

## Feeling on Edge? Don't Agonize! Organize!

by Linda J. Hoover

In August 2017, the Voice of America (VOA), a U.S. government-funded news source, posted an article titled “Trump’s Tweets, Use of Rhetoric, Keep World on Edge”.<sup>1</sup> It reports: “‘We always have important things to discuss with our American allies... but it is the elephant in the room,’ one Western diplomatic official told VOA of Trump’s tweets.”



*Former WAMM Director Pepperwolf and generations of family members were among the 90,000 to 100,000 (official estimate) who rallied at the Women's March in St. Paul, January 2017. Photo: Linda Hoover*

While the above VOA statement is intended primarily for an international audience, it is telling that even the VOA sees the President's statements as keeping the world on edge. This article, however, is limited to a discussion of the opinions of Americans and suggests that one expression of people feeling on edge may be their self-reported stress levels. Another may be their lack of confidence in the government in Washington, D.C.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “in 2017, many Americans say they are stressed about at least one issue facing our nation, and a majority of adults (59 percent) said they consider this the lowest point in our nation's history that they can remember...” A mere five percentage points separated this thinking as being related to age group, with Gen Xers (born 1965 to 1978) feeling most stressed. In 2015, it was the millennials (born 1979 to 1999).<sup>2</sup>

Reporting in 2015, the APA writes: “Since 2007, the survey has found that money and work are the top two sources of very or somewhat significant stress (67 percent and 65 percent in 2015, respectively).” For more information on the breakdown of identified stressors by various demographic groups, see the APA report.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the Pew Research Center suggests that changes in the economy are an ongoing factor affecting the level of trust that survey participants have in the government. The Pew Research Center includes the following question in one of its surveys: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?” The percentage of Americans reporting that they trust the government in Washington always or most of the time reached a peak of 40 percent in February 2000, and was at a low of 18 percent in November 2017. However, whether the White House is occupied by Democrats or Republicans, declining trust has been persistent over time and has been multigenerational.<sup>4</sup>

The millennial generation (those born in 1981 or later) has experienced the greatest decline of trust in the government in Washington, moving from a high of 44 percent in 2004 to a low of 15 percent in 2017. This generation is commonly considered to have spearheaded some of the major mass protests in the streets in the past decade. Yet participants have been multigenerational.

According to one survey, 64 percent of those in the Occupy Wall Street movement were under the age of 35.<sup>5</sup> Another study reported that in the Black Lives Matter movement adults between 30 and 64 years old were more active than young adults.<sup>6</sup>

The 2016 protest against the oil pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s reservation in North Dakota was initiated by youth but quickly became multigenerational,<sup>7</sup> as was the 2017 international Women’s March to express disdain for many of President Donald Trump’s views and policies.<sup>8</sup> At the St. Paul, Minnesota, Women’s March, I documented with photos the age spread, from toddlers to older adults. (Adults born in the 1920s to early 1940s are sometimes referred to as the silent generation.)

Likewise, at the March 2018 Washington, D.C., March for Our Lives event that was spearheaded by teenagers, the average age of the adults in the crowd was just under 49 years old. Only about 10 percent of the participants were under 18.<sup>9</sup>

Youth-led March for Our Lives activities and other antigun protests events just this year were pretty clear that the violence in contemporary America is systemic. Youth demanded to have a voice in their future.

Even the annual May Day events are increasingly multigenerational with their recent focus on immigrant rights. In addition, the refusal of Washington politicians to grant a path to citizenship for DACA youth “...has resulted in some confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety for kids and their parents and teachers...”<sup>10</sup>

Increasing stress and declining lack of trust in the government in Washington may be reasons that the top four attended mass protests in the United States have taken place during the Trump administration.

The VOA statement and the APA and Pew Center surveys support the idea that recent spontaneous mass movements may be a response to a population that feels on edge. It is probably safe to say these recent movements help point the way forward.

It may be unclear what conditions will be necessary to move the U.S. to institutional changes. It is, nevertheless, clear that millions of Americans are ready for a national agenda that moves the country toward a more inclusive economic, political, and social agenda.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Seldin, Jeff. (2017, August 17.) Trump's Tweets, Use of Rhetoric, Keep World on Edge. voanews.com. [tinyurl.com/yarnpq7d](https://www.tinyurl.com/yarnpq7d)

<sup>2</sup>American Psychological Association. (2017, November 1.) Stress in America: The State of Our Nation. (APA defined age groups) [tinyurl.com/y85swdxd](https://www.tinyurl.com/y85swdxd)

<sup>3</sup>American Psychological Association (2015). Stress Snapshot: 2015 Stress in America. apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2015/snapshot.aspx. [tinyurl.com/y9g5b3wb](https://www.tinyurl.com/y9g5b3wb)

<sup>4</sup>Pew Research Center. (2018, March 3.) Public Trust in Government: 1958-2017. people-press.org. (Pew Research defines millennials as those born I 1981 or later.) [tinyurl.com/mfc69he](https://www.tinyurl.com/mfc69he)

<sup>5</sup>The Week Staff. (2011, October 20.) The demographics of Occupy Wall Street: By the numbers. theweek.com. [tinyurl.com/y8chjyrf](https://www.tinyurl.com/y8chjyrf)

<sup>6</sup>Olteanu, Alexandra; Weber, Ingmar; Gatica-Perez, Daniel. (2015, August.) Characterizing the Demographics Behind the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. researchgate.net. [tinyurl.com/yb928na4](https://www.tinyurl.com/yb928na4)

<sup>7</sup>Elbeinjan, Saul. (2017, January 31.) The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock. nytimes.com. [tinyurl.com/gsp9exr](https://www.tinyurl.com/gsp9exr)

<sup>8</sup>Lee, Esther Yu Hsi. (2017, January 21.) People in more than 60 countries are protesting Trump with the Women's March. thinkprogress.org. [tinyurl.com/ydgplscg](https://www.tinyurl.com/ydgplscg)

<sup>9</sup>Fisher, Dana R. (2018, March 28.) Here's who actually attended the March for Our Lives. (No, it wasn't mostly young people.) washingtonpost.com. [tinyurl.com/ybygy9bz](https://www.tinyurl.com/ybygy9bz)

<sup>10</sup>Persyn, Mary Kelly. (2017, September 8.) An End to DACA: Helping Children Manage Stress and Anxiety: An Interview with Dr. Lisa Gutierrez-Wang. embracerace.org. [tinyurl.com/y8u3yul6](https://www.tinyurl.com/y8u3yul6)