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The Effect of Media Tone on Youth Trust in Government

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in U.S. democratic institutions is at historic lows, particularly among younger generations. This study examines how narrative framing of democracy influences adolescents' coping strategies and civic engagement intentions. Ninety-three high school students in New Jersey were randomly assigned to read pessimistic, neutral, or optimistic passages about the state of U.S. democracy and completed survey measures adapted from the COPE Inventory. Factor analysis revealed three clusters of responses: active engagement, institutional confidence, and voting intention. Results showed that neutral frames paradoxically produced the lowest confidence in democracy, while pessimistic frames heightened concern and correlated with greater willingness to engage in protest or activism. These findings extend research on framing effects (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996) and youth political psychology (Oosterhoff et al., 2018) by highlighting the role of coping mechanisms in democratic resilience. Implications suggest that civic education and political communication strategies should account for the ways adolescents transform concern into constructive participation.

INTRODUCTION

Public trust in American democratic institutions has reached historic lows, with only 19% of citizens expressing confidence in government as of 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2023). This erosion of trust is particularly consequential for Generation Z, who are not only the newest entrants into the electorate but also digital natives whose political identities are formed in a highly mediated information environment. Research shows that adolescents increasingly rely on social media platforms for political information (Auxier et al., 2022), where narratives of polarization, corruption, and institutional dysfunction are algorithmically amplified. Such exposure raises critical questions about how young people process political information and whether narrative framing of democratic challenges—whether pessimistic, neutral, or optimistic—influences their confidence in institutions and willingness to engage civically.

Political psychology provides one framework for understanding these dynamics, highlighting how individuals cope with stressors that feel larger than themselves. Drawing from Carver et al.'s (1989) COPE Inventory, as well as Folkman's (2008) and Ojala's (2019) research on meaning-based coping with climate change, civic participation can be understood as a coping strategy for democratic stress. Previous studies suggest that adolescents often respond to distrust or victimization with paradoxically higher civic engagement (Oosterhoff et al., 2018), indicating that concern and action may coexist in a productive tension. To explore these questions in context, this study surveyed 93 high school students from Northern New Jersey,

focusing on Bergen County and surrounding communities. By situating the analysis within a regional sample of adolescents approaching voting age, this research offers insights into how local high schoolers interpret narratives about democracy's future and how concern, skepticism, and optimism shape their civic coping strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and Media Consumption Patterns Among Youth

The 21st century has witnessed a significant transformation in information consumption patterns, particularly among Generation Z (Auxier et al., 2022). Contemporary research indicates that 51% of Generation Z adolescents primarily acquire news through digital and social platforms rather than traditional information sources such as search engines or established news websites. Watson's (2022) quantitative analysis further substantiates this trend, revealing that 50% of Generation Z individuals engage with social media daily for news consumption, with cumulative monthly usage reaching 85%. In stark contrast, alternative news sources demonstrate substantially lower daily engagement rates: online-only news sites (13%), cable news networks (6%), and local newspapers (5%), though their respective monthly utilization remains notable at 58%, 58%, and 30%. This shift in information acquisition pathways coincides with heightened youth interest in sociopolitical issues including climate change, unemployment, and healthcare access, which is potentially attributable to the algorithmic amplification of such content across digital platforms (Auxier et al., 2022).

The proliferation of social media as a primary information source presents significant epistemological challenges. Rahman et al. (2021) critically examine the dissemination of misinformation within digital ecosystems, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis reveals that social media platforms function as catalytic environments for information transmission—both accurate and inaccurate—absent sufficient regulatory frameworks. The researchers identify the phenomenon of "infodemic" as an overabundance of information that compromises source verification capabilities among consumers. They note the strategic exploitation of information oversaturation to advance political and commercial agendas, while simultaneously highlighting the potential for digital platforms to facilitate citizen demands for governmental transparency and accountability.

Examining source attribution patterns in contemporary journalism, Van Leuven et al. (2019) conclude that despite digital transformation, traditional news gathering mechanisms (e.g., press conferences, official releases) retain primacy over emergent media sources (e.g., social platforms). Their findings indicate continued dominance of political and organizational voices in news construction, with citizen contributions primarily limited to foreign correspondence. While the researchers suggest that concerns regarding media democratization may be overstated, methodological limitations (specifically the exclusive utilization of Belgian newspaper data) necessitate cautious extrapolation to international contexts. Their analysis suggests that contemporary challenges in information dissemination reside not in source acquisition but in distribution modalities.

Political Communication and Trust Dynamics

The framing of political discourse significantly influences public perception and institutional trust. Cappella and Jamieson's (1996) seminal work demonstrates how subtle alterations in

news framing substantially impact audience reception of governmental information. Through systematic analysis of political advertisements, election coverage, and print/broadcast content, the researchers establish causal relationships between media framing and public opinion formation. While this research predates contemporary digital ecosystems, its fundamental principles regarding framing effects maintain theoretical relevance across emergent platforms, though platform-specific algorithmic personalization introduces additional complexity not present in traditional media environments.

Institutional trust exhibits hierarchical variation across governmental strata. Cole and Kincaid's (2006) trend analysis reveals persistent patterns of public confidence, with local governmental institutions receiving highest public approval ratings, followed by federal and state entities respectively. Their findings further demonstrate demographic variance in institutional trust: African American respondents express disproportionate confidence in federal institutions, while Hispanic communities demonstrate preferential trust in local governance structures. This research provides critical context for understanding contemporary civic engagement patterns, particularly in relation to vertical governmental structures.

The relationships between governmental self-representation, media portrayal, and public trust is further explained in Miller et al.'s (2019) empirical analysis of newspaper effects on civic confidence. Their findings reveal that while most journalistic content maintains neutral or positive governmental framing, consumption of critically oriented media correlates with increased institutional distrust. Notably, the researchers identified minimal impact of critical coverage on political efficacy, suggesting that media exposure primarily affects trust rather than perceived capacity for civic influence. The study proposes a structural model of political inefficacy wherein cumulative distrust—stemming from policy dissatisfaction rather than leadership evaluation—engenders systemic cynicism. Complementing this analysis, Liu et al. (2020) identify specific communication strategies that influence media framing of governance, finding that direct media engagement correlates positively with favorable coverage, while departmental coordination deficiencies and inadequate communication resources predict negative representation.

Contemporary Trust Deficits and Civic Implications

Current empirical data demonstrate historically unprecedented erosion of public confidence in American democratic institutions. The Pew Research Center's (2023) qualitative analysis of political discourse reveals predominant characterization of governmental systems as "divisive," "corrupt," and "messy" among respondents. This negative perception correlates with quantitative measurements indicating public trust has reached nadir levels of 19% in 2023—the lowest recorded measurement in several decades. These findings provide critical context for understanding contemporary challenges in civic participation and institutional legitimacy.

The relationship between public opinion and democratic functionality is theoretically examined in Shapiro's (2018) analysis of governance mechanisms. His work establishes that while public trust represents one factor in governmental efficacy, citizen capacity for meaningful participation constitutes an equally critical variable—an area requiring further theoretical development. Clark and Lee (2019) introduce the concept of "optimal trust" as

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contextually variable depending on political structure and ideological frameworks. Their research establishes that trust optimization increases with voter decisiveness, demonstrates inverse relationship with governmental scale (higher in local than federal contexts), increases in contested rather than unanimous decisions, and correlates negatively with emotional investment in outcomes.

Civic Engagement and Democratic Sustainability

The reciprocal relationship between institutional trust and civic participation has significant implications for democratic resilience. King et al. (2020) critically evaluate government-initiated community engagement initiatives, proposing a paradigmatic shift from governmental outreach to community empowerment. Their analysis challenges conventional approaches to civic participation, advocating instead for structural reforms that enable communities to initiate governmental engagement rather than respond to institutionally defined parameters. This reconceptualization emphasizes the necessity of authentic trust relationships between governmental entities and constituent communities to facilitate meaningful civic action.

Examining the relationship between adverse experiences and political engagement, Oosterhoff et al. (2018) identify a counterintuitive correlation wherein adolescents reporting victimization experiences simultaneously demonstrate heightened governmental distrust and increased political participation. This relationship maintains consistency across victimization types, demographic variables, and historical periods, suggesting enduring psychological mechanisms that connect negative experiences with civic engagement motivation. While their sample population (New Jersey adolescents aged 16-21) limits generalizability, the findings nonetheless provide valuable insights regarding youth political identity formation.

The cumulative evidence establishes clear relationships between political communication modalities, institutional trust, and civic engagement patterns. Contemporary American society demonstrates historically low governmental confidence, a phenomenon potentially exacerbated by information ecosystem transformation. This trust deficit particularly impacts young citizens who predominantly access political information through digital platforms vulnerable to misinformation. Given the critical role of youth participation in democratic sustainability, this research examines the relationship between media framing of governmental institutions and high school students' trust development and civic engagement intentions.

METHODS

Participants and Sampling Method

The study took place in January and February of 2025, and data were collected by surveying high school students who are currently enrolled in a public school in New Jersey. A total of 87 students participated in the surveys, and 200 students was determined to be an ample sample size from the Qualtrics Sample Size calculator, as that was the amount that was found to be able to account for a 10,000 population with a 95% confidence interval and a 6% margin of error.

The survey was approved by the Bergen Academies' Institutional Review Board, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the survey process, as no information was collected

about the participants, and anonymization was enabled in Qualtrics, the platform on which the survey was conducted. All students confirmed that they were between 16 and 26 years of age, and the surveys were shared in the New Jersey schools of Bergen County Academies, Glen Rock High School, Ridgewood High School, and Fair Lawn High School. Data was collected through convenience sampling.

The survey was shared on the researcher's personal social media page to maximize the amount of responses collected, which could further contribute to voluntary response bias, limiting the applicability of the findings.

Surveys

The study consisted of three different versions of a survey, where three different groups of students were randomly presented with an alternate survey. Each version differed in the initial passage that the students were asked to read, which each take either a pessimistic, neutral, or optimistic perspective to the US's current governmental system and how it will continue to operate in the future. The passages were chosen based on phrases and overall ideas used to frame the U.S. government, and each participant was randomly assigned to only one passage. The passages are as follows:

Table 1: Pessimistic Tone Passage (Balz et al., 2023)

The old dates to the writing of the Constitution - debates and compromises that resulted in representation in the House based on population and in the Senate based on equal standing for the states; the odd system by which we elect presidents; and lifetime appointments for Supreme Court justices. In general, the founders often distrusted the masses and sought to create structural protections against them. The newer element, which has gathered strength in recent decades, is the deepening polarization of the political system. Various factors have caused this: shifts within the two parties that have enlarged the ideological gap between them; geographic sorting that has widened the differences between red and blue states; a growing urban-rural divide; and greater hostility among individuals toward political opponents. ... Henry Brady, professor of political science and public policy at the University of California at Berkeley, has been studying these issues for many years. As he surveys the current state of the United States' democracy, he comes away deeply pessimistic. "I'm terrified," he said. "I think we are in bad shape, and I don't know a way out."

Table 2: Neutral Tone Passage (Gehl et al, 2020)

The Founders and Framers didn't pretend to know every detail about how our government would need to function. They took care, in our extraordinary Constitution, to provide for amendments and to delegate most of the power for elections machinery to the states and for legislative machinery to Congress. Thomas Jefferson observed the opportunity this created, writing that as circumstances change, our "institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times." Currently, most efforts to save our democracy revolve around a laundry list of reforms, from reducing money in politics to instituting term limits. We endorse some elements of the popular reform agenda, but many of its proposals either fail to address the root causes of systemic problems, or aren't viable, or both. Bottom line: They won't make a significant difference in the results the system delivers, so we must focus elsewhere.

Table 3: Optimistic Tone Passage (Mears et al., 2024)

Federal legislation is not the only path to progress; states can also step up to protect Americans from

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unequal barriers to voting by passing their own state-level voting rights acts (VRAs). State VRAs do not obviate the need for federal legislation, nor is federal legislation on its own sufficient. Rather, they should be viewed as complementary: Both federal and state-level voting rights legislation are needed to address unequal barriers to voting.
State VRAs are important because they can help prevent discriminatory voting practices before they go into effect, and they also provide practical tools that communities can use to fight back against discriminatory voting and election practices in state and local elections. For example, the California Voting Rights Act prompted hundreds of local jurisdictions to move away from winner-take-all, multiseat, at-large elections, which often drown out voters of color and lead to unequal representation. This has already led to a significant increase in diverse representation in local offices within the state.

The passages were pulled from different articles found online, and they were ensured to be classified as either optimistic, neutral, or pessimistic by sending out a survey to 10 students who categorized the passages as either optimistic, neutral, or pessimistic. The passage intended to be optimistic received 8 optimistic votes and 2 neutral votes, the passage intended to be negative received 9 negative votes and 1 neutral vote, and the passage intended to be neutral received 5 neutral votes, 3 pessimistic votes, and 2 optimistic votes. While the students' opinions were mixed, the highest response group (50%) perceived it as neutral, making neutrality the most common impression. Additionally, the neutral passage's relatively balanced response distribution further indicates it was not clearly optimistic or pessimistic, reinforcing its neutral status.

Measures

The COPE Inventory, developed by Carver et al. (1989), provided a theoretical framework for assessing how people respond to stressors: in this case, concerns about democracy. This multidimensional scale measures different coping processes across various domains, which allowed the research to categorize statements in a psychologically grounded way.

The statements in the survey were organized according to three coping dimensions derived from the COPE Inventory:

1. **Belief-based statements** (corresponding to problem-focused coping): These statements assessed participants' cognitive evaluations of democracy's current state and potential for improvement. Problem-focused coping involves directly addressing the source of stress, which in this context manifested as evaluations of democratic institutions and their capacity for change.
2. **Meaning-based statements** (adapted specifically for this study): This category was particularly relevant since climate change, and by extension, democratic challenges, are issues that cannot be easily solved by individuals. Drawing from Folkman's (2008) work and Ojala's (2019) research on climate change coping, these statements measured how participants find significance and purpose in civic engagement despite limited individual control.
3. **Action-based statements** (corresponding to emotion-focused coping): These evaluated participants' behavioral intentions in response to democratic concerns, similar to how emotion-focused coping in the COPE Inventory assesses how people manage emotional reactions to stressors.

This approach aligned with the study's objective of understanding how different narrative frames (optimistic, neutral, or pessimistic) might influence participants' coping strategies when confronting challenges to democracy.

The participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("I don't agree at all") to 5 ("I totally agree"). See Table 4 for the complete list of statements.

Table 4: Statements provided to participants which were rated on a Likert scale from 1-5.

Belief-based statements

1. I have confidence in the current state of US democracy.
2. I believe US democracy can positively evolve from its current state with the resources it has right now.
3. I believe that US democracy requires critical reform and a lot of pressure from its citizens to properly serve the nation.

Meaning-based statements

4. The topic of US democracy seriously concerns me.
5. I believe in the power of protests to bring attention to a prevalent issue in the government.
6. I believe civic engagement (i.e., being informed about political events, voting, even going to protests) strongly influences the democratic process.

Action-based statements

7. I am going to vote in the 2028 presidential election.
8. I would be willing to contact a government official if a law was passed that I disagree with.
9. If given the opportunity, I would join a protest to advocate for changes in government policies or practices.

RESULTS

A total of 93 high school students completed the survey across four New Jersey schools. The Qualtrics randomization made it so 35 people read the negative passage, 36 people read the neutral passive, and 22 people read the constructive passage. To analyze their responses, we first examined how the survey questions grouped together using factor analysis, then tested whether different passages led to different response patterns using statistical comparisons between groups.

We used factor analysis to understand how similar questions were related to one another and potentially grouped together. We found that students' responses clustered into three main patterns. The first cluster, or factor one included questions 4, 5, 8, and 9, which pertained to concerns, beliefs about protests, and contacting government officials. These loaded together because they focused on individuals who are willing to take action in their civic systems, and they had a reliability of $\alpha = .84$, indicating those questions consistently measure the same thing.

Factor two was confidence in current civic systems, including questions 1 and 2, asking about people's trust in our current systems of democracy (what does this mean) and whether they believe it can be meaningfully reformed and improved. These loaded with a reliability of $\alpha = .66$, indicating they are related, but not as strongly as the questions about active engagement. Additionally, this is a low number; while this reliability is acceptable for exploratory research,

future studies should include additional questions to better measure confidence in democracy.

Factor three loaded with just question 7, which was about planning to vote, perhaps suggesting that voting is viewed differently from other forms of engagement. Additionally, two items cross-loaded on multiple factors: belief that democracy requires critical reform (question 3) and believe in civic engagement's influence (question 6). This crossloading suggesting those questions tap into multiple aspects of democratic coping.

Notably, Q6_1 and Q6_2 (confidence questions) have negative loadings with Factor 1 in some cases. This means that students who are more concerned about democracy (high Factor 1) tend to have less confidence in current systems, and there is a psychological tension between being worried and being confident; thus, students' heightened concern does not always translate into reassurance. In fact, it can actually amplify skepticism.

Table 5: Means and standard deviations for the scores of each question, grouped by factor analyses

	Factor group 1 (active engagement)				**Factor group 2 (confidence)**				
	Q6_4	Q6_5	Q6_8	Q6_9	Q6_1	Q6_2	Q6_3	Q6_6	Q6_7
Constructive									
Mean	3.904762	3.190476	3.047619	3.142857	2.380952	3.047619	4.190476	4.428571	4.619048
Standard Deviation	1.135991	1.209093	1.283596	1.458962	1.023533	1.283596	1.123345	0.810643	0.86465
NEGATIVE									
Mean	3.681321	3.310561	2.921768	3.312086	2.207997	3.242769	4.065809	4.129323	4.484039
Standard Deviation	1.342708	1.253384	1.254301	1.419584	0.847097	1.10629	1.055049	1.110604	1.137655
Neutral									
Mean	3.870968	3.548387	3.129032	3.580645	2.032258	3.16129	4.322581	4.290323	4.483871
Standard Deviation	1.310011	1.027577	1.203936	1.258946	0.874981	1.240881	0.871286	1.039024	1.207503

It also seems that those who read the neutral, balanced information felt slightly less confident about democracy than people in the other two groups. According to the table above, for Q6_1 ("I have confidence in the current state of US democracy"), neutral framing produced the lowest confidence rating (M = 2.03), compared with constructive (M = 2.38) and negative (M = 2.21) framings. Although Q6_2 showed smaller differences across groups (Neutral = 3.16; Constructive = 3.05; Negative = 3.24), the consistently low average for Q6_1 suggests that neutral framing uniquely dampened participants' confidence in democracy relative to the other conditions. While it is easy to assume that the negative passage would make its audience less confident and balanced information would be reassuring, the results indicated that people who read pessimistic information were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards the future of the US and its government, but people who read a more ambivalent take on the US's future felt the least confident of all

Furthermore, based on the ANOVA tests, it was found that those who read the neutral, balanced information actually felt less confident about democracy than people in the other two groups. The neutral group had an average confidence of 1.82, the negative group had an average of 2.36, and the constructive group had an average of 2.42. While it is easy to assume that the negative passage would make its audience less confident and balanced information

would be reassuring, the results indicated that people who read pessimistic information were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards the future of the US and its government, but people who read a more ambivalent take on the US's future felt the least confident of all.

Students who read the pessimistic passage showed the highest levels of active engagement (M = 3.5, SD = 1.2) and displayed the most confidence in the current system, although its mean number of M=2.72 (SD=0.97) was not particularly high out of the scale of 5, nor was it notably different from the average of those who read the confident passage (M=2.71, SD=4) or the neutral passage (M = 2.8, SD = 0.9). All groups showed similarly high intentions to vote, with the optimistic group having a mean of 4.62, and the pessimistic and neutral groups having a mean of 4.48. Furthermore, all groups demonstrated strong belief in the power of civic engagement, with the constructive group showing the highest confidence (M= 4.43).

While only confidence in democracy (question 1) reached statistically significant numbers in its results, several other variables showed moderate to large-effect sizes, suggesting meaningful differences that may have been obscured by limited statistical power due to unequal group sizes, with the constructive group having only 22 respondents compared to the negative and neutral groups' sizes of 35 and 36 respondents, respectively.

DISCUSSION

Pessimistic passages tended to lead to higher scores in factor one, active engagement, potentially suggesting that exposure to concerning information about democracy may actually motivate students to consider more direct forms of civic participation. This ties back to the COPE framework for responses to stressors: action-based statements in particular. The finding that students who read pessimistic passages showed higher levels of active engagement aligns with theories of motivated coping, where perceived threats can energize problem-focused responses (Carver et al., 1989). Although this finding differed from the original hypothesis of negative, pessimistic writing leading to decreased responses that supported action to reform the federal government, this finding alternatively suggests that rather than discouraging civic participation, concerning information about democracy may actually motivate young people to consider taking action.

Our findings both support and extend existing research on framing effects in political communication. Cappella and Jamieson's (1996) foundational work showed that subtle differences in narrative framing could meaningfully alter public perception of government. Consistent with this, our study demonstrates that the tone of democratic narratives (pessimistic, neutral, or optimistic) significantly shapes how young people report coping with democratic stressors. In particular, the finding that neutral framing produced the lowest confidence in democracy complicates assumptions that balanced information is inherently reassuring. This echoes Miller et al.'s (1979) observation that exposure to critical media increases distrust, suggesting that ambivalence or ambiguity may in fact deepen feelings of uncertainty among adolescents.

The results also extend research on political psychology and youth engagement. Oosterhoff et al. (2018) found that negative life experiences correlated with higher distrust but also higher political participation among adolescents. Our data parallels this paradox: students exposed to pessimistic framings expressed greater concern and lower confidence in democracy, yet

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also reported higher willingness to engage in protest and activism. This suggests that democratic coping among youth may involve transforming feelings of threat or worry into action, aligning with Folkman's (2008) and Ojala's (2019) findings that meaning-based coping can channel anxiety about uncontrollable problems into constructive civic engagement.

At the same time, the study raises challenges for existing theories. Traditional models often assume that pessimistic framings erode both trust and participation, while optimistic framings encourage engagement (Shapiro, 2011; King et al., 2020). Yet our results complicate this picture: optimism and pessimism both produced higher confidence than neutrality, and pessimism in particular correlated with stronger active engagement. One possible explanation is the unique developmental stage of our participants. High school students, many approaching voting age, may be especially sensitive to narratives that frame democracy as threatened, interpreting them as calls to action rather than deterrents. Methodological factors, such as our reliance on digital survey passages rather than live media exposure, may also have influenced outcomes by allowing students more reflective processing of the frames.

Finally, this study contributes novel insights to the literature on youth political efficacy in the current political climate. While Pew Research Center (2023) documents historically low levels of public trust in American institutions in recent years, our results suggest that adolescents are not uniformly disengaged. Even under conditions of pessimism, students showed strong intentions to vote and engage civically. Studying high school students specifically reveals how coping strategies develop at the earliest stages of civic identity formation, offering a window into how Generation Z may reconcile distrust with commitment to democratic processes. By situating democratic coping within the broader context of societal stress research, these findings highlight that political concern and political confidence are not mutually exclusive; instead, they coexist in a productive tension that may drive young people toward more active, if skeptical, participation.

The findings carry important implications for educators, policymakers, and communicators concerned with democratic resilience. As adolescents increasingly rely on digital platforms for political information, the way democratic challenges are framed has tangible effects on how young people think about trust, engagement, and reform. Our results suggest that pessimistic or critical narratives may not necessarily demobilize youth, but instead can catalyze concern-driven action. This highlights the potential for civic education to harness worry or skepticism as a motivational force, teaching students to channel political concern into constructive democratic participation rather than disengagement.

More broadly, the results underscore the role of coping strategies in political psychology. By applying the COPE inventory framework to democratic stressors, this study demonstrates that civic responses can be understood through the same psychological mechanisms individuals use to cope with other large-scale societal challenges, such as climate change. This connection suggests that fostering resilience in democracy may require the same tools used in other domains—helping young people manage uncertainty, reframe anxiety, and identify actionable pathways toward agency. In this way, democratic coping is not just about political knowledge but about psychological adaptability, with implications for designing curricula and interventions that integrate emotional resilience with civic skills.

LIMITATIONS

While the findings provide meaningful insights, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size (N = 93) was smaller than originally intended and uneven across the three framing conditions, reducing statistical power and potentially obscuring significant effects. Second, the sample was drawn from high schools in a single region of New Jersey through convenience and voluntary response methods, limiting the generalizability of the results to other geographic, socioeconomic, or cultural contexts. Additionally, reliance on self-reported intentions (e.g., plans to vote, willingness to protest) introduces potential gaps between expressed attitudes and actual future behavior. Finally, the study only examined immediate responses to brief written passages; it remains unclear whether these effects persist over time or under conditions of repeated exposure to political information.

Future research should expand the scope of this study by recruiting larger and more diverse samples across different regions and demographic groups to improve generalizability. Longitudinal designs would be especially valuable in determining whether narrative framing effects on coping strategies endure over time or influence real-world behaviors, such as voting turnout or protest participation. Additionally, future studies could examine framing across different media formats—including video, social media posts, and peer-to-peer communication—to better approximate the digital environments where young people actually encounter political information. Finally, integrating physiological or qualitative measures of coping (e.g., stress markers, open-ended interviews) could deepen understanding of how young people emotionally and cognitively navigate democratic stressors, offering richer insight into the mechanisms behind democratic resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how narrative framing of democratic challenges influences young people's coping strategies and civic engagement intentions. By examining high school students' responses to pessimistic, neutral, and optimistic portrayals of U.S. democracy, we found that framing shapes both confidence in institutions and willingness to act. Neutral frames paradoxically reduced confidence the most, while pessimistic frames heightened concern and promoted stronger engagement intentions. These results challenge conventional assumptions about political framing, revealing that ambivalence may discourage confidence more than overtly negative narratives, and that worry can coexist with civic motivation. Despite limitations in sample size and scope, the findings highlight the value of viewing democratic participation through the lens of coping psychology. Understanding how adolescents manage democratic stressors can inform civic education, communication strategies, and broader efforts to cultivate resilience in future citizens.

APPENDIX

Table 5: Factor Analysis Results

Total Variance Explained									
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.784	42.045	42.045	3.784	42.045	42.045	3.125	34.717	34.717

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2	1.347	14.966	57.011	1.347	14.966	57.011	1.888	20.974	55.692
3	1.123	12.481	69.492	1.123	12.481	69.492	1.242	13.800	69.492
4	.833	9.254	78.746						
5	.576	6.396	85.142						
6	.499	5.546	90.688						
7	.423	4.696	95.383						
8	.251	2.794	98.177						
9	.164	1.823	100.000						
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.									

Component Matrix[a]			
	Component		
	1	**2**	**3**
Q6_1 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - I have confidence in the current state of US democracy.	-.533	.621	.344
Q6_2 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - I believe US democracy can positively evolve from its current state with the resources it has right now.	-.528	.543	.069
Q6_3 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - I believe US democracy requires critical reform and large pressure from its citizens to properly serve the nation.	.635	-.053	.519
Q6_4 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - The topic of US democracy seriously concerns me.	.851	.124	-.173
Q6_5 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - I believe in the power of protests to bring attention to a prevalent issue in the government.	.622	.499	.296
Q6_6 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - I believe civic engagement (i.e., being informed about political events, voting, even going to protests) strongly influences the democratic process.	.532	.165	-.624
Q6_7 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - If I could vote by 2027, I would vote in the upcoming election.	.354	-.533	.473
Q6_8 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the	.818	.206	.001

statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - I would be willing to contact a government official if a law was passed that I disagree with.			
Q6_9 From a scale of 1-4, slide the bar to indicate how much you agree with the statement (1 = I don't agree at all, 5 = I totally agree) - If given the opportunity, I would join a protest to advocate for changes in government policies or practices.	.794	.211	.020
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.			
a. 3 components extracted.			

Component	**1**	**2**	**3**
1	.855	-.491	.168
2	.511	.738	-.440
3	.092	.462	.882
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.			

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