

Sleep Apnea in the White House

Sleep Apnea is a sleeping disorder characterized by breathing which stops and restarts continuously throughout one's sleep. The disorder is common, and two American presidents have been afflicted by it — likely more, unofficially. According to the American Medical Association, about 30 million Americans have sleep apnea, and it is more common among men.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine estimates that around 26 percent of the American population has sleep apnea, which, when applied to the 46 presidents of the United States, means that nearly 12 presidents should have had the disorder. Of all presidents, however, only William Taft and Joe Biden have publicly acknowledged their affliction. This fact continues to build upon a theme of sleep — here, sleep disorders — being used as a tool in painting opposing political figures as unequipped for office. Joe Biden, after releasing a statement in 2023 stating that he used a CPAP machine, received criticism from Republicans who portrayed the disorder as proof of his old age and alleged senility.

While the use of sleep apnea as a political tool may be unethical, it is also effective in bringing attention to the disorder — without question a positive development. This dual role raises questions about the intersection of health disclosures in politics, public perception, and the positive impact of new awareness concerning common sleep disorders.

As discussions about the health of public figures continue to evolve and spread, we make strides in improving the broader societal conversation surrounding the importance of sleep and its impact on overall well-being — even for presidents.

