II. INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

High Involvement Work Systems and Political Efficacy: A Tale of Two Departments

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Abstract

Carole Pateman argues that democratic participation in the workplace can increase workers' feelings of political efficacy and political participation. We explore this issue by looking at the implementation of a high involvement work system (HIWS), using both cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons. Political efficacy did not change overall, but increased in one department where the HIWS was strongly supported and very successful, and decreased in another department characterized by bad labor-management relations and little management support. The results suggest that social connections, a sense that one's work is meaningful, and positive labor-management relations can increase workers' feelings of political efficacy.

Does industrial democracy encourage political democracy? The political theorist Carole Pateman raised this question over thirty years ago but the question has taken on new salience given the continuing decline in voter turnout and other forms of political and civic participation in the United States (Conway 2000; Putnam 2000). While this decline has led to a number of proposals and policy initiatives, little attention has been paid to the political implications of what goes on in the workplace.

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Pateman argued that traditional, autocratic workplaces reduce employees' feelings of political efficacy—the belief that they are competent to take part in politics or that the political system is responsive to their interests. Since Pateman wrote her book in 1970 many companies have experimented with ways to increase employee involvement, both direct (or on-line) forms embedded in the organization of work itself and indirect (or off-line) forms like labor-management committees. The effects of employee involvement on employee and firm outcomes have received substantial attention, but little attention has been paid to how it may affect feelings of efficacy and participation outside the workplace.[1]

This study uses new data to examine workers' feelings of political efficacy following the implementation of a high involvement work system (HIWS) at a major pharmaceutical company. One unique aspect of this study is that workers filled out surveys both before and after the implementation of the HIWS, providing panel as well as cross-sectional data. In addition, the HIWS was implemented at three different work sites and among three different occupational groups. Variation across these work sites and groups provides insights into the factors that can affect the success of HIWS and its influence on feelings of political efficacy.

Literature Review

Schlozman et al. (1999) and Schur (2003) analyze nationally representative data sets and find that civic skills developed at work (through such activities as leading meetings and participating in decision making) are linked to greater political involvement. Madsen finds similar results, although he claims that Pateman's hypothesis only fully applies to workers with a "collectivistic" orientation (Madsen 1997, 387). A longitudinal study by Karasek (1978) found that workers who enjoyed increased freedom in decision making on the job became more politically active outside of work, while those who lost decision-making authority on the job became more politically passive outside of work. Clearly, the relationship between workplace decision making and political participation is not a simple one, and depends in part on the types of participation being considered. Directly participating in workplace decisions seems to have positive effects on forms of political participation other than voting (specifically campaign work and involvement in community projects); in contrast, voter turnout is not related to most measures of workplace decision making and appears to be depressed by working in an economically troubled cooperative (Arrighi and Maume 1994, 154; Greenberg et al. 1994, 317–21; Sobel 1993, 348).

Pateman argues that political efficacy is a key mediator between industrial democracy and political participation. Through participation in workplace

decisions with their fellow workers, individuals increase their sense of personal and political efficacy which, in turn, leads them to be more politically engaged and active in the broader community outside the workplace. Political efficacy is generally divided into internal political efficacy (the belief that one is well qualified to participate in politics) and external political efficacy (the belief that the political system is responsive to one's interests). While many studies have supported the idea that both types of political efficacy are important predictors of political participation (Conway 2000, 59–61; Schur 2003), only a few studies have focused specifically on the influence that workplace decision making may have on feelings of political efficacy.

Greenberg, Grunberg, and Daniel (1994) find that direct face-to-face participation in workplace decisions, but not representative participation, is associated with a greater sense of internal political efficacy. Elden (1981) finds that semiautonomous work groups are linked to a greater sense of political efficacy, while structures that simply make workers more satisfied with their jobs but do not increase their autonomy are not associated with a greater sense of political efficacy. A study by Peterson (1992) finds that respondents who reported greater participation in workplace decision making also reported higher levels of political efficacy and involvement in political activities. Several earlier studies from the 1960s and 1970s also found a connection between control over workplace decisions and feelings of personal and political efficacy (summarized in Elden 1981, 53–54).

Data

The data come from surveys of employees involved in a new HIWS at a large pharmaceutical company in New Jersey. The goal of this project was to improve productivity and quality while enhancing employment security and earnings. Rutgers faculty have helped organize shop-floor and department level labor-management teams responsible for planning, decision making, problem solving, information sharing, and system administration since 1998. The high involvement work system has been implemented in all areas of the company across four New Jersey locations in which employees are represented by a union. The units include maintenance, manufacturing and packaging, veterinary sciences, analytical R&D, and laboratory services. The teams received training in planning, problem solving, group decision making, conflict resolution, workplace diversity, data analysis, meeting skills and leadership, and team dynamics. Teams met off-line for an average of one hour several times per month and worked on the problems they selected with the support and guidance of the labor-management leadership committee in their department. While there have been some efforts to create on-line teams of employees who would work together to accomplish their day-to-day work

tasks, thus far the majority of employees have been involved only in off-line team problem-solving activity.

In each department, the first set of employee surveys was administered to employees at the beginning of the training, and the second set was distributed approximately one year after the high involvement system had been in effect. To date, 417 employees have filled out the first survey in eleven departments, and 163 have filled out the second survey in six departments.

This exploratory analysis presents cross-sectional regressions based on the first round of surveys, and longitudinal comparisons of departments that completed both rounds of surveys. It should be noted that individual responses cannot be matched between the first and second sets, but changes in average scores among the department can be examined to see what variables are associated with changes in political efficacy.

Political efficacy is measured using respondents' level of agreement with two statements: "I can influence decisions that affect my community" and "By working together, people in my community can influence decisions that affect the community." Answers are given on a scale of one to five, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Both questions combine the concepts of internal and external political efficacy, since a positive answer indicates both perceived competence to participate in politics and the perception that the political system is responsive.

Results

Repeating the approach used in many prior studies, Table 1 reports results of cross-sectional regressions that relate political efficacy to attitudes towards work and the workplace environment. The first three predictors are built on work alienation scales from Mottaz (1981) that measure control and autonomy (the degree of perceived control in planning and performing one's daily tasks at work), embeddedness (the perceived importance of one's work and how it fits into the organization), and intrinsic rewards (the extent to which one's work is interesting, challenging, and a source of personal fulfillment). While one might expect control and autonomy to be associated with political efficacy, neither this measure nor intrinsic rewards is a significant predictor. Those who report a greater sense of embeddedness, however, are significantly more likely to report that by working together people can influence community decisions. This result suggests that perceiving a sense of connection between your work and that of your co-workers may be key to perceiving that as a group you can work with others to make a difference.

Regressions 2 and 4 add three variables of interest: a labor-management relations index (summing twenty-three five-point items), a satisfaction index (summing eight five-point items), and an item measuring the frequency of

TABLE 1

Predicting Political Efficacy Using Cross-sectional Data

Based on surveys prior to implementation of high involvement work system.

Dependent variable:	I can influence community (1)		I can influence community (2)		People can influence community (3)		People can influence community (4)		Mean (5)	(s.d.)
Workplace outcomes										
Control/autonomy	−0.006	(0.55)	−0.007	(0.60)	−0.002	(0.24)	−0.004	(0.40)	27.94	(6.78)
Embeddedness	0.012	(0.81)	0.008	(0.48)	0.047	(3.53)***	0.043	(2.84)***	27.62	(5.38)
Intrinsic rewards	0.007	(0.50)	0.011	(0.71)	0.016	(1.34)	0.016	(1.17)	24.06	(5.76)
Labor-management relations index			0.013	(2.25)**			0.003	(0.57)	61.88	(13.41)
Often interact w/co-workers in company and union events			0.100	(1.58)			0.149	(2.63)**	2.77	(1.14)
Perceive a lot of cooperation across depts.			0.038	(0.61)			−0.035	(0.63)	2.93	(1.20)
Control variables										
Male	0.085	(0.57)	−0.014	(0.08)	−0.097	(0.76)	−0.002	(0.01)	0.73	(0.44)
Years in community	−0.091	(0.48)	0.155	(0.70)	0.050	(0.30)	0.109	(0.55)	0.71	(0.45)
Union member	−0.002	(0.55)	0.002	(0.33)	−0.006	(1.68)	−0.004	(0.87)	22.00	(15.98)
Some college/tech degree	0.021	(0.15)	0.144	(0.92)	−0.045	(0.37)	−0.086	(0.62)	0.36	(0.48)
College/grad degree	−0.081	(0.41)	0.004	(0.02)	0.161	(0.92)	0.136	(0.67)	0.26	(0.44)
Tenure 6–10 years	0.074	(0.31)	−0.109	(0.38)	0.136	(0.65)	0.107	(0.41)	0.15	(0.36)
Tenure 11–15 years	0.402	(1.54)	0.331	(1.05)	0.264	(1.14)	0.150	(0.53)	0.13	(0.34)
Tenure 16–20 years	−0.210	(0.74)	−0.176	(0.53)	0.107	(0.44)	−0.058	(0.20)	0.09	(0.29)
Tenure 20+ years	0.028	(0.12)	−0.071	(0.24)	0.207	(1.01)	0.138	(0.54)	0.53	(0.50)
Constant	2.522	(5.32)***	1.210	(1.86)*	2.006	(4.74)***	1.618	(2.78)***		
R-squared	0.027		0.081		0.117		0.124			
n	330		264		331		265			
Dependent variable mean (s.d.)	2.870	(1.07)	2.864	(1.08)	3.677	(0.98)	3.66	(0.99)		

* p < .10; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

T-statistics in parentheses except as noted.

interaction with co-workers in company- or union-sponsored events (on a scale of one to five). Workers who interact frequently with their co-workers are significantly more likely to report that people can influence the community, while those who report more positive labor-management relations are more likely to report that "I can influence decisions that affect my community." One interpretation is that having good connections with one's co-workers—reflecting stronger social capital—is important for a sense that people can work together effectively. In contrast, the sense that one can personally make a difference may depend very much on having a climate where labor and management listen to each other and cooperate so that individual suggestions are more likely to be acted upon.

These cross-sectional results are of course subject to concerns about causality—the relationships may reflect, for example, other unmeasured aspects of individual personalities or job characteristics. Those who feel more efficacious may simply have more positive views of labor-management relations. To explore this, we present comparisons between the responses to the two sets of surveys from six departments. Examining changes over time controls for any fixed attributes of the people or jobs, and provides insights into whether changes in the workplace are associated with changes in perceived efficacy.

The panel results, presented in Table 2, show that overall efficacy levels did not change significantly between the first and second sets of surveys. A different picture emerges, however, when looking at individual departments. Average efficacy scores changed significantly in two departments. There was a strong increase in the perception that "I can influence the community" among the laboratory technicians at Site A and a decrease in the perception that "People can influence the community" among the veterinary science employees at Site C. Consistent with results from the cross-sectional analysis, the laboratory technicians also reported significant improvement in labor-management relations, suggesting that a positive labor relations climate may help enhance feelings of individual efficacy. In addition, the laboratory technicians reported improvements in several other measures: interactions with co-workers, cooperation across departments, and satisfaction. Finally, they were significantly more likely to say that "I can influence the department." This is consistent with Pateman's argument that there are strong connections between increases in workplace efficacy and political efficacy.

In many respects the veterinary science department at Site C provides an opposite picture. In addition to the decline in political efficacy, there was a decrease in embeddedness—the sense that employees' work is meaningful and connected to that of their co-workers. This finding is consistent with the relationship found in the cross-sectional analysis. In addition, workers perceived significantly worse labor-management relations, less cooperation across depart-

TABLE 2
Panel Comparisons of Political Efficacy and Workplace Outcomes

Figures represent changes in average scores between rounds 1 and 2.

	Overall (1)	Site A Maintenance (2)	Site A Lab techs. (3)	Site A Vet. sci. (4)	Site B Lab techs. (5)	Site B Vet. sci. (6)	Site C Vet. sci. (7)
Political efficacy							
I can influence community	0.10	0.23	0.76**	-0.08	0.10	0.12	-0.38
People can influence community	-0.03	0.04	0.31	-0.11	0.24	0.00	-0.68*
Workplace outcomes							
Control/autonomy	1.16	2.28	0.28	1.43	0.40	1.36	-2.02
Embeddedness	0.48	0.89	-0.45	1.18	-0.78	2.02	-3.51*
Intrinsic rewards	0.56	1.13	2.27	1.08	-0.78	-0.68	-2.44
Labor-management relations index	3.86**	0.47	16.45**	8.06**	15.12*	2.63	-12.15**
Interact w/co-workers at company or union events	-0.06	0.07	0.80*	-0.25	0.65	-0.75**	-0.31
Perceive a lot of cooperation across depts.	0.22*	0.65**	0.79**	-0.07	0.54	0.24	-0.92**
Satisfaction index	0.13	2.36	3.43*	0.64	1.70	-3.05	-5.04**
Workplace efficacy							
I can influence department	0.16	0.26	0.75**	0.03	0.75	0.22	-0.47
People can influence department	-0.07	0.11	-0.01	-0.05	0.14	-0.13	-0.74**
n Round 1	154	40	15	53	10	20	17
Round 2	142	49	17	33	11	15	16

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$

ments, and lower levels of satisfaction, in addition to a decreased sense that people can influence the department.

Why was there such a striking difference between these two departments? Much can be explained by workplace culture, management attitudes, and the circumstances in which the HIWS was implemented.

At Site A, the HIWS was fully supported by the laboratory technicians, the managers, and the union. The manager of the department, who had been a worker himself, trusted the employees. He encouraged innovation and was willing to delegate authority. Workers responded enthusiastically and the teams used their greater decision making power to take several initiatives. For example, one team created a computer lab to help other employees develop and strengthen their computer skills.

Site C was a newly opened work site. The veterinary science department was staffed in part by company employees whose manufacturing jobs had been discontinued and who were allowed to bid for new jobs at this site. Many of them resented having to work as animal handlers, as well as the increased commuter time. There was also division in the department between younger workers who chose to be animal handlers and the older workers who were forced to do this job in order to remain employed. To make matters worse, the department managers did not appear to appreciate the difficulties experienced by the older workers or to embrace the principles of HIWS. Instead of delegating authority and empowering employees, they tried to control the workforce and remained inflexible. For example, the managers blocked the efforts of employees who tried to work together in designing more flexible schedules, which could easily explain decreases in the belief that people could influence the department and the community. In short, differences in the histories of these two departments and the ways in which HIWS was implemented can help explain the divergent results in feelings of political efficacy.

Conclusion

This study on the effects of a HIWS does not provide a simple answer to the question of whether employee involvement encourages political democracy. While individual control over daily work is not connected to political efficacy, both the cross-sectional and panel results indicate that a greater sense of embeddedness—the feeling that one's work is meaningful and connects to the work of others—increases the belief that people can work together to influence their workplaces and communities. Both sets of results also suggest that a climate of labor-management cooperation and trust may help increase a sense of political efficacy, while mistrust and a deteriorating labor-management relationship may have negative effects.

These findings indicate that social connections at work play an important role in shaping workers' views of political participation. This makes sense given that making a difference in the political system requires working with other people. The factors related to political efficacy in this study are similar to most definitions of social capital, a construct of increasing interest in the social sciences. This study suggests that when HIWS is done well it may increase workers' social capital which, in turn, may increase their feelings of political efficacy.

This is a rich area for further study, especially if it includes measures of political involvement that examine connections among HIWS, social capital, political efficacy, and civic and political participation. Such research could help answer the important question of if, and how, industrial democracy can encourage political democracy.

Note

1. Whether or not these management-initiated forms of employee involvement constitute actual industrial democracy is a different question (see for example Schurman and Eaton 1996).

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