

Disrupting Politics - #polivation  
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**Disrupting Politics and Governance:  
Why Transformation needs Political Innovation**

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## 1 Introduction

The demand for participatory democracy as a response to “undemocratic liberalism” (Mounk, 2018), an increasing elite-electorate gap, high levels of voter turnout, and general dissatisfaction with the representative system (Hay, 2013; Pharr & Putnam, 2000) is raised increasingly louder (Elstub & Escobar, 2017). The basic conviction of the research strand on participatory democracy is that giving citizens the means to participate in democratic decision-making could counter the current public alienation from politics and will be exploited actively by citizens in liberal-representative democracies (Fishkin, 2011; Habermas, 1992).

This premise builds on the implicit assumption that citizens have intrinsic motivation and a proclivity towards political participation and are only daunted by some dysfunctionalities of the current representative system and its discouragement of political participation. However, if this premise does not hold, next to innovations operationalizing participatory democracy political innovations which do not require the citizen for adapting liberal-representative democracy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century should receive more attention for experimentation and in public and academic discourse.

Thus, embedded in the project *#polivation* centered at the Technical University Munich which accelerates a scientific and public discourse on political innovations, this contribution aims at exploring whether increased means for political participation would be also exploited by (groups of) citizens or whether (groups of) citizens are rather “lazy” regarding political participation where elections are already enough of political engagement. Consequently, the research question is: How widespread is the openness towards political participation in the citizenry of liberal-representative democracy, and what explains political proclivity towards political participation?

The exploration could deliver insights on the suitability of political innovations that demand more political participation through institutions like deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2011; Habermas, 1992) or liquid democracy (Blum & Zuber, 2016), and their counterparts which liberate citizens from the duty of participating politically (Hidalgo, 2021; Kersting, 2019). Additionally, it could predict potential selection biases in a participatory democracy where specific parts of the electorate are (self-)excluded from participation due to a lack of political interest or a self-perceived lack of knowledge among other factors.

The initial literature overview on political participation points to decisive explanators for political participation in elections. Problematizing the research approach of operationalizing political participation over elections which does not fit the style of political participation demanded by participatory democracy, the theoretical understanding builds on a small research

strand evaluating antecedents for political interest which is considered as a factor that mediates effects on voter turnout (Blais & Daoust, 2020). After describing the research design of multivariate regression models on data from the ninth wave of the European Social Survey in 2018 (ESS Round 9, 2021), the findings evaluate the proclivity of citizens towards political participation and its antecedents in European liberal-representative democracies.

In the discussion, the findings are united with the practical interest of this study whether innovations demanding more political participation or whether those demanding less political participation match better to current levels of proclivity towards political participation. Next to discussing theoretical implications, this is coupled with practical recommendations for the further advancements of these innovations embedded in the aspiration of the project *#polivation* to accelerate an evidence-based public and academic discourse about how to adapt liberal-representative democracy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ere the conclusion closes this contribution.

## 2 Theory

Participatory democracy could be considered the broadest research strand on political innovations for liberal-representative democracy (Biehler, 2021). It focuses on developing concrete means like deliberative forums to enable the participation of citizens in democratic decision-making (Elstub & Escobar, 2017). Mainly driven by political theorists, and although it is problematizing the exclusion of citizens from participation under current liberal-representative democracy (Della Porta, 2019), the research strand has not proven yet that citizens desire more means for political participation but rather takes this as an implicit premise. It rather follows an “idealized depiction of politics as an arena of deliberation, public scrutiny, accountability and responsiveness” which stands in stark contrast to the negative connotation of politics in popular discourse (Hay, 2013, p. 5).

More empirically oriented research from the research strand of voting behavior and political participation indicates that parts of the electorate refrain from political participation in current democracies (Blais, 2006). Proponents of participatory democracy frame the current low level of political participation as a *symptom* of the prevalence of representative democracy suppressing means for the political participation of citizens (Habermas, 1992). They trust that citizens will participate if they are empowered or incentivized to do so (Fishkin, 2011). Problematic in this vein is the lack of research on the robustness of this premise. If the premise does not hold, if citizens would also restrain from participation when they are empowered, participatory democracy would be dysfunctional from the first day of its establishment.

Thus, to test the central antecedent for participatory democracy, the pressing question is how many citizens would hypothetically participate in institutions operationalizing

participatory democracy and from which groups of society those participants would stem. This lack of evidence in the research strand of participatory democracy on its central antecedent – the willingness of citizens to participate over formal channels - coincides with a general lack of empirically driven research on the downsides of participatory democracy and the challenges it is facing. Only strayed literature tackles this topic (Fung, 2015).

Due to the lack of widespread participatory means in current liberal-representative democracies, the lack of research on antecedents for participatory democracy, and the restricted resources of this contribution it is suitable to build on related literature which allows deepening our understanding of whether citizens are hypothetically willing to play an active role in participatory democracy.

## **2.1 Declining formal political participation and changing informal participation**

Turning towards the broad, multi-faceted, theoretical robust, and empirical-oriented research strand on political participation is a suitable means. However, its backward-oriented empirical orientation on political participation does not capture the phenomenon of interest: the willingness of citizens for political participation in institutions that operationalize participatory democracy. It rather captures political participation divergently with three dedicated sub-strands. First, the actual formal participation in institutions of the representative system, second, informal participation outside of the representative system, and, third, public trust in representative institutions (Hay, 2013). This divergent operationalization of the phenomenon of interest – requires scrutiny in building on the theoretical and empirical evidence from the literature on classic political participation.

This literature is driven by political scientists and even more by political sociologists and builds on the central motivational factor of political efficacy which has an internal and an external side (Finkel, 1985): External efficacy means the expectations of individuals to have the possibility to influence the political system with own actions whereas internal efficacy captures the individual self-perception of citizens to have the knowledge and competencies for political participation (Glavanovits et al., 2019). This could also be coined as the supply side and the demand side of political participation where citizens need to have the feeling on the supply side that the political system is responsive to the participation of the citizens and where they need to be self-conscious enough on the demand-side to have the means to do so.

In this sense, political disaffection is caused if the political system is not perceived as responsive (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). This is specifically the case if political institutions do not react sufficiently to short-term changes. To put it simply: If the performance of political

institutions does not meet citizens' preferences and standards, disaffection increases (Magalhaes, 2006).

Literature observes a current refrainment of citizens from *formal* political participation over institutions becoming evident in increasing vote absenteeism and declining party member bases. Explanations for the current refrainment include differences in personality traits (Gallego & Oberski, 2012), socioeconomic and demographic factors (Beeghley, 1986; Brady et al., 1995; Polacko, 2021), and mention dissatisfaction with the current mode of politics and with representative institutions as explanators for decreasing political participation over democratic institutions (Harrebye & Ejrnæs, 2015).

Interrelated, the extent of participation over *informal* and extra-parliamentary ways has increased, allegedly due to public disaffection with formal modes of political participation (Torcal & Montero, 2006). The turn towards informal political participation, to “alternative politics” is driven by ICTs like social media (Boulianne, 2015). Many activists openly confess to non-participation in formalized institutions to express their negative attitude towards the political system. This could be coined “political non-participation” where politically interested citizens actively refrain from participation due to their dissatisfaction with the political system (O'Toole et al., 2003).

## **2.2 The effect of disaffection on formal political participation**

The basis for both types of political participation are the attitudes of citizens towards political institutions in liberal-representative democracy: It is evident that democracy is constantly perceived as the best type of government whereas acceptance in its core institutions – parliaments, government, and parties – is constantly decaying (Hay, 2013). The reasons for it are identified on the supply-side: “Nowhere, it seems does politics animate electorates consistently *en masse* to enthusiastic participation in the democratic process” (Hay, 2013, p. 1). This public alienation from politics translates into political disaffection (Pharr & Putnam, 2000): It is a distrustful perception of politics coupled with a chronic detachment from democratic institutions and political authorities. To make it short: political disaffection comprises institutional disaffection and political disengagement (Montero & Torcal, 2006). Following Montero and Torcal (2006), symptoms of it are external inefficacy for participation, cynicism and distrust, lack of confidence in political institutions, and beliefs of unresponsiveness and unaccountability which result in decreased legitimacy of the political system (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020)

Disaffected citizens are less likely to vote, and even if they do they are the least informed about policies and parties' positions (Torcal & Lago, 2006). This indicates that political disaffection produces uninformed citizens and likely reduces the proclivity towards political

participation in formalized institutions whereas it increases the proclivity towards informal political participation (Torcal & Lago, 2006). However, the level of political disaffection – the external efficacy – is only one side of the coin.

Internal efficacy – the individual self-perception to have the personal means for political participation - has proven more explanatory for formal political participation (Glavanovits et al., 2019). The premise is that it is even more explanatory for proclivity towards political participation in institutions operationalizing participatory democracy because external efficacy is always based on the current perception of an institutional regime. Its structure will be changed under participatory democracy. Consequently, drawing conclusions from current levels of external efficacy based on the perception of the current institutional structure does not deepen our knowledge of how citizens would react to increasing means for political participation.

### **2.3 Antecedents for voter turnout**

Thus, regarding those who do not participate in formalized ways, it needs to be assessed whether their refusal of participation is rooted in alienation with the current mode of politics or whether they are generally political apathetic citizen who won't participate even if disaffection would be reduced (Dahl et al., 2018).

The socioeconomic status (SES) model explains formal political participation with resources of citizens – namely time, money, and civic skills – which are distributed differently in a society defined by socioeconomic status consisting of the indicators education, income, and occupation (Brady et al., 1995). It was applied to make sense of socioeconomic asymmetrical participation: The lower third of societies in liberal-representative democracies concerning income self-excludes from voting when their preferences are not represented by political parties (Polacko, 2021) which is often the case in current liberal-representative democracies (Merkel, 2014). They more often lack internal efficacy next to external efficacy and resemble in this vein politically disaffected and uninformed voters. Those citizens do not even build a political opinion and tend to “do not know” answers when asked about policy issues (Laurison, 2015).

The SES model also predicts that participatory means that require more action from citizens than voting will even widen the socioeconomic gap as economically disadvantaged humans cannot afford to invest their already sparse free time for political action (Brady et al., 1995).

Similarly, a study on the UK among adolescents found that a working-class background and poor education are explanatory for internal inefficacy translating into political disaffection, a lack of interest in politics, and vote absenteeism (Bynner & Ashford, 1994). Disaffected adolescents also refrain from other forms of formal political participation as they have a sense of inefficacy that their voice is not heard on institutionalized channels. Another study in the US



found that formal political participation increased by age with younger people preferring informal online participation (Weber et al., 2003).

However, socioeconomic, and demographic explanations for voter turnout have proven empirically less robust than propagated by its proponents (Blais, 2006; Polacko, 2021). Additionally, the evidence from the SES model is only valid for explaining voter turnout, not for explaining the individual proclivity towards political participation because it was hardly tested for it.

#### **2.4 Antecedents for proclivity towards political participation**

Blais and Daoust's analysis (2020) is more suitable for the research interest of this contribution. It translates the empirical evidence from the literature on voter turnout in a conceptual model on voting decisions which opens a causal path capturing the willingness to participate politically. The voting decision is considered as a four-step process where the first step is about political interest: The rationale is that a human who likes politics also likes voting (Blais & Daoust, 2020, p. 7). Already this causal step is decisive for this research project because if this motivational interest in politics is given, also political interest in other forms of political participation than voting is likely.

Political interest in this sense means “the affective motivation that drives people to follow or avoid politics the way they do other domains” (Blais & Daoust, 2020, p. 31). Thus, political interest is comparable with interest in sports or other hobbies. Its opposite is political apathy, a lack of desire, or motive, to take an interest in politics (Fox, 2015). Apathy differs from alienation in that sense that individuals are more aware of what they are alienated from. Regarding formal political participation, the “political non-participation” of activists would thus fall under alienated citizens but not under apathetic citizens, rather under politically interested citizens. Political interest is thus a valid term to capture the hypothetical proclivity for political participation in participatory democracy.

Motivational political interest is significantly stable over time after solidifying in the early twenties of age (Prior, 2019). The sociodemographic factors of sex, age, education, and race having been raised by earlier research influence this political interest next to individual-level factors (Blais & Daoust, 2020): “Education still trumps income” in this sense (Leighley & Nagler, 2014, p. 66). However, only the difference between primary and secondary schooling is empirically robust. Education is sidelined by age as the second-most explanatory factor (Blais & Daoust, 2020; Blais & Rubenson, 2013) whereas empirical evidence for income and occupation – the other two factors next to education in the SES model lack empirical robustness according to Blais and Daoust (2020). However, these SES-model-based factors (Brady et al.,

1995) are hardly explanatory considering their statistical impact (Blais & Daoust, 2020; Blais & Rubenson, 2013). Individual-level factors are expected to have a bigger impact (Blais & Daoust, 2020, p. 96; Prior, 2019). This evidence on sociodemographic factors is tested with the following hypotheses:

*H1.1: Respondents with secondary schooling are more interested in politics than those with primary schooling.*

*H1.2: The older the respondents the higher their political interest.*

*H1.3: The individual-level models are more explanatory than the SES model.*

The requirement to re-evaluate the robustness of the SES model lays also in the problem that Blais and Daoust (2020) and Prior (2019) treat motivational political interest predominantly as an explanator for voting proclivity rather than as an explanandum. And even when they treated it as the latter, they have only tested the influence of the sociodemographic variables with a data set consisting of five countries (Blais & Daoust, 2020). Thus, there exists the requirement for empirical analyses with a broader data set that test the influence of sociodemographic variables on proclivity towards political participation, and that explore which individual-level factors are more explanatory.

Regarding the latter, first research has developed the mediation hypothesis –again with voter turnout as an explanandum – and identified certain personality traits that are directly affecting political interest which then mediates those effects on voter turnout (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Gallego & Oberski, 2012): The assumption of the mediation hypothesis is that personality traits have developed earlier in life and predetermine political interest which then affects voter turnout (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011). Interdisciplinary research on genealogy has found, that already genetic predispositions predetermine personality traits that are manifesting in adolescence and translate into stable political interest (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2017). Consequently, personality traits on the individual level could be more valid and robust explanators for the proclivity towards political participation than structural explanators.

In this vein, literature on the mediation hypothesis identified general personality traits (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011) and those from the influential Big 5 model as explanators (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Lindell & Strandberg, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). The latter is a popular framework for many (inter-)disciplinary studies in psychology, sociology, behavioral sciences, or economy. These factors capture those individual-level explanators which promise to be more explanatory than structural factors like the SES model (Blais & Daoust, 2020).

Regarding the general personality traits, altruism, and internal efficacy have proven robust in influencing political interest positively whereas shyness is influencing it negatively (Blais &

St-Vincent, 2011). This evidence was only found in an analysis on five established liberal-representative democracies and thus requires further testing by the following three hypotheses:

*H 2.1: The more internally efficacious respondents are, the higher their political interest.*

*H2.2 The more altruist respondents are, the higher their political interest.*

*H2.3: The shyer respondents are, the lower their political interest.*

Research on the explanatory power of Big Five personality traits for the mediation hypothesis indicates that these factors have explanatory power as well. Wang et al (2019) found in a study on Taiwan, that extraversion and conscientiousness positively affect political interest whereas agreeableness has a negative effect. No effect of emotional stability and openness on political interest and no effect of any Big 5 trait on internal efficacy was found by those authors. This is partly contradicted by the evidence on Spain where openness is increasing the interest in politics and the internal efficacy whereas extraversion affects internal efficacy positively as well (Gallego & Oberski, 2012). In opposition to the research on Taiwan and Spain, Lindell and Strandberg (2018) found in an analysis on Finland, that lower levels of emotional stability indeed affect political interest negatively. The partly contradictory evidence (see Table 1 in the Appendix) and the single case design of these studies require testing of the effect of Big 5 personality traits on political interest:

*H3.1: The more extroverted a respondent, the higher the political interest.*

*H3.2: The more conscious a respondent, the higher the political interest.*

*H3.3: The higher the agreeableness of a respondent, the lower the political interest.*

*H3.4: The more open the respondents, the higher their political interest.*

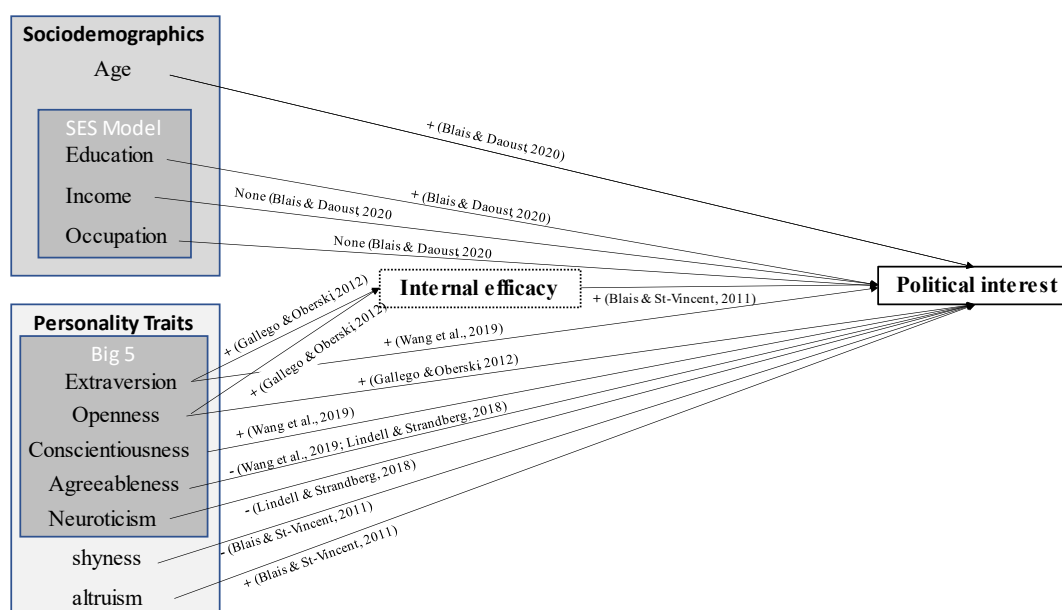
*H3.5: The less emotionally stable the respondents, the lower their political interest.*

A combination of these insights on Big 5 personality traits with the research on general character traits (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011) indicates that internal efficacy is not an independent variable but rather a mediating variable. Openness and extraversion seem to be partly mediated by internal efficacy in its positive influence on political interest. In combination with H2.1 which captures the influence of internal efficacy on political interest, this requires to hypothesize and test the effect of Big 5 personality traits on internal efficacy and its effect on political effect based on the aforementioned evidence at hand (Gallego & Oberski, 2012).

*H4.1: The more open the respondents, the higher their internal efficacy.*

*H4.2: The more extroverted the respondents, the higher their internal efficacy.*

The causal link of Big 5 traits to political interest over internal efficacy raised by research on the mediated hypothesis (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Gallego & Oberski, 2012) is illustrated in the theoretical framework on antecedents of political interest (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Antecedents of Political Interest (Theoretical Model)**

*Source: Own Illustration*

The theoretical model does not include external efficacy as a mediating variable that could be influenced by disaffection with current political institutions (Hay, 2013; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). The research interest of this contribution tries to isolate the proclivity towards political participation from the current political situation: The institutional structure would be reorganized under participatory democracy anyway. Thus, integrating a supply-side variable like external efficacy which measures satisfaction with an institutional regime differing from the hypothetical dominant institutional structure under participatory democracy would bias the theoretical model. Relying on the more stable demand-side explanation for motivational political interest over stable personality traits will be in this case more indicative whether citizens are likely to also participate in institutions operationalizing participatory democracy.

### 3 Research Design

The partly contradictory evidence on explainers for political interest (see Table 6 in the Appendix) and the lack of empirical analyses measuring proclivity towards political participation on a large number of liberal-representative democracy creates the need for further empirical research.

The research question is a hypothetical one. It would require social experimentation where a representative group of citizens has far-reaching means for political participation to assess which, and how many citizens are lazy or active participators in the political system. Given the restricted frame of this research paper, and as social experimentation bears practical and ethical

issues (Huitema et al., 2018), conducting quantitative multivariate regression models coupled with descriptive statistics is a suitable alternative. It also allows identifying which socioeconomic, demographic, and individual-level indicators influence the personal proclivity towards political participation. This deepens our theoretical understanding of potential (self-) selection biases in participatory democracy and its potential effects on those restraining from political participation.

However, a large N design based on survey data is not free from caveats. There does not exist a longitudinal data set which includes indicators of personality traits and political interest, and allows to test the assumed stability of personality traits and political attitudes (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011). Additionally, proclivity for political participation in institutions operationalizing participatory democracy is not captured in existing surveys.

This does not make the research question unanalyzable. The ninth wave of the European Social Survey from 2018 released on 17<sup>th</sup> of February, 2021 containing 30 European countries and a total of 49.519 respondents (ESS Round 9, 2021) is a suitable data source as its focus on European liberal-representative democracies fits the scope of the *#polivation* project and allows to test the hypotheses on a broader data set than the contributions before. Its questionnaires include a wide variety of indicators capturing socioeconomic, demographic, and personality trait factors. It also captures the proclivity of citizens towards political participation and internal efficacy.

The latter two are the dependent variables for the multivariate regression models. Following Prior (2019) proclivity towards political participation is defined as a motivational and attitudinal orientation capturing the desire and the motive of citizens to take an interest in politics just in opposite to political apathy – the lack of desire, or motive, to take an interest in politics (Dahl et al., 2018; Fox, 2015). In congruence to the literature, the hypotheses are based on (Blais & Daoust, 2020; Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Dahl et al., 2018; Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Lindell & Strandberg, 2018; Prior, 2019; Wang et al., 2019), proclivity towards political participation as the counterpart to political apathy is measured by the question “How interested are you in politics?” As Prior (2019) has demonstrated it is a suitable valid and reliable operationalization of affective political interest<sup>1</sup> due to the strong correlations between single-item measures targeting political interest. In the ESS it is measured with an ordinal Likert Scale where a lower value indicates a higher proclivity towards participation. Thus, for the regression models, negative coefficients of independent variables indicate a positive effect on proclivity towards political participation.

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<sup>1</sup> „Political interest“ and „proclivity towards political participation“ are used interchangeably meaning the same

Similar to the aforementioned research, internal efficacy is measured with the question “How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?”. It applies a Likert Scale where higher values are associated with higher internal efficacy meaning that positive coefficients indicate a positive relationship. Also the operationalization of the independent variables (see Table 2) is comparable to earlier research.

Variable	Measurement	Scaling
Proclivity for Participation	B1: How interested you say you are in politics?	Ordinal Likert Scale (1 very, 4 not at all)
Internal efficacy	B5: How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?	Ordinal Likert Scale (1 not at all, 5 completely)
Age	F31a: In what year were you born?	Metric Scale
Education	F15: Highest level of education, ES – ISCED	Ordinal Likert Scale (1 less than lower secondary, 7 MA level)
Income	F41: Which letter describes your household's total income, after tax and compulsory deductions, from all sources?	Metric scale (J 1 <sup>st</sup> decile, H 10 <sup>th</sup> decile)
Occupation	F33: What is/was the name or title of your main job?	Categorical Scaling
Extraversion	How much do you agree that it is important to listen to other people and to understand them?	Ordinal scale (1 very much, 6 not at all)
Openness	How much do you agree that it is important to do lots of different things in life?	Ordinal scale (1 very much, 6 not at all)
Conscientiousness	How much do you agree that it is important to behave properly?	Ordinal scale (1 very much, 6 not at all)
Agreeableness	How much do you agree that it is important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close?	Ordinal scale (1 very much, 6 not at all)
Neuroticism	C1: How happy are you?	Ordinal scale (1 extremely unhappy. 10 extremely happy)
Shyness	How much do you agree that it is important not to draw attention to yourself?	Ordinal scale (1 very much, 6 not at all)
Altruism	How much do you agree that it is important to help people around you and to care for their well-being?	Ordinal scale (1 very much, 6 not at all)

**Table 1: Operationalization of Variables based on European Social Survey (ESS Round 9, 2021)**

*Source: Own illustration*

In total, 15 regression models are conducted eight with political proclivity as a dependent variable and seven with internal efficacy as a dependent variable: Starting with the proclivity-models, model 1.1 measures the effect of age on proclivity towards participation in a univariate

regression model. Model 1.2 assesses the explanatory power of the SES model on political interest in a multivariate regression model capturing the independent variables of education, income, and occupation. Model 1.3 tests all four sociodemographic variables in a multivariate regression model.

Turning towards the personality trait models, Model 1.4 tests the impact of the Big 5 personality traits on proclivity towards participation whereas model 1.5 tests the impact of shyness and altruism, both with multivariate regression models. Model 1.6 measures all personality trait factors together. Model 1.7 measures the effect of internal efficacy on proclivity towards participation in a univariate regression model, ere model 1.8 assesses the impact of all explanatory factors on proclivity towards political participation in a multivariate regression model.

The same models except for the “brother model” 1.7 are run to test the effects on internal efficacy which replaces proclivity towards political participation as the dependent variable. These models allow assessing whether internal efficacy is mediating the influence of sociodemographic and/or individual-level factors on proclivity towards political participation. The seven models are numbered similarly starting with 2.1. Only model 2.7 which measures the impact of all explanators on internal efficacy could not be compared number-wise to its “brother model”.

## 4 Findings

Already the pure consideration of descriptive statistics on proclivity towards political participation (see Table 3) gives low support for the implicit premise of participatory democracy that citizens have an intrinsic motivation to participate politically. Only 43,3% of the respondents have at least quite an interest in politics whereas more than a third is only hardly interested in politics and a fifth not at all.

How interested in politics	Very interested	Quite interested	Hardly interested	Not at all interested	Refusal	Don't know	Total
Frequency	5.423	16.016	17.837	10.145	43	53	<b>49.519</b>
%	11,0%	32,3%	36,0%	20,5%	0,1%	0,1%	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Tabulation of proclivity towards political participation**

*Source: Own illustration*

### 4.1 The explanatory power of models on political proclivity and internal efficacy

Turning to the regression models, it gets evident that all 15 models are highly statistically significant on the 99,9% confidence level<sup>2</sup>. Except for openness, also all variables are significant on this confidence level with unidirectional influence on the dependent variables throughout all models. However, the explanatory power of the models is relatively small which also

<sup>2</sup> Skewness and kurtosis tolerable, no multicollinearity, curvilinearity and heteroskedasticity observable, outliers were kept because they are of theoretical interest, assumption of heteroskedasticity holds

holds for the impact of the single variables on proclivity towards participation for the first eight models (see Table 3), and on internal efficacy for the latter seven models (see Table 4).

Regarding the former, the explanatory power of the sociodemographic models (1.1 to 1.3) is higher than the one of the personality traits models (1.4 to 1.6) which all have an Adjusted  $R^2$  below 0,05 (see Table 7 in the Appendix). With an Adjusted  $R^2$  of 0,264, the total model (1.8) has the highest explanatory power of all multivariate models. This contravenes earlier evidence that considered either sociodemographic variables (Brady et al., 1995) or personality traits variables (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011) as most explanatory for proclivity towards political participation. The evidence of this empirical analysis indicates instead that both groups of factors brought together are most explanatory of political proclivity.

Internal efficacy has the highest impact on political proclivity in the total model with a standardized coefficient of -0,40 (see Table 8 in the Appendix), which is sidelined by a high  $R$ -value in the bivariate regression model (1.7) of 0,445. This supports H2.1 that internal efficacy has a positive impact on proclivity towards participation. Considering the explanatory power of the models with internal efficacy as a dependent variable (see Table 9 in the Appendix), it gets evident that the personality traits models with internal efficacy as a dependent variable (2.4 to 2.6) have higher explanatory power compared to the models with personality traits factors with political proclivity as a dependent variable (1.4 to 1.6) whereas the explanatory power of the sociodemographic models and the total model is lower compared to the models with proclivity as a dependent variable. This supports the argument that internal efficacy mediates the effect of personality traits on proclivity towards political participation. This has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the causal relationship between individual-level factors and political proclivity which is further assessed in the discussion.

#### **4.2 Effects of sociodemographic and personality traits on the political proclivity**

Turning to the assessment of the influence of the single variables, H1.1 is supported: Higher education levels indeed affect proclivity towards participation positively throughout all models. Considering descriptive statistics, there is support for the argument that those with primary schooling as the highest education are less interested politically (Blais & Daoust, 2020). Only 27,1% of them are at least quite interested, whereas a third is only hardly interested and almost 40% are not interested at all in politics (see Table 5 in the Appendix).

However, considering the standardized coefficients throughout all models, earlier empirical evidence that education has a higher effect than income does not hold. The standardized coefficient for income in the SES model (1.2) with -0,08 is higher than the standardized coefficient for education with -0,07. This gap even widens in the total model (1.8) and the



sociodemographic model (1.3). This strengthens earlier evidence that socioeconomic inequality explains political alienation over decreasing political interest (Merkel, 2014).

H1.2 is not supported: Assuming a positive influence of age on proclivity towards participation, all three regression models capturing age indicate a weak negative influence on political proclivity (see Table 3). In the total model, age is even the second-most explanatory factor after internal efficacy with a standardized coefficient of 0,22 (see Table 8 in the Appendix).

Model	Sociodemographics			Personality Traits			Efficacy	Total
	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.8
Constant	-10,09	2,44	-14,1	2,83	2,58	2,86	3,45	-19,07
Age	0,01 (0,00)***		0,01 (0,00)***					0,01 (0,00)***
Education		-0,02 (0,00)***	-0,02 (0,00)					-0,01 (0,00)***
Income		-0,03 (0,00)***	-0,04 (0,00)***					-0,02 (0,00)***
Occupation		0,00 (0,00)***	0,00 (0,00)***					0,00 (0,00)***
Extraversion				0,10 (0,00)***		0,11 (0,00)***		0,05 (0,00)***
Openness				-0,00 (0,00)		-0,01 (0,00)		-0,00 (0,00)
Conscientiousness				-0,06 (0,00)***		-0,04 (0,00)***		-0,03 (0,00)***
Agreeableness				0,05 (0,01)***		0,05 (0,01)***		0,02 (0,01)***
Neuroticism				-0,05 (0,00)***		-0,05 (0,00)***		-0,01 (0,00)***
Shyness					-0,05 (0,00)***	-0,06 (0,00)***		-0,02 (0,00)***
Altruism					0,10 (0,00)***	0,03 (0,01)***		0,02 (0,01)***
Internal efficacy							-0,38 (0,00)***	-0,34 (0,00)***

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

**Table 3: OLS Regression with proclivity towards political participation as the dependent variable**

Source: Own Illustration

H1.3 assuming that individual-level factors are more explanatory than the SES model does only hold partly. The explanatory power of the isolated SES model (1.2) is higher than those of the Big 5 model (1.4), the shyness-altruism model (1.5), and the general character trait model (1.6). However, in the total model (1.8), the standardized coefficients of the variables of interest

are comparatively equal. Thus, the hypothesis needs to be revised in stating that both, socio-demographic and individual-level factors, explain political proclivity.

The hypotheses H2.2 and H2.3 are supported. Higher levels of shyness indeed affect proclivity towards participation negatively whereas higher levels of altruism affect it positively throughout all models. Regarding the Big 5 factors, all hypotheses except those for openness (H3.4) which is lacking statistical significance, and for conscientiousness (H3.2) are supported. Extraversion indeed positively affects political proclivity (H3.1) which also holds for increasing emotional stability (H3.5) and conscientiousness (H3.3) whereas higher agreeableness lowers political interest (H3.3).

Model	Sociodemographics			Personality Traits			Total
	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7
Constant	-12,04	2,13	-9,30	1,86	2,11	1,77	-5,08
Age	0,01 (0,00)***		0,01 (0,00)***				0,00 (0,00)
Education		0,03 (0,00)***	0,02 (0,00)***				0,02 (0,00)***
Income		0,05 (0,00)***	0,04 (0,00)***				0,03 (0,00)***
Occupation		-0,00 (0,00)***	-0,00 (0,00)***				-0,00 (0,00)***
Extraversion				-0,10 (0,00)***		-0,12 (0,01)***	-0,10 (0,10)***
Openness				-0,06 (0,00)***		-0,05 (0,00)***	-0,04 (0,00)***
Conscientiousness				0,10 (0,00)***		0,07 (0,00)***	0,06 (0,00)***
Agreeableness				-0,07 (0,01)***		-0,07 (0,01)***	-0,07 (0,01)***
Neuroticism				0,08 (0,00)***		0,07 (0,00)***	0,05 (0,00)***
Shyness					0,11 (0,00)***	0,11 (0,00)***	0,09 (0,00)***
Altruism					-0,13 (0,01)***	-0,03 (0,01)***	-0,03 (0,00)***

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

**Table 4: OLS Regression with internal efficacy as the dependent variable**

Source: Own Illustration

Turning towards the assumed positive effect of openness (H4.1) and extraversion (H4.2) on internal efficacy, both hypotheses are supported throughout all models (see Table 4).

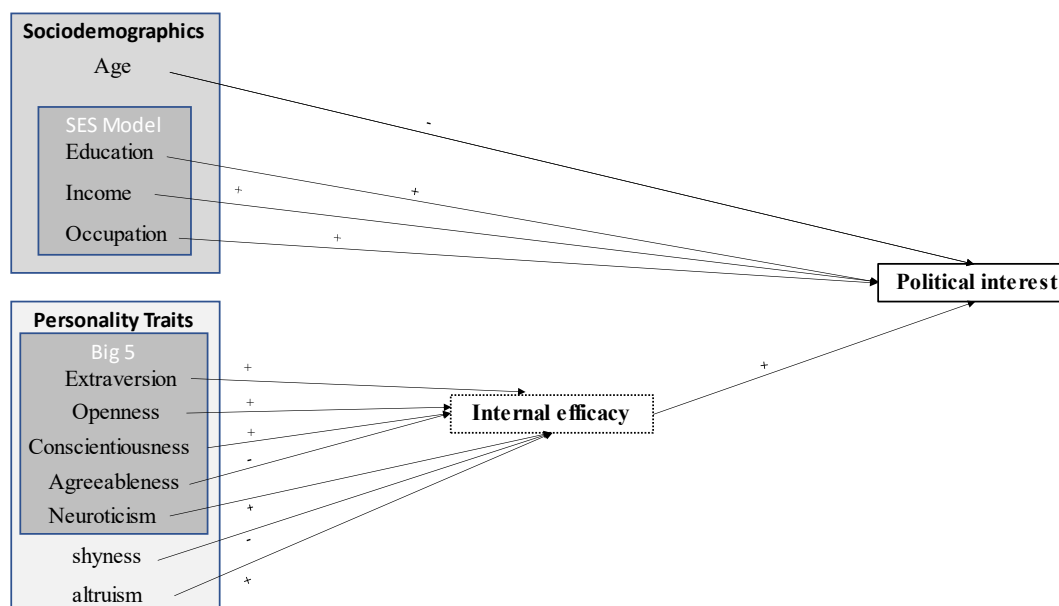
It becomes evident, that the standardized coefficients of personality traits in explaining internal efficacy are higher than those in explaining proclivity towards political participation. This

does not hold for the sociodemographic factors. Additionally, the impact of the individual-level factors on internal efficacy is higher than that of the sociodemographic factors in model 2.7 considering the standardized coefficients (see Table 10 in the Appendix). This supports the argument that internal efficacy indeed mediates the effect of personality traits on political proclivity whereas sociodemographic factors directly affect it.

## 5 Discussion

This contribution tested explanators raised by research for proclivity towards political participation on the broadest data set so far with the European Social Survey capturing almost 50.000 respondents from 30 European liberal-representative democracies (ESS Round 9, 2021).

The empirical evidence mostly supports the causal effects which have been observed by earlier research (see Table 11 in the Appendix). However, in opposite to earlier research (Blais & Daoust, 2020; Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Gallego & Oberski, 2012), it has become evident that structural factors and individual-level factors are both explanatory. Structural explanators from the SES model directly affect proclivity towards political participation whereas the effect of individual character traits is mediated by internal efficacy. This requires an adaption of the causal path to explain proclivity towards political participation (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Revised theoretical model explaining proclivity towards political participation**

*Source: Own Illustration*

Support is found for the argument that widening socioeconomic inequality translates into a gap regarding political interest where those disadvantaged are less politically interested (Brady et al., 1995; Dahl et al., 2018; Merkel, 2014). Also those with primary education are significantly less interested politically supporting earlier evidence (Daoust & Nadeau, 2020). Those

structural factors capture supply-side effects which are not directly related to the current political system like external efficacy. These economic factors are more influenceable than the individual-level factors (Brady et al., 1995).

The analysis reveals that personality traits indeed affect internal efficacy more than political proclivity. More open, extroverted, conscious, happy, outgoing and altruist persons have a higher confidence in being able to influence politics. In a second step, this internal efficacy directly affects political interest. This mediating relationship is also robust from a theoretical perspective. The positive effect of altruism on political interest supports the Aristotelian notion of the human as a *zoon politikon*: Community-oriented humans do have an interest in participating also politically.

However, this general interest in participation is found to be low: Less than 50% of the respondents are at least slightly interested. Or to put it to the opposite: More than 50% of the respondents are at most hardly interested in politics. This evidence is incisive on the implicit premise of participatory democracy that humans will participate if participate institutions allow them to do so. The stability of personality traits attested by research political psychology (Gallego & Oberski, 2012) and genetics (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2017) does not promise that those with low political interest change their mind just because participatory institutions exist.

Thus, the normative aspiration of democratizing democracy by introducing participatory means could be flawed just from the beginning. It seems that many citizens in democracy are rather lazy concerning political participation (Glavanovits et al., 2019). Some of those with a lack of political interest go voting because they perceive it as a duty (Blais & Daoust, 2020). But if they are asked to engage in political activities which require more than going voting once every few years, they are likely to refrain. Upgrading the role of citizens in decision-making and demanding full citizen engagement for participatory democracy which is a prerequisite for it (Ianniello et al., 2019) if only less than 50% of them are willing to participate and especially the socioeconomic disadvantaged are excluded will likely not increase input legitimacy and throughput legitimacy of liberal-representative democracies. It rather potentially reduces it due to the (self-)exclusion of significant parts of the citizenry.

## 5.1 Research potentials and limitations

However, it should not be dismissed that participatory democracy could also have catalyzing effect on political participation irrespective of the political interest. The institutional setting does make a difference (Scheufele et al., 2004). Appealing discussion forums which target needs of citizens could indeed catalyze political participation (Wuttke, 2021). This endogenous factor thus promises to increase participation. However, it has not proven as explanatory yet.

This aggravates the general need for further experimental research with participatory democracy while mitigating its ethical trade-offs (Huitema et al., 2018). Experimenting with digital twins of government, a digital “clone” of a jurisdiction (Moore, 2019) could be a suitable means in this vein. Additionally, experimenting with participatory democracy in a restricted setting on a local level under scientific supervision has already proven feasible: The deliberative *Cooperative Council* in Groningen where citizen ambassadors, randomly selected citizens, and city counselors discuss jointly on policy issues has increased participation and satisfaction with democracy in the Dutch city (Innovation in Politics, 2019).

Taking a narrow perspective on the theoretical model on proclivity towards political participation, further empirical assessments of the revised causal path from individual-level factors over internal efficacy on proclivity, and on the explanatory power of both, the sociodemographic factors and the individual-level factors are required. This would also help to cure limitations of this contribution. The empirical analysis based on the European Social Survey does not allow to test the newly opened causal path: The lack of a longitudinal data set capturing personality traits, internal efficacy and political proclivity does not allow to test the premised stability of personality traits over time and its effects in internal efficacy (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2017), especially not under different institutional structures with diverging degrees of participatory means.

Additionally, especially some personality traits are insufficiently operationalized in the ESS due to the lack of questions capturing those indicators fittingly. This is true for conscientiousness, shyness and partly also for extraversion. However, to the knowledge of the author, no other dataset allows to test the broad set of variables on a comparable broad set of liberal-representative democracies. Thus, these flaws of the empirical analysis are accepted.

## **5.2 Theoretical and practical contributions and implications**

This is also the case because the theoretical contributions outweigh the limitations of the analysis. The strayed empirical evidence was tested for the first time in a large N research design which allowed merging the strayed empirical evidence to advance the theoretical understanding on explanators for proclivity towards political participation. The theoretical model was revised with introducing internal efficacy as a mediator for personality trait factors, and, the interdisciplinary perspective on political proclivity which integrates stable psychological factors on the individual level with personality traits based on genetic insights (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2017) with classical structural factors like the SES model from sociology (Brady et al., 1995) deepen our theoretical understanding. The better explanatory power in comparison to

exclusively disciplinary research supports the argument to accelerate interdisciplinarity in social sciences.

Turning towards the practical contributions, it became evident that proclivity towards political participation is merely an interest of a minority in society and is not followed by a broad societal majority. Thus, the central assumption of participatory democracy is unstable that increasing participatory means will increase citizen participation automatically (Habermas, 1992).

From a normative perspective, this deepens the need to influence the structural factors in such ways that they increase political interest if participatory democracy is indeed perceived as a suitable means to cure defects of democracy. The socioeconomic-driven interest gap requires for modifications of the socioeconomic system to enable higher equality in society as a prerequisite for truly effective participatory democracy where the interests of the whole population are represented. This means inequality needs to be reduced by realigning the neoliberal economy to liberal democracy (Merkel, 2014).

As achieving equality in a large-scale society driven by neoliberalism seems somewhat unrealistic in the short-term and because liberal-representative democracy is under pressure just now (Mounk, 2018) it is feasible to sideline experimentation with participatory democracy with experimentation with political innovations that relax rather than increase the duty for citizens to participate politically in order to cure defects of current liberal-representative democracies. Propositions in this vein are *Automated Democracy* (Hidalgo, 2021) or *Real Time Smart Government* (Kersting, 2019) which are still in a theoretical state and promise to predominantly increase output legitimacy while also affecting input legitimacy and throughput legitimacy (Scharpf, 2003; Schmidt, 2013) of liberal-representative democracy positively.

In general, the contribution again points to the need for an evidence-based public and scientific discourse on implicit and explicit premises and normative aspirations related to political innovations in order to upgrade liberal-representative democracy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **6 Conclusion**

This contribution tested the implicit premise of participatory democracy that an increase of participatory means will lead to a broad participation of citizens in decision-making. The empirical analysis of proclivity towards political participation in thirty European liberal-representative democracy based on the European Social Survey unveiled that this premise does not hold because more than half of the European population is at most hardly interested in politics. This motivational proclivity towards political participation is even lower among socioeconomic disadvantaged and those who have only primary education.

The revision of the theoretical understanding on political proclivity based on the empirical insights includes the integration of both, sociodemographic structural factors and individual-level factors of personality traits whose effect is mediated by internal efficacy to explain proclivity towards participation. The stability of personality traits throughout life indicates that political proclivity is significantly predetermined and stable and hardly influenceable by changing exogenous factors. However, the significant effect of specifically socioeconomic factors on political proclivity indicates that a closure of the socioeconomic gap towards equality could increase political interest of those disadvantaged. Additionally, an appealing design of participatory means which targets human needs could have a positive effect on willingness for participation.

However, more research is required to test the newly introduced causal path with the mediating role of internal efficacy and also due to some limitations related to the European Social Survey as a data source. This needs to be sidelined with increasing experimentation and research both, on innovations related to participatory democracy but especially also on those which liberate individuals from the duty of political participation while still preserving input and output legitimacy of liberal-representative democracies.

This may seem like an attempt to square the circle but first propositions like *Augmented Democracy* where AI-enhanced digital agents represent citizens in political decision-making (Hidalgo, 2021) require more attention. This to be said, the project *#polivation* centered at the Technical University Munich serves as a academic and public discussion and research hub aiming at upgrading liberal-representative democracy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Appendix

How interested in politics	Very interested	Quite interested	Hardly interested	Not at all interested	Total
Frequency	200	824	1.279	1.485	<b>3.788</b>
%	5,3%	21,8%	33,8%	39,2%	<b>100</b>

**Table 5: Proclivity towards political participation filtered by education not higher than primary schooling**  
Source: Own illustration

Explanator	Political interest	Internal efficacy	Author(-s)
Internal efficacy	+/None		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)/(Wang et al., 2019)
Age	+		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)
Education	+		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)
Income	None		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)
Occupation	None		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)
Extraversion	+/None	None/+	(Wang et al., 2019)/(Gallego & Oberski, 2012)
Openness	+/None	+/+	(Wang et al., 2019)/(Gallego & Oberski, 2012)
Conscientiousness	+	None	(Wang et al., 2019)
Agreeableness	-/-	None	(Wang et al., 2019)/(Lindell & Strandberg, 2018)
Neuroticism	-/	/None	(Lindell & Strandberg, 2018)/(Wang et al., 2019)
Shyness	+		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)
Altruism	+		(Blais & Daoust, 2020)

**Table 6: Evidence in Literature on the hypothesized effects on political interest and internal efficacy**  
Source: Own Illustration

Model <sup>3</sup>	Sociodemographics			Personality traits			Efficacy	Total
	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.8
Valid N	49.202	36.904	36.821	47,477	48,182	47,190	48.006	35.077
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0,131	0,075	0,099	0,036	0,013	0,042	0,445	0,264
F-value	858	994	1.013	358	307	293	11.481	1.050

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01: \*\*\* p<0.001

**Table 7: Explanatory power of models with proclivity towards participation as dependent variable**  
Source: Own Illustration

<sup>3</sup> For the univariate models (1.1, 1.7 and 2.1) the R-value is depicted instead of the Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>

Explanators	BETA
Internal efficacy	-0,40
Age	0,22
Education	-0,05
Income	-0,07
Occupation	0,10
Extraversion	0,06
Openness	-0,00
Conscientiousness	-0,04
Agreeableness	0,02
Neuroticism	-0,02
Shyness	-0,03
Altruism	0,02

**Table 8; Standardized Coefficients for Model 1.8**

Source: Own Illustration

Model	Sociodemographics			Personality Traits			Total
	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7
Valid N	47.847	36.160	36.078	46.482	47.060	46.230	35.009
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0,125	0,086	0,095	0,061	0,024	0,074	0,132
F-value	759	1.140	945	605	571	531	485

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

**Table 9: Explanatory power of models with internal efficacy as dependent variable**

Source: Own Illustration

Explanators	BETA
Age	0,06
Education	0,07
Income	0,09
Occupation	-0,15
Extraversion	-0,09
Openness	-0,05
Conscientiousness	0,07
Agreeableness	-0,05
Neuroticism	0,08
Shyness	0,10
Altruism	-0,03

**Table 10: Standardized Coefficients for Model 2.7**

Source: Own Illustration

Explanator	This analysis		Earlier Research	
	Political interest	Internal efficacy	Political interest	Internal efficacy
Internal efficacy	+		+/None	
Age	-	+	+	
Education	+	+	+	
Income	+	+	None	
Occupation	+	-	None	
Extraversion	+	+	+/None	None/+
Openness	None	+	+/None	+/+
Conscientiousness	+	+	+	None
Agreeableness	-	-	-/-	None
Neuroticism	+	+	-/	/None
Shyness	-	-	-	
Altruism	+	+	+	

**Table 11: Revised evidence on political interest and internal efficacy compared to earlier research**

*Source: Own Illustration*

	Proclivity for Partici- pation	Internal ef- ficacy	Age	Education	Income	Occupa- tion	Extraver- sion	Openness	Conscien- tiousness	Agreeable- ness	Neuroti- cism	Shyness
Internal ef- ficacy	-0.442 **	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	0.121 **	0.137 **	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Education	-0.149 **	0.163 **	0.097 **	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income	-0.158 **	0.211 **	0.254 **	0.206 **	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Occupa- tion	0.246 **	-0.246 **	-0.041 **	-0.319 **	-0.332 **	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Extraver- sion	0.128 **	-0.146 **	-0.066 **	-0.066 **	-0.071 **	0.141 **	-	-	-	-	-	-
Openness	0.046 **	-0.126 **	-0.186 **	-0.056 **	-0.080 **	0.081 **	0.234 **	-	-	-	-	-
Conscien- tiousness	-0.049 **	0.089 **	0.142 **	0.053 **	0.066 **	-0.039 **	0.173 **	0.011 *	-	-	-	-
Agreeable- ness	0.091 **	-0.117 **	-0.063 **	-0.027 **	-0.073 **	0.099 **	0.378 **	0.188 **	0.228 **	-	-	-
Neuroti- cism	-0.122 **	0.169 **	0.096 **	0.082 **	0.245 **	-0.174 **	-0.150 **	-0.121 **	-0.019 **	-0.168 **	-	-

Shyness	-0.062 **	0.107 **	0.071 **	0.066 **	0.098 **	-0.075 **	0.272 **	0.017 **	0.315 **	0.195 **	0.002	-
Altruism	0.075 **	-0.090 **	-0.042 **	-0.009	-0.021 **	0.071 **	0.417 **	0.207 **	0.221 **	0.476 **	-0.162 **	0.266 **

**Table 12: Correlation matrix of relevant variables**

*Source: Own Illustration*