

Voting causes stress: study

September 14 2011

As the United States nears another election day, researchers at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) have determined scientifically, for the first time, that voting is a stressful event, inducing measurable hormonal changes.

According to Prof. Hagit Cohen from the Anxiety and Stress Research Unit at BGU's Faculty of Health Sciences, "We understand that emotional changes are related and affect various [physiological processes](#), but we were surprised that voting in democratic elections causes [emotional reactions](#) accompanied by such physical and [psychological stress](#) that can easily influence our decision making."

In a study to be published in the print journal, *European Neuropsychopharmacology*, researchers found that the level of cortisol - a hormone secreted in times of stress to help the body cope with threats -- was nearly three times higher just before voting than the cortisol level of the control group, and nearly twice their level 21 months later. It is known that when a person is in a state of stress, threat or emotional distress, the body releases a series of hormones such as cortisol, known as the "stress hormone."

The study was conducted on Israel's Election Day in 2009 on 113 people who were on their way to vote. They were asked to give a saliva sample for cortisol testing and to complete a questionnaire examining their emotional arousal at a stand that was placed about 10 meters from the ballot box. The control group consisted of other people from the same area who were asked to give a [saliva test](#) and complete the questionnaire

on post-election day.

The study also found that people were more emotionally aroused just before casting their ballot. "Since we do not like to feel 'stressed out'," adds Prof. Cohen, "It is unclear whether this pressure on Election Day can influence people and cause them not to vote at all. Impact on voter turnout is particularly important given that the [stress levels](#) rise if our preferred party or candidate for whom we want to vote is not popular in the polls and projections."

The researchers emphasized that their findings are only a first step in understanding the relationship between stress at a biological level and voting, and that their study did not examine -- and therefore did not find -- if high levels of cortisol affect choice. However, evidence about the decision making processes and biological processes in the body should be explored in future research.

Provided by American Associates, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Citation: Voting causes stress: study (2011, September 14) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-09-voting-stress.html>

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