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What's Stressing Americans Out? Virtual School and Social Media, not COVID or the Election

Democratic Women are the Most Stressed; Republican Men the Least; Being a Democrat is About as Stress-Inducing as Having a Toddler

Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, NJ, October 30, 2020 – In the wake of a global pandemic and a tumultuous Presidential election, it's taking care of kids in virtual school and social media that are stressing Americans out, according to a new national phone survey conducted by researchers at Fairleigh Dickinson University for the FDU Poll. By including a validated psychological stress scale in the survey (Perceived Stress Scale), the researchers determined how stressed Americans are right now, and pinpointed which concerns, traits and behaviors are linked with the highest and lowest levels of stress.

Those Following the Presidential Election the Least Experience the Most Stress

It might seem like paying close attention to this year's Presidential election would lead to higher levels of stress, but paying close attention to the race is actually correlated with lower levels of perceived stress. Only 32 percent of Americans who are following the election very closely report high levels of stress, compared with 38 percent among those who say that they are following it somewhat closely, and more than half (52%) among those who aren't following it at all closely.

This relationship between paying attention to the election and lower stress levels holds up across the partisan spectrum. Just 35 percent of Democrats who are following the election closely report high levels of stress, compared to 58 percent among those not following it at all closely. Similarly, just 26 percent of Republicans who are following it closely report high levels of stress, compared with 38 percent among Republicans who are not following it at all closely.

This isn't to say that there aren't partisan differences, though: Democrats and Independents on the whole report being much more stressed out than Republicans: 36 percent of Democrats and independents are in a "high" stress category, compared with just 28 percent of Republicans. Conversely, 40 percent of Republicans are in a "low" stress category on the Perceived Stress Scale, compared to just 26 percent of Democrats and Independents.

To put that in context, the difference between Democrats and Republicans in stress levels right now is just a bit smaller than the difference between Americans without a child at home, and those with a child under the age of 6.

"There are a lot of reasons why Democrats, on the whole, might be more stressed out than Republicans: they're generally younger, more likely to be women, and more likely to have small kids at home," said Dr. Dan Cassino, a professor of Government and Politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University. "But that doesn't account for the whole difference. In the Trump Era, Democrats are just stressed out."

Demographic differences tend to magnify, rather than reduce, other differences in reported stress levels. For instance, 33 percent of men are in the low stress category, and 34 percent are suffering from high levels of perceived stress. But only 25 percent of women are in the low stress category, and 39 percent of women have scores that place them in the high stress category. As such, Republican men wind up being the least stressed group in the study, with 45 percent of Republican men scoring in the “low” range of stress, and just 26 percent in the “high” range. In contrast, only 22 percent of Democratic women are in the “low” stress category, with 40 percent reporting “high” levels of stress.

While paying close attention to the election is related to lower stress levels, the same cannot be said for all issues. Americans who say that they’re following the COVID-19 epidemic very closely report higher stress levels (37 percent high stress) than those who aren’t following it at all closely (27 percent high stress). Concern with other major issues, like race relations and healthcare, aren’t significantly correlated with stress levels.

Virtual School is Stressing American Parents

It will come as no surprise that parents with small children report being much more stressed out than people with older children, or adults without children at home. 32 percent of Americans with no minor children at home report low levels of stress, and 34 percent report high levels. In comparison, 43 percent of parents with any children report high levels of stress, and 52 percent of parents with children under the age of 6 report high levels of stress. Just 1 in 7 parents of children under the age of 6 (14 percent) report low levels of stress.

Among parents, those who report having to help their children with virtual school at least once a day are much more stressed than those who say that they do so less than once a day, or never. More than half (51%) of parents who have to help with virtual school daily, or more than once a day, report high levels of stress, with only 12 percent in the low stress category.

“Normally, once your kids are at school, the most intensive part of parenting is over,” said Cassino. “But the average parent who has to help with virtual school is as stressed out as the parent of a toddler.”

“Doom Scrolling” Through Social Media is Stressful

Use of social media is also closely related to reported stress levels among Americans. Generally, Americans who seek out more information about current events are less stressed than those who seek out less information. For instance, Americans who read a newspaper daily (29 percent high stress) are less stressed than those who never do (41 percent high stress). Even those Americans who watch the often contentious coverage on cable news daily (31 percent high stress) aren’t less stressed than those who never watch it (37 percent high stress). However, unlike other sources of news and information, social media use is correlated with higher levels of reported stress. Americans who use social media daily (42 percent high stress, 21 percent low stress) have more stress than those who use it sometimes, but less than daily (37 percent high stress, 30 percent low stress). Fully 40 percent of Americans who never use social media are in the low stress category, with only 27 percent in the high stress group.

“It’s not clear from the data whether using social media is stressing people out, or if stressed people are just using social media more,” said Cassino. “But there certainly seem to be less stress-inducing ways of getting news and information, so social media definitely isn’t helping.”

Demographic Differences in Stress Levels

Demographic factors like race, ethnicity, education and age also impact the level of stress reported by Americans. White respondents report less stress (34 percent high stress) than non-white (42 percent high stress) or Hispanic respondents (42 percent high stress). In general, older Americans report less stress: those under 35 report greater stress (50 percent high stress, 18 percent low stress) than respondents between 35 and 55 (41 percent high stress), and those 55 or older (27 percent high stress). More educated Americans also report lower levels of stress, with just 30 percent of college graduates reporting high levels of stress, compared to 38 percent among those Americans with some college but no degree, and 42 percent among those who didn’t attend college.

Methodology

The online survey was conducted between October 9 through October 19, 2020, using the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Ipsos provides at no cost a laptop/netbook and ISP connection. People who already have computers and Internet service are permitted to participate using their own equipment. Panelists then receive unique log-in information for accessing surveys online, and then are sent emails throughout each month inviting them to participate in research. This survey contained 1003 adults, 18 or older, and was conducted in all 50 states and was available in Spanish for respondents who requested it.

For selection of general population samples from KnowledgePanel, a patented methodology has been developed that ensures all samples behave as EPSEM samples. Briefly, this methodology starts by weighting the pool of active members to the geodemographic benchmarks secured from the latest March supplement of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) along several dimensions. Using the resulting weights as measures of size, a probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) procedure is used to select study specific samples. It is the application of this PPS methodology with the imposed size measures that produces fully self-weighting samples from KnowledgePanel, for which each sample member can carry a design weight of unity. Moreover, in instances where a study design requires any form of oversampling of certain subgroups, such departures from an EPSEM design are accounted for by adjusting the design weights in reference to the CPS benchmarks for the population of interest.

Once all survey data have been collected and processed, design weights are adjusted to account for any differential nonresponse that may have occurred. Depending on the specific target population for a given study, geodemographic distributions for the corresponding population are obtained from the CPS, the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), or in certain instances from the weighted KnowledgePanel profile data. For this purpose, an iterative proportional fitting (raking) procedure is used to produce the final weights. In the final step, calculated weights are examined to identify and, if necessary, trim outliers at the extreme upper and lower tails of the weight distribution. The resulting weights are then scaled to aggregate to the total sample size of all eligible respondents.

All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. Sampling error should be adjusted to recognize the effect of weighting the data to better match the population. In this poll, the simple sampling error for 1003 US adults is +/- 3.26 percentage points, including the design effect, at a 95 percent confidence interval.

Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording, or context effects.

Measuring stress

Stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale, which uses four questions to assess how stressed a respondent feels. The scale is made up of questions like, "In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?" and "In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?" Responses were combined to create a score between 0 and 16, where 0 is the least stressed, and 16 is the most stressed. The mean score in the sample was 5.4, in line with previously published mean scores for the US population, indicating that Americans are not, in general, more stressed than in the past, even if some groups are. Past research has shown that higher scores on this scale are linked with depressive symptoms and health problems.

Scores were divided into low stress (3 or below on the 16-point scale), moderate stress (4-6 on the scale) and high stress (7 or above on the scale), with roughly 1/3rd of the overall sample in each category.

Question wording and order

Q1 How closely, if at all, are you following news about the following [randomize]:

The presidential election

The coronavirus pandemic

Race relations in the United States

Healthcare in the United States

Weather events like wildfires in the west and hurricanes in the southeast

1. Very closely
2. Somewhat closely
3. Not at all closely

Q2 How often do you use the following to get news and information about current events [randomize]:

Social media, like Facebook and Twitter and other outlets

Cable news

A newspaper, either local or national television news

1. Multiple times a day
2. Once daily
3. A few times a week
4. Occasionally
5. Rarely
6. Never

Q3 Do you have children at home who are engaged in virtual instruction at least sometimes?

1. Yes
2. No [SKIP Q4]

Q4 How often, if at all, are you required to help your children with the technology, like Zoom and other platforms, that are being used to deliver virtual instruction?

1. Multiple times a day
2. Once or twice daily
3. Occasionally
4. Rarely
5. Never

Q5 In the last month, how often have you felt...? [randomize]

That you were unable to control the important things in your life?

Confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

That things were going your way

Difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

1. Very often
2. Fairly often
3. Sometimes
4. Almost never
5. Never

Weighted sample demographics

AGE 29% 18-34, 30% 35-54, 41% 55+

PID 32% Democrat, 43% Independent/Other, 24% Republican

RACE 63% Non-Hispanic White, 12% Non-Hispanic Black, 6% Non-Hispanic Other, 17% Hispanic, 3% Non-Hispanic Multi-racial

GENDER 48% Male, 52% Female

EDUCATION 9% Less than High school, 29% HS only, 28% some college, 35% college degree

Tables

Stress Level	Overall	Sex		Party ID		
		Men	Women	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Low	29	33	25	40	26	26
Moderate	35	33	36	32	38	38
High	36	34	39	28	36	36

Stress Level	Republican		Democrat		Independent	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Low	45	35	30	22	28	24
Moderate	29	35	39	37	34	42
High	26	30	31	40	37	34

Stress Level	Overall	Race/Ethnic Group			Age			Education		
		White	Non-White	Hispanic	Under 35	35-54	55+	HS or Less	Some College	College+
Low	29	32	23	21	18	23	38	25	29	33
Mod	35	34	35	37	32	36	35	33	33	37
High	36	34	42	42	50	41	27	42	38	30

Stress Level	Overall	Children			Help with Virtual School	
		No Children	Children	Children Under 6	Less than Daily	Daily+
Low	29	32	22	14	32	12
Moderate	35	35	35	34	33	37
High	36	34	43	52	35	51

Stress Level	Overall	TV News			Cable News		
		Never	Sometimes	Daily+	Never	Sometimes	Daily+
Low	29	31	27	31	34	25	32
Moderate	35	28	38	33	29	36	37
High	36	41	35	36	37	39	31

Stress Level	Overall	Newspapers			Social Media		
		Never	Sometimes	Daily+	Never	Sometimes	Daily+
Low	29	30	25	36	40	30	21
Moderate	35	29	38	35	34	34	37
High	36	41	37	29	27	37	42

		Following Presidential Election			Following COVID-19			Following Race Relations		
		Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely	Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely	Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely
Stress Level	Overall									
Low	29	32	26	22	28	30	32	28	29	33
Mod	35	35	35	26	35	33	41	35	35	32
High	36	32	38	52	37	37	27	37	36	35

		Following Healthcare			Following Wildfire, Weather Events		
		Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely	Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely
Stress Level	Overall						
Low	29	27	32	27	31	30	25
Moderate	35	37	33	36	38	34	33
High	36	36	36	37	30	37	42

Stress Level	Democrats			Independents			Republicans		
	Following Presidential Election			Following Presidential Election			Following Presidential Election		
	Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely	Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely	Very Closely	Somewhat Closely	Not at All Closely
Low	27	23	33	29	24	20	45	38	29
Moderate	38	42	8	40	38	20	30	34	33
High	35	35	58	31	38	60	26	29	38