Adolescents' perspectives on traditional, non-traditional, and direct political activities: The role of identity-processing styles and political beliefs

Jan Šerek, Zuzana Petrovičová, & Petr Macek

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
serek@fss.muni.cz

This version is an original submission to the journal with revisions after peer review accepted by the editor.

Perspectivas de Adolescentes en Actividades Políticas Tradicionales, No Tradicionales y Directas: El Rol de los Estilos de Identidad y las Creencias Políticas

Adolescents' Perspectives on Traditional, Non-traditional, and Direct Political Activities: The Role of Identity-Processing Styles and Political Beliefs

Resumen

La investigación abordó si la tendencia de los adolescentes al emplear el estilo de identidad informativo o normativo predice su efectividad percibida en diferentes actividades políticas. Los datos fueron tomados de un amplio estudio longitudinal realizado en la República Checa y en el que se incluyeron reportes de 179 participantes (primera etapa de evaluación = a los 17 años; segunda etapa evaluación = a los 19 años). El análisis de trayectorias sugirieron que los adolescentes los cuales buscaron información se inclinaron a percibir la actividad política tradicional (por ej. en las organizaciones civiles) como efectiva, mientras que el conformismo normativo de los participantes predijo la no creencia en actividades propiamente políticas (por ej. las peticiones). La efectividad percibida en actividades tradicionalmente políticas (por ej. votar) reflejó la confianza política de los adolescentes a diferencia de sus estilos de procesamiento de identidad. Estos resultados complementan investigaciones previas en la correlación entre los estilos de identidad y el pensamiento político de los adolescentes.

Abstract

The study examined whether adolescents' tendency to employ informational, or normative identity-processing style predicts their perceived effectiveness of different political activities. Data were taken from the broader longitudinal study conducted in the Czech Republic, and included reports from 179 participants (Time 1 = age 17; Time 2 = age 19). Path analyses suggested that adolescents who sought information tended to perceive non-traditional political activity (e.g., in civic organizations) as effective, while participants' normative conformism predicted disbelief in direct activity (e.g., petitions). Perceived effectiveness of traditional activity (e.g., voting) reflected adolescents' actual political trust rather than their identity-processing styles. These results complement previous findings on the correlates of identity-processing styles and adolescents' political thinking.

Palabras claves: adolescencia tardía, confianza política, efectividad en actividades políticas, eficacia política, estilos de identidad

Keywords: identity-processing styles, late adolescence, political activity effectiveness, political efficacy, political trust

Word count (incl. text, references, tables, figures): 3,498.

Introduction

The past years have seen growing youth engagement in unconventional political activities (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Thus, the need to understand why young people prefer one kind of political activity over the others is becoming more apparent. Previous studies have shown that the ways in which adolescents process self-relevant information (identity-processing styles) have the implications for their values and social and religious beliefs (Berzonsky, Cieciuch, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011; Duriez, Soenens, & Beyers, 2004). So far, however, too little attention has been paid to the association between adolescents' identity styles and their perceptions of political activities. In order to fill this gap, the present paper examines whether adolescents' tendency to employ different identity styles relates to how they perceive the effectiveness of various political activities.

People can choose among various means how to express their political views and promote social change. Such means comprise (1) traditional activity, targeting established agencies such as political parties; (2) non-traditional activity, aiming at civic organizations; and (3) direct activity oriented towards specific causes and includes petitions or demonstrations (see Norris, 2003). Deciding among these activities depends on whether the person perceives a given activity as an effective instrument for achieving the desired outcome because people usually do not participate politically if they doubt the effectiveness of such participation (Klandermans, 1997).

The preference for particular forms of political activity is known to be associated with one's political beliefs. Traditionally, political trust and political efficacy are hypothesized to affect persons' willingness to act politically (Gamson, 1968) and their preference for either traditional or non-traditional means of participation (Bandura, 1997). Political efficacy consists of two interrelated beliefs: an assessment of personal capabilities and resources (internal efficacy), and an assessment of the openness of a social system to

change (external efficacy). This paper focuses rather on the external aspect, which represents generalized belief that social changes are possible, and as such, positively relates to perceived effectiveness of a wide variety of political activities targeting these changes. On the other hand, political trust (a belief that political authorities observe the rules of the game and serve the public) relates to the preference for traditional activity while not for other activities (Bandura, 1997).

Besides, political thinking and behavior have to be seen at the context of personal and social development of the individual (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). These processes become salient especially in late adolescence, when political identity is being formed and young people express their identities and identity-related processes through their behavior, including political activities (Bynner, Romney, & Emler, 2003; Erikson, 1968). Using a social-cognitive developmental perspective, Berzonsky (1989) identified three ways in which young people seek, process, and use identity-relevant information: (1) the information-oriented style, characterized by the search for, and evaluation of information before committing to certain decisions, (2) the normative style, with a predominant focus on the norms and expectations of significant others, and (3) the diffuse-avoidant style with a tendency to procrastinate when making decisions. We suppose that namely two active identity-processing styles (informational and normative) can influence the process of political thinking and participation of adolescents since people employing diffuse-avoidant style do not commit to specific planned actions and tend to drift from one decision to another.

We expect that young people employing informational style are more inclined than other people to non-traditional solutions to problems and appreciate creative and sophisticated political activities that go beyond traditional politics. It comes from the fact that they are able to cope with conflicting information, are more autonomous and complex in their thinking (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996), have a higher need for cognition (Berzonsky &

Sullivan, 1992), and are more open to new experiences, ideas or actions (Dunkel, Papini, & Berzonsky, 2008; Duriez et al., 2004). Moreover, their tendency to gather information and look for new solutions is associated with a perceived internal control over the events around them (Berzonsky, 1989). Thus, we suppose that the informational style positively predicts the overall sense of political efficacy.

On the other hand, people high in the normative style are expected to decry the direct forms of political activity and incline to the traditional ones. These people are conformist, internalize the values and goals of others, and protect themselves from information that might interfere with their perceptions (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992). Previous research has also revealed their tendency to approve of right-wing authoritarian political ideology and conservative attitudes (Duriez & Soenens, 2006; Soenens, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005), which are characterized by an adherence to conventional norms and an aversion to any form of social rebellion (Altemeyer, 1996). In addition, the respect for social authorities, typical among normative-oriented young people, may translate into higher political trust, which strengthens their appreciation of the traditional activity.

In sum, our question is whether the employment of different identity styles relates to how a person perceives the effectiveness of traditional, non-traditional, and direct political activity. We expect that people employing an informational style will perceive non-traditional activity to be effective, while people employing a normative style will appreciate traditional and diminish direct activities. Next, we suppose that the informational style affects the development of political efficacy, and that the normative style affects the development of political trust, thus the effect of identity-processing styles will be mediated by these two political beliefs.

Method

Participants and procedure

Our data came from the psychological branch of the broader European Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood, conducted in the Czech Republic (Jezek, Lacinova, Sirucek, & Michalcakova, 2008). Original sample consisted of 883 children (age 8), randomly selected from almost all children born in medical institutions in a city with 400,000 inhabitants between March 1991 and June 1992. Data for the present study were drawn from the biennial 2008/09 (T1 = age 17; N = 477) and 2010/11 (T2 = age 19; N = 213) examinations. The analyses included all 179 participants (64 % girls) who had valid values of dependent variables at T2. Adolescents with higher education level were overrepresented in the sample due to dropout in the previous examinations (49 % grammar school, 44 % vocational school, 5 % art school or lyceum, 2 % not studying). Those who left the study between T1 and T2 did not have significantly different identity styles, political efficacy, or political trust from those who remained.

Adolescents completed self-report computer-based questionnaires at the research institute. Measures comprised identity styles and political beliefs at T1 and T2. Moreover, participants answered items about perceived effectiveness of political activities at T2.

Measures

Identity styles. Two information-processing strategies were measured by the two subscales of the fourth version of the Identity Style Inventory (Likert-type scale with responses ranging from one to five; Berzonsky, Soenens, Smits, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2007): (1) informational style (12 items, e.g. "When I have to make a decision, I like to spend a lot of time thinking about my options"; alphas .83 at T1, and .83 at T2); (2) normative style (seven items, e.g. "I find it is best for me to rely on the advice of close friends or relatives when I have a problem"; alphas .80 at T1, and .73 at T2). Latter subscale was formed from

the original 12-item version by omitting five items, uncorrelated with total score. CFA showed that the present version was one-dimensional (standardized factor loadings from .32 to .78) and retained measurement invariance over time. A model with two correlated latent factors (normative style at T1 and T2), assuming equal factor loadings and intercepts of the same indicators, reached a reasonable fit (χ^2_{77} = 153.22, p < .01; χ^2/df = 1.99; SRMR = .08; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .07) after two pairs of T1 residuals and three pairs of T2 residuals were allowed to correlate.

Political beliefs. Two Czech Likert-type scales with responses ranging from one to four, piloted in the previous studies (Serek & Macek, 2010), were used. (1) Political efficacy scale assessed adolescents' beliefs that they can achieve any change or stop the negative development in their communities (eight items, e.g. "People like me can influence what is going on in the place where they live"; alphas .81 at T1, and .84 at T2). CFA proved one-dimensionality of the scale (standardized factor loadings from .43 to .80) and full measurement invariance. A model with two correlated latent factors (political efficacy at T1 and T2), assuming equal factor loadings and intercepts of respective indicators, reached an acceptable fit (χ^2_{109} = 171.45, p < .01; χ^2/df = 1.57; SRMR = .08; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .06) after one pair of T1 residuals was allowed to correlate. (2) Political trust scale assessed adolescents' perceived trustworthiness of political environment, regarding politicians' service to the public and observance of the rules (six items, e.g. "Although it may seem different, politicians pay respect to basic principles of decency and morality"; alphas .76 at T1, and .80 at T2). Similar to the previous scale, CFA confirmed one-dimensionality (standardized factor loadings from .48 to .76) and measurement invariance. One T1 residual correlation had to be allowed to reach an acceptable fit (χ^2_{57} = 76.36, p = .04; χ^2/df = 1.34; SRMR = .07; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .04).

Perceived effectiveness of political activities. Participants were asked: "If ordinary

citizens want to influence decisions taken on social issues, they can choose from various activities. How meaningful do you think the following activities are in terms of influence on social issues?" Then they assessed seven activities on the four-point scale from "is always meaningful" to "never is." *Traditional activity* was represented by two items: voting, and political party membership ($\alpha = .61$). *Non-traditional activity* was represented by two items: sending money to some organization dealing with the issue, and giving active help to some organization dealing with the issue ($\alpha = .72$). *Direct activity* was represented by three items: petition signing, taking part in demonstrations, and illegal action (e. g., occupation) ($\alpha = .68$). Confirmatory factor analysis proved the existence of three distinctive perceived forms of political activity. A model with three correlated latent factors exhibited a perfect fit ($\chi^2_{11} = 9.09$, p = .61; $\chi^2/df = .83$; SRMR = .03; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00), while an alternative model assuming only one latent factor fitted the data considerably worse ($\chi^2_{14} = 83.77$, p < .01; $\chi^2/df = 5.98$; SRMR = .08; CFI = .74; RMSEA = .17).

Strategy of analyses

In order to retain a reasonable ratio between free parameters and sample size, we estimated three separate path models with: perceived effectiveness of traditional, non-traditional, and direct activity. Full information maximum likelihood estimator (Mplus 6.1) was used to include the cases with partially missing data (covariance coverage from 82 to 100 %). All models contained T1 and T2 measurements of informational style, normative style, political efficacy, and political trust. Based on our assumptions, we allowed informational style to correlate with political efficacy, and normative style to correlate with political trust. Also both political beliefs were allowed to intercorrelate. Further, we assumed two longitudinal effects: from informational style to political efficacy, and from normative style to political trust. All T2 variables were set to predict perceived effectiveness of traditional/non-traditional/direct activity, which was measured only at T2 (see Figure 1).

Results

Three path models predicting perceptions of three forms of activity are depicted together in Figure 1. All models had a perfect fit, suggesting that no relevant path was omitted. Correlation matrix of all scales can be found in Table 1.

All variables measured at T1 were significantly associated in the expected way. However, informational style did not predict a change in political efficacy, and normative style did not predict a change in political trust. The paths could be removed from the model without significant worsening of its fit ($\Delta\chi^2_2 = 2.69$, p = .26). Thus, despite the association at T1 we found no longitudinal effect of identity styles on political beliefs. This result implicated that the effect of identity styles on perceived effectiveness could not be mediated by political beliefs.

Perceived effectiveness of different forms of political activity was predicted by different variables. Perceived effectiveness of traditional activity was predicted mainly by political trust, perceived effectiveness of non-traditional activity was predicted mainly by informational style, and perceived effectiveness of radical activity was predicted by adolescents' political efficacy and (negatively) by normative style.

Discussion

We found that there is an association between how young people perceive the effectiveness of various political activities and their identity-related cognitive strategies. Information-oriented people are open to non-traditional ideas, actions, and values (Berzonsky & Sullivan, 1992). Our data suggests that this openness is reflected in their political thinking as well. Specifically, the tendency to search for information in the process of self-definition (informational style) positively predicts greater appreciation of non-traditional political

activity aiming at organizations focused on specific social issues. At the same time, the information-orientation does not translate into perceptions of direct activity and only slightly affects the evaluation of traditional activity. The tendency of young people to conform and to dismiss inconvenient information (normative style) has a weaker but still noticeable relation to their perception of political activities. It is not true that highly normative people appreciate traditional political activity more than the others as we hypothesized based on their preference of conservative beliefs (Berzonsky et al., 2011; Duriez & Soensen, 2006). Nevertheless, consistently with their conservative beliefs, they distrust the effectiveness of direct activity. The associations are present despite the two-year interval between the measurements, suggesting that some political perceptions do reflect more stable cognitive styles.

Originally, we argued that the tendency to search for information strengthens one's general belief that achievement of social change is possible (political efficacy), and that the normative style leads to higher political trust. Although these associations were moderately present at the age 17, no longitudinal effects were found. These findings suggest that the development of political efficacy and trust in late adolescence is driven by different factors than the identity-related cognitive styles (e.g., direct and indirect experiences with political world). The associations with cognate personality traits that are reported in the literature (Mondak & Halperin, 2008) may originate from the earlier political development.

Looking at our results from another perspective, young people's thinking about political activities is associated with both their political beliefs and more general cognitive styles. However, both factors have unequal relevancy for different activities. Traditional activity is perceived as effective by people who trust politicians, while personality characteristics play only a minor (informational style), or no (normative style) role here. When considering the effectiveness of non-traditional activity, the tendency to look for

information is the only substantial predictor while political trust does not matter. Direct activity is favored by people who believe in the possibility to achieve social change and who tend to be nonconformists. At the same time, the appreciation of direct activity does not stem from lower political trust, which supports recent findings that direct activity is not the domain of people frustrated by traditional politics (Norris, Walgrave, & Aelst, 2005). Generally, it seems that perceived effectiveness of traditional activity reflects actual trust in the political system, while more general and stable personality characteristics matter within perceptions of less conventional activities.

Besides some limitations, our study extends current knowledge about the correlates of identity-related cognitive styles. Since it was conducted on participants with higher educational level, included a limited number of possible predictors, employed only one measure of perceived effectiveness, and had not completely longitudinal design (dependent variable was not measured at the age 17), further replications are needed. Based purely on the fact that people reported some degree of effectiveness for certain actions, we cannot infer whether they would engage in those activities in reality, because other factors come into play, such as resources and opportunities. On the other hand, most of our results are consistent with expectations deduced from the general characteristics of both identity styles. While previous studies have shown the implications for a person's values and social and religious beliefs, we have pointed out that the perception of political activities is associated with identity styles as well. At the same time, our research suggests that young people's perceptions in this area are not only based on their beliefs about the political system but also stem from more general ways of approaching the social world.

References

Altemeyer, B. (1996). *The authoritarian specter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy*. W.H. Freeman.

Berzonsky, M. D. (1989). Identity style: Conceptualization and measurement. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *4*(3), 268 -282. doi:10.1177/074355488943002

Berzonsky, M. D., Cieciuch, J., Duriez, B., & Soenens, B. (2011). The how and what of identity formation: Associations between identity styles and value orientations. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *50*(2), 295-299. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2010.10.007

Berzonsky, M. D., & Ferrari, J. R. (1996). Identity orientation and decisional strategies. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *20*(5), 597-606. doi:10.1016/0191-8869(96)00001-3

Berzonsky, M. D., Soenens, B., Smits, I., Luyckx, K., & Goossens, L. (2007). *Identity Style Inventory (ISI4): Draft Version*. Unpublished measure, Department of Psychology, State University of New York, Cortland, NY.

Berzonsky, M. D., & Sullivan, C. (1992). Social-cognitive aspects of identity style: Need for cognition, experiential openness, and introspection. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *7*(2), 140-155. doi:10.1177/074355489272002

Bynner, J. M., Romney, D. M., & Emler, N. P. (2003). Dimensions of political and related facets of identity in late adolescence. *Journal of Youth Studies, 6*(3), 319-335. doi:10.1080/1367626032000138282

Dunkel, C. S., Papini, D. R., & Berzonsky, M. D. (2008). Explaining differences in identity styles: Possible roles of personality and family functioning. *Identity*, *8*(4), 349-363. doi:10.1080/15283480802365338

Duriez, B., & Soenens, B. (2006). Personality, identity styles and authoritarianism: An

integrative study among late adolescents. *European Journal of Personality*, *20*(5), 397-417. doi:10.1002/per.589

Duriez, B., Soenens, B., & Beyers, W. (2004). Personality, identity styles, and religiosity: An integrative study among late adolescents in Flanders (Belgium). *Journal of Personality*, *72*(5), 877-910. doi:10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00284.x

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity youth and crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Gamson, W. A. (1968). *Power and discontent*. Homewood: Dorsey Press.

Jezek, S., Lacinova, L., Sirucek, J., & Michalcakova, R. (2008). The psychological branch of the ELSPAC study: A survey of 15-year-old respondents. In L. Lacinova & S. Jezek (Eds.), *Fifteen-year-olds in Brno: A Slice of Longitudinal Self-Reports* (pp. 7-11). Brno: Masaryk University. Retrieved October 17, 2011, from http://is.muni.cz/repo/806682/chapter01Intro.pdf/publication/806682

Klandermans, B. (1997). *The social psychology of protest*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Mondak, J. J., & Halperin, K. D. (2008). A framework for the study of personality and political behaviour. *British Journal of Political Science*, *38*(2), 335-362. doi:10.1017/S0007123408000173

Norris, P. (2003, November). *Young people & political activism: From the politics of loyalties to the politics of choice?* Report presented at the Council of Europe Symposium 'Young people and democratic institutions: from disillusionment to participation', Strasbourg. Retrieved October 17, 2011, from http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/COE%20Young%20People%20and%20Political%20Activism.pdf

Norris, P., Walgrave, S., & Aelst, P. V. (2005). Who demonstrates? Antistate rebels, conventional participants, or everyone? *Comparative Politics*, *37*(2), 189-205.

Serek, J., & Macek, P. (2010). Proc se politicky (ne)angazovat: obsah a struktura presvedceni u adolescentu [Why (not) to become politically engaged: Content and structure of

beliefs in adolescence]. *Ceskoslovenska psychologie [Czechoslovak Psychology]*, *54*(2), 160-174.

Soenens, B., Duriez, B., & Goossens, L. (2005). Social-psychological profiles of identity styles: Attitudinal and social-cognitive correlates in late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, *28*(1), 107-125. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2004.07.001

Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2006). *A new engagement? Political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations between all measures.

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*M*	*SD*
1. Information style T1											3.47	0.57
2. Information style T2	.61**										3.54	0.55
3. Normative style T1	.02	.04									2.98	0.64
4. Normative style T2	-.06	.09	.64**								3.04	0.56
5. Political efficacy T1	.19*	.08	-.10	-.09							2.61	0.49
6. Political efficacy T2	.17*	.18*	.01	-.12	.49**						2.65	0.52
7. Political trust T1	.04	-.01	.12	.08	.32**	.10					2.14	0.45
8. Political trust T2	-.04	.05	-.01	.03	.28**	.24**	.42**				2.18	0.51
9. Perc. eff. traditional act. T2	.12	.21**	-.02	.02	.22**	.27**	.19*	.35**			3.00	0.65
10. Perc. eff. non-trad. act. T2	.26**	.33**	-.02	.10	.05	.21**	.03	.14	.36**		2.74	0.69
11. Perc. eff. direct act. T2	.09	.12	-.23**	-.19*	.16	.27**	-.05	.06	.28**	.32**	2.47	0.56

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1. Path models examining the relations among identity-processing styles, political beliefs, and perceived effectiveness of traditional/non-traditional/direct activity.
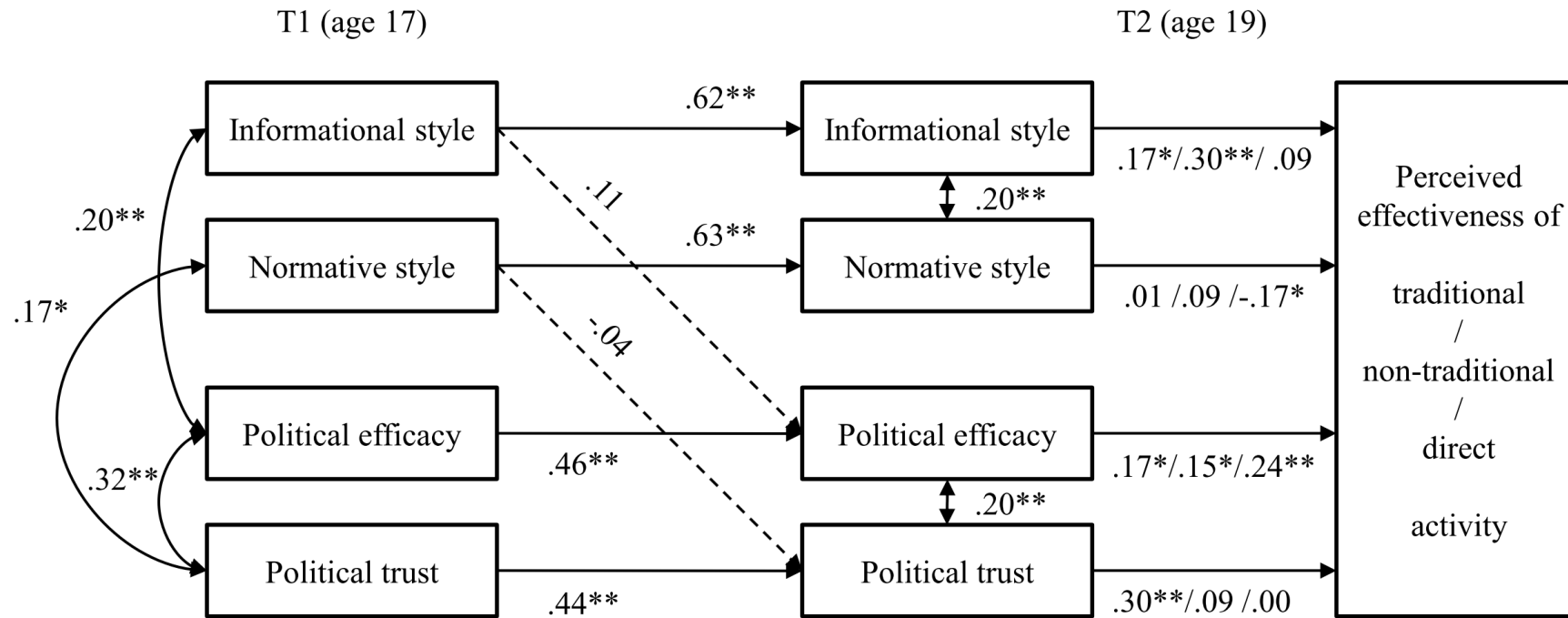
Note. Standardized path coefficients are reported. Coefficients in the left part of the figure were identical for all three models. Model fit: $\chi^2_{21} = 19.59$, p = .55; $\chi^2/df = .93$; SRMR = .04; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00 (model with traditional activity); $\chi^2_{21} = 21.95$, p = .40; $\chi^2/df = 1.05$; SRMR = .04; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .02 (model with non-traditional activity); $\chi^2_{21} = 24.94$, p = .25; $\chi^2/df = 1.19$; SRMR = .05; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .03 (model with direct activity).

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.