Risk factors associated with election-related stress and anxiety before and after the 2016 US Presidential Election

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Abstract:

Introduction. Over the last several months, the effects of the 2016 US Presidential Election on the mental health and well being of Americans has become a topic of great interest to care-providers in the United States. Risk factors for election-related stress and anxiety have yet to be explored.

Materials and methods. To determine indicators associated with election-related stress and anxiety in the weeks preceding and following the 2016 US Presidential Election, two surveys – “pre-election” (October 20–21, 2016) and “post-election” (January 20–21, 2017) – were administered online via the Survey Monkey Audience panel platform. A total of 999 pre-election respondents (of 1025) and 1009 post-election respondents (of 1026) were retained after data cleaning. Multivariable linear regression analyses were then conducted in Orange on the pre- and post-election survey data sets. For both analyses, a summative election-related stress and anxiety index served as the outcome of interest.

Results. Compared to women, men scored an average of .610 (95%CI: .291, .929; $p < .001$) and .359 (95%CI: .089, .629; $p = .009$) points lower on the election-related stress and anxiety index among pre-election and post-election survey respondents, respectively. Though insignificant among pre-election survey respondents, Democratic Party affiliation (.805 points; 95%CI: .466, 1.14; $p < .001$) and low household income (.83 points; 95%CI: .173, 1.49; $p = .013$) were associated with higher election-related stress and anxiety index scores among post-election survey respondents.

Discussion. Election-related effects on stress and anxiety are complex, and some segments of the American population appear to be more vulnerable than others. Though further study of additional risk factors is needed, those noted here may be utilized to better identify and provide care for Americans suffering from election-related stress and anxiety moving forward.

Introduction:

Over the last several months, the effects of the 2016 US Presidential Election on the mental health and well being of Americans has become a topic of great interest to care-providers in the United States (1–5). The American Psychological Association (APA) reported in October 2016 that 52% of American adults felt that the 2016 Election was a considerable (i.e. very or somewhat significant) source of stress (6). Then, in February 2017, the APA reported that 57% of American adults felt that the current political climate was a considerable (i.e. very or somewhat significant) source of stress, indicating that the effects of the 2016 Election on the mental health and well being of the US population had not subsided considerably following the election (7).

Care-seeking behavior for election-related stress and anxiety in the United States reflects these trends. Leading up to and following Election Day 2016, therapists across the United States noticed upticks in appointment requests – not only for in-person and phone visits, but for asynchronous counseling via text- and video-messaging as well (3, 8, 9).

Beyond election-related stress and anxiety, previous research has revealed a variety of potential risk factors in the development of generalized stress and anxiety, including gender, socioeconomic status, and race. According to a report published by the APA in 2010, women are more likely to report higher levels of stress compared to men, as well as physical symptomatic manifestations of said stress, such as headaches or an upset stomach (10). Likewise, socioeconomic status (SES) has also been shown to influence individual-level stress and anxiety, as those living with lower SES face numerous unique challenges (e.g. financial hardship, harsher living conditions, inadequate access to medical care, and poor nutrition) (11). Furthermore, race and perceived race-based discrimination are also significant predictors of anxiety, especially among Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans (12).

Now, nearly five months later, Americans continue to suffer from election-related effects on their mental health and well being (13, 14). Here, we use data from two point-in-time surveys to quantify risk factors associated with pre- and post-election stress and anxiety in the United States.

Materials and methods:

Two short surveys designed by Talkspace – a text- and video-based therapy service – were administered online via the Survey Monkey Audience panel platform to study risk factors associated with election-related stress and anxiety (15–17). The Survey Monkey Audience panel consists of individuals in the United States who have agreed to take

surveys in exchange for contributions to charities of their choosing. Respondents for this study were recruited from a potential pool of almost three million Survey Monkey users aged 18 years and older; the survey sample was then balanced by age and sex to reflect American population demographics as determined by the US Census Bureau American Community Survey. The first “pre-election” survey was administered from October 20, 2016 to October 21, 2016, and the second “post-election” survey was administered from January 20, 2017 to January 21, 2017. Data on gender, household income, age group, and geographic region for each survey respondent were auto-generated via Survey Monkey participant profiles.

The content of both survey instruments focused on election-related stress and anxiety as self-reported by respondents. Phrasing changes between the pre- and post-election survey questions reflect the fact that the election and its outcome were announced in between study periods.

Only survey questions with comparable counterparts across both survey instruments were included in the primary risk factor analysis presented in this paper. Relevant categorical variables from both surveys were transformed into binary dummy variables, and respondents with missing data were eliminated. A total of 999 pre-election respondents (of 1025) and 1009 post-election respondents (of 1026) were retained after data cleaning. Exploratory data analysis was conducted on both data sets to compare demographics across survey populations (Table 1).

A summative election-related stress and anxiety index [range: one, 14] was calculated for each respondent using responses from three outcome-centric questions from each survey, including self-reported election-related stress (simple scale), election-related mental health symptoms (multiple response), and election-related stress effects (multiple response). Multivariable linear regression analyses were then conducted in Orange on the pre- and post-election survey data sets. For both analyses, 7 categorical variables (after conversion into dummy variables) were included as input covariates and the election-related stress and anxiety index served as the outcome of interest (Table 2). An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses.

Results:

Pre- and post-election survey populations were demographically similar and varied less than 9 percentage points from each other with respect to political affiliation, gender, household income, age group, and geographic region

(Table 1). After controlling for all variables included in the multiple regression model, several significant indicators for election-related stress and anxiety emerged from both pre- and post-election survey data sets (Table 2).

Election-related stress and anxiety among Democrats, Republicans, and third-party respondents was not significantly dissimilar during the pre-election survey. During the post-election survey however, Democrats reported significantly higher election-related stress and anxiety than Republicans and third-party respondents ($p < .001$); on average, Democrats scored .805 (95%CI: .466, 1.14) points higher on the election-related stress and anxiety index than Republicans and third-party respondents.

Election-related stress and anxiety among pre-election survey respondents who expressed concerns about the presidential candidates' capability, moral values, international policy, tax policy, immigration policy, or temperament was not significantly different from respondents who did not express such concerns. However, the post-election survey revealed that respondents who were concerned about President Trump's capability ($p < .001$), moral values ($p = .013$), international policy ($p = .002$), or immigration policy ($p = .001$) reported significantly higher election-related stress and anxiety compared to those who did not. Meanwhile, respondents who were not concerned about President Trump's temperament reported significantly lower election-related stress and anxiety compared to those who were ($p = .022$). Concerns about President Trump's tax policy did not significantly impact election-related stress and anxiety ($p = .163$).

Election-related stress and anxiety among pre-election survey respondents who indicated that the outcome of the election would affect their financial investments, healthcare decisions, spending patterns, travel plans, or business (or career) strategies was not significantly different from those who did not. However, on average, those who indicated that the outcome of the election would affect their place (or location) of residence scored 1.243 (95% CI: $Coeff \pm .96(Std Err) = .816, 1.67$) points higher on the election-related stress and anxiety index than those who did not ($p < .001$). Moreover, post-election survey respondents who indicated that the outcome of the election would impact their healthcare decisions ($p < .001$), spending patterns ($p < .001$), travel plans ($p = .001$), business (or career) strategies ($p < .001$), or place (or location) residence ($p < .001$) reported significantly higher election-related stress and anxiety compared to those who did not. Election-related stress and anxiety among those who indicated that the outcome of the election would impact their financial investments did not differ significantly from those who did not ($p = .116$).

Men reported significantly less election-related stress and anxiety than women both before the election ($p < .001$) and after it ($p = .009$). Compared to women, men scored an average of .610 (95%CI: .291, .929) and .359 (95%CI: .089, .629) points lower on the election-related stress and anxiety index among pre-election and post-election survey respondents, respectively.

On average, pre-election survey respondents in the \$100-124K household income bracket scored .903 (95%CI: .229, 1.58) points higher on the election-related stress and anxiety index than respondents in other brackets ($p = .009$), while post-election survey respondents in the \$0-9K household income bracket scored .83 (95%CI: .173, 1.49) points higher than respondents in other brackets ($p = .013$).

Election-related stress and anxiety did not differ significantly across age groups and geographic regions, neither among pre-election survey respondents nor among post-election survey respondents.

Discussion:

In this paper, we attempt to quantify and compare risk factors associated with election-related stress and anxiety both before and after the 2016 US Presidential Election. We found that women were more likely to score higher on the election-related stress and anxiety index than men across both pre- and post-election survey populations, while other risk factors – namely, political affiliation, respondent concerns specific to President Trump, expected effects of the election on respondent lifestyle, and household income – varied between study periods.

Though Talkspace was able to collect race and ethnicity data during the administration of the post-election survey, such data were not collected while administering the pre-election survey; as a result, comparison across study periods using these data was not possible. However, when the post-election multivariable linear regression model was expanded to add race and ethnicity data, coefficients and p-values associated with significant variables in the unexpanded model did not change considerably; this may signify that the other included indicators are independently pertinent to election-related stress and anxiety in the post-election survey population (Table 3). In addition to race and ethnicity data, other valuable indicators that should be collected during follow-up study periods include education attainment, sexual orientation, and social media use.

It is also worth noting that a number of our findings are consistent with election-related aggregate stress statistics reported by the American Psychological Association (APA), both before and after the 2016 US Presidential Election (6, 7, 18). Like the APA, we found that Democrats were significantly more likely to report election-related

stress and anxiety following the election than Republicans, despite similar rates of reporting prior to the election (Table 2) (6, 7). Moreover, results pertaining to race and ethnicity in our expanded post-election multivariable linear regression model are comparable to the primary findings presented by the APA prior to the election; namely, we found that – on average – non-white Hispanics scored 1.25 (95%CI: .629, 1.86) points higher on the election-related stress and anxiety index than other racial and ethnic groups ($p < .001$) (18).

Interestingly, the aggregate statistics reported by the APA prior to the election did not find significant differences in election-related stress between men and women, and differences between men and women were not noted in their post-election analysis (6, 7, 18). Despite this, our multivariable analyses – which are more robust to potential confounders – reveal that, after controlling for all other input variables, women reported significantly higher election-related stress and anxiety than men – both before and after the election (Table 2). Until now, care-providers have speculated that women may be more likely to report election-related stress and anxiety than men (3, 4). To our knowledge, this is the first attempt at quantifying this potential effect and assessing its statistical significance. Furthermore, our findings are consistent with others that have explored the role of gender in the occurrence and reporting of stress and anxiety more generally (19–25).

We also examined additional variables that were not discussed in the APA reports, a number of which were statistically significant indicators for election-related stress and anxiety among the post-election survey population (Table 2). Our post-election multivariable linear regression model found that respondents in the lowest income bracket reported significantly higher election-related stress and anxiety index scores than others, which is consistent with previous work that has been published at the intersection of poverty and mental health outcomes (26–32). We also found that post-election survey respondents who expressed concerns about President Trump’s capability, moral values, international policy, immigration policy, and temperament – but not his tax policy – were more likely to report higher election-related stress and anxiety index scores than those who did not. Similarly, we found that post-election survey respondents who believed that the outcome of the election would impact their healthcare decisions, spending patterns, travel plans, business (or career strategies), or place (or location) of residence – but not their financial investments – reported higher election-related stress and anxiety index scores than those who did not. Taken together, these findings suggest that election-related stress and anxiety among the post-election survey population may be motivated less by longer-term fiscal considerations (e.g. taxes, investments) and more by the expected ramifications of the current administration on immediate personal and forthcoming societal circumstances.

Our study is not without limitations, however. Like most survey-based studies, the potential impact of respondent bias on source population representativeness must be considered. In our case, large sample sizes and similar demographic makeup across surveys, as well as the Survey Monkey population balancing methodology, alleviates some of this risk. However, unlike many other pre/post-style survey-based studies, we did not survey the same individuals during both study periods. While this design choice also reduces the likelihood of maturation- and testing-related threats to validity, it restricts opportunities for following the precise impact of the election on any single survey respondent. Because of the pre/post nature of our study, survey instruments were not identical for both study periods; increased specificity of the post-election survey content (i.e. questions were posed regarding President Trump specifically, as opposed to presidential candidates in general) may have resulted in increased likelihood of statistically significant indicators in the post-election multivariable linear regression model. Finally, it is possible that the summative index for election-related stress and anxiety, which was used as our outcome of interest for both pre- and post-election multivariable linear regression models, masks heterogeneities in individual respondent experiences. However, by including multiple outcomes – self-reported stress, mental health symptoms, and stress effects – in the election-related stress and anxiety index, we were able to determine risk factors across a wider variety of respondent experiences.

Without question, election-related effects on the mental health and well being of Americans are complex, and some segments of our population appear to be more vulnerable than others. Though further study of additional risk factors is needed, those noted here may be utilized to better identify and provide care for Americans suffering from election-related stress and anxiety moving forward.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre- and post-election survey populations.

	Pre-Election Survey Population		Post-Election Survey Population	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Political Affiliation				
<i>Democrat</i>	402	40%	409	41%
<i>Republican</i>	296	29%	275	28%
<i>Other</i>	311	31%	315	32%
Age Group				
<i>18–29 years old</i>	174	17%	207	21%
<i>30–44 years old</i>	290	29%	261	26%
<i>45–59 years old</i>	190	19%	276	28%
<i>60+ years old</i>	355	35%	255	26%
Gender				
<i>Male</i>	473	47%	478	48%
<i>Female</i>	536	53%	521	52%
Household Income				
<i>\$0–9K</i>	57	6%	60	6%
<i>\$10–24K</i>	94	9%	101	10%
<i>\$25–49K</i>	173	17%	170	17%
<i>\$50–75K</i>	186	18%	187	19%
<i>\$75–99K</i>	150	15%	115	12%
<i>\$100–124K</i>	79	8%	88	9%
<i>\$125–149K</i>	39	4%	48	5%
<i>\$150–174K</i>	21	2%	36	4%
<i>\$175–199K</i>	24	2%	22	2%
<i>\$200K+</i>	43	4%	39	4%
<i>No response</i>	143	14%	133	13%
Geographic Region				
<i>Pacific</i>	213	21%	170	17%
<i>Mountain</i>	91	9%	98	10%
<i>West North Central</i>	95	9%	76	8%
<i>East North Central</i>	79	8%	101	10%
<i>East South Central</i>	146	14%	161	16%
<i>South Atlantic</i>	57	6%	42	4%
<i>Middle Atlantic</i>	161	16%	179	18%
<i>New England</i>	108	11%	119	12%

Table 2. Outputs for pre- and post-election multivariable linear regression (MLR) models.

	Pre-Election MLR				Post-Election MLR			
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Var=</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Var=</i>
Political Affiliation								
<i>Democrat</i>	-0.171	0.371	0.191	1	0.805	<.001	0.173	1
<i>Republican</i>	0.096	0.654	0.213	1	-0.247	0.178	0.183	1
<i>Other (ref)</i>								
Respondent Concerns About Candidate/President								
<i>Capability</i>	-0.321	0.127	0.21	0	0.893	<.001	0.196	1
<i>Moral values</i>	-0.249	0.261	0.222	0	0.487	0.013	0.196	1
<i>International policy</i>	-0.33	0.162	0.236	0	0.602	0.002	0.197	1
<i>Tax policy</i>	0.065	0.758	0.209	0	-0.268	0.163	0.192	1
<i>Immigration policy</i>	0.195	0.387	0.225	0	0.692	0.001	0.204	1
<i>Temperament</i>	-0.299	0.14	0.203	0	-0.443	0.022	0.193	0
<i>None of these</i>					-0.558	0.016	0.232	1
<i>All of the above (ref)</i>								
Effects of Election Outcome on Respondent Lifestyle								
<i>Financial investments</i>	0.216	0.277	0.198	1	0.315	0.166	0.227	1
<i>Healthcare decisions</i>	0.319	0.125	0.208	1	1.217	<.001	0.229	1
<i>Spending patterns</i>	0.253	0.232	0.212	1	0.886	<.001	0.24	1
<i>Travel plans</i>	0.352	0.098	0.213	1	0.825	0.001	0.253	1
<i>Business/career strategy</i>	0.255	0.247	0.22	1	0.879	<.001	0.252	1
<i>Place/location of residence</i>	1.243	<.001	0.218	1	1.681	<.001	0.318	1
<i>None of these</i>	-0.672	0.003	0.229	1	0.21	0.373	0.236	0
<i>All of the above (ref)</i>								
Age Group								
<i>18–29 years old</i>	-0.004	0.988	0.245	1	0.324	0.12	0.208	1
<i>30–44 years old</i>	0.025	0.915	0.231	1	-0.079	0.644	0.171	1
<i>45–59 years old</i>	-0.137	0.534	0.219	1	-0.127	0.505	0.191	1
<i>60+ years old (ref)</i>								
Gender								
<i>Male</i>	-0.61	<.001	0.163	1	-0.359	0.009	0.138	1
<i>Female (ref)</i>								
Household Income								
<i>\$0–9K</i>	0.414	0.289	0.39	1	0.83	0.013	0.335	1
<i>\$10–24K</i>	0.538	0.105	0.331	1	-0.001	0.997	0.282	1
<i>\$25–49K</i>	0.44	0.134	0.293	1	0.017	0.943	0.239	1
<i>\$50–75K</i>	0.312	0.277	0.287	1	-0.112	0.633	0.235	1
<i>\$75–99K</i>	0.533	0.096	0.32	1	-0.232	0.35	0.248	1
<i>\$100–124K</i>	0.903	0.009	0.344	1	-0.135	0.65	0.296	1
<i>\$125–149K</i>	0.355	0.404	0.426	1	0.272	0.474	0.379	1
<i>\$150–174K</i>	-0.325	0.49	0.471	1	-0.307	0.53	0.489	1
<i>\$175–199K</i>	0.306	0.597	0.578	1	-0.018	0.969	0.463	1
<i>\$200K+</i>	0.555	0.228	0.46	1	-0.226	0.539	0.367	1
<i>No response (ref)</i>								
Geographic Region								
<i>Pacific</i>	0.201	0.608	0.392	1	-0.308	0.319	0.309	1
<i>Mountain</i>	0.358	0.403	0.428	1	-0.497	0.158	0.352	1
<i>West North Central</i>	0.124	0.78	0.445	1	-0.632	0.07	0.349	1
<i>West South Central</i>	-0.077	0.856	0.427	1	-0.708	0.051	0.363	1
<i>East North Central</i>	-0.234	0.556	0.397	1	-0.377	0.248	0.326	1
<i>East South Central</i>	-0.15	0.77	0.515	1	-0.686	0.081	0.392	1
<i>South Atlantic</i>	0.059	0.879	0.39	1	-0.558	0.084	0.322	1
<i>Middle Atlantic</i>	-0.34	0.411	0.413	1	-0.36	0.289	0.339	1
<i>New England (ref)</i>								

Table 3. Outputs for expanded post-election multivariable linear regression (MLR) model. Only statistically significant indicators ($p < .05$) are listed.

	Post-Election MLR			
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>Std Err</i>	<i>Var=</i>
Political Affiliation				
<i>Democrat</i>	0.851	<.001	0.175	1
...				
Respondent Concerns About Candidate/President				
<i>Capability</i>	0.889	<.001	0.196	1
<i>Moral values</i>	0.512	0.009	0.195	1
<i>International policy</i>	0.628	0.001	0.196	1
...				
<i>Immigration policy</i>	0.616	0.003	0.204	1
<i>Temperament</i>	-0.4	0.039	0.193	0
<i>None of these</i>	-0.599	0.01	0.232	1
...				
Effects of Election Outcome on Respondent Lifestyle				
...				
<i>Healthcare decisions</i>	1.23	<.001	0.228	1
<i>Spending patterns</i>	0.897	<.001	0.239	1
<i>Travel plans</i>	0.813	0.001	0.252	1
<i>Business/career strategy</i>	0.93	<.001	0.25	1
<i>Place/location of residence</i>	1.661	<.001	0.318	1
...				
Age Group				
...				
Gender				
<i>Male</i>	-0.389	0.005	0.137	1
...				
Household Income				
<i>\$0–9K</i>	0.853	0.011	0.333	1
...				
Geographic Region				
...				
Race and Ethnicity				
<i>White (Non-Hispanic)</i>	-0.858	0.003	0.286	0
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	1.247	<.001	0.315	1
...				
<i>Asian</i>	0.843	0.02	0.362	1
...				

Supporting information (available by request):

S1. Pre-election survey.

S2. Post-election survey.

S3. Election-related stress and anxiety index

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