Frances McClelland Institute
Children, Youth, and Families

Young Adults' Psychological and Physiological Reactions to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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Background

As the U.S. prepared for the 2016 presidential election on November 8th, reports from multiple news sources suggested that the country was experiencing a period of heightened stress. This anecdotal evidence was supported by the Stress in America Survey conducted in August 2016, which found that more than half of all Americans (52%) said that the election was a "very" or "somewhat" significant source of stress in their lives (American Psychological Association, 2017). Guided by an ecological framework and psychobiological theories of social status, the current study examined young adults' self-reported mood and physiological reactions (i.e., diurnal cortisol) to this election in real-time: two days before the election, election night, and two days after the election of Donald Trump, with the goal of understanding whether (and the extent to which) sociopolitical events influenced young adults' psychology and physiology.

Research Questions:

- How did positive and negative affect change across election week?
- How did cortisol levels change across election week?
- Did reactions differ based on political factors (e.g., which candidate your supported?

Method

- Data collected from UA (Arizona) and Fordham University (NY) during 2016 U.S. Presidential Election
- **286 students** participated (Mage = 20.24, SD = 2.16). Students recruited both online and flyers distributed around campus and in classrooms.
- Completed an initial online questionnaire (Saturday), and 5 nightly surveys and salivary sampling protocol (Sunday – Thursday)
- 72% of sample were women; 57% White, 12% Latino, 11% Asian, 7% African American, 12% Multiracial/Ethnic

Measures

Positive/Negative Affect

Rated using the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)

Cortisol

Salivary samples were gathered 3X per day over 5 consecutive days (15 samples total): wake-up, 30 minutes after wake-up, and bedtime.

Assays were conducted in duplicate using a time-resolved dissociation-enhanced lanthanide fluorescence immunoassay (Dressendörfer, et al., 1992)

Individual and Political Predictors

Gender coded 0 =male, 1 = female; Race/ethnicity coded White = 1, Ethnic/racial minority = 0.

Participants were asked to rate how well you think Donald Trump would fulfill the role of president from 0 (lowest/worst rating) to 100 (highest/best rating).

Descriptive Information

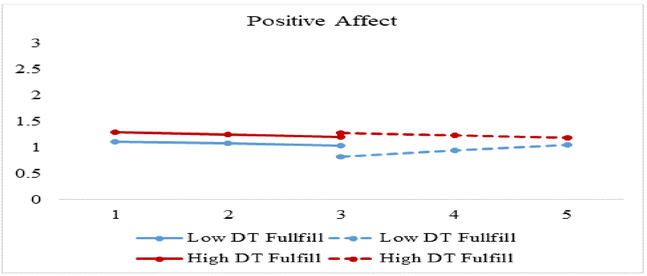
Trump (%)	Clinton (%)	Other (%)	Did not vote (%)
17.6%	68.0%	7.0%	7.4%

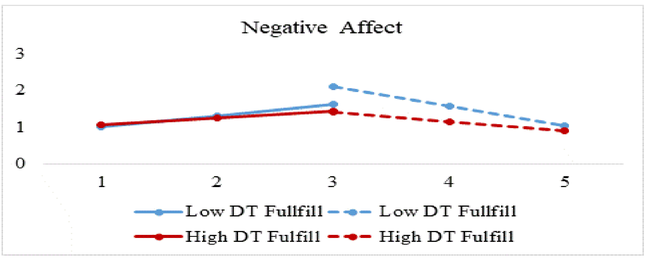
Fulfilled by Donald Trump Presidency (1 – 100 Likert scale)
M = 19.89, *SD* = 25.50

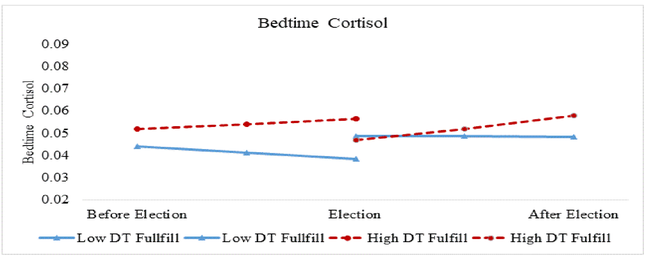
Confidence in Donald Trump winning (1 = 100 Likert scale)
M = 37.05, *SD* = 20.50

Results

Piecewise trajectory analyses were conducted in SAS, Version 9.4.







Conclusions and Implications

We examined young adults' mood and cortisol diurnal rhythm during the week of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Overall, our findings support the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), which posits that macro-level sociopolitical events influence individual processes (i.e., mood, cortisol levels). Further, we found that most psychological and physiological responses were largely dependent upon (or moderated by) political attitudes and individual factors.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge support from the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families.

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