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**The Worst Is Behind Us:
News Media Choice and False Optimism in the Summer of 2020**

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, mitigation efforts slowed the first US wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts warned, however, that without coordinated, sustained mitigation—such as testing and tracing, limited travel or gatherings, social distancing and mask wearing—the worst could lie ahead. A July survey found majority (59%) agreement with the expert warnings, while a minority (27%) mistakenly thought that the worst was behind us, or that COVID-19 was not a real problem. Among frequent Fox News and conservative talk radio consumers, however, large majorities (67–80%) held such false optimism or denial views, in contrast with small minorities (9–16%) among public radio and local television audiences. The impacts of news media choice were strongest among Republicans. Republicans who frequently watched Fox News were significantly more likely to express false optimism/denial views, whereas Republicans who watched a local TV station (ABC affiliate) or listened to public radio were significantly less likely to express false optimism/denial. News media choices had weaker effects on political Independents, however, and almost no effects on Democrats. These news media × party interactions suggest political asymmetry in the importance of “elite cues” for shaping COVID-19 perceptions. Unrealistic perceptions had real consequences: false optimism and denial correlate with lower support for mitigation steps, which worsened the pandemic.

Introduction

The first US case of COVID-19 was confirmed in January 2020; by late March the rate of infection reached tens of thousands per day. Infections peaked above 30,000 cases and 2,000 deaths per day in April, before mitigation efforts including stay-at-home policies slowed down this first wave. By late July, during the survey described in this paper, there had been 160,000 confirmed deaths nationwide. The rate of new fatalities remained below its spring peak, but infections were rising again. Epidemiologists warned that without mitigation on a much larger scale, there was nothing to prevent worse outcomes in the seasons ahead. Coordinated mitigation efforts did not happen, and the warnings came true. In winter 2020/2021, daily hospitalizations

and deaths far exceeded their spring 2020 peak (**Figure 1**), and more than half a million Americans had died.

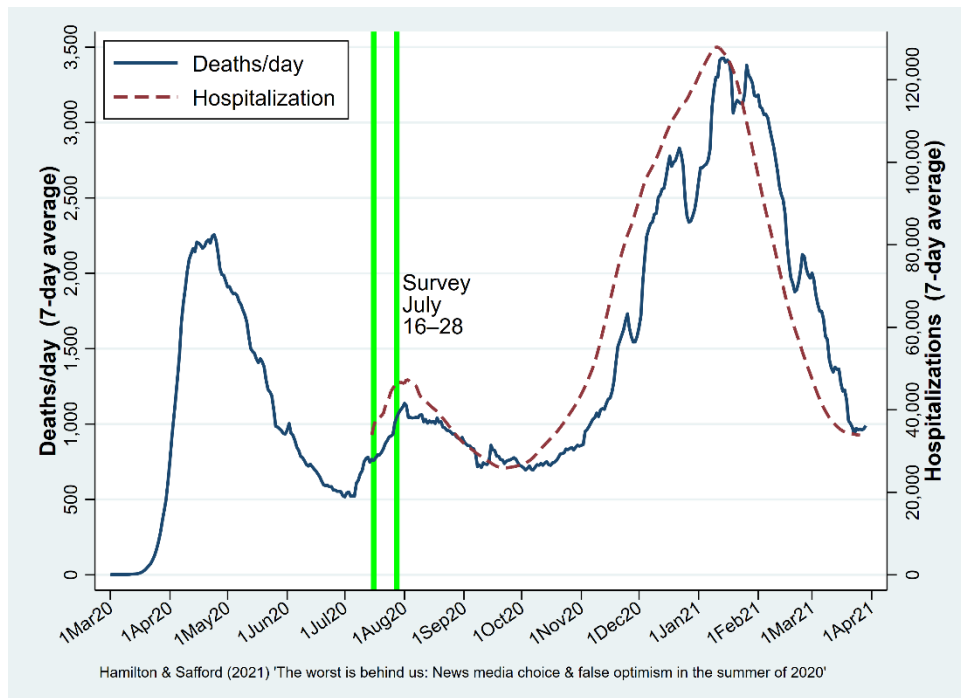


Figure 1: Daily U.S. COVID-19 deaths and hospitalization (7-day averages) from March 1 2020 to March 29 2021. Vertical lines enclose dates of our July 2020 survey. COVID data: Roser et al. (2020).

Our survey took place from July 16 to 28, in the US state of New Hampshire. During this period, the state was experiencing comparatively mild impacts, averaging around 30 new cases and one death per day. As elsewhere, things subsequently worsened: in January the 7-day averages passed 700 new cases and 10 deaths per day. One question on the July survey had invited respondents to look forward: Did they think that for the US, the worst of the pandemic was yet to come? Or that the worst was behind us, or even that COVID-19 was not really a major problem? In hindsight, as in scientifically-informed opinion at the time, the latter two views reflect false optimism at best, or simply denial. They contributed to the disaster by implying less need for prevention, whether policy or individual behavior.

What were the social bases of false optimism? Aside from its demographic patterns, what can we say about the role of information sources in supporting (or countering) inaccurate perceptions that the pandemic was waning or unreal, so preventive steps were not urgent? The July survey sheds light on these questions.

Data and Methods

Our summer 2020 survey was part of a series examining coronavirus-related beliefs and behavior (Hamilton & Safford 2020b, 2020c, 2021; Safford & Hamilton 2020). Background and citations to related studies appear in previous articles on public trust in scientists regarding vaccines (Hamilton et al. 2015), the Zika virus pandemic (Hamilton & Safford 2020a; Safford et al. 2017),

and topics such as climate change (Hamilton 2015; Safford et al. 2020). Other studies give evidence that on science-related issues, New Hampshire surveys approximate US nationwide responses (e.g., Hamilton et al. 2019).

Sampling for this online survey employed the University of New Hampshire Survey Center's Granite State Panel, composed of residents recruited randomly from phone numbers across the state. A total of 959 people responded to the July 2020 survey. Weights adjusting for representativeness in terms of age, gender, education, political party and region have been applied to all analyses in this article.

Variables analyzed here are listed in **Table 1**, with response summaries and codes for regression. Independent variables include age, gender, education and political party, along with how frequently respondents watched or listened to four news sources: Fox News, conservative talk radio, a local TV station (WMUR, an ABC affiliate), or New Hampshire public radio (NHPR).

Figure 2 charts responses to our dependent variable, the *behind us* question. Although 59% agreed with expert warnings that the worst of the pandemic was yet to come, 21% took a more sanguine view that the worst was behind us, while 6% maintained that COVID-19 had not been a real problem. The latter two views proved badly mistaken. Combing the two responses defines a {0,1} indicator of false optimism or denial (27%).

Table 1: Variables in this analysis, with weighted response summaries and codes used for regression.

Independent Variables

Age — 19 to 91 years, mean 49

Gender — male (0, 48%), female (1, 52%)

Education— high school or less (1, 34%), technical school/some college (2, 33%), college graduate (3, 21%), postgraduate (4, 12%)

Party — *Democrat* (48%), *Independent* (10%), *Republican* (42%) each coded as a 0/1 dummy variable

Fox News — watch never/DK (0, 58%), occasionally (1, 24%), frequently (2, 18%)

Conservative talk radio — listen never/DK (0, 74%), occasionally (1, 17%), frequently (2, 9%)

Local TV (WMUR, an ABC affiliate) — watch never/DK (0, 21%), occasionally (1, 38%), frequently (2, 41%)

Public radio (NHPR) — listen never/DK (0, 45%), occasionally (1, 33%), frequently (2, 22%)

Dependent Variable

Behind us — Which statement do you think is more accurate concerning the coronavirus of COVID-19 in the United States?

- The worst is yet to come (0, 59%)
 - The worst is behind us (1, 21%)
 - COVID-19 has not really been a major problem in the US (1, 6%)
 - Don't know/no answer (0, 14%)
-
-

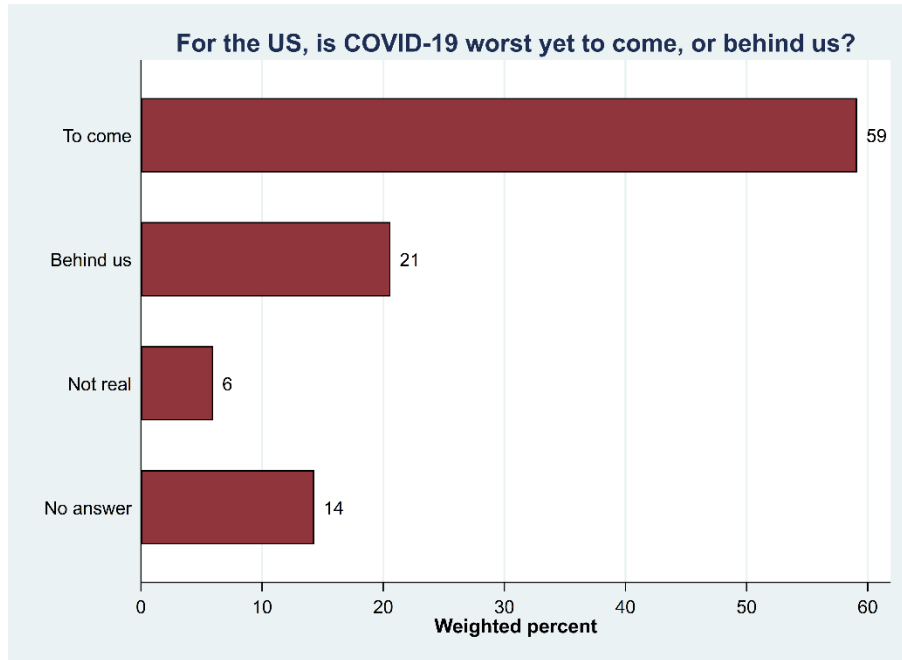


Figure 2: Which statement do you think is more accurate concerning COVID-19 in the United States?

Results

Figure 3 breaks down the percentage of false-optimism responses (*behind us* = 1) by respondent characteristics and media choices. Differences between age groups, men and women, or by education appear small compared with the 50-point gap separating Republicans (54% false optimism) from Democrats (4% false optimism). Independents (22%) stand closer to Democrats. Even wider gaps separate those who frequently (67%) or never (10%) watch Fox News, and frequently (80%) or never (13%) listen to conservative talk radio. Significant differences occur in the opposite direction among local TV watchers and public radio listeners. These news-media effects reflect information conveyed by each source—often downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic (in line with President Trump’s pronouncements) on Fox News and conservative talk radio, contrasting with more attention to infectious-disease expert perspectives on local TV and public radio. Recent studies explore the resulting impacts of conservative media on coronavirus conspiracy beliefs (Jamieson & Albarracin 2020), preventive behavior (Simonov et al. 2020) and COVID-19 infections (Bursztyn et al. 2020).

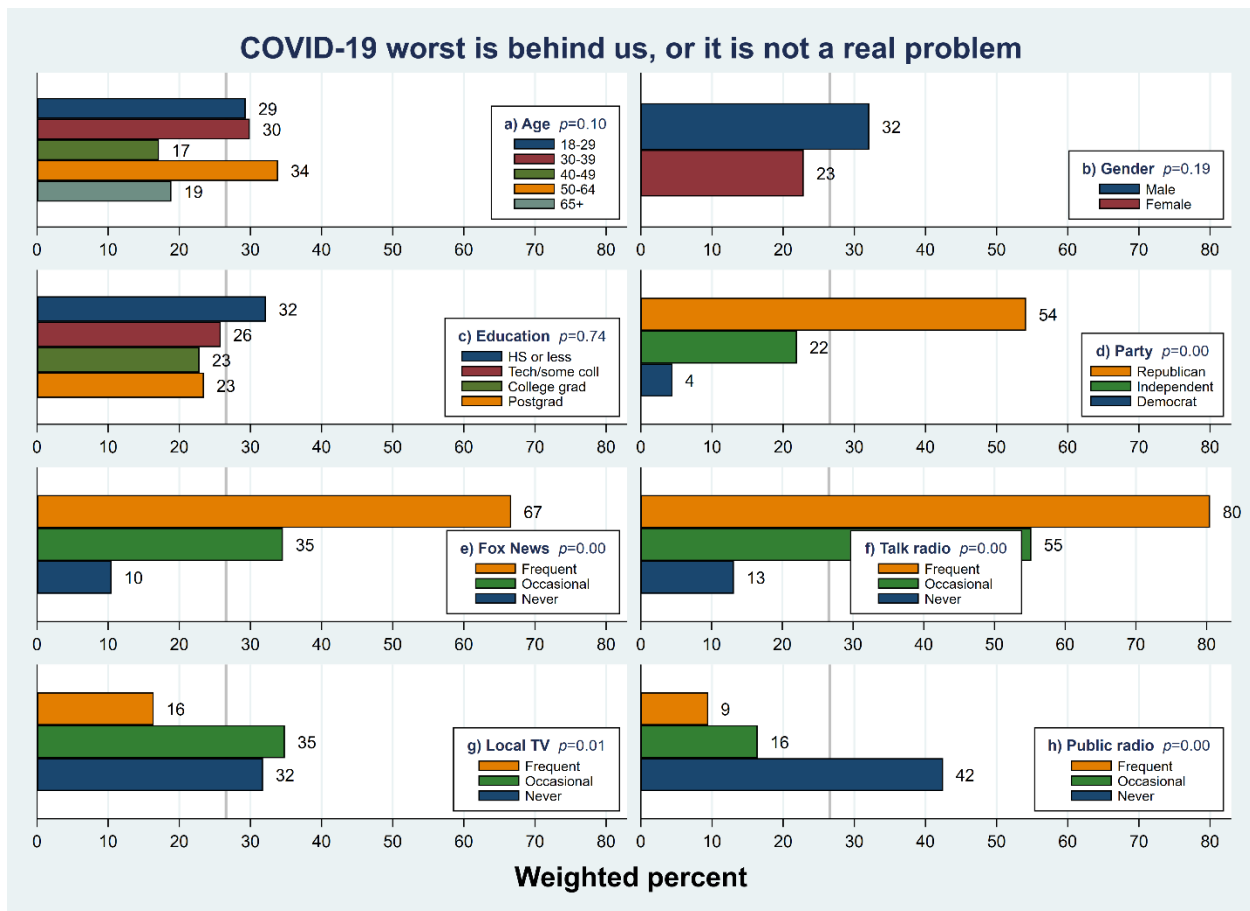


Figure 3: Percentages saying the worst is behind us or COVID-19 is not really a major problem (overall, 27%) by respondent characteristics and news media choices. Probabilities from design-based *F* tests.

Political identity is known to influence news media choices (e.g., Bolin & Hamilton 2018), so relationships in Figures 3e–h might be spurious. Media/party associations also raise the question of whether media effects might be different across parties. A multivariate analysis summarized in **Table 2** tests these possibilities by entering all four media items, together with media × party interactions, age, gender and education, into a logit regression model predicting the odds of a false optimism/denial response (*behind us* = 1). Older respondents are less inclined to false optimism/denial ($p = 0.028$), but otherwise *Republican* identity and media × *Republican* interactions dominate these results. The significant main effect for *Republican* ($p < 0.0005$) indicates that, even among respondents who say they never watch or listen to any of the four listed news sources, Republicans are more inclined toward false optimism/denial. Non-significant main effects for each of the four media items mean that news media choices had little effect on perceptions among Democrats, the base or reference category of party.

Turning to interactions, the positive *Fox News* × *Republican* coefficient ($p = 0.010$) tells us that among Republicans, more frequent Fox viewership is associated with higher probabilities of false optimism/denial, as visualized in **Figure 4a**. Conversely, the negative *local TV* × *Republican* ($p = 0.012$) and *public radio* × *Republican* ($p = 0.008$) coefficients indicate that Republicans who attended to those news sources were less inclined toward false optimism/denial

(Figures 4c and 4d). News media choices show no significant effects among Democrats or Independents.

Table 2: Weighted logit regression of response that worst is behind us or COVID-19 is not a real problem (*behind us* = 1) on respondent age, gender, education, political party and frequency of news media consumption, with news × party interactions. Showing coefficients, linearized standard errors, *t*-test probabilities, and 95% confidence intervals. Colors denote statistically significant positive (blue, more false optimism) or negative (red, less false optimism) effects; estimation sample *n* = 899.

Predictor	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i>	ci lower	ci upper
<i>Age (years)</i>	-0.025	0.011	0.028	-0.048	-0.003
<i>Gender (F)</i>	0.050	0.363	0.890	-0.662	0.762
<i>Education</i>	0.246	0.188	0.192	-0.124	0.615
Party					
<i>Democrat (base)</i>	....	....	....	....	....
<i>Independent</i>	2.386	1.226	0.052	-0.019	4.792
<i>Republican</i>	4.408	0.851	0.000	2.739	6.078
<i>Fox News</i>	-0.264	0.506	0.602	-1.257	0.729
<i>Fox News × party</i>					
<i>Democrat (base)</i>	....	....	....	....	....
<i>Independent</i>	-0.069	0.866	0.936	-1.769	1.631
<i>Republican</i>	1.453	0.564	0.010	0.346	2.561
<i>Talk radio</i>	0.879	0.725	0.226	-0.544	2.303
<i>Talk radio × party</i>					
<i>Democrat (base)</i>	....	....	....	....	....
<i>Independent</i>	-0.633	1.154	0.583	-2.898	1.631
<i>Republican</i>	-0.104	0.785	0.894	-1.646	1.437
<i>Local TV</i>	0.731	0.447	0.102	-0.146	1.608
<i>Local TV × party</i>					
<i>Democrat (base)</i>	....	....	....	....	....
<i>Independent</i>	-0.397	0.805	0.622	-1.977	1.183
<i>Republican</i>	-1.591	0.633	0.012	-2.833	-0.349
<i>Public radio</i>	0.374	0.389	0.337	-0.390	1.139
<i>Public radio × party</i>					
<i>Democrat (base)</i>	....	....	....	....	....
<i>Independent</i>	0.394	0.617	0.523	-0.818	1.606
<i>Republican</i>	-1.443	0.540	0.008	-2.502	-0.384
Constant	-3.966	0.774	0.000	-5.485	-2.447

p* < 0.05 *p* < 0.01 ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed *t* tests)

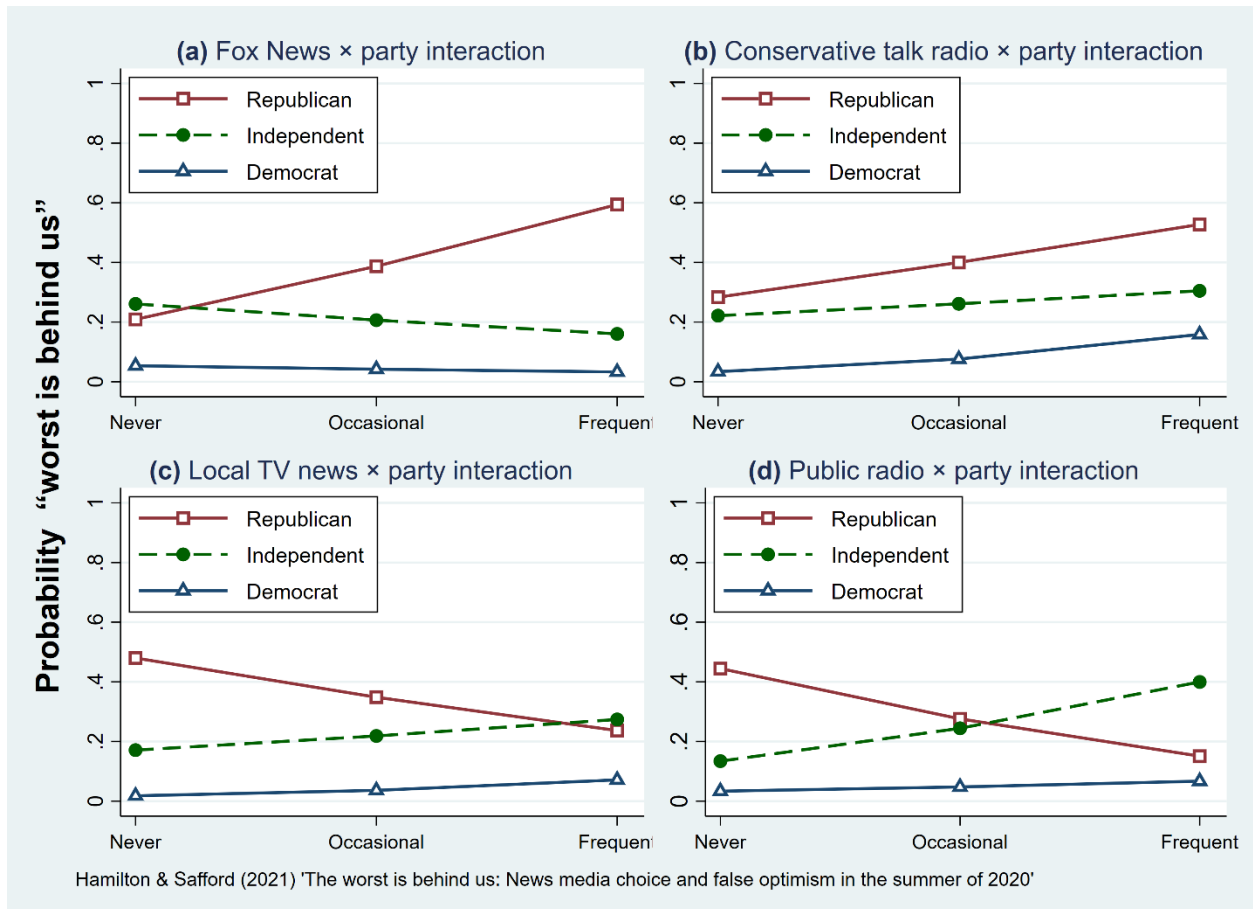


Figure 4: Visualizing news media × party interaction effects: adjusted margins plots based on regression model of Table 2.

Discussion

Associations between partisan identity, news media preferences and perceptions are well known for many topics, including climate change as well as COVID-19. Our analysis of 2020 survey data adds a new element: evidence that media choices affected Republican COVID-19 perceptions more than they did for other political groups. Elite cues from co-partisan political or media leaders tend to disproportionately influence conservatives (Bullock 2011; Carmichael et al. 2017; Hamilton & Safford 2021). In this new COVID-19 analysis, it appears that elite cues from sources that are not co-partisan may disproportionately affect conservatives as well. For Republicans in particular, attending to local TV news and public radio supported realism; attending to Fox News and conservative talk radio did the opposite, implying less need for prevention.

Our survey’s *behind us* indicator has tetrachoric correlations of -0.72 with mask wearing, -0.67 with concern that the respondent or their family might become sick, and -0.85 with prioritizing government efforts to control the virus. Through such connections to behavioral and policy mitigation steps, false optimism and denial contributed to worsening the pandemic.

Acknowledgments

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