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Bridging the Age Gap: The Impact of Age-Specific Priming on Political Interest.

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Political interest



- The extent to which individuals pay **attention to political matters** (Van Deth, 1990)
- "a citizen's willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other topics" (Lupia & Philpot, 2005, p. 1122)
- A crucial trait of "good citizenship"
- A very relevant predictor of participation

Puzzle: An Unevenly Distributed Attitude

An **age gap** in political interest persists across generations despite changing social and political contexts (Reichert, 2018; Keusch, 2013). This might be due to:

1 a genuine manifestation of youth alienation

2 an artifact of broad, inadequate measures of political interest

Can we try to **diminish this gap** in order to

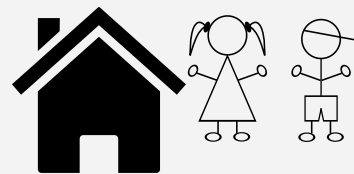
a) substantially getting young people engaged in politics, and

b) obtain better, less biased survey measures



Arguments & Hypothesis

There are age-related interests



As people age, their focus shifts to topics that align with life-stage priorities (Jennings & Markus, 1988; Goerres, 2007).

General “interest” may trigger social desirability among the older



The term “politics” tends to be more associated with traditional, electoral politics and older people feel more “dutiful” in this regard

Hypothesis

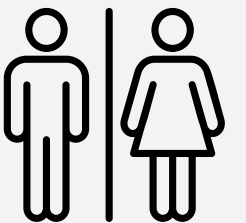
Priming younger participants with topics deemed relevant to their age group will increase their political interest, closing the age gap.

There are cohort-related interests



People remain most interested in topics emphasized by elites during their youth, e.g. identity-based, and postmaterialist issues (Cluverius & Dyck, 2019; Vromen et al., 2015).

General “interest” has proven to cause other gaps



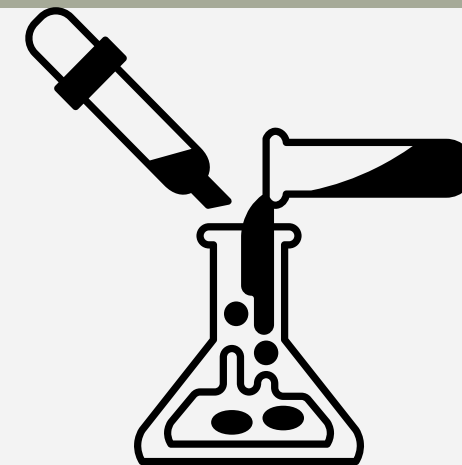
The observed gender gap for political interest (men > women) can be reduced and even vanishes when women's specific political interests are brought forth

Methods & techniques (I)

A survey...



- Data Source: First wave of the Catalan Citizen Panel (Centre for Opinion Studies, REO 1070).
- Fieldwork: Conducted between May 2 and July 29, 2023.
- Sample: 6,520 individuals aged 16+ in Catalonia; analysis limited to 5,938 Spanish nationals.



...experiment

- Weighted survey experiment with 6 groups (5 treatment groups and 1 control group).
- Control Group: Asked only a general interest question (0-10 scale).
- Treatments (5): Included interest questions on specific political topics (0-10 scale) + general scale

Methods & techniques (II)

Primes



- Youth-Related: Housing access, job insecurity.
- Current: Climate change, gender equality.
- National Identity: Catalan, independence.
- Traditional: Elections, political parties.
- Senior-Related: Economic performance, citizen security

Age groups



- **16-29:** Youth exploring political identity, lower engagement.
- **30-64:** Middle-aged, active in work/family, consistent interest.
- **65+: Retired**, focus on economic stability and security issues.

Control group:

(1/6 of the sample)

Null

(no specific interests questions)

+ *General interest
in politics* + *Cognitive open-
ended question*

Treatments:

(5/6 of the sample)

Specific political interests

A) Youth-related topics

Access to housing
Job insecurity

**B) Traditional masculine
politics**

Elections
Political parties

C) Current topics

Climate change
Feminism and equality between
men and women

+ *General interest
in politics* + *Cognitive open-
ended question*

D) National identity topics

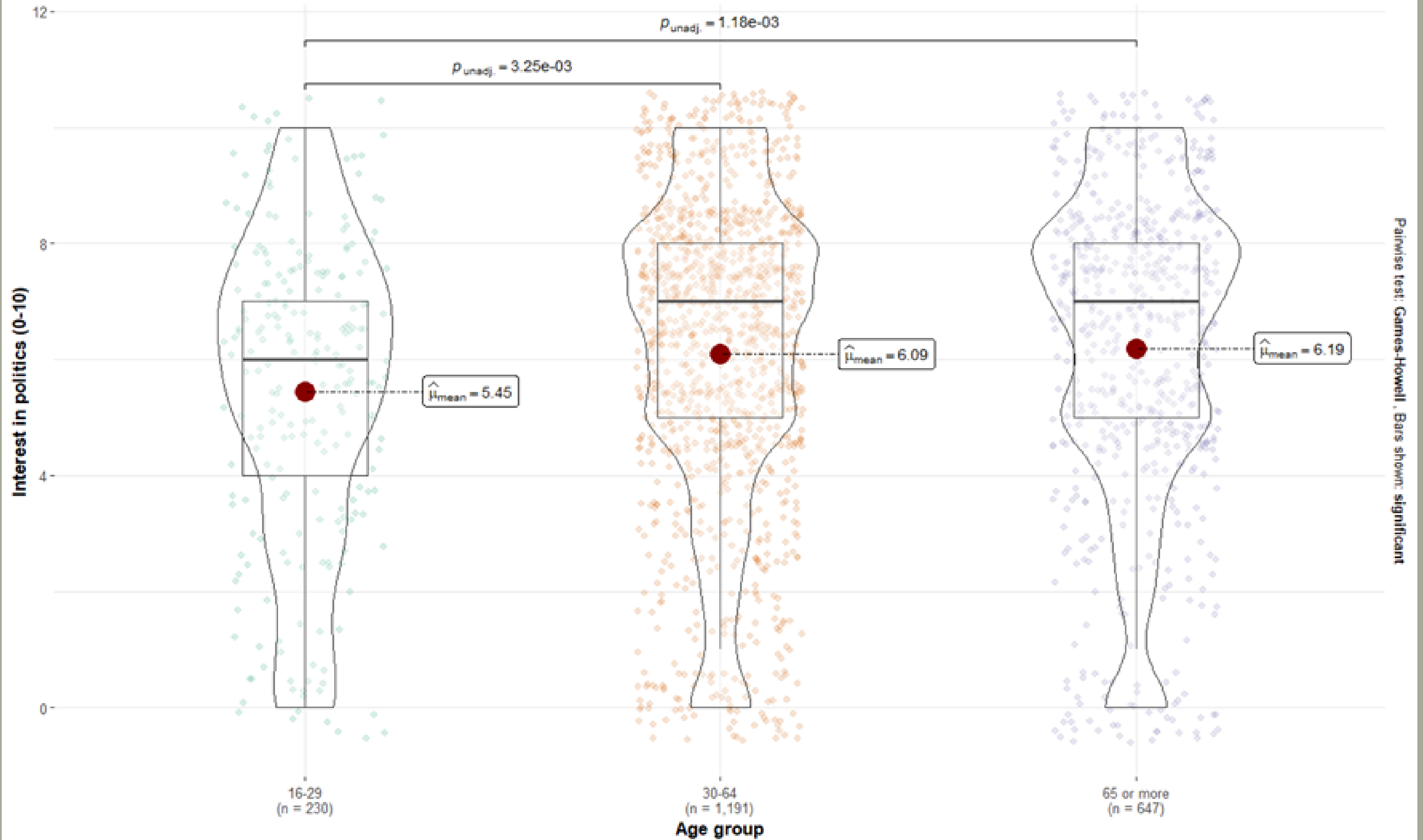
Presence of Catalan or Spanish
languages in Catalonia
Debate in favor or against Catalan
independence

E) Senior-related topics

Economic performance
Citizen security

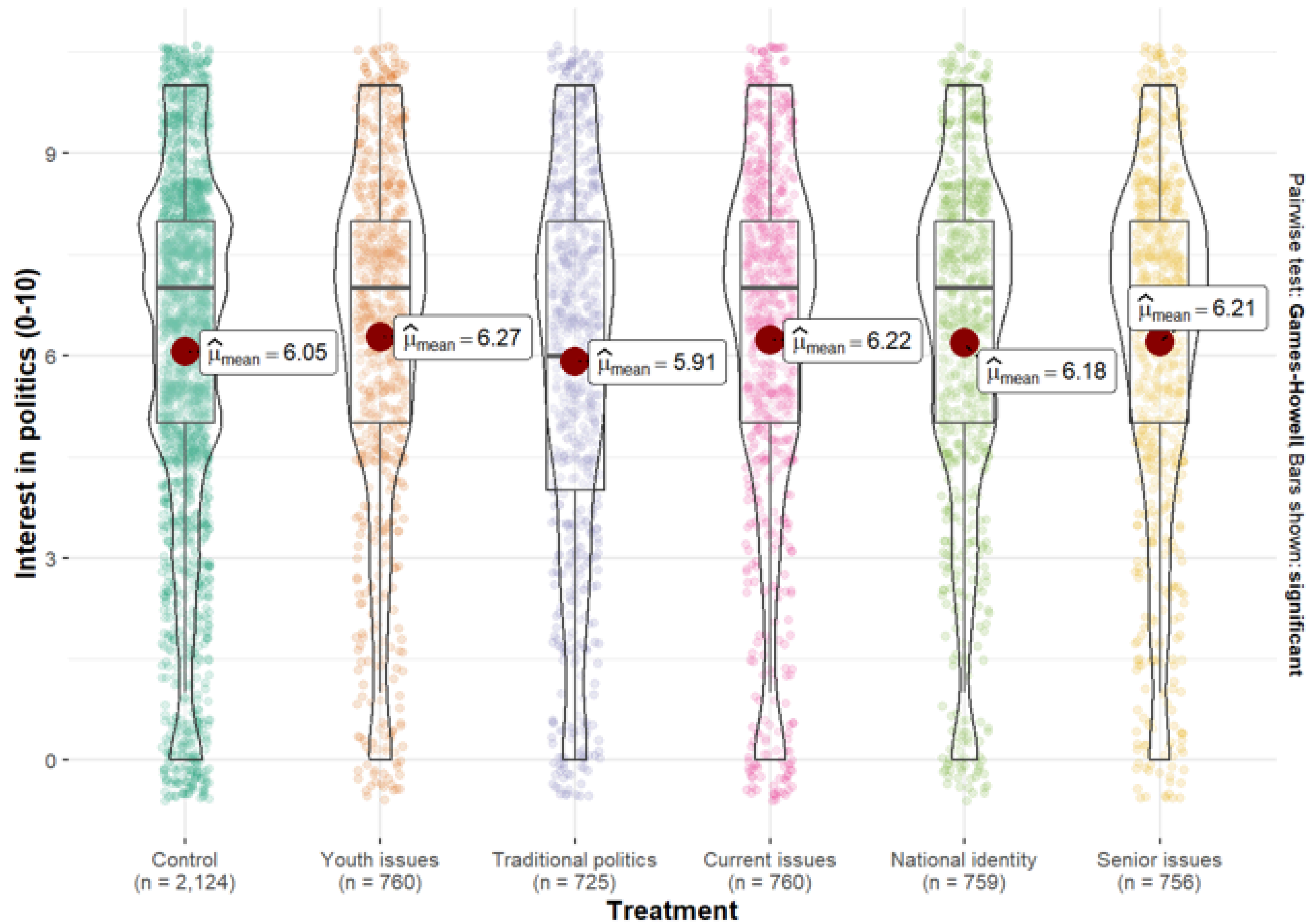
Results

Control group

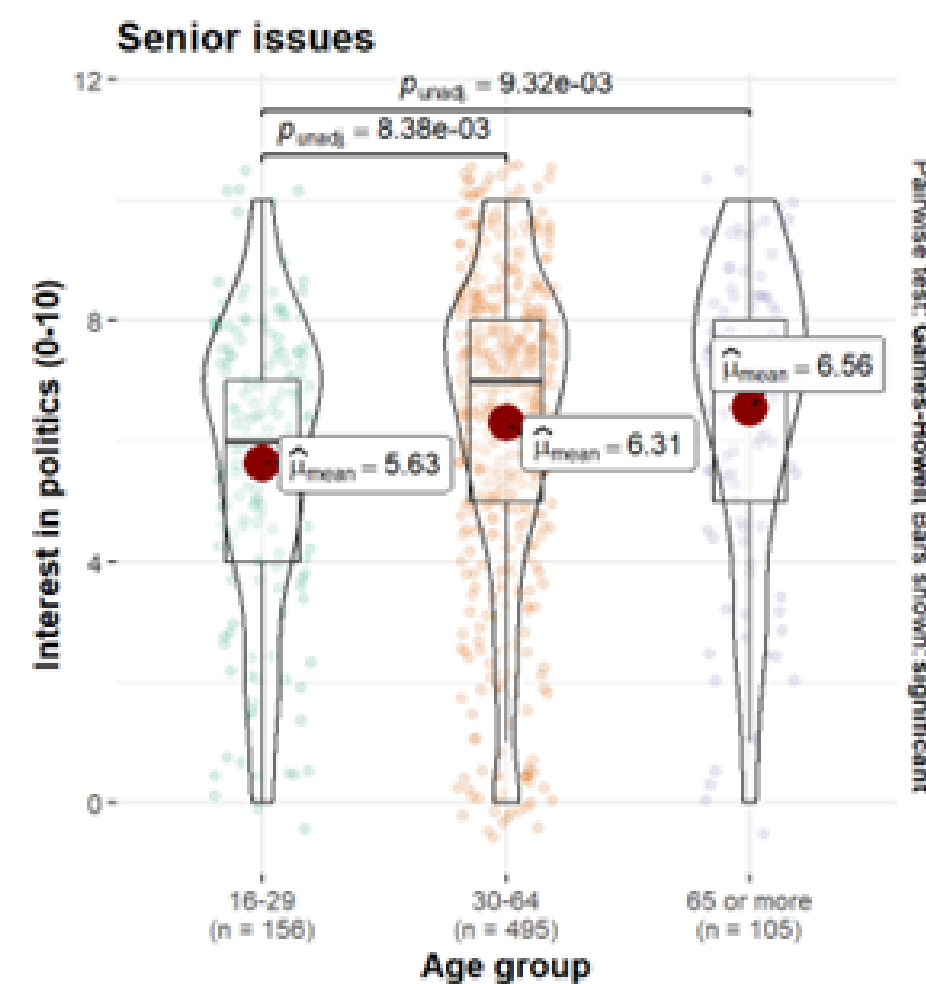
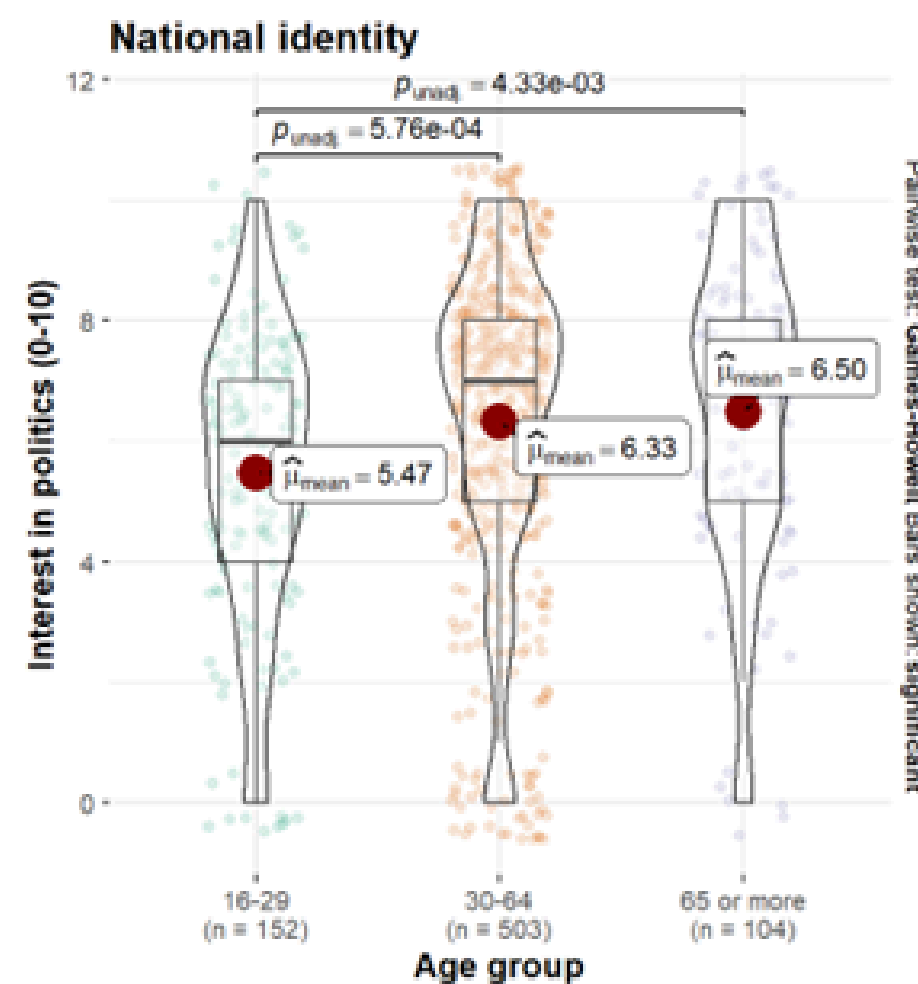
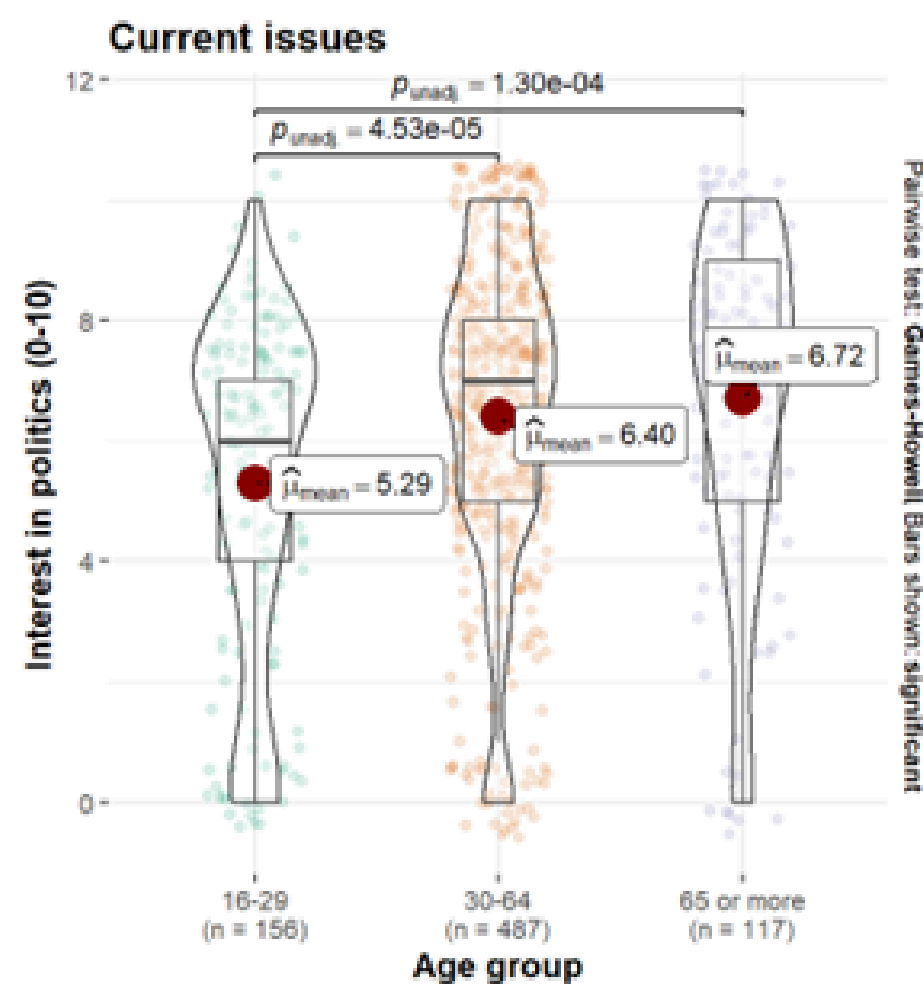
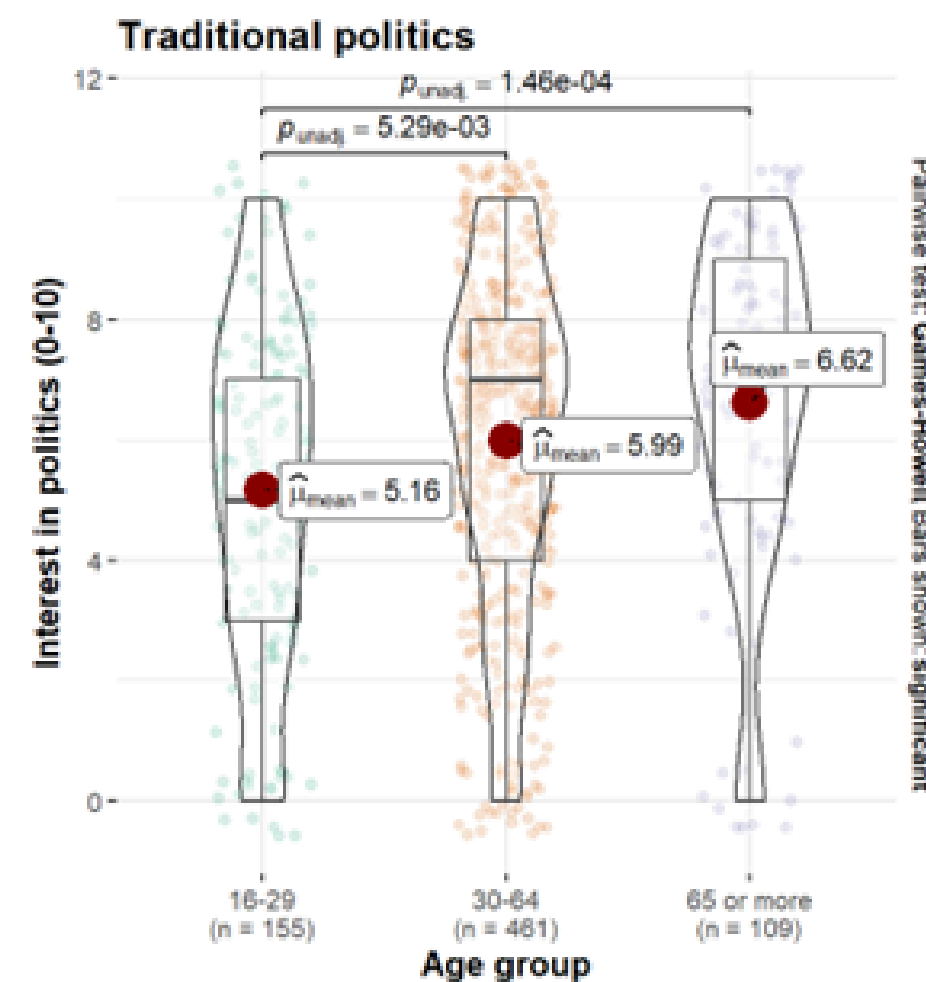
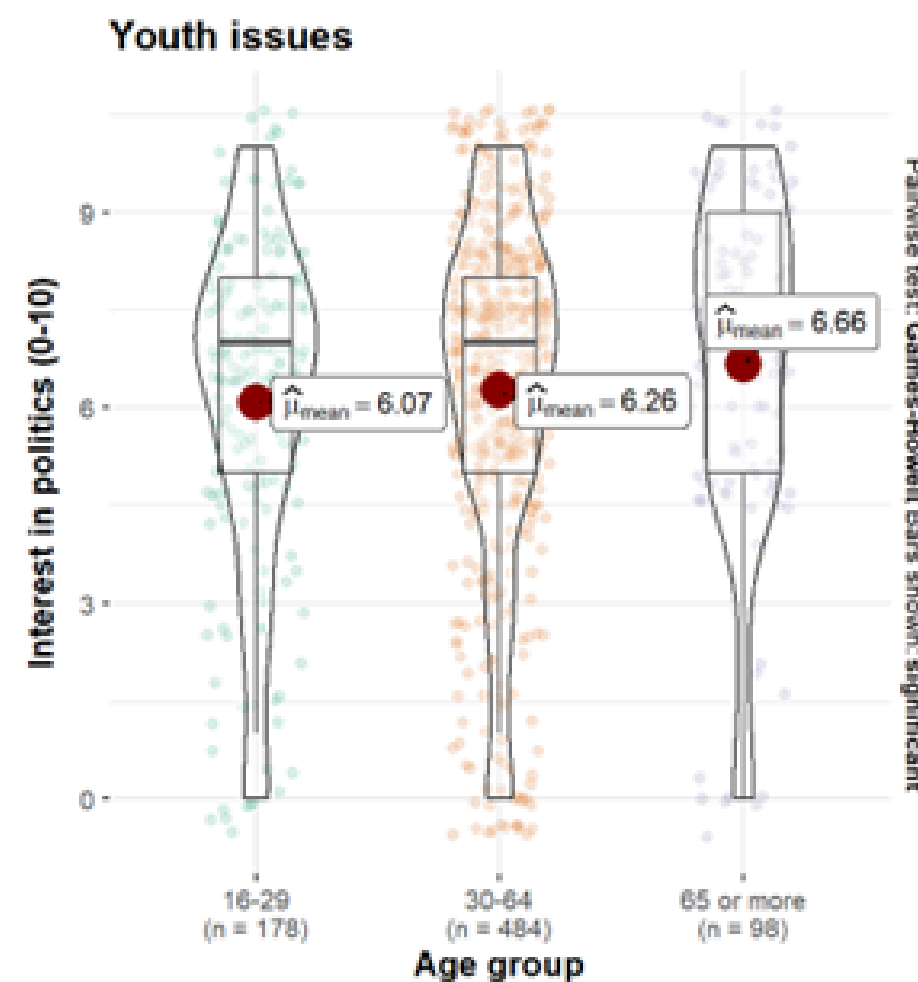
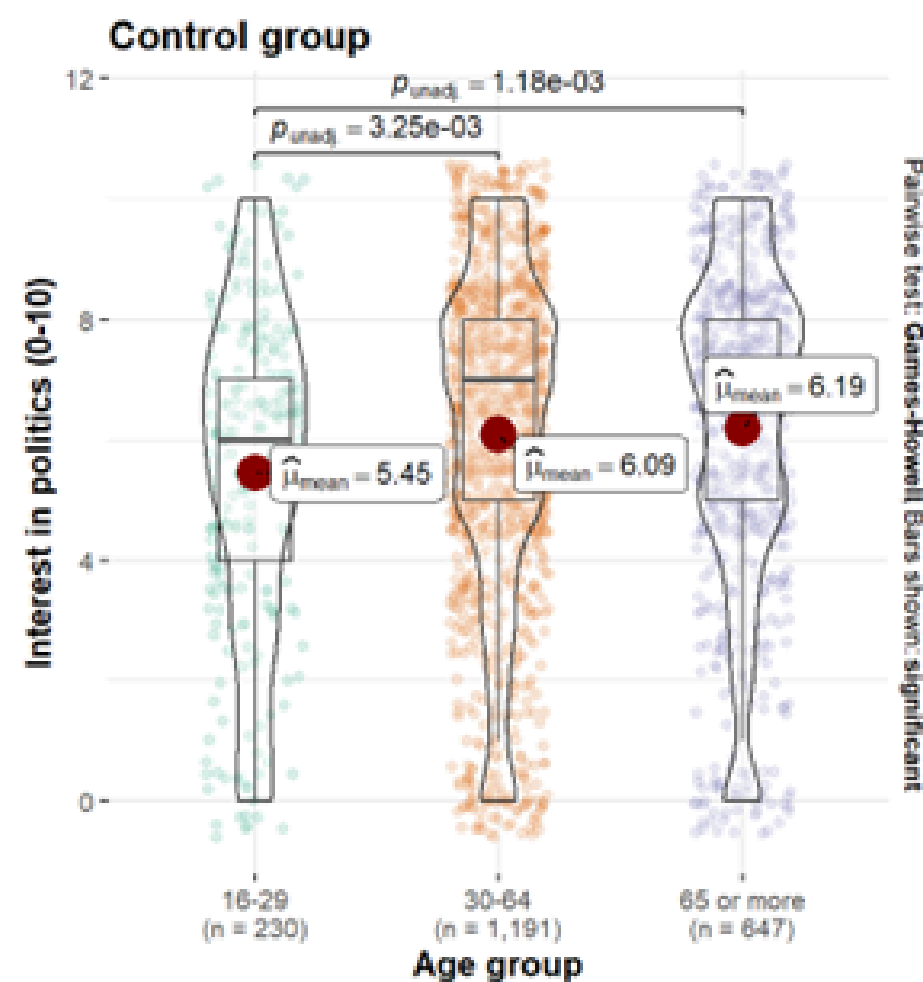


18-29			30-64		65+	
1	Job insecurity	8.41	Job insecurity	8.65	Security	8.84
2	Housing acces	8.27	Security	8.46	Climate change	8.49
3	Security	7.90	Climate change	8.39	Economy	8.47
4	Climate change	7.55	Housing acces	8.37	Language	8.23
5	Feminism	7.48	Economy	8.19	Housing acces	8.01
6	Language	7.28	Language	7.79	Job insecurity	8.01
7	Economy	7.06	Feminism	7.72	Feminism	7.80
8	Elections	5.81	Elections	6.67	Elections	7.33
9	Cat.-Spa. relations	5.44	Cat.-Spa. relations	6.43	Cat.-Spa. relations	6.99
10	Political parties	4.75	Political parties	5.12	Political parties	5.59
Mean			7.58		7.78	
St. Dev.			1.15		0.94	

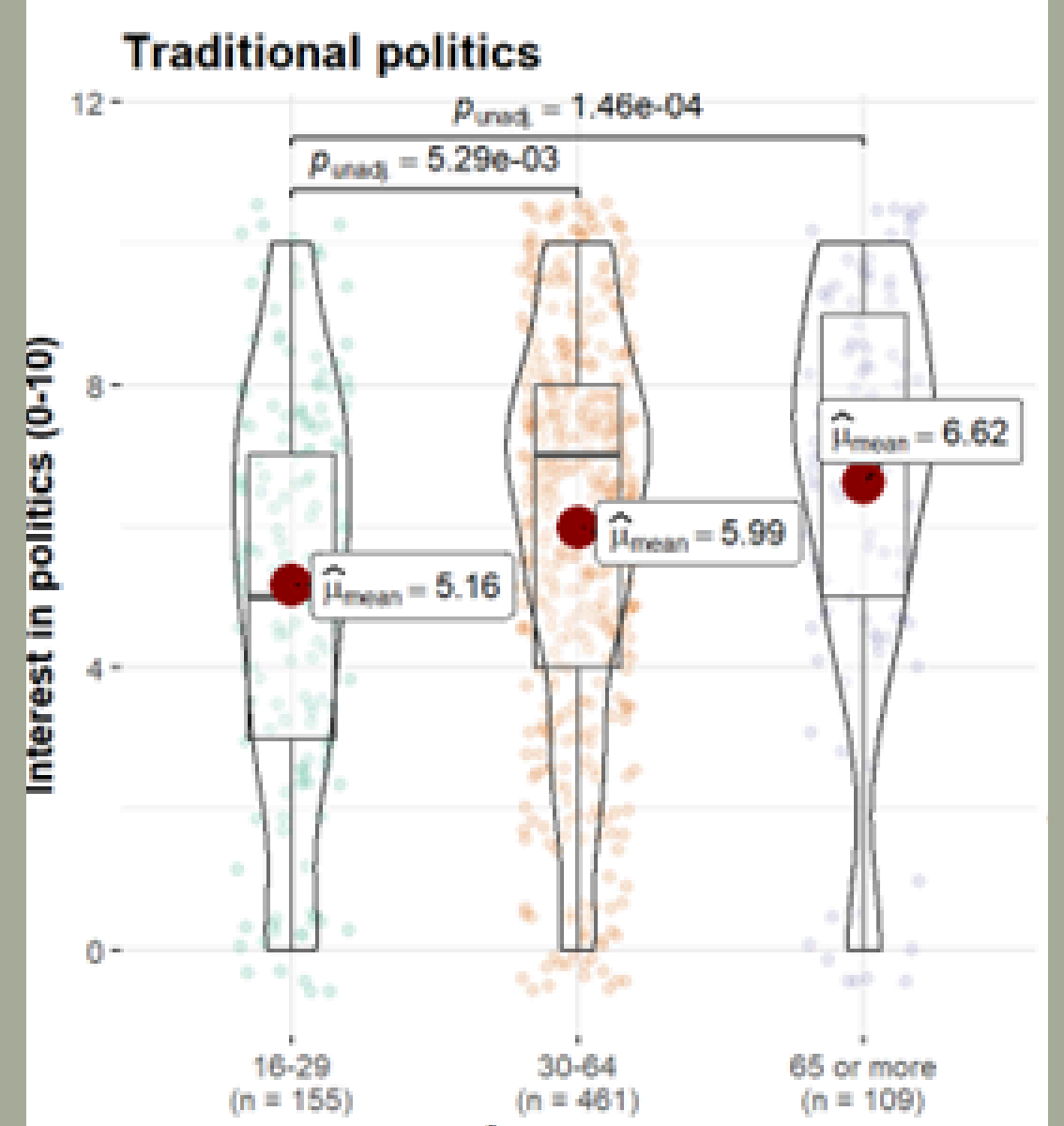
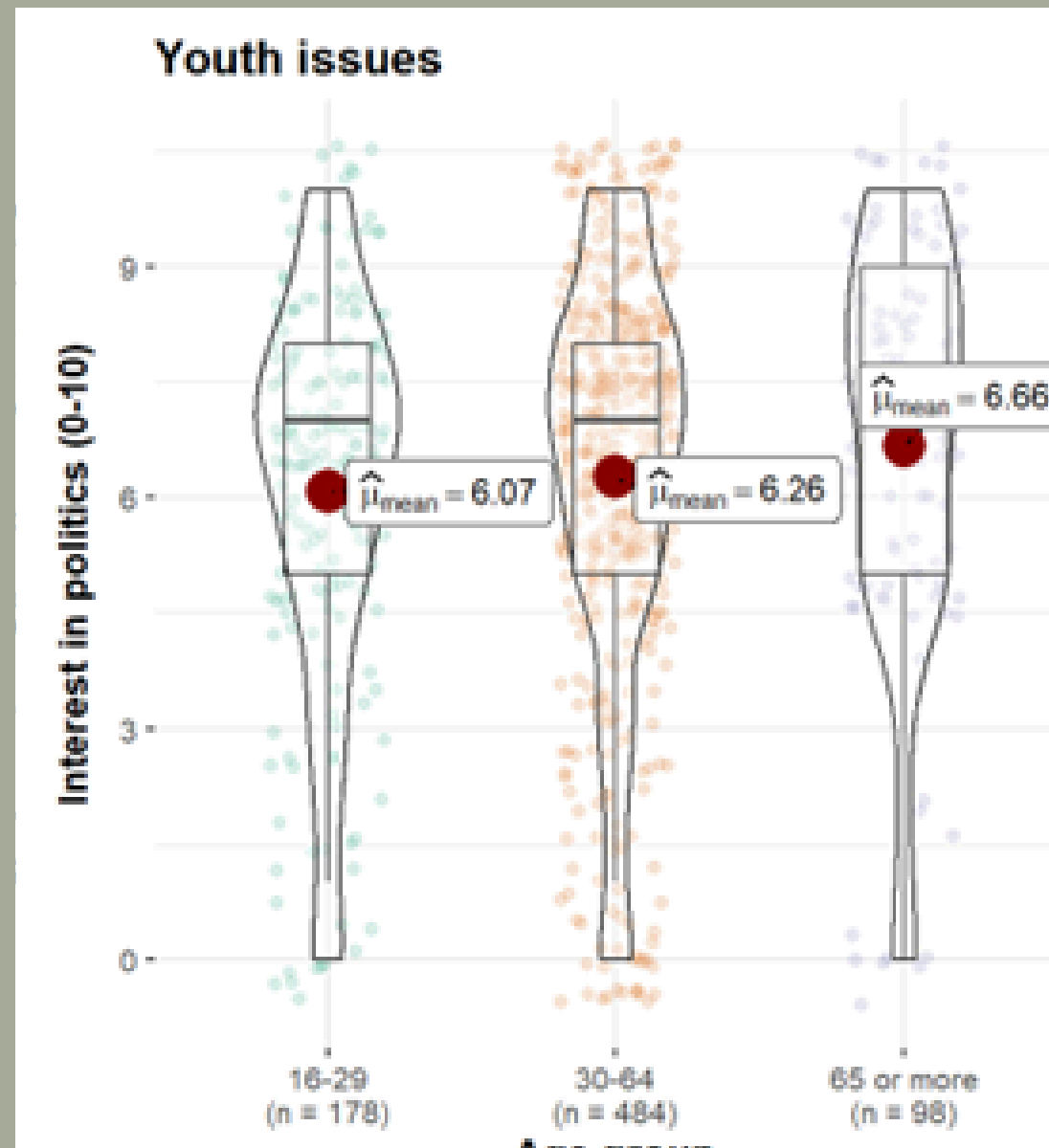
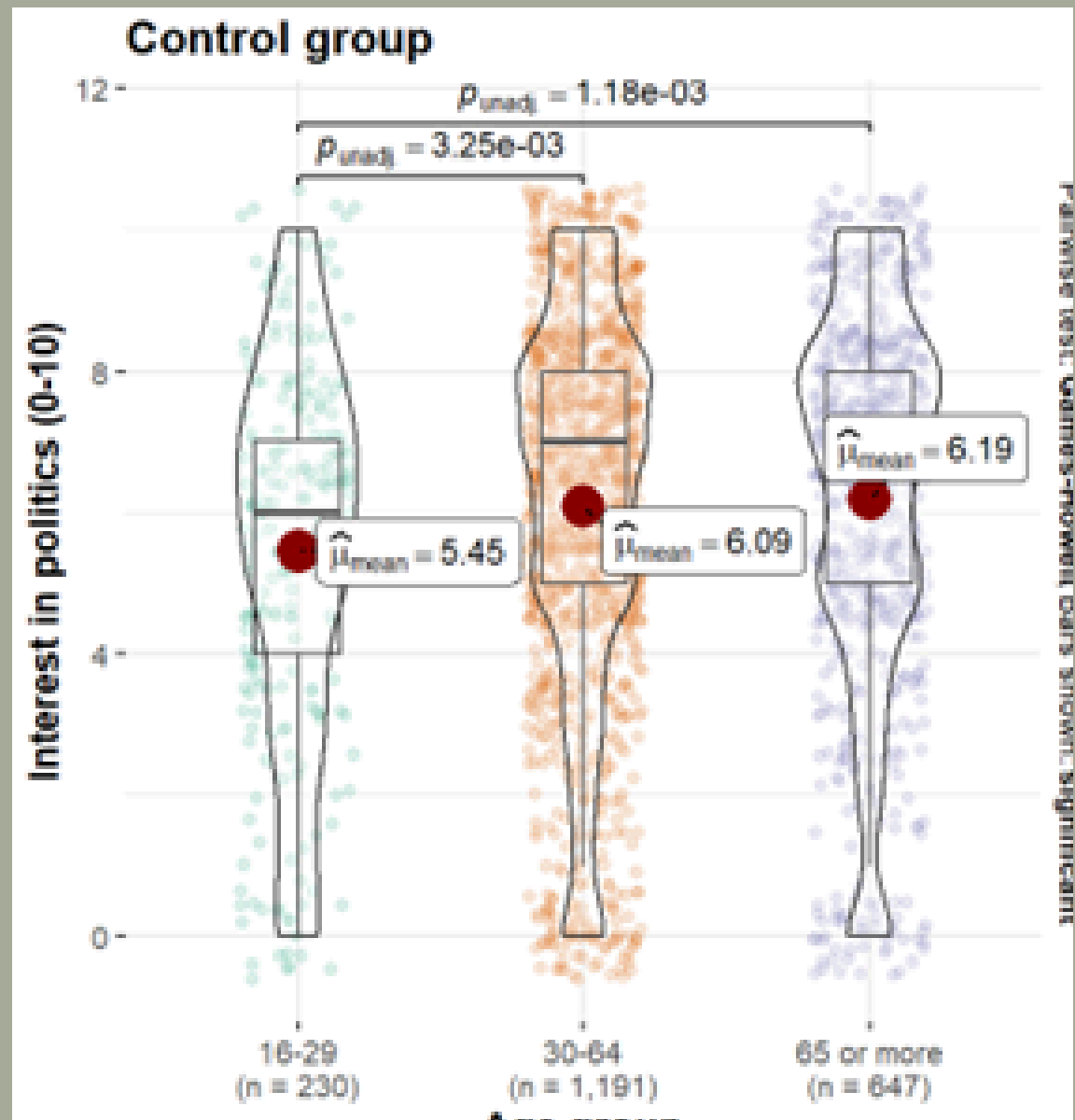
Figure 4. Main effects of the experiment on general political interest.



Comparison of the age-gap in the different treatment groups



p-values only shown if significant



Conclusions & discussion (I)

- The **age gap** in political interest is not static; it **shifts depending on the topics primed**
 - **Youth-relevant issues** (housing, job insecurity) significantly **narrow** the age gap, engagement increases when topics align with younger people's experiences.
 - Issues **like elections and political parties** tend to widen the gap, failing to resonate with younger respondents.
- Limitation: **context dependency**. Primes refer to a specific region and time, threatening generalizability. Also, we do not distinguish between age & cohort

Conclusions & discussion (II)

- **Policy Implications:** Political actors and advocates should emphasize youth-relevant topics to boost engagement and foster inclusive democratic participation.
- **Survey Methodology implications:** We are likely overestimating the age gap. Broad questions on general political interest can misrepresent true engagement levels; topic-specific questions can provide more accurate insights.



Thank
You