How Can Intersectionally Marginalized Groups be Empowered? : Explaining the impact of descriptive representation on political efficacy

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0. Introduction

The mid-term election of the United States in 2018 named the year “the Year of the Women.” More than 100 women were elected and 42 of this number were women of color, and at least three of them are LGBTQ+. The first Muslim women and Native American women were elected to Congress as well, and these phenomenal records made big news. This representation full of diversity is seemed to be the huge improvement comparing with decades ago. However, what the headline celebrates is the advance only of women, which distracts citizens’ attention from other marginalized groups. Actually, these unconscious bias can often be seen a lot in the daily lives. When imagining a marginalized “group,” many of us come up with a set of people who are comparatively more powerful in the groups; white women in the feminists, and gay people from LGBT community as the word “gay marriage” describes. Since more inclusive society is needed, it is high time to consider more deeply about intersectionally marginalized groups.

Then, how can intersectionally marginalized groups be more empowered? First and primal solution is to enhance the political efficacy by increasing descriptive representation of marginalized groups. In fact, many previous studies have pointed out that descriptive representation influences the mindset and participation of each citizen. However, these research picked up only 1 factor such as being women or African American, and failed to
explain the dynamics and oppression that lie at the intersection of these categories. Thus, this thesis considers the importance of marginalization along multiple or intersectional identities, and suggests that for groups with higher rates of descriptive representation, higher levels of political efficacy will also be observed.

1. Why does political efficacy matter?

Previous studies on political efficacy have revealed that marginalized groups have lower political efficacy than the rest of the population, which makes it difficult for them to be politically empowered. It intuitively sounds obvious that the lack of substantive representation leads to low political efficacy, though, they have also found that even descriptive representation influences the sense of inclusiveness among citizens. These studies have shown that the increase in female descriptive representation enhances women’s political efficacy (L, Atkeson and N, Carrillo 2007) and participation (A, Alexander. 2012), and later K, Tate and S, Harsh (2005) explained more generalized model that descriptive representation along gender lines influences political efficacy of each sex. Moreover in the field of minority studies, S, Banducci, T, Donovan, and J, Krap (2005) verified that minorities’ descriptive representation enhance their participation, and more specifically, African Americans that are descriptively represented by other African Americans have higher efficacy than those represented by non-Blacks (S, Gleason and C, Stout. 2014).

These facts makes up more generalized model as my hypothesis; when similarity between individuals and their representative increases, political efficacy of each citizen goes up. In the context that WASP men dominate the congress seats, having marginalized factors means low similarity with their representative, therefore their efficacy remains low. Conversely, when a person from a marginalized group is elected to office, citizens having similar factors
get higher efficacy, which previous researches identified.

Disclosing the mechanism of political efficacy is important for addressing unjust problems happening in current society. Mainly two problems have the potential to be improved. First is the legitimacy of government’ ruling over citizens. The reasons why governments can enjoy coercive power is because citizens are regarded to have socially contracted with that their representatives rule the country to reflect citizens’ will. Obviously, politician can best represent citizens’ interests by having similar background (W, Smooth. 2011). If we are in the situation that only privileged groups can more likely reflect their interests, we would have to say that current democracy is not legitimate enough except for white men. In fact, John Adams explicitly articulated that elected representatives should be “a portrait of the people at large in miniature.”

The second importance of political efficacy is it directly leads to the empowerment of marginalized groups. It has found that political efficacy is a positive predictor for expected political activities (W, Schulz, 2005). Because of cost-benefit calculation, for example, citizens tend not to vote when they feel their votes have no ability to influence the outcome of elections. This decreases their substantive representation, which lowers their political efficacy. This vicious circle delays marginalized groups from being more politically active.

This paper is unique to focus on intersectionality because not only gender and race, but also the overlapping impact of age, income, religion, and other marginalized factors are worth being paid attention in current context. This paper would like to call for having intersectional perspectives, not only counting the number of female politicians.

This paper aims to verify the correlation between descriptive representation and political efficacy, but does not aim for showing causal relationship between them. Because previous research has indicated the existence of causal relationship between them in the field
of Black study (S, Gleason and C, Stout. 2014), it seems obvious that same mechanism can be applied to this research on intersectionality when the correlation coefficient is found.

2. Theoretic approach

The hypothesis is supported by two theories. First is the law of similarity. Psychologists have revealed that people feel more familiar with others with similar personalities. Through the media, citizens confirm that their identities are represented in political sphere, and feel that every expression the politician gives conveys the idea “I am one of you.” (S, Banducci and others, 2005; C, Swain. 1993). This feeling is important because representatives are regarded as agency of citizens to reflect their interest on policies. Especially for the case of minority, they tend to become much more sensitive toward group differences (L, Bobo and F, Gilliam. 1990) because they have hoped to be more included in the society for a long time. Due to this unconscious and sensitive sensor, marginalized groups feel underrepresented today then political efficacy decreases.

The second one is the assimilation effect. K, Jamieson and J, Cappella (2008) found that people tend to perceive that politician’s position is more like your own than it is when conservatives see a conservative president (assimilation). Conversely, they also found that liberals tend to see a conservative president that his position is different from their own than reality is (contrast). These effects are applicable because the essence of this theory is that people tend to automatically categorize others into friends and foe, and believe friends share same political position in every issue. Same as democratic and republican party pursue different policy, men and women, gay and transgender people, the rich and the poor are for the sake of different, and (partially) opposite interests which may often conflict. One side of the groups imagine that they have no room, or it is impossible to make compromise each other
with the other side of the groups. This is the one of the reasons why not only substantive representation but also descriptive representation influence political mindsets of citizens. For these reasons, citizens feel they are represented by their “friends” and by their agency when their representatives has similar attributions (and more similar they become, the stronger this tendency appears).

3. Analytic approach

This section aims to verify the correlation between the impact of descriptive representation and political efficacy. However, the impact of descriptive representation cannot be expressed by mere number on how many similarities they share. The quality of attributes should be taken into account as long as different attributes has different impacts on political efficacy. The factor that they have same hobby has less influence than that they share similar racial background, for instance. This makes an analytic approach much more complexed. Therefore, this research would like to focus on two marginalized factors in order to make it verifiable, and to know how they overlap each other.

The marginalized factors to be focused on are gender and race. The first criteria to be chosen is visibility of factors. Both gender and race are visible at first sight so citizens can understand quickly whether they are common in these factors, even without knowing representatives’ background so deeply. The second is public attention. Because having these two factors strongly impacts with your lives due to injustices, people have paid attention and made successive social movements for more than a century. Therefore, gender and race is the most measurable factors to see the relationship between descriptive representation and political efficacy.

The research use two different datasets. One is American National Election Studies
(ANES)\(^1\) and the other is National Black Election Studies (NBES) 1996 (K, Tate. 1996). The advantage of using ANES dataset is to be able to minimize the influence coming from specific incidents which might be happened in certain year because it contains data for about 70 years. On the other hand, BNES dataset is rich in the number of samples of African American because it exclusively contains data of African Americans. By analyzing two different datasets, the reliability of results will be improved more. As for ANES data, the paper utilizes the data from 1990 to 1998 because necessary data is completed only in this term. Table 1 shows the number of respondents from each dataset.

Political efficacy is divided into two concepts (R, Hero and C, Tolbert. 2005). One is the internal efficacy, refers one’s beliefs about their ability to participate in politics. The other is external efficacy, refers one’s beliefs about government responsiveness. The research exclusively focus on external efficacy because the impact of descriptive representation on internal efficacy is intuitively more understandable, so this paper would like to go further on how descriptive representation changes the perception of individual on government responsiveness. External efficacy is measured by the question “government officials don’t care much what people like me think” in NBES on a five point scale, and by the question “government officials care much what people like me think” in ANES on a three point scale. Believing “government officials care much what people like me think” indicates that respondents have high external efficacy.

Independent variable is the height of external efficacy, and dependent variable is the extent of similarity with their representative. Similarity with representative is weighed by whether representative with same gender or race of each respondent exists in the House of Representative from their district when respondents answered the questionnaire.

Table 1: The numbers of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NBES</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>ANES</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>(313)</td>
<td>(546)</td>
<td>(1,216)</td>
<td>4,232</td>
<td>5,023</td>
<td>9,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>1,216</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>1,094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>represented by</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>represented by same gender</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**[Result]**

Data from both datasets indicates that female African American have higher external efficacy when they are represented by female African American as hypothesis predicted. Having representative with same race and gender decreases approximately 5.8% citizens having low external efficacy when focusing on female African American group, which is seemed to have two marginalized factors (women and non-white) (see Table 2).
### Table 2: external efficacy of female African American with different gender representative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>BNES</th>
<th>ANES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female African</td>
<td>Female African</td>
<td>Female African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American with male</td>
<td>American with female</td>
<td>American with male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High external efficacy (%)</strong></td>
<td>67</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low external efficacy (%)</strong></td>
<td>78</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: external efficacy of male African American with different gender representative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>BNES</th>
<th>ANES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male African</td>
<td>Male African</td>
<td>Male African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American with male</td>
<td>American with female</td>
<td>American with male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High external efficacy (%)</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low external efficacy (%)</strong></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On the other hand, in terms of male African American, significant difference cannot be seen from Table 3. One possible reason is biased sampling. The number of the male African American is small (even when comparing with female), so it might be not enough to estimate the reality. On the other hand, we must say that this might be credible result. There are no significant difference in the case of male because as noted in the theoretical approach, it is only marginalized side that sensitively cares their descriptive representation.

In order to show statistically that political efficacy goes significantly higher when represented by more similar politician, I conducted t-test. However, a null hypothesis “both means of political efficacy of between female African American represented by male African American and those represented by female African American is equal” is not rejected in p=0.05 level. This result indicates the difficulty of measuring political efficacy of intersectionally marginalized groups because of the lack of samples to show highly credible result. Moreover, the lack of substantive representation makes it difficult. Intersectionally marginalized groups tend to feel that their interests are not represented enough. This makes the effects from descriptive representation relatively smaller to the extent that the greatness of effects are hindered.

To sum up, statistically significant difference cannot be found due to method problem. However, table 2 and 3 successfully shows us that descriptive representation of intersectionally marginalized group enhance the political efficacy of citizens more than 5 per cent, without damaging political efficacy of comparatively less marginalized group. This indicates that it is highly important to uphold diversity in congress in order to heighten political efficacy of citizens as a whole.
4. Discussion and Conclusion

Intersectionally marginalized groups have the tendency to feel the government is not responsive to “people like me.” Political efficacy goes up when similarity between individuals and their representative increases, then it upholds government’s legitimacy on ruling. Theoretical approach successfully supports this by showing two theories; the law of similarity, and the assimilation effect.

From analytical approach, in conclusion, the hypothesis remains unconfirmed due primarily to data sources available. The thesis only found that the more similarity increases, the higher political efficacy gets more than 5 per cent. Two points are expected for further study. One is to confirm the hypothesis using updated data which is statistically large enough, given more recent changes in levels of representation for marginalized populations.

The other is to see the changes of political efficacy of non-marginalized groups. When representation of marginalized groups increases, inevitably, representation of “non-marginalized” decreases. It might declines political efficacy of non-marginalized groups. L, Bobo and F, Gilliam (1990) have stated that minority groups have more tendency to be sensitive group differences, thus the increase of minority representation might not lead declining efficacy of non-marginalized groups. This theory is the underlying assumption of the thesis, though, analytic study is still needed so that it helps us to sake for ideal representation for every group in a country.

In the reality, the diversity in the congress is gradually increasing. It enhances political efficacy of citizens, and political participations. The increase of political participation of minority groups, especially, contribute to their empowerment. I hope this tendency for increasing diversity proceeds.
References


L, Atkeson and N, Carrillo. “More is Better: The Influence of Collective Female Descriptive Representation on External Efficacy.” Politics & Gender, 3. University of New Mexico,


