

Election risk: Elected heads of government win greater risk of early death

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We see it happen all too often: The youthful visage of a candidate becomes, in a few short years, the grizzled countenance of a head of state. But is this oft-observed rapid aging evidence of a statistically significant health impact of being an elected head of state?

A team of researchers led by senior author Anupam Jena, associate professor of health care policy at Harvard Medical School, set out to test the theory that politicians elected to lead a country's government may experience premature death.

After adjusting for life expectancy at time of last election, the team found that elected leaders lived 2.7 fewer years and experienced a 23 percent greater risk of death compared to runners-up.

"This suggests that the stress of governing may substantially accelerate mortality for our elected leaders," said Anupam Jena, who is also a physician at Massachusetts General Hospital.

The results are published in the Christmas issue of *The BMJ*.

"By comparing the lifespans of elected leaders with runners-up, we were able to calculate the mortality cost of winning elections and serving as head of state," said co-author Andrew Olenski, HMS research assistant in [health care policy](#).

The researchers compared 279 nationally elected leaders from 17

countries to 261 unelected candidates who never served in office. The study group was made up of candidates in elections that took place from 1722 to 2015.

The researchers determined the number of years each competitor lived after the last election that they ran in, and compared the results to the average life span for an individual of the same age and sex as the candidate during the year of the election.

The researchers designed their study to overcome the limitations of similar studies of elected officials and other successful individuals.

The researchers said that earlier research by others found no significant effect on the life expectancies of U.S. presidents, perhaps because the sample size was too small. In addition, presidents would be expected to live longer than the general population due to higher socioeconomic status alone. The failure of prior studies to detect a difference suggests that mortality costs of being president may have been masked. Similar studies of [life expectancies](#) for winners of prestigious prizes such as the Academy Awards and the Nobel Prize have also been conducted.

More information: Do heads of government age more quickly? An observational study comparing mortality between elected leaders and runners-up in national elections of 17 countries, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.h6424

Parliamentary privilege - mortality in members of the Houses of Parliament compared with the UK general population: retrospective cohort analysis, 1945-2011, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.h6563

Provided by Harvard Medical School

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