

Investigating the Effect of Personal Mediators on the Relationship Between Socioeconomic Status and Political Participation

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to investigate whether the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is direct or do they connect via personal mediators such as self-esteem, locus of control and political efficacy. In addition, identifying the process of mediation between these mediators if there are any is the secondary objective of this study. Data were collected from 150 Isfahan University students tested using questionnaires. Path model analysis was done using SPSS 16 AMOS 18. Findings show that the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is better understood by personal variables than their direct relationship. These findings also show that objective and mental participations are separate but when combined, they result in objective political participation. In addition, all variables were more related with mental political participation than with objective political participation.

Key words: Socioeconomic status, political participation, internal political efficacy, self-esteem, internal locus of control

INTRODUCTION

Political participation has been one of the most crucial concepts in social sciences. Verba, Scholzman and Brady in their book *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* argue that citizens' participation is realized in form of democracy and democracy is not conceivable without citizens being able to freely participate in political processes (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Barber-Barry and Rosenwein (1985) have also argued that democratic values are in fact, participatory values and at the heart of the theory of democracy there is the assumption that people should involve in the governing political procedures themselves. People who do not engage in political activities most probably have a non-democratic attitude toward the world (Guyton, 1988). Then, it is not surprising that many thinkers are trying to understand the forms and factors determining political participation.

In this respect, there seem to be two approaches in the existing political participation literature: the first is the sociological approach that traditionally focuses on structural variables and tries to explain the factors affecting political participation. In this framework, the role of socioeconomic status is emphasized as the most important parameter determining political participation. Results from this study indicate that political participation is higher among citizens with better socioeconomic status

(Peterson, 1990). The second approach is psychological and concentrates on attitude-personal variables including locus of control and political efficacy as factors affecting political participation (Carmines, 1992).

Some researchers have mentioned the limitations of using sociological and psychological approaches in predicting political participation. Wolsfeld (1986) believes that the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation might be better understood through personal-psychological variables. Verba *et al.* (1995) argue that the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is more complex than what researchers assume. According to this theory, different structures of socioeconomic status have different relationships with various patterns of political participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995). A second limitation of past researches is that most of them have investigated objective and mental political participations. As a result it was not possible to compare the relative potential effects on the two separate but related forms of political participation. In this regard in order to elaborate on distinguishing between these two forms of political participation, Verba *et al.* (1995) have attempted to provide a solid definition for political participation. They believe that psychological involvement in politics and active political participation are highly correlated but they should be treated separately (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

Accordingly, the goal of the study is to better understand the relationship between personal-psychological variables, socioeconomic status and political participation by testing several models of this relationship. In other words, it is attempted to study the relationship among political participation, socioeconomic status, personal-psychological variables such as self-esteem, locus of control and political efficacy as mediating variables. It was also tested how these variables are related to each other. It should be mentioned that this research is performed using the path model of SPSS 16 and AMOS 18 Software.

Political participation: One of the most important definitions of political participation is that proposed by Verba *et al.* (1971), political participation is the means by which the interests, desires and demands of the ordinary citizen are communicated, all those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the decisions that they make. A more recent definition by Verba *et al.* (1971) suggests that political participation is an activity which intends to influence governmental actions; either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

The reason why this definition is used in this research is because it is both limited and extended in comparison to other definitions. It is limited because it does not believe psychological orientations including political efficacy, etc. to be equal to political participation that is because according to this definition, qualities such as interestedness in political activities do not influence in practice the type of political activities government pursues. However, this definition is more extensive than other definitions in other researches on political participation which restrict the activities of political participation mainly to voting, campaigning, etc. (Milbrath and Goel, 1977). In Verba *et al.* (1995)'s opinion although, political participation incorporates a wide spectrum of activities, only those activities that influence the political system are considered political participation. Such activities include voting, party and campaign work, communicative work, contacting officials, attending political meetings, protest activities and other related activities. Hence, Verba *et al.* (1995) conclude that definition of political participation must focus on individuals' activities and behaviors instead of their attitudes and orientations and instead of politics itself, one should be concerned about doing politics (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

The present research treats political participation as a multidimensional concept. And objective and mental participations in politics are distinguished. Objective or active political participation dimension is understood in regard to the definition by Verba *et al.* (1995) who consider political participation as the entire activities of citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the decisions that they make (Verba *et al.*, 1971). But mental or psychological mental is a complementary concept representing knowledge and understanding about social and political issues. Milbrath and Goel (1977) have defined psychological participation as the degree to which citizens are interested in politics and governmental affairs. Therefore, psychological-mental participation refers to the level of citizens' understanding and knowledge of social and political issues regardless of their effective activities in these issues. In their studies, Verba *et al.* (1971) found a positive and significant correlation between mental participation and voting, political campaigns, etc. in five countries. Also, Feldman and Kawakami (1991) show that those who were more interested in political information in the media were also more politically active. Hence, both political participation dimensions are tested with separated but related structures.

The relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation: Existing studies about the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation show that political participation is in a higher level among citizens who enjoy a better socioeconomic status (Milbrath and Goel, 1977). Citizens with higher income and more suitable jobs participate in political activities more than citizens with lower socioeconomic status. The reason is that citizens with high socioeconomic status have more opportunities to participate, more personal contacts with officials and more personal resources. They also feel more obligation and normative pressure to participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995). However, some past researches indicate that the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is not direct or simple, i.e., personal-psychological variables might act as mediators. For example, findings by Verba and Nie (1972) show that socioeconomic status is positively related to civic orientations such as political efficacy, political knowledge and feeling of belonging to the community. These findings have been reconfirmed by Verba *et al.* (1971). They believe that the each component of participation may have different outcomes under the effect of mediating variables (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Milbrath (1981) argues that

social variables do not cause any specific behavior but it appears that social conditions form personalities, beliefs and attitudes in a way that affect a certain action such as political participation. In other words, according to this view, socioeconomic status does not affect political participation directly but instead leads to personal beliefs and attitudes in the individual which in turn affect participation. Apart from these issues, research in behavioral science has demonstrated that there exists a relationship between socioeconomic status and personal variables. Ilfeld (1978), for instance has shown when the socioeconomic status is lower, individuals' self-esteem and self-control will also be lower. Thus, it seems that the environmental stimulations shape personal inclinations which in turn can affect human behavior.

Relationship between psychological-mental variable and political participation: In discussing psychological-mental variables and political participation, it appears that Verba *et al.* (1995) have a strong justification to include personal variables as variables affecting political participation. They show that personal motivation of individuals is one of the most salient causes of participation. For example, political participation is more prevalent among people with greater concern for their environment and among those who are psychologically capable having strong social interactions. Krampen (1991) also argues that motivation to be involved in political issues is mainly a result of expectations one has of one's political environment and that this may be related to personality traits. In this research, researchers will examine the three variables of self-esteem, locus of control and political efficacy which might act as mediators between socioeconomic status and political participation.

In this regard, self-esteem can be considered as one of the ways one perceives one's capabilities and qualifications. A person with high self-esteem will feel more secure and confident in dealing with problems in her life (Carlson and Hyde, 1980). Two explanations have been offered for the effect of self-esteem on political participation.

On the one hand, according to the actualization hypothesis, people with high self-esteem will strive for higher levels of political participation because they feel more secure and confident regarding their capabilities in participating in important political issues. On the other hand, according to the compensation hypothesis, people with lower self-esteem will strive to compensate for their low self-esteem and this will lead to the increased level of their participation in various activities. Most research has rejected the compensation hypothesis and supports actualization (Carlson and Hyde, 1980).

Concerning the relation between locus of control and political participation, researchers should say that according to Rotter, locus of control derives from social learning theory. People with powerful internal locus of control are relatively decisive in determining their fate. People with powerful external locus of control, however are less decisive in their actions. In other words, these people believe that chance, luck or powerful agencies exert affect their destinies (Rotter, 1966). Here also, two theories have been put forth for the effect of locus of control on political participation. According to the competence theory, people with internal locus of control will be highly motivated to take part in the political process because they believe that the political system, like other systems surrounding them can be affected by their activities efforts. Such people do not feel helpless and believe they can control their lives and because the political system can affect their life and destiny they should affect it in the best way they can. The rationality theory, however, suggests that those with external locus of control are more motivated to participate in politics because people with external locus of control will participate in politics to increase their low control they believe they have since political participation is one way whereby people with external locus of control can compensate for their deficiencies (Carmines, 1992).

Finally, Milbrath and Goel (1977) have argued that political efficacy is part of the sense of mastery a child acquires in society. Political participation includes two dimensions: internal efficacy and external efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to one's belief in one's ability and competence in understanding political processes and accepting the responsibility of some of them. But external efficacy refers to one's belief that the political system and political officials are responsible for the demands of the citizens (McPherson *et al.*, 1977). Therefore, it seems that people with high internal and external feeling of efficacy will be highly motivated for political participation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Mental participation: This variable is defined as the degree of an individual's concern for social and political issues and knowledge and awareness about these issues. The scale includes 5 statements (for instance, I am interested in following the latest political events on radio, TV, etc. I am interested in discussing social and political matters with my family, friends and myself. I am interested in reading books or magazines related to political and social issues, etc.). A range of 0-5 was attributed to each statement in which 0 indicates the lowest level of mental participation and 5 indicates that highest level of

participation. The reliability of this dimension was calculated to be 0.77 using Cronbach's α on a 30 people sample.

Objective political participation: This variable was defined as the person's direct involvement with the aim of influencing political officials and political decision-makings. This scale includes 5 statements (for instance, I try to participate in the elections so that I can select the right person for political positions; I am effectively in contact with organizations, parties and political activists; I am prepared to financially contribute to a political organization or a parliament candidate in an attempt to pursue my political ends, etc.). Here also, a range of 0-5 was attributed to each statement in which 0 indicates the lowest level of participation and 5 indicates that highest level of participation. The reliability of this dimension was calculated to be 0.75 using Cronbach's α on a 30 people sample.

Socioeconomic status: Socioeconomic status is a combined index which has been commonly used in studying inequalities in populations and the degree of people's access to development resources. There are different ways for evaluating socioeconomic status the most of important of which is the monthly income of individuals. Monthly income is referred to the total money received during a period (usually 1 month) in exchange for the economic activities performed (Deaton, 1997).

Self-esteem: This variable was defined and measured by Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. He defines self-esteem as an individual's positive and supportive attitude toward oneself and one's world. The scale included 10 statements. Each of the statements was measured in a spectrum with the range on 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). The Cronbach's α value for this questionnaire in the research by Sheikh Shabani, Bashlideh, Taqipur and Nisi was 0.75 and in this study it was calculated to be 0.71 with a 30 people sample.

Locus of control: The evaluation instrument of this variable is a 10 question self-assessment scale which reveals the locus of control and it is built on the basis of locus of control questionnaire developed by Rotter (1966). In the study by Sohrabi and Javanbakhsh, internal consistency of its statements using Cronbach's α was determined to be 0.78 in the Iranian case. In order to curtail the questionnaire, 10 questions were chosen and the questionnaire's reliability was calculated using Cronbach's α on the first 30 participants to be 0.72. In this

research, the questionnaire used in the form of reverse scoring so that a high score indicates higher internal control.

Political efficacy: Political efficacy means having confidence in political participation and its effect on the procedures of sociopolitical changes. More specifically, political efficacy is an individual's feeling that her political participation affects past political processes and whereby she can influence the future of her society. This variable was constructed and measured by the researchers. This scale contains seven statements (for instance, my vote influences the fate my country; generally, I consider my political officials decent and reliable; I consider myself a qualified citizen, etc.). Each statement was measured in a scale of 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). The internal consistency of statements was determined to be 0.74 using Cronbach's α which is sufficient for research objective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, descriptive findings are presented and then the model will be fitted. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the participants' scores self-esteem, political efficacy, locus of control, mental participation and objective participation variables. As it can be seen, the mean of mental political participation among students is higher than objective political participation. It appears that students' mental political challenge is higher than the level of their objective activity.

Figure 1 shows the political participation path model according to psychological and socioeconomic variables Table 2 shows path model fitting indices. As it is observed, adjusted goodness of fitness index and comparative fitness index are found to be >0.90 and the root mean square error of approximation index was <0.05 which show that the model is consistent with the data to an acceptable degree.

Table 3 presents the standard and nonstandard regression coefficients of the path model for political participation. As it can be seen, internal locus of control has the highest standard regression weight (0.43) for objective participation ($p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of status on objective political participation has been found to be 0.09. Political efficacy has the highest regression weight (0.58) for mental political participation and the indirect effect of status on mental political participation is determined to be 0.12. Social status has shown to have the highest standard regression weight (0.46) on internal locus of control. The best predictive variable for the

Table 1: The mean and standard deviation of research variables

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Variables	Mean	Standard deviation
Self-esteem	32.81	3.22	Mental participation	15.98	4.63
Political efficacy	20.46	4.57	Objective participation	12.28	4.25
Locus of control	30.23	5.09	-	-	-

Table 2: Path model fitting indices

χ^2/df	df	χ^2	AGFI	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
2.45	5	12.26	0.935	0.985	0.901	0.962	0.041

Table 3: Standard and non-standard regression coefficients of the path model

Criterion variables	Parameters	Status	Predictive variables			
			Self-esteem	Locus of control	Political efficacy	Mental Participation
Self-esteem	Standard coefficient	0.320	-	-	-	-
	Non-standard coefficient	0.610	-	-	-	-
	Significance level	0.001	-	-	-	-
Internal locus of control	Standard coefficient	0.460	-	-	-	-
	Non-standard coefficient	0.570	-	-	-	-
	Significance level	0.001	-	-	-	-
Internal political efficacy	Standard coefficient	0.390	-	-	-	-
	Non-standard coefficient	0.270	-	-	-	-
	Significance level	0.001	-	-	-	-
Mental participation	Standard coefficient	0.120 [†]	0.460	0.540	0.580	-
	Non-standard coefficient	0.190 [†]	0.590	0.110	0.330	-
	Significance level	0.001 [†]	0.010	0.010	0.010	-
Objective participation	Standard coefficient	0.090 [†]	0.190	0.430	0.390	0.270
	Non-standard coefficient	0.170 [†]	0.540	0.390	0.550	0.130
	Significance level	0.001 [†]	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

[†]Indirect effects of socioeconomic status on political participation

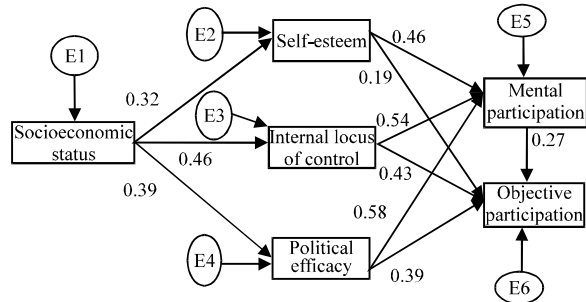


Fig. 1: Political participation path model according to psychological and socioeconomic variables

objective political participation was found to be internal locus of control (i.e., standard regression weight of 4.43) and the best predictive variable for mental political participation was found to be political efficacy (i.e., standard regression weight of 0.58). In sum, the variables applied to the model, produced higher regression weights for describing mental participation. All regression weights obtained are significant ($p < 0.05$). Accordingly, it seems that mental political participation is more affected by the psychological variables of the model and socioeconomic status (as one of the most important psychological variables) than objective political participation is.

Results demonstrate that the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation is better

understood through mediating personal variables. In other words it appears that the socioeconomic status of people first affects their personal qualities and this in return influences their participation in political issues.

These findings are consistent with those of Verba *et al.* (1995) who argues that mediating variables influence the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995). This shows that individual resources (individuals' socioeconomic status) and personal factors may have different effects on political participation for these resources are unevenly distributed throughout the society and therefore people's capacities to participate are different. Verba *et al.* (1995) have extensively discussed the importance of socioeconomic status but they have not been able to work in detail on the significant role of psychological constructs such as self-esteem, locus of control and political efficacy as potential mediating variables between socioeconomic status and political participation. Thus, further research is necessary to reveal the nature of these potential effects (if there are any).

CONCLUSION

Research findings show that political participation is better understood through sociological and psychological theories. Some of the results from this study may help

better conceptualize the process of political participation. For example, socioeconomic status is little related to political participation but internal locus of control highly influences both objective and mental political participations. The effect of self-esteem on mental political participation is much more than it is on objective political participation. Political efficacy has the highest effect on mental participation and mental participation affects objective participation.

Furthermore, another importance of this research is that it examines political participation in two mental and objective levels as dependent variables. Mental and objective participations in politics are considered as different domains. Indeed, it is the relationship between these two types of participation that leads to the active participation of people. In addition, findings indicate that all variables are more related to mental participation than they are to objective participation and this proves that personal variables are more related to behavioral orientations and attitudes than to objective behaviors.

Structural equations model is a powerful instrument for investigating such models and studies like this may extend the knowledge about factors influencing political participation. In other words, political participation is the result of behavioral and structural considerations. Therefore, in studying this phenomenon, interdisciplinary theories should be used. Other notions from different disciplines may help us better understand this phenomenon. For instance, stress may be used in understanding political participation. Evidence shows that intense stress in individuals has negative influence on the degree of political participation (Peterson, 1990). Thus, it appears that other psychological variables may still be used in understanding the phenomenon of political participation.

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