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Politicization of COVID-19 health-protective behaviors in the United States: Longitudinal and cross-national evidence

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During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. conservative politicians and the media downplayed the risk of both contracting COVID-19 and the effectiveness of recommended health behaviors. Health behavior theories suggest perceived vulnerability to a health threat and perceived effectiveness of recommended health-protective behaviors determine motivation to follow recommendations. Accordingly, we predicted that—as a result of politicization of the pandemic—politically conservative Americans would be less likely to enact recommended health-protective behaviors. In two longitudinal studies of U.S. residents, political conservatism was inversely associated with perceived health risk and adoption of health-protective behaviors over time. The effects of political orientation on health-protective behaviors were mediated by perceived risk of infection, perceived severity of infection, and perceived effectiveness of the health-protective behaviors. In a global cross-national analysis, effects were stronger in the U.S. (N = 10,923) than in an international sample (total N = 51,986), highlighting the increased and overt politicization of health behaviors in the U.S. © 2021 Public Library of Science. All rights reserved.

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