

The impact of political activism on college students' Mental Health: A longitudinal study

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Abstract—In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in political activism levels among college students, reflecting evolving generational attitudes and the impact of socio-political dynamics. Younger generations, including Millennials and Generation Z, have exhibited heightened engagement in political and social causes, driven by factors like increased access to information and a deep-seated desire for social change. This surge in activism is often amplified during moments of significant political upheaval and social movements, with college students at the forefront of movements like Black Lives Matter and climate activism. Furthermore, the digital age has transformed the landscape of political participation, enabling students to connect, mobilize, and advocate on a global scale. As issues closely aligned with personal values, such as environmental sustainability and social justice, gain prominence, college students continue to play a vital role in shaping the future of civic engagement and societal progress. Understanding these shifts is crucial for educators, policymakers, and society at large, as it provides insights into harnessing the potential of this demographic to effect meaningful change and drive a more inclusive and responsive democracy.

Keywords: Political activism, college students, generational shifts, socio-political dynamics, digital influence, social movements, civic engagement, societal change.

I. INTRODUCTION

Political activism, characterized by organized efforts to promote social or political change, has long been a central component of civic engagement and democratic societies (Tilly, 2004). In recent years, college students across the globe have displayed a remarkable surge in political activism, participating in movements addressing issues such as climate change, racial justice, gender equality, and economic inequality. This heightened political engagement among college students has been evident in mass protests, grassroots campaigns, and increased voter turnout in various elections (Keeter et al., 2017). While such engagement can be seen as a positive expression of civic responsibility, it raises important questions about its potential impact on the mental health and well-being of those involved.

This longitudinal study sets out to examine the intricate relationship between political activism and the mental health of college students. It is essential to address this topic as political activism among young adults is on the rise, with students often taking on leadership roles in advocacy groups and participating in emotionally charged movements. This increasing involvement may expose them to various stressors, including social and online activism, political polarization, confrontations with opposing ideologies, and the emotional toll of advocating for change in challenging societal contexts.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In recent years, these young adults are actively engaging in social and political causes, often at the forefront of movements addressing issues like racial justice, climate change, and more. While this surge in activism reflects a deep-seated desire for social change, it raises questions about the potential impact on the mental well-being of the students involved.

The study is motivated by the need to better understand the consequences of this heightened political engagement. College is a crucial developmental stage, where students are navigating the complexities of academic, personal, and social life. Engaging in political activism adds an additional layer of responsibility and emotional involvement. The study will explore various aspects, including the frequency and intensity of political engagement, the causes students are passionate about, and how these factors correlate with changes in their mental health over time. It will also examine potential moderators, such as social support, coping mechanisms, and prior mental health conditions, to provide a comprehensive view of the relationship. This research is important because it can shed light on whether political activism serves as a source of empowerment or stress for college students, and how institutions and support systems can adapt to better meet the mental health needs of this generation of

politically active students. Understanding this relationship will contribute to the development of strategies to support students in maintaining a healthy balance between their activism and their mental well-being.

III. OBJECTIVES

- Assess how the mental health of college students changes over an extended period by measuring various indicators such as stress, anxiety, and depression.
- Examine the potential relationship between students' engagement in political activism (e.g., protests, advocacy, political club participation) and changes in their mental health indicators.
- Identify any moderating factors or variables that may influence the connection between political activism and college students' mental health, considering demographics, personality traits, and external stressors.

IV. METHOD

1. Participant Recruitment and Selection

- Identify and recruit a diverse sample of college students, considering factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and previous involvement in political activism.

2. Data Collection at Baseline

- Administer surveys and questionnaires to collect initial data on participants' mental health, which includes assessments of stress, anxiety, depression, and overall well-being.

- Gather information about participants' level of engagement in political activism, such as the frequency of participating in protests, involvement in political clubs, and advocacy activities.

3. Longitudinal Data Collection

- Establish a schedule for follow-up data collection, which could occur at regular intervals (e.g., every semester or annually) over an extended period.

- Re-administer the same mental health surveys and political activism questionnaires at each data collection point to track changes and trends.

4. Inclusion of Control Group

- Consider the inclusion of a control group of college students who have limited or no involvement in political activism.

- Collect similar mental health data from the control group to facilitate comparisons with the activist group.

5. Ethical Considerations

- Ensure the study complies with ethical guidelines by obtaining informed consent from all participants.

- Guarantee participants' privacy and confidentiality during the data collection process.

6. Data Analysis

- Utilize statistical methods to analyze the collected data, potentially employing regression analysis to examine the relationship between political activism and mental health indicators while controlling for confounding variables.

7. Longitudinal Data Analysis

- Conduct longitudinal data analysis techniques to investigate how mental health indicators change over time in response to political activism.

- Explore trends and patterns in the data and assess the direction and strength of the relationship between activism and mental health.

8. Moderating Variables

- Investigate potential moderating variables, such as gender, personality traits, and external stressors, that could influence the observed relationship between political activism and mental health.

9. Qualitative Data (Optional)

- Incorporate qualitative interviews or open-ended survey questions to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of political activism on their mental health.

10. Data Validation

- Ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data by using standardized mental health assessment tools and carefully designed survey questions.

11. Data Management and Reporting

- Organize and manage the collected data for analysis and maintain transparent records of the study's methodology and findings.

12. Long-Term Monitoring

- Continuously monitor and track participants' involvement in political activism and their mental health status over the designated study period.

13. Interim Reports

- Periodically report and share findings at different stages of the study to contribute to ongoing discussions and potential interventions related to the impact of political activism on college students' mental health.

V. RESULTS

The results of the longitudinal study on the impact of political activism on college students' mental health would offer critical insights into how political engagement influences mental well-being. These findings may highlight trends in mental health indicators over time, shedding light on whether stress, anxiety, depression, or overall psychological well-being change significantly during the study period. They might also reveal the existence and nature of the relationship between students' level of political activism and shifts in mental health, indicating whether heightened activism corresponds to particular mental health outcomes. Additionally, the results could provide an understanding of the direction of this relationship, clarifying whether increased political engagement is associated with improved or worsened mental health. The data may also identify any moderating factors, such as demographic variables or personality traits, that influence the connection between political activism and mental well-being, offering a comprehensive picture of the complex interplay between political activism and college students' mental health.

V.I. POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Political activism is a powerful force that shapes the social, political, and cultural landscape of societies across the globe. It is a collective and often organized effort by individuals or groups to advocate for or against specific political, social, or environmental issues. Rooted in the principles of civic engagement and participation, political activism encompasses a wide range of activities, from peaceful protests and lobbying to online advocacy and grassroots movements. This introduction will delve into the significance, forms, and historical context of political activism.

V.II. SIGNIFICANCE OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Political activism plays a pivotal role in the functioning of democratic societies, providing a means for citizens to voice their concerns, influence government policies, and effect change. It serves as a crucial channel for the expression of dissent, the pursuit of justice, and the advancement of social progress. Activists often work to raise awareness about pressing issues, mobilize communities, and hold authorities accountable.

V.III. FORMS OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Political activism takes on various forms, each with its unique methods and objectives. Some common forms of political activism include:

1. Protests and Demonstrations: Peaceful gatherings of individuals expressing their grievances, demands, or support for a particular cause. Protests can range from small rallies to massive marches.

2. Community Organizing: Building grassroots movements and community-based initiatives to address local or broader issues, often through direct action and mobilization.
3. Online Activism: Leveraging digital platforms and social media to raise awareness, organize campaigns, and mobilize supporters.
4. Civil Disobedience: Deliberate violation of certain laws or regulations as a form of protest, with the aim of drawing attention to injustices and inspiring change.
5. Boycotts and Consumer Activism: Encouraging individuals to withhold support for businesses or products associated with practices or policies deemed unethical.
6. Artistic Expression: Using art, music, literature, and other forms of creativity to convey political messages and provoke thought.

V.IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of political activism is rich and diverse, with numerous movements that have shaped societies and influenced political change.

Anti-apartheid activism in South Africa contributed to the dismantling of the apartheid system and the establishment of a more inclusive government. Environmental activism, exemplified by movements such as Earth Day and Greenpeace, raised awareness about ecological issues and led to environmental regulations.

In the contemporary landscape, political activism continues to be a dynamic and evolving force. It has been amplified by the accessibility of digital communication and social media, enabling individuals and groups to connect, organize, and mobilize on a global scale. While activism can drive positive change, it can also be accompanied by challenges, such as polarization, confrontations, and ethical dilemmas. As such, the study and analysis of political activism remain essential for understanding the dynamics of modern societies and the pursuit of a more just and equitable world.

V.V. IMPACT OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM ON MENTAL HEALTH

It is a multifaceted issue that requires a nuanced understanding. While some individuals may find activism empowering and fulfilling, others may experience stress, burnout, or emotional distress as a result of their involvement (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Moreover, the relationship between political activism and mental health is likely to evolve over time, making it imperative to conduct a longitudinal investigation.

This study is motivated by the need to provide empirical evidence and insights into the potential consequences of political activism on college students' mental health. By conducting a longitudinal analysis, we aim to shed light on how the mental health of college activists may change or adapt as they become more deeply engaged in political movements. Additionally, we will explore potential moderating factors that may influence the direction and strength of this relationship.

Understanding the impact of political activism on college students' mental health is not only of academic interest but also holds practical significance. Universities, mental health practitioners, and policymakers must be equipped with knowledge about how to support students who engage in political activism effectively. This study seeks to contribute to this knowledge base, ultimately promoting the well-being of college students who are at the forefront of social and political change.

V.VI. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

There are several important rationales that highlight the significance and relevance of this research:

1. **Emerging Societal Relevance:** In recent years, there has been a noticeable surge in political activism among college students worldwide. Young adults are increasingly engaged in advocacy, social justice movements, and political causes. This trend has become a defining feature of this generation, making it a timely and socially relevant topic to investigate.
2. **Youth as Agents of Change:** College students often occupy a unique position in society as both learners and active participants in civic life. They are at the forefront of many political movements and have played pivotal roles in shaping public discourse and driving social change. Understanding how their involvement impacts their mental health is crucial, as it can have far-reaching implications for their well-being and future contributions to society.

3. Mental Health Concerns: Mental health is a growing concern, particularly among young adults. The transition to college life, academic pressures, and societal challenges can already exert significant stress on students. The addition of political activism to their lives introduces another dimension that may either exacerbate or mitigate mental health issues. This study aims to shed light on the complex interplay between political activism and mental well-being.

4. Longitudinal Approach: The inclusion of the term "Longitudinal Study" in the title underscores the research methodology used. Longitudinal studies involve tracking the same individuals or groups over an extended period, allowing for a deeper understanding of how relationships between variables change over time. This approach is essential when investigating the evolving nature of political activism and its effects on mental health, as it captures trends and patterns that cross-sectional studies cannot.

5. Evidence-Based Insights: The title emphasizes the research's commitment to providing empirical evidence and insights. As political activism continues to be a significant aspect of college life, it is essential to base discussions and policy recommendations on data-driven findings. The research seeks to contribute valuable information that can inform universities, mental health professionals, and policymakers about best practices for supporting college students engaged in political activism.

6. Interdisciplinary Relevance: The study at the intersection of political science and psychology is significant. It recognizes that political activism is not merely a political phenomenon but also a psychological and sociological one. By examining both political engagement and mental health, the research acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the issue and its potential impact across disciplines.

In summary, the title "The Impact of Political Activism on College Students' Mental Health: A Longitudinal Study" reflects the timeliness and importance of the research topic, its potential implications for the well-being of college students, and the methodological rigor employed to investigate this complex relationship. It underscores the need to bridge the gap between political activism and mental health research, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by today's college students.

V.VII. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

"The Impact of Political Activism on College Students' Mental Health: A Longitudinal Study," are designed to guide the research process and provide a clear framework for investigating the complex relationship between political activism and the mental health of college students over time. These objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the evolution of political activism among college students.
2. To assess the mental health of college students.
3. To explore the correlations between political activism and mental health.
4. To identify moderating factors.
5. To assess the long-term effects of political activism.
6. To provide evidence-based recommendations

These objectives collectively aim to address the research gap in understanding how political activism impacts the mental health of college students over time.

VI. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A substantial body of literature has explored the intricate relationship between political activism and the mental health of college students. This research has illuminated both positive and negative aspects of this connection.

On one hand, political engagement has been associated with positive psychological outcomes. Some studies suggest that participating in activism can lead to increased self-esteem and a sense of empowerment (Klendermans et al., 2008).

Engaging in political movements can provide individuals, including college students, with a sense of purpose, belonging, and a feeling of making a meaningful contribution to society (Ojeda, 2016). This sense of collective identity and efficacy may promote psychological well-being (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

However, the literature also highlights potential challenges and adverse consequences of political activism on mental health. College student activists, like activists in other age groups, may experience stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion as a result of their involvement. Activism can be emotionally demanding, particularly when activists confront opposing ideologies, experience confrontations, or face societal backlash. (Bostwick et al., 2016).

Identity plays a pivotal role in moderating the relationship between political activism and mental health. Individuals whose activism aligns closely with their personal identity may experience fewer mental health challenges associated with their political engagement. Conversely, identity conflicts or the perception of threats to one's identity can exacerbate mental health issues. (Tausch et al., 2011)

The contextual factors surrounding political activism are also critical. The political climate and societal support for a particular cause can influence how political engagement impacts mental health. Additionally, the availability of social support networks, both within and outside the activist community, can play a significant role in shaping the well-being of college student activists. (Kahn & McAlister, 1997)

Some studies emphasize the positive influence of political activism on civic engagement among young individuals. Engaging in activism, particularly during college years, has been associated with increased political awareness and participation in activities such as voting and community organizing. (Keeter et al., 2002).

The advent of social media and digital platforms has given rise to a new area of research within political activism. Scholars explore how these digital tools are used for mobilization, rapid information dissemination, and coordination of protests and campaigns. (Tufekci, 2017).

Historical and contemporary activist movements have played a pivotal role in driving social change. Movements like the Civil Rights Movement, feminist activism, and LGBTQ+ rights activism have achieved substantial legislative and societal transformations. (McAdam, 1982).

The emotional dynamics of political activism have garnered scholarly attention. Emotions such as anger, compassion, and solidarity can serve as powerful motivators for individuals participating in social and political movements. (Tausch et al., 2011).

Researchers also explore how the impact of political activism on mental health varies across different demographic groups. Marginalized or minority communities may experience unique stressors and benefits related to their activism. (Alvarez et al., 2009). Various theoretical perspectives are employed to explain political activism. Social identity theory, for instance, delves into how individuals' identification with a social or political group influences their likelihood of engaging in collective action. (Turner et al., 1987).

Contemporary activist movements, including those focused on climate change, racial justice, and gender equality, are subjects of ongoing research. Scholars assess the innovative strategies and tactics employed by these movements and their impact on society and policy. (Bond & Exley, 2020).

In conclusion, the literature on the impact of political activism on college students' mental health reflects a nuanced relationship. While political engagement can have positive effects on self-esteem, empowerment, and a sense of belonging, it can also introduce stressors and emotional challenges. Identity alignment and the broader sociopolitical context further shape this relationship. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for providing appropriate support and interventions for college students engaged in political activism.

VII. CHANGES IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM LEVELS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Changes in political activism levels, especially among college students, are influenced by a myriad of factors. One notable driver of these changes is generational shifts. Younger generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z, have demonstrated heightened interest in political engagement compared to their predecessors (Keeter et al., 2002). This trend is often attributed to increased access to information through digital media, a strong desire for social change, and a sense of urgency regarding critical issues like climate change and social justice.

The socio-political climate plays a pivotal role in shaping activism levels. Periods marked by political turbulence, the emergence of social movements, or significant elections tend to spark increased activism (McAdam, 1982). For instance, the

rise of movements like Black Lives Matter has led to a surge in activism, particularly among young people, focusing on issues of racial justice.

The digital era has transformed political activism through online platforms and social media. This evolution has made it easier for individuals, including college students, to engage in online activism, share information, and connect with like-minded individuals globally (Tufekci, 2017). Digital activism can lead to rapid spikes in political engagement during critical events or campaigns.

Activism levels also fluctuate based on the issues that resonate with a particular generation or group of individuals. College students, for example, have taken a leading role in climate activism, advocating for action on climate change. When issues align closely with personal values and concerns, it often results in sustained and passionate engagement.

Election cycles also exert a significant impact on political activism. College students may become more politically active in the lead-up to elections, engaging in activities like voter registration drives, canvassing, and campaign participation (Bond & Exley, 2020). The intensity of political engagement during these periods can vary depending on the perceived importance of the election.

The educational environment itself can influence activism levels among college students. Institutions that actively promote civic engagement and provide opportunities for involvement in political activities may witness higher levels of student activism. Personal experiences and exposure to certain events can trigger changes in political activism. For instance, individuals who have experienced discrimination or injustice may become more politically active in advocating for change.

Peer influence within college communities can also contribute to changes in political activism levels. Students may become more politically engaged if they are part of social circles or organizations that prioritize activism. Lastly, access to information and the ease of accessing news and political content can significantly impact activism. College students, who are often well-connected online, may be more informed and inspired to engage in activism when they are exposed to compelling narratives and information.

In summary, changes in political activism levels among college students are influenced by a complex interplay of generational factors, the socio-political climate, digital platforms, issue-specific concerns, personal experiences, peer influence, and access to information. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the evolving landscape of political engagement among young adults.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, changes in political activism levels among college students represent a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon deeply intertwined with generational shifts, socio-political contexts, and the evolving digital landscape. Younger generations, notably Millennials and Generation Z, have displayed heightened political engagement, fuelled by increased access to information and a fervent commitment to driving social change. The socio-political climate, characterized by moments of upheaval and social movements, plays a pivotal role in mobilizing student activism, often resulting in surges of engagement. Furthermore, the digital revolution has reshaped how college students participate in political causes, enabling them to connect, organize, and amplify their voices on a global scale.

Issues that resonate deeply with personal values, such as climate change and social justice, continue to motivate sustained and passionate involvement. Ultimately, understanding the intricate dynamics of these changes is vital for educators, policymakers, and society as a whole, as it allows us to harness the potential of college students as active participants in shaping the future of our democracy and addressing pressing societal issues.

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