

Identifying the Antecedents of Political Engagement Behavior among Young Adult College Students

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Abstract

Aim: This study assesses the impact of political social motivation, trust in government, political efficacy, and personal motivation on political engagement behavior among young adult college students.

Study design: Quasi-experimental One-shot Case Study Design.

Methodology: Survey data of indicators of the five latent constructs was collected from college students. Exploratory principal component factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha test were performed to identify the factorial structure of the each of the political engagement scales. Structural equation modeling analysis was performed to estimate the overall model fit indices and the magnitude of effects of political social motivation, trust in government, political efficacy, and personal motivation on political engagement behavior among the young adult college students.

Results: The analysis found that internal political efficacy had a large significant negative impact on political engagement behavior. External political efficacy had a large significant positive influence on political engagement behavior. Trust in government had a small positive insignificant effect on political engagement behavior. Political social motivation and personal motivation had no meaningful impact on political engagement behavior of the young adult college students.

Conclusion: Collectively, these findings suggest that to sustain American democracy, proponents should focus on promoting internal and external political efficacy, and to a less extent trust in government, not on political motivation of young adult college students.

Keywords: Political engagement; Youth voting; Trust in government; Political efficacy; Political engagement Motivation; Elections; Democracy

Introduction

The sustenance of American democracy depends on active engagement of all citizens in the political process. Political engagement involves taking responsibility for building communities, solving public problems, and participating in the political and electoral process [1-3]. In the United States, political engagement has consistently fallen below desired levels [4-6]. The lack of political engagement has been more pronounced among young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 years old [2,7-9]. For example, in the 1996 and 2000 Presidential elections, less than 35 percent of all eligible voters aged 18-24 years voted [10]. In 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections, the percentage of registered young adults who actually voted increased to 47 percent and 52 percent, respectively [10,11]. However, in the 2012 Presidential election, young adult voting declined to 41 percent, which ranked lowest among all the other age groups [12]. This decline of young adult political engagement is troublesome for two reasons. First, research has shown early political participation to be a strong predictor of future electoral involvement, which helps to sustain democracy [13,14]. Second, other research has found a strong correlation between political engagement and the distribution of government benefit in democratic societies [15].

Numerous studies have identified factors that contribute to the political engagement behavior of young adults [8,16,17]. These factors include political social motivation [7], trust in government [18-20], external political efficacy [21-24], and internal political efficacy [3,25], and race [26-28].

With the continued decline in young adult engagement in American political process, the need for a better understanding of

political engagement within this age group is imperative. Research suggests that the development of theory-driven behavior models that specify predictive constructs of political engagement behavior not only have the potential of providing a comprehensive explanation of voter turnout in elections, but more importantly, a framework for predicting voting behavior [3]. Independent research has shown that individual who are more informed about politics [9], more personally invested [24], more trusting of government [1] and have a greater number of resources and skills [29], are more likely to vote.

One theoretical model that has integrated these four factors and proven useful in explaining political engagement behavior, young adult voting behavior, and other behaviors is the Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills (IMB) model [30-32]. In particular, the IMB model states that motivation works through behavioral skills to influence behaviors, such as political engagement behavior [31]. The model considers information and motivation to be independent constructs, but may relate to the practice of behavioral skills that are relevant to behavior change. In effect, the model proposes that to engage in

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politics, it is necessary for an individual to possess the information or knowledge about how to be politically engaged, and the motivation to engage in politics or the democratic process [3,31].

The framework is appropriate because it is considered to be parsimonious, its constructs are operationally defined, and it specifies the causal linkages between its theoretical determinants and their relation to behavior [33,34]. Unlike other behavioral models, such as the theory of reasoned action [35] and the theory of planned reason [36,37], used in the study of behavior the IMB model which has been validated extensively, provides a more comprehensive model for identifying socio-cognitive predictors of behavior outcomes (such as political engagement behavior) that are of theoretical and empirical importance [30,38-40]. Moreover, the IMB model has been applicable to behaviors outside the political engagement domain such as, HIV prevention behavior [30,39,41-44], breast self-examination behavior among women [32], adolescence smoking behavior [45] and oral rehydration behavior in developing countries [46].

This study extended the IMB model to include other constructs from previous independent studies considered to be predictors of political engagement behavior. The constructs are political social motivation, trust in government, external political self-efficacy, internal political self-efficacy, and political engagement behavior [3,24,47-50]. Given that increasing the level of political engagement among young adults can potentially increase voter turnout and help sustain the democratic system over time, this study was aimed at contributing to this sustenance effort by developing a model for assessing young adult political behavior. Specifically, the study will address the following research question: What are the direct effects of political social motivation, trust in government, external political efficacy, and internal political efficacy on political engagement behavior among young adults?

Methods

Research design

This study employed a cross-sectional quasi-experimental one-shot case study design [51]. This design is generally considered to be most useful in exploring researchable problems or developing ideas for action research, and considered to be appropriate when exploring individuals' acquisition of relatively new or less understood phenomenon, such as political engagement behavior of young adult college students [51]. A schematic representation of the design is displayed in Figure 1.

Where X is a young adult student's political social motivation, trust in government, external political efficacy, internal political efficacy, and personal motivation. O₂ is the level of a young adult student's political engagement behavior. The limitations of this type of research design are outlined in the discussion section of this proposal.

Participants and procedure

The University selected for this study has a population of 6,217 college students enrolled. A breakdown of the population by race/ethnicity shows that approximately 70% was African American, 17% was Caucasian, 4% is Hispanic, 1% is Native American and 4%

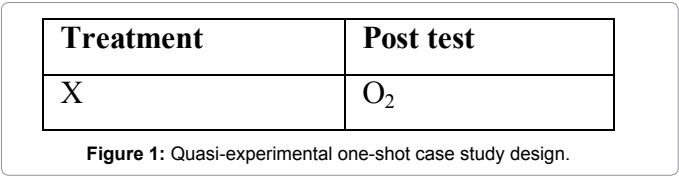
was other racial/ethnic groups. The age distribution of the student population consisted of 55% in the age range of 17-25 years old, 31% aged 26-40 years, and 14% is over 40 years. Most of the students (68%) were females, while 32% were males. The distribution of the population by academic class shows that 19% was freshmen, 15% was sophomore, 18% was junior, 32% was senior, and 11% was graduate level. Most of the students (66%) attending the university were enrolled as full-time students, while 34% were part-time.

Participants in the study included a purposive sample of students aged 18 years or older attending this particular university. After receiving Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval, various professors were contacted and asked for permission to conduct the survey during a portion of their class time. Students enrolled in an Ethics and Civic Engagement in Action course (ETCE 200-SL2) served as Co-Principal Investigators. In this role, they assisted the Principal Investigator in administering the survey. All the Co-Principal Investigators received formal training in research methods including the ethics of conducting research on human subjects. Both the Principal Investigator and Co-Principal Investigators took and passed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Certification before administering the survey. The ETCE 200-SL2 students received detailed training on how to administer the survey instrument. Once the permission was granted by the professors, ETCE 200-SL2 student co-investigators met with the young adult students during the class period and explain the purpose of the study to them. They were also informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they might either opt not to participate in the study or decline to provide a response to any of statements. In addition, the students were informed that no incentive would be provided for their participation in the study. The students who agreed to participate in the survey were provided with a consent form for them to read and keep. The consent form explained to the students that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their grade, and their identity would be kept strictly confidential, and their names would not appear in any report. Investigators adhered to all American Psychological Association (APA) research guidelines. The survey was anonymous in that no identifying information was connected to individuals, or included in the data set. Participants completed the survey during class time and returned them before leaving the class. Non-participants were asked to remain quiet during survey administration. The survey took 10 minutes or less to complete. Once the survey was completed, the participants' responses were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The scores were reversed for negatively stated items. The responses were then entered into a constructed SPSS Version 21.0 dataset for analysis.

Measures

The study consisted of five exogenous latent constructs (political social motivation, trust in government, external political efficacy, internal political efficacy, and personal motivation) and one endogenous latent construct (political engagement behavior). The items measuring each of the latent constructs were contained in a constructed political engagement behavior survey instrument. Items measuring these constructs were derived from previous studies, and were tested for reliability and validity using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.

Political social motivation: Political social motivation assesses social support for enacting political behavior. This exogenous latent construct was measured by a battery of nine items derived from previous work, such as "Most people who are important to me think I



should vote in election” [3,52].

Trust in government: Trust in government was measured by seven items obtained from previous studies such as, “I think the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” [12,49].

Internal political self-efficacy: This construct was measure by three items from previous research, such as “People like me don’t have any say in what government does” [50].

External political self-efficacy: External political self-efficacy was measured by three items obtained from previous research, such as “I don’t think government officials care much what people like me think” [48].

Personal motivation: Personal motivation was measured by ten items obtained from previous research, such as “I feel like it is important that I should vote in state elections” [3].

Political engagement behavior: Political engagement behavior was measured by three items such as, “It is hard for me to learn the skills needed to vote in a voting booth”.

All the items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The scores of negatively-worded items were reversed.

Statistical Analysis

The data collected from the survey was subjected to descriptive, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses using SPSS 21.0 and AMOS 21.0.

Descriptive statistics

Frequency distribution was performed to determine the young adults’ level of political social motivation, trust in government, internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, personal motivation, and political engagement behavior. To maintain efficiency in reporting the results, the original 5-point scale was recalibrated after data collection to a 2-point scale consisting of low for the summation of frequency scores for somewhat low, low, and very low, and high for the summation of the frequency scores for high and very high.

Exploratory factor analysis

The items measuring each latent construct were subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using a separate sample (N=150) from the same student population to determine the meaningful loading structure of the 25-item political engagement behavior instrument. In particular, principal component factor analysis applying the varimax rotation was used to reduce or organize the item pool into a smaller number of interpretable factors. The number of factors was determined by joint consideration of [53] scree plot and the latent root residual (eigenvalue) criteria. Thurstone’s [54] principle of simple structure using pattern coefficients of absolute 0.3 as the lower bound of meaningful per factor and interpretability of the solution was used to determine the final solution [55].

The second step of the analysis involved calculating the internal consistency estimates (Cronbach’s alpha) for the items representing each factor retained from the exploratory factor analysis procedure. Cronbach’s alpha of 0.6 was considered as the minimum acceptable level of internal consistency for using a factor [56]. For factors with Cronbach’s alpha below this minimum benchmark, the internal consistency of the factor was improved by identifying and removing items with low item-test correlation and item-rest correlation [57]. If

no improvement of the reliability score occurred, the factor was deleted.

Confirmatory factor analysis

Latent variable structural equation confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the influence of political social motivation, trust in government, and political efficacy (internal and external), and personal motivation on political engagement behavior using AMOS 21.0 [58]. To make full use of the available data, full maximum information likelihood (FIML) estimation procedure was used. A number of indices were used to evaluate the goodness of fit of the five-factor orthogonal Political Engagement Behavior (PEB) structural model. The model absolute fit was assessed using chi-square statistics, χ^2 , with low χ^2 considered good fit [59,60]. Incremental fit was evaluated using the Root Mean Square Errors of Approximation (RMSEAs) with a value less than 0.06 indicating a relatively good fit, along with Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) with values of .95 or greater considered desirable [59,61-63]. The likelihood that the model’s parameter estimates from the original sample will cross-validate across in future samples was assessed by examining the Akaike’s [64] Information Criterion (AIC) and Bozdogen’s [65] consistent version of the AIC (CAIC) with lower values of the hypothesized model compared to the independent and saturated models considered to be appropriate fit. The likelihood that the model cross-validates across similar-sized samples from the same population was determined by examining the Expected Cross-Validation Index (ECVI) with an ECVI value for the hypothesized model lower compared to both the independent and saturated models considered to represent the best fit to the data. Finally, Hoelter’s [66] Critical N (CN) was examined to determine if the study’s sample size was sufficient to yield an adequate model fit for a χ^2 test [67] with a value in excess of 200 for both .05 and .01 CN indicative of the structural model’s adequately representing the sample data [68].

Normality of the distribution of the model’s variables was assessed by Mardia’s [69,70] normalized estimate of multivariate kurtosis with value of 5 or less reflexive of normal distribution. Multivariate outliers were detected by computation of the squared Mahalanobis distance (D^2) for each case with D^2 values standings distinctively apart from all the other D^2 values as indicative of an outlier.

The magnitude of effect of political social motivation, trust in government, external political efficacy, internal political efficacy, and personal motivation on political engagement behavior latent constructs was determined by estimating the standardized regression coefficients (Beta coefficients (β) or factor loadings), with β ’s below .05 too small to be considered meaningful influences on political engagement behavior, even when they were statistically significant; those between .05 and .10 were considered small influence on political engagement behavior; those between .10 to .25 were considered moderate influences on political engagement behavior; and those above .25 were considered large effects on political engagement behavior [71].

Results

Table 1 through 6 present the frequency distribution of each of the political engagement latent constructs among the young adult college students. The students exhibited a high level of political social

Scale	Count	Percent
Low	45	9.90%
High	410	90.10%
Total	455	100%

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Political Social Motivation of Young Adult College Students.

motivation (90.1%), and political personal motivation (90.7%). Sixty-nine percent of the students had low trust in government and 75.3% of the students had a low external political efficacy. The level of internal political efficacy was slightly high with 51.2% of the students having low internal political efficacy. Finally, 67.8% of the students had a high level of political engagement behavior (Tables 2-6).

Table 7 and Figure 2 display the standardized parameter coefficients with factor loadings of latent variables onto the measured variables and the direct effects within the structural portion of the tested causal model. The fit of the political engagement behavior model of this complexity was good ($\chi^2(104, N=474)=208.095, p<.01$; CFI=.98; TLI=.97; RMSEA=.05). The model explained 26.6% of the variance in political engagement behavior among this sample of young adult college students. The AIC fit statistics of 340.094 for the hypothesized model is equal or lower compared to the saturated model (AIC=340.000) or the independent model (AIC=5588.948), indicative of appropriate fit of the model to the data. Also, the ECVI for the hypothesized model is equal or lower (.719) compared to the independent model (.719) and the saturated model (11.816), suggesting that the model represent the best fit for the data. Hoetler's Critical N value for the model is 293 at .05 level and 320 at the .01 level, which suggests that the structural causal model adequately represent the sample data. Finally, Mardia's normalized estimate of multivariate kurtosis (C.R. value) is -1.756 which is reflexive of a normal distribution. The square Mahalanobis distance (D^2) values showed minimal evidence of multivariate outliers.

Scale	Count	Percent
Low	311	68.40%
High	144	31.60%
Total	455	100%

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Trust in Government of Young Adult College Students.

Scale	Count	Percent
Low	241	51.20%
High	230	48.80%
Total	455	100%

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Internal Political Efficacy of Young Adult College Students.

Scale	Count	Percent
Low	356	75.30%
High	117	24.70%
Total	473	100%

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of External Political Efficacy of Young Adult College Students.

Scale	Count	Percent
Low	42	9.30%
High	411	90.70%
Total	453	100%

Table 5: Frequency Distribution of Political Personal Motivation of Young Adult College Students.

Scale	Count	Percent
Low	154	32.80%
High	316	67.20%
Total	455	100%

Table 6: Frequency Distribution of Political Engagement Behavior of Young Adult College Students.

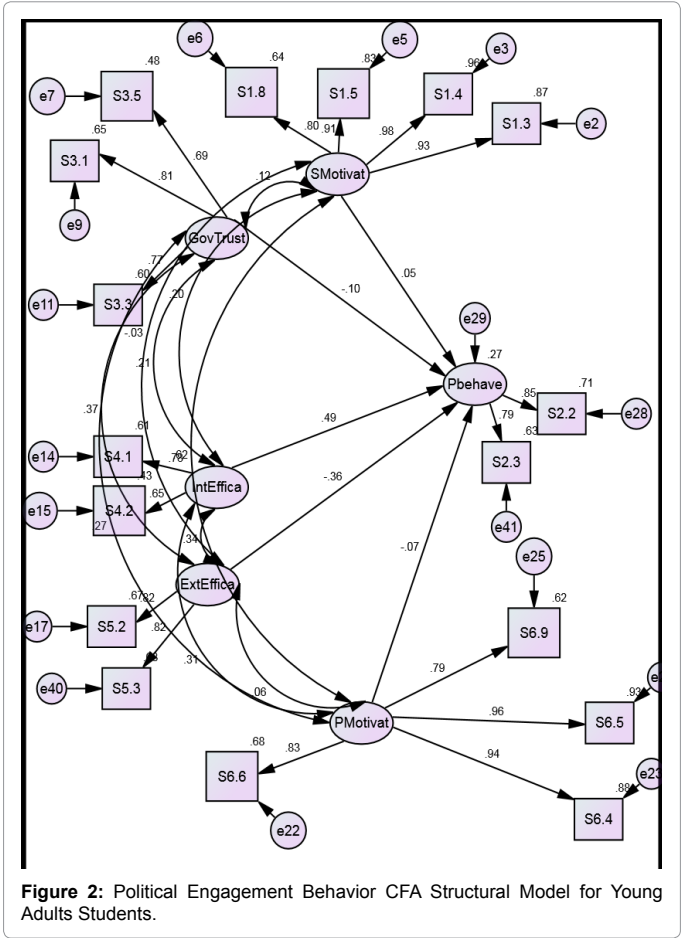


Figure 2: Political Engagement Behavior CFA Structural Model for Young Adults Students.

Table 8 displays the estimated standardized (β) coefficients associated with each of the exogenous latent constructs in the structural equation causal model. Political internal efficacy had a large positive and significant impact on political engagement behavior ($\beta=.49, t=5.779, p<.01$). Political external efficacy had a large negative and significant effect on political engagement behavior ($\beta=-.36, t=5.114, p<.01$). Trust in government had a small negative and insignificant influence on political engagement behavior ($\beta=.10, t=-1.542, p>.01$). Political social motivation and personal motivation had no meaningful and insignificant impact on political engagement behavior ($\beta=.05, t=.822, p>.01$; $\beta=-.07, t=1.007, p>.01$, respectively).

Discussion

This study sought to provide a predictive model which political analysts, civic and political engagement practitioners, and service learning practitioners and scholars could use to assess young adult political engagement behavior. Given the continued decrease in political engagement among young adults in the United States, it was expected that the results would indicate a strong negative effect of political social motivation, trust in government, external political efficacy, and internal political efficacy on political engagement behavior among young adult college students. However, the findings of this study were mixed at best. For example, of the five exogenous latent constructs, only one (internal political efficacy) had a strong positive influence on political engagement behavior. This finding is consistent with previous research [3,25]. External political efficacy had a strong negative effect on political engagement behavior, which is also consistent with previous

Political Engagement Measurement scale items		Estimate
Political Social Motivation (SMotivat)	(Cronbach's α =.96)	
	Most people who are important to me think I should vote in Congressional Elections (S1.3)	0.93
	Most people who are important to me think I should vote in State elections (S1.4)	0.98
	Most people who are important to me think I should vote in City elections (S1.5)	0.91
	Most people who are important to me think I should vote in during elections (S1.8)	0.8
Trust in Government (GovTrust)	(Cronbach's α =.80)	
	I trust the government in Washington D.C. to do the right thing (S3.1)	0.8
	I think the government is run for the benefit of all the people (S3.3)	0.77
	Most people running the government are honest (S3.5)	0.69
Internal Political Efficacy (IntEffic)	(Cronbach's α =.70)	
	People like me don't have any say in what the government does (S4.1)	0.78
	I think the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves (S4.2)	0.65
External Political Efficacy (ExEffic)	(Cronbach's α =.80)	
	I don't think government officials care much about what people like me think (S5.2)	0.81
	Elected officials in Washington D.C. are out of touch with the rest of the country (S5.3)	0.82
Personal Motivation (PMot)	(Cronbach's α =.93)	
	I feel that it is important that I vote in State elections (S6.4)	0.94
	I feel that it is important that I should in City elections (S6.5)	0.96
	I feel that it is important that I vote in school board elections (S6.6)	0.83
	I feel that it is important that I vote on initiatives suggested by members of the State General Assembly (S6.9)	0.79
Political Engagement Behavior (PBehave)	(Cronbach's α =.80)	
	It is hard for me to learn the skills needed to vote in a voting booth (S2.2)	0.85
	It is hard for me find out where to vote on election day (S2.3)	0.80

Table 7: Standardized estimate for Political Engagement Measure items.

Exogenous Construct	b	S.E.	β	t	P
Political Social Motivation	0.06	0.068	0.05	0.822	0.411
Trust in Government	-0.1	0.067	0.1	-1.542	0.123
Internal Political Efficacy	0.5	0.087	0.49	5.779	0.001
External Political Efficacy	-0.41	0.081	-0.36	-5.114	0.001
Personal Motivation	-0.07	0.072	-0.07	-1.007	0.314

Endogenous Construct: Political Engagement Behavior

N=474; Square multivariate correlation=26.6%.

Table 8: Structural Equation Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Weights of Political Social Motivation, Trust in Government, Internal Self-efficacy, External Self-efficacy and Personal Motivation on Prevention Behavioral Skills among Young Adult College Students.

research findings [21-24]. Meanwhile, the finding of a small effect of trust in government on political engagement behavior is somewhat consistent with previous research findings [18-20]. There was no effect of both social and personal motivation on political engagement behavior, which deviates from both previous research findings [7], and the proposition and research on political engagement behavior using of the IMB model [2,3,24,30,32,47-52]. This finding suggest that inclusion of common cause constructs in the IMB model seems to moderate the effect of personal and social motivation on political engagement behavior.

Collectively, the study findings suggest that the key antecedents of political engagement behavior among young adults seem to behave differently among young adults than among the general population

or other age groups as suggested by theory or previous research. Therefore, to sustain American democracy, a key focus should be on promoting external political efficacy and trust in government among young adults, rather than enhancing the level of political motivation. To be sure, descriptive statistics from this study show that the levels of external political efficacy and trust in government are low compared to political motivation among young adults (Tables 2 and 4).

This study had some limitations that should be acknowledged. While the findings of the study provided unique insights into the influence of political social motivation, trust in government, external political efficacy, internal political efficacy, and personal motivation on political engagement behavior among college young adults, the external validity of the findings remains questionable because the study relied on a one-shot case design. This type of research design has three major limitations. First, there was a lack of a control group and the sample included college students attending only one university-in this case is a Historically Black University. Both factors limit the external validity of the findings. To be sure, the "quick and easy" nature of this approach, which is often used as a basis for change or innovation, is misleading [51]. Second, there is no provision for comparison, except implicitly, intuitively and impressionistically. Third, this approach to inquiry usually involves the "error of misplaced precision" in that a great deal of time is devoted to the collection of data about which the conclusion derived can only be impressionistic and imprecise. Moreover, self-report instruments often have the problem of respondent dishonesty.

Furthermore, the student sample proposed to be used in this study was not randomly selected. Hence, the findings may not be representative of the political engagement behavior of young adult college students or young adults as a whole. These limitations suggest that interpretation or generalization of the findings of this study should be limited to young adult college students attending the particular university under investigation or colleges with similar population mix or composition. Furthermore, although the estimated predictive fit indices (AIC and ECVI) may indicate the adequacy of the model to be applicable across future samples and samples of the same population, future studies should expand the validation process the causal model of this study to multi-group tests of equivalence of the young adult political engagement behavior, as well as conduct the study in other settings to future establish external validity of our findings.

These limitations notwithstanding, as a contribution to theory-building, the study did provide important insights into the influence of key predictive factors of political engagement behavior among young adults. Education leaders, politicians, practitioners, political scientists, and policy makers can use the information both to design programs that seek to enhance political engagement among young adult college students, as well as to the political behavior of this group.

Acknowledgement

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