

# **Political behavior from the perspective of the goal systems theory**

Katarzyna Jasko

Jagiellonian University

## **Abstract**

Political behaviors vary from relatively low-cost behaviors such as signing petitions and sharing information on social media to extreme behaviors such as joining a terrorist organization. People engage in such actions because by doing so they hope to achieve some valuable political goals. In general, psychological research shows that people commit to goals that they consider important and desirable and which they perceive as attainable through their own actions. To achieve these goals, they then engage in behaviors believed to be instrumental means (Kruglanski et al., 2002). While these motivational assumptions have been extensively tested in other social domains, their applicability to the political domain remains understudied. The goal of this chapter is to apply these general principles of goal-directed behavior to the political domain, summarize available empirical evidence and identify gaps in the existing literature.

Politically motivated actions can range from making an inconsequential comment on social media to setting a bomb in a suicide terrorist attack. It might thus seem inadequate to propose one theoretical framework to address cases as diverse as these extreme examples and anything in the space between them. Moreover, models that are typically applied to explain these behaviors include factors that belong to the same socio-political domain. For instance, popular theoretical models include variables such as the characteristics of the political system, the role of political elites, attitudes toward the political issues or group identities. In contrast to these domain-specific approaches, in this chapter I will analyze behaviors such as expressing political opinions, engaging in protest, or using political violence from a general motivational perspective.

My goal is to demonstrate the usefulness of the goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002, 2015) for understanding political behaviors. Drawing on this framework, I propose that political behavior can be conceptualized as a means to a goal (or multiple goals) and as such it should be guided by the same motivational principles as other non-political behaviors. In other words, people donate money, attend protests, vote, or join extremist groups because by doing so they hope to achieve some valuable outcomes. If that is true, then intentions to engage in political behavior should depend on the importance of those outcomes, expectancy of their successful attainment, and perceived instrumentality of the particular behavior. In this chapter, I will explore how well these general principles apply to the political domain, summarize available empirical evidence, and identify gaps in the existing literature as well as promising directions for future research.

### **The Importance of Goal Importance**

According to the fundamental principle shared by all motivational models, including goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2015), people commit to and strive for goals that are important to them. People aim at achieving desirable future states such as being successful at work or finding an attractive partner. They also act to avoid undesirable states as when they lock their door to avoid robbery or follow fitness routines to stay healthy. When applied to the political domain it would lead to a relatively straightforward prediction that political issues perceived as more important should motivate greater commitment and engagement than causes perceived as less important. In this section I will first address the question of why people perceive some political causes as more important than other issues and whether these perceptions are indeed related to their political behaviors. Secondly, I will examine a more complex picture of the relationship between cause importance and political behavior using the insights from goal systems theory.

Starting with the simple version of the relationship between goal importance and political engagement, it is indeed not that difficult to find evidence demonstrating that more motivationally invested individuals are more likely to become politically active than people with less intense commitment to the cause. Whereas past studies on goals that motivate political engagement range from those focused on specific issues to research exploring the role of abstract values, they can be summarized under several more general categories. First major motivational factor that has frequently been associated with political engagement is a sense of relative deprivation (Gurr, 2015). In line with control theories (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1982), a discrepancy between what one feels they deserve and what they actually get can be a potent source of motivation for political action. An extensive meta-analysis (Smith et al., 2012)

confirms a positive relationship between a sense of deprivation and political action and more recent research also demonstrates its role for the support for extreme political behaviors (Obaidi et al., 2019). Of particular relevance is a sense of collective deprivation, which occurs when one feels that their important group suffers from a disadvantaged position or lack of respect that they feel it deserves (Golec et al., 2019, Jasko et al., 2020). Sense of collective injustice is often prompted by strong group identification with the group that is a subject of the suffering (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; van Zomeren et al., 2008). The relationship between group identity and political engagement becomes stronger when the group identity takes a politicized form and when it is accompanied by anger. However, people become politically active not only because their personal or collective conditions prompt the sense of grievances. They often engage in actions in solidarity with other people including those who belong to outgroups. The source of motivation in this case often involves threats to fundamental moral values that apply across the group boundaries. Research on moral convictions (Skitka & Bauman, 2008) and sacred values (Atran & Ginges, 2012) converges on the conclusion that when people feel their values are under threat they are more likely to engage in political action. That happens even when such engagement puts them in conflict with their group commitments. According to these theoretical approaches, a difference between values considered as sacred and other goals is qualitative rather than simply a differences in magnitude.

Whereas this literature offers support for the role of desirability of political goals, it quickly becomes clear that it is not enough that people say a cause is important to them for them to actually get involved in actions on behalf of it. The size of the gap between acknowledgment of cause importance and behavioral engagement for the cause is often quite substantial. For

instance, in one study on the mobilization for a peace demonstration (Klandermans & Oegma, 1987), only 5% of those who agreed with the goals of the protest eventually participated in it. Even among those who intended to go, only 40% actually went to the demonstration. Results of our recent study focused on climate activism demonstrate a similar gap (Jasko et al., 2021). In that study, we measured the importance of the goal of fighting climate change. The overall agreement among participants was that climate change was a serious threat and a very important problem. We also measured willingness to engage in actions for this cause such as joining a demonstration or volunteering for an activist organization. The importance of the problem was strongly ( $r > .60$ ) correlated with these intentions, which seems to be highly consistent with research referenced earlier. However, at the end of the study we gave participants an opportunity to get involved in a set of actions for the cause. Specifically, we told them that in collaboration with a climate activist organization we were conducting a weekly long activist challenge during which they could sign up for up to seven tasks that would help that organization achieve their activist goals. Participants could volunteer for how many tasks they wanted. In contrast to the overwhelming general willingness to get involved in climate actions reported earlier in that study, a majority of people did not sign up for any task. Moreover, over the next week less than 1/3 of the people who committed themselves to doing something actually engaged in the tasks they volunteered to do. Finally, the correlation between goal importance and the actual involvement in any action for the cause was below .20, which is a much less impressive result than the correlation between the goal importance and their general intentions.

Our finding is perfectly consistent with the results of opinion polls, which systematically show that many more people agree on the importance of social problems than are willing to

actually do something to solve them. The question is whether such a gap between goal importance and behavior is unique to political behavior. The answer offered by decades of research on the psychology of self-regulation gives a negative answer to that question. Multiple studies demonstrated similar gaps in domains such as health, work, relationships, moral behaviors among many others (Sheeran, 2002). While it does not diminish the importance of the overall issue, it suggests that more universal mechanisms might be at play. What could those mechanisms be then?

The important insight from goal systems theory is that the entire network of goals should be taken into account when trying to predict political (or any other) behaviors. Therefore, it is not enough if somebody says that a goal of fighting climate change is very important for them. This goal should be also either more important than their alternative concerns that are chronically or situationally activated, or it should be easily integrated with them allowing a behavior to be multifinal. For example, a person whose friends are members of an activist organization may find it easier to get involved since not only their political goals but also their relationship needs will be satisfied. In contrast, if there is a conflict between the goals, a less important goal will have to yield. For instance, a participant in our study might have avoided the activist challenge because the climate change problem – while very important when considered in isolation – subsided when confronted with everyday life filled with other commitments. This highlights the importance of considering the full motivational structure rather than focusing on a single goal (Kung & Scholer, 2021). It also means that the more demanding or difficult to integrate action is, the greater the role of relative importance of the political cause might also be.

What kind of evidence is there to support these ideas? One line of research that is relevant here is research on the role of biographical availability for political engagement. This construct refers to the lack of constraints that would increase the costs and risks associated with political engagement (McAdam, 198). They may include factors such as financial concerns, time required for the involvement, or exposure to dangerous situations. In the motivational vocabulary they denote alternative goals that a person pursues. Specific commitments that are typically examined in this research include marriage, having children, being fully employed in a job that does not offer flexibility (Bunnage, 2014). Indeed, research offers evidence that these alternative concerns might indeed be associated with lower chances of getting politically involved. One example could be a study on participants of Freedom Summer, which was an activist project aimed at increasing the number of registered Black voters in Mississippi in 1964. McAdam (1988) analyzed the applications of volunteers who had signed up for the project, including both those who eventually went to Mississippi and those who had volunteered but never went there. He found that, in comparison to a general population, all volunteers in this project were more likely to be young, unmarried, unemployed, and childless.

However, the comparison of both groups complicates the picture of the relationship between biographical availability and activism as the differences between them were less straightforward than between all volunteers and general public. Moreover, closer inspection of other studies on biographical availability also offers inconsistent evidence (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006). Even though some studies find negative relationship between political participation and being married, having full-time job, or having children (e.g., Petrie, 2004), other studies do not find it (e.g., Nepstad & Smith, 1999; Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). One possible explanation of

the inconsistencies in the research on biographical availability following from the goal systems theory is that it is the type of the relationship between goals that matters. For instance, if both partners are committed to the same political cause and they can simultaneously achieve their activist goals and their relationship goals then there is no reason to expect a negative relationship between being married and political engagement. More generally, it means that whereas taking alternative goals into account is an important and much needed step toward better understanding of political engagement, it may not be enough. Researchers of political behavior should not only include measures of alternative goals in the study but they should also pay attention to the specific – conflicting or facilitating - relationships between the political goal and alternative goals. It could be expected that individuals who see greater integration between their political goals and other life concerns should be more likely to initiate and maintain their engagement than those who experience frequent trade-offs.

A research area that highlights the role of relations between goals and how well- or poorly-integrated they are is the literature on passion. This research typically distinguishes two types of passion, harmonious and obsessive (Vallerand, 2010). Both are related to stronger importance attached to the activity. However, whereas harmonious passion represents the important goal that is well-integrated with other goals and does not result in conflict, obsessive passion refers to a situation when the activity one is passionate about overtakes other goals. As such it represents an imbalanced goal structure. Several studies examined the consequences of both types of passion for engagement in political actions. For instance, a study conducted among Quebec Sovereignty activists showed that both types of passion were related to greater willingness to get involved in actions for a cause (Rip et al., 2012). However, the difference



occurred with regard to the type of actions individuals with different types of passion were willing to engage. Whereas those with harmonious passion were more interested in democratic and peaceful forms of activism, those with obsessive passion favored extreme and aggressive actions. The same pattern of results was obtained with regard to other types of political causes including environmental cause, engagement in a political party and religious cause (Belanger et al., 2019; Gousse-Lessard et al., 2013). In short, this research shows that relative goal importance contributes to greater willingness to get involved. The differences between the types of goal structures (well-integrated or imbalanced) are related to specific kinds of actions that a person considers. Recent work on extreme personality (Szumowska et al., 2022) also shows that people who are prone to favoring single goal over alternative goals are more likely to support and get involved in more extreme forms of activism for a cause.

Importantly, the demands and costs of an imbalanced goal structure might lead to such a structure being difficult to maintain over the long run. Telling with that regard is research on activist burnout and disengagement from social movements (Gorski & Chen, 2015), which shows that disengagement often it is a result of unsustainable commitment and large sacrifices for the movement. Similarly, research on passion for a cause demonstrated that volunteers for causes (e.g. humanitarian missions) who were obsessively passionate were more likely to experience negative health consequences of their engagement than those with well-integrated passion (St-Louis et al., 2016). Self-neglect was one of the mechanisms that mediated this process.

In short, whereas several areas of research related to political goals offers confirming evidence that the importance of such goals matter, there is a need to consider a wider network of

interconnected goals (political and non-political) in order to make more precise predictions about political behavior.

### **Goal Expectancy**

Another main assumption of the majority of motivational models, including goal systems theory, is that people engage in pursuit of goals to the extent that they think they can succeed in achieving them (Feather, 1982). The impact of feasibility considerations on goal commitment and behavioral engagement has been demonstrated in domains such as educational achievement (Wigfield, 1994, Xiang et al., 2003) or organizational context (Feather, 1992) among many others. Research on individual differences in self-efficacy has similarly shown that this factor significantly contributes to persistence and eventual success in goal pursuit (Bandura, 1977). Lay people also agree that a person is more rational when they pursue attainable rather than unattainable goals (Kruglanski et al., 2015) and that it is more meaningful when one tries to accomplish a desirable outcome using instrumental rather than inadequate means (Tilburg et al., 2014). In this section, I will address the question of how this general tendency plays out in the domain of political behavior and what insights into the role of expectancy for political behavior can be gained from the application of goal systems theory.

Past research on social movements has often examined expectancy in a form of collective efficacy (van Zomeren et al., 2008). This construct refers to a sense that a collective cause can be achieved through joint action. The slogan used by the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign, “Yes we can,” is one particularly vivid example of the appeal to collective efficacy. It has been identified in past research as a positive predictor of activist intentions and other political behaviors. For instance, Wegemer (2021) found that civic behaviors among youth were

higher when both efficacy and value of the cause were high. A systematic meta-analysis that included collective efficacy along the sense of injustice and social identity found it to be a unique and positive predictor of collective action (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; van Zomeren et al., 2008). In our own research conducted among participants of a teachers' strike in Poland we found that positive expectations toward the outcomes of a future strike were a strong predictor of willingness to participate in it (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al., 2020). It would thus seem that perceived attainability indeed works in the same way in the context of a political cause as it does in other life domains.

However, there are multiple examples of studies that yielded non-significant results when it comes to collective efficacy (e.g., Schofield & Pavelchak, 1989; Strumer & Simon, 2004) showing that people are willing to act despite lack of belief that their action will change anything. Moreover, even when the correlations between collective efficacy and collective action intentions are significant they do not seem to be particularly strong. Others have found moderators of this relationship. For example, Cohen-Chen and van Zomeren (2018) showed that group efficacy beliefs predicted collective action only when hope was high but it was non-significant when people did not have hope. Studies also showed that experiences of failures do not necessarily discourage people from acting for a cause (Cocking & Drury, 2004) and may even encourage them to engage in more radical actions (Louis et al., 2021). Finally, when looking at historical examples of political actions it is not that rare to find cases when the probability of success was extremely low or completely absent wherein participants were fully aware of those odds at the time of their actions and they acted regardless. For instance, the analysis of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a dramatic act of Jewish resistance during World War

II, led Einwohner (2003) to conclude that “collective action in the Warsaw Ghetto emerged not in response to opportunity but to a lack thereof; in fact, it was only once the ghetto fighters became aware of the hopelessness of their situation that they began to plan for resistance.” On a much less dramatic scale, almost in every election some people vote on unpopular candidates in an act that is well known in advance to make no difference in terms of electoral outcomes.

More generally, there are good reasons to suspect that low or highly uncertain chances of success are a norm in the political domain rather than an exception. First, political outcomes are rarely under the control of an individual person. For example, it is highly unlikely that one person’s vote will be decisive in electing a desirable candidate. Also uncertain is whether the candidate’s actions, once they’re elected, will bring about the actual outcomes their voters really cared about. Similarly, the success of a protest depends in large part on whether other people participate (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011) and on the responsiveness of the system (Cichocka et al, 2018). Moreover, the chances that the political causes that activists fight for will find complete resolution in the foreseeable future are extremely small if not null. In short, it seems that the political domain is characterized by relatively high uncertainty and low controllability in comparison to other, non-political goals that people typically pursue. What could then explain commitment to goals and engagement in actions that may have no visible results during one’s lifetime?

### **Expectancy of What Goal?**

The first answer refers to the idea directly following from goal systems theory, namely that political actions frequently serve multiple goals (i.e., they are multifinal). Thus, even when the actions of an activist seem futile to an external observer because they do not have any impact

on policy makers or do not create a meaningful social change, they may still be considered successful by the actor if they help them attain their alternative goals. What could those other goals be? In the case of political behaviors they could include the satisfaction of psychological needs such as the need to belong to a group of like-minded people (van Bavel & Pereira, 2018), achieving personal significance (Kruglanski al., 2022) or confirming one's deeply held beliefs. To satisfy some of those psychological goals, mere engagement and showing up might be enough even when there are no expectations of external rewards outside of the political act itself. In a more extreme version of this motivational structure, a person engages in action not because of the rewards the action brings, but because the counterfactual of doing nothing seems to be even more aversive. An extreme and poignant example of such a framing is an excerpt from the memoirs of one of the participants of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: "...people in the ghetto finally realized death was certain to come sooner or later, and that there was nothing to lose by resisting. (...) Everyone knew the chance of victory was zero, but winning wasn't the goal. We just wanted to die with dignity" (2000, pp. 61–62, cited in Einwohner, 2003). The counterfactual that encourages engagement despite negative expectations of success might also include the predicted negative reactions of significant others to one's inaction or contempt from other citizens who participated in the elections.

In support of this idea, research by Hornsey et al. (2006) showed that both members and non-members of activist organizations conditioned their future engagement on attaining multiple goals through their participation in the protest. Importantly, expectancy of influencing decision makers was not the most important (or even significant) predictor of their intentions. The researchers found that for non-members it was the expectancy of expressing important values

and influencing the general public that were predictive of their willingness to participate in a future protest. In contrast, for members of an organization, the perceived effectiveness of building a social movement predicted their future intentions. Similarly, research on the willingness to attend union meetings (Flood, 1993) showed that while the expectancy of the impact of the meeting was a significant predictor of the intentions to participate, it was not the only one or even not the most important one. Other expectations such as having a say in one's union affairs were more central. These findings are consistent with our own research on personal significance gained from participation in political movements (Jasko et al., 2019). Studies conducted among engaged activists showed that when people acted on behalf of important social values, they gained a sense of personal significance, and as a result they were more willing to self-sacrifice for the cause in the future. This occurred regardless of their expectations of future successes of their protest, which in many cases was very low. Overall, these results show that success (and its respective expectancy) can be defined in various ways depending on goals that people associate with their political engagement.

### **Importance More Important Than Expectancy**

Another explanation for why the likelihood of success might not be included in calculations about political actions could be that the importance of the cause is a much more decisive factor. There are several theoretical reasons for why this could be the case. First, it could be that when people think about morally-charged issues, especially when they involve sacred values (Atran & Ginges, 2012), probabilistic concerns are less salient. In support of this, Ginges and Atran (2011) investigated the role of deontological vs. instrumental thinking in making judgments about war. The results of six studies showed that when people were making

decisions about war, their decisions were relatively insensitive to costs or other negative consequences. These findings show that critical decisions in highly moralized political domains (e.g., about war) might not be affected by instrumental concerns. Interestingly, judgments about negotiations were impacted by the manipulated costs. It could suggest that decisions about extreme moral circumstances such as war and political violence activate an imbalanced goal structure that privileges a given goal regardless of the costs that come with it.

Another possible mechanism that could lead to the neglect of expectancy may be the differences in temporal perspective one takes with respect to the political cause. As mentioned earlier, problems such as climate change, economic inequalities or minority discrimination cannot be realistically expected to be solved in the near future. In line with that observation, our research conducted in the context of numerous protests and social issues in recent years consistently found that activists had different short-term and long-term expectations of success (Jasko et al., 2019). While they did not expect positive outcomes in a short time and were rather pessimistic about the immediate effects, their expectation of success in the long run was high. In one recent study conducted among almost 1,000 Polish activists, their estimated probability of success of their cause in the short term was 35%, which could be contrasted with the estimated 66% probability of success in the long term (Jasko et al., 2022).

Why should temporal perspective matter for the role of expectancy? According to construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998), distance to the goal changes the relative importance of desirability and attainability concerns because it makes different features of the goal salient. Specifically, research shows that when people think about goals that are in the distant future, the desirability becomes a more important factor guiding their actions while the

role of attainability decreases. In contrast, when people think about outcomes that are closer in time, both desirability and attainability play a role. In the context of political behavior it could mean that when people think about long-term outcomes of their actions the fact that those outcomes seem to be highly uncertain or unlikely to attain might not matter as much because of the inflated weight of goal importance. Therefore, if activists are predominantly focused on long-term goals, the focus on desirability may keep them engaged because they do not condition their commitment on short-term outcomes, which often result in failures. Paraphrasing Alexander Hamilton's words from the musical defining what legacy is (Miranda, 2015), activists are planting seeds in a garden that they never get to see. Paradoxically, that might in fact encourage them to act.

A final moderating factor that could be relevant with regard to the relative weight placed on importance and expectancy might be the mindset that people take when thinking about an issue. Of particular relevance here is the distinction between prevention focus and promotion focus. Past research in non-political domains showed that under the prevention focus people are more likely to be guided by importance and to neglect expectancy but that changes under the promotion mindset (Shah & Higgins, 1997). Inspired by these findings, Zaal and colleagues (2011) examined the moderating role of prevention vs. promotion focus for political intentions. They showed that when people were in the promotion focus, the perceived likelihood of success of a protest was positively related to their commitment to collective action. However, under prevention focus, the chances of success did not matter for people who considered the goal to be important because they were willing to get involved in actions for the cause regardless of the outcome. These findings suggest that when the cause is framed in prevention terms (e.g., acting



*against* a looming threat as opposed to fighting *for* a better world) expectancy of success might be less relevant. Importantly, this type of situation is probably more frequent in the political realm.

This short overview shows that the role of expectancy for political actions, while consistent with the motivational theories, may be more complicated than the simple linear relationship often assumed in the research on collective efficacy. Next, I will look into the role of another aspect related to expectations, namely the question of instrumentality of particular political actions.

### **Instrumentality of Political Actions**

A central tenet of goal systems theory is that goals are linked to means and that people use means to pursue goals according to their perceived instrumentality, which denotes the expectation that a given behavior will help attain the goal. For example, a person with a goal of losing weight will engage in dieting only if they perceive this behavior to be an effective way to reach their goal. In contrast, if they do not have such a belief and consider exercising as a more instrumental way to lose weight they should not be expected to follow a diet.

In the political domain it would mean that it is not enough that a cause (e.g. women's rights) is important to an individual. This person should also believe that a behavior such as signing a petition, joining a demonstration, or volunteering for a feminist organization will indeed contribute to promoting the women's cause. Instrumentality describes a link between a given means and a particular goal and as such it should be considered separately with regard to multiple goals. For instance, signing a petition might be perceived as moderately instrumental with regard to the goal of convincing the politicians in the government but it might be considered

highly instrumental to a goal of signaling one's commitment to the cause. Moreover, according to the theory, perceptions of instrumentality in part depend on the number of available means such that a greater number of them results in diluted usefulness of each single means in a set (Belanger et al., 2015). Therefore, the perceived instrumentality of a political protest should also depend on the overall number of actions available to a person in addition to the protest. The hypothesis would be that when people have multiple ways to act for their cause, perceived effectiveness of each of the means is lower.

Surprisingly, little past research compared the instrumentality of specific political actions and their impact on people's willingness to get involved in them. The majority of existing work focuses on the comparison of violent and peaceful political actions. It is an interesting case because there is evidence, both experimental (Feinberg et al., 2020) and from real-world, historical cases (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), suggesting that political violence is objectively less effective in comparison to peaceful protests. Moreover, under the majority of circumstances support for violent actions is generally low so it is informative to examine the conditions under which this support may increase. Applying the instrumentality logic, some of the research tested the idea that violence could be justified as a tactic used by activists if it is perceived as the only means they have to pursue their cause.

Indeed, people are more likely to support violence when they see that alternative means are beyond their reach or non-existent. For instance, participants, who were exposed to videos about two activist groups supporting the same cause, one violent and one peaceful, were less supportive of the violent group than those who were not presented with a peaceful alternative (Schumpe, et al., 2018). The mediating mechanism was the reduced perceived instrumentality of

the violent group when the alternative was present. Similarly, Tausch et al. (2011) found that the endorsement of violent collective action was greater when the perceived efficacy of the ingroup to redress injustice by non-violent means was low. Finally, when observers attribute the use of violence to desperation and a lack of better alternatives they may become more sympathetic to the activists' cause. In a series of studies Orazani (2020) showed that if people are aware of a history of activist attempts which has progressed from peaceful but ineffective actions to violence, they are more likely to accept a violent choice than when violence was the only strategy ever tried by the activists. One of the mechanisms of increased support was the perception of violent strategies as the last resort. Overall, this research shows that typically low support for violent means could be increased when violence is perceived as relatively more effective means to achieve political goals than peaceful actions. However, there is also some evidence suggesting that when aggressive collective action is perceived to be efficacious, the perceived efficacy of peaceful collective action may not matter that much (Saab et al., 2016). If that is the case, under some circumstances violent means could be chosen even when peaceful actions were perceived to be equally instrumental.

Outside of the comparison of violent and non-violent actions it is difficult to find examples of research that focused on the instrumentality considerations, their underpinnings and their consequences. One example from our research examining the role of instrumentality is a study that compared the perceptions of climate actions by activists and nonactivists (Jasko et al., 2021). Specifically, we were interested in whether perceptions of effectiveness of different actions addressing the problem of climate change could explain differences between activists and nonactivists. When it comes to environmental actions, three types of actions are typically

distinguished: private sphere individual actions (e.g., reducing meat consumption), public sphere collective actions (e.g., demonstrations or volunteering for activist organizations), and public individual actions (e.g., support for certain environmental policies). We focused on the comparison between the first two categories because even though social change requires pressuring decision-makers through collective actions, the majority of people involved in environmental actions seem to be predominantly engaged in individual actions such as recycling and they largely refrain from collective actions. We wanted to check whether differences in one's level of activist engagement might be related to perceived instrumentality of those two types of actions and therefore impacted willingness to get involved in them in the future. To that aim, we recruited people with varying levels of past activist involvement. We measured their willingness to get involved in individual and collective actions in the future and their perceived effectiveness of those actions. First, we found that regardless of the type of an action (individual or collective), perceived instrumentality of the actions in fighting climate change was strongly related to future intentions to get involved in them. Moreover, we found that whereas activists perceived both individual and collective actions as highly instrumental, nonactivists perceived collective actions to be less effective than individual actions. Finally, whereas activists were more likely to engage in both individual and collective actions, nonactivists were more likely to engage in individual than collective actions.

What are the implications of considering instrumentality judgments for political engagement? The first implication is that it is important to establish whether people know which means are instrumental to achieve the goals of their cause. This could in part explain why despite the fact that majorities of people agree that climate change is an important concern that requires

action, very few people do anything beyond recycling. 55% of participants of the international poll said that the reason behind their inaction was that they were missing information and clear guidance (Bohlender et al., 2021). One reason behind the impact of activists such as Greta Thunberg would be that they provide people with examples of the specific ways in which they might engage in protest.

Another implication could be that people might misassess the effectiveness of different means. Future research should investigate why people have those perceptions. One option is that they are based on inaccurate information that could be corrected by providing people with more reliable facts. However, it could also be a result of motivated reasoning such that people are unwilling to invest more effort in the cause and their attributions to low effectiveness serve as justifications. This interpretation would be consistent with the poll on climate change actions (Bohlender et al., 2021). The poll found that actions perceived as the most important to address climate change were reducing waste and increasing recycling, which are at the same time the least effortful means. They were followed by solutions that did not require effort on the part of individual citizens. In contrast, objectively more effective but at the same time more demanding actions such as using public transport, reducing air travel and reducing meat consumption attracted fewer than 1/3 of surveyed participants.

Finally, as the direct application of goal system theory, the role of the number of means for a political goal could be investigated as these predictions have not been previously applied to the political context. For example, a comparison of the effects of having multiple versus fewer means; examining the effects of engaging in counterfactual means; or measuring the role of equifinal versus multifinal means could all be fruitful avenues for future research on political

engagement. Research also suggests that not only the number of means but also their variety plays an important role (Etkin, 2022). Applying this insights into political domain could inspire studies on how different – rather than just multiple - actions of activists may increase political engagement among observers.

While so far I discussed the central constructs from the goal systems theory and how they could be applied to the political domain, in the next section I will look at the factor that occupies a major role in existing accounts of political behavior, namely social context. I will propose several ways in which motivational accounts could be used to illuminate the psychological mechanisms behind the importance of this factor.

### **Social Context and Political Engagement**

Existing evidence suggests that being surrounded by others who are politically active is a predictor of individual political engagement (Klandermans et al., 2008). For instance, participation in a group discussion focused on political issues boosted intentions to take collective action (Thomas et al., 2016). Knowing someone who participates in action or being asked to protest by someone were the strongest predictors of protest engagement (Schussman & Soule, 2005). Importantly, the mobilizing effect of other people does not require direct contact. A study on political mobilization showed that political messages delivered to social media users influenced not only those who received them but also their friends, and friends of friends with the effect of social transmission being greater than the direct effect of the messages (Bond et al., 2012). Similarly, research on perceived social norms demonstrated that they are positively related to political behavior (e.g., Gerber & Rogers, 2009; Potoczek et al., 2022; Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

A similar pattern of results can be found in the context of violent political action. Simply having a friend who is engaged in a violent course of action is positively related to individual violent involvement in that cause. For instance, a longitudinal study demonstrated that adolescents whose peers had been involved in illegal political behavior were more likely to get involved in such behavior themselves (Dahl & van Zalk, 2014). Past research also demonstrated a positive relationship between having violent friends and becoming an ISIS foreign fighter (Holman, 2016), joining Al-Qaeda (Sageman, 2004), using violence among political extremists in the U.S. (Jasko et al., 2017), and supporting violent extremism (Jasko et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2018). Taken together, this body of research consistently shows that interaction with and the perception of political activism in others is positively related to one's own level of political engagement. However, it is currently less clear what psychological mechanisms account for the effects of social norms. Drawing on goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2015), several possible mechanisms could be proposed to account for the effects of social context.

First, social context can influence the perceived value of the cause. When people interact with others who are politically engaged, political goals become more salient to the point that they dominate over other concerns. Research on opinion polarization demonstrates that when people discuss issues with others they radicalize and become more committed to those opinions. They are more likely to moralize those issues and form a politicized identity around them. In turn, people who are strongly identified with a particular group or an issue react with greater outrage and anger when they perceive this group/cause to be unfairly treated, even if they do not experience injustice firsthand (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Research on group fusion further confirms that people who are strongly identified with a group or a cause are more likely to

support fighting and dying on their behalf (e.g., Gomez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009). For instance, a study on revolutionary Libyan groups showed that nearly half of the active fighters felt a higher sense of fusion with their battalion than with their own families, whereas just over a quarter of the non-fighters felt this way (Whitehouse et al. 2014). On a less extreme level, when people see that the majority of people in society believe that climate change is an important threat it might motivate them to revisit their own perceptions of how important this problem should be for them as well. In line with that possibility, recent work showed that when people believe that voting is more normative in society they are more likely to consider their participation in elections as important; that applies particularly to people who felt they had no sociopolitical control themselves (Potoczek et al., 2022).

A second possible mechanism through which social networks might exert their effects involves expectations of success. Those who are already involved in collective action have a higher sense of self-efficacy (Niemi et al., 1991), they are less pessimistic about political reality, and they believe that their efforts can actually solve the problem (Fox & Schofield, 1989). Therefore, when people interact with others who are politically engaged their perception of attainability of the cause might also change. Higher collective efficacy can in turn motivate them to engage in political behavior because they feel they can influence problems that might otherwise seem uncontrollable and overwhelming. They might also exaggerate the popularity of the cause, which can further strengthen their commitment. For instance, when other people consider climate change to be an important issue a person might expect that actions aimed at fighting climate change will be more successful than when the majority of the population seems to ignore it.



Finally, as mentioned earlier despite the role played by value and expectancy in forming goal intentions, it is important to remember that intentions are not always translated into actions (Sheeran, 2002; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). People might not know how to pursue a given goal or they might lack the resources, skills or opportunities needed to perform a behavior that serves this goal. Therefore, even a belief that a cause is important accompanied by an expectation that it might in fact succeed might not be enough to motivate people to do something about it. Therefore, an alternative explanation for why people are more likely to engage in actions under influence of politically active others is that they gain awareness and access to appropriate means. For instance, people who interact with violence-supporting others may come to a conclusion that violence is an appropriate action to fight for the cause. In support of that, a recent study demonstrated that individuals who perceived political issues in moral terms were more supportive of violence at protests when they were convinced that other people supported the use of violence than when they saw no social convergence (Mooijman et al., 2018). In contrast, those who interact with peaceful activists might start perceiving marches, demonstrations or petitions as instrumental ways to strive for political goals. Moreover, while some political actions might be psychologically demanding, creating a local norm social context might decrease the difficulty of individual engagement. For instance, research has demonstrated that when people perceived others to be supportive of violent actions they were more likely to engage in violence themselves in part because they experienced less stress about it (Webber et al., 2013). In short, social context can make effortful behaviors easier to perform by offering support (Fitzsimons et al., 2015), incentives (Willer, 2009), and opportunities to act (Littman & Paluck, 2014).

In short, whereas factors related to social context such as group identity, having a direct contact to politically active others, or positive social norms have been investigated in the past research, their exact psychological mechanisms are unclear. Drawing on the motivational accounts could enrich our understanding of social influence in the political domain and offer insights into the processes through which such influence occurs.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas the usefulness of goal systems theory has been demonstrated in multiple domains such as e.g. health behaviors (Zhang et al., 2007), romantic relationship (Orehek & Forest, 2016), or consumer behaviors (Kopetz et al., 2012), its potential for understanding political behaviors has been underused. In this chapter I hoped to outline the main directions inspired by this theoretical framework, in which the area of research on political engagement could be further developed.

One fruitful avenue for future research would be to investigate the role of relative goal importance for political engagement as it could explain the puzzle of low levels of political engagement even when people declare the cause to be high on absolute importance. For example, inconsistent findings with regard to biographical availability and activism could be examined with a greater focus on conflicting vs. facilitating relationships between political goals and other active life goals. Similarly, the role of multifinal vs. counterfinal associations between political actions and the goals that they fulfill or harm could further inform the specific role political engagement plays in one's life.

Secondly, while the role of collective efficacy has been extensively studied in the context of political engagement, the specific aspect of goal expectancy related to perceived

instrumentality of political means offers another opportunity for research. Moving beyond the distinction between violent and peaceful actions, future research could examine perceptions of effectiveness of actions that differ in terms of sacrifice (e.g., effort) they require. On the one hand, sacrificial actions could signal the immense importance of the cause, and through this mechanism they could motivate greater engagement. On the other hand, seeing an activist who commits their entire life to the cause might decrease the expectancy of success if one doubts that enough of other people will follow in their footsteps. Similarly, research on risky activist behaviors could be informed by the goal-means analysis that has been so far applied to other types of risky behaviors (Kopetz & Starnes, 2022).

Finally, I proposed how the mechanisms behind the impact of social context and social norms on political engagement might be conceptualized within the goal systems framework. This line of reasoning could be further developed into an analysis of political actions as a case of interdependent pursuit of collective goals (Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Orehek, 2022). In short, while these are just a few examples of research areas that could benefit from incorporating insights from goal systems theory, I am convinced that this theoretical framework will inspire many more of them in the next 20 years.

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