



## Adolescent views of civic responsibility and civic efficacy: Differences by rurality and socioeconomic status

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in civic beliefs and efficacy for youth living in rural or city contexts and from higher or lower socioeconomic homes. Youth ( $N = 1847$ ; 88.6% White; 56% female;  $Age = 15.72$ ) from a rural town (46.1%) and a mid-sized city (53.9%) completed questionnaires assessing civic beliefs (should, obligation, respect judgments) for community service, standard political, and social movement behaviors, as well as community efficacy, political knowledge efficacy, and political action efficacy. Rural youth and youth from less educated households had lower political efficacy and rated standard political activity as less important, obligatory, and worthy of social praise. Adolescents from more educated households viewed social movement involvement as more important and morally worthy. A parent education by rurality interaction indicated rural youth from less educated families endorsed lower beliefs that people should engage in standard political action. Findings highlight the importance of community and socioeconomic context for youth civic development.

Civic engagement is thought to emerge through dynamic, bi-directional interactions between the individual and the context in which they live (Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, & Erickson, 2014). Adolescents who reside in different contexts, such as rural communities or youth from lower socioeconomic families, would be expected to have different opportunities or motivations that alter person-context interactions than youth living in cities or those from families with more resources. These unique experiences may lead to varying civic engagement pathways including differences in how individuals conceptualize civic engagement or rate themselves as competent civic actors. Both civic beliefs (judgments about what individuals *should* do) and civic efficacy (judgments about what individuals *can* do) are cognitive facets of civic development that have been postulated to undergird and facilitate political action into adulthood (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Metzger & Smetana, 2010; Wray-Lake, 2019). However, little research has examined how these conceptualizations differ for youth living in different geographic or socioeconomic circumstances. For instance, youth whose parents have less years of formal education or youth living in rural areas may view different types of civic behavior (e.g., political vs. non-political) as more or less obligatory or have different views of their own efficacy to participate in community or political activities. The current study examined differences in civic beliefs and civic efficacy for youth living in rural or city contexts and

for individuals from higher or lower socioeconomic homes.

### Civic beliefs and efficacy as cognitive components of civic development

An engaged and active populace is essential for the continuation, health, and thriving of democratic institutions and communities (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Civic involvement is multifaceted and includes a wide range of both political and non-political activities (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, & Flanagan, 2016). Non-political engagement includes activities thought to improve community functioning and well-being, such as community service and volunteering activities (Youniss et al., 2002). In addition, political behavior can take different forms and comprises both *standard political involvement* and *social movement involvement*. Standard political behavior entails engagement within existing political systems such as voting in political elections, staying informed about political news and current events, and being a member of a political party. Social movement involvement includes activities aimed at changing or influencing current political structures or policies such as protesting or boycotting products for a political or social cause (Torney-Purta, 2004; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010).

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Civic development researchers also stress that civic engagement includes civic cognitions and attitudes (Wray-Lake, 2019). Cognitive dimensions of civic engagement are important to consider during adolescence given that youth are often prevented from multiple forms of civic behavior due to legal restrictions (e.g., voting age) or because they lack the economic and social resources necessary for sustained engagement. Studying how adolescents think about civic behavior can provide important insights into the cognitive competencies that facilitate civic development (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Civic reasoning involves a wide range of constructs including civic knowledge (Flanagan, Gallay, Gill, Gallay, & Nti, 2005; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007), socio-political values, (Oosterhoff, Ferris, Palmer, & Metzger, 2017), and political views (Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake, Palmer, & Kaplow, 2019b; Settle, Dawes, Christakis, & Fowler, 2010). In addition, reasoning or cognitive aspects of civic engagement include *civic beliefs*, or adolescents' understanding of civic responsibility, as well as *civic efficacy* defined as beliefs about their own ability to productively participate as civic actors. Civic beliefs and civic efficacy may both be critically important to consider as antecedents of later adult civic behavior. High levels of civic action are more likely when individuals both believe such activity is important and view themselves as capable of participating in the behavior.

Broadly, civic beliefs represent the ways that individuals reason about different forms of civic action. One approach to studying civic beliefs involves assessing the individuals' socio-moral conceptualizations of civic engagement including whether activities are viewed obligatory or morally worthy (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). This research leveraged the theoretical lens and methodological approach of the social domain theory of social reasoning (Metzger, Oosterhoff, Palmer, & Ferris, 2014; Smetana, 2013). Social domain theory posits that individuals think about the social world from different domains of reasoning including the moral, social conventional, and personal domains. The moral domain entails concepts of welfare, fairness, and rights, the social conventions pertain to authority, consensus, and the smooth functioning of social interactions, and personal issues and behaviors lie outside of conventional regulation or moral concern and involve matters of choice and personal prerogative (Smetana, 2013). To assess how individuals apply domain-relevant concepts, researchers typically ask a series of criterion judgments and also collect justifications.

Using a similar methodological strategy, previous research has explored individuals' conceptualizations of different types of civic engagement. A key concept that distinguishes personal behaviors from both moral and conventional behaviors is that personal activities are not obligatory (Nucci, 1996). To assess beliefs about obligation and civic activities, previous research has asked whether individuals *should* engage in the activity and also whether it was *wrong NOT to* (obligation) engage in the activity. This distinction draws on Kohlberg's (1971) theorizing that "should" judgments by themselves do not necessarily reflect moral obligation, as individuals might view certain prosocial actions as important, or good to do without necessarily viewing them as morally obligatory. Beyond obligation concepts, previous research has also drawn on moral philosophers such as Williams (1985), who argued that discretionary actions (like civic actions) are thought to be moral if they are "greatly admired" or "well thought of." To operationalize this social-praise dimension, individuals have been asked whether they would *respect* someone who engaged in the activity.

Adolescents differentially apply should, obligation, and respect judgments to community service, standard political involvement (e.g., voting in elections), and social movement involvement (e.g., protesting; Metzger & Ferris, 2013). Researchers have argued that these distinctions point to potential differentiation and domain-specificity in adolescents' conceptualizations of civic responsibility (Alvis & Metzger, 2019; Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Further, these judgments have been both concordantly and longitudinally related to adolescents' engagement in different types of civic activities at school and in their communities (Metzger, Ferris, & Oosterhoff, 2018). Taken together,

previous research indicates that should, obligation, and respect judgments are individually useful for capturing unique socio-moral aspects of adolescents' civic beliefs.

In addition to viewing civic behavior as obligatory and morally worthy, it is also important for youth to feel that they have the skills necessary to productively participate in civic activities. For instance, an individual may think that voting or volunteering is important, but that person is unlikely to participate if they do not think they are capable of voting or volunteering. Political scientists have long investigated civic *efficacy*, which encompasses individual's views about whether their actions will actually have a positive influence on their communities and lead directly to political change (Beaumont, 2010; Levy, 2011). Political efficacy refers to how individuals view their own ability to wield political power, make an impact in their political world, and achieve goals through political means (Morrell, 2005). Individuals who believe that their political actions will actually have an impact are more likely to engage in political activities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). However, civic engagement includes both political and non-political behaviors, and it is likely that individuals may feel more or less efficacious about participating in political vs community service activities. For instance, an individual may feel they have knowledge and skills necessary to participate in political process but feel less efficacious concerning their ability to positively impact their own communities.

In addition to distinguishing between efficacy for political vs. non-political behaviors, it may also be important to distinguish between different facets of political efficacy. Research in political science has distinguished external political efficacy or the belief that governmental institutions are responsive to citizens' demands from internal political efficacy, which is a self-evaluation about one's competence to engage with and affect the political process (Lane, 1959). However, less research has distinguished between efficacy that individuals feel for their level of political knowledge versus their ability to engage in political action to influence political or social policy. This is a potentially important distinction, as some individuals may view themselves as less politically efficacious because they have a poor understanding of current political issues or are uninformed about policy while others may feel less efficacious about their ability to actually engage in politically-relevant behavior. Although adolescents are unable to participate in some forms of political activity, youth still have beliefs about their ability and knowledge to influence political process and make a difference in their communities (Serek, Lacinova, & Macek, 2012). In the current study, we examine different facets of *civic efficacy*, including adolescents' views of their own political knowledge, their ability to make a difference in their own communities, and their views of their own ability to effectively participate in political activities to make a difference.

#### *Geographic and socioeconomic correlates of adolescent civic beliefs and efficacy*

It is important to consider potential contextual experiences that may affect how adolescents perceive civic engagement or rate their own abilities to participate in different types of civic activities. Previous research points to potential individual variability in average patterns of change in adolescents' civic beliefs and efficacy including gender and age differences in civic beliefs (Metzger & Ferris, 2013; Metzger & Smetana, 2009) and political efficacy (Arens & Watermann, 2017; Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009; Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012). However, less research has considered how adolescents' civic beliefs and efficacy may be affected by geographic and socioeconomic factors.

Developmental research has consistently found significant differences in developmental processes for children growing up in rural relative to non-rural communities (Huston, Mcloyd, & Coll, 1994) and civic beliefs and efficacy may also vary for youth living in different geographic contexts. On average, adults living in rural areas are less

likely to attend college and rural communities have higher levels of unemployment compared to urban and suburban areas (Cochran et al., 2002), so rural youth may therefore have fewer role models who are actively engaged in community and political activities. The scarce and scattered distribution of the population within rural communities may also provide multiple logistic obstacles that could impede youth civic participation (Pritzker & Metzger, 2011), as rural adolescents may have to travel longer distances to engage in civic or community organizations and activities located in more populated cities. An additional factor contributing to the risk of rural areas is the lack of support services and limited community infrastructure (Lichter & Johnson, 2007). Rural youth may be more isolated from extra-familial influences such as the types of community and civil institutions available in urban or suburban areas (Kohnler, Anderson, Oravec, & Braun, 2004). Such isolation may also influence how adolescents think or reason about different forms of political and community involvement including whether they are obligatory or morally worthy, as well as affect their views of themselves as competent civic actors. Indeed, political theorists have argued that youths' communities provide important contexts for fostering (or potentially lowering) adolescents' beliefs about their own efficacy (Beaumont, 2010).

Adolescents' civic beliefs and efficacy may also be impacted by more proximal factors including their family's socioeconomic status such as parental education. Adolescents from higher socioeconomic status families tend to be more civically involved relative to those from lower socioeconomic status families (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). Researchers posit that living in higher socioeconomic communities grants adolescents access to more varied opportunities for civic engagement such as a greater variety of social organizations that promote civic behavior compared to youth who live in poorer neighborhoods, where such social capital resources are more limited (Hart et al., 1998). Youth from higher socioeconomic families also have more resources (e.g., time, money), making it easier to engage in civic activities. Increased opportunities for engagement may lead adolescents to place greater importance on community and political involvement and view such activity as more obligatory. Parental education is also positively related to adolescents' civic knowledge (McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007) and both traditional and online civic engagement (Warren & Wicks, 2011; Wray-Lake & Shubert, 2019). In addition, more educated parents have been found to differentially stress the importance of civic action in discussions with their adolescents (Oosterhoff, Metzger, & Babskie, 2015). Both household income and years of education are strongly and positively related to higher levels of political efficacy (Verba, Lehman, & Brady, 1995), which is consistent with research highlighting how early social experiences within families, schools, and communities contribute to feelings of civic efficacy (Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008).

### Current study

The current study examined individual differences in two aspects of civic reasoning in a sample of primarily White youth: adolescents' views of civic engagement as important, obligatory, and morally worthy (civic beliefs) and adolescents' evaluation of their own ability to participate effectively in political and community civic activities (civic efficacy). We examined the effects of geographic context (rural community vs. mid-sized city) and socioeconomic status (youth of parents with either high or low levels of education) on youth civic beliefs and civic efficacy. Based on previous research, youth living in rural areas were expected to have lower civic beliefs (i.e., view civic behavior as less important, obligatory, and morally worthy) and civic efficacy, particularly for political behaviors, relative to youth living in non-rural areas. Youth from higher socioeconomic status families were expected to view civic behaviors as more important, obligatory, and morally-worthy and also higher levels of civic efficacy. Given that previous research has found consistent gender and age differences in both civic beliefs (Metzger &

Ferris, 2013) and efficacy (Arens & Watermann, 2017), we both controlled for these demographic characteristics in our models and also explored whether gender and age moderated rural and SES differences in youth civic beliefs and efficacy. Finally, we also account for adolescents' political ideology, as past research has found ideological differences in youths' political engagement (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019).

### Methods

Data were collected as part of the Youth Civic Development Project (YCDP; Oosterhoff et al., 2017 citations removed for double-blind review). Participants were recruited from two high schools (grades 9–12) in a mid-Atlantic region of the United States. One school was located in a small town (population = 7000) within a county designated as “rural” by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010). The rural town was located approximately 50 miles from the nearest city with a population of 25,000 or more. The other school was located in a mid-sized city (population = 30,000). This mid-sized city represents the economic, commercial, and medical epicenter of the region. School and community level descriptive statistics indicate that general student enrollment, minority student enrollment, and community size were smaller for the rural compared to non-rural school. School level statistics also indicate that a greater percentage of students in the rural school received free or reduced lunch relative to the non-rural school. The student to teacher ratio and graduation rate were comparable across schools. All students in grades 9–12 enrolled in social studies were eligible to participate. Participants enrolled in social studies courses from each school at the time of data collection were surveyed annually across three waves. Thus, some youth who participated in initial waves were not sampled in later waves and vice versa if they were not enrolled in social studies courses. This study design produced large cross-sectional cohorts of youth as well as a smaller subset of youth who participated in different combinations of longitudinal surveys.

A total of 743 adolescents participated at Wave 1, 1841 participated at Wave 2, and 898 participated at Wave 3. Of these youth, 412 adolescents participated in at least two waves and 88 participants in all three waves. Due to low rates of continued participation between waves (11–35%), cross-sectional data were utilized for the current study. Data from three cross-sectional cohorts of youth were combined in a single dataset, resulting in an analytic sample of 1847 adolescents. For youth with longitudinal data, data from participants' first wave were used. The first cohort of youth surveyed was the largest ( $n = 703$ , 38%). The second cohort included 620 (33.6%) youth who were first surveyed in the second wave of the study, and the third cohort included 524 (28.4%) youth who were first surveyed in the third wave of the study.

A relatively equal number of participants attended school in the small, rural town (46.1%) and mid-sized city (53.9%). Youth were aged 13–20 years ( $M = 15.72$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ; 56% female). The sample included more 9th graders (32.2%) and slightly more 12th graders (26.1%) than 10th (19.5%) or 11th graders (22.2%). Participants were primarily White (88.6%), followed by Black/African American (5.1%), Asian (2.4%), Hispanic/Latinx (1.2%), Native American/American Indian (0.8%), and 1.8% identified as another race or ethnicity. Youth reported on their parents' highest education level: 2.5% of youth had both parents complete 8th grade or less, 31.6% had at least one parent complete high school, 39.9% had at least one parent complete college, and 26% had at least one parent complete graduate school (e.g., Ph.D., M.D.).

### Measures

#### Civic beliefs

*Civic involvement categories.* Adolescents made a series of judgments (should, obligation, and respect) about 13 adult-level civic behaviors assessed in previous research focusing on citizenship and civic

engagement (e.g., Metzger & Ferris, 2013; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Adolescents made judgments about four *community service* activities (i.e., volunteer for a fundraiser aiding victims of a natural disaster, volunteer to help disabled students at your school, volunteer to help the people in your community, volunteer to help feed the homeless people), five *standard political* activities (i.e., keep up with current events and politics, join a political party, work on a political campaign, vote in a political election, know who their elected representatives and leaders are), and four *social movement* activities (i.e., write to a newspaper, magazine, blog, or website about a social or political issue, take part in a political protest or rally, work to change a law that they disagree with, distribute a petition for a cause).

**Should judgments.** Participants rated whether individuals “should” take part in each of the 13 civic involvement behaviors using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*doesn't matter*) to 5 (*definitely should*). Mean should scores were calculated separately for community service ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), standard political ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), and social movement activities ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ) with higher ratings indicated stronger beliefs that individuals should engage in each activity.

**Obligation judgments (wrong).** Similar to previous research (Metzger et al., 2014; Metzger & Ferris, 2013), youth reported whether it was wrong if individuals *did not* engage in the 13 civic involvement behaviors. Responses were scored using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all wrong*) to 5 (*very wrong*). Mean scores were calculated for community service ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), standard political ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), and social movement activities ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ) with higher values indicating stronger beliefs that each activity is obligatory (i.e., wrong NOT to participate).

**Respect judgments.** Participants rated the social-praiseworthiness of the 13 civic involvement behaviors by reporting whether they believed involvement in each civic activity was worthy of respect (e.g., “How much would you RESPECT someone who takes part in the following activities?”) using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a lot*). Mean scores were calculated for community service ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), standard political ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), and social movement activities ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ) with higher values indicating more respect/social-praiseworthiness of each civic activity.

#### Civic efficacy

**Community efficacy** was measured with three items asking adolescents about their perceived ability to use community service to help people in need, make a meaningful contribution to the community, and use what they know from community service to solve “real life” problems ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores indicating greater community efficacy.

Participants responded to five items that assessed their perceived **political efficacy**. A principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on the political efficacy items, resulting in the creation of two political efficacy subscales. Details about the PCA procedure and results are described in the Supplemental Materials. Three items assessed youths' **political knowledge efficacy** (e.g., I think that I am better informed about politics than most people my age; I feel I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ). **Political action efficacy** was measured with two items that assessed adolescents' perceived ability to make a difference through political action (e.g., teens like me can join political rallies or protests and make a difference; even though I am only a teenager, there are ways for me to get involved in politics and make a difference;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores indicating greater efficacy.

#### Demographic covariates

Adolescents reported their age, gender, and parent education. Highest level of mothers' and fathers' education were reported with separate items on a 4-point scale including 1 (*completed 8th grade*), 2 (*completed high school*), 3 (*completed college*), and 4 (*graduate degree*) with the option of indicating “I don't know” and were combined into one index representing 1 (*neither parent attended college*), 2 (*at least one parent completed college*), and 3 (*at least one parent completed graduate school*). Adolescents also reported on their political ideology on a 5-point scale from 1 (*very conservative*) to 5 (*very liberal*) with an option to indicate “I don't know”.

#### Analytic technique

Analyses were estimated using the `lm` function and `Manova` package in R Version 3.6.3 (R Core Team, 2020). Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) models were used to examine geographic and socioeconomic correlates of adolescent civic reasoning, which included rural status (0 = non-rural, 1 = rural) and parent education as primary independent variables and adolescent gender, age, political ideology, and cohort as covariates. Four separate models specified civic efficacy, and civic beliefs for community service, standard political, and social movement as dependent variables. For main effects that were significant based on Wilks' Lambda, follow-up univariate tests (ANCOVAs) were conducted. Pillai's criterion was used to interpret the MANCOVA when Box's test of equality was significant (Johnson & Field, 1993). For univariate tests, if the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated based on Levene's test, a stricter alpha level of 0.001 was used (Allen & Bennett, 2008). Post hoc pairwise tests were conducted with Bonferroni corrections applied to the alpha level. Effect sizes for all omnibus tests were determined using partial eta squared ( $\eta_p^2$ ), to which the following descriptors have been applied: 0.010 is small, 0.058 is moderate, and 0.137 is large (Cohen, 1988).

#### Missing data

The majority of participants had complete data across key items ( $n = 1586$ ; 86%) and 13.3% of participants ( $n = 245$ ) were missing data on up to 3 items. The majority of missing data were for parent education (8%) and political ideology (5.7%) due to the “I don't know” option for these variables being recoded as missing. Little's MCAR test was used to examine the stratification of missing values across constructs included in the primary models. The MCAR test was significant ( $\chi^2 = 216.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicating that the data were not missing completely at random. Following current guidelines (Widaman, 2006), low levels of missing data for key variables were estimated with multiple imputation using the `mice` package in R. The `mice` package was utilized to impute 5 datasets over 50 iterations and employs an algorithm that uses information from other variables in the dataset to predict and impute the missing values. All key study variables were used to inform the imputation.

#### Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations for key study variables are reported in Table 1.

#### Rural and SES difference in community service beliefs

A MANCOVA examined rural and SES differences in community service beliefs (should, obligation, respect) after accounting for age, gender, political ideology, and cohort. There were no significant main effects for rural status or parent education, and no significant interactions. Significant main effects were found for gender and age (Table 2). A higher alpha threshold (0.001) was used to evaluate should and respect ANCOVA models based on significant Levene's tests. Univariate

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for key study variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	15.71	1.27																
2. Gender			-0.05*															
3. Liberal	2.94	0.91	0.06*	0.04														
4. Parent Edu.	1.92	0.77	-0.04	0.02	0.08**													
5. Rural Status			0.04	-0.03	-0.02	-0.25**												
6. Comm. Eff	3.70	1.00	0.02	0.21**	0.06*	0.15**	-0.07**											
7. Pol. Knowl. Eff	2.91	1.16	0.01	-0.10**	0.20**	0.20**	-0.06*	0.36**										
8. Pol. Action Eff.	2.97	1.20	0.06*	0.09**	0.12**	0.12**	-0.12**	0.46**	0.52**									
9. CS should	3.89	0.90	-0.06**	0.27**	0.02	0.05*	0.01	0.47**	0.14**	0.26**								
10. CS wrong	2.63	1.03	-0.04	0.20**	-0.03	0.03	0.02	0.24**	0.06*	0.11**	0.43**							
11. CS respect	4.40	0.74	0.01	0.26**	0.01	0.05*	0.00	0.48**	0.14**	0.21**	0.60**	0.33**						
12. SP should	3.14	0.98	0.08**	0.01	0.03	0.23**	-0.10**	0.34**	0.51**	0.43**	0.37**	0.18**	0.27**					
13. SP wrong	2.28	1.05	0.03	0.06*	0.03	0.15**	-0.08**	0.18**	0.30**	0.24**	0.16**	0.55**	0.16**	0.50**				
14. SP respect	3.21	0.95	0.08**	0.09**	0.03	0.14**	-0.05*	0.35**	0.42**	0.36**	0.28**	0.11**	0.39**	0.61**	0.37**			
15. SM should	2.72	0.83	0.01	0.05*	0.12**	0.08**	-0.01	0.32**	0.37**	0.52**	0.52**	0.21**	0.26**	0.58**	0.27**	0.37**		
16. SM wrong	1.76	0.72	-0.06*	0.05*	0.03	-0.01	0.00	0.15**	0.15**	0.17**	0.24**	0.58**	0.15**	0.26**	0.63**	0.22**	0.38**	
17. SM respect	3.26	0.81	0.03	0.15**	0.12**	0.08**	-0.02	0.39**	0.31**	0.37**	0.35**	0.12**	0.49**	0.42**	0.61**	0.71**	0.53**	0.23**

Note. M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . Comm. Eff. = Community Efficacy. Pol. Knowl. Eff. = Political Knowledge Efficacy. Pol. Action Eff. = Political Action Efficacy. CS = Community Service. SP = Standard Political. SM = Social Movement.

**Table 2**  
Multivariate analysis of covariance model results.

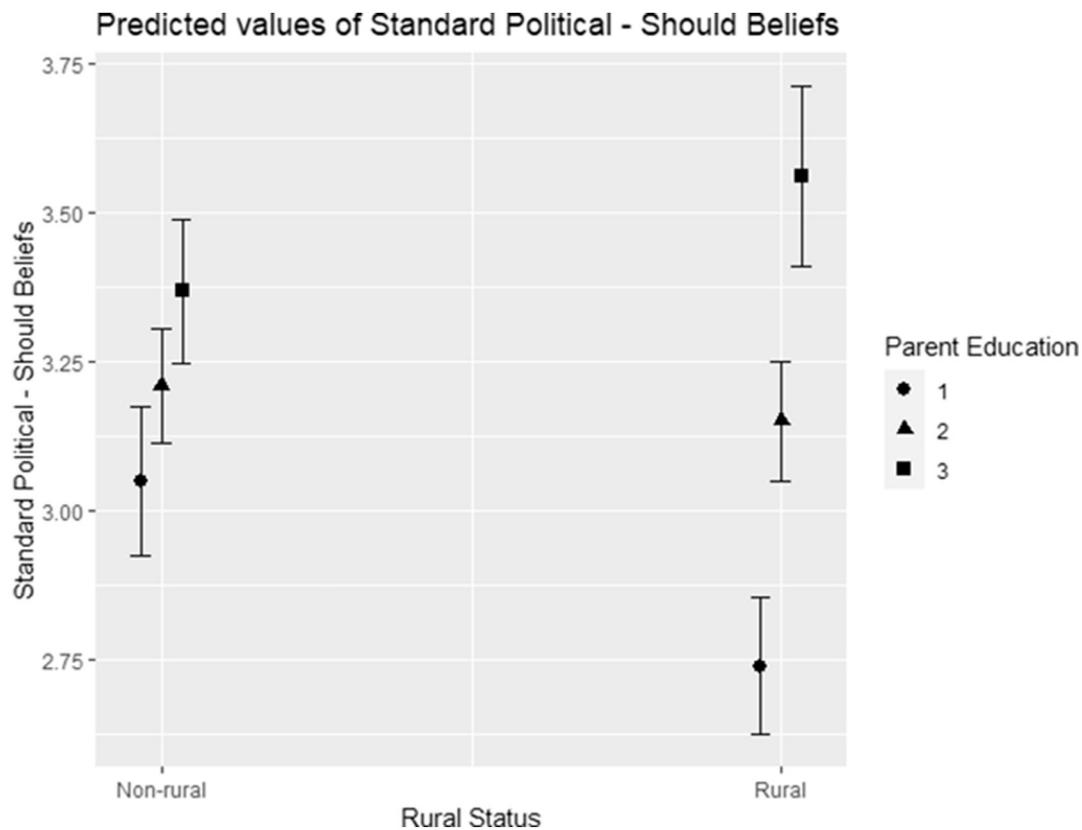
	F	df1	df2	$\eta_p^2$
Outcome: Civic Efficacy				
(Intercept)	27.97***	3	1837	
Cohort	4.59***	6	3676	0.007
Gender (female)	58.82***	3	1837	0.088
Age	2.45	3	1837	0.004
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	12.57***	3	1837	0.020
Rural Status	6.8***	3	1837	0.011
Parent Education	23.78***	3	1837	0.037
Outcome: Community Service Beliefs				
(Intercept)	106.09***	3	1837	
Cohort	0.66	6	3676	0.001
Gender (female)	64.45***	3	1837	0.095
Age	3.73*	3	1837	0.006
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	1.02	3	1837	0.002
Rural Status	0.99	3	1837	0.002
Parent Education	1.81	3	1837	0.003
Outcome: Standard Political Beliefs				
(Intercept)	15.03***	3	1836	
Cohort	4.1***	6	3674	0.007
Gender (female)	8.16***	3	1836	0.013
Age	7.11***	3	1836	0.011
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	2.36	3	1836	0.004
Rural Status	8.69***	3	1836	0.003
Parent Education	9.27***	3	1836	0.044
Rural X Parent Education	8.24***	3	1836	0.013
Outcome: Social Movement Beliefs				
(Intercept)	56.82***	3	1837	
Cohort	4.72***	6	3676	0.008
Gender (female)	14.67***	3	1837	0.023
Age	5.05**	3	1837	0.008
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	9.71***	3	1837	0.016
Rural Status	0.18	3	1837	0.000
Parent Education	3.95**	3	1837	0.006

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

tests indicated that adolescent girls viewed community service as more important (should), obligatory (wrong), and morally worthy (respect) compared with boys (Table 4). Univariate age effects were not statistically significant at  $p < .001$  level.

*Rural and SES difference in standard political beliefs*

The MANCOVA examining standard political beliefs revealed significant main effects for all independent variables and a significant rural by parent education interaction (Table 2). Results from the follow-up univariate tests are reported in Table 4. A stricter alpha threshold (0.001) was used to evaluate univariate effects for should (importance) standard political beliefs based on significant Levene's test, which indicated that rurality, higher parent education, older age, and female gender were significantly associated with adolescents' views of standard political behavior as more important. The rural and parent education main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect. The effect of rural status on should ratings was significant at the lowest level of parent education (i.e., neither parent attended college),  $F(1, 626) = 18.40, p < .001$ , but not at higher levels of parent education,  $F_s < 1.00, ns$  (Fig. 1). Rural youth with low levels of parent education reported significantly lower should judgments for standard political involvement ( $M = 2.70, SE = 0.05$ ) compared to their non-rural counterparts ( $M = 3.03, SE = 0.06$ ). When predicting obligation judgments for standard political behavior, higher levels of parent education and being female was associated with higher obligation judgments. When predicting respect judgments, living in a rural context, having higher levels of parent education, being female, and being older were associated with greater respect for standard political behavior. Although a significant rural by parent education interaction effect was found, follow-up tests indicated the effect of rural status on respect



**Fig. 1.** Interaction effect of rural status X parent education on should beliefs about standard political involvement. Note. Mean difference between non-rural and rural youth was only significant at the lowest level of parent education. Parent education: 1 = neither parent attended college, 2 = at least one parent completed college, 3 = at least one parent completed graduate degree.

beliefs was not statistically significantly at any of the three levels of parent education.

*Rural and SES difference in social movement beliefs*

The MANCOVA examining social movement beliefs revealed significant main effects for parent education, gender, age, and political ideology (Table 2). There were no significant main effects for rural status and no significant interactions. Based on significant univariate tests (Table 4), higher levels of parent education and more liberal political ideology was associated with higher importance judgments for social movement. When predicting views of social movement as obligatory, older age was associated with lower obligation judgments (i.e., social movement viewed as less obligatory). For social movement respect beliefs, being female and identifying as more politically liberal was associated with higher respect for social movement involvement.

*Rural and SES difference in civic efficacy*

Finally, a MANCOVA was used to examine rural and SES differences in civic efficacy (community, political knowledge, political action). The MANCOVA revealed a significant main effect for rural status, parent education, and each of the covariates (Table 2). There were no significant interactions. Follow-up one-way ANCOVAs were performed on each domain of civic efficacy (Table 3). When predicting community efficacy, higher parent education and being female were associated with greater community efficacy. Higher parent education, being male, older age, and liberal ideology were associated with greater political knowledge efficacy. Results indicated a small effect of rural status on political action efficacy ( $\eta_p^2 = 0.009$ ), such that youth residing in a rural town ( $M = 2.83, SE = 0.04$ ) reported significantly lower political action efficacy compared with non-rural youth ( $M = 3.06, SE = 0.04$ ).

**Table 3**  
Follow-up ANCOVA model results for civic efficacy.

	F	$\eta_p^2$
<b>Outcome: Community Efficacy</b>		
(Intercept)	79.1***	0.041
Cohort	1.42	0.002
Gender (female)	85.24***	0.044
Age	1.95	0.001
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	3.42	0.002
Rural Status	3.15	0.002
Parent Education	28.26***	0.015
<b>Outcome: Political Knowledge Efficacy</b>		
(Intercept)	28.61***	0.015
Cohort	3.36*	0.004
Gender (female)	22.08***	0.012
Age	0.10	0.000
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	32.24***	0.017
Rural Status	0.15	0.000
Parent Education	64.12***	0.034
<b>Outcome: Political Action Efficacy</b>		
(Intercept)	17.52***	0.009
Cohort	2.51	0.003
Gender (female)	11.95***	0.006
Age	5.74*	0.003
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	22.76***	0.012
Rural Status	16.16***	0.009
Parent Education	15.16***	0.008

Notes: \*\*\* p < .001, \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05.

In addition, higher levels of parent education, being female, and liberal political ideology were associated with greater political action efficacy. Marginal means for all outcomes by rural status are described in the Supplemental Materials.

**Table 4**  
Follow-up ANCOVA model results for civic beliefs.

	Civic Belief Domain					
	<i>Should</i>		<i>Obligation</i>		<i>Respect</i>	
	F	$\eta_p^2$	F	$\eta_p^2$	F	$\eta_p^2$
<b>Outcome: Community Service Beliefs</b>						
(Intercept)	200.38***	0.098	47.21***	0.025	287.53***	0.135
Cohort	1.16	0.001	0.21	0.000	0.72	0.001
Gender (female)	148.15***	0.075	76.09***	0.040	131.87***	0.067
Age	3.26	0.002	1.22	0.001	1.53	0.001
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	0.58	0.000	1.26	0.001	0.01	0.000
Rural Status	2.29	0.001	1.83	0.001	0.84	0.000
Parent Education	4.90*	0.003	1.75	0.001	3.04	0.002
<b>Outcome: Standard Political Beliefs</b>						
(Intercept)	29.14***	0.016	23.02***	0.012	34.91***	0.019
Cohort	1.54	0.002	7.29**	0.008	2.01	0.002
Gender (female)	0.10	0.000	4.61*	0.003	15.05***	0.008
Age	16.03***	0.009	1.26	0.001	16.04***	0.009
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	6.14*	0.003	0.31	0.000	0.79	0.000
Rural Status	21.52***	0.012	0.12	0.000	5.94*	0.003
Parent Education	16.43***	0.009	24.08***	0.013	6.83**	0.004
Rural X Parent Education	17.54***	0.009	0.12	0.000	5.33*	0.003
<b>Outcome: Social Movement Beliefs</b>						
(Intercept)	82.43*	0.043	113.22***	0.058	89.51***	0.046
Cohort	4.74**	0.005	9.78***	0.011	0.14	0.000
Gender (female)	3.30	0.002	3.52	0.002	40.09***	0.021
Age	0.01	0.000	9.07**	0.005	2.93	0.002
Pol. Ideology (liberal)	23.17***	0.012	3.13	0.002	21.03***	0.011
Rural Status	0.29	0.000	0.00	0.000	0.01	0.000
Parent Education	8.26**	0.004	0.17	0.000	5.28*	0.003

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

Civic engagement is vital for the continuation of democratic institutions and also contributes to healthy and vibrant communities, making it important to increase our understanding of the developmental processes that culminate in engaged citizenship in adulthood. The current study contributes to this broader research goal by comprehensively examining two important aspects of civic reasoning within a sample of primarily White youth: civic beliefs and civic efficacy. Civic theorists have argued that viewing civic engagement as obligatory and morally worthy is an important antecedent of future civic activity (Metzger & Smetana, 2010), and both developmental and political science research have consistently found that viewing oneself as competent to participate in political activities is linked to greater political involvement (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). The current study provides important insights into geographic and socioeconomic differences in adolescents' developing civic reasoning.

Consistent with hypotheses, findings indicate community context and SES differences in youths' political efficacy. Youth from households in which parents had more years of education felt more efficacious about their own political knowledge, their ability to participate in political action, and their ability to contribute to helping their own communities. Socioeconomic status is a consistent predictor of political and community engagement in adulthood, and these findings demonstrate that greater SES is associated with greater civic efficacy in adolescence. Greater socioeconomic status grants individuals an array of personal and social resources that help to facilitate political engagement in adulthood (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). Thus, living with more-educated parents may expose youth to more politically

active role models. In addition, greater socioeconomic status may increase adolescents' access to additional individual and community resources and organizations that could also facilitate greater involvement (Hart et al., 1998). All of these different experiences may lead youth from more educated households to have greater confidence in their abilities to effectively participate in civic action. After accounting for parental education and consistent with hypotheses, differences in adolescents' political efficacy emerged by geographic location. Compared to youth living in the nonrural location (mid-sized city), rural youth rated themselves as less capable of effectively participating in political action. Rural areas may have fewer political and civil institutions compared to urban or suburban communities (Kohnler et al., 2004), so rural youth may feel more isolated from political process. This feeling of isolation may lead them to see fewer opportunities to become engaged to fix social problems through political activity, as opportunities for such engagement may be reduced.

Both geographic location and parental education levels were also associated with adolescents' civic beliefs. Youth whose parents had fewer years of education rated standard political activity as less important, obligatory, and worthy of social praise. Youth with less-educated parents may have less exposure to politically active role models and also less access to community resources that facilitate civic engagement (Brady et al., 1995; Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, & McKee, 2017; Hart et al., 1998; McIntosh et al., 2007). Increased parental education has been positively linked to a wide range of civic outcomes (Warren & Wicks, 2011; Wray-Lake & Shubert, 2019). In addition, research using video-recorded conversations between parents and teens found that parents with increased years of education are more likely to stress the importance of standard political participation (Oosterhoff et al., 2015). Potentially, youth from less-educated families may feel less attached to mainstream political institutions, leading them to view such activity as less of a civic obligation. There was also a significant multivariate effect of rurality on adolescents' civic beliefs about standard political activity. Living in communities that are further away from civic and political institutions may also leave rural youth feeling more isolated from political process. Social network analyses have found that political activities were less centrally connected to rural adolescents' organized activity networks (Oosterhoff, Metzger, & Alvis, 2019a). Feelings of disconnect and lack of opportunities for political participation may lead rural youth to view such behavior as less central to their duties as citizens.

A parent education by rurality interaction indicated that rural youth from less educated families may be the least likely to view standard forms of political behavior as important. This suggests that disparities in political behavior and views of civic obligation that accompany rurality and lower socioeconomic status may compound and exacerbate one another. That is, poorer rural youth may feel particularly alienated from conventional forms of political action such as voting in political elections even compared to their rural peers from more-educated homes. This finding highlights heterogeneity in the civic experiences of youth living in different geographic contexts, as well as the importance of considering the ways in which the combination of social and contextual experiences may intersect and interact to produce unique civic development pathways (Lerner et al., 2014).

Adolescents from more educated households also viewed social movement involvement as more important and morally worthy. Social movements often involve protests or demonstrations over morally relevant political and social issues. Potentially, adolescents living in more-educated households are exposed to different discussions about protest and the goals of those social movements (Oosterhoff et al., 2015), which could lead those youth to view social movements more favorably than youth from less educated households.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences between adolescents living in rural vs. non-rural settings or from families with more or less educated parents in their beliefs that community service is obligatory and morally worthy. While caution should be taken in the

interpretation of null effects, this hints at the possibility that adolescents' experiences in rural vs. non-rural communities or in higher or lower socioeconomic families do not affect their views that community service is an activity in which citizens are obligated to engage. Previous research rooted in social domain theory has found that adolescents' conceptualizations of civic obligation are differentiated and youth apply domain-specific concepts to different forms of engagement (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Specifically, youth conceptualize community service as a moral behavior in their judgments and justifications, while standard political activities are viewed as being social conventions (Alvis & Metzger, 2019; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). According to social domain theory, moral behaviors entail principles of individual welfare and fairness that are universally applicable and not contingent on rules, customs or contextual norms while social conventions entail concepts of authority, consensus, and the smooth functioning of social interactions (Smetana, 2013). Moral and conventional concepts develop through distinct processes with morality developing through dynamic, universal social experiences and social conventional reasoning developing from socialization processes learned within specific contexts (Smetana, 2013). That is, youth's understanding of community service is rooted in normative, universal concepts of human welfare and the importance of reducing suffering, and such beliefs would be expected to emerge across social contexts. In contrast, conceptualizations of political behaviors would develop from experiences and learned norms within specific environments. Overall, this pattern of findings provides further evidence for the utility of social domain theory for explicating adolescents' developing understanding of civic responsibility and also indicates that contextual experiences may play a stronger role in political development compared to non-political aspects of civic development (Metzger & Smetana, 2010).

Additional findings for gender, age, and ideology differences for civic efficacy and beliefs were largely consistent with previous research. For instance, adolescent girls viewed community service as more worthy of social praise than did adolescent boys (Metzger & Ferris, 2013; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Community service involves direct and overt forms of helping behavior. Boys and girls have been found to emphasize different types of prosocial behaviors (Eagly, 2009), and girls score higher than boys on measures of prosocial behavior (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999). However, in contrast to previous research, adolescent girls gave higher respect judgments for both forms of political behavior compared to boys and also gave greater obligation judgments for standard political behavior. Adolescent gender was also significantly associated with adolescents' civic efficacy. Adolescent boys rated themselves as having greater political knowledge and skills necessary for political action. This latter finding is consistent with a great deal of previous research indicating that boys rate themselves higher on political efficacy relative to girls (Arens & Watermann, 2017; Caprara et al., 2009; Eckstein et al., 2012). However, the current study indicates that adolescent girls do not necessarily view themselves as inefficient when it comes to civic engagement, as females rated themselves as more capable of effectively participating in political action and positively contributing to their communities.

Consistent with previous research, older youth viewed standard political behaviors as more important and morally worthy, while younger youth viewed social movement involvement as entailing greater obligation (Metzger & Ferris, 2013). While adolescents continue to view community service as morally worthy from 9th to 12th grade, decreases in obligation judgments may be driven by increasing recognition of personal jurisdiction choice (Nucci, 1996), as adolescents coordinate views of personal prerogative with their understanding of moral obligation (Nucci, Turiel, & Roded, 2017). With increasing age, adolescents may be exposed to more information in civics and government classes about governmental organization, voting, and the importance of citizens' contributions to maintaining political institutions (Galston, 2001). Adolescents' appreciation for conventional political activity may also stem from more enhanced understanding of citizens'

responsibilities due to information absorbed from mass media (Boyd, Zaff, Phelps, Weiner, & Lerner, 2011) or within their families (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2016).

Youth who identified as more politically liberal rated themselves as more efficacious regarding political behavior and their own political knowledge. Liberal political ideology was also associated with higher importance and respect judgments for social movement involvement. Past research has shown that liberal youth are more engaged in social movement forms of political action (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019), which may provide a greater sense of knowledge and efficacy. Political action may also be viewed as an adult-like activity and conservative youth may be more inclined to abide by traditional age norms and thus be less politically active.

#### *Implications for theory and policy*

Findings from this study have important implications for public policy. Specifically, findings from this study demonstrates how context may help to shape individuals' views of themselves as effective political actors. If rural youth feel less-equipped to politically participate or believe political activity is less important, they may grow into adults who are less politically active. This could lead to continued geographic disparities in political participation (Kaufman, 2019), which could lead to reduced advocacy for policies to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities (e.g., higher rates of severe health problems, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Future research should also examine the intersection between rural political participation, geographic isolation, poverty, and the strength of partisan views (Kaufman, 2019).

Our findings of gender differences in political efficacy and beliefs have implications for civic education and service experiences. Political theorists have argued that service-learning programs often focus on volunteering and may downplay importance of political participation (Walker, 2000), and adolescent girls may be especially likely to be steered toward community service and away from political action (Walker, 2002). In addition, the historical marginalization of women from political action and office holding may continue to give adolescent girls fewer political role models compared to males (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). However, the current study indicates that while girls view themselves as less politically knowledgeable compared to boys, they have high levels of efficacy when it comes to positively impacting their communities or engaging in political actions.

#### *Limitations and future directions*

Results from this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Cross-sectional designs reduce the capability to make assumptions about causality. In addition, the sample was overwhelmingly White, and non-White youth may differentially prioritize different forms of civic engagement and may have different views of their own political efficacy (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Moreover, the experiences of living in a rural vs. city context most likely differs for White youth vs. youth of color. Self-report measures are subject to socially desirable reporting, and this could have directly affected youth's reports of their own behaviors or feelings of efficacy. Our measure of geographic context compared youth living in a rural setting and a mid-sized city, so we did not capture the full range of geographic context including urban or suburban cities. We also did not fully capture youth experiences in different types of rural contexts. Additionally, data for this study came from two high schools, which may limit the generalizability of study findings to youth from other rural communities. Future research should consider additional measures such as distance that adolescents live from city centers and capture civic beliefs and efficacy among youth from a wider range of rural settings. We utilized parental education as a measure of socioeconomic status, but SES entails is multifaceted and future research should consider the impact of

components of SES (Hauser, 1994). Although the pattern of findings in this study points to important differences in youth civic developmental experiences, many effects were relatively small. Finally, our assessment of socioeconomic status focused on parental education, but other factors might also influence youth civic cognitions such as family income or financial strain. Future research may benefit from using more comprehensive measures of socioeconomic status.

## Conclusion

Civic engagement is multifaceted, and the current study provides important information about the correlates of cognitive aspects of youth civic engagement (civic beliefs and efficacy). Findings highlight the nuanced and domain-specific way that adolescents interpret civic duty and reason about their own civic efficacy. The current study also demonstrates the ways in which contextual experiences such as living in a rural community or socioeconomic status are associated with adolescents' reasoning about civic responsibility and views of themselves as competent civic actors. Civic development theory stresses the importance of considering how interactions between individuals and their environment lead to unique civic development trajectories (Lerner et al., 2014). It may be important for civic educators to be aware of potential gender, SES, and rural differences that may differentially shape youths' perceptions of civic responsibility and efficacy. Finally, findings additionally contribute to civic developmental theory by highlighting the utility in examining distinct aspects of adolescents' civic beliefs and efficacy.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101183>.

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