Political efficacy revisited
– a clearer concept and a way of approaching political inequality

Sofia Sohl
PhD Student in political science
Youth & Society (YeS)
Örebro University
sofia.sohl@oru.se

Paper prepared for presentation at the workshop on
The Dilemma of Political Sophistication and Political Equality
ECPR Joint Sessions, Münster, Germany
22nd–27th March 2010

Abstract
The political inactivity of young people is still haunting the debate on political participation and democracy. Many studies show that there are large differences in the levels of participation among both young and old. These variations bring forward the problem of political and democratic inequality, a problem often referred back to the structural variations of socioeconomic factors. There is however another factor, being more dynamic and alterable, affecting political participation; namely the sense of political efficacy. The concept was introduced by Campbell et al. in the 1950’s and has ever since been under conceptual and methodological debate. Not least from the 1970’s and forward, when Bandura introduced social cognitive theory in which political efficacy is derived from the concept of self-efficacy. This paper presents a critical review of how the concept of political efficacy previously has been treated and measured before offering a new, more interdisciplinary, approach. Thus, influences from both political scientists and psychologists are discussed. The main conclusion is that “external political efficacy” should be separated from the concept of political efficacy. However one should still acknowledge the importance of this dimension per se and its correlation to the more stripped concept of political efficacy. Further the paper puts political efficacy into the context of political and democratic equality and offers suggestions on how to work with the concept in order to “balance out” the structural disadvantages of young with low socioeconomic status. The recommendation is to put democratic practice on the school curricula.

Keywords
political efficacy, youth, political participation, political equality

N.B
Working paper, comments welcome.
Please do not quote without permission from author.
Political efficacy revisited
– a clearer concept and a way of approaching political inequality

Although recent research suggest that the issue of political participation by youth is more complex and nuanced than perceived in the early 2000’s, the image of Putnam’s (2000) passive and almost apathetic youth still prevails as the common depiction of youth in society. Numerous researchers also refer to such a negative image within the political as well as academic sphere (Pirie and Worcester 1998; Yates and Youniss 1999; Delli Carpini 2000; Soule 2001; Hooghe 2003; Norris 2003; Hooghe 2004; Forbig 2005a; Wilkenfeld 2009). At the same time it is now questioned whether this picture is not premature and that the problem lies not in a lower level of engagement and participation by youth, but in the way researchers and politicians define politics and political participation (O'Toole 2003a; O'Toole, Marsch et al. 2003b; Sloam 2007). The questioning seems particularly appropriate since the predominant view comes from research on American youth (see e.g. Putnam 2000; Galston 2004) and might not be applicable in the same way in Europe (Hooghe 2003).

Nonetheless, it is the conventional participation related to representative systems of today’s liberal democracies, i.e. voting, campaigning, and joining a political party, which is the most common way of measuring the activity of citizens. Studies show that there is in fact a decrease in such activities in many democracies today (see e.g. Crozier, Huntington et al. 1975; Gray and Caul 2000; Putnam 2000; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Putnam 2002; Galston 2004). Evidence is also found that the levels of participation, interest, knowledge and type of participation varies both among adults and youth and between the different generations (Almond and Verba 1963; Miller 1992; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Soule 2001; Keeter, Zukin et al. 2002; Sohl 2009). Nevertheless, many researchers note that it is primarily youth that are portrayed as scapegoats and the demons of democracy (see e.g. O'Toole 2003a; O'Toole, Marsch et al. 2003b; Forbig 2005b; Sloam 2007).

Regardless of who is to blame for the current trends of political participation, or which mode of participation is the “most important”, low and especially unequal levels of political participation are indeed problematic for democracy. According to Dahl (1989; 2006) effective and equal participation is one of the main criteria and thus of substantial essence for a functioning democracy. Democracies need active, enlightened citizens with a reasonable control over the agenda and where the political process is admitting voting equality (Dahl 1989). Also it is crucial to have equal opportunities to get one’s voice and interests heard (Dahl 1989). In other words, political equality is, if not the most, one
of the most central features of democracy (a normative stance also supported by e.g. Pateman 1970; Thompson 1970; Barber 1984).

It is thus reasonable to argue that one of the main questions for the political equality of a society’s demos lies in equal participation and citizens possibilities to have their interests heard. The variations in political participation among different groups in society, and the negative image of youth, are thus worrisome from the standpoint where political equality and an active, enlightened citizenry are seen as crucial premises for a vital democracy.

This paper has two purposes. The main purpose is to present the concept of political efficacy\(^1\) as a potential means of remedy of today’s political inequality. The minor purpose is twofold. Firstly it is to provide an empirical and theoretical base for the main discussion on political efficacy and political inequality; secondly it is to present a smaller research note on political efficacy in order to bring more theoretical clarity to the concept.

As for the disposition I will first discuss the connections between democracy, political equality and participation as well as the most common reason for the participatory (and thus political) inequality, namely socioeconomic status. I will then portray the connection between political efficacy and political participation before moving on to a more thorough investigation of the concept of political efficacy per se. This part will include both a historical and a theoretical review of the concept. In the last part of the paper I will discuss the connection between democracy, political equality and political efficacy. I argue that, if approached in a conceptually clearer way, the political efficacy of young people can play a vital role as a remedy, although not a final cure, for the political inequality in today’s democracies.

Democracy, political equality, and participation

No matter how democratic a country is today there are nevertheless flaws to be found in practice, in the real execution of democracy. Dahl (1989) emphasizes that democracy is the best form of government even though it is still far its own ideal, even in the most democratic of states. Maybe the most central of these flaws is concerning the political equality of the demos in an association (country, state etc.) (Dahl 1989).

Political inequality is a democratic problem which is multifaceted and puts democracy up to discussion in many ways (Dahl 1989; 2006). This is not the place for such philosophical, theoretical or normative discussion, since the focus here is not to argue for or against democracy or to justify the goodness of political equality but to see what can be done when political equality, and thus

\(^1\) I will return to the meaning of political efficacy in detail below but roughly it is about the perception of one’s abilities to execute political actions.
democracy, actually seems to fall short. Therefore I’ll settle with stating that the starting point of this discussion on political efficacy, political equality, and youth is the normative assumption of the “goodness” of democracy and the importance of political equality for fulfilling a vital and functioning democracy.

Although the multifaceted issue of political equality includes different aspects of citizenship, political systems, decision procedures, minority rights etc., one way of addressing it is to look upon political participation among the citizenry. Not least since many democracy theorists are stressing the importance of active and engaged citizens (Pateman 1970; Thompson 1970; Barber 1984; Dahl 1989). Without participation of some kind, the voices and interests of the individuals in a democracy will not be heard, making political participation crucial for a system where the demos are to rule over themselves (Dahl 1989:2006) Also Verba, Schlozman et al. (1995) acknowledge the connection between democracy, participation and some form of political equality:

Democracy rests on the notion of the equal worth of each citizen. The needs and preferences of no individual should rank higher than those of any other. This principle undergirds the concept of one man, one vote as well as its corollary, equality of political voice among individuals. On the presumption that those who are excluded from will be unable to protect their own interest and, thus, will receive less favorable treatment from the government, any system that denies equal participatory rights violates a fundamental principle of democracy.
(Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995, p. 10)

Having established the importance of a more or less equal political participation for democracy it is only natural to ask how the situation looks like in reality. The common view within research is that the actual levels of conventional participation are declining in many of the modern democracies. With conventional participation one foremost mean voting in elections, being a member of a political party, contacting a politician and standing for election. Researchers and politicians speak of the crisis of democracy where the representative and participatory ideals are threatened (see e.g. Crozier, Huntington et al. 1975; Gray and Caul 2000; Putnam 2000; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Putnam 2002; Galston 2004). So even if youth participate in politics and society in other, more “unconventional”, ways today (O’Toole 2003a; Zukin, Keeter et al. 2006), the problem of representation and equal participation persists. But in order to be able to remedy the political inequality, most notably seen in unequal levels of political participation, one must know what is actually causing it.

Socioeconomic status, political inequality and political participation

Regarding the reasons for political inequality, research often bounce back on the explanation of socioeconomic factors such as education, income, living area, ethnicity and other more rigid variables (Milbrath and Lal Goel 1977; Verba, Nie et al. 1978; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Ødegård
and Berglund 2008). Behind these factors lie the basic structures in society providing the more or less static background of individuals which in turn bring about the variations in participation and political sophistication. Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) also show that the intergenerational class mobility is low and that parent’s work status to a large extent affects the future socioeconomic status of their children.

Dahl (1989) points out the uneven distribution of resources as the main source of the inequalities within societies. The socioeconomic factors are all connected to resources of some kind and closely interwoven with political knowledge, skills and interest. With money come higher education, time, and security. With higher education comes more access to information and skills needed for public debate. Further, an individual’s living area can establish better networks and contacts which offer opportunities to make one’s interests heard. In turn, all of these factors give greater opportunities for participation. Then there is also the reciprocal relationship between political participation and interest to be considered. With higher socioeconomic status comes more participation and thus also interest and vice versa (see e.g. Campbell, Gurin et al. 1954; Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Teorell, Sum et al. 2007).

Many studies and projects are thus aiming to counter inequality among different social class strata by trying to close the socioeconomic gaps. This has however proven to be quite hard and there is still today much inequality to be found in all democratic countries. Moreover it is questionable if one actually should try to even the factors behind SES. Different answers are to be found depending on how one sees political equality. Dahl (1989; 2006) means that having an equal lot is not the issue for the democratic ideal or principles. It is the consequences stemming from having an unequal lot which is the actual problem of political inequality. That is when the unequal lots or allocation of resources are causing inequality in the political processes. Some of the demos are not reaching their democratic potential even if there are no legal obstacles (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Nie et al. 1978; Dahl 1989; Dahl 2006)

In sum it should not be controversial to claim that democracy needs a citizenry which is to some extent enlightened and active; that cares about, takes interest in, and participates in society. But it is also a crucial condition for a democracy that participation and information are more or less equally distributed among the demos. Today the last point seems to fall short in most liberal democracies due to variations in the more or less fixed socioeconomic status causing uneven levels of political participation and knowledge among citizens.
Political efficacy and political participation

So if the more rigid SES-factors are hard to change due to their static nature and maybe not even justifiable to change in terms of the democratic ideal (which is not stating anything on the allocation of resources as a problem per se), is there something that can be done to remedy at least some of the political inequality? I would say yes. Verba et al. (1995) not only points to the importance of SES related factors when explaining political participation but also to more dynamic factors. One of these factors is political efficacy which has been used and measured in various ways within political science leaving quite a lot of confusion about what it actually is. Nevertheless almost all previous research points to the potential and the actual effect of political efficacy in explaining various political behaviors and participation (see e.g. Campbell, Gurin et al. 1954; Easton and Dennis 1967; Craig, Niemi et al. 1990; Yeich and Levine 1994; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Morell 2003; Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2009). Further it has also been shown that political efficacy is positively related to political interest and political knowledge (Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Not surprisingly, political efficacy is also related to SES (see e.g. Abramson 1983; Finkel 1985; Hayes and Bean 1993; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995) but as I will claim below, the effects of political efficacy on participation goes beyond the effects of SES.

Consequently, I argue that political efficacy has a unique and vital role to play for generating more politically equal demos through its ability to increase citizen’s participation. This is particularly true when it comes to young people who today, in my view, often are seen as second-class citizens giving rise to a problem of political inequality to begin with.

However, before being able to say anything about the potential of political efficacy as an equalizing factor for political inequality, a historical and theoretical background of the concept is needed. A historical review is essential in order to see its complexity and the more or less constant debate over the core meaning of political efficacy which haunts the concept since its emergence in the 1950’s (Campbell, Gurin et al. 1954). The conceptual debate, which still goes on today (Morell 2003; Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2009; Beaumont 2010 (in press)), has caused much confusion and unclarity, making a seemingly effective way of increasing political participation hard to use in reality, or comparable within research. And although I will not claim to have found a final definition, or the definitive way of using political efficacy, I will present a way of approaching it, making the concept of political efficacy clearer and more usable, for both research purposes and policy making. The theoretical roots need to be addressed in order to be able to get a clearer picture of the mechanisms behind the power of political efficacy, and to use it effectively for the purpose of equalizing political participation. The theoretical base of the concept also ties together the main ideas of this paper with the suggestion how to fight at least some of the political inequality among youths. In other words a
clear view on what political efficacy is and how it works is needed in order to understand how it can be used in order to boost political participation among youth and thus remedy some of the political inequality in modern democracies. Or, when confronted with a complex problem, proper tools are essential in order to be able to fix it.

**Political efficacy – an essentially contested concept?**

The term political efficacy was coined by Campbell et al. (1954) in their study of the National Elections in the United States. The concept was not their main focus and was therefore dealt with in an appendix where the pioneer and all-so-often cited definition is to be found:

“Sense of political efficacy may be defined as the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e. that it is worth while to perform one’s civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change.” (Campbell, Gurin et al. 1954, p. 187)

The definition shows the influence of motivational theory which was dominating the efficacy-field in the 50’s and 60’s. It taps on a more general sense that it is worth engaging in politics, it is motivated to be active in politics. Naturally then, the concept includes the individual’s assessment of external factors such as the government, the political system, and certain political acts but also internal factors such as the individual’s ability to understand politics. The base for this formulation consisted of five items which are still widely used today. The scale was created with the aim to capture a sort of “general assessment” that it is worth while to engage in politics. However it was quite soon discovered that the concept had two separate dimensions, the so called external and internal dimensions of political efficacy. These were brought into the light by Robert E. Lane in 1959:

“It has, of course, two components – the image of self and the image of democratic government – and contains the tacit implication that an image of the self as effective is intimately related to the image of democratic government as responsive to the people” (Lane 1959, p. 149)

The external dimension is trying to capture a belief in the responsiveness of the political system (including the government, public officials, politicians, the voting procedure etc). The internal

---

2 The following items were used by Campbell et al. (1954)
- I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think.
- The way people vote is the main thing that decides how things are run in this country.
- Voting is the only way that people like me can have a say about how the government runs things.
- People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.
- Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.

Response scale: Agree – Disagree (dichotomy)
The questions are still being used in studies although many scholars have pointed to their inadequacy (see e.g. Acock, A., H.D. Clarke et al. 1985; Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2009)
dimension has been developed in more diverse ways since the focus of the beliefs in one’s own capabilities can take many different starting points. Internal political efficacy has been about interest in politics, cognitive capabilities, ability to perform certain actions, ability to influence, and the intention to do something etc. (see e.g. Litt 1963; Finifter 1970; Balch 1974; Miller, Miller et al. 1980; Abramson 1983; Craig, Niemi et al. 1990; Niemi, Craig et al. 1991; Yeich and Levine 1994; Morell 2003; Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2009).

The confusion over the actual meaning of the concept has thus been lingering in the research on political efficacy more or less since its actual introduction. Easton and Dennis (1967) saw the concept as existing in three forms; as a norm, as a set of dispositions, and as a certain conduct or behavior. In their study of children aged 7 to 13, the results showed that the norm of political efficacy was found among the participants, meaning that children are in some sense politically aware already at the early stages of life. Besides this conclusion Easton and Dennis (1967) describe political efficacy as a complex phenomenon including a number of interwoven sentiments which also points to the difficulties of studying it;

“...a person must sense his competency at the level of his political self-identity. He must construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself to the places of officialdom. He must come to believe that when he speaks other political actors will listen.” (Easton and Dennis 1967, p. 26)

Easton and Dennis (1967) thus refer to some sort of autonomy of the individual (that “I” can make a change), on one hand, and the responsiveness of the political system, or political actors, on the other. Yet, they also go deeper and explore five possible sub-dimensions of the concept. Beside autonomy and responsiveness, Easton and Dennis (1967) also discuss; the comprehensibility (basic political knowledge with which individuals see their own political roles towards the “political system”, connecting the internal and external side), access to means of influence and resistance to fatalism (to be stuck in the role as “being ruled” by “rulers”). As can be seen just by this one study, a conceptually clear meaning of what political efficacy seems hard to pinpoint.

The difficulty of being precise when it comes to political efficacy can also be seen quite clearly when focusing only at the so called external dimension of the concept (system responsiveness). This part of political efficacy seems to be hard to separate from other concepts used in political science research such as trust, alienation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, diffuse support etc. (see e.g. Finifter 1970; Iyengar 1980; Craig and Maggiotto 1982; Niemi, Craig et al. 1991). The incoherence, “fuzziness” and ambiguity of the concept of political efficacy are also the foremost reasons to argue against the use of a two-dimensional scale of political efficacy, which is something I will return to.

In the 1970’s began the era of putting the concept of political efficacy and its measures under statistical tests. One of the first of these investigations is presented by McPherson, Welch et al.
(1977) who conclude that the Campbell, Gurin et al. (1954) scale seems quite robust and reliable at the same time as they make serious criticisms against some of its items and how these have been used. Since then, several studies have presented statistical tests of different scales of political efficacy with mixed results (Craig and Maggiotto 1982; Zimmerman 1989; Craig, Niemi et al. 1990; Niemi, Craig et al. 1991; Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2009). During the 1980’s, more interest was also turned to the so called “Gamson hypothesis”\(^3\) (Gamson 1968). The hypothesis that combinations of political efficacy and trust works as a catalyst or “brake” for different modes of political action, is reinvestigated by for example Craig (1980; 1984), Craig and Maggiotto (1981) and Paige (1971). Craig (1980) finds that the hypothesis indeed has flaws but that the core thought still seems to be useful in explaining political protest but also more “conventional” political behavior. Craig (1980) modifies the Gamson hypothesis and shows the mediating and moderating effects of both internal and external political efficacy on so called “unconventional” or “extra-parliamentary” political participation; a high belief in one’s own capabilities or “competence” to participate together with a perceived unresponsiveness of the political system (external efficacy) fosters action outside of the conventional channels of participation. The effect is also pushed further by dissatisfaction with policy performance (Craig 1980; Craig and Maggiotto 1981).

Although Craig (1980) seems to be one of the first who show that the two dimensions of political efficacy potentially have different effects on different outcome variables, he was not the first to differentiate external and internal political efficacy as two quite distinct variables. His work builds on Miller, Miller, et al. (1980) who in their analysis of American national election data made a quite clear differentiation of the two dimensions\(^4\). Miller, Miller et al. (1980) described political efficacy in a way which is quite representative of how the concept has been seen by many researchers since. Miller, Miller et al. (1980) mean that internal efficacy “indicates individuals’ self-perception that they are capable of understanding politics and competent enough to participate in political acts such as voting” and external efficacy “measures expressed beliefs about political institutions rather than perceptions about one’s own abilities ...The lack of external efficacy ... indicates the belief that the public cannot influence political outcomes because government leaders and institutions are unresponsive” (Miller, Miller et al. 1980, p 253).

Also Abramson (1983) emphasizes the importance of keeping the two dimensions separate and that they do in fact have different effects on for example political behavior and political trust.

---

\(^3\) The Gamson hypothesis is best described by a quote from his own work: “a combination of high sense of political efficacy and low political trust is the optimum combination for mobilization – a belief that influence is both possible and necessary” (Gamson 1968, p. 48)

\(^4\) Noteworthy is though that Miller, Miller et al. (1980) do not view the two dimensions as independently as Craig (1980). However, the very first to claim the duality of the concept was Lane (1959) who on the other hand did not study the relations to other concepts for the two dimensions as did Craig (1980).
Further, Abramson (1983) makes a substantial input by concluding that despite all the previous studies there is actually not enough data to clarify how the sense of political efficacy develops and when and where. One of the reasons for this he claims to be the lack of theory, that the research on political efficacy and in particular political socialization has been more or less atheoretical (Abramson 1983). According to Abramson (1983) there was already in the 1980’s a need to further address the components of political efficacy and to make more longitudinal research, particularly on youth, to see just how significant the feelings developing in the early stage of life are, and if they are persistent throughout adulthood (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Abramson 1983).

Abramson’s (1983) call for more theoretical thinking and research within the framework concerning political efficacy came about just in a time when an interest in the notion of efficacy started to evolve in the field of psychology. Albert Bandura (1977) launched his theory of self-efficacy as a part of the larger domain of social cognitive theory (SCT) in the late 1970’s and although the focus of Bandura’s theoretical framework is not primarily on the political he does write quite substantially on political efficacy in his larger work on self-efficacy; Self-efficacy – the exercise of self-control (Bandura 1997). Unlike the tradition within political science, where the two-dimensional view of political efficacy most often have meant dealing with motivations and in some way outcome expectancies of political participation, the research in psychology has its starting point in theories of cognitions and the processes of the thinking about oneself and others (Bandura 1986; 1997).

Bandura (1982) defines sense of self-efficacy in the following way:

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations. (Bandura 1982, p.122)

The introduction of SCT in the research of political efficacy has meant that researchers now have started to look more at the individual and her/his own abilities rather than focusing on the influence of environment as was common before (Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt et al. 2010 (in press)). The base of the effect of efficacy beliefs on action could be put quite simply: “people do not undertake activities that they feel are beyond their capabilities, nor are they inclined to pursue ambitious goals… unless they believe they can produce the desired results by their own actions” (Caprara, Regalia et al. 2004, p. 247). The quote points to the increased focus on the feelings and internal processes of the individual although there is still the classical motivational aspect within it. Outcome expectancies still seem kept in mind when studying political efficacy. Bandura (1997) reflects upon the matter in this way:

“Perceived political efficacy involves people’s beliefs that they can influence the political system.”
(Bandura 1997, p. 483)
Again the two-sidedness of political efficacy is surfaced. Bandura is not clear on this point when he on one hand wants to separate self-efficacy from the concepts of self-esteem, locus of control, and outcome expectancies (Bandura 1997; 2006), and on the other acknowledges the importance of being able to exert some form of influence (produce certain outcomes) in order to feel politically efficacious and act upon these beliefs (Bandura 1997). However it is on the internal dimension of the concept that most research within psychology, regarding political efficacy, is being done. It seems as if scholars within psychology have gotten further in the exploration of this side of the concept. The study by Caprara, Vecchione et al. (2009) concludes that more predictive and powerful scales can be constructed if one; disregards the system responsiveness side and looks solely at the belief in one’s own capabilities to act within the political realm and makes the items more specific and less bound to “being informed” or having a “good understanding” about politics. They, like Beaumont (2010 (in press)), aim to bridge the research on political efficacy within both fields in order to move forward and be able to use the concept more fine-tuned and precise (Caprara, Vecchione et al. 2009).

A conceptually clearer view?!

Judging by the research history of political efficacy one can ask what is actually meant and measured by the concept. There is no clear cut answer to this issue and the task of providing a more accurate framework is not an easy one. Therefore I will by no means claim to have found the universal and final definition or approach to the concept of political efficacy, nor will I go into depth regarding the issues of measurements and operationalizations. What I will offer is a sort of research note in the conceptual debate of political efficacy on a theoretical level where I will argue for two points regarding how further research should be done on the matter.

First, I my aim is, like Beaumont (2010 (in press)) and Caprara, Vecchione et al.(2009), to merge the theoretical thinking, and points of view on the concept of political efficacy from the fields of political science and psychology. On one side there are the empirical roots and research traditions connected with the concept mostly from the field of political science which could be summarized as follows; Perceived political efficacy is a crucial factor when it comes to predicting political behavior, it is a two-dimensional concept consisting of 1) internal efficacy; an individual’s belief in her/his own capacities to participate in and make a difference in the realm of politics and 2) external efficacy; an individual’s belief about the responsiveness of the actors, institutions etc. within the political system. In other words, researchers within political science are referring to some form of general assessment that one can influence/make a difference in society which is not so far from Campbell, Gurin et al.’s (1954) original ideas on the motivational aspect of participation, that is; an assessment that
participation is *worth while* on the whole. On the other side there is the theoretical and more recent empirical input of researchers in psychology in general and in SCT in particular. Summarizing these contributions would give a view as follows; *Perceived political efficacy is a crucial factor when it comes to predicting political behavior. It is a one-dimensional concept best measured with clear items focusing on an individual’s perceived belief that one can execute certain courses of action required for certain situations. However, one should also take into account the individual’s perception of prospective influence in politics.* In other words there is a focus on the *internal* dimension of political efficacy but with the reservation that some form of evaluation of the responsiveness of the political system to the individual’s action is also of relevance for the study on political efficacy, if not as part of the concept then at least as a mediating and/or moderating variable. What is then the conclusion, what is political efficacy? Taking into account both the empirical base and line of thinking from the political science tradition, and the more recent theoretical contributions as well as empirical studies from the academic field of psychology, I will argue for a view on political efficacy as; *the perception of one’s abilities to execute actions that would, if one is successful, produce a change in society.*

The conclusions bring forward three major points paving way for a more stringent way of looking upon political efficacy. Firstly the so called *external political efficacy* should indeed be totally separated from the concept of political efficacy and instead be denoted and treated as a separate concept/construct, namely *perceived system responsiveness.* Consequently I believe that the concept of perceived system responsiveness will find a more appropriate and adequate theoretical base in for example theories on critical attitudes, political trust, political alienation, and cynicism etc. (see e.g. Norris 1999; Norris 2002). However one should keep in mind the importance of perceived system responsiveness when studying political efficacy, not least due to the theoretical and empirical relevance of the Gamson hypothesis.

The second point, which is strongly connected to the first point, is that the core of political efficacy is and should be the belief in one’s capacities to *do something.* The previous “all-encompassing” concept thus seems too broad. It is the internal cognitive processes and perceptions of the self that in many studies have proven to be the most important factor for political participation. This “something” (a course of action) then needs to be *political* in the sense that it is aimed to make a difference in society in some way, if the course of action is successful. What makes this separation of so called internal and external political efficacy possible, and as I argue, indeed motivated and much needed, is foremost the different characteristics of *internal* and *external* political efficacy. Studies have shown that the two dimensions are indeed two separate and distinct variables (Zimmerman 1989; Niemi, Craig et al. 1991; Yeich and Levine 1994) that indeed correlate...
with other variables in different ways (Craig and Maggiotto 1982; Craig, Niemi et al. 1990; Hayes and Bean 1993; Yeich and Levine 1994). Moreover there is the theoretical support of Bandura’s (1977; 1997) self-efficacy which focuses on the “internal” part of political efficacy also leading to my other point.

Thirdly, I agree with Abramson (1983) in his claim that there was, and still is, a lack of theoretical base and framework for the concept of political efficacy. With Bandura (1997) and the theories on self-efficacy, the concept has gained a firm base for focusing on the internal side of political efficacy and also for separating the external dimension from the concept. However, self-efficacy and SCT does not fully capture the wholeness of political efficacy since it is indeed connected to the political sphere and some kind of expectation of making a difference. The insufficiency of the purer psychological theoretical foundation for the concept of political efficacy is further demonstrated by the uncertainty over the concept by Bandura (1997). When perhaps the most pronounced proponent of domain specific efficacy beliefs seem hesitant over the concept of political efficacy and proposing that one must consider the power of perceived influence, one needs to realize that political efficacy has something more to it than just mere perceived ability to execute just any given task (Bandura 1997; 2006). Further, theoretical discussions on the meaning of the political in political efficacy are therefore needed which would bring about an even better way of understanding what the concept entails, and also how it works. A good starting point for this is presented by Beaumont (2010 (in press)) who presents four pathways through which political efficacy works connecting the theoretical roots of Bandura’s self-efficacy with the previous research within political science.

**The sources or pathways of political efficacy**

Throughout the last half century most of the research on political efficacy has been concerning its effects and not its sources. Political efficacy has been and is mostly (at least within political science) treated as an independent variable focusing on what political efficacy leads to. The link between the role of political efficacy and political equality is however to be found in the factors which generates political efficacy.

An individual’s self-efficacy is according to Bandura (1977; 1982; 1997) derived from the following; mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological/affective states. Mastery experiences come from actual experiences of performing the course of action in question, or other very similar courses of action. Naturally, mastery experiences, are the source that most effectively boosts an individual’s sense of efficacy (Bandura 1977; 1997). The second most
effective mean of generating efficacy is when an individual sees others perform a certain task and the effect is considered to be amplified when the individual can identify with the other person. Efficacy can also be increased by the verbal persuasion of others, that is when others convince the individual that he or she has the capacity to execute a certain action (Bandura 1977; 1997). Lastly Bandura (1977; 1997) refers to physiological states, which is not in the same way applicable to the current theory on political efficacy as the previous three sources. When Bandura (1977; 1982) first developed his hypotheses on self-efficacy he was working with individuals and their phobias. In these cases the bodily reactions of the person confronting the object/situation of fear are of course of high relevance, stress and anxiety would deter people from performing a certain task while feeling of accomplishment would motivate them to try harder (1977; 1982). Further on, Bandura (1997) has extended his theories to all kinds of domains (sports, school, career, health, politics etc.). He also elaborated additionally on the sources and mechanisms affecting a person’s perceptions of her or his own abilities (Bandura 1997; 2006).

Obviously the four initial sources of efficacy are still valid and highly relevant within psychology due to the strong theories of self-efficacy within different domains. However, these sources have proven not to be optimal for the study on political efficacy. Bandura’s (1977) original sources of efficacy have therefore been reformulated by Beaumont (2010 (in press)) in a way more suitable for the study of political efficacy. Beaumont (2010 (in press)) presents four pathways of increasing political efficacy of which three are directly derived from the original sources presented by Bandura in (1977). The study by Beaumont (2010 (in press)) is based on a pre- and postsurvey answered by 481 college students who participated a course or programme which focused on the promotion of political engagement.

The first pathway Beaumont (2010 (in press)) refers to is skill-building political mastery experiences. The idea is that political efficacy is increased by actual hands-on and guided real world political experiences. These should however not be too easy but challenge the individual at some level in order to gain a feeling of accomplishment. The connection to Bandura’s (1997) mastery experiences is clear, something like “believing by doing”. The second pathway is role models within the political realm. The idea is to provide young people with examples of people with different backgrounds, qualities, and characteristics who have accomplished something within politics or civil society. It also seems important that these role-models are not always following the norms and molds of society but who are sometimes a bit of “outsiders” or minorities. The second pathway can easily be referred back to Bandura’s (1997) vicarious experiences, “believing by seeing”. Thirdly, Beaumont (2010 (in press)) presents social encouragement and social networks as an important way of gaining belief in one’s own capacity to make a difference in society. She means that persons who
are persuaded and/or encouraged that they can make a difference (that their abilities are good enough to succeed in the execution of certain tasks), will in fact make greater efforts trying. Moreover it is important that the young feel they have someone to turn to and that they are part of a bigger community. Surely a sense of security plays a big role for the development of political efficacy as well as feedback, reflection, and discussions over the things one can do, one’s role in society etc. The value of discussing the previous, actual, and prospective political participation is also something that is emphasized by other scholars in the area (Yates and Youniss 1998; Galston 2001; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2003; Kahne and Westheimer 2006). The third pathway is represented by verbal persuasion in the theories of Bandura (1997) although Beaumont (2010 (in press)) takes it further, including social inclusion and social networks as important surrounding factors when it comes to the political context, believing by support. Lastly, Beaumont (2010 (in press)) presents a fourth pathway which she refers to as hopeful and empowering political outlooks. By this she means that youths having a more optimistic view of the future and of the society are also more likely to be less cynical, apathetic, and hopeless towards everything that has to do with “politics”. Beaumont (2010 (in press)) here points to the fact that the fourth pathway is connected with the three previous pathways. By helping young people see the society and the political in realistic terms, neither exaggerating nor underestimating their capacities, a more constructive way of looking upon the society and the political system that one lives in, can be reached. In turn, this can provide the feeling of actual having something to contribute with and the power to make a relevant difference in concordance with realistic goals. As one can see, this last pathway does not directly transfer back on the fourth source of self-efficacy presented by Bandura (1997) (physiological/affective states). However, Beaumont’s (2010 (in press)) version of a fourth pathway is according to me quite an accurate and relevant substitute for affective states when it comes to the political realm. Having positive and empowering outlooks on politics and one’s role in society is surely connected with the feelings of confidence and well-being which are affective states closely connected with one’s sense of (political) efficacy. Something like “believing by keeping it real and positive”.

To sum up, political efficacy is indeed one important factor predicting political participation on top of the “traditional” explanations of socioeconomic status. In the following section I will show how the reciprocal link between political practice and political efficacy can contribute to the leveling of political inequality going beyond socioeconomic variables. Also, I will argue why this is especially important among youth.
Democracy, political equality, and political efficacy

Going back to the basic problem, the following are the premises; uneven political participation means political inequality due to the importance of enlightened and to some minimum extent active and engaged citizens. Further, the uneven levels of political participation, interest, and knowledge, which are the base of the political inequality, are for the most part grounded differences in socioeconomic status among the citizenry in today’s liberal democracies. The democratic “crisis” and the problem of political inequality thus lie, for a substantial part, in socioeconomic status. Consisting of factors such as education, family income, gender, living area, parents’ profession etc., the SES is indeed a quite rigid and static factor being hard to change. However as have been seen above there is another factor that can affect political participation; political efficacy. Already in 1963 Almond and Verba acknowledge this in their renowned work The Civic Culture:

In many ways, then, the belief in one’s competence is a key political attitude. The self-confident citizen appears to be the democratic citizen. Not only does he think he can participate, he thinks others ought to participate as well. Furthermore, he does not merely think he can take part in politics; he is likely to be more active. And, perhaps most significant of all, the self-confident citizen is also likely to be the more satisfied and loyal citizen. (Almond and Verba 1963, p. 257)

As can be seen from the quote, the confidence and belief if one’s competence is indeed something to count on in relation to political participation. The potential of political efficacy is also further proven by the above reviewed research on the concept; one’s belief in one’s own capacity to make a difference in society is indeed a powerful predictor of political participation. Notably political efficacy is also correlated with the traditional SES variables (see e.g. Abramson 1983; Finkel 1985; Hayes and Bean 1993; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995), justifying the question if it is really something that could be helpful in the strivings for political equality and a “better” democracy, or if it is merely a spurious effect. However, research also show that political efficacy do have a unique effect and that it goes beyond the effects of SES in creating inequality (see e.g. Hayes and Bean 1993; Beaumont, Colby et al. 2006). And as can be seen from the theoretical base of (political) efficacy, changes and development of an individual’s sense of efficacy can indeed occur throughout the lifecycle. By means of; real world political mastery experiences, role-models, encouragement, development of social networks and positive outlooks on the political, the political efficacy among college students did increase regardless of their initial levels of efficacy and their SES (Beaumont, Colby et al. 2006; Beaumont 2010 (in press)). Another issue is whether the increased levels of political efficacy and political participation gained in different ways are long-lasting or just a temporary pseudo-solution. Several studies show support for a long-lasting effect on political efficacy among young people who have taken part in different programmes/projects with the aim of
increasing their political efficacy and participation (Yates and Youniss 1998; Keen and Hall 2008; Pasek, Feldman et al. 2008). My reasoning could be illustrated, although very simplified way, as in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

**Figure 1**
Initial problem picture

![Diagram](image1)

**Figure 2**
Suggested mechanism of political efficacy as a remedy

![Diagram](image2)

By having a clearer and more stringent concept of efficacy, focusing on the capacities of the young person to do something, one can through the pathways of Beaumont (2010 (in press)), increase the participation among the least resourceful in society and gain equalizing effects on political equality. But how could political efficacy, and thus political participation, be increased in practice? What are the concrete measures to take in order to reach the goal of a more evenly distributed political equality? And what is so special about youth?

**Political participation on the school curricula**

The last, but for this paper perhaps the most interesting, question to address is then how an increase in political efficacy and thereby political participation for the “passive youth” could be realized. By making this connection clear, yet another part of the puzzle of political equality could become clearer. Before plunging into more concrete actions, it is however important to clarify the importance of addressing youth in the strivings for political equality.

I believe there are two major reasons addressing youth when discussing political equality; young people are citizens in their own right (UN-General-Assembly 1989; Stasiulis 2002; Jans 2004;
UNICEF-Sverige 2008), and political efficacy gained during younger years has proven to predict higher political participation later on (Youniss, McLellan et al. 1997; Yates and Youniss 1998; Keen and Hall 2008; Pasek, Feldman et al. 2008). As for the first reason, young people are often “left out” when talking about democracy and citizenship, and at the same time they are blamed for not being interested enough or participating in a way that is expected in the “good citizenship”. As discussed in the introduction, the young are seen as the demons of democracy. On one hand, young people are treated as “citizens-to-be” which are not yet really part of society in a political sense (UN-General-Assembly 1989; Bronäs 2000; Stasiulis 2002; Jans 2004; UNICEF-Sverige 2008) 5, on the other hand they are expected to be active, interested, knowledgeable, and engaged in politics (see e.g. Dahl 1989; Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995; Putnam 2000; Galston 2004). I would argue that this approach actually enhances the problem of political inequality where young people actually are not seen as demos and therefore their opinions, interests and ways of acting does not count as much as for “real” citizens. To enhance their sense of belonging, outlooks, levels of participation and not at least their belief that they can actually make a difference in society, is thus important for political equality and democracy. The democratic crisis and the disengagement of young people in conventional politics is not only to be blamed on youth themselves, as O’Toole, Marsch et al. (2003b) put it: “Political literacy cuts both ways”.

As for the second reason, it has been proved that the effects of increased political efficacy through actual participation, reflection, inclusion etc. in the younger years has a positive effect on the participatory levels later on (Youniss, McLellan et al. 1997; Jennings and Stoker 2004; Keen and Hall 2008; Pasek, Feldman et al. 2008). There is however a need for more studies concerning these long-term effects of programmes, projects etc. aimed at increasing political efficacy and thus political participation. If one can succeed in convincing youth that they can actually make a difference in society and that their interests actually are as important as anyone else’s, the chances of having a more politically engaged and active youth increases. This would in turn be beneficial for democracy according to theorists such as Dahl (1989; 2006), Thompson (1970) and Pateman (1970).

If accepting that youth is of key importance in the discussion of political equality it seems only natural that schools can play a vital role for the concrete actions on the matter. As many others with me, I believe the key lies in putting democratic practice on the agenda in schools. Study after study show that different extra-curricular programmes in schools and volunteer programmes does indeed

5 It is also worth mentioning a Swedish dissertation thesis called Demokratin ansikte. En jämförande studie av tyska och svenska samhällskunskapsböcker för gymnasiet (“The face of democracy. A comparative study of German and Swedish schoolbooks in civics for the upper secondary school”, own translation) by Agneta Bronäs (2000). One of Bronäs conclusions is that the schoolbooks on civics portray citizenship as something “to come” and that societal issues such as democracy are important but also put in a context as something that will concern the reader later on in life.

SOHL, Sofia, Örebro University
Political efficacy revisited
Working paper, ECPR Joint Sessions 2010
boost the political efficacy as well as increasing political participation among the participants of such programmes (Youniss, McLellan et al. 1997; Yates and Youniss 1998; Torney-Purta 2002; Metz and Youniss 2003; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2003; Beaumont, Colby et al. 2006; Kahne and Westheimer 2006; Pasek, Feldman et al. 2008; Beaumont 2010 (in press)).

As a first example Yates and Youniss, (1998) present a case study of Black urban adolescents’ participation in a service-learning programme. The students of a catholic high school attended a religion course on social justice and part of this course was to serve a minimum of 20 hours at a local soup kitchen for homeless people. The study does not explicitly bring up political efficacy as a concept but one of the findings is “participation in a service learning program encouraged reflections on personal agency and government responsibility” (Yates and Youniss 1998, p. 499). Of key interest here is the agency component coming close to the correlation between the belief in one’s capacities and participation; “when youth are given opportunities to use social skills to redress social problems, they can experience themselves as having agency and as being responsible for society’s well-being” (Yates and Youniss 1998, p. 499). Further, the discussions in the classroom and following the service for the homeless brought up the connection between being a minority or at least a partially excluded group in society and the individual’s own identity. The students started to reflect on their own political status in society in relation to their own identity and power to change their status (Yates and Youniss 1998). Abramson (1983) looks particularly at race when he presents four different explanations for the unequal distribution of political efficacy; the political-education explanation, the social-deprivation explanation, the intelligence explanation, and the political reality explanation. Of the four sets of hypothesis he concludes that it is foremost social deprivation and political reality that lies behind the lack of efficacy among blacks. Blacks are deprived of opportunities to participate in society and have less political influence (they are not listened to in the same manner) as whites resulting in lower feelings of political efficacy. These explanations could also be transferred to the situation of young people today. Children, adolescents and young adults are, as mentioned above, not always counted as citizens in their own right and depicted as the root cause of low participation within society. They are being deprived of opportunities and are not listened to creating a negative “self-image” and disinterest in politics resulting in low political efficacy and low participation.

Another study that shows how projects or programmes including some form of political or civic activities can enhance political efficacy and political participation is Beaumont, Colby et al.’s (2006) study of the pre- and post surveys of 481 students connected to the The Political Engagement Project (PEP). The PEP investigated the effects of 21 different civic courses, with at least some degree of hands on political activity, on 1000 undergraduate students. The results show that
students participating in these courses were more likely to get engaged and politically active further on. Moreover, the study shows that the self-selection mechanism proposing that only students who are politically interested from the beginning will benefit and become active due to the courses, can be refuted:

“...the group that began the interventions with lower levels of political interest can be seen as largely politically disengaged at entry. At the first survey administration they had not yet developed many key elements of responsible political engagement – political knowledge, skills, and motivations. ... By the time of the postsurvey, their political understandings, skills, and motivations have developed and they are significantly more likely to plan to participate in a range of political activities, including both electoral activities and activities expressing political voice.” (Beaumont, Colby et al. 2006, p. 263)

The study thus indicates that students with fewer “political” resources (most probably having lower SES) are actually affected more than students already possessing a certain amount of “political capital”. Activating young people in school and at colleges can therefore contribute to remedy some of the political inequality regarding political of today’s liberal democracies.

As can be seen from these examples, real life political/civic experiences, role models, supportive discussions in school etc., are boosting the participants’ belief in their own capacity to make changes in society. Also the school programmes seem to foster a more long-term will to engage oneself in society. As for democracy and political equality these are good news. The increased participation by youth not only increased the total participation in society, but it seems as though one can also see greater effects among the students with less resources and lower SES. Yet, these are only a few examples posing limits to claims of generalizations, and more studies needs to be done. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that civic engagement programmes in school focusing on the students’ own practical involvement are indeed increasing the political efficacy of the students on an aggregate level. This fact alone is speaking for putting democratic practice on the school curricula, not the least to increase the representation of the views of young people in society. Also the dynamics of the sources, or pathways, of political efficacy speak for an increased focus on political efficacy as a mean of affecting political participation, and also political equality. Beaumont’s (2010 (in press)) pathways thus seem most relevant and provides a base for further studies on political efficacy. In other words; political efficacy provides a more dynamic way of dealing with the political inequality, going beyond the rigidity problem of SES.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper has been to present the concept of political efficacy as a potential means of remedy of today’s political inequality. The minor purpose has been to; 1) provide an
empirical and theoretical base for the main discussion on political efficacy and political inequality and 2) present a smaller research note on political efficacy in order to bring more theoretical clarity to the concept. At first glance the two purposes purposes may seem quite distant. What does political efficacy have to do with political equality? The answer is that even if the reasons for looking deeper into political efficacy can stand alone, one cannot properly deal with the relationship between political equality and political efficacy if one does not have a clear view on what political efficacy entails. In order to deal with and indeed look for a way of increasing political equality, one must have clear unambiguous concepts (i.e. proper tools) to work with. This leads to the first conclusion of this paper.

As for the concept of political efficacy it is proven that the so called internal dimension is what really matters for civic engagement although one shall not forget the political in political efficacy. Or in other words; it is the belief in your own capacity to undertake political (civic) actions that is of major concern when the aim is to increase participation in younger cohorts. It is crucial that political efficacy is not confused with the belief in the responsiveness of the political system or the actors within this system (the so called external dimension). However, perceived system responsiveness, is still of great importance for the research on political participation, not least when looking at different modes of participation.

The second conclusion to be drawn is that political efficacy can indeed be increased among individuals through different pathways and that this increase does not primarily depend on the socioeconomic status of the individuals. Although more research would be beneficial, we can already conclude that mastery experiences of real life political or civic participation is an important factor for political efficacy since many studies show that the effects of different extracurricular and civic volunteerism programmes are substantial.

The third conclusion suggests that when one is able to, at least to some extent, disregard the SES as the root of political inactivity, a new light is shed on the issue of political equality. Increased political efficacy can predict increased political participation regardless of social strata meaning that a sort of remedy of political inequality is at hand. This is particularly interesting since changing the beliefs of the own competence seem much easier to affect than the education of the parents of an individual or her/his living areas or family income. Moreover there seem to be long term effects of the participation stemming from increased efficacy of youth.

With these conclusions in mind, I would propose a recommendation for policy makers to put more political participation, civic activities, volunteerism etc., on the national curricula. In Sweden there are two main tasks of the mandatory school; to provide students with basic knowledge and some work practice in order to be prepared for the labour market and to foster students into
democratic citizens (Skolverket 1994). The problem as I see it is that there is often some form of work practice included in the school system, but no democratic practice. See figure 3 for the complete suggested mechanism over political efficacy as a form of remedy of political inequality among youth.

Finally, I would again like to stress the problem that youth are not seen as part of society on the same terms as adults. They are instead portrayed as “to-become-citizens” causing a democratic inequality problem on the meta-level. The apathetic and inactive youth are seen as one of the major challenges of liberal democracies although it at the same time seems like youth are not “let into” society on the same terms as adults. Therefore, I would like to propose a change of view that also could be beneficial in the strivings for political equality. We need to stop seeing youth as demons since they are in fact demos!

Figure 3
Complete suggested mechanism of political efficacy as a remedy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic Practice:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political participation programmes in schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of efficacy:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive outlooks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increased political efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased participation, particularly among the young with low SES and few resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less political inequality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy closer to its ideals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources of efficacy:
- Mastery experiences
- Role models
- Encouragement
- Social Networks
- Positive outlooks

Increased political efficacy
- Increased participation, particularly among the young with low SES and few resources

Less political inequality
- Democracy closer to its ideals

Figure 3
REFERENCES


SOHL, Sofia, Örebro University
Political efficacy revisited
Working paper, ECPR Joint Sessions 2010


Norris, P. (2003). *Young people & political activism: from the politics of loyalties to the politics of choice?* Cambridge, MA.


