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Social Support, Gender and the Roots of Political Efficacy: Evidence from the Swiss Household Panel

Annika Lindholm*

Abstract: This study explores how social support, defined as the number and quality of close relationships, affects feelings of political influence. Using Swiss Household Panel data (1999–2018), it reveals that the quality of relationships (emotional support) enjoyed from weak ties drives women's political efficacy, while having no significant effect for men. In addition to extending on the socially oriented drivers of political engagement, social support has the potential to reduce female disadvantage in political efficacy and eventually alleviate gender inequality in politics.

Keywords: political efficacy, gender, social support, panel data, Switzerland

Soutien social, genre et efficacité politique : résultats tirés du Panel suisse de ménages

Résumé : Cette étude examine l'effet du soutien social, défini comme le nombre et la qualité des relations personnelles étroites, sur le sentiment d'influence politique. À travers le Panel suisse des ménages (1999–2018), nous révélons que la qualité des relations (le soutien émotionnel) entretenues dans les liens faibles augmente l'efficacité politique chez les femmes, sans avoir d'effet chez les hommes. Le soutien social peut ainsi réduire le désavantage féminin pour le développement de l'efficacité politique, et à terme réduire l'inégalité de genre dans la politique.

Mots-clés : efficacité politique, genre, soutien social, données de panel, Suisse

Soziale Unterstützung, Geschlecht und die politische Wirksamkeit: Ergebnisse aus dem Schweizer Haushalt-Panel

Zusammenfassung: Diese Studie untersucht den Effekt der sozialen Unterstützung, definiert als Anzahl und Qualität enger persönlicher Beziehungen, auf das Gefühl politischer Einflussnahme auswirkt. Anhand von Daten des Schweizer Haushaltspanels (1999–2018) zeigen wir, dass die Qualität der Beziehungen (emotionale Unterstützung), die in schwachen Bindungen gepflegt werden, die politische Wirksamkeit von Frauen antreibt, während sie keinen signifikanten Einfluss auf Männer hat. Soziale Unterstützung kann somit die Geschlechterungleichheit in der Politik reduzieren.

Schlüsselwörter: politische Wirksamkeit, Geschlecht, soziale Unterstützung, Paneldaten, die Schweiz

* Institut des Sciences Sociales (ISS), Université de Lausanne, CH-1015 Lausanne, annika.lindholm@unil.ch.

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1 Introduction

I examine how social support influences the perception of political influence, a key indicator of political efficacy that shapes a politically engaged citizen. The socially-oriented predictors of political engagement are not novel to political research, but the discipline has for long been dominated by a strong focus on recruitment and mobilizing networks (Armingeon 2007; Lin 2008), civic norms (Putnam 1995; 2000) and skills (Verba et al. 1995; Teorell 2003) that are developed within these networks, as well as on other factors stemming from the broader socio-political environment that individuals are surrounded by (Campbell 2013). These explanations find their theoretical core in the social capital literature (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995; Portes 1998; 2000; Hays 2015; Morales and Giugni 2016) that has become immensely popular for explaining how social structures and mores favour political activity.

Building on this scholarship, this article re-focuses the debate to the individual's experience of support in their social relationships. I argue that social support favours individual feelings of political efficacy, irrespective of the influence of formalized social networks, social trust, or other conventional indicators of social capital. Political efficacy is widely viewed as a cornerstone of participation in political activities (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba et al. 1997; Karp and Banducci 2007), making the drivers of efficacy a key concern for the social sciences. Yet the wider range of the socially oriented predictors of political efficacy, such as social support, have not received much consideration in previous research. This study shows that the mechanism that links social support to political efficacy is very different between women and men. It drives women's within-individual efficacy development, while being less influential for men. Therefore, this study builds on an important and underexplored aspect of the discipline, that is, explaining where political efficacy comes from, and also sheds light on how the intra-individual development of political efficacy is driven by very different factors for men and women. The conventional belief is that gender disparities exist in terms of efficacy (Solhaug 2006; Paxton et al. 2007; Vecchione and Caprara 2009; Cicognani et al. 2012; Arens and Watermann 2017). Social support should thus be brought to the forefront in initiatives that combat gender inequality in politics. Considering how strongly political efficacy is correlated with actual participation, paying more policy attention to social support may have profound consequences on patterns of political behaviour.

While at present time, the majority of research on political efficacy is cross-sectional, this study examines trajectories of political efficacy over time using Swiss Household Panel (SHP) data (20 waves, 1999-2018). The Swiss context is suitable for studying gender differences in politics due to a particularly persistent gender gap in Swiss politics compared to many other Western democracies (Engeli et al. 2006; Stadelmann-Steffen and Koller 2014). Moreover, access to high-quality longitudi-

nal data brings a clear advantage to the present study in examining causal effects compared to previous cross-sectional research in the domain.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Political Efficacy

The ability to influence politics is a key indicator of political efficacy, which is one of the strongest predictors of political participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Karp and Banducci 2008; Wolak 2018). Political efficacy has been defined as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have an impact on the political process" (Campbell et al. 1954, 187). It is developed over the life course, and particularly in adolescence and early adulthood (Caprara et al. 2009; Zaff et al. 2011; Arens and Watermann 2017). A conventional distinction is made between internal and external efficacy: while the internal component relates to the broader feeling of self-efficacy and is described as the individual's belief in her own abilities to influence political processes (Craig et al. 1990; Rasmussen and Nørgaard 2018), external efficacy is the individual's perception of the responsiveness of the political system, or the "feeling of having a voice in politics" (Wolak 2018, 764). Internal and external political efficacy are correlated but conceptually separate concepts, and it is possible for individuals to experience simultaneously different levels of external and internal efficacy. For instance, one can feel confident in their own ability to participate (high internal efficacy), but believe they are not heard by decision-makers (low external efficacy). Or to the contrary, one can have faith in the political system (high external efficacy), while feeling that politics is hard to understand or personally difficult to engage in (low internal efficacy). However, some measures of political efficacy, such as the personal feeling of political influence (the key dependent variable of this study), combine elements from both dimensions of efficacy, thus blurring out any sharp empirical distinctions between the two dimensions (see e. g. Acock and Clarke 1990; Niemi et al. 1991).

While past research has mainly used political efficacy as an independent variable, it is conceptually relevant to consider efficacy as a dependent variable and examine the antecedents of political efficacy. There is widespread agreement that resources related to socio-economic status (Verba et al. 1995), associational involvement (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 2000), political knowledge (Pasek et al. 2008), or political participation itself (Quintelier and Van Deth 2014) positively relate to political efficacy. Among the psychological predictors of efficacy, personality factors (Mondak 2010; Gerber et al. 2011) and good physical and mental health (Denny and Doyle 2007; Mattila et al. 2013; Ojeda 2015) have been mentioned. Still, most former research has settled for recognizing that politically efficacious individuals engage more in politics without fully understanding how efficacy develops in the

individual's mind. I argue that is essential to extend on this literature and consider the other psychological predictors of efficacy that are cultivated interpersonally – such as social support.

2.2 Social Support

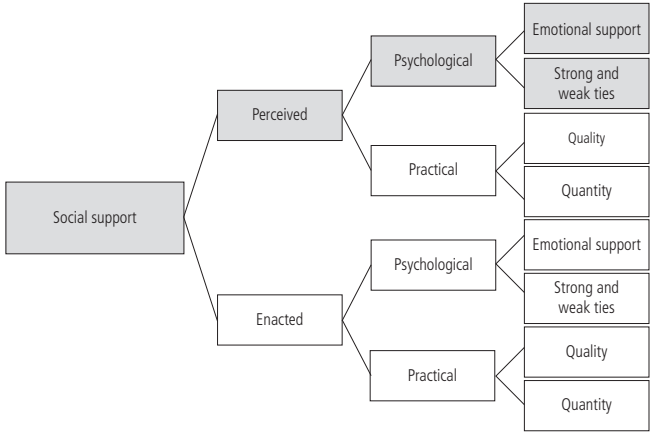
The importance of social support for physical and mental wellbeing has widely been recognized in psychology as well as by health practitioners (Vaux 1988; Krause 2001; Harandi et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2018; Uchino et al. 2018). Social support is defined as the availability (the quantity) and the quality of close, trustful, and reliable relationships with surrounding persons (Larson 1993). How much is enough social support is highly personal; some people prefer to have several people to rely on for support, others are satisfied with just one close relationship (Cohen et al. 2000). Satisfaction with the available support is also strongly individual, and partly influenced by self-esteem and the level of control one has over their surroundings (Silverstein et al. 1996). These circumstances highlight the need to examine intra-individual trajectories in social support, instead of relying on between-person comparisons only.

Social support can either be practical, entailing help and support in concrete tasks, or psychological, which involves caring, empathy, love, and trust in one's social relationships, as well as a feeling of belonging, being accepted and needed in these relationships (Langford et al. 1997; Krause 2001). Despite that scholars have gradually started to explore how the act of giving (practical or psychological) support influences individual wellbeing (e. g. Inagaki and Orehek 2017), or on the transactional process of giving and receiving support (Liu et al. 2020), traditionally the domain focuses on the subjective experiences of perceived support (Sarason et al. 1983; Krause 2001; Utz and Breuer 2017). Accordingly, this study focuses on explaining how the *psychological* dimension of *perceived* social support (hereafter "social support") relates to political efficacy.

Participation in social activities (associations, clubs, or other organizations) and enjoying social support are likely positively correlated. Social participation has been described as vehicular to social support, rather than an indicator of support itself (Langford et al. 1997), and the structure through which social support may be provided (or not) (Ryan et al. 2008). A person may be integrated in social relationships without receiving sufficient social support, but one cannot receive social support without having any social contacts (Larson 1993). Moreover, the quality of support in personal relationships, or emotional support, should be more important for wellbeing than the mere number of relationships, that is, the weak and strong ties[1] individuals maintain (Ishii-Kuntz 1990; Krause 2001). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptualization of social support that is used in this study.

1 The terminology of weak and strong ties stems from social network theory that investigates structures of interpersonal relationships and their influence on individual and group social capital (Granovetter 1977).

Figure 1 Conceptualizing social support



Note: Author's own illustration. The shaded boxes indicate the dimensions of social support considered in this article.

2.3 Social Support and Social Capital

Studying efficacy through the social support framework has many potential merits, similarly to the more traditional indicators of social capital. Social capital has broadly been defined as the level of involvement in more or less formalized social networks and the extent of interpersonal trust which may or may not extend to strangers (Coleman 1988; Brehm and Rahn 1997), as well as the civic norms that "facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995, 67). Social capital is thought to favour political activity and civic engagement on the individual and group level, by teaching skills, transmitting norms of civic duty, and increasing social trust (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000; Stolle and Hooghe 2005; Armingeon 2007; Hays 2015).

Notwithstanding the great contribution social capital theory has made to our understanding of the social processes that favour political engagement, there are good reasons to call for more attention to social support as a distinct source of social capital and a driver of efficacy beliefs. Social support has been described in research as a source of the social capital that is cultivated in close social networks (Coleman 1988; Ryan et al. 2008; Lee et al. 2018). Still, social capital scholarship traditionally focuses on explaining the influence of the "bridging" ties persons cultivate, which extend to the wider circle of social contacts through involvement in associations or other (more or less) formalized social networks. By contrast, social support is mostly cultivated in "thick" social relationships, or "bonding" ties, meaning our

close, personal relationships (Lee et al. 2018). The specificity of social support is illustrated by how persons could have small social networks, e. g. because they do not belong to any clubs or associations, yet these individuals could cultivate one or a few strong personal relationships and be fully satisfied with the support they receive in these relationships. Simply put, social support *per se* could be beneficial for intra-individual efficacy development, irrespective of the bridging ties persons maintain.

2.4 Social support and political efficacy

In addition to traditional sources of social capital, social support provides an additional pathway to political efficacy. Social support is an established source of personal efficacy (Sarason et al. 1983; Langford et al. 1997; Krause 2001; Molino et al. 2018). It also likely strengthens feelings of political influence, since feeling supported favours personal competence (Krause 2001) and enhances a sense of control (Langford et al. 1997; Thoits 2011), capabilities of problem-solving (Whitfield and Wiggins 2003), and a sense of self-worth (Cohen et al. 2000; Karademas 2006). Social support thus strengthens the awareness of one's own capabilities as a political actor. By contrast, a lack of social support is associated with external locus of control and difficulty of persisting with a task that does not deliver an immediate and ready solution (Sarason et al. 1983), which characterize many activities that seek to exert political influence. Finally, social support reinforces a sense of belonging to a group or a collective, which is particularly favourable to the development of political efficacy (Moscardino et al. 2010; Talò et al. 2014; McDonnell 2020). On this note, Anderson (2010) showed that the prevalence and quality of social relationships positively relates to personal political efficacy in a community. It is therefore expected that social support favours the intra-individual development of political efficacy (Hypothesis 1, H_1).

2.5 Gender Differences in Social Support and Political Efficacy

Considering gender differences in political efficacy development sheds light on how socialization and societal norms influence individual attitude-formation. The debate is on-going whether a gender gap (still) exists in political engagement. Although some studies have relativized the persistence of a gender gap, at least in electoral participation (Norris 2002; Burns et al. 2018), many others have shown that women continue to be less engaged in politics due to their lower involvement in associations and social norms that discourage women's political participation, resulting in lower levels of political interest, knowledge, and political efficacy among women (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Beauregard 2014; Fraile 2014; Dassonneville and McAllister 2018). Moreover, the politico-institutional context provides cognitive cues, facilitates the organization, and provides more opportunities for men over women in politics (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Beauregard 2014). Gender differences in political efficacy and related attitudes stem from political socialization in adolescence

and early adulthood. Boys and men typically display higher levels of political efficacy than girls and women (Solhaug 2006; Paxton et al. 2007; Vecchione and Caprara 2009; Cicognani et al. 2012), and gender-specific trajectories are likely to continue into adulthood (Hill and Lynch 1983; Arens and Watermann 2017).

Gender differences also extend to social support practices. It influences the type of social relationships individuals are embedded in; some studies even suggest that, generally speaking, women have more "thick" relationships where social support is given and received, whereas men maintain more extended social networks ("thin" relationships) (Fuhrer et al. 1999; Perrewé and Carlson 2002). Importantly, social support has been found to be more significant as a resource for women than men in efficacy development, particularly in fields that are traditionally male-dominant (Vekiri and Chronaki 2008; Arens and Watermann 2017; Guan et al. 2017; Molino et al. 2018). Politics is arguably still a male-dominant field, due to the deep-rooted influence of socialization and social norms on gender roles. It is therefore likely that women benefit more than men from social support in terms of within-individual development of political efficacy (Hypothesis 2, H_2).

2.6 Political Efficacy in Switzerland

The Swiss context is interesting for studying political engagement, considering the particular politico-institutional context of direct democracy in which Swiss citizens participate in politics (Lutz 2006). From a normative perspective, direct democracy should increase political competence and system responsiveness to citizens' demands, both being favourable to individual political efficacy (Pateman 1970). In this rationale, average levels of political efficacy (internal and external) should be comparatively higher in Switzerland (Bowler and Donovan 2002), although empirical evidence is inconclusive in this regard (Blais 2014). On the other hand, direct democracy presupposes a high level of political sophistication from citizens. It may make uninformed citizens believe that participation is too hard, and dampen political efficacy (Dyck and Lascher 2009; Schlozman and Yohai 2008). As for gender differences, studies show that they are more persistent in Swiss society than in many other Western democracies (Engeli et al. 2006). Swiss women continue to have lower levels of political knowledge, skills, and interest compared to men (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010), and likely also lower political efficacy. While some claim that direct democracy mitigates gender differences in political efficacy (Kim 2015), the gender gap in Swiss politics tends to suggest otherwise. Despite the mixed evidence of political efficacy in a direct democracy setting, it entails that the results of this study cannot be guaranteed to hold in other contexts. But this study provides valuable information on how political efficacy develops intra-individually in a direct democracy, and possibly also in other political systems.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 The Sample and Measures

The hypotheses will be tested on SHP data. Since 1999, the SHP is an annual panel study based on a stratified random sample of private households and individuals living in Switzerland (SHP 2020). Respondents who participated in 1999 and in any of the subsequent waves until 2018 are included in the analysis, thus amounting to twenty waves (waves 1–20) and 1724 respondents. The interviews were mainly done by telephone.

Table 1 recapitulates the measurements used in the analyses. Political efficacy is a single item expressing belief in one's own ability to influence political decision-making, thereby combining elements from the external (Niemi et al. 1991) and internal (Acock and Clarke 1990) dimensions of efficacy . Respondents in the sample score on average 4 out of 10 in political efficacy across time, with intra-individual variation ($\sigma = 1.7$) in the panel being slightly, but not substantively, lower than between-individual differences ($\sigma = 1.8$). Feelings of political influence are thus not static but develop for individuals over time.

Social support is measured through quantity of close relationships and the quality, i. e. the emotional support, enjoyed from those relationships. The number of close relationships with relatives or friends are combined into an indicator of strong informal ties ("strong ties"), whereas close relationships with neighbors or colleagues indicate weak informal ties ("weak ties"). The extreme values of the number of relationships were truncated at the top due to low occurrence of these high values (between 1–4 % of all observations).[2] Emotional support is measured through personal satisfaction with the support enjoyed in those relationships.[3] To differentiate between the sources of that support, I distinguish between support received from strong ties (friends and relatives) and weak ties (neighbours and colleagues). The items are combined into two cumulative indices: emotional support from strong ties and from weak ties.[4] Details on the construction of the social support measures are available in Appendix A1.

To compare the influence of social support with some of the traditional indicators of social capital, I control for social participation, associational involvement, and

2 Measurement scale of the indicators of strong and weak ties was changed in waves 15 and 18 from continuous to categorical. To preserve equivalence of measurement, these variables were excluded from analysis for waves 15 and 18.

3 These questions were not asked whenever respondents reported not having any contact with a relative, friend, colleague, or neighbor in a particular wave. This occurred at least once for a number of respondents (relatives: 21 %, friends: 20 %, colleagues: 81 %, neighbors: 70 %). However, only between 20–35 % of those respondents never changed their answer in the panel (see Appendix A5 for details). The responses that never change are excluded by default from the fixed-effects analysis, which requires that individual change takes place in order to estimate causal effects.

4 The correlations between emotional support from weak ties ($r = .44$) and strong ties ($r = .39$) are sufficient for index creation (Clark and Watson 2016).

social trust in the models. Social participation is measured by overall engagement in social activities as well as by active membership in social and political associations. Since civic skills are likely to be better learnt through actual participation in associational activities, active members are isolated from passive members in the associations. Active political party membership is considered separately from other political associations due to its presumed strong influence on political efficacy.

The models additionally control for the influence of sociodemographic characteristics and core political attitudes. Structural and social aspects of life (such as age, education, and income) influence one's social relationships, since "people do not begin or maintain their quest for social well-being with the same assets" (Keyes 1998, 123), in addition to being correlated with political efficacy (Finkel 1985; Brady et al. 1995). Income is measured through satisfaction with one's financial situation. Subjective income measures are less sensitive to item non-response and can be considered a better proxy of the quality of life than objective indicators (Ackerman and Paolucci 1983). Finally, political interest is controlled for as one of the strongest predictors of political engagement (Prior 2010).

3.2 The Method

Fixed-effects OLS regressions were estimated in the data to encounter for within-individual change in social support and political efficacy and to identify potential causal effects. The fixed-effects model is similar to a multilevel regression model where observations are nested within individuals, and where the fixed-effects coefficient expresses variation over time in the individual-specific mean of a construct. An advantage of the fixed-effects model is that it controls for time-constant heterogeneity between individuals that may be correlated with the outcome, thereby making self-selection into treatment no longer a problem (Allison 2009). In this way, fixed-effects estimation provides a significant advantage over other methods for inferring causal effects of a predictor on an outcome. When estimating individual change in statistical models, the individual error terms are likely to correlate across waves. Therefore the standard errors are clustered by respondents in the analysis. Since fixed-effects models only use within-individual variation to estimate effects, the influence of time-constant characteristics cannot be directly estimated by these models; on the other hand, the models implicitly control for the influence of time-constant traits (Allison 2009). To test gender differences (H_2), the models are estimated separately for men and women.

Table 1 Variable Descriptions

Item	Measurement	Wording
Political efficacy	0–10	"How much influence do you think someone like you can have on government policy, if 0 means 'no influence', and 10 'a very strong of influence?'"
Emotional support, weak ties	0–10	"To what extent can your (neighbours/colleagues) be available in case of need and show understanding, by talking with you for example, if 0 means 'not at all' and 10 'a great deal'?"
Emotional support, strong ties	0–10	"To what extent can your (friends/relative) be available in case of need and show understanding, by talking with you for example, if 0 means 'not at all' and 10 'a great deal'?"
Strong ties	0–10	"With how many relatives living outside of your household do you have a good and close relationship?" "How many good and close friends do you have?"
Weak ties	0–10	"With how many of your neighbors are you on good terms and enjoy a close relationship?" "With how many work colleagues or acquaintances met during the course of leisure, political, religious or other activities, are you on good terms?"
Social participation	yes = 1, no = 0	"Do you take part in clubs' or other groups' activities (religious groups included)?"
Active in a political party	active member = 1, passive member or not a member = 0	"I will now read out a list of associations and organisations. Could you tell me for each of them whether you are an active member, a passive member, or not a member?" (political party)
Active in political organization	active member = 1, passive member or not a member = 0	"I will now read out a list of associations and organisations. Could you tell me for each of them whether you are an active member, a passive member, or not a member?" (union/environmental/tenants)
Active in social organization	active member = 1, passive member or not a member = 0	"I will now read out a list of associations and organisations. Could you tell me for each of them whether you are an active member, a passive member, or not a member?" (local or parents/charity/cultural or education/women/sports association)
Social trust	0–10	"Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people, if 0 means 'Can't be too careful' and 10 means 'Most people can be trusted'?"
Education, highest attained	secondary level or less = 1 completed secondary = 2 tertiary-level or advanced vocational degree = 3	
Satisfaction with financial situation	0–10	"Overall how satisfied are you with your financial situation, if 0 means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 'completely satisfied'?"
Political interest	0–10	"Generally, how interested are you in politics?"
Age	in years, numeric	
Gender	female = 1, male = 0	

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

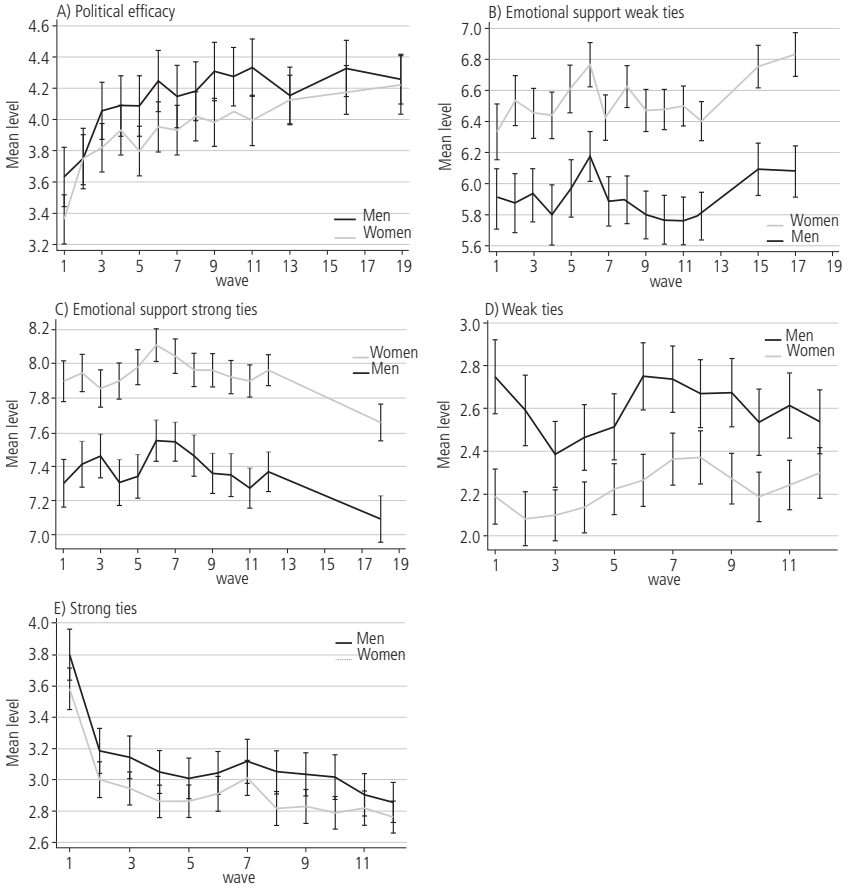
Through a cross-sectional lens, significant gender differences can be observed in the mean levels of social support across time in the sample (Figures 2a–e). Men maintain on average more weak ties than women (2d), while women report more emotional support in their relationships (2b and c). These findings reflect past research on gendered patterns of social relationships (Fuhrer et al. 1999; Perrewé and Carlson 2002). By contrast, and perhaps surprisingly, men and women are not significantly different in the panel in terms of average levels of political efficacy (2a). At least one explanation could relate to the specific attributes of panel participants, i. e. that they tend to be more politically and socially active than the general population (Voorpostel 2010). While the descriptive results align with some studies that do not find gender differences in efficacy (e. g. Anderson 2010), it should be recalled that Figures 2a–e express differences *between* individuals in the panel, thereby effectively ignoring individual trajectories in political efficacy. In other words, while men and women in the panel do not significantly differ in terms of average political efficacy, the drivers of their political attitudes may very well be different.

4.2 Fixed-Effects Estimation

Table 2 shows the fixed-effects estimators (FE) for the entire sample and separately for men and women. The standardized coefficients facilitate the comparison of the predictors across models. Firstly, we observe that social support does not attain statistical significance in the global sample. While an intra-individual increase in emotional support from neighbours or colleagues (weak ties) to a certain extent fosters political efficacy, this effect only attains statistical significance at the 0.08 level, which is below the conventional threshold. The number of close ties individuals have are not significant in predicting political efficacy either. In summary, I do not find very strong evidence of social support being a significant predictor of political efficacy across groups in the sample.

Meanwhile, examining gender differences reveal that emotional support received from weak ties is statistically significant for women in the sample ($\beta = .046$; $p < 0.05$), but not for men ($\beta = .006$; ns). Strikingly, the positive influence of emotional support among women overrides the effect of the traditional indicators of social capital. Social participation, associational involvement, or social trust do not emerge as significant within-individual predictors of efficacy. The fact that emotional support cultivated in weak ties is more influential than support from strong ties underscores, however, the relevance of the wider social networks for the intra-individual development of efficacy and in this way speaks to the social capital literature. The magnitude of the effect of emotional support from weak ties may appear as modest, being responsible on average for a 5-percentage point increase in within-individual political efficacy

Figure 2A–E Mean Levels of Political Efficacy And Social Support Across Time, By Gender, 1999–2018



Note: gray line = women; black line = men. Spikes show 95 % confidence intervals. The gaps in the graphs is due to data unavailability for certain years.

development among women, yet its effect exceeds some other conventional predictors of efficacy, such as age, or indicators of social participation. These results suggest that from a within-individual perspective, increases in formal social participation or trust do not have as much influence on women's feelings of political influence as emotional support has. While women who participate actively in associations and other social activities likely feel, on average, more efficacious and are more involved politically, having access to broad social networks does not fully explain the mecha-

nism that makes individuals feel more politically efficacious. Equally interesting is the finding that the positive effect of emotional support from weak ties remains for women even when controlling for political party membership or political interest, despite that these are conventionally viewed as some of the most powerful predictors of political engagement.

Figure 3 further illustrates the salience of emotional support from weak ties for women's political efficacy by displaying the average predicted probabilities (AME:s) of efficacy along increases in emotional support. The AME:s are calculated for each observation in the data, separately for men and women, and then averaged to get the predicted values. Figure 3 shows that while women in the panel tend to have lower political efficacy than men without emotional support (albeit confidence intervals overlap in the lowest levels of support), this gap is progressively narrowed when women enjoy more emotional support from their weak ties, and finally the gender gap in efficacy closes when women and men are fully satisfied with the emotional support they receive. In other words, a lack of emotional support in their weak ties "penalizes" women in terms of within-individual political efficacy development, but as women receive more emotional support they tend to "catch up" to men in this regard. Figure 3 illustrates how emotional support could become a meaningful resource for women in overcoming their initial disadvantage in political efficacy. This echoes previous research on the important gender differences in giving and receiving social support (Fuhrer et al. 1999; Perrewé and Carlson 2002), as well as feelings of political efficacy (e. g. Verba et al. 1997; Paxton et al. 2007; Cicognani et al. 2012; Arens and Watermann 2017). Emotional support emerges in the analyses as an *underexplored pathway* for the shaping of politically efficacious and engaged women.

4.3 Robustness Checks

The stepwise built models are available in Appendices A2 a–c. They show that there is a base effect of emotional support (from weak ties) for the global sample and for women in the data, which holds with the inclusion of sociodemographic controls. The main models were also estimated without the emotional support variables (Appendix A3) to verify whether the effect of the other socially oriented predictors will change. The influence of weak and strong ties did not change in the models, however, involvement in political associations and social trust became significant. This underlines how some of the influence of these traditional social capital indicators actually stem through the emotional support enjoyed in relationships, instead of mere network participation and size, or generalized trust.

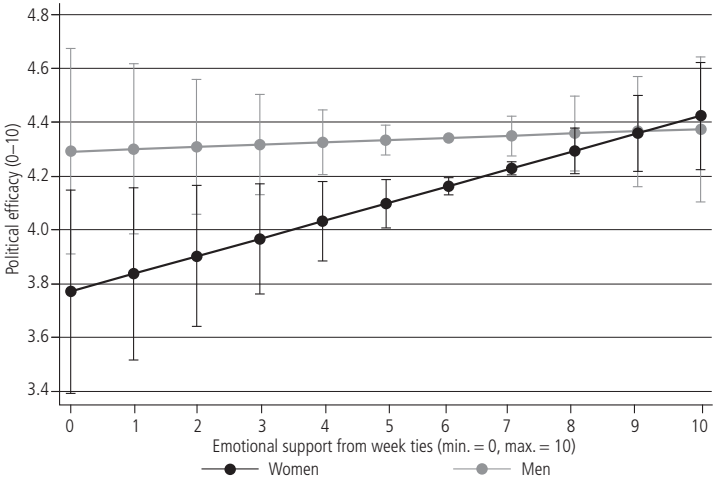
Some of the control variables could also be considered as potential colliders in the model. For instance, high political efficacy could also cultivate political interest, and not only result from it (Brussino et al. 2011; Pedersen 2012). Therefore, we also estimate the main model without political interest (see Appendix A4). The exclusion of political interest does not substantively change the influence of emotional support

Table 2 Fixed-Effects Estimation of Political Efficacy, 1999–2018

Predictors of political efficacy	All		Women		Men	
	FE	SE	FE	SE	FE	SE
Social support						
Emotional support from weak ties	0.0289 †	0.01574	0.0464 *	0.02093	0.0058	0.02364
Emotional support from strong ties	0.0282	0.01782	0.0295	0.02274	0.0262	0.02815
Number of weak ties	0.0070	0.01187	0.0218	0.01624	–0.0096	0.01739
Number of strong ties	–0.0013	0.01345	0.0073	0.01779	–0.0096	0.02061
Covariates						
Age in years	0.0452 **	0.01641	0.0368 †	0.02214	0.0539*	0.02432
Age-squared	–0.0004 *	0.00016	–0.0002	0.00022	–0.0005 †	0.00024
Education, completed (ref. secondary-level)						
Compulsory school	–0.0610	0.18674	–0.0932	0.28374	0.0169	0.13670
Tertiary level	–0.0813	0.07549	–0.0793	0.10516	–0.0902	0.10593
Satisfaction with income	0.0048	0.01420	–0.0105	0.01826	0.0329	0.02258
Social participation (clubs/ groups) (y/n)	–0.0087	0.02908	–0.0113	0.03544	–0.0036	0.05002
Active in political association (y/n)	0.0646 †	0.03559	0.0692	0.04553	0.0604	0.05345
Active in political party (y/n)	0.2053 **	0.06009	0.1315	0.08783	0.2501**	0.08028
Active in social association (y/n)	0.0168	0.02518	0.0127	0.03306	0.0273	0.03824
Social trust	0.0169	0.01469	0.0200	0.02038	0.0143	0.02063
Political interest	0.1655 ***	0.02199	0.1754 ***	0.02889	0.1483***	0.03323
Constant	1.1456 *	0.48055	0.8455	0.64052	1.4844*	0.72692
Model diagnostics						
Std. dev of residuals (within-person)	0.82		0.81		0.84	
Std. dev of residuals (between-person)	0.62		0.63		0.62	
Correlation within-person errors/regressors	–0.11		–0.14		–0.10	
rho	0.63		0.62		0.65	
R^2 (within-person)	0.02		0.03		0.02	
n (persons)	1538		895		643	
N (observations)	7332		4192		3140	

Note: FE = standardized fixed-effects estimators. Standard errors (SE) are panel robust. Significance: † = $p < 0.08$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 3 Predicted Values of Political Efficacy Across Emotional Support Scale, By Gender, 1999–2018



Note: Probabilities calculated from models in Table 2. The average marginal effects are reported; other covariates in the model are at their actual values. Spikes indicate 95 % confidence intervals.

main analyses. Finally, a first difference (FD) model was also estimated in the data (results available upon request). The results were robust to the main models.

4.4 Discussion

The results do not provide strong support for H_1 regarding a generalized positive influence of social support on political efficacy. Meanwhile, I find support for H_2 about gender differences in benefiting from emotional support for intra-individual political efficacy development. This echoes previous research on the salience of social support for women's efficacy in traditionally male-dominant fields (Vekiri and Chronaki 2008; Arens and Watermann 2017; Guan et al. 2017; Molino et al. 2018), and on how it is the quality, and not the quantity, of social support that influences individual perceptions and beliefs (Ishii-Kuntz 1990; Krause 2001; Utz and Breuer 2017).

In all three samples (full and split by gender), the surprisingly weak influence of social participation, most forms of associational activity, and social trust stand out in the analyses. There is limited within-person variation in the social participation and association activity variables in the sample (see Appendix A5), which is one possible explanation to their non-significance in the model. On a related note, the

differences in political efficacy between individuals are moderately high, explaining up to 63 % of the variance in the full model (rho=0.63), 62 % for women and 65 % for men. The results should therefore not be understood as contradicting the widespread recognition that persons having large social networks and who participate more in social activities feel generally more politically efficacious, but instead it sheds light on how *changes* in social support relate to political efficacy development *within* individuals, and women particularly, over the life course. Understanding these gender differences in efficacy development are extremely useful in view of building on the social capital literature and by bringing social support to the forefront among the more established, socially-anchored drivers of a politically-engaged citizenry.

Some limitations to this study should be acknowledged. Despite the many merits of panel data, a drawback is its sensitivity to self-selection, thus attracting respondents with stronger patterns of political involvement and pro-social behaviour (Voorpostel 2010), and likely also higher levels of political efficacy. The distinct profile of panel participants should therefore be kept in mind when interpreting the results of this study. In addition, considering that the analyses were conducted on Swiss data, a country with a distinct politico-institutional setting and pronounced gender differences in political involvement, the results should not be generalized across political contexts, but instead serve as an illustration of how the relationship between social support and efficacy could look like in similar settings. Future longitudinal, cross-national research would be desirable in order to test the relationship in other country contexts. Finally, data availability in the SHP constrained this study to examine political efficacy through a single item that combines elements of internal and external political efficacy. This is admittedly a drawback, since internal and external efficacy are conceptually distinct and correlate differently with other indicators of the political individual, such as political trust or participation (Anderson 2010; Wolak 2018). While it was shown that emotional support fosters intra-individual changes in political influence, we cannot differentiate whether this effect taps on external or internal efficacy, or both, with the data. Future data collection endeavours should aim to target social support and both dimensions of political efficacy so that we could more carefully disentangle between the effects of social support on the different aspects of the political individual.

5 Conclusions

This study has revisited the mechanism that makes socially well-connected individuals more likely to feel influential in politics. I showed that the emotional support that is cultivated in weak ties is more influential on women's intra-individual political efficacy development than the number of social ties, the extent of social participation and associational activity, or the level of social trust. By showing that

emotional support fosters women's political efficacy development, this study challenges the conventional wisdoms on the main socially-rooted predictors of political engagement. These findings have important implications on how scholars should think about the social resources that shape individual perceptions of political influence, and how gender interacts in this relationship. It highlights the need to look into how interactions in close personal relationships shape how women feel about politics – thus unveiling just how important these are for getting women more involved politically. This study therefore calls for more systematic consideration to social support, and its quality in particular, in future research that aims to shed light on the development of politically efficacious female citizens.

Could social support become a remedy for gender disparities in politics? It is certainly possible. Promoting social support practices in female education, by preference already during formative years (Arens and Watermann 2017), as well as strengthening existing initiatives that combat social isolation among politically disengaged female populations have the potential to reduce women's disadvantage in political efficacy over the life course. Actions such as these may alleviate gender inequalities and combat stereotypes about women's political involvement, and ultimately increase women's participation in politics. If we acknowledge that the extent of citizen's political engagement is an indicator of a well-functioning democratic societies, paying attention to social support becomes paramount for the purpose of democratic inclusion. Considering social support more systematically in research on women's political involvement thereby emerges as a promising new research agenda in the political and social sciences.

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Appendices

A1. Social Support-Measures

"Weak ties": number of colleagues (C) or neighbors (N) the respondent reports having close contact with (if any) in a particular wave. Combined additive index, rescaled to 0–10.
"Strong ties": number of friends (F) or relatives (R) the respondent reports having close contact with (if any) in a particular wave. Combined additive index, rescaled to 0–10.
"Emotional support, weak ties": The level of satisfaction a respondent reports enjoying from their relationships with colleagues (C) or neighbours (N) in a particular wave. Combined additive index, rescaled to 0–10.
"Emotional support, strong ties": The level of satisfaction a respondent reports enjoying from their relationships with friends (F) or relatives (R) in a particular wave. Combined additive index, rescaled to 0–10.

The emotional support indices do not differentiate from the number of social ties persons receive satisfaction from. Consider the following examples:

- *Respondent A* has a close relationship with 11 colleagues (C), 3 neighbors (N), 13 friends (F) and 5 relatives (5).
- They report low satisfaction (2/10) for C and medium satisfaction (5/10) for N,
- and high satisfaction (8/10) for friends (F) and relatives (F) (7/10).
- Respondent A's overall emotional support index for *weak* ties is (2 + 5)/2 = 3,5. Respondent A's overall emotional support index for *strong* ties is (8 + 7)/2 = 7,5.

- *Respondent B* has a close relationship with 4 friends (F), 1 relative (R), 4 colleagues (C), and no neighbors (N).
- They report medium satisfaction (6/10) for F, low satisfaction (1/10) for R, and high satisfaction (9/10) for colleagues (C).
- Respondent B's overall emotional support index for *weak* ties is (0 + 9)/2 = 4,5.
- Respondent B's overall emotional support index for *strong* ties is (6 + 1)/2 = 3,5.

Respondent A maintains more strong ties than Respondent B and also report being more satisfied from in these relationships, thus having a higher score on the

emotional support index for strong ties. By contrast, although Respondent A has a larger network of weak ties, their overall satisfaction in these relationships is lower than Respondent B's satisfaction of weak ties, and thus A scores lower in emotional support from weak ties than B.

Table A2a Fixed-Effects Estimation: Base Model (Emotional Support Only)

Predictors of political efficacy	All		Women		Men	
	FE	SE	FE	SE	FE	SE
Social support						
Emotional support from weak ties	0.0381 **	0.01289	0.0519 **	0.01703	0.0196	0.01966
Emotional support from strong ties	0.0105	0.01383	0.0136	0.01711	0.0063	0.02273
Constant	0.0672 ***	0.00038	0.0318 ***	0.00281	0.1060 ***	0.00427
Model diagnostics						
Std. dev of residuals (within-person)	0.80		0.78		0.81	
Std. dev of residuals (between-person)	0.67		0.66		0.67	
Correlation within-person errors/ regressors	0.02		0.03		0.03	
rho	0.59		0.58		0.59	
R^2 (within-person)	0.00		0.00		0.00	
n (persons)	1602		926		676	
N (observations)	9622		5495		4127	

Table A2b Fixed-Effects Estimation: Emotional Support And Strong And Weak Ties

Predictors of political efficacy	All		Women		Men	
	FE	SE	FE	SE	FE	SE
Social support						
Emotional support from weak ties	0.0381**	0.01289	0.0524**	0.01716	0.0191	0.01946
Emotional support from strong ties	0.0090	0.01388	0.0113	0.01712	0.0062	0.02285
Number of weak ties	0.0092	0.01011	0.0224	0.01368	–0.0050	0.01493
Number of strong ties	–0.0107	0.01118	–0.0057	0.01456	–0.0164	0.01737
Constant	0.0644***	0.00553	0.0232**	0.00696	0.1132***	0.01092
Model diagnostics						
Std. dev of residuals (within-person)	0.80		0.78		0.81	
Std. dev of residuals (between-person)	0.67		0.66		0.67	
Correlation within-person errors/ regressors	0.02		0.03		0.03	
rho	0.59		0.58		0.60	
R^2 (within-person)	0.00		0.00		0.00	
n (persons)	1602		926		676	
N (observations)	9594		5479		4115	

Table A2c Fixed-Effects Estimation: Sociodemographics Added

Predictors of political efficacy	All		Women		Men	
	FE	SE	FE	SE	FE	SE
Social support						
Emotional support from weak ties	0.0385 **	0.01277	0.0526 **	0.01710	0.0191	0.01919
Emotional support from strong ties	0.0108	0.01392	0.0131	0.01713	0.0082	0.02289
Number of weak ties	0.0136	0.01003	0.0257 †	0.01368	–0.0001	0.01475
Number of strong ties	0.0027	0.01123	0.0090	0.01491	–0.0044	0.01705
Covariates						
Age in years	0.0674 ***	0.01245	0.0528**	0.01587	0.0861***	0.01987
Age-squared	–0.0005 ***	0.00012	–0.0003*	0.00016	–0.0007 ***	0.00019
Education, completed (ref. secondary-level)						
Compulsory school	–0.1573	0.09110	–0.1770	0.13079	–0.1148	0.12429
Tertiary level	–0.0931	0.06669	–0.1209	0.08201	–0.0651	0.11080
Satisfaction with income	–0.0082	0.01276	–0.0178	0.01599	0.0079	0.02096
Constant	1.6530 ***	0.36351	1.1703*	0.46127	2.2707 ***	0.58238
Model diagnostics						
Std. dev of residuals (within-person)	0.85		0.84		0.86	
Std. dev of residuals (between-person)	0.66		0.66		0.66	
Correlation within-person errors/ regressors	–0.31		–0.31		–0.32	
rho	0.62		0.62		0.63	
R^2 (within-person)	0.02		0.02		0.02	
n (persons)	1602		926		676	
N (observations)	9578		5465		4113	

Note: SHP 1999–2018 data. FE = standardized fixed-effects estimators. Standard errors (SE) are panel robust. Significance: † = $p < 0.08$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A3 Fixed-Effects Estimation Without Emotional Support

Predictors of political efficacy	All		Women		Men	
	FE	SE	FE	SE	FE	SE
Social support						
Number of strong ties	0.0076	0.01088	0.0116	0.01467	0.0029	0.01610
Number of weak ties	0.0070	0.00847	0.0208	0.01104	–0.0088	0.01303
Covariates						
Age in years	0.0418 **	0.01254	0.0321	0.01670	0.0548 **	0.01892
Age-squared	–0.0004 **	0.00012	–0.0003	0.00016	–0.0005 *	0.00019
Education, completed (ref. secondary-level)						
Compulsory school	–0.0170	0.14788	0.0633	0.19492	–0.1505	0.18316
Tertiary level	–0.0414	0.05812	0.0368	0.07674	–0.1715*	0.08684
Satisfaction with income	0.0138	0.01047	0.0100	0.01285	0.0215	0.01779
Social participation (clubs/groups) (y/n)	0.0297	0.02187	0.0132	0.02743	0.0523	0.03640
Active in political association (y/n)	0.0730 **	0.02787	0.0790 *	0.03619	0.0649	0.04168
Active in political party (y/n)	0.1831 ***	0.04741	0.0648	0.07434	0.2550 ***	0.06083
Active in social association (y/n)	0.0372	0.01950	0.0595 *	0.02519	0.0047	0.03059
Social trust	0.0430 ***	0.01105	0.0550 ***	0.01390	0.0248	0.01795
Political trust	0.1700 ***	0.01603	0.1737 ***	0.02057	0.1653 ***	0.02560
Constant	1.0461 **	0.36300	0.7698 **	0.47816	1.4624 **	0.55593
Model diagnostics						
Std. dev of residuals (within-person)	0.76		0.74		0.81	
Std. dev of residuals (between-person)	0.65		0.65		0.65	
Correlation within-person errors/ regressors	–0.04		0.02		–0.16	
rho	0.58		0.56		0.61	
R^2 (within-person)	0.02		0.02		0.02	
n (persons)	1705		989		716	
N (observations)	12 482		7298		5184	

Note: SHP 1999–2018 data. FE = standardized fixed-effects estimators. Standard errors (SE) are panel robust. Significance: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A4 Fixed-Effects Estimation Without Political Interest

Predictors of political efficacy	All		Women		Men	
	FE	SE	FE	SE	FE	SE
Social support						
Emotional support, weak ties	0.0318 *	0.01563	0.0478 *	0.02072	0.0101	0.02359
Emotional support, strong ties	0.0330 †	0.01790	0.0382	0.02276	0.0266	0.02829
Number of strong ties	0.0096	0.01196	0.0269	0.01634	–0.0094	0.01752
Number of weak ties	0.0001	0.01362	0.0078	0.01808	–0.0075	0.02080
Covariates						
Age in years	0.0474 **	0.01666	0.0397 †	0.02257	0.0549 *	0.02454
Age-squared	–0.0004 *	0.00016	-0.0003	0.00022	–0.0005 †	0.00024
Education, completed (ref. secondary-level)						
Compulsory school	–0.0862	0.19826	–0.1456	0.30206	0.0313	0.13992
Tertiary level	–0.0745	0.07352	–0.0780	0.09987	-0.0746	0.10712
Satisfaction with income	0.0047	0.01436	–0.0109	0.01845	0.0331	0.02289
Social participation (clubs/groups) (y/n)	–0.0087	0.02949	–0.0096	0.03599	-0.0064	0.05054
Active in political association (y/n)	0.0712 *	0.03587	0.0719	0.04578	0.0693 **	0.05396
Active in political party (y/n)	0.2309 ***	0.06106	0.1654	0.08858	0.2693	0.08159
Active in social association (y/n)	0.0177	0.02546	0.0137	0.03343	0.0281	0.03857
Social trust	0.0229	0.01482	0.0257	0.02050	0.0204	0.02098
Constant	1.2116 *	0.48784	0.8998	0.65336	1.5520 *	0.73249
Model diagnostics						
Std. dev of residuals (within-person)	0.84		0.83		0.85	
Std. dev of residuals (between-person)	0.63		0.63		0.62	
Correlation within-person errors/ regressors	–0.15		–0.19		–0.13	
rho	0.64		0.63		0.65	
R^2 (within-person)	0.01		0.01		0.01	
n (persons)	1538		895		643	
N (observations)	7332		4192		3140	

Note: SHP 1999–2018 data. FE = standardized fixed-effects estimators. Standard errors (SE) are panel robust. Significance: † = $p < 0.08$.; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A5 Within-Person Variation in Predictors, SHP 1999–2018, in %

	Ever	Always		Ever	Always		Ever	Always		Ever	Always
Emotional support, friends			Emotional support, relatives			Emotional support, colleagues			Emotional support, neighbors		
0	2.9	13.5	0	8.8	15.0	0	9.4	19.3	0	11.1	23.3
1	1.6	9.2	1	4.0	11.7	1	5.5	13.3	1	5.7	18.6
2	7.3	10.8	2	10.1	12.8	2	20.2	16.9	2	18.9	19.0
3	11.4	12.0	3	15.4	12.6	3	31.5	17.0	3	26.5	18.1
4	17.2	12.9	4	19.0	12.4	4	43.8	17.6	4	34.7	17.7
5	44.5	19.4	5	48.4	17.3	5	76.4	27.3	5	70.1	26.0
6	49.7	16.5	6	47.7	16.0	6	68.3	22.1	6	62.4	21.7
7	74.7	23.4	7	72.0	22.2	7	71.7	24.9	7	69.1	24.8
8	90.1	32.9	8	88.9	30.9	8	66.7	25.9	8	69.2	28.4
9	59.0	20.1	9	55.4	18.5	9	20.9	14.9	9	25.5	17.3
10	61.7	31.5	10	67.0	34.2	10	28.5	23.7	10	33.7	26.4
Nr. of close relationships; friends			Nr. of close relationships; relatives			Nr. of close relationships; colleagues			Nr. of close relationships; neighbors		
0	19.7	25.3	0	21.2	20.0	0	81.0	29.1	0	70.2	35.3
1	20.4	20.6	1	22.1	19.4	1	25.1	13.9	1	43.1	20.2
2	50.4	26.1	2	45.0	20.9	2	49.9	18.0	2	71.5	25.9
3	64.2	23.7	3	54.5	20.1	3	53.0	15.7	3	58.8	18.9
4	66.7	21.6	4	61.8	18.9	4	49.5	14.4	4	61.0	18.4
5	64.4	21.6	5	65.2	18.7	5	59.3	16.2	5	41.8	15.0
6	53.7	17.5	6	55.9	16.3	6	37.1	13.0	6	39.0	16.2
7	17.8	11.9	7	30.0	11.9	7	13.2	10.7	7	12.7	10.6
8	29.1	14.2	8	39.5	13.6	8	21.5	10.8	8	21.6	13.0
9	1.7	9.9	9	6.9	9.9	9	1.5	9.6	9	2.9	10.1
10	46.5	24.7	10	63.7	22.6	10	66.1	20.5	10	28.4	18.9
11	0.6	8.5	11	2.8	10.3	11	0.8	9.4	11	0.8	8.5
12	12.7	14.1	12	21.2	13.4	12	13.7	13.2	12	8.1	12.7
13	0.8	8.4	13	2.1	10.8	13	0.9	9.4	13	0.4	10.8
14	1.0	10.4	14	4.1	9.7	14	1.2	8.9	14	1.5	10.8
15	12.4	14.3	15	25.5	13.6	15	25.5	12.5	15	6.7	12.5
16	1.5	10.3	16	2.7	10.2	16	1.0	9.4	16	1.0	9.8
17	0.1	33.3	17	0.8	11.0	17	0.6	8.6	17	0.4	8.3
18	0.5	9.3	18	1.9	9.7	18	0.7	8.8	18	0.1	8.3
20	14.4	20.0	20	30.7	20.8	20	45.7	24.7	20	8.0	13.8
Satisfaction with income			Social trust			Political interest					
0	6.3	11.1	0	14.2	17.6	0	18.7	27.9			
1	2.9	7.9	1	5.9	10.2	1	13.9	13.5			
2	9.5	8.5	2	15.7	12.4	2	26.3	16.3			
3	17.4	9.8	3	22.4	12.9	3	31.9	15.5			
4	28.3	10.9	4	31.2	14.0	4	36.7	15.2			
5	50.2	16.0	5	64.1	26.0	5	61.5	25.2			
6	51.4	14.9	6	63.3	18.2	6	60.1	18.5			
7	77.8	24.1	7	80.3	28.7	7	67.7	26.1			
8	89.3	36.4	8	75.7	32.1	8	63.3	31.6			
9	57.8	21.0	9	36.6	18.8	9	31.8	19.4			
10	49.5	29.1	10	27.0	19.7	10	26.9	28.6			

Continuation of Table A5 on the following page.

Continuation of Table A5.

	Ever	Always
Social participation		
No	81.0	52.6
Yes	89.1	64.4
Active in political association		
No	99.3	90.0
Yes	40.9	26.1
Active in social association		
No	82.3	55.8
Yes	89.4	60.5
Active in political party		
No	98.3	94.3
Yes	17.4	42.2
Education		
Compulsory	15.5	79.2
Secondary	65.4	90.9
Tertiary	31.7	89.4

Note: SHP 1999–2018 data. "Ever" = respondents having ever reported a given response category during the panel; "Always" = the respondents in the "Ever" column that never changed their response in the panel.