

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Intensifying Gender Inequality: Why Belgian Female Students (Sometimes) Gain Less Internal Political Efficacy from Citizenship Education Than Male Students

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(Received 07 October 2022; revised 21 May 2024; accepted 31 May 2024)

## Abstract

Persistent gender inequalities in internal political efficacy have traditionally been attributed to gender differences in resources. This article complements the resource model by focusing on how gendered political socialization occurs during citizenship education and how citizenship education might mitigate, reproduce, or intensify inequalities. Based on multilevel models on a 2016 survey dataset (3898 students across 150 schools) of Belgian senior high school students, we show that citizenship education increases internal political efficacy for both male and female students. However, we also find that citizenship education intensifies inequalities since male students gain more from it than female students, especially in schools with a conservative gender role culture. Our results indicate that the influence of citizenship education depends on the gendered school context in which it is offered. In this respect, citizenship education risks intensifying rather than mitigating gender inequalities.

**Keywords:** internal political efficacy; political socialization; gendered political socialization; citizenship education; gender inequality

## Introduction

The persistent gender gap in internal political efficacy (IPE), where women express lower confidence in their ability to engage with politics, is a democratic problem (Matthieu 2023). IPE is a mediator for political participation and ambition (Grasso and Smith 2022; Levy and Akiva 2019; Van Dijk 2024), and research points to women's lower confidence levels, especially in a political

setting, as a pathway to understanding why women participate less politically (Wolak, 2020). If women feel that politics is not for them, they are likely to display lower levels of political activity (Grasso and Smith 2022; Levy and Akiva 2019), resulting in political outcomes that do not reflect their needs (Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas 2008).

The uneven distribution of resources traditionally explains inequalities in IPE (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The positive relationship between education and political participation is a well-established finding (Willeck and Mendelberg 2022), fostering the assumption that educational opportunities can provide the necessary tools to become politically active. In particular, skill-building activities such as citizenship education have often been proposed to mitigate inequalities in IPE (Beaumont 2010). When studying the gender gap in IPE, however, the traditional resource model falls short. After all, women consistently outperform men in educational contexts (van Hek, Kraaykamp, and Wolbers 2016; Voyer and Voyer 2014), yet continue to be less politically efficacious and more silent in political discussions (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014).

Instead of focusing exclusively on resources, we advocate for a shift toward gendered political socialization theory (Bos et al. 2022). We study how citizenship education moderates gender differences in IPE. Although citizenship education is often advanced as a silver bullet to mitigate inequalities in political engagement, it might also reproduce or intensify gender inequalities in IPE (Matthieu and Junius 2023, 2024). After all, political socialization processes during citizenship education do not occur in a vacuum, but in school environments where gender stereotypes and norms risk being reproduced. Therefore, we argue that the influence of citizenship education on gender differences in IPE will depend on the gendered school context. By combining insights from the literature on gender and political socialization, we map out how gendered political socialization processes influence IPE in the school context.

We investigate the influence of three citizenship education components on gender inequalities in IPE: (1) civic learning experiences, (2) an open classroom climate for discussion, and (3) active student participation at school. In doing so, we also account for gender role stereotypes, gender school culture, and the proportion of female students. The analyses are based on a large 2016 survey dataset (N = 3898, 150 schools) of senior high school students in Belgium (Flanders) collected to test the attainment targets of citizenship education. The dataset is unique because, on the one hand, it includes survey items about civic engagement, yet on the other hand, it includes a knowledge test about civic learning targets. This permits the study of IPE while controlling for students' civic knowledge. It is notable that students completed this questionnaire before entering the adult world, giving a unique insight into the political attitudes of a new generation of citizens.

After discussing the state-of-the-art concerning gender differences in IPE, we lay a theoretical foundation for understanding how citizenship education moderates gender inequalities in IPE. Its principal contribution is challenging the theoretical resource model of political action by showing how gendered socialization processes are central to understanding gender differences in IPE. We

formulate and subsequently test three competing theoretical hypotheses concerning citizenship education's moderating role: whether it (1) mitigates, (2) reproduces, or (3) intensifies the gender gap in IPE. In the empirical section of this article, several multilevel models show that citizenship education is likely to intensify, as opposed to mitigate or reproduce, gender inequalities. However, this depends on the gendered school context. The intensification of gender inequalities in IPE is more pronounced in schools with a conservative gender role culture, whereas in a progressive gender role culture, the gap is not intensified. These findings are valuable for scholars and policymakers invested in gender emancipation in politics.

## Theory

### *Gender Differences in Internal Political Efficacy*

IPE refers to individuals' beliefs and self-confidence in understanding and engaging with politics. It is close to self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), which is embedded in cognitive social learning theory. This conceives of people as active information processors who are "often more affected by what they believe will happen than by what they actually experience" (Shaffer et al. 2020, 43), and places self-efficacy, the confidence one has in successfully carrying out a task, at the root of human agency. Such beliefs significantly affect a person's motivation and behavior, and a vast literature shows how self-efficacy substantially influences people's achievements in fields as diverse as academia to sports. Caprara et al. (2009, 1004) noted that "Unless people believe they can produce desired outcomes, they have little incentive to address challenging tasks, to pursue ambitious goals and to persevere in the face of difficulties." The same holds in the political field, where people's belief in their political capabilities mediates future political participation (Grasso and Smith 2022; Levy and Akiva 2019; Pfanzelt and Spies 2019).

Gender differences in IPE are well established. Studies consistently show that women are less likely to feel internally efficacious than men (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Fraile and de Miguel Moyer 2022; Gidengi et al. 2008). For instance, Fraile and de Miguel Moyer (2022) find that the gender gap in IPE is consistently present across Europe. In each of the 27 countries under study, women report lower levels of IPE than men, although the size of the gender gap varies. The gap was greater in Switzerland, Cyprus, and Austria and least evident in Bulgaria, Denmark, and Lithuania. As discussed in this article, Belgium returned the 10th largest gender gap. These findings align with previous studies focusing on the United States and Canada (Burns et al. 2001; Gidengi et al. 2008).

### *The Resource Model Explaining Gender Inequalities in Internal Political Efficacy*

Scholars have considered different explanations for gender differences in IPE. The first focuses on gender differences in resources, pointing to the uneven distribution of resources such as education, income, and workforce participation among men and women (Burns et al. 2001; Verba et al. 1995). The underlying

principle of this resource model is a (direct) causal link between the resources one possesses and one's political participation. This assumes that educational experiences, such as citizenship education, can provide the political tools, such as knowledge and skills, needed to participate (Willeck and Mendelberg 2022, 91). Learning about politics through civic instruction embedded in a school's curriculum can be considered an intentional political socialization endeavor to cultivate a new generation of citizens. This holds much democratic potential as schools are considered the ideal socialization agent that can provide political learning experiences to those not growing up in politically stimulating home environments and compensate for inequalities in political socialization opportunities (Matthieu and Junius 2023, 2024; Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016).

Beaumont (2010) identifies skill-building and mastery of the political domain as essential in developing political efficacy. She argues that "this pathway for promoting efficacy involves providing young people with opportunities to become skilled and confident actors in the public arena through hands-on, guided experiences" (539). Studies show an overall positive association between citizenship education and students' IPE (Campbell 2008, 2019; Galston 2001; Knowles, Torney-Purta, and Barber 2018; Pasek et al. 2008). Most children generally benefit from these activities and feel more politically capable, and we expect the same in the Flemish study setting. Therefore, we assume a positive association between citizenship education and the IPE of female and male students (Hypothesis 1).

In addition to a direct relationship between citizenship education and IPE, which implies that more citizenship education results in higher levels of IPE, studies also draw attention to how citizenship education can affect children from different backgrounds differently (Campbell 2019). Additionally, it is often hoped that citizenship education may help close the gender gap in IPE. The "gender convergence" hypothesis posits that citizenship education can help compensate for initial gender differences in resources and experiences, leading to a convergence of political attitudes (Arens and Watermann 2017). Hence, when female students have a lower starting position regarding IPE levels and receive equal citizenship education opportunities, the influence of citizenship education is expected to be larger because of the greater potential for growth of female students and potential ceiling effects in the male student group. In that way, the gender gap in IPE is expected to decrease, and the IPE levels of male and female students should show convergence. Hence, we expect a stronger positive association between citizenship education and IPE for female students than male students, which may contribute to mitigating the gender gap in IPE (Hypothesis 2a).

### ***Complementing the Resource Model with Gendered Political Socialization***

The traditional resource model has been challenged by recent scholarship showing how increasing levels of female educational attainment and participation in the paid workforce did not eliminate gender differences in IPE. Gidengil et al. (2008), for instance, find that women with a college education are still less self-confident than men regarding their ability to understand and participate in

politics. As a result, they conclude that “it is quite clear that a simple socioeconomic resource model cannot explain why women are more likely than men to think politics is too complicated for them to understand” (556). The same tension is noticeable when examining the relationship between education and political participation from a gender perspective. Although women outperform men in educational contexts (van Hek et al. 2016; Voyer and Voyer 2014), they remain less politically engaged regardless of academic credentials. Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014, 34) argue that “while women are now better educated and more civically experienced than men, they remain the less authoritative, and therefore relatively ‘silent’, gender in public affairs.”

Because the resource model cannot fully account for the reproduction of persistent gender inequalities in IPE, we need to apply a more expansive view of educational processes and consider the gender socialization processes during citizenship education. In line with recent scholarship (Bos et al. 2022), we consider the political socialization process – how people learn about politics – to be gendered. As argued by Bos et al. (2022, 3), “this process is likely to communicate to children that boys are compatible with political leadership roles and that girls are not.” When the political socialization process instills a perception of politics as a male domain, this is likely to influence children’s IPE.

During citizenship education, students might be exposed to both political socialization and gender socialization simultaneously. Different theoretical relationships are expected when taking this gendered approach of looking into the possible influence of citizenship education on IPE. Whereas the influence of citizenship education from a resource perspective expects mitigation of inequalities due to the intentional political socialization activities aimed to be an equalizing force (Matthieu and Junius 2023, 2024), a gendered political socialization approach complements this by also considering often unintentional gender socialization processes that happen conjointly (Bos et al. 2022). In addition to the citizenship education curriculum that aims to increase valuable skills and attitudes, schools and educational programs also have a “hidden curriculum” that socializes students differently (Haidet, Teal, and Hafferty 2019). Such a theoretical approach views education “as a complex “‘grand treatment’ with a wide swath of long-term consequences” (Willeck and Mendelberg 2022, 92).

Political gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in society, and the gender socialization literature shows how children internalize gender concepts and stereotypes early on and conform to the accompanying gender expectations (Risman 2018). This is likely also the case for IPE in the school environment, where gender-stereotypical roles influence whether one feels politically capable. Research shows a strong relationship between gender role socialization and feelings of general self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), and liberal gender role attitudes strongly affect self-efficacy feelings for all respondents except white males (Buchanan and Selmon 2008). This indicates that progressive gender role attitudes might influence female students’ IPE but not necessarily male students’ efficacy.

Ideally, the school environment should help overcome gender stereotypes and inequalities in IPE, but this is not necessarily the case due to (unintentional)

gender socialization processes. Gender socialization occurs when students are introduced to politics and indirectly learn that politics is a male domain (Bos et al. 2022). Male students potentially learn that politics is more suited to them and consequently experience an increase in their IPE, while female students internalize the opposite. When male and female students are placed in a political setting, they might assimilate into the hegemonic beliefs about women and politics. Hence, citizenship education might reproduce or intensify gender inequalities in IPE because of the gender-stereotypical experiences they receive while learning about politics. Arens and Watermann's (2017) longitudinal study offers compelling evidence for the gender intensification hypothesis by showing an initially higher mean level of political efficacy for boys in grade 7 and an intensification of this inequality by grade 10. Encounters with the political field might thus intensify rather than diminish inequalities. Hence, we challenge the mitigation hypothesis 2a with two alternative competing hypotheses that assume a reproduction or an intensification of gender inequality. The reproduction hypothesis expects no difference in the positive association between citizenship education and IPE for female students compared with male students, thus reproducing the gender gap in IPE (Hypothesis 2b). The intensification hypothesis expects a weaker positive association between citizenship education and IPE for female students than male students, intensifying the gender gap in IPE (Hypothesis 2c).

Alongside the individual socialization processes at the student level, the gender socialization literature emphasizes the importance of social context in influencing learning processes (Risman 2018). Because we study the gendered political socialization process in a school context, it is useful to consider how far citizenship education is embedded in the gendered school context. We include this by examining the gender culture present at a school and the gender composition. First, in addition to the significant effect of individual gender role beliefs discussed above, dominant gender stereotypes can also influence gendered political socialization on a macro level. Risman (2018) argues how ideologies about gender influence behavior and individual gender expectations. In a school environment, hegemonic gender stereotypes commonly manifest in the school culture (Van Houtte 2020). We expect that any mitigation of the IPE gender gap due to citizenship education is expected to increase, or any intensification is likely to decrease, in schools with a more progressive gender role culture (Hypothesis 3a).

Second, the gendered political socialization process might also depend on specific school characteristics in which the proportion of female and male students is a key determinant (Huyge, Van Maele, and Van Houtte 2015). The relative gender distribution within a group influences gendered interaction dynamics and women's status. Research on tokenism shows that when women constitute a minority, they face the risks for marginalization, negative stereotyping, and role entrapment (Kanter 1977), resulting in diminished influence during group interactions, especially in relation to topics that are not considered stereotypically "appropriate" for women and in an increased likelihood of women perceiving their own contributions and capacities as inferior. The increase in women's presence may affect their relative influence and status

within the group while potentially reducing negative gender stereotyping associated with their engagement in political activities and discussions. Changing the gender composition during deliberations may also significantly influence individual preferences due to changing discussion dynamics. These studies indicate that groups with more women are more oriented toward consensus, equality, and conflict avoidance (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2007, 2014). Based on this line of reasoning, we assume that any mitigation of IPE gender inequality due to citizenship education is expected to increase, or any intensification is likely to decrease, in schools with a higher proportion of female students (Hypothesis 3b).

## Method

### Data and Study Setting

This study uses data collected in Flanders, Belgium's Dutch-speaking region.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, a large-scale data collection took place among senior high school students to test the attainment targets of citizenship education, which were commissioned by the Flemish educational ministry.<sup>2</sup> Flemish education is tracked based on prior achievement from the seventh grade onward, separating the general academic track from a (pre)-vocational track. After 2 years, students are streamed even further into four educational tracks: general education (ASO), technical education (TSO), art education (KSO), and vocational secondary education (BSO) (Onderwijs Vlaanderen n.d.). The data collectors used a stratified random cluster sampling design to obtain a representative sample of the senior high school population in Flanders. The data collectors needed a random sample of about 70 high schools within each track to have a representative sample in which they succeeded.<sup>3</sup> They also stratified for educational provider, school type, and urbanization level. Because so few students are enrolled in art education, we took a subsample, only including, including ASO, TSO, and BSO students. The final dataset we used includes data from 150 schools and 3898 students. List-wise deletion of missing values was used to perform the multi-level analysis, as it necessitates complete cases. The survey items can be consulted in the [online appendix B](#). The knowledge items used for the civic knowledge test cannot be reported due to legal constraints. The fit indices of the one-factor confirmatory factor analysis of the scales can also be consulted in the [online appendix A](#) in [Table A.1](#).<sup>4</sup>

### Variables

#### Internal Political Efficacy

Our dependent variable is the "internal political efficacy" scale measured with the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) citizenship self-efficacy scale (Schulz et al. 2016, 35). The construction of the scale fits well with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy concept in a political setting, and theoretically fits the IPE concept. With a 4-point scale ranging from *not well at all* to *very well*, students were presented with five items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) about how well they think they

could discuss a newspaper article about a conflict between countries; argue their point of view on a controversial political or social issue; run for a school election; follow a televised debate on a contentious issue; and give a presentation in class about a social or political topic.

### *Individual-Level Variables*

To distinguish between male and female students, we include the variable gender as a proxy for students' sex assigned at birth (Schulz et al. 2018, 139). In our sample, 48% are male students, and 52% are female.<sup>5</sup> Male students are the reference category. As discussed above, conservative gender-stereotypical attitudes negatively influence self-efficacy. We include a three-item scale ( $\alpha = .60$ ) including attitudes about equal pay for men and women doing the same job; women's suitability to be political leaders compared to men; and whether raising children is primarily women's responsibility. This is measured by a 4-point scale ranging from *totally disagree* to *totally agree*. High scores on the constructed scales indicate progressive attitudes, whereas low scores indicate conservative attitudes.

To study the moderation of different citizenship education components, we include three citizenship education scales: traditional civic learning experiences, an open climate for discussion, and active student participation. The ICCS initially developed all these scales (Schulz et al., 2016).

First, civic learning experiences are measured using a 4-point scale ranging from nothing to a lot. This scale consists of six items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) concerning how much students have learned about civic-related topics at school, including how citizens can vote, how laws are changed, how to solve local problems, how civic rights are protected, political issues and events abroad, and how to look critically at media coverage.

Second, the open climate for discussion is measured with a 4-point scale ranging from *never* to *often*. This scale consists of six items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) regarding how often teachers encourage students to share their opinions; students take the initiative to discuss political topics; students openly express dissenting opinions; teachers encourage students to talk with others who have a different idea; and teachers discuss the different sides of an argument while discussing political topics.

Third, active student participation is measured by asking if students have done the following activities during the past 12 months: actively participating in a debate; voting for class representatives or being involved in the composition of the student council; participating in decision making about how things are arranged at school; participate in discussions during student meetings; nominate yourself as a class representative or as a member of the student council. Three answer categories measured these five items ( $\alpha = .75$ ): "Yes, I participated in this in the last 12 months," "Yes, I participated in this but more than a year ago," and "No, I've never participated in this before."

The following individual-level control variables are included: students' political home environment, migration background, civic knowledge, and educational track.



We include the scale “political home environment” and combine direct and indirect political socialization factors to measure the levels of political stimulation in students’ home environment. This relates to the abovementioned recourse model to explain gender differences in IPE. The political home scale consists of six items ( $\alpha = .70$ ). It includes items of cultural capital consistent with the conceptualization of Bourdieu (1986) and previous empirical applications studying inequality in students’ political socialization processes (Hoskins, Janmaat, and Melis 2017, 94; Matthieu and Junius 2023, 2024). We included parents’ political interests, parents’ political talk with their children, the number of books at home, and the highest educational credential the mother and father obtained.

Because previous research shows that IPE is influenced by migration background (Beaumont 2011), we include students’ immigration status as a dummy variable indicating if the students’ parents were born in Belgium. Students with an immigration background are the reference category.

To isolate differences in IPE while controlling for civic knowledge, we include a knowledge test used to test the Flemish cross-curricular final objectives regarding civic education. More specifically, this test is about how to act democratically and measure knowledge on subjects such as how well students recognize the role of checks and balances between the legislative, executive, and judiciary in democratic systems.

As noted above, Flanders uses educational tracking. Our analysis distinguishes between ASO, TSO, and BSO using the academic track as the reference category.

### *School-Level Variables*

The gender composition is measured by calculating the proportion of female to male students in a school.<sup>6</sup> This resulted in a continuous variable ranging from schools with no female students (0%) to all-girl schools (100%). To measure the gender role culture in a school, we aggregated the students’ scores on the individual scale of gender-stereotypical attitudes. We included the mean scores per school. Higher levels indicate a more progressive culture regarding gender roles, with lower levels indicative of a more conservative one. Finally, we also included an indicator of citizenship education at the school level with the individual-level measurement because, notwithstanding individual-level influence, there are good reasons to believe that the school environment in which citizenship learning takes place has additional explaining power (Barber, Sweetwood, and King 2015; Campbell 2008, 2019; Lüdtke et al. 2009).

### *Analysis*

Several multilevel models were estimated to study students’ gendered political socialization process. Before modeling, we standardized all constructed variables, making possible comparisons of estimates. We distinguished between the individual and school level<sup>7</sup> and estimated the intra-class coefficient, indicating a 10% variance of IPE at the school level. Because we ran cross-level interactions, we used a random intercept-random slope model where the main association between gender and IPE varies per school. Our primary multilevel models

reported in the [online appendix A](#) in [Tables A.2, A.3, A.4, A.5, and A.6](#) follow the same structure as the theoretical section.

[Table A.2](#) reports the estimates of the gender socialization models. After detailing the estimates of all the control variables, including students' political home environment, migration background, educational track, and civic knowledge test scores, we include the variable students' gender in the second model. In the third model, we describe the relationships central to this study in explaining gender differences in IPE, specifically students' attitudes toward gender roles, the school's gender role culture, and the proportion of female students. The fourth model includes the interactions between, on the one hand, students' gender relative to the proportion of female students, and, on the other hand, their perception of gender roles.

[Table A.3](#) presents the estimates of the political socialization models. The first model in this table includes the relationships between citizenship education and various individual and school-level variables. The second, third, and fourth models explore both the individual and cross-level interactions with the school-level variables for each citizenship education component. Finally, [Tables A.4, A.5, and A.6](#) present the models where we investigate whether the significant interactions in the previous models can be explained by the school's gender role culture and the relative proportion of female students in a school.

When possible, model fit indices were compared and reported. All models with significant relationships have a better fit than the previous model. We also investigated potential multicollinearity issues. We report the correlation matrix of all numeric variables in [Table A.7](#) of the appendix and estimate the generalized variance inflation factor (GVIF) (Fox and Weisberg 2019). The highest correlation is 0.6, which is acceptable. However, the GVIF was too high for model 2 of [Table A.6](#) between the variables measuring gender and the proportion of female students. We should thus be extra cautious when interpreting these results. In the other models using the proportion of female students, the GVIF was acceptable.

## Results

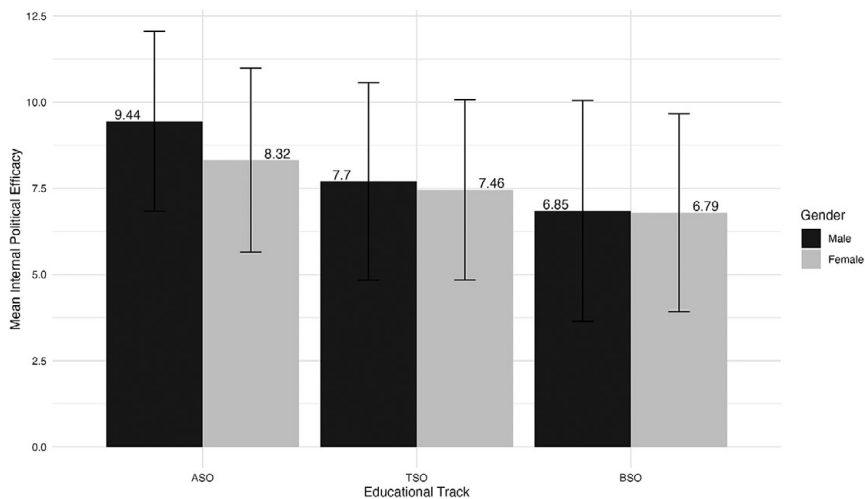
The theoretical section argues for a complementary approach to understanding gender inequalities in IPE from a resource perspective. Instead of focusing exclusively on resources, we advocate a shift toward gendered political socialization theory. For the results of this empirical study, we begin by describing the gender differences in IPE from a resource perspective, including findings on access to citizenship education, educational tracking, and, most importantly, the relationships and moderation of citizenship education. We complement these models in the second empirical section with the gendered political socialization perspective, where we first focus on the gendered socialization model by describing the relationships involving gender role attitudes, a school's gender role culture, and gender composition. We end the results section by showing how the moderation of citizenship education on gender differences in IPE varies in gendered school contexts.

### Gender Differences in Internal Political Efficacy from a Resource Perspective

First, female students' IPE is significantly lower than male students' (female students  $M = 7.7$ ; male students  $M = 8.0$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, Figure 1 shows how the differences in IPE are only situated in the academic track, with male students showing much higher levels than female students. Barely any gender differences are noticeable in the technical and vocational tracks. No significant difference emerges between male and female students regarding their political home environment (female students  $M = 13.1$ ; male students  $M = 12.7$ ; NS). Although this is a determining variable explaining IPE based on the resource model, male and female students indicate similar levels of direct and indirect political stimulation at home, with female students having even higher levels than male students. Hence, it is unlikely that the main driver of gender differences is the lack of resources.

Our sample also shows significantly more female students on the academic track than male students, corresponding with the reality in Flemish schools (Van Landeghem and Van Damme 2007). We also see a small yet significant difference in students' civic knowledge, with male students scoring on average one point higher (female students  $M = 49$ ; male students  $M = 50$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Female students also indicate significantly higher levels of involvement in open discussion climates (female students  $M = 12.6$ ; male students  $M = 11.6$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), active student participation at school (female students  $M = 4.9$ ; male students  $M = 4.1$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and go to schools with higher mean levels of all three citizenship education components (see Table A.8 in the online appendix for all descriptive statistics).

Table A.9 in the online appendix includes the analyses of access to citizenship education (Deimel, Hoskins, and Abs 2020), which predicts the amount of citizenship education a pupil receives. Here, we notice that the differences in



**Figure 1.** Mean and standard deviation of internal political efficacy by gender and educational track. Note: Bar plot generated on unstandardized raw data. The plot is made with the R ggplot2 package.

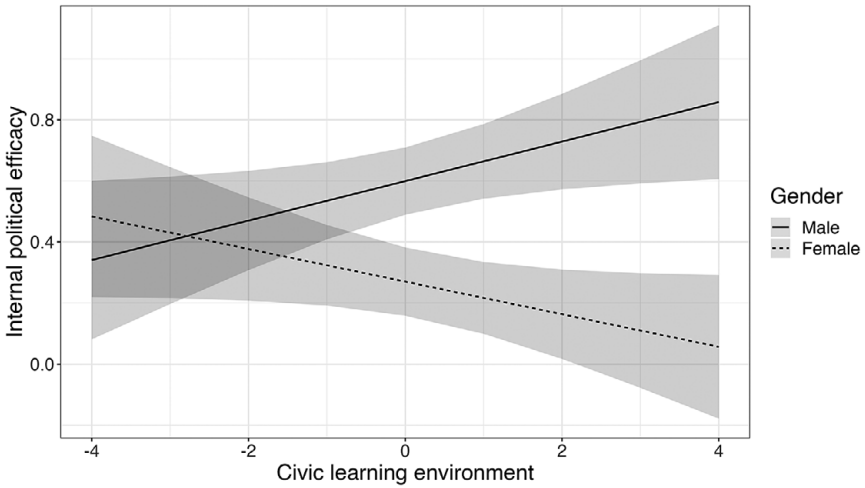
citizenship education are not solely due to educational track. Although being in an academic, technical, or vocational track is still the most influential factor, the estimates show that gender also plays a significant role. We observe that civic learning experiences are negatively associated with being female ( $b = -0.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas an open discussion climate ( $b = 0.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and active student participation at school ( $b = 0.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ) are positively associated. This suggests that the lower amount of IPE is not due to a lack of citizenship education; other processes are likely influencing the gender differences in IPE within these schools.

Regarding the relationships involving citizenship education, model 1 of Table A.3 in the online appendix includes all components of citizenship education measured at the individual and school levels. Civic learning experiences show a significant positive relationship for individual civic learning experiences ( $b = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but not for the school environment ( $b = 0.00$ , NS). This suggests that increased civic learning experiences at the individual level correspond with higher IPE. Regarding the relationship with an open discussion climate, we see significant positive associations at both the individual ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and school levels ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that individual perceptions of how open the school is to discussion and conflicting points of view positively correspond with a supportive school environment, enhancing students' IPE. For active student participation, there is a significant positive association at the individual level ( $b = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a significant negative association at the school level ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that the more students participate in (political) school activities, the higher their IPE. However, a higher mean level of student participation in these activities is associated with lower IPE.

We are, however, mostly interested in how these relationships differ for male and female students. To study this, we estimated two-way interactions between the respondent's gender and citizenship education component to explain their level of IPE. This shows a significant cross-level interaction for the civic learning environment ( $b = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and no significant interaction for individual civic learning experiences ( $b = 0.04$ , NS) in model 2. Figure 2 makes this significant cross-level interaction more apparent by showing a cross-over interaction, where higher levels of a civic learning school environment resulted in a greater advantage to male students' IPE, confirming the gender intensification hypothesis. This cross-over interaction also explains the lack of a direct influence from the school's civic learning environment.

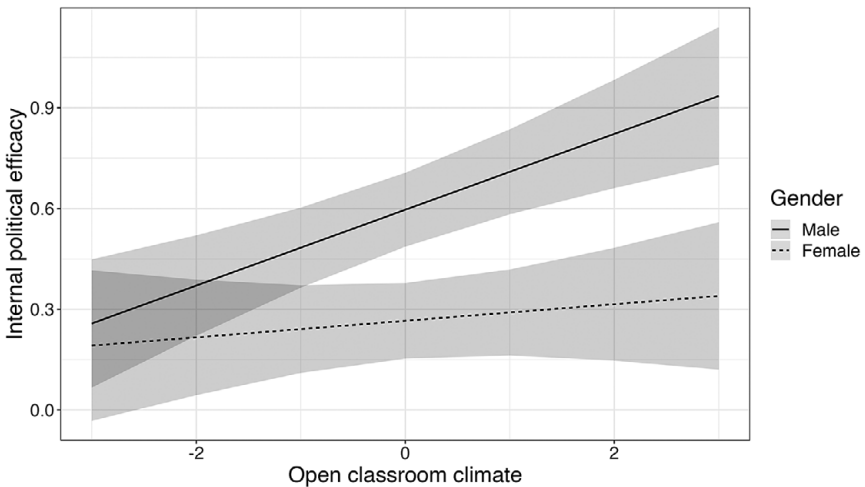
Regarding the interaction of the open classroom climate, we also see a cross-level interaction ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but no interaction between the individual-level variables ( $b = 0.05$ , NS). Figure 3 again shows a steeper slope of an open climate for male compared with female students, also confirming for this citizenship education component the gender intensification hypothesis.

Active student participation at school has a significant interaction on the individual level ( $b = -0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and not the school level ( $b = 0.01$ , NS). Figure 4 again shows an intensification of inequalities due to active student participation, where male students' IPE increases slightly more than female students' IPE.



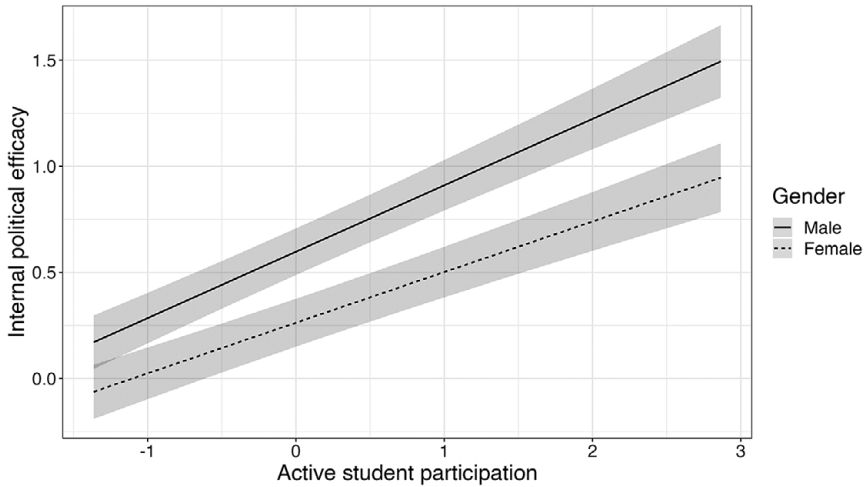
**Figure 2.** Interaction plot of the marginal relationships between IPE, the average number of civic learning experiences in a school, and gender.

Note: This plot is generated with the coefficients of Table A.3, model 2. This is made with the R `ggpredict` function of the `ggeffect` package. All scale variables are standardized, and 95% confidence bands are shown.



**Figure 3.** Interaction plot of the marginal relationships between IPE, the average amount of open discussion climate, and gender.

Note: This plot is generated with the coefficients of Table A.3, model 3. This is made with the R `ggpredict` function of the `ggeffect` package. All scale variables are standardized, and 95% confidence bands are shown.



**Figure 4.** Interaction plot of the marginal relationships between IPE, the amount of active student participation, and gender.

*Note:* This plot is generated with the coefficients of Table A.3, model 4. This is made with the R `ggpredict` function of the `ggeffect` package. All scale variables are standardized, and 95% confidence bands are shown.

Although this seems less dramatic than the other plots, the estimates for this kind of citizenship education are more precise.

### **Gender Differences in Internal Political Efficacy from a Gender Political Socialization Perspective**

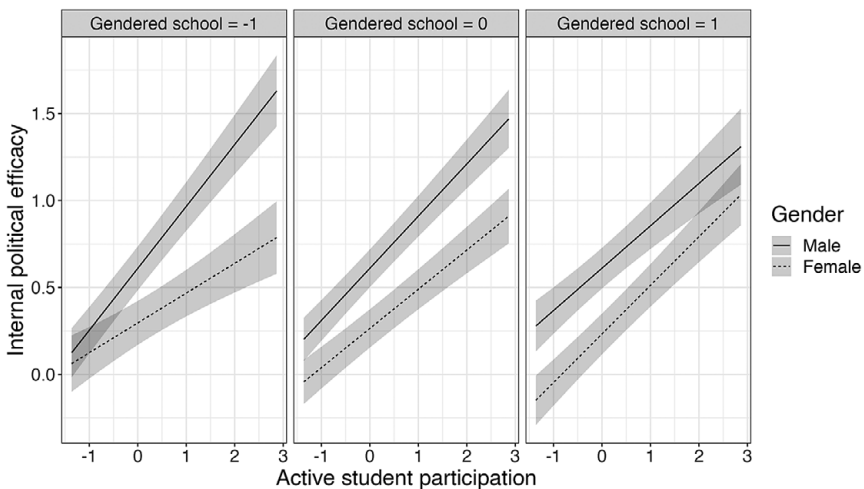
Consistent with our descriptive findings, Table A.2 in the appendix, which includes key predictors to explain gender differences in IPE, shows a significant negative association for the female respondents ( $b = -0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$  in model 2;  $b = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$  in model 3). The association of gender increases noticeably from an arguably small to medium influence when considering the gendered context. In this gender socialization model, we find a significant positive influence for more progressive gender role attitudes ( $b = 11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The more progressive one's gender role attitudes toward women are the higher one's IPE. Additional subgroup analyses in Tables A.10 and A.11 show how this matters much more for female students ( $b = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than for male students ( $b = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The interaction in Table A.2 between gender role attitude and the respondent's gender ( $b = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) confirms this. This indicates that it might be important for female students to perceive the political field as an inclusive space for women to feel politically capable. On the other hand, the gender role culture at the school level has no direct association with IPE ( $b = -0.01$ , NS).

Concerning the relative proportion of female students, we see a large association with IPE ( $b = 0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additional subgroup analyses show

the opposite compared with the influence of gender role attitudes. Whereas the influence of the number of female students matters a lot for male students' IPE ( $b = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), no significant relationship is present for female students ( $b = 0$ ,  $16$ , NS). The interaction between gender and the proportion of female students confirms this ( $b = -0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This might indicate that other group dynamics are at play when relatively more or fewer female students are present, influencing male students and female students differently.

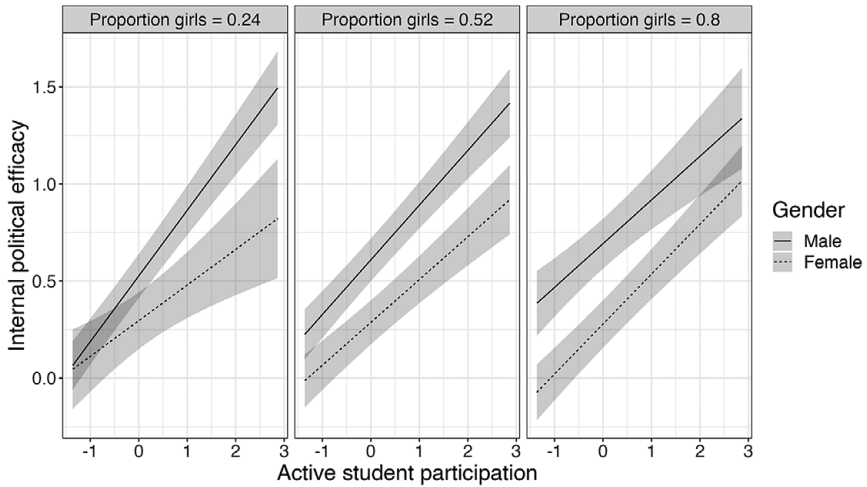
All the significant interactions between respondents' IPE, gender, and amount of citizenship education were also studied to discern the significance (if any) of specific school characteristics. We empirically tested if the significant interactions showing an intensification of inequalities were due to the gender role culture or the relative proportion of female students. The results are reported in Tables A.4, A.5, and A.6 in the appendix. This is the case for active student participation, where we find a significant three-way interaction where the interaction between gender and active student participation differs in schools with a more conservative or progressive gender role culture ( $b = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Figure 5 shows how the intensification of gender inequality is pronounced in schools with a conservative gender role culture but disappears in schools with a progressive gender role culture, indicating that the school context matters in teaching citizenship education with active student participation.

The relative proportion of female students reveals a similar mechanism with a significant three-way interaction ( $b = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Figure 6 shows an increase in inequalities in schools with fewer female students and the reproduction of



**Figure 5.** Interaction plot of the marginal relationships between IPE, the amount of active student participation, gender, and the school's gender role culture.

Note: This plot is generated with the coefficients of Table A.6, model 1. This is made with the R `ggpredict` function of the `ggeffect` package. All scale variables are standardized, and 95% confidence bands are shown.



**Figure 6.** Interaction plot of the marginal relationships between IPE, the amount of active student participation, gender, and the relative proportions of female students.

*Note:* This plot is generated with the coefficients of Table A.6, model 2. This is made with the R `ggpredict` function of the `ggeffect` package. All scale variables are standardized, and 95% confidence bands are shown.

inequalities with more female students. However, the uncertainty of these estimates is higher than those for the estimates of the gender role culture. Nonetheless, this might indicate that group dynamics differ with more or fewer female students, influencing how active student participation works for female and male students.

## Discussion

Recent empirical studies that reflect a concern about lower IPE levels in the female population (cf. *supra*), are confirmed by our study of Flemish high school students. Our results show how female students on the verge of adulthood are less confident in their political abilities than their male counterparts. Consistent with other research (Gidengil et al. 2008), the traditional resource model on inequality fails to explain this gender difference. We notice how both genders indicate similar levels of political home environment and how female students indicate higher levels of receiving citizenship education, except for traditional civic learning. From an equality of opportunity perspective in a school context, being a girl should be advantageous. Female students currently have a greater chance of being on the academic educational track in Flanders (Van Landeghem and Van Damme 2007), where much more citizenship education is taught (see the results of the access models). Hence, why female students (and women more broadly) systematically feel less confident in a political setting might lie elsewhere.



We contribute to this research puzzle by examining female and male students' gendered political socialization processes regarding their IPE. We find that gender role perception is important for female but not male students. When female students believe that, among other things, women are also suitable political leaders, their IPE is higher. This confirms that gender role socialization matters, not only for general feelings of self-efficacy (Buchanan and Selmon 2008), but also for IPE. Because this strongly influences female students' IPE, they are likely to benefit from more positive (educational) interventions communicating (in)directly the normative desirability of a gender-inclusive political field. This touches upon the research on role models, indicating how "it is essential to provide positive female role models, who make women realize that getting involved in politics must not be left to men in suits" (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007, quoting Sandra Gidley on p. 921). Our results suggest that communicating this successfully increases female students' IPE levels, increasing their chances of becoming politically active.

Notwithstanding this, we are primarily interested in unpacking the finer-grained ways citizenship education influences IPE. More specifically, we studied how the political socialization process of citizenship education works differently for male and female students, and the extent to which the gendered school environment can explain this. First, we confirm our initial hypothesis, claiming that educational provisions such as citizenship education matter for most students and contribute to higher levels of IPE. For both male and female students, all citizenship education components positively influence IPE, but active student participation increases this markedly (overall  $b = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; female students  $b = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; male students  $b = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) compared with general civic learning experiences (overall  $b = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; female students  $b = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; male students  $b = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and an open discussion climate (overall  $b = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; female students  $b = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; male students  $b = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

The largest difference in measured influence between male and female students for this citizenship education component complements the prominent association between active student participation and IPE. We find a significant interaction for active student participation, showing how this is slightly more effective for raising IPE for male students than female students ( $b = -0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This result indicates that active forms of citizenship education, such as running for student council, are more likely to have a detrimental effect on gender equality, increasing rather than decreasing gender differences in IPE. Although we should be careful implying causal inference based on cross-sectional data, we also find the same intensification for the other two citizenship education components. However, for these citizenship education components, cross-level interactions were found. This indicates that in schools where, on average, more students learn about citizenship topics ( $b = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) or perceive the environment as open for discussions ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), gender differences might increase. Hence, we find significant intensification for all three citizenship education components, confirming hypothesis 2b.

Finally, we were also interested in explaining possible moderation by considering the gendered school context. We studied this by investigating if the significant (cross-level) interactions depend on the gender school culture or the relative proportion of female students. We found evidence that both matters for active student participation. Regarding the gender school culture, we show that the intensification of gender inequality disappears when the mean gender school culture is more progressive, confirming hypothesis 3a. Hence, active student participation is not inherently bad for female students. Instead, attention should be given to the gendered school, and how gender inclusive this is. Considering the proportion of female students, the greater the number of female students, the weaker the intensification becomes. However, even in schools with proportionally more female students, a reproduction of inequalities is still evident. This indicates the salience of other dynamics based on the gender group composition of the school. Studies focusing on the gendered dynamics of tokenism in skewed groups, for instance, show that tokens experience increased visibility, awareness, and stereotyping (Kanter 1977). Although we should be cautious when drawing conclusions because of the relatively large errors in the three-way interaction of gender group composition, it is nevertheless relevant to note that the influence of citizenship education on gender inequalities in IPE behaves differently depending on the gendered school context.

## Conclusion

Persistent inequalities in IPE have traditionally been attributed to gender differences in resources, particularly education. This article complements the resource model by focusing on how gendered political socialization occurs during citizenship education and how citizenship education moderates inequalities. One main contribution is that we challenge the mitigation hypothesis with two alternative competing hypotheses that assume a reproduction or intensification of gender inequality in IPE due to more citizenship education exposure. In addition, we also theoretically and empirically explore two specific mechanisms that might explain why citizenship education reproduces or intensifies IPE gender inequalities rather than mitigating them: the gendered school context and relative gender proportions of a school. Based on multilevel analyses of survey data from 3898 senior high school students across 150 schools in Belgium, we show that citizenship education increases IPE for both male and female students. However, male students gain more from it than female students, especially in schools with a conservative gender role culture. Citizenship education risks intensifying rather than mitigating gender inequalities in IPE.

What broader conclusions can we draw? The first conclusion is that the gains of political learning are far from distributed equally. In Belgium, male students benefit more from citizenship education than female students regarding their IPE. Although citizenship education is sometimes portrayed as a panacea for and a proven positive for students' IPE, we strongly suggest greater attention to the differential influences of citizenship education.

Which students benefit from political learning activities, and to what extent does this reproduce gender-stereotypical attitudes and behavior? In a gender emancipation agenda, citizenship education should be able to communicate to all children that they are, and can become, active political agents. But this voice should be as loud to female students and arguably even louder to compensate for the negative political gender socialization they receive elsewhere.

A second conclusion is that citizenship education might interact with the gendered school environment in which it is offered. In schools with a more conservative gender role culture, hegemonic beliefs about women in politics are reinforced rather than challenged, which hinders female students' relative gains in IPE compared with male students. Similarly, fewer female students seem to intensify gender inequalities in IPE. However, this is less stable than the three-way interaction considering gender role culture. Even in schools with a progressive gender role culture, the positive influence of citizenship education cannot (fully) mitigate the gender gap in IPE, arguably because gendered political socialization processes affect male and female students' beliefs about politics and their own capacities from an earlier age on.

Although these findings shed new light on the complex relationship between citizenship education and gender inequalities in political efficacy, modesty is warranted because of several limitations. First, theories on citizenship education and gender inequalities in IPE generally assume causality. However, because our findings were correlational and the data were not part of a longitudinal panel study, we cannot fully verify the direction of the causal relationship. Further research would do well to track a panel of students at several points in time or to rely on experimental data to verify claims of causality.

The second is that the data we had access to were gathered at one point in time, in one place, and focused on one age group; this limits the generalizability of the findings. However, there is no indication that Belgium is an outlier regarding gender inequality in IPE. According to the study of Fraile and de Miguel Moyer (2022) on the gender gap in IPE across Europe, Belgium falls within the middle range in terms of IPE gender differences compared with other European countries. Hence, Belgium can be considered a typical case regarding gender differences in IPE. Although our study is geographically limited, the underlying mechanisms contributing to gender inequality in IPE are often similar across different countries. However, future research could enhance the generalizability of our findings by conducting comparative analyses across multiple countries.

Future research might also investigate whether the findings hold for different age groups. Although there is a consensus among political socialization scholars that the impressionable years between 17 and 25 are crucial in someone's political development (Neundorf and Smets 2017), studies on gendered political socialization show changes in gender differences in political attitudes between the ages of 6 and 12 (Bos et al. 2022). Future research studying the influence of citizenship education on the gender gap in IPE might also benefit from investigating these younger cohorts.

Finally, our results are not only relevant to scholars. They also contain a call to action for policymakers, schools, and teachers: despite citizenship education often being heralded as an important emancipatory tool, simply providing it will not suffice to reduce the gender gap. The social and educational contexts in which female and male students are politically socialized matter greatly and should be the object of critical reflection and policy. If policymakers are serious about valuing and developing men's and women's political engagement and commitment equally, the larger macro-structures of society and the meso-level structures of schools should be transformed to valorize their contributions equally. This can be done by critically scanning the curriculum for hidden biases, not only in what is taught but also in how it is taught. Assessing and evaluating the language and gendered imagery (e.g., pictures, role models, etc) used by teachers in class, by schoolbooks, in school regulations, and policy documents can help us uncover the implicit normativity about female' and male students' positions in politics which continue to reproduce gender inequalities in IPE. This process of genuinely reconsidering the gendered school and how female students perceive the role of women in the public sphere will require a culture shift rather than a tweak to the curriculum.

**Supplementary Material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000151>.

**Acknowledgments.** The data supporting this study's findings are available on request at the Flemish department of education and the Steunpunt Toetsontwikkeling en Peilingen of the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL) and the University of Antwerp (UA). The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions. The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research. The data collection was conducted by the Steunpunt Toetsontwikkeling en Peilingen of the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL) and the University of Antwerp (UA) adhering to the highest ethical standards. More information on the data collection procedure can be consulted in Ameel et al. (2016).

The authors acknowledge Prof. Dr. Bram Spruyt for his valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper. They acknowledge Prof. Dr. Gema García-Albacete and Dr. Anja Durovic for the chance to present an earlier version during the 2022 European Conference on Politics and Gender (ECPG) where they received valuable comments to improve our paper. They also acknowledge the reviewers of the paper for their most helpful comments. This work was supported by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO Vlaanderen) under grant G0G7620N, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel under Grant SRP79 – Enhancing Democratic Governance in Europe.

**Competing Interest.** The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## Notes

1. Belgium is a federal state consisting of three regions –Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital – and three linguistic communities –Dutch-speaking community, French-speaking community, and German-speaking community. Educational policy is a designated authority of each community.
2. The data were also collected simultaneously with the ICCS data, ensuring an extensive overlap between the measured constructs explained. For clarification, the used data is not ICCS data but a different dataset collected among an older cohort of students. In this analysis, we use the data of the older cohort since inequalities are more pronounced at older ages and because the Flemish authority's highly differentiated school system (Agirdag, Van Houtte, and Van Avermaet 2012) is then at its peak. For a technical overview of the ICCS measurement, see Schulz et al. (2018). For

information on the data collection of the attainment targets, see AHOVOKS (2017) and Ameel et al. (2016). This information is only available in Dutch.

3. A total of 1509 ASO students, 1,420 TSO students and 1185 BSO students completed the tests (completely or not). For ASO, these students were spread over 70 schools (with the same number of locations) and 94 classes, for TSO, over 65 schools (with 67 locations) and 131 classes, and for BSO, over 59 schools (with 61 locations) and 134 classes. A total of 166 schools took part. Note certain schools could be sampled twice if these schools provided more educational tracks.

4. We conducted a one-factor CFA for the scales internal political efficacy, civic learning experiences, open classroom climate, active student participation, and political home environment. We cannot report the CFA fit measures for the scale gender-stereotypical attitudes because this model was saturated.

5. There are too few nonbinary people for the analysis, but we acknowledge the existence of more than two genders.

6. In the dataset, no identifier of the classroom was provided, and because of the sampling method, too few classrooms were sampled to distinguish between the classroom and the school in the multilevel analysis.

7. Ideally, we would distinguish between three levels to consider the classroom level. However, too few classrooms were surveyed to make this distinction.

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**Cite this article:** Matthieu, Joke, Silvia Erzeel, and Didier Caluwaerts. 2024. "Intensifying Gender Inequality: Why Belgian Female Students (Sometimes) Gain Less Internal Political Efficacy from Citizenship Education Than Male Students." *Politics & Gender* 20, 645–668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000151>