

PHD SUMMARY & REVIEW

Summary: Searching for a Democratic Equaliser: How Citizenship Education Moderates Inequalities in Internal Political Efficacy

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Inclusiveness is a crucial pillar in democratic decision-making processes. This pillar rests on the equal political opportunities principle, which posits that every citizen should have an equal chance to influence political decisions. This democratic principle stands, however, in strong contrast to the inequalities among those politically active. One of political science research's most stable and reliable findings is that privileged citizens participate more politically. Especially educational attainment is one of the best predictors of political participation (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). Scholars traditionally explain this by differential levels of resources (Verba et al., 1995). Due to disparities in resources such as time, money and cognitive sophistication, people have different barriers to taking up their civic rights. Education is traditionally believed to lower these barriers and increase the knowledge and skills necessary for political action. However, this reasoning fails to explain why political participation levels, especially among youngsters, have decreased in the past century while educational levels have risen drastically (Willeck &

Mendelberg, 2022). It also fails to explain the persistent gender gap in political ambition, while women outperform their male counterparts academically in high school and university (Matthieu, 2023).

Differential individual resources seem to be only part of the explanation. To understand how inequalities in political action are reproduced across generations, this PhD research argues that we must also consider inequalities in the psychological drivers of political action, especially one's internal political efficacy (IPE), which is considered pivotal for political action (Levy & Akiva, 2019). IPE refers to individuals' beliefs and self-confidence about their abilities to understand and engage with politics (Beaumont, 2010). Research shows how people's beliefs in their political capabilities mediate future political participation (Grasso & Smith, 2022; Levy & Akiva, 2019; Pfanzelt & Spies, 2019). Firstly, this PhD research aims to theorise and empirically test how class and gender inequalities in IPE emerge among Flemish senior high school students and how these inequalities intersect. Secondly, this research aims to theoretically and empirically examine citizenship education's potential as a democratic equaliser for inequalities in IPE. Lastly, citizenship education as a

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democratic equaliser is studied while considering the Flemish-tracked education system, which perpetuates social class inequalities.

Based on the results of multilevel models estimated on data collected in 2016 to test the Flemish cross-curricular attainment targets of citizenship education among senior high school students, the empirical papers of this PhD show significant inequalities in IPE due to differential political home environments, educational tracking and gender while controlling for students' civic knowledge (Chapter 4; Matthieu & Junius, 2023). Even when students score similarly on a civic knowledge test, not growing up in a politically stimulating home environment, going to a lower status track and being female negatively affect one's confidence in a political setting. Furthermore, these inequalities intersect with each other. The research results show how gender inequality in IPE is the largest in the most politically resourceful environments, which is contradictory to a traditional resource-based explanation (Chapter 7).

The results also conclude that citizenship education has the potential to be a democratic equaliser for those students not growing up in a politically stimulating home environment (Chapter 4; Matthieu & Junius, 2023). When looking across educational tracks, however, citizenship education's compensating effect is much more articulated in the academic track compared to the technical and vocational tracks. Furthermore, students from technical and vocational tracks report lower access to these citizenship education opportunities. These students are potentially deprived twice (Chapter 5).

Regarding gender inequalities in IPE, an intensification of gender inequalities in IPE is found due to more citizenship education. This means gender inequality in IPE increases when students receive more citizenship education, and this is most articulated for active types of citizenship education. This PhD pleads for more critical political socialisation, which researches gendered political socialisation processes and contributes to this aim by showing how vital gender role attitudes are in political socialisation processes. Progressive gender role attitudes explain away the intensification effect of citizenship education. When female students believe that, for example, both men and women are equally capable of being political leaders, their IPE levels are higher, but there is also no intensification of gender inequalities due to citizenship education (Chapter 6).

The results of this PhD show that citizenship education is not only a potential democratic equaliser to compensate for the lack of politically stimulating environments but also the potential reproducer and intensifier of persistent inequalities within a democracy. These results are insightful for scholars and policymakers aiming to increase the inclusiveness of our political system and how citizenship education does and does not contribute to this democratic goal.

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