



Master's thesis

*Youth Political Identity Development – A  
 Systematic Review*

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Are there deviations of the Master's thesis from the proposed plan?

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### **Abstract**

A rapidly changing political landscape along with novel influences on political views profoundly affect the ways in which young people construct their political identities. Research surrounding this topic is scattered and includes a variety of constructs and methods used to examine youth political identity formation. This systematic review aims to synthesize the literature of the past 15 years to illuminate how young people construct their political identities and what factors influence this development. The search yielded 553 papers, of which 24 were included in the final analysis. The majority of the included papers had qualitative designs and were of an average to high quality. The results showed that young people develop their political identities through day-to-day interactions in which they negotiate their identities and evaluate its fit with other domains. This process is influenced by factors such as young people's personal context, their social relationships, and digital environments.

*Keywords:* political identity, identity development, adolescence, emerging adulthood, systematic review

## **Youth Political Identity Development - A Systematic Review**

Examining how individuals develop their political identities is more relevant than ever.

People in countries all over the world are becoming more and more polarized with regards to their political identities (Kamarck & Muchnick, 2024). The increasing divide is fueled by a rapidly changing political landscape in which individuals have to face uncertain economic conditions, as well as widespread geopolitical conflict including, among others, war and violence in Ukraine, occupied territories of Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan (Amnesty International, 2025b; Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNHCR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2025a). These concerning circumstances profoundly affect people's engagement with and trust in political parties, as is visible in rising levels of political distrust (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Related to this, García-Rivero (2023) coined the phenomenon “democracy fatigue” which refers to an increasing global disillusionment with democracy. Indeed, trust in parliaments has decreased in 36 democracies worldwide. As these political systems and politicians lose public trust, it may increase individuals to identify with more extremist beliefs and further increase polarization (Krouwel et al., 2017).

Political polarization is detrimental to society. It is related to increasing politically motivated violent attacks in various countries of the world (United Nations, 2022). Further, political distrust and feelings of uncertainty provide fertile ground for the further rise of right-wing parties (Kutiyski et al., 2019; Hogg et al., 2010). This poses a threat to the rights of any people who are a part of marginalized groups such as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), members of the LGBT+ community, immigrants, and women which are all affected disproportionately by right-wing extremist policies (Farkhari et al., 2025; Verkuyten et al., 2021; Coi, 2024). To reduce political polarization and the risks it poses, it is essential to understand how people develop their individual political identities. This is because political identity serves as the main guiding framework for individuals' political beliefs and behaviors.

As political identity develops in early life (Rekker et al., 2018), it is especially crucial to examine young people's identification with politics at this time. However, currently no comprehensive overview on political identity development exists.

### ***Young People's Political Engagement***

Just as in the overall population, the unstable, polarized political climate also affects young people's satisfaction with and trust in electoral politics (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Young people play a vital role in political participation, as they not only represent the emerging voter base but present a driving force for political development. Still, their participation in electoral politics is lacking, showing a large number of non-voters and disinterest in current events (Silva, 2024; Zhang, 2022). Further, young people join political parties at low rates (Quaranta et al., 2021). Popular belief encourages the picture of the politically apathetic youth, such as in an Observer article which claimed that due to being distracted by social media young people care less about current events (Staehr, 2024) and are influenced by misinformation on social media (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). The development concerns researchers, calling youth "pessimistic, disaffected citizens" (p.2, Essomba et al., 2023).

However, other authors suggest that the situation is more complex than a general disinterest in politics. According to Silva (2024), the lack of engagement occurs because young voters do not feel represented by political candidates who are often much older than them, which is, for instance visible in the European parliament in which over half of the politicians are 51 years and older. Indeed, Cammaerts et al. (2013) found that young people are interested in participating in politics but find that current discourses in electoral politics do not reflect their needs and concerns. Further, despite lacking voting participation, Sloam (2012) found that young people engage in non-electoral politics, such as signing petitions, joining protests and boycotting, to higher degrees than the rest of the population which

highlights that young people are not politically apathetic but may simply participate in different ways than the rest of the population.

Especially during the last 15 years youth have had to deal with a variety of new influences which could affect their political socialization. For one, current youth are in a unique position in which they are growing up in increasingly “heterogeneous and plural societies” (p.3, Ross, 2018) which may mean that young people now grow up with more complex perspectives on political issues. Through an increasingly digitalized world and a “democratization of information” (p.5, Rani, 2025) on social media, young people experience geopolitical events much more closely than previous generations. The most recent example of this is the widespread sharing of information, pictures, and videos of the current conflict in Palestine (Coleman, 2024). However, while young people now are more connected than ever to the world around them, they are, at the same time, feeling more and more lonely (Twenge et al., 2021). This puts the current generation of young people in a unique position in which they have a close idea of current global events but at the same time feel isolated from the people around them. This may make it more difficult for young people to engage themselves politically in traditional ways and foster feelings of helplessness which have become increasingly common in younger generations (Heys, 2024).

Understanding young people’s engagement with (electoral) politics is crucial as party preference is often developed during early life stages and remains stable throughout life (Rekker et al., 2018). A central driving force behind their political engagement is having developed a committed political identity (Gentry, 2017). Specifically, researchers found that political identity is a significant predictor of political knowledge, voting behavior and to what extent someone follows news surrounding politics (Gentry, 2020; Chen & Urminsky, 2019). Therefore, especially when considering the current political climate, it is important to understand what influences the process of political identity formation among youth.

However, the literature on political identity development is scattered and includes various definitions which are not well integrated. Therefore, the paper at hand aims to comprehensively summarize the current research on youth political identity development in the form of a systematic review. To do this, it is first necessary to further clarify the current definition(s) of political identity.

### ***(Political) Identity Development***

Identity is defined as a sense of self that stays the same over time and throughout different contexts (Erikson, 1959). According to Marcia (1980), identity formation occurs through two processes, namely exploration, in which an individual tries out different identities, and commitment, in which an individual commits to a specific identity that suits them. These processes occur in everyday life through interactions with one's environment, on the micro-level (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). In this way, identity may develop through many different micro-level interactions and progress over long periods of time. Further, it was found that processes of exploration and commitment can be highly individual to each person (Van Der Gaag et al., 2015). Apart from the process of identity development, an emerging topic in the literature is that of identity content which differentiates between various life domains in which individuals develop their identity (Galliher et al., 2017). The domain of interest for this particular thesis is that of political identity.

Political identity is defined as “how a person or group of persons think of themselves in relation to the politics and government of a country” (p.126, Bozonelos et al., 2023). Gentry (2017) terms the concept of political ego identity and asserts that those with a developed political ego identity know who they are politically and recognize politics as a salient aspect of their life and are therefore more likely to participate in elections. Developing a political identity occurs through a variety of actions such as self-reflecting on one's beliefs (Gentry, 2017). This is especially vital during youth since there is an increased sensitivity to

political events during one's adolescence and emerging adulthood (Neundorf & Smets, 2017). The process of developing a political identity may include a period of exploring and questioning one's beliefs which then consolidates young people's identities and affirms their subsequent political decision making (Gentry, 2020). Related to this, Beck (1977) highlights a process of political socialization in which individuals gain experiences in the political world over the lifespan which fosters political identity construction. This is influenced by a variety of socialization agents such as family, school, peers, (social) media, as well as political events (Neundorf & Smets, 2017).

When compared to other domains, such as occupation, political identity development can be more complex and varied among individuals. This has two main reasons. For one, political terms and constructs may be understood in different ways over time and are influenced by historical events or current cultural notions. For instance, the definitions of left and right wing vastly differ across countries and over time, such as found in an analysis of 34 different party systems over the course of 75 years (Jahn, 2022). Political constructs are also often understood in abstract rather than concrete terms which makes it difficult for individuals "to identify with [which] therefore can hinder political identity development" (Gentry, 2017, p.23). Secondly, how one constructs their political identity is highly contextual and may, for instance, depend on one's place of upbringing. Feinberg et al. (2017) found that how individuals living in the US identified on the political spectrum depended heavily on whether they live in a "blue" or in a "red" state. These factors illustrate that political identity is influenced by a complex interplay of how political constructs are understood in a given place and time as well as an individuals' personal context.

Political identity is a multifaceted construct involving not only political ego identity but also a variety of related constructs. To gain a comprehensive picture of the literature on youth political identity development, the following constructs have also been taken into

account. The first relevant construct to consider is that of activist identity. Activism is a form of political mobilization which involves protesting, boycotting, and other activities in which individuals speak up for their beliefs in a non-electoral way. Another relevant construct to consider is that of partisan identity which is primarily used in political science and describes an individual's identification with a specific political party (Mayer & Smith, 2023). Lastly, another construct of interest is that of civic identity which describes "how one engages with others in the social, political, and economic structures within their society" (p.1, Viola, 2020). Each of these constructs highlights a different facet of political identity which shows the multiplicity of the construct. In view of young people, some of these constructs may be more relevant than others, e.g. when considering the increased engagement in activism and fading trust in politicians, young people may develop stronger activist identities while neglecting to develop a partisan identity.

### ***Current Review***

This review will explore how young people navigate their political identity development among new influences such as social media as well as the unstable political climate. While there is some literature exploring this topic (e.g. Essomba et al., 2023, Ross; 2018), a systematic review that focuses specifically on (1) how young people construct their political identity and (2) what factors influence this, is currently missing. Further, political identity has various conceptualizations in different fields, such as in developmental psychology, social psychology as well as in political science. A review which takes into account these various constructs presents a valuable addition to the literature to understand how young people develop their political identities in the current political landscape.

### **Methods**

The review at hand adhered to the relevant guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021).

### ***Search Strategy***

The databases Academic Search Premier, Communication & Mass Media Complete, ERIC, MEDLINE, APA PsycInfo, SocINDEX, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection were searched in April 2025 using the following search string: TI "identit\*" OR "self concept" OR "self identity" AND SU politic\* OR partisan OR activist OR civic AND youth OR adolesc\* OR "young people" OR teen\* OR "young adults" OR "emerging adults". Three filters were used to restrict the search according to paper type, language, and publishing date.

### ***Screening Process***

The papers of the review were yielded by use of the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed below. Titles and abstracts were screened using Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), after which the articles' full texts were screened. Rayyan is an AI-based review software in which researchers can read abstracts and full-texts of articles and decide whether to include each article. Although AI-based, human control is still central to the review process in Rayyan. Each article was reviewed manually and no decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion were automated.

### ***Inclusion criteria***

Papers were included or excluded based on five predetermined inclusion criteria. Papers were included if they were (1) peer reviewed empirical papers which were (2) in English and (3) were about political identity development or a related construct (which included civic identity, activist identity, and partisan identity). Further, as the population of interest includes adolescents and emerging adults, papers were only included if (4) the mean age or age range of the participants was between 13 and 25 years old. Lastly, papers were only included if (5) they were published between 2010 and 2025 as the focus of the review lays on how political identity develops in the face of current political circumstances.

## ***Quality Assessment***

### ***Quality Assessment of Quantitative Studies***

To assess the quality of the included quantitative studies, the Newcastle-Ottawa Quality Assessment Scale (Wells et al., 2000) was used. As the scale was constructed for case control studies which is not suitable for the review at hand, an adapted version for cross-sectional studies was used (found in Modesti et al., 2016; Appendix A) from which the scales regarding selection and outcomes were used. The criteria included factors such as size and representativeness of the sample, quality of the measurement tools, outcome assessment, as well as the suitability of the statistical test which was used. A maximum of 8 stars could be achieved. The achieved number of stars will be included in a table summarizing study characteristics.

### ***Quality Assessment of Qualitative Studies***

To assess the quality of the qualitative studies, the Qualitative Studies Checklist by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2024; Appendix B) was used. The checklist includes ten questions regarding validity of qualitative studies which may be answered with “yes”, “no” or “can’t tell”. Criteria include factors such as appropriateness of the qualitative research design and the recruitment strategy, reflexivity of authors, consideration of ethics, rigorousness of the data analysis, as well as the overall value of the research. For purposes of this review, the number of questions which were answered with “yes” will be included in the final table. A maximum of 10 points could be awarded.

### ***Data extraction and synthesis of results***

Along with the quality scores, other relevant study characteristics were extracted from the papers and summarized in a table. This included sample characteristics and sample size, the setting of the study, the mean age or age range of the sample, the kind of data collected, the method used for analysis, as well as a summary of the findings. Since most of the studies

were of a qualitative nature, the synthesis of the results was done through an analysis process inspired by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was done by reading through the articles multiple times and while noting down findings relevant to the research questions. After this, findings were summarized according to overarching themes found among the papers. During this synthesis, great attention was paid to maintaining the nuance portrayed in the individuals papers to reflect an accurate portrayal of the complex process of political identity formation.

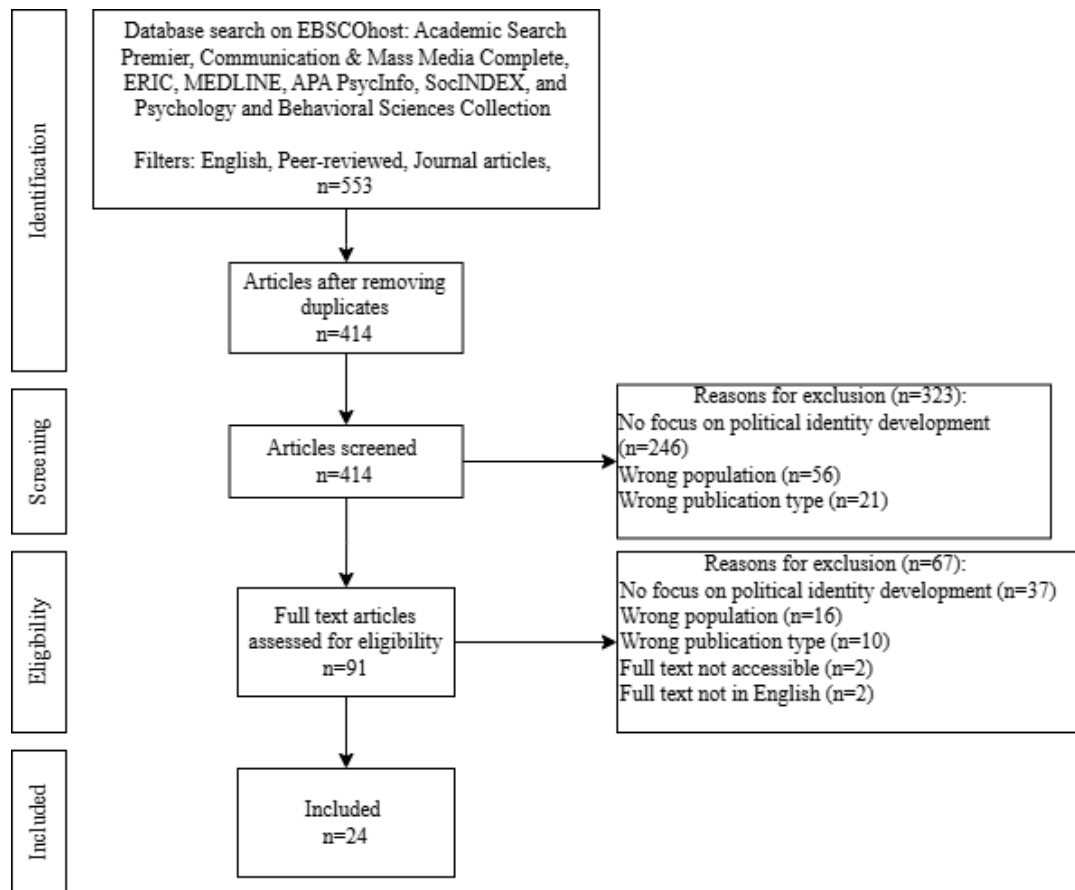
## **Results**

### ***Screening***

The screening process is outlined in Figure 1. In total, 553 articles were yielded based on the search criteria. After removing duplicates, 414 articles remained which were screened for titles and abstracts on Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016). After this, 91 articles remained for full text screening. Finally, 24 articles remained after the entire screening process.

### **Figure 1**

*Flowchart of Screening Process*



### ***Study Characteristics***

An overview of the studies' characteristics can be found in Table 1. The included articles were mainly qualitative articles with only three out of 24 articles having quantitative designs. The qualitative studies used a variety of designs such as grounded theory (n = 3), discourse analysis (n = 3), thematic analysis (n = 2), phenomenological analysis (n = 1), narrative analysis (n = 1), qualitative content analysis (n = 1) as well as other coding techniques or non-specified qualitative analyses (n = 9). The quantitative studies included two cross-sectional designs which, respectively, used Chi-square analysis and hierarchical regression modeling for analysis, as well as one longitudinal study in which repeated measures ANOVA was used for analysis. The studies included a variety of sample sizes from one participant to 2000. The ages of the participants ranged from twelve to 25. The majority of studies (n = 16) were set in the United States. Other studies were set in Asia (n = 4),

Europe ( $n = 3$ ), and South America ( $n = 1$ ). The participants of the studies are primarily high school and university students ( $n = 21$ ). Three of the studies include participants from refugee or migration contexts, while one study looks at youth studying abroad. Further, one study specifically sampled students of color and two studies sample activist youth.

The studies used various identity constructs related to political identity. Out of the 24 studies, 14 specifically examined political identity. Further, eight articles examined the development of individuals' civic identity and two studies were concerned with activist identity development. Notably, none of the studies examined the development of partisan identities.

### ***Measures of outcomes***

The included studies used a variety of outcome measures to examine political identity development. Looking firstly at the quantitative studies, it is visible that they all used self-report measures. While two of the quantitative studies used self-constructed scales to measure political identity constructs, Porter (2013) used the civic identity scale (Beaumont et al., 2006) which is a validated measure. The qualitative studies also made use of self-report measures in various forms such as interviews ( $n = 13$ ), focus groups ( $n = 4$ ), and self-constructed qualitative surveys ( $n = 2$ ). Further, studies included observational measures such as conductance of naturalistic observations and recording conversations ( $n = 7$ ), or collecting writings of participants ( $n = 3$ ). Two studies combined multiple self-report measures and four studies combined self-report and observational measures.

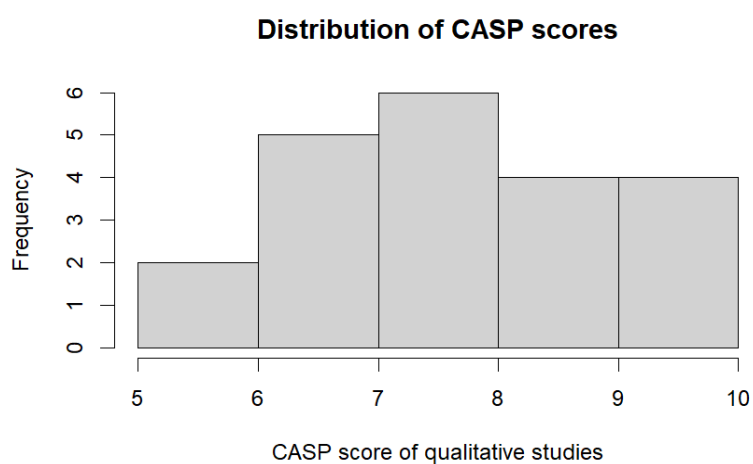
### ***Quality assessment***

In the case of the quantitative studies, an average rating of 5 out of 8 was achieved. In the case of the qualitative studies, an average rating of 8.1 out of 10 was achieved (see Figure 1). Although the studies majorly were of a satisfactory quality, it was noticeable that 13 of the qualitative studies did not sufficiently take into account ethical issues. Further, nine of the

qualitative studies did not sufficiently consider the relationship between the researcher(s) and the participants, such as by not including reflexivity statements in their papers.

**Figure 2**

*Histogram of CASP Scores*



**Table 1**

*Summary of Study Characteristics*

Study	Sample Characteristics	Sample Size	Setting	Age Range or Mage	Data	Data Analysis	Findings	Quality Assessment
Bennett et al. (2022)	Latinx high school students	116	United States (Nuevo South)	N/A	Qualitative survey	Iterative coding process	Participants enacted activist identities by resisting marginalization used their agency to improve the conditions of the Latinx community.	CASP: 8/10
Enright and Toledo (2023)	Students in social studies methods courses	99	United States	18-24 years	Written Memos, class work, observations of classroom interactions	Content analysis and grounded theory	Most students (70 out of 99) identified as personally-responsible citizens. Students found that their citizen identities are fluid and context-dependent. They describe potential conflicts between their professional and citizen identities.	CASP: 8/10
Eränpol (2014)	High school students	42	Finland, Sweden, Norway	15-17 years	Observations of students playing simulation game	Grounded theory	In the simulation game, students expressed their civic identities through dialogue and showed a desire to actively engage with social issues.	CASP: 6/10
Filip-Fouser (2023)	University students who spent time studying abroad in the US	21	Thailand	N/A	Interviews	Deductive and inductive coding	Thai students developed their civic identities through mutual discussion with peers and in the classroom and gained a new perspective on social issues. They used social media for activism. Political discussions with parents were rare.	CASP: 7/10
Fullam (2017)	High school student	1	United States	17 years	Interviews	Narrative analysis	The participant de-emphasized the importance of social media for his activist identity and highlighted family and community experiences, as well as adult mentors as most important in forming his activist identity.	CASP: 8/10
Gomez et al. (2019)	University students*	191	United States	M=19.22	Quantitative survey	Repeated measures ANOVA	Participants affirmed their political identity over time ( $p < .001$ ) and after the candidate lost the election ( $p < .001$ ).	NOS: Selection: ★★★★★ Outcome: ★★☆☆
Hung (2020)	Male high school students	4	United States	16-18 years	Recordings of conversations on Xbox Live	Discourse analysis	The participants deliberated their political identities with their peers while simultaneously trying to maintain their friendships by carefully managing disagreements.	CASP: 9/10
Kadiwal and Durrani (2018)	High school students	19	Pakistan	15-17 years	Interviews	Qualitative analysis (not specified)	Participants were motivated to engage themselves politically and enacted their political identities through pursuing an education and volunteering. However, their agencies were limited due to a lack of democratic justice in Pakistan.	CASP: 8/10

\*only one of the study's samples was included, as the other sample did not fit the inclusion criteria

Study	Sample Characteristics	Sample Size	Setting	Age Range or Mage	Data	Data Analysis	Findings	Quality Assessment
Keegan (2017)	Dominican students at a US high school	5	United States	17-21 years	Interviews, focus group	Grounded theory	Participants developed their civic identities through community engagement, developing social relationships, and through interactions with teachers. Maintaining transnational ties with their families in the Dominican Republic provided another civic resource.	CASP: 9/10
Kristensen and Solhaug (2017)	High school students who are voting for the first time	28	Norway	18-20 years	Interviews	Grounded inductive analysis, qualitative content analysis	Young People used Voter Advice Applications in three different ways. They are either skeptical or use the applications to confirm or explore their political identities. Social relationships played another important factor in participants political identity formation.	CASP: 7/10
Kubow (2020)	Arab female youth (refugees and Jordanian citizens)	92	Jordan	12-18 years	Focus groups	Eisner's (1997) four-stage analytical approach	Participants enacted their civic identities by showing social responsibility and maintaining peace rather than engaging oneself politically, e.g. by protesting.	CASP: 10/10
Liu (2012)	University students	38	China	N/A	Interviews	Qualitative analysis (not specified)	Participants' use of the internet is mainly apolitical and mostly has the purpose of entertainment but some participants use internet to share nationalist ideas and to find similar-minded people.	CASP: 5/10
Lo (2017)	High school students of color	2	United States	M=17	Interviews, recordings of classroom interactions	Open and analytic coding	Role plays and simulations helped participants develop civic identities by helping them reflect on and express their opinions on some political issues. They gained feelings of assurance and confidence in their political identities.	CASP: 7/10
Martinez et al. (2012)	Young people who are involved with prosocial and political organizations	6	Chile	16-24 years	Interviews	Grounded theory	Participants' activist identities were shaped by relationships with siblings, close friends, and organization leaders, as well as by family experiences and personal reflections.	CASP: 9/10
Meyer et al. (2019)	University students	597	United States	M=19.81-20.96	Quantitative survey, political implicit association test	Chi-square test	Young people's political identities were significantly associated ( $p<.001$ ) with their parents' political identities.	NOS: Selection: ★★☆☆☆ Outcome: ★★☆☆
Morgan (2021)	University students	39	United States	19-25 years	Interviews	Phenomenological analysis	Students developed their political identities over time and tried to find congruence between their political and other social identities. Minority students' political identities were influenced by experiences of oppression. Some connected their career aspirations to their political identity while others viewed them as unrelated.	CASP: 10/10

Study	Sample Characteristics	Sample Size	Setting	Age Range or Mage	Data	Data Analysis	Findings	Quality Assessment
Morgan (2022)	University students	39	United States	19-25 years	Interviews	Thematic analysis	Students developed their political identities by means of relevant political events which led them to reflect on their political understanding. They enact their political identities in response to dissonant politically motivating experiences.	CASP: 10/10
Morgan et al. (2017)	Engineering students	20	United States	19-25 years	Focus groups	Thematic analysis	The majority of students preferred to keep their professional engineering identity separate from their political identities. Curricula provided little opportunities for students to develop their political identities.	CASP: 10/10
Porter (2013)	High school students	1578	United States	M=17.4	Quantitative surveys	Hierarchical regression analysis	Political identity was significantly related to traditional and expressive political action ( $p<.001$ ) and was not related to nonpolitical volunteering.	NOS: Selection: ★★☆☆☆ Outcome: ★★☆☆
Ross (2020)	European youth	2000	Various European countries	12-19 years	Focus groups	Qualitative analysis (not specified)	Participants were mostly likely to discuss political issues with parents and less so at school or with peers but wish for more political education at school.	CASP: 7/10
Sierra (2023)	University student activists	4	United States	N/A	Recording of conversation	Discourse analysis	Participants related their political identities to their professional identities and authenticated these multiple social identities in discourse by using epistemic stances.	CASP: 7/10
Vakil (2020)	High school students	30	United States	M=15	Interviews, field notes, class recordings, surveys	Qualitative analysis (not specified)	By actively working on a politically relevant project, participants were able to develop their political and activist identities and gain a new understanding of social issues.	CASP: 8/10
Walsh and Tsurusaki (2018)	High school students	3	United States	N/A	Interviews, classroom recordings, curricular artifacts, field notes	Discourse analysis	Students enact their political identities through certain discourses regarding climate change which are influenced by parents' beliefs and the media. Classroom discussions and scientific evidence influenced students' views.	CASP: 8/10
Wilkinson (2020)	Female university student dance artists	12	United States	N/A	Surveys, interviews	Inductive coding	The dance project allowed participants to enact their political identities in a playful environment. Inhabiting roles that challenged their views on political issues expanded the participants' empathy and understanding of others' points of views.	CASP: 9/10

## ***Findings***

### *Political Identity Development in Micro Contexts*

Of the included studies, twelve found political identity development to be a process which is continuously negotiated in everyday interactions and discussions with other people (Enright & Toledo, 2023; Eränpol, 2014; Filip-Fouser 2023; Fullam, 2017; Hung, 2020; Lo, 2017; Morgan, 2021; Morgan, 2022; Sierra, 2023; Vakil, 2020; Walsh & Tsurusaki, 2018; Wilkinson, 2020). In various contexts, youth deliberated with other people about their political identities which moved along the identity construction process. In this process, hearing multiple perspectives from other people helped young people develop their points of view and, consequently, their political identities (Filip-Fouser, 2023, CASP: 7/10; Fullam, 2017, CASP: 8/10; Walsh and Tsurusaki, 2018, CASP: 8/10). Further, Wilkinson (2020, CASP: 9/10) highlighted the potential role creativity and playfulness have in this process, as students from a dance group were able to reconsider their political commitments upon acting out different roles during their performance.

This process also involved evaluation of the fit of their political identity with various other identity domains. Six studies discussed the complex interplay between political identity and other domains, namely professional identity (Enright and Toledo, 2023; Morgan, 2021; Morgan et al., 2017; Sierra, 2023; Vakil, 2020), gender identity (Kubow, 2020; Wilkinson, 2020), ethnic identity (Kubow, 2020), as well as minority identity, broadly (Morgan, 2021). It was described how individuals evaluated the fit of these identity domains with their political identity and resolved conflicts by adjusting their identity commitments in the various identity domains (Morgan, 2022, CASP: 10/10). Individuals also used other identity domains to strengthen or validate their political identity such as by connecting them to each other in conversation (Sierra, 2023, CASP: 7/10). However, conversations were not the only way this

deliberation could occur, as Vakil (2020, CASP: 8/10) described how participants gained a new understanding of social issues by working on a socially relevant computer science project which helped participants in connecting the professional and political domain, gaining a stronger sense of their political identity in the process. In line with this, keeping identity domains separated resulted in fewer opportunities to explore one's political identity (Morgan, 2021, CASP: 10/10).

### *Political Identity and Social Relationships*

Apart from identity negotiations as described above, participants also developed their political identities more broadly through their social relationships. Eleven studies highlighted social relationships as important influencing factors for the development of one's political identity (Eränpol, 2014, Filip-Fouser, 2023, Fullam, 2017, Hung, 2020, Keegan, 2017, Kristensen & Solhaug, Martínez et al., 2012, Meyer et al., 2019, Morgan, 2022, Ross, 2020, Walsh & Tsurusaki, 2018). The studies named different social influences as relevant such as parents, peers, adult mentors and community influences. The results show that through these relationships young people learned about values such as social responsibility (Fullam, 2017, CASP: 8/10), empathy (Filip-Fouser, 2023, CASP: 7/10), and other values (Martínez et al., 2012, CASP: 9/10) which contributed to their political identities. However, some young people also hesitate to discuss politics with others due to experiences of conflict and disagreements (Ross, 2020, CASP: 7/10). Further, by working together and discussing with peers, young people were able to consider different perspectives and identify with others which contributed to their identity exploration (Eränpol, 2014, CASP: 6/10; Filip-Fouser, 2023, CASP: 7/10; Martínez et al., 2012, CASP: 9/10).

When considering which is the most relevant social influence, there are mixed results. Some studies highlight parents as the most important influence such as Meyer et al. (2019,

NOS: 4/8) who found that young people's political identity correlates with their parents'.

Further, one study finds that young people are most likely to discuss politics with their parents (Ross, 2020, CASP: 7/10). Meanwhile other studies de-emphasized parents' influence and highlight peers as the most relevant group for young people's political identity formation. Specifically, Filip-Fouser (2023, CASP: 7/10) found that discussions with parents may be insufficient, as they do not provide diverse perspectives for the young people to engage with.

### *Context and Political Identity Development*

A few studies (n = 7) discussed that context had an influence on the extent to which the participants could explore and develop their political identity (Filip-Fouser, 2023; Kadiwal and Durrani, 2018; Keegan, 2017; Kubow, 2020; Liu, 2018; Morgan et al., 2017; Ross, 2020). For instance, living in a city where community was less present made it more difficult to develop their political identities (Keegan, 2017, CASP: 9/10). Schools and their curricula play an important role for this aspect. Filip-Fouser (2023, CASP: 7/10), who examined students taking part in an US exchange program, found that the educational environment offered many opportunities for the participants to explore and discuss their political beliefs and attitudes which set it apart from their home environment in which politics were not discussed as much. On the other hand, some schools or teachers did not offer room for political discussions even when desired by students (Morgan et al., 2017, CASP: 10/10; Ross, 2020, CASP: 7/10).

A restriction in educational freedom due to a lack of democratic justice in some countries also presents a challenge to political identity formation. Two studies examined populations in Pakistan and Jordan where young people were offered limited information on political issues in their curricula (Kubow, 2020, CASP: 10/10) or lacked access to education in general (Kadiwal & Durrani, 2018, CASP: 8/10). These circumstances also restricted their

opportunities for political identity development. Similarly, governments may limit young people's opportunities of political identity exploration by means of censorship of online resources such as described by Liu (2012, CASP: 5/10) whose population was young people in China.

### *Digital environments and political identity*

Six of the included studies focused on political identity development in a kind of digital environment such as on social media (Liu, 2012, CASP: 5/10; Fullam, 2017, CASP: 8/10), on voter advice applications (Kristensen and Solhaug, 2017, CASP: 7/10), on online gaming platforms (Hung, 2020, CASP: 9/10) or in political simulation games (Eränpol, 2014, CASP: 6/10; Lo, 2016, CASP: 7/10), with mixed findings. Some studies highlighted digital contexts as platforms for discussion and exchange which aided in forming young people's political identities (Eränpol, 2014, CASP: 6/10; Hung, 2020, CASP: 9/10; Lo, 2016, CASP: 7/10). In the case of social media, it was noticeable that it was mainly used by participants as a tool to communicate or distribute information about activism but less so influenced political identity formation (Fullam, 2017, CASP: 8/10). Indeed, two studies de-emphasized the relevance of social media for political identity, as participants viewed other factors, such as social relationships as more influential (Fullam, 2017, CASP: 8/10) or were generally not interested in engaging oneself in political topics in digital contexts (Liu, 2012, CASP: 5/10). Digital simulations showed more influence as it was visible that young people engaged actively with these platforms and used them to discuss issues with peers and deepen their understanding of certain issues, therefore contributing to political identity development (Eränpol, 2014, CASP: 6/10; Lo, 2016, CASP: 7/10).

## **Discussion**

Among new influences such as a rapidly changing political landscape and decreasing public trust in political institutions, the process of developing a political identity is marked by uncertainty and becomes increasingly a challenge, especially for young people. So far, research on this issue is scattered across various disciplines with different constructs used to describe political identity development making it difficult to draw definite conclusions. Therefore, this systematic review served to synthesize empirical articles surrounding youth political identity formation, specifically focusing on (1) how political identity develops in adolescents and emerging adults and (2) what factors contribute to this development.

The findings of the included studies highlight political identity formation as an iterative process which occurs through everyday micro-level interactions in which young people negotiate and construct their identities. Further, they evaluate the fit of their political identity with various other identity domains and adjust them accordingly to construct a coherent view of their identity. In this process, an important influencing factor is the relationships which young people have with significant others such as their peers and their families with whom they have discussions and deliberations about political topics. Further, context played an important role in the extent to which young people had agency to explore their political identities. Some studies highlighted much room for political identity development provided by discussion opportunities in classrooms and digital simulations while other studies mentioned restrictions due to limited access to education and information on political topics.

While there is much research on identity development of young people, this review contributes specifically to the knowledge of identity in the political domain. It is visible that political identity development follows similar mechanisms of other identity domains relevant to young people. Existing research corroborates youth identity formation as a process led by

day-to-day interactions in which social relationships and one's environment are central influencing factors (Sugimura et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2005; Solomontos-Kountouri & Hurry, 2008). The findings of the review support the generalizability of these factors to identity development in the political domain. Further, it highlights the complex interplay of political identity and various other identity domains. Specifically, the results showed that young people connect their political identities to their professional, ethnic, and gender identities and try to integrate these various domains into a coherent view of self. This is supported by Galliher et al.'s (2017) theoretical model which highlighted the interdependence of various identity domains.

### ***Practical Applications***

The recent increase in political polarization among young people provides ground for the continued rise of right wing parties and threatens the rights of many individuals. While previous research suggests that young people are apathetic towards politics (Silva, 2024; Zhang, 2022), the current review indicates that young people are interested and motivated to engage with these topics, provided they are given sufficient opportunities. Therefore, to effectively combat the issue of polarization, it is necessary to support young people's political socialization by fostering discussions and social relationships in which youth can talk about political issues and explore their positions in an open manner. In the following, some practical suggestions are made as to how to cultivate this.

One main way in which young people's political identity formation can be supported is by employing educational interventions which encourage adolescents and emerging adults to explore their political identities. Research suggests that educational institutions should play a significant role in political socialization, as it has lasting effects on young people's engagement with politics (Keating & Janmaat, 2015). While parents also have a strong

influence on youth political development, political deliberation in the family is often not sufficiently productive and critical (Vandamme, 2023). However, schools can give students the tools and the room to discuss and gain insights from others' perspectives, encourage critical thinking, and give students a more holistic view of political issues. Further, schools can provide students with a diverse environment and opinions from others which may foster political identity formation (Parker, 2010). In line with the findings of the review, teachers should construct classroom discussions in a way that encourages students' agency to explore their political identities. This is supported by Melacarne and Slavutzky (2023) who suggest that (political) deliberations in the classroom, if done in an effective manner, foster feelings of agency in students.

Another way to encourage young people's political identity development is through digital platforms. As youth do not yet have much power in political processes, online contexts present a kind of playground to explore and understand them which can empower and motivate them to further engage with politics. In this way, online simulations support young people's agency and empowerment when engaging with political processes (Lo, 2016). Existing studies support this finding and further highlight that simulations can help young people learn about complex political processes (Oberle et al., 2020) and foster "internal political efficacy" (p.239, Oberle & Leunig, 2016). However, they also highlight that these interventions should be viewed as a supplement to political education (Oberle & Leunig, 2016). Instead, it might be ideal to combine such digital measures with classroom deliberations such as mentioned above.

While digital environments can add much value to political education and identity formation, they also pose risks of radicalisation, such as by providing young people with extremist content (Risius et al., 2023). This is why it is important to add that these digital

measures need to be used with caution and, when used in educational settings, teachers should monitor their students' engagement and provide them with needed nuance in subsequent discussions. When it comes to social media, it may not be possible to prevent young people from being confronted with radicalizing content. Therefore, teachers and parents should make efforts to foster critical engagement with social media content and encourage young people to discuss political topics not just in online but in offline contexts as well (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2025). The present review offers little insight into online radicalisation which is why further research is needed to make more concrete and effective recommendations.

### ***Limitations of the Field***

While some important implications can be highlighted based on this review, some notable limitations of the field also stand out. Firstly, the included studies provide relatively little insight into the mechanisms of radical political identity formation in young people. Recent reports highlight the increasing radicalisation and political polarization of young people (Jones et al., 2023). This trend, along with an influx of politically motivated violence (United Nations, 2022), raise important questions about how young people come to identify with extremist views. Adding to this subject matter from an identity-based lens could add important insights regarding emerging factors contributing to radicalization and how to prevent it. The papers in this review provide no findings examining the development of radical or extremist identities in young people which presents a fundamental gap in knowledge.

Secondly, the exploration of social media in the included studies lacks depth and nuance. Relevant studies primarily focused on young people's active engagement with social media as a political tool. However, young people's social media use is increasingly

characterized by passive consumption, rather than creating one's own posts (Jones, 2025; D'Hombres et al., 2024). This is especially relevant when considering the role of active engagement and agency highlighted in the study of the review. Indeed, as found by D'Hombres et al. (2024), passive use of social media contributes to loneliness rather than fostering connection. Therefore, it is important to study how different kinds of social media consumption shapes youth political identities which is currently underexplored. The emerging influence of artificial intelligence (AI) has also not yet been considered in this context but is an increasingly important issue as research shows that interactions with generative AI may influence political decision making (Fisher et al., 2024).

Thirdly, the samples of the included studies lack diversity. A majority ( $n = 19$ ) of the studies are set in a Western context, 16 of which are set in the United States. This highlights a clear bias towards a Western perspective on the subject matter. As visible in the limited studies considering these populations, growing up in a country which restricts the freedom of expression of individuals may impact one's opportunities to explore one's (political) identity. Additionally, the available studies have not sufficiently explored the extent to which being part of a marginalized group may affect young people's political identity. Additionally, while there is some consideration on how women are affected by oppressive circumstances, the studies at hand fail to consider other marginalized identities such as queer or BIPOC youth who may also explore their identities in different ways than non-marginalized young people.

Lastly, while there are many detailed and high-quality qualitative studies exploring youth political identity formation, the literature using quantitative measures is currently scarce. Further, many of these studies included in this review had small sample sizes with a majority of studies ( $n = 17$ ) having less than 50 participants. These studies still contribute to the understanding of youth political identity, however the lack of quantitative studies with

larger samples creates a disadvantage of not being able to generalize results to wider populations. Adding to this, quantitative studies may offer empirical support to the existing theories in this area and strengthen the credibility of existing qualitative studies. Thus, increasing quantitative studies on youth political identity may offer new perspectives and insights into potentially unexplored mechanisms regarding identity formation in this domain.

### ***Strengths and Limitations of the Review***

The review at hand has several strengths, one of which is the use of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and a clearly outlined search strategy. This makes it easy to replicate the review process if desired. Further, the papers were drawn from a wide variety of databases from various disciplines making the selection of papers inclusive of many different facets of the political identity construct. This has the advantage of leading to a more nuanced discussion of youth political identity formation by providing an interdisciplinary point of view. Lastly, another strength of the review is that, through use of thematic analysis to synthesize the findings, it is able to give a comprehensive and integrated overview of the findings which reflects the complexity of youth political identity development.

On the other hand, this review also has some notable weaknesses. Firstly, as this review constitutes a master thesis, there was only one reviewer screening articles and setting up inclusion and exclusion criteria. This could lead to potential selection bias which could have influenced the extent to which all relevant papers for the review were identified. Secondly, it is visible that there is a lack of papers discussing political radicalisation of young people (e.g. in digital contexts). To prevent this limitation, more comprehensive search terms referring to radicalisation or extremism could have been included. Lastly, another limitation is that grey literature was not considered for this review. While this decision was made to collect empirical papers of a high quality, it also poses the risk of excluding relevant

literature, especially since the topic at hand is a research interest which is, as of now, still emerging.

### ***Future Directions***

While current contributions offer some insight into mechanisms and influencing factors of this process, there is still much work to be done to understand current developments of young people's political identities. Future studies should include more diverse methodologies, such as cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. There should also be a focus on populations from non-western countries which could give further insight into how various governments influence individual political identity formation. Apart from this, it is clear that the current literature does not offer sufficient understanding of how young people develop extremist and radicalized identities. Specifically, researchers should aim to gain an understanding of how radicalized identities are developed in young people and what factors contribute to this development. To do this, studies should focus on populations who are (at risk to become) radicalized. Further, more nuanced explorations of the risks of digital environments are necessary as these are increasingly contributing to young people's move toward extremist identities (Van Wonderen et al., 2023).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this systematic review aimed to effectively synthesize the recent literature examining youth political identity development, focusing both on the process, as well as contributing factors. The included papers found that young people developed their political identities through day-to-day interactions and discussions which were influenced by their social relationships, their personal context, as well as digital environments. These findings highlight the necessity of giving young people sufficient opportunities to explore their political identities such as by increasing their feelings of agency with regards to politics

and by encouraging open discussions in educational settings and at home. Despite these insights it is visible that the field currently lacks diversity regarding the sample populations and study methodology. Further, an understanding of the mechanisms and etiology of young people's increasing political radicalisation is currently missing. All in all, it is visible that young people's political identity formation is an active and complex process influenced by social and contextual factors.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### *Newcastle Ottawa Scale (adapted for cross sectional studies)*

Selection: (Maximum 5 stars)

1) Representativeness of the sample:

- a. Truly representative of the average in the target population. \* (all subjects or random sampling)
- b. Somewhat representative of the average in the target population. \* (nonrandom sampling)
- c. Selected group of users.
- d. No description of the sampling strategy.

2) Sample size:

- a. Justified and satisfactory. \*
- b. Not justified.

3) Non-respondents:

- a. Comparability between respondents and non-respondents characteristics is established, and the response rate is satisfactory. \*
- b. The response rate is unsatisfactory, or the comparability between respondents and non-respondents is unsatisfactory.
- c. No description of the response rate or the characteristics of the responders and the non-responders.

4) Ascertainment of the exposure (risk factor):

- a. Validated measurement tool. \*\*
- b. Non-validated measurement tool, but the tool is available or described.\*

- c. No description of the measurement tool. Comparability: (Maximum 2 stars)

Outcome: (Maximum 3 stars)

1) Assessment of the outcome:

- a. Independent blind assessment. \*\*
- b. Record linkage. \*\*
- c. Self report. \*
- d. No description.

2) Statistical test:

- a. The statistical test used to analyze the data is clearly described and appropriate, and the measurement of the association is presented, including confidence intervals and the probability level (p value). \*
- b. The statistical test is not appropriate, not described or incomplete

**Appendix B*****Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Qualitative Research***

Section A: Are the results of the study valid?

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

Section B: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?

Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?