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**Projection Bias and Youth's and Parents' Perceptions
of Their Joint Political Discussions**

Abstract

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Abstract

This study investigated the idea that youth's perceptions of the frequency of family political discussions and of parental political support mostly derive from their own political interest, a form of projection bias. Tests were performed of whether the same bias applies to parents, and whether youth's and parents' perceptions of political discussions and political support overlap to only a limited extent. Multivariate multiple regression analyses, combining two age cohorts of adolescent-parent pairs (509 13-year-olds and 541 16-year-olds), supported these expectations, indicating that parents and youth live, at least in part, in different perceptual worlds. These findings explain differences in youth's and parents' reports of political interactions, illuminate the theoretical models indicating that family discussions determine whether or not a child is interested in politics, and show the limitations of relying solely on reports of either youth or parents when studying the influence of family political discussions on youth's political development.

Keywords: projection bias, political interest, political discussions, adolescence, youth, parents, political support

Projection Bias and Youth's and Parents' Perceptions of Their Joint Political Discussions

This study proposes that there is perceptual bias in both youth's and parents' perceptions of the amount of political discussions in the family. Youth tend to project their own political interest onto their interactions with parents, regarding both the amount of perceived political discussions and perceptions of parents' support for their political activities. The same bias applies to parents, in that parents project their political interest onto their perceptions of the frequency of political discussions with their children and their political support, but their perceptions do not always match their children's.

Political Interactions in the Family

Discussions at home between parents and adolescents have featured prominently in research on political socialization. The general belief is that the more frequently youth discuss political issues, the more they become aware of their parents' opinions and attitudes, the more their political engagement can be supported by their parents, and the greater the likelihood that they will internalize their parents' views (Jennings et al., 2009). The frequency of such discussions has been associated with youth's political interest (Warner & Colaner, 2016); attention to news (Shehata & Amnå, 2017); political knowledge (McIntosh et al., 2007); volunteering, civic engagement and political participation (Boyd et al., 2011; Wray-Lake & Sloper, 2016); and voting (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2008). Overall, there seems to be strong empirical support for the idea that engagement in political discussions with parents makes youth more politically sophisticated. This effect seems to be as true for early adolescents as for late adolescents and young adults. Lake Snell Perry and associates (2002), who examined political and civic engagement among young adults, concluded that "[t]he impact parents have on their child's political and civic attitudes and behaviors cannot be

overstated” and that “...discussing politics is the strongest predictor of a range of young adults’ attitudes and behaviors” (pp. 6-7).

The argument that youth’s political interest derives from their political discussions with parents rests on the assumption that there is a clear correspondence between youth’s and parents’ perceptions of their joint family discussions. This argument is far from being consistently supported in the literature. For example, studies show only low to moderate correlations between parents’ and youth’s perceptions of the frequency of their political discussions (Meadowcroft, 1968; Meeusen, 2014; Pacheco, 2008), and also low correlations between communication styles related to political discussions in the family (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Saphir & Chaffee, 2002; Tims & Masland, 1985). Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) concluded that it is not tenable to assume that family members share a common perception of family communication norms. Further, in a study of the intergenerational transmission of conversation and conformity orientations in the family, the transmission in these orientations from grandparents, to parents, and further on to their children was found to account for only between 12% and 20% of the shared variance (Rauscher et al., 2020). Altogether, youth’s perceptions of the frequency of family discussions about political issues and communication orientations in the family do not seem substantially to converge with those of their parents.

Projection

Low concordance between youth’s and parents’ perceptions has been explained in different ways, such as by the lack of a precise definition of political issues (Fitzgerald, 2013) and social desirability (Prior, 2019). Perhaps a major, systematic reason for misperception is projection, the notion that people tend to believe that other people have similar attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions to their own (Krueger, 1998). Projection in this study is defined as a tendency for youth’s and parents’ perceptions of their political interactions with

each other to be colored by their own political interest. Here, projection is a systematic perceptual bias, in that both youth and parents tend to view their mutual interactions to be more in line with their own political interests than is the case.

Projection has been used to explain the inconsistent results of studies of the transfers of life values between generations, in which small to moderate correlations often have been found between adolescents' and parents' values (Oswald & Schmid, 2006). By contrast, much higher correlations have been found between adolescents' life values and the values they believe their parents to hold (Gniewosz et al., 2008; Ojeda & Hatemi, 2015). Recently, Stattin and Kim (2018) found low agreement between parents' and youth's life values, but high associations between youth's own and their perceptions of their parents' life values, as well as between parents' own and their perceptions of their youth's life values. This pattern of associations accords with what would be expected from a projection perspective, where both adolescents and parents overestimate the similarity in values between them.

Is there a similar projection effect in youth's perceptions of their political interactions with their parents? Previous studies of projection reveal that people's own motivations and ideals can color their interpersonal perceptions (Lemay et al., 2010; Maner et al., 2005). Political interest is one of the most important predictors of the many facets of young people's political engagement (Prior, 2019). We propose that youth's political interest tends to color their perceptions of family political discussions and the political support they receive from their parents, and that the same perceptual bias applies to parents. Thus, both politically interested parents and youth will tend to over-interpret the frequency of their political interactions with each other, but youth's and parents' perceptions will have low correspondence. Such perception bias may illuminate previous findings that youth's perceptions of the amount of family communication about political issues converge to only a limited extent with parents' perceptions.

In our view, projection bias is a general perceptual phenomenon that applies to both youth and parents. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed (see Figure 1 for the overall theoretical model):

H1: Youth's perceptions of the frequency of family political discussions and of parental political support derive mostly from their own political interest.

H2: The same projection bias applies to their parents.

H3: There is only limited overlap between youth's and parents' perceptions of their joint political discussions and of parents' political support.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Method

Participants

This study is based on a longitudinal study in Örebro, Sweden, a city with about 130,000 inhabitants (Amnå et al., 2009). Five age cohorts were followed in waves over five years. Here, Wave-1 information was used. Data were collected in 2010 from two adolescent cohorts, since parental reports were not available for the other age cohorts. The target samples (all students in school records) comprised 960 13-year-olds ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.43$, $SD = 0.56$) and 1052 16-year-olds ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.62$, $SD = 0.71$); 89% ($n = 904$ in the younger cohort, $n = 892$ in the older cohort) of whom responded to our questionnaires. The participants' parents were also invited to take part; in the younger cohort, 571 parents returned our questionnaires, in the older cohort 581 returned our questionnaires. Complete data for parents and youth were obtained for 509 persons in the younger cohort (56% of the analytic sample) and 541 persons in the older cohort (60%).

The first cohort was recruited from 10 compulsory schools, and the second cohort was obtained from three upper-secondary schools, all strategically chosen to represent the social and demographic characteristics of the adolescents in Örebro. The city is close to the national average on factors such as population density, income, unemployment, and percentage voting in parliamentary elections (Statistics Sweden, 2010). The proportion of participants with both parents born outside the country was slightly higher in the city (22.8%) than it was nationally (19.1%), and the participants' parents were slightly better educated than their national counterparts.

Procedures

Data collection took place in classrooms during regular school hours. Parents were informed about the study prior to the first assessment and could decline their children's participation (1.8% declined). Each class involved was paid for participation (approximately \$120). The youth were informed about the study in advance and about their rights to decline participation and withdraw from the study at any time. After data collection, a questionnaire was sent to the parents to be completed either individually or together. In the latter case, for most of the measures, they had the chance of reporting separate answers for mothers and fathers. The Regional Ethics Committee in Uppsala approved the data collection (DNR 2010/115).

Measures

Unless stated otherwise, the measures in this study were developed in the project.

Political interest. The political interest measure for youth and their parents combines interest in and feelings about politics. The youth questionnaire contained two initial questions: "How interested are you in politics?" and "How interested are you in what is going on in society?". The response scale for both questions ranged from 1 (*totally uninterested*) to 5 (*very interested*). They were also asked: "People differ in what they feel about politics. What

are your feelings?,” with responses ranging from 1 (*loathe*) to 6 (*is great fun*). The political interest scale, with the items rescaled to range between 0 and 1, had good reliability ($\alpha = .77$ for the younger age cohort and $.86$ for the older age cohort; $M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.22$ for the younger cohort and $M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.24$ for the older cohort).

Parents were asked the questions: “How interested are you in politics or societal issues?” and “People in a household differ regarding what they feel about politics. What are your feelings?,” with the same response scales as for the youth. The questions were asked about mothers’ and fathers’ interest and feelings about politics/society separately. Where only one of the parents participated in the study, s/he also provided responses for the non-participating parent. A scale combining the four items yielded an alpha of $.71$ for the younger age cohort and $.76$ for the older age cohort ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.15$ for the younger cohort and $M = 0.64$, $SD = 0.13$ for the older cohort).

Political discussions. The youth and their parents reported how often they discussed: “What they had heard on the news about what is going on in Sweden and around the world” and “Politics or societal issues”. The response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*) ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.74$ in the younger cohort and $M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.72$ in the older cohort). For validation, the youth were also asked how often they had discussions with their parents about “Films, music, and TV series;” “Family activities;” “School, school work, and homework;” “Friends (what you do, etc.);” and “Relatives and friends of the family,” using the same response scale as above. On factor-analyzing the two political-discussion items with the other everyday-life items, two factors were obtained that separated the political-discussion items from the other items.¹ The cross-loadings were low, averaging $.05$ for the 13-year-olds and $.07$ for the 16-year-olds. Parents also reported on how often they had discussions about “Family activities (doing things together)” and “School, schoolwork, and homework” using the same response scale ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.54$ in the younger cohort and $M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.50$

in the older cohort). Factor analyses produced the same two distinguishing factors. The cross-loadings averaged .06 for the parents of the 13-year-olds and .02 for the parents of the 16-year-olds.

Parental support. A five-item scale measured parents' support for youth's political interest and engagement. It was designed to first measure whether parents try to *raise youth's awareness*: "Do your parents try to make you more aware of environmental issues?" and "Do your parents try to make you more aware of what is going on in the world?" It then tapped into whether parents *make concrete proposals for action*: "Suggest newspapers, books or websites where you can read about politics or societal issues;" "Give me information about activities or organizations in which you can get engaged;" and "Want me to sit down and watch the news on television with them". The response scale for the raising-awareness questions ranged from 1 (*no, never*) to 5 (*yes, almost always*) and for making concrete proposals for action ranged from 1 (*definitely doesn't apply*) to 5 (*applies very well*). Factor analyses of the standardized items produced one factor for both age cohorts. Alpha reliability was .76 for the younger cohort and .75 for the older cohort ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.85$ in the younger cohort and $M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.81$ in the older cohort).

Parents responded to the same five items, slightly reframed to assess their attempts to *raise their youth's awareness* and to establish whether they *make concrete proposals* for action (e.g., "We suggest newspapers, books or websites where our child can read about politics or societal issues"), with the same response scales as for youth. Factor analyses of the standardized items produced one factor in each age cohort. Alpha reliability was .72 for both cohorts ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.70$ in the younger cohort and $M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.67$ in the older cohort).

Control variables. The main analyses controlled for parents' education, ranging from 1 (*less than 9 years*) to 5 (*university*), sex of participants, and which parent(s) answered the questionnaires (47% mother, 10% father, 42% both parents together).

Data Analysis

The structural validity of the measures was checked to determine whether the youth and parents' reports tap into different constructs. This was done separately for each measure: interest in politics, frequency of political discussion, and parental support for youth's political interest and engagement. A second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was modeled for political interest, with youth's, mother's and fathers' political interest representing the first-order components, and with parents' political interest as the second-order latent factor. For political discussion and parental support, we tested a model contrasting youth's and parents' reports on the frequency of political discussion, and youth's and parents' perceptions of parental support (first-order CFA). We also tested for measurement invariance to ensure that the measurements of political interest, discussion, and support were equal across age cohorts, using the factor-loading invariance as evidence of measurement invariance. The fits of the models were evaluated using conventional levels of model χ^2 , CFI, TLI, and RMSEA (Kline, 2016).

Structural equation modeling with latent variables then was used to test whether politically interested youth and parents project their interest onto their reports of political discussions and political support (see Figure 1). To test hypotheses 1 and 2, the youth- and parent-reported frequencies were regressed on youth's and parents' political interest, respectively. The model also included estimation of the correlations between youth's and parents' perceptions of their common political discussions and of parents' political support, allowing us to test hypothesis 3. The model was tested for the two cohorts together.

All the analyses were run in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). Full-information

maximum likelihood (FIML) was used to test whether missingness was related to demographic variables, such as age, sex, and parent education, or at random (Enders, 2010). No systematic association between the demographic variables and missingness was found, suggesting that FIML could be used to estimate the models.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Attrition analyses investigated whether the youth whose parents responded to the initial questionnaires differed on the study variables from those whose parents did not. There were no significant differences in the younger cohort. In the older cohort, the youth whose parents responded showed higher political interest than those whose parents did not (Wald = 6.26, $p = .012$). With very low Nagelkerke R^2 values, the study is unlikely to be founded on biased data.

Table 1 presents the bivariate correlations among all variables in the study, which were in the expected directions. Youth interested in politics were likely to report a high frequency of family political discussions and high levels of support for political participation. The same pattern was observed for parental reports. By contrast, the correlations between youth- and parent-reported political interest, political discussions, and parental support were relatively weak.

Insert Table 1 about here

Also, the preliminary analyses of measurement validity confirmed that the structural validity of the measures was satisfactory as all models reached good, if not excellent fit. The preliminary analyses of measurement invariance indicated that the measurements did not work differently for the two age cohorts.² Thus, the two age cohorts were combined.

Do Youth and Parents Display a Projection Bias?

A multivariate multiple regression model was fitted where youth-reported political discussions and parental support were regressed on youth's own political interest, and parent-reported political discussions and parental support was regressed on parents' own interest in politics (see Figure 2). The effect of youth's political interest on both parents' views of political discussions and parental support, and the effect of parents' political interest on both youth's views of political discussions and parental support, were fixed at zero. In the model, youth sex, age cohort, parental education, and source of parental report (i.e., mother, father, with "both" as reference category) were controlled. Model fit was good: $\chi^2(248) = 796.649$, $p < .001$, CFI = .923, TLI = .902, RMSEA = .046 [90% CI = .042, .049]. Overall, politically interested youth reported a high frequency of political discussions with their parents ($R^2 = .54$) and high parental support for their political development ($R^2 = .31$). Similarly, politically interested parents reported that they engaged in frequent political discussions with their youth ($R^2 = .68$) and provided support for their political development ($R^2 = .44$).

 Insert Figure 2 about here

The residual correlations between the youth-reported and parent-reported political discussions and support represent the degree of congruence between youth and parent reports, after accounting for the political interest of youth and parents, youth sex, parental education, and source of parental report. These results indicate rather low congruence between parent- and youth-reported discussions and reported parental support for political development, which suggests that youth and parents have quite different views on how much they discuss politics with each other. Youth and parents showed relatively greater agreement over how much

support parents provided for political development. However, the magnitude of the correlation between the youth and parent reports was low.

In sum, the combination of substantial associations between political interest, perceived frequency of political discussions, and parental support in parent and youth reports, and low agreements between youth's perceptions of the frequency of political discussions with their parents/parental support and their parents' reports of political discussions/political support, are what would be expected if there is projection bias in youth's and parents' reports.

Finally, a longitudinal replication was performed to see if projection bias would be observable at a later point in time, controlling for the same perceptions one or two years earlier (older and younger cohorts, respectively). These analyses replicated the findings reported in Figure 2 in that the longitudinal replication confirmed the existence of a projection effect.³

Discussion

It was proposed that politically interested adolescents and parents tend to project their own political interest onto their perceptions of political interactions in the family. Political interest, frequency of political discussions, and parental support were closely linked in youth's reports and parents' reports. However, youth's reports of political discussions and parental support did concord with their parents' reports of political discussions and parental support to only a small extent. Strong empirical support was found for the idea of projection, and there were no significant differences obtained between the younger and the older cohorts. Overall, this study provides insight into individual perceptions of political communication in the family and offers new explanations for the disagreements between youth and parents over common family norms reported in the family patterns communication literature (Rauscher et al., 2020; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Tims & Masland, 1985; Saphir & Chaffé, 2002).

The strength of this study is that it provides empirical support for the idea that projection may explain why parents' and youth's perceptions of their joint political interactions differ. Two different age cohorts of youth (ages 13 and 16) were used to examine the robustness of the findings, and this study also made use of longitudinal replication. This study goes beyond advising caution over expecting strong agreement between youth and parents in perceptions of the frequency of political discussions in the family. Our findings provide an explanation for why youth and parents have such strongly divergent opinions.

A central message of this study is that projection bias can affect youth's perceptions of their political interactions with their parents: politically interested youth may over-rate the frequency of family political discussions and their parents' political support. Using youth's reports about the frequency of political discussions is commonplace in political socialization research, but it has well-known drawbacks. In particular, what parents and adolescents perceive as having discussions about "political issues" may be imprecise and differ within and between families (cf. Fitzgerald, 2013; Tims & Masland, 1985), as too may social desirability, the quality of recall of events (Prior, 2019), and the reliability of measurement (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). This study suggests an additional systematic reason why researchers should be cautious about using youth reports as acceptable indicators of the frequency of parent-youth political discussions. However, the finding of perception bias does not refute the argument that disagreements between family members' reports are valid reflections of individuals' differing perceptions of the family environment (Fujioka & Austin, 2003; Ritchie, 1991).

This study conveys the message that practitioners and parents need to be aware of projection effects, and that projection applies to both parents and youth. It may have the consequence that parents and adolescents do not have accurate perceptions of each other's political interests. If parents are politically interested and wrongly consider that their youth

are also politically interested, parents may regard their value-transmission efforts as successful. Accordingly, they may have little motivation to introduce their youth to current political issues (Stattin & Kim, 2018). Likewise, politically uninterested youth who wrongly believe that their parents are also politically uninterested may not try to explore and adapt to their parents' political orientations or be aware of their parents' political support. Indeed, that political interest may color both youth's and parents' perceptions has implications for the broader issue of youth's internalization of their parents' views. For example, key to value socialization theory are youth's accurate perceptions and acceptance of their parents' views (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). When youth correctly perceive their parents' values and attitudes, they can decide whether to adopt them as their own. This model might not be fully applicable in political socialization research because, as we have argued, youth's perceptions of and receptiveness to their parents' political messages may be biased by their own political interest.

Limitations and Future Directions

In this study, projection was inferred from the expectation that youth's perceptions of family political discussions and their parents' political support would be strongly related to the youth's own interest in politics, but have a weaker resemblance to how often their parents report that they have family political discussions, or their views on political support. The same approach to projection has been used in peer research (Jussim & Osgood, 1989; Young et al., 2014) and in research on partner relations (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001) and on life values (Stattin & Kim, 2018). However, an experimental test of our projection hypothesis awaits.

Perhaps the strongest objection to the study is that it makes causal claims based on cross-sectional data, yet the longitudinal replication of these analyses does not affect the conclusions. Another limitation is that this study is based on youth and their parents from a single Swedish city. However, when comparing the parents with the representative Swedish

sample interviewed in the European Social Survey (European Social Survey, ESS, Round 5 Data, 2010), a similar level of political interest was found, with 58.7% of the parents in this study and 61.5% of the ESS Swedish respondents reporting themselves to be quite or very interested in politics. Overall, we believe that projection bias does not only apply to youth and their parents in Sweden, but that projection is a general perceptual phenomenon across ages, sexes, and countries.

Despite these limitations, these findings have potential for gaining a deeper understanding of communicative processes in the family. It is through political discussions with others that young people gain political information and become interested in political issues. This belief is fundamental to many current models in political socialization research (for a summary, see Shah et al., 2017). For example, news consumption and communication with others about current events have been labeled “civic competence,” and have been shown to affect youth’s political activism (Shah et al., 2009). In the communication mediational model, political discussions with others have been shown to explain the link between media use and political participation (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; Shah et al., 2017). It is postulated that such communication competence is shaped by socialization agents (e.g., family, school, media, and peers), and primarily through the communication orientations in the family – concept-oriented and socio-oriented (Shah et al., 2009). In family communication patterns theory (FCP), both conversation orientation and conformity orientation have been found to be associated with relational quality with parents (Scruggs & Schrodt, 2021). In most studies built on these theoretical models, the frequency of having political discussions with others was based on youth reports. Hence, it was youth’s perceptions of having political discussions with parents and peers that were measured, which equates the frequency of political discussions in the family with youth’s views on these discussions. The findings in this study – that youth’s perceptions of the frequency of political discussions with parents and of parents’

political support are closely linked to their own political interest, and that there is low concordance between youth's and parents' perceptions of joint political discussions – provide a starting point for future longitudinal studies that might examine the directions of effects between youth's political interest and perceptions of joint family discussions about politics (and family orientations to communication), and the extent to which politically interested youth are active agents in their own political development through the instigation of political discussions at home.

Conclusion

This study suggests that there is projection bias in youth's perceptions of their parents' political interests and engagements. Politically interested youth are likely to believe that their parents are also politically interested. Hence, they over-rate the extent of their parents' political interest. A similar projection bias also seems to apply to parents, suggesting that parents' reports are not necessarily more objective than those of youth. Youth and parents may well not be aware of this projection bias.

Notes

¹All the factor analyses in the Measures section were principal axis factor analyses with promax rotation.

²We found that all latent constructs were invariant, as indicated by the comparison between an unconstrained model to a competing model in which factor loadings were constrained to be equal across the two cohorts: Political interest, $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.084$, $\Delta df = 5$, $p = 0.41$, $\Delta CFI = 0.00$; political discussion, $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.441$, $\Delta df = 2$, $p = 0.49$, $\Delta CFI = 0.00$; political support, $\Delta\chi^2 = 10.566$, $\Delta df = 8$, $p = 0.23$, $\Delta CFI = 0.00$.

³The measures used in the study were also available two years later for the younger cohort, and one year later for the older cohort. Thus, we regressed the youth- and parent-reported frequency of political discussions and parents' support at T₂ on youth's and parents' political interest at T₂ and T₁ in each age cohort. Each measure was also regressed on its lagged score. The results mirror the results obtained from adopting the cross-sectional approach. Hence, we draw the conclusion that the projection effect observed in this study is not a random phenomenon.

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Table 1. *Bivariate correlations between the study variables.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex ¹	-	-.06	.00	-.05	.01	-.05	.05	-.01
2. Parent education	-.02	-	.12**	.22***	.09	.16***	.09*	.10*
3. Youth political interest	-.02	.10*	-	.27***	.60***	.30***	.40***	.17***
4. Parent political interest	-.07	.18***	.24***	-	.23***	.46***	.18***	.40***
5. Political discussion (Y)	-.05	.05	.51***	.22***	-	.30***	.54***	.27***
6. Political discussion (P)	-.07	.16***	.14**	.43***	.18***	-	.20***	.56***
7. Political support (Y)	-.07	.01	.46***	.18***	.58***	.15**	-	.28***
8. Political support (P)	-.05	.12**	.18***	.38***	.21***	.57***	.25***	-

Note. Correlations below the diagonal are for the younger cohort; correlations above the diagonal for the older cohort.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Sex¹. 1 = female, 0 = male.

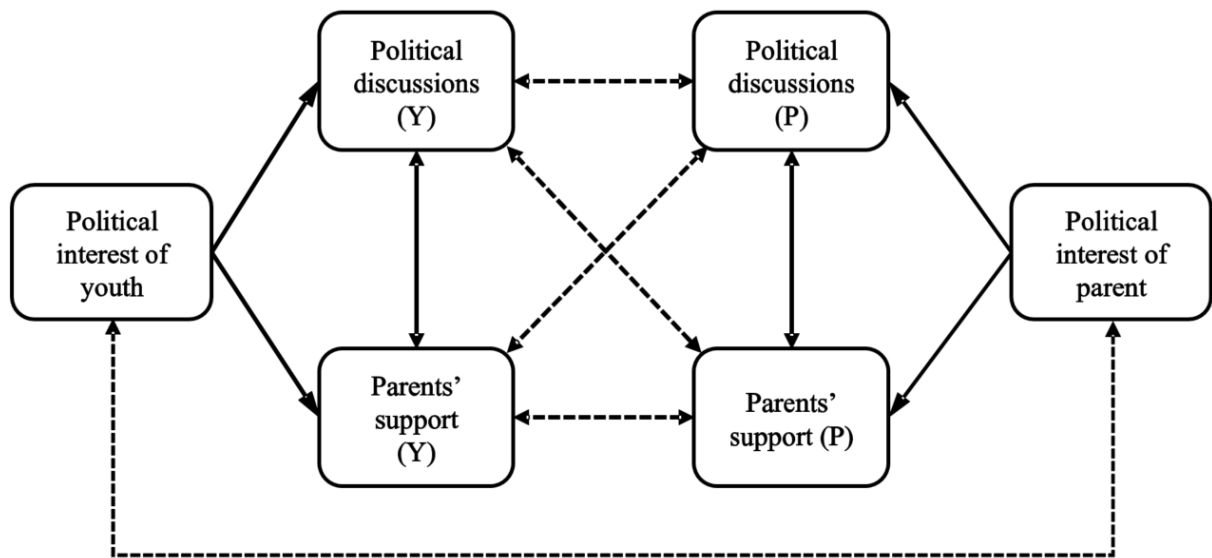


Figure 1. The conceptual model. Y stands for youth report, and P for parent report. Solid lines represent our expectation of strong associations and dotted lines represent our expectation of weak associations.

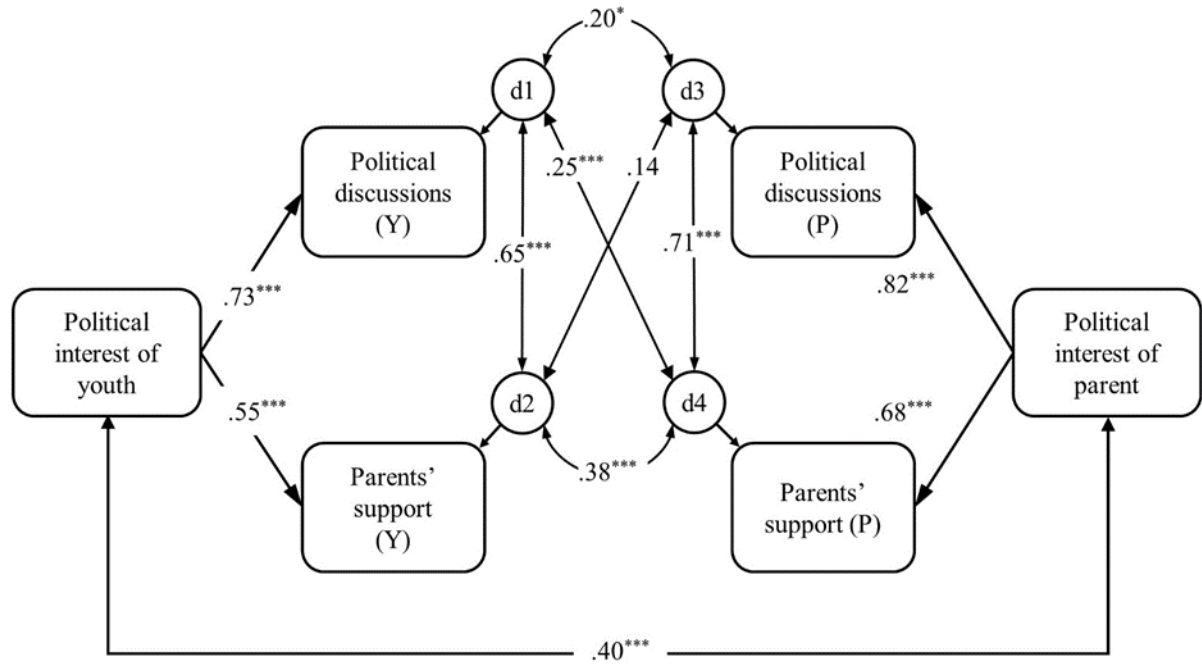


Figure 2. Multivariate multiple regression model. Standardized coefficients are reported. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.