

Q&A: How COVID-19 is impacting politics in the United States

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The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting many aspects of our lives, and politics is no exception, especially in a presidential election year. Most in-person campaigning has stalled. Politicians are judged on their responses

to the pandemic. Even mask-wearing has become politicized.

University of Arizona political scientist Samara Klar is studying the relationship between [partisan politics](#) and the prevalence of COVID-19 cases.

Klar is a Melody S. Robidoux Foundation Fund Professor in the UArizona School of Government and Public Policy. She co-authored the book "Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction." Her article "When Common Identities Decrease Trust: An Experimental Study of Partisan Women" tied for the best article of 2019 in the *American Journal of Political Science*.

Klar discussed the relationship between COVID-19 and partisanship, the impact of the virus on the upcoming election and why the country might not be as divided as it seems.

Q: When the pandemic started, it seemed that partisan rancor might decrease, since the country was tackling a common enemy. Now it seems like the partisan divide is as entrenched as ever. What are your thoughts on this?

A: This question is so important, as a unified approach seems essential in order to battle something as monstrous as an epidemic. As many scholars are showing, Democrats and Republicans seem unfortunately divided along [party lines](#) when it comes to COVID-19, though it is important to note that majorities of both Democrats and Republicans do support stay-at-home orders and other measures to combat the virus.

I have just finished some research with professors Jamie Druckman at Northwestern University, Yanna Krupnikov at Stony Brook University,

Matt Levendusky at the University of Pennsylvania and John Ryan at Stony Brook University that gives us an even clearer picture of what's going on.

We find that in counties where cases are very low, polarized partisans—that is, Democrats and Republicans with strong preferences for their party over the other—are indeed deeply divided along party lines. However, as cases increase in a county, partisans become more unified. More specifically, Republicans in counties with a lot of COVID cases become as concerned about the pandemic as Democrats, and support for policies becomes extremely high among both parties.

So, it seems that as the issue becomes more important and more personal to people, the polarization actually decreases.

Q: What are some of the other important ways the pandemic is affecting politics this year?

A: Campaigning is seeing a big shift. Political scientists have shown that the most effective campaigning strategies involve as much interpersonal contact with voters as possible—knocking on doors, face-to-face canvassing and such. Obviously, that is not much of an option during a pandemic. So, campaign staff are going to have to get creative—text messages will be big, phones might be ringing even more than voters are used to, and direct mail will get even more personal. Where we used to see glossy flyers, campaigns will turn to hand-written postcards as an attempt to get as personal as possible without literally getting in voters' faces.

Turnout is an unknown right now—it certainly seems as though fewer people will venture out to the polls. Mail-in voting is going to be crucial, and both parties will try to leverage it to their advantage, though political

science scholarship currently shows no clear partisan winner when it comes to mail-in ballots.

The news cycle is dominated by COVID, meaning that we are probably getting less exposure to stories about the candidates, but, of course, that all could change in the four months we have left before the election.

Q: Determinants of the outcome of the 2020 presidential race seem to be shifting by the day, including people's impression of how the president is handling COVID-19, the economy and racial strife. What do you think are the most important variables impacting the presidential race?

A: The news is just moving so quickly these days that stories that once seemed so important—impeachment, for example—get abruptly overshadowed. So, it seems foolish to even try to predict what might arise from now until Election Day. But, as it stands, COVID and the economic fallout seem absolutely inextricable from people's political evaluations, and this extends not only to the president but also to how people view their mayors', congresspeople's, governors' and senators' reactions. This affects every level of government.

Q: You have written about identity politics—whether someone's identity as, for example, a woman or an African American is more important than their identity as a Democrat or Republican when they vote. Do you see that being a variable in the upcoming election?

A: I don't know if those identities are more important to the vote, but they can overshadow partisanship when it comes to policy choices. I think COVID is actually a great example of this. As I mentioned, Democrats and Republicans in low-case counties rely on their partisan identity when evaluating the pandemic and the political response. But as cases climb, other important concerns kick in: People become concerned about their employment, their kids, their health and the health of their loved ones. Partisanship is no longer the driving force in formulating political evaluations. For this reason, Trump should be nervous. Republicans who might otherwise support him based on their party affiliation might now be pulled in another direction, thanks to the threats that COVID poses to their other important identity groups. This might not mean they vote for the Democrats, but it could certainly mean that they sit out the election altogether.

Q: You have previously written about how the country may not be as polarized as it appears. What should people keep in mind as they watch the news or go on social media and feel like there is an unbreachable political divide in this country?

A: I would keep in mind that Republicans and Democrats among the mass public agree a lot more than they disagree. A majority in each party supports stay-at-home measures. A majority in each party wears masks and thinks that others should wear masks. Everyone wants their kids to be healthy and safe and educated. Everyone is worried about their immunocompromised friends, relatives and themselves. There is so much more agreement than what we see when we turn on cable or read vitriolic fights on Twitter. Of course, people hold different policy views, ideological perspectives and values, but they do value compromise. A political scientist named Jennifer Wolak has a great new book out, "Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization," in which she finds that a

majority of Americans support compromise not only in theory but in practice. So, I know I'm ever the optimist, but one of the reasons that I love being a political scientist is that I get to read past the pundits and crazy media reports and find empirical research, which often shows that things are better than they seem.

More information: Samara Klar. When Common Identities Decrease Trust: An Experimental Study of Partisan Women, *American Journal of Political Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12366](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12366)

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