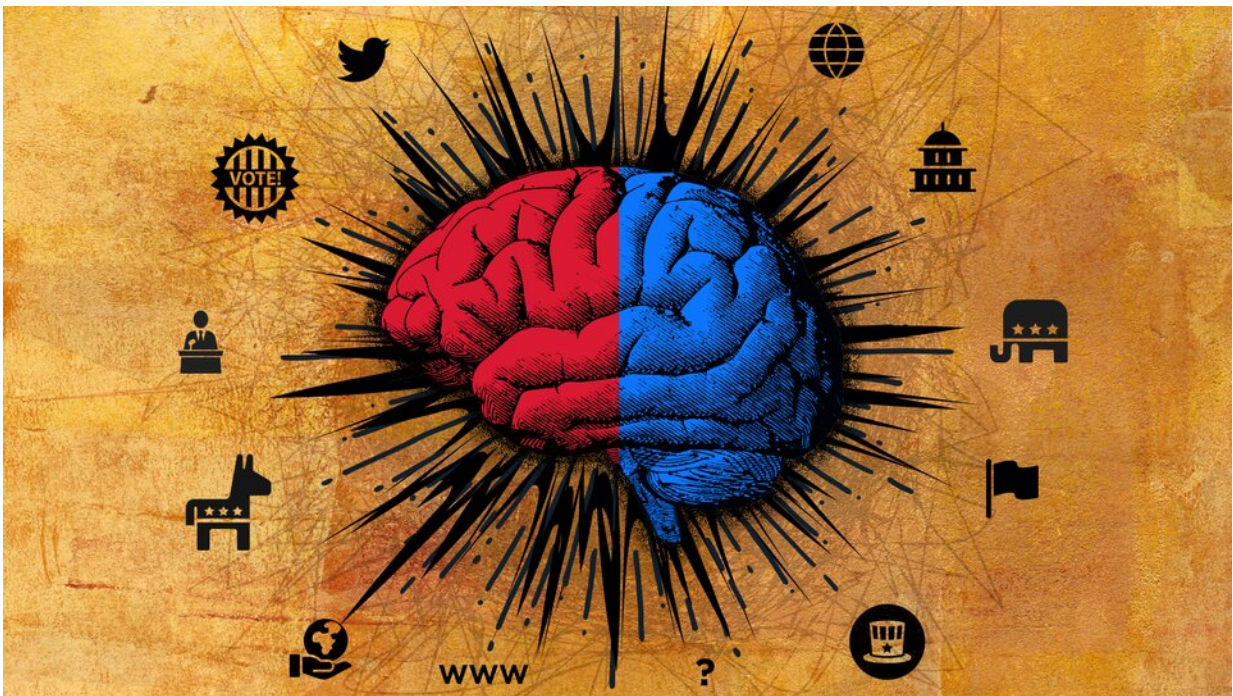


Study is first to define anxiety spiraling from national election

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A new study suggests that Americans' political anxiety crescendos before a major election. The study is the first to examine anxiety tethered to a specific political event: the 2020 presidential election. Credit: Clint Chapman | University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Researchers are beginning to better understand the toll of polarized politics on mental and physical health, and a new study published in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* suggests that Americans'

political anxiety crescendos before a major election.

Led by University of Nebraska–Lincoln political scientist Kevin Smith, with Aaron Weinschenk of the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay and Costas Panagopoulos of Northeastern University, the study is the first to examine [anxiety](#) tethered to a specific political event—the 2020 [presidential election](#), touted by both sides as the most consequential in recent history.

Using a two-wave panel survey of political anxiety administered two weeks before and two weeks following the 2020 election, the study found that Americans were more anxious before the election, as researchers had hypothesized. Following the election, it was those who specifically voted for Donald Trump, as well as conservatives and African Americans, who reported lower levels of anxiety.

"We found a lot of political anxiety right before the election, and that the election was an intervention to treat some of that anxiety—how much, we don't know, because of some of the craziness around the election," said Smith, chair and Olson Professor of political science. "But pretty much across the board, political anxiety went down following the election, and it went down surprisingly in some groups."

"One thing that really surprised us, though, was that even before the election, anxiety was lower for African Americans than their white counterparts."

The most anxious group, before and after the election, were those more politically engaged or attentive to [politics](#). Their anxiety levels rose after the election.

"While some results were surprising, you also saw results that fit exactly what you'd expect," Weinschenk said. "We found that more engaged

people, or people who knew more about politics, were more anxious after the election. You'd expect that because of the uncertainty immediately following the election, and these are people more invested."

The researchers noted that the 2020 election was anything but normal. A record number of votes were cast, and it was the most expensive election on record, topping \$6.6 billion spent in the contest between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump. Voters were also contending with a pandemic, and [conspiracy theories](#) abounded about election fraud.

Despite that, Smith said the study establishes a method for researchers to measure political anxiety going forward.

"Our measure appears to be valid," he said. "We're looking at 2024 and hoping we can replicate some of this to possibly parse out some of those effects."

Smith and Weinschenk also suggested that scientists could use the measures to look at the mental health toll of state and local elections, which are becoming more expensive and more polarized.

"Would an election in a Republican- or Democratic-leaning state, where the outcome seems pre-determined, be less anxiety-inducing than in a battleground state, where a ton of money from outside special interests is coming in, and it's dominating the news cycle?" Smith said. "I don't know, but it is a relevant question, because with state and local elections, you'd be going through this cycle each year."

"One of the things we're hoping for is that other researchers will pick up this measure and use it in other surveys."

As with his previous research into the deleterious effects of politics,

Smith said this line of examination is important for understanding how an engaged populace in a polarized political environment may be suffering from stress and anxiety—and what measures can be taken to circumvent those effects.

"Essentially, politics may be serving as a primary source of stress—and specifically anxiety—in an environment that would be more or less constant. And what do we do about that?" Smith said. "There's not a large group of us looking at this yet, but hopefully, that number grows."

More information: Kevin Smith et al, On pins and needles: anxiety, politics and the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/17457289.2023.2189258](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2189258)

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