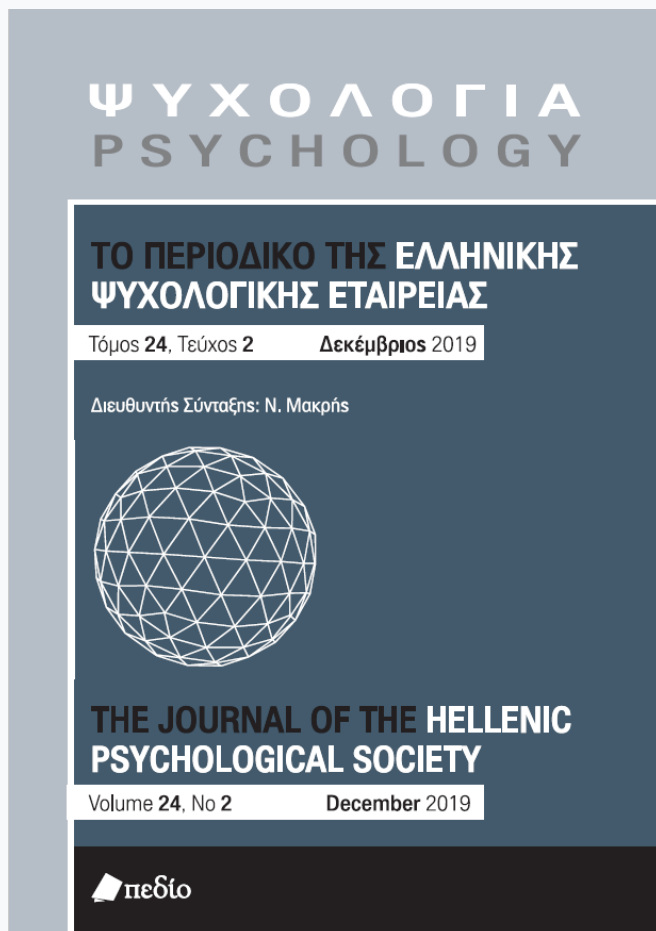


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# From Political Interest to Participation in EU-related Actions: The Mediating Role of European Identity and Political Efficacy

VASSILIS PAVLOPOULOS<sup>1</sup>, DIMITRA KOSTOGLOU<sup>1</sup> & FROSSO MOTTI-STEFANIDI<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

European youth's civic engagement and political participation in EU-related issues is a timely imperative. Research findings on youth citizenship range from political apathy to alternative forms of participation, although theoretical evidence remains poor. This study is based on empirical data from the Greek contribution to the European program CATCH-EyoU (Horizon 2020), aiming to explore different forms and predictors of youth's civic engagement and political participation on EU-related issues. Based on social psychological theoretical background, we assumed that the expressed political interest for the EU translates to specific forms of action. Identification with the EU and perceived political efficacy/alienation were expected to mediate the above relationship. The sample consisted of 749 young adults aged 18-27 ( $M = 22.2$ , 50.7% women, 89.7% Greek citizens, 72% university students, 75.5% employed). In addition to voting, four components of political participation and civic engagement were studied, namely conventional participation (in support of political parties and goals), activism (acts of protest against the authorities), online participation (social networks), and volunteering (non-profit actions). Mediation analyses showed that the relationship between political interest and participation can be explained by different mechanisms: The sense of belonging in the EU lead to more frequent electoral participation, but to less activism and online participation. On the contrary, EU identity exploration and reconsideration contributed to increased conventional participation. Political efficacy seemed to promote activism and online participation, while political alienation tended to decrease activism. These findings reveal the multiple connotations of youth's political participation regarding EU issues.

*Keywords:* Activism, European identity, political alienation, political efficacy, political interest, political participation.

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Young people's active citizenship is a timely topic. Its social relevance lies in the expressed concern raised by the decline in youth voting rate and other traditional forms of political action (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, critical scientists point to the elitist character of established citizenship in Western societies that leads certain social groups – such as immigrants and young people, in particular – to political and social exclusion (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2014). At the same time, modern societies undergo deep changes that challenge the legitimacy of established political institutions. These include, among others, the rise of far-right populism (Pavlopoulos, 2018), immigration and the refugee crisis (Maricut, 2017), recession (Hatton, 2016), and growing inequalities (Kuhn, Van Elsas, Hakhversian, & Van der Brug, 2016).

The study of youth active citizenship also has significant theoretical implications. From a psychological perspective, it involves both developmental and social-psychological mechanisms. Being engaged in political and community issues is considered a developmental goal and a marker of the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Political participation has been studied both as an outcome and an antecedent of group belonging (Klander-mans, 2014). In other words, identity as social cognition and as social practice is important to understand collective action (Reicher & Drury, 2011). Moreover, political participation entails perceptions of one's ability to mobilize resources in order to achieve desired goals; conversely, it is undermined by feelings of powerlessness and estrangement. Therefore, self-efficacy and alienation, embedded in the notion of agency in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002) may explain motivational aspects of active citizenship.

This paper draws on the above theoretical framework to examine young people's political participation as an expression of political

interest through the mediating mechanisms of identity and political efficacy/alienation. We chose to focus on EU-related issues as this will allow us to test assumptions relevant to the emerging European identity, which have not been adequately addressed so far in the literature, yet they are of particular interest in a period of instability at the economic, social, political, and even institutional level within the EU.

### **Civic Engagement and Political Participation**

Terminologies of civic engagement and political participation vary considerably across disciplines and epistemological approaches. In his seminal work, *Politics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle depicted what today constitutes a normative view of the good citizen with rights and responsibilities, tightly connected to the ideal democratic city-state, with justice acting as a fundamental moral framework (cf. Banaji et al., 2018). More recently, a number of scholars have pointed out that this mainstream view of the 'good citizen' is ideologically bound and far from inclusive. For example, youth are seen as active agents in the political processes, whereas the voice of women, migrants, and minorities is not always given equal attention in the discourse on civic and political engagement (e.g., Bee & Guerina, 2014). Still, part of scientific research in this area has been mostly descriptive, focuses on limited types of political action, especially voting, and tends to ignore subtle, alternative, or new forms of participation.

The terms 'civic engagement' and 'political participation' have been defined either too loosely (Adler & Goggin, 2005) or too narrowly (Teorell, Torcal, & Montero, 2007). Civic engagement refers to how an active citizen participates in the life of a community, in order to improve conditions for others or to help shaping the community's future (Adler & Goggin, 2005). On the other hand, political participation is a behavioral expression of an

engagement consisting of political interest, attention, knowledge, opinions and feelings, which focus on political institutions, processes and decision making (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). It encompasses actions or activities by ordinary citizens that, in some way, are directed toward influencing political outcomes in society (Teorell et al., 2007).

A common element to be found in the two conceptualizations is the active stance of the conscious citizen, as opposed to apathy. These should not be conceived as mutually exclusive categories, but rather as the two extremes in a continuum that encompasses various forms of political action, beyond electoral behavior. Therefore, acts of protest, such as demonstrations, strikes or boycotts are also considered political participation. In their comprehensive typology, Ekman and Amnå (2012) distinguish between manifest and latent forms of civic engagement that may be viewed as pre-political or standby. By using these terms they refer to activities that entail involvement in the public sphere, although they do not mean to directly produce specific political outcomes. Political discussions, news and media consumption, social networking and other online activities targeting at issues such as climate change, poverty, gender inequality, discrimination and minority rights constitute examples. These latent forms of civil participation further differentiate between mere involvement and more active civic engagement. Manifest political participation, in turn, includes formal and extra-parliamentary, legal or illegal, forms of action.

### **Political Interest**

Probably the most important contribution in the typology of Ekman and Amnå (2012) is the proposition of an additional group called non-participation or disengagement. This allows to study phenomena that were neglected in previous studies, such as political alienation. The researchers managed to

do so by keeping political interest conceptually separate from participation, in order to improve understanding of political passivity. Political interest encompasses a cognitive domain, whereas political participation is the way people try to influence political decision making. In this way, Amnå and Ekman (2014) were able to detect different types of political passivity: the standby citizens (highest interest-moderate participation), the unengaged (low interest-low participation) and the disillusioned (low participation-lowest interest). Indeed, Banaji (2008) points out that a number of young people do express lack of interest, cynicism and mistrust in relation to politicians, political parties and government while, at the same time, they communicate their desire to debate, inform, suggest ideas, raise funds, protest and volunteer their time to particular causes through alternative forms of action, new media and the Internet.

Research suggests that political interest is linked differentially to emerging types of participation (e.g., social networks, volunteering) in modern democracies, where norms are shifting from a pattern of duty-based citizenship to engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2008) and to informal social interactions (McClurg, 2003). In this realm, political interest may be related to traditional forms of participation, such as voting or support for political parties, but not to subtle types of political action, such as civic engagement. In a study relevant to the scope of the present project, Stockemer (2011) reported that higher levels of political interest predicted increased citizens' support for the EU and participation in European parliament elections.

Moreover, political interest may have an indirect effect on participation through its association with a number of mediating variables. For example, Kenski and Stroud (2006) found that political interest explained a substantial amount of variance of political efficacy and knowledge, which are known to lead to political action. A significant positive associ-

ation was also established between political interest, on the one hand, and identity formation, namely commitment making and exploration in breadth, on the other (Mannerström, Lönnqvist, & Leikas, 2017).

### Political Efficacy/Alienation

Recent research shows that there is a decline in political interest among youths, due to their lack of political efficacy (Mierina, 2014). Political efficacy is defined as the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, namely, that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). This includes both judgments about individual capabilities and attitudes toward the political system. Thus, internal political efficacy refers to the individual's own confidence that s/he can influence the political life, whereas external political efficacy focuses on the responsiveness of the governing authorities to the demands made (Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009). Political efficacy can be better conceived within a broad theory of human agency, namely social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), that assigns to self-efficacy beliefs a decisive role in enabling people to act purposefully. This is of vital importance in a representative democracy, where effective participation relies on the control that the citizens can exert on their political representatives, by selecting them through elections, but also by monitoring their activities.

In line with the above assumption, Karp and Banducci (2008) examined political efficacy and voter turnout in 27 democracies to find that individuals in countries with proportional systems had a greater sense of political efficacy than did individuals in non-proportional systems. A similar concept to political efficacy in the school context was studied by Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schilz (2001) in 28 countries. They found that conceptualizations of citizenship involved both

conventional and social movement activity in countries high on school efficacy. Students in these countries also expressed a greater willingness to participate in political activities as adults. Furthermore, internal political efficacy has been shown to promote both conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation, whereas external efficacy is mostly related to general trust in political institutions (Caprara et al., 2009).

The mediating role of political efficacy has been examined extensively. Thus, political efficacy was found to mediate the relation between personality and different types of political participation (Gallego & Oberski, 2011), the use of news media (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011), watching television (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009), and interpersonal discussions (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999).

At the opposite spectrum of political efficacy, political alienation refers to the sense of estrangement one feels from the political institutions and politics in general (Lane, 1962). It consists of four dimensions: powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and isolation (Finifter, 1970). Powerlessness, which is the most relevant to the purposes of this paper, describes the sense an individual has that s/he cannot influence any political situation. In this respect, it is found at the low end of internal political efficacy. Politically alienated individuals may show interest regarding political matters, but it is not clear whether they will be mobilized on their interests, by actively participating to fight for them (Dahl, et al., 2018) or not. Instead, political alienation encloses feelings of weakness, illegality and loss of meaning (Finifter, 1970). It is not to be confused with political apathy, which is characterized by a lack of motivation to take an interest in politics. Young people are particularly vulnerable to be affected by political disengagement that leaves them apathetic or alienated (Dahl et al., 2018).

Whereas it is almost a banality to conclude that young people who express alienation and

distrust toward social and political institutions are increasing in number across Europe (e.g., Eurobarometer, 2013), the direct association of alienation with different forms of political participation is less clear, since it was found to relate negatively with electoral participation but positively with activism (Dahl et al., 2018). This is in line with a recent trend that emerged in a study of young people in Greece of recession, suggesting their 'return to politics' but only through direct-democratic unconventional action first, and then through the established political institutions (Pantelidou-Malouta, 2015).

### **Political Identity: The European Dimension**

From a social psychological perspective, and beyond feelings of personal agency, political participation is primarily a behavioural manifestation of politicized collective identities. When individual actions on behalf of a group aim to claim the support of other groups or the authority, social identity becomes political identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Political identity serves as a mobilizer for members of a group to act with the goal to achieve change for the group. In particular, identity processes are supposed to play a crucial role in political protest as antecedents, mediators, moderators, or consequences (Klandermans, 2014). The more an individual identifies with a group, the more probable it is that s/he will act in a manner defending his or her own group interests. In three meta-analyses synthesizing a total of 182 effects, Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears (2008) showed that political identity, along with political efficacy and perceived injustice, correlated positively with political action. Furthermore, political identity mediated the relation between perceived injustice, political efficacy and political actions. Within community psychology, there is extensive evidence on the association between sense of belonging and identification with a community, on the one hand, and civic participation, on the other (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007).

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is the age when identity formation becomes a salient goal (Erikson, 1968). Civic engagement and political participation were found to have a reciprocal longitudinal association with identity formation during this age (Crocetti, Garckija, Gabrielavičiūtė, Vosylis, & Žukauskienė, 2014). The exploration of alternative identities was also found to contribute to increased political participation (Mannerström et al., 2017). Since this process entails an active search for information relevant to the group, it is expected to mediate the relation between political interest and political participation. Similar processes might apply to the reconsideration of the political identity, as a renegotiation of the identification and the search of future identifications (Crocetti et al., 2014).

Given the relevance of political identity in political participation and, ultimately, in the quality of democracy, it comes as a surprise that this is an understudied issue in the context of the EU. Cerutti (2003) points out that the shaping of a European political identity, distinct from its national and cultural components, is a precondition for the full legitimization and accountability of European institutions. One of the few related studies focusing on the results of the 2014 European parliamentary elections showed that a large number of youths explained their vote referring to being in favour of the EU and feeling European or citizen of the EU (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2014). More recently, Mazzoni et al. (2018) found that cross-border mobility had a significant indirect effect on participation concerning EU issues through European identification and vision of the ideal EU as a political community. European identification also mediated the effect of both short- and long-term mobility on voting intentions at the next EU elections. Still, the role of other dimensions of identity formation, such as identity exploration or reconsideration, on latent forms of political participation has not been examined.

## The Present Study

This paper is based on data drawn from the Greek contribution to the Horizon 2020 CATCH-EyoU project (Constructing AcTive CitizensHIp with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions; [www.catchyou.eu](http://www.catchyou.eu)), an interdisciplinary consortium aimed to identify the factors, located at different levels (psychological, developmental, macrosocial and contextual) influencing the different forms of youth active engagement in eight European countries, with an emphasis on EU-related political issues.

The purpose of the study is twofold. First, we set out to explore the links between political interest, on the one hand, and political participation and civic engagement, on the other. Second, we will explore the mediating role of European identity and political efficacy/alienation in the relationship between political interest and political participation.

With respect to the first goal, on the basis of previous findings, we hypothesized that political interest will predict various types of political participation, especially those expressed through conventional forms, such as electoral participation and support for political parties, and less so latent types of action, such as civic engagement.

In order to address mediation effects, the relationship of European identity and political efficacy/alienation with civic participation needs to be established first. Then, it is expected that political efficacy/alienation will mediate the positive relationship between political interest and EU-related actions. Moreover, identification with, exploration, and reconsideration of European identity will mediate the positive relationship between political interest and EU-related actions. In particular, we assumed that the mediation of political efficacy/alienation will be more salient in unconventional acts of protest, where change of status for the group is at stake. On the other hand, identification with the EU will be more relevant

in confirmatory political actions, while the indirect effect of European identity exploration will matter more in actions involving social interaction. Finally, reconsideration of European identity may undermine political participation through mechanisms similar in nature to identification with the EU, but of opposite direction.

Additional objectives of the study include examination of the frequency in which young people participate in different forms of political action, as well as comparison of the demographic and psychological profiles of politically active vs. non-active participants.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 749 young adults from Greece who took part in the CATCH-EyoU project. Of them, 380 (50.7%) were female and 367 (49.0%) were male. Two participants (0.3%) did not report their gender. Their age ranged from 18 to 27 years, with a mean of 22.16 years ( $SD = 1.99$  years). About 9 in 10 reported that they had Greek citizenship ( $N = 672$ ) and/or Greek nationality ( $N = 679$ ), while 63 (8.4%) were born in another country. About 70% ( $N = 527$ ) lived in Athens or in Thessaloniki, 116 (15.5%) lived in the outskirts of a big city, 59 (7.9%) lived in a town or a small city, 41 (5.5%) lived in a village, and 6 (0.8%) did not report their place of residence.

Almost half of participants (46.9%) were secondary education graduates, 86 (11.5%) had finished professional education, 274 (36.6%) had a university degree, 30 (4.0%) had a master's degree and one (0.3%) had a PhD. There is no information available for the education of 7 (0.9%) participants. However, 539 (72%) reported that they were still in education or training. With regards to employment status, 177 (23.6%) worked full time, 210 (28.3%) had a part-time job, 138 (18.4%) were looking for a job, and 216 (28.8%) were not

working and not looking for a job. Six (0.8%) participants did not report their working situation. In terms of family status, 505 (67.4%) participants lived with their parents, 57 (7.6%) with their partner, 34 (4.5%) with friends or roommates, 118 (15.8%) lived alone, and 35 (4.7%) did not answer.

## Measures

The self-report questionnaire used in this quantitative study was devised for the purposes of CATCH-EyoU ([www.catcheyou.eu](http://www.catcheyou.eu)). The items were drawn from a thorough literature review in each of the constructs under study. Short versions of long scales were preferred for reasons of convenience. Back translation procedures were followed, in order to adapt the original English tool to the language of the collaborating country teams. The measures included in this paper are as follows:

**Political interest.** Four items were used to study the extent to which participants express an interest in political issues, e.g., *'How interested are you in what is going on in society?'*. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = 'Not interested at all' to 5 = 'Extremely interested'.

**EU electoral participation.** Two verification ('Yes' = 1/'No' = -1) questions were asked with regards to voting. Those referred to participation in the last EU Parliament elections, held in 2014, and to voting intentions in the future EU parliament elections, to be held in 2019. The aggregate of the two answers was used as a quantitative index of EU electoral participation (valid range: from -2 to +2).

**EU-related civic and political participation.** A list was built on the basis of previous studies, which contained items describing various actions of political participation and civic engagement. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency in which they were involved in these actions during the past 12 months. Principal component analysis has revealed four factors, namely conventional par-

ticipation (5 items, e.g., *'Have you ever worked for a political party or a political candidate?'*); political activism (4 items, e.g., *'Have you taken part in an occupation of a building or a public space?'*); online participation (4 items, e.g., *'Have you discussed social or political issues on the Internet?'*); and volunteering (3 items, e.g., *'Have you volunteered or worked for a social cause such as children/the elderly/refugees/other people in need/youth organization?'*). Participants filled in two versions of this list, one referring to the frequency of their civic and political engagement, in general, and another focusing on EU issues (*'Were any of these activities related to the European Union?'*). This latter version was used for the purposes of the present study. Participants responded on a Yes/No basis (coded as 1/0, respectively). Scores represent the mean of participants' responses to the items constituting each factor of civic and political participation, thus making scores of factors with different number of items directly comparable (valid range: 0-1).

**European identity.** This 9-item scale consisted of three subscales measuring European identity commitment (3 items, e.g., *'I feel I have strong ties with the EU'*), European identity exploration (3 items, e.g., *'I seek information regarding the EU'*), and European identity reconsideration (3 items, e.g., *'My feelings for the EU are changing'*). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. For each dimension of European identity, scores represent the mean of responses to the respective items.

**Political self-efficacy.** This scale measured the perceived influence the individuals could exert on political processes. It consisted of seven items (e.g., *'I feel I have a pretty good understanding of social issues'*) rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. The mean responses of participants were calculated.

**Political alienation.** This scale measured



**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Political Interest, European Identity, Political Efficacy/Alienation, and EU-related Political Participation**

	# items	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Alpha
Political Interest	4	747	1	5	3.53	0.80	.79
<i>European Identity</i>							
Belonging	3	748	1	5	2.99	1.08	.85
Exploration	3	749	1	5	2.69	1.05	.74
Reconsideration	3	748	1	5	3.12	0.98	.70
<i>Political Efficacy/Alienation</i>							
Political Efficacy	7	742	1	5	3.58	0.65	.76
Political Alienation	4	745	1	5	3.60	1.00	.82
<i>EU Political Participation</i>							
Electoral Participation	2	747	-2	2	0.74	1.41	.42 <sup>a</sup>
Conventional Participation	5	394	0	1	0.09	0.19	.83
Activism	4	394	0	1	0.15	0.21	.79
Online Participation	4	394	0	1	0.31	0.25	.71
Volunteering	3	394	0	1	0.24	0.30	.69

<sup>a</sup> Value represents Pearson *r* (instead of Cronbach  $\alpha$ ) coefficient.

the perceived powerlessness of the individuals regarding ongoing political processes. A sample item is 'People like me don't have the opportunity to influence EU related decisions'. The same 5-point Likert scale from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree' was used. Scores are based on the means of responses in the four items of this scale.

## Procedure

The young adult participants were recruited by members of the research team following announcements posted in university campuses and in the social media. Convenience sampling was used. In some cases, the snowball method was also implemented. Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form prior to data collection. No incentive was offered, other than the assistants

expressing their appreciation to participants for their contribution. Data was collected using paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Data collection took place between October and December 2017.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics of the variables under study are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, acceptable  $\alpha$  reliability coefficients were established for all variables, ranging from .69 to .85. Voting in EU elections reached moderate to high mean scores, whereas EU-related political participation was considerably lower. This is especially true for conventional participation and activism, and less so for volunteering and online participa-

Table 2  
 Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Political Interest, European Identity, Political Efficacy/Alienation,  
 and EU-related Political Participation

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Political Interest	1.00									
<i>European Identity</i>										
2. Belonging	.10*	1.00								
3. Exploration	.32***	.31***	1.00							
4. Reconsideration	-.12*	-.19***	.07	1.00						
<i>Political Efficacy/Alienation</i>										
5. Political Efficacy	.41***	-.08	.16**	-.02	1.00					
6. Political Alienation	-.23***	-.27***	-.13*	.24***	-.18***	1.00				
<i>EU Political Participation</i>										
7. Electoral Participation	.26***	.22***	.14**	-.04	.10*	-.15**	1.00			
8. Conventional Participation	.38***	.08	.17**	-.23***	.18***	-.14**	.18**	1.00		
9. Activism	.21***	-.26***	-.03	-.06	.20***	.12*	.01	.33***	1.00	
10. Online Participation	.21**	-.08	.15**	-.03	.20***	-.04	.04	.29***	.22***	1.00
11. Volunteering	-.01	.06	.12*	.01	.07	.01	-.03	.24***	.21***	.10*

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .  $N = 749$  for EU Electoral Participation;  $N = 394$  for EU-related Political Participation.

tion. The participants' responses of political interest, political efficacy and alienation had a normal distribution with a mean of moderate to high level. The mean scores of the three European identity dimensions were moderate to low.

The four types of political participation correlated positively with each other, the size of the respective coefficients ranging from .10 to .33 ( $p < .001$  in 5 out of 6 cases). On the contrary, voting in EU elections had only one significant association of small size ( $r = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with conventional participation. The correlations of EU voting and EU-related political participation with political interest, European identity, and political efficacy/alienation presented some interesting patterns (Table 2). Higher levels of political interest and political efficacy were related to higher scores in EU voting and in all forms of political participation but volunteering. European identity exploration correlated positively with EU voting and political participation, with the exception of activism. A strong sense of belonging in the EU correlated positively with voting in EU elections but negatively with political activism. On the other hand, reconsideration of European identity yielded only one significant coefficient, with conventional participation, indicating a negative relationship. As expected, political alienation was linked to less frequent voting in EU elections and other forms of conventional participation, but it was positively related to activism. The size of these coefficients ranged from small to medium. Finally, political interest correlated significantly with European identity and political efficacy/alienation towards the expected direction, which was a precondition for running mediation analyses.

### Active vs. Non-active Participants

In the analyses involving political participation, only subjects who gave at least one positive response in the list of 16 items of political action relevant to the EU were included,

in order to avoid extremely skewed variable distributions that would violate fundamental assumptions of parametric statistical tests. On the basis of this criterion, 394 (52.6%) young adults were selected for further analyses. This handling raised questions regarding potential differences between EU-related politically active and non-active participants. Indeed, ANOVA findings indicated that those who reported they were involved in at least one political action relevant to the EU scored higher in political interest ( $M = 3.38$ ), European identity exploration ( $M = 2.89$ ), and political efficacy ( $M = 3.70$ ), compared to their non-active counterparts ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $M = 2.44$ , and  $M = 3.45$ , respectively). Though significant, the magnitude of these differences was rather small:  $F(1, 732) = 51.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .065$ , for political interest;  $F(1, 732) = 35.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .047$ , for European identity exploration; and  $F(1, 732) = 28.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .037$ , for political efficacy.

On the other hand, the sociodemographic profiles of active vs. non-active participants did not differ significantly as a function of any of the variables measured, i.e., gender ( $p = .660$ ), citizenship, ( $p = .063$ ), nationality ( $p = .280$ ), country of birth ( $p = .072$ ), place of residence ( $p = .479$ ), education level ( $p = .788$ ), job status, ( $p = .408$ ), living with parents ( $p = .129$ ); living with partner or spouse ( $p = .583$ ), or living alone ( $p = .073$ ).

### Mediation Analyses

The hypotheses involving mediation effects were tested using model 4 of the SPSS macro PROCESS v. 3.00 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), which allows for multiple mediators operating in parallel. In these analyses, political interest was the independent variable and voting/political participation at the EU level were the dependent variables. The dimensions of European identity and political efficacy/alienation were inserted as mediators. The bootstrapping procedure with 1000 samples

**Table 3**  
**Indirect Effect and 95% Bias-Corrected Confidence Interval of Political Interest on EU Electoral Participation (N = 749) and EU-related Political Participation (N = 394)**

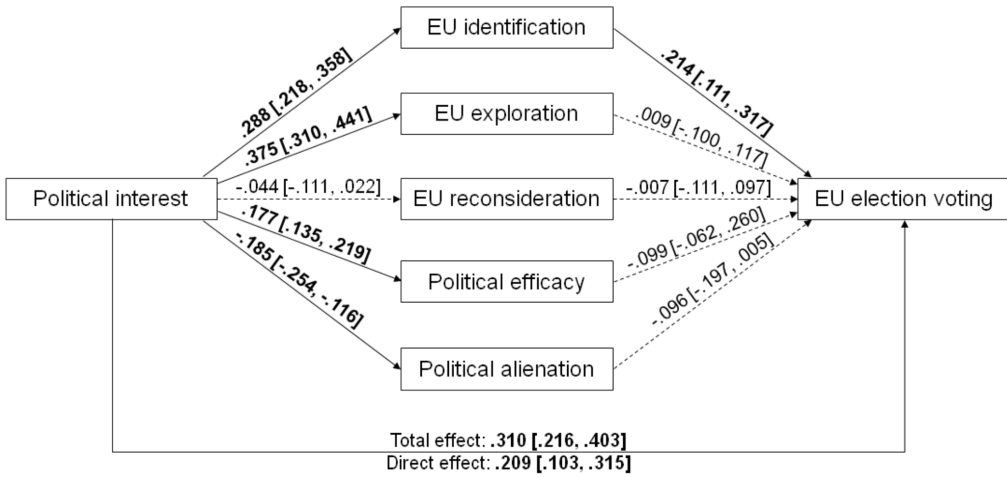
Indirect Effects	Effect	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
<b>EU Electoral Participation</b>				
EU Identification	<b>.062</b>	<b>.018</b>	<b>.030</b>	<b>.104</b>
EU Exploration	.003	.021	-.042	.039
EU Reconsideration	.000	.003	-.005	.008
Political Efficacy	.018	.015	-.010	.049
Political Alienation	.018	.010	-.001	.040
<b>Conventional Participation</b>				
EU Identification	-.002	.002	-.008	.002
EU Exploration	<b>.007</b>	<b>.004</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>.016</b>
EU Reconsideration	<b>.006</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.013</b>
Political Efficacy	.004	.003	-.001	.010
Political Alienation	.002	.002	-.001	.006
<b>Political Activism</b>				
EU Identification	<b>-.014</b>	<b>.005</b>	<b>-.026</b>	<b>-.006</b>
EU Exploration	.001	.005	-.009	.010
EU Reconsideration	<b>.004</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.011</b>
Political Efficacy	<b>.010</b>	<b>.004</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.019</b>
Political Alienation	<b>-.005</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>-.012</b>	<b>-.001</b>
<b>Online Participation</b>				
EU Identification	<b>-.010</b>	<b>.005</b>	<b>-.021</b>	<b>-.002</b>
EU Exploration	<b>.015</b>	<b>.006</b>	<b>.004</b>	<b>.028</b>
EU Reconsideration	.002	.003	-.002	.010
Political Efficacy	<b>.012</b>	<b>.005</b>	<b>.004</b>	<b>.024</b>
Political Alienation	.001	.003	-.005	.007
<b>Volunteering</b>				
EU Identification	.003	.004	-.004	.014
EU Exploration	.010	.006	-.001	.025
EU Reconsideration	.000	.003	-.006	.007
Political Efficacy	.005	.005	-.003	.016
Political Alienation	-.002	.003	-.008	.003

Note: SE: Standard error; BootLLCI: Bootstrapping lower limit confidence interval; BootULCI: Bootstrapping upper limit confidence interval. Significant mediation effects are marked in bold.

was used to estimate indirect effect. This was preferred over other techniques, such as the Sobel test, because it is a powerful yet robust nonparametric resampling method that does not assume normal distributions for any variable (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Confidence level for bias-corrected confidence intervals

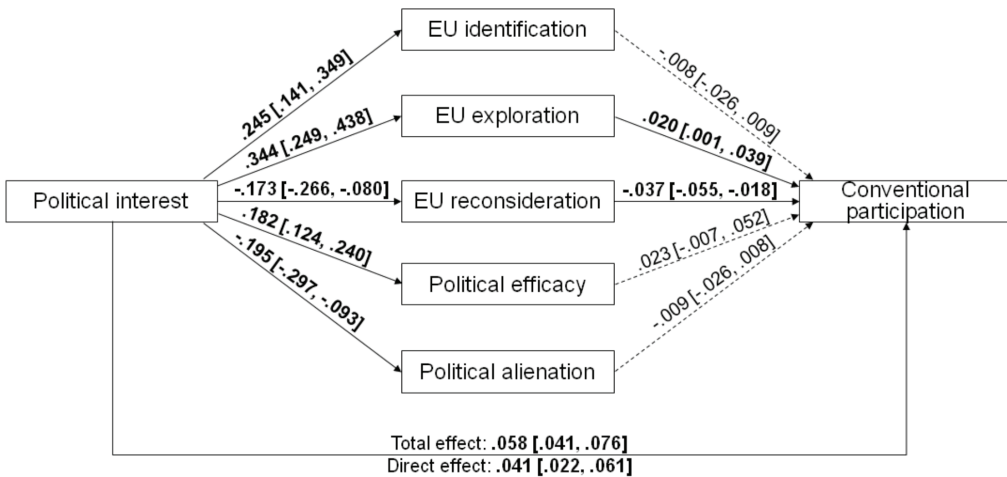
was 95%. Figures 1 to 4 depict the path coefficients of these analyses, while table 3 summarizes the tests for indirect effects.

As expected, political interest was positively related to identification with the EU, exploration of European identity, and political efficacy. Conversely, political interest



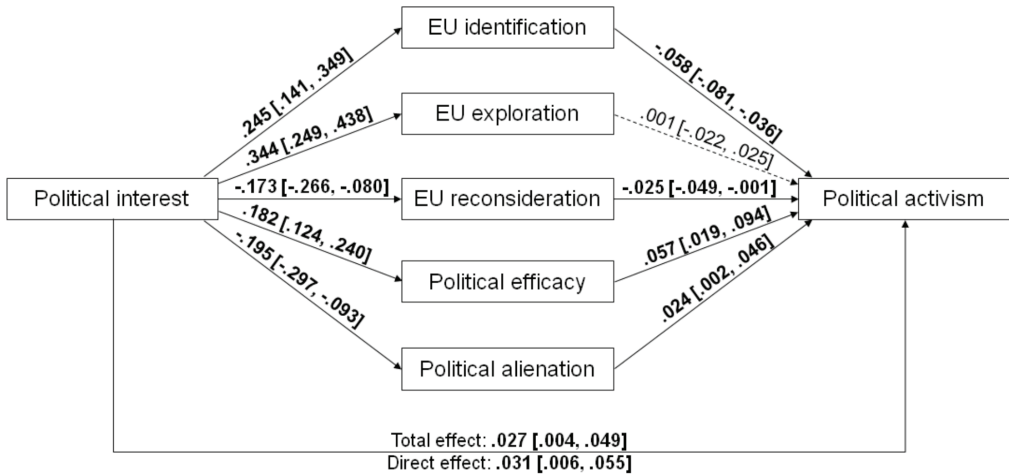
**Figure 1. Mediation of European identity and political efficacy / alienation in the relationship between political interest and EU electoral participation.**

**Note:** All numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients; numbers in brackets correspond to bootstrapping upper and lower limit confidence intervals, respectively. Confidence intervals falling outside zero represent significant coefficients at  $\alpha = .05$ .



**Figure 2. Mediation of European identity and political efficacy / alienation in the relationship between political interest and EU-related conventional political participation.**

**Note:** All numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients; numbers in brackets correspond to bootstrapping upper and lower limit confidence intervals, respectively. Confidence intervals falling outside zero represent significant coefficients at  $\alpha = .05$ .



**Figure 3. Mediation of European identity and political efficacy / alienation in the relationship between political interest and EU-related political activism.**

Note: All numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients; numbers in brackets correspond to bootstrapping upper and lower limit confidence intervals, respectively. Confidence intervals falling outside zero represent significant coefficients at  $\alpha = .05$ .

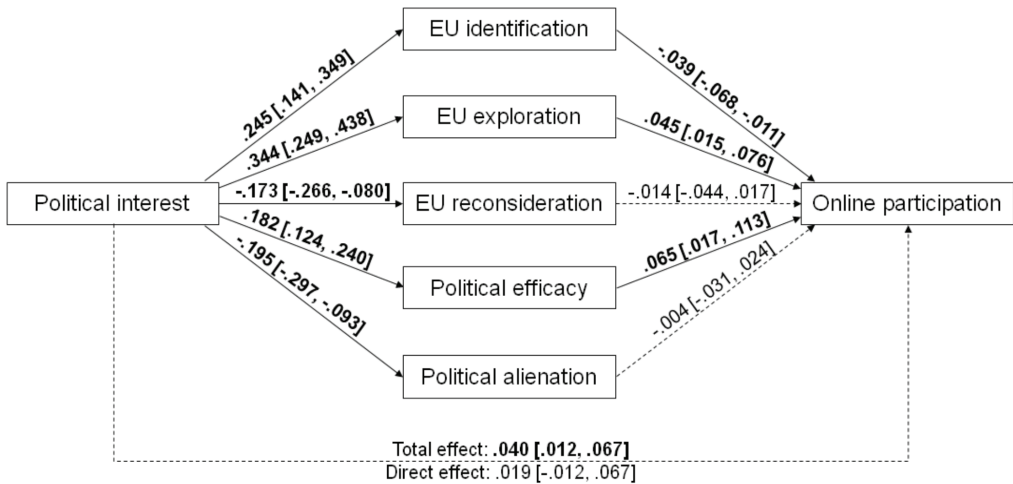
was negatively related to a reconsideration of European identity and political alienation. Furthermore, political interest was related to all types of political participation, explaining a percentage of the dependent variable variance that ranged from a modest 10.2% (for conventional participation) to a poor 1.4% (for political activism).

EU identity and political efficacy/alienation, treated as mediators in the models examined, differentially predicted political participation as follows: Identification with the EU was associated positively with voting, and negatively with activism and online participation; EU identity exploration positively predicted conventional and online participation; reconsideration of the European identity was negatively related to both conventional and activist participation; political efficacy was associated to more activism and online participation; and political alienation negatively predicted activism.

Several significant mediation effects did emerge. EU identification explained 19.9% of

the total effect of political interest on voting in EU elections, the remaining effect being significant, thus suggesting partial mediation (Figure 1). A similar pattern was evident concerning the indirect effect of political interest on conventional participation, which was partially explained by higher exploration (11.7% of total effect) and by lower reconsideration of the European identity (10.8% of total effect) (Figure 2).

The mediation analysis yielded more complex results with regards to the indirect effect of political interest on activism, as there was evidence for parallel complementary mediation in two cases and for competitive mediation in another two instances. Specifically, higher political efficacy and lower reconsideration of the European identity partially explained the above relationship (contributing to 38.6% and 16.0%, respectively, of the total effect). On the other hand, the mediating role of identification with the EU seemed to remove 53.8% from the total effect, as political



**Figure 4. Mediation of European identity and political efficacy / alienation in the relationship between political interest and and EU-related online political participation.**

Note: All numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients; numbers in brackets correspond to bootstrapping upper and lower limit confidence intervals, respectively. Confidence intervals falling outside zero represent significant coefficients at  $\alpha = .05$ .

interest was associated to increased levels of identification with the EU but this, in turn, predicted lower levels of political activism. In the same realm, political interest was related to lower alienation, which tended to increase the levels of activism. This competitive mediation removed another 17.6% of the total effect. The above combined resulted in an increased total effect of political interest on activism once the mediators were taken into account (Figure 3).

A mixed pattern of complementary and competitive mediation was also found when considering the indirect effect of political interest on online participation. Higher levels of European identity exploration and political efficacy explained 39.0% and 29.6%, respectively, of the above relationship. At the same time, the role of identification with the EU was antagonistic removing 24.2% of the explained variance, as identification with the EU was positively related to political interest but negatively related to online participation. Overall, the above mediators fully explained the effect of political

interest on online participation, as it became non-significant once European identity and political efficacy were considered (Figure 4).

No significant effect, either direct or indirect, was found in the relationship between political interest and volunteering.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore the links of political interest with various forms of political participation relevant to the EU, as mediated by European identity formation and political efficacy/alienation of young adults in Greece. Overall, our findings are congruent with the core hypotheses. In this sense, they confirm previous research on youth political participation and extend our understanding of active citizenship at the EU level.

While the mean ratings of political interest and political efficacy ranged from medium to high, political participation reached extremely low scores. This is yet another instance of the

well-documented decline in the involvement of young people with politics, a tendency that raises concerns as to the quality of representative democracy in Western societies (Putnam, 2000). Conventional participation, in particular, that refers to support for political parties and contact with politicians, was hardly traceable, even lower than extreme forms of active protest. In comparison, new types of political action, such as online participation, and acts of civic engagement with indirect or implicit political connotations, such as volunteering, were more frequent, which is consistent with previous findings in many European countries (Cammaerts et al., 2014), including Greece (Theocharis, 2011). In any case, our data failed to provide support for the alleged return of Greek youth into politics (Pantelidou-Malouta, 2015), probably due to the fact that the focus in our study was on EU-related political issues. There is evidence that the harsh austerity measures, imposed in part by the European institutions, during the Greek government-debt crisis have contributed –independently or combined with other socio-political developments– to a Eurosceptic shift in public opinion and the electoral success of Eurosceptic parties (Vasilopoulou, 2018).

On the other hand, political interest did show clear associations with political participation. These were stronger for established forms of citizenship, such as electoral behaviour and conventional participation, and tended to become lower for unconventional and alternative forms, such as online participation, to reach non-significance for civic engagement. It seems that, although already familiar with new types of political action, young people hold a rather traditional idea of what politics is about, probably resulting from their socialization in the family and at school (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003).

Politically active vs. non-active participants differed in aspects reflecting positive engagement (i.e., political interest, identity exploration, political efficacy), but not in potentially

negative dimensions that undermine participation (i.e., identity reconsideration, political alienation). Also, they had a similar sense of belonging to the EU. The above findings suggest that, when it comes to citizenship, non-active does not equal to passive. This is depicted nicely in Amnå and Ekman's (2014) work on the diverse faces of political passivity. According to these authors, the disillusioned citizen holds a profile similar to the non-active group in our study, i.e., low in political interest, political participation, and political efficacy. In addition, disillusioned citizens have low levels of social and institutional trust, negative feelings about politics, and they are dissatisfied with democracy. A more optimistic interpretation for those youth who appear to be non-active is that they are in fact 'monitorial citizens' (Schudson, 1998), which constitutes a critical and observational form of citizenship. The findings for the non-active group in our study also suggest that interventions and policies should focus on enhancing assets, such as political efficacy, rather than on diminishing barriers against participation.

Political efficacy was related to new or alternative forms of citizenship, but not to political behaviour in the strict sense, which was found in previous research as well (e.g., Caprara et al., 2009). Specifically, political efficacy failed to predict voting in EU elections, and conventional or unconventional participation. The notion of personal agency and the belief that individual contributions can bring a visible change in the public sphere becomes more salient in unstructured informal contexts, where political institutions are not directly involved. This is supported by findings on the mediating role of political efficacy on political participation in relation to exposure to news media (Jung et al., 2011), TV watching (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009) and informal interpersonal communication (McLeod et al., 1999). On a methodological note, it is important to identify which component of self-efficacy is relevant to the measures under study. There-



fore, generalized self-efficacy is expected to relate loosely to political issues, compared to political efficacy. Similarly, the distinction between internal (i.e., personal agency) and external (i.e., institutional effectiveness) political efficacy may explain inconsistent findings across studies. In the present research, external efficacy was not included, which might have yielded significant associations with institutional politics, such as support for political parties or voting in elections.

Findings on the role of European identity are inconclusive. EU identification was positively related to voting, but negatively to political activism and online participation, while it was not related to conventional participation. Moreover, European identity exploration explained a significant amount of variance only in conventional and online participation. Therefore, it seems that there is more to the study of identity than identification. Active search for information regarding one's group or even reconsideration of belonging seem to trigger political action, though in different ways. European identity exploration is probably a mechanism of identity building through participation, in line with the assumption of Reicher and Drury (2011) that identities are as much a product as a precursor of collective participation and develop as a function of evolving social relations. European reconsideration explained the pathway from political interest to both conventional and unconventional participation in negative terms. In this respect, it may be viewed as a reversed process of disengagement from the European identity in light of rising Euroscepticism in Greece (Vasilopoulou, 2018).

The weak effect of identification with the EU on most types of political participation but voting in European elections unveils the role of political identity in legitimating European institutions (Cerutti, 2003). As Milana (2008) put it, the notion of European active citizenship is used to legitimize the EU rather than to include diverse groups of citizens. Similarly, in

their systematic meta-review of youth citizenship in the existing literature of social sciences, Banaji et al. (2018) concluded that most key-terms may be inclusive of Europe in their theory and research, but they are not explicit of or specifically conceived around Europe.

In sum, the mediating effects of political interest on electoral participation suggested an identity affirmative role. The association of political interest to activism was promoted by political efficacy and reconsideration of European identity, but it was undermined by political alienation and identification with the EU. Online participation was mostly a matter of agency (political efficacy) and European identity exploration. Finally, volunteering was not related to any of the above. The latter finding implies that self-motivated acts of civic engagement are assumed to have a wider scope that goes beyond direct political connotations in the society of citizens. Some authors suggest that these latent forms of civic engagement may be alternative to conventional participation, which is discredited due to political alienation and low levels of institutional trust (e.g., Ekman & Amn, 2012). In our study, this seemed to be true for online participation, rather than for volunteering. Other researchers also failed to confirm a significant relationship of political identity with non-political service in adolescents, though this path was established for political involvement (Porter, 2013). When reciprocal associations between identity and civic engagement were revealed, these referred to personal identity styles rather than to political identity (Crocetti et al., 2014). Again, measuring constructs at the appropriate level of analysis proves to be essential for valid hypothesis testing. This may also explain the non-significant association between political efficacy and volunteering in our study.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Any attempt to investigate political participation through a cross-sectional design with

the use of self-report scales has some inherent limitations. Causality of relationships cannot be inferred. For this purpose, longitudinal data are necessary. In fact, mutual associations of self-efficacy and political identity with political interest and participation are possible due to the dynamic nature of these constructs in the period of late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Convenience sampling posed another limitation in our study; therefore, generalization of findings should be made with caution. Other factors of relevance to political interest and participation were not included in the analyses. Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani (2018) have proposed a conceptual model of youth civic participation that encompasses three nested levels, namely the individual level (e.g., personality, self-regulation, adaptive history with respect to other developmental tasks), the level of interactions (including family, school, peers, and community life), and the societal level (referring to macro-social variables, such as the political system, the distribution of power, structural barriers, and the media, among others). Such integrative theoretical attempts are necessary to advance our understanding of youth active citizenship and inform future research.

The study of political participation should not restrict itself in identifying old and new forms of political action. It is equally important to focus on the content of participation, which may result in taking a critical stance against our established ideas of participatory democracy, or at least the way it is implemented, i.e., with embedded controversies, asymmetries, and power inequalities. For example, Banaji (2008) points out that the target of youth political actions can be right-wing, authoritarian or violent, thus challenging the definition of civic engagement as de facto altruistic and democratic. Is this kind of participation better than no participation? What are the driving forces of radicalization and extremism? What are the limits of legitimate political acts? How can we promote constructive citizenship? These are

questions of scholarly interest as much as of social relevance in times of global economic and social change.

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# Από το Πολιτικό Ενδιαφέρον στη Συμμετοχή σε Δράσεις Σχετιζόμενες με την Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση: Ο Διαμεσολαβητικός Ρόλος της Ευρωπαϊκής Ταυτότητας και της Πολιτικής Αυτοαποτελεσματικότητας

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η παρούσα έρευνα βασίζεται σε εμπειρικά δεδομένα από την ελληνική συνεισφορά στο ευρωπαϊκό πρόγραμμα Catch-EyoU (Horizon 2020). Σκοπός ήταν η καταγραφή των μορφών κοινωνικής και πολιτικής συμμετοχής των νέων σε δράσεις συναφείς με την ΕΕ και η μελέτη των παραγόντων που τις ενεργοποιούν. Με αφετηρία κοινωνικοψυχολογικές θεωρίες, υποθέσαμε ότι το πολιτικό ενδιαφέρον για την ΕΕ μεταφράζεται σε συγκεκριμένες μορφές δράσης διαμέσου της ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας και της πολιτικής αυτοαποτελεσματικότητας/ αποξένωσης. Το δείγμα αποτέλεσαν 749 νέοι ενήλικες 18-27 ετών ( $M = 22,2$  έτη, 50,7% γυναίκες, 89,7% Έλληνες υπήκοοι, 72% φοιτητές ή ασκούμενοι, 75,5% εργαζόμενοι). Πέραν της εκλογικής ψήφου, η ανάλυση συμπεριέλαβε τέσσερις συνιστώσες της πολιτικής συμμετοχής: συμβατική (υποστήριξη πολιτικών σκοπών), ακτιβιστική (διαμαρτυρία απέναντι στην εξουσία), διαδικτυακή (κοινωνικά δίκτυα), εθελοντική (κοινοφελείς δράσεις). Οι αναλύσεις διαμεσολάβησης ανέδειξαν διαφορετικούς εξηγητικούς μηχανισμούς της πολιτικής συμμετοχής από το πολιτικό ενδιαφέρον. Η αίσθηση του ανήκειν στην ΕΕ οδήγησε σε συχνότερη εκλογική συμμετοχή, αλλά σε λιγότερο ακτιβισμό και διαδικτυακή συμμετοχή. Αντιστρόφως, η διερεύνηση και η αναθεώρηση της ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας συνέβαλαν στην αύξηση της συμβατικής συμμετοχής. Η πολιτική αυτοαποτελεσματικότητα φάνηκε να προάγει τον ακτιβισμό και τη διαδικτυακή συμμετοχή, ενώ η πολιτική αποξένωση έτεινε να μειώνει τον ακτιβισμό. Τα αποτελέσματα καταδεικνύουν τις πολλαπλές νοηματοδοτήσεις της πολιτικής συμμετοχής των νέων αναφορικά με την ΕΕ.

*Λέξεις-κλειδιά:* Ακτιβισμός, ευρωπαϊκή ταυτότητα, πολιτική αυτοαποτελεσματικότητα, πολιτική αποξένωση, πολιτικό ενδιαφέρον, πολιτική συμμετοχή.

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