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Marginalized (non)citizens: migrant youth political engagement, volunteering and performative citizenship in the context of Brexit

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ABSTRACT

Migrants' opportunities for civic and political participation are often restricted by their legal rights. This paper reports on a study which included a survey with 1,120 young people aged 12–18 originally from Central and Eastern Europe, living in the UK, and follow-up focus groups with 122 participants. We examine young people's views on political and non-political participation and their engagement in everyday performative citizenship. We found connections between civic participation and political participation, and both are conditioned by one's sense of belonging to place and recognition of individual agency. Young people were interested and wanted to be involved in politics, yet they did not feel they could shape political decisions, unlike other forms of participation, such as volunteering and social activism. The study progresses existing knowledge on young people's exclusions from everyday performative citizenship, in the context of current public debates on youth engagement and young migrants' integration.

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Introduction

The last few decades have seen an increased interest in youth participation, including political participation, in the context of wider debates about citizenship and the democratization of political structures. These debates have been linked to concerns for youth disaffection and a perceived political "apathy" (Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones 2007; Amnå and Ekman 2014). A major concern is that young people are less likely to vote than older groups and previous youth generations. Research shows however that young people have alternative ways to make their voices heard, through informal movements,

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standby citizenship, pro- and anti-democratic activism (Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Cammaerts et al. 2016; Pickard 2022). While it is not political apathy that explains young people's resistance to voting, but rather their feelings of marginalization and lack of trust in the political class (Henn and Foard 2014; Pickard 2019), studies on youth political participation have predominantly focussed on differences between age cohorts rather than barriers to participation for particular youth subgroups, like minoritized youth or young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Youth political participation varies across countries (Kitanova 2020) and over time, as rates of political participation in the UK General Elections in 2014 and 2019 and the EU Referendum in 2016 have shown. While 64 per cent of young people with the right to vote went on to vote in the Brexit Referendum, showing interest to participate in key political decisions, they remain conspicuously absent from political debates. Young people's uncertainty over their future and a sense that politicians are leaving youth behind are heightened by their feelings of not fully understanding the role of political institutions (Sharpe and Henn 2016). While levels of political engagement were shown to be positively affected by the EU Referendum (Fox and Pearce 2016), young people thought that Brexit had "created a platform for hate, racism and discrimination" (British Youth Council 2017) and were concerned about the rising intolerance, anti-immigration messages and the decline of Britain's multicultural image.

In this paper, we aim to contribute new knowledge on attitudes and forms of political and civic participation among young people aged 12–18 who had moved to Britain as children from Central and Eastern European countries. To our knowledge, very limited research exists on the political views of young people from migrant backgrounds, who often do not have voting rights in the countries they settle in. However, given that increasing numbers of young people live in countries other than their countries of birth, understanding how migrants engage with politics and social activism is increasingly important. This paper aims thus to make a timely and original contribution to understanding young migrants' interest in politics and the ways in which they engage in various acts of citizenship available to them, from voting to volunteering and activism for social justice. We draw on data from a survey conducted with 1,120 young people and follow-up focus groups with 122 participants in England and Scotland. As most of the young people in our study had not been involved in their families' decision to migrate, many were torn between belonging "here" (their country of residence) and "there" (their country of birth) and had a range of views on citizenship rights they should gain with long-term settlement. We therefore also examine the impact of young people's sense of belonging and connection to place to their interest in political engagement and involvement in other forms of citizenship, such as volunteering and activism, which is another under-explored area. We start first with a review of existing literature, before moving on to discussing the methodology for data collection and analysis and our findings.

Young migrants, sense of belonging and their civic and political participation

Citizenship and forms of political participation

Political participation can be viewed as a "repertoire" of potential actions for political expression (Hooghe 2014), with various degrees of recognition by the state and which requires resources, such as knowledge and civic skills. Verba and Nie (1972, 2) identified four dimensions of political participation, including electoral participation, campaigning, contacting officials and community-based activities. Studies have examined other forms of participation, such as protesting and political consumerism (Newman and Bartels 2011) or online campaigning (Fox 2014; Pickard 2019), expanding thus the scope of what counts as political action. Similarly, Flanagan (2013) has argued that politics is about more than party membership or elections and described politics as concerning "membership in communities and the processes and practices whereby we work with fellow members of those communities to determine the kind of communities, society, and world we want to live in" (2). What used to be described as *conventional* and *non-conventional* participation has been replaced by distinctions between *institutionalised* and *non-institutionalised* activities.

In relation to migrant groups, political rights are seldom granted to those who do not have nationality of the state, creating an area of conflict in rights and opportunities for participation for those without full citizenship rights. The idea that citizenship is bound by one's nationality is transcended by broader understandings and priorities in relation to desired political and civic participation. Citizenship is defined by the freedoms and rights individuals have for democratic participation, but also by the claiming of these rights (Isin 2017) and it can be regarded as "the participatory dimension of belonging to a political community" (Yuval-Davis 2011, 46). Migrants' opportunities for political participation are thus impacted by state-regulated restrictions and uncertainties that often surround their legal rights. Policies of political belonging bounded by the dominance of the nation-state go thus against global trends of mobility and globalization and favour immobility. This leaves many mobile citizens with no alternative but to find non-institutional forms of participation to exercise their citizenship and feel involved, as our data will also show later.

Isin's (2017) concept of "performative citizenship" allows us to move understandings of citizenship beyond traditional (legal and constitutional) definitions by focussing on how people *perform* citizenship. He discusses five overlapping aspects of performative citizenship, namely:

> (a) citizenship involves political and social struggles over who may and may not act as a subject of rights; (b) these struggles feature not only citizens, but also

> non-citizens as relational actors; (c) citizens and non-citizens include different social groups making rights claims; (d) people enact citizenship by claiming and performing rights and duties, and; (e) when people enact citizenship, they creatively transform its meanings and functions. (2017, 502)

Given that citizenship is constitutive of rights, the study of citizenship needs to examine both how individuals exercise rights *and* their struggle to claim them. In the case of migrants, the boundaries between citizens-insiders and alien-outsiders are dynamic and involve a struggle over rights, which can be the spaces within which groups "stage creative and transformative resistances and articulate claims against domination" (Isin, 504). Relying on Isin's conceptualization of performative citizenship, we examine young migrants' opportunities for political participation and citizenship within the politics of belonging and everyday bordering practices perpetuated by the state (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019). This also involves a transnational dimension of citizenship, as migrants find their citizenship identity moving across borders and in-between nation states (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003).

Belonging and the transnational dimension of migrants' citizenship

The assignment of citizenship rights is dependent on the "political projects of belonging" (Yuval-Davis 2011, 58) of nation states and the extent to which individuals or groups are regarded as part of the *polis* or political arena and included in citizenship structures. This is particularly relevant in relation to young migrants, given they are at an important life stage of identity development. Extensive research with Central and Eastern European migrants has documented the effects of the EU Referendum on EU citizens' right in the UK, the impact on their sense of identity and belonging in Britain (Botterill and Hancock 2018; Botterill, McCollum, and Tyrrell 2018; Burrell and Schweyher 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019; Tyrrell et al. 2019). The politics of belonging effected by nation states impacting minoritized groups involves "not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers, but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents" (Yuval-Davis 2006, 205). These actions, which are ideologically driven, shape the dialogical construction of identity and belonging, specifically by setting boundaries of who belongs, and have a direct impact on young migrants' sense of being part of a community or nation. The differentiation between "them" and "us" often used in relation to migrants/non-migrants is based thus on "imagined communities" of non/belonging (Anderson 1983), regardless of whether this affects a state and its definition of who is a "citizen".

For historically marginalized groups, the participatory part of citizenship presents thus a multidimensional challenge. While belonging may refer to

a geographical space, it is also a feeling of attachment and identification with social spaces and groups and wanting to be part of "communities of belonging" (Antonsich 2010). Individuals' identification with a community is subject to a collectively shared identity narrative, less fixed and more of a fluid, ongoing process, where individuals develop a "feeling" that they belong and are seen by others as belonging. These collective identity narratives can be constructed verbally, performatively by either symbolic or nonsymbolic practices, or through shared experiences (Butler 1990). Identity and belonging, i.e. sharing collective identities, are constantly developed through an interdependent relationship, a dialogue that is "both reflective and constitutive" (Yuval-Davis 2011, 16). Since individuals can have multiple legal citizenships, their sense of belonging can thus acquire a transnational dimension and a sense of belonging to multiple communities, as one may maintain attachments to other places they lived in. Migrants represent thus a group of "in-betweeners" regarding citizenship, often "outsiders" of the polity given their legal status. In this context, we see belonging as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing a "social location", individual identifications and emotions towards others and a value system within which one's own and other people's belonging are judged. We therefore adopt an intersectional lens (Anthias 2012) to investigate young people's complex identities, including political, and their connections with multiple places and localities (Hopkins 2017), recognizing that singular analytical categories cannot account for complex experiences and identities.

In this paper, we aim thus to examine young migrants' civic and political participation as a form of belonging to community and a way of affirming their "self", through the construction of belonging to political collectivities. We also explore how young migrants find alternative ways to be active, involved citizens, when some of their rights, such as voting rights, are curtailed, because of their age, nationality and/or residence rights.

Political participation of migrants

Evidence exists that migrants want to be involved citizens in the communities where they settle, however, their struggle to claim and enact citizenship rights is significant. Sanders et al. (2013) found no significant difference between minority and British citizens in terms of desire to be politically involved, but reported "general tendencies for the young and second generation to be less engaged" (136). O'Toole (2015) interviewed young activists from minority groups in England and found that their participation was often ignored by established civil society organizations. In another study, islamophobia was a central feature of young Muslims' everyday lives and an obstacle to community involvement, but also a driving force for political participation (Finlay and Hopkins 2019). In the UK, minoritized groups have been

increasingly affected by racism and hate crime since the Brexit Referendum (Albornoz et al., 2020; Rzepnikowska 2019; Sime et al. 2022). Anti-immigration rhetoric and framing the "immigrant" in a culturally racialized and semantically degrading manner have also been markers of tabloid journalism (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Anderson 2013), fostering a climate of xenophobia. Brexit and the increase in casual xenophobic incidents have not only contributed to ruptures in self-perceived identities (Sime 2020), but have also caused a reported withdrawal from public life among European migrants (Lumsden, Goode, and Black 2019) and has impacted young migrants' perspectives on their futures and sense of belonging (Tyrrell et al. 2019; Sime, Moskal, and Tyrrell 2020). These reports make it highly pertinent to investigate young migrants' political views and experiences of civic and political participation, given the peripheral location of migrants in the public sphere, where their experiences are silenced or undervalued.

Political participation of migrants is often examined from the perspective of *immigrant politics*, which refers to the "political activities that migrants or refugees undertake to better their situation in the receiving country, such as obtaining more political, social and economic rights, fighting discrimination" (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003, 762). Transnational networks constituted through voluntary associations and organizations have been found to be mobilizing factors for collective political and civic actions of migrants (Pilati 2016), including voting from abroad and political remittances (Boccagni, Lafleur, and Levitt 2016). In addition to the mobilizing power of self-organization among migrant groups, civic and political engagement is also stimulated by perceptions of internal and external political efficacy, trust and confidence in political institutions (Anduiza and San Martín, 2011). The preoccupation with migrants as disengaged or "unsettled" citizens in a democratic system stems from politicized agendas. On the one hand side, migrants' marginal participation leads to lack of representation and, potentially, limited integration (Morales and Giugni 2011) and reduced access to resources (Ortensi and Riniolo 2020; Pilati 2016). On the other, participation rights can be deliberately withheld from migrants when governments pursue anti-immigrant agendas (Morales and Giugni 2011).

Finally, it has been shown that migrants' political competence increases with education; high levels of social trust and involvement in local civic institutions, such as voluntary associations, have an increasing effect of migrants' civic and political engagement (Pilati and Herman 2020). These authors have also highlighted the importance of migrants' confidence in speaking the local language and having full citizenship rights, which positively impact engagement and "induce migrants to feel and act as full political members of the country where they live" (121). Migrants' political marginalization may sometimes result in self-organization of migrant groups or even radicalization of political actions repertoires (Pilati 2016), instead of full integration.

Discrimination and exclusion from rights based on cultural or ethnic differences can thus marginalize and alienate minority groups. In the current study, exclusion from rights is particularly relevant, given young people's transition from adolescence to adulthood, when a sense of belonging becomes central to one's identity formation.

Methodology

The paper draws its findings from a study carried out with young people aged 12–18 living in the UK, who had migrated as children from Central and Eastern European countries. The majority had been in the UK for 5 + years or longer (Table 1; see also Sime et al. 2022). An online survey was carried out in England and Scotland, including questions on young people's everyday experiences, involvement in communities, relationships, access to services, voting intentions and preference for political parties. This also asked participants to discuss their sense of identity and belonging and their plans for future. The online survey took place just after the June 2016 EU Referendum (October 2016–April 2017), with ethical approval from the authors' departmental Ethics Committee. Advertised through schools and social media, it attracted 1,120 responses from a self-selected sample of young people aged 12–15 (32 per cent) and 16–18 (68 per cent), where 97 per cent of the respondents identified as White. Over half of the respondents were Polish (56 per cent), followed by Romanian (10 per cent), Lithuanian (9 per cent) and other nationalities. While the sample reflected the majority groups of Eastern European nationalities recorded in the UK at the time, we do not claim representativeness given the self-selected nature of the group. Data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric measures (Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient).

Following the survey, 20 focus groups were carried out with 122 young people. Participation in the focus groups required written consent from parents/carers; young people were also made aware of their right to withdraw participation at any time and limits to confidentiality, in cases of disclosure of harmful behaviours. The focus groups allowed us to access young people's narratives about their everyday experiences and involved 55 female and 57 male young people aged 12–18 across the UK. The sessions took place across urban (11), semi-urban (3) and rural (6) areas in schools and community centres and were held in English, with interpreters present if young people required it, then transcribed in full to allow for in-depth thematic analysis. At the end of each focus group, young people were invited to write a postcard with their key message to "someone in a position of power" on an issue they wanted to see addressed. The data from these postcards (95 in total) were also analysed thematically.

Table 1. Profile of survey respondents (Sample = 1120) (see also Sime et al. 2022).

	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender ($N = 1118$)	Male	419	37
	Female	673	60
	Transgender	3	n/a
	Other/Prefer not to say	23	2
Age groups ($N = 1112$)	12–15	359	32
	16–18	753	68
Country of birth ($N = 1116$)	Poland	625	56
	Romania	116	10
	Lithuania	101	9
	Hungary	59	5
	Latvia	56	5
	Bulgaria	46	4
	Other	39	3
	Slovakia	29	3
	Russia	19	2
	Estonia	10	1
	Czech Republic	9	1
	Ukraine	4	n/a
	Slovenia	3	n/a
Ethnicity ($N = 1098$)	White	1,062	97
	Mixed/multiple	20	2
	Gypsy/Traveller/Roma	9	1
	Asian	3	n/a
	Black	2	n/a
	Latino/Hispanic	2	n/a
Religion ($N = 1095$)	Christian	645	59
	Atheist	403	37
	Other/Don't know	47	4
Location in the UK ($N = 911$)	England	720	79
	Scotland	191	21
Year young person moved to the UK ($N = 974$)	2011–2014	347	36
	2005–2010	504	52
	1998–2004	90	9
	Don't know	33	3
Feelings on Brexit* ($N = 948$)	Uncertain	535	56
	Worried	513	54
	Scared	257	27
	Hopeful	177	19
	Angry	175	18
	Excited	66	7
	Happy	53	6
Experienced racism "because of accent, colour of your skin or the way you look" ($N = 882$)	Very often	56	6
	Often	71	8
	Sometimes	278	32
	Rarely	274	31
	Never	203	23

Note: *Respondents could choose more than one answer.

Findings

Our findings are organized under three themes that allow us to examine: (1) the extent of young migrants' interest in politics, (2) the role of one's sense of

belonging in civic and political participation, (3) young people's performative citizenship and interest in social justice issues, volunteering and social activism. We then discuss the implications of opportunities for engagement for young people's understandings of citizenship.

Young migrants and interest in politics

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2015 allowed only British, Irish and Commonwealth nationals to vote in the Brexit Referendum, meaning that citizens of the EU27 countries living in the UK were excluded from this significant decision. Our survey asked young people about their interest in politics immediately after the Brexit vote and 52 per cent ($n = 1{,}026$) said they were interested in politics. About 1 in 6 said they were *very interested* (16 per cent), while 1 in 3 said they were *quite interested* (36 per cent) in politics. Another third (30 per cent) seemed more ambivalent, saying they were *neither interested, nor disinterested*, while only a minority said they were "*not very interested*" (12 per cent) or "*completely disinterested*" (6 per cent) in politics. Overall, young migrants' expressed political interest was high (where 52 per cent said they were *fairly* or *very interested* in politics) and they did not seem to show any less interest in politics than the overall population group of similar age (Hansard Society 2019). When comparing interest in politics by different groups, such as gender (female/male), age (12–15 and 16–18 year-olds) and country of residence (England/Scotland), no statistically significant differences in mean were found.

In focus groups, we discussed the importance of voting and political participation in more depth. In line with other studies (Henn and Foard 2014; Mejias and Banaji 2019; Pickard 2019), we found that most young people expressed an interest in political affairs, although they found political debates unrepresentative of young people's concerns (see also McMellon et al. 2018). Participants also felt politicians were unlikely to care about young people or EU nationals' rights, as they were a minority and most could not vote. For many, lack of voting rights was a clear issue of frustration and some felt their vote, if granted, would make no difference:

Martina:	Some people say we should not vote because we are not from this country. That only Scottish people should vote.
Interviewer :	How do you feel about it?
Mladin:	We pay taxes so … Well, my parents do.
Martina:	We should be treated like everyone else here.
Interviewer:	Do you think you should have the same rights?
Martina:	Yeah, just because you are from a different country, it doesn't mean you shouldn't have the rights. (Focus group, Scotland)

Interviewer:	Do you think voting is important for people, would you like to vote?

Kaspar: I don't think we care about politics or voting at all (…)
Marta: It just doesn't bother me …
Kaspar: No, because it would be probably the same, even if I was allowed to vote, so I just don't care. (Focus Group, Scotland)

Young people were asked if they would choose to vote, if allowed, although EU nationals are currently not allowed to vote in the UK parliamentary elections. Respondents in the younger age group (12–15) were more likely to say they would not vote (13 per cent) than 16–18 year-olds (10 per cent); the younger cohort were also more likely to say they did not know who they would vote for (47 per cent) than their older peers (35 per cent). When asked to indicate the political party they would choose, 36 per cent of respondents in England and 45 per cent in Scotland said they did not know who they would vote for. Respondents in Scotland were twice as likely to say that they would not go to vote (18 per cent) than respondents in England (9 per cent). From those who said they would vote if they could, the preference for political parties is shown in Table 2, split for residents in England and Scotland. Young female participants were less likely to express a preference for the Conservative party and were more in favour of a Labour vote than male respondents (see also McMellon et al. 2018).

As the study took place after the Brexit Referendum, where young EU nationals did not have the right to vote, many said they wanted to apply for British citizenship to feel more secure about their status post-Brexit, but also to access their voting rights. Melania (17, Latvia) talked about her frustration at not having a vote, unlike her classmates:

> [British] citizenship will allow me to vote in general elections, but it wasn't on my agenda, whereas now, it's higher up on my agenda.
> Interviewer: Is voting something that's quite important to you?
> Yes, because we always have discussions [in class] about what political parties we support, where we stand in the ideological spectrum. Some people say you can't really have an opinion if you don't vote, so I want to have that.

Table 2. Differences in intention to vote between respondents who live in England ($N = 720$) and who live in Scotland ($N = 191$).

Intention to vote (if they were eligible)	Respondents living in England	Respondents living in Scotland
Conservative	11%	2%
Labour	24%	7%
Liberal Democrats	8%	1%
Green Party	8%	5%
Scottish National Party	1%	20%
UKIP	3%	2%
I wouldn't vote	9%	18%
I don't know	36%	45%
Total	100%	100%

Note: Survey question: "If you could vote, which party would you be most likely to vote for?"

Many young people were straddling two or more national contexts when following political affairs, as they kept up with political developments in their countries of birth and the UK. They said their families discussed politics across countries, comparing and contrasting politicians' actions and behaviours in the UK and abroad. Young people living in Scotland were also aware of the ongoing political debates around Scotland's position in the UK following Scotland's Independence Referendum in 2014 and the Brexit vote result in Scotland, which had been a majority for remaining in the EU. Many worried about the long-term impact of Brexit on EU nationals' rights to reside in the UK and the erosion of their rights:

> The UK just dropped out of Europe. Now Brexit is going to have a higher chance to deport people because they're probably going to make a visa rule (…) And then probably in 2 years or so, more people are going to get kicked out this country if they didn't live here long enough. Just gets worse and worse every day. (Marek, Polish, 15)

Overall, we found that young migrants were broadly interested in politics and supportive of the democratic process of elections, but were aware they did not have access to voting rights as "outsiders" and non-British citizens (see also Henn and Foard 2014; Ortensi and Riniolo 2020). They were also doubtful that voting and elections lead to meaningful social change. Some connected these views with previous experiences of fragile, emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe and the public perceptions of corrupt politicians and neoliberal economies which did not prioritize people's welfare, equalities or social justice. Many were also aware of structural barriers that made it difficult for new minoritized groups to claim rights to political participation and be recognized as full citizens.

The significance of belonging for political and civic participation

Under this theme, we explore the role of sense of belonging to young people's interest in political and civic life and how belonging impacted their everyday opportunities for citizenship, for example through volunteering. In the survey, 83 per cent of young people said they felt they *belonged in the UK*, at least *a little*, with almost two-thirds (63 per cent) saying that they belonged in the UK *definitely* or *most of the time* ($N = 916$) (see also Tyrrell et al. 2019). A majority (76 per cent) also said they felt they *belonged to their neighbourhoods,* at least *sometimes*, with almost half (47 per cent) saying they had a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood *definitely* or *most of the time*, while only 10 per cent did not feel any sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods ($N = 846$). There was no difference identified in the sense of belonging to the UK between respondents in Scotland (83 per cent reported a sense of belonging) and respondents in England (84 per cent).

However, a small difference was found in reported feelings of belonging to one's neighbourhood, where 83 per cent respondents in Scotland said they felt they belonged at least *sometimes* to their neighbourhood, compared to 75 per cent in England. A similar gap was also present in the reported overall satisfaction with life, with 85 per cent of respondents in Scotland reporting to be either *fairly satisfied* or *very satisfied* with their lives in the UK, higher than the 74 per cent of respondents in England who answered the same (Scotland sample, $n = 142$; England sample $n = 574$).

When asked about experiences of racism and discrimination, 3 in 4 young people said they had experienced these (77 per cent); of these respondents, while a third said they *rarely* (31 per cent) or *sometimes* (32 per cent) experienced racism and discrimination, a small group (14 per cent) said they experienced racism and discrimination *often* or *very often*. Young people's experiences of racism and discrimination were found to have a potentially decreasing impact on their sense of belonging to the UK, showing a weak, but significant, negative correlation between the two. In other words, experiencing discrimination may alienate young people from the places they live in, with consequences for political and civic participation (see also Sime et al. 2022).

To explore the relationship between feelings of belonging and other factors, a Spearman's rho correlation was run (see Table 3). Weak significant positive correlations were found between reported sense of belonging to the UK and feeling safe in one's community and feeling positive about one's neighbourhood and relationships with friends in the UK. Moderately strong relationships were found between a sense of belonging to the UK and a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and overall life satisfaction. The sense of belonging to one's neighbourhood was also moderately strong correlated with feeling safe in one's neighbourhood and being satisfied with life in the UK overall. While it is difficult to pinpoint cause and effect in these relationships, these correlations indicate that social capital, consisting of relationships with friends, family and one's immediate surroundings, plays a significant role in one's sense of belonging, which impacts on young people's ability and confidence to get involved in citizenship. Having experiences of racism consistently showed significant negative correlations in relation to other factors of belonging: moderate effects were identified for one's sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and for one's perception of safety. The role of English language skills could not be investigated since most respondents reported a high level of competence in English. However, young people reported that despite their linguistic abilities, they had experienced negative remarks on their use of English, especially their accents.

As indicated above, young migrants' expressions of political interest were high and this group did not show less interest in politics than the overall

Table 3. Matrix of Spearman's rho correlations between sense of belonging to the UK and other factors, using standardized scores.

	Sense of belonging to the UK	Sense of belonging to neighbourhood	Feeling safe in one's community	Strong feeling about one's neigh-bourhood	Feeling happy about relationships with family in the UK	Feeling happy about relationships with friends in the UK	Satisfaction with life in the UK overall	Experiences of racism
Sense of belonging to the UK	1.000							
Sense of belonging to neighbourhood	.479**	1.000						
Feeling safe in one's community	.306**	.491**	1.000					
Strong feelings about one's neighbour-hood	.252**	.559**	.305**	1.000				
Feeling happy about relationships with family in the UK	.191**	.294**	.283**	.270**	1.000			
Feeling happy about relationships with friends in the UK	.369**	.353**	.301**	.287**	.381**	1.000		
Satisfaction with life in the UK overall	.475**	.477**	.368**	.281**	.373**	.471**	1.000	
Experiences of racism	-.199**	-.320**	-.359**	-.165**	-.188**	-.151**	-.224**	1.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

population group of similar age. However, their intention to vote was likely to be affected by the notion that neither they nor their parents had full voting rights (some local elections would allow EU nationals with residence rights to vote). For these young people, political exclusion was thus seen as exclusion from substantive citizenship and ultimately an indication that they were perceived as outsiders, non-citizens and as not belonging. The lack of voting rights due to their legal citizenship status represents a clear marker of exclusion from political participation for young migrants at a stage in their lives when they think about their place in their communities and have an increasing sense of wanting to belong and contribute (Moskal and Sime 2021). Pickard (2019) argues that the focus on voting in studies of young people's participation in politics has meant that other actions in which young people are involved have been ignored, giving a skewed impression of young people's citizenship. She proposes a much wider exploration of participation, which

> encompasses both individual and collective shared values and actions (both online and offline) in public and in private, which deliberately seek to maintain or bring about change to political, societal or environmental contexts within a community, locally, nationally or globally. (2019, 61)

A common form of participation that young people reported in our study was volunteering. This subgroup of young volunteers from migrant backgrounds is important, given restrictions migrants face to civic citizenship and also their interest in being involved in their communities. In the survey, 17 per cent of young people said they volunteered at least a few times every month. Among the female respondents, this attributed to 20 per cent, while reported volunteering was lower among males, at 10 per cent. Young people aged 16–18 were more likely to volunteer than those aged 12–15, which may reflect more opportunities available for older groups rather than interest or willingness of younger groups. Compared by nations, participants displayed a higher rate of engagement in volunteering in England (20 per cent) than Scotland (13 per cent). While these findings reflect national trends on geographic distribution (Volunteer Scotland 2017), they also indicate that young migrants in our sample reported lower rates of volunteering than young people overall in the UK, with national data indicating that 35 per cent of 16–24 year-olds volunteer at least once a year and 21 per cent at least once a month (NCVO 2020). Similarly, the Community Life Survey reported that 37 per cent of 16–24 year-olds participated in civic engagement and formal volunteering (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2020).

While there was no difference between those who volunteered and those who did not volunteer regarding their sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, there were small differences in their perceived sense of belonging to

the UK. For those who volunteered regularly, 71 per cent felt that they belonged in the UK *definitely* or *most of the time*, compared to 65 per cent in the overall sample. This shows a potential connection between young people's sense of belonging and their likelihood of getting involved in social action, which requires further research. Previous studies have shown that involvement in volunteering is a route to other forms of participation. Li and Zhang (2017) have also reported that membership in civic associations is positively associated with political activities. The intensity or depth of involvement in civic associations in particular and social networks has a significant effect in political recruitment. In our data, young people who were volunteering showed an overall higher interest in politics and were considerably less likely to say they would abstain from voting (see Tables 4 and 5).

Similarly to Pickard (2019), who states that young people "are not politically apathetic, they are living their politics on their own terms" (7), we found that young people were involved in a range of civic activities that reflected their ethical and political values, such as campaigning for local services and signing petitions, volunteering or helping out, recycling and cleaning public spaces. They felt these activities were more likely to lead to social change where they could influence the outcomes, unlike voting and political decisions. Some of these activities were directly connected to issues impacting migrant groups, through their lack of legal citizenship or precarity of rights and conditions, while others were of general benefit to local or, sometimes, transnational communities. It was also evident that a sense of belonging enabled young people to have the confidence to enact or "claim" their rights to participation. Amelia (18, Polish, Scotland) explained how she was involved in political and civic activities through school, while also helping online with a charity raising funds for disadvantaged children in Poland:

> I was the number one person that was involved in every single activity. Every parents' evening, I was there making coffee and giving out cake. (…) And then speaking to politicians and trying to get them to be involved in the school. I was in the news when [name of politician] came over to our school and asked him questions about his upcoming campaign. I was also on the charity committee.

Table 4. Differences in interest in politics between respondents who volunteered ($N = 184$) and those who did not volunteer ($N = 842$).

Interest in politics	Respondents who volunteered	Respondents who did not volunteer
Very Interested	20%	15%
Quite interested	44%	34%
Neither interested, nor disinterested	27%	31%
Not very interested	6%	14%
Completely disinterested	3%	6%
Total	100%	100%

Table 5. Differences in intention to vote between respondents who volunteer ($N = 133$) and those who did not volunteer ($N = 496$).

Intention to vote (if they were eligible)	Respondents who volunteered	Respondents who did not volunteer
Conservative	13%	14%
Labour	39%	30%
Liberal Democrats	12%	10%
Green Party	19%	11%
Scottish National Party	8%	8%
UKIP	2%	6%
I wouldn't vote	7%	21%
Total	100%	100%

Note: Survey question: "If you could vote, which party would you be most likely to vote for?"

Many of the participants did not identify as volunteers or campaigners, they saw their participation and activism as just "something you do" or as them "helping out", encouraged by a feeling of belonging to a group of volunteers passionate about the same issues:

> I help in a charity shop at the weekends (…) I started doing it because I was doing my Duke of Edinburgh award and you do volunteering, but I've just continued it because I thought it was something to do and it's quite nice. I really like the people and it's something to do. (Nikola, 14, Bulgaria)

Young people also mentioned how difficult it was at times to engage in volunteering, because of limited information on local opportunities, age restrictions, stigma and negative attitudes of other volunteers or the associated costs to volunteering, such as travel.

> I used to volunteer at an old folks home, but they sort of realised that I wasn't old enough to be there because I was under sixteen, so they took it from me. (Marcel, 16, Poland)

> I was ridiculed for my accent during a volunteering programme. (Martina, 18, Poland)

Performative citizenship: young people's interest in social justice issues, volunteering and social activism

For some young people, the disappointment and/or distrust in politicians related back to their countries of birth and their parents' experiences of living in totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe before the 1990s. The debates surrounding Brexit were a clear indication for many families that most politicians could not be trusted in the UK either, as they did not have migrants' rights and welfare in mind and some were clearly anti-immigration. This distrust in the political class made many young people feel powerless in relation to their "voice" or the value of voting, while others felt that their only solution was to act politically, without necessarily taking part in politics. This

reflects the insecure nature of their citizenship, where young people engage in the "struggle for rights" (Isin 2017), including the right to participate. As political opportunities were denied to them, young people often related citizenship to legal citizenship and the process of securing British nationality (see also McMellon et al. 2018). In the context of Brexit and as only 8 per cent in the sample had a British passport, many said that they wanted to secure their British citizenship, but they were concerned about the high costs of the citizenship fee (at the time, £1,330/person), language tests and passport fees. For others, Brexit had triggered family conversations about leaving the UK before they would need to apply for British citizenship, decision precipitated also by their experiences of discrimination and xenophobia (see Sime et al. 2022):

Antoni:	The people that don't have citizenship will have to leave and move back to their country?
Interviewer:	We don't know yet.
Antoni:	Yeah, yeah, but that's what I'm, like, afraid of.
Interviewer:	Yeah, so that's what you're afraid of?
Antoni:	Not for me, cause I'm leaving in one year, but, like, the people that are going to still be here. I've been here 10 years and I don't really like it. (…) Because, the people are like … most of them are, like, too racist. I've had a lot of bad experiences (…) I was chased by a guy with a saw. Just because I'm Polish. (Focus group, Scotland)

Young people did not discuss their volunteering and involvement in social activism as "citizenship", instead they preferred to talk about what made them a good person, neighbour or friend, or a "good migrant". They accepted that power was often in the hands of politicians and governments and their options to vote were restricted, but they saw other sites of participation as accessible to them. In some cases, they claimed their right to citizenship by campaigning or being involved in other forms of social activism, such as protesting or involvement in non-political associations. In order to assert young people's interest in social issues, we asked those taking part in focus groups to write a postcard to "someone in a position of power" on an issue they wanted action on. In total, we had 95 postcards completed. Most of the young people chose to address their postcard to the Prime Minister of the UK (at the time, Theresa May) or First Minister of Scotland (Nicola Sturgeon) or to members of the royal family. An analysis of the postcards shows the wide range of issues young people were passionate or concerned about, from migrants' access to better services and voting rights, to general concerns about the government's role in promoting migrants' rights and diversity policies, tackle racism and xenophobia and issues of local governance.

Given all our participants were in school and had moved to the UK as children, many wanted better provision of English language services (ESOL) in their schools or local colleges, aware that some of their parents were also

keen to attend language classes. Others wanted more choice in subjects, changes to uniform policies and more support for schools to tackle bullying:

> Dear Nicola Sturgeon, to make life better for young people, especially migrants, you could: introduce ESOL lessons in primary; make teaching young people English a priority; encourage out of school activities. Thank you!

> In the future, I would think that the government could somehow stop bullying because some people end up self-harming or start falling out with friends and have family problems and also it could get the police involved and no one would want that. Personally I sometimes experience bullying, but I always got friends around me.

> Dear ministers, think about more educational pathways for young people.

Several participants commented on the anti-immigration rhetoric which had proliferated since the Brexit Referendum and wanted political leaders to tackling racism and xenophobia and the discrimination of migrant workers:

> Dear Prime Minister, I hate being treated differently because of my culture and personality and something needs to be done because I'm sure a lot of people hate it, so please do something.

> To Theresa May: I would like the Government to take greater care in making sure racism is taken seriously and should be punished more severely. Schools should also punish racist children, rather than just ignore racism.

> Do not deport people. Ban racism. Accept people from other countries.

Young people were concerned about the erosion of EU migrants' rights post-Brexit and the vulnerabilities Brexit had created for migrants, including employers' discriminatory practices and xenophobic attitudes. They wanted politicians to prioritize migrants' settlement and citizenship rights and also to give migrants voting rights, seen as a route to participative citizenship and recognition. Thinking of their local areas, young people wanted politicians to prioritize provision of local services, including safe spaces for young people, and to tackle police aggression and negative attitudes in the wider community:

> I think that people should be allowed to make a citizenship application if they've been over a year in Britain. The citizenship fee should be cheaper.

> Dear Prime Minister, People who are not citizens of the UK should be able to vote.

> Dear Queen, I would like more opportunities for teenagers in the city, like open days where the people could meet, where is safe and where everybody feels included.

> Dear Nicola Sturgeon, I think you should make a job centre for people aged 16–18. That would be really good because a lot of them are looking for a job and so am I.

> To have more rights with the Police, they are very aggressive towards teenagers.

Young people also thought that it should be a priority to tackle social inequalities – unemployment, poverty, homelessness – in addition to expressing wider concerns about human rights, animal rights and climate justice, and individuals' right to a decent standard of living, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds or nationality.

What can we deduce about young people's understandings of citizenship from these insights into the issues impacting their lives? Young people perform citizenship and claim their rights through various routes, such as membership of associations, campaigning, making their voices heard, often through schools, but also through other sites of citizenship. While their possibilities and potentialities may be limited by formal structures of restricted rights afforded to them, they are engaged in performative citizenship for the benefit of their communities and their own. They have an acute sense of justice and are equally aware of the injustices inherent in citizenship regimes, which exclude certain groups and position these as liminal citizens or outsiders. As a result, many were also engaged in the struggle to re-claim their rights, for example by securing legal citizenship as a route to gaining voting rights.

Discussion

Citizenship is a multi-layered concept in which legal rights are one aspect of national and/or regional political projects of belonging. Our data show that young people from migrant backgrounds are not apathetic when it comes to politics, but rather sidelined by political systems which do not see minority groups as citizens. The changes to migrants' rights since Brexit have clearly impacted young migrants' trust in politics and politicians' motivations in relation to the rights of EU nationals. Over half said that Brexit made them feel "uncertain" (56 per cent), worried (54 per cent) or "scared" (27 per cent) about their future. They had limited opportunities to engage in political debates and therefore saw themselves as uninformed in political matters, generally having a negative view of their own ability to participate in politics. Young people are thus seeking alternative sites of active citizenship, adopting a "do-it-ourselves" politics (Pickard 2019, 2022), which does not wait for politicians to act. Movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have also shown the power of youth in bringing issues of long-standing social injustice to the fore. In our study, young people displayed higher interest in politics

and a clearer sense of voting preference when they were taking an active social role, for example through volunteering or social activism.

The theoretical understanding of citizenship as the relationship between individuals and the state continues to be subject to ideological perspectives across nation states, including in relation to which individuals/groups count as citizen and what rights, privileges and obligations are afforded to them. While the "citizen" in its idealized version has been claimed to equalize people of different social and demographic characteristics in terms of gender, ethnicity or class, theorists have highlighted the disparity in the acquisition and application of citizen rights, especially in relation to children, women and minority groups (Lister 1997). Our findings show that young migrants are excluded from many legal rights, such as political rights, but they find different ways to re-claim their citizenship. Other research with EU migrants has demonstrated also how migrants take time to process and navigate Brexit (Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020) and think strategically about their application for "settled status" or to secure citizenship as a route to security mainly, but also to participate in political decisions (Szredanovic 2020).

Citizenship can be seen as the essence of democratic societies, where participation of individuals in decision making processes features as an aspiration of governments. This paper has explored young migrants' views of political and civic participation, the impact of a sense of belonging on their participation and also their understandings of citizenship and how society functions in terms of individuals' rights and claims to these rights. We have shown that young migrants felt that politicians do not champion policy issues that affect them and their families and felt marginalized through lack of voting rights and limited opportunities to discuss politics or take part in political actions. When they had the chance to participate, for example through volunteering, their sense of feeling connected or belonging were improved. This positive influence of civic involvement on political participation has been observed among other migrant groups and re-enforces the idea that civic interactions contribute to one's identification within a social space and a sense of having a stake (Morales and Pilati 2011). While volunteering rates were lower among our participants than among non-migrant groups, most said they wanted to be more involved, although they were uncertain how to access opportunities. These findings point to the role of civic and political participation as a route to migrant integration, with scope for creating better opportunities for performative citizenship among migrants.

Isin's concept of *performative citizenship* focuses on organized and spontaneous acts of participation of people, often tangent to more than just narrowly defined legal status. The author's contemporary approach to citizenship, looking at "how people creatively perform citizenship" (2017, 501) emphasizes citizenship-as-practice and provides an intersectional view on understanding the multiple layers which frame acts of citizenship. Since

they are not granted the same participatory rights as British citizens, the exclusion of young migrants from democracy could lead to a decrease in their social trust and ability to get involved as full members in society. This concern is further amplified by the lack of access to sources of political information and education in schools, which does not just affect young people from migrant backgrounds, but also their peers from non-migrant backgrounds. A lack of political education and failure to engage with issues impacting young people directly have been found to impede youth participation (Pontes, Henn, and Griffiths 2017). In the case of minoritized youth, the exclusion from citizenship and the additional societal marginalization in form of discrimination do not just affect the development of a sense of belonging, but also interfere with the acquisitions of political literacy and perceived internal efficacy to engage in political and civic activities later. Young migrants remain an under-researched group on the issues of political literacy and their civic and political participation. At a time of ongoing austerity and hostility towards migrants, it becomes central for schools and other agents to create spaces for young people to engage in debate and develop the confidence to claim their rights and turn from involuntary outsiders to recognized citizens.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available through the UK Data Service for registered users at: doi: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-854232.

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