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Andrej Naterer

Department of Sociology, University of Maribor, Slovenia
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5947-8808
andrej.naterer@um.si

Danijela Lahe

Department of Sociology, University of Maribor
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7595-4077
Slovenia, danijela.lahe@um.si

POLITICAL ATTENTION AND RELATIONAL STRAIN: SLOVENIAN YOUNG PEOPLE BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ZAINTERESOWANIE POLITYKĄ I NAPIĘCIA W RELACJACH: MŁODZI SŁOWEŃCY PRZED PANDEMIĄ COVID-19 I PO NIEJ

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Abstract: This article examines differences in political orientations and relational well-being among Slovenian young people surveyed in 2018 and 2023. Using a comparative mixed-methods design, it integrates nationally representative repeated cross-sectional survey data with focus-group accounts of young people's pandemic experiences. Political interest and support for strong leadership were higher in 2023, while satisfaction with family life and friendships was lower. The standardised relational differences were small to small-to-moderate and interpersonal trust displayed a mixed pattern rather than uniform decline. These results identify divergent developments across political and relational domains rather than a single transformation of young people's attitudes. The qualitative material suggests that governmental decision-making became unusually salient during the pandemic, while restrictions disrupted everyday relational environments. Because political interest is an attitude rather than participation, the article does not interpret the difference as evidence of civic engagement. Social capital is used narrowly to interpret family, friendship, and trust relations.

Keywords: youth, political interest, relational well-being, social capital, interpersonal relationships, COVID-19 pandemic, Slovenia

Streszczenie: W artykule przeanalizowano różnice w orientacjach politycznych i dobrostanie relacyjnym młodych Słoweńców badanych w 2018 i 2023 roku. Zastosowano porównawczy schemat badań mieszanych, łącząc dane z reprezentatywnych ogólnokrajowych, powtarzanych badań przekrojowych z wypowiedziami młodych ludzi uzyskanymi podczas wywiadów fokusowych dotyczących ich doświadczeń związanych z pandemią. W 2023 roku odnotowano wyższy poziom zainteresowania polityką oraz poparcia dla silnego przywództwa, natomiast niższy poziom zadowolenia z życia

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rodzinnego i relacji przyjacielskich. Standaryzowane różnice w zakresie relacji były małe lub małe do umiarkowanych, a zaufanie interpersonalne wykazywało niejednoznaczny wzorzec zmian, a nie jednolity spadek. Wyniki wskazują na rozbieżne kierunki zmian w sferze politycznej i relacyjnej, a nie na jednorodną transformację postaw młodych ludzi. Materiał jakościowy sugeruje, że w okresie pandemii decyzje podejmowane przez władze stały się wyjątkowo istotnym elementem doświadczeń młodych ludzi, podczas gdy ograniczenia pandemiczne zakłóciły ich codzienne środowisko relacji społecznych. Ponieważ zainteresowanie polityką jest postawą, a nie formą uczestnictwa, autorzy nie interpretują zaobserwowanej różnicy jako dowodu zaangażowania obywatelskiego. Pojęcie kapitału społecznego jest stosowane w wąskim znaczeniu, odnoszącym się do relacji rodzinnych, przyjacielskich oraz zaufania.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież; zainteresowanie polityką; dobrostan relacyjny; kapitał społeczny; relacje interpersonalne; pandemia COVID-19; Słowenia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted both institutional decision-making and everyday interpersonal life and young people experienced these changes during an already uncertain transition to adulthood (e.g. Furlong, 2012; Arnett, 2023). This article compares political orientations and relational well-being among Slovenian young people before the pandemic and in 2023. It focuses on political interest, attitudes toward strong leadership, satisfaction with family life and friendships and interpersonal trust with the aim of identifying whether these domains changed in similar or different ways and to use young people's qualitative accounts to contextualise the observed survey patterns.

Research on youth and crises shows that social disruption can affect political attention and interpersonal well-being through different processes. Pandemic governance made institutional decisions directly consequential for schooling, mobility, work and social contact, while restrictions altered the frequency and quality of everyday interaction (e.g. Naterer & Potočnik, 2025). Evidence from adolescents during lockdown links loneliness to greater mental health difficulties and closer parent relationships to lower distress, illustrating that family ties could remain protective even when peer contact was disrupted (Cooper et al., 2021). These conditions provide a reason to examine political orientations and relational well-being together, but they do not imply that change in one domain caused change in the other. Nor does greater political interest by itself demonstrate civic or political participation (Loader et al., 2014; Marquis et al., 2022).

The study therefore examines divergent changes across political and relational domains without treating their coexistence as inherently paradoxical, showing that a large-scale crisis does not necessarily produce uniform changes across different areas of young people's lives. The article thus asks how political orientations and relational well-being among Slovenian young people differed between 2018 and 2023 and how qualitative accounts help contextualise those differences. The Slovenian case is especially relevant because recent national evidence documents change in both domains. A study of Slovenian upper-secondary and university students found that reported difficulties increased across several close relationship domains during quarantine, with friendships and opportunities to form intimate relationships particularly affected (Puklek Levpušček & Poredoš, 2023). At the same time, the Youth Study Slovenia 2024 describes a marked rise in political consciousness since 2018 and frames the pandemic, lockdowns, and school closures as part of the context in which young people came to recognise the importance of political power and voice (Rutar, 2024). These findings support examining political orientations and relational well-being in parallel while keeping them analytically distinct.

The comparison also speaks to the timing of youth transitions. Respondents were between

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16 and 29 years old, including secondary school pupils, university students, young workers and people moving between education and employment. Their access to peers, public space, study and work changed sharply during the pandemic, and these disruptions occurred at a stage of life when friendships, movement outside the household and growing independence from parents carry particular weight (e.g. Furlong, 2012; Arnett, 2023). A shift in one relationship domain therefore cannot stand in for a general change in well-being.

The two survey years mark distinct social settings of the present study. The 2018 wave provides a pre-pandemic reference point, while the 2023 wave was collected after the main period of restrictions, when schools, workplaces and public life had reopened, but respondents could still reflect on a recent period in which public rules deeply affected everyday routines. The design does not isolate a pandemic effect, for economic conditions, cohort composition, political events, and survey mode may also contribute to differences between the waves. Rather, this comparison is used to describe the scale and direction of population-level differences and to assess whether the qualitative accounts offer plausible context for them.

Slovenian research gives reason to expect variation within the relational domain. Puklek Levpušček and Poredoš (2023) found that students reported difficulties involving friendships, intimate relationships, parental control, living with parents and family conflict during quarantine. The pattern does not support a simple account of family decline. For example, families could provide routine and practical support while prolonged co-residence reduced privacy, while peer relationships faced a different constraint because ordinary contact in classrooms, universities, workplaces and leisure settings was interrupted. The present study therefore examines family satisfaction, friendship satisfaction, and trust separately.

Theoretical framework

Social capital provides a focused framework for examining resources embedded in durable social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). Research conducted during COVID-19 shows why these resources should not be expected to change uniformly. Among Chinese young people, individual and community social capital decreased during lockdown, while family and societal dimensions increased, demonstrating that reduced external contact can coexist with stronger family connection (Luo et al., 2022). The analysis therefore does not assume that restrictions uniformly weakened family-based resources, but instead treats satisfaction with family life, friendships and interpersonal trust as related but domain-specific indicators.

Relational well-being and social capital

Following Putnam (2000), family and friendship networks can be understood as forms of bonding social capital that may provide emotional and practical support. Their protective potential depends on relationship quality rather than on co-residence alone. Specifically, longitudinal evidence indicates that positive close relationships supported adolescent adjustment during COVID-19, while negative relationship qualities could compound pandemic-related stress (e.g. Campione-Barr et al., 2021). Similarly, Slovenian evidence points to the increased difficulties involving friendships, parental control, living with parents and family conflict during quarantine (Puklek Levpušček & Poredoš, 2023). The framework therefore accommodates both support and strain within close relationships.

Satisfaction and trust capture different aspects of relational life. While *satisfaction* asks respondents to evaluate a domain of their lives, *trust* concerns expectations about particular groups of people. For example, a respondent may remain satisfied with family life while reporting

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less trust in relatives, or may value friendships despite frustration with limited contact. Treating these measures as interchangeable would conceal this variation, therefore the analysis retains the distinction and examines whether the direction and magnitude of between-wave differences are similar across measures.

The pandemic also changed the settings in which relationships were maintained. Digital communication allowed many friendships to continue, but it did not reproduce the full range of ties and unplanned encounters that occur in schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods and public spaces. For example, Cooper et al. (2021) found that loneliness during the pandemic was linked to mental health difficulties among adolescents, while relationship quality shaped how young people experienced restrictions. Such findings make friendship satisfaction and trust in more distant social groups relevant outcomes, particularly when compared with trust in immediate family members.

Interpersonal trust is expected to vary with the social distance and the role of the group being evaluated. Immediate family members and friends usually involve repeated interaction and direct knowledge, while trust in neighbours or classmates may depend more on shared settings, informal cooperation and expectations formed through less intimate contact. Restrictions altered both settings unevenly: household contacts often increased, classroom and workplace contact decreased or moved online, and neighbourhoods became more visible as people spent more time near home. Because such differences make a uniform rise or decline in trust unlikely, our analysis focuses on each trust category separately and avoids combining them into one social-capital score.

Political attention and orientations toward authority

Political interest is here treated separately from social capital and from civic engagement, mainly because of its cognitive or attitudinal orientation, while voting, protest, volunteering and other participation are behaviours. Longitudinal crisis research also shows that these dimensions need not move together; political discussion or trust may increase even when political interest or participation does not (e.g. Marquis et al., 2022). Because the present surveys measure political interest but not participation, the analysis cannot infer civic activation from changes in interest.

A crisis has potential to make politics more visible because public decisions often result in immediate consequences: rules concerning education, movement, work and social contact enter daily routines and become topics of discussion. This heightened visibility offers one explanation for greater political interest, but it does not specify how people judge the institutions involved. For example, interest may accompany approval, frustration, uncertainty or a wish for clearer decisions. The focus group accounts are used to examine how participants described this salience, while the survey comparison establishes the population-level difference.

Research on crisis politics suggests that threat and uncertainty can alter orientations toward authority, but the direction and meaning of change depend on context. Experimental evidence from the COVID-19 period found that crisis conditions can increase support for executive authority (e.g. Lowande & Rogowski, 2021), while a 17-country study linked perceived contagion risk and political instability to stronger-leadership preferences and support for controlling government, particularly among respondents already higher in authoritarian orientations (Pizarro et al., 2024). Research in Italy similarly associated the wish for a strong leader with conspiracy beliefs and reduced trust, while stronger national or European identification was linked to less support for such leadership (Moscatelli et al., 2023). These studies justify examining leadership preferences as a distinct political orientation. They cannot establish that

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the Slovenian difference was caused by the pandemic or that it represents civic engagement.

Support for strong leadership requires interpretation separate from political interest. The item used here records agreement with a leader governing with a strong hand for the public good. It does not measure a complete authoritarian worldview, support for a particular politician or rejection of elections and civil liberties. Crisis research shows that demands for decisive leadership may grow when respondents perceive uncertainty or ineffective coordination (Lowande & Rogowski, 2021; Pizarro et al., 2024). The present analysis therefore reports the change without assigning a single motive to respondents.

Research questions

The study addresses one main question: How did political orientations and relational well-being among Slovenian young people differ between the pre-pandemic period and 2023? Three subquestions guide the analysis:

1) How did political interest and attitudes toward strong leadership differ between 2018 and 2023?
2) How did satisfaction with family life, friendships, and interpersonal trust differ between 2018 and 2023?
3) How do young people's qualitative accounts help contextualise these quantitative differences?

Methods

This study uses a comparative mixed-methods design, bringing together two cross-sectional surveys and qualitative focus group material. The quantitative comparison draws on Slovenian youth data collected before the pandemic in 2018 through the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Youth Studies Southeast Europe project and on post-pandemic data collected in 2023 through the YO-VID22 project (Well-Being and Support Structures of Young People Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic). The two surveys sampled the same target population but did not follow the same people, therefore the results describe the differences between the youth populations represented in the two survey waves, rather than changes within individuals. The focus groups add accounts of how young people experienced the pandemic period and help place the survey patterns in context; they are not used to establish causal mechanisms.

The survey and focus group components address the same broad areas of life, but each was analysed on its own terms before the two were brought together during interpretation. The surveys show how response distributions and mean scores differed between two nationally representative samples. The focus groups show what participants said about political attention, government decisions, prolonged family co-residence, and disruptions to friendship. When both sources concern the same domain, their convergence can make an interpretation more credible. Even then, each method retains its limits: a focus group account cannot demonstrate why a population estimate changed, and a survey response cannot reveal what an experience meant to every respondent.

The research questions guided the integration of the two components. Findings on political interest and support for strong leadership were considered alongside participants' descriptions of pandemic rules, public communication, and government decision-making. Findings on family and friendship satisfaction were read together with accounts of support, reduced privacy, loneliness, and the difficulty of resuming face-to-face contact. Trust remained mainly a quantitative finding because the focus groups did not offer systematic material on every trust category. The qualitative evidence was therefore used where it could genuinely clarify a result, without being stretched to cover experiences that participants had not discussed in sufficient detail.

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Qualitative component

Five focus groups with Slovenian young people were conducted within the YO-VID22 project. A total of 30 young people aged 16 to 29 participated. Purposive recruitment aimed to include variation in age, gender, education, and employment status. The groups included secondary school pupils, university students, employed young adults, and young people who were not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Participants were recruited through schools, universities, youth organisations, project networks, and Project Learning for Young Adults (PUMO). This strategy was intended to bring a range of pandemic experiences into the discussions rather than produce a statistically representative picture of the Slovenian youth population.

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes and followed a semi-structured discussion guide. Participants were invited to reflect on everyday life before, during, and after the main period of restrictions. The discussion covered family relationships, contact with friends, education and work, mental well-being, and perceptions of institutional responses. Because the guide was semi-structured, moderators could pursue topics that participants raised in their own accounts, including experiences of support and conflict, loss of privacy, closer attention to politics, and difficulties reconnecting socially. Participation was voluntary, and no financial compensation was offered.

All discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised before analysis. Two researchers coded the Slovenian transcripts in QDA Miner, using a combination of a deductive and inductive approach. The initial framework followed the project questions and included family support, relational strain, social contact, institutional responses and changes associated with the pandemic. When repeated topics did not fit this framework, the researchers added new codes. They then compared their coding decisions, discussed disagreements and returned to the transcripts to group related codes into broader themes. This iterative process kept the analysis tied to participants' language while ensuring that the themes remained relevant to the study questions.

For the purpose of the present article, the qualitative analysis was narrowed to material that could illuminate the survey comparison. The excerpts selected below represent recurring ways in which participants described heightened political attention, inconsistent rules, family co-residence, loneliness and the return to face-to-face contact. They are treated as evidence of how participants understood their experiences, rather than as estimates of how widely a view was shared among Slovenian young people. Gender and social position are included in participant descriptions where this information was available, while details that could identify individuals were removed.

Quantitative component

The quantitative component combines two nationally representative, independent cross-sectional surveys of young people in Slovenia, conducted in 2018 and 2023. Political orientations and relational well-being were compared using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, chi-square tests and independent-sample t-tests. Survey weights were applied throughout the comparative analysis and weighted valid sample sizes are reported for categorical tests. Cramer's V is used to describe the effect size for chi-square tests. For each t-test, Cohen's d was calculated by dividing the weighted difference between the 2018 and 2023 means by the pooled within-wave standard deviation; a positive value therefore indicates a higher mean in 2018. The gender comparisons reported in the Results section use the 2023 dataset. Since respondents were sampled independently in each wave, the analysis identifies differences between population estimates and should not be read as evidence of individual trajectories.

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The 2018 data come from the Slovenian component of the FES Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2018/2019. Fieldwork was conducted from 23 January to 2 March 2018 and produced 1,014 valid interviews with respondents aged 14 to 29. Interviews were conducted face to face using computer-assisted personal interviewing, usually in respondents' homes. The study used a stratified quota design based on statistical region and settlement type, together with quotas for gender, age, and completed education. Because the YO-VID22 target population began at age 16, the present comparison excludes respondents aged 14 and 15 from the 2018 data. The resulting 2018 analytical sample contains N = 925 respondents aged 16 to 29.

Among respondents in the harmonized 2018 sample, 469 were men and 456 were women. After weighting, men accounted for 50.5% of the sample and women for 49.5%. The age distribution included 227 respondents aged 16-19, 372 aged 20-24, and 326 aged 25-29. The weighted mean age was 22.55 years (SD = 3.94). Post-stratification weights were first calculated for the combination of gender and age group and were then adjusted for completed education. In the original fieldwork, 1,201 people were approached and 1,014 completed a valid interview, giving a reported response rate of 84.4%.

The 2023 data were collected through the YO-VID22 project between 8 September and 2 November 2023. Data collection used computer-assisted web interviewing, and the final sample comprised N = 1,287 Slovenian citizens aged 16 to 29. Recruitment combined the Valicon "JazVem" online panel, referrals from existing panel members, and an Instagram campaign. Quotas were set for gender, age, statistical region, and settlement type, using 2023 population figures from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. Crossing the twelve statistical regions with four settlement categories and the remaining demographic criteria produced 156 quota cells intended to improve coverage of the target population.

In the 2023 sample, 52.8% of respondents were men and 47.2% were women. Respondents aged 16-19 made up 26.6% of the sample, those aged 20-24 accounted for 35.1%, and those aged 25-29 for 38.3%. The mean age was 22.87 years (SD = 4.00). Random Iterative Method weighting aligned the data with population benchmarks for gender and age, statistical region, and settlement type. The 2023 methodological documentation does not provide a conventional response rate, largely because recruitment combined an online panel, referrals, and social media outreach rather than a single probability-based contact frame.

Measures and comparability across waves

Measures were harmonised across the two waves by comparing the construct, item content and response scale. The wording was substantively equivalent, although it was not always identical. In 2018, political interest referred to interest in national political affairs, while in 2023 the item asked about interest in political conditions. Both used a five-point scale ranging from one (not interested at all) to five (very interested). Support for strong leadership was measured in the harmonised data through agreement with the statement that Slovenia should have a leader who governs with a strong hand for the public good. Responses again ranged from one (completely disagree) to five (completely agree). These variables are treated as political attitudes, not as measures of participation.

The original questionnaires also support comparison of the relational measures. In 2018, respondents rated their satisfaction with 'your family life' and 'circle of friends' on scales from one (very dissatisfied) to five (very satisfied). The 2023 questionnaire referred to 'my family life' and 'my circle of friends' and used a scale from one (not at all satisfied) to five (very satisfied). Trust was measured in both waves on five-point scales for the same social groups: immediate family, extended family, friends, neighbours and classmates, fellow students, or colleagues. The item stems differed slightly, asking about the

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degree of trust in 2018 and average trust in 2023, but both scales ran from one (no trust at all) to five (high trust). Values coded 98 ('don't know') and 99 ('no answer') were treated as missing. The remaining wording differences are minor but are taken into account when interpreting between-wave estimates.

Political interest and strong leadership attitudes were analysed in their original five response categories. Chi-square tests assessed whether each distribution differed between survey waves, while Cramer's V indicated the strength of the association. The same procedure was used for gender comparisons within the 2023 sample. For family satisfaction, friendship satisfaction, and interpersonal trust, weighted means were compared with independent-samples t-tests. Cohen's d expresses each mean difference in pooled standard-deviation units, with its sign determined by the order in which the wave means were subtracted. Statistical significance was considered alongside effect size, because a large sample can make a small difference statistically precise without making it substantively large.

The age range of 16 to 29 encompasses several stages in the transition to adulthood. A 16-year-old who attends school and lives with their parents may encounter family and peer relationships differently from a 29-year-old who is employed, partnered, or living independently. Age is represented in the survey weights, but the present analysis does not estimate separate models for each age group. The reported results should therefore be understood as average differences across the youth population aged 16 to 29. Examining whether the patterns vary by age or living arrangement would add useful detail, but it lies beyond the comparative questions addressed in this article.

Ethical procedures

The YO-VID22 study was reviewed and approved by the project's joint scientific and ethical committee in Zagreb on 12 and 16 May 2023. Survey responses were collected anonymously, while focus group participation was confidential. Before taking part, focus group participants were informed about recording and transcription, the removal of identifying information, the possible use of selected excerpts in publications, and their right to withdraw. Adult participants gave informed consent. Participants aged sixteen or seventeen provided assent, together with permission from a parent or legal guardian where national legislation and institutional guidelines required it.

Methodological limitations

The design has several methodological limitations. It relies on self-reported perceptions and contains no objective measures of family interaction or relationship quality. The two waves also used different modes: interviews were conducted face to face in 2018 and online in 2023. Mode effects may therefore account for part of the observed difference, as may the minor wording differences that remained after harmonisation. Online recruitment in 2023 may also have underrepresented young people with limited digital access. Concentrating on Slovenia limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised elsewhere, although it allows the institutional and social setting to be considered in greater depth.

The focus groups provide interpretive detail, but they cannot resolve these limitations. Participants were selected purposively, and the discussions took place after the most acute phase of the pandemic. Their recollections may have been shaped by subsequent experiences, by hindsight, and by the presence of other participants in the group. For that reason, the qualitative material is used to identify recurring interpretations, tensions, and experiences. It is not used to estimate prevalence, reconstruct a precise chronology, or attribute a survey difference to one cause.

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Political orientations

The survey comparison points to a clear increase in political interest among Slovenian young people between 2018 and 2023. The proportion who reported no interest fell from 46.7% to 32.0%, whereas the proportion expressing some or strong interest rose from 13.6% to 24.7%. The distribution differed significantly between the two waves, and the association between survey year and political interest was small ($\chi^2(4) = 71.66$, $p < .001$, weighted N = 2,171, Cramer's V = .18). Figure 1 presents this shift in an attitudinal measure. Since the surveys did not measure political action, the result should not be described as direct evidence of civic engagement or political participation.

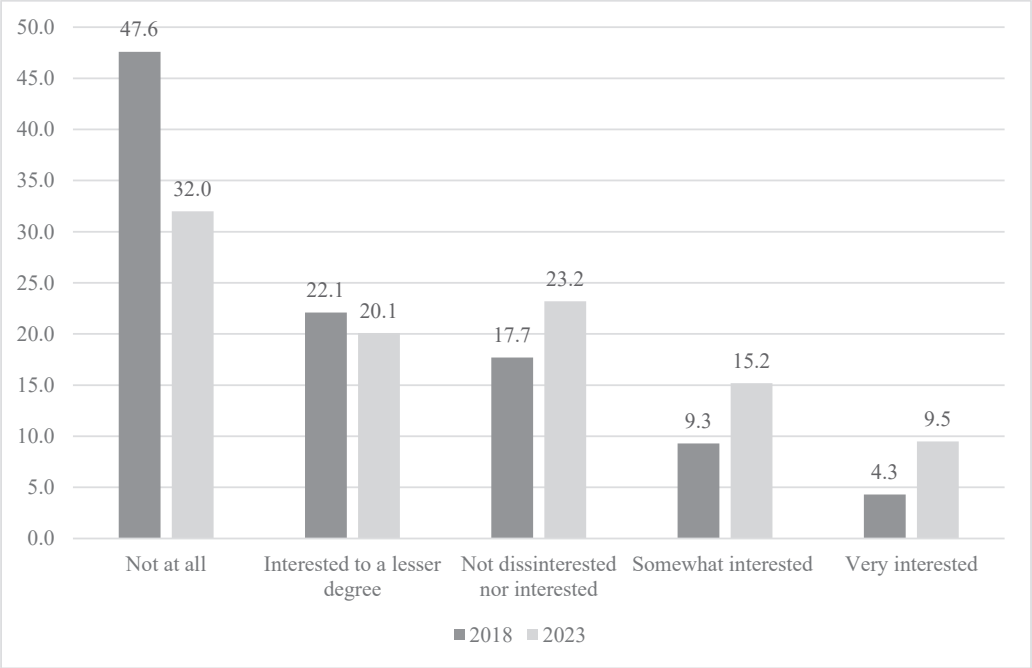


Figure 1: Comparison of interest in the political situation in Slovenia, 2018 and 2023

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

A gender difference was also present within the 2023 sample. High political interest, defined as a response of four or five, was reported by 30.5% of male respondents and 18.0% of female respondents. The full five-category distribution differed significantly by gender, although the association was small ($\chi^2(4) = 39.81$, $p < .001$, weighted N = 1,274, Cramer's V = .18). Thus, this result describes how respondents positioned themselves on the interest scale, without establishing a parallel gender difference in political knowledge, competence or participation.

Views of political leadership changed over the same period. Agreement or strong agreement with the statement that Slovenia needs a strong leader increased from 29.8% in 2018 to 48.2% in 2023. The overall response distribution differed significantly by survey wave, with a small-to-moderate association ($\chi^2(4) = 100.31$, $p < .001$, weighted N = 2,007, Cramer's V = .22). This difference is larger than the wave association for political interest, but the item still captures a particular preference for decisive leadership rather than a complete measure of authoritarian attitudes.

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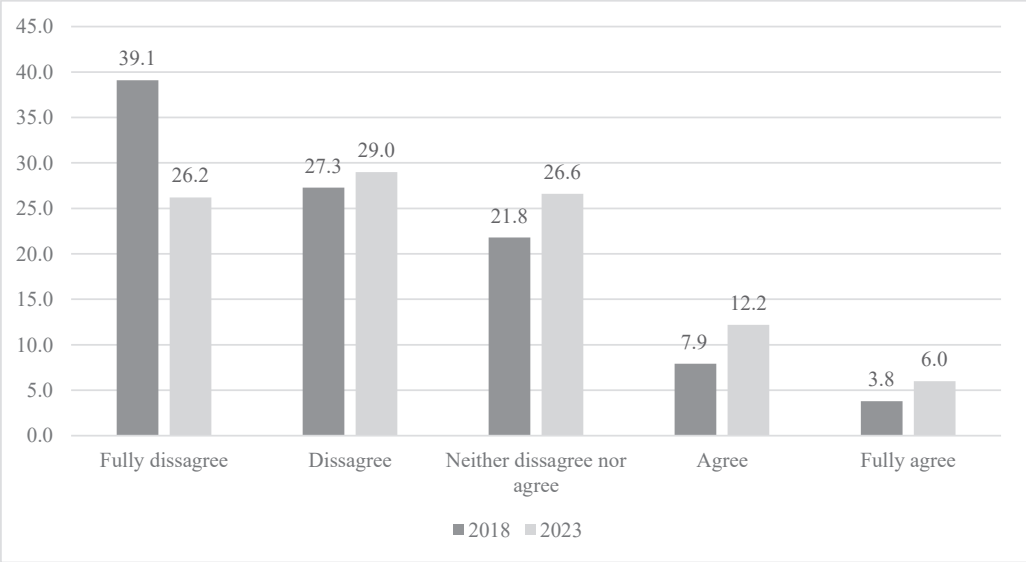


Figure 2: Support for strong leadership among Slovenian young people, 2018 and 2023

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In 2023, male respondents selected the strongest agreement category more often than female respondents (28.5% compared with 21.4%). Across all five response categories, however, the gender difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 8.11$, $p = .088$, weighted $N = 1{,}183$, Cramer's $V = .08$). Political interest and support for strong leadership were significantly associated within the same survey, but here too the relationship was small ($\chi^2(16) = 94.35$, $p < .001$, weighted $N = 1{,}179$, Cramer's $V = .14$). The association links two political attitudes, without showing that politically interested respondents participated more, nor does it reveal whether their interest reflected approval, criticism, or ambivalence.

The quantitative results indicate greater political interest and stronger support for decisive leadership in 2023. They do not establish a rejection of democratic norms, and they offer no evidence of behavioural civic activation. The focus groups provide a more grounded context for these shifts. Participants repeatedly described frustration with changing or inconsistent pandemic policies, alongside a new awareness of how strongly institutional decisions could shape education, movement, and social contact. These accounts help explain why politics and authority became more visible in everyday discussion, while leaving open the different ways in which young people evaluated those developments.

Two themes recur in these accounts, although participants did not always express them together. Some described following politics more closely because government rules had immediate effects on their daily lives. Questions about what was allowed, when restrictions would change, and how decisions were explained brought politics into ordinary conversations. Others emphasised the need for clearer and more consistent authority when the rules appeared uncertain. Closer attention to politics may arise from criticism as readily as from approval, whereas support for a strong leader concerns how authority should be exercised. The qualitative material therefore helps to identify two responses that the survey association alone cannot separate.

> "At some point during the pandemic it was totally confusing. Nobody knew what the actual rules were… That was the time I started to pay attention to politics." (female university student)

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"...during the pandemic we needed clear rules and consistency. If we had somebody with decisive authority everything would be easier." (male university student)

The first quotation ties political interest to confusion about changing rules. The participant describes beginning to follow politics more closely but says nothing about voting, protesting, volunteering or taking part in another political activity. The second quotation expresses a wish for decisiveness during an uncertain period. It neither identifies a preferred political leader nor endorses authority without limits. Considered alongside the survey results, these accounts show how pandemic governance could have made politics more visible and decisive leadership more appealing to some young people.

Interpersonal life and social well-being

The relational pattern moved in the opposite direction from political interest. Mean satisfaction with family life fell from 4.16 in 2018 to 3.91 in 2023. The difference was statistically significant and small in standardised terms ($t(2177) = 5.80$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.25$). Friendship satisfaction declined from 4.27 to 3.91, also a statistically significant difference, with a small-to-moderate effect ($t(2182) = 8.53$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.37$). The decline was therefore more pronounced for friendships than for family life. Even so, both distributions continued to overlap substantially and neither effect reached a conventionally moderate magnitude.

Within the 2023 sample, family life satisfaction was distributed similarly among male and female respondents. The gender difference was not statistically significant and the association was negligible ($\chi^2(4) = 2.45$, $p = .654$, weighted $N = 1{,}275$, Cramer's $V = .04$), suggesting that the lower average family satisfaction observed between waves cannot be reduced to a pronounced gender difference within the later sample.

The qualitative accounts give these trends a social context without reducing them to a single

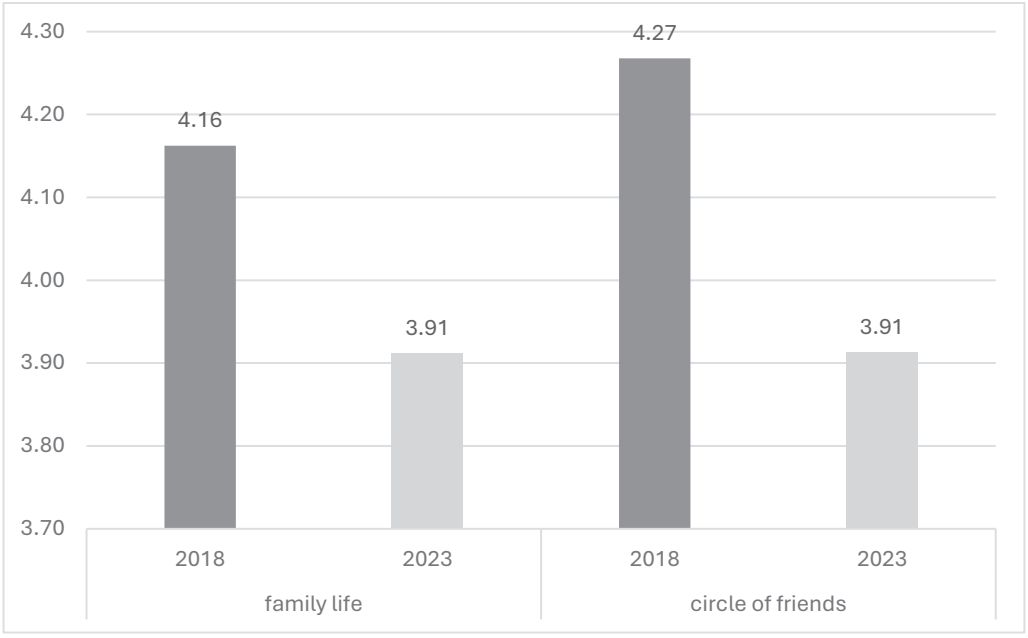


Figure 3: Comparison of family life and friendship satisfaction, 2018 and 2023

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

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mechanism. Participants described prolonged time at home as a source of support and strain, sometimes within the same family. They also spoke about loneliness, the loss of ordinary peer contact and the difficulty of reconnecting once restrictions were lifted. These accounts are consistent with the direction of the survey differences, but they do not demonstrate that a particular experience produced the change in mean satisfaction.

The focus group material also helps explain why family and friendship satisfaction need not have changed to the same extent. For many participants, family members remained physically present and continued to provide meals, daily routines, advice and company. At the same time, constant proximity could lead to irritation, closer monitoring and a loss of privacy. Friendships depended more on access to classrooms, campuses, workplaces, cafés, sports and other settings outside the home. Online communication preserved some close ties, but it could not replace informal encounters or the simple possibility of leaving the household. This contrast fits the larger standardised difference in friendship satisfaction, although the design cannot test it as a causal explanation.

> "How would I describe it? Stuck at home! Stranded in my room." (male high school student)

The image of being 'stranded' in a bedroom conveys confinement rather than a straightforward rejection of family members. That distinction is important: a household could remain supportive while prolonged co-residence generated frustration and reduced privacy. The lower family satisfaction mean in 2023 might therefore reflect accumulated tension, limits on independence or comparisons with life before restrictions, while leaving the family's supportive role intact. The single survey item cannot be distinguished among these experiences, which is why the qualitative account is useful as context rather than as proof of one mechanism.

Participants also described how the effects of isolation could continue after formal restrictions ended. Returning to face-to-face interaction was not always immediate or effortless, even when the opportunity for contact had returned.

> "At first it was fun, staying at home, playing video games or watching YouTube all day. But I got lonely. Yes, I was with my family and I could meeting my friends online, but I could not get out, you know, get away. . . And to me even more shocking - when lockdown ended and we could go out again, it was really hard to reconnect with people again. During those first days after (lockdown) I actually felt estranged." (female NEET)

This account unfolds over time. Staying home, playing games, and communicating online was manageable at first. Loneliness emerged as the period of restriction continued, and face-to-face interaction felt unfamiliar when lockdown ended. The experience illustrates how relational disruption could outlast the rules that initially produced it. It also clarifies why the existence of digital contact should not be treated as equivalent to a satisfying friendship life. Online communication maintained connection, but it did not necessarily restore spontaneity, shared physical settings, or ease in social interaction. The quotation is valuable precisely because it records this uneven movement from initial adaptation to loneliness and then to difficulty reconnecting.

Figure 4 makes clear that interpersonal trust did not move uniformly across social circles. Mean trust was lower in 2023 for immediate family members (4.67 versus 4.47), $t(2181) = 5.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.25$; extended family members (3.79 versus 3.41), $t(2185) = 8.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$; friends (4.20 versus 4.04), $t(2181) = 4.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.18$; and classmates, course mates, or work colleagues (3.12 versus 3.00), $t(2174) = 2.78$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.12$. Trust in neighbours moved in the other direction, increasing from 2.61 to 2.78, $t(2174) = -3.63$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.16$. Every standardised effect was small, though the difference for extended family

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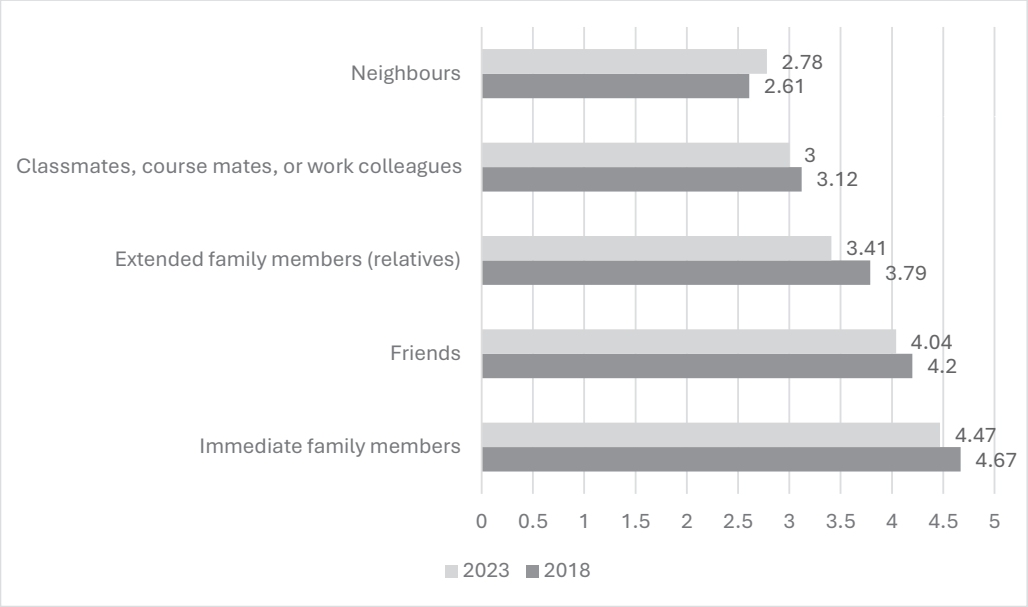


Figure 4: Comparison of interpersonal trust among Slovenian young people, 2018 and 2023

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

was larger in relative terms than the others. The pattern therefore does not support a general claim that trust eroded across all relationships.

The trust results qualify the decline observed in satisfaction. Immediate family and friends remained the two most trusted groups in both survey waves, despite modestly lower mean scores in 2023. The estimates describe shifts from relatively high starting points, rather than a collapse in confidence in close relationships. Neighbour trust increased, which might reflect experiences of local assistance, greater awareness of nearby residents or other developments between 2018 and 2023. The available items cannot distinguish between these possibilities and the focus groups do not provide systematic evidence on every trust category, so the most plausible interpretation is that trust changed differently across types of relationship and that each difference was small.

Discussion

From 2018 to 2023, political and relational indicators moved in different directions. Political interest and support for strong leadership were higher in the later survey, while satisfaction with family life and friendships was lower. Trust varied by relationship category rather than following one direction. These patterns occurred over the same five-year period, but simultaneity should not be mistaken for a causal connection. A repeated cross-sectional comparison cannot show that political attention increased because relational well-being declined, or that attention shifted from interpersonal life toward politics. The comparison is therefore most informative when the domains are examined side by side without treating one as the cause of the other.

Political attention and preferences for authority

The higher level of political interest in 2023 is consistent with research showing that crises can direct attention toward institutions whose decisions affect everyday life. During the pandemic, government decisions altered schooling, mobility, employment, and opportunities to meet other

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people. Several focus group participants recalled following politics more closely when rules seemed unclear or inconsistent. Rutar (2024) likewise describes a rise in political consciousness among Slovenian young people after 2018. Together, this evidence supports an interpretation of greater political attention at population level. It does not tell us whether young people approved of government performance, which political positions interested them, or whether attention translated into political action.

The rise in support for strong leadership is less straightforward to interpret than the distribution alone might suggest. During an emergency, a desire for clear rules and coordinated decisions may increase agreement with an item about a strong leader, especially when institutions appear slow or contradictory. Lowande and Rogowski (2021) show that crisis conditions can increase support for executive power, while Pizarro et al. (2024) link perceived instability with stronger preferences for controlling government. These studies identify mechanisms that could be relevant in Slovenia, but the survey did not measure perceived threat, institutional performance, or reactions to specific policies. The focus groups confirm that consistency and authority concerned some participants; they cannot account for the response distribution in the national sample.

Political interest and support for strong leadership were related within the 2023 survey, yet the association was small. Young people who closely follow politics may favour decisive leadership, oppose it, or hold an ambivalent position shaped by the issue at hand. The survey records an association between two attitudes but cannot distinguish these paths. Direct measures of democratic commitments, political efficacy, institutional trust, information use, and participation would be needed to explain how heightened interest relates to broader political orientations. Without such measures, it would be misleading to describe the association as evidence of a single political transformation.

Gender differences in 2023

Men in the 2023 sample reported high political interest more often than women. Although statistically clear, the association was small, and the analysis cannot identify its origin. Political socialisation, the perceived relevance of particular issues, exposure to political discussion, and differences in willingness to describe oneself as politically interested could all contribute. The result is best treated as a descriptive pattern that warrants closer analysis. It does not show that women have less political knowledge or participate less; neither outcome was measured by this item.

The remaining gender comparisons were considerably weaker. Men selected the strongest response in favour of a strong leader more often, but the overall five-category distribution did not differ significantly by gender. Family life satisfaction was also similar among male and female respondents. These results show why each outcome must be examined separately: a gender difference in self-reported political interest does not imply comparable differences in authority preferences or family well-being. Further analysis could test whether age, education, employment status, political efficacy or patterns of media use help explain the observed interest gap.

Relational well-being and social capital

Social capital is used here to interpret the relational findings. Satisfaction with family life and friendships, together with trust in specific groups, captures aspects of the interpersonal environments through which support and other resources may be available. These indicators remain narrower than a complete measure of network structure or accessible resources. Political interest and preferences for strong leadership are kept outside the social-capital framework and analysed as political orientations. This distinction follows the measures themselves and avoids

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assigning a social capital meaning to an attitude that the surveys measured separately.

The family life result indicates a small population-level difference rather than widespread family breakdown. Average satisfaction remained high in both years, even though the 2023 mean was lower. Focus group participants described a more ordinary and internally mixed form of relational strain: routines became crowded, privacy limited, parental monitoring felt intrusive and constant proximity became exhausting. Yet the same households could still offer practical help and emotional security. Campione-Barr et al. (2021) similarly found that positive close relationships supported adolescent adjustment during the pandemic, while negative relationship qualities added stress. Therefore, family support and lower satisfaction can coexist without contradiction.

The difference in friendship satisfaction was larger than the difference in family life satisfaction. This is plausible in a life stage when peer relationships depend heavily on shared settings and informal contact. Restrictions closed or transformed schools, universities, workplaces, leisure venues, and public spaces, making interaction more deliberate and more dependent on digital media. Participants spoke about becoming lonely during lockdown and finding it difficult to reconnect afterwards. Cooper et al. (2021) likewise associated loneliness and disrupted social relationships with poorer adolescent mental health. The present study cannot show that these experiences caused the lower 2023 mean, but the qualitative material identifies processes consistent with both the direction and the larger size of the friendship difference.

Interpersonal trust followed no single pattern. Mean trust was lower for immediate family, extended family, friends, and classmates or colleagues, but higher for neighbours. Every standardised difference was small. This variation supports a domain-specific account of social capital because close family ties, extended kinship, friendship, institutional acquaintances, and neighbourhood relations involve different expectations and opportunities for contact. Luo et al. (2022) also found that dimensions of social capital moved in different directions during lockdown. Combining the measures into one index of relational decline would conceal the increase in neighbour trust and flatten meaningful differences among social ties.

The effect sizes place these relational changes in proportion. The family life difference was small ($d = 0.25$), while the friendship difference was somewhat larger but remained small-to-moderate ($d = 0.37$). Absolute trust effects ranged from $d = 0.12$ to $d = 0.36$, with neighbour trust moving in the opposite direction from the remaining categories. Family co-residence could offer security while also producing tension, and greater political interest could reflect the practical importance of crisis governance without implying participation or democratic renewal. The evidence points to modest divergence across domains, not to a paradox that assumes political and relational attitudes should move together.

Statistical significance should also be considered alongside effect size. Most comparisons draw on more than two thousand valid observations, allowing small mean differences to be estimated precisely and to produce low p-values. Cohen's d places each difference against the variation within the two survey waves. Values ranging from 0.12 to 0.37 imply substantial overlap between the 2018 and 2023 distributions, which means that many young people in both samples gave similar answers. Friendship satisfaction shows the largest relational difference in this study, although it remains below a conventionally moderate effect. The pattern is consistent with disruption that affected young people unevenly rather than with a wholesale reorganisation of youth attitudes.

Mixed methods interpretation

The two sources of evidence address different parts of the research question. The surveys establish

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that political and relational indicators were distributed differently in 2018 and 2023. The focus groups show how some young people understood pandemic governance, disrupted routines, and altered relationships. Reading the components together gives social meaning to changes in percentages and means without turning a repeated cross-sectional comparison into a causal design. Across the political and relational measures, the evidence does not point to one unified shift in youth attitudes. It shows several changes whose direction and magnitude depended on the domain being examined.

Study limitations and implications

Several features of the study limit the conclusions that can be drawn. The survey modes differed, and small wording differences remained after harmonisation. Respondents sampled in 2018 and 2023 came from the same age-defined population, but they were not the same individuals. The estimates may reflect period effects, cohort composition, data collection mode, political developments, economic conditions, or other social changes between the waves. Online recruitment in 2023 may also have underrepresented young people with limited digital access. Weighting improves correspondence with known population benchmarks, but it cannot remove every source of selection or measurement difference.

The measures themselves are concise and leave important questions unanswered. Political interest does not show which sources respondents followed, what issues attracted their attention, or whether attention led to action. The strong leader item cannot distinguish a temporary preference for decisive crisis management from a more general authoritarian orientation. Single-item measures of satisfaction and trust summarise relationships that may contain support, conflict, obligation and ambivalence at the same time. Focus groups add detail to these measures, but purposive recruitment and retrospective discussion limit what can be said about prevalence, sequence, and timing.

These limitations do not remove the practical relevance of the findings. During prolonged disruption, youth services, schools, universities, and local institutions should treat access to peers and to spaces outside the household as part of relational well-being. Digital contact can help, but participants did not experience it as a full substitute for informal face-to-face interaction. Their repeated concern with uncertain rules also points to the value of clear and consistent public communication. These implications arise from the observed comparisons and participants' accounts, and should be tested directly in studies that measure policy exposure, communication quality, and evaluations of institutions.

Conclusion

This article compared political orientations and relational well-being among Slovenian young people surveyed in 2018 and 2023 and used focus group accounts to interpret the statistical differences. Political interest and support for strong leadership were higher in 2023, whereas satisfaction with family life and friendships was lower. The standardised relational differences were small or small-to-moderate. Interpersonal trust did not decline uniformly: mean trust was lower for several close and institutional relationships but higher for neighbours, and every difference was small. The most visible change in relational well-being concerned friendship satisfaction, although the two wave distributions still overlapped substantially.

The overall pattern is one of modest divergence across domains, not civic activation. Political interest is an attitude, and neither survey measured civic or political participation. Social capital is therefore applied to family ties, friendships, and trust, while political interest and support for strong leadership remain separate political

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orientations. Different survey modes, residual wording differences, and the repeated cross-sectional design prevent a causal claim that the pandemic produced these changes. Participants' accounts indicate that government decisions became unusually visible in everyday life and that restrictions disrupted ordinary social interaction. They help interpret the survey results without establishing a common experience or a tested mechanism.

Future research should measure political participation directly and distinguish it from political attention, institutional trust, democratic commitments, and preferences for decisive authority. Longitudinal studies could follow the same young people through periods of crisis and recovery, while repeated surveys could show whether the differences reported here persist or recede. More detailed measures of living arrangements, relationship quality, digital communication, and access to public space would help explain why family, friendship, and trust indicators moved differently. Careful cross-national comparison could then establish whether the Slovenian pattern appears in other institutional settings and under different pandemic policies. Such work would also help clarify whether the changes reported here were temporary responses or part of longer-term developments among young people.

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