

---

# Democracy & Education

---

## It's Time to Disagree: Young People's Self-efficacy for Political Disagreement in Norway

*Kjersti E. Dahl (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)*

---

---

### Abstract

Discussion about political and social issues in school matter for a wide array of democratic skills and competences such as political engagement, participation, and knowledge. However, little research has been done on what impact characteristics of the discussion climate in classrooms can have on young people's engagement with political disagreements and conflicts. This article applies structural equation modelling (SEM) to survey data from the 2016 Norwegian International Civic and Citizenship study (ICCS) to show how discussions about social and political issues in the classroom setting can serve as an arena for building young peoples' self-efficacy for political disagreements. The analysis also considers the role of political interest and socioeconomic background.

### Submit a response to this article

Submit online at [democracyeducationjournal.org/home](http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home)

### Read responses to this article online

<http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol30/iss1/4>

### Introduction

**D**ISAGREEMENT ABOUT POLITICS is a central element of democracy, but for many people, disagreements have negative associations. For example, some people associate political disagreement with feelings of discomfort or fear of losing friends. Others wish to avoid situations involving political disagreement because they believe that they are not competent enough (Conover et al., 2002; Peacock, 2019). Using International Civic and Citizenship (ICCS) data, this article addresses how democratic education and the facilitation of classroom discussion can have an impact on young peoples' self-belief regarding their ability to engage in discussions characterized by disagreement. The research question for the study is: What impact can the discussion climate have on students'

self-belief when it comes to handling political disagreement?

Therefore, the aim of this article is to contribute to a discussion on how we can prepare young citizens for engagement in political discussions in which differing political perspectives are present. In this article, political disagreements are understood as situations in which at least two different perspectives on a political or social issue are expressed. Disagreements involve different levels of intensity, with lower levels pointing to more harmonious conversations about differences in opinions and higher level pointing to harsher conflicts between individuals with opposing perspectives.

This study explores young peoples' self-belief when it comes to handling political disagreement. Whether and how people enter

---

KJERSTI E. DAHL is a PhD candidate in the Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

situations depends on the judgments they make about their own ability to handle and succeed in the given task or situation (Bandura, 1986; Condon & Holleque, 2013; Pajares, 1996). This is also applicable to situations characterized by disagreement and conflict. The evaluations young people make about how well they can handle a disagreement have consequences for their participation in that disagreement; this study uses the concept of *conflictual self-efficacy* to refer to these judgments. Conflictual self-efficacy is defined as a person's faith in their own ability to master disagreement and conflict about politics and society. Young people's development of self-efficacy is highly connected to their previous experiences (Bandura, 1997). Thus, with the aim of lowering the threshold for participation in political conflict, it is important that young people experience to master situations characterized by disagreement and conflict about politics. Schools are a possible arena for such experiences. In school, students meet peers with a variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions, which can lead to discussions and different levels of disagreement and conflict. These discussions can also take different forms and can be facilitated in a variety of ways. It is therefore valuable to understand whether the characteristics of the discussion climate can have an impact on students' self-belief when it comes to handling political disagreement.

There is a large body of literature in the field of democratic education that focuses on classroom discussions. For example, many studies have focused on the ways in which discussions about political and social issues can foster outcomes, such as political engagement, participation, and knowledge (Alivernini & Manganelli, 2011; Campbell, 2008; Persson, 2015a). Studies have also connected discussion climate to the development of skills needed for political disagreement, such as the ability to take different perspectives (Hahn, 1998) and think critically (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). However, less attention has been paid to how the characteristics of the discussion climate in classrooms impact young people's engagement with political disagreements and conflicts. By applying structural equation modelling (SEM) to survey data from the 2016 ICCS, this article shows how the characteristics of the discussion climate in Norwegian classrooms affect young people's self-efficacy for political disagreements. This article examines how discussions about social and political issues in the classroom setting can serve as an important arena for building conflictual self-efficacy. The analysis also considers how political interest and socioeconomic background can have impact on this relationship.

The article is structured as follows. The first section presents the background to the study and explores why there is a need to teach young people that democracy is also about learning to disagree. The second section describes the theoretical perspective for the article and analyses disagreement in light of deliberative and agonistic theory and research. The third section presents the methodology used in the study by showing how the SEM-model was constructed and clarifying the variables used. The fourth section presents the model and results. Finally, the fifth section discusses the results, their implications, and the limitations of the study.

## Background and Context: Why Should Disagreement Be Part of Democratic Education?

Previous research has shown that many citizens dislike or have an aversion toward political conflict and disagreement. Several psychological theories have attempted to explain why people tend to avoid engaging in disagreements and conflicts over political issues (Conover et al., 2002; Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Studies have found that some people generally avoid discussions about politics because they do not feel sufficiently competent to engage in them, while others are fearful of appearing ill-informed or afraid that political disagreements will disrupt their social relations (Conover et al., 2002). Additionally, many citizens seem to have a negative view of the role of conflict in democracies. For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) showed that many Americans view political conflict as something negative and that this affects their perceptions of democratic procedures. Moreover, their study highlighted that many people view political conflict as unnecessary, illegitimate, and even a sign that there is "something wrong" with governmental procedures (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). However, participation in activities such as political discussions has been found to elevate tolerance of conflict and disagreement (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Furthermore, conflict avoidance has also been found to be related to gender, with women being more politically conflict-avoidant compared to men (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2017). While these findings come from research on adult citizens, we do expect that these trends are relevant in characterizing younger age groups' approaches to conflict.

Avoidance and feelings of discomfort and incompetence thus appear to characterize citizens' relationship with conflict. If people are likely to avoid conflict and interpret it as something negative from a young age, they will most likely hesitate or even avoid participating in political conflict when they become adult citizens. Moreover, if the level of political conflict in democracies increases, the threshold for citizens' participation might also increase, leading to a decrease in overall levels of participation. This trend would ultimately undermine the principle of equal participation and therefore represent a challenge to the ideals of democracy. Against this backdrop, democratic education can help prepare young people to handle disagreements and conflicts.

While most studies on conflict avoidance have so far been conducted in the U.S., this article focuses on Norway. Norway and other Scandinavian countries are perceived as some of the most well-functioning democracies in the world. For instance, they tend to have a top ranking on the Democracy Index compiled by *The Economist Intelligence Unit*. Also, the ICCS study shows that Norwegian students have a high democratic understanding and disposition for participation as democratic citizens compared to other countries. This indicates that Norwegian schools emphasize democratic education, something that is reflected in in the 2020 curriculum, which identifies "democracy and citizenship" as a main theme in all school subjects. The curriculum specifies that learning to take different perspectives and handle differences in opinion are learning goals included in this theme (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). Also, from a comparative perspective, Norway is a less polarized country (Boxell et al., 2020) with lower levels of

societal conflict (Knudsen, 2021). Hence, Norwegian students are expected to be able to handle disagreements in a constructive manner compared to students in other countries with higher levels of conflict. This makes Norway and Norwegian schools a context well suited to both study and promote capabilities for disagreement.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Disagreement in Theories of Democracy and Educational Research**

Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable parts of any political process (Klofstad et al., 2013; Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Thus, conflict and diversity of perspectives are at the core of many theories of democracy. This study is based on theoretical perspectives from an ongoing debate between agonistic and deliberative theories of democracy. At the center of this discussion are different views on conflict and pluralism. On one side, deliberative theory puts communication, rationality, and deliberation at the center of democracy. Political legitimacy is not secured by voting; rather, it is secured by the public deliberation of free and equal citizens and defensible reasons account for public decisions (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Held, 2006). As Held (2006) pointed out, “The key objective is the transformation of private preferences via a process of deliberation into positions that can withstand public scrutiny and test” (p. 237). Deliberation aims to solve conflict by stimulating citizens with different opinions to listen to others with different views and values, gain knowledge and engage in constructive dialogue to find solutions on which they can agree (Esterling et al., 2015; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1997).

On the other side, Mouffe (2013) and radical democracy theorists have highlighted that not all political conflict raises the possibility of consensus and that conflicts are important for political adversaries to challenge each other’s opinions. Mouffe has argued that deliberative theories, with their aim of consensus, are unable to adequately represent modern democracy and the conflicts and pluralism it entails. From this perspective, an important part of democracy is to transform conflict from antagonistic into agonistic, where participants acknowledge each other as adversaries with the right to fight for their opinions rather than as enemies (Mouffe, 2013, 2015).

The same debate has also received attention in educational research. Deliberative theories have been criticized for not acknowledging the conflictual nature of democracies in their perspectives on democratic education. For instance, Biesta (2009, p. 151) argued that there is a tendency within citizenship research to portray democracy in terms of consensus rather than conflict and that there is a need for more variation in how students learn about democracy. Furthermore, Ruitenberg (2010) argued that the aiming for consensus diminishes the role of disagreement in democracies and that this has led to an overemphasis on capacities for consensus at the expense of other important factors, such as the capacity for disagreement and the role of affections.

Educational theorists with a deliberative focus have traditionally argued for a democratic education that focuses on deliberation skills, such as communication skills, the ability to argue rationally and listen, and the ability to build consensus (Englund, 2006;

McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). Samuelsson (2018) argued that consensus in contemporary deliberative theories is often not seen as the absolute aim of every discussion but, rather, something to be oriented toward as far as possible. However, there are deliberative approaches which emphasizes disagreement and participation in conflictual discussions. For example, structured academic controversy (SAC)—a classroom discussion template where students learn controversial issues by representing different perspectives—has a strong place in deliberative educational research (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Parker, 2011). Also, there is a body of work on controversial issues in education promoting tolerance and the ability to take perspective (Hess, 2009; Ljunggren, 2008). There is additional literature highlighting the value of disagreement in teacher education, with the goal of ensuring that teachers can support their students in their participation in collective decision making (Harell, 2020).

The tension between deliberative and agonistic theories shows that preparation for disagreement is highly relevant theme in democratic education. This article strives to acknowledge the criticisms made from an agonistic perspective. It combines these criticisms with deliberative educational theory with an aim to promote a political education that includes teaching competence for disagreement, such as ability to tolerate others’ views, agree with one another, change one’s mind, argue a point of view, be true to one’s own values, and develop self-efficacy. While all these skills are relevant, this paper focuses only on self-efficacy for disagreement and studies how young people can develop it.

### **Conflictual Self-Efficacy and Discussion in the Classroom** *Conflictual Self-Efficacy*

Enduring a disagreement requires a certain belief in one’s own ability to argue and convince others. This can be seen as a form of self-efficacy for political conflict and disagreement, herein called conflictual self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as the “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Self-efficacy is not about people’s specific skills or knowledge; it is about what they think they can do with the skills and knowledge they have regarding a given task or domain. Self-efficacy is connected to the generative capability to organize cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral subskills that, in turn, serve one or several purposes (Bandura, 1997). Conflictual self-efficacy refers to individuals’ evaluations of their own capabilities to master political disagreement. To master a political disagreement, it is necessary to organize and analyze the situation, evaluate the course of action, and make decisions with the purpose of making good arguments based on these judgments. While the relevant capabilities for mastering political disagreements consist of several factors, the ability to construct a convincing argument, understand the perspectives of others, and respond to them are key competences.

Judgments of personal competence are important in determining how people handle situations such as political disagreement, what their threshold is for entering or avoiding such situations, how they manage and behave in them, and how they

experience them. People tend to engage in tasks in which they feel confident and competent while avoiding those tasks in which they do not feel competent (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 1996). Thus, self-belief in one's ability to succeed in a discussion about political and social issues is not only important for determining one's achievements but also for determining whether one participates in a disagreement to begin with. These beliefs also influence one's effort, persistence, and resilience when facing obstacles and challenges, can impact thought-patterns and emotional reactions, and fostering overall interest. People with high self-efficacy tend to see obstacles as challenges to overcome; they invest more in their subsequent efforts and adopt a more positive mindset. In comparison, people with low self-efficacy tend to be easily demotivated by obstacles and have a lower threshold for surrender (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 1996). Consequently, young people with a strong self-efficacy for political disagreement are expected to be more positive about political conflicts, have a lower threshold to enter them, put more effort into them, and have higher resilience once they participate in them. Bandura (1997) identified previous experience as a main source of self-efficacy. If people have mastery experience with a task, they are more likely to engage in the same or similar activities again. As such, it is important that adolescents attain mastery experiences with political disagreements to develop conflictual self-efficacy, either in school or in the private sphere.

### ***Discussion Climate in the Classroom***

In this article, the discussion climate is related to the ICCS's concept of the "open classroom climate," which refers to the extent to which students experience their classroom as a safe place in which they can freely discuss political and social issues, explore their own and peers' opinions, and experience how their statements are appreciated by fellow students and teachers (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Previous studies show that these traits of the discussion climate can have a positive impact on students' civic and political engagement (Barber & Torney-Purta, 2012; Campbell, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2001), political self-efficacy (Campbell, 2008; Pasek et al., 2008), and political learning (Persson, 2015a).

An open climate for classroom discussions has also been linked to the development of skills deemed relevant for disagreements about political and social issues. For instance, studies have shown that such discussion climates are positively associated with perspective-taking and tolerance (Hahn, 1998), critical thinking and consciousness (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Newmann, 1990), and an appreciation of conflict as an essential part of politics (Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, having mastery experiences is a strong source of self-efficacy. Experiencing success in a task, especially after facing a challenge, can be seen as authentic proof that success can be repeated (Bandura, 1997, p. 81). Discussions in school can be a source of mastery experiences regarding disagreement, diverse opinions, and conflicting opinions.

### ***Political Interest and Socioeconomic Background as Contributors to Conflictual Self-Efficacy***

This article highlights two contributors to adolescents' conflictual self-efficacy: political interest and socioeconomic background.

While other variables could have been included in this study, such as political knowledge, political activities, values or parents' political interest, our selection was based on two main reasons. The first reason concerns previous research on young people's engagement with political issues and democratic education, together with the selection of variables available in the dataset. Second, the goal was to keep the model simple. Since little research has been conducted on this theme, the goal was to find a simple model that could function as a starting point for discussing young people's engagement with political conflicts within democratic education research.

Political interest is among the most important indicators of democratic citizenship and political participation (Martinussen, 2003). People with high political interest tend to score higher on political knowledge, voter turnout, and political participation compared to those with lower scores (Neundorf et al., 2012). Interest and engagement in political and social issues are key elements of political participation. To be able to discuss and express diverging opinions, young people need to be familiar with relevant political or social topics of discussion (Fjeldstad et al., 2010). A high frequency of discussion about political and social issues with family and friends tends to spur adolescents' political development, including their level of political interest (Dostie-Goulet, 2009), knowledge, and willingness to take political action (McIntosh et al., 2007). Studies have also revealed that adolescence is a period in which political discussions between children and parents occur, especially among older adolescents (Kim & Stattin, 2019). Interest in political and social issues is relevant for developing conflictual self-efficacy. Being interested in and talking to friends and family about politics tends to make people acquainted and comfortable with conflict and disagreement through experience. These experiences, both negative and positive, are central to developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Socioeconomic background is among the strongest correlates of political participation, engagement, and interest (Martinussen, 2003). A higher social status is assumed to provide a wide range of resources and the development of skills that facilitate political participation. This can include skills in arguing, writing, speaking, and developing knowledge for coping in organizational settings and social networks (Verba et al., 1995). People from a more privileged socioeconomic background tend to report higher political interest than others (Lange & Onken, 2013). Education has also been shown to engender greater confidence in one's self-perceived ability to be a "good" citizen (Persson, 2015b). Additionally, parental socialization is particularly strong in childhood and teenage years (Neundorf et al., 2012). For example, children with politically engaged parents tend to become politically engaged themselves, and political party identification has its origin in how children learn about politics from their parents (Dinas, 2014). Parents' educational level also impacts adolescents' societal interest and awareness (Wanders et al., 2020). Therefore, socioeconomic background potentially results in the enhancement of several skills and characteristics considered influential for the development of conflictual self-efficacy. Conflict avoidance is also correlated with socioeconomic background, and people with higher levels of

education and income tend to be more tolerant of disagreements and conflicts than those with lower social status (Ulbig & Funk, 1999).

### The SEM Model of Conflictual Self-Efficacy

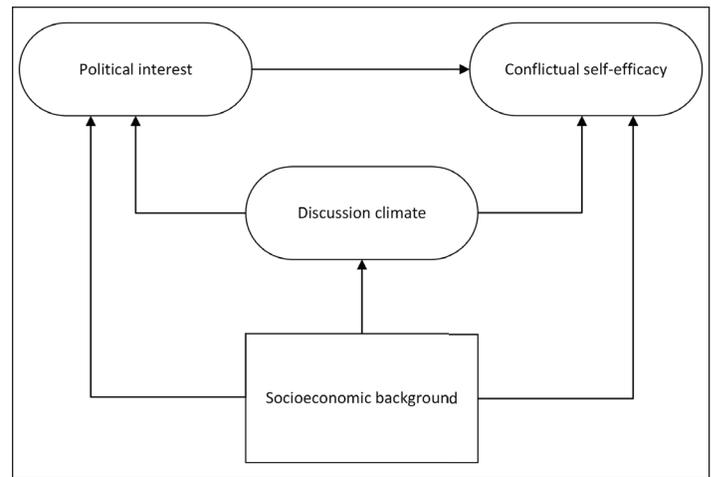
SEM refers to a group of techniques that allow latent independent and dependent variables to be used in the estimation of a model (Kline, 2016; Mehmetoglu & Jakobsen, 2017). Using this technique, it was possible to examine the hypothesized relationship between the three latent variables (conflictual self-efficacy, discussion climate, and political interest) and socioeconomic background. Using SEM, a path model was constructed to study young people's self-efficacy for interpersonal disagreements about political and social issues. The main goal of the model was to explore the ways in which the discussion climate in classrooms might impact adolescents' self-efficacy for disagreements about political and social issues. Another aim was to use the findings to discuss the implications that this might have for democratic education in both research and practice. Given the role that political interest and socioeconomic background play in citizenship and young people's engagement with political and social issues, the SEM model needed to control for how these two variables impact the relationship between discussion climate and conflictual self-efficacy. It is likely that the discussion climate does not only have a simple causal effect on conflictual self-efficacy but that there is also an interplay with political interest and socioeconomic background. For instance, some previous studies (Campbell, 2008; Fjeldstad et al., 2010) indicated that discussion climate can have a mediated effect on conflictual self-efficacy through political interest. More specifically, the discussion climate tends to have a positive impact on the frequency with which adolescents talk about politics. Furthermore, becoming familiar and more comfortable with discussing politics might lower the threshold for talking about such issues with friends and family and thereby build conflictual self-efficacy.

Socioeconomic background is well known to have impact on development political skills, interest, self-efficacy, and participation. Homes characterized by higher socioeconomic status might include parents who embody and value skills that are favorable to participation in disagreements. This context probably affects how their children respond to interpersonal disagreements about political and social issues. Socioeconomic background was therefore constructed as a base variable in the SEM model. Figure 1 shows the path model for this article.

## Methods

### Sample and Design

The study used Norwegian data from the 2016 ICCS, an international study developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The ICCS aims to provide comparative perspectives on students' knowledge and understanding of citizenship as well as their perspectives, values, and activities relevant for civics and citizenship (Schulz, Ainley et al., 2018). The Norwegian data consisted of 6,271 ninth-grade 14-year-olds from 148 schools. Of the participating students, 49.5%



**Figure 1**  
Path Model for Conflictual Self-Efficacy

were girls, 8.6% had a minority language background, and 59.6% had parents with higher-education qualifications. The ICCS included four parts: questionnaires for students, teachers, and school leaders and a knowledge test taken by the students. Only variables from the students' questionnaires are used in this paper.

To evaluate the proposed model, an SEM analysis was performed in R 3.5.2 with *lavaan*, and the model was estimated with maximum likelihood. The final model was constructed in several steps. The factors were analyzed with exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and items with low factor loadings were deleted (this is explained further in the section on measures). This model was first run without residual correlations and was then respecified after the modification indices. The residual correlations necessary to obtain a good fit were specified.<sup>1</sup> In line with the principles of parsimony, the model was kept as simple as possible (Kline, 2016).

### Conflictual Self-Efficacy

The SEM model consisted of four key measures, with self-efficacy for political disagreement being the dependent variable. Conflictual self-efficacy was constructed as a latent variable with three indicators. The ICCS data material included an item battery about citizenship self-efficacy. Within this battery, three variables were relevant for disagreement. The letters indicate the variables' placement in the ICCS battery. Using a four-point scale ranging from "very well" to "not at all," the students' were asked about the extent to which they thought they would do well in the following situations: (b) "argue your point of view about a controversial

1 In the model, there was a residual correlation between 17A and B: teachers encouraging students to form and express an opinion. In the factor for conflictual self-efficacy, 29E and F were correlated: following a televised debate and writing to a newspaper about one's view on a current issue. Regarding the factor of interest, two residual correlations were applied: (1) 14A and F, which were regarding talking to parents about political/social issues and talking to friends about happenings in other countries; and (2) D and E, which were regarding talking to friends about political/social issues and talking to parents about happenings in other countries.

political or social issue”; (e) “follow a television debate about a controversial issue”; and (f) “write a letter or email to a newspaper giving your view on a current issue.” For interpretation reasons, these scores were reversed, making 1 = “not at all” and 4 = “very well.”

There are disadvantages to working with existing variables. Unfortunately, there were no other variables relevant to conflictual self-efficacy in the ICCS material. It is often believed that three variables are the ideal minimum per factor (Kline, 2016). The measurement of conflictual self-efficacy would have been strengthened if the factor consisted of a few more variables to better grasp other aspects of self-efficacy for disagreement and avoid possible technical problems. The three items used focused on two abilities of relevance to political disagreements: first, the ability to argue one’s point of view in writing or orally, and second, the ability to understand and discuss a current political conflict mediated through media. Table 1 shows the results of a factor analysis run in SPSS. The extraction method used is principal axis factoring and varimax for rotation.

**Table 1**  
**Factor Loadings in Conflictual Self-Efficacy**

|                               |      |
|-------------------------------|------|
| b) argue your point of view   | .630 |
| e) follow a television debate | .758 |
| f) write a letter or email    | .730 |

Only one factor was extracted from the EFA, and the factor loadings were strong. Cronbach’s alpha for these three variables was .748, indicating good reliability. This supports that conflictual self-efficacy, as a latent factor, causes common variance in the variables. The three variables were therefore, used to construct an index for conflictual self-efficacy. Missing values were excluded.

### *Operationalizations of Independent Variables*

The discussion climate was operationalized through six variables. Using a four-point scale, the students were asked to evaluate how often the following things happen when discussing political or social issues during their regular lessons: (a) teachers encourage students to make up their own minds, (b) teachers encourage students to express their opinions, (c) students bring up current political events for discussion in class, (d) students express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other students, (e) teachers encourage students to discuss the issues with people who have different opinions, and (f) teachers present several sides of the issue when explaining it in class. These six variables were entered into an index to measure how the students perceived the discussion climate in their classroom.

Political interest was measured as an index containing five variables. While again using a four-point scale, the students were asked how often they were involved in the following activities: (a) talking to parent(s) about political or social issues, (d) talking to friends about political or social issues, (e) talking to parent(s) about what is happening in other countries, (f) talking to their friends about what is happening in other countries, and (g) using

the internet to find information about political or social issues. All five variables were related to the extent to which students talked to their parents and friends about political or social issues, both domestic and abroad. It was anticipated that young people with high political interest would talk about politics with members of their close social circles, while others would not.

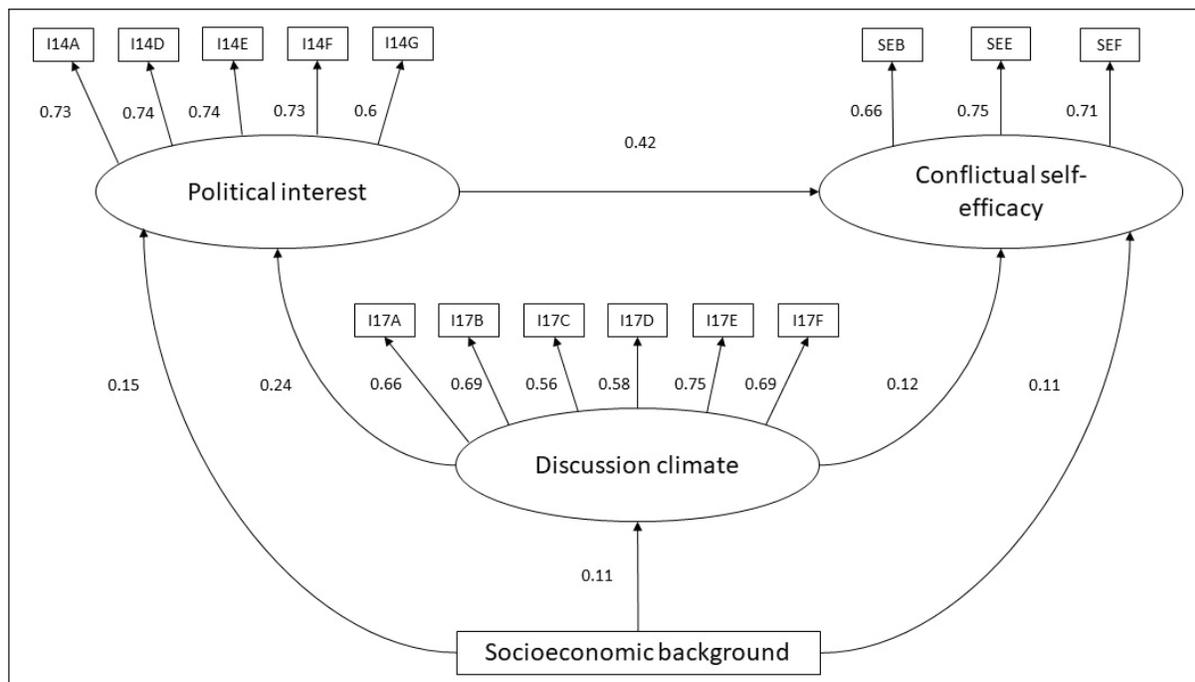
Socioeconomic background was measured using the national index of socioeconomic background taken from the ICCS. It was derived from the highest parental occupational status, the highest educational level of parents, and the number of books at home. The score consisted of factor scores for the first principal component, with national averages at 0 and standard deviations of 1 (Schulz, Carstens et al., 2018).

### **Results and Analysis**

Figure 2 presents the results with standardized coefficients from the SEM analysis. For the main fit indices, the root mean square (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) were used. An evaluation of the fit shows CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .04 and SRMR = .03. Based on the threshold values from Kline (2016), these results indicate a good fit for the structural model.

The model shows that an open discussion climate contributes to the development of students’ self-belief when it comes to handling political disagreement. First, the discussion climate showed a moderate direct contribution (.12), indicating that when students experience characteristics such as teachers’ encouraging discussion, disagreement, and forming opinions, it tends to have a positive impact on their development of self-efficacy for disagreement. Also, the model showed a positive impact of the discussion climate on conflictual self-efficacy mediated through political interest (.11). This indicates that when students experience discussion as valued in their classroom tend to have a positive impact on their political interest and the frequency with which they talk about such issues with friends and family. Furthermore, higher political interest tends to give adolescents higher scores on conflictual self-efficacy. The scores from the model indicate that the direct and mediated effects of the discussion climate were at a similar level. The model shows that political interest was the factor with the single highest effect on conflictual self-efficacy. Political interest had the highest direct effect (.42) compared to the other independent variables. As such, students’ interest in political and social issues and spending time talking about these issues with others were of great value for developing their conflictual self-efficacy.

Socioeconomic background also had a significant effect on young people’s conflictual self-efficacy. When controlled for other variables, the model showed a direct effect (.11). Previous research has stated that socioeconomic background is positively correlated with political self-efficacy (Martinussen, 2003) and the model shows that the same tendency seems to be valid for self-efficacy for political disagreement. Socioeconomic background also seems to be an important indirect contributor to conflictual self-efficacy. The models show indirect effects through the discussion climate (.013) and political interest (.063). As such, there is support for the



**Figure 2**  
Path Model for Conflictual Self-Efficacy with Standardized Coefficients

expectation that homes with higher resources tend to stimulate students' political interest and the frequency with which young people talk to friends and family about politics, further benefitting their development of conflictual self-efficacy.

Explained variance ( $R^2$ ) show that 29% of the variation in conflictual self-efficacy could be explained by the direct and indirect effects of discussion climate together with political interest and socioeconomic background. Together with good measures of fit for the model, the analysis shows significant results that are relevant to discussions about young people's participation in current and future politics.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between young peoples' conflictual self-efficacy and the characteristics of the discussion climate in classrooms using the research question, What impact can the discussion climate have on students' self-belief when it comes to handling political disagreement? The main finding of the study is that an open classroom discussion climate seems to increase students' self-belief in their ability to engage in discussions characterized by disagreement. The results highlight two ways in which discussion climate can positively impact the development of conflictual self-efficacy. First, students who experience their discussion climates as open also tend to score higher on conflictual self-efficacy compared to those with a lower score on discussion climate. Second, the findings show a mediated effect from discussion climate through political interest. Students who experience an open classroom discussion climate also tend to score higher on political interest, which also tends to have a positive impact on conflictual self-efficacy.

Drawing on the literature and previous studies presented earlier in this article, a possible interpretation of the positive

relationship between an open discussion climate and higher scores on conflictual self-efficacy can be related to the experience students acquire through disagreement during classroom discussions. The experience of an open classroom climate might provide mastery experience for students, which is a primary source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Political discussions in an open discussion climate may also make young people familiar and more comfortable with conflicting opinions. It might function as a form of practice that contributes to a self-belief that they are able to handle political disagreement. Since there is a positive impact from both discussion climate and political interest, the results might indicate that talking about politics in general is significant for the development of conflictual self-efficacy. It is likely that by talking about politics with others, young people encounter and gain experience with conflicting opinions, which makes them less likely to believe that they cannot handle a political disagreement.

The results are in line with the expectations and indications of previous research. Previous studies have shown that discussion climate has an impact on several skills and competences relevant to democratic education. For instance, studies have shown a positive relationship between the traits of the discussion climate and political engagement (Campbell, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2001), political self-efficacy (Campbell, 2008; Pasek et al., 2008), political learning (Persson, 2015a), perspective-taking, and tolerance (Hahn, 1998). This article shows that the discussion climate can also have an impact on young people's self-belief in handling situations characterized by political disagreement and conflict. A possible interpretation is that the experience of an open classroom climate provides a space in which students may be comfortable enough to participate in political disagreement and thereby gain mastery experiences with conflicting opinions.

The results of this study should also be discussed in light of the ongoing debate between agonistic and deliberative theories of democracy. The findings represent one possible approach to preparing young people for participation in situations which are not clearly deliberative or agonistic in nature. Examples of such situations can be discussions in which consensus might be hard to reach or in which finding a solution with consensus is not the main goal. Participation in such situations is also something that democratic education should pay attention to. It is likely that young people will, at some point, encounter political conflicts with high levels of intensity where consensus seems far or that they will encounter situations in which it is important to express disagreement and stand up for what they believe in, even if they are alone or in a minority. Being able to handle disagreement and believe in one's own ability to handle conflictual situations is important regardless of whether it is in a discussion in which the goal is to reach consensus about a solution or fighting for one's own opinions in an agonistic conflict.

The findings have some implications. First, they are relevant for the development of curricula on democratic education. Altogether, the findings support the idea that classrooms have the potential to be a space in which young people can be comfortable expressing and engaging with conflicting opinions and, in doing so, learn to endure conflict, disagree, and withstand the arguments of others. Based on this, there is potential to enhance the existing curriculum on democratic education and debate by including aspects of disagreement and conflict. There are already traces of this in the latest Norwegian national curriculum, which encourages students to learn about the key conflicts defining Norwegian society, the different perspectives on these conflicts and their rationale.

Second, the present study introduces the issue of how teachers can handle political disagreement in the classroom and facilitate an open discussion climate for students. Thus, political disagreement should also receive attention in teacher education. During their time in teacher education, upcoming teachers should be able to build competence in handling political disagreements in their future classrooms. If the teacher is uncomfortable with political conflict, it is unlikely that the students will be motivated to disagree, and their signal to the students may well be that political conflicts are unwanted or something to avoid. Thus, education in and about political conflict should be introduced in teacher education.

Third, and more broadly, there is a need for a greater focus on political disagreement in the research field of democratic education. There have been several studies on discussions of controversial issues, approaches to engage students in conflicting perspectives, and how to learn perspective-taking, most of which involve finding a common solution or seeking consensus-building as a goal. However, this study calls for a greater focus on the potential of learning to disagree. Being part of political discourse is not only about building consensus; it can also be about standing up for what you believe in. Against this backdrop, there is a need for democratic education to recognize that democracy is also about learning to disagree.

There are some limitations to this study that could be addressed in future research. First, as previously pointed out, some of the measures used could be extended further. For example, the

factor for conflictual self-efficacy includes three items; ideally, to cover other relevant aspects of self-efficacy for political disagreement and thereby offer a better measurement, it could include more items. Second, the measure of discussion climate is based on how students individually experience their classroom discussions, not on how discussions are actually facilitated. In future research, collating information from students and teachers (and curricula) can offer a more holistic portrait of the discussion climate. Since students can experience the same discussion climate in very different ways, applying multilevel models can account for intraclass correlations.

This article draws on ICCS 2016 data, which is the only representative survey data currently available for secondary level students and democratic education in Norway. It is especially useful in identifying broad trends, such as the correlation between discussion climate and conflictual self-efficacy. Collecting further, more focused data from students and teachers on the themes of democratic education would be useful to examine how and to what extent we teach young people that democracy is also about learning to disagree.

Third, this study is based on cross-sectional data which is not ideal for inferring causality. Time series would be better to explore causality in the relationship between discussion climate and self-efficacy. Unfortunately, there are currently no data with such qualities available in the Norwegian context. The article draws on a theoretically constructed model with proposed directions for the effects based on the literature. However, it is likely that there is an interplay between the included variables and that they mutually influence each other. For instance, it is possible that students who score high on conflictual self-efficacy experience their classroom climate as being more open than students with lower scores. The model does not take into account these differences, but they are important to be aware of and offer potential avenues for future research.

## References

- Alivernini, F., & Manganelli, S. (2011). Is there a relationship between openness in classroom discussion and students' knowledge in civic and citizenship education? *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 3441–3445. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.04.315>.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory* (The Prentice-Hall Series in Social Learning Theory). Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.
- Barber, C., & Torney-Purta, J. (2012). Comparing attitudes in the 1999 and 2009 IEA civic and citizenship education studies: Opportunities and limitations illustrated in five countries. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 11(1), 47–63.
- Biesta, G. (2009). What kind of citizenship for European higher education? Beyond the competent active citizen. *European Educational Research Journal*, 8(2), 146–158. <https://doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2009.8.2.146>.
- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2020). *Cross-country trends in affective polarization*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Campbell, D. E. (2008). Voice in the classroom: How an open classroom climate fosters political engagement among adolescents. *Political Behavior*, 30(4), 437–454. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9063-z>.
- Coffé, H., & Bolzendahl, C. (2017). Avoiding the subject? Gender gaps in interpersonal political conflict avoidance and its consequences for political engagement. *British Politics*, 12(2), 135–156. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bp.2016.9>.

- Condon, M., & Holleque, M. (2013). Entering politics: General self-efficacy and voting behavior among young people. *Political Psychology, 34*(2), 167–181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12019>.
- Conover, P. J., Searing, D. D., & Crewe, I. M. (2002). The deliberative potential of political discussion. *British Journal of Political Science, 32*(1), 21–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123402000029>.
- Dinas, E. (2014). Why does the apple fall far from the tree? How early political socialization prompts parent-child dissimilarity. *British Journal of Political Science, 44*(4), 827–852. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123413000033>.
- Dostie-Goulet, E. (2009). Social networks and the development of political interest. *Journal of Youth Studies, 12*(4), 405–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260902866512>.
- Dryzek, J. S., & Niemeyer, S. (2010). *Foundations and frontiers of deliberative governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Englund, T. (2006). Deliberative communication: A pragmatist proposal. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 38*(5), 503–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270600670775>.
- Esterling, K. M., Fung, A., & Lee, T. (2015). How much disagreement is good for democratic deliberation? *Political Communication, 32*(4), 529–551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.969466>.
- Fjeldstad, D., Lauglo, J., & Mikkelsen, R. (2010). *Demokratisk beredskap. Norske ungdomsskoleelevers prestasjoner og svar på spørsmål i den internasjonale demokratiundersøkelsen ICCS 2009*. Universitetet i Oslo ILS.
- Godfrey, E. B., & Grayman, J. K. (2014). Teaching citizens: The role of open classroom climate in fostering critical consciousness among youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 43*(11), 1801–1817. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-013-0084-5>.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. F. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Belknap Press.
- Habermas, J. (1997). *Between facts and norms* (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought). Polity Press.
- Hahn, C. (1998). *Becoming political: Comparative perspectives on citizenship education*. Suny Press.
- Harell, K. F. (2020). The value of conflict and disagreement in democratic teacher education. *Democracy & Education, 28*(1). <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol28/iss1/3/>.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy*. Polity.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge.
- Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. (1985). Classroom conflict: Controversy versus debate in learning groups. *American Educational Research Journal, 22*(2), 237–256. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1162842>.
- Kim, Y., & Stattin, H. (2019). Parent-youth discussions about politics from age 13 to 28. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 62*, 249–259. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2019.04.001>.
- Kline, R. B. (2016). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (4th ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Klofstad, C. A., Sokhey, A. E., & McClurg, S. D. (2013). Disagreeing about disagreement: How conflict in social networks affects political behavior. *American Journal of Political Science, 57*(1), 120–134. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00620.x>.
- Knudsen, E. (2021). Affective polarization in multiparty systems? Comparing affective polarization towards voters and parties in Norway and the United States. *Scandinavian Political Studies, 44*(1), 34–44.
- Lange, D., & Onken, H. (2013). Political socialization, civic consciousness and political interest of young adults. In M. Print & D. Lange (Eds.), *Civic education and competences for engaging citizens in democracies* (pp. 65–76). Sense.
- Ljunggren, C. (2008). Det offentliga rummets princip—om kontroversiella frågor i utbildningen. *Norsk Pedagogisk Tidsskrift, 92*(4), 316–327.
- Martinussen, W. (2003). *Folkestyre? Politisk medborgerskap i Norge over den siste generasjonen*. Unipub Skriftserier.
- McAvoy, P., & Hess, D. (2013). Classroom deliberation in an era of political polarization. *Curriculum Inquiry, 43*(1), 14–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12000>.
- McIntosh, H., Hart, D., & Youniss, J. (2007). The influence of family political discussion on youth civic development: Which parent qualities matter? *APSC, 40*(3), 495–499. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096507070758>.
- Mehmetoglu, M., & Jakobsen, T. G. (2017). *Applied statistics using Stata: A guide for the social sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2015). *Om det politiske*. Cappelen Damm akademisk.
- Neundorf, A., Smets, K., & García-Albacete, G. M. (2012). Homemade citizens: The development of political interest during adolescence and young adulthood. *Acta Politica, 48*(1), 92. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2012.23>.
- Newmann, F. M. (1990). A test of higher-order thinking in social studies: Persuasive writing on constitutional issues using the NAEP approach. *Social Education, 54*(6), 369.
- Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of Educational Research, 66*(4), 543–578. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543066004543>.
- Parker, W. (2011). Feel free to change your mind. A response to “The potential for deliberative democratic civic education.” *Democracy & Education, 19*(2). <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol19/iss2/9/>.
- Pasek, J., Feldman, L., Romer, D., & Jamieson, K. H. (2008). Schools as incubators of democratic participation: Building long-term political efficacy with civic education. *Applied Developmental Science, 12*(1), 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690801910526>.
- Peacock, C. (2019). (Not) Talking Politics: Motivations and Strategies for Avoiding the Expression of Political Opinions. *Western journal of communication, 83*(5), 581–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2019.1597157>.
- Persson, M. (2015a). Classroom climate and political learning: Findings from a Swedish panel study and comparative data. *Political Psychology, 36*(5), 587–601. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12179>.
- Persson, M. (2015b). Education and political participation. *British Journal of Political Science, 45*(3), 689–703. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123413000409>.
- Ruitenberg, C. (2010). Conflict, affect and the political: On disagreement as democratic capacity. *Factis Pax, 4*(1), 40–55.
- Samuelsson, M. (2018). Education for deliberative democracy and the aim of consensus. *Democracy & Education, 26*(1). <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol26/iss1/2/>.
- Samuelsson, M., & Bøyum, S. (2015). Education for deliberative democracy: Mapping the field. *Utbildning & Demokrati—tidsskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik, 24*(1), 75–94.
- Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., Agrusti, G., & Friedman, T. (2018). *Becoming citizens in a changing world. IEA international civic and citizenship education study 2016 international report*. Springer International Publishing.
- Schulz, W., Carstens, R., Losito, B., & Fraillon, J. (2018). *ICCS 20016 technical report*. IEA.
- Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. IEA.
- Ullbig, S. G., & Funk, C. L. (1999). Conflict avoidance and political participation. *Political Behavior, 21*(3), 265–282. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022087617514>.
- Utdanningsdirektoratet (2020). *Læreplan i samfunnsfag (SAF01-04)*. <https://data.udir.no/klo6/v201906/laereplaner-lk20/SAF01-04.pdf?lang=nn>.
- Verba, S., Scholzman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Wanders, F. H. K., Dijkstra, A. B., Maslowski, R., van der Veen, I., & Amnå, E. (2020). The role of teachers, parents, and friends in developing adolescents' societal interest. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 65*(5), 736–751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1754901>.