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# **Political Literacy and Social Inequalities Among Young People: Evidence from an Outermost Region**

## **Literacia Política e Desigualdades Sociais Entre Jovens: Evidência de uma Região Ultraperiférica**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses the political literacy of young people in the Azores, aged between 12 and 30, based on an empirical study conducted in this outermost region of Portugal. It aims to contribute to the debate on youth political literacy in peripheral and insular contexts, which remains largely overlooked in national and European surveys. Drawing on a measure of political literacy based on factual knowledge of key political actors and democratic institutions, a Political Literacy Index was constructed using a representative sample of Azorean youth. The findings reveal marked inequalities in political literacy associated with social class, educational attainment, and age, as well as differences in the type and intensity of political participation, mediated by levels of political literacy. By showing that political literacy operates as a socially differentiated form of civic capital, the article advances sociological debates on social inequalities and democratic participation in insular contexts.

*Key Words:* Political literacy; Youth; civic and political participation; Social inequalities; Azores.

*JEL codes:* D72, I24, J13, R11

### **Resumo**

Este artigo analisa a literacia política dos jovens açorianos, com idades entre os 12 e os 30 anos, a partir de um estudo empírico realizado nos Açores. O objetivo é contribuir para o aprofundamento do debate sobre literacia política juvenil em contextos ultraperiféricos, frequentemente negligenciados nos inquéritos nacionais e europeus. A partir de uma abordagem centrada no conhecimento factual sobre os principais protagonistas políticos e instituições democráticas, foi construído um Índice de Literacia Política aplicado a uma amostra representativa de jovens açorianos. Os resultados evidenciam desigualdades significativas na distribuição da literacia política, associadas à classe social, à escolaridade e à idade, bem como diferenças no tipo e na intensidade da participação política, mediadas pelos níveis de literacia. Ao demonstrar que a literacia política funciona como um recurso socialmente diferenciado, o artigo contribui para o debate sociológico sobre a reprodução das desigualdades na participação democrática em contextos insulares.

*Palavras-chave:* literacia política; juventude; participação cívica e política; desigualdades sociais; Açores

*JEL codes:* D72, I24, J13, R11

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Representative democracies are currently facing multiple challenges, intensified by the intersection of economic, social, environmental, and geopolitical factors. In this context, democratic vitality and institutional health depend, in part, on the capacity to engage citizens in processes of deliberation and political participation (Habermas, 1996). However, among younger segments of the population, political participation tends to be lower: young people participate less in elections, display lower levels of interest in traditional party politics, and are less inclined to hold public office (OECD, 2020; Quaranta *et al.*, 2021; Malschinger *et al.*, 2023; Giugni & Grasso, 2025). This relative disengagement has generated growing concern among governments, institutions, and civil society, which increasingly view youth participation as a key element for the sustainability of contemporary democracies (European Commission, 2024; Magalhães, 2022; OECD, 2020).

Recent scholarship, however, points to an apparent paradox. Despite widespread distrust of and dissatisfaction with traditional forms of political participation, such as party membership and electoral engagement, young people are increasingly involved in non-conventional and informal forms of civic and political action, often mediated by digital spaces (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Feio, Silva & Martins, 2023). This pattern has been situated within a European context shaped by the prolonged effects of the sovereign debt crisis in Southern Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of populist forces, the intensification of the climate crisis, and the outbreak of armed conflicts. Together, these developments have exposed structural vulnerabilities in democratic systems and intensified debates around democratic deficit and transformation, particularly with regard to younger generations (Costa & Silva, 2022; Gardner, Carvalho & Valenstein, 2022; Quaranta *et al.*, 2021).

At the same time, the digitalisation of societies has profoundly transformed the ways individuals act, think, and participate politically. Digital platforms have created new spaces for expression, mobilisation, and youth activism, but they have also introduced significant risks, including information fragmentation, algorithmic personalisation, and the reproduction of inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies, inequalities that unevenly affect different groups of young people (Magalhães, 2008). These transformations pose new challenges for understanding political participation and call for renewed attention to the skills required to navigate critically within an increasingly complex informational environment.

As a social category, youth, particularly in Southern European countries, is characterised by increasingly prolonged, uncertain, and socially differentiated transitions, resulting from structural changes in life trajectories: extended educational pathways, delayed entry into the labour market, employment precariousness, economic instability, and difficulties in achieving residential independence (Buyukkececi, 2025; Carmo, Cantante & Almeida, 2014; Carmo & Matias, 2020). These conditions help to explain, at least in part, the low levels of conventional political participation among young people, while simultaneously raising the possibility that we are witnessing forms of political engagement that escape traditional metrics and are not equally accessible to all youth (Menezes, 2003; Weiss, 2020).

It is within this context that a critical rethinking of the concepts of political literacy and political participation becomes necessary. Despite the growing body of research on youth political literacy, some of the earlier approaches, while foundational to the consolidation of the field, tended to conceptualise it primarily as an individual competence, paying limited attention to the social processes that unevenly structure access to political knowledge (Cassel & Lo, 1995; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Norris, 2004). Such approaches risk obscuring the fact that political literacy also constitutes a form of civic and cultural capital, deeply shaped by structural conditions such as social class, educational capital, and family contexts of political socialisation (Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Menezes, 2003). By shifting the analytical focus from individual attributes to the mechanisms through which inequalities in access to political knowledge are produced and reproduced, this article

adopts a sociological perspective that understands political literacy as an integral dimension of contemporary social inequalities.

Moreover, much of the existing research remains anchored in national or metropolitan contexts, often assuming a degree of territorial homogeneity that renders the specific conditions of peripheral and outermost regions largely invisible. Examining political literacy in insular contexts enables a more nuanced interrogation of the relationships between territory, social inequalities, and citizenship, and challenges the transferability of dominant explanatory models to settings characterised by geographic dispersion, lower institutional density, and distinct socio-economic trajectories.

Accordingly, this article seeks to contribute to this debate through the construction of a composite index of political literacy applied to Azorean youth, an insular and peripheral population within the Portuguese context. Through this empirical analysis, we aim to examine how political literacy is distributed among young people in the Azores, how it relates to key sociodemographic variables, namely age, educational attainment, and social class, and what implications arise for understanding inequalities in democratic participation in outermost regions. More specifically, the study assesses: i) knowledge of key political actors, ii) understanding of the functioning of the democratic regime, and iii) knowledge of regional autonomy. This focus stems from the need to examine whether, and to what extent, political knowledge constitutes a socially differentiated precondition for political and civic participation among younger generations.

In doing so, the article contributes to the study of social inequalities by demonstrating, through robust empirical evidence, that political literacy among young people is deeply structured by classical social cleavages, particularly social class and educational attainment, even at early stages of the life course. In this sense, the article offers a critical reading of the often-optimistic narrative surrounding the “democratization” of youth participation, demonstrating that political literacy operates as an unequal form of civic capital that shapes not only the extent, but also the nature of young people’s political engagement.

## **2. POLITICAL LITERACY AND YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

### **2.1 Political literacy as a citizenship competence**

In the context of the information and knowledge society, individuals face new everyday demands that require skills for interpreting, evaluating, and using written information across multiple spheres of social, personal, professional, and civic life (Ávila, 2008). The ability to mobilise such knowledge is now widely regarded as a fundamental condition for the exercise of citizenship in the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). Consequently, the relationship between literacy and citizenship has been extensively discussed in literature, grounded in the assumption that higher levels of literacy foster more informed and critical forms of participation (Dalton, 2008; Ashbridge *et al.*, 2022).

The concept of literacy has increasingly been applied across multiple domains, such as politics, health, the environment, and the digital sphere - as a means of assessing citizens’ levels of knowledge, skills, or practices in these specific areas (Ávila, 2008; Serpa & Santos, 2020). Although etymologically associated with reading and writing, sociological research has conceptualised and developed literacy as the “capacity to process written information in everyday life” (Benavente *et al.*, 1996: 4), encompassing the ability to mobilise, interpret, and apply knowledge in concrete life situations, based on reflexive and cumulative learning processes (Costa & Ávila, 1998; Bonnet & Rosenbaum, 2020).

In this article, the analysis focuses on political literacy, understood as the set of knowledge and competencies required to comprehend political processes and to participate in democratic life in an informed manner (Cassel & Lo, 1995). Political literacy entails recognising the main actors, structures, and procedures of the political system, as well as understanding civic rights and duties, mechanisms of representation, and forms of institutional or informal intervention (Cassel & Lo, 1995; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Koren, 2023).

It is important, however, to acknowledge that the relationship between literacy and political participation is complex and multifactorial. The literature identifies a range of predictors of civic participation and political interest that extend beyond factual knowledge alone (Menezes, 2003; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002). Moreover, the very definition of political participation has expanded,

particularly with the emergence of social media and digital activism, incorporating less conventional and more horizontal forms of engagement (Farthing, 2010; Handoko *et al.*, 2023).

From this perspective, political literacy must also be understood within the framework of digital and critical competencies. In the twenty-first century, literacy involves the ability to use technology to access and communicate information, while critically assessing content and its sociopolitical implications. In this regard, authors such as Ashbridge *et al.* (2022), Santos and Serpa (2020), and Handoko *et al.* (2023) highlight political, critical, or digital literacy as essential for understanding and intervening in systems of power and inequality, advocating an approach that combines technical competence, political awareness, and a sense of social justice. The relevance of literacy has become even more pronounced in the post-COVID-19 world, where informed and reflexive navigation of digital platforms has become increasingly central to democratic life. Individuals, particularly young people, are now exposed to a complex set of informational challenges that require specific competencies to distinguish credible sources from misinformation (Bonnet & Rosenbaum, 2020), to recognise hate speech and propaganda (Castano-Pulgarín *et al.*, 2021), and to critically evaluate scientific information and anti-science discourses (Malcolm, 2021).

In this article, we propose to analyse the levels of political literacy among young people in the Azores, recognising that contemporary political participation takes place across multiple spheres (online and offline) and assumes both conventional and non-conventional forms. Such an analysis simultaneously requires reflection on the very concept of youth, understood sociologically as a dynamic and plural social construction (Luckmann & Berger, 2004 [1966]). Sociological research on this topic has consistently shown that youth does not constitute a homogeneous group, but rather a social condition marked by profound cleavages related to gender, social class, ethnicity, educational attainment, occupational status, or migratory condition (Ferreira *et al.*, 2017; Menezes *et al.*, 2012; Pais, 1990).

Furthermore, transitions to adulthood have become increasingly heterogeneous and uncertain. Processes such as extended education, delayed partnership formation, family dependence, and labour market instability have contributed to the “blurring” of boundaries between youth and adulthood (Lanctôt & Poulin, 2024). These transformations are also reflected in the ways young people position themselves in relation to politics and society, in their future orientations, and in the styles of participation they adopt (Carmo & Matias, 2020; Malschinger *et al.*, 2023), contributing to what Pitti, Mengilli, and Walther (2023) describe as a form of “liminal participation” in the public sphere, situated between conventional and non-conventional modes of engagement.

## 2.2 Youth and political participation

Despite the widespread public perception of young people’s disenchantment with politics, often articulated through narratives of apathy and disengagement, recent studies have problematised this view as overly simplistic (Cancela, 2020; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Quaranta *et al.*, 2021; Magalhães, 2022). In practice, young people have been key protagonists in diverse forms of civic and political participation, articulated around their specific interests, ranging from education and the environment to housing and gender equality (Costa & Silva, 2022; Fernandes, 2023; Portos & Carvalho, 2019). Since the second half of the twentieth century, young people have played a significant role in shaping public agendas in line with their concerns and causes and have been regarded by authors such as Touraine (1969) as agents of social change (Müller-Bachmann *et al.*, 2022).

That said, youth participation does not follow a linear or uniform pattern. The literature has consistently shown that political participation among young people varies significantly according to social contexts, sources of information, and the specific stages of the life course in which individuals find themselves (Magalhães, 2022). Several factors help to explain inequalities in political literacy and participation within this population group, among which three main effects are commonly highlighted (Norris, 2004): the generational effect, the life-course effect, and the historical period effect.

The generational effect refers to the importance of primary political socialization (particularly within the family and peer groups) in the transmission of political values and attitudes. Empirical studies confirm that young people who grow up in politically active family environments (for example, where politics is discussed or electoral participation is practiced) tend to display higher

levels of civic engagement and a lower likelihood of abstention (McIntosh, Hart & Youniss, 2007; Kudrnáč & Lyons, 2017). According to Norris (2004), early encounters with politics during youth can leave lasting imprints on patterns of political participation throughout adulthood.

The life-course effect relates to the ways in which specific trajectories, such as entry into the labour market, family formation, and the strengthening of community ties, influence individuals' propensity to participate politically. Authors such as Wass (2007) argue that political participation tends to increase with age, particularly in more conventional forms such as voting. Drawing on data from the European Social Survey, Magalhães (2022) identifies an inverted U-shaped pattern of electoral participation in Portugal: low levels in youth, increasing through mid-adulthood, and declining again in later life.

The third factor, the historical period effect, highlights how critical events, such as wars, economic crises, pandemics, or corruption scandals, shape political interest, trust, and modes of participation. In this respect, since the financial crisis of 2008 there has been evidence of stagnation or decline in young people's trust in public institutions (OECD, 2020), although moments of instability or electoral competition may trigger renewed political interest (Accornero & Pinto, 2015; Cancela, 2020; Quaranta *et al.*, 2021).

Although these effects often operate simultaneously and in interdependent ways, it is important to emphasise that their impacts are neither fixed nor universal. Abstention, for example, is a phenomenon observed across all age groups and should be interpreted in light of a combination of structural and conjunctural factors, including the inability of democratic systems to address persistent social problems, such as labour precariousness, housing crises, social inequalities, and climate change, as well as growing distrust towards political elites, the perceived impunity of corruption, and the absence of a participatory civic culture (Sousa, Magalhães & Clemente, 2022).

Cancela's (2020) analysis, based on Eurobarometer data from 31 European countries, further identifies a set of factors shaping citizens' engagement in political discussions at both local and national levels. The findings indicate that: a) individual factors, such as gender, age, educational attainment, and involvement in civil society organisations, influence how citizens discuss politics; b) patterns of engagement with national politics are associated with countries' levels of economic development; and c) engagement with local politics constitutes a central dimension for understanding civic involvement. Cancela (2020:40) concludes that even in contexts marked by political dissatisfaction and apathy, interest in issues on local political agendas is capable of mobilising a significant proportion of the population across several European countries, including groups more distant from national politics.

Other studies similarly demonstrate that youth political participation is socially differentiated. A European survey by Grasso and Giugni (2025) shows that young people from social classes endowed with higher levels of resources, such as entrepreneurs, professionals, and managers, are more likely to participate, both in conventional and non-conventional forms of political action. Comparable findings had already been reported by Henn and Foard (2014), reinforcing the role of educational attainment and economic resources as key predictors of participation.

In Portugal, research on patterns of political participation, including studies by Magalhães (2022) and Fernandes (2023), indicates that young people participate less than adults in electoral terms but are comparatively more active in informal or alternative forms of participation, such as demonstrations, petitions, and engagement through social media. Even so, Portuguese youth display levels of political involvement below the European average (Magalhães, 2022).

Taken together, these findings reinforce the relevance of an intra-generational analysis sensitive to inequalities of social class, gender, educational attainment, and territorial context, as is the case for young people in the Azores. In the study of political literacy, it is therefore essential to examine whether, and how, levels of literacy among young people shape their modes of civic and political participation. Consideration of place and the local scale of politics is particularly pertinent, insofar as young people in peripheral territories experience specific socio-economic and institutional conditions, such as regional autonomy, realities that are often absent or rendered invisible in large-scale national and international studies.

### **3. THE AZOREAN CONTEXT: INSULARITY, YOUTH AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

The Azores constitute a politically autonomous Portuguese region composed of nine islands located in the North Atlantic, characterised by geographic dispersion and demographic asymmetries. As an outermost region of the European Union, the archipelago combines political autonomy with structural peripheralisation, making it a particularly relevant context for examining the relationship between territory, citizenship, and democratic participation. The establishment of political autonomy following the 1976 Constitution granted the Azores' legislative and executive powers, while judicial authority remained centralised at the national level. Beyond its institutional configuration, autonomy has played a key role in shaping a distinct political and civic space, marked by strong local governance, proximity between political actors and citizens, and the coexistence of regional, national, and European political arenas. These features have important implications for political socialisation, especially among younger generations, whose experiences of citizenship are shaped simultaneously by insularity, scale, and autonomy (Lalanda-Gonçalves, 1992).

Research on Azorean youth has consistently highlighted low levels of conventional political participation, particularly in relation to party membership and formal political organisations. Early sociological studies have already pointed to limited associative engagement and weak political involvement, with participation largely confined to recreational, cultural, or religious activities (Carmo, Rocha & Medeiros, 1990). Subsequent research confirmed these patterns, while also identifying significant territorial disparities, particularly between urban and rural contexts. Young people living in more urbanised islands tend to display higher levels of political and civic engagement, whereas those in rural settings are more likely to participate in non-political or community-based activities (Rocha, Medeiros & Diogo, 1995).

More recent studies on youth associational life in the Azores indicate that, despite recognising the civic value of political participation, most young people remain distant from conventional political channels (Borrvalho, Rocha & Silva, 2019; Diogo *et al.*, 2024; Lopes, 2010). Politics is rarely perceived as a sphere of personal fulfilment or effective intervention, a pattern that reflects broader processes of political disengagement observed in peripheral regions. At the same time, these findings suggest that youth participation in the Azores is not uniformly low, but rather socially and territorially differentiated, shaped by access to resources, educational opportunities, and local networks (Lopes, 2010).

This context makes the Azores a particularly relevant case for analyzing political literacy among young people. Insularity, territorial fragmentation, and political autonomy create specific conditions for political socialisation, access to information, and engagement with democratic institutions, conditions that are often absent or overlooked in large-scale national and international surveys. Examining political literacy in this setting allows for a more nuanced understanding of how structural and territorial inequalities shape young people's access to political knowledge and, consequently, their modes of civic and political participation.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Data and sample**

The data presented in this article were collected within the framework of a research project (Diogo *et al.*, 2024) carried out by the Azores Youth Observatory (OJA) in 2023, at the request of the Regional Directorate for Youth (Diogo *et al.*, 2024). The respondents were divided into two distinct samples (aged 12-17 and 18-30), although in practice the differences between the questionnaires relate only to questions concerning electoral participation. Each of the two samples is representative of the Azorean youth population within its respective age group. Data collection for the project was organised according to these two age groups, considering that the age of 18 constitutes a logical threshold, as it marks the minimum voting age and, consequently, a shift in young people's formal political responsibility. This decision is also supported, regarding issues related to information and

communication technologies, by studies on internet use that identify this age as generally marking a clear distinction within the broad set of age categories commonly referred to as youth (Ofcom, 2023).

Throughout the data collection process, a set of legal, ethical, and deontological requirements was strictly observed and duly documented in the Informed Consent Forms, which were provided to participants prior to completion of the questionnaire. In the case of underage respondents, informed consent was also obtained from their legal guardians. The study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the University of the Azores, as well as the Code of Ethics of the Portuguese Sociological Association. Accordingly, the questionnaires and ethical procedures of the research were submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Azores.

Based on data from the 2021 Census provided by Statistics Portugal (INE), two representative samples of the Azorean youth population were constructed using a non-probability quota sampling method, stratified by island, sex, age, and educational level. The research design defined two independent cohorts: adolescents aged 12-17 and young adults aged 18-30. Assuming a 95% confidence level and a 4% margin of error, the final samples comprised 579 respondents in the younger cohort and 591 respondents in the older cohort. Data collection took place between July and December 2023 across the nine islands of the Azores and involved 22 interviewers from the Integrated Business Support Network (RIAE), a branch of the Regional Government. Given the geographical dispersion of the territory and the size of the target population, the fieldwork required extensive logistical coordination and the collaboration of schools, public institutions, civil society organizations, and companies throughout the Autonomous Region of the Azores. The questionnaire was administered using both online and paper-based formats when necessary.

## 4.2 Construction of the political literacy index

To construct an index capable of measuring the political literacy of Azorean youth, a direct assessment methodology was employed (Ávila, 2008: 107), drawing on previous studies of political literacy - namely the *European Social Survey* and, in the specific case of the Azores, Borralho *et al.* (2019). The index is based on a set of questions assessing knowledge of the individuals who lead the main international, national, and regional political institutions, which are understood here as indicators of awareness of the existence of these institutions and of their functioning (Table 1). Asking respondents about individuals in relation to the offices they hold has the advantage that recognising the individual presupposes recognition of the institution they represent; therefore, a correct answer signals political literacy regarding institutional and political matters.

In addition, two questions relating to the regional autonomous system were included. As discussed above, political literacy entails recognising the actors, structures, and procedures of the political system, as well as understanding rights and mechanisms of representation (Cassel & Lo, 1995; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Koren, 2023). In this article, however, analytical attention is focused primarily on the first of these dimensions.

**Table 1. Items included in the Political Literacy Index**

|                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Can you say who is currently the President of the Republic?                                               |
| And who is currently the Prime Minister?                                                                  |
| Can you say who is the current President of the Assembly of the Republic (national parliament)?           |
| Can you say who the current President of the European Commission is?                                      |
| And who is the current Secretary-General of the United Nations?                                           |
| Can you say who is the current President of the Legislative Assembly of the Azores (regional parliament)? |
| Now, can you say who is the current Representative of the Republic in the Azores?                         |
| Can you say who the current President of the Regional Government of the Azores is?                        |
| In which city of the Azores is the Legislative Assembly of the Azores located?                            |
| Regarding the Azores, have you ever heard of autonomy?                                                    |

Each correct answer was assigned a score of 2 points. Accordingly, political literacy could theoretically range from 0 points (total absence of literacy, with no correct answers) to 20 points (maximum literacy, with all 10 questions answered correctly). To assess the quality of the index, it was cross-tabulated with several sociodemographic variables which, based on the literature, have

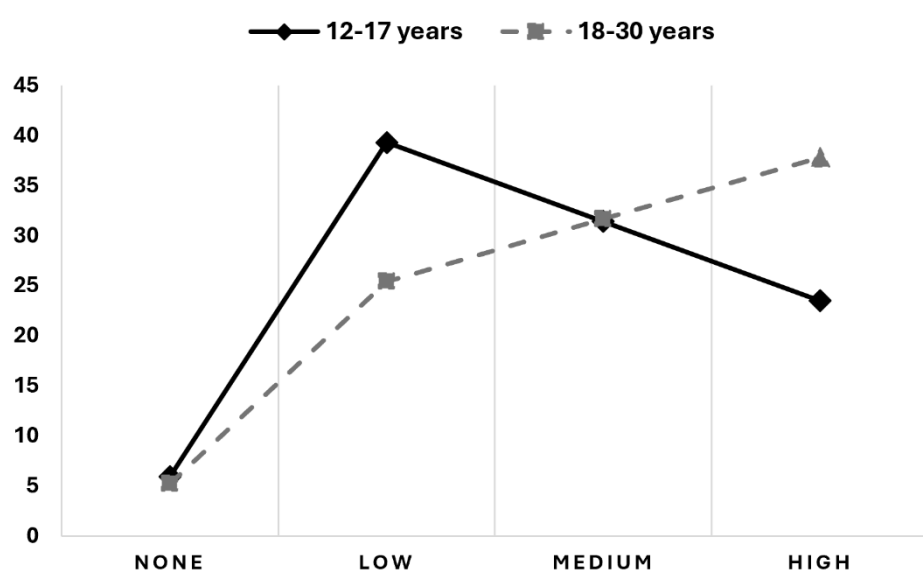
been identified as factors influencing youth political literacy in Portugal, namely age, gender, educational attainment, and social class. The Political Literacy Index used in this study operationalises a specific dimension of political literacy, centred on factual and institutional knowledge of the main actors, offices, and structures of the political system (Menezes, 2003; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002). This methodological choice allows for an objective and comparable measurement of political knowledge, although it does not encompass the full range of dimensions associated with political literacy, namely critical, interpretative, or attitudinal competencies (Ashbridge *et al.*, 2022; Handoko *et al.*, 2023). The index should therefore be interpreted as an indicator of institutional familiarity rather than as an exhaustive measure of political literacy in a broader sense.

## 5. RESULTS

Overall, the findings indicate that young people's political literacy varies according to age groups (Figure 1). Among young people aged 12 to 17, the majority display low to medium levels of political literacy (70.7%)<sup>1</sup> (Table 2). By contrast, among young adults aged 18 to 30, higher levels of political literacy are observed, with 69.5% presenting medium to high levels (Table 2).

A more fine-grained analysis, dividing each sample into two age categories (12-14; 15-17; 18-24; and 25-30 years), shows that this pattern remains robust at this level of disaggregation (Table 2). The increase in political literacy is particularly pronounced and statistically significant between the 18-24 age group and the older group aged 25-30 ( $\chi^2 = 41.691$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Figure 1. Distribution of Political Literacy Levels (PLL) among Azorean youth aged 12–17 and 18–30, 2023 (%)**



*Methodological note:* Political literacy levels were constructed based on a Political Literacy Index ranging from 0 (no literacy) to 20 (high level of literacy), calculated separately for each age group. Literacy levels were defined as follows: None (0 points), Low (2-6 points), Medium (8-12 points), and High (14-20 points).

<sup>1</sup> Political literacy levels in the index were aggregated into four categories: none (0 points), low (2-6 points), medium (8-12 points), and high (14-20 points).

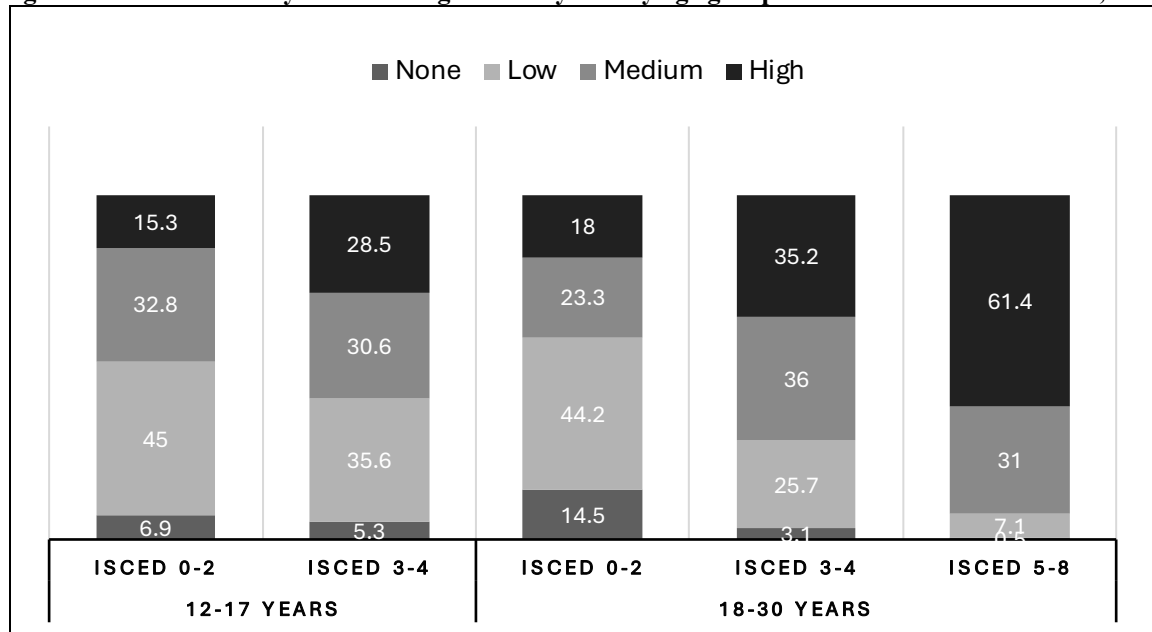
**Table 2. Summary of variation in Political Literacy Levels (PLL) among Azorean youth according to sociodemographic characteristics**

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |           | Political Literacy Level (PLL) (%) |      |        |      |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------|------|--------|------|
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |           | None                               | Low  | Medium | High |
| 12-17 years           | Total PLL (12-17 years)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |           | 5.9                                | 39.3 | 31.4   | 23.5 |
|                       | Age groups                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 12-14 yrs | 6.4                                | 43.2 | 32.7   | 17.7 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 15-17 yrs | 5.7                                | 37.3 | 30.8   | 26.2 |
|                       | Gender                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Female    | 6.8                                | 38.9 | 30.4   | 23.8 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Male      | 4.8                                | 39.7 | 32.4   | 23.0 |
|                       | Young person's educational attainment <sup>1</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | ISCED 0-2 | 6.9                                | 45   | 32.8   | 15.3 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ISCED 3-4 | 5.3                                | 35.6 | 30.6   | 28.5 |
|                       | Mother's educational attainment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ISCED 0-2 | 6.1                                | 41.9 | 24.6   | 27.5 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ISCED 3-4 | 6.6                                | 36.6 | 35.5   | 21.3 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ISCED 5-8 | 3                                  | 33.1 | 43.6   | 20.3 |
|                       | Social class <sup>2</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | EDL       | 2.8                                | 22.2 | 55.6   | 19.4 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | PT        | 1.3                                | 35.5 | 40.8   | 22.4 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | TI        | 6.8                                | 35.6 | 31.5   | 26   |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | EE        | 8.2                                | 42.9 | 26.6   | 22.3 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | O         | 5.9                                | 40.6 | 24.8   | 28.7 |
| 18-30 years           | Total PLL (18-30 yrs)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |           | 5.2                                | 25.4 | 31.7   | 37.8 |
|                       | Age groups                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 18-24 yrs | 6.2                                | 29.8 | 32.9   | 31.0 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 25-30 yrs | 2.5                                | 13.9 | 28.4   | 55.2 |
|                       | Gender                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Female    | 3.8                                | 23.3 | 33.4   | 39.5 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Male      | 7.3                                | 28.5 | 29.2   | 35.1 |
|                       | Young person's educational attainment <sup>1</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | ISCED 0-2 | 14.5                               | 44.2 | 23.3   | 18.0 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ISCED 3-4 | 3.1                                | 25.7 | 36.0   | 35.2 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ISCED 5-8 | 0.5                                | 7.1  | 31.0   | 61.4 |
|                       | Social class <sup>22</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | EDL       | 6.1                                | 12.1 | 27.3   | 54.5 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | PT        | -                                  | 13.3 | 27.8   | 58.9 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | TI        | 5.5                                | 34.5 | 23.6   | 36.4 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | EE        | 3.7                                | 28.1 | 35.9   | 32.2 |
|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | O         | 15.7                               | 37.3 | 28.9   | 18.1 |
| Methodological notes: | <sup>1</sup> Educational attainment was classified according to the International Standard Classification of Education: ISCED 0-2 (Pre-primary, Primary and Lower Secondary Education); ISCED 3-4 (Upper Secondary and Post-secondary Non-tertiary Education); ISCED 5-8 (Tertiary Education). |           |                                    |      |        |      |
|                       | <sup>2</sup> Social Class: EDL - Employers, managers, and liberal professionals; PT - Technical and supervisory professionals; TI - Self-employed workers; EE - Clerical and routine employees; O - Manual workers.                                                                            |           |                                    |      |        |      |

Turning to gender inequalities among young people, differences between boys and girls aged 12 to 17 are present but small and not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 1.476$ ,  $p = 0.688$ ). However, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the relevance of gender inequalities in structuring contemporary societies, the results indicate that gender exerts a modest but statistically significant effect on political literacy in the older age group ( $\chi^2 = 7.809$ ,  $p = 0.050$ ). Among young adults aged 18 to 30, women display slightly higher levels of medium to high political literacy (72.9%) compared to men (64.3%). Conversely, within this same age group, a higher proportion of young men (36%) exhibit political literacy levels classified as none or low, compared to young women (27%).

The analysis then turns to the role of young people's educational capital in shaping variation in political literacy levels (Figure 2 and Table 2).

<sup>2</sup> Social class was constructed drawing on the literature underpinning the most widely used classification method in Portugal, appropriate to the country's class structure and known as the Almeida -Costa-Machado social class schema (ACM class system) (Costa *et al.*, 2015).

**Figure 2. Political literacy levels among Azorean youth by age group and educational attainment, 2023**

Legend: ISCED 0-2 (Pre-primary, Primary and Lower Secondary Education); ISCED 3-4 (Upper Secondary and Post-secondary Non-tertiary Education); ISCED 5-8 (Tertiary Education).

For the younger group (aged 12-17), in addition to respondents' own educational attainment, mothers' educational attainment was used as a discriminating variable. For the older group, this issue of collinearity does not arise, since from the age of 18 onwards educational trajectories may be (and often are) considerably more diverse; in this sense, respondents' own educational attainment retains its discriminating power. The data therefore show that young people with lower educational capital display lower levels of political literacy. A similar pattern is observed among the younger group when the analysis is conducted using mothers' educational attainment. It should be noted, however, that this effect is not independent of age, given the close relationship between age and educational attainment within the population under study. Accordingly, the effect of age is attenuated only among the older group. When focusing exclusively on young people aged 18 to 30, the effect of educational attainment is particularly pronounced and statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 139.696$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming the hypothesis that political literacy varies according to educational attainment.

Alongside educational capital, the analysis sought to examine whether levels of political literacy vary according to social class<sup>3</sup>. Social class was operationalised as an index constructed from the socio-professional characteristics of the household: for minors, this was based on the individual socio-professional indicators of both parents; for respondents aged 18-30, it was based either on the young person's own occupational status (when economically active) or on household characteristics in the case of inactive respondents or students. The resulting index, therefore, considers both occupation and age, while carefully considering the influence of the family context on each young person's class position.

As observed for educational attainment, political literacy levels vary according to social class in both age groups. Table 2 clearly shows that young people from more resource-rich social classes, namely EDL (employers, managers, and liberal professionals) and PT (technical and supervisory professionals), display higher levels of political literacy than those from working-class backgrounds, regardless of age group. Among the older cohort, approximately nine out of ten young people from the EDL and PT classes exhibit medium to high levels of political literacy, compared with only around five out of ten young people from manual worker backgrounds.

### 5.1. The relationship between political literacy and civic and political participation among young adults

The analysis subsequently examined the hypothesis that higher levels of political literacy are positively associated with greater participation in different forms of civic and political engagement. For this purpose, the analysis focused specifically on young adults aged 18 to 30, as they are eligible to exercise their right to vote. To assess the relationship between political literacy and civic and political participation among Azorean young adults (18-30 years), Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted (Table 3).

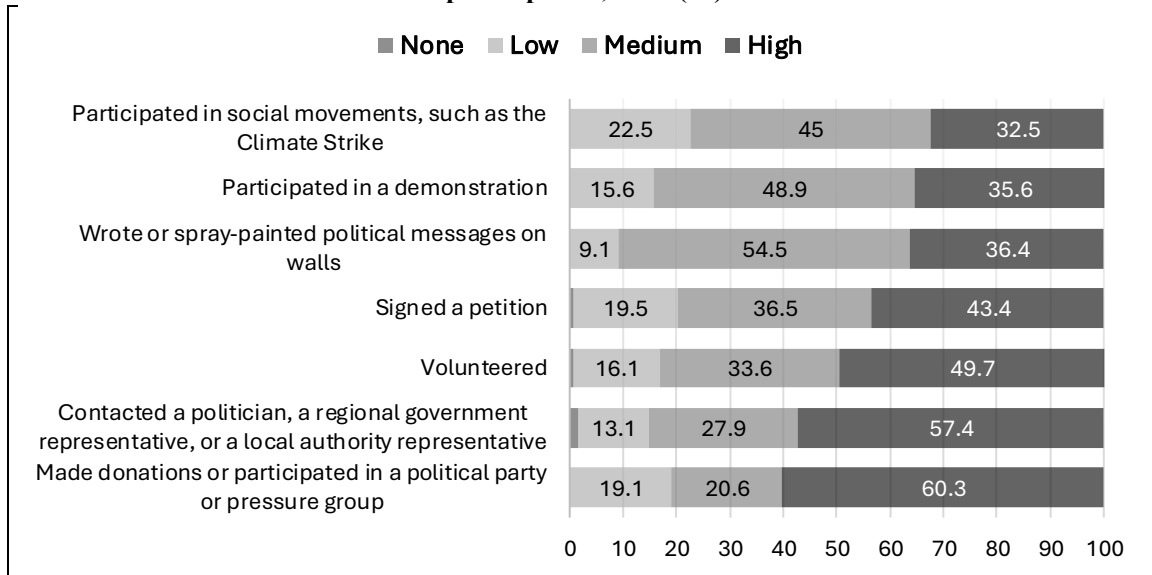
**Table 3. Differences in political literacy levels among Azorean young adults (18-30 years) according to forms of civic and political participation (yes/no)**

| Type of participation                            | Higher value | U de Mann-Whitney | Z      | p-value      |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------|--------------|
| Donations**                                      | Yes          | 14213.5           | -3.207 | <b>0.001</b> |
| Contacted a politician/representative**          | Yes          | 22551.0           | -4.381 | <b>0.001</b> |
| Signing petitions                                | Yes          | 32031.0           | -1.593 | 0.111        |
| Graffitiing political messages                   | Yes          | 3030.5            | -.475  | 0.635        |
| Demonstrations                                   | Yes          | 12182.000         | -.475  | 0.635        |
| Volunteering**                                   | Yes          | 27880.500         | -3.246 | <b>0.001</b> |
| Participation in movements (e.g. Climate Strike) | No           | 11024.000         | -.313  | 0.754        |

*Note:* The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare political literacy levels between participants and non-participants in different forms of civic and political action.  $p < 0.01$  (\*\*),  $p < 0.05$  (\*).

The results reveal statistically significant differences in political literacy levels between participants and non-participants in the following activities: making donations or participating in political parties or pressure groups ( $U = 14,213.5$ ;  $Z = -3.207$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ); contacting a politician or government representative ( $U = 22,551.0$ ;  $Z = -4.381$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ); and volunteering in non-profit or civic-oriented organisations ( $U = 27,880.5$ ;  $Z = -3.246$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ). In all these cases, participants displayed significantly higher mean ranks, indicating higher levels of political literacy.

By contrast, no statistically significant differences in political literacy levels were found regarding participation in the following activities: signing petitions; writing graffiti with political messages; participating in demonstrations; or taking part in movements such as the Climate Strike or movements for human or labour rights. These findings suggest that more conventional or organised forms of participation, such as volunteering or contacting political representatives, tend to be associated with higher levels of political literacy, whereas more informal forms of participation are not. Figure 3 presents the relationship between different levels of political literacy and the frequency with which young people report participating in various forms of civic and political action. These data are restricted to respondents who reported participation in at least one civic or political activity. Nevertheless, this exploratory analysis already allows for the identification of relevant trends regarding how levels of political literacy may influence both the type and intensity of participation.

**Figure 3. Political literacy levels among Azorean young adults (18–30 years) by civic and political participation, 2023 (%)**

*Note I:* Values refer only to cases in which respondents answered “yes” to these activities.

*Note II:* Data are ordered in descending order, from the highest to the lowest level of political literacy.

The results reveal a clear association between young people’s levels of political literacy and their engagement in different forms of civic and political participation. High levels of political literacy are strongly associated with more conventional forms of participation, such as contacting political representatives (57.4%) or contributing to political parties and pressure groups (60.3%), but also with non-conventional forms of engagement, including volunteering (49.7%) and signing petitions (43.4%). By contrast, young people with medium levels of political literacy are more prominent in expressive forms of participation, such as demonstrations (48.9%) and the expression of political opinions through messages or slogans (54.5%). Young people with low or no political literacy display very limited participation, even in less demanding activities such as signing petitions. Taken together, these findings suggest that political literacy functions as a crucial form of civic capital for young people’s political integration.

The findings show that young people from family backgrounds with higher levels of educational and socio-professional capital exhibit significantly higher levels of political literacy, reinforcing the argument that inequalities of origin are not mitigated by youth status or by new forms of civic participation (Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Fernandes, 2023; Magalhães, 2022). Instead, they tend to be reproduced through differential access to political knowledge and the resources required for democratic participation.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that young people’s political literacy varies according to age groups, tending to be higher among older youth. This observation is consistent with patterns identified in previous studies, which show that political literacy, as well as political interest and participation among young people, tends to increase with age (Cancela, 2020; Magalhães, 2022). The increase in political literacy is particularly pronounced and statistically significant between the 18-24 age group and the older cohort aged 25-30. This growth can be partly attributed to the transition to adulthood, which marks the onset of greater reflexivity regarding political identity and socialisation, alongside an enhanced capacity to evaluate political representation and expanded access to information, with particular emphasis on the role of digital media and social networks (Feio, Silva & Martins, 2023; Norris, 2004). While the transition to adulthood is typically characterised by several key milestones – such as leaving school, entering the labour market, leaving the parental home, and forming a stable romantic relationship (in a variable order and under increasingly fluid conditions, as noted earlier in this article) – the marked increase in political literacy appears to add an additional dimension to what has been described in the literature as a life-course effect (Wass, 2007).

The results further demonstrate that the distribution of political literacy among Azorean youth is deeply structured by social inequalities, reflecting the cumulative effects of social mechanisms that unevenly condition access to political knowledge from the early stages of the life course. Young people with higher levels of educational attainment and those from more socially advantaged class backgrounds exhibit significantly higher levels of political literacy, whereas those from less privileged contexts are concentrated at the lower end of the literacy spectrum. This pattern indicates that political literacy functions as a socially differentiated resource, shaped by inequalities of origin that emerge early and tend to be reproduced over time. These findings are consistent with national and international research highlighting the central role of the family and the school as key sites of differentiated political socialisation, where dispositions, cognitive repertoires, and modes of engagement with politics are transmitted in socially uneven ways (Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Menezes, 2003). Additionally, although regional autonomy provides a common political framework for all Azorean youth, effective knowledge of regional institutions remains socially differentiated, meaning that autonomy does not automatically foster civic cohesion nor prevent the reproduction of territorial inequalities, as only some young people possess the resources needed to understand and mobilise it politically.

Regarding civic and political participation, a positive relationship emerges between political literacy and engagement: the higher the level of literacy, the greater the likelihood of participation, particularly in more conventional forms such as contacting political representatives, making donations, or engaging in party politics. Certain forms of participation, such as demonstrations or signing petitions, appear to be more accessible to young people with medium levels of political literacy, whereas more structured and formal forms of action (such as contacting representatives or party involvement) are strongly associated with high levels of literacy. The findings also show that less literacy-demanding forms of civic and political participation, such as episodic or expressive actions, are not significantly differentiated by levels of political literacy. From a territorial perspective, this pattern may indicate that contexts associated with limited access to political literacy are likely to generate fragile, intermittent, or absent forms of participation, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities.

Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate, as discussed earlier, that political participation takes multiple forms and that young people do not engage with democracy in a uniform manner (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Fernandes, 2023; Müller-Bachmann *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, as shown in this analysis, traditional social inequalities are clearly reproduced among young people, regardless of the diversity of civic and political participation modalities considered. From this perspective, political literacy should not be understood merely as an individual outcome of schooling or age, but rather as the product of intergenerational processes of social inequality reproduction, in which social class, educational capital, and contexts of socialisation operate in a combined and reinforcing manner. The results presented here thus support the view that inequalities in youth democratic participation reflect broader structural inequalities, reproduced through differential access to political knowledge and to the resources required for its mobilisation.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article seeks to deepen the understanding of young people's political literacy and its relationship with different forms of civic and political participation in peripheral contexts that are often underrepresented in national and international research. The trends identified in this analysis indicate that levels of political engagement and participation among young people in the Azores broadly resemble those observed in other national (Costa & Silva, 2022; Fernandes, 2023; Magalhães, 2022) and international studies (Cancela, 2020; Pitti, Mengilli & Walther, 2023; Quaranta *et al.*, 2021).

Alongside the insular context, this article also proposes an original analytical approach to political literacy. The results derived from the Political Literacy Index reveal statistically significant differences among Azorean youth, particularly regarding age, educational attainment, and social class. Analysis of the distribution of political literacy uncovers marked sociodemographic cleavages, with higher levels observed among older youth and among those with greater educational and social capital. With respect to age, even small differences produce substantial effects on political literacy,

which tends to increase as young people grow older. These findings corroborate the notion that youth does not constitute a homogeneous category but rather encompasses a plurality of youth experiences (Ferreira *et al.*, 2017; Menezes *et al.*, 2012; Pais, 1990), whose relationship with politics is strongly mediated by social inequalities.

The construction of a Political Literacy Index applied to an outermost region represents a significant advance in relation to the dominant literature, which has been largely centred on national or metropolitan contexts and has often rendered insular realities invisible. By incorporating context-specific dimensions, such as knowledge of regional autonomy, the study demonstrates sensitivity to the political-institutional context and adds analytical depth to the measurement of political literacy. Moreover, by articulating political literacy, civic participation, and social inequalities from an intra-generational perspective, the article contributes to sociological debates on youth as a plural and internally differentiated social category.

As with any empirical analysis, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The construction of a composite index made it possible to capture, in an integrated manner, some dimensions of political literacy related to young people's factual knowledge. However, it must be recognized that the index does not encompass a more multidimensional understanding of literacy. For example, knowing who the President of the Regional Government is does not necessarily imply an understanding of how government functions, nor does it indicate political interest or critical engagement with the political system or with political information encountered online. Nevertheless, the index serves the analytical purpose for which it was designed and provides valuable insight into what young people in the Azores know about regional, national, and international politics. Although the analysis relies primarily on bivariate statistical techniques, this choice is consistent with the exploratory and descriptive aims of the study, which seek to map the distribution of political literacy and its associations with key sociodemographic variables in a largely under-researched territorial context. Future research could build on these findings by employing multivariate models to further disentangle the relative weight of age, education, and social class.

In sum, political literacy among Azorean youth is neither simple nor linear, and multiple forms of youth appropriation of political knowledge coexist regarding key political actors and political life more broadly. Analysing political literacy through a life-course lens reveals that political knowledge is not static but rather evolves alongside the processes of transition and change that shape youth trajectories. These include progressive autonomy, completion of educational stages, transition into the labour market, and, potentially, the consolidation of family life, independent housing, and individual life projects. Although these stages do not follow a fixed sequence, they nonetheless influence the formation of young people's social consciousness, political orientations, capacity for agency, and positioning within the public sphere, both online and offline.

Recognising that political identity formation is a gradual process, and that young people do not participate in public life in the same ways or with the same resources, it is essential to acknowledge and address the constraints that prevent young people from certain social groups, family backgrounds, and geographic contexts from benefiting equally from these experiences, an issue that should be taken into account in the design of public policies (Diogo *et al.*, 2024). Looking ahead, a promising avenue for future research lies in examining more closely whether insularity introduces specific factors that influence access to political information. Geographic dispersion, the decentralisation of political institutions, and potentially lower densities of political and civic networks on some islands may limit young people's exposure to politically stimulating environments, thereby producing intra-regional inequalities. The findings have clear implications for future research and public policy, suggesting that strategies to promote democratic participation among young people should be grounded in a social justice perspective, recognising that access to political knowledge and opportunities for participation is unevenly distributed, even within consolidated democratic contexts.

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