

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Contacting a public official: Concept and measurement in cross-national surveys, 1960s–2010s

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## Abstract

**Background:** In the digital age, contacting a public official is a direct, low-cost means of influence, but most cross-national surveys ignore it.

**Objective:** We go in-depth on “contact” to define it, present how it has appeared in major cross-national surveys since the 1960s, and how survey respondents might understand it today. We then explore its popularity and determinants in Europe across time.

**Methods:** We use the Survey Data Recycling project’s Cotton File and the European Social Survey (ESS) 2002 and 2018.

**Results:** Of nine major international survey projects that have this item, only ESS regularly includes it. Across Europe, the popularity of contact did not change much, and the factors that associate with generalized contact in 2002 are the same as in 2018.

**Conclusion:** Data producers should test the meaning of contact among respondents and differentiate between generalized and particularized forms.

Representatives, civil servants, and bureaucrats of various kinds perform the day-to-day functions of democratic government. Citizens can contact them to solicit their involvement in personal or social issues. In the digital age, “contacting a public official” captures the most direct, low-cost, and personal means of influence. This type of action nowadays requires very little time or money—it can be done with a cell phone call or by sending an email or a message through social media—and if the contactor can persuade the right person, the intended results could be quick and effective. Contact has been an integral part of “who gets what and why” in politics (Hirlinger 1992, pp. 553–554); it is a way to provide feedback on democratic performance, and, thus, help make representatives accountable for their actions (Jones et al. 1977, p. 148; Lussier 2011, p. 297). However, across Europe, it appears that only a small percentage of European citizens contact a public official (Aars and Stromsnes 2007). This small percentage is steady across time but varies across nations. For example, according to the European Social Survey (ESS), in 2002, 9 percent of Poles contacted a public official, and in 2018, again, 9 percent of Poles did so; in 2002, 22 percent of Norwegians contacted a public official, and in 2018, it was 23 percent (see Table 1).

Research focused specifically on “contact” as a form of political engagement stretches back decades, but after the 1980s, interest waned. Attentiveness toward its unique qualities began with the *Political Participation and Equality in Seven Nations* (PPE7N) project conducted from 1966 to 1971 by Verba, Nie, and Kim. That

**TABLE 1** Contacted a politician or government official in the last 12 months

| Percent contacted by country and year |      |                    |      |
|---------------------------------------|------|--------------------|------|
|                                       | 2002 |                    | 2018 |
| Finland                               | 24.1 | Norway             | 23.2 |
| Norway                                | 22.4 | Sweden             | 20.6 |
| Ireland                               | 21.7 | Austria            | 20.5 |
| Czech Republic                        | 21   | Finland            | 20.4 |
| Austria                               | 18.3 | Ireland            | 20.3 |
| The United Kingdom                    | 17.7 | Belgium            | 19.3 |
| Sweden                                | 16.9 | Portugal           | 18.6 |
| France                                | 16.8 | The Netherlands    | 18.1 |
| Switzerland                           | 16.6 | The United Kingdom | 17.7 |
| Belgium                               | 16.3 | Germany            | 16.7 |
| Hungary                               | 14.1 | Switzerland        | 15.9 |
| The Netherlands                       | 14   | Slovenia           | 15.2 |
| Portugal                              | 12.4 | Spain              | 14.4 |
| Slovenia                              | 11.9 | Czech Republic     | 14.2 |
| Germany                               | 11.5 | France             | 11.3 |
| Spain                                 | 11.5 | Italy              | 9.6  |
| Italy                                 | 11.3 | Poland             | 9.2  |
| Poland                                | 9.7  | Hungary            | 6.1  |

*Note:* The European Social Survey item, as it appears in all survey rounds, reads, “There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?... Contacted a politician, government or local government official.” Percentages from poststratification weight and design weight.

survey project was the first and last cross-national in-depth look: Across nations, it included many items on the reasons for contact, whether the respondent had contacted, and the respondent’s perception of the consequences of that contact. Much of the scholarly work on contact from the 1970s to 1990s was spurred by the work of Verba and colleagues but shifted to citizen contact of local government public officials in American cities, often with administrative levels as the units of analysis, but not always (e.g., Hirlinger 1992; Jones et al. 1977; Vedlitz, Durand, and Dyer 1980). Scholars paid less attention specifically to “contact” in the 2000s and 2010s (an exception is Aars and Stromsnes 2007), and the recent work is on the impact of Internet technologies on contact (e.g., Cavallo, Lynch, and Scull 2014; Panagiotopoulos, Bigdeli, and Sams 2014). As of the late 2010s, few scholars examining political participation across nations and time specifically study contact, preferring instead to treat it as a component of multi-item measures (e.g., scales or indices) of political behavior. Moreover, most of the empirical literature on contact is about specific nations, and none, to our knowledge, examines determinants specific to contact with a cross-national perspective.

“Contact” is a fundamental and venerable form of a political voice that is even easier to do in the digital age, yet it has not attracted sustained research interest among political sociologists in the last two decades. This article explores the meaning of this concept and its measurement in comparative surveys. We ask four basic and related questions: What is the definition of contact? How has this concept been operationalized in major cross-national surveys? How might respondents today understand contact? What characteristics of individuals are associated with expressing political voice through contact? This last question we address with ESS data, thanks to their quality and geographical coverage, and that they are the only major European

survey to consistently include contact as a survey item in every round. We focus on the project's first (2002) and ninth (2018) rounds to understand cross-national and overtime variation in determinants of "contact."

## DEFINITION OF CONTACT AS A FORM OF PARTICIPATION

We begin with the argument that "contact" expresses political voice and meets standard definitions of political participation. Verba et al. (1973, p. 1) defined participation as "legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take"; Conge (1988) defined it as "individual or collective action at the national or local level that supports or opposes state structures, authorities, and/or decisions regarding allocation of public goods" (p. 247); van Deth (2014) pithily defined it as "citizens' activities affecting politics" (p. 351); and Teorell, Torcal, and Montero (2007) expands on different types as does van Deth (2014). As identifiable participation modes proliferate over time, the scope of what is considered political participation widens. At root, participation is an attempt to influence the decisions of decision-makers who operate in a political sphere.

Nonetheless, in the various discussions of what contact is, we see that "contact" is an inherently vague and overly broad concept. Verba and colleagues thought of contact as non-communal political action outside of the electoral procedure (1973, Chap. 3). Vedlitz, Durand, and Dyer (1980) specified dimensions of "contact" as it applies to American cities and then referred to it as "nonelectoral citizen contacts with public officials" (p. 50). Another way of describing contact is as a means to obtain goods or services. Hirlinger (1992, p. 553) defined contact as "the act of individuals approaching government officials in order to obtain some specific-related benefit from government..." He goes on to argue that people contact officials for ego-tropic (personal) concerns and for sociotropic (societal or community-wide) concerns. Others see it as an inherently multifarious action. Aars and Stromsnes (2007, p. 94) go at length to discuss the dimensions of contact. In a single article, there can be multiple names. Aars and Stromsnes (2007, p. 94) refer to it as "citizen-initiated contacting," "citizen contacting," and just "contacting." We note that contact is sometimes called "citizen-initiated contact" to differentiate it from situations in which public officials initiate contact with citizens. We focus on citizen-initiated contact.

Moon, Serra, and West (1993) argued that to understand contact, we must first understand who is contacted and thus draw a distinction between bureaucrats and other government representatives, such as parliamentarians and representatives of localities. Moon, Serra, and West's (1993) excellent suggestion is hampered by vagueness on who counts as a "public official." One approach is to include just about anyone employed by the government with a modicum of authority: "A public official is anyone in a position of official authority that is conferred by a state, i.e., someone who holds a legislative, administrative, or judicial position of any kind, whether appointed or elected. This definition applies to individuals who hold such positions or exercise a public function for any part of a territory, as well as for the whole of a country."<sup>1</sup> This extends the term to everyone from a parliamentarian to a police officer to a soldier. Public officials do not have to be elected in order to hold their post, and a public official can be someone who works in the administration of government. Thus, if survey producers use the term "public official," they immediately create the uncertainty that Moon, Serra, and West (1993) caution against.

Much of the classic literature from the 1970s to 1990s distinguishes between particularized and generalized contact. "Particularized" is contact on behalf of the contactor or their family (Verba et al. 1973, p. 54) for the purpose of solving a problem. Particularized contact led Jones et al. (1977) to posit their well-known needs-awareness model, in which a citizen will contact a public official if they have a need and are aware that government can provide for that need (Jones et al. 1977; see also Sharp 1982; Vedlitz, Durand, and Dyer 1980). "Generalized" is a complaint about a social or political problem not necessarily explicitly connected to the individual. In most major cross-national surveys from the 1990s to the present, generalized contact has been the dominant concept.

<sup>1</sup> University of Oxford Compliance Definitions: "Who are public officials?" <https://web.archive.org/web/20210812220141/> <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/definitions-and-interpretations>.

Altogether, extant research to date does not provide a unified definition of contact. We propose such a definition here. In doing so, we build on the articles published from the 1970s to the 2000s, especially Jones et al. (1977), Vedlitz, Durand, and Dyer (1980, pp. 50–51), Moon, Serra, and West (1993), and Aars and Stromsnes (2007, pp. 95–97), and some additional thinking about the concept as it appears in the digital age. We note that owing to the vagueness inherent in “contact” itself, the resulting definition is broad. In turn, any operational definition will ultimately be broad.

Contacting as a form of political voice has the following characteristics. First, it is a form of *political linkage* in which the person is directly connected to the workings and workers of government. Second, it is an *individualized* action in which people choose whom they contact, what they say, and when they say it. Third, the contact may be *private*, insomuch as officials are obliged, or not, to make such contact public (e.g., White House visitors log). Fourth, contact may be *done in many ways*, from personal visits (physical) to filling in an online form (virtual). Fifth, the contact reason can be *for just about anything*, including an expression of support, a protest, a demand or supplication for services or a change in policy, or to share information and opinion. Sixth, in a single contact, the reason can be about *a single issue or multiple issues* (e.g., a protest and a supplication in a single visit). Seventh, the *contact beneficiar(ies)* can be *very narrow*, for example, to benefit an individual, *or very broad*, for example, to ask for world peace. Seventh, *any government official* can be contacted, from bureaucrats and civil servants to parliamentary representatives. Eighth, contact can be *at any level*, such as local (mayor), national (member of parliament), and supranational (e.g., EU parliamentarian).

Thus, “contact a public official” can be defined, broadly, as an individualized and private form of political connection conducted in many ways and for many reasons and that may be an expression for more than one issue in a single connection, the beneficiaries of which may be the person doing the contacting or it can be the entire community or society and can be directed at any government official at any level of government administration. This unified definition exposes the inherent complexities of the concept. These complexities will likely influence how respondents may interpret “contact.”

## HOW RESPONDENTS MAY INTERPRET “CONTACT”

At least as important as the researchers’ definition is how survey respondents interpret this concept. Do respondents consider “contact” a form of political voice? How do they understand the scope of “contact”: Can it include a personal visit, a physical letter, telephone call, an email, a Tweet, or filling in an online form?

The concept raises even more questions when we consider how and to whom contact is made. For example, what is a “sit-in” at a legislator’s office? Is it a demonstration? Or is it contacting a public official? A sit-in can be both. How do respondents understand such an action? Does filling in an online form on a representative’s webpage constitute “contact?” Respondents may also have a broad definition of “politician” or “public (or government) official.”

While precise answers to the questions may be elusive, theory and survey methodology equip us with a set of reasonable assumptions. Because survey items on “contact” are embedded in a battery of other political action items, we can expect that respondents understand this form of voice as political and are not merely reporting a complaint to a postal employee about the efficiency of bureaucracy. Respondents are likely to understand “contact” liberally, from personal visits to mailed letters to online forms. We can assume that people contact parliamentarians and local government administrators to voice their interests or influence them.

Together, the questions of how respondents might understand “contact” and the inclusive definition we proposed earlier are a statement of the problem itself: The concept of contact is wide, therefore the definition is eclectic, and therefore contact is difficult to validly and reliably measure within the space of general surveys, cross-national projects like ESS and International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) included.

## HISTORY OF CONTACT IN CROSS-NATIONAL SURVEYS OF THE EUROPE

To trace the history of the item wording, we examined 23 international survey projects from 1966 to 2018.<sup>2</sup> Classic articles from the 1970s start the history of the empirical literature on “contact” with the survey study “Political Participation and Equality in Seven Nations, 1966–1971 (PPE7N)” by Verba, Nie, and Kim. PPE7N included an extraordinary number of items dedicated to contacting. They begin with items asking about perceived problems in the community, and then they ask if it would be necessary or useful to solve a problem by contacting a public official about it (e.g., and in their gendered language, councilman and alderman, as well as mayor). They then ask the respondent whether they came alone to the official or if they went with others, what they talked about with the public official, and whether they perceive that the contact was successful.

Subsequent major cross-national survey projects in Europe have not replicated this level of detail. In Europe, from the PPE7N study to now, there have been nine international survey projects (in chronological order, with year started and other relevant notes in parentheses):

- PPE7N (1966–1971)
- Political Action 1 (PA1; An Eight Nation Study; 1973–1976)
- Political Action 2 (PA2; 1979–1981)
- Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (1990)
- Asia Europe Survey (2000)
- ESS (2002)
- International Social Survey Programme (contact appears only in 2004 and 2014)
- European Quality of Life Survey (started in 2003)
- Eurobarometer (started in 1973, but the only time contact appears is 2004).

In major cross-national survey projects, the contact item is usually part of a battery of other questions. It appears in the 1970s, disappears in the 1980s, reappears in the 1990s, and continues into the 2010s. The ESS (2002–2018) is currently the longest-running Europe-focused survey that asks about “contact” in every round.

There are variations of the wording, but most are similar in framing contact as one thing that people can do in politics and are about generalized contact. For example, PA1 and PA2 asked about generalized contact:

Some people do quite a lot in politics while others find they have not the time or perhaps the interest to participate in political activities. I will read you briefly some of the things that people do, and I would like you to tell me how often you do each of them. How often do you... contact public officials or politicians?

Consider, too, that the contact can be sociotropic or ego-tropic. To illustrate, we examine the item wording of “contact” as employed by each round of the ESS 2002–2018 and the International Social Survey Programme in 2014.

The ESS question reads as follows:

There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?... Contacted a politician, government or local government official.

<sup>2</sup> SDR 2.0 Cotton File developed by the Survey Data Recycling project, funded by the National Science Foundation (PTE Federal award 1738502). Data prepared by Przemek Powalko, 2019, “SDR 2.0 Cotton File: Cumulative List of Variables in the Surveys of the SDR Database,” <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/6QBGNF>, Harvard Dataverse, V2.

In a questionnaire footnote, ESS states that, by “prevent,” they mean “serious problems.” The item is embedded in a national scene—improve or prevent things in Poland, for example—and one can argue that the respondent understands the item to be sociotropic rather than ego-tropic. ESS asks about local government too.

In the International Social Survey Programme 2014 wave, the item appears as follows:

Here are some different forms of political and social action that people can take. Please indicate, for each one, whether you have done any of these things in the past year, whether you have done it in the more distant past, whether you have not done it but might do it or have not done it and would never, under any circumstances, do it... Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or a civil servant to express your views.

They consider Internet participation as part of it. Unlike ESS, the ISSP connotation could be personal or collective and for reasons that are neither “serious” nor sociotropic. The wording encompasses both particularized and generalized variants.

As these two item wordings suggest, the questions are about contacting “politicians” as well as officials and civil servants. We note that PA1 and PA2, ESS, and ISSP do not separate elected from unelected officials. Thus, respondents had wide latitude to interpret the range of “officials” they contacted.

## WHO CONTACTS?

After exploring the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of the concept, we now understand the extent to which the concept, given how it has been measured, is empirically viable.

There are several theories of the association between individual characteristics and contacting a public official. Claggett and Pollock (2006, p. 594) argue that contacting requires some higher level of skill than other forms. That might have been true in the past, but we argue that contact in the digital age is relatively easy and cost-free. First, (a) it is reasonable to assume that many people know where their local officials are, even if they do not know, off-hand, who they are (but they can easily look it up) and (b) the percent of people contacting Europe does not vary much from before mass Internet access (2002) to the current time when most have Internet access (2018). With the advent of the telephone, citizens do not have to leave their homes to perform this mode of influence. They can pick up a phone and call or send an email or Tweet, and contact is made.

Internal political efficacy and socioeconomic status should have a positive impact on the likelihood of contact (Hirlinger 1992, p. 554). Efficacious individuals tend to believe that their actions could matter, and thus contact is a manifestation of this belief. Efficacy, economic situation, and education tend to go together (e.g., Marx and Nguyen 2016). A comfortable household income and a college education can have a positive impact on the propensity to contact, even if political efficacy is not so high (even historically, e.g., Sharp 1982).

Dissatisfaction with the government could lead to an increased propensity to contact the government (Moon, Serra, and West 1993). Individual contact is a citizen-initiated response to a malfunctioning bureaucracy. We arrive, then, at a kind of political grievance, but of a specific kind—that about the quality of government. Thus, across nations, we would expect contact to be associated with dissatisfaction with the government rather than dissatisfaction with democracy writ large. Efficacy and dissatisfaction with the government are perhaps empirically related.

A related but distinct concept to political grievances is confidence in institutions. Aars and Stromsnes (2007, pp. 96–97) suggest that confidence in institutions matters but is connected to efficacy such that efficacious individuals would have to trust the institutions to turn to them for help with a social or political problem. In their Norwegian study, Aars and Stromsnes (2007, p. 107) combine various institutions, including “national parliament (Stortinget), the cabinet, the local council, the civil service, the political parties and politicians” and find that it does not have much of an impact on contact (p. 111). We argue that while there

may be interesting nuances between dissatisfaction with government and trust in the many political institutions, political grievances toward government—rather than toward all political institutions—are likely a more direct indicator of why someone would contact that government.

Hirlinger (1992) also posits that “political ties” could matter: Those who know people in politics would be more likely to contact them. This seems true and circuitous at the same time; if one is to contact public officials, they are likely in contact with them. However, Hirlinger (1992) makes this more interesting by suggesting another characteristic: Those who contact are those who generally engage in politics, which is why they may know public officials or perhaps feel competent in this societal realm. Hirlinger (1992) theory then suggests that the greater the individual engages in other forms of non-institutional participation, the greater the likelihood that they would contact a public official.

In this article, we focus more on individual and social group characteristics than on country-level characteristics, but a note on cross-national variation at the country and regional levels is necessary. One cause for regional variation could be the post-Communist legacy. One part of this argument is akin to Aars and Stromsnes (2007) assertion that trust in institutions should matter. We know that post-Communist countries, in comparison to the West, have lower levels of trust in political institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001; Slomczynski and Janicka 2009) and have lower overall levels of political participation (Hooghe and Quintelier 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013). While the post-Communist “legacy” may matter, what matters more are individual and country-specific characteristics. Thus, we expect to find that living in a post-Communist society would be a rather insensitive catch-all for the region’s past and future governmental and economic problems. By 2018, citizens would not be less likely to contact a public official because their parents or grandparents survived Communism.

We expect that those who are more likely to contact a public official live in outside of post-Communist Europe, have higher levels of internal political efficacy, are dissatisfied with the government, are interested in politics, have engaged in more than one other form of political participation, and enjoy a more comfortable economic situation, and have a higher level of educational attainment.

## DATA AND METHODS

To answer the research question, *what characteristics of individuals are associated with contacting a politician?*, we use ESS. ESS is a high-quality cross-national data set (Slomczynski, Tomescu-Dubrow, and Wysmulek 2021) with individuals as the units of analysis. Moreover, it is the only cross-national survey in Europe to have the item consistently repeated across nations and time. To explore the stability and change in the characteristics associated with contact, we compare the first-ever ESS round (2002) to a recent round (2018) for a pooled set of countries that appeared in both rounds: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

An advantage of ESS is that the survey item on contact has the same or similar wording across rounds. Our dependent variable is dichotomous, coded 1 if the respondent reported that they contacted a politician and 0 otherwise.

The wording of the political efficacy items was similar, but not the same, between 2002 and 2018. In 2002, the item was “Do you think that you could take an active role in a group involved with political issues?” (response range is *definitely not* [1] to *definitely* [5]). In 2018, it was, “How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?” (response range is *not at all able* [1] to *completely able* [5]). We treat these as similar enough to compare. For “political efficacy,” the higher the score, the greater the respondent’s belief that they could take an active role.

Most of our main independent variables on attitudes were from items worded exactly the same in 2002 and 2018. We measure political dissatisfaction with the item, “Now thinking about the [country] government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?” We reverse coded the original 11-point scale such that the higher the score, the greater the dissatisfaction. “Trust in politicians” is an 11-point

scale, where the higher the score, the greater the respondent trusts politicians. In our models, we coded interest in politics from *not at all interested* (1) to *very interested* (4).

To address Herlinger's (1992) hypothesis of political ties, which we interpreted as political activity, we included a variable that adds up the non-institutional political participation items of ESS (except for contact) that appeared in 2002 and 2018 (worked in a political party or action group, worked in another organization or association, worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker, signed petition, taken part in a lawful public demonstration, and boycotted certain products). The ESS asks only about such actions taken in the last 12 months. Our political activity variable ranges from zero to six.

To address the classic hypothesis that those who contact a politician are more likely to have a grievance against the government and believe that they can do something about it, we include an interaction term of political efficacy and political dissatisfaction.

We also included demographic and economic characteristics in the models. We measure economic situation with feelings about household income currently, where the greater the score, the more comfortable they feel about living on their present income (range 1 to 4). We coded education as the number of years spent in educational institutions. We coded gender as a dichotomy (women = 1, men = 0). We coded age as linear with a range of 18 to 90, and because age often has a curvilinear relationship with political participation (Garcia-Albacete 2014), in the equation, we included the squared term as well.

Our analytic strategy is a two-level mixed-effects logistic regression model. We report the exponentiated coefficients. To explore whether the postcommunist past influences contacts with politicians, we add a binary random slope to the model (1 = Post-Communist past, 0 = otherwise).

## RESULTS

ESS data for 2002 and 2018 for countries covered in both waves reveal a substantial degree of stability in the percentages of respondents who answered that they contacted a politician.

Table 2 presents two-level regression models for 2002 and 2018. Indicators with the exemption of dissatisfaction with government and trust in politicians are statistically significant. The most striking feature of the results is their stability: All variables that are significant in 2002 remain so 16 years later.

Net of other factors, political efficacy increases the odds of contacting a politician. Dissatisfaction with government, on its own, does not – but the interaction term between efficacy and dissatisfaction does. Trust in politicians is not statistically significant, but its relation to contact is positive, as theory suggested. Interest in politics and political activity are positive, significant factors, *ceteris paribus*. Whereas a comfortable household income does not significantly impact the odds of contacting a politician, a higher education does. Women are less likely than men to contact a politician, while age shows a positive relation. Finally, post-Communist countries have, on average, a lower percentage of the population that contacts a public official. In 2002, net of individual-level characteristics, living in a post-Communist nation (as opposed to living somewhere else), significantly decreased the odds of expressing political voice via contact. This country-level effect is not significant in 2018.

## CONCLUSION

While the concept of “contact” enjoyed some popularity in survey projects from the 1960s to the 1990s, few since have explored its contemporary definition and meaning. Moreover, whereas many studies include “contact” in the analysis of standard batteries of political participation items, few have explored the stability or change in individual factors associated with the contact and its variation across contemporary Europe. The purpose of this research note was to contribute to the filling of these gaps in the literature.

Combining the conceptual literature from the 1970s to the 2000s, we find the definition of “contact” at a particularly expansive moment. Technology has made it easier than ever to contact public officials, and, thus, the meaning of “contact” varies greatly. We argue that such expansiveness is in the nature of the

concept. Without detailed questions on who is contacted and why, cross-national survey measures of the concept are less useful.

We agree with Moon, Serra, and West (1993), who argued that, to better understand contact, surveys should make the distinction between elected (politicians) and unelected (e.g., civil servants) officials. The “why” of contact is rarely captured in cross-national surveys after the 1970s. Whereas urban and cross-national surveys such as the PPE7N study used to make a fine distinction between generalized and particularized forms of contact, contemporary surveys, most notably ESS, which is the only survey to consistently include it in successive rounds, have not. Most have focused on its generalized form, even if we are limited to the United States (Claggett and Pollock 2006).

To explore the concept quantitatively, we used the ESS rounds 2002 and 2018 that measure generalized contact. The most important result is the remarkable stability in individual-level characteristics associated with the odds of contact. The results lend support to the basic, long-theorized determinants of contact, and these results have not changed across one and a half decades in Europe. In 2002 and 2018, individuals with a strong sense of efficacy and who are also dissatisfied with the government are more likely to contact, other things equal. Hirlinger’s (1992) hypothesis also finds support: The more politically active the person is, the more likely they are to contact a politician. With cross-sectional survey data, we cannot tell whether contact came before or after the other forms of political action, but it is clearly associated with the politically active.

Social scientists who wish to examine “contact” as it has been collected in cross-national surveys since Verba and Nie (1972) have limited options; ESS (2002 to the present) is the only cross-national survey in Europe to consistently include a question on this type of political voice. In this article, we advise that future cross-national surveys will allow scholars to explore who contacts and for what purpose. We understand that this choice would lengthen the questionnaire. As such, we also advocate for more qualitative research to better understand how contemporary respondents interpret “contact” in terms of the action’s scope, motivations for acting, and expected returns, among others.

Contacting a public official is an established form of political participation worthy of study in its own right. However, it has been neglected in the last two decades, at exactly the point when contact is easier and bears a lower cost than ever before. For the last 20 years, we lack detailed cross-national survey information on contact. The next decade is an opportunity to improve our knowledge of this fundamental form of political voice.

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