

## **The Nitty Gritty: The Unexplored Role of Grit and Perseverance in Political Participation**

**Keywords:** grit, psychosocial skills, political participation, voter turnout

Political scientists and policymakers have long lamented the consistently dismal levels of civic engagement in the United States. Despite widespread recognition that low levels of voter turnout are a concern for American democracy, it remains unclear how to remedy the problem.

Existing theories of participation share the fundamental assumption that voting is costly. In addition to the informational costs associated with becoming informed about elections and registering to vote, citizens face a number of obstacles in turning out to vote, including locating and traveling to polling locations and navigating long lines on Election Day. In the United States, the costs of participation are incurred repeatedly, given the large number of elections held and the need to re-register with any changes in home address. Existing theories of participation focus on the individual resources—especially education, income, and mobilizing social networks—that enable individuals to participate. Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment have the cognitive resources to figure out voting requirements and make sense of the noise of political campaigns. Those with higher incomes have the ability to absorb the financial costs of participating. Those at the top end of the education and income distributions are also more likely to be in social networks where they will be *asked* to participate. Yet, policy efforts based on these theories have been notoriously unsuccessful. Civic education programs that have focused on teaching facts and knowledge about politics have found limited success (Bachner 2010; Langton and Jennings, 1968; Litt, 1963), mobilization campaigns—whether Rock the Vote or

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GOTV efforts—often find small effects (Green and Gerber 2008; Bennion and Nickerson 2011), and efforts to reform elections laws have generally done little to increase turnout (Holbein and Hillygus 2015; Keele and Minozzi 2013; Burden et al. 2014).

We propose examination of an under-explored resource—noncognitive or psychosocial skills.. Whereas political scientists often recognized the importance of political motivation, we contend that general motivations like grit—or, the ability to persevere towards goals, in spite of obstacles or distractions—help people overcome the obstacles that get in the way of political participation.<sup>3</sup> This argument builds on a vibrant, growing body of research outside of political science that shows success in school and beyond depends not only on academic knowledge but also on a range of non-cognitive or psychosocial skills—the ability to regulate motivations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (e.g., Heckman and Kautz 2013). In our recent work (Hillygus, Holbein, and Snell 2015; Holbein 2015), we provide evidence that these psychosocial skills help to explain why some people vote and others do not. In particular, the psychosocial skill of grit appears to play a strong role. We further show that these skills are malleable to targeted interventions—such as those that prime individuals to think of themselves as gritty—and that these primes increase individuals’ willingness to overcome the barriers to participation, such as waiting in line to vote (Hillygus, Holbein, and Snell 2015).

Given these promising results and the fact that psychosocial skills, like grit, have rarely been measured in surveys with measures of political attitudes and behaviors, we propose adding a battery to the American National Election 2016 Pilot Study and the ANES 2016 Time Series Study that measures grit. This will allow scholars to study the other political consequences of

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<sup>3</sup> Grit is often described using synonyms like perseverance, pluck, fortitude, resolution, determination, persistence, tenacity, dedication, resolve, resilience, motivation, endurance, drive, hard work, focus, effort, commitment, and fight

grit and help us to explore the mechanisms that drive the strong relationship between grit and political participation.

## **Measurement**

We propose adding a measure of grit—or, the ability to persevere towards goals, in spite of obstacles or distractions—to the ANES battery of questions. Grit or perseverance has been measured in a number of ways; however, the most common and best-studied approach utilizes the scale developed by Angela Duckworth and her collaborators (Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth and Quinn 2009). The Short Grit Scale (Grit-S) contains 8 questions that ask the respondent to evaluate their ability to persevere in spite of obstacles. The Grit-S scale is framed with the following question stem:

Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. For the most accurate score, when responding, think of how you compare to most people -- not just the people you know well, but most people in the world. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly!

Respondents are then directed to answer how well a series of 8 statements describes them. These statements include:

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don't discourage me.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me

- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

5. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

6. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

7. I finish whatever I begin.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

8. I am diligent.

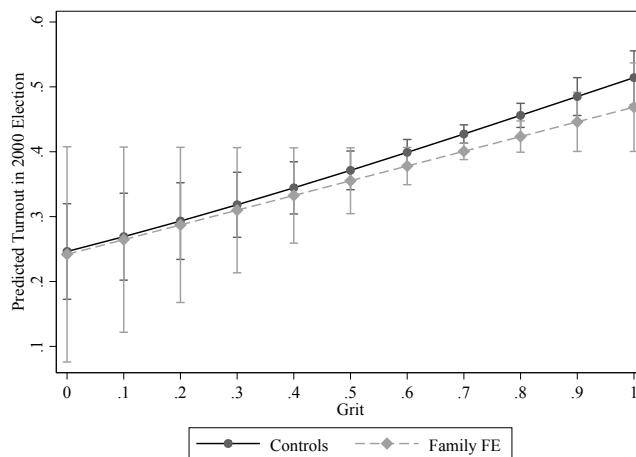
- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

The scale has desirable properties—with these measures being strongly reliable; able to load on a common factor; independent of other measures of human attributes (like the Big Five personality traits and cognitive ability); and able to predict a variety of life success outcomes, including

success in school and the labor force as well as participation in politics (Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth and Quinn 2009; Hillygus, Holbein and Snell 2015).

Figure 1 displays the relationship between grit and political participation, as measured in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)—a survey that pairs measures of grit in early adolescence to reported voter turnout in adulthood (the 2000 presidential election).<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 shows using multiple approaches—including a variety of controls and a family fixed effect approach—that grit is strongly related to whether an individual votes. Those who have the highest levels of grit in adolescence are more than 20 percentage points more likely to vote than individuals with lower levels of grit.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1: The Relationship Between Grit or Perseverance and Voter Turnout



Notes: Figure 1 plots the relationship between adolescent levels of grit and voter turnout using reported turnout from the 2000 election. The data source is the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). The plot displays that gritty individuals are 20 percentage points more likely to vote.

Although not crucial, we also propose adding several additional measures to the ANES

<sup>4</sup> In Add Health, grit is measured using an 8-item instrument that compares favorably with the Duckworth Scale when both are included in Mechanical Turk surveys. However, given that it has been better studied, we prefer to use the Duckworth Scale outlined above.

<sup>5</sup> We have observed this relationship in other data sources as well, including middle school students from the Wake County Public School System (North Carolina). Students who are grittier are more likely to express an intention to vote in later elections, an interest in politics, and political efficacy—all strong proxies of adult voter turnout.

survey that could be used as control variables in our analyses. Given grit’s conceptualization as a “non-cognitive” skill, we would hope to include a measure of cognitive ability. The standard measurement approach is to include items from the GSS WordSum scale, which have previously been included in ANES questionnaires.<sup>6</sup> Another relevant control might be the Big Five personality traits, typically measured using the standard Ten Item Personality Index (TIPI).<sup>7</sup> Finally, we would the pilot will include political attitudes that could be related: political interest, knowledge, efficacy, and duty.

## **Discussion**

As of yet, there are no data sets that pair measures of grit with the wide variety of political attitudes, motivations, and behaviors. Adding these questions will allow us to explore the nature of the relationship between grit and political participation that we have observed in a number of data sources. This will provide scholars with a rich new data source to explore the political consequences of grit, providing insights into how to remediate perpetually low and unequal rates of political participation.

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<sup>6</sup> A single-item proxy might ask about academic performance, for example: Thinking back to the last time you were in school, how would you say your grades compared to the rest of your class? Top of your class, Well above average, Slightly above average, About average, Slightly below average, Well below average, Bottom of your class.

<sup>7</sup>The TIPI starts with the stem, “Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.” The individual is then presented with two word combinations, which include: extraverted or enthusiastic; critical or quarrelsome; dependable or self-disciplined; anxious or easily upset; open to new experiences or complex; reserved or quiet; sympathetic or warm; disorganized or careless; calm or emotionally stable; conventional or uncreative. Answers are scored from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (7).

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