

“Should Politicians Be Anxious?”



WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Center for the Study
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Do we want our politicians to be anxious? The answer may seem obvious: No. After all, not only does anxiety signal weakness in a leader, but it also tends to spawn vicious cycles of worry, withdrawal, and motivated reasoning that undermine one’s decision making. Anxiety, in short, is a political liability, not an asset. But this condemnation is too quick, as recent research examining anxiety’s role in promoting both voter engagement and virtuous action suggests that we want our politicians to be appropriately anxious.

Political anxiety comes in different forms. First, there’s a practical form of anxiety: the unease experienced in the face of uncertainty about what to do. Second, there’s a more defensive, outcome-focused version—unease about what will happen given that one has chosen a particular course of action. Using historical case studies, Kurth argues that anxiety in its practical form is what we want to see in politicians because it brings a concern for accuracy that prompts open-minded inquiry and engagement—a conclusion that gains further support from research in psychology.

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