

Political Polarization Harms Public Health

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Political polarization poses considerable risks to individual and collective well-being.
- Both ideological polarization (“extremification” of policy positions and ideological orientations) and affective polarization (out-party hate) have increased over the past several decades with detrimental effects on public health.
- Political identities shaped health behaviors in the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study of Americans from 2020-2021, Trump support was linked to lower probabilities of engaging in recommended pandemic health behaviors, including social distancing and mask wearing.
- Community leaders, scientists, and government officials must regain and sustain trust to reduce the harms of political polarization on health.

Political polarization poses considerable risks to individual and collective well-being.¹ Polarization is a collective phenomenon when the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society become concentrated at opposing extremes. Further, ‘partisanship’ reflects deep-rooted social and/or political identities at the individual level. In the United States, one of the strongest predictors of COVID-19 vaccination rates during the pandemic was political partisanship, suggesting that beliefs and norms around the coronavirus were starkly different between Republicans and Democrats both among political leaders and in the public.¹

This partisan vaccination gap, in turn, was linked to an excess death rate among Republican voters that was 43% higher than among Democratic voters.² Thus, there is an urgent need to understand and reduce the health risks associated with political polarization. This brief summarizes our recently [published paper](#) that considers the impacts of political polarization on public health in the United States, highlights the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study on the health risks of polarization, and offers strategies to combat the health harms associated with polarization.

How Does Political Polarization Impact Public Health?

Polarization can impact health in several ways. At the policy level, polarization makes it difficult for political parties to reach necessary compromises or develop legislation on matters of public health. It might also lead to significant changes in healthcare rights

and policies such as recent rollbacks in abortion access when one party takes power. What's more, developing effective public policy becomes difficult when disagreements are based on partisan identification rather than evidence. For instance, after the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was passed, Republicans were less likely to enroll in the program than Democrats. These partisan divisions can lead to more sick days, higher healthcare costs, and increased death rates.

Compared with other high-income countries, the U.S. has experienced a longstanding disadvantage in health outcomes,^{3,4} as well as in health access and cost. One factor contributing to these disadvantages is that the U.S. delegates policymaking to individual states, which differ ideologically. As policy polarization at the state level has increased over time, so has the difference in lifespan and health across states.⁵ People who live in states with more liberal social policies, such as increased Medicaid coverage, higher taxes on cigarettes, more economic support (i.e., minimum wages), and more firearm regulations [live longer](#)⁶ than people in states that embrace more conservative policies. State preemption (where states limit the policies that county or city governments can enact) makes these differences across states even more stark, as it limits which policies local health officials can implement.⁷ Due to widening polarization, states have increasingly preempted local governments' ability to regulate food, implement paid sick days or minimum wages, or regulate firearms.

Polarized Individuals Have Worse Physical and Mental Health

At the individual level, polarization can undercut collective action because those with the strongest partisan identities might be reluctant to accept contradictory information about whether to be concerned about a health risk or take preventative measures, such as getting the flu vaccine or purchasing health insurance. As people move further from the political center in either direction, there is a deterioration in individual and public health, such as trust in medical expertise, participation in healthy behaviors and preventive practices (ranging from healthy diets to vaccination).⁸ As a result, individuals who are more ideologically extreme than their state's average voter have worse physical and mental health.^{8,9}

Additionally, polarization affects what health information people are willing to believe and shapes the relevant actions they are willing to take. Polarization narrows the types of news sources partisans trust and increases their hostility to a wider range of elites (including medical experts, scientists, and government officials) and media outlets. This can weaken democratic functioning and trust in institutions and foster the spread of misinformation.

Republican Counties Experienced Higher COVID-19 Infection and Death Rates than Democratic Counties

Political leaders can worsen public health outcomes by linking health behaviors to partisan identity rather than medical needs or expert advice. For example, once the Trump administration and Republican elites expressed skepticism regarding COVID-19 prevention behaviors, such as social distancing and vaccinations, partisan leaders and news sources amplified the skepticism, and polarized Republicans readily accepted it.¹ This led to widening gaps in social distancing and vaccination rates between Republicans and Democrats over the course of the pandemic,¹⁰ despite the increasing evidence about the health risks (see Figure 1).

Leaders who frequently spread anti-establishment rhetoric often undercut the role of experts. For instance, Donald Trump publicly disagreed with scientific experts during

the pandemic, an approach that was linked to polarized responses to public health for the entire pandemic. As a result of this partisan gap, Republican counties experienced higher subsequent COVID-19 infection and death rates than Democratic counties.^{2,11}

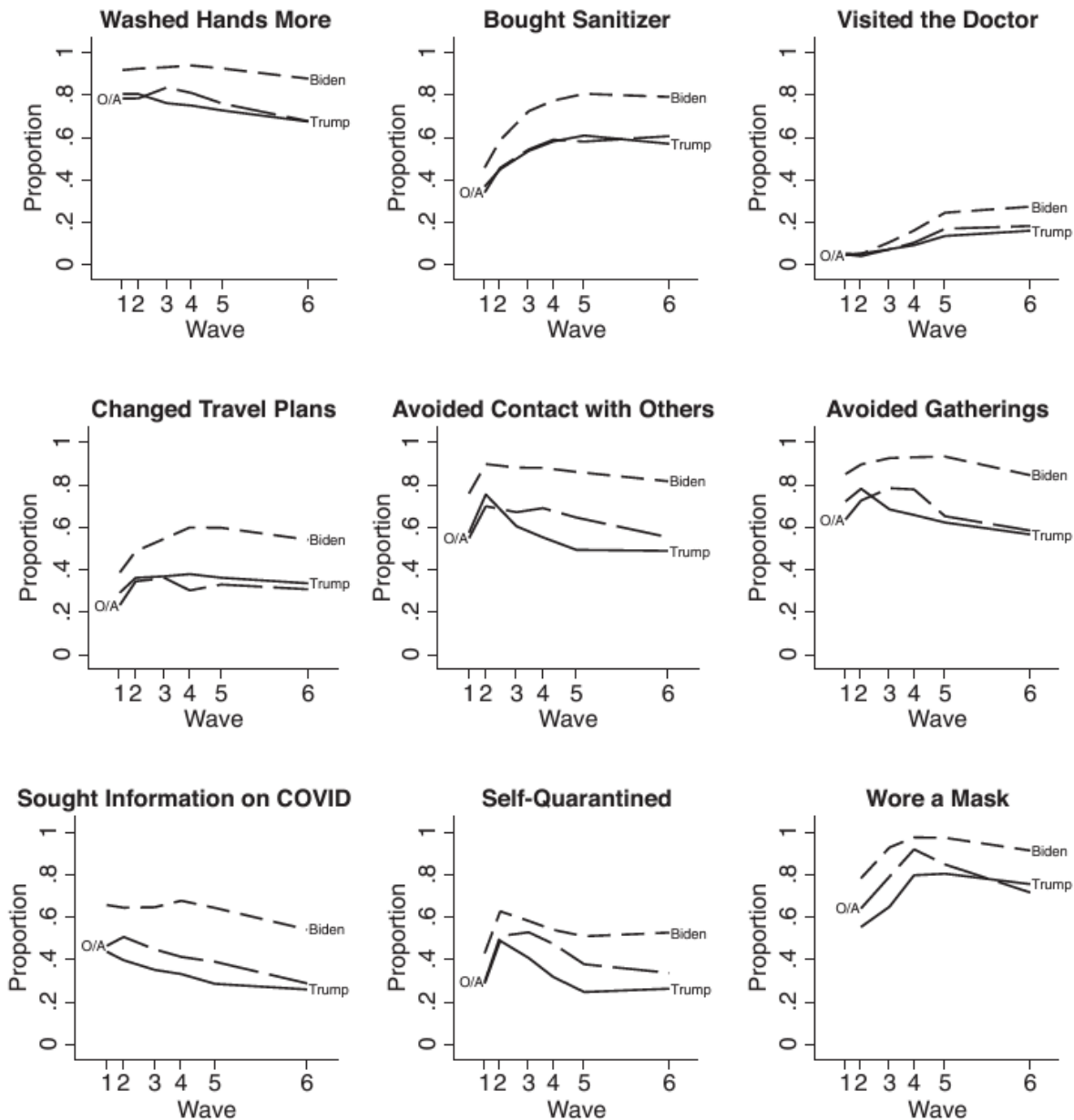


Figure 1: Trump Support and Health Behavior During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Data Source: Data are from a six-wave YouGov panel survey measuring the probability of engaging in a variety of health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic among supporters of Joe Biden or Donald Trump.

Note: This figure is reprinted with permission from Oxford University Press.¹³

How Can we Reduce the Health Harms of Political Polarization?

Public health leaders must regain and sustain trust, which is one of the most important factors linked to health compliance. High levels of public trust make it harder to foster suspicion, spread misinformation, and disengage from medical and public health institutions during health crises. To do so, leaders, scientists, and government officials

should emphasize unknowns and uncertainties, as well as set expectations for when more information will be available. Additionally, it is important to communicate the continually evolving nature of science and that recommendations may change over time. Trusted community members can also play a key role in disseminating health information, as research shows that vaccine-hesitant conservatives were more likely to get vaccinated if they heard positive messages from right-wing political leaders.¹²

Data and Methods

Data are from a six-wave panel survey measuring the probability of engaging in a variety of health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic among supporters of Joe Biden or Donald Trump from the 2020 election (wave 1, March 2020; wave 2, April 2020; wave 3, June 2020; wave 4, August 2020; wave 5, October 2020; wave 6, March 2021) and among respondents who supported another candidate or no candidate (O/A), and show that Trump support was linked to a lower probability of healthy behaviors.

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