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"Things Will Get Worse Before They Get Better": LGBTQ + People's Reactions to the 2020 US Presidential Election

Michele M. Schlehofer[1] · **Kathryn Wagner**[2] · **Emily Bramande**[2]

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Abstract

Introduction Previous research has found that political discourse over proposed legislation that impacts lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) people serves as a distal stressor which is associated with poorer mental and physical health. This study sought to document responses to the 2020 US Presidential election among LGBTQ + people living in the USA.

Methods Nineteen LGBTQ + people ages 20 to 76 (M = 47.20; SD = 17.66) living across the USA were interviewed via Zoom video conferencing software between October and early December 2020. The modal participant was female (36.8%), identified as gay or lesbian (47.3%), and White (84.2%). Interviews were coded using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Results Seventeen codes emerged, which were grouped into three themes. Participants viewed specific political figures, namely then-President Trump and Supreme Court nominee Coney-Barrett, as symbolic of the potential loss of rights and disenfranchisement of LGBTQ + people. Participants exhibited uncertainty about the future; however, a Biden presidential win was viewed as potentially instilling complacency and leading to fracturing of the LGBTQ + community. While some participants avoided news, most were engaged with the political process as a means of coping with election uncertainty.

Conclusions The findings have implications for better understanding the concerns of LGBTQ + folks as it relates to how they view political discourse and the future of the equality movement.

Policy Implications Policies which beneficially impact and engage a diverse range of LGBTQ + people would facilitate mobilization of LGBTQ + political communities.

Keywords Election · Minority stress model · Trump · Politics · Structural stigma · LGBTQ +

Introduction

The movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) equality in the USA has seen significant gains and setbacks in recent years. In addition to the 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges decision which established nationwide marriage equality, the USA also saw a sharp increase in formal recognition and support for LGBTQ + people at the federal level during the Obama administration (Byne, 2017). Many states have also, in recent years, taken steps to ban harmful practices such as conversion or reparative therapy with minors. However, the backlash to these advances in LGBTQ + rights has been far-reaching and deep. In sharp contrast to their predecessor, the Trump administration, as well as the general platform of the Republican party, signified that the scant existing federal protections for LGBTQ + people in the USA would be rolled back (Byne, 2017). Trans youth have been particularly targeted with discriminatory legislation in recent years. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2022) reports an exponential rise in state-level bills which seek to curtail the rights of trans people, and particularly trans youth, in areas as wide-ranging as access to public bathrooms, healthcare, and participation in youth sports. The heightened political rhetoric these policy changes bring can be stressful for LGBTQ + people. This qualitative study explores the 2020 election as a source of stress for LGBTQ + people. We discuss various themes that emerged from our data, including that of

✉ Michele M. Schlehofer
mmschlehofer@salisbury.edu

[1] Department of Psychology, Salisbury University, 1101 Camden Ave, Salisbury, MD 21804, USA

[2] Department of Psychology, Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C, USA

political fears and anxieties, uncertainty about the future, and strategies for coping with election stress, as well as participant resilience and advocacy. Our findings aim to educate others about the unique concerns LGBTQ + folks face as they relate to the future of the equality movement, and to provide pathways for interventions to mitigate these harmful stressors.

Public Policy as a Structural Stressor

The increased public policy focus over LGBTQ + rights puts the everyday lived experiences of LGBTQ + people into public debate, functioning as a stressor which increases societal stigma (Fredricksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Herek, 2011). The minority stress model (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 1995, 2003) is a framework for understanding the impact of the disproportionate stressors that LGBTQ + people face in comparison to their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts. The model posits that widespread societal-level homophobia and transphobia lead LGBTQ + people to face unique, chronic stressors that are experienced in addition to the typical life stressors (e.g., daily hassles, life transitions) that all people experience. These additional, stigma-related stressors include the stress of anticipating and experiencing harassment, rejection, discrimination, and violence based on being LGBTQ + (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 1995, 2003). As a result of increased stigma, LGBTQ + people may become isolated, hide their identity (be "closeted"), and internalize homophobia and transphobia (Casey et al., 2021; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Several recent reviews of the empirical literature have linked increased minority stress experiences with worse mental health (Mongelli et al., 2019; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018) and physical health (Flentje et al., 2020; Lick et al., 2013).

The minority stress model also suggests that structural stigmas—stigma and discrimination embedded within societal institutions—serves as a distal stressor (Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Meyer, 2003). Political discourse over legislation that impacts LGBTQ + people is a form of structural stigma (Fredricksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Herek, 2011). Research has linked public policy discourse surrounding LGBTQ + rights to the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ + people. Political arguments against LGBTQ + rights often draw on emotions of disgust (Gadarian & van der Vort, 2018) and negative stereotypes about LGBTQ + people (Riggle et al., 2009). These strategies expose LGBTQ + people to negative messages about their lived experiences (Rostosky et al., 2009), are socially stigmatizing (Conrad, 1983; Fingerhut et al., 2011; Herek, 2011; Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011), and imply to LGBTQ + people that society devalues them (Anderson et al., 2020; Frost & Fingerhut, 2016; Levitt et al., 2009). Consequently, many LGBTQ + people find political debates over LGBTQ + rights to be a significant stressor (Casey et al., 2020, 2021; Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011; Riggle et al., 2009; Rostosky et al., 2009, 2010) which contributes to psychological distress above and beyond existing life stressors (Bartos et al., 2021; Ecker et al., 2019). Increases in distress occur even when the debated policies are not personally relevant; for instance, Flores and colleagues (2018) found that LGBTQ + people were negatively affected by televised political ads from a neighboring state. Conversely, signifiers of public political support for LGBTQ + equality accompanying political discourse instills pride and optimism, signifies social acceptance, and increases feelings of unity within the LGBTQ + community (Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011). Additionally, signifiers of public political support for LGBTQ + equality increases commitment to fighting for equal rights (Rostosky et al., 2010) and political participation (Riggle et al., 2009).

As with exposure to political rhetoric, anti-LGBTQ + public policies negatively impact LGBTQ + people's perceptions of stigma, stress, internalized homophobia, and mental and physical health (Fingerhut et al., 2011; Russell & Richards, 2003) and are associated with greater likelihood for having a substance abuse disorder (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). These effects are persistent (Casey et al., 2020), lasting well after the initial legislative shift, with one study finding LGBTQ + people were still experiencing trauma and feelings of disempowerment from a statewide marriage ban a decade later (Russell et al., 2011).

Although less frequently studied, equalizing legislation that extends the rights and protections that cisgender, heterosexual people enjoy to LGBTQ + communities (such as marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws) serves a protective function. Exposure to political rhetoric promoting equalizing legislation can prompt feelings of happiness and enjoyment in LGBTQ + people (Flores et al., 2018), and LGBTQ + people who live in areas in which equalizing legislation is passed have lower rates of clinical-level anxiety disorders (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009). Globally, countries that have adopted marriage equality laws subsequently see reductions in rates of adolescent suicide (Kennedy et al., 2021).

Structural stigma in the form of public policies and associated political discourse impacts the social relationships of LGBTQ + people, contributing to relationship strain and loneliness (Anderson et al., 2020; Doyle & Molix, 2015; Gabriele-Black et al., 2021), lower relationship satisfaction with significant others (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016), and increased arguments with co-workers and family members (Brown & Keller, 2018). However, when surrounded by supportive others, experiences of structural stigma can lead to deepened feelings of closeness and openness to discuss one's sexual orientation (Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011), and increased resilience within LGBTQ + communities via increased community contact (Russell & Richards, 2003). Thus, while political discourse and public policies which stigmatize LGBTQ + people

and communities can serve as a stressor, public displays of support for LGBTQ + people and equalizing legislation can foster community connections and resilience.

Structural Stigma During the Trump Administration and Beyond

The 2016 Presidential election brought concerns over structural stigma back to the forefront. Then-President Elect Trump's political rhetoric in the months leading up to the 2016 election led to uncertainty over his support for LGBTQ + people. He was the first Republican candidate to use the term "LGBTQ +," and he expressed a commitment to protecting LGBTQ + people during his 2016 campaign (Lamont et al., 2017; Seigel, 2016). However, Trump's presidency was marked by significant rollbacks of LGBTQ + rights, including but not limited to rollback of protections for transgender youth in schools afforded under Title IX (Thompson, 2018), curtailing collection of data on sexual orientation and gender identity to document and describe health inequalities (Cahill & Makadon, 2017), and prohibiting transgender people from serving in the military (Jackson & Kube, 2019).

Research emerging in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election has documented the negative impact the election had on LGBTQ + people. LGBTQ + people experienced greater stress, anxiety, and depression post-election (Brown & Keller, 2018; Garrison et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2018b; Price et al., 2020; Veldhuis et al., 2018), experienced poorer sleep (Garrison et al., 2018), had greater psychological rumination on their LGBTQ + identity (Gonzalez et al., 2018b), and reported strained relationships with others (Gonzalez et al., 2018a). LGBTQ + people had increased vigilance of their surroundings and increased safety concerns post-election (Drabble et al., 2019; Price et al., 2020). These effects were stronger among gay and lesbian people who described themselves as gender non-conforming (Garrison et al., 2018). Price and colleagues (2020) found that transgender and gender diverse people experienced heightened concerns over stigma, fear over potential loss of affirmation of their gender, and isolation from the dominant community, coupled with increased feelings of helplessness. Some LGBTQ + people became motivated to marry for fear of losing their right to do so (Lannutti, 2018). However, the 2016 election also brought upsides, prompting people to seek out and recognize supportive others (Lannutti, 2018; Riggle et al., 2018), and increasing political engagement (Riggle et al., 2018).

The Current Study

The current study is an exploration into LGBTQ + people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the weeks immediately preceding the 2020 election. To our knowledge, no research has yet explored the 2020 election as a source of structural stigma for LGBTQ + people. While we can expect based on prior research with the minority stress model that the 2020 US Presidential election cycle would pose a significant stressor for LGBTQ + people, experiences with the 2020 election are unique and worthy of documentation. The 2020 election cycle occurred simultaneously with the COVID-19 pandemic, itself a stressor which disproportionately negatively impacted LGBTQ + communities on a wide range of physical, mental, and economic health indicators (Bhalla & Argawal, 2021; Drabble & Eliason, 2021; Krause, 2021; Moore et al., 2021). The wide-scale Black Lives Matter protests further created a unique socio-political environment which brought discussions about racial oppression to the forefront (Riggle et al., 2021). As a result of the socio-political environment, LGBTQ + people were more strongly politically engaged (Scott, 2020). This exploratory study, designed with a social justice perspective in mind, was designed to capture and document LGBTQ + people's reactions and responses to this point in time. Broad research questions were as follows: (1) How did LGBTQ + people experience the 2020 election cycle? (2) How are LGBTQ + people and communities engaging in meaning-making during this time? and (3) What are LGBTQ + people's beliefs about the future?

Methodology

Participants

Nineteen self-identified LGBTQ + adults ages 20 to 76 years old (M = 47.20; SD = 17.66) were interviewed. The sample was predominantly White ($n = 16$; 84.2%); two participants identified as Black, and one participant was a biracial Latinx and White person. The modal participant was female (seven participants); five identified as male, three as nonbinary, one as cisgender female, one as nonbinary male, one as transfeminine, and one as a transman. Five identified as gay, four as lesbian, three as straight, two as queer, two as pansexual, one as biromantic demisexual, and one as kinkster (one did not report). The sample was highly educated, with a modal education level of a Master's degree (6 participants; 31.2% of the sample); 15 participants (78.9% of the sample) had at least a 4-year college degree. Consequently, income level was high among our participants, as well, with the modal income being over $1000 a week (10 participants; 52.6%).

Participants were recruited from across the USA, with the greatest representation being from states in the Southeast ($n = 8$; 42%). To code the extent to which participants resided in states with equalizing or discriminatory legislation, the statewide equality map and coding from the Movement Advancement Project was used to label participants'

state of residence as having either "high," "medium," "fair," "low," or "negative" tallies of equalizing legislation and policies for LGBTQ + people. Based on this, the modal participant ($n = 5$) resided in states with a high level of laws and policies protective of LGBTQ + people; there was, however, significant range, with seven participants residing in states with low or negative policies (see Table 1 for an overview of participant demographics).

Procedure

The data were collected as part of a larger mixed-method project on the experiences of LGBTQ + people during the COVID-19 pandemic. People were eligible if they were (1) aged 18 or older and (2) self-identified as LGBTQ + . Participants were recruited through a combination of network sampling supplemented with respondent-driven sampling, methods commonly used to recruit hard-to-reach populations (Aglipay et al., 2015). All PFLAG Chapters in the USA were sent a recruitment invitation via email in mid-May 2020 (prior to the murder of George Floyd), with a request to distribute an online survey to LGBTQ + people within their networks. PFLAG Chapters were used to assist in recruitment as PFLAG is a national organization with over 400 chapters in all 50 US states, and contact information for PFLAG Chapters is publicly available, thus potentially providing access to a wide range of LGBTQ + people. In addition to PFLAG Chapters, the survey was distributed via a professional listserv of scholars with an interest in LGBTQ + people and communities, with a request for assistance in recruiting. Participants expressing interest were directed to an online consent form and survey. All participants completed informed consent prior to participation. Sixty-six participants completed the online survey. Participants who took the survey were asked upon completion to assist with recruiting additional participants. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to provide their email address and phone number for later follow-up.

Measures and Interview Protocol

In October 2020, participants who provided contact information for follow-up ($n = 35$) were emailed and invited to participate in a subsequent qualitative interview with the

Table 1 Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender[a]	Sexual orientation[a]	Race or ethnicity	Area of the country[b] and state policy[c]	Highest education level
Addison	20	Female	Gay	White	Southwest; low	High School
Blaine	67	Male	Gay	White	Midwest; fair	Doctorate
Cameron	50	Female	Lesbian	White	West; high	2-year College Degree
Drew	48	Male	Gay	White	Southeast; negative	Masters
Emery	20	Nonbinary	Queer	White	Southeast; medium	High School
Finley	39	Female	Queer	Biracial (Latinx and White)	Midwest; high	Masters
Grayson	28	Male	Gay	Black	Southeast; low	4-year College Degree
Harper	58	Female	Straight	White	Southeast; medium	4-year College Degree
Ira*	76	Male	Gay	White	Midwest; low	Masters
Jan	25	Cisgender female	Biromantic demisexual	White	North; high	4-year college degree
Kai	73	Female	Lesbian	White	Midwest; fair	Masters
Logan	70	Male	Straight	White	Southeast; negative	Masters
Morgan	53	Nonbinary	Pansexual	(did not report)	Southwest; low	4-year College Degree
Niko	45	Nonbinary/male	Straight	White	Southeast; negative	4-year College Degree
Ollie	57	Transfeminine	(did not report)	White	Southeast; medium	Masters
Payton	34	Transman	Pansexual	Black	Southeast; medium	High School
Quin[d]	33	Nonbinary	Kinkster	White	Midwest; high	Masters
River[d]	41	Female	Lesbian	White	Northeast; high	Doctorate
Sam[d]*	57	Female	Lesbian	White	Midwest; fair	Doctorate

*Did not discuss politics during their interview

[a]Self-reported

[b]Participants provided their state of residence; coded in accordance with regions identified by National Geographic, availablehttps://www.nationalgeographic.org/maps/united-states-regions/

[c]States were coded as having high, medium, fair, low, or negative LGBTQ + relevant laws and policies using the Movement Advancement Project's state equality map, available https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps

researchers involved in this study, including the authors on this paper. Qualitative interviews are an appropriate methodological choice when seeking to understand participants' meanings and perspectives, as they can provide richer and more nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

Those expressing interest ($n = 20$) signed a separate consent form, provided their availability, and were scheduled for an interview. All participants completed informed consent prior to scheduling. One participant withdrew from the study due to lack of availability to participate in an interview; final $n = 19$. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with participants' geographic disbursement, all interviews were completed over Zoom. Interviews were conducted between early October and early December, 2020. Fourteen were interviewed before the 2020 Presidential election, one was interviewed after the election but before the results were announced, and three were interviewed after election results were announced. Data from the May 2020 quantitative survey were analyzed in order to develop the qualitative questions for the second phase of the study. Interviewers respected participants' time, availability, and willingness to participate, and thus interviews varied in length; most, however, were around 45 min. A semi-structured interview protocol was used; participants were encouraged to share experiences that were of importance to them. Participants were asked questions including: "Since you took the survey, please tell us about your experiences as an LGBTQ + person. What have been some sources of stress and/or sources of support?" "What do you imagine the future holds for LGBTQ + folks more generally and LGBTQ + folks of Color in particular?" "What is your most pressing concern at this moment in time?" and "What can organizations, such as LGBTQ + community centers and advocacy organizations, be doing to best support you during these uncertain times?" No questions asked specifically about politics or political stress. Participants were compensated $20 for their time.

Follow-up prompts were broad, affirming, and asked for deeper contextualized information. For instance, participants were asked to provide examples, as well as to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to current socio-political events. Although no interview questions asked directly about politics, the election, or election stress, if participants mentioned politics, interviewers followed up via informal prompts.

All interviews were recorded via Zoom with participants' consent at two points in time: both on the initial consent form and verbal consent at the beginning of their interview. Participants had the option of turning their camera on or off, based on their comfortability and stability of their Internet connection. To facilitate building rapport, all interviewers had their cameras on throughout the duration of the interview. Transcripts were auto generated by Zoom, after which they were read by the interviewer and matched against the video and audio recording. All errors in the automatic transcription were corrected, and all identifying information (e.g., names of people, towns, support programs) was removed from the transcripts; participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities in data reporting.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality guides the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions (Holmes, 2020) and influences all stages of the research process (Foote & Bartell, 2011), including qualitative data analysis and interpretation (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). Thus, reflecting on and reporting out one's positionality as a researcher is a vital step of qualitative research (Holmes, 2020). The first author is a White cisgender and heterosexual woman who is a professor in a psychology department at a state university in the Southeast. Trained as an applied social psychologist, the first author has increasingly adopted a critical theoretical lens to her work. For the past decade, she has been involved in the LGBTQ + equality movement as an ally, researcher, teacher, and community practitioner. She founded a local-level LGBTQ + advocacy organization and engaged in substantive local and state-level legislative advocacy for LGBTQ + rights. The second author is a White nonbinary and queer person who is an assistant professor of psychology at a university in the Southeast that caters to deaf and hard of hearing individuals. They also identify as Deaf. The second author is trained as a clinical psychologist and academic; they utilize a social justice approach to their clinical work, teaching, and research. They have been involved in LGBTQ + activism and support groups for over a decade and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in LGBTQ + healthcare. The third author is a White cisgender woman who is a clinical psychology PhD candidate at a university in the Southeast that caters to deaf and hard of hearing individuals. She has been involved in LGBTQ + organizations and research throughout her undergraduate and graduate studies and has worked clinically with LGBTQ + individuals for the past 2 years. In keeping with the approach undertaken in community psychology research, this research project was conducted from an explicit social justice framework.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed via interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is not a specific process (Smith et al., 2009), but rather an approach in which researchers seek to embrace and understand the lived experience of their participants. As one of the priorities of IPA is to capture how and what people think about

their experiences, understanding participants' cognitive processes and beliefs are central when coding transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the data was coded inductively using a multi-stage process based on guidance outlined by Smith et al., (2009). First, all transcripts were reviewed by all authors to assist in adoption of participant perspectives. Next, the first author read through all transcripts, looking for any content pertaining to politics, specific politicians or political events, the election, or election-related stress. The list of content identified was exhaustive, capturing every mention during their interview which pertained to political topics, regardless of frequency. This list was next grouped into emergent themes and subthemes. Findings were then discussed with the second author and through this discussion, a consensus list of themes and subthemes was developed. Consensus themes and subthemes were reviewed and verified by the third author. For each subtheme, illustrative quotes were identified. Quotes were selected for inclusion based on the extent to which they served as strong examples of the theme or subtheme. Effort was made to quote every participant who mentioned politics, to lend credibility to the data (Sandelowski, 1986) and provide an accurate and thorough representation of participant voices.

Results

Seventeen participants (89.5%) mentioned politics at least once during the course of their interview. From their responses, a total of 17 unique codes were generated, grouped into three broad themes. Broad themes were *political fears and anxiety* (five subthemes), *beliefs about the future* (eight subthemes), and *strategies for coping* (four subthemes). Each subtheme in this section is supplemented by illustrative quotes.

Political Fears and Anxiety: "There's This Underlying Stress"

The first theme to emerge was political fear and anxiety. Fears and anxieties were broad and were thus parsed into five distinct subthemes. First, there were fears and anxiety centered around *specific people*. Specific people who participants expressed anxiety over were both then-President Trump winning a second term and Honorable Amy Coney-Barrett's appointment to a seat on the Supreme Court. No other politician or notable figure was individually named and identified as a source of anxiety. Fears of particular people being in power were expressed by multiple participants. Blaine, a 67-year-old gay White man living in the Midwest in a state with a fair level of LGBTQ + equalizing policies, says, "I can't even allow myself to imagine what would happen if Donald Trump won again… It's horrifying to consider that as a possibility."

Trump and Coney-Barrett caused anxiety as they were seen as having not only power to shape laws and policies, but also as symbolic figureheads who set the tone for political discourse in the nation in ways which directly impacted participants' lived experiences. Participants, such as Harper, a 58-year-old White transgender woman living in the Southeast in a state with a medium level of LGBTQ + equalizing policies, felt that the fearful political climate Trump created has "trickled down to [impact] the LGBTQ community." Cameron, a 50-year-old White lesbian woman living on the West Coast in a state with a high level of LGBTQ + equalizing policies, echoes these sentiments when she says, "I had this weird idea that the president of the United States is a symbolic notion and sets the agenda for the rest of the country." Addison, a 20-year-old White gay woman living in the Southwest in a state with a low level of equalizing policies, expressed similarly: "Before Trump, we all thought, whoever the president is, they make a little bit of a difference, but really doesn't influence our day-to-day lives. I think we have seen, no, it influences our day-to-day lives in a very impactful manner."

Fears and anxieties around specific people were present for a few different reasons, as expressed in other subthemes. There were fears of *rollback or continued loss of rights* that participants worried would accompany specific powerful others. Participants were concerned about losing several rights: marriage equality via an overturn of the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision, fear of loss of healthcare access via rollback of non-discrimination protections or legality of accessing certain types of healthcare, and fear of curtailing of general broad rights for transgender people. Although Jan, a 25-year-old White cisgender biromantic demisexual woman living in the Northeast in a state with a high level of equalizing policies, felt that an overturn of marriage equality was unlikely, she acknowledged that it was nevertheless "a valid fear," and points to other LGBTQ + rights under attack:

> You've had two justices say that they are looking to take another look at [Obergefell v. Hodges]…I don't necessarily think that marriage equality will be overturned. I don't think we're in that kind of political environment, though I think it's a valid fear…What we need to be looking at is transgender people who still can't really fully serve in the military, and you know they have difficulty getting coverage under healthcare. The Affordable Care Act might be overturned.

Logan, a 70-year-old White man who lived in a Southern state with negative levels of LGBTQ + legislation, was in the process of attaining gender confirmation surgery at the time of his interview. He says, "One of the reasons why I want to get the surgery done before the end of the year was, God forbid

if this fool [President Trump] gets reelected. I have no idea what's going to happen to LGBTQ + rights."

Participants feared increased *violence or overt discrimination* against LGBTQ + people, in particular LGBTQ + people of color. Supporters of specific powerful people were seen as capable and willing to engage in such violence. Addison expresses her fears as someone living in a conservative area: "You know, some of these [Trump supporters] are crazy… [in this community] they're like…gun toting out in public… I truly am concerned about violence around the election… [LGBTQ + people] can be very much targeted, not just racial [minorities]."

Ollie, a 57-year-old White transfeminine person living in the Southeast in a state with medium levels of protective legislation, noted that there has been an uptick in not only overt prejudice in her area against LGBTQ + people of all races, but also against people of color generally: "We've had KKK flyers out in our county here recently…I have never heard of that. I mean, like I said, I grew up here. I never heard of that [in] 50 plus years until this year."

Fears of *political disenfranchisement*, the fourth subtheme, included both concerns that the public's voting rights would be eroded, as well as that votes would not be accurately counted. Again, powerful others were seen as driving these fears. Logan articulated these concerns during their interview, noting that "you know, they're already talking about disenfranchising transgendered [sic] people anyways." Drew, a 48-year-old White gay man living in a Southeastern state with a negative level of LGBTQ + policies, when acknowledging the "underlying stress" of the election, speaks to concerns of disenfranchisement: "Are all the votes going to be counted? Is he [President Trump] going to try to contest the election if he loses? …There's so many what if's in all of this that are just so frightening to me."

Finally, 20-year-old Emery, a White nonbinary queer person living in the Southeast in a state with a medium level of legal protections, expressed support of the Black Lives Matter movement, but was fearful that "we're going to see increased militarization of the police and that is scary."

Beliefs About the Future: "Things Will Get Worse Before They Get Better."

The next theme, beliefs about the future, entailed eight distinct subthemes, the first of which is that the *election brings uncertainty*. When asked about what the future holds for LGBTQ + people, Addison gives a typical response: "I think a lot of that depends on the election that's coming up."

Participants also expressed *tepid optimism* and the belief that the political climate would get worse before it gets better. Grayson, a 28-year-old Black gay man living in a Southeastern state with low levels of legal protections, exemplifies this theme below.

> There's so much that's going on today surrounding LGBT rights. I always want to be optimistic and say that it will get better. It's constantly getting better;... constantly growing. But then we'll see, we see the media, and we hear the stories, and we see what's really going on right now in our country with certain rights that are just up for debate. Like 'You don't need this right. So, we're just gonna [take it away]…' like that… That's ridiculous to me….I want to be optimistic and say it will get better, but I honestly believe that things will get worse before they get better.

Morgan, a White 53-year-old pansexual nonbinary person living in the Southwest in a state with low levels of equalizing legislation, similarly sees "possibilities for a great deal of progress and a lot of good signs for that." They added, "But I also see possibilities that a lot of the progress that we've made in the last 50 years can be wiped out really quickly."

Many participants discussed what the future would hold if Biden won the presidency. Three subthemes pertained to speculations on what would happen in this scenario. The first of these was that a Biden Presidential win would *reinstate rights lost under President Trump* or further protect LGBTQ + rights. Payton, a 34-year-old Black pansexual transman living in a Southeastern state with medium legal protections, states "I feel hopeful that Biden is gonna restore some of those things that Trump had undone." Others felt that a Biden win would lead to *progress*. Beliefs that a Biden Presidency would bring further progress for LGBTQ + rights were in part due to the nostalgia for former President Obama that Biden evoked. For instance, Kai, a 73-year-old White lesbian woman from the Midwest who resides in a state with fair levels of LGBTQ + equalizing policies, explicitly talked about the nostalgic symbolism of a Biden win: "It was so wonderful to have Obama, you know, talk about us at his inaugural speech and and be so supportive. Openly supportive. That was a nice period of time."

Finally, some participants felt that a Biden win would lead to *complacency*, and that LGBTQ + people would stop working so hard to fight for additional rights, leading to a stalling or even rollback of LGBTQ + rights. There was an acknowledgement that the Trump administration, as it instilled fear over loss of rights for LGBTQ + people, was both a unifier for the LGBTQ + community and a motivator to push harder for LGBTQ + rights than had been seen in recent history. For instance, Drew says:

> I do think that in the eight years of the Obama administration maybe we got a little bit complacent. Maybe we just sort of assumed that, you know, we had changed the hearts and minds of people enough that there… was no turning back. I do think that going through this administration and, you know, going through a pandemic and just all the different things that have hap-

> pened, I do feel like that the LGBT community is as unified probably as it's been in a very, very long time.

Some participants expressed concern that complacency under a Biden presidency would result in *dissolution of this unity*, and those members of the LGBTQ + community who held greater privilege, such as White or wealthy LGBTQ + people, would withdraw from the LGBTQ + rights movement. Quin, a 33-year-old White nonbinary kinkster from the Midwest who lives in a state with high levels of legal protections and who was interviewed after the election results were known, encapsulates this sentiment when he predicts "that Biden will…qualm people enough where people stop mobilizing for actual change, systemic change." Quin elaborates later on that it will be those with more privilege who stop mobilizing for change, and draws comparisons to other political elections to support this belief:

> I think with Biden being elected the fear will dissipate and I think fear is a huge motivator…I think with Biden being elected White people, White LGBT people, aren't going to be feeling as threatened because Biden is on our side. In a similar way that, like, Lori Lightfoot was perceived by a lot of White gay men in Chicago, where it's this false sense of security because of the positions of privilege that people are in. Like [I saw] White gay men fighting for the first time in a long time because their rights were being threatened. White gay system. White gay wealthy system. But I can almost guarantee that a lot of their support will pull back. Same thing with White women.

For Quin, Biden being elected to the Presidency would relieve the feelings of immediacy and the need to mobilize among LGBTQ + people with greater privilege. Those people, which Quin articulated as White wealthy gay men and White women, would back out of the fight for LGBTQ + rights, resulting in a slowing of the LGBTQ + equality movement.

Some participants acknowledged that the concerns regarding rifts in the LGBTQ + movement mirror already-existing rifts. Several participants acknowledged that LGBTQ + people who have less privilege experience marginalization within LGBTQ + circles and that their rights are deprioritized over the rights of those with greater privilege. For instance, River, a 41-year-old White lesbian woman living in a state in the Northeast with high legal protections and who was interviewed after the election results were known, explains how gains in rights for LGBTQ + people are not experienced equally:

> I do have some transgender friends, also Caucasian, that I would say they, probably, um, wouldn't agree [that things are positive]. I'm noticing a lot of regional discrepancies with what people are experiencing. Even though the South is [experiencing] lots of change, there's still a lot of discomfort in things that are said [in the South], that if said in the Northeast would be a non-issue.

Two participants who experienced marginalization within LGBTQ + political spaces expressed *frustration over lack of voice*. Harper, who is transgender and lives in a Southeastern state with medium legal protections, expresses concerns over transgender people's invisibility and de-prioritization within the broader LGBTQ + equality movement when she says, "Not that the T [transgender people] had a lot of voice before, but even now, [that voice] just seems to be completely gone." Niko, a 45-year-old White nonbinary/male person living in the Southeast in a state with negative levels of LGBTQ + legislation, is a conservative who feels politically marginalized within the LGBTQ + community. Niko sees lack of unity and specifically lack of inclusion of conservative voices as undermining the equality movement. To Niko, being conservative leads them to feel "frustrated…I don't see where a conservative viewpoint can't blend in with the community." Niko believes that inclusion of conservative voices within the LGBTQ + movement would help advance LGBTQ + rights because "it's going to take somebody with…a more conservative leaning to reach those on the right or on the far right…change needs to also come from within the conservative community for the conservative community to understand and accept it."

Some participants felt that complacency resulting from a Biden presidential win would not only fracture the LGBTQ + community, but would result in a similar *break between LGBTQ + people as a group and progressives* who are not LGBTQ +, the last subtheme. Participants felt that with intersectional movements came the realization that marginalized people may not get all their needs met. Thus, some believed that progressives would stop advocating for LGBTQ + rights after some gains were made. Finley, a 39-year-old queer biracial Latinx and White woman living in the Midwest in a state with high legal protections, explains this concern:

> I have been wondering if right now there's a really strong alliance between progressives in general and the LGBTQ community, and I am concerned that that alliance might fall apart somewhat as LGBTQ folks become more comfortable in their rights and less worried about losing them. You know, I think that could be a challenge going forward.

Strategies for Coping with Election Anxiety: "I'm Not Even Paying Attention to the News"

The final theme entailed various strategies that participants mentioned for coping with election anxiety, broken into four

subthemes. Some participants *immersed themselves in the news*. For instance, Jan says, "Every day, I'm kind of reading what's going on. And not just focusing on the presidential election but also focusing on, you know, the Senate race." Others *avoided or limited their exposure to news* that was anxiety-provoking. Morgan says:

> I'm not even paying attention to the news anymore. I just turned all that stuff off. I can't do anything about it, I voted, I can't do anything more about it. So I don't want to pay attention because I don't want to be anxious about [it]. So, there are other things in my house [so I] don't have to pay attention to what's going on. So that's where I am with pressing issues.

Some participants engaged in *voting and/or encouraged others to vote* as a way to cope with their anxiety. Again, we turn to Morgan, who in addition to mentioning having voted, also discusses how they encouraged others to vote:

> Another thing I've done on…PFLAG's Facebook page, [is] trying to encourage people to get out the vote and because all the times in the past LGBTQ+ people voted in actually fairly low numbers, and we need to get people out to vote if they're going to have, [if] we're going to make a difference...

Finally, some participants either engaged in *marches or protests* or planned for them. Cameron, who was affiliated with a PFLAG Chapter in her city, said that her organization was planning ahead in anticipation of having to protest post-election:

> I feel like we're in a waiting period…of anticipation and trying to figure out what we need to do. My partner and I have been listening to a lot of nonviolent podcasts on how to protest in nonviolent ways and how to organize things…And there's a conversation coming up this week with church members about how we are going to organize around what's going on. And if there's a power grab, what's going to happen. So, I also feel like right now we're in this, this waiting period where you have to rest because it's going to get…it's probably going to get dicey though. I also at the same time, I was like, I live in (a liberal city). Our elected officials are going to make sure every ballot is counted. And we're not having a power grab here…any protest or any actions that are going to be happening in (my city will) already be in support and in what's going on in the rest of the country.

Discussion

This research documented LGBTQ + people's thoughts and emotions centered around the 2020 US Presidential election, a historical moment of considerable upheaval, where disparities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and increased public discussion and debate over the legacy of racism were occurring in the midst of a contentious election. The minority stress model (Brooks, 1981; Meyers, 2003) is a well-established model which explains how politics function as a source of structural stigma. We know from ample research that political discourse and public policies impacting LGBTQ + people's rights have significant implications for LGBTQ + people's health and functioning, including mental health and well-being, feelings of safety, substance abuse, suicidality, quality of people's relationships with others, and physical health (Bartos et al., 2021; Casey et al., 2020, 2021; Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011; Price et al., 2020; Riggle et al., 2009; Rostosky et al., 2009, 2010). Our findings reinforce existing research and build upon emerging evidence that specific political events, such as elections, and specific political figures can themselves serve as sources of stress (Brown & Keller, 2018; Drabble et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2018b; Lannutti, 2018; Price et al., 2020; Riggle et al., 2018; Veldhuis et al., 2018). Our findings also suggest several points of intervention to reduce the impact of election stress.

Participants in this study expressed a number of anxieties and concerns over the 2020 election and the political climate. The fact that almost all of our participants expressed concerns despite not being asked specifically about politics during their interview speaks to the significance of the election as a source of stress. In line with the minority stress model (Brooks, 1981; Meyers, 2003), participants feared loss of rights, legislative and procedural disenfranchisement from the election process, and increased militarization of the police, all of which were anticipated if then-President Trump was re-elected.

During the 2020 election cycle, there were significant differences in legislative rhetoric surrounding LGBTQ + rights occurring at the state level; while some participants resided in states that were increasingly passing (or were anticipated to pass) equalizing legislation and increased protections for LGBTQ + people, others resided in states which were actively engaged in stripping legal protections and restricting freedoms for LGBTQ + people, with trans youth specifically targeted. However, despite state to state differences in the political landscape, participants tended to respond to the 2020 election cycle very consistently, with a focus on national elections and appointments. It is interesting in retrospect that participants did not discuss with us the impact of state-level legislative actions or policy rhetoric. It may be that participants were more aware of the national, in comparison to state-level, political landscape. It may also be that national political rhetoric and national political change took psychological precedence for participants. Future research should explore the nuanced ways in which simultaneous national and state-level political rhetoric surrounding LGBTQ + rights impacts LGBTQ + people and

communities, as well as whether affirming state-level political rhetoric can offset stressors caused by national politics.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the data were collected in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants' reactions to political stress were not deeply intertwined with concerns over COVID-19. Participants did not mention, for instance, the government's pandemic response or the impact of the 2020 election on the pandemic response in their interviews. It may be that other concerns brought forth by the election had greater immediacy for participants. The lack of mention of COVID-19 in the context of political stressors might also be a matter of timing. By the time participants were interviewed for this study, 6 to 8 months into the pandemic, participants may have become acclimated to the life changes brought about by COVID-19, and government restrictions, such as stay-at-home orders and restaurant closures, had largely been lifted. Finally, this might reflect that our participants were well educated and predominantly White, a group which was less impacted by COVID-19 in comparison to more precarious LGBTQ + communities.

One way this study extends prior work is that participants perceived specific high-profile public figures as symbols who, in and of themselves, contributed to the stigma of LGBTQ + people and served as a stressor. Then-President Trump and Justice Coney-Barrett were specifically identified as symbolic of LGBTQ + people's oppression, and as reminders that there remains active anti-LGBTQ + sentiment among the general public. Trump and Coney-Barrett were seen as symbols of potential erosion of LGBTQ + rights and intentional political disenfranchisement of LGBTQ + communities. These key figures were also seen as instrumental in creating a socio-political climate which put LGBTQ + people at increased risk of violence. Furthermore, participants expressed retroactive understandings of former President Obama serving in a similar role; Obama was viewed as symbolic of a period of time of broad public support for LGBTQ + people. Whether or not participants saw Obama in symbolic terms during his presidency, or only retroactively, is unclear.

Participants were very concerned over losing existing rights, and the risk of losing rights was seen as in large part dependent on the outcome of the 2020 election. This is consistent with prior research on reactions to the 2016 election (Lannutti, 2018; Price et al., 2020). Marriage equality, which was legalized nationwide via a Supreme Court decision, was identified as particularly fragile due to the changing makeup of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court's June 2022 reversal of the 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision, which effectively terminated legal access to abortion nationwide, suggests that concerns that a more conservative Supreme Court could also remove rights for LGBTQ + people are legitimate. Taken together, our findings suggest it is important that existing rights which were obtained via court rulings be codified into law. Legislation which closes legal gaps in treatment between LGBTQ + and cisgender heterosexual people would have a strong, positive impact on LGBTQ + people's health and well-being by reducing the threat that rights could be removed by future court rulings. Working to enshrine rights won via court rulings into codified law is one potential long-term macrosystemic intervention to offset minority stressors brought about by contentious political elections.

In line with the minority stress model, participants expressed concerns over increased discrimination, harassment, and violence due to the charged political climate. These later fears were not unfounded, as some participants had observed an uptick in overt discrimination in the months leading up to the election. These findings suggest that an uptick in oppressive political rhetoric and discriminatory legislative proposals led participants to also experience an uptick in fears of being a target of a hate crime. Participants both expressed concerns about future violence, and saw an uptick in discriminatory actions within their communities, such as a resurgence of KKK activity not seen in decades. The cyclical link between these distal and proximal stressors has been documented elsewhere; for instance, legal scholars have noted a rise in hate crimes during the Trump administration, partly driven by the use of divisive and stigmatizing political rhetoric (Koski et al., 2020). Another possible explanation for these findings was that participants were previously less aware of events such as KKK activity in the area, and became more attuned to them due to the increase in distal stress from the charged political climate. Thus, it is possible that encountering more political rhetoric centered around LGBTQ + rights lead LGBTQ + people to become more aware of and hypervigilant to daily instances of discrimination. The cyclical link between experiencing increased political rhetoric and debate over LGBTQ + rights and awareness and experiences of overt discrimination should be further explored in future research. Psychologists and other mental health providers working with LGBTQ + clients in times of challenging political climates could help them process their feelings of increased risk of violence and develop effective coping mechanisms.

Participants believed negative political rhetoric, although a stressor, could unite LGBTQ + people around the need to protect and advance LGBTQ + rights. This is similar to findings by Maisel and Fingerhut (2011), who found that Proposition 8, California's same-sex marriage ban, led to increased involvement and mobilization within the LGBTQ + community. Consequently, gains in the equality movement led people in our study to worry that LGBTQ + people as a collective would experience internal rifts to such an extent that they would undermine future advocacy goals. These anticipated rifts included perceptions that those most marginalized within the LGBTQ + community, such as transgender people and LGBTQ + people of color, would be left behind

as LGBTQ + people with greater racial and wealth privilege pulled back from advocacy efforts. Related were concerns that small gains for LGBTQ + equality would result in progressive cisgender and heterosexual people losing interest in advocating for LGBTQ + rights. People working within LGBTQ + equality movements will need to advocate for public policies that benefit a wide swath of LGBTQ + people in order to prevent dissolution of unity.

The concern that LGBTQ + people with race and wealth privilege would disengage from the LGBTQ + equality movement is surprising considering that the majority of participants in our sample were White and reported high levels of education and income. That is, the participants in our sample were those with race and wealth privilege who they saw as potentially withdrawing from the LGBTQ + equality movement. There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, as some of our participants mentioned during their interviews, past experiences demonstrate the real possibility that complacency could lead to fractures within the LGBTQ + equality movement. It has been well-documented in the media that transgender people, lower income LGBTQ + people, and LGBTQ + people of color felt left behind in the push for marriage equality (Thrasher, 2016). Participants also mentioned similar events in which specific political wins (e.g., Lori Lightfoot's mayoral election in Chicago) led to dissolution of unity within the local LGBTQ + movement (e.g., people who benefit from wealth and racial privilege became divested). Experiences of marginalization within collective action movements are supported by research. For instance, Hagen and colleagues (2018) found that transgender and sexual minority women both experienced oppression from within activist communities with which they were engaged. Similarly, Newman-Freeman (2013) found that Black lesbian women were unaffected by the marriage equality movement, perceiving it as an issue most relevant for White gay men. Rather, these women were more concerned with policy issues that directly impacted the Black communities in which they lived, such as policies addressing housing and homelessness, safe communities, quality education, and legal protections for trans people. Additionally, Worthen (2020) has documented that some of the rifts participants in our sample alluded to are already occurring, with tensions forming between transgender individuals and liberals. Thus, one explanation is that participants in our sample are reporting out concerns in the LGBTQ + equality movement based on prior experience.

A second related, but distinct, explanation is that participants may have increased critical consciousness over intersectional lived experiences and the advantages of intersectional collective action as part of witnessing the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Indeed, one novel finding from our research was that participants seemed more keenly aware of the intersectional experiences of LGBTQ + people than suggested by past research on political stress (Brown & Keller, 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2018b; Riggle et al., 2018; Veldhuis et al., 2018). Participants repeatedly mentioned concern for other members of the LGBTQ + community who were multiply marginalized, such as transgender people and LGBTQ + people of color. Concerns included fears of loss of rights for more marginalized members of the LGBTQ + community, as well as concerns over the increased risk of violence that more marginalized members of the LGBTQ + community face. Future research should more deeply explore the increased awareness of intersectionality, and particularly the greater awareness of the lived experiences of LGBTQ + people of color, that was brought about during the summer of 2020's large-scale Black Lives Matter protests and how this increased critical consciousness may both heighten political stressors and increase engagement in collective action. Another potential intervention for community psychologists and others working at the community level is to facilitate diverse groups of LGBTQ + people looking to become and remain politically organized.

Two of our participants expressed frustration with being marginalized within the broader LGBTQ + equality movement. One person expressing feelings of frustration was a conservative nonbinary man. While our participants were not unilaterally "progressive" and expressed a wide range of political views ranging in progressiveness, this participant was the only self-identified conservative in the sample. The participant felt that conservative LGBTQ + people should have a voice in part because they are better-equipped than progressives to speak within conservative circles on the importance of LGBTQ + rights and to advocate for change. One takeaway for LGBTQ + equality groups is to intentionally engage conservative LGBTQ + people to better understand what types of mobilizing tactics would work best within conservative communities. Understanding strategies that work to advance LGBTQ + equality in conservative communities is particularly important considering that LGBTQ + people have less policy protections within conservative areas. People in conservative areas are also in many instances the first to face policy backlash for advancement in LGBTQ + rights. For instance, while more than 250 anti-LGBTQ + bills were introduced in all 50 states in the USA during the 2021 legislative session, bills only became law in conservative, Republican-dominated states (Ronan, 2021). Organizations working to advance LGBTQ + equality will need to work closely with conservative-leaning LGBTQ + people and allies in these areas to effectively fight this harmful legislation.

It is clear that participants in our sample employed a wide range of mechanisms for coping with election stress. While some participants avoided the news, most demonstrated increased political engagement as a coping mechanism: they were following the news, voting, and encouraging others to vote. A few participants were preparing to

engage in collective action (marches and protests) post-election. Political engagement by LGBTQ + people can both serve a protective, coping function and as a stressor (Bartos et al., 2021). Political engagement can deepen connections to the LGBTQ + community (Szymanski et al., 2021) and empower people (Casey et al., 2022). Political engagement among participants speaks to the resiliency of LGBTQ + people and communities in the face of structural stigma and oppression. Although themes of resilience do emerge in the literature examining the impact of election stress on LGBTQ + people (Riggle et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2011), resiliency remains understudied (Casey et al., 2022), with the majority of research in this area coming from a deficit-frame, focusing on the negative impacts of policy on health and well-being. Future research should explore the strength and resiliency of the LGBTQ + community when experiencing times of heightened structural stigma, and how LGBTQ + people can draw on collective resiliency to both persevere during heightened political stressors, and mobilize to achieve policy wins.

Political engagement, if unsuccessful, can lead to disempowerment and disconnection from the LGBTQ + community (Russell et al., 2011). When there are legislative losses, people heavily involved in LGBTQ + political advocacy and activism can feel subsequently ostracized by the broader community, blamed for advocacy failures, and feel disempowered; these feelings can motivate people to leave the equality movement (Russell et al., 2011). This pattern can be detrimental in the long-term, exacerbating activist turnover and loss of the type of historical and institutional knowledge needed for successful long-term advocacy and activist engagement.

Psychologists and other social scientists working within or alongside LGBTQ + equality movements should identify ways to instill resilience among LGBTQ + activists so as to retain them in the movement in the face of failures. It is important for social scientists working within and alongside equality movements to develop mechanisms for continual leadership development, "small wins" approaches to maintain motivation, and warehousing of historical and institutional knowledge, so that activist efforts do not stall if or when key people need to step back from political organizing and mobilization. Furthermore, psychologists and other social scientists should also aim to familiarize themselves with the issues that LGBTQ + activists face (both as an LGBTQ + person and as a person doing activist work) such that recommendations for self-care and for avoiding burnout are tailored to this unique population.

Psychologists need to identify ways to reduce the additional stressors caused by political rhetoric and debates around legislation which impacts LGBTQ + people. It is impossible to control or regulate stressful political rhetoric and public debate, and thus our attention should turn to mitigating the negative impact of rhetoric. Clinical and counseling psychologists in training should aspire to get experience (via externship, internship, or postdoc) with LGBTQ + healthcare in order to deepen their knowledge about the unique stressors, including political stress, that LGBTQ + clients face. One such place that offers training is the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, which has over nine locations that provide clinical training specific to the LGBTQ + veteran population (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). Additionally, psychologists in training should not shy away from asking clients, via individual or in group therapy, about their experiences as an LGBTQ + person in our current political climate. For instance, a recently published article showcased the unique stressors LGBTQ + persons faced and coping strategies used during the Trump Administration (Gonzalez et al., 2022); given that political stressors impact the mental health of LGBTQ + folks who show up for clinical services, clinical and counseling psychologists and psychologists-in-training should educate themselves and invite participants to share their stories in the service of facilitating healing and resilience.

Strengths and Limitations

In this study, we were able to capture participants' stress around a unique political flashpoint. Our findings both reinforce prior research on the stress caused by political rhetoric and political legislation, and add to the emerging research which finds that specific political events and political figures can serve as a source of stress in and of themselves. One of the benefits of qualitative research is the ability to provide deeper, contextualized insight into the everyday lived experiences of people. Furthermore, the fact that this study captured the political stressors of participants without directly asking them is a strength of this study, and speaks to the significance of this moment in time.

Limitations of this study primarily entail the limits of extrapolating from small samples. Although qualitative research of this nature provides deep insight into people's lived experiences, it cannot be confidently generalized to a larger population of people (Anderson, 2010); this is particularly the case for the current study, which consisted of people who were widely geographically disbursed. Furthermore, the sample was rather homogenous on race, education, and income. It is possible that LGBTQ + people who experience compounded oppressions along racial, class, ability, or other systemically marginalized identities experience structural stigmas stemming from politics differently. For instance, Kteily and Bruneau (2017) found Latino and Muslim people felt highly dehumanized during the 2016 Republican primary election cycle, suggesting that Latino and Muslim LGBTQ + people may experience compounded structural oppression. However, these questions are open for exploration. For instance, Newman-Freeman's (2013)

research explored Black lesbian women's views towards marriage equality and found that the women in her sample were largely not impacted by stigmatizing political discourse, as they viewed the political discussion as irrelevant and as an agenda pursued by and for White gay men. Thus, whether the findings could be extrapolated to intersectional LGBTQ + communities are unknown, and might vary as a function of how relevant those communities viewed the political climate to their personal lives.

Our use of PFLAG Chapters to recruit our sample might have limited our ability to generalize these findings to LGBTQ + communities more broadly. Ostensibly, LGBTQ + people participating in PFLAG might be more likely to be White, better-supported in their community, and more politically engaged. It is unclear whether people who are not affiliated with a PFLAG Chapter experienced the election differently.

Conclusions

This study provides insight to the experiences of LGBTQ + people during an important political moment: the 2020 US Presidential election, during which the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened awareness of systemic racism coincided with a charged, contentious national election. The findings suggested that LGBTQ + people experienced heightened stigma stemming from political discourse and viewed key national figures as symbolic of efforts to erode LGBTQ + rights and protections. Participants in our study were concerned about the short-term and long-term impact of the election, both in terms of their immediate experiences with discrimination and loss of rights, and the future ability of LGBTQ + people to politically mobilize. The findings have implications for LGBTQ + advocacy groups, and the ways in which social scientists can work alongside and with LGBTQ + people and organizations to support them in the equality movement.

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Availability of data and material Anonymized data are available upon written request addressed to the first or second author.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Salisbury University (6/2/20, IRB #29) and Gallaudet University (6/25/20, IRB #2838).

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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