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Youth Political Culture in the European Union: Welfare Institutions, Political Trust, and Participation

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Abstract

Youth policies in Europe have long aimed to enhance political, social, and economic inclusion. Yet young people remain vulnerable across key welfare dimensions, which can delay their transitions to adulthood and full citizenship. This study examines the political culture as shaped by trust in political and welfare-state institutions, interpersonal and social trust, and political engagement. It draws on data from the European Social Survey (2002–2023) covering the EU-28 countries, with a specific focus on young adults aged 18–29. A theory-driven hierarchical multiple regression was used, entering welfare state factors in Model 1; interpersonal, social, and individual characteristics in Model 2; and political power and activism variables in Model 3, all to explain trust in political institutions. The results show that satisfaction with welfare-state institutions is the strongest predictor of political trust, explaining 40.6% of the variance. Despite a low level of formal political participation, the findings indicate that structural and social factors—welfare satisfaction, interpersonal and social trust, and education—play a more substantial role in shaping youth political trust than direct participation. Overall, the results highlight that youth political culture is multidimensional and shaped not only by formal democratic engagement but also by institutional performance and social organisation.

Keywords

political culture; political trust; welfare institutions; youth

1. Introduction

As shown in the literature, the working-age population has traditionally been both the primary beneficiary and principal contributor to the modern Western welfare state through taxation and social insurance (Baldwin, 1990; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Taylor-Gooby, 2008; Titmuss, 2018, pp. 17–30). By contrast, young

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people occupy a structurally marginal position within this contribution–worth paradigm. Commonly framed as dependents rather than contributors, youth are often positioned at the periphery of welfare states' logics, despite facing increasing socioeconomic insecurity. Across EU countries, social policy reforms concerning benefit adequacy, eligibility, and coverage display substantial age-related variation, and young people remain difficult to identify as a distinct category within social assistance and benefit systems. This institutional ambiguity has become more consequential as welfare states struggle to confront new social risks—including youth poverty, income inequality, precarious employment, and delayed transitions to adulthood. These challenges are often viewed as signs of institutional inertia, path dependency, or limited adaptive capacity (Chevalier, 2016; Garritzmann, 2023; Lauri et al., 2025). At the same time, comparative welfare state research has increasingly moved beyond static regime typologies. Early scholarship centred on "decommodification" as a core indicator of social rights (Esping-Andersen, 1990), but subsequent work has expanded the analytical focus toward broader social and political outcomes, including gender equality, poverty, intergenerational justice, and—critically for this study—political trust and civic engagement. Empirical studies demonstrate that welfare regimes are dynamic policy configurations shaped by crises, reforms, and political conflict rather than fixed institutional models. In this vein, comparative research shows that social-democratic regimes, characterised by universalism and redistribution, tend to generate higher levels of institutional trust and civic participation (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005), while liberal regimes—relying more heavily on market allocation—are associated with lower trust and weaker perceptions of fairness. Conservative-corporatist regimes yield more heterogeneous outcomes, often conditioned by social status and group membership (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

Despite these advances, the specific position of young people within welfare regimes remains under-theorised in relation to political attitudes and culture. The concept of "youth welfare citizenship regimes" (Chevalier, 2016, 2019; Lauri et al., 2025) represents an important step forward by integrating (de)commodification and (de)familialization to explain cross-national variation in youth transition to adulthood. Using European Social Survey (ESS) data, Chevalier (2019) demonstrates that political trust among young people varies systematically with institutional arrangements across Europe. More inclusive and individualised welfare regimes are associated with higher political trust, highlighting the role of welfare structures in shaping institutional confidence. While this framework effectively captures school-to-work transitions, it pays less attention to the broader political culture through which young people interpret welfare institutions, evaluate fairness, and develop orientations toward participation and citizenship.

This omission is consequential, as structural fragility affects youth material well-being, their perceptions of legitimacy, trust in political institutions, and willingness to engage. Political culture provides a valuable lens for understanding these processes, encompassing shared orientations toward authority, solidarity, and participation, shaped by historical legacies, institutions, and socialisation. The aim of this study is to examine political culture as a multi-level phenomenon that links individual orientations, social embeddedness, and welfare institutional contexts.

Youth welfare regimes do not merely allocate resources; they also convey normative expectations about inclusion, responsibility, and citizenship. As a result, variations in welfare regime design and performance are expected to shape how young people interpret their social position, evaluate public institutions, and decide whether political engagement is meaningful or worthwhile. Exploring the intersection between political culture and youth welfare regimes, therefore, allows the study to assess how structural vulnerabilities

associated with youth—such as labour market insecurity and delayed transitions to adulthood—translate into cross-national differences in political trust, participation, and support for welfare policies across Europe.

2. State of the Art: Political Culture and Youth Welfare Regimes

In the 1950s, Almond (1956) coined the term "political culture." Over subsequent decades, this theoretical framework was further developed by Almond and Verba (1963), who argued that every political system is embedded in a specific pattern of orientations toward political action, distinguishing between parochial, subject, and participant roles. Their notion of civic culture, rooted in the post-war stability of Anglo-Saxon democracies, emphasised political awareness, participation, and loyalty to democratic institutions. Central to this framework is the idea of an allegiant participant culture, in which citizens combine engagement with diffuse institutional trust—a generalised confidence in political institutions that extends beyond short-term political outcomes. Such trust is seen as essential for democratic legitimacy and system stability, sustaining compliance, acceptance of authority, and support for representative governance even during periods of political dissatisfaction (Almond & Verba, 1963). In this sense, the framework aligns with broader theories of democratic stability, including Easton's (1975) concept of diffuse support and Eckstein's (1988) emphasis on cultural–institutional congruence.

In the more recent reassessment debates over declining political trust in advanced democracies, some have called into question the idea that high levels of institutional confidence are a necessary condition for democratic functioning. While early interpretations framed declining trust as a crisis of democracy, later research suggests that scepticism and critical orientations may coexist with, or even enhance, democratic accountability. Furthermore, the expansion of systematic public opinion research in less developed and transition democracies undermines the sharp dichotomy between civic and parochial cultures. Citizens in these societies often display substantial political awareness and normative commitments to democracy, even when political participation levels are lower or institutions are weak (Dalton & Shin, 2014; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that political and civic culture should be understood less as a fixed prerequisite for democracy and more as a dynamic, context-dependent set of orientations that interact with institutional performance and historical experience—an interpretation that refines rather than fully rejects Almond and Verba's original insights. To account for these shifts, it is essential to adopt a value-change perspective that foregrounds generational transformation. Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 2009) argue that social modernisation and rising levels of human development have fostered a new type of democratic citizen: one that strongly endorses democratic principles while remaining critical of political elites and institutions.

While this foundation assumes that stable institutions shape orientations across generations, this approach has several limitations when applied to the political culture of youth. Many young people today come of age in contexts of structural uncertainty characterised by economic crises, welfare retrenchment, climate anxiety, and rapid technological change. These factors fundamentally alter how political trust, participation, and legitimacy are experienced. Among younger cohorts, this critical orientation does not signify democratic disengagement but reflects a reconfiguration of political trust—away from deferential institutional confidence and toward conditional, performance-based institutional support (Chevalier, 2019; Lauri et al., 2025). Moreover, globalisation and expanded access to education and digital media have diffused political awareness and cosmopolitan values across both advanced and developing societies.

From a youth welfare regimes perspective, political culture should be understood not merely as a stable set of values, but as an outcome of historically accumulated patterns of governance and institutional performance, shaped by the design and functioning of political and welfare institutions (Eatwell, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This framework explains how institutional arrangements shape young people's experiences of inclusion, protection, and recognition. It also highlights the limits of regime-based explanations: Welfare generosity and stable institutions often only partly offset new social risks, such as labour market insecurity, unemployment, and rising inequality, that disproportionately affect younger generations (Dauderstädt, 2025; de Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Giustozzi & Gangl, 2021). Consequently, youth political culture cannot be fully explained by aggregate regime characteristics alone but must be understood in relation to how welfare institutions condition young people's everyday encounters with risk, uncertainty, and social citizenship.

A complete understanding requires analysing political culture at multiple levels. First, political trust in institutions. Second, this includes political trust in governing institutions, as well as trust in welfare state provision, such as public services and social security systems, which together shape citizens' perceptions of state responsibility and legitimacy. At the individual level, welfare citizenship is further conditioned by social organisation, civic engagement, and broader value orientations that influence how citizens relate to both political and welfare institutions. Garritzmann (2023) demonstrates that institutional trust facilitates public support for welfare reform by linking welfare provision to key components of social capital—namely trust, shared norms, and social networks—within different welfare regimes. Notably, even in contexts of declining electoral participation or low support for political parties, citizens often continue to support democracy as a form of government, particularly in established welfare regimes (Garritzmann et al., 2021; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This underscores the importance of cross-level linkages, as aggregate democratic outcomes depend on individual-level values such as trust and participation

Youth political orientations tend to be less institutionally embedded and more strongly shaped by contextual and generational experiences, including crisis-driven governance, transnational activism, and digitally mediated forms of mobilisation. At the individual level, political culture research has long emphasised the role of identities, group affiliations, and social norms in fostering trust and participation, often in dialogue with rational choice perspectives that stress instrumental motivations for collective action presented by Olson in 1965 (Udehn, 1993). Almond and Verba (1963) linked political trust and participation to integration within stable social structures, including class, religion, family, and voluntary associations. For younger generations, however, these traditional social anchors are often weaker, more fragmented, or delayed due to extended transitions to adulthood and increasing social mobility (Giddens, 1994). Political identities are therefore more likely to form through fluid, issue-based, and peer-oriented networks rather than through long-term organisational membership. This shift highlights a limitation of classical civic culture frameworks, which tend to underestimate the importance of horizontal, network-based modes of participation that are central to contemporary youth political culture. In this respect, Inglehart's (2007) theory of postmaterialist and self-expression values offers greater analytical leverage for understanding youth participation. Younger cohorts consistently display stronger support for autonomy, diversity, and emerging political issues, which translate into new repertoires of engagement that emphasise voice, visibility, and moral expression over formal institutional participation. These values redefine the meaning and practice of welfare citizenship in late-modern societies, linking political culture more closely to questions of inclusion, recognition, and social justice.

If we agree that a civic culture is the product of an extended period of stable and good government and the specific nature of its structures (Eatwell, 1997), the political dimension reflects the trust in the welfare state institutions, hereafter referred to as trust in political institutions. It has been widely acknowledged as both a central determinant of political culture and an important factor influencing welfare state regimes, including those that affect youth (Chevalier, 2019; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005; Newton, 2001). Trust in political institutions can be conceptualised as citizens' confidence in political institutions to act in the public interest, fairly, and effectively (Zmerli & Newton, 2008). It reflects not only short-term evaluations of political performance but also deeper, institutionalised expectations about the legitimacy and accountability of democratic systems (Norris, 2011).

Within the framework of political culture theory (Almond & Verba, 1963), political trust is an integral indicator of the institutional dimension of political culture, reflecting citizens' orientations towards authority, governance, and institutions. Trust in the legal system, police, politicians, political parties, and parliaments, as operationalised in the ESS, captures the multidimensionality of institutional trust. This dimension has also been empirically linked to broader patterns of political participation, regime satisfaction, and democratic resilience (Chevalier, 2019; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Newton, 2001). Drawing on welfare regime theory, cross-national EU evidence, and political culture research, this analysis connects macro-level welfare institutions with young people's trust, political orientations, and patterns of participation. By integrating classical civic culture theory with generational value change and youth welfare regime perspectives, it captures how contemporary youth political culture is shaped by both institutional contexts and evolving forms of political engagement. This synthesis provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the diversity and dynamics of youth political participation in Europe today.

2.1. Linking Trust in Political Institutions With the Welfare State

From the welfare regime perspective, trust in welfare state institutions plays a dual role. First, as argued by Rothstein and Stolle (2008), the quality of institutions and the universality of welfare arrangements are key drivers of generalised trust, reinforcing the trust–welfare nexus. Trust in governmental institutions reflects the development of democratic institutions and is closely linked to interpersonal trust and its broader effects on democratisation, citizenship, and social cohesion (Newton, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000). Countries with more universalistic and egalitarian welfare regimes tend to sustain higher levels of political trust because they reduce inequality and strengthen perceptions of fairness (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). Youth, as a particularly vulnerable and transitional group, are strongly affected by institutional credibility and welfare guarantees, which in turn shape their long-term orientations toward political systems (Chevalier, 2019; Chevalier & Loncle, 2021).

The theoretical framework of youth welfare regimes underscores the importance of addressing welfare dimensions that reflect key areas of social policy intervention, such as social protection, access to education, labour market participation, housing, and health. These dimensions directly influence young people's transitions from school to work and continue to shape their broader life trajectories (Chevalier, 2016; Lauri et al., 2025). Garritzmann (2023) finds a strong link between satisfaction with government and the capacity to undertake social investment reforms. Countries with higher trust are more capable of implementing welfare expansion, while those with low trust struggle to do so. A study by Lühiste (2014) finds that higher social protection expenditure correlates with greater satisfaction with democracy. Additionally, Mewes

(2024) shows that increases in universal (non-means-tested) welfare spending are positively associated with growing social trust, whereas means-tested spending often correlates with lower trust.

The effect of economics is strongly related to general welfare provision, employment opportunities, and incomes. Evidence indicates that greater income inequality tends to erode political trust. One mechanism is the perceived unfairness of inequality, which undermines confidence in institutions (Bobzien, 2023). Education has long been considered a key determinant of political culture, shaping citizens' cognitive skills, evaluative capacity, and engagement with political institutions. For youth, the connection to educational institutions is especially strong, making education central to their socialisation into citizenship and welfare state structures. However, the relationship between education and political trust is not consistent.

Finally, on the welfare dimension, it is important to emphasise the relationship between health care provision and trust in institutions. Cammett et al. (2015), using ESS data, found that greater reliance on private health care financing is associated with lower trust in government, particularly in more unequal societies. During the Covid-19 pandemic, studies in Germany and Italy confirmed that trust in the healthcare system—its fairness, performance, and crisis response—was positively linked to generalised political trust, while lower trust in health institutions correlated with vaccine hesitancy and susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs (Busemeyer, 2022; Scacchi et al., 2024). Similar patterns were observed in Sweden, where trust in the health system was generally high but weaker among younger people, women, immigrants, and the economically vulnerable. Overall, these findings suggest that health services not only influence perceptions of system performance but also play a crucial role in shaping broader political trust (Baroudi et al., 2022). Accordingly:

> Hypothesis 1: Higher satisfaction with welfare state institutions (social protection, economy, education, healthcare, and public services) is associated with greater political trust among youth.

There are several indicators in ESS that can be used to confirm the functioning of the welfare state in the interest of citizens. Specifically, countries and individuals reporting better performance or higher satisfaction with welfare provision are expected to exhibit stronger generalised political trust, whereas perceived deficiencies, inequality, or reliance on means-tested or privatised services are expected to correlate with lower trust. Education and healthcare are central components of this relationship, as they both shape young people's socialisation into political and welfare structures and serve as tangible indicators of government performance.

2.2. Linking Trust in Political Institutions With Interpersonal and Social Trust

Most often, it is rather difficult to understand the low political participation of youth without understanding the historical or national context. Thus, there are more models that acknowledge the importance of individualised interpersonal engagement and participation behaviours. Young people in this analysis are defined as a distinctive group in their participation and are thus interesting to analyse. The social dimension, measured through interpersonal trust and active social participation, is theoretically connected to the effectiveness and legitimacy of welfare regimes and to the way young people experience citizenship. Welfare state literature emphasises that the effectiveness of social policies is not solely a function of institutional provision but also of societal trust and social cohesion, which facilitate compliance with rules, redistribution, and collective problem-solving (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). High levels

of interpersonal trust and civic engagement have been associated with stronger support for redistributive policies and more effective implementation of welfare programs.

As previously mentioned, from a political culture perspective, welfare regimes shape citizens' normative orientations by influencing expectations about reciprocity, fairness, and collective responsibility. In a social-democratic welfare regime, high institutional trust tends to reinforce interpersonal trust, fostering social solidarity and cohesive civic networks. In contrast, lower institutional trust may be associated with weaker interpersonal trust, reflecting fragmented social networks and lower engagement in collective welfare practices (Daniele & Geys, 2015). Thus, analysing interpersonal and social trust allows for testing the personal trust–welfare–culture nexus, examining how institutional performance and societal perceptions mutually reinforce each other to shape young people's experiences and engagement in welfare regimes. Accordingly:

> Hypothesis 2: Higher levels of interpersonal trust and engagement in social organisation are positively associated with political trust in institutions among youth.

Specifically, young people who report greater trust in others, stronger perceptions of fairness and willingness to help, higher educational attainment, and more active participation in social or religious networks are expected to exhibit higher trust in political institutions. This relationship reflects the mutually reinforcing nexus between social cohesion, civic engagement, and institutional legitimacy, whereby stronger social organisation and interpersonal trust support both welfare compliance and broader political trust.

2.3. Linking Trust in Political Institutions With Political Activism

The concept of political participation encompasses voluntary activities performed by individuals in their role as citizens, through which they seek to influence political decisions, including both conventional and unconventional forms (van Deth, 2021). These elements capture different analytical dimensions of participation, namely its actors (individual citizens), its normative character (voluntary action), and its forms (types of participatory activities). In its earlier, narrow understanding, political participation was limited to voting, while more recently it has expanded to a broader spectrum of civic and social engagement and other forms of citizens' activities, e.g., campaigns, contacting politicians, protests, social movements, social engagement, and civic participation. No longer is the voting or electoral arena a substantial factor in understanding political participation and trust as determinants of political culture. At the same time, many institutionally embedded civic activities, such as signing a petition, boycotting, etc., reflect the common practice of European political culture well (Pateman, 2012). Accordingly:

> Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of political trust in institutions are positively associated with youth political activism and voting behaviour.

Thus, young people who express greater trust in political institutions are more likely to engage in both conventional (e.g., voting) and non-conventional forms of political participation, such as contacting politicians, participating in campaigns, signing petitions, demonstrating, or boycotting. This relationship reflects the role of institutional legitimacy in motivating civic engagement, whereby political trust facilitates active participation and strengthens the broader embedding of welfare and social policies within society.

3. Methodology

As previously noted, political culture and democratic institutions within welfare states can be examined through individual-level attitudes and self-expression values, which, when aggregated, yield insights at the national (macro) level (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, 2009). Given the conceptualisation of political culture along four interrelated dimensions—(a) trust in political institutions, (b) welfare state institutions, (c) social and interpersonal trust, and (d) political activism—a multilevel regression approach is particularly well-suited for this study. This framework incorporates variables at both the individual and macro levels. Individual-level variables include factors such as interpersonal trust, education, religiosity, and political activism, while macro-level variables encompass welfare state characteristics and institutional quality. This structure naturally creates a hierarchical dataset, with individuals nested within national contexts (Figure 1).

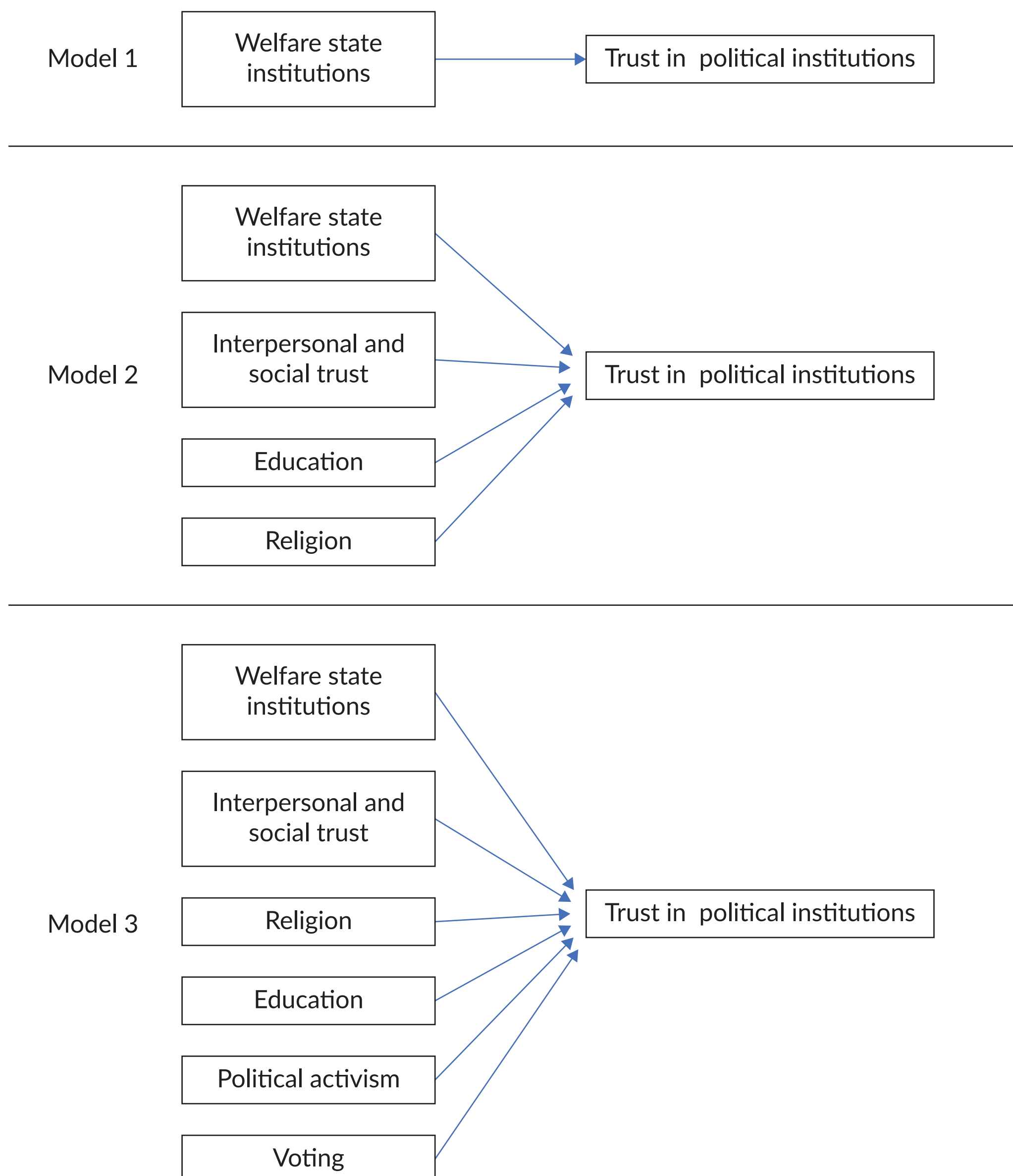

Figure 1. Multilevel regression model of political culture.

Hierarchical (multilevel) regression modelling is particularly well-suited for this design, as it allows for the simultaneous examination of individual-level and contextual influences on youth political engagement. Specifically, it enables the testing of cross-level interactions, such as whether the impact of political trust on activism is conditioned by the strength or type of welfare state and broader patterns of social organisation. In addition, multilevel modelling accounts for the non-independence of observations within countries, improves the precision of parameter estimates, and facilitates a rigorous assessment of how individual attitudes and structural conditions jointly shape political culture and participation among youth across the European context. By integrating both micro- and macro-level determinants, this approach provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between institutional trust, social structures, and political engagement.

This study focuses on EU-28 countries to examine the pre-defined determinants of youth political culture from 2002 to 2023, which captures a period of sustained structural turbulence—including the 2004 EU enlargement, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the socio-economic impacts of the war in Ukraine—all of which shaped political trust, redistributive preferences, and generational political orientations. EU membership provides a basis for comparability, as countries share similar political and economic transition paths, pre- and post-accession. Non-EU countries were excluded due to greater heterogeneity in policy trajectories, except for the UK, whose long EU membership and subsequent Brexit effects make it relevant for understanding EU-related political culture shifts.

In this study design framework, “trust in political institutions” functions as both a dependent and explanatory factor: It reflects the perceived legitimacy of institutions and predicts patterns of interpersonal trust, which, in turn, mediate the effectiveness of welfare provision and the broader societal embedding of welfare policies. By integrating “welfare state institutions” and “social and interpersonal trust” dimensions to institutional trust, this study situates youth experiences within a multi-level understanding of welfare regimes, highlighting how institutional quality, societal trust, and social participation interact to produce variations in outcomes across generations. Finally, the political activism dimension was represented by “voting” and “political activism” variables (Figure 1).

Data are drawn from the ESS rounds 1–11 (2002–2023), which provide high-quality, harmonised cross-national data on individual attitudes, values, and behaviours. The ESS allows aggregation from individual to societal levels, consistent with the conceptualisation of political culture as both a micro- and macro-level phenomenon. The study focuses on youth aged 18–29 (N = 64,585). Pooling multiple waves ensures sufficient statistical power for multilevel analyses and enables examination of intergenerational differences across different welfare regimes.

4. Results

4.1. Trust in Political Institutions

On the political dimension, trust in political institutions has been acknowledged as an important determinant affecting youth welfare regimes (Chevalier, 2019) and an important indicator for understanding political culture. Although the ESS dataset does not include a specific question on political trust, it contains several items representing the institutional dimension of political culture. These items measure trust in (a) the legal system, (b) the police, (c) politicians, (d) the European Parliament, (e) the United Nations, (f) political parties,

and (g) the national parliament. Responses to these items are recorded on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*no trust at all*) to 10 (*complete trust*; see Supplementary File).

For the measurement of internal consistency between selected items (a) to (g), Cronbach's α was based on an analysis of 45,880 valid cases (71% of the total sample), while 18,705 cases (29%) were excluded due to listwise deletion of missing values. The seven-item trust scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α of .909 (standardised α = .910), indicating also that some of the questions selected might be too similar and highly correlated with each other. Inter-item correlations were all positive and ranged from moderate to strong, suggesting that the items measure a coherent underlying construct of political trust. The strongest associations were observed between "trust in politicians" and "trust in political parties" (r = .880), as well as between "trust in the European Parliament" and "trust in the United Nations" (r = .751). The decision to exclude trust in political parties (f) from the latent scale of trust in political institutions can be theoretically and empirically justified. Conceptually, political parties differ fundamentally from procedural and non-partisan institutions, as they are competitive and ideologically polarised actors whose evaluation is closely tied to electoral outcomes and partisan alignment (Dalton & Shin, 2014). Consequently, trust in political parties tends to be more volatile and context-dependent than trust in legal or administrative institutions, introducing construct-irrelevant variance into generalised measures of political trust (Newton, 2001; Zmerli & Newton, 2008).

Empirically, the exclusion of "trust in political parties" resulted in a more coherent and parsimonious measurement model. The revised six-item scale demonstrates high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .886; standardised α = .887) based on 51,254 valid cases (79.4% of the sample), indicating that reliability remains strong despite the reduction in items (Table 1).

Table 1. Internal consistency of the latent scale: Trust in political institutions.

Latent construct of dependent variable	Cronbach's α	Cronbach's α Based on standardised items	No. of items	Valid cases, *N*	Valid cases, %	Excluded*	Total
Trust in political institutions I	.909	.910	7	45,880	71%	18,705	64,585
Trust in political institutions II	.886	.887	6	51,254	79.4	13,331	64,585

Note: * Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Inter-item correlations among the remaining indicators are consistently moderate to strong and display a balanced pattern across national, legal, coercive, and supranational institutions (r = .432 to .740), suggesting that the items capture a shared underlying latent construct (see Supplementary File). The selection of the dependent variable is based on institutional theories with the hypothesis that the "trust in institutions varies within and across countries in accordance with both individual attitudes and values and the social and economic positions individuals occupy" (Mishler & Rose, 2001, p. 37). On this basis, "trust in political institutions" (Figure 1) is selected as the dependent variable, and all six items were calculated into one combined *mean score* (SPSS function), as it represents a theoretically grounded and empirically robust indicator through which the interaction between individual attitudes, institutional performance, and youth welfare regime contexts can be systematically examined.

4.2. Welfare State Institutions

The independent variable on the “welfare state institutional” dimension is first introduced in Model 1 and later complemented by other dimensions in Models 2 and 3 (Figure 1). It reflects the welfare state’s capacity to respond to citizens’ needs. As Chevalier (2019) acknowledges, more inclusive economic and individualised social citizenship are associated with higher political trust among young people, demonstrating how welfare regime structures influence young people’s institutional confidence. The ESS data, similarly to the “trust in political institutions” questions, represents attitudes or satisfaction with (a) the present state of the economy in the country, (b) the national government, (c) the way democracy works in the country, (d) the state of education in the country nowadays, (e) the state of health services, and (f) life as a whole (see Supplementary File). This approach is grounded in the youth welfare regime approach, which highlights those institutional configurations—especially in the transition to adulthood—shaping young people’s political trust. Empirical work also shows that country-level welfare state features such as inclusiveness, universality, and access to education and social services influence trust and related social outcomes (Chevalier, 2019; de Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Lauri et al., 2025; Mewes, 2024).

The ESS data scale goes from 0 = *extremely dissatisfied with the welfare state institutions* to 10 = *extremely satisfied*. The internal consistency of the six-item scale capturing evaluations of welfare state-related institutions and outcomes was assessed using reliability analysis. The analysis was based on 58,307 valid cases (90.3% of the total sample), with 9.7% of cases excluded due to listwise deletion of missing values. The scale demonstrates good internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s α of .817 (standardised α = .814), indicating that the items form a reasonably reliable composite measure (Table 2).

Table 2. Internal consistency of the latent scale: Welfare state institutions.

Latent construct of independent variable	Cronbach's α	Cronbach's α Based on standardised items	No. of items	Valid cases, *N*	Valid cases, %	Excluded*	Total
Welfare state institutions	.817	.814	6	58,307	90.3%	6,278	64,585

Note: * Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Inter-item correlations are uniformly positive and range from weak to moderately strong (r = .246 to .655), suggesting that the items are related but not redundant. The strongest associations are observed among items reflecting the political and economic dimensions of welfare, particularly between satisfaction with the national government and satisfaction with the present state of the economy (r = .655), as well as satisfaction with the way democracy works and satisfaction with the national government (r = .643). This clustering indicates a coherent evaluative dimension related to perceptions of state performance and democratic governance. In contrast, “satisfaction with life as a whole” shows consistently weaker correlations with the remaining items (r = .246 to .367), implying that it captures a more general subjective well-being component rather than institutional performance *per se*. Nevertheless, its positive associations with evaluations of the economy, government, and democracy suggest that overall life satisfaction is meaningfully, though indirectly, linked to perceptions of welfare state functioning. Evaluations of education and health services exhibit moderate correlations with governance-related items and a relatively strong association with each other (r = .529), indicating a distinct but integrated service-provision dimension within

the broader construct (see Supplementary File). All items were calculated into one combined *mean score* (SPSS function).

The pattern of correlations supports the interpretation of the scale as a multidimensional yet internally consistent measure of “welfare state institutions,” combining subjective well-being, political governance, and public service performance into a single, coherent latent framework. On this basis, the composite measure of “welfare state institutions” is operationalised as an independent variable in the subsequent analysis (Figure 1), capturing cross-national variation in young people’s assessments of welfare regime performance and its role in shaping political trust and related outcomes.

4.3. Social, Interpersonal, and Individual Characteristics

The operationalisation of the individual-level characteristics affecting political culture focuses on social interpersonal trust, capturing the social contexts in which young people acquire norms, values, and orientations toward others. This dimension reflects the networks and everyday social relations through which political culture is formed (Newton, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000), including family environments, interactions within local communities, and engagement with social or religious groups that are not directly related to formal politics but play a crucial role in shaping trust, cooperation, and social expectations among youth. There is evidence that political trust or distrust can affect interpersonal trust; thus, trust in political institutions can predict the political culture on interpersonal trust level (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), confirming its validity in the model.

In Model 2 (Figure 1), the “interpersonal and social trust” dimension as an independent variable is operationalised using the ESS set of items measuring generalised interpersonal and social trust orientations. The primary indicator assesses the extent to which respondents believe that most people can be trusted, measured on a 0–10 scale ranging from 0 (*you can’t be too careful*) to 10 (*most people can be trusted*). In addition, broader perceptions of social relations are captured through items evaluating whether most people are perceived to “take advantage of others” or “try to be fair,” and whether “people are generally helpful” or “mostly looking out for themselves.” Together, these indicators capture the relational foundations of political culture by reflecting how young people interpret social interactions and collective norms in their everyday environments. The latent scale of interpersonal trust was constructed using three indicators and is based on N = 63,899 valid cases, representing 98.9% of the total sample. Only 686 cases (1.1%) were excluded due to listwise deletion, indicating exceptionally low levels of missing data and suggesting that the “social and interpersonal trust” items are salient, comprehensible, and consistently answered by respondents. The internal consistency of the scale is acceptable, with a Cronbach’s α of .757 (Table 3).

Table 3. Internal consistency of the latent scale: Social and interpersonal trust.

Latent construct of independent variable	Cronbach's α	Cronbach's α Based on standardised items	No. of items	Valid cases, N	Valid cases, %	Excluded*	Total
Interpersonal and social trust	.757	.757	3	63,899	98.9%	686	64,585

Note: * Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Given the small number of items, this level of reliability can be considered satisfactory and consistent with established benchmarks for short psychological and attitudinal scales. The inter-item correlations show moderate positive associations among the items measuring interpersonal trust and related perceptions of others. Specifically, interpersonal trust is moderately correlated with the belief that people are fair (r = .565) and with the perception that people are generally helpful (r = .483). Additionally, the belief that people are fair is moderately associated with the perception that most people are helpful most of the time (r = .482; see Supplementary File).

These values suggest that while each item captures a related aspect of interpersonal and social trust, they are not redundant. Moderate correlations also indicate that a composite scale or index of interpersonal and social trust is appropriate, and that internal consistency is likely acceptable for scale construction. Therefore, all three items were calculated into one combined *mean score* (SPSS function). The result indicates that the three items capture a common underlying dimension of generalised social and interpersonal trust while still allowing for some heterogeneity in how trust is expressed. From a measurement perspective, the combination of high data completeness and acceptable internal consistency supports the validity of modelling interpersonal and trust as a latent construct. The limited number of items enhances parsimony and comparability across analyses, while the reliability estimate suggests that the scale achieves an appropriate balance between conceptual breadth and internal coherence. Overall, the results provide strong empirical justification for the creation and use of a latent interpersonal trust scale in subsequent multivariate or structural analyses, particularly in large-scale comparative research where concise yet robust measurement is essential.

Model 2 extended the analysis by including individual-level covariates capturing education and religiosity. Education was measured using the EU-ISCED classification, ranging from 1 (*less than lower secondary*) to 7 (*higher tertiary education*). Religiosity was operationalised as membership in a particular religion or denomination, coded as a dichotomous variable (1 = yes, 0 = no). These additions as control variables allow the model to account for the influence of individual value-oriented and cultural factors on the outcome.

4.4. Political Activism and Voting

Political activism of youth can also represent a range of civic activities, such as contacting politicians, wearing or displaying stickers, and signing a petition, captured by a set of questions in the ESS dataset. There are more than 10 items intended to measure one latent construct—"political activism"—but over the study period, the items changed and were not all consistently available. For analysis, the chosen indicators were harmonised and recoded into dummy variables (1 = yes, 0 = no), covering activities such as contacting officials, working in political or other organisations, displaying campaign materials, signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, boycotting products, and sharing political content online during the last 12 months (see Supplementary File). The results indicate a moderate level of internal consistency among the eight indicators representing "political activism" (Cronbach's α = .687). Inter-item correlations (ranging from .11 to .35) suggest that while these activities are related, they reflect distinct forms of engagement, with low-cost or symbolic actions (e.g., signing petitions, boycotting, online activity) showing stronger interconnections than high-effort actions (e.g., contacting officials, formal party work). The dataset is limited by a high proportion of excluded cases due to missing responses (82.7%), indicating that findings pertain to a subset of respondents and may not fully represent the broader population (Table 4).

Table 4. Internal consistency of the latent scale: Political activism.

Latent construct of independent variable	Cronbach's α	Cronbach's α Based on standardised items	No. of items	Valid cases, *N*	Valid cases, %	Excluded*	Total
Political activism	.687	.694	8	11,175	17.3%	53,410	64,585

Note: * Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Overall, the results highlight the multidimensional nature of political participation, encompassing formal, informal, and symbolic forms of engagement. All items were calculated into one combined *mean score* (SPSS function).

Political activism often requires knowledge, organisational skills, and leadership, particularly among young people who must navigate both formal and informal channels of participation. Theoretically, this aligns with Verba et al.'s (1995) civic voluntarism model, which emphasises that engagement depends not only on political interest but also on civic skills and resources, including time, knowledge, and social networks. Similarly, research on youth political participation highlights that young citizens often combine formal avenues (such as working in parties or contacting officials) with informal and symbolic actions (such as signing petitions, boycotting products, or participating in demonstrations) to exercise influence in ways that suit their capacities and contexts. Despite the limitation that only 17.3% of the total sample was analysed—likely reflecting respondents' willingness and ability to report multiple forms of participation—these results demonstrate a clear plurality of engagement among youth. Overall, these patterns underscore that "political activism" as an independent variable is multidimensional, requiring initiative, strategic decision-making, and diverse forms of engagement, and that youth activism is shaped by both structural opportunities and individual competencies (Figure 1).

At the theoretical level, political power in terms of voting is one of the most debated dimensions in the study of the relationship between political and interpersonal trust. Voter turnout is generally considered a good predictor of political engagement in analytical frameworks; however, when focusing on youth as a distinct group, turnout is typically the lowest (Martin, 2012).

In Models 2 and 3, control variables were added to account for factors influencing political culture. Religious affiliation and education were included in Model 2, while Model 3 additionally controlled for voting in national elections (1 = yes, 0 = no). Variables were entered according to their measurement level to isolate the unique effects of the main predictors (Figure 1). Family composition, income level, and labour market participation were not included as predictors, as the younger generation is still in transition to adulthood. In this context, family composition does not constitute a sufficiently stable or meaningful determinant of political trust.

5. Theoretical Model Testing: Predictors of Political Trust Among Young Adults

The aim of this theory-driven hierarchical multiple regression model was to examine predictors of trust in political institutions among young adults (aged 18–29). Specifically, the model tested the contribution of the welfare state institutions (independent variable in Model 1), social organisation in the form of interpersonal trust and individual characteristics (religion, education; independent variable in Model 2), and political engagement (political activism and voting; independent variable in Model 3; see Figure 1).

The results support Hypothesis 1: Political trust in institutions was positively associated with the functioning of the welfare state, indicating that higher satisfaction with key welfare domains was linked to greater trust in political institutions among youth. Satisfaction with welfare state institutions alone explained 40.6% of the variance in political trust ($R^2 = 0.406$, $F(1, 47{,}221) = 32{,}211.39$, $p < .001$), highlighting the central role of the economy, education, general life conditions, and health services (Tables 5 and 6).

Hypothesis 2 was confirmed in Model 2, showing that higher levels of interpersonal and social trust are positively associated with political trust among youth. Adding these social and individual characteristics (religion, education) to the model explained an additional 1.2% of the variance in political trust ($\Delta R^2 = 0.012$, F-change = 312.09, $p < .001$), highlighting that youth who are more socially connected and trusting of others tend to place greater confidence in political institutions (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. Model summary.

Model/variables entered	*R*	*R* Square	Adjusted *R* Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	*F* Change	*df1*	*df2*	Sig. *F* Change
1. Welfare state institutions[a]	.637	.406	.406	1.52822	.406	32,211.389	1	47,221	< .001
2. Religion, education, interpersonal and social trust[b]	.646	.417	.417	1.51334	.012	312.085	3	47,218	< .001
3. Voted last elections[c]	.651	.424	.424	1.50417	.007	578.332	1	47,217	< .001

Notes: [a] Predictors: (Constant), Welfare state institutions; [b] Predictors: (Constant), Welfare state institutions, Religion, Education, Interpersonal and social trust; [c] Predictors: (Constant), Welfare state institutions, Religion, Education, Interpersonal and social trust, Voting (tolerance = .000 limit reached).

The full Model 3, which adds "political activism" and "voting" behaviour, remains statistically significant and further increased variance explained to 42.4% ($\Delta R^2 = 0.007$, F-change = 578.33, $p < .001$), demonstrating that political engagement independently predicts trust in institutions even after accounting for structural and individual factors. Voting has a positive and significant effect on political trust ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < .001$; Tables 5 and 6), indicating that youth who participate in elections tend to report higher trust in political institutions, confirming part of Hypothesis 3. However, political activism could not be included in the model due to perfect multicollinearity (tolerance = 0.000), likely because it overlaps strongly with voting or other engagement variables. As a result, the model cannot test the independent effect of activism on political trust (see Supplementary File). This suggests that while formal engagement through voting reinforces trust, the broader spectrum of political activism among youth—such as petitions, demonstrations, and online participation—remains difficult to capture in this regression framework, reflecting both measurement and conceptual challenges.

Overall, all three hierarchical regression models are highly significant ($p < .001$), demonstrating that the included predictors meaningfully explain political trust among youth. Despite these significant predictors, approximately 57–58% of the variance in political trust remains unexplained, suggesting that other contextual, cultural, or psychological factors not captured in the models also play a substantial role.

Table 6. ANOVA.

	Model	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig.
1[a]	Regression	75,227.976	1	75,227.976	32,211.389	< .001
	Residual	110,282.118	47,221	2.335		
	Total	185,510.094	47,222			
2[b]	Regression	77,372.171	4	19,343.043	8,446.064	< .001
	Residual	108,137.922	47,218	2.290		
	Total	185,510.094	47,222			
3[c]	Regression	78,680.659	5	15,736.132	6,955.133	< .001
	Residual	106,829.435	47,217	2.263		
	Total	185,510.094	47,222			

Notes: [a] Predictors: (Constant), Welfare state institutions; [b] Predictors: (Constant), Welfare state institutions, Religion, Education, Interpersonal and social trust; [c] Predictors: (Constant), Welfare institutions, Religion, Education, Interpersonal and social trust, Voting.

A key limitation of the study is the availability of comprehensive measures of the social dimension, such as broader forms of digital engagement and organisational involvement. Consequently, the effect of political activism is limited in the models, reflecting both measurement constraints and multicollinearity with voting behaviour. This highlights ongoing questions about the accessibility of political power and how young people perceive their role in democratic processes. The low political engagement and voting behaviour are characteristic of the broader political culture, while other factors, such as interpersonal and social trust, education, and satisfaction with welfare institutions, consistently exert a stronger influence on trust in political institutions, indicating that these factors have maintained a stable role in shaping political trust over the past decades.

6. Conclusion

Youth political culture is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be fully captured through simple analyses. Nevertheless, the hierarchical multiple regression model employed in this study, which encompassed three dimensions—welfare institutions, interpersonal and social organisation (including religion and education), and political activism and voting—demonstrates its validity in explaining trust in political institutions.

The strong effect of "welfare state institutions" on political trust aligns with theories of institutional performance and legitimacy of youth welfare regimes (e.g., Chevalier, 2019; Chevalier & Loncle, 2021; de Blok & Kumlin, 2022; Lauri et al., 2025; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). According to these frameworks, young citizens are more likely to trust political institutions when they perceive them as providing tangible benefits and ensuring social welfare. This is particularly relevant in modern welfare states, where economic and social provisions are seen as a measure of government competence and fairness. Still, to increase political trust, the welfare state shall not only deal with old social risks but also address new social risks primarily affecting younger generations (Taylor-Gooby, 2008).

Similarly, the meaningful contribution of "interpersonal and social trust" supports social capital theory (Newton, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000), which posits that networks of trust and civic cooperation underpin

citizens' confidence in public institutions. Individuals embedded in trusting social networks are more likely to perceive political institutions as legitimate, responsive, and fair.

The relatively low effect of "political activism" and "voting" is consistent with research suggesting that political culture and engagement vary across generations and modalities of participation. The findings indicate that structural and social determinants (welfare satisfaction, education, interpersonal and social trust) remain more central to political trust than direct participation, reflecting a broader, persistent pattern in democratic societies. Further research is needed to explore how young people increasingly engage in non-traditional forms of civic participation, such as online activism or volunteering, compared with older generations who tend to participate through more conventional channels. Overall, these results support a theory-driven hierarchical perspective, where broader welfare institutional factors provide the foundational influence on trust, augmented by social capital and sociodemographic characteristics, while behavioural participation has a more limited role.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the pooling of ESS data across waves from 2002 to 2023 means that members of the same age cohort may have been socialised under substantially different historical, economic, and political conditions. Generational differences in socialisation could influence both perceptions of welfare institutions and trust in political institutions, potentially introducing unobserved heterogeneity that is not fully captured in the models. Second, structural changes in national welfare systems over this period—such as reforms in healthcare, education, or social protection—may affect satisfaction with welfare institutions and, consequently, political trust, complicating comparisons across time. While sensitivity analyses for temporal effects provide preliminary insights, future research could address these limitations more rigorously by incorporating time-series analyses or cohort-specific modelling approaches to disentangle period effects from generational effects.

Despite low formal political participation among youth, the strong association between trust in political institutions and satisfaction with the welfare state suggests that young people retain a meaningful "voice" in democratic welfare systems. These findings indicate that young people's political culture is shaped not only by formal participation but also by the institutional performance of democratic institutions and the strength of social organisation, providing a foundation for understanding political culture across generations.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data are available at the ESS Data Portal: https://ess.sikt.no/en

LLMs Disclosure

The author used ChatGPT (Sept 3 version) for language editing and text clarity improvement; all analytical decisions and interpretations remain the author's own.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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