

Study examines how picture books introduce kids to politics

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Politics have been known to put adults to sleep, but political engagement could be part of children's bedtime stories as well. Lessons about the importance of politics could be part of their early education. A new

University of Kansas study analyzed political messages in the most popular picture books of the last several years to see what political messages are included and how they are presented.

Meagan Patterson, associate professor of educational psychology at KU, researches developmental psychology and has previously studied what children know about politics, presidential candidates, the political process and related topics. That research inspired the study of how kids learn about politics through picture books, one of the most popular forms of literature for children from birth to age 8. The study recently was published in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology*.

Disney movies have a wealth of kings, queens and princesses among their characters, but mayors and city council members rarely play the role of hero. Perhaps picture books provided a better window into politics.

"One of the things we saw in the earlier data set was a lot of variability and misconceptions in children's knowledge," Patterson said. "You'd have a kindergartner who knew a ton and an older student who had misconceptions about the difference between a president and a king. Picture books could be a good way to start conversations about those topics that can be difficult to discuss or for kids to get information on topics their parents aren't discussing."

Patterson and co-researchers analyzed the books on The *New York Times*' best-seller list for picture books from 2012 to 2017. They searched the 251 books for depictions of political issues, processes, leaders, symbols associated with politics or political leadership, and government employees. About half of the books had at least one instance of such content.

Researchers found a number of relevant themes:

Those that included political content contained very little information about political processes such as voting or protesting. Voting was almost always depicted in a formal setting like adults voting for president. More informal examples, such as a teacher having students vote what to name a classroom pet—an instance that shows voting is something everyone can take part in—were rare.

Protesting was usually depicted as past events such as the civil rights movement or the story of Rosa Parks. Those books did not, however, connect how those events are related to today, suggesting that protests were something that only happened in the past. That could provide an opportunity for parents and teachers to talk about the importance of such engagement now, Patterson said.

The analysis also showed several insights into how [political leaders](#) are portrayed. Monarchical leaders were depicted more often than democratic leaders. Among the former, they were mostly fictional characters and were most often presented as women or children. Democratic leaders tended to be historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln or George Washington, though there were a few contemporary figures such as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

"Especially for girls, those monarchical figures may give them more characters to identify with. The books with democratic leaders felt more educational, where the others seemed more for entertainment," Patterson said. "It makes me wonder if we are presenting democracy just as a thing you have to learn about, versus something exciting and important."

Democratic leaders were mostly presented at the national level, such as presidents. Mayors, city council members and government employees were rarely depicted. There were some instances of teachers, which could be expected given children's familiarity with educators, but few instances of government employees such as mail carriers, police officers

or garbage collectors.

"How much do kids, or even their parents, know about who is or isn't a government employee?" Patterson said. "We included that element in the analysis because it could be a way into talking about political systems and processes and understanding who makes decisions and does the work that affects our everyday lives."

The findings suggest that picture books miss an opportunity for political socialization for young children. Patterson argues it is important to start educating children about the importance of politics and political processes, as research has shown lessons learned at a young age carry lasting effects into knowledge and attitudes adults hold on a variety of issues. Additionally, politics are an important part of life that affect individuals and those around them daily, children included. More educated, informed citizens are also more likely to grow up to be engaged adults who take part in political processes.

Like religion, politics have a long, complicated and nuanced history. When parents want a child to have a religious education, they start at a young age. Picture [books](#) could be a way to start important conversations with [children](#) about topics that can be difficult to discuss otherwise. Adults often cite literature or reading a certain book at a key time in their life as the impetus for career choices, passions, hobbies or interests.

"I think you could do the same thing for politics, in starting with literature that discusses them at a young age," Patterson said. "Literature can have a strong impact and help people think 'this is an important issue' or inform the type of person they want to be as an adult."

More information: Meagan M. Patterson, Children's Literature as a Vehicle for Political Socialization: An Examination of Best-Selling Picture Books 2012–2017, *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* (2019).

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