

# Bitter partisan divide shapes California opinions on COVID-19, poll finds

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With temperatures rising and sun-seekers on the move, California Gov. Gavin Newsom has closed the state's beaches in an effort to check the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: Flickr/CC BY-ND 2.0

California voters are deeply divided about the COVID-19 pandemic,

with supporters of President Donald Trump more worried about the economy and less concerned they will infect others, according to a new poll by UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS).

While they generally agree on the importance of washing hands, supporters and opponents of the president are polarized about core strategies to slow the spread of the virus, including shelter-in-place orders and the economic lockdown.

"It is striking the way that polarized political attitudes even affect everyday behaviors," said IGS co-Director Cristina Mora. "That Trump supporters are much less likely to believe in the efficacy of practices such as social distancing, and are generally much less worried about contracting COVID-19, denotes just how powerfully politics can shape understanding of health and safety."

"The sharp differences between Trump supporters and opponents suggest that the fight over reopening the economy could end up just reinforcing the polarized battle lines that have characterized the past decade," added IGS co-Director Eric Schickler. "If a pandemic on this scale cannot overcome partisan warfare, it is unclear whether any crisis or threat can create the kind of unity we saw during World War II or in the immediate aftermath of 9/11."

The online Berkeley IGS Poll of 8,800 registered California voter] was conducted April 16-20 by IGS in conjunction with the UC-based California Institute of Health Equity and Action. It is one of the first U.S. efforts to gauge opinion on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact, and it suggests that Trump's sometimes controversial positions on the crisis are having a significant polarizing effect on public opinion.

The poll found approximate agreement on several strategies for controlling the spread of the virus.

For example, almost everyone surveyed concurred that hand-washing is an important way to prevent infection. The two sides were largely aligned on wearing masks and gloves, too, though Trump supporters were somewhat more skeptical. On the 6-foot guidance for social distancing, 97.9% of Trump opponents called it somewhat or extremely effective, compared to 88.6% of Trump supporters.

But beyond that, disagreements widened, and the basics of pandemic science sometimes came into question.

For example, can vitamins be effective at preventing infection? Among Trump supporters, 67% said they could be somewhat or extremely effective, compared to 49.6% of opponents. Taking vitamins has not been part of mainstream scientific advice.

## **Deep division over core strategies and goals**

The Berkeley IGS Poll found that voters are deeply polarized over the president's performance in office. Almost 55% of California voters strongly disapproved, while 20% strongly approved. Overall, just a quarter of the voters were closer to the middle in their assessments.

The pollsters found that such extreme disagreement carries over to assessments of core strategies and goals of the pandemic response, and even to scientific credibility:

- Just 24% of strong Trump supporters were very concerned about spreading the virus to others; nearly half of them expressed little or no concern. Among strong Trump opponents, 58% were very concerned about passing the virus to others, and only 13% were not concerned. Overall, 48% of California voters were very concerned they might spread the virus to others.
- Just over 57% of strong Trump supporters said that staying at

home as much as possible was extremely effective in checking the spread of infection; more than 90% of strong Trump opponents favored staying at home.

- Among Trump supporters, 77.6% were most worried about the economic damage of keeping the stay-at-home policy in place too long, while 22.3% were more concerned with the health effects of ending the policy too soon. Among Trump opponents, 91.2% said health should be the higher priority.
- More than 73% of Trump partisans expressed some or complete trust in scientists, versus 98.6% among those opposed to the president. Trump supporters held far less trust in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

The Berkeley IGS Poll had a margin of error of three percentage points.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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