The Emotional Costs and Benefits of Politics: Longitudinal Associations between Adolescent Political Emotions and Political Engagement

Benjamin Oosterhoff1 & Lauren Alvis2

1Department of Psychology, Montana State University, P.O. Box 173440 Bozeman, MT 59717-3440

2Department of Pediatrics, Baylor College of Medicine/Texas Children’s Hospital, West Tower, 6621 Fannin St. B.19810, Houston, TX 77030

Address correspondence to:

Benjamin Oosterhoff

Department of Psychology

Montana State University

P.O. Box 173440

Bozeman, MT 59717-3440

USA

E-mail: Benjamin.oosterhoff@montana.edu

Phone: 517-897-4160

Abstract

Political involvement is accompanied by a range of positive and negative emotional experiences, including stress, sadness, anger, regret, purpose, and empowerment. These experiences may be especially potent during adolescence when youth are forming political opinions and are becoming more integrated within the political system. Little research has examined adolescents’ political emotional experiences and how these experiences are connected with concordant and future political engagement. Using an ecological momentary assessment design, this study test cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between adolescents’ political emotional costs and benefits and subsequent engagement. Participants (*N*=290, *Mage*=16.09) completed four assessments of political emotional reactions (stress/sadness, anger, greater, purpose/empowerment) and multiple forms of political engagement (intent, interest, efficacy, and participation) across one day. Greater political empowerment was cross-sectionally associated with all forms of political engagement and longitudinally associated with greater next-moment intent to protest, political interest, political efficacy, and belief-consistent political engagement. Greater political anger was associated with greater cross-sectional political interest and belief-consistent engagement and interest and greater next-movement intent to vote and protest but lower next-moment political efficacy. Greater political stress/sadness was associated with greater intent to vote and higher next-moment intent to protest. Greater political regret was associated with lower next-moment interest. Findings emphasize the importance of empowerment for adolescent political engagement and demonstrate nuanced connections between negative political emotions and subsequent engagement.

Keywords: *Political Emotions; Political Engagement; Political Efficacy; Adolescence; Political Intent*

Longitudinal Associations between Adolescent Political Emotions and Political Engagement

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by greater awareness of social and political issues and engaging within the political system (Erikson, 1968; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Recent conceptual models of adolescent political engagement highlight that political action entails social and emotional costs and benefits for youth (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019).

Considerable research has theoretically and empirically connected adolescent political engagement with greater feelings of meaning, purpose, and personal fulfillment as well as enhanced health and well-being (Ballard & Ozer, 2016; Ballard et al., 2018). In contrast, theoretical advances in political science have highlighted that political action may entail emotional costs, including increased stress, sadness, anger, and regret (Oosterhoff, Hill, & Slonaker, 2019; Smith, Hibbing, Hibbing, 2019). Adolescents who are more interested and engaged in politics report greater emotional costs and benefits relative to those who are less engaged (CITE). This between-person difference is unsurprising given that youth are more politically engaged have a greater opportunity to experience a wide-range of political reactions relative to those who are less engaged. Less research has examined how political emotional costs and benefits predict political engagement overtime. Examining longitudinal links between political emotional costs and benefits and subsequent engagement may advance theoretical understanding on the implications of political emotions for political development among youth.

Testing longitudinal associations between political emotions and engagement requires certain methodological considerations. Emotional states are transitory and can fluctuate throughout a given day. Ecological-momentary assessment (EMA) study designs may be especially well-suited to capture momentary political emotional costs throughout a day and the implications for subsequent engagement.

Political engagement is multi-faceted and includes attitudes, intentions, and behaviors that range in intensity and frequency (Wray-Lake, Metzger, & Syvertsen, 2018). Certain

Other behaviors–such as discussing politics with like-minded and unlike-minded others–are necessary for democratic functioning and may occur throughout the course of the day.

The purpose of this study was to examine longitudinal associations between adolescents’ political emotions and subsequent engagement. Based on prior research (e.g., Oosterhoff et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019) and theory, we hypothesized that negative political emotions (i.e., stress, sadness, anger, regret) would be associated with greater concordant political engagement but lower future engagement. Additionally, we expected that greater positive emotional experiences (i.e., purpose and empowerment) would be associated with greater concordant and future political engagement.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedures**

The initial survey was completed by 290 adolescents ages 13-19 years (*M* = 16.09, *SD* = 1.22). On the final measurement occasion, 93% (*n* = 270) were still participating. The sample was primarily 10th (23.1%), 11th (26.5%), or 12th (25.5%) graders with fewer 9th (14.1%) graders. Two youth stated that they were not currently in high school. The sample was composed of slightly more females (61.0%) than males (32.1%) with 6.9% indicating a gender other than male or female. The sample was primarily White/Caucasian (78.4%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (13.1%), African American/Black (5.8%), Asian American/Pacific Islander (12.4%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (4.5%). A total of 1.7% indicated a race other than those listed. As a proxy for family financial strain (Galinsky 1999), youth were asked whether their families had: enough money to buy almost anything they wanted (11.0%), no problem buying the things they need and can also sometimes buy special things (57.2%), just enough money for the things they need (26.9%), or a hard time buying the things they need (4.8%).

This study was advertised on various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit). Participants self-selected into the study and completed an initial 5-minute survey. Participants also provided their phone numbers to receive text message reminders to complete the daily diary portion of the study. Participants completed the initial survey during a sign-up week; then all participants completed the EMA portion of the survey the following Monday. Momentary survey links were sent at to all participants at the following times: 8:00 AM, 12 PM, 4 PM, and 8 PM. This study involved no more than minimal risk and thus, passive parental permission was used. Upon signing up for the study, participants were given a link to a letter explaining their participation in the study and asked to provide this letter to their parents. All youth provided informed assent were invited to participate. Those who completed the initial survey were entered into a drawing for a $100 Amazon gift card. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the first author’s institution.

**Measures**

**Political Emotional Costs and Benefits.** Political emotions were assessed using items adapted from the Political Costs Scale (Smith et al., 2019), which assesses a wide range of political reactions and has been used with adolescence in past research (Oosterhoff et al., 2020). Participants were asked to report the extent to which politics has caused them to experience 6 negative emotions (i.e., stress, sadness, anger, hatred, guilt, regret) and 2 positive emotional states (i.e., purpose, empowerment) that have been linked with political engagement in past research (CITES). Participants rated the extent to which they experienced each of these emotions because of politics since they were awake (first time point) or in the past 4 hours on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Based on past factor-analytic research (Oosterhoff et al., 2020), these items were combined into 4-subscales including three negative emotional states: *stress/sadness* (momentary ɑ’s ranged from .83 to .88), *anger* (momentary ɑ’s ranged from .70 to .77), and *regret* (momentary ɑ’s ranged from .62 to .71) and one positive emotional state: *purpose/empowerment* (momentary ɑ’s ranged from .83 to .91). Mean scores were calculated with higher values indicating greater sense of purpose.

**Political Intent.** Two items assessed the extent to which participants would engage in protesting and voting. Participants were asked “If I could, I would participate in a protest right now” and “If I could, I would vote right now” with responses options given on a 7 point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Past research that has demonstrated that intent to protest and vote has different correlates (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019), thus items were modeled separately.

**Political Interest.** Political interest was measured with a single item which stated, “Right now, how interested are you in politics?” Responses were provided on a 6-point scale from 1 (*no at all*) to 6 (*extremely interested*), with higher values indicating greater political interest.

**Political Efficacy.** Political efficacy was measured with a single item which stated, “Right now, I feel well-qualified to participate in politics” and “Right now, I don't feel like I could influence other people's political opinions.” Responses were provided on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Items were modeled

**Political Engagement.** Political engagement was assessed using four-items created for the purpose of this study. Two-items assessed *belief-consistent* political engagement in which participants rated the frequency in which they read political news or had a political discussion that was consistent with their beliefs (e.g., “Since your last survey, how much have you discussed politics with someone who did NOT share your views?”) and two items assessed belief-inconsistent political engagement in which participants rated the frequency in which they read political news or had a political discussion that was inconsistent with their beliefs (e.g., “Since your last survey, how much have you discussed politics with someone who did NOT share your views?). Momentary ɑ’s ranged from .xx for belief-consistent political engagement and.xx-.xx for belief-inconsistent political engagement. Responses were given on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to (*the entire time*). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale with higher values indicating greater political engagement.

**Analytic Technique**

Six linear mixed-effects modeling were used to examine concordant and longitudinal associations between political emotions and engagement. Data was structured in long format and subject was treated as a random effect with measurement wave nested within person. Concordant negative (i.e., stress/sadness, anger, regret) and positive (i.e., purpose/empowerment) political emotions were entered as primary predictor variables. One-wave lagged variables were created for each political emotion and entered into the model to examine longitudinal effects. Indicators of political engagement (protesting intent, voting intent, political interest, political efficacy, belief-inconsistent engagement, and belief-consistent engagement) were specified as outcome variables. All models accounted for participant gender, age, race, and financial strain. Analyses were performed in R using the lme4 packages (Bates et al., 2007). Data and analysis script are available at (OSF LINK). All political emotional costs and benefits items and engagement items are reported.

**Results**

Table 1 displays the means and correlations among political emotions and engagement. Most political emotions were moderately and positively correlated and most forms of political engagement were moderately correlated. Political emotions were positively and moderately correlated with political engagement. Intra-class correlation coefficients (ICCs) were used to describe within-day variability in political emotions and engagement. The between-person variance for the political emotional costs and benefits ranged between 40% and 60%. The between-person variance for political engagement ranged from 43% and 52%, whereas the between person variance for political intent, interest, and efficacy was slightly higher and ranged from 68% to 82%. These results indicate substantial within-day variability for the political emotional costs and benefits as well engagement, with slightly less within-day variability for political intent, interest, and efficacy.

Six linear mixed-effects models were used to examine concordant and longitudinal associations between political emotional costs and benefits and political engagement. The full mixed-model table is available in the supplemental file. Figure 1 displays the concordant and longitudinal associations between political emotional costs and benefits and political intent. After accounting for gender, race, age, and financial strain, greater political stress/sadness (*B* = .05, *95%CI* = .00-.10, *p* = .031), anger (*B* = .08, *95%CI* = .03-.14, *p* = .004), and purpose/empowerment (*B* = .14, *95%CI* = .09-.20, *p* < .001) were associated with greater concordant intent to vote and greater anger (*B* = .17, *95%CI* = .10-.25, *p* < .001), and purpose/empowerment (*B* = .25, *95%CI* = .18-.33, *p* < .001) were associated with greater concordant intent to protest. Additionally, greater past political stress/sadness (*B* = .10, *95%CI* = .02-.18, *p* = .018) and empowerment (*B* = .07, *95%CI* = .00-.15, *p* = .040) were associated with higher next-moment intent to protest.

Figure 2 displays the concordant and longitudinal associations between political emotional costs and benefits and political interest and efficacy. After accounting for gender, race, age, and financial strain, greater political anger (*B* = .09, *95%CI* = .03-.16, *p* = .003) and purpose/empowerment (*B* = .27, *95%CI* = .21-.34, *p* < .001) were associated with greater concordant political interest and greater purpose/empowerment (*B* = .29, *95%CI* = .22-.36, *p* < .001) were associated with greater concordant political efficacy. Additionally, greater past political regret (*B* = -.11, *95%CI* = -.18- -.03, *p* = .005) was associated with lower next-moment political interest and greater purpose/empowerment (*B* = .18, *95%CI* = .12-.24, *p* < .001) was associated with higher next-moment political interest. Greater past political anger (*B* = -.08, *95%CI* = -.16- -.01, *p* = .035) was associated with lower next-moment political efficacy and greater purpose/empowerment (*B* = .15, *95%CI* = .09-.22, *p* < .001) was associated with higher next-moment political efficacy.

Figure 3 displays the concordant and longitudinal associations between political emotional costs and benefits and political participation. After accounting for gender, race, age, and financial strain, greater political anger (*B* = .09, *95%CI* = .04-.13, *p* < .001) and purpose/empowerment (*B* = .14, *95%CI* = .09-.18, *p* < .001) were associated with greater concordant belief-consistent political engagement and greater purpose/empowerment (*B* = .12, *95%CI* = .08-.16, *p* < .001) was associated with greater belief-inconsistent political engagement. Further, greater past purpose/empowerment (*B* = .05, *95%CI* = .01-.10, *p* = .017) was associated with greater next-moment belief-consistent political engagement.

**Discussion**

* Purpose and empowerment associated with concordant intent to vote and protest, political interest, political efficacy, belief-consistent engagement, belief-inconsistent engagement,
* Purpose and empowerment associated with greater next-moment intent to protest and political interest and political efficacy, and belief consistent political engagement.
* Anger was associated with greater belief-consistent engagement and interest. Anger associated with intent to vote and protest.
* Political anger associated with less next-moment political efficacy…
* Greater political stress/sadness greater intent to vote and higher next-moment (but not concordant) intent to protest.
* Greater political regret was associated with lower next-moment interest.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Findings should be taken in light of certain limitations. Although an EMA design can offer reliable information about dynamic associations between political emotions and engagement, this study cannot determine causality. Third variables may account for the results found in this study. Additionally, the sample used in this study was composed of primarily White youth and lacks generalizability to other ages and demographic groups. Future studies should examine links between political emotions and engagement among those from diverse demographic backgrounds. To reduce response burden, many constructs in this study were measured with only a few number of items. Although these measures demonstrated adequate psychometric properties in this study, future research should consider utilizing the full assessments of a wider-variety of political emotions that may be relevant to civic action (Smith et al., 2019). Findings should also be considered in light of the specific sociohistorical context from which this study occurred. It is possible that links between political emotions and engagement during historical periods with varying levels of political polarization. Future research may benefit from utilizing larger sample sizes to capture daily variability in political emotions and engagement when political polarization is low to better understand possible period effects.

**Conclusion**

Character strengths are thought to be an important developmental asset that undergirds youth civic action. Findings from this longitudinal study highlight the dynamic and highly nuanced relation between various civic experiences, sense of purpose, future-mindedness, and gratitude. Future research should continue to examine the intersection between character strengths and civic engagement using longitudinal, within-subject methodology. Such queries will advance theory on civic engagement and provide direct guidance for programs seeking to enhance the well-being of people and their community.

References

Table 2

*Intra-Class Correlation Coefficients for Adolescent Political Emotions and Engagement*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Construct** | **ICC** |
| Stress/Sadness | .40 |
| Anger | .57 |
| Regret | .57 |
| Purpose/Empowerment | .61 |
|  |  |
| Protesting Intent | .82 |
| Vote Intent | .79 |
| Political Interest | .76 |
| Political Efficacy | .68 |
| Belief-Inconsistent Engagement | .52 |
| Belief-Consistent Engagement | .43 |