

COVID-19, Politics, and Science in Utah

Executive Summary of Research Findings
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Key Findings

While as of September 16, 2020 Utah is the 43rd state in terms of COVID-19 death rates (14 per 100,000) and the 26th state in terms of case rates (1,841 per 100,000)¹, the state has not escaped the widespread social and economic impacts of the pandemic as survey results show:

- 1. Experience:** About one in four Utahns are part of households that know someone who has tested positive or been sick from the coronavirus.
- 2. Financial Impacts:** Nearly one in three Utah households experienced or expect a loss of income or experienced a negative impact on their finances because of the pandemic. This is particularly true for less-educated and lower class Utahns.
- 3. Well-Being:** Almost one-half of residents said their overall life had been negatively impacted by COVID-19. Thirty-eight percent also said their mental health was negatively impacted, with percentages particularly high for female and younger Utahns.
- 4. Behavior Change:** Most Utahns made major changes to their behavior during the stay-at-home order, and these changes have persisted to a greater degree in non-rural parts of the state and among elderly residents.
- 5. Mask Wearing:** Fifteen percent of Utahns never wear a face mask in public places, most commonly in rural areas of the state. The majority wear them sometimes or always (except when outside and they can properly distance themselves).
- 6. Government Response:** Views on President Trump's handling of the coronavirus were much more polarized than views of Governor Herbert and local government officials. Utahns expressed the most disapproval for Congress.
- 7. Community Response:** The majority of Utahns thought their communities came together to respond to the pandemic and that they knew people they could turn to for help. Many also would like to see the pandemic used to create social change.
- 8. Information:** Out of a variety of sources, Utahns have the highest levels of distrust and lowest levels of trust in information from President Trump regarding COVID-19.
- 9. Views on Science:** While there is some skepticism of scientific findings in general, most Utahns are concerned about issues like climate change and see it as a human caused.

¹ Data obtained on September 16, 2020 from the New York Times "Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count" (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>).

- 10. Politics:** Both political identity and registered political party were key predictors of many attitudes and behaviors in Utah related to both the pandemic and science. Those with more liberal political identities and registered Democrats were more worried about the coronavirus, more likely to change their behavior, and more supportive of science.

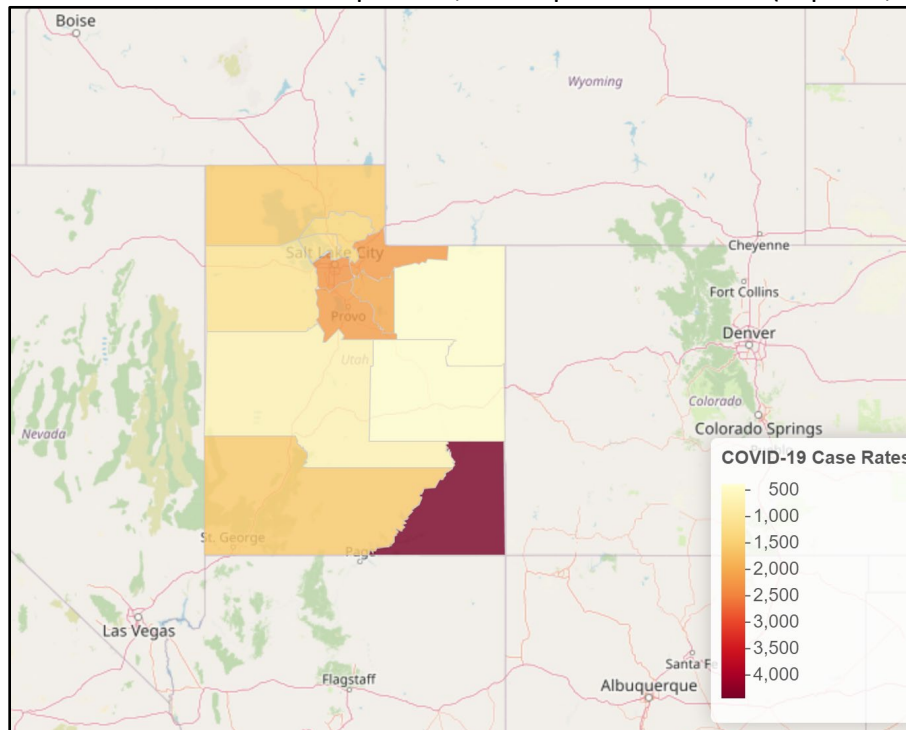
- 11. Ethnicity:** Hispanic residents of Utah were more likely to: know someone who has become sick and died from COVID-19, have experienced negative financial outcomes, have worries about the pandemic, wear masks, and be critical of state and local government than non-Hispanic residents of the state.

Overview

Daily life in the United States and Utah has changed considerably since the global outbreak of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus. On March 6th, 2020, Gary R. Herbert, Governor of the State of Utah, declared a “State of Emergency” in response to pandemic. On March 27th the Governor then issued the “Stay Safe, Stay Home” Directive, which was much less strict than the shelter in place orders seen in other states as it simply urged residents to leave home infrequently, stay 6 feet away from others outside the home, and banned private gatherings larger than 20. At the end of April, the Utah COVID-19 Public Health Risk Status was moved from Red (High Risk) to Orange (Moderate Risk), meaning the Governor’s recent directive was no longer in place as of May 1st.

According to the Utah Department of Health, as of September 15th, the state of Utah had 59,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases, 3,361 hospitalizations, and 436 deaths. The majority of each have been concentrated in Salt Lake and Utah counties, the most populated counties in the state, yet rates are highest in rural San Juan County (see Figure 1).

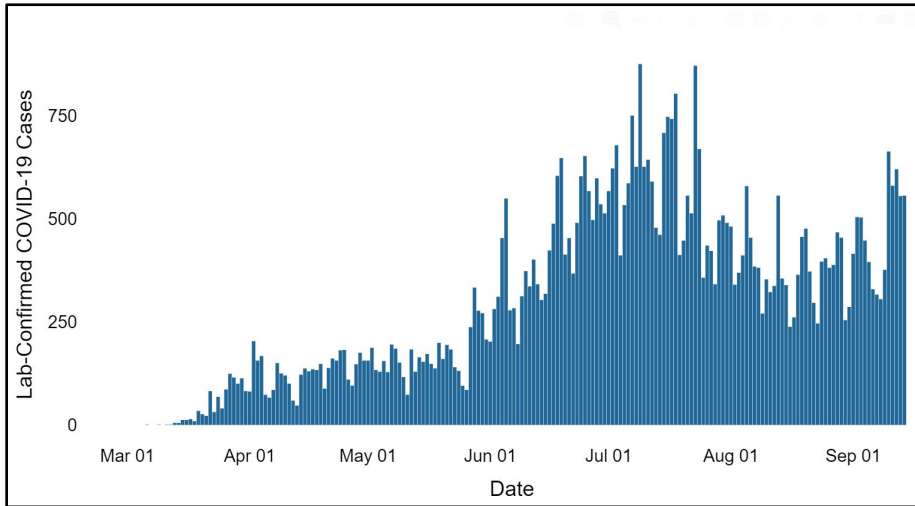
Figure 1. COVID-19 Case Rates per 100,000 Population in Utah (Sept. 16, 2020)



Source: Utah Department of Health, <https://coronavirus.utah.gov/case-counts/>

Just over 725,000 people have been tested throughout the state, with testing peaking in July (Utah Department of Health 2020). While the curve of lab-confirmed positive COVID-19 cases started to flatten in April, they peaked again during July, and remained at higher levels before increasing again in September (see Figure 2.)

Figure 2. COVID-19 Cases by Positive Test Report Date in Utah (Sept. 16, 2020)



Source: Utah Department of Health, <https://coronavirus.utah.gov/case-counts/>

Amidst all of these events, little reliable and representative information exists about how Utah residents are perceiving and behaving during the coronavirus epidemic, including how politics and views of science is driving behavior and attitudes regarding COVID-19. The data in this executive summary are based on an online panel survey of 634 adult residents of Utah conducted from June 12th to June 29th, 2020, just as the virus was trending upwards in the state mid-summer. We use weights with our data (by sex, age, education, party registration, and region), to adjust the results somewhat to be more representative of Utahn adults. With weights, about half are female, 40% have a college degree, and 35% are registered Republicans.

Methods

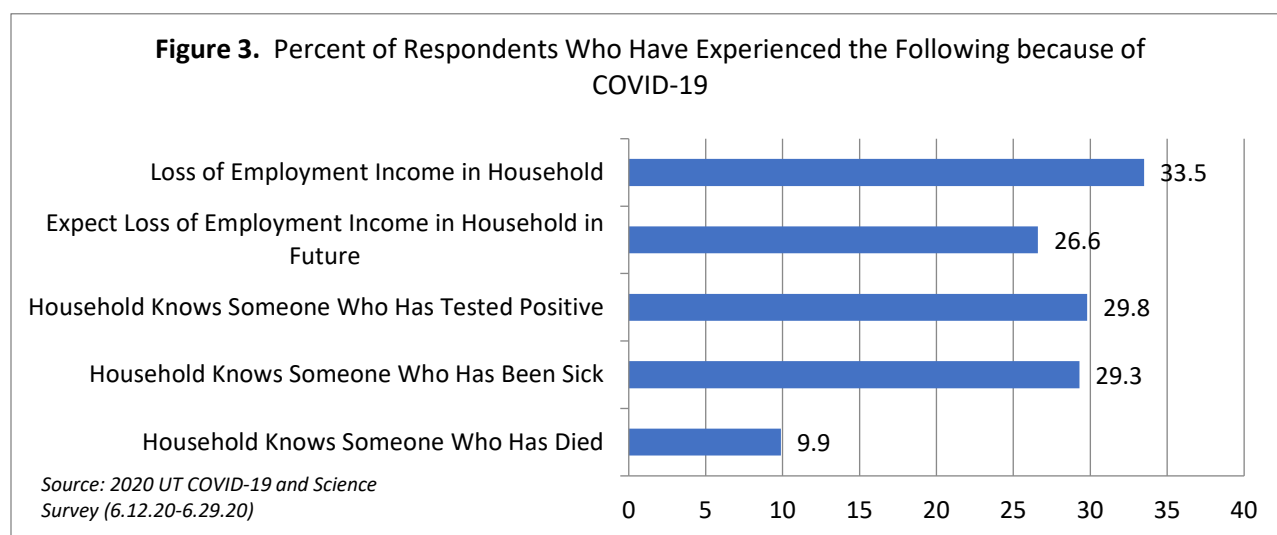
The COVID-19, Politics, and Science in Utah Survey was developed by researchers at Utah State University and funded by the [Mountain West Center for Regional Studies](#) small grant program. A number of questions included in the survey were based off of recent surveys conducted by Lawrence Hamilton and Thomas Safford at the [Carsey School of Public Policy](#) at the University of New Hampshire. We also included some questions based on the U.S. Census Bureau [Household Pulse Survey](#) and the [Rural West Covid Project](#).

A panel of respondents was purchased from Qualtrics and respondents took the survey online. The data in this executive summary are based on the responses from 634 adults in Utah who completed the survey. In order to take the survey, respondents had to be 18 years or older, live in Utah year-round, or be a seasonal resident who was also currently registered to vote in the state. The survey was conducted from June 12 to June 29, 2020, when cases were spiking during the summer throughout the U.S. and Utah. To ensure the data is representative of Utah adults, we use rake weights by gender, age, education, part registration, and [region of the state](#). The margin of sampling error is $\pm 4.0\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

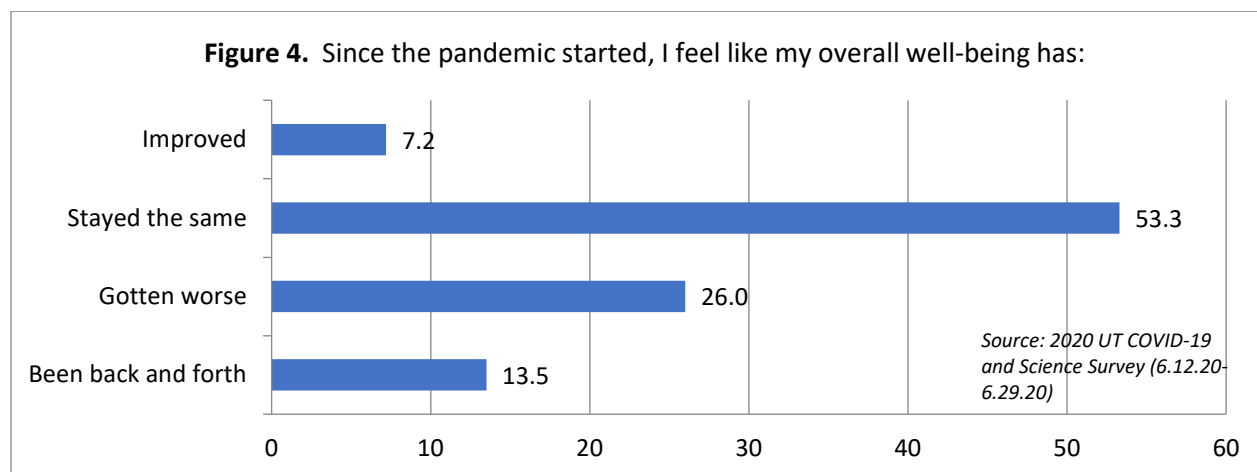
In this executive summary we present the overall responses to most questions included in the survey as well as notable/significant ($p < .05$) response differences by gender (male, female), political identity (liberal, moderate liberal, moderate, moderate conservative, conservative), political party registration (Democrat, Independent, Republican, Other (including Libertarian)), educational attainment (high school or less, tech/some college, college graduate, grad school/professional degree), age group (18-34, 35-49, 50-64, 65+), class (upper, upper middle, lower middle, working, lower), race (white, non-white), ethnicity (Hispanic, non-Hispanic), rurality (urban, rural, suburban, mix of urban and rural, other), religion (members of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or non-LDS), and region (Northern, Salt Lake, Western, Southwest, Eastern).

Impacts and Views of the COVID-19 Pandemic

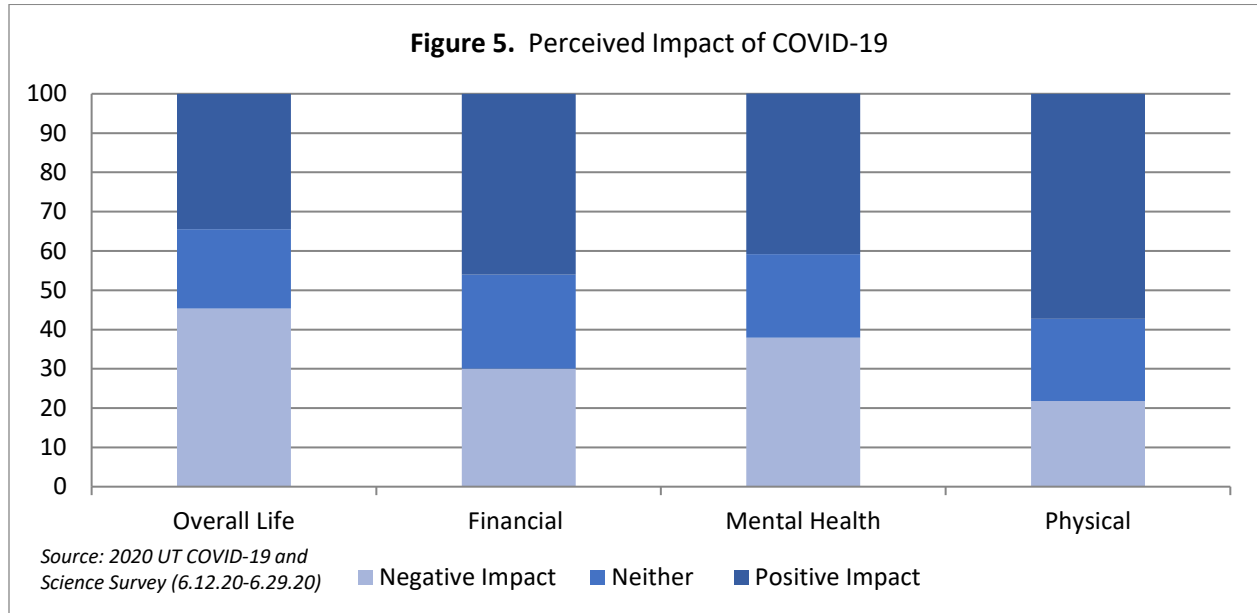
As shown in Figure 3, about one in three Utahns experienced a loss of employment income in their household, expect a future loss of income in their household, has someone in their household who knows someone who has tested positive for COVID-19, or has someone in their household who knows someone who has been sick from COVID-19. About one in ten has someone in their household who knows someone who has died because of COVID-19. Utahns who have lower levels of education, are younger, are either working or upper class, and are Hispanic were more likely to have experienced and/or fear future household employment loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hispanics were also more likely to know someone who had become sick and died of COVID-19.



When asked about their overall well-being since the pandemic started (see Figure 4), most respondents (53%) said it had stayed the same, while about one in four said it had gotten worse. Liberals, democrats, younger residents (18-34), and lower and working class respondents were much more likely to say things had gotten worse.

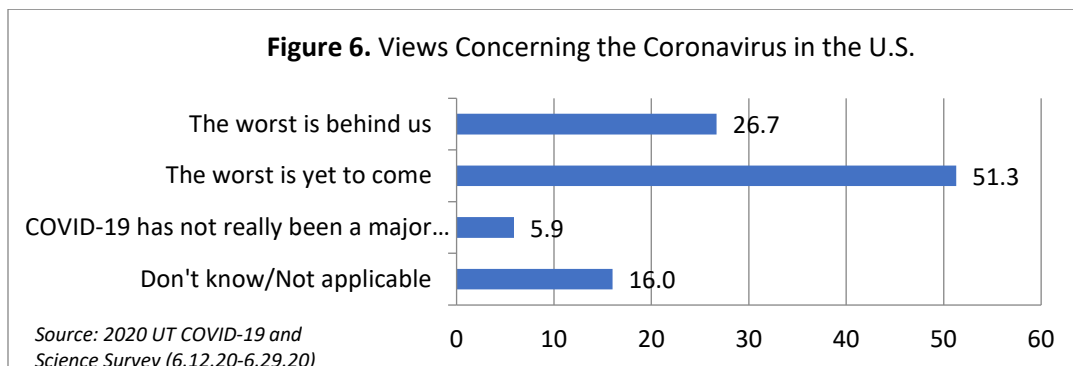


When asked whether COVID-19 was positively or negatively impacting their overall life as well as financial, mental health, and physical aspects, respondents were most likely to say it was having a negative impact overall (45%) and on their mental health (38%) (see Figure 5). Respondents were most likely to say the pandemic was having a positive impact on their physical well-being (57%).

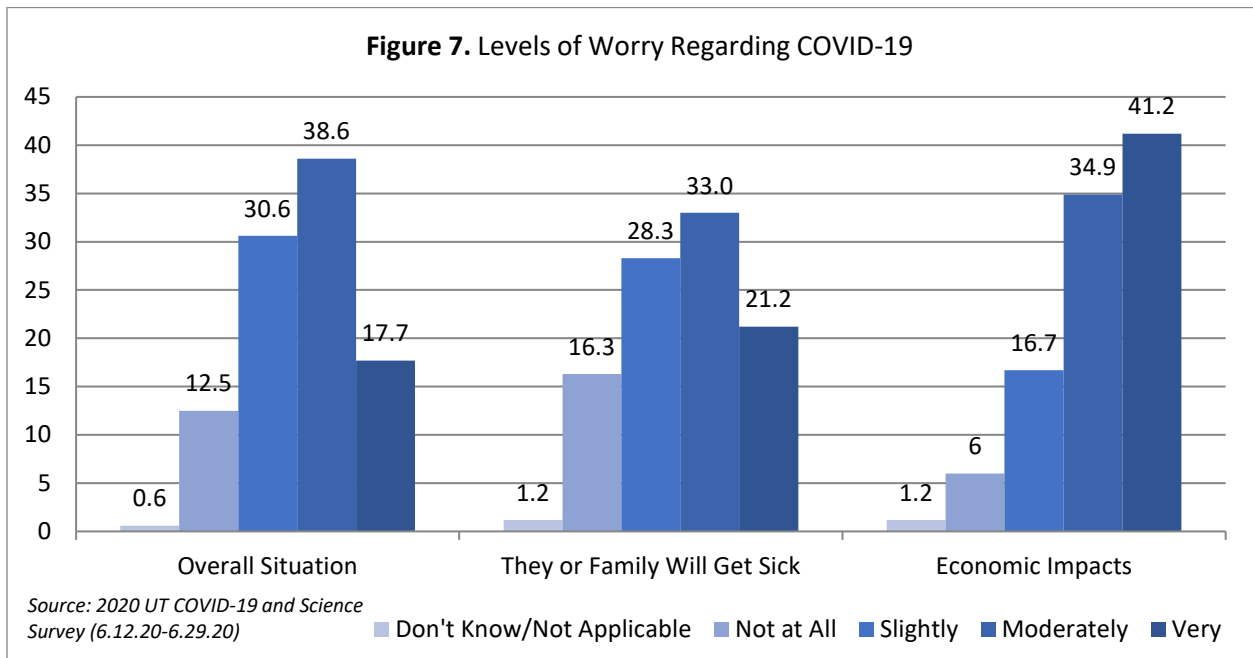


Overall life impacts were more negative for females, democrats, and lower/working class Utahns. Financial impacts were more positive for conservatives, but more negative for younger (18-34) and working/lower class Utahns. Mental health was most negatively impacted for females and younger Utahns (18-34). Physical health was most likely to improve for males and older Utahns (65+).

When asked about the future of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. (see Figure 6), most Utahns believed that the worst is yet to come (51%). Only 6% said that they thought COVID-19 had not been a major problem in the U.S. Liberal, Democrat, and Hispanic residents were much more likely to think that the worse is yet to come. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), on the other hand, were more likely to say that the worst is behind us.

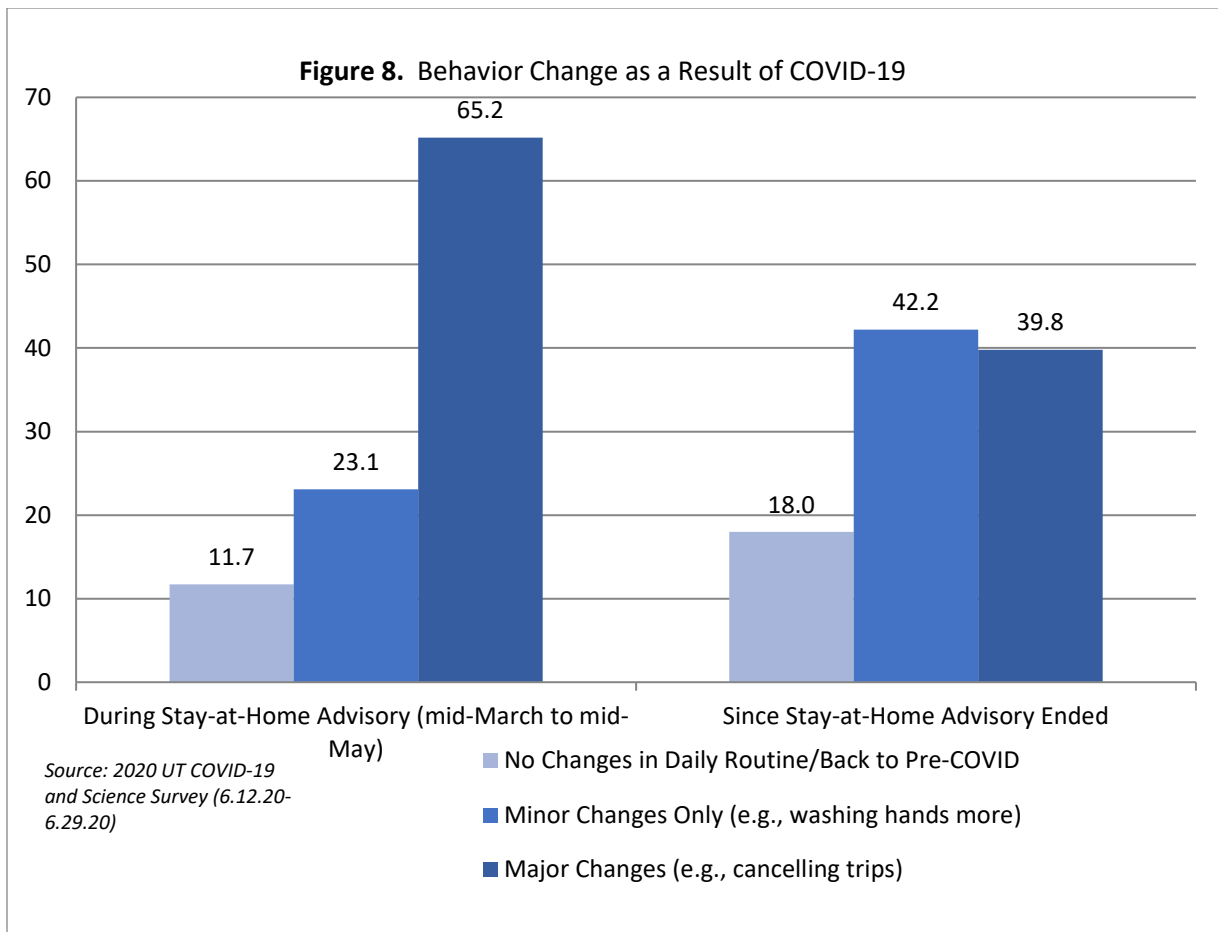


The highest percentage of Utahns are moderately worried about the overall coronavirus situation (39%) and that they or their family will get sick with COVID-19 (33%) (see Figure 7). However, with regards to the economic impacts of the pandemic, the highest percentage (41%) are very worried. Liberal, Democrat, non-white, Hispanic, and non-Mormon Utahns were more likely to be very worried about the coronavirus overall and they or their family getting sick. There were no differences in economic worries between the various categories of residents examined.

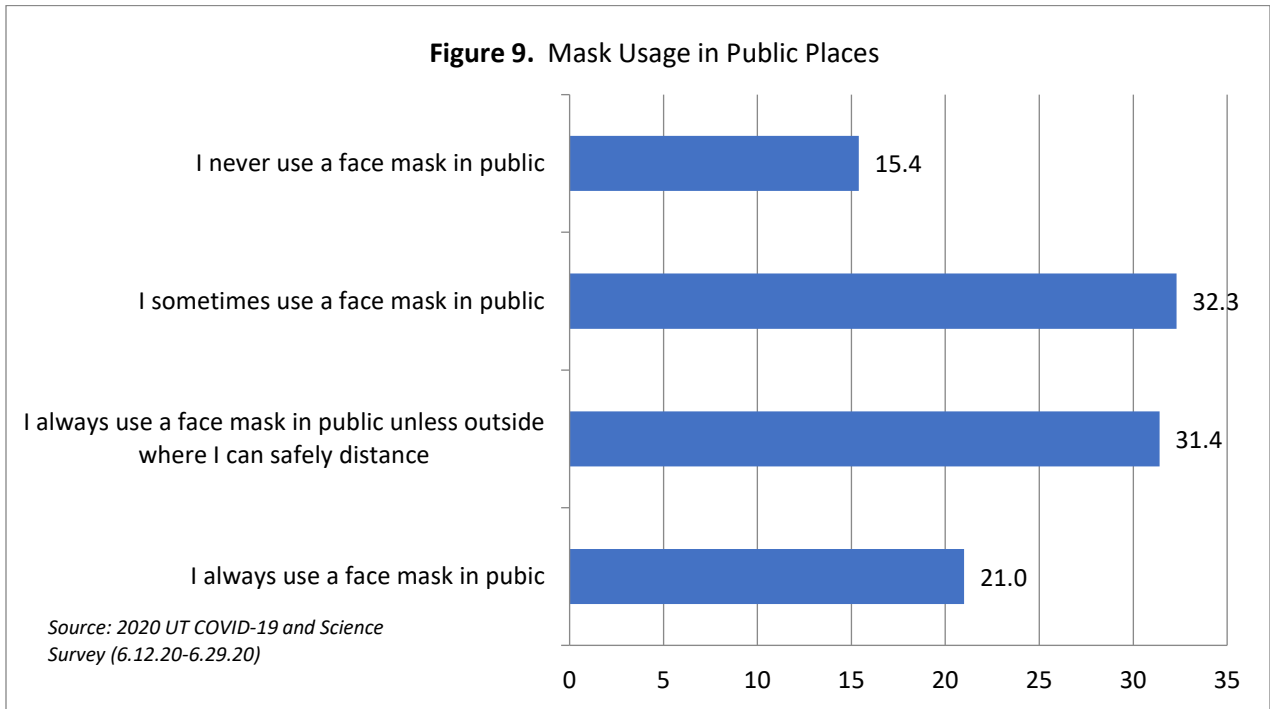


Behavior Change During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the stay-at-home advisory that lasted from mid-March to mid-May, most Utahns said they changed their behavior as a result of the pandemic (see Figure 8). About two-thirds said they made major changes, one in four said they made minor changes, and one in ten made no changes in their daily routines. Once the stay-at-home advisory ended, about 40% were each still experiencing both major and minor changes to their daily lives, while life remained/was back to pre-COVID for about one-fifth of the population. During the stay-at-home advisory, liberal, younger (18-34), and older (65+) Utahns were the most likely to have made major changes to their daily lives. Those living in rural places were the most likely to have made no changes. With the lifting of the advisory, liberals, Democrats, and older residents were more likely to be living with major changes. Upper, upper middle, and working classes were more likely than other classes to still be living with major changes to their lives while those in rural places were the most likely residence group to still have no changes to their daily lives.

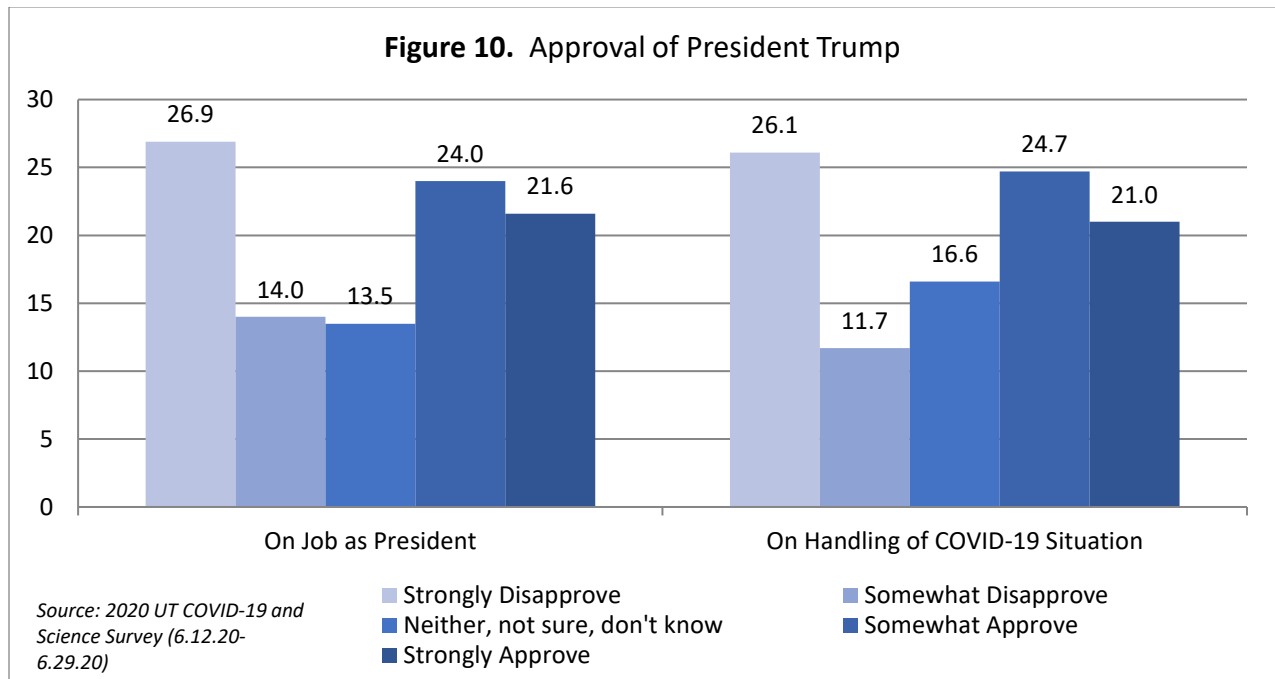


Fifteen percent of Utahns never use a face mask in public places (e.g., grocery store, restaurant, park, etc.) (see Figure 9). The majority sometimes use a mask (32%), while 31% always use a mask except outside where they can safely distance themselves from others, and 21% always use a face mask when in public. Liberals, Democrats, and Hispanics are much more likely to wear masks (particularly in the always except for outside category). On the other hand, rural residents are much more likely to never wear masks than those living in suburban or urban areas. There are also fewer never-wearers in the Northern and Salt Lake regions.

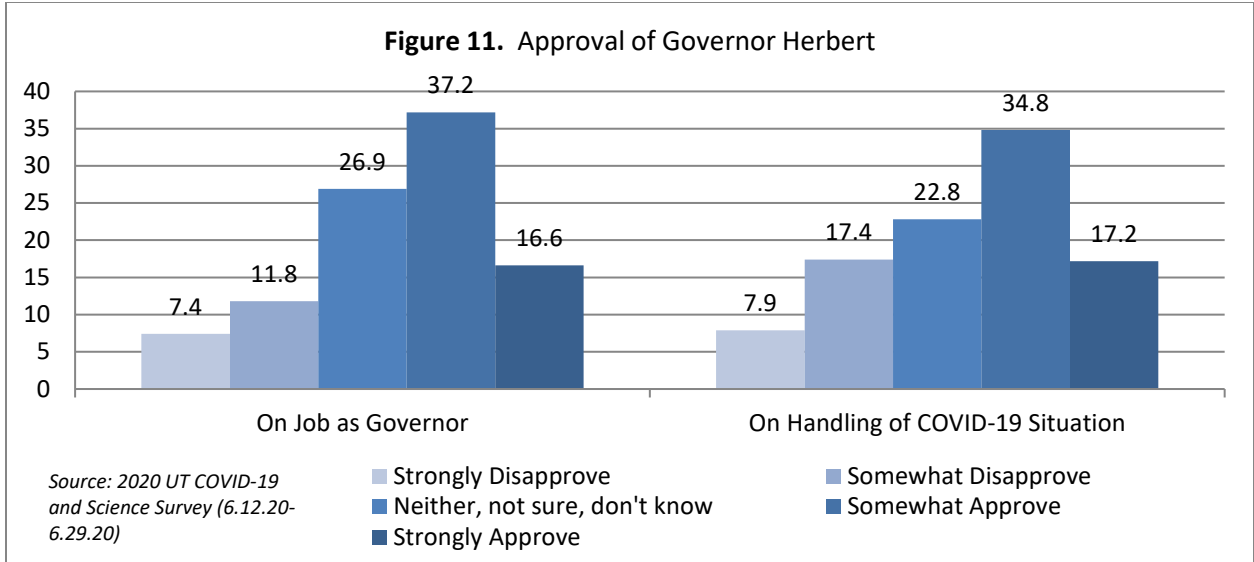


Political Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

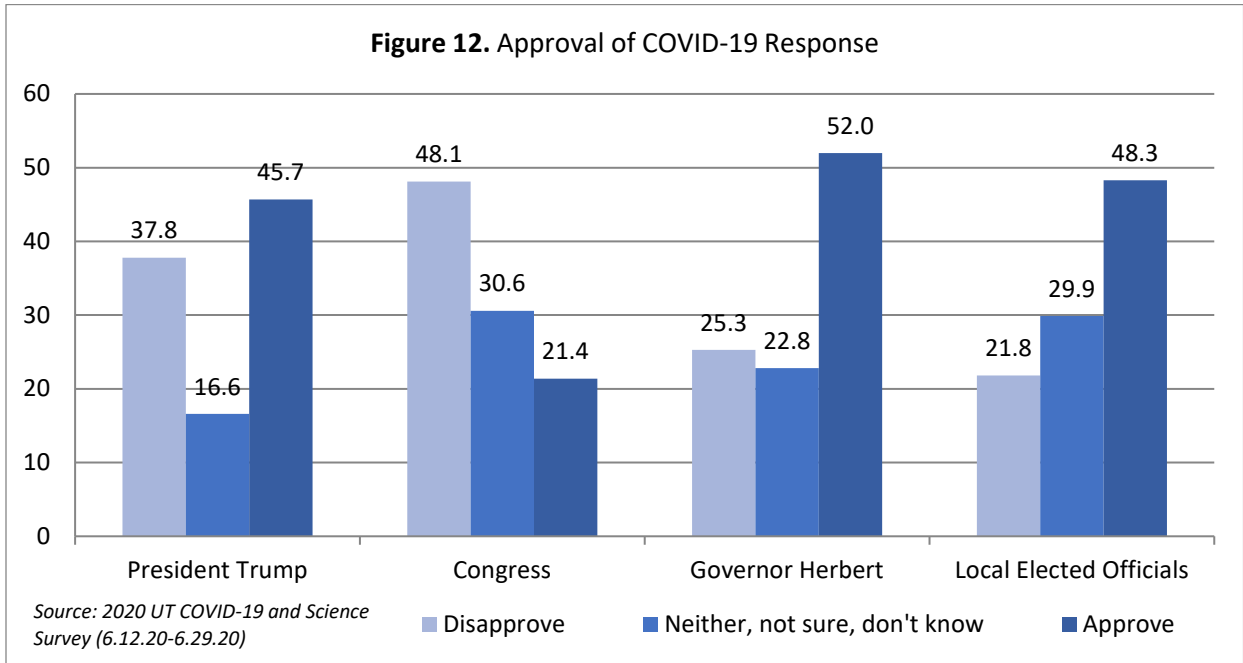
Utahns views on the job President Trump is doing generally and on handling the COVID-19 situation are quite similar and bifurcated (see Figure 10). In other words, people tended to either disapprove or approve of the job he is doing as president and how he has been handling the coronavirus pandemic. The highest percentage, however, did strongly disapprove of his job on both accounts (27% and 26%, respectively). In terms of his overall job as president, liberal, Democrat, more highly educated, non-rural, and non-LDS were more likely to strongly disapprove. The oldest group of Utahns (65+) held the strongest beliefs with 28% strongly disapproving and 34% strongly approving. Utah residents who are more liberal, Democrat highly educated, and older were more likely to strongly disapprove of how President Trump has been handling the COVID-19 situation. On the other hand, Utah residents in the upper class and part of the LDS religion were more likely to approve.



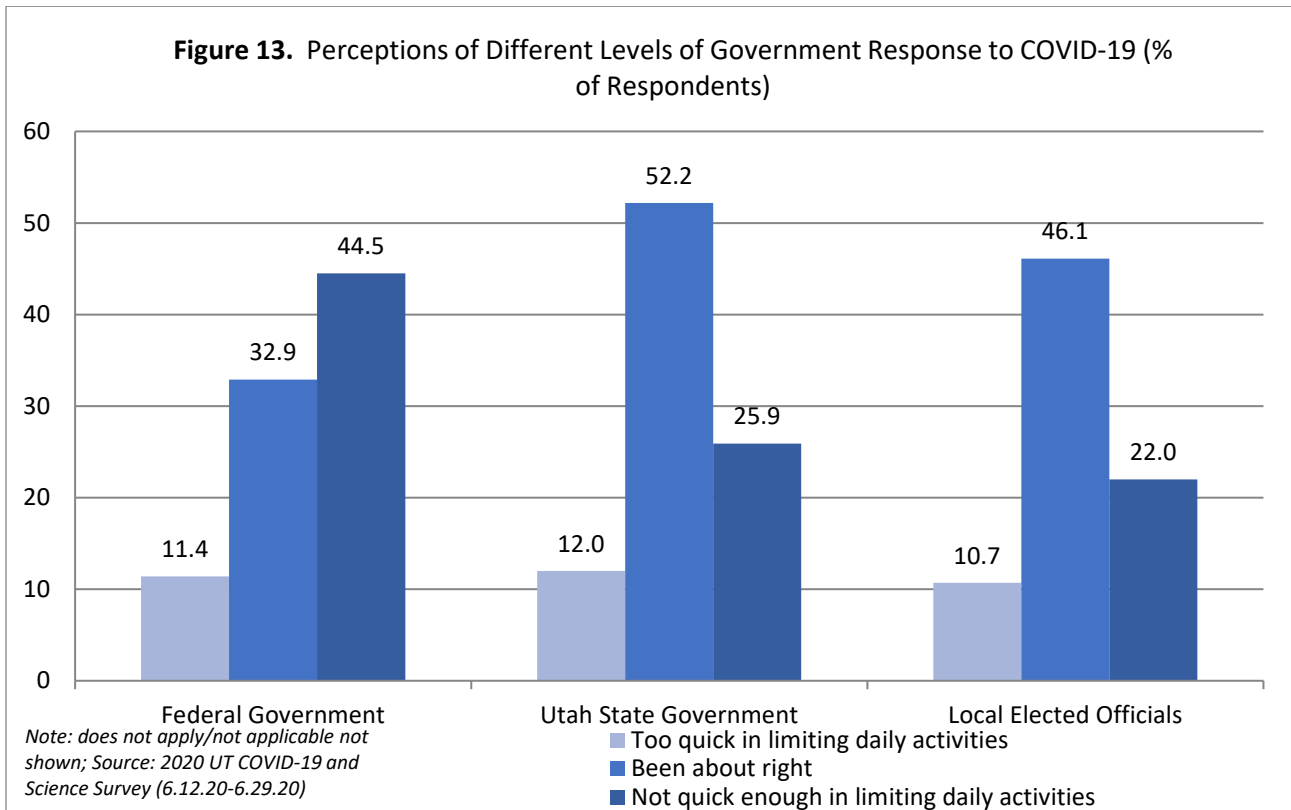
Utahns’ views on the job Governor Herbert has been doing generally and during the COVID-19 pandemic were less polarized than views on President Trump (see Figure 11). The majority of residents somewhat approved of the job he has been doing as governor (37%) and on handling the COVID-19 situation (35%). Conservatives, Republicans, highly educated, older, and LDS Utahns were the most likely to approve of his job as president and on his job handling the COVID-19 situation. Hispanic Utahns were more likely to strongly disapprove of how Governor Herbert has been handling the pandemic.



When comparing various levels of government on only their COVID-19 response, approval for handling is lowest for Congress at only 21% (see Figure 12). Approval is much more bifurcated for President Trump (38% disapprove, 46% approve), but higher for Governor Herbert (52% approve) and local elected officials (48%). With the exception of Congress, liberal and Democrat Utahns are less likely to approve of the job various levels of government are doing to deal with COVID-19.

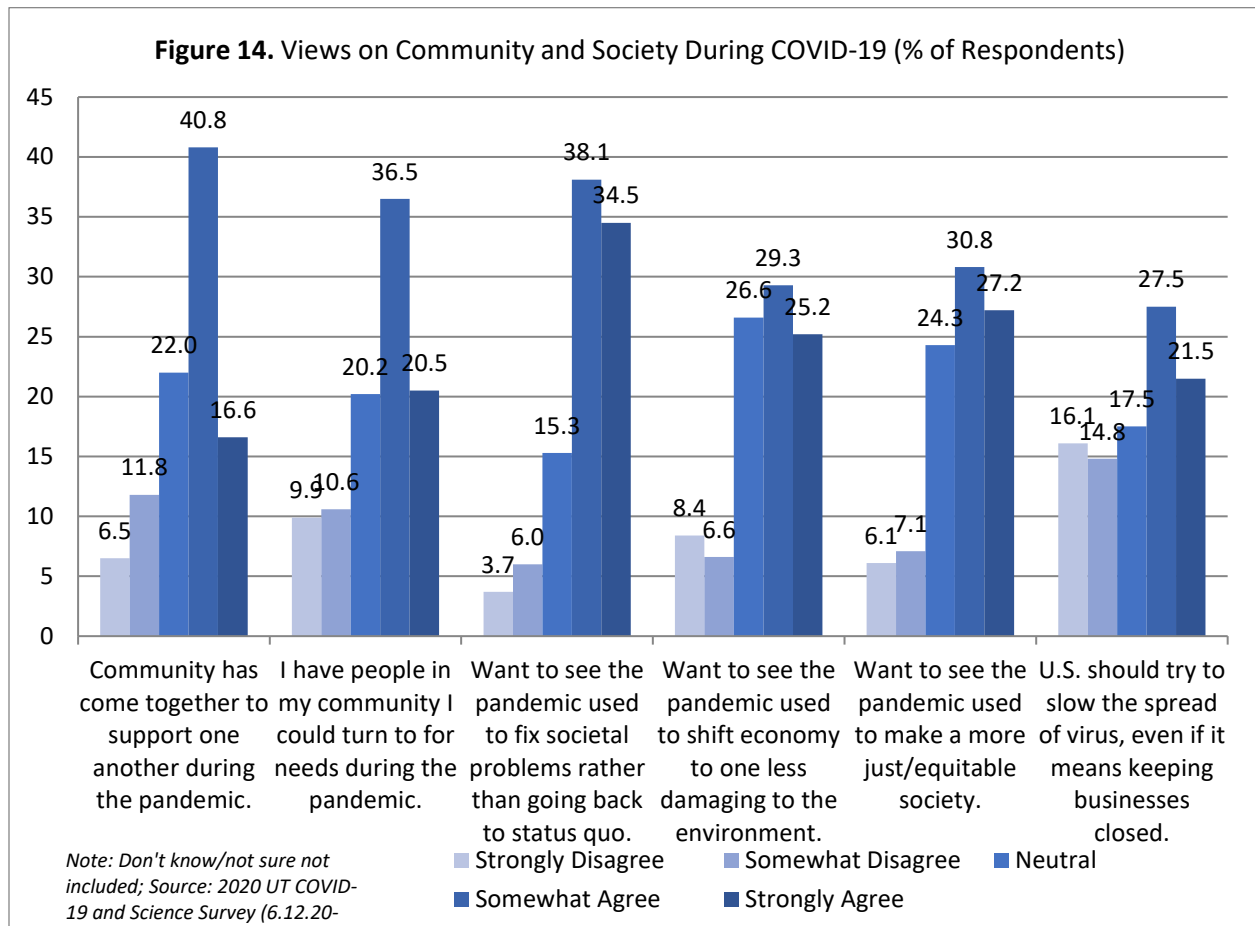


In terms of how quickly various levels of government dealt with the coronavirus by limiting daily activities (see Figure 13), Utahns were most likely to say that the federal government had not acted quickly enough in limiting activities (45%). They were most likely to say that the response of the Utah state government had “been about right” (52%) followed closely by local elected officials (46%). Notably, few said that any level of government had been too quick in limiting daily activities. Liberal, Democratic, and younger Utahns were much more likely to say that government at all levels did not react quickly enough. Hispanic and urban residents were more critical of the pace of response by the state and local governments than non-Hispanic and non-urban Utahns, while LDS Utahns were more critical of the slowness of the federal and state governments than non-LDS residents.



Community and Social Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

When asked about whether their community has come together to support one another during the pandemic, the majority of Utahns agreed (see Figure 14). Nearly 60% somewhat or strongly agreed. This was particularly true for Republicans, those with lower levels of education, those in a higher economic class, and those in urban areas (particularly Salt Lake). We also asked whether individual respondents felt like they had people they could turn to in their community for needs during the pandemic (see Figure 14). Over half (57%) of respondents agreed with this statement as well. Rural and LDS residents were more likely to strongly agree with this. We also asked whether respondents felt like they had people they could turn to in their community for needs during the pandemic (see Figure 14). Over half (57%) of respondents agreed with this statement as well. Rural and LDS residents were more likely to strongly agree with this.

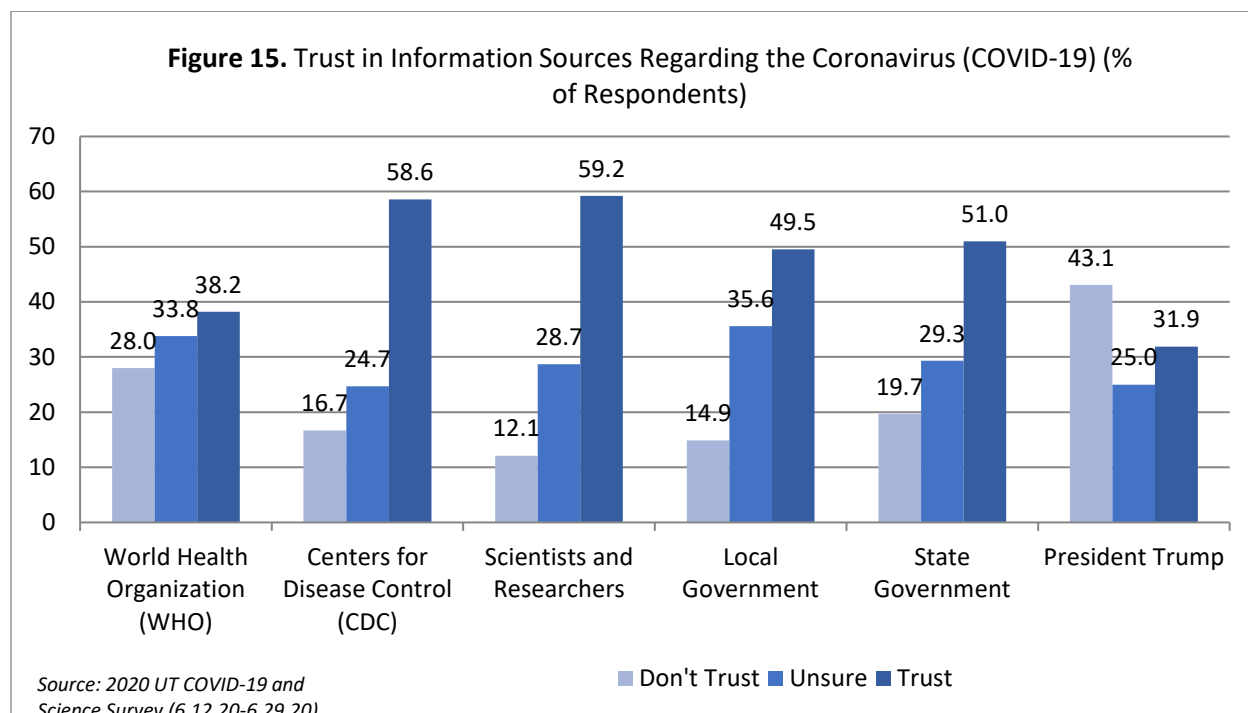


We also asked three questions about whether respondents would like to see the pandemic shift how society functions (see Figure 14). There were high levels of agreement with using the pandemic to fix social problems rather than returning to the status quo (55%), shift the economy to one less damaging to the environment (58%), and make a more just/equitable society (58%). A relatively low percentage of respondents disagreed with any of these statements. In each case, liberal and Democrat Utahns were most likely to support such changes. Females also had higher levels of agreement with fixing social problems and making a more just/equitable society than males.

There was less agreement with slowing the virus by keeping businesses closed (see Figure 14). About 31% disagreed with this statement, with conservatives, republicans, middle aged, lower and working class, non-Hispanic, and LDS residents of Utah more likely to disagree (strongly and somewhat).

Uses and Trust of Information Sources

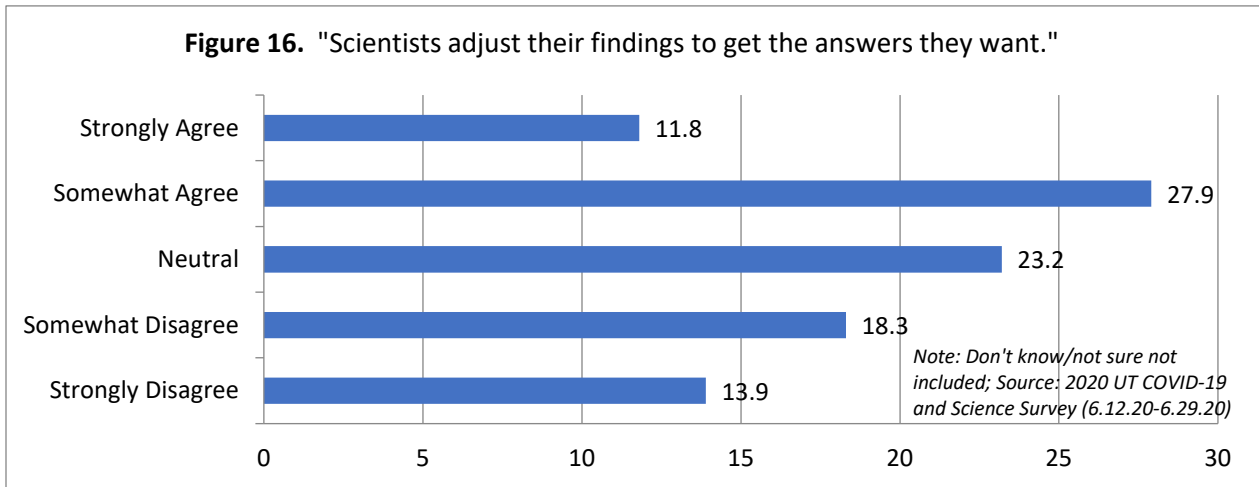
Utahns get their news from a variety of sources (not shown in figure). Local news is the most commonly used everyday news source with 26% of Utahns watching every day. A high percentage (21%) also get their daily news from social media. In terms of who residents are trusting for information regarding the coronavirus (see Figure 15), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (59%) and scientists/researchers (59%) have the highest levels of trust. Residents are most unsure about the World Health Organization (WHO) (34%). The highest levels of distrust (43%) and lowest levels of trust (32%) in information about the coronavirus are from President Trump.



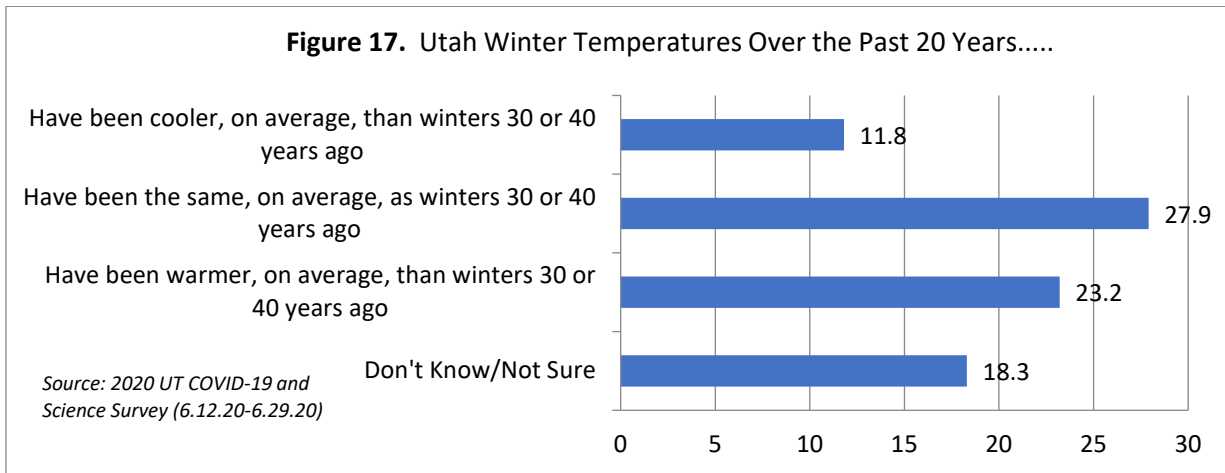
Liberals, Democrats, and Hispanics are less likely to trust information from Trump, while LDS residents of Utah are more likely to trust information from him. Trust in information from the state is higher among males, conservatives, Republicans, highly educated, older, upper class, and LDS Utah residents. The local government is trusted more often by conservative, upper class, suburban, and LDS residents. Scientists/researchers, the CDC, and WHO are more trusted as information sources among male, liberal, Democrat, highly educated, upper/upper middle class and non-rural residents.

Views on Science

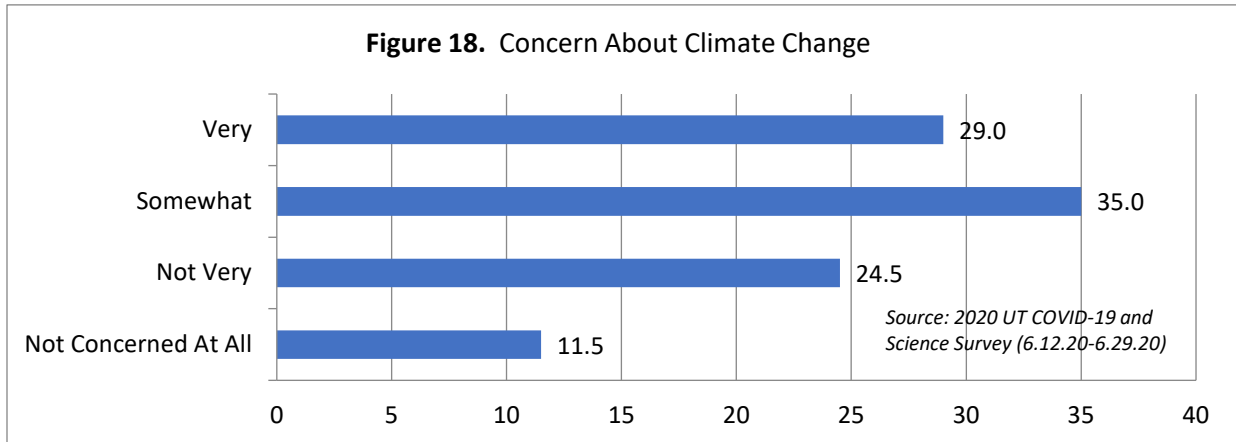
Forty percent of Utah residents think that scientists adjust their findings to get the answers they want (strongly and somewhat agree) (see Figure 16). Men, conservative, Republican, and Utahns with less education are more likely to agree with this statement.



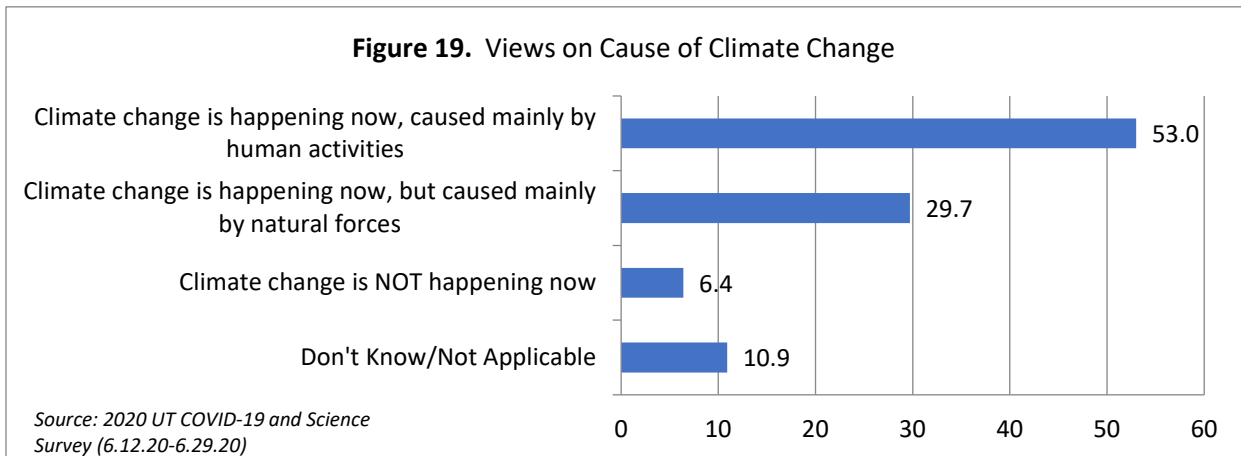
The largest category of Utahns believe that Utah winter temperatures in recent decades are about the same, on average, as winters 30 or 40 years ago (28%) (see Figure 17). About one in five believe they have gotten warmer, one in ten cooler, and about two in ten are not sure. Liberal and Democrat respondents were more likely to think they have gotten warmer.



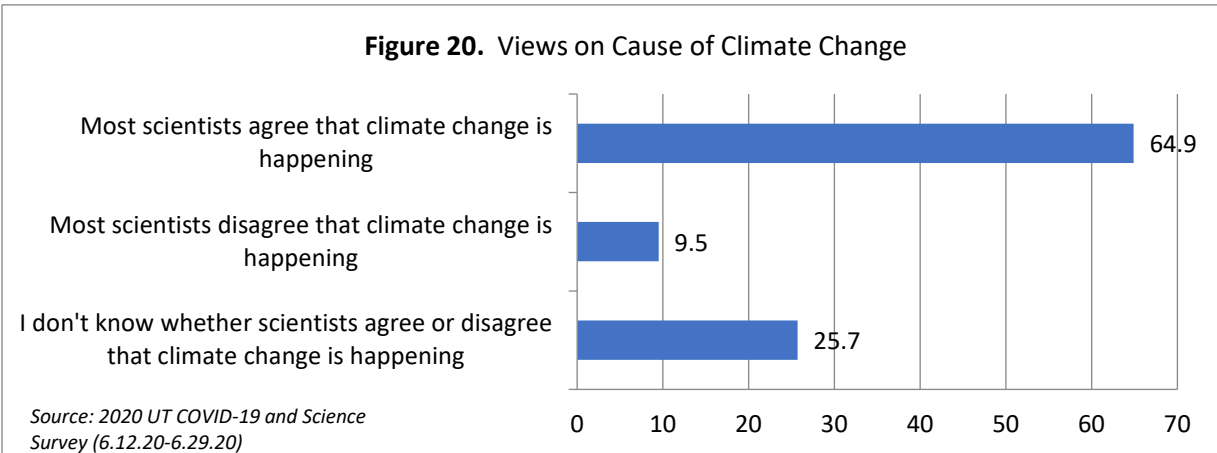
Most Utah residents do have some concern about climate change with 29% being very concerned and 35% being somewhat concerned (see Figure 18). About one in four are not very concerned and one in ten are not concerned at all. Liberal, Democrat, younger, Hispanic, and not LDS have greater levels of concern. On the other hand, those in the Western region are less likely to be very concerned than those living in other regions.



Utah residents generally do believe that climate change is happening (83%), but are mixed on whether it is human caused (53%) or caused by natural forces (30%) (Figure 19). Only 6% do not think it is happening and 11% don't know or are unsure. Female, liberal, Democrat, younger, upper class, non-LDS Utah residents are the most likely to think it is happening now and caused mainly by human activities.



Most Utah residents are confident that most scientists agree that climate change is happening (65%) (see Figure 20). Nearly one in four also say that they don't know if scientists generally disagree or agree on this. Liberal, Democrat, highly educated, and non-LDS residents were the most likely to think scientists agree. The oldest and youngest were also more likely than middle aged respondents to say scientists agree.



Nearly one in five Utahns believe they know a great deal about climate change, and almost half think they know a moderate amount (see Figure 21). About 30% say they only know a little and only 3% say they know nothing at all. Males and those living in the Salt Lake City region are the most likely to say they understand a great deal.

