

# Civic Engagement and the 2016 Presidential Election: Trajectories of Climate and Civic Development of Diverse University Students

Maura Shramko<sup>1</sup>, Katharine H. Zeiders<sup>1</sup>, Lindsay T. Hoyt<sup>2</sup>, Russell B. Toomey<sup>1</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>The University of Arizona, <sup>2</sup>Fordham University

## Background

- Universities provide unique opportunities and resources for civic development (Finlay et al., 2010; Flanagan & Levine, 2010).
- However, universities are also contexts where racism may occur, including discriminatory campus climate.
- Although discriminatory campus climate may negatively affect young adults of color (Milkman et al., 2015; Tynes et al., 2012), little is known about its relationship to civic engagement.

Drawing on **sociopolitical development theory** (Watts et al., 2003), young adult **civic engagement**, including **critical consciousness** and **community engagement**, may be relevant for young adults perceiving **discriminatory climate** on campus.

- In particular, following the 2016 presidential election, racist and discriminatory campus climates may have increased (Dreid & Najmabadi, 2016), juxtaposed with growing awareness of racism and opportunities for engagement.

This study examined **trajectories of critical consciousness and community engagement** during, and six months following, the 2016 presidential election. We examined the role of perceived discriminatory campus climate (controlling for personal experiences of discrimination) and participants' race-ethnicity in these trajectories, to understand how context and individual characteristics worked alongside shifting sociopolitical events.

## Methods

Data come from a longitudinal study of US university students at two universities (n=286) collected at three timepoints: during election week, at inauguration, and 100 days after inauguration.

- Participants (72.5% female) reported White race-ethnicity (56.1%), followed by Latina/o (12.2%), multiracial (11.8%), Asian American (10.8%), and Black (7.3%). Almost half the sample (48.8%) reported family household income of \$100,000+.

### Measures

- Civic engagement** was assessed via critical consciousness (3 items;  $\alpha = .81-.84$ ) (Flanagan et al., 2007; Syvertsen et al., 2015) and community engagement (4 items;  $\alpha = .80-.89$ ) at each timepoint.
- Discriminatory climate** (1 item) rated overall discriminatory campus climate during election week.
- Covariates:** age, race/ethnicity (0 = White, 1 = Person of color [POC]), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), family income, and discrimination (17 items;  $\alpha = .86$ ) (Broncolo et al., 2005; Contrada et al., 2001), to control for individual experiences of discrimination above and beyond perception of discriminatory climate.

## Results

In R (Version 3.4.1), multilevel growth modeling (two-level, time within people) was used to estimate trajectories of civic engagement (community engagement and critical consciousness) at election week, inauguration, and 100 days after inauguration.

Growth models of community engagement and critical consciousness (controlling for age, income, gender, and individual discrimination) showed significant changes over time (Table 1).

- Young adults declined in community engagement ( $b_{intercept} = 1.76$ ,  $b_{slope} = -.30$ ,  $SE_{slope} = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but increased in critical consciousness ( $b_{intercept} = 3.09$ ,  $b_{slope} = .05$ ,  $SE_{slope} = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Interactions between climate and time on community engagement and critical consciousness were not significant.

However, the three-way interaction between climate, time, and race/ethnicity was significant for critical consciousness (see Figure 1).

- Simple slopes analyses revealed that among students of color, critical consciousness increased only when they perceived high discriminatory climate.
- In the context of low discriminatory climate, student of color critical consciousness did not change.
- The opposite pattern emerged among White students; in the context of low discriminatory climate, critical consciousness increased.
- In the context of high discriminatory climate, White students' critical consciousness did not change.

## Implications

Climate predicted **higher critical consciousness for students of color when they perceived a discriminatory climate**.

- Findings align with sociopolitical development theory (Watts et al., 2003), suggesting that marginalized youth are uniquely positioned to develop critical consciousness.
- For students of color in racially discriminatory climates, critical consciousness development may be a form of resilience to racial marginalization targeting racial-ethnic minorities.

In contrast, climate predicted **higher critical consciousness among White students in low discriminatory climate**.

- Previous research has not examined sociopolitical development among White youth (Diemer et al., 2016); critical consciousness may develop differently among White youth.
- Further, it is unclear why critical consciousness increases only in contexts of low discriminatory climate.

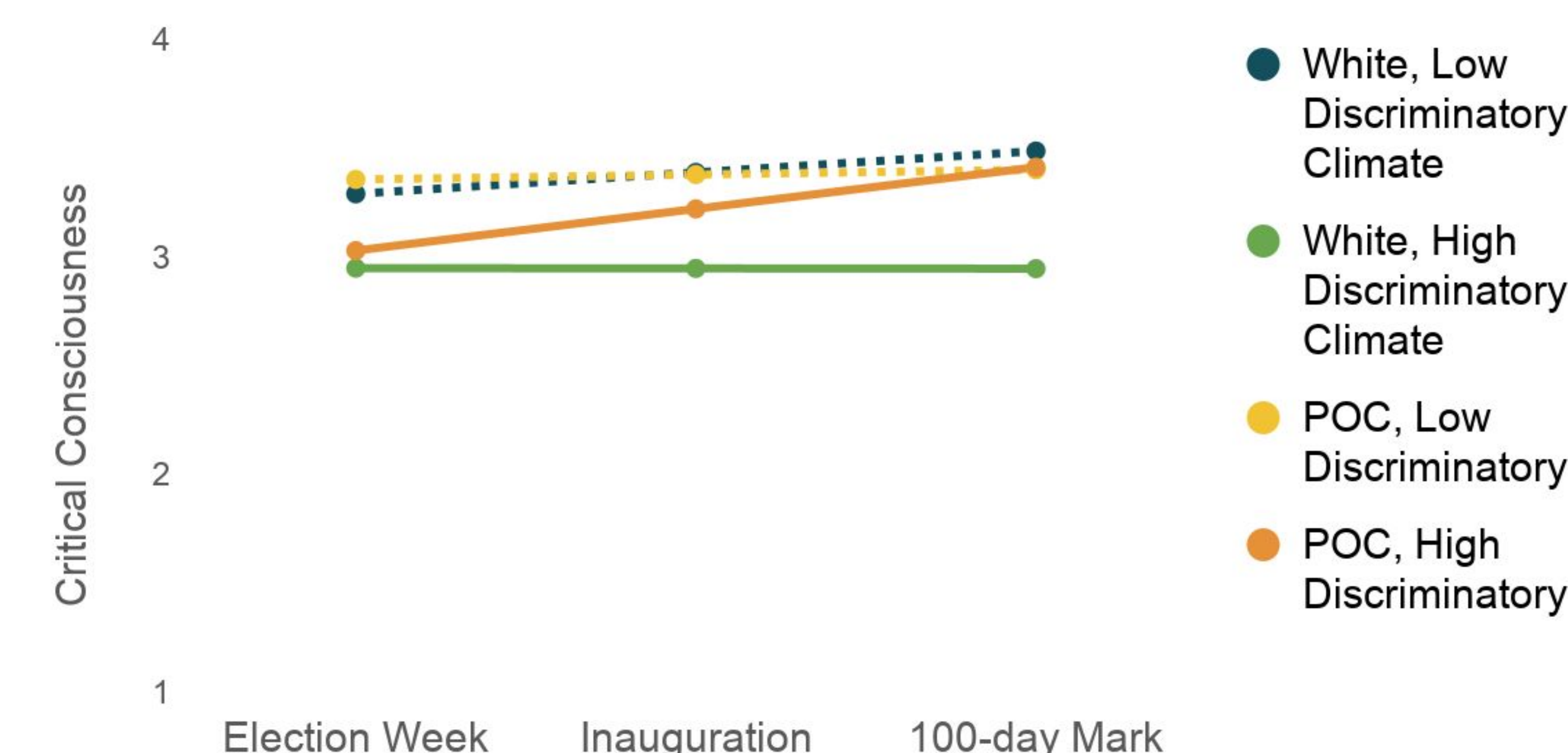


Figure 1. Interaction between discriminatory climate, race/ethnicity (White or Person of Color [POC]), and critical consciousness

Table 1. Growth models of young adult civic engagement

	DV: Community engagement						DV: Critical consciousness					
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
Intercept	1.76***	(0.08)	0.18***	(0.08)	1.81***	(0.08)	3.09***	(0.07)	3.10***	(0.07)	3.12***	(0.07)
Time	-0.30***	(0.03)	-0.30***	(0.03)	-0.34***	(0.04)	0.05*	(0.03)	0.06*	(0.03)	0.05	(0.03)
Age	0.00	(0.04)	0.00	(0.04)	0.00	(0.04)	0.01	(0.03)	0.00	(0.03)	0.00	(0.03)
Gender	-0.16	(0.12)	-0.14	(0.12)	-0.14	(0.12)	-0.2	(0.10)	-0.18	(0.11)	-0.18	(0.10)
Family income	0.03	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
Discrimination	0.52***	(0.13)	-0.45***	(0.13)	-0.45***	(0.13)	-0.1	(0.11)	0.01	(0.11)	-0.02	(0.11)
Race	-0.27*	(0.13)	-0.30**	(0.12)	-0.39**	(0.14)	0.16	(0.11)	0.12	(0.11)	0.07	(0.12)
Racist climate			-0.13**	(0.05)	-0.17**	(0.06)			0.14**	(0.05)	-0.15**	(0.06)
Time*Racist climate			0.00	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)			0.01	(0.02)	-0.04	(0.03)
Time*Race					0.10	(0.06)					0.06	(0.06)
Race*Racist climate					0.11	(0.11)					0.01	(0.09)
Time*Race*Racist climate					-0.07	(0.05)					0.12*	(0.05)

