

Political polarization leads to noncompliance with pandemic health advice, study finds

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If you identify as blue in a red state or red in a blue state, you might not be complying well with advice given by your governor that is meant to keep you healthy during the coronavirus pandemic. Notre Dame

Assistant Professor of Economics Kirsten Cornelson and her co-author Borianna Miloucheva of the University of Toronto [found](#) that in states with governors who won by close margins, compliance with stay-at-home orders and other health advice is lower among people with the opposite party affiliation.

The researchers surveyed about 1,000 individuals across 12 states using Amazon's Mturk crowdsourcing platform, and resurveyed about 200 people they initially surveyed in 2019 about political polarization. Cornelson noted that they intentionally used data from states where elections were barely won by the leading party so that they could compare the response among people in the same party who lived in similar political environments.

The Mturk sample was roughly 60 percent Democratic and 40 percent Republican and skewed young. The researchers asked them questions about travel outside their homes in the past 48 hours and what those trips entailed (to deem if travel was essential or not) and what kind of measures they were taking to prevent the spread of the virus, such as increased handwashing.

"Approximately 20 to 30 percent of the sample reported leaving their home for non-essential travel in the previous 48 hours. Both Democrats and Republicans report leaving home more often in Republican states, although the difference is larger for Democrats," they write.

Regarding increased handwashing, use of hand sanitizer and staying home, both Democrats and Republicans are less likely to report these behaviors when living in states run by the other party. Cornelson and Miloucheva found no consistent opposite-party pattern regarding some other measures, including limiting contact with high-risk people and wearing masks or gloves.

Their research into other variables like differences in attitudes about the severity of the crisis, the need for social distancing and even mistrust of medical organizations shows no [significant difference](#) between members of the two major parties, yet compliance levels are different.

"We believe that the most probable explanation for this pattern is that individuals are simply less willing to cooperate when the leader of their state—and the person who is typically the public face of efforts to combat COVID-19—is from the other party."

The authors showed that the response to an opposite-party governor was strongest in the states where political hostility was highest prior to the pandemic. Interestingly, however, this was not true for individuals; when the authors gauged individual respondents' hostility toward the opposing party, they found the response to an opposite-party governor is strongest among those who report lower levels of relative hostility to the other party. "It may therefore be perceptions of the hostility of other people, rather than an individual's own hostility, that undermines cooperative behavior," they write.

As an economist, Cornelson is concerned about what this might mean for the bigger picture regarding people's willingness to give toward the public good through taxes, levies, philanthropic contributions and other means.

"A lot of what we accomplish in society depends on people's willingness to cooperate and contribute to the public good," Cornelson said. "Most of us have a sense of civic duty—a sense of buy-in, that we're connected to wider society. When we have these fractures in society, people might not want to contribute, which hurts economic growth."

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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