

Civic Engagement: Who is Engaged among College Students?

Abdulfattah Yaghi

ayaghi@kennesaw.edu



Introduction

Contacting the government is considered an indication of civic engagement.

The purpose of this study is to explore student-initiated contacts with local and state governments, bureaucrats, and public officials in Mississippi, Kentucky, and Georgia.

The study examines different patterns of student-initiated contacts and the impact of students' academic, racial, social backgrounds, and civic and political behavior on contacting the government.

Previous studies have not treated students as a coherent group, students were included in the general, adult population. This study focuses on college students.



Theory

- Initiated contacts with the government is a “political process” through which the contactor aims to accomplish certain goals (e.g., get benefits).

- “Contacting” can serve either the contactor (particularized referent) and/or other people on behalf of whom he/she initiates a contact (general referent) (see for example, Verba and Nie, 1972: 67-77; Hirlinger, 1992:557; Zuckerman and West, 1984: 122).

- Four major overlapping theoretical models have been developed by researchers to explain the contacting behavior (Sharp, 1982; Jones et al., 1977; Jacob, 1972; Zuckerman and West, 1984; Peterson, 1986; Hirlinger, 1992):
 - The socioeconomic
 - The parabolic
 - The clientele, and
 - The general referent-particularized contacting models.



□ The socioeconomic model

Verba and Nie (1972) argue that citizens' socio-economic status (SES) influences the way they contact the government; those of a higher level of SES are more likely to contact and to contact more often than those who are in a lower SES (also see, Hero, 1986).

Brady et al. (1995:285-293) explain that rich, educated, professional, and efficacious citizens have better *resources* that enable them to participate in public life as well as to contact the government in various ways.



□ The parabolic model

Citizens contact the government because they:

- (1) have needs
- (2) are aware of their needs, and
- (3) recognize the vitality of government's services and programs

Citizens behave rationally to satisfy their needs. Needs, however, cannot by themselves drive contacting unless there is a personal awareness that need X or Y should be fulfilled.



□ The clientele model

This model is an attempt to focus on needs, interests, and SES from a consumer perspective.

Citizens are clients (demanders) who contact the government (provider of services and goods) because they have needs that should be satisfied

Citizens estimate benefits, and they carefully calculate their actions to gain as much benefits as possible from governmental programs and services.



□ General referent-particularized contacting model

Hiringer (1992: 553-563) and Traut and Emmert (1993) stress that while particularized contacting is best explained by citizens' perceived needs and political ties, general referent contacting is best explained by perceived efficacy.

Perceived needs, resources, and political ties constitute fundamental factors in contacting the government as well as political activism.

Compared to large cities, small or homogeneous communities (e.g., racially, culturally, or ideologically) may have more people who are willing to contact on behalf of others.



Sample

Simple random sample selected from a list of courses offered by departments of political science, public administration, and international affairs.

Students enrolled in:

American government, comparative governments, international relations, political geography, ethics in public administration, political seminar, and public policy... number of final cases is (510) students.



Variables

Dependent variable:

Number of initiated contacts with state and local governments.

Independent variables:

Age, gender, ethnicity, level of study at school, political ideology, political efficacy, political affiliation and civic involvement, satisfaction with government's performance, reason for contacting (needs), and final recipient factor.



Hypotheses

- H1: Age is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H2: Gender is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H3: Ethnicity is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H4: Level of study at school is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H5: Political ideology is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H6: Political efficacy is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H7: Political affiliation and civic involvement is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H8: Satisfaction with government's performance is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H9: Reason for contacting (needs) is statistically associated with the number of contacts
- H10: Final recipient factor is statistically associated with the number of contacts



Data and Methods

- 620 questionnaires (close-ended) were distributed.
- 510 valid cases.
- 82 percent is response rate (510 out of 620).
- The response rate is relatively high due to distributing questionnaires and collecting them during the same class session
- Analysis:
 - Bivariate analysis: chi-square for simple hypothesis testing and associations, and
 - Gamma for the strength of the association between contacting the government (dependent) and all other independent variables.
- I dichotomized the original responses of several questions as needed.

Findings

Distribution of Sample		
# Contacts	Frequency	%
One time	55	16
Twice	87	25.4
Three times or more	201	58.6
Total	343 (167 cases did not contact, 32.7% of sample)	100



Describing the Sample

- The largest percentage of contactors is amongst those of 21 years of age and above.
- In all age categories there are more students contact three times or more.
- There are more female students than male that contact twice. Comparatively, more male students contact three times or more.
- The general trend is similar for all ethnicities except, maybe, for those who indicate “other.” It should be noted that “other” ethnicities contact more often than any other group does.
 - “other” could refer to international and foreign student.



Testing Hypotheses

- There is a significant relationship between contacting and the following demographics:
 - Age (Chi-square 58.028, sig., .000, Gamma 0.137, sig., .022)...Confirms reports by Verba and Nie (1972), Brown (1982), and Hero (1986).
 - Gender (Chi-square 5.934, sig., .051, Gamma .180, sig., .061).

- There is insignificant association between contacting and ethnic background.

These findings add ambiguity to inconsistent findings reported by Jacob, 1972, Eisinger, 1972, and Verba and Nie, 1972, Thomas 1982, and Hero 1986.

Statistical Relationships

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Ci-square*</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>Gamma**</i>	<i>Sig</i>
□ Political ideology (liberal vs. non-liberal)	9.531	3.60	.021	.404
□ <i>Political efficacy</i> (<i>contact vs. no contact</i>)	16.336*	.011	.450**	.003
□ Political and civic affiliation (yes-no)	8.150*	.027	.221**	.008
□ Satisfaction (satisfied vs. not satisfied)	9.806	.601	.042	.225
□ Reason to contact	9.738*	.032	.511**	.006
□ Final recipient	16.812*	.047	.127**	.078

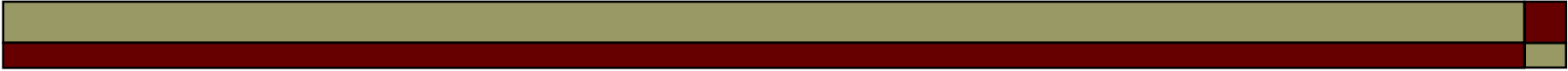
* Significant at the .05 level

** Significant at the .05 level (for dichotomized variables)



Discussion and Implications

- About 67 percent of the sample initiates at least one contact.
 - This rate is the highest among all previously reported rates (see, for example, Verba and Nie, 1972; Lehnen, 1976; Thomas, 1982; Zuckerman and West, 1984; Hirlinger, 1992; Thomas and Melkers (1999)).
- The study confirms that older students contact more often than younger students do. Similarly, senior-level students contact more often than do freshmen.



Student-initiated contact with state and local governments could be predicted by a model of seven variables (ordered according to Gamma strength of association):

Need (reason)

Efficacy

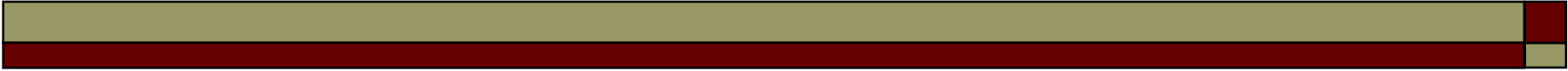
Political and civic affiliation

Gender

Level at school

Referent contacting (recipient), and

Age

- 
-
- Political ideology and satisfaction with government's performance were insignificant predictors of the contacting behavior.



What Does The New Model Mean?

- For researchers:
 - Contacting the government is a dynamic phenomenon that varies from one person to another. Compared to previous studies, new factors should be taken in consideration, namely gender, age, level at college.
 - College students represent a large segment of the population in the country. Therefore, researchers should pay better attention to their political behavior.
 - Future studies should expand this research into a national sample.
 - Several elements of the findings of this study might have been resulted from the cohesiveness of the sample (age group, class subject, and community). Therefore, a heterogeneous sample could be utilized to test the extent to which the student body can maintain its cohesive responses we saw in this study.



□ For practitioners:

- Needs, efficacy, and political ties/affiliation are the most significant factors. Therefore, while contactors might approach the government for different reasons, particularized and general-referent contacts seem to be influenced by the same factors.
- Schools should encourage civic involvement and public awareness among students because the study confirms that efficacy and civic engagement are the most important factors, after need, that motivate contacting governments and public officials.
- Students do contact more often than all other age groups (look at previous studies).