



Why Are Some People More Politically Active Than Others?

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Introduction

Political activism has helped to abolish slavery, helped protect our environment, and done numerous other things to better our world. Yet some people do not participate.

Individuals differing in the extent to which they engage in evaluating things is referred to as “the need to evaluate” (Bizer, Krosnick, Petty, Rucker, & Wheeler, 2000). People high in this trait hold opinions on a wide variety of topics, whereas people who are low in this trait are less opinionated. People who score higher on the need to evaluate are more likely to have attitudes towards a variety of political issues compared to people who score lower on this trait. (Jarvis & Petty, 1996).

Additionally, people’s evaluations of government administrations are important explanations of political attitudes and voting (Solevid, 2009). Dissatisfaction with the state is an important political driving force. One study found that citizens who were dissatisfied with public school services were more politically active (Solevid, 2009).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1:

People who score higher on the need to evaluate scale will be more politically active.

Hypothesis 2:

Satisfaction with the current president will moderate this relationship.

Methods

Participants

Participants were from the American National Election Studies 2016 Pilot Study Questionnaire (ANES, 2016). They collected the data in January 2016. There were 1,200 completions of the survey, and this analysis included $N = 1139$ who responded to all of this study’s measures. The participants were 53% female and 47% male. This survey was nationally representative. The participants were U.S. citizens who are 18 years of age or older. The mean age was 51.

Design and Materials

A secondary data analysis was conducted using the ANES data set. This study is from the 2016 national election.

Political activism is measured by using one item: “During the past 4 years, have you joined in a protest march, rally, or demonstration, or have you not done this in the past 4 years” (ANES, 2016). If an individual said yes, they were categorized as politically active, if one said no, they were categorized as not politically active.

Need to evaluate was measured using three questions from the Need to Evaluate scale: “It is very important to me to hold strong opinions”, “I would rather have a strong opinion than no opinion at all”, and “I like to have strong opinions even when I am not personally involved.” Responses were indicated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 5 (extremely characteristic of me). A total score was calculated by averaging questions to determine someone’s need to evaluate. The reliability score was $\alpha = .726$. Higher scores indicate a higher need to evaluate.

Satisfaction with the current president was measured using a single item: “Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?” The responses ranged from 1 (Approve extremely strongly) to 7 (Disapprove extremely strongly). This item was then reverse scored.

Results

Logistic regression was used to investigate whether satisfaction with the current president might moderate the effects of the need to evaluate on political activism. Both predictors were converted into z-scores before computing the interaction term, and all items were entered into the model together.

Contrary to the hypothesis, need to evaluate was not a significant predictor of political activism on its own, $B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.10$, $Exp(B) = .95$, $p = .59$. However, greater satisfaction with the president did predict greater political activism, $B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.09$, $Exp(B) = 1.49$, $p < .001$. The results also indicated a significant interaction, $B = -0.25$, $SE = 0.09$, $Exp(B) = .78$, $p = .006$.

To probe the interaction, simple effects coefficients were computed 1 SD below and 1 SD above the mean. If someone has low satisfaction with the president, then their need to evaluate does not at all predict their likelihood of taking political action, $B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .21$. But if someone has high satisfaction with the president, then lower need to evaluate predicts greater likelihood of taking political action, $B = -0.30$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .002$.

Discussion

The present study hypothesized that people who are higher in the need to evaluate will take more political action moderated by satisfaction with the current president’s job. This hypothesis was not supported by the data. Contrary to the hypothesis, people who are low in the need to evaluate and highly satisfied with the president’s job are more likely to take political action than those who are high in the need to evaluate and are dissatisfied with the President’s job. The previous literature found that people who score higher on need to evaluate scales were more likely to have attitudes towards a variety of political issues (Jarvis & Petty, 1996). The differing results could be due to the previous literature assessing political attitudes instead of political action. The need to evaluate is a trait that is based on judgments and thoughts which is a different process than actions.

In this study a person was politically active if they had joined in a protest march, rally, or demonstration in the past 4 years. This type of political action may be extreme and discounts people who vote, discuss politics on social media, or contact representatives as not taking political action. Future studies should examine differing degrees of political action that are taken based on the need to evaluate and satisfaction with the current president’s job.

References

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