Key findings:

- Mexico displays the highest levels of external efficacy (51%), while the United States displays the lowest (23.9%)

- Countries that experienced recent elections (Mexico, Colombia, Paraguay, and Brazil) tend to have more efficacious individuals, while countries that are experiencing economic or political hard times (Chile, Honduras, Panama, and the US) tend to have less efficacious individuals

- Individuals with higher levels of education are considerably less efficacious than individuals with less formal education

- Respondents in lower wealth quintiles, those living in urban residences, and older individuals report higher external efficacy. Gender does not have a significant association with efficacy.

- Political legitimacy has a strong positive association with external efficacy

- Respondents who are more engaged with their communities are more likely to report higher levels of external efficacy
At its core, liberal democracy depends on elected representatives to provide quality representation to their constituents in order to function. If citizens are content with the quality of representation they receive, they are more likely to continue supporting not only the party/person in office, but they are also more likely to participate in politics. On the other hand, perceptions of poor representation may lead citizens to support candidates who promise to make drastic changes to the status quo. One measure of representation is commonly referred to as external political efficacy, which measures the extent to which individuals feel that elected representatives listen to what they have to say.

In the 2018/19 round of the AmericasBarometer, 31,050 individuals were asked the following question:

**EFF1:** Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Respondents answered on a 1-7 scale where 1 indicates “Strongly Agree” and 7 indicates “Strongly Agree.” Figure 1 represents the percentages of respondents in the region who answered a 5, 6, or 7 on the 7-point scale. Across the region, there is a 27-percentage point difference between the most efficacious country, Mexico (51%), and the least: The United States (23.9%). While a slim majority of Mexicans feel that leaders listen to them, less than a quarter of Americans feel the same. Unsurprisingly, countries that are experiencing political or economic “hard times” (Honduras, Chile, Panama, and the United States) fall towards the bottom of the scale. In contrast, countries that had recent elections (Mexico and Colombia, and to a lesser extent, Paraguay and Brazil) seem to get an efficacy boost, perhaps because their preferred candidate was recently elected, generating a sense of election euphoria.

Interestingly, Nicaragua and Bolivia appear at the top of the list (as the third and fourth most efficacious countries, respectively). The 2016 re-election of President Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua was marred by claims of fraud. Given the diminished accountability Ortega faced, it is intriguing that citizens in Nicaragua are comparatively efficacious. Similarly, Bolivia recently experienced a “coupvolution” (a combination of a coup and a revolution), in which the forced resignation of former President Evo Morales was orchestrated in part by uprisings (the “revolution”) and in part by the military (the “coup”). The finding for Bolivia could be in part attributed to when fieldwork was conducted, which was obviously well before Morales’ resignation, but Nicaragua is less clear. One possibility is that Nicaraguans fear retribution, and are thus engaging in self-censorship.

While Figure 1 draws attention to national-level trends, what predicts political efficacy among individuals?
Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents Reporting *High* Levels of External Efficacy
As a preliminary step, I evaluate individual-level characteristics that may affect external efficacy, including education, gender, wealth quintile, age, and whether an individual lives in an urban or rural area. Of these predictors, previous research has singled out education as having a particularly strong impact on external efficacy. Agerberg (2019) and Rasmussen and Nørgaard (2018) find positive relationships between higher education and individuals’ likelihood to report greater levels of external efficacy. In particular, Rasmussen and Nørgaard (2018) find that this effect persists even when personal dispositions are accounted for (unlike internal efficacy, which looks at individuals’ belief that they are capable of understanding politics).

I also expect age to exert a positive influence on external efficacy. Previous research has shown that older individuals, many of whom lived through non-democratic regimes, to be more positive towards political institutions. Cassell, Booth, and Seligson (2018), for example, show that older individuals are less supporting of a hypothetical coup than younger individuals. Meanwhile, Castorena and Graves (2019) show that older people tend to be more supportive of democracy, as well.

In terms of individuals’ relative wealth, measured using wealth quintiles, I predict a negative relationship: those who are wealthier are likely to be less efficacious.

I do not anticipate finding a significant difference between genders for external efficacy. While women and men in the region differ in areas such as authoritarianism and support for coups, it is not clear that external efficacy should have the same effect given that it is not related to governing style or crime. Using 2018/19 LAPOP data, Castorena and Graves (2019) find a slight difference between men and women when examining support for democracy (with 59.4% of men and 56% of women expressing support). The authors reveal a slightly wider difference upon examination of satisfaction with democracy (42.3% of men expressing satisfaction with democracy compared to 36.9% of women). If anything, these findings indicate that men may feel more efficacious than women.

Finally, concerning urban versus rural dwelling, I expect that urbanites will be more efficacious because politicians often cater more to urban populations than rural ones since there are more potential voters in urban settings.

To evaluate the relationship between these five predictors and external efficacy, I utilize an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model. Figure 2 presents the results of this analysis, which utilizes, but does not present country fixed effects to account for country-by-country differences. In the figure, the black dots represent the estimated effect size for each of the independent variables (predictors) when regressed on external efficacy. The blue bars on either side of the dot represent 95% confidence intervals. If the estimate and error bars fall on either side of the red line, then the predictor has a statistically significant effect. More precisely, if the estimates are completely to the left of the red line, they have a significant negative effect on external efficacy, while estimates wholly to the right positively predict external efficacy.
Another way to indicate whether a variable is statistically significant is whether the black circle is filled in (representing a significant finding), or open (representing a finding that is not significant). The numbers for each point estimate represent minimum-to-maximum changes; that is, going from the lowest value of a variable to the highest.

Figure 2: Maximal Effects of Demographic and Socioeconomic Predictors on External Efficacy

Figure 2 demonstrates that higher levels of education are negatively associated with external efficacy in this sample. The magnitude of the effect of education on external efficacy is worth highlighting, as it is the largest in the model. The results indicate that going from having no formal education to having post-secondary education represents an 11.7 percentage point shift (out of 100). This finding is contrary to previous studies. One reason for this divergence is that the aforementioned studies were not conducted with a Latin American sample—Agerberg (2019) evaluated 31 democracies, primarily in Europe, while Rasmussen and Nørgaard (2018) conduct their research on Danish and Americans via MTurk. Another potential explanation is that more educated respondents are more critical because they follow politics more closely and have higher expectations of their representatives. More educated individuals are also more likely to have higher rates of exposure to international politics, thereby having comparisons to pit against their own country’s representation.

As predicted, wealthier individuals are less likely to be efficacious: going from the lowest to highest wealth quintile translates to a 1.8 percentage point decrease in efficacy. Though
statistically significant, this finding is only marginally substantively significant in that the magnitude is relatively small.

In line with expectations, older individuals are more likely to be efficacious, although the effect size is relatively small given that respondents’ ages range from 16 to 99 (and the results demonstrate minimum to maximum shifts). Furthermore, urban individuals are more efficacious than rural dwellers by 3.4 percentage points. Meanwhile, the finding for being a female is statistically insignificant, indicating that women are not more or less likely to report high levels of efficacy compared to men.

In sum, of the demographic and socioeconomic predictors evaluated, education appears to be the most impactful finding, with a strong negative impact on external efficacy. However, Figure 2 also demonstrates that less wealthy individuals, those living in urban areas, and older individuals are more efficacious on average in this sample.

Attitudinal and Behavioral Predictors of External Efficacy

Though demographic and socioeconomic factors are critical in explaining many political attitudes and behaviors, external efficacy is a complicated political concept with several possible influences. Based on extant literature, I assess the impact of seven variables, which I group into three overarching categories: 1) political legitimacy, 2) economic evaluations, and 3) online and offline participation.

The first group, political legitimacy, is comprised of two predictors: presidential approval and system support. From a theoretical perspective, political legitimacy is of two concepts: specific support, which refers to evaluations of the specific individuals occupying political office, and diffuse support, which refers to attributes of the system as a whole, such as trust in institutions.\(^8\) Presidential approval is used here as a measure of specific support.\(^9\) Given the nature of the external efficacy question, individuals are likely to think first and foremost of the most visible politician in a country: the president. To measure diffuse support, LAPOP’s measure of system support is used, which is an additive index of five variables measuring trust in institutions.\(^10\) Scholars have consistently shown that system support has important effects on things such as support for coups,\(^11\) political participation and activism,\(^12\) and even regime stability.\(^13\) Furthermore, Castorena and Morton (2019) find a statistically significant association between system support and external efficacy.\(^14\) I anticipate that higher support for the president (specific) and higher system support (diffuse) will lead individuals to report higher levels of external efficacy.

The second group, economic evaluations, includes two predictors: evaluations of one’s personal economy and evaluations of the national economy.\(^15\) Scholars have consistently demonstrated the penetrating effects of the economy on political attitudes and behavior, including political evaluations such as external efficacy.\(^16\) In line with this robust literature, I expect that as individuals’ economic perceptions improve, so will their reported external efficacy.
The last group, online and offline participation, includes three variables: community participation, high social media use, and low social media use (where the latter two variables are compared to individuals who do not use social media at all). For community participation (offline participation), Anderson (2010) finds that a “sense of community” (measured using survey items about perceptions of one’s community) among respondents in the United States engenders greater efficacy. More broadly, Finkel (1985, 1987) demonstrates electoral and campaign participation lead to higher external efficacy, while Rhodes-Purdy (2017) shows that individuals with more participatory opportunities are more likely to support the regime and have higher external efficacy. In terms of online participation, Kenski and Stroud (2006) conclude that higher internet use leads to greater levels of external efficacy. More relevant for the times, Lupu, Zechmeister, and Bustamante (2019) demonstrate that social media use (a particular form of internet use) impacts a number of theoretically similar outcomes in the Latin American region, including support for democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and political tolerance. The authors conclude that “high social media users are more tolerant, and more supportive of democracy as a system of government than are low social media users or non-users” (62), although the reverse is true for satisfaction with government. Meanwhile, Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, and Ardévol-Abreu (2017) find that increased news exposure decreases external efficacy. Thus, the expected direction of social media use is not entirely clear: extant literature suggests online activity could either increase or decrease external efficacy.

Figure 3 incorporates these predictors into the same model in Figure 2, which is again estimated using OLS Regression. Note that the socioeconomic and demographic indicators from the previous model are included here, but not presented. The interpretation remains the same as Figure 2: the effect sizes below represent minimum to maximum shifts, with solid black dots representing statistically significant findings, and hollow dots representing insignificant associations.
Figure 3: Maximal Effects of Attitudinal and Behavioral Predictors on External Efficacy

Figure 3 demonstrates that political legitimacy, namely presidential approval and system support, is positive and statistically significant in the model. Individuals that approve of the president more strongly (specific support) and report high levels of system support (diffuse support) are more likely to feel that politicians listen to people like them. The magnitude of the effect for system support is by far the largest in the model: the shift from individuals reporting no system support to individuals reporting the highest levels of system support is 46.8 percentage points. Meanwhile, going from the lowest to highest presidential approval is associated with a 17.3 percentage point shift, which is also comparatively strong compared to other predictors.

The economic variables indicate mixed results. On the one hand, the perception of one’s own economic situation does not have a statistically significant effect. On the other, a minimum to maximum shift in perceptions of the national economy is associated with a 2.5 percentage point increase in external efficacy. This finding is not entirely surprising given that the focus of external efficacy is more national in scope.

The third group of predictors, participation, reveal a positive association for community participation, but no significant association for social media use (when compared to individuals who do not use social media at all). The finding for community participation suggests that the
more individuals participate in their community, the more likely they are to feel efficacious. The insignificant finding for social media use is not entirely surprising given that scholarship is relatively new and how and what social media use impacts are still being uncovered.

Discussion

External efficacy is an important indicator of the health and quality of a democracy. If respondents do not feel that their leaders listen to them, at best, they vote them out of office in the next election. However, antipathy between voters and their representatives can have downstream consequences, from negative evaluations of democracy to supporting candidates that may propose radical changes to the status quo.

This analysis has demonstrated that respondents’ demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds have a small, but nonetheless significant impact on external efficacy. In particular, one’s level of education has a strong, negative association with external efficacy, a result that is contrary to what previous studies have found. In addition, individuals in lower wealth quintiles, those living in urban areas, and older respondents are more likely to report that political representatives listen to what they think. Meanwhile, gender does not have a significant effect.

When the scope of the analysis is broadened to include political attitudes and behaviors, political legitimacy (both diffuse and specific) stands out as the strongest predictors of efficacious attitudes. Individuals that think that the president is performing their job well and those that have high system support are much more likely to display high levels of external efficacy. Economic predictors reveal mixed effects: while evaluations of the national economy exert a positive influence, evaluations of one’s personal economy are not distinguishable from 0. Finally, while community participation significantly affects efficacy attitudes, social media usage does not, indicating that at least for this particular attitude, offline participation is more impactful than online participation in this sample.

In a global climate that is increasingly critical of both democratic institutions and political leaders in particular, external efficacy is an important signal about not only the relationship between individuals and their representatives but the health of democracy more broadly.
References


Notes

1 Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, and Ardévol-Abreu (2017) find that individuals who exhibit “government efficacy” are more likely to participate politically. While government efficacy and external efficacy are different concepts, there is strong conceptual overlap.
2 Castanho Silva (2018)
3 Castorena, Oscar and Graves (2019)
4 Fisher (2019)
5 This graph shows the percentage of respondents in each country that selected a 5, 6, or 7 in response to the efficacy category.
6 Gender is measured with the variable Q1. Sex [Record but DO NOT ask]: (1) Male(2) Female.
Education is measured with the variable edr, which is created from responses to the survey item: ED. How many years of schooling have you completed? Responses are then sorted into the following four categories: none, primary, secondary, and post-secondary. Age is measured with the variable Q2. How old are you? (in years). Urban/Rural uses the country’s census definition to classify the respondents’ dwelling as either (1) Urban or (2) Rural. Wealth is measured by the variable quintal, which divides respondents into five quintiles using questions about possessions present in the respondent’s household. Respondents are asked whether their households own the following types of items: refrigerator, washing machine, microwave oven, landline telephone, cell phone, cars, motorcycle, potable water, connection to the sewage system, indoor bathroom, computer, internet, TV, and flat panel TV.
7 Cassell, Booth, and Seligson (2018); Castorena and Graves (2019)
8 Easton (1976)
9 Presidential approval is measured using the variable M1: Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President [NAME CURRENT PRESIDENT] 1) Very good (2) Good (3) Neither good nor bad (fair) (4) Bad (5) Very bad.
10 System support is an additive index of the five standard LAPOP items: B1. To what extent do you think the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? (Read: If you think the courts do not ensure justice at all, choose number 1; if you think the courts ensure justice a lot, choose number 7 or choose a point in between the two.) B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)? B3. To what extent do you think citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)? B4. To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of (country)? B6. To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)? Each of these questions is asked on a 1-7 scale (ranging from “not at all” to “a lot,” which is then rescaled to run from 0-100, where 0 represents extremely low system support, and 100 the highest degree of system support. See Booth and Seligson (2009); Booth and Seligson (2005); and Seligson (2000) for additional information on system support.
11 Cassell, Booth, and Seligson (2018)
12 Booth and Seligson (2005)
13 Booth and Seligson (2009)
14 Note that the relationship was in the opposite direction as the one examined here: the authors found that external efficacy positively predicted higher levels of system support.
15 Evaluation of ones’ personal economy is measured with the variable IDIO2: Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago? (1) Better (2) Same (3) Worse. Evaluation of the national economy is measured with the variable SOCT2: Do you think that the country’s current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was 12 months ago? (1) Better (2) Same (3) Worse.
Community participation is an index created from attendance of meetings of religious organizations (CP6), parents associations (CP7), community associations (CP8) measuring average frequency of attendance; ranges from 0 “Never attends meetings of any organization” to 1 “Attends meetings of all organizations at least once a week”. High and low social media use (as well as no social media use, the reference category) are based on individuals’ usage for 3 social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and Whatsapp. According to Lupu, Zechmeister, and Bustamante (2019, 64) “For each platform, we identify users with a combination of two sets of survey questions. First, we identify users as those who respond positively to the questions, SMEDIA1/SMEDIA4/SMEDIA7. Do you have a Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp account? Then, we recode as non-users those who respond “never” to the follow-up questions, SMEDIA2/SMEDIA5/SMEDIA8. How often do you see content on Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp?”. Puddington (2016)