
**Political Efficacy and the Wallace Vote:
Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, 1968**

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In their study of American voting behavior, Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954), at the University of Michigan Survey Research Center, developed an attitude scale designed to measure a concept called political efficacy. The presupposition which gives meaning to this particular attitudinal set is that some people find politics a distant and complex realm beyond the power of the ordinary citizen to affect. Others, of course, find the affairs of government can be understood and influenced by individual citizens. This concept of political competence has since been used by social scientists interested in the relationship between a feeling of political efficacy and electoral participation (Campbell, et al., 1960), and cross-cultural political activity (Almond and Verba, 1963). Dahl (1961) in his now famous study of community power in New Haven also found the concept valuable.

Few attempts have been made to probe the relationship between efficacy and the direction of a person's vote in a presidential election or to a person's basic political philosophy such as a liberal or conservative orientation. The primary reason for this lies in the fact that most national elections do not present a good opportunity to get at attitudes of political

disaffection or alienation because of the nature of our broadly based two-party system, the compromising nature of national politics, and the limited chance to vote on specific issues. Thus, Thompson and Horton (1960) have concluded that those who feel politically ineffective are more likely, in national elections, to be found among the nonvoters. However, if given the opportunity for expression, which may be possible in some local referendum issues, feelings of political powerlessness would be expected to be translated into either an undirected vote of resentment or an organized vote of opposition. As Agger and Ostrum (1956) put it:

... Although the analogy may not be particularly useful in terms of probable developments in the community, the apathetic, habitual nonvoters in Germany came to life with a bang when Hitler opened up meaningful channels of political activity and convinced the apathetics that their lot could be dramatically improved by "politics."

The 1968 national election in this country was not an ordinary one in several respects. Among other developments, one particular candidate for the Presidency rose to national prominence on the basis of an appeal to the so-called "little man"—the cab driver, hair dresser, or assembly-line worker who presumably had become fed-up with the two major political parties. There were indications that in some areas, at least, the Wallace appeal was particularly well received among certain groups which had, in fact, become disenchanted with the ordinary political process. Evans and Novak (1968), for instance, reported a conversation with the 37-year-old wife of a United Auto Worker who had never voted "because all politicians are liars," but had registered this year and was joyously planning to vote for George Wallace. From a broader perspective, previous research on political efficacy (Campbell, et al., 1960) has shown that the South has a far greater number of persons of low efficacy than any other major region in the country. Of course, this area, as it turned out, was the only real Wallace country in 1968.

For reasons such as these it was thought that the 1968 Presidential election might prove to be one of the few recent national elections in which the political efficacy concept would have some significance in terms of the presidential vote. In general, the hypothesis investigated herein is that persons with a high sense of political efficacy would not be attracted to the candidacy of George Wallace.

An opportunity to test this proposition in a local setting arose when a political attitudes survey among residents of Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, was planned and carried out, under my direction, by an undergraduate class in "political parties" at Oklahoma City University. The four-item, political-efficacy scale was included in the survey schedule along with a number of additional questions designed to tap other political beliefs and opinions. Disagreement with each of these items, as follows, was scored as an efficacious response:¹

- (1) "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think";
- (2) "Voting is the only way people like me can have any say about how the government runs things";
- (3) "People like me don't have any say about what the government does";
- (4) "Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't understand what's going on."

¹A three-level classification—high, medium, and low efficacy—was then devised as follows. First, respondents who answered two or more "don't know" were eliminated from further consideration. Then, those persons agreeing with all four statements (N = 64) were placed in the low category; those agreeing with two or three statements (N = 226) were classified as medium efficacy; and those who agreed with one or none (N = 128) were placed in the high efficacy column. (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, 1954).

The survey, conducted over the weekend of 26-27 October 1968, was based on a random sampling of all the platted blocks in the county and resulted in a very accurate prediction of the outcome of the Presidential and U.S. Senatorial races for Oklahoma County.¹

Table I reflects the number and percentage of respondents found in each of the three levels of political efficacy. A little over half of the Oklahoma County sample was found to be in the middle efficacy group and exactly twice as many persons were considered to be highly efficacious as opposed to those of low efficacy.

TABLE I. LEVEL OF POLITICAL EFFICACY, OKLAHOMA COUNTY, SAMPLE SURVEY, 1968

Category	Number	%
High	128	30.6
Medium	226	54.1
Low	64	15.3
Total	418	100.0

The percentage of respondents in this study found in the three levels of efficacy is quite comparable with the percentages shown in the original 1954 study for the nation's metropolitan areas where 33% were in the high category, 50% were medium, and 15% were considered of low efficacy.

When various demographic characteristics were compared with degrees of political efficacy, the expected positive correlations between high educational attainment, upper income, white race, and high efficacy were established for the Oklahoma County sample.

In comparing the presidential preferences of the respondents with sense of political efficacy the anticipated relationship is found, albeit less pronounced than might be expected. It will be noted from Table II that the support for Wallace declines steadily as one moves from low to high efficacy. It was somewhat surprising, however, to find that the Nixon and Humphrey supporters made up a larger percentage of the low efficacy column than did the supporters of George Wallace. Nevertheless, upon closer examination it is apparent that the percentage favoring Nixon and Humphrey rises steadily as the degree of efficacy goes up, which is in direct contrast with what happens in the case of the Wallace supporters.

¹The average error in predicting the outcome of the presidential election for Oklahoma County was 1.2%. For the senatorial contest a 0.9 average percentage of error was obtained. See *The Oklahoma Journal*, 11 November 1968 for a more complete report on the entire survey.

TABLE II SENSE OF POLITICAL EFFICACY AND PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE, OKLAHOMA COUNTY, SAMPLE SURVEY, 1968

Presidential Preference	Sense of Political Efficacy					
	low		medium		high	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Wallace	14	21.9	39	17.3	17	13.3
Nixon	17	26.6	83	36.7	53	41.4
Humphrey	17	26.6	57	25.2	40	31.3
Undecided	16	25.0	47	20.8	18	14.1
Total	64	100.1	226	100.0	128	100.1

Two reasons might be suggested as possible explanations for the less than overwhelming evidence in support of the basic hypothesis. First, as revealed in previous research on political efficacy and as borne out by the data for this study, the Negro has a lower feeling of political potency than the white. Obviously, few Negroes are to be found among Wallace supporters, thus eliminating one group of low efficacy from the Wallace column. When Negro respondents are removed from the data ($N = 47$ or 11.2%), a comparison of presidential preference with levels of efficacy does further accentuate the tendencies already noted. As Table III indicates, the Wallace vote among whites of low efficacy increases from 21.9% to 25.5%.

TABLE III. WHITE ONLY, POLITICAL EFFICACY AND PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE, OKLAHOMA COUNTY, SAMPLE SURVEY, 1968

White Only, Presidential Preference	Sense of Political Efficacy					
	low		medium		high	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Wallace	13	25.5	38	18.9	17	14.3
Nixon	14	27.5	80	39.8	53	44.5
Humphrey	9	17.6	42	20.9	34	28.6
Undecided	15	29.4	41	20.4	15	12.6
Total	51	100.0	201	100.0	119	100.0

Second, in the very limited empirical research done on the political attitudes of certain elements of the "far right", it has been determined that many of these people are certainly not politically passive. To the contrary, Wolfinger, et al. (1964) found a higher sense of political efficacy among a group attending an Anti-Communist Crusade school in California than among white, Northern, college-educated persons. Sufficient evidence seems to be available from various newspaper and magazine accounts to document the backing which George Wallace received in the 1968 election from various right-wing groups.

In conclusion, the data gathered in a pre-election political attitudes survey among a random sample of Oklahoma County voters gives some support to the hypothesis that as degree of political efficacy increases, particularly among white voters, support for the candidacy of George Wallace declines.

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