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Political Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental question asked in early survey-based political communication research is whether people feel that their political actions can affect political processes. Research has consistently shown the centrality of this political attitude, known as “political efficacy,” for democratic functioning. In recent research, political communication scholars have asked whether the rise of digital media may transform the public’s sense of political efficacy for good (due to improved information access and interactive possibilities with decision-makers) or for ill (due to information overload and a globalized sense of powerlessness). The best available cross-national evidence to date indicates, however, that digital media use and political efficacy are positively associated, and that political efficacy has a similar positive relationship with online and offline political participation. Next-step research is needed to clarify more nuanced contextual effects, particularly for lower-status individuals who tend to have lower levels of political efficacy.

Keywords: Political attitude; Internal efficacy; External efficacy; Perceived responsiveness; Democratic legitimacy; Online political efficacy

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Do people feel that their political action can have an impact on democratic political processes? This fundamental question for scholars of political communication was first systematically researched in the 1950s in Campbell, Gurin, and Miller's (1954) classic study "The Voter Decides," focused on individual and institutional processes in the United States. The classic definition from Campbell et al. (1954, p. 187) defines political efficacy as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process." The less well-known continuation of this sentence clarifies the stakes for democratic functioning: "...i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties" (Campbell et al., 1954, p. 187). From its earliest inception, the scholarly interest in political efficacy as a type of political attitude has been focused on the implications of this attitude for people's engagement in civic and political activities. Taking this classic definition of political efficacy as a launching point, this entry details the evolution of the concept, discusses the connection between political efficacy and digital media use, and concludes by outlining fruitful areas for future research.

Evolution of the Concept of Political Efficacy

Even at the time of Campbell et al.'s (1954) study of voter decision-making, it was clear that political efficacy was among the most important political attitudes to investigate to understand dynamics of political communication in democratic societies. Next-step research on political efficacy in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s was motivated by concerns for democratic legitimacy amidst civil unrest, with a specific focus on how declines in political efficacy may harm both the legitimacy and stability of democratic functioning (Pollock, 1983). The subsequent decades of research on political efficacy have consistently shown that political efficacy is positively associated with a wide variety of pro-democratic attitudes and behaviors. For example, political efficacy is consistently positively associated

with the political attitudes of political trust and political interest (Craig et al., 1990). For political behavior, research shows a strong connection between political efficacy and multiple types of political participation, including voting (Karp & Banducci, 2008), and non-electoral participation of all kinds (Verba et al., 1995), including online political participation (Oser et al., 2022). Importantly, studies that carefully investigate causal pathways in different contexts have shown a reciprocal relationship between political efficacy and political participation (Finkel, 1985), indicating that higher levels of both can reinforce a virtuous circle of democratic engagement.

Conceptually, political efficacy was originally conceived of as a global measure tapping into a single attitudinal dimension. This idea of a single attitudinal concept for political efficacy was employed in early studies of political efficacy in the United States (e.g., Campbell et al., 1954; Lane, 1959) as well as in early cross-national survey measures, such as Almond and Verba's (1963) investigation of civic culture in five diverse national contexts. Over time, researchers identified two distinctive dimensions of political efficacy. Internal efficacy focuses on individuals' sense of their own understanding and capacity to engage in political processes (Niemi et al., 1991). This internal efficacy measure assesses whether people feel knowledgeable or well-qualified to participate in politics. As demonstrated by Morrell (2003), there is scholarly consensus regarding the conceptualization and measurement of internal efficacy in both survey-based and experimental literatures.

In contrast to internal efficacy, external efficacy describes people's assessment of the degree to which they have the capacity to have an influence or impact upon political processes and outcomes. There is clear consensus in the literature that external efficacy is an important concept, summarized powerfully by Chamberlain (2012, p. 117) in his longitudinal

investigation of external efficacy in the U.S.: “Since the United States is a democratic society, it is important to know how the public perceives its effect on politics. Normatively, there should be a concern if the population feels its voice goes unheard.” Despite consensus on the conceptual importance of external efficacy, researchers have not yet reached clear consensus on the most robust empirical measures of external efficacy (Morrell, 2003). A related recent advance in the literature has been the new conceptualization and measurement of “perceived responsiveness” which avoids the highly generalized and emotionally-charged beliefs inherent in measures of external efficacy to instead focus more on specific actions of targeted actors (Esaiasson et al., 2015).

These two dimensions of internal and external political efficacy are the most prominent in the literature, and have been found to be cross-nationally valid measures (Hayes & Bean, 1993). Yet, additional conceptualizations and measures of political efficacy have also gained attention in recent years, such as the concept of collective political efficacy (Halpern et al., 2017), and specialized measures of online political efficacy (Sasaki, 2016).

Political Efficacy and Digital Media

For scholars of political communication, the topic of political efficacy has become even more salient in recent years with the advent and increased popularity of digital media. As noted by Kenski and Stroud (2006) in their classic early study on the connections between Internet use and political efficacy, there were conflicting theoretical expectations regarding how the digital era may impact on people’s sense of their own capacity to understand and engage in political processes. Despite the potential of digital media to increase people’s perceptions of being politically informed and to expand their opportunities to engage in politics, it is clear that information overwhelm and the globalized digital context may fuel a sense of

powerlessness (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Indeed, recent research indicates that many people in contemporary democracies feel frustrated and even enraged in an era of high levels of populism and concerns for democratic erosion (Rico et al., 2020).

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of political efficacy and digital media use shows, however, that they are systematically and positively associated (Boulianne et al., 2023). While the association of digital media use with internal efficacy is even stronger than the association with external efficacy, both types of efficacy are positively related with digital media use. In Boulianne et al.'s (2023) analysis of data from 37 countries in studies published between 1991 and 2021, it is clear that the relationship between digital media and political efficacy is positive in both democratic and authoritarian contexts. Yet cross-national research focused on differential contextual effects found that levels of freedom of the democratic context can be consequential for these relationships, as Wagner et al.'s (2017) study of Latin American countries showed that digital information consumption has a slightly larger association with political efficacy in more democratic countries.

While the digital age has not facilitated declines in political efficacy anticipated by some scholars, an important topic for ongoing research in this field is the question of socio-demographic-based gaps in political efficacy. On this topic, Oser et al. (2023) analyzed the most comprehensive cross-national data available between 1996 and 2016 to assess whether gaps in objective representation measures along key socio-demographic parameters (e.g., gender, education, and income), is reflected in people's subjective sense of their own political efficacy. The findings show remarkable stability during this observation period of lower efficacy levels for people from lower-status backgrounds (i.e., women with lower education and income). Further, Rennwald and Pontusson (2022) find a sharp decline in perceived

political influence specifically among unionized workers since the 1970s, which is connected with the declining political power of unions as robust protectors of workers' political and economic interests.

Conclusion and Future Research

Taken together, the literature synthesized in this entry shows the centrality of political efficacy for individual-level research on political communication, and the importance of future research on how contextual factors may influence political efficacy at the individual level. The literature suggests that contextual factors may impact people's capacities to fulfil Robert A. Dahl's (2006) vision of political equality that would allow individuals from all social groups to consider themselves as political equals. The conventional wisdom on the balance between individual versus contextual factors in the study of political efficacy since the 1950s has been that political efficacy is primarily an individual-level attitude that develops at an early age and remains stable over time, with little relation to objective contextual features of responsive governance (Easton & Dennis, 1967). A recent state-based study in the United States by Wolak (2018) is the first study detailing multiple contextual factors that can enhance people's sense of efficacy. Specifically, Wolak's (2018) study of state politics shows that people have higher levels of political efficacy when they have greater opportunities for political voice, and when their concerns are reflected in the policy process. Future research is needed beyond the U.S. context to assess what types of contextual-level factors might enhance individuals' sense of their capacity to participate in and influence political processes.

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