

Sozial arbeits politik

STRENGTHENING POLITICAL SOCIAL WORK: EMPIRICAL BASED SUGGESTIONS¹

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Does the profession of Social Work have a political mandate? To what extent are social workers politically interested and engaged? This article provides insight to the results of a quantitative survey of 1815 social workers in Switzerland, discussing possible proposals for strengthening political social work.

INTRODUCTION

Social work and politics have always had a close and often tense interrelationship. On the one hand, the general framework conditions of social work are defined in political negotiation processes. On the other hand, it is social workers who implement socio-politically agreed measures within their everyday practices.

Furthermore, social work always acts as an up- and downstream instance of social policy at the same time: it improves gaps in the system retrospectively and, as an expert at grassroots level, draws attention to new social problems and structural deficits (Benz & Rieger 2015: 30f).

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The question to which extent political activity is part of social workers professional duty is answered differently in the literature (Merten 2001). Lüssi (2008) for example decisively speaks out against a political mandate of the profession and describes political participation as inappropriate and counterproductive. He writes: «A social worker who in no way directly participates in social policy but irreproachably solves social problems in individual cases fully fulfils the social worker's role in the narrower sense. Socio-political activity is not a necessary component of this task» (Lüssi 2008: 130, translated by the Author).

The German Association of Social Workers DBSH (2014) paints a completely different picture along its professional ethical principles by, among other things, asking members of the profession to initiate and accompany political processes (33f). This position is in line with the position of IFSW (n.d.), which explicitly understands «policy formulation and analysis and advocacy and political interventions» as social work tasks. In a pointed form, the National Association of Social Workers in the USA clarifies this political understanding of social work in its Code of Ethics by demanding that «social workers should engage in social and political action» (NASW 2017: 30). Summing up these principles, Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2007) states «that the wording in the professional codes would actually be sufficient to think and act (passionately) politically on a professional-scientific basis» (242f, translated by the Author).

Hence, the fact that in accordance with the various professional codes of ethics there seems to be increasing agreement in the professional discourse that social work «also» (Rieger 2013: 54) has a political mandate, brings another question to the fore: To what extent is this political mandate proclaimed not only by

academics and representatives of professional associations but also accepted and carried out by social workers at grassroots levels in their everyday practice?

So far, this question has received little attention in empirical social work research. While the state of research on the political activity of social workers in the USA is already somewhat more advanced (Lane et al. 2018; 3f; Ostrander et al. 2018: 43f), there is little empirical evidence on this topic in German-speaking countries (for an overview of the current state of research see Kindler 2019b: 24). In this respect, I intend to contribute to closing this important research gap with my Masterthesis at the FHS St.Gallen, Switzerland. For this purpose, I conducted an online survey from May to July 2018. The link to the questionnaire was distributed via professional associations, employers, Facebook groups, alumni and students associations, universities and personal contacts. This resulted in an occasional sample of 1815 social workers from all cantons in Switzerland who gave information on their political attitude, political activity and understanding of politically active social work. Selected results are presented and discussed below.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

The 1815 social workers surveyed are on average 37 years old and had 11 years of work experience at the time of the survey. 66 percent identified as females, 33 percent identified as males and 1 percent indicated another gender identity. 68% of participants have a tertiary degree in social work, 25% are currently studying social work and 7% work with another educational background in the field of social work. The exact breakdown of the educational backgrounds can be found in Table 1. With 27%,

the legal area of social welfare assistance and child and adult protection is most strongly represented in the sample.

POLITICAL ATTITUDES & POLITICAL INTEREST

When asked about their political attitudes, 86% of the participants ranked between zero and four on the left-right scale from zero (left) to ten (right), the middle (five) was chosen by 8% and 6% positioned themselves between six and ten on the right (see Figure 1).

On average, the social workers surveyed were more interested in politics than the Swiss population as a whole. While in the eighth round of the European Social Survey 75% of tertiary educated people stated an interest in politics (Ernst Stähli et al. 2016), in the sample described here 85% are very or quite politically interested. This high value can be explained, among other influences, by the selectivity of the sample: It can be assumed that politically uninterested persons tend to be less motivated taking part in a survey on political activity. As can be seen in Figure 2, 90% of respondents are interested in national political events, 80% in cantonal political events and only 61% in communal political events. This result is particularly interesting since in Switzerland a large part of the socio-political regulations relevant to the practice of social work are negotiated at municipal level.

POLITICAL SOCIAL WORK

In a next step, I focus on whether the participants understand political engagement as part of their job, as it is demanded, for example, in the professional codes of ethics mentioned at the beginning. Table 2 shows that 1693 out of 1815 (94%) participants agreed to the statement

that «social work has a political mandate», 122 (6%) did not agree. Similarly, high approval ratings were achieved by the statements that social work must initiate socio-political interventions (92%) or that it is important for social workers and their professional work to understand political processes (95%). Therefore, social work has a political mandate in the eyes of the interviewees. At the same time, half of the participants reacted with rejection to the statement that «social workers should be politically active during their *working hours*». In addition, 41% were in favor of social workers not being politically active during their *free time*. This raises the question of the extent to which the interviewees implement the political mandate, which they agreed to 94%, in the form of actual political activity.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY

In the context of the study, political activity was understood to mean all activities «undertaken voluntarily by individuals with the aim of influencing decisions at various levels of the political system» (Kindler 2019b: 44, translated by the Author), following the definition of Kaase (1996: 521). In order to operationalize this rather abstract definition for the survey, 37 concrete political activities were listed in the questionnaire, such as «voting» or «motivating service users to political activity». Participants were asked to indicate for each of them how often they had exercised this activity during the last twelve months. The answers to choose from were *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often* and *very often*. The results show that on average 388 respondents (21%) can be described as never, 1069 (59%) as rarely, 286 (16%) as sometimes, 71 (4%) as often and one respondent as very often politically active. In comparison with the overall Swiss population, these values can be

classified as average or slightly above average (Ernst Stähli et al. 2016). Looking at individual political activities, it can be seen that 16% of respondents have already run for a political office, such as the city council, and that a total of 11% have actually held or are currently holding such an office. A closer look also reveals that certain activities are carried out more frequently than others (see Figure 3). Elections, votes or discussions on political issues among friends are particularly frequent. Public speeches, strikes or voluntary political work are rarely chosen as a form of political engagement. The conclusion is that participants prefer political activities that require little resources in terms of time, money, knowledge and public exposure.

FACTORS INFLUENCING POLITICAL ACTIVITY

How comes that certain social workers are more politically engaged than others? The different levels of political activity among the respondents indicate the existence of certain variables that impede or favor the political activity of the participating social workers. In the conducted study, such variables could be identified hypothesis-driven by bivariate correlation analysis. Among other variables, strong connections between political activity and political interest, memberships in mobilization networks, political efficacy, agreement to a political social work and gender were found.

On the Political Activity Scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often politically active), for example, politically very interested (Mean [M]=1.7, n=542) differ significantly from respondents who are not politically interested at all (M=0.48, n=17), $p<.001$.

Participants were also asked about their memberships in mobilization networks. Meant

by that are: (1) associations of social work, (2) political parties, (3) trade unions, (4) political organizations without a professional connection and (5) political bodies. The analysis shows that the greater the number of memberships in mobilization networks (minimum=0, maximum=5), the more pronounced the political activity. Figure 4 shows that, for example, respondents with five memberships (M=2.39, n=13) differ in their political activity from respondents with no membership (M=0.9, n=674), $p<.001$.

The number of memberships in mobilization networks also correlates positively with the internal political efficacy. This means that a person with membership in five mobilization networks feels on average more competent and effective in political work than a person with one, two, three or four memberships. Thus, it can be interpreted that on the one hand mobilization networks, such as the Swiss Association of Social Workers (AvenirSocial), strengthen the internal sense of effectiveness of their members by supporting them, for example, in acquiring competences or knowledge. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the mobilization networks surveyed actually succeed in mobilizing their relatives for political activities.

Internal political efficacy, in contrast to external political efficacy, is strongly related to political activity. The more effective and competent the social workers feel, the higher their political activity will be. Participants with a maximum internal political efficacy of 10 points (n=105) achieve an average score of 2.12 on the Political Activity Scale, while respondents with a minimum political effectiveness of zero points (n=15) achieve an average score of 0.56, $p<.001$ (see Figure 5).

Figure 6 illustrates the relationship between support for political social work (see Table 2 for

statements on operationalization) and the extent of political activity in the sample examined: the more pronounced the support for political social work the higher the political activity. Participants with full support (n=664) average 1.55 on the Political Activity Scale, while respondents who reject political social work more or less (n=144) average 0.8, $p < .001$.

Similar to the Social Work Students Survey by Dieter Kulke (2018), interesting gender-specific differences can as well be identified in the study presented here. Persons with a female gender identity achieve an average value of 1.19 on the Political Activity Scale. Persons with a male gender identity achieve a mean value of 1.25 and persons with a third gender identity score a mean value of 1.72 (see Figure 7). Even if men and women differ statistically significantly, the difference of 0.06 points is of none importance in regard to the scale's differences. On the other hand, the difference between social workers with male or female gender affiliation and social workers with a third gender affiliation is statistically significant and practically important at the same time.

STRENGTHENING POLITICAL SOCIAL WORK: EMPIRICAL BASED SUGGESTIONS

So far, it could be shown that swiss social workers have a strong left-wing political orientation, an above-average political interest and an average political activity. It was also discussed that the majority of participants agree with a political mandate of social work but at the same time are highly opposed to political activity within the framework of work and/or leisure time. In the last section, five variables were presented that are strongly related to political activity. Finally, I present three suggestions for further strengthening political social work.

(1) *Universities (of Applied Sciences)*: Many representatives of social work emphatically demand greater interference by social workers in political negotiation processes (Chassé 2014; Seithe 2014). Thus, if the political commitment of social workers is to be strengthened, the results of this study can provide important indications of the success of such projects. For example, it would be advisable to establish political classroom trainings or Summer Schools in order to increase the internal political efficacy or the political interest of future social workers.

(2) *Research*: As mentioned in the introduction, social work representatives are talking a lot about the relationship between the profession and politics. Discussions usually remain abstract, referring little to practical implementation and seldom reflecting to what extent normative demands are actually implemented in practice. This article aims at stimulating a more focused, constructive and increasingly empirical discussion culture. Consequently, this requires further research. On the one hand, broadly based, internationally comparative quantitative projects could be useful in order to gain an overview of different participation patterns, influencing factors and tendencies. On the other hand, qualitative research approaches are also in demand when it comes to working out different political understandings of social workers by means of narrative interviews or group discussions.

(3) *Practice*: A profession that wants to play an effective role in political decision-making processes depends on members of the profession pulling in the same direction with similar ideas. In this sense, it should be clarified who is politically involved on which levels, with which strategies, with which goals and in whose name – and finally, who leaves the political work (at least partially) to others as it cannot be explicitly assumed that *all* social workers are politically

active on a full-time basis and beyond. However, a discussion of the above-mentioned issues is likely to be required among universities, professional associations and employers as well as among all social workers who are concerned about professional and effective social work.

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Table 1. Highest educational attainment of participants [N=1815] (Kindler 2019b)

Degree level	Number	Percent
Currently studying social work (SW)	453	25%
Higher College: SW	266	14.7%
University of Applied Sciences: Bachelor in SW	711	39.2%
University of Applied Sciences: Master in SW	132	7.3%
University: Bachelor in SW	44	2.4%
University: Master in SW	70	3.9%
Dissertation/Habilitation	19	1.1%
Other	119	6.6%
Missing	1	0.1%

Table 2. Endorsment of a political social work (Quelle: Kindler 2019b)

Aussage	Yes	No
Social Work has a political mandate/duty.	94%	6%
Social work must initiate socio-political interventions.	92%	8%
Political activity contradicts the ethical values of social work.	19%	81%
Social workers should demand the fulfilment of human and social rights.	95%	5%
Social workers should be politically active during their working hours.	50%	50%
Social workers should be politically active during their free time.	59%	41%
Understanding politics is important for social workers and their professional work.	95%	5%
A central task of social workers is to combat social inequality at the structural level.	90%	10%

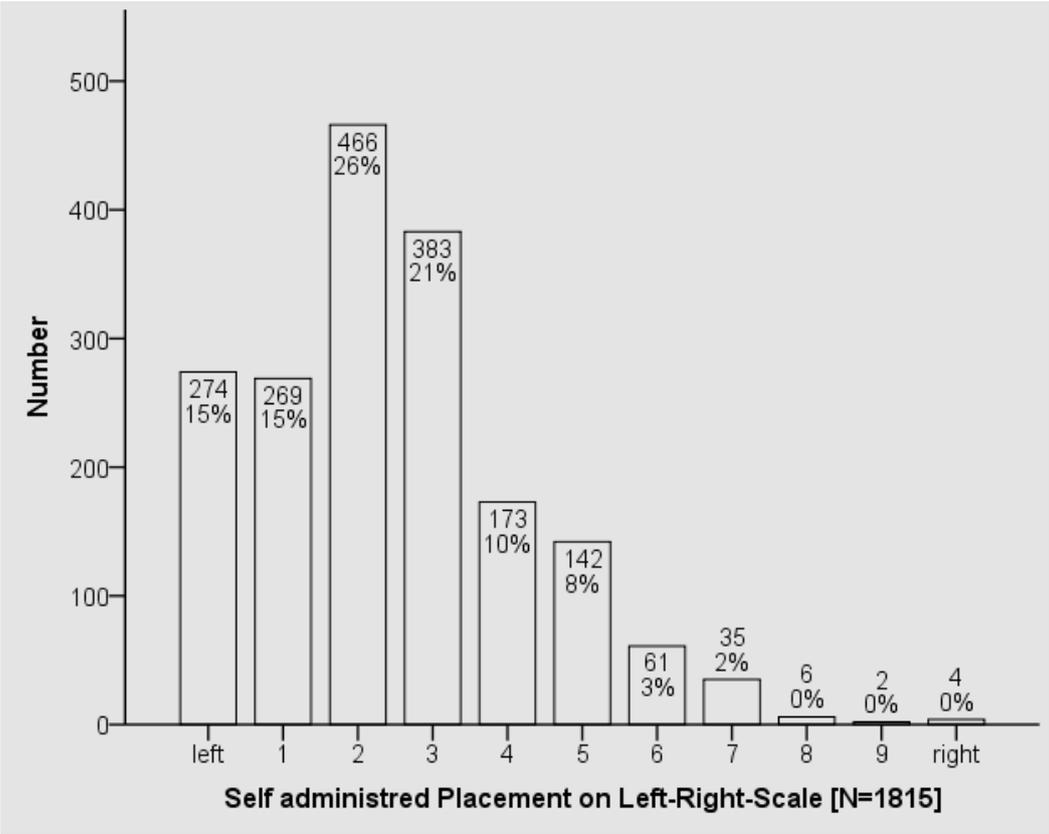


Figure 1. Distribution on the Left-Right-Scale (Kindler 2019b)

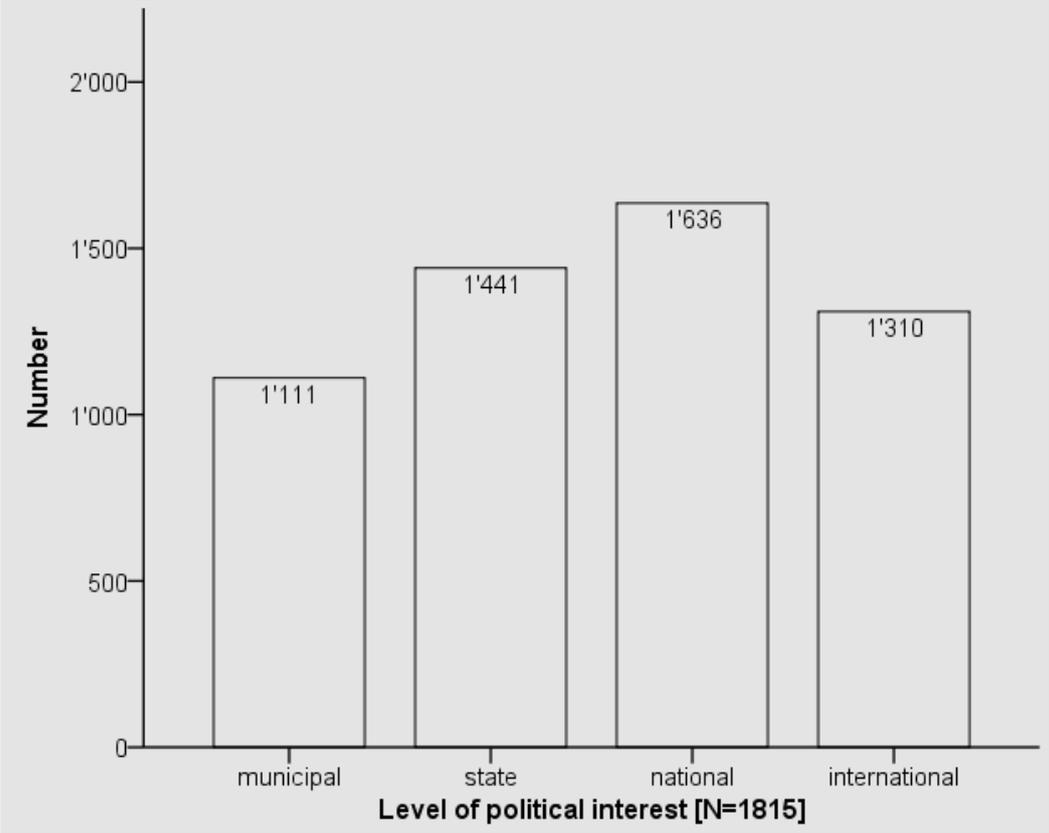


Figure 2. Level of political interest (Kindler 2019b)

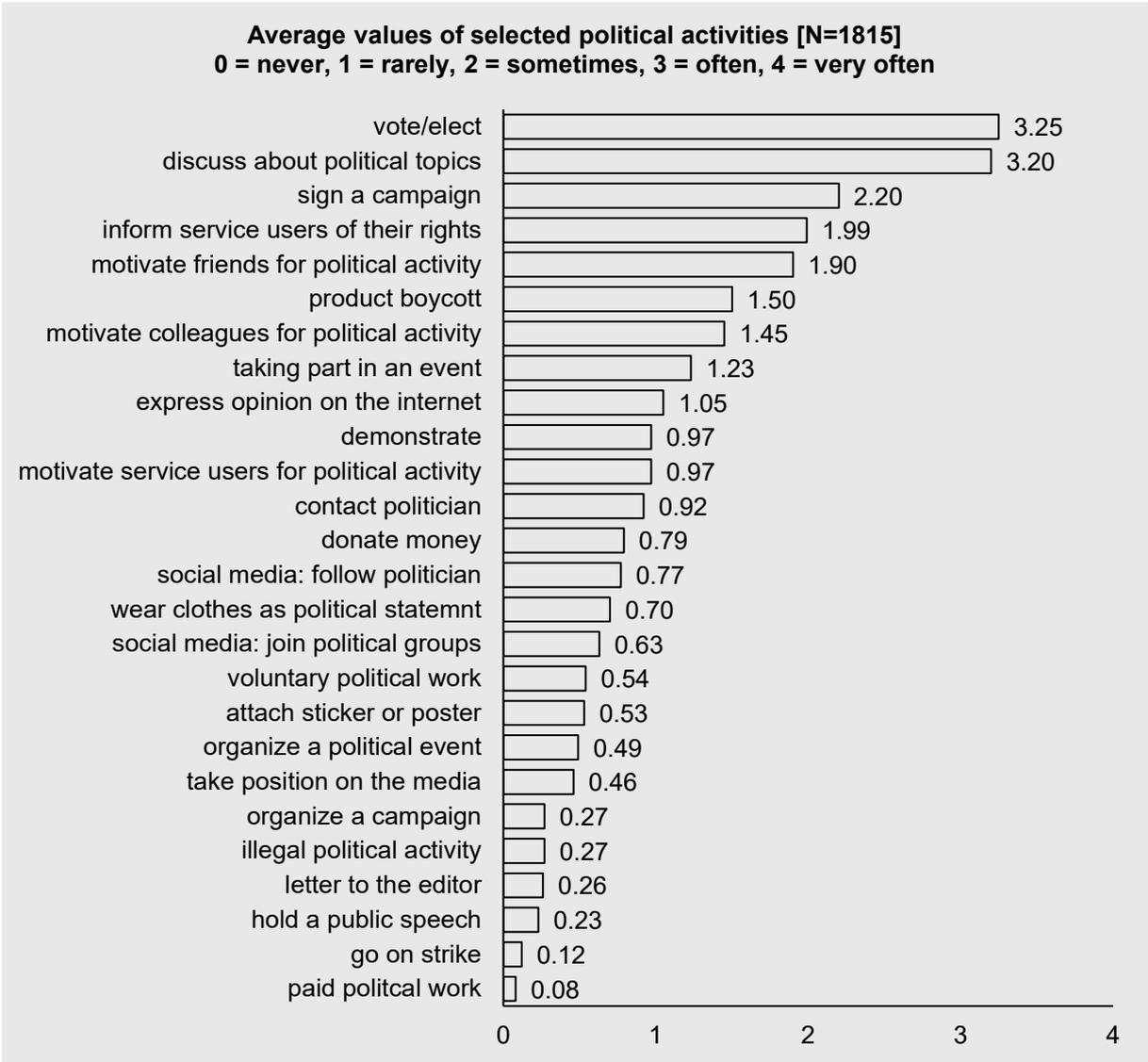


Figure 3. Average values of selected political activities (Kindler 2019b)

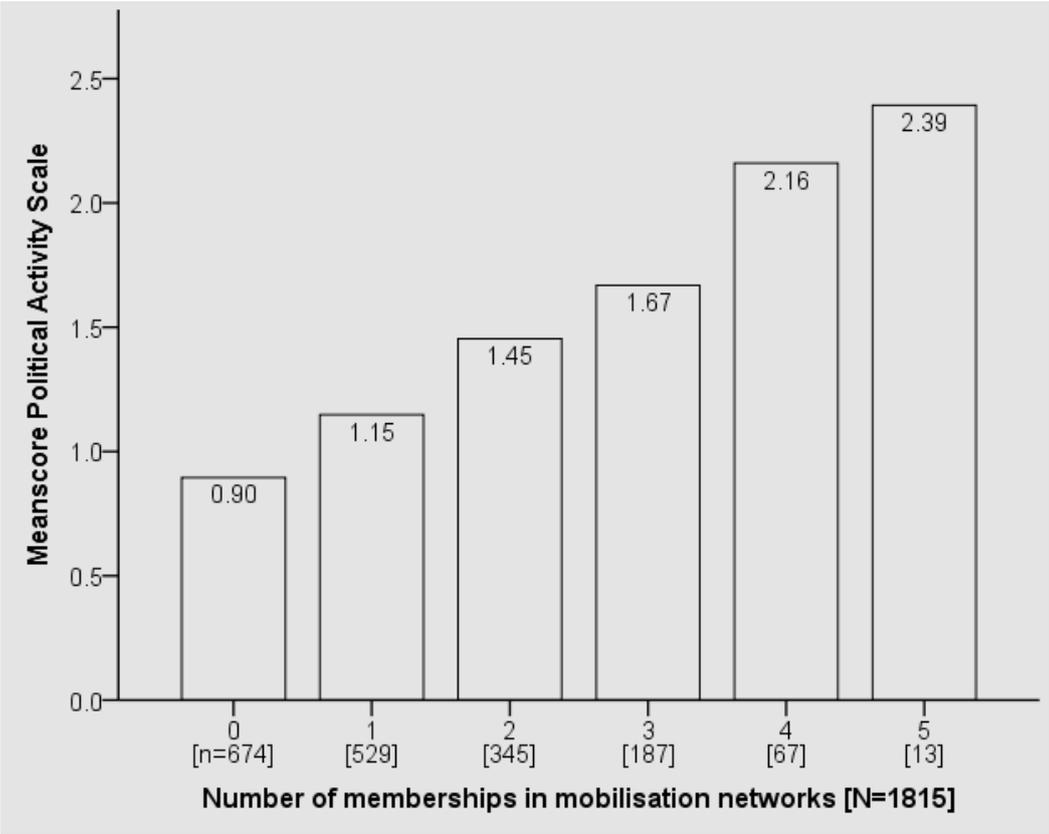


Figure 4. Membership in mobilisation networks and political activity (Kindler 2019b)

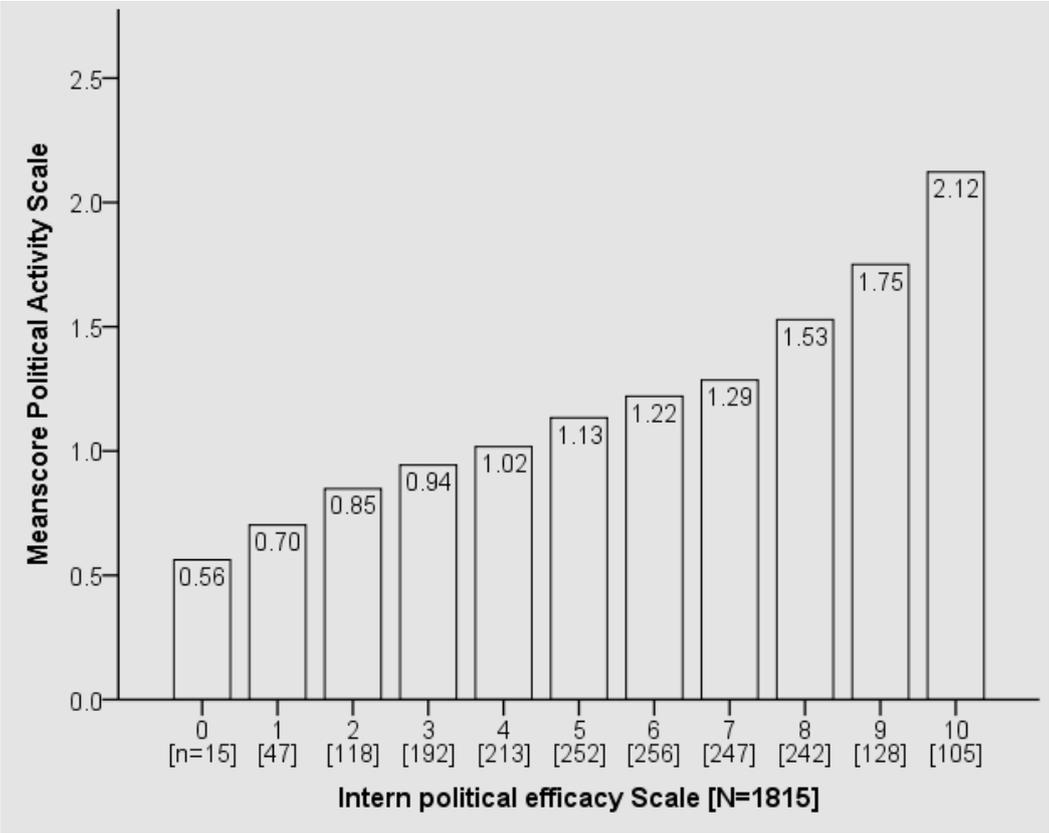


Figure 5. Intern political efficacy and political activity (Kindler 2019b)

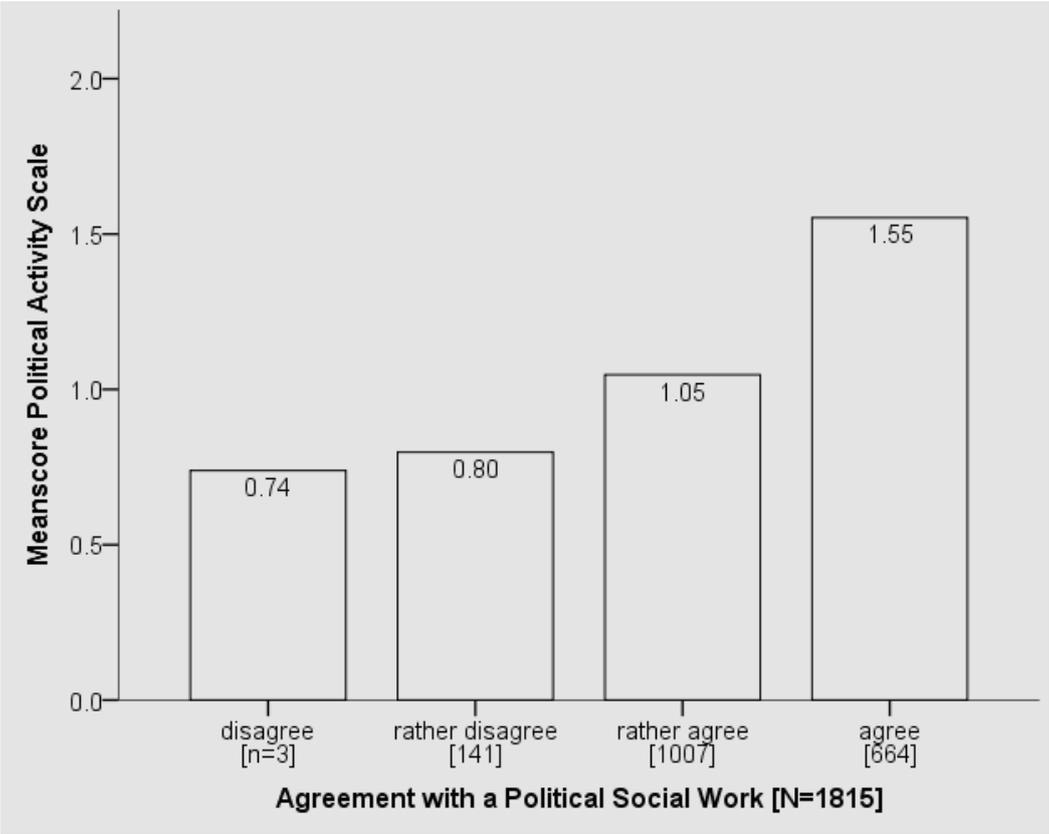


Figure 6. Political Social Work Scale and political activity (Kindler 2019b)

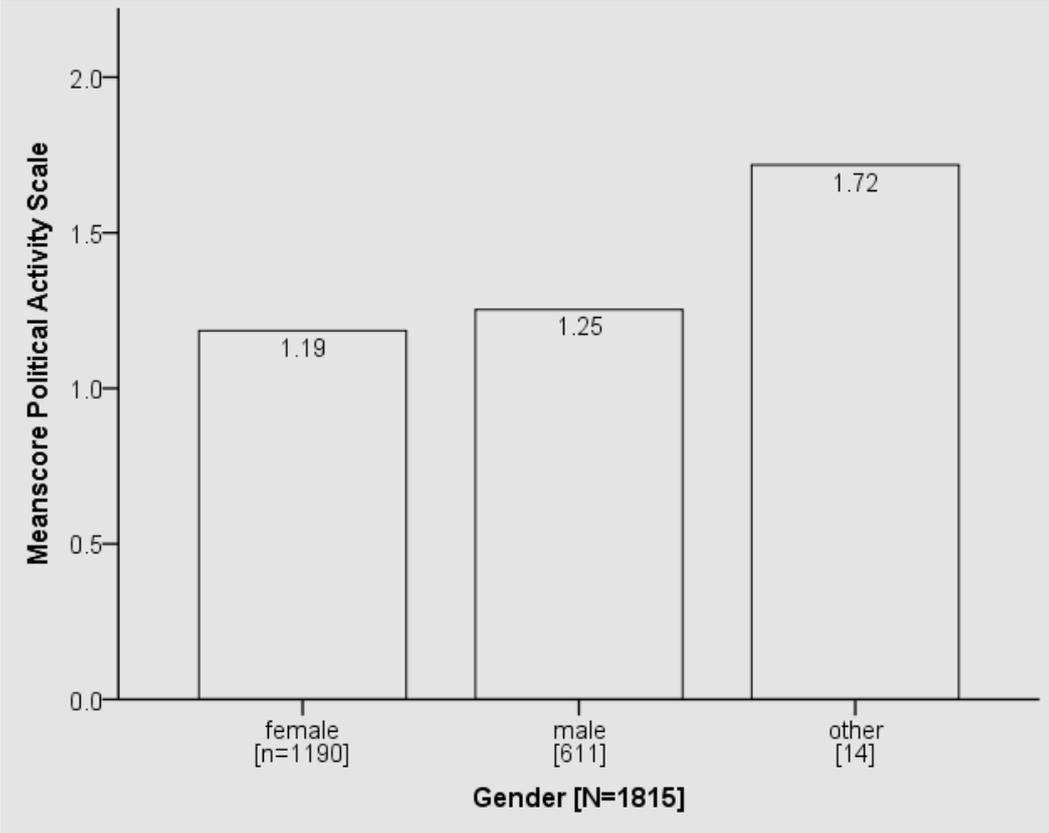


Figure 7. Gender and political activity (Kindler 2019b)