

The scientific reasons we engage in politics (or don't)

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The science of politics Assistant Professor of Government Jaime Settle is investigating why some people disengage from politics in the face of contention. Photo by Steve Salpukas

If you flip on the television during an election year, chances are you'll be met with a barrage of political chatter from candidates, analysts, news reporters, and the like. For William & Mary Assistant Professor of Government Jaime Settle, what's more intriguing than the outpouring of political noise is the silence that stems from it.

For the past year and a half, Settle has been conducting research on the

voices much less heard during [election](#) season—those disenfranchised because of their proclivity to withdraw from stressful situations, including disagreements that surround politics in an increasingly polarized world.

"There's growing evidence that people who are conflict avoidant, so people who go out of their way to try and have agreeable conversations, are much more likely to disengage from the political process," said Settle.

Along with a group of undergraduate research assistants in her SNaPP (Social Networks and Political Psychology) Lab, Settle is using biology to better understand and predict political behavior. Her research, funded through a grant from the National Science Foundation, aims to ultimately figure out a way to help enfranchise citizens who are inadvertently turned off by the current political system.

"The idea of looking at the biological response to political behavior and social behavior is really an important way forward in the field of political science," she said. "We're able to measure things in a way that we've never been able to measure them before."

Settle began studying the biological reasons behind political attitudes and behavior as a grad student. "I was drawn to this idea that our genetic predispositions shape the way we respond to competition in our environment and to other people in the political world," she said.

In a world where, according to Settle, politics have become more polarized and contentious, the tendency for certain people to withdraw may be increasing. Furthermore, the advent of social media has only increased people's day-to-day exposure to political discussion and disagreement. In a previous study, Settle analyzed more than 100 million Facebook status updates in an effort to assess the amount of political

information available and how that affects political engagement.

"Most people post very little political content to Facebook," said Settle. "But that same majority who say they don't post frequently also say that the vast majority of the time they're encountering political information on their news feed because of the way Facebook is structured."

For some people, increased exposure to political competition could prove fruitful to their likelihood of voting. In that same social media study, Settle found that a higher percentage of people in battleground states like Virginia post political messages which, in turn, increases their probability of self-reported voting on Election Day.

On the other hand, political arguments—whether encountered on social media, on [television](#) or in person—could discourage a whole segment of the population from voting. Settle's current research assesses people's physiological reactions to different contentious situations to understand which types of political stimuli might be most stressful to citizens.

With help from undergraduate student researchers such as John Stuart '16 and Edward Hernandez '17 Settle's first step is asking test subjects, ranging from William & Mary students to community members, survey questions and hypothetical third-party scenarios to better evaluate their personality types.

"People have these ideas about what they think you want to hear and what the socially acceptable answer is when you're doing research, so it's important to also measure how their bodies respond to situations so you can get a better picture of how they interact with things," said Stuart.

The physiological testing involves hooking participants up to sensors that measure biological triggers to anxiety and excitement, such as increased heart rate and sweating palms. The subjects are shown a series of videos

depicting politically or socially themed disagreements, from Tea Party rallies and Occupy Wall Street protests to confrontations on The Jerry Springer Show.

"We wanted to find disagreements that were contentious but not overtly partisan," said Hernandez.

The second part of the physiological testing measured people's reactions to face-to-face interactions. The participants were told they'd be discussing politics with another person with varying levels of political knowledge and with whom they either agreed or disagreed.

"It seems that the thing that really makes people the most physiologically responsive is the idea that they need to engage with others, and then especially so if they think it's going to be a disagreeable conversation," said Settle. "People's heart rates jumped just with the idea that they were going to have to have that conversation."

Settle hypothesizes that interpersonal interaction could invoke stress for a number of reasons, including the fear of being judged about their beliefs or lack of political knowledge. It also could stem from a desire to abide by social norms—the idea that it's impolite to talk about topics like politics or religion at the dinner table.

Ultimately, Settle said, if more information can be learned about the reasons people are disengaging, then more can be done to reengage them in the political process.

"I think the more we learn about what aspects of politics people seem to be the most sensitive to, the more we can advise people about how to make those around them feel more comfortable," Settle said. "For example, if fear of judgment is an issue, perhaps make clear at the outset of a political conversation that this is a judgment-free zone. You can

separate the ideas from the person and agree to disagree about your political opinions."

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