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The Emotional Cost of Political Engagement

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Political polarization is increasingly recognized as a critical threat to individual and collective well-being. Prevailing frameworks suggest that political engagement diminishes well-being by evoking negative emotions, which act as chronic stressors. However, the relationship between politics and emotion has largely been investigated by relying on static snapshots of emotional reactions to political events, overlooking how well-being is impacted by the temporal dynamics of political engagement and associated emotional responses. Across two longitudinal experience-sampling studies that include long-form "diary" responses ($N = 259$, 1,788 observations), we examine how political engagement shapes daily affective experiences. Contrary to the prevailing notion that engaging with politics leads to sustained negative moods, we find that political engagement is characterized by heightened affective instability—that is, frequent and large fluctuations in affective states—which, in turn, predicts lower well-being (i.e., greater anxiety). Politically polarizing events are particularly destabilizing when they are highly salient and when individuals spontaneously engage with these events. Strong partisans on both ends of the political spectrum also show the greatest fluctuations in daily affect, characteristic of an unstable emotional life. By observing that political engagement is intimately tied to increased affective instability, this research reveals an overlooked emotional cost of political involvement. These findings open new avenues for understanding and mitigating the emotional and mental health consequences of political engagement in an era of deepening divides.

Keywords: politics, emotion, affect, affective dynamics, well-being

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On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for 9 min and 29 s. Hours later, bystander footage of Floyd's fatal encounter with police went viral, igniting national outrage and sparking mass protests against police brutality and racial inequality. This footage was the catalyst for the largest protests in U.S. history (Buchanan et al., 2020), protests that were not only emotionally charged, but also politically polarizing (Horowitz, 2021; Jackson & Newall, 2020). The public outcry laid bare deep societal divisions, exemplifying how political events can influence collective and individual well-being (American Psychological Association, 2024; Stanton et al., 2010; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Indeed, emerging research suggests that political engagement and partisan hostility come with a psychological and emotional toll (Ford et al., 2023; Nayak et al., 2021; Roche & Jacobson, 2019; Smith, 2022). Although there is a growing concern that political engagement amplifies discord and distress, the mechanisms through which political involvement undermines emotional functioning and well-being remain poorly understood. At a time when ideological divisions are deepening and outgroup animosity is surging, understanding how politics shapes our emotional and psychological well-being is crucial to mitigating its harmful effects and fostering a healthier civic climate.

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Human well-being is intimately tied to our emotions, which serve as the bedrock of our social lives. We feel emotions like love, frustration, joy, and disgust whenever we are with others, and in many cases, because of others (Mesquita & Boiger, 2014). These emotions are not static but continually unfolding and changing as we engage with the world around us (Larsen et al., 2009). In fact, changing emotions are a critical signal for responding adaptively to environmental changes (Frijda, 2007; Larsen, 2000; Scherer, 2009). However, not all temporal dynamics are conducive to well-being, as certain patterns of change are associated with mental health disorders (Houben et al., 2015). For example, on one end of the spectrum, the persistence of negative mood states is characteristic of depression (Kuppens et al., 2010, 2012; J. Nelson et al., 2020; van de Leemput et al., 2014), and on the other end, rapid emotional shifts are a defining symptom of borderline personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; D'Aurizio et al., 2023). In short, *how* emotions fluctuate offers a window into an individual's mental health and well-being.

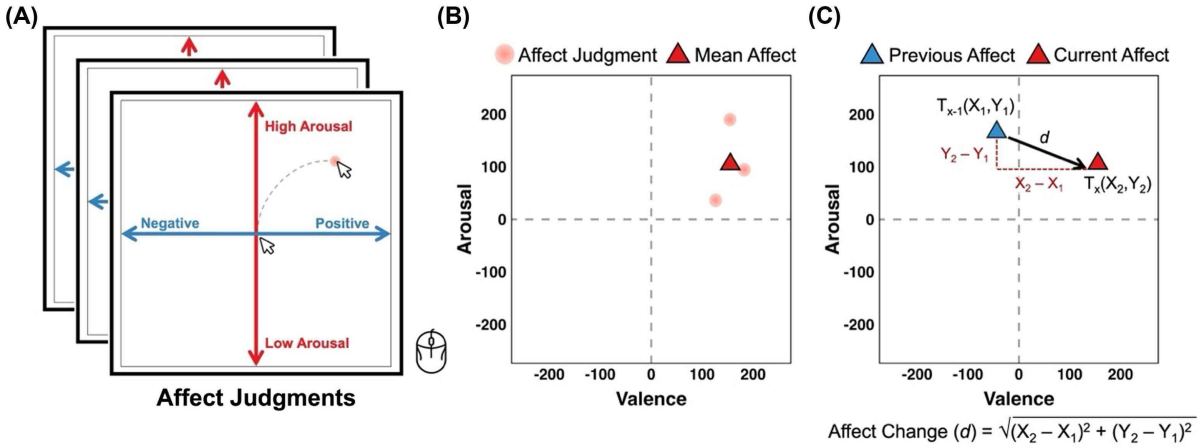
Despite the dynamic nature of emotion and its close link to well-being, research investigating the relationship between politics and emotion largely relies on static snapshots of individuals' emotional reactions to political phenomena. For example, a subject may be asked to report the extent to which they feel various negative emotions after viewing political content or to report their feelings toward different political groups (Iyengar et al., 2019). These approaches reveal that political phenomena evoke negative emotions that are associated with diminished well-being (Ford et al., 2023; M. H. Nelson, 2022), but they cannot address just how variably emotions unfold over time in response to political events. To better understand how political engagement impacts emotional functioning and psychological well-being, it is essential to examine how political events shape the temporal dynamics of people's emotional experiences. One particularly useful approach for studying the temporal dynamics of emotion is to characterize changes in an individual's core affect (FeldmanHall & Heffner, 2022; Frijda, 2007; Scherer, 2009), affective responses which vary along the dimensions of valence (i.e., pleasurableness) and arousal (i.e., intensity). These affective measurements can be used to quantify several distinct emotion dynamics, including affective instability, variability, and inertia (Houben et al., 2015).

Affective instability is a widely used metric that reflects frequent, unpredictable changes in affective states from one moment to the next (Marwaha et al., 2014). Individuals with high affective instability experience volatile emotional lives characterized by heightened reactivity to environmental stressors (Jahng et al., 2008). In contrast, affective variability captures the breadth of a person's affective experiences (Kuppens et al., 2007). Those with high levels of variability experience a wide affective range, including extreme emotions indicative of poor regulatory control (Kuppens & Verduyn, 2015). Finally, affective inertia reflects the degree of continuity between a person's past and present affective states (Kuppens et al., 2010). High levels of inertia signal that a person's emotional state has a tendency to remain consistent and is resistant to changes over time, which acts as a marker of emotional "stickiness" or rigidity. Such stickiness is often seen in depression, when feelings of sadness persist even after the initial trigger has been resolved (Kuppens et al., 2012; van de Leemput et al., 2014). Examining how these different signatures of affective dynamics are evoked by political events can help deepen our understanding of the adverse effects of political engagement on well-being.

We used these metrics of affective dynamics to test three (not mutually exclusive) hypotheses of how political engagement could impact everyday affective experiences and psychological well-being. First, it is possible that political engagement has a destabilizing effect, such that people exhibit large fluctuations in affective states when engaging with political events. Political engagement has been linked with both negative (e.g., anger) and positive (e.g., enthusiasm) emotions (Combs et al., 2009; Groenendyk & Banks, 2014; Huddy et al., 2015; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Partisans tend to experience negative affect when exposed to information that threatens their political group or ideals (e.g., election losses and ideologically incongruent arguments), and positive affect when encountering information that increases their group's status or affirms their values. Therefore, repeated exposure to both ideologically congruent and incongruent stimuli may result in greater affective fluctuation during periods of political engagement—fluctuations that, over time, may diminish well-being. Second, political engagement may increase affective variability. Prior research suggests that political events often evoke strong emotional responses (Ford et al., 2023; Pierce et al., 2016), particularly among partisans who staunchly identify with a particular political party (Huddy et al., 2015; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Individuals may therefore experience a wider affective range—including more extreme emotions—when politically engaged, which may, in turn, undermine their well-being. Third, given that political events frequently evoke negative emotions (Ford et al., 2023; Hoyt et al., 2018), it is possible that political engagement results in greater affective inertia, triggering negative moods that persist for hours, days, or even weeks (Roche & Jacobson, 2019).

To test these three accounts, we leverage a longitudinal experience sampling design to capture how the dynamics of people's day-to-day affective experiences are shaped by their engagement with politically polarizing events (Study 1) or partisan political attitudes (Study 2). In Study 1, we assess the temporal patterns of participants' affect following the murder of George Floyd. During an 8-week period encompassing 23 data collection points, we measured affective responses using a dynamic affect grid (FeldmanHall & Heffner, 2022; Russell et al., 1989; Figure 1) and political engagement using naturalistic open-ended diary prompts. This allowed us to repeatedly record people's affective states to see how affect at one timepoint predicts affect at subsequent timepoints, given whether individuals were engaging with the ongoing national discourse around racial inequality (Figure 2). We were then able to link these repeated measurements to metrics of well-being, particularly anxiety and depression. Given that ideologically extreme individuals engage more with partisan news (Levendusky, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2020) and have stronger emotional reactions to political stimuli than their more moderate peers (Bakker et al., 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2015), we explicitly test in Study 2 whether strong partisans experience larger affective shifts. By connecting the extremity of an individual's political beliefs with the dynamics of their everyday affect, we highlight a previously overlooked emotional consequence of partisanship—one

Figure 1
Study 1: Affect Judgments



Note. (A) During each study session, participants reported three events from their past two days and indicated how they felt about each event by clicking within a 500 × 500 pixel affect grid. (B) We calculated the mean affect (valence and arousal) of these judgments as a measure of participants' affect at each timepoint. (C) We measured the overall magnitude of participants' timepoint-to-timepoint changes in affect by calculating the Euclidean distance between participants' current valence and arousal (T_n) and their valence and arousal at the previous timepoint (T_{n-1}). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

that may contribute to the diminished well-being of politically polarized individuals.

Study 1

Method

Participants

We recruited 138 U.S. residents from the Prolific online labor market, a sample size consistent with past work using longitudinal experience-sampling designs (Wrzus & Neubauer, 2023), including those investigating affect and well-being (Goicoechea et al., 2025; Heller et al., 2019; Lenneis et al., 2024). We excluded participants who failed to complete at least two questionnaires (n = 25), as affective dynamics cannot be assessed with data from a single timepoint. The final data set consisted of 113 participants (M_{age} = 30.42, SD_{age} = 9.98; 69 Female, 43 Male; 71 White, 17 Asian, 13 Black, 6 Hispanic/Latinx, 6 mixed/other), each of whom completed multiple questionnaires (M = 13.58, SD = 7.15), yielding a total of 1,534 assessments. This intensive longitudinal approach—spanning 23 timepoints—improved statistical power and precision by leveraging within-subject variability and reducing error variance. All participants received monetary compensation for their participation. All study procedures were approved by Brown University's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to their participation.

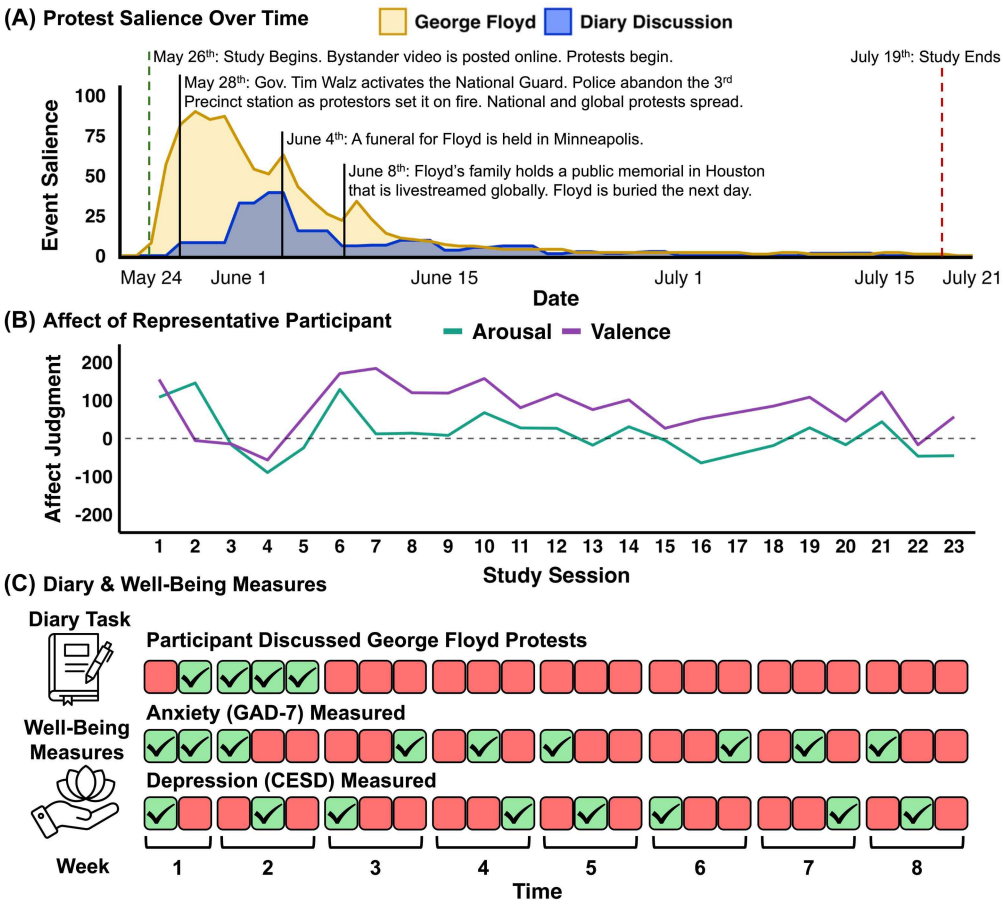
Political Event Salience

The 8-week time frame of Study 1 coincided with the sharp rise—and subsequent fall—of national interest in politically polarizing protests against police brutality and racial inequality (Figure 2A). To estimate the cultural salience of these protests, we used data from Google Trends (https://google.com/trends) to quantify how frequently terms related to these protests were searched for in the United States during each study timepoint (Chykina & Crabtree, 2018). Specifically, we acquired a daily Google Trends search interest score for five search terms over the course of Study 1 (May 26 to July 19, 2020): "George Floyd," "riots," "protests," "BLM," and "Derek Chauvin." Search interest scores reveal the proportion of Google searches for a given term relative to the peak search volume in the data set (in this case, "riots" on May 31). Therefore, higher scores indicate that a greater number of Americans searched for a term on a given day. The popularity of all search terms followed a similar trajectory, peaking around May 31, with search frequency diminishing considerably by mid-June. Here, we use the term "George Floyd" as our primary measure of event salience as it was the most frequently searched term across the full study period and represents a direct index of all events related to Floyd's murder, subsequent protests, and politically polarizing discourse surrounding both. Robustness checks reveal that all effects replicate when measuring event salience using the aggregated day-to-day popularity of all event-related terms and when controlling for the salience of the concurrent coronavirus pandemic, indexed by the frequency of Google searches for "coronavirus" in the United States (Supplemental Materials).

Design and Procedure

Participants completed (up to) 23 online questionnaires over the course of 8 weeks (May 26 to July 19, 2020). They began each questionnaire by writing a freeform "diary" entry about their past two days (*Diary Task*). Next, from all the events participants wrote about, they selected three events and reported their feelings toward each event using a 500 × 500 affect grid (*Affect Judgments*). Depending on the questionnaire, participants concluded the study session by responding to questions assessing their anxiety and/or depression symptomology (*Psychological Well-Being*; Figure 2C).

Figure 2
Study 1 Design



Note. (A) Study 1 began the day after George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. We measured the salience of the mass demonstrations that followed Floyd's death using data from Google Trends and text from participants' diary entries. Data from Google Trends revealed the number of times the term "George Floyd" was searched as a proportion of the highest number of daily searches in our Google Trends data set. Diary discussion scores reflect the proportion of participants who discussed the George Floyd protests. The salience of these protests fluctuated over the course of Study 1, as did participants' discussion of them, allowing us to capture the effect of event salience and engagement on participants' affect and well-being. (B) One representative participant's affect over the course of the study. The time axis is aligned with Panel A, revealing a large shift in affect corresponding to the George Floyd protests. Participants reported their affective experiences three times a week, completing a total of (up to) 23 study sessions over an 8-week period. (C) In addition to affect judgments, we collected text data from a freeform diary-writing task as well as two measures of well-being from standardized questionnaires. Participants began each study session by completing a diary task in which they were asked to reflect on and write about their last two days. For each timepoint, we assessed whether participants spontaneously discussed the George Floyd protests in their diary responses (coded as a *yes/no* binary variable). The representative participant's explicit discussions of the George Floyd protests are depicted with green checkmarks, which appear to correspond with the large shift in affect shown in Panel B. At select timepoints (once per week), participants also completed the GAD-7 and CES-D questionnaires, which measure anxiety and depression symptoms, respectively. Gov. = Governor; GAD-7 = Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item; CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Materials and Measures

Diary Task. Participants began each questionnaire by writing about their last two days. They were told that there was no right or wrong way to write their response but were encouraged to be thoughtful and detailed, and indeed, descriptive statistics indicate that participants took this instruction seriously (word count: *Mean* = 181, *SD* = 165, and *Median* = 134). Diary task instructions included prompts such as, "What were the activities you engaged in, and the events that you found important?" and "What were the thoughts you had, and the emotions you experienced?". Study instructions made no reference to politics or ongoing political events. Thus, all discussion of political events within diary entries was unprompted, reflecting a participant's

personal view that one or more political events were an important part of their past two days.

We used data from this freeform diary task to capture participants' personal engagement with the George Floyd protests at each timepoint, yielding 1,534 diary entries across all participants and timepoints. Two trained research assistants (RAs), blind to study hypotheses, judged whether participants engaged with this politically polarizing event. Before reading diary entries, RAs were provided with information detailing the murder of George Floyd and the global protests that followed. For each diary response, RAs were asked to judge whether a participant (based on their diary text) showed "engagement with the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd, the demonstrations and/or civil unrest that took place afterwards, and/or the general topics of police brutality and racism." RAs provided a rating of "0" to diary responses (94.5% of diary entries) that made no reference to this event or related topics, a rating of "1" to diary responses (3.0% of diary entries) that indicated moderate engagement, and a rating of "2" to diary responses (2.5% of diary entries) that indicated strong engagement (Figure 3). We collapsed ratings of "1" and "2" to create a binary variable reflecting whether a participant engaged with the George Floyd protests over the last two days. Participants judged to have engaged with this event reported a range of activities, including attending demonstrations, donating to protest-related charities, participating in extended conversations about racial inequality, and actively following news coverage of the event. Consistent with past work (Mannerström et al., 2017; Verba et al., 1997), our operationalization of "political engagement" did not always involve direct political action, but did consistently reflect participants' attentive following of this event, with all engaged participants providing an unprompted discussion of the George Floyd protests when asked to describe meaningful events from their past two days. RA judgments showed almost perfect agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .86$, 95% CI [0.80, 0.92]), disagreeing on only 2.3% of cases. Instances of disagreement were discussed by RAs until a consensus was formed. Overall, 47 participants (42% of the sample) mentioned the George Floyd protests in at least one diary entry.

Affect Judgments. Following each diary entry, participants picked three events they had just written about. For each event, they described the event in a few words (e.g., "called my mother"), and provided an affect judgment that reflected their feelings toward it. Affect judgments were made using a granular 500 × 500 pixel affect grid that captured emotional experiences on two dimensions: valence (pleasurableness, *x*-axis) and arousal (intensity, *y*-axis; Figure 1A). Participants were instructed on how to use the affect grid and then rated the pleasurableness (valence) and intensity (arousal) of their feelings regarding each event by clicking within the 500 × 500 grid, producing two ratings for every event (i.e., one on each

Figure 3

Representative Diary Excerpts Illustrating Political Engagement

Rating	Diary Snippet
1	"Last night, [Name] and I did not really play games like I thought but really just talked for a couple of hours. He kept bringing up the protests and other current events and it was clear we disagreed on most things and it was awkward trying to avoid any conflicts."
	"Watching the protests in general and Trump with his photo at St John Episcopal. Mixed feelings as I am not sure everyone can separate the peaceful protests from the looting. Frustration with TV media which had been mostly focused on the negative. Disappointed about needing to carefully cull through the internet to find positive stories on an intense time in the nation."
	"I met up with [Name's] friends and we talked about politics, and sociopolitical issues. ... I have been following the current protests which made me feel hopeless about this country."
2	"Yesterday, I attended a Christian protest at the capitol advocating for racial equality and justice. This was my first time participating in a protest and I was really nervous. I wasn't exactly sure what to expect, and was antsy leading up to my participation. During the protest, things were unexpectedly calm, and I was also surprised by the number of people in attendance. I didn't feel all that comfortable there, but felt happy that I was able to get a feel for what the protests were actually like. I was also hopeful hearing about what could happen moving forward."
	"When I got to work, there were several customers there that were complaining about the Black Lives Matter protesters, saying that the people involved were just looking for an excuse to loot and steal. I got very upset, especially since I felt like I couldn't say anything back to them since I was currently working. ... I also decided that I was going to donate all my tips from those racist customers to the Black Lives Matter movement. I posted a few more articles, showing my support for the rioting, and had a few arguments with conservative friends who blindly support the police. Although there is a part of me that feels like I shouldn't engage with them, another part of me feels that as a white person, it is a part of my duty to try to help other white people have compassion for marginalized groups."
	"The thoughts of injustice in this country are far too great to think of anything else. I went home and the protest in my hometown was cancelled due to racist threats. Me and my friends decided that by not going the racists would win. ... The first protest was very nice, peaceful and calm. The second of the day was peaceful and calm as well, I'm glad it went that way but am still upset over the racism that persists in this country."

Note. Example of diary entries coded as showing moderate (Rating = 1) or strong engagement (Rating = 2) with the George Floyd protests. Each snippet is from a different participant. Minor edits were made to protect anonymity and improve readability (e.g., removing names and correcting spelling).

dimension) that varied from −250 to +250. Thus, during each questionnaire, participants provided three affect judgments, reflecting their feelings toward recent events that were important to them. We calculated the mean valence and arousal of each participant's judgments as our measure of their affect at a given timepoint (Figure 1B), which we then used to quantify affective dynamics.

We quantified the overall magnitude of short-term changes in affect by calculating the Euclidean distance between a participant's self-reported valence and arousal at one timepoint (T_n) and their valence and arousal at the preceding timepoint (T_{n-1}; Figure 1C). We also captured longer term affective dynamics using classic measures of affective instability, variability, and inertia, ensuring in all cases, as is common practice, that these measures were based on a minimum of three consecutive timepoints (Houben et al., 2015). Affective instability was calculated as the mean squared successive difference (MSSD) between consecutive timepoints for each participant within a given period (Jahng et al., 2008). Affective variability was calculated as the 95% confidence intervals of each participant's (two-dimensional) affective judgments for a given period. This approach extends canonical measures of affective variability in unidimensional judgments (Kuppens & Verduyn, 2015), to simultaneously account for variability in both valence and arousal. Affective inertia was calculated separately for the valence and arousal dimensions by taking the autocorrelation of each participant's valence and arousal judgments across time (Kuppens et al., 2010).

Psychological Well-Being. We used well-validated measures of anxiety and depression, measured weekly, to index well-being. Anxiety was assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7), a seven-item instrument used to measure the severity of generalized anxiety disorder (Spitzer et al., 2006). Participants indicated how often they had been bothered by different anxiety-related symptoms (e.g., "worrying too much about different things") over the past week. Responses to GAD-7 items were provided on a 4-point scale that ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*). Responses to all seven items were summed to create a GAD-7 score for each participant, with higher scores reflecting greater anxiety. Depression was assessed using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), a 20-item measure of depressive symptomatology (Radloff, 1977). Participants reported how often they felt or behaved in ways connected to depressive symptoms (e.g., "I could not get going") over the last week using a 4-point scale that ranged from 0 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 3 (*most or all of the time*). Responses to all twenty CES-D items were summed to create a CES-D score for each participant, with higher scores reflecting greater depression.

Statistics and Software

All analyses were conducted in RStudio v2024.12.0 + 467 (Posit Team, 2024) with R v4.4.2 (R Core Team, 2024) with the exception of multilevel mediation models, which were fitted in Stata v18 (StataCorp, 2023). Linear mixed-effects models, with maximal random effects where possible, were fitted to participant data using the lme4 package v1.1.35.5 with degrees of freedom estimated using the Satterthwaite method (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Bonferroni correction was used to correct for multiple comparisons. Plots of participant data and model predictions were generated using the ggplot2 (v3.5.1; Wickham, 2016) and ggeffects (v1.7.2; Ludecke, 2018) packages, respectively.

Transparency and Openness

For both studies, we collected the full sample prior to data analyses and report all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures used. All measures and materials presented within Studies 1 and 2 can be viewed in the Supplemental Materials. Neither study was preregistered. All data and analysis scripts have been made publicly available at https://osf.io/3dyr7.

Results

Politically Polarizing Events Evoke Unstable Negative Affect

First, we assessed how the cultural salience of a politically polarizing event (i.e., the George Floyd protests) impacted the dynamics of participants' affect. Before testing our main hypotheses about longer term affective dynamics, we first validated our method by measuring whether short-term changes in affect fluctuated as a function of day-to-day changes in the salience of George Floyd's murder and subsequent protests. We quantified the overall magnitude of short-term affective change as the Euclidean distance between a participant's valence and arousal at one timepoint (T_n) and their valence and arousal at the preceding timepoint (T_{n-1}; Figure 1C). As expected, a linear mixed-effects model reveals that greater national search interest for "George Floyd" was associated with a greater magnitude of affect change between study timepoints, $b = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.47], $t(237) = 2.30$, $p = .022$, semipartial $r^2 = .005$, even after controlling for affect and search interest at T_{n-1}. We observe similar effects when using other event-related search terms and when controlling for the cultural salience of the concurrent coronavirus pandemic (Supplemental Materials). Further analyses probing how event salience shaped affect on the valence dimension reveal that participants' affect became more negative as searches for the term "George Floyd" increased, $b = -0.41$, 95% CI [−0.65, −0.17], $t(167) = -3.34$, $p = .001$, semipartial $r^2 = .009$. Conversely, searches for "George Floyd" were not associated with movement toward either higher or lower arousal states, $b = -0.07$, 95% CI [−0.30, 0.16], $t(73) = -0.63$, $p = .532$, semi-partial $r^2 < .001$.

We next tested our main hypotheses concerning longer term affective dynamics. First, we assessed the extent to which different measures of affective dynamics and mood were correlated over time. These analyses revealed minimal overlap between measures, with the exception of instability and variability, which were moderately correlated (Supplemental Materials). Next, leveraging a multiweek longitudinal design and the prolonged salience of the George Floyd protests (Figure 2A), we examined whether participants' affective experiences exhibited distinct temporal patterns across periods of high compared to low event salience. Specifically, we tested whether participants displayed greater affective instability, variability, and inertia during a 2-week period when American's interest in the George Floyd protests was highest (May 26–June 7, a period containing 80% of all searches for "George Floyd" during the study's time frame), compared to the following 6-week period when interest remained much lower (June 8–July 19). To ensure

sufficient data for assessing affective dynamics, we retained only participants who completed at least three study sessions in *both* periods, resulting in a sample of 51 participants for this specific analysis. Despite these exclusions, sensitivity power analyses indicate that our retained sample ($n = 51$) provided 80% power to detect a small-to-medium effect ($d = 0.40$) for the conducted paired-samples *t tests*.

During the period when the George Floyd protests were most salient, participants displayed greater affective instability (Figure 4A) and variability (Figure 4B) compared with the lower salience period (Table 1). These results were replicated when using the popularity of all event-related search terms to define periods of high versus low event salience (Supplemental Materials). Participants also exhibited less affective inertia on the valence dimension, but inertia on the arousal dimension did not reliably differ between periods. We also tested whether participants' general mood changed across periods of high compared to low event salience, where mood is operationalized as participants' mean valence and arousal for each period. Participants exhibited more negative valence but no significant changes in arousal during the period when the George Floyd protests were highly salient. However, unlike the effects above, the effect of a negative mood did not survive correction for multiple comparisons. In sum, participants' affect was less stable and more variable during the peak of America's interest in the George Floyd protests.

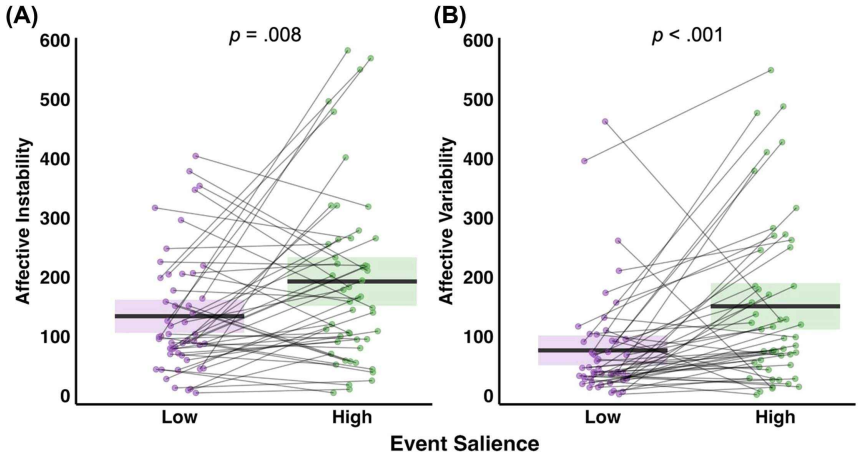
Political Engagement Destabilizes Affect

While these results suggest that highly polarizing and culturally salient events are reflected in people's affective dynamics, they do not explicitly tether participants' affect to their *personal* engagement with political events. Therefore, to assess the emotional impact of political engagement within our sample, we drew upon data from a freeform diary-writing task administered throughout the study, assessing whether participants provided an unprompted discussion of the George Floyd protests that reflected engagement with this event (coded as a binary *yes/no* variable). Thus, while the Google search interest data from the previous set of analyses capture the cultural salience of these polarizing protests, participants' discussions of these protests in their diary entries reflect their personal engagement with this event.

Mirroring our approach with Google search data, we first validated that we could predict the overall magnitude and direction of participants' day-to-day changes in affect based on their personal engagement with politically polarizing protests. Remarkably, nearly half of the sample (42%, $n = 47$) organically mentioned the George Floyd protests in one or more diary entries. When explicitly mentioning the George Floyd protests in their diary entry, participants exhibited larger changes in affect, $b = 0.32$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.50], $t(20) = 3.73$, $p = .001$, semipartial $r^2 = .012$, and greater movement toward negative affective states, $b = -0.46$, 95% CI [−0.70, −0.21], $t(38) = -3.85$, $p < .001$, semipartial $r^2 = .019$. These effects remained when accounting for the frequency of searches for "George Floyd," with both personal engagement and increased search interest independently predicting larger and more negative day-to-day affective shifts (Supplemental Materials). Conversely, political engagement was not associated with movement toward either higher or lower arousal states, $b = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.31], $t(41) = 0.98$, $p = .334$, semipartial $r^2 = .001$, replicating analyses using Google search data. In short, participants' everyday affective experiences were associated with their personal engagement with political events, as they experienced larger

Figure 4

Study 1: Affective Dynamics Associated With Event Salience



Note. Solid black lines show the mean level of affective instability (Panel A) and variability (Panel B) during periods of low compared to high event salience. Boxes represent the 95% confidence intervals around these means. Dots represent participant-level affective instability and variability during periods of low (purple) versus high (green) event salience. Lines connect within-participant data points. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 1
Comparing Affective Experiences Across Periods of High Versus Low Event Salience

Affect measure	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*	95% CI for *d*	
					LL	*UL*
Instability	2.77	50	**.008**	0.39	0.10	0.67
Variability	3.80	50	**<.001**	0.53	0.24	0.82
Inertia (valence)	−2.88	50	**.006**	−0.40	−0.69	−0.12
Inertia (arousal)	−1.83	50	.074	−0.26	−0.53	0.02
Mood (valence)	−2.08	50	.043	−0.29	−0.57	−0.01
Mood (arousal)	0.04	50	.969	0.00	−0.27	0.28

Note. Results of paired-samples *t* tests comparing affective dynamics and mood across periods of high versus low event salience. Only *p* values in bold survive correction for multiple comparisons (Bonferroni-corrected threshold $p = .008$ at $\alpha = .05$ for six comparisons). CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

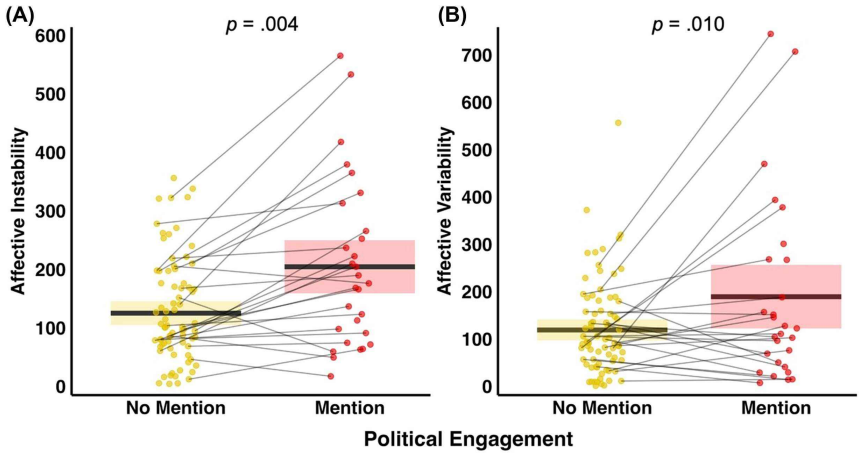
affective shifts—predominantly to more negative affective states—when politically engaged.

We next assessed how political engagement relates to affective dynamics. We measured political engagement on a week-to-week basis, capturing whether participants' diary responses reflected engagement with the George Floyd protests during a given week. We then used this measure to predict the temporal dynamics of participants' affect (i.e., instability, variability, and inertia) during the same time frame, allowing us to link participants' affective dynamics to their personal engagement with a politically polarizing event. Linear mixed-effects models (each predicting a distinct component of affective dynamics) reveal that participants exhibit greater affective instability (Figure 5A) and variability (Figure 5B) when politically engaged (Table 2). However, only the association between political engagement and affective instability remained significant after correction for multiple comparisons. For this primary effect, a post hoc simulation-based power analysis based on the fitted instability model (1,000 simulations; $\alpha = .05$) estimated power at 0.83. Notably, the association between engagement and instability persisted even after controlling for national search interest, suggesting that personal engagement with the George Floyd protests was linked to increases in affective instability above and beyond the broader cultural salience of this event (Supplemental Materials). Participants did not exhibit greater affective inertia on either the valence or arousal dimensions when politically engaged. We additionally tested whether participants' mean valence or arousal during each week (i.e., their mood) was associated with the George Floyd protests being top of mind. Contrary to our expectation, political engagement was not associated with more negative valence or greater arousal. Therefore, rather than evoking persistent negative moods, political engagement is associated with distinct patterns of affect change—marked by high instability—which suggests that affective destabilization could explain why political engagement lowers well-being.

Affective Instability, Evoked by Political Engagement, Reduces Well-Being

Given the known link between affective instability and decreased well-being (Houben et al., 2015), the natural next question is to test whether affective instability serves as a mechanistic pathway underlying the relationship between political engagement and diminished well-being. We used well-validated measures of anxiety (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006) and depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), measured weekly, to index well-being. Having already documented

Figure 5
Study 1: Affective Dynamics Associated With Political Engagement



Note. Solid black lines depict the predicted magnitude of affective instability (Panel A) and variability (Panel B) from our mixed-effects model when participants did versus did not mention the George Floyd protests in their diary entries. Boxes represent the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates. Dots represent participant-level affective instability and variability when they did (red) versus did not (yellow) discuss the George Floyd protests in their diary responses. Lines connect within-participant data points. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 2
Political Engagement as a Predictor of Affective Dynamics and Mood

Affect measure	Estimate	95% CI	*t*	*df*	*p*	R^2_{sp}
Instability	0.79	[0.29, 1.28]	3.16	30	**.004**	.030
Variability	1.68	[0.47, 2.89]	2.78	28	.010	.066
Inertia (valence)	−0.15	[−0.63, 0.32]	−0.64	41	.528	.002
Inertia (arousal)	−0.26	[−0.77, 0.26]	−0.99	304	.321	.003
Mood (valence)	−0.15	[−0.34, 0.03]	−1.76	33	.088	.009
Mood (arousal)	0.07	[−0.13, 0.28]	0.70	34	.492	.002

Note. Results of linear mixed-effects models, each predicting a distinct affective measure based on political engagement. All models included a random intercept and a random slope for political engagement, with the exception of the model predicting inertia on the arousal dimension for which this random slope was removed in order to allow the model to converge. Only the *p* value in bold survives correction for multiple comparisons (Bonferroni-corrected threshold $p = .008$ at $\alpha = .05$ for six comparisons). R^2_{sp} = semipartial R^2; CI = confidence interval.

that political engagement robustly predicts affective instability, we used multilevel mediation models to test the hypothesis that affective instability, evoked by political engagement, is a driver of diminished well-being (Figure 6).

A multilevel mediation model using anxiety to index well-being revealed that participants report greater anxiety when politically engaged (total effect: $p = .036$; Figure 6A). We also identified a significant indirect effect ($p = .032$): Political engagement was associated with greater affective instability, which, in turn, predicted greater anxiety. After accounting for affective instability, political engagement no longer predicted anxiety (direct effect: $p = .182$), leaving affective instability as the sole significant predictor ($p = .004$) and providing evidence of full mediation. In other words, affective instability appears to be at least one mechanism by which anxiety increases during political engagement.

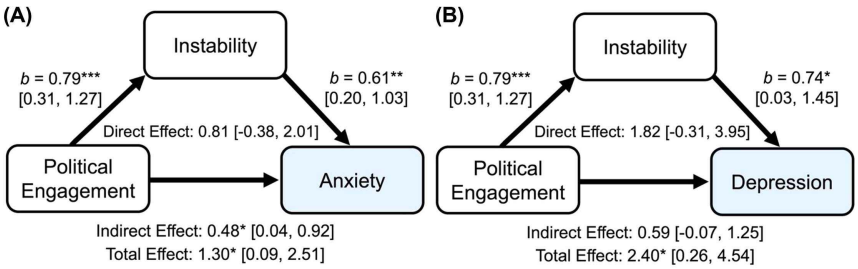
We next performed the same multilevel mediation analysis using depression as an index of well-being (Figure 6B). Mirroring what we observed for anxiety, participants reported more severe symptoms of depression when politically engaged (total effect: $p = .028$). Furthermore, political engagement no longer predicted depression after accounting for affective instability (direct effect: $p = .095$), which remained a significant predictor of depression ($p = .040$). However, unlike with anxiety, the mediational pathway was only marginally significant (indirect effect: $p = .083$). Together, our findings suggest that people exhibit increased anxiety when engaging with politics because political engagement is affectively destabilizing. At the same time, our results hint at the possibility that the same affective mechanism explains why people exhibit increased depression during political engagement, though this link is less robust.

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrates the affective consequences of engaging with a nationally salient and politically polarizing event: Political engagement is associated with greater affective instability, which, in turn, accounts for its positive association with anxiety. While these findings highlight the emotional and psychological costs of political triggers stemming from the external environment, it remains unclear whether individuals' internal political attitudes similarly shape their affective experiences. Prior research suggests that individuals on the ends of the political spectrum (strong partisans) exhibit more intense emotional reactions to political content (Bakker et al., 2021; Huddy et al., 2015; van Prooijen et al., 2015) and harbor greater hostility toward their political opponents (Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019)—often to the detriment of their own well-being (M. H. Nelson, 2022; Van Bavel et al., 2024). These findings suggest that individuals with stronger, more polarized political beliefs may also be predisposed to less stable emotional lives. Yet, the day-to-day affective profiles of political partisans remain largely unexplored.

Study 2 was designed to address this gap. Moving beyond momentary engagement with a rapidly evolving political event, we examined whether individuals with stronger, more polarized political attitudes exhibit larger day-to-day changes in affect. Because political attitudes are relatively stable over short periods

Figure 6
Study 1: Multilevel Mediation Analyses



Note. Results of multilevel mediation analyses assessing a mediational pathway in which political engagement increases anxiety (Panel A) and depression (Panel B) by increasing affective instability. The direct, indirect, and total effects from each model are shown above, as are effects depicting the relationship between political engagement and affective instability and affective instability and well-being. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Sears & Funk, 1999), we did not track within-person shifts in political attitudes or assess how these changes relate to long-term emotional and psychological well-being. Instead, we used a two-wave design to test whether individual differences in political attitudes predicted day-to-day affective change—a proxy for longer term affective instability. This approach reflects a deliberate shift in focus from the within-person affective consequences of engaging with a salient political event to the between-person affective profiles of politically polarized individuals across the ideological spectrum.

Method

Participants

We recruited 370 individuals to complete a brief prescreening questionnaire on Prolific. Due to our interest in characterizing the affective profile of political partisans, we only invited individuals to participate in Study 2, if they self-identified as a Democrat or Republican, and reported more positive feelings toward their own political party. From this initial set of 370 participants, we recruited 121 participants who met these criteria to complete Study 2. All participants endorsed English as their first language and possessed at least a 99% approval rating on Prolific. As in Study 1, we excluded participants ($n = 13$) who completed only an initial questionnaire, leaving data from 108 participants ($M_{age} = 41.84$, $SD_{age} = 11.21$; 66 Female, 38 Male, 4 other; 50 Democrats, 58 Republicans; 70 White, 11 Asian, 12 Black, 10 Hispanic/Latinx, 5 mixed/other) each of whom completed two questionnaires, yielding a total of 216 assessments.

Design and Procedure

Participants completed a prescreening questionnaire, responding to items assessing their political affiliation and feelings toward different political groups. We administered the prescreening questionnaire on May 10, 2024. Next, participants completed two additional questionnaires two days apart. These questionnaires were administered between May 11, 2024 and May 19, 2024. Study 2 followed a similar procedure as Study 1. Participants began each questionnaire by writing about their past two days (*Diary Task*), summarized how they felt during this period using the affect grid (*Affect Judgments*), and completed items measuring their anxiety symptomology (*Psychological Well-Being*) and political attitudes (*Political Attitudes*).

Materials and Measures

Diary Task. The diary task presented to participants in Study 2 was the same as that administered to participants in Study 1. However, based on our interest in participants' political attitudes and the lack of a coinciding highly salient and politically polarizing event, we did not analyze participants' diary entries in Study 2.

Affect Judgments. Affect judgments in Study 2 were elicited in the same manner as Study 1, with one exception: Participants were not asked to select three events from their diary entry, but were instead asked to report how they generally felt over the past two days using the affect grid. Thus, participants in Study 2 provided a single affect judgment during each questionnaire that summarized their recent feelings. As in Study 1, we used affect change to quantify the magnitude of participants' timepoint-to-timepoint affective shifts (Figure 1C). However, because Study 2 used a two-wave design, it is not possible to compute longer term affective dynamics, such as affective instability, variability, or inertia, all of which require at least three consecutive assessments. Instead, we focused on affect change—a shorter term proxy for affective instability. While affect change differs from affective instability in temporal scope, the two are conceptually and mathematically related: Affect change captures the size of a single affective shift, whereas affective instability reflects the broader pattern of these shifts over time. In Study 1, individual differences in affective instability, computed across the full 8-week period were strongly correlated with individual differences in affect change between adjacent timepoints (mean $r = .51$, $SD = .11$, range = .21–.68), indicating that this single timepoint-to-timepoint measure captures meaningful between-person variation in longer term affective instability.

Psychological Well-Being. Given the robust association between within-person affective instability and anxiety in Study 1, we again measured participants' anxiety symptomology in Study 2 using the GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006). However, because Study 2 focused on the relation between individual differences in stable political attitudes and affective change, it did not allow for analyses linking within-subject changes in political attitudes or affective dynamics to psychological well-being. Nonetheless, this design did allow us to explore the association between individual differences in political attitudes and anxiety symptomology, which we report in the Supplemental Materials.

Political Attitudes. Participants responded to multiple questions probing their political attitudes, allowing us to measure ideological extremity and affective polarization. During the first questionnaire, participants stated their level of agreement with five political statements (see the Supplemental Materials) by positioning a slider on a 101-point scale that ranged from "0" (*strongly disagree*) to "100" (*strongly agree*). In doing so, they provided their attitudes regarding five politically polarizing issues (abortion, immigration, climate change, gun control, and racism). We measured participants' ideological extremity using their responses to these items. Responses were recoded onto a "0" (*strong liberal attitude*) to "100" (*strong conservative attitude*) scale depending on whether agreement with a statement was associated with a liberal or conservative ideology. Following this recoding, we calculated the extent to which participants' mean rating diverged from a neutral ("50") midpoint. Thus, ideologically extreme participants consistently expressed strong liberal or strong conservative attitudes, while participants with lower levels of ideological extremity expressed more moderate (or ideologically inconsistent) attitudes. Participants also stated their feelings toward the Democratic and Republican parties using a 101-point scale that ranged from "0" (*very cold or unfavorable*) to "100" (*very warm or favorable*). These questions were administered in a prescreening questionnaire one day before the first questionnaire in Study 2. Following past work (Iyengar et al., 2019), we measured participants' level of affective polarization by calculating the absolute difference between their feelings toward the Democratic and Republican parties. Thus, participants showing high levels of affective polarization endorsed feeling

considerably more warmth toward their political ingroup compared to the outgroup, while those showing low levels of affective polarization felt similarly toward both political parties.

Results

We first checked that participants' political attitudes varied sufficiently to test our hypotheses. Indeed, 33% of our sample had an ideological extremity score of at least 35 (out of 50), endorsing strong political attitudes that consistently aligned with either liberalism or conservativism. Similarly, 36% of our sample rated their political in-party at least 75 points higher than their political out-party on a 101-point feeling thermometer. The average ideological extremity of the sample was 27.46 ($SD = 13.79$), while the average affective polarization score was 59.56 ($SD = 27.36$). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that our sample ($n = 108$) provided 80% power to detect small-to-medium–sized effects ($r = .27$).

We next tested whether individual differences in ideological extremity were associated with day-to-day changes in affect. Confirming our predictions, greater ideological extremity corresponds with larger day-to-day changes in affect (Figure 7), even when controlling for affect at T_1, political affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican) and demographic covariates (age, gender, race, and education; Table 3). In contrast, ideological extremity was not associated with mood (i.e., mean valence or arousal). These results suggest that strong partisanship, like political engagement, is not associated with persistent negative moods but rather large affective swings characteristic of an emotionally unstable life. We observed the same pattern of results when using affective polarization as our measure of partisan strength: Greater affective polarization predicted larger day-to-day affective shifts but again was not related to mood. These effects were observed on both sides of the political aisle, as political affiliation did not predict affect change, $b = 0.09$, 95% CI [−0.36, 0.54], $t(96) = 0.40$, $p = .693$, or interact with measures of partisan strength to predict changes in affect (both $ps > .1$). Taken together, our findings suggest that amid deepening political divides, the emotional costs of politics are experienced not as persistent negative moods but as larger day-to-day fluctuations in affect.

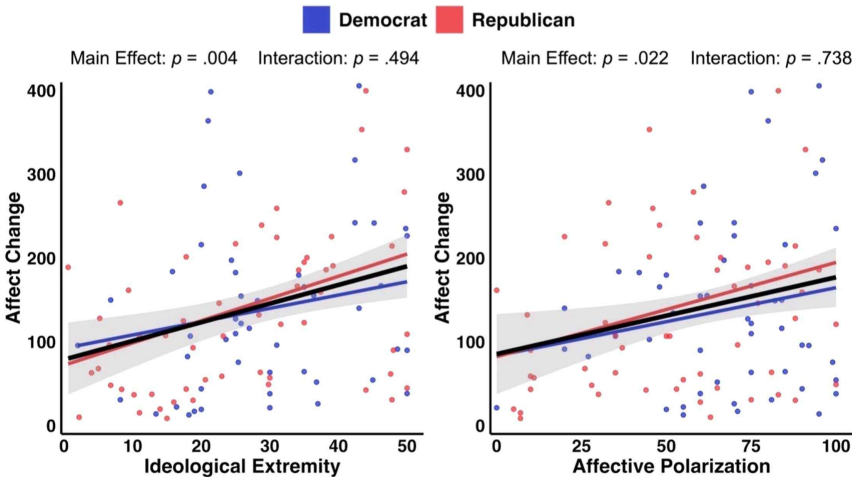
General Discussion

There is growing concern that deepening political divides harm individual and collective well-being (American Psychological Association, 2024; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Current frameworks posit that political engagement evokes negative emotions, which act as chronic stressors that hinder well-being (Ford et al., 2023; Hoyt et al., 2018). Under this framework, an implicit assumption is that fluctuations in an individual's affective experiences reflect short-term reactivity to political engagement, which cumulatively compound with repeated exposure. Here, we find that the emotional consequences of political engagement extend beyond immediate emotional reactions to shape day-to-day affective dynamics.

Affective dynamics are a key component of mental and emotional health. Prior research shows that individuals with anxiety and depression experience higher levels of affective instability, variability, and inertia in daily life (Houben et al., 2015). These affective dynamic patterns are also known to precede declines in well-being (Sperry et al., 2020; van de Leemput et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2025), with individuals reporting more inert and variable negative emotions prior to worsening depression (van de Leemput et al., 2014). Similarly, greater variability and

Figure 7

Study 2: Politically Polarized Partisans Exhibit Larger Affective Shifts



Note. Both ideological extremity (left) and affective polarization (right) were positively associated with affect change. Black lines represent the predicted values of affect change at each level of ideological extremity and affective polarization. Shaded regions reflect the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates. Colored lines display these associations for Democrats (Blue) and Republicans (Red) independently. Dots reflect data from individual participants. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 3
Political Attitudes as a Predictor of Day-to-Day Affect

Variable	Estimate	95% CI	*t*	*df*	*p*	R^2_{sp}
Ideological extremity (IV)						
Affect change	2.46	[0.93, 3.98]	3.20	95	.002	.090
Mean valence	0.06	[−1.58, 1.70]	0.07	97	.941	<.001
Mean arousal	0.09	[−1.37, 1.55]	0.13	97	.900	<.001
Affective polarization (IV)						
Affect change	0.94	[0.15, 1.74]	2.35	95	.021	.050
Mean valence	−0.28	[−1.11, 0.55]	−0.67	97	.507	.004
Mean arousal	0.40	[−0.33, 1.14]	1.09	97	.280	.010

Note. Results of linear regressions predicting affect change, mean valence, or mean arousal using either ideological extremity or affective polarization (separate models). All models included political affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican) and demographic covariates (age, gender, race, and education) as predictors. Models predicting affect change additionally controlled for valence and arousal at T_1. IV = independent variable; R^2_{sp} = semipartial R^2; CI = confidence interval.

instability in both positive and negative affect prospectively predict the emergence of new depressive symptoms in adolescents over time (Yang et al., 2025). Taking inspiration from this work, we identify a mechanistic pathway through which political engagement can undermine well-being: By giving rise to rapid and significant changes in affect, political engagement may trigger longer term affective instability that worsens well-being.

Across two longitudinal studies, we characterize the affective consequences of political engagement and strong partisanship. By looking beyond short-term emotional reactions to capture longer term affective dynamics, we find that periods of political engagement are *not* marked by decreases in mood, but rather by frequent and large affective fluctuations that are characteristic of high affective instability: (a) As the salience of politically polarizing events increases, so too does affective instability; (b) when an individual engages with politically polarizing events, their affect becomes more unstable, which predicts greater anxiety; (c) the stronger an individual's partisan attitudes, the more their day-to-day affect fluctuates. These large fluctuations in affect can have real costs. Corroborating existing work on the maladaptive consequences of affective instability (D'Aurizio et al., 2023; Houben et al., 2015; Yen et al., 2004), we find evidence in Study 1 that affective instability is a pathway by which political engagement increases anxiety. Therefore, as cross-party animosity rises and divisive politics become more prevalent (Finkel et al., 2020; Gentzkow et al., 2019), our findings highlight the potential emotional costs of politics on individuals' mental and emotional health.

Political engagement is an essential part of any healthy democracy. Thus, understanding the psychological processes by which political engagement lowers well-being is critical for mitigating its adverse effects and cultivating a healthier civic climate. Our findings provide key insights toward these goals. First, the impact of politics is not limited to immediate affective reactions or persistent negative moods. Political engagement also destabilizes affect, which in turn drives increased anxiety. This suggests that interventions targeting affective instability may be effective at reducing the psychological costs of political involvement. Second, we identify the affective profile of the individuals who we suspect are most vulnerable to the emotional costs of politics: People with strong partisan beliefs experience larger day-to-day changes in affect compared to their more moderate peers. This may prove valuable for identifying individuals who are most susceptible to the destabilizing effects of politically salient events and most likely to benefit from interventions aimed at attenuating the negative consequences of political engagement—those on the extreme ends of the political spectrum.

As political polarization intensifies, so do concerns about its psychological toll (American Psychological Association, 2024; Van Bavel et al., 2024). By capturing how affective dynamics are shaped by engagement with salient and polarizing political events, we demonstrate how affective instability plays a pivotal role in undermining well-being by increasing anxiety. In addition, we show that more polarized political partisans tend to exhibit larger day-to-day affective shifts reflective of a less stable emotional life. Our results therefore provide new insights into the emotional costs of political engagement and partisanship, revealing a mechanistic pathway by which affective dynamics shape the relationship between politics and emotional health.

Constraints on Generality

Our findings were observed in a sample of American participants recruited through the online research platform Prolific. While generally more representative than a sample of American undergraduates, the exclusive recruitment of US residents potentially limits the generalizability of our results. Political polarization has been observed across the globe (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021) with political events outside of the United States also being linked to lower well-being (Kavetsos et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Therefore, we anticipate that our findings will generalize to other sociopolitical contexts, particularly those exhibiting meaningful ideological divides. However, the generalizability of our findings—particularly to non-Western or non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations—remains an open question. Second, while we observe associations between distinct measures of partisan attitude strength and day-to-day affective shifts (Study 2), measures of event salience and political engagement in Study 1 focused on a single political event—the murder of George Floyd and ensuing civil unrest. Although we expect our findings to generalize to other politically polarizing events (e.g., elections), this remains a question for future research. Finally, we measured affective dynamics and day-to-day affective change by assessing participants' feelings toward personally

significant events every two days. However, we expect our findings to generalize to other time scales suitable for measuring affective dynamics (Houben et al., 2015). We have no reason to believe that the results depend on other characteristics of the participants, materials, or context.

Statement of Limitations

While Study 1 included 113 participants who completed 1,543 affective assessments across 23 timepoints, analyses investigating affective dynamics necessarily relied on a subset of participants who completed a sufficient number of consecutive assessments. The reduced sample size used for these analyses represents a potential limitation. However, these analyses included multiple observations per participant, adding meaningful within-subject power, and post hoc power analyses consistently indicated adequate sensitivity to detect effects in the small-to-medium range. Moreover, findings from analyses assessing affective dynamics closely aligned with those investigating shorter term affective change using the full sample, further supporting the robustness of these results. More broadly, the longitudinal experience sampling data used in our research are correlational. Thus, while our methodological approach allowed us to capture participants' unprompted engagement with a real-world political event over time, it did not permit a direct test of the causal influence of political engagement on everyday affect and well-being. It is possible, for example, that affective instability or diminished well-being prompted participants to engage with current political events. While the tight link between population-level interest in ongoing protests and participants' day-to-day affect supports the influence of politics on affect and well-being, the lack of direct evidence for this causal pathway reflects a limitation of the present work.

Future Directions

The present work links the cultural salience of a politically polarizing event and individuals' personal engagement with it to the dynamics of their day-to-day affect and well-being. Future research can build on these findings by examining the causal relationships between political engagement, affective instability, and well-being. For instance, experimental studies that manipulate individuals' exposure to polarizing political content could gauge how much political engagement is needed to increase affective instability. Longer term longitudinal research could additionally assess whether changing political attitudes, including increases in ideological extremity, predict corresponding shifts in affective dynamics and well-being over time. Finally, future research may consider assessing individuals' moment-to-moment affective states during political engagement (e.g., while consuming political content) to identify specific affective patterns that make political engagement more likely to harm well-being.

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Online Supplementary Materials

For:

The Emotional Cost of Political Engagement

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Part A: Materials and Measures

Diary Task (Study 1 & Study 2)

Instructions: Please take some time to reflect on the **last two days**. If it is still early, please reflect on yesterday and the day before. If it is later in the day, please reflect on today and yesterday.

There is no right or wrong way to write your response, but please try to be thoughtful and detailed. Please separate each activity/event into its own paragraph.

- What were the activities you engaged in, and the events that you found important?
- What were the thoughts you had, and the emotions you experienced?
- If you interacted with others, who did you interact with, and how did you feel about the interaction(s)?

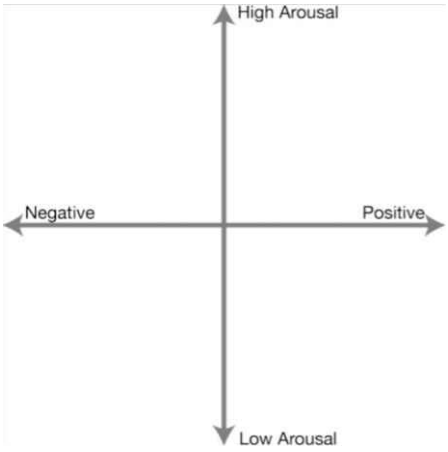
When you are responding, please use codenames when referring to other people (e.g., their initials or an anonymous nickname). Also, please keep in mind that your responses will not be reviewed in real-time.

Response Option: [Free-entry text box]

Affect Judgments (Study 1 & Study 2)

Instructions [Study 1 Only]: From the events you have written about above, please pick three to briefly elaborate on. You will be asked to provide a very short description of those events (e.g., "called my mother" or "played video games"), then to make a rating of your emotions regarding those events.

Instructions [Study 1 & Study 2]: As a reminder, here is how to use the map of your feelings:



The **center** of the square represents a neutral, average, everyday feeling. It is neither positive nor negative.

The **right** half of the grid represents pleasant feelings. The farther to the right, the more pleasant. The **left** half represents unpleasant feelings. The farther to the left, the more unpleasant.

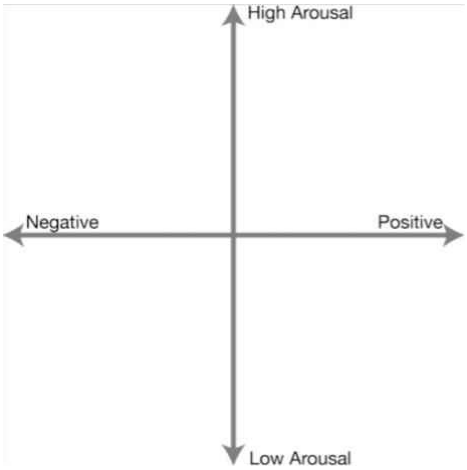
Moving vertically in the map represents your degree of arousal. This is how wide awake, alert, or activated a person feels—independent of whether the feeling is positive or negative. The **top** half is for feelings that make you feel wide awake or alert. The **bottom** half is for feelings that make you feel sleepy or sluggish.

Study 1 Affect Judgment Items

1. In a few words, please describe Event #1:

Response Option: [Free-entry text box]

2. Please click on the area of the image that expresses how you feel about Event #1:

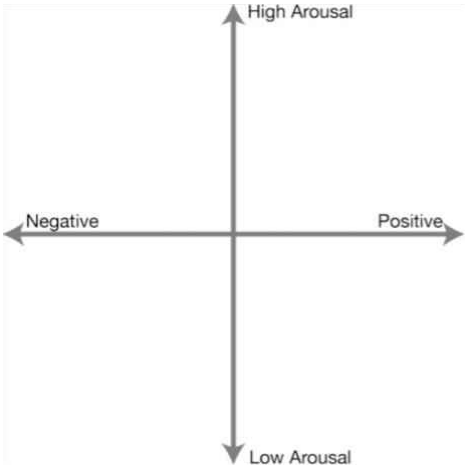


Response Option: Placement of final click on the affect grid

** Items 1 and 2 were repeated for Events 2 and 3.*

Study 2 Affect Judgment Item

1. Please click on the area of the image that summarizes **how you felt** in general over the **past two days:**



Response Option: Placement of final click on the affect grid

Anxiety Symptomology (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006; Study 1 & Study 2)

Study 1 Instructions: How often have you been bothered by the following **over the past week?**

Study 2 Instructions: How often have you been bothered by the following over the last few days?

1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying
3. Worrying too much about different things
4. Trouble relaxing
5. Being so restless that it's hard to sit still
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

Response Options: Not at all; Several days; More than half the days; Nearly every day

**Responses were scored, from Not at all to Nearly every day, as 0; 1; 2; 3. As such, GAD-7 scores range from 0 to 21.*

Depression Symptomology (CES-D; Radloff, 1977; Study 1 Only)

Instructions: Below is a list of some ways you may have felt or behaved. Please indicate how often you have felt this way during the last week.

1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.
3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.
4. I felt I was just as good as other people.
5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.
6. I felt depressed.
7. I felt that everything I did was an effort.
8. I felt hopeful about the future.
9. I thought my life had been a failure.
10. I felt fearful.
11. My sleep was restless.
12. I was happy.
13. I talked less than usual.
14. I felt lonely.
15. People were unfriendly.
16. I enjoyed life.
17. I had crying spells.
18. I felt sad.
19. I felt that people disliked me.
20. I could not get going.

Response Options: Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day); Some or a little of the time (1-2 days); Occasionally or a moderate amount of the time (3-4 days); Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

**Responses were scored, from Rarely or none of the time to Most or all of the time, as 0; 1; 2; 3. As such, CES-D scores range from 0 to 60.*

Political Affiliation (Study 2 Only)

1. What political party do you identify with?

Response Options: 101-point slider ranging from 0 (Strong Democrat) to 100 (Strong Republican)

** The slider also had labels at 25 (Democrat), 50 (Independent), and 75 (Republican). The default slider position was set to 50.*

2. If you had to choose, would you consider yourself a Democrat or a Republican?

Response Options: Democrat; Republican

** Item #2 was only administered to participants who selected "50 (Independent)" for item #1*

Ideological Extremity (Study 2 Only)

Instructions: Please state your level of agreement with each statement presented below.

1. Abortion should be legal in all or almost all cases.
2. The American government should increase security along the United States-Mexico border to reduce illegal crossings.
3. The American government is doing too little to reduce climate change.
4. Gun laws should be more strict than they are today.
5. People of all races and ethnicities enjoy equal rights in America.

Response Options: 101-point slider ranging from 0 (Strong Disagree) to 100 (Strongly Agree)

** See Figure S1 below for more detail regarding this measure of Ideological Extremity*

Affective Polarization (Study 2 Only)

Instructions: We would like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. We'll show you the name of a person or group and we'd like you to rate that person or group using the "feeling thermometer" below.

Note that higher ratings represent more warm or favorable feelings while lower ratings represent more cold or unfavorable feelings.

1. The Democratic Party
2. The Republican Party

Response Options: 101-point slider ranging from 0 (Very cold or unfavorable) to 100 (very warm or favorable)

** See Figure S1 below for more detail regarding this measure of Affective Polarization*

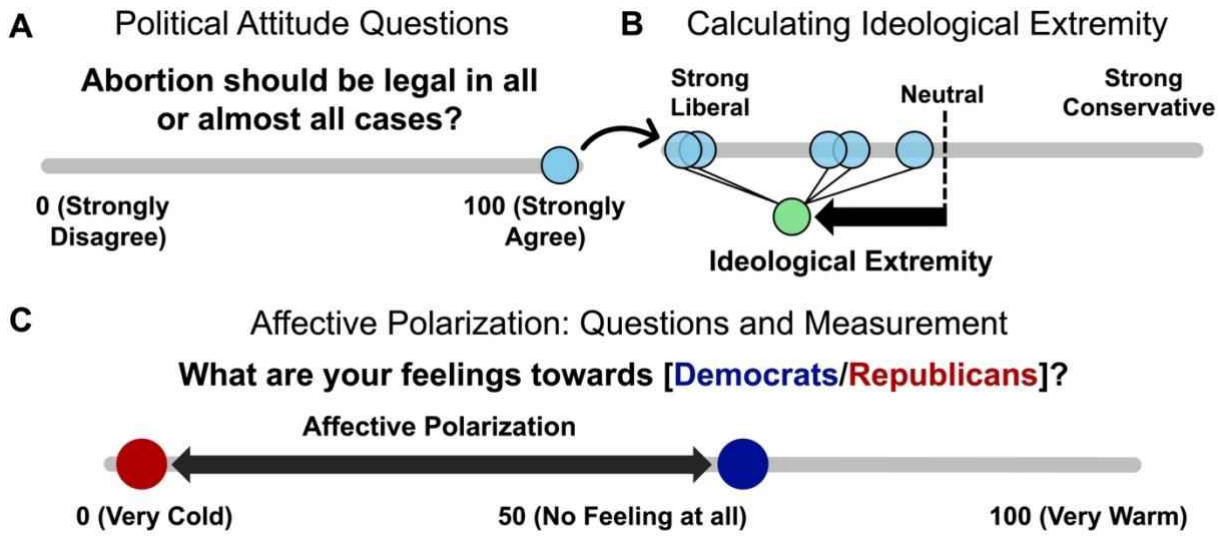


Figure S1 | Study 2: Measuring Ideological Extremity and Affective Polarization. *Responses from a Democrat participant are depicted in Panels A-C for illustration.* ***A)*** *Participants were asked to state their level of agreement with five political statements (listed above), reflecting their attitudes regarding five politically-polarizing issues. Responses were made by positioning a slider on a 101-point scale that ranged from 0 = Strongly Disagree to 100 = Strongly Agree and had labels at 25 (Disagree), 50 (Neither Agree nor Disagree), and 75 (Agree). The default slider position was set to 50.* ***B)*** *Responses to*

each question were recoded onto a 0 = Strong Liberal to 100 = Strong Conservative scale, based on whether agreement with a statement was associated with a liberal (statements 1, 3, and 4) or conservative (statements 2 and 5) ideology. Following this recoding, we measured each participant's ideological extremity by calculating how strongly their mean rating diverged from a neutral midpoint. Thus, larger values reflect stronger ideologically-consistent attitudes regarding five politically-salient topics. ***C)*** *Participants stated their feelings towards Democrats and Republicans using a 101-point scale that ranged from 0 = Very cold or unfavorable, to 100 = Very warm or favorable. The default slider position was set to 50. Affective polarization was measured by calculating the difference between ratings of Democrats and Republicans, with larger values reflecting more polarized feelings.*

Additional Measures (Study 1 & Study 2)

Additional measures were collected for purposes unrelated to the present study and were therefore not included in project data analyses or discussed in the main text of this manuscript. Specifically, in the first questionnaire of Study 1, participants were asked to indicate how much support they give and get from their friends, acquaintances, family members, and work colleagues, as well as indicate whether they primarily interacted with these individuals in-person or online. Participants also completed measures assessing their intolerance of uncertainty, interpersonal regulation, coping strategies, extraversion, neuroticism, and COVID-19 news consumption during the first, but not subsequent, questionnaires. Following the diary task and affect judgments discussed in the main text, and described above, participants completed a *prospective* diary entry in which they reflected on the next two days, writing about events they expected to engage in during this period. From this diary entry they then selected three prospective events and indicated their feelings towards each event using the 500x500 affect grid. Finally, participants also completed UCLA Loneliness and Brief Resilience Scale items once per week, during select questionnaires.

As in Study 1, participants in Study 2 wrote a prospective diary entry and indicated how they expected to feel over the next two days using the affect grid. In Study 2, participants also indicated how they felt in the present moment and completed measures assessing their intolerance of uncertainty (T_1 only) and loneliness (T_1 and T_2). Finally, participants completed measures regarding their perceptions of the average liberal and conservative, their attitudes towards a specific political event (i.e., the Israel-Hamas conflict), their support for undemocratic practices, and wrote briefly about the current political issue that they found most important.

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Part B: Examining the Relationship between Event Salience and Affect using Additional Event-Related Search Terms (Study 1)

Study 1 coincided with the nationally-salient protests against police brutality and racial inequality that followed the murder of George Floyd. In the main text, we measured the cultural salience of this polarizing event using Google search data reflecting the popularity of the term "George Floyd." This term was chosen as it was the most frequently searched and represents a direct index of all events related to Floyd's murder, subsequent protests, and politically-polarizing discourse surrounding both. To verify the robustness of our analyses, we can alternatively operationalize event salience based on the popularity of all event-related search terms in our dataset: "George Floyd," "Riots," "Protests," "BLM," and "Derek Chauvin."

Replicating results reported in the main text, linear mixed-effects models reveal that, for each event-related term, greater national search interest was associated with larger changes in affect between study timepoints (Table S1), even after controlling for affect and search interest at T_{n-1}. In fact, we observe similar, albeit stronger, effects when using the terms "Riots", "Protests", "BLM" and "Derek Chauvin" as well as when simultaneously considering the popularity of all event-related terms. Next, we conduct secondary analyses probing the relationship between search interest and changes in valence and arousal. We replicate findings in the main text (using "George Floyd" as the measure of event salience) when using the popularity of all event-related terms to measure event salience. Specifically, more searches for event-related terms was associated with participants moving to more negative affective states (Table S2). Conversely, there was no association between event-related searches and shifts to higher or lower arousal states (Table S3). We observe a different pattern of results when using either the search term "Riots," "Protests" or "BLM" independently to quantify event salience. That is, affect did not become more negative as searches for these terms increased (Table S2). However, more frequent searches for these terms was associated with movement towards more high arousal affective states (Table S3).

Table S1 | Event Salience as a Predictor of Affect Change

Search Term	*b*	95% CI	*t*	df	*p*	R^2_{sp}
George Floyd	0.25	[0.04, 0.47]	2.30	237	.022	.005
Riots	0.38	[0.10, 0.66]	2.69	87	.009	.007
Protests	0.52	[0.16, 0.89]	2.84	100	.006	.007
BLM	4.35	[1.51, 7.13]	3.12	106	.002	.008
Derek Chauvin	1.63	[0.36, 2.91]	2.50	69	.015	.006
All Terms	0.71	[0.22, 1.21]	2.82	204	.005	.007

Note. Results of linear mixed-effects models predicting affect change based on the Google search frequency of different event-related terms. All models control for affect and search term frequency at the previous timepoint (T_{n-1}) and included a random intercept and all possible random slopes except in cases where random slopes had to be trimmed to allow the model to converge. Search terms are sorted by their relative popularity across Study 1. All terms reflects the average search interest each day across all five event-related terms. R^2_{sp} = *semi-partial r*^{2}.

Table S2 | Event Salience as a Predictor of Change on the Valence Dimension

Search Term	*b*	95% CI	*t*	df	*p*	R^2_{sp}
George Floyd	-0.41	[-0.65, -0.17]	-3.34	167	.001	.009
Riots	-0.13	[-0.44, 0.18]	-0.80	85	.426	.001
Protests	0.00	[-0.40, 0.40]	0.00	93	.999	<.001
BLM	0.50	[-2.52, 3.57]	0.33	225	.743	<.001
Derek Chauvin	-2.27	[-3.80, -0.77]	-2.93	107	.004	.008
All Terms	-0.57	[-1.11, -0.03]	-2.06	192	.041	.003

Note. Results of linear mixed-effects models predicting change on the valence dimension based on the Google search frequency of different event-related terms. All models control for valence and search term frequency at the previous timepoint (T_{n-1}) and included a random intercept and all possible random slopes. Search terms are sorted by their relative popularity across Study 1. R^2_{sp} = *semi-partial r*^{2}.

Table S3 | Event Salience as a Predictor of Change on the Arousal Dimension

Search Term	*b*	95% CI	*t*	df	*p*	R^2_{sp}
George Floyd	-0.07	[-0.30, 0.16]	-0.63	73	.532	<.001
Riots	0.34	[0.08, 0.60]	2.57	87	.012	.006
Protests	0.57	[0.23, 0.92]	3.30	90	.001	.009
BLM	3.64	[0.88, 6.42]	2.59	91	.011	.007
Derek Chauvin	0.12	[-1.09, 1.36]	0.19	130	.847	<.001
All Terms	0.41	[-0.06, 0.90]	1.71	138	.089	.003

Note. Results of linear mixed-effects models predicting change on the arousal dimension based on the Google search frequency of different event-related terms. All models control for arousal and search term frequency at the previous timepoint (T_{n-1}) and included a random intercept and all possible random slopes except in cases where random slopes had to be trimmed to allow the model to converge. Search terms are sorted by their relative popularity across Study 1. R^2_{sp} = *semi-partial r*^{2}.

Next, we assessed whether participants displayed distinct affective dynamics and moods during the height of the George Floyd protests. These analyses complement corresponding analyses in the main text by considering the popularity of all event-related searches when defining periods of high compared to low event salience. During Study 1, 80% of all searches for our five event-related terms occurred during a fifteen-day period between May 26–June 9, 2020. We categorized this fifteen-day period as a period of high event salience and tested whether participants exhibit greater affective instability, variability, and inertia during this period, compared to the following period between June 10–July 19, 2020, which contained comparatively few Google searches related to the George Floyd protests. We also assessed whether participants' general mood changed across periods, operationalizing mood as participants' mean valence and arousal during each period. We

excluded participants who completed fewer than three study sessions in either period, as these participants provided insufficient data for us to measure their affective dynamics. This left us with a sample of 55 participants for these analyses.

Replicating results from our primary analyses, participants displayed greater affective instability (Fig S2A) and variability (Fig S2B) during the period of high compared to low event salience (Table S4). Participants' affective inertia did not differ between periods on either the valence or arousal dimension. We also did not observe differences with regards to mood: neither participants' mean valence or arousal differed between periods. In sum, when measuring the cultural salience of the George Floyd protests based on the popularity of all event-related search terms, we again find that participants' day-to-day affect was less stable and more variable during the height of this event.

Table S4 | Comparing Affective Experiences across Periods of High vs. Low Event Salience

					95% CI for *d*	
Affect Measure	*t*	df	*p*	*d*	Lower	Upper
Instability	2.22	54	.031	0.30	0.03	0.57
Variability	3.01	54	.004	0.41	0.13	0.68
Inertia (Valence)	-1.34	54	.186	-0.18	-0.45	0.09
Inertia (Arousal)	-1.26	54	.211	-0.17	-0.44	0.10
Mood (Valence)	-0.79	54	.433	-0.11	-0.37	0.16
Mood (Arousal)	1.28	54	.206	0.17	-0.09	0.44

Note. Results of paired-samples *t*-tests comparing affective dynamics and mood across periods of high vs. low event salience.

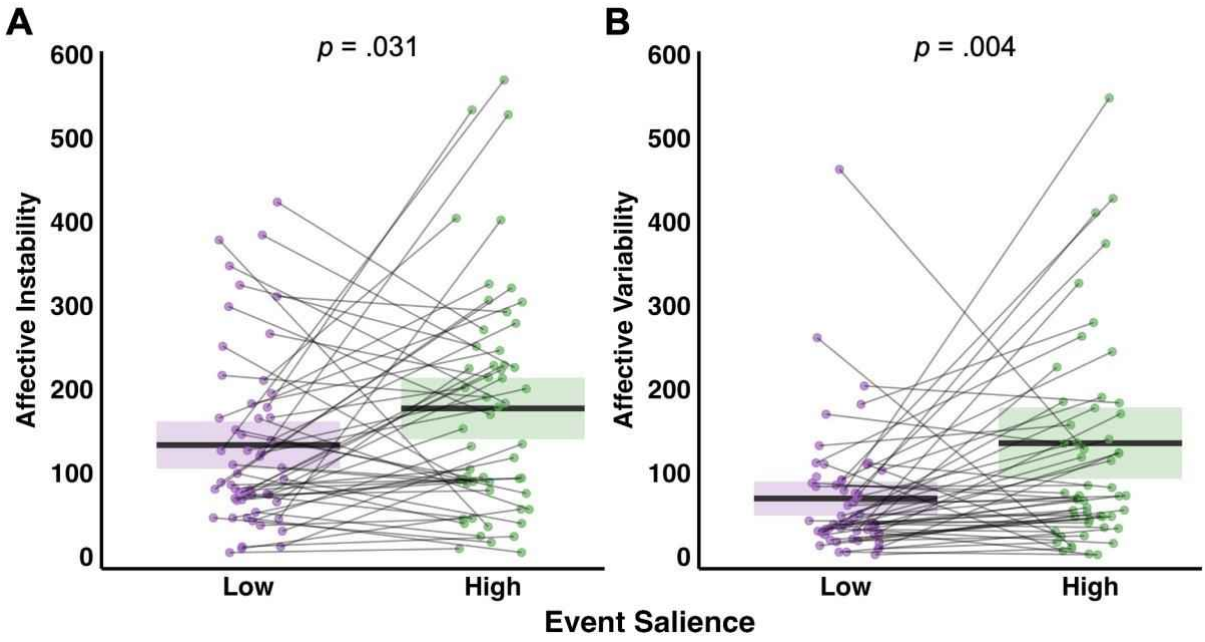

Figure S2 | Study 1: Affective Dynamics Associated with Event Salience (All Terms). *Solid black lines show the mean level of affective instability (Panel A) and variability (Panel B) during periods of low compared to high event salience. Boxes represent the 95% confidence intervals around these means. Dots represent participant-level affective instability and variability during periods of low (purple) vs. high (green) event salience. Lines connect within-participant datapoints.*

Part C: Controlling for the Salience of the Concurrent Coronavirus Pandemic (Study 1)

Study 1 was originally designed to examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on individuals' day-to-day affect and well-being, yet also happened to coincide with a nationally salient and politically polarizing event (i.e., the George Floyd protests). This temporal overlap provided a unique opportunity to examine how participants' emotional experiences were shaped by the cultural prominence of a salient political event and motivated the focus on political partisanship in Study 2.

As the day-to-day salience of pandemic-related news had the potential to impact participants' everyday affect, we assessed whether the aforementioned associations between event-related search interest and affect change remained after controlling for the frequency of pandemic-related searches. Specifically, we added a Google search interest score for the term "coronavirus"—the most popular pandemic-related search term during this time frame according to data from Google Trends—to the aforementioned linear mixed-effects model predicting affect change based on the frequency of "George Floyd" searches. More Google searches for "George Floyd" were associated with larger day-to-day affective shifts (b = 0.28, 95% *CI* [0.04, 0.52], $t(332) = 2.27$, $p = .024$, *semi-partial* $r^2 = .004$), even when controlling for the frequency of pandemic-related searches. The same pattern of results was observed when using our composite measure of event salience, reflecting interest across all event-related terms (b = 0.79, 95% *CI* [0.24, 1.35], $t(307) = 2.78$, $p = .006$, *semi-partial* $r^2 = .006$). Therefore, the association between the salience of the George Floyd protests and participants' day-to-day affective shifts, could not be attributed to changes in the salience of the concurrent coronavirus pandemic. We also conducted additional analyses revealing that participants' affect became more negative as searches for "George Floyd" increased even when controlling for the frequency of "coronavirus" searches (b = -0.33, 95% *CI* [-0.60, -0.06], $t(176) = -2.40$, $p = .018$, *semi-partial* $r^2 = .004$). However, when using our composite measure of event salience, the association between search interest and movement on the valence dimension was no longer significant after controlling for "coronavirus" searches (b = -0.30, 95% *CI* [-0.93, 0.34], $t(159) = -0.91$, $p = .366$, *semi-partial* $r^2 = .001$).

Participants exhibited larger day-to-day affective shifts and greater movement towards more negative affective states when explicitly discussing the George Floyd protests in their diary entry. Here, we sought to examine the unique contributions of personally engaging with the George Floyd protests and the broader cultural salience of this politically-polarizing event on participants' day-to-day affective change. Consistent with our previous analyses, we indexed the day-to-day cultural salience of the George Floyd protests using data from Google Trends, reflecting the frequency of Google searches for "George Floyd" on a given day. Follow-up linear mixed-effects models reveal that, when using both personal engagement and population-level search interest to predict affect change, both personal engagement and increases in search interest independently predict larger and more negative affective shifts (Table S5). Thus, personally engaging with the George Floyd protests was associated with larger and more negative day-to-day changes in affect, even when controlling for the population-level salience of this polarizing event. Likewise, the cultural salience of this

event continued to predict larger and more negative affective shifts after controlling for individual-level political engagement.

Table S5 | Political Engagement and Event Salience as Independent Predictors of Affective Change

Variable	*Estimate*	95% CI	*t*	df	*p*	R^2_{sp}
Political Engagement (IV)						
Affect Change	0.25	[0.08, 0.43]	2.92	18	.009	.007
Valence Change	-0.51	[-0.75, -0.28]	-4.29	49	< .001	.021
Search Interest (IV)						
Affect Change	0.26	[0.05, 0.48]	2.42	252	.016	.005
Valence Change	-0.40	[-0.63, -0.17]	-3.34	204	.001	.008

Note. Results of linear mixed-effects models predicting affect change and valence change using political engagement, search interest (frequency of Google searches for "George Floyd" on a given day) and participants' political engagement, affect, and national search interest at the previous timepoint. All models included a random intercept and a random slope for political engagement and search interest. R^2_{sp} = *semi-partial* r^2.

Finally, we assessed whether the association between personal engagement with the George Floyd protests and greater affective instability remained after controlling for population-level interest surrounding this event. Given that affective instability was measured on a week-to-week basis, we measured both political engagement and Google search interest (for the term "George Floyd") using the same week-to-week time frame. Thus, our measure of political engagement—for these specific analyses—reflected whether or not a participant engaged with the George Floyd protests in a given week while our measure of population-level event salience reflected the average (mean) search interest score for "George Floyd" during the same week. These analyses reveal that the association between political engagement and affective instability persisted even after controlling for national event salience (b = 0.85, 95% *CI* [0.25, 1.43], $t(45)$ = 2.83, p = .007, *semi-partial* r^2 = .024), suggesting that personal engagement with the George Floyd protests was linked to increases in affective instability above and beyond the population-level salience of this event, which itself did not predict affective instability in this model (b = -0.21, $t(269)$ = -0.35, p = .727).[1]

Part D: Zero-Order Relation Between Affective Measures (Study 1)

We assessed the degree to which measures of affective dynamics (instability, variability, and inertia) and mood (mean valence and arousal) were correlated in Study 1. For these analyses, we calculated each participant's affective dynamics and mood for every week in which they completed

[1] This may have been due, at least in part, to our week-to-week measure of event salience reflecting a less precise measurement of population-level interest in the George Floyd protests, one that effectively masks notable day-to-day fluctuations in search interest by averaging over these differences.

all three study time points. We excluded data from participants who completed all time points in a given week less than three times, retaining a sample of 57 participants for this analysis. We observed a moderate positive correlation between affective instability and variability ($r(56) = .54$, $p < .001$; Table S6). Furthermore, affective instability was negatively associated with inertia on the valence dimension ($r(56) = -.26$, $p < .001$). We also observed positive associations between inertia on the valence and arousal dimensions ($r(56) = .20$, $p = .015$) as well as between mean valence and arousal ($r(56) = .24$, $p = .012$). Finally, inertia on the arousal dimension was negatively associated with mean valence ($r(56) = -.18$, $p = .013$). No other correlations between affective measures were statistically significant (Table S6).

Table S6 | Study 1: Zero-order Correlations between Affective Measures

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Instability	-					
2. Variability	.54*** [.42, .65]	-				
3. Inertia (Valence)	-.26*** [-.39, -.13]	-.12 [-.25, .02]	-			
4. Inertia (Arousal)	-.12 [-.26, .03]	-.11 [-.26, .04]	.20* [.04, .36]	-		
5. Mood (Valence)	-.16 [-.34, .01]	-.14 [-.32, .03]	-.07 [-.22, .08]	-.18* [-.33, -.04]	-	
6. Mood (Arousal)	-.07 [-.23, .09]	-.13 [-.29, .03]	.03 [-.12, .17]	-.01 [-.16, .14]	.24* [.06, .43]	-

Note. Average zero-order pair-wise correlations between affective measures within participants ($n = 57$). Measures of mood reflect participants' mean valence or arousal, depending on the dimension specified. Statistical significance was assessed using one-sample *t*-tests comparing the mean zero-order pair-wise correlation between affective measures to zero. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Part E: Exploring the Association between Individual Differences in Political Engagement and Well-being (Study 1) and Individual Differences in Partisanship and Anxiety (Study 2)

While participants in Study 1 reported greater anxiety and depression when politically engaged, individual differences in political engagement were not associated with individual differences in well-being. That is, participants who engaged with the George Floyd protests more frequently did not report higher mean levels of anxiety (linear regression: $b = 0.08$, 95% *CI* [-0.65, 0.81], $t(111) = 0.22$, $p = .827$) or depression ($b = 0.25$, 95% *CI* [-1.02, 1.52], $t(111) = 0.39$, $p = .694$). Similarly, while participants exhibited greater affective instability during weeks in which they engaged with the George Floyd protests, individual differences in engagement frequency were not associated with individual differences in affective instability (i.e., affective instability across the entire 8-week study period; $b = 0.14$, 95% *CI* [-0.07, 0.36], $t(97) = 1.31$, $p = .194$). Thus, while political engagement predicted increases in affective instability, anxiety, and depression *within-individuals*, participants'

who more frequently engaged with a polarizing political event did not, on average, exhibit less stable affect or lower well-being across the 8-week period of Study 1.

Study 2 consisted of two study sessions, preventing us from examining how within-individual changes in political attitudes were related to within-individual changes in well-being (i.e., anxiety). However, while the focus of Study 2 was on assessing the relationship between political attitudes and affect, we were able to explore whether more politically polarized partisans self-reported greater anxiety. Neither ideological extremity (linear regression: b = 1.17, 95% *CI* [-6.46, 8.79], $t(106) = 0.30$, $p = .762$) or affective polarization (b = 2.43, 95% *CI* [-1.39, 6.24], $t(106) = 1.26$, $p = .210$) was associated with anxiety. Thus, our data suggests that more polarized individuals did not experience greater anxiety than their less polarized peers.

Future research should further explore the relationship between political behavior and well-being, particularly given our robust within-subject evidence linking periods of political engagement to greater affective instability and anxiety (Study 1), and our finding that strongly partisan individuals exhibit larger day-to-day affective shifts characteristic of an unstable emotional life (Study 2).