**WHO FEELS THEY CAN UNDERSTAND AND HAVE ­AN IMPACT**

**ON POLITICAL PROCESSES? SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CORRELATES OF POLITICAL EFFICACY IN 46 COUNTRIES, 1996-2016**

**Abstract**

While recent research has produced robust objective evidence of unequal representation in democracies, there is little evidence about whether this inequality is consistent with individuals’ subjective perceptions of their own political efficacy. To answer this question, we use all available data on political efficacy from the International Social Survey Programme modules for 46 countries (1996-2016) to investigate trends and correlates of external and internal political efficacy. With a focus on descriptive representation, we investigate socio-demographic characteristics that are central to recent literature on unequal representation: gender, education, and income. Our individual-level findings show that education and income are positively associated with both external and internal efficacy, while being female is associated with lower levels of internal efficacy but unrelated to external efficacy. We complement these individual-level analyses with a contextual investigation of descriptive representation for gender, which shows that women are less likely to feel they have a say in policy decisions when their political context is dominated by men. We conclude by noting how future research can leverage cross-national data to identify contextual mechanisms that may impact upon these persistent social gaps in political efficacy across contexts and over time.

Keywords: political efficacy, unequal representation, internal efficacy, external efficacy, International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)

There is strong evidence of global unequal representation in objective measures of policy and political outcomes. Initial work from the United States showed important inequalities in wealth and economic policy (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens & Page 2014). More recent work shows that unequal substantive representation on multiple policy dimensions is a global phenomenon that is relevant for several key socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, education, and income (Elkjær & Klitgaard, in press; Elsässer et al. 2021; Lupu & Warner 2022a, 2022b; Reher 2018; Rosset & Stecker 2019; Schakel & Van der Pas 2021). There is little research, however, on whether these patterns of substantive unequal representation are consistent with individuals’ perceptions of their capacities to understand and influence politics, and whether these perceptions are impacted by contexts of under-representation in relation to key socio-demographic characteristics.

We address these gaps in the literature by examining whether the key socio-demographic groups that tend to obtain lower levels of substantive representation also have lower levels of subjective political efficacy. In addition, we complement this individual-analysis of the association between key socio-demographic characteristic and individuals’ perceptions of their political efficacy with analysis of the best available data on descriptive representation across contexts.

This investigation of how key socio-demographic characteristics relate to people’s sense of their own political efficacy is a fundamental building block for advancing research on unequal representation. From a normative perspective, a central concern of political theory has been the responsiveness of governments to all citizens, who should be “considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971: 1). Prominent work by scholars such as Lijphart (1997) and Pateman (1970) has argued that governments should not be systematically more responsive to some groups and individuals than others. As noted in Chamberlain’s (2012) longitudinal study of efficacy in the United States, there should be normative concern in democratic societies if the population feels its voice is unheard. From this perspective, systematic socio-demographic variance in the degree to which people consider themselves to be political equals would indicate that—at least in the eyes of citizens—the normative ideal of equal responsiveness has not been attained. Yet to date, the burgeoning cross-national literature on unequal representation has focused on objective measures of substantive representation only, without also assessing whether there are systematic socio-demographic gaps in individuals’ subjective perceptions of their capacity to engage in and influence political processes.

A key attitudinal measure that captures individuals’ perceptions of the connection between citizens and the state is political efficacy. Campbell et al. (1954: 187) defined efficacy as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process.” Subsequent research identified two distinct dimensions of efficacy, namely *external efficacy*, referring to “beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizen demand,” and *internal efficacy*, defined as “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in, politics” (Niemi et al. 1991: 84-85). Taken together, these two dimensions of political efficacy allow researchers to assess who feels they can understand and have an impact on political processes.

Research on whether individuals’ subjective reports of political efficacy reflect patterns of socio-demographic inequality in objective measures of representation is important, because inequalities in efficacy could contribute to a vicious cycle that exacerbates the underrepresentation of traditionally lower-status groups. The potential for this type of vicious cycle is informed by prior research showing that political efficacy is positively associated with pro-democratic attitudes and behaviors that are prevalent in contexts characterized by strong democratic functioning (e.g., Erber & Lau 1990). For example, research has shown that political efficacy is consistently positively associated with attitudes of political trust and political interest (Niemi et al. 1991). In addition, researchers have found a strong association between political efficacy and all types of political behaviors, including electoral turnout (Abramson & Aldrich 1982; Davis & Hitt 2017; Finkel 1985; Karp & Banducci 2008), and civic and political participation beyond the electoral arena (Verba et al. 1995). Reflecting on these and related findings, the importance of investigating people’s subjective sense of their own political efficacy was clearly articulated by Morrell (2003: 589): “Simply put, efficacy is citizens’ perception of powerfulness (or powerlessness) in the political realm.”

To examine whether empirically established representational inequalities are reflected in citizens’ perceptions of their own political efficacy, we analyze socio-demographic correlates of both external and internal efficacy. Specifically, we analyze all available International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data on political efficacy (1996-2016) for 46 countries and investigate the three socio-demographic characteristics that are the focus of recent cross-national findings of unequal representation: gender, education, and income. Our individual-level findings identify socio-demographic-based efficacy gaps for most measures, showing that the objective measures of unequal representation identified in recent studies are generally consistent with people’s subjective perceptions. We complement this comprehensive individual-level analysis with a contextual-level assessment of whether descriptive under-representation on socio-demographic parameters available for analysis (i.e., gender) have an impact on political efficacy. Taken together, our individual-level and contextual-level analyses show the importance of leveraging new data gathering efforts on the socio-demographic characteristics of political leaders to advance future research on the relationship between political efficacy and descriptive representation.

**Unequal representation and political efficacy**

A growing body of research has found that people with different socio-demographic characteristics are not equally represented by governments or political outcomes. The earliest and most clearly established line of research on this topic focused on the association between wealth and representation in the United States and found that the rich are better represented than the poor (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens & Page 2014). Cross-national studies have extended this work and found similar patterns worldwide (Elkjær & Klitgaard, forthcoming; Lupu & Warner 2022a, 2022b; Traber et al. 2022). Recent studies have documented unequal representation in additional socio-demographic characteristics, including education (Elsässer et al. 2021; Rosset & Stecker 2019; Schakel & Van der Pas 2021) and gender (Reher 2018).

This body of work has focused on objective measures of representation of citizens’ preferences, such as congruence in ideology or policy positions between citizens and their representatives, and responsiveness of policy outcomes to citizens’ preferences. From the perspective of Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) classic distinction between different types of representation, this line of work focuses on *substantive representation*, meaning the representation of the preferences and interests of distinctive social groups. These consistent findings of the substantive under-representation of lower-status demographic groups (i.e., women, and those with less education and income) highlights the lack of empirical research to date on what Pitkin (1967) described as *descriptive representation*, meaning the personal similarity between the representative and the represented. Yet systematic, cross-national and longitudinal research on descriptive representation is important for developing a clearer understanding of inequalities in representation, as research in specific contexts and time periods has suggested that the numerical underrepresentation of certain social groups in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender and ethnicity) can yield policy that conflicts with these groups’ interests (Broockman 2013, Hakhverdian 2015).

Despite mounting evidence of unequal substantive representation in objective measures, little is known about whether the under-represented social groups identified in this line of research (e.g., women, and those with less education and lower income) perceive *themselves* as less capable of engaging in political processes. Investigating people’s subjective sense of their own capacity to effectively engage in political processes is important to assess the degree to which unequal substantive representation seems to be reflected in the subjective perceptions of the impacted populations.

There are logical reasons why these substantively under-represented groups may not report lower levels of political efficacy. In the economic policy domain, for example, the less affluent might not perceive the empirically established fact that their preferences are less well represented. Further, even if they do perceive the objective evidence of unequal representation, they might not interpret it as reflecting poorly on their own capacity to understand or influence political processes. To date, however, systematic research has not yet been conducted to assess the subjective perceptions of political efficacy of key socio-demographic groups across contexts and over time.

**Research Question and Hypotheses**

Integrating these literatures, our main *research question* is whether subjective measures of political efficacy follow the pattern of socio-demographic inequality evident in objective measures of representation. Our main focus of inquiry is individual-level associations between political efficacy and the key socio-demographic characteristics (gender, education, and income), and we use the most comprehensive data available across diverse national contexts and over time to obtain robust findings.

*Individual-level hypotheses*

To inform our hypotheses on the expected associations between political efficacy and individuals’ key socio-demographic characteristics, we synthesize select findings from prior research on political efficacy that included socio-demographic characteristics as control variables. This review of previous research clarifies that the literature does not inform clear or consistent expectations about whether external or internal efficacy will show the largest gaps.

*Gender:* Early empirical studies consistently indicated that men reported higher efficacy levels than women (Campbell et al. 1954). Subsequent findings on gender are mixed, with some studies showing no association between gender and either external or internal efficacy (Hayes & Bean 1993). More recent studies have shown no significant relationship between gender and external efficacy (Karp & Banducci 2008; Wolak 2018) but a lower level of internal efficacy for women than men (Fraile & de Miguel Moyer 2022; Wolak 2018). In general, the literature suggests that women have lower levels of political efficacy than men, particularly for internal efficacy, with the potential that this association has changed over time.

*Education:* For external efficacy, prior research suggests a consistent positive association with education (Karp & Banducci 2008; Wolak 2018). In contrast, mixed findings are identified for internal efficacy, with some studies (e.g., Hayes and Bean 1993) finding no significant relationship with education, while others (e.g., Wolak 2018) report a positive significant relationship.

*Income:* Prominent studies on the determinants of political efficacy have not consistently included income measures in their analyses (e.g., Karp & Banducci 2008; Wolak 2018). The most comprehensive study we are aware of on the connection between political efficacy and income measures placed theoretical focus on external efficacy, and found a strong and stable positive association over time (Rennwald & Pontusson 2022). The literature therefore informs an expectation of a positive association between efficacy and income.

Taken together, this review of the literature focused on individual-level expectations informs three hypotheses about the association between political efficacy and key sociodemographic characteristics:

*H1. Women have lower levels of political efficacy than men, particularly for internal efficacy.*

*H2. Education is positively associated with political efficacy.*

*H3. Income is positively associated with political efficacy.*

This review of individual-level evidence from different contexts and time periods indicates that levels of political efficacy may have shifted over time for certain socio-demographic groups, and particularly for women. Thus, systematic longitudinal investigation of these associations is necessary. Research on longitudinal trends in political efficacy in the literature has focused primarily on the United States based on the American National Election Studies (ANES) time trend series from 1952 to the present. This research has indicated long-term decline in political efficacy in the U.S.—particularly external efficacy—that has often been interpreted as a secular trend that is potentially generalizable to other contexts (Abramson & Aldrich 1982; Chamberlain 2012). However, for the observation period for which systematic cross-national data are available in the current study (1996-2016), ANES (2021) data suggest relative stability in levels of both external and internal efficacy. Due to the lack of robust cross-national literature on this topic, our analysis of longitudinal trends is primarily exploratory, with the intention of establishing baseline findings to inform future research.

*Contextual-level hypothesis*

We complement our main focus on individual-level hypotheses with an investigation of whether contextual measures of objective representation are systematically associated with the political efficacy of distinctive social groups. As detailed in the data and methods section, our contextual analysis leverages the best comprehensive available data on objective representation measures, which allows us to investigate the impact of descriptive representation by gender. Specifically, we investigate whether the percentage of female representation has an impact on women’s levels of political efficacy in a given context. The only country-specific analysis we are aware of in the literature that has conducted a similar analysis—by Wolak (2018) in the U.S. states—found greater efficacy for external efficacy, but no effect on internal efficacy. Yet it is feasible that women’s external and internal efficacy would both be higher in contexts with greater female representation, and this is the logic we use in articulating our hypothesis on descriptive representation for gender.

*H4. A higher degree of female representation in parliament increases women’s levels of efficacy.*

**Data and methods**

We test our expectations by conducting a cross-national and longitudinal investigation using individual-level data from the ISSP (2023).[[1]](#footnote-2) The analysis uses ISSP data for every module that includes consistent measures of political efficacy: 1996, 2004, 2006, 2014, and 2016 (n > 200,000).[[2]](#footnote-3) The statement on *external efficacy* notes: “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.” The statement measuring *internal efficacy* notes: “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.” These ISSP measures are classic indicators in the literature of external and internal efficacy, respectively. We coded the efficacy variables so that a low score (1) indicates low efficacy, and a high score (5) indicates high efficacy. These five-point scales for external and internal efficacy are the dependent variables of our analyses.

As the optimal multi-indicator measurements of political efficacy are still subject to debate (Chamberlain 2012; Morrell 2003), the ISSP single-item measures have the advantage of conceptual and analytical clarity (Allen et al. 2022). Distinct from more recently developed, innovative measures of efficacy—such as Esaiasson et al.’s (2015) measure of the perceived responsiveness of targeted actors—our theoretical focus is on generalized measures that relate to affectively charged beliefs. An important advantage of this approach for conducting a robust cross-national and longitudinal analysis is that the ISSP’s political efficacy survey questions and response categories are identical for the 1996-2016 dataset and 46 countries in the study, allowing us to conduct the most comprehensive investigation to date of the socio-demographic correlates of political efficacy.

As noted, our main focus in the current study is on the association between political efficacy and the three key individual-level socio-demographic correlates that have received the most attention in research on substantive representation, namely gender (Reher 2018), education (Elsässer et al. 2021; Rosset & Stecker 2019; Schakel & Van der Pas 2021), and income (Elkjær & Klitgaard, forthcoming; Lupu & Warner 2022a, 2022b; Traber et al. 2022). We conduct a comprehensive individual-level analyses of these three most prominent socio-demographic measures in the literature, as consistent measures are available in the ISSP data for these characteristics across countries and over time. Additional socio-demographic characteristics are also of worthy of theoretical and empirical attention on this topic, such as race and ethnicity (Sobolewska et al. 2018; Wolak 2018) and disability (Reher 2020, 2022). Empirical analysis of these characteristics is not possible using ISSP data, however, as the survey does not include consistent questions on these topics.

In addition to our main focus on the individual-level analysis of the association between subjective measures of political efficacy and key socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, and education), we complement this approach with an assessment of whether individuals’ levels of political efficacy are also are also systematically related to objective measures of representation at the contextual level. While the ISSP data are an optimal data source for consistent and high-quality measures of political efficacy across contexts and over time, the relevant available data for assessing the relationship between political efficacy and objective measures of representation are fairly limited. A comprehensive analysis of the correlation between the efficacy measures and *substantive* representation is not possible, as the ISSP lacks consistent measures of individual-level ideology or policy preferences. Assessment of the correlation between efficacy measures and *descriptive* representation is feasible for one of our key socio-demographic measures, namely gender, as detailed below in our documentation of the contextual-level analyses.

*Individual-level data and methods*

The pooled mean of external efficacy is 2.70 (S.D.=1.30) and of internal efficacy is 3.30 (S.D.=1.08). These average levels of political efficacy are relatively close to the scale’s midpoint, and internal efficacy is somewhat higher than external efficacy, which is consistent with the literature (e.g., Wolak 2018). The correlation between the pooled means of external and internal efficacy measures are relatively low (gamma correlation=0.10), which is also consistent with prior findings (e.g., Balch 1974; Wolak 2018), and supports our analytical approach of treating these two indicators as separate dependent variables. Consistent with trends in U.S. data for this time span (ANES 2023), mean levels of both external and internal efficacy are relatively stable over the observation period (see Appendix C for pooled and country-specific mean trend figures).

In terms of socio-demographics, the ISSP questionnaire includes standard questions about gender (0=male, 1=female; mean=0.53, S.D.=0.50), age (continuous years, mean=47.14, S.D.=17.23), and education (schooling years, 0-21; mean=11.94, S.D.=3.83). For income, we follow recent research (cf. Armingeon & Weisstanner 2022; Donnelly & Pop-Elches 2018) to create a cross-nationally comparable standardized variable (mean=0; S.D.=1). To provide an example of the substantive impact of a one-unit shift in income using this measure, the mean income in the U.S. for Module 5 is $58,546.66, and one standard deviation is $38,753.63. See Appendix D for additional information on the values corresponding to income quantities of interest in selected countries.

For the individual-level regression analyses, we estimate linear regressions with fixed effects for country and module, with standard errors clustered by country and module. We first run separate bivariate models for each efficacy-socio-demographic measure combination of gender, education, and income to avoid post-treatment bias.[[3]](#footnote-4) We then estimate two full models (one for each type of efficacy) that include all three socio-demographic variables. We include age as a control variable, in line with prior research (Karp & Banducci 2008; Verba et al. 1995; Wolak 2018). The observational nature of our research design means that we cannot infer causality. While it is plausible to infer that individuals’ education and income levels precede their sense of political efficacy, the opposite causal direction is also possible. We apply ISSP national weights (design or post-stratification weights) when available, as well as weights that adjust for country sample size. To assess longitudinal trends in the correlates of efficacy, we include interactions between survey modules and the three key socio-demographic characteristics.

*Multilevel data and methods*

To test our hypothesis on the impact of descriptive representation for gender on political efficacy, we use data on the percentage of female MPs for the relevant country-years in the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature, as compiled by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al. 2021). This type of multilevel analysis requires the inclusion of relevant country-level factors in the model as control variables. For this purpose, the multilevel regression analyses include country-level control variables that take into account the contextual electoral system, the level of economic inequality in the country, and measures of country-level economic activity.

For our multilevel analysis of descriptive representation for gender, we merged these country-level control variables from various sources in country-year format with the ISSP individual-level data. Specifically, for *electoral system* we use a categorical measure from the V-Dem project of whether the electoral system for the lower or unicameral chamber of the legislature is majoritarian, proportional, or mixed (Coppedge et al. 2021). In addition to this categorical measure of the electoral system in the main models reported in the article, we also conducted a robustness test that replaced this variable with an electoral system measure of district magnitude, also measured by V-Dem, and the findings are substantively similar (see replication materials for documentation of this robustness test). For contextual measures of *economic inequality* we use the Gini index of inequality in equivalized household income using the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt 2020). For country-level measures of *economic activity* we use Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as measured by the World Bank in current U.S. dollars (The World Bank 2021). Additional detail on these country-level data sources is documented in the Appendix H (“Descriptive statistics and data sources”).

To properly take into account the nested structure of the data in our analysis, we estimate multilevel linear regressions in which individuals (Level 1) are nested within studies conducted in specific country-years (Level 2), which are nested within countries (Level 3). We use this modeling approach because observations are not independent within each study, and studies are not independent from other studies conducted in the same country. In this multilevel data structure, the independent variables are not at the same level of analysis: while some independent variables represent individual-level measures (e.g., gender, education), other variables correspond to contextual-level measures documented by country-year (e.g., percent of female MPs, GDP).

Although gender is the only sociodemographic characteristic among those we investigate in the current study for which comprehensive data are currently available to allow an analysis of objective (under-)representation of descriptive measures, there are two new major data construction efforts that are currently gathering systematic socio-demographic data on political leaders. Specifically, Gerring et al.’s (2019) “Global Leadership Project (GLP)” has gathered data on a variety of types of political leaders, with a first round of data gathering complete between 2010-2013, and a second round focused on 2017-2018. While currently available data from this project do not have a large enough sample size to allow for valid estimation with our dataset, it will be important to assess whether this project’s future data releases can be used to obtain valid results. A separate data gathering effort, the “Global Legislators Database (GLD),” focuses on the socio-demographic characteristics of legislators (Carnes et al. 2022; Carnes & Lupu, in press). Although the dataset produced by this project is not yet publicly available, analyses produced based on data derived from legislators who served during one legislative session in 2016 and 2017 (Carnes et al. 2022) show the potential to leverage these data to break new ground in future research on descriptive representation.

**Results**

*Individual-level findings*

Table 1 shows OLS estimates for external efficacy to the left and internal efficacy to the right. For each dependent variable, we show the results of models that focus on one main socio-demographic indicator at a time before presenting the estimates of a model that includes all socio-demographic indicators. Beginning with external efficacy, the findings for gender show a marginally significant and substantively small gender gap for the bivariate association, but this relationship is not significant in the full model. Those with more education and income report higher external efficacy. Specifically, and focusing on the full model, one year of formal education is associated with a .048 point increase in external efficacy, while an increase of one unit in income yields a .090 point increase in external efficacy.

[Table 1 about here]

For internal efficacy, the gender findings differ from those observed for external efficacy. Women, on average, report a significantly lower level (-.277) of internal efficacy than men. In contrast, the results for education and income are similar to those for external efficacy, as both measures are positively and substantively associated with internal efficacy. The coefficients of the full model suggest that one additional year of education is associated with a .051 increase in internal efficacy, while a one unit increase in income is associated with a .071 increase in internal efficacy.

Taken together, these findings show that those with more education and income clearly have higher external and internal efficacy in comparison to those who have less education and income. For gender, the findings show no gender gap for external efficacy, but for internal efficacy women report substantially lower levels than men. Figure 1 visualizes these effects by plotting predicted levels of external (left) and internal (right) efficacy by respondents’ sex, and based on their education and income.

Figure 1*.* Socio-demographic characteristics and predicted levels of political efficacy

External Efficacy Internal Efficacy

[Figure 1 about here]

*Note*. Predicted efficacy levels based on model results presented in Table 1. Spikes indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Further, the predicted levels of efficacy based on all three socio-demographic characteristics together show a clear difference between the more privileged group (men with education and income one standard deviation above the mean), with external and internal efficacy values of 2.99 and 3.72 respectively, compared to the less privileged group (women with education and income one standard deviation below the mean), with external and internal efficacy values of 2.37 and 2.87, respectively.[[4]](#footnote-5)

To assess the cross-national generalizability of these findings, we estimate six separate linear regressions for each country: one for each combination of socio-demographic indicator-efficacy type combination (see Appendix F for average marginal effects plots). These country-specific analyses support our conclusions based on the pooled sample. In particular, women have significantly lower levels of internal efficacy than men, while those with less education and income report significantly lower external and internal efficacy than higher-status individuals. From these analyses we conclude that the observed associations between citizens’ socio-demographic characteristics and political efficacy are relatively consistent across countries.

We assess longitudinal patterns of the individual-level findings by using country-module interaction terms. Similar to the mean values for political efficacy over time (cf. Appendix C), the average marginal effects plots in Figure 2 show over-time stability in the magnitude of the association between the three socio-demographic characteristics and the efficacy measures taking confidence intervals into account. While the results indicate that the magnitude of the association between education and external efficacy decreased meaningfully in the most recent module, further research is needed as data become available to assess whether this data point is part of a longitudinal trend. Taken together, these findings indicate that gaps in political efficacy related to socio-demographic characteristics have remained stable between 1996-2016.

Figure 2. Political efficacy marginal effects over time for gender, education, and income

External Efficacy Internal Efficacy

[Figure 2 about here]

*Note*. Plots display the average marginal effects (AMEs) of the relationship between the three key socio-demographic characteristics (gender, education, and income) and external/internal political efficacy with module interactions. The results exclude information from surveys that overlap temporally with surveys from other modules (n=4; for details see Appendix B).

*Multilevel findings*

XX To be adapted from the review memo

**Discussion**

In this study, we asked and answered the question “who feels they can understand and have an impact on political processes?” at a moment when there is much new evidence of unequal substantive representation across social groups. Specifically, research on substantive representation across democracies favor men over women (Reher 2018), and those with greater education (Elsässer et al. 2021; Schakel & Van der Pas 2021) and income (Elkjær & Klitgaard, forthcoming; Lupu & Warner 2022a, 2022b) over those with less education and income. We contribute to this line of research by assessing whether findings of unequal representation based on objective measures are consistent with individuals’ subjective perceptions of their own political efficacy. In addition, we complement our investigation of individual-level associations between key socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, education, and income) with contextual analysis of descriptive representation by gender.

Our findings show that individuals with less education and income report lower external and internal efficacy than their higher status counterparts. For gender, the findings show no gender gap for external efficacy, while women consistently report lower internal efficacy than men. These results apply across a diverse range of countries and are persistent over time. Socio-demographic groups that are disadvantaged in terms of objective measures of political representation, thus, appear to be keenly aware of this, as reflected in their relatively low efficacy levels.

Returning to our opening discussion of democratic political theory, the persistence of these socio-demographic-based gaps is clearly suboptimal in relation to the democratic ideal of governance in which individuals are considered political equals (Dahl 1971: 1). Until recently, the conventional wisdom in the study of political efficacy—based primarily on analyses of U.S. data—has been that political efficacy is an intrinsically personal characteristic (e.g., Easton & Dennis 1967; Iyengar 1980) and aggregate-level analyses show no relation between political efficacy and contextual factors (Chamberlain 2012). However, recent comparative analysis of a survey conducted in the U.S. states in 2014 by Wolak (2018) provides new evidence of a variety of contextual factors that affect individuals’ external and internal efficacy. We also find some evidence of variation between national contexts. The current study’s empirical contributions therefore lay the foundation for future cross-national research on how contextual factors influence citizens’ capacity in Dahl’s (1971) terms to consider themselves as political equals.

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**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics and political efficacy

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | DV: External Efficacy | | | | DV: Internal Efficacy | | | |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
| Female | -0.044\* |  |  | -0.014 | -0.295\*\*\* |  |  | -0.277\*\*\* |
|  | (0.015) |  |  | (0.013) | (0.021) |  |  | (0.020) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Education |  | 0.055\*\* |  | 0.048\*\* |  | 0.043\*\*\* |  | 0.051\*\*\* |
|  |  | (0.007) |  | (0.007) |  | (0.003) |  | (0.003) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Income |  |  | 0.152\*\*\* | 0.090\*\*\* |  |  | 0.114\*\*\* | 0.071\*\*\* |
|  |  |  | (0.012) | (0.009) |  |  | (0.011) | (0.008) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Age |  |  |  | -0.001 |  |  |  | 0.009\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |  | (0.001) |  |  |  | (0.001) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Constant | 2.482\*\*\* | 1.921\*\*\* | 2.479\*\*\* | 2.053\*\*\* | 3.298\*\*\* | 2.702\*\*\* | 3.109\*\*\* | 2.399\*\*\* |
|  | (0.069) | (0.108) | (0.070) | (0.105) | (0.022) | (0.040) | (0.023) | (0.046) |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Country F.E. | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Module F.E. | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| *N* | 211,508 | 196,008 | 170,135 | 157,140 | 207,052 | 191,939 | 166,907 | 154,168 |

*Note.* Entries correspond to estimates from linear regressions with country and module fixed effects. Clustered standard errors by country and module in parentheses. Ordered logit specification yields the same substantive results (see Appendix E). Significance levels: \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

**Table 2***.* Cross-level interactions: Descriptive representation by gender

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | DV: External Efficacy | | DV: Internal Efficacy | |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Female gender | -0.082\*\*\* | -0.084\*\*\* | -0.309\*\*\* | -0.311\*\*\* |
|  | (0.019) | (0.019) | (0.023) | (0.023) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| % Female MPs | -0.011\* | -0.010 | 0.002 | 0.004 |
|  | (0.005) | (0.005) | (0.003) | (0.003) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Female gender x | 0.003\*\*\* | 0.003\*\*\* | 0.001 | 0.001 |
| % Female MPs | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Age | -0.001\*\*\* | -0.001\*\*\* | 0.009\*\*\* | 0.009\*\*\* |
|  | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.000) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Education | 0.046\*\*\* | 0.047\*\*\* | 0.051\*\*\* | 0.050\*\*\* |
|  | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Income | 0.088\*\*\* | 0.090\*\*\* | 0.071\*\*\* | 0.071\*\*\* |
|  | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.003) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Year | 0.009\* | 0.004 | -0.001 | -0.002 |
|  | (0.004) | (0.005) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Electoral |  | 0.164 |  | -0.035 |
| system |  | (0.110) |  | (0.057) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Gini |  | 0.007 |  | 0.005 |
|  |  | (0.009) |  | (0.004) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| GDP |  | 0.105\*\* |  | 0.022 |
|  |  | (0.039) |  | (0.020) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Constant | -16.025 | -9.357 | 4.370 | 5.286 |
|  | (8.949) | (9.322) | (4.635) | (4.590) |
| *N* | 157,140 | 150,879 | 154,168 | 147,944 |

*Note.* Significance levels: \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001

**Figure 1.**Socio-demographic characteristics and predicted levels of political efficacy

External Efficacy Internal Efficacy

Shape

Description automatically generated with medium confidence*Note*. Predicted efficacy levels based on model results presented in Table 1. Spikes indicate 95% confidence intervals.

**Figure 2**. Political efficacy marginal effects over time for gender, education, and income

External Efficacy Internal Efficacy

Chart

Description automatically generated

*Note*. Plots display the average marginal effects (AMEs) of the relationship between the three key socio-demographic characteristics (gender, education, and income) and external/internal political efficacy with module interactions. The results exclude information from surveys that overlap temporally with surveys from other modules (n=4; for details see Appendix B).

**Figure 3.** Descriptive representation of women and external efficacy



*Note.* Figure is a margins plot of the interaction term in Table 2, Model 2: the interactive effect on external efficacy of individual-level female gender by contextual-level percent of female MPs, controlling for country-level factors.

1. See Supplemental Data for the online Appendix, which includes additional information on data and supplementary analyses. Replication files including data and code for all analyses presented in the article and Appendix are available at the Harvard Dataverse <doi to be added upon publication>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Years indicate the ISSP module name, and the fieldwork date ranges for some country-modules extend beyond the calendar year of the ISSP module name (see Appendix A for documentation). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. XXX Footnote on post-treatment bias to address R2’s question [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. We computed these predicted levels of efficacy using the ‘margins’ command in Stata. Specifically, following the fully specified regression analyses reported in Table 1 (Models 4 and 8) we predict levels of external and internal efficacy by setting the socio-demographic characteristics to high-status values for each independent variable, and then to low-status values. See the replication file in the Harvard Dataverse for further detail <doi to be added upon publication>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)