

The American case on external Political Efficacy and trust in the government

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## Abstract

Political science is a broad field that undercover various topic, including the impact of an individual's political efficacy—the belief that one's actions can affect the political process. Although research exists on political efficacy and trust in government, there is a notable gap concerning the Western perspective. This study explored the relationship between American political efficacy and trust in the government through interviews with three American citizens, each lasting 25 to 35 minutes. The participants, with an average age of 29, included two registered Democrats and one nonpartisan individual. Given the upcoming election and the current political climate in the United States, examining external political efficacy and trust in government is especially relevant. The study's alternative hypothesis posited that Americans' trust in the government is not significantly influenced by their external political efficacy. This hypothesis was accepted due to the varied responses and insufficient data to support the null hypothesis.

*Keywords:* Political efficacy, trust in government, American politics

## Introduction

The past nine years have marked a significant period in United states history, notably influenced by Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election. This event catalyzed a "progressive increase in polarization" among Americans, reflecting a unique political atmosphere (Dinkelberg et al. 2021, 292). Research indicates that "ideological distance and polarization increased with each election cycle since 2012, with a particularly notable rise from 2016 to 2020" (Dinkelberg et al. 2021, 297). This suggests a shift in American political society from overlapping ideologies to more divergent ones.

The concept of political efficacy is central to this study, defined as "the feeling that individual political action can impact the political process" (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, 187). Political efficacy is divided into two branches: Internal Political Efficacy (IPE) and External Political Efficacy (EPE). IPE refers to "beliefs about one's competence to understand and participate effectively in politics" (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991, 1407), while EPE concerns "beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizen demands" (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991, 1408).

The second focus of the study is political trust, particularly in government, defined as "the degree to which people perceive that governments produce outcomes consistent with their expectations" (Robinson et al. 2021, 16). Given the evolving political landscape in the United States of America, this study seeks to answer the question: Does high external political efficacy affect trust in government? The hypothesis posits that Americans with high external political efficacy will exhibit higher levels of trust in government compared to those with low external political efficacy. This hypothesis is grounded in the observation that the past nine years have been a tumultuous period, characterized by ideological shifts fostered by Trumpism. The rationale for this study stems from its academic relevance and the intrinsic interest in exploring this topic.

## Interviews

For this study, I conducted three interviews online via voice call. To maintain confidentiality, the participants are referred to as subjects W, M, and R. The subjects were diverse in terms of financial background, age, and occupational background. Subjects W and R were both of African American ethnicity, while Subject M was of mixed ethnicity, being both

White and Latino. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 35 minutes and included 15 pre-planned questions.

During the interviews, some questions were occasionally reworded to clarify their meaning, though this paraphrasing did not significantly affect the results. The primary questions asked in the interviews included:

1. Can you tell me what you're politically affiliated and have voted for in the recent decade, and what motivated you to do so
2. Do you believe that the actions of the government reflect the will of the people?
3. Do you feel that your opinions about government policies are heard by politicians?
4. How effective do you think ordinary citizens are in influencing government decisions?
5. Scale: 1 (being not at all) and 5 being (a great impact)
6. how much trust do you have in the federal government to do what is right?
7. Scale: On a scale of 1 to 10,
8. What factors influence your level of trust in the government?
9. Are you optimistic that the political system will improve in the future? Why or why not?

These questions were designed to explore the participants' perceptions of government responsiveness, political efficacy, and trust in governmental institutions. The responses provided valuable insights into the participants' views and attitudes toward the political system.

*Subject W Interview summary*

Subject W, a 30-year-old employed in the retail sector, holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics. Registered as a Democrat, W has consistently voted for Obama and Biden. W believes that the government does reflect the will of the people and that politicians listen to public perspectives on policies. This belief stems from W's experience as a student, where government support helped individuals like him achieve financial stability. W also noted that during Republican administrations, such as Trump's, policies appeared to cater primarily to middle- and high-income individuals. When discussing the influence of ordinary citizens on the government, W rated it at 4.5 out of 5. This rating was influenced by recent events, such as the attempted assassination of Trump and President Biden's decision to potentially step back from the presidential race. Regarding trust in the federal government, W rated it a 6, citing dissatisfaction with political campaign conduct and the government's failure to hold individuals accountable, particularly referencing the allowance of Trump, whom W implied as a "felon," to run for president.

In conclusion, when asked about optimism for the political system's future improvements, W expressed a positive outlook. This optimism is fueled by the historical precedent of having an African American president and the potential for a female president of mixed ethnicity in the future.

### *Subject M Interview Summary*

Subject M is a 35-year-old business owner with a master's degree in computer science. He is affiliated with the Democratic Party and has consistently voted for Democratic candidates since college. His motivation largely stems from a disagreement with Republican rhetoric, which

he finds "offensive," particularly due to the rise of aggressive right-leaning ideologies in recent years.

M believes that government actions reflecting the public will are circumstantial. He cited the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* during Trump's presidency as an example of a government action that did not reflect the popular will. M rated the effectiveness of ordinary citizens in influencing government decisions as a 2 out of 5, indicating that he believes they have minor influence at the federal level, though there might be some impact at the local or state level.

Regarding trust in the federal government, M rated it a 3 out of 10. This low level of trust is influenced by his perception of the dysfunctional state of the government, particularly the lack of alignment between the Senate, House, and executive branches. M's trust is further diminished by concerns about the Supreme Court's accountability, the influence of money, and corruption within the political system.

M concluded by expressing that the future of the political system heavily depends on the outcomes of upcoming elections. He indicated that a Democratic victory might bring some hope, while a Republican win could have the opposite effect.

#### *Subject R interview summary*

Subject R is a 24-year-old, currently unemployed, with a high school diploma as their highest level of education. R identifies as non-partisan, attributing this stance to their religious beliefs. R has never voted, expressing a lack of value in choosing between Republican and Democratic candidates. They believe their opinions are not heard, primarily because they do not actively voice them.

R perceives that the government sometimes acts in the public interest, but at other times, it implements policies that make life harder for certain groups. They believe that citizens can influence government decisions, especially through the use of social media, which they see as bolstering popularity votes. Despite these views, R rated their trust in the government as 3 out of 10. This low trust level is influenced by instances where government actions do not align with public welfare, such as the negative outcomes following Michelle Obama's healthy food initiative, which led to public schools cutting corners on lunch quality.

R expressed a lack of optimism about the future, stating that the country's trajectory is declining and unlikely to improve. They feel disillusioned with the current situation and skeptical about the potential for positive change.

## **Analysis**

The interviews reveal a range of perspectives on political efficacy and trust in government, highlighting the complexity of these concepts among American citizens. Subjects W, M, and R, with their diverse backgrounds, expressed skepticism about the influence of ordinary citizens on government decisions. W acknowledged that citizens might have some impact, particularly at local levels, while M and R were more skeptical. M emphasized the role of money and corruption in shaping political outcomes, whereas R attributed significant political power to social media rather than direct civic engagement. All subjects reported low trust in the federal government, with ratings between 3 and 6 out of 10, citing perceived corruption, lack of accountability, and special interest influence which is a direct association to how “trust in government has declined dramatically over the last thirty years (Heatherington et al. 1998, 791). The reason why this association is of utmost importance is due to the understanding that political

trust is essential to a proper functioning democracy (Heatherington et al. 1998, 792). Based on this studies findings one could assume that the disparity of trust is due to effective working policy that maintains its quality, such successes should not be singularly viewed through economic prosperity as stated by Heatherington 1998. M's distrust was linked to government dysfunction and concerns about the Supreme Court's accountability, while R's was influenced by negative experiences with government policies, like those affecting public-school lunches under Michelle Obama's initiative. Both examples show how “decreasing trust leads to (the) negative evaluation of both incumbent president and congress as a political institution” (Heatherington et al. 1998, 791). Political affiliation also played a role, with W and M, both Democrats, expressing dissatisfaction with Republican policies, particularly under Trump's administration, viewing them as misaligned with the popular will, as seen in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. In contrast, R, non-partisan and abstaining from voting, reflected broader disillusionment with the political system. Bringing up partisanship in this study is valuable information as it has been observed throughout different studies that show “partisan identity as a major cue for political choices, most notably, voting behavior (Iyengar et al. 2015, 690), Additionally we see that partisanship is contextual to how individuals are influenced to make decisions outside of politics and so on. As a concluding question I asked the subjects to explain their opinions of the possible future to which optimism for the future varied: W was cautiously optimistic, hopeful for diverse leadership, M saw potential only with a Democratic party wins, and R was pessimistic, doubting any significant positive change, which can be a direct association with R’s personal ‘ongoing’ experience as a minority living in the United States of America, which has been observed to have a heavy weight on R’s opinions.

## **Conclusion**



The interviews provided valuable insights into the American case of external political efficacy and trust in government. This study aimed to delve deeper into the concept of political efficacy, with a particular emphasis on external political efficacy. However, the findings suggest that there is insufficient data to support the hypothesis that high external political efficacy influences trust in government. Therefore, this study accepts the alternative hypothesis that external political efficacy has no discernible impact on Americans' faith in the government. It appears that other variables, possibly contextual factors related to trust in government, play a significant role. Additionally, the current political environment in the United States presents challenges in gathering comprehensive and valuable information on these issues.

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