

Understanding psychological drivers of civic engagement

Uganda



Sector

Governance

Project Type

Mobile-lab experiment

Sample Size

287 participants

Behavioral Themes

Self-efficacy



What psychological factors motivate an individual to engage with issues affecting their communities?

Active engagement in community issues is a critical driver of accountable political systems. Civic engagement can be measured through a number of ways: direct political participation such as voting, expressing political opinion through rallies and signing petitions, or attending community meetings and other venues of discussion.

This study specifically studies the role of self-efficacy in driving civic engagement. A self-efficacy approach poses the idea that an individual's belief in themselves can help overcome some of the obstacles to engagement, including the intimidation of doing something new, as well as a sense of hopelessness around the possibility of change.



A Behavioral Science Approach

While structural challenges are often to blame for impeding civic engagement, there are also many less obvious psychological drivers as well. Factors such as identity, perceptions of self-efficacy, and social signals all contribute to an individual's willingness to engage comfortably with a community issue.

The aim of this study is to assess the different effects of improved self-efficacy when induced intrinsically compared to extrinsically. In particular, we use the extrinsic self-efficacy prime developed in McClendon and Riedl (2015)¹ and compare its effects to an exercise designed to induce intrinsic self-efficacy, in which participants are asked to recall and write about a moment where they felt successful.

Design and Results

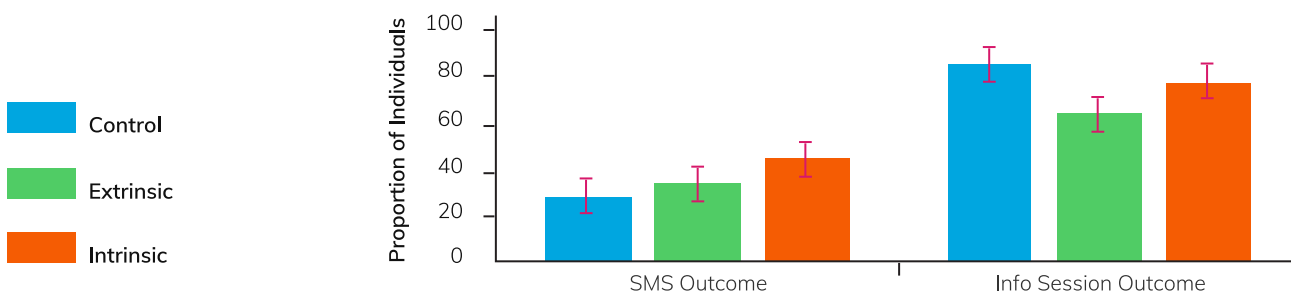
To simulate political participation, we created two proxy behaviors that we could measure. First, participants who attended the session could sign up for any of the below two campaigns, or sign up for neither.

1. A campaign focused on the environment (a critical civic advocacy issue in Western Uganda given the recent discovery of natural resources)
2. A campaign focused on financial literacy (used as a placebo for willingness to receive information)

Second, participants were also invited to attend a second information session at a later date, and asked to indicate their willingness to be contacted for those sessions.

Immediately before they made their choice, they were randomized into one of the two following treatment groups, or a control group that asked them to listen to a neutral recording for the same period.

Treatment	Details
Intrinsic Self-efficacy	In the intrinsic treatment group subjects were asked to engage in a recollection and writing exercise designed to improve self-efficacy. Specifically they were asked "Please think about a time when you did something and it went well? Please give 3-4 sentences about what happened."
Extrinsic Self-efficacy	The extrinsic treatment group heard the same self-affirming message as used in McClendon and Riedl (2015) but translated into Luganda. This message consisted of an external speaker emphasizing your ability to achieve your goals, intending to replicate the actions of a motivational speaker or community leader at a local forum.



¹ McClendon, G., & Riedl, R. B. (2015). Religion as a stimulant of political participation: Experimental evidence from Nairobi, Kenya. *The Journal of Politics*, 77(4), 1045-1057.



Discussion

Intrinsic over extrinsic

Results from this study suggest that intrinsic self-efficacy primes were more effective at motivating political participation than extrinsically motivated messages. This may suggest that the typical community forum could benefit from further tactics focused on asking community members to reflect within, rather than engage with messaging from community leaders.

Deferred participation

While intrinsic outperformed extrinsic in both scenarios, we did find a fairly stark difference in participation rates between the two outcomes. One theory explaining this could be the idea that the “SMS” outcome would result in implicit participation, while the “info session” allowed for deferred participation, in that you could always elect not to participate in future. This gap in participation between the two outcomes suggest a need for further research around the right outcome measures for political participation in lab experiments.

