

Pass/No Pass: Student Reactions to Policy Changes

Ashley Ratcliff, Brent Hsueh, Jocelynn Garcia

Objective

To evaluate how recent policy changes under the current President Trump administration affect the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of UCSD undergraduate students

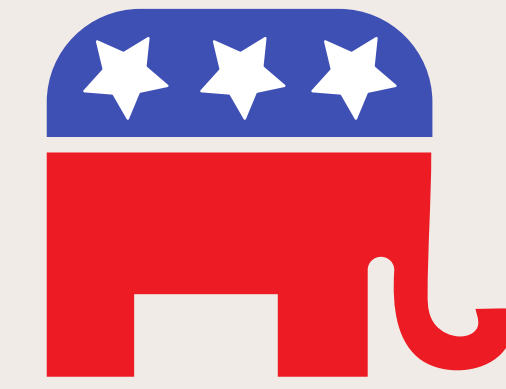
Background

- Key **public health policy changes**: withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the National Institutes of Health partial research funding freeze
 - U.S. contributed **12-15%** of the **World Health Organization's** (WHO) funding, data, and staffing¹
 - U.S. collaboration with the WHO was vital during the COVID-19 pandemic²
- Partial research freeze on **National Institutes of Health** (NIH) funding impacts research at top universities like UCSD^{3,4,5,6}
 - Previously provided **~\$8 billion** for cancer research alone⁷
 - Froze **1600** grant applications, **impacting student research**⁸
- Knowledge and beliefs** on the current political climate could affect:
 - Amount of **trust** in future healthcare and research
 - College students' **mental health** due to anxiety about **the future**⁹
- There are **major gaps in literature**, as there currently not a lot of data that evaluates undergraduate students' reactions to policy changes

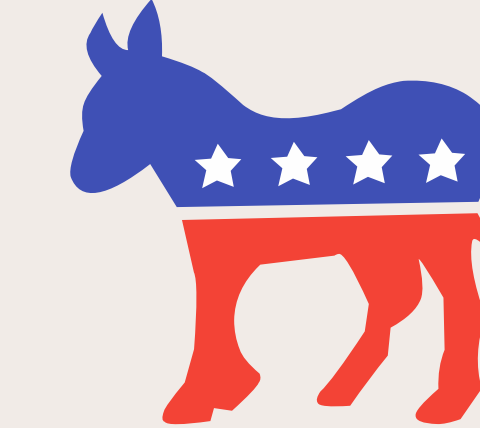


Methods

- Type of Study**: Cross sectional study
- Target Population**: UCSD Undergraduate students (N=79)
- Recruitment Method**: anonymous Qualtric survey distributed from April-May 2025 by:
 - Social media (e.g. Instagram, Discord)
 - Various student involvement group-chats
 - Distribution via email by Public Health Department
- Recruitment Measures**:
 - Demographics (Gender, Political Party, Race and Ethnicity, and Majors)
 - Note on Majors:
 - Public Health and Global Health Majors are considered to be Health Majors rather than STEM Majors
 - STEM majors are Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math related majors
 - Exposures**: knowledge and awareness related to public policy changes, as well as general engagement with politics
 - Outcomes**: student attitudes (e.g. amount of trust and agreement) and behaviors (e.g. social media posting and protesting) related to the policy changes, perceived mental health effect
 - A 4-point scale** to evaluate perceived effect (e.g. on research or mental health) due to various policy changes and agreement level to them
 - A 3 leveled scale** for agreement and behavior
 - "Yes, Unsure, and No" as options
- Two-Sided Independent Sample T-Test and Chi-Square Test via **SPSS v29**



Results



★Attitudes★

Table 2. Perception of the WHO Withdrawal on their Mental Health by College Major

Major	Mean	Standard Deviation	p-value
Health	2.84	0.800	-
STEM	2.21	0.774	0.005
Non-STEM/Health	2.44	0.821	0.087

After a Two-Sided Independent t-test, there is a significant difference between STEM and Health majors. Health majors reported the highest score

Table 3. Perception of the NIH Funding Freeze on their Mental Health by College Major

Major	Mean	Standard Deviation	p-value
Health	3.20	0.645	-
STEM	2.66	0.974	0.021
Non-STEM/Health	2.64	0.810	0.009

After a Two-Sided Independent t-test, there is a significant difference between STEM and Health Majors, and between Health and Non-STEM/Health majors. Health majors reported the highest score

Table 4. Mean Statement Agreement Score on a 4-Point Scale

Statement	Mean	p-value	χ^2
The WHO withdrawal will affect future health responses.	3.82	0.459	3.627
I have less medical trust from the cancer research budget cuts.	3.06	0.260	7.714
The NIH Funding Freeze impacts future treatments.	3.83	0.730	0.629
The NIH Funding Freeze of the public health department changes my quality of life.	3.60	0.478	3.502
Pausing or rescinding PhD admissions due to the freeze will impact our future.	3.79	0.800	0.445
Cutting down The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will positively affect public health.	2.06	0.345	6.749

The closer the average score is to 4, the more the responders agree with the statement. After a Chi-Square test, no significant difference in answers between all responders

Table 1. Sample Demographics (N = 79)

Gender	n (%)	Political Party	n (%)
Female	52 (65.8)	Democratic	59 (74.7)
Male	25 (31.7)	Independent/No Affiliation	18 (22.8)
Non-Binary	2 (2.5)	Green	1 (1.3)
		Libertarian	1 (1.3)
Race and Ethnicity	n (%)	Majors	n (%)
Asian	44 (55.6)	STEM	29 (36.7)
White/Caucasian	12 (15.2)	Health	25 (31.6)
Hispanic or Latino	10 (12.7)	Non STEM/Health	25 (31.6)
Mixed	10 (12.7)		
Middle Eastern	2 (2.5)		
Black/African American	1 (1.3)		

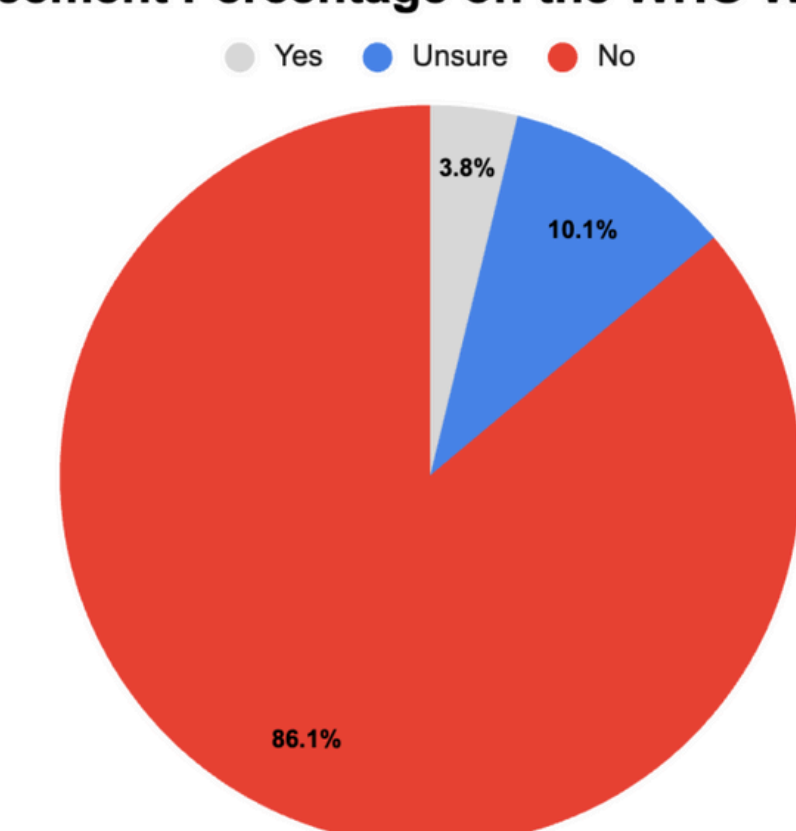
Knowledge:

- 83.5% (n=66) were aware of the WHO withdrawal before the survey
- 88.6% (n=70) were aware of the NIH Funding Freeze before the survey

Behaviors:

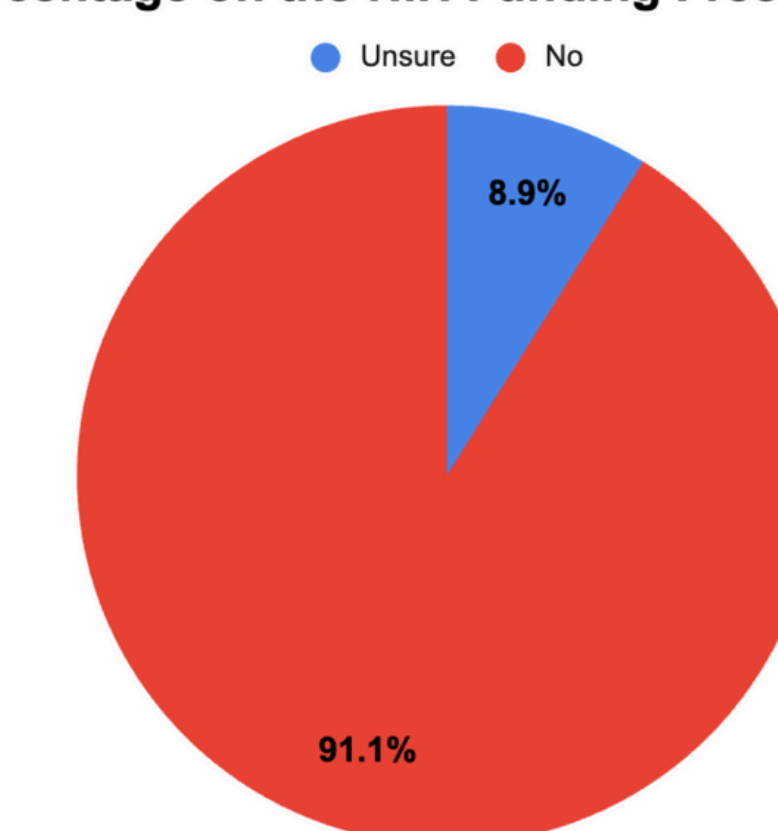
- 29.3% (n= 22) of responders- willing to attend a protest
- 52.0% (n= 39) of responders- unsure if they were willing to attend a protest
- 18.7% (n= 14) of responders- not willing to attend a protest
- Social media engagement after Trump's 2024 re-election:
 - 8.0% (n=6) of responders posted frequently
 - 24.0% (n=18) of responders posted a few times
 - 68.0% (n=51) of responders never posted on social media

Figure 1. Agreement Percentage on the WHO Withdrawal



Majority of all responders do not agree with the WHO withdrawal. After a Chi-Square Test, no significant difference for all responder's response($\chi^2 = 8.372$, $p = 0.079$)

Figure 2. Percentage on the NIH Funding Freeze



No responders agree with the NIH Funding Freeze. After a Chi-Square Test, no significant difference for all responder's response($\chi^2 = 1.628$, $p = 0.443$)

Conclusions

- Consistent with negative feelings** among general public against the actions of the Trump Administration¹⁰
 - Protests such as the UCSD **"Stand Up for Science"** rally¹¹
- Not as many** students were willing to take action against the policy changes
 - Students may be **afraid to** protest or post on social media due to the topic of politics being a **sensitive** subject
- First stepping stone** to cover the literature gaps for what UCSD undergraduate students **think** of the recent policy changes and how they **act** towards it
- Limitations**:
 - No respondents identified as a Republican, potentially leading to biased and non-representative data



Policy Implications

- UCSD Political Science department can **implement** new:
 - Elective Classes**- to look at the health effects on students from politics
- Political student organizations** (e.g. College Democrats or College Republicans at UCSD) can jointly hold:
 - Discussions**: spread awareness and debate about the effects of politics
 - Workshops**- collaborate and work with political figures to address policy impacts

References

