Political Studies Association

Article

Political Studies Review
2025, Vol. 23(3) 886–905

DOI: 10.1177/14789299241296794
journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev
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Efficacy and Action: How Targeted Messages Influence Support of Social Advocacy Organizations

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Abstract

Scholars widely agree that to mobilize individuals to action, it is vital that interest groups persuade them of the efficacy of participation. Despite firmly establishing the relationship between efficacy and action, research tells us surprisingly little about what kind of messaging most effectively evokes feelings of efficacy. To address this gap in the literature, we conduct a pair of survey experiments, each with three manipulations. The experiments present messages by fictitious advocacy organizations that emphasize the individual (action by an individual can produce change), the identity group (action by a specific identity group can produce change), or the organization (action by our organization can political change). Each message is designed to increase self-efficacy, group efficacy, or organizational efficacy, respectively. We conduct a two-stage analysis to determine first whether each message is able to increase efficacy, and then whether those feelings translate to behavioral support of the campaign. We find that while motivational messages often increase the intent to support a campaign, they only induce behavioral change in limited contexts.

Keywords

mobilization, efficacy, support, donations, interest groups

Accepted: 9 October 2024

Introduction

Research firmly establishes efficacy to be a key predictor of political behavior: individuals who believe that their actions influence outcomes are more likely to take part in social mobilization efforts (Corning and Myers, 2002; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Social advocacy organizations (SAOs), whose aims of achieving particular social or political goals

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necessitate mobilizing individuals, are aware of this and attempt to raise efficacy beliefs in potential and actual supporters (Benford and Snow, 2000). Oxfam International (2022) tells visitors to its homepage that "A radically better world is within our grasp . . . Take action. Change the world." Yet, while we know much about the relationship between efficacy and action, as well as SAOs' attempts to cultivate support from individuals, scholarship tells us surprisingly little about what kind of messaging most effectively evokes feelings of efficacy in people (see Hornsey et al., 2021). Indeed, recent research on the topic presents null findings, showing that the communications SAOs deploy most frequently to increase efficacy in their target audience do not have that intended effect (Anspach and Draguljić, 2019; McEntire et al., 2015).

The purpose of this article is to delve further into mechanisms of target-based messages of efficacy. Though there are many elements of strategic communication that can influence a message's effectiveness, the ubiquity of target-based efficacy frames in mobilization communications—and the null results of recent research investigating their effects—warrants further study. In this article, we assess which messages foster efficacy, and once activated, whether that feeling leads to action. We build on previous research by broadening the types of messages under study, as well as the types of efficacy they intend to evoke. Drawing on political science and social psychology research on mobilization, we identify three common pairings. First, individual messages intend to increase self-efficacy—the belief that one is capable of taking the action necessary to produce an outcome (Bandura, 1997)—by highlighting the stories of individuals achieving particular goals (Hamann and Reese, 2020). Second, identity group messages seek to raise the salience of the audience's group membership and its group efficacy, the shared belief among members that their collective efforts can lead to attainment of their goals (Bandura, 1997; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). Finally, organizational messages communicate the SAO's successes in furthering its mission in an attempt to influence the audience's cost–benefit calculations of participation (Klandermans, 1984; Simon et al., 1998). The aim is to raise organizational efficacy, which is the perception that the SAO can effectively achieve its goals.

Using Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform, we administer a pair of survey experiments ($n = 685$, $n = 852$) to analyze whether each message, attributed to fictionalized SAO campaigns on plastic pollution or children's education, increases the associated type of efficacy and whether that efficacy translates to support of the SAO behind the message. We assess support as both intent and action: the former, by asking respondents whether they would hypothetically support our SAOs through donating, volunteering, or petition-signing; the latter, by presenting respondents with actual opportunities to do so. We find that messages highlighting the capabilities of the individual or a specific identity group are the most effective at raising efficacy, while organizational messages have limited utility. Moreover, though respondents were overall much more likely to report an *intent* to support the SAO, we find that self-efficacy and group efficacy can also elicit *actual* support, at least in limited contexts.

This study makes a number of contributions. First, it addresses a gap in the literature at the intersection of politics and communication, showing that different types of messages can mobilize through different conceptualizations of efficacy. These findings have implications for the myriad political and social organizations that rely on mobilizing public support for their causes. More broadly, the findings also speak to debates focused around increasing political and civic engagement, indispensable components of participatory democracy. Finally, our research demonstrates the utility of measuring both intent and action and raises important questions about the relationship between the two variables.

Efficacy and Action

Types of Targeted Messages

Under what circumstances are individuals motivated to participate in collective action? This question has long preoccupied scholars, practitioners, and observers of politics, as an engaged citizenry is vital for the functioning of a healthy democracy. One factor to which much of the literature points is efficacy—the sense that one has influence over events and circumstances. On the continuum of perceptions of control, efficacy stands opposite to fatalism (Corcoran et al., 2011). The finding that individuals who feel efficacious are more likely to mobilize and participate in collective action than those who hold fatalistic views spans across decades (Corning and Myers, 2002; Fox and Schofield, 1989; Klandermans, 1984; Van Zomeren et al., 2004), cultures (Corcoran et al., 2011), and contexts (Van Zomeren, 2013). Researchers have linked efficacy to behaviors such as voting (Doherty and Webler, 2016), petition-signing (Doherty and Webler, 2016; Van Zomeren et al., 2012), pro-environmental action (Chen, 2015; Homburg and Stolberg, 2006), and a range of political activism (Corning and Myers, 2002; Fox and Schofield, 1989; Tausch et al., 2011; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013).

This literature has important implications for SAOs, whose ability to effect social change depends on mobilizing public support and action. To be successful in such mobilization, research suggests that SAOs should strategically frame their communication efforts to foster beliefs about efficacy (Corcoran et al., 2011; Doherty and Webler, 2016). Communication frames "suggest how politics should be thought about, encouraging citizens to understand events and issues in particular ways" (Kinder, 2003: 359). Frames that evoke certain emotional responses seems to be particularly important in influencing how individuals process information, form attitudes, and act (Gross, 2008; Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004; Kim and Cameron, 2011; Kuhne and Schemer, 2017).

SAOs have developed a tendency toward using motivational framing, presumably with the intent of eliciting the feeling of efficacy. Amnesty International, for example, utilizes motivational messaging in 70% of its campaigns (McEntire et al., 2015). These communications are action-oriented, highlighting the role the recipient can play in achieving the organizations' policy victories (Benford and Snow, 2000). Messages like the following from Greenpeace's website fit this motivational mold, as they emphasize the ability of the reader to achieve positive change if they take up the organization's call to collective action: "We're ready to fight . . . and protect our environment, but we can't do it without you. We rely entirely on support from members like you!"

Yet, despite their wide use, these motivational frames do not appear to be successful, as studies find these generic messages do not elicit feelings of efficacy in the target audience (Anspach and Draguljić, 2019; McEntire et al., 2015). These studies often use two-stage analyses, determining whether a communication can increase efficacy, and then whether efficacy influences a certain behavior. McEntire et al. (2015), for example, find that despite efficacy's (what they call agency) correlation with supporting human rights campaigns, motivational message treatments themselves fail to foster individuals' sense of agency. Given the state of the literature, these findings are not altogether surprising: as Hornsey et al. (2021) discussed in detail, researchers often fall short in their attempts to raise efficacy through experimental manipulations.

We thus know that raising efficacy is vital for SAOs, but that it is unclear how they can most effectively do so. It is possible that two design choices in Anspach and Draguljić (2019) and McEntire et al. (2015) explain the null findings. First, both studies tested the

effects of a generic motivational message directly addressed to the reader. While this is a common practice in SAO communications, SAOs also often vary whose agency they emphasize, highlighting the roles of a specific *individual*, an *identity group*, or of the *organization* itself. The second design decision that may have lead to null results is the use of a generic conceptualization of efficacy. The literature is conclusive on the existence of different types of efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Van Zomeren et al., 2010), so a catch-all operationalization of the concept may not adequately capture the processes activated by targeted messages.

Given these practical and theoretical considerations, we broaden the scope of this research agenda in two ways: we assess different motivational communications that emphasize the agency of specific actors and whether those frames, in turn, activate distinct types of efficacy. Specifically, we investigate whether strategic communications that highlight the agency of a specific *individual*, an *identity group*, or of the *organization* itself impact the target audience's self-efficacy, group efficacy, and organizational efficacy, and whether those feelings of efficacy impact behavior.

Individual messages tell stories of specific people who affected change through their work with the SAO. While similar to the motivational frame, it shifts the focus from the generic reader ("you") to a real person who has contributed to a tangible outcome. Although Hamann and Reese (2020) found null results when deploying this strategy (an article about "Mark's" impact on lowering CO_2 emissions did not affect participants' behaviors), research on SAO communication shows that presenting human rights or environmental issues through their effects on specific individuals can lead to attitudinal and behavioral change in the target audience (Anspach and Draguljić, 2019; McEntire et al., 2015).

In contrast to individual messaging's focus on specific difference-makers, group identity messages highlight the targets' belonging to a specific group and present the latter as a political movement capable of achieving change. The Alliance for Youth Action (2022), an organization focused on increasing progressive youth political engagement, utilizes this messaging on its homepage: "[We] lift up the examples of our generation turning out in record numbers and winning real progress. We connect elections and issues for young voters & then connect those voters to the ballot."

Finally, organizational messaging emphasizes the actions and victories of the SAOs rather than individual members or broader identity groups. It is difficult to find an SAO that does not advertise its actions and accomplishments. For example, the homepage of the International Rescue Committee (n.d.), a humanitarian aid organization focused on violence and conflict, touts its 72-hour crisis mobilization time. Similarly, a Planned Parenthood mailer highlights the organization's achievements, communicating that it "pushed back successfully against unconstitutional laws and restrictions, including many state-based extreme abortion bans that were blocked last year" and "opened new health centers in Alabama, Florida, Illinois, and Pennsylvania."

To summarize, SAOs regularly make use of strategic communications highlighting the accomplishments of specific individuals, social identity groups, of the organizations themselves. These organizations design such messages in the hopes of mobilizing their audiences to contribute to their cause. In the next section, we discuss how individual, group, and organizational messages may influence feelings of self-efficacy, group efficacy, and organizational efficacy that, in turn, may lead to behavioral support.

Types of Efficacy and Their Effects

Having detailed how SAOs regularly use individual, group, and organizational messages to mobilize potential supporters, we now explain how each type of message may influence a specific type of efficacy. Self-efficacy focuses on the individual and the belief that one can capably perform a behavior that is required to produce a particular outcome. Individuals with high self-efficacy are willing to put forth more time and effort toward a goal, even when faced with obstacles (Bandura, 1977, 1997). We argue that individual messages touting the accomplishments of real-life people target self-efficacy. Research has shown that messages that merely explain how individuals can easily take political action can influence feelings of efficacy (Feldman and Hart, 2016; Hart and Feldman, 2016). Perhaps, then, exposure to an actual person's success story raises the audience's own expectations of success and therefore self-efficacy. Greenpeace, for example, documents many such experiences on its website. In one story, a man from England writes about his volunteer work on a British campaign against genetically modified crops. Recounting his experience of getting arrested and then acquitted for removing test crops from a farm, he concludes, "GM crops are still banned in the UK."

Group messages highlighting the role of a social identity, on the other hand, are designed to increase feelings of group efficacy. An influential line of research that falls under the umbrella of social identity theory proposes that people both seek and benefit from positive group-based social identities (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). While there are different theories explaining the formation of group identities, they all highlight the important role identification plays in mobilization (Huddy, 2013; Smith et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2009). Scholars argue that group identification generates awareness of similarity, a shared fate and outlook, and commitment to group norms of activity. Members, sensing an inner obligation, feel motivated to participate on behalf of the group (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013; Thomas and McGarty, 2009). Research consistently shows that stronger group identification leads to both greater intention to participate and higher actual participation in collective action (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013; Van Zomeren, 2013). Van Zomeren et al. (2008) build on this scholarship through their integrated social identity model of collective action (SIMCA), arguing that in addition to motivating collective action directly, social identity also impacts group efficacy. Also referred to as collective efficacy, group efficacy is the shared belief among members of a group that they can achieve certain goals through their collective efforts (Bandura, 1997; Chen, 2015; Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Overlooked in recent studies of mobilization communications (e.g. Anspach and Dragulјić, 2019; McEntire et al., 2015), group efficacy may be a more important factor in collective action mobilization than self-efficacy, because self-efficacy is most likely to lead to behavioral change when individuals perceive a problem as an individual one (Van Zomeren et al., 2010). For example, fostering a person's self-efficacy may lead them to quit littering or overspending, but may not influence their engagement with social issues like air pollution or the national debt. Instead, research in environmental psychology finds that group efficacy increases the likelihood of individuals' engagement with collective action problems that necessitate interaction, coordination, and shared knowledge, while self-efficacy alone has no effect (Chen, 2015; Homburg and Stolberg, 2006; Jugert et al., 2016; Van Zomeren et al., 2010). In order for SAO communications to increase group efficacy, it appears necessary to raise the salience of targets' membership in that group. For example, presenting college students with information that a student

organization successfully advocated for the lowering of greenhouse gas emissions may make them feel more efficacious (Hamann and Reese, 2020).

Finally, organizational messages touting the accomplishments of the SAO are designed to increase organizational efficacy—an SAO's ability to engage in action that leads to a desired outcome. This type of efficacy is closely related to organizational effectiveness, a concept defined broadly as the extent to which an organization reaches its goals (Herman and Renz, 1999). Research finds that individuals' subjective perceptions of an organization's effectiveness impact volunteering, donations, and other forms of support (Willems et al., 2015). When considering participation in collective action, individuals partake in a cost–benefit analysis, weighing the time and resources that participation requires against the likelihood of successful outcome and the value they place on that outcome (Klandermans, 1984; Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer and Simon, 2004). An organization that convinces the target audience that it can attain its goals becomes associated with success and thereby elicits participation. Research shows that simply communicating an organization's specific practices leads to assessments of effectiveness (Willems et al., 2015). For these reasons, SAOs have an incentive to highlight organizational efficacy by communicating how their actions achieve their goals.

Distinguishing between self-efficacy, group efficacy, and organizational efficacy has its benefits. First, we can test whether feelings of specific types of efficacy correlate with the featured actors or groups in strategic communications deployed by SAOs. In addition, accounting for the distinction between self-efficacy, group efficacy, and organizational efficacy, we are able to determine whether one type of strategic message (e.g. individual messages) has spillover effects into other types of efficacy.

Of course, raising audience efficacy is not the end goal of SAO messages. By fostering feelings of efficacy, SAOs hope that individual, group, and organizational messages will convince recipients to support their cause. This support can take many forms, including contacting government representatives, volunteering, and donating to the cause, among others. We therefore hypothesize that SAOs' efficacy messages operate through a two-stage process. First, the messages increase feelings of efficacy in the target audience. Then, those increased feelings of efficacy lead to behavioral support of the organization. Figure 1 illustrates our two-stage model.

The mediation model shown in Figure 1 allows us to test the hypotheses below through a two-stage process. The first stage of our model (a_i) represents a message's effect on each type of efficacy. Though our hypotheses below predict that each message will increase the respective efficacy (e.g. messages about a specific individual will activate individual efficacy), the model illustrated in Figure 1 allows for spillover effects (e.g. messages about a specific individual may also activate group and/or organizational efficacy). The second stage (b_i) investigates whether and how efficacy influences support for the SAO. For a mobilization message to be effective under this model, the entire path from message to support (i.e. both a_x and b_x) must be significant. As explained in the hypotheses below, we expect each message to operate via specific paths: individual messages through self-efficacy (H1), group messages through group efficacy (H2), and organizational messages through organizational efficacy (H3). For precision and parsimony, we estimate the mediation effects of all three types of efficacy in a single model (see Preacher and Hayes, 2008). The c' path in Figure 1 represents the unmediated effect of the mobilization message. This direct effect captures

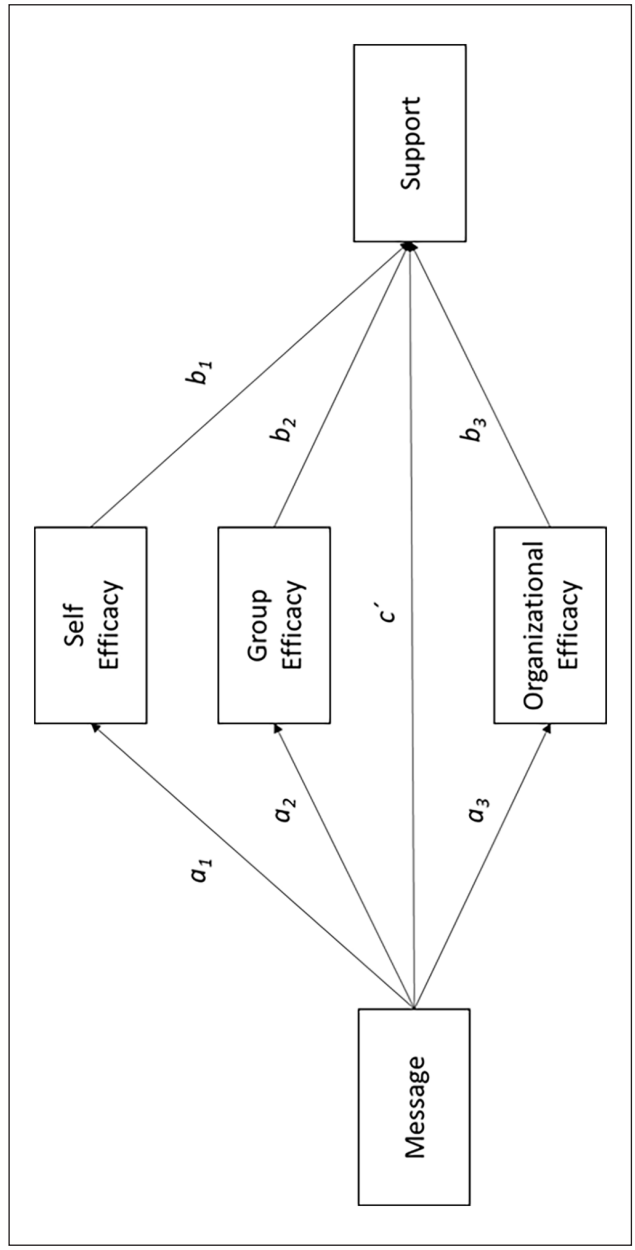

Figure 1. Efficacy Mediation Model.

any leftover effects of our treatments that do not operate through our three conceptions of efficacy.

H1: Exposure to messages that feature a specific individual's contributions will increase behavioral support for a campaign.

H1a: Exposure to messages that feature a specific individual's contributions will increase feelings of self-efficacy.

H1b: Increased feelings of self-efficacy are associated with greater behavioral support.

H2: Exposure to messages that highlight a social identity group's capabilities will increase behavioral support for a campaign.

H2a: Exposure to messages that highlight a social identity group's capabilities will increase feelings of group efficacy.

H2b: Increased feelings of group efficacy are associated with greater behavioral support.

H3: Exposure to messages that highlight an organization's capabilities will increase behavioral support for a campaign.

H3a: Exposure to messages that highlight an organization's capabilities will increase feelings of organizational efficacy.

H3b: Increased feelings of organizational efficacy are associated with greater behavioral support.

Research Design

We recruited a sample of subjects through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform to test the above hypotheses. Despite concerns regarding the characteristics of MTurk workers and the quality of their responses, we opt for this cost-effective online convenience sample due to the need to target members of specific groups for the purposes of testing our group efficacy hypotheses. Even so, research has shown that MTurk workers are more representative than other types of convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012) and compare favorably to traditional samples (Berinsky et al., 2012; Buhrmester et al., 2011; Paolacci and Chandler, 2014).

The advertisement for our survey was vague to avoid selection effects, asking workers only to "Answer a few questions about your behavior." We conducted two waves of experiments in March 2020, each featuring a different issue and target group.[1] Subjects who participated in the first study were ineligible to participate in the second. The first experiment centered on plastic waste and young people. The second focused on an effort to donate school supplies to disadvantaged students and was targeted toward women. We chose these issue-group combinations because recent survey data show that 61% of women cite education as a top priority, while 54% of young people say the same about environmental concerns (Pew Research Center, 2022). We avoided the issue of climate change, however, due to its overwhelming salience; by focusing on the less-prominent issue of plastic pollution, we hoped to avoid the situation where our subjects were treated outside the bounds of our experiment by receiving mailers in the real world.

To test our group efficacy hypotheses, it was necessary to recruit members of the groups featured in our experimental treatments (young people and women, respectively).

For both survey experiments, MTurk workers were required to live in the United States, be a member of the target group (either 18–30 years old or a woman), have at least a 90% HIT approval rating, and pass an in-survey attention check.[2] Each worker received $1.00 for completing the survey. We include descriptive statistics of both samples in the Appendix.

For both experiments, we randomly assigned subjects to one of four experimental conditions (balance tests can be found in the Appendix), each created to mirror real-world dynamics. Three conditions presented subjects with a message focused on individual, group, or organizational action. The fourth was a control condition in which participants received no communication or information about the featured issue. To preserve the external validity of the design, we did not utilize a placebo text condition (i.e. a treatment that used innocuous text not meant to mobilize its audience). If placed in one of the treatment groups, subjects were presented with a short campaign message from the either the Plastic Waste Initiative (first survey experiment) or the Happy Backpack organization (second), fictional organizations dedicated to their respective causes. The messages shown (Figures 2 and 3) were designed to increase the idea that individuals, the targeted group (young people and women, respectively), or the organizations themselves can affect meaningful change (see Hamann and Reese, 2020; Hanss and Böhm, 2010).

To ensure that our messages were externally valid, we turned to recent mobilization messages from prominent SAOs, including Greenpeace, Amnesty International, International Rescue Committee, the Human Rights Campaign, March for our Lives, the Sierra Club, and Planned Parenthood, among others. Specifically, we drew from SAO messaging on their websites and mailers, using common phrases in our own treatments. Each treatment follows the same format: an individual or group addressed the problem of concern, spawning a viral movement that has made a lasting, positive impact. The treatments all conclude with a call to action, highlighting the role of the individual, group, or organization, depending on the assigned treatment group.

The individual message attempts to increase self-efficacy by stressing the reader's agency in being able to bring about change (see Hamann and Reese, 2020; Hanss and Böhm, 2010). The group message highlights the outsized role young people/women have in addressing the issue of concern. Finally, the organizational message emphasizes the ability of the Plastic Waste Initiative/Happy Backpack organization to solve the featured problem.

After treatment, subjects continued with the survey. We first measured subjects' self, group, and organizational efficacy using three 5-point Likert-type prompts for each concept (see Appendix for prompts and inter-item correlations). We then summed the responses for the three types of efficacy, creating a total score for each that ranges from 0 to 12.

Following these measures of our moderators, we recorded each subject's willingness to become more involved in helping to address the experiment's highlighted problem. Here, we asked subjects the likelihood of hypothetically adding their name to a petition supporting the cause, receiving information about volunteering with their local organization, and/or donating a portion of their MTurk payment to the SAO, if given the opportunity. With these questions, we measure subjects' *intended* willingness to contribute to the campaign. At the end of the survey, however, we also measure subjects' *actual* willingness to do so: subjects were given the opportunity to actually add their name to a petition, receive information about volunteering, or donate to the organization. The survey concluded with a debriefing page in which subjects were

Figure 2. Message Treatments (Study 1).

informed that the Plastic Waste Initiative/Happy Backpack organization are fictional, and that regardless of their responses in the survey, no actual action would be taken on their behalf.

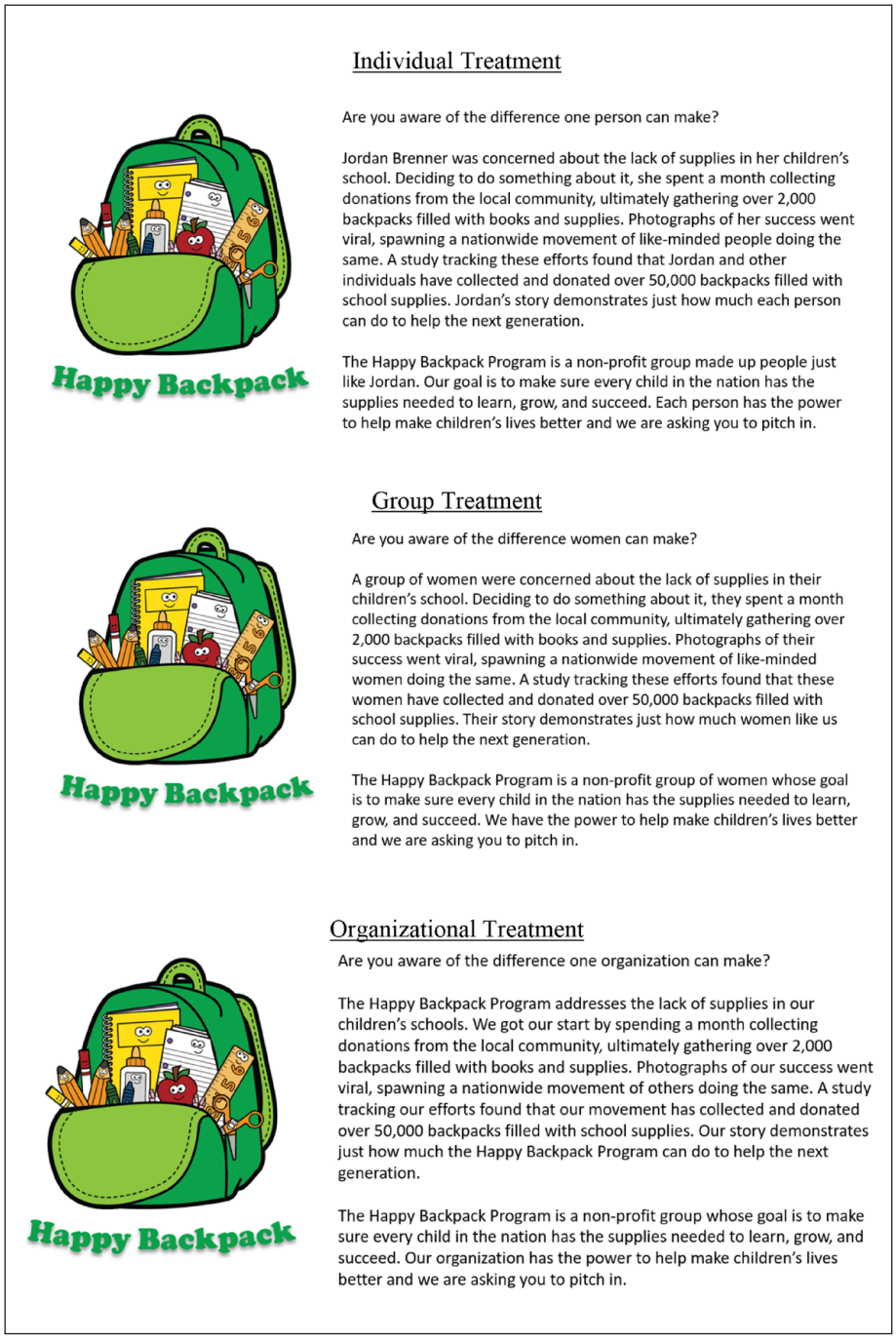

Figure 3. Message Treatments (Study 2).

To determine whether and how self, group, and organizational efficacy mediate the effects of mobilization messages, we follow Anspach & Dragulјić's (2019) design by implementing a general structural equation model. This approach allows us to test each

stage of Figure 1. Specifically, we test how our messages influence subjects' feelings of efficacy (a_i), whether that sense of efficacy influences behavior (b_i), and any direct treatment effects not mediated by efficacy (c').

Results

Tables 1 and 2 display the results of our general structural equation for Studies 1 and 2, respectively. Because studies that do not measure actual behavioral change may overestimate the influence of mobilization messages (Anspach and Draguljić, 2019), we use both *intended* willingness to support a campaign and *actual* support for the campaign as our dependent variables. Models 1–3 of each table display each message's effect on each of our three types of efficacy: self, group, and organizational efficacy (represented by the a_i paths of Figure 1). In these models, statistical significance indicates each treatment's ability to influence the respective type of efficacy. As predicted by H1a, exposure to the individual treatment increased subjects' feelings of self-efficacy in both studies. However, it is noteworthy that these messages about the actions of a single individual have spillover effects; in addition to raising individual efficacy, the individual treatment also increased feelings of group and organizational efficacy in both studies. We discuss these spillover effects in greater detail in the following section.

We observe a similar effect with the group efficacy treatment. We designed these messages to increase feelings of efficacy toward the targeted group (young people and women), as predicted by H2a. The results in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate support for our hypothesis, but additionally show that the group efficacy message also increased feelings of individual and organizational efficacy. Together, these findings speak to the power of framing mobilization messages around the abilities of specific individuals or targeted groups.

The above findings stand in contrast to the organizational treatment effect. In Study 1 (Table 1), we found that the message highlighting the Plastic Waste Initiative's ability to create positive change did not increase feelings of efficacy about the organization. However, in the follow-up study (Table 2), the organizational treatment increased subjects' feelings of efficacy toward the Happy Backpack organization (it is worth noting that in Study 2, the organizational treatment also increased individual efficacy). Together, we consider these findings to offer mixed support for H3a. In all, Models 1–3 in these tables suggest that SAOs would do best to focus on the efforts of individuals or to link the organization's efforts to a specific group, as opposed to focusing on the organization's own accomplishments.

Though Models 1–3 suggest preliminary support for our theory, they only represent the first stage of our two-stage process. Before determining the overall effectiveness of such mobilization messages, we must test the second stage of the process: whether each feeling of efficacy influences behavior. Models 4–6 of Tables 1 and 2 display the analyses for subjects' *intended* likeliness of supporting our fictional SAO if given a chance, by signing a petition, receiving information about how to volunteer, or donating a portion of their Mechanical Turk payment to the organization (each measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale). In contrast, Models 7–9 measure whether subjects *actually* engaged in these three behaviors when asked to support the campaign (each measured as a dummy variable). In these models, we test whether our three types of efficacy (the b_i paths of Figure 1) and the direct, unmediated treatment effects (the c' path of Figure 1) influence the respective behavior.

Table 1. Mediated Treatment Effects on Reported and Actual Support (Study 1).

	Efficacy mediators			Support (reported)			Support (actual)		
	Self (1)	Group (2)	Org. (3)	Petition (4)	Volunteer (5)	Donate (6)	Petition (7)	Volunteer (8)	Donate (9)
Individual Treatment	**0.810**	**0.495**	**0.551**	–0.138	–0.0503	–0.0972	**–0.106**	**–0.0980**	–0.0307
	(0.242)	**(0.227)**	**(0.252)**	(0.123)	(0.115)	(0.123)	**(0.0511)**	**(0.0397)**	(0.0340)
Group Treatment	**0.711**	**0.488**	**0.642**	–0.201	0.0902	–0.0206	–0.0577	**–0.0842**	–0.0374
	(0.244)	**(0.229)**	**(0.255)**	(0.124)	(0.116)	(0.125)	(0.0516)	**(0.0401)**	(0.0344)
Organization Treatment	0.217	0.137	0.338	–0.0566	0.0222	–0.0068	–0.0784	**–0.0794**	–0.0058
	(0.246)	(0.231)	(0.256)	(0.125)	(0.117)	(0.125)	(0.0516)	**(0.0402)**	(0.0344)
Self-Efficacy	–	–	–	**0.111**	**0.145**	**0.117**	0.0196	0.0081	0.0047
				(0.0266)	**(0.0249)**	**(0.0266)**	(0.0111)	(0.0086)	(0.0073)
Group Efficacy	–	–	–	**0.713**	0.0333	0.0034	0.185	0.0130	0.0088
				(0.0291)	(0.0273)	(0.0292)	(0.0121)	(0.0094)	(0.0080)
Organizational Efficacy	–	–	–	0.0424	0.0229	**0.0952**	0.0109	-0.0044	–0.0061
				(0.0220)	(0.0206)	**(0.0221)**	(0.0091)	(0.0071)	(0.0061)
Control	**8.64**	**9.20**	**7.40**	**0.878**	**0.840**	**0.473**	0.0299	0.0733	0.0571
	(0.164)	**(0.153)**	**(0.171)**	**(0.216)**	**(0.202)**	**(0.217)**	(0.0897)	(0.0698)	(0.0597)
Observations	684	685	683	682	682	682	682	682	682
Pseudo R^2	0.0048	0.0023	0.0031	0.054	0.056	0.047	0.031	0.021	0.010
LR chi^2	14.02	6.38	9.49	103.43	109.5	98.0	28.87	13.21	4.82

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients significant at the $p < 0.05$ level presented in bold.
Efficacy mediators: sum of three 5-point Likert-type scales (range: 0–12).
Reported support: dependent variable is 5-point Likert-type scale (positive values indicate increased likelihood).
Actual support: dependent variable is binary variable (1 = support).

Table 2. Mediated Treatment Effects on Reported and Actual Support (Study 2).

	Efficacy mediators			Support (reported)			Support (actual)		
	Self (1)	Group (2)	Org. (3)	Petition (4)	Volunteer (5)	Donate (6)	Petition (7)	Volunteer (8)	Donate (9)
Individual Treatment	**0.908**	**0.480**	**0.886**	–0.110	0.0018	0.0032	–0.0617	–0.0094	**–0.0806**
	(0.214)	**(0.183)**	**(0.205)**	(0.110)	(0.0996)	(0.0989)	(0.0497)	(0.0384)	**(0.0378)**
Group Treatment	**0.848**	**0.840**	**1.20**	**–0.239**	–0.0940	–0.0684	–0.0551	–0.0572	–0.0666
	(0.207)	**(0.178)**	**(0.199)**	**(0.108)**	(0.0973)	(0.0967)	(0.0486)	(0.0375)	(0.0370)
Organization Treatment	**0.571**	0.301	**0.784**	–0.0241	–0.0623	–0.0414	–0.0179	–0.0402	–0.0306
	(0.204)	(0.174)	**(0.195)**	(0.105)	(0.0945)	(0.0939)	(0.0472)	(0.0365)	(0.0359)
Self-Efficacy	–	–	–	**0.118**	**0.181**	**0.158**	**0.0359**	0.0090	0.0040
				(0.0247)	**(0.0224)**	**(0.0222)**	**(0.0112)**	(0.0086)	(0.0085)
Group Efficacy	–	–	–	**0.0882**	0.0372	0.0406	0.0147	0.0006	**0.0278**
				(0.0306)	(0.0277)	(0.0274)	(0.0138)	(0.0106)	**(0.0105)**
Organizational Efficacy	–	–	–	0.0478	0.0426	**0.0549**	–0.0106	0.0112	–0.0052
				(0.0272)	(0.0246)	**(0.0244)**	(0.0122)	(0.0095)	(0.0093)
Control	**8.73**	**9.87**	**9.00**	**0.620**	**0.474**	**0.520**	0.0730	0.0029	–0.0600
	(0.149)	**(0.128)**	**(0.143)**	**(0.218)**	**(0.197)**	**(0.195)**	(0.0981)	(0.0759)	(0.0747)
Observations	852	852	851	846	846	847	847	847	847
Pseudo R^2	0.0069	0.0068	0.0117	0.0668	0.0846	0.0836	0.0219	0.0149	0.0272
LR chi^2	23.80	20.39	38.58	148.48	189.93	188.57	25.23	11.68	20.94

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients significant at the $p < 0.05$ level presented in bold.
Efficacy mediators: sum of three 5-point Likert-type scales (range: 0–12).
Reported support: dependent variable is 5-point Likert-type scale.
Actual support: dependent variable is binary variable.

We first draw attention to the effects of our efficacy mediators, starting with self-efficacy's influence on behavior. In both studies, greater self-efficacy increases subjects' intended support for all three behaviors; subjects demonstrating high individual efficacy were more likely to report a likelihood of signing a petition, receiving information about volunteering, and donating to the study's respective campaign (Models 4–6). This initial evidence for H1b suggests that the rationale behind SAOs' attempts to highlight the efforts of specific individuals is not entirely misplaced.

However, we must temper the results shown in Models 4, 5, and 6 with those of Models 7, 8, and 9. The results of these analyses—estimating *actual* campaign support—show that subjects were less likely to follow through on their intended willingness to support each organization. Indeed, we find that self-efficacy only increases subjects' tendency to sign a petition. Moreover, we only find this effect in Study 2; self-efficacy's effect in every other analysis regarding actual behavior is statistically insignificant. Recall that H1 predicted that individual frames would increase self-efficacy, which in turn would induce behavioral support. We find partial evidence for this hypothesis regarding individual messages' ability to increase the likelihood of signing a petition, but not for volunteering or donating.

We find some effect for group efficacy. Model 4 in both tables shows that increased group efficacy is associated with increased likelihood of reporting a willingness to sign a petition. However, this intended willingness does not translate to actual behavioral change, as group efficacy's effect on actually signing a petition is null in both studies (Model 7). Instead, we see a modest, positive effect on actually donating to the campaign in Study 2 (Table 2, Model 9). Since group frames both increased group efficacy (H2a), which then elicited limited behavioral change in one study (H2b), we find partial support for H2.

We next turn to our last type of message: organizational. Recall that we only found partial support for H3a, as the organizational treatment only increased organizational efficacy in Study 2. In both studies, that increased organizational efficacy increased the likelihood of indicating a willingness to donate to the respective campaign (Model 6). However, that intended willingness does not equate to actual behavioral change, as we observe null effects for organizational efficacy not only for donating, but also for signing a petition and receiving information about volunteering, as well. Because we find no support for H3b, the broader H3 is falsified.

Though we do not have any specific hypotheses regarding each treatment's direct effects on behavioral support, we finally analyze those treatment effects not mediated by feelings of efficacy (c' in Figure 1). Here, we see evidence that SAOs may face tradeoffs when framing their mobilization communications around efficacy. Whenever such frames' direct effects on actual behavioral change are not insignificant (as is largely the case), they are negative. Indeed, all three treatments in Study 1 are associated with a decreased likelihood of seeking information about volunteering (Table 1, Model 8). In addition, we found the individual treatment to have a negative effect on signing the petition (Table 1, Model 7) and on donating (Table 2, Model 9) in certain contexts. We discuss these negative direct effects in greater detail in the following section.

Discussion

In this article, we examine whether and how mobilization communications mediated by feelings of self-, group, and organizational efficacy influenced support for a social advocacy campaign. Overall, we found that messages highlighting the individual or identity group were effective in that they increased all three types of efficacy. Nonetheless, efficacy

fostered actual support of SAOs in only limited contexts. The impact of organizational messages was minimal. These results have implications for scholars studying mobilization messages as well as for the political organizations whose success relies on employing effective communication strategies.

Contrary to studies concluding that self-efficacy only motivates individuals to tackle individual challenges and that group efficacy is necessary for collective mobilization (Chen, 2015; Homburg and Stolberg, 2006; Jugert et al., 2016), we show that self-efficacy can motivate collective action: self-efficacy increases the intent of signing a petition, volunteering, and donating, and leads participants to actually commit to signing a petition in certain contexts. In addition, consistent with expectations laid out by social identity theory and the SIMCA model (Van Zomeren et al., 2008), our findings point to the importance of group messages and group efficacy: although group messages do not produce results as consistently as individual messages, group efficacy leads to both intended and actual support of the SAO in certain situations. Specifically, participants reported an intention to sign a petition and an actual willingness to donate to the backpack SAO in Study 2. Given that participants were compensated $1.00 for their work, their commitment to making a monetary donation points to the potential of group identity messaging.

To advance this research agenda, we see four fruitful areas for future investigation. First, it is noteworthy that our results linking efficacy to actual SAO support stemmed from the study targeting female participants and the issue of education. In Study 1, individual and group messages on the environment raised feelings of efficacy in young people, but those feelings did not lead to action. This finding speaks to social identity scholarship that argues that some identity groups are more easily politicized and primed for mobilization for certain issues (Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer and Simon, 2004). It is possible that the issue of education is particularly salient with a female audience, as Pew Research Center (2022) survey research shows that a majority of American women prioritize improving education and that there is a substantial gap between the genders on this matter. And while younger people show much greater concern with the environment than older generations, plastic pollution may not have the same level of salience as an issue like climate change. All of this suggests that messages that raise feelings of efficacy alone are not enough to generate support for a campaign—they have to be targeted toward identity groups who are predisposed to take interest in the issue or must employ some framing that makes them take interest.

Second, some of our treatments had spillover effects: the individual messaging increased feelings of group and organizational efficacy, while the group messaging increased feelings of individual and organizational efficacy. This raises concerns regarding our general theorizing of efficacy and its effects. It is possible that there is a single, underlying efficacy concept and that separating individual, group, and organizational efficacy from one another is a misguided approach. If so, the perception that something *can* be accomplished may be more important than *who* can accomplish it. However, we note that SAOs regularly craft their own mobilization messages to target the individual, identity groups, or to tout their own organization's accomplishments. In this, our design simply mirrors the messages used in the real world.

Third, though self- and group efficacy are able to elicit actual behavioral support in certain contexts, recall that the direct treatment effects of our messages sometimes *decreased* the likelihood of engaging in such behaviors. Until researchers untangle these contradictory findings, our results should be interpreted with caution by SAOs who utilize such communications to mobilize potential supporters: efficacy messages may

sometimes work against their intended goals. If such messages fail to foster efficacy, the problems described in the communication may leave recipients with a fatalistic attitude. This feeling that nothing can be done to improve the situation may make behavioral support less likely than if they had not received the message in the first place. Of course, other mechanisms of behavioral support exist besides efficacy (Anspach and Draguljić, 2019; McEntire et al., 2015), but our treatments' negative direct effects suggest that common strategies pursued by advocacy organizations may have unintended consequences that work against their goals.

Finally, we recognize that there are many ways to support a political or social cause. The behaviors featured in our experiments (signing a petition, volunteering, and donating) represent just three. Arguably, some of these behaviors are costly, particularly volunteering (time) and donating (money). Future research could investigate other means of support.

Of course, our study comes with limitations. First, we recruited our sample using the online Mechanical Turk platform. Though research validates the use of MTurk samples (Berinsky et al., 2012; Buhrmester et al., 2011; Paolacci and Chandler, 2014), it is worth noting that ours was not a truly representative sample. It is possible that a sample more closely resembling the population may have yielded different results. In addition, it is possible that the nature of our sample may have underestimated the real-world effects of similar mobilization messages. SAOs often target their communications to individuals that they have identified as potentially sympathetic to their causes. We could not capture this prior support in our MTurk sample, but it may be that mobilization messages and feelings are efficacy are more influential among those who already predisposed to support a political or social cause.

Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insight into the effects of SAO mobilization messages. Given the ubiquity of communications designed to increase feelings of efficacy, SAOs clearly believe such approaches to be effective. This study demonstrates how such organizations can tailor their messages to achieve their ends. By highlighting the capabilities of specific individuals or by connecting the campaign to a broader identity group, SAOs can increase audience efficacy and, potentially, garner support for their respective causes.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Balance Tests—Study 1.
Balance Tests—Study 2.
Survey Questions (Study 1).
Survey Questions (Study 2)

Notes

1. The survey protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at each of the authors' institutions (approval numbers 19FA012 and 1911060775, respectively).
2. Subjects who did not pass the attention check were immediately removed from the MTurk survey upon failure and did not receive payment. Research indicates that attention checks are a suitable means to screen for inattentive participants without sacrificing scale validity (Kung et al., 2018), and as a result, MTurk samples tend to be more attentive than other convenience samples (Hauser and Schwarz, 2016). However, we recognize that removing attention check failures may bias our analyses toward significant results, as passage correlates with politically relevant characteristics (Berinsky et al., 2014) and strengthens intention-to-treat (ITT) effects (Kane, 2024).

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