

# Early COVID-19 news coverage amplified political divide

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Newspaper coverage of COVID-19 is at least as politicized and polarized as climate change coverage, say University of Michigan researchers.

Both [newspaper](#) and network [news](#) COVID-19 stories were polarized in early coverage of the pandemic, which may have shaped pandemic attitudes, according to a new U-M analysis of U.S. media coverage from March to May 2020.

Using multiple computer-assisted content analytic approaches, researchers found that politicians appeared in newspaper coverage more frequently than scientists. Both politicians and scientists were equally featured in network news.

The divide in pandemic opinions has been immediate—unlike other issues such as global warming coverage which became politicized over several decades, said Sol Hart, U-M associate professor of communication and media and the study's lead author.

"Polarization around COVID-19 is at least as high as coverage of climate change, if not higher. This is particularly striking as climate change is currently one of the most polarizing issues in the U.S. today," Hart said.

Politicization is the degree that politicians are mentioned in conjunction with the issue, and polarization is how discussion varies based on the presence of actors from different political parties.

Hart and colleagues Stuart Soroka of U-M and Sedona Chinn of the University of Wisconsin investigated the degree to which COVID-19 was politicized and polarized in stories published in *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and covered by ABC, CBS and NBC. The database included more than 36,600 stories.

For newspaper coverage, the level of politicization in content increased very quickly around the time that a U.S. national health emergency was

declared in March 2020 and remained elevated throughout the period of analysis, the study showed.

While political mentions quickly increase above those of scientist mentions, the frequency of scientist mentions remains fairly consistent throughout the period of analysis, said Chinn, assistant professor of science communication at Wisconsin.

The patterns in network news coverage of COVID-19 were different—whereas polarization was high, politicization was lower.

Politicians have been mentioned more, relative to scientists, in newspapers than on network news. Hart said polarization is roughly even across news sources, which means that while politicians are mentioned less in network news than newspaper coverage, mentions are still associated with highly polarized language.

The researchers did not offer guidance of how journalists should cover emerging science and risk issues, but this "type of news [coverage](#) in the early months of COVID-19 is likely to amplify partisan differences in perceptions of the issue," said Soroka, U-M professor of political science and communication and media.

The study appears in *Science Communication*.

**More information:** P. Sol Hart et al. Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage, *Science Communication* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1075547020950735](https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547020950735)

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