

# THE MODERATION EFFECT OF ACTIVISM ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND POLITICAL ANXIETY IN DOMESTIC - ROMANIAN STUDENTS COMPARED TO ROMANIAN STUDENTS FROM DIASPORA

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**Abstract:** *This study looked at the moderation effect of activism on the relationship between psychological well-being and political anxiety. Data was collected between the two election points of the 2025 presidential election via a survey of Romanian college students doing their studies in their home country or abroad. Two moderation analyses were conducted to assess the correlation between the variables. Results showed activism was a significant positive predictor of both well-being and political anxiety when each were entered as the dependent, but there was no interaction effect between activism and psychological well-being or anxiety, when each were entered as the independent. We found no differences in moderation between the groups.*

**Key words:** political anxiety, psychological well-being, activism

## 1. Introduction

Political anxiety, as conceptualized by Weinschenk and Smith (2024), differs from the general type in that politics becomes the “uniquely salient source of worry and uncertainty, one that induces anxiety even in those who would not score highly on standard batteries of general anxiety”. Between June 2024 and June 2025, Romania experienced several political milestones: four elections (one postponed), the presidential inauguration, the formation of a new government, and the management of a growing budget deficit. In the context of the 2024 cancelled presidential elections in Romania, the level of anxiety concerning the political stage increased among the population (Momoc, 2025). These events can generate tension and anxiety within society. Conflict between group members (relatives, friends, coworkers, etc.), such as the one created within Romanian society by the political circumstances, is associated with poorer mental health (Johnson & Cionea, 2016). Therefore, it is important to assess how political anxiety is

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ultimately associated with mental health to further provide protective factors if needed. Activism comprises all “the ways in which people choose to express themselves” in society (Noris, 2004). For exclusion risk populations - especially students - this could act as a buffer against future mental problems (Hope et al., 2017). A particularly salient subgroup in the 2025 Romanian elections is represented by young adults, many of whom were first-time voters. Out of nearly 19 million registered voters, approximately one million cast their vote for the first time (G4Media Editorial Team, 2025). This group may lack prior experience navigating civic duties during political upheaval. Consequently, it becomes essential to examine how political anxiety and well-being are related for these emerging adults—especially students—who are just beginning to exercise their electoral rights- and how activism could help ease the stress. Another important segment is the Romanian diaspora, which accounted for roughly one million voters in 2025 (G4Media Editorial Team, 2025). International students within this group may perceive and process political stress differently than their domestic counterparts due to factors such as physical distance, cultural re-adaptation, and weaker social ties in the host country. Therefore, the baseline differences in appraisal of political anxiety, as well as even the relationship between political anxiety and well-being, may differ significantly between diaspora and local students, justifying a comparative approach.

This study is informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which posits that an individual's mental health is shaped by multiple layers of their environment. Viewed through this theoretical framework, the political instability in Romania during this election cycle represents a powerful macrosystemic stressor. The uncertainty which comes with political changes is associated with anxiety states (Dugas et al., 2001). Since political instability is associated with lower psychological well-being, a link between politics-caused anxiety and psychological well-being should be observed as well.

Grounded in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), political anxiety is conceptualized as an individual's psychological response to a situational stressor—in this case, the election. According to this model, stress is not determined solely by the external event, but by how that event is cognitively appraised and emotionally processed by the individual. To further extrapolate on this, media presented within the country and how distant the population feels to the issue, contributes to how individuals relate to the political problem (Vu et al., 2018). Diaspora might not be exposed unwillingly to such salient media. Therefore, Romanian citizens and Romanian citizens from diaspora might appraise differently the relationship between political anxiety caused by the election and their psychological well-being.

The Stress Process Theory (Thoits, 2006) explains how personal agency acts as a buffer towards distress, while also accounting for population differences in coping resources. Political activism is one's way of showing civic engagement. Thus, filtered through this model, activism should act as a buffer towards political anxiety, regardless of the system from which the individual experiences the political changes - homecountry, Romania, or diaspora.

Previous research by Manalo-Pedro et al. (2024) studied the relationship between anxiety symptomatology and perceived threat to family caused by political immigration status in students, as well as if this relationship is influenced by political engagement. They

found a significant association between family threat and anxiety, while a higher level of political engagement was found to reduce the strength of this association. Nevertheless, they only focused on anxiety as a component of psychological well-being. Held et al. (2025) accounts for this by studying the relationship between policy-related stress (during the Trump administration compared to the Biden administration) and mental health on multiple levels among first and second-generation immigrants in the U.S.A. Results found that during the Trump administration, policy-related stress increased and was negatively correlated with mental health. However, this relationship was tested only for adult populations. For young, first-time voters, the stress from casting their vote for the first time could add to the overall political anxiety and thus influence how this is visible for their psychological well-being. Ayyash-Abdo (2010) studied the influence of negative affect on subjective well-being in students during peace time compared to a politically tumultuous time. Results found that negative affect had a negative impact on subjective well-being. Moreover, no significant differences were found between the two periods of time. Another study (Khan et al., 2025) investigated the impact of political instability on psychological well-being in university students. They found political instability to significantly predict psychological well-being. Therefore, considering all previous literature, there is a research gap on the correlation between political anxiety and psychological well-being in Romanian university students.

This research paper studied the relationship between political anxiety and psychological well-being in the context of the 2025 presidential election in Romania among university students from the diaspora compared to those studying in the country. We also investigated if political activism could act as a buffer for the correlation between political anxiety and psychological well-being. To answer this research question, we ran two regression models (to test whether political activism moderated the relationship between political anxiety and well-being, and between well-being and political anxiety). Building on prior research on politics-induced anxiety and mental health, as well as on previously presented theories, we hypothesize that there is a negative correlation between political anxiety and psychological well-being and that this relation is being moderated by activism. Finally, we expect better moderation effects in domestic students compared to diaspora.

## 2.1. Data and procedure

The target population for the present study consisted of students of Romanian nationality doing their studies abroad or in Romania. The questionnaire was sent to multiple student associations in Romania (Organizația Studenților din Universitatea Babeș Bolyai – “Babeș Bolyai University Student Organization”, Sindicatul Studenților din Cibernetică – “Cybernetics Student Union”, Societatea Studenților la Medicină din București – “Medical Students Society of Bucharest”, Asociația Studenților la Litere - Universitatea București – “Association of Letters Students - University of Bucharest”) as well as to Romanian student associations from abroad (Liga Studenților Români din Strainătate – from Germany and The Netherlands). Sixty-two participants (40 females, 22 males, 19 - 28 years old,  $\mu = 20.71$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ , 30 from Romania, 32 from diaspora) took part in the study. The survey was open for completion from May 4th until May 18th, the

period between the two election rounds. The participants could complete the survey on their own, anytime during those two weeks. They had to read through the instructions, give consent, fill in the demographics and eventually answer the questionnaires for the variables in the following order: political anxiety, psychological well-being, activism.

## 2.2. Measures

### ***Psychological well-being***

The outcome variable, level of psychological well-being, was measured using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale -DASS 21 (Gomez, 2016), a 21-item self-report questionnaire that measures severity of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms over the previous week. Each item has a scale from 0 (*did not apply to me at all over the last week*) to 3 (*applied to me very much or most of the time over the past week*) (Gomez, 2016). For the three scales - depression, anxiety and stress (D, A, S)- the scores need to be summed up. This tool represents a shorter version of the DASS, a longer form of 42 items. Thus, the final score for each group (D, A, S) needs to be multiplied by two. For the DASS-21, the scores are rated as following: Depression (Normal: 0-4, Mild: 5-6, Moderate: 7-10, Severe: 11-13, Extremely Severe: 14+), Anxiety (Normal: 0-3, Mild: 4-5, Moderate: 6-7, Severe: 8-9, Extremely Severe: 10+), Stress (Normal: 0-7, Mild: 8-9, Moderate: 10-12, Severe: 13-16, Extremely Severe: 17+).

### ***Political anxiety***

For measuring the level of political anxiety, we used Smith et al.' (2023) political anxiety battery. The survey consists of eight items on general state-related anxiety, each being recorded on a scale from 1 (*no anxiety at all*) to 10 (*a great deal of anxiety*). Higher overall scores indicate a higher level of anxiety. The internal consistency found by the original authors was proved to be high for both waves for which the tool was tested - Cronbach's alpha of wave 1 = 0.89, Cronbach's alpha for wave 2 = 0.91. Moreover, the two waves were correlated with each other with  $r = 0.69$ .

### ***Activism***

The moderator, activism, was measured using a 14-item, two-part scale by Doolittle & Faul (2013). The first part consisted of 8 items assessing on a Likert scale how true/ how often (1 = *Not true at all/ Never*, 7 = *Very true/ Always*) participants engage in the following activities: (1) *I feel responsible for my community.*, (2) *I believe that I should make a difference in my community.*, (3) *I believe I have a responsibility to help the poor and hungry*, (4) *I am committed to contributing to my community*, (5) *I believe that all citizens have a responsibility to their community*, (6) *I believe that is important to be informed about community issues.*, (7) *I believe that it is important to volunteer*. (8) *I believe that it is important to support charitable organizations*. The second part focused solely on how often (1 = *Never*, 7 = *Always*) the participants find themselves in these situations: (1) *I am involved in structured volunteer work in the community*, (2) *When I work with others I make a positive difference in the community*, (3) *I help members of my community*, (4) *I stay informed about the events in my community*, (5) *I participate in discussions that raise issues of social responsibility*, (6) *I contribute to charities in the community*.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Group differences

Descriptive statistics

Table 1

	Anxiety		Activism		Well-being	
	Diaspora	România	Diaspora	România	Diaspora	România
N	32	30	32	30	32	30
M	0.011	-0.012	0.072	-0.077	-0.007	0.007
SD	1.460	1.259	1.302	1.002	0.653	0.628
Min	-5.270	-3.145	-3.765	-1.836	-0.810	-1.096
Max	1.980	1.730	1.806	1.521	1.904	1.42

Independent-samples Welch's *t*-tests were conducted to examine sex differences. Women ( $M = 7.94$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) reported significantly higher political anxiety than men ( $M = 6.75$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(31.66) = 3.25$ ,  $p = .003$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.96$ , 95% CI [0.41, 1.51]. No significant sex differences were found for well-being,  $t(36.01) = 0.84$ ,  $p = .404$ ,  $d = 0.24$ , or activism,  $t(31.42) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .192$ ,  $d = 0.40$ .

Domestic and diaspora students did not differ in political anxiety, well-being, or activism. For political anxiety, domestic students ( $M = 7.51$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) and diaspora students ( $M = 7.53$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) showed no significant difference,  $t(59.60) = -0.07$ ,  $p = .947$ ,  $d = -0.02$ . Well-being was also equivalent between groups,  $t(59.96) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .932$ ,  $d = 0.02$ , as was activism,  $t(57.85) = -0.51$ ,  $p = .614$ ,  $d = -0.13$ . A nonparametric Wilcoxon test confirmed that political anxiety did not differ significantly between domestic and diaspora students,  $W = 458.5$ ,  $p = .767$ .

#### 3.2. Moderation analyses

Two regression models tested whether political activism moderated the relationship between political anxiety and well-being, and conversely, between well-being and political anxiety. All predictors were mean-centered prior to analysis.

When well-being was entered as the dependent variable, the overall model was significant,  $F(3, 58) = 5.87$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .23$ . Activism was a significant positive predictor of well-being,  $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t = 2.71$ ,  $p = .009$ . Anxiety showed a positive but nonsignificant trend,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t = 1.83$ ,  $p = .072$ . The interaction between anxiety and activism was not significant,  $b = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t = 1.33$ ,  $p = .188$ .

When anxiety was entered as the dependent variable, the model was also significant,  $F(3, 58) = 9.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .32$ . Well-being was a significant positive predictor of anxiety,  $b = 0.59$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $t = 2.11$ ,  $p = .039$ , and activism likewise positively predicted anxiety,  $b = 0.42$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $t = 2.89$ ,  $p = .005$ . The well-being  $\times$  activism interaction was not significant,  $b = -0.38$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $t = -1.83$ ,  $p = .072$ .

### 3.3. Group differences in moderation

Three-way interaction models were conducted to test whether the moderation effects differed between domestic and diaspora students. When well-being was the dependent variable, the overall model was significant,  $F(7, 54) = 2.50, p = .027, R^2 = .24$ , but the three-way interaction of anxiety, activism, and group was not significant,  $b = 0.04, SE = 0.10, t = 0.38, p = .708$ . Similarly, when anxiety was the dependent variable, the model was significant,  $F(7, 54) = 3.67, p = .003, R^2 = .32$ , but the three-way interaction was not significant,  $b = -0.04, SE = 0.46, t = -0.08, p = .933$ . Thus, the hypothesized moderation effect of activism did not differ significantly between domestic and diaspora students.

### 3.4. Assumption checks

Regression assumptions were examined. Residuals were approximately normally distributed, Shapiro–Wilk  $Ws = 0.99$  and  $0.96$ ,  $ps = .90$  and  $.07$ , respectively, and Q–Q plots indicated only minor deviations. Homoscedasticity was supported by nonsignificant Breusch–Pagan tests,  $\chi^2(3) = 6.92, p = .075$ , and  $\chi^2(3) = 2.29, p = .514$ . Multicollinearity was not a concern, as all VIF values were  $< 1.6$ . For group comparisons, normality was met within most groups, apart from diaspora students' anxiety scores (Shapiro–Wilk  $p = .001$ ). However, results of nonparametric Wilcoxon tests confirmed the absence of group differences. Equality of variances was supported for group comparisons but violated for sex differences in anxiety,  $F(39, 21) = 0.45, p = .031$ ; therefore, Welch's  $t$ -test was used.

### 3.5. Outlier and robustness analyses

Influence diagnostics identified one influential case (Case 40), which exhibited high leverage and Cook's distance across both regression models. To assess robustness, models were re-estimated after excluding this case, and the results remained substantively unchanged. In the well-being model, activism remained a significant predictor,  $b = 0.20, p = .010$ , while the anxiety  $\times$  activism interaction was again nonsignificant,  $b = 0.08, p = .192$ . In the anxiety model, activism remained significant,  $b = 0.32, p = .035$ , and the well-being  $\times$  activism interaction remained nonsignificant,  $b = -0.11, p = .646$ . Robust regression analyses (rlm) confirmed these results, with activism significantly predicting higher well-being and anxiety, and well-being significantly predicting higher anxiety. Likewise, heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors (HC3) yielded consistent results. Taken together, these analyses indicate that the findings are robust to influential cases and heteroscedasticity.

### 3.6. Johnson–Neyman analyses

Although the overall interaction terms were not statistically significant in the regression models, we conducted Johnson–Neyman analyses to further probe the conditional effects of anxiety and well-being across levels of political activism. This approach yielded results

that both complement and slightly nuance the regression findings. For the model predicting well-being, the Johnson–Neyman technique confirmed that political anxiety was not a significant predictor of well-being at any observed level of activism. This aligns with the nonsignificant interaction in the regression model, reinforcing the conclusion that activism does not moderate the association between anxiety and well-being. In contrast, for the model predicting anxiety, the Johnson–Neyman analysis revealed a more conditional pattern. Specifically, well-being significantly predicted higher levels of anxiety when activism scores were below the sample mean, whereas the effect of well-being on anxiety became nonsignificant as activism increased. This suggests that political activism may buffer or weaken the positive association between well-being and anxiety—a finding that, while only marginal in the regression model, provides a complementary perspective when considering the role of activism. Taken together, these results suggest that although the regression models showed limited evidence of moderation, the Johnson–Neyman technique highlights the possibility that activism functions as a protective factor, attenuating the link between well-being and political anxiety, particularly among students with lower levels of activism.

#### 4. Discussion

This research paper studied the relationship between political anxiety and psychological well-being in domestic Romanian students compared to Romanian students from diaspora. We also investigated if activism moderates the correlation between the two variables. It was hypothesized that there is a negative relationship between political anxiety and psychological well-being, and, moreover, that this correlation is being moderated by activism. Results showed that activism was a significant positive predictor of both well-being and political anxiety when each were entered as the dependent, but there was no interaction effect between activism and psychological well-being or anxiety, when each were entered as the independent. Finally, we hypothesized better moderation effects in domestic students compared to diaspora. However, results showed no difference between the two groups.

Some findings were not supported by theory. It was expected to see better moderation effects of activism in students doing their studies in Romania compared to those doing it abroad. No difference between the two groups was found. According to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), these results are not in line with the anticipated effect of media consumption on stress appraisal. One explanation might be that our international sample consisted of students from the Netherlands and Germany. These are two of the four countries in the European Union that have a tradition of policy-making in media literacy (Cernison & Ostling, 2017). Thus, Romanians studying in the Netherlands or Germany could have cultivated the skills and the interest to delve deeper into the Romanian media and stay informed. Consequently, this could have led to no differences between domestic and diaspora students in how media consumption influences the need to act on stress by engaging in civic acts.

#### **4.1. Limitations**

There are some limitations to this study. Regardless of working with political anxiety and measuring the variables in a political context, we opted for activism as a general concept for the moderation effect. However, political activism could be an effective moderator in the relationship between political anxiety and psychological well-being. Relatedly, the tool we used to assess activism had no political undertone. Participants were rather asked about their engagement in the community as a general activity, but not in a political manner. The Johnson - Neyman probing indicated that the effect of well-being on anxiety was present only at lower levels of activism. This finding, suggesting a possible protective role of activism, could further be explored by future research and tested for political activism.

Because data were collected during an election cycle, participants were likely experiencing heightened political salience and ambient exposure to campaign content (news, social media, interpersonal discussion). This “election-season lift” may inflate levels of anxiety, activism, and even self-reported well-being (via collective efficacy or mobilization), potentially biasing means and attenuating—or artificially producing—associations among variables. In other words, the observed relations may reflect short-term reactivity to an exceptional media environment rather than stable dispositions, limiting external validity to non-election periods. Moreover, unmeasured confounds tied to the context (e.g., volume/valence of media exposure, perceived electoral stakes, local events) could differentially affect subgroups and mimic moderation.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Considering all, this study aims to elevate the current understanding of the complex intricacies underlying the realm of complex interactions responsible for political attitudes and behavior, an endeavor especially relevant in an increasingly tense political climate. It is important to reiterate that the study did not find political engagement as a moderator for the relationship between political anxiety and general well-being. Further research, thus, could focus on expanding the knowledge and validating the current findings in several ways. Including a larger sample, changing the moment of measurement relative to the elections (testing different baselines) or adding more than one time of measurement (adding temporal perspective) or exploring even more the bidirectional relationship and the feedback loop happening between political anxiety and general well-being. Even though the lack of significant results clearly indicates that there is no support for potential interventions based on this model, with well-being significantly predicting higher levels of anxiety when activism scores were below the sample mean are still worth exploring. This pattern may reflect a context-specific phenomenon, such as “anxious engagement,” in which students with higher well-being are also more attuned and reactive to political uncertainty. Investigating this detail further is relevant because it may uncover how well-being and anxiety can co-occur in politicized environments, and how activism

potentially transforms anxiety from a distressing state into a mobilizing or buffered experience, thus touching the overarching scope of interventions tailored for students.

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