

Partisanship and the Pandemic: How and Why Americans Followed Party Cues on COVID-19

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Abstract

The United States underperformed its potential in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using original survey data from April 2020 to March 2022, we show that political partisanship may have contributed to this inconsistent response by distinguishing elites and citizens who took the crisis seriously from those who did not. This division was not inevitable; when the crisis began, Democrats and Republicans differed little in their viewpoints and actions. However, partisans increasingly diverged when their preferred political leaders provided them with opposing cues. We outline developments in party politics over the last half-century that contributed to partisan division on COVID-19, most centrally an anti-expertise bias among Republicans. Accordingly, Republicans' support for mitigation measures, perception of severity of COVID-19, and support for vaccines gradually decreased after the initial outbreak. Partisan differences also showed up at the state level; Trump's vote share in 2016 was negatively associated with mask use and positively associated with COVID-19 infections. Diverging elite cues provided fertile ground for the partisan pandemic, underscoring the importance of political accountability, even in an era of polarization.

Keywords COVID-19, party polarization, public opinion

The COVID-19 crisis served as a stress test for the American body politic. By most measures, it failed. In October 2019, the Global Health Security Index at Johns Hopkins University ranked the United States as the country best equipped to handle a public health emergency (Nuclear Threat Initiative and Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security 2019). But living up to its potential would, among other things, require citizens to embrace the best practices suggested by the nation's public health apparatus. Scientific consensus emerged in the early months of the pandemic, recommending the importance of staying at home, social distancing when in public,

avoiding large indoor gatherings, and wearing a face covering when around others.

Unfortunately, many Republican leaders, most notably former President Donald Trump, downplayed the deadliness of COVID-19 and failed to embrace these recommendations.

Moreover, the extraordinarily effective vaccines, which were developed in record time, also became the subject of partisan politics. As a result, the US drastically underperformed the potential identified in the Johns Hopkins assessment.

A pandemic is bound to kill a substantial number of people but, according to Deborah Birx—a key member of President Trump’s COVID-19 task force—many could have been saved. While the initial surge of 100,000 deaths that occurred by May 2020 was probably unavoidable, Birx estimated that at least 130,000 deaths that took place after that but before vaccines became widely available could have been mitigated by following guidelines and recommendations put forward by the public health and scientific communities (Oversight and Reform Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis 2022). Failure to observe best practices followed a partisan pattern. We show that Republican and Democratic citizens developed very different perceptions about the pandemic, and that red states and blue states differed markedly in their infection rates in the last months of the Trump presidency. After vaccines became available in spring 2021, political partisanship again emerged as the deepest fault line distinguishing those who got vaccinated from those who did not. The unnecessary carnage almost surely fell disproportionately on Republican partisans, although anti-mitigation decisions negatively affected Americans of all political stripes.

For those who do not study politics for a living, what unfolded must be vexing. How could so many people have chosen to follow *political* cues rather than medical and scientific ones, in the face of a public health crisis? We start from a time-honored premise in public

opinion and political psychology: when it comes to navigating a complicated set of circumstances, citizens often lack enough information or expertise to make good judgments on their own, so they look to their information environment for recommendations from sources they trust (Lenz 2012, Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Facing a novel coronavirus, people were bound to search for advice, but from whom? In the polarized political environment in which the pandemic occurred in the US, Americans' personal identities are increasingly tied up in their partisan identities (Mason 2018). That has encouraged them to rely increasingly on political leaders to inform their opinions and behaviors, even in areas where partisan cue-taking might seem suboptimal. After the pandemic became politicized by party, the result was a public health disaster.

Although the bulk of this paper traces the implications of diverging elite partisan cues about the pandemic, we begin by providing some conjecture as to why Republican leaders broke from scientific orthodoxy on the pandemic. Being anti-science is not, historically speaking, a Republican position. In the 1950s, for example, a different Republican president, Dwight Eisenhower, threw the weight of the federal government behind a mass vaccination program that eventually eradicated polio in the US. However, the base of that era's party is much different from the one today. It has evolved from one centrally motivated by a philosophy favoring small government to a party centrally motivated by a philosophy favoring the maintenance of time-honored traditions. As Galileo Galilei, for one, might attest, the latter is often accompanied by a marked skepticism about science.¹

Although our insights about the parties suggest many Republicans in the electorate were disposed to doubt the scientific consensus on COVID-19, our results indicate that a partisan

¹ Galileo was put to death by the Catholic Church for the heresy of arguing the Earth revolved around the sun, a belief that challenged the traditional understanding that the Earth sat at the center of the universe.

pandemic was still not inevitable. When leaders of both parties reflected the beliefs of public health experts as they did in the early months, the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats in the electorate did not differ much. Only after Republican leaders started to downplay the health risks associated with COVID-19 did partisan differences on mitigation widen into chasms. Even then, not all Republicans were equally susceptible to leader cues, with those who feared becoming seriously ill from the virus having mitigation preferences much like Democrats. Last, we turn to data gathered during the period after vaccines became available, which reveal a similar and deadly pattern. Worse, a spillover effect from attitudes about COVID-19 vaccines in particular to attitudes and behaviors about vaccination in general has developed among Republicans. As we begin, let us be clear that our intent is not to definitively test the application of these theories to the COVID-19 crisis, but rather to help explain the public's response using public opinion evidence.

Partisanship in Washington and in the Electorate

The prevailing wisdom in political science is that citizens' sense of partisan identification exerts an exceptional influence on their political opinions (Gerber and Huber 2010; Lenz 2012). No force is more important, no variable is more central, to citizen opinion and behavior (Campbell et al. 1960). Because most Americans know less about political matters than one might ideally hope and expect, they tend to use shortcuts to get by. The most common shortcut is to look to their favored party's leaders to deduce where they should stand and what they should believe on issues of the day (Converse 1964). These long-standing insights are arguably more relevant today than at any other time. Polarization has made Americans' party identities central to their personal identities (Mason 2018), supercharging the leader-follower dynamic and ensuring that

COVID-19 took place in a political context in which citizens are even more likely to rely on party cues (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Leeper and Slothuus 2014).

Ironically, COVID-19 is the type of issue that actually had the potential to break the grip of partisanship. Many political issues, such as affirmative action, gender equality, and LGBT rights, are “easy” issues for citizens to engage; they have a long history of salience or they contain easily accessible symbolic referents that citizens can use to develop a position (Carmines and Stimson 1980). “Harder” issues, such as tax policy, typically require a higher degree of content knowledge (Johnston and Wronski 2015), something not often in abundance among average citizens (Converse 1964). COVID-19 might be considered an especially hard issue; it was a new type of risk, it developed quickly, and even public health experts needed time to assess and understand the situation. As such, it was the kind of issue on which Republicans in the electorate might have followed scientific expertise had their leaders encouraged them to do so (see, for example, Leeper and Slothuus 2014 on contextual elements constraining the use of party cues). And for a time, they did. As with other Western democracies where citizens supported their governments’ efforts to combat the pandemic regardless of party (Mordecai and Connaughton 2020), our evidence suggests that Republicans and Democrats alike took cues from public health scholars and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at the beginning.

As the pandemic dragged on into the summer, the information environment evolved. On the one hand, a scientific consensus hardened around the importance of a range of mitigation strategies. On the other hand, Republican political leaders began to diverge from that consensus. To understand why, it is useful to remember that doubting science and being Republican do not necessarily go together, historically. Today’s GOP is much more populist than has been typical.

Not long ago, the country club – a symbol of elitism – was an exemplar of Republican identification. While it is true that the US has always had an anti-intellectual streak (Hofstadter 1963), it has not always found its home in the Republican party. Rather, the most noteworthy populist-minded politicians of America's first 200 years include Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, Huey Long, and George Wallace—all Democrats.

The Republican turn to populism over the past twenty years is important because party followers will not blindly follow any cue put forward by a party leader. If, for example, Republican politicians one day endorsed affirmative action and abortion rights, most Republicans in the electorate would not follow. Opposition to both are central to Republicans' understanding of politics and society. Partisans will more closely follow leaders when their stances are broadly consistent with why they favored their party in the first place. Through the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the line that divided the parties was best understood in terms of differences in opinion on government spending and regulation (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Most Democrats wanted government to do more of both, whereas most Republicans wanted it to do less, producing parties divided by social class and income. However, a class divide does not suggest a clear connection to belief in scientific expertise, which is likely part of the reason why the Eisenhower administration embraced the polio vaccine. One might imagine those in higher income brackets—as Republicans were until relatively recently—would be more likely to *embrace* scientific expertise. It is also noteworthy that Republicans of that era purged conspiracy-minded groups like the John Birch Society from their ranks, at the behest of conservative leaders such as William F. Buckley and Ronald Reagan (Mulloy 2014). Conservatism then is different from conservatism now.

Rather than the size and reach of government, the divide between the parties has morphed into one centrally organized by stances about the wisdom of existing traditions and hierarchies (Hetherington and Weiler 2018). This is at least partially due to the rise of a range of culture issues in the last decades of the 20th Century. Whether it was race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, Democrats embraced groups that had been disadvantaged by existing traditions and occupied the bottom of social hierarchies. Republicans took the opposite position, often pinning their opposition to change to their belief in traditional religious tenets. In addition to creating more racial, ethnic, and gender polarization in voting than ever before, these disputes between the parties created a divide anchored more in education than income.

This change coincided with evolving views about the value of scientific expertise. From the 1970s (when survey organizations first started to ask Americans about their confidence in science) through the 1990s, Republicans consistently expressed more confidence than Democrats did. Those differences reversed over time, as the basis for party identification shifted from size of government to race and culture. Our survey research shows that in 2020, 58 percent of Democrats believed the benefits of scientific research outweighed any harmful effects, compared to only 40 percent of Republicans. This makes sense; scientific advances over centuries have often run counter to traditional understandings of how the world should be ordered. We suspect the same impulse that fuels the Republican anti-elitist, anti-university rhetoric that is so common around election time is precisely what made it fertile ground for Republicans in the electorate to follow party leadership when it came to questioning the validity of scientific assessments and expert recommendations made during the pandemic. Put more directly, President Trump's skepticism about the seriousness of COVID-19 tapped into something that already existed among his co-partisans.

Consensus, then Dissensus in Pandemic Perceptions

It is hard to remember now, several years past the beginning of the pandemic, but the political environment when the crisis first took hold was much different from how it was in the months and years that followed. Revisiting that time suggests that the fracturing of the country and the resulting carnage the US experienced was not inevitable. President Trump reluctantly championed the national lockdown in March 2020, only later failing to embrace the steps that scientists and public health professionals recommended. In fact, both Republican and Democratic leaders were initially sober about the dangers posed by COVID-19. Given the stakes for the economy, neither side was enthusiastic about instituting lockdowns, shutting non-essential businesses, or upending their constituents' lives. However, the grisly outcomes that had occurred first in China, then in Italy, and next in New York City caused leaders to react forcefully. Reflecting the bipartisanship of the moment, Congress quickly passed—and President Trump signed—a massive aid package (the CARES Act) to help soon-to-be struggling businesses and citizens.

By the time infections had begun to spread widely across the country, however, the moment of elite cooperation had passed. President Trump was a central reason why. Whether he was trying to quell panic or truly believed his rhetoric, his public statements were often at odds with reality and aimed at downplaying risk. During the shutdown in March, he expressed his belief that suicide deaths “definitely would be far greater in numbers than the numbers that we are talking about” relative to COVID-19 (Cathey 2020). In May, he said COVID-19 would “go away without a vaccine” and, in June, he claimed the pandemic was “fading away” (Wingrove

2020). On Independence Day, he pronounced 99 percent of cases “totally harmless” (Rabin and Cameron 2020).

The president has the country’s biggest megaphone, but Trump was not alone among Republican office holders in minimizing the threat. Adolph et al. (2021) found that Republican governors were several times less likely than Democratic governors to impose policies like mask mandate, and, even when they did, the mitigation efforts tended to come a month later on average than in Democratic-run states. Instead, Republican governors seemed to race each other to reopen their states. In mid-April, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said he was “working on very aggressive strategies to make sure Texas was first at getting back to work” (CBS News Texas 2020). Governor Brian Kemp of Georgia was even more aggressive than Trump himself in reopening his state’s economy in the last week of April (Higgins-Dunn and Feuer 2020). Not all Republican governors were similarly invested in “getting back to normal;” two – Charlie Baker of Massachusetts and Larry Hogan of Maryland – approached mitigation more like Democratic governors did. It is noteworthy that their states generally tend to vote for Democrats.

With Democratic officeholders at least publicly taking the pandemic seriously throughout this same period, Americans’ information environments began to diverge. This is important, especially in the present polarized environment, because citizens tend to seek out news and information that aligns with their political predispositions. As evidence that this process was at work during the COVID-19 crisis, citizens who paid more attention to politics—and were thus best-positioned to reflect cues from party leaders—were more divided when it came to attitudes toward COVID-19 than those who paid less attention (Kam and Sides 2020).

To evaluate the evolution of COVID-19 attitudes and behaviors over time, we contracted with Qualtrics in April 2020 to collect survey data of American adults, with the sample

calibrated to meet Census benchmarks on race, gender, education level, and income. We fielded additional survey waves – each featuring more than 2000 respondents -- throughout the following two years. Our data show a consistent pattern: Early waves reveal general agreement in the mass public—similar to that observed among elites. But as spring turned to summer in 2020, Republicans’ opinions and health behaviors began to reflect their party elites’ message that public health professionals had overblown the pandemic’s seriousness. The result was sharp disagreement about how the government should address the pandemic, how to protect oneself from illness, and even whether COVID-19 represented a legitimate health threat.

Consider, for example, partisans’ attitudes toward mitigation measures, displayed over five waves in Figure 1. Overwhelming majorities endorsed a range of extraordinary restrictions that government might need to impose to limit viral spread. In April 2020, 96 percent of Democrats and 88 percent of Republicans endorsed stay-at-home orders, indicating that regardless of partisanship, Americans supported one of the greatest (and most invasive) tools that government could use to decrease infections. By March 2021, that percentage had dropped to 42 percent among Republicans, with the difference between Democrats and Republicans increasing from 9 to 40 percentage points. The same basic pattern of change emerged for support for business closures and mask mandates, which we also display in Figure 1. Support for mask mandates is particularly noteworthy: Republicans’ endorsement of such restrictions decreased from 80 percent in April 2020 to 66 percent in March 2021, while Democrats’ support for them actually increased slightly over the same timeframe, from 92 to 94 percent.

[Figure 1 here]

These sharp party-line differences and declines in support for pandemic mitigation policies among Republicans paint a stark picture of the politicized response to COVID-19. It is important to note, however, that Republicans did not respond to party cues as a monolithic bloc; there were important variations in their proclivity to downplay the pandemic. Age was likely one factor that led some Republicans to support mitigation measures they otherwise would have been reluctant to embrace. COVID-19 tended to hold the most severe consequences for the elderly. This heightened risk encouraged Americans over the age of 65 to wear face coverings at higher rates than younger Americans, even in rural areas (Haischer et al. 2020), which skew heavily Republican.

Anxiety also had a particularly dramatic effect. Fear of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19 led Americans of all partisan colors—but especially Republicans—to seek out new information about the pandemic, hold more accurate information about COVID-19, and support policies to mitigate its impact (Mehlhaff et al. forthcoming). In fact, Republicans who reported being “very concerned” about COVID-19 looked nearly identical to Democrats in their support for mitigation policies, a position they could only take by resisting the influence of party cues.

In seven waves, we asked respondents to report how concerned they were about becoming seriously ill from COVID-19. Figure 2 plots the percentage of Democrats and Republicans in each wave attesting that they were “somewhat” or “very concerned” about becoming seriously ill. Here, too, the distance between parties increased over time. In April 2020, about 63 percent of Republicans expressed being fearful of an illness brought on by COVID-19, only 16 percentage points less than Democrats. Because the virus had not yet spread to red states or the redder parts of blue states, the difference had some basis in fact. However, as the pandemic *worsened* and the virus spread into red states and red areas within blue states,

Republicans actually expressed *less* concern about getting seriously ill. Approximately one year later, in March 2022, the gap between parties had increased to 28 percentage points.

In general, both Democrats' and Republicans' fear of becoming seriously ill declined over the course of our panel survey, but one exception is notable. Both parties saw a brief spike in concern in October 2020. In fact, this wave represents the highest degree of concern among Democrats, higher even than at the beginning of the pandemic in April, when uncertainty and anxiety were especially high. We can rule out increased caseloads as the cause of this temporary increase in fear; records from the CDC show that around 7,000 people died from COVID-19 on a weekly basis in October. This is a massive loss of life, to be sure. But it is dwarfed by the 17,000 weekly deaths seen in April. If fear of COVID-19 was exclusively a function of pandemic severity, partisans' reported fear in October would be much lower. Instead, we attribute this spike in anxiety to the combination of two different factors. First, the presidential election campaign reached a fever pitch in the same month—an election in which COVID-19 was the major issue. Although our data cannot speak directly to this hypothesis, it is noteworthy that the election season and fear of COVID-19 appear to track each other closely. Second, President Trump tested positive for COVID-19 and fell ill at the beginning of October. That likely acted as a sign of alarm, even to Republicans who might not otherwise have taken the risk of illness seriously.

[Figure 2 here]

One reason Republicans expressed less concern about getting seriously ill is that they increasingly evaluated the virus as more like a flu than as a potentially deadly disease. We asked respondents to assess, on a ten-point scale, the degree to which they thought people suffered as a result of catching COVID-19. Figure 3 depicts the percentage of Republicans and Democrats

responding that they thought COVID-19 did not represent a serious threat (response options 1 through 4), was more “like a bad flu” (5 through 7), or portended “serious illness, with risk of death” (8 through 10). A noticeable partisan gap is already visible in the June 2020 wave. In this survey, 61 percent of Democrats perceived COVID-19 as causing a risk of death, about twenty percentage points greater than Republicans. By October of that same year, the proportion of Democrats perceiving COVID-19 as life-threatening had risen to 71 percent, whereas the proportion of Republicans with that perception had decreased to 36 percent, a gap of 35 percentage points. It is remarkable that, after more than 200,000 Americans had died, the percentage of Republicans who viewed COVID-19 as potentially life-threatening actually *fell* by five points. At the other end of the scale, a vanishingly small subset of Democrats believed that COVID-19 was “not serious”—only three percent in October. Meanwhile, five times as many Republicans—fifteen percent—expressed this belief.

[Figure 3 here]

One reasonable explanation for these diverging patterns in policy support, anxiety, and severity perceptions is that Republicans and Democrats simply experienced different pandemics. Republicans tend to live in lower-density, more rural areas, while Democrats are more likely to live in high-density cities, where an airborne virus is more likely to spread unabated. Our data suggest, however, that this explanation holds little water. In fact, Democrats and Republicans were strikingly similar in their pandemic experiences. We began asking our respondents in April 2020 whether they personally knew someone who had been infected by COVID-19 in the past month and continued to do so throughout the year. The party differences were 2, 6, 6, and 3 points, respectively, across the four surveys. While the divide between Republicans’ and Democrats’ *attitudes* about the pandemic widened, their *experiences* remained quite similar.

Taking (In)Action to Prevent Infections

As Republicans adopted partisan cues and came to see COVID-19 as less threatening, their personal behavior began to reflect it. In June and October 2020, we asked Americans the degree to which they were engaging in certain activities, focusing on things that might increase the chances of contracting and transmitting COVID-19. Some of the activities were essential tasks, such as going to the grocery store and going to work. Others involved more personal choices, such as going to a restaurant or shopping in a mall. Figure 4 reveals that, in June, Democrats were about ten percentage points more likely than Republicans to say they were doing these things “a lot less” than they were before the pandemic.

[Figure 4 here]

By October, despite exploding infection rates, partisan differences more than doubled when it came to personal choices like avoiding restaurants and shopping malls. Both Democrats and Republicans became wearier of staying home. Only about sixty percent of Democrats reported they were now going to restaurants and shopping malls “a lot less” than before the pandemic; those percentages had been almost fifteen percentage points higher in June. However, the drop among Republicans was even more pronounced. For example, only forty percent of Republicans reported going to restaurants “a lot less” in October. Accordingly, the difference between parties more than doubled in four months, largely due to Republicans returning to their pre-pandemic routines.

Not only did Republicans start to return to their normal lives more than Democrats did, but their willingness to take actions to fight COVID-19 also declined sharply. In six waves extending from April 2020 to August 2021, we asked respondents to consider three health-

related behaviors that could decrease the transmission of illness, especially COVID-19: staying six feet away from other people, wearing a mask when indoors in public, and washing one's hands frequently. Figure 5 displays the percentage of Republicans and Democrats in each wave reporting that they engaged in these behaviors "very often" over the previous two weeks. Similar to the results presented in Figures 1 through 3, partisans differed little in their behaviors in the early days of the pandemic; April 2020 estimates for all three behaviors are never more than ten percentage points apart. Democrats always engaged in mitigation behaviors more than Republicans did, but this difference was not especially large at first.

[Figure 5 here]

By late spring, differences between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate began to develop. Similar again to results in previous analyses, growing partisan differences were largely attributable to especially steep decreases in mitigation actions among Republicans. When the pandemic started, Democrats stated that they engaged in social distancing at a rate of eighty percent; Republicans were just behind at 73 percent. By August 2021, the percentage of Democrats practicing social distancing had decreased only nine points, to 71 percent, but the percentage of Republicans doing so had taken a sharp nosedive to 39 percent. The gap between the parties widened from seven to 32 percent over that period, almost entirely due to changes in Republicans' willingness to stay six feet apart. The data on mask-wearing tells a similar story, with the gap between parties doubling from ten to twenty points. The increase was hardly due to movement on the Democratic side. In fact, Democrats wore masks at a higher rate in August 2021—almost a year and a half into the pandemic—than they did at the outset.

These differing levels of commitment to mitigation strategies likely opened the door to a deepening of the crisis. Figure 6A illustrates the relationship that developed between the

percentage of people in a state who voted for President Trump in the 2016 election and the percentage of people wearing a mask in a state (Delphi Research Group 2023). The relationship is incredibly strong, with a correlation of -0.85. More than ninety percent of people wore masks in dark blue states like Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Maryland. In contrast, fewer than 75 percent wore them in dark red states like Wyoming, North Dakota, and Idaho. Mask-wearing in swing states like North Carolina, Georgia, and Pennsylvania clusters around 85 percent.

[Figure 6 here]

Because fewer masks produce more viral spread, America's bifurcated response also reveals itself in the number of confirmed cases at the state level. States that voted more heavily for Trump not only masked less, but they also tended to lead the nation in infections after June 1, a date we chose because states struggled to identify best practices before then. As Figure 6B shows, the relationship is again strong, with a correlation of 0.65. Blue states as regionally diverse as Vermont, Maryland, and Washington had fewer than 5,000 infections per 100,000 residents. Regionally diverse red states, such as the Dakotas, Tennessee and Utah all had more than 8,000 infections per 100,000.

This analysis is purely correlational, and caseloads and mask-wearing habits might be explained in part by a wide variety of factors. One such factor might simply be the average age of a state's residents. Older Americans were more likely to contract COVID-19 and develop serious illness as a result, which could partially account for the higher caseloads in Republican-leaning states, which also tend to have older residents. In addition, as we previously explained, the anti-mitigation rhetoric of many Republican governors likely influenced the attitudes and behaviors of co-partisans in their respective states. Moreover, Republican governors' tendency to open their states sooner and spurn mask mandates throughout the pandemic likely affected the

health of their states' residents. Caseloads and mask-wearing are themselves related; lower masking rates produce higher caseloads. Even so, it is striking that each variable tracks closely with the relative division of Republican and Democratic votes. Elite messaging is likely to have played a large, if not singular, role.

A Shot in the Partisan Arm

By the time infections were spreading largely unchecked in the United States, it became clear that developing a safe, reliable vaccine was likely the only feasible means to bring an end to the pandemic. Thanks to advances in mRNA technology and a scientific community working overtime for months on end, the United States had such a vaccine a mere nine months after the first lockdowns were instituted—a record development timeline. The Food and Drug Administration issued the first emergency use authorization for a COVID-19 vaccine in December 2020, and the general public gradually began to get vaccinated over the ensuing months.

At first, it seemed as if Americans might be enthusiastic about vaccination. In June 2020, still early in the pandemic and months before a vaccine was developed, 63 percent of Democrats and 48 percent of Republicans stated that they believed others should get vaccinated if a vaccine was successfully developed. Democrats were more supportive of vaccination, but with about half of Republicans similarly expressing support, these might have been interpreted as encouraging numbers at the time. At the height of election season that same year, however, both partisan groups were less supportive of vaccination than they had been over the summer. In October, 55 percent of Democrats and only 37 percent of Republicans believed others should get vaccinated if a vaccine was developed.

This decrease in support across the board might reflect the changing information environment. In March, the idea of a vaccine was still rather abstract. Once multiple vaccines began final clinical trials later in the year, concerns about potential side effects and the speed at which the vaccine was developed were starting to become more prominent. However, the decrease in support for vaccination likely also reflects the rhetoric unleashed by both presidential candidates throughout the campaign, in which COVID-19 was the most salient issue.

Absent a blanket legal mandate, public messaging was perhaps the most valuable tool the federal government could use to encourage Americans to get vaccinated. In fact, Larsen et al. (2023) use a field experiment to show that pro-vaccine messaging from President Trump himself increased vaccine uptake in Trump-voting counties. Though his delivery was not always the most convincing or reassuring, President Trump actually maintained a supportive stance toward vaccination, calling the vaccines “one of the greatest achievements of mankind” and insisting that “if you take the vaccine, you’re protected” (Finn 2021). At the same time, however, he was loathe to impose any sort of vaccine mandate during his final months in office, or to support it after President Biden’s inauguration, urging Americans to “forget about the mandates; people have to have their freedom” (Oppenheim 2021).

Whether because or in spite of Trump’s rhetoric, the partisan gap in vaccine uptake was substantial. Democrat-leaning counties consistently had higher vaccination rates than Republican-leaning ones, and this gap widened over time (Ye 2023). Once individuals completed their initial vaccine series, they were equally likely to get a booster shot, regardless of their county’s partisan lean (Kates, Tolbert, and Orgera 2021). Nevertheless, the gap in baseline vaccine uptake likely had devastating effects on health outcomes. Data beginning in May 2021, the month in which vaccines became widely available, show counties that voted for Trump in

2020 had a death rate 2.73 times that of counties that voted for Biden. This disparity in death rates increases as counties' Trump vote share increases and persists even after controlling for age (Wood and Brumfiel 2021).

To whom did Americans look when seeking advice on vaccination? Could the source of partisans' information explain the difference in vaccination rates? We presented respondents with a series of entities—President Trump, President Biden, Anthony Fauci, their own doctor, and the scientific community in general—and asked how much confidence they had in each entity's vaccine-related advice. Figure 7 displays the percentage of Democrats and Republicans feeling “a great deal” of confidence in advice from each entity. We first asked this question in March 2021, just as vaccines were starting to become available to the general public, and again in August 2021, when anyone who wanted a vaccine could easily get one. Notably, responses do not differ much across the two waves.

[Figure 7 here]

Republicans put the most stock in advice from two sources: former President Trump and their own doctor. 44 percent of Republicans expressed “a great deal” of trust in President Trump's vaccine-related advice, and about the same proportion said they trusted their own doctor. Democrats trusted their own doctor at rates about fifteen percentage points higher than Republicans, about the same rate at which they trusted President Biden. They expressed even more trust in Anthony Fauci, a key member of the White House COVID-19 task forces under both Presidents Trump and Biden. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Republicans expressed little trust in these individuals, with their support never surpassing twenty percent. Similarly, a majority of Democrats expressed trust in the scientific community in general, while Republicans' support lagged behind. This may reflect more fundamental disagreements than merely COVID-19

messaging. Our data show that 58 percent of Democrats believe the benefits of scientific research have outweighed its harmful effects, while only forty percent—a minority—of Republicans believe the same. 29 percent of Republicans also believe “we depend too much on science and not enough on faith,” again revealing a preference for using traditional religious tenets to guide society rather than the views of scientific experts.

We also asked our respondents a series of questions about how they perceive the efficacy of the vaccines, regardless of whether they got vaccinated themselves. Figure 8 shows how Republicans and Democrats answered two of these questions in March 2022. Even a year after vaccines became available, sixteen percent of Republicans still believed the vaccines were more dangerous than COVID-19 itself. Perhaps more astonishing, 37 percent of Republicans interpreted the continued infection of vaccinated Americans as evidence that vaccines were ineffective, rather than as evidence that vaccines can make illness less severe. Only 17 percent of Democrats agreed with this statement, representing a gap of twenty percentage points between parties.

[Figure 8 here]

To add insult to injury, evidence is emerging to suggest that Republican hesitancy surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines may be spilling over into general beliefs about vaccination. Take the seasonal flu vaccine, for example. Two sets of survey data gathered in late 2021 suggest an enormous partisan gap in uptake has developed since the pandemic began (see Enten 2021). Data collected by IPSOS revealed that 68 percent of Democrats said they had either received the flu vaccine or were very likely to get it, compared with just 44 percent of Republicans. A poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation showed the same pattern: 65 percent of Democrats but only 40 percent of Republicans said they had already gotten or would definitely get a flu shot. These

numbers represent a staggering departure from data gathered before the pandemic took hold in the US. In February 2020, an Associated Press-NORC survey found only a four-point difference in flu vaccine uptake (58 to 54 percent). In 2016, the difference was only two points, according to a Princeton Survey Research Associates poll (Enten 2021).

A partisan gap is also widening as it relates childhood vaccines. In surveys conducted in 2016 and 2019, Pew Research Center found only modest differences between Republicans and Democrats in their support for children being required to receive the MMR vaccines to attend public school. Whereas Republican support was 79 percent in the two pre-pandemic surveys, it plummeted to 57 percent in a March 2023 survey that asked the exact same question. Democrats' support, in contrast, remained steady at 85 percent (Funk et al. 2023). Party-line differences also appear to be widening when it comes to reports of adverse vaccine effects. Motta (2023) finds a significant jump, starting in 2021, in parents reporting health concerns after having their children receive the MMR vaccines, but only in states that tend to vote Republican. There is no corresponding jump in reporting concerns in states that tend to vote Democratic. This development probably reflects the findings of a recent YouGov/Economist poll that finds fewer than half (47 percent) of Republicans believe that vaccinations in general are "very safe." By contrast, nearly 75 percent of Democrats believe vaccinations are safe (Frankovic 2021).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that recommendations from public health experts and life-saving vaccines from the pharmaceutical industry can only take a country so far. Information and expertise must flow from the scientific community to the mass public. Especially in the case of a global pandemic in which people must rely on how other people behave to remain safe, public

buy-in must be nearly universal. In the United States, at least, politics short-circuited that process. From the perspective of political science, this development was hardly surprising. A successful pandemic response would require public faith in media and science. Unfortunately, decades-long Republican efforts to win votes by running against these institutions has undermined faith in them. As a result, Republicans naturally turned to President Trump and Fox News for advice about the pandemic rather than Anthony Fauci and the majority of news media that broadcast information that would have provided better guidance.

The change in confidence in institutions over time is stark. According to the 1973 General Social Survey (GSS), Republicans actually expressed more confidence in the media than Democrats did. Indeed, only 13 percent of the former said they had “hardly any confidence” in the media. By 2018, that percentage had skyrocketed to 65 percent. In 1991, when the GSS asked about confidence in the scientific community, nearly half of Republicans (47%) and about a third of Democrats (32%) expressed “a great deal of confidence”. By 2018, Republican confidence had dropped to 39 percent while Democratic confidence surged to 50 percent (Hetherington and Ladd 2020). The pandemic only polarized assessments further. In the 2022 GSS, high confidence in the scientific community among Republicans fell to a mere 26 percent. It is tough to defeat a pandemic when huge swaths of a major political party have little faith in scientists—the group best positioned to inform best practices—and the media, the group best positioned to transmit those best practices to the masses.

Even with this troubling context in mind, our survey data collected over the course of the pandemic provide a major takeaway time and again: The partisan division over matters of public health, scientific integrity, and even ground truth was not inevitable. It was spurred in large part through deliberate public messaging undertaken by Republican political leaders—President

Trump in particular. In an environment of uncertainty, anxiety, and risk, partisans coped by looking to their preferred elites for guidance on what to believe, where to get information, and how to approach their daily lives. At the beginning of the pandemic, political elites worked together to pass legislation and communicate the seriousness of COVID-19. This unified messaging could have continued throughout the ensuing months and years. Instead, messaging diverged, and the mass public responded by becoming divided on attitudes toward mitigation policies and behaviors. It is a reminder that public health and individual well-being is not divorced from politics, that elections matter, and that responsible governance is as important as ever.

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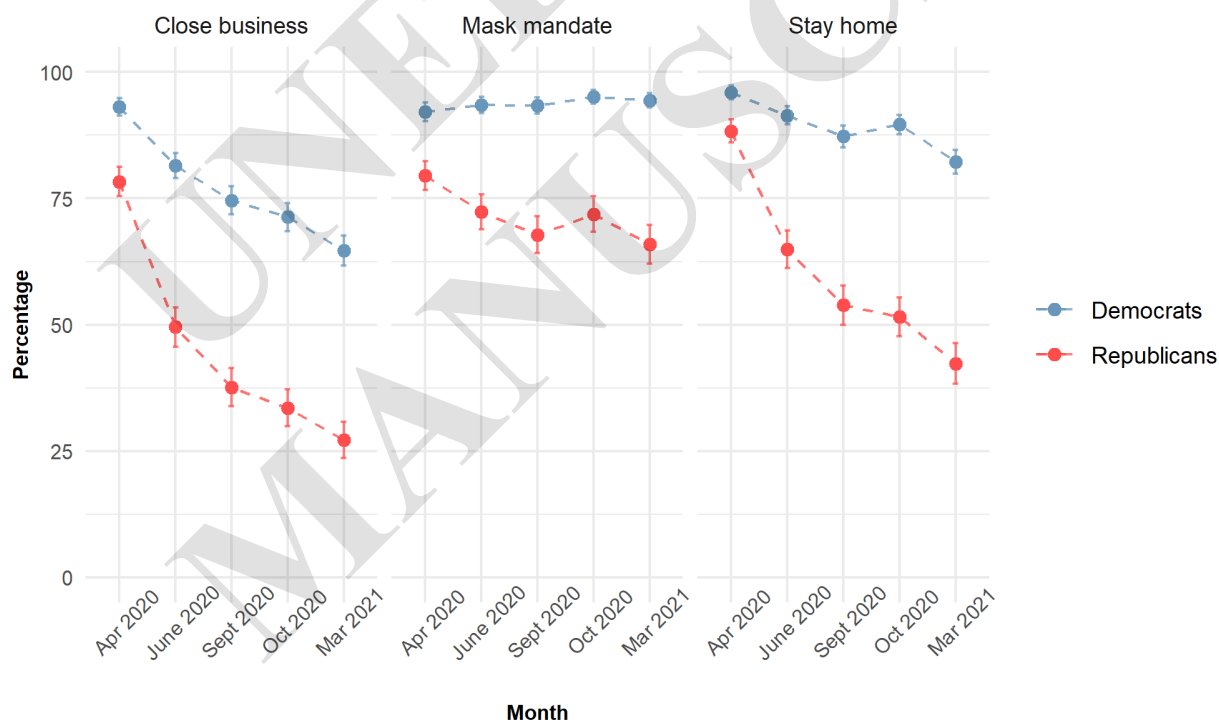
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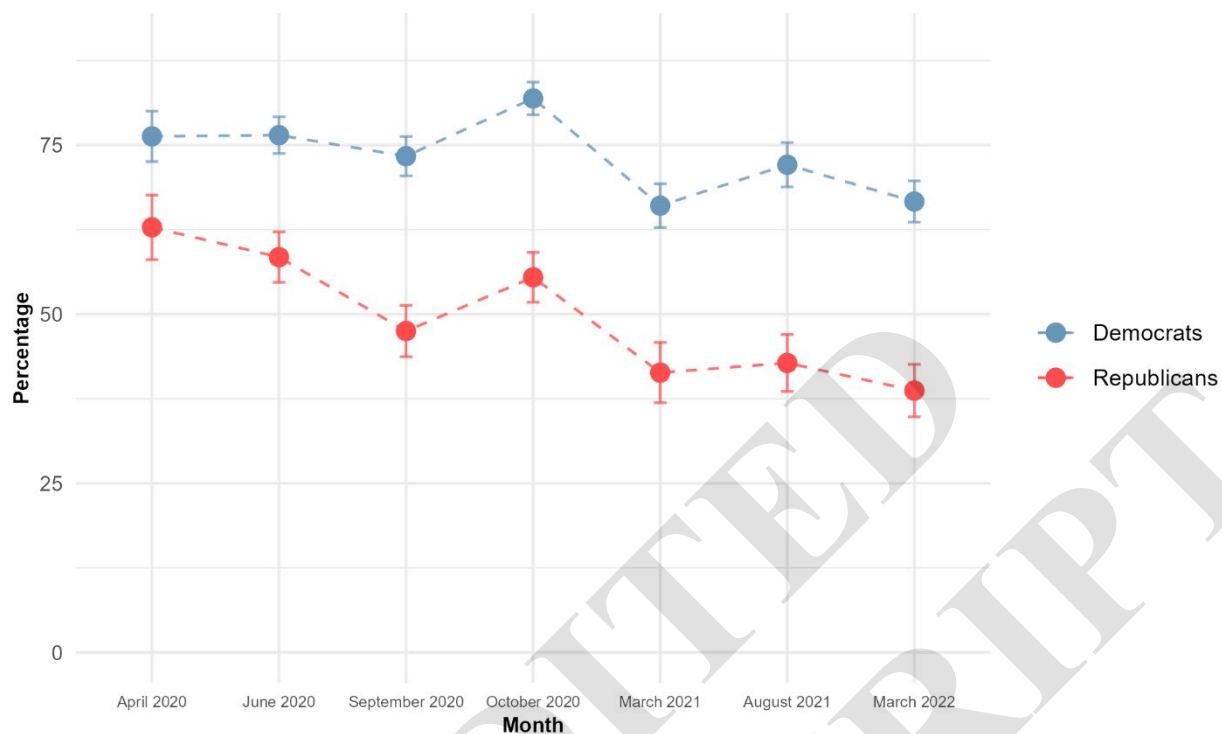
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Figure 1 Support for COVID-19 Mitigation Policies over Time.



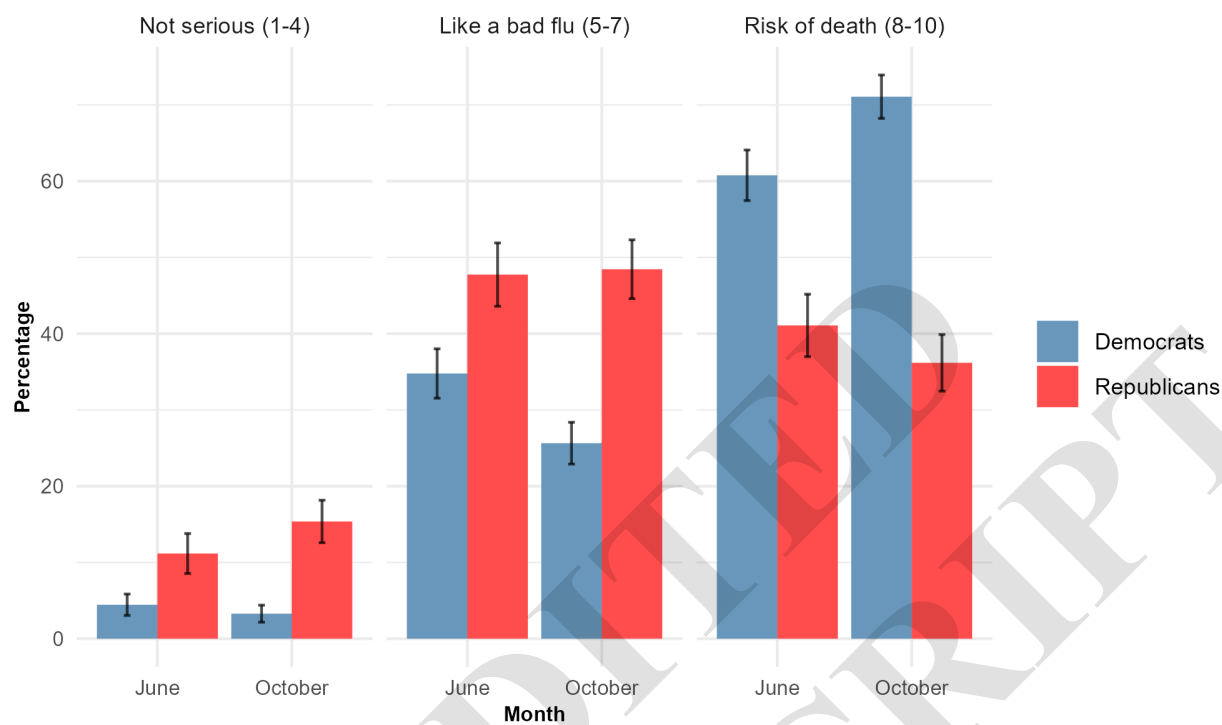
Note: Point estimates are percentages of Democrats and Republicans supporting pandemic mitigation policies. They do not include covariates. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2 Fear of Becoming Seriously Ill from COVID-19 over Time.



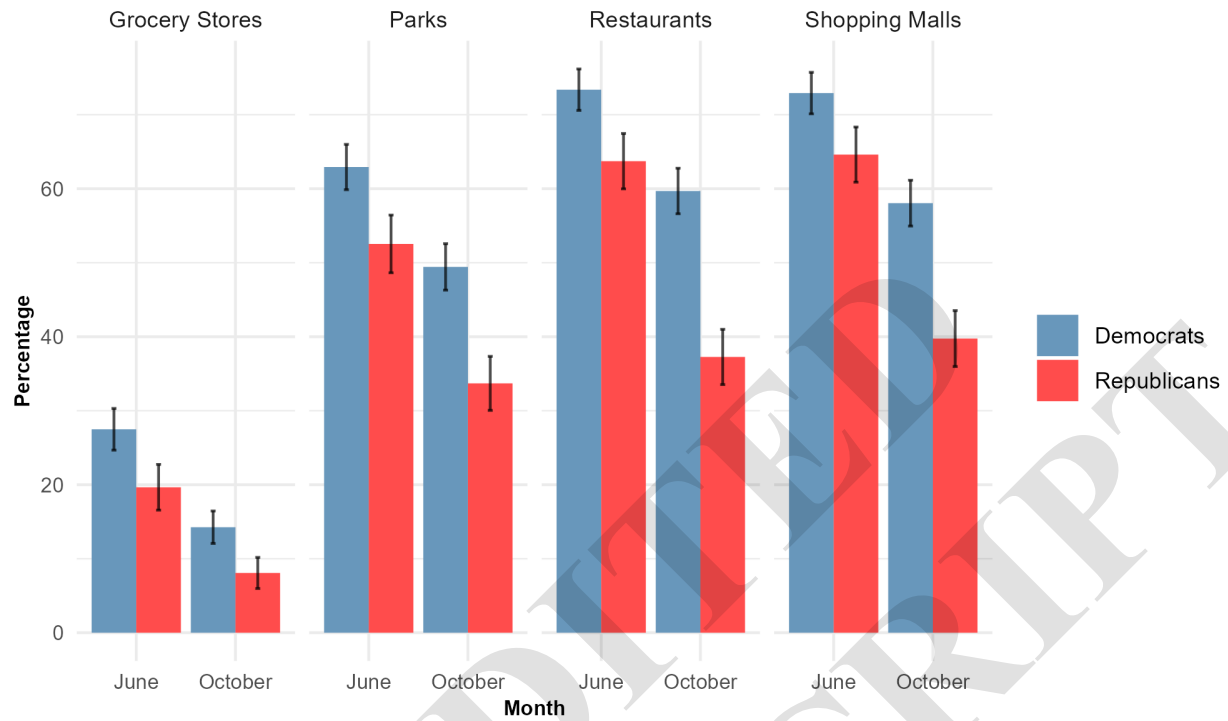
Note: Point estimates are percentages of Democrats and Republicans expressing fear of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19. They do not include covariates. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3 Partisan Beliefs about COVID-19 Illness Severity.



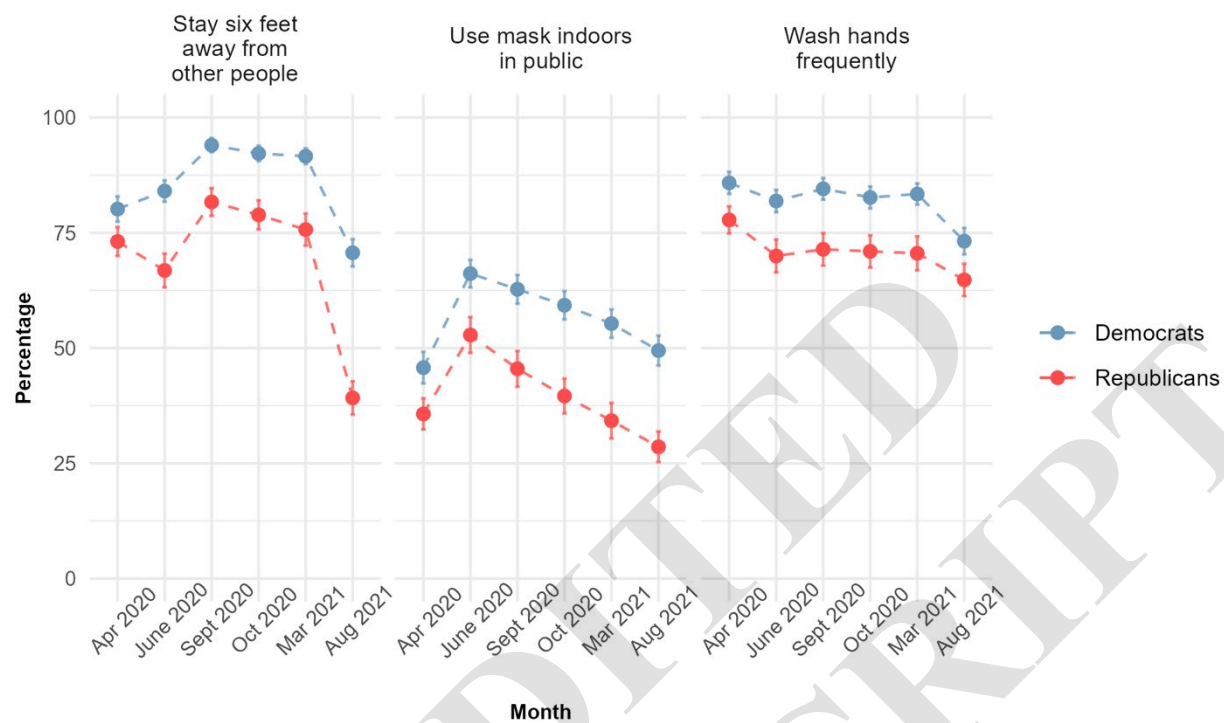
Note: Point estimates are percentages of Democrats and Republicans expressing beliefs about COVID-19 illness severity. They do not include covariates. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4 Decreases in Daily Activities Relative to Pre-Pandemic Period.



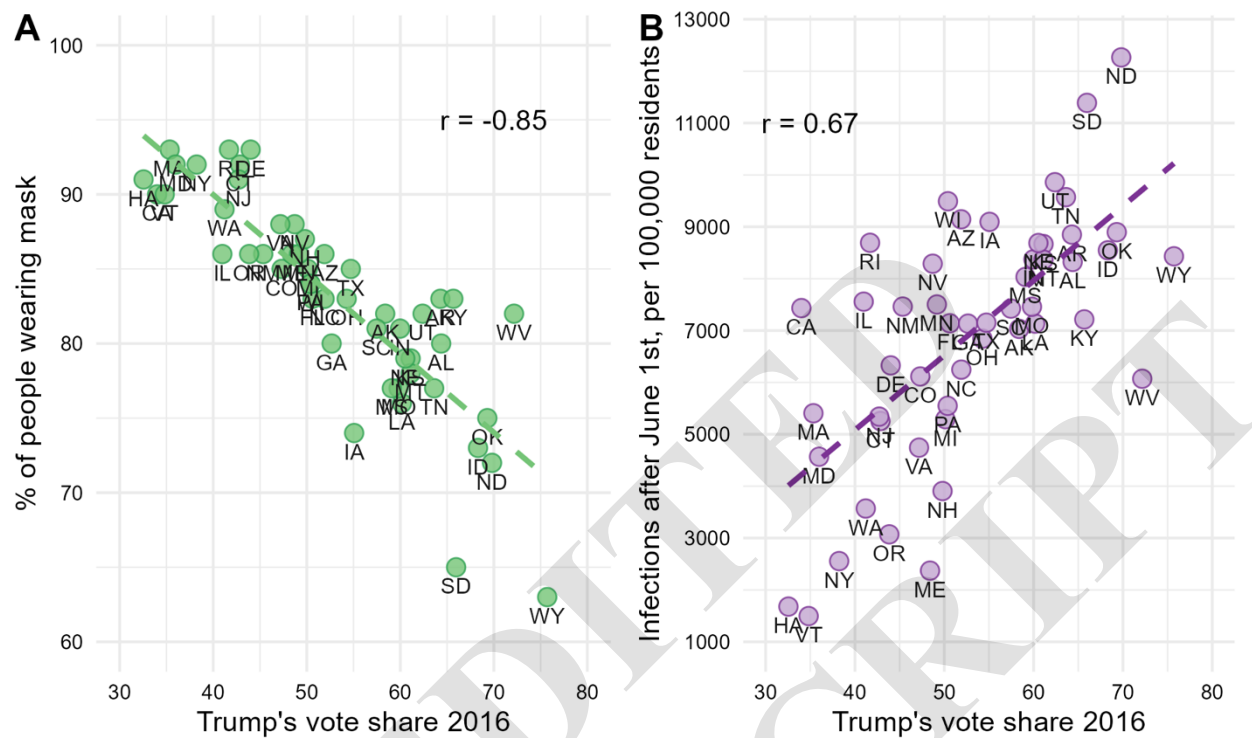
Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5 Percentage of Partisans Engaging in COVID-19 Mitigation Behaviors over Time.



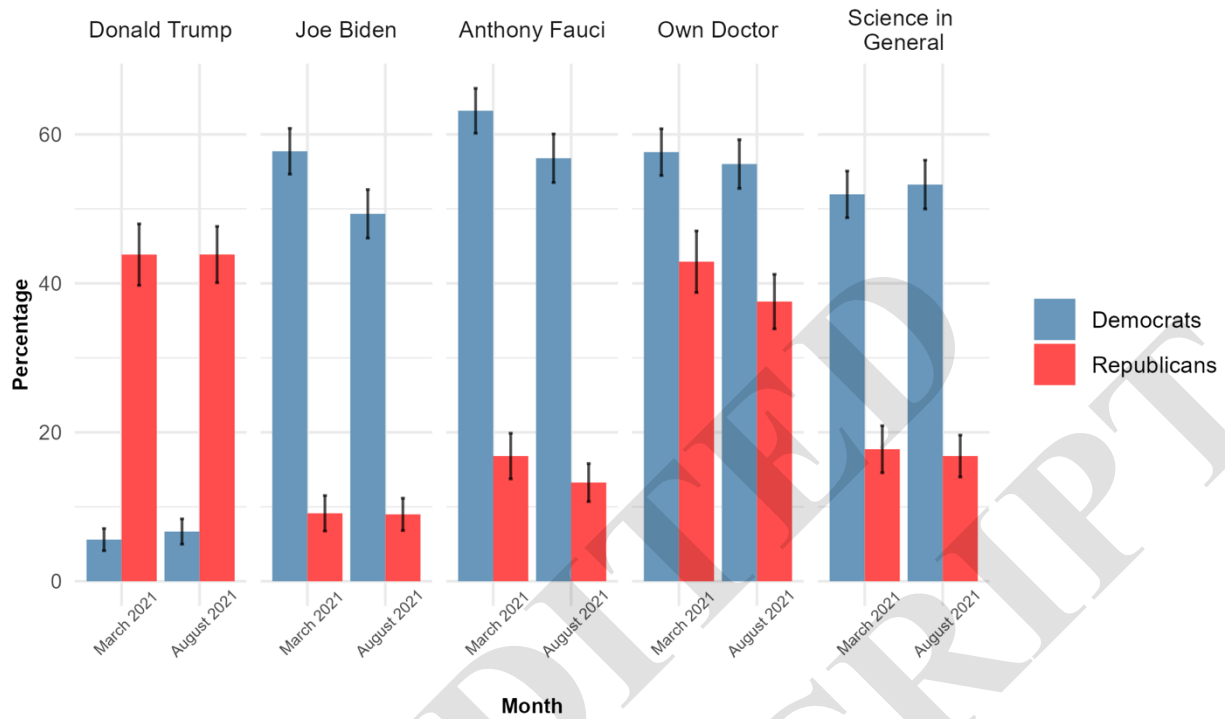
Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 6 State-Level Correlation of Trump Vote Share with Mask-Wearing and COVID-19 Infection Rate.



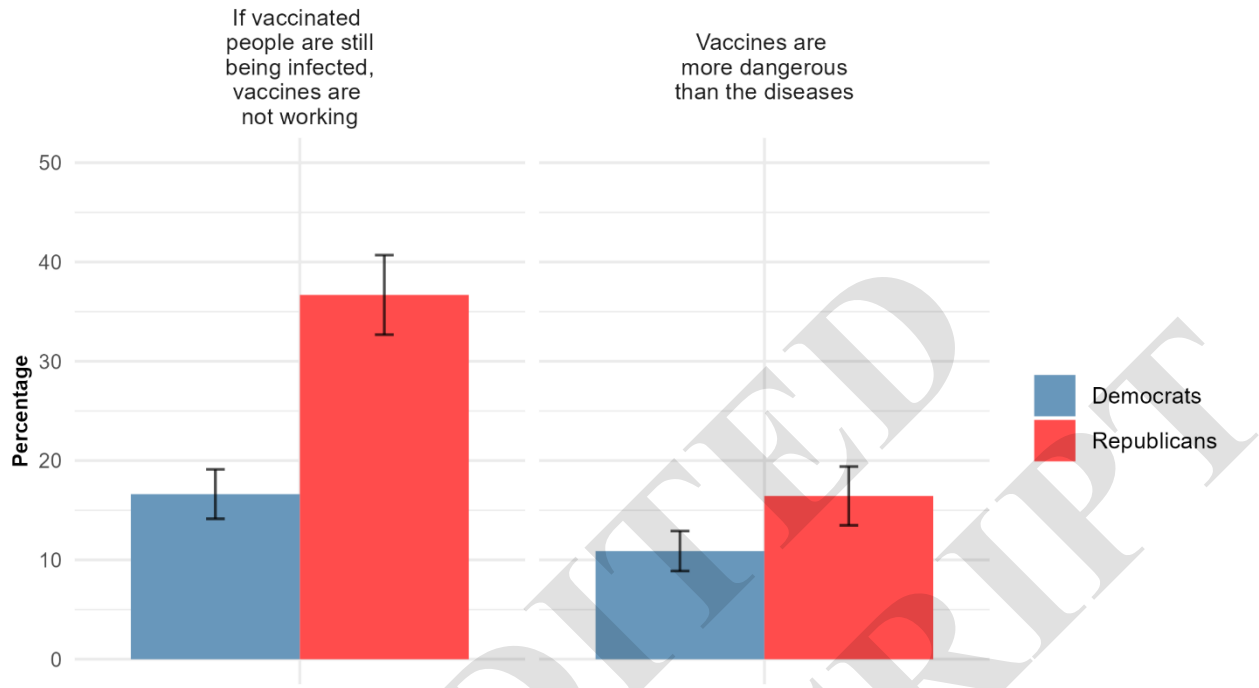
Note: Pearson correlation coefficient printed on each plot.

Figure 7 Percentage of Partisans Trusting Sources' Advice on COVID-19 Vaccination.



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 8 Beliefs about Vaccine Efficacy by Party.



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.