresponsive to their needs. Contrarily, one could also expect a positive effect of discrimination experiences on selected political orientations and behavior. For example, members of marginalized groups might follow politics closely and engage in political discussions or use forms of political participation to change policies related to their status (Dawson, 1995; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024). Participation of Black Americans in the Black Lives Matter movement could be a more recent and prominent example.

Studies (with adults) regarding the relationship between discrimination experiences and political participation and cognitive political attitudes such as political interest found positive effects. Takyar (2019), for instance, shows that the discrimination experiences of Muslims in the US slightly increased their interest in politics. Positive effects have also been found regarding the impact of discrimination experiences on actual political participation (Fleischmann et al., 2011; Oskooii, 2016, 2020; Pilati, 2017). Furthermore, Besco et al. (2022) found that racist attacks from political candidates did not decrease intended voting among Latinos in the US. Instead, among respondents with a strong Latino identity, these attacks increased the probability of participation in the elections. Fischer-Neumann (2014) reported that among German immigrants (Turks, ex-Yugoslavs, and Southern Europeans), discrimination experience positively affects general political interest, especially for immigrants with a dual identity. Although these studies looked at adult populations in Western democracies, we expect this relationship to work for adolescents, perhaps even more when we account for the socialization perspective. Jungkunz and Weiß (2024) showed that negative experiences in schools affected political orientations among Austrian, German, and Swiss youth by increasing the probability of

holding higher levels of populist attitudes if they think teachers treated them unfairly. For German youth, Dollmann (2022) found a mobilizing effect of perceived discrimination on political participation.

We therefore expect the following:

H1: Discrimination experience leads to higher levels of political interest among youth.

Social participation, such as voluntary work or formal and non-formal participation in social or school organizations, positively influences not only political participation (Verba et al., 1995) but also political interest (Cicognani et al., 2012; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). In a longitudinal analysis of Swedish students in 13 junior high schools, Dahl and Abdelzadeh (2017) showed that volunteering *per se* has no socialization effect on political interest; being a member of an association increased students' political interest over time (Dahl & Abdelzadeh, 2017). In a qualitative study, Balcazar et al. (2024) found that among less politically interested students, civic engagement training increased understanding of societal and political topics and political interest. Social participation such as voluntary work in organizations provides learning opportunities and practical experiences and raises civic skills that can deepen interest and understanding as Balcazar et al. (2024) suggested. Therefore, we expect a positive effect of social participation on political interest:

H2: Frequency of social participation is positively associated with political interest.

Next to these expected direct effects of perceived discrimination experiences and social participation on the political interest of youth, there could also be a moderation effect of discrimination experiences on political interest. Regarding social participation, studies showed that discrimination experience led to practices in which respondents challenged the status quo of discrimination or engaged in civic organization to combat discrimination (Ballard, 2015; Christophe et al., 2022). In a study among Latinos in the US, Schildkraut (2005) showed that perceived discrimination is negatively correlated with the perception that politicians care about the discriminated group (see also Chan & Latzman, 2015). This perception might lead to more involvement in fighting for the group's interest.

In a comprehensive study of adult Native Americans, Dai et al. (2023) showed that perceived discrimination led to higher social participation. Furthermore, they showed that respondents with higher Native identification perceived more discrimination and that the indirect effect from identification to social participation via perceived discrimination is positive and complementary to the main effect (Dai et al., 2023). Similarly, Riley et al. (2021) showed that racial discrimination among African American students led to increased social participation. In a study on discrimination experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, Tran et al. (2024) furthermore indicated that discrimination during the pandemic and discrimination before the pandemic significantly and positively affected engagement in political and community organizations among US adults (including Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White Americans). Finally, it has been shown that political and social participation are positively connected to political interest (Cicognani et al., 2012; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). Regarding these results, we expect that the experience of discrimination activates youth's social participation since voluntary organizations may provide a supportive environment for individuals who experience discrimination. This effect might be more substantial among adolescents in the formative years of political involvement than for adults who have already stabilized their political involvement:

H3: The positive association between discrimination experience and political interest is stronger for individuals who frequently participate in social organizations.

Since the levels of political interest also vary according to sex/gender and socioeconomic and cultural background, we control for these factors in our models. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds typically show less interest than their more privileged contemporaries (Fraile & Sánchez-Vitores, 2020; Jennings et al., 2009; Quaranta & Dotti Sani, 2018; Sheata & Amna, 2019; van Deth, 2000). Additionally, female adolescents often express lower political interest than males (e.g., Fernández et al., 2021; Fraile & Gomez, 2017; Fraile & Sánchez-Vitores, 2020; García-Albacete, 2013; Quaranta & Dotti Sani, 2018). Studies have found mixed effects regarding race or immigration background, with some showing lower political interest among minority groups (Alozie et al., 2003; Wray-Lake et al., 2020) and others indicating higher interest (Hochman & García-Albacete, 2019; Wolak, 2020).

3. Data and Methods

To analyze discrimination effects on youth with and without immigrant backgrounds, we utilize data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU; Kalter et al., 2017). This dataset, collected from 2010 to 2013 in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and England, is unique in its focus on youth, particularly children of immigrants. Given the link between minority status and marginalized socioeconomic background, this dataset is ideal for modeling the effects of discrimination on the political interest of young people. When the panel study started, respondents were about 15 years old; in wave 3, they were around 17.

Since not all measurements were repeated across the three waves, we could not use the panel structure. Instead, we used information from prior waves to complement our waves of analysis. Respondents reported their levels of political interest in waves 2 and 3. However, we opted to use wave 3 since this is the only one that included a measurement of social participation.

3.1. Measurement and Descriptives

Table A1 in the Supplementary File shows the descriptive statistics for all continuous variables. Before the linear regressions, all continuous variables were scaled by 1 standard deviation (SD) and centered. Political interest, the dependent variable, is measured on a 5-point scale. The average level of political interest is 1.532 (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File).

Our primary independent variable is discrimination experience. In most observational studies, respondents refer to perceived discrimination, indicating their assumption that they or their group are treated unfairly (Oskooii, 2020). This assumption is subjective and might not mean verifiable discriminatory encounters, but it shows the respondents' evaluation of different experiences as discriminatory (Santana, 2018). Furthermore, measurements of discrimination experience should capture different areas of public life to make the measurement more concrete instead of relying on a diffuse (general) feeling of being discriminated against. In the CILS4EU data, discrimination experience was measured in wave 1 with four items on a 5-point Likert scale: "How often do you feel discriminated against or treated unfairly...1)...in school?, 2)...in trains, buses, trams, or the subway?, 3)...in shops, stores, cafés, restaurants, or nightclubs?, and 4)...by police

or security guards?” It is important to note here that, concerning the item on possible discrimination in schools, it is not clear who is responsible for creating this experience. Either teachers and principals or fellow classmates and peers could be the source of discrimination in schools.

Regarding Oskooii (2016, p. 616), items 1 and 4 might refer to political discrimination (assuming teachers/principals are responsible for discrimination). Items 2 and 3 can be seen as societal discrimination in this sense. Table A1 in the Supplementary File presents the descriptive statistics of the respective items on the original scale. We can see that discrimination is perceived as highest in schools. Overall levels of discrimination experience were 0.494/0.486 for schools, 0.147/0.144 for public transportation, 0.155/0.153 for public areas, and 0.220/0.195 for police and security. Furthermore, Table A3 in the Supplementary File shows that experiencing discrimination is higher among immigrant youth or children of immigrants and youth with lower socioeconomic backgrounds or lower educational aims.

We follow the recommendation to run an EFA before CFA (Hurley et al., 1997) because even if researchers believe items already achieved sufficient empirical evidence of the theorized latent variables, controlling these latent variables in an EFA is worthy (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). In the exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we could establish a 1-factor solution (see Supplementary File, Tables A8–10 and Figure A7). The final distribution on the built mean index of discrimination experience for the regression models is highly right-skewed (Skewness 2.330, Kurtosis 8.416, see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). Therefore, we decided to build a dummy on discrimination experience, indicating “experienced discrimination at least once” against “never experienced discrimination” (for frequencies see Table A2 in the Supplementary File).

To measure social participation, we use the variable of how often respondents do voluntary or community work. Adolescents showed an average engagement in community organizations of 0.756, between responses *never* and *less often* (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File).

We added several control variables to the model that in the past have consistently been shown to be determinants of political interest: political discussions at home, socioeconomic background, immigration background, gender, education aim, and survey country’s language proficiency. For political discussions, we include the variable on how often respondents discuss political or social issues with their parents. As discussed above, political interest and political discussions have a reciprocal relationship. Furthermore, there was no measurement of political discussions in wave 3; therefore, we needed to include the item from wave 2. As a result of this, it precedes the occurrence of political interest in wave 3. On average, adolescents showed a low frequency of political discussions of 1.899 on a 5-point scale (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File).

The socioeconomic background provided in wave 1 measures parents’ socioeconomic status based on the job title (conversion by International Socioeconomic Index of occupational status; see Ganzeboom et al., 1992). If respondents had answers for both parents, we calculated the average value; if only one answer was available (mother or father), we used the single response, and if there was no answer, we set it as missing. We transferred this variable to wave 3; regarding the stability of these variables, this does not present a measurement problem; however, respondents not participating in wave 1 were excluded from the analyses. Higher values indicate a higher socioeconomic background.

We included a variable to differentiate respondents according to their specific immigration background. The generational variable of immigration divides respondents into, on one side, first- and second-generation (immigrants), and, on the other, older generations (up to the fourth generation) or natives (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File).

Since we used measurements across countries, we included dummy variables for the countries involved in the study. Approximately a quarter of the respondents come from each of the four countries, indicating an equal distribution of respondents across the four countries (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). Since gender differences in political involvement are well documented, we included a variable indicating gender in a binary way (boy/man or girl/woman). Table A2 shows that nearly 50% of respondents are self-described men or women in both waves.

Furthermore, educational background matters in terms of levels of political interest. Since respondents were first asked in their formative years, we included a variable indicating their educational aim. The answers on this item were already harmonized by the conductors of the survey (Kalter et al., 2017) into *no degree*, *degree below upper secondary school*, *degree from upper secondary school*, and *university degree*. There was no sufficient group size for the first category (*no degree*); hence, we merged the first two categories (*no degree* and *degree below upper secondary school*) into a joint category. Overwhelmingly, students responded to educational aspirations with *a university degree* (70%), as seen in Table A2 in the Supplementary File. Only 20% indicated upper secondary school, and only 8% indicated a degree below upper secondary school.

It is necessary to consider the respondents' ability to communicate in the survey country's language since most political involvement relies on skills in the respective country's language. We included a variable representing the mean language proficiency in the survey country's language in speaking and writing. Most respondents indicated at least a high ability of speaking and writing in the survey country's language (mean at 4.26 on a 5-point scale; see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). Furthermore, the middle 50% are in between *very well* (4) and *excellent* (5).

3.2. Analytical Approach

We used linear regression models with interaction terms for our analysis. Moderation is a "variable that alters the direction or strength of the relation between a predictor and an outcome" (Frazier et al., 2004, p. 116; see Judd, 2001). For the possible moderation effect between discrimination experiences and social participation, we plotted the effect relying on post-estimation techniques. Therefore, we can test whether the effect of discrimination experience alters the effect of social participation or whether the effect of social participation mutates the effect of discrimination experience. At this moment, we do not inherently declare causal directions; instead, we test each moderation. This approach underscores that, in formative years during political socialization processes, attitudes not only shape behavior as is highlighted in general political behavior research, but behavior also shapes political orientations. Hence, we show and discuss both possible moderation effects.

In addition to the linear regression, to check the robustness of our results, we calculated a logit regression with a binary constructed political interest indicating very much and a lot of interest against the other three categories. Results indicate no relevant differentiation to the linear models (see Table A4 in the Supplementary

File); therefore, we discuss the results of the linear model. We checked for multicollinearity in the models, but there was no severe violation (see Figures A1–A6 in the Supplementary File).

4. Analyses and Results

In this analysis, we assess the effect of discrimination experience on political interest in the third wave of the CILS4EU data (Kalter et al., 2017). We focus on the effects of discrimination experiences on political interest with a possible moderation via social participation. With this step, we test possible moderation effects of discrimination experience via social participation and the interplay towards political interest.

Table 1 shows the results of our pooled linear regressions in three models. First, we calculated a model that only includes discrimination experience and social participation. Second, we included the interaction terms of discrimination experience and social participation. Third and lastly, we included control variables in the model. The effects in our robustness tests (logistic regression, Table A4 in the Supplementary File) do not differ in direction or significance. Furthermore, we ran the linear regressions by country (Tables A5–A7 in the Supplementary File).

Table 1. Results of pooled linear regressions on political interest.

	Base model (M1)	Interaction model (M2)	Controls model (M3)
Discrimination experience (ref: no)	0.067 (0.026)** [0.016, 0.118]	0.067 (0.026)** [0.016, 0.118]	0.040 (0.025) ⁺ [−0.008, 0.088]
Social participation (centered)	0.139 (0.013)*** [0.114, 0.165]	0.142 (0.019)*** [0.105, 0.179]	0.115 (0.018)*** [0.081, 0.149]
Discrimination experience × social participation		−0.005 (0.026) [−0.055, 0.046]	−0.013 (0.023) [−0.059, 0.032]
Female (ref: male)			−0.313 (0.024)*** [−0.359, −0.266]
Migration up to 2nd gen. (ref: native)			0.024 (0.026) [−0.026, 0.074]
Age (centered)			0.023 (0.013) ⁺ [−0.004, 0.049]
From upper secondary (ref: below upper secondary)			0.188 (0.048)*** [0.093, 0.283]
University degree (ref: below upper secondary)			0.513 (0.047)*** [0.421, 0.606]
Language proficiency (centered)			0.101 (0.014)*** [0.072, 0.129]
Political discussions at home (centered)			0.340 (0.012)*** [0.316, 0.364]
Socioeconomic status (centered)			0.023 (0.013) ⁺ [−0.003, 0.049]

Table 1. (Cont.) Results of pooled linear regressions on political interest.

	Base model (M1)	Interaction model (M2)	Controls model (M3)
Germany (ref: England)			0.923 (0.038)*** [0.848, 0.997]
Netherlands (ref: England)			0.467 (0.040)*** [0.389, 0.544]
Sweden (ref: England)			0.285 (0.037)*** [0.212, 0.359]
(Intercept)	1.516 (0.018)*** [1.480, 1.552]	1.516 (0.018)*** [1.480, 1.552]	0.794 (0.054)*** [0.688, 0.900]
Num. Obs.	8,431	8,431	8,431
R ²	0.015	0.015	0.196
R ² Adj.	0.015	0.015	0.194
AIC	26,809.5	26,811.4	25,123.0
BIC	26,837.6	26,846.6	25,235.7
RMSE	1.19	1.19	1.07

Notes: + $p = 0.1$; * $p = 0.05$; ** $p = 0.01$; *** $p = 0.001$.

We find support for H1. We can see a direct and positive effect of discrimination experience among youth on political interest in models 1 and 2. By adding the interaction effect in model 3, the effect remains only significant at $p = 0.1$; however, it only measures the effect of discrimination experience when social participation is 0 (mean). This result indicates, as suggested by others (Dollmann, 2022; Fischer-Neumann, 2014; Takyar, 2019), that the negative experience of discrimination leads to an increase in political interest rather than political alienation among young people in the formative years.

Furthermore, we can see through all models an apparent positive effect of social participation. Youth frequently engaging in voluntary and community work display higher political interest levels. In these formative years of political socialization, positive learning within voluntary or community work can especially be seen as “schools of democracy” that nurture the political interest of young citizens. It might seem counterintuitive that behavior shapes cognitive orientations; however, socialization research has stressed this possibility among adolescents (Cicognani et al., 2012; Dahl & Abdelzadeh, 2017; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). In summary, we find support for H2.

However, our third hypothesis, the possible interaction of discrimination experience and social participation, is not supported. As Table 1 shows, the interaction effect is not statistically significant. To get a fuller picture, we look at the marginal plots for the possible moderation of discrimination experience by social participation and social participation by discrimination experience (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 illustrates the possible moderation effect of social participation on the relation between experiences of discrimination and political interest. While there is a higher political interest among youth participating in social organizations across discriminated and non-discriminated youth, it is evident that the change in levels of social participation for the effect of discrimination relies only on the main effect (moderation effect close to 0). There is no evidence that social participation significantly alters the impact of discrimination experiences on

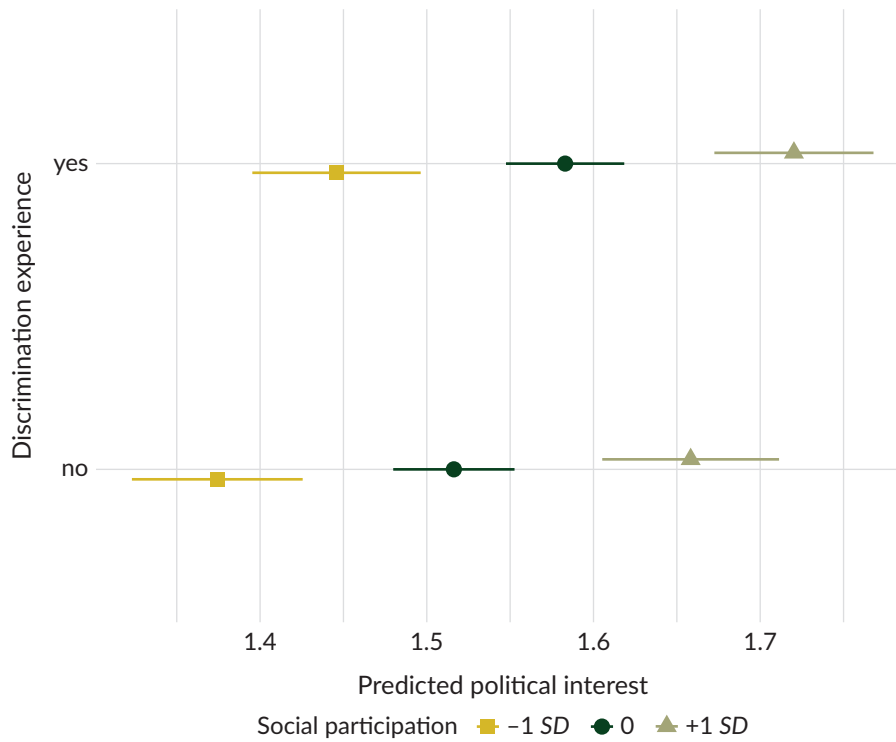


Figure 1. Marginal effects of being discriminated against among social participation. Note: Estimates are based on model 2. Source: CILS4EU (Kalter et al., 2017).

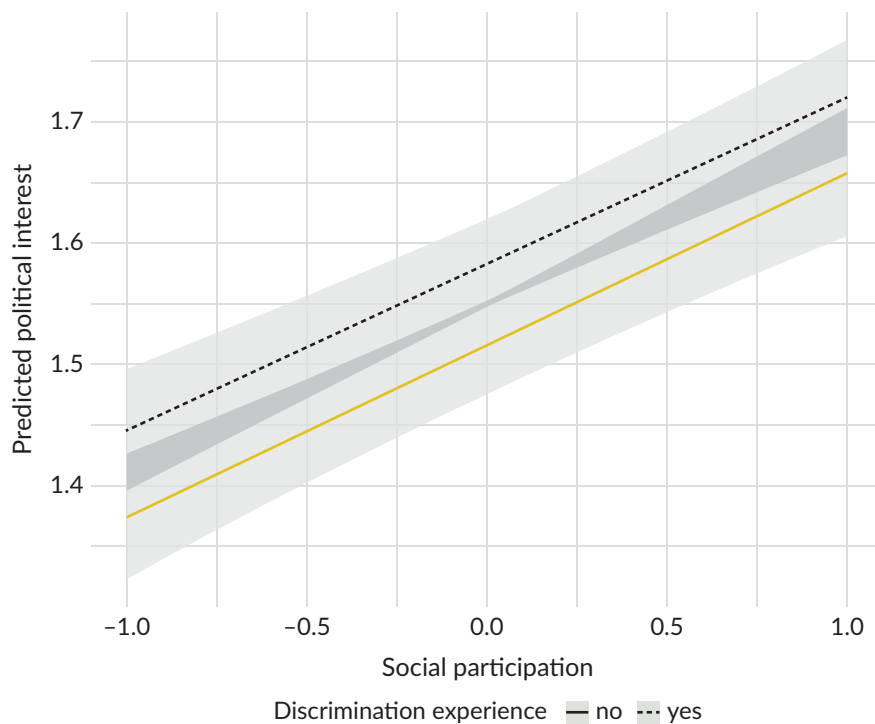


Figure 2. Marginal plots of social participation among discrimination experiences. Note: Estimates are based on model 2. Source: CILS4EU (Kalter et al., 2017).

political interest. Therefore, we cannot confirm H3 since no additional moderation exists. The figure indicates that youth who have experienced discrimination tend to report higher levels of political interest than those who have not, as evident by the higher position of the same-colored points on the y-axis.

Moreover, Figure 1 illustrates the effect of social participation. Between youth who engage more frequently in voluntary organizations and youth who less frequently engage in voluntary organizations, the predicted level of political interest differs by 0.28 scale points. Our finding suggests that active participation in voluntary activities enhances political interest across the board but is not accelerated by discrimination experiences.

Figure 2 illustrates the potential reversed moderation effect of discrimination experience on the relationship between social participation and political interest. It shows the relationship between social participation and political interest, depending on whether young people experienced discrimination. Since the lines are parallel, there is no moderation effect of discrimination experience, and the relationship between voluntary social participation and political interest is consistent across both groups.

5. Discussion

This study explored the relationship between discrimination experience and political involvement among European adolescents using data from the innovative CILS4EU study that enables a comprehensive empirical analysis of discrimination among youth. Our findings reveal that the discrimination experienced by adolescents has a direct and positive effect on political interest. This result suggests that those youngsters who face discrimination are more likely to become politically interested than alienated in order to better understand and address the injustices they encounter. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that marginalized groups often engage more politically to advocate for their rights (Oskooii, 2016, 2020; Takyar, 2019). Though discrimination experiences are not a good encounter from a normative perspective, the good news is that they at least do not harm young people's political involvement.

Next to discrimination experiences, we also investigated the possible learning effect of social participation. As shown in prior studies, behavior such as social participation positively affects the levels of youth's political interest (Cicognani et al., 2012; Dahl & Abdelzadeh, 2017; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). Social participation in the broader context of engaging with fellow citizens and society might not be explicitly political. However, it is positively connected to political interest in the formative years.

Regarding our hypothesized possible moderation effect between discrimination experience and social participation, we see no evidence to support this hypothesis in our analysis. Contrary to our assumption, based on studies among youth in the US (see Dai et al., 2023; Riley et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2024), we do not see a further amplifying effect in the interaction of discrimination experience and social participation. Although social participation may provide a supportive environment for individuals who experienced discrimination, besides the main effects, there is no further boosting between discrimination experience and social participation in political interest. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to notice that among youth discriminated against and not discriminated against, those engaging in voluntary activities expressed higher levels of political interest. This result might suggest that interventions to increase social participation such as voluntary work or service-learning activities could be equally effective in fostering political interest for both discriminated and non-discriminated youth.

Looking at our control characteristics, we also find some interesting results. The assumed (adverse) effects of low socioeconomic status, migration background, and female gender are confirmed for the studied age group. Educational aspirations and language proficiency in the survey country are also vital to developing adolescent political interest. Regarding social characteristics, engaging in political discussions is considered healthy for political participation and involvement in general and an essential correlate of political interest. The analyses showed that youth who discuss politics are also more politically interested, which is in line with prior research (García-Albacete, 2013; Hochman & García-Albacete, 2019; Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019; Jennings et al., 2009; Quintelier, 2015; Roßteutscher et al., 2022; Sheata & Amna, 2019).

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, some of the measurements were collected at different time points, which may influence the stability and comparability of the regression coefficients. Specifically, the primary independent variable, discrimination experience, was collected in wave 1 (school year 2010/2011), while the dependent variable, political interest, was measured in wave 3 (school year 2012/2013). This temporal gap could introduce biases related to changes in context or individual circumstances between waves.

Second, the overall distribution of discrimination experience was right-skewed, with most respondents reporting low levels of discrimination or no discrimination. To address this skewness, the variable was dichotomized for analytical purposes, potentially oversimplifying the variation within the data.

These findings have important implications for policy and education aimed at fostering political interest. The positive effects of both discrimination experience and social participation on political interest suggest that personal experience of marginalization and active participation in civic activities can motivate individuals to engage with political issues. This finding highlights the need for policies that address discrimination and promote inclusivity, as reducing systematic barriers may encourage broader political engagement. Additionally, fostering social participation through educational programs and community initiatives could serve as a vital tool to enhance political interest, particularly among marginalized groups. However, the non-significant interaction effect indicates that the benefits of social participation are not further accelerated by a prior experience of discrimination. Together, these insights underscore the value of combating discrimination and actively promoting civic engagement to strengthen democratic participation. Overall, this study highlights the significant impact of discrimination on political interest among adolescents, indicating the need for interventions to foster a politically active and informed youth population.

Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their valuable comments and insightful suggestions during the review process. Their constructive feedback has significantly contributed to the improvement of this manuscript.

Funding

This work was done under the project Gender Empowerment Through Politics in Classrooms, which received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation program under grant agreement no. 101095000.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

Replication files are available on OSF (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/PUQT7>). The replication material does not include the data set since a request is necessary to access the data set.

We used the data from the CILS4EU project, <https://www.cils4.eu>. We used a combined data set of all three waves (version 3.3.0). The data set has restricted access and is available at the GESIS repository under the identifier ZA5656: <https://doi.org/10.4232/cils4eu.5656.3.3.0>

Supplementary Material

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

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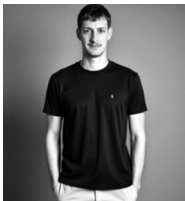
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About the Authors



Philipp Kleer is currently a postdoctoral affiliate in the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia at Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Brazil. He was a postdoc researcher in the EU-funded project G-EPIC: Gender Empowerment Through Politics in Classrooms at Justus Liebig University of Giessen until 2024. In 2023, he was a visiting postdoc at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco in Recife, Brazil. Before that, he was a doctoral fellow at Justus Liebig University of Giessen. His research focuses on political socialization, political attitudes, youth, and special populations.



Simone Abendschön is a professor of political science at Justus Liebig University Giessen in Germany. After completing her dissertation on children and democratic value orientations at the University of Mannheim, she worked as a postdoc at the University of Frankfurt/Main and as an interim professor at Bamberg University before she moved to Giessen. She has published on political socialization in childhood and youth, political orientations, participation, and democracy, especially from the perspective of social and gender inequalities.



Gema García-Albacete is an associate professor at the Department of Social Sciences at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and a fellow at the Carlos III-Juan March Institute. Her research relates to citizens' inequalities in political engagement based on age, gender, and/or origin and has been published in journals such as the *International Journal of Press Politics*, *West European Politics*, and the *International Journal of Public Opinion*, among others. More information on her research projects is available at www.garcia-albacete.com



Lidia Núñez worked as a research assistant on the EU-funded project G-EPIC: Gender Empowerment Through Politics in Classrooms. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Social Sciences at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, where she is developing her dissertation on the gender gap in political attitudes, focusing on its origins, transmission, and development across the life cycle.



David Sánchez is a doctoral researcher in social sciences at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, contributing to the G-EPIC project. His research focuses on analyzing the effect of polarization on internal political efficacy. Additionally, he investigates inequalities in internal political efficacy and political interest from an intersectional perspective.