The Interplay Between Political Beliefs, Institutional Trust, and Political Participation

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Abstract

Our democracy is dependent on political participation, which ensures inclusiveness and representation when working towards change. Despite how important it is, many citizens and eligible voters choose not to engage in politics. This paper investigates the interconnectedness between political beliefs, institutional trust, and political participation to better understand the causes of political activeness. Drawing from existing evidence, we discuss how individual political beliefs are shaped by familial and environmental influences, media exposure, and social networks. We explore the connection between this, and the role of institutional trust, and how this impacts individuals' feelings of political efficacy, as well as their desire to engage in expressing their political values – such as through voting and political consumerism. This connection is important in order to transform our democracy into one that is representative of everyone, no matter their identity or place in society. Ultimately, by examining these factors, we aim to find ways to increase political engagement and a more representative democratic process.

Introduction

Political participation is essential – it is the basis of democracy and the primary way to change the way our country is governed. Greater political participation across all demographic groups can lead to a less corrupt or one-sided government, incorporating the opinions of all these groups rather than focusing only on those of people in power – usually those with the most money to influence political figures.

Even beyond the running and governing of America, greater political participation can have a global impact. In a country as diverse as America, the voices of people from diverse backgrounds can change our government's relationship with other countries and how we involve ourselves with those countries. This influence can only be achieved from heavy political involvement. For example, despite the Jewish community being a minority population, they are politically involved enough to sway the government to support Israel in the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Furthermore, political participation is essential because it allows people the ability to contribute and shape policies that impact their everyday lives and communities. Being an active political participant goes beyond just voting; it also includes things such as advocacy, community organizing, political consumerism, and the news channels and media we choose to engage with. Through being an active political participant, people can maximize their effect on the government and voice their opinions and values. Expressing their opinions and values is key to creating change to benefit themselves in a democracy built around weighing diverse perspectives while making decisions that impact the lives of everyone in the country, regardless of whether they choose to be politically active or not.

Unfortunately, despite how important political participation is, many people fail to exercise their democratic rights. In the 2020 presidential election, only about 66% of eligible voters actually went to the polls, and this was the highest voter turnout ever, surpassing the 49% of eligible voters who voted in the 2016 election (Pew Research Center, 2023). Only the voices of these few people were represented in the important task of choosing America's next president.

This is far from ideal - the most representative government we could have is one that incorporates the voices of 100% of eligible voters – not one where an entire third of them are ignored.

Overview

The question is then raised of why so many people choose not to exercise their right to vote. While the reasons for why an individual may participate in politics or not are complex and varied, a few immediate concerns stand out. To start off, people's relationships between people can influence the amount they decide to participate in politics through several routes. For one, the values that surround us while growing up, such as the local political scene, can often dictate if we are politically active or not (Lyons, 2017). Similarly, someone growing up in a household that consistently voted, went to rallies or community groups, or even just discussed politics will be more likely to participate in politics when they are older as well.

Additionally, the level of activeness of our peers or social networks in politics can lead to us being less or more active due to us wanting to feel a sense of belonging within these groups. We will often try to match our participation to theirs in order to not be seen as an outsider or someone who is more or less politically involved than the rest of the group. This happens as a result of social pressures and our want to avoid aggression or stress, coming from being viewed as an outsider by those around us (Paquette et al., 1999). These social pressures can apply to political activeness as well. For instance, if someone's friend group tends to avoid paying attention to or discussing politics, it will likely lead to them being less involved in politics because being politically active is not something that's part of their everyday life.

Finally, our relationship with others who also identify with and share our beliefs may impact the amount we participate in politics (Erisen et al., 2012). If a Republican hears about a protest against policies they also disagree with, there is a good chance they will support other Republicans and the protest, or even participate in the rally themselves.

Another reason people may feel less inclined to participate in politics is because they believe they have very low political efficacy, i.e. they do not feel like their actions can meaningfully influence politics (Karp et al., 2008). They may feel that corporations and institutions have an overwhelmingly large influence on politics, and their own voices feel insignificant and not worth contributing by comparison. This contributes to the issue of accurate representation in the government, with the government mainly representing large corporations. This occurs as a result of corporations being a major influence in voters' behavior in elections as well as the lack of individual's desire to vote. For many minorities and marginalized groups, this problem is especially relevant, as being involved in politics can often be one of the only ways for these groups to present their concerns and struggles – allowing them to have the opportunity to find solutions instead of continuing to face hardship or oppression. Without significant political participation from these marginalized groups, a cycle of unfairness against them cannot be broken, and yet, whether these groups choose to involve themselves in politics may depend on individuals' political efficacy within the group, environment, and media around these particular groups (Karp et al., 2008). If people do not trust that institutions will listen and support their beliefs, they may come to believe engaging with politics is futile and choose to stay home on voting day. For example, individuals in poverty or with lesser economic status might feel that their voice doesn't matter, that instead corporations will undoubtedly still control the economy without allowing them to improve their financial situations. If this is their belief, then they might

feel discouraged to vote as a result of their low political efficacy. If this occurs, there is no chance at all that policy will be changed in favor of these individuals – it will stay the same in favor of corporations. The only way to begin shifting policies to benefit people in this situation would be for them to vote and have their voices raised above those of corporations, especially because there are likely many more people with lower economic status than there are people running large corporations – corporations just appear to have more power because of their elevated and strong economic status controlling the government and economy.

Because institutions have such a strong influence on people's political beliefs as well as whether people exercise their right to vote, it is important to examine exactly how this relationship functions. How do personal political beliefs develop and interact with the political messaging displayed by institutions, and how do these relationships determine how much we trust institutions? In this review, I will explore the connections between political beliefs, institutional trust, and political participation to better understand the dynamics behind people's voting behavior. By better understanding these phenomena, we can develop better ways to encourage people to participate in politics, with the goal of creating a government most representative of the people.

Political belief formation

It is first important to understand where individuals' political views come from, and how they affect how someone navigates the world. Research has shown that we are heavily influenced by our parents' ideological views at younger ages, such as around age 18 when we begin voting, whereas at older ages our environment has a greater effect on an individual's political beliefs (Lyons, 2017). This means that whatever beliefs we were raised with growing up are likely to become the beliefs that stay with us when we begin making important choices in our life, since many of these decisions are driven by our political views and what we believe is morally correct. The main exception to this is if our surrounding "environment", such as the social factors like the people, places, and ideas we engage with by socializing every day, contradicts the initial views that surrounded us in the early years of our life (Lyons, 2017). For instance, someone raised in a conservative suburb may initially also adopt Republican views; however, if the person ends up moving to a liberal city later in life, their views may change due to the shift in beliefs surrounding them. The same goes for growing up in a politically active family. If a person grows up with constant discussion about politics, voting, or involvement in their political communities, then they will likely at first continue to be very involved. On the other hand, if the person later forms social circles that aren't as politically active as the person, then they might feel discouraged from participating in politics due to wanting to blend in with their new surroundings and environment, possibly decreasing their political participation.

Our political opinions can also be shaped by particular people or groups we feel attachment to, such as a public figures or political parties that we feel a sense of identity or belonging with (Canover et al., 1981). When we support these people and groups, we are also paying attention and generally accepting the messaging they promote. If a public figure with a large following promotes doing something like voting, then there is a good chance their supporters will listen, increasing their political participation. Conversely, if they were to encourage people to not vote, this would have the opposite effect with political participation decreasing. Additionally, the figure could promote a particular policy that appeals to them, perhaps shifting the political beliefs of their followers. The more people like the public figure, the

more they may be willing to change their beliefs to vote for a policy promoted by this figure instead of voting for what they would have otherwise voted for on their own. This can also encourage political discussion of the policies supported by this figure on a more personal level among supporters, allowing for either cementing or shifting of beliefs within them. An example of this would be a famous person or artist sharing a political message, such as Taylor Swift. As a popular music artist, Taylor Swift has gained the attention of a variety of people with many political backgrounds. She is able to maintain this support despite not sharing political opinions with all of her followers. Despite having different opinions than Taylor Swift, these followers and fans are still so invested in the product: Taylor Swift and her music. As a result, Taylor Swift is able to spread political messaging differing from these people's own political beliefs. For example, on voting day 2023, Swift shared a picture of herself with an I Voted sticker on her social media encouraging fans to vote because, "We have the opportunity to choose those who will represent us for the next four years."[1] She has also been vocal about her generally liberal beliefs, appearing in a picture with cookies supporting the Biden/Harris campaign, and expressing her support of LGBTQ+ rights, anti-racism policies, and anti-sexism policies. She encourages people to vote, and educate themselves about who and what they are voting for. Undoubtedly, not all of Taylor Swift's fans share her liberal beliefs, however many still remain followers because of the value they place in her music. Many of her fans were exposed to her political messaging, potentially changing their minds about voting and increasing the number of voters at the polls (Drissen, 2022).

Additionally, one of the biggest environmental factors that goes into shaping and reshaping our viewpoints is media. News outlets and many social media networks typically have a political messaging or bias behind them, oftentimes reporting stories in a way that skews them to support one extreme of liberalism or conservatism over another. For example, Fox News is known to be more conservative in its coverage. If conservatives only listen to Fox News, they are stuck in a conservative echo chamber, being surrounded with media that confirms or agrees with their beliefs with no exposure to alternative ideas (Chan et al., 2022). In this case, the news channel would only be confirming the opinions they have already formed on their own about the story or will provide insights that seem very correct and easy to digest to them. On the other hand, to a liberal, hearing stories reported by Fox News would likely seem like the news outlet was reporting it wrong or withholding facts, with a clear identification of the conservative bias present (Pew Research Center, 2020). People stuck in echo chambers are less likely to be able to change their political views because they are only being exposed to one side of a story – they aren't even considering another viewpoint on an issue. They are gravitating towards people and news outlets that support their beliefs, wanting only to confirm their beliefs instead of questioning if the way the story is told, through bias, is correct. This is an issue because if people are only seeing a story one-sidedly, then they are not receiving fully accurate information and therefore cannot make informed choices and decisions, both political and not.

However, research has shown that some factors may help people be less susceptible to echo chambers. When people spend more time on social media, they are naturally exposed to content that doesn't align with their personal political beliefs. If this is combined with a skepticism towards the media, people are less likely to fall into echo chambers (Chan et al. 2022). When people are seeing content with a range of political biases, it enables them to think

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[1] See https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a44551559/taylor-swift-nashville-elections-vote/

critically about what they're seeing, allowing them to recognize that there may be a bias present and that the whole true story may not be present in just one source or telling of the story. This critical skepticism of media is very important in escaping echo chambers, as well as being open minded towards political views that don't match your own. Independence in having control over shaping your political beliefs and being socially active and in contact with people who have a diverse set of views can also aid in escaping from echo chambers (Chan et al. 2022).

Another factor that helps avoid getting trapped in echo chambers is higher education, especially when highly educated people are very interested in politics. Higher education combined with a greater interest in politics means that people participate in expressing their political views more as well (Newman et al. 2011). When people are more interested in politics and are highly educated, they are also more likely to make informed decisions relating to politics. They are more likely to seek out accurate information in order to avoid a one-sided, single-perspective story about an event or issue, instead understanding more fully the context of what occurred. This could lead them to have more diverse political views because of their exposure to more viewpoints and political beliefs. Our social networks, being a large part of our environment, are one of the most important factors influencing our political beliefs because they can present a variety of perspectives, leading us to expand our viewpoints without getting a one-sided story. If a person is being exposed to more political beliefs, there is a good chance they are doing this through meeting new people and expanding their social circle beyond a single point of view, diversifying it and introducing alternative perspectives to consider. In fact, being exposed to more diverse opinions creates a positive feedback loop where having a more diverse social network increases political participation, which in turn increases the chances of meeting more politically diverse people (Quintelier et al. 2012).

One final factor related to a person's social network that can affect their political participation is their faith or religion. Those strongly believing in God were more likely to be less politically active, but participation in church activities led to an increase in political participation (Driskell et al. 2008). This could come from being around people or having a social network of people with political beliefs that match your own and encourage you to believe you can cause change with your political expression. Alternatively, being around those with diverse political views can expand your knowledge about a topic and allow you to develop an interest in politics to become more politically involved. Overall, our political beliefs and behavior are strongly influenced by the people, media, and environment around us, extending not only to our attitudes on specific topics, but also to the way we choose to participate in politics.

Institutional trust

In addition to our individual political beliefs, our trust in institutions – large corporations, academic institutions, and even the government itself - plays a large role in impacting our political participation. Institutions often express certain viewpoints – whether that be through their marketing/advertising, bias towards specific groups in their decisions, or how much they support the needs and opinions of consumers. For example, several universities this past year, including Harvard, faced court cases questioning why they did not address threats towards Jewish students on campus (New York Times, 2023). This seemingly revealed a bias against Jewish students within even well-known academic institutions with powerful voices. Another example is how Nike has taken on campaigns that promote anti-racism and anti-racial injustice (New York Times, 2020). It seems important to ask the question of how people choose the

institutions they involve themselves with, and how much someone's values match those of the institution impacts their support of that institution.

Much like how individuals we look up to can influence our political beliefs, institutions can play the same role. Research has largely shown that when an individual has values matching the values that an institution promotes, for example if an individual and Nike are both against racial injustice, an individual will pay closer attention to their messaging. Conversely, when an individual's values differ from those of an institution, they tend to reject the institution's messaging and will often withdraw support from that institution (Nelson et al. 2005). However, sometimes an individual is able to look past an institution's political messaging, despite disagreeing with it, because they feel strongly about the product of the institution – perhaps education in the case of academic institutions or a certain product in the case of a corporation like Nike. This especially applies when consumers place great value on the product – if what they have seen about it in the media perceives it as "trendy," or something else that enhances an individual's feelings of belonging with the people around them (Zeitzoff, 2017). This is one way of diversifying opinions – exposing them to other perspectives so that they can make a more informed and well-thought-out decision when it comes to politics. Earlier, we discussed how someone's environment is a strong influence on their political beliefs, and thus in this way, "institutions" can also expose people to ideas they may otherwise not have come across or considered. Many people buy from Nike despite not caring about racial injustice – they don't simply stop supporting Nike because their political views differ. However, political messaging not aligning with someone's beliefs might gradually undermine trust in that institution because we might see the institution's values as "wrong" because they are different than our own. If people are, for instance, trapped in an echo chamber, they may struggle to understand or engage with beliefs outside of their own.

Therefore, while institutions can exert a positive effect of exposing people to a variety of political views through their messaging, this can backfire or result in lost trust in cases where people ignore or stay away from corporations who do not support the same values they do. For example, many people have found alternatives to shopping at Target because of their clear support of LGBTQ+. Selling pride apparel and special products for pride month has been something Target has practiced and supported for a while, and many people who don't support this community have stopped supporting Target as well. This can exacerbate the problem of echo chambers if susceptible people are not sufficiently critical of the media, people, and environment they are exposed to. When this occurs, people will support only institutions with the same political views they do, sealing themselves off from alternative perspectives and continuing to have the same unwavering stance on any given issue.

People may also feel as though they shouldn't trust institutions to promote policies in the best interest of the lower class, since institutions tend to be controlled by the upper class. Affluent Americans, such as those associated with corporate America or other large institutions, often support more conservative economic policies. The government responds disproportionally to these views, which can lead to non-affluent Americans to have a distrust for both the government and these corporations (Mendelberg et al. 2017). If the government favors the voices of affluent Americans, then minorities will begin to distrust the government, and they will involve themselves less and participate less in politics, especially if an individual identifies with a group they perceive not to have as much political influence (Miller et al. 1981). If individuals don't have much trust in government because they don't believe their voices will have an impact or actually help implement change, they will likely choose not to vote, giving up any chance of

influencing political policy. Thus, it is important to recognize the effects that institutional messaging can have both on people's trust in those institutions, but also their willingness to participate in politics.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that political participation does not only involve voting, but also includes other ways of expressing political beliefs such as through political consumerism (i.e. choosing to purchase or boycott goods for political reasons) or publicly through protests. This political expression is directly related to the amount of trust people have in their ability to change the government in a way that benefits them and will improve their quality of life according to their values (Karp et al., 2008) and may also affect how much they push to accomplish their goals through political participation (Paige, 1971). If people believe that the government will change, they will participate in politics more, voicing their opinions with the hope that the government will evolve in their favor. People may also express their beliefs through political consumerism – choosing and buying from brands that support or don't support certain issues that match what an individual chooses to support. For example, left leaning liberals and people with greater awareness about economic issues were also more likely to purchase "fair trade" goods, acting through ethical consumerism. (Hudson et al. 2013). They are more likely to buy goods approved by international standards, ensuring that they are healthier and produced more eco-friendly. Ultimately, political consumerism is another way for people to express their political beliefs - usually fueling the political figures, symbols, and causes that match their own ideals when they are consciously making politically informed decisions. Notably, sometimes people will still support institutions that don't support their values due to ignorance of the institution's true ideals, or they choose to support institutions for other reasons despite their differing views. By and large, supporting specific institutions based on their policies can have an impact on policy. Supporting certain businesses can put market pressure on other businesses to adopt the same values. For example, if consumers only support sustainable businesses, then it puts pressure on non-sustainable businesses to become sustainable in order to stay in the market. This would mean that more and more powerful corporations feel pressure to become sustainable, therefore increasing the overall support in government of sustainability if people started prioritizing sustainability over non-eco-friendly options. Political consumerism can also help form social groups with people who share beliefs or who all support brands with similar beliefs, possibly creating an echo chamber effect. Overall, it is important to recognize the way institutions affect the political landscape, both by influencing policy, but also in the way they build trust and loyalty with individuals, shaping their beliefs and behavior along the way.

Discussion

In summary, the connections between political beliefs, institutional trust, and political relationships reveal that these factors combined strongly influence how we engage with the politics of our democracy. Our political beliefs are intertwined with our political participation – people with stronger political beliefs are more interested in politics and are more likely to be politically active. Our social relationships with people of many political backgrounds and beliefs also increases our participation, often because they can force us to think about and consider perspectives other than our own, leading us to adopt different beliefs. On the other hand, echo chambers can cement our already existing values. Our relationships and trust in institutions and their political messaging also affects how much we participate in politics, depending on what values this messaging promotes and if they match our own values, or if the product is desirable

enough for us to overlook our differences. The trust we have in the fairness, effectiveness, and responsiveness of political institutions, especially the government, is a major factor that goes into a person choosing whether to participate politically, especially in a society where it's easy to believe we have no true power due to the overwhelming economic, social, and political power and bias towards corporations. When our political beliefs lead us to be politically active, high levels of institutional trust can help this further by promoting political discussion and policies through messaging, such as by reaffirming trust in the government to those who no longer trust in our democracy. One way the government might reaffirm trust in its people is by increasing its transparency and honesty about its opinions and decision-making process. If people are educated about how decisions are made, and possibly why the outcomes are not in their favor, they may feel more compelled to get involved and try to find a way to influence policy benefitting them. More government initiatives to engage and involve the public, asking for their opinions about policy, could also help increase political efficacy and help people feel that their voice matters. For example, we can do this through town halls with representatives or forming discussion groups to talk about policy between individuals who are strongly affected by it. Furthermore, private institutions might consider similar initiatives to improve trust, as they also carry tremendous impact on our political efficacy, sometimes being stronger than the effect of our beliefs, social networks, and interest in politics.

Future research should work to continue uncovering how much the environment versus our close relationships affect our political beliefs and therefore political participation, as well as the main factors of institutional trust when beliefs are bypassed, and how that affects our interpretation of that institution's political messaging. Additionally, more work should investigate why we are instantly so opposed to beliefs that do not match our own, and why we so often feel like they are morally "wrong" just because they're not our own.

Rebuilding trust in the government is essential to overall increasing political participation. To do so, leaders need to consider the wants and needs of all people and create a government where everyone's voice has equal weight. When people feel that institutions are the only people getting heard due to their economic power and influence, it exacerbates the problem of an unfair and unrepresentative government. By increasing political efficacy, people will feel that they matter to the government, that the government cares about defending them more than exclusively focusing on economic or power interests. It may also help to educate people more about current events and what is going on in the government, especially to help them escape echo chambers. People need to expose themselves to a variety of content based on several different political perspectives in order to have the ability to think critically about new information. It is important for people to be able to consider the context of whatever information is presented to them, rather than just accepting it without question. People need to feel a personal connection with the government on some level – they need to feel like the government is there to help them. They need to see their government present in the media, being open and transparent about policy. If people feel they are working against the government, it only creates a hostile society, where extremely different values cannot coexist. Instead, we need to have a society where people are open-minded and willing to discuss the political climate at any given time with both people who do and don't share their experiences. Moving forward, it is essential to examine ways to improve the government's relationship with the people, in a way that increases political efficacy while allowing people to make informed political decisions. Increasing voter turnout and encouraging people to express their political standpoints is the best way we can truly make a difference in our democracy meant to be centered around representing the

people. With increased political participation, it is possible to create a government representative of everyone, regardless of social status or identity, to create the fairest government possible.

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