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# Evaluating the Effect of Mental Illness Stigma on Voting Behaviors

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## Abstract

Mental health stigma is defined as stereotypes and prejudice resulting from misconceptions about mental illness (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Boor (1978) found simulated college voters cast fewer votes for a candidate when it was known the candidate had consulted a psychotherapist, indicating negative attitudes indeed exist towards perceived psychological treatment even in the absence of a diagnosed mental illness. This poses a significant problem, as research suggests that voters may sense a desire to “get even” with political candidates in electoral context for perceived wrongdoings and may make suboptimal choices when casting a ballot (Bechwati & Morrin, 2007). Coupled with the above, this is indicative of a link between voting behavior and negative treatment of those with a mental illness. Despite this, little research has been done on how mental health issues attributed to the candidate affects voting behaviors. Six candidate vignettes for a hypothetical Kansas Governor election were created with gender neutral names and indicative of policies aligning with participant views. Two vignettes of each had symptoms related to a mental illness, a diagnosis, or neutral. Participants were also asked questions regarding their personal attitudes and general stigma toward mental illness. Results indicated participants were more likely to endorse statements suggesting general stereotypes than statements indicating negative attitudes towards individuals with a mental illness. Our study did show that voters had an aversion toward candidates with a mental health diagnosis which partially supports our initial hypothesis.

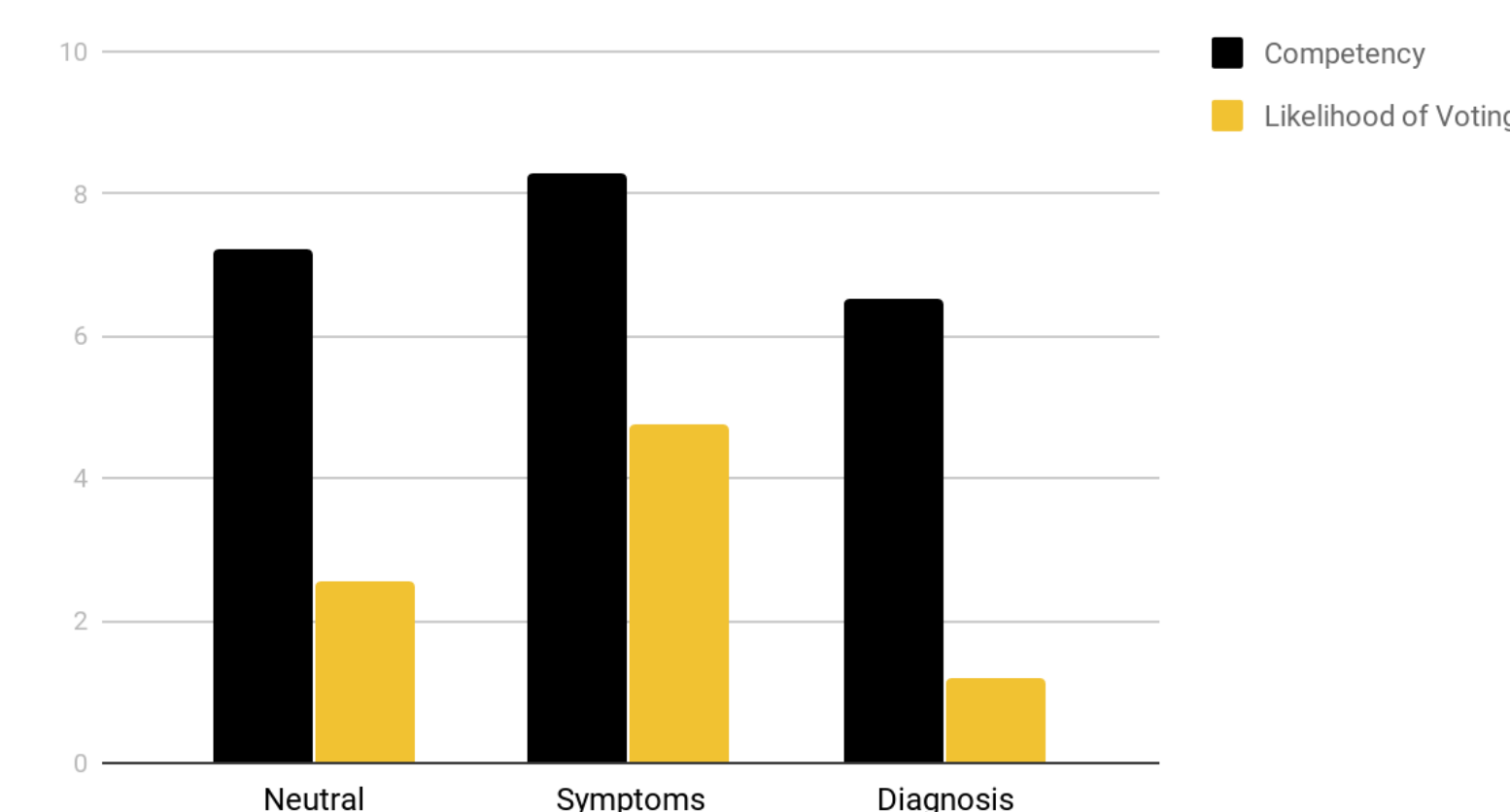
**Research Question:** Does candidate mental illness influence voter behavior?

**Hypothesis:** Participants will be less willing to vote for a candidate with a diagnosed mental illness or exhibiting symptoms of a mental illness than a candidate with no diagnosis or symptoms.

## Method

- 122 students enrolled in Psychology courses at Fort Hays State University were recruited to participate and complete the study via SurveyMonkey.
- Participants were given a series of political vignettes for a potential candidate for a hypothetical Governor of Kansas election.
  - Three conditions (Neutral, Symptoms, Label)
- Participants were asked to complete a series of questions regarding voting behaviors, negative attitudes and stigmas toward the potential candidate, and demographic information.

Competency and Likelihood of Voting



### Example Vignette:

Pat Williams is a candidate for the 2018 Governor of Kansas election. You've researched Pat's stance on the Kansas economy and terrorism and find yourself excited about Pat's proposed policies. Through a news article you learn more about Pat's plan to improve the education system in Kansas and find that you wholeheartedly agree with Pat's plans. Recently, a news outlet published an email from Pat's therapist discussing Pat's diagnosis of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

## Results

Participants were mostly female (71.3%), Caucasian (74.6%) with a mean age of 28.13 and ranged about equally from freshmen to seniors. Within subjects ANOVAs were run, participants were most likely to vote for candidates showing symptoms of mental illness with no diagnosis ( $M=7.24$ ,  $SD=2.28$ ), followed by neutral candidates ( $M=9.45$ ,  $SD=2.76$ ), and those with a mental health diagnosis ( $M=10.80$ ,  $SD=2.75$ ),  $F(1.83, 221.74)=98.02$ ,  $p=.000$ . Participants were more likely to endorse statements suggesting general stereotypes ( $M=2.34$ ,  $SD=.52$ ) than statements indicating negative attitudes towards individuals with a mental illness ( $M=3.51$ ,  $SD=.48$ ). Additionally, participants perceived candidates showing symptoms of mental illness with no diagnosis as being most competent ( $M=3.72$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ), followed by neutral candidates ( $M=4.78$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ), then those with a mental health diagnosis ( $M=5.47$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ),  $F(1.72, 208.31)=77.24$ ,  $p=.000$ .

## Discussion

- Understanding how mental illness stigma influences voting behaviors will provide more information on negative perceptions of mental illness. This could help develop interventions to decrease stigma against mental illness.
- Limitations of this study include that the population was from a small midwestern university and recruited from classes, also the survey was online so participants may have been less invested in their answers.
- Future research could look at educational interventions to help reduce stigma.

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