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The Anxious State

If you were asked to describe American politics in a single word, how would you reply? You might pick something like “*polarized*,” “*hostile*,” or “*divided*”; and there would be good reasons for doing so. Partisan animosity is certainly one of the dominant narratives of our time. Deep divisions among voters are the subject of innumerable news reports.¹ Popular books have done their best to explain this hostility.² And according to academics and journalists, politics is increasingly responsible for dividing families, social groups, workplaces, and whole communities into mutually suspicious tribes.³

Or perhaps you might choose a word like “*annoying*,” “*stressful*,” or “*loud*.” After all, whatever damage politics is or isn’t doing to social cohesion, there’s no denying its increasingly intrusive presence in our lives. Thanks to advances in modern technology, we’re now more connected to ideas and information than at any time in human history. The digital age means living with a constant 24-hour news cycle, bottomless social media feeds, and political commentary launched from nearly every direction, whether you want to hear it or not. In an era defined by polarization and pervasive political coverage, it seems that everything becomes politicized eventually: companies and brands, sports, children’s cartoons, and even the weather.⁴ To be a modern American means you can run, but you can’t hide from the stress of politics.

While we cannot forecast your precise response, we can confidently make two guesses about whatever word popped into your mind. First, it was negative. A few glass-half-full types might have said “open” or even

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“hopeful.” But we’re positive that they’re outnumbered by a much larger group who would choose words like “scary” or “irritating.” Second, that word either has something to do with polarization or something to do with the ubiquitous presence of politics in our lives (especially on social media) and how it is driving us nuts. Our self-assurance on this matter is more than a whim. It’s based on our own research. In early 2024, we asked a sample of American voters to pick the adjectives that best described the political discussions they encountered on social media. The most common choices were words like “one-sided” (50%), “frustrating” (49%), “informative” (42%), “angry” (33%), “hateful” (31%), and “stressful” (30%). Less than one-in-five selected words like “thoughtful” or “constructive.”⁵ While we were specifically asking about social media, the results almost certainly generalize to politics in America writ large. With a single exception – “informative” – the words chosen by our respondents mostly fit into one of two categories: *stress* and *polarization*. These, increasingly, appear to be the defining features of twenty-first century American politics.

You don’t need to take our word for it. There’s plenty of evidence suggesting that politics is a major source of individual stress. Surveys by the American Psychological Association (APA) indicate that in 2024, more than two-thirds of adults identified the presidential election as a significant source of stress, a jump of 15 percentage points over the 2016 election cycle. The same survey suggests that more than three-quarters of people get stressed out just thinking about the future of the nation.⁶ A number of research studies have directly linked political engagement – even just paying attention to the news – to a range of adverse, stress-related mental health effects.⁷ For many of us, these effects are increasingly hitting close to home. For example, Americans frequently tell stories of friendships and even family ties falling apart over political disagreements.⁸

The evidence regarding polarization is even more overwhelming. Survey data consistently show that Democrats and Republicans think poorly of each other. This partisan animosity is increasingly driven by what political scientists call “affective polarization,” meaning it’s characterized less by a love for one’s own party than an intense dislike of the other. Between 2016 and 2022, the Pew Research Center observed a double-digit increase in the percentage of both Democrats and Republicans who described one another as “closed-minded,” “dishonest,” “immoral,” and “unintelligent.”⁹ In fact, by 2022, a majority of voters in

each party described the other in these terms. Not only have these trends undermined public civility and the ability of political leaders to effectively compromise, but they may also contribute to the effects of political stress on individual well-being. For example, Americans who feel most polarized within their communities are more likely to experience poorer physical health outcomes as a result.¹⁰

It doesn't take a degree in political science to recognize that this assessment of the political climate is not good. Don't get us wrong – it's not simply that we're somehow *more* divided over politics today than those Americans who came before us. After all, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr engaged in a duel to the death. The nation slid into a bloody civil war in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century saw Vietnam, Watergate, and McCarthyism, events that triggered powerfully divisive political movements. But something about the twenty-first century *feels* different. And perhaps that's the keyword: politics has increasingly become not something we simply think or talk about, but something we *feel*. Bombarded by endless streams of political content – and primed by political influencers to interpret the ebbs and flows of politics as threats to our own safety and identity – our differences of opinion have given way to outright distress. Americans are increasingly worn out, exhausted, and overwhelmed by politics.

In the face of these trends, perhaps the best one-word description of American politics today isn't "*polarized*," "*hostile*," or "*annoying*," but rather "*anxious*." And that anxiousness is the focus of this book. In framing our discussion around the idea of "*The Anxious State*," we don't intend to coin or define a new academic construct. It's simply a term meant to capture the convergence of political polarization, emotional exhaustion, and social fragmentation that defines life for so many in modern America. Over the course of the 2024 presidential election, we set out to develop a deeper understanding of what we perceive to be the two pillars of the anxious state: (1) political stress and (2) affective polarization. In the chapters that follow, we will define these terms more clearly, summarize what the fields of political science and psychology have to say about them, and examine the extent to which they define America's modern political culture.

We're far from the first to undertake an in-depth examination of these concepts. Affective polarization has attracted the interest of political scientists for a long time. An interest that has become more intense over the past 20 years as partisan animus has steadily increased.

Political stress has received considerably less attention, both in the academic and popular press. Nonetheless, over the past decade, a growing body of academic research has documented clear and consistent trends linking politics to stress, anxiety, and negative health outcomes.

While this extensive body of data and research – discussed in the coming chapters – has helped us to understand the increasingly anxious state of American politics, we’re unaware of any prior effort to track these phenomena closely over the course of an entire election cycle. That is what we did in 2024, conducting four large, national surveys to measure and track both political stress and affective polarization among American voters. That data collection effort not only makes possible a comprehensive assessment of America’s modern political climate, but it also allows us to examine how stress and polarization vary and respond to political events and outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, this understanding opens the door to empirically informed discussions about whether and how we can protect ourselves from the negative impacts of politics on our own individual and collective well-being.

It’s important to set the proper expectations up front. Our primary goal is not to explain how we got here – how twenty-first century America became *The Anxious State*. There’s plenty of time for those discussions, and more than a few possible answers. Our goal is to demonstrate that *America is an anxious state* by sharing and assessing the extensive data that we collected throughout 2024. We’ll tell you more about this data and how it was procured, but first we’d like to provide some context. Not only is our data unique, but so too were the circumstances that it was gathered in.

The Unexpected Twists of a Historic Election

We planned this study in late 2023, motivated by the opportunity to contribute something unique to our collective understanding of America’s political climate. What we didn’t realize at the time is that 2024 would prove to be one of the most unconventional elections in modern history, with an abundance of electoral anomalies and moments of unexpected political upheaval. This made 2024 a powerful testing ground for theories about political stress and polarization, as these unexpected twists and turns provided an opportunity to see American voters reacting to natural political stressors in real time.

The 2024 contest was most famously upended when the sitting President and Democratic nominee (Joe Biden) was pressured by his own party to withdraw from the race following a disastrous debate performance in June of that year. This was the first time an incumbent President was forced out of his reelection campaign due to questions over his health and mental competency. It was also the latest point in the electoral cycle at which any sitting President has withdrawn their candidacy.

Biden's withdrawal was far from the only atypical shock to hit the political system during the 2024 campaign. There was an attempted assassination of Donald Trump at a Pennsylvania rally in July. That was followed by a heated and at times chaotic debate between President Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris, who replaced Joe Biden as the Democratic nominee. And in the closing days of the election, Donald Trump held a controversial rally at Madison Square Garden in New York that inflamed racial tensions and drew widespread comparisons to a 1939 rally held by Nazi sympathizers in the same location. The information environment also saw a marked shift in 2024. Podcasts emerged as an influential conduit between campaigns and voters, while social media continued to evolve into one of the most prominent political information media. Collectively, these factors made the 2024 election a rich and unprecedented context in which to study whether and in what way highly salient events in America's political climate affect political stress and affective polarization.

In a fast-paced information world, where week-old news can sometimes seem ancient, it's worth laying out a brief timeline of the 2024 election cycle just as a reminder of how unusual it was:

- **January 15: Iowa Republican Caucus.** Donald Trump opts out of the Republican primary debates. Two potential leading competitors emerge: Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley. Despite his absence from the debate stage, Trump decisively wins Iowa's "first in the nation" primary caucus, earning over 50% of the vote. This solidifies his status as the frontrunner for the Republican nomination. On the Democratic side, President Joe Biden faces little opposition in party primaries, which were largely a formality due to his incumbent status.

- **March 5: “Super Tuesday.”** Trump wins primaries in 14 of 15 states, including large and decisive states like California and Texas. This ends Haley’s campaign. DeSantis dropped out even earlier. After Super-Tuesday, Trump is all but guaranteed to be the Republican nominee in 2024.
- **June 27: Biden Versus Trump Debate.** This debate, the first of two scheduled between the parties’ presumptive nominees, is held historically early in the election cycle. The result is a disaster for Biden and his campaign. A hoarse voice, rambling responses, and moments of perceived incoherence amplify previously voiced concerns about the President’s age and mental acuity. It triggers widespread calls from within the Democratic Party for Biden to withdraw from the race and be replaced with another candidate.¹¹
- **July 13: Attempted Assassination of Donald Trump.** Trump is injured in an attempted assassination at a rally outside of Pittsburgh. The would-be assassin fires shots from a nearby rooftop, one bullet fatally striking an attendee near the stage, while another bullet grazed President Trump’s ear. The shooter is killed by Secret Service Agents, and images of a bloodied and shoeless Trump being escorted off the stage soon begin to circulate around the world as a symbol of his campaign’s resilience.¹²
- **July 15–18: Republican National Convention (Milwaukee, WI).** The Republican Party holds its national convention in Milwaukee to formally nominate Trump as their candidate for President. In the wake of the recent shooting, the event focuses on themes of unity. Trump’s former rivals – Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley – offer their endorsement and support.¹³
- **July 21: Joe Biden Withdraws from the Race.** Biden accedes to nearly a month of mounting pressure from fellow Democrats and the media to withdraw from the race. He endorses then Vice President Kamala Harris to replace him on the Democratic ticket.
- **August 6: Kamala Harris Becomes the Democratic Nominee.** After two weeks of aggressively consolidating support from party insiders and delegates, Vice President Harris officially secures the Democratic nomination. She becomes the first woman of Black and South Asian descent to be nominated for the American Presidency by a major political party.

- **August 19–22: Democratic National Convention (Chicago, IL).** Harris uses this event to reframe the election around issues such as housing affordability, reproductive rights, and economic opportunity. Her convention speech attempts to shift the focus of the race from a referendum on Joe Biden’s record in office to a contest between competing visions for the future of America.
- **September 10: Harris Versus Trump Debate.** Trump and Harris’ only debate appearance is a barn burner. It includes false claims, wild allegations, and accusations of moderator bias. In one of the more memorable and unconventional moments of the debate, Trump accuses Haitian immigrants in Springfield Ohio of “eating the pets” of local residents. Harris is widely judged to be the “winner” of the debate, though Trump and his supporters’ express concerns over moderator bias.¹⁴
- **October 25: “The Joe Rogan Experience.”** Trump appears on an episode of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, the most popular podcast in the United States. The interview – lasting nearly three hours – is seen as a way for Trump to connect with young men, a demographic that has traditionally been difficult to mobilize through conventional campaign efforts. While an unconventional forum for electioneering, the podcast appearance is consistent with Trump’s history of leveraging emerging and nontraditional communication media (as he did with Twitter in his 2016 campaign). Critics argue that unlike the moderated debate in September, the host (Joe Rogan) offered little pushback on false claims made by the President during the interview.¹⁵
- **October 27: Donald Trump’s Madison Square Garden Rally.** A week before Election Day, Trump holds a widely publicized rally at Madison Square Garden in New York. An extensive roster of speakers includes Elon Musk, Melania Trump, JD Vance, and Tony Hinchcliffe, a controversial comedian whose derogatory comments about Puerto Rico spark a backlash among some Hispanic voters. Trump promises to carry out a mass deportation of immigrants.¹⁶
- **October 29: Kamala Harris at the Ellipse.** Harris delivers the “closing argument” of her campaign from the Ellipse in Washington D.C. The location is symbolically chosen as a reminder of the violent uprising that started at that same site on January 6th, 2021,

when Trump supporters attempted to storm the US Capital Building and prevent Congress from certifying his electoral loss to Joe Biden. Harris attacks Trump in aggressive terms, portraying her opponent as “unstable,” a “would be dictator,” and “obsessed with revenge.”¹⁷

- **November 5: Election Day.** Final polls suggest a tight race, with most reputable outlets predicting results within the margin of error. Trump nonetheless decisively defeats Harris, amassing 312 Electoral College votes (compared with 226 for Harris). Trump wins the popular vote for the first time in his three Presidential elections, securing 49.8% of the total vote. Among the primary drivers of Trump’s victory are notable increases in support among Hispanic and Black voters, as well as young males.¹⁸

As this timeline shows, the 2024 election was, by any yardstick, unusually dramatic. It included any number of events – an assassination attempt, a debate performance leading to a campaign implosion, the emergence of the podcast as a formidable electioneering tool – that were largely unprecedented. It was marked throughout by moments of intense intra- and inter-party hostility. If we experimentally controlled the world, it would be hard to conceive of a set of events better designed to move the dials on affective polarization and political stress. And we were collecting data throughout all of it.

The Data

During 2024, we administered four large national surveys. These included recurring measures of stress and polarization. In other words, we took the country’s temperature at four different times in order to track changes over the course of the year – this is what serves as the basis of the analyses in later chapters. While several prior studies have examined stress and polarization among American voters, to the best of our knowledge, none have followed these trends consistently over the course of an entire election cycle.

To conduct these surveys, we used a third-party market research firm (Prodege) and purchased access to their panel of survey respondents. The funding to support this project was provided by the Florida Center for Cybersecurity (at the University of South Florida). By purchasing

access to a large, online panel of participants, we were able to use what researchers call a “stratified quota sampling approach.” That means we first divided (or stratified) the country by Census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West), and then set quotas to ensure that the samples were representative of the country’s population based on key demographics. These included age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, and political affiliation. An appendix at the end of this book provides a detailed summary of the demographics for each of the four survey samples, as well as how they compare with population data for the United States. The key takeaway here is that our samples were designed from the beginning to provide an accurate measure of what American voters were really thinking and feeling about politics in 2024.

Each of the four surveys included a sample of 1,500 registered voters, resulting in a total of 6,000 unique responses across the four surveys. To be eligible to participate in the surveys, respondents were required to be at least 18 years of age, and they had to report being registered to vote in their home states. The four surveys were conducted using what researchers would call a “cohort design,” meaning we surveyed the same population (registered voters in the United States), but not necessarily the same individuals, each time. Much like a poll intended to predict the outcome of an upcoming election, this approach allows us to observe trends in the broader population without the added cost and logistical challenges of tracking the same individual voters over the course of an entire year.

Beginning in January 2024, the surveys were conducted quarterly. Table 1.1 shows the dates during which each survey was fielded as well as the electoral context at the time of data collection. While each survey occurred at unique and varying moments of political salience, Survey 3 in particular stands out as it was fielded in late July and early August, shortly after Joe Biden withdrew from the election, and just weeks after the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in Pennsylvania. This particular survey provided us a unique opportunity to understand the extent to which political upheaval impacts stress and polarization among American voters.

That said, all four surveys make key contributions to what follows. As far as we are aware, they collectively represent a unique dataset and an unprecedented opportunity to measure how political stress and affective polarization respond in real time to events in the political world.

Table 1.1 Summary of 2024 election surveys.

Survey	Survey dates	Electoral context
1	January 23–27, 2024	Fielded less than two weeks after the Iowa Caucus, while Republican candidates were preparing for “Super Tuesday,” and before Ron DeSantis withdrew from the race.
2	May 3–9, 2024	Fielded at a “soft point” in the electoral cycle. The Republican and Democratic nominations were “decided” at this point, but the first Trump v. Biden debate was not scheduled for nearly seven more weeks.
3	July 28–August 3, 2024	Fielded just a week after Joe Biden officially withdrew from the race, after nearly a month of pressure from Democratic leaders and the media. The survey followed the attempted assassination of Donald Trump by approximately two weeks, and it was taken after the Republican National Convention but before the Democratic National Convention. Kamala Harris was not the official nominee (but was seen as the likely candidate) at the time that the survey was fielded.
4	October 22–27, 2024	Fielded less than two weeks before Election Day. Donald Trump’s Madison Square Garden Rally and appearance on the Joe Rogan Experience both occurred while this survey was being fielded.

The Plan

Our goal is not to explain every possible root cause or effect of political stress and affective polarization. Nor is it to provide a comprehensive history of everything that political scientists and psychologists have to say on these matters. What we focus on is quantifying and demonstrating the extent to which stress and polarization have become defining features of America’s modern political climate. In so doing, we hope not simply to lay bare the patterns of stress and polarization throughout an election

year cycle. We also hope to inform conversations – both in the conclusion of this book and beyond – about what (if anything) can be done to mitigate often damaging cycles of stress and polarization. We won't pretend that the effects of our modern information environment can be easily wished away or that our elected leaders will suddenly embrace idealized norms of civility. Nor do we make light of the challenges posed by stress and polarization or minimize their deleterious effects on the well-being of our bodies, minds, and political systems. In short, we seek to go where the data lead us in a comprehensive examination of the increasingly anxious state of American politics, even if that doesn't lead to the happy endings most would prefer.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section focuses specifically on political stress, while the second focuses on affective polarization among American voters. Each of these sections begins with a chapter defining those terms and situating them in the context of what we know about them from the fields of political science and psychology. The final section examines what (if anything) can be done to “break the cycle” of stress and polarization in modern America. It asks a simple question: *is the anxious state here to stay?*

In Chapter 2, we define political stress and examine the research suggesting that politics is a stimulus that provokes both a physiological and a psychological stress response. Drawing on what is known about the physical and emotional consequences of chronic stress, we consider the ways in which politics could be doing harm to the health of American voters and what prior research has already shown us about the pernicious effects of America's modern political climate on our collective well-being.

In Chapter 3, we begin examining the survey data to determine whether politics acts as a “chronic stressor” for Americans, as well as whether its impacts rise to the level of a true “public health problem.” Based on the data collected throughout 2024, the answer to both questions appears to be an unfortunate and resounding “yes.” Not only do we see evidence that politics acts as a chronic stressor, but we find consistently high levels of political stress and negative health impacts throughout the course of the election year, with little variation caused by disruptive political events.

Having established in Chapter 3 that political stress presents as a genuine public health problem in the United States, we set out in Chapter 4 to better understand the “comorbidities” of this condition.

In other words, which demographic and personal attributes make it more or less likely that American voters will experience the adverse effects of political stress. Notably, we find the most significant health impacts among the youngest voters – with young women (18–28 years old) reporting the highest incidence of political stress by a notable margin. We also find a strong link between education and political stress, with college-educated voters reporting significantly more adverse health effects due to politics than their counterparts. Each of these associations is situated and discussed in light of the latest research in psychology and the social sciences, helping us to make sense of these notable comorbidities.

Building on the comorbidities identified in the previous chapter, Chapter 5 considers more behavioral factors, such as how closely voters choose to follow political news, whether they rely on social media and/or partisan news outlets for political information, and the frequency with which they are exposed to (and participate in) political discussions online. Notably, we find evidence to support the argument that media consumption is directly linked to political stress. In other words, the more that Americans follow the news, the more stress and adverse health impacts they experience. These impacts are notably worse in the case of partisan media consumption and social media usage, which aligns well with what we understand about how information is shared on these media.

In Chapter 6, we focus specifically on the impact that political stress has on our most vital social relationships (such as close friends and family), as well as the influence that news and social media have on our ability to get along. Specifically, we look at the frequency and intensity of politically motivated conflict within social groups, as well as the factors or platforms that contribute to more intense arguments around the dinner table. From our data, we find that many voters are living in a permanent state of political tension that doesn't fluctuate even with highly salient, stressful political moments.

Beginning in Chapter 7, we shift our focus to understanding the nature of affective polarization. In this chapter, we explore how Americans increasingly view members of the opposing political party with distrust and disdain, as well as how the measurable rise in affective polarization observed over recent years may have far-reaching implications for American society. We tackle the motivations for and causes of affective polarization, including the increasing tendency of Americans to view partisan affiliation as a form of social identity, which leads to often

exaggerated “us-them comparisons” and unnecessarily harsh assessments of “the other side.”

In Chapter 8, we uncover what can only be described as “unwarranted disdain” between Democrats and Republicans. The data show high (perhaps near record) levels of animosity between voters in the two parties, and these attitudes are at best weakly correlated with the actual policy preferences held by voters. Perhaps more alarmingly, we find that (like political stress in Chapter 3) affective polarization does not change throughout the course of the election year. Democrats and Republicans hold the same negative views of one another in late October as they expressed in January. Even high levels of competition and electioneering in so-called “swing states” seem to have little effect on these attitudes, suggesting that high rates of affective polarization are simply a baseline reality of modern American politics.

In Chapter 9, we explore whether affective polarization is more or less pronounced among different groups within the electorate. The data show that polarization is high among all segments of the population, and overlapping social identities appear to have very little impact on these attitudes. However, there do appear to have been some shifts in reported polarization among minority voters after Kamala Harris became the Democratic Party’s nominee. For example, Black and Hispanic voters expressed less animosity toward the Democratic party and slightly more animosity toward Republicans once Harris became the nominee. These trends also coincided with Donald Trump’s controversial Madison Square Garden Rally in the waning days of the campaign.

Following the same structure we used to examine political stress; in Chapter 10, we turn to the topic of media consumption and its impact on affective polarization. We find that Democrats and Republicans often react differently to information media, reflecting differences in how partisans have leveraged emerging technologies such as social media, podcasts, and the internet. For example, Republicans who regularly use podcasts and social media as sources of political news report significantly higher rates of affective polarization, but the same does not hold true for Democrats. Both Democrats and Republicans report significantly higher rates of affective polarization when they rely on partisan news sources, such as MSNBC and Fox News, respectively.

In the final two chapters of the book, we tie together the findings presented in the first 10 chapters and examine both the overall lessons learned about the anxious state of American politics, and what

(if anything) can be done about it. In Chapter 11, we synthesize the findings from previous chapters to highlight the major lessons learned, and in Chapter 12, we consider actions that could be taken to improve how we as individuals engage with and react to America's political climate. There's a lot of data to unpack, but in the end, some very clear (and at times alarming) patterns emerge. We're excited to share them with you, so let's get started!

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