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Research Project

“We Are Only Fighting Against Something”: Queer Political Participation in Contemporary Germany

Submitted by:

Frederike Sporleder
MA Political Science
4. Semester

Student Email Address: s8829146@stud.uni-frankfurt.de

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1. Introduction

Political participation is often associated with formal and visible forms of engagement, such as voting, party membership, demonstrations, activism, or participation in civil society organisations (Hunklinger 2022: 21, 27). However, this understanding can overlook forms of political practice that are less institutionalised, more everyday, or shaped by unequal access to safety, visibility, resources, and recognition. This is particularly relevant for queer people, whose political participation may be closely connected to experiences of marginalisation, belonging, visibility, self-protection, and everyday negotiation (Brodersen et al. 2025: 1-3, 10-14; Chan/Mak 2021: 5-6, 9).

In Germany, LGBTQIA+ rights and queer visibility have become increasingly present in public and political discourse. Legal reforms, Pride symbols, and broader cultural representation have contributed to a stronger visibility of queer lives (Hunklinger 2022: 12-18; Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 6-7). At the same time, these developments are accompanied by anti-gender discourse, right-wing mobilisation, hostility toward trans and non-binary people, and renewed debates about the legitimacy of queer rights (Hunklinger 2022: 18, 48; Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 6-7). This creates an ambivalent political context in which queer people may experience both recognition and insecurity as well as both increased visibility and intensified backlash.

Against this background, this research project examines queer people in Germany participate politically. The analytical focus of this research is guided by the following question: How do queer individuals in Germany experience, interpret, and navigate political participation in everyday life under contemporary political conditions?

This question is used as an analytical orientation rather than as a hypothesis. It allows the analysis to remain open to interview participants' own meanings while focusing on the relationship between queerness, political participation, and contemporary political conditions.

Empirically, the research project is based on five qualitative interviews with queer participants living primarily in Frankfurt and the surrounding area. It does not aim to provide a representative account of LGBTQIA+ political participation in Germany as a whole. Instead, it offers an

exploratory contextually grounded analysis of situated experiences in urban and semi-urban German contexts.

The project is structured as follows. First, the theoretical and conceptual background introduces relevant debates on political participation, queer politics, visibility, and backlash. The methodology section then explains the research design and analytical approach. The findings and analysis chapter presents the main themes developed from the interviews. Finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on what these findings suggest about queer political participation in contemporary Germany.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Political participation is frequently defined in terms of formal and institutional practices, including voting, party membership, involvement in trade unions, engagement with non-governmental organizations, signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, and contacting politicians (Hunklinger 2021: 21–22; Hunklinger 2022: 21, 27; Daoust et al. 2024: 1, 4). These forms remain important because they allow marginalised groups to voice interests, make claims, and seek representation (Hunklinger 2022: 9–20; Reynolds/LGBT Representation and Rights Initiative 2013: 25).

At the same time, queer political participation cannot be reduced to these institutional forms. Sexuality and gender identity are not merely private characteristics, but politically relevant dimensions of social life. Hunklinger argues that German political science has paid relatively little attention to queer people and their political participation, attitudes, and voting behaviour, making them largely invisible as political subjects (Hunklinger 2022: 7–8). Sexuality is connected to gender, race, and class and influences and shapes how people organise, what they believe, and how they participate politically (Hunklinger 2022: 7). This broader understanding is supported by research that conceptualises political participation as taking place both inside and outside institutions, for example through “invited” and “invented” spaces of participation (Triangle Project et al. 2018: 4, 11). Chan and Mak similarly distinguish between public and private collective action, showing that political participation can also take interpersonal and

everyday forms, such as challenging heterosexist language or discussing LGBTQIA+ rights with loved ones (Chan/Mak 2021: 5–6, 9).

This broader perspective is especially relevant for queer politics because queer agency often emerges in everyday negotiations of identity, visibility, and self-definition. Brodersen et al. argue that young queer people become political actors through their struggles over visibility, coming-out, and challenging established heteronormative expectations (Brodersen et al. 2025: 1–3). The term “queer” can therefore function both as self-description and as political practice, enabling alliance-building, norm critique, and claims to recognition (Brodersen et al. 2025: 2, 10–14).

Visibility is central to queer politics, but also deeply ambivalent. It can enable recognition, authenticity, self-determination, belonging, and political claims-making (Brodersen et al. 2025: 1–2, 5–7; Hunklinger 2022: 18–20). Historically, queer visibility has supported political organisation, for instance, through gay and lesbian movements in West Germany and CSD demonstrations (Hunklinger 2022: 12–14). Community spaces, role models, and media representation can also help young queer people recognise themselves and experience their identities as legitimate and liveable (Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 16–17). At the same time, visibility produces vulnerability. Brodersen et al. describe queer visibility as having a “double character” meaning that it can promise recognition while exposing queer people to misunderstanding, exclusion, pressure, or even violence (Brodersen et al. 2025: 5–6). Similarly, Ayoub and Rainer argue that public queer visibility can create solidarity and recognition, but may also generate backlash if it is not locally grounded or context-sensitive (Ayoub/Rainer 2025: 2, 11–13).

This ambivalence becomes especially visible in the context of backlash and anti-gender discourse. Recent scholarship challenges linear narratives of inevitable progress in queer rights: progress and backlash often coexist (Ayoub/Page 2019: 696, 698; Page et al. 2022: 1165–1166). Political homophobia can mobilise opponents of LGBTQIA+ rights, especially when state policies or political actors frame queer rights as a threat to traditional values (Ayoub/Page 2019: 696–699; Page et al. 2022: 1174–1175). In Germany, the AfD has used LGBTQIA+ rights and especially trans issues as an “ideal battleground” while framing queer issues as private matters rather than political questions (Hunklinger 2022: 18, 48). Gavranić and Stemmer similarly describe a paradoxical situation in which legal and cultural gains coexist with right-wing

mobilisation against gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, and especially trans people (Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 6–7).

Political fatigue can be understood as one possible response to this climate, although not as simple apathy. Collective action can create hope, empowerment, and agency, but also frustration and despair when institutions remain unresponsive (Chan/Mak 2021: 8). At the same time, activism and community participation can function as coping strategies by creating a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, meaning, and a sense of being able to act (Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 17, 23–24; Chan/Mak 2021: 8).

Finally, queer political participation must be understood intersectionally. Queer communities are not homogeneous political subjects: gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and other queer people differ in background, political attitudes, voting behaviour, resources, and forms of engagement (Hunklinger 2022: 27–29, 105; Wurthmann 2024: 574–575, 580–583). Queer people can be marginalised through sexuality or gender identity while simultaneously being privileged through whiteness, masculinity, class, education, or citizenship (Hunklinger 2022: 106). These differences also shape access to political participation, since race, education, employment, services, and resources structure how LGBTQIA+ people can engage politically (Triangle Project et al. 2018: 1–3). Gavranić and Stemmer stress that LGBTQIA+ youth also differ by age, rural or urban location, gender identity, sexuality, class, racism, poverty, disability, migration, and even refugee status (Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 4–5, 31). Internal community differences, therefore, matter politically, especially because anti-gender, anti-trans, racist, or assimilationist discourses can also be reproduced by queer subjects themselves (Hunklinger 2022: 94–95, 105–106).

3. Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This research project follows a qualitative, exploratory and contextualised research design. It examines how queer individuals in Germany experience, interpret and navigate political

participation in everyday life. Rather than measuring participation through predefined indicators such as voting behaviour, party membership or protest attendance, the project approaches political participation as a situated meaning-making practice.

Germany was selected as the empirical context because recent legal reforms and increased queer visibility coexist with anti-gender discourse, anti-trans mobilisation and right-wing backlash. This makes Germany a relevant case for analysing queer political participation under ambivalent political conditions. Empirically, the research project is situated primarily in Frankfurt am Main and the surrounding urban and semi-urban areas. It does not aim to compare different German regions or national cases. While a comparative design was initially considered, the final project prioritised depth, feasibility and contextual coherence over comparison.

3.2 Sampling, Recruitment and Participants

The empirical material consists of five semi-structured interviews with queer participants between their early twenties and early thirties. Participants differed in terms of gender identity, sexual identity, political background, forms of engagement and relationships to queer community and political spaces. Recruitment took place through personal and extended networks and was shaped by availability, trust and participants' comfort with the topic.

The sample is not intended to be representative of queer people in Germany. Instead, it allows for close qualitative attention to lived experience and meaning-making. The relatively narrow age range and the participants' connections to urban, academic, activist or politically aware environments shape the perspectives represented in the research project. This limits the analysis with regard to older queer generations, rural contexts and people with less access to academic or activist networks. One additional interview was excluded after the participant expressed discomfort with the use of their statements, reflecting the project's commitment to voluntary participation and participant control over their data.

Overview of interview participants:

Interview	Participant	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Age group
Interview 1	Participant 1	Non-binary/ Genderqueer	Queer	20s

Interview	Participant	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Age group
Interview 2	Participant 2	No gender	Lesbian	20s
Interview 3	Participant 3	Cis-gender man	Bisexual	30s
Interview 4	Participant 4	Cis-gender man	Gay	20s
Interview 5	Participant 5	Cis-gender woman	Bisexual/Queer	20s

3.3 Interview Design and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. This format was chosen because it allowed the research to follow a common thematic structure while leaving space for participants' own meanings, experiences and priorities. The interview guide covered everyday life, understandings of political participation, engagement and disengagement, queerness and political experience, perceptions of the current political climate, safety in political spaces, differences within queer communities and strategies of coping or response.

The interview guide was developed in English, but the interviews were conducted in German to allow participants to express themselves more comfortably and precisely. Since the thesis is written in English, interview excerpts used in the analysis were translated by the researcher. In some cases, statements are quoted directly in translated form; in others, they are paraphrased in English. Slight shifts in wording, tone or nuance may therefore occur, but care was taken to preserve the meaning and analytical relevance of the original German statements as closely as possible. Paraphrased material from the interviews is cited in the same way as direct quotations, using interview number and transcript position.

The full interview guide is included in the appendix.

3.4 Methodology

This research uses a modified grounded theory-informed thematic analysis. The approach combines elements of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory with Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. This methodological choice reflects the exploratory aim of the

project: rather than testing a predefined hypothesis, the research project seeks to develop an explorative and interpretative understanding of how queer individuals in Germany experience, interpret and navigate political participation in their everyday lives.

A classic grounded theory approach was initially considered because of its openness to emergent findings and its suitability for developing concepts from qualitative data.

Grounded theory is commonly understood as an inductive and systematic qualitative research approach in which data collection and analysis are closely connected and in which theoretical categories are developed through engagement with empirical material (Mohajan/Mohajan 2022: 1–2). Initially this approach was useful for this project because the research started with a broader interest in queer political participation rather than with a fixed explanatory model. Grounded theory also offered useful analytical principles, particularly coding, memo-writing, comparison across cases and openness to emerging patterns (Mohajan/Mohajan 2022: 11–12).

However, this project does not apply grounded theory in its full classical sense. A full grounded theory study would require a more extensive and iterative research design, including simultaneous data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling and the refinement of emerging analytic categories (Mohajan/Mohajan 2022: 11–12). Given the scope of this project, the limited number of interviews and the focus on producing a thematic analysis rather than a fully developed substantive theory, a complete classic grounded theory would have exceeded the scale of the project. Instead, it draws selectively on grounded theory principles while using reflexive thematic analysis as the main analytical framework.

Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory was particularly relevant because it understands research as interpretative, situated and reflexive rather than as the neutral discovery of objective categories (Charmaz 2017: 34). Charmaz argues that constructivist grounded theory encourages researchers to ask questions about the data and to scrutinise both the researcher and the research process. In contrast to more objectivist versions of grounded theory it situates the research process and its outcomes within historical, social, and situational contexts (Charmaz 2017: 34). This is especially appropriate for a study of queer political participation, because interview participants' accounts are shaped by power relations, political discourse, social location and the wider conditions under which queer lives become visible, vulnerable or politicised.

Charmaz's emphasis on reflexivity and "methodological self-consciousness" (Charmaz 2017: 36) is also important for this research project. She argues that researchers should critically examine their own positions, privileges and priorities, and consider how these shape the research process and their relationships with interview participants (Charmaz 2017: 36). This supports the project's reflexive approach to interviewing, coding and interpretation, especially because the research deals with politically sensitive questions of queerness, marginalisation, belonging and political agency.

The main analytical structure, however, follows Braun et al.'s reflexive thematic analysis. Braun et al. describe thematic analysis as a family of methods that uses coding and theme generation to analyse qualitative data, with developed themes capturing patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun et al. 2022: 20). Reflexive thematic analysis was suitable for this study because it allowed the analysis to remain flexible and interpretative while still providing a clear structure for moving from coded interview material to broader analytical themes.

The analysis followed Braun et al.'s six phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, reviewing and developing themes, refining, defining and naming themes and finally producing the research report (Braun et al. 2022: 28). The process began with repeated familiarisation with the interview material. After the interviews had been transcribed and prepared for analysis in MAXQDA, the transcripts were read and reviewed several times. During this phase, initial notes and memos were written to record early impressions, possible patterns and analytical questions. Braun et al. describe familiarisation as the process of getting to know the data through reading and re-reading, while making notes on aspects that appear interesting or analytically relevant for the project (Braun et al. 2022: 28).

The next step in the research process was the coding of the interview material. The interviews were coded in MAXQDA using an initially broad coding tree. This coding tree was not fixed in advance, but was developed throughout and with the coding process. Codes were renamed, expanded, merged and reorganised as new analytical insights emerged from the material. This iterative process reflects the grounded-theory-informed character of the analysis: coding was not treated as a mere mechanical act of sorting data, but as an ongoing interpretative process in which the meaning of codes was repeatedly reconsidered in relation to the wider dataset. Braun

et al. similarly define coding as a close reading practice in which the researcher tags data that capture aspects relevant for the research with code labels (Braun et al. 2022: 28).

After coding, the analysis moved into the initial generation of themes. Codes were compared, clustered and then re-clustered again in order to identify broader patterns of meaning across the five interviews. Braun et al. describe this phase of grouping similar codes in order to explore possible patterns of shared meaning organised around a core concept (Braun et al. 2022: 28). The initial themes were then reviewed against the coded segments and the full dataset. This led to further refinement, including the merging of overlapping ideas, the clarification of theme boundaries and the development of more precise analytical arguments for each theme. Braun et al. stress that the process of reviewing and developing themes entails evaluating whether themes effectively encapsulate patterns in connection with both coded data and the entire dataset, while also taking into account the analytical narrative represented by each theme (Braun et al. 2022: 28).

The final themes were then refined, defined and named. This phase in thematic analysis, according to Braun et al., is where researchers delineate the extent and core concept of every theme and choose labels that capture the interpretative narrative of the analysis (Braun et al. 2022: 28, 32). The five themes presented in the findings chapter are therefore not simply descriptive categories, but interpretative patterns that organise the central analytical story of the project. They capture different but connected dimensions of queer political participation: expanded meanings of participation, visibility and safety, political backlash, fatigue and coping, and differences within queer communities. The process of theme development was recursive rather than linear, as later insights sometimes led to reconsideration of earlier codes or theme boundaries. This is consistent with Braun et al.'s argument that thematic analysis often involves moving back and forth between phases rather than following a strictly linear procedure (Braun et al. 2022: p. 32).

Throughout the research process, memo-writing also played a crucial role. Memos were used to record emerging interpretations, tensions between interviews, possible analytical arguments and links between codes. This was informed by grounded theory, where memo-writing is commonly understood as a way of developing and clarifying analytic ideas during the research process (Mohajan/Mohajan 2022: 11–12). Charmaz also emphasises the importance of close reading,

initial coding and the ongoing refinement of analysis in constructivist grounded theory, especially because these practices help researchers develop more precise and critical interpretations (Charmaz, 2017: p. 41).

The research question functioned as an analytical focus rather than as a classic research question. The research was guided by the question of how queer individuals in Germany experience, interpret and navigate political participation in everyday life under contemporary political conditions. However, the analysis remained open to participants' own meanings and to themes that became visible through the coding process. This reflects Charmaz's argument that constructivist grounded theory is well suited to beginning with a broad research topic and following more specific questions that arise from the field (Charmaz, 2017: p. 39).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The research involved sensitive topics, such as sexuality, gender identity, experiences of marginalisation, political fear, and community conflict. For this reason, ethical considerations were central throughout the research process. Participation for the interviews was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before each interview, and participants were informed that they could refuse to answer questions or withdraw from the study. All interviews were anonymised, and identifying details were removed or generalised. Exact ages are not provided; instead, participants are described only through broad age ranges.

The analysis avoids unnecessary exposure of participants' personal details and focuses on their accounts only insofar as they are relevant to the research. The interview material is cited using anonymised interview numbers and transcript positions.

The exclusion of one interview after the participant expressed discomfort with publication further reflects the project's commitment to participant autonomy and care.

3.6 Scope and Limitations

Several limitations follow from this research design. The sample is small and not representative of queer people in Germany. Participants are relatively young and primarily located in urban or

semi-urban environments, with several having connections to university, activist or politically aware spaces. The project therefore cannot make general claims about all gender and sexual minorities in Germany and does not systematically compare different regions, generations or identity groups.

However, these limitations are consistent with the exploratory and interpretative aim of the research project. The value of the material lies not in statistical representativeness, but in the depth with which participants reflect on political participation, safety, visibility, backlash, fatigue and community. It therefore offers context-sensitive insights into how queer individuals make sense of political participation under contemporary political conditions

4. Findings and Analysis

The analysis identifies five central themes that structure how the participants experience, interpret, and practise political participation. Across the interviews, political participation is not understood as a single formal act, but as a situated and uneven practice shaped by identity, capacity, safety, political climate, community, and everyday life. The participants move between institutional engagement, embodied visibility, low-threshold practices, defensive politics, fatigue, and solidarity. Rather than presenting queer political participation as either active or inactive, the findings show how participants continuously negotiate what forms of engagement are meaningful, accessible, safe, and sustainable under contemporary political conditions.

4.1 Expanding Political Participation: From Formal Institutions to Everyday Practice

Across the interviews, political participation is understood as much broader than voting, party politics, or demonstrations. Formal politics remains important for several participants, especially those involved in parties, student/university politics, unions, or local institutions. However, none of the participants reduce participation to these formal arenas. Instead, they describe political participation as something that also takes place in everyday conversations, family contexts, educational spaces, professional work, social media, and embodied forms of queer visibility. This broader understanding is captured particularly clearly by participant 4, who argues that “one

cannot be unpolitical” and that participation begins when someone tries to make a political difference in conversation, including among friends or family (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 14). Political participation is therefore not presented as one fixed activity, but as a situated practice shaped by capacity, biography, identity, institutional access, and responsibility.

This broader understanding becomes especially visible in the contrast between participants who are institutionally embedded and those who define participation through more accessible or everyday practices. Participant 1 offers the clearest critique of normative models of participation. The participant describes the need to define political participation in a way that includes people who “do not have so many capacities to go to demonstrations or help in political organisations” (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 6). For them, informing oneself, exchanging with friends, and speaking up in family contexts already constitute meaningful political acts (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 6–8). In contrast, participants 3 and 4 are more strongly connected to institutional politics through unions, student politics, party work, and local political structures (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 6, 10, 14; Interview 4 2026: Pos. 6). Yet, these participants do not understand participation only institutionally. Participant 4, for example, connects formal political work with everyday attempts to convince others or intervene in political conversations (Interview 4 2016: Pos. 14).

The role of voting illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Some participants describe voting as a necessary minimum, while others view it as insufficient or even passive if it becomes a way of delegating political responsibility to representatives and institutions. This difference is analytically important because it shows that even among politically engaged queer participants, formal democratic participation carries different meanings. Voting may be understood as a basic civic duty, as one element amongst many others, or as too limited unless accompanied by more active, collective, or resistant forms of engagement.

The interviews also show that participation is closely connected to identity and self-positioning, but not reducible to individual identity. In interview 2 the participant describes queer existence and gender-nonconforming embodiment as political in itself, stating that their “mere existence” is already a form of political activism (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 24). At the same time, several participants move beyond self-oriented understandings of politics. Participant 3 describes using a relatively comfortable position to act in solidarity with others (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 32), while participant 4 describes a shift toward “fighting more for other people” rather than acting only

from an individual perspective (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 16). Participant 5 connects present possibilities to earlier queer struggles, explaining that they would not have the possibilities they have today without the work and dedication of earlier activists (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 76). Overall, this theme points out that queer political participation operates across multiple scales: the body, the family, the university, the workplace, social media, political institutions, and collective movements.

4.2 Queerness, Visibility and Safety: Recognition, Risk, and Strategic Navigation

Queer visibility emerges as one of the most important but also most ambivalent dimensions of the interviews. Visibility can create recognition, belonging, identity formation, and political agency. It allows the participants to feel seen, to imagine liveable queer futures, and to enter spaces where they do not have to hide or explain themselves. At the same time, visibility also exposes the participants to risk, self-consciousness, surveillance, and potential hostility. The interviews therefore complicate any simple celebration of visibility. Being visible as queer can be empowering, but it can also require careful and strategic navigation.

This ambivalence is shaped by how differently the participants are read in everyday life. Some are only perceived as queer when they disclose their identity or are visibly affectionate with their partner in public. Participant 4, for instance, reflects on their relatively privileged position as a gay cisgender man because others usually only know they are gay when they say so or when they hold hands with their partner in public (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 30). Yet even this limited visibility can become a source of fear: they describe consciously avoiding certain forms of public affection because “something could always happen”, including verbal or physical violence (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 30). Others describe their gender expression, clothing, hairstyle, body language, or public presence as making them visibly queer or gender-nonconforming. In interview 2 the participant gives the strongest account of this embodied dimension of visibility, describing their appearance in non-queer spaces as a way of questioning existing structures (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 24). Their presence itself becomes political because it makes norms visible and unsettles them.

At the same time, visibility can become risky depending on the space. Participant 1 describes remaining closeted as genderqueer in a cis-normative women's association because the space does not feel safe enough for them to come out (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 14). Here, invisibility is not simply a lack of recognition, but also a strategy of self-protection. Participant 2 similarly describes being read as male in public as sometimes protective, while also worrying that a situation could become dangerous if someone reads them as female and interprets their appearance through a hostile political "enemy image" (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 104). Visibility is therefore not merely symbolic; it is bodily, spatial, and situational.

Representation plays a similarly ambivalent role. In interviews 3 and 5 the participants describe queer representation in media, music, film, and television as important for their identity formation and crucial for their coming out. Participant 5 explains that queer media representation helped them gather the courage to come out (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 38), while participant 3 describes queer media and music as helping them feel more comfortable in their own identity over time (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 56–58). However, participant 5 also criticises representation when it becomes detached from material politics. They argue that representation can be "corrupted", for example when corporations or military-related actors appear at Pride events (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 38). This not only shows that representation matters, but also that not all representation has the same political meaning. The question is not only whether queer people are visible, but who is made visible, under what conditions, and for what purpose.

Furthermore, the interviews also reject the assumption that queer, leftist, or progressive spaces are automatically safe. Participant 1 describes queer spaces that fail to include disabled and neurodivergent people (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 14), while participant 2 criticises masculine dominance and heteronormativity in some leftist spaces and therefore feels more drawn toward FLINTA spaces (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 58). Participant 4 also discusses misgendering within a queer activist network, describing it as especially painful because the space was supposed to offer protection especially for marginalised individuals (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 71–73). Safety is therefore not simply a property of a space, but something produced through actual practices of recognition, accessibility, respect, and accountability. Overall, this theme shows that queer visibility functions as both a resource and a risk for safety.

4.3 Political Climate, Backlash and Defensive Politics

All participants describe the contemporary political climate in Germany as marked by an unstable coexistence of queer integration and anti-queer backlash. Legal reforms, public visibility, Pride symbols, and institutional inclusion have made queer lives more visible and, in some respects, more recognised in politics and society. At the same time, these gains are experienced as fragile, delayed, incomplete, and increasingly contested. Participant 5 summarises this ambivalence particularly clearly by describing Germany as “a country where many things happened much too late” (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 72). The interviews therefore do not tell a simple story of either progress or regression. Rather, participants describe a contradictory political moment in which queer rights and visibility have expanded, while anti-queer hostility has also become more normalised, especially in right-wing environments.

An additional central pattern across the interviews is the sense that queer politics has become increasingly defensive. Participants describe a political situation in which rights and forms of visibility that seemed already achieved must now be defended again. This becomes especially clear in interview 4, where the participant states that queer politics has returned to a point where people are “defending things that we had actually already fought for” (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 12). Political participation is therefore experienced less as the expansion of new possibilities and more as the prevention of regression, symbolic erasure, and right-wing normalisation. This is also reflected in the participant’s statement that “we are only fighting against something now and no longer as strongly for something” (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 52).

Moreover, the interviews locate political backlash on several levels. Participants mention far-right rhetoric, conservative shifts, anti-gender discourse, media debates, institutional resistance, symbolic conflicts, bureaucratic obstruction, and increasing fear of violence. Participant 3 strongly emphasises the role of public discourse and media framing. They describe the current climate as “very hostile” (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 60) and argues that queerness is repeatedly debated in negative ways by political parties, in media, and in talk shows (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 62). This constant public questioning is experienced as hostile because it normalises the idea that queer lives are up for debate. Participant 2 adds an institutional dimension by describing how

AfD parliamentary inquiries into LGBTQIA+ inclusion work created extensive bureaucratic work and contributed to self-censorship in professional queer-political contexts (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 90). Backlash is therefore not only loud and discursive; it can also operate through administrative pressure and institutional obstruction.

Anti-trans discourse appears as a particularly important site of contemporary backlash as well. Several participants describe trans, non-binary, and inter people as especially targeted. Participant 1 experiences news about increasing hostility toward trans and non-binary people as frightening and emotionally overwhelming (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 20) and participant 2 even describes trans people as being used as scapegoats in right-wing politics (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 94–96). In interview 3 the participant argues that more marginalised queer groups are often attacked first, stating that “it is always trans people, non-binary people, inter people who are thrown under the bus” first (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 80). Participant 5 further points to the continuing restrictions around trans healthcare and medical access (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 74). Across the interviews, anti-trans politics is therefore not treated as a separate issue, but as central to the future of queer rights in general.

At the same time, the political climate produces different responses in the interviews. For some participants, it leads to anxiety, overload, and a feeling of fatigue; for others, it creates a sense of urgency for action and renewed motivation to organise. Participant 1 describes fear and panic in response to anti-trans hostility (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 20), while participant 2 argues that now is precisely the moment to organise and resist withdrawal (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 86–88). Participant 5 similarly describes the hostile climate as motivating rather than demoralising because current rights are understood as an inheritance from earlier struggles (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 76). Overall, this theme shows that queer political participation takes place under conditions of fragility. The participants experience rights, visibility, and safety as neither absent nor secure.

4.4 Fatigue, Withdrawal and Coping Strategies

Political participation is not described as stable or linear by any of the participants in the interviews. Instead, the interviews show cycles of engagement, exhaustion, withdrawal, and renewed motivation. Political fatigue emerges from multiple sources: information overload,

negative media discourse, fear of violence, frustration with political institutions, perceived inefficacy, shame about not doing enough, and the emotional burden of constant backlash. The participants do not simply describe themselves or others as politically active or inactive. Rather, they show how engagement fluctuates depending on personal resources, political context, social support, and perceived possibilities for change.

A central finding is that withdrawal should not be understood as simple apathy. The participants often withdraw from political participation because they are overwhelmed, afraid, exhausted, or trying to protect themselves. Participant 1 shows this most clearly. They describe daily political news as “extremely overwhelming” due to the constant stream of new information, which they say is difficult for them to process daily (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 6). Social media, especially TikTok in this case, is described as a concentrated source for bad news that can weaken their political engagement (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 10). Their withdrawal from certain forms of engagement is therefore not caused by indifference, but by limited capacity, anxiety, disability-related constraints, and the need for self-protection. This challenges normative expectations of constant political participation and activism.

Participant 4 also describes a decline in their political activism over time. They state that they now go to demonstrations “almost not at all anymore” and no longer have the same activist impulse as in earlier years (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 8). In the past, they would have responded to political frustration by demonstrating or posting on social media; now, their reaction is more often defined by frustration or a feeling of numbness (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 22–24). However, this does not mean that political commitment has disappeared from the participant’s everyday life. Rather, participation has changed form. Institutional and party-political work remain important, while public protest and activist intensity have become harder to sustain. Participant 3 describes a similar ambivalence on a more social level. The participant observes widespread fatigue and withdrawal among politically interested people, while also reflecting on their own inner blockages and the fear of becoming “too much” or annoying others with political content (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 88–99).

Other participants respond to fatigue more through resistance and continued mobilisation. Participant 2 acknowledges fear, frustration, and avoidance of violent confrontation, but also argues that retreat is exactly what right-wing actors want. The participant describes withdrawal

as a form of silencing and argues that the current moment should be used to politically organise and take action (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 86–88). They describe coping with political fatigue as something that involves community care, protective bubbles, safer spaces, and taking smaller steps. In interview 5 the participant similarly describes fighting, education, and political continuation as ways of coping with depressive or frustrating political developments. When asked how they deal with political frustration, the participant answers: “fight, as always” (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 113). These interviews show that political fatigue does not erase political commitment; it can also generate more strategic forms of engagement.

Social media appears as a major site where political fatigue is intensified. Several participants describe doomscrolling, negative news feeds, and constant exposure to anti-queer or global crises as politically draining (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 10; Interview 3 2026: Pos. 68; Interview 2 2026: Pos. 118). However, coping is rarely described as purely individual. Participants rely on collective exchange, safe spaces, friendship networks, queer community, taking breaks, choosing their safe spaces carefully, and preserving hope through smaller-scale action. Participant 1 locates hope in collective exchange rather than isolated consumption of bad news (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 10), while participant 2 emphasises breaking political action into smaller steps and relying on community support more (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 118). Overall, this theme shows that sustainable political participation requires ongoing negotiation. Fatigue shapes not whether participants care, but what forms of political action are possible, bearable, and sustainable.

4.5 Differences and Tensions within Queer Communities

All interview participants challenge the idea of a unified queer community. Queer community appears as important, but also as something that internally differentiated. Participants describe queer spaces as sources of safety, healing, recognition, solidarity, and political motivation. At the same time, they also describe internal hierarchies, exclusions, and tensions within queer communities. One central point is that queer belonging does not automatically produce political solidarity. Queer people occupy different social positions depending on gender identity, sexuality, race, class, disability, education, etc. and whether they can pass as straight or cis. These differences shape how people experience political participation, what risks they face, how visible they are, and what responsibilities they might feel toward others.

Community is therefore ambivalent. Participant 2 describes queer spaces as healing because they allow people to exist without heterosexuality being automatically assumed. They recall entering a space for the first time where it was not immediately assumed that they were attracted to men, describing this as a moment of immediate belonging (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 54–58). Participant 1 also emphasises the importance of queer and disabled networks, where shared struggles and fluctuating capacities are recognised (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 2). These spaces can reduce shame, isolation, and fear, and can make political participation more possible and accessible. However, queer spaces are not automatically safe for all queer people. In interview 1 the participant describes that a lot of queer spaces do not consider disability or neurodivergence (Interview 1 2026: Pos. 14). Furthermore, participant 4 describes misgendering and exclusion within queer activist spaces, pointing out that it would be wrong to assume that every queer person is automatically queer-sensitive (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 71). These examples show that exclusion is not only external to queer communities, but can also be reproduced within them.

Privilege within queer communities is another central pattern. Participants 3 and 4 reflect on their own relatively privileged positions as white, cis male, and/or straight-passing queer people (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 48; Interview 4 2026: Pos. 30). In interview 2 the participant similarly argues that white queer people may be able to rely on their white privilege and avoid confronting certain political questions (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 108). This affects political participation because people with more socially accepted forms of queerness may be less dependent on radical change or may be able to adapt more easily to dominant social and political norms. At the same time, several participants suggest that privilege can create responsibility. Participant 3, for example, argues that a privileged position can either be used to rest comfortably or to make things better and stand up for others (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 93).

Intra-community tensions around transgender and gender diversity are especially important. Several participants describe trans, non-binary, and inter people as more vulnerable within both society and queer communities. Participant 3 suggests that more recognised forms of queerness, such as being gay or lesbian, may distance themselves from more marginalised groups (Interview 3 2026: Pos. 80) while participant 4 discusses conflicts between traditional gay and lesbian politics and broader queer politics, as well as racist narratives within parts of the queer community, such as the idea that the AfD protects queer people from supposedly violent

migrants (Interview 4 2026: Pos. 73). In interview 2 the participant frames solidarity with trans people as crucial under current conditions of political backlash (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 96). These tensions within the queer community show that anti-trans discourse and exclusionary politics do not only come from outside queer communities; they can also be reproduced by queer people who benefit from more socially accepted positions.

Class and education are also aspects that shape participation. participant 2 points out that political spaces are often academic and therefore less accessible to people without certain educational backgrounds (Interview 2 2026: Pos. 110). Participant 5 similarly argues that class affects how people relate to queerness and what forms of political participation are available to them, stating that one does not have the same possibilities for political participation depending on class position (Interview 5 2026: Pos. 103).

This expands the analysis beyond identity alone. Political participation depends not only on sexuality or gender identity, but also on material resources, political knowledge, education, and access to activist or institutional spaces. Overall, this theme shows that queer political participation is shaped not only by external hostility, but also by internal community dynamics. Queer community can provide strength and resilience, but solidarity must be actively practised. It cannot be assumed simply because people share queer identity.

5. Discussion

The findings of this research project support the argument that queer political participation cannot be understood only through formal or institutional forms of engagement. While voting, party membership, unions, NGOs, demonstrations and contacting politicians remain important forms of participation in political science literature (Hunklinger 2021: 21–22; Hunklinger 2022: 21, 27; Daoust et al. 2024: 1, 4), the interviews show that the participants also locate political participation in everyday life, embodied visibility, community-building, self-protection, interpersonal conversations and acts of solidarity. This confirms broader approaches that understand political participation as taking place both inside and outside institutions, including through public and private collective action (Triangle Project et al. 2018: 4, 11; Chan/Mak 2021: 5–6, 9). In this sense, the participants' accounts extend conventional understandings of political

participation by showing how queer political agency can appear in less formal, less visible, and sometimes less easily measurable practices.

This is particularly visible in the way participants describe queer existence, self-positioning and everyday negotiation as political. Brodersen et al. argue that queer young people become political actors not only through formal activism, but also through struggles over visibility, coming-out, self-naming and challenges to heteronormative expectations (Brodersen et al. 2025: 1–3). The interview material strongly reflects this argument. Several participants understand political participation as something that happens through everyday speech, the body, gender expression, refusing shame, or challenging normative assumptions in non-queer spaces. This suggests that queer political participation is not only about entering established political arenas, but also about making everyday life politically meaningful.

At the same time, the findings complicate celebratory accounts of visibility. The literature identifies visibility as central to queer politics because it can enable recognition, claims-making, belonging and public presence (Hunklinger 2022: 12–14, 18–20; Brodersen et al. 2025: 1–2, 5–7). The interviews confirm this: representation, queer role models, Pride symbols and queer spaces can support identity formation, coming-out, belonging and political confidence. However, the material also shows that visibility is never simply empowering. Brodersen et al.’s argument that queer visibility has a “double character” is particularly useful here: visibility can promise recognition while also exposing queer people to misunderstanding, pressure, exclusion or violence (Brodersen et al. 2025: 5–6). Participants repeatedly describe visibility as situational and strategic. Passing, selective outing, public affection, gender expression and institutional representation all become questions of safety. This supports Ayoub and Rainer’s argument that public queer visibility can create solidarity and recognition, but may also generate risk or backlash depending on context (Ayoub/Rainer 2025: 2, 11–13).

The findings also align with scholarship that challenges linear progress narratives. The interviews do not describe Germany as simply moving toward greater queer inclusion. Instead, participants experience a contradictory political situation in which legal recognition and public visibility coexist with anti-gender discourse, anti-trans hostility, right-wing mobilisation and fear of rights rollback. This reflects Ayoub and Page’s argument that progress and backlash often coexist rather than replacing one another (Ayoub/Page 2019: 696, 698). Similarly, Page et al.

show that homophobia and anti-gender mobilisation remain politically powerful even in contexts where LGBTQIA+ rights have expanded (Page et al. 2022: 1165–1166, 1174–1175). The interviews make this coexistence visible at the level of lived experience: participants acknowledge gains such as legal reforms and greater visibility, but they also describe those gains as fragile, incomplete and increasingly contested.

The centrality of anti-trans discourse in the interviews is also supported by the literature. Hunklinger argues that the AfD uses LGBTQIA+ rights and especially trans issues as an “ideal battleground” while attempting to frame queer issues as private rather than political (Hunklinger 2022: 18, 48). Gavranić and Stemmer similarly describe a paradoxical situation in which legal and cultural gains coexist with right-wing mobilisation against gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and especially trans people (Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 6–7). The interview material confirms that participants do not understand attacks on trans, non-binary and inter people as isolated. Instead, they interpret anti-trans politics as a warning sign for wider authoritarian, anti-democratic and anti-queer developments. This is why several participants describe contemporary queer politics as defensive: rather than only fighting for new rights, they feel forced to defend visibility, legitimacy and rights that seemed already achieved.

The findings further show that political fatigue is not the opposite of political engagement. Instead, fatigue emerges as one possible effect of continuous backlash, media exposure, fear and perceived political inefficacy. This connects to Chan and Mak’s argument that collective action can produce empowerment and agency, but also frustration and despair when political systems appear unresponsive (Chan/Mak 2021: 8). In the interviews, fatigue appears as overwhelm, numbness, withdrawal, doomscrolling through social media, shame and exhaustion. Yet withdrawal should not be read as apathy. Especially for participants who describe anxiety, disability-related limits, fear of violence or emotional overload, stepping back can function as self-protection. Gavranić and Stemmer’s emphasis on coping strategies, community participation and self-efficacy is useful here, because activism and community can provide meaning, belonging and the sense of being able to act (Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 17, 23–24). The interviews show exactly this ambivalence: some participants withdraw in order to remain sustainable, while others transform anger and fear into renewed motivation.

Finally, the research project confirms that queer political participation must be understood intersectionally. The literature stresses that queer communities are not homogeneous and that political attitudes, resources and forms of engagement differ across sexuality, gender identity, class, race, education, disability and other social positions (Hunklinger 2022: 27–29, 105–106; Wurthmann 2024: 574–575, 580–583; Gavranić/Stemmer 2024: 4–5, 31). The interviews strongly support this point. Queer community appears as a source of safety, healing and political strength, but also as a space where hierarchies can be reproduced. Participants describe racism, ableism, cisnormativity, trans exclusion, class barriers, masculine dominance and assimilationist tendencies within queer spaces. This confirms Hunklinger’s argument that anti-gender, anti-trans, racist or assimilationist discourses can also be reproduced by queer subjects themselves (Hunklinger 2022: 94–95, 105–106). Therefore, solidarity cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of shared queer identity. It must be actively practised across unequal positions within queer communities.

In summary, the findings suggest that queer political participation in contemporary Germany is best understood as a situated and ambivalent practice. It is shaped by formal institutions, everyday life, visibility, safety, backlash, fatigue and community. The participants do not simply participate or withdraw. Rather, they continuously negotiate how to remain politically responsive while also managing vulnerability, limited capacity, unequal access and the emotional weight of contemporary political conditions.

6. Conclusion

This research project examined how queer individuals in Germany experience, interpret and navigate political participation in everyday life under contemporary political conditions. Based on five qualitative interviews, the analysis showed that political participation is understood much more broadly than formal democratic engagement. Participants described participation through voting, parties, unions and demonstrations, but also through everyday conversations, embodied visibility, professional work, community-building, self-protection and solidarity.

The findings show that queer political participation is deeply ambivalent. Visibility can create recognition, belonging and agency, but it can also expose participants to risk, fear and strategic

self-management. Similarly, the current political climate is experienced as contradictory: legal and symbolic gains coexist with anti-gender discourse, anti-trans backlash, right-wing mobilisation and fears of regression. Under these conditions, queer politics often becomes defensive, requiring participants to protect rights and forms of visibility that appeared already achieved.

It was also shown that political fatigue and withdrawal should not be understood as simple apathy. For some participants, stepping back is a necessary strategy of self-protection in response to overload, fear or limited capacity. For others, backlash produces urgency, anger and renewed motivation. Finally, the analysis demonstrated that queer community is not homogeneous. It can provide safety and strength, but it is also shaped by internal hierarchies around gender identity, sexuality, race, class, disability, education and passing.

The contribution of this research project lies in showing how queer political participation is lived and negotiated in everyday contexts. Rather than treating participation as a fixed set of activities, it understands it as a situated practice shaped by unequal access to safety, visibility, recognition and resources. Due to its small, urban and semi-urban sample, the project cannot make representative claims about queer people in Germany as a whole. However, it offers exploratory insight into how queer individuals make sense of political agency under conditions of partial inclusion, backlash and uncertainty.

Future research could build on this by including more diverse regional, generational and social positions, especially rural perspectives and people with less access to academic or activist spaces. A larger research design could also expand this project through a larger comparative design, for example by examining queer political participation in different national, European, or international contexts. This could show more clearly how different legal developments, political cultures, and levels of anti-gender backlash shape queer visibility, safety, fatigue, and political agency.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Interview Guide

Question 1: Personal Background

Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your everyday life?

Follow-up questions:

- What currently shapes your daily life?
- What environments do you move in?

Question 2: Understanding of political participation

What does “political participation“ mean to you personally?

Follow-up questions:

- Has this changed over time?
- With what do you associate it? Do you associate it with institutions, activism, everyday actions?

Question 3: Experiences of engagement or withdrawal

Can you describe situations where you felt politically engaged or disengaged?

Follow-up questions:

- What motivated or discouraged you?
- How did you feel in that moment?

Question 4: Queerness and Political Experience

In what ways does being queer shape your political experience?

Follow-up questions:

- Have you experienced barriers or support?
- Does visibility play a crucial role for you?

Question 5: Political Climate in Germany

How do you perceive the current political climate in Germany regarding LGBTQIA+ issues?

Follow-up questions:

- Does this influence your willingness to engage politically?
- Do you feel safe in political spaces

Question 6: Differences and Strategies

Do you perceive differences within the queer community regarding political participation?

Follow-up questions:

- What kinds of differences?
- How do you personally deal with political fatigue or tension?

Question 7: Is there anything important we have not discussed or that you would like to talk about?