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What Young People Know and Think They Know about Politics: Factors Influencing Political Knowledge among Romanian First-Time Voters

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34135/mlar-24-02-01>

ABSTRACT

As they approach voting age, young people aged 17 to 19 years old are at a significant turning point in their political development. In this formative stage, their perceptions and understanding of the political landscape depend, among other things, on the diversity of information sources and content to which they are exposed to on a daily basis. In such a context, political knowledge plays a key role in informed decision-making for first-time voters. However, many young people tend to overestimate their levels of political knowledge, a phenomenon explained by the Dunning-Kruger effect. This study examines factors influencing both factual and perceived political knowledge among Romanian high school students (N=519). The main findings reveal a significant discrepancy between the actual political knowledge of young people and their perceived understanding of political matters. Political efficacy (the belief in one's ability to understand and engage in politics) proves to be a strong predictor of both factual and perceived political knowledge. Those with high levels of political efficacy are not only more informed but also believe they know more about politics than their peers. Furthermore, results show that young people who believe they know more than their peers about political affairs consume more mainstream media news, but no other correlation of political knowledge with news consumption is significant. Additionally, while male students perceive themselves as more knowledgeable than females, no significant gender differences in factual knowledge were observed. These findings highlight the need for educational strategies to improve both political knowledge and efficacy, contributing to a more informed and participatory youth electorate in Romania.

KEY WORDS

Civic Attitudes. Dunning-Kruger Effect. Political Efficacy. Political Knowledge. Young People.

1 Introduction

Political knowledge is a powerful predictor of political participation (Grönlund & Milner, 2006). In other terms, the more individuals know about politics, the higher the chances that they actively participate in politics-related actions. Furthermore, what citizens know about the political system and its participants is a central aspect of informed voting, and is key for liberal democracies to work properly (Memoli, 2011). Extant literature indicates variations of political knowledge based on socio-demographics, such as gender (e.g., Fraile, 2014; Verba et al., 1997), education (Persson, 2015), or age (Quintelier, 2007; Tambe & Kopacheva, 2024). For example, one of the most robust findings in the study of political behaviour is that men score higher than women in measures of political knowledge (Dow, 2009). At the same time, higher levels of education result in higher levels of political knowledge among people (Persson, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that younger generations lack some of the important resources that promote political participation, including knowledge, cognitive skills, money, time, abilities, and social contacts. As a result, they tend to participate less in formal politics (Owen et al., 2011; Verba et al., 1995). Compared with their older counterparts, young people aged 18-25 were found to be significantly less engaged in electoral activities (Quintelier, 2007). As a consequence, they are more apathetic and, thus, less likely to get engaged in any form of political participation, including voting (Owen et al., 2011). On the other hand, due to the technological advance and the rise of digital platforms, different forms of political engagement have emerged (Malafaia et al., 2021; Sloam, 2016). Nowadays young people can easily generate political content and further distribute it to networks of friends or to larger communities.

How digital political participation is enhanced by means of political knowledge is largely underexplored, as are the covariates of political knowledge among first-time voters. This category is special for two reasons. First, it is because they have rather limited levels of political knowledge and, in turn, when developing voting intentions, for example, they might be highly influenced by interpersonal discussions with both parents and friends (Ekström & Östman, 2013; Zukin et al., 2006). Second, they lack serious previous exposure to political messages and might develop independent thinking about politics by following content on social media (Pasek et al., 2006).

This article seeks to investigate the main covariates of political knowledge among Romanian adolescents (future first-time voters) aged 17 to 19 years old. In the context in which several studies describe young people as being less and less interested in politics, and lacking political knowledge, this article aims at unveiling the main factors that account for different levels of political knowledge among Romanian youth. Our focus is not only on determining covariates of factual political knowledge (i.e., what people really know about politics), but also on analyzing factors accounting for perceived levels of political knowledge (i.e., what people perceive they know about politics, compared with other people).

There are multiple reasons that account for this particular case study. First, most Western democracies have reported decreased political participation (Xenos & Bennett, 2007; Norris, 2004), while young people are especially pointed to as being a problematic group (Biesta et al., 2009; Harris et al., 2010), mainly due to their low levels of political knowledge (e.g., Meirick & Wackman, 2004). However, little empirical evidence exists on the East-European countries, and more specifically in the Romanian context (for exceptions, see, e.g., Gherghina, 2010; Gherghina & Rusu, 2021). Furthermore, the existing research dedicated to political knowledge among Romanian youth is related to a peak-event period (i.e., the presidential campaigns) (Gherghina & Rusu, 2021) and does not account for general levels of political knowledge among young people which might, then, explain several political attitudes and behaviours within Romanian society as a whole. Second, another reason that makes this an interesting case study is related to a general low level of turnout among Romanian youth, which might be significantly related to their levels of political knowledge as well (based on the idea that knowledge precedes any type of action – in this case, going to vote). According to a study conducted by the Romanian

Youth Council (2019), 39.48% young people between 18 and 35 years old participated in the elections for the Romanian President in November 2019 and 43.2% in the elections for the European Parliament in May 2019, compared to only 31.48% in 2016 in the elections for the Romanian Parliament. However, only 25.9% of young people participated in the parliamentary elections in December 2020.

Last, but not least, lower levels of political knowledge might not mean disinterest in politics, but, instead, that young people are very dependent on information from other sources, such as trusted adults, entertainment, and social media (Marchi, 2012; Sveningsson, 2015), and thus, that they do not have the chance to be exposed to political-related information. In this particular context, we seem to face a paradox. On the one hand, young people live in information-rich environments, with many available media sources and content about politics, which may result in higher levels of political knowledge. On the other, they experience newer patterns of news media consumption (preference for entertainment, while being selectively exposed to political news or completely avoiding it) (see also, Powell et al., 2021; Prior, 2005), which, together with the algorithms' curation on social media (Fouquaert & Mechant, 2021) result in less and less exposure to information about politics. Furthermore, this paradox may be linked to what researchers identify as different forms of participation. Although young people might not engage in political contexts as their older counterparts do, it does not imply they are less involved; rather, it suggests they have a different pattern of political participation (Guzmán Grassi et al., 2024). In this context, this article seeks to explore the main covariates of political knowledge among Romanian youth, in an attempt to shed light on the key aspects related to the democratic process.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Younger Generations and Political Knowledge

Political knowledge, largely defined as citizens' ability to answer factual questions about politics, is a central concept in political research, and has received constant scholarly attention in the past decades (e.g., Moeller & de Vreese, 2019; de Zúñiga et al., 2021). From a normative point of view, scholars have demonstrated that citizens who are more knowledgeable hold consistent political views and participate more in political activities (Galston, 2001). Therefore, political knowledge acquisition is a long-term goal of political scientists (for an overview see Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Various studies (e.g., Anson, 2018; Dunning, 2011; Kruger & Dunning, 1999) indicate that people tend to think of themselves as being more politically knowledgeable than they really are. This relates to a well-known effect, studied in social psychology and tested more recently in political research – the *Dunning-Kruger effect* – which refers in short to individuals with low levels of competence who judge themselves to be better achievers than they really are, while those with high levels of competence underestimate their excellence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

The Dunning-Kruger effect occurs because individuals vary in their awareness of 'known unknowns' (which lays within an individual's awareness) and 'unknown unknowns' (concepts, skills, or experiences that individuals are unaware of) (Anson, 2018). Consequently, unprepared or ignorant people are unaware of the extent of their ignorance or their lack of skills (Everson & Tobias, 1998). This phenomenon described as a 'double burden of incompetence' (Dunning, 2011) means that low achievers often overestimate their own performance. A related aspect refers to the reduced capability of such low-performing individuals to rate and compare themselves with peers (Krajc & Ortmann, 2008). Other studies have demonstrated that individuals' overconfident self-assessments are a reality and not a mere product of how statistical tests are run or of which knowledge scales are applied (Schlösser et al., 2013).

Furthermore, empirical evidence confirms a Dunning-Kruger effect existing in the realm of political knowledge (Anson, 2018; Schlösser et al., 2013). This phenomenon has serious consequences for political knowledge in general, because it influences, for instance, the perceived utility of engaging in political discussion (David, 2009) or the chances of adopting extreme positions in terms of ideology (Ortoleva & Snowberg, 2015). Despite these potentially important consequences, researchers in social sciences have only occasionally (e.g., Leeper & Slothuus, 2014) examined the subject and have rarely tested the way overconfidence affects political knowledge and the assessments of political proficiency among young people. Furthermore, no existing study of political knowledge, to our knowledge, has appraised how adolescents in particular relate to it from the perspective of the Dunning-Kruger framework. Some extant research designs (Anson, 2018) have examined how the Dunning-Kruger effect conditions citizens' perceptions of political knowledgeability in general, without further investigation of how this affects younger generations, which traditionally have a lower interest in politics (de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Moeller & de Vreese, 2019; Schlösser et al., 2013) and, as shown by recent research (Castro et al., 2022), different patterns of consuming political news and media in general.

Overestimation, in which individuals assess their performance on a task, is at the core of the Dunning-Kruger thesis, which holds that top performers on tasks rate themselves as lower achieving than they should, while the low achievers overestimate their performance (Dunning et al., 2004). The majority of the social psychology studies dedicated to overconfidence have sought to measure it on objective task performance, focusing largely on self-evaluation (for an overview, see Schlösser et al., 2013). Some extant research designs have examined political overconfidence as a predictor of ideological extremeness and strength of partisanship in general (Ortoleva & Snowberg, 2015). Additionally, when asked to report their performance relative to their peers on a political knowledge battery, low achievers consistently rank themselves as above average (Sheldon et al., 2014).

Based on such findings, we should expect the overestimation component of the Dunning-Kruger effect to extend to adolescents' assessments regarding political knowledge. Kruger and Dunning (1999) posit that when respondents achieve extremely low results on a knowledge battery, they will also be less likely to evaluate their peers correctly due to their complete lack of political sophistication. Such low-achieving subjects will be unable to correctly place the performance of others because they cannot recognize when peer performance is of high or low quality relative to their own (Dunning, 2011). Building on these insights, we would expect young people's self-assessments of political knowledge to be desynchronised with their objective performance on the battery of questions measuring political knowledge. In this context, we posit that:

H1a. Young people estimate they know more about politics than they actually do.

Moreover, according to the Dunning-Kruger thesis, this pattern should be more prominent among those with low levels of political knowledge. This category of young people will not only lack political knowledge, but they will also be unaware of their political ignorance, since the complexities of the political realm are unknown 'unknowns' to them. We posit, therefore, that overconfidence will affect how young people evaluate their levels of political knowledge and we expect young people performing poorly on a political knowledge task to be overconfident when self-assessing their performance. Thus, we posit that:

H1b. Young people with low levels of political knowledge estimate they know more about politics than the majority of their peers.

2.2 News Consumption and Political Knowledge

People usually turn to news media in order to learn about politics (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017), and consequently, the news media has a significant influence on the level of political knowledge (Moeller & de Vreese, 2019). The relationship between citizens' media usage and their political knowledge has been confirmed by numerous studies, which have mainly investigated the impact of using different media or media types (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Soroka et al., 2013) on political knowledge. Virtually, all comparative research about media effects focuses on the differential role of newspaper and TV consumption, traditional or online media news outlets, social media, or else selective media exposure in order to explore levels of political knowledge (Castro et al., 2022). More recently, research has focused on the information potential of online and social media, and has brought to light the fact that using social media for news instead of traditional outlets or news websites has null effects on political learning (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021).

In extant literature, the idea that there might be a different pattern of influence between political knowledge and news usage among adolescents is often suggested, but empirical proof is scarce. Some authors (Moeller & de Vreese, 2019) have advanced, for instance, a model of political learning similar to a spiral, where political knowledge influences news use more than the other way round; also suggesting that news media contributes to political learning among younger and older generations in a different way. Yet, the relationship between political knowledge and news usage among adolescents needs further clarification and constant updates due to the rapidly changing patterns of media use in today's society. Against this backdrop, we hypothesise that:

H2a. Young people consuming more political news from mainstream media are more politically knowledgeable than their peers.

Extant research suggests that Romanian users, similar to Italian, Hungarian and Polish users tend to follow social media for news in greater numbers than users in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, or Norway (Castro et al., 2022). Furthermore, other studies (Newman et al., 2018) have confirmed that people usually learn very little about political issues by following social media platforms such as Facebook. There even seems to be a negative association between following the news on Facebook and political knowledge, mainly due to an increased feeling of information overload among Facebook users (van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). Young people are affected by this side effect in particular, since they use online and social media the most. While recent research (Castro et al., 2022) shows that the knowledge gains from using news media vary across media types, as mentioned above, there is no study investigating the specific implications of Facebook news use versus other news media on political knowledge and their potentially different impact on political information acquisition. Filling this void is important for two main reasons. First, in reality, adolescents consume a mix of different news and news sources, with alternative platforms, such as TikTok, being the preferred media of choice, with Facebook playing an increasingly minimal role in the mix (van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). Second, empirical evidence shows that Facebook provides less ideologically diverse information, being more prone to disinformation and, thus, reducing political knowledge acquisition (Castro et al., 2022). As previous research has shown (e.g., Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011), when accessing high quality and diverse news, people have a better understanding of the political world and are more socially involved. In this study, we differentiate between Facebook as a source of news and various other social media, as in Romania, Facebook is barely even on adolescents' radar in general, let alone used as a consistent source for political news. Statistics (Statista Research Department, 2023) show that late teenagers in their early 20s accounted only for a fifth of all Facebook users in the country, most Facebook users in Romania being either between 25 and 34 years old (21.7%), or over 65 years old (7.5%). Building on such insights, we predict that:

H2b. Young people consuming more political news from social media (except Facebook) are less politically knowledgeable than their peers.

H2c. Young people consuming more political news from Facebook are less politically knowledgeable than their peers.

Following the same line of reasoning, young people are also likely to rely on media cues to evaluate not only their own political knowledge, but also the political expertise of their peers. Research shows that young people are more prone to overestimation and attribution errors when crystalizing their opinions based solely on information received from the media, without further critical processing of the media content to which they have been exposed (Anson, 2018; Fraile & Iyengar, 2014). Therefore, we also expect the increased consumption of political news to enhance the Dunning-Kruger effect on political knowledge, possibly due to the inflated sense of political proficiency an information-abundant media diet might offer. Along these lines, we consider that exposure to political news will have an impact on self-reported political knowledgeability, and predict that:

H2d. Young people consuming more political news (from both mainstream or social media) believe they are more politically knowledgeable than their peers.

Another vein of research in political science has explored the link between confidence in political perceptions, showing that people highly confident in their political beliefs are also more politically involved (Druckman, 2004). Recent work on the causes and consequences of political misperceptions among young people correlates them with modest political participation (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005) and generally low levels of activism and social involvement in contemporary society (Flynn et al., 2017).

Various studies have examined the predictors of political involvement and how they impact politically engaged mature or older individuals (e.g., Gottfried et al., 2016). However, few studies have tried to fill in the gaps in the political research literature by answering the question of how youth can become politically engaged (Wray-Lake, 2019). Such research suggests that young people learn more about politics not via exposure to political information, but instead by being involved in their communities and taking part in day-to-day social activities, through which they develop a sense of what it means to be a part of a community (Wray-Lake, 2019).

It has also been empirically proven that adolescents who have a base of political knowledge are more inclined to engage in political and civic activities than those who do not (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). There is a clear, positive relationship between knowledge and contacting, voting, campaign engagement, community engagement, digital engagement, and activism (Moeller & de Vreese, 2019). In addition to this, research dedicated to youth political participation has found that active participation requires individuals to believe in their own ability to influence the course of politics, in other words, to feel politically efficacious. The firm belief in making a difference is, in general, conducive to developing participatory inclinations amongst young people (Sperber et al., 2022). Additionally, empirical studies indicate that adolescents become more motivated to participate in politics if their levels of political self-efficacy are high (Grasso & Giugni, 2021; Reichert, 2016). The relationship between efficacy and expected participation, however, fluctuates over time, during the process of political socialization (Oser et al., 2022). Self-confidence in dealing with politics seems to increase with age, nonetheless, beliefs in the responsiveness of the political system become more pessimistic and, thus, older students have lower expectations to become actively involved in politics in adult life (Borg & Azzopardi, 2021). Based on such findings, we argue that internal political efficacy (or self-efficacy), defined as the belief in one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in politics (Oser et al., 2022) is key when evaluating political involvement in younger generations. Moreover, continuing this line of reasoning, we postulate that low achievers on internal political efficacy are less inclined to acquire information about politics or get politically involved, while young people more confident in their ability to decode politics are more likely to possess higher levels of political knowledge and, therefore, are more inclined to participate in political actions.

H3a. Young people exhibiting higher levels of internal political efficacy are more politically knowledgeable than their peers.

While conventional measurement of political knowledge has relied heavily on retrieval accuracy (for an overview, see Fraile & Iyengar, 2014), there has not been advanced any fine-grained measurement tool for self-reported political knowledge. To the best of our knowledge, virtually no studies are dedicated to how perceived, self-declared political knowledge impacts factual political participation or willingness to engage in political activities. However, empirical data shows that confidence in political knowledge helps information retrieval and has an overall positive impact on both knowledge and confidence (Grasso & Giugni, 2021; Sperber et al., 2022). The same findings indicate that active involvement may facilitate, but do not guarantee, informed political choices. Such findings warrant further theoretical and empirical exploration of how self-perceived or self-reported political expertise may impact factual political proficiency.

In the same line of reasoning, we predict that political efficacy is likely to play an important role in self-assessments of political knowledge. Furthermore, the Dunning-Kruger thesis holds that low achievers fail to accurately self-place due to an inability to engage in metacognitive reflection on their performance (Dunning, 2011). Hence, we should expect a pattern in which political efficacy causes overconfident self-placement to increase among young people with moderate or low levels of political knowledge. When evaluating peer performance, politically efficient young people will assess their political knowledgeability as superior to their peers.

H3b. Young people more politically efficient believe they are more politically knowledgeable than their peers.

2.3 Gender Gap in Political Knowledge

Extant literature dedicated to political knowledge has also shed light on a gender gap in terms of political proficiency. Scholars have argued either that the gender gap is real and quasi-impossible to be eliminated, or that it is an artifact of the way the concept is measured (for an overview, see Jerit & Barabas, 2017). As various studies have empirically proven, the roots of the gender gap in political knowledge are based in late adolescence (Mondak & Anderson, 2004). Statistical data indicates that young women are significantly less politically knowledgeable than young men, and the main explanation for this gap resides in how young people respond to the campaign environment. Young women are more likely to gain information in environments marked by consensus rather than conflict, and since the political environment is increasingly conflictual, this has a negative impact on political learning (Wolak & McDevitt, 2011).

Moreover, statistical data (Fortin-Rittberger, 2016) shows that institutional factors, such as electoral rules or opportunity structures, also have an impact on gender gaps in regard to political participation. In addition to this, research demonstrates that survey particularities, such as question format, content, and difficulty of questions are the most consequential where gender gaps in political knowledge are concerned (Mondak & Anderson, 2004). However, research demonstrates that knowledge gaps can be ameliorated via exposure to political information (Jerit & Barabas, 2017). While these findings are important in shedding light on how to promote political learning among young people, they are usually US or Western-Europe-centred. Building on such findings, we also want to explore if there are gender-based differences in political knowledge among Eastern-European adolescents. Furthermore, since the Romanian political environment is predominantly conflictual, with populist parties increasingly having electoral success (Hameleers et al., 2018), we believe that this might have a negative impact of political knowledge acquisition among young girls. We posit, therefore, that there is a gender gap in the sense that:

H4a. Boys are more politically knowledgeable than girls.

H4b. Boys believe they are more politically knowledgeable than girls.

Overall, this paper tries to fill the gap regarding the relationship between young people's media use, political involvement and how these variables impact how much they know or think they know about politics. We expect the Dunning-Kruger effect on political knowledge to be enhanced by low political involvement and, therefore, argue for the necessity of fostering political implication among younger generations, in order to reduce deficiencies and increase the level of political proficiency.

3 Method

3.1 Sample

For the purpose of this study, we conducted a survey on a convenience sample of Romanian high school students in the 12th grade (N=519) from six cities, 13 high schools, and 49 classes. The sample was diverse in terms of the size of the municipalities where the high school is located (ranging from less than 20,000 to more than 1,000,000 inhabitants).

The pen-and-paper, anonymous questionnaire was self-administered. We asked for informed consent for the entire class (i.e., all the students that were present in the classroom were given the pen-and-paper questionnaire; however, not all the classes are the same size, mainly because of the class location) and it was granted by the class teacher, after securing approval for the study from the high schools' principals. Since twelfth graders are aged 17 to 19 years old, an acceptable way of obtaining informed consent by Romanian University Ethics Committees and by the Quality Assurance Committee in high schools is by securing the school's approval, if the study does not tackle sensitive topics. In our sample, 39 out of the 519 were less than 18 years old. Students had the permission to opt out from the study by returning a blank questionnaire, and were instructed to do so without any consequence at any time of the completion of the survey. The researchers did not formally document the response rate, but their observations during the data collection process suggest that a very small number of students chose to opt out from the study.

The sample comprises 37% male students (63% female), with 43% of students reporting that at least one parent had completed university (this is of particular importance in this study mainly because it may help explain variations in other factors, such as children's academic success and overall development, including their levels of political knowledge, which are often linked to parental education levels).

3.2 Measures

Factual political knowledge was measured by asking participants to indicate their response to the following four questions: "Who is currently the prime minister of Romania?", "When will the next presidential elections be held in Romania?", "Which of the following countries does not belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?", and "Who is currently leading the European Commission?". Four possible answers were offered for each question. We summed the number of correct responses to create the political knowledge variable.

Perceived political knowledge (self-perceived political competence) was measured by asking participants to evaluate, on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*), the extent to which they agree that compared to most of their peers, they know a lot about political issues.

News consumption was measured by asking participants to indicate how many days in the past week they obtained the news from 11 different news media sources. The scale grouped in three factors (CFA using principal component analysis and a varimax rotation): "news consumption from mainstream media sources" (TV programs, print and online newspapers,

radio, websites of any kind – other than social media) with factor loadings ranging from .625 to .742, $\alpha=.640$, $M=2.09$, $SD=1.43$; “news consumption from social media sources” (WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) with factor loadings ranging from .740 to .867, $\alpha=.847$, $M=5.10$, $SD=2.10$, and “news consumption from Facebook” (Facebook and Facebook messenger as a source of news) with factor loadings ranging from .866 to .896, $\alpha=.834$, $M=2.84$, $SD=2.45$.

Political efficacy (internal dimension) was measured using three items. The first two, taken from Groskurth et al. (2021), asked participants to evaluate, on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*), the extent to which they agree with the following two assumptions: “I am good at understanding and assessing important political issues” and “I have the confidence to take active part in a discussion about political issues”. The third item measured, on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 5 (*very interested*) how interested young people are in politics in general. All three items grouped in one factor (CFA using principal component analysis and a varimax rotation), with factor loadings ranging from .759 to .885, $\alpha=.780$, $M=2.52$, $SD=.95$.

We used school performance (measured in grades) and family education as control variables.

School performance was measured by asking participants to indicate the general grades they obtained in the last year. Family education was measured using a single-item dichotomous variable, with 1 meaning at least one of the parents had a university degree.

4 Results

Generally speaking, adolescents are cautious in saying they know more than their peers about politics ($M=2.81$, $SD=.93$ on a 5-point scale). However, their actual political knowledge (again on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 to 4, with 0 meaning they did not answer any of the 4 questions about political facts correctly; 4 meaning they answered all four questions correctly) shows how little young people actually know about politics ($M=1.26$, $SD=1.28$). In fact, more than 60% of pupils could not answer more than one question about politics correctly, of which more than 35% did not answer any of the questions correctly. What is surprising, though, is that their cautious estimation does not match their actual political knowledge. In fact, people that know almost nothing about politics (did not answer any of the factual questions correctly) estimate their knowledge compared to peers as only slightly lower than those who answer 3 or 4 questions on real political facts correctly, the correlation between the two variables being actually very weak ($r=.16$, $N=515$, $p<.01$) (see Figure 1). These findings suggest a Dunning-Kruger effect among adolescents: those who know very little about politics tend to overestimate their knowledge on the matter (H1a and H1b confirmed). Conversely, adolescents who answered all four questions correctly only estimate that they know slightly more than their peers about politics.

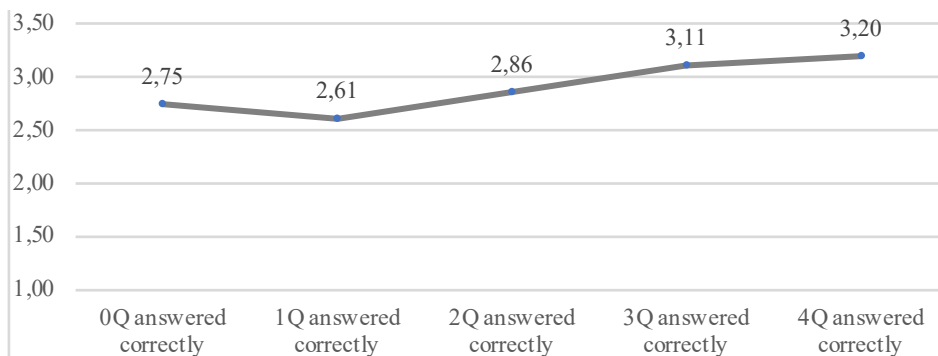


FIGURE 1: Factual knowledge plotted against perceived knowledge

Source: own processing, 2024

When investigating factual and perceived political knowledge covariates, results show that people who believe they know more than their peers about political affairs consume more mainstream media news, but no other correlation of political knowledge with news consumption is significant (H2d confirmed for mainstream media, but H2a, H2b, H2c not validated – see Table 1). News consumption from all sources does not seem to correlate with political knowledge in any form. If this could be due to a ceiling effect for mainstream and Facebook originated news (very low levels of news consumption already, $M=2.10$, $SD=1.43$ for mainstream media and $M=2.83$, $SD=2.45$ for Facebook news), the explanation does not hold true for news coming from SNS ($M=5.10$, $SD=2.10$). Additionally, both factual and perceived political knowledge are highly correlated with political efficacy (H3a, H3b confirmed) (see Table 1). Political efficacy is the strongest predictor of both models, which suggests a strong correlation of how politically efficient late adolescents feel not just with how much they know, but also how much they believe they know about politics. The direction of the correlation is not clear: either the more they know about politics, the more adolescents feel efficient about political matters or vice versa: the more they feel efficient, the more they learn and thus know about politics.

	Factual political knowledge			Perceived political knowledge superiority		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
(Constant)	-1.188	.450		1.485	.280	
News consumption from mainstream media	-.044	.044	-.049	.058	.027	.090*
News consumption from SNS	-.022	.029	-.036	.014	.018	.031
News consumption from FB	-.018	.026	-.034	.007	.016	.019
Political efficacy	.442	.066	.317**	.560	.041	.555**
Gender (female)	-.208	.124	-.079†	-.243	.077	-.128**
General grade	.171	.033	.240**	-.017	.020	-.033
Family education	.067	.089	.035	-.007	.055	-.005
Adj R square	.14			.37		

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .1$

TABLE 1: Factual and perceived political knowledge prediction models among adolescents

Source: own processing, 2024

Additionally, boys tend to estimate they know more than girls do ($B = -.243$, $p < .01$), which is not confirmed by real knowledge differences (H4b confirmed, H4a not validated). Even though the boys ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 1.33$) in our sample responded slightly better than the girls ($M = 1.34$, $SD = 1.23$) to the questions regarding politics, the difference is not statistically significant in the regression model ($p = .094$).

Academic performance is positively correlated with factual political knowledge, but does not influence how pupils perceive themselves compared with their peers.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined what late adolescents know about, how they evaluate what they know about politics and how much these variables covariate with news consumption and political efficacy. The findings show that factual political knowledge and perceived political knowledge are weakly correlated (H1a is validated). Moreover, there is a Dunning-Kruger effect, that is, adolescents who know (almost) nothing about politics tend to overestimate their political knowledge level (H1b is validated), while those who really know a good deal about politics only

estimate they know slightly more than their peers. This aligns with findings from studies in both Romania (e.g., Gherghina & Marian, 2024) and other European countries. For instance, research conducted on the voting-age population in Finland (Rapeli, 2023) indicates that young people tend to be overly confident about their political knowledge. This overconfidence appears to be influenced by frequent exposure to social media, which seems to amplify their perceived understanding of political matters. The existence of the Dunning-Kruger effect with regard to high school students' political knowledge was also reported by other recent research conducted in Germany (Alscher et al., 2024).

Consumption of political news from mainstream media, social media, and especially Facebook are not correlated with factual political knowledge (H2a, H2b, and H2c are invalidated). Only the consumption of news coming from mainstream media is significantly, but weakly correlated with perceived political knowledge superiority (H2d is partially validated). This raises serious concerns about the role media plays in young people's (un)informed political decisions (including future voting). One possible explanation is related to high news avoidance habits among young people (Toff & Karogeopoulos, 2020), and the more prominent role of the parents' conversations about news (York & Scholl, 2015).

The finding supports the hypotheses H3a and H3b, namely that (internal) political efficacy is correlated with higher political factual knowledge and perceived political knowledge. Therefore, the adolescents' political efficacy in politics makes them more politically informed and confident about their political knowledge. This adds to the extant literature about predictors of political knowledge among adolescents (Fortin-Rittberger, 2016; Moeller & de Vreese, 2019), and suggests important ways to address the general lack of information about politics among parents, teachers, and society in general: building young people's confidence that their actions can actually count in the democratic process, and avoiding political cynicism (Schmuck et al., 2022).

Finally, boys are more confident that they have political knowledge, but they do not necessarily have more actual political knowledge than girls (H4a is invalidated, H4b is validated), partially in line with the literature that discusses an established gender gap in political knowledge (Jerit & Barabas, 2017; Mondak & Anderson, 2004). Regarding the control variables, only school performance makes adolescents more political knowledgeable, thus students with more school knowledge also have more political knowledge.

Given that informed citizens are a key element for democracy (Memoli, 2011), as they are more able to evaluate politically relevant issues and have higher political interest (de Zúñiga et al., 2021), the results draw attention to how ready late adolescents are to go to the polls in an informed manner. About one in three research participants did not answer any of the four political knowledge questions correctly, and only one in three answered just one question correctly. Moreover, students who know nothing about politics believe they are informed on this topic (see the confirmed Dunning-Kruger effect). These findings should be taken into consideration regarding any political base policy to lower the voting age. Currently, there is a bill in the Romanian Chamber of Deputies to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 years old. Our findings do not support such a policy given that the majority of adolescents are not sufficiently informed regarding politics. Furthermore, one takeaway based on the findings is that high schools should prepare teenagers for their future civic engagement, and that teachers should take into account that students perceive themselves as having more political knowledge than they actually have. Because political efficacy is the strongest predictor for how much late teenagers know or think they know about politics, one way to increase their actual political knowledge is to make them aware of the importance, and real consequences of being an informed and involved citizen in democracy, including voting. Possible concrete actions that might be implemented to address the issue of limited political knowledge among young people include a comprehensive review of the high school curriculum to identify those subjects that focus on political knowledge gaining, such as civics and history (which might include elements of political education). This

should be followed by an analysis of the content that is taught in such classes and by an examination of the teaching methods. After such an examination, one could advance some curriculum enhancements to incorporate more lessons about current political events at both national and international levels. Such actions could actively contribute to improving factual political knowledge among the young generation and, in the long term, to developing a more informed and healthy democracy. This study has some methodological limitations. First of all, we used a convenience, albeit diverse sample, also limited to the population of late adolescents from Romania, thus the hypotheses should also be tested on samples from other cultural contexts. Secondly, perceived political knowledge was measured generally, by asking students to evaluate how much they know about politics compared to their peers. Therefore, in this paper, actual political knowledge measured with specific questions about political figures was related to students' opinions about general knowledge. Thirdly, it is important to stress that we only measured political efficacy, and no other forms of political involvement, which might have proved important predictors. Nevertheless, this methodological option was justified by the age of the research participants, as they do not have the chance to vote, which is the best way to make the voice of citizens heard (Kitanova, 2019).

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