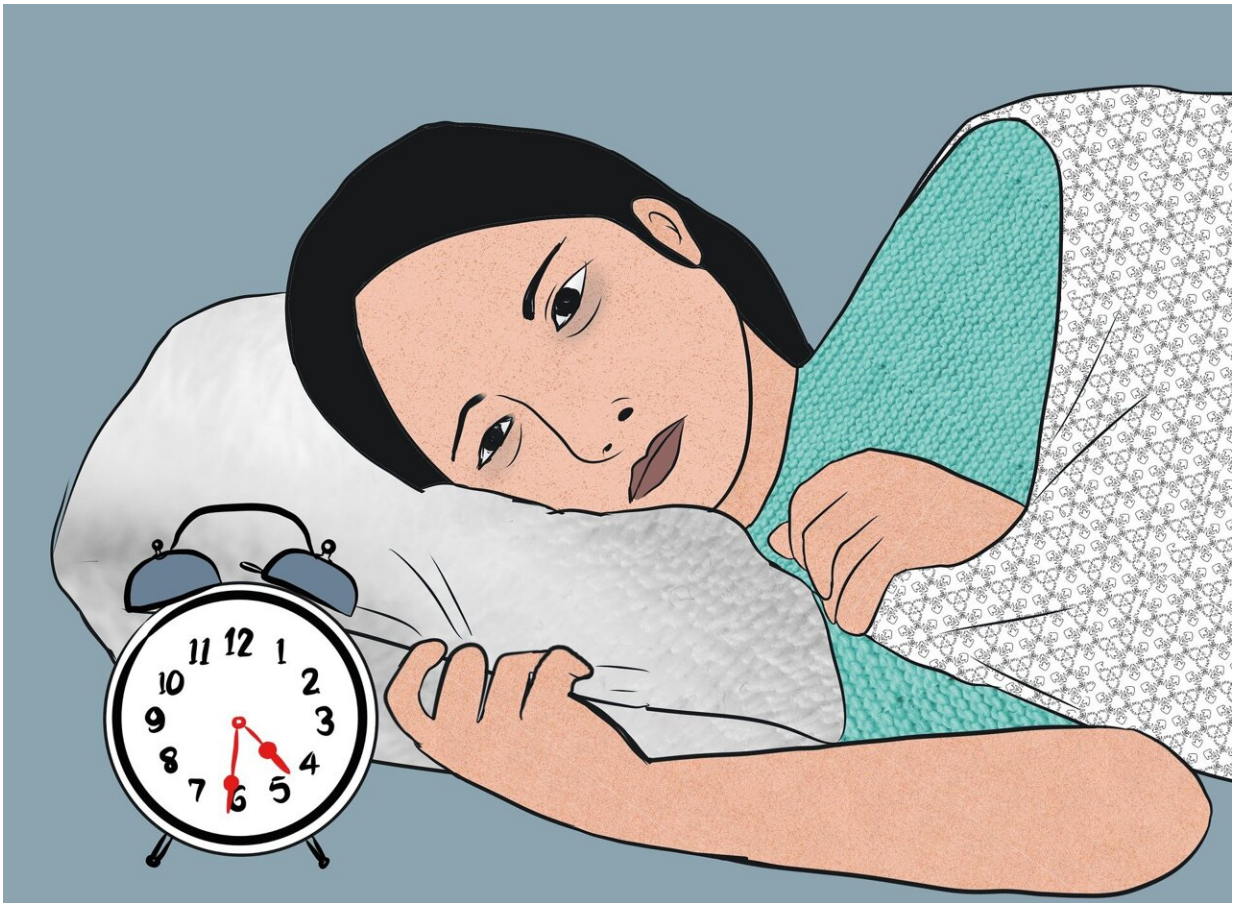


New research suggests political events impact sleep

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Major political and societal events can have dramatic impacts on psychological health and impact sleep and emotional well-being. While

conventional wisdom suggests these highly anticipated events, such as elections, can cause stress and disrupt well-being, little research has been published exploring this relationship.

Now, researchers at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) and colleagues show how major sociopolitical events can have global impacts on sleep that are associated with significant fluctuations in the public's collective [mood](#), well-being, and [alcohol consumption](#). The findings, published in the journal *Sleep Health* show that divisive political events negatively influenced a wide variety of factors related to public mood.

"It is unlikely that these findings will come as shock to many given the political turbulence of the last several years," said corresponding author Tony Cunningham, Ph.D., director of the Center for Sleep and Cognition at BIDMC. "Our results likely mirror many of our own experiences surrounding highly stressful events, and we felt this was an opportunity to scientifically validate these assumptions."

As part of a larger study exploring the sleep and psychological repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the team surveyed 437 participants in the United States and 106 international participants daily between October 1–13, 2020 (before the [election](#)) and October 30–November 12, 2020 (days surrounding the November 3 U.S. election). Participants reported on their duration and quality of sleep, alcohol consumption and subjective experience of overall [stress](#).

Their responses revealed reduced sleep quantity and efficiency coupled with heightened stress, negative mood and alcohol use in the period surrounding the election. While these results were observed at a lower level in non-U.S. participants, worsening health habits were significantly correlated with mood and stress only among U.S. residents.

The daily surveys—delivered each morning at 8:00 am local time—asked respondents to assess the previous night's sleep by recording their bedtimes, time required to fall asleep, number of awakenings through the night, morning wake time and time spent napping during the day. They also recorded the previous night's alcohol consumption. Mood was assessed using a validated questionnaire as well as questions from a standard depression screening tool.

With regard to sleep, both U.S. and non-U.S. participants reported losing sleep in the run-up to the election; however, U.S. respondents had significantly less time in bed in the days around the election. On Election night itself, U.S. participants reported waking up frequently during the night and experiencing poorer sleep efficiency.

U.S. participants who ever reported drinking alcohol significantly increased consumption on three days during the assessment period: Halloween, Election Day and the day the election was called by more media outlets, Saturday, November 7. Among non-U.S. participants, there was no change in alcohol consumption over the November assessment period.

When the scientists looked at how these changes in behavior may have affected mood and well-being of U.S. participants, they found significant links between sleep and drinking, stress, negative mood, and depression.

Analysis revealed that stress levels were largely consistent for both U.S. and non-U.S. participants in the assessment period in early October, but there was a sharp rise in reported stress for both groups in the days leading up to the November 3 election. Stress levels dropped dramatically once the election was officially called November 7. This pattern held for both U.S. and non-U.S. residence, but changes in stress levels were significantly greater in U.S. participants.

U.S. participants reported a similar pattern with depression that their non-U.S. counterparts did not experience; however, non-U.S. participants reported significant decreases in negative mood and depression the day after the election was called.

"This is the first study to find that there is a relationship between the previously reported changes in Election Day public mood and sleep the night of the election," Cunningham said.

"Moreover, it is not just that elections may influence sleep, but evidence suggests that sleep may influence civic engagement and participation in elections as well. Thus, if the relationship between sleep and elections is also bidirectional, it will be important for future research to determine how public mood and stress effects on sleep leading up to an election may effect or even alter its outcome."

The authors emphasize that the interpretation of their results are limited in that the experience of the majority of participants was the buildup of election stress and subsequent response dependent on their preferred political candidate. Further research with a more representative and diverse sample is needed to confirm the impacts of political stress on public mood and sleep for the general public.

"The 2020 election took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Cunningham. "Despite the chronic stress experienced during that time, the acute stress of the election still had clear impacts on mood and sleep. As such, research exploring the impact of the pandemic should also consider other overlapping, acute stressors that may exert their own influence to avoid inappropriately attributing effects to the pandemic."

More information: Tony J. Cunningham et al, How the 2020 US Presidential election impacted sleep and its relationship to public mood

and alcohol consumption, *Sleep Health* (2022). DOI: [10.1016/j.sleh.2022.08.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2022.08.009)

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