Abstract

Objective: The present study investigated whether associations between sociopolitical discussions and mental health differed by racial discrimination among racially minoritized college students. We also tested whether associations differed between election years—when sociopolitical discussions may be more frequent—and non-election years. **Methods and Results**: In November 2020, racially minoritized college students (N=225; M_{age}=19.84, SD=1.41; 72.89% female; 52.00% Asian, 22.67% Latino, 16.00% multiracial, 9.33% races including Black and Middle Eastern) reported how often they had experienced racial discrimination, their frequency of sociopolitical discussions with friends and family, and their mental health. Results indicated that participants who had more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends—but not family—only reported more internalizing problems if they had never or rarely experienced racial discrimination in the past year. To determine whether results were unique to discussions during election years, a second sample (N=262; M_{age}=20.18, SD=2.30; 82.53% female; 48.86% Asian, 18.56% Latino, 15.42% multiracial, 17.78% races including Black and Middle Eastern) was recruited one year later, and racial discrimination did not moderate associations between sociopolitical discussions and internalizing problems. **Conclusions**: Sociopolitical discussions with friends during presidential elections may be related to greater internalizing problems for racially minoritized college students who experience racial discrimination less frequently, potentially because they may feel less prepared or less motivated to have these conversations compared to racially minoritized college students who experience racial discrimination more frequently. Future studies should investigate means of promoting sociopolitical discussions on

campus while attenuating the association between sociopolitical discussions and internalizing problems.

Keywords: college students, marginalization, psychopathology, racial discrimination, sociopolitical engagement

Public Significance Statement

College students who frequently have sociopolitical discussions with friends tend to have poorer mental health. Results highlight that efforts are needed to lessen the negative impacts of having these discussions with friends during election years and to avoid disproportionately burdening individuals who experience racial discrimination.

Racial Discrimination Moderates associations between Sociopolitical Discussions and

Internalizing Problems among Racially Minoritized College Students

Settings of higher education provide a space for students to develop their sociopolitical

identity. College students learn about sociopolitical issues and means of sociopolitical

involvement through coursework, community and civic engagement, and discourse with other

students in addition to their families (Finlay et al., 2010). Conversations and experiences during

college can have long-lasting influences on political leaning decades later (Alwin et al., 1991).

Still, studies have been mixed regarding whether sociopolitical discussions and civic engagement

more broadly relate to better versus poorer well-being among college students (Ballard et al.,

2020; Roche & Jacobson, 2019). Associations may be further complicated by whether they are

discussing with family versus friends and the timing of presidential elections, when

sociopolitical discussions are more frequent and people deeply consider the implications of

sociopolitical issues for their futures (Gerber et al., 2012). Therefore, the present study

investigated associations between frequency of sociopolitical discussions with internalizing

problems—a dimension of mental health regarding negative affectivity—and whether these

associations differ by individuals' experiences with racial discrimination shortly following the

2020 presidential election and one year later.

Sociopolitical Discussions and Civic Engagement

According to sociopolitical development theory, knowledge of social issues and critical

social analysis is necessary for sociopolitical engagement (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts &

Halkovic, 2022). Sociopolitical discussions enable individuals to learn about civic issues and

engage in critical reflection (Golden et al., 2021; Wray-Lake, 2019). Civic knowledge and

critical reflection, in turn, predict greater civic engagement and voting likelihood (Littenberg-

Tobias & Cohen, 2016). Individuals who have more frequent political discussions—particularly with dissenting viewpoints—have greater political knowledge, are more likely to engage in civic behavior such as voting, and are more tolerant and understanding of opposing views (Eveland, 2004; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Discussions with parents regarding sociopolitical and racial issues have been related to greater concern for others, community involvement, civic responsibility, and greater knowledge, awareness, and engagement with political issues among youth (Martinez et al., 2022; Pinetta et al., 2020; Warren & Wicks, 2011).

Sociopolitical discussions can promote the development of sociopolitical identity among college students by exposing them to diverse viewpoints and life experiences (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011). During adolescence and the transition to adulthood, individuals develop greater autonomy and stronger peer relationships (Collins, 1997; Höltge et al., 2021). Peers, who may have different backgrounds and sociopolitical viewpoints, and parents become distinct sources of socialization (Schacter & Margolin, 2019). Colleges also provide resources to gain skills, knowledge, and abilities that can promote sociopolitical engagement (Watts & Halkovic, 2022). For instance, having peers involved in civic engagement, opportunities to address sociopolitical issues at schools, and facilitators in school organizations with high self-efficacy in discussing sociopolitical issues have been related to greater civic engagement and more frequent sociopolitical discussions (Poteat et al., 2019; Suzuki et al., 2022).

Motivation for sociopolitical engagement is informed by social identities and early life experiences and consequently may differ between white and racially minoritized individuals (Watts & Halkovic, 2022). Throughout adolescence and young adulthood, youth develop social identities including racial and ethnic identity and recognize how these identities are viewed by broader society (Rahal et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Parents from racially minoritized

backgrounds often engage their youth in sociopolitical discussions to foster these social identities (Bañales et al., 2021; Pinetta et al., 2020), although this has received less attention among Asian families (Juang et al., 2017). Coping with racism and other forms of marginalization can also motivate individuals to discuss these issues and better their communities. Latinx college and high school students who experienced more rejection related to undocumented status were more likely to be civically engaged (Perez et al., 2010). Limited research has examined sociopolitical discussions as an important behavior that can promote civic engagement and sociopolitical development. More recently, sociopolitical discussions provided one means for students unable to legally vote (e.g., underage, international, undocumented) in the 2020 election to remain involved in American politics while safely adhering to strict quarantine measures that were enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, research is needed to identify who is engaging in these discussions and the implications of these discussions for these individuals' mental health.

Sociopolitical Involvement and Mental Health

It remains unclear how having sociopolitical discussions can affect mental health. Discussing sociopolitical issues can eventually lead to sociopolitical action, which has been posited to promote mental health among college students by increasing a sense of purpose, connection with one's community, and social support from like-minded peers (Finlay et al., 2010; Roberts & Christens, 2021). Involvement in sociopolitical issues can also promote sociopolitical identity and commitment to one's community or society (Flanagan & Bundick, 2011; Malin et al., 2015; Piliavin & Siegl, 2015). Furthermore, college students often feel lonely during the college transition because they are entering an unfamiliar student community, and

sociopolitical engagement can promote social connection and better mental health (Moeller &

Seehuus, 2019).

Associations between sociopolitical involvement and mental health have been mixed.

Whereas voting and volunteering have been related to better mental health (Ballard et al., 2019;

Wray-Lake et al., 2019), activism has been related to poorer mental health and health-risk

behaviors (Ballard et al., 2020; Ozer, 2016). Limited research has assessed the effects of

sociopolitical discussions on mental health, although expressive forms of political engagement

such as discussions have been related to poorer mental health (Ballard et al., 2020). In spite of

potential benefits, sociopolitical discussions and actions can be emotionally taxing because

extreme or dissenting views may alienate one from friends and elicit negative responses from

other people (Hayes et al., 2013). Indeed, many individuals avoid political discussions,

especially when they anticipate disagreement (Gerber et al., 2012; Settle & Carlson, 2019).

Sociopolitical involvement may be particularly beneficial for racially minoritized

individuals (Watts & Halkovic, 2022). The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems

Theory (P-VEST; Spencer, 2006) posits that individuals' identities are recursively related to their

environments. Messages and experiences (e.g., discrimination) from the local environment

inform how individuals connect with their social identities, and individuals' social identities

impact how they engage with the local environment. Youth from racially minoritized

backgrounds experience greater stress related to racism at societal, institutional, and individual

levels and develop coping strategies that are informed by their social identities (Spencer, 2006).

Sociopolitical action is one form of coping that can mitigate the consequences of marginalization

by raising awareness of social issues and identifying ways to address injustice (Hope & Spencer,

2017; Watts et al., 2011). Research is needed to determine whether sociopolitical discussions could similarly relate to better mental health for racially minoritized individuals.

Racial Discrimination and Sociopolitical Involvement

Although all individuals are affected by the socially constructed system of racism, individuals differ in the degree to which they encounter racial discrimination in their daily lives (Williams et al., 1997). Racial discrimination refers to the unfair mistreatment that individuals receive based on their race, and this taxing experience can galvanize individuals to have sociopolitical discussions and be civically engaged (Lewis et al., 2015). Asian Americans who experience more discrimination are more aware of structural causes of social inequality and, in turn, more engaged in activism (Tran & Curtin, 2017). Black and Latinx students who more frequently experience racism, stigma, and minority stress are more likely to engage in activism and have stronger civic attitudes (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Hope et al., 2016; Szymanski, 2012; White-Johnson, 2012). Racially minoritized college students have organized together to combat shared experiences of discrimination (Grim et al., 2019; Mwangi et al., 2018, 2019).

Experiences of racial discrimination may also impact how having sociopolitical discussions influence mental health in line with P-VEST. Individuals who experience racial discrimination may be more prepared to discuss racism and other sociopolitical issues. In qualitative interviews, racially minoritized students reported feeling pressured to engage in racial issues and speak as a representative for their race in predominately white classrooms (Mwangi et al., 2018). Identity-based organizations can also provide a safe space to discuss social issues (Museus, 2008; Poteat et al., 2019). Engagement with peers regarding cultural and racial issues not only provides a means to combat racism, but these experiences can be therapeutic by providing students with support, autonomy, a means of coping with stress, and a sense of

belonging (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Oskooii, 2016; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020). Sociopolitical

discussions may similarly be less challenging or more beneficial for college students who

experience racial discrimination than for students who have not experienced racial

discrimination, although this has not been empirically tested.

Sociopolitical Discussions during Election Years

Sociopolitical discussions may have a particularly strong impact on mental health during

presidential elections. Individuals often become more politically minded during elections as they

must decide for whom to vote while being inundated by political media. Still, people tend to

discuss politics less frequently when they disagree with their discussion partners, likely to avoid

confrontation or negative emotion (Gerber et al., 2012; Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008). Prior

studies have found that individuals had more negative emotion and higher cortisol when their

presidential candidate lost (Scheibe et al., 2011; Stanton et al., 2010), and that undergraduates

experienced increased negative emotion and poorer sleep quality on the day after the election

(Roche & Jacobson, 2019).

Sociopolitical discussions may be more negatively charged or tense during election years

compared to subsequent years. More frequent discussions following Trump's election were

associated with better mental health for white individuals but not for racially minoritized

individuals (O'Brien et al., 2022). This racial difference could have emerged because racially

minoritized individuals felt targeted or unsafe from the rhetoric of President Trump (McHendry,

2018). Frequency of political discussions was not related to mental health the next year,

potentially because the election year heightened the intensity, frequency, or salience of these

discussions (O'Brien et al., 2022). Another study found that political discussions were unrelated

to mental health or hope in the fall during the 2016 presidential election, but individuals who

more frequently discussed politics were more hopeful the following spring (Rosenbach et al., 2022). These findings highlight how the timing of sociopolitical discussions may influence their impact on well-being, as well as the importance of examining how sociopolitical discussions relate to mental health for racially minoritized individuals.

The 2020 presidential election occurred following the deaths of several Black civilians, most notably George Floyd, and a series of national protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Hate crimes against Asian Americans reached an all-time high that year because of misguided associations with the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated by political rhetoric of President Trump (Han et al., 2022). Police reform and systemic racism, which are more consequential for racially minoritized individuals, became central political issues (Cheng et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2020). Elections have also been found to uniquely impact the well-being of individuals from racially minoritized backgrounds. For instance, Black graduate students had stronger and more positive Black racial identity following the election of Barack Obama (Fuller-Rowell et al., 2011). People from marginalized backgrounds were particularly distressed both immediately and several months following the election of Donald Trump, in large part because they felt that their livelihood was threatened and that election results reflected racism and xenophobia from the American public (Tashjian & Galván, 2018). Sociopolitical discussions during the 2020 presidential election may be similarly related to mental health for racially minoritized students, especially those who experienced discrimination. Given uncertainty regarding the predicted outcome of the election, discussions may be more frequent and more related to mental health immediately following the 2020 election compared to months thereafter.

Present Study

The present study tested whether having sociopolitical discussions with friends and family was related to mental health with respect to internalizing problems and whether associations differed by students' experiences with racial discrimination. Internalizing problems constitute one dimension of psychopathology that refers to negative affectivity and typically involves anxiety and depressive disorders and stress-related disorders (Kotov et al., 2017). Racially minoritized students at a liberal university reported internalizing problems (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, perceived stress), how frequently they had sociopolitical discussions with friends and family, and experiences of racial discrimination following the 2020 presidential election. We hypothesized that sociopolitical discussions would relate to fewer internalizing problems, especially for students who experience racial discrimination frequently. Additionally, a second sample of students at the same university completed the same survey a year later, such that we could explore whether frequency of sociopolitical discussions was similarly related to internalizing problems during the presidential election, when discussions may be more frequent, and one year later.

Method

Participants and Procedures

In November and December 2020, shortly after results of the 2020 election were announced, 238 racially minoritized college students in California completed a psychosocial survey and received psychology course credit. Participants completed an attention check, in which they were asked to select 'somewhat agree', and an honesty check noting that they would receive course credit even if they admitted to being dishonest. This resulted in removal of 13 participants, leaving 225 participants in the sample (M_{age}=19.84, SD=1.41). These participants

did not differ from participants in the sample with respect to age, gender, race, parents'

education, or political leaning, all ps > .05.

Participants were ethnically diverse and predominately from Asian backgrounds (52.00%

Asian, 22.67% Latino, 16.00% multiracial, 9.33% races including Black and Middle Eastern).

Most participants were female (72.89%), and nearly half of participants had two parents who had

averaged a four-year degree (44.44%). Participants attended a liberal university in Southern

California with a racially and socioeconomically diverse student population (58% female; 33%

Asian & Pacific Islander, 26% white, 21% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% unknown or

other ethnic identities; 31% first-generation). Participants were enrolled in psychology courses,

and demographics of the Psychology Department majors are comparable to university

demographics.

A second sample of 262 racially minoritized college students at the same institution

(M_{age}=20.18, SD=2.30) was recruited roughly one year later (October–November, 2021) to

determine whether a similar pattern of results emerged during non-election years. These

participants completed the same survey and also received course credit, and 253 passed both the

attention check and the honesty check. Using independent samples t-tests and chi-squared tests,

we found that this sample did not differ from the prior sample with respect to age, race, gender,

and parents' education, all ps > .05 (84.19% female; 48.22% Asian, 18.58% Latino, 15.42%

multiracial, 17.78% races including Black and Middle Eastern; 36.95% had parents who

averaged a four-year degree). All participants completed scales regarding racial discrimination,

sociopolitical discussions, and internalizing problems The study was approved by the University

of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed

consent.

Measures

Racial Discrimination. Participants completed the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams et al., 1997). Participants reported how often they experienced 10 forms of discrimination related to their race over the past year using a four-point scale (*1=never*, *2=once*, *3=two or three times*, *4=four or more times*; e.g., "You have been treated with less respect than other people"; "People have acted as if they're better than you are"). Previous studies have validated that this scale measures perceived discrimination consistently across Asian, Latino, and Black individuals (Kim et al., 2014). The mean of the reported frequencies was taken across the 10 items, and the scale had good internal consistency (α=.90). Higher levels of racial discrimination using this measure have been related to higher levels of mistreatment, distress, and poorer physical and mental health (Chia-Chen Chen et al., 2014; Lawrence et al., 2022; Majeno et al., 2018; Rahal & Kurtz-Costes, 2021).

Frequency of Sociopolitical Discussions. Participants completed three items regarding how frequently they had sociopolitical discussions with family using the Sociopolitical Discussions-Parents Scale (i.e., "In my family we talk about politics and current events"; "In my family we talk about problems facing our community"; and "In my family we talk about times when people are treated unfairly"; Syvertsen et al., 2015). Participants reported whether they generally agreed, and a timescale was not specified. They rated these same items again regarding how frequently they had sociopolitical discussions with friends (e.g., "My friends and I talk about politics and current events"). Items were rated on Likert scales (*1=Never*, *5=Very Often*) and showed good reliability (αs=.90 and .88 for discussions with friends and family, respectively). Two means were calculated for frequency of discussions with friends and family,

and higher scores indicated more frequent sociopolitical discussions. More frequent

sociopolitical discussions with family have been related to a greater sense of caring for the

community, concern for others, community involvement, civic responsibility, and cultural

socialization (Martinez et al., 2022; Pinetta et al., 2020), although the subscale regarding

frequency of sociopolitical discussions with friends has not been widely administered.

Depressive Symptoms. Participants completed the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic

Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). They rated the extent to which they

experienced depressive symptoms over the previous week on a scale from *1* (*Rarely or None of*

the Time) to *4* (*Most or All of the Time*; e.g., "I felt depressed"; "I felt lonely"). This scale had

excellent reliability (α=.91). Four items were reverse-coded, and a mean was taken across the 20

items such that higher values represented higher levels of depressive symptoms. This scale is

widely used, well-validated, and related to other measures of depressive symptoms (McDowell,

2006; Vilagut et al., 2016).

Trait Anxiety. Participants completed the 20-item trait subscale of the State-Trait

Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983). They rated the extent to which they agreed with

statements regarding anxious feelings and sensations over the past month on a scale from *1*

(*Rarely or None of the Time*) to *4* (*Most or All of the Time*; e.g., "I am tense"; "I am worried").

This scale had excellent reliability (α=.93). Nine items were reverse-coded, and a mean was

calculated with higher values representing higher trait anxiety. This scale is widely used and

shows high convergent validity with other measures of anxiety (McDowell, 2006).

Perceived Stress Scale. Participants completed the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale

(Cohen et al., 1983). They rated the extent to which they felt upset, stressed, and overwhelmed

over the past month on a scale from *1* (*Rarely or None of the Time*) to *4* (*Most or All of the Time*; e.g., "In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?"). Items showed high reliability (α=.88). Four items were reverse-coded, and a mean was calculated with higher values representing higher perceived stress. This scale is well-validated and shows high reliability (Lee, 2012).

Political Leaning. Participants completed an item regarding their political ideology (*1=Strong Liberal*, *7=Strong Conservative*). To validate this item, they also completed an open-ended item regarding the political parties they identified with (if any). As expected, across both samples democratic participants (*n*=367, *M*=2.07, *SD*=1.02) were more liberal than participants who identified as republicans (*n*=24, *M*=5.50, *SD*=1.32), *t*(389)=15.73, *p* < .001. This item has been used in prior studies of political attitudes (Federico et al., 2012).

Analytic Strategy

Participants were not missing data on study variables. Sociopolitical discussions were expected to similarly relate to depression, anxiety, and perceived stress as highly interrelated internalizing problems. A recent meta-analysis of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale found that a one-factor model of the scale—treating them as one latent construct—had nearly identical fit to the three-factor model (Yeung et al., 2020), and prior studies have calculated a composite from these measures (e.g., Beaton et al., 2022). Therefore, an exploratory factor analysis was used to determine whether values for depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress could be measured using a single factor for each sample, and values for each construct were *z*-scored using the sample mean and averaged into a single composite of internalizing problems.

Regression models predicted internalizing problems from racial discrimination and frequency of sociopolitical discussions, and the Racial Discrimination × Sociopolitical Discussions interaction was added to the model. Simple slopes were probed at low, average, and high values of racial discrimination. Follow-up models tested associations with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress separately (Supplemental Tables S1-S3). Sociopolitical discussions with family and with friends were tested in separate models because they were moderately correlated (r=.47). Similar associations emerged when testing sociopolitical discussions with family and with friends simultaneously (Supplemental Table S4).

Next, we examined whether associations were unique to presidential election year. We tested a three-way interaction in a model including both samples (Racial Discrimination × Sociopolitical Discussions × Recruitment Timing [0=sample recruited during election, 1=sample collected during presidency]) to determine whether the magnitude of associations significantly differed between the two samples. Significant three-way interactions were probed by examining the two-way Racial Discrimination × Sociopolitical Discussions interaction in the sample who completed surveys in 2021, one year after the election. Models were then tested controlling for participant political leaning (mean-centered), age (mean-centered), gender (female=0, non-female=1), and race (dummy-coded with Asian [sample majority] as referent). Political leaning was covaried because the content of these discussions and how they are received by other people may be related to political leaning, particularly at a liberal institution. Models also controlled for gender, age, and race because these demographic factors are often related to reports of racial discrimination and mental health (Lee et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). Adjusted models indicated a substantively identical pattern of results.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables for each sample are provided in Table 1. The two samples did not differ in racial discrimination, frequency of sociopolitical discussions with family, anxiety, or depressive symptoms. Participants who completed surveys following the presidential election reported more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends (t[476]=2.05, p=.041; M_{Election}=3.18, SD=0.05; $M_{\text{One Year Later}}$=3.05, SD=0.04) and greater perceived stress (t[476]=2.12, p=.035; M_{Election}=3.75, SD=0.06 $M_{\text{One Year Later}}$=3.58, SD=0.05) than those who completed surveys a year later. Most participants were liberal and identified as democrats (75.8%). ANOVA indicated that discrimination differed by race, F(467, 2)=9.01, $p < .001$. According to post-hoc Tukey-Kramer's pairwise contrasts, Latino participants reported higher levels of racial discrimination (M=2.48, SD=1.04) compared to participants who were Asian (M=2.10, SD=0.65) or from different racial backgrounds (M=2.06, SD=0.91); qs > 5.20, ps < .001.

More liberal participants reported experiencing more frequent racial discrimination and more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends and family immediately following the election, and lower internalizing problems and more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends one year after the election (Table 1). Higher parents' education was correlated with less frequent racial discrimination. Participants who experienced more frequent racial discrimination and who were younger reported more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends following the election. More frequent racial discrimination was associated with having more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends and family one year afterwards. Depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress were highly correlated and showed high factor loadings onto a single factor using exploratory factor analysis in both samples (all factor loadings > .82;

eigenvalues > 2.35 for single factor, eigenvalues <1 for multiple factors). Therefore, z-score

values were averaged across the three scales to create a composite of internalizing problems.

First, regression models examined the main effects of racial discrimination and frequency

of sociopolitical discussions on internalizing problems among racially minoritized college

students shortly following the 2020 presidential election. Associations for the frequency of

sociopolitical discussions with friends and the frequency of sociopolitical discussions with

family were tested in different models. Results suggested that students who experienced more

racial discrimination (B=0.21, SE=0.07, p=.005, 95% Confidence Interval [CI] [0.06, 0.35],

β=.19) and who had more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends (B=0.18, SE=0.07,

p=.012, 95% CI [0.04, 0.32], β=.17) reported greater internalizing problems. Next, the Racial

Discrimination × Sociopolitical Discussions interaction was tested as a predictor. This interaction

was significant (B=-0.26, SE=0.09, p=.002, 95% CI [-0.43, -0.10], β=-.22; model F(3, 221)=9.20,

R^2=11.10%) and remained significant after adjusting for covariates (Table 2, column 1). Simple

slope analyses indicated that sociopolitical discussions were only positively related to

internalizing problems for people who experienced racial discrimination less frequently (Fig. 1).

There was neither a main effect of frequency of sociopolitical discussions with family, p=.396,

nor an interaction between frequency of sociopolitical discussions with family and frequency of

racial discrimination, p=.995, in both unadjusted and adjusted models (Table 2, column 3).

Next, a regression model using both samples tested a three-way Racial Discrimination ×

Sociopolitical Discussions × Sample interaction (with all main effects and two-way interactions)

to determine whether the magnitude of associations differed across the two samples. The three-

way interaction was significant (B=-0.24, SE=0.12, p=.046, 95% CI [-0.47, -0.005], β=-.14;

Supplemental Table S5; Supplemental Fig. S1), indicating that the degree to which racial

discrimination moderated the association between frequency of sociopolitical discussions with friends and internalizing problems was significantly stronger during the months after the election than the year afterwards. A model was also tested for sociopolitical discussions with family, which indicated that associations did not differ between the two samples and that frequency of sociopolitical discussions with family was consistently unrelated to internalizing problems.

Because the interaction was significant, models were then tested among the sample recruited one year after the 2020 presidential election. As observed before, more frequent racial discrimination (B=0.15, SE=0.06, p=.011, 95% CI [0.03, 0.26], β=.14) and more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends (B=0.15, SE=0.06, p=.008, 95% CI [0.04, 0.26], β=.15) were related to greater internalizing problems, whereas frequency of sociopolitical discussions with family was not, p=.922. The Racial Discrimination × Sociopolitical Discussions with Friends interaction was not significant for this sample, p=.400 (model F[3, 258]=4.71, R^2=5.19%; Table 2, column 2), in contrast to post-election results (Fig. 1).

Discussion

The present study determined that more frequent sociopolitical discussions with friends following the 2020 presidential election was related to greater internalizing problems only among racially minoritized college students who rarely or never experienced racial discrimination. These findings have implications for sociopolitical discussions among college students. First, results suggested that, for the majority of college students, more frequent sociopolitical discussions were not related to greater internalizing problems, and the present findings should not discourage college students from engaging in such discussions. Rather, prior research has suggested that civic engagement is a poignant aspect of development for young adults and related to tolerance and voting (Eveland, 2004; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Mutz &

Mondak, 2006). Second, sociopolitical discussions related to internalizing problems for certain

groups of individuals. In line with P-VEST, individuals who experience racial discrimination

may become civically engaged as a means of coping (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Spencer, 2006).

Having more frequent sociopolitical discussions may be more normative for individuals who

experience more frequent racial discrimination, which may explain why frequency of

sociopolitical discussions was not related to internalizing problems for these individuals.

More frequent sociopolitical discussions may only relate to greater internalizing problems

among college students who experience less frequent racial discrimination because these

individuals may feel less prepared to have these discussions than individuals who experience

more frequent racial discrimination. P-VEST posits that individuals' social identities and

experiences impact how they engage with the world (Spencer, 2006). Racially minoritized

individuals who experience more frequent racial discrimination may engage in these

conversations and other forms of sociopolitical activity frequently, irrespective of the election, as

a means of coping with systemic discrimination (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Oskooii, 2016; Pinetta

et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011). Indeed, racial discrimination was related to more frequent

sociopolitical discussions with friends both immediately after and a year after the presidential

election. However, data were cross-sectional such that causality cannot be assumed. For instance,

people with more internalizing problems may have more frequent sociopolitical discussions,

although it seems unlikely that this association would be apparent only in people who less

frequently experience racial discrimination.

Results were specific to the election year, potentially because of the heightened

discussion of racism and marginalization in the 2020 election (Mwangi et al., 2018). Anti-Asian

hate crimes spiked in March 2020 and gradually declined across the COVID-19 pandemic (Han

et al., 2022), which may have contributed to more frequent racial discrimination and sociopolitical discussions among Asian participants. Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd also initiated national discourse. In line with prior research, we found that students tended to engage in more sociopolitical discussions during election years than the following year (Gerber et al., 2012). It is possible that the content of these discussions may differ in election years more generally. Political discussions are often a source of hostility and strain for social relationships (Hayes et al., 2013), and people tend to be invested and show emotional responses to election results (Scheibe et al., 2011). It is possible that heightened tension surrounding politics in election years may cause these sociopolitical discussions with friends to be more deleterious for individuals who experience less racial discrimination.

It is also possible that the negative consequences of these conversations may be attenuated by positive outcomes such as role fulfillment for college students who experience racial discrimination more frequently. Individuals who experience racial discrimination tend to be more involved in activism, potentially because they are invested in sociopolitical issues and creating a more equitable society (Hope et al., 2020; Szymanski, 2012; Thomas et al., 2023). Sociopolitical discussions may strain social relationships for most individuals and simultaneously impart a sense of fulfilment of one's role as an engaged citizen (Ballard et al., 2019; Cialdini et al., 1982; Flanagan & Bundick, 2011; Malin et al., 2015; Piliavin & Siegl, 2015). Having the space to discuss their personal experiences and causes that have directly impacted them could be rewarding for individuals who experience more racial discrimination. The salience of social identities including racial identity can change day-to-day (Yip et al., 2022), and sociopolitical discussions could increase salience of one's racial, national, or other group identity more strongly for individuals who experienced frequent racial discrimination.

Although individuals who experience less frequent racial discrimination may feel less prepared for sociopolitical discussions or appraise them more negatively than individuals who more frequently experience racial discrimination, sociopolitical engagement can be a challenging but necessary step to address societal marginalization (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts & Halkovic, 2022). Institutional efforts are needed to encourage all college students to participate in sociopolitical discussions so that marginalized groups are not disproportionately burdened with leading (Finlay et al., 2010). Interventions can aim to amplify the positive feelings associated with these discussions. Having more frequent sociopolitical discussions during non-election years, when feelings are less tense, could make individuals feel more comfortable discussing potentially charged topics in election years.

The 2020 election also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have shifted both the content of political discussions as well as with whom individuals had sociopolitical discussions. University instruction was remote during 2020 but not 2021 for this sample, such that many of these sociopolitical discussions during the presidential election may have needed to be conducted virtually via video calling or text messaging as opposed to in-person. It is possible that individuals who experienced racial discrimination less frequently may have felt particularly distressed about having sociopolitical discussions virtually. Technological limitations may also exacerbate differences in individuals' comfort with having discussions regarding sensitive topics, such that they may feel less understood by being unable to see people's body language during these conversations. Lastly, aggression, irritability, and depression were heightened during the pandemic (Killgore et al., 2021), and this timing may have exacerbated associations between sociopolitical discussions and internalizing problems.

Finally, racial discrimination did not moderate associations between sociopolitical discussions with family and internalizing problems. Individuals may feel comfortable disagreeing with family, depending on their familial closeness. Sociopolitical discussions with friends were more frequent in months following the election than the following year, whereas frequency of discussions with family did not change. Individuals may already know their family members' political stance and therefore either feel prepared to have these conversations or only discuss issues on which they agree (Warren & Wicks, 2011). In contrast, people may discover their friends' dissenting views or reveal their own during sociopolitical discussions.

Limitations

The sample was limited by the sample and measures. The sample was primarily Asian and Latino at a liberal university, and results may not generalize to individuals from other minoritized backgrounds or individuals at more ethnically homogenous or politically conservative campuses. Although racial discrimination was assessed, varied forms of discrimination (e.g., institutional, interpersonal) may influence the association between sociopolitical discussions and internalizing problems. Future studies can recruit more diverse samples and incorporate an intersectionality framework to measure discrimination related to social identities (e.g., gender, generation status) and intersections across identities.

Measures assessed different timescales. Participants reported racial discrimination over the past year, and future studies can assess whether discrimination experienced over different timespans (e.g., childhood, past month) impact individuals' inclination to have sociopolitical discussions. Similar patterns of associations emerged between frequency of sociopolitical discussions and each measure of internalizing problems, despite measuring internalizing problems across different timescales (i.e., feelings over past week versus month). Participants

reported their sociopolitical discussions generally, although frequency likely differed with temporal proximity to the presidential election (i.e., over past week versus month). Intensive longitudinal designs can be used to assess daily frequency of sociopolitical discussions and directionality of associations.

We lacked information regarding the content, valence, and people involved in discussions. Information regarding the content of discussions would clarify whether sociopolitical discussions generally or those regarding racism relate to internalizing problems. They could also clarify whether associations differed by election year because certain topics are more commonly discussed before versus after the election. The rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 may have impacted the content of sociopolitical discussions during the election year. We were also unable to assess barriers to having sociopolitical discussions. People who experience discrimination could have fewer sociopolitical discussions because of fear of experiencing invalidation or further discrimination from peers, and people who experience less discrimination may fear misspeaking about racism (Poteat et al., 2019). We also did not measure how many friends and family members participants generally interacted with. Future studies can assess interpersonal factors that influence participants' opportunities for sociopolitical discussions, such as social network size and university racial composition.

Conclusion

Sociopolitical discussions can be important for college students to develop their sociopolitical identity. Having these discussions with friends more frequently was related to greater internalizing problems among college students from racially minoritized backgrounds who never or rarely experienced racial discrimination during the 2020 presidential election, but

not one year later. Having discussions with friends more frequently beyond election years may

prepare students for these sociopolitical discussions. Future studies can identify means of

attenuating associations between sociopolitical discussions and internalizing problems to

facilitate sociopolitical discourse among students.

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    Developmental Psychology, 58(1), 176-192. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001283

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables immediately after the election (below the diagonal) and one year later (above the diagonal).

	Election M	SD	Next Year M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Stress	3.18	0.73	3.05	0.68	—	.87***	.74***	.20***	.02	.18**	-.10	-.03	-.17**
2. Anxiety	2.46	0.59	2.43	0.61	.84***	—	.80***	.15*	.02	.12	-.05	-.04	-.19**
3. Depressive Symptoms	2.06	0.55	2.03	0.52	.76***	.83***	—	.14*	.00	.21***	-.02	-.08	-.22***
4. Discussions with Friends	3.75	0.88	3.58	0.88	.21**	.18**	.21**	—	.46***	.27***	-.03	.05	-.23***
5. Discussions with Family	3.33	0.93	3.31	0.93	-.04	-.07	.02	.47***	—	.14*	.11	-.05	-.12
6. Racial Discrimination	2.13	0.86	2.21	0.82	.18**	.12	.27***	.18**	.08	—	-.19**	.06	-.05
7. Parents' Education	3.94	1.80	4.21	1.84	-.09	-.07	-.12	-.07	.10	-.25***	—	.00	.08
8. Age	19.96	2.47	20.18	2.30	-.11	-.07	-.07	-.15*	-.09	-.02	-.06	—	.00
9. Conservative Leaning	2.47	1.36	2.49	1.35	-.11	-.06	-.07	-.34***	-.17*	-.08	.15*	.10	—

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 2

Internalizing problems as a function of sociopolitical discussions with friends (left) and family (right) and racial discrimination immediately post-election and one year post-election.
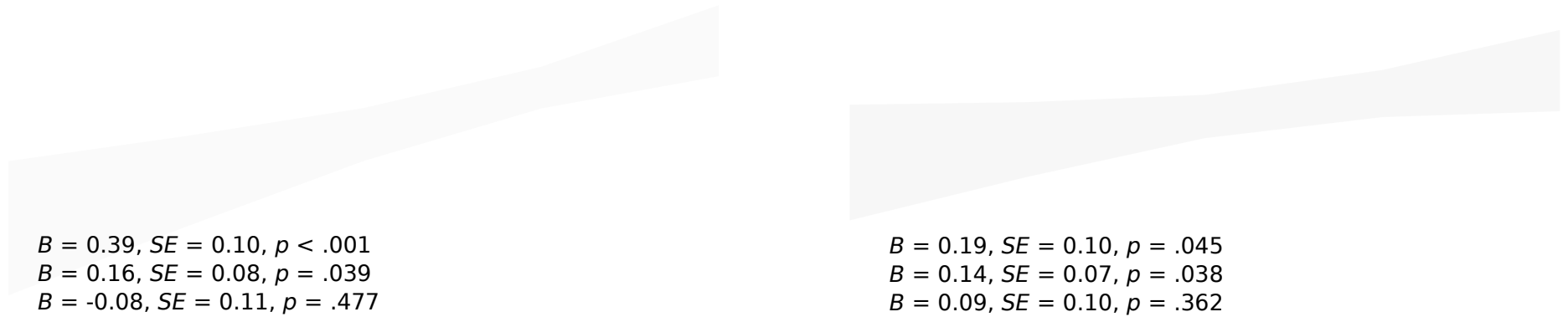
	Internalizing Problems as a function of						Internalizing Problems as a function of					
	Sociopolitical Discussions with Friends						Sociopolitical Discussions with Family					
	Immediately Post-Election			1 Year Post-Election			Immediately Post-Election			1 Year Post-Election		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Intercept	-0.11	0.14	—	-0.16	0.14	—	-0.22	0.16	—	-0.29	0.16	—
Sociopolitical Discussions	0.14	0.08	.13	-0.07	0.07	-.07	0.09	0.07	.09	-0.05	0.06	-.05
Racial Discrimination	0.30***	0.08	.28	0.24**	0.08	.22	0.17*	0.07	.15	0.19**	0.07	.17
Sociopolitical Discussions × Racial Discrimination	-0.25**	0.09	-.20	0.04	0.08	.04	-0.06	0.08	-.04	-0.01	0.08	-.01
Age	-0.03	0.02	-.08	-0.04	0.03	-.10	-0.02	0.02	-.05	-0.02	0.02	-.06
Conservative Leaning	-0.14	0.15	-.10	0.02	0.16	.01	-0.04	0.13	-.01	0.02	0.13	.01
Latino	-0.23	0.15	-.06	-0.28	0.16	-.13	-0.01	0.15	-.02	0.00	0.15	.00
Different Racial Background	0.30*	0.14	.14	0.29*	0.15	.14	0.20	0.16	.08	0.25	0.16	.10
Female	-0.02	0.05	-.03	-0.04	0.05	-.07	-0.11*	0.04	-.16	-0.12**	0.04	-.19

Note. Frequency of sociopolitical discussions, racial discrimination, age, and political leaning were mean-centered. Latino and different racial background were dummy-coded with Asian as the reference group. Female was dummy-coded (0 = different gender identity, 1 = female).

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Figure 1

Internalizing problems as a function of racial discrimination and sociopolitical discussions with friends immediately following the 2020 presidential election (left) and one year later (right).

B = 0.39, *SE* = 0.10, *p* < .001
B = 0.16, *SE* = 0.08, *p* = .039
B = -0.08, *SE* = 0.11, *p* = .477

B = 0.19, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .045
B = 0.14, *SE* = 0.07, *p* = .038
B = 0.09, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .362

Note. SD = Standard Deviation. Models controlled for age and conservative political leaning (mean-centered), race (Latino and different race were dummy-coded with Asian as the reference group), and gender (dummy-coded, 0 = non-female, 1 = female). Coefficients are presented next to the corresponding line in the legend.