Middle-Schoolers' Perceptions of Government: Intersection of Information and Civic Literacies

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Abstract

This article examines young people's perceptions of government, as well as the connection between these perceptions and their information and civic literacies. A case study of 37 young teens uses descriptive survey data, along with participant observation and other qualitative data collection methods, and finds that participants base their perceptions of government on a variety of factors, including institutions, the presidency, policies and policy outcomes, and the media's portrayal of government. Nearly half of the overall perceptions that each participant had of government was negative. Within these perceptions, however, participants demonstrated contradictory opinions and gaps in civic and information literacy, providing important implications for librarians and library workers and educators.

Introduction

In an age where "fake news" is discussed both by and about government daily, general trust in government is an area prime for research. The effect of an increasingly polarized political environment on youth is particularly concerning. As Kelly states, "The very nature of social trust—trust in individuals and trust in government and social institutions—promotes the likelihood for individuals to actively engage in society through service, voting, and other forms of self-governance, such as political activism,"[i] citing such studies as Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, and Soutter;[ii] Kwak, Shah, and Holbert;[iii] Newton;[iv] Newton and Norris;[v] and Torney-Purta, Richardson, and Barber[vi] as further proof. The developmental stages of this study's participants, eleven- to fourteen-year-olds, are described by Piaget and Inhelder as

concrete operational and formal operational, wherein young people are beginning to form their own opinions and beliefs, and are developing critical thinking skills and attitudes of trust.[vii] This study posits that these formative stages thus have a direct impact on future civic and voting behavior, given that both involve critical thinking and attitudes of trust. Thus, this article, using data collected during a larger study on youth and government information, discusses eleven- to fourteen-year-olds' perceptions of government and observes connections between their perceptions of government and their information and civic literacy skills.[viii] The findings inform education in these literacies and suggest specific areas in which youth may have critical gaps in knowledge

Research Questions

This study asks two primary questions:

1. What are participants' perceptions of government?
2. What are the connections between perceptions of government and participants' information and civic literacies?

Literature Review

This study examines young people's perceptions of government and the connection between these perceptions and their information and civic literacies. Because this is an exploratory study, we did not know what the participants based their perceptions of government on. The following review of the literature looks at research that explains inputs that may influence young people's perceptions, including political socialization and, specifically, the influences of the media, major world events, and civic education on people's ideologies.

Political Socialization

Much of the scholarship related to government and younger adolescents and children focuses on political socialization. Scholars find that young people show signs of having a distinct political identity.[ix] Additionally, early perceptions of government institutions affect "a young person's developing identity for political participation, for a sense of civic responsibility, and for a sense of political efficacy."[x] Flanagan and Sherrod highlight the differences between early research on political socialization, in which young children, assumed to be passive, were the focus of study and authority figures were expected to be their biggest influences versus the research of later

years, in which adolescents and young adults were believed to be more active participants in their political development.[xi] Recent research tends to unite the two views with new knowledge of developmental patterns and plasticity of beliefs throughout life. Influences believed to have some effect on young people's later political beliefs include parents, peers, the media, level of education, involvement in organized activities as youth, civic education, and major world events that occur during their formative years.[xii] Particularly salient to this study are the possible effects of the media and major world events on young people's ideologies.

Media Use and Influence

Adolescents spend a lot of time around media. A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found particularly high rates of media use among children and young teens: "Eleven- to fourteen-year-olds average just under nine hours of media use a day (8:40), and when multitasking is taken into account, pack in nearly 12 hours of media exposure (11:53)."[xiii] These numbers are compelling for many reasons, but particularly notable for this study is the relationship of media use and political socialization. Studies find that media has a profound impact on young people, particularly with regards to health behaviors like aggression and use of tobacco and alcohol.[xiv] Additionally, scholars note that both the choice of media type and the consumption of media affect young people's general socialization; as Arnett explains, "When they seek entertainment or high sensation from media, when they use media materials toward identity formation or for coping, when they participate in a media-based youth subculture, adolescents are also, in a larger sense, participating in activities that are part of their socialization."[xv] With adults, TV news has been connected to political polarization,[xvi] and trust in government has been linked to the overall positivity or negativity of the press.[xvii] Perhaps more notably, many studies have recently linked media use to higher levels of civic engagement[xviii] and political knowledge.[xix] Overall, the type, frequency, and attitudes of media influence young people's socialization.

Societal Climate

Political socialization also depends on the societal climate in which a person develops. In their study of the socialization effects of political campaigns, Sears and Valentino assert that "most socializing communications, and the greatest socialization gains, are likely to be triggered by the intervention of exogenous political events."[xx] This carries with it the implication that while socialization may be related to a life stage, connections are based more on events that occur

during a period of time in a generation's youth than the general developmental characteristics that all generations possess, an example of which, the authors cite, are the trusting attitudes that children tended to have under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy compared to the less favorable attitudes developed under Presidents Johnson and Nixon.[xxi] Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers found that although parent-child transmission of political views is generally predictably strong, during periods of societal change, such as the 1960s, politicized households more frequently produced children who disagreed with parental views.[xxii] While these data do not necessarily reflect the current state of society, they do suggest that when society goes through periods of change (such as after significant cultural events), normal political socialization processes can be altered.

Methods

This study uses data gathered from 37 eleven- to fourteen-year-old participants of the second year of an after-school program held during the 2014–2015 school year in four mid-Atlantic middle schools. Two of the schools were grades K–8, and two were grades 6–8. Participants were drawn only from grades 5–8 at all four schools. As table 1 shows, of the 37 participants, 14 were male (38%) and 23 were female (62%). The majority were (self-described) Hispanic/Latino (34%) or Black (31%), 9% identified as Asian, 3% as white, 13% as two or more races, and 9% as other.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Gender	Participant Race[*]	Participant Grade[*]
Male: 14 (38%) Female: 23 (62%)	Asian: 3 (9%) Black: 10 (31%) Hispanic/Latino: 11 (34%) White: 1 (3%) Two+ races: 4 (13%) Other: 3 (9%)	5th grade: 3 (9%) 6th grade: 3 (9%) 7th grade: 15 (47%) 8th grade: 11 (34%)

[*]Five students did not fill out surveys, so self-described race and grades are unknown and did not figure into the percentages.

The after-school program was part of a larger research study designed to help young people conduct online research on health topics of personal interest. During the first year of the after-school program, the participants encountered government-produced websites during their personal research. Many of the youth were unaware of how to distinguish government information from other types of websites and displayed some confusion over the source of information displayed on government websites. The second year of the program offered an opportunity to further study youth knowledge of and perceptions of government websites, as well as their perceptions of the government in general. The findings of these questions are presented in the author's dissertation,[xxiii] but this article focuses specifically on the participants' understanding and perceptions of government.

Several qualitative data collection methods were used to understand participants' perceptions, including some that were already being used in the after-school program and others that were developed specifically to study the participants' perceptions of government and government websites. These methods included a survey, a health literacy assessment tool, interviews, a card-sorting activity, a credibility screenshot poster activity, word association, and participant observation during the weekly one-hour sessions of the ten- to twelve-week program at each of the four schools. These methods are described briefly below.

- *Survey:* Questions asked about trust in government, including open-ended questions asking participants to define government and about their knowledge of government websites and agencies, as well as questions on their general trust and belief in fairness and equality in America. Some questions were informed by or adapted from prior work.[xxiv]

- *Health Literacy Assessment Tool:* Participants were asked to answer questions about the meaning of URLs, credibility judgments, and other information-literacy skills.

- *Interviews:* Semi-structured interviews of approximately fifteen minutes each were conducted at each school early in the after-school program with one to two participants at a time. Participants were asked about their strategies for search and their perceptions of government and government websites. Interview techniques were informed by guidelines for interviews with children.[xxv]

- *Card-Sorting Activity:* Researchers used three decks—types of people, types of sources, and types of Internet sites—made up of several individual cards with a particular source

printed on the front (e.g., in the people deck, one card had "teacher" printed on it) to ask groups of 2–4 participants whether they would use the source and why (or why not).

- *Credibility Screenshot Poster Activity:* Poster-sized screenshots from the homepages of several health-related websites were presented during the after-school program to participants who then used Post-it notes to write explanations for their evaluations and to stick on the sections of the homepages they thought made the sites trustworthy (green Post-its) or not trustworthy (pink Post-its). For this study, data were only analyzed from the participants' thoughts on the homepage of www.alzheimers.gov.

- *Word Association:* This activity was designed to capture participants' understanding of government and government websites. Participants were asked: "What does the term 'government' mean to you? In other words, what words do you associate with the term 'government'?" After completing their list for government, the same question was asked for dot-gov websites. The group then discussed their answers.

- *Participant Observation:* Throughout the after-school program, at each school, the researchers present at each session kept field notes and wrote observation notes. This practice of using multiple evaluators is described by Patton as "investigator triangulation"[xxvi] and is one method this study used to corroborate observations. In addition to these field and observation notes, each session was audio-recorded and relevant segments were transcribed.

Note: Because the data collection for this study was undertaken during a voluntary after-school program, there was significant variance in the attendance of participants.

The data collected from these tools were studied using content analysis.[xxvii] The transcriptions of all the activities were coded three ways: using codes from the literature, in vivo, and summative. Data were also analyzed using hand-coded sentiment analysis (coding each statement as positive, negative, or neutral) to gain a better understanding of how each participant felt overall about the government. This was important because it was rare that participants offered only positive or only negative statements throughout the program.

The data was collected as part of an IRB-approved study. The participants' parents consented to their participation, and the youth gave their own assent. The families were offered fifty dollars for their participation in the after-school program. Participants' privacy was protected through the use of pseudonyms in all of the data collection tools and the artifacts

gathered throughout the program. These pseudonyms, chosen by the participants, are used throughout this article.

Findings

Participants' Definitions of Government

At the outset of this study, researcher-assigned definitions of the term "government" were left intentionally vague. This was a conscious decision made to uncover how these participants arrived at their opinions on government. In other words, one aspect of the research question was uncovering what concepts of government figured into the formation of these youths' perceptions.

In their definitions of "government," participants varied in the boundaries they placed on the institution. Eight participants used the generic word "people" in their definitions, such as Nunu's answer that government is "a group of people that make laws, also people who gather info of other places or jobs." A few participants mentioned the president or presidents specifically, either by defining the government as a president (Unknown, Ms. Sterious, Katniss, Waldo) or by mentioning the president, e.g., "Government—helps the president with decisions" (Jay the Greatest, as well as Soccer4Life). Other participants thought of government in terms of a place or area (Batman, Anonymys, Coffee Ice Cream, Jessica, and Foxy57), a group (Ana Lynch), a service (Sweet Hershey Kiss), an agency (Flash), and "a thing" (The Blue Anime). Sparten117 described the government as "branches." In addition to these conceptions, participants considered the functions of government. Table 2 shows the most common.

Table 2. Common Functions Included in Definitions of Governments

Function	Examples
Law-making	• "As a place where people talk about laws" (Batman) • "A group of people that make laws, also people who gather info of other places or jobs" (Nunu) • "People who make laws" (Unknown)
Generally helps or does not help America/Americans	• "The government stands up for our rights and laws" (Morgan Rice) • "The government does not care about the economy or us" (Jazzy Jay)
Protection, safety, and security	• "To me government is a group that ensures security and safety" (Ana Lynch) • "A place to protect our state" (Foxy57)

Leadership, law, and order	• "The agency that runs a country" (Flash) • "A service which helps to run and keep America a civilized place" (Sweet Hershey Kiss) • "The people that control our society" (Gabriela)
Taxation	• "They steal our taxes to give to other countries" (Jazzy Jay) • "A thing where people collect taxes and help other people" (Agent Chicken Wing)

Other participants described the government as "secret" (Dr. Who, Marie), fair (Percy Potter), "somewhat" untrustworthy (Natsu Dragniel), reliable and serious (Hopekeeper), and private and important (Marie). Overall, many of the definitions were neutral statements (e.g., the definition offered by Flash in table 2), but many also demonstrated emotional responses toward the government (e.g., Jazzy Jay's definition).

Participants' Perceptions of Government

The next section examines the factors through which participants filtered their evaluations of government, as well as whether these evaluations were positive or negative. This section organizes participants' evaluations into five categories taken from the literature on trust and government.[xxviii] These categories are participants' evaluations of the following:

1. *Specific Institutions:* This category includes participants' opinions of government based on their opinion of institutions, such as elected officials and political parties, as well as the more general "people" they refer to as carrying out the duties of government.

2. *The President:* This category includes participants' opinions of government based on their opinions of then-president Obama.

3. *Policy and Policy Outcomes:* This category includes participants' opinions of both government based on their evaluation of general government operations (e.g., their role in providing security) as well as of specific policies (e.g., the Affordable Care Act).

4. *Information from the Media:* This category includes participants' opinions based on their experience with media's evaluation and presentation of government.

5. *Government in General:* This category includes participants' references to the degree to which the government is fair, impartial, nondiscriminatory, equitable, and

trustworthy without a specific clarification as to what part of government they were referring.

The subsections that follow describe both the positive and negative perceptions of participants within these categories. This organization demonstrates the frequency with which participants had opposite opinions on similar issues. For example, while many participants stated their belief in the government's equity, other participants said that they believe the government is unfair. Other themes included trust, economics, effectiveness, helpfulness, and knowledge. In addition to these general evaluations, more specific themes, including government secrecy and surveillance, terrorism, and government defense emerged from both the positive and negative statements. As was expected, participants generally did not have only negative or only positive things to say about the government. For example, during one word association activity, Batman stated, "Government gives rules [positive], but some rules are iffy and they basically don't make sense [negative]."

Institutional Evaluation

While participants did not often mention specific institutions, many of their positive statements reflect an evaluation of the people who run the country. Percy Potter listed in his word association the term "leadership" to describe government. Coffee Ice Cream said that government is "something like a second president," which means "they help run the United States, and you know, keep it good, not bad and stuff." In his interview, Flash said government means "a type of agency or type of group that runs the country and helps makes the country better." Ana Lynch said she believed that "the government is a group to keep people secure, and safe," and when asked if she trusted them, she replied in the affirmative.

The lack of specificity in institution may be due to a lack of knowledge; in one instance, a researcher asked participants to give her an example of a trusted source. Cap'n Crunch answered "the FDC" but could not recall what it stood for past "Federal." Additionally, 7 (out of 32) respondents answered the survey question "What is a government agency? If you can, give an example" with, "I don't know," "?," "I'm not sure," or left the question blank.

Some negative evaluations focused on elected officials. Chocolate Rain and Unknown both mentioned that elected officials often say one thing, but do another. More specifically, Chocolate Rain said that "when people run for governor and stuff like that, they tell you one

thing and then they win and they don't come through with what they said." Unknown referenced that politicians make promises during campaigns, "oh I'm going to do this, this, this, and this" but in fact "they don't do any of that." The survey also specifically asked respondents whether they felt elected officials could be trusted. Eleven participants (just over one-third) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Political parties came up at one school. Unknown mentioned "Republicans" in his word association, which prompted Nightwing to note that he doesn't "like them." Unknown agreed, saying he "go[es] for Democrats." Batman mentioned that he had heard "that many people, many Republicans, only a small party refused that [then-]President Barack Obama [should] be President. For some reason." He elaborated that he thinks that is "wrong because it was two mixed presidents so far. Frederick Douglas[s] and President Barack Obama." Putting aside the incorrect history, it was clear that while Batman did not know why the other party disliked the president, he equated it in some way to race. Cap'n Crunch echoed these sentiments when he told a researcher that since he is Hispanic, he feels "offensive [offended] when Republicans made decisions about immigration."

Presidential Evaluation

Surprisingly few of the students evaluated the president at all during the program. Many wrote "the President" in their word associations, and all respondents to the survey knew that Barack Obama was the U.S. president (which was the case at the time this data was collected), but none of these answers carried any sort of judgment either way. Batman did elaborate on his assertion of the government's usefulness "in information" with the explanation that "President Barack Obama usually has meetings . . . to declare laws, how will the laws be treated, why do we need the laws, and how good the laws will be when you announce them." On the more negative side, during one session Natsu Dragniel, Jazzy Jay, and Anonymys discussed whether then-president Obama is "a puppet" because, as Jazzy Jay opined, "you say you care about the people, you should have enough time or something to at least write the speeches to say to the people." Anonymys reminded the group that the president has to "sign bills" (presumably suggesting that this took up the majority of his time), but Jazzy Jay was undeterred.

Policies and Policy Outcome Evaluation

While mentions of specific policies were rare, participants frequently talked about government decisions and actions generally. Among the positive statements representing this evaluation, Dr. Who said that the government "can make really good decisions to help lots of the people." LolaRam wrote in her word cloud about government the term "helpers" and further clarified that she thinks "the government helps you in paper, work, and money." Agent Chicken Wing defined government as "a thing where people collect taxes and help other people," and Flash said that the government is "good" and that "they help the environment and people . . . like the communities."

Some participants had a positive view of government as it related to jobs or the economy. Ana Lynch, for example, wrote "high quality job" in her word association for government. Agent Chicken Wing noted that "when we get our tax, it goes to the government and then helps us, so I think that's good." Similarly, Batman told an interviewer, "Government means to me, like as a part of our life, like taxes. Taxes help, benefit people if they're cops, police, usually they get reductions and that money, that money that they have goes back to them too. Because you know you get income tax which goes back to you."

Evaluations of government's policies were not all positive, however. Two of the participants noted that they do not like it when the government makes decisions with which they do not agree. Jay the Greatest said that "at times it [the government] could have a point, but sometimes it needs to help people out more 'cause sometimes we may not agree with what they say." Queen Pam agreed, saying, "You can trust them a little, but not sometimes because they may make decisions without us agreeing on it." Sparten117 asserted that the government "make[s] stupid laws" and referenced that in the state in which the research took place and where he lives, "there's pretty much taxes on everything and my dad's really mad." Sweet Hershey Kiss also had concerns over monetary policy:

> I have trust issues when it comes to money. Think about it. . . . When you first
> start dealing with the government when you become an adult, you have to go
> through forms, beginning to get tax money and having to pay tax money, and
> when it comes to the government, sometimes they try to out cheat you with your
> money.

Natsu Dragniel negatively referenced the government's funding of wars, saying that "they . . . get into other countries' business."

In a few cases, there were discussions about specific policies. One of these instances was the Ebola outbreak of 2014. Kira thought that the government responded "pretty well" to the scare, and Morgan Rice remembered that "they didn't let some people from East Africa in" and that she "kind of did agree that they were checking them and then they did let them come in, but they had to get a check-up to see if they had Ebola." When a researcher asked the group for an example of a time the government "screwed up" (echoing the words of a participant), Nightwing answered, "ObamaCare . . . A whole lot of people didn't like ObamaCare. I don't know why, but I just know ObamaCare was a problem."

Media Evaluation

Many students connected their distrust of either the government or the media with their perception of the other. Sweet Hershey Kiss said she would not go to government agency websites for information because she has "kind of a trust issue with the government. They change their story all the time, just like the news, that's why I didn't choose news websites. Cuz there's no way on TV there can be news at 5, news at 6, they're just changing the story up a little bit and replaying on TV." She mentioned in another session that she does not read the newspaper "because it's not worth it." When asked how she finds out about issues, she said she mostly gets alerts on her phone or her mother tells her things. She said, however, that "most of the time [she doesn't] really trust . . . so many things have happened and the government have made promises that they've never been able to keep." Agent Chicken Wing said she does not like the news because it scares her. She agreed with Marie and Sweet Hershey Kiss that "the media does have a big impact because something might happen, but what the media tells us might not be true," and when asked whether she thought the government has influence over what the media says, she replied that "maybe they bribe them to say this or that."

Many of the students gave examples of learning things about the government from media. Most of these statements were negative, and many of the anecdotes mentioned were conspiracy theories. This information came from both entertainment and the news. Kira learned about Area 51 from a documentary she saw on the Discovery Channel, Ms. Sterious thought she heard about it from the movie *Monsters vs. Aliens*, and Mr. Paste said he gets his information on the government's secrets from a show that airs on weekend nights on (he thinks) the CW. Chocolate Rain just mentioned she learned about these types of theories online:

> There're a lot of theories when you go online . . . because the world is really
> overpopulated and [the government] secretly knows the cures to these things
> [that] they're not exposing . . . like the guy who had Ebola, how come the nurse,
> the patient died, the nurse died, but then one of the researchers who caught it, he's
> still alive? I don't trust them!

Some of the information was more sinister, such as Agent Chicken Wing's account that she saw on CNN that the government is "planning something." While she could not remember the details, she said "I know it's bad . . ." Jazzy Jay remembered that she has heard about "these policemen raping . . . girls" and notes to her fellow participants that they would have heard about it too "if [they] listen to the news. . . ."

Some of the media's information that taught participants about the government was more positive. Morgan Rice mentioned that she "heard . . . on NPR or something, that [the government] checks all our text messages. . . . That someone gave out the secret," but she thinks that is okay because of the threat of terrorism. Kira offered as a reason for her positive evaluation of the government's response to Ebola: "As you can see in the news, there's not a lot more cases of it." A few of the participants even learned about government websites from the media. Cap'n Crunch noted that government websites make him think about exercise because "sometimes there are commercials that say every child should get active at least an hour a day. And then go to this website, something I can't remember . . . like getactive.gov or getmoving.gov." Unknown heard about a government website for health care on the news, and Dr. Who mentioned that he connects health to government because he had heard ads for healthcare.gov.

Generic Evaluation

Some of the participants' perceptions either were based on a non-specific idea of government or on one that they did not specifically state. For example, many of the participants described the government as trustworthy. Participants phrased this in a variety of ways. When asked in an interview whether they trusted the government, both Morgan Rice and Ana Lynch simply said yes. Hopekeeper listed "trustworthy" in her word association. Morgan Rice noted in her survey that "the government stands up for our rights and laws." None of these statements clarified how the participant was defining government, however.

This happened with negative evaluations as well. Marie, for example, explained that though she trusts the government "to a level, it depends on what they're talking about. There's been a couple of cases where they haven't been particularly honest about what they're doing or what is happening and they make people think all these things are happening and in reality they're not." In response to a researcher's questioning whether she trusts government, NinjaGirl mentioned that the government "can take your house away." Though she was sure they could not take kids away, they do "take their houses, their car, their money, their phone." This seemed to be from personal experience, as she told the researcher that she knows someone to whom this has happened. Participants also brought up more general ideas of inequality. Chocolate Ice Cream wrote in her word association that the government is "mean with Spanish people." Presumably these opinions are referring to either specific government policy or officials, but the participants did not elaborate on which.

Overall Perceptions of Government

From the above data and the sentiment analysis conducted on each participant's set of statements made throughout the program, nearly half of the participants had overall negative perceptions of government. Table 3 represents the overall perceptions.

Table 3. Participants' Dominant Attitude about Government

Generally Positive about Government	Generally Negative about Government	Neutral about Government	Not Enough Data
1. Ana Lynch 2. Anonymys 3. Dr. Who 4. Flash 5. Foxy57 6. Hopekeeper 7. Kira 8. LilMarMar 9. LolaRam 10. Morgan Rice 11. Percy Potter 12. Soccer4Life 13. The Blue Anime 14. Unknown	1. Agent Chicken Wing 2. Chocolate Rain 3. Coffee Ice Cream 4. Jay the Greatest 5. Jazzy Jay 6. Marie 7. Mr. Paste 8. Ms. Sterious 9. Natsu Dragniel 10. Nightwing 11. NinjaGirl 12. Nunu 13. Queen Pam 14. Sparten117 15. Sweet Hershey Kiss	1. Batman 2. Cap'n Crunch 3. Waldo	1. Gabriela 2. Jessica 3. Katniss 4. Mr. Golden Man 5. SuperSweet

Discussion

Comparison to Prior Research

This study's participants evaluated the government using many similar measures, as adults have also demonstrated in prior studies of trust and government. While the participants did occasionally evaluate the president and institutions, opinions most commonly seemed to stem from participants' views of policies and from the type of media to which they had been exposed. These particular foci of the participants seem to connect with prior findings in political socialization research that current events and periods of society upheaval can influence political development.[xxix] The general state of society was an obvious underlying element to participants' evaluations. Agent Chicken Wing, for example, does not like the news because it scares her; they constantly talk about ISIS—"beheaded this . . . beheaded that." Sweet Hershey Kiss brought up issues of racial profiling by the police during her interview:

> I mean with the Michael Ferguson, with the Michael Brown thing, it's not fair
> how they're making assumptions. I mean, I just want everything to come together
> as one, not just saying, "Oh, the white man was picking on the black man, or the
> black boy deserved it." I mean, it's just all about equality and fairness.

The participants' general lack of trust also echoes prior research. A recent study using data from two national studies found that trust "was at an all-time low in 2012 among 12th graders. For example, 32% of 12th graders in 1976–1978 agreed that 'most people can be trusted,' but this figure sunk to 18% in 2010–2012."[xxx] These twelfth-graders also showed marked decreases in confidence in institutions; for example, their opinions on how good of a job large corporations were doing sunk significantly between 2000–2002 and 2010–2012, from 54% rating them "good" or "very good in the early 2000s," to 33% just a decade later. The authors suggest that these numbers may be due to economic inequality or rising crime rates, the latter of which was noted by this study's participants obliquely during data collection (e.g., Jazzy Jay's comments on the police).

Implications for Librarians and Library Workers and Educators

The findings shed light on how a librarian, librarian worker, or other type of educator can contextualize his or her students' perceptions of government in order to best provide instruction

on issues of policy and civics, particularly important when teaching students who may have preexisting biases and negative opinions. Indeed, one of the school librarians helping to run the after-school program at Jazzy Jay's school demonstrated a keen awareness of the need for this type of individualized instruction when she had several conversations with Jazzy Jay about the difference between opinions and facts, the danger of parroting others' beliefs without having the knowledge to back them up, and the benefits of government that Jazzy Jay was ignoring. As this librarian said, "Opinions are like elbows: everyone has them." This type of critical thinking and analysis is often missing from a school day organized around tests and other assessments.

One way to introduce these skills is to tie them to the curriculum. The social studies curriculum for the state in which this study took place aligns well with many of the literacy gaps:

1. Analyze the usefulness of various sources of information used to make political decisions.
2. Analyze the influence of the media on political life.
3. Examine the impact of governmental decisions on individual rights and responsibilities in the United States.
4. Analyze how government needs to provide more protection and order during times of crisis, such as natural disasters and threats to national security.
5. Analyze a document to determine point of view. Identify bias and prejudice. Compare information to prior knowledge. Determine the reliability of the document. Compare ideas, models, systems, and perspectives. Reconstruct the arguments of issues or events. Assess the costs and benefits of alternatives. Verify or change prior understandings based on new information.
6. Engage in civic participation and public discourse.[xxxi]

Having students look at the information used by the government may give them insight into (a) the real-life application of information-literacy skills and (b) a greater belief in the transparency of the political process. Learning to critically examine the media may help them identify their own biases and mitigate the effect of popular conspiracy theories or misinformation. Considering individual rights, as well as the benefits and trade-offs of increased protection and security, will help students make educated decisions regarding their beliefs in policies, information-related and not. Analyzing documents, comparing information, and

changing opinions based on new information are critical information-literacy skills that will also help to teach young people to have open minds and alter past beliefs if they find them to be false. Finally, engaging in civic discourse teaches young people about different perspectives and allows them to see their own fallacies of belief. Because of the time constraints on the typical classroom teacher, this is a role that teen services librarians in public libraries and school librarians can embrace.

Limitations

This is not a longitudinal study, so we cannot know whether these events—the terrorism caused by ISIS in the Middle East and the many prominent instances of police brutality during confrontations with young African Americans—or this general distrust will continue to impact the participants over the course of their political lives. Additionally, the years immediately following this study were even more politically chaotic. The media's relationship with the Trump administration, as well as the administration's concept of truth (and arguable reliance on misinformation and a lack of transparency), would likely have had considerable impact on these participants' responses. However, if anything, this points to the importance of this research and the need for further study. Young people's perceptions of government and the civic and information-literacy skills they use (or do not use) to form these perceptions are more important than ever.

Aside from the timing of the study, this is a relatively small sample size and a specific demographic of youth, reducing the generalizability of these results. Future studies should investigate youth with different characteristics—race, ethnicity, economic status, family political background, and exposure to media—to see how these characteristics further influence their perceptions.

Conclusion

This study had two goals: (1) To learn participants' perceptions of government and (2) to observe connections between their perceptions of government and their information and civic literacies. These issues are important because of the following:

- The potential insight that a study of young adolescents who are just starting to form abstract beliefs might give to agencies and educators who are attempting to develop the next civically engaged generation.

- Better understanding the distrust of government that recent studies of young people have shown.

This study is yet one more example of the critical role that information and civic literacy plays in the lives of people of all ages and only emphasizes the need for educators to help youth understand information bias, information policy, and information and civic literacy skills.

Acknowledgments

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