



# Politicized Social Work Future — A Quantitative Study Comparing Social Work Students' Voluntary Political Participation in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland

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## Abstract

This quantitative study focuses on the political engagement of social work students by comparing the extent of voluntary political participation and the factors that influence this type of engagement among Austrian ( $n=197$ ), German ( $n=2998$ ), and Swiss students ( $n=453$ ). Findings indicate that Swiss students are most engaged in political activities, followed by Austrian and German participants. Consistent with the findings of previous scholarship, the results of this study show that social work students prefer to participate in passive activities rather than in active forms of political participation. The study identifies internal political efficacy, political ideology, political interest, membership, and the country of residence as main factors influencing voluntary political participation among social work students. Along with similarities among the countries, this article also identifies and discusses differences between the three countries. Finally, ideas for future research directions are discussed based on the findings of this study.

**Keywords** Political social work · Policy engagement · Policy practice · Social work · Voluntary political participation · International comparison · Students

## Introduction

This quantitative study focuses on voluntary political participation (VPP) of social work students by integrating and comparing three studies from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. While in other countries — e.g., the USA (Jansson, 2018; Lane & Pritzker,

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2018; Ritter, 2019) or Israel (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015) — the engagement of social workers in policy processes is an integral part of social work practice and education; this type of practice still receives little attention in the German-speaking professional discourse. Previous publications discussed whether social work has an obligation to participate in policymaking efforts (Lallinger & Rieger, 2007; Merten, 2001) and how this obligation can be justified (Benz & Rieger, 2015). Recently, the number of publications on social workers' policy engagement in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland has been increasing (e.g., Amann & Kindler, 2021a, b; Dischler & Kulke, 2021; Klammer et al., 2020; Rieger & Wurtzbacher, 2020). In line with these scientific publications and based on the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014), the professional codes of ethics in the three countries also emphasize the significance of political decision-making processes for social work. This is particularly evident in the Swiss code of ethics, which calls upon social workers to make use of their civic rights (e.g., voting, demonstrating etc.) to influence policies and advocate for a socially just and democratic society (AvenirSocial, 2010, p. 14).

There are different ways for social workers to respond to this call: Gal and Weiss-Gal (2013) distinguish between policy practice as part of their job and policy engagement as a private citizen. The latter is consistent with the following definition of VPP by Verba et al. (1995): “By political participation we refer simply to activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action — either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies. By voluntary activity we mean participation that is not obligatory — no one is forced to volunteer — and that receives no pay or only token financial compensation” (pp. 38–39).

Based on these definitions, social work students are excluded from policy practice because most of them are not yet working in the field, but they are offered multiple opportunities for political participation (Frankenberger et al., 2014; van Deth, 2009), so that they can still support the goals of social work as policy actors (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2014). Students' attitudes towards and the actual participation in politics are of particular interest as they form the future of social work practice. If the profession is interested in promoting social work students' motivation to become politically engaged, the question arises how this can be done effectively. This study contributes to this issue by examining the VPP of social work students in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, the factors that influence their participation, and differences between the three countries.

## Methodological Framework

To address these research objectives, this study draws on the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) introduced by Verba et al. (1995) as a methodological framework. This model states that VPP is mainly influenced by resources, psychological engagement with politics, and recruitment networks (Schlozman et al., 2018).

First, available resources in the form of time, money, knowledge, and skills have an influence on whether and how easily a person can participate in politics. To begin with, many forms of VPP — for example, collecting signatures or preparing and delivering a public speech — require a greater or lesser investment of

time. Moreover, financial support for candidates or campaigns is directly related to the amount of money available. Finally, it is easier for people with sufficient organizational and communication skills to (effectively) engage in VPP. Second, psychological engagement with politics in the form of political efficacy, political interest, or strength of party preference influences the extent to which a person wishes to engage in VPP. Third, the authors identify membership in mobilization networks as a central factor influencing VPP. They assume that people are encouraged or prompted to engage in voluntary political activities by their fellow citizens, for example, in the context of their workplace, in association or other networks and groups. Mobilization networks thus function as “triggering factor[s]” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 273) that encourage people who are still undecided to engage in VPP.

## Literature Review

Since its development, the CVM has also been used and advanced to examine the VPP of social workers (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Hamilton, 1998; Ostrander et al., 2021; Ritter, 2008; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020). However, little is known about factors influencing the VPP of social work students, and not all existing studies explicitly draw on a theoretical model such as the CVM.

The majority of scholarship on social work students’ political participation examines the effectiveness of social work education using pre-post-designs (e.g., Hill et al., 2019; Rocha, 2000). These studies suggest that courses, seminars, and trainings are helpful in increasing the political interest, internal and external political efficacy, and (planned future) VPP and policy practice activities (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Lane et al., 2018; Ostrander et al., 2017; Schwartz-Tayri et al., 2021).

Other studies focus solely on the level of political attitudes and participation of social work students. They show that social work students strongly agree with the political mission of the profession (Krings et al., 2019), are strongly left-wing oriented/liberal (Kohlfürst & Kulke, 2018; Kulke & Schiffert, 2018; Roth & Yollu-Tok, 2017) and are more involved and interested in politics than the general population (Gries et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2018). Like professional social workers (Kindler, 2021a), social work students primarily participate in passive activities that do not require much time, energy, or resources rather than active forms of political engagement (Ostrander et al., 2018; Pritzker & Burwell, 2016).

More recent scholarship has identified factors associated with social work students’ motivation to participate in policy engagement. Consistent with CVM theses, findings from these studies suggest that political knowledge and an understanding of democratic processes lead to more VPP (Hylton, 2015). Furthermore, having a liberal/left-wing political orientation (Shelton, 2006), membership in recruitment networks (Kindler, 2021b; Swank, 2012), or opting for macro-oriented study tracks compared to micro-oriented tracks (Ostrander et al., 2018) have been found to positively influence social work students’ political participation.

While these initial studies shed light on social work students' VPP and suggest approaches to increase their engagement in this type of practice, most of them lack a solid theoretical foundation such as the CVM. Moreover, most studies focus on single factors influencing students' political participation in a single country or even at a single university.

This study addresses the aforementioned research gaps by comparing the political participation of social work students from three different countries. Therefore, the CVM is extended to include political institutions (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015) as another important factor influencing political participation. Austria, Germany, and Switzerland have an expanded welfare state and similar amounts of total net social spending between 24.3 and 25.2% of GDP (OECD, 2019). All three countries are pluralistic and representative democracies with a high relevance of non-parliamentary professional and welfare associations in the policymaking process (Gabriel & Plasser, 2010). Despite these basic similarities, each country offers different opportunities to participate in politics. Accordingly, their populations have been shown to differ in their levels of participation: On a scale from 0 to 1, a representative sample of the Swiss general population achieved a mean score of 0.724, Austrian participants reached 0.662, and German respondents scored 0.561 (Frankenberger et al., 2014). Our study extends the existing state of research by addressing the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent do social work students from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland engage in VPP?
- (2) What factors influence their VPP?
- (3) What differences can be identified between social work students from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland with regard to the first two questions?

## Methods

The data described here were collected from Austrian, German, and Swiss social work students in three separate voluntary, self-administered, self-report online surveys that contained scales and items that could be used for comparison (Gabriel & Vökl, 2005).

### Data Collection and Sampling

The first study is an online survey by Kohlfürst and Kulke (2018) in Austria. For this purpose, a link to an online questionnaire was sent to all social work program directors at Austrian universities of applied sciences with the request to forward it to their students. The data collection period was between December 2017 and January 2018; the total response was  $n = 193$ . The mean age was 29 ( $SD = 6.9$ ), 77% identified as female, 22% as male, and 1% as diverse. A total of 93% stated that they have the Austrian nationality.

For the second study in Germany (Kulke, 2019), an online survey was conducted between July 2017 and April 2018. The questionnaire was identical to that of the Austrian study except for a few country-specific items. It was distributed in cooperation with the expert committee politics of social work of the German Association of Social Work (DGSA) by professors of social work — most of them are members of the DGSA — during their seminars and courses at universities across Germany. With this approach, data from 2998 social work students from 52 universities in Germany were collected. The mean age of the respondents was 27 ( $SD=7.1$ ), and as in the Austrian survey, 77% identified as female, 22% as male, and 1% as diverse. A total of 96% stated that they have the German nationality.

The third data set derives from a study in Switzerland. There, Kindler (2019) surveyed social work students about their political attitudes and political participation. The online questionnaire was made available from May to July 2018 through universities (of applied sciences), student councils, professional associations, Facebook groups, and personal contacts. The sample thus obtained is composed of 453 social work students from all cantons in Switzerland. Their mean age was 28 ( $SD=7.3$ ), 68% identified as female, 31% as male, and 1% as diverse. A total of 97% stated that they have the Swiss nationality.

In order to compare the political participation and the corresponding influencing factors between Austrian ( $n=197$ ), German ( $n=2998$ ), and Swiss social work students ( $n=453$ ), all data sets described above were merged using the Statistical Package IBM SPSS (Version 28). For the overall sample of 3648 participants, the mean age was 27 ( $SD=7.1$ ), and the sample was predominantly female (76%).

## Research Instruments

VPP was constructed as the dependent variable. The instrument used to measure this variable consists of the 8-item VPP scale developed for the European Social Survey (ESS). Participants were asked whether they participated in the listed forms of policy engagement (see Table 2) during the past 12 months. The response options were “yes” or “no.” For the political participation scale, all eight items were summed to obtain a total score ranging from 0 (no performed activity) to 8 (all eight activities performed during the last 12 months).

Consistent with the propositions of the CVM and previous studies, the following variables were constructed as independent variables influencing the VPP of the social work students studied: political interest, internal and external political efficacy, political ideology, and membership in recruitment networks.

The item used to measure political interest was taken from the ESS. Participants were asked the following question: “How interested would you say you are in politics in general?” Response options were very (3), quite (2), hardly (1), or not interested at all (0).

The item used to measure internal political efficacy was taken from the ESS. Participants were asked “How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?” with response options on a 10-point rating scale ranging from “not at all able” (0) to “completely able” (10).

The item used to measure external political efficacy was taken from the ESS. Participants were asked “How much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics?” with response options on a 10-point rating scale ranging from “not at all” (0) to “a great deal” (10).

Two different single-question instruments were used to measure respondents’ left–right ideology. In the Austrian and the German surveys, a 10-point scale taken from the ALLBUS survey was used with scores from 1 (strong left-wing) to 10 (strong right-wing ideology). In the Swiss survey, an 11-point scale taken from the ESS survey was used with scores ranging from 0 (strong left-wing) to 10 (strong right-wing ideology). To make the measurements made with these instruments comparable, we harmonized the values of the 10-point ALLBUS instrument towards the 11-point ESS instrument. For this purpose, we used the linear stretching method. In this method, questions with different numbers of scale points (i.e., response options) are aligned by setting the minimum and maximum response options equal and then stretching all other responses with equal distances in between (Cohen et al., 1999; de Jonge et al., 2017; Singh, 2021).

The instrument measuring respondents’ membership in recruitment networks consisted of two questions regarding participants’ membership in a trade union and the professional association of social workers. The response options were “yes” or “no.” For the analysis, these answers were dichotomized as follows: The group of participants who reported no membership at all (0) was compared to the group of respondents who are members in at least one of the two recruitment networks (1).

## Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28) was used to analyze the data. All data sets from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland were merged into one data set. Descriptive statistical methods were used to answer research question 1 and mean values and standard deviations are reported. To answer research question 2, a linear regression analysis was performed both for the overall sample as well as for each individual country. To answer research question 3, the coefficients of the regression analysis were compared. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether there is a difference between the means of the three groups on the overall VPP scale, and multiple comparison post hoc tests were conducted using the Bonferroni test. Finally, a chi-squared test of independence was conducted to examine differences for each of the eight individual political activities on the VPP scale.

## Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations. First, all study groups are non-probabilistic convenience samples. All surveys must account for possible self-selection effects such as interest in politics or access to the internet. The survey in Germany was mainly conducted in the context of courses to reduce these effects. In Austria and Switzerland, respondents filled out the questionnaire in their free time. Despite these strategies, we

assume that the three samples are not systematically biased. Moreover, the German sample consists of more students than the Austrian and Swiss samples. While not all Austrian and German participants answered every question, the Swiss participants were required to answer all survey questions. Finally, this study relies on cross-sectional self-reports.

## Findings

### Description of Independent Variables

As can be seen in Table 1, respondents have an average interest in politics of 2.09. Austrian students ( $n=194$ ) are more interested in politics than their German ( $n=2924$ ) and Swiss fellows ( $n=453$ ). Participants reach an average internal political efficacy of 4.95. Austrian students ( $n=185$ ) report higher numbers in internal political efficacy compared to German ( $n=2783$ ) and Swiss social work students ( $n=453$ ). Participants reach an average external political efficacy of 4.96. Swiss students ( $n=453$ ) report higher numbers in external political efficacy compared to German ( $n=2687$ ) and Austrian social work students ( $n=179$ ). On the political ideology scale, participants reach an average of 2.51. Austrian social work students ( $n=193$ ) place themselves more towards the left-wing side than Swiss ( $n=453$ ) and German students ( $n=2943$ ). A total of 18.7% of respondents are members in at least a trade union or the professional association of social workers. A total of 36.5% of Austrian ( $n=189$ ), 30.5% of Swiss ( $n=453$ ), and 15.7% of German social work students ( $n=2894$ ) are members in at least one of these two mobilization networks.

### Description of Dependent Variable: Voluntary Political Participation (VPP)

Respondents reach an average score on the VPP scale of 3.16 ( $SD=2.01$ ). There is a significant difference between the three countries concerning the level of VPP ( $F(2, 3505)=69.226, p<0.001, n=3508$ ). Post hoc comparisons indicate that the mean score on the VPP scale differs between the German ( $M=2.98, SD=1.97, n=2858$ ) and the Austrian ( $M=3.69, SD=1.82, n=197$ ),  $p<0.001$ , and between the German and the Swiss ( $M=4.09, SD=2.04, n=453$ ) respondents,  $p<0.001$ . The difference between Austrian and Swiss students is not statistically significant,  $p=0.056$ .

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics for independent variables (M and SD, or %)

| Variable (range)                   | Austria     | Germany     | Switzerland | Overall     |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Political interest (0–3)           | 2.27 (0.65) | 2.10 (0.72) | 1.96 (0.66) | 2.09 (0.71) |
| Internal political efficacy (0–10) | 5.41 (2.40) | 4.93 (2.62) | 4.87 (2.69) | 4.95 (2.63) |
| External political efficacy (0–10) | 4.46 (1.96) | 4.89 (2.05) | 5.56 (2.24) | 4.96 (2.09) |
| Political ideology (0–10)          | 2.04 (1.49) | 2.55 (1.64) | 2.49 (1.80) | 2.51 (1.66) |
| Membership in >0 organizations     | 36.5        | 15.7        | 30.5        | 18.7        |

**Table 2** Comparison of different forms of VPP in %

| Form of voluntary political participation (VPP) | Austria  |      | Germany  |      | Switzerland |      | $\chi^2$<br>( <i>df</i> =2) |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|-------------|------|-----------------------------|
|                                                 | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i>    | %    |                             |
| Sign a petition                                 | 197      | 88.3 | 2909     | 68.1 | 453         | 86.3 | 92.45*                      |
| Sign a citizen initiative                       | 197      | 58.4 | 2998     | 31.9 | 453         | 86.3 | 510.29*                     |
| Boycott certain products                        | 197      | 54.8 | 2918     | 59.3 | 453         | 58.5 | 1.59                        |
| Volunteer in another organization               | 197      | 49.7 | 2904     | 44.5 | 453         | 42.2 | 3.20                        |
| Take part in a demonstration                    | 197      | 43.7 | 2919     | 33.1 | 453         | 47.5 | 41.64*                      |
| Wear/display a campaign sticker                 | 197      | 36.0 | 2906     | 33.3 | 453         | 35.8 | 1.49                        |
| Contact a politician                            | 197      | 26.9 | 2910     | 19.1 | 453         | 37.3 | 79.54*                      |
| Volunteer in a political party                  | 197      | 11.2 | 2911     | 8.9  | 453         | 14.8 | 16.14*                      |

\*  $p < .001$ 

Table 2 allows a comparison of all the individual political activities that together make up the VPP scale. Five of these eight activities differ significantly between the three study groups: Austrian social work students (88.3%) signed a petition more often than Swiss (86.3%) and German students (68.1%) during the past 12 months. Swiss students (86.3%) signed a citizens' initiative more often than Austrian (58.4%) and German participants (31.9%). Swiss respondents (47.5%) participated in a demonstration more often than Austrian (43.7%) and German (33.1%) social work students. Swiss students (37.3%) contacted a politician more often during the past twelve months than Austrian (26.9%) and German participants (19.1%). And Swiss students were also more engaged in volunteering in a political party (14.8%) than Austrian (11.2%) and German social work students (8.9%).

### Factors Influencing VPP

Table 3 shows the results of linear regression analyses identifying factors influencing the VPP of social work students in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland in the overall sample and for each country separately. Controlling for country influence, as shown in the "overall" column, the strongest influencing factor is internal political efficacy ( $\beta=0.31$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), followed by political ideology ( $\beta=-0.24$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), membership ( $\beta=0.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and political interest ( $\beta=0.13$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). These variables are also strong predictors of VPP in the separate regression models for each country. Internal political efficacy ( $\beta=0.24$ , 0.32, 0.29), political ideology ( $\beta=-0.34$ ,  $-0.21$ ,  $-0.35$ ), and political interest ( $\beta=0.16$ , 0.13, 0.16) contribute to the explained variances in all the separate models for Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. While membership in recruitment networks affects social work students' VPP in Germany ( $\beta=0.17$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Switzerland ( $\beta=0.11$ ,  $p=0.003$ ), this factor is not significant in the Austrian sample ( $\beta=0.08$ ,  $p=0.078$ ).

**Table 3** Regression coefficients of independent variables on VPP for Austrian, German, and Swiss subsamples and overall sample

| Variable                    | Austria ( <i>n</i> = 163)  |         | Germany ( <i>n</i> = 2417) |         | Switzerland ( <i>n</i> = 453) |         | Overall ( <i>n</i> = 3033) |         |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------|-------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------|
|                             | <i>B</i>                   | $\beta$ | <i>B</i>                   | $\beta$ | <i>B</i>                      | $\beta$ | <i>B</i>                   | $\beta$ |
| Constant                    | 2.33***<br>[1.16, 3.51]    |         | 1.49***<br>[1.20, 1.78]    |         | 3.07***<br>[2.37, 3.78]       |         | 2.55***<br>[2.26, 2.85]    |         |
| Political interest          | 0.48*<br>[0.04, 0.92]      | .16     | 0.35***<br>[0.24, 0.45]    | .13     | 0.50***<br>[0.22, 0.78]       | .16     | 0.38***<br>[.28, 0.47]     | .13     |
| Internal political efficacy | 0.18**<br>[0.06, 0.29]     | .24     | 0.24***<br>[0.21, 0.27]    | .32     | 0.22***<br>[0.15, 0.28]       | .29     | 0.24***<br>[0.21, 0.26]    | .31     |
| External political efficacy | 0.04<br>[-0.08, 0.17]      | .05     | 0.03<br>[0.00, 0.06]       | .03     | -0.04<br>[-0.10, 0.03]        | -.04    | 0.02<br>[-0.01, 0.05]      | .02     |
| Political ideology          | -0.43***<br>[-0.61, -0.25] | -.34    | -0.25***<br>[-0.29, -0.21] | -.21    | -0.39***<br>[-0.48, -0.30]    | -.35    | -0.28***<br>[-0.32, -0.25] | -.24    |
| Membership                  | 0.28<br>[-0.23, 0.80]      | .08     | 0.87***<br>[0.70, 1.05]    | .17     | 0.50**<br>[0.18, 0.83]        | .11     | 0.77***<br>[0.62, 0.92]    | .16     |
| Austria                     | -                          | -       | -                          | -       | -                             | -       | -0.65***<br>[-0.94, -0.36] | -.07    |
| Germany                     | -                          | -       | -                          | -       | -                             | -       | -0.95***<br>[-1.12, -0.79] | -.19    |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>       | .31                        |         | .31                        |         | .39                           |         | .34                        |         |

\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001

## Discussion

On the VPP scale consisting of eight political activities (range 0–8), Austrian social work students score an average of 3.69, German students score 2.98, and Swiss students score 4.09. Consistent with the findings of previous scholarship (Kindler & Ostrander, 2022; Ostrander et al., 2018; Pritzker & Burwell, 2016), the findings of this study show that social work students tend to prefer passive activities that do not require much time, energy, or resources rather than active forms of political engagement. There are significant differences not only in the overall VPP scale but also in signing a petition and a citizen initiative, participating in a demonstration, contacting a politician, and volunteering in a political party.

The study identifies internal political efficacy, political ideology, political interest, membership, and the country of residence as factors influencing social work students' VPP. In the separate regression models for each country, internal political efficacy, political ideology, and political interest contribute similarly to the explained variances. While membership in recruitment networks affects social work students' VPP in Germany and Switzerland, this factor is not significant in the Austrian sample. External political efficacy also does not significantly influence participants' VPP in all three countries.

The individual-level variables examined are able to explain an overall variance in social work students' VPP between 31 and 39%. Also in the overall model, the standardized beta coefficients for individual factors are much stronger than those of the countries' dummy variables. However, there are other influencing factors that are not captured in this study, such as institutional and organizational settings. Thus, further research that more fully incorporates structural factors is needed. For students, higher education institutions provide essential contexts for the development of VPP. These contexts and facilitation structures may differ from university to university. In terms of future engagement of social work students on their professional route, the development of political awareness and political efficacy should be strengthened through appropriate curricula (e.g., Burzlaff, 2021; Weiss-Gal, 2016). More systematic involvement of professional and political social work groups, such as young chapters of professional social work associations, at universities could motivate students to become political actors.

On the structural level, the comparison between the three countries shows that political institutions that promote VPP and a culture of participation, as in Switzerland, also stimulate social work students' actual VPP. This is particularly evident in direct democratic forms of VPP, such as signing petitions, referendums, and initiatives, which are much more prevalent in Switzerland than in Austria and Germany. However, when focusing on forms of participation that are less dependent on institutional frameworks (e.g., product boycott, wearing stickers), the differences between the three countries are much smaller. As the trend towards more and more diverse forms of VPP continues and deliberative forms such as citizens' assemblies or advisory boards have become increasingly established worldwide (OECD, 2020) and especially in Germany in recent years (Landwehr, 2020), social work students as

well as practitioners should take advantage of these growing opportunities of VPP to further advance social work goals at the political level.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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