

Study: Political polarization doesn't dominate people's perceptions of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been perceived in the national media as a largely partisan issue in the United States, with Democrats being portrayed as more concerned about the severity of the pandemic than Republicans. However, a new study by a University of Missouri

researcher and colleagues suggests that while these political tendencies are still present on a local level, partisan beliefs do not seem to overshadow how people perceive the severity of the pandemic in their own communities.

The study, published in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, was based on the analysis of survey responses from 1,000 participants who took the Cooperative Election Study (CES) in 2020.

Jake Haselswerdt, an associate professor of political science in the Truman School of Government and Public Affairs, said the study found that even people who supported Republican candidates at the ballot box were aware of the severity of the [pandemic](#) in their [local communities](#).

"While there is definitely politics going on in terms of the way people perceive the COVID-19 pandemic, it's not drowning out what's happening in real life," Haselswerdt said. "The real public health trends are still getting through to people."

Haselswerdt said the researchers also found [people's perceptions](#) of the pandemic do matter for what they would expect—support for COVID-related policies.

"Not surprisingly, we found people who believe the situation was more severe in their counties were more supportive of restrictions, like mask mandates and closing K-12 schools and businesses," Haselswerdt said. "On the other hand, we found no relationship between county-level perceptions of the pandemic and the way respondents say they voted in the 2020 election."

Haselswerdt was also surprised to not find a filter bubble effect—the feeling that it doesn't matter what's going on because someone is not paying attention to it—with Republicans and viewers of Fox News

Channel. He said while Americans with these [political leanings](#) did give significantly lower estimates of the pandemic's severity in their county, these estimates were still related to their actual county case rate, suggesting local public health information did still get through to them.

"We were expecting to find [with Republicans and viewers of Fox News Channel] that 'it doesn't matter what the COVID-19 rate is in my county because I'm not paying attention to it, and maybe I don't even believe it anyway,'" said Haselswerdt, who has been interested in American politics since he was a child. "Or, 'I have [information sources](#) that I listen to telling me that it's no big deal, or masking and shutting down schools is a waste of time.' But that's not what we found, instead we found the real world still matters to people."

The results from this study are similar to the findings of a previous study Haselswerdt and co-author Sarah Gollust from the University of Minnesota did on the opioid epidemic and political voting behavior. In the previous study, Haselswerdt said they also found public perceptions of the opioid epidemic on a local level did not translate to political behavior.

Haselswerdt and Gollust are currently working with some of the data they collected for this study for a related project examining what kinds of people Americans think are most harmed by COVID-19, such as people with pre-existing conditions, the elderly, and different races and ethnicities.

More information: Jake Haselswerdt et al, Awareness of COVID-19 at the Local Level: Perceptions and Political Consequences, *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* (2022). [DOI: 10.1215/03616878-10351896](#)

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