



# Self-determination theory and the role of political interest in adolescents' sociopolitical development

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## ABSTRACT

In this study we adopted an agentic perspective and used self-determination theory to analyze the role of political interest in youth's sociopolitical development. Inspired by this theoretical framework, we identified indicators of the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence within the political sphere. We followed two age cohorts (Swedish 13- and 16-year-olds) over one year, with a total of 1992 adolescents, who are at a crucial age for sociopolitical development. Results from autoregressive structural cross-lagged models indicated that political interest predicted significant increases in autonomy, relatedness, and competence over one year, but these psychological needs did not predict a change in political interest over the same time period. The findings speak in favor of an agentic perspective, suggesting that political interest can serve as a basis for youth's political development.

## 1. Introduction

In this study, we adopted an agentic perspective and used a unifying theoretical framework, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), to analyze adolescents' sociopolitical development over one year. We focused on the role of political interest since it is a key prognostic factor for political and civic activity (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Consistent with this, virtually every study aimed at explaining political engagement has included political interest among its main determinants. However, theoretical arguments explaining the role of political interest in young people's political development are still less well developed. We suggested and tested the idea that youth's political interest acts as a motivational force for behaviors that satisfy the basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence within the political sphere.

### 1.1. Youth's agency in political development

Psychological theorists consider adolescence a crucial period for sociopolitical development (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). Adolescence is regarded as a period of transition during which young people face the tasks of exploring and consolidating identity (Erikson, 1968), and of developing independence of thought (Flanagan & Christens, 2011). Adolescence is the time for exploration in a variety of fields, and politics is not an exceptional one. During this

period, youth consolidate social responsibility (e.g., Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011), develop a political identity (e.g., Yates & Youniss, 1998), and start to engage in political and civic activities (e.g., Flanagan, 2013; Levy, Solomon, & Collet-Gildard, 2016; Manganelli, Lucidi, & Alivernini, 2015). Overall, a variety of studies have confirmed the importance of this life period for youth sociopolitical development.

Some researchers focusing on adolescents' civic and political development have presented a view that goes beyond the internalization model of political socialization, which has tended to explain youth's political development on the basis of the unidirectional influences of the social environment. For example, Flanagan and Christens (2011) claimed that young people are agents of social change and should be regarded as assets to their community; similarly, Yates and Youniss (1998) suggested that young people are reflective agents who interpret the options and opportunities that they encounter. This agentic perspective is in line with the most recent theories in developmental psychology, highlighting a view of individuals as active participants in their environment (e.g., Sameroff, 2009). In this study, we utilized this agentic perspective to analyze the role played by political interest in adolescents' political development.

The idea that youth's political interest can influence their own civic and political development has been tackled mainly in two areas of research. The first deals with civic and political discussions within the family. McDevitt (2006) suggested a model of developmental provoca-

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tion, according to which young people who are interested in political issues will develop a sense of political agency at home. Once they are stimulated by some external factor, such as school civic education, they will want to initiate political discussion at home with their parents, who, in turn, will be prompted to strengthen their own political competence as preparation for future conversations. A series of empirical studies evaluating the consequences of participating in Kids Voting – a set of activities in a school curriculum dealing with issues related to voting in a democracy – supported this idea (McDevitt & Chaffee, 1998, 2000). This line of research suggests that once young people become interested in societal and political issues, they are likely to be eager to engage in discussion and get feedback from their family.

The second research model derives from media and communication studies, and concerns exposure to political news. In this field, the role of individual characteristics and predispositions, like socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes, interests, prior experience, and personality, in driving the selection of and attention to media content has for long been recognized. For example, the “uses and gratification” approach seeks to understand what attracts and holds audiences to different types of media channels and contents (e.g., Cantril, 1942). Slater (2007) suggested that there is a mutual influence of media selectivity and media effects, which produces reinforcing spirals, such that political attitudes and beliefs increase political media use and are reinforced by it. For example, Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) adopted a longitudinal design to investigate the relationship between news-media use and interest in politics among adults. They found that the relationship between attention to political news and political interest was reciprocal, and that the effect of political interest on news-media use was stronger than the effect of news-media use on political interest. On the whole, empirical findings support the idea that people interested in politics tend to seek political information, mainly because political issues are salient to them (cf. Hutchings, 2001).

These studies indicate that youth interested in politics are active in bringing up political discussions with their family, stimulate civic interest in their communication partners, and are selective in the information they want to get from the media. They all point to the fruitfulness of an agency perspective on youth's political development, but the youth-agency view still lacks a unifying theoretical framework to explain how and why youth's interest in politics promotes their own political development.

### 1.2. Political interest and self-determination theory

One of the more influential models dealing with human motivation lies in self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2006). In this theory, intrinsic motivation refers to engagement in an activity because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to engagement in an activity for instrumental reasons, e.g., with regard to social pressures or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT takes its starting point in young people's early intrinsic motivation. The theory suggests that young people freely explore the things they are interested in. For example, if they are curious about and interested in politics, they will be motivated to pursue and develop their interest further if the conditions and other people's reactions to them facilitate the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the theory, intrinsic motivation acts as a driving force. Youth will try to satisfy their basic psychological needs in the fields where they are intrinsically motivated. When they feel their basic needs are satisfied, their interest will grow further in an iterative process of mutual reinforcement.

SDT has been used to study people's engagement in a variety of settings, such as sports and in school, but its application to politics is virtually absent (see, however, Stattin, Hussein, Özdemir, & Russo, 2017). In this study, we do not use the standard SDT measures

previously used in the literature. Instead, inspired by SDT, we identify various *indicators* that should be particularly relevant to politically interested young people in satisfying their basic psychological needs. We suggest that needs satisfaction should be reflected in the excitement, enjoyment, and perceived mastery experienced when engaging in politics-related behaviors.

The first need, the need for *autonomy*, is about feeling free to explore and deepen personal interests in a self-governed manner. Being autonomous means perceiving a full sense of choice in endorsing actions that stem from personal interest (Deci & Ryan, 2002). If youth's exploratory behaviors are experienced as autonomous expressions of the self (Ryan, 1995), they should be accompanied by positive feelings and exploration of new stimuli (Deci & Ryan, 2008). If young people are politically interested, their motivations for exploration are likely to be primarily intrinsic (fun, enjoyable), rather than extrinsic (gaining the respect of others, making other people happy). They will likely be attentive to news, from whatever source, and will enjoy exploring what happens in society and the world.

The need for *relatedness* refers to feeling connected to others and being accepted by them. In general, relatedness has been described as striving authentically to relate to others and to feel a satisfying involvement with them (Deci & Ryan, 1991). In other words, relatedness is the feeling of belonging to a group of people who share the same interest. For politically interested youth, we suggest that discussing politics with family and peers is one way of satisfying the need for relatedness. Young people with a high political interest are likely to talk often with their parents and peers about political issues, and they are also likely to be excited by what their parents and peers say in these conversations. It is worth noting that, according to SDT, the need for relatedness does not conflict with the need for autonomy. Rather, it is nested within the development of greater autonomy (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Indeed, this need is satisfied mainly when individuals feel autonomously involved in a social relationship (Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990).

Finally, the need for *competence* is defined as “the desire to feel efficacious, to have an effect on one's environment, and to be able to attain valued outcomes” (Deci, 1998, p. 152). Competence is not an attained skill but is rather a sense of confidence in action (Deci & Ryan, 2002); thus, feelings of efficacy (Bandura, 1996) are central to the satisfaction of competence needs. Experiences of learning about society from various sources, and from discussions with others, are likely to increase the perceived competence of young people who are interested in politics. Over time, interested youth will come to perceive that they can make a difference in society: that is, a more general sense of political efficacy is evoked.

### 1.3. The present study

SDT offers a general framework for understanding what is likely to happen over time when young people have an early interest in politics. In the present study, we adopt the SDT perspective and suggest that politically interested youth will be active in meeting their basic psychological needs within the political sphere. We propose that the following indicators are salient to satisfying the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Driven by an internal motivation to know more, and feeling that politics is engaging, youth who are politically interested will enjoy following the news (satisfying the need for autonomy). They will engage in political talks with parents and peers about politics and society, and will perceive them as exciting, to a greater extent than other youth (satisfying the need for relatedness). Finally, youth with a strong political interest will regard themselves as having political efficacy to a greater extent than other youth (satisfying the need for competence).

We use longitudinal data to test whether the early political interest of youth tends to enhance our proposed set of indicators over time. It is

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