Mummy's Girls, Daddy's Boys: The Gendered Transmission of Political Engagement in Families

Abstract

Despite gains in women's education, workforce participation, and leadership roles, a gender gap in political self-efficacy persists across European nations. Women consistently report lower confidence in their ability to participate in and understand politics compared to their male counterparts. This study posits that, although society inherently signals to boys their place in politics, a politically engaged mother can counteract this by providing her daughter with a positive role model and fostering her interest in politics, thereby bolstering the daughter's political self-efficacy. Drawing from survey data of 15–16-year-old Finnish students (n = 5,220) from 2021, the findings reveal two critical insights: Fathers tend to boost political self-efficacy more in sons than in daughters. In contrast, the political engagement of mothers has a stronger positive association with their daughters' confidence in politics. Moreover, parents' political involvement fosters political interest in their children, which then enhances the latter's sense of political self-efficacy.

Keywords: Political self-efficacy, gender, political engagement, adolescents

Despite the significant gains in women's educational attainment, their active participation in the workforce, and their increasing share of leadership positions, the following 'enduring conundrum' (Beckwith 1986) sticks fast: compared with European men, the political self-efficacy of European women is at a significantly lower level. In all European countries, women have less confidence in their abilities to participate in politics (Hoskins et al. 2023). Similar results have also been obtained in Canada (Gidengil et al. 2008) and the US (Bos et al. 2022). Curiously, this finding holds even when the focus is narrowed to the Nordic countries despite women's achievements in gender equality and the strong political representation of women in this region (Møller et al. 2021).

The socioeconomic resource model has not been able to provide an explanation for the gender gap in political self-efficacy: women still derive less political competence from affluence than men, feminist mobilisation and changing gender roles have hardly narrowed the gap and neither

women's nor men's political self-efficacy is related to their work outside of the home (Thomas 2012). It seems that many women are still socialised to believe that politics is a man's world. While young children, both boys and girls, already perceive politics as a male-dominated space, the older they grow, the more deeply they internalise gendered expectations which guide their interests towards professions that fit their gender roles (Bos et al. 2022). This makes girls turn their back on politics, especially on political leadership, and the gap also exists at other levels of political engagement, for instance, in terms of political interest, political self-efficacy and political knowledge (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Frazer and McDonald 2003; Mondak and Anderson 2004). In other words, in gendered political socialisation (as proposed by Bos et al. 2022), children's socialisation to gender roles and their political socialisation are two intersecting processes. Consequently, at a young age, girls already observe that political roles conflict with their defined gender roles (see also Lay et al. 2021). Since society provides natural cues for boys on their place in politics, an example given by a politically engaged mother may counteract this strong predisposition by also providing girls with a positive role model. Therefore, we should have a closer look at mother–daughter relationships (as proposed by Gidengil et al. 2010).

In this study, we investigate to what extent the perceived parental political engagement of mothers and fathers (including their political encouragement) increases their adolescent girls' and boys' political self-efficacy and whether political interest acts as a mediator in the association between perceived parental political engagement and children's political self-efficacy. Both political self-efficacy and political interest encompass a sense of involvement in political life; however, they represent distinct components of it (Hess and Torney-Purta, 1967: xxiii). *Political self-efficacy* (also known as *internal political efficacy*) pertains to the confidence individuals possess in their capacity to understand and effectively participate in

politics (Niemi et al. 1991), whereas *political interest* encompasses a general curiosity about political events and ongoing evaluations of political events, potentially bolstered by the belief that citizens should demonstrate such an interest (Hess and Torney-Purta 1967: 152; Prior 2010). Arguably, these facets can undergo differential development throughout childhood and adolescence.

Our main argument is that mothers, acting as role models, may either passively or actively encourage their daughters' sense of involvement in politics: passively, by purely showing an example of a politically engaged woman, and actively, by supporting their daughters' interest in politics and their ability to understand and discuss political matters. While the passive observation of a politically engaged mother may, evidently, affect the political self-efficacy of a daughter via status transmission (see, e.g. Verba et al. 2003) and generate a belief in the daughter that she can do what her mother can do due to their similar social status – it is more likely that politically engaged mothers increase their daughters' political self-efficacy by evoking their daughters' interest in politics. We argue that mothers, more than fathers, can stimulate their daughters' political interest by discussing politics in a manner that is especially relevant to girls, thus making politics more accessible to their daughters.

We draw empirical evidence from the first round of the Finnish Adolescents' Political Engagement Panel (FAPEP), a large survey conducted in spring 2021 among 15–16-year-old students in their final year of comprehensive education in Finland (n = 5,220). In Finland, similar to other Nordic countries, there is nearly equal representation of women and men in political assemblies (Møller et al. 2021). During the data collection period, women accounted for 47 per cent of the Members of Parliament in Finland. This suggests that the impact of the lack of female role models in politics on the gender gap in adolescent political self-efficacy

may be less pronounced in the Finnish context. Consequently, studying the Finnish context allows us to better isolate and examine the impact of familial role models.

Our results show, first, that the fathers appear to positively influence their sons' political self-efficacy to a greater extent than they positively influence their daughters' political self-efficacy and that the mothers' levels of political engagement are more strongly associated with their daughters' political self-efficacy than their sons' political self-efficacy. Second, political interest clearly acts as a mediator in the association between the parents' political engagement and encouragement, and their children's political self-efficacy. In other words, the parents' political engagement impacts on their children's political interest, which then affects the children's political self-efficacy.

Political socialisation by gender

In the broader context of *political socialisation* – defined by Sapiro (2004) as 'the patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning, constructing their relationship to the political contexts in which they live' – the development of political self-efficacy can be approached from three perspectives (as proposed by Beaumont 2011). The first perspective emphasises the role of social status in providing individuals with the material resources necessary for political participation. These resources contribute to their confidence in their ability to engage in political activities effectively. The second perspective highlights the compensating effect of families, organisations and schools in reducing disparities that are based on social status. These institutions play a role in providing support and opportunities for individuals from different social backgrounds, helping to foster political self-efficacy. The third perspective, which is particularly relevant to this study, argues that political self-efficacy

emerges through sociopolitical learning, which focuses on the influence of the environment and social relationships. This includes the presence of role models who actively engage in politics and make the acquisition of political skills meaningful. Sociopolitical learning operates through four mechanisms: learning within politically active communities, organising collective action on issues, engaging in political discourse and learning within collaborative pluralistic contexts that allow for diverse opinions. As Wray-Lake (2019) noted, youths learn to be political by forming attachments to their communities in everyday life.

Beaumont's (2011) concept of sociopolitical learning highlights the importance of a diverse context in acquiring civic skills. However, adolescents face more limited resources and opportunities for direct political engagement compared with adults, highlighting the influential role of the family in early political socialisation. For instance, political interest and its growth seem to be strongly determined by family. The transition to adulthood and life events such as starting a family, entering the labour market or getting married do not directly affect the growth of political interest (except for those who have grown up in less politicised families) (Neundorf et al. 2013). While peer groups play a vital role in the lives of adolescents, political values are typically not the defining features that connect the members of peer groups (Dinas 2014). However, in cases where the family has a lower level of political engagement, non-familial socialisation agents can become more influential in shaping political attitudes and behaviour (Jennings et al. 2009).

While acknowledging the genetic contribution to the transmission of political values – such as the predisposition of individuals with higher levels of extraversion and openness to exhibit increased political self-efficacy (Vecchione and Caprara 2009) – prior research provides robust evidence that the family environment has a significant influence on shaping adolescents'

political attitudes (Hatemi and McDermott 2012). According to voting studies, the influence of the environment operates through two mechanisms. Firstly, according to social learning theory, children observe their parents' behaviour and adopt it or learn from the consequences it produces. This observational learning, also known as *modelling*, involves individuals acquiring new behaviour and using this encoded information as a guide for future actions (Bandura 1977). Secondly, status transmission theory suggests that children tend to inherit both their parents' socioeconomic status and educational attainment, which in turn influences their development of similar political attitudes and behaviour (Glass et al. 1986; Siegel-Stechler 2021). The family environment can also have an indirect impact. As proposed by Dalton (1982), parents shape their children's social characteristics by placing them in specific social milieus. Through this social-milieu pathway, the secondary groups associated with social class, race, religion and regional attachments serve as points of political reference for children, and their influence persists even after leaving the childhood home.

Traditional theories of value transmission from parents to their offspring – based on imitation, reinforcement and explicit education – have later been challenged. Contemporary perspectives emphasise the children's agency in their political socialisation (McDewitt and Chaffee 2002; Hatemi and Ojeda 2020) and the importance of discussion within families (Quintelier 2015). As children receive political input from sources beyond the family, parents adapt by enhancing their civic competence to maintain their leadership role within the family (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002). This adaptation can also spill over into actual political participation. Dahlgaard (2018) demonstrated that parents whose children became eligible to vote were more likely to vote themselves compared with parents whose children were not yet eligible. This phenomenon, known as *the trickle-up effect*, suggests that children can influence family communication patterns that facilitate political learning.

According to the perception-adoption model (Ojeda and Hatemi 2015; Hatemi and Ojeda 2020), children's values are not simply replicated from their parents. Instead, children first perceive their parents' values, whether accurately or inaccurately, and then make a conscious or unconscious decision to adopt or reject those perceived values. It is also evident that political discussion within families does not necessarily lead to like-mindedness between parents or between parents and their children. While adolescents generally adopt the political values of their parents, and generational gaps on economic and social issues have remained stable or even decreased over time (O'Grady 2022), the older they grow, the more prone they are to challenge these values (Warren and Wicks 2011). This highlights the dynamic nature of political socialisation during this stage of life. Indeed, affective polarisation tends to increase with age: as individuals grow older and become more involved in communities, join voluntary associations and become parents, they tend to develop stronger emotional ties to their political beliefs and the parties that represent their values (Phillips 2022).

In summary, the influence of parents in transmitting political attitudes to their children is well documented. However, the extent to which this transmission is gender based – that is, whether maternal and paternal influences differ – remains understudied. Building upon the work of O'Bryan et al. (2004), Filler and Jennings (2015) discussed the following three models that theorise the gendered transmission of values from parents to their children. *The parent equivalent model* suggests that parental influence is generally equal on children, regardless of the parents' gender, particularly when the parents share a common societal perspective. *The differential effects model*, for its part, argues that mothers and fathers may have differing influences on value transmission across different spheres and attitudes. Roest et al. (2010), for example, demonstrated that parents and children tend to transmit values that are salient to them, and, considering that the political arena is still predominantly male dominated, it could be

assumed that fathers have a stronger impact on both their daughters and sons in this domain. Finally, *the same-sex model* suggests that attitudes are more readily transmitted between parents and offspring of the same sex compared with opposite-sex dyads. This model is based on the underlying notion that societal norms and expectations foster stronger social cohesion among same-sex parents and their children (Aldous and Hill 1965).

With increasing divorce rates and births out of wedlock, a growing number of children live with only one parent, typically the mother (Nielsen 2011). Furthermore, low fertility, voluntary childlessness, postponed parenthood, divorce, remarriage, post-divorce families, blended families, single parenthood, joint custody, and the increasing number of non-heteronormative families, have all contributed to rising postmodern family diversity. Fathers today are dedicating more time to childcare activities compared with the 1960s. However, on average they still spend less time on childcare than mothers (Sayer et al. 2004; Eurostat 2019). Consequently, children generally feel closer to their mothers than their fathers (Nielsen 2011). This dynamic is likely to strengthen the reciprocal process of political socialisation between mothers and children, particularly through the trickle-up effect. Indeed, mothers have been shown to engage in more conversational communication styles in comparison to fathers. The conversational communication style has been linked to higher levels of political similarity among family members (Schulman and DeAndrea 2014; Weiss 2023). Thereby, mothers may have a greater influence in shaping their children's attitudes compared with fathers. Studies show, for instance, that mothers have a significant role in transmitting gender ideology to both daughters and sons (Carlson and Knoester 2011). Mothers also transmit their partisanship to their children at a higher rate than fathers, although the differences in the early 2010s were smaller compared with the late 1990s (Oxley 2016).

Whether or not adolescents are living with both parents, they tend to identify and spend more time with their same-sex parents (Raley and Bianchi 2006). As observation and association play crucial roles in the intergenerational transmission of values and behaviour (Bandura 1977), mothers are likely to play a crucial role in the political socialisation of their daughters, especially in enhancing their political self-efficacy. Gidengil et al. (2010) suggested that the influence of a politically active mother indeed outweighs that of a politically active father. Through direct observation, a politically active mother serves as a role model, highlighting that women can engage in politics and have the capacity to understand and influence political processes.

The role-model effect of mothers becomes particularly significant given that young children already perceive politics as a male-dominated domain and, as they grow older, girls tend to view political leadership increasingly as a 'man's world'. This *gendered political socialisation* combines gender socialisation, where children observe and associate men and women with different social roles, and political socialisation, which encompasses lifelong political learning (Bos et al. 2022). In this process, the stronger role of men in politics, particularly in leadership positions, conflicts with defined gender roles and discourages girls from aspiring to political roles. Adolescence, in particular, is a period when young people often navigate complex social dynamics and – as proposed by Hill and Lynch (1983) – may face pressure to conform to traditional gender norms (the gender intensification hypothesis). Evidently, the role models outside the family sphere matter for reducing the gender gap in political self-efficacy as well. For instance, Chen et al. (2019) showed that female teachers were able to foster the formation of a science identity among girls – another male-dominated field.

As noted by Jennings et al. (2009), the effectiveness of transmitting political values depends on the extent to which cues are provided and reinforced by the socialiser. While the observation of women politicians or a politically engaged mother may not be sufficient to stimulate a girl's political self-efficacy, active political encouragement can be influential. Both a mother's example and her explicit political encouragement can have an impact from early childhood (Sapiro 2004), although some authors argue that maternal influence is strongest in early adulthood (Hooghe and Stolle 2004). This logic aligns with recent voting studies, such as those by Siegel-Stechler (2019; 2021), which emphasise the importance of parental encouragement (particularly through direct verbal instruction) in explaining youth voting behaviour.

The long-term impact of mothers on the political socialisation of their daughters is less well understood. Evidence from voter turnout studies suggests that parents' influence on young adults' political engagement decreases as they leave home and is partially replaced by the influence of peers (Bhatti and Hansen 2012). Political self-efficacy tends to increase with age as adolescents encounter political issues (e.g. in civic education classes) and may experience a growing sense of pressure to actively participate themselves (Sohl and Arensmaier 2015; Zaff et al. 2011). However, time does not heal the gender gap. In addition to the gender gap in political self-efficacy, a gender gap can also be observed in terms of political-information behaviour, political knowledge and political interest, with the gap widening over time (Arens and Watermann 2017).

The mediating role of political interest

To better understand the role-model effect that mothers have on their daughters, we should investigate the mediating role of political interest. Prior studies on descriptive representation

show that the increased share of women politicians strengthens women's and girls' psychological engagement (their interest, knowledge, and efficacy) in politics (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). One explanation for this is that the mere presence of fellow group members in political roles may make girls more likely to pay attention to and discuss politics because having women politicians challenges dominant norms about politics being a man's world (Mansbridge 1999; Fox and Lawless 2005; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). While men and boys need little additional evidence that they can enter the halls of power, for women and girls, such evidence is important in overcoming the persistent belief that politics is a masculine domain in which women have very little to achieve.

However, another prominent explanation is that women speak about politics in a manner that is relevant to girls and, hence, stimulate their interest in politics, which then increases the girls' political self-efficacy. Previous research suggests that the ability to acquire political information is often domain specific and selective, and that women are more engaged with politics when the issues are more directly relevant to them (Burns et al. 2001: 103–104). In elections, women candidates tend to pay more attention to women's issues (Fox 1997; Kahn 1993). As officeholders, women are more likely to pursue legislation and frame legislative decision-making in terms of the women's perspective (Swers 2002; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Walsh 2002). In a similar vein, by paying attention to women's issues, it is very likely that mothers can make politics more interesting and accessible to their daughters in comparison with what fathers can do. By allowing their daughters to understand that politics is more than 'wars and guns' and also by explaining, in a relevant way, the domain of 'wars and guns', mothers can increase their daughters' interest in politics, which then strengthens their daughters' sense of being able to understand and influence politics.

In line with the above argument, we present a model with political interest as a mediator between a parental role model and political self-efficacy. We argue that the mothers' role in narrowing the gender gap in political self-efficacy should work through two mechanisms. First, mothers should have a *direct role-model effect* on their daughters' political self-efficacy. Simply by observing a politically engaged mother, daughters learn that politics is not only for men. Daughters then adopt the idea that since their mothers are politically competent, the same is possible for them. Second, mothers also have an *indirect role-model effect*. When daughters discuss politics with their mothers and/or see their mothers actively participate in politics, they themselves become more interested in politics and see politics as meaningful. This increased political interest then feeds into the daughters' political self-efficacy: the more interested in politics the daughters are, the more confident they become in their ability to understand and influence it. We believe that, for daughters, the role model of the mother is the most crucial model. Having a politically engaged father does not have as strong a direct effect because daughters identify more strongly with the same-sex parent (i.e. the mother). Also, fathers do not have an indirect role-model effect due to not capturing their daughters' imaginations as well as the mothers.

While our model proposes that heightened political interest bolsters political self-efficacy, we recognise that prior research also points to the reverse dynamic. For example, Arens and Waterman's (2017) longitudinal study of German adolescents suggested a unidirectional relationship wherein perceived competence in political domains spurred greater political interest. This finding parallels a broader trend that has been identified in studies across various fields (for example, math or sports), demonstrating that individuals are prone to develop increased interest in domains in which they feel adept (Bandura and Schunk 1981; Jacobs et al.

2002; Marsh et al. 2005). Consequently, even as our research offers an alternative perspective that foregrounds the mediating role of political interest, we acknowledge that the interplay between political interest and self-efficacy is more nuanced. This intricate relationship warrants further exploration to parse out its dynamics and bidirectional potential, as well as to refine our understanding of the complex ways in which political self-efficacy and interest interact and influence one another.

The data, variables and method

The data

Our empirical analysis was based on data from the first round of the Finnish Adolescents' Political Engagement Panel (FAPEP survey. The survey targeted Finnish ninth-grade pupils (aged 15–16) in comprehensive schools, resulting in a total of 5,220 respondents. Data collection took place between December 2020 and May 2021 across 37 municipalities, 80 schools and 379 classes throughout Finland. Strategic cluster sampling was utilised to select the participating municipalities and schools. In each parliamentary constituency (excluding Helsinki), at least one larger and one small or mid-sized municipality were chosen, and research permits were obtained from the municipal authorities. Comprehensive schools in Finland are predominantly public and maintained by municipalities, with less than two per cent of pupils attending private or state schools. In larger municipalities, schools were selected from areas representing different levels of socioeconomic status based on postal code-level information from Statistics Finland. While approximately one third of the contacted schools declined to participate, alternative schools from similar neighbourhoods were recruited when available. The schools were requested to involve as many classes as possible in the study within a four-

month period, resulting in most schools having all classes participate. This comprehensive inclusion helps minimise potential biases arising from selective class inclusion based on specific emphases, such as music or sports.

Swedish-speaking pupils were overrepresented, reflecting the bilingual nature of Finland, where Finnish- and Swedish-speaking populations coexist. Finnish and Swedish speakers receive education in separate schools. Out of the survey respondents, 4,133 were pupils from Finnish-speaking schools (7.3% of the total ninth-grade students in Finnish-speaking schools during the 2020–2021 school year), while 1,087 were from Swedish-speaking schools (30.5% of the total ninth-grade students in Swedish-speaking schools during the same school year) (Statistics Finland 2021). Pupils from larger municipalities are also slightly overrepresented in the data. To address these sample imbalances, we use weights that account for municipality size and school language in our empirical analysis.

Although the sampling of municipalities and schools was not random, the data provide a representative view of 15–16-year-old youths in Finland due to the inclusive approach of collecting data during school lessons. Finland's educational system is internationally recognised for its high egalitarianism – social background does not play a significant role in school allocation (see, e.g. Chung 2015). However, recent studies suggest increasing diversification in the largest cities with more diverse populations (Kosunen et al. 2020), which is why in larger municipalities' schools were selected from areas representing different levels of socioeconomic status. Survey participation was voluntary, and while efforts were made to reach all pupils, it is possible that non-response bias exists, particularly from students with less interest in responding to a survey about engagement in politics. Students were not obliged to respond to the survey but were required to be present during the survey administration, where

non-responding students were assigned alternative schoolwork. This ensured that not responding to the survey did not necessarily indicate a more attractive choice. According to official statistics, the gender distribution among the ninth-grade pupils was nearly equal (51% boys, 49% girls) (Statistics Finland 2021). However, in the dataset, 45 per cent identified as boys and 50 per cent as girls. Less than four per cent chose not to declare their gender, and approximately one per cent identified as other'. This suggests that boys were slightly less likely to participate in the study compared with girls.

The survey was conducted electronically using computers, tablets or phones during a single lesson, typically a civics lesson. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the schools were equipped with electronic devices, enabling the survey to be conducted fully online. Prior to the survey, the respondents were shown a tailored five-minute video introducing the study and explaining how to participate. Due to quarantine or distance-learning measures, approximately nine per cent of the respondents completed the survey at home under a teacher's supervision through an online meeting app.

Variables

The dependent variable investigated was each child's political self-efficacy. Six items from a set of statements about political self-efficacy (see Table 1) were used to construct this dependent variable. All the statements were rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*I completely disagree*) to 5 (*I completely agree*), with a neutral response option (*I neither disagree nor agree*) in the middle. Due to the Likert-scale nature of the items, a principal component analysis was conducted using a polychoric correlation matrix. This analysis revealed that all the variables loaded onto a single component, with five component loadings

being equal to or greater than 0.75 and one being over 0.50. Several of these items have been previously employed for measuring political self-efficacy in the adult population, and our findings demonstrated their effectiveness in assessing political self-efficacy among adolescents as well. Notably, we included one statement where adolescents evaluated themselves relative to their peers. The responses were then combined into a single index where each item's weight was based on the principal component analysis. The results of an independent samples *t*-test indicated that the sons' political self-efficacy index ($m = 0.21$, $SD = 0.02$) was significantly higher than that of the daughters' ($m = -0.18$, $SD = 0.02$), $t(4403) = 13.62$, $p < 0.01$.

Table 1. Principal component analysis of political self-efficacy among 15–16-year-olds (n = 4,405).

Survey items	Component loadings
know more about politics than most people my age	0.88
have political opinions that are worth listening to	0.86
When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say	0.86
understand the most important political issues in Finland	0.77
trust in my ability to participate in politics	0.75
Sometimes politics seems so complicated that I can't really understand what is going on[a)]	0.52

[a)] Item reversed so that a higher score represents higher efficacy.

Regarding the two first focus variables, the political engagement of the child's father (or male caregiver) and mother (or female caregiver) were based on five items for each (see Table 2). Children ticked a box for 'yes' or 'no' when asked whether the statements about their parents' (or caregivers') engagement and encouragement were true. While standard principal component analysis assumes that variables are continuous and follow a multivariate normal distribution, in our case, the items were binary. Therefore, we conducted a principal

component analysis on a matrix of tetrachoric correlations. We applied oblique (quartimin) rotation to allow the two components to be correlated as it represented reality better, considering within-person similarities when they evaluated their mothers' and fathers' political engagement. The factor loadings obtained from the factor analysis confirmed that the items aligned with our theoretical expectations, with all rotated component loadings being above 0.60. Factor scores were created in order to index the parents' political engagement. The correlation between the two index scores was moderate ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$).[1]

Table 2. Principal component analysis of father's and mother's political engagement among 15–16-year-olds (n = 4,405).

Survey items	Component loadings	
	1	2
My father is interested in political and social issues	0.88	—
My father is well informed about political and social issues	0.86	—
My father follows the news	0.85	—
My father encourages me to discuss about political and social issues	0.75	—
My father encourages me to make independent decisions	0.70	—
My mother is interested in political and social issues	—	0.85
My mother is well informed about political and social issues	—	0.88
My mother follows the news	—	0.80
My mother encourages me to discuss political and social issues	—	0.72
My mother encourages me to make independent decisions	—	0.64

Notes: Component loadings below 0.3 are suppressed.

This measurement approach has inherent limitations as the respondents' perceptions of their parents' political engagement may or may not align with their parents' actual level of engagement if directly queried. Additionally, there is a potential bias wherein more politically

engaged adolescents may perceive their parents as more politically engaged. While an ideal approach would involve measuring both the parents' stated opinions and the child's perception, this option is not available to us with the current data. Nevertheless, prior research has shown that children's perceptions of their parents play a mediating role in the transmission of parental political attitudes and activities. This suggests that perceptions may hold greater importance in shaping children's political attitudes, even if those perceptions are not entirely accurate (Acock and Bengtson 1980). Ultimately, the significance of others' attitudes and behaviour is determined by how individuals perceive and define them.

The third focal variable was political interest, an index covering not only politics in general but a range of topics, such as national and international issues (see Table 3). The responses were recorded on a four-point ordinal scale ranging from 'not at all interested' to 'very interested'. Principal component analysis applied on a polychoric correlation matrix confirmed a one-component solution (see Table 3) and the component scores were used to construct the index.

Table 3. Principal component analysis of political interest among 15–16-year-olds (n = 4,405).

Survey items	Component loadings
Politics in general	0.92
Political issues concerning Finland	0.92
International politics	0.86
The politics of the European Union	0.85
Political issues of the municipality one lives in	0.78

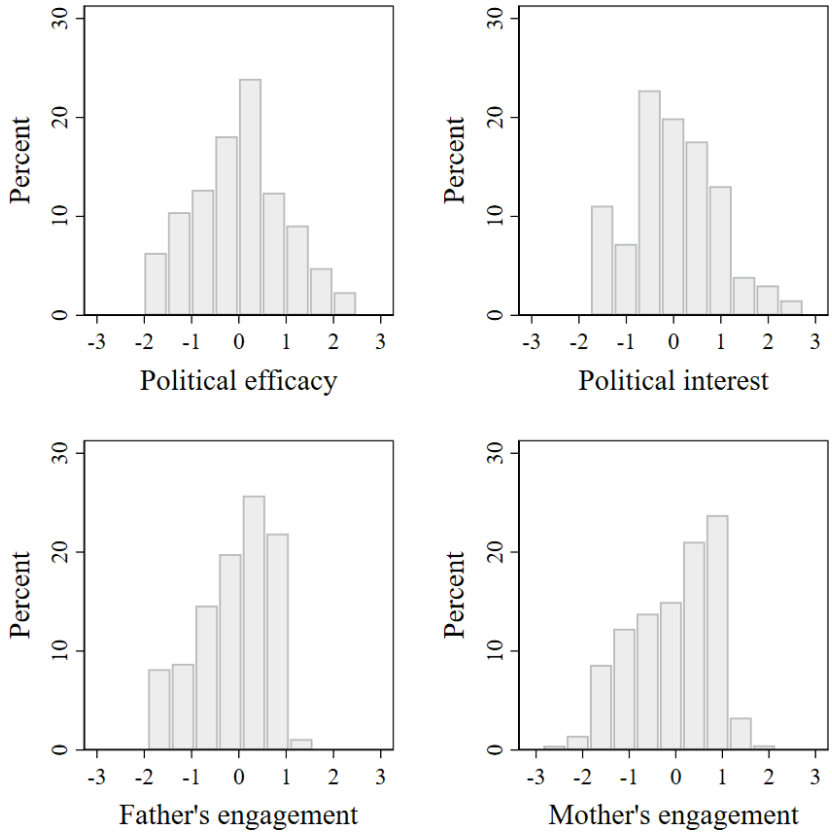

Figure 1. The distributions of the dependent variable and the focus independent variables.

We controlled for self-reported family economic status (rated on a five-point scale ranging from 'very bad' to 'very good'), the father's education and the mother's education. This allowed us to isolate the influence of parental political engagement on political self-efficacy while considering the potential confounding effects of socioeconomic factors that impact on political socialisation, such as neighbourhood characteristics and community resources. Additionally, we controlled for school language (Finnish or Swedish) as the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland has a strong minority identity and distinct political concerns (Karv et al. 2022) which may influence their sense of political self-efficacy. We also controlled for a migration background based on the country of birth of both the respondent and his or her parents using the following categories: (1) *Finnish origin*: both the respondent and his or her parent(s) were born in Finland; (2) *migrant*: both the respondent and his or her parent(s) were

born abroad; (3) *Generation 2*: the respondent was born in Finland, but his or her parent(s) were born abroad; (4) *Generation 2.5*: the respondent was born in Finland with one parent being born abroad and the other parent being born in Finland.

The method of analysis

A simple mediation model includes three variables: an independent variable *X*, a mediator variable *M* and a dependent variable *Y*. The mediator variable *M* is supposed to transmit the causal effect of *X* on *Y*, either partly or entirely. Variable *X* can have both a direct effect on *Y* and an indirect effect on *Y* that is transmitted through *M*. The total effect of *X* on *Y* is a combination of a direct effect and an indirect effect. In this study, the father's political engagement and the mother's political engagement represented two different *X*'s. Each child's political interest was the single mediator *M*, and each child's political self-efficacy was the dependent variable *Y*. We henceforth avoid using the term *effect* because it suggests a causal relationship and instead we use the term *association* because we rely on nonexperimental (observational) data.

We applied a multiple-group generalised structural equation model wherein sons and daughters were separated into different groups. In such a model, parameters can be allowed to either vary or be constrained across the two groups. We settled for a simpler two-group model for computational efficiency by constraining the intercepts so they were equal across the groups. However, the estimates of the coefficients were allowed to vary between sons and daughters. Our data had a hierarchical data structure: students (Level 1) were nested in school classes (Level 2) that were nested in schools (Level 3). We fit a model with random intercepts at Levels 2 and 3.

Results

This section presents the results of the study, initially focusing on the path diagram depicted in Figure 2. Unstandardised coefficients of the pathways for sons and daughters are reported separately. Due to missing values, the estimation sample consisted of over 4,000 youths. We first found that both sons' and daughters' political interest was strongly associated with political self-efficacy. Specifically, a one-unit increase in political interest led to a corresponding increase in political self-efficacy of 0.614 points among sons and 0.654 points among daughters. It is important to note that political interest had a component score ranging from –1.8 to 2.3 with a standard deviation close to 1. However, parental political engagement was not generally directly associated with a child's political self-efficacy when controlling for other factors, including the child's political interest. Only the father's political engagement was directly and positively associated with political self-efficacy for sons. The mother's political engagement was not directly associated with the son's political self-efficacy, and neither the father's nor the mother's political engagement was associated with the daughter's political self-efficacy.

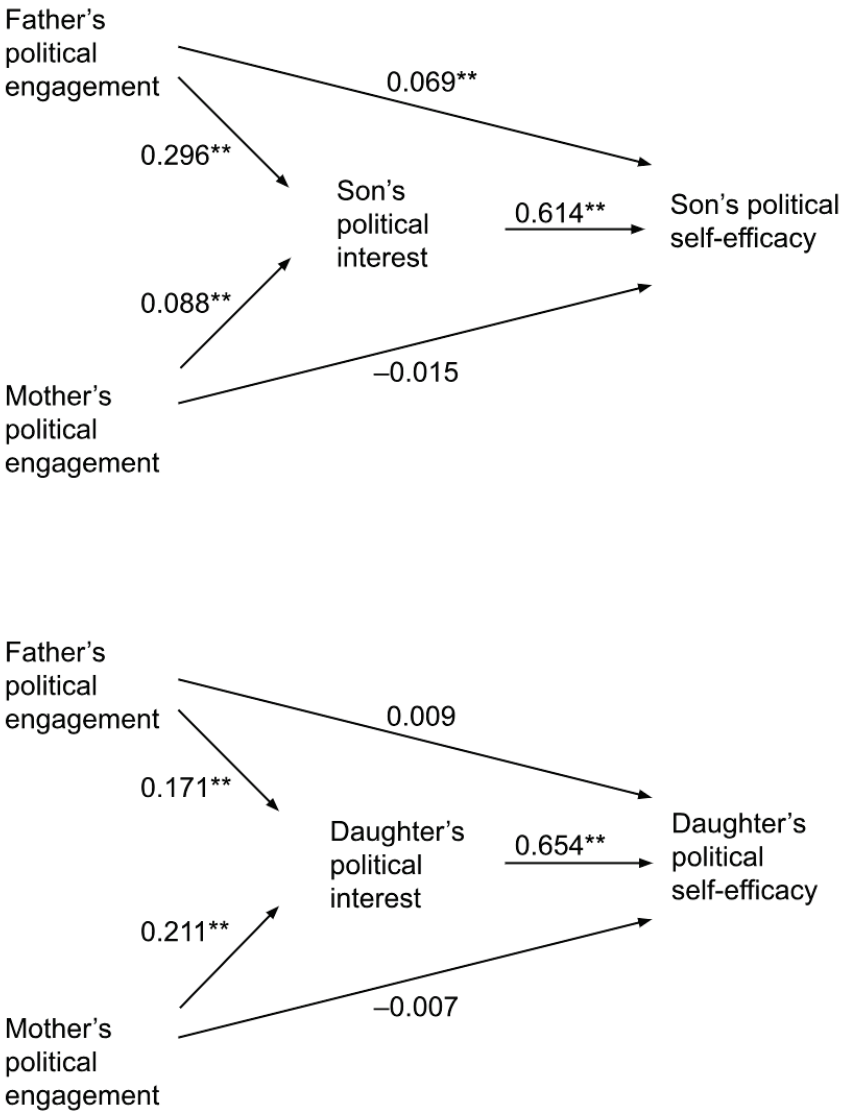

Figure 2. Estimates of a multiple-group generalised structural equation model designed to assess whether political interest mediates the associations between father's and mother's political engagement and their child's political self-efficacy. The statistics are unstandardised regression coefficients. Asterisks indicate the levels of statistical significance: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Instead of having a direct effect, the parents' political engagement appears to influence the child's political self-efficacy through the child's political interest, acting as a mediator to transmit the influence of the father's and mother's political engagement on their child's political self-efficacy. This pattern is first evident in Figure 2, where both parents' political engagement directly and significantly associates with their child's political interest, which, in turn, strongly relates to political self-efficacy. As expected, the strength of the association

varied based on both the parent's and child's gender. First, the father's political engagement was more strongly associated with his son's political interest ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.01$) than the mother's political engagement was with her son's political interest ($\beta = 0.088$, $p < 0.01$). Second, the coefficient for the mother's political engagement was higher ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.01$) compared with that of the father's political engagement ($\beta = 0.171$, $p < 0.01$) among daughters.

Furthermore, Table 4 reports the decompositions for the direct, indirect and total associations between the parents' political engagement and their child's political self-efficacy. In addition, the estimates from each of the groups – sons and daughters – are compared and tested statistically with a Wald test in the last column. In terms of the direct association between the father's political engagement and the child's political self-efficacy, there was no difference between the sons and daughters. Neither was there any significant difference between the sons and daughters in terms of the direct association between the mother's political engagement and the child's political self-efficacy.

The indirect influence of the fathers' political engagement on the child's political self-efficacy through political interest was, as already seen in Figure 2, somewhat greater for the sons than for the daughters. When comparing them, the difference was 0.070 points and statistically significant at the 0.01 level according to the estimate in the last column of Table 4. In contrast, the daughters were significantly more influenced by their mothers as the indirect association via political interest is 0.084 points higher compared with the sons.

Finally, the total association is the sum of the direct and indirect associations. The difference between the sons' and daughters' estimates for the father's political engagement was 0.130 points (higher for the sons) and the difference between them for the mother's political

engagement was 0.092 points (higher for the daughters). Both of these differences were statistically significant.

Table 4. Direct, indirect and total associations between parents' political engagement and their children's political self-efficacy (n = 4,032).

	Sons	Daughters	Difference
Direct			
Father's political engagement	0.069**	0.009	0.060
	[0.023, 0.114]	[–0.033, 0.050]	[–0.001, 0.121]
Mother's political engagement	–0.015	–0.007	–0.008
	[–0.053, 0.024]	[–0.044, 0.029]	[–0.061, 0.046]
Indirect			
Father's political engagement	0.182**	0.112**	0.070**
	[0.145, 0.218]	[0.078, 0.145]	[0.020, 0.119]
Mother's political engagement	0.054**	0.138**	–0.084**
	[0.024, 0.084]	[0.108, 0.168]	[–0.127, –0.042]
Total			
Father's political engagement	0.250**	0.120**	0.130**
	[0.194, 0.306]	[0.068, 0.173]	[0.053, 0.206]
Mother's political engagement	0.039	0.131**	–0.092**
	[–0.010, 0.088]	[0.085 , 0.177]	[–0.159, –0.025]

Note. Entries are unstandardised OLS regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals in brackets.
** $p < 0.01$

Conclusions

In this study, we explored the role of parents' political engagement and encouragement in relation to their children's political self-efficacy (namely, in relation to how their children estimated their own ability to understand politics and have a say in it). We argued that politically engaged and encouraging parents evoke political interest in their children and that this is the key mechanism that mediates the relationship between parental political engagement and encouragement, and the political self-efficacy of their offspring. Although the present analyses do not allow any statements about causality and present correlations, our results show, quite strikingly, that the fathers' political engagement seems to matter much more to their sons'

political self-efficacy than to their daughters' political self-efficacy, while for their daughters, the mothers play a bigger role than they do for their sons. This holds true when we look at the direct association of the parents' political engagement and encouragement, and the indirect association via political interest. Thereby, our findings yield support for the same-sex model.

Although the studied adolescents, on average, evaluated that their mother as less politically engaged than their father, the mother's role is far from insignificant. It could be argued that, in Finland, the role models provided by society and political life are able to either compensate for the female inheritance of political self-efficacy in cases where mothers are not politically engaged or reinforce it in cases where they are. When the data was collected, the Prime Minister was a young woman (the internationally recognised Sanna Marin), most of the incumbent ministers were women and five out of nine governmental parties were led by women. While female role models exist in Finnish politics, the gender gap in political self-efficacy can even be observed among fifteen-year-olds, meaning that, thus far, female role models have not boosted political self-efficacy among Finnish girls. Rather, it seems that the proximity of a role model, as well as association with the role model, is important. The evaluation of the capabilities of 'people like me' to participate in society is more easily reflected by a close example, a father or mother, rather than by political decision makers coming from very diverse backgrounds.

That said, pure modelling (i.e. the direct effect of parents' political engagement upon their children's political self-efficacy) is not especially strong. Instead, a significant portion of the association is transmitted through a child's political interest. Indeed, parents in Western countries increasingly spend more time with their children and are more and more involved in their children's learning (see, e.g. Faircloth 2014). This means that parents nowadays are

probably even more important agents in triggering their offspring's interest in politics and strengthening their confidence in the political domain. Our results show, however, that a father's political engagement and encouragement are more strongly associated with his son's political interest, while a mother's political engagement and encouragement are associated with her daughter's political interest, which further underpins the political self-efficacy of both genders. As family structures are becoming increasingly diverse, scholars should consider the role of political socialization within, for example, blended families or families headed by a single parent. Unfortunately, this particular aspect falls beyond the scope of the current study.

It should be noted that despite the dominance of direct transmission theory in political socialisation studies in past decades, recent openings emphasising the trickle-up effect and increasing interaction in parent–child relationships may challenge the traditional causality in value transmission in families. Some indications of this appear in turnout studies. For instance, Dahlgaard (2018) found that parents are more likely to vote when their children enter the electorate and still live at home. This effect is especially strong when a child is in secondary school and a parent has no secondary school education. Given that 60 per cent of those who graduated from secondary school were girls in Finland in 2022, it is possible that the daughters are actually in a key position for increasing the political efficacy of their mothers.

In terms of solving the 'enduring conundrum' – that is, women's lower levels of political self-efficacy compared with men's – a lot of expectations are directed at schools as they serve as practically the only avenue accessible to the government through which they can bring together young people from diverse family backgrounds and expose them to interventions and an environment that could enhance their political self-efficacy. To state the obvious, avoiding gender-based participatory roles in the classroom, for instance, should be taken as a default, as

well as creating a safe atmosphere in which to discuss political issues, even controversial political issues. However, while scholars have emphasised teachers' potential significant influence on adolescents' political socialisation, it is worth noting that teachers may not always fulfil this role effectively. Despite the inherent potential of schools as sites of political socialisation, empirical studies like that of Hess and McAvoy (2014) suggest that political discussions in classrooms are surprisingly infrequent. This infrequency is largely attributed to teachers' tendency to avoid controversial political issues, fearing divisiveness or accusations of bias.

Indeed, the results on what schools can do to level the differences in political engagement are mixed, and they mostly concern political participation (see, e.g. Siegel-Stechler 2019; Quintelier 2015). Quintelier (2015), for instance, found that among different agents of political socialisation, the role of schools in boosting political participation was much less important than that of the parents and peers. Her explanations for this are only tentative: schools may not focus enough on civic education or the teachers may not be sufficiently trained to deal with these issues. Either way, it would be important to problematise how politics can be discussed in a manner that also encourages girls' interest in politics both in teacher education and at the school level and thereby encourage their sense of political self-efficacy.

Furthermore, the strong connection between political self-efficacy and feelings of general self-confidence (as demonstrated by Wolak 2020), highlights that narrowing the gap in political self-efficacy extends far beyond the realms of politics or the confines of families and schools. It speaks to the overarching objective of achieving gender equity in society. Empowering women and enhancing their sense of capability and agency in all aspects of life becomes a pivotal step in closing the gender gap in political self-efficacy. Moreover, in a globalised world,

the struggle for gender equity transcends individual societies. The particularly vulnerable position of women in some parts of the world and the observation that the hard-fought gains made by women could be at risk (pertaining to such gender backlash, see, e.g. the publication by UN Human Rights [2023]), even in countries where gender equity has been deemed to be at a relatively high level, further emphasise the need for concerted efforts.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes on contributors

Elina Kestilä-Kekkonen is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Tampere University and one of three principal investigators of the 2023 Finnish National Election Study. Her main research interests are political socialisation and inequalities in political engagement. She has published in journals such as *European Journal of Political Research*, *European Political Science Review* and *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties.* [elina.kestila-kekkonen@tuni.fi]

Josefina Sipinen is a post-doctoral researcher affiliated with both the Faculty of Management and Business at Tampere University and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research delves into political engagement, political representation, and the political socialisation of migrants, youth, and women. She has

published in *Party Politics*, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, and *European Societies*, among others. [josefina.sipinen@tuni.fi, josefina.sipinen@helsinki.fi]

Peter Söderlund is an associate professor of political science at Åbo Akademi University. His research has focused on political attitudes, voting behaviour, and electoral systems. He has published articles in journals such as *Political Behavior*, *European Journal of Political Research*, and *West European Politics*. [peter.soderlund@abo.fi]

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Appendix

Table 4. Direct, indirect and total associations between parents' political engagement and their children's political self-efficacy (n = 4,032).

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	[–0.010, 0.088]	[0.085 , 0.177]	[–0.159, –0.025]

Note. Entries are unstandardised OLS regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals in brackets.
** $p < 0.01$; * $p > 0.05$.

[1] Table A1 in the appendix addresses potential gender differences in assessing parents' political engagement. For example, gender roles may influence how boys and girls evaluate their parents. However, the differences are generally small. First, daughters tended to have more positive evaluations of both their parents' political engagement. For the first three items, both sons and daughters rated their fathers' political engagement more positively than their mothers', but the gaps were, at most, 0.03 points greater among sons. Sons also had more favourable evaluations of their fathers' encouragement on discussing political and social issues. Daughters, on the other hand, reported that their mothers were more encouraging in making independent decisions, with a gap of 0.12 points. In terms of the indexes, sons had somewhat more positive evaluations of their fathers' engagement, while daughters had more positive evaluations of their mothers' engagement.