

# Politics still make people sick

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Scrolling social media, reading websites, listening to podcasts, watching news. With so many options, it's never been easier to follow American politics, but at what cost?

According to research from University of Nebraska–Lincoln political

scientist Kevin Smith, all the political jockeying is harmful to our health, has been for some time, and even a change in party power didn't help.

In a follow-up to the groundbreaking 2017 survey study where he first measured the effects of the political climate on Americans' physical, social, mental and [emotional health](#), Smith has published a new article in *PLOS ONE*. Smith repeated the same 32-question survey twice in 2020—two weeks prior to the election, and two weeks after. The 2020 findings mirrored the 2017 results, and again found that a large proportion of American adults blame politics for causing them stress, loss of sleep, fractured relationships and more.

Similar to the 2017 findings, the 2020 surveys found that an estimated 40% of Americans identified politics as a significant source of stress. Additionally, between a fifth and a third of adults (50 to 85 million people) blamed politics for causing fatigue, feelings of anger, loss of temper and triggering compulsive behaviors. About a quarter of adults reported they'd given serious consideration to moving because of politics.

That the results remained mostly stable after nearly four years is cause for alarm, Smith said.

"This second round of surveys pretty conclusively demonstrates that the first survey was not out of left field—that what we found in that first survey really is indicative of what many Americans are experiencing," Smith, chair and professor of political science, said. "It's also unpleasant to think that in that span of time, nothing changed. A huge chunk of American adults genuinely perceive politics is exacting a serious toll on their social, their psychological and even their physical health."

Smith repeated the survey with the same group of people both before and after the election to see if the election's outcome—whatever it ended

up being—would recast people's perceptions.

"We wondered if a change in presidency, which indeed was the case, would shift attitudes, and the short answer is no," Smith said. "If anything, the costs that people perceive politics is exacting on their health increased a little bit after the election."

Most stunning to Smith was the repeated finding that 5% of Americans blame politics for having suicidal thoughts.

"One in 20 adults has contemplated suicide because of politics," Smith said. "That showed up in the first survey in 2017, and we wondered if it was a statistical artifact. But in the two surveys since, we found exactly the same thing, so millions of American adults have contemplated suicide because of politics. That's a serious health problem."

Adults who were most likely to be negatively affected by politics were younger, more often Democratic-leaning, more interested in politics and more politically engaged.

"If there's a profile of a person who is more likely to experience these effects from politics, it's people with those traits," Smith said.

Besides pointing to a possible health crisis, Smith warned the findings could be a bad recipe for democracy.

"There's potential for a demobilization effect here," Smith said. "If people view politics as so conflictual, and potentially a threat to their own well-being, they'll say 'heck with it, I don't want to get involved.' And democracies depend on participation. We need civically-engaged citizens."

So, how can these effects be mitigated? Smith said that's a question he

plans to explore further in future research, though his team has identified one possible tool: becoming more politically knowledgeable.

"People who were more politically knowledgeable were less likely to report these negative outcomes," Smith said. "Something I'd really like to look at would be if you took somebody who's politically interested, but not particularly politically knowledgeable, and they were given information about the political system, would that reduce these negative costs of politics? That could be a positive outcome of civic education that's never been considered before."

**More information:** Politics is making us sick: The negative impact of political engagement on public health during the Trump administration, *PLOS ONE* (2022).

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