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The 2016 United States Presidential Election’s Impact on Families with Transgender Adolescents in New England

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Abstract

During and after the 2016 United States (U.S.) presidential election, discriminatory policies and stigmatizing rhetoric have been increasingly directed toward the transgender community at state and national levels. Transgender and/or nonbinary (TNB) adolescents, already at elevated risk for poorer health relative to their cisgender (non-transgender) peers, may have been adversely impacted by the shifting sociopolitical climate. This secondary analysis used qualitative data from the Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project to investigate how perceived shifts in the sociopolitical climate following the 2016 election affected families with TNB adolescents in the New England region of the U.S. (states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont). Data included two waves of semi-structured interviews conducted with TNB adolescents and their caregivers and siblings (N=20 families, 60 family members). Two coders analyzed transcripts using a thematic analysis approach. Emergent themes included: contemporary life for trans people in America (e.g., being discriminated against and dehumanized), perceptions of the national sociopolitical climate (e.g., anger toward political figures), forms of resistance and advocacy (e.g., confronting misinformation), and factors amplifying or buffering effects of the sociopolitical climate (e.g., the formation of alliances or coalitions within the family). Findings indicate the 2016 election spurred the redefinition of communication boundaries within, and outside, the immediate family, particularly regarding online communication and social media. TNB adolescents and their families anxiously anticipated changes in the sociopolitical climate and their foreseen impact on TNB adolescents’ rights and safety. Implications for family therapy, intervention design, and policy reform are discussed.

Keywords

adolescent; family systems; minority stress; politics; qualitative

In the wake of the 2016 United States (U.S.) presidential election of Donald Trump, transgender and/or nonbinary (TNB) individuals, who have a gender identity different from their designated sex at birth, have increasingly been the target of discriminatory policies and social stigma. Since the election, anti-transgender rhetoric has been on the rise in national discourse, including a proposed policy to ban TNB individuals from serving openly in the military and a proliferation of bills seeking to limit TNB individuals' access to public accommodations (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms) aligned with their gender identity (Cahill et al., 2018). Structural-level changes in the sociopolitical climate (e.g., policy changes, anti-transgender rhetoric in media) can constrain the opportunities and well-being of sexual and gender minorities, increase levels of structural stigma and minority stress, and subsequently harm the mental health of sexual and gender minorities (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Meyer, 2003; Perez-Brumer et al., 2017; Rostovsky et al., 2009; White Hughto et al., 2016). Among TNB individuals, the election has often been characterized as an acute and immediate stressor, with community members expressing concern about losing civil rights and becoming the target of anti-transgender victimization (Bockting et al., 2020; Garrison et al., 2018; Price et al., 2020; Veldhuis et al., 2018). Given the election's role in increasing levels of structural stigma and minority stress for sexual and gender minorities (Gonzalez et al., 2018), it may have negatively impacted the mental health of TNB adolescents.

TNB adolescents, who comprise an estimated 1.3% to 3.2% of the adolescent (age 12–18 years) U.S. population (Herman et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2016), may be particularly susceptible to the health effects of the sociopolitical climate. TNB adolescents experience well-documented mental health disparities relative to their cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) peers, including a higher incidence of both depression and suicidal ideation (Perez-Brumer et al., 2017; Reisner et al., 2013; Reisner et al., 2015). Although prior research has found parental and familial support to be protective in buffering the impact of social stigma and stress on TNB adolescents (Seibel et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2016), increased scrutiny of individual family member's identities (e.g., the TNB adolescent's gender identity), can negatively impact the entire family system (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016). Little research has examined effects of sociopolitical climates that are hostile to TNB individuals on the functioning of the family system in families with TNB adolescents.

Family Systems Theory states that each family member interacts with all other family members, thus creating a family system with its own rules, norms, and patterns that are maintained through homeostasis (Minuchin et al., 2006). Since its inception, Family Systems Theory has been expanded to incorporate an ecological/ecosystemic lens, positing that environments and societies in which families exist play a vital role in shaping the family system (McGoldrick et al., 2008). Systems theorists have argued that while external stressors play a key role in shaping individual behaviors, such as chronic disagreements and other constraining patterns (Almeida et al., 2008; Kant, 2015), these stressors may also

lead to supportive behaviors. Our team and others have used a systemic lens to study the lives of TNB youth and their families, with particular focus on the ways families adjust to having a TNB family member and act as a source of support and resilience for TNB youth (Katz-Wise et al., 2017, 2018; Pariseau et al., 2019).

Political discordance is defined as political or partisan disagreement, including differential preference for a certain political party or disagreement about a particular politician or political issue (Fitzgerald & Curtis, 2012). Some prior research has examined how political climates and ideologies impact family functioning, with a focus on influences both within and outside the family system. One study of the role of parental political discord in the political identities of youth in three European countries found that families with politically discordant caregivers tended to have children who were more politically engaged (Fitzgerald & Curtis, 2012). In the U.S., the 2016 presidential election offered a unique opportunity to observe shifts in family dynamics in real-time. One study used smartphone metadata to track the duration of Thanksgiving dinners, occurring two weeks after the election, and found that family members from politically discordant voter districts (e.g., family members from Republican-majority districts visiting family members in Democrat-majority districts) spent roughly 30–50 minutes less time at dinner than family members from politically concordant districts (Chen & Rohla, 2018). Few studies have examined how the election specifically impacted TNB individuals and their families. An ongoing ethnography of TNB children and their families reported that the election had a negative impact, with families feeling constant fear regarding the immediate future (Galman, 2020). Another study documented the protective role of families for TNB adults, with families mobilizing to support TNB family members following the election (Bockting et al., 2020). However, to our knowledge, no studies have examined the effects of the election on families with TNB adolescents.

The current study used a family systems perspective to investigate how the 2016 U.S. presidential election impacted the health and well-being of families with TNB adolescents in New England, with particular emphasis on changes to structure and communication patterns in the family system. Longitudinal qualitative data were analyzed from TNB adolescents and their families who participated in the Trans Teen and Family Narratives (TTFN) Project, a community-based longitudinal mixed methods study of the ways in which the family environment affects the health and well-being of TNB adolescents (Katz-Wise et al., 2018). Findings and their implications for clinical practice, intervention design, and policy reform are discussed.

Method

Researchers

The research team held diverse identities, professional backgrounds, and life experiences which shaped their interpretation of study findings. Gender identities included transgender woman, cisgender woman, and cisgender man. Sexual orientation identities included queer, bisexual, gay, and straight. All members of the research team had a White race/ethnicity. Researchers represented many occupational and disciplinary backgrounds, including developmental, clinical, and narrative psychology; adolescent health; social epidemiology; family therapy; social work; women and gender studies; and health policy

and law. All members of the research team had prior experience working with TNB adolescents and their families through research, clinical practice, and/or political advocacy. Some members of the research team are parents, though none are parents of TNB youth. The analytic team included a transgender woman and cisgender man, both supervised by a cisgender woman. All analytic team members had a White race/ethnicity and liberal political orientation.

At the beginning of the research process, the analytic team reflected on how our personal identities and experiences could influence our interpretation of the qualitative data. Team members went through a process of documenting and cross-endorsing assumptions and biases about their political beliefs and the experiences of TNB adolescents and their families (e.g., Based on our political identities, did we assume conservative caregivers were more or less likely to support a TNB youth's gender identity?). We reviewed the document containing our common biases and assumptions before and during the analytic phase of the study to promote reflexivity and cognizance about how our experiences and beliefs might color our interpretation of the qualitative data. On a biweekly basis, team members met to discuss perceived trends in the data and reinforced their assertions by referencing salient examples in the transcripts.

Sample

Participants included 20 families with TNB adolescents (ages 13–17 years), cisgender caregivers, and cisgender siblings from the TTFN Project. The full TTFN sample included 33 families recruited from community-based venues in the New England region of the U.S., including the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Recruitment venues included lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) organizations; homeless shelters; support organizations; youth drop-in centers; medical and mental health providers; and gender clinics. Eligibility criteria included: (1) currently living in New England; (2) age 13 to 17 years with a gender different than one's sex assigned at birth; (3) age 13 years or older and a sibling of a TNB youth; (4) age 18 years or older and a parent or caregiver of TNB youth; and (5) both the TNB youth and at least one family member were recruited to participate in the study. See Table 1 for sociodemographic information for the analytic sample. The sociodemographic composition of the analytic sample (n=60 family members) was similar to that of the full TTFN sample (n=96 family members). Sociodemographic information for the full TTFN sample is published elsewhere (Katz-Wise et al., 2018).

Procedures

The TTFN Project included five waves of data collected every six months across two years. Data for this analysis came from two waves collected around the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which occurred in November 2016: Wave 3 (1-year post-baseline), collected in March 2017 to October 2017 (4–10 months post-election); and Wave 4 (1.5 years post-baseline), collected in November 2017 to June 2018 (11–18 months post-election). Families were included in this analysis if at least two family members participated in both Waves 3 and 4. Study sessions occurred either in-person (i.e., participants' homes, researchers' institutions) or online (i.e., video conferencing), and lasted approximately

two hours, with a 1-hour semi-structured interview and 1-hour electronically administered survey. These sessions were conducted by research team members who openly support the LGBTQ+ community, with many team members identifying as LGBTQ+ themselves. Each participant provided informed consent/assent prior to participating at each wave. This study was approved by the Boston Children's Hospital Institutional Review Board.

Interview Protocol

Separate semi-structured interview protocols were created for TNB adolescents, caregivers, and siblings, with parallel content worded specifically for each type of family member. Interview protocols were developed collaboratively with a community advisory board, a scientific advisory board, and community stakeholders, including TNB adolescents, their families, and medical and mental health providers who care for them. Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, questions about the sociopolitical climate were added to the interview protocol beginning in Wave 3. Sample questions for TNB adolescent participants: "In what ways, if any, has the U.S. election impacted you and your family related to your gender identity or expression?" (Wave 3); "How have conversations with people in your immediate family gone in the past six months related to the current U.S. government and your gender identity or expression?" (Wave 4); "Are there any new kinds of support that you've needed related to your gender identity or expression in the past six months because of changes in the U.S. government?" (Wave 4). Questions were similarly worded for caregivers and siblings, but referring to the TNB youth (i.e., "your trans child's gender identity" or "your trans sibling's gender identity").

Analytic Methodology

Interview transcripts were analyzed using immersion/crystallization (Borkan, 1999) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approaches. Immersion/crystallization involved repeated engagement with the raw data throughout the analytic process (e.g., conducting interviews, reading transcripts, and coding) (Borkan, 1999). Dedoose software was used to consolidate and organize the data into smaller chunks of information, which were then reorganized, interpreted, and defined as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A codebook was developed and tested using transcripts from three families who participated in both waves (4 family members per family, 16 total transcripts). Families were chosen to represent varying political views, family structures (i.e., number and types of family members), and levels of household political concordance. Families were considered politically concordant if they shared similar views toward political topics (e.g., immigration reform) or identified as members of the same political party (e.g., Democrats, Republicans). The codebook was then used to code the remaining transcripts; any new codes that were developed during the coding process were applied to all previous transcripts such that the full codebook was applied to all transcripts.

The transcripts were divided between two independent coders, who each served as the primary coder for a given transcript. Transcripts were coded by family across the waves (e.g., all transcripts from Family A at Waves 3 and 4 were coded before moving on to Family B). Any discrepancies in coding and emergent codes were discussed and resolved through a series of ongoing biweekly meetings with the analytic team. After all transcripts

were coded, a code cleaning process was conducted during which codes were consolidated or removed from the codebook until each code mapped onto a distinct construct. These finalized codes were then sorted into preliminary theme piles which were refined, validated using coded excerpts from the interview transcripts, and defined as final themes.

In addition to coding, the analytic team developed a novel memoing structure to examine political concordance among family members and change across waves. Memoing involved two steps: 1) for individual family members, writing a short summary of the individual's experiences with, and perceptions of, the sociopolitical climate in Waves 3 and 4; and 2) for the entire family, describing how familial political concordance changed over time (if it did) and how this change impacted family functioning. This memoing structure allowed the analytic team to move between individual and family-level perceptions of the sociopolitical climate, documenting individual family member's political views at each wave, and describing how shifts in political views between waves impacted familial political dynamics (e.g., toward political concordance or discordance) and family functioning.

Results

We developed four primary themes encapsulating families' distal and proximal experiences of the U.S. sociopolitical climate: (1) contemporary life for trans people in America; (2) views toward the national sociopolitical climate; (3) forms of resistance and advocacy; and (4) factors amplifying or buffering effects of the sociopolitical climate. These four themes also constitute an organizational framework for emergent subthemes, with subthemes clustering around and between the four overarching themes (see Figure 1). Illustrative quotes for each theme and subtheme are in Table 2.

Theme 1: Contemporary Life for Trans People in America

Theme 1 described contemporary life for families with TNB adolescents following the 2016 presidential election, including experiences with victimization, changes to parenting behavior, and concern for the well-being of the TNB adolescent and the broader transgender community.

Subtheme 1.1: Feeling Dehumanized and Discriminated Against—Many TNB adolescents described feeling dehumanized and discriminated against following the election. These feelings were often an internalized response to the contemporary policies and actions of local, state, and federal governments (e.g., the rescinding of federal Title IX nondiscrimination guidance for schools, the transgender military ban, public accommodation bills or “bathroom bills”) (Table 2, Q1.1). In some families, family members held discrepant views about the seriousness or personal relevance of the changing sociopolitical climate. More often, families shared a common understanding about how the changing sociopolitical climate could impact, or had already impacted, the TNB adolescent's health and well-being. Caregivers often reported struggling with observing the impact of contemporary sociopolitical events on their TNB adolescent, as one mother of a 16-year-old trans boy described:

This last week with transgender military...the message that was received in this home was that...and I always say I have two sons, and one has full rights...and one just fights for everything he needs. So in this house what we interpreted that, and what [TRANS TEEN] interpreted it, was that he somehow was less of a man than his own brother, or less of a human than anybody else serving in the military. So that was hard, you know?

Consequently, after the election, caregivers often became more protective of their TNB adolescent and altered their parenting behavior to shield their child from the changing sociopolitical climate.

Subtheme 1.2: Parenting a TNB Adolescent—The sociopolitical climate had a direct influence on the experiences and parenting behaviors of caregivers with TNB adolescents. Due to insufficient protections for TNB adolescents at the state and federal level, it was common for caregivers to become increasingly protective of their child following the election. In some cases, this led parents to purposefully parent their TNB and cisgender children differently. This subtheme was particularly salient in a discussion about college applications between a caregiver and her TNB adolescent (Table 2, Q1.2). These protective parenting behaviors reflected caregivers' growing concern for the health and well-being of their TNB child amidst an increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate.

Subtheme 1.3: Concern for Well-being—Families expressed concern about the sociopolitical climate's impact, either experienced or anticipated, on the physical and mental health of individual family members. Their concerns often focused on the well-being of TNB adolescents, including their physical safety. Caregivers and siblings often mentioned that the election had a more substantial impact on the TNB adolescent's well-being than their own. As a result, siblings and caregivers often focused on addressing the mental health needs of the TNB adolescents and reassuring them of their safety. Some TNB adolescents, however, seemed to interpret family members' reassurances as platitudes; statements highlighting the disconnect between the TNB adolescents' concerns and those of other family members. On the evening of the election, one mother experienced this disconnect in a conversation with her trans son, when she attempted to reassure him that he was safe in the state where they live (Table 2, Q1.3). Some family members' statements reflected the broader TNB community. For instance, in Q1.3, the mother focused on the well-being of her son, while her son focused on the well-being of his friends in the broader TNB community.

Subtheme 1.4: Perceived Barriers to Gender Affirmation—In addition to concerns about physical safety, which often focused on physical harm either through interpersonal or institutional violence, families' fears were also heightened regarding structural barriers, such as policy changes that would hinder access to legal gender affirmation (e.g., name changes on legal documents, gender markers) and medical gender affirmation (e.g., hormones, surgery).

Theme 2: Perceptions of the National Sociopolitical Climate

Theme 2 described how participants experienced and evaluated the national sociopolitical climate following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, particularly their description of changes in the sociopolitical climate, responses to national-level sociopolitical events, and experiences with discourse regarding the existence and rights of transgender Americans.

Subtheme 2.1: Increasing Hostility—Family members perceived the U.S. sociopolitical climate as increasingly hostile or intolerant toward the TNB community following the election. Descriptions of the contemporary sociopolitical climate often contained generalizations about the thoughts and behaviors of President Trump’s supporters and their potential impact on their family. A mother of a 20-year-old nonbinary youth describe the perceived increase in discrimination:

[I’m] more fearful of my child of being harmed because people seem to be a little bit more free with their discrimination and their hate these days. So it kind of heightens your fear a little bit, but it hasn’t personally affected us. So there’s nothing that’s happened to us personally, but there’s that underlying fear that it will. Someday, what’s gonna happen, you know?

Despite the rise in anti-TNB hostility, families recognized the role of visibility in teaching others about the lived experiences of families with TNB adolescents, and how recognition could be leveraged to foster acceptance and empathy toward the broader TNB community (Table 2, Q2.1).

Subtheme 2.2: Changing Nature of TNB Community Visibility—Family members described how the visibility of the TNB community has changed since the election. Participants perceived a growing national interest in the rights and existence of the TNB community following the election, with legislative advances and increased media coverage underscoring how the TNB community had become a topic of sociopolitical discourse (Table 2, Q2.2). While families recognized this growing visibility, they also perceived a regression in society’s treatment of the TNB community triggered by the election, as described by a sister of a 17-year-old trans boy:

But then you look back and you’re like, “Oh shit,” and that’s what happened. Trump is what happened. So it feels like some of the hard work has been erased because of this presidential election and, like, specifically to the trans stuff. Because, like I said, a lot has come out since him getting into office and I feel that it’s taken the conversation from a potentially positive one back to that, like, degrading, demeaning, trans people are crap sort of conversation. And I feel like we’re backpedaling now.

These perceptions of societal regression were often followed by narratives of resistance, including actions family members took after the election to foster a better sociopolitical climate for the TNB adolescent and the broader TNB community (see also Subtheme 3.2).

Theme 3: Forms of Resistance and Advocacy

Theme 3 described family members' behavioral responses to the changing sociopolitical climate, including various forms of resistance and advocacy to promote the well-being of the TNB adolescent and the larger TNB community.

Subtheme 3.1: Taking (In)action—Families described either taking action, or avoiding taking action, due to shifts in the sociopolitical climate. Actions generally served three purposes: (1) gain distance from stressors related to the sociopolitical climate; (2) foster the safety of the TNB adolescent; or (3) actively change the sociopolitical climate.

Following the election, families often tried to shield the TNB adolescent from media-related stress by changing the frequency with which they watched or listened to political media. While some caregivers began to pay closer attention to the news to understand how emerging policies could impact their TNB child (Table 2, Q3.1), others perceived political media as a source of stress and encouraged family members to avoid it (Table 2, Q3.1 and Q3.2).

Beyond altering their own level of media engagement, some TNB adolescents reported altering their gender expression (i.e., presentation of masculinity or femininity) to foster feelings of safety, while others avoided using restrooms and locker rooms in public. As one 16-year-old trans boy said, "I've tried to present as masculinely as I can, just because I feel like that would make me safer, especially in the climate of my school." Several TNB youth also described avoiding the discussion of politics with people who held socially conservative views.

While families engaged in a variety of behaviors to cope with stress from the sociopolitical climate, many also decided to face the contemporary sociopolitical climate head-on with the intent of changing it. Common forms of sociopolitical engagement included advocating for TNB-related legislation (e.g., public accommodations bills), dispelling myths about the TNB community both in-person and online (e.g., posting comments on Facebook to dispel unfounded claims that TNB people seek bathroom access for sexual predation), and volunteering with local organizations to educate people about TNB-related issues (e.g., volunteering at PFLAG). Families also perceived their participation in the current study to be a form of community-focused activism, as a mother to a 14-year-old nonbinary youth described:

...because of what's been happening politically with Trump and whatnot, I really am happy that I'm in a study. I would be in more studies if there were any that I could find and was eligible for. I think [trans teen] would say the same thing.

Regardless of the venue in which their advocacy behaviors occurred (in-person or online) families considered them meaningful contributions to developing a more inclusive sociopolitical climate for the TNB adolescent.

Theme 4: Factors Amplifying or Buffering the Effects of the Sociopolitical Climate

Theme 4 described factors that either amplified or buffered the impact of the 2016 U.S. presidential election on families with TNB adolescents.

Subtheme 4.1: Identifying Sources of Support—Following the election, family members identified sources of psychosocial support located within the household, extended family, and outside the family (e.g., coworkers, friends). These support networks were often comprised of individuals with similar sociopolitical views and served as a venue for family members to vent about their feelings of stress and anger stemming from the sociopolitical climate. While having politically concordant views generally improved the cohesiveness of the family system, politically discordant people often had a mixed effect on the family. In the case of extended family, some family members made a clear distinction between supporting the gender identity of a TNB adolescent within their family and supporting the broader TNB community by voting or advocating for TNB-inclusive policies (Table 2, Q4.1). In these cases, caregivers and TNB adolescents did not equate the political concordance of extended family members with supportiveness, as for one 17-year-old nonbinary youth:

Like everyone has been supportive of like, “[President Trump]’s being really rude. Like he’s taking away your rights. Like it’s not fair.” There’s no one who’s been like, “Yeah, you shouldn’t be in the military.” Like there’s no one in my life that’s been like that; even the Trump supporters in my school haven’t been like that.

This behavior, however, was not the norm; families generally considered supportive individuals to be those with politically concordant views. Support networks sometimes offered emotional or material support to address concerns stemming from changes in the sociopolitical climate (Table 2, Q4.3). By identifying networks of supportive people, and purging those considered unsupportive, families were able to prepare for the anticipated impact of the Trump Administration on their health, well-being, and functioning.

Subtheme 4.2: Reorganizing Relationships and Boundaries—Families described redefining interpersonal relationships in response to the changing sociopolitical climate. Following the election, the dynamics of pre-existing relationships were often amplified, and immediate families (i.e., TNB adolescents, caregivers, siblings) found it necessary to redefine relationships and boundaries to preserve their mental health and well-being. Individuals who, before the election, were perceived as likeminded and supportive were drawn closer to the immediate family. These relationships were generally considered less emotionally taxing to family members and served as a venue for venting about feelings of aggravation and anxiety surrounding the sociopolitical climate.

On the other hand, pre-existing relationships that caused family members stress surrounding the sociopolitical climate often became further removed from the family. This boundary redefinition occurred frequently in the context of the Internet; for example, who was blocked or “unfriended” on Facebook in the immediate wake of the election. Loosely estranged extended family members with politically discordant views became more definitively and concretely estranged. This was particularly pronounced in caregivers’ communication with their parents (i.e., extended family). Politically discordant extended family members were often considered emotionally taxing, and caregivers either created strict boundaries regarding the content that could be discussed with an extended family member (e.g., no discussions of politics) or severed communication altogether. For some families, the

sociopolitical climate also led to redefining relationships in the immediate family. One caregiver described how the sociopolitical climate played a role in amplifying the tension between her and her partner, ultimately becoming a catalyst for their divorce (Table 2, Q4.2). While this represents an extreme case in redefining relationships following the election, the exacerbation of pre-existing relationship tension was common – to some degree – across families.

Subtheme 4.3: Forming Alliances and Coalitions—In some families, alliances and coalitions formed as a result of the election and in accordance with family members’ political ideologies and party affiliations. Alliances were conceptualized as supportive, informal sub-groupings of family members with similar interests/values. These alliances served to form a distinct sub-system within the larger family system, which could benefit all family members. Sometimes, alliances took the form of subtle networks of support around shared experiences that allowed two or more family members to share in their collective frustration/worry about the political climate. This was especially true for family members who shared marginalized identities, as described by a 20-year-old nonbinary youth:

And my sister is gay and I’m trans, like, while I’m upset that we have to get angry over these things, I’m glad that we do get angry over the same things versus having to argue about it at the dinner table [laughing] or anything like that.

On the other hand, coalitions were conceptualized as alignments formed between family members that served to exclude or override other members of the family. These coalitions could result in subsystems which ultimately changed the structure of the overarching family system. In one case of coalition formation, a decrease in communication with one family member inevitably led towards more frequent communication with the other family member; this, in turn, was seen as evidence of intentional exclusion, fueling further arguments about who makes decisions in the house. An 18-year-old nonbinary youth described a similar dynamic in their family: “Well, if I talk to my mom, you know, [conversations] go well. If I talk with my dad, it ends up with me getting annoyed and just walking away.” When caregiver-youth coalitions formed in the immediate family, this often put a politically concordant caregiver in the position of having more executive power in the family (Table 4, Q4.3). In a subsample of cases, this resulted in total reorganization of the family system (e.g., family members moving, separation or divorce; see also Subtheme 4.2).

Political Concordance

The majority of families in the current study had concordant and often liberal, political views. However, this political concordance was often restricted to members of the immediate family (i.e., TNB adolescents, caregivers, and siblings), and family members varied in how openly they discussed their political beliefs outside of the immediate family and how willing they were to engage in advocacy efforts for the broader TNB community. For example, in one family, the mother actively engaged in state-wide advocacy efforts against a bathroom bill; the father, despite expressing support for the transgender community, said he would not be the one to “pick up a flag and charge;” and the TNB adolescent attempted to subtly support his mother’s advocacy efforts while also remaining stealth (i.e., being presumed to be cisgender). These multidimensional facets of political concordance resulted in immediate

family members varying in their approach - and investment - in politics, despite sharing a common political ideology.

Beyond the immediate family, extended family members who endorsed Republican, conservative, or pro-Trump views were often referred to as points of contention, particularly among caregivers discussing the political views of their parents, siblings, or cousins. Discordant political beliefs with extended family members often resulted in immediate family members either: (1) severing communication with, or avoiding, the politically discordant extended family members; or (2) striking a mutual agreement not to talk about politics with those family members. Yet, despite the existence of a pronounced and partisan political divide, some family members remained nuanced in their evaluation of whether or not extended family members shared their values and beliefs. For instance, some TNB adolescents reported that politically discordant extended family members were supportive of their gender identity despite differences in their overall political affiliations and beliefs. However, these examples were rare; more often, participants' narratives reflected the increasingly polarized sociopolitical climate in the U.S.

Experience of the Sociopolitical Climate Over Time

Although political ideologies of immediate family members remained largely the same between Waves 3 and 4, there were fluctuations in the frequency in which the sociopolitical climate was discussed. Within some families, there was a decrease or halt to political conversations within the household over time. In some cases, this was attributed to the shock of the election wearing off and the reality of the new Trump Administration beginning to settle. In other instances, after prolonged exposure to emotionally charged political discussions – despite family members seeing eye-to-eye – some families devised household policies to limit or halt political discussions. One TNB adolescent described a “no politics rule” in his house where the family members were not allowed to discuss politics at the dinner table to avoid fighting. These changes in affect and communication signify the family system's adaptation to the altered sociopolitical climate, with the family system altering its behavior to construct a new sense of stability amidst a highly divisive sociopolitical climate.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how the 2016 U.S. presidential election – and the changes it produced in the U.S. sociopolitical climate – impacted families with TNB adolescents in New England. Interviews with family members revealed that transgender-hostile policies and rhetoric pertaining to the TNB adolescents' rights (e.g., access to public bathrooms) often impacted the entire family system. Similar to other research on families with TNB youth (Galman, 2020), families in the current study described a negative impact of the election on their family, including increased anxiety about anticipated changes to the sociopolitical climate. At the same time, families demonstrated resilience in the face of these stressors, as evidenced by engagement in political activism. This finding is consistent with the recently articulated Minority Strengths Model, which describes how personal and collective strengths in sexual minority populations create resilience and ultimately better mental and physical health outcomes (Perrin, Sutter, Trujillo, Henry, and Pugh, 2020).

As found in another study of effects of the election on TNB adults (Bockting et al., 2020), families in the current study mobilized to support their TNB family member. This study goes beyond previous research to provide an understanding of how the changing sociopolitical climate affected families on a system level. Results indicated that in order to preserve family functioning and the TNB adolescent's mental health in a political climate perceived as increasingly hostile, families often severed or reconfigured interpersonal relationships along the lines of politically concordant/discordant beliefs, including within the immediate family, extended family, or broader social network (e.g., friends, coworkers). While restructuring often resulted in more politically homogenous social networks, it provided greater social support for TNB youth and helped moderate the pathway between distal minority stressors (e.g., extended family members supporting transgender-discriminatory policies) and TNB youth's mental health (Meyer, 2003).

This study also contributes a novel approach to analyzing longitudinal qualitative data from multiple family members' perspectives through family-level memos that can track concordance among family members and change over time in attitudes and experiences. The examination of relationship redefinition among families is one example of how these memos provided an opportunity to deepen the analysis in the current study. Unlike many processes that were visible through single participant quotes at one time point, alliance and coalition formation was a system-wide process that shifted across time. Use of the family-level memos with side-by-side comparisons of interviews between different family members within the same family system showed how smaller family subsystems formed out of perceived necessity, creating new patterns of communication. For example, family members perceived as politically discordant were increasingly removed from decisions about sensitive topics (e.g., medical transition), while remaining concordant family members formed new pathways of decision-making across generational lines (e.g., between parent and sibling subsystems). This memoing approach is a promising analytic method for other longitudinal research with families.

Findings from the current study have a number of implications for clinical practice with TNB adolescents and their families. Many theorists and practitioners have emphasized the importance of bringing sociopolitical issues into the context of therapy, including those with an explicit feminist orientation (Almeida et al., 2008). This study provides support for incorporating a discussion of clients' experiences with and responses to the sociopolitical climate. Several models exist for bringing political conversations into family therapy, including feminist psychotherapy, narrative therapy, and liberation psychology (Almeida et al., 2008; Madsen, 2013; Martín-Baró, 1994; White, 2011). While divergent in both form and execution, these approaches encourage practitioners to help clients draw direct parallels between private struggles and discourse in the larger sociopolitical context. In addition, findings from the current study suggest that mental health providers should be mindful of the sociopolitical context's potential impact on households with TNB youth. The sociopolitical context has a strong bearing on how an individual family member experiences their own feelings and actions internally, in the context of their family, and beyond the immediate family.

Furthermore, the dynamics among family members shift as the sociopolitical climate permeates each family member's experiences. In the face of a hostile sociopolitical climate, TNB youth can have a profound effect on their caregivers' functioning. Many parents/caregivers may not engage in political activism to fight for transgender rights, if they did not themselves have a TNB child. Similarly, parents/caregivers may not have cut off extended family members so completely if not for having a TNB child they felt they needed to protect against conservative or transphobic beliefs and attitudes. Protective actions such as these served to mediate the degree to which TNB youth experienced the hostility of the overall political climate. This in turn created situations in which caregivers were holding relational burdens that were invisible to TNB youth, forcing stressed caregivers to rely on extended family members or older siblings for support. This often facilitated rapid role changes among family members.

Therapists have an important role in helping families navigate the negotiation of boundaries in the immediate and extended family, while also processing the feelings of loss that this might bring up for some family members. Therapeutic approaches to caring for youth often promote attention to the whole child. Findings from this study suggest that when working with TNB youth and their families, providers must attend not only to the whole child, but to the family system in which they are embedded and the larger sociopolitical climate.

Beyond informing clinical practice with families, findings from the current study have implications for public policy to help reshape the broader U.S. sociopolitical climate. Policies that exacerbate anti-transgender stigma negatively affect the health and well-being of TNB youth. Anti-transgender discrimination and victimization are common, particularly in school settings, and have negative effects on the health and well-being of transgender young people (Johns et al., 2019). Anti-transgender stigma, both experienced and anticipated, can also act as a barrier to accessing health care for TNB people (Reisner, 2015; Romanelli & Hudson, 2017). Many TNB youth hesitate to disclose their gender identity because they are worried about provider acceptance and whether they will be subjected to more discrimination as a result of this disclosure (Fisher et al., 2018). Nondiscrimination policies are needed to protect TNB people, including TNB youth, against discrimination in schools, public accommodations (including healthcare), employment, and other aspects of life. While the Trump Administration has rescinded guidance and regulations prohibiting anti-transgender discrimination in schools, homeless shelters, and in health care, two federal courts have enjoined the administration's June 2020 repeal of gender identity and sexual orientation nondiscrimination provisions in federal health regulations (Cahill, 2020; Gross, 2020). Hopefully this will have implications for nondiscrimination policies to protect TNB youth in schools and in other social settings.

A number of limitations should be considered. First, families in this sample likely did not reflect the national diversity of TNB adolescents and their families. Families in the current study were predominantly White race/ethnicity and higher income. These families may have been less concerned with the changing sociopolitical climate, as they would have been less likely to need public health insurance or depend on government assistance programs. Second, political affiliation was only collected for participants age 18 years and older (i.e., legal voting age) at one time point. While the use of a novel memoing structure made it

possible to examine political affiliation and political concordance/discordance over time, the collection of political affiliation on the surveys from participants of all ages, at both time points, would have allowed us to triangulate political ideologies across survey and interview data. Third, potential selection bias and the underrepresentation of politically discordant and conservative views in our sample could limit the generalizability of our findings. Because participants in the TTFN Project enrolled as a family, families with politically discordant or predominantly conservative views may have been less likely to enroll in the cohort, especially if the TNB youth and caregivers in these families are more likely to have a tumultuous relationship. Fourth, all members of the analytic team held liberal political orientations and may have overlooked nuances in the ways conservative and politically discordant family members support and affirm TNB youth. Finally, while TNB youth described experiences of transphobia and political hostility that may resonate with other TNB adolescents and their families, many families acknowledged that their experiences were likely buffered by living in a relatively progressive region of the country (i.e., a liberal bubble). Despite these limitations, this is the only study (to our knowledge) to longitudinally examine the 2016 U.S. political climate's impact on TNB adolescents and their families.

Conclusion

The current study makes a substantial contribution to understanding how the 2016 U.S. presidential election impacted family functioning and well-being in families with TNB adolescents in New England. This longitudinal qualitative study provides a unique insight into how family structures and behaviors changed in response to a sociopolitical climate perceived by families to be increasingly hostile. By conducting interviews with multiple family members, it was possible to examine – through multiple perspectives – the ways in which families experienced stress stemming from the sociopolitical climate and, in response, adapted their behaviors and the overarching family structure to maintain their health and well-being. Finally, this study which bridges the external U.S. sociopolitical climate and the day-to-day experiences of families with TNB adolescents provides empirical evidence that can inform the development of therapy and policy interventions to support TNB adolescents and their families.

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Table 1

Participant Sociodemographic Characteristics (N=20 families, 60 family members)

Characteristic	TNB Adolescents (n = 20)	Siblings (n = 11)	Caregivers (n = 29)
Age of youth in years, mean (SD) (W3)	16.6 (1.3)	18.5 (2.3)	N/A
Gender identity, n (%) (W3)			
Trans girl/woman (AMAB)	5 (25)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Trans boy/man (AFAB)	10 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Nonbinary (AMAB)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Nonbinary (AFAB)	5 (25)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Cisgender girl/woman (AFAB)	0 (0)	5 (45)	19 (66)
Cisgender boy/man (AMAB)	0 (0)	5 (45)	10 (34)
Questioning (write-in)	0 (0)	1 (9)	0 (0)
Race/ethnicity, n (%) (W3)			
White	16 (80)	8 (73)	28 (97)
Hispanic/Latinx	2 (10)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Black/African American	0 (0)	1 (9)	0 (0)
Asian	2 (10)	2 (18)	0 (0)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (5)	1 (9)	1 (3)
Mixed race/ethnicity	1 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Current grade, n (%) (W3)			
9th grade equivalent	2 (10)	0 (0)	
10th grade equivalent	2 (10)	1 (9)	
11th grade equivalent	6 (30)	1 (9)	
12th grade equivalent	4 (20)	1 (9)	
HS graduate/GED, not in college	1 (5)	2 (18)	
HS graduate/GED, currently in college	5 (25)	6 (55)	
Caregiver educational attainment, n (%) (W3)			
High school diploma/general equivalency diploma			2 (7)
Associate's degree			3 (10)
Bachelor's degree			7 (24)
Master's degree			11 (34)
Doctoral or professional degree			6 (21)
Sexual orientation identity, n (%) (W3)			
Completely straight/heterosexual	3 (15)	7 (64)	18(62)
Mostly straight/heterosexual	1 (5)	0 (0)	7 (24)
Bisexual	4 (20)	1 (9)	2 (7)
Mostly lesbian/gay	6 (30)	0 (0)	1 (3)
Completely lesbian/gay	2 (10)	1 (9)	1 (3)
Queer	8 (40)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Pansexual	8 (40)	1 (9)	0 (0)
Questioning	5 (25)	1 (9)	0 (0)
Another sexual orientation identity	4 (20)	1 (9)	0 (0)

Characteristic	TNB Adolescents (n = 20)	Siblings (n = 11)	Caregivers (n = 29)
Caregiver relationship status, n (%) (W3)			
Single			2 (7)
Married, living together			24 (83)
Married, living apart			2 (7)
Relationship, living together			1 (3)
Divorced			1 (3)
Adoption status, n (%) (W1)			
No	17 (85)		
Yes	3 (15)		
Age at adoption in years, mean (SD)	0.7 (0.6)		
Most recent political views, n (%) (W3 & W4)			
Very conservative	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Conservative	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (7)
Moderate	1 (14)	2 (33)	5 (17)
Liberal	4 (57)	3 (50)	9 (31)
Very Liberal	2 (29)	0 (0)	13 (45)
Most recent political party affiliation, n (%) (W4)			
Democrat	3 (43)	2 (33)	19 (66)
Republican	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (7)
Independent	3 (43)	3 (50)	8 (28)
Other	1 (14)	1 (17)	0 (0)
Household income (USD), n (%) (W3)			
\$0 to \$60,000			5 (25)
\$60,001 to \$100,000			3 (15)
\$100,001 or higher			21 (72)

Note. $N = 60$ participants. Missing data ranged from 0–5% across variables for TNB adolescents, 0–16% for siblings, and 0–3% for caregivers. Abbreviations: SD = standard deviation; W3 = data collected in wave 3; W4 = data collected in wave 4; AFAB = assigned female at birth; AMAB = assigned male at birth. If blank, demographic data was not collected for that group. Participants were able to select more than one response option for race/ethnicity and sexual orientation identity. Adoption status for TNB adolescents was reported by caregivers. Most recent political views were reported by caregivers in W3 and TNB adolescents in W4.

Table 2

Themes, Subthemes, and Quotes from Transgender and Nonbinary (TNB) Adolescents, Caregivers, and Siblings (Waves 3 & 4)

Theme	Subtheme	Quote (Number)	Subtheme Frequency ^a
Contemporary life for trans people in America	Feeling dehumanized and discriminated against	(Q1.1) And for me, that hit me like a train or I was like, "That is not okay. We shouldn't have presidents who don't accept trans people because it is a big thing." And my parents were kind of like, "Oh, we'll just get the policy changed." I was like, "You don't know that. Like, you don't know how it feels to be trans and have your own President say trans people aren't allowed to be in the military or in the army." I'm like, for me... I feel like we definitely see differently, like we don't see eye to eye on those topics. – <i>17-year-old trans girl</i>	127
	Parenting a TNB adolescent	(Q1.2) ... [trans teen] started out wanting to go [to] far places, and he was picking states that didn't have full trans protections, and I said, "Absolutely not. Quite certain you're gonna have to pee in four years while you're in college." ... [trans teen's sibling] didn't get limitations. I said, "Well, [trans teen's sibling] isn't trans, I'm sorry." "That's not fair, mom." "Oh well. Oh well, you're not going." So, right now he's applying to New England states. – <i>Mother to a 17-year-old trans boy</i>	25
	Concern for well-being	(Q1.3) And then I put my child to bed with him saying, "I'm not safe anymore." Because we kept saying, "You're in [STATE], you're in [STATE]." [STATE GOVERNOR] has been really amazing. ... and we're always like, "You're in [STATE], you're in [STATE]." [Trans teen] woke up the morning of the election saying, "Do you know what? My entire community of transgender friends are not in [STATE]. What about them?" I didn't have an answer. I didn't have an answer. And it's been horrendous. – <i>Mother to a 17-year-old trans boy</i>	66
Perceptions of the national sociopolitical climate	Perceived barriers to gender affirmation	(Q1.4) The day after the election I texted both of my brothers and said... told them how terrified I was. And that's when it all came up about we have to get this surgery on the books now because it's not going to be covered soon. And at which point one of my brothers said, "Do it when the time is right for [trans teen], don't go rushing into something if he's not ready for it. And at that time if it's not covered, we'll pay for it." Which just still kills me. Which is the most generous, supportive thing that I've ever heard in my whole life... – <i>Mother to a 17-year-old trans boy</i>	30
	Increasing hostility	(Q2.1) When it first happened, like when Trump was elected and stuff... I was definitely worried about, like, my safety and stuff. And, like, I still am, but not as much as I used to be, just because, like, I've just seen a lot more good than bad about trans people stuff in the media... I would say it's just probably me, like, myself and my family more open to talking about stuff that advocates for trans people, because in the political climate, there's a lot of people who are encouraged by the government who have now to feel like they can say shit and discriminatory things about trans people. And so I think it's just been important that my family and I, that we, like, just keep trying to be open about it and be willing to talk about our experiences with it so that we can help other people understand as best they can. – <i>19-year-old trans boy</i>	b
Forms of resistance and advocacy	Changing nature of TNB community visibility	(Q2.2) And I have seen this progress through the years in high school. Like freshman year, nobody really brought up the topic. It wasn't really a big thing. It was just like, "Oh, there's a trans person in our grade." Sophomore year, people started talking more about it. And it's like, okay, more people are starting to see how this is affecting other people and how it's affecting her, how it's affecting our community. Junior year, which is like the peak... this has been like the peak year for trans issues in [STATE], which we thankfully got the [STATE BILL] passed. So that brought a lot of thoughts like people's minds and like brought a lot of tension to being trans in [STATE]... And so it's just interesting seeing how people through the years have progressed and changed. – <i>17-year-old trans girl</i>	b
	Taking (in)action	(Q3.1) I mean, it's made me watch the news a lot more and it's made my mom's boyfriend be paying attention to the news more than he typically does, but it hasn't changed how my mom watches the news at all or pays attention to anything... She's trying to watch out for me and be like, "Don't watch the news. Just ignore what's going on. It's just more stress that you don't need." – <i>17-year-old trans boy</i>	201
		(Q3.2) Well, you know, I'm sort of plonking my head in the sand and just ignore it all. And I think [other caregiver] gets more stressed out. I think [trans teen] does, too, obviously. And we haven't really talked too much in recent times, but you know, a lot of it... And we were all kind of sad and depressed about it, you know? – <i>Father to an 18-year-old nonbinary youth</i>	
		(Q3.3) ... we've got so much support from our community... but my parents, they just won't come around with this whole trans thing, and that's always stressful, it's always there. And the politics have escalated that because they're conservative, they're Republican, they're Trump supporters, they're susceptible to a lot of misinformation propaganda and all kinds of stuff that's floating around out there about transgender people. And they have just been sucked into it and they are just convinced that... I mean, well I don't know what they're convinced of. I probably am making some assumptions but just based on, you know, their reactions and some things they've said and the ways that they've,	

Theme	Subtheme	Quote (Number)	Subtheme Frequency ^a
Factors amplifying or buffering the effects of the sociopolitical climate	Identifying sources of support	<p>you know, interacted with me. It's kind of a downward spiral. [laughing] We're just...we're going down in flames. And it's just not...it's not getting any better, [crying] so." – <i>Mother to a 14-year-old trans boy</i></p> <p>(Q4.1) Well, I think so. I mean, we have a couple of smatterings of conservatives in both sides of our family. But even all of them I think are still very supportive of [trans teen]'s gender identity, at least outwardly and out of the way, you know. But they all see the disconnect between all the horrible policies these people have even if they may agree with them on one or two things, you know. Not just the gender identity but a lot of things, you know. – <i>Father to an 18-year-old nonbinary youth</i></p>	75
	Reorganizing relationships and boundaries	<p>(Q4.2) We [other caregiver and participant] are separated... [Participant mentions an upcoming divorce]... [trans teen] knows about this, but wasn't a direct recipient, I was, of messages, Facebook posts, newspaper articles about [trans teen] going to hell from my husband's...one of his sisters. And then his brother-in-law is very, very active... against the bathroom bill and protests often, and they're very vocal about this, and I had a husband that wasn't gonna tell them to stop. So it wasn't the only reason that we left, but it was one of the reasons that we left, was I was not gonna...I'm not doing this to my child. I'm not doing it. – <i>Mother to a 17-year-old trans boy</i></p>	420
	Forming alliances and coalitions	<p>(Q4.3) I think my husband has accused me, sort of, of loading the children with my beliefs and agenda, but I have told him that they're pretty grown-up kids and they form their own opinions. And just because they happen to mirror mine, which makes me thrilled, but just because they happen to align with mine, they have made their own opinions. – <i>Mother to an 18-year-old nonbinary youth</i></p>	297

Note.

^aSubtheme frequency across TNB youth, siblings, and caregivers for waves 3 and 4.

^bThe subthemes of “increasing hostility” and “changing nature of TNB community visibility” were inductively derived from 255 excerpts containing participants’ perceptions of, and feelings toward, the current U.S. sociopolitical climate.