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ASSESSMENTS OF GROUP INFLUENCE, SUBJECTIVE POLITICAL COMPETENCE, AND INTEREST GROUP MEMBERSHIP

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This research examines the relationship between citizens' assessments of how much influence the group they identify with is able to exercise in American politics and their subjective political competence and political participation. Appraisals of group influence have a powerful effect on subjective political competence, fulfilling theoretical expectations outlined by Leon Festinger many years ago. Moreover, assessments of group influence affect individuals' decision concerning membership in an interest group that promotes the interest of one's reference group. The work reported here is an improvement over past efforts in that it explicitly defines and assesses the causal importance of a concept that has been featured in prior research.

The research presented here defines and operationalizes a concept—group efficacy—that has been featured in prior research without being operationalized and empirically examined. Group efficacy is hypothesized to be a determinant of subjective political competence (also referred to as internal efficacy), political participation, and willingness to engage in collective action through interest-group membership. The theoretical reasons for these linkages are presented and subjected to empirical verification. Moreover, because there are reasons to expect reciprocal causation between group efficacy and internal efficacy, and between group efficacy and interest group membership, nonrecursive simultaneous equation models are estimated. By serving as an intermediary between the individual and the political process, groups personalize politics, affecting citizens' sense of subjective political competence and their willingness to contribute to the provision of collective goods.

Both interest groups and reference groups have occupied prominent positions in studies of American politics. Scholarly studies of mass publics

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have noted that a significant proportion of the electorate conceptualizes politics in terms of what groups are advantaged or disadvantaged by the major political parties and their candidates (Campbell et al., 1960), and that political preferences and perceptions are powerfully shaped by group identifications (Campbell et al., 1960; Conover, 1984). Pluralists have modeled politics at both the elite and mass level as competition among diverse factions over scarce resources. Additionally, interest groups are viewed as serving as a link between the citizenry and political elites and government. In sum, both scholars and mass publics have conceptualized politics as competition among groups with distinct preferences.[1]

GROUP EFFICACY AND INTERNAL EFFICACY

Researchers long ago determined that political efficacy is an important determinant of political participation and, consequently, a desirable trait for democratic societies. From a normative perspective, efficacy is of interest because it defines the ideal citizen in a democratic society and, concomitantly, the orientation of political elites and government. Since high levels of political efficacy are associated with high rates of participation, factors that raise or lower the level of political efficacy in a society are of special interest because of their effect on the prospects for a democratic polity.

Political efficacy is generally divided into two analytically distinct components (Abramson, 1983; Balch, 1974; Converse, 1972; Craig, 1979; and Craig et al., 1990). Internal efficacy refers to the extent that individuals feel capable of understanding the political process and external efficacy focuses on citizens' belief that the government is responsive to the citizenry's preferences. Both types of political efficacy have been demonstrated to affect political participation. Generally, scholars have listed age, income, and, most importantly, education as the determinants of internal political efficacy. External efficacy also has its origins in education and age (though less so than internal efficacy), but contemporary political events—commonly referred to as period effects—play a crucial role. As such, internal efficacy is seen as resulting from factors that exist within the individual whereas external efficacy is largely affected by factors outside the individual.

What determines citizens' assessments of their group's amount of political influence? There has been little theoretical or empirical efforts that aid in explaining what determines citizens' assessments of their group's political effectiveness. In general, such assessments are probably shaped by perceptions of the extent that the political system is responsive to the group's preferences, characteristics of the group, or the efforts of a particularly persuasive group leader. This issue will be discussed further.

There are considerable theoretical grounds for expecting assessments of group influence to affect subjective political competence. Social psychological research posits that individuals are social beings in search of self-definition. Self-definitions are derived, at least in part, from social definitions, which is one of the primary benefits of reference group identification. Although reference groups serve a variety of functions for their identifiers, the most commonly studied function of reference groups by political scientists is their role in the formation of political preferences. Social psychologists have held that reference groups are not only useful to the individual for forming preferences but also for making inferences about abilities.

Reference groups serve as a cognitive heuristic for the individual in a world that is often complex and ambiguous; they allow an individual to categorize, and thus simplify, the social and political world. Information is attained by individuals through the social comparison function of reference groups, first discussed by Festinger in a classic article presented in 1947.[2] Festinger began with the assumption that "there exists, in the human organism, a drive to evaluate his opinions and abilities." Given the need to make such evaluations, Festinger posits that "to the extent objective, nonsocial means are not available, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison, respectively, with the opinions and abilities of others." Accordingly, individuals seek out other individuals who are members of a similar category with which to compare abilities and opinions. As a result of this process of search and comparison with similar others—members of one's reference group—individuals establish their opinions and assess their abilities.

Additional theoretical expectations for a relationship between assessments of group influence and internal efficacy are presented by Converse (1972). Converse has argued that the effects of education on political efficacy may in fact be spurious. Converse notes that all societies are characterized by a "natural pecking order," a hierarchy of haves and have-nots. The hierarchy represents the amount of influence various groups are able to exercise in a given society; groups that are politically influential will be able to translate their influence into educational gains. What is implied in Converse's argument is that an individual's placement in the "pecking order" contributes to personal political effectiveness.

It is thus reasonable to hypothesize that one's subjective political competence is at least partly derived from an assessment of the amount of political influence one's reference group is able to exercise. To the extent that one believes one's reference group is not politically effective, an individual is likely to deduce that he himself lacks political competence. This argument is made explicitly by Opp (1986) with regard to the individual's decision

calculus for collective action. He asserts that individuals utilize assessments of their group's amount of political influence to make appraisals of their own political efficacy.

ASSESSMENTS OF GROUP INFLUENCE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Theories of collective action posit that assessments of group influence will have direct effects on political participation. Olson (1965) refers to the importance of individual assessments of the likelihood that his or her contribution will affect whether the collective good will be provided, but such assessments are not a major part of his analysis. More recent literature has given greater prominence to the importance of individuals' assessments of the likelihood the group will succeed and has listed a host of factors that can serve as determinants of individuals' assessments of their group's political effectiveness—access, financial resources, entrepreneurial or charismatic leaders, cohesion, intensity, etc. (Chong, 1991; Hardin, 1982; Moe, 1980; Opp, 1986; and Rothenberg, 1988).

Proponents of the "nonstandard" view of the decision calculus for collective action posit that assessments of the likelihood that collective action will be successful determines an individual's decision to contribute. Chong (1991), for example, posits that "members of a group . . . are enthusiastic about contributing to collective action or are pressured to, only when such collective action has a realistic opportunity to achieve the public good" (Chong, 1991, p. 11). Moe (1980) and Rothenberg (1988) also argue that assessments of the likelihood of successful collective action figure prominently in individuals' decision calculus. Opp (1986) goes even further, arguing that individuals take the group's probability of success as a measure of the probability that their own personal actions will change the outcome.

In sum, individuals take into account the effectiveness of the group as a whole as a measure of the likelihood that if they contribute to the provision of the good the good will be attained. Willingness to engage in collective action should increase when the probability of success is high and should decrease when the probability is low. For individuals who perceive the group they identify with to be influential, the likelihood of success resulting from collective action—that is, that the desired benefit will result—should serve to increase the willingness to contribute toward the provision of the collective good.

Although having made important advances, prior empirical studies are limited in that they only examine individuals who have already joined an interest group; nonjoiners are not included in their analysis (Moe, 1980; Opp, 1986; and Rothenberg, 1988). A more satisfying empirical investiga-

tion requires the inclusion of those who have joined in the collective action effort as well as those who have not. Moreover, since joiners' assessments of the likelihood of success may represent a rationalization of their decision, testing a model that allows for reciprocal causality is essential.

DATA

The 1972–76 American National Election Study provides a suitable research design for examining the relationship between group efficacy and internal efficacy and collective action. The 1972–76 election study is a panel design, facilitating estimation of a nonrecursive model, and it is the only survey containing questions pertaining to reference group influence. As is true for all of the election studies since 1972, respondents were presented with a list of reference groups and asked which groups they "feel particularly close to—people who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings about things." Respondents were then asked to look at the groups they had indicated they felt close to and indicate which one they felt closest to. Approximately 80 percent of the respondents listed a group in 1972 and 1976. Respondents were also asked to estimate the amount of influence the group they felt closest to was able to exercise "in American Life and politics—a great deal, some, not very much, or none."

Although recent research has challenged the validity of one of the two questions NES has traditionally employed to measure internal efficacy, the validity of the other question utilized by the 1972 and 1976 election studies has been established by Craig et al. (1990) and is used here. This question asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement, "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." Importantly, this question is best suited for capturing the "skills" or "ability" component of personal efficacy, which is the aspect of efficacy of concern here (Craig et al., 1990).

A wide variety of groups were contained on the lists for measuring group identification in 1972 and 1976. Some of the groups—businessmen and whites—are groups that are generally considered the most influential groups in American politics, whereas other groups—the poor and blacks—are regarded as the least politically influential. Tables 1 and 2 list all of the groups, the very close identifiers' appraisals of their group's amount of influence, and the mean score for each group for both 1972 and 1976. As one might expect, identifiers of blacks and the poor are the most pessimistic about their amount of influence, whereas businessmen and whites are the most positive. For the majority of groups, the average score is neither extremely positive nor negative, typically lying between those of the most advantaged and disadvantaged groups. The data indicate a fair amount of

TABLE 1. Reference Groups and Assessments of Group Efficacy, 1972

	Great Deal	Some	Not Very Much	None	$\bar{X}$
Businessmen	60.3	35.6	4.1		1.43
	(44)	(26)	(3)		
Liberals	16.3	61.2	22.4		2.06
	(8)	(30)	(11)		
Southerners	11.1	61.1	25.0	2.8	2.19
	(4)	(22)	(9)	(1)	
Poor people	4.3	25.8	52.7	17.2	2.82
	(4)	(24)	(49)	(16)	
Catholics	13.8	50.0	34.5	1.7	2.24
	(8)	(29)	(20)	(1)	
Protestants	25.8	56.1	15.1	3.0	1.95
	(17)	(37)	(10)	(2)	
Jews		70.6	29.4		2.29
		(12)	(5)		
Young people	22.0	54.6	23.1	.3	2.01
	(65)	(161)	(68)	(1)	
Whites	77.6	19.4	3.1		1.25
	(76)	(19)	(3)		
Blacks	9.9	25.4	54.3	8.5	2.63
	(7)	(18)	(40)	(6)	
Conservatives	24.0	66.0	10.0		1.86
	(12)	(33)	(5)		
Women	25.4	54.2	19.5	.8	1.95
	(30)	(64)	(23)	(1)	
Middle class	27.1	56.2	15.4	1.3	1.90
	(107)	(222)	(61)	(5)	
Workingmen	19.7	49.4	28.6	2.3	2.1
	(51)	(128)	(74)	(6)	
Farmers	7.4	41.1	49.5	2.1	2.46
	(7)	(39)	(47)	(2)	
Older people	8.8	30.9	50.2	10.1	2.61
	(19)	(67)	(109)	(22)	
Total	23.1	46.8	26.9	3.2	2.10
	(463)	(937)	(540)	(64)	

Entries are percentages; *N*'s are in parentheses.

variance (disagreement) within each group over how much influence the group possesses. Only for blacks, the poor, whites, businessmen, and the elderly are a large proportion of the responses at one end of the scale.

There is some evidence that citizens consider the properties of their group and features of the political system to explain the reason for their group's amount of political influence. In both 1972 and 1976 respondents

TABLE 2. Reference Groups and Assessments of Group Efficacy, 1976

	Great Deal	Some	Not Very Much	None	$\bar{X}$
Businessmen	50.8	40.0	7.7	1.5	1.6
	(33)	(26)	(5)	(1)	
Liberals	30.4	60.9	8.7		1.78
	(7)	(14)	(2)		
Southerners	23.5	41.2	35.3		2.10
	(4)	(7)	(6)	(1)	
Poor people	4.0	24.8	55.4	15.8	2.83
	(4)	(25)	(56)	(16)	
Catholics	14.3	66.7	16.7	2.4	2.07
	(6)	(28)	(7)	(1)	
Protestants	34.0	50.0	16.0		1.82
	(17)	(25)	(8)		
Jews	16.7	55.6	27.8		2.11
	(3)	(10)	(5)		
Young people	15.1	54.7	27.8	2.4	2.17
	(32)	(116)	(59)	(5)	
Whites	74.1	23.5	2.4		1.28
	(63)	(20)	(2)		
Blacks	13.7	58.8	25.5	2.0	2.15
	(7)	(30)	(13)	(1)	
Conservatives	18.6	52.9	28.6		2.10
	(12)	(33)	(5)		
Women	19.4	64.5	16.1		1.96
	(24)	(80)	(20)		
Middle class	18.3	61.8	17.8	2.1	2.03
	(70)	(236)	(68)	(8)	
Workingmen	22.5	53.7	23.3	.4	2.01
	(51)	(122)	(53)	(1)	
Farmers	17.4	39.5	41.9	1.2	2.26
	(7)	(39)	(47)	(2)	
Older people	8.5	35.1	52.1	4.3	2.52
	(16)	(66)	(98)	(8)	
Total	21.0	50.3	26.3	2.4	2.10
	(365)	(876)	(458)	(42)	

Entries are percentages; *N*'s are in parentheses.

were asked if there was anything their group could do to increase its level of political influence; 62 percent said there were things their group could do. Among the 38 percent who said their group could not increase its political influence, 41 percent believed the source of the group's difficulties resided within the group.[3] Thus, what evidence there is suggests that citi-

zens think the determinants of group influence are the responsiveness of the political system and the characteristics of the group.

GROUP INFLUENCE AND EXTERNAL EFFICACY

Some might think that group efficacy is merely a creation of external efficacy. It is thus imperative to conduct a test of construct validity to determine if group efficacy is empirically distinct from external efficacy. To test for the construct validity of group efficacy it is necessary to determine if group efficacy correlates with variables that correlate with external efficacy. Recall that scholars learned external efficacy is separate from internal efficacy because external efficacy changed over time in response to contemporary political events, whereas internal efficacy did not (Converse, 1972; Balch, 1974). Examination of the temporal variation in group efficacy reveals that group efficacy is indeed distinct from external efficacy. External efficacy declined precipitously from 1972 to 1976 in response to the Watergate scandal (Abramson, 1983). If group efficacy is merely a component of external efficacy, similar reductions in assessments of group influence from 1972 to 1976 should be evident. This clearly is not the case. The mean score for assessments of group influence in 1972 was 2.10; four years later, the 1976 mean was an identical 2.10.

Assessments of group influence are not the same as external efficacy. A member of a group can obviously believe that his or her group has a great deal of political influence while believing that the system is not responsive to the general citizenry, which is what external efficacy refers to.

ASSESSMENTS OF GROUP INFLUENCE AND POLITICAL EFFICACY

Do assessments of group influence contribute to feelings of personal political efficacy? Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, probit is the appropriate multivariate statistical technique to estimate the effect of assessments of group influence on subjective political competence.[4] In addition to assessments of group influence, variables for age, education, and income are also included in the model, since prior research has demonstrated their causal importance for personal efficacy.[5]

The analysis, presented in Table 3, indicates that in both 1972 and 1976 assessments of group influence affected personal efficacy. Positive assessments of the political influence of the group one feels psychologically closest to contribute to positive assessments of one's subjective political competence. Individuals not only assign the preferences of their reference group to themselves but what they perceive to be the abilities of the group as well. The effect of assessments of group influence on personal efficacy suggests the existence of a link between citizens' appraisals of the political

TABLE 3. Multivariate Analysis of Determinants of Internal Efficacy and Group Influence

Independent Variables	*Internal Efficiacy* 1972	1976	TSLS, 1976	*Group Influence* TSLS, 1976
Constant	.56***	.83***	.73***	3.16***
	(.08)	(.02)	(.06)	(3.25)
Group influence	.13***	.13***	.42*	
	(.04)	(.048)	(.20)	
Age	.002	.009***	.0034	
	(.002)	(.002)	(.004)	
Education	.18***	.24***	.32***	
	(.02)	(.024)	(.042)	
Income	.11***	.074***	.025	
	(.02)	(.023)	(.04)	
Internal efficacy				.030
				(.028)
Black ID				.29**
				(.12)
Poor ID				.75***
				(.096)
Business ID				−.24**
				(.10)
Elderly ID				.40***
				(.071)
Trust				.071***
				(.020)
1972 Group influence				.18***
				(.028)
N =	1937	1616	980	976
R^2 =	.58	.58		
−2 log likelihood, full model	2352.3	1774.3		

**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$
Entries for the first two columns are probit coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. Internal efficacy is a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the respondent is efficacious, zero otherwise. Entries in the last two columns were generated by the OLS two-stage least squares program. The R presented here and in subsequent probit analysis is analogous to a multiple correlations coefficient for regression analysis, since it is standardized to be between 0 and 1. It is defined as exp [(log(likelihood))/n].

world and what resides within the individual in terms of her assessment of her abilities.

Before the above results are accepted another path of causality needs to be considered. It is possible that citizens project their personal political efficacy onto their assessments of their group's amount of political influ-

ence. To test this proposition, specification of a nonrecursive, simultaneous equation model is necessary. There is little prior empirical or theoretical research, however, that aids in the specification of a model of assessments of group influence. I propose a model of assessments of group influence that includes identification with blacks, businessmen, the elderly, the poor, a prior (1972) measure of group efficacy, and respondents' assessments of whether the government can be trusted to do what is right.[6]

These variables are utilized to generate an instrument for two-stage least squares analysis of the effect of assessments of group influence on internal efficacy. Age, education, and income were used as exogenous variables to create a purged instrument to determine the effect of internal efficacy on assessments of group influence. The coefficients generated by the two-stage least square estimation procedure are presented in the last two columns of Table 3.[7] The results show that assessments of group influence affect personal political efficacy, but that personal political efficacy does not shape appraisals of group influence.

These findings indicate that education has direct effects on internal efficacy. Converse's assertion that the relationship between education and political efficacy is spurious is rejected. However, the results also indicate that those who believe they belong to groups that they characterize as "haves" possess a higher sense of political efficacy than those who believe they are part of the "have-nots," ceteris paribus. Thus, this aspect of Converse's argument is confirmed.

ASSESSMENTS OF GROUP INFLUENCE AND PARTICIPATION

Do assessments of group influence have direct effects on political participation? Two measures of political participation are employed here as dependent variables to determine if assessments of group influence have direct effects on participation: voting and a commonly employed additive index of nonvoting forms of participation.[8] For voting and other forms of conventional participation, positive assessments of group influence should yield an increase in participation. Age, education, internal political efficacy, an index of external efficacy,[9] and income are included in the model as control variables; the results are contained in Table 4.

There is no statistical evidence for the presence of direct effects of assessments of group influence on electoral forms of participation. It is worth speculating as to why assessments of group influence do not have direct effects on these types of political participation. For these political acts citizens are not concerned with the amount of political influence their group is able to exercise. These activities are probably not commonly understood by citizens as a form of collective action on behalf of their reference group.

TABLE 4. Multivariate Analysis for Voting and Other Forms of Participation

Independent Variables	*Voting* 1972	1976	*Other Participation* 1972	1976
Constant	.53***	.45***	.22	.26
	(.02)	(.02)	(.18)	(.19)
Group influence	.038	.09	.011	.015
	(.042)	(.051)	(.04)	(.04)
Age	.017***	.017***	.0035*	.006***
	(.0021)	(.002)	(.0018)	(.002)
Education	.16***	.16***	.17***	.17***
	(.022)	(.028)	(.019)	(.02)
Income	.175***	.13***	.15***	.12***
	(.03)	(.026)	(.023)	(.02)
Internal efficacy	.03	.07***	.09***	.07***
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
External efficacy	.19***	.21***	.15***	.16***
	(.042)	(.047)	(.04)	(.04)
N =	1901	1537	1897	1512
R^2 =	.60	.61	.17	.16
$-2 \times \log$	1936.3	1497.8		

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$

For voting, entries are probit coefficients; for "Other participation," entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. "Voting" is a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the respondent voted, zero otherwise.

Since these forms of political participation do not generally have a group focus, appraisals of group influence may not be relevant to the participatory decision. This is not to say, of course, that group concerns are never relevant to the participatory decision. Fiorina and Shepsle (1989) and Uhlaner (1989b) have presented theoretical arguments and empirical evidence that demonstrate citizens can be motivated by policy dissatisfaction or entrepreneurial leaders to participate. These researchers have specified a specific set of circumstances for group concerns to motivate turnout, circumstance that may not have been present during the 1972 or 1976 presidential elections for the wide variety of groups included in the analysis presented here.

ASSESSMENTS OF GROUP INFLUENCE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

One form of political participation deserves special attention. Collective action via interest group membership represents a form of political behavior in which individuals work together to attain collective benefits—bene-

fits that are valued by all group members and from which no member can be excluded from consuming. Assessments of group influence may be more likely to contribute to political participation when the aim of such efforts is explicitly directed toward benefiting one's reference group, the group with which one feels a sense of interdependence. Assessments of group influence should be an important determinant of the decision to attain or maintain membership in an interest group that seeks to provide collective goods for a reference group.

For individuals who are members of reference groups that lack political influence, joining a group that attempts to provide collective goods might seem a futile effort. Current and prospective members must be convinced of the likelihood of political success. Otherwise, individuals will conclude that the chances of success are small, and that contributions have little chance of bearing fruit. Indeed, from the perspective of Moe (1980), an interest group is based on a set of exchange relationships between the entrepreneur and each potential member. The entrepreneur offers some combination of selective benefits and collective goods and the potential member decides on the basis of cost-benefit calculations whether to join the group. Members, potential or actual, who believe the reference group is influential in politics should be willing to contribute to the provision of collective goods through an interest group.

Both the 1972 and 1976 election studies asked respondents if they were a member of an organization that represented the group they most closely identified with —whether they "belong to any organizations that represent the interests and viewpoints" of their closest group.[10] Multrivariate probit analysis is employed to determine if assessments of group influence affect the decision to join or maintain membership in an organization that works to provide collective benefits for the group. In addition to the group influence variable, internal efficacy, age, education, and income were included in the model. The results are contained in the first two columns of Table 5.[11]

The results of the probit analysis indicate that assessments of group influence affect the membership decision. In both 1972 and 1976, the more positive an individual's assessment of his group's capacity to exercise influence the more likely he is to be a member of an organization that works to provide benefits for the reference group with which he most closely identifies.

Of course, it is reasonable to suspect that once the membership decision has been made, for whatever reason, citizens might rationalize that decision by ascribing success to the group. Moreover, one of the chief tasks of the leadership of an interest group is to convince members and potential members of the group's effectiveness. Entrepreneurial leaders, knowing that perfect information about the marginal costs and benefits of collective

TABLE 5. Multivariate Analysis for Group Membership and Group Influence

Independent Variables	*Group Membership* 1972	1976	TSLS, 1976	*Group Influence* TSLS, 1976
Constant	.38***	.32***	.34***	3.23
	(.019)	(.02)	(.06)	(3.30)
Group influence	.13***	.170***	.45**	
	(.041)	(.049)	(.18)	
Age	.0083***	.010***	.018***	
	(.002)	(.0021)	(.0042)	
Education	.08***	.11***	.10**	
	(.02)	(.025)	(.043)	
Income	.11***	.034	.10**	
	(.024)	(.023)	(.042)	
Internal efficacy	.015	.026	−.041	
	(.018)	(.02)	(.033)	
Group membership				.083**
				(.034)
Black ID				−.29**
				(.12)
Poor ID				−.63***
				(.097)
Business ID				(.097)
				.21*
				(.10)
Elderly ID				−.39***
				(.073)
1972 Group efficacy				.17***
				(.028)
Trust				.05**
				(.02)
Public officials respond				.02*
				(.11)
People like *R* have say				.054***
				(.012)
N =	1901	1534	987	951
R^2 =	.56	.57	.04	.05
−2 × log	2173.6	1739.8		

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$

Entries in the first three columns are probit coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Group membership is a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if a respondent is a member of a group, zero otherwise. Entries in the last two columns were generated by an OLS two-stage least squares program.

goods is not available, but that a large amount of uncertainty and ambiguity may exist, attempt to persuade current members of the group's likelihood of success (Moe, 1980).[12] It is thus necessary to estimate a nonrecursive, simultaneous equation model of the membership decision—one that considers the possibility that group membership itself can be a determinant of assessments of group influence.

For group membership, the 1972 measure of membership, income, age, and education are utilized as exogenous variables to create a purged instrument for 1976 group membership. For assessments of group influence, identification with the elderly, poor, blacks, and businessmen, the 1972 measure of group efficacy, two measures of external efficacy, and the trust in government item were employed to create a purged instrument.[13] The results of the two-stage least squares analysis are presented in the last two columns of Table 5.

The analysis indicates a reciprocal relationship between group membership and assessments of group influence. Once individuals have joined an interest group they are more likely to make positive assessments of their reference group's capacity to influence the political process. Interest group members become more positive about the success of their reference group through either a process of rationalization, persuasion by interest-group leaders, or simply truthful information gained after membership. Additionally, the analysis indicates that assessments of group influence affect the membership decision.

CONCLUSION

Theories of reference groups, personal political efficacy, and collective action have not been integrated with each other. The research presented here demonstrates that citizens' appraisals of the influence of various political groups in American society have consequences for personal efficacy and interest group membership. Citizens make assessments of how much political influence they believe various groups in the American political system are able to exercise, and with these assessments make inferences about their own subjective political competence. In the American political system not all reference groups have equal amounts of political power; consequently, different citizens make different inferences about their political competence.

Assessments of group influence are not only important for deriving inferences about one's personal efficacy but they also play a role in citizens' decisions to engage in collective action through interest group membership. Citizens make assessments of the likelihood that collective action will be successful—whether or not the group with which they feel a sense

of interdependence has sufficient political influence—and then decide whether or not incurring the costs of collective action is justified. When the probability of success is high, individuals are more willing to bear the costs because it is likely the benefits will be achieved. But when the probability of success is low, individuals are less likely to assume the costs. The analysis presented here is a considerable improvement over past efforts as it includes both joiners and nonjoiners and tests a nonrecursive, simultaneous equation model of choice.

For many theorists, politics is about competition between different groups over scarce resources. The mass citizenry is witness to this conflict, yet we rarely study the consequences of their appraisals of this conflict for their political lives. A democratic interest group system, where groups have relatively equal amounts of political influence, will contribute to a democratic citizenry, one in which individuals from different social groups participate at equal rates because they are instilled with similar beliefs about their political competence. The unequal distribution of political influence in the American political system has consequences for the participation of the citizenry.

Future research should establish what causes assessments of group influence to change. Alterations in presidential administrations, the emergence of charismatic or entrepreneurial leaders of particular groups (i.e., Martin Luther King), passage or defeat of legislation or constitutional amendments (i.e., the 1964 Civil Rights Act or the Equal Rights Amendment), or media coverage of political events all might affect assessments of group influence. From 1972 to 1976 only for blacks is there evidence of substantial change over the four-year time interval. Their decreasing belief in the political influence probably stems from the winding down of the civil rights movement. Efforts to determine change in assessments of group influence probably require data gathering over an extended period of time. Empirical analysis of how assessments of group influence wax and wane would contribute to our understanding of how some interests are able to mobilize political influence to realize their interests, while other groups are demobilized, lessening their capacity to achieve their goals.

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NOTES

1. Of course, interest groups and reference groups are not the same things. An interest group is an organization representing some set of societal interests; a reference groups is a group in society that an individual "feels close to," "identifies with," and takes as a "frame of reference" for self-definition.

2. For a contemporary discussion of the social comparison function of groups as well as a review of recent literature see Levine and Moreland (1987).
3. Unfortunately, this question was only put to those respondents who believed their group could not increase its political influence. See Koch (1987) for a more complete description of these data.
4. For ease of interpretation, the four-point group influence scale has been reversed so that increasing values indicate a more positive assessment of the group's influence.
5. Age is coded in years. The NES income variable has been recoded in the following manner: 0–$4,999 = 1; $5,000–$9,999 = 2; $10,000–$14,999 = 3; $15,000–$19,999 = 4; $20,000–$24,999 = 5; and greater than or equal to $25,000 = 6. Education is recoded to form a six-point scale, where eighth-grade education or less = 1; eighth to eleventh grade = 2; high school diploma = 3; some college = 4; college graduate = 5; and graduate study = 6.
6. This specification assumes that assessments for group influence are determined by citizens' views of the political system and that identification with specific groups is associated with particular appraisals of group influence. Analysis indicated that identification with blacks, the poor, the elderly, and businessmen, and trust in government did not have statistically significant effects on internal efficacy when included in a multivariate model that included age, education, and income. Each of the instrument variables correlates at least moderately with assessments of group efficacy.
7. In the absence of a statistical package for performing two-stage least squares with probit or logit, the analysis contained in the final columns are OLS coefficients. Thus, the TSLS coefficients cannot be compared with those generated by the probit analysis.
8. Respondents were asked if they engaged in any of the following activities: influence others' vote choice, attend political meetings or rallies, work for a party or candidate, wear a button or put a sticker on the car, write a letter to a public official, write a political letter to a newspaper, or give money to a political party. An eight-point additive index was constructed from responses to these questions. Voting is a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the respondent claimed to have voted in the election, zero otherwise.
9. A three-point additive external efficacy index was formed from responses to the following two questions: (1) "People like me don't have any say about what the government does"; and (2) "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think."
10. A minority of the respondents claimed membership in an organization—21.0 percent in 1972 and 27.3 percent in 1976.
11. Regrettably, measures of other variables of interest of the group-membership decision—desire for selective or solidary benefits, for example—were not included in the 1972 or 1976 surveys.
12. Others who discuss the important role of leaders in affecting individual's assessments of the likelihood that collective action will prove successful are Chong (1991), Frohlich et al. (1971), and Uhlaner (1989a).
13. None of the identification, external efficacy, or trust measures used as exogenous variables to create the instrument for assessments of group influence were statistically significant in a probit model of group membership. The external efficacy measures are listed in footnote 9.

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