

WELLBEING DURING AN ELECTION YEAR

September 2020

INTRODUCTION

Over 60% of people who took part in the American Psychological Association's "Stress in America" 2019 survey considered today's political climate "a significant source of stress." We know that the workplace and higher education are not immune to the impacts of heightened political debates and tensions. Among the findings from Gartner's [Election Employee Sentiment February 2020 Survey](#), employees stated:

- **91%** of employees said they either personally talk about politics at work or overhear others discussing politics at work.
- **47%** said the election had impacted their ability to get work done (26% say the impact is moderate or large).
- **36%** say they avoid talking to or working with a co-worker because of their political views.
- **24%** say the topic of the presidential election has led them to argue about politics with their co-workers.
- **29%** witnessed at least one instance in which a co-worker was treated in a way they felt was unacceptable because of their political beliefs
- At organizations with political expression policies, over **75%** of employees agree with those policies.

It's not surprising that people try to process their reactions to this political season while at their workplace. In addition to the inherent dramatic frenzy of any election year, there are other factors that could be making voters more anxious than in past years: reports by U.S. intelligence agencies stating that non-U.S. influences are impacting our democratic process has created serious concern from all political parties, the impacts of climate change are distressing for many, national unrest related to racism and police brutality, and the coronavirus outbreak all have caused extreme worry as people wonder how individuals, organizations, and political officials should respond. How does all of this impact our wellbeing and how can we navigate it as institutions and as individuals?

PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

There's actually a relationship between our physical wellbeing and election season, according to a [new study](#) from the National Bureau of Economic Research, with acute respiratory infections and gastrointestinal conditions being the most common physical ailment connected to the added election stress. The research establishing a relationship between elections and public health examined health care claims and determined that elections increased health care use and expense during legally specified campaign periods by as much as 19%.

Political scientists have long known that political involvement exacts costs, but they have typically defined these costs in relatively narrow, largely economic terms. [Recent evidence](#) suggests that the costs of politics may in fact extend beyond economics to frayed personal relationships, compromised emotional stability, and physical problems. The results show 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. The table below exhibits data collected from this March 2017 study.

Item	Percent Agreeing	Item-Index Correlation
Politics has caused me to be stressed.	38.0	0.78
I have become depressed when a preferred candidate lost.	26.4	0.73
Politics has caused me to be fatigued.	21.4	0.72
Exposure to media outlets promoting views contrary to mine can drive me crazy.	31.8	0.66
I have lost my temper as a result of politics.	29.3	0.73
Politics has led me to hate some people.	26.5	0.69
Politics has caused me to think seriously about moving.	23.3	0.62
I spend more time thinking about politics than I would like.	25.6	0.70
I care too much about who wins and loses in politics.	22.1	0.58
Differences in political views have damaged a friendship I valued.	20.3	0.63

Chronbach's alpha = .88

INSTITUTIONAL GUIDANCE

Most institutions have a wide range of students, staff, and faculty who come from an even broader range of backgrounds and experiences that all influence their personal viewpoints and politics. It falls upon leadership to help organizations behave in ways that are consistent with organizational values without “dictating” perceptions and beliefs to internal stakeholders. What can institutions do to support the wellbeing of their academic communities and also appropriately embody the organizational values when it comes to politics?

1. Determine the right political expression policies for the organization and communicate them early.

Gartner’s survey found that at organizations with political expression policies, over 75% of employees agree with these policies. After verifying federal, state, and local laws that may have implications on regulating employee speech or activity, leadership should use their organization’s culture and values as a guide to determine what types of guidelines to put in place around political expression in the workplace. Focus on clearly articulating the policy’s goals and the prohibited activities and behaviors, as well as any disciplinary actions taken if the policy is broken. Human Resources should work with managers and supervisors to ensure the policy is being enforced consistently across the institution.

The principle of free speech is a foundational pillar in academia – from research to teaching to creative expression to advocacy – and that is why we encourage academic communities to discuss and deliberate on the most challenging issues of our time. But with the power of free speech also comes the responsibility of ensuring that our speech does not demean, dehumanize, or delegitimize other members in our community. Now that many institutions are learning, meeting, and socializing in new online spaces, we are more vulnerable to online bullying and cruelty. This is especially true for under-represented students, employees, and communities, who are disproportionately subjected to marginalizing speech, both on campus and online. Organizations could consider which forms of political expression are most likely to have the greatest impact on their workplace, rather than attempting to shut down all forms of political expression.

Institutions should encourage their entire communities, no matter their individual political affiliation, to engage in the democratic process of an election and could also advocate for online voter registration, early voting with extended hours, and working with state election officials to establish polling places or ballot drop boxes on campuses. As the 2020 U.S. election rapidly approaches, and voting conditions continue to change, community education will be crucial for voter turnout. Colleges and universities can help by ensuring that their employees and students know about ID requirements, registration deadlines, and how, when, and where they can submit their ballots.

2. Emphasize organizational commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

According to Gartner, 29% of employees have witnessed at least one instance of unacceptable treatment of a co-worker because of their political beliefs, including being called offensive names, being avoided by colleagues, or being treated unfairly. Leadership should emphasize the organization’s commitment to ensuring a safe and inclusive work environment for all employees via their visible and actionable commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Communicate the organization’s political expression policy and DEI commitment months in advance to set the tone for the community’s future engagement on this topic. Also establish the communications norms now that focus on constructive discussion-oriented environments that are voluntary and with clear rules of engagement for everyone’s psychological safety. This may include creating a space for relevant communication about the election and reinforcing existing policies, processes, and programs on workplace abuse, discrimination, harassment, and bullying. This may also involve setting up “brave spaces” with structured topics and facilitators that focus on learning, growth, and honest discussion that advances the community dialogue around these issues. “Safe spaces” function as a place for respite and recovery for those groups who are under-represented or marginalized. It would be advantageous for institutions to create contingency plans for whatever the election outcomes may be regarding the wellbeing and diversity, equity, and inclusion supports for their community and particularly those who may be impacted the most by the outcomes.

3. Equip managers and educators to support employees/students and address political conflict.

Managers and educators play a critical role in mitigating risks associated with political expression in the workplace or the classroom. Leadership can help managers and educators minimize the disruptive effects of political stress in several ways:

- **Sense and respond to the need for support.** Help managers and educators recognize signs of distress among their employees and students, both directly (through conversations) and indirectly (through observation). Your institution's [AVWP](#) may be able to provide training support in this space.
- **Model the right behaviors to reduce the likelihood of misconduct or marginalization.** Ensure that managers and educators at all levels understand the organization's values and ethical standards so that they can effectively communicate and demonstrate them across the organization. Educators will need to be cognizant of how their "off-topic" comments about any political party or candidate may alienate students in the classroom. If there is legislation that would or does impact the curriculum topic being discussed, then it would be appropriate to discuss the impacts of the legislation. It would not be relevant to say to the classroom, *"Anyone who votes for XYZ candidate is an idiot."*
- **Resist the urge to be conflict avoidant and ignore issues that are bubbling up.** When we avoid difficult conversations, we trade short-term discomfort for long-term-dysfunction. Conflict may be instinctually uncomfortable but that doesn't mean that it can be ignored and will naturally "work itself out" or "blow over." It is the role and responsibility of leaders, managers, and educators to address conflict through productive conversations. Educators can also look to [this resource](#) for navigating these tensions in the classroom when problematic comments are made by students or classroom guests.
- **Address and mediate sensitive political tensions between employees or students.** This may require utilizing confidential resources, such as your institution's ombudsman, wellbeing professional(s), or mental health professional(s). Recognize that power imbalances and the fear of potentially weak disciplinary outcomes may play a large role in whether or not community members report bias-related incidences.

HOW CAN WE AND OTHERS COPE WITH ELECTION STRESS?

While we don't want to avoid all news and casual discussions until the election is over, there are steps we can take to help us manage stress related to any election:

1. **Register to vote and make time in your schedule to vote.** By voting, you are taking a proactive step towards creating the change you'd like to see in your life and the world. Seek out balanced information on the candidates and issues, make informed decisions considering other points of view, and wear your "I Voted" sticker with pride.
2. **Limit your media consumption.** According to a [2018 study](#), Americans spend an average of 11 hours a day on average consuming news and social media. Engage enough to stay informed but carve out opportunities to disconnect from news and social media, particularly if you find yourself becoming distraught, anxious, or emotionally reactive because of it. Staying in a state of high stress over extended periods of time can be harmful to your physical and emotional health. Take media breaks when you need to without judging yourself.
3. **Turn off non-emergency media notifications.** Set a dedicated time once per day to check the news and set a timer to keep yourself accountable, turning off all non-emergency push notifications. These types of notifications often cause us to interrupt our current task and are meant to pull us into the article that comes up on our phone. This will cause our brain to make a cognitive shift from what we are working on to then focus on the article. It will then take us even more time and mental energy to shift back into a working mindset.
4. **Limit discussions when appropriate about the election if you think it might create unresolvable conflict.** Be aware of how much you're discussing the election with friends, family members, or co-workers and whether they want to engage as frequently on the topic. People feeling secure enough to express their perspectives is positive, but not everyone is open to a discussion or debate about political topics that could be deeply personal and/or directly impact them. Designate some spaces at work and home as "politics-free" spaces where appropriate (such as the break room or the dinner table).

5. Recognize that stress and anxiety about what might happen is not productive. We can channel our concerns into making a positive difference on issues we care about. Consider volunteering in your community, advocating for an issue you support by contacting your Congressional representative, or joining a local group that's in alignment with your values. Try to channel that stress and anxiety into action when you can. Change what's changeable and control what's controllable - understanding the difference is powerful in managing our own stress levels.

6. Remember that whatever happens on Election Day, life will and must go on. Political beliefs are just one part of who we are, and we have so many more things in common than different. Try to maintain a balanced perspective. Direct your energies on the things that are in your sphere of control, such as our day-to-day routines and relationships with loved ones. Investing in those during times of stress can mitigate the impact of upsetting news and allow us to better maintain equanimity and balance.

7. Perspective counts. Although historically elections heighten dominant opposing views among segments of the electorate and the nation, the transfer of political power through elections typically reduces conflict and violence relative to authoritarian societies. In other words, elections may be stressful, but they're better than a coup d'état.

8. Set boundaries and decide how you'll respond. It's not a bad thing to care about politics and to become emotionally involved in them. However, it is important to set boundaries to optimize our own mental and emotional health. Sometimes a political conversation is sprung on us while in a group or we sense that someone with an opposing viewpoint is trying to bait us into a political debate. If you'd prefer to not engage, having a statement ready can really help. We may need a few different sentences in our mental "back pocket" to use when the situation arises. Practice saying it aloud a few times, and it will be easier to use when the time comes. Try something as simple as:

- *"I've been discussing politics a lot lately and would love a break to hear more about the other things going on in your life."*

- *"I don't know enough about this topic yet to have a well-informed opinion, so I'd rather discuss something else right now."*

- *"This topic is deeply personal to me so I wouldn't enjoy having/hearing a debate about it. Let's discuss something else."*

- *"I think that we view this topic so fundamentally different that there's not a good reason to discuss it right now."*

9. Practice "values-based living." Values-based living is the premise that the closer our everyday actions are in alignment with our values, we feel a greater sense of fulfillment and contentment in our lives. For example, if someone is passionate about helping the environment, then they could spend time sewing the button back on a shirt to save the environmental impact of buying a new one and having it shipped to their home, or plant flora that supports local bee colonies, or try to reduce their food waste through thoughtful meal planning. Our personal values and priorities may evolve over our lifetime, and they should as we grow in information and knowledge about the world, but we all have shared core values that help us develop our personal growth and also encourage us to be good neighbors to each other. Strive to live your values.

History is filled with turbulent and troubling times, just like our current news cycle, but don't overlook the virtuous moments. There are also a lot of good things happening, and that may mean that sometimes our voices will be in conflict. We hope that as we all engage with each other on these topics, we can move beyond stereotyped beliefs that lead to implicit and explicit biases, and instead foster a more supportive academic culture. While no political process is perfect, democratic campaigns and elections give citizens many opportunities to express their beliefs and change their communities for the better.

Stay safe and take care of each other.

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