From Books to Ballots: Libraries as the Gateway to Civic Participation

A Research Study to Measure the Effectiveness of Civic Information Sessions in a Public Library

Introduction

Trust in government and election integrity are at an all-time low (Saad, 2024). American citizens are increasingly utilizing social media platforms to gather their news (Shearer et al., 2024) and are regularly interacting with misinformation and disinformation on these platforms (Aïmeur et al., 2023). Libraries are institutions grounded in accuracy, truth, and reliability. It is their responsibility to ensure that patrons are informed voters, understand civic participation, and are accessing accurate information sources (De Paor & Heravi, 2020). The goal of this study is to understand the impact that libraries can have on their patron's civic knowledge, engagement, and participation after a 3-session workshop discussing basic civic and democratic processes, political ideology, and how to accurately judge information sources.

Research Questions

The questions that will guide this research as well as be answered by conducting this study are:

1. What is the average civic knowledge of a library patron in the U.S.?

2. How likely are library patrons to engage in civic processes (e.g. Voting)?

3. Where do library patrons receive their political and civic news from?

4. What topics should libraries cover when hosting informative civic sessions?

5. What kind of civic information do patrons want their libraries to provide for them?

6. How else can libraries increase the civic knowledge and participation of their patrons?

Adding Context

It should be important to note that this proposed study would cover a proliferated, 3session workshop that covers specific parts of what it means to be civically engaged. Civic engagement can be defined in multiple ways, but we see that most Americans believe a good citizen is someone who votes (Wike et al., 2022). This study has aimed to condense the idea of civic engagement into 3 umbrella topics that can be taught in 3 separate learning sessions. The 3 topics are: 1) Civic and democratic processes; 2) Political and ideological information; 3) Accurate judgement and uses of information sources. It can be assumed that with adequate knowledge of the 3 topics, a patron can be considered an active and critically engaged citizen.

The study should also acknowledge the nature of neutrality in libraries and their programming. Many public libraries have strict parameters set for their level of civic engagement and may face backlash from the public or their board. It is important for all libraries willing to participate in a study like this, that there are many topics that can be discussed and promoted in libraries. Librarians should consider all topics proposed in this study with discretion for their community, and tailor their sessions to the participants authentic needs and capabilities. The goal is to educate and increase civic participation, without coercing or considering a specific party or ideology at a forefront. Many libraries have policies about ideological and partisan behavior of staff.

Existing Literature

There is not much existing literature studying the intersection of civic engagement and public libraries. The topic, though important, seems to be on the backburner for LIS professionals due to struggles with funding or staffing, especially when it comes to research within public

library settings. This study will be able to add more civic-related research to the LIS field, while also encouraging librarians and information professionals to spend time with this topic.

Similar LIS Research

There are 4 research studies in the LIS field that hold similarities to the proposed study in this paper. These studies are nowhere near the same combination of civic education workshops in a public library setting, but they generally compare civics within a library setting in some way.

Bonnell (2014) published a case study that evaluated the effectiveness of a voter registration program at an academic library in a Midwestern University. The study was conducted over 8 years, focusing on the presidential election years of 2004, 2008, and 2012. Reference librarians in the university library began a robust voter registration program, hoping to register as many students as possible and assist with any voting questions they may have.

The study found that there was very high turnout of students registering to vote at the library because it was accessible to get to, and because they trusted the reference librarians that helped them. These two factors are important to the proposed study in this paper as well, as trust and accessibility are characteristics of all libraries. The study concluded that academic libraries do have an important role to play in civics, especially when registering students to vote.

Another study that focuses on civics in a public library setting was conducted by Hebert and Lambert (2019), in which the researchers studied how public libraries in Tennessee respond to low voter turnout and knowledge of Tennesseans. Most public libraries that responded to the survey administered noted that they can only do so much voter education, due to barriers in staffing and training. Respondents explained how they wanted to do more, like host more educational sessions and even serve as a poll-site, but did not have the resources to.

This study showcases the importance of adequate funding, staffing, and training within public libraries when it comes to civic educational opportunities. It is important to see that librarians are interested and willing to engage their patrons civically, as the existing literature on this topic is sparse, it cannot be assumed that this is the case without evidence like this.

A research study conducted by Cocciolo (2013) and PBS (Public Broadcast Television) highlighted civic engagement within libraries utilizing the medium of art, more specifically film and documentaries. PBS and public libraries around the US collaborated over a 4-year period to increase civic and social knowledge of patrons. PBS shared DVDs and educational materials on different topics requested by public libraries, and in return, the patrons involved in the program were to complete a survey detailing their experience. Many patrons expressed increased civic interest and desire to contribute to civics in a multitude of ways after viewing the films. This study highlights how different mediums can be used to educate the public about civic information but emphasizes the library as a space for education.

The last research study that has similar goals to this proposed study was conducted by Hallman (2023). Another study located in Tennessee; this takes civics into a different lens by utilizing action-research methods. A library in downtown Memphis planned to rebuild their library through new programming, infrastructure, and design – all with a focus on civic engagement and community involvement. The researchers involved with the study embraced the action-research method by incorporating community members at every step. Once the library was done with the redesign, patrons were found to be more civically involved, and more interested in civic-related programs.

The 4 studies mentioned above were some of the only studies published that shifted the LIS lens to analyze how public libraries in the US engage with civics. They highlight how most libraries do want to engage with their patrons civically, even in the smallest of ways.

Other studies discussing libraries and civic knowledge have been conducted outside of the US, including 4 that were consulted for this proposal. Ugwonna et al. (2023) studied how school-age adolescents can utilize public libraries for civic information in Nigera. Kine and Davidsone (2021) analyzed public librarians' impact on patrons' media literacy and civic knowledge in Latvia. Johnston and Audunson (2017) showcased how public libraries in Norway can help integrate immigrants into society through civic programming in public libraries. Lastly, Carlsson et al. (2023) analyzed how public libraries in Sweden act as meeting places that support democratic and civic conversation between patrons.

Existing Literature Impact on this Study

As aforementioned, the existing literature on this topic is sparse. Though this study will not be able to draw much inspiration from others, it will do something more: fill in gaps. There is a clear space in the literature for more civic education in public libraries and how it assists patrons. This proposed study of a 3-session civic workshop will be able to collect more and rich data regarding multiple areas of civics.

The existing literature did impact the research design that will be utilized for this study, focusing on a survey as well as a group-interview. Both methods have been used in the existing literature and seem to have been able to gather significant data. This study will utilize a mixedmethods approach due to the success in the existing literature.

Research Strategy and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a 3-session workshop, which will be conducted once a week, for 3 weeks, at a public library. To properly evaluate the workshop, the study will utilize a mixed-methods approach. The study will consist of two surveys: a pre-survey before the start of the workshops, a post-survey at the end of the workshops. The study will also use a semi-structured group interview a week after the last workshop was given. These two methods were chosen due to success in the existing similar LIS literature, as well as the data they would be able to supply.

The survey research method was chosen due to the quantitative nature. The research questions allude to how patrons receive the workshops and if they gained new knowledge from them. Utilizing a pre-survey and post-survey that has some identical questions will be able to show a change in response if there is one. The surveys will also be able to collect the existing knowledge of participants in these topics and demonstrate how the workshops have affected their knowledge.

The qualitative nature of the semi-structured group interview will allow for the participants to share more about the content of the workshops and share honestly their feelings about it. The interview will also be able to encourage participants to share what other information, if any, they wished the sessions covered as well as share how they would like their library to engage with them civically.

As described, utilizing both methods are important for this study. Quantitative methods like survey research clarify, on a granular level, any changes. Qualitative methods like group

interviews allow for participants to share information and feedback that they may not have time or space to on a survey. It also allows for conversation between participants and encourages idea sharing.

Gathering the Data

Participant Recruitment

Participants in this study should follow these requirements:

1. Over the age of 18

2. Registered to vote in the U.S.

3. Fluent or proficient in English

To recruit participants, the library conducting the study should begin by sharing flyers with their patrons in multiple ways (see Appendix A). The flyer can be posted around the library, given to patrons at check-out, or posted on social media.

To make recruitment accessible for all participants, the library should utilize multiple methods for signing up (QR code, in-person at reference, or phone/email). This will ensure that potential participants are not discouraged from signing up due to a perceived barrier.

To incentivize participants, the study should offer a $50 gift card at the completion of the study. This price was chosen since it is high enough to be an incentive and compensation for their voluntary participation, but it is not too high that it may coerce a participant to participate in the study.

The sample should be a diverse group (or as much as it can be) of library patrons. Libraries are a space for all people, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, and more. The population of

a library patronage is quite large and diverse; therefore, the sample should attempt to accurately represent the population available.

Once patrons have been recruited and the study is ready to begin, all participants should have been informed of the study, its content, its commitment, and sign the consent form (see Appendix B).

How to Collect the Data and the Instruments Used

The pre-survey

Once recruitment is completed and participants are ready, the study can begin to take place. The study with participant involvement, will take 4 weeks.

On the first day of the study, participants will come to the library and take the pre-survey (see Appendix C). Before the pre-survey is administered, the survey software should randomly assign each participant with a unique identifier number. This number will be assigned to each participant at random and will not repeat. The unique identifier is necessary to input into both surveys, so that during the final stages of analysis, the researchers will be able to see any change in response from specific participants.

The pre-survey is a digital instrument that is administered to the patrons through the Qualtrics software on library-owned iPads. The pre-survey will begin by asking each participant to input their unique ID, which they were assigned prior to the beginning of the survey. All participants should be informed that they must remember their ID so they can complete both surveys administered. The unique ID will instill that each participants responses remain anonymous and will never be tied to a name – only this unique number. The pre-survey may take up to 20 minutes, as it is longer than the post-survey. The pre-survey includes a set of

demographic questions for participants to answer. It then shares questions related to each of the civic topics: general civics, politics, and news, in which participants will reflect on their current knowledge and behaviors regarding these topics. Lastly, the pre-survey will also ask participants about their expectations of the upcoming sessions.

The information sessions

On the first day of the study, after each participant completes their pre-survey, they will then enter their first learning session (to view the schedule and outline for each session, see Appendix D) These learning sessions will take place in a closed space within the library (meeting rooms, study rooms, etc.) that can accommodate the number of participants as well as ensure privacy. The sessions will take about 1 hour, and participants are encouraged to ask questions before, during, and after all sessions. Participants are allowed to take notes during sessions if they would like to.

The first session is titled "The Civic Process and Our Democracy," which will cover the basics of the U.S. government, like important history, structures, and vocabulary. Upon completion of the first session, all participants can leave the library, unless they have any followup questions to ask the researchers.

The second session will be held the next week, and it is titled "It's All Politics: Neutral and Unbiased Information About Our Political Ecosystem." This session will focus on any current political candidates, recent election results, and the ideological differences of political parties and policies. Upon completion of the second session, all participants can leave the library, unless they have any follow-up questions to ask the researchers.

The third and final session will be held a week after the second session. It is titled "Find Your Way Through the News" and will cover the different kinds of news mediums, news biases, and misinformation/disinformation. Upon completion of this last information session, participants will take their post-survey.

The post-survey

Following the completion of the final information session, participants will be asked to complete the post-survey (see Appendix E). The post-survey will be administered with the Qualtrics software on library-owned iPads. Like the pre-survey, the post-survey asks for participants to input their unique ID number. The post-survey does not include any demographic questions, as demographic data for participants have already been collected. The post-survey asks some identical questions to the pre-survey, so that analysis can properly be done if there was a change. It also asks the participants some opinions about the information sessions and content that was discussed.

The semi-structured group interview

A week after the last information session (the fourth and final week of the study), the participants will return to the library to participate in a semi-structured group interview. The interview will be conducted by a researcher a part of the study and will utilize a small interview guide (see Appendix F). The interview will cover the same topics asked in the survey but call for more detail and opinion from the participants. The researcher leading the interview will record an audio transcript, and then transcribe it through writing, while anonymizing all identifiable information of the participants.

Limitations to the Research

As with all research, this proposed study does have some limitations. The results will only be as clear as the information provided by the participants. The sample can only be a representation of the population available. In this study, the population will be library patronage. Every city in the U.S. is different in population size, so this will differ. The results of the study should not be used as a representation of the entire country, or even state, in which the research took place.

Ethical Considerations

There is minimal to no risk associated with the study. All survey responses and participation in interviews will be anonymized upon analysis. Participants will not be in any physical danger and will have the same risk level as a regular day in life. Participants can withdraw themselves from the study at any time. The study itself must be reviewed by an Internal Review Board before taking place.

Timeline of the Study

Before beginning the study, a timeline should be in place to prioritize the most important tasks:

1. Creating and writing the instruments
2. Receiving IRB approval
3. Recruitment
4. The study and sessions
5. Analysis

A Gantt chart is a helpful tool to utilize when creating the ideal timeline for this study (see Appendix G).

Findings and Analysis

Analyzing the Data

To begin, there are two types of data collected that must be analyzed: survey results and a semi-structured group interview.

The survey responses should be tabulated through the Qualtrics software. It will be important to analyze the demographics of participants and if there are any leading trends between them. Analysis should also prioritize the identical questions from both surveys, to see if there was a change in responses. The open-ended survey responses should be reviewed and coded by 2 researchers to find a theme. All findings should then be summarized in a slide deck or report.

The semi-structured group interview transcript should be reviewed and coded by 2 researchers to ensure accuracy. The emerging themes should be noted and summarized along with the survey responses.

Importance of the Findings

Once the data are analyzed, the researchers should begin to synthesize the results and make conclusions.

The findings may show the effectiveness of the workshops and if they were able to increase the civic knowledge and education of the participants. They will also showcase the civic actions as well as news-based information behavior of the participants.

The findings are helpful for not only the researchers but the LIS field as a whole. The researchers will get feedback on the information sessions and learn what to fix, if necessary. This study will also fill in gaps that are currently presented in LIS literature regarding civic information and public libraries. Hopefully, this study will also encourage more LIS professionals to engage in similar research and dedicate time to giving their patrons the civic information they need and want.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer: To use when looking for participants. It is important to include the

incentive, requirements, information about the study, and how to apply for the study.

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

RECEIVE A $50 GIFT CARD AT THE END OF THE STUDY!

Study Information

- Interested in helping your community out while also learning more about civics? Join our study today!
- Learn all about civics right here in your public library and contribute to science!
- Participate in a pre-survey, post-survey, 3-session workshop, and a group interview
- All participation will be anonymized in findings
- Receive a $50 gift card upon completion of the study.

Requirements

- Over the age of 18
- Registered to vote
- Fluent or proficient in English

Interested?

- Scan the QR Code
- Tell a reference librarian
- Call 516-555-7629 or email libstudy@buffalo.edu

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form: This consent form is presented to the participants before agreeing to participate in the study. They must sign this before participating.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Civic Workshops in a Public Library

You are being asked to participate in a study evaluating the effectiveness of Civic Learning Sessions in a Public Library.

If you agree to participate, you will engage in the following:

- Pre-Survey

- 3-week civic learning workshop (1 workshop a week, 3 workshops total)

- Post-Survey

- Group Interview

The surveys will take no longer than 20 minutes, each civic session will be 1 hour long, and the group interview will take no longer than 1.5 hours.

The potential risk of this study is minimal, as the surveys to be completed are anonymous. Participants will not be in any physical danger, and the risk level can be compared to the same risk level as an average day in life.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and upon full completion you will be awarded a $50 gift card. If at any time you wish to withdraw your participation from this study, you are free to do so without retribution.

Please contact your head researchers if you have any questions before, during, or after the study.

AUTHORIZATION: I have read and understand the nature of this study. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this study, I am protected to withdraw myself from this study at any time. I grant the researchers permission to access the responses to my anonymized survey responses as well as my responses in the group interview. I understand that I can contact the Internal Review Board at the Public Library System at any time.

Participant's signature: _____   Date: _____

Researcher's signature:_____   Date: _____

Appendix C

Pre-Survey: This survey is administered to participants before the information sessions take place.

	Survey Question	Response Choices
1	What is your survey ID #?	*Respondents will input their unique identifier number.*
	Demographic Questions	
2	What is your age?	• 18-24 • 25-34 • 35-44 45-54 • 55-64 • 65 or older
3	What is your gender identity?	• Woman • Man • Transgender Woman • Transgender Man • Non-binary/Gender Nonconforming • Prefer not to say
4	What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply)	• Asian or Asian American • Black or African American • Hispanic or Latino/a/x • Middle Eastern or North African • Native American or Alaska Native • Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander • Another option not listed here: _____ • Prefer not to say
5	What is your educational background?	• High school diploma/GED • Some college • Bachelor's degree • Master's degree • Doctorate or higher • Prefer not to say
6	What is your current employment status?	• Full-time

		• Part-time
		• Self-employed
		• Unemployed
		• Student
		• Retired
		• Prefer not to say
7	Do you identify as a person with a disability?	• Yes • No • Prefer not to say
8	What is your political affiliation?	• Democrat • Republican • Unaffiliated • Other: _____ • Prefer not to say
Civic Questions		
9	Have you ever voted in a U.S. election?	• Yes • No
10	*[If participant answers yes to question 9, they will receive this question]* What type of elections have you voted in? Please select all that apply.	• Presidential Elections • • Midterm Elections • • Primary Elections • Local Elections Other:_____
11	How likely are you to vote in an upcoming election?	• Very likely • Likely • Neutral • Unlikely • Very Unlikely
12	How confident are you in your understanding of the structure of the U.S government?	• Very confident • Moderately confident

		• Somewhat confident
		• Neutral
		• Not at all confident

	Political Questions	
13	Have you voted in the most recent election?	• Yes • No
14	*[If participant answers yes to question 13, they will receive this question]*	• Very familiar • Somewhat familiar • Neutral • Not very familiar

	How familiar were you with the candidates on your ballot?	• Unfamiliar
15	Please select all government positions in which you know who represents you.	• President • Senators • Congressperson • Governor • State senate • State house/assembly • Mayor • City council
16	Are you familiar with political ideologies? *Ex. what each party stands for in comparison to each other?*	• Yes • Somewhat • No
	Information and News Questions	
17	How often do you engage with the news? *Ex. articles, newspaper, tv, radio, social media news*	• More than once a day • Once a day • A few times a week • Once a week • A few times a month • Once a month or less

18	How do you receive your news? Select all that apply.	- TV - Radio - Podcast - Newspaper (physical or digital) - Social Media - Other: _____
19	*[If participant answers TV to question 18, they will receive this question]* What TV channels/networks do you watch to receive your news? Select all that apply.	- The Young Turks - MSNBC - CNN - NBC - C-Span - PBS - CBS - Fox Business - NewsNation - Fox News - OAN Network - NewsMax - InfoWars
20	*[If participant answers newspaper to question 18, they will receive this question]*	- Associated Press - The Atlantic - Daily Beast

	What newspapers and other news media companies do you utilize to receive your news? Select all that apply.	- The New Yorker - Vox - Axios - The New York Times - NPR - Politico - TIME - BBC News - Forbes - The Hill - Newsweek - Reuters - The Wall Street Journal - The Epoch Times - The Free Press - New York Post - Breitbart - Daily Caller - The Daily Wire

		• The Federalist
21	*[If participant answers social media to question 18, they will receive this question]* What social media platforms do you use to receive news? Select all that apply.	• Facebook • X (formerly Twitter) • Bluesky • Truth Social • Instagram • Youtube • TikTok • Snapchat • Reddit
22	Do you know what misinformation is?	• Yes • No • I don't know
23	Do you know what disinformation is?	• Yes • No • I don't know
24	How confident are you in your ability to spot untrustworthy news articles or sites?	• Very confident • Moderately confident • Somewhat confident • Neutral • Not at all confident
	Expectations about upcoming sessions	

25	What are you most interested in learning about in the upcoming sessions? Please select all that apply.	• Voting information • Government structure and background
		• Political candidates • Political parties • Political ideologies • Misinformation and Disinformation • News bias
26	Do you have any questions for your workshop leader?	*[Open response]*

Appendix D

Information Session Schedule: This schedule outlines the topics that will be covered in each information session taking place.

Session	Name	Topics
1	The Civic Process and Our Democracy	• The Basics of the U.S. Government ○ Structure of federal, state, and local offices ○ General history of the government ○ Important laws/vocabulary terms to understand
2	It's All Politics: Neutral and Unbiased Information About Our Political Ecosystem	• Political Candidates ○ Current and future political candidates that are running for office ○ Past candidates and their election results • Political parties ○ Ideological differences ○ Spectrum of parties
3	Find Your Way Through the News	• Different kinds of news mediums • The differences between misinformation and disinformation • Media biases • How to spot bias

Appendix E

Post-Survey: This survey is administered to participants after the information sessions take place.

	Survey Question	Response Choices
1	What is your survey ID #?	*Respondents will input their unique identifier number.*
Civic Questions		
2	How likely are you to vote in an upcoming election?	• Very likely • Likely • Neutral • Unlikely • Very Unlikely
3	How confident are you in your understanding of the structure of the U.S government?	• Very confident • Moderately confident • Somewhat confident • Neutral • Not at all confident
Political Questions		
4	Please select all government positions in which you know who represents you.	• President • Senators • Congressperson • Governor • State senate • State house/assembly • Mayor • City council
5	Are you familiar with political ideologies? *Ex. what each party stands for in comparison to each other?*	• Yes • Somewhat • No
Information and News Questions		
22	Do you know what misinformation is?	• Yes • No • I don't know
23	Do you know what disinformation is?	• Yes

		• No • I don't know
24	How confident are you in your ability to spot untrustworthy news articles or sites?	• Very confident • Moderately confident • Somewhat confident • Neutral • Not at all confident
	Opinion about sessions	
25	What topics of the information session did you feel were most informative? Please select all that apply.	• Voting information • Government structure and background • Political candidates • Political parties • Political ideologies • Misinformation and Disinformation • News bias
	What topics of the information session did you feel were least informative? Please select all that apply.	• Voting information • Government structure and background • Political candidates • Political parties • Political ideologies • Misinformation and Disinformation • News bias
26	Do you have any comments for your workshop leader?	*[Open response]*

Appendix F

Semi-structured group interview guide: This semi-structured interview guide will assist the researcher holding the group interview. Researchers should lead with caution and allow for participants to guide the interview to an extent. It will be important to keep on topic while also allowing for as much information from participants as possible.

Topic	Questions to ask
Information Sessions	• How did you feel about the information given during the sessions? • What did you think about the specific topics presented during the sessions?
Civics	• Are you going to vote in the next election? • Did any of the information sessions fill in gaps you may have had about civics? • Did you resonate with any of the topics of conversation during the sessions?
News and Information	• Have you spent any time thinking about the different platforms or companies you receive news from?
Other	• What other information would you like to receive from the library itself regarding the topics discussed during our sessions? • What other comments do you have about the information sessions today?

Appendix G

Gantt Chart Timeline: This timeline showcases an idea of how much time should be spent completing each specific task of the study.