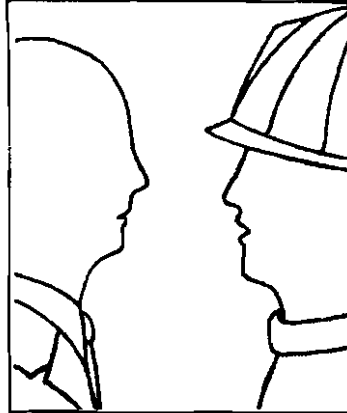


SOCIAL SCIENCE *Quarterly*

VOL. 60 / NO. 4 / MARCH, 1980



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A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO MEASURING POLITICAL EFFICACY¹

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THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL EFFICACY (OR ITS INVERSE, POWERLESSNESS) has been a fundamental building block of behavioral research in the social sciences for over 20 years. Defined by Campbell et al. (1954:187) as "the feeling that an individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process," a sense of efficacy is believed by many analysts to be essential for the effective functioning of democratic systems (Almond and Verba, 1963; Easton and Dennis, 1967; Campbell et al., 1964). Moreover, certain combinations of efficacy and political cynicism have been hypothesized to be the primary ingredients in radical political mobilization (Gamson, 1968).² Until recently the indicators employed to measure the concept were largely accepted on face value. New research, however, has challenged the traditionally accepted measures on a number of grounds so that there is now good reason to believe that the time has come for the creation of new indicators of efficacy that may avoid the pitfalls of the measures now in use. This article briefly discusses some of the central criticisms of the traditional measures and uses those criticisms to assist in the construction of a new efficacy scale. The new measure is then tested on separate samples and found to hold promise for further research.

THE WEAKNESS OF THE TRADITIONAL EFFICACY MEASURES

Two approaches have dominated the measurement of political efficacy, although there has been some variation in the particular items used. The

¹ The Costa Rican data analyzed in this paper were gathered under grants from the Social Science Research Council, the Danforth Foundation and the Ford and Rockefeller Joint Program in Population and Development Policy. The 1976 peasant sample was collected with the collaboration of Lic. Elena A. Wachong of the Universidad de Costa Rica and with the institutional support of José Manuel Salazar Navarrete, executive president of the Instituto de Tierras y Colonización of Costa Rica. The 1976 national sample was made available by Lic. Miguel Gómez B., director of the Unidad de Opinión Pública of the Oficina de Información, Casa Presidencial, Costa Rica. John Booth, Cal Clark, James W. Clarke, John A. García, Edward N. Muller, Michael P. Sullivan and Susan Welch made helpful suggestions on earlier drafts.

² For a review of the literature testing this hypothesis and for an analysis linking trust, efficacy and both institutionalized and mobilized political participation in Costa Rica, see Seligson, 1979c,d.

most frequently used measures come from the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan. These well-known items have been used continually in the SRC surveys since the 1950s and have been employed in countless surveys both in the United States and abroad. These items ask the respondent to agree or disagree with four or five statements regarding his/her perceived ability to influence the political system: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does"; "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think"; "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on"; and "Voting is the only way that people like me can have a say about how the government runs things." Somewhat less frequently used but equally well known are the "subjective competence" items introduced in Almond and Verba's (1963) classic study, *The Civic Culture*. While these items are different in form from the SRC measures, many researchers treat them as their functional equivalent. These items posit a hypothetical situation to the respondent and ask him/her to comment on it: "Suppose a law were being considered by the local government that you considered very unjust or harmful. What do you think you could do?"³

The attacks on the traditional efficacy measures have been devastating. One criticism leveled against the SRC items concerns their content (McPherson et al., 1977:520-21). It is argued that the items are fraught with ambiguity, and that it is not at all clear which response is the efficacious one. Furthermore, the wording of some of the items, especially the ones which ask the respondent if he/she feels that politics and government are too complex to be understood, are thought to be contaminated with social desirability response set since agreeing with the item would be tantamount to admitting ignorance. A second criticism leveled against the measures is related to their format. Since the SRC items are phrased in the "agree-disagree" pattern it is believed that they are highly susceptible to acquiescence response set. Some research has shown that response set is a serious problem with items phrased in this manner (Landsberger and Saavedra, 1967; Caar, 1971). A third difficulty with the SRC items concerns their temporal stability and reliability. Several researchers have found that some of the items, which are supposed to tap an underlying social-psychological orientation not generally subject to significant variation over time, are quite unstable and unreliable (Converse, 1972; Asher, 1974; Welch and Clark, 1974; McPherson et al., 1977). A fourth problem is that the SRC items have been found to be multidimensional rather than unidimensional (Balch, 1974; Welch and Clark, 1974). A fifth problem, it is argued, is that individuals feel efficacious (or powerless) with relation to specific levels of government and to partic-

³ The complete texts of these items are contained in the code book available from Inter-University Consortium for Political Social Research. The variables used in this paper to measure efficacy were VAR0038 to VAR0045.

ular institutions at each level (Balch, 1974). Hence, questionnaire items that attempt to tap an overall feeling of efficacy may be measuring a nonexistent attitude.

One final, and perhaps most important, failing of the SRC measures is that they focus on only one of the three aspects or dimensions of efficacy. According to Muller (1970:793), efficacy involves three dimensions: "(1) a general belief that government is responsive to *citizen influence*; (2) *skills* necessary for effective political behavior; and (3) a psychological disposition or *feeling of confidence* in one's personal ability to influence salient government decisions" (italics added).

The SRC items primarily focus on the first dimension, what Balch (1974) has called "external efficacy," or what I would term "government responsiveness." The focus on the government-responsiveness aspect of efficacy is particularly unfortunate in light of Paige's (1971:814) observation that efficacy measures of the SRC type invariably are contaminated by evaluation of government performance. As Coleman and Davis (1976:190) assert, "unless citizen perceptions of government structures are totally random, there must be some degree of association between the reality of governmental performance and how citizens evaluate the responsiveness of their government." For example, the item "public officials don't care much what people like me think" is as much of a statement about the way public officials deal with citizen opinion (and demands) as it is a statement about the individual's capacity to make himself or herself heard. Following Paige's reasoning, efficacy measures probably should avoid the first of the three dimensions listed by Muller in order to avoid the trust contamination problem. Separate measures should be used to tap *citizen opinion regarding government responsiveness*. In other words, efficacy measures uncontaminated with trust would measure only internal efficacy (i.e., skills and feelings of confidence).

In light of the above criticism, the Almond and Verba items, which focus primarily on the skills and feelings of confidence dimensions (Muller's dimensions 2 and 3), are to be recommended over the SRC measures. However, one central failing of these items is that in their attempt to move away from the situationally vague items of the SRC type they move too far in defining the situation for the respondent (Mathiason, 1972:68). Hence, individuals may feel that since their elected representatives are empowered to act in the best interests of their constituents their actions should not be interfered with. These same respondents may likewise feel that it is only through the vote that disapproval of legislators' actions should be expressed. Therefore, by defining the situation very specifically the Almond and Verba items *overdefine* the situation for the respondent causing only those who are efficacious in a *situation defined by the researchers* to be considered efficacious (Mathiason, 1972:68). A better approach may be to permit the respondent to define the situation.

A further difficulty with the Almond and Verba items is that empirical

evaluation finds that the dimensionality varies across cultures. For example, a varimax rotated component factor analysis (principal components with unities on the main diagonal) of Almond and Verba's efficacy (or "citizen competence") variables reveals two distinct dimensions for four of the five nations, whereas for Germany three dimensions are uncovered.

In four of the nations the first factor contains all of the variables relating to citizen response to an unjust or harmful law (VAR038 to VAR040, VAR042 to VAR044) and the second factor contains the two variables that relate to efficacious action—that is, citizen action to influence a decision at the local and national level (VAR041, VAR045). In the German data, however, the first factor split into two, with two of the variables that relate to the respondent's reaction to an unjust or harmful law at the nation level (VAR042, VAR043) forming a separate factor.

Paige has proposed the use of information about politics as a surrogate for the standard efficacy items in order to avoid the contamination of efficacy with political trust. In essence, Paige is arguing that efficacy measures should consist only of Muller's second dimension, the "skills necessary for effective political action." Unfortunately, Paige's solution to the problem has drawbacks of its own. While Paige is probably correct in assuming that information is a necessary prerequisite to efficacious action, the possession of information does not necessarily indicate that individuals *feel* they can influence government decisions (Muller's third dimension). Conversely, individuals with little or no information might still feel efficacious, although they would have little likelihood of taking efficacious action. Hence, Paige's measure might be viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for efficacious action.

A NEW APPROACH: THE PROBLEM-SOLVING EFFICACY SCALE

The difficulties presented by the previous attempts to measure efficacy suggest that any new measure should meet the following criteria: (1) it must not be contaminated by acquiescence response set; (2) it must not be contaminated by social desirability response set; (3) it should be free from contamination by the respondent's evaluation of government responsiveness; (4) it should have a dimensional structure that remains stable across different cultures and across time; (5) it should be situationally specific without having the situation predetermined by the researchers; and (6) it should tap both the skills and confidence dimensions of the concept.

In attempting to construct a scale that meets these criteria this paper builds on Mathiason's (1972) research on the urban poor in Venezuela. Mathiason employed a series of questions that were used to tap what he considered to be three separate and unique types of powerlessness:

"insufficient attributes"; "inadequate modes of discrimination"; and "prior communication failures." Mathiason's work, while highly suggestive, did not consider the possibility of creating an overall, unidimensional scale of efficacy. Furthermore, Mathiason's central concern related to mass communication and its role in development, whereas the purpose of this article is to develop an index that might be useful in a broad range of public opinion research.

The central focus of the measure of efficacy developed below is problem solving. Efficacy questions may have little meaning if they are divorced from this context. Almond and Verba perceived this when they structured their questions around solving a problem. However, they went astray when they specified for the respondent the particular problem that needed attention (i.e., an unfair law). By permitting the respondent wide latitude for context specification, it is possible to construct a series of questions which relate directly to the problem that concerns the *respondent*. In this way, the scale will be anchored in a respondent-defined, problem-solving context.

The new efficacy scale begins by asking the respondent to name a community problem about which he/she is concerned (see Table 1 for the text of the questions). Excluded from consideration are purely personal problems (e.g., a medical problem) unless the personal problem is linked *by the respondent* to a community problem (e.g., no hospitals).⁴ Hence, the first question simply sets the context by asking the respon-

⁴ In the administration of the questionnaire, if the respondent mentioned a national-level problem (e.g., unemployment) the interviewer noted this response and then proceeded with a mandatory probe that emphasized the communal nature of the problem. Focusing exclusively on the communal problems in the analysis avoids the difficulty of comparing local problem solving (i.e., ones that have the potential of being resolved within the community) with national problem solving (i.e., ones which the solution is probably beyond the influence of even the most efficacious citizen). In Costa Rica, the country from which the data reported in this paper were drawn, the community problem mentioned invariably concerned roads, potable water and other civic needs, all of which customarily have been resolved largely through community effort (see Booth and Seligson, 1979a,b).

It should be noted that among certain sample populations it might be difficult to separate some local problems from their national linkages (e.g., problems of racial segregation in the United States). In such cases special care would need to be taken in comparing the responses from those individuals who selected such a local-national problem with those who selected a solely local problem. However, since the questions (and mandatory probe) focus the respondent's attention on the local aspect of the problem, it can be expected that even respondents who select such local-national problems will be able to address themselves to the local aspects of the problem, the ones potentially resolvable at the local level. It is important, nevertheless, to have the interviewers note the problem mentioned by the respondent so that these can be coded and analyzed by the investigator. This procedure was followed in the present investigation and a check was made to see if different kinds of problems would produce substantive differences in the scale results and multiple regression analysis (as performed in Table 2). No such differences were encountered in the present analysis.

dent (1) to name the most serious problem in the community. This item, therefore, gets at the *informational* aspect of efficacy viewed as important by Paige. The scale does not stop there, however. It goes on to gather more information on the respondent's political *skills* by asking him/her to explain briefly (2) how the problem arose and (3) what might be

TABLE 1
Guttman Scale and Univariate Distributions
for Problem-Solving Efficacy Scale

| Item | Sample (Percent with efficacious response) | | |
|--|--|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Cross-Section Peasants | Land Reform Peasants | National Cross-Section |
| "What is the most serious problem in this village (town)?" (Efficacious response involves naming a community problem, but see footnote 5 for further details.) | 63.1 | 85.7 | 64.5 |
| "How did this problem come about?" (Efficacious response involves providing an explanation.) | 60.1 | 80.6 | 59.4 |
| "How could the problem be solved?" (Efficacious response involves providing an explanation.) | 56.3 | 75.6 | 55.7 |
| "Do you think you could do something to help solve it?" (Efficacious response coded for "yes" replies.) | 34.7 | 56.5 | 18.0 |
| Coefficient of reproducibility | .98 | .97 | .99 |
| Coefficient of Scalability | .95 | .89 | .98 |
| (Sample Ns) ^a | (513) | (753) | (1707) |

^a Further details of the samples are reported in footnote 8.

done to solve it. Finally, the scale attempts to tap the *feeling of confidence* aspect of efficacy by asking (4) whether the respondent thinks that he/she could help resolve the problem.

The items were specifically designed to conform to the psychological model implicit in the Guttman scale. That is to say, individuals who cannot (or do not) name any community problem will not be able to discuss how the problem arose. Similarly, those who are not able to explain how the problem came about are unlikely to be able to explain what can be done to solve it. Following this logic, if the error pattern uncovered is within acceptable limits (i.e., the coefficient of reproducibility is sufficiently high) individuals can be assigned a scale score based on the number of questions in the series they answered in an efficacious manner.⁵

The proposed scale immediately meets several of the criteria for an improved efficacy measure. First, it is a situation-specific series of questions, but the situation is primarily defined by the respondent. The only definition provided by the researcher is the problem-solving context. Hence efficacy is linked to an issue that, because it has been named by the respondent, is presumed to have some salience for him/her. The measure, therefore, does not attempt to measure a generalized feeling of efficacy, a concept whose empirical existence has not been verified. What the measure tries to do is determine if the respondent is efficacious with respect to a problem that is salient for him/her. Second, contamination by acquiescence response set is eliminated because the agree-disagree format is not used. The scale also meets the criterion of being uncontaminated by the respondent's evaluation of government responsiveness. Unfortunately, social desirability response set is only partially avoided by the new measure. Hence, respondents who do name a problem and perceive that it is socially desirable to so so may respond in an efficacious fashion to the remaining questions even if their true responses might have been otherwise.⁶

Table 1 presents the items, the univariate response distributions from three samples⁷ and the coefficients of reproducibility and scalability. It

⁵ Although there are several ways to deal with the problem of assigning scale scores to respondents with errors, in this article a simple summation is used. Experimentation with the three methods of treating errors used in the University of Michigan OSIRIS package of programs produced slightly different scale scores but no substantively different results in the correlation and regression analyses discussed below.

⁶ However, the problem of social desirability is only poorly understood at the present time. It is not now possible to determine how many of the questions are perceived to have a socially desirable side. In the future it would be helpful to use some of the scales designed to test for social desirability response set (Crowne and Marlow, 1964) to determine if the new measure is contaminated.

⁷ The cross-section peasant sample included a wide range of peasants, landed and landless alike (Seligson, 1977), who were interviewed by the author and his wife,

is quite clear that for all three samples the items form a robust scale. Moreover it should be emphasized that the samples are diverse in nature, two of them focusing on separate segments of the peasant population in Costa Rica and the third a national sample. The national sample was divided into its urban ($N = 527$) and rural components and the Guttman scale program applied to the urban subset in order to determine if the scale would work equally well in that sector. It did, yielding a coefficient of reproducibility of .96 and scalability of .86. Hence, there is strong evidence of the unidimensionality of the scale.

Some comment needs to be made on the univariate distributions, since there are some rather large differences among the samples on some items. The most striking difference occurs in the higher levels of efficacious responses found in every item for the land reform sample as compared to the other samples. Elsewhere the attitudes reflected in this sample are examined in some detail (Seligson, 1979a) and it is found that the respondents, all of whom have received land from the national government, are generally a more activist group than the cross-section of peasants. The differences in attitudes of this sample, therefore, reflect the different nature of the land reform beneficiaries when compared to the cross-section of peasants.

THE PREDICTIVE POWER OF THE NEW SCALE

The ultimate test of the new measure is its power to predict behavior. If the scale is a more powerful predictor than the SRC, Almond-Verba and Paige measures then there is strong reason for encouraging its use in future studies. In fact the tests performed to date offer some encouragement.

In order to test the power of the new efficacy measure it was hypothesized that when compared to the conventional measures it should be a better predictor of political participation. The linkages between efficacy and participation have been explored both theoretically and empirically, as has been pointed out by Madsen (1978:867):

A great many studies in the past two decades have examined the democratic citizen's sense of political efficacy. For the most part, this attention springs from an immediate theoretical focus on political par-

Susan Berk-Seligson, in 1973. Details of the sample design are contained in Seligson (1974, 1979b). The land reform peasant sample was interviewed in 1976 and represents peasants who had received land from the Instituto de Tierras y Colonización, the national land reform institution (see Seligson, 1979a). Finally, the national cross-section sample, from which the Metropolitan San José sample is taken, was administered by the Unidad de Opinión Pública of the Oficina de Información in San José, Costa Rica (see Seligson, forthcoming; Seligson and Salazar, 1979). All three were stratified probability samples.

ticipation in national political life, efficacy being viewed as an important influence for two reasons. First, it is thought to affect the *character* of participation. . . . Second . . . a sense of political efficacy is thought to effect the *extent* of participation.

Table 2 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis performed on the cross-section peasant data set. In that table two modes of political participation (local government activism and organizational activism) are regressed on the three measures of efficacy. Each of these modes is measured by a multi-item index drawn from the survey. Scale construction and dimensionality are discussed elsewhere in considerable detail (see Seligson, 1978, 1979c; Seligson and Booth, 1976, 1979; Booth and Seligson, 1978, 1979a,b). Four measures of efficacy are used: the Almond and Verba subjective competence item (reaction to a proposed unfair local law); an index based on two measures from the SRC efficacy scale (Is government interested in what people think? Is government too complicated?); an index based on three items of information (following Paige's definition of efficacy);⁸ and the problem-solving efficacy scale. Additional details of these measures are contained in Seligson (1979c).

An examination of the beta weights shown in Table 2 reveals that the problem-solving efficacy scale is a better predictor of these modes of political participation than are the other three measures. It must be pointed out, however, that the predictive power of the new efficacy measure is not particularly impressive, although cross-cultural participation studies have generally produced rather low correlations between attitudes and participation (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1971). Moreover, the sample is truncated socioeconomically, including only the poorest members of the Costa Rican social structure (namely, peasants). Hence, the variance of all the variables (SES, attitudes, behaviors, etc.) is restricted to a fairly narrow range and therefore the correlations are uniformly lower than they probably would have been in a national cross-section sample.

Evidence of the stronger relationships to be found in samples which are not truncated is revealed in the national cross-section sample. Since local government activism was not measured in that study, only organizational activism was correlated with three of the efficacy measures reported on in Table 2 (no data were available for the information efficacy scale). Once again the problem-solving efficacy measure proved to be the best predictor of behavior, with the zero-order correlation higher than in the peasant sample ($r = .24$). This was expected because of the greater variance in the national cross-section data.

One final piece of evidence of the relative strength of the new measure comes from the land reform peasant sample (again a truncated sam-

⁸ The information items required the respondents to state if they knew (1) which government agency was in charge of road repairs; (2) which agency had the responsibility for medical services; and (3) the current minimum wage for peasants. A summated index of these items was created.

ple). In that sample a series of questions was asked regarding partisan activity and political communication (i.e., talking to neighbors about politics). It was again found that the new measure was a better predictor of these forms of behavior than the traditional SRC and Almond and Verba measures. Hence, attendance at political meetings and working for a political party or candidate have low but significant correlations with the new measure ($r = .07$ and $.09$, respectively) and a somewhat higher relationship to frequency of persuading people to vote for one's candidate ($r = .18$). The traditional measures demonstrated no significant relationships with these items.

TABLE 2
Stepwise Multiple Regression Results on
Cross-Section Peasant Data Set^a

| CORRELATION MATRIX | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Problem-solving Efficacy | SRC Efficacy | Subjective Competence | Information Efficacy | Organiza- tional Activism |
| SRC efficacy | .03 | | | | |
| Subjective competence | .17 | .06 | | | |
| Information efficacy | .06 | .01 | .05 | | |
| Organizational activism | .16 | .08 | .12 | -.01 | |
| Local government activism | .26 | .00 | .20 | -.02 | .23 |
| REGRESSION RESULTS: FINAL STEP | | | | | |
| Efficacy Measures | | | | | |
| Modes of Participation | Problem-solving Efficacy | Information Efficacy | Subjective Competence | SRC Efficacy | Multiple R |
| Local government activism | .23* | -- | .16* | .01 | .30 |
| Organizational activism | .14* | .01 | .09 | .07 | .02 |
| (N = 531, but varies slightly owing to nonresponse) | | | | | |

^a Numbers in the columns are beta weights. Betas followed by an asterisk are significant (F ratio) at the 0.5 level or better. No entry in the place of a beta weight indicates that the variable did not enter the equation.

It must be emphasized that the moderate to low levels of association between the new efficacy scale and the participation measures are no reason to be disappointed with the measure. Participation is not hypothesized to be solely a product of efficacy, but is related to other attitudes, contextual factors, socioeconomic status and demographic variables (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1971, 1978; Milbrath and Goel, 1977). The central point is that the new efficacy scale does correlate in the predicted direction with participation, and does so to a higher degree than to the traditional measures for the data sets analyzed here.

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined a new approach to the sticky problem of measuring political efficacy. The traditional measures are plagued with difficulties, most of which are either eliminated or mitigated by the problem-solving scale proposed here. It has been shown that in three separate samples the items form a Guttman scale with high coefficients of reproducibility and scalability. The scale has been shown to be of utility in predicting several modes of political participation more effectively than the traditional measures. It is time to stop lamenting the inadequacies of the traditional efficacy measures and to begin examining new ones.

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