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Civilization and Its Discontented: Links Between Youth Victimization, Beliefs About Government, and Political Participation Across Seven American Presidencies

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Promoting trust in public officials and active political engagement is vital to sustaining a well-functioning democracy. Developmental psychologists propose that youths' beliefs about government and participation in politics are rooted in personal experiences within their communities. Previous studies have focused on how positive experiences within youths' families, schools, and communities facilitate greater social trust and political participation. However, less is known about how negative interpersonal experiences—such as criminal victimization—intersect with youths' beliefs about the trustworthiness, competence, and knowledge of government officials, and their participation in political activity. Using data from 39 waves of the Monitoring the Future study, the current study examined associations among youth victimization, beliefs about government, and participation in various political activities. Adolescents ($N = 109,574$; 50.9% female) enrolled in 12th grade across the United States reported on whether they had experienced various types of victimization during the previous year, their beliefs about government, and their participation in multiple forms of political activity. Adolescents who reported more frequent victimization experiences endorsed significantly greater discontent with government and were significantly more engaged in various forms of political activity. The magnitude and direction of these effects were generally consistent across different types of victimization, different demographic subgroups of youth, and different sociohistorical periods. Findings are interpreted from a social contract theory perspective, followed by a discussion of implications for building psychological theory and informing public policy.

Keywords: political engagement, adolescence, victimization, social contract theory, trust in government

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Facilitating greater trust in government and increasing youth political engagement are national priorities that have received considerable attention within psychology (e.g., Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). Endorsing positive beliefs about government, including trust and confidence in government officials, and actively participating in politics, is necessary to maintain a peaceful, cooperative, and democratic society (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Cultivating positive beliefs about government and political participation may be particularly important during adolescence, a developmental period when youth are forming skills and behavioral habits important for active engagement throughout adulthood (Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009). Developmental psychologists have proposed that adolescents' concepts of government and political involvement are rooted in their everyday experiences within their communities (e.g., Flana-

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gan, 2013). Much of this research has focused on how positive experiences within youths' communities promote greater social responsibility and motivate civic action (Galston, 2001; Zaff et al., 2010). Less is known about how negative life experiences—such as being the victim of assault or property damage—are associated with youths' perception of government and political participation. Experiencing victimization may prompt adolescents to view government officials as ineffective or negligent in their duty to ensure the liberty and safety of the people and may also motivate political participation as a means of enacting social change (Locke, 1689/1993). Drawing from research in psychology and political philosophy, the current study tested whether experiencing victimization is associated with youths' beliefs about the motives, competence, and overall trustworthiness of government officials and their participation in political activities.

Adolescent Civic Development: Social Contract Theory

Psychologists have long recognized adolescence as a formative period for developing skills, knowledge, competencies, and beliefs necessary for engaged citizenship (Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009). Adolescence is characterized by pervasive physical, emotional, and social–cognitive growth that provides youth with the ability to form a complex understanding of society, including beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of government and its citizens (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009). During late adolescence, youth also make substantial gains in political skills and knowledge (Hart & Atkins, 2011) and become more involved in political activities (Flanagan, 2013). The political skills, knowledge, and behavioral habits that develop during adolescence are theorized to lay the foundation for sustained political participation throughout adulthood (Flanagan, Syvertsen, Gill, Gallay, & Cumsille, 2009).

Although various theories have been used to describe and explain the developmental processes that lead to active citizenship (e.g., Zaff et al., 2010), social contract theory provides an especially suitable framework for examining links among youth victimization, beliefs about government, and political behavior. Concepts of the social contract were first articulated in the early writings of John Locke (Locke, 1689/1993) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rousseau, 1762/1920), and provide a philosophical foundation for many modern democracies around the world. The *social contract* refers to a pact that unites individuals within a given society with a common goal of establishing social harmony. As part of this pact, citizens are obligated to forfeit certain freedoms that may infringe on the rights and welfare of other citizens (e.g., we agree that we should not steal from each other), while also engaging in activities that help sustain a well-functioning democracy (e.g., political participation). In re-

turn, the polity is obligated to protect individuals from harm and uphold individual rights, thereby ensuring their liberty. In the 20th century, Rawls (1971) added another dimension to the social contract—a fundamental moral sensibility to principles of social justice and fairness. Rawls theorized that violations of these principles evokes moral indignation that spurs offended parties to engage in political activity with the intention of promoting moral order.

Psychologists have used social contract theory to help define which activities constitute one's "civic duty" (Flanagan et al., 1999) and to elucidate the developmental processes implicated in active citizenship (Flanagan, 2013). This research has revealed that adolescents possess a complex understanding of the role of government and the relationship between self and society that closely aligns with Locke's and Rousseau's original conceptions of the social contract. For instance, youth view government as having an obligation to create (and citizens as having an obligation to follow) laws that protect individuals from harming each other (Flanagan, 2013; Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). Further, youth recognize that individuals have an obligation to contribute to society by performing various civic duties, including voting, joining political campaigns, and becoming knowledgeable about social issues (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Youth also acknowledge that, at times, it may be appropriate to take stands against government in an effort to rectify perceived injustice or correct institutional deficiencies through protesting and boycotting (Metzger & Smetana, 2009). Collectively, these studies suggest that youth recognize that government has a responsibility to protect its citizens from harm, and reciprocally, that citizens have a duty to maintain effective governance through political participation.

Although many youth recognize the importance of political participation, fewer youth are actually engaged in the political process. Voting and registration rates are lowest among 18- to 24-year-olds compared with all other ages (File, 2014), which may be because of age-related differences in available social or economic resources that support participation, or whether developmental milestones that increase the relevance of political decisions have yet been achieved (e.g., stable employment, marriage; Zaff et al., 2010). Developmental research on youth political participation suggests that positive experiences within families, schools, and communities during adolescence promotes social trust and provides youth with important skills conducive of political involvement (Zaff et al., 2010; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007). However, fewer studies have examined how adverse life experiences may intersect with adolescent beliefs about government and involvement in politics.

Youth Victimization and the Social Contract

Being the victim of a crime, such as physical assault or property damage, is an adverse life event that may have

important implications for youths' beliefs about government and political participation. Victimization is common among youth, with some reports indicating that 57% of adolescents aged 10 to 17 years have experienced some type of assault in their lifetime—often by members of their own communities (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). An important tenet of social contract theory is that citizens forfeit some personal freedoms *in exchange for security and social harmony*. From this perspective, experiencing victimization constitutes a breach of the social contract, in that social and political institutions have failed to ensure social harmony, secure personal safety, and protect life, liberty, and personal property. According to Locke (1689/1993) and Rawls (1971), when the government defaults on the social contract, citizens have the right (and obligation) to withdraw their support and work to change political and social systems. This discontent with the social order may manifest in criticism of governmental institutions, condemnation of government leaders, or engagement in political activities intended to catalyze social change.

To date, scholars have not directly examined associations between adolescent victimization and their views toward government and political participation. Nevertheless, two related areas of research can help inform how violations of the social contract could be linked to youths' beliefs about government and political participation. One area of research concerns the intersection between minority youths' experiences with prejudice and their beliefs about government responsiveness to their racial or ethnic group (Flanagan et al., 2009; Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, & Flanagan, 2008). This research proposes that those from less privileged or minority backgrounds who experience prejudice may be more aware of group-based structural inequalities within political systems and view certain tenets of the social contract—such as access to government officials—as unequally available for all groups of people. Indeed, ethnic minority youth who report experiencing prejudice also report accompanying perceptions of social inequality in America and view government as less responsive compared with those without such experiences (Flanagan et al., 2009; Wray-Lake et al., 2008). Results from this research thus raise the question of whether youths' experiences of injustice are linked to their views about the legitimacy, justness, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of government.

The second area of research focuses on links between exposure to wartime violence and political participation. The central premise of this research is that individuals who have been exposed to wartime violence may be motivated to engage in politics in an effort to derive meaning from their experiences or utilize shifting political climates to enact social change (Tripp, 2000). Indeed, voter registration was higher in areas of Sierra Leone that experienced more violence during its recent civil war (Bellows & Miguel, 2006), and adults who experienced violence during an on-going war in Uganda were more likely to vote in political elections and work on political campaigns (Blattman, 2009). Similarly, Palestinian youth who were exposed to war-related violence were more engaged in political activism (e.g., demonstrating) during times of conflict (Barber & Olsen, 2008). Together, these studies suggest that exposure to war-related violence may be linked to greater political participation.

Although prior research provides preliminary evidence of a link between victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation, little research has directly examined how experiencing victimization may intersect with the political lives of American youth. Notably, one study found that adults who had been the victim of any crime within the past year were more likely than nonvictims to engage in protesting and attend political meetings compared with nonvictims (Bateson, 2012). Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether victimization in adolescence is linked to greater discontent with government and participation in a variety of different political activities, including voting, joining political campaigns, writing government officials, and boycotting. Examining the intersection between adolescent victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation holds promise for psychological theory and public policy by identifying specific experiences that may promote discontent toward government and motivate youth political action. Further, examining these links may also help to elucidate the broader social, developmental, and psychological implications of youth victimization.

Sociohistorical and Methodological Considerations

Testing theorized connections between youth victimization and political beliefs and behaviors requires certain sociohistorical and methodological considerations. Victimized youths' views toward government and their participation in political activities may vary across historical contexts. In the United States and other democratic nations, natural shifts have occurred in the social priorities of government officials across different political offices, including public stances on crime and criminals. For instance, the Clinton era was noted for passing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (U. S. Department of Justice, 1994), designed to reduce crime and victimization nationwide. In contrast, incarceration rates declined under the Obama presidency (Carson & Golinelli, 2013), which may be interpreted as reflecting a softer stance toward crime and criminals. These structural shifts in government priorities over time may alter victimized youths' beliefs about government officials and participation in politics. For instance, youth victimized during sociohistorical periods when government officials were enforcing "tough on crime" legislation may view government as less responsible for the act

and be less discontent with government, whereas youth victimized during periods when government officials relaxed penalties for various crimes may be more discontent with government and politically active. To address this confound, the present study used nationally representative data collected from different consecutive annual cohorts of youth from 1976 to 2014. This age-period-cohort design allowed testing of links between victimization, political beliefs, and political participation across seven consecutive U.S. presidencies.

In addition to potential sociohistorical effects, other potential confounds arise when examining youth victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation. Opportunities to engage in certain political behaviors (e.g., voting) may vary based on election cycles and attenuate links between victimization and political participation. Additionally, youth who experience greater victimization report lower life satisfaction in general (e.g., You et al., 2008); thus, anticipated links between youth victimization and discontent with government may reflect higher dissatisfaction with life more broadly. Further, victimization and political participation vary by several demographic characteristics, including adolescent gender, age, parents' education, rural versus urban community settings, political ideology, one-versus two-parent household composition, and school track (File, 2014; Smith, 2013; Zaff et al., 2010). To address these concerns, this study examined links between victimization and prior political participation, as well as *intent* to engage in politics among youth who are not currently politically active, while accounting for life satisfaction and a wide breadth of demographic characteristics.

Study Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of this study was to examine potential links between victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation among youth by addressing two primary questions. The first study question focused on whether experiencing victimization was associated with greater discontent with government. Consistent with political theory (Locke, 1689/1993), Hypothesis 1 proposed that youth who reported experiencing greater victimization would endorse greater discontent with government, as indicated by stronger beliefs that government officials are more dishonest, less trustworthy, less competent, more likely to waste tax payer money, and do not represent the interests of the people. The second study question focused on whether experiencing victimization was associated with greater political involvement. Consistent with political theory and prior research (Bateson, 2012; Rawls, 1971), Hypothesis 2 posited that youth victimization would be positively associated with participation in multiple forms of political behavior.

Method

Participants

Participants were 12th graders enrolled in consecutive years of the Monitoring the Future (MTF) study (Johnston, Bachman, O'Malley, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014) between 1976 and 2014. Beginning in 1975, the MTF study has continually recruited independent, nationally representative samples of approximately 16,000 12th graders from about 135 high schools during the spring of each year to examine age-period-cohort changes in substance use and its affiliated risks (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2012). Currently, the MTF study has made 39 waves of data available to the public (1976 to 2014). Participants each received one of six randomly distributed self-report surveys. Each MTF study survey contained a set of core questions common to all forms as well as questions unique to that form. Only Form 2 assessed the constructs of interest; thus, all analyses were limited to youth who received Form 2 (approximately 3,000 participants per wave) and answered questions regarding victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation.

The final analytic sample consisted of 109,574 high school seniors. Participants were 50.9% female, 79.3% were 18 years or older,[1] 67.5% were White, 11.1% were Black, 3.1% were Hispanic, 1.1% reported being "None-White,"[2] and 17.1% did not report race or ethnicity. Regarding parent education, 14% of mothers (16.3% of fathers) did not complete high school, 32.0% of mothers (27.0% of fathers) completed high school but did not have any college training, 18.1% of mothers (15.4% of fathers) completed some college, 29.3% of mothers (31.9% of fathers) obtained a college degree or higher, and 7.7% of youth did not report or did not know their mothers' education (8.4% of youth for fathers). Youth (42.0%) reported that they resided in a rural community or small city (<50,000 people), midsized city (50,000 to 100,000 people) or a suburb of medium-sized city (24.4%), or an urban city (100,000 or more people) or suburb of an urban city (33.7%). Youth varied in their political ideology, with 17.8% self-identifying as conservative, 29.4% as moderate, 20.7% as liberal, and 32.1% as "other" or as not knowing their ideology. The majority of youth were from two-parent households (71.8%) and varied in their school track (51.1% academic, 29.2% general, 9.4% vocational, 10.2% other/did not know).

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[1] Public use age data was coded 1 = under 18 and 2 = 18 and older (exact ages were not provided).
[2] For data collected in 1976, 1977, and 1980, participants reported whether they were "White" or "not White." Additionally, ethnicity was assessed beginning in 2005.

Measures

Demographics. Participants reported their age, gender, race/ethnicity, parents' education, urbanicity of community, political ideology, household composition, and school track. Highest level of mothers' and fathers' education were reported separately on a 6-point scale from 1 (*completed grade school or less*) to 6 (*graduate or professional school after college*), and were averaged to create one indicator of parents' education. Youth reported on the urbanicity of where they grew up, as categorized by rural (*on a farm, in the country but not on a farm, in a small city of under 50,000 people*), midsized city (*in a medium-sized city of between 50,000 and 100,000 people or in the suburb of a midsized city*), and urban community (*in a large/very large city of 100,000 + people or affiliated suburb*). Political ideology was measured through self-reported identification on a scale from 1 (*very conservative*) to 5 (*very liberal*). Youth reports of whether they lived with their primary female and male caregiver were used to create a dichotomous indicator of single-parent (coded as 0) versus two-parent (coded as 1) household. Youth also reported their school track (academic or college prep, vocational, general, other/did not know).

Life satisfaction. One item assessed life satisfaction (i.e., "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?"). Responses were given on a 7-point scale from 1 (*completely dissatisfied*) to 7 (*completely satisfied*), with higher values indicating greater life satisfaction.

Victimization. Youth reported the number of times they experienced each of seven types of victimization during the previous 12 months. These included four types of *physical assault* (i.e., assaulted with a weapon, assaulted without a weapon, threatened to be assaulted with a weapon, threatened to be assaulted without a weapon) and three types of *property damage* (i.e., had property valued under $50 stolen, had property valued over $50 stolen, had property deliberately damaged by someone). The number of episodes of each type of victimization was recorded on a 5-point frequency scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*5 + times*). Mean scores were calculated for overall victimization ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .52$, $\alpha = .74$), property damage ($M = 1.51$, $SD = .66$, $\alpha = .64$), and physical assault ($M = 1.31$, $SD = .58$, $\alpha = .70$). Higher values indicated more episodes of each type of victimization.

Discontent with government. Discontent with government was measured using five items inquiring whether youth believed government officials (a) are dishonest, (b) are untrustworthy, (c) are incompetent, (d) waste tax payer money, and (e) do not represent the interest of the people. Table 1 presents item wordings and response options. Mean scores were calculated, with higher values indicating greater discontent with government ($M = 3.14$, $SD = .59$, $\alpha = .72$).

Political participation. Political participation was measured using six items assessing whether youth had, or intended to, (a) vote, (b) donate to a political campaign, (c) volunteer for a political campaign, (d) write public officials, (e) boycott, (f) or protest. Responses were recorded using a 4-point nominal scale consisting of *I probably will not do this*, *I probably will do this*, *I have already done this*, and *I do not know*. Dummy codes were created to represent whether youth had already participated (coded 1) or had not participated in the activity (coded 0). Separate dummy codes were also created indicating an intention to participate (coded 1) versus no intention to participate (coded 0) for youth who had not already participated in that activity.

Analytic Procedure

Hierarchical linear models (HLMs) were used to test associations between victimization, discontent with government, and political participation. For all models, variance accounted for by measurement wave was specified as a random effect. The primary analyses consisted of estimating

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Discontent With Government

Label	Question	Response options	M	SD
Dishonest	Do you think some of the people running the government are crooked or dishonest?	1 = None at all are crooked or dishonest 5 = Most of them are crooked or dishonest	3.66	.83
Wastes money	Do you think the government wastes much of the money we pay in taxes?	1 = No tax money is wasted 5 = Nearly all tax money is wasted	3.62	.78
Trust	How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?	1 = Almost always 5 = Never	2.76	.89
Competence	Do you feel that the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing?	1 = They almost always know what they are doing 5 = They never know what they are doing	2.40	.86
For the people	Would you say the government is pretty much run for a few big interests looking out for themselves, or is it run for the benefit of all the people?	1 = Nearly always run for the benefit of all the people 5 = Nearly always run for a few big interests	3.25	.94

separate HLMs to test whether victimization was associated with overall discontent with government as well as specific beliefs about government (dishonesty, trust, competency, waste tax money, for the people), and whether victimization was associated with overall political participation and involvement in specific political activities (vote, donate to a political campaign, volunteer for a political campaign, write public officials, boycott, and protest). Similar analyses were performed to test whether victimization was also linked with *intent* to participate in politics among youth who had not yet participated.

Several follow-up analyses were used to test the generalizability of model findings. The first set of follow-up analyses tested whether links between victimization, discontent for government, and political participation varied by type of victimization experienced (physical assault, property damage). A second series of follow-up analyses tested whether the pattern of findings was consistent across different demographic subgroups, including age (under 18 and 18 and older), gender (males and females), race/ethnicity (White, Black, and Hispanic), parents' education (above median and below median), political ideology (conservative and liberal), urbanicity (rural, midsized city, and urban), household composition (single-parent and two-parent family), and school track (college, general, vocational). A third series of follow-up analyses tested the stability of study findings across each yearly measurement wave spanning from 1976 to 2014. These analyses explored potential sociohistorical trends across different samples nested within different waves of data collection.

All models used for both primary and follow-up analyses controlled for adolescent gender, age, race/ethnicity, parents' education, political ideology, urbanicity, household composition, school track, and life satisfaction, and incorporated sampling weights. Given the large sample size and accompanying potential for Type I error, all analyses are presented with point estimates and confidence intervals, and effects are discussed in terms of consistency in magnitude and direction. Primary effects for victimization are displayed in forest plots, and all effects estimated in each model are available in the online supplemental materials. Effect sizes in the form of ΔR^2 were calculated for victimization on a local level by estimating the R^2 value for the full model and subtracting the R^2 value from a similar model without victimization.[3]

Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for discontent with government. Tables 2 and 3 display the descriptive statistics for youth victimization and political participation, respectively. Rates of youth victimization resembled prior reports (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Having property valued under $50 stolen was the most commonly

reported form of victimization, with 43.9% of youth reporting at least one occurrence in the past year. This was followed by property damage (31.8%), being threatened without a weapon (28.1%), having property valued over $50 stolen (21.9%), being assaulted without a weapon (17.1%), being threatened with a weapon (15.8%), and being assaulted with a weapon (5.1%). Participation in political activities also varied among youth. Writing a letter to government officials was the most common form of political participation (10.5%), followed by voting (7.4%) and boycotting (7.3%). Fewer youth reported having worked on political campaigns (4.6%), protesting (3.6%), or having given money to a political campaign (3.3%). Among youth who had not yet participated in political activities, the majority stated that they probably would vote in the future (84.2%). Fewer youth indicated that they would write government officials (20.7%), boycott (18.7%), protest (17.4%), donate money to a campaign (16.3%), or volunteer to work on a political campaign (9.2%) in the future.

Several demographic differences emerged among adolescents' discontent with government and political participation (see the online supplemental materials). Youth who were younger, female, Black, had less educated parents, identified as liberal, who lived in urban communities, who lived with one parent, and who were on a vocational school track endorsed greater discontent toward government compared with youth who were older, male, White or Hispanic, had more educated parents, identified as conservative, who lived in rural or midsized city communities, who lived with two parents, and who were on a general or college school track (all $ts/Fs > 4.40$, $ps < .001$). Further, youth who were older, male, White, had more educated parents, identified as liberal, lived in midsized city, lived with two parents, and who were on a college school track, were more engaged in politics compared with youth who were younger, female, Black or Hispanic, had less educated parents, identified as conservative, who lived in rural or urban communities, who lived with one parent, and were on a vocational or general school track (all $ts/Fs > 7.36$, $ps < .001$).

Test of Hypothesis 1: Links Between Youth Victimization and Discontent With Government

Multilevel models tested associations among victimization and discontent with government after accounting for gender, age, race/ethnicity, parents' education, political ideology, urbanicity, family composition, school

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[3] Multiple imputation ($N = 10$) was used to address low levels of missing data for certain covariates (most ranging from 1% to 6%, although race/ethnicity had 17% missing). Analyses conducted with and without multiply imputed data were identical; thus, estimates from multiply imputed models are provided.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Victimization

Victimization	Not at all n (%)	Once n (%)	Twice n (%)	3 or 4 times n (%)	5+ times n (%)
Robbed <$50	60,315 (56.1)	27,489 (25.6)	11,724 (10.9)	5,472 (5.1)	2,452 (2.3)
Robbed >$50	83,841 (78.1)	16,659 (15.5)	4,382 (4.0)	1,768 (1.6)	750 (.7)
Property damaged	73,227 (68.2)	20,873 (19.4)	8,436 (7.9)	3,512 (3.3)	1,366 (1.3)
Assaulted with weapon	102,070 (94.9)	3,575 (3.3)	1,023 (1.0)	456 (.4)	375 (.3)
Threatened with weapon	90,442 (84.2)	9,590 (8.9)	3,641 (3.4)	1,975 (1.8)	1,728 (1.6)
Assaulted without weapon	89,025 (82.9)	10,949 (10.2)	3,847 (3.6)	1,939 (1.8)	1,656 (1.5)
Threatened without weapon	77,269 (71.9)	13,868 (12.9)	6,455 (6.0)	4,403 (4.1)	5,400 (5.0)

Note. Reports of victimization were occurrences within the past 12 months.

track, and life satisfaction. Figure 1a displays standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for these models. In support of Hypothesis 1, greater victimization was associated with greater overall discontent with government. These effects were consistent in direction and magnitude across specific beliefs about government (range: $\beta = .05$ to .09, all $ps < .001$), and were relatively small ($\Delta R^2s = .01$). Greater victimization was associated with stronger beliefs that government officials are dishonest, waste money, are less trustworthy, are less competent, and do not represent the people.

Variation by type of victimization. Follow-up HLMs tested whether associations among victimization and discontent with government were consistent across different types of victimization. Figure 1b displays a forest plot of standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for these models after adjusting for covariates. Being the victim of either property damage or physical assault was consistently and positively associated with greater discontent with government. The effect sizes were small ($\Delta R^2s = .01$) and appeared consistent across specific beliefs about government. Additionally, links between victimization and discontent with government appeared to be consistently stronger for physical assault (range: $\beta = .04$ to .08, all $ps < .001$) than for property damage (range: $\beta = .02$ to .04, all $ps < .001$).

Variation by subgroup. A second series of follow-up HLMs were performed to examine whether associations

among victimization and discontent with government varied for different subgroups of youth. Figure 2 displays a forest plot of the standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for these models after adjusting for covariates. In general, these subgroup analyses produced strikingly similar estimates across youth with different demographic characteristics. All effects were positive, significant, and ranged from $\beta = .06$ to .10 (all $ps < .001$, $\Delta R^2s = .01$) for youth across gender (males and females), age (under 18 and 18 and older), race/ethnicity (White, Black, and Hispanic), parents' education (high median and low median), political ideology (conservative and liberal), community context (rural, midsized city, and urban), household composition (one parent and two parent households), and school track (general, college, vocational). These findings demonstrate that links between victimization and discontent with government do not vary considerably across different demographic backgrounds.

Variation by sociopolitical context. A series of follow-up regression models were estimated to examine whether victimization was associated with discontent with government across different sociopolitical and historical contexts. Figure 3 displays standardized estimates for links between victimization and discontent with government by measurement wave (adjusted for covariates). Overall, effects were positive and significant for each wave, with point estimates ranging from $\beta = .05$ to .14 (all $ps < .01$) and the majority oscillating around $\beta =$

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Political Participation

Political participation	Have participated n (%)	Have not participated n (%)	Probably will participate n (%)	Probably will not participate n (%)	I don't know n (%)
Vote	7,961 (7.4)	101,613 (92.6)	85,551 (84.2)	5,178 (5.1)	9,432 (9.3)
Donate to a campaign	3,550 (3.3)	106,024 (96.7)	17,316 (16.3)	45,450 (42.9)	41,639 (39.3)
Work on a campaign	5,014 (4.6)	104,560 (95.4)	9,599 (9.2)	57,506 (55.0)	35,730 (34.2)
Write government	11,317 (10.5)	98,257 (89.5)	20,323 (20.7)	28,869 (29.4)	47,410 (48.3)
Boycott	7,858 (7.3)	101,716 (92.7)	19,053 (18.7)	38,242 (37.6)	42,790 (42.1)
Protest	3,896 (3.6)	105,678 (96.4)	18,350 (17.4)	39,620 (37.5)	46,071 (43.6)

Note. Total sample ($N = 109,574$). Youth who have not yet participated ($N = N$ total sample – N participated in activity). Percentages for youth who indicated that they probably will participate, probably will not participate, and do not know if they will participate are based on the subsample of youth who did not participate. Reports of political engagement were occurrences in lifetime.
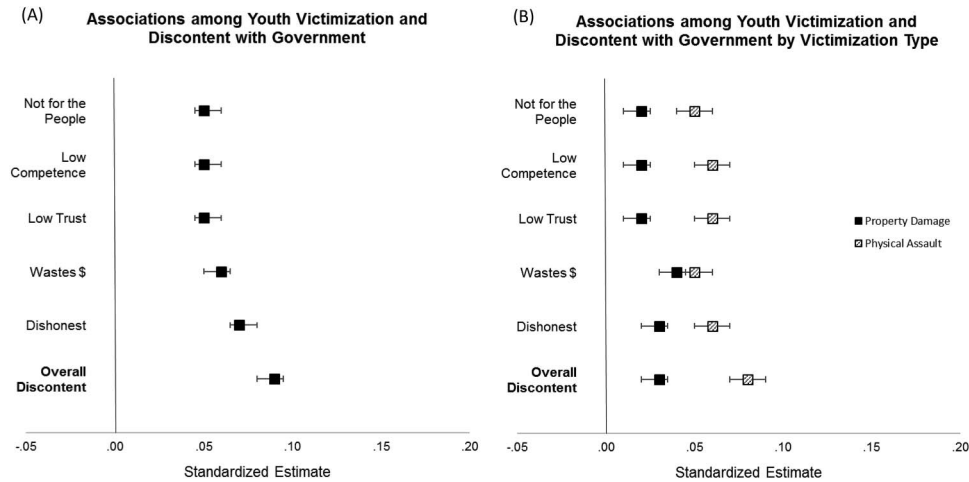
Figure 1. (a) Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models examining associations among victimization and discontent with government. (b) Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models examining associations among different types of victimization and discontent with government. All estimates in Figure 1a and Figure 1b accounted for gender, age, parents' education, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, political ideology, household composition, school track, and life satisfaction. Point estimates and confidence intervals for all variables in the model are available in the online supplemental materials.

.10. These findings show little evidence of sociopolitical differences in the magnitude of association between victimization and discontent with government. Regardless of sociohistorical differences in the composition and specific priorities of the U.S. government, youth who experienced greater victimization tended to endorse greater discontent with government functioning.

Test of Hypothesis 2: Links Between Youth Victimization and Political Participation

Multilevel models were used to test associations among victimization and adolescent political participation. Figure 4a displays standardized effects and 95% confidence intervals for these models. In support of Hypothesis 2, experiencing greater victimization was associated with greater overall political participation among youth after accounting for demographic characteristics and life satisfaction. These effects were significant and positive for all forms of political participation, ranged from $\beta = .05$ to .17, (all $ps < .001$), and were relatively small (ΔR^2s = .01 to .03). Similar trends were also found for links between victimization and *intent* to engage in different types of political action among those not already involved (Figure 4b).

Variation by type of victimization. Follow-up HLMs tested whether associations between victimization and political participation were consistent across different types of victimization (Figure 4c). Being the victim of physical assault or property damage was consistently and positively associated with greater overall political partic-

ipation ($\beta = .07$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .06$, $p < .001$, respectively). These effects were similar for many specific political activities (ranging from $\beta = .02$ to.10 for physical assault and $\beta = .03$ to .07 for property damage, all $ps < .001$), although associations between physical assault and protesting ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$) appeared larger than associations between property damage and protesting ($\beta = .07$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that links between victimization and political participation are fairly consistent across different types of victimization and political behaviors.

Variation by subgroup. Additional follow-up HLMs tested whether associations among victimization and political participation varied across demographic subgroups. Figure 5 displays standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals adjusted for covariates. Effect sizes for links between victimization and political participation were very similar across demographic subgroups. All standardized estimates were positive, significant, and consistent (range: $\beta = .10$ to .16, all $ps < .001$ per subgroup; ΔR^2s = .01 to .03). These findings suggest a high level of consistency in the links between victimization and political participation across youth from different backgrounds.

Variation by sociopolitical and sociohistorical context. A final series of follow-up regression models were estimated to test associations among victimization and adolescent political participation across different sociopolitical contexts. Figure 6 displays standardized estimates for these models after adjusting for covariates. All point estimates
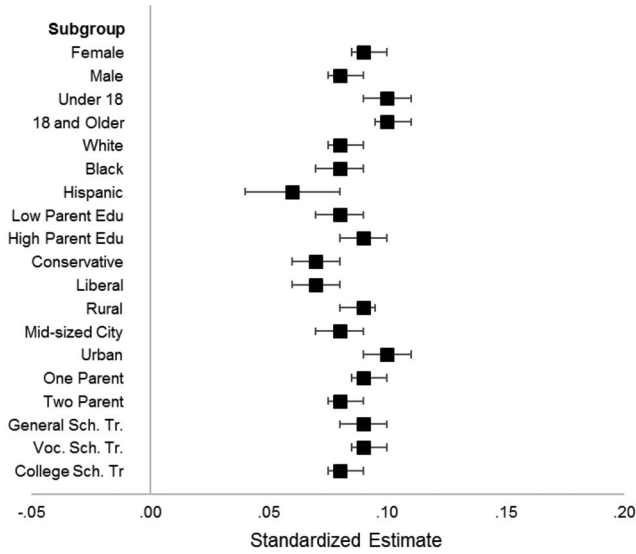
Figure 2. Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models testing associations among victimization and discontent with government by demographic subgroups. High parental education indicates above the median; low parental education indicates below the median. Estimates accounted for all demographic characteristics (gender, age, parents' education, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, political ideology, household composition, and school track) and life satisfaction. Point estimates and confidence intervals for all variables in each model are available in the online supplemental materials.

were positive and significant, ranging from β = .04 to .17 (all *p*s < .01) with the majority of effects oscillating around β = .10. These findings indicate a general consistency in the direction and magnitude of association between victimization and political participation across the seven U.S. presidential administrations spanned by the MTF surveys. Regardless of the priorities of government officials or potential opportunities to become engaged in politics that accompanied different national election cycles, youth who experienced greater victimization were more politically active.

Discussion

Facilitating greater trust in government and increasing youth political engagement represent national priorities that are important to maintaining a well-functioning democracy. Political philosophers theorize that when the social contract between citizens and governmental agencies is violated, people have an obligation to withdraw their support and engage in behaviors that promote social change (Rawls, 1971). Victimization is theorized to constitute a breach of the social contract, in that government agencies have failed to provide individuals with the natural rights of security and liberty. Accordingly, a primary aim of this study was to

examine links between victimization, discontent with government, and political participation during adolescence—a developmental period characterized by the formation and consolidation of competencies essential to active citizenship in adulthood (e.g., Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009). Consistent with social contract theory and in support of both study hypotheses, adolescents who experienced greater victimization endorsed greater discontent with government and were more engaged in political affairs. These effects were fairly similar across different types of victimization, different demographic characteristics, and different sociohistorical contexts.

Victimized Youth Endorse Greater Discontent With Government

Consistent with social contract theory and with Hypothesis 1, youth who experienced greater victimization endorsed greater discontent with government, as reflected in views that government officials are more dishonest, less trustworthy, less competent, waste money, and do not represent the people. Prior research indicates that youth believe that government is obligated to protect citizens' safety and property by enacting laws that prevent harm and property destruction (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017). Results from this study suggest that youth who have personally experienced physical harm, threat, and property damage are generally less satisfied with government, potentially because government has failed to uphold its obligation to ensure life, liberty, and protect their safety. These findings extend prior research linking prejudice and group-based exclusion from politics (e.g., Flanagan, Syvertsen, et al., 2009) by demonstrating that being the victim of a crime is associated with youths' perceptions of the adequacy and effectiveness of
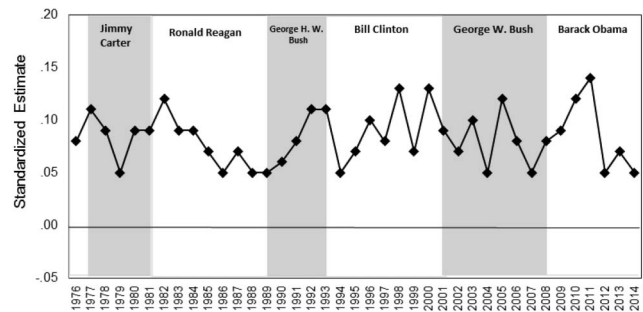

Figure 3. Standardized estimates for multiple regression models testing associations among victimization and discontent with government by assessment year. All estimates accounted for gender, age, parents' education, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, political ideology, household composition, school track, and life satisfaction. Gerald Ford was president for one of the data points in 1976 (not depicted in this image because of space constraints). Point estimates and confidence intervals for all variables in each model are available in the online supplemental materials.
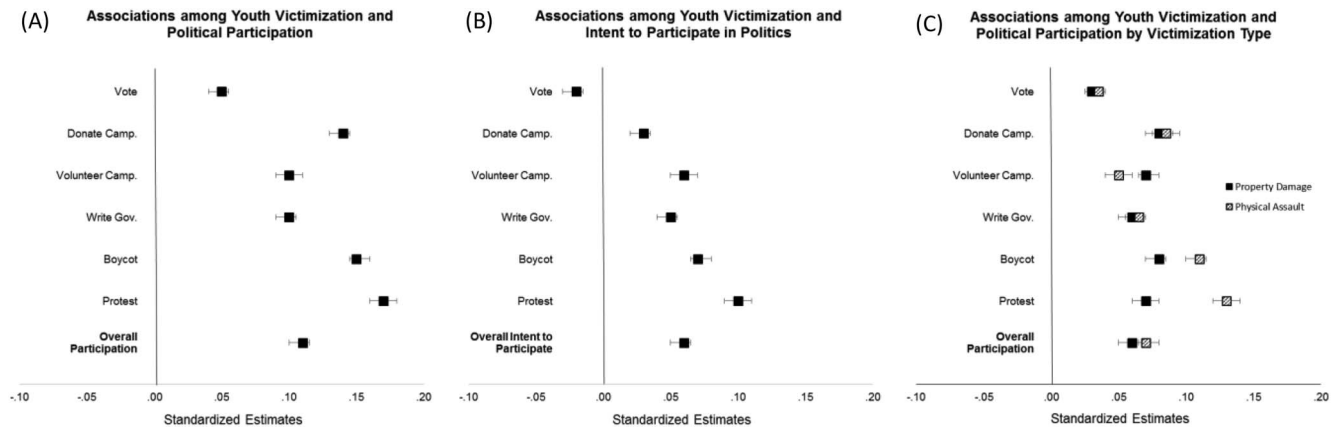
Figure 4. (a) Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models testing associations among victimization and political participation. (b) Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models testing associations among victimization and intent to participate in politics. (c) Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models testing associations among victimization and political participation by victimization type. All estimates in Figure 4a, 4b, and 4c accounted for gender, age, parents' education, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, political ideology, household composition, school track, and life satisfaction. Point estimates and confidence intervals for all variables in the model are available in the online supplemental materials. Camp. = campaign; Gov. = government.

government in general. Similar results emerged for youth who experienced different types of victimization, youth from different demographic subgroups, and youth from different sociohistorical periods. These results suggest that links between victimization and discontent with government may be fundamentally rooted in experiencing a violation of personal rights and an associated breach of the social contract, rather than the particular sociopolitical contexts in which the violation occurred.

Although property damage and physical assault were both independently and positively associated with greater discontent with government, the effect size was generally larger for youth who experienced physical assault. Acts of violence are often considered more serious than acts of property damage (Wolfgang, Figlio, Tracy, & Singer, 1985). It is thus possible that youth who are victims of physical assault may view the transgression as more severe—and consequently hold government more accountable for the act—than youth whose property was stolen but who were not assaulted.

Victimized Youth are More Politically Active

Social contract theory also proposes that citizens who experience violations of the social contract may be more compelled to engage in behaviors intended to evoke social change. Political participation is one potential avenue through which adolescents can work to change society in accordance with their personal motives, values, and goals. Consistent with social contract theory and with Hypothesis 2, greater victimization was associated with higher levels of adolescent political participation. Youth who experienced

greater victimization within the past year were significantly more likely to have voted, donated to political campaigns, volunteered for a campaign, written government officials, boycotted, and protested. These effects were strikingly consistent across victimization types, demographic subgroups, and waves of data collection. This pattern of findings also generally extended to adolescents' *intention* to participate in political activities among youth who had previously not done so—a finding that provides more robust support for the proposition that the abrogation of the social contract through victimization leads to increased motivation to involve oneself in political activities (Rawls, 1971). Victimized youth may engage in political behaviors as a means of changing existing social and political structures, potentially in ways that help to restore social justice, rectify their experience of victimization and moral indignation, and prevent future victimization for themselves and others.

Associations among victimization and political participation were also fairly consistent across sociohistorical contexts (comprised of yearly waves of data collection from 1976 to 2014). This is particularly notable when considering that opportunities to participate in politics and social norms conducive of political participation may vary with national election cycles. Consistency in the associations between youth victimization and political participation across presidential and nonpresidential election years may indicate that victimized youth pursue opportunities to engage in politics using multiple modalities and political arenas. This may involve becoming engaged in politics at different ecological levels (e.g., national, state, local) and utilizing different

Associatoins among Youth Victimization and Political Participation by Subgroup
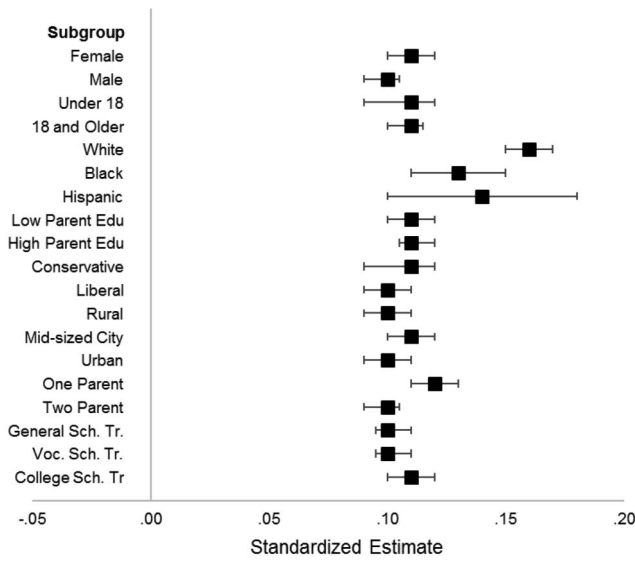
Figure 5. Standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals for hierarchical linear models testing associations among victimization and political participation by demographic subgroup. Estimates accounted for all demographic characteristics (gender, age, parents' education, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, political ideology, household composition, and school track) and life satisfaction. Point estimates and confidence intervals for all variables in each models are available in the online supplemental materials. Edu = education; Sch. = school; Tr. = track; Voc. = vocational.

forms of political action when others are less accessible (e.g., writing public officials in nonelection years).

Implications for Psychological Theory and Public Policy

The consistent nexus between youth victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation has several implications for psychological theory. Research on youth political engagement has generally focused on how positive community experiences promote assets conducive to democratic values and political participation (Zaff et al., 2010). Findings from this study suggest that negative community experiences may motivate adolescent political action and demonstrate that social contract theory may be a useful framework to elucidate these effects. Connecting youth victimization with beliefs about government and political behavior invites the investigation of psychological research questions regarding the specific mechanisms that could explain these effects. Candidate explanatory mechanisms include youths' psychological reactions to the event, such as beliefs that the social contract has been violated, moral indignation, and motivation to repair and restore the social contract (Rawls, 1971). Findings also raise questions concerning whether victimization is linked with greater discontent with social institutions other than government, partic-

ularly institutions responsible for keeping youth safe (e.g., police force, judicial system, schools). Researchers seeking to elucidate the origins of political behavior may benefit from integrating social contract theory with other conceptual models to examine the complex interplay between victimization, psychological reactions to the event, and beliefs about social and political institutions. An additional fruitful direction of future research concerns testing whether youths' experiences with specific types of victimization, such as racism and sexism, are similarly linked with discontent with government and political participation (Pateman & Mills, 2007).

Results from this study raise important questions about whether certain forms of political participation are associated with psychological benefit among victimized youth. For instance, group protests may help to validate one's personal experiences with victimization and create a shared sense of empowerment in advocating for social change. Additionally, therapeutic interventions that focus on repairing the social contract and mobilizing constructive social action among victimized youth may be an effective means of fostering recovery from traumatic experiences (Saltzman et al., in press). Also of interest is whether sentencing guidelines that invoke principles of restorative justice help to repair the social contract, reduce psychological distress, and increase positive attitudes toward government.

Findings from this study also have important implications for public policy. Political participation provides victimized youth with opportunities to directly shape societal priorities by electing officials who endorse specific values, advocate for the appropriation of resources, and personally invest time, effort, or revenue into agencies that represent a particular social cause. Policymakers who seek to decrease

Associations among Youth Victimization and Political Participation from 1976-2014
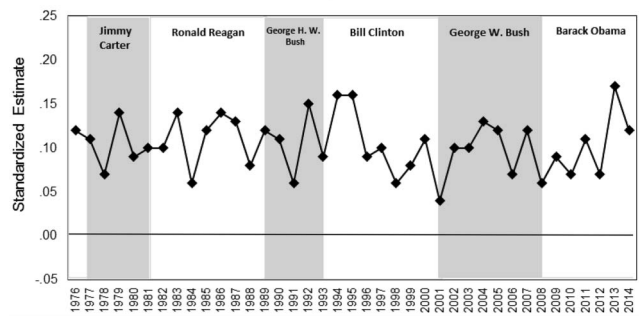
Figure 6. Standardized estimates for multiple regression models testing associations among victimization and political participation by assessment year. All estimates accounted for gender, age, parents' education, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, political ideology, household composition, school track, and life satisfaction. Gerald Ford was president for one of the data points in 1976 (not depicted in image because of space constraints). Point estimates for all variables in each model are available in the online supplemental materials.

youth victimization may benefit by mobilizing victimized youth to change existing political structures. Given the high prevalence of youth victimization, recognizing and incorporating the perspectives of victimized youth as potential agents of social change may help to recruit youth to assist governing bodies in formulating and enacting public policy. Involving victimized youth in political decision-making may also promote more favorable attitudes toward government, facilitate knowledge of political systems, and potentially bolster efficacy in other forms of civic and political involvement (Zaff et al., 2010).

Study Limitations

Although drawn from sequential data sets spanning a 39-year period, all waves of data were cross-sectional and do not permit causal inference. Thus, even though prior victimization was associated with greater intent to engage in politics, it is conceivable that youth who engage in political activity may also engage in behaviors that increase their risk for victimization, or that third variables produce these associations. Future studies can adopt longitudinal designs to examine the temporal sequencing, causal mechanisms, and processes that undergird these findings. The MTF dataset did not include assessments of family income or poverty in the same form as the constructs of interest. Although analyses accounted for other indicators of socioeconomic status (e.g., parents' education), it is possible that some study findings are because of variation in poverty. Future research may benefit from disaggregating aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage (Abramovitz & Albrecht, 2013) to elucidate the potentially complex intersection between poverty, victimization, and political engagement.

Additionally, effect sizes across models were generally small. It is possible that unmeasured variables, such as self-efficacy, individualism-collectivism, and perceived receptiveness of government may potentially moderate our results. The importance of these small effects should be considered in light of the high prevalence of victimization and the relatively low level of political involvement among youth nationwide. Moreover, the instruments used did not include contextual variables that may influence victims' subsequent evaluation of government performance, including whether perpetrators were apprehended, charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced. Future research is needed to examine how government officials' response to victimization intersects with youths' political participation and beliefs about government.

Last, an important assumption of the proposed theoretical model is that youth recognize that government has an obligation to uphold their individual rights – in part by protecting them from harm and property damage– and that experiencing victimization is perceived as a failure by government to uphold this responsibility. Although prior re-

search documents that American youth believe government has an obligation to enact laws that protect people from harm and property damage (Oosterhoff & Metzger, 2017), this belief was not directly tested in this study. Future research is thus needed to directly test whether links between victimization, beliefs about government, and political participation are explained by perceptions that government violated the social contract.

Conclusion

These results provide consistent evidence that victimized youth are more discontented with government and more likely to engage in politics, potentially as a means of producing social change. Public policy and strategies that bring politicians and victimized youth together can strengthen democratic functioning and improve public health by empowering adolescents to contribute actively to political affairs. Mobilizing victimized youth in the political process may also increase support for legislators, and strengthen youths' views regarding the legitimacy and value of government, as they strive to reduce the prevalence and impact of youth violence and victimization. Although further research is needed, these efforts can guide endeavors to help victimized youth make meaning of their experiences, contribute to their local communities, and improve long-term personal and social well-being.

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