FACT SHEET

CIRCLE
The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement

Adolescents' Trust and Civic Participation in the United States: Analysis of Data from the IEA Civic Education Study[1]

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What difference does a sense of trust in a political system, schools, or fellow citizens make for young people's civic and political participation? Some argue that a certain amount of skepticism among adult citizens motivates participation rather than complacency. Is that also true for young people? Or, is there a threshold level of trust necessary to believe it is worthwhile to get involved?

Researchers interested in engagement in politics distinguish between trust of other people and trust of institutions.[2] This two-level model may not fully capture the range of trust. While some institutions like government are experienced from a distance, individuals come into regular contact with representatives of other social institutions. A *three*-level model of trust seems appropriate.[3]

- *Delegated trust* is the trust that individuals have in social institutions that are not directly encountered on a day-to-day basis. Trust in government is an example of delegated trust.
- *Collective trust* is the trust that individuals develop in social institutions through daily contact with individuals who represent that group. Students develop collective trust in schools as they interact with their teachers and principals, for example.
- *Affective trust* is broader. Questions asking whether people in general can be trusted capture affective trust.

One type of trust does not necessarily lead to another. Given the importance of education for the next generation, however, trust in schools may be as important as trust in more distant institutions.

Data collected in 1999 by the IEA Civic Education Study, with a focus on students' civic and political knowledge and attitudes, provides an opportunity to examine this three-level model and the following three questions: [4]

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1. **How do students in the United States compare to those in other countries in their levels of trust?**

2. Are students who participate in voluntary organizations more trusting?

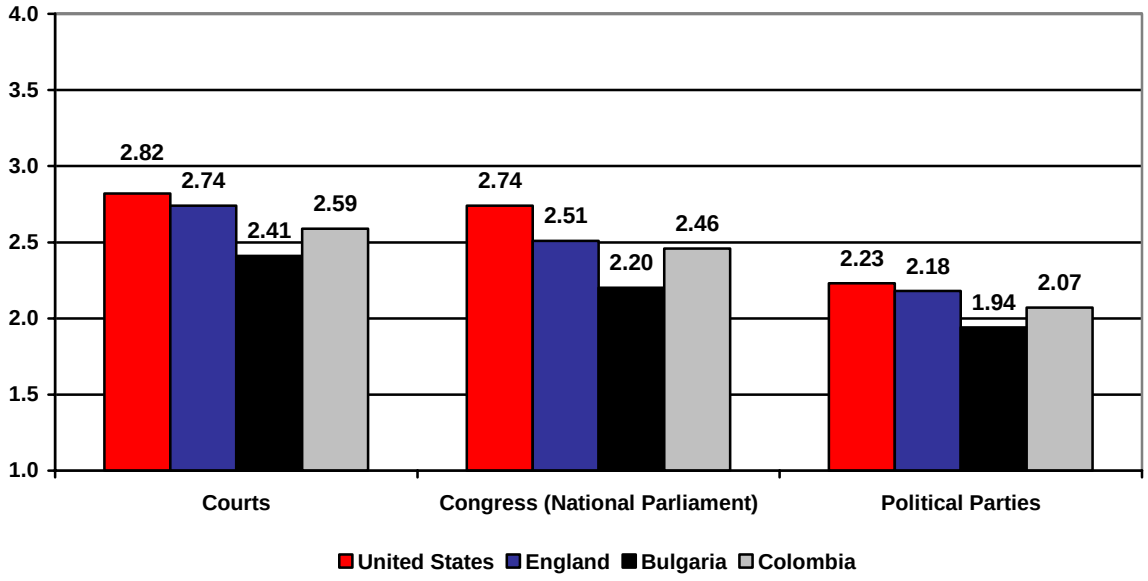
3. Does trust relate to United States students' expectations of future civic participation?

How do students in the United States compare to those in other countries in their levels of trust?

As part of its focus on attitudes toward democratic political and social institutions, the IEA Civic Education Study asked 14-year-olds in 28 countries about their levels of trust in twelve institutions. Trust in each institution was measured on a four-point scale, with students indicating that they "never," "some of the time," "most of the time," or "always" trusted the group. Higher scores correspond to more trust. Average levels of trust in each institution differed significantly between countries. Data from four countries (the United States, England, Bulgaria, and Colombia) are used to illustrate the differences. These countries were chosen as examples because of variations in their political histories. For example, the United States is a longstanding democracy with a tradition of civic education. It is compared to a country with an even longer history of democracy that lacks a civic education tradition (England), a recently-established democracy where democratic civic education is quite new (Bulgaria) and a nation with a moderately long history of democracy where instability and violence in the neighborhood and community often contradict school-based civic education (Colombia). Average levels of trust in each of three major governmental among students in these four nations are reported in Graph 1.

Comparing institutions, the courts were trusted more than the legislative bodies, which were trusted considerably more than the political parties. The parties were, in fact, the least trusted of all the institutions by a considerable margin.

Graph 1: Average Trust in Courts, Congress (National Parliament), and Political Parties in the United States, England, Bulgaria, and Colombia



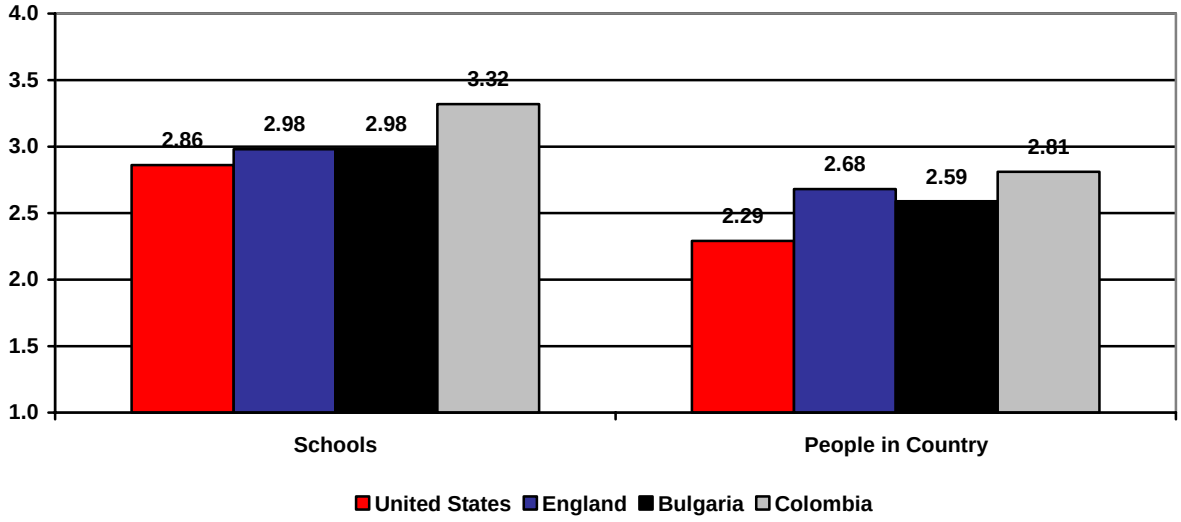
When these four countries were compared, averages for trust in the courts, the legislative body, and political parties were highest in the United States, a country with a strong democratic tradition, and lowest in the most recently established democracy in this group (Bulgaria). The average student in the United States reported trusting these institutions "most of the time," while the average student in Bulgaria trusted "some of the time." The average level of trust in government institutions among English students was moderate. The average level of trust among Colombian students was somewhat lower than the trust reported by English students. When the full group of 28 countries was examined, the highest levels of trust in government institutions were found in Denmark and Norway. Countries in which students had *higher* average levels of governmental trust also had:

- *More durable*, longer-standing democracies[5]
- *Greater* proportions of adults satisfied with democracy in their country
- *Lower* average proportions of students coming from families of low-socioeconomic status

One finding in Colombia and Bulgaria sheds light on the process. In those two countries the students who were most trusting of government institutions were the least knowledgeable students; this may be a kind of blind or unthinking trust present in a small group of young people. In contrast, the more knowledgeable students in democracies such as the United States and England were the most trusting.

This pattern of national averages of trust in government ("delegated trust") was different from that observed for trust in schools ("collective trust") or trust in people ("affective trust"). Graph 2 reports the national averages for these latter types of trust, as measured by single four-point items in which students indicated how often they trusted schools and people who live in their country.

Graph 2: Average Trust in Schools and Trust in Other People in the Country in United States, England, Bulgaria, and Colombia



Looking first at trust in schools, the average level was highest in Colombia and lowest in the United States. Students in the United States trusted the school to about the same extent as they trusted courts (compare Graphs 1 and 2). Students in Colombia trusted

the schools much more than they trusted institutions such as the national legislature or the courts. Countries with higher trust in schools, including Colombia, had:

- *Less* durable, less stable democracies
- *Higher* levels of corruption and violence in the country
- *Higher* proportions of students coming from families of low-socioeconomic status

These correlates of trust in schools at the national level suggest that despite (or perhaps because of) the negative political climate in certain countries, students considered schools safe havens or sanctuaries contrasting with their neighborhoods or city streets. Indeed, a recent study of trust among Colombian students identified schools as one of a small number of community institutions that generate productive trust (as compared with asocial trust generated in gangs)[6].

Turning now to the generalized "affective trust" that students have for other people in their country, the average level of trust expressed by students in the United States was low in comparison to these three other nations. In fact only one country in the entire study (Italy) had lower average general trust in people than did the United States. Unlike trust in the government or trust in schools, there were very few correlations between national averages of generalized affective trust and other characteristics of the countries.

Are students who participate in voluntary organizations more trusting?

While the previous section compared four countries' average levels of trust and their correlates, this next section will look *within* the United States to explore the activities that related to high or low trust in government and trust in schools among 14-year-old students.

The IEA Civic Education Study asked students about their participation in various activities both inside and outside of school, and these measures were used to contrast groups:

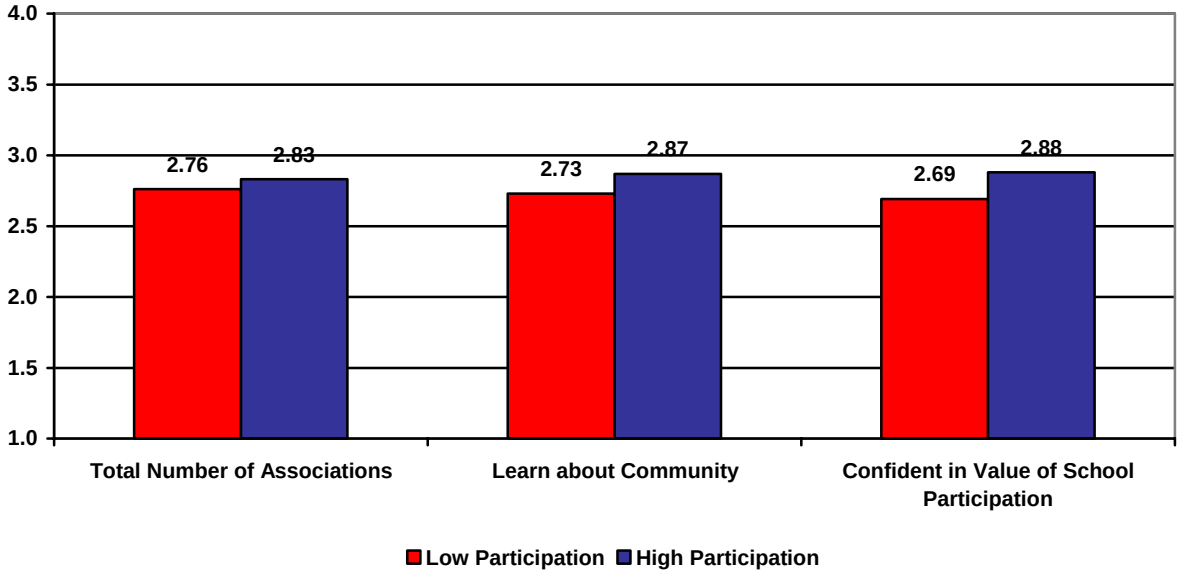
- *The Total Number of Organizational Memberships* as reported by the student. This tallied student responses to twelve participation questions. High-participation students belonged to 4 or more organizations.
- *Learning about the Community* through service participation. High-participation students learned about the community through membership in an organization volunteering to help the community *and* also studied about community problems in school[7].
- *Confidence in School Participation* that affects changes within the school. High participation students scored above-average on a scale containing items such as the following: "Electing students to suggest changes in how the school is run makes schools better;" or "students acting together can have more influence on what happens in this school than students acting alone."

One of the basic propositions in the civil society debate is that membership in associations leads to higher trust (conceptualized as social capital). Such participation is thought to provide individuals not only with an understanding of how organizations work, but also with a sense of cohesion and closeness with others that comes from common endeavors. However, previous research has provided mixed evidence as to which sorts of association memberships do actually have an influence on trust. Some have found that participation in extracurricular activities (including community service) has little effect on trust, while experiences with democracy in school have a greater effect.[8]

For this analysis of trust in government (a type of "delegated trust"), a composite score was formed. Student responses indicating the extent to which they trusted the national government, local government, and courts were averaged. Graph 3 illustrates the differences in average levels of trust in the government (as measured by the composite score) between students who reported low and high levels of participation in organizations and in learning about the community, as well as students who had a positive view of the value of student participation in schools. In each of these cases, the differences between levels of trust for students with high and low participation in organizations were significant, although the difference for general organizational membership was the smallest.

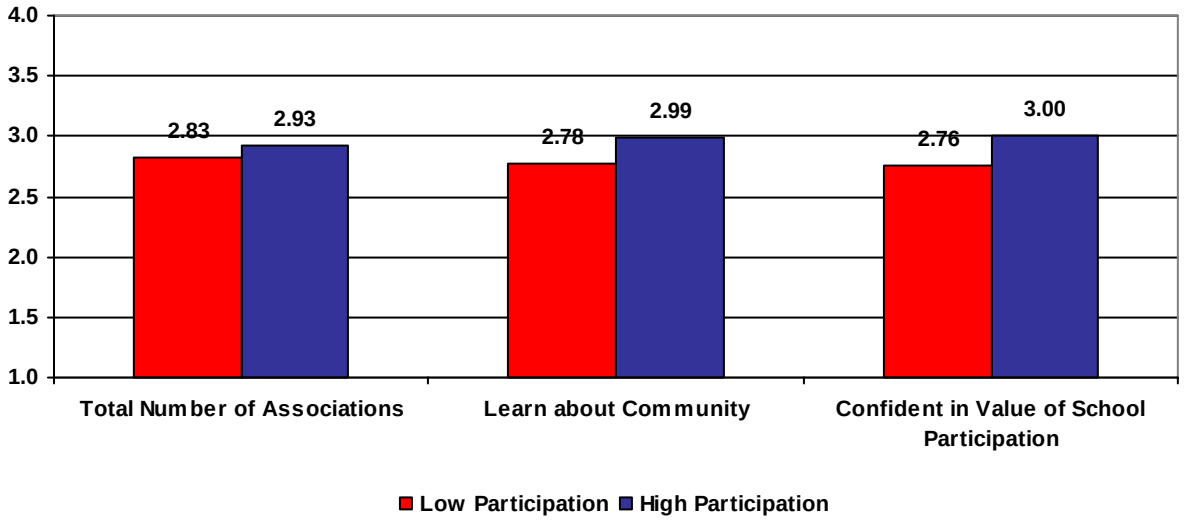
It appears that associations do have something to do with building trust in institutions, although it seems not to be a function of membership alone. Rather, students seem to develop trust through positive experiences that increase their confidence in organizations playing a substantial role in solving problems that matter to them.

Graph 3: Average Trust in Government Composite Scores for United States Students who have Low or High Levels of Participation in Voluntary Associations.



There were also differences in levels of *trust in schools* among those with high and low participation, illustrated in Graph 4. Trust in schools was not only significantly higher among those involved in various associations, but also among those who believed that student associations are capable of affecting change within the school. It is not enough just to belong to an organization. Rather, the adolescent needs to feel a sense of purpose in the group and that important goals can be achieved there.

Graph 4: Average Trust in Schools for United States Students Who Have Low or High Levels of Participation in Voluntary Associations.



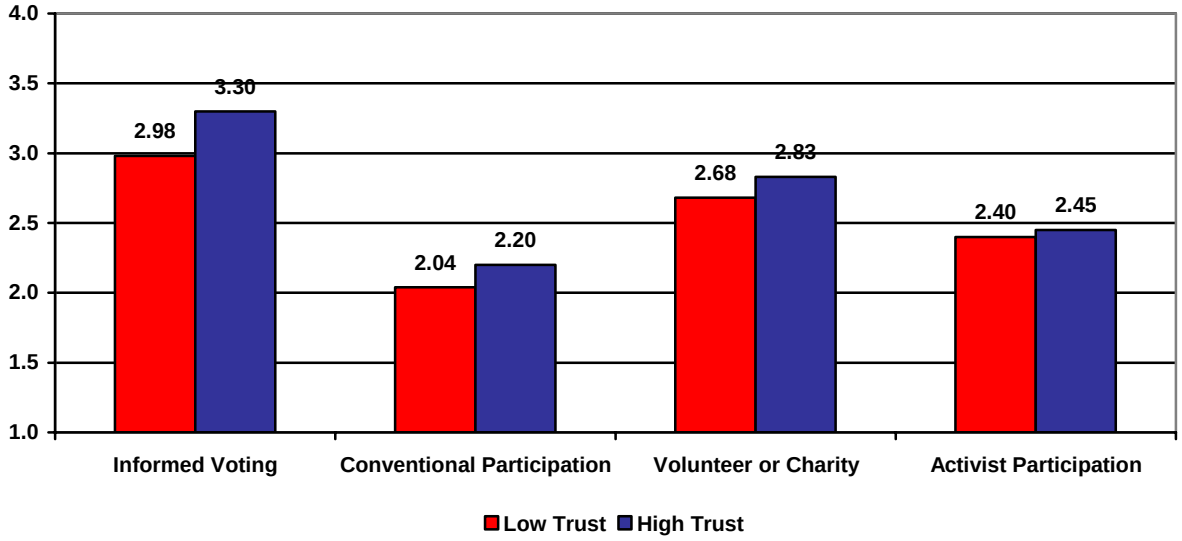
Does trust relate to students' expectations of future civic participation?

While trust may relate to students' current participation, it also may influence students' plans for continuing to participate in their communities and in the political process as they grow older. However, an excess of trust could lead to complacency, which might discourage individuals from political involvement. Although the IEA Civic Education Study was cross-sectional in nature, it did ask students about their expectations of participating in various civic activities as adults. This third and final section explores how students with high or low trust in the government differed in their expectations of:

- *Informed Voting,* defined as the expectation that one will vote in national elections and will gain information about candidates before voting;
- *Conventional Participation,* defined as the expectation that one will write a letter about a political issue or join a political party;
- *Volunteer/Charity Participation,* defined as the expectation that one will volunteer in the community or collect money for a charity or social cause;
- *Activist Participation,* defined as the expectation that one will participate in a protest march or collect signatures for a petition.

Looking first at expected participation by level of trust in government-related institutions, it appears that students who trusted government institutions "most of the time" or "all of the time" had significantly higher expectations of informed voting, conventional participation, and volunteering/charity work (Graph 5). However, level of trust in the government did not relate to expectations of activist participation in the United States.

Graph 5: Average Expectations of Civic Participation for United States Students with High or Low Trust in the Government



Trust was only one of the significant predictors of the likelihood of participation, however. Regular reading of the newspaper, learning about voting at school, and discussion of politics with parents all predicted expectations of informed voting, of conventional political activities, and of volunteering.[9] Students who were knowledgeable about political and civic matters were more likely to think they would be informed voters, but they were not more likely to expect to volunteer or donate to charity. Learning about the community in school and by volunteering showed small positive effects on the expectation of voting and large effects on expectations of civic participation in the community. Looking at these factors together, it appears that a threshold level of trustworthiness on the part of a government may be necessary for a political system to foster civic and political participation in young people. But trust in government is only one of several important factors.[10]

These data suggest that students in the United States with higher levels of trust expected to participate *more* in several types of political activities than did less-trusting students. If these students follow through on their expectations, trust may have an effect different from that sometimes theorized. Rather than indicating complacency in citizens, trust may provide young people with a baseline foundation of confidence for building participation.

Notes

[1] This fact sheet is derived from a report on a CIRCLE-funded grant, "Trust in Government-Related Institutions and Civic Engagement among Adolescents: Analysis of Five Countries from the IEA Civic Education Study," by J. Torney-Purta, W. K. Richardson, and C. H. Barber, College Park, MD: CIRCLE (2004). Other portions of this fact sheet have previously appeared in: "Educational Inequality, Democracy, and Three Types of Trust: A Cross-National Investigation using IEA Data," by J. Torney-Purta, J. Amadeo, and C. H. Barber, paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA (2004). For a more complete description of the IEA Civic Education Study, please refer to the following two international reports (found at www.wam.umd.edu/~iea.): "Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen", by J. Torney-Purta, R. Lehmann, H. Oswald, and W. Schulz, Amsterdam: IEA (2001), and "Civic Knowledge and Engagement: An IEA Study of Upper Secondary Students in Sixteen Countries", by J. Amadeo, J. Torney-Purta, R. Lehmann, V. Husfeldt, and R. Nikolova, Amsterdam, IEA (2002).

[2] Examples of this two-level model can be found in: M. Warren, "Introduction," in M. E. Warren (Ed.), *Democracy and Trust*, pp. 1-21, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999); M. Hooghe and D. Stolle, *Generating Social Capital: Civil Society and Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Palgrave (2003); and K. Newton, "Trust, social capital, civil society, and democracy," *International Political Science Review, 22*(2), 201-214 (2001).

[3] O. Patterson, "Liberty against the democratic state: On the historical and contemporary sources of American distrust," in M. E. Warren (Ed.), *Democracy and Trust*, pp. 151-207, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999).

[4] All Graphs are based on data from the IEA Civic Education Study. Nationally representative samples of 14-year-olds tested in 1999 totaled 2811 in the United States. The 28 participating countries are: Australia, French-speaking Belgium, Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The instrument is found at www.wam.umd.edu/~iea. Additional analysis on trust can be found in "Strengthening Democracy in the Americas: An Empirical Study of the Views of Students and Teachers," by J. Torney-Purta and J. Amadeo, Washington, DC: Organization of American States (2004). www.oas.org/udse.

[5] This matches a similar finding in a study of governmental trust using World Values Survey data reported in H. Klingemann, "Mapping support in the 1990's: A global analysis," in P. Norris (Ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*, pp. 40-44, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999).

[6] C. McIlwaine and C. Mosher, "Violence and social capital in poor communities: Perspectives from Colombia and Guatemala" *Journal of International Development, 12*, 965-984 (2001).

[7] This may be thought of as similar to a measure of participation in "service learning," since both volunteer experience and school discussion must be present for a student to be categorized as a high participant.

[8] A. J. Damico, M. M. Conway, and S. B. Damico, "Patterns of political trust and mistrust: Three moments in the lives of democratic citizens," *Polity, 32*(3), 377-400 (2000); Newton (2001); and Warren (1999).

[9] These findings are illustrated in Torney-Purta, Richardson, and Barber's CIRCLE Working Paper, (2004).

[10] Similar patterns to those just described existed in average expectations of participation for students who reported high and low levels of trust in schools. Students who trusted schools were more likely to vote in an informed way, more likely to participate in conventional civic activities, and more likely to participate in community-related activities.