



Political Knowledge and Voting Behavior among African American College Students

Brittney D Brown
Millersville University
brittney.brown2018@gmail.com

Abstract

Previous research (Hope and Jagers, 2014) found that African American youth were more likely to be civically engaged if they perceived institutional discrimination, were politically efficacious and civically educated. Efficacy and cynicism were measured by four point Likert scales developed by Hope and Jagers (2014). Civic engagement was measured a forced-choice, author developed scale and education was measured by an indicative question. Based on this study, the author hypothesized that if political efficacy, civic engagement, and civic knowledge are high but political cynicism is low, African American youth are more inclined to vote. The author also hypothesized that the correlation between political efficacy, civic knowledge, and voting would be positive while the correlation between political cynicism and civic engagement would be negative. A convenience sample of seventy- five African American students at a mid-sized public institution were surveyed. The author developed a questionnaire concerning current political events as well as a questionnaire concerning their voting behavior since their 18th birthday. The hypothesis was confirmed. A positive correlation was found between knowledge and voting behavior. These results, although based on a small and particular sample, imply the importance of political education to increase young African American participation in electoral politics.

The purpose of this study was to discover if there was a correlation between the voting behavior of African American college students and their political efficacy, political cynicism, civic engagement and civic knowledge. These four interconnecting elements are highly influential in regard to political behavior, since they can play a role in an individual's political socialization and development (Hope and Jagers 2014). Currently, the United States is in the year of a presidential election, so studying the voting behavior of African American youth could provide insight to voting patterns of this demographic on a smaller scale. Civic engagement among college students is important because millennials (1980-1999) are currently the most diverse generation: 18.5% are Hispanic; 14.2% are black; 4.3% are Asian (Keeter 2010).

Hope and Jagers (2014) sought to understand the relationship between sociopolitical attitudes and civic education with regard to civic engagement among Black youth. The authors predicted that there would be a negative correlation between political cynicism and civic engagement. They also predicted that there would be a positive correlation between perceptions of institutional discrimination and civic engagement.



Hope and Jagers (2014) further predicted a positive correlation between political efficacy and civic engagement.

Hope and Jagers (2014) obtained their data through the Youth Culture Survey, in which African American youth ages 15-25 were randomly dialed. Approximately 634 Black youth were involved, yet the majority of participants were female at 54.8%. The social political measures were political cynicism and perceived institutional discrimination. The other measures were political efficacy, maternal education, civic education and civic engagement. Hope and Jagers (2014) found a positive correlation between political cynicism to perceived institutional discrimination and a negative correlation with political efficacy. Institutional discrimination had a positive correlation with civic engagement. Political efficacy and civic education both had positive correlations with civic education. A small but positive relationship was found between civic education and civic engagement. Findings showed that perceived discrimination may result in civic and political action to create social change. This result shows that Black youth are likely to be civically engaged when confronting political and social inequity. Hope and Jagers (2014) lastly found that those who took a civics course were more involved in political activities ranging from volunteer work to campaigning.

Chung and Probert (2010) sought to understand the relationship between civic engagement and outcome expectations among African American young adults. Outcome expectations are defined as, "the results or desired results of intentional actions in which an individual choose to engage" (Chung and Probert 2010). Three hypotheses were posited by the study conducted. Hypothesis one was that outcome expectations come from past involvement in political actions and perceptions of community functioning; for example, their observations of situations within an individual's environment. Hypothesis two was that there would be a strong correlation between higher outcome expectations and stronger intentions to participate. The third hypothesis was that there was a relationship between previous civic participation and intentions to participate in future civic activities.

Chung and Probert (2010) conducted their study in Trenton, New Jersey and recruited participants through mailing city residents, phone calls, and presentations at community centers. Participants were between the ages of 18-25 and had to identify as



African American. One hundred and twenty-nine African Americans participated; 66 were female and 63 were male. The measures in this study were previous civic participation, perceptions of community functioning, outcome expectations, likelihood of future civic participation and covariates. Chung and Probert (2010) found that there is a relationship between outcome expectations and life experience. Young African American adults with high perceptions of community functioning, hence the absence of violence and high spirits of civic participation, are more likely to believe that positive community outcomes are a result of engaging in political actions. The authors also found that African American young adults, with previous political experience are more likely to believe that participating in political activities can result in positive individual outcomes such as personal satisfaction. Chung and Probert (2010) found that African American young adults with positive outcome expectations are more likely to be civically engaged in the future. The final result found was that African American young adults are more likely to be civically engaged in the future if involved before. This finding was consistent with the fact that previous engagement is one of the most effective ways to promote future participation according to Chung and Probert (2010).

Based on the study by Hope and Jagers (2014), this current study posited two hypotheses. Hypothesis one stated that African American students are more inclined to vote if political efficacy, civic engagement, and civic knowledge are high but political cynicism is low. Hypothesis two stated that there will be a significant positive correlation between political efficacy, civic knowledge, and political engagement and a significant negative correlation between political cynicism and civic engagement.

Method

Participants

The participants were a convenience sample of seventy-five African American students at Millersville University. Millersville University is a mid-sized public institution located in Central Pennsylvania. The ages of the students ranged from 18-27 and came from a variety of majors, excluding Political Science. Political Science majors were excluded from the study to avoid bias due to specialized knowledge. Subjects were mainly recruited from student organizations such as the National Association for the



Advancement of Colored people and the Black Student Union. Additional students were obtained from a table in the Student Memorial Center, classes and various events on campus. The sample included 10 freshmen, 28 sophomores, 17 juniors and 20 seniors.

Instruments

The instruments used included an informed consent form, an indicative question, a questionnaire and 2 scales. To obtain permission to use responses within the study, students were given a consent form developed by the author which stated that they could withdraw at any moment. If a decision was made to withdraw, the student could then have his or her responses excluded from the study. Students were presented with an indicative question that asked for past exposure to civic education in which they answered yes or no. The only demographics that were asked in the survey were age, classification, and major.

Measurements

Civic engagement was measured by asking participants whether or not they had performed any civic and political activities within the last 12 months upon receiving the questionnaire. Activities included community service, campaigning, boycotting, registering to vote, and participating in political discussions. Political efficacy and cynicism were the social political measures used in the study. Political efficacy is one's confidence in the government while cynicism is one's belief that the government is motivated by self-interest (Hope and Jagers 2014). Political efficacy and cynicism were measured using a four item four point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* which was recorded as one, to *strongly disagree* which was recorded as four. The questionnaire took approximately 5-7 minutes for each participant to complete. The questions were mainly developed by Hope and Jagers (2014), although some aspects were author-developed. Each question was objective so that participants would not spend too much time trying to answer them.



Civic Engagement Questionnaire

Instructions: Please check yes or no. (Please remember to answer in terms of the last 12 months.)

___Yes ___No

1) Are you currently registered to vote?

___Yes ___No

2) Will you be voting in your state's primary election for the presidential nomination"?"

___Yes ___No

3) For any reason, have you contacted a public official not including but not limited to a phone call, letter, social media, etc.

___Yes ___No

4) Have you signed any petition?

___Yes ___No

5) Were you able to actively participate in a protest, demonstration or sit it?

___Yes ___No

6) Were you able to actively participate in a boycott?

___Yes ___No

7) Are you currently affiliated with any political party or political group?

___Yes ___No

8) On social media, have you written or posted about any political issue?

___Yes ___No

9) Have you worked or volunteered on a political campaign?

___Yes ___No

10) Have you had any open conversation with family or peers about a political issue, campaigns, or parties?

___Yes ___No

11) Have you collaborated with members of your community to combat local political issues?

___Yes ___No

12) Have you written any letters to the editor about a political issue or problem?



___Yes ___No

13) Have you either engaged, organized, or volunteered community service work?

___Yes ___No

Political efficacy was measured by a four item, four point Likert scale ranging from 1 *strongly agree* to 4 *strongly disagree* developed by Hope and Jagers (2014). It is a positive perception of the government.

Political Efficacy

Instructions: Please circle the response with which you most agree.

1) My vote makes a difference and or counts.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

2) I have the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

3) I could do a good job in politics

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

4) I am more informed about the government than most of my peers.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

Political Cynicism was measured by a four item, four point Likert scale ranging from 1 *strongly agree* to 4 *strongly disagree* developed by Hope and Jagers (2014). It is a negative perception of the government.

Political Cynicism

Instructions: Please circle the response with which you most agree



1) The leaders in government care very little about people like me

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

2) The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

3) People can have very little effect on the government

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

4) I don't trust the government in Washington to do what is right.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

Procedure

College students who identified as African American were asked to take a survey measuring civic education, civic engagement, political efficacy and political cynicism, based on present circumstances surrounding the U.S government. Students were asked their area of study prior to completing the survey to avoid bias in the data from Political Science majors. Students were also asked if they identified as African American or Black. Approximately 5-7 minutes was spent completing the survey.

Results

The hypothesis was partially confirmed. There was a significant positive correlation between political efficacy and civic engagement at the .01 level. There was not a significant correlation between civic education and civic engagement or between cynicism and civic engagement. (See table 1 below)



Table 1. Correlations

		efficacy	Cynicis m	engagemen t
efficacy	Pearson	1	0.031	.444**
	Correlation			
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0.396	0
cynicism	N	75	75	75
	Pearson	0.031	1	-0.103
	Correlation			
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.396		0.19
engagement	N	75	75	75
	Pearson	0.444**	-0.103	1
	Correlation			
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0		
	N	75	0.19	75

****.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Discussion

Research confirmed a significant correlation between political efficacy and civic engagement. This result confirms the idea that citizens are more prone to participate in civic engagement duties when they feel a difference will be made, not only in the government through voting, but within their own communities. The correlation between education and engagement was not significant, possibly because knowledge of current events is not always gained from sitting in a lecture. There were not any questions alluding to where the students received their information on politics. Interestingly, there was not a correlation between political cynicism and civic engagement. This may have been due to



a small sample size. These findings are informative, but a larger sample size would have been more beneficial in analyzing the data.

Limitations

A small sample size of 75 students were used for this study. The study was conducted by using a convenience sample since subjects were easy to obtain due to each participant being a student at Millersville University. Many demographics such as gender and party identification were not included in the questionnaire. The study excluded Political Science majors so there was no room to compare and contrast the data to said major. The survey had three parts so some considered it to be slightly lengthy. A comparison of race, gender, and college majors could not be analyzed to see which groups have more political cynicism, are more civically engaged and have more political efficacy. To test civic knowledge, instead of asking a single indicative question, some multiple choice questions could be asked that would actually test what a participant knows.

Further Research

For improvement of this study, a larger sample size that is non-convenient is needed. To provide more insight into political efficacy and cynicism, open ended questions could be included in terms of why participants feel the government is for or against their interests. More demographic questions such as gender, race, and area of residence i.e. urban, suburban or rural and party identification could be included. These demographics will allow for more comparisons among different groups. Further research could also include other aspects of civic engagement such as speaking out against certain injustices or attending community meetings. Perceived institutional discrimination against minority groups would be measured to determine if that is a factor in becoming civically engaged.



References

- Chung, H. L., & Probert, S. (2011). Civic engagement in relation to outcome expectations among African American young adults. *Journal Of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 32(4), 227-234. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2011.02.009
- Hope, E. C., & Jagers, R. J. (2014). The Role of Sociopolitical Attitudes and Civic Education in the Civic Engagement of Black Youth. *Journal Of Research On Adolescence (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 24(3), 460-470. doi:10.1111/jora.12117
- Keeter, S. (2010). Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1501/millennials-new-survey-generational-personality-upbeat-open-new-ideas-technology-bound>