

Towards Measuring Political Efficacy Level and its Implication on Political Participation

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Abstract

People who feel efficacious politically are much more likely to become actively involved in politics to follow politics, to discuss politics, to be more active partisans and to be more engaged in political activities. The higher the political efficacy of the citizenry, the higher is its general participation in political matters. This is one of the reasons why it is crucial to examine political efficacy of voters while analysing their participation in the political process. The study found that political attitudes and perceptions towards democratic process do contribute to a combination of factors that motivate the electors to go to the polls. As a whole the study indicates that there is a positive link between the sense of political efficacy and level of political participation of the respondents.

Keywords: Sense of Political Efficacy, Democracies, Voting, Confidence, Government

1. Introduction

Political efficacy is the feeling that an individual political action does have, or can have an impact upon the political process. According to Campbell et al., (1954), sense of political efficacy (SPE) is the feeling that individual political action does have or can have an impact upon the political process. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change. It refers to the degree in which an individual believes he or she has the ability to influence the political system (Aaron Cohen et al., 2001). Almond and Verba (1965) considered political efficacy to be; “an index of the extent to which citizens consider their political system democratic and closely related to many attitudes vital for understanding the nature of democratic political orientations”.

High levels of efficacy among citizens are usually viewed as desirable for the stability of democracy, because in the modern democratic society, citizens should feel that they have some power to influence the actions of their government (J.D. Wright, 1975). People with a higher belief in their competence or capacity to take political action are more disposed to do so, meaning that a politically efficacious citizen is also likely to be an active one. Political efficacy is not a uni-dimensional concept and is generally considered to have two components: internal and external political efficacy. In political terms, ‘internal’ efficacy is determined by the individual’s belief that participating in politics – for example, by voting, financially supporting a candidate, or talking to friends about politics – could have some desirable outcome, such as the successful election of a preferred candidate. It refers to the individual’s belief in her own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics. ‘External’ efficacy refers to the degree to which the individual perceives government officials and institutions to be responsive to citizen demands, i.e., the extent to which government actually fulfills its side of the democratic bargain (R. G. Niemi et al., 1991).

Primarily then political efficacy is a factor that is strongly connected to political participation. It has been commonly regarded that political efficacy has a direct and positive impact on political participation, which suggests, attitude directs behavior (Paul Abramson & John Aldrich, 1982). Consequently, political efficacy is commonly employed as an important predictor of political participation. Decades of political efficacy research and measurement has consistently shown a positive relationship with a variety of participatory behaviors (Delli Carpini, 2004). Similarly, Dahl (1965) state the political stratum consists of individuals who are psychologically involved in governmental decisions. Why some people are more involved in politics psychologically and think themselves effective in politics? This question relates to the voters sense of political efficacy which is a direct indicator of legitimacy and efficiency of the political institutions and authorities. Therefore, this study examines the level of the respondents’ sense of political efficacy which is expected to have an impact on voters’ patterns of political participation.

2. Data and Method

This work is based on qualitative, empirical and is intensive in nature. Data is collected from both the primary as well as secondary sources. The primary information is

collected from the field study conducted during the year 2016 which is specifically based on the last Nagaland Legislative Assembly Elections. The present study is limited to the district of Mokokchung. Politically, Mokokchung is one of the most crucial districts in the state since it represents the largest ten representatives out of sixty MLAs to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. For the study, a sample size of five Assembly Constituencies was selected to conduct the study. The selection is made using the Systematic Random Sampling (SRS) method. From each of the sampled assembly constituencies, three polling stations were selected. Out of which thirty voters (respondents) each were selected from the electoral roll of the selected polling station. This was supplemented by interview with people from various walks of life to enrich the data collected from the field. The secondary information is gathered from various published and unpublished academic books, journals, articles, official records, statistical documents and seminar papers, etc.

3. Discussion

The respondent's level of sense of political efficacy was thoroughly examined about politics and government by the four standard questions pertaining to political efficacy statement. An efficacy scale of measurement placed the respondents in one of the three levels of political efficacy scale –high, medium and low political efficacy.

A three-point Likert Scale is used to measure the respondents' level of sense of political efficacy. The respondents were asked to rate agreement or disagreement with each statement on a scale of one to three, with the key as follows: 1=Don't know, 2=Disagree and 3=Agree. Based on the respondent's indication, each answer was scored from 3 points for agree, 2 points for disagree and 1 point for don't know. Accordingly, the respondents' sense of political efficacy has been categorized under three levels – High (for agree), Low (for disagree) and None (for don't know) respectively. A higher overall score indicates higher political efficacy.

Table 1: Measurement of Level of Political Efficacy

Political Efficacy Item	High	Low	None	Liker t Scale
1. Does the government/politicians care much about what people like you think?	12.03	60.20	27.77	1.84
2. "People like me don't have any say about what the government does".	43.74	37.84	18.42	2.25
3. Does politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what is going on?	56.51	19.91	23.58	2.32
4. "Voting is the only way that people like me have a say on how government runs things".	44.72	32.93	22.35	2.22

Source: Field Study, 2016

Several interesting findings can be drawn from the above given Table 1. It is evident that one's level of political efficacy determines one's level of political participation. As we move from none to high degree of SPE, the proportion in low level of political participation decreases significantly almost in all the items. Except in item number one, respondents were having a high level of political efficacy which implies their attitude in political participation. Generally, with the increase in SPE, the proportion in high level of participation increases. On the other hand, respondents having low level of SPE have mostly exhibited high level of political participation. This outcome suggests a highly significant association between sense of political efficacy and political participation.

Data as highlighted in the above analysis reveals a mixed pattern of political efficacy by the respondents. Out of the four items on political efficacy, the study indicating highest (2.32%) level of expression was the respondent's inability to understand about politics and government. They were asked to respond the statement, "Does politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what is going on?". Thereupon, a high level of 56.51per cent respondents agreed on the statement. Then the

percentage of efficacy decreased to 19.91 per cent under low level and further climbed up to 23.58 per cent under the none political efficacy level. This entire outcome did not come as a surprise that such low sense of political efficacy prevailed among the respondents. Even though the respondents have participated at a high rate (86.48%) in voting, they could not really understand the complexity of politics and government. This unorthodox pattern of negative assessment is not so prominent in other established democracies. One key element of perceptions in these democracies is that most electorates easily manage to understand the core nature of politics and its significance of government. Build on such basic foundations of political culture transforms the citizens to possess a healthy rate of political attitude in them.

There is a general understanding that item three statements being the highest and is a valid indicator of political efficacy. However, because agreement with this statement is an admission of confusion or ignorance, it is possible that responses will be contaminated by a social desirability response set, which may in turn be linked to social class (McPherson et al., 1977). Reading on this theoretical significance, the present analysis somehow resulted on this similar trend. One immediate factor could be due to concentration of majority (71.75%) of respondents belonged to rural population (DHDR 2013). Mostly ruralites are usually engaged in agricultural related activities, hence their day-to-day livelihood are focused towards such orientations. And thus by keeping their future sustenance a priority makes them minimal exposure about the dynamics of politics and government.

Confidence in their ability to influence government among the respondents was relatively on a higher level. Unlike the other indicators of political efficacy, however, this statement reverses the order in which personal and systemic referents are introduced, and some individuals may respond to the first stimulus presented ('people like me'). As a result, responses to 'no say' may be more strongly influenced by feelings of another item of efficacy than it is preferred. Despite this possibility, previous studies almost uniformly have placed 'no say' in the external dimension and we would be surprised to find that it was not strongly related to the three unambiguous indicators of political efficacy (George Balch, 1974). Likewise, when the respondents were asked to respond to evaluate the statement, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does", the level of the respondents stood at 2.25 per cent. The percentage of respondents expressing a form

of agreement under this item varies from High (43.74%), Low (37.84%) to None (18.42%) respectively. This pattern of respondents' feeling regarding political efficacy can be understood as a consequence of the prevalent unhealthy electoral politics scenario in the state. Similar tone was echoed by respondents stating that 'government totally ignores the plight of common citizens thereby curtailing public opinion all together'. This is one demotivating factor which decreases people's confidence in their ability to participate in government.

Comparing the response level from the above third item, respondents expressing in agreement stressed the importance of voting (2.22%) under item four. They were asked to respond the statement, "Voting is the only way that people like me have a say on how government runs things". 44.72 per cent respondents agreed on the statement given. This is followed by 32.93 percent under low level and none of 22.35 per cent respectively. These proportions indicate that overall, slightly less than fifty per cent of electorates considers that their only way to participate in government is through voting. There is a general believe that this item forms an important valid indicator of political efficacy. But at the same time, it also presents a similar problem, in that respondents who feels confident in his or her abilities might either agree, disagree or won't comment with the statement. Otherwise, disagreement might denote a belief that one can be effective in ways other than voting (e.g., community activism, group participation, direct action) with agreement indicating one's confidence that government can be controlled by citizens who exercise their right to vote (Philip E. Converse, 1972). Not only do these responses reflect a high sense of efficacy, but they also may represent beliefs about the government's probable responsiveness to citizen demands. Although we expect that voting is associated with other items of political efficacy, the ambiguity of this item is such that it probably should not be employed as a measure of either dimension.

Respondents' perceptions towards government/politician authority remained at the bottom level. When they were asked to evaluate the statement, "Does the government/politicians care much about what people like you think?", the level of agreement stood at 1.84 per cent. The percentage of respondents expressing a form of agreement under this item varies from High (12.03%), Low (60.20%) to None (27.77%) respectively. These figures are quite different from other established democracies. Pharr and Putman (2000), in their comparative study of dissatisfied countries, found out that in

Unites States the proportion of citizens who agree that “most elected officials don’t care what people like me think” increased from one-third by the 1960s to nearly two-thirds in 1998. Similarly this pattern of negative assessment can also be traced in other Western democracies such as Canada and Italy. The percentage of citizens who agreed that government and politicians “don’t care what people like me think” seemingly increased from 45 per cent in 1968 to 84 per cent in 1997 (Susan J. Pharr & Robert D. Putnam, 2000). When citizens eventually believe that the government and politicians don’t care like other people, they are expressing their desired degree of confidence. In such context there is a proof of higher deviation between the ideal and reality of popular government machinery that is placed in the state.

Perhaps the figures in given table, which are correlated among all statement related to the elements of political efficacy in the present study, presents no surprises. For instance, as expected respondents in agreement particularly under the first item of political efficacy recorded the lowest. Conversely this is related to the response of respondents whereby they have poorly rated the performance (Dissatisfied; 76.17%) of the government and their respective MLAs. Obviously, these figures clearly suggest that respondents were pretty confident that government and politician don’t care at all upon the people.

In summary, there is evident variation in respondent’s responses under all the items analyzed under political efficacy statement. The foregoing analysis provides significant mixed patterns in the degree of political attitudes of respondents. Moreover, the quantity and quality of political participation may be ineffectual if it continues to produce uneven distribution in the sense of political efficacy. In this sense, democracy is better if the voices and interests of the people are well taken into considerable reality. This consideration is projected to manifest while maintaining correct frame of political attitudes since it provides some of the most basic building blocks for democratic foundations. The study shows that patterns of participation have positive and significant effects on the basic dimensions of political efficacy.

4. Conclusion

Fostering positive efficacious attitudes seems to be connected with the building of a stronger pattern of participation in which citizens are involved; becoming more intricately involved and absorbed in the context helps to promote a greater sense of political efficacy.

Finding ways to foster patterns of participation is found out to ultimately yield positive feelings of efficacy. This is important given the direct effects we know to exist between efficacy and other types of political behaviors and attitudes. From the above results suggest that sense of participation may indirectly affect many of the factors known to be influenced by efficacy. Above all, the existing knowledge on efficacy based on the theory of participatory democracy reveals the link that level of political participation per se enhances political efficacy. On a finer note the study found out that a perceived lack of political efficacy tend to diminish political participation.

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