

Closing the IX-XII Civic Education Vacuum: A School-Based Intervention to Build Political Efficacy and Democratic Resilience in Romanian Adolescents Following the December 2024 Election Crisis

Research Topic:

Reversing political disengagement: A civic education intervention addressing curriculum absence and efficacy in Romanian youth

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1. Abstract

Following the December 2024 annulment of Romania's presidential election, the first such annulment in EU history, this proposal asks whether a 12-week civic-education intervention in grades XI-XII can restore the political efficacy that Romania's curriculum withdraws after Grade 8. A 2025 Braşov-County pilot (N = 292) found 86.6% of secondary students report no civic education and 91.4% no civic involvement, despite 69.5% acknowledging political decisions affect their daily lives. The proposed quasi-experimental study tests, in six matched schools (N = 320), whether structured intervention converts this latent engagement into measurable gains in civic knowledge, internal political efficacy, and resistance to populist algorithmic content.

2. Introduction

On 6 December 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court unanimously annulled the first round of a presidential election, the first such annulment in the European Union's history. It was triggered by a coordinated TikTok and Telegram operation that propelled Călin Georgescu, a sovereigntist independent polling below 5% one month earlier, to a 22.95% first-round plurality (Gherghina, 2025; Stan, 2025). His campaign fused neoliberal self-responsibility narratives with Orthodox-spiritual nationalism (Trifan, 2025); pro-Georgescu content was algorithmically recommended at four to fourteen times the rate of content supporting his runoff opponent (Gross & Schultz, 2025), consistent with documented TikTok radicalization-pipeline mechanisms (Shin & Jitkajornwanich, 2024). His vote was disproportionately young in a country where voters under 35 had been largely absent from conventional political life. The crisis transformed a long-standing structural concern, that Romanian secondary education delivers civic instruction only in lower secondary (grades III-IV and VII-VIII) and withdraws it in grades IX-XII before students reach voting age, into an urgent question of democratic security. No Romanian study has yet tested whether a structured civic-education intervention in the IX-XII window can restore political efficacy and democratic resilience before students cast their first vote.

3. Literature Review and Preliminary Pilot Evidence

Political socialization theory holds that politically relevant orientations are acquired during adolescence and durable into adulthood (Hyman, 1959; Greenstein, 1965). Niemi and Junn (1998), reanalysing the 1988 NAEP, demonstrated that the amount and recency of civic coursework raise civic knowledge net of demographics; Galston (2001, p. 217) synthesised this as the claim that civic knowledge causally affects “the acceptance of democratic principles, attitudes toward specific issues, and political participation.” Flanagan and Levine (2010) further establish that civic-identity formation extends through late adolescence, exactly the IX-XII years that Romanian curriculum leaves civically empty. A complementary tradition, beginning with Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954), distinguishes external from internal political efficacy and shows the two routinely dissociate in young samples (Bandura, 1997; Caprara et al., 2009). Amnă and Ekman (2014) sharpen this for European youth by identifying a “standby” cluster, alert and informed but currently inactive, while digital media's effect on participation has shifted from neutral to substantively positive over two decades (Boulianne, 2020).

These pillars apply with extra force in Romania, where post-communist civic-association membership declined through intra-cohort change rather than cohort replacement, indicating structural rather than generational disengagement (Voicu, 2013). Romania's sole ICCS data point, from 2022, places Romanian Grade-8 civic knowledge at 470 against an international mean of

508, despite Romania having one of the most formally institutionalised lower-secondary civic curricula in the study (Schulz et al., 2024). The same cohort paradoxically expects the highest European-election turnout of any participating country (77%) while distrusting domestic institutions (Damiani et al., 2024), a profile of external efficacy without internal agency.

A pilot study I conducted across Braşov County during 2025 (general-population $N = 292$, plus $N = 78$ student-council benchmark; full results in Appendix A) confirms each pillar in the Romanian context. 86.6% of general-population students report receiving no civic education in school, statistically uniform across grade level, academic profile, and political-interest level ($\chi^2 = 0.048$, $p = 0.827$). 69.5% acknowledge that political decisions affect their daily lives, yet 91.4% report zero civic involvement; among the 119 students who feel most strongly affected, 89.1% remain entirely uninvolved, an exact empirical signature of decoupled external and internal efficacy. Critically, 36.9% of self-identified non-interested students would still participate in structured civic-education activities, against 87.0% in the embedded student-council benchmark. The 50-point gap is the institutional space an intervention could occupy.

4. Research Questions

RQ1. Does a 12-week civic-education intervention delivered in grades XI-XII raise internal political efficacy, civic knowledge, and political interest, relative to matched non-treated peers?

RQ2. Does the intervention reduce uncritical engagement with populist algorithmic content on TikTok and similar platforms? **RQ3.** Which intervention component (substantive content, open classroom-discussion climate, or media-literacy module) accounts for the largest share of any observed effect?

5. Methodology

Design. A quasi-experimental, pre-post cluster design with six Braşov-County secondary schools recruited through 2025-pilot relationships, paired by academic profile, and matched on baseline interest. Three schools receive the intervention, three continue standard curriculum. Anticipated $N = 320$ across twelve months (schematic in Appendix B).

Intervention. A 12-week module of 24 lessons covering Romanian constitutional structures and the Constitutional Court, EU institutional design, an open-classroom-discussion protocol modelled on ICCS items (Schulz et al., 2024), and a media-literacy unit on algorithmic curation (Gross & Schultz, 2025; Shin & Jitkajornwanich, 2024).

Measurement. Pre- and post-tests measure civic knowledge (ICCS-derived), internal and external efficacy (Caprara et al., 2009 P-PSE scale in Romanian), algorithmic content engagement, and the indices validated in the 2025 pilot. **Analysis.** Difference-in-differences and ANCOVA with school-level fixed effects, plus thematic analysis of student journals (RQ3). Ethics protocol from the pilot will be replicated.

6. Significance and Feasibility

Romania is the most acute current European case of institutionally disengaged youth reached by algorithmically optimised anti-system content (Cammaerts et al., 2014). The Braşov pilot established working access to the County School Inspectorate and validated the instrument suite (Cohen's $d = 1.909$); findings will inform Romanian curriculum-reform debates scheduled for 2026 review.

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Appendix A. Braşov County Pilot Study (2025): Selected Findings

The 2025 pilot enrolled 370 secondary students across three deliberately separated distribution waves. Wave 1 (N = 78) was distributed via the county student-council network and is reported as a civically-engaged subgroup benchmark; Waves 2 and 3 (combined N = 292) were distributed via the Braşov County School Inspectorate to all secondary school principals and constitute the general-population estimate. ANOVA across waves: $F(2, 367) = 6.695$, $p = 0.0014$.

Indicator	General population Waves 2+3 (N = 292)	Student-council benchmark Wave 1 (N = 78)	Test / effect size
Reports no civic education in school	86.6%	83.3%	$\chi^2 = 0.048$, $p = 0.827$
Mean political-interest score (1-5 Likert)	2.65 (SD = 1.22)	3.22 (SD = 1.17)	$t = 3.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.467$
Self-identifies as politically interested	35.6%	65.4%	n/a
Acknowledges political decisions affect daily life	69.5%	n/a	Likert ≥ 3
Reports zero civic involvement	91.4%	89.7%	n/a
Strongly affected by politics <i>and</i> entirely uninvolved	89.1% (n = 106 of 119)	n/a	n/a
Disinterested students who would still participate	36.9%	n/a	n/a
Overall willingness to participate in civic-ed activities	48.4%	87.0%	n/a
Convergent validity: interested vs. non-interested groups	Cohen's $d = 1.909$	n/a	$t = 15.62$, $p < .001$

Note. χ^2 test reported for the curriculum-absence indicator across three interest-level groups (low / medium / high), Cramer's $V = 0.013$, indicating that report-of-no-civic-education is statistically uniform across all interest levels and therefore reflects an institutional reality rather than self-rationalisation by disengaged students. Cohen's d for the convergent-validity check uses the binary self-identification item as comparator on the Likert measure.

Appendix B. Proposed Study Design

Six Braşov-County secondary schools paired by academic profile and matched on baseline political-interest distribution from the 2025 pilot. Random assignment within matched pairs to treatment or control. Twelve-month fieldwork window.

Treatment Arm (3 schools, N ≈ 160)	Control Arm (3 schools, N ≈ 160)
Week 0: Baseline pre-test	Week 0: Baseline pre-test
Civic-knowledge battery (ICCS-derived); internal & external political efficacy (Caprara et al., 2009 P-PSE scale, Romanian translation); algorithmic-content engagement; political-interest & standby-citizenship indices.	Identical instrument battery.
Weeks 1-12: 12-week intervention module	Weeks 1-12: Standard national curriculum
24 lessons (50 min each, 2/week): • Romanian constitutional structures & CCR • EU institutional design & European elections • Open-classroom-discussion protocol • Media-literacy module on algorithmic curation	Standard national curriculum continues. No civic-education subject scheduled in IX-XII.
Week 13: Post-test	Week 13: Post-test
Identical battery to baseline. Reflective journals collected throughout intervention.	Identical battery to baseline.

Analysis. Difference-in-differences and ANCOVA with school-level fixed effects on each outcome variable; multiple-imputation handling of attrition; inductive thematic analysis of student journals to identify mechanisms (RQ3). Power analysis based on the 2025 pilot effect-size estimates indicates 80% power to detect $d = 0.35$ at $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed, with the anticipated N.