

Effects of External Efficacy on Political Participation:
A Multigenerational Analysis of Efficacy

MacKenzie Carlson

Professor Kent Portney

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The United States Government operates successfully through voluntary political participation to select political leaders and enact reform. However, the system is far from perfect when encouraging citizens to express their ideology through voting. The integral process of voting is rapidly deteriorating in modern times, which detrimentally effects the democratic operation of the government. Political scientists are increasingly attempting to identify the cause of this decline in voting rates nationwide and among certain subgroups of the American population. Young people have especially become increasingly absent from political participation in recent years, which has led to serious concerns about the future of political participation. Will these disenfranchised young people ever become political participants? In an attempt to answer this question, political scientists are searching for the primary indicator of voter participation in order to understand why individuals vote, what convinces them to vote and the changing voting pattern implications for the future of American political participation.

At the forefront of this discussion is the notion of efficacy as the determining primary indicator as to whether or not an individual becomes politically active. A high rate of external efficacy has been determined to instill a desire to vote in an individual. External efficacy is defined by Steven Finkel in relation to voting and campaign activity as the “attitude that has been defined, or strongly linked to, feelings of “system responsiveness”, political trust, and diffuse political support” (Finkel 892). For this analysis, external efficacy is whether or not an individual feels that they are able to enact change in the government through their own political participation. External efficacy has been associated with participation among adults, but infrequently examined among young people. The relationship between external efficacy and voting should remain constant among young people, as it does for adults. However, because young people vote consistently less than adults, it is assumed that young people have lower

percentages of high external efficacy. Additionally, the correlation between efficacy and voting among adults is stronger than the same correlation among young people. Ideally, this will demonstrate that as individuals' age their external efficacy increases and they become more likely to become politically active.

Central Research Question

If efficacy is a determining factor in the reason why an individual votes, then it is important to understand how it can be used to increase voter turnout among all age cohorts, especially young people. In *A New Engagement?* Zukin states that, "Political scientists have never found significant age-related differences in political efficacy" (Zukin 118). It is surprising that this relationship has never been identified, since it stems from very logical reasoning. This relationship would demonstrate that as individuals' age, they are more likely to feel efficacious and subsequently vote. An implication of this would be that if political scientists could induce efficacy among young people earlier in life, voter turnout among young people would rapidly increase. Also, the analysis done by Pollack and Finkel occurred in the 1980s and has yet to be re-analyzed even as the current trend in voter participation continues to decline. Efficacy offers a direct indicator of voter participation and lack thereof, "In fact, as much as half of the decline in presidential turnout between 1960 and 1980 can be attributed to the erosion of political efficacy." (Pollack 402) According to this research, the nature of political efficacy is a primary concern for understanding voter participation and maintaining high voter turnout. If political scientists wish to assuage the decline in voter turnout, addressing the decline external political efficacy among the voting population is an important place to begin research.

Hypothesis

The idea that high external political efficacy contributes to voting has been well researched and identified among adults, but is rarely used to address young people, who are just beginning to become involved in the political system. Their perception that they are able to enact noticeable change in the government must be considerably lower than those who have been involved in politics and elections for years. First, among youth voters, those who have participated must have higher levels of external political efficacy than those that choose not to participate. The young people who are most involved in politics act under the assumption that their individual voices will be heard and that they can personally enact change in the government. Otherwise, these young people are not behaving economically rational, and should invest their time in other activities. From this basis, the relationship between young peoples' external political efficacy and older generations' political efficacy can be addressed. Due to the fact that older generations vote at substantially higher rates compared to the young demographic, the assumption can be made that older generations have higher levels of external efficacy, which is the cause of their increased participation. Also, if the older generations should have a stronger correlation between the high efficacy leading to voting and low efficacy leading to lower turn out, based on the assumption that as a generation grows older they are more likely remain relatively consistent in their views on efficacy. If this is true, it will imply that the low levels efficacy among young people will remain constant over time and become a serious issue in the future. Ideally, the data will show that as young people age, they are more likely to have positive perceptions about the government and this will cause their increased voting percentages. The results of this analysis will be especially pertinent for future political candidates.

The implications of high levels of efficacy directly relating to electoral participation is an important ideology for politicians to utilize an untapped portion of the electorate. According to this hypothesis, if a politician can convince the youth demographic that they are actively involved in changing the political system, then the politician will obtain a large underutilized portion of the vote. Obvious implications of being able to tap the youth vote will drastically help any politician become elected. Also, if efficacy is shown to be an important influence in voting across all age demographics, that candidate is likely to be very successful. Hopefully, the results will allow for politicians to begin analyzing methods in which they can increase the efficacy of the electorate, providing the politician with victory and the populous with a leader who is more responsive to their own needs. However, the hypothesis could be wrong by assuming that external efficacy is the primary contributing factor to energizing the population to participate.

There are two major potential flaws with the hypothesis: external efficacy may not be the primary determinant of voting behavior, just a contributing factor; and determining that political participation is caused by high levels of political efficacy versus high levels of external efficacy being a byproduct of political participation. Research is constantly attempting to address the primary causation for low voter turnout. A variety of different variables possibly contribute to an individual's decision to participate, but which is the determining factor? Can external efficacy demonstrate a higher causation than levels of government trust, social pressures, internal efficacy, or political knowledge? External efficacy is perhaps a very important factor in determining whether an individual participates, but external efficacy is by no means the only factor that convinces an individual to vote. The second issue with the hypothesis is the determination of whether or not efficacy causes voting or voting causes efficacy. Finkel identified this as "the problem in causal inference in the overwhelming majority of these studies

is the reliance on cross-sectional designs, which renders the estimation of links both from participation to efficacy as well as from efficacy to participation as almost impossible” (Finkel 894). Zukin also considered this a primary issue with the theory that political efficacy directly causes increased voter turnout. Due to the loosely defined nature of external efficacy it is almost impossible to determine whether it is at the forefront of an individual’s mind when voting or if the efficacious feelings stem from the participation. The relationship between may be more intermingled and inseparable using these methodology used to address this hypothesis.

Methodology

For the analysis of external efficacy and its relationship to political participation, two surveys are utilized: the Tisch College “National Survey of Civic and Political Engagement of Young People” (2007); and the “National Civic Engagement Survey 1.” (2002) These two surveys were used because they each offer different important contributions to analyzing the hypothesis. The Tisch College Survey contacted 1,000 young people ages 18-24 with roughly equal numbers of college students and non-college students. This survey was selected because it was conducted very recently and it asks very specific questions about the nature and implications of government responsiveness, which are very applicable to efficacy. This survey is used to lay the ground work in demonstrating the direct correlation between high external efficacy and political participation. The Tisch College Survey allows for a solid analysis of the conceptual underpinnings of the youth demographics efficacy. The National Civic Engagement Survey 1 (NCES1) is a much larger survey conducted sampling respondents from a variety of generations. NCES1 survey sampled 3,200 individuals, with the age breakdown: 1,000 respondents’ aged 15-25, 1,000 respondents’ aged 26-37, 600 respondents’ 37-56 and 600 respondents’ aged 57-97. The questions used from this survey are less useful in obtaining accurate and in depth analysis of

efficacy. This survey is initially used to confirm the data trends identified in the Tisch College Survey, hopefully, providing an even firmer base for the relationship between efficacy and political participation. However, since this survey samples a broad range of age groups it is very useful in addressing the issue of whether or not efficacy increases with increased age and the relationships between the variety of age demographics and efficacy. This survey provides the data to analyze the relationship between efficacy, age and political participation. Both these surveys provide an extremely broad array of participants and were taken 5 years apart. Therefore, it is very feasible that these results can be universally applied to the population.

The questions utilized to investigate the hypothesis are questions that analyze the individuals' perception on government responsiveness and voting behavior. The first sets of tables are from the Tisch College Survey and were selected to analyze the three aspects that Finkel linked with external efficacy "feelings of "system responsiveness," political trust, and diffuse political support" (Finkel 892). The questions were used as the independent variables when the cross-tabulations were performed. The questions asked for the respondent to agree or disagree with the following statements, and are listed in the order in which they apply to Finkel's definition:

"If I choose to participate in political activities in the future, I will be able to make a meaningful contribution."

"I am confident that, through political activities, I can make a difference."

"By participating in political activities, I can help people to help themselves."

The first question is related to "system responsiveness," because it asks the individual to evaluate whether through his political activities that the government will take action to solve the respondents concerns and change. The second question relates to trust through the concept that the respondent trusts that the government will agree with the respondent and make a positive

difference in society. Finally, the third question related to the diffuse political support since the question asks the respondent to think compassionately about others and about the greater political good, rather than self interest. These independent variable questions were analyzed against the dependent variables that pertained to voting. These voting questions are:

“How likely is it that you will vote in the general election for president next year?”
“Have you ever voted?”

These questions were chosen as solid measures for political participation. The first question pertaining to next year’s election is pertinent for the discussion of implications of youth political efficacy. And is important in allowing some respondents to answer because this maybe very politically active, but have not had an opportunity to vote yet. However, this question can easily be skewed by the altruism of the respondent, who may not ever vote in the election. That is why the second question is used to obtain a standardization that ideally avoids the altruism of the young participants and obtains more factual data. In order to obtain the closest results to the Tisch College Survey the questions on the NCES1 are as similar as possible.

The questions that are selected for analysis on with the NCES1 also attempt to measure external efficacy, but the wording allows for a more opened interpretation and they are harder to use as measures of efficacy. The questions analyzed are almost exactly the same; the only difference is that the wording of one is slightly changed so it can be asked to respondents that were too young to have been voters. The independent variable question asks:

“Thinking about the problems you see in your community, how much difference do you believe YOU can personally make in working to solve problems you see- a great deal of difference, some difference, a little difference, or no difference at all.”

This question directly analyzes whether or not a respondent feels that they are able to enact a difference in their community, which is a contributing factor to external efficacy. The issue with

this question is that it has no direct mention of the respondent effecting change through the use of government a crucial facet of efficacy. The second question is the dependent variable used to analyze voting and is the variable that is slightly modified for respondents that are too young to have politically participated, the wording for those old enough is as follows:

“We know that most people don’t vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?”

This question is very useful in not only obtaining the data that the respondents vote or not, but also in identifying how frequently the respondent feels that they actually do vote. This is especially valuable in analyzing the levels of participation based on the individual efficacy. And this data can be especially useful for politicians who are trying to be elected during midterm elections or other unimportant elections in determining the whether or not external efficacy plays a large enough in the electoral process. These are the questions used to evaluate the nature of political efficacy in terms of voter behavior. Following are the results from the cross tabulations of the respondents answers to these questions.

Results

Table 1: Voting and the Belief in Meaning Contribution to Politics (TCS)

		Make a Meaningful Contribution		
		Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree
Ever voted	Yes	66%	49%	45%
	No	34%	51%	55%
	Totals (N)	100% N= 539	100% N=355	100% N=101

Independent Variable: If I choose to participate in political activities in the future, I will be able to make a meaningful contribution.

Dependent Variable: Have you ever voted?

This table demonstrates that young people who believe that they can make a meaningful contribution are more likely to have voted before in an election. Believing that one can make affect change in the government directly relates to the concept of external political efficacy because the individual feels that the government will be responsive to their participation. This pattern was expected based on previous research about the direct relationship of high external political efficacy and voter participation. Also, the even split about the “neither agree or disagree” answer helps further emphasize the correlation on either side of the cross-tabulation, that an individual is more likely to vote if they have high efficacy, and less likely to vote if they do not. This cross-tabulation is important too because it is the only cross-tabulation given for the Tisch College Survey that uses the have ever voted variable. Therefore, it avoids the research dilemma of prediction of future behavior that faces the other two Tisch survey questions must suffer. Also, this table demonstrates arguably the strongest correlation between the effect of external political efficacy and voting.

Table 2: Planning on Voting in 2008 Election and Thoughts on Ability to Make a Difference (TCS)

Expected to Vote in 2008 Presidential election	Can Make a Difference Through Politics			
		Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree
Likely Voter		94%	77%	76%
50/50 Chance of Voting		3%	12%	10%
Unlikely Voter		3%	11%	14%
Totals (N)		100% N=447	100% N=350	100% N= 123

Independent Variable: I am confident that, through political activities, I can make a difference.

Dependent Variable: How likely is it that you will vote in the general election for president next year?

First and foremost, this table can be used to exemplify the enthusiasm among young people for the upcoming election, which is demonstrated by the high percentage in all independent variable categories. This enthusiasm may not translate into actual voting. It raises the question as to what is the factor that influences this enthusiasm for politics that is not nearly as present among young people during the 2002 NCES1, possible explanations can be derived from the presidential election as opposed to the midterm elections, increased media coverage or even nationalism associated with 9/11. However, despite the reason for the increased enthusiasm, there is still a clear correlation between the number of people who believe that they are able to make a difference and plans on voting. This suggests that even without this enthusiasm the correlation would remain, especially since the correlation is found in Table 1. Those who feel they can enact change are determined to vote while a much larger portion of those who do not believe that they are able to make a difference are less likely to vote. This implication is very important for the upcoming presidential race; it demonstrates that the youth vote will most likely go to the candidate that makes young people feel that they can personally affect change through the support of the candidate. This combined with the following table based on altruism of young people in voting for candidates who they feel will help others suggests that young people are looking for a candidate who will listen to their opinions and make a difference by helping others.

Table 3: Planning to Vote in 2009 Election and Participation will Help Others Help Themselves (TCS)

Expected to Vote in 2008 Presidential Election	Vote will Help Others			
		Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree
Likely Voter		91%	81%	78%
50/50 Chance of Voting		5%	11%	5%
Unlikely Voter		4%	8%	17%
Totals (N)		100% N=422	100% N=364	100% N=125

Independent Variable: By participating in political activities, I can help people to help themselves.

Dependent Variable: How likely is it that you will vote in the general election for president next year?

This survey confirms the same relationships between efficacy and political, and further broadens the basis for the effects of efficacy on young people. Also, this question is especially intriguing because it asks the responded to think compassionately and for the greater good, which demonstrates the willingness of the respondents to consider others when making political decisions. Again conveying the hypothesis that if an individual thinks the government will help others, then they are more likely to vote in the upcoming election. The broader implications of this table may hint to the nature of community service in contributing to the increasing of political efficacy. Due to the nature of helping others with community service, it would seem to directly correlate with a desire to see the government help others. This would suggest that participation in a community service program may feed young people with the notion that they can enact change to help others themselves, and subsequently that they are able to enact change in the government. Theoretically, this would mean that community service organizations strengthen external efficacy and encourage politically participation. However, this implication, which deserves further research, will not be addressed here.

Table 4: Planning to Vote in Elections and Personal Difference in the Community (NCES1)

Age Group: 15-25	Planning on Voting in Elections	Can you Make a Difference in the Community				
			A Great Deal of Difference	Some Difference	A Little Difference	No Difference / Don't Know
	Always		56%	45%	38%	41%
	Sometimes		29%	39%	45%	22%
	Rarely		6%	8%	7%	15%
	Never		9%	8%	10%	22%
	Totals (N)		100% N=34	100% N=186	100% N=157	100% N=59

Independent Variable: Thinking about the problems you see in your community, how much difference do you believe YOU can personally make in working to solve problems you see- a great deal of difference, some difference, a little difference, or no difference at all.

Dependent Variable: We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half or those eligible come out to vote. As an Adult, how often do you thinking you will vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely or never?

Table 4 begins the first in a series of tables tabulated from the National Civic Engagement Survey 1 (2002). This table is provided to confirm the analysis from the Tisch College Survey, by demonstrating that another survey obtained similar data relating to the correlation between external political efficacy and political participation. This table demonstrates similar results of the Tisch College Survey, but is much less effective due to the nature of the questions. However, the cross tabulations are similar in demonstrating a decrease in the feeling of making a difference in the community also correlates to the decrease in planning on being a consistent voter. This table is also important to acknowledge that the respondents had not voted at the time, which this survey was taken, so this data can be used as an indicator for the past opinions of those polled in the Tisch College survey. Since the Tisch College survey respondents

would have been of similar age as the respondents in this survey. This does not suggest that the respondents are directly related it only helps demonstrate continuity over the effects of efficacy on young people and their voting patterns. Simply, that they young people evaluated in this section of the survey are now currently of the same age as those in the Tisch College survey, and provides a semblance of connection between the two surveys. Consequently, this cross-tabulation can be used as further a demonstrator of a different portion of the American youth demographic that provides confirmation of the conclusions made using the Tisch Survey.

Table 5: Varying Age Group Voting and Personal Difference in the Community

Difference Age Groups		Can You Make a Difference in the Community				
15-25 years Old	Voting in Elections		Great Deal of Difference	Some Difference	A Little Difference	No Difference / Don't Know
		Always	45%	32%	21%	20%
		Sometimes	27%	39%	32%	29%
		Rarely	15%	6%	16%	15%
		Never	13%	23%	31%	36%
		Totals (N)	100% N=47	100% N=191	100% N=192	100% N=84
26-37 Years Old	Voting in Elections	Always	48%	44%	31%	33%
		Sometimes	27%	35%	40%	25%
		Rarely	7%	10%	12%	11%
		Never	18%	11%	17%	31%
		Totals (N)	100% N=79	100% N=423	100% N=294	100% N=164

38-56 Years Old	Voting in Elections	Always	78%	62%	55%	38%
		Sometimes	13%	28%	31%	31%
		Rarely	3%	6%	5%	12%
		Never	6%	4%	9%	19%
		Totals (N)	100% N=68	100% N=272	100% 151	100% N=100
57 – 97 Years Old	Voting in Elections	Always	88%	79%	75%	64%
		Sometimes	8%	17%	16%	20%
		Rarely	0%	2%	3%	9%
		Never	4%	2%	6%	7%
		Totals (N)	100% N=49	100% N=192	100% N=165	100% N=186

Independent Variable: Thinking about the problems you see in your community, how much difference do you believe YOU can personally make in working to solve problems you see- a great deal of difference, some difference, a little difference, or no difference at all.

Dependent Variable: We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?

Table 5 compares the varying rates of participation based on whether or not an individual feels that they can enact political change based on an individual's age. The respondents are divided into age groups in order to analyze whether or not aging increases an individual's level of external political efficacy; and therefore, his or her political participation. The independent variable for this cross-tabulation is also analyzed in Table 4. The data for the youth in this table is a different group, however, because this is the population of young people that could actually vote when the survey was taken. This is an important distinction because young people who have not voted do not have as accurate view about their desire and ability to participate as those that have voted. The correlation between enacting change and political participation does remain

among young people, similar to Table 4. However, what can be deduced about the relationship between efficacy and older generations?

All of the age generations demonstrate some degree of correlation between external efficacy and voter participation. Each age group has the highest percentage of voters who feel that their participation enacts some sort of meaning. In fact, the two youngest age groups, the 15-25 year olds and the 26-37 year olds both have the strongest correlation between political external efficacy and voter participation. This suggests that the younger generation's participation is very dependent on whether or not they can personally enact change or that young people with high efficacy will vote and those with low efficacy will not. This encourages the importance for politicians in instilling a sense of openness and willingness to listen in the younger generations if the politicians hope to obtain their votes in an election, which was first demonstrated in Table 3 and Table 4. However, the older age groups correlation between efficacy and voting becomes weaker, while the percentage of participation continues to increase.

Surprisingly, the older respondents, 38-56 age group and 57-97 age group, relationships between external efficacy and political participation drastically declined. The rates of those who politically participate who have high efficacy increase significantly, and are much higher than both the younger groups. But, the percentages of the older people, who do not feel that they can enact change through electoral participation, still participate at a startling rate. The data shows that across all older generations both individuals that believe they can personally enact change and those that do not, vote at about the same rate, and in much greater number than the younger generations. From this, the conclusion can be made that older generations' participation is not dependent on their ability to enact change. Apparently, the notion of political efficacy ceases to be the primary influence in voter participation as an individual age. This contradicts the

hypothesis that age increases the correlation between external political efficacy and political participation. And the data set demonstrates that in older generations' low levels of efficacy and voting behavior are completely unrelated. However, this highlights the notion that the importance for politicians to convince younger generations that they are listening to them. This cross-tabulation demonstrates that older generations will continue to vote out of habit, whether or not they feel that the politicians respond to their needs. This is especially pertinent when the different percentages between the categories of "always" voting and "sometimes" voting in presidential elections. The data set demonstrates that as individual ages he or she is more likely to participate in every political election. The impact of "always" voting confirms the patterns of voting in America, yet because older people still vote at the highest rates without efficacy it decimates the hypothesis that efficacy increases with age and is the primary reason that older generations are politically active. Younger generations need to feel a sense of influence on the political system in order to vote. The implications yield that if politicians can increase the efficacy of young people, while maintaining a solid base among older generations; they are set on a path for electoral success.

Critique of Hypothesis

This hypothesis testing produced the results that young people with high levels of external efficacy are more likely to participate, while older generations participate regardless of their views on enacting change. However, there are multiple sources for potential error arising from the methodology of analysis. The use of the two surveys, while allowing to analyze both young people and the greater population, yielded problems when identifying questions that evaluated similar aspects of efficacy in both surveys. The Tisch College Survey offered very intricate questions about the participants views on external efficacy, and probably offered the

best analysis of external efficacy recently taken. However, the respondents of the survey were only young people, so it was impossible to compare young people to older generations on as intricate level of analysis. On the other hand, the NCES1 survey provided a large sample size with an excellent cross section of different age groups, but without the in depth analysis of the Tisch College Survey. The most effective means to evaluate this hypothesis would be to use the questions from the Tisch College Survey on the sample from the NCES1 survey. This would provide the data to explicitly research the changing views of external efficacy of individuals over time.

Conclusion

External efficacy plays an important role in the political participation of young people in America. Many politicians and political scientist must learn to instill a sense of external efficacy among the youth demographic, if higher youth turnout is to be obtained. However, as individuals' age, their electoral participation increases despite their views on efficacy revealing that external efficacy is not the primary predictor for voting among older generations. The analysis also raises further questions for analysis. How can political efficacy be increased in the youth demographic? Why do old people continue to participate even if they feel they cannot make a difference in the government? What, if any, is the primary ideological indicator of political participation? This data set provides a starting point for further and more important analysis of American political participation for both young people and aging citizens. The data demonstrates hope for the future of American participation because according to the trend outlined in the data, every generation participates more than the generation it succeeds. A more successful American democracy hinges on the heightening of external efficacy among young

people to generate a broader voting base that will continue to increase as young people become adults.

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