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Resilience of the Research Enterprise During the Covid-19 Crisis

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The Roots of Partisan Differences in Response to COVID-19

James N. Druckman

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As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the U.S., surveys show Americans split along partisan lines. Democrats express more concern about the disease, and advocate stricter policies to contain it. Republicans worry more about the economic fallout and advocate for more for re-openings of businesses. Such seemingly insurmountable partisan divisions raise questions about America's ability to handle an issue that requires a unified and collective response from all citizens. Yet, the source of these partisan gaps remains unclear. On the one hand, they could reflect different values, such that Republicans place more weight on economic concerns while Democrats worry more about public health. If so, these divisions are firmly rooted in policy preferences. Alternatively, the differences could reflect a more group-based divide. Elite partisan conflict over how best to handle the pandemic might lead partisans to adopt different opinions based on their in-group partisan identities and a desire to be distinct from the (disliked) opposing party. This would suggest that it is neither ideology nor values, but rather something rooted in *affective polarization*—partisans' distrust and dislike of those from the other party—that guides Americans views on this important crisis.

Understanding the source of this partisan divide is essential if we are to successfully implement policies and communication strategies to address the pandemic. If partisan differences reflect substantive concerns, appeals to policy compromise would be effective. However, if the differences stem from a commitment to group identities—e.g., affective polarization—other strategies will be needed, such as correcting misperceptions about the other side or appealing to larger superordinate identities.

In this presentation, I draw on two data sources to examine the roots of partisan differences in response to COVID-19. The first is a weekly panel dataset based on a large sample of Americans. With these data, we show the evolution of partisan differences over the course of the pandemic thus far. The data show how partisan differences have grown, particularly among extreme partisans. They also reveal

partisan differences when it comes to the consequences of COVID-19 including mental health and perceptions of risk, as well as attitudes about political response including support for vote by mail.

The second data source offers a unique opportunity to unravel the source of partisan division. These data measured affective polarization (i.e., hostility towards the other party) prior to the emergence of COVID-19. That allows for clear causal identification of the impact of affective polarization (since it cannot be the product of COVID-19 debates). The data show a notable effect of affective polarization when it comes to COVID-19 behaviors (e.g., social distancing) and policy support. However, those differences decrease in areas most affected by the pandemic. Where COVID-19 has had more severe effects, partisan animosity has less of an effect in responses. This suggests that extreme threat tempers emotional partisan response.

I discuss the implications of these findings for communication strategies with regard to COVID-19 as well as for what we might expect in terms of partisan divides in the future. I also describe our plans for each of the aforementioned data collection efforts.

Understanding and Addressing Disinformation and Misinformation

Claire Wardle

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For the past three years, the potential impact of political *dis*information on Facebook has been front and center in terms of public debate. As a result, Facebook invested in a partnership with fact-checkers around the world, strengthened their policies and influence operations teams, and around elections now systematically create 'war-rooms' to coordinate responses about deliberate attempts to manipulate election outcomes.

People working globally however, have been trying make clear that while potential election interference is a concern, a greater problem globally is *mis*information around health and science, particularly on closed messaging apps like WhatsApp. This might be rumors about the safety of food, false claims about cancer cures, or problematic advice about how to protect yourself from different diseases, for example HIV.

As COVID-19 becomes the subject of conversation for citizens globally, it's a moment to reflect on the lack of preparation around the impact of health misinformation online, as well as the lack of engaging, shareable quality information. This isn't just about debunking the falsehoods, it's about ensuring everyone knows where to access quality information.

A recent study, based on nationally representative surveys of nearly 2,500 U.S. adults, found that up to 20% of respondents were at least somewhat misinformed about vaccines. The authors found that "people who received their information from traditional media were less likely to endorse common anti-vaccination claims." (Stekula et al., 2020).

But those who want to push false information about vaccines are incredibly skilled at creating emotional, visually engaging simple posts and videos. Health authorities are incredibly skilled at creating 87 page pdf documents with a large image of a dripping needle on the cover. The playing field is asymmetrical.

And now we see the same playing out with COVID-19. Government and Health authorities are not as skilled communicating in this new era of information disorder. While everyone is trying their best, we've seen poor quality videos with slow pacing, poor lighting and off-putting tones. We've seen posters and instagram posts that fail to follow any of the best practices for debunking information, whereby the falsehood is bigger and more prominent than the facts.

Right now, we need a coalition of the best health professionals, with the best communication professionals. We need the best Netflix producers, Snap and Tiktok creators, and designers, working with psychologists. We need community organizers, faith leaders and diaspora media outlets to ensure hard to reach communities. We need newsrooms working together, not in competition for clicks about the most recent updates on the death toll.

In this talk, Wardle will outline the major trends in Coronavirus-related misinformation, examine the danger of online data voids and will provide advice for scientists and public health officials on best practices for communicating in a polarized and weaponized information environment.