

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The reciprocal relationship between political participation and mental health in Germany: A random-intercept cross-lagged panel analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: Political participation has been identified as a predictor of mental health. Previous research studies have reported mixed results concerning the relationship between political participation and mental health. Moreover, findings have generally been confined to the between-individual level. The few studies that investigated within-person associations have not examined bidirectionality. In the current study, the bidirectional relationship between political participation and mental health was investigated.

Methods: Data from the GESIS Panel study were used to assess the bidirectional association between political participation and mental health. The GESIS Panel study is a probability-based panel representative of the German-speaking population residing in Germany and aged between 18 and 70 years ($M = 44.52$; $SD = 14.67$; 52 percent female participants). Mental health was assessed using measures of depression symptoms and subjective well-being.

Results: Using up to nine waves of longitudinal survey data, a random-intercept cross-lagged panel model indicated little evidence for cross-lagged effects from political participation to mental health or vice versa. Notwithstanding, few significant cross-lagged paths were observed.

Conclusions: Overall, the findings were not consistent with the theorized effect of political participation on mental health. Moreover, there is little evidence that mental health affects political participation.

KEYWORDS

depression, longitudinal, mental health, participation, well-being

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In their framework of citizen participation, Wandersman and Florin (2000) highlighted the costs and benefits of participation. Well-being is one of the most reported benefits of political participation (e.g., Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Klar and Kasser 2009; Owen, Videras, and Willemsen 2008; Pacheco and Lange 2010; Pavlova and Lühr 2023; Prati 2022). Political theorists have long recognized the psychological benefits of political participation, such as sense of efficacy and empowerment (e.g., Barber 1984; Bowles and Gintis 1986; Mansbridge 1983; Olsen 1982). As Dreze and Sen (1995, p. 106) write:

The importance of local democracy is not confined, of course, to this issue of public services, or other instrumental roles of participatory politics. Participation also has intrinsic value for the quality of life. Indeed, being able to do something not only for oneself but also for other members of the society is one of the elementary freedoms which people have reason to value.

There is evidence suggesting that the experiences associated with political participation and interventions to foster political participation may be related to well-being (Montague and Eiroa-Orosa 2018; Prati et al. 2020). On the other hand, research has called into question a win-win narrative on political participation and highlighted the dark side of political participation (Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021). Political participation may not be as beneficial because it is perceived as messy, ineffective, filled with conflict, disgusting, morally reprehensible, and selfish (e.g., Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann 2022a, 2022b; Pavlova et al. 2022; Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005). Previous research on the psychological outcomes of political participation has been predominantly cross-sectional in nature (e.g., Brown and Kasser 2005; Montague and Eiroa-Orosa 2018; Pacheco and Lange 2010; Pavlova and Lühr 2023; Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021; Serrat et al. 2017). Few longitudinal studies focused on the effect of political participation on well-being (e.g., Chan et al. 2021; Ding, Berry, and O'Brien 2015; Pirralha 2017, 2018). However, longitudinal evidence on the effect of political participation on mental illness is scant. Moreover, most of these longitudinal studies did not separate interindividual differences (between-person level) from intraindividual change (within-person level). Between-person effects comparing different individuals to each other are likely to be confounded by self-selection mechanisms (e.g., people with better mental health are more likely to participate) and by the stability of trait-like constructs (Hamaker, Kuiper, and Grasman 2015).

Recently, some studies have been conducted to investigate the within-person associations between mental health and political participation. Croezen et al. (2015) found that within-person increases in participation in political/community organizations were associated with within-person increases in depressive symptoms. However, in this study, participation in political/community organizations was measured using one item, and it is not possible to distinguish the effects of different types of political participation. There is theory and empirical evidence (Ekman and Amnå 2012; Stefani et al. 2021; Tzankova, Prati, and Cicognani 2021) indicating that political participation is a multidimensional construct that encompasses different activities such as joining a political party and demonstrating. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey and the Understanding Society, Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann (2022a) found little evidence that political participation has an effect on life satisfaction and GHQ-12 scores at the within-person level. The only significant finding was a positive within-person association between political participation and life satisfaction among older adults. Using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel, Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann (2022b) found no significant within-person associations between political participation and subjective well-being. The only exception was a significant and negative within-person association between political volunteering and subjective well-being among older adults. It should be noted that these two studies reported significant effects among older adults in the opposite direction. In addition, in these two studies, multilevel models were used to examine within-person associations separately from between-person differences. There is evidence that multilevel models may result in severely biased estimates of cross-lagged effects in conditions in which it is unrealistic to assume a priori no autoregression in the predictor (i.e., no inertia in variables) and no bidirectional effects (e.g., Falkenström, Solomonov, and Rubel 2022). There is evidence that mental health is moderately stable over time (e.g., Lucas and Donnellan 2007; Lykken 1999; Oldehinkel and Ormel 2023). Such partial stability reflects an autoregressive process.

Moreover, there is also evidence suggesting that mental health predicts political participation (Couture and Breux 2017; Flavin and Keane 2012; Landwehr and Ojeda 2021; Ojeda 2015).

The theoretical link between subjective well-being and political participation has been discussed by Veenhoven (1988). According to Veenhoven, people experiencing high levels of happiness may be more likely to maintain the political status quo and show political apathy. Therefore, following this perspective, it is possible to hypothesize that the consequence of increased subjective well-being is the emptying of democracy. However, Veenhoven acknowledges that this perspective is limited and partial. Veenhoven posits that satisfied citizens are more likely to be concerned with broader social and political problems and to participate in community organizations. Veenhoven concluded that subjective well-being does not have the potential to disengage people from the political process. Subjective well-being may also play a role in the involvement in unconventional political activities. Although it is commonly assumed that happy people are less willing to become engaged in protest activities, there are also reasons to believe that happiness fosters rather than blocks engagement in protest activities (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Klandermans 1989). According to Klandermans (1989), the feeling of having control over the environment is an important cognition that is related to both happiness and protest.

Research on the effect of mental health on political participation remains underdeveloped (Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann 2022b; Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021). Notwithstanding, there is a growing literature on the predictors of political participation that acknowledges the importance of well-being. Two studies provided evidence that depressive symptoms decrease the likelihood of political participation (Landwehr and Ojeda 2021; Ojeda 2015). However, better mental health was found to negatively predict political information seeking and signing a paper or online petition (Couture and Breux 2017). Flavin and Keane (2012) analyzed the data from the American National Election Study and found a significant relationship between life satisfaction and non-conflictual forms of political participation. However, life satisfaction was not related to non-conflictual forms of political participation in the study of Cheng, Chung, and Cheng (2021) using data from the World Values Survey in Hong Kong. Using data from Wave 6 of the World Values Survey in Ghana, Sulemana and Agyapong (2019) found that subjective well-being did not predict political participation activities related to protests. Conversely, other studies found evidence that well-being is positively associated with indicators of activism (Klar and Kasser 2009) and that life satisfaction is negatively associated with protest activities (Cheng, Chung, and Cheng 2021). Yet, the engagement in a brief activist behavior did not influence well-being, thereby suggesting that activism might not have a causal role (Klar and Kasser 2009).

The existing research on the effect of mental health on political participation is almost entirely based on cross-sectional data (Cheng, Chung, and Cheng 2021; Flavin and Keane 2012; Sulemana and Agyapong 2019; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2011). One notable exception is a recent longitudinal study investigating individual trajectories of subjective well-being and protest intentions (Lindholm 2020). The findings of this study showed that there is some evidence of a mutual influence between some dimensions of subjective well-being and some forms of future protest intentions. However, intentions and behaviors are related but distinct constructs (Ajzen 2005). Another exception is the study conducted by Ding, Berry, and O'Brien (2015) using the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia data. In this study, political participation one year previously had a significantly negative effect on generalized distress. However, the bidirectional effects between political participation and mental health were not investigated in the same model, and this is an important issue when investigating cross-lagged effects in mechanisms of change (e.g., Falkenström, Solomonov, and Rubel 2022). Therefore, except for the study conducted by Ding, Berry, and O'Brien (2015), the existing research precludes conclusions regarding the directionality of the reported relations and the potential role of third variables in explaining these relations.

The present study

The main aim of the current study was to investigate the reciprocal relationship between political participation and mental health. The novelty of the current study is to distinguish among the bidirectional effects

between different forms of political participation and dimensions of mental health. In the present study, the focus is on political participation, which is a type of voluntary participation that is distinct from other types of voluntary participation such as civic engagement and community participation (e.g., Ding, Berry, and O'Brien 2015; Lee et al. 2019; Pavlova et al. 2022). Moreover, in the present study, the different types of political behaviors were distinguished to acknowledge the qualitatively diverse experience of different modes of participation (e.g., Cheng, Chung, and Cheng 2021). Finally, following the two continua model of mental health (e.g., Keyes 2002, 2005; Westerhof and Keyes 2010), mental illness and well-being were considered separately because they represent related but distinct dimensions of mental health.

Research on the relationship between political participation and mental health has not investigated the within-person bidirectional effects. The current study therefore posited two research questions related to political participation and mental health:

RQ1: Does political participation predict mental health?

RQ2: Does mental health predict political participation?

METHOD

Sample and procedure

The participants for this study came from the GESIS Panel study (Bosnjak et al. 2018; GESIS 2023), and all participants were included except for those who had missing data on all study variables. The number of participants for each analysis ranged from 6862 to 8060, depending on the number of cases with missing data on all variables. Table 1 reports the number of participants in each analysis. The GESIS Panel is a probability-based access panel study of a representative sample of German-speaking adults residing in Germany. The GESIS Panel Study has been conducted annually since 2013. The analyses examined the association between political participation and mental health using all available waves of data, starting from the first wave to 2022 (Wave j**b**). Variables were not measured across all waves and participants. For instance, happiness was not measured after Wave h (year 2020). Therefore, the number of waves of data and of participants differed in each analysis. Table 1 reports the number of waves in each analysis. Information about mental health has been collected every year in and around March, whereas political participation has been assessed every year in and around May. In the current study, the focus was the lagged effect from one year to the next.

The vast majority of participants (95.3 percent) were German citizens. The remaining participants were citizens of other European Union countries (EU 28; 2.5 percent) and citizens of non-EU 28 countries (2.2 percent). Female participants represented 52 percent of the sample. In the first wave, the age of participants ranged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 44.52$; $SD = 14.67$). Participants' highest level of education was as follows: 1.2 percent left school without a degree of lower secondary school; 20.6 percent lower secondary school; 25.8 percent secondary school; 1.3 percent polytechnic secondary school GDR (degree 8th or 9th grade); 8.0 percent polytechnic secondary school GDR (degree 10th grade); 9.3 percent advanced technical college certificate; 32.7 percent general qualification for university entrance; 0.7 percent other degree, 0.5 percent student.

Instrument

Depressive symptoms were assessed using an eight-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression (CES-D) instrument (Ojeda, Bernardi, and Landwehr 2023; Radloff 1977). Specifically, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they experienced eight symptoms on a six-point scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 6 = *always*. Cronbach's alpha across the waves ranged from $\alpha = 0.86$ to $\alpha = 0.88$. After

TABLE 1 Political participation (PP) and depression (Dep), life satisfaction (LS), and happiness (Hap): Results from bivariate random intercept cross-lagged panel models.

Political participation/mental health		Correlations among random intercepts		Cross-lagged coefficients			
		PP↔Dep		PP→Dep		Dep→PP	
Depression ^a	Waves	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI
Contacted a politician	9	-.12	-.16, -.08	.01	-.02, 0.03	.01	-.03, 0.04
Worked in a political party	7	-.10	-.18, -.02	.17	.06, 0.23	.13	.04, 0.19
Signed a petition	9	-.04	-.07, -.01	.01	-.01, 0.03	.00	-.03, 0.02
Public demonstration	9	.01	-.03, 0.06	.01	-.02, 0.05	.01	-.03, 0.04
Bought or boycotted	9	-.02	-.05, 0.02	.00	-.02, 0.02	-.01	-.03, 0.02
Discussed with friends	6	-.19	-.22, -.14	-.01	-.05, 0.03	-.02	-.07, 0.02
Letter to a newspaper	7	-.04	-.10, 0.01	.03	-.03, 0.08	.03	-.02, 0.09
Political party participation	9	-.03	-.07, 0.02	.01	-.03, 0.05	.02	-.03, 0.06
Life satisfaction ^b	Waves	PP↔LS		PP→LS		LS→PP	
Contacted a politician	8	.09	.04, 0.13	.00	-.03, 0.03	-.01	-.04, 0.02
Worked in a political party	6	.05	-.01, 0.12	-.15	-.24, -.05	-.10	-.17, -.01
Signed a petition	8	.00	.06, -.01	.07	-.03, 0.02	-.01	-.03, 0.02
Public demonstration	8	-.03	-.08, 0.01	.03	-.00, 0.07	.00	-.03, 0.03
Bought or boycotted	8	.02	-.02, 0.05	-.01	-.04, 0.02	-.02	-.04, 0.01
Discussed with friends	5	.12	.07, 0.17	.01	-.05, 0.07	.08	.01, 0.14
Letter to a newspaper	6	-.03	-.08, 0.03	.02	-.05, 0.08	.06	-.01, 0.12
Political party participation	8	.02	-.03, 0.06	.01	-.04, 0.06	.01	-.03, 0.06
Happiness ^c	Waves						
Contacted a politician	7	.11	.07, 0.15	-.04	-.07, 0.00	-.03	-.06, 0.01
Worked in a political party	7	.08	-.00, 0.16	-.12	-.18, -.01	-.06	-.13, 0.02
Signed a petition	7	.04	.00, 0.08	-.02	-.04, 0.01	-.01	-.04, 0.02
Public demonstration	7	.01	-.04, 0.05	.01	-.03, 0.05	-.01	-.06, 0.03
Bought or boycotted	7	.02	-.02, 0.05	.02	-.01, 0.05	.00	-.02, 0.02
Discussed with friends	6	.12	.07, 0.17	-.02	-.07, 0.02	.00	-.05, 0.05
Letter to a newspaper	7	-.01	-.06, 0.04	-.03	-.08, 0.02	-.02	-.07, 0.02
Political party participation	7	.03	-.02, 0.07	.02	-.03, 0.06	.05	-.01, 0.09

Note: All coefficients are standardized. Parameter estimates with confidence intervals that did not include zero are shown in bold. Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

^aN's range from 7364 to 8060 depending on the number of cases with missing data on all variables.

^bN's range from 6862 to 7555 depending on the number of cases with missing data on all variables.

^cN's range from 7204 to 7207 depending on the number of cases with missing data on all variables.

reversing appropriate items, a mean score was calculated so that a high score indicated high depression symptoms.

Happiness and life satisfaction were assessed using the following questions, respectively: "All things considered, how happy would you say you are at the moment?" (the response options ranged from 0 = *extremely unhappy* to 10 = *extremely happy*) and "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your current life?"

(the response options ranged from 0 = *extremely dissatisfied* to 10 = *extremely satisfied*). In the last waves, the response options ranged from 1 to 5. Because the questions were answered using different response options, the responses were standardized before the analysis.

Political participation was assessed by asking respondents the following question, “During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you ...” and these seven items: Contacted a politician; Worked in a political party; Signed a petition/signature campaign online or offline; Taken part in a public demonstration; Bought or boycotted a certain product; Discussed with friends about politics; Sent a letter to a newspaper. The GESIS Panel study also included another item (“Worked in another organization”) which was excluded due to an unspecified form of political participation. Participants responded using one of the following response options: 1 *No*; 2 *Yes, once*; 3 *Yes, sometimes*; and 4 *Yes, often*. Furthermore, participants were asked to report how often, during the last 12 months, they participated in a political party. Participants also reported their political party participation using a four-scale response ranging from 1 = *No* to 4 = *Often*. Given that the political participation variables exhibited a strong floor effect (e.g., 95 percent of “No” responses), all variables were dichotomized by assigning a score of 1 for “No” responses and a score of 2 for any other response. When there is a strong floor effect, the multivariate unrestricted probit model is not appropriate for ordinal outcomes (Muthén, Asparouhov, and Witkiewitz 2023).

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted in Mplus. To investigate the bidirectional relationship between political participation and mental health, the random intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM; e.g., Hamaker, Kuiper, and Grasman 2015; Lucas 2023) was used. The RI-CLPM is an extension of the cross-lagged panel model that accounts for time-invariant, trait-like sources of variance through the inclusion of a random intercept. The Bayesian estimator was used along with a full information approach to deal with missing data. To obtain more precise estimates of cross-lagged paths, equality constraints were imposed (Lucas 2023). Moreover, there are no theoretical reasons to expect different effects across the observed timespan. The measures of political participation were treated as binary variables. Based on the recommendations of Orth et al. (2022), the size of cross-lagged effects was interpreted using the following benchmark values: 0.03 (small effect), 0.07 (medium effect), and 0.12 (large effect).

RESULTS

Depression

Results from bivariate RI-CLPMs are presented in Table 1. No cross-lagged effects of political participation on depression symptoms were found. Within-person elevations in depression symptoms were associated with subsequent (i.e., from one year to the next) within-person increased likelihood of working for a political party, $b = 0.11$, 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) [0.05, 0.17]. Moreover, within-person increased likelihood of working for a political party predicted subsequent within-person elevations in depression symptoms, $b = 0.17$, 95 percent CIs [0.06, 0.23]. In other words, when participants worked in a political party more than usual, they were more likely to experience higher levels (than usual) of depression in the next wave and vice versa. The effect sizes were large in magnitude. The remaining cross-lagged effects were not statistically significant. Significant and negative associations at the between-individual level between depression and four forms of political participation (i.e., contacting a politician, signing a petition, working in a political party, and discussing politics with friends) were found. In other words, a participant’s standing in the sample’s distribution on depression correlated negatively with his or her standing in the sample’s distribution on these four forms of political participation.

Life satisfaction

Table 1 reports the findings from bivariate RI-CLPMs. Significant cross-lagged paths were observed from life satisfaction at each time point to a higher likelihood of discussing politics with friends, $b = 0.06$, 95 percent CIs [0.01, 0.11], and a lower likelihood of working for a political party, $b = -0.09$, 95 percent CIs [-0.15, -0.02], at the subsequent time point (i.e., from one year to the next). In other words, within-person elevations in life satisfaction were associated with a subsequent within-person greater likelihood of discussing politics with friends and lower likelihood of working for a political party. The effect sizes were medium in magnitude. However, the other cross-lagged paths from life satisfaction at one time point to political participation at the next time point were not statistically significant. Furthermore, working for a political party more than usual was associated with a subsequent within-person decrease in life satisfaction, $b = -0.08$, 95 percent CIs [-0.15, -0.00]. The remaining cross-lagged paths from political participation at one time point to life satisfaction at the next time point were not statistically significant. At the between-individual level, significant associations indicated that participants with higher overall levels of life satisfaction also reported a higher likelihood of having contacted a politician and discussed politics with friends.

Happiness

The results from bivariate RI-CLPMs are displayed in Table 1. A significant and negative cross-lagged path was observed from working in a political party to happiness, $b = -0.11$, 95 percent CIs [-0.18, -0.01], at the subsequent time point (i.e., from one year to the next). Thus, when participants worked in a political party more than usual, they were more likely to experience lower levels of happiness in the next wave. The effect size was large in magnitude. The other cross-lagged effects were nonsignificant. At the between-individual level, significant associations indicated that participants with higher overall levels of happiness also reported a higher likelihood of having contacted a politician, signed a petition, and discussed politics with friends.

DISCUSSION

The main aim of the current study was to examine the reciprocal relationship between political participation and mental health in a large sample of German adult participants. The results from these analyses revealed few statistically significant cross-lagged paths at the within-person level. Overall, there was almost no evidence supporting the notion that political participation is predictive of mental health and vice versa. There are a few exceptions to this conclusion. When participants reported higher levels of life satisfaction relative to their typical level, they were more likely to discuss politics with friends and less likely to work in a political party at the subsequent time point. Furthermore, when participants reported higher levels of depression relative to their typical level, they were more likely to work in a political party at the subsequent time point. Finally, an increase in participants' work in a political party relative to their typical level is associated with a subsequent increase in depression and a decrease in life satisfaction and happiness.

The findings of the current study are consistent with those of previous research on the within-person effects of political participation on subjective well-being indicating almost no evidence that political participation has an effect (Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, the findings offer little support for the hypothesis advanced by political theorists concerning the psychological benefits of political participation (e.g., Barber 1984; Bowles and Gintis 1986; Dreze and Sen 1995; Mansbridge 1983; Olsen 1982). While the current findings cast serious doubts on a win-win narrative on political participation (Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021), they do provide some, albeit limited, evidence supporting the dark side of political participation (e.g., Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann 2022a, 2022b; Pavlova et al. 2022; Serrat,

Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005). A possible explanation is that the positive and negative effects of political participation on mental health do occur but cancel each other out, leading to no net effect.

Greater depression symptoms and lower life satisfaction were found to predict subsequent work in a political party, suggesting that depression symptoms and low life satisfaction may also be related to concerns with personal, social, and political problems, which, in turn, motivate people to engage in professional political participation. Therefore, apart from professional political participation, the hypothesis of a causal effect of depressive symptoms on political participation (Landwehr and Ojeda 2021; Ojeda 2015) received little support. Indeed, depression symptoms were not predictive of other forms of political participation, whereas life satisfaction was predictive of discussions with friends about politics. Furthermore, it was found that participants with higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness have a higher likelihood of contacting a politician and discussing politics with friends compared to participants with low levels of life satisfaction and happiness (i.e., between person effects). Because these results are at the between-person level, they may be due to preexisting between-individual differences or confounded by other factors such as genotype and/or cultural socialization that predict both mental health and political participation.

The findings of the current study do raise the question as to whether there are any within-person effects of political participation on mental health. Positive experiences of political participation were considered an opportunity to fully express and fulfill oneself and to improve a community, thereby leading to a sense of empowerment (e.g., Barber 1984; Bowles and Gintis 1986; Dreze and Sen 1995; Mansbridge 1983; Olsen 1982). On the other hand, negative experiences of political participation may be characterized by disgust, immorality, unbounded competition, selfishness, and cynicism (e.g., Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann 2022a, 2022b; Pavlova et al. 2022; Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005), leaving people with a sense of alienation, disillusionment, strain, frustration, and disempowerment (e.g., Lühr, Pavlova, and Luhmann 2022b; Serrat, Chacur-Kiss, and Villar 2021; Serrat, Villar, and Chacur-Kiss 2023). Mental health outcomes might be affected by the quality of the process of political participation rather than political participation per se. There is evidence that the quality of participation is an important factor explaining the positive effects of a youth-led participatory action research citizenship education project (Albanesi et al. 2023; Prati et al. 2020). In addition, there is also evidence that the impact of political participation on subjective well-being depends on the internalization of nondemocratic and anti-democratic values and attitudes (Prati 2022; 2023). Thus, interventions aimed at reducing anti-democratic attitudes and the role of education for democratic citizenship (Graham and Svulik 2020; Osler and Starkey 2006) must be considered when providing opportunities for political participation.

The contention that subjective well-being does not substantially lead to political apathy and disengagement from political activities (Veenhoven 1988) was supported in the current study. However, there are some noteworthy exceptions. Higher depression symptoms and lower life satisfaction predicted greater professional political participation (i.e., working in a political party). Therefore, there is some support for the hypothesis that discontent is the driving force behind professional political participation (Veenhoven 1988) and that when citizens achieve a higher level of subjective life satisfaction, they are more likely to reduce engagement in the political process (Flavin and Keane 2012). Only life satisfaction was found to positively predict discussion with friends about politics. The finding that life satisfaction predicted a higher likelihood of discussing politics with friends supports the view that satisfied citizens are more likely to look beyond their personal needs and address broader political and social concerns (Flavin and Keane 2012). According to post-materialism theory (e.g., Inglehart 1990, 1997, 2009), the achievement of a desired level of life satisfaction is followed by an increase in the attention paid to general social and political problems through political engagement. These mixed findings suggest that the potential impact of political participation on subjective well-being and mental health is complex and cannot be described in a simple way.

There are several limitations to the current study that should be acknowledged. One limitation is that all the measures were based on participants' self-reports. Self-report data may be influenced by biases (e.g., social desirability, recall bias). Another limitation concerns the use of one-item measures. When measuring constructs that are not complex and ambiguous to participants, the use of single-item measures

is considered acceptable (Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy 1997). Moreover, the psychometric properties of single-item measures of subjective well-being are comparable to those of their multiple-item counterparts (e.g., Abdel-Khalek 2006; Cheung and Lucas 2014). Notwithstanding, the use of multi-item measures in future studies would facilitate a more nuanced evaluation of the variables under investigation. In addition, the measures used in the current study do not tap the full range of dimensions of mental health and political participation. For instance, illegal forms of political participation as well as anxiety symptoms were not assessed. Future research is needed to investigate potential bidirectional relationships between other mental health dimensions and other forms of political participation. It should also be noted that the generalizability of the current findings to other countries and cultures may be limited. Finally, although the possibility of common method bias may not be completely excluded, it was minimized in the longitudinal design by assessing predictors and outcome variables at different moments.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study generally do not support bidirectional effects between political participation and mental health, with some exceptions depending on the form of political participation and the dimension of mental health. Nevertheless, the potential effect of political participation on mental health and vice versa should not be disregarded. In this context, to achieve a better understanding of the bidirectional relationship between political participation and mental health, the importance of the quality of political participation and the meaning attributed to the experience might be crucial. For instance, political participation can be based on common good or self-interest motives and be characterized by power struggle and competition (e.g., conflictual and partisan logic) or empowerment. Therefore, a focus on the quality of political participation rather than participation per se may be more promising for understanding its bidirectional relationship with mental health.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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