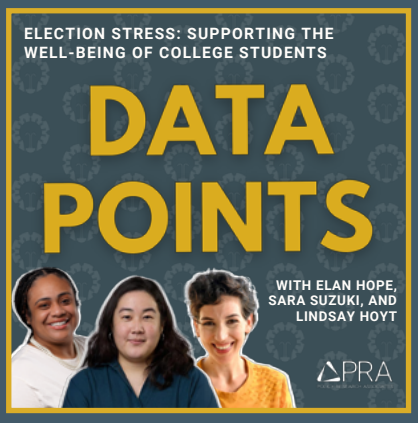

Data Points

Election Stress: Supporting The Well-Being of College Students

August 2024 | Podcast Transcript

Overview

This episode features Dr. Elan Hope, Lindsay Hoyt, and Sara Suzuki, and discusses their paper, *Trajectories of Sociopolitical Stress During the 2020 United States Presidential Election Season: Associations with Psychological Wellbeing, Civic Action, and Social Identities*.

Data Points is an ongoing podcast series produced by Policy Research that discusses research for social change.

Sara Suzuki:

We are really interested in making sure that young people can have their voice heard through civic engagement, including participating in important elections, but we also want to ensure and think about how that impacts their wellbeing and the ways that they can engage in other activities.

Holley Davis:

That was Dr. Sara Suzuki, senior researcher at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. In this podcast, she and her co-authors, Dr. Elan Hope and Lindsay Hoyt, discussed their recent study on the impacts of sociopolitical stress on college students.

Welcome to *Data Points* where we discuss research for social change. *Data Points* is a production of Policy Research. My name is Holley Davis and I'm the communications Director at Policy Research. In this episode, Dr. Elan Hope, Sara Suzuki, and Lindsay Hoyt will discuss their recently published paper, *Trajectories of Sociopolitical Stress During the 2020 United States Presidential Election Season: Associations with Psychological Wellbeing, Civic Action, and Social Identities*.

Elan is the vice president for research and evaluation at Policy Research Associates. She develops and provides oversight on research projects and uses her area's research findings to inform and strengthen Policy Research's technical assistance efforts. Dr. Hope has a strong background in research focused on academic, civic, and psychological wellbeing for racially marginalized groups, youth and emerging adults. Sara is a senior researcher at the Center for Information and Research on civic learning or CIRCL, housed at Tufts University. There she works on projects that explore how youth civic engagement can empower communities and bring about social change. Lindsay is an associate professor of applied developmental psychology at Fordham University. She studies stress processes,

social inequalities, and positive youth development among adolescents and emerging adults. Thank you all for joining me. I'm looking forward to diving into the research with you today.

Elan Hope:

Thanks for having us, Holley. It's great to be here.

Sara Suzuki:

Thank you so much for having us. It's so great to be here.

Lindsay Hoyt:

I always love talking with this group. Thanks for inviting us.

Holley Davis:

All right. Let's dive in. Elan, can you share what you all were studying?

Elan Hope:

Yes. Thank you. So in this study we wanted to know more about how college students in the United States, many of whom are newly eligible to vote in their first presidential election, navigate the political process and the stress that might come with it. We had two bigger picture questions. First, we wanted to know what the patterns of stress looked like for college students before, during, and after the 2020 presidential election. And if those trajectories were different for students with different social identities like race, gender, sexual orientation, political party affiliation, and socioeconomic status. We also wanted to look at how those different patterns or stress trajectories were related to overall mental health and to civic action. Does changes in stress throughout the election cycle affect college students' mental health and wellbeing or even their own engagement in the political process?

Holley Davis:

Excellent. Thank you so much, Elan. We're in the midst of a presidential election, so this is a very timely study. Sara, can you share what caused your interest in this specific topic?

Sara Suzuki:

Yeah, thank you for that question, Holley. As a researcher, we are really interested in making sure that young people can have their voice heard through civic engagement, including participating in important elections. But we also want to ensure and think about how that impacts their wellbeing and the ways that they can engage in other activities.

Lindsay Hoyt:

And I'll just add on a more personal note. Us and our other co-authors on this study work really closely and care a lot about young people and college students. And I think we felt highly motivated to better understand through research, not just our day-to-day experiences with youth, how these sociopolitical processes like a big election were affecting them.

Holley Davis:

Thank you so much for that, Sara and Lindsay. Let's get into the study itself. Lindsay, can you please define some of the key terms that were used throughout? I know for me, sociopolitical stress was a new term that I had not encountered before.

Lindsay Hoyt:

Yes. It's a term that this group of researchers has really come up with and developed. So we define sociopolitical stress or even more recently we've been altering the language a little bit to maybe call it sociopolitical distress. And we defined sociopolitical distress as the intense feelings that people have that stem from awareness of exposure to and, or involvement in macro level sociopolitical events. So an election is an example of a sociopolitical event. The reason why we have focused on elections in part is because they're predictable. So as researchers trying to design a study, an election is a sociopolitical event that we know the date of. So we can design this study as Elan was saying, to measure these distress levels before, during, and after a specific date.

Other key constructs that we're measuring in this study are civic action and psychological wellbeing. So civic action we're defining as specific sociopolitical actions that young people are taking in their daily lives. So this can be things like writing to a representative about an issue that they care about. On the ground activism, like attending a protest a march or demonstration or participating in some political club or organization, either on or off campus.

And finally, one thing we thought that was important about defining psychological wellbeing was that we wanted to capture aspects of mental health. So we measured depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms, but we also believe that psychological wellbeing is more than just the absence of symptoms or poor mental health. So we also measured optimism and a flourishing scale.

Holley Davis:

Thank you so much for defining those terms, Lindsay. Can you please share a bit more about the study design such as how many participants there were and how you assessed their stress and wellbeing over time?

Lindsay Hoyt:

Absolutely. We recruited 628 current college students from 10 universities across eight different geographically diverse states. The mean age of our sample was just over 19. We had a larger

proportion of women, about 73% of the students who participated were women. 26% were men and 1% were gender diverse. About 2/3 of the sample was white, which I think we can come back to later as an important limitation of the study. And then we had 11% Asian participants, 11% Latinx, 4% black, and 7% multiracial. In terms of political affiliation, the biggest group was those who identified with the Democratic Party, so that was about 43%, and then we had a little over 21% as Republican, 9% as third party and the final quarter were unaffiliated.

The study included three waves and these were strategically planned to take place before, during and after the 2020 election. So everyone completed a baseline survey at the beginning of October, 2020. So importantly, that was before election day, which took place on November 3rd, 2020. And then time two, so this is our measure of during the election. Time two took place between November 4th to 16th, and then finally time three took place during the first two weeks of December. So that was after the election period.

So in this study, we adapted a pretty well-known measure of perceived stress called the perceived stress scale. So we took questions from that scale and adapted them to focus specifically asking them about the election in the last couple of weeks rather than talking about stress in general. So for example, one of the questions was, "In the last week, how often have you found that you could not cope with things related to the 2020 election?"

Elan Hope:

This study design was really exciting because we were able to get the opinions and experiences of college students from across the country. So we weren't limited to one geographical region. We weren't limited to one majority party state. We had a selection of colleges and universities in states with different political majorities in power, different diversity of political opinion on and off campus and in their local communities. We had racial and gender representation that was a little more broad than if we just were at one particular campus or in one particular state. So we could really see not just how is sociopolitical stress working for one group of people, but we could get into questions about how sociopolitical stress may look across folks with different experiences with our political systems.

Holley Davis:

Thank you both so much for sharing that context and details. So Sara, what did you and your co-authors find from analyzing these results?

Sara Suzuki:

When we looked at this longitudinal trend, this trend over time for all 600 plus college students in our sample, we saw that sociopolitical stress is at a medium level before the election. It really peaks during the election and then falls off and there's a little bit of a recovery after the election, so you see this triangle for the whole sample. What we were then interested in understanding was what if we split this base triangle up? So we did this growth mixture modeling analysis and we found that actually you could split this base triangle up into different shaped triangles peaks. So one was a consistently low profile

and this was about 43% of our sample, all three time points. Their sociopolitical stress was much lower before the election, stayed pretty low during and was low afterwards as well.

We had another group that we gained moderate and increasing. This was a very small portion of our sample, just 5%, but they were very unique in that their levels of sociopolitical stress went up from time one to time two, and then continued to rise and stay elevated so that it was actually the highest of any group at the third time point in December. We had another group that we named the high to low group, which was about a quarter of the sample. This group did have highly elevated levels of sociopolitical stress, but experienced really rapid recovery such that by the last time point they were at levels similar to the consistently low group. And then our last group, which is high and decreasing, also about 1/4 of our sample. This group had the highest levels of sociopolitical stress even before the election, definitely the highest during the election, and it did come down a little bit by the third time point, but still pretty high.

And what's interesting then is examining who are in these groups. So on average, the young people who are in that really elevated triangle where their sociopolitical stress peaked and had difficulty coming down, many of those young people tended to be women, also tended to be identifying as LGBTQ+. There were youth who identified as gender diverse or transgender in there as well. And then in comparison, that low triangle at the bottom had many men and many youth who identified as heterosexual.

Another finding, and Lindsay alluded to this earlier about how our sample was predominantly white in terms of race. So it was difficult to see this signal, but we were starting to see a non-significant finding where there were more youth of color in that elevated triangle as well, but we weren't able to achieve statistical significance with that finding probably due to our sample makeup. Another finding that we were looking at was what are levels of psychological wellbeing in these different peaks that we had? And not surprisingly, we see this really strong link between sociopolitical stress becoming elevated and mental wellbeing suffering.

Lindsay Hoyt:

I would just add that if anyone's really interested in these profiles, you can check out a graphical abstract that'll be linked in the show notes and follow along.

Holley Davis:

So Lindsay, what should colleges do with this information? Especially as we have an election coming up in November, we have a whole new group of students who are going to be participating in their first election. How can college staff identify students and provide appropriate resources?

Lindsay Hoyt:

I think the first thing that colleges can do is to acknowledge that sociopolitical distress is real, and that can be on a more micro level in the classroom and interpersonal communications too, on a larger level messaging from the administration so we can be more sensitive in acknowledging that

sociopolitical stress, just like illness or a loss in the family can have an impact on student wellbeing. Secondly, and really importantly, colleges need to recognize that sociopolitical stress is a social justice issue. We know from our research and other research that these types of sociopolitical events do not impact all students equally. If you have some overall policy that's more sensitive to students experiencing sociopolitical stress that might impact their wellbeing or how well they do on an exam or an assignment that you're not only promoting wellbeing generally, but also it's a way to show your commitment to efforts around equality on campus.

I think another thing that the universities could and should do is to think about ways to promote civic development on campus. We understand that civic engagement activities can be a really great coping mechanism for sociopolitical stress, especially because it can bring empowerment to students, to young people, especially as they're still developing their political ideologies and learning about inequalities that exist and how to address them. At the same time, we also know that civic action can be very distressing and harmful for students, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds. So here is a perfect way that universities can step in by promoting safe spaces for young people to test out their civic action. Civic engagement can be encouraged and students can feel more confident in getting involved, meeting and talking to different people because it can be really good for them and for democracy in general.

Elan Hope:

Lindsay, as you mentioned, colleges and universities have commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and they also have stated commitments in their missions for civic engagement and community involvement. So for universities to align on those missions, it's important for students to feel that they're not only supposed to be engaged citizens, but really truly have the space to test those muscles. We know that early engagement, early political participation is one of the primary factors for long-term engagement. If you vote early and often, you're going to keep voting. So colleges are essentially a practice ground.

And if you have experiences that are stressful, if political participation becomes and continues to be stressful and causes decreases in the positive aspects of your wellbeing, then how is that going to impact your trajectory of your political participation for the rest of your life? Colleges and universities have the opportunity to really create positive experiences around political engagement that will then have these long-term effects, not just for the individual, but for our society as a whole.

Holley Davis:

You've mentioned civic engagement as a really important, almost antidote to these feelings of depression, anxiety. When is the right time for colleges to start implementing these? You've mentioned listening sessions, you've mentioned protests. What does that also look like in practice?

Elan Hope:

Yeah. Civic engagement as an antidote is I think one of the most powerful pieces of psychology in the last couple of decades. Recognizing that civic engagement isn't just a good thing to do with good outcomes, but that civic engagement in and of itself can be healing and hopeful for not just young people but their communities and people at large. We have ongoing sociopolitical issues that affect students on campus each and every day. So for students, engaging and being a part of systems change is twofold in the way it's an antidote. In one way, you're actually making changes. If you see a policy that's unjust, you advocate for what the changes you want to see are. Maybe you run for an office on campus and student government, maybe you speak at a city council meeting. You are part of the change.

So the change happens. That's a good thing for you and your community, but then also the process of doing the work. You are building those muscles. You're letting your voice be heard. You're not internalizing the negative things that may be a part of why this issue is so important to you, but you're really getting that out there into the community. Your voice is being heard, and it can be a challenge. When you're pushing up against large systems, that's not easy to do. So for young people, they're optimistic. They see the world in this whole new light, and they say, "Well, it doesn't have to be this way. We're a democracy. We can make new rules, change policies." So that process of engaging could be an antidote. It could be healing. As we see in our research in this paper, it could also be stressful. So how can we create structures that reduce the stress, still encourage civic engagement, and truly give a warm entree into being an active and engaged citizen?

Sara Suzuki:

Yeah. I really want to add to that finding. Unfortunately, a lot of the research that we do at CIRCL as well as the actual data in the study that we're talking about, show that civic engagement overall can be related negatively to mental health, meaning that those higher levels of taking action has consequences for their wellbeing psychologically. And I think a piece that is really important here and where colleges can take action is to think about young people having access to a political home or young people having access to peer spaces, counter spaces sometimes where they can connect with others who can support them through their activism, who can provide a long-term vision, where they might not see one, where they can engage in processes of community healing with others. But it's really important to remember that we do push young people into being able to express their voice through civic engagement, but we don't want them to be alone because a lot of the research is pointing to the fact that without that home or community around them, it can have negative consequences for their wellbeing.

Holley Davis:

We've talked a bit about how colleges should prepare to support students. What can the individual student do? What steps do they take? How do they find community?

Sara Suzuki:

Thanks for that question, Holley. And I think we always want to remember that young people have their own agency, and so they are going to be taking steps. And I think some advice that our research points to is that young people should really prepare for this period of high sociopolitical stress around the elections. The media frenzy can be really harmful. So thinking about really diversifying and curating your social media and other media sources, I think is one step that young people can actively take. I think we were talking earlier about the importance of finding others who you connect to and who are equally passionate about the issues that you care about. And they may not have the exact same views as you on that issue, but if they're passionate about that issue, it is going to be great to connect with them and be in dialogue with them.

Thinking with others who have long-term visions for the change that you're thinking about, thinking about connecting with others intergenerationally, it's always great. I found to learn from our elders in our community, so I'd really seek out their mentorship and expertise. I really believe that young people deserve to have those political homes, to have those civic spaces that are theirs, to learn and develop, and to discover new ideas and really debate how to resolve certain issues that are impacting your generation. So advocate for having that space is another step that I think young people can take.

Holley Davis:

So Elan, what should researchers consider next for this field?

Elan Hope:

This is exciting for the field going forward. We have more data now than ever about sociopolitical stress or distress and just how and when civic engagement, political engagement is helpful or harmful. So I think it's important to keep investigating what helps reduce sociopolitical stress and what factors make it worse. Particularly structurally, are there ways we can redesign systems so that we can reduce sociopolitical stress overall, and especially for those groups that Sara mentioned earlier who may be more likely to experience levels of stress and who may not get those decreases after a sociopolitical event. So that's, I think the next frontier for this work is what are the factors at the structural level and also at the individual level that we know we can lean into to keep folks engaged, but not at the risk of their wellbeing and at the risk of their mental health.

Lindsay Hoyt:

I can say another next step for researchers is to think about creative and adaptive ways to measure sociopolitical distress in real time so that we can capture really impactful events. I think it's been harder to measure specific events related to these other sociopolitical aspects because we cannot expect a date to work around. So I think an exciting direction for researchers is brainstorming and coming up with other ways using smartphones and daily diary type approaches in order to capture some of these other really salient macro level stressors that might be more unplanned.

Sara Suzuki:

I think one thing I want to add is that we were really only able to find these results because we decided to look at our sample through this lens of thinking about differences between people because of their social identities. So I think our research also points to really important methodological recommendation to parse out your data in these ways, to try approaches that allow you to look at differences by subgroup and to apply a quantitative critical approach to your work.

Holley Davis:

We're coming to the end of our time here together. Would anyone like to share any final thoughts before we sign off?

Elan Hope:

I'll just say that I'm excited for this work. I am glad that we were able to document how sociopolitical stress works before, during, and after an election for college students. And I'm hopeful that we can continue this path, and not just understanding, but acting to help to increase wellbeing and increase civic engagement and political participation all at the same time.

Lindsay Hoyt:

One of the important repercussions of this work is just awareness of sociopolitical distress, and we'll just add that one of our main outcomes that we were hoping for is just to increase awareness around sociopolitical distress. So we really appreciate you taking the time to interview us and giving us a chance to define and talk about some of the repercussions of this important phenomenon.

Sara Suzuki:

Yeah. Thank you both for those final thoughts. And I think one thing that still remains with me is that in this study, we were looking at students who were in college and did vote, because those are criteria for being in our study. And I want us to remember that there are many young people in our country today, both in and out of college who face barriers to voting. They lack the information and the supports they need to participate in this really important political action even if they are of age. And also there are many, many young people who do not have access to college as a context that can really empower them to vote. So thinking about those young people who may not be in college but still deserve to have their voice heard and thinking about how we can support political engagement among those young people too.

Holley Davis:

Thank you so much for your time, everyone. It was really interesting to hear about your research and to think about structurally how colleges can prepare for this upcoming election cycle to really provide that space for college students to develop into the participatory citizens that they'll grow to be in adulthood.

Well-being is such a complex topic, and institutes of higher education have a really significant role to play in supporting their students during election cycles and other times of high sociopolitical stress. I appreciate the work that you and your team have done on this topic.

Lindsay Hoyt:

This project was a group effort, so we also want to thank our wonderful co-authors, Neshat Yazdani, Mariah Kornbluh, Melissa Hagan, Alison Cohen, and Perissa Ballard.

Elan Hope:

We'd also like to thank the other researchers and faculty who helped us collect data at all of our colleges and universities across the country.

Sara Suzuki:

And thank you so much to all the students who participated in our study.

Holley Davis:

This has been an episode of *Data Points*, a production of Policy Research. Learn more about us by visiting prainc.com. If you have questions or comments about this episode, email us at communications@prainc.com. *Data Points* is available via Spotify, Apple Podcasts and SoundCloud. This study and the graphical abstract will be available in our show notes. This episode was produced and hosted by Holley Davis and engineered and edited by Elianne Paley. Until next time, keep creating positive social change.

About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. is a women-owned small business founded in 1987. We offer four core services: research, technical assistance, training, and policy evaluation. Through our work, we enhance systems that assist individuals with behavioral health needs on their journey to recovery.

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