

More exposure to political TV ads heightens anxiety

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We've all seen them: political ads on television that promise doom and gloom if Candidate X is elected, and how all your problems will be solved if you choose Candidate Y. And Candidate Y, of course, approves this message.

Beyond attempting to move a large swath of the population to vote one way or another, the seemingly constant bombardment of negativity in the name of our democratic process is anxiety-inducing, researchers have found.

"Many of my friends and [family members](#) wind up quite stressed out, for

lack of a better word, during each [election season](#)," said Jeff Niederdeppe, professor in the Department of Communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, "and I've seen this pattern repeat itself across the last several election cycles."

Niederdeppe is lead author of "Exposure to Televised Political Campaign Advertisements Aired in the United States 2015-2016 Election Cycle and Psychological Distress," which published April 3 in *Social Science & Medicine*.

Also contributing was Rosemary Avery, professor of policy analysis and management in the College of Human Ecology, and Jiawei Liu, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Communication, along with colleagues from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Wesleyan University and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Their research, Niederdeppe said, uncovered evidence that exposure to one form of political messaging—televised campaign ads—was associated with increased odds of a person being diagnosed with anxiety by a doctor.

For the study, Niederdeppe's team purchased and conducted secondary analysis on two large national datasets:

Kantar/CMAG's database on TV airings for campaign ads appearing between Jan. 1, 2015 and Election Day 2016; and data from five waves of the Simmons National Consumer Survey on TV viewing patterns and [consumer behavior](#) completed between Nov. 10, 2015, and March 7, 2017. The latter survey, used to gauge consumer preferences, also included a detailed section on health ailments and engagement with doctors about those concerns.

The Simmons survey asked respondents, "Have you been told by a doctor or other health care professional in the past year that you have ..." followed by a series of conditions that respondents could check as applicable—anxiety, depression and insomnia, as well as a negative control condition (cancer), in an attempt to clearly illustrate ad exposure's link to mental wellness.

The study found consistent positive association between the volume of campaign advertising exposure and a reported diagnosis of anxiety among U.S. adults, suggesting that elections themselves may contribute to individual-level mental health issues.

One of the aims of the study was assessing whether associations between campaign ad exposure and mental health outcomes varied by political party of the respondent, the party of the candidate featured in the ad, or the office under consideration.

The nature of the 2016 [presidential campaign](#) made that particularly relevant, Niederdeppe said.

"We included that analysis [of the presidential vs. non-presidential ads] as a check, essentially, to say, 'Is this a Trump vs. Clinton effect?'" he said. "Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had a uniquely divisive rhetoric and campaign and so one possible explanation would say, 'Hey, is this just an outlier, because it's 2016?'"

Political ads in general have gotten increasingly negative, Niederdeppe said, because research has shown that people pay attention to and remember those types of ads more than positive messages.

Political ads also tend to catch people "in environments where they're not looking for them—a commercial break embedded within other programming," he said. "You don't watch 'Jeopardy!' with the purpose of

seeking out political information. But there it is."

Niederdeppe hopes this research can be part of a larger conversation on the effect of campaign advertising on public health.

"If these results play out in future election cycles, there's an immediate sort of public health readiness kind of element to this," he said. "If you know that these [political ads](#) are going to potentially increase the number of people who need treatment for anxiety, say, then you can prepare as a sort of public health infrastructure by offering by broadening treatment or having treatment plans ready for how you might deal with this particular form of anxiety."

He said it could also inform the existence and tone of [campaign](#) ads themselves.

"I would never say you have to ban all political ads," he said. "But should you consider the broader [health](#) implications of political messaging? When you're considering the right way to go about regulating this in the future, I think the answer is yes, that should be one factor."

More information: Jeff Niederdeppe et al. Exposure to televised political campaign advertisements aired in the United States 2015–2016 election cycle and psychological distress, *Social Science & Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113898](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113898)

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