

Voting as a Vital Sign

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Election Stress Disorder affects individuals from both sides of the aisle and has been affecting more and more people in recent election cycles. In 2016, 52% of Americans indicated that the election was a source of significant stress in their lives. In 2020, this number jumped to 68%.¹ With the upcoming 2024 presidential election, thinking of the future can seem stressful and beyond our control. However, voting outcomes affect our patients, our public health systems, and our health policies. It is our duty as physicians to care for our patients holistically, and this means getting involved with the systems that guide our country.

Added stress from election cycles can manifest through fractured friendships and emotional instability, and even somatically, most commonly through acute respiratory infections and gastrointestinal conditions.² However, studies have found that political participation can contribute to patients' mental health recovery by increasing social inclusion.³ When patients feel isolated from the outside world due to their confinement to a hospital bed, this can be a tremendous benefit. In fact, higher political participation, including voting and registering to vote, is strongly correlated with lower mortality among American women.⁴

Unfortunately, there is a tragic cycle at play. Gerrymandering has demonstrated its devastating effects by hindering Medicaid expansion, resulting in preventable morbidity and mortality for millions of Americans.⁵ These votes lost to morbidity and mortality in marginalized populations may impact electoral and policy outcomes, including public health policy.⁶ Disappointingly, between 2004 and 2018, physician voting rates were 12% lower than the general public, with physicians who did not register to vote being 70% more likely to report that they were "too busy" or have "conflicting work or school."⁷ This is on top of the fact that Indiana ranks 39th in terms of voter turnout with only 58.9% of the eligible population participating in voting.⁸

Fortunately, healthcare interventions aimed at increasing voting rates have emerged within nursing, social work, and medicine.⁹ The Health Resources and Services

Administration has released guidance encouraging Federally Qualified Health Centers to engage in nonpartisan voter registration efforts.¹⁰ Hospitals and other healthcare institutions facilitating nonpartisan voter registration efforts have legal protections to do so according to the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and existing IRS code 10. In our very own Indianapolis student outreach clinic, we have incorporated voter registration efforts into clinic flow with the help of our local League of Women Voters chapter, who held a session on voter registration.

In recent years, medicine as a whole has been more willing to embrace talking about the social determinants of health (SDOH), which include education, health care, neighborhood environment, social/community context, and economic stability. It is widely accepted that outside factors disproportionately affect a person's health aside from their interactions with the healthcare system. While having an awareness of the SDOH is an important first step, it is often treated as the only step. Instead, we embrace reframing this concept and instead calling it for what it really is - the political determinants of health.¹¹ All of the SDOH are directly tied to politics and cannot be addressed without acknowledging this reality. Politicians are most responsive to the concerns of those who are civically engaged and vote in elections. As is, we have a vicious cycle where those who are underserved by our healthcare system are the same people who are less likely to vote in elections. This is in large part intentional and due to structural barriers that limit voting rights and result in health policy that continues to exclude our underserved populations.¹²

At the American Medical Association Medical Student Section (AMA MSS) 2023 Interim meeting, Resolution OF010 - Supporting The Health Of Our Democracy passed. This means that in June 2024, the AMA House of Delegates will vote on whether or not the AMA supports efforts to engage physicians and other healthcare workers in nonpartisan voter registration efforts in healthcare settings, including emergency absentee ballot procedures for qualifying patients, visitors, and healthcare workers. The resolution also calls on the AMA to support nonpartisan

and independent redistricting efforts. This resolution originated from the IUSM Voter Coalition as a grassroots movement and passed the AMA's MSS without any opposition, which is a point of hope, as we look to the future healthcare leaders. As with so many societal issues our country, we can't fix healthcare without strengthening our democracy.

In recent years, politicians have inserted themselves between physicians and their patients to a staggering and alarming degree. Healthcare professionals must become more actively politically involved instead of continuing to be reactive and letting politicians practice medicine without a license. Learn about the emergency absentee ballot procedures at your facilities. Emergency absentee voting is an important (but often underutilized) mechanism that allows hospitalized patients and healthcare workers to vote in instances that they wouldn't otherwise be able to. Request a free VotER badge through the website to have quick access to voter registration links. Ask about patient voter registration status while performing an HPI. Help cover your peers' shifts so that they can make it to the polls. Get to know your local chapter of League of Women Voters and consider ways you can support their efforts financially or through volunteering. Explore more information about voting by visiting vote411.org and selecting your state. The health of our patients is tied to the health of our democracy, and it's time we take a stronger stand to protect both.

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