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

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Low Turnout

60% presidential, 40% midterm, lower in off year

Yes, we know.

But, how do we increase turnout meaningfully?
Proposal 1: Education

Growing body of evidence that education impacts turnout

But, why?
Civic education, cognitive skills, social status

Evidence
Civic education—small effects
Cognitive skills—perhaps not very malleable
Social status—perhaps not very malleable
Proposal 2: Electoral Reforms

Many fail to mobilize

Why? May be ineffective because they target costs, not individual motivations

“Non-participants are not likely to flood the polls simply because registration barriers diminish”
Political Motivation

Interest in or attachment to politics

Very important for participation, but...

**Tautology?** Those interested in politics participate in politics.

**Malleable?** Stable throughout adulthood (Prior 2010)

**Rethinking Motivation:**
Explore more general/broad components of motivation
Malleable motivation
Broader Motivation: Grit

Perseverance and passion towards long-term goals.

Strongly predictive of educational attainment, labor market success, and well-being
(above and beyond Big 5 and cognitive skills)

Measurement
I have overcome setbacks to conquer challenges.
I finish whatever I begin.
When I get what I want, it's usually because I worked hard for it.

Considered malleable/teachable
Grit & Non-Cognitive Skills

Grit is conceptualized as a “non-cognitive” skill, rather than a personality trait.

Develop during early childhood—adolescence

Self-regulation & social skills

Strongly predictive of education, labor, health, well-being outcomes.

***But, no examination of non-cognitive skills political behaviors
Why Grit and Turnout?

Gritty people overcome obstacles to participation
• Psychological barriers to participation
• Time-based barriers to participation
• Information-based barriers
• Resource barriers to participation

Hypotheses:

H1: Grit is predictive of participation above and beyond: cognitive skills, the Big 5, and other standard predictors of participation.

H2: Grit’s “effect” varies by political motivation.
Data

Add Health
Representative cohort study of 7th-12th graders (1994-95 school year)

Add Health Grit Scale (Measured: ages 12-17)
Paired with political participation and interest (Measured 13 years later)

CCES
Representative, non-probability sample (2014 pre-election)

Duckworth Grit Scale (Measured: 18+)
Paired with political participation and interest (Measured simultaneously)
Results: H1, grit & participation

Add Health

CCES
Results: H1, grit & participation

Source: Add Health
Results: H2, by political motivation

Source: CCES
Conclusions

Grit is important for participation & may be most important for low propensity participators

Not an artifact of cognitive ability, personality traits, political interest, school/neighborhood context, or shared family traits.
Broader Agenda
Are “non-cognitive” skills important for political behavior?

Remaining Questions:
Is grit malleable?
If we exogenously improve grit, does participation move downstream?
Other non-cognitive skills?

Extensions:
Gritty mindset experiment (in the field)
Collaboration with public schools (in the field)
Non-cognitive skill interventions (working paper; Holbein 2015)
Thank you!
H3: Indirect Channels

Source: Add Health