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Disinterested or just less confident? The gendered effects of interest and internal efficacy on young people's non-electoral political participation

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Introduction

This working paper examines how interest and confidence have gendered impacts on young people's non-electoral political participation. Research continuously shows that women tend to report lower political interest, which may result in lower political participation, specifically electoral participation. However, some studies have suggested that the gender gap in political interest could be attributed to the framing of politics as 'masculine', as women seem to state higher levels of interest when being asked about specific political and social issues. Additionally, women may report lower political interest due to a reduced sense of confidence in their participatory abilities. This sense of confidence about one's ability to understand and participate in politics is also referred to as 'internal efficacy'. A lack of perceived internal efficacy, i.e. not feeling confident about one's own ability to make a difference in politics, hinders political participation.

Drawing on an online survey with young people in the UK aged 16 to 24, this working paper focuses on the gendered effects of interest and internal efficacy

on non-electoral participation. Young people are still in the process of developing a sense of confidence regarding political participation, thus, potential gender differences often occur during this time of adolescence. No significant gender difference was found with regard to the average number of non-electoral activities participated in, but once active, female respondents tended to be more likely to become engaged in more activities than male respondents. The analysis considered respondents' interest in politics and interest in social issues to uncover gendered differences in reported interest levels. It looked into the effect of internal efficacy on engagement with non-electoral activities and found that there is an interaction effect of gender and internal efficacy for female respondents. For young women, a higher level of internal efficacy was associated with a greater increase in non-electoral participation. For young men, this relationship was less pronounced. To address this issue, civic education should focus on building political confidence to encourage participation among all young people.

Political participation and gender

Women remain less politically involved than men, especially when considering predominantly institutionalised forms of political action such as participation (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2012; Córdova and Rangel, 2017). While there is unclarity about if and to what extent the discrepancy between women and men in voter turnout still exists (Stockemer and Sundstrom, 2023; Kostelka, Blais and Gidengil, 2019), the gender gap in political participation persists. This remains the case, especially in democracies of the 'Global South' (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010, 2011; Coffé and Dilli, 2015) and for participatory actions focused on political institutions (e.g. government, parliaments or political parties) but not necessarily including voting (Iyer and Mani, 2019; Liu, 2022). Common explanations for this persistent phenomenon include the relative socio-economic deprivation of women; the structural barriers to political education; and differences in the socialisation process of young women and men. The latter, the socialisation perspective, emphasises that societal norms about gender-appropriate behaviour shape political participation which lie at the root of one of the most important predictors of political action, interest in politics (Fraile and Gomez, 2017).

Interest in politics and gender

Studies have consistently found that women show lower levels of interest in politics than men (Hayes and Bean, 1993; Verba, Burns and Schlozman, 1997). This apparent gap in political interest has been attributed to gendered socialisation processes and, thus, is likely to impact young people early on, during their adolescence (Cicognani *et al.*, 2012). Gendered socialisation processes affect young people's interest in politics by priming their perceptions and preferences in general, which are also transferrable to political institutions. While it is suggested men learn to identify themselves with the concepts of leadership and assertiveness, women are introduced to concepts of empathy and passivity (Gilligan, 1983; Alwin, Cohen and Newscomb, 1991). With regard to politics, studies have shown that girls are more inclined to participate in social or environmental issues, while boys tend to prioritise foreign policy and matters related to war (Lynn, Irwing, and Cammock, 2001; Fridkin and Kenney, 2007).

Research has shown that the framing of politics, especially institutionalised politics, is often perceived as 'masculine'. This perception is influenced by favoured rhetoric in political discourse and the predominant representation of men in political office (Fox and Lawless, 2014; Teele, Kalla and Rosenblut, 2018). Given this perception, women tend to associate 'politics' with institutional politics and male-dominated topics (Fitzgerald, 2013). When women are asked specifically about their interest in topics with a societal connection, they are more likely to express their interest (Ferrín *et al.*, 2020). The commonly asked survey question measuring interest in politics is "far from gender-neutral", as this standard measurement reflected the gendered socialisation process instead of mitigating it by incorporating the "latent idea of 'politics' associated with masculine codes" (Tormos and Verge, 2022, p. 129) in survey design, leading to a skewed view of men being more interested and women less interested in politics.

Internal efficacy and gender

Internal efficacy is another factor assumed to be affected by this gendered political socialisation. Internal efficacy refers "to beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in politics" (Niemi, Craig and Mattei, 1991, p. 1407) and can be defined as self-efficacy in terms of one's assessment of one's ability to act within politics (Vecchione and Caprara, 2009). Both interest in politics and perceived knowledge about politics feed into one's perception of internal efficacy (Kenski and Stroud, 2006). This perception can be impacted by how the environment is perceived. For instance, studies have shown that when young people feel they are not taken seriously by political institutions or older people, such "lack of responsiveness reduces their belief in their ability to have any influence politically or civically" (Zani and Cicognani, 2019, p. 8) and their motivation to participate in the future.

Similar to interest in politics, a gender gap has been identified in internal efficacy. Low internal efficacy and a general lack of self-confidence are linked to lower electoral participation, voting in particular, and this is an issue affecting women in particular (Condon and Holleque, 2013). Young women report lower confidence levels than men when it comes to their political abilities, which "can contribute to less interest

in following politics and less confidence in their ability to keep up with current affairs” (Wolak, 2020, p. 1499). Reduced or even a lack of self-confidence represents a barrier to political participation and has been traced back to gendered differences in risk behaviour and gendered socialisation processes (Sweet-Cushman, 2016; Wolak, 2020). Another study described the consistently lower self-assessment of self-efficacy by women as a “*miss-alignment* between how individuals perceive themselves and the common perceptions about political participation” (Fraile and de Miguel Moyer, 2022, p. 1475).

Gender differences across different modes of political participation

One challenge in researching the gender gap in political participation stems from the way politics is typically perceived through a more masculine lens. As a result, the definition of political action is often limited and closely linked to the institutions that are traditionally associated with male-dominated ideas and structures. Women may not participate less, but differently: they are more likely to be engaged in ‘cause-orientated’ actions (Norris, 2002) rather than political party or party-affiliated activities (Childs, 2004). Their political activities include signing petitions, political consumerism, donating or raising money. This preference for more individual activities, detached from political party or other institutionalised structures, has been noted for women across different socio-economic groups and as arguably “the least resource dependent and most easily incorporated in daily life” (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010, p. 330). Such differences in participatory patterns may also relate to the differences in political socialisation, with men showing to be more inclined to be interested in institutional politics and women in latent political topics. Studies have found “a higher involvement of men in political participation and of women in civic forms of participation” (Zani and Cicognani, 2019, p. 5) and that “women tended to volunteer more topics related to social policies” (Ferrín *et al.*, 2020, p. 481). Therefore, rather than exploring a single gender gap in political participation, it is more appropriate to consider various “gender gaps across modes of participation” (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010, p. 330).

Researching young people’s non-electoral participation

Evidence suggests that gendered socialisation affects preferences for different modes of participation early on in life, yet there is a gap in research focusing on the influence of gender on the political affiliation and civic engagement of young adults (Norona, Preddy and Welsh, 2015). Young adulthood constitutes a transitional time from childhood into adolescence and adulthood, which has also been found to be the most formative with respect to political interest (Neundorf, Smets and García-Albacete, 2013). Young people are going through a developmental life stage in which they not only become more aware of political and social issues around them, but may also start assuming and attributing responsibility for these issues (Behrens, 2023). They tend to be more engaged in political participation outside political parties and institutionalised structures and characterised by non-electoral activities which are taking place in everyday life and are less focused on the state as a single actor (Pickard, 2019). While social networks remain important, they are rather fluid and horizontal, as emphasis is placed on the individualisation of action repertoires in “issue-based participatory politics” (Vromen, 2017, p. 9).

Based on the literature on gendered differences in political participation and changing structures of youth activism, this working paper addresses how gender influences young people’s engagement in non-electoral political activities, drawing on an original survey from a doctoral research project. The survey was conducted in early 2021 and disseminated on social media, thus representing a self-selecting sampling process. The weighted sample included 948 respondents between the age of 16 and 24, with residency in the UK. The questionnaire contained questions on respondents’ participation in a range of non-electoral political activities, their interest in politics and social issues, and their perception of efficacy, agency and influence regarding politics. The main purpose of the survey was to examine the effects of factors commonly explored in the context of electoral participation, such as interest in politics and perception of efficacy, on engagement in non-electoral participation.

Effects of interest and internal efficacy on young people's non-electoral participation

The survey results showed similar participatory rates for female and male respondents in non-electoral activities. Non-electoral activities encompassed five activities of an individual character - (1) Liking, sharing or posting political content online, (2) Signing a petition, (3) Buying certain products or brands because of ethical, moral or political reasons, (4) Avoiding buying products or brands because of ethical, moral or political reasons, (5) Becoming a vegetarian (meatless diet) or going vegan (diet without any animal products) - and four activities with a more collective dimension - (1) Volunteering in a non-profit organisation, community or group (for political or communal causes), (2) Taking part in a protest march, demonstration or rally, (3) Participating in or being a member of an activist group, (4) Mobilising other people to take part in a protest march, demonstration or rally. On average, young women had participated in 4.5 out of these nine pre-defined activities, young men in 4.2. When breaking young people's non-electoral participation down by activity and gender, female respondents appeared to be more involved in 'lifestyle' politics, including political consumerism and changes in their diet, and male respondents had a slightly greater affinity for engaging with political content online and being part of an activist group. Overall, women were more likely to participate in more additional non-electoral activities once engaged in at least one.

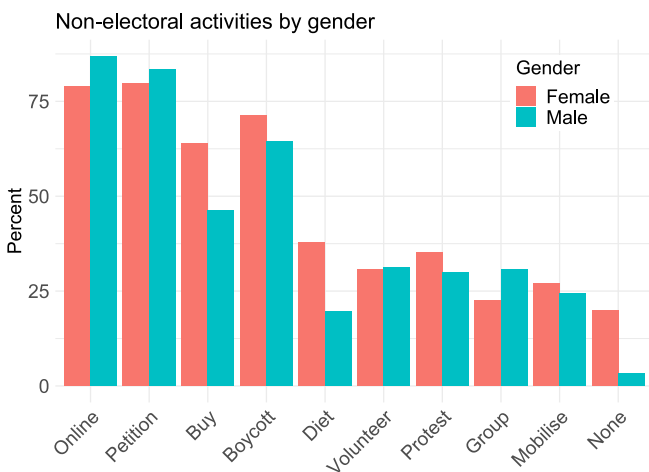


Figure 1. Non-electoral activities respondents reported to have participated in (N = 948).

The questionnaire asked for respondents' self-assessed level of interest in politics, as well as their interest in social issues. Both were measured on a 4-step scale ranging from *not at all interested* to *very interested*. Female respondents tended to express a stronger interest in social issues (88.3% *very interested*) than male respondents (48.2% *very interested*). Reverse figures were found for interest in politics, with 51.4% of female respondents and 79.9% of male respondents being *very interested* in politics. These differences indicated that female respondents might perceive themselves as more inclined towards issues when they are presented as 'social' rather than 'political'.

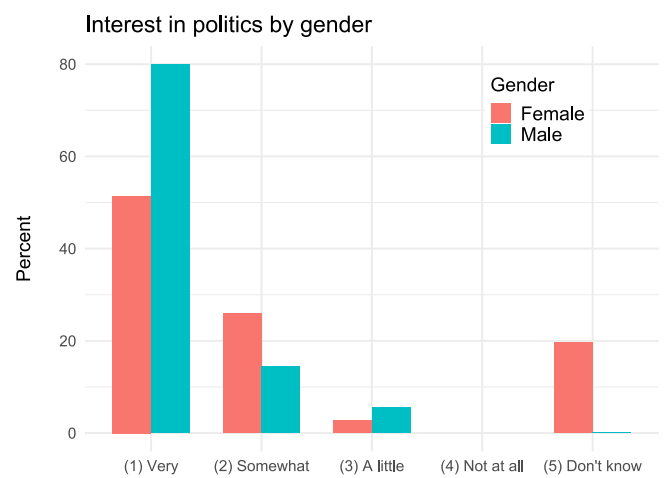


Figure 2. Interest in politics by gender (N = 948).

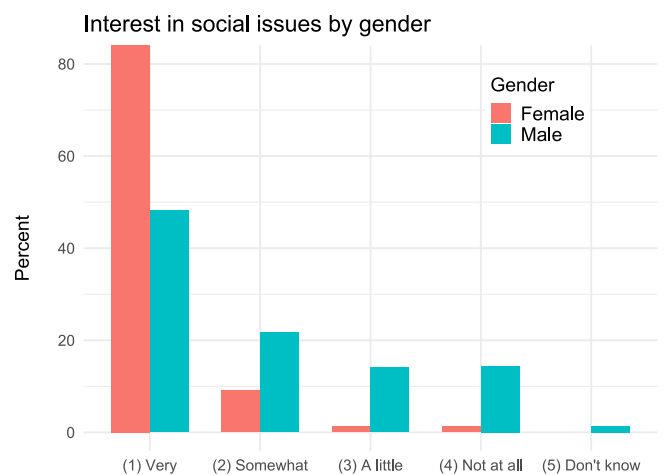


Figure 3. Interest in social issues by gender (N = 948).

An OLS regression model was run to examine the effects of the interest variables on engagement in non-electoral activities. Regression models are a statistical method used to investigate the relationship between variables and to identify potential causal

effects between them. In addition to gender, the model included further control variables such as age, self-assessed socio-economic class, ethnicity, and education status. Both interest variables demonstrated a positive impact on young people's level of non-electoral participation, meaning that a heightened interest in politics or social issues corresponded to a greater number of non-electoral activities participated in. This observation applied to female and male respondents equally.

The survey also asked respondents about their confidence in their ability to participate in politics, by prompting "How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?" The answer options consisted of a 5-step scale from *not at all confident* to *completely confident*. More male respondents stated to be very or completely confident (37.2% of all male respondents) than female respondents (19.9% of all female respondents). About a fifth of young women and a tenth of young men were unsure about their political self-efficacy.

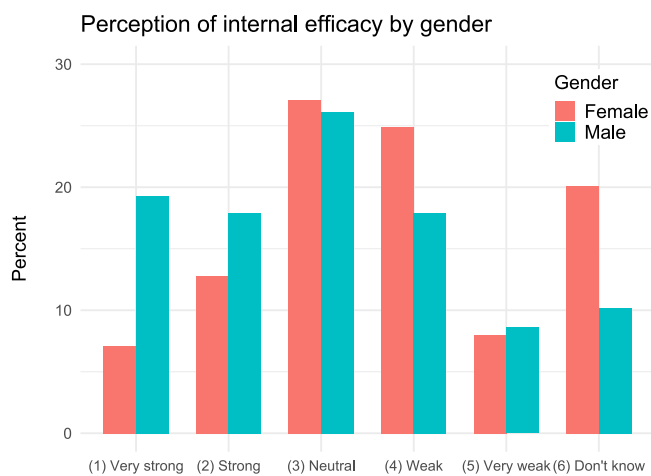


Figure 4. Perception of internal efficacy by gender (N = 948).

An OLS regression model was used to determine the effect of the perception of internal efficacy on engagement in non-electoral activities, including the aforementioned control variables age, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and education status. The model showed that there may be an interaction effect between internal efficacy and gender, as the perception of political self-efficacy appeared to have a stronger impact on young women's engagement in non-electoral activities. The figure below illustrates that for

female respondents there was a more tangible effect of perceived self-efficacy on the numbers of non-electoral activities participated than for male respondents.

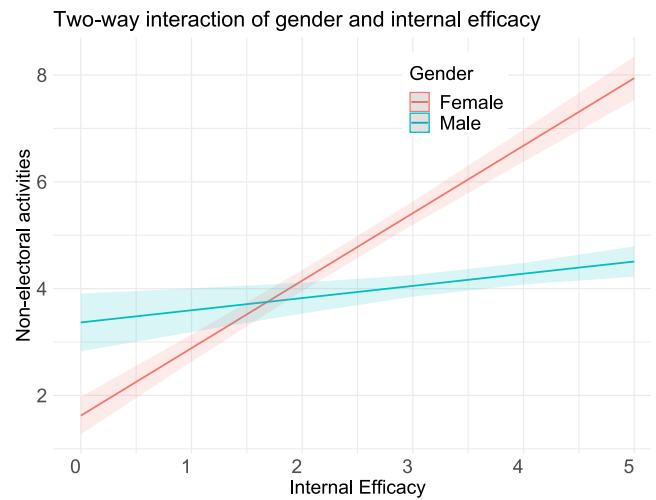


Figure 5. Two-way interaction between gender and internal efficacy on reported non-electoral activities (N = 948).

The interaction effect disappeared when adding the political interest variable to the model, due to the high correlation between the two items ($r_s = .639, p < .001$) - suggesting that confidence in political abilities is linked to interest in politics. This correlation may offer another explanation as to why women are less likely to state their interest in issues and institutions labelled as 'political', as they perceive themselves as not able or knowledgeable enough to have a high level of confidence in their political efficacy.

Conclusion

This working paper reviewed literature on apparent gender differences in political participation and interest. In recognition of the evidence that there is a gendered gap in electoral participation, though there is no conclusive data on differences in women and men's voter turnout, the analysis focused specifically on young people and their participation in non-electoral forms of political action. Consistent with previous research, the data demonstrated that there are gender differences in reported interest in politics, with young men claiming to be more interested than young women. Following suggestions to re-think the measurement of political interest due to inherent gender bias, the analysis also looked into respondents' interest in social issues and found that young women were more likely to express their interest in those.

Internal efficacy, the perceived ability to participate in politics, has been shown to impact young people's engagement in non-electoral activities. Women were overall less likely to be confident about their political self-efficacy, an observation which was also linked to the reduced reported political interest. The regression analysis revealed an interaction effect between gender and perception of internal efficacy, suggesting that young women's non-electoral participation increases more strongly with confidence in participatory ability than young men's.

The findings confirm that the commonly used measurement for interest in politics does not suffice to capture young women's interest levels, as it falls short of incorporating social issues as part of 'the political'. To bridge the gendered differences in reported political interest, more inclusive or additional measures should be introduced to mitigate bias. Given its strong correlation with internal efficacy, reported political interest is likely affected by young women's reduced sense of confidence. Confidence in political ability does not just affect gendered trends in electoral participation but extends to non-electoral participation. Therefore, civic education should focus on building confidence of boys and girls to strengthen young people's abilities of political – electoral and non-electoral – participation. This could be achieved by creating inclusive spaces for boys and girls to

participate equally and fostering systems of gender-balanced representation. For instance, the WiSE Centre for Economic Justice has recently completed a project which aimed at strengthening women's confidence in their participatory abilities by fostering their knowledge about economic policymaking. The author's forthcoming research will explore further gendered differences influencing the political engagement of young people, including their perceived ability to act and their belief in the effectiveness of collective action.

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