



Anatomy of Political Stress: What it Is, Symptoms, Vulnerable Populations, and Protective Factors



Section 1: Game Plan

Make the case for six depressing propositions:



1: Politics is
negatively
associated with
well-being



1. Politics negatively associated with well-being
2. Politics is a *unique* social stressor



1. Politics negatively associated with well-being
2. Politics is a *unique* social stressor
3. We can quantify/measure political stress and separate it from general stress



1. Politics negatively associated with well-being
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3. We can quantify/measure political stress and separate it from general stress
4. Those measures point to a serious public health problem



1. Politics negatively associated with well-being
2. Politics is a *unique* social stressor
3. We can quantify/measure political stress and separate it from general stress
4. Those measures point to a serious public health problem
5. Political stress is more **chronic** rather than acute



1. Politics negatively associated with well-being
2. Politics is a *unique* social stressor
3. We can quantify/measure political stress and separate it from general stress
4. Those measures point to a serious public health problem
5. Political stress is chronic rather than acute
6. Political stress impacts some more than others



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5. Political stress is chronic rather than acute
6. Political stress impacts some more than others

ANY QUESTIONS BEFORE DIVE IN??





1. What Are We Afraid Of???



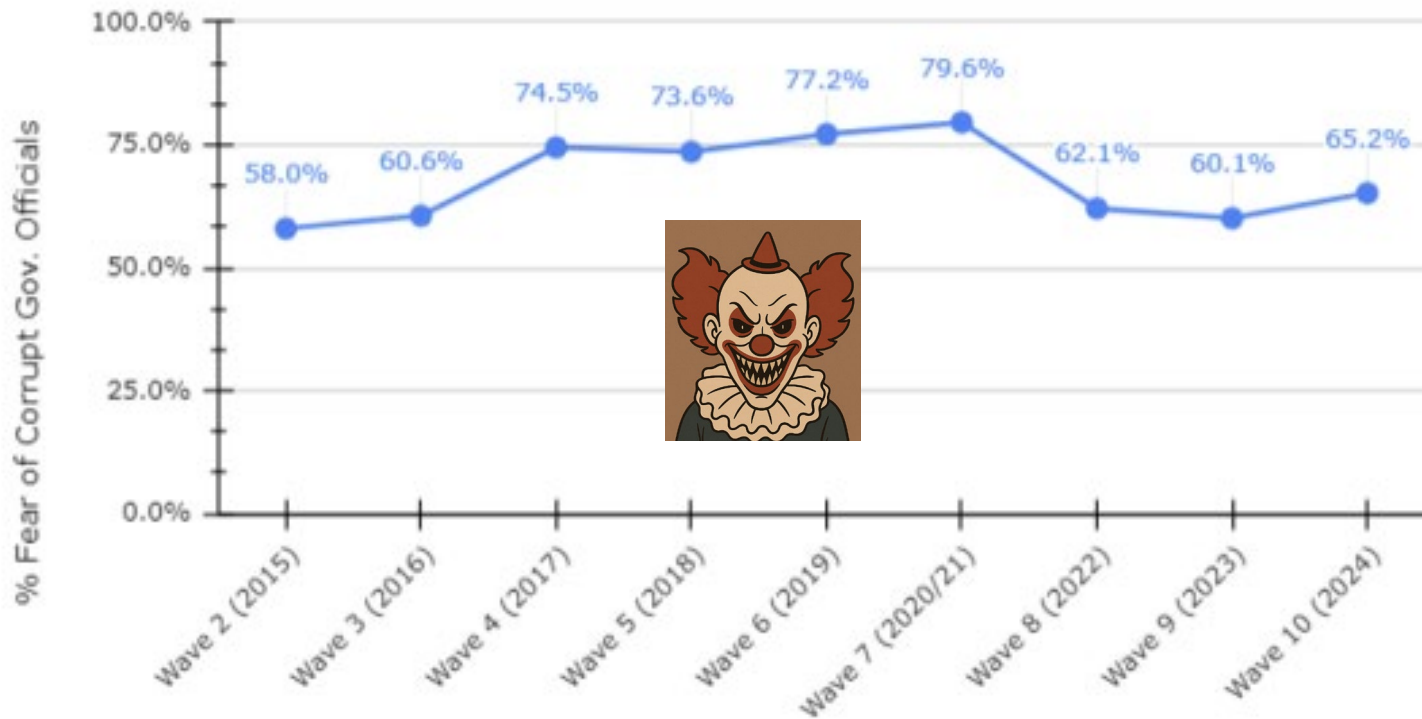
Your candidate is going to lose

Top 10 Fears of 2024

Fear	% of Very Afraid or Afraid	Rank in 2023	
1. Corrupt Government Officials	65.2%	1	
2. People I Love Becoming Seriously Ill	58.4%	5	⬆️
3. Cyberterrorism	58.3%	9	⬆️
4. People I Love Dying	57.8%	6	⬆️
5. Russia Using Nuclear Weapons	55.8%	3	⬇️

Source: [2024-csaf-key-findings-final.pdf](#)

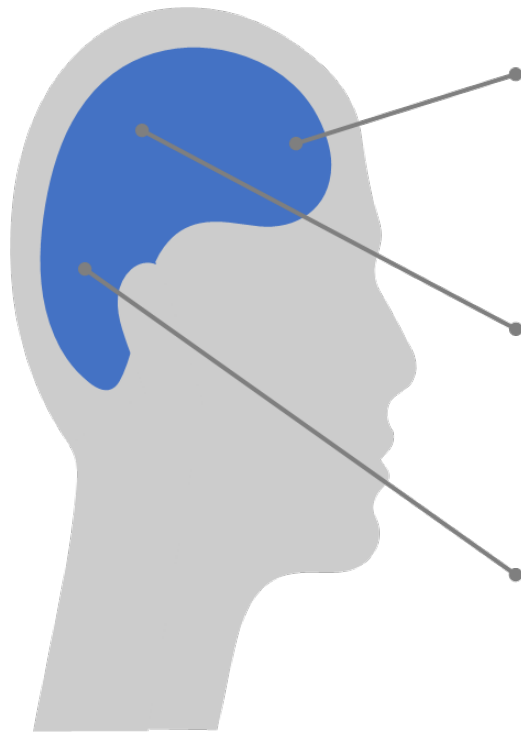
Fear of Corrupt Government Officials (%) by Year



Source: Chapman Survey of American Fears 2015-2024 by Tyler Coker ('25)

The nation's number one fear for a long time!

People Say Politics Is A Source of Anxiety and Stress



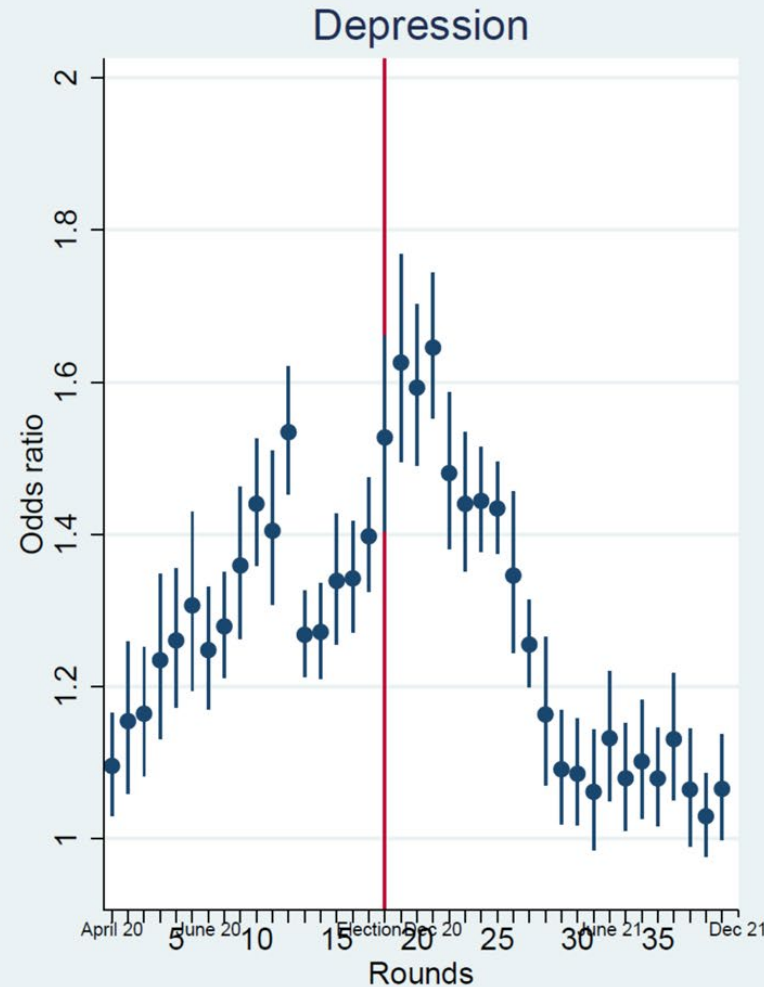
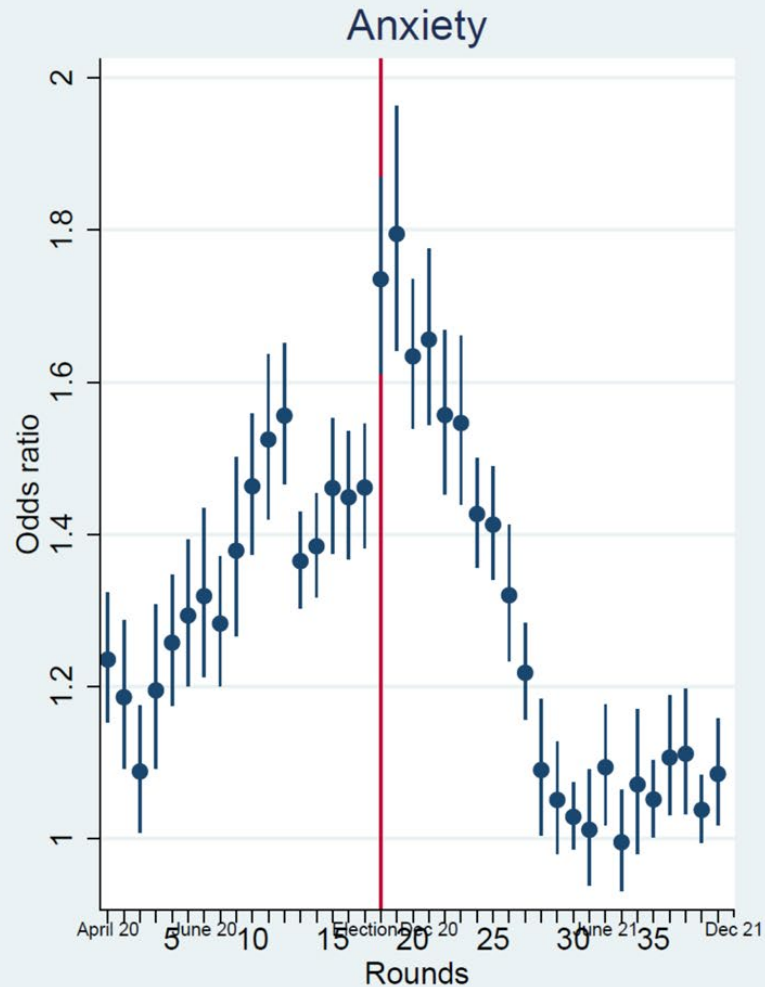
American Psychological Association says politics is a significant source of stress for 76% of adults

64% say they feel like their rights are under attack.

More than half of you adults (ages 18-34) say they've considered leaving the country because of its politics



Presidential election and mental distress



Scholars increasingly associate politics with various mental health issues

Results from weekly survey from Spring 2020 to December 2021

People report more symptoms of anxiety / stress (also mental health visits/mental health medication use) as election nears, symptoms drop after election

Source: Muckhodpadhyay, 2022



How the 2020 US Presidential election impacted sleep and its relationship to public mood and alcohol consumption

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Major sociopolitical events can influence the general public's affective state and other affect-related processes, such as sleep. Here, we investigated the extent that the 2020 US presidential election impacted sleep, public mood, and alcohol consumption. We also explored the relationship between affect and sleep changes during the peak period of election stress.

Participants: US-residing ($n = 437$) and non-US-residing ($n = 106$) participants were recruited online for participation in the study.

Methods: A non-representative, convenience sample responded to daily assessments of their affect, sleep, and alcohol consumption during a baseline period (October 1–13, 2020) and in the days surrounding the 2020 US Election (October 30–November 12, 2020).

Results: Analyses determined changes within and between US and non-US participants. Election Day evoked significantly reduced sleep amount and efficiency, coupled with heightened stress, negative affect, and increased alcohol use. While US participants were significantly more impacted in a number of domains, non-US participants also reported reduced sleep and greater stress compared to baseline. Across participants, disrupted sleep on Election Night correlated with changes in emotional well-being and alcohol consumption on Election Day.

Conclusion: These results suggest that major sociopolitical events can have global impacts on sleep that may interact with significant fluctuations in public mood and well-being. Further, while the largest impact is on the local population, these results suggest that the effects can extend beyond borders. These findings highlight the potential impact of future sociopolitical events on public well-being.

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It's not just in our heads: politics associated with dysfunctional/unhealthy behaviors, e.g. increased alcohol use/lost sleep etc



It's Not Just Psychological Health Well-Being, but Physical Health Too

Journal of the American Heart Association

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Arrhythmia Risk During the 2016 US Presidential Election: The Cost of Stressful Politics

Lindsey Rosman , PhD; Elena Salmeron-Blotcher , MD, PhD; Rafat Mahmood, MD; Hannan Yang, BS; Quefeng Li, PhD; Anthony J. Mazzella , MD; Jeffrey Lawrence Klein, MD; Joseph Bumgarner, MD; Anil Gehl, MD

BACKGROUND: Anger and extreme stress can trigger potentially fatal cardiovascular events in susceptible people. Political elections, such as the 2016 US presidential election, are significant stressors. Whether they can trigger cardiac arrhythmias is unknown.

METHODS AND RESULTS: In this retrospective case-crossover study, we linked cardiac device data, electronic health records, and historic voter registration records from 2436 patients with implanted cardiac devices. The incidence of arrhythmias during the election was compared with a control period with Poisson regression. We also tested for effect modification by demographics, comorbidities, political affiliation, and whether an individual's political affiliation was concordant with county-level election results. Overall, 2592 arrhythmic events occurred in 655 patients during the hazard period compared with 1563 events in 472 patients during the control period. There was a significant increase in the incidence of composite outcomes for any arrhythmia (incidence rate ratio [IRR], 1.77 [95% CI, 1.42–2.21]), supraventricular arrhythmia (IRR, 1.82 [95% CI, 1.36–2.43]), and ventricular arrhythmia (IRR, 1.60 [95% CI, 1.22–2.10]) during the election relative to the control period. There was also an increase in specific types of arrhythmia, including atrial fibrillation (IRR, 1.50 [95% CI, 1.06–2.11]), supraventricular tachycardia (IRR, 3.7 [95% CI, 2.2–6.2]), nonsustained ventricular tachycardia (IRR, 1.7 [95% CI, 1.3–2.2]), and daily atrial fibrillation burden ($P < 0.001$). No significant interaction was found for sex, race/ethnicity, device type, age > 65 years, hypertension, coronary artery disease, heart failure, political affiliation, or concordance between individual political affiliation and county-level election results.

CONCLUSIONS: There was a significant increase in cardiac arrhythmias during the 2016 US presidential election. These findings suggest that exposure to stressful sociopolitical events may trigger arrhythmogenesis in susceptible people.

Key Words: arrhythmia ■ implantable cardioverter-defibrillator ■ mental stress ■ pacemaker ■ triggers

People with underlying heart conditions experience up to a 77% increase in the risk of cardiac arrhythmia in election season compared to non-election season (this study looks at 2016 presidential election)

Presidential elections are high-stakes, stressful polarized reactions to the unexpected election results.¹

The Media Increasingly Reports That Politics is a Major Source of Stress and Anxiety

ung adults, the 201... America's Top Fears 2016 - Cl... X

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For some young
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TRENDING Government Shutdown



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Be Mindful

Feeling Stressed? Experts Warn America's Political Turmoil is Taking Toll on Mental Health



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HEALTH

Feeling the stress of Election Day? Here are a few healthy ways to cope

UPDATED NOVEMBER 5, 2024 · 11:01 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

Obed Manuel

2-Minute Listen PLAYLIST TRANSCRIPT

Aliza Biding is accompanied by her son Jayce, age 6, as she votes at the 146-year-old Buck Creek school on Election Day, Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2024, in rural Perry, Kan.

aches – is political health?

article

etrics

ent with politics is associated

h, a bumper election year and

ns.

over Washington, DC, on that 6 January in 2021. As the

ross the country watched in shock. Newsreel after

ng footage of a mob storming the US Capitol Building,

il to a climax after a tense few weeks. Since the 2020

tbreaks of protest, voter fraud accusations and legal

battles had followed months of divisive rhetoric, all at the peak of a pandemic

wave that plunged the economy into crisis.



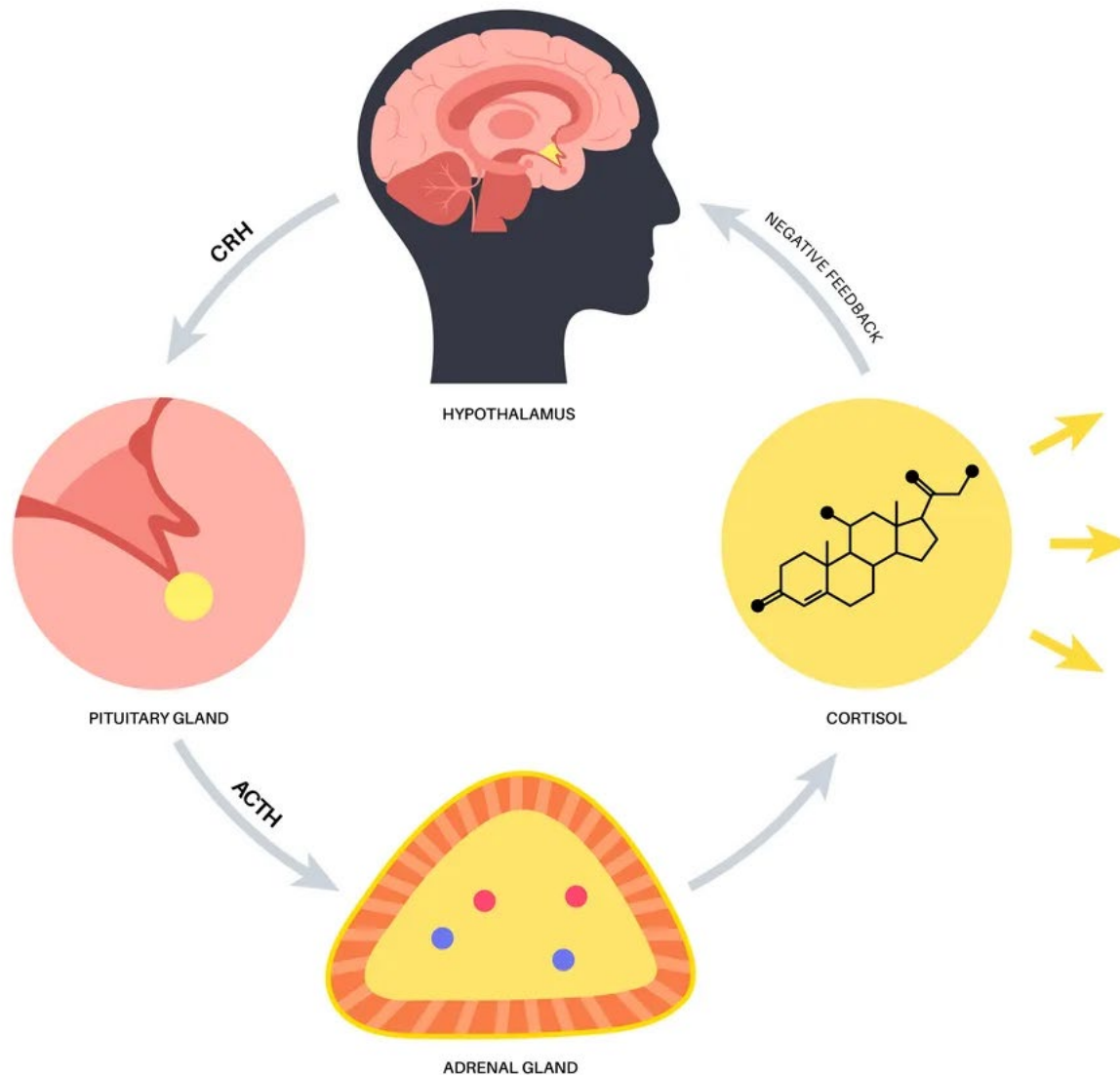
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- There are lots of reasons to suspect that politics is having a negative impact on well-being
 - Not least—psychologists and therapists increasingly report treating patients who attribute degradation of mental and social health to politics



2. But Is Politics Actually The Problem?

- Stresses of modern life—politics just one among many?
- Anxiety/stress depression
 - Politics maybe play **a** role, but not **the** role?
- All get a bit jittery around elections, but they come and go? It is an acute rather than chronic problem?

STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM



APA definition of stress: a physiological and/or psychological response to an external stressor

Stressor = stimulus that disturbs homeostasis

Anxiety = same thing, but an *internal* stressor

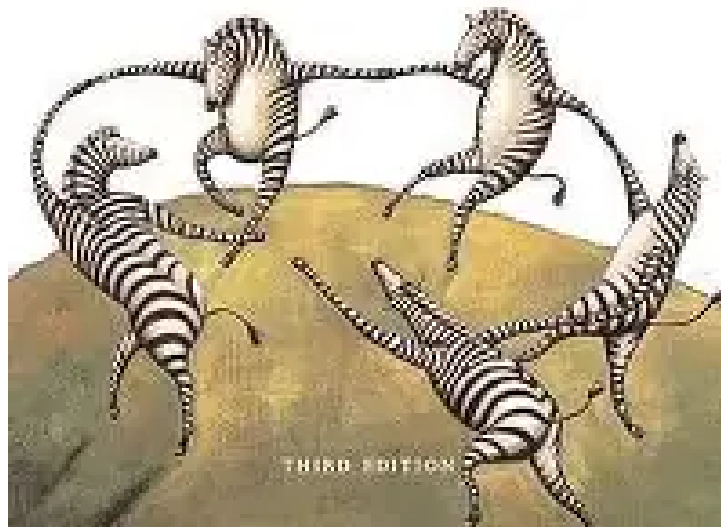
ROBERT M. SAPOLSKY

Author of A Primate's Memoir

WHY ZEBRAS DON'T GET ULCERS

The Acclaimed Guide to Stress, Stress-Related
Diseases, and Coping—Now Revised and Updated

"One of the best science writers of our time."
—Ole Sar Sævi



Acute stress/anxiety – transient, response to something temporary (seeing a bear, thinking about upcoming test)

Evolutionary adaptive, even pleasurable (roller coasters!)

If this is what political stress is, maybe not a problem?

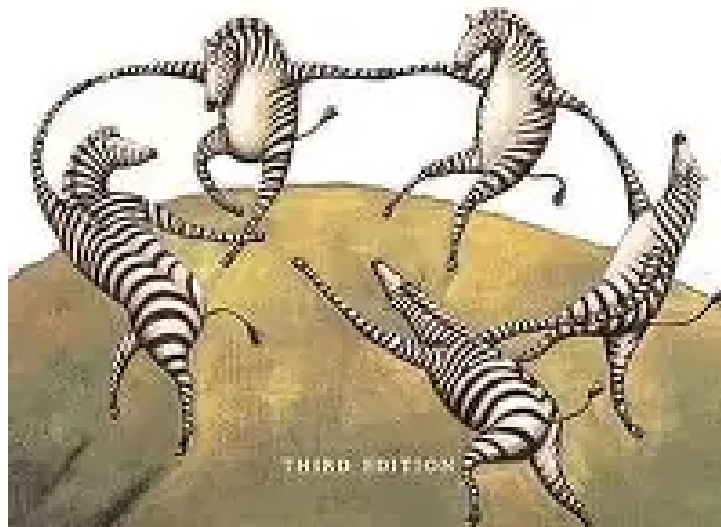
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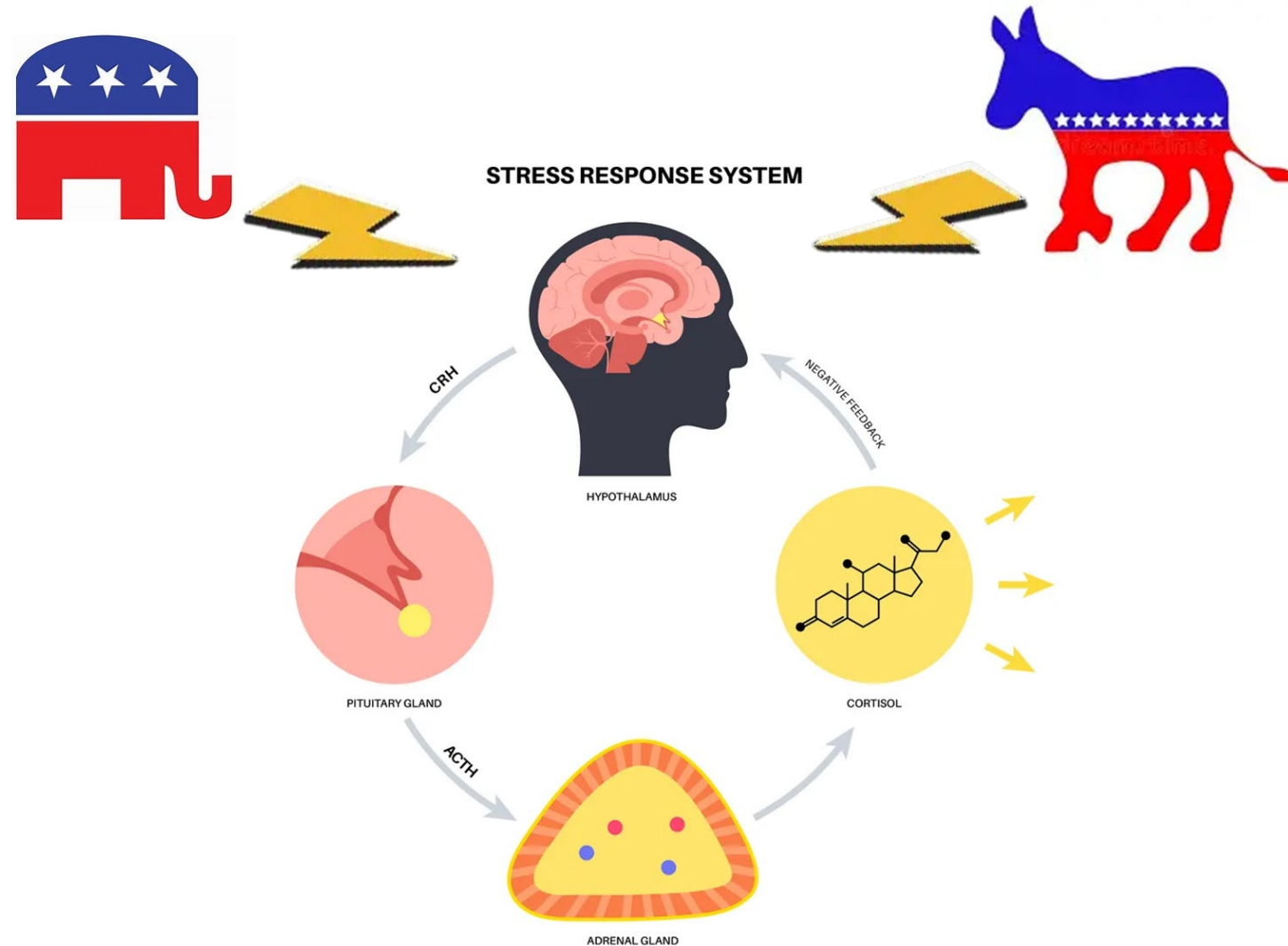
Chronic stress/anxiety – repeated, long-term exposure to stressor

Long linked to health impacts—depression, self-medication, lost sleep, anxiety disorders, range of other mental health problems, behavioral disorders, ulcers, cardiac problems etc etc

If this is what political stress is then big implications for individual and public health

You tell me: What do you think—political stress (if a distinct Phenomenon) more likely to be acute or chronic? Why?

Is This What Politics Is Actually Doing? Is it a Unique Stressor? How Would We Know if it Was?





3. Measurement Approaches

Can try to measure political stress and differentiate it from general stress in a number of ways.

Examples:

- Single question (APA/Chapman)
- Physiologically
- Adapt validated scale



OPEN ACCESS

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Data Availability Statement: Data for Smith, Kevin

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Voting at Home Is Associated with Lower Cortisol than Voting at the Polls

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Abstract

Previous research finds that voting is a socially stressful activity associated with increases in cortisol levels. Here we extend this research by investigating whether different voting modalities have differential effects on the stress response to voting. Results from a field experiment conducted during the 2012 presidential elections strongly suggest that traditional “at the polls” voting is more stressful, as measured by increases in cortisol levels, than voting at home by mail-in ballot or engaging in comparable non-political social activities. These findings imply that increased low-stress voting options such as mail-in ballots may increase political participation among individuals who are sensitive to social stressors.

Introduction

Several recent studies suggest a correlation between political participation and the functioning of the neuroendocrine stress system. Specifically, the basal activity and stress-response of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis have been assessed by taking individual-level cortisol assays and correlating the results with various aspects of voting [1–4]. Cortisol is a glucocorticoid that helps regulate the HPA axis and is well-known to be associated with stress response (cortisol is sometimes referred to as “the stress hormone”). That cortisol levels co-vary with political participation makes a good deal of sense; differences in HPA-axis function are known



Cortisol and politics: Variance in voting behavior is predicted by baseline cortisol levels



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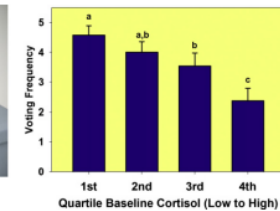
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HIGHLIGHTS

- Participation in national elections in U.S. is low: 40–60% of voters participate.
- We measured actual voting behavior and nonvoting political activities.
- Variation in baseline cortisol (CORT) accounts for variance in voting behavior.
- CORT differences do not explain variation in other kinds of political involvement.
- First demonstration that actual electoral participation associated with physiology

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

Participation in electoral politics is affected by a host of social and demographics variables, but there is growing evidence that biological predispositions may also play a role in behavior related to political involvement. We examined the role of individual variation in hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) stress axis parameters in explaining differences in self-reported and actual participation in political activities. Self-reported political activity, religious participation, and verified voting activity in U.S. national elections were collected from 105 participants, who were subsequently exposed to a standardized (nonpolitical) psychosocial stressor. We demonstrated that lower baseline salivary cortisol in the late afternoon was significantly associated with increased actual voting frequency in six national elections, but not with self-reported non-voting political activity. Baseline cortisol predicted significant variation in voting behavior above and beyond variation accounted for by traditional demographic variables (particularly age of participant in our sample). Participation in religious activity was weakly (and negatively) associated with baseline cortisol. Our results suggest that HPA-mediated characteristics of social, cognitive, and emotional processes may exert an influence on a trait as complex as voting behavior, and that cortisol is a better predictor of actual voting behavior, as opposed to self-reported political activity.

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Can measure political stimulus -> stress response physiologically.

Cortisol studies clearly suggest political engagement elicits a stress response

Perceived Stress Scale (Kohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983)

The questions below ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way about politics.

0 = Never, 1 = Almost Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Fairly Often, 4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you felt upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt you were unable to control the important things in your life?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?
- 4.* In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- 5.* In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things you had to do?
- 7.* In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that are beyond your control?
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?



Perceived Political Stress Scale (derived from Kohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983)

The questions below ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way about politics.

0 = Never, 1 = Almost Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Fairly Often, 4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you felt upset because of some political event that happened unexpectedly?
 2. In the last month, how often have you felt that politics has gotten in the way of controlling the important things in your life?
 3. In the last month how often have you felt nervous and “stressed” about politics?
 - 4.* In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle political problems you see, hear, or read about?
 - 5.* In the last month, how often have you felt that things in politics were going your way?
 6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the political news and information?
 - 7.* In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations about politics in your life?
 8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of political news?
 9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of politics?
 10. In the last month, how often have you felt political difficulties were piling up so high that you could not see the country overcoming them?
- * indicates reverse coding needed.



Source: Warren 2022 – the Perceived Political Stress Scale Directly adapted from Perceived Stress Scale

Below is a list of problems that people sometimes have in response to a stressful election. Please read each problem carefully and then circle one of the numbers to the right to indicate how much you have been bothered by that problem in the past month.

- Answers: Not at all | A little bit | Moderately | Quite a bit | Extremely

- 1 Repeated, disturbing, and unwanted memories of the election?
 - 2 Repeated, disturbing dreams of the election?
 - 3 Suddenly feeling or acting as if the election were actually happening again (as if you were actually back there reliving it)?
 - 4 Feeling very upset when something reminded you of the election?
 - 5 Having strong physical reactions when something reminded you of the election (for example, heart pounding, trouble breathing, sweating)?
 - 6 Avoiding memories, thoughts, or feelings related to the election?
-

PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) – Validated Diagnostic Check for PTSD

Combined Scale 0-80 with scores ≥ 31
indicative of PTSD

20-item PCL-5 Questions, adapted for 2020 Election

Just substituted “election” for “event”

The Most Commonly Used (So Far) Measure of Political Stress

- First real attempt at comprehensive measure of impact of politics on well-being
- Data N=800, 2017
- Driving question: What are the psychological, social and physical costs of political engagement
- Labels: Political Stress Scale, PMH (political mental health) scale



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Friends, relatives, sanity, and health: The costs of politics

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Abstract

Political scientists have long known that political involvement exacts costs but they have typically defined these costs in relatively narrow, largely economic terms. Though anecdotal evidence suggests that the costs of politics may in fact extend beyond economics to frayed personal relationships, compromised emotional stability, and even physical problems, no systematic evidence on these broader costs exists. We construct and validate batteries of survey items that delineate the physical, social, and emotional costs of political engagement and administer these items to a demographically representative sample of U.S. adults. The results suggest that a large number of Americans believe their physical health has been harmed by their exposure to politics and even more report that politics has resulted in emotional costs and lost friendships.

Introduction

Like all choices, the decision of whether or not to get involved in politics can be viewed in cost-benefit terms. Downs' [1] classic formulation of political participation began with a somewhat narrow conceptualization. Costs were taken to be the time, effort, and money required to become informed and then to participate in politics, perhaps by traveling to the polls, making a campaign contribution, or communicating with a public official; benefits were the favorable policies enacted as a result of a preferred candidate assuming office.

In order to explain a variety of political phenomena, the benefits of politics were quickly expanded to include social and psychological as well as policy benefits. These additional benefits included feelings of fulfillment derived from performing a civic duty [2–3], expressive or solitary benefits produced by joining with like-minded people to support a candidate, party, or cause [4–5], and the entertainment rewards derived from being a “hobbyist” [6]. In addition, research has provided evidence that political participation can positively affect social capital, a collective benefit that not only promotes social cohesion but may even have public



OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Smith KB, Hibbing MV, Hibbing JR (2019) Friends, relatives, sanity, and health: The costs of politics. PLoS ONE 14(9): e0221870. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221870>

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Data Availability Statement: All files are available from the Harvard Dataverse database (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WCPGAU>).

Instrument created by adapting self-diagnostic batteries used by AA and GA

Example AA/GA Question:

- *Does gambling/drinking ever cause you to have difficulty sleeping?*

Adaptation

- *I have lost sleep because of politics*

Response categories: 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree)

32 Items A Priori Divided into Four Categories/Indexes:

Physical Health

e.g. “I have lost sleep because of politics”

Emotional Health

e.g. “Politics has led me to hate some people”

Compulsive Behavior

e.g. “I have vowed to spend less time on politics but failed to follow through”

Social and Lifestyle Costs

e.g. “I have lost time from work or school because of politics”

Smith et al measure

- US national surveys 2017, 2020 (twice), 2024 (four times)
- US nurses (survey in field)
- Dutch national survey 2023, 2024 (three waves)
- Turkey (pilot study underway)
- Pakistan (survey underway)
- Hungary (pilot survey planned)
- General takeaway thus far—psychometrics solid, results seem to be comparable
 - General phenomenon not just a US one?
- Pro: Real basis for comparison, well tested and validated
- Con: It's still very new!!!



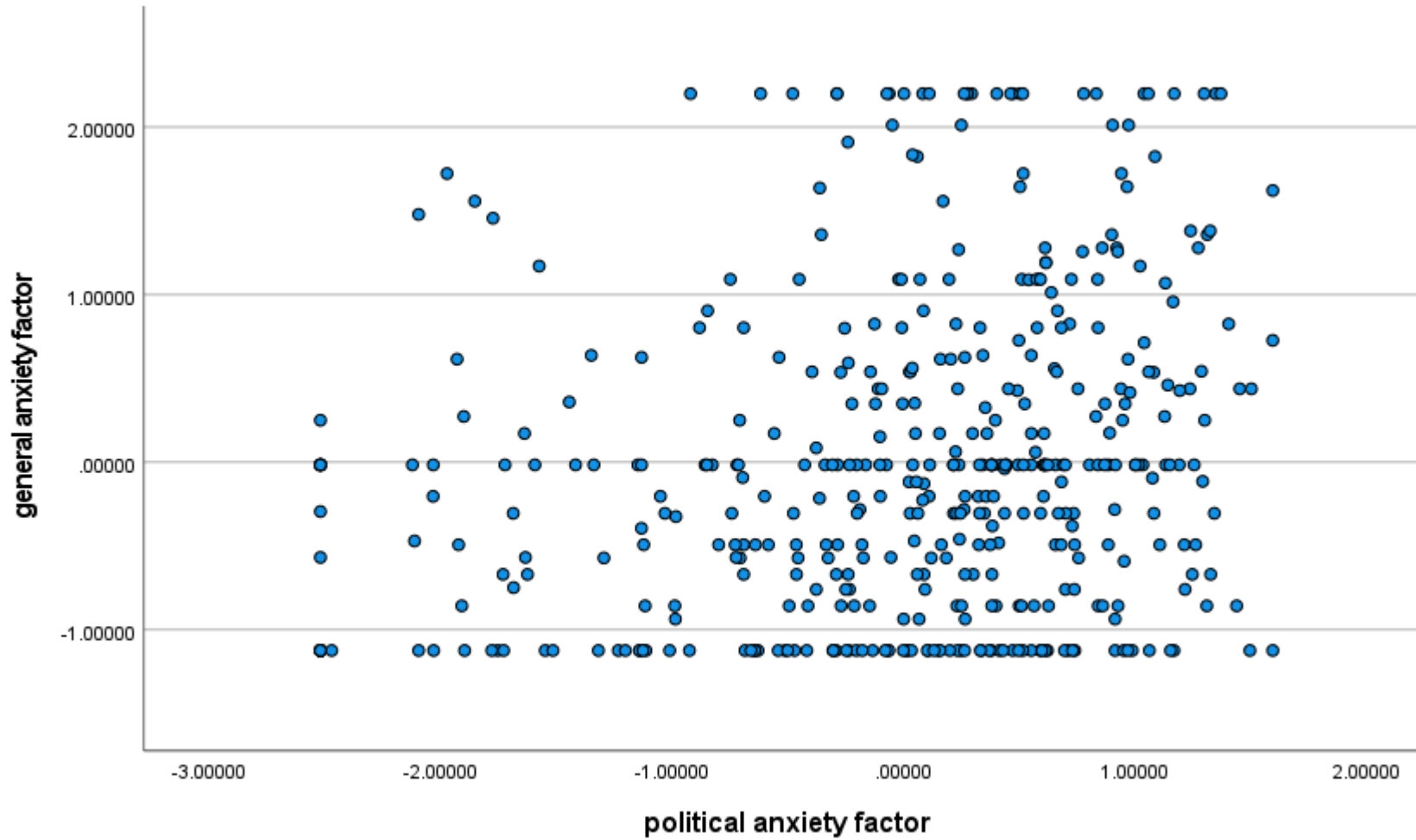
OK We Can Measure Political Stress, But is It Really Different from General Stress? How Would We Figure This Out?

Point 4.1: Political Stress/Anxiety Is Different From General Stress/Anxiety

<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Student Sample		AMT Sample	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political Stress	0.055*** (0.008)	0.035*** (0.008)	0.076*** (0.014)	0.023* (0.014)
General Stress	0.024*** (0.007)	0.018*** (0.007)	0.042*** (0.011)	0.026*** (0.010)

<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Student Sample		AMT Sample	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political Stress	0.140** (0.063)	0.057 (0.065)	0.563*** (0.152)	0.218 (0.155)
General Stress	0.728*** (0.055)	0.705*** (0.054)	0.682*** (0.117)	0.574*** (0.114)

Perceived Stress Scale and Perceived Political Stress Scale are ***independent*** predictors of a range of mental health/behavioral issues, e.g. sleep loss, anxiety, difficulty controlling emotions
Table from Warren 2022.



Relationship between political anxiety and general anxiety is pretty weak ($r=.24$, $N=451$, WI sample).

Inference: These not measuring same thing

Table 1: Political Mental Health

Political Mental Health
1. Politics has caused me to be stressed.
2. Politics has caused me to be fatigued.
3. Exposure to media outlets promoting views contrary to mine can drive me crazy.
4. I have lost my temper as a result of politics.
5. Politics has led me to hate some people.
6. Politics has caused me to think seriously about moving.
7. Not being able to stop or control worrying about politics.
8. Feeling down, depressed or hopeless about politics.
9. I have become depressed when a preferred candidate lost.
10. I spend more time thinking about politics than I would like.
11. I care too much about who wins and loses in politics.
12. Differences in political views have damaged a friendship I valued.
13. Politics makes me very angry.
14. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge about politics.
15. Little interest or pleasure in following politics

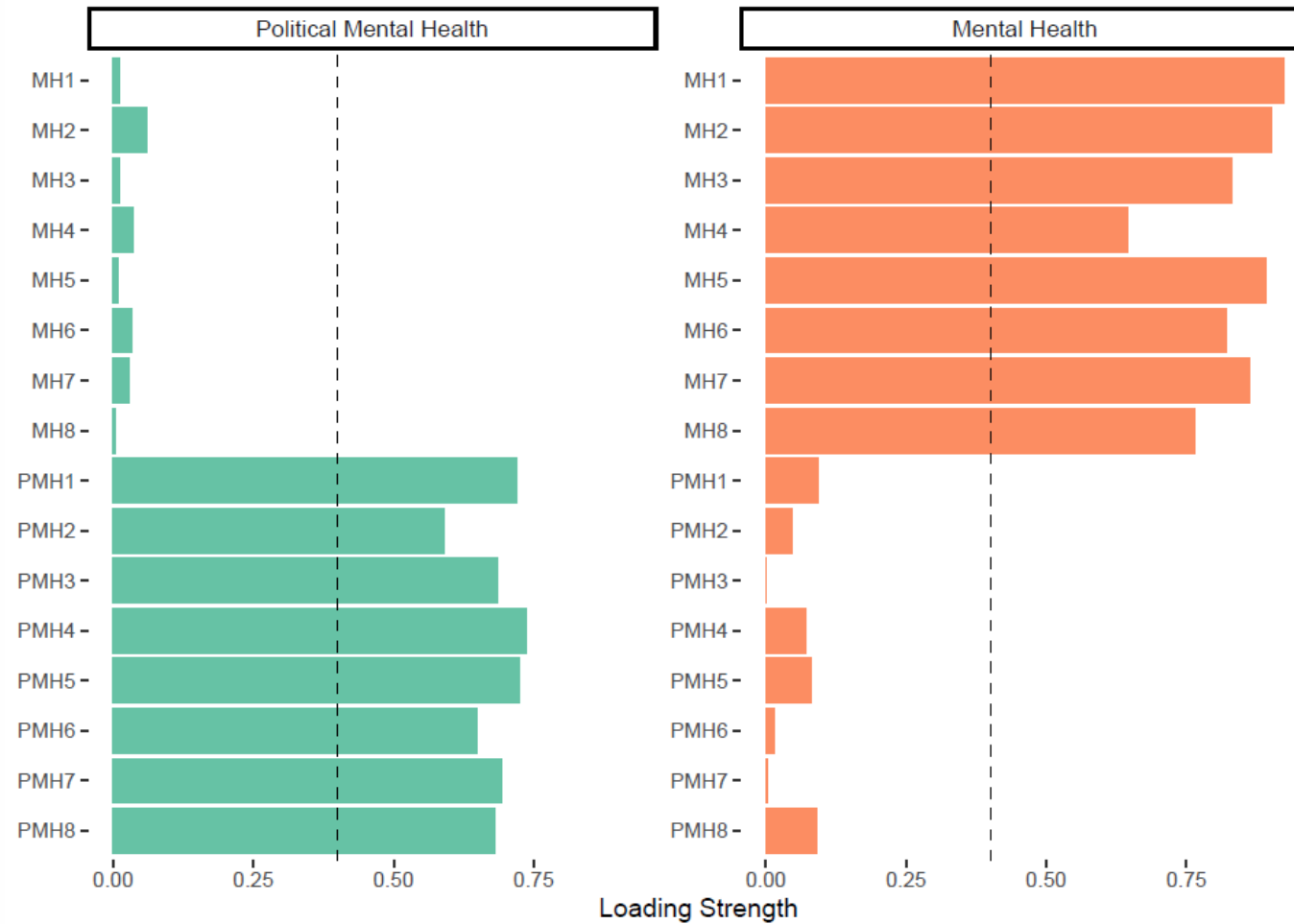
Table 2: Mental Health

Mental Health
1. Felt nervous and stressed?
2. Felt constantly under strain?
3. Felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?
4. My emotions are overwhelming or out of control?
5. Feeling unsatisfied with your social contacts?
6. Felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
7. Lost much sleep over worry?
8. Felt down or depressed?
9. Been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing?
10. Felt that things were going your way?
11. Felt confident in your ability to handle your personal problems?
12. Feeling down, depressed or hopeless.
13. Little interest or pleasure in doing things?
14. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
15. Not being able to stop or control worrying.

Political mental health and general mental health items tend to reflect *different* dimensions of well-being

Peterson, Schumacher, Hopp and Bakker 2025. Sample is Dutch, data collected 2023-2024. OSF pre-print

Figure 3: Test of Dimensionality: PMH and MH



Factor analysis from Peterson et al – PMH really does look distinct and different from general MH

Note: This plots the loadings for our PMH and MH items - combined from Wave 1 and Wave 2. The panel to the left, plots the loadings for dimension 1, and consists of the 8 PMH items (in green). The panel to the right, plots the loadings for dimension 2, and consists of the 8 MH items (in orange).

Quick Recap

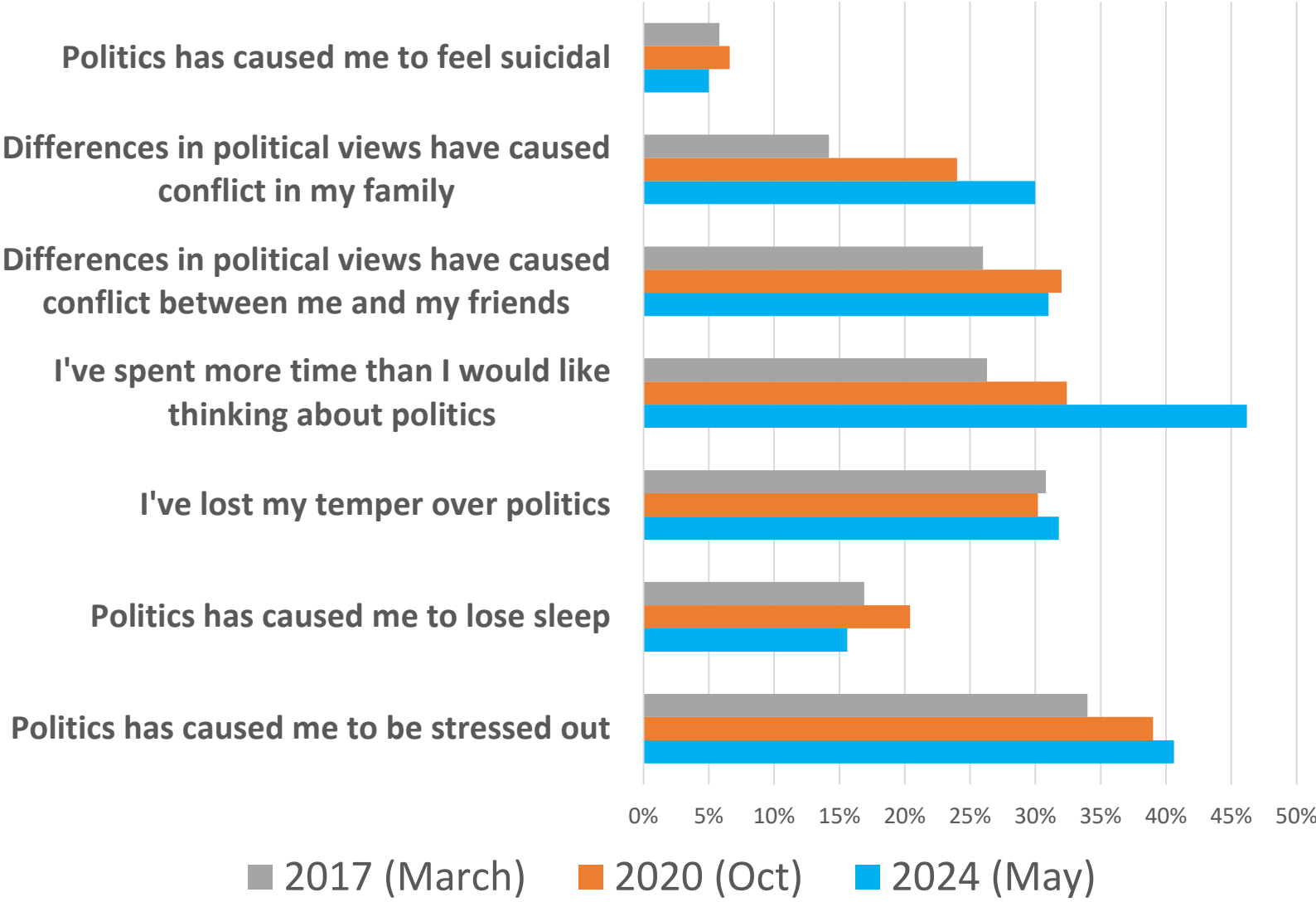
- Measures of political stress (anxiety) developed
- Suggest political stress is separable from general stress (anxiety)
- So, if these measures are valid and reliable and political stress really a thing How big a thing is it?
- **You tell me:** How many people do you think suffering from political stress?



4. The Public Health Problem These Measures Reveal

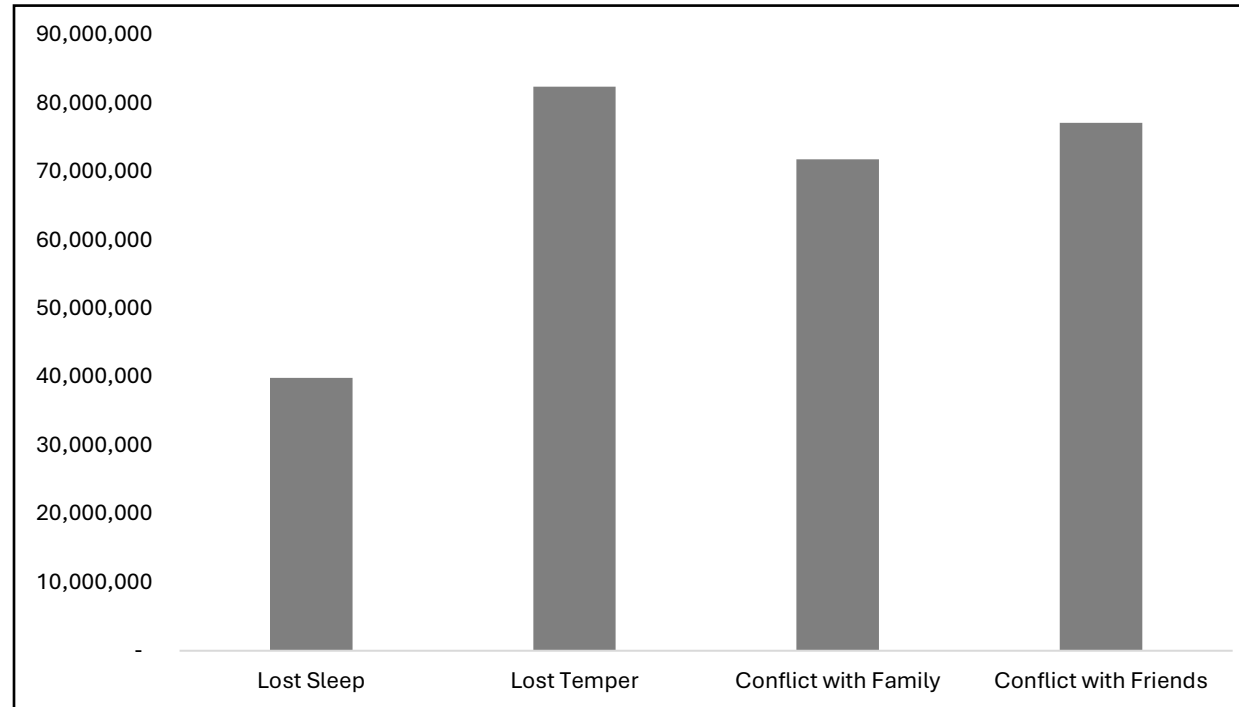


Impact of Politics on Well-Being, Selected Examples 2017-2024



Politics Negatively Impacts
The Well-Being of Lots of People

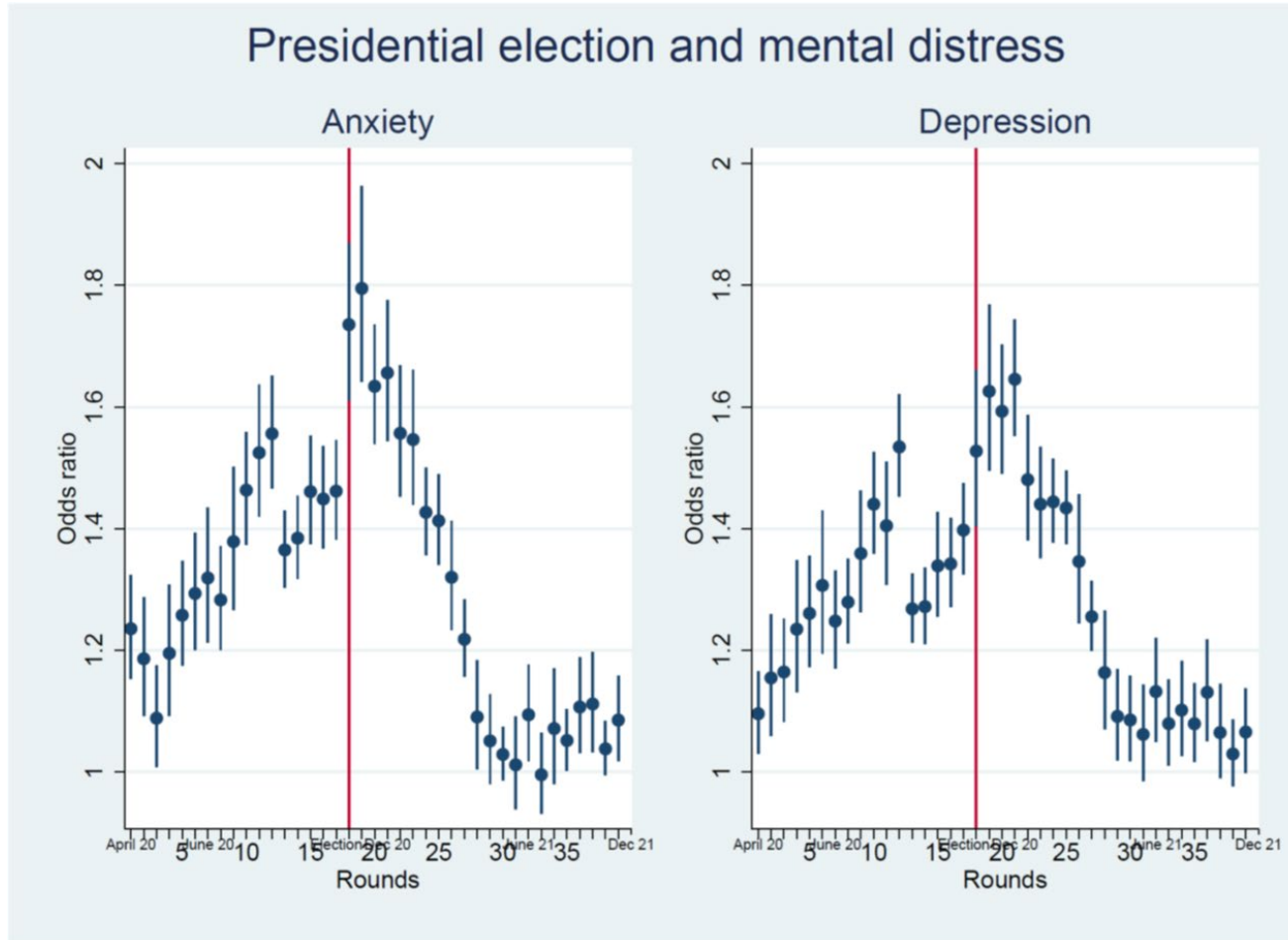
Estimated Number of Americans Suffering From Selected Outcomes 2024



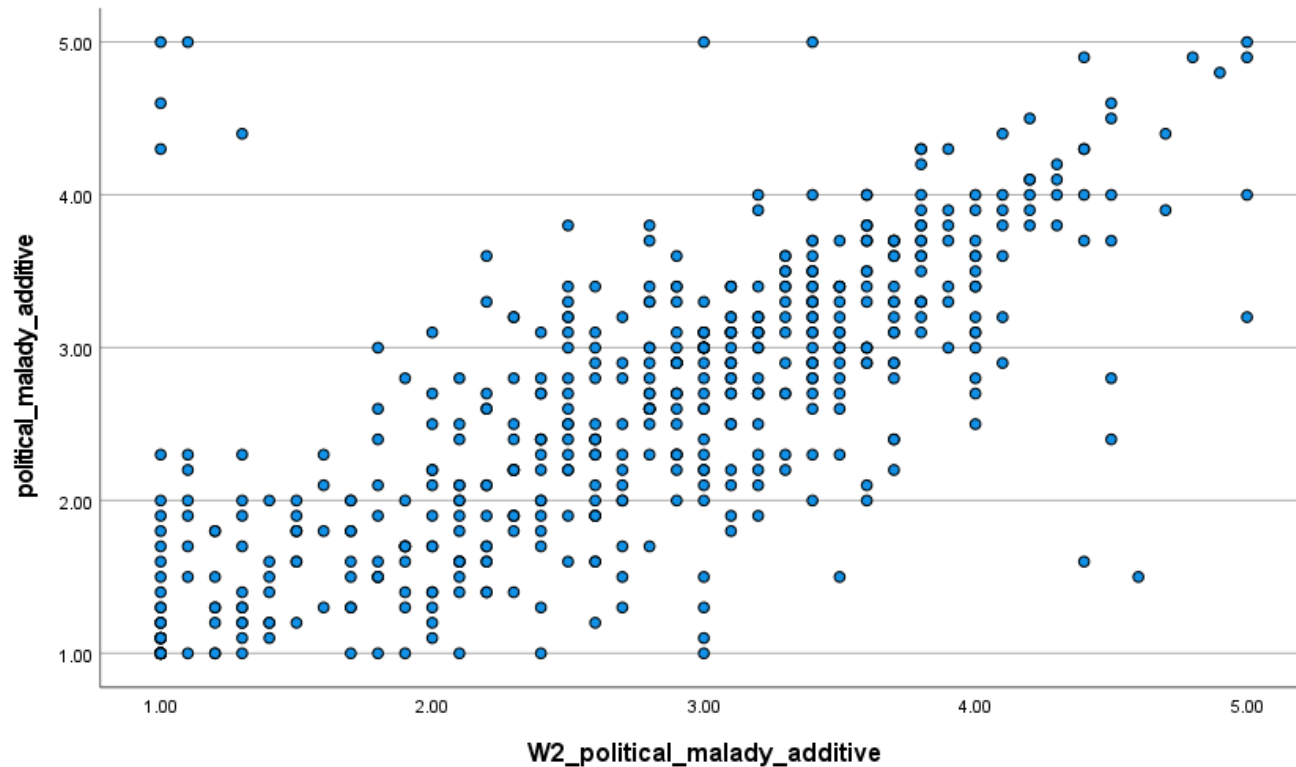
Note: Calculated by multiplying the percentage of respondents who “strong” or “somewhat agreed” with each statement by the population of U.S. adults in 2024 (266 million).

An estimated 13 million people reported feeling suicidal because of politics in 2024

5. Is This Just Election Syndrome? An Acute Problem?

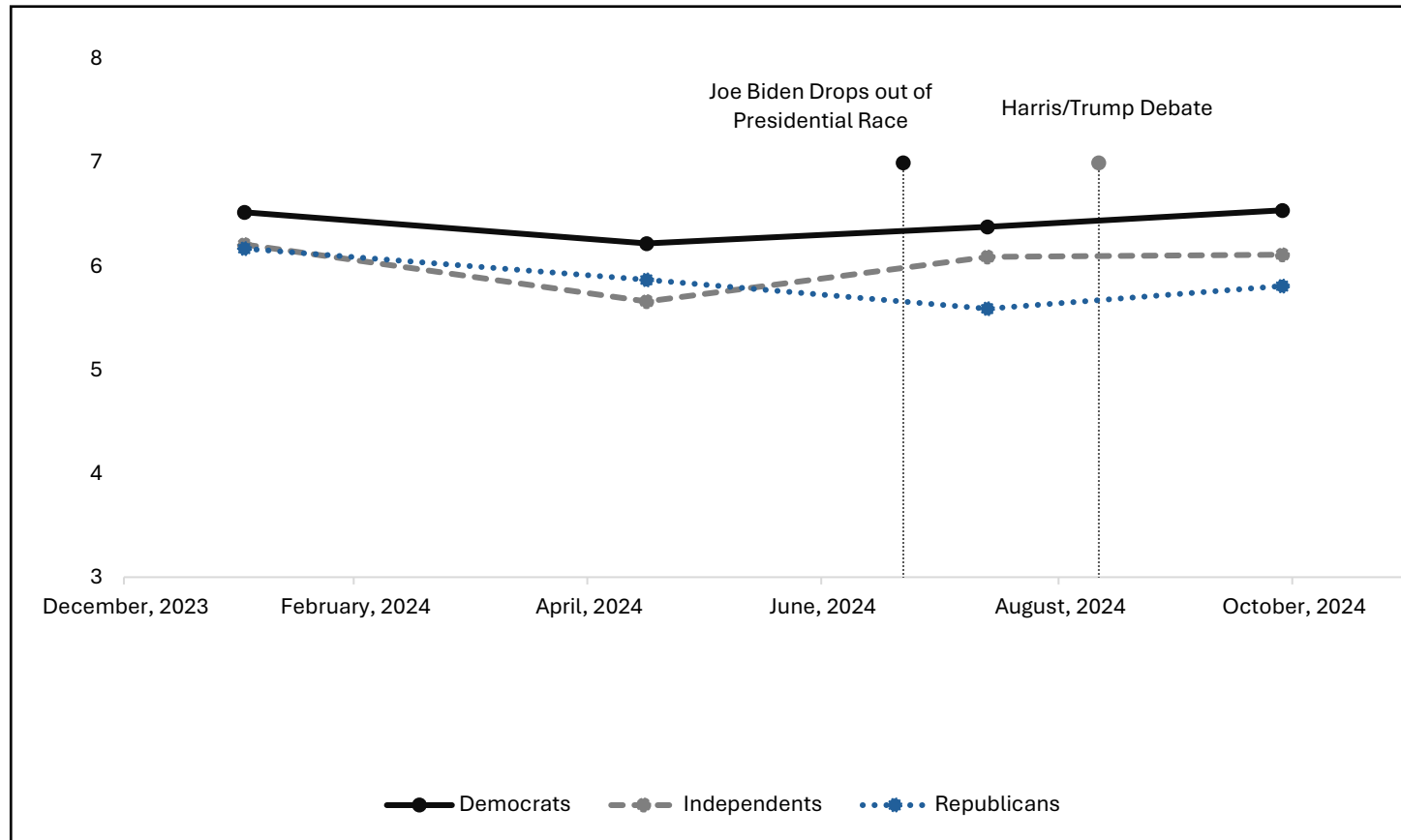


5. A Chronic Problem?



- This looks chronic?
- Pre- and post-election (2020) scores on Smith et al measure (approx. a month apart).
- $R = .73$
- Within individuals, scores do not change much

5. A Chronic Problem?



At population level stability seems to be the norm—levels do not seem to react much to events in the political environment. Data from Neely et al forthcoming. N=1500 per wave

More Chronic than Acute?

- General measures anxiety/stress
 - Some evidence rise/fall with political events
- Political measures:
 - Within individual test-retest correlations seem to be high ($> .70$)
 - Repeated population level surveys suggest extreme stability
- Inference:
 - Minimum—highly salient political events negative impact on well-being
 - More likely—political stress is chronic for huge numbers of US adults—i.e. constant and associated with persistent negative impacts on well-being



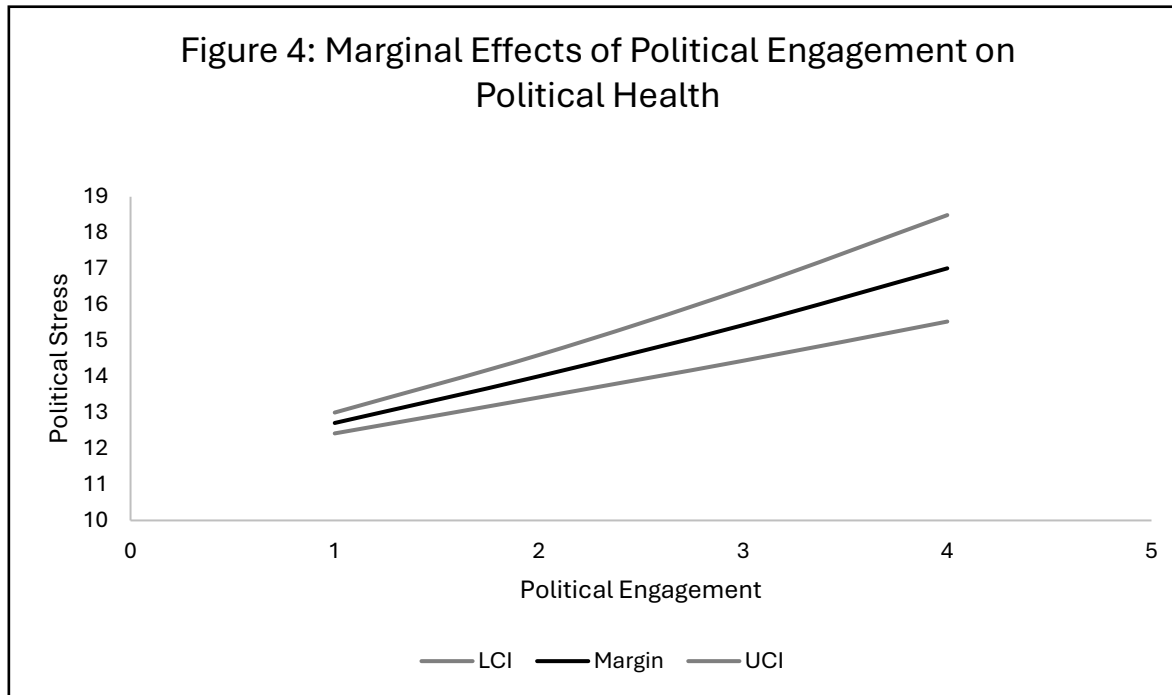
6. So, Who Is Politics Harming?

- Consistent across measures/studies:
 - Left more than right (effect size variable)
 - Those who are paying attention/involved



Politics Harms The Political Engaged, Esp. People on the Left

- Politically attentive/engaged/ideologically committed
 - All data/models suggest this
 - US surveys 2017, 2020, 2024, WI survey 2023



1 unit increase in political engagement -> ~10% increase in impact on well-being using Smith et al scale.

Source: Neely et al forthcoming.

Politics Harms Certain People More than Others

- Demographics:
 - Age – younger people more likely to report these effects
 - Gender – females generally report more than males
 - Race – Minorities, esp. African Americans, *less* likely to report politics harming well-being
- Demographic findings are not as consistent as for political traits
 - Effects are not huge
 - Most consistent (thus far) is the race finding ... which we really can't explain



Table 3. Effect sizes of political anxiety and general anxiety predictors

Measure	Political anxiety Model 1	Political anxiety Model 2
Income	0.019	0.062
White	0.079 [#]	0.090*
Male	-0.082*	-0.051
Age	-0.054	0.056
Education	0.088*	0.090 [#]
Ideology	-0.090*	-0.052
Political interest	0.369*	0.322*
Political knowledge	0.119*	0.150*
General anxiety		0.314*
Political anxiety		
Adj. R ²	.203	.282

Notes: Standardized betas from OLS regression models are reported. Full models are descriptive statistics for predictor variables. *p < .05, [#]p < .10 (two-tailed tests). VIF stat 1.21 (Model 3), and 1.24 (Model 4).

Predictor/health scale	Full Scale	Physical Health Scale	Compulsion Scale	Social Lifestyle	Emotional Health Scale	10-item Short Scale
Constant	1.739* (0.098)	1.63 (0.11)	1.701* (0.101)	1.915* (0.104)	1.676* (0.108)	1.378* (0.112)
Partisanship	-0.13* (0.025)	-.23* (0.03)	-0.123* (0.026)	-0.106* (0.026)	-0.126* (0.028)	-0.202* (0.029)
Political Interest	0.148* (0.021)	.177* (0.25)	0.156* (0.022)	0.079* (0.022)	0.183* (0.023)	0.249* (0.024)
Political Opposites	0.041* (0.007)	0.50* (0.01)	0.028* (0.007)	0.024* (0.007)	0.071* (0.008)	0.078* (0.008)
Gender	0.09* (0.039)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.149* (0.04)	0.091* (0.041)	0.032 (0.043)	-0.005* (0.044)
2020 Dummy	0.027 (0.039)	0.09* (0.04)	0.035 (0.041)	0.021 (0.041)	0.021 (0.043)	0.123* (0.045)
Black	-0.22* (0.062)	-.30* (0.07)	-0.174* (0.064)	-0.187* (0.065)	-0.276* (0.069)	-0.291* (0.071)
Age	-0.01* (0.001)	-0.01* (0.001)	-0.008* (0.001)	-0.011* (0.001)	-0.011* (0.001)	-0.01* (0.001)
N	1327	1393	1381	1383	1381	1368
F	32.13	36.38	22.81	19.1	40.73	53.2
Adj. R-2	0.14	0.15	0.10	0.08	0.17	0.21

Unstandardized coefficient (standard error) reported,

* = p < .05.

For full description of variables and descriptive statistics on all variables see supplementary materials.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262022.t001>

WI N=451, 2023
DV Political Anxiety

US 2017 and 2020 samples combine N=~1400
DVs Various Political Health Scales

Key takeaway: General pattern is that age is negatively associated with political health/anxiety, but effect Small? Difference between a 20-year-old and 50-year-old is roughly 1 point on DV with theoretical range of 1 to 5 (DVs here are averages rather than additive)

Who Suffers The Most? A Very Rough Profile

Clear and consistent evidence that the politically interested and engaged likely to suffer more

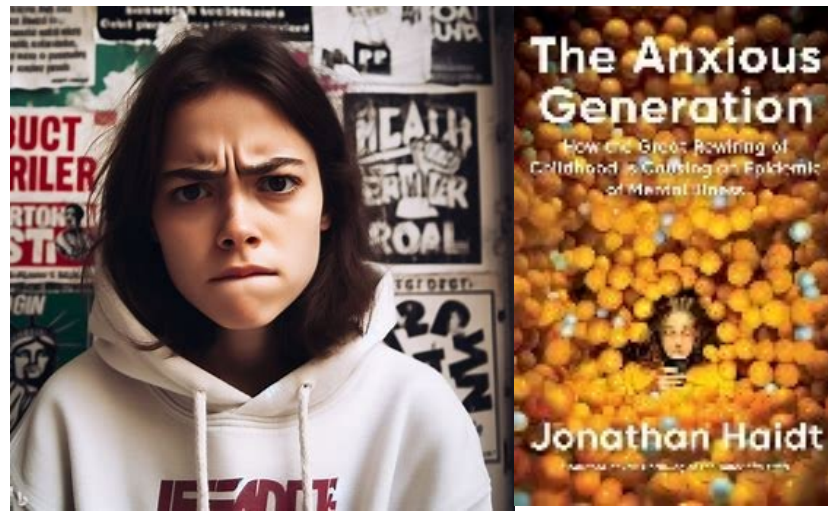
Outside of that, findings a little more inconsistent but generally speaking

Summary Findings from 2017, 2020, 2024:

Young people
Females
Left leaning
White
Affectively polarized



Same demographic ID'd as most suffering from increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues since ~2010??



The Story Thus Far:

1. Politics negatively associated with well-being
2. Politics is a *unique* social stressor
3. We can quantify/measure political stress/harm and separate it from general measures of anxiety/stress
4. Those measures indicative of a serious public health problem
5. Political impact on well-being is chronic rather than acute
6. Some are more vulnerable to these negative impacts than others



Depressed Yet?

Cheer yourself up – ask me a
question!



Section 2: Is there anything we can do about this?

Navigating Political Anxiety

Cultivating Mindfulness, Agency, and Social Connection



Mindfulness



Agency



Social
Connection

Dealing With Political Stress and Anxiety is *Hard*.

- Why?
 - Live in a polarized world
 - Political differences increasingly seen as **moral** differences
 - Political conflicts seen as existential—losing is seen as a real threat
- Politics = coalitional struggle for power is a struggle of “good” versus “bad”, losing means “bad” has won
 - That’s stressful!

How Emotional Frames Moralize and Polarize Political Attitudes

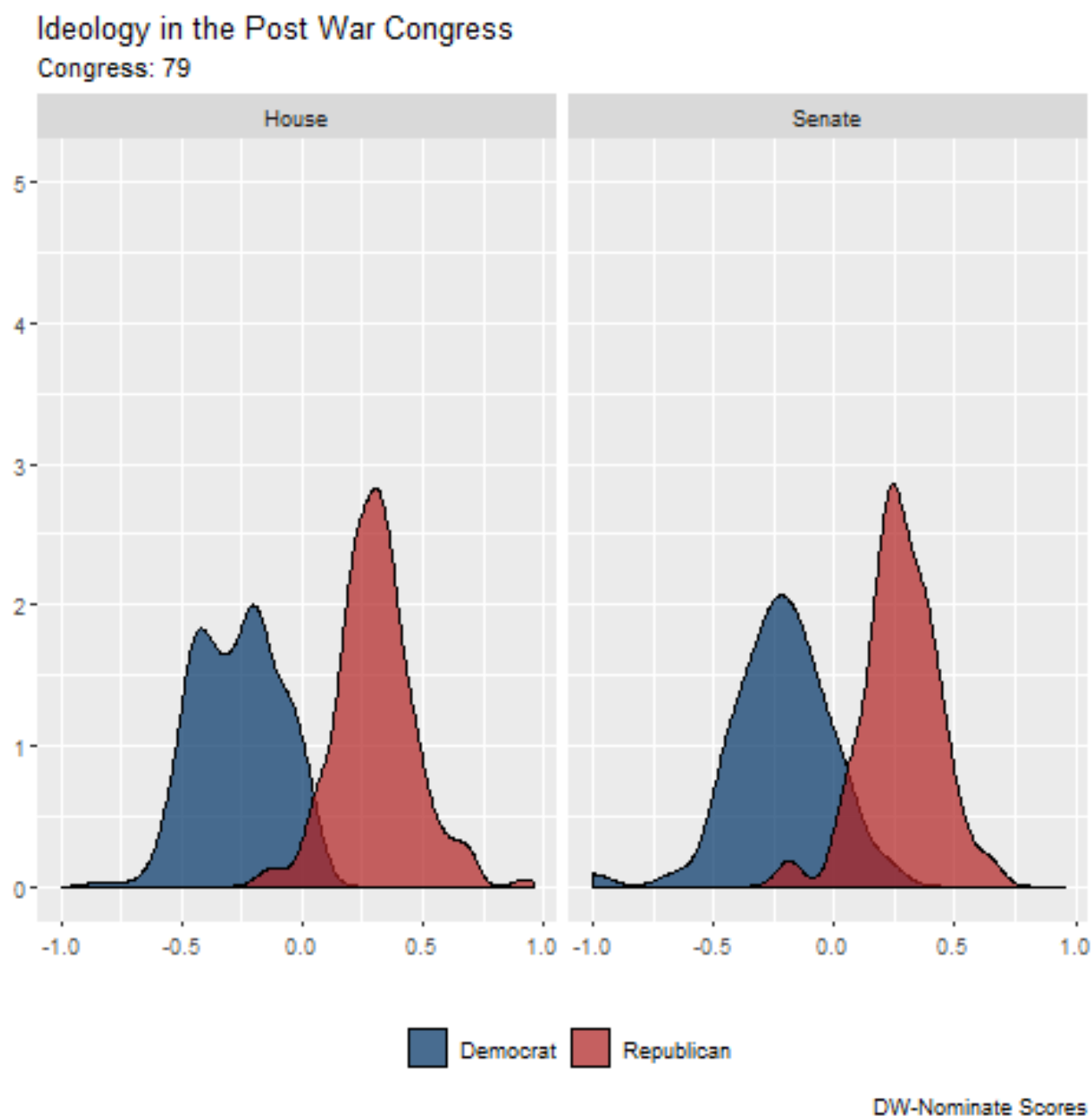
Scott Clifford
University of Houston

Moralized issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage, are some of the most polarizing and divisive issues in politics. These topics motivate political engagement but present a barrier to democratic resolution. Yet we know little about how some issues become “moral issues” and others do not. In this article, I argue that exposure to persuasive frames, particularly those eliciting anger and disgust, serves to moralize and polarize public opinion. I test these hypotheses across three experiments on emerging debates over food politics. The results consistently show that persuasive frames increase issue moralization and, in turn, facilitate polarization. A panel analysis demonstrates that the effect of a single exposure lasts at least two weeks. Mediation analyses suggest that feelings of disgust and anger help explain how persuasive frames moralize political attitudes, while anger alone seems to explain the polarizing effects of framing. Overall, the findings provide new insight into framing, emotion, and the development of moral issues.

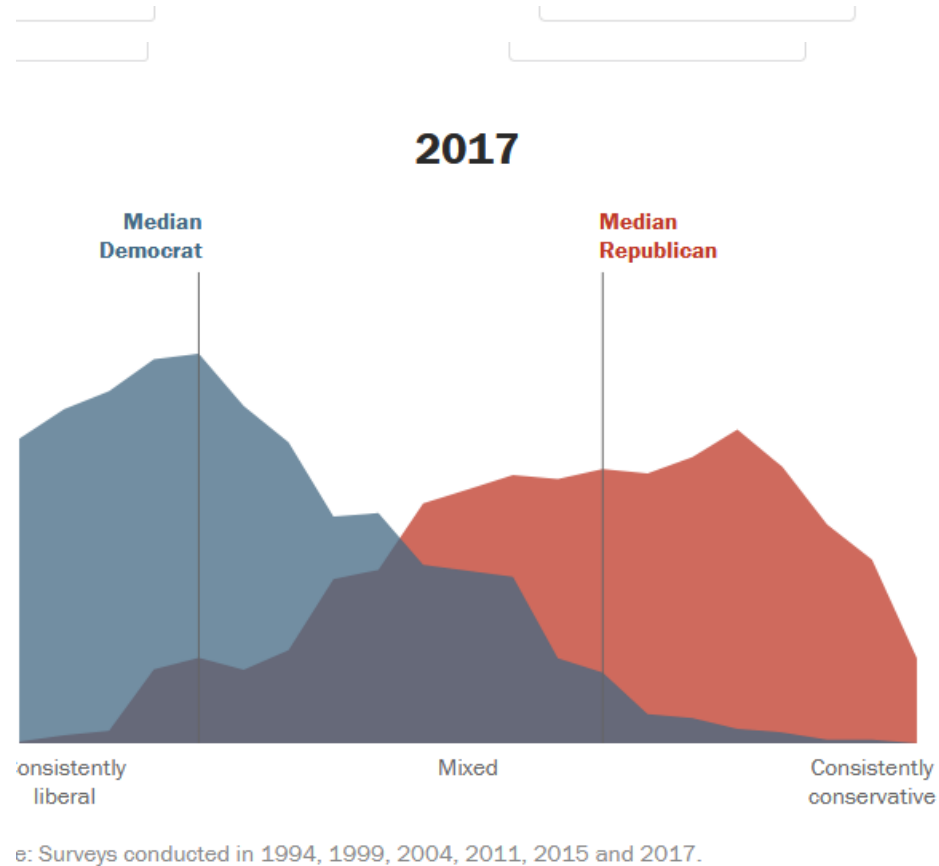
KEY WORDS: anger, disgust, framing, moral conviction, moralization

Little Doubt that
Elites are Polarizing

Partisanship in Congress
1945-2021



Mass Public is Also Polarizing



Source: Pew, Political Polarization 1994-2017 – based on 10 questions (e.g. govt regulation, govt efficiency, govt role in helping Needy immigration, corporate profit, environment, gay rights)

This is Not Just Policy Disagreement



64%

I get angry when other people praise this party



32%

When I talk about this party, I say 'they' instead of 'we'



39%

I do not have much in common with supporters of this party

Source: author, from YouGov survey Oct. 2020, N=802 weighted to Am. Comm Survey

Politics Makes Bastards of Us All

DOI: 10.1111/pops.12924

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Political Psychology

Politics makes bastards of us all: Why moral judgment is politically situational

Kyle Hull  | Clarisse Warren | Kevin Smith

Department of Political Science, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

Correspondence

Kyle Hull, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 515 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0328, USA.
Email: khull10@unl.edu

Abstract

Moral judgment is politically situational—people are more forgiving of transgressive copartisans and more likely to behave punitively and unethically toward political opponents. Such differences are widely observed, but not fully explained. If moral values are nonnegotiable first-principle beliefs about right and wrong, why do similar transgressions elicit different moral judgment in the personal and political realm? We argue this pattern arises from the same forces intuitionist frameworks of moral psychology use to explain the origins of morality: the adaptive need to suppress individual behavior to ensure ingroup success. We hypothesize ingroups serve as moral boundaries, that the relative tight constraints morality exerts over ingroup relations loosen in competitive group environments because doing so also serves ingroup interests. We find support for this hypothesis in four independent samples and also find that group antipathy—internalized dislike of the outgroup—pushes personal and political moral boundaries farther apart.

KEYWORDS

behavior, judgment, moral boundaries, morality

“imagine a person you find completely despicable” would you “falsely accuse this person of a serious misdeed?”

1-5 scale of definitely would/would not do it

Make a minor change—replace “person” with “politician—and answers change. Shift towards **would** do it.

Inference: We are willing to let politics dictate our moral choices!

Morality politics:

No compromise (good vs bad)

Information resistant

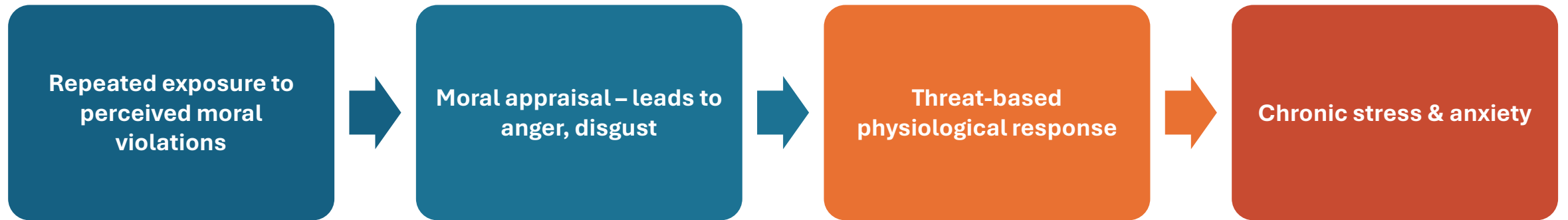
Politically Motivated Moral Tradeoffs

Political Side	Illustrative Example	Moral Intuition Violated	Typical Moral Justification
Left	Excusing property damage or intimidation as resistance	Harm / Nonviolence	Preventing systemic injustice justifies coercive tactics
Left	Deplatforming or sanctioning controversial speakers	Fairness / Due Process	Protecting vulnerable groups outweighs neutrality
Right	Harsh policing or immigration enforcement	Care / Harm	Order and security outweigh individual suffering
Right	Excusing misconduct by favored leaders	Fairness / Rule of Law	Loyalty and group survival take precedence

Right sees outrageous moral violations

Left sees outrageous moral violations

What Does This Do To People?



E.g.:

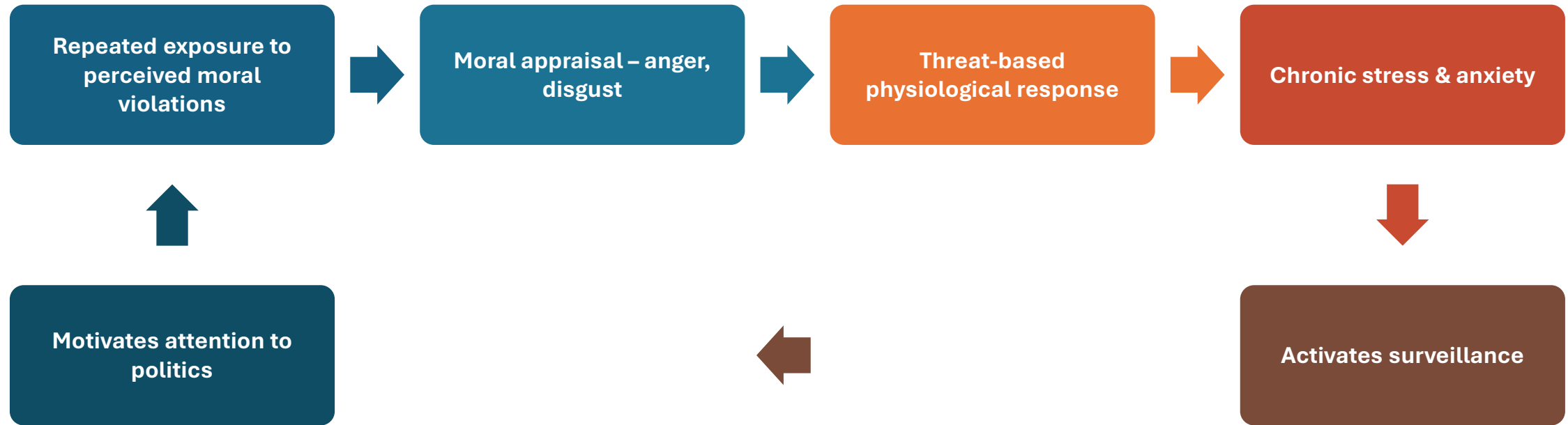
Lindert (2021), *Eur J Public Health*; witnessing moral transgressions linked to mental distress and anxiety.

Suzuki et al. (2023), *Compr Psychoneuroendocrinol*; Trajectories of sociopolitical stress during the 2020 United States presidential election season.

VanderWeele et al. (2025), *Frontiers in Psychology*; repeated moral violations conceptualized as moral trauma spectrum.

Litz et al. (2024), *J Traumatic Stress*; chronic exposure to morally injurious events linked to anxiety and exhaustion.

A Doom Loop



E.g.:

Lindert (2021), *Eur J Public Health*; witnessing moral transgressions linked to mental distress and anxiety.

Suzuki et al. (2023), *Compr Psychoneuroendocrinol*; Trajectories of sociopolitical stress during the 2020 United States presidential election season.

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Litz et al. (2024), *J Traumatic Stress*; chronic exposure to morally injurious events linked to anxiety and exhaustion.

Marcus & Newman (2000), *Affective intelligence and political judgement*. U of Chicago Press.



From this worldto yours!

Three Potential Answers to Disrupting The Doom Loop

- Mindfulness
 - Approaching politics (maybe life) with openness and without judgement
- Agency
 - Developing a sense of control
- Social connection
 - Developing understanding and empathy with others – even those you disagree with



Mindfulness



Agency



Social
Connection

Mindfulness



Mindfulness

High quality research suggests mindfulness practice (meditation) can promote well-being, including reducing anxiety, helping with depression, promoting healthy social interaction – could it also work for politics?

OPEN ACCESS PEER-REVIEWED

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Supporting mental health and well-being in college students: A systematic review and evidence of interventions

Joanne Deborah Worsley , Andy Pennington, Rhiannon Corcoran

Published: July 29, 2022 • <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266725>

Article	Authors	Metrics	Cite

Journal of Psychiatric Research

Volume 107, December 2018, Pages 1-10

Interventions for common mental problems among university and college students: A systematic review and analysis of randomized controlled trials

[Junping Huang](#)^a, [Yeshambel T. Nigatu](#)^b, [Rachel Smail-Crevier](#)^b, [Xin Zhang](#)^a

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2018.09.018>

APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY: Health and Well-Being

Original Article Full Access

Mindfulness-Based Interventions for University Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials

[Anna F. Dawson](#), [William W. Brown](#), [Joanna Anderson](#), [Bella Datta](#), [James N. Donald](#), [Karen Hong](#), [Sophie Allan](#), [Tom B. Mole](#), [Peter B. Jones](#), [Julieta Galante](#)

First published: 19 November 2019 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12188> | Citations: 188

SECTIONS

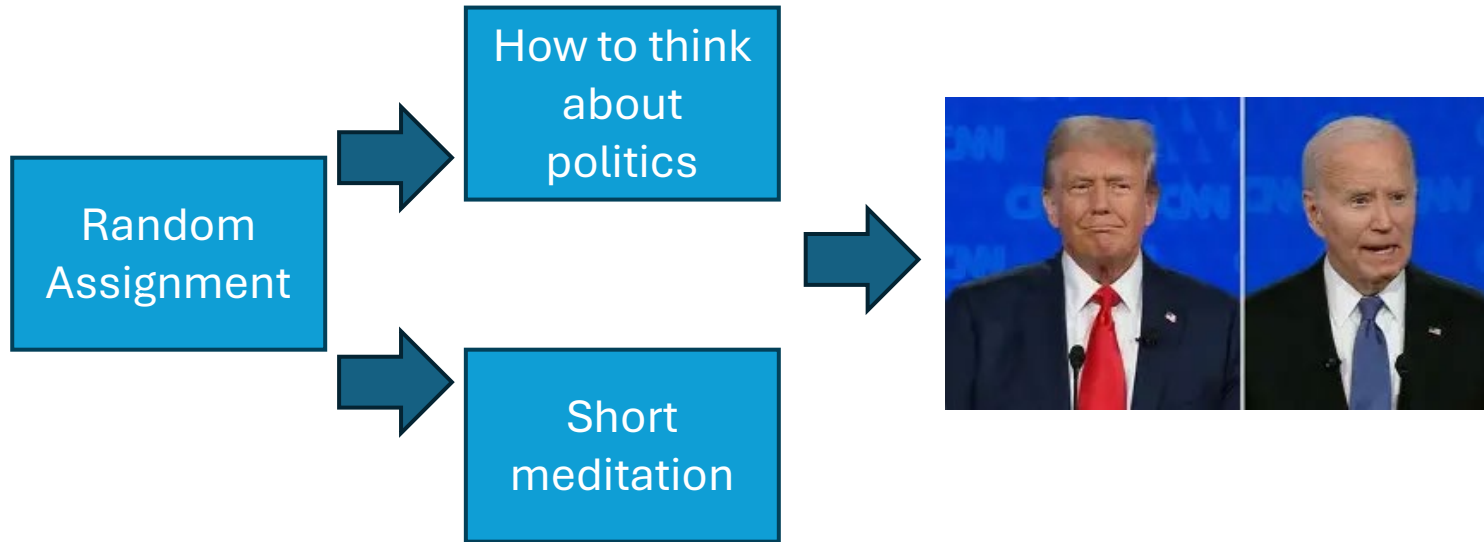
PDF TOOLS SHARE

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Mindfulness

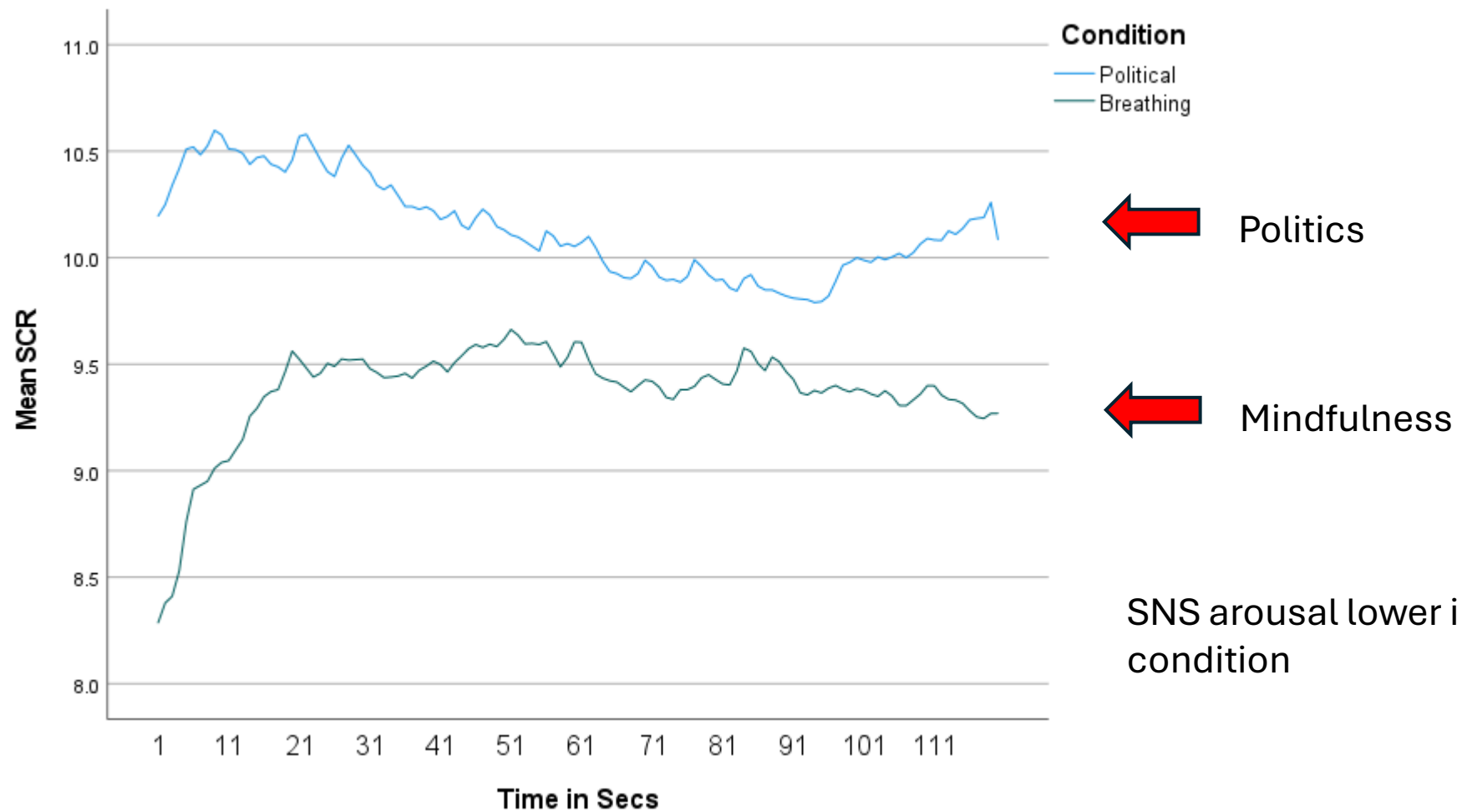
N=48 undergrads



Measure stress response physiologically
by monitoring classic measures of ANS

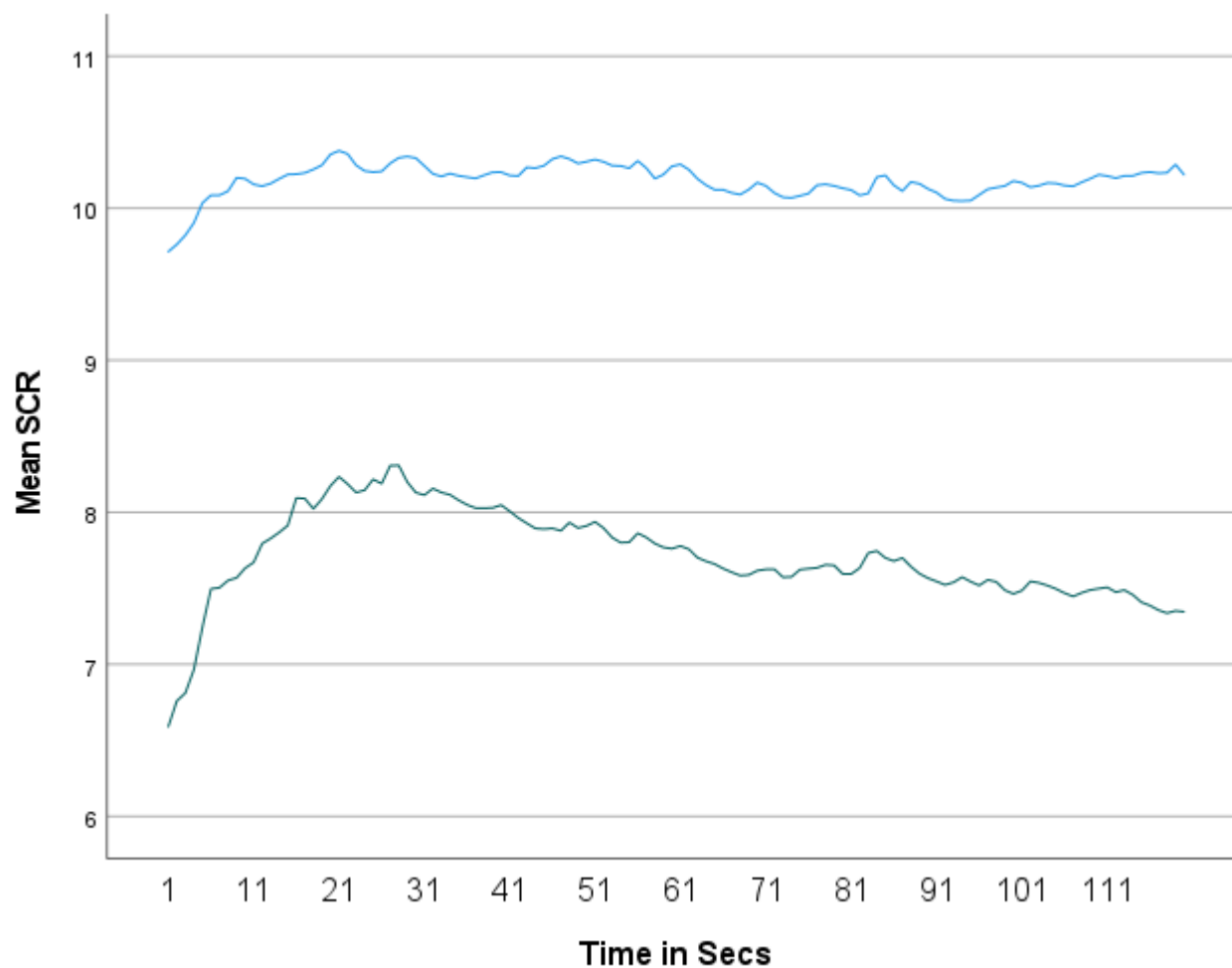


Mindfulness





Mindfulness



Does Not Meditate Weekly

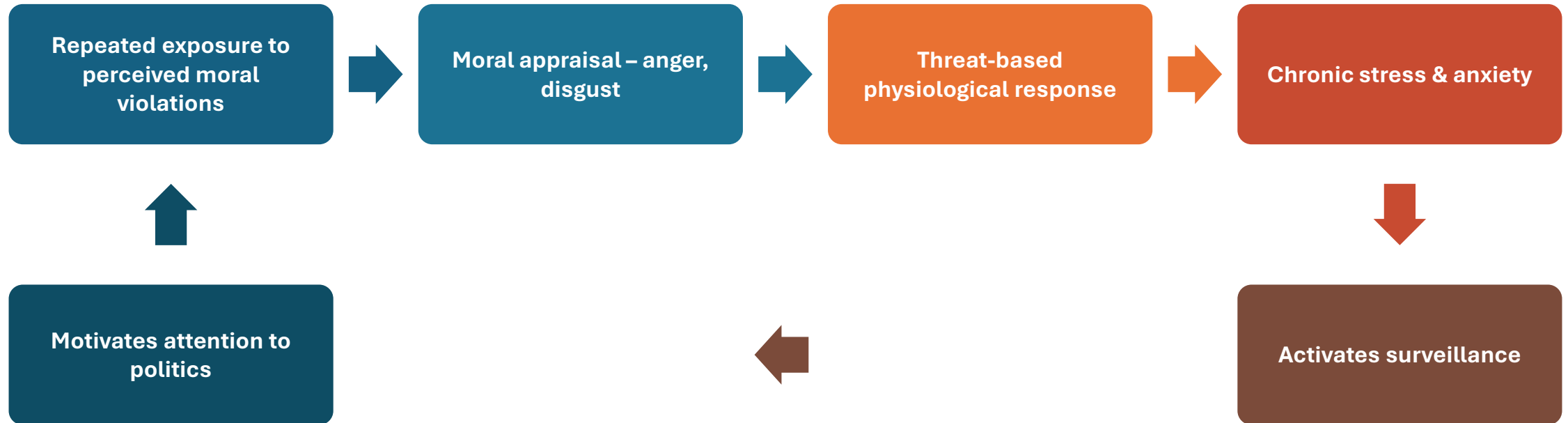


Meditates at least Weekly

Same data, but just looking at SNS activation between those who do/do not meditate regularly



Mindfulness

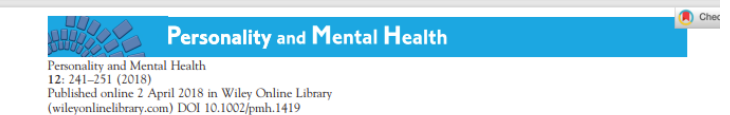
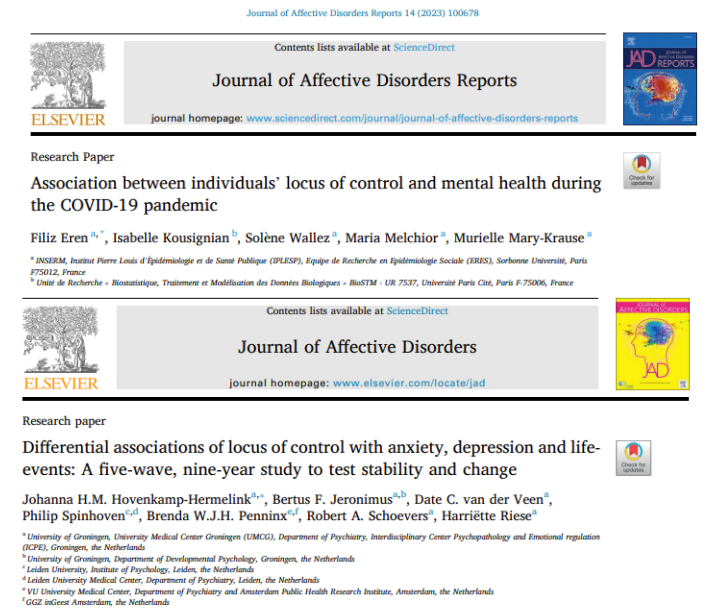


Agency

- Low sense of agency linked to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems and behavioral problems.
- A key concept here *is locus of control*
 - Internal – belief that your own actions and decisions determine life outcomes
 - External -- belief that external force (fate/luck/other people) determine life outcomes



Agency



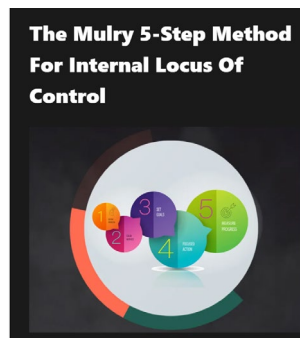
The association between locus of control, emotion regulation and borderline personality disorder features

NORA H. HOPE¹, MATTHEW A. WAKEFIELD, LYNNAEA NORTHEY AND ALEXANDER L. CHAPMAN, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada

ABSTRACT

Agency

- Some research suggests interventions can increase internal locus of control.
- These can be relatively simple, e.g. journaling
- This sort of thing already fairly common in therapeutic practice???



Wolinsky, F.D., Vander Weg, M.W., Martin, R., Unverzagt, F.W., Willis, S.L., Marsiske, M., Rebok, G.W., Morris, J.N., Ball, K.K., & Tennstedt, S.L. (2009). Does cognitive training improve internal locus of control among older adults? *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 65B(5), 591–598. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbp117. Advance Access published on December 11, 2009.

Does Cognitive Training Improve Internal Locus of Control Among Older Adults?

Fredric D. Wolinsky,^{1,2,3,4} Mark W. Vander Weg,^{1,2,3,4} René Martin,^{1,2,3,4} Frederick W. Unverzagt,⁵ Sherry L. Willis,⁶ Michael Marsiske,⁷ George W. Rebok,⁸ John N. Morris,⁹ Karlene K. Ball,¹⁰ and Sharon L. Tennstedt¹¹

Impact of Journaling on Students' Self-Efficacy and Locus of Control

Krista K. Fritson, PsyD
Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
University of Nebraska at Kearney

While considerable research has examined the academic and cognitive value of journaling, little has examined the psychological impact of journaling on the personal development of college students. Research on cognitive-behavioral therapy indicates that journaling can have a positive impact on individuals' self-growth and intrapersonal characteristics. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of classroom-based journaling on students' self-efficacy and locus of control. Students

Nursing,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/psychocog/

SEARCH
BROWSE
Recent Searches
My List
My Psych

Treatment of cognitive behavior therapy for the locus of control with internet gaming addiction problem.

EXPORT
Add To My List
Database: APA PsycInfo
First Posting

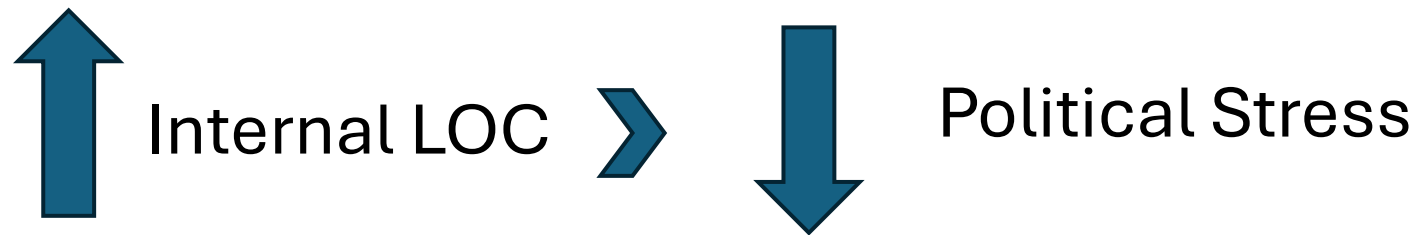
Citation
Full text from publisher
Cited by 1

Sugara, G. S., Nurfadila, N. A., Arumsari, C., Rahimsyah, A. P., & Muhajirin, M. (2024). Treatment of cognitive behavior therapy for the locus of control with internet gaming addiction problem. *Japanese Psychological Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpr.12566>

Abstract
Research has identified Internet gaming addiction as a new and often unrecognized clinical disorder that impacts users' ability to control Internet gaming use, which can lead to relational, work, and social problems. The locus of control is a factor in controlling the use of Internet games. Researchers have suggested using cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) as the treatment of choice for Internet addiction. This paper presents the findings of a study that utilized an A-B-A single-case research design to explore the impact of CBT on enhancing internal locus of control and reducing Internet gaming addiction. The participants in this study were three high school students (N = 3) who exhibited a high level of Internet gaming addiction and a predominantly external locus of control. CBT intervention was provided in six sessions. Treatment focused on modified cognitive distortion and developing positive behavior using the down arrow technique, acting as if, shaping, problem-solving, and behavior reinforcement. Participants completed the Game Addiction Scale for Adolescents and the Locus of Control Scale for Game Addiction. Data were obtained at three distinct phases: before, during, and after the CBT intervention. Results show that CBT reduced Internet gaming addiction and enhanced internal locus of control both during and after the intervention, indicating its potential as an effective treatment for students with gaming addiction issues. (PsycInfo Database Record (c) 2024 APA, all rights reserved)

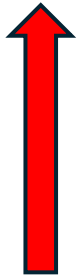
Key RQ: Does LOC Predict Political Stress?

- If answer is yes, suggests a potentially effective strategy to decrease negative impact of politics on well-being:

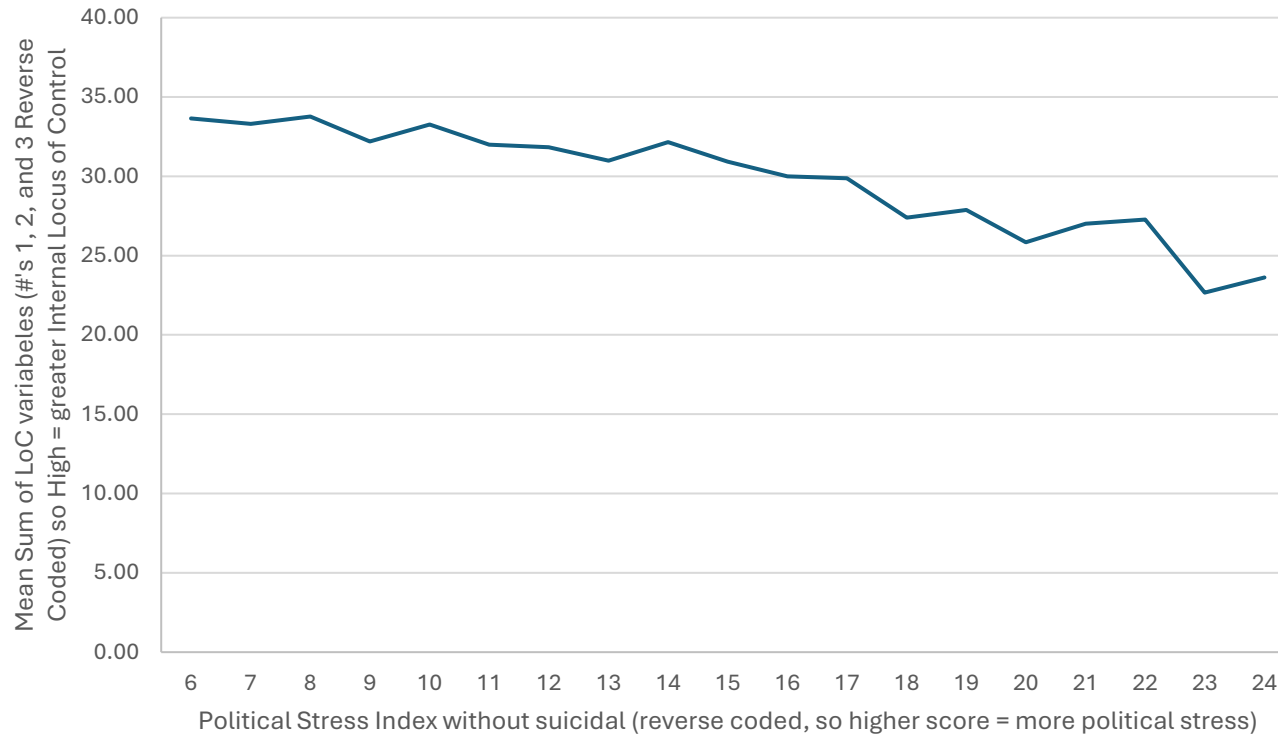


	Applies Completely (1)	Applies Mostly (2)	Applies Somewhat (3)	Applies a Bit (4)	Does Not Apply at All (5)
I'm my own boss. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If I work hard, I will succeed. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Whether at work or in my private life, what I do is mainly determined by others. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fate often gets in the way of my plans. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

LOC short scale – on
2024 survey that included
Smith et al politics and health scale



Higher Internal LOC



People with an internal locus of control report lower political stress

$r = -.34$ – this is a HUGE effect size in context of this research



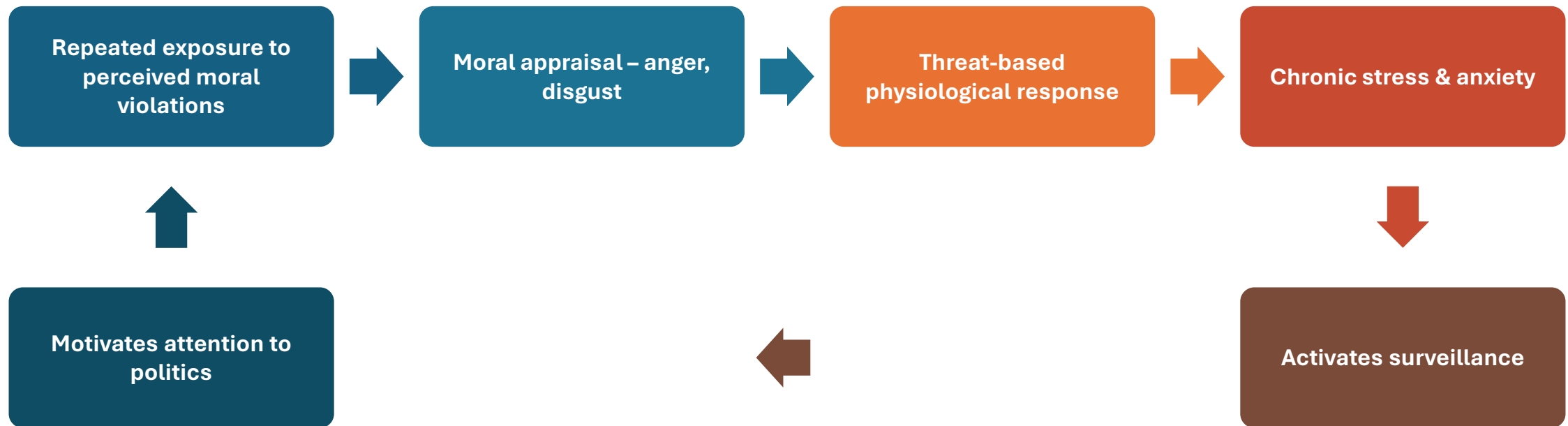
Higher political stress

2024 Data. Weighted to be nationally representative on key demographics, N=1500





Agency





Key Conclusion?

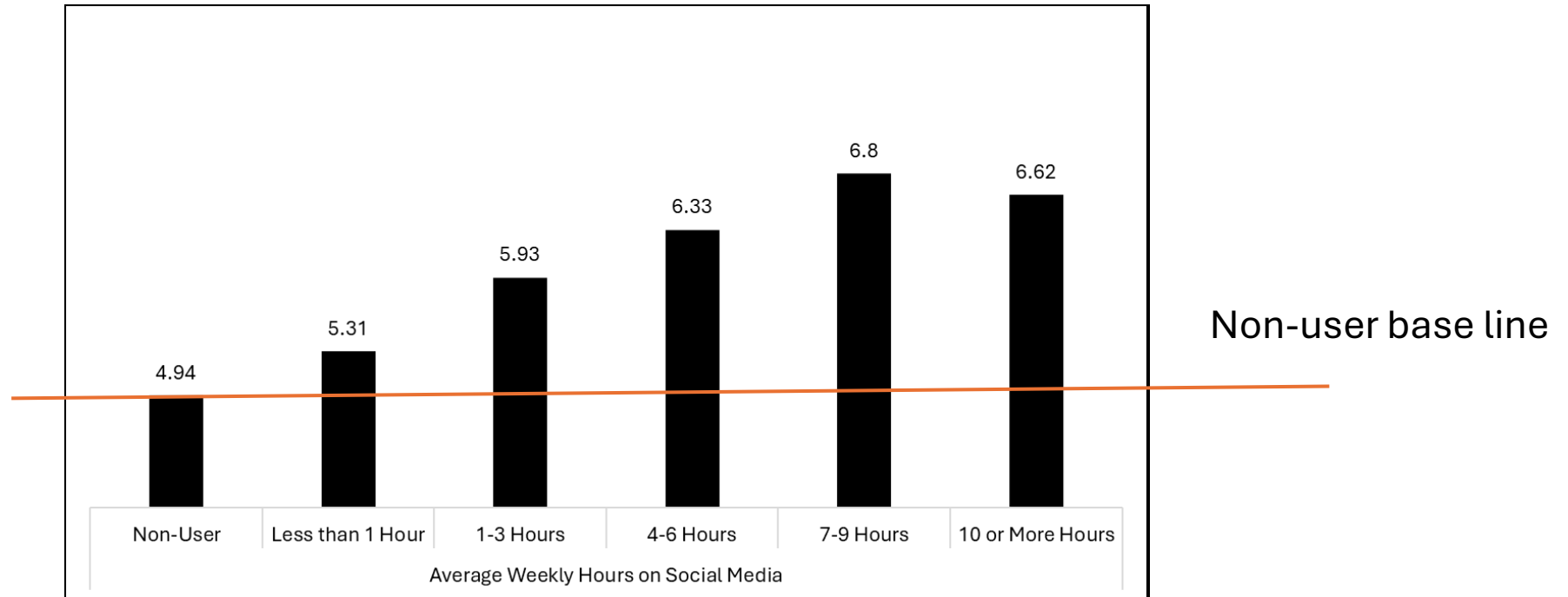
- Increase internal LOC (sense of agency) = decrease in vulnerability to political stress.
- This fits with data, but not directly tested (at least not by me)
 - We've got a correlation
- But ... a reasonable hypothesis?



Putting That Agency to Practice

- New media technology
 - Access to more information than ever before
 - Bombarded by more negative political stimuli than ever before
- Social media ubiquitous (esp. for young)
- Choosing to reduce exposure also reduce political stress?
- Also reasonable hypothesis?

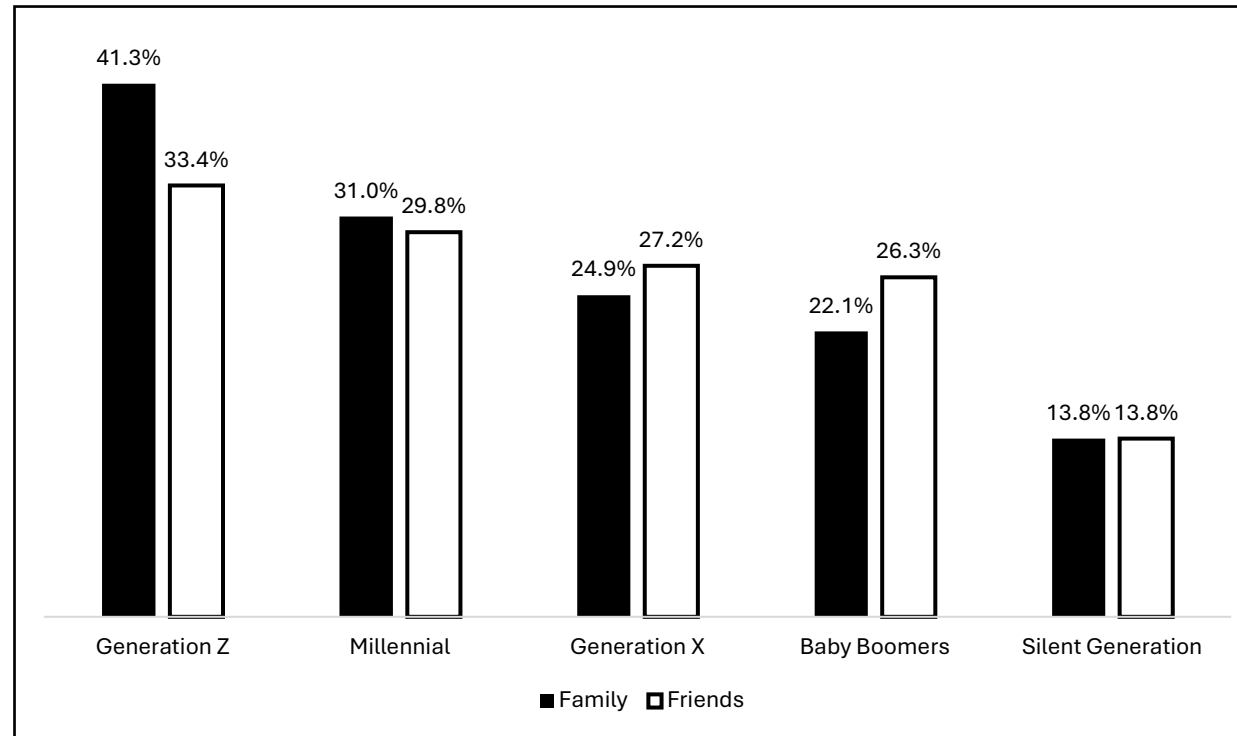
Political stress by time spent on social media.



Inference: More time on social media higher political stress

Source: Neely et al forthcoming, N=1500. Measure is a short form version of Smith et al political stress scale

Politically Motivated Conflict with Friends Based on News Sources



The young—heaviest users of social media—report highest levels of impact on well-being

~40% of Gen Z report conflict w/family over politics!

Source: Neely et al forthcoming, N=1500. Percent agree/strongly agree w/statement that politics has caused conflict with family/friends.



Agency

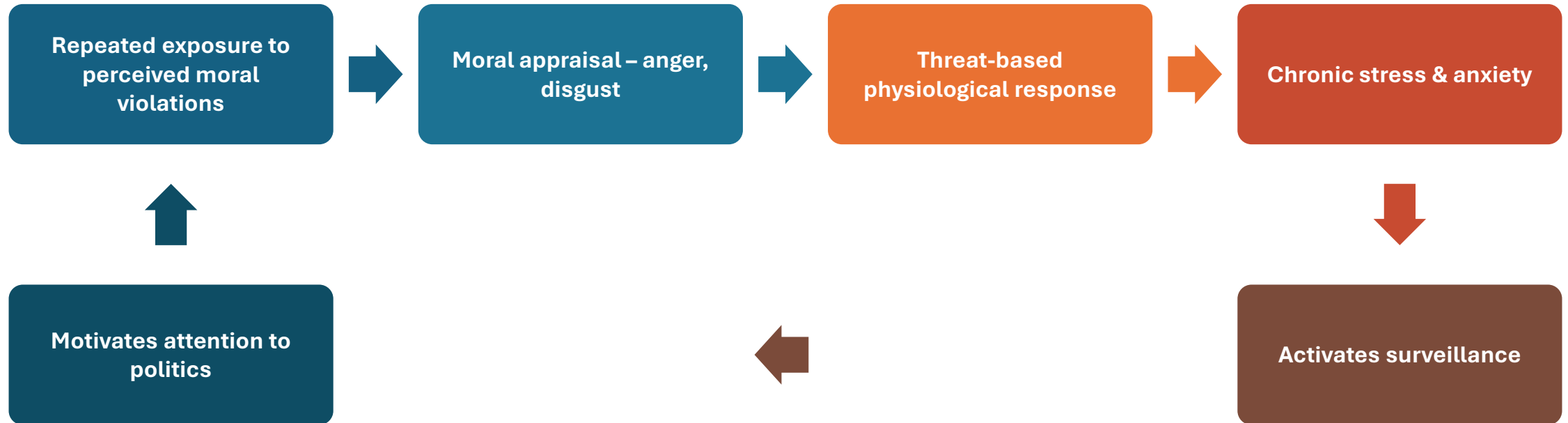
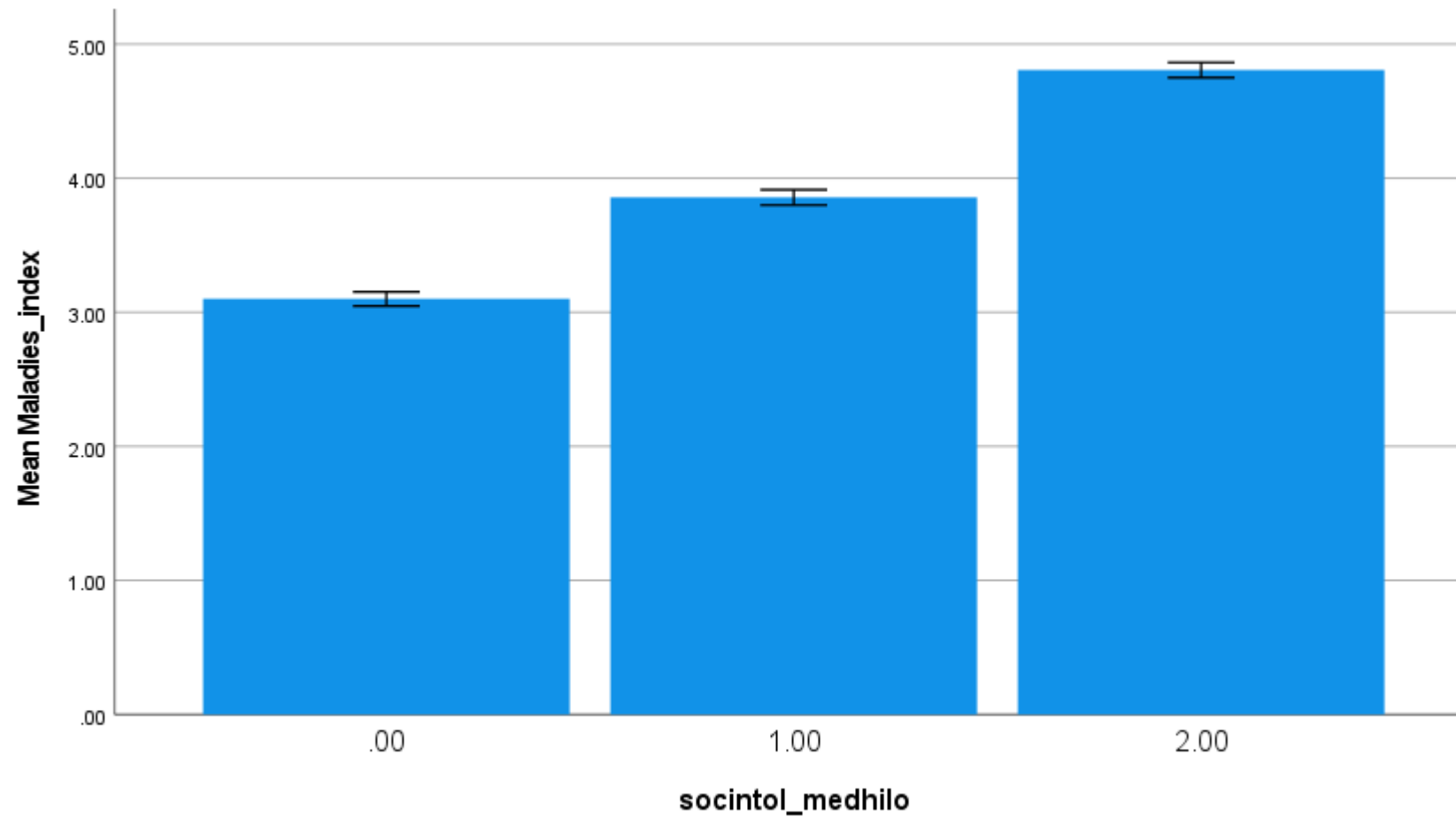


Table 1**Republicans' views on a variety of political subjects and Democrats' and Independents' estimates of those views**

	Republicans' Views	Democrats' Estimates	Perception Gap	Independents' Estimates	Perception Gap
Properly controlled immigration can be good for America	85%	52%	33%	65%	20%
Racism still exists in America	79%	51%	28%	56%	23%
Many Muslims are good Americans	70%	41%	29%	47%	23%
Sexism still exists in America	66%	47%	19%	52%	14%
The government should do more to stop guns getting into the hands of bad people	65%	47%	18%	53%	12%
Donald Trump is a flawed person	48%	47%	-1%	51%	3%
People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us	46%	44%	-2%	47%	1%



Difference between Republicans actual beliefs and Democrats estimate of Republican beliefs



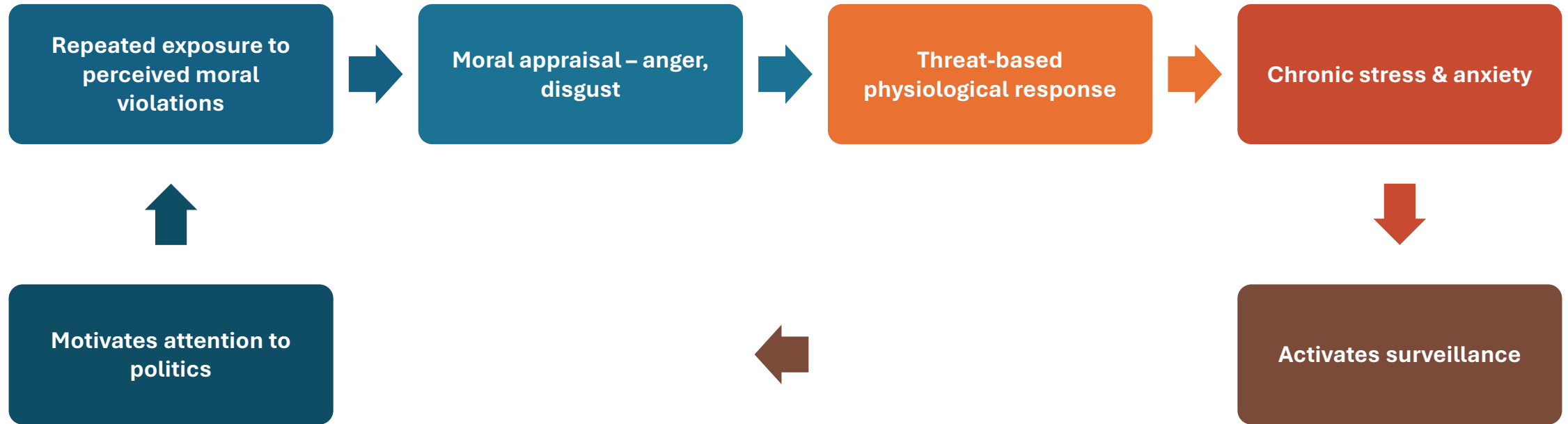
Error bars: 95% CI

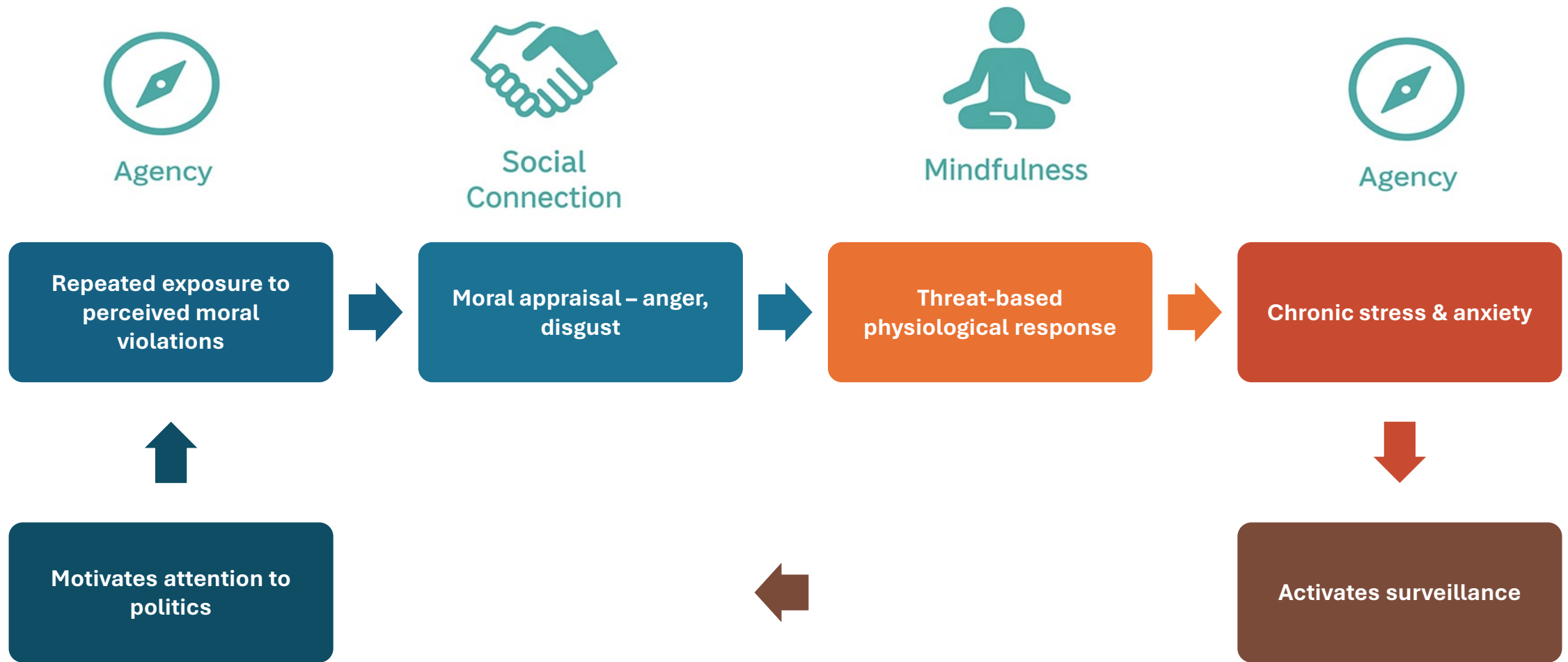
High intolerance ->
higher political stress
(Smith et al scale)



Social
Connection

Maybe this is why meaningful social connection works?





Key takeaways: Maybe possible to constructively intervene in the doom loop?

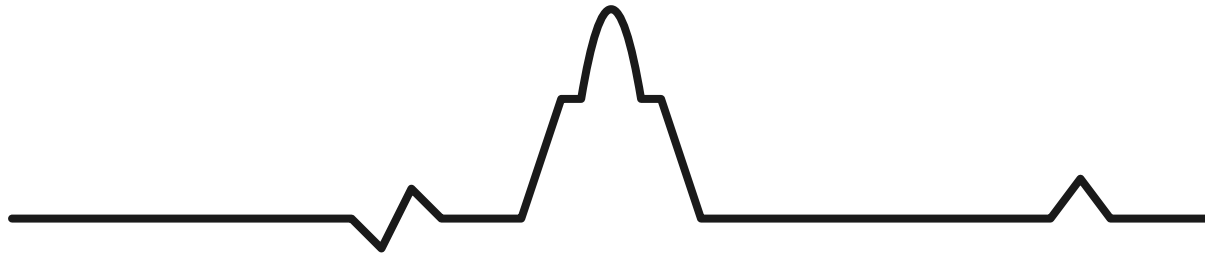
A Quick Summary

- Section 1
 - Political stress is real and negatively impacts well-being of tens of millions.
 - Individual difference in impact—ideology and age, perhaps gender and race
- Section 2
 - Dealing with political stress hard because we live in a politics saturated, polarized world
 - There do seem to be some evidence-backed interventions that can mitigate harms of political stress

What Don't We Know

- A LOT
- Not even sure of our measures
 - Lack of research on bio markers of allostatic load
 - Survey instruments all pretty new
- Interventions seem plausible, but evidence far from slam dunk?

Help me figure it all out!



The Political
Stress Lab

Questions???