

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politically Salient Events May Modulate Effects of Naturalistic Psychedelic Use on Support for Partisan Violence

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Abstract

Background: Previous research indicates that psychedelics may produce outcomes that are dependent on the immediate context. Recent scholarship hypothesizes that such outcomes may also depend on the broader sociocultural context, but empirical data are lacking.

Methods: Using a longitudinal observational research design with a large sample of US adults ($N = 21,990$) followed during a 2-month study period, we investigated associations between naturalistic psychedelic use on dates of politically salient events such as the Fourth of July (i.e., US Independence Day) and changes in support for partisan violence.

Results: Of the 21,990 participants who completed the survey at baseline, 12,345 completed the survey at follow-up. Among the participants who completed the survey at follow-up, 505 reported psychedelic use during the two-month study period, with 19 having had the most intense psychedelic experience on the Fourth of July and 486 having had the most intense psychedelic experience on another date. The primary analyses showed an association between having had the most intense psychedelic experience on the Fourth of July and decreased support for partisan violence, with exploratory analyses yielding a similar association for the date of the Trump assassination attempt. By contrast, other exploratory analyses showed that having had the most intense psychedelic experience on any of the dates of the national party conventions or on a date closer to Election Day was associated with increases in support for partisan violence.

Conclusions: Taken together, the results suggest that naturalistic psychedelic use on the Fourth of July and other dates of politically salient events may modulate support for partisan violence in directions that depend on the political nature of the events. While future replications are needed to validate these findings, it appears the broader sociocultural context could influence outcomes following naturalistic psychedelic use.

Keywords: psychedelics, hallucinogens, violence, risks, political, context

Introduction

There have been notable acts of political violence in the United States (US) in recent years. For example, the former US House Majority Whip Stephen Scalise (R-La.) and three other people were injured on June 14, 2017, in a shooting that targeted Republican members of the

congressional baseball team. Other acts of political violence have occurred since then,¹ including the attack on the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, by more than a thousand individuals in an attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election results. The individuals involved in the attack were primarily supporters of Donald Trump,²

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who himself survived two assassination attempts (July 13, 2024; September 15, 2024) during his 2024 presidential campaign.³ Such acts of political violence represent a small minority of violent hate crimes in the US,⁴ but support for political violence has, by some estimates, become relatively high.⁵ For instance, in a nationally representative cohort survey of the US adult population conducted in 2023, approximately one-in-four respondents considered violence to be usually or always justified to advance specific political objectives.^{5,6} Although methodological issues (e.g., participant disengagement, nonspecific survey questions) may have upwardly biased population-based estimates of support for political violence in the US,^{4,7,8} many experts agree that support for political violence and other antidemocratic attitudes are a significant threat to American democracy.⁹ This underscores the need to identify factors that may be related to support for political violence in the US.

A growing body of research has investigated factors related to support for political violence in the US. For example, previous studies have shown associations between support for political violence in the US and firearm ownership,¹⁰ military service, authoritarianism, conspiratorial thinking, and anxiety.¹¹ The research to date on support for political violence has largely focused on demographic and psychological factors, but recent incidents have raised questions about the potential role that substances such as psychedelics may play. For instance, William Watson had been arrested for possession of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) 6 months prior to his participation in the Capitol Building attack,¹² while Jacob Chansley (i.e., “the QAnon Shaman”), who also participated in the Capitol Building attack, had reportedly used psychedelics extensively in the past.¹³ While it is impossible to attribute Watson’s and Chansley’s actions during the Capitol Building attack to psychedelics directly, and many of the people involved presumably had no experience with psychedelics, recent scholarship has argued that psychedelic use could have context-dependent effects on political outcomes,¹⁴ potentially including support for political violence.

Psychedelics such as LSD and psilocybin are relatively unique in that their use can lead to increased suggestibility¹⁵ and produce outcomes that are dependent on the immediate context (i.e., the individual “set and setting”).¹⁶ If administered in controlled settings to rigorously screened participants, the research to date suggests that these substances are relatively safe^{17,18} and show clinical potential (e.g., as a treatment of depressive disorders).^{19,20} However, the vast majority of psychedelic use currently occurs in naturalistic settings and therefore without the guardrails of tightly controlled studies, which could increase risks that may be more likely in uncontrolled, real-world contexts. For example, the context-dependent effects of these substances, in theory, may make them nonspecific amplifiers

of the broader sociocultural context (i.e., the collective “set and setting”).^{14,21} Because the collective “set and setting” in the US has become increasingly polarized by partisan politics,²² it is conceivable that psychedelic use in the US may amplify partisan or even antidemocratic attitudes such as support for partisan violence, especially if there is exposure to the broader sociocultural context (e.g., through live events, traditional media, or social media) in close time proximity to the use of psychedelics. If, however, psychedelic use takes place on dates associated with bipartisan sentiment such as the Fourth of July (i.e., US Independence Day),²³ it is possible that decreased partisan antagonism may result, potentially through the personal intention to celebrate the holiday or through exposure to the collective celebration of the holiday. It is also possible that the directionality and the size of effects may be amplified provided that the group norms associated with the date or the event are perceived to be similar to the opinions of the individual using psychedelics.²⁴

However, testing these hypotheses experimentally is not straightforward. Because the broader sociocultural context cannot easily be experimentally manipulated with sufficient ecological validity, alternative methods such as a natural experiment may be more appropriate. Using a longitudinal observational research design with a large sample of US adults ($N = 21,990$) followed during a 2-month study period, we investigated associations between naturalistic psychedelic use on the Fourth of July and changes in support for one form of political violence: partisan violence. We hypothesized that: (1) participants who reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience during the 2-month study period on the Fourth of July would report lower support for partisan violence than participants who reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience during the study period on a date other than the Fourth of July, relative to support for partisan violence at baseline (T1); and (2) participants who reported no psychedelic use during the study period would report lower support for partisan violence than participants who reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience during the study period on a date other than the Fourth of July, relative to support for partisan violence at T1. We conducted exploratory analyses to investigate associations and moderators of psychedelic use on other dates of politically salient events with changes in support for partisan violence.

Methods

Design and participants

Participants were recruited through Prolific Academic (<https://prolific.com>) to complete an online survey at T1 between June and September in 2023 and in June 2024 (see Supplementary Materials for more information). We used purposive sampling and recruited US residents (18–50 years

old) to maximize the percentage of participants who would likely report psychedelic use during the study period, based on prior results.²⁵ The study description did not mention psychedelics to limit the possibility of self-selection bias (see Supplementary Materials for more information). Participants were invited approximately 2 months after the T1 survey to complete an online follow-up survey (T2).

At T1, all participants reported their demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender) and which, if any, of the following psychedelics they had used in the past 2 months: psilocybin, ayahuasca, *N,N*-Dimethyltryptamine, LSD, mescaline, peyote, or San Pedro. These are so-called “classic” psychedelics that all share their primary mechanism of action at the serotonin 2A receptor in the brain.²⁶ At T2, participants reported past 2-month use of psychedelics or other substances, as well as whether they had celebrated the Fourth of July. Participants who reported past 2-month psychedelic use at T2 were also asked to report the date and dose size of the most intense psychedelic experience in the past 2 months. At both T1 and T2, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire assessing support for partisan violence (see Supplementary Tables S1 and S2 for items, descriptive statistics, and reliability estimates).^{6,27} In the 2024 data collection, all participants were also asked to report past 2-month in-group elite threat cues (i.e., characterizing out-party elites as threats) at T1 and T2, with only those who reported past 2-month psychedelic use being asked to report in-group elite threat cues on the day of the most intense psychedelic experience (see Supplementary Tables S3 and S4 for more information on survey items).

This study was part of a larger survey,²⁸ and the completion of T1 and T2 surveys resulted in small payments. The study procedures were determined to be exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Informed consent was obtained digitally from all participants. The 2024 study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/w9z65>.

Statistical analyses

As indicated in our preregistration, we used multiple linear regression to assess whether there were significant differences in support for partisan violence change scores (i.e., change from T1 to T2) between participants who did not use psychedelics during the study period, participants who used psychedelics during the study period and had the most intense psychedelic experience on the Fourth of July, and participants who used psychedelics during the study period and had the most intense psychedelic experience on a date other than the Fourth of July (reference category). We controlled for age, gender identity, religious belief, educational attainment, political affiliation, past 2-month use of alcohol, nicotine products, cannabis

products, MDMA, major stimulants, illicit narcotic analgesics/opioids, illicit benzodiazepines and barbiturates, inhalants, and other substances at T2, and past 2-month use of psychedelics at T1. We also controlled for survey year in analyses using the full sample.

In addition to the preregistered analyses, we conducted several exploratory analyses to further test our hypotheses. First, because there may be anticipatory and lingering effects of the Fourth of July,²³ five additional categorical variables were created and tested in multiple linear regression models, each expanding the time window by 1 day in both directions (i.e., past, future). Such effects may be pronounced among those who actively celebrate the Fourth of July, which also motivated investigation of celebration of the Fourth of July as a potential moderator in interaction models. These models controlled for the same covariates as the preregistered model. Second, recent research suggests that the Trump assassination attempt on July 13, 2024, reduced support for partisan violence among Republicans (but not Democrats),²⁹ while there were other politically salient events during the election campaign in 2024 that may have produced partisan sentiment (e.g., Democratic and Republican National Conventions). These events offered an opportunity to further test our hypotheses. We created two additional categorical variables that replaced the Fourth of July category in the preregistered model with the dates of these events (i.e., 07/13/2024 for the Trump assassination attempt and 08/19/2024–08/22/2024 plus 07/15/2024–07/18/2024 for the Democratic and Republican National Conventions) for each of the new variables. These models controlled for the same covariates as the preregistered model. Third, because pro-democracy messaging by in-group elites (i.e., party leaders) has been shown to reduce support for partisan violence,²⁷ we conducted an interaction model to investigate whether in-group elite threat cues might result in the opposite for participants with the most intense psychedelic experience during the party conventions on support for partisan violence. Because the in-group elite threat cues were not included in the 2023 study, we focused on data from 2024. This model controlled for the same covariates as the preregistered model, except for survey year. It also controlled for past 2-month in-group elite threat cues at T1 and T2, as well as dose size associated with participants' most intense psychedelic experience. The same interaction model was not conducted for the Trump assassination attempt due to low cell counts. Fourth, previous research suggests that election salience may influence partisanship,^{30,31} which offered yet another opportunity to further test our hypotheses (i.e., testing whether having had the most intense psychedelic experience on a date closer to Election Day was associated with increases in support for partisan violence). Because 2023 was not an election year, we focused on data from 2024. This model

controlled for the same covariates as the preregistered model, except for survey year. It also controlled for dose size associated with participants' most intense psychedelic experience. Additional sensitivity analyses were conducted to examine the robustness of results from our main models.

In all models, the outcome variable (i.e., support for partisan violence) was the change in support for partisan violence scores between T1 and T2. Possible outcome change scores ranged from -100 to $+100$. To produce standardized coefficients, the outcome variable was standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Thus, the standardized coefficients represent the effect of a one unit change in the predictor on the outcome in standard deviation units, while controlling for other variables in the model. In models using categorical predictor variables, the standardized coefficients represent the change in standard deviations of support for partisan violence for each category of the predictor variables compared with the reference category of each predictor variable, while controlling for other variables in the model. In the model using a continuous predictor variable (i.e., days until Election Day), the predictor variable was also standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, which means the coefficients represent the change in standard deviations of the outcome variable for a one standard deviation increase in the predictor variable, while controlling for other variables in the model. All models controlled for the same covariates that have been used in a previous longitudinal study on naturalistic psychedelic use,²⁵ with additional covariates added whenever appropriate. We report the standard error, *t*-value, and *p* value for models using unstandardized coefficients. These metrics are not reported for models using standardized coefficients.

The main dataset was split into two smaller datasets: (1) one dataset that did not have any missing data (i.e., data from survey items only presented to participants who reported psychedelic use during the 2-month study period); and (2) one dataset that did have missing data (i.e., data from survey items presented to all participants). We used multiple imputation to handle missing data, creating 20 imputed datasets. The model was fitted to each imputed dataset, with results pooled using Rubin's rules.^{32,33}

Results

Descriptive statistics

There were 21,990 participants who completed the survey at T1, of whom 12,345 completed the survey at T2 (i.e., 56.1% retention). Among the participants who completed the survey at T2, 505 participants reported psychedelic use during the 2-month study period. Of these, 19 participants reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience on the Fourth of July, and 486 participants

reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience on another date. These two groups differed with regard to age and celebration of the Fourth of July, but there were no significant differences with regard to gender identity, political affiliation, or dose used on the day of the most intense psychedelic experience (see Table 1; see Supplementary Tables S5, S6, S7, and S8 for more information).

Inferential statistics

The primary analyses for the full sample (i.e., both survey years) showed an association of having had the most intense psychedelic experience on the Fourth of July and no psychedelic use with decreases in support for partisan violence, compared with participants who reported psychedelic use and had the most intense psychedelic experience on a date other than the Fourth of July (see Table 2). Similar coefficients were observed when the primary analyses were separated by survey year and when the primary analyses were conducted with the non-imputed data (see Supplementary Tables S9, S10, and S11).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	<i>MIPE on the Fourth of July</i>	<i>MIPE on another date</i>	<i>p value</i>
Age			0.024
18–24	21.6%	5.3%	
25–34	41.4%	42.1%	
35–44	29.0%	26.3%	
45–50	8.0%	26.3%	
Gender			0.501
Male	42.1%	45.9%	
Female	57.9%	48.8%	
Other	0.0%	5.4%	
Political affiliation			0.977
Democratic Party	79.0%	79.2%	
Republican Party	21.1%	20.8%	
Celebrated the Fourth of July			0.028
Yes	89.5%	65.2%	
No	10.5%	34.8%	
Dose on day of MIPE			0.510
Low	26.3%	34.8%	
Moderate	42.1%	46.9%	
Large	21.1%	11.3%	
Very large	5.3%	5.4%	
Extremely large	5.3%	1.7%	

This table shows sample characteristics of participants who reported past 2-month psychedelic use at T2.

Percentages are rounded to the closest decimal point and reflect the proportions of participants who reported most intense psychedelic experience (MIPE) on the Fourth of July ($n = 19$) or MIPE on another date ($n = 486$) out of each group's total.

Total percentages may not equal 100%. Chi-squared tests were used to examine whether there were significant differences between participants who reported MIPE on the Fourth of July and those who reported MIPE on another date.

Table 2. Model Estimates

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p value</i>	β
Reference	...	...	...	...	...
No psychedelic use	−3.02	0.84	−3.61	0.0003	−0.19
MIPE on the Fourth of July	−11.20	3.69	−3.04	0.0024	−0.71

This table shows associations between most intense psychedelic experience (MIPE) on the Fourth of July and changes in support for partisan violence, using imputed data from the full sample.

Reference category included participants who reported psychedelic use during the study period and had the most intense psychedelic experience on a date other than the Fourth of July.

Positive unstandardized (*b*) or standardized (β) regression coefficients indicate an increase in support for partisan violence relative to the reference group, whereas negative coefficients indicate a decrease in such support.

The exploratory analyses using the expanded time windows also yielded significant associations with decreased support for partisan violence (see Supplementary Tables S12 and S13), especially among participants who celebrated the Fourth of July (see Supplementary Tables S14 and S15). Notably, further exploratory analyses showed that, compared with the reference category, having had the most intense psychedelic experience on the date of the Trump assassination attempt was associated with decreases in support for partisan violence (see Supplementary Tables S16 and S17), with such decreases only reported by Republicans (see Supplementary Table S18). By contrast, having had the most intense psychedelic experience on any of the dates of the Democratic or Republican National Conventions was associated with increases in support for partisan violence (see Supplementary Tables S19 and S20), which appeared to be moderated by in-group elite threat cues on the day of participants' most intense psychedelic experience (see Supplementary Tables S21 and S22). Yet another exploratory analysis showed that having had the most intense psychedelic experience on a date closer to Election Day was associated with increases in support for partisan violence (see Supplementary Table S23). In additional analyses, political affiliation did not significantly moderate the observed relationships in any of our main models.

Discussion

The present study investigated associations between naturalistic psychedelic use on the Fourth of July and other dates of politically salient events and changes in support for partisan violence. The primary analyses showed that participants who reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience during the study period on the Fourth of July showed a greater decrease in support for partisan violence, compared with participants who reported having had the most intense psychedelic experience on a date other than the Fourth of July. Notably, exploratory analyses demonstrated that psychedelic use on other dates of politically salient events (e.g., day of Trump assassination attempt and days of party conventions) also influenced support for partisan violence in directions that depended on the political nature of the events. While future replications

are needed to validate these findings, it appears the broader sociocultural context could influence outcomes following naturalistic psychedelic use.

This study provides an empirical test of previous theoretical work that has proposed that the collective “set and setting” may impact the outcomes of naturalistic psychedelic use.^{14,21} While a qualitative study of Palestinians and Israelis who consumed ayahuasca together indicated that naturalistic psychedelic use, under specific circumstances, may contribute to peacebuilding,³⁴ such findings might not replicate in other contexts. The interaction models in this study provide nuance and suggest that the collective “set and setting” may influence the directionality and the size of psychedelic-related effects through the individual “set” (e.g., intention, expectation, or general mindset motivated by the broader sociocultural context) and “setting” (e.g., direct or indirect exposure to the broader sociocultural context through live events, traditional media, or social media). As psychedelics such as LSD and psilocybin are becoming more widely used in naturalistic settings,^{35,36} it is important to recognize the neuroplasticity these substances may promote³⁷ and the concomitant intended or unintended consequences of their use in uncontrolled, real-world contexts. Based on findings from the current study, it appears that naturalistic psychedelic use may have broader societal impacts than previously thought. This should be further investigated in future research.

While the present study did not focus on mental health outcomes, its findings could have clinical implications. It may be that salient events in the broader sociocultural context modulate effects of naturalistic psychedelic use on clinical outcomes, as they appear to do on support for partisan violence. As one example, prior work has demonstrated associations between stock market performance and mental health outcomes,^{38,39} especially among individuals with large stock holdings.⁴⁰ It is therefore possible that severe stock market turbulence could moderate effects of psychedelic use on mental health, both in naturalistic and clinical settings. If these hypotheses were confirmed in future studies, these kinds of factors could potentially impact the generalizability of clinical trial results across different economic and other mental health-linked sociocultural conditions. Future research will need

to establish which aspects of the collective “set and setting” may be most potent and for which specific outcomes.

The present study’s results should be interpreted in light of several important limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling helped to maximize the number of participants who reported psychedelic use during the study period, but it likely limited generalizability of the findings to the general population. The study also occurred in a unique temporal and sociocultural context (i.e., 2023–2024 in the US) and focused specifically on politically salient events, which further limits generalizability. It would have been helpful to investigate the potential effects of psychedelic use on dates of politically salient events in other countries (e.g., Bastille Day in France), as well as on dates of culturally salient but less politically salient events in the US (e.g., Thanksgiving). Second, participants were asked whether they celebrated the Fourth of July or not, which was directly relevant to the primary analyses. No questions were presented to participants, however, specifically about the Trump assassination attempt, the party conventions, or the general election. Nor were participants presented with other questions that could have been relevant to the analyses (e.g., political engagement, citizenship). Third, all the measures were self-reported, and responses may therefore have been susceptible to a range of biases (e.g., social desirability bias),⁴¹ even if the survey was anonymous. Fourth, the attrition rate at T2 was high (43.9%), and 505 participants reported psychedelic use during the study period (4.1% of completers). Of these, only 19 reported having their most intense psychedelic experience on the Fourth of July (3.8% of those who reported psychedelic use during the study period). Despite using multiple imputation to handle missing data, the relatively small number of individuals who used psychedelics on the Fourth of July suggests the results should be interpreted cautiously. The same caution should similarly be applied to the other dates of politically salient events. Fifth, the present study used a longitudinal observational study design, and therefore no conclusive causal inferences can be made. Ultimately, to build on the findings from this study, future research should ideally utilize a 2×2 factorial design and randomize participants to administration of either a psychedelic or a placebo, with exposure to content shown to reduce support for partisan violence (e.g., pro-democracy messaging by political elites)²⁷ vs no exposure.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides empirical support for the idea that the collective “set and setting” may impact the outcomes of naturalistic psychedelic use. The results suggest that naturalistic psychedelic use on the Fourth of July and other dates of politically salient events may modulate support for partisan violence in directions that depend on the political nature of the events. While future replications are needed to validate these findings, it

appears the broader sociocultural context could influence outcomes following naturalistic psychedelic use.

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Authors’ Contributions

O.S. designed the research. O.S. and S.B.G. analyzed the data. O.S. wrote the first draft. W.O., P.S.H., and S.B.G. provided comments. S.B.G. supervised the study.

Data Availability

The fully anonymized non-imputed data for the primary analyses and the R code are available in the Open Science Framework repository: <https://osf.io/asr23/files/osfstorage>.

Author Disclosure Statement

P.S.H. was previously in paid advisory relationships with Eleusis Benefit Corporation, Reset Pharmaceuticals Inc., and Silo Pharma and is currently in paid advisory relationships with Bright Minds Biosciences Ltd. and Journey Colab Corporation. P.S.H. is cofounder of Equulus Therapeutics and Mycelial Health. None of the other authors have any competing interests to declare.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary Data

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