

Examining the Effects of Priming on Private Politics Use

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Abstract: I explore when individuals prefer to target a private firm as opposed to a government institution to lobby for political change. I conduct a laboratory experiment to identify the factors which contribute to the choice of lobbying target. Participants received two treatments. The first treatment presented government running as a business to be more efficient, emphasized the importance of pluralism, or a control. The second varied whether it accentuated previous successful efforts to get a private company to change policy (business efficacy), efforts via the public route (political efficacy), or a control. Participants were then asked to make the discrete choice between an e-petition targeting a corporation (private politics) or an e-petition targeting a government agency (public politics). I find that is that efficacy drives behavior – when business efficacy is emphasized, participants opt for the private petition whereas they go public when political efficacy is mentioned. In contrast, framing the government as if it were better run like a business does not affect the lobbying choice. The results suggest that efficacy is a key concept to understanding private politics.

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Individuals typically participate in politics in order to influence the allocation of resources and the passage of laws. This can be accomplished by influencing a government actor (e.g., lobbying elected officials) through public politics or influencing a corporation via private politics. Private politics encompasses a wide variety of behaviors such as boycotting and buycotting, and is typically orchestrated through non-governmental organizations (Baron et al. 2016).¹ Successful private political campaigns spread through media coverage (Baek 2010). People must be aware of a campaign in order to participate in it, and media coverage, including social media, helps to spread information on the campaign (e.g. de Zúñiga et al. 2013, Kam and Deichert 2017). However, we do not know the mechanism for why individuals opt to utilize market methods rather than approach government agencies—can people be induced to choose private politics over public politics, or do they have persistent preferences?

Inducing Private Politics

I use Diermeier's (2009) definition of private politics, "the use of market mechanisms to change business practices rather than the more traditional route of relying on public institutions instating regulation" (1). Due to term lengths, election cycles, and other institutional factors, public politics often takes longer than private politics, giving private politics an advantage (Baron and Diermeier 2007; Diermeier 2009). These factors among others have led a non-trivial proportion of the electorate to participate in private politics. Other scholars have previously noted that these private methods of participation actually exceed several forms of traditional governmental participation (Kam and Deichert 2017). A nationally representative 2016 study found that 35 percent of respondents participated in either a boycott or buycott (Endres and

¹ Political consumerism is "a consumer's decision either to punish (i.e. boycott) or reward (i.e. buycott) private companies by making selective choices of products or brands, based on social, political or ethical considerations" (Baek 2010, p. 1066). However, political consumerism does not fully describe all the elements of private politics, for example, it does not focus on the role of NGOs in persuading individuals to take these actions (Baek 2010).

Panagopoulos 2017). These results are analogous to the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) pilot, where 32 percent said they participated in a boycott and 22 percent stating they engaged in a boycott within the past 12 months. For a comparison to governmental participation, in the same ANES survey, 17 percent of individuals stated they had donated to a candidate running for office or political party. Moreover, individuals often still disapprove of the government process. Common concerns about the governmental process include the perceived inordinate influence of special interests, as well as elected official's perceived detachment from the problems of everyday individuals (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Previous work has found that participants in private politics are less trusting of political institutions (Stolle et al. 2005, Newman and Bartels 2011).

For this paper I specifically focus on two factors: opinions on whether the government should run like a business, and external efficacy. To clarify, my focus on private politics is mostly relative to governmental participation, which differs from electoral participation (e.g. Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The latter involves voting and activities related to voting, such as canvassing, whereas the former includes, for example, contacting electing officials or attending an organized protest against a government policy. I focus on government participation as it is the relevant baseline to compare private politics (i.e., both aim to influence policy rather than the choice of elected officials). The expectation is that those who believe the government should run more like a business will believe contacting the government is an ineffective avenue for pursuing change. Rather, they would likely believe going directly to businesses themselves would be more effective since change can happen more quickly. This leads to the expectation that the more individuals believe government should run like a business, the more they will attempt to work their influence directly via corporations – that is, private politics.

This view – about how government should be run – can potentially be shaped via communications. For example, Gangl (2007) created two vignettes, one of which she described as “pluralist” which emphasizes the positive aspects of the government process (full wording in appendix).² Pluralist theory describes a political system in which freely competing social interests influence government decisions (Kernell et al. 2018). The frame characterizes the government process as working as defined in the pluralist model—the frame emphasizes the importance of considering other viewpoints and interests before making decisions. The second, or “business” frame, declares that many think the government should be run like a successful business. When presented with the pluralist frame, respondents were more likely to state that the government process was timely and fair compared to those who received the business frame. I predict that these frames will produce the same results when it comes to inducing private political behavior. If people are primed to think government should run like a business, they will apt to just act via businesses themselves when given the choice. But, when primed that government is complex and pluralistic, they will go through public political channels.

Prediction 1: After reading a frame highlighting the merits of government running like a business, individuals will be more likely to pursue private politics methods, all else constant.

Prediction 2: Individuals primed to believe that government should not run like a business (e.g., and is pluralistic) will be more likely to utilize public politics methods, all else constant.

My second key variable is efficacy. Individuals with a greater sense of efficacy participate at higher rates than those who do not. Efficacy comes in two forms: internal efficacy, defined as “a sense of personal competence in one’s ability to understand and to participate in

² Following Gangl (2007), the pluralist frame mentions a counterargument directly, where the business frame does not.

politics” (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, p. 15); and external efficacy, which is the belief that the government will respond and take action (Converse 1972). I specifically focus on external efficacy. Individuals can be mobilized to feel more efficacious. For example, political interest groups often persuade citizens to write letters to Senators and members of the House of Representatives (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, p. 108). The presumed *mobilization* mechanism is enhanced efficacy – interest groups make people feel like they can make a difference, and this leads them to act (Prewitt 1986). Mobilization can come in various forms beyond interest groups – including from teachers or church officials who teach individuals that they can make a difference in their community (Finkel 1985, Rosenstone and Hansen 1996).

Other evidence on the mobilizing possibility of efficacy comes from field experiments of participation – while this focuses on electoral participation, the results are nonetheless telling. For instance, voting increases when individuals are targeted directly and told that it was their civic duty to vote, or that the election was close (e.g. Gerber and Green 2000). People who are told their vote matters and they are more likely to turn out because of the increase in external efficacy. I thus predict that when individuals are primed with messages that emphasize external governmental efficacy, they will be more likely to engage in governmental participation.

There is a parallel here, too. While I am unaware of any formal discussion of business efficacy or private politics efficacy, the concept transports straightforwardly. The greater individuals think they can influence politics via approaching businesses, the more likely they are to do so. Thus, I predict when individuals are primed with messages that emphasize external *businesses* efficacy (i.e., they can influence what businesses do), they will be more likely to engage in private political participation.

Prediction 3: Upon reading about previous successes from contacting the government, individuals will be more likely to engage in public political participation, all else constant.

Prediction 4: After reading about previous successes from targeting private corporations, individuals will be more likely to engage in private political participation, all else constant.

Methods

To test these predictions, I designed a laboratory experiment to represent the choice between public and private politics. Respondents were required to make a discrete choice to sign one e-petition or another – either to the NOAA (the National Oceanic Atmospheric Association, a government agency) or BP (a gas and oil company).³ Choosing the petition directed to the NOAA represents a public political act, and choosing the petition directed at BP represents a private political act. The e-petitions were directed at an environmental issue, as such issues are one of the main political issues targeted through private politics and NGOs (Karpf 2010; Hadden and Jasny 2017). Furthermore, the topic of the overfishing of bluefin tuna was chosen, as the issue is not one on which individuals would have strong opinions which would make them unlikely to be moved by frames (Druckman and Leeper 2012). Finding a relatively low salience issue is important to the validity of this experiment because previous research has found people continue to hold onto the opinion they developed upon first hearing about an issue (Druckman, Fein and Leeper 2012). This is a sensible starting point for an initial test of private political

³ Participants were only allowed to choose one target to petition in the results viewed so far. However, in the world of politics, interest groups often encourage engagement in both public and private politics (e.g. Baron 2001, Diermeier 2007). I therefore asked an additional question to participants on who they would lobby more, the NOAA (the public politics entity) or BP (the private politics entity), or if they would lobby both equally. The results of that question similarly demonstrated that efficacy was the major driver of lobbying choice.

communications. This issue has high external validity too since it has in fact been a subject of private politic efforts.⁴

Undergraduate students received one of nine treatments. Students received one of three frames that either presented government running as a business to be more efficient, emphasized the importance of the time-consuming government process in order to insure all voices are heard (i.e., pluralism), or a control. For the efficacy dimension, respondents randomly received an article that did not mention political or business efficacy, one that mentions only political efficacy, or one that mentions only business efficacy. In the business efficacy frame, the article points to a previously successful social pressure campaign directed at private businesses. The campaign led to the desired result of the businesses changing their practices in order to protect bluefin tuna. For the government efficacy message, participants receive an analogous frame but focused on politics. In this frame, social pressure successfully caused the government agency (the NOAA) to take actions in protecting of bluefin tuna, thus demonstrating the efficacy of e-petitions directed towards government agencies. Table 1 lists the combinations of the treatments.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Results

Choice of E-petition

As stated previously, the main variable of interest is the choice of e-petition—I seek to find if and how individuals can be persuaded to pursue one form of participation over the other. The choice of public politics is represented by sending an e-petition to the government agency,

⁴ The surveys were based off of were one sponsored by The International Game Fish Association (available at <<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/618/212/596/>>). Other private politic efforts on the topic of Bluefin tuna have been sponsored by the Center for Biological Diversity.

the NOAA. By choosing the e-petition directed at BP, the individual is engaging in private politics.

I present the results of these choices in Table 2, listing the proportion of respondents who opted to sign the NOAA petition rather than the BP one. The results suggest that the frames that affected views of government – the government should run as a business frame and the pluralist frame – have no clear effect on which petition to sign. This is counter to predictions 1 and 2. But I do find, consistent with predictions 3 and 4, a very strong effect for efficacy and this is what I highlight in the table with the asterisks indicating significant movement from the control. Indeed, the political efficacy frame significantly moved people to sign the NOAA petition whereas the business efficacy frame did the reverse. The conditions without efficacy frames had no effect. Of those who received the control efficacy frame, 81 percent chose the government petition, a high baseline. In the government efficacy group, 92.9 percent of chose the government petition. In contrast, significantly less (52.8 percent) of those in the business efficacy group chose the NOAA petition. In short, nearly a 40 percent shift occurred based on an efficacy message. The business efficacy frame had a larger effect than the pluralist efficacy frame, but this should not be over-interpreted given Democratic skew of the sample likely lead individuals in the control to be more likely to opt for NOAA and thus there was a ceiling on the movement towards NOAA. While there are not enough Republican participants to analyze by treatment, across all treatments, 59 percent of Republicans chose the e-petition directed at the NOAA compared to 81 percent of all Democrats and 73 percent of Independents.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

In sum, the main driver of behavior was efficacy, with both two of the three political efficacy frames and all of the business efficacy frames reaching significance compared to the

control. As mentioned, potential reason why one of the political efficacy treatments did not reach significance is perhaps because of a ceiling effect (Condition 8).

Opinions on How the Government Should Run

Contrary to expectations, the pluralist frames and government should run like a business frames did not have an effect on e-petition choice. I therefore present a manipulation check to see if the frames did have any influence on opinions of how often government should run like a business. The survey included an item that asked,

Some people believe that there are some important differences between how government should be run and how a business should be managed. Others believe the government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people. Still others say a combination would work best. What best represents what you think the government should run like?

- 1. The government should never run like a business*
- 2. The government should run like a business rarely, less than 10% of the time*
- 3. The government should occasionally run like a business, about 30% of the time*
- 4. The government should sometimes run like a business, about 50% of the time*
- 5. The government should frequently run like a business, about 70% of the time*
- 6. The government should usually run like a business, about 90% of the time*
- 7. The government should always run like a business*

If the treatments successfully shifted attitudes, we should see participants in the “pluralist” treatments prefer the government to function as a business for a smaller amount of the time since they will come to appreciate the realities and complexities of government (Hibbing and Thiess-Morse 2002). In converse, I expect those in the “government should run like a business” treatments to believe the government should run like a business for a larger percentage of the time. I furthermore suspected a possibility that the business efficacy treatment would lead individuals to think government should run more like a business since it suggests more efficacious outcomes via government as a business.

[Insert Table 3 About Here]

The results are in Table 3. The asterisks indicate significance at the one-tailed level relative to the control. The results leave little doubt that messages emphasizing either pluralism

or government running as a business fundamentally affect views of government. The respondents who received a pluralist frame were significantly different than the respondents that received the control frame to believe government should never run like a business, with the exception of the pluralist and efficacy frame (the differences in means was greater than zero or positive). In contrast, those who received the government should run like a business frame were significantly different than those who received the control frames, in every case (the difference in means was less than zero or negative). I did not find much difference based on efficacy. In short, efficacy messages do not seem to affect views of how government should run but the manipulation check here shows that the government running as a business frame and pluralism frame do affect attitudes – just not behavioral intentions.

In sum, these findings suggest that the relationship between opinions of how the government should run and efficacy are more nuanced than previously thought, and should be studied further. Overall, efficacy treatments seem to be the main driver of *behavior* directed towards the government or businesses, whereas the pluralist and government should run as a business frames effect *attitudes*. When it comes to the lack of an effect of the pluralist frames, if one believes pluralism is best, they may recognize efficacy is lower and so learning about efficacy does not have a salient influence, at least in light of the more direct messages offered by the other frames. The overall result is dramatic insofar as people's fundamental views of how government should function can be altered by a single communication; while I have no way to assess the endurance of these effects, it suggests people's understanding and perspectives of governing are malleable.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the absence of strong opinions about whether the government should or should not run like a business, certain frames can persuade individuals to change their mind (Gangl 2007). Activists have stated they target corporations for private politics in part because of the time-consuming nature of lobbying the government (Baron and Diermeier 2007, p. 600). I sought to determine whether Gangl (2007)'s findings would transfer over not only to the issue of whether the government should run like a business, but the avenue of politics chosen—in this case, private or public. Moreover, I explored the impact of efficacy. By selecting a low-salience topic and using different frames, I was able to successfully influence participants' choice of e-petition to direct towards a government agency (the NOAA) or a private company (BP, the oil company).

The results suggest efficacy is a key factor in motivating participation. Participation is largely based on the availability of resources, including tangible ones such as monetary resources but also psychological motivations (e.g. Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012). Signing an e-petition takes very few tangible resources, all that is needed is a moment of spare time and Internet access, and like many online tasks the cost is extremely low (Karpf 2012). Lowering participation costs leads to increased participation. However, psychological motivation is still needed in order for individuals to decide to sign and potentially share these petitions.

The ability to change political motivation has dramatic consequences for research in participation. Since online political participation costs substantially less than other forms of participation it does not have the same barriers to entry that other forms of participation, such as donations to candidates, attending town hall meetings, or even voting, do. If organizations can successfully trigger efficacy, they can amplify public and private political participation. Further research is needed to explore the consequences of these effects.

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Table 1: Treatments

	Control 2	Political Efficacy Frame	Business Efficacy Frame
Control 1	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3
Pluralist Frame	Condition 4	Condition 5	Condition 6
Government as Business Frame	Condition 7	Condition 8	Condition 9

Table 2: E-Petition Choice by Treatment

Condition 5	0.97 (0.03)**
Condition 2	0.92 (0.04)*
Condition 8	0.91 (0.04)
Condition 7	0.82 (0.06)
Condition 1 (Control)	0.82 (0.06)
Condition 4	0.79 (0.06)
Condition 6	0.60 (0.07)**
Condition 3	0.53 (0.10)***
Condition 9	0.45 (0.08)***

*** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; * $p \leq 0.10$ (one-tailed vs. control)

Table 3: Mean Opinion on Frequency the Government Should Run Like a Business

The government should never run like a business (1)	
Condition 5	1.90 (0.21)***
Condition 4	2.57 (0.19)**
Condition 6	2.76 (0.16)
Condition 2	2.92 (0.15)
Condition 1 (Control)	3.00 (0.16)
Condition 3	3.03 (0.20)
Condition 8	3.45 (0.18)**
Condition 9	3.66 (0.26)**
Condition 7	3.68 (0.24)***

The government should sometimes run like a business, about 50 percent of the time (4)

*** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; * $p \leq 0.10$ (one-tailed vs. control)