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How social policy impacts inequalities in political efficacy

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Abstract

Political efficacy—the feeling that one is able to effectively participate in politics and also that her input is worthwhile—is an important precursor to numerous political activities, most prominently voting. Beyond individual resources, there is growing evidence that social policies also matter for inequalities in political efficacy. This review centers on the concept of political efficacy and its dimensions to highlight the ways in which social policies can promote or hamper people's subjective beliefs about their role vis-à-vis the state. I review studies examining the ways in which social policies can shape political efficacy, focusing on social policy design and administration. Particular attention is given to the policy feedback literature, which posits that policies can influence political efficacy through the channels of resource and interpretive effects. The review concludes by discussing the limitations and challenges of the topic and also outlines areas for the further study of political efficacy and social policy.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Why people take part in politics is a question that has held the attention of social scientists for the entire history of the discipline. Of equal importance are the questions why people do *not* engage with politics and which citizens are less likely to be politically involved. The theoretical and empirical literatures on political participation have provided an expanding body of evidence pointing to the pivotal role of resources in explaining electoral participation, but also

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political interest, party membership, or campaign involvement and donations. Studies generally underscore education, income, and time as the key socio-economic resources which positively predict political involvement (Almond and Verba, 1963; Brady et al., 1995; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). A further central component to explanations of political participation is a concept known as *political efficacy*. Political efficacy refers to people's subjective beliefs about their own abilities to take part in politics and whether that participation is worthwhile (Campbell et al., 1960). Put simply, political efficacy is a driving force behind many types of political participation, as people not only need to feel confident in their own abilities to participate, but they must also perceive that their participation is meaningful.

Like many forms of political participation, political efficacy is also characterized by a notable socio-economic gradient: In particular, people with higher levels of education and income tend to report feeling both more confident in their abilities to take part in politics and that politicians care what people like themselves think. There are numerous potential consequences that may occur when it is primarily better-off individuals who believe that political involvement is a feasible and worthwhile activity. For example, due to the strong links between voting and political efficacy, unequal input on Election Day can potentially lead to skewed outputs in terms of who gets elected, the policies they subsequently implement, and, ultimately, whose political interests are represented. A burgeoning field of literature on policy feedback effects has underscored the importance of public policy—in particular their design and implementation—for drawing citizens with fewer resources into the political sphere.

This review centers on the concept of political efficacy and its inequalities to highlight the ways in which social policies can promote or hamper people's subjective beliefs about their role vis-à-vis the state. I begin by briefly introducing the concept of political efficacy and its dimensions. I then review studies examining the ways in which public policies can shape political efficacy, focusing on social policy design and administration. I conclude by discussing the limitations and challenges of the topic and also outline areas for the further study of political efficacy.

2 | POLITICAL EFFICACY

While often discussed as a necessary condition for many forms of political participation, compared to voting, for example, political efficacy is far less frequently studied directly as a political outcome in and of itself. Before delving into the antecedents and dimensions of political efficacy, it is useful to justify the study of what may seem to be a rather narrow concept. Not only is political efficacy a prerequisite to many forms of political behaviors, but by studying political efficacy we can gain further insights into why and how socio-economic factors, such as income and education, matter for political participation. Marx and Nguyen (2016), for example, argue that a focus on political efficacy may be a more proximate way of capturing the ways in which one's socioeconomic status shapes political engagement. In other words, while the relationship between education and electoral participation is well-established, zooming in on political efficacy will arguably provide us with a better picture of the causal chain linking resources and political participation. While we should not assume that politically efficacious individuals will automatically take part in elections or actively contact their representatives, a lack of political efficacy seems to be particularly harmful for active democratic engagement.

Political efficacy also has many consequences for political culture: An absence of political efficacy “aptly defines civic disengagement” (Loveless, 2013, p. 474). Societies marked by high levels of political efficacy are thought to hold a “reservoir of citizen support for the political system” (Sullivan and Riedel, 2001, p. 4353). Political efficacy, as a component of political support, may be indicative of a healthy and robust democratic system. Declining political efficacy, however, is arguably cause for concern, for it may be indicative of perceptions that the system lacks legitimacy (Easton, 1975; Easton and Dennis, 1967; Scotto and Xena, 2015). Due to the importance of political efficacy for both further forms of political engagement and for the health of democracies, it has even been referred to as an important indicator of the quality of life (Campbell and Converse, 1972).

Political efficacy was first labelled as such by Campbell et al. in 1954 as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process, that is, that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties (1954, p. 187). More than half a century later, the concept continues to attract scholarly attention. Although there are many debates on how to best measure political efficacy,¹ there is generally theoretical and empirical consensus that political efficacy can be conceptualized along two distinct dimensions (Balch, 1974; Craig et al., 1990; Lane, 1959), although there are many instances of an undifferentiated approach to the concept. Political efficacy is divided into an internal and external component. While not entirely unrelated, the two dimensions imply two different objects of analysis, with internal efficacy tapping people’s perceptions of themselves and external efficacy tapping people’s perceptions of their states or governments (Westholm and Niemi, 1986). Internal political efficacy refers to “an individual’s self-perceptions that they are capable of understanding politics and competent enough to participate in a political act such as voting” (Miller et al., 1980, p. 253). External political efficacy, on the other hand, refers to people’s perceptions that institutions and politicians are responsive to citizens’ preferences and participation.

Who is politically efficacious? Of the individual-level attributes found to be significant predictors of political efficacy, education is arguably the most powerful correlate (Abramson and Books, 1971; Brady et al., 1995; Hayes and Bean, 1993; Niemi et al., 1991; Sullivan and Riedel, 2001). Its association with internal political efficacy is rather straightforward: Education enhances cognitive skills which facilitate political sophistication and political attentiveness, both of which are directly linked to higher levels of internal political efficacy (Nie et al., 1996). Higher education is furthermore linked to greater earnings potential, occupational prestige, broader social networks, better life chances, and better health outcomes. With regard to external political efficacy, all these cumulated resources improve individuals’ socio-economic position “and the ease with which they can gain access to political decision makers and political networks” (Rasmussen and Nørgaard, 2018, p. 25). In other words, increases in education are not only associated with absolute gains in resources, but also relative gains in terms of their potential political influence compared to less well-off citizens. As many studies have pointed out, a comparison with other citizens is implicit in the standard external efficacy survey questions which ask whether politicians, the government, or political institutions are responsive to “people like me” (Balch, 1974; Craig et al., 1990; Niemi et al., 1991).

While education is generally seen as the primary path through which political efficacy is formed, other studies additionally find that poverty (Marx and Nguyen, 2018a), poor health (Mattila et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2020), unemployment (Marx and Nguyen, 2016; Westholm and Niemi, 1986), or minority ethnic and religious status (Abramson, 1983; Oskooii, 2016; Schwartz, 1973) are all associated with lower political efficacy. There are therefore many other potential sources of low political efficacy that can lead to feelings of political alienation and a withdrawal from political engagement (Almond and Verba, 1963). Beyond individual socio-economic characteristics, the socio-political environment can also be a powerful shaper political efficacy, both positively and negatively, as I discuss in the following section.

3 | HOW PUBLIC POLICIES IMPACT POLITICAL EFFICACY

The research on political efficacy has overwhelmingly concentrated on the ways in which individual attributes shape both the internal and external dimensions. We know far less about how the socio-political context in which an individual is embedded contributes to the development or depletion of political efficacy. A notable exception are policy feedback studies, which can help us answer the question whether people’s experiences and interactions with government programs “overshadow traditional predictors of participation such as education, time, and money” (Watson, 2015, p. 647). The policy feedback approach posits that public policies and citizens exist in a dynamic relationship: Not only do citizens’ votes influence who gets elected and which policies are subsequently implemented, but policies themselves can shape citizens’ policy preferences, how they think about government and democracy, and even their likelihood of future political involvement. While the policy feedback literature has expanded rapidly over the past years (Campbell, 2012; Larsen, 2018; Ziller, 2019), the idea that public policy can play an important role in shaping

patterns of political engagement is by no means a new one. Schattschneider (1935) can be considered as one of the forerunners to the policy feedback approach and is frequently referenced for his idea that “new policies create new politics.” Schattschneider (1960) later challenged the idea that poor people themselves were to blame for their apparent political apathy and lack of political engagement; perhaps the lower classes abstained from politics not because they lacked civic or moral norms, but because the political system offered them very little to mobilize or engage their political participation (Mettler and Soss, 2004).

What does this mean for political efficacy, and how can policies influence people's subjective political attitudes? We look to both the design and administration of social policies, for this policy area is thought to be most likely to generate feedback effects due to the particular relevance social welfare programs have for people's everyday lives and livelihoods (Campbell 2012). Paul Pierson (1993) identifies resource effects and interpretive effects as the main channels through which policy feedbacks occur. Social policies can (re-)distribute *resources* needed for political involvement: Depending on the size or generosity of benefits, political engagement may be fostered due to an increase in the recipient's capacity to participate (in terms of time and money) (Campbell, 2012). Being a beneficiary of a social program can create personal stakes that foster an interest in certain issues or politics in general. If, for example, a policy targets a program that directly impacts the individual, he or she may be more likely to pay attention to and engage with politics due to the meaning a policy has for his or her own wellbeing. Following and paying attention to politics can promote internal political efficacy.

Policies can also have *interpretive* or cognitive effects on citizens (Pierson 1993), and these are the effects that are perhaps most important with regard to political efficacy, particularly for the external dimension. For example, a social policy, depending on design, may signal to individuals or groups that they have rights to certain benefits or services, that they are entitled to and deserving of support. The messages policies send to citizens can provide information about their standing within society (Schneider and Ingram, 1997) or “whether the government is responsive to their concerns, thereby encouraging engagement, passivity, or even alienation” (Wichowsky and Moynihan, 2008, p. 909).

3.1 | Policy design

One of the best studied differences in policy design in terms of its impact on individuals' democratic political engagement is the distinction between means-tested and universal programs. Means-tested benefits involve eligibility criteria, usually defining the maximum income (and sometimes even savings) a potential recipient is allowed to have in order to be eligible for a benefit or social assistance. While eligibility requirements are not in and of themselves a stigmatizing element of policy design, the ways in which eligibility is often determined can be. For example, people seeking to make use of social assistance may be asked what they perceive to be very intrusive and prying questions into their personal lives. Means-tested program beneficiaries are often subject to potential sanctions if they, for example, cannot prove they have actively applied for employment. Moreover, social assistance recipients often report that they feel they have very few opportunities to make consequential choices about their own life and that they are at the beck and call of a bureaucratic agency. Soss' (1999) study of users of social assistance in the US (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, later renamed Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, a program designed to support children whose families had low or no income) showed exactly this. The processes of applying for and receiving benefits not only impacted recipients' wellbeing, but the stigmatizing and isolating experiences also spilled over into the political realm: Both qualitative interviews and quantitative survey analyses showed lower external political efficacy among recipients. The paternalistic nature of the program, along with recipients' reported degrading experiences impacted how they saw their position in society and in relation to government. “What image of government does this convey to a group that already tends to be disadvantaged in political life?” (Soss, 1999, p. 376).

User experiences with the universal social programs, on the other hand, tend to have completely opposite effects on external political efficacy. One very prominent example, again from the United States, shows politically

empowering effects of social security programs. Campbell's (2011) study of American pensioners demonstrates how pension reform transformed this once politically inactive group into an extremely democratically engaged one. The effects of the pension reform were strongest for those in the lowest socio-economic strata, as social security comprised the largest share of their incomes. The pensions were now universal and more generous, which not only made retirement a real option for low-income senior citizens, but the policy sent them the message that their interests were being heard and protected. This in turn was found to boost external political efficacy.

Various scholars have also examined the impact of benefit conditionality on democratic engagement. Unlike with universal social policies, such as pensions in the United States or child allowances in Germany, conditional benefits involve more government oversight and more frequent, often intrusive interactions with caseworkers or bureaucrats (Watson, 2015). Soss (1999) examined political attitudes of SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) beneficiaries in the United States, a social insurance program which grants support based on previous contributions and not means-testing. He found that SSDI users had much greater levels of external political efficacy than the AFDC users. Not only did they experience responsiveness to their demands within the program, but these experiences also transferred to their political attitudes. Watson's (2015) study of conditionality in the United Kingdom reveals nuanced effects: For recipients of contributory disability benefits, she found generally positive effects of program experiences on democratic outcomes, including external political efficacy, but a negative impact of the means-tested lone parent benefit. She argues that conditionality need not harm political engagement, but when conditional programs are marked by stigmatizing means-testing procedures, these experiences convey to recipients a certain sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis the state. Recipients of these programs generally do not have opportunities for personal input and are made to feel it is their own fault that they are in need of state benefits. Moreover, while some contributory benefits are attached to a sense of deservingness, because both the recipient and public tends to see these benefits as earned entitlements, means-tested programs tend to have a great deal of social stigma attached to them. Stigma creates clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders, with the recipients of highly stigmatized social programs internalizing these feelings of personal failing. In sum, being a recipient of a stigmatized social benefit impacts how people view their position in society, which can lead to the perception that the government is unresponsive and unreliable (Watson 2015).

3.2 | Policy administration

Closely related to the design of public policies is policy administration. Though we cannot completely disentangle the effects of policy design and administration on political efficacy, it is worthwhile to examine people's personal experiences with public services and programs, as a primary source of interpretive effects (Kumlin, 2004; Mettler and Soss, 2004; Moynihan and Soss, 2014; Soss, 1999; Tyler, 2006). Although traditionally the domain of public administration scholars, political behavior researchers have been increasingly examining how personal experiences with public administration and bureaucracies matter for democratic political engagement (Béland, 2010; Kumlin, 2004; Wichowsky and Moynihan, 2008), for bureaucracies can be thought of as important democratic interfaces between the state and society (Peters, 2010, p. 216). It is precisely these personal interactions with "street-level bureaucracies" that may inform people about their standing in society and whether the state is responsive to their needs and preferences (Lipsky, 1980). People's interactions with frontline institutions and their staff, the people who administer public policies, can form the basis of evaluations and perceptions of other democratic institutions (Andrews and Jilke, 2016). In other words, encounters with bureaucracies may have broader implications for how people think about democracy and their position in society: "[T]hey can teach citizens lessons about the state, mark them in politically consequential ways, later their political capacities, and reposition them in relation to other citizens about dominant institutions" (Moynihan and Soss, 2014, p. 322). When we think about how people form their opinions about politics and democracy, it is much more likely that they will have had interactions with caseworkers or bureaucrats than their elected officials. We can therefore consider social welfare experiences as important sites of political learning (Soss 1999; Watson 2015).

When people have hierarchal, adversarial, and paternalistic interactions with bureaucracies, they are often likely to make inferences about the nature of politics from these experiences (Watson, 2015). This has often been found to be the case with means-tested social programs. Universal policies, on the other hand, tend to be characterized by very different bureaucratic-client interactions (Lipsky, 1980). Particularly with regard to vulnerable groups within society, attention to how social policies and programs are administered may provide insight into why members of these groups are more or less politically engaged (see also Grohs et al., 2016 on discrimination by public administrations). Drawing on survey data on young people with a history of unemployment, Shore and Tosun (2019) find that experiences with public employment services are related to levels of external political efficacy. Young jobseekers who reported employment agency interactions marked by respect and fairness were more likely to have higher levels of external political efficacy. The helpfulness of the employment agency offerings were also predictive of external political efficacy. The study underscores the importance of bureaucratic interactions for political inclusion, as young people with a history of unemployment are not only at risk of economic exclusion, but they are also more likely to experience political marginalization than people whose career paths got off to a smoother start (Emmenegger et al., 2017; Marx and Nguyen, 2016; Schraff, 2018). Moreover, interactions with public services may be particularly relevant for young people's political efficacy, as these experiences may constitute their first experiences with "the state" (Barnes and Hope, 2017; Giugni and Lorenzini, 2017).

As Soss (1999) also shows, experiences with programs targeted at disadvantaged groups need not necessarily leave a negative impact on political efficacy. Looking at the Head Start program in the United States, which provides early childhood education services to low-income children and families, he found that the way the program was administered fostered political engagement. Despite being a means-tested program, participants reported a very different picture of government than the group of study participants only receiving AFDC benefits. They were much more likely to view political involvement as a worthwhile activity and to consider the political system to be open and democratic. Their involvement with this program, which required parents to take part in "policy councils and local decision-making processes" (Soss 1999, p. 372), imparted them with valuable lessons not only about their own capabilities to get involved with politics, thereby enhancing internal efficacy, but also how they could expect politicians to respond, which taps into external political efficacy. "Direct experiences with policy design provide citizens with 'scripts' that indicate how they can expect government to act" (Soss, 1999, p. 376). In other words, people's personal interactions—both positive and negative—with public services shape their overall perceptions of government and can shape their perceptions of political efficacy (Moynihan and Soss, 2014).

The stigma people may experience can potentially exacerbate their own self-doubt about their ability to effectively take part in the political system (i.e., internal political efficacy). Stigma serves to set people apart from social norms and is often internalized by users of social assistance themselves. People who have stigmatizing experiences with case works often are made to feel that they lack the personal discipline needed to make it on their own or that, compared to the rest of society, they are to blame for their own personal failings. Such experiences are associated with lower *personal* efficacy (Stuber and Schlesinger, 2006; Watson, 2015). Though we have good reason to believe that lower personal efficacy is likely to translate into lower internal political efficacy, we have far less empirical evidence about how social policies can be politically empowering by compensating for internal political efficacy deficits among vulnerable groups (exceptions include Marx and Nguyen, 2018b; Soss, 1999).

4 | DISCUSSION AND THE ROAD AHEAD

While the fields of sociology, political science, and psychology have produced countless works on the origins and consequences of political efficacy over the past six decades, including contested debates on its measurement, the road ahead nevertheless holds much uncharted territory. In this review, I outlined how political efficacy, in both its dimensions, is structured by patterns of advantage and disadvantage and what this implies for the health and legitimacy of democratic states. Asking how political efficacy can be shaped by forces beyond individual resources,

I looked to studies from the policy feedback literature, focusing on how the design and administration of social policy programs impact political efficacy. Social policies are argued to play a pivotal role for political efficacy, particularly for people whose socioeconomic resources would predict rather tepid levels. Depending on design or administration, social policies can either encourage or harm perceptions that democratic political engagement is both a feasible and worthwhile undertaking. How policies are designed and implemented can affect perceptions of both deservingness and societal stigma (Roosma et al., 2016). Policy design, for example as universal or means-tested, can serve to shape group identities and notions about their deservingness. Policies can thus send messages of inclusion or stigma and can inform people about their standing in society (Mettler and Soss, 2004; Schneider and Ingram, 1997). The personal experiences people have with social policies and programs are more than simply bureaucratic errands: They are potentially important instances of political learning and can teach people whether they can expect to have their claims heard and addressed. These experiences have many implications for how responsive people perceive their political institutions and actors to be.

According to policy feedback studies, we know that policies can have different types of effects on how people think about the state, namely, resource, and interpretive effects. The resources and benefits that social policies provide may enhance equality of internal political efficacy if they are able to narrow socio-economic resource gap. Social policies are generally of particular relevance to vulnerable groups, and by providing resources that enhance people's perceptions of their own capabilities to take part in politics, they can therefore have a politically integrative function (Marx and Nguyen, 2018b; Shore, 2019). Social policy benefits can furthermore foster external political efficacy via the messages that they convey to individuals. Do they experience that their material needs are being adequately addressed and that policymakers are responsive to their needs? The messages people are sent are strongly influenced by policy design (are benefits adequate? Is it degrading to be a recipient?) and administration (do people experience stigma in applying for social assistance?). It however remains a challenge to pinpoint these types of effects and how exactly they are related to the two separate dimensions of political efficacy. Due to how policy design and administration are frequently interrelated, it is often difficult to distinguish interpretive effects from resource effects. For example, universal programs tend to also be more generous in terms of the level of benefits. Moreover, given the tendency in the extant literature on social policy effects to focus on only a single dimension of political efficacy (e.g., Marx and Nguyen, 2018b; Shore and Tosun, 2019), it remains unclear whether and how social policy matters for both dimensions.

Another important question that deserves greater attention involves causality. That is, how certain are we that it is the differences in social policy design and administration that are causing the inequalities in political efficacy? For all intents and purposes, it is nearly impossible to randomly assign individuals to different social policy settings (for example, one group experiences a highly means-tested benefit while the other experiences a universal benefit) in order to isolate the effects of different "treatments." As Campbell (2012, p. 343) points out, "true random experiments are rare in social sciences, and researchers have typically possessed only observational data on program reciprocity or other policy experiences." Though our survey data may reveal differences in terms of the political efficacy of different kinds of social policy beneficiaries, can we really attribute inequality of political efficacy to the variation in social policy? Or is it perhaps that differences in the composition of the groups who use and interact with different types of social policies are what drives the political efficacy gap? (Kumlin, 2004, p. 98–99). While we cannot ever completely rule out this possibility using observational data, we may be able to better assess the causal relationship between political efficacy and social policies by, for example, examining the effects of different social programs which target the same population. Capturing policy change may also help to address the causality question: If a program's design is altered, do clients' feelings of political efficacy change as well? (Campbell, 2012). In other words, in order to be able to make causal claims about how social policy can shape inequalities in political efficacy, careful attention must be paid to the research design. Identifying social programs that truly target the same population or have changed in such a manner that we can expect, for example, stigmatizing or empowering effects on recipients is not an easy task.

The pioneering studies of political efficacy came from the United States, drawing on the long series of data from the American National Election Surveys (ANES). Even today, political efficacy tends to be studied using American survey data. We have far fewer comparative studies of political efficacy, with one exception being the European Social Survey (ESS), which has included various measures in its survey rounds since 2002, though the dimensions of efficacy as well as the questions used to tap them varied widely in the earlier survey rounds. The growth of high quality surveys such as the ESS holds many opportunities to examine political efficacy both over time and from a comparative perspective. In terms of policies' effects on political efficacy, again, the bulk of the literature comes from the United States, though there are of course exceptions here as well (Kumlin, 2004; Kumlin and Haugsgjerd, 2017; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014; Marx and Nguyen, 2016; Marx and Nguyen, 2018b). Beyond the need for comparative studies of social policy and political efficacy, we know little about the lasting effects of policy encounters on political efficacy. For example, do stigmatizing experiences early on in life leave a lasting imprint on political efficacy, or do they perhaps "wear off" over time or as one's situation improves?

Finally, we also know relatively little about how other components of the socio-political context impact political efficacy. While there is evidence that, for example, disproportional electoral systems have an external efficacy depleting effect, particularly for supporters of small parties (Karp and Banducci, 2008), how other aspects of the electoral system, such as registration requirements or voting rules, impact both dimensions of political efficacy remain to be studied. Moreover, is political efficacy affected by socio-political tumult? Do we find that economic or migration crises impact political efficacy? Finally, we must address these new questions with a view to political equality. As we know from decades of research, people who are politically efficacious tend to have more resources at their disposal. How can we design policies so as to not further erode politically vulnerable groups' political efficacy? Given the powerfully predictive nature of political efficacy for political participation, this question is by no means a trivial one.

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ENDNOTE

¹ While beyond the scope of the present contribution, for further information on the debates and developments in measuring political efficacy, see for example, Morrell (2003); Caprara et al. (2009); Schneider et al. (2014); or Vecchione et al. (2014).

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