

# Stressed out: Americans making themselves sick over politics

September 25 2019

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The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Kevin Smith and colleagues have published a new study that chronicles the mental and physical toll that politics is taking on US adults. Nearly 40% of surveyed Americans said politics is stressing them out, 20% are losing sleep over it, and 20% report damage to friendships stemming from political discourse. Credit: University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Never-ending campaigns, social media, 24-hour news cycles. Politics are impossible to escape, even for the casual observer.

But are policy fights and polarization more than a headache in the collective consciousness? New research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln suggests yes—that we're making ourselves sick over politics.

Nearly 40% of Americans surveyed for the study said politics is stressing them out, and one in five are losing sleep. These responses and others show many in the United States believe their mental and [physical health](#) has been harmed in some way by exposure to politics.

The research, led by Nebraska political scientist Kevin Smith, is the first to look comprehensively at the physical and emotional costs of paying attention to and participating in [political discourse](#). Previous examinations have focused almost solely on [economic costs](#), such as time lost from work to vote or the monetary costs of supporting a campaign.

Smith and co-authors John Hibbing, Foundation Regent University Professor of political science at Nebraska, and Matthew Hibbing of the University of California, Merced thought it was time for a different take.

"It became apparent, especially during the 2016 electoral season, that this was a polarized nation, and it was getting even more politically polarized," Smith, Olson Chair and professor of political science at Nebraska, said. "The cost of that polarization to individuals had not fully been accounted for by social scientists or, indeed, health researchers."

Smith said the results, which were published Sept. 25 in the journal *PLOS ONE*, are akin to a public health crisis.

"Quite a few of the numbers jumped out at me," Smith said. "Twenty percent have damaged friendships because of political disagreements. One in five report fatigue. And it's a small (proportion), but 4% of the people in our sample said they've had suicidal thoughts because of

politics. That translates into 10 million adults."

Data were collected by YouGov for five days in March 2017, with 800 respondents. YouGov uses a panel of 1.8 million people to create representative samples. Because no previous studies on this phenomenon have been completed, the questionnaire was developed by mirroring diagnostic instruments used by Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous. The survey contained 32 questions in four categories—physical health, [mental health](#), regretted behavior and social/lifestyle costs—and delved into how people perceive politics as the source of the problems they were experiencing.

Among the other findings:

- 11.5% reported politics had adversely affected their physical health
- 31.8% said exposure to media outlets promoting views contrary to personal beliefs had driven them crazy
- 29.3% said they've lost their temper as a result of politics
- 1 in 5 say differences in political views have damaged a friendship
- 22.1% admit they care too much about who wins and who loses

"Politics is really negatively affecting a lot of people's lives, or at least, they're perceiving that politics is really negatively affecting their lives in deep and meaningful ways," Smith said. "Stress is a real phenomenon that can have disastrous health effects. If politics is a significant contributor to the levels of stress that American adults are experiencing, then yeah, it makes sense that there's a real add-on health effect from that."

"If we understand what's causing it, that can lead us to ameliorative strategies."

Perceptions of political stress emerged more in respondents who considered themselves on the left side of the political spectrum. Smith said this may be tied to the controversial 2016 election cycle.

"One of the things that we're really interested in is: What happens if a very left-leaning person is elected into the White House?" Smith said. "Do the symptoms stay the same but shift across the ideological spectrum?"

Because the study is the first of its kind, Smith and his co-authors plan to re-issue the survey in the future and are assisting scholars in pursuing similar research.

"I think it's critically important that we push this out to other political scientists," Smith said. "We've already handed it over to a couple of psychologists to include on some of the surveys they're doing, so we will start to get a little clearer picture and a little bit more traction on some of the questions we have."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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