

School Teasing and Bullying After the Presidential Election

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In response to media reports of increased teasing and bullying in schools following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, we investigated its prevalence with a Virginia school climate survey completed by approximately 155,000 seventh- and eighth-grade students in 2013, 2015, and 2017. Survey results were mapped onto presidential election results for each school division's locality. In localities favoring the Republican candidate, there were higher adjusted rates of students reporting that (a) they had experienced some form of bullying in the past year (18% higher) and (b) "students in this school are teased or put down because of their race or ethnicity" (9% higher). For these two outcomes, there were no meaningful differences prior to the election. These results provide modest support for educator concerns about increased teasing and bullying since the 2016 presidential election in some schools and warrant further investigation.

Keywords: presidential elections; race-related bullying; sexual orientation; teasing and bullying; Virginia

Bullying is recognized as a serious concern that affects approximately 21% of students ages 12 through 18 in the United States (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017). There is abundant evidence that peer victimization, especially bullying, is associated with a decline in student engagement and academic achievement (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Nansel et al., 2001). Student victims of bullying also exhibit emotional adjustment problems and are at increased risk for long-term mental health problems such as depression (Benedict, Vivier, & Gjelsvik, 2014; Hong & Espelage, 2012; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). Furthermore, pervasive bullying and teasing has a general effect on school climate that affects the student body as a whole. Studies have found that the perceived prevalence of bullying and teasing reported by students in a school, beyond the effects of personal victimization, has a negative association with student engagement, schoolwide academic achievement, and school graduation rates (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Lacey & Cornell, 2013; Mehta, Cornell, Fan, & Gregory, 2013).

Bullying After the Presidential Elections

Although rates of bullying have decreased since 2005 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), numerous media reports have claimed that racially and sexually related incidents are on the rise as a result of

the 2016 presidential campaign (Bazelon, 2016). There have been more than 50 news reports of school bullying since the election in which students made statements linked to the newly elected president (Samaha, Hayes, & Ansari, 2017). The assumption of these reports is that the election of Donald Trump stimulated an increase in bullying behavior. The National Education Association (Blad, 2016), news analysts (Page, 2017), as well as experts on bullying (Juvonen, 2017) have characterized President Trump as engaging in bullying with his harsh and demeaning statements.

It is obviously difficult to demonstrate a causal link between statements by a public figure and schoolyard bullying. Nevertheless, there are incidents in which youth made threats and jeering statements that closely matched language used by President Trump (Thomsen, 2017). Such incidents are suggestive of the social learning model of aggression and classic studies showing how easily children model the aggressive behavior of adults (Bandura, 1971). However, skeptics have understandably questioned the evidential value of anecdotal observations (Kamenetz, 2016). Even if some students have adopted language from the president, this might represent a shift in the form of bullying rather than an increase in prevalence, and observers might be sensitized to report forms of bullying that parallel the

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presidential election rhetoric in the absence of an increase in its prevalence.

A survey of 2,000 K–12 teachers by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) claimed a national increase in student bullying and harassment. The survey report included case examples in which students engaged in name-calling, teasing, and generally inflammatory language. The derogatory racial and sexual nature of the behavior was deemed to parallel presidential rhetoric (Costello, 2016). However, the SPLC acknowledged that the survey was not a representative sample of teachers, making its results difficult to interpret. The responses did not measure students' own experiences, and it is possible that bullying reports by teachers may be skewed because teachers may not witness bullying in some places (e.g., bathrooms, cafeteria) or not notice more covert forms of victimization (e.g., cyber bullying, social bullying) that take place (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). In addition, these results were cross-sectional in nature and did not allow for the examination of changes over time.

More recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released its Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS) estimate of bullying prevalence for 2017 among high school students. The CDC has tracked the prevalence of bullying longitudinally on a national basis. Compared to rates of bullying in 2015 (20.2%), there were no statistically significant differences in the 2017 rates (19.0%) (Kann et al., 2018). These findings suggest that rates of teasing and bullying have not increased as a result of the presidential electoral campaign (Temkin, 2018). However, school-based bullying may take several forms (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), and it may be that some forms of bullying have increased in some locations and not in others.

How the Elections Could Influence Bullying Behavior

The hypothesis that a presidential election or presidential rhetoric might influence student bullying behavior deserves examination. Bullying has been conceptualized as a social-ecological phenomenon produced by the interaction of individual and systems factors (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Most bullying research has concentrated on family and school influences, with less emphasis on community and mass media exosystems. Hong and Garbarino (2012) identified homophobic bullying as a problem especially vulnerable to exosystemic factors such as mass media and the community environment and by macro factors such as cultural norms and beliefs about sexuality. They asserted that tolerance for homophobic bullying and aggression against sexual minority youth is perpetuated by media stereotypes and cultural norms. However, there is little research investigating how national events such as a presidential election, or behavior by role models such as the president of the United States, could influence student interactions.

There is some potentially relevant research on workplace bullying that examines the effects of the boss on employees (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). This research has found evidence of a "trickle-down" effect by which abusive behavior by the manager is associated with abusive

behavior by subordinate supervisors, which in turn is associated with employee aggression such as making fun of others and acting rudely toward someone at work. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how behavior perceived as bullying by a presidential candidate or office holder would induce similar behavior among the nation's adolescents. There might be multiple pathways of influence, and youth unfamiliar with presidential statements nevertheless might emulate family members and other adults in the community who have been influenced by presidential behavior. Furthermore, it seems likely that persons who share the president's views and supported his election would be most likely to echo his statements and attitudes in their own behavior.

The presidential election triggered a multitude of media activities. For example, after the presidential election, a prominent hate website, *Daily Stormer*, encouraged its audience to make foreigners and persons wearing Islamic clothing feel unwanted and frightened (Williams & Medlock, 2017). There is evidence that Russian operatives used Facebook ads to amplify political divisions and engender conflict on controversial topics including race, immigration, and sexual minority rights (Byers, 2017). It is plausible that some of these efforts affected adolescents or adults who had influence on adolescents, especially their parents.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) suggests that individuals learn behaviors by imitating others and behaviors are likely to persist when rewarded. Although statements by President Trump might directly encourage bullying attitudes and behaviors among students (Samaha et al., 2017), it does not seem plausible that large numbers of school-age youth were closely following the president's statements. It seems more likely that there are multiple indirect effects and intermediate steps in the causal chain from campaign rhetoric and presidential statements to the activities of supporting organizations and others who share the president's views. These effects are mediated by social and news media attention and, in turn, lead to the behavior of parents and other adults who have direct contact with youth. Children may be using coarse, racially charged language (learned from televised campaign rallies) to taunt their classmates (Fisher, 2016); and "if the president can say those things, why can't they?" (Samaha et al., 2017). However, the acceptability of such language used in the campaigns differed by political party, with 66% of Democrats finding the rhetoric used in the campaigns as "repulsive" compared to 37% of Republicans (George Washington University Battleground Poll [GWUBP], 2016). In addition, 29% of Republicans felt that the language used during the presidential campaign was "not a big deal," compared to 18% of Democrats (GWUBP, 2016). This suggests that the influence of the President's statements might differ substantially based on the student's immediate environment. Students residing in areas that are predominantly Republican might be expected to hear more support and emulation of the president.

In addition to the complex network of effects that might encourage bullying, there were many who were critical of the president's statements and their actions in support of targeted groups such as immigrants or minorities might reduce his impact. Consequently, we anticipated that students residing in localities where presidential candidate Trump was supported

would have the most exposure to statements and behaviors that encouraged bullying compared to areas where he was not supported. Furthermore, we expected that the election of President Trump would incite celebratory activity and more active emulation of his rhetoric in localities where he won compared to localities where he did not win. For these reasons, we hypothesized that there would be higher rates of bullying among students attending schools in localities that supported candidate Trump than in localities that did not support candidate Trump.

The Current Study

The state of Virginia administered a statewide school climate survey to seventh- and eighth-grade students in the spring of 2013, 2015, and 2017 (with Grades 9–12 surveyed in alternate years). Of particular interest were the items that measured the prevalence of teasing and bullying. The fortuitous timing of the survey made it possible to examine differences in teasing and bullying rates before and after the 2016 presidential election. The phrase “teasing and bullying” is used broadly in recognition that there are various forms of peer aggression and that student reports do not necessarily conform to an academic definition of bullying. The items covered teasing about clothing or physical appearance, race or ethnicity, sexual topics, sexual orientation, and bullying (Konold et al., 2014). We had particular interest in items concerned with teasing about race/ethnicity and sexual orientation because campaign rhetoric raised concern about presidential attitudes toward racial/ethnic and gender minorities.

In order to investigate possible campaign/election effects, we tested whether differences in student reports of teasing and bullying in 2017 were associated with voter preference for the Republican candidate in the school locality. Virginia public school divisions are organized to serve entire counties or cities, which can be matched with voting results. Virginia provides a good sample for analysis because voter preferences varied widely across the state, ranging from 10.6% to 82.3% in support of the Republican presidential candidate. In 2016, Virginia election poll results were 49.9% (1.92 million votes) for the Democratic candidate and 45.0% (1.73 million votes) for the Republican candidate. We hypothesized that, in areas favoring the Republican candidate, teasing and bullying would be higher in 2017 while controlling for prior prevalence rates, socioeconomic status (SES), population density, and the percentage of White student enrollment.

Data and Methods

Data Source

In the spring of 2013, 2015, and 2017, seventh- and eighth-grade public school students ($n_{2013} = 43,805$, $n_{2015} = 60,695$, $n_{2017} = 62,844$) completed the Authoritative School Climate (ASC) Survey as part of Virginia’s school safety audit program (Cornell et al., 2016).¹ Nearly all (97%) eligible schools with seventh- and eighth-grade students participated, with student participation rates exceeding 80% in all years. Alternative schools, schools that dealt primarily with a special needs

population, and juvenile detention centers were not included. The high school-level response rates were achieved through the help of the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services who encouraged participation.

Students completed an online Qualtrics survey supervised by teachers or staff who provided students with a standard set of instructions. Surveys were completed from February to April. The survey was anonymous and consisted of approximately 100 items related to school climate, demographic information, and scales related to school bullying and student victimization. Completed surveys were screened using two checks for response validity. First, students were asked two screening items: “I am telling the truth on this survey” and “How many of the questions did you answer truthfully?” Students who responded that they were not telling the truth or that they answered only some, a few, or none of the items truthfully were excluded from the sample (i.e., 5.9%–9.0% of the respondents). Second, surveys that were completed in an unreasonably short amount of time (i.e., ~ 6 minutes), based on the minimum times of survey testers who attempted to complete the survey as quickly as possible, were excluded (i.e., 0.3%–1.1% of respondents). This validity screening procedure has been shown to improve the overall quality of adolescent survey data (Cornell, Klein, Konold, & Huang, 2012), including bullying victimization rates (Jia, Konold, Cornell, & Huang, 2018). Inattentive or careless responders in Internet-based surveys have been shown to reduce reliability estimates (Johnson, 2005); respondents on the low end of completion time distribution can be considered careless responders (Meade & Bartholomew, 2012). The final analytic sample, less invalid respondents, consisted of 39,364 students in 2013, 56,508 students in 2015, and 58,908 students in 2017.

All students were eligible to participate except those unable to complete the survey as a result of a disability or because of limited English proficiency. Schools were given two options for sampling students to provide administrators the flexibility to choose a more or less comprehensive form of assessing school climate: (a) invite all students to complete the survey, or (b) use a provided random number list to select at least 25 students at each grade level to participate. To account for the uneven selection probabilities in the analyses, responses were weighted based on the inverse of the student’s probability of selection at the school.

Based on the 2017 survey, 50% of the participants reported that they were White, 16% Black, 14% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 14% identified as other or two or more races/ethnicities. State records for student enrollment are based on parental reports and indicate a similar distribution: 59% White, 21% Black, 11% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 5% identified as two or more races/ethnicities. In the survey sample, students were somewhat more likely to self-report membership in the other or two or more races category and less likely to report being White or Black in comparison to school enrollment records. It was not possible to determine whether the differences were due to sampling differences or differences in how students and parents reported racial/ethnic membership. However, the latter explanation is more likely as the race/ethnicity breakdown was consistent for all survey years.

Measures

Dependent variables. Students responded anonymously to five items on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying (PTB) scale: “Students in this school are teased about their clothing or physical appearance”; “Bullying is a problem at this school”; “Students in this school are teased or put down because of their race or ethnicity”; “There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics in this school”; and “Students in this school are teased or put down about their sexual orientation.” Each item was answered on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The rationale for this approach is to obtain a broader assessment of peer aggression that is not limited to the term *bullying* and avoid the potential biases and defensiveness that can be aroused when students are asked to admit that they are victims of bullying (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013). There is strong support for the PTB scale in four previous factor analytic studies (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012; Konold & Cornell, 2015; Konold et al., 2014). A study of a statewide sample of 39,364 students (Grades 7 and 8) attending 423 schools (Konold et al., 2014) demonstrated the usefulness of these items for measuring the PTB construct at both the student and school level through multilevel modeling. Multilevel confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated good fit at both the student and school level, revealed all items to yield appreciable loadings for students ($> .69$) and schools ($> .81$), and demonstrated reliability estimates of .79 and .88 at the student and school levels ($M = 12.62$, $SD = 1.16$, Range = 8.42–15.62), respectively. PTB has been found to be predictive of school-wide discipline problems (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009), student engagement in schools (Mehta et al., 2013), and high school dropout rates (Cornell et al., 2013). For the current study, the individual items were examined because of particular interest in different types of peer aggression, especially teasing that targeted race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. Weighted student responses were aggregated to the school division level to represent the percentage of students who agreed (i.e., *agree* and *strongly agree*) with each of the statements.

As part of the survey, students also responded to a bullying victimization scale that has demonstrated good reliability and validity in middle school grades (Baly & Cornell, 2011; Baly, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2014; Branson & Cornell, 2009; Lee & Cornell, 2009). Prior to answering questions about bullying victimization experiences, students were presented with a standard description of bullying, derived from the widely used definition of Olweus (1996). We shortened the original definition but retained the key elements of repetition, intention, and power imbalance.

Use this definition of bullying to answer the questions below. Bullying is the repeated use of one’s strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is not bullying when two students who are about the same in strength or popularity have a fight or argument.

Students were then asked whether they had been physically, verbally, socially, or cyber bullied in the past year. A 4-point scale was used to assess prevalence: *never*, *once or twice*, *about once per week*, *more than once per month*. Following the guidelines of Solberg and Olweus (2003) that considered the frequency of being victimized, students who were bullied at least once a week or more in any modality were considered bully victims, and responses were aggregated to the school division level representing the proportion of students bullied ($M_{2017} = .17$, $SD_{2017} = .04$). Prevalence rates were comparable to national estimates (19.0%) in the same time period (Kann et al., 2018).

Independent variable. The percentage of voters supporting the Republican presidential candidate in each school division (county or city in Virginia) was used ($M = .45$, $SD = .16$). Two forms of the independent variable were investigated: The first was a continuous measure of the percentage voting for the Republican candidate, and the second was a dichotomous measure that indicated whether the Republican candidate won (1 = Republican majority) or lost (0 = Democratic majority) in the locality. Data were retrieved from the Internet.² The Republican candidate won in 94 out of 132 school divisions representing approximately 45% of voters.

Covariates. We examined teasing and bullying rates while controlling for prior teasing and bullying rates; the percentage of White student enrollment in the school division; population density;³ and two indicators of SES: the percentage of students from low-income families, as measured by the percentage eligible for free or reduced price meals (FRPM), and the percentage of students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher (see Figure 1). In a nationally representative study, race/ethnicity was found to be a predictor of bullying involvement (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007). Controlling for the prevalence of White voters and parental education level (Silver, 2016) were important because of their strong relations with the percentage of Republican supporters in each division.⁴ Confounding variables, which are associated with both the dependent and independent variables, need to be included in the statistical models to avoid reporting spurious relationships. The percentage of White students enrolled ($M_{2017} = .50$, $SD_{2017} = .20$) and the percentage of students eligible for FRPM ($M_{2017} = .42$, $SD_{2017} = .19$) were retrieved from the Virginia Department of Education website for the appropriate school years.

In addition, the population density at the school division level (inhabitants per square mile) was based on the intercensal estimates by locality from the Weldon Cooper Demographics Research Group.⁵ The land area of the school divisions was taken from the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau.⁶ Although the U.S. Census Bureau had population density figures as of 2010, we wanted to use more recent figures. The Weldon Cooper numbers are updated on an annual basis, and the two data sources, for 2010, were correlated at $r = .99+$. Given the skewed nature of the population density estimates (range = 6 to 10,693 inhabitants per square mile, mean = 879, median = 102,

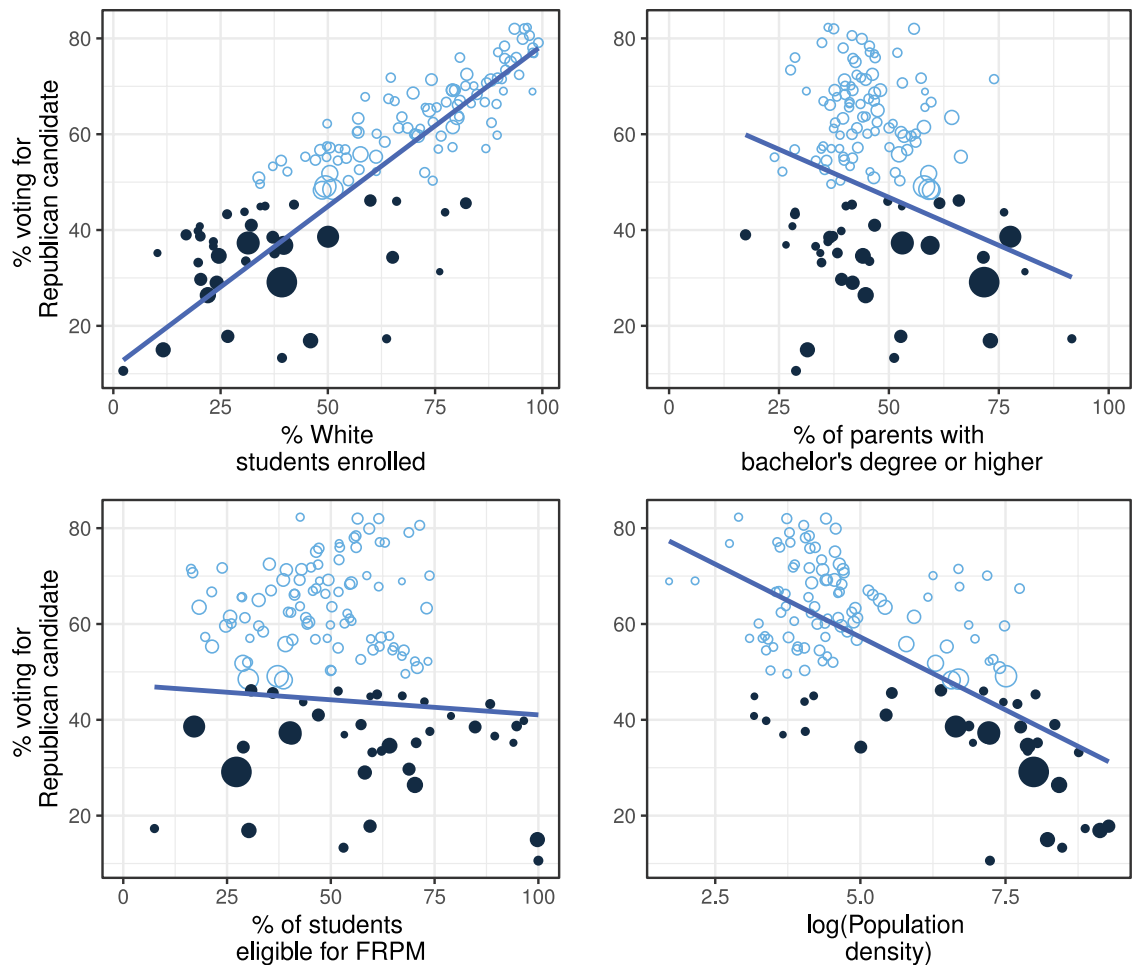


FIGURE 1. *The association of school division demographic characteristics (in 2017) with the percentage voting for the Republican presidential candidate (n = 132).*

Note. FRPM = free or reduced price meals. Size of circles weighted by student enrollment size. Clear circles represent divisions won by the Republican candidate and filled circles represent divisions won by the Democratic candidate.

skewness = 3.25), the numbers were log transformed in the analysis.

In the ASC survey, respondents were asked, “How far did your mother, father, or guardian go in school? (Pick the one who went the farthest).” Response options included: *did not graduate from high school, graduated from high school, graduated from a two-year college or technical school, graduated from a four year college, and completed post-graduate studies after graduating from a four-year college.* The percentage of parents graduating from a 4-year college or higher was used as covariate for parental education ($M_{2017} = .55, SD_{2017} = .13$). Parental education levels and neighborhood SES are known to be associated with bullying involvement (Jansen et al., 2012). All weighted descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Data Management Procedures

Virginia public schools are organized into 132 school divisions, with each division serving an entire county or city. Election polling results mapped neatly within the school divisions with few exceptions.⁷ Data from the school climate

surveys and Virginia Department of Education administrative records were merged by school division and by year. Election results in 2016 were combined with the main dataset by school division. Data management was performed using R 3.4 (R Core Team, 2017).

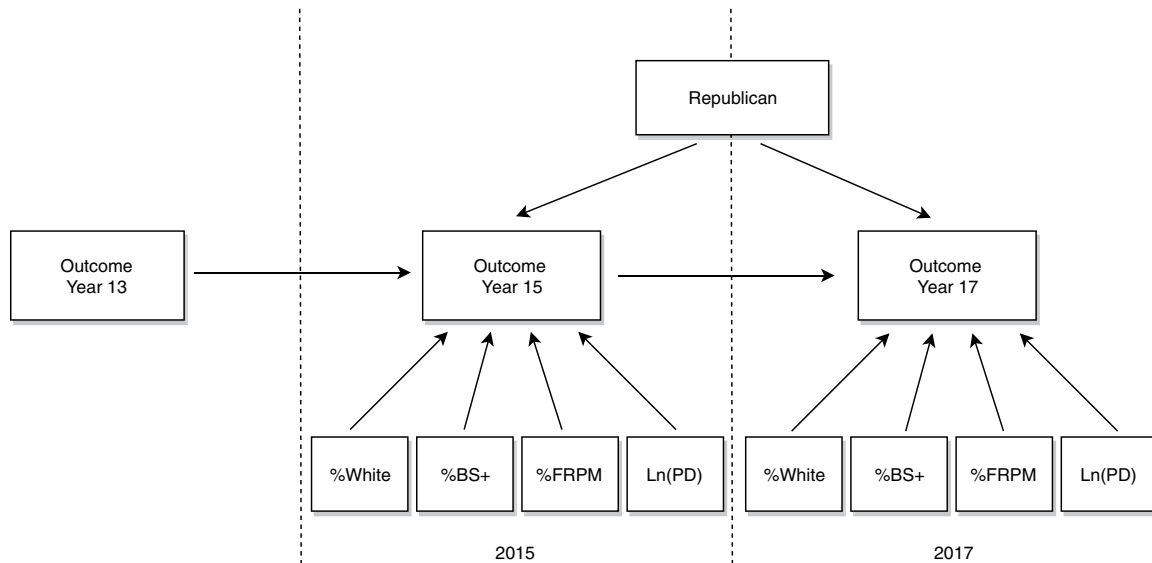
Analytic Strategy

In order to test whether there were differences in the teasing and bullying prevalence rates in the school divisions based on voter preferences for the Republican candidate, we used path analyses, or structural equation modeling with observed variables, with the school division as the unit of analysis ($n = 132$). The hypothesized structural model is presented in Figure 2 and had two endogenous variables: the teasing and bullying outcomes in 2017 and 2015. Path analyses use a series of regressions based on the number of endogenous variables but allow all parameter estimates and standard errors to be computed in one overall model (i.e., per outcome, one model is estimated instead of two separate models). In general, each endogenous variable was estimated using the following specification:

Table 1
Descriptives (n = 132 School Divisions)

	2013		2015		2017	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Prevalence rates						
Bullied in school this year	.182	.033	.162	.038	.167	.043
PTB items						
Teased about clothing/appearance	.684	.111	.684	.108	.685	.102
Teasing about sexual topics	.523	.069	.506	.071	.564	.058
Teased or put down about sexual orientation	.382	.083	.347	.087	.365	.085
Teased or put down because of race/ ethnicity	.366	.065	.353	.067	.357	.060
Bullying is a problem	.500	.101	.464	.120	.450	.124
% voting for Republican candidate					.447	.161
% White students enrolled	.529	.207	.513	.207	.497	.204
% of parents with bachelor's degree or higher	.540	.142	.540	.138	.553	.135
% of students eligible for FRPM	.399	.158	.417	.173	.418	.187
Population density ^a	856	1,629	874	1,689	879	1,707

Note. PTB = prevalence of teasing and bullying scale items; FRPM = free or reduced price meals. Weighted by school enrollment size per school division. ^aMeasured as number of inhabitants per square mile, unweighted.



Outcomes

- Bullying prevalence (i.e., physically, socially, verbally, cyber-bullied)
- Students in this school are teased or put down because of their race or ethnicity
- There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics in this school
- Students in this school are teased or put down about their sexual orientation
- Students in this school are teased about their clothing or physical appearance
- Bullying is a problem at this school

FIGURE 2. Hypothesized path model.

Note. %BS+ = percent of parents with bachelor's degree or higher. %FRPM = percent eligible for free or reduced price meals. %White = percent of White students enrolled in the school division. Ln(PD) = log of population density.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{REPUBLICAN} + \beta_2 \text{PRIOR} + \beta_3 \% \text{FRPM} + \beta_4 \% \text{BS} + \beta_5 \% \text{White} + \beta_6 \ln(\text{popDensity}) + \varepsilon,$$

where *Y* represented the individual PTB items (e.g., the prevalence rate of teasing in the school division due to race/ethnicity) or the bullying victimization prevalence rate in the corresponding

school year, *REPUBLICAN* represented either the continuous percentage of voters supporting the Republican candidate or a dummy-coded variable indicating whether the Republican candidate won or lost (1 vs. 0), *PRIOR* was the prior corresponding outcome, and ε represented the stochastic error term. The four covariates were the percentage of White students enrolled, percentage eligible for FRPM, percentage of parents with a bachelor's

degree or higher, and the log population density. The covariates (i.e., %White, %FRPM, %BS, popDensity) were each measured in the corresponding year of interest.

The predictor variable of interest was analyzed both as a continuous and as a binary variable in separate models. Both forms of the predictor are meaningful, and the correlation between the dichotomous and continuous form of the predictor variable was high, $r = .84$. For interpretability, when analyzing the predictor of interest as a continuous variable (i.e., percentage voting for the Republican candidate), the bullying/teasing variables (i.e., the outcomes and the pretest measures) were log transformed. By doing so, the coefficient for the predictor has the straightforward interpretation that a 1 point increase in X is associated with an $\exp(B) - 1$ percentage change in Y (as rates were expected to increase). When analyzing the predictor as a binary variable (i.e., the Republican candidate won or lost in the school division), the outcomes were left untransformed so that the coefficient for the dummy-coded predictor represented the adjusted percentage point differences in teasing/bullying rates.

Models used maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors using Mplus 6.1 (Muthen & Muthen, 2011).⁸ The individual models were based on analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) models, which are commonly used when investigating adjusted mean differences between groups while controlling for a baseline measure (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Although path models are often presented using standardized coefficients in order to interpret indirect effects, variables were left unstandardized to allow for the straightforward interpretation.

Several indices were consulted to assess model fit of the path analytic models (Kline, 2011). As a stand-alone measure of model fit, χ^2 was assessed and a nonstatistically significant χ^2 (i.e., $p > .05$) was indicative of good model fit (Byrne, 2012). Additional indices were also considered: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the comparative fit index (CFI). For RMSEA, values $\leq .10$ are considered reasonable (Fan, Thompson, & Wang, 1999), and the latter two measures ranged from 0.0 to 1.0 with values at or greater than .90 suggestive of better fitting models (Hu & Bentler, 1995).

All analyses were weighted by the student enrollment size of the school division. Weighting was necessary because some school divisions were extremely small (e.g., Highland County with approximately 200 students), and others were extremely large (e.g., Fairfax County, the 10th largest school division in the United States with 185,000 students). The correlation between the number of students in the school division and the total number of voters for the Republican and Democratic candidate was $r = .98$.

We hypothesized that the *REPUBLICAN* variable would be a statistically significant predictor of 2017 outcomes. We hypothesized that rates of teasing and bullying would be higher in localities favoring the Republican candidate and would warrant a unidirectional test; however, we adopted a more conservative two-tailed test. We also tested if the *REPUBLICAN* variable was associated with adjusted prevalence rates in 2015 (prior to the elections) within the same model. If differences were present prior to the election, this suggests that differences in bullying/

teasing rates in 2017 were preexisting and not necessarily a result of the election.

Other forms of analyses were also taken into account. Multilevel modeling was considered where schools were nested within divisions, but 61 school divisions (out of 132) had only one school with seventh- and eighth-grade students, thereby confounding school- and division-level effects. Because the outcome variables were prevalence rates, we also considered beta regression (Smithson & Verkuilen, 2006); however, for all models, residuals were normally distributed, robust standard errors were used, and ceiling/floor effects were not present. Yet another model considered was a repeated measures between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) (i.e., a split plot or difference-in-difference models), but this approach answers a different research question and has less power to detect effects given our limited sample size, which is based on the 132 school divisions (Frison & Pocock, 1992; McKenzie, 2012).

Results

Using a Continuous Predictor Variable

Results were first analyzed using the percentage of voters⁹ supporting the Republican candidate as the predictor of interest. Model fit indices for the path analyses were inspected and all χ^2 values were not statistically significant (all $ps > .05$), indicating good model fit (see Table 2). As part of regression diagnostics, the variance inflation factor (VIF) of the predictor variable was inspected for multicollinearity. Results indicated that VIFs for the models with the continuous predictor of interest were extremely high and ranged from 8.1 to 9.9. The high VIFs seriously decrease the power of the model to detect effects and make finding statistically significant results difficult due to highly inflated standard errors (Allison, 2012).

Nevertheless, for the outcome, "Students in this school are teased or put down because of their race or ethnicity" in 2017 (see Table 3), the percentage voting for the Republican candidate was a statistically significant predictor ($B = .005, p = .01$) while controlling for all other variables in the model. A 10 percentage point increase in voters supporting the Republican candidate was associated with a 5% change in teasing because of race/ethnicity (i.e., $\exp[10 \times .005] - 1$). In addition, for being bullied in school this year, the coefficient for the percentage voting for the Republican candidate was also notable ($B = .008, p = .08$). A 10 percentage point increase in voters supporting the Republican candidate was associated with an 8% change in bullying victimization.

Using a Dichotomous Predictor

Using a dichotomous predictor is also meaningful (i.e., the Republican candidate won or lost in the locality) because elections are determined on a binary basis: The individual with the most votes, by any margin, is declared the winner. As a result of some covariates being highly correlated, VIFs were high (i.e., the percentage of students eligible for FRPM and the percentage of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher both had VIFs ~ 5.0). However, the higher VIFs were for the covariates but not for the predictor variable of interest ($VIF_{REPUBLICAN} \sim 2$ to 3) and, thus,

Table 2
Path Model Fit Statistics

Outcome	$\chi^2(df = 9)$	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Continuous predictor					
Teased about clothing/physical appearance	14.13	.12	.99	.99	.07
Bullying is a problem	11.70	.23	.99	.99	.05
Teasing about sexual topics	13.04	.16	.98	.94	.06
Teased or put down about sexual orientation	10.13	.34	1.00	.99	.03
Teased or put down because of race/ethnicity	16.42	.06	.96	.90	.08
Bullied in school this year	5.96	.74	1.00	1.00	.00
Dichotomous predictor					
Teased about clothing/physical appearance	20.97	.01*	.99	.97	.10
Bullying is a problem	16.10	.06	.98	.96	.08
Teasing about sexual topics	13.21	.15	.97	.94	.06
Teased or put down about sexual orientation	11.57	.24	.99	.98	.05
Teased or put down because of race/ethnicity	13.63	.14	.97	.93	.06
Bullied in school this year	8.92	.44	1.00	1.00	.00

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

* $p < .05$.

was not as problematic (Allison, 2012) in contrast to when the predictor was a continuous variable ($VIF_{\text{REPUBLICAN}} \sim 8$ to 10). Model fit indices for the six path analyses using the dichotomous predictor are presented in Table 2. All alternative fit indices were reasonable (Fan et al., 1999), and all models (except for one) had χ^2 values that were not statistically significant ($p > .05$), which is indicative of good model fit.

Results for the six path analyses are presented in Table 4. The 2017 prevalence rate differences for four of the six outcomes, while controlling for 2015 measures—the percentage of White students enrolled, level of parental education, population density, and the percentage of students eligible for FRPM—were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Specifically, covariate adjusted rates were higher in areas where the Republican candidate won for the following outcomes: bullied in school this year ($p < .001$), teasing or put down because of their race/ethnicity ($p < .01$), teasing about sexual topics ($p = .027$), and teasing about sexual orientation ($p = .035$). The coefficients can be interpreted as the percentage point difference of teasing and bullying in the localities where the Republican candidate won versus lost (i.e., .031 indicates that teasing due to race was 3 percentage points higher in school divisions where the Republican candidate won).

For all of the 2015 outcomes, the differences in adjusted prevalence rates were, for the most part, not practically meaningful between the school divisions based on the two groups of interest. However, adjusted rates of teasing about sexual orientation were approximately 3.4% higher already in 2015 in the localities where the Republican candidate won ($p = .06$). In addition, when analyzed using the continuous predictor, the percentage voting for the Republican candidate was statistically significant ($p < .01$) for teasing due to sexual orientation. Results indicate that differences in 2017 for teasing due to sexual orientation were already present in 2015 and may not be a direct result of the elections.

Comparing Both Sets of Analyses

Using both the continuous and the dichotomous forms of the predictor, teasing due to race/ethnicity and being bullied in school this year showed more consistent results in both sets of analyses. The effect sizes, using the dichotomous predictor and based on standardized mean differences of the 2017 prevalence rates, can be considered moderate to large in size (i.e., $d_{\text{bullying}} = .72$, $d_{\text{race}} = .52$). However, to place this in context, the adjusted bullying prevalence rates in 2017 where the Republican candidate won was 19.9% compared to 16.8% where the Democratic candidate won (higher by approximately 18% or $[19.9/16.8] - 1$). For teasing because of race/ethnicity ($M_{\text{rep}} = 37.1$ vs. $M_{\text{dem}} = 33.9$), adjusted rates were higher by approximately 9%. The difference in adjusted prevalence rates can also be considered in the context that antibullying programs have been shown to reduce bullying victimization by approximately 20% (Tofsi & Farrington, 2011). A visual display of the adjusted differences for each of the outcomes by year is shown in Figure 3. Although teasing about sexual topics was higher in areas where the Republican candidate won in 2017, the relationship was negligible when using the continuous predictor.

Discussion

Our findings lend modest support for educator concerns about student teasing and bullying in the year following the presidential election. We found meaningful and statistically significant differences in spring 2017 for student reports of being bullied, as well as student observations of teasing about race/ethnicity at their school, that were associated with voter preference for the Republican candidate. Specifically, students reported a higher prevalence of being bullied and were more likely to report observing that their peers were teased or put down because of their race or ethnicity. The differences in rates compared localities where the Republican presidential candidate received more

Table 3
Path Analyses Results Using 2017 and 2015 Outcomes (n = 132 School Divisions)
With a Continuous Predictor

Variable	2017 Outcomes (Postelection)					
	Teased About Clothing/ Physical Appearance	Bullying Is a Problem	Teasing About Sexual Topics	Teased About Sexual Orientation	Teased Because of Race/Ethnicity	Bullied in School This Year
% voting for Republican candidate	.000 (.001)	.002 (.002)	.001 (.001)	.004 (.003)	.005* (.002)	.008+ (.004)
Prior measure (2015)	.722*** (.063)	.713*** (.098)	.443*** (.063)	.582*** (.065)	.272*** (.068)	.229* (.108)
% with BS+	-.099 (.103)	.018 (.196)	.139 (.156)	.274 (.232)	-.148 (.178)	-.195 (.351)
% FRPM	-.015 (.058)	.257* (.130)	.037 (.096)	.271+ (.156)	.044 (.134)	.386+ (.227)
% White	-.121 (.093)	-.263+ (.147)	-.214** (.082)	-.329 (.215)	-.655*** (.144)	-.142 (.315)
Log(popDensity)	-.014* (.006)	-.040*** (.011)	-.007 (.009)	-.035** (.013)	-.007 (.013)	.003 (.021)
R ²	.82	.84	.38	.71	.52	.45

Variable	2015 Outcomes (Pre-Election)					
	Teased About Clothing/ Physical Appearance	Bullying Is a Problem	Teasing About Sexual Topics	Teased About Sexual Orientation	Teased Because of Race/Ethnicity	Bullied in School This Year
% voting for Republican candidate	.001 (.001)	.002 (.002)	.001 (.002)	.006* (.003)	.001 (.002)	.005 (.003)
Prior measure (2013)	.748*** (.074)	.745*** (.087)	.540*** (.077)	.569*** (.095)	.321*** (.079)	.224+ (.133)
% with BS+	-.216+ (.118)	-.376 (.249)	-.342+ (.198)	-.392 (.349)	-.432+ (.242)	-.230 (.507)
% FRPM	.034 (.075)	.385* (.165)	.061 (.134)	.370+ (.207)	.148 (.185)	.486 (.338)
% White	.019 (.086)	.104 (.144)	.081 (.123)	-.072 (.221)	-.104 (.181)	-.064 (.189)
Log(popDensity)	.008 (.009)	.022 (.016)	.025* (.012)	.044* (.021)	.048** (.015)	.020 (.024)
R ²	.85	.84	.52	.68	.48	.39

Note. All outcomes and prior measures are log transformed for interpretability. FRPM = free or reduced price meals. % with BS+ = percentage of parents with bachelor's degree or higher. % White = percentage of White students enrolled in the school division. Analyses weighted by student enrollment size in the school division. Robust standard errors in parentheses. The variance inflation factors (VIF) for the % voting for Republican candidate ranged from 8.1 to 9.9.

+*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

votes with localities where the Democratic candidate received more votes. The differences between these two groups of localities were found in the spring 2017 survey after accounting for spring 2015 prevalence rates.

Although the national YRBS results indicated no change in high school bullying prevalence between years 2017 and 2015 (Kann et al., 2018), those results do not necessarily contradict our findings. If prevalence rates increased in some localities but decreased in others, there might be no overall change. Figure 3 shows this pattern for teasing due to race/ethnicity and for being bullied in school this year where rates increased in areas where the Republican candidate won and decreased where the Republican candidate lost.

An increase in teasing and bullying is a serious problem because of the deleterious effects both on victims and the general

student body. Direct victims of bullying experience a decline in school engagement and achievement, social-emotional difficulties, and increased risk of long-term mental health problems (Hong & Espelage, 2012; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). In addition, there are indirect effects on the general student body because teasing and bullying typically occur in a group context with multiple peer observers (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Students may be distressed about the hostility directed toward their friends and classmates, and they may be anxious that they are prospective targets. Furthermore, teasing one student about his or her race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation affects other students who have the same characteristic. Students who find school to be a hostile environment are going to be wary, uncomfortable, and less engaged in school. Consequently, it is not surprising that schools with a higher prevalence of teasing and bullying have

Table 4
Path Analyses Results Using 2017 and 2015 Outcomes (n = 132 School Divisions)
With a Dichotomous Predictor

Variable	2017 Outcomes (Postelection)					
	Teased About Clothing/Physical Appearance	Bullying Is a Problem	Teasing About Sexual Topics	Teased About Sexual Orientation	Teased Because of Race/Ethnicity	Bullied in School This Year
Republican (1 = won)	.011 (.014)	.022 (.019)	.025* (.011)	.032* (.015)	.031** (.011)	.031*** (.008)
Prior measure (2015)	.715*** (.063)	.697*** (.078)	.515*** (.070)	.644*** (.060)	.291*** (.078)	.212* (.101)
% with BS ⁺	-.076 (.063)	.024 (.077)	.076 (.087)	.058 (.081)	-.077 (.059)	-.022 (.065)
% FRPM	-.006 (.041)	.135* (.061)	.027 (.054)	.080 (.055)	.027 (.044)	.085* (.039)
% White	-.085* (.039)	-.115* (.045)	-.110** (.038)	-.088* (.042)	-.171*** (.036)	.000 (.026)
Log(popDensity)	-.010* (.004)	-.020*** (.004)	-.005 (.005)	-.015** (.005)	-.006 (.005)	-.001 (.004)
R ²	.82	.84	.42	.72	.55	.50
2015 Outcomes (Pre-Election)						
Republican (1 = won)	.009 (.016)	.013 (.018)	.004 (.015)	.034 ⁺ (.018)	-.007 (.016)	.011 (.008)
Prior measure (2013)	.744*** (.073)	.616*** (.085)	.484*** (.076)	.406*** (.086)	.311*** (.078)	.200 ⁺ (.109)
% with BS ⁺	-.142* (.068)	-.151 (.107)	-.183* (.088)	-.143 (.096)	-.170* (.080)	-.059 (.067)
% FRPM	.019 (.054)	.207* (.094)	.029 (.069)	.147* (.072)	.048 (.066)	.069 (.054)
% White	.013 (.042)	.045 (.052)	.059 (.048)	.025 (.055)	.001 (.047)	.009 (.025)
Log(popDensity)	.005 (.005)	.005 (.006)	.010 ⁺ (.006)	.009 (.006)	.015** (.005)	.001 (.004)
R ²	.85	.81	.50	.64	.49	.39

Note. Republican indicates if the Republican candidate won (1) or lost (0) in the locality. All variables unstandardized. FRPM = free or reduced price meals. % with BS+ = percentage of parents with bachelor's degree or higher. % White = percentage of White students enrolled in the school division. Analyses weighted by student enrollment size in the school division. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

⁺p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

lower levels of academic engagement, lower school passing rates on standardized tests, and higher dropout rates (Cornell et al., 2013; Lacey & Cornell, 2013; Mehta et al., 2013).

In the past 20 years, bullying has become an important legal and policy concern in American schools (Cornell & Limber, 2015). In 1999, two events brought attention to the problem of school bullying. First, the shooting at Columbine High School, along with several other high-profile school shootings, were characterized as acts of revenge against bullying that schools had neglected to address (Fein et al., 2002). Second, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999) that schools could be found liable under Title IX for failure to stop student-on-student sexual harassment when it was sufficiently severe. Since 1999, schools throughout the country have initiated antibullying

programs, and every state has passed antibullying legislation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

In 2010, a "Dear Colleague" letter from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Education (2010) cautioned schools that bullying can have broader legal significance when it involves race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, national origin, or disability status. When bullying in one of these categories is sufficiently severe or pervasive that it interferes with the student's ability to benefit from the school's educational services, it constitutes a civil rights violation. Schools receiving federal funding are obligated by law to respond to incidents of harassment and, more broadly, to "eliminate any hostile environment and its effects" and to take steps to prevent the harassment from recurring (pp. 2–3).

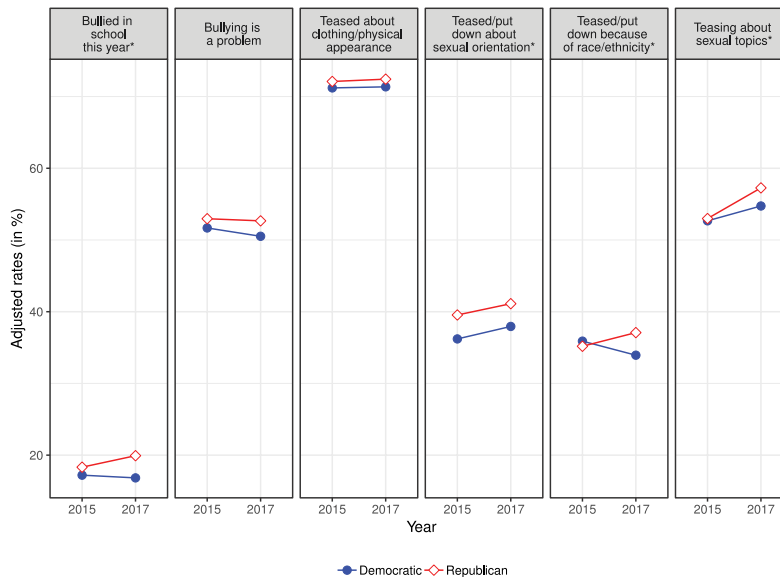


FIGURE 3. Adjusted prevalence rates for student-reported bullying victimization and Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying scale items, comparing school divisions where the Republican candidate received more versus fewer votes than the Democratic candidate.

Note. Prevalence rates were adjusted for prior outcome measures, percent of White students enrolled, percent of parents in the school division with a bachelor's degree or higher, percent of students eligible for free or reduced price meals, and population density. All results were weighted by student enrollment size in the school division.

*Differences between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < .05$) in 2017.

There is general agreement that schools can reduce bullying and harassment by a combination of universal and targeted efforts to improve school climate (Hong, Espelage, & Lee, 2018). Universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been found to increase positive peer interactions and reduce peer aggression such as bullying (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). In addition, there are specific antibullying programs that demonstrate modest effectiveness (Limber, Olweus, Wang, Masiello, & Breivik, 2018; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides a multitiered approach to student behavior that can improve school climate and facilitate bullying prevention efforts (Bradshaw, 2013). Finally, multicultural education programs (Banks, 2015; Manning, Baruth, & Lee, 2017) might be an avenue for increasing understanding and acceptance of individual differences that reduces the kinds of bullying and teasing elevated in this study.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

These findings are correlational and cannot establish a causal relationship but invite the need for further study. Perhaps the simplest design is to conduct an experimental study to investigate how exposure to presidential statements directly affects student behavior. Six decades of research have found that exposure of children and adolescents to media violence has an effect on aggressive attitudes and aggressive behavior (Anderson, Bushman, Donnerstein, Hummer, & Warburton, 2015). For example, a classic study found that boys randomly assigned to watch a violent film were more aggressive in playing floor hockey

at school (Josephson, 1987). More recent studies have found that violent video games promote aggressive attitudes and behavior, whereas prosocial video games have the opposite effects (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014). It might be possible to expose a randomly selected group of students to news reports that vary the dosage of presidential statements that are hypothesized to promote aggressive attitudes and bullying behavior and then to track incidents of bullying and teasing.

A more realistic hypothesis is that presidential behavior has indirect effects on the social environment experienced by students. It would be informative, albeit difficult, to measure the accumulated effects of students' exposure to adults endorsing or emulating presidential behavior, such as making statements that disparage minorities, immigrants, and women. The prevalence of these actions could be compared across localities and linked to voting outcomes. Because a comprehensive assessment is not practical, indirect methods such as the analysis of data on television viewing and Internet use might be informative.


It is also possible that teasing and bullying has not changed as much in prevalence as in content. Bullies may have switched from standard taunts and hurtful jibes to election-related taunts and jibes that draw more attention. Williams and Medlock (2017) asserted that election campaigns can have both positive and negative public health effects. For example, the election of minority candidates has been associated with increased feelings of well-being and pride among minority citizens. Williams and Medlock reported that the election of President Obama had mixed effects—leading many White Americans to believe that racism had been overcome in the United States and, at the same time, stimulating an increase in anti-Obama racial animosity in social media.

The timeframe for this study conveniently bracketed the presidential campaign and election, but measurement at a few time points is not sufficient to pinpoint when changes in student aggression occurred. It is not possible to assess whether the hypothesized effects had peaked and started to diminish at the time of the spring 2017 survey or were maintaining an upward trend. Repeated assessment of bullying and teasing levels would provide a better indication of how public events are associated with student behavior and whether there are fluctuations after news attention to particular issues such as immigration policy, rights for sexual minorities, or controversy about White supremacist groups. There is provocative evidence that media coverage of certain events, such as suicides by public figures, is associated with copycat behavior by adolescents (Dill, Redding, Smith, Surette, & Cornell, 2011; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986). Forensic experts have repeatedly cautioned the news media about copycat crimes inspired by sensational reports of mass shootings; for example, a *Mother Jones* study identified 74 plots of shooting incidents by bullied or troubled students emulating the Columbine shooting (Follman & Andrews, 2015). A relatively new research strategy to illuminate the influence of both public statements and high-profile events is to examine Internet behavior such as Google searches in response to public events such as presidential speeches (Soltas & Stephens-Davidowitz, 2015).

This study was limited to an examination of prevalence rates for teasing and bullying, which does not encompass the range of potential negative (or positive) effects of the presidential election. We did not have measures of the quality and intensity of peer aggression or its impact on victims. Findings for simple prevalence might understate its impact on targeted students. For example, immigrant students who are teased about their ethnicity might be more distressed after the election because of the potential for changes in government policy that could affect their well-being or that of their family members. A prospective study could examine bullying incidents with more qualitative detail, including an assessment of their impact on victims and bystanders.

In conclusion, there is correlational evidence from a statewide sample of seventh- and eighth-grade students that, in 2017, some forms of teasing and bullying were higher in localities that supported the Republican presidential candidate. The differences in adjusted prevalence rates were present in 2017, but not in 2015 (prior to the elections). These differences were observed in school localities where voters favored the Republican candidate, whose public statements have been criticized in general as modeling bullying and in particular as expressing harsh and derogatory attitudes toward certain minority groups. Further research is needed to determine whether there is a causal link between presidential behavior and student peer aggression and what intervening variables may help explain the mechanism of this effect. Regardless of its origin, however, the prevalence of student teasing and bullying demands greater attention and intervention in our schools.

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NOTES

¹The survey, in its current format, was first administered statewide in 2013. In 2013 and 2015, the survey only included seventh- and eighth-grade students; but in 2017, sixth-grade students were added to the survey. In order to maintain consistency, this study used only surveys from seventh- and eighth-grade students.

²See <http://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/virginia/>. The largest percentage of votes from any school division for an independent party candidate was 4.7%.

³This was recommended by a reviewer.

⁴This is also referred to as the “diploma divide,” where non-college-educated White voters were more likely to support the Republican candidate (Harris, 2018).

⁵See https://demographics.coopercenter.org/sites/demographics/files/2018-01/VA-Intercensal-Estimates_2010-2017_UVA-CooperCenter.xls (published January 29, 2018).

⁶See <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-48.pdf>

⁷Separate polling data were available for Emporia City, Fairfax City, and James City, which were part of the school divisions of Greensville County, Fairfax County, and Williamsburg City, respectively. As a result, the electoral data were combined to match the appropriate school division. In addition, two small school divisions (Colonial Beach and West Point) did not have disaggregated polling results, so the polling data from their surrounding counties (Westmoreland County and King William County, respectively) were used. Colonial Beach had a population of 3,500 people with a total 570 K–12 students (<http://www.cbschools.net/>). In 2013, Westmoreland County Public Schools enrolled 761 K–12 students (<http://www.wpschools.net/business-and-finance-6b81a708>). A middle school in one school division (Nelson County) with only one school with seventh and eighth graders did not participate in the 2015 survey; so in the current analysis, 2013 data were used as a proxy for the 2015 data. In 2017, Southampton County, which had only one middle school, had only seven students in total respond to the school climate survey, all of whom indicated that they were not bullied. Instead, the 2015 bullying prevalence rate of 10.5% was used.

Population density estimates were based on a ratio of the population in the given year and the land area in square miles. Similar to the polling data, data for Emporia City, Fairfax City, and James City were combined with the corresponding city/county. Data for the Colonial Beach and West Point districts were downloaded from their respective school division websites and had one constant figure for the 3 years of analysis (because the year-by-year breakdown was not available).

⁸Models were also estimated using the lavaan 0.6-3 (Rosseel, 2012/2018) package in R, which showed the same coefficients and standard errors. Model fit indices, however, differed slightly.

⁹For interpretability of the regression coefficients, the variable was scaled from 0 to 100 instead of using 0.00 to 1.00.

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