

External Efficacy and Political Participation Revisited: The Role of Perceived Output Structures for State- and Non-State-Oriented Action Forms

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Numerous studies have stressed the role of citizens' perceptions of the state's responsiveness to explain political participation. However, in doing so, they have mainly focused on citizens' perceptions of the state's willingness to respond. In contrast, how political participation is affected by citizens' perceptions of the state's ability to respond remains empirically overlooked—despite wide theoretical support. This article aims to address this gap in the literature using data from the 2014 PARTIREP Belgian election survey (N = 2019). In line with the hypotheses, mediation analyses confirm that the state's perceived ability to respond indirectly increases state-oriented political participation, while non-state oriented political participation is unaffected.

Keywords: Boycotts, Contacting politicians, External efficacy, Petitions, Political participation, Political efficacy

1. Introduction

Citizens' political participation 'beyond the vote' is often considered to be an essential condition for a good rule *of, by and for* the people (Christensen, 2011; della Porta, 2013). Many studies have therefore sought to explain why citizens do or do not become politically active, often understanding political participation as a means for citizens to change political outcomes and to foster social change (Verba *et al.*, 1995; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). From this instrumental point of view, citizens can be assumed to be most likely to engage in political participation if they consider doing so to be effective in achieving such goals. Of course, political participation can also have expressive motivations, like venting a particular grievance, preference or sense of solidarity

(Klandermans, 1997), and in such cases, the goal of participation is in the act itself, rendering perceptions of effectiveness irrelevant. Nevertheless, in general, a sense of political efficacy is found to be a strong predictor of participation (Bandura, 1982; Verba *et al.*, 1995; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Hence, understanding exactly why people perceive political participation as effective is crucial for our comprehension of why some become politically active, while others do not. Therefore, this study analyses what determines citizens' efficacy beliefs regarding specific forms of participation, and it tests whether actual political participation is consequently affected as well.

It is often argued that efficacy beliefs strongly depend upon perceptions of the political context (Bandura, 1982; Lee, 2010). In particular, numerous authors have emphasised that citizens' perceptions of the responsiveness of the state play a major role in determining their (perceived effectiveness of) political participation (e.g. McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 2011). Citizens who consider government to be responsive will consider participation to be more effective because in their view it is likely that authorities will change political outcomes according to their demands, and consequently, they will become more likely to participate (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Karp and Banducci, 2008). If they consider government to be irresponsible instead, participation will appear ineffective, and hence, unappealing. To explain citizens' expectations of effectiveness, therefore, it is important to look at their perceptions of state responsiveness, i.e. at their external efficacy (Niemi *et al.*, 1991).

Although external efficacy is a well-established predictor of political participation, it is often overlooked that state responsiveness has at least two dimensions: (i) whether authorities are *willing* to take citizens' demands into account, and (ii) whether they are *able* to get things done (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Hutter, 2014). To express this more technically, states have an 'input structure' that can be more closed or open to citizens' demands, and they have an 'output structure' that determines their ability to effectively produce political outcomes. This article explores the idea that citizens' external efficacy should reflect this duality, thereby affecting their political participation. Perceptions of the state's willingness to take citizens into account will be defined as *external input efficacy*, while perceptions of the state's ability to act will be defined as *external output efficacy*. Until now, studies analysing external efficacy have only measured external input efficacy, which they indeed find to relate positively to political participation (Niemi *et al.*, 1991; Karp and Banducci, 2008). In contrast, external output efficacy has rarely been studied, and as a result, it remains largely unknown whether and how it affects (the perceived effectiveness of) political participation. This study aims to address this gap in the literature. As Figure 1 illustrates, it analyses the effect of both external input efficacy and external output efficacy on various forms of political participation, and it tests whether indeed, this effect is mediated by perceptions of

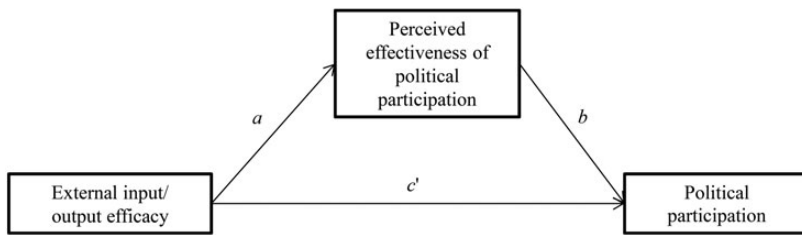


Figure 1. Hypothesised direct and indirect effects.

effectiveness. Expected variations between the effects on different forms of participation will be discussed in the next section.

Data are used from the 2014 PARTIREP election survey. This survey is the first large-N survey to include measures of external output efficacy, and these data are therefore uniquely appropriate to address the research question. To analyse direct and indirect effects, mediation analysis will be used. In what follows, I will further outline the theoretical framework, the data, measurements and methods, after which I will present the results of the analyses. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical implications of the findings.

2. Participation, efficacy and the state's ability to act

Perceptions of *state responsiveness* play a central role in this study's attempt to explain citizens' (perceived effectiveness of) political participation. This presupposes that political participation links citizens and the state (e.g. Almond and Verba, 1963). After all, assuming that citizens' perceptions of the state will affect their participation only makes sense if the state can be considered a relevant party in a particular negotiation. This state-centred view clearly reflects Verba, Schlozman and Brady's classic definition of political participation as 'activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action' (Verba *et al.*, 1995, p. 38). Of course, not all forms of political participation target the state, and below, the implications of perceptions of responsiveness for emerging, non-state-oriented forms of participation will be discussed in detail (Norris, 2002; Fox, 2014; van Deth, 2014). For now, however, this state-centred view provides a useful starting point as many prevalent forms of political participation do remain targeted at the state. That is, institutional forms of political participation, such as contacting politicians, are targeted at the state by definition, and in many instances, so are extrainstitutional forms of political participation like petitioning (Bochel, 2013). Hence, notwithstanding the growing importance of non-state oriented action forms (e.g. political consumerism), in many cases the state remains an important contextual determinant that should be taken into account when explaining political participation (Vrablikova, 2014).

More specifically, this view suggests that the state's *political opportunity structure* (POS) provides an essential determinant of political participation, as it is assumed to determine the effectiveness, and consequently, the prevalence, of political participation (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Christensen, 2011; Vrablikova, 2014). That is, for state-oriented political participation to be effective, the state needs to be responsive to its claimants. After all, unresponsiveness can be considered to preclude effectiveness when it comes to action that demands policy-enforced change. This underscores the two core dimensions of the state's POS: its input structure and its output structure (Kitschelt, 1986; Hutter, 2014). On the one hand, responsiveness refers to the state's willingness to take citizens' demands into account, or in other words, to the openness of its input structure. For instance, a state may have many institutional structures that enable civic involvement, like civic initiatives or referenda, or it may have a strong facilitative tradition towards civil society groups (Tarrow, 2011). On the other hand, responsiveness refers to the state's ability to produce political output, or put differently, to the strength of its output structure. A state is considered to be strong when its internal organisation allows it to effectively develop and implement public policy, when there are few external forces that inhibit this ability, and thus, when its decisions and actions have a strong impact on society (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Goodin, 1996). It is assumed that state-oriented political participation is most effective in the context of a state with an open input structure and a strong output structure, because here, the state is both willing and able to respond to citizens' demands (Kriesi *et al.*, 1995).¹

Concurrently, citizens' *perceptions* of the POS can be expected to determine their beliefs in the effectiveness of state-oriented political participation, and in turn, their preparedness to engage in such activities (McAdam, 1982; Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Klandermans, 1997). Perceptions of effectiveness motivate people to engage in political participation by giving them the confidence that doing so will have the desired outcome (Bandura, 1982; Verba *et al.*, 1995; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Following the POS approach, these perceptions of effectiveness could thus be explained by beliefs about the responsiveness of government to its claimants (McAdam, 1982; Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Lee, 2010), or in other words, by *external efficacy* (as opposed to *internal efficacy* which refers the feeling that one can understand and participate in politics) (Niemi *et al.*, 1991, pp. 1407–1408). In short, as people with higher external efficacy are inclined to believe that state authorities will respond to their demands, they will consider political participation

¹Some authors describe a trade-off between a state's openness and its strength. That is, a state that has a very open input structure might have to reckon with more interference from external actors, such as citizens and social movements, which limits its ability to act (Kitschelt, 1986). Still, this trade-off is not definite. For instance, Kriesi *et al.* (1995) describe countries that have a facilitative tradition towards social movements but that are still fairly autonomous in the development and execution of particular policies.

to be more effective, becoming more likely to participate (Bandura, 1982; Niemi *et al.*, 1991; Karp and Banducci, 2008).

As argued above, though, the state's responsiveness depends on both its willingness and its ability to translate citizens' demands into effective political output. Arguably, then, perceptions of both these elements make out someone's external efficacy. For instance, someone may be confident that politicians are willing to take his/her demands into account, but at the same time be sceptical about politicians' ability to translate those demands into some form of political output, like policy change. As a result, this person will believe that it is rather unlikely that government will be responsive in terms of providing the demanded change. Nevertheless, existing studies have generally only measured external efficacy as individuals' perception of the state's *willingness* to take citizens' demands into account (e.g. Niemi *et al.*, 1991; Karp and Banducci, 2008). Individuals' perceptions of the state's *ability* to produce political output are rarely measured. Put differently, while external *input* efficacy is often included in analyses, external *output* efficacy is generally overlooked. Consequently, the literature on external efficacy and political participation has painted a one-sided picture that leaves unanswered the question of how external output efficacy affects (the perceived effectiveness of) political participation. It is the main goal of this study to address this gap in the literature.

2.1 State- and non-state oriented action forms

The argument made so far only makes sense for forms of political participation that are in some way targeted at the state. However, as mentioned above, political participation is increasingly found to be expanding, coming to include non-state-oriented action forms as well (Norris, 2002; van Deth, 2014). As political power is shifting towards international organisations and corporate actors, the nation-state is becoming a less obvious target for people who want to bring about certain social changes (Sloam, 2007; Fox, 2014). Instead, citizens become increasingly engaged in action forms that could target new power holders. For instance, petitions are today used to target state as well as non-state actors, and boycotts pose an increasingly popular activity to directly target economic actors (Christensen, 2011; Copeland, 2014; Hooghe and Marien, 2014).

In these cases, the hypothesised (indirect) effect of external input/output efficacy is likely to be different. That is, depending on the degree to which a form of participation is state oriented, the hypothesised effect of both forms of external efficacy will vary, resulting in three different effects. First, it is expected that the effect will be strongest in the case of types of political participation that mainly target state actors (e.g. contacting politicians through mail or email). Second, it is expected that the effect will be present but weaker for types of participation that can be targeted at both state and non-state actors (e.g. signing a petition). Finally, it is expected that

the effect will be absent in the case of non-state-oriented types of participation (e.g. boycotting a product). Including this counterfactual hypothesis will provide further evidence for the specificity of the assumed link between external efficacy and state-oriented action forms.

H1: *There is a positive effect of external input/output efficacy on state-oriented forms of political participation that is mediated by the perceived effectiveness of those forms of participation.*

H2: *The more state-oriented the form of participation, the stronger the effects.*

H3: *There are no effects on non-state oriented forms of political participation.*

3. Data, measurements and methods

3.1 Data

In order to test the hypotheses proposed above, data are used from the 2014 PARTIREP pre-election survey. This CAPI survey contains data from a representative sample of 2019 Belgian adults, including both citizens from the Flemish and the Walloon part of the country (response-rate = 45%). To correct for over- and under-representation of certain age, gender and education categories, weighting coefficients have been computed using the ranking ratio method. The survey was conducted prior to the three-level (regional, national and European) elections of 25 May 2014. Of course, the fact that the PARTIREP survey contains data from only the Belgian population has important implications for the generalizability of the findings. Still, as Hooghe and Marien (2014) have observed, ‘analyses of the European Social Survey have shown repeatedly that it [Belgium] is not exceptional with regard to participation patterns or political attitudes in the European context’ (p. 7). Hence, although further comparative analyses would merit the generalizability of this study, the Belgian case has theoretical implications beyond its own borders as well.

3.2 Measurements

3.2.1 Dependent variables: state- and non-state oriented political participation As an example of state-oriented participation, contacting politicians through mail or email is used.² As an example of non-state-oriented participation, boycotting products are used. Signing a petition represents a ‘mixed’ form that can be used either to target state or non-state actors. These forms of participation have in common

²Voting is perhaps the prototypical form of state-oriented political participation; however, since we surveyed voters only, there is no variation to be explained using this indicator. Moreover, voting is mandatory in Belgium, which overall reduces explainable variation.

that they are among the most prevalent forms of participation, which is generally ascribed to the low participation-threshold related to their non-structural nature (Sloam, 2007; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). For each of these types of participation, respondents were asked whether they had made use of it during the last 12 months (1 = yes, 0 = no).³ Moderate tetrachoric correlations indicate that there is an important connection between these forms of participation, but that there is still sufficient unique variation between them (see Supplementary data, Appendix 1). This supports this article's emphasis on treating these forms of participation as related but distinct types of behaviour.

3.2.2 Independent variables Building on numerous studies that have already included external input efficacy in their analyses (but of course referred to it as external efficacy, e.g. Niemi *et al.*, 1991; Hooghe and Marien, 2014; Vrablikova, 2014), external input efficacy is here measured by tapping into respondents' perceptions of government's general openness towards citizens' demands. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) with the statement that 'The average citizen does affect political decisions and the actions government takes'.

In contrast, the PARTIREP survey is the first large-N survey to include a measure of external output efficacy. To measure respondents' perception of government's ability to act, they were asked to what extent they agree or disagree (ranging 1–5) with the statement that: 'Politicians in my country are capable of acting upon problems'. It is important to note that the item measures *whether* respondents believed politicians are able to act, not *why*. The literature has given various explanations in this regard. As mentioned already, recent studies have mainly emphasised that states are becoming increasingly powerless with the expansion of global governance, arguing that this evolution renders citizens sceptical about politicians' ability to act (Fox, 2014), yet others have emphasised the role of personal traits of politicians, like their professional competence (Gamson, 1968). Although different processes may thus underlie citizens' beliefs in politicians' ability to act, citizens who score low on this item can be said to have limited external output efficacy. The survey question was used and tested previously in a mixed-methods case-study on Belgian environmental activists (de Moor, Marien and Hooghe, 2013). This study confirmed that this question performed well in terms of understandability, and triggered sufficient variation.

³The original questionnaire contained four possible answers as to whether someone had engaged in a form of political participation: (i) often, (ii) sometimes, (iii) rarely and (iv) never. For reasons of distribution (all items are heavily skewed towards the 'never' category, with only few respondents indicating the 'often' and 'sometimes' categories), the items were recoded into two categories. The first three categories were recoded into 'participated', while the fourth category became 'did not participate'.

Thus, whereas external input efficacy measures whether respondents believe government is open to their demands, external output efficacy measures whether they believe government can actually get something done. The bivariate correlation between these two variables is moderate (0.187***), which suggests that, although they are related, they measure clearly distinct evaluations of government responsiveness. This indicates the usefulness of disentangling this attitude.

3.2.3 Mediating variables: the perceived effectiveness of political participation The PARTIREP survey contains detailed information on how effective respondents consider several particular forms of political participation, including contacting politicians, signing a petition and boycotting. Concerning each of these forms of participation, respondents were asked the following question: ‘Citizens can do different things in order to try to have an impact on political decisions. Could you rate the following acts on how effective they are in order to influence political decisions?’ Answers were given on a Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (‘very ineffective’) to 7 (‘very effective’). This question clearly measures the perceived instrumental impact of these action forms (Hooghe and Marien, 2014).

3.2.4 Control variables Several personal characteristics and political attitudes have been linked to (the perceived effectiveness of) political participation in previous studies and therefore need to be controlled for in the analyses as well. Men and older people generally feel more efficacious about politics, and they are more inclined to engage in institutional forms of participation (Marien *et al.*, 2010; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). Women and young people have a stronger tendency to engage in non-institutional forms of participation (Stolle and Hooghe, 2011), although some studies suggest that even here older people are overrepresented (Wattenberg, 2012). People with higher education generally feel more efficacious, and overall they participate in politics more often (Niemi *et al.*, 1991; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). As for political attitudes, we know from a large body of voting literature that party identification affects the way in which citizens engage with the political system. While some argue that party identification imbues citizens with a loyalty-based tendency for political participation (Green *et al.*, 2002), others suggest that it reflects citizens’ judgements about the performance of parties and leaders, in turn affecting what they expect to gain from any instrumental interactions with the system (Clarke *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, in general, people with higher political interest and internal efficacy are more inclined to participate in politics (Verba *et al.*, 1995; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Political trust is found to have a positive relation with institutional participation, whereas it relates negatively to non-institutional participation (Hooghe and Marien, 2013). Finally, satisfaction with democracy is found to affect political participation in various ways as well (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2014). Thus, age, sex (0 = men, 1 = women), and a categorical variable for level of education (recoded to 1 = low,

2 = middle, 3 = high)⁴ are included as background variables in all analyses. Party identification is measured by asking respondents whether (1 = yes, 0 = no) there is a party they identify with more strongly than all others. Political interest is measured using a single item where 0 means very low political interest and 10 very high political interest. Internal efficacy is measured using a sum-scale of 4 items with a Cronbach's α of 0.67. Political trust is also measured using a sum-scale of 11 items with a Cronbach's α of 0.91. See Supplementary data, Appendix 2 for details on the items of these scales. Satisfaction with democracy is measured by asking people how satisfied they were with the way democracy functions in their country, with answers ranging from 1 = very unsatisfied, to 4 = very satisfied.

3.3 Methods

The hypotheses formulated above presume that external (input/output) efficacy (X) affects different forms of political participation (Y) as mediated by the perceived effectiveness of those forms of participation (Z). Baron and Kenny (1986) prescribe that in order to test such mediation, we need to calculate the 'reduced model', where the effect of external efficacy on political participation is estimated without controlling for perceptions of effectiveness (this effect is called c , or the total effect), and we need to calculate the 'full model', where the effect is estimated with the control for this mediator (this effect is called c' , or the direct effect). The difference between c and c' represents the degree to which the effects of X on Y are confounded by Z, i.e. the mediated effect (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Karlson *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, to know exactly how Z mediates the effects of X on Y, we also want to know what the effect is of X on Z (we call these effects a) and of Z on Y (we call this effect b). Hence, for each form of participation, three separate regressions need to be calculated: X needs to be regressed on Z to obtain a ; X needs to be regressed on Y to obtain c and Z and X need to be regressed on Y to obtain b and c' , respectively. Both a and b need to be significant for an indirect effect of external efficacy on political participation (ab) to occur (Baron and Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the size of the indirect effect is obtained by subtracting c' from c .

Although this decomposition strategy is a useful starting point, it is developed to test mediations that are built up of linear regressions (Baron and Kenny, 1986). In this study, however, the dependent variables and the mediators are categorical and they are predicted using logistic regression analysis, which complicates matters somewhat. The problem is that the inclusion of an additional (mediating) variable in a logistic regression not only affects the effect sizes, but also the scaling of the parameters (for more information, see Kohler *et al.*, 2011). In effect, comparing c and c' using logistic

⁴Low = none, primary, or lower secondary; middle = higher secondary; high = non-university higher, and university.

regressions might conflate mediation and rescaling and we therefore could not assess whether or not a mediating effect occurs, nor how large it is.

To address this problem, Karlson, Holm and Breen (Karlson *et al.*, 2010) propose the KHB method that corrects this limitation of the decomposition method for nonlinear probability models. It includes the standardised residuals of the regression of X on Z in the reduced model, thereby ensuring that the coefficients in the different models are measured on the same scale. Consequently, the KHB method warrants against the conflation of mediation and rescaling, and coefficients can be compared across different nonlinear models, thereby providing a robustness test for decomposition based on separate regressions. This method will be applied as a robustness check using the 'khh' programme in Stata 12.

Throughout all regression analyses, robust standard errors will be used. To compare effect sizes across regressions, the N needs to be kept stable. Therefore, respondents with missing observations on one of the outcome variables are deleted from the analyses (N = 57).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Before turning to the explanatory analyses, it is useful to look at some descriptive statistics that give us a general idea of the external input/output efficacy and (the perceived effectiveness of) political participation within our sample (see Supplementary data, Appendix 1 for further descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations).

On average, respondents scored 2.51 on a scale of 1–5 for external input efficacy, with a standard deviation of 1.13. For external output efficacy, they scored 3.12 on a scale of 1–5, with a standard deviation of 0.97. The latter suggests that in general people are moderately positive in their evaluation of politicians' willingness and ability to respond, but also that these variables varied strongly among the respondents. As external output efficacy is a new indicator, it is interesting to analyse how it relates to other, more conventional indicators of perceived political system performance and to establish whether this variable really measures something new. Apart from external input efficacy, typical measures are people's satisfaction with democracy and political trust (Norris *et al.*, 2005). The respective bivariate correlation of these variables with external output efficacy are 0.357*** and 0.405***. Although these figures indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between these system evaluations, they are moderate, leading to the conclusion that this variable gauges a thus far unmeasured dimension of perceived system performance.

As for political participation, people averagely feel more efficacious about signing a petition ($\bar{x} = 3.84$, SD = 1.59) than about boycotting products ($\bar{x} = 3.53$, SD = 1.87) or contacting politicians ($\bar{x} = 3.12$, SD = 1.57). Paired *t*-tests

indicate that the differences between these means are statistically significant. Signing petitions was the most prevalent form of participation (53% of the respondents indicated to have done so), followed by boycotting products (36%), and contacting a politician (18%). These averages are in line with previous studies indicating that petitions and boycotts currently rank among the most prevalent forms of political participation (Sloam, 2007; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011).

4.2 Analyses

In this section, I present three separate figures with the standardised direct (*c'*) and indirect (*ab*) effects (odds ratios) of external input efficacy and external output efficacy on contacting politicians, signing petitions and boycotting products. The full regression models (including control variables and pseudo R^2) are presented in Supplementary data, Appendix 3. In Table 1, the total, direct and indirect effects on all three forms of participation as provided by the KHB analyses are presented together.

4.2.1 Contacting politicians The logistic regressions suggest that people with high education, who identify with a party, who score higher on political interest,

Table 1 Total, direct and indirect effects of external input/output efficacy on political participation

	<i>B</i>	SE	β	<i>p</i>
Contacting politicians				
External input efficacy (total)	1.145	0.073	1.167	*
External input efficacy (direct)	1.091	0.070	1.105	0.170
External input efficacy (indirect)	1.049	0.018	1.057	**
External output efficacy (total)	0.907	0.057	0.908	0.209
External output efficacy (direct)	0.849	0.067	0.852	*
External output efficacy (indirect)	1.067	0.024	1.066	**
Signing petitions				
External input efficacy (total)	1.079	0.055	1.091	0.131
External input efficacy (direct)	1.055	0.053	1.063	0.292
External input efficacy (indirect)	1.023	0.015	1.027	0.124
External output efficacy (total)	0.831	0.054	0.833	**
External output efficacy (direct)	0.788	0.051	0.790	***
External output efficacy (indirect)	1.055	0.021	1.053	**
Boycotting products				
External input efficacy (total)	1.051	0.056	1.059	0.343
External input efficacy (direct)	1.016	0.059	1.019	0.759
External input efficacy (indirect)	1.034	0.017	1.039	*
External output efficacy (total)	0.927	0.059	0.928	0.235
External output efficacy (direct)	0.922	0.059	0.923	0.200
External output efficacy (indirect)	1.006	0.021	1.006	0.774

Notes: Reported are unstandardised odds ratios (*B*), standard errors (SE), standardised odds ratios (β) and *p*-values. $N = 1869$.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

political trust and satisfaction with democracy perceive contacting politicians to be more effective. Similarly, and in line with previous studies, people who score higher on education, political interest and internal efficacy, and who identify with a political party, are more likely to have contacted politicians. Political trust and satisfaction with democracy constitute a negative effect here, which seems to contradict previous findings (Hooghe and Marien, 2013).

As for our variables of interest, Figure 2 suggests that there is indeed a positive indirect effect of both forms of external efficacy on contacting politicians: if citizens perceive politicians as willing or able to take their demands into account, they will perceive contacting politicians to be more effective, which in turn renders them more likely to actually engage in this form of action. Looking at these relations separately, though, does not guarantee that the indirect effect is significant. Table 1 presents the results of the KHB mediation analysis and, in further support of H1, confirms the significance of the indirect effects. It is interesting to note that the effect of external output efficacy is stronger than that of external input efficacy. A one unit increase of external input efficacy indirectly increases someone's odds of having contacted a politician by 4.9 per cent, while a one unit increase of external output efficacy increases it by 6.7 per cent. This supports the argument made above that while the literature has mainly focused on the latter, the former is at least as important in understanding why people feel more or less efficacious about state-oriented political participation.

What do these indirect effects mean for the overall relation between external input/output efficacy and contacting politicians? We see in Table 1 that the total effect of external input efficacy on contacting politicians is positive significant as well, and that perceptions of effectiveness mediate roughly one-third of this relation. The remaining direct effect is also positive, but not significant. In contrast, the total effect of external output efficacy is insignificant, which is somewhat surprising. The argument predicting a positive indirect effect should also lead to the assumption that the total effect is positive, and that the mediator simply reveals its causal pathway. However, the results indicate that there is more going on than

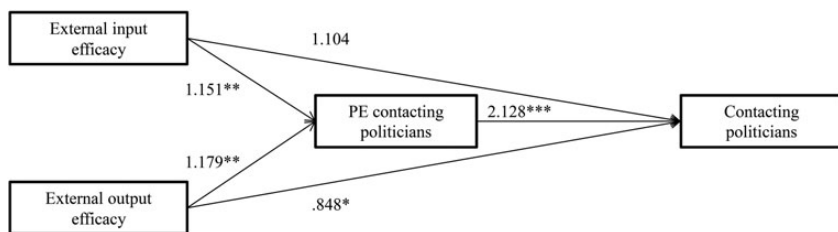


Figure 2. Direct and indirect effects of external input/output efficacy on contacting politicians. Note: Coefficients are standardised odds ratios derived from two separate regressions. N = 1869. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

was anticipated: there also appears to be a direct negative effect. The direct and indirect effects balance each other out, and as a result, the total effect becomes insignificant. In statistical terms, the mediator thus performs the role of suppressor: it distinguishes the positive indirect effect that runs through perceptions of effectiveness, and thereby isolates the remaining direct effect which as a consequence becomes significant (Baron and Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon *et al.*, 2007). Hence, the absence of a significant total effect does not contradict the existence of the indirect effect (Hayes, 2009), but the results do indicate that there are multiple ways in which external output efficacy and contacting politicians are related. How we can explain this finding in more substantive terms I will return to in the discussion.

4.2.2 Signing petitions The analyses suggest that women find signing petitions more effective than men do. Contrary to what Wattenberg (2012) argues, but in support of, e.g. Stolle and Hooghe (2011), younger people are more likely to engage in this activity, and in line with most literature, so are people with higher education, party identification, higher political interest and higher internal efficacy.

Because petitions can be targeted at both state and non-state actors, it was hypothesised (H2) that external input efficacy and external output efficacy would have an indirect effect on signing petitions, but that these effects would be weaker than in the case of contacting politicians. We see in Figure 3 that, contrary to this hypothesis, there is no effect of external input efficacy. The indirect effect of external output efficacy, however, is positive and significant. This is confirmed by the KHB analyses presented in Table 1: a one unit increase on external output efficacy indirectly increases one’s chances of having signed a petition with 5.5 per cent. In line with Hypothesis 2, we see that this effect is smaller than that on contacting politicians. Figures 2 and 3 show that while perceptions of effectiveness strongly predict both forms of participation, the perceived effectiveness of contacting politicians is more dependent on perceptions of government’s ability to act.

Like with contacting politicians, the indirect effect of external output efficacy is contrasted by its direct effect. That is, external output efficacy constitutes a negative

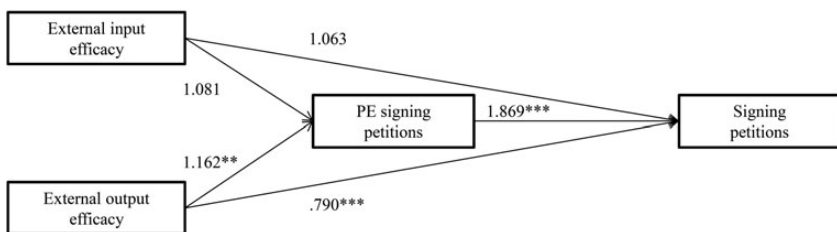


Figure 3. Direct and indirect effects of external input/output efficacy on signing petitions. Note: Coefficients are standardised odds ratios derived from two separate regressions. N = 1869. **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

direct effect that is stronger than the positive indirect effect, resulting in a negative total effect. Again, these direct and total effects do not contradict the hypothesised indirect effect per se (Hayes, 2009), yet it is clear that there is more going on than was hypothesised. The results suggests that, although people who perceive the state’s output structure as strong are generally less inclined to sign petitions, they are more likely to perceive contacting politicians as effective. If they do so, this increases the likelihood that they will sign petitions, thereby reducing the negative direct effect. In the discussion, a more substantive interpretation of these findings is provided.

4.2.3 Boycotting products Finally, like with signing petitions and in line with previous studies (e.g. Stolle and Hooghe, 2011) young people, people with higher education, people with higher political interest and people with higher internal efficacy are more likely to boycott products.

Whereas a positive (indirect) effect was hypothesised of external input/output efficacy on contacting politicians, and to a lesser extent, on signing a petition, it was hypothesised (H3) that no such effect should exist for non-state-oriented forms of participation like boycotting products. That is, although it is expected that people who consider boycotts to be effective will be more likely to engage in them, their perceptions of effectiveness are most likely not to be affected by their perceptions of the state. The analyses confirm that people who believe boycotting products is effective are also more likely to actually engage in this activity. In line with H3, however, we see that these perceptions of effectiveness are not affected by external output efficacy (Figure 4). This is logical, because boycotts do not rely on politicians’ ability to act. As a counterfactual then, these results provide evidence for the specificity of the link between external output efficacy and state-oriented political participation. In contrast, however, external input efficacy does relate positively to these perceptions of effectiveness, which seems to contradict this article’s theoretical assumptions. Although this relation is weaker than that on the perceived effectiveness of contacting politicians, the question remains why perceptions of effectiveness of a non-state-oriented form of participation would be affected by perceptions of the state’s willingness to respond.

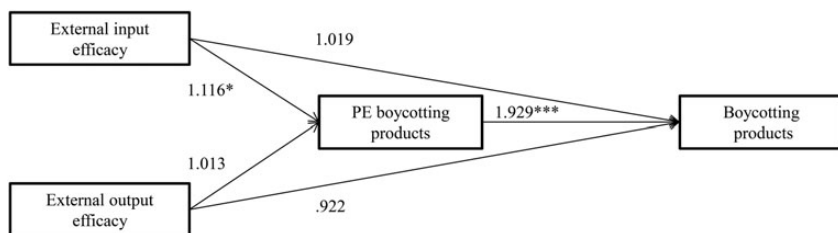


Figure 4. Direct and indirect effects of external input/output efficacy on boycotting products. Note: Coefficients are standardised odds ratios derived from two separate regressions. N = 1869. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

In line with most political participation literature, this study indicates that citizens are more likely to engage in political participation if they consider a specific form of action to be more effective (Bandura, 1982; Verba *et al.*, 1995; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013).⁵ In fact, this relation is similar for all three forms of participation analysed in this study—contacting politicians, signing petitions and boycotting products. Moreover, it suggests that perceptions of the political context are significant predictors of the perceived effectiveness of political participation, as well as the act of political participation. In particular, it proposes that if citizens consider the state to have an open input structure and a strong output structure, they are more likely to perceive state-oriented political participation as an effective means to social change. Consequently, there is a positive indirect effect of external input efficacy and external output efficacy on state-oriented political participation (i.e. contacting politicians). There is a weaker but still significant effect of external output efficacy on signing petitions. Assumably, this effect is weaker because signing petitions is sometimes, but not always, targeted at the state. On the non-state-oriented action form of boycotting products, external output efficacy has no effect, which, as a counterfactual, further supports the theoretical argument of the article. In contrast, the theory proposed in this article cannot account for the found effect of external input efficacy on boycotting products and the nature of this relation should therefore be investigated further in future research.

Overall, these findings provide preliminary evidence for a commonly made, but understudied assumption about the link between citizens and the state in the context of globalisation. For instance, according to Peter Mair (2014), the globalisation (and especially Europeanisation) of politics forces governments away from their representative task of translating citizens' demands into political output by increasingly requiring them to act 'responsibly' in respect of the principles constituted by external veto players like the EU or the WTO (see also Laffan, 2014). This creates a situation where 'even though governments might be willing to heed their voters' demands . . . they may well be limited in doing so by having "other constitutionally prescribed roles to play' (2014, p. 590). Political globalisation, in other words, detaches governments' willingness to respond to citizens demands from their ability to do so by the introduction of external constraints. Several authors have suggested that as a result of these processes, the state is becoming a less attractive target for citizens who want to advance social change

⁵Analyses not presented in this article for reasons of space indicate that engagement in specific forms of participation is generally not affected by the perceived effectiveness of the other forms of participation. Only signing a petition is affected weakly by the perceived effectiveness of boycotting a product. However, as the perceived effectiveness of boycotting products is not affected by external output efficacy, this has no implications for the overall hypothesised mediation effects.

(e.g. Norris, 2002; Fox, 2014). They assume that citizens who are sceptical about the state's ability to translate citizens' demands into political output will perceive state-oriented political action as ineffective and will therefore be more likely to abstain from it. This study's findings provide the first empirical evidence for the existence of such an effect: to perceive state-oriented participation as effective, and to consequently engage in it, citizens' perceptions of politicians' willingness *and* ability to respond are important. Hence, although the findings do not tell us whether citizens' perceptions of government responsiveness reflect the institutional changes described by Mair, they do confirm that such perceptions are important for citizens' continued involvement in politics beyond the vote.

Whereas this study finds that external output efficacy has a positive indirect effect on contacting politicians and signing petitions, its direct effect is negative. If citizens perceive the state as having a strong output structure, they become less likely to act, and vice versa. These surprising findings do not contradict the indirect effects *per se*, but they still beg further reflection regarding their potential meaning and regarding their implications for the total effect of external output efficacy on political participation.

In the case of signing petitions, a potential explanation for the direct negative effect could be that citizens who lose faith in politicians' ability to act embrace alternative forms of participation to address non-state power holders about their concerns. Of course, the data do not inform us about the targets of the petitions signed by the respondents, but it might be that they are drawn to petitioning campaigns to remain politically involved while avoiding state-oriented politics. Following the same logic, however, we would also expect a negative effect on boycotting products and it remains unclear why no such effect is found. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the fact that on average, citizens consider petitioning to be more effective than boycotting.

The negative direct effect on the state-oriented act of contacting politicians, however, clearly requires a different explanation. It might be that citizens who feel that the state is capable of addressing problems in society consider contacting politicians as less urgent or less necessary. In their eyes, the state is effectively dealing with society's challenges, and, therefore, there is less need for citizens to interfere. This interpretation resonates with an argument that William Gamson made in 1968: 'high trust in authorities implies some lack of necessity for influencing them' (p. 7). In a similar vein, Almond and Verba (1963) have described the *satisfied citizen*, who may well feel efficacious, but who considers corrective political participation to be unnecessary. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that it also implies that citizens who feel the state is not capable of solving society's main problems contact politicians to demand appropriate change. This interpretation contradicts the instrumental logic underlying the hypothesised and confirmed indirect effect: if politicians cannot act, contacting them is unlikely to result in any

substantial change. Perhaps, therefore, this direct negative effect points in the direction of expressive motivations for political participation, suggesting that someone could also contact politicians to *express* discontent with their inability to act. These are all speculations, however, and what is particularly clear is that more research is needed to investigate this relation further and to identify other mediating processes that could help explain the seemingly complex relationship between external output efficacy and political participation.

External output efficacy thus performs an important double role in linking citizens and the state. On the one hand, when citizens perceive the output structure as strong, they are overall less likely to participate in politics. On the other hand, a strong output structure presents an important prerequisite for citizens to believe that political participation can be effective, inciting them indirectly to participate. Hence, disentangling this effect indicates that external output efficacy affects political participation in various positive as well as negative ways. It becomes clear, therefore, that the exclusive attention for external input efficacy in the literature is unjustified. While this article does support the common understanding that an open input structure facilitates state-oriented political participation, it stresses that perceptions of the output structure affect political participation even more. Future research would therefore benefit from taking into account both dimensions of responsiveness when analysing the link between the perceived political context and political participation.

To conclude, it is important to note certain limitations of this study and possible avenues for future research as well. First, it needs to be recognised that the structure of the used data is cross sectional and that this limits our ability to make strong causal claims regarding the link between political attitudes (like efficacy) and political behaviour. In fact, some studies argue that political attitudes are shaped by the experience of participation, rather than the other way around (Quintelier and van Deth, 2014). Notwithstanding the importance of this argument, however, many studies support the assumption that attitudes do predict behaviour in at least some way (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). For one, people who have never engaged in political activities have political attitudes nevertheless and in a way, political attitudes thus precede political participation. Moreover, as Inglehart (2008) has suggested, political attitudes remain relatively stable throughout people's lives, rather than being changed after each individual experience of political participation. Experimental psychology supports this argument with regard to efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1982). Still, the findings in this study would benefit from a longitudinal or experimental study that could more strongly assess questions of causality.

Second, the findings in this study are limited to one case. Although the Belgian case is often considered to be representative of other developed European democracies (Hooghe and Marien, 2014), assessing whether this study's findings will hold

in different national contexts would advance the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, a comparative approach would allow us to assess whether country-level variations of output strength are reflected in citizens' political attitudes and behaviour. Combined with a longitudinal approach, it could even be assessed whether changes in output structures, such as those described by Mair, can explain political participation across time and space. As for now, this study strongly suggests that the effect of external output efficacy on political participation will be supported by such a comparative study.

Supplementary data

Supplementary material available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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