

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND DRUG USE

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Introduction

Dependence on substances such as alcohol, nicotine, tobacco, and other drugs has been shown to vary greatly depending on a wide range of factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, education, and geographic location (Hawkins & Marlatt, 2004; Mellor & Freeborn, 2011).

Political affiliation and participation are similarly dependent on these same variables (Pabayo, Kawachi, & Muennig, 2015), however, the relationship between these two aspects of an individual's identity has thus far been largely neglected as a topic of interest for further study (Dr. Tammy Peacock conducted a study in 2009 focused on addiction professionals and political participation, but the attitudes of addicts themselves were not heavily discussed).

Particularly since beliefs regarding the treatment of those struggling with drug addiction have been heavily politicized and this has become a deeply partisan issue, the political views of the people who are the most impacted by the decisions of politicians on this aspect of public health are deserving of more critical analysis- both in terms of their beliefs themselves and the extent to which they value political participation at all.

Research Questions

- Is there a significant association between a person's history of drug use (specifically intravenous drugs and crack cocaine) and their political affiliation?
- What about their degree of involvement with politics at all?
- How does this change when considering other aspects of their identity at the same time?

Methods

Sample

- This project uses data from the 2004 issue of the General Social Survey (GSS). New editions of this survey have been released every year since 1972, each year with different sets of questions asked to a different population of Americans regarding their views on any number of issues.
- This data is frequently used by politicians and other policy makers in order to gauge public opinion about potentially challenging topics.
- 2004 was the year selected for this study since it is the most recent year with an abundance of questions related to political engagement and participants' views on substance abuse.
- This data set consists of 2,812 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 89+ years old. Respondents were 54.5% female and 45.5% male, and were predominantly white, with about 20.6% of respondents identifying as either black or "other."

Measures

- Variables related to drug use are mostly yes/no questions asking whether or not a respondent has ever used a needle to inject drugs or used crack cocaine.
- In the case of injected drugs, a further variable was used containing details about when a respondent last injected drugs, specifically if it had been longer than three years since their last injection.
- Variables related to political affiliation and level of engagement are measured from a scale of 1 to 4, 1 to 5, or 1 to 6, and ask the degree to which respondents agree with a provided statement (i.e. "Political parties encourage people to become active in politics"; "Most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally," etc.)

Results

Univariate

- 2,224 people responded either "yes" or "no" when asked if they had ever taken drugs by injection with a needle; 56 of those people answered "yes" to this question (2.52%).
- 52 respondents who had experience with injecting drugs via needle also reported their more specific history of use, with 8 people (15.38%) reporting injection in the last three years and 44 (84.62%) who stated that their last injection was more than three years prior to the survey.
- 2,225 people responded "yes" or "no" when asked if they had ever used "crack" cocaine in chunk or rock form, and 108 (4.85%) of these people answered "yes."
- 53.41% of 1,468 respondents have never belonged to a political party, 27.45% belong but do not participate, 14.71% belong and actively participate, and 4.43% used to belong but no longer do.
- 44.75% of 2,771 respondents identify to varying degrees with the Democratic party, 38.26% with the Republican party, and the remaining 17% identify as Independents.

Bivariate

- Chi-Square analysis revealed significant associations between several variables of interest, particularly pertaining to crack use:
- Those who reported having used crack were found to be significantly more likely to have no history of belonging in a political party (68.42%) compared to those who had never used crack (50.71%); $\chi^2=9.0887$, $P=0.028$.
- Those who reported having used crack were found to be significantly more likely to strongly agree that politicians are highly motivated by personal gain (29.82%) than those who had never used crack (11.84%); $\chi^2=16.4828$, $P=0.002$.
- Those who reported having used crack were found to be significantly more likely to have visited a web site for political information more than five times in the past 30 days (33.33%) compared to those who had never used crack (10.45%); $\chi^2=10.9166$, $P=0.012$.

Multivariate

- After conducting regressions and controlling for a respondent's race, sex, age, and years of education, four different associations were found to be significantly related between drug use and politics, three of which involve the use of crack.
- Participants who have used intravenous drugs in the last three years were found to be significantly more likely to disagree with the statement that political parties encourage people to become active in politics than those who had not injected drugs in over three years. Age is also a confounding variable in this case.
- Participants who have used crack were found to be significantly more likely to agree with the statement that most politicians are only in politics for what they can get out of it personally than those who had never used crack (Figure 1). Race was found to be a significant confounding variable in this case, and years of education is a moderator.
- Participants who have used crack were found to be significantly more likely to agree with the statement that political parties do not give voters real policy choices compared to participants who have never used crack. Age is also a confounding variable in this case.
- Participants who have used crack were found to be significantly more likely to have visited a web site for political information in the last 30 days than those who have never used crack (Figure 2). Sex and years of education were both found to be confounding variables as well.

Figure 1: Average agreement that politicians are greedy (1=strongly agree, 3=disagree), according to crack usage (1=have used crack, 0=have never)

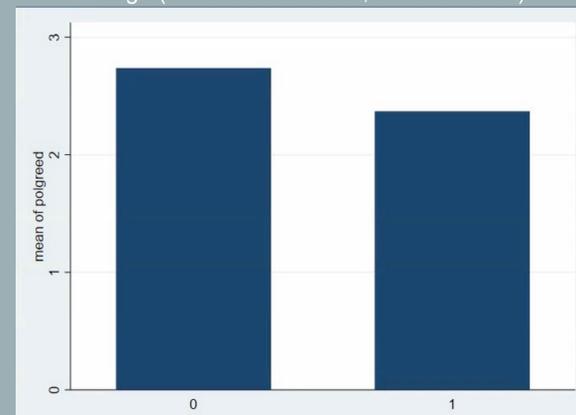
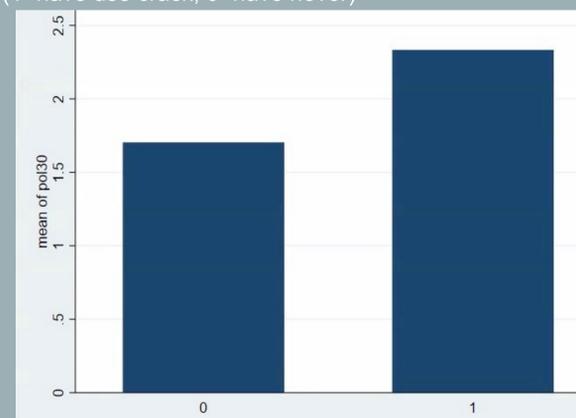


Figure 2: Amount of engagement on political websites (1 = never, 2.5 = 3 times a week), according to crack usage (1=have use crack, 0=have never)



Discussion

- Individuals who have used crack may be significantly more likely than others to feel cynical about the political process, however, they are also significantly more likely to actively seek political information than others.
- People who have a recent history of intravenous drug use are also significantly more likely to be prone to political cynicism, suggesting that recovery from such a habit can lead to higher levels of political optimism.
- Age, race, sex, and education experiences were also often found to be confounding variables related to this association in several cases to varying degrees, which aligns with the work of prior studies supporting this connection.

References

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