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98. Political efficacy

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Political efficacy is a key attitudinal measure that captures individuals' perceptions of their connection with the state. Measures of political efficacy are among the most frequently used survey questions of political attitudes and are considered to be centrally important empirical indicators of the positive functioning and health of democratic systems (Craig et al. 1990).

The often-quoted early description of political efficacy articulated by Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954: 187) defined political efficacy as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process." Importantly, the less-cited continuation of this sentence adds the following: "i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change." Taken as a whole, this classic definition fully captured that the concept of political efficacy relates to both attitudes and behavior, and subsequent survey-based research further clarified approaches for how this complex concept can be empirically measured and analyzed.

The most fundamental conceptual distinction to the Campbell et al. (1954) definition was added a few years later by Lane (1959: 149) who discussed two main aspects of political efficacy, described as "the image of the self" and "the image of democratic government." Subsequent empirical research has sharpened this theoretical and empirical distinction to define two distinct dimensions: internal efficacy, which relates to individuals' conceptions of themselves as political actors; and external efficacy, which concerns people's assessments of the broader political context (Craig et al. 1990; Niemi et al. 1991). Consistent findings in the literature of a relatively low correlation between

internal and external efficacy measures are consistent with the consensus in the literature that they are theoretically distinct attitudinal constructs (Craig & Maggionto 1982; Wolak 2018).

Optimal measurement of political efficacy has been a topic of intense theoretical debate and empirical research. The evolution of the conceptualization and measurement of these two dimensions of political efficacy since they were first measured in survey-based research in 1952 by the American National Election Studies (ANES) resulted from the refinement of these measures over time (Craig et al. 1990; Niemi et al. 1991). These studies refined the indicators used to measure political efficacy as a distinct construct from other important political attitudes, such as political trust and government evaluations. Although most of the early survey-based research was based primarily on data from the United States, and particularly from the American National Election Studies surveys, subsequent research established the cross-national validity of the conceptual and empirical dimensions of external and internal efficacy (Acock et al. 1985; Hayes & Bean 1993). These questions are usually phrased as a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

For internal efficacy, the index based on the four questions used to measure this construct in Niemi et al.’s (1990) analysis of the ANES 1987 pilot survey was subsequently validated by Morrell’s (2003) experimental research. These four internal efficacy statements note the following: (1) “I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics”; (2) “I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people”; (3) “I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country”; and (4) “I think I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people.” Morell’s (2003) combination of observational and experimental findings provided clear confirmation of this four-item index as a strong measure of internal efficacy.

For external efficacy, however, optimal measurement is still a topic of debate. The two measures used by Morrell (2003) relate to people’s perceptions of whether others care about their opinions, and whether they have a say in politics. Although these two external efficacy items did not yield as robust findings for index measurement as the internal efficacy items, these types of questions are still used in contemporary research to measure external efficacy. For example, Stauffer’s (2021) research on gender and external political efficacy used data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study which included the following two survey items: (1) “Government officials care what

people like me think”; and (2) “People like me have a say in what the government does.” Yet, Chamberlain’s (2012) longitudinal study challenges the validity of prevalent external efficacy measures based on the finding that aggregate external efficacy is not responsive to changes in the political environment that would be expected to make a difference for people’s perceptions of their capacity to influence political processes. Scholars’ efforts to more clearly conceptualize and measure external efficacy are ongoing, including work by Esaiasson, Köln, and Tupper (2015) to distinguish between the concept of external efficacy and the idea of the “perceived responsiveness” of the political system.

A main early motivation for research on the topic as a central attitudinal construct in political science and sociology was the linkage between this attitude and diffuse support for the political system (Easton 1965). Indeed, Easton’s (1965) focus on political efficacy was informed by his argument that individuals who perceived that they were capable of influencing government outcomes would be more likely to support the democratic system as a whole.

Subsequent research confirmed a strong empirical connection between political efficacy and multiple important attitudes and behaviors for democratic functioning. Regarding political attitudes, research showed that political efficacy is consistently positively associated with political trust, political interest, and government evaluations (Niemi et al. 1991). Regarding political participation, decades of research have found a strong association between political efficacy and a range of political behavior, including electoral turnout (Abramson & Aldrich 1982) and participation beyond the electoral arena (Verba et al. 1995), as well as online political participation (Oser et al., 2022).

Political efficacy is strongly related to political participation because feeling efficacious encourages participation and also because participation can boost feelings of efficacy, thus increasing the likelihood that participation will continue in the future (Finkel 1985). As such, political efficacy is an important political attitude for enabling strong connections between citizens and their elected leaders and for ensuring both the functioning and the legitimacy of democratic political systems (Iyengar 1980; Wolak 2018).

Integrating this scholarship on the importance of political efficacy for attitudes and behaviors that are central to democratic functioning, Morrell (2003: 589) stated: “Simply put, efficacy is

citizens' perceptions of powerfulness (or powerlessness) in the political realm." At a time of concern for democratic stability and legitimacy, it is clear that the investigation of factors that may affect individuals' sense of their own political efficacy is an important area of future research. Particularly for democratic systems, we will continue to expect that the public perceives that it has some degree of effect on political processes. As noted by Chamberlain (2012: 117), there should be normative concerns for the health of democratic systems if the public generally feels that its voice is unheard.

A perennial normative concern in scholarship on political efficacy is the potential that systematic inequalities in political efficacy across distinctive socio-economic groups could contribute to a vicious cycle that exacerbates the underrepresentation of traditionally lower status groups (Verba et al. 1995). In a cross-national study designed to investigate the socio-demographic correlates of political efficacy (Hayes & Bean 1993), analysis of comparable data gathered in 1985 in four advanced democracies showed a clear positive association of measures of socio-economic status (i.e., education, income) with both internal and external efficacy. This finding of higher political efficacy for those with higher socio-economic status is a consistent finding in empirical research (e.g., Karp & Banducci 2008; Wolak 2018). The persistence of this type of socio-economic-based gap in political efficacy is clearly suboptimal in relation to the democratic ideal of governance that values both voice and equality (Verbal et al. 1995).

A central topic of ongoing scholarship on political efficacy is the degree to which it is inherently an individual trait, or alternatively, a political attitude that can be enhanced or diminished by specific contextual features. Early survey-based research focused on data from the United States concluded that political efficacy is a personal character trait that is formed in childhood (Easton & Dennis 1967; Iyengar 1980). More recent research focused on external efficacy in the United States supports this conclusion by showing no over-time connection between aggregate measures of external efficacy and national-level contextual factors that are expected to affect individuals' perceptions of their own political efficacy (Chamberlain 2012). However, some comparative research has found that certain contextual-level factors may affect individuals' sense of political efficacy, including Karp and Banducci's (2008) cross-national investigation of electoral system characteristics and Wolak's (2018) analysis of politicians' actions and government design in the US states. The importance of better

understanding factors that affect individuals' political efficacy along with the development of sophisticated analytical techniques (such as big data analysis and machine learning approaches) promise that scholarship on political efficacy will continue to yield new insights in the coming years.

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