Youths’ Political Efficacy: Sources, Effects and Potentials for Political Equality

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Doctoral Dissertation

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I don’t mind if I have to sit on the floor at school.
All I want is education, And I’m afraid of no one.
M. Yousafzai.

The cover of this dissertation shows a painting of the Pakistani girl Malala Yousafzai who was shot in the head by the Taliban at the age of 15 for fighting for girls’ education. Malala well illustrates the theme of this dissertation. Despite being young and female in a patriarchic, and partly undemocratic, society, she holds strong beliefs in her own ability to take political action and effect change in society. In a world of political insecurity and economic crisis where various anti-democrats have gained ground, the positive power of youths like Malala is crucial. Thus, understanding why and how young people become politically involved are of importance for democratic development. This dissertation advances knowledge on one vital factor in youths’ active citizenship, namely political efficacy. Three main topics are discussed: what political efficacy is, how youths develop it, and which effects it can have on political participation. Also, youths’ political efficacy is discussed in the light of democracy and political equality.

The dissertation presents a multidisciplinary perspective on political efficacy, with a focus on people’s beliefs in their capacities to perform political actions. It shows that youths gain political efficacy along four pathways: political mastery experiences, role models, encouragement/support, and positive outlooks on the political world. Further, the school’s potential for stimulating political efficacy, especially among the least advantaged, is discussed. The results confirm that political efficacy positively influences political participation, and shows that, combined with political interest, it facilitates the transformation of psychological engagement into political action.

The findings will inform discussion on the implications of stimulating youths’ political efficacy to promote political participation and political equality. By boosting political efficacy along the various pathways – in part independently of socioeconomic status – political equality may be promoted by benefiting the least advantaged.