ON BECOMING MOTIVATED EUROPEANS: A STUDY ON EUROPEAN YOUNG ADULTS' INTENTION TO VOTE IN GENERAL ELECTIONS

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This study examines the voting intentions of young adults across five European countries—Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a foundational framework to understand motivation and participation in the political sphere. Given the context of widespread institutional distrust and sociopolitical shifts in Europe, this research integrates SDT constructs—such as needs satisfaction, motivation, and amotivation—alongside participative efficacy and politicized identification. The Politicized Identification Model of Intention to Vote (PIMIV) was tested, hypothesizing that the fulfillment of psychological needs would enhance intrinsic motivation, which would, in turn, indirectly influence voting intentions through politicized identification. Results indicate that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters intrinsic motivation, positively impacting voting intentions through the mediating role of politicized identification. Conversely, amotivation negatively affects both voting intentions and identification with the group of voters. The study's findings, which were consistent across all analyzed countries, highlight the importance of both individual and group factors in shaping political engagement. This research provides insight into the mechanisms driving electoral participation and underscores the role of social identification in fostering civic engagement, offering practical implications for enhancing political motivation among young Europeans. Thus, this study opens new avenues for future research into the psychological underpinnings of democratic participation.

Keywords: *intention to vote, politicized identification, Self-Determination Theory, political participation, Europeans*

1. Introduction

The proper functioning of a democracy, citizens' trust in democratic institutions, and the effective representativeness of these institutions depend on citizens' participation in elections (and referendums) (Macedo, 2006). Therefore, a system can be considered democratic if public decisions (laws, decrees, and other measures) are deliberated directly by citizens (in

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referendums) or by individuals chosen to represent them (through elections). Democratic participation legitimizes institutions and ensures their derivation from popular sovereignty. Thus, participation is not only a democratic value to be upheld and affirmed but also the concrete mechanism for the actual functioning of democracy, with institutions supported and respected by citizens who believe in and identify with them.

Contemporary young Europeans have already experienced a series of events that have contributed to making today's societies uncertain both economically and socially (Dadvand & McLeod, 2021). The economic crisis that hit Europe in the early 2010s marked a pivotal point in young people's lives, leading to higher rates of NEETs among them (Ellena et al., 2021; Ellena et al., 2023) and fostering a climate of distrust toward the political and banking class, both nationally and within the European Union (Muro & Vidal, 2017). Correspondingly, this distrust in institutions has been accompanied by a decline in young people's participation in the political sphere, particularly in national and European political elections (Koivula et al., 2021). Beyond the issue of trust, other factors influence political participation. For example, some studies have highlighted how high levels of self-efficacy can positively correlate with political engagement (Lieberman & Zhou, 2022). Vecchione and Caprara (2009) specify that the perception of being capable of performing an action (in this case, participating politically, such as in a demonstration or other activities) can promote its execution. Similarly, the belief that one's actions can make a difference has often been considered in the literature on participation. Consequently, applying this argument to voting, it can be stated that the stronger people's perception that their action can bring about change, the more likely they are to intend to vote (Bamberg et al., 2015). If voters lose confidence in the impact of their vote, some argue that it is preferable to provide them with direct decision-making opportunities on specific issues rather than simply delegating representatives (e.g., the increased use of referendums; Qvortrup, 2020).

Voting is not always voluntary; in many countries, it is even mandatory. However, where voting remains voluntary, constructs such as motivation and self-determination play a crucial role (Panagopoulos, 2008). The literature has long emphasized the importance of these concepts in explaining behavior across various domains, including health, sports, and everyday activities (Flannery, 2017; Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996). Nevertheless, little research has explored these factors in relation to electoral participation (Glasford, 2008). This paper aims to examine young people's motivation and self-efficacy related to political participation in order to develop a model that better explains a specific aspect of it: the intention to vote. As will be discussed later in this study, voting intention—rather than the act of voting itself—was considered the outcome variable.

2.   Self-Determination Theory

Motivation has been investigated from various perspectives, and for the present study, the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was adopted. Developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985, SDT is a broad theory of human motivation that focuses on the extent to which individuals' actions are self-motivated and self-determined-defined as the perception of making independent choices and experiencing a sense of control over one's own destiny. According to

Deci and Vansteenkiste (2004), SDT posits that individuals possess innate psychological needs that drive self-motivation.

To foster motivation, three distinct needs have been identified: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence refers to interactions with the environment and the perception of being capable of executing and expressing abilities in relation to it. This relationship develops naturally from childhood, leading to the satisfaction derived from excelling at something (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy pertains to the ability to make independent choices without being influenced by external impositions. Making decisions for oneself fosters a sense of harmony with one's identity and consistency with it. It represents a form of self-affirmation, not so much in relation to the external environment but rather to the individual's own sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness concerns relationships and the feeling of belonging to a group or community where individuals feel comfortable. The need for relatedness stems from the desire to be part of a social context where connections can be formed and shared experiences created. This is the foundation for social emotions such as friendship and love. Building relationships also facilitates goal achievement, which is why the domain of relatedness is often linked to competence. It is essential to form relationships in environments where one's abilities are expressed (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

These needs are considered innate rather than acquired through learning and are prevalent in all individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When individuals experience a sense of autonomy, competence, and social connection in their actions, they are more likely to engage intrinsically. Specifically, the more an activity satisfies these needs, the more motivated individuals will be to pursue it. SDT suggests that motivation cannot be regarded as a singular concept and that it is crucial to consider the specific circumstances. In other words, what drives an individual at a given moment must be taken into account (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2019). One of the most innovative aspects of SDT is its categorization of different types of motivation.

The theory primarily identifies three types: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation is characterized by the experience of interest and enjoyment. The reward for intrinsic motivation lies in engaging in the activity itself rather than in any external outcome. In other words, intrinsically motivated actions are sustained by the spontaneous feelings associated with the activity. Activities that a person genuinely enjoys—such as reading, drawing, climbing a mountain, or swimming—are intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The concept of intrinsic motivation describes a full range of voluntary actions that occur in the absence of external rewards or punishments. Although intrinsically motivated activities require effort, their rewards are entirely derived from the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2020). From an SDT perspective, the energy for such activities stems from the previously discussed psychological needs.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to performing activities in pursuit of external rewards. This type of motivation is characterized by an instrumental relationship between the action and some separable outcome. In this case, the individual does not engage in the activity because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable but rather because doing so provides a reward. Actions taken to avoid punishment, to please others, to gain acceptance from a group, or to outperform someone else are all examples of extrinsically motivated behaviors. However, SDT identifies four different types of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The first is external

motivation, which occurs when actions are driven by external demands or the promise of rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The second is introjected motivation, where the individual internalizes the regulation of an action but does not fully accept it as their own (e.g., engaging in an activity to avoid guilt or anxiety or to maintain self-esteem).

The third, identified motivation, reflects a conscious recognition of the value of an action's goal, leading the individual to accept and consider it personally significant. Finally, integrated motivation is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation, involving a complete internalization of the action's rationale. Although actions characterized by integrated motivation share similarities with intrinsic motivation, they remain extrinsic because they are pursued to achieve outcomes distinct from the activity itself. Lastly, amotivation refers to a lack of motivation to engage in an activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000), representing the absence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Stavrou, 2008). SDT has been widely applied in various fields, including sports (Fortier et al., 2012), education (Chiu, 2022), and adolescent behavior (Grolnick et al., 2017). However, no studies have been found that apply this theory to the context of voting. In this regard, this paper aims to contribute to filling this gap in the literature.

3.   Political participation

Political participation stands for people's involvement and interest in the political system (Levy & Akiva, 2019; Talò et al., 2014; Stefani et al., 2021). According to Barrett (2015) it encompasses actions which intent is directed towards government influence. Voting is one of the different ways in which people may express themselves in the context of political participation (Barrett, 2015; Macdougall et al., 2020; Pozzi et al., 2017). Consequently, in accordance with Beckman (2009), voting can be referred as a particular form of practicing the right of representation that everyone living in a democratic country has.

Voting behavior is often linked to broader forms of social participation, such as membership in associations, political activism, or volunteering. The latter fosters social trust and civic engagement, potentially providing a foundation for broader political involvement. However, evidence from longitudinal studies and initiatives such as the UK's National Citizen Service offers limited support for the assumption that volunteering significantly enhances political engagement, including voting or political interest (Mohan, 2024). The relationship between social participation and voting behavior varies considerably across European countries due to differing political, social, and economic contexts. For instance, in Northern Europe, high levels of association membership are strongly correlated with political participation, whereas in Southern European countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal, economic crises and high youth unemployment have led to a decline in institutionalized participation (e.g., voting) and an increase in non-institutionalized forms of engagement, such as protests (Weiss, 2020).

A study conducted across 21 Western established democracies between 1948 and 2019 found that winning parties disproportionately benefited from young voters. This "youth bonus" was even more pronounced for new parties, whose electoral success was significantly driven by young voters. Furthermore, electoral shifts among young voters predicted similar trends among older citizens in subsequent elections. These findings suggest that young voters are not only more

responsive to electoral trends but also play a crucial role in shaping them, ultimately driving electoral volatility (Rekker, 2022). Despite the significance of youth participation in elections, there has been a general decline in their electoral engagement (Grasso & Giugni, 2022).

The distinctive literature of participation, and specifically the one concerning voting, presents two crucial constructs that are involved in people's motivation to politically participate: Participative Efficacy and Politicized Identification (Alberici & Milesi, 2016; van Zomeren et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2019).

Participative Efficacy can be considered as the individual effectiveness a person perceives every time he/she decides whether to participate or not in a collective action context (Mazzoni et al., 2015; Pozzi et al., 2022; Wilkins et al., 2019). Specifically, we can refer to it as the awareness that individual's contribution can affect the results of an action and, in the case of the present research, the idea that each vote is important and can impact on the final election results. Moreover, there is evidence that this individual variable can be more significant than the group one (van Zomeren et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2019).

The second variable considered is Politicized Identification, the social identification that a person derives from belonging to a social group that performs a certain action aimed at impacting on a particular political system, in this case it corresponds to the identification with the group of those who vote (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). It develops when members of a group share the group's rules and goals, thus becoming aware of the need to participate in the public context. Therefore, since other group members participate, people who experience a strong identification feel the duty to participate as well, thus perceiving a kind of inner obligation to take part in the actions promoted (Alberici & Milesi, 2018; Barkas & Chryssochoou, 2017; Schmitt et al., 2019). The literature on political participation suggests how Participative Efficacy and Politicized Identification may be connected. In fact, many studies conducted on the relationship between the above-mentioned variables show how the former can be considered an antecedent of the latter, highlighting how people, before identifying with a group (in this case of those who vote), must experience a sense of efficacy meaning that their action can have a concrete effect (Alberici & Milesi, 2016, 2018).

4. The present research

This study proposes a model that integrates SDT with the variables of political participation described above (Participative Efficacy and Politicized Identification) in an attempt to explain voting behavior. Several studies have sought to integrate these two theoretical concepts (Koestner et al., 1996; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Wuttke, 2020). However, none of the aforementioned authors have specifically examined Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in the context of voting, which represents a distinct form of political participation. One study conducted on an Italian sample applied these variables to voting, modeling their effects within that context (Pistoni et al., 2023). The present research aims to build on this work by extending the model's testing to different European countries, with the goal of assessing its robustness and applicability across diverse political and cultural settings.

4.1 Proposal for an integrated model

In this study, we tested what we refer to as the Politicized Identification Model of Intention to Vote (PIMIV) (see Figure 1). Several studies on SDT suggest using the Self-Determination Index (SDI)—a composite measure of the SDT Internalization Continuum—to better analyze this issue (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Levesque et al., 2004; Müller & Palekčić, 2005; Vallerand, 1997). The SDI is a measure that incorporates all the different types of motivation analyzed in this study, weighting them to obtain an overall index. However, motivation itself is not considered in the calculation of the SDI. To address intention to vote, we focused on intention to vote as a well-established antecedent of voting behavior, as outlined in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Bamberg et al., 2015; Flynn et al., 1997; Hansen & Jensen, 2007; Tesfaye et al., 2012). Furthermore, given the international relevance of the topic, this study aims to test the model in five different European countries (Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom). These countries were selected due to their significant roles within the European Union—as, at the time of the study, the UK was still a member (albeit on the verge of exiting). Additionally, these nations are among the largest and most populous in Europe, providing a comprehensive representation of the continent's diverse cultural, political, and socio-economic landscapes, which influence youth voting behavior.
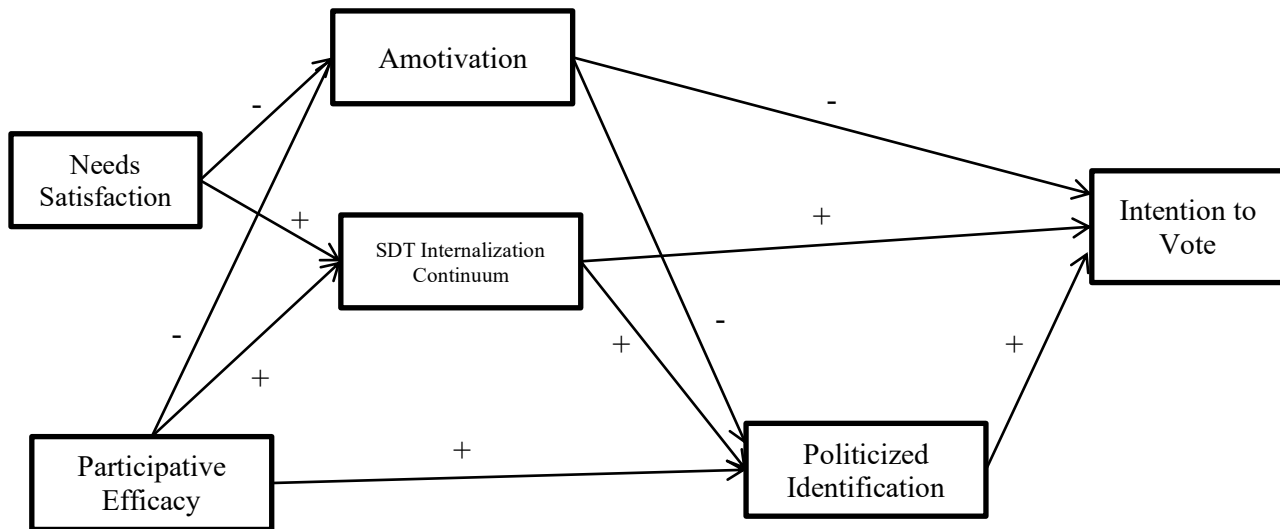

Figure 1. Theoretical Politicized Identification Model of Intention to Vote (PIMIV)

As for the model, the following assumptions are expected to be confirmed:

Hp1: We expected that Needs Satisfaction would be negatively related to Amotivation and positively related to the SDT Internalization Continuum.

Hp2: We expected the SDT Internalization Continuum would positively predict the Intention to Vote, whereas Amotivation would negatively predict it.

Politicized Identification is considered the key point of the model as it is expected to play a mediating role between all the antecedents and the Intention to Vote.

Hp3: We hypothesized that Politicized Identification has a partial mediator role between Amotivation and Intention to Vote.

Hp4: Politicized Identification partially mediates SDT Internalization Continuum and Intention to Vote.

Hp5: Politicized Identification totally mediates the association between Participative Efficacy and Intention to Vote.

Hp6: SDT internalization continuum and Amotivation totally mediate the relation between Participative Efficacy and Politicized Identification.

Hp7: SDT internalization continuum and Amotivation totally mediate the relation between Participative Efficacy and Intention to Vote.

As for the differences between countries, we expect that there will be none at the model level, as we aim to measure invariance. We believe that globalization, Erasmus programs, and similar factors have made the voting intentions of the younger generation invariant across countries such as the UK, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain.

One primary reason for this expectation is the effect of globalization, which has created a convergence of cultures across Europe, particularly among younger people. Some scholars have studied this cultural convergence (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), showing how young people in different countries are increasingly influenced by post-materialist values and a cosmopolitan identity. This influence has led to similar attitudes toward social, economic, and environmental issues, fostering expectations that young Europeans will express comparable voting intentions across borders.

Additionally, the Erasmus program and other forms of European mobility have had a profound impact on the new generation. Furthermore, Erasmus fosters a European identity and strengthens intercultural cohesion (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003), contributing to a homogeneity in political opinions among young people in different countries (Ellena et al., 2024). Therefore, we anticipate that variables related to voting intention will not significantly differ between these nations.

5. Method

5.1 Data

This study involves the secondary analysis of data collected by the Osservatorio Giovani of the Istituto Toniolo di Studi Superiori (Milan, Italy). Sampling and data collection were conducted by IPSOS. Since 2012, the Osservatorio Giovani of the Istituto Toniolo di Studi Superiori conducts yearly computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) surveys regarding topics related to young people. The authors contributed to the design of the major study. Sampling and data collection were conducted by IPSOS during 2019, after the European parliament elections. The questionnaire was developed by the authors in Italian. IPSOS handled the translation into all required languages by involving native speakers. Whenever possible, validated scales were used in the corresponding language. We conducted a priori power analysis to determine a minimum sample size to detect model misfit using the semPower tool (Moshagen & Erdfelder, 2016). Given alpha = .05, power =

0.90, RMSEA = .05, df = 8, and number of observed variables= 6, the power analysis revealed that the minimum sample size to detect model misfit is 958. Specifically, a national representative sample was analyzed of young adults living in Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and UK, and with voting rights. Concerning Italy, a total of 1,000 young adults (503 females, 50.3%; 497 males, 49.7%) aged between 20 and 34 years old (M=27.62, SD=4.12) replied to the online questionnaire. Regarding education, 274 had a University Degree (27.4%), while 569 had a High School Diploma (56.9%) and 157 a Middle School Diploma (15.7%).

Concerning Spain, a total of 1,000 young adults (564 females, 56.4%; 436 males, 43.6%) aged between 20 and 34 years old (M=27.34, SD=4.32) replied to the online questionnaire. Regarding education, 126 had a University Degree (12.6%), while 316 had a High School Diploma (31.6%) and 558 a Middle School Diploma (55.8%).

Concerning Germany, a total of 1,000 young adults (565 females, 56.5%; 435 males, 43.5%) aged between 20 and 34 years old (M=27.61, SD=4.22) replied to the online questionnaire. Regarding education, 275 had a University Degree (27.5%), while 443 had a High School Diploma (44.3%) and 282 a Middle School Diploma (28.2%).

Concerning France, a total of 1,000 young adults (552 females, 55.2%; 448 males, 44.8%) aged between 20 and 34 years old (M=27.40, SD=4.35) replied to the online questionnaire. Regarding education, 50 had a University Degree (5.0%), while 516 had a High School Diploma (51.6%) and 434 a Middle School Diploma (43.4%).

Concerning UK, a total of 1,000 young adults (519 females, 51.9%; 481 males, 48.1%) aged between 20 and 34 years old (M=27.47, SD=4.16) replied to the online questionnaire. Regarding education, 94 had a University Degree (9.4%), while 357 had a High School Diploma (35.7%) and 549 a Middle School Diploma (54.9%).

5.2   *Measures*

Needs Satisfaction. The "satisfaction" subscale from the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (Italian validation; Costa et al., 2018) was used to measure needs satisfaction. The scale consists of 12 items. Participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 = "Totally disagree" to 5 = "Completely agree". According to different studies that declare that the three dimensions of Basic Need Satisfaction are mutually and strictly related (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2019), and given strong positive correlation among them (r from .64 to .74) they were used as a single dimension "Needs satisfaction" α = .91.

Motivations. The Self-determination dimensions related to voting were measured using the [BLINDED]. This scale consists of 18 items and examples of items for each dimension can be found below. Participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 = "Totally disagree" to 5 = "Completely agree". Amotivation (3 items): "I do not see why I should vote" α = .84; External (3 items): "I vote because others say I should" α = .85; Introjected (3 items): "I feel I failed when I do not vote" α = .80; Identified (3 items): "I think it is important to make the effort to vote" α = .84; Integrated (3 items): "I consider voting a fundamental part of who I am" α = .86; Intrinsic (3 items): "I find satisfaction and contentment in voting" α = .85. Müller and Palekčić (2005) highlighted the importance of using a composite measure of SDT while testing models. Then, the variable related the SDT Internalization continuum can be assessed by the Self-determination Index (SDI;

Levesque et al., 2004; Vallerand, 1997), which is calculated as follows: SDI = (2 x intrinsic motivation) + identified motivation – introjected motivation – (2 x external motivation). The self-determination index can reach a maximum score of +12 and a minimum score of -12. The SDI can, therefore, summarize self-determined motivation (positive scores) or external motivation (negative scores) (Levesque et al., 2004; Vallerand, 1997). Amotivation is considered separately and does not count in the SDI calculation.

Participative Efficacy. This scale consists of two items and measures the efficacy that people feel in achieving the objectives by voting and has been adapted from van Zomeren et al. (2013). Participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 = "Totally disagree" to 7 = "Completely agree". One example is "I believe that, as a participant in the general election, I can make an important contribution to changing things in the country". α = .79.

Politicized Identification. This scale consists of 6 items and measures social identification with the group of citizens who will participate in the political elections; the scale was adapted from Fattori et al. (2015). Participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 = "Totally disagree" to 7 = "Completely agree". An example is "I feel that I have a lot in common with those citizens who will participate in the political elections". α = .88.

Intention to vote. The intention to vote has been assessed with a single ad hoc item: "Do you think you will go and vote in future general elections?" Participants responded on a Likert scale from 1 = "Definitely not" to 4 = "Definitely yes".

6.   Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables were calculated. To answer the research aim, Amos v. 21 was used to test the PIMIV model running path analysis. The goodness-of-fit indexes were examined through the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < .08), the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR < .08), the Comparative fit index (CFI > .90) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI > .90) (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2011; Pastore, 2012; Ullman, 2006).

The mediating effect of Politicized Identification was tested using the accelerated-bias-corrected bootstrap estimation procedure, which yields the most accurate confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2004). The given sample size was randomly resampled 5,000 times with replacement in the procedure, and then 5,000 estimations of the indirect effect were calculated. When the 95% CI for an indirect effect did not include zero, the indirect effect was significant. The multi-group analysis was assessed comparing the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

7.   Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among measured variables.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between variables for each nation

	Italy						
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Needs Satisfaction	3.74	.77	–				
2. Amotivation	2.39	1.23	-.18	–			
3. SDT Internalization Continuum	2.59	3.33	.39	-.61	–		
4. Participative Efficacy	4.41	1.59	.27	-.09	.26	–	
5. Politicized Identification	4.86	1.50	.38	-.33	.49	.66	–
6. Intention to vote	3.52	.83	.31	-.43	.47	.32	.51
	Spain						
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Needs Satisfaction	3.96	.71	–				
2. Amotivation	2.39	1.22	-.22	–			
3. SDT Internalization Continuum	3.40	3.53	.37	-.66	–		
4. Participative Efficacy	4.59	1.57	.17	-.24	.33	–	
5. Politicized Identification	4.79	1.48	.29	-.40	.50	.72	–
6. Intention to vote	3.41	.83	.21	-.47	.46	.42	.54
	Germany						
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Needs Satisfaction	3.86	.68	–				
2. Amotivation	2.23	1.23	-.32	–			
3. SDT Internalization Continuum	3.57	3.69	.42	-.74	–		
4. Participative Efficacy	4.51	1.49	.37	-.21	.32	–	
5. Politicized Identification	4.83	1.45	.41	-.37	.48	.69	–
6. Intention to vote	3.40	.86	.30	-.49	.51	.36	.50
	France						
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Needs Satisfaction	3.82	.70	–				
2. Amotivation	2.25	1.20	-.21	–			
3. SDT Internalization Continuum	2.76	3.33	.33	-.66	–		
4. Participative Efficacy	4.06	1.64	.24	-.28	.34	–	
5. Politicized Identification	4.38	1.60	.26	-.45	.52	.73	–
6. Intention to vote	3.17	.96	.24	-.56	.51	.37	.56
	UK						
	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Needs Satisfaction	3.75	.75	–				
2. Amotivation	2.51	1.26	-.16	–			
3. SDT Internalization Continuum	2.54	3.35	.30	-.60	–		
4. Participative Efficacy	4.28	1.58	.26	-.23	.27	–	
5. Politicized Identification	4.65	1.56	.32	-.45	.47	.69	–
6. Intention to vote	3.15	.95	.24	-.52	.52	.35	.57

Note. All the correlations $p < .01$

The model presented an acceptable goodness-of-fit (RMSEA = .034 [.027, .040], SRMR = .021, CFI = .99, TLI = .96). For significance of estimated paths see Tab. 2. Some path coefficients have not been significant and were set to 0 (the dotted paths in the model, see Fig. 3). In order to better expose results, R^2 and path values were included in Table 2 and Figure 2.
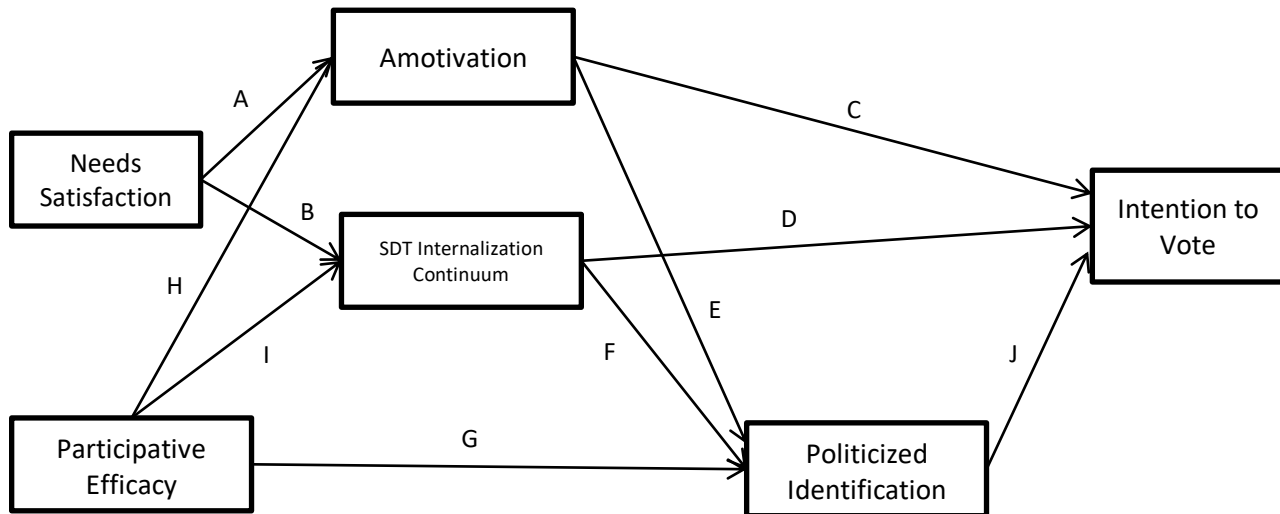

Figure 2. Test of Politicized Identification Model of Intention to Vote (PIMIV)
Note: Every path is identified with a specific letter to simplify each values' reporting; see Tab. 2 for Path values and CI significance for each nation

Table 2. R^2, Path values [CI 95%] for each nation

	Italy R^2=.35	Spain R^2=.37	Germany R^2=.37	France R^2=.44	UK R^2=.44
A	-.16 [-.23, -.09]	-.19 [-.25, -.12]	-.28 [-.35, -.21]	-.15 [-.22, -.09]	-.11 [-.17, -.04]
B	.34 [.28, .40]	.32 [.27, .38]	.35 [.29, .40]	.27 [.21, .32]	.25 [.19, .32]
C	-.22 [-.29, -.14]	-.24 [-.31, -16]	-.23 [-.32, -.15]	-.34 [-.41, -.26]	-.23 [-.30, -.16]
D	.16 [.09, .23]	.11 [.03, .18]	.18 [.10, .26]	.10 [.03, .17]	.20 [.14, .26]
E	-.12 [-.17, -.06]	-.11 [-.16, -.05]	-.06 [-.14, .01]	-.12 [-.18, -.06]	-.20 [-.25, -.14]
F	.27 [.21, .33]	.22 [.17, .28]	.24 [.17, .31]	.23 [.18, 30]	.19 [.14, .25]
G	.58 [.54, .63]	.62 [.58, .66]	.60 [.56, .65]	.62 [.57, .66]	.59 [.54, .64]
H	-.04 [-.12, .03]	-.21 [-.27, -.17]	-.11 [-.18, -.03]	-.24 [-.31, -.17]	-.20 [-.25, -.14]
I	.16 [.09, .23]	.28 [.22, .34]	.19 [.13, .25]	.27 [.21, .33]	.21 [.14, .27]
J	.36 [.29, .42]	.38 [.32, .45]	.33 [.26, .40]	.36 [.29, .42]	.37 [.30, .43]

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed (see Fig. 2 and Tab. 2): Needs Satisfaction has a negative relation with the Amotivation and a positive relation with the SDT Internalization Continuum. An increase in the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is related to, on one side, a decreasing of the Amotivation, and, on the other side, an increase of the internalized motivation. Hypothesis

2 is also confirmed. Amotivation and SDT Internalization Continuum have a direct effect on Intention to Vote. It is confirmed that Amotivation and Intention to Vote are negatively related: an increase of the Amotivation is related to a decreasing of Intention to Vote. SDT Internalization Continuum, contrariwise, is positive related to Intention to Vote: an internalization of the motivation is related to an increasing of Intention to Vote.

Then, we tested the indirect effect of the variables on Politicized Identification and the outcome Intention to Vote, using 5,000 bootstrapping resamples. See Table 3 for each variable's standardized indirect and total effects (estimates and CIs). Hypothesis 3 is confirmed. Amotivation has a significative relation with Politicized Identification; Politicized Identification mediate the association between Amotivation and Intention to Vote. Hypothesis 4 is also confirmed. As seen in Hp2, SDT Internalization continuum has a direct effect on Intention to Vote, so Politicized Identification is a partial mediator. Hypothesis 5 was verified. Politicized Identification shows the role of total mediator between Participative Efficacy and Intention to Vote. Hypothesis 6 was confirmed. Amotivation mediate the association between Participative Efficacy and Politicized Identification; furthermore, SDT Internalization Continuum is a partial mediation between Participative Efficacy and Politicized Identification. Finally, Hypothesis 7 was confirmed. Amotivation mediates the association between Participative Efficacy and Intention to Vote; furthermore, SDT Internalization Continuum mediate the association between Participative Efficacy and Intention to Vote.

Table 3. Standardized indirect and total effects (Estimates [CIs 95%]).

		Politicized Identification	Intention to Vote
Needs Satisfaction	IE	.11 [.08, .14]	.13 [.10, .17]
	TE	.11 [.08, .14]	.13 [.10, .17]
Amotivation	IE	–	-.04 [-.06, -.02]
	TE	–	-.26 [-.34, -.18]
SDT Int. Continuum	IE	–	.10 [.07, .12]
	TE	–	.26 [.19, .32]
Participative Efficacy	IE	.05 [.02, .07]	.26 [.21, .32]
	TE	.63 [.58, .68]	.26 [.21, .32]

Note. IE: Indirect Effect; TE: Total Effect.

To test the between-group difference, we compared this model with a model in which all regression paths were constrained to be equal across each nation. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual index confirmed the non-differences between the five nations (.025 [.022, .029]), showing a better fit of the model.

8.   Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the interplay between Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Participative Efficacy, and Politicized Identification in shaping voting intentions across five European countries—Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. By extending the framework developed by Pistoni et al. (2023) in the Italian context, this study contributes to the broader understanding of psychological mechanisms underlying electoral participation among young adults within diverse sociopolitical landscapes. Findings confirm that when individuals perceive their psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—as satisfied, they exhibit higher levels of internalized motivation, as measured by the SDT Internalization Continuum Index. This intrinsic motivation, in turn, enhances voting intention, with Politicized Identification serving as a partial mediator. Conversely, amotivation exerts a negative impact on both Politicized Identification and voting intention, highlighting the critical role of motivational deficits in disengagement from the electoral process. These results align with the foundational principles of SDT, which posits that need satisfaction fosters volitional engagement and self-endorsed behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The implication is that fostering an environment where young citizens feel competent, autonomous, and socially connected may strengthen their intrinsic motivation to participate in democratic processes. This is particularly salient in the context of widespread political disaffection and declining youth voter turnout across Europe (Grasso & Giugni, 2022).

A central contribution of this study is the emphasis on Politicized Identification as a mediating mechanism. The findings support existing literature that underscores the importance of group belonging in political engagement (Klandermans, 2002; Thomas et al., 2016). Individuals who lack motivation to vote also appear to lack identification with the Voting Group, suggesting that interventions aimed at increasing motivation should simultaneously address social identification processes. This perspective aligns with social identity theories, which emphasize that individuals are more likely to engage in collective action when they perceive a strong identification with a relevant group (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Furthermore, the study reveals that Politicized Identification mediates the relationship between Participative Efficacy and voting intention. This finding highlights the interdependence of individual and collective dimensions of political participation. While Participative Efficacy is an individual-level belief in one's ability to influence political outcomes (Mazzoni et al., 2015), its positive effect on voting intention is amplified when individuals simultaneously identify with a broader electoral community. This reinforces the notion that collective engagement is not merely an aggregate of individual decisions but emerges through dynamic interplays between personal agency and group-based identification.

One particularly compelling aspect of this study is the consistency of findings across all five European countries analyzed. The cross-national invariance of the model suggests that psychological mechanisms underlying voting behavior are robust despite variations in political institutions, electoral systems, and cultural contexts. This aligns with broader trends in globalization and European integration, which have fostered a shared political and cultural experience among young Europeans (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The observed uniformity across countries lends support to the hypothesis that structural political differences (e.g., majoritarian

vs. proportional electoral systems) may have less impact on youth voting motivation than commonly assumed. Instead, psychological factors, particularly need satisfaction and group identification, appear to serve as universal drivers of electoral engagement. This finding invites further research into whether similar patterns hold in non-European contexts, where different sociopolitical histories and institutional structures may modulate the effects of these variables.

From a policy perspective, these findings offer valuable insights into strategies for increasing youth voter turnout. Traditional interventions, such as informational campaigns and appeals to civic duty, often assume that lack of knowledge or awareness is the primary barrier to voting. However, this study suggests that a more effective approach may be to target motivational and social-psychological factors. For instance, programs that enhance young people's sense of political efficacy and create opportunities for meaningful political engagement within group settings may be more effective in fostering sustained participation. Schools, universities, and community organizations could implement initiatives that emphasize peer-based political discussions, participatory simulations, and mentorship programs linking young voters with politically active role models. Such interventions align with previous research suggesting that participatory learning environments enhance both efficacy beliefs and political engagement (Wilkins et al., 2019). Furthermore, political parties and electoral commissions might benefit from strategies that cultivate Politicized Identification. Framing voting as a collective act rather than an isolated decision could enhance turnout by leveraging social norms and group-based motivations. This is consistent with findings from behavioral science, which show that emphasizing collective participation—e.g., "Join millions of voters in shaping your country's future"—is more effective than individualized appeals (Otjes et al., 2020).

9.   Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that warrant further investigation. First, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal research is needed to assess whether changes in need satisfaction and efficacy beliefs predict shifts in voting behavior over time. Additionally, while the study focused on voting intention, actual voting behavior remains an open question. Future studies should examine whether intention translates into action, considering potential barriers such as logistical challenges and voter suppression mechanisms. Moreover, while the study examined young adults across five countries, future research could explore age-related differences in the proposed model. It is possible that older voters exhibit different patterns of motivation and identification, shaped by greater political experience and long-term partisan affiliations. Investigating these dynamics across generational cohorts could deepen our understanding of how political engagement evolves over the life course. Finally, while this study assumes that European youth share increasingly homogeneous political attitudes due to globalization and programs like Erasmus (Ellena et al., 2024), qualitative research could provide deeper insights into how young people construct their political identities in different national and regional contexts. Examining narratives of political socialization through interviews or focus groups could enrich our comprehension of the psychological underpinnings of electoral participation.

10.   Conclusions

Several potential actions emerge to better address the phenomenon of low electoral participation among young adults. On one hand, addressing the issue of motivation requires a commitment from institutions—not only schools but also universities, workplaces, and community organizations—to provide comprehensive information and resources. This guidance enables young people to act with competence and autonomy, fostering a sense of independent motivation to participate in elections.

Additionally, it is crucial to create opportunities and initiatives for political discussion and debate among young people, helping them to build an active civic identity. By identifying with a community of active voters, young people may come to see their voting as both meaningful and impactful, understanding that their voice can indeed make a difference. Institutions, including schools, universities, and workplaces, play a fundamental role in supporting young people through their initial voting experiences, offering structured pathways into the civic sphere.

Furthermore, communities and municipalities are key in building a culture of citizenship. By promoting local meetings and discussions that engage young people in political participation, they reinforce the importance of civic involvement at the local level. Early education on participation is also vital, which can be encouraged through engagement in youth-focused bodies such as youth parliaments and, in municipalities, youth councils. In conclusion, the model analyzed here illuminates the variables influencing voting intentions, providing valuable insights into the phenomenon of low participation and paving the way for future research to deepen understanding in this area.

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