

# Political news takes mental toll, but is disengaging the answer?

January 19 2023, by Alan Mozes

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In today's highly polarized political environment, is it possible to stay up-

to-date with the news of the day without getting totally stressed out?

If not, is there a way to limit the emotional and physical fallout? Or is all that individual stress in service of a greater societal good?

New research paints a complex picture with no easy answers.

On the one hand, paying close attention to the daily doings of politicians does appear to have a way of making people feel consistently bad, investigators found. And those negative emotions appear to take a toll, they warn, in the form of poorer mental *and* physical health.

On the upside, the study also found that staying politically informed appears to serve a larger good, motivating people to get more involved in important causes, through [volunteer work](#) or financial donations.

"We expected people would have [negative reactions](#) to politics each day, but we were somewhat surprised by how consistent the effects were," noted study author [Matthew Feinberg](#), an associate professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

What's clear, however, is that all that negativity seems to source back to a fundamental fact, Feinberg said, People take politics very, very personally.

"They internalize what happens in the [political arena](#)," he said. And the result is that all "the scandals, the incivility and the animosity so common and central in the political arena is impairing many people's well-being on a daily basis."

Feinberg and his colleagues pointed out that theirs is not the first study to find that politics gives rise to stress. But much of the prior research has focused on stress related to major political moments, like an

election.

To dig deeper, the latest study set out to look at how people react to the routine [political news](#) of the day.

For their first experiment, the team spent two weeks speaking with nearly 200 Americans of all political stripes.

Each day, participants were asked to highlight the political [news](#) that was top of mind; how they felt about that news; what—if anything—they did to process their feelings and overall well-being, and how motivated they felt to get involved politically.

Participants were *not* asked to focus solely on negative reactions to political news. Yet most did so anyway, suggesting that exposure to daily politics is largely a [negative experience](#).

And all the [negative emotions](#) triggered by a steady stream of daily political news was linked to reports of worse overall health, both mentally and physically, the team found.

In a second experiment, investigators asked more than 800 Americans—again of all political stripes—to watch a TV news brief. Liberals viewed a clip of a liberal host, MSNBC's Rachel Maddow. Conservatives viewed a clip of a conservative host, Fox News' Tucker Carlson.

Compared with participants who watched "neutral" non-political clips, those who watched one of the partisan reports said they felt much more negatively afterwards.

Still, both experiments highlighted a positive aspect of constant political news exposure: In both cases, participants said feeling bad about the

news made them more likely to get involved in politics, regardless of political affiliation.

And in both cases, participants also suggested that there are effective ways to tamp down on their negative reactions to the news. One was simply by taking steps to distract and disengage from the daily political shake-out. The other was to try to "reframe" their reaction to political events.

"In terms of protecting oneself, we find that using emotion regulation strategies—so that people rethink or reinterpret political happenings in a way that makes them less emotionally evocative—can help," Feinberg explained.

"For instance," he noted, "people can distance themselves from politics by reminding themselves how what is happening in the political arena has little to do with their personal lives. Alternatively, people can take a break from politics and instead distract themselves with something more enjoyable and apolitical, [such as] watching a movie or playing a video game."

But that seemed to give rise to a "difficult trade-off," Feinberg noted. Because in both experiments, when people took steps to limit the emotional fallout, they also ended up less engaged with the political process.

"If you don't protect yourself, you'll be more likely to experience worse well-being, but be more motivated to take action," Feinberg noted. "If you do protect yourself, you'll likely have better well-being, but be less motivated to take action."

The findings were published online Jan. 19 in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

[Lynn Bufka](#), a member of American Psychological Association's "Stress in America" team, noted one other reason for why political news engenders negative reactions.

"Our news cycle tends to highlight controversial aspects of politics, and perhaps 'pull for' more negative emotion" by focusing on "the negative components of political actions," said Bufka, who wasn't part of the study.

In that context, she agreed that "learning to manage emotions is important," even if doing so increases the risk that they'll be "less motivated to take actions consistent with their political points of view."

The challenge for people, Bufka said, is "to find ways to maintain their motivation to act and at the same time to work towards desired change, while still managing what can be strong emotions."

**More information:** There's more on coping with stress at [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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