The Political Implications of Economic Lives: Listening to AVP Respondents' Perceptions of Efficacy

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How are Americans' perceptions of their economic lives related to their perceptions of their agency (internal efficacy) and institutional responsiveness (external efficacy) in the political realm? We use the American Voices Project data to listen to such perceptions using in-depth, holistic analysis of a subsample of cases. We find that individuals' understandings of their place in the economy resemble the sense of efficacy they express with respect to politics, with those with extreme economic insecurity talking about politics as a world removed from their own. These views are a stark indicator of the compounding effects of economic and political disaffection.

Keywords: political efficacy, economic perceptions, political participation

In theory, the public's participation in politics is the cornerstone of democracy. However, the United States is far from achieving this ideal. Few people exercise their voice in the political realm, even by voting.[1] For many, a key barrier appears to be their economic circumstances, given that people with low incomes repeatedly show up on political participation studies as less active (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018).

But economics matter for democratic engagement beyond the resources people have to draw on. Individuals' place in the economy influences which government programs and actors they encounter, and those experiences in

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1. The percentage of the voting eligible population that votes in a presidential election has not been over 70 percent in more than 120 years. Midterm general election turnout hovers at around 50 percent. Participation in other political acts, such as contacting elected officials, taking part in demonstrations, or working with others on community problems, is much lower (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018).

turn affect their attitudes about their ability to make a difference in the political realm (Mettler and Soss 2004). For example, experiencing punitive, racist, or intrusive policy provision can depress feelings of political agency (Soss and Weaver 2017). On the other hand, successfully navigating benefit programs can boost people's perceptions that government is responsive to people like themselves (Soss 2000).

In other words, socioeconomic status affects the kinds of interactions people have with government, and those experiences affect people's sense of political voice or power. But how does economic experience—beyond economic resources and status—inform people's sense of their political selves and their relationship to government? This is a pressing question in this historical moment. The context of stagnating wages for the middle class, but skyrocketing income for the wealthiest, combined with a deepening class-based divide between those who set policies and those who are affected by them (Carnes 2013; Bartels 2016), makes for a precarious situation for democracies. The growing number of candidates with antidemocratic tendencies who are winning office by tapping into grievances about this state of affairs is a case in point.

Understanding how people translate their economic situation into their political behaviors requires investigating more than their objective economic circumstances. The way people perceive connections among economic, social, and political concerns matters (Lindh and McCall 2020). Perceptions of being left behind (Hochschild 2016), of being denied one's fair share (Cramer 2016), or of status threat (Mutz 2018) outweigh objective economic circumstances in many individuals' vote choices, for example.

In this article, we seek to know how people's perceptions of economic experience are connected to their attitudes about political engagement. How are people making sense of their control over their economic lives, and how is that sense-making connected to their perceptions of agency in the political realm?

To investigate these questions, we use the American Voices Project data to "listen" to the way people are making sense of their lives. The AVP is a nationally representative study of in-depth interviews and closed-ended survey questions conducted between July 2019 and August 2021, with an oversample of people in the bottom half of the income distribution. In-person interviews were conducted with 1,860 respondents before the start of the pandemic. An additional 859 interviews were subsequently conducted remotely. The AVP data, available as transcripts and survey responses, are extraordinary for their ability to illuminate the perceptions that people have about many aspects of their lives. As Corey Abramson and her colleagues (2024) argue, how people understand their experiences is central to how they act. Like Amy Casselman-Hontalas, Dominique Adams-Santos, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2024, this issue), we take advantage of this opportunity to understand how perceptions of experience with the institutions people must navigate in everyday life translate into subsequent engagement with those power structures.

We analyze a sample of individual cases from the AVP in a holistic fashion by closely reading the interview and closed-ended questionnaire data for particular respondents. We analyze the way participants understand their economic experiences, how they understand their political experiences, and how they do or do not relate the two to one another. We find that individuals' understandings of their place in the economy often resemble the sense of efficacy they express with respect to politics. Those who are insecure economically express a tenuous, at best, connection to the political realm. One's experience in the economic arena is shaped by overlapping, intersectional identities, such that gender and racial identities inform how respondents make sense of their economic experiences. In addition, these salient identities contribute to the way people perceive their economic challenges, opportunities, and choices. Those with extreme economic insecurity talk about politics as a world removed from their own. Although they may be dissatisfied with politics, they have little to no confidence in their capacity to meaningfully affect it. This is a face of inequality worth recognizing. If the manner in which the United States emerges from the challenges of the first part of the twenty-first century depends at all on whose voice is at the table, those of us in a position to

listen need to notice the compounding effects of economic and political disaffection.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our concern with individuals' understanding of their experience in the economic and political realms centers on the concept of efficacy. Our investigation is motivated by an interest in the ways experiences in the economy can inhibit individuals from taking action in the political realm. People are more likely to participate politically when they perceive that they have the capacity to act and that forces external to themselves will be affected by that action—that their involvement will make a difference and is worth doing (Almond and Verba 1963; Jacobs, Mettler, and Zhu 2022). The concept of political efficacy, when broken down conceptually into internal and external political efficacy, helps focus on these two related, but sometimes opposing, perceptions: the perception of one's capacity to influence political decisions (internal political efficacy) and the perception of the responsiveness of political institutions to people like oneself (external political efficacy) (Lane 1959; Craig and Maggiotto 1981).[2]

We can imagine an equivalent set of attitudes in the economic realm. A person might believe that they have the individual skills, initiative, or training to get ahead in the economic realm (high internal economic efficacy), yet feel that economic institutions (banks, one's workplace, and so on) are unfair and difficult for people like them to navigate successfully (low external economic efficacy).

We want to underscore that internal and external efficacy are perceptions. They may be linked to objective indicators of one's capacity and the responsiveness of external forces to one's actions, but they are not the same thing as objective reality. People construct their sense of their abilities to make a life of their choosing in response to objective conditions, and through the lens of what is appropriate for someone of their gender, family background, political affiliation, national origin, race, ethnicity, and so on (Abelmann 2003; Bourdieu 1984). For example, workers who once felt a high level of economic and political efficacy and perceived that the economy was designed in a way that everyone could succeed may blame themselves when they fall behind (Dudley 2000; Newman 1999) or become even more devoted to the ideal of self-actualization when American economic institutions, such as the corporation, fail (Gershon 2017; Lane 2010).

The concept of efficacy has important overlaps with the concepts of agency, power, and locus of control. We understand agency to be a feeling of control over one's actions and their consequences, and power to be the ability to bring about a desired result. We focus on the concept of efficacy because it is explicitly a perception of capacity, control, power, and so on, and again draws attention to perceptions of both internal capacity and external forces. Whether people attribute the source of their economic challenges to their individual behavior, to external forces such as systematic discrimination or government action, or to natural causes, matters for whether people take political action (Miller et al. 1981; Stone 1989; Levin, Sinclair, and Alvarez 2016). Our differentiation between internal and external efficacy in the analyses is intended to account for perceptions of both internal and external forces. Throughout the rest of the article, we at times use the term *agency* as a synonym for internal efficacy, and *responsiveness* to refer to external efficacy.

Expecting a Connection Between Efficacy in the Political and Economic Realms

We have many reasons to expect that political efficacy and economic efficacy are related, but how they are is an open question. Americans do not necessarily think of these two realms in the same way (Hochschild 1981), and efficacy in one realm may not transfer into another (Ban-

2. Survey measures of these two attitudes used frequently in the American National Election Studies are internal efficacy: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" and external efficacy: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" and "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think" ("The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior," https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide).

dura 2012, 13; see also Wuepper and Lybert 2017). However, we expect that when people consider engaging in politics but have little experience doing so, perceptions of self-efficacy in other aspects of life matter (Condon and Holleque 2013).

We also expect that the lenses people use to understand their economic lives are positively correlated with the ones they use to understand their political lives because of the association between economic resources and political action, and because people with more economic resources tend to have higher levels of political efficacy (Lipset 1981; Lindh and McCall 2020).

Another reason to expect high economic efficacy to correspond with high political efficacy is the relationship between economic standing and political power. Lower-income people generally exert less influence over policy in the United States (Bartels 2016, chap. 8; Gilens 2012), and experiencing less policy responsiveness correlates with lower political efficacy (Wolak 2018). Further, both the political realm and the economic realm are aspects of life in which large institutions impose constraints on what one can achieve. Systematic biases in whose voices matter in society likely span these two realms. Also, less trust in institutions in one realm is related to distrust of institutions in the other (Lindh and McCall 2020, 431).

Despite these relationships, it is possible that perceptions of low external efficacy in the economic realm might instead spur higher political efficacy. Experiencing inequity can mobilize people politically. The distinction between internal and external efficacy is useful for understanding this. People who recognize inequality and interpret this as a lack of responsiveness by institutions (low external efficacy) may nevertheless have high internal efficacy. Experiencing that set of perceptions may actually encourage people to engage in the economy (Roy et al. 2019), or mobilize political action (Gamson 1968; see also Valentino, Gregorowicz, and Groenendyk 2009).[3]

However, a negative experience in the economic realm may depress political participation. The evidence on this is unclear because aggregate-level relationships, individual-level relationships, and contextual effects vary in the literature. At the aggregate level, an analysis of county-level data suggests heightened state-level unemployment increases voter turnout in presidential and gubernatorial elections (Burden and Wichowsky 2014), and an analysis of county-level turnout data in elections for several state and federal offices from 1969 to 2000 suggests that higher wages and employment are related to lower turnout but have no effect on presidential turnout (Charles and Stephens 2013). However, on the individual level, analyses have shown unemployment is related to lower internal political efficacy among U.S. voting age adults, using data from the 1970s (Schlozman and Verba 1979; Rosenstone 1982), and mid-1970s through mid-1990s (Lim and Sander 2013). People living in countries with low welfare state generosity, low levels of economic development, high unemployment rates, and large income inequality also tend to report lower levels of internal political efficacy (Marx and Nguyen 2016). We take these conflicting results as further reason to examine how individuals' interpretations of their economic lives correspond to that of their political lives.

METHODS

Our goal was to investigate how individuals' understandings of their experience in the economic realm relate to their perceptions of their personal capacity and responsiveness of institutions in the political realm. To reiterate, our focus was on perceptions or the lenses through which people think about their economic and political lives. That focus requires listening. We sought to describe what it sounds like when, for example, people experience disempowerment in the economic realm and use that lens to think about politics. We wanted to describe such views in enough detail that we could better understand the connection between eco-

3. Gamson's assertion was specifically about low political trust and high internal political efficacy (1968, 48), but see Craig and Maggiotto's reinterpretation of this as a matter of external and internal political efficacy (1981). They find that individuals with low external and high internal political efficacy are more supportive of political protest or violence.

nomic experience and contemporary political behavior.

To investigate, we used the AVP data to listen to the way a wide range of people talked about a range of issues, including their experience and perceptions about the economic and political realms. The AVP interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions about everyday experiences, including perceptions of economic circumstances and responses to those circumstances, sources of incomes, jobs that the respondent and other household members held, and political beliefs and political participation, as well as many others. The open-ended questions were followed with closed-ended questions about subjective social standing, perceived discrimination, perceived control, perceived opportunity, and perceived health and well-being. The interviews averaged 2.2 hours in length.[4]

We attempted to use the transcriptions as if we had been in the room (or on the call) ourselves. We examined the way people talked about issues related to their economic and political lives, the connections that they volunteered between the two, as well as their views on all of the other aspects of life covered in the AVP interviews. We held open the possibility that their comments about things not explicitly related to politics or economics would help us understand the lenses they used to talk about those two realms. We tried to put ourselves in their shoes as much as possible, to see the world from their vantage point, and then compared across respondents of a wide variety of backgrounds to gain an understanding of the types of characteristics, experiences, and social locations that seemed to vary with the perceptions of efficacy we were identifying.

Our approach is best described as an interpretive approach, in which we are trying to provide a coherent account of individuals' understandings so that we explain why people express the opinions and take the actions that they do (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). We are attempting to explain how the way that people interpret the world leads them to regard their behaviors as appropriate for someone like themselves (Soss 2014).

Because we were interested in the ways perceptions of economic life demobilize people politically, we focused primarily on respondents who were likely to have experienced the greatest economic challenges, in the lowest and middle earnings tiers (less than $24,000 and from $24,000 to $72,000 in household earnings in the previous year, respectively). We randomly added in respondents in the highest earnings tiers ($72,000 and above in household earnings) as points of comparison. (None of the households we sampled earned more than $120,000 per year.) The AVP's oversample of people experiencing the lowest earnings in the lowest earnings tier was enormously helpful in this respect, given the typical underrepresentation of these voices in surveys and other social science research (Ver Ploeg, Moffitt, and Citro 2002). We intentionally focused on earnings, as opposed to total income, because earnings include benefits, alimony, and so on. This is a more direct indicator of individuals' experience as an actor in the economy.[5] We began with simple random samples within these earnings tiers and then added in respondents to provide variation in terms of age, region, type of place, race, ethnicity, and gender. (The cases we analyzed are presented in table 1.) The goal of this sampling strategy was not to create a representative subsample of U.S. residents, but to provide variation on the objective indicators that we expected to relate to experiences with the economy.

Specifically, we started with a simple random sample of five cases. The initial cases included respondents from lower, median, and upper earnings tiers. Our analyses of these

4. For more detail, see American Voices Project methodology, 2021, https://inequality.stanford.edu/avp/methodology (accessed March 2, 2024).

5. Our distinction between income and earnings is grounded in our observation from the transcripts that respondents often recognized that income was separate from benefits such as food stamps. Also, although we used the earnings tiers in the data to choose our cases, we paid attention to the number of household respondents in our analyses and note that when relevant to characterize the economic challenges respondents faced.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Observations (n = 40)
Household earnings ($)	
0–24,000	18
24,001–120,000 or DK/RTA	22
Gender	
Man	19
Woman	21
Location type	
Urban	17
Suburban-rural	23
Region	
Non-South	25
South	15
Education	
>High school and high school	15
Some college	12
Bachelor's	13
Age	
18–34	12
35–54	17
55–65+	11
Race-ethnicity	
Non-White	20
White	20
Party identification	
Partisan	18
No preference	11
Independent	11

Source: Authors' tabulation.
Note: Household earnings: DK (don't know); RTA (refused to answer); race-ethnicity: non-White includes Black American, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian respondents; party identification: partisan indicates identifying as a Republican or Democrat.

cases alerted us to an extreme disconnect from government among the lowest-earnings respondents. We therefore purposively sampled additional respondents in specific earnings categories from a variety of geographic regions and racial backgrounds to help us examine whether this pattern held up when we added in such variation.[6]

6. After the initial sample of respondents, we added four upper-income respondents ($72,000 to $120,000). Next, we randomly selected six men from the low to mid-earnings level (less than $48,000). We were interested in whether our analysis differed between union and non-union households and we randomly sampled seven respondents that belonged to a union. The remainder of cases followed this selection strategy, where we added cases that allowed for comparison along a relevant dimension.

For each respondent sampled, we read through the responses to the closed-ended questions to acquaint ourselves with that person's demographics, economic situation and political leanings, and then read through the transcript as a whole. We paid special attention to questions that were explicitly about economics and politics, but held open the possibility that people were unfamiliar with conventional political terms but exhibited familiarity or engagement with political action in other ways. We wrote a summary of each case, with emphasis on aspects of the interview that related to political or economic perceptions and experiences. We looked for patterns across the cases, including patterns in what respondents were not talking about, such as the lack of mention of politics (Fujii 2017).

We shared with each other our case analyses and the conclusions we were reaching concerning the connections in efficacy between the economic and political realms, and identified the types of cases we needed to add to our sample that would allow us to challenge these conclusions. For example, at one point in our analysis we focused on union members in a variety of earnings tiers on the assumption that union members are more likely to encounter political information through their work so that we could investigate cases of people with relatively higher levels of political efficacy at lower earnings levels (Ahlquist 2017).

With several dozen cases in hand, we drafted a memo by reading through the notes and interpretations related to each case and looking for common themes. We checked the patterns we articulated against additional case analyses. For example, after investigating an initial set of low-earnings tiers respondents, it appeared that government showed up in those respondents' comments in only vague ways. We turned to additional cases in these earnings brackets as well as respondents in the highest earnings tiers to verify that this pattern was not a coincidence of the cases that we had chosen and was distinct from patterns among respondents in higher earnings tiers.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Although we held open the possibility that the AVP respondents thought about the economic and political realms in distinct ways, we were struck by how irrelevant the distinction between economics and politics seemed to be for the most disaffected people. Most of the low-income respondents we analyzed expressed little sense of agency or responsiveness from institutions of any type. They described having little to no control over their economic lives and little capacity for interest in politics (including debates over specific policy as well as elections or particular government actors.) When they referred to government, they typically did so in ambiguous terms and did not reference specific people or entities they might contact for help or with concerns.

For example, Ruby was a middle-aged woman living with her daughter and her mom. She expressed a sense of futility about looking for work, saying that every time she gets a job she is laid off. She blamed herself for many things. She said she had made some "bad choices" in her life, and did not want her daughter to be like her.[7] In general, Ruby expressed a profound sense of insecurity and described having no social or societal safety net. This insecurity was compounded by Ruby's experiences as a single mother and the perception that "the government doesn't believe that her father shall pay any money," which led Ruby to reduce housing costs by living with her mother. Citing her previous experiences with the justice system, Ruby said the events "destroyed my whole life."

She talked about her circumstances with a combination of self- and system blame. Her disaffection seemed so profound it was difficult at times to determine whether she was talking about government. When she was clearly talking about government safety net programs, she described them as impossible to navigate.

The vagueness with which Ruby referenced all but the most prominent political actors and entities (such as Donald Trump and George Floyd) was common among the respondents

7. We quote verbatim from the AVP transcripts throughout, even when we suspect there is an error in the transcription, given we do not have a way to determine what was actually said.

we studied with the lowest earnings. They seldom used proper nouns, but instead more often used a vague *they* or *them*.

For example, Paola, a low-income woman who was juggling life with her children in a neighborhood she regarded as very unsafe, never said the word *government*. She said there were shootings "all the time" near her home, and she was so concerned for her children's safety that she enrolled them in a different school, where she was not afraid that they would get shot at recess. This required her to shuttle them to and from school, making it hard for her to get a job between pick-up and drop-off times. As she talked about struggling to pay her rent, she referred to government only as *they* and *them*. Such a faceless, amorphous force is an impossible target to contact for help or to voice concerns, even if she thought it would make a difference. When the interviewer did turn to politics explicitly, Paola's disaffection was on full display: "What's the point in voting? Don't affect me at all."

Likewise, Allison, a young woman who was attempting to get back on her feet after many years of encounters with violence, explained to her interviewer that she could not vote because of prior convictions. When the interviewer asked, "How would you describe your political views if you pay attention to that sort of thing?" She said, bluntly, "I don't. I don't even know what you are talking about. I don't really know." Her response might read as a lack of familiarity with the term political or the idea of political views. But there was nothing in her entire interview to suggest that Allison had any sense of agency with respect to any of the institutions affecting her life.

The descriptions that these and other respondents with low household earnings gave of their lives suggested that they had been dealing with challenges on a variety of fronts for many years with the justice system, the healthcare industry, education, employment, and even their families. After reading those perspectives, their expressions of a lack of agency or responsiveness in the political realm as well were not surprising.

What was perhaps surprising was the way people experiencing household earnings in the middle tiers also talked about politics in a way that reflected a lack of agency and responsiveness in the economic realm. Participants who were homeowners and currently employed described a similar lack of control in their economic lives and a disconnect from politics. Julio, a Hispanic man who owned his home in a suburb, showed some signs of internal and external efficacy in the economic realm; yet his situation suggested a lack of financial security. We took the following as signs of economic efficacy: He had a job and worked part time for a second employer. He expressed pride and enjoyment in his work. He said he was very satisfied with his life, and was in a long-term relationship.

However, Julio said he was a 4 when asked where he would place himself on a status ladder from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. Although he enjoyed his job, he said he was not getting paid very much, which is why he worked a second job. He did not have a high school diploma. He struggled to pay his mortgage during the pandemic and reported spending hours on the phone pleading for an extension. He and his partner were having a hard time finding time together because of his partner's job schedule.

When the interview turned to politics, Julio had little to say. He did not answer a question about whether he votes and asked to pass on other questions about politics. People avoid politics for many reasons; we cannot say for sure why this or any other respondent asked to skip such questions.

However, Julio, like many others who professed no knowledge, interest, or concern about politics, had plenty to say when asked, "If you could talk to someone in charge, someone who could change things, what would you say to this person?" "Try to help the most needy, I would say. Because nowadays, I see it that way, I tell you, because people get stressed, lately I see it more, people with all the changes that have taken place and everything changes suddenly, more than anything to help people, someone who really listens to them and really helps people." Julio did not exude agency in the political realm, but he had enough awareness

of policy to diagnose a lack of responsiveness from those in charge.

That kind of expression—that those in charge are not listening—as vague as it might be—should give us pause. The people expressing little political agency were aware of mechanisms of responsiveness that were not working. Julio wanted someone to listen to the problems of the neediest. Allison wanted better transportation. Their lack of specific knowledge about politics was not due to lack of concern or lack of awareness of things that needed reform.

Political observers have long argued that most people are occupied mainly with personal concerns and have little bandwidth for politics (Schumpeter 1942; Lippmann 1922). We could write off the focus on personal and family concerns even among respondents with some expressions of higher efficacy as merely that phenomenon. But the AVP data call into question the idea that the lack of attention and connection to politics among people with lower earnings and less education is due to a lack of knowledge or lack of capacity for thinking about policy. The data suggest that the distance from politics is part of a more general orientation to professionals or authority that is learned and reinforced in multiple arenas of their lives, such as in their homes (Lareau 2011), in schools (Golann 2021) and in interacting with schools as parents (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003), in colleges (Jack 2019), and in hospitals (Gengler 2014).

For example, when Taylor—a single Black woman living in the Southwest with her children—says "I really don't per-se speak on [politics]. . . . I don't really have an opinion about it or talk about it," is that a sign of lack of sophistication? Or is it a learned response to living in a society in which she has had to use loans to pay utility bills but notices that people from other backgrounds have been able to grow wealth across generations?

We did encounter respondents in lower earnings tiers who did convey interest and attention to politics. However, even they talked as though their voice did not matter in the political realm. They seemed to pay attention mainly as a hobby, participating only as spectators (Hersh 2018). Cindy, an older White woman in the Northeast, read and watched political content on her phone often, seemingly as a form of entertainment, perhaps particularly during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. But she still felt disconnected from politics and that lack of agency resembled the way she talked about her life more generally. Cindy reported not working in her adulthood because of mental health issues and disability. She lived in an apartment and neighborhood she was embarrassed about. She described herself as a weak Republican, but said, "I really don't care, I'm not really into politics like that, I just be listening to what's going on in the world and what Trump does and what this one does, I worry what's going on in the world." Cindy said COVID-19 government safety net programs had provided "more help now than we ever had it before in my life." She was interviewed after the first round of relief payments. However, when asked what she would tell someone with the power to make a difference, she said, "I am just overwhelmed physically and more depressed . . . and I just want them resources that will help me be able to have my own place, be able to have money left over." Even though she consumed a great deal of political news, when given the opportunity to identify reforms, she did not mention policy or structural change but instead expressed a desire to gain some control and stability in her own life.

Indeed, what people in the lower earnings brackets asked for to make their lives better tended to be modest and focused on sufficiency rather than wealth (see, for example, Anderson 2007). Perhaps it is this perception that even sufficiency is more and more difficult to secure that breeds distrust and alienation from the institutions that supposedly affect their lives.

Economic Security as a Source of Efficacy

Some people who reported household earnings in the lower tiers did express more agency in their connections to government. But it turns out that they were not really exceptions to the pattern of low economic efficacy coinciding with low political efficacy. Their relatively low earnings were deceptive. Their overall income (earnings as well as government benefits, child support, alimony), or their parents' wealth, stable incomes, or access to health care provided

a level of financial security that was not indicative of other low-earnings respondents. That status of having enough to be able to choose and to plan (Hacker 2008) seemed to coincide with clear and intense political attitudes and in some cases knowledge about how to take action in the political realm to achieve change.

One such respondent was Sofia, a woman who reported total income between $72,000 and $120,000. She is self-employed and finds time to work in between shuttling her children with special needs to programs and doctors' appointments and homeschooling. She receives child support from a previous marriage, and various government benefits for her children.

In other words, Sofia exhibited a fair amount of economic agency. Her relatively high level of financial security enables her to take time away from working to care for and home-school her children, and invest money.

Sofia's self-sufficient attitude with respect to employment and about caring for her children showed up in the way she talked about politics, too. She contrasted what she called her libertarian and conservative views with those of a more liberal family member, with whom she argues about immigration. Sofia was very opinionated about politics in the interview, and reported not being shy to express her opinion in other forums. She was stridently antiregulation and antigovernment, and highly critical of state-run health care, but had successfully navigated government programs to obtain help with housing and programs for her children. Her distance from government was an ideological one, not one of disaffection.

Some of the younger adults we interviewed had low household earnings as well as low total incomes but expressed financial security and strong political efficacy. They struggled economically a bit, but they said their families and social networks provided a reliable safety net.

For example, Kylie, a young woman living in a rural community, had intentionally chosen a low-income lifestyle out of a love for outdoor education. She had pursued this path after graduating from college. She talked about economic struggles but reported no debt "which totally feels like a privilege." The interviewer observed that the financial situation that she enjoyed was "pretty smooth sailing." Kylie did not talk about lower-tier earning as a hardship but said that it had been fun to start to earn a salary. "Yeah. And it's been, I don't know—it's been nice to be able to count on like, being able to live on everything we make each week. Yeah, that's fun. That's a fun thing." If faced with a $400 emergency, "It wouldn't feel good but it would be doable. Yeah, like it wouldn't . . . It'd be a hit for sure but it wouldn't make me feel unsafe."

Kylie perceived she could choose her own path within the economy. In other words, she displayed internal economic efficacy. That sense of agency came across in her comments about politics as well. She called herself "radically liberal" and exuded a strong sense of justice and where to target it. She reported always voting and emphasized the importance of doing so. She believed that although many things might be wrong with contemporary American politics, a person could still make a difference at the local level.

Another young respondent, Sandra, a Black woman in a suburban community, seemed to come from a family with much less wealth than Kylie's but still felt a strong level of support from her parents. She was living in her own apartment for the first time and also reported, like Kylie, enjoying being responsible for her own expenses. She had been in school on scholarship when the pandemic began and planned to reenroll in the near future.

Getting started on her own economically had been difficult as she struggled to find employment that paid a living wage, was safe with respect to COVID-19, and did not require working under racist managers. But Sandra's family was a source of financial security as well as emotional support that apparently had made it possible for her to quit her job at a workplace she described as racist. She described her parents as her support in times of emergency and remained on their health-care plan.

That security and ability to choose when and where to work are an important part of economic internal efficacy that showed up in Sandra's political self as well. She expressed injustice and ideas about what to do about it. However, she talked about the politically debilitating effects of racism. She did not have

much faith in political institutions or authorities and refused to identify with either party. She said people would vote "if we felt like we were being taken care of." In the summer of 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, she was feeling "antigovernment right now especially with everything going on with the riots. . . . I don't think they are really doing good by us right now and not even just Black community, just everyone, especially students and elder, older people." Sandra recounted numerous experiences of racism in her life, from her family's experiences of injustice with the criminal justice system to discrimination at her previous job. She was skeptical that the government and other powerful institutions were built for people like herself.

Sandra exuded significant passion and conviction, but the perception of living in a country in which the institutions were created to prevent her from having agency seemed disempowering.

> It just doesn't feel like the country is being run to help us grow, it just feels like they're just finding new ways to take money out of our pockets to put people under . . . To just, rob us of literally our whole life. . . . it's just really frustrating, you're not empowered, you kind of wish that you were so, that you could make a difference, but in all honesty, you never really know what goes on behind the curtains, honestly. So, I can't even say I wish I was in power because I don't know what power looks or feels like.

Sandra's reflections on power underscore that even when we observed a relationship between economic security and heightened political agency, it did not necessarily extend to a belief that government is responsive. The experiences and perceptions shared in the interviews by respondents of color in particular underscore that people who recognize their agency may nevertheless feel disempowered by the barriers surrounding them.

People in Higher Earnings Brackets Conveyed an Ability to Plan as Well as Choose

The deterrents to taking political action sounded much lower for people in the higher earnings tiers. These respondents exuded more economic security than their counterparts in lower earnings brackets and also seemed to have the capacity to make plans and execute them. Some of the respondents who did not currently have high household earnings but were in the midst of education that would likely launch them into high-earning careers exuded a sense of security and capacity to act similar to high-earning respondents.

For example, when Hank, a White man in a medical fellowship and living with his wife and child, answered a question about what he would say to someone in charge, his response reflected no need for government to respond to his challenges. "That's a good question. I would say give people a chance to be their full selves, and help strengthen and support not only the individual but give strength to the family as a unit that drives individual support for individual success and that helps drives [*sic*] any relationships in this country." He drew on his experiences as a health-care provider to justify his views that the federal government is too bureaucratic, top down, and inefficient. When asked what he thinks the people in charge should do in response to COVID-19, Hank said, "I think it's tough, especially coming from health care, because it's so varied across every plane. And I think we shouldn't pretend that a country as varied as America is can have one response to it. . . . I think we should back down on trying to project a national right or wrong way, and focus on assessing what one's risk is, then allowing that to come down to the individual municipalities." He said that he had grown into that point of view once he started paying taxes. At that point, he had started to question whether the government was really better at deciding how to spend his money than he was.

Hank's confidence in his political views likely stemmed in part from the efficacy he felt in his youth. Growing up, his family had above average income. His father was a doctor and his mother was a homemaker. With familial resources and support, Hank was able to execute his plan to become a doctor. Based on his experiences, his confidence that individuals, families, and communities will likely do better without federal government interference is not very

surprising. When the interviewer asked whether his life will be different five years from now, all that Hank imagined was foreseeable and achievable through his own actions: more healthy children, to be further along in his career, and mentoring younger doctors. He believed he would be making much more money, have a loving, large family and a fulfilling career.

Not everyone in the upper earnings tiers expressed certainty about upward mobility, and many wished they earned more. However, especially among White respondents, their relatively high level of stability and security coincided with a confidence that their political opinions were important and that others would want to hear them.[8] Respondents in the upper earnings tiers talked about politics in specifics, citing particular policies and political actors even beyond the most prominent headlines. This was a stark contrast to people in the lowest income tiers, who talked about government only in terms of they and them and seemed to not know where to begin when asked what they would want changed by someone with power. People with economic efficacy expressed criticism of contemporary politics and the inability of politicians to respond to the needs of the public, but they did so with a level of authority that was distinctive from people who talked about themselves as rudderless in the economy. They conveyed a familiarity with exercising power.

The relationship between internal economic and political efficacy was more than a by-product of greater fascination with political news among people with college degrees (Hersh 2018, 3–4). The people with higher earnings and security appeared to be in social networks that readily connected them to political activity. For example, Chris, a self-proclaimed upper-middle-class White man, ran for school board. He was well versed in the concept of civic engagement, was active politically, and expected the same of others.

Not all upper-earnings people were politically interested and certainly not politically active. However, relative to respondents with lower earnings, many conveyed a level of economic stability that freed up the mental space as well as the resources to pursue other things, including politics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The American Voices Project data have enabled us to look closely at the way a wide range of Americans understand both their economic and political lives. The opportunity to examine the way people at the lowest household earnings talk about their lives while examining those in the middle and upper earnings tiers is rare indeed (Ver Ploeg, Moffitt, and Citro 2002). We have treated the data from a selection of several dozen cases in an interpretive and ethnographic fashion, examining the views of the respondents as holistically as possible to look for the connections that emerged between their economic and political selves.

The richness of the AVP data and our approach have allowed us to learn about many aspects of these respondents' lives. Most studies of political efficacy examine attitudes about politics. But these data have enabled us to consider and reveal the political implications of how people think about their power and voice in a more immediate aspect of their lives: the economy. We have shown the ways that experience with employment, securing housing, and the challenge of making ends meet show up in individuals' sense of agency in the political realm.

We have observed that, as Americans navigate their lives in the twenty-first century, there is reason to expect that those who understand their place in the economic world as fixed and beyond their control think about their political lives in much the same way. Even though politics was a highly salient topic when these data were collected, people with extreme economic insecurity often had little to say. However, those who did have the stability and security to make economic choices and plans talked as if they had some attachment to politics, could navigate government programs, and had polit-

8. As Reuel Rogers (2024, this issue) notes, Black respondents in the AVP sample, although diverging in opinions along socioeconomic lines on some issues, shared a common low expectation that the government would be responsive to their concerns.

ical opinions that they believed were important for others to hear. Although many things affect individuals' political views, the AVP data have illuminated how perceptions of experience with the economy can fill in the blanks when people are asked to talk about a realm arguably more distant, politics.

It may seem obvious that for some people, economic challenges are so difficult that they are disaffected from society in general, including politics. This insight is often forgotten in the contemporary era. Support for populist candidates is often described as motivated, at least in part, by economic grievance (Rodrik 2018). Those accounts imply that economically aggrieved citizens view politics as an opportunity for voice and representation. That conclusion may be driven by insufficient attention to the very lowest income members of society (Parker 2022). Fortunately, the AVP data enable a focus on those underexamined experiences. Among these interviewees, people who perceive a lack of responsiveness are not mobilizing to obtain more responsiveness. Instead, the people we listened to who feel as though they have little agency in the economic realm seemed to see no point in taking political action.

Our work has also underscored that it is perceptions that matter when it comes to political behavior. Traditional models of political participation that focus on the connection between resources and participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) may overlook that it is often perceptions of one's resources or relative power relative to others that matter for whether and how one engages. The opportunity to listen to how these respondents understand their place in the economic and political realms has helped demonstrate that a sense of economic security may be more meaningful than objective socioeconomic standing for engagement in the political realm.

This study has limitations, of course. One is that we have tried to understand the extent of agency people feel in the political realm in general, when the level of agency they feel likely varies by situation (Zilberstein et al. 2024). Another is that we chose an intense focus on a subset of cases, rather than taking advantage of a larger part of this enormous study, or combining our analyses with a machine-driven analysis of all of the cases. Another set of limitations come from the data themselves. We did not have access to the recordings and therefore were sometimes unsure of the tone or intent of what was provided in the transcripts. Also, interviewees seemed considerably fatigued by the end of these lengthy interviews, and we are concerned about the quality of their responses in the later parts of these sessions. In addition, our analyses offer a measure of caution about the household income measure and highlight the need for qualitative studies to understand the resources that an individual actually has access to. As is likely the case with any human data collection, it appears interviewers did not always record things accurately. In the transcripts, we noticed some discrepancies in the household earnings coded by the interviewer and what the interviewee said. Even when a given case showed no such discrepancy, a respondent did not always perceive that they had access to the entirety of the household earnings or income. This was particularly the case in multigeneration families, and in couples with a power imbalance. In one case, a spouse reported that "I never know how much he [her spouse] makes," and his earnings "ain't my business." Finally, we would have liked to know more about the interviewers, given that they undoubtedly had an impact on the nature of the interviewee's responses.

Throughout the study we report here, we focused on perceptions and treated the data as self-reports, not objective measures, of the individual's circumstances. However, it is worth considering the ways these transcripts are valuable indicators of these respondents' actual experiences. The people who create social welfare policy live lives often far removed from the targets of those policies. These data are measures of what it is like to be the recipient, or the aspiring recipient, of social welfare programs. These are accounts that those designing policy and its implementation may not have heard before or taken the time to fully absorb. What is more important for creating effective policy, indicators of circumstances and need measured by those who have never experienced those circumstances, or perceptions of need voiced by

people living those circumstances? Both seem important, perhaps especially as complements to one another. Many of the AVP respondents report information about the mismatch between the policies in place and the nature of the problems those policies were supposedly designed to address. For example, Phil, a man who worked with youth struggling with addiction issues had this to say:

> Somebody has got to handle the addiction problem; this thing is just too clearly out of control. And I know that [a] lot of people I guess that are in the position of making policy that addresses that problem or attempts to address it or pretends to address it or whatever, it must be completely disconnected from reality because they have no idea what's going on. I mean, the rules and the schemes and the plans they come up with just . . . really don't help it any.

One might cynically observe that the U.S. economy was never designed to produce widespread political engagement. However, if those who set policy in the United States seek to foster a democracy more than in name only, the disengagement from government that the current economy appears to foster for many people is worth listening and responding to.

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