

Voting in elections is stressful -- emotionally and physiologically

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A new study, conducted has found that the level of cortisol -- the "stress hormone" -- in individuals immediately prior to casting a vote was significantly higher than in the same individuals in similar non-voting conditions. Researchers say this is a first step in understanding the link between biological stress and voting.

"Emotions can affect biological processes, which in turn can influence our decision-making processes," explains Dr. Israel Waismel-Manor of the University of Haifa's School of [Political Science](#).

Now there is proof: Voting in elections is stressful, even to a point that it causes [hormonal changes](#) among voters. This new study, conducted by scholars from the University of Haifa and Ben-Gurion University in Israel, has found that the level of [cortisol](#) – a hormone released when a person is under pressure and helps the body cope with threats – in individuals immediately prior to casting a [vote](#) was significantly higher than in the same individuals in similar non-voting conditions. "It is important to understand that emotions can affect biological processes, which in turn can influence our decision-making processes," said Dr. Israel Waismel-Manor of the School of Political Science at the University of Haifa.

Earlier studies have shown that when a person is under pressure, threat or [emotional](#) stress, the body releases a series of hormones that assist it in coping with the situation. The main hormone is cortisol, also known as the "stress hormone". The present study, conducted by Dr. Waismel-

Manor alongside Dr. Gal Ifergane of the Department of Neurology at Soroka Medical Center, and Prof. Hagit Cohen of the Ministry of Health Mental Health Center, Anxiety and Stress Research Unit, both from Ben-Gurion University, set out to determine whether voting in elections is a stressful experience. Its findings will soon be published in the journal *European Neuropsychopharmacology*.

The survey was conducted on the day of Israel's 2009 national elections. 113 voters just about to enter the ballot booth were asked to provide a saliva sample to be examined for [cortisol levels](#), and to complete a questionnaire that examined their affective state. The control groups included individuals from the same township who reported their affective state on the evening of the elections through a phone survey; and a second group who gave a saliva sample on the following day. The research team also went back to the first study group of actual voters 21 months later in order to examine their baseline cortisol levels; and since cortisol has a diurnal cycle, this part of the study was carried out on a non-work day, like [Election Day](#), and at precisely the same time of day as the original saliva samples were taken.

The results show that the level of cortisol in individuals immediately before voting was almost 3 times higher than in the following day control group, and almost twice these voters' own cortisol levels 21 months after Election Day. The study also revealed that individuals about to cast a vote were emotionally aroused, both in terms of positive effect, such as sharpness and inspiration, and negative effect, such as nervousness or embarrassment. Interestingly, the study also found that voters who said they would vote for a party which polls predicted will lose seats and may not serve on the next government, had higher levels of cortisol than those who intended to vote for a party that polls predicted were to gain seats and had a good chance of forming the new government.

The researchers emphasized that their findings are just a first step in understanding the link between biological stress and voting. The study did not examine whether the high levels of cortisol ultimately affect the actual vote, but evidence linking the decision-making processes and biological processes should be examined in future studies. "Studies of decision-makers, stock traders and the general public have shown that higher levels of cortisol influence decision-making. Elevated cortisol leads to risk-taking behavior and at the same time it impedes memory retrieval. These findings, along with the results of the present study, bring into question the decision-making process among voters. Our study has found that voting is both exciting and stressful, psychologically and physiologically. It remains to be seen whether Election Day stress is capable of altering voting decisions and outcomes," Dr. Waismel-Manor concluded.

Provided by University of Haifa

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