

Efficacy: Political

Original Publication by J.L Sullivan and E. Riedel

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Sullivan and Riedel have set out to define political efficacy by exploring the intellectual origins of the term, placing it in context over time, discussing methods of measurement, and predicting future streams of research. Political efficacy pertains to a citizen's belief in affecting the political system. First conceptualized to predict political behavior, measurement of political efficacy is now considered a barometer of democratic systems.

Examining the concept, scholars found that political efficacy is split into two parts: internal and external. Internal efficacy "represents beliefs about the impact a person may have on the political process as a result of their own skills and confidence" or of the skills and confidence of people just like them. External efficacy concerns the political institutions' responsiveness to citizens' actions in the political process. Research has linked internal efficacy with political interest, knowledge, or engagement. External efficacy has been linked with trust.

Researchers have relied heavily on data from the American National Election Study (ANES) to measure political efficacy since the 1950's, with some additions to the assessment items made in the 70's. While the continuity provided by this data is admirable, there are criticisms of the precision of the items for continued research.

Feelings of political efficacy can be influenced by education, socioeconomic background, gender, and ethnic status. Examining the structural antecedents of political efficacy, researchers found that educating citizens in nonpolitical environments about self-governance increased internal efficacy. This method seems to work to elevate internal efficacy levels, but not external efficacy. Direct political participation influences external political efficacy. Differences within minority groups regarding external political efficacy reflect their lack of political influence. Minority groups experience low external efficacy when there are few minority leaders in elected positions. Declining external efficacy is correlated with political trust and voter turnout. When the voter confidence within groups declines, fewer people may participate in the democratic process.

Citizens will vote if they feel their vote will exact change in the political system. Research on political efficacy can be focused on the federal, state, or local level. Yet, feelings of external efficacy increase when one's own party is in power, especially at the presidential level. Majority party citizens feel political institution responsiveness. Distrusting citizens can lose faith in the system. While democracies can function with moderate levels of distrusting citizens, the system is better preserved when a significant portion of society supports the political system.

Research shows internal efficacy has remained strong overtime in the U.S., while external efficacy has decreased. Future studies will explore the relationship between implementing public policy and external efficacy, the relationship between political efficacy and specific political institutions, and the effect of political culture on feelings of political efficacy. Citizens' feelings of trust and external efficacy are on the decline. The authors suggest that "attempts to rebuild reservoirs of social capital ought to attend to both trust and efficacy."