

Poll shows social networks strong in response to COVID-19 crisis

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In a time of a documented decline of community and social connections, a large number of people who have needed assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic have found that help through community

organizations, the government and their family, friends and neighbors, according to a newly released poll from the University of Rhode Island's Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy.

In a representative survey of 600 Rhode Island residents, 23% of respondents said that during the crisis they have needed help, and the vast number of those—72% – have found that help. Fifty-four percent of those needing aid said they received it through their social network, while 28% credited organizations such as a food pantry, and 27% said they received help from the government.

People are also volunteering in large numbers. Just under half (44%) of respondents said they had volunteered for an organization, helped a person in need, donated money, or done some other act to help the community during the pandemic. Those who have lost their jobs or experienced reduced pay or hours due to the pandemic were more likely to volunteer than those whose work had not been disrupted by the pandemic.

"It really showcases the strength of the Rhode Island community, from social networks to community organizations to government," says Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, director of the URI Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy. "For decades, all the academic and popular press coverage about the strength of communities in the U.S. is that it's been in decline. The country is also so politically divided that it is hard to see the unity that exists in communities. This poll really shows that in a time of crisis, we're seeing very strong communities in Rhode Island. It's not just government stepping in and supporting people. People are getting the support they need from friends, from neighbors and from [community organizations](#). It shows a lot of hope for our state in a time of political division."

The poll, designed by the Social Science Institute for Research,

Education, and Policy and conducted by YouGov, was fielded between May 14 and May 26. It covered several critical issues concerning the pandemic, including respondents' feelings about the government's response to the crisis, [media coverage](#), and access to assistance. The poll was funded by the Rhode Island Foundation. It is part of a larger collaboration between the Foundation and the Institute measuring how Rhode Islanders consume and interact with state and local media. Data from the larger project will be released at a later date.

"With state and local media in decline across the country, we're very interested in learning how Rhode Islanders feel about their state and local media. Do they feel that they have good representation in the media? Or is it lacking and we need to, as a state, support greater access to information?" says Pearson-Merkowitz. "At the same time, we have this unprecedented moment. So, this subset of the survey is dedicated to where residents are getting their COVID-19 information and how they feel about it. Because if there was ever a time in which people need relevant, local news, it's the middle of a pandemic when your life is really contingent on critical information about the rules, regulations, and health of the community in which you live and work."

The community assistance the poll documents comes at a time of high unemployment and job disruption. The poll shows 15% of responders either lost their jobs or faced furloughs during the crisis, while another 11% saw their pay or hours reduced. Only 25% reported that the crisis did not affect their work hours or pay. Forty-two percent of those who were furloughed or lost their jobs said they are receiving unemployment benefits.

Political leadership

During the crisis, Gov. Gina Raimondo has taken a very public role in trying to lead the state through the coronavirus pandemic, providing

daily televised updates on the pandemic and its spread in the state. That has earned her many viewers, and she also earned high marks from respondents for her handling of the crisis.

In the poll, 69% of the 600 respondents approved of the way Raimondo has guided the state during the pandemic, with only 18% reporting disapproval. Her approval rating was highest among Democrats (81%) and ideological liberals (82%). But her performance was rated high across all subsets of the poll, gaining approval from Republicans (53%), conservatives (56%) and those who have seen job disruptions (58%).

And her daily briefings have had a wide audience, with 86% saying they have watched at least one of the daily briefings and 51% having watched more than half. Ten percent said they have watched them all.

In contrast, only 32% of respondents approved of Republican President Donald Trump's performance during the crisis, with 56% disapproving. Seventy-two percent of Republicans and 64% of ideological conservatives approved of his performance. Meanwhile, Congress' approval was split nearly evenly among approval (33%), disapproval (39%), and unsure (28%).

Media coverage

News coverage by state and local media earned the approval of a vast majority of respondents for providing essential news during the crisis. Eighty-four percent said the media has done either very (45%) or somewhat well (39%) providing information that they needed during the crisis. The most popular venue for news has been TV, according to 70% of respondents. It was followed by government websites (34%), with news websites, apps and podcasts (28%) nearly tied with friends, family and co-workers (27%).

Non-white respondents were less likely to feel state and local news outlets were doing very well at providing virus information that they needed—32% approval compared with 48% for white respondents.

While the vast majority reported that they have followed the news closely, many questioned the accuracy of some reports.

A total of 87% of respondents said they have followed pandemic related news either very or fairly closely, 55% and 32% respectively. Forty-five percent say they've watched the news more closely since the pandemic, while only 8% reported following it less than usual.

But while praising state and [local news](#) outlets, 45% of respondents questioned the quality of the information they're getting on the pandemic. Republicans (56%) and ideological conservatives (58%) were the groups mostly likely to report seeing conflicting information.

Just over half of all respondents said they've seen information about the pandemic that seemed completely made up, with 43% reporting some fabrication and 12% a lot. Of those reporting false information, 58% said they saw it on social media sites; another 34% said they saw it on TV. Republicans and ideological conservatives, 43% and 48% respectively, were most likely to report seeing made-up news on television; Democrats (62%) and ideological liberals (67%) were mostly likely to report seeing fabricated [news](#) on [social networking](#) sites.

The survey has a margin of error of +/- 4.78 percentage points.

To see the full questionnaire, result highlights and a detailed methodology on the coronavirus [pandemic](#) section of the survey, go to the SSIREP [website](#).

Provided by University of Rhode Island

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