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Between Local Politics and Classroom Norms: How Context Shapes Adolescents' Populist Voting Intentions

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a person-within-context framework, the study investigates how adolescents' political engagement—specifically, the intention to vote for a right-wing populist party—is shaped by political climates in two key developmental contexts: the school classroom and the local community. Data were collected from 717 German adolescents ($M_{Age} = 14.46$, $SD_{Age} = 0.64$, 53.1% female) across 53 classrooms in 20 schools during the 2021 national election. Three-level multilevel modeling showed that both classroom and local political contextual conditions (i.e. share of anti-democratic attitudes within class and right-wing voting at the local level) related to adolescents' right-wing populist voting intentions. Youth in classrooms with higher average anti-democratic attitudes, as well as those in communities with stronger far-right electoral support, were more likely to express intentions to support a right-wing populist party, after controlling for individual attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics. Experiencing a democratic classroom climate did not emerge as a significant moderator compensating for the effects of anti-democratic contextual conditions. Overall, the findings underscore that adolescents' voting intentions reflect not only personal dispositions but also the normative climates of their educational and local environments. Integrating multilevel political contexts is thus essential for understanding and ultimately supporting democratic development during adolescence.

1 | Introduction

Growing evidence shows that adolescents follow societal issues and start to develop coherent political positions well before reaching voting age. Against this backdrop, rising distrust in political actors and institutions among young people is viewed with concern, as it reflects broader trends of declining satisfaction with democracy among younger generations (Foa et al. 2020). Such discontent was found to precede populist breakthroughs (Giebler et al. 2021; Rooduijn et al. 2016), and recent elections across several liberal democracies confirm that young people's support for populist and right-wing extremist parties is a notable feature of the contemporary political landscape (Foa and Mounk 2019; Guth and Nelsen 2021; Zagórski et al. 2021). From a developmental perspective, the foundations of democratic commitment or detachment are assumed to be shaped in early ages, as individuals begin to integrate societal information and construct political positions. These processes, however, do not unfold in a social vacuum. Rather, young people are susceptible to the prevailing opinions and narratives within their immediate social environments. Despite sustained interest in contextual effects on political development in youth, research has rarely examined such processes beyond the school setting. Even for the latter, research on classroom opinion climates remains limited. As a result, little is known about the simultaneous workings of school- and community-level characteristics from a multilevel perspective. The present study seeks to contribute to this line of research by investigating how German adolescents' political

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engagement—specifically, their intention to vote for a right-wing populist party—is shaped by political opinion climates in two key developmental contexts: the school classroom (i.e. share of anti-democratic attitudes within class) and the local community (i.e. right-wing populist voting at the local level).

1.1 | Adolescence as a Sensitive Period for Anti-Democratic and Right-Wing Populist Orientations

Adolescence represents a formative period of political development, during which individuals acquire the socio-cognitive competencies necessary to engage with civic life (Metzger and Smetana 2010). At the same time, as young people explore their personal identities, questions of how to locate themselves within the political sphere become increasingly salient (Erikson 1968). Thus, with growing societal awareness, while still searching for their political positioning, youth are assumed to be particularly susceptible to contextual influences on their political attitudes and behaviors (*impressionable years hypothesis*; Sears and Levy 2003). Empirical research shows that the impact of political events (e.g. elections) is most pronounced during adolescence, with increased sensitivities stretching well into childhood and young adulthood (Bartels and Jackman 2014; Ghitza et al., 2023).

In light of this, adolescence is an important period for promoting liberal democratic development or attenuating anti-democratic tendencies. At the core of the present study are youth's intentions to vote for a right-wing populist party. While populism is often described as a 'thin-centered ideology' marked by a sharp polarization between 'the people' and 'the elite' (e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; for an overview of populism in youth, see Noack and Eckstein 2023), populist attitudes and behaviors—when aligned with a far-right ideology—can further be situated within a broader anti-democratic mindset. As such, right-wing populist voting intentions (and behaviors) were shown to be accompanied by high levels of dissatisfaction with existing politics and generalized distrust in political actors and institutions (Lindholm et al. 2024). Moreover, right-wing populist voting co-occurs with other right-leaning attitudes, including ethnic prejudice, authoritarianism, or support of conspiracy beliefs (Heinze and Scheuer 2025; Lindholm et al. 2024). Yet unlike most attitudes, voting intentions and electoral choices fluctuate over time, particularly among young people, revealing a degree of malleability that underscores the need of examining their social antecedents in greater depth. Consistent with contextual models of human development (e.g. Bronfenbrenner 1979; Sameroff 2010), voting intentions are shaped within nested social environments. Beyond family and peers, schools and local communities are expected to be particularly influential, offering not only formal civic instruction but also everyday experiences that convey political norms and expectations.

1.2 | Contextual Effects of Local Environments

Developmental theorizing highlights the role of local environments, such as neighborhoods, on youth civic development (Wilkenfeld et al. 2010), yet empirical research in this area remains limited. One notable exception is a study showing that local opportunity structures can mobilize adolescents' intentions to engage in protest activities, while reducing more conventional forms of participation (Deimel and Abs 2022).

Beyond this, valuable insights into local contextual influences on political attitudes and behaviors can be drawn from the field of prejudice and intergroup relations. One strand of research has adopted an intergroup contact perspective (Allport 1954), arguing that structural local characteristics, such as ethnic diversity, can foster intergroup attitudes (e.g. prejudice against immigrants; for an overview see Christ et al. 2022). Supporting this assumption, several studies found that greater ethnic diversity within local districts is associated with lower levels of prejudice among residents (Schlueter and Wagner 2008; Schmid et al. 2014; Wagner et al. 2006). Still, the general direction of effects remains inconclusive. For example, in one study, the proportion of stigmatized immigrants was linked to greater threat perceptions, which in turn were related to increased intentions to vote for right-wing parties (Green et al. 2016).

A second line of research conceptualizes aggregate-level data on implicit bias as a reflection of systemic racism in the environment (Payne and Hannay 2021). This perspective argues that implicit prejudice (e.g. as measured by the Implicit Association Test; IAT) is better conceptualized as an aggregate-level phenomenon rather than an individual attitude (Payne et al. 2017). Relatedly, the role of social contexts, manifested in local norms, policies, and procedures, is highlighted (i.e. Prejudice in Places Model; Murphy et al. 2018). Supporting this perspective, regional levels of implicit racial bias have been linked to discriminatory policing practices, greater use of lethal force against Black individuals, and increased racial inequalities in schools (Chin et al. 2020; Hehman et al. 2018; Stelter et al. 2022).

Overall, there is empirical support for the idea that characteristics of the local context, including ethnic diversity and shared attitudes or norms, affect political attitudes and behaviors of individuals in those contexts. Moreover, local communities differ in their dominant political cultures, which is also reflected in patterns of electoral support and public discourse (Deimel and Abs 2022). These community-level dynamics may reinforce or challenge prevailing attitudes in other developmental settings (e.g. family or school), creating a multilevel socialization structure in which adolescents' political preferences are jointly shaped by individual dispositions and contextual climates. Yet, most of this literature has focused on adult samples, such that comparatively little is known about the role of local dynamics in adolescents' political development.

1.3 | Contextual Effects of Classrooms and Schools

School is a key context for civic learning and development (Noack and Eckstein 2023). Beyond formal curricula, informal learning experiences within schools constitute an important influence on youth's political attitudes and behaviors. Students spend substantial time in classrooms, which are characterized by shared values, actions, and norms that can serve as attitudinal anchors during adolescence. These classroom norms may carry a political tone and thus contribute to the formation of a political opinion climate that reinforces orientations legitimizing beliefs

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that are more or less participatory, or outright authoritarian and (anti-)democratic. Research points to such contextual effects—for example, the impact of norms within friendship networks on intolerant attitudes (van Zalk et al. 2013) or inclusive classroom norms (Barth and Grütter 2024). Yet, the role of prevailing political opinions within class (i.e. classroom political opinion climate) on young people's anti-democratic political attitudes and behaviors remains largely unexplored.

In contrast to prevailing opinions, the contextual effects of a democratic school or classroom climate on adolescents' political attitudes and behaviors have been more thoroughly considered. Accordingly, research shows that shared perceptions of a democratic school environment, where standpoints are openly exchanged, interactions are respectful and fair, and participation is encouraged, are associated with lower anti-democratic tendencies among students (Eckstein et al. 2021; Wachs et al., 2023). While such direct effects are well-documented, a democratic classroom environment may also serve as an important buffering factor.

Following the compensation hypothesis (Campbell 2008), it can be assumed that a democratic climate in school classrooms may help counteract anti-democratic contextual effects, including those originating from other social settings, such as the prevailing opinion climate within the family or local community. A democratic classroom environment can expose students to alternative norms and perspectives that may challenge anti-democratic messages encountered elsewhere. Such classrooms may also reduce pressure to conform to dominant attitudes by fostering open discourse and encouraging independent opinion formation. In this way, classrooms characterized by a democratic climate can create a space in which students feel able to explore and express personal viewpoints that lie outside the normative and dominant discourse, thereby promoting critical reflection on civic issues and strengthening commitment to democratic attitudes and behaviors, even when the latter receive little support within youth's broader social environment.

At the individual level, evidence suggests that a democratic classroom climate can have this compensatory effect, particularly encouraging civic behavior among adolescents from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds or with lower levels of political knowledge (Campbell 2008; Liu et al. 2025). At the contextual level, it has likewise been shown that civic learning opportunities particularly foster political engagement among students attending schools in impoverished neighborhoods (Wilkenfeld 2009). The present study aims to further extend this literature by investigating the moderating role of a democratic classroom climate in mitigating the contextual effects of anti-democratic opinion climates at the classroom and local level.

2 | The Present Study

2.1 | Research Questions

This study focuses on students (Level 1, L1), nested in classrooms (Level 2, L2), which are nested in schools, embedded in broader local contexts (Level 3, L3). Drawing on this multilevel structure, it examines how adolescents' individual intentions to vote for a right-wing populist party are shaped by the political opinion climates of two core developmental contexts: the classroom and the local community. To this end, the school level is conceptualized as an indicator of the local opinion climate, capturing right-wing populist voting behavior during the 2021 national election in school's surrounding areas. Integrating theories of political socialization and contextual influence, we specifically test whether contextual effects remain after accounting for students' individual attitudes and socio-demographic variables, and whether a democratic classroom climate can buffer these effects. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. *There is a positive association between anti-democratic attitudes at the classroom-level (L2) and individual right-wing populist voting intentions (L1, context effect).*

H2. *There is a positive association between the share of right-wing populist voting at the local level (L3, reflecting voting behavior in schools' surrounding areas) and individual right-wing populist voting intentions (L1, context effect).*

H3. *Both context effects are moderated by democratic classroom climate. The associations between anti-democratic attitudes at the classroom-level (L2, H3a) as well as local right-wing populist voting behavior (L3, H3b) with individual right-wing populist voting intentions (L1) are less pronounced when students report a democratic climate at the classroom level (L2). Figure 1 summarizes the models three-level structure and main hypotheses.*

2.2 | Context of the Present Study

The data collection for the present study coincided with the German national election (Bundestagswahl) in the fall of 2021, providing the opportunity to include official electoral statistics as indicators of contextual voting behavior. Germany has a multiparty system, and in recent years, the parties consistently represented in the Bundestag include CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union), SPD (Social Democratic Party), the Green Party, FDP (Free Democratic Party), and the Left (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021). Since 2013, the AfD (Alternative for Germany), originally founded as a Eurosceptic party, has undergone a rightward shift toward extreme positions while simultaneously gaining increasing support and establishing itself as a major right-wing populist protagonist[1].

The 2021 election campaign was largely shaped by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside debates on climate change and immigration—issues that were strongly emphasized by the AfD through climate skepticism and anti-immigration rhetoric (Decker 2021; Schläger et al. 2021). This strategy proved electorally successful, with the AfD receiving more than 10% of the national vote (and even 20.6% in the 2025 election; Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021, 2025). Moreover, a separate analysis of the 2021 election results by federal state showed that the AfD was the strongest party in Thuringia, where data collection took place, receiving 24% of the votes. The study's regional context warrants further consideration, as Thuringia, a region in former East Germany, is characterized by comparatively low ethnic-cultural diversity and stronger support for right-wing populist parties than other parts of Germany (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021; Körner et al. 2023).

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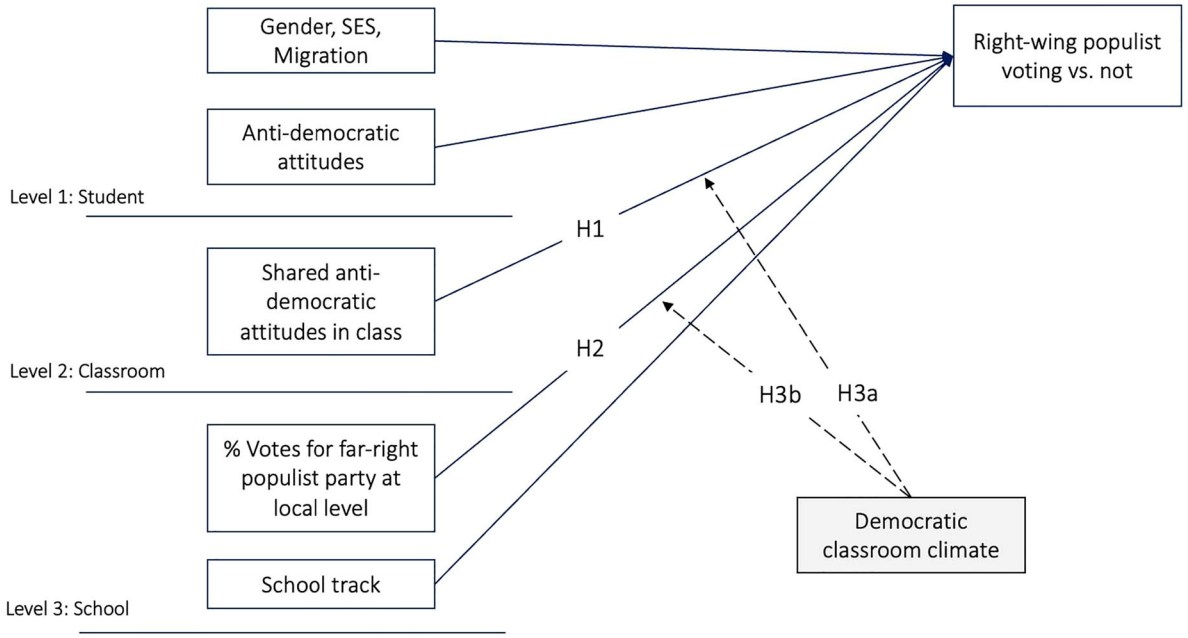

FIGURE 1 | Overview of study hypotheses.

The findings should therefore be interpreted against the backdrop of the specific regional context, which may limit generalizability to other youth populations and contextual settings.

3 | Method

3.1 | Sample

The data for the present study were collected as part of a larger project on general and EU-related political orientations in youth (*JUROP: Youth and Europe*). The current sample is based on 717 German adolescents from the federal state of Thuringia[2]. At the time of data collection, the students were in the 9th grade with a mean age of 14.46 ($SD = 0.64$) years. A slightly higher proportion of adolescents identified as female ($n = 381$, 53.1%) than as male ($n = 325$, 45.4%), with a small number identifying as diverse ($n = 6$, 0.8%; no answer: $n = 5$, 0.7%). Eleven percent of the sample was of immigrant descent (i.e. either students themselves or at least one parent was not born in Germany, $n = 77$; no migrant background: $n = 570$, 79.5%; no answer: $n = 70$, 9.8%). The relatively small proportion of students of immigrant descent is characteristic for the region in which the data were collected (Statistisches Informationssystem 2020–2025).

The participating youths were recruited through schools and were either enrolled in college-bound high schools ($n = 401$, 55.9%) or more practically-oriented schools ($n = 316$, 44.1%)[3]. Altogether, 20 schools ($n_{\text{college-bound}} = 10$, $n_{\text{practically-oriented}} = 10$) and 53 classrooms were included in the study, with an average number of $M = 13.53$ students per classroom (*range*: 5–26).

The procedure of data collection was similar across all schools: After schools agreed to take part, consent was obtained from both students and their parents. The pen-and-paper survey was then administered during regular class time (~ 90 min). A research associate was present in the classroom to oversee the process. Each class received a small contribution (100€) to its class fund as compensation for participation. The project was approved by the regional school administration office as well as the ethics committee of the University of Duisburg-Essen and the Friedrich Schiller University Jena (FSV 21/047).

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Outcome Variable

3.2.1.1 | Right-Wing Populist Voting Intention. Adolescents voting intentions were assessed by asking "If you were allowed to vote in the next national election, which party would you choose?". The response options included all major parties in Germany at the time of the 2021 national election: (a) CDU/CSU, (b) SPD, (c) Green Party, (d) AfD (right-wing populist party), (e) FDP, (f) The Left, (g) Another party, (h) I don't know yet, and (i) No response. For the subsequent main analyses, the variable was dichotomized with the response categories 0 = *vote for a democratic party or non-voting*[4], and 1 = *vote for right-wing populist party*[5].

3.2.2 | Individual and Contextual Indicators

3.2.2.1 | Anti-Democratic Attitudes. Anti-democratic attitudes were measured using a composite score calculated as the mean of five political orientations: Intolerance towards immigrants (4 items, $\omega = 0.86$); distrust in politicians/ anti-elitism (5 items, $\omega = 0.64$); conspiracy beliefs (3 items, $\omega = 0.85$); institutional distrust (8 items, $\omega = 0.86$); and dissatisfaction with democracy (1 item). All responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *I do not agree at all*, 5 = *I fully agree*), with higher values reflecting stronger anti-democratic attitudes. The

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aggregated composite score yielded a reliable indicator ($\omega = 0.72$, latent construct reliability = 0.77). Detailed information on item wording and scale construction is provided in the open online material (Table S1).

3.2.2.2 | Anti-Democratic Attitudes at the Classroom Level. The measure of anti-democratic attitudes was aggregated across classrooms to reflect the shared anti-democratic opinion climate at the contextual classroom level.

3.2.2.3 | Right-Wing Populist Voting at the Local Level. To capture the local opinion climate, we used the share of votes for the right-wing populist party in the areas surrounding the study's schools during the 2021 German national election by aggregating votes across polling stations. These data were taken from the official electoral statistics of the federal state of Thuringia (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, 2025) and document the election results for each party down to the level of individual polling stations, allowing for a more fine-grained operationalization of the local level than broader voting districts. For schools located in rural areas ($n = 13$)[6], there was typically only one school per town, so the town's overall result, which included several polling stations, was used to reflect the local level. For schools in larger cities ($n = 7$), all polling stations within the surrounding area of each school were included to capture contextual variation across the city's neighborhoods. To this end, areas of comparable size (approximately a 500 m radius around each school) were defined to approximate the school's local surroundings on a comparable scale (see open material O2, for further information). The relative vote share for the right-wing populist party at the local level (i.e. schools' surrounding areas) ranged from 8.03% to 37.62%, with an average of 27.59% ($SD = 7.31$).

3.2.2.4 | Democratic Classroom Climate. Democratic classroom climate was assessed using a 15 item-scale that measured various facets of school life, including aspects of classroom community, teachers' fairness, and classroom discussion (e.g. "There is a strong sense of community in my class."; "Most teachers treat us fairly."; "Students are encouraged to form their own opinions about issues."). The response options ranged from 1 = *I do not agree at all* to 5 = *I fully agree* ($\omega = 0.88$). To capture shared perceptions of the democratic climate as a contextual indicator, students' individual responses were aggregated at the classroom level.

3.2.2.5 | Control Variables. Gender (dichotomized as 0 = *female*, 1 = *male*, because of the small number of diverse students[7]), immigrant background (0 = *no immigrant descent*, 1 = *immigrant descent*), family financial resources ("Does your family have enough money for everything your family needs?"; 1 = *not at all*, 4 = *completely*), and school track (dichotomized as 0 = *practically-oriented track*, 1 = *college-bound track*) were included as covariates.

3.3 | Analytic Procedure

Descriptive analyses (i.e. correlations) were conducted in SPSS 30 (IBM Corp., 2023), whereas all other analyses were run in M*plus* 8.7 (Muthén and Muthén 2012–2021). To address the study's hypotheses, three-level multilevel modeling was employed, using Bayesian estimation. The latter is required in M*plus* for TYPE = THREELEVEL models with categorical outcome variables (Muthén and Muthén 2012–2021). In addition, Bayesian estimation has been shown to be advantageous in yielding more robust parameter estimates when the number of higher-level units is limited (e.g. Stegmueller 2013; McNeish and Stapleton 2016). All analysis codes and outputs are available at https://osf.io/y5278/overview?view_only=07b1424be42a449e99e339427cceb5ea.

Model 1 examined context effects on right-wing populist voting intentions at the classroom and local levels. To address Hypothesis 1, anti-democratic attitudes were included as predictor at the classroom (L2) as well as individual level (L1). In doing so, M*plus* allows for an implicit latent group-mean centering of Level 1 predictors (i.e. *multilevel latent covariate model*; Lüdtke et al. 2008). Unlike traditional observed group-mean centering, this approach models the Level-2 aggregate as a latent group mean, thereby separating within- and between-level variance while accounting for the unreliability (sampling error) of manifest group means. Although a significant between-level effect indicates associations at the classroom level, it may mainly reflect the aggregation of individual-level effects rather than an emergent classroom-level process. Thus, to test whether anti-democratic attitudes at the classroom level are related to right-wing populist voting intentions over and beyond students' individual attitudes, the difference between both effects (βb—βw) was estimated as a derived parameter via M*plus*' MODEL CONSTRAINT command (i.e. compositional or contextual effect; see Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). To address Hypothesis 2, the share of right-wing populist votes at the local level was entered as an additional predictor at Level 3. Furthermore, socio-structural background variables were considered at their respective level with gender, family financial resources, and migration background serving as L1 covariates, whereas school track was added as a L3 covariate. All L1 covariates were grand-mean centered, as this centering option allows for modeling covariate effects while retaining both within- and between-cluster variation (Lüdtke et al. 2009).

Models 2 and 3 examined the moderating role of democratic classroom climate at the contextual level within a three-level design. Model 2 focused on the effect of anti-democratic attitudes at Level 2. To this end, an interaction term reflecting the product of Level 2 democratic classroom climate and shared anti-democratic attitudes (L2) was incorporated into the model (both variables were group-mean centered at L3 to capture within-context effects[8]). In addition, individual anti-democratic attitudes (L1, group-mean centered at L2), as well as covariates at Levels 1 and 3, were included in the model.

Model 3 examined whether the effect of local right-wing populist voting (L3) was moderated by shared perceptions of the democratic classroom climate. Since multilevel models with random slopes assume that the moderator is located at the higher contextual level (Heisig and Schaeffer 2019), classroom climate could not be specified as a Level 2 moderator. Therefore, the moderation was examined at L3 by including an interaction term defined as the product of Level 3 classroom climate and local right-wing populist voting. As in Model 2, anti-democratic attitudes at Level 1, along with covariates at Levels 1 and 3, were further taken into account.

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TABLE 1 | Zero-order correlations between study variables.

Individual level	Right-wing populist voting	Anti-democratic attitudes	Democratic classroom climate
1 Right-wing populist voting	—	—	—
2 Anti-democratic attitudes	0.43**	—	—
3 Democratic classroom climate	−0.12**	−0.28**	—
4 Gender	0.16**	0.02	−0.07
5 Family financial resources	−0.10*	−0.12**	0.03
6 Migration background	−0.08*	−0.02	−0.02
Classroom level			
7 Anti-democratic attitudes	0.75**	—	—
8 Democratic classroom climate	−0.32*	−0.45**	—
School level		—	—
9 Local election behavior	0.51*	−0.04	—
10 School type	−0.63*	0.58**	−0.36

Note: Right-wing populist voting (0 = democratic party/non-voting, 1 = right-wing populist voting); gender (0 = female, 1 = male); migration background (0 = no, 1 = yes); school type (0 = practically-oriented track, 1 = academically-oriented track). $N_{\text{Invidual Level}} = 717$; $N_{\text{Classroom Level}} = 53$; $N_{\text{School Level}} = 20$.

4 | Results

4.1 | Preliminary Analyses

4.1.1 | Descriptive Analyses

Zero-order correlations of all study variables at the individual and contextual levels are reported in Table 1. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were estimated to assess the proportion of variance at the level of the classroom and school. The examination of the variance components revealed that 10% of the variance in students' right-wing populist voting intentions was located at the contextual level (ICC = 0.101), thereof 2.4% at the classroom and 7.7% at the school level. Although this proportion is modest, it is sufficient to justify the use of multilevel modeling (Bliese 1998). In addition, anti-democratic attitudes and democratic classroom climate were further indicators measured at both the individual and contextual level (i.e. classroom). With 12.5% for anti-democratic attitudes and 14.9% for democratic classroom climate, a substantial amount of contextual variance was observed. Finally, a missing value analysis was run, which included all study variables. Little's MCAR test (Little 1988) was not significant ($\chi^2[8] = 10.03$, $p = 0.263$), suggesting that data were missing at random. Missing values were therefore not excluded from the subsequent analyses, but were handled within M*plus*' Bayesian procedure through data augmentation during Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) estimation, based on all available information (Muthén and Muthén 2012–2021).

4.1.2 | Subgroup Analyses Comparing Democratic Voters and Non-Voters

The main analyses contrasted students who would vote for the right-wing populist party (n = 88) with all other students (n = 629). Since the latter group was heterogeneous, including both students who indicated voting for a democratic party (n = 379) as well as students who reported no voting intention (n = 250; either because they were unsure or preferred not to answer), preliminary analyses compared 'democratic voters' and 'non-voters'. Logistic regression showed no significant differences in gender (b = −0.12, SE = 0.09, p = 0.110), family financial resources (b = −0.02, SE = 0.08, p = 0.380), migration background (b = 0.20, SE = 0.16, p = 0.130), or perceptions of democratic classroom climate (b = 0.05, SE = 0.08, p = 0.300). Non-voters, however, reported stronger anti-democratic attitudes (b = 0.38, SE = 0.10, $p < 0.001$) and were more likely to attend practically-oriented school tracks (b = −0.19, SE = 0.11, p = 0.040) than democratic voters. Despite these specific differences, the main outcome was still treated as a dichotomous indicator (right-wing populist voting intentions vs. all others), given the study's focus and the high complexity of the subsequent analyses.

4.2 | Main Analyses

4.2.1 | Contextual Effects on Right-Wing Populist Voting Intentions

Model 1 examined contextual effects on right-wing populist voting, while accounting for the effects of individual attitudes and socio-structural covariates. The results showed that both anti-democratic attitudes at the individual level (L1; b = 1.32, SE = 0.15, $p < 0.001$) as well as at the classroom level (L2; b = 1.83, SE = 0.87, p = 0.024) were significantly linked to higher right-wing populist voting intentions. The difference between the two effects was, however, not significant (i.e. contextual effect; b = −0.52, SE = 0.88, p = 0.261). Thus, the classroom-level effect of anti-democratic attitudes (L2) did not differ from the individual-level effect (L1), not fully supporting H1, since the finding indicates differences between classrooms, but provides no evidence for a genuine contextual effect beyond students' individual attitudes.

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TABLE 2 | Individual and contextual level effects on right-wing populist voting.

Right-wing populist voting	Model 1 Std. Est. (Posterior SD) [95% CI]	Model 2 Std. Est. (Posterior SD) [95% CI]	Model 3 Std. Est. (Posterior SD) [95% CI]
Individual level			
L1 anti-democratic attitudes	0.58 (0.05)*** [0.479, 0.657]	0.56 (0.05)*** [0.461, 0.645]	0.59 (0.05)*** [0.495, 0.673]
Gender	0.26 (0.06)*** [0.142, 0.368]	0.26 (0.06)*** [0.143, 0.374]	0.26 (0.06)*** [0.144, 0.368]
Family financial resources	−0.03 (0.06) [−0.138, 0.089]	−0.03 (0.06) [−0.146, 0.085]	−0.03 (0.06) [−0.138, 0.096]
Migration background	−0.15 (0.08)* [−0.306, 0.002]	−0.16 (0.08)* [−0.315, −0.012]	−0.15 (0.08)* [−0.305, −0.005]
R^2	0.44	0.41	0.44
Classroom level			
L2 anti-democratic attitudes	0.77 (0.26)* [0.013, 0.983]	0.60 (0.23)** [0.118, 1.015]	n.a.
L2 democr. classroom climate	n.a.	−0.21 (0.26) [−0.677, 0.316]	n.a.
L2 attitudes* L2 climate	n.a.	0.14 (0.15) [−0.155, 0.431]	n.a.
R^2	0.59	0.58	n.a.
School level		—	—
L3 election behavior	0.53 (0.20)** [0.111, 0.895]	n.a.	0.83 (0.25)** [0.269, 1.248]
L3 democr. classroom climate	n.a.	n.a.	−0.29 (0.24) [−0.753, 0.198]
L3 election behavior* L3 climate	n.a.	n.a.	0.28 (0.23) [−0.195, 0.689]
School type	−0.65 (0.20)** [−0.956, −0.182]	−0.67 (0.19)** [−0.938, −0.212]	−0.42 (0.21)* [−0.777, 0.021]
R^2	0.78	0.45	0.78

Note: $N = 717$. n.a. = not applicable. Right-wing populist voting (0 = democratic party/ non-voting, 1 = right-wing populist party).
***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

The share of right-wing populist votes during the 2021 national election at the local level (L3) was positively associated with students' individual voting intentions ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = 0.008$), supporting H2. Regarding the considered covariates, gender, migration background, and school track were significantly related to voting intentions, with males, students without a migration background, and those from practically-oriented tracks being more likely to vote for the right-wing populist party than their counterparts. With a $R^2 = 0.44$ at Level 1, $R^2 = 0.59$ at Level 2, and $R^2 = 0.78$ at Level 3, the model explained a substantial amount of variance in students' right-wing populist voting intentions (see Table 2).

4.2.2 | Moderating Role of Democratic Classroom Climate

Model 2 examined whether classroom-level democratic climate moderated the effect of Level 2 anti-democratic attitudes. The results indicated that the interaction between the two variables was not statistically significant, and thus H3a was not supported. All covariate effects remained significant, as shown for Model 1. A complete summary of the model's parameter estimates is provided in Table 2. In a final step, Model 3 assessed whether classroom climate moderated the L3 effect of local right-wing populist votes. Again, the interaction term between both variables did not reach statistical significance, not confirming H3b. The model's parameter estimates are, again, reported in Table 2.

4.3 | Exploratory Analysis

The main analyses accounted for the contextual effects of anti-democratic opinion climates independently at L2 and L3. To assess whether both contextual conditions may reinforce one another, an exploratory analysis tested the interaction between the local share of right-wing populist votes (L3) and classroom-level anti-democratic attitudes (L2). To this end, a cross-level interaction was specified with a random slope at L2 for the effect of classroom-level anti-democratic attitudes (group-mean

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centered at the school level) and the share of local right-wing votes defined as L3 moderator. The interaction reached statistical significance ($b = 1.25$, $SE = 0.64$, $p = 0.020$), indicating that anti-democratic attitudes at the classroom level exerted a stronger effect on individual right-wing populist voting intentions when the local share of right-wing voting was also high (i.e. effect of L2 attitudes for above-average schools: $\beta = 0.86$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$) as compared to low (i.e. effect of L2 attitudes for below-average schools: $\beta = 0.52$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = 0.108$). The interaction was confirmed, albeit attenuated, in a full model incorporating all covariates (gender, financial resources, migration background, anti-democratic attitudes at L1, and school track at L3; see open material O3 for a complete summary of the results).

5 | Discussion

Given the increasing electoral success of right-wing populist parties across many liberal democracies and their growing resonance among young people, the present study examined how political climates within adolescents' social environments relate to their right-wing populist voting intentions. Adopting a person-within context perspective, prevailing anti-democratic attitudes within students' classrooms and the share of local right-wing populist votes, as reflected in official electoral statistics, were considered as contextual indicators. Beyond this, the study sought to elucidate whether experiences of a democratic classroom climate may mitigate anti-democratic dynamics in youth's social environments.

Our results showed that, although anti-democratic attitudes at the classroom level were significantly linked to higher right-wing populist voting intentions, this effect did not differ substantially from students' individual anti-democratic attitudes, which, as expected, were also related to higher right-wing populist voting. Consequently, the Level 2 association appeared to mainly reflect the composition of individual attitudes within classrooms, rather than a genuine contextual effect beyond students' individual orientations, not fully in line with our expectations. A possible explanation is that classroom-level opinion climates may not always be sufficiently visible or salient to exert a distinct impact on students. In fact, research on pluralistic ignorance in the field of intergroup attitudes (i.e. the tendency to perceive the majority of others in a social context to be less tolerant than oneself) shows that adolescents may misperceive the actual classroom climate when it comes to prejudice, underestimating their classmates' non-acceptance of prejudiced attitudes (Váradi et al. 2021). Future research should therefore consider more direct indicators of the prevailing classroom opinion climate, such as students' perceptions of dominant political norms, teacher reports on classroom-level processes, or observational data. Moreover, our measure captured only the average level of anti-democratic attitudes within classrooms and may therefore have masked within-classroom heterogeneity. For example, a few outspoken or highly politicized students could disproportionately shape the perceived opinion climate—an effect not captured by our measure. Similarly, classrooms with highly polarized attitudes could display the same mean score as classrooms characterized by homogeneous moderate attitudes, despite likely differing substantially in their normative climate (see Feaster et al. 2011). More research on such classroom-level dynamics is needed, for instance, by applying social network approaches.

Beyond the classroom, our findings revealed that local voting behavior in a national election held during the time of data collection (i.e. German Bundestagswahl 2021) was associated with students' individual voting intentions. More specifically, students attending schools located in local areas with higher levels of right-wing populist voting were themselves more inclined to vote for that party. These findings extend existing evidence that regional opinion climates shape individual attitudes and behaviors—an effect previously documented among adult samples (Falter 1979, for a seminal study). Thus, exposure to local political norms and the surrounding discourse can shape political development in youth (Eckstein et al. 2024), highlighting the need to consider the role of external conditions. Because broader contextual dynamics often occur subtly and unconsciously, future research should specify the processes through which regional opinion climates exert their impact. From an ecological developmental perspective (e.g. Bronfenbrenner), distal factors are expected to foster development indirectly through shared values and norms, as well as interactions within more proximal environments like family, peer groups, or classrooms (e.g. Valentino and Sears 1998; Wilkenfeld and Torney-Purta 2012). However, to date, the interplay between different contextual characteristics on youth's civic development has received little systematic attention. Our exploratory analysis provided some support for this assumption. Specifically, the effect of shared anti-democratic attitudes was found to be stronger in classrooms located in regions with high levels of right-wing populist voting, indicating that classroom- and regional-level opinion climates mutually reinforce one another.

In light of such contextual synergies, it is particularly important to identify conditions that can counteract anti-democratic trends. The present study therefore assessed the compensatory potential of a democratic classroom climate for anti-democratic opinion climates at the classroom and local level. Yet, within our data, no such moderating role could be confirmed. When interpreting this pattern, it should be noted that we concentrated on students' shared perceptions of the prevailing democratic classroom climate. As discussed above, aggregated indicators do not capture within-class heterogeneity and consequently may mask variability in how individual students respond to the classroom climate. Therefore, future research should examine whether students' individual perceptions constitute a more sensitive indicator of potential compensatory processes. Moreover, the role of further classroom and school-related factors should be considered, as for example civic education initiatives. Targeted democratic education programs may bolster youth's resilience against prevailing right-wing populist rhetoric and sentiments while enhancing their ability to critically reflect on the local political climate. Accordingly, civic learning opportunities have been shown to promote political engagement, particularly among students attending socio-economically disadvantaged schools (Wilkenfeld 2009), indicating that such initiatives can play a crucial role in fostering democratic development.

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5.1 | Limitations

Several limitations of the present study need to be acknowledged. First, our analyses were based on cross-sectional data, which preclude causal inferences. Although theoretical considerations support the hypothesized direction of effects, longitudinal designs are needed to draw more definite conclusions. Relatedly, the timing of data collection warrants consideration. The study was conducted in the broader context of a national election, a period characterized by heightened political discourse and mobilization (Eckstein et al. 2024; Valentino and Sears 1998). Contextual opinion climates may therefore have been more salient during the time of data collection, potentially intensifying contextual dynamics. Future research should compare contextual effects during more and less politicized times to gain a deeper understanding of their temporal fluctuations. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the study's sample size was limited at the hierarchical level of classrooms ($n = 53$) and schools ($n = 20$), which constrained statistical power within our analyses, especially in detecting smaller contextual effects. Although Bayesian estimation was applied, which is considered advantageous under small cluster conditions (e.g. Stegmueller 2013), more research based on larger higher-level samples is needed. Along these lines, the present study focused on comparing students who would vote for a right-wing populist party with all other students. The latter group, however, was heterogeneous, comprising both adolescents who mentioned a preference for any other democratic party and those who either did not indicate a party preference or were unsure which party to vote for. Further research is needed that focuses on the latter subgroups in greater detail. Our preliminary analyses pointed to differences between 'democratic voters' and 'non-voters' in terms of personal attitudes and school type. Yet, given the high complexity of our models and the limited sample size, such an in-depth comparison was beyond the methodological scope of the present study. Finally, the regional context of data collection deserves closer attention because the present study was conducted in Thuringia, a federal state in former East Germany. National surveys repeatedly document higher levels of political dissatisfaction and distrust, as well as greater openness to right-wing populist and anti-democratic sentiments in the regions of former East Germany (e.g. Arzheimer and Bernemann 2024). These patterns have been discussed in terms of historical, structural, as well as individual factors (Weissenkircher 2020). Although data from another federal state (North Rhine-Westphalia, former West Germany) were initially available, these could not be included in our analyses due to the very low prevalence of right-wing populist voting intentions in this subsample at the time of data collection ($n = 8$, $< 2\%$). Additional research should determine the extent to which the present findings generalize to other regional and national contexts with varying socio-political and historical backgrounds.

6 | Conclusion

As societies face rising political polarization and growing support for anti-democratic and right-wing populist narratives, strategies aimed at fostering democratic values and resilience are increasingly important. The present study showed that anti-democratic opinion climates within youth's classrooms and local communities are linked to a higher intention to vote for a right-wing populist party, thereby underscoring the importance of considering the multilevel nature of contextual influences. The latter is further highlighted by the finding that anti-democratic climates within classrooms and the local community appeared to be intertwined. Given that young people are in a formative period of political development in which they are especially susceptible to contextual influences, a better understanding of these processes is of utmost importance. After all, such knowledge can help inform the targeted provision of opportunities for democratic discourse and civic learning—within schools and beyond—that strengthen political competencies and promote resilience against anti-democratic forces among youth.

Author Contributions

Katharina Eckstein: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, visualization, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, project administration. **Anna–Maria Mayer**: conceptualization, investigation, writing – review and editing, methodology, project administration. **Elise Grunwald**: conceptualization, writing – review and editing, methodology, project administration. **Astrid Koerner**: conceptualization, writing – review and editing, visualization, project administration. **Peter Noack**: conceptualization, funding acquisition, resources, writing – review and editing, project administration. **Philipp Jugert**: conceptualization, writing – review and editing, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, formal analysis.

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Ethics statement

This research was approved by the ethics committees of the University of Duisburg-Essen and of the University of Jena (FSV 21/047).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Analysis scripts and data necessary to reproduce the results can be retrieved from https://osf.io/y5278/overview?view_only=07b1424be42a449e99e339427cceb5ea

Endnotes

[1] In March 2021, the AfD was classified as a 'confirmed right-wing extremist organization' by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution of the federal state of Thuringia.

[2] The survey was conducted in two regions of Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW, $n = 488$) and Thuringia. However, since the number of adolescents who indicated to vote for the right-wing populist party was too small in NRW to allow for the estimation of contextual dynamics ($n = 8$), the main analyses focused on the Thuringian subsample.

[3] The practically-oriented schools also include comprehensive schools, which combine different tracks. However, due to their overall hetero-

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geneous student body and practice-oriented curriculum, they are more similar to the practically-oriented schools than to the academically oriented, college-bound schools.

[4] Non-voting included students who were unsure (h) or preferred not to answer (i).

[5] Of all participants, two mentioned another far-right party (i.e. NPD) in the open-ended response format. Given the substantial ideological overlap between this party and the AfD in Thuringia—where the AfD had been classified as a 'confirmed right-wing extremist organization' at the time of data collection—both cases were included in the group of AfD voters within the main analyses.

[6] Towns with less than 25,000 inhabitants.

[7] Diverse students were coded as missing for the variable but remained in the analyses.

[8] Group-mean centering was chosen to isolate within-context effects, ensuring that only within-group variance contributes to the estimates, unlike grand-mean centering, which conflates within- and between-group variance. Level 2 anti-democratic attitudes were aggregated to the classroom level prior to the analysis. This was necessary because this variable was also considered at the individual level, and in M*plus*, group-mean centering cannot be applied simultaneously to the same variable at different higher levels (in this case, Level 2 and Level 3).

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