

TRUTH DECAY

SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND GROUPS

CIVIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE ERA OF TRUTH DECAY

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Public trust and confidence in such institutions as government, media, and religion has dropped precipitously in recent years amid growing disagreements about facts and increasing reliance on opinion and personal experience.¹ Although the reasons for this decline are numerous, one likely factor is the increasingly fractured media landscape that has led to a reduction in many Americans' exposure to diverse viewpoints and experiences. A recent analysis by Pollard and Kavanagh,² for instance, showed that reliance on different news platforms (e.g., cable news, social media) varied by

such factors as age and level of education and that few Americans intentionally seek out sources that would offer views different from their own.

Schools can serve a key role in shaping views on the trustworthiness of different sources of information among the students they serve. As described in another Data Note in this series, large majorities of teachers agree that "students must learn to critically evaluate information for credibility and bias – it's a crucial citizenship skill."³ Yet, as indicated in that Data Note, the percentage of teachers who indicated that this statement comes very close to their own views appears to have declined by

DEFINING CIVIC DEVELOPMENT

Public schools in the United States play a key role in preparing students not only for college and careers, but also for civic life. Indeed, the founders of the U.S. system of public education argued that the primary mission of public schools was to develop educated citizens who would uphold the nation's democratic values,⁴ and scholars continue to refer to the system as a "guardian of democracy."⁵ Schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. This set of attributes can be characterized as *civic development*. The need to support students' civic development is particularly important in the face of recent results from the Nation's Report Card that documented no improvements between 2014 and 2018 in students' civic scores and declines in their achievement in U.S. history and geography.⁶

Civic knowledge: an understanding of government structures, government processes, and relevant social studies knowledge and concepts, along with U.S. and global history and the ways that history affects today's government and society

Civic skills: abilities that allow students to engage in democratic processes in an active and informed way, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration

Civic dispositions: attitudes that are important in a democracy, such as a sense of civic duty and concern for the welfare of other people as well as for one's country and community⁷



One factor that might influence how teachers help students critically evaluate information is the extent to which they themselves trust particular institutions and are willing to accept recommendations of particular groups.

about 20 percentage points since 2010. Furthermore, as Kavanagh and Rich note, what is taught and learned in U.S. schools does not necessarily reflect the complicated and technologically rich environment surrounding the general population.

One factor that might influence how teachers help students critically evaluate information is the extent to which they themselves trust particular institutions and are willing to accept recommendations of particular groups. Understanding what teachers view as trustworthy sources could give us a window into the sources of information that teachers might be drawing on for their instruction.

In this Data Note, we build on related research on public trust in institutions to investigate U.S. teachers' trust in institutions and groups.⁹ To do so, we administered survey items to U.S. public-school teachers of social studies for kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12). These items originally appeared on surveys given to participants in the RAND American Life Panel, a nationally representative, probability-based panel of more than 6,000 members ages 18 and older who are regularly interviewed over the internet for research purposes,⁹ and they reflect similar items in the AmericasBarometer survey.¹⁰ The questions asked teachers to rate (1) their trust in institutions, such as the government, media sources, and religion and (2) their willingness to accept recommendations or information provided by members of particular groups, ranging from scientists and medical doctors to journalists and scholars.

Fewer than half of teachers expressed trust in nearly all the institutions they were asked about (from religion to the federal government).

The most-trusted institutions, according to social studies teachers, were organized religion, national newspapers, and network television (Figure 1). That said, with the exception of secondary teachers' ratings of their trust in national newspapers, fewer than half of teachers rated their trust in nearly any institution as greater than a 3 on a scale of 0 to 6, where 3 equals "neither distrust or trust." These percentages might be similar to those of the general public. For example, Hagan drew on similar items fielded to respondents in multiple countries in 2016–2017 and noted that about 30 percent of U.S. respondents expressed trust in "mass media," which is roughly similar to or even lower than the percentages of teachers who expressed trust in the variety of media sources that we asked about in our survey.¹¹

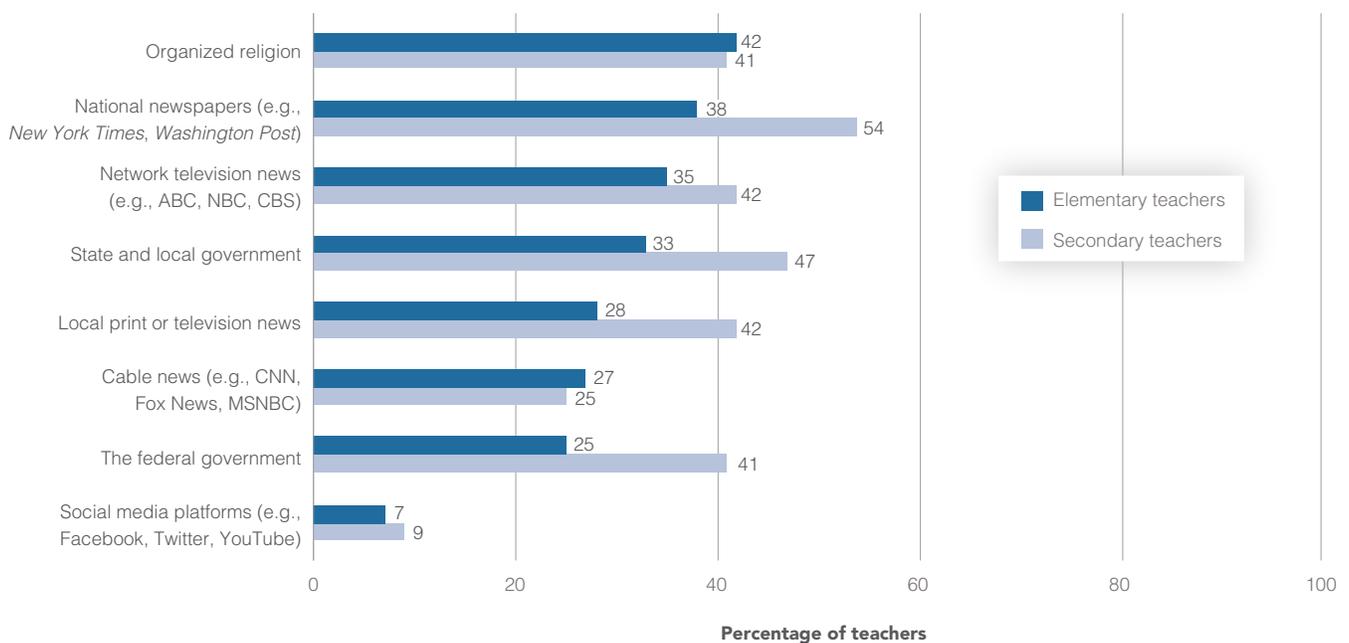
Significantly higher percentages of secondary teachers than elementary teachers indicated trust in a variety of institutions, such as national newspapers, state and local government, local print or television news, network television, and the federal government. It is hard to know why trust ratings were often higher among secondary social studies teachers than their elementary counterparts. It might be that secondary social studies teachers—who address a variety of topics from U.S. history to world cultures and likely studied social studies topics to some extent in college—simply have more faith in news sources, government, and other institutions than their elementary counterparts, who are less likely to have studied social studies topics in depth. Most elementary teachers of social studies also teach all subjects; secondary social studies teachers are much more likely to have certifications and educational backgrounds specifically focused on social studies. These differences in the motivations and backgrounds of elementary versus secondary teachers of social studies might be connected to the results we see.

Among all teachers, trust in social media platforms was low. This might be encouraging, in that social media platforms are well known to communicate inaccurate information to the public.¹² Teachers with low trust in social media platforms might be more apt to encourage students' critical thinking about the information they receive through such platforms.

Through our regression models, we identified the following additional patterns in teachers' trust:

1. Teachers from towns and rural areas were significantly more likely than their suburban counterparts in our reference category to indicate trust in organized religion, local print or television news, and cable news.
2. Teachers of color were less likely to indicate trust in the federal government, state and local government, and organized religion, although they were more likely to indicate trust in social media platforms.

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Social Studies Teachers Indicating Trust in Each Institution



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *Using a scale from 0 to 6, where 0 indicates complete distrust and 6 indicates complete trust (so 3 would indicate that you neither trust nor distrust), please indicate your level of trust in the following: [each institution].* Percentages are for teachers who gave a rating of 4, 5, or 6. ABC = American Broadcasting Company; CBS = Columbia Broadcasting System; CNN = Cable News Network; NBC = National Broadcasting Company.

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It might be that school-level urbanicity and teacher ethnicity are proxies for other variables that might be related to trust, such as political affiliation or perceptions of less support from the government.

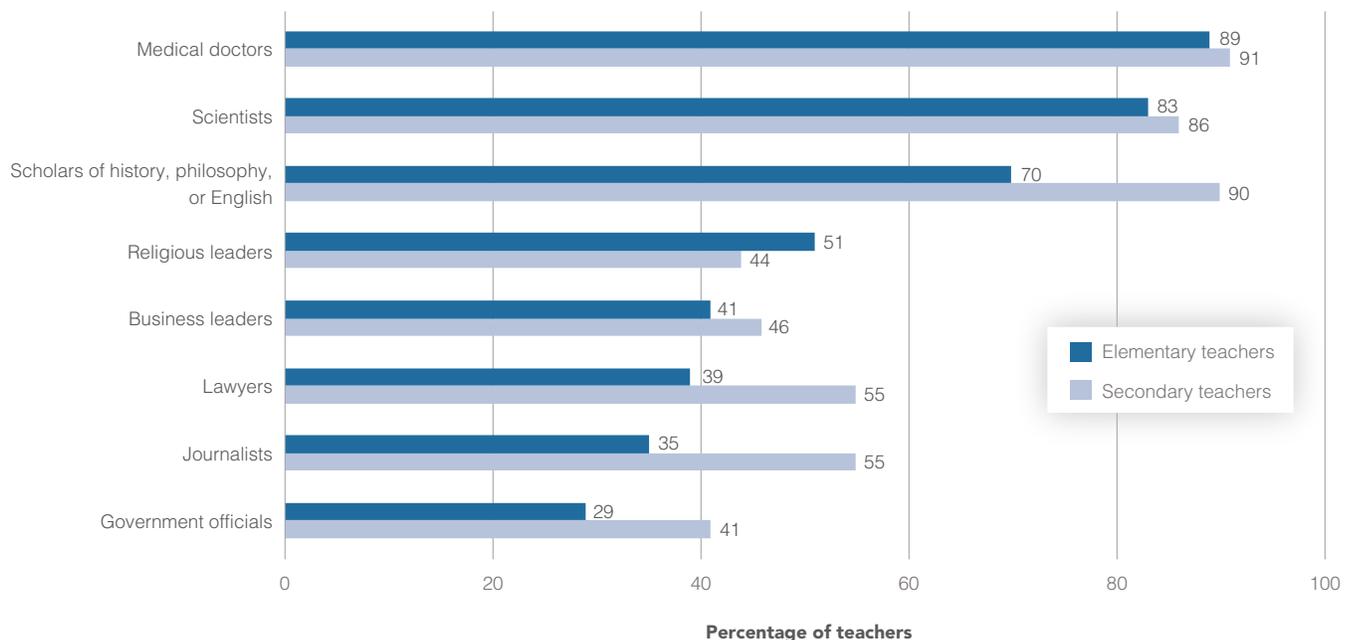
Majorities of teachers indicated willingness to accept the recommendations of medical doctors, scientists, and scholars, although secondary teachers were more willing to accept recommendations from a variety of groups than were elementary teachers.

Social studies teachers were much more likely to indicate that they would accept the recommendations of medical doctors, scientists, and scholars than the recommendations of religious leaders or lawyers (Figure 2). Teachers were least likely to indicate trust

in government officials. That said, as with the trust findings, secondary social studies teachers indicated willingness to accept the recommendations of certain groups—including government officials, scholars, lawyers, and journalists—far more often than elementary teachers. Again, these findings might reflect that those who have specifically studied social studies topics and elected to teach social studies (as opposed to elementary teachers of all subjects) tend to have more faith in the recommendations of these groups.

As with teachers' trust in institutions, we examined willingness to accept recommendations among various teacher subgroups. Although our analyses indicated that teachers in towns or rural areas were more likely to trust certain groups, we did not find any trends in willingness to accept recommendations from members of particular groups based on urbanicity. That said, we did find that teachers of color indicated less willingness than their white counterparts to accept the recommendations of scientists, medical

FIGURE 2 Percentage of Social Studies Teachers Indicating Willingness to Accept the Recommendations of Each Group



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *Using a scale from 0 to 6, how would you rate your willingness to accept the recommendations or information provided by a member of one of the following groups when they are advising within their area of expertise, where 0 indicates complete unwillingness and 6 equals complete willingness?* Percentages are for teachers who gave a rating of 4, 5, or 6.



doctors, business leaders, and religious leaders. Again, these subgroup variables might be proxies for other variables related to individuals' willingness to accept recommendations from particular groups. For example, teachers of color might face cultural biases every day, which might make them less likely to accept recommendations from particular groups.

What should you make of these data?

These findings suggest that social studies teachers do not have a great deal of trust in many public institutions, although many appear willing to accept recommendations from some of these groups. We do not know whether teachers' trust has diminished over time. Nonetheless, teachers' trust and confidence in these institutions might have implications for how much they draw on or reference such institutions in their instruction. At the same time, if teachers have less trust in particular institutions, they might be well positioned to help students critically

judge and use these information sources to make their own claims or arguments. Teachers' low trust in social media, in particular, might support them in addressing inaccuracies in social media communications with students and help students critically consume information from those sources. In future analyses of these survey data, we hope to examine the role that trust might play in the actual instruction that teachers indicate providing to students.

The differences between elementary and secondary teachers are intriguing and suggest some potential differences in how teachers at these different grade levels are helping their students make good decisions about information consumption. In some cases, these differences could be concerning: Elementary teachers might have lower trust in groups that could be providing accurate information, including scholars and some journalists. At the same time, as we have noted, lower trust in some institutions could imply that teachers are supporting students in thinking critically about information from particular sources.

Notes

- ¹ Kavanagh and Rich, 2018.
- ² Pollard and Kavanagh, 2019.
- ³ Hamilton, Kaufman, and Hu, 2020.
- ⁴ Mann, 1855.
- ⁵ Gould, 2011.
- ⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, undated.
- ⁷ Hansen et al., 2018; Vinnakota, 2019.
- ⁸ American Life Panel, 2018; Hagan, 2019.
- ⁹ RAND Corporation, undated.
- ¹⁰ Vanderbilt University, undated.
- ¹¹ Hagan, 2019.
- ¹² Kavanagh et al., 2019.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country. We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public-school teachers and leaders who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand more about how to better support their hard work in schools. We also appreciate the efforts of the whole RAND American Educator Panel research team: David Grant, Christopher Young, Claude Setodji, Courtney Armstrong, and Casey Hunter. Thanks to Andrew Parker for the helpful input he provided on this Data Note and to our reviewers, Brian Gill and Andrew McEachin, for helpful feedback that improved this report. We also thank editor Arwen Bicknell, production editor Monette Velasco, and designer Pete Soriano for their support in presenting this series.

This work is part of RAND’s Countering Truth Decay initiative (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), which studies the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life. Through

this initiative, RAND has invited researchers and engaged stakeholders to find solutions that counter Truth Decay and the threat it poses to evidence-based policymaking. More information about Truth Decay is available at www.rand.org/truth-decay.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to laurah@rand.org and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

FUNDING

Funding for this research was provided by gifts from RAND supporters and income from operations.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The AEP Civic Education Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of results from our American Teacher Panel civic education survey. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see our technical documentation (www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

This Data Note is one in a series about how schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. The other Data Notes in this series are

- Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, Lynn Hu, David Grant, Claude Messan Setodji, and Matt Strawn, *2019 American Teacher Panel Civic Education Survey: Technical Documentation*, RR-A112-1
- Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, and Lynn Hu, *Media Use and Literacy in Schools: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-2
- Julia H. Kaufman, Laura S. Hamilton, and Lynn Hu, *Teachers' Civics Instructional Materials: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-3

- Julia H. Kaufman, Laura S. Hamilton, and Lynn Hu, *Social Studies Teachers' Perspectives on Key Civic Outcomes in 2010 and 2019: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-4

A more comprehensive report on the state of civic education in America's schools is also in development.

To explore how teachers and schools promote civic development, we created a survey for social studies teachers that was administered to members of the RAND Corporation's American Teacher Panel in fall 2019.^a These teachers included both general-education teachers (typically for kindergarten through 5th grade [K–5]) and teachers who reported teaching social studies exclusively or in combination with a small number of other subjects (typically teachers in middle and high schools). We summarize responses separately for elementary (grades K–5) and secondary (grades 6–12) teachers; where relevant, we discuss differences in responses for subgroups of teachers when they are statistically significant for an outcome of interest, as indicated by regression models that included several teacher- and school-level factors as independent variables. Additional details about the survey and analytic methods, including our definitions of these subgroups and methods for testing statistical significance of differences, are available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1.

^a Teachers were sampled to participate in this survey if they reported teaching social studies, civics, or similar material in a previous survey. Teachers were screened at the beginning of the survey to ensure that they still taught the target subject or subjects—i.e., if they indicated teaching “social studies or social science (including general social studies, geography, history, government/civics, etc.)” If they did not, they were screened out of the survey.

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