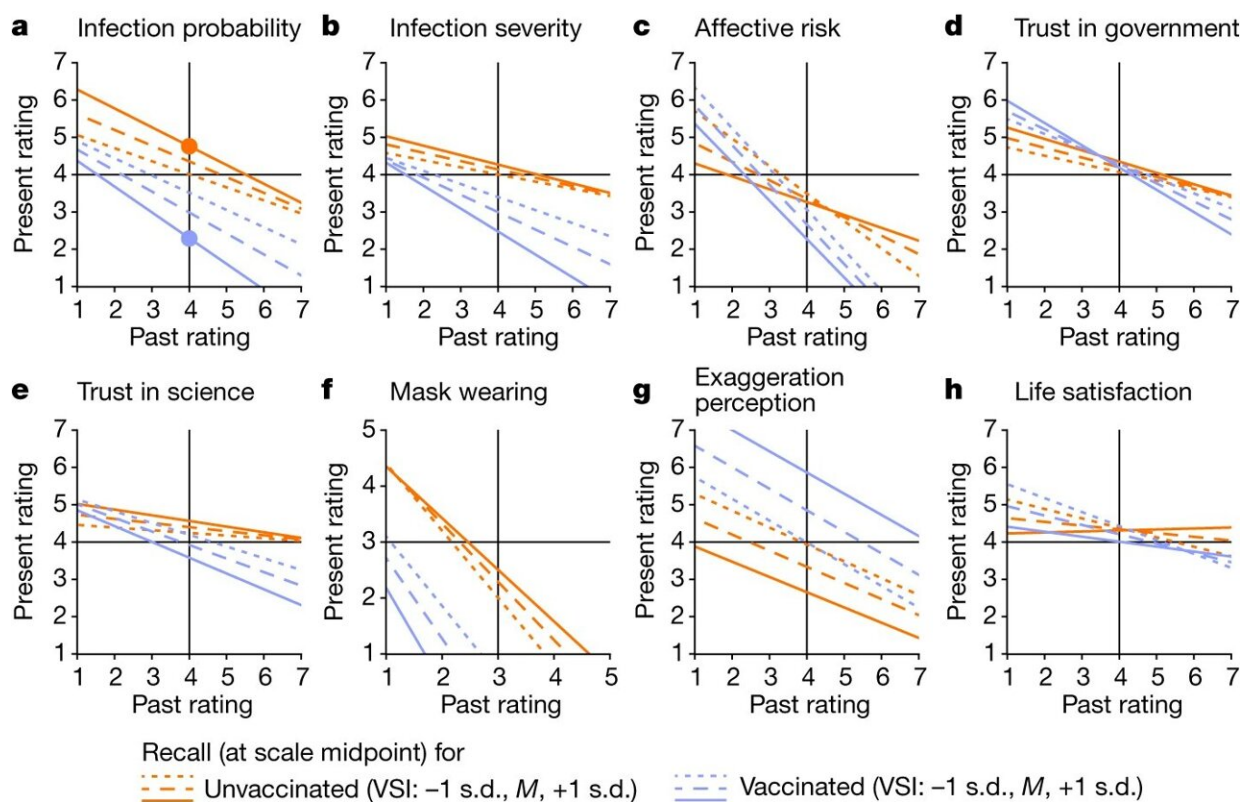


# Societal polarization regarding vaccinations found to be distorting accuracy of people's recall of pandemic

November 26 2023, by Bob Yirka



Biased recall of pandemic perceptions and behaviors in study 1. Results of a linear regression predicting the individual recall of past perceptions on the basis of actual past ratings ( $x$  axis) in 2020–2021 and present ratings ( $y$  axis) in late 2022, as well as interactions with vaccination status (colors) and vaccination status identification (VSI; dashed and dotted lines) of  $n = 1,644$  participants (if not indicated otherwise) for infection probability (**a**), infection severity (**b**), affective risk (**c**), trust in government (**d**;  $n = 1,600$ ), trust in science (**e**;  $n =$

1,489), mask wearing (**f**;  $n = 1,600$ ), exaggeration perception (**g**) and life satisfaction (**h**;  $n = 1,539$ ). Each line indicates the recall at the scale midpoint (for example, recall = 3 for mask wearing and recall = 4 for all other variables) as predicted by past and present ratings. The direction and strength of the bias are indicated by the line's position relative to the midpoint of the scale; the angle indicates how much recall is influenced by past and present perceptions (the more tilted towards horizontality, the more influenced by present ratings; the more tilted towards verticality, the more influenced by past ratings). Example: the lines in **a** represent the predicted recall of infection probability = 4 given different past and present ratings, so the dots mark this recall given the actual past rating of 4 for highly identified vaccinated and unvaccinated people. The respective lines are tilted below (vaccinated) and above (unvaccinated) the midpoint. This indicates that people's recall of the probability of infection is influenced by their present rating of the probability, and that this influence goes in different directions for vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals (having higher and lower recalled infection probability than actually perceived in the past). See 'Study 1: Analyses' in the Methods for more information; regression tables are provided in Extended Data Table 1. Credit: *Nature* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41586-023-06674-5

A quartet of psychologists, economists and health behaviorists from the University of Bamberg, the University of Chicago, the University of Vienna and the University of Erfurt, respectively, has found that people's political views on vaccinations is colorizing their memories of the severity of the global pandemic.

In their paper [published](#) in the journal *Nature*, Philipp Sprengholz, Luca Henkel, Robert Böhm and Cornelia Betsch, describe how they conducted surveys of people regarding the [pandemic](#) and what they learned from it. The editors at *Nature* have posted a Research Briefing outlining the work done by the team on this effort and also an Editorial discussing possible implications of their findings.

Most health organizations around the world have deemed the global pandemic to be over despite the fact that people all over the world are still being infected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus—this is because of the degree of immunity that has been built up, both by people being infected and those who have been and continue to be vaccinated.

By all accounts, the pandemic was a major event in modern world history—in addition to the many people who were made ill or died, most economies around the world took a major hit. And because it was such a major event, many in the [science community](#) have begun to take a look back—some at its many impacts, and others looking for lessons learned.

In this new effort, the research team suggests that one of the lessons that needs to be learned is that once a pandemic is over, people will remember it differently, depending on their [political views](#)—in this case, on their views regarding vaccinations.

To learn more about how people remember the severity of the pandemic, the research team surveyed over 10,000 people living in 11 wealthy, Northern Hemisphere countries, asking them to rate their risk of infection. Some of those people living in Germany had responded to a survey conducted earlier, by the same group, asking them the same questions. On the second go-round, those people in Germany were also asked to try to remember how they had rated their risk in the first survey.

In looking at the data from the German participants, the researchers found, among other things, a trend—people who had not been vaccinated and who had strong feelings about it, tended to remember themselves ranking their risk lower than they actually had. They also found that those people from the same group who had been vaccinated tended to remember themselves ranking themselves more at risk than they actually did. Put another way, both groups were re-writing history

based on their political feelings regarding vaccinations.

The researchers suggest their findings indicate people involved in looking back at the pandemic need to keep in mind that the memories of people being queried may be clouded by their own biases.

**More information:** Philipp Sprengholz et al, Historical narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic are motivationally biased, *Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-023-06674-5](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06674-5)

Personal motivations polarize people's memories of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/d41586-023-03082-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-03082-7)

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Citation: Societal polarization regarding vaccinations found to be distorting accuracy of people's recall of pandemic (2023, November 26) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-11-societal-polarization-vaccinations-distorting-accuracy.html>

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