

Why Do Some Adolescents Encounter Everyday Events That Increase Their Civic Interest Whereas Others Do Not?

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Using a longitudinal design, we asked 2 age cohorts of adolescents (15- and 18-year-olds) whether they, during the last year, had experienced events that had increased their civic interest and about details of their experiences. Based on self-determination theory, we predicted that the adolescents who reported having experienced events of this kind had already been more interested and had had more positive feelings about politics much earlier in time, and that this original interest would have increased more over time, than that of other adolescents. Second, we proposed that the adolescents who had encountered events that triggered their civic interest would have been engaged in behaviors that reflected their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, much earlier in time, and that, over time, they would have increased these behaviors more than other adolescents. These 2 predictions were largely confirmed. As for the content of the events the adolescents reported, many of them concerned national and international issues experienced as threatening, and that challenged the adolescents' beliefs and morality. Overall, a previous interest in politics and engagement in exploratory behaviors that reflect the adolescents' psychological needs seem to play crucial roles in understanding why adolescents in their everyday life encounter events that trigger their civic interest. Further, the findings show that having had everyday experiences that trigger the adolescents' civic interests are associated with a later increase in political interest more broadly.

Keywords: political interest, political agency, adolescents, self-determination theory, longitudinal research

Some adolescents experience events in their daily life that trigger their civic interest. They perceive what they learned at school as eye-opening experiences, become thrilled and excited by the views and opinions of their parents, peers, and teachers, or have up-front political experiences that trigger their interest. Also, today's generation of young people is growing up in an "information age," where information is instantly available. The abundance of media coverage of daily events, and information gained from talking with others about them may trigger the civic interest of young people. However, how adolescents are influenced by everyday civic events that trigger their interest has not been systematically investigated. There is no systematic research on whether and how everyday local, national, and global events may act as eye-openers for adolescents. This raises the questions of what characterizes the adolescents who encounter events that trigger their civic interest, and of what these events are. Also, do adolescents who experience such events become more politically interested over time? To the best of our knowledge, no studies in the literature have addressed these questions.

The role of macro political events has, however, received attention in political socialization research. For the most part, these

studies asked whether people who grew up during certain periods of time (the long civic generation, the baby boom generation, and Generation X) became more politically interested or had attitudes different from those brought up during other periods (e.g., Jennings & Niemi, 1981). The presumption was that people in their formative years experience national and international events of the same kind, which shape their interests and attitudes. In this study, we ask a different question. We are interested in events that are likely to differentiate between young people of about the same age, rather than in events that are supposed to affect a whole generation of adolescents in a similar manner. We ask whether representative samples of adolescents have encountered events that increased their civic interest and what these events were. Finally, we ask if such events have led to an increase in the adolescents' political interest.

The reasons some adolescents experience events that increased their civic interest may be highly idiosyncratic, but it can be argued that there are common features to them. In line with Dawson and Prewitt's (1969) argument that a higher initial political interest provides a likely explanation for why some people encounter political events that increase their interest, we propose that it is mainly young people who have an earlier interest in politics who will experience events that trigger their civic interest. Adolescents who are already politically and societally interested should be more receptive to these events.

In this study, we will use self-determination theory (SDT) as a guiding theoretical framework to understand why some adolescents, but not others, experience everyday events that trigger their civic interest. SDT is a human motivation theory (Deci & Ryan,

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2000, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2006). At its core is the belief that, if people have an intrinsic interest in an issue, and experience a sense of volition in their exploration of it, they will find means to become better at what they are interested in. They will engage in behaviors that satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2006). *Autonomy* is about having a sense of volition to explore things one is interested in and deepen one's personal interests in a self-governed manner. *Relatedness* is the need for being connected to others, and feel understood and loved. *Competence* captures peoples' perception of being effective, and encompasses attempts to obtain a sense of ownership of the development of their interests (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In short, when people feel free to explore, their intrinsic interests will, according to SDT, be followed by behaviors that satisfy their basic psychological needs.

In this study we ask what feelings, perceptions, and behaviors were characteristic of the adolescents who later in time encountered events in their everyday life that triggered their civic interest. First, we assume that an interest in political and societal issues for many adolescents is an intrinsic motivation to attend to political issues. Because an intrinsic motivation is accompanied by positive feelings (Deci & Ryan, 2008), we assume that the adolescents who are interested in politics will have positive feelings about their engagements with politics. Hence, we propose that, at a much earlier point in time, the adolescents who encountered events that triggered their civic interests were more politically interested and had more positive feelings about political issues than the adolescents who did not experience any such events. Of the many events that young people experience on a daily basis, those with an earlier intrinsic political interest will be attentive to the ones that stimulate their interest, whereas uninterested adolescents will ignore them or not perceive them as relevant.

Second, based on SDT, we identified a set of *indicators* (behaviors, feelings, opinions) that can be potentially important for politically interested adolescents to be able to satisfy their basic psychological needs. They are not the standard needs measures (feeling autonomous, related, and competent) that have been used in the SDT literature, because few, if any, studies have systematically applied the SDT framework to the development of political and societal interest among adolescents. We suggest that these behavioral indicators will differentiate the adolescents who later had experiences that triggered their civic interest from the adolescents who did not have such experiences.

Autonomy is tightly connected to the concept of intrinsic motivation, because being autonomous means perceiving a full sense of choice in endorsing specific actions and acting from personal interest (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The need for autonomy, according to SDT, is about feeling free to explore and deepen one's personal interests. Following the news to learn about current politics and society should be a core activity of the adolescents who have a political interest. If they feel free to explore what happens in politics and society, we would expect them to have positive feelings about and perceive it to be personally relevant to attend to the news. Because autonomy is accompanied by setting personal goals related to the object of interest (Deci & Ryan, 2008), we would also expect that politically interested adolescents will set more long-term goals related to their political engagement than other adolescents.

The need for *relatedness* refers to feeling connected to others and being accepted by them. This need is satisfied only when individuals feel involved in their social relationships (Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990). In formal groups, as in sports, education or work environments, relatedness is often measured by the extent to which participants feel connected to others in their groups (cf., Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). Here, people often have the same explicit goals and are engaged in the same or similar activities to reach these goals. Thus, relatedness concerns the feeling of belonging to a group of people who share a similar interest.

In relation to intrinsic motivation for political and civic issues, it is not straightforward to identify which groups or people adolescents rely on to satisfy their need for relatedness. In this study, we focus mostly on the family environment because parents are considered the primary socialization agents, and because the adolescents still live at home, they spend a significant amount of time with their parents. In line with prior studies in sports and workplace settings (e.g., Van den Broeck et al., 2010), we use adolescents' perception of the interpersonal climate at home, feeling connected to one's parents, feeling understood and loved, as indicators of relatedness. Although the particular interests that the family members have, and the activities they are engaged in, are in part similar, they are also likely to differ between members of the same family. Hence, it is not immediately obvious that feeling part of the family per se satisfies adolescents' need for relatedness in relation to their motivation for political and civic issues.

We also want to capture more directly engagement in shared activities related to political issues of the parents and the adolescents. Communications and discussions about political and societal issues make up a central shared activity (Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). Everyday political communications at home have often been interpreted as occasions when parents transfer their values, attitudes, and behaviors to their adolescents. From a SDT perspective, such communications can also reflect the adolescents' choice to open up political discussions with their parents. In addition to everyday political discussions at home, to capture adolescents' need to establish satisfying relations in their family around political issues, we also look at their attempts to initiate political conversations with their parents. In sum, we suggest that adolescents' initiation of political discussions may reflect their choices directed at establishing a satisfying involvement with their parents.

Over and above the home environment, we further propose that politically interested adolescents will initiate talks about political and social issues with other people, peers and others on the Internet more than other adolescents will. Interacting with others on the Internet about political issues should represent politically interested adolescents' own choice to share their interest on social media.

The need for *competence* concerns feeling skilled or capable, and refers to a sense of confidence in one's own action rather than an achieved skill (Deci & Ryan, 2002). An internal political efficacy, that is, belief in one's own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990), should facilitate the growth and nourishment of interest in political matters for adolescents who have an intrinsic interest in politics.

All in all, we propose that adolescents who encounter events that increase their civic interest will differ in several ways much earlier in time from the adolescents who do not have these event experi-

ences. First and foremost, we assume that they earlier had a stronger interest in politics and more related positive feelings. Specifically, we hypothesize that the adolescents who experienced civic interest triggering events more than other adolescents earlier in time had positive feelings about attending to news, set long-term goals, had political discussions with their parents, of which some were initiated by the adolescents themselves, initiated talks on the Internet with peers and others, felt that they could make a difference in society, and felt that they could make a difference with respect to political issues.

SDT is not a static model of human motivation, but may forecast processes that will operate over time. An intrinsic motivation to attend to political issues should increase adolescents' motivations to be more autonomous, related, and competent. Hence, we should expect an initial and growing interest in politics to be associated with an initial and growing increase in exploratory behaviors that reflect adolescents' psychological needs. In effect, adolescents who encounter events that trigger their civic interest should have a growing interest in political issues much earlier in time than other youths, and this early political interest should be followed by increases over time in behaviors that reflect the adolescents' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. We test this overall idea in this study.

The Present Study

We collected longitudinal information about adolescents' interest in politics. Two cohorts were followed over 3 years. When the participants in the younger cohort were 15-years-old and the participants in the older cohort were 18-years-old (at T_0), they were asked about their political interest and feelings about politics, and to freely recall if they had experienced any event during the last year that had made them more civically interested. One year earlier, at ages 14 and 17, and 2 years earlier, at ages 13 and 16, (T_{-1} and T_{-2} respectively), they answered the same questions about their political interest that were posed at T_0 .

First, we hypothesized that the adolescents who said that they had encountered civic interest-triggering events at T_0 were more interested in and had more positive feelings about politics 2 years earlier than the adolescents who said that they had not encountered any such events. Also, we expected that the early interest in, and feelings about politics in the former group of adolescents would grow more steeply over time—from T_{-2} to T_0 .

Second, we hypothesized that this early interest in politics would be accompanied by an increase over time (from T_{-2} to T_0) in exploratory behaviors that reflect these adolescents' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Again, the increase in these behaviors from T_{-2} to T_0 was expected to be steeper for the adolescents who later experienced events that triggered their civic interest than other adolescents.

We performed control analyses, using peer nominations, to examine if independent observers had perceived, 1 and 2 years earlier, that the adolescents who at T_0 reported having experienced events that increased their civic interest were more politically interested than those who did not report having experienced such events.

Finally, for the participants in the younger cohort we have information about their interest in politics 1 year *after* they reported on events increasing their civic interest. We examined

whether having experienced such events increased their future interest in politics more broadly. These analyses address the question of whether encountering events that trigger adolescents' civic interest has the potential to increase the general political interest later on.

Method

Participants

This study is based on a longitudinal investigation of the development of young people's civic interest and engagement from age 13 to 30 (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009). We use information from two adolescent cohorts (younger cohort, $N = 909$; older cohort, $N = 869$). All the adolescents were sampled from schools in a Swedish city of 137,000 inhabitants. The schools were selected from a range of neighborhoods to ensure that different ethnic and social backgrounds were represented. The proportion of participants whose both parents were born outside the country was higher (22.8%) in the city than nationally (19.1%). In our sample, 14.6% of the participants had parents who had immigrated from countries outside Europe. The city is close to the national average on factors such as population density, income level, and unemployment (Statistics Sweden, 2010).

Descriptive information about the samples at each wave of data collection is reported in Table 1. The analytical samples at each age constituted about 86.3% of the target samples (range = 81.7%–94.7%). The 1,586 adolescents who took part in the data collections at T_0 (age 15 for the younger cohort, and age 18 for the older) were examined in this study.

Procedure

Parents and adolescents were informed about the study in advance, and about their rights to decline participation or to withdraw from the study at any time. Parental consent was obtained for adolescents under 18. The adolescents were given the questionnaires in class with test leaders present. Each class received a payment for participation of \$120 to their class fund. The participants in the older cohort received a movie ticket. Prior to the start of the project, a regional ethics board approved all measures and procedures. It should be mentioned that the first of the 3 years covered by this study (T_{-2}) was an election year in Sweden.

Table 1
Sample Descriptives

Cohort	Target sample ^a	Analytical sample	Percent	Percent males
Younger cohort				
T_{-2} age 13, 2010	960	909	94.7%	49.1%
T_{-1} age 14, 2011	987	883	89.5%	49.0%
T_0 age 15, 2012	954	836	87.6%	49.1%
Older cohort:				
T_{-2} age 16, 2010	1052	869	82.6%	49.0%
T_{-1} age 17, 2011	996	814	81.7%	49.9%
T_0 age 18, 2012	916	750	81.9%	50.7%

^a The number of adolescents who were officially enlisted in the schools.

Measures

Encountering events that trigger civic interest. Our key measure was based on an open-ended question that asked adolescents at T_0 if they had encountered an event that had increased their civic interest. The adolescents were asked: "Has something happened this last year that made you more or less interested in issues concerned with what is going on in Sweden and the world or in political and ecological matters?" If they answered "Yes, I became more interested" or "Yes, I became less interested" they were asked to give more details about their experiences in an open-ended question. A small percentage of the adolescents said that they had had event experiences that decreased their interest (younger cohort, 4.7%; older cohort, 5.2%). Because this study focuses on experiences that increase adolescents' civic interest, we decided to omit the adolescents who reported a lowered interest. Of the 792 participants in the younger cohort, 150 (18.1%) reported an event that increased their civic interest. Of the 704 participants in the older cohort, 177 (23.8%) reported an event that increased their civic interest; from here on referred to having encountering an interest-triggering event.

Indicators for Intrinsic Motivation

Political interest. The participants were asked two questions at all three waves of data collections (T_{-2} , T_{-1} , T_0): "How interested are you in politics?" and "How interested are you in what is going on in society?" They answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*totally uninterested*), to 5 (*very interested*). The correlation between the two variables across the ages was .62, $p < .001$ (range = .46–.70), so we aggregated the two and labeled the measure Political Interest. Alpha reliability of the measure averaged .76 across all six ages.

For the participants in the younger cohort, we also had information about their political interest one year *after* they reported on interest-triggering events. This enables us to examine the critical question of whether encountering interest-triggering events is followed by a later increase in political interest.

Feelings about politics. The participants were asked "People differ in what they feel about politics. What are your feelings?" They answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*loath*) to 6 (*great fun*).

Indicators for the Satisfaction of Autonomy Needs

Cognitive and emotional engagement in news consumption. Participants indicated whether watching or reading the news (on TV, in daily newspapers, or on the Internet): 1 (*doesn't engage me at all*) to 6 (*engages me a lot*); 1 (*gives me no new ideas at all*) to 6 (*gives me many new ideas*); 1 (*is boring*) to 6 (*is fun*). Alpha reliability for this measure averaged .90 across all six ages.

Setting long-term goals was a one-item measurement. The participants were asked: "Some people have set goals for themselves concerning their engagement in societal issues. Have you?" and answered: 1 (*I'm not interested in issues like this, rather the opposite. I will certainly not commit myself to doing anything about them*), 2 (*I'm not interested in issues like this and, as far as I can see, I will not commit myself to getting engaged in them*), 3 (*I will definitely work actively (in organizations or by other means) on issues like this but have not yet committed myself*), and 4 (*I will*

work actively in organizations and I'm already a member of such an organization).

Indicators for the Satisfaction of Relatedness Needs

Perceived family social climate. To capture how adolescents perceived the interpersonal quality in their families broadly, we used four subscales that tap into whether the adolescents perceived themselves valued, supported and close to their parents. The first concerned the *democratic climate* in the family (Stattin, Persson, Burk, & Kerr, 2011), with items like "Your parents let you take part when you are going to decide something in the family," and "Your parents ask you when decisions are to be made in the family." The responses ranged from 1 (*do not agree at all*), to 4 (*agree totally*). Average alpha reliability was .90. The second subscale measured *attached relations to parents* (Biesecker, 2007), with items like "I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my mother (father)" and "I feel like I can try new things because I know my mother (father) supports me." The adolescents reported on their attached relations separately for their mother and their father on a scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). The average correlation between the mother and father scales was .56 across ages, so we aggregated the two measures. The two final subscales measured positive parent reactions (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010). Items measuring *parents' attempted understanding* used a stem question: "What happens if you do something your mother [father] really dislikes?." Example of items are "Is clear about what she/he thinks, but is open to discussion," and "Honestly wants to understand why you did what you did." The response scales ranged from 1 (*never*) to 3 (*most often*). The average correlation between the mother and father scales was .65 across ages, so we aggregated the two measures. The last scale measured *parents' warmth* toward the adolescents. Example items are "Focuses on the positive and seldom the negative things you do," and "Shows with words and gestures that she/he likes you." The response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 3 (*most often*). Again, because the average correlation between the mother and father scales was as high as .66 across ages, we aggregated the two measures. The average reliabilities for the mother and father scales for attached relations to parents, attempted understanding, and warmth ranged from .80 to .91. We factor analyzed the four subscales, and they produced one factor at all ages with factor loadings ranging from .75 to .88. We used that factor for measuring the perceived family social climate.

Discussing political issues with parents. The participants were asked how often they discussed "What they had heard on the news about what is going on in Sweden and around the world," "Environmental issues," and "Politics or societal issues," with their parents. The response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). The measure had an average alpha reliability of .78.

Initiating political conversations with parents. Political agency is defined as person's intentional attempts to affect other peoples' minds about political and issues. Here we measured the adolescents' political agency with two items: "Are you trying to get your parents to become more aware of what is going on in the world?" and ". . . more aware of environmental issues?," with a response scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The average correlation between the two items was .65.

Political talk on the Internet. We measured how often the adolescents went out on the Internet to discuss political and societal issues with their peers and others. The scale consisted of four items, asking if the participants, during the last two months, had, for example, “Discussed societal or political questions with friends on the Internet,” and “Discussed societal issues with people I don’t know.” The response scale ranged from 1 (*no*) to 3 (*yes, several times*). Alpha reliability averaged .72.

Indicator for the Satisfaction of Competence Needs

Political efficacy was measured by nine items, all referring to a domain-specific efficacy belief in one’s own actions to change society (Bandura, 2006). After the stem question “If I really tried, I could manage to. . .,” the participants responded to nine statements, including: “Take on responsibility in a political youth organization,” and “Be an active member of a political organization.” The response scale ranged from 1 (*I could definitely not manage that*) to 4 (*I could definitely manage that*). Average alpha reliability was .93.

We made use of gender and family education as covariates in the analyses. When their children were 13- and 16-years-old their parents were asked about their level of education, and they answered on a ranging from 1 (*less than 9 years of study*) to 5 (*university college/university*). We computed a mean value for mothers’ and father’s level of education. Information was available on 556 parents (70.2%) in the younger cohort and 460 parents (65.3%) in the older cohort.

Independent reports of political interest. All the measures above are based on self-reports. In order to examine whether independent observers perceived the early political interest of the participants who later reported that they had experienced interest-triggering events, we made use of peer nominations. All participants in each class were, at T_{-2} and T_{-1} , asked to nominate the two persons in their class who best matched the descriptions: “Keeps track of what is going on in Sweden and in the world” and “Often starts discussions about societal issues in class.” The number of times a student was nominated in his or her class was transformed into a standard score. Because of high correlations between the two peer nominations (younger cohort, $r = .68$; older cohort, $r = .72$), we aggregated them. A student who scored high on this measure is one who is regarded by their classmates as knowing a lot about what is going on in society and the world, and often brings these issues up in class.

Attrition Analyses and Missing Data

In this study, we formulated hypotheses about political interest and psychological needs 1 and 2 years earlier than when participants reported on their interest-triggering events. Thus, we examined retrospectively whether the participants who answered the question about interest-triggering events at ages 15 (younger cohort) and 18 (older cohort) differed from those who participated in the data collections 1 or 2 years earlier on any of the study variables. In the younger cohort, adolescents who did not take part in the study at age 13 scored significantly lower in setting long-term goals (odds ratio [OR] = .60, $p = .02$) and talking to other on the Internet (OR = .53, $p = .03$) than those who participated in the study by age 15. The 15-year-olds who did not take part in the

study at age 14 scored lower on enjoyment in news consumption than the 15-year-olds who took part in the study at age 14 (OR = .74, $p = .04$). Finally, the 18-year-olds who did not take part in the study at age 16 scored higher on setting long-term goals (OR = 1.56, $p = .03$), higher on general efficacy (OR = 1.46, $p = .01$), and lower on political discussions with parents (OR = .64, $p = .03$) than the 18-year-olds who participated in the study at age 17. Nagelkerke R^2 varied between 0.02 and 0.06 in the four comparisons, and the few significant differences had low p values. Thus, we conclude that the analyses of political interest and behaviors reflecting psychological needs 1 and 2 years earlier than when the participants reported on interest-triggering events were unlikely to be based on biased data.

Inspection of the data for missing values showed that the proportion of missing data for all study variables for the two cohorts was 14% (range = 13.0%–15.6%) at T_{-2} and 12.4% (range = 11.0%–14.6%) at T_{-1} . We employed the expectation maximization (EM) algorithm at item level to deal with missing information (Dempster, Laird, & Rubin, 1977). The EM algorithm estimates missing information on the basis of the mean vector and covariance matrix of all available data, and provides relatively unbiased estimates compared with case-deletion and single-imputation techniques, especially in large samples (Schafer & Graham, 2002). The EM estimated means, standard deviations and correlation values in the current study differed mostly at second-decimal points from the estimates obtained from the raw data.

Analyses

We used latent growth curve modeling (LGCM) to estimate the levels of and changes in adolescents’ political interest and feelings about politics over time, and indicators that reflect the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. In LGCM, intercept refers to the baseline level of the assessment and its variation across individuals, and slope refers to the mean rate of change in the group and its variance across individuals over time. We expected that the youth who experience interest-triggering events would differ in both initial level and change over time in political interest and engagement in behaviors that reflect the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence then the adolescents who have not experienced such events. Thus, we fitted multiple group LGCM to test our hypotheses. First, we identified the best fitting growth models for the two groups by fitting the latent growth models simultaneously with freely estimated intercept and slope. Model fits were evaluated using chi-square, the comparative fit index (CFI; $>.95$), the root-mean-square-error of approximation (RMSEA; $<.06$), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR; $<.08$; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Second, we compared initial levels and rates of change over time across the adolescents who did and did not experience an interest-triggering event by adding equality constraints on intercept and slope factors in the models, respectively, followed by chi-square difference tests (Kline, 2011). A significant chi-square value would indicate a statistically significant difference. In all analyses we controlled for the gender of the participants and parental education, but we found no significant effects of these variables in the analyses. All the models were run using EM imputed data sets. Simulation studies have shown that EM imputation technique performs well under different conditions,

such as varying levels of missing data, sample size, and distributional features (Gold & Bentler, 2000).

Results

Descriptive Results

In total, 18.1% of the 15-year-olds (20.4% males and 16.1% females) and 23.8% of the 18-year-olds (22.4% males and 25.1% females) reported at T_0 (during the spring term of 2012), that they had experienced interest-triggering events during the last year. Adolescents in the older cohort were more likely to report interest-triggering events than those in the younger cohort, $\chi^2(2) = 8.65$, $p = .013$.

What Events Increased the Adolescents' Civic interest?

Two raters independently coded the events. Table 2 shows the categories of events reported on by at least three persons at any age. Cohen's Kappa for interrater reliability was .79 for the younger cohort, and .85 for the older cohort. The participants reported on specific matters, such as particular school issues, environmental issues and climate change, gender inequality, and file sharing on the Internet. They also reported on events that were specifically related to Sweden, especially to immigration (e.g., that an anti-immigration party had entered the Swedish parliament) and party politics (e.g., speeches by the party leaders, the resignation of the prime minister). Other issues associated with Swedish politics that were less commonly expressed (Swedish politics: others) were Swedish weapon exports, Internet integrity, and tax policy. Of the

international events reported, the participants particularly mentioned the tragic shootings in Norway where a right-wing extremist killed 69 and wounded 110 young people at a summer camp in 2011. The participants also reported on U.S. politics (e.g., the Lehman bankruptcy, and the presidential primary elections), and on the war in Syria, the situation in Iraq, the consequences of the Arab Spring, and the economic crisis in Greece.

In some cases, the participants did not refer to any explicit issue, or a national or international event. Instead, they reported on people they had met during the last year who had evoked their political interest, and also on specific contexts to which they attributed an increase in interest, such as engaging in tasks they had been assigned at school or that they had had teachers who had inspired them. Some also mentioned being engaged and activated by peers, the media, and information and contacts on social media. Finally, in some cases, the participants did not mention being activated by external sources, but said that they had come to the realization one day that they needed to be active themselves on one or several specific issues. Some participants became 18 years of age in 2012, and eligible to vote, and they reported on this as a triggering event.

Overall, it is noteworthy that, for many adolescents, international and national crises, wars, and threats, were reasons to become more interested in civic affairs. In the words of the adolescents, their civic interest increased because these events challenged their perspectives on fairness, rights, and values, and their view of a just society. By contrast, other events positively spurred the adolescents' interest because they gave them eye-opening experiences, such as events at school, people who stimulated their thinking, and having the opportunity to vote. We compared the adolescent reports with media reports during the last year. Ultimately, most of the events that the adolescents reported were events that had been brought up by the media during the last year.

Table 2
Reported Events That Had Increased the Adolescents' Civic Interest in the Two Cohorts at T_0 (2012)

Reported events	Age 15		Age 18	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Specific issues				
School issues	3	2.0	5	2.8
Environment & climate change	1	0.7	4	2.3
File sharing	4	2.7	4	2.3
Others: Specific issues	4	2.7	6	3.4
Swedish politics				
Immigration	12	8.0	13	7.3
Party politics	11	7.3	10	5.6
Others: Swedish politics	5	3.3	10	5.6
International events				
Norway	11	7.3	16	9.0
USA	5	3.3	1	0.6
Arab Spring & Middle East	3	2.0	10	5.6
Greece	4	2.7	1	0.6
Others: International events	10	6.7	10	5.6
Source				
School	14	9.3	14	7.9
Influential teachers	4	2.7	1	0.6
Peers	2	1.3	6	3.4
Media & social media	9	6.0	14	7.9
Self				
Own development	10	6.7	17	9.6
Voting age	0	0.0	9	5.1
Could not be coded	38	25.3	26	14.7
Total	150		177	

Earlier Differences in Political Interest and Feelings About Politics, and Change Over Time

Our first hypothesis was that the adolescents who had experienced an interest-triggering event would have been more interested in politics 2 years earlier than the adolescents who did not report having had any such experience. We compared the intercepts of the LGCM for political interest for the adolescents who reported an interest-triggering event with those who did not report such an event (see Tables 3 and 4). For both the younger and older cohorts, political interest was significantly higher among the adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event than among those who did not experience such an event, controlling for gender and parent education level. The same pattern was observed for differences in feelings about politics. The adolescents who experienced interest-triggering events had more positive feelings toward politics than those who did not experience such events. Overall, the adolescents who experienced interest-triggering events, in both the younger and older cohorts, had a higher interest in politics and more positive feelings toward politics 2 years earlier, suggesting a genuine intrinsic motivation regarding political issues.

Table 3

Growth in Basic Psychological Needs for Younger Adolescents Who Did and Did Not Experience Interest-Triggering Events

						Test of equalities ^a	
Experienced events (Yes or No)	Age 13, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Age 14, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Age 15, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Intercept	Slope	Equality of intercept	Equality of slope
Intrinsic motivation							
Political interest							
No	2.76 (.89)	2.78 (.96)	2.74 (.93)	2.76***	−.02	13.20***	18.33***
Yes	3.07 (.92)	3.27 (.87)	3.47 (.93)	3.06***	.20***		
Feelings about politics							
No	2.84 (1.13)	3.01 (1.24)	3.31 (1.23)	2.82***	.25***	20.21***	10.83***
Yes	3.3 (1.12)	3.57 (1.15)	4.18 (1.10)	3.28***	.42***		
Autonomy							
Engagement in news consumption							
No	3.37 (1.28)	3.35 (1.23)	3.5 (1.26)	3.35***	.06*	7.50**	4.66*
Yes	3.68 (1.24)	3.84 (1.22)	4.09 (1.17)	3.65***	.20***		
Setting long-term goals							
No	2.08 (.68)	2.01 (.68)	2.02 (.64)	2.07***	−.03*	5.74*	3.85*
Yes	2.24 (.76)	2.22 (.70)	2.37 (.71)	2.23***	.05		
Relatedness							
Family social climate							
No	4.12 (.74)	4.06 (.79)	4.03 (.78)	4.11***	−.05***	.59	.12
Yes	4.16 (.78)	4.13 (.81)	4.04 (.86)	4.16***	−.04		
Political discussions with parents							
No	2.24 (.69)	2.23 (.65)	2.36 (.69)	2.21***	.04*	6.19**	8.10**
Yes	2.36 (.69)	2.51 (.69)	2.68 (.77)	2.36***	.16***		
Adolescent-initiated discussions							
No	2.44 (1.02)	2.29 (.91)	2.32 (.94)	2.41***	−.06*	4.20*	9.14**
Yes	2.63 (1.03)	2.63 (.96)	2.81 (1.05)	2.60***	.08*		
Talking to others on the Internet							
No	1.38 (.40)	1.4 (.41)	1.47 (.43)	1.37***	.05**	8.67**	6.30**
Yes	1.52 (.49)	1.55 (.50)	1.78 (.56)	1.50***	.11***		
Competence							
Political efficacy							
No	2.40 (.63)	2.39 (.72)	2.47 (.76)	2.39***	.04**	12.35***	9.51**
Yes	2.59 (.67)	2.77 (.69)	2.87 (.69)	2.59***	.14***		

^a Equalities of intercepts and slopes were tested using equality constraints and subsequent chi-square difference test. Significant test statistics suggest statistically significant differences in the estimates.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The differences between the adolescents who did and did not experience an interest-triggering event also were observed in how their political interest and feelings about politics changed over time. In the younger cohort (see Table 3), and in the older cohort (see Table 4), the comparisons between the slope factors (overtime changes) showed that the adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event increased in political interest significantly more than the adolescents who did not experience such an event. This is graphically shown in Figure 1. Adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event also increased in feelings about politics at a faster rate than the adolescents who did not experience an event. All these findings support the first study hypothesis. Adolescents who had experiences of interest-triggering events were already more interested in politics and had more positive feelings about politics 2 years earlier, and their early interest in politics grew more over time than those who had not had such experiences. The effect sizes for the differences in the intercepts of political interest between the youths who had and had not experienced an interest-triggering event, were $d = .34$, $.54$, and $.74$ for the younger cohort, and $d = .36$, $.53$, and $.78$ for the older cohort, on the three consecutive measurement occasions. Similarly, the

effect sizes for the differences in the intercepts of feelings about politics were $d = .45$, $.53$, and $.75$ for the younger cohort, and $d = .44$, $.63$, and $.72$ for the older cohort, on the three consecutive measurement occasions.

Engagement in Behaviors That Reflect Needs for Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence

In SDT, it is presumed that people with an intrinsic interest in a particular issue will, when free to explore, engage in behaviors and have views that reflect their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. We suggested some specific behaviors and views that would mirror these three psychological needs. Regarding indicators of autonomous engagement in politically oriented behaviors, we expected the adolescents with a political interest to enjoy following news, and be more committed to further engagement much earlier in time than the other adolescents (at T_{-2} and T_{-2}). We tested hypotheses using multiple Group LGCM (see Tables 3 and 4). The comparisons of intercepts across the groups showed that the adolescents who experienced interest-triggering events, in both the younger and older cohorts, were more likely to enjoy following news about social and political issues and be committed

Table 4

Growth in Basic Psychological Needs for Older Adolescents Who Did and Did Not Experience Interest-Triggering Events

Experienced events (Yes or No)	Age 16, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Age 17, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Age 18, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Intercept	Slope	Test of Equalities ^a	
						Equality of intercept	Equality of slope
Intrinsic motivation							
Political interest							
No	2.98 (.91)	3.11 (.94)	3.04 (.99)	2.98***	.12***	18.12***	9.78***
Yes	3.31 (.90)	3.59 (.85)	3.79 (.82)	3.31***	.25***		
Feelings about politics							
No	3.29 (1.24)	3.42 (1.24)	3.49 (1.25)	3.30***	.10***	29.87***	9.92***
Yes	3.81 (1.15)	4.16 (1.11)	4.30 (1.00)	3.84***	.25***		
Autonomy							
Engagement in news consumption							
No	3.61 (1.15)	3.84 (1.11)	3.88 (1.14)	3.65***	.10*	8.42**	1.23
Yes	3.93 (1.24)	4.17 (1.12)	4.30 (1.05)	3.94***	.18***		
Setting long-term goals							
No	2.05 (.65)	2.07 (.68)	2.06 (.62)	2.05***	.01	11.27***	18.79***
Yes	2.25 (.82)	2.45 (.74)	2.58 (.75)	2.26***	.16***		
Relatedness							
Family social climate							
No	3.91 (.81)	3.98 (.81)	3.97 (.82)	3.91***	.03*	.01	.56
Yes	3.92 (.89)	3.95 (.85)	4.03 (.86)	3.92***	.05*		
Political discussions with parents							
No	2.25 (.62)	2.35 (.62)	2.53 (.67)	2.23***	.14***	8.90**	8.02**
Yes	2.41 (.6)	2.59 (.62)	2.86 (.73)	2.39***	.22***		
Adolescent-initiated discussions							
No	2.38 (.96)	2.41 (.90)	2.36 (.92)	2.38***	-.01	24.15***	.97
Yes	2.82 (.99)	2.85 (.95)	2.88 (.93)	2.80***	.04		
Talking to others on Internet							
No	1.54 (.44)	1.58 (.47)	1.66 (.50)	1.53***	.06***	28.31***	3.01
Yes	1.76 (.54)	1.76 (.57)	1.95 (.59)	1.76***	.10***		
Competence							
Political efficacy							
No	2.53 (.69)	2.62 (.74)	2.66 (.75)	2.54***	.06**	16.75***	13.20***
Yes	2.76 (.67)	2.95 (.67)	3.08 (.67)	2.77***	.16***		

^a Equalities of intercepts and slopes were tested using equality constraints and subsequent chi-square difference test. Significant test statistics suggest statistically significant differences in the estimates.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

to engage in politics in the future compared with those who did not experience such events. In addition, these adolescents displayed a steeper increase in their enjoyment of following news with political content over time compared with those who had not experienced an interest-triggering event. This pattern of findings was highly similar across the cohorts. Regarding setting long-term goals, the younger adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event did not increase in their commitment over time, whereas the adolescents who did not experience an event decreased in their commitment. That is, the latter group became less and less committed to engagement in politics in the future. In older adolescents, only those who experienced an interest-triggering event developed a stronger commitment to engage in politics in the future. Overall, consistent with our hypothesis, the adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event were not only higher in their enjoyment of news consumption and commitment to future engagement at an earlier point in time, but also generally showed a steeper increase in the behaviors that indicate their autonomous engagement in politics.

Regarding indicators of behaviors that may satisfy the relatedness need, we compared the initial level and overtime changes across the adolescents who experienced and who did

not experience an interest-triggering event on four indicators (see Tables 3 and 4). Consistently we found that the adolescents who had experienced an interest-triggering event were more likely earlier in time to engage in political discussions with parents, initiate discussions with parents, and also talk to others on the Internet than the adolescents who did not experience such an event. In addition, in the younger cohort, comparison between the slopes suggested that the overtime changes were steeper for the adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event compared with those who did not experience such an event. The older cohort did not differ in their overtime change in self-initiation of political discussion and communicating with others on the Internet. Regarding the adolescents' perception of family climate, there was no difference in either the initial level or the rate of overtime change across the adolescents who did and did not experience an interest-triggering event, in either the younger or the older cohort. Overall, the findings again suggest that the adolescents who experienced an interest-triggering event engaged in behaviors that may satisfy their needs for relatedness much earlier, and their discussions with other people increased over time more, than the adolescents who did not experience such an event.

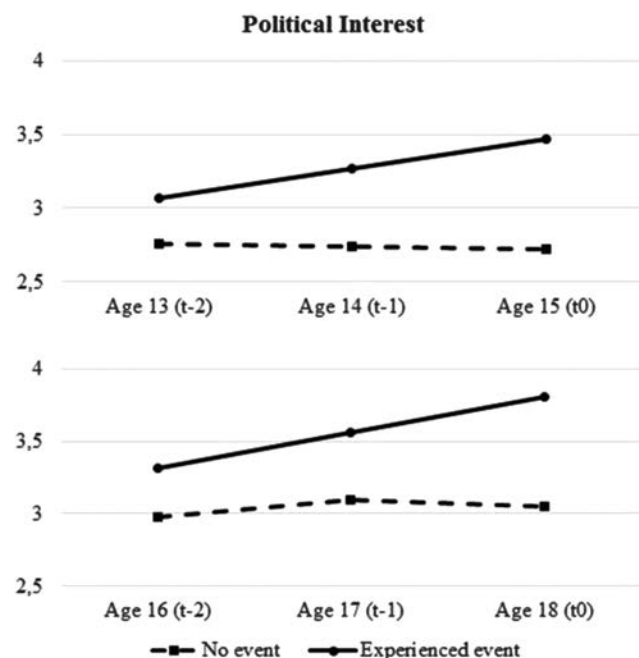


Figure 1. Political interest at three points in time for the participants who experienced and did not experience interest-triggering events.

As an indicator of the need for competence, we compared the two groups on their feelings of political efficacy (see Tables 3 and 4). Our findings confirmed our expectations that, in both age cohorts, the adolescents who experienced interest-triggering events were higher in political efficacy initially, and displayed a steeper increase over time, compared with the adolescents who did not experience any events.

Observers' Views

All the results presented so far reflect reality as experienced by the participants. This reality may, or may not be verified by independent observers. All students nominated the two classmates who knew a lot about what was happening in the world and brought up such issues in class—an outside-observer point of view. These peer nominations were collected 1 and 2 years prior to the participants reporting on interest-triggering experiences. We aggregated the measures at the two time points and compared the adolescents who had reported experiencing interest-triggering events with the adolescents who had no such experiences.

As shown in Table 5, the students who reported interest-triggering events later on were perceived as more politically active in their classes both 1 and 2 years earlier (T_{-1} and T_{-2}) than the adolescents who did not report such experiences. This is in line with our finding that there was higher political interest earlier in time among the adolescents who later experienced interest-triggering events. We also examined whether the rate of change over the years differed between the adolescents who had experienced an interest-triggering event and those who had not (not reported in the tables). We found no significant difference.

Prospective Analyses of Political Interest and Event Experiences

For the participants in the younger cohort we have information about their interest in politics one year *after* (age 16) they reported on encountering an interest-triggering event. This offered the opportunity to ask the prospective question of whether encountering these types of events would subsequently increase the adolescents' interest in politics more broadly.

We used a cross-lagged panel model and tested these assumptions using data from ages 15 and 16 (T_0 and T_{+1}) for the younger cohort. This analysis showed, first, a stability of political interest from age 15 to age 16 ($\beta = .59, p < .001$), and a stability for the dichotomous measure of having encountering interest-triggering events or not ($\beta = .21, p < .001$). It should be noted that, at age 16, 32.5% of the participants reported having experienced such an event, compared with 23.8% one year earlier. Second, having encountered an interest-triggering event at age 15 increased the adolescents' political interest from age 15 to age 16 ($\beta = .11, p = .003$). Thus, encountering interest-triggering events leads to a more general interest in politics over time in mid-adolescence. Also, the adolescents' political interest at age 15 increased the likelihood of encountering an interest-triggering event at age 16 ($\beta = .22, p < .001$). The magnitude of the overtime effect of early political interest and experiencing an interest-triggering event were not significantly different, $\chi^2(1) = .05, p = .817$. Apparently, bidirectional associations exist between adolescents' political interest and encountering interest-triggering events.

Discussion

At a time when young people are exposed to a vast amount of political information, this study set out to understand why some adolescents encounter everyday events that increase their civic interest whereas others do not.

Prior Political Interest

Based on SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), we proposed that adolescents who encountered events that triggered their civic interest were more politically interested and had more positive feelings about political issues at a much earlier point in time than the

Table 5
Peer Ratings of Political Activity at School at T_{-1} and T_{-2} for the Participants Who Experienced an Event That Had Increased Their Civic Interest at T_0 and Those Who Had Not, Controlling for Gender

Cohorts	No event at T ₀		Event at T ₀		F	p	Effect size
	M	SD	M	SD			
Younger cohort							
T ₋₂ (age 13)	-.08	(.80)	.19	(1.07)	10.09	**	.28
T ₋₁ (age 14)	-.07	(.83)	.22	(1.09)	9.51	**	.31
Older cohort							
T ₋₂ (age 16)	-.07	(.83)	.38	(1.22)	23.48	***	.43
T ₋₁ (age 17)	-.08	(.83)	.33	(1.21)	24.36	***	.40

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

adolescents who did not experience any interest-triggering events. We found support for these hypotheses in the two age cohorts that we examined. Specifically, we found that the adolescents who reported that they had encountered interest-triggering events were already significantly more interested in and had more positive feelings about politics 1 and 2 years earlier than the adolescents who had no such event experiences. The results also show that the adolescents who reported having encountered an event that had triggered their civic interest increased their interest in and positive feelings about politics over the three years covered by the study more than other adolescents. In short, before they encountered an event that increased their civic interest, these adolescents were already more interested in politics and had more positive feelings about politics than the other adolescents, and their prior interest in and feelings about politics increased more over time than the other adolescents.

Characteristics of the Reported Events

The participants were encouraged to recall any event that had increased their civic interest. They reported on very diverse events. Apparently, what is eye-opening for one adolescent is not for another. This challenges previous ideas in the literature that young people in the same developmental period experience similar national and international events that shape their interests and attitudes (Jennings & Niemi, 1981).

Some features of the adolescents' reports should be noted. First, almost all of the events that the participants reported seemed to be events that had been high on the agenda of the media during the previous year, such as the killing of politically active young people in Norway, the US presidential primary elections, and particular occurrences in Swedish political life. It seems as if the news reported in the media in Sweden largely became the events that the Swedish adolescents themselves reported.

Second, the adolescents perceived some events as inspiring, exciting, and motivational. For example, some 18-year-old adolescents greeted the prospect of voting with enthusiasm. Also, tasks at school that encouraged adolescents to look into civic affairs, and inspiring teachers, were perceived as motivational. But what also stands out is that a majority of the events were "negative" in the sense of being perceived as threats, dangers, or as challenging the adolescents' values. These events concerned terrorist attacks, wars, crises, and global inequality in various forms. In the words of the adolescents, they were eye-openers because they challenged the adolescents' views on justice, fairness, and morality, and prompted their concern. The finding that "negative" events increase adolescents' civic interest has its counterpart in previous studies showing that parents' skepticism and critical comments about the news were positively correlated with parent-child talks about political issues (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001). Apparently, the things that motivate many adolescents' political interest are the problems that they perceive around them—locally, nationally, and internationally (cf. Bloemraad & Trost, 2008).

This has implications for conventional attempts to inspire adolescents to be involved in politics. It is not only positive information that thrills and excites young people that can be used as an input for discussion. "Negative" events may also spur adolescents' critical thinking and discussion, and motivate them to search for more information. Discussions of controversial topics are rare in schools (cf. Torney-Purta, 2002), and might be problematic for

teachers to bring up (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014). Still, because students specifically mentioned that tasks to solve when reading about societal issues in their textbooks had triggered their thinking, a political problem-solving approach to "negative" political issues might stimulate adolescents' civic interest and generate excitement in class (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006).

Self-Determination Theory

We used SDT to make specific predictions about what adolescents' political interest would entail in terms of exploratory behaviors. We made assumptions about which behaviors these adolescents would engage in and which opinions they would hold if they had an earlier intrinsic interest in politics. We found that the adolescents who reported events that triggered their civic interest scored higher on the exploratory behaviors that mirror autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs already 2 years earlier. Commensurate with the SDT idea that an intrinsic interest over time drives exploratory behaviors that satisfy the three psychological needs, we found a steeper increase in most of the indicators reflecting these needs among the adolescents who had encountered interest-triggering events than among the others. This was true for both age cohorts.

There is one exception to these findings. The need for relatedness has been defined as feeling closely connected to others and feeling cared for. We did not find that the adolescents who experienced events that triggered their civic interest earlier in time perceived themselves valued, supported and close to their parents more than other adolescents. The creators of SDT have stated that the need for relatedness might be of less importance relative to needs to autonomy and competence, because the support of others might not be essential among people with high intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Our interpretation of the findings is that political discussion in many families is not likely to be a major shared activity, or involve shared goals. Hence, good parent-child relations may not automatically foster political engagement in adolescents. However, parents' autonomy support to their children may play a role, such that parents' reactions toward political discussions can encourage or thwart intrinsic motivation. Further research is needed to explore the relationships between intrinsic motivation, political interest, need for relatedness, and the way that parents react—positively or negatively—to their children's political development.

For the other indicators supposed to be associated with satisfying the need for relatedness, we found that the adolescents who encountered events that triggered their civic interest discussed politics more with their parents much earlier in time, and the frequency of these discussions increased over time more for these adolescents than other adolescents. In the political socialization literature, it is traditionally assumed that parents transfer their political and civic values, and attitudes to their adolescents through discussions at home. In the present study, we argued that political discussions in the family partly reflect adolescents' choice to open up these kinds of discussions as a way of engaging in nourishing communications with their parents. This argument was further supported by finding that discussions about political and societal issues initiated by the adolescents themselves occurred more frequently much earlier in time among the adolescents who encountered interest-triggering events, and in the younger cohort in-

creased more steeply over time, than among the adolescents who did not have these event experiences. We also found the same with respect to initiating political discussions with others on the Internet.

SDT has, with few exceptions (Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996; Losier, Perreault, Koestner, & Vallerand, 2001), not been a main theme of political socialization researchers. However, the theory, with its agentic perspective, complements the classical models that primarily emphasize the role of external socialization agents, like parents, peers, school, and the media (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). The findings in this study support the view that the SDT framework offers a new way of looking at adolescents' political development. Adolescents who encountered events that triggered their civic interest were much earlier in time more interested in political issues and had more positive feelings about politics than other adolescents. In SDT terminology, they had a stronger intrinsic motivation to attend to political issues than other adolescents. Also, they engaged in behaviors that reflected their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, much earlier in time than the adolescents who did not encounter interest-triggering events. All these features were derived from the SDT.

At the same time, it should be noted that the findings in this study could be understood from theoretical frames other than that of SDT. For example, the basic assumption in SDT that peoples' exploratory behaviors are intrinsically motivated and lead to integration and growth, have their counterparts in the schemata of assimilation and accommodation in the organismic theory of Piaget (Deci & Ryan, 2013). In selective attention research (Kahneman, 1973) it is proposed that, guided by initial cues, people's attention will be drawn to some pieces of information in their environments rather than others. In a sense, they will be "prepared" to be more influenced by such events than other adolescents (Klofstad, 2010). Indeed, it can be argued that some adolescents are more interested in political issues earlier than others, and this difference increases over time and makes them more alert to political issues. The strength of SDT, though, is that many facets of this development can seemingly be predicted. A systematic agentic perspective has not yet featured in the political socialization literature. The agentic feature of SDT theory offers such a framework. For instance, an agentic perspective might well integrate previous research showing that engagement in civic behaviors is associated with development of a civic identity (Hart & Fegley, 1995). According to SDT, we should expect intrinsically motivated behaviors to be more deeply integrated into the self over time. In sum, there is an exciting future for studies that make use of agentic perspectives when explaining the political development of young people.

The agentic frame of this study does not necessarily contradict the classical explanations in the political socialization literature concerning the roots of adolescents' political interest. Many would argue that these roots lie in the ideas that their parents transmitted, what their peers tried to influence, what the media and Internet communicated, and what their teachers brought up at school (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). Others would argue that genetic or personality characteristics, such as a general openness to experience, or environmental factors operating at different levels are at work. Still others would argue more generally for an interaction between individual characteristics and environmental factors. In

this study, we found strong support for the agentic perspective in that, prior to having experienced events that triggered some adolescents' civic interest, these adolescents were already more interested in and had positive feelings about politics, and engaged in behaviors that were assumed to satisfy their psychological needs. Note that we did not measure the satisfaction of needs directly. We inferred which behaviors, feelings and opinions, would be involved if adolescents aimed further to satisfy their basic needs when deepening their political interest. There are many different study designs to use when taking a self-determination perspective on development. Future studies should complement the present study with measures that directly assess the extent to which different proposed behaviors and opinions satisfy the needs of the adolescents when they expand their interest in politics.

In this study, we used two cohorts of adolescents. They reported, at the ages of 15 and 18, on events that had triggered their civic interest. In many respects, the findings reported in the study were similar for the two age cohorts. Even though the level of political interest was substantially higher for the members of the older cohort than for those of the younger, we found a higher prior political interest among those who had experienced events triggering their civic interest, a stronger increase over time in political interest, and very similar changes in measures reflecting psychological needs over time. In short, roughly the same type of progression over time seemed to operate across the cohorts, suggesting that our findings are not due to chance fluctuations but reflect robust developmental processes in adolescence.

Limitations and Strengths

There are limitations to this study. The recall issue is clearly a limitation, because it is concerned with validity. It might be that some participants were unable to recall if they had actually experienced an event that increased their civic interest. It might also be that we capture primarily the adolescents who had experienced an event that had happened right before the data collection rather than those who had experienced an event earlier in the year. Indeed, it can be questioned whether people are generally aware of what influences them, and if they can connect a particular event to the subjective view that the event increased their civic interest. On the other hand, the findings of the study support the idea that the adolescents who reported having encountered an event that triggered their civic interest were more interested in politics much earlier, and also engaged in behaviors and held opinions that, according to SDT, would be influenced by their initial interest in politics. Perhaps the most convincing finding is that, according to peer reports, the adolescents who remembered encountering events that increased their civic interest were also the ones who, earlier in time, were perceived as more politically active in class by their peers. They were more often nominated by their classmates, 1 and 2 years earlier, as students who were knowledgeable about what was happening in society and the world, and who brought up societal issues in class, than the adolescents who did not report any civic-interest-triggering experiences. Contrary to expectation, we did not find an increase over time in these nominations of politically active students.

Another limitation is that we cannot meaningfully differentiate between first-hand experiences and experiences of having heard about issues in the media or in communications with others. If this

had been possible, we would have been able to say something more precise about the sources of information.

A further limitation is that we only considered the adolescents who reported an event that increased their interest. Due to a lack of statistical power, we excluded the ones who reported that they had experienced an event that decreased their civic interest. Although they made up only a small group of adolescents, following them would have been interesting, because those who lose civic interest are rarely talked about in the literature, and they add another dimension to the widely accepted view that there is a general increase in political interest from mid- and late adolescence into adulthood (Russo & Stattin, 2016).

The study has important strengths. To our knowledge, it is the first to have made use of predictions from SDT to understand how adolescents are influenced by everyday civic events that trigger their interest. The agentic perspective of SDT seems to be useful for getting a grasp on what characterizes the adolescents who have experiences of events that trigger their civic interest. Indeed, by using predictions from SDT we were able to say a lot about the participants' political interest and exploratory behaviors long before they encountered events that increased their civic interest. Another strength is that we had a longitudinal design. This enabled us to examine not only what had earlier differentiated the adolescents who experienced events that triggered their civic interest from other adolescents, but also to propose specific hypotheses about changes over time. Third, stability and change in political interest in the literature have, with few exceptions (Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Neundorff, Smets, & García-Albacete, 2013; Shani, 2009), been investigated in adult populations. At a time when perhaps the majority of young people are not particularly interested in politics (Russo & Stattin, 2016), there is a need to understand more about the processes through which some adolescents are influenced by events that happen to them in everyday life, and, more generally, about what triggers adolescents' political interest. A first attempt at this is presented in this study.

Conclusions

What role do civic-interest-triggering events play in adolescents' political development? A clear message of this study is that encountering events that trigger adolescents' civic interest lead to higher political interest later on. This suggests that the promoting of the gaining of these kinds of event experiences on the part of adolescents should be important for society. Perhaps young people need to have such critical event experiences throughout their development in order for them to acquire a strong interest in politics? We can only speculate about the role of these event experiences in adolescents' political development. Apparently, there is quite a substantial proportion of adolescents who have these experiences, and they seem to be more common among older than younger adolescents. One would expect to find an overrepresentation of the adolescents who have these experiences at one age who also have the experiences at another age. But adolescents who have not had these event experiences may also, at one or another point in time, come to experience them. Extrapolating to the whole period from early to late adolescence, a high proportion of adolescents may have event experiences of this kind. If there were a means of transforming the eye-opening experiences of young people into political engagement, then the pessimistic view

of adolescents as generally uninterested in politics (Putnam, 2000, 2015; Rahn & Transue, 1998; Sloam, 2014) would perhaps change to a more optimistic one, that change is possible.

At the broadest level, our results show that interested adolescents not only attend and respond to civic cues in their environment, but also actively engage in behaviors that allow them to explore their interests. They lend support to the presumption in SDT that, when young people encounter experiences that trigger their interest, they will engage in behaviors that satisfy their basic psychological needs. Interest as a motivational influence to be attentive to civic information and to act and behave to satisfy the basic needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, may become a new arena for future research.

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