Promoting Political Agency, Addressing Political Inequality: A Multilevel Model of Internal Political Efficacy

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Promoting Political Agency, Addressing Political Inequality: A Multilevel Model of Internal Political Efficacy

Elizabeth Beaumont  University of Minnesota

Some roots of political inequality are planted early in life through linked disparities in individual background and sense of political agency and efficacy. Education often exacerbates these early political advantages. This article uses data from a study of undergraduates to examine whether some types of political learning can promote a sense of political confidence equitably—boosting efficacy for all without making the “political haves” come out farther ahead. Multilevel analysis examines the role of their socioeconomic status, civic resources, and sociopolitical learning for internal efficacy achievement. The findings identify sociopolitical learning mechanisms that differently interact with individual background to contribute to political efficacy and political equality: experiences in a politically active community, acquiring skills for political action, engaging in political discourse, and inclusion in collaborative pluralist contexts. These aspects of political learning can enhance efficacy and reduce the influence of largely unchosen political advantages, creating an alternative pathway to political empowerment.

Political inequality related to patterns of unequal participation is a persistent “democratic dilemma” (Lijphart 1997). This dilemma emerges in part from the fact that many important bases of political participation, including powerful motivations like political agency and efficacy, are largely “unchosen” and unevenly distributed across families, neighborhoods, and schools, classes, races, and genders. This article addresses a pressing tension between democracy and equality by examining how young adults’ backgrounds and political learning intersect to influence their sense of political efficacy—their perceptions of their political capacities—and render it less dependent on background inheritances.¹

Discrepancies in the political resources young people acquire by virtue of socioeconomic status and personal background—political knowledge, experience, norms, and so on—often persist and compound over time, disempowering large segments of the population. Education yields valuable political assets, but often intersects with status and civic resources, providing the greatest benefits to those who need them least. This interaction undermines political equality, contributing to cumulative patterns of political advantage and disadvantage. As a result, education can be a double-edged sword for democracy, simultaneously promoting and stratifying political capacities (Junn 2004; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996).

Most prominent work on education and democracy overlooks this tension, leaving us wondering if there is a troubling trade-off between democratic learning and political equality (Callan 2004; Galston 2001; Gutmann 1987; Macedo 2003; Reich 2002). I argue that some types of political learning can promote both political capacity and political equality: promoting a greater sense of efficacy for all without making the “political haves” come out even farther ahead and helping those who lag behind begin to catch up.

Decades of research emphasize that a sense of internal political efficacy, or political confidence or competence, is a crucial component of political agency and democratic participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Bandura 1997; Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Morrell 2003; Pateman 1971). Studies of young people and adults demonstrate that efficacy and other motivations are often more important for

¹An online appendix at http://journals.cambridge.org/JOP contains information on the survey sample, a preliminary model examining initial efficacy, notes on other preliminary analyses, and question wording and coding. The SPSS dataset is available at http://www.polisci.umn.edu/~beaumont, but following IRB and confidentiality agreements, data that could identify specific students or programs has been replaced by separate identifiers.
participation than influences like civic skills, and many key pathways to participation, including status, are mediated by political efficacy (Beck and Jennings 1982; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Indeed, a strong sense of political efficacy can disrupt the dominant role of status in political life (Shingles 1981).

Yet most studies of political behavior treat efficacy as a given, largely fixed, precondition of political participation, rarely considering how this democratic disposition emerges or how it could be developed more equitably across all groups (see, e.g., Rudolph, Gangl, and Stevens 2000). This study helps fill this gap, using insights from social learning theory to illuminate development of political efficacy in young adults, explain some processes at work, and reveal some complex interactions between individual and contextual-level influences.

Moving beyond conventional explanations of political behavior focused on socioeconomic status and civic resources, I suggest a model of sociopolitical learning focused on four distinctive mechanisms: experiences in a politically active community, acquiring skills for political action, engaging in political discourse, and inclusion in collaborative pluralist contexts. Employing a unique data set drawn from undergraduates participating in different political programs across the country, I use multilevel modeling to test the premise that these learning processes may be able to promote political efficacy and render it less dependent on background influences, offering a more equitable pathway to political empowerment.

### Development of Political Efficacy

How do people gain a sense of political efficacy? Studies suggest three crucial sets of influences on young adults’ political development and behavior: social status, civic resources, and political socialization (Campbell 2006; Conover and Searing 2000; Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Langton and Karns 1969). The first two sets of influences have been studied most extensively. One’s position in the social hierarchy provides valuable material resources, shapes the political norms around us, and influences invitations into politically active groups (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Other research shows that the civic resources people acquire through families and activities like volunteering—knowledge, skills, motivations, and social networks—are often more important for political life than status or material assets per se (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). But civic resources are not evenly or randomly distributed, either. They often overlap with SES and personal background. Thus, civic resources rooted in personal background can contribute cumulatively to unequal levels of political efficacy and participation across groups, reinforcing the democratic dilemma.

### The Overlooked Influence of Sociopolitical Learning Mechanisms

A third lens for viewing development of political efficacy, sociopolitical learning, is a variant of political socialization. It operates through what psychologists term social learning—learning that takes place in relation to social contexts through observations and interactions, and the ways in which people come to interpret, practice, and internalize the perspectives and behaviors they see around them (Bandura 1977, 1997). In essence, a sociopolitical learning model suggests that we are most likely to develop political confidence when our environments and relationships actively encourage political engagement, help us to care about the political realm and identify methods of influence, connect us to others “like us” acting politically, and help us acquire the political skills and commitment to play a meaningful role ourselves.

Thus, the political learning model is not at odds with SES or civic resources models. It complements them, but stresses the role of somewhat different mechanisms these models do not fully capture or explore. Indeed, it similarly emphasizes that those who enter young adulthood with low SES or few civic resources will feel politically disempowered. But it traces this problem to the formative social learning provided by such influences, such as inclusion in authentic political experiences and interactions with politically involved peers. Crucially, the learning model suggests that although high status and early proximity to civic resources are often sufficient for a sense of political confidence, they are not necessary for it.

Deviating from traditional civic education assumptions, a sociopolitical learning model recognizes that the processes that foster a sense of political efficacy do not necessarily occur through formal education. They may be more common and more potent in real-life settings beyond traditional classrooms, including
workplaces, civic groups, and families (see, e.g., Jennings and Stoker 2004; Mansbridge 1983; Pateman 1971). But there is potential for academic courses, extracurricular activities, and campus cultures to include empowering sociopolitical learning mechanisms. It is on this subset of experiences in college students that this study focuses (Kahne and Westheimer 2006; Niemi and Junn 1998; Sigel and Hoskins 1981).

There is already evidence that political development during high school and college years, including some school-related experiences, can have significant long-term effects on political perspectives and participation, even 25 and 50 years later (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991; Beck and Jennings 1982; Hillygus 2005; McAdam 1988; Nie and Hillygus 2001).

At the same time, it is possible that, as with the stratifying effects of education writ large, efforts to provide sociopolitical learning may widen preexisting gaps in efficacy. As one friendly critic warns, when typical civic education efforts measure democratic outcomes, they “will likely demonstrate the strongest and most persistent effects in populations who already control democratic processes, and the weakest effects among disadvantaged populations. In politics as in economy, the rich get richer” (Junn 2004, 254).

Four Mechanisms of Sociopolitical Learning

When political scientists consider the sizable influence of education on political life, they typically either treat it as a “black box” indicator of status or they focus on individual political knowledge and analytic skills (Torney-Purta 1997; Niemi and Junn 1998). Sociopolitical learning theory suggests that four other processes related to social contexts and shared experiences are also critical for developing political efficacy (see, e.g., Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Hahn 1998; Youniss et al. 1997).

Experiences in a Politically Active Community

The first mechanism is learning within a politically active group or community—people consciously engaging in politics, trying to get things done around some shared political concern. This mechanism relates to the experiential learning often identified by democratic theorists and educators as promoting creative faculties through learning-by-doing and problem-solving (Astin 1993; Dewey [1916] 1966; Tocqueville [1835] 1990). It is also linked to psychologists’ studies of self-efficacy: engaging in political experiences with mentoring and seeing others with whom we identify navigating the political realm engenders feelings of political competence (Bandura 1997).

Learning in a politically active community also reveals the human, everyday face of politics: the nuances and uncertainty and the diverse actors and strategies at work. In doing so, this learning can counter abstract, mechanistic views of politics, revealing smaller scale challenges and successes and opportunities to observe people working on a range of goals. Such experiences can generate feelings of political inclusion, commitment, solidarity, and integrity that foster a sense of political confidence not tied to the rewards of success alone.

Acquiring Skills for Political Action

The second mechanism relates to experiential learning, but focuses on one key element: opportunities to acquire and practice active political skills, like organizing people to work on an issue. While critical thinking and other intellectual skills can make us more sophisticated political analysts, they may contribute less to our sense of competence for political action than do skills that tend to be learned and applied in real-life contexts (Colby et al. 2007; Kirlin 2002; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). As with learning skills in other arenas, like sports, math, or music, it is empowering to recognize that many consequential political actions and strategies—from initiating a letter-writing campaign to changing a school policy to winning an election to organizing a protest—can be broken down into smaller sets of component skills. This can help us see that we often possess basic building blocks of political involvement, and others can be learned. Focusing on the nuts and bolts of political action also reveals how individuals and groups can take effective incremental steps toward larger goals, yielding a sense of competence.

Engaging in Political Discourse

The third mechanism for gaining political efficacy, engaging in political discourse, reflects Aristotle’s insight that political life turns on exchanging political ideas and evaluations. Talking about politics in settings that encourage open inquiry and basic respect for persons not only fosters political development through knowledge and communication skills, it encourages us to see politics as relevant to our own lives and concerns,
and something about which our judgments matter. In keeping with this insight, national and international educational studies show that discussing current events with peers and open, discursive classes are among the most important influences on youth political socialization (Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002).

Because discussing current events involves issues that are unfolding and unsettled, it invokes the actual complexity and contingency of politics. Such “real-time” discussions are particularly likely to generate different opinions, test our political views, and encourage us to be more attuned to politics and varieties of belief and action. In addition, talking about politics regularly with the same group creates a politically engaged community in which such discussions—and both the political attentiveness and conflicts they entail—come to be seen as normal and valuable. If one gains habits and norms of discussing politics, this often spills over into other relationships and settings, becoming self-reinforcing outside the classroom. Further, political discussions in contexts beyond family and close friends can make us feel greater ease with formulating our political ideas and exchanging them with those who may disagree with us.

Inclusion in Collaborative Pluralist Contexts

This leads us to a fourth mechanism, learning in collaborative pluralist contexts. Differences and conflict arising from pluralism can shape personal development by creating dissonance and disequilibrium that disrupt individual’s worldviews and political status quo (Deutsch 1961; Piaget 1985/1975; Ulbig and Funk 1999). Political conflicts often operate along multiple lines, including partisanship, class, and religion, and learning contexts featuring such differences can shape political development. Political experiences in racially pluralist environments are particularly likely to move people out of their comfort zones and open them to political change because such differences are highly visible and uncomfortable in American politics.

But interracial and other pluralist contexts can be politically motivating or debilitating, depending on how they are interpreted. Cross-cutting networks, for example, can decrease people’s desire to participate, perhaps because they wish to avoid political conflict (Mutz 2002, 2006). While racial contexts influence political behavior, most people lack positive political interactions across racial lines in schools, workplaces, and communities (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2005; Morrell 2005). When racially pluralist contexts are perceived as supportive and collaborative, such as by providing opportunities to form relationships and resolve tensions, they can contribute to positive political growth. Some research on the effects of racial diversity on undergraduates’ political development supports this idea. Compared to a control group, students who had extensive interactions with ethnically diverse peers gained greater political interest, participated more in campus political activities, and perceived racial differences as less divisive (Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez 2004). Political learning in contexts that are both collaborative and racially pluralist can foster political efficacy by disrupting the stubbornness of early political dispositions. They may help us feel more capable of navigating political complexity and difference, reduce anxiety over racial conflict, and avoid the negative effects cross-cutting exposure can have in other environments.

Research Questions: Links between Sociopolitical Learning and Political Efficacy

The goal for this research is to understand how sociopolitical learning influences undergraduates’ sense of efficacy. To answer this, the study design is not a conventional framework in which participants are compared to controls. Rather it compares participants in different kinds of political programs and contexts. I pose two main research questions:

**Question 1.** Is development of political efficacy conditioned by sociopolitical learning, even when important aspects of individual background, such as socioeconomic status and preexisting civic resources are taken into account? I hypothesize that it is, and that measures tapping four learning mechanisms—experiences in a politically active community, acquiring skills for political action, engaging in political discourse, and inclusion in collaborative pluralist contexts—will contribute positively to a sense of political efficacy.

**Question 2.** Can sociopolitical learning help compensate for aspects of our backgrounds that contribute to low initial political efficacy, helping students who are lagging behind catch up. Or is political learning magnified by SES and background civic resources, leading the political “haves” to come out farther ahead? I hypothesize that political learning can provide an alternative path to political efficacy. This path can promote greater efficacy overall while attenuating the profound impact of personal background on political development and it can
compensate for political disadvantages tied to lower status and preexisting civic resources.

Empirical Analysis

Sample and Data

I examine influences on the development of sense of political efficacy in young adults through a unique dataset drawn from the Political Engagement Project, a multimethod study of nearly 1,000 undergraduates participating in different political courses and programs at colleges across the country from 2001 to 2004. The study involved two stages of sampling, beginning with selection of programs. To maximize variability, 21 political courses and programs were selected to represent a range of student populations and institutional contexts, from highly selective schools to open access institutions and community colleges. Programs were also selected to represent common types of political learning: summer political institutes, a semester in Washington, extracurricular programs, political internships, multiyear living-learning programs, as well as single-term academic courses offered in political science and other departments. Topics ranged over aspects of local, state, national, and international politics.

Finally, programs were selected to include at least one active experience prior research suggests may promote political engagement. These include extensive political discussion; opportunities to interact with political leaders or activists; participation in politically related internships, community placements, or service learning projects; initiating political action projects or undertaking political activities on campuses or in the community; and engaging in political simulations or role-playing, such as Model UN (Astin 1993; Kuh et al. 2005).

Four brief examples help identify the ways in which some study programs tapped one or more of the four sociopolitical learning mechanisms that seem important for political efficacy. (Researchers coded political learning mechanisms based on a combination of faculty and leaders’ responses to a questionnaire on program goals and activities and student participants’ responses to survey questions on learning experiences See online appendix for variables and coding).

Interventions that place students in community groups working on political problems or in local political organizations, for example, have potential to promote learning experiences in a politically active community. One such course was an Introduction to American Government taught at California State University, Los Angeles, an open-access institution. The course generally draws students with little initial interest in politics, many of whom are from immigrant families and/or are first-generation college students. In addition to studying the basics of national and state government, fulfilling a graduation requirement, students work each week for a local political advocacy organization or in a local official’s office. Most students are from the LA neighborhoods served by these organizations and affected by the issues they address. This provides students with a new sense of perspective and inclusion in the complex politics at play in their own communities. Students reflect on how their experiences in local political organizations relate to textbook theories of politics in writing assignments and discussions.

Programs with extensive opportunities for discussing current political events have potential to promote learning mechanisms involved in engaging in political discourse. One such program, the College Leaders Program, is a summer leadership training program held at several Virginia colleges that helps students learn the state’s political topography—its institutions, agencies, interest groups, and public opinion on various issues. Students apply for the program, and are generally politically interested when they begin. As a prominent emphasis of the program, students study and debate issues facing the state in academic-style seminars, talks, and workshops featuring political leaders, and a mock assembly exercise. As a capstone, students select a state issue, ranging from affirmative action to transportation to smoking laws, and write and present a final report discussing policy recommendations, cost/benefit analysis, and the political context and mobilization issues likely to affect adoption of a new policy.

Still other programs focused on helping students gain the kinds of learning involved in skills of political action, skills like how to organize people to work on a political problem. One such intervention is Democracy Matters, a nonpartisan extracurricular program that helps students who are frustrated about democratic processes connect to various campus, community,

2See http://www.carnegiefoundation.org for descriptions of programs, copies of survey instruments, and protocols for student and faculty interviews; see Beaumont et al. (2006), Colby et al. (2007), and Beaumont (2010) for other quantitative and qualitative analyses.
state, and national projects. Students lead their own Democracy Matters groups on dozens of campuses, while the organization’s home base at Colgate University facilitates mentoring, networking, and workshops on how to work effectively for political reform. Students undertake various political action projects, including efforts related to campaign finance reform, fair elections, voter protection, and other issues related to fair democratic processes. To work toward these goals, students begin learning how relevant legislation gets enacted or stalled, and how various political actors influence the process. A critical element of program’s training and mentoring involves helping students acquire concrete political skills for working incrementally toward larger goals: how to gain visibility for their efforts on campuses and in communities, how to run meetings and attract members, how to lobby different levels or institutions, how to form coalitions with other groups.

Finally, some interventions that sought to promote students’ political empowerment did so within collaborative pluralist environments. One example is a large introductory American Government course at Wayne State University, an ethnically diverse campus in Detroit. In addition to teaching students the basic elements of national politics, and fulfilling a university requirement, the course engages students in creating a “Youth Urban Agenda.” The Agenda project begins by assigning students to small groups to identify what they consider to be pressing local issues. The student groups eventually come together in a large convention to select a focal issue and adopt a political agenda for addressing it. Through this experience, students must discuss their political views and goals, which often conflict. They must work together across racial and other differences to build coalitions, adopt a political agenda, and communicate it to stakeholders, including high school students, community groups, the press, and political candidates or officials.

All students in these and the other courses and programs in the study were invited to participate in a pretest survey upon enrollment, generally from fall to summer of 2000–2001 academic year, and a posttest survey upon completion, with the duration ranging from a college quarter to two academic years. Response rates were 70% or higher among all programs for each survey (See online appendix for details). Data used for this analysis are drawn from a subsample of 595 students who completed pre- and postsurveys that represented the full length of their political learning programs. Because several programs occurred more than once during the study, data used for these analyses represent 27 distinct cohorts of students.

The study was not designed to mirror the national undergraduate population, but the sample included a range of student backgrounds. 16% had parents whose mean education equated to a high school diploma or below. Slightly more than a third identified themselves as racial/ethnic minorities; about 20% were immigrants or children of immigrants. As in contemporary higher education, the programs included more women than men (60%). Thus, although college attendance, generally, offers distinct political advantages, the study programs included many students from groups that tend to feel less political efficacious or are at-risk for opting out of political involvement, including racial minorities, first-generation college students, those with lower socioeconomic status, and women (Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003).

About one-quarter of participants were politics majors (political science, public policy, etc.), but the large majority had majors crossing other fields. Self-selection based on initial political interest played an important role for about half the participants. The other half had different motivations, such as fulfilling college requirements, enhancing resumes, meeting scheduling needs, or choosing professors with good reputations. We might assume that more self-selected students who enter programs with higher interest would reap the greatest benefits, but this was not the case. Rather, repeated measures analysis of covariance showed that while the positive effects of interventions differed significantly between students with lower versus higher initial levels of political interest, lower-interest participants experienced greater changes (larger effect sizes) across a wider range of political engagement outcomes (Beaumont et al. 2006). These gains were not large enough to allow less politically interested students to completely catch up to their more engaged peers, but helped close the gap.

Since the study includes only participants in political programs, we must be cautious about generalizing to broader populations. But using data on individual and aggregate levels drawn from various settings provides a valuable opportunity to examine development of political efficacy in this diverse group and to generate cross-level inferences (Achen and Shively 1993).

**Analytic Approach and Measures**

The study employs a quasi-experimental repeated measures design in which students serve as their own controls. Development of sense of political efficacy is measured using the covariance approach, treating political efficacy achievement, or internal political
evidence of civic skill and interest, which promote political efficacy. Research questions seek to understand the role of individual-level influences like socioeconomic status on political efficacy achievement, as well as contextual-level influences, like program political discussion. (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). By estimating variations in outcomes at two different levels, the individual (Level 1) and the contextual or program level (Level 2), we can better identify contextual processes at work while accounting for key aspects of individual background and examine interactions between three types of influence on political development: status, initial civic resources, and political learning.

To assess political efficacy achievement relative to initial political efficacy, the survey employed pre- and posttest measures of internal political efficacy adapted from items in National Election Surveys (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). Each participant’s efficacy score is the mean of her responses to five questions tapping confidence in one’s capacities for political judgment and action, rating agreement with items like “I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics” (See online appendix for question wording and variable descriptions).

Measures of Individual Background: SES, Demographics, and Civic Resources

At Level 1, I examine the influence of SES on efficacy using an average of parents’ education level as an indicator. Initial civic resources are measured through three variables: Home political discussion, Past community volunteering, and Politics major. Having parents who discuss politics at home builds political knowledge and interest, which promote political efficacy. Volunteering can confer valuable civic skills and place people in social networks that encourage political involvement. Choosing a politically focused major presumably reflects a greater degree of political knowledge and interest than other majors and is an imperfect proxy for these civic resources.

Gender and race (White) continue to stratify political development and behavior generally, so these measures are also included (Emig, Hesse, and Fisher 1996; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Sapiro 1983; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). Unfortunately, sample size prevents separating out all racial groups for analysis, so the role of race can be examined only through a crude white/nonwhite framework. Level 1 also includes a basic measure of College selectivity as a control. This may influence political development as a proxy for intellectual ability or motivation or campus differences in social networks or availability of politically relevant extracurricular opportunities.

Measures of Sociopolitical Learning Experiences and Contexts

The Level 2 context-level variables include indicators of four key aspects of sociopolitical learning. Program racial composition is a measure of the proportion of white students in the program, a crude indicator of a racially pluralist context. Program political experience in community is a dummy measure for programs that place participants in community groups or settings, which seeks to tap the role of learning in a politically active community. The last two measures, Program emphasis on current events discussion, and Program emphasis on political action skills, are based on students’ reports at posttest, and tap the mechanisms involved in political discourse and learning active political skills. I also include a control measure of Program size (total students enrolled) to ensure that relationships are not an artifact of size, such as the possibility that smaller programs provide more resource-intensive experiences.

To the extent that self-selection based on initial political interest plays an important role in these experiences—just as self-selection influences most things we do in life, from the groups we join to the careers we choose—employing a pretest-posttest design helps address this. The multilevel model helps account for concerns about endogeneity by including participants’ initial levels of political efficacy as a covariate in the model, as well as by including measures related to participants’ preexisting civic resources, including measures for political science majors, family discussions of politics, and past volunteering. This allows us to evaluate the influence of learning experiences on political efficacy while taking into consideration important background influences.

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3Similar to multiple regression, HLM models estimate intercepts and slopes, and the multilevel model can be conceived in terms of an individual-level (within-group) and contextual-level (between-group) equation, but the two equations are estimated simultaneously through maximum likelihood, allowing us to assess individual- and contextual-level effects together. Traditional multiple regression analysis must pool variance or assume that the means (intercepts) would be approximately equal for all groups or programs, often leading to violations of assumptions and biased regression coefficients and standard errors (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). HLM allows intercepts and slopes to vary over programs as a function of contextual-level predictors.
Moreover, the study design of examining variations related to learning experiences of different types and durations (lasting from several months to 1+ academic years), helps address concerns that shifts in efficacy could be attributed to simple time or treatment effect alone.

Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 1. All scale variables were recoded to a 0–1 range to aid interpretation. On average, participants had an initial political efficacy level of .69, and political efficacy achievement was .74, so average pre-post gain was 5% (standard deviations at both time points are about .2). This increase is statistically significant, though modest. This is not surprising; sense of political efficacy tends to be stable, and we would not expect a single program to strongly shift a core disposition shaped by many influences (McPherson, Welch, and Clark 1977).

Findings

To confirm the appropriateness of a multilevel approach, I examined how much between-group variation exists in the dependent variable, political efficacy achievement, in addition to within-group variation, in a fully unconditional HLM model. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC), reflecting the correlation for political efficacy achievement among members of the same group, is .21, adjusted for reliability. This indicates that a sizable 21% of the difference in political efficacy achievement relates to the political programs in which students participated and can be explained by program-level differences.

Determining Baseline Political Efficacy: The Influence of SES and Civic Resources

To set the stage for answering my research questions, I used a basic one-level model to examine initial levels of political efficacy and see how tightly SES and civic resources are linked to participants’ political confidence on program entry (see Table A in online appendix). Considering individual demographics alone shows that while all participants share the political advantage of being in college, those who are male, White, or having more highly educated parents still bring significantly more political confidence to the table. Adding measures of civic resources, however, subsumes all demographic measures except gender, revealing five significant background influences on initial efficacy: home political discussion, majoring in political science, college selectivity, and gender (volunteering fell just below statistical significance).

The Role of Individual Background in Political Efficacy Achievement

Having examined influences on students’ initial efficacy, I proceed to my main research questions by examining participants’ achievement of political efficacy when controlling for initial efficacy. Model 1 in Table 2 is a “within-program” HLM model that includes only individual-level influences, examining each student’s political efficacy achievement as a function of her SES, civic resources, and other background influences. This a net achievement model in which each effect is computed net of all others in the

4 Transforming variables that originally operated on different Likert-type scales to a 0–1 range places them on the same metric, permitting comparison of effect sizes. Standardized coefficients are more common, but 0–1 rescaling has distinct benefits. It is a linear transformation of the raw score requiring minimal manipulation, avoiding problems of normalization or standardization. It makes statistical research more interpretable to a broad audience and those without statistical expertise. 4 On average, participants had an initial political efficacy level of .69, and political efficacy achievement was .74, so average pre-post gain was 5% (standard deviations at both time points are about .2). This increase is statistically significant, though modest. This is not surprising; sense of political efficacy tends to be stable, and we would not expect a single program to strongly shift a core disposition shaped by many influences (McPherson, Welch, and Clark 1977).

5 Results from repeated measures analyses of variance, with time as a within-subjects measure and efficacy as a between-subjects measure, showed highly significant simple main effects, demonstrating that political efficacy achievement was significantly higher than initial efficacy (F (1,620) = 52; p < .001).

6 HLM assumes variables are normally distributed. Histograms showed that several variables were skewed, but all fell within the acceptable range of +/-2 for skewness and kurtosis. Normal probability plots (Q-Q plots) showed that observed values fell roughly on a 45-degree line. Thus, variables sufficiently approximated normal distribution and did not require transformations.

7 The ICC is obtained by running an intercept-only model in HLM, using the equation ICC = tau / (tau + sigma squared). For this model, Variance between programs (tau) = .00516, Variance within programs, pooled across programs (sigma-squared) = .02801, and Estimated HLM reliability (lambda) = .714. Thus, the ICC is .00516 / (.00516 + .02801) = .16. ICC adjusted for reliability is computed with the same formula, but multiplying sigma-squared by lambda or estimated reliability: 00516/ [.00516 + (.02801 * .714)] = .21.
When all individual-level factors are included, they help explain about 80% of the between-program variance in political efficacy achievement. The sizable influence of initial efficacy ($b = .55$, $p < .001$) shows that a student’s baseline strongly conditions political efficacy achievement—students with little political efficacy at the beginning of their programs are likely to have little efficacy at the end. An individual’s initial sense of political efficacy exerts a great deal of inertia, or makes it difficult for political efficacy to shift up beyond one’s baseline or status quo.

Neither SES, nor gender, nor race significantly affects political efficacy achievement. This does not mean that these influences are unimportant. Rather, the preliminary baseline model showed that these factors strongly shaped efficacy at pretest, so their influence is now largely incorporated into the initial efficacy slope. Importantly, however, for participants in these programs, none of these unchosen or inherited background characteristics exerts additional or cumulative influence on political efficacy. Turning to the role of civic resources, we see that efficacy achievement does not hinge on resources gained from past volunteering or college selectivity, but it is significantly influenced by frequent political discussions at home and by majoring in politics.

### Variable Means and Standard Deviations for Analyses of Political Efficacy Achievement

#### A. Individual-level variables (Level 1) ($N = 595$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy achievement</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>Dependent variable. 0–1 scale for posttest political efficacy where 1 = Very strongly agree/High efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial political efficacy</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>0–1 scale for pretest political efficacy where 1 = Very strongly agree/High efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>0–1 scale for parents' average educational attainment. Mean equates to combined equivalent of A.A. degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>Dummy where 1 = male; Sample is 39% male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>Dummy where 1 = White; Sample is 62% Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home political discussion</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>0–1 Scale for frequency of parental political discussion growing up where 1 = Parents discussed politics very often, once a week or more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past community volunteering</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>Dummy where 1 = frequent volunteering; 76% volunteered frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics major</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>Dummy where 1 = political science or related major; 24% politics majors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College selectivity</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>0–1 scale, where 1 is highly selective; Mean equates to moderately selective.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### B. Context-level variables (Level 2) ($N = 27$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program size</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>0–1 scale for number of students: 1 = 280, largest program. Program mean equates to 36 students/program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program racial composition</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>Dummy where 1 = White; Program mean equates to 68% White.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program political experience in community</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>Dummy where 1 = community-based political learning; Program mean equates to 48% of programs included this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on current events discussion</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>0–1 scale based on average of students’ reports within program; 1 = Very important to my learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on political action skills</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>0–1 scale based on average of students’ reports within program; 1 = Very important to my learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

1. All scale variables were rescaled to 0–1 for analysis to aid interpretation.
2. Program- or context-level means were computed for each program in the study and left unweighted.

---

The sizable influence of initial efficacy ($b = .55$, $p < .001$) shows that a student’s baseline strongly conditions political efficacy achievement—students with little political efficacy at the beginning of their programs are likely to have little efficacy at the end. An individual’s initial sense of political efficacy exerts a great deal of inertia, or makes it difficult for
Importantly, Model 1 also shows that although individual background, as represented by initial efficacy slope and background civic resources, shapes efficacy achievement, it does not crowd out new influences related to political learning. Participants’ efficacy achievement differs systematically from program to program, as demonstrated by the Chi-square tests of the HLM parameters at the bottom of Table 3: both the influence of initial efficacy and program mean achievement of political efficacy (average efficacy among one’s program peers) vary significantly among different types of programs (both p < .001).

The positive influence of program mean political efficacy achievement (b = .75, p < .001) shows that sociopolitical learning context matters for one’s own efficacy development. We can think of this mean as representing the efficacy-achievement context, a kind of black box that may include many things, such as types of students or types of learning. In this sample, an individual’s efficacy achievement is very similar to her program mean. But we also see that if a student is in a high efficacy-achievement context (a program with high mean posttest efficacy), this has an additional beneficial impact above and beyond her own initial political efficacy and her background political assets—just as achievement contexts matter for other learning, from math to music, they matter for political learning. For a student in this sample who begins with low political efficacy, for example, if she participates in a political program where her peers achieve higher efficacy, her sense of efficacy will rise more than we would guess from her own personal starting point. This suggests a variant of a “rising-tide lifts all boats” effect: students whose initial political confidence lags behind program peers will be drawn up toward the group mean.

Taken together with the preliminary model of initial efficacy, Model 1 provides a glass half-full picture of the relationship between early, largely inherited, political advantages and achievement of political efficacy. On the one hand, political advantages connected to socioeconomic status, race, gender, and college selectivity play a role in shaping baseline political efficacy, but they do not exert additional

---

**Table 2** Within-Program Model of Individual Influences on Political Efficacy Achievement (Posttest Efficacy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect of Independent Variable</th>
<th>HLM Standardized Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 Initial efficacy + SES + civic resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program mean for political efficacy achievement (program intercept)</td>
<td>.75 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial political efficacy</td>
<td>.55 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = male)</td>
<td>.01 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>.01 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.00 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics major</td>
<td>.02 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home political discussion</td>
<td>.03 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past community volunteering</td>
<td>.00 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College selectivity</td>
<td>.03 (.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Between-Program Variance Component**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program mean for political efficacy achievement (program intercept)</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial political efficacy</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>68.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.289</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>54.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 595. In order to identify systematic variations in 1) influence of program mean efficacy achievement and 2) influence of initial efficacy on efficacy achievement, the program intercept for efficacy achievement and the slope for initial efficacy are treated as random parameters or left free to vary across programs. All other Level 1 independent variables are fixed and have their residual parameter variance set to zero. For the within-program HLM model presented here, and the full two-level HLM model below, all level-one independent variables are grand-mean centered (i.e., means for all participants in the sample) in order to control for these influences across all programs (and not just within them).
Table 3  A Multilevel Model of Political Efficacy Achievement (Posttest Efficacy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect of Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 2 + socio-political learning variables</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On Individual Political Efficacy Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = male)</td>
<td>.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>.01 (.02)</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>−.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics major</td>
<td>.02 (.01)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past community volunteering</td>
<td>.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College selectivity</td>
<td>.01 (.03)</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Differentiation in Program Mean for Political Efficacy Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average program mean for political efficacy achievement</td>
<td>.66 (.04)</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on political action skills</td>
<td>.13 (.06)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Differentiation in Influence of Initial Efficacy on Political Efficacy Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average influence of initial political efficacy on efficacy achievement</td>
<td>.64 (.26)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program political experience in community</td>
<td>−.19 (.06)</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on discussing current events</td>
<td>−.10 (.18)</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on political action skills</td>
<td>−.39 (.21)</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program racial composition (% non-White)</td>
<td>.45 (.13)</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program size</td>
<td>.18 (.05)</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Differentiation in Influence of Home Political Discussion on Political Efficacy Achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average influence of home political discussion on efficacy achievement</td>
<td>.56 (.14)</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program political experience in community</td>
<td>−.09 (.04)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on discussing current events</td>
<td>−.33 (.10)</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program emphasis on political action skills</td>
<td>−.35 (.14)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program racial composition (% White)</td>
<td>.04 (.10)</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program size</td>
<td>−.10 (.04)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between-program variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program mean achievement of political efficacy (program intercept)</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Variance Component</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial political efficacy</td>
<td>.466</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>65.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>22.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Level 1 N = 595; Level 2 N = 27. Two-level HLM model predicting Intercepts-and-Slopes as Outcomes. Home political discussion slope is fixed because it does not vary significantly by program. Since Model 1 showed that initial efficacy slope varied significantly among programs, it is allowed to vary or is treated as random. This slope no longer varies significantly once level-two variables are included and could be modeled as fixed; running such a model yields only very slight differences in figures for beta coefficients, standard errors, and p-values without changing substantive interpretation of the model.

Influence on efficacy achievement. Civic resources connected to home political discussion and politics major amplify achievement of efficacy, and thus have cumulative effects. And both the preliminary model of baseline efficacy and correlation matrices show that these measures overlap with many personal inheritances. Thus, the strong influence of initial political efficacy demonstrates the problematic stratifying effects discrepancies in individual background create for political development in young adults.

But Model 1 also shows that, as sociopolitical learning theory suggests, achievement of political efficacy is not a function of individual background alone. It can be positively influenced by learning contexts. Neither the extent of efficacy achievement nor the degree of inertia one’s initial efficacy exerts is
the same for participants who experience different kinds of political learning. This offers a preliminary positive response to Research Question 1.

**How Sociopolitical Learning Influences Achievement of Internal Political Efficacy**

The full HLM model in Table 3 adds sociopolitical learning variables to fully address my two research questions. Is development of political efficacy conditioned by four strands of sociopolitical learning: political action skills, political experiences in the community, discussing current events, and racially pluralist environments? And, can these types of learning compensate for political disadvantages tied to individual background, helping students who are lagging behind catch up or close the political efficacy gap?

We saw in Model 1 that program mean efficacy achievement, initial political efficacy, and home political discussion all shape individuals’ political efficacy achievement. Building from this, Model 2 treats the program intercept and slopes for initial efficacy and home political discussion as outcomes, examining whether different types of learning interact with these influences. Thus, Model 2 shows how individual factors and sociopolitical learning operate and interact to affect four outcomes important for political efficacy and political equality: *Average Individual Political Efficacy Achievement, Differentiation in Program Mean for Political Efficacy Achievement, Differentiation in Influence of Initial Efficacy for Political Efficacy Achievement, and Differentiation in Influence of Home Political Discussion for Political Efficacy Achievement*. I discuss these outcomes separately below.

After including contextual-level variables, we see that there is no significant between-program variability in the degree of influence a participant’s baseline efficacy exerts on his efficacy achievement (the Chi-square statistic for between-program differentiation in initial efficacy has become insignificant). This provides a partial positive response to our research questions: accounting for four aspects of political learning helps explain why and how some programs tend to promote greater efficacy achievement. They reveal that these experiences can help disrupt the strong inertia exerted by one’s initial political efficacy or efficacy status quo.

**Effects of Individual Influences on Average Individual Political Efficacy Achievement**

Employing the HLM framework, Model 2 uses a slopes-and-intercepts-as-outcomes approach. This full HLM model illuminates the interaction of sociopolitical learning with three outcomes that shape individual efficacy achievement: program mean efficacy achievement, initial efficacy slope, and home political discussion slope.

**Effects on Differentiation in Program Mean for Political Efficacy Achievement**

Offering a positive response to Research Question 1, this segment of the model shows that emphasis on political skills is particularly beneficial for political efficacy. In general, participants in programs that focus on political action skills tend to achieve greater efficacy than those in programs lacking such an emphasis, even controlling for initial efficacy and other key influences. For a one unit increase in a program’s emphasis on political skills, average efficacy achievement within a program increases about 20% (.66 + .13). (Following HLM restrictions regarding the number of level-2 predictors that can be included, other learning variables were removed from this segment of the equation after determining their statistical insignificance.)

**Effects on Differentiation in Influence of Initial Efficacy for Political Efficacy Achievement**

Strengthening the positive response to Research Question 2, this portion of the model demonstrates that sociopolitical learning affects how much influence one’s baseline efficacy exerts on one’s efficacy achievement. The average slope for initial efficacy across the entire sample, is .64, controlling for all other variables (p=.02). This steep positive slope is a main effect indicating that efficacy achievement is strongly tethered to baseline efficacy. But four elements of political learning shift the pull of initial political efficacy: community-based political learning, emphasis on political action skills, racial balance, as well as program size.

Interpreting these effects is somewhat complicated. In general, when political learning factors interact with initial efficacy negatively, flattening it, it means that the strong inertia of initial efficacy has been reduced. In these instances, political efficacy achievement is less determined by individual background, and thus more equitable and open to the influence of sociopolitical learning. By the same logic, when an aspect of political learning has a positive interaction, the pull of baseline political efficacy becomes stronger. In these instances, one’s baseline efficacy, and the aspects of individual background it reflects, restrict growth and limit the potential for new influences to boost efficacy.
Thus, the negative sign on the coefficients for political experience in the community and emphasis on political action skills indicates that, all else being equal, to the extent that students experienced either type of learning, their efficacy status quo exerted less influence. Or, their political efficacy achievement was more open to the benefits of political learning. Specifically, for a one unit increase in a program’s emphasis on political action skills, controlling for all other variables, the influence of initial efficacy on efficacy achievement drops about 50%, from .64 to .28 (.64 -.38). For political learning in the community, a one unit increase reduces the pull of initial efficacy by about 30%, from .64 to .45 (.64-.19).

The positive coefficient for racial composition shows that, whether a participant was white or non-white, in programs with less racial diversity, the influence of initial efficacy was magnified more than two-thirds, from .64 to 1.09. Thus, overwhelmingly White political learning environments heighten the stratifying effects of individual background for efficacy. Conversely, environments with more non-white students will tend to yield the opposite relationship. This suggests that racially pluralist contexts can temper the influence of initial efficacy, promoting political confidence more equitably. Finally, larger programs increase the pull of initial efficacy. Thinking conversely again, this suggests that smaller programs may benefit efficacy development by reducing the weight of students’ efficacy status quo.

**Effects on the Influence of Home Political Discussion for Political Efficacy Achievement**

This segment of the model furthers the positive response to Research Question 2: three aspects of sociopolitical learning—political experience in the community, political actions skills, and discussing current events—can reduce the background influence of family political discussion on efficacy achievement. Average influence of home political discussion is .56 across all programs; controlling for all other variables (p < .001). Similar to cross-level interactions with initial efficacy, two factors, political experiences in the community and emphasis on political action skills, enhance efficacy achievement by narrowing the role of home political discussion. A one unit increase in emphasis on political action skills reduces the influence of home political discussion on efficacy by over 50%, from .56 to .21 (.56-.35); a similar increase in political experiences in the community reduces its weight by about 15% (.56-.09).

We also see a third political learning element conditioning this slope: program emphasis on discussing current events. Here, for a one unit increase in current events discussion, the role of family political discussion shifts down by 40%, controlling for all other variables (.56-.35). Programs that emphasize political discussion benefit efficacy by strongly mitigating the background influence of home political discussion, perhaps by conferring similar civic resources. Finally, in contrast to the relationship we saw between program size and initial efficacy, program size has a negative coefficient here. Larger programs can enhance efficacy achievement by reducing the influence of home political discussion about 20% (from .56 to .45).

**Discussion**

Not surprisingly, development of political efficacy is strongly influenced by baseline levels of efficacy and by having grown up in a politically active home. But four aspects of political learning can reduce the role of such background advantages, providing alternative routes to political confidence. Thus, while the sociopolitical learning model complements SES and resource models, it identifies alternative equitable avenues to political resources, explains more fully the relationship between individual background and sociopolitical learning, and shows the critical importance of cross-level interactions for political development.

What does a more robust sense of political efficacy look like among undergraduates who have opportunities for empowering political learning? As one student put it, her program “made me more confident about my abilities to contribute. Part of the empowerment was that I can do something about the political situation in the country—even if I’m in the minority, I’m still a voice. And that there should be a place for all voices in this country, and not all voices get listened to right now. And part of my responsibility is making that known... And I think all of those things are important parts of the process and they’re parts of the process that I feel enough tied to that I can do something about.”

These analyses help explain this growth in political confidence. They demonstrate that, even controlling for status and civic resources, sociopolitical learning can contribute to a greater sense of political agency.

Space limitations prevent a thorough discussion of how these specific learning mechanisms operate in the study’s courses and programs, but extensive descriptions and related qualitative analysis can be
found elsewhere (Beaumont 2010; Colby et al. 2007). These findings have several implications for designing empowering learning experiences that are concerned with political equality as well as political efficacy, revealing that different learning processes can condition achievement of political efficacy and political equality somewhat differently.

In this model, the measure for political action skills is the single most important sociopolitical learning mechanisms, possessing the largest number of beneficial effects: This is the only learning experience that boosts the program mean effect on efficacy, and it also mitigates the inequitarian effects of prior efficacy and home discussion on efficacy achievement. Finding ways to emphasize political skills that help students work collaboratively and incrementally toward concrete political goals—organizing a group, running a meeting, getting publicity, lobbying political institutions—seem to offer the greatest potential for enhancing both greater political efficacy overall and enhancing political equality by making efficacy achievement less dependent on background assets.

Three other measures of sociopolitical learning do not significantly boost efficacy achievement, but they help close efficacy gaps and are critical for political equality: they condition efficacy achievement in ways that reduce the influence of preexisting stratification. Learning related to inclusion in politically engaged communities, such as providing students with opportunities to work with local political groups, appears particularly valuable in this regard, since this mechanism played the most consistent role in reducing the role of background inequalities. It mitigates the effects of initial efficacy and home discussion, thus compensating for political disadvantages tied to SES and family background.

In this study, current events discussions and racial contexts play important but less consistent roles in reducing the role of background political inequalities. Programs that emphasize current events discussions have the benefit of mitigating the influence of home discussion (without exacerbating the effect of initial efficacy). Participating in a racially diverse program is likely to do precisely the opposite, mitigating the pull of initial efficacy (without exacerbating the effects of home discussion). Carving out time for thoughtful, open discussions of the tides of politics is a natural fit for most political learning efforts. And, although moderating open political discussions involves attention and skill, this is a relatively straightforward program enhancement to undertake. Faculty and program leaders often do not select their students, but this study suggests that courses and programs featuring racial diversity can promote political equality when they foster cross-cutting collaboration.

Finally, these analyses suggest that program size should not be an issue. Smaller programs, in general, are not more likely to enhance efficacy than larger. They offer a mixed bag for equality concerns: although they may reduce the influence of initial efficacy, they may exacerbate the influence of home discussion. It seems that larger political courses and programs, which can be less resource-intensive and more feasible under tight budgets, can be as politically empowering as smaller efforts.

Conclusions: Rethinking Political Learning, Political Efficacy, and Political Equality

In many settings, including education, socioeconomic status and civic resources create a skewed playing field on which future political experiences operate. While education holds many benefits for democracy, it often contributes to this uneven playing field—despite wishful thinking, current educational practices do not create an “aristocracy of everyone” (Barber 1992). For those concerned about promoting democratic equality—more equal opportunities for political participation and influence across all members of society—the stratifying effect of education, writ large, is deeply troubling. This study takes this democratic dilemma as a central focus, and seeks to address it by identifying political learning mechanisms that can promote greater overall political efficacy and promote it equitably. I show that while much of what we know about political engagement is tied to the stratifying effects of socioeconomic status, some types of sociopolitical learning can weaken these bonds and compensate for the different political assets individuals gain from their early backgrounds. Taken together, these influential sociopolitical learning mechanisms suggest that political efficacy and equality depend on developing relationships and capacities that help us navigate the genuine challenges and rewards of democratic politics. As some political theorists suggest, experiences that foster political agency “must deal with issues that really matter in people’s lives” and help them work on those issues: “One can’t experience freedom or learn citizenship in a ‘Mickey Mouse’ group where nothing of importance is at stake” (Pitkin and Shumer 1982, 52). Providing such robust political learning experiences, especially to young adults that tend to gain fewer political assets from families and neighborhoods, is critical for helping them gain a sense of political agency. Unfortunately, these
opportunities remain rare on most high school and college campuses (Colby et al. 2007; Kirlin 2002).

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References


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