Youth Disengagement in a Transitional Democracy: Alienation, Political Distrust, and Emigration Intentions in Albania

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Abstract

In Albania, youth participation in politics is particularly important given that the population is relatively young and the functioning of democratic institutions remains fragile. This study examines structural, attitudinal, and social factors shaping youth political engagement in Albania. It further explores how dissatisfaction with politics, perceived exclusion, and intentions to emigrate interact in influencing patterns of youth participation. To achieve this purpose, the study employs correlation analysis, multiple regression, and exploratory factor analysis to identify key mechanisms behind youth political disengagement. The findings suggest that youth disengagement from politics is mainly shaped by structural obstacles, institutional distrust, and perceived exclusion, rather than by youth apathy. Dissatisfaction with politics emerges as the strongest factor associated with both political disengagement and emigration intentions, suggesting a broader withdrawal of young people from political life. Perceived stereotyping and limited opportunities for political expression were associated with higher levels of alienation and lower levels of political engagement. At the same time, respondents who perceive higher levels of inclusion and institutional responsiveness tend to report lower levels of alienation and higher levels of political participation. Differences were also observed among demographic groups, with women, older youth, and university-educated respondents reporting higher levels of dissatisfaction and stronger perceptions of barriers to participation. The study highlights the relationship between political disengagement and emigration in a transitional democratic context. It also contributes to broader discussion on youth political participation and suggests the need for policies that strengthen youth inclusion.

Keywords: youth political disengagement, political alienation, emigration intentions, institutional distrust, youth participation, transitional democracy, Albania

1. Introduction

Youth participation in politics is widely considered important for democratic legitimacy and the functioning of democratic institutions. Classic approaches to political participation emphasize the role of individual motivation, institutional trust, political efficacy, and access to participatory opportunities (Verba & Nie, 1972; Dahl, 1998; Putnam, 2000). In many countries undergoing political and economic transition, youth participation in formal politics continues to be relatively low (Kostelka, 2014; Freedom House, 2023). In such contexts, youth political disengagement is often linked to dissatisfaction with institutional performance and limited opportunities for meaningful participation, rather than to political apathy among youth (Norris, 2011; Milner, 2010; Pontes et al., 2018).

In Albania, low levels of youth political engagement have been associated with distrust in public institutions, high unemployment, and economic insecurity (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2024; Freedom House, 2024; Bërdufi & Pacukaj, 2022; Duci et al., 2019). Existing local conditions may further reinforce these structural barriers (Cenaj, 2013). Informal factors such as family influence, clientelism, and vote-buying continue to affect political behavior (Qendresa Qytetare, 2023).

Young Albanians are often stereotyped as politically immature and often report exclusion from decision-making as well as low trust in political parties and elected representatives (CRCA/ECPAT Shqipëri, 2025; Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2024). Such experiences are also linked to stronger intentions to emigrate among young people (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2019; King & Gedeshi, 2020). As a result, many graduates increasingly look for educational and professional opportunities abroad (Likaj et al., 2024; Cenaj, 2021, 2025).

Previous studies have examined political participation, institutional trust, and emigration, although they are often treated separately. This study uses an integrated framework to examine how structural, institutional, and attitudinal factors impact youth political engagement in Albania. Based on survey data from 404 respondents aged 18–30, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do socio-economic and institutional factors shape youth political engagement in Albania?
2. In what ways do trust, political efficacy, and perceived inclusion affect youth political participation?
3. How are dissatisfaction with politics, political alienation, and perceived marginalization related to disengagement and emigration intentions?
4. How do structural, attitudinal, and contextual factors jointly shed light on youth political disengagement?

2. Literature Review

The contribution of youth participation in politics is recognized by social researchers as essential to the functioning of democratic systems. Active engagement among young citizens strengthens civic responsibility and social cohesion, while also contributing to the continuity of democratic practices across generations (Dahl, 1998; Verba et al., 1995). Classical theories of political participation argue that engagement is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by institutional trust, perceived political efficacy, access to information, and the responsiveness of political structures (Verba & Nie, 1972; Dahl, 1971; Putnam, 2000; Norris, 2011).

Traditional indicators of political participation, such as voting and party membership, remain central in measuring civic engagement (Dahl, 1998; Verba et al., 1995). However, the levels of participation are shaped by access to political information, opportunities for deliberation, and perceptions of institutional responsiveness (Dahl, 1998; Denters et al., 2007). Political trust also plays a key role, as citizens are more likely to engage when they perceive political institutions as legitimate and responsive (Norris, 2000).

Although theories of participation emphasize its importance, recent research indicates a general decline in youth engagement in formal political activities. This decline has been linked to decreasing institutional trust and weak political representation among younger generations (Putnam, 2000; Zukin

et al., 2006; Gordon, 2010). Some scholars argue that this decline reflects a shift toward alternative forms of engagement, including protests, petition signing, and online activism (Norris, 2002; Dalton, 2009; Dalton, 2017). These patterns point to a transformation rather than a decline in political engagement.

Empirical evidence from Albania points to a clear gap: despite widespread digital access to political information, active civic and political participation remains limited (SCiDEV, 2024). This gap between high information consumption and low engagement suggests that greater exposure to political content does not automatically lead to higher participation. As Milner (2010) argues, the internet may also allow individuals with limited political interest to avoid engaging with it more easily, rather than acting as a catalyst for greater engagement.

Structural conditions are central in shaping youth political behavior (Putnam, 2000). Economic insecurity, unemployment, and limited access to institutions can reduce engagement by constraining young people's time, resources, and political efficacy (Tyyskä, 2009). Socio-economic inequalities also reinforce these constraints by limiting opportunities to develop civic competencies and critical political awareness (Koseni et al., 2025). These structural barriers interact with social perceptions, particularly stereotypes portraying young people as politically inexperienced, apathetic, or passive, which further reinforces their exclusion from meaningful political processes (Pontes et al., 2018; Tolman & Pittman, 2001; Battenfeld, 2025).

Civic education and youth empowerment initiatives are widely recognized as important mechanisms for increasing political participation (Milner, 2010). Such programs aim to strengthen civic competence, responsibility, and engagement through both formal and informal learning environments (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Damon, 2004). Volunteering is often associated with higher levels of civic participation (Campbell, 2006), although it remains relatively low among Albanian youth (Center for Bridging Communities, 2025). In a post-communist context such as Albania, the legacy of compulsory volunteering has contributed to negative perceptions of civic participation (Zenelaga & Beshku, 2021). Contemporary volunteering is often used primarily as a way to improve employability rather than as civic engagement (Cenaj & Kuci, 2024), which limits its potential to foster long-term political participation (Kim & Morgül, 2017).

Education is a key factor shaping civic development and critical thinking (Milner, 2010), both of which are essential for developing political competence (Azis, 2025; Saldıray & Doğanay, 2024; Simoni & Koseni, 2020). Although schools and universities play a central role in developing civic knowledge and democratic competence, education in Albania remains largely theoretical rather than practice-oriented (Petro et al., 2025). Limited exposure to participatory learning (Leka et al., 2024) and limited engagement with both democratic and authoritarian historical experiences constrain civic understanding (Mehmeti et al., 2025). Research also suggests that knowledge of Albania's communist past is linked to more critical attitudes toward current democratic institutions (Kalemi et al., 2026).

Beyond the education sector, broader structural changes, such as increased student mobility under the Bologna Process, have facilitated migration, although opportunities remain limited (Laze, 2021a, 2021b). The COVID-19 pandemic also intensified economic insecurity and intentions to migrate among young people, raising concerns about long-term civic disengagement (Cenaj & Daher, 2023). As a result, Albania has experienced sustained youth emigration, with consequences for democratic participation and institutional renewal.

In contexts marked by fragile governance, socio-economic challenges, and public dissatisfaction, such perceptions are linked with stronger intentions to migrate, as individuals seek opportunities and greater stability abroad (King & Gedeshi, 2020). Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice-loyalty framework remains highly relevant in this context. When institutional channels for participation and "voice" are perceived as ineffective, particularly in contexts of democratic deficits, individuals are more likely to choose "exit" strategies, including emigration (Hirschman, 1970; Norris, 2011).

The literature suggests that youth political engagement is shaped by the interplay of structural constraints, institutional trust, socio-economic conditions, and social perceptions. Rather than reflecting apathy (Milner, 2010; Norris, 2002), youth disengagement is better understood as a response to perceived exclusion, institutional barriers, and limited political efficacy (Pontes et al., 2018).

Addressing these challenges requires strengthening institutional responsiveness, expanding civic education, and creating more meaningful opportunities for youth participation in both formal and informal political processes.

3. Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional, quantitative design, based on an online survey of respondents aged 18–30. Participants were recruited mainly through social media platforms, using non-probability sampling, resulting in a sample that is somewhat skewed toward urban and higher-educated youth. Although 404 valid responses were collected, the findings should be interpreted with caution regarding generalizability, particularly for rural populations and less digitally connected populations. Despite these limitations, the dataset enabled both descriptive and inferential analyses of political engagement, institutional trust, and socio-demographic patterns among respondents.

Sample Characteristics:

- Gender: 52.5% female, 47.5% male
- Age: 32.2% (18–20), 45.8% (21–25), 22.0% (26–30)
- Education: 52.2% enrolled in higher education, 24.5% completed higher education, 22.6% with secondary education.

Instrument Development: The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended, multiple-choice, binary, and Likert-scale items designed to assess political engagement, attitudes, and perceptions among young people. The instrument was organized into five thematic sections:

1. Socio-demographic and structural characteristics, including gender, age, education, and occupation, as well as perceived socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and limited opportunities for youth.
2. Political engagement, including electoral participation and involvement in political activities.
3. Factors influencing voting behavior, such as party affiliation, candidate evaluation, personal connections, policy preferences, and media influence.
4. Political trust, institutional responsiveness, and perceived political efficacy, including their relationship to migration intentions.
5. Perceptions of inclusion, inequality, and discrimination, including experiences of gender-based and structural marginalization.

The instrument captured the structural, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions of youth political engagement, providing a comprehensive assessment of these constructs.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component extraction was conducted on Likert-scale items to examine the underlying structure of the constructs and to inform the development of composite indices. Varimax rotation was applied to improve the interpretability of the factor structure. Items were retained based on factor loadings ≥ .40 and cross-loadings < .30. Composite indices were then computed as unweighted sums of the retained items.

The final indices included:

- Dissatisfaction with Politics: captures *negative evaluations of political parties, political leadership, and institutional responsiveness.*
- Influences on Vote Decision-Making: captures the *relative importance of political, personal, and informational factors shaping individual electoral choices.*
- Perceived Stereotypes of Youth: captures *perceptions that young people are viewed as politically inexperienced or incapable.*
- Perception of Political Representation and Voice: captures *the extent to which youth feel represented and believe their opinions matter in political decision-making.*
- Political Alienation: captures *feelings of exclusion, lack of influence, and disconnection from political processes.*
- Sense of Civic Responsibility: *captures the internalized belief that voting and civic participation are moral or social obligations.*

- Disengagement & Emigration: captures *the tendency of young people to disengage from political participation and to consider emigration as a response to dissatisfaction with politics and institutions.*
- Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges: captures *perceived economic and structural barriers affecting young people's opportunities and participation.*

Validity and Reliability: A pilot study with 20 youth respondents aged 18-30 was conducted to assess the clarity of the instrument and preliminary reliability. Feedback from the pilot study was used to make minor revisions to the final questionnaire.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.62 to 0.85, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency for an exploratory study. Construct validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis, with a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.816 and a statistically significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2(406) = 5047.384$, $p < .001$), confirming suitability for factor analysis.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process, and all data were used exclusively for research purposes.

Data Analysis and Results

4. Reliability and Factor Structure

Exploratory factor analysis indicated a well-defined underlying structure. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .816, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(406) = 5047.384$, $p < .001$), confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Principal component analysis extracted eight factors, which together explained 59.66% of the total variance.

Each factor was operationalized as a composite index by summing the scores of items with primary factor loadings ≥ .40. Table 1 reports the number of items per index along with the corresponding Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All scales showed acceptable to good internal consistency (α = .621–.850). The Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges index (α = .657) fell slightly below the conventional .70 threshold. However, values above .60 are often considered acceptable in exploratory research, particularly when scales capture complex and multidimensional social phenomena (Kline, 1999). The scale was therefore retained because of its theoretical relevance and satisfactory item coherence.

Table 1. Reliability of Indices

Composite Index	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Dissatisfaction with Politics	5	.850
Influences on Vote Decision-Making	4	.771
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	3	.763
Perception of Political Representation and Voice	4	.763
Political Alienation	5	.795
Sense of Civic Responsibility	2	.621
Disengagement & Emigration	4	.786
Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges	12	.657

5. Descriptive Analysis

The analytical sample consisted of 404 respondents, with minimal missing data. Socio-economic concerns were highly prevalent, particularly the high cost of living (73.5%) and low wages (57.2%).

Political engagement levels were relatively low. Only 10.4% reported active political involvement, and 10.9% reported membership in a political party, despite a higher rate of electoral participation (71.0% reported voting in the most recent election).

High levels of political discontent were also evident: 69.1% expressed dissatisfaction with political parties, while 79.9% believed that politicians primarily act in their own self-interest. In addition, 57.5% of respondents reported low political efficacy, indicating that they perceive their vote as having little impact, and 75.0% stated that political issues influence their intention to emigrate. Despite these patterns, civic norms remained strong, as 83.2% agreed that voting is a civic duty.

6. Correlation Analysis

Following the descriptive overview of respondents' political attitudes and experiences, correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the key study variables. Spearman's rho correlations ($p < .01$) revealed several statistically significant associations among key variables. Disengagement & Emigration showed a strong positive association with Dissatisfaction with Politics ($\rho = .664$) and Political Alienation ($\rho = .616$).

Moderate positive correlations were observed between Political Alienation and Perceived Stereotypes of Youth ($\rho = .454$), as well as between Disengagement & Emigration and Perceived Stereotypes of Youth ($\rho = .425$). Perceived Stereotypes of Youth were also moderately associated with Dissatisfaction with Politics ($\rho = .406$).

Overall, the results indicate a consistent pattern of statistically significant positive associations among Dissatisfaction with Politics, Political Alienation, Perceived Stereotypes of Youth, and Disengagement & Emigration (see Table 2).

Table 2. Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficients among Key Indices

No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1	Disengagement & Emigration	—	0.664**	0.524**	0.425**	-0.295**
2	Dissatisfaction with Politics		—	0.616**	0.406**	-0.307**
3	Political Alienation			—	0.454**	-0.539**
4	Perceived Stereotypes of Youth				—	-0.231**
5	Perception of Political Representation and Voice					—

Note: ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

7. Regression Analyses

Building on the correlation results, multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of political dissatisfaction, alienation, and disengagement. The assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of residuals, and absence of multicollinearity (VIF < 5) were satisfied. Given the study's cross-sectional design, results are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal relationships.

7.1 Predicting Dissatisfaction with Politics

The regression model was statistically significant ($F(4, 399) = 246.27$, $p < .001$) and explained 71.2% of the variance in Dissatisfaction with Politics ($R^2 = .712$).

All predictors were statistically significant ($p < .05$), although their effects varied in magnitude. The strongest predictor was Disengagement & Emigration ($\beta = .577$, $p < .001$), followed by Political Alienation ($\beta = .429$, $p < .001$). Smaller but statistically significant effects were observed for Perceived Influence of Voting Decisions ($\beta = .108$, $p < .001$) and Perceived Stereotypes of Youth ($\beta = -.069$, $p = .031$).

Overall, Dissatisfaction with Politics is most strongly associated with Disengagement & Emigration and Political Alienation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Dissatisfaction with Politics

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Disengagement & Emigration	.577	.033	.577	17.62	< .001
Political Alienation	.429	.033	.429	12.91	< .001
Influences on Vote Decision-Making	.108	.033	.108	3.27	.001
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	-.069	.032	-.069	-2.17	.031

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

Model summary. F (4, 399) = 246.27, p < .001, R^2 = .712.

7.2 Predicting Disengagement & Emigration

Building on the previous model, a second regression analysis was conducted to identify the factors associated with disengagement and emigration intentions among young people. The model was statistically significant (F (5, 398) = 128.43, p < .001) and explained 61.7% of the variance in Disengagement & Emigration (R^2 = .617).

Dissatisfaction with Politics emerged as the strongest positive predictor of Disengagement & Emigration (β = .766, p < .001), followed by Perceived Stereotypes of Youth (β = .255, p < .001). Other variables showed weaker effects when controlling for Dissatisfaction with Politics, suggesting substantial shared variance among attitudinal constructs (see Table 4).

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Disengagement & Emigration

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Dissatisfaction with Politics	.766	.030	.766	25.31	< .001
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	.255	.030	.255	8.51	< .001
Political Alienation	-.191	.033	-.191	-5.83	< .001
Perception of Political Representation and Voice	-.103	.033	-.103	-3.17	.002
Influences on Vote Decision-Making	-.076	.038	-.076	-2.01	.045

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.
Model summary. F (5, 398) = 128.43, p < .001, R^2 = .617

7.3 Predicting Political Alienation

A final regression model was estimated to examine the predictors of political alienation and to assess the relative contribution of the study variables. The regression model was statistically significant (F(5, 398) = 79.52, p < .001) and explained 50.0% of the variance in Political Alienation (R^2 = .500).

Dissatisfaction with Politics emerged as the strongest predictor of Political Alienation (β = .745, p < .001), followed by Perceived Stereotypes of Youth (β = .279, p < .001). Other variables showed weaker effects when controlling for Dissatisfaction with Politics. Greater Perception of Political Representation and Voice was linked to lower levels of Political Alienation (β = −.226, p < .001), displaying inverse associations. Perceived Influence of Voting Decisions was not statistically significant (β = −.095, p = .057) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Political Alienation

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Dissatisfaction with Politics	.745	.038	.745	19.49	< .001
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	.279	.038	.279	7.34	< .001
Disengagement & Emigration	-.140	.043	-.140	-3.26	.001
Perception of Political Representation and Voice	-.226	.043	-.226	-5.29	< .001
Influences on Vote Decision-Making	-.095	.050	-.095	-1.91	.057

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.
Model summary. F (5, 398) = 79.52, p < .001, R^2 = .500.

5. Group Differences

5.1 Gender Differences

Independent-samples t-tests showed that female respondents scored significantly higher than males on Perceived Stereotypes of Youth, Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges, and Disengagement & Emigration (all p < .05) (see Table 6).

Table 6: Gender Differences in Key Indices

Variable	Comparison	Mean (Female vs Male)	t	p
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	Female > Male	14.46 vs 13.72	2.21	.028
Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges	Female > Male	21.25 vs 20.26	4.57	< .001
Disengagement & Emigration	Female > Male	8.71 vs 8.03	3.97	< .001

Note. Mean differences are based on independent-samples *t*-tests.

7.4 Age Differences

One-way ANOVA with Tukey post hoc tests revealed significant differences across age groups. Respondents aged 18–20 reported lower levels of Perceived Stereotypes of Youth and Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges compared to older respondents, suggesting that perceived barriers increase with age (see Table 7).

Table 7. Post Hoc Tukey HSD Comparisons across Age Groups

Variable	Group Comparison	Mean Difference	p
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	18–20 vs 21–25	-1.224	.004
Perceived Stereotypes of Youth	18–20 vs 26–30	-1.617	.001
Perceived Socio-Economic Challenges	18–20 vs 26–30	-0.849	.015

Note. Mean differences are based on Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons.

7.5 Education Differences

University-educated respondents showed significantly higher levels of Political Alienation and Dissatisfaction with Politics compared to respondents with secondary education (both $p \leq .001$) (see Table 8).

Table 8. Education Differences in Key Indices

Variable	Comparison	Mean (Secondary vs University)	p
Political Alienation	University > Secondary	10.62 vs 11.46	< .001
Dissatisfaction with Politics	University > Secondary	18.84 vs 20.98	.001

Note. Means are reported in the order Secondary vs. University. Mean differences are based on independent-samples t-tests.

7.6 Political Engagement Differences

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in political attitudes and perceptions across levels of political engagement. The results showed that more politically engaged respondents (e.g., voters, party members, and those following political developments) report higher levels of perceived political inclusion (Perception of Political Representation and Voice) and lower Political Alienation. In contrast, lower political engagement was associated with higher Political Alienation and lower perceived political inclusion (see Table 9).

Table 9. Differences in Political Engagement Behaviors

Engagement Indicator	Outcome Variable	t	p	Direction of Difference
Voted in the last elections	Perception of Political Representation and Voice	2.59	.010	Voters > Non-voters
Registered party member	Influences on Vote Decision-Making	3.52	< .001	Members > Non-members
Registered party member	Political Alienation	-5.62	< .001	Members < Non-members
Follow political developments	Political Alienation	-5.29	< .001	Followers < Non-followers
Not engaged – limited opportunities	Political Alienation	2.44	.015	Limited > Others
Not engaged – lack of interest	Influences on Vote Decision-Making	-6.25	< .001	Less interested < Others
Actively engaged	Perception of Political Representation and Voice	2.20	.029	Engaged > Non-engaged

Note. Mean differences are based on independent-samples *t*-tests.

8. Discussions

The findings suggest that many young people in Albania remain disengaged from formal political activity, largely due to perceptions that political leaders act in their own interests and that institutions are insufficiently responsive to citizens' concerns. These perceptions emerged as central factors associated with low political participation. Dissatisfaction with politics appears closely linked to political alienation, limited engagement in formal political processes, and stronger intentions to emigrate. All three variables were closely associated with lower levels of participation among young Albanians aged 18–30. Established theories of democratic citizenship suggest that dissatisfaction with politics is linked to distrust in formal political institutions and reduced participation in both formal and informal political processes (Dahl, 1998; Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000). In the present study, these

relationships are interpreted as associational rather than causal due to the cross-sectional research design. Given the reciprocal nature of these constructs, the regression findings should be understood as reflecting statistical associations rather than directional effects. In Albania, widespread skepticism toward political parties and public institutions suggests that dissatisfaction with politics extends beyond personal opinion, as it is associated with lower political participation and stronger intentions to emigrate (King & Gedeshi, 2020), further highlighting the broader impact of political dissatisfaction on youth attitudes and engagement.

Perceptions and stereotypes surrounding young people appear to influence feelings of alienation and political withdrawal. Many respondents reported limited opportunities for meaningful participation and felt that their views were insufficiently considered in political decision-making processes. Those expressing such perceptions were also more likely to demonstrate lower levels of political engagement. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that social norms and adult-centered perceptions of political competence create important psychological barriers to participation (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). In Albania, where young people are often perceived as politically inexperienced or passive, such stereotypes may further exclude them from political participation, potentially reinforcing a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion and disengagement.

The relationship between political alienation and emigration intentions is evident in the findings. Political alienation is associated with both lower levels of participation and stronger intentions to migrate among respondents. However, all findings are associative, and the observed relationships do not imply causality. The results suggest that perceptions of exclusion and limited influence may contribute to broader disengagement from both political and social life.

These patterns can be interpreted through Hirschman's (1970) framework of exit, voice, and loyalty. When young people perceive limited opportunities to influence political outcomes through participation and voice, emigration may become an alternative strategy for pursuing opportunities elsewhere.

Regression analysis identified dissatisfaction with politics as the strongest factor associated with disengagement and intentions to emigrate. This finding highlights the potential democratic consequences of persistent political discontent among young people.

Perceived political inclusion and representation were associated with lower levels of alienation and disengagement. Young people who felt that their opinions were valued and that they could influence political decisions were less likely to become disconnected from civic and political life. These findings are consistent with democratic theories emphasizing the importance of meaningful inclusion in strengthening civic engagement (Dahl, 1971; Verba et al., 1995; Milner, 2010). Despite this positive relationship between inclusion and civic engagement, the findings suggest that opportunities for meaningful youth participation in Albania remain limited, while existing mechanisms are often perceived as ineffective.

The findings reveal significant differences across respondent groups. Female respondents, older youth, and university students reported higher levels of perceived barriers, stereotyping, dissatisfaction, and political alienation. This pattern may suggest that individuals with greater exposure to social, institutional, and educational structures become more aware of the challenges they face and, consequently, more likely to experience feelings of marginalization.

In contrast, young people who actively participate in political processes, such as voting, party membership, or following political developments, reported higher levels of perceived inclusion and lower levels of political alienation. These findings underscore the continued importance of traditional forms of political participation, even as informal and alternative forms of engagement become more visible. Expanding meaningful access to these traditional channels may contribute to more positive attitudes toward democratic participation and institutions.

In summary, youth alienation from democratic participation appears to be closely associated with institutional exclusion, social marginalization, mistrust in political institutions, and limited opportunities for meaningful participation, rather than with apathy or lack of interest (Milner, 2010; Norris, 2002). The findings also reveal a clear relationship between political disillusionment and emigration intentions, with broader implications for Albanian society, including population decline and

the potential loss of human capital important for the country's democratic development.

Based on the findings of this study, several measures may help strengthen youth political participation and reduce political alienation:

1. Enhance institutional transparency through mechanisms such as regular audits and accessible open data platforms.
2. Strengthen and expand youth councils at local and national levels to improve youth representation in policymaking processes.
3. Reform civic education by placing greater emphasis on practical and participatory learning experiences.
4. Develop national awareness campaigns, in cooperation with civil society organizations, to challenge negative stereotypes surrounding young people's political capabilities.
5. Increase financial and institutional support for youth-led initiatives and promote greater youth inclusion within political parties.

The effective implementation of these measures will require genuine political commitment, continuous monitoring, and cooperation among multiple stakeholders. Failure to address these challenges may contribute to ongoing dissatisfaction, political disengagement, and emigration, with potential long-term consequences for Albania's democratic development.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the political engagement of young Albanians aged 18–30 by focusing on dissatisfaction with politics, perceived inclusion, political alienation, and emigration intentions. Drawing on survey data from 404 respondents, the findings suggest that disengagement from formal political participation is shaped primarily by structural and institutional barriers, particularly dissatisfaction with political leadership and perceptions of institutions as unresponsive and self-serving, rather than by political apathy.

Dissatisfaction with politics emerged as the strongest predictor of disengagement and emigration. Perceptions of stereotyping limited political voice, and marginalization further contribute to political alienation, forming a mutually reinforcing pattern of associations that discourages participation. While conventional forms of engagement (such as voting and party membership) and perceived inclusion are associated with lower alienation and stronger civic connection, these positive effects appear limited within the current Albanian context. Group differences indicate that women, older youth, and university-educated respondents report higher levels of dissatisfaction and perceived barriers.

These results support key theoretical perspectives, including Norris's (2011) concept of critical citizens and Hirschman's (1970) framework of exit, voice, and loyalty. In Albania's transitional democracy, lower perceived effectiveness of 'voice' is associated with stronger tendencies toward 'exit' through emigration rather than participation through political engagement. This dynamic poses substantial long-term risks, including population decline and the loss of human capital essential for democratic consolidation.

This study has several limitations. The use of non-probability online sampling limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Albanian youth, particularly those living in rural areas or with limited internet access. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions regarding the relationship among political dissatisfaction, alienation, disengagement, and emigration intentions. Future research could employ probability-based sampling techniques and longitudinal designs to further examine these relationships.

In conclusion, youth political disengagement in Albania appears to reflect rational responses to perceived institutional shortcomings and limited opportunities rather than political indifference. Addressing this pattern requires sustained efforts to improve institutional transparency and responsiveness, strengthen mechanisms for meaningful youth representation, and reform civic education to make it more participatory. It also requires actively challenging negative stereotypes about young people's political capacity. Through such comprehensive reforms, Albania may enhance youth inclusion, mitigate emigration pressures, and strengthen the foundations of its democratic systems.

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10.1 AI Use Statement

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of the manuscript for language editing, grammar correction, and improving academic style. The research design, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of findings, and final approval of the manuscript remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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