

# Even on Facebook, COVID-19 polarized members of US Congress: study

July 14 2021, by Jeff Grabmeier



When communicating about COVID-19, most messages by members of Congress have a positive or negative tone. Credit: Laura Moses / OpenMoji

Facebook posts by members of the U.S. Congress reveal the depth of the partisan divide over the COVID-19 pandemic, new research shows.

A study of all 12,031 Facebook posts concerning the pandemic by members of Congress between March and October 2020 showed that

Democrats generally took a more negative or neutral tone on the issue, while Republicans were more likely to have a positive tone in their posts.

Public crises, like the pandemic, highlight how central social media is to messaging and how important it is to understand how rhetoric impacts engagement and sharing of messages said Laura Moses, co-author of the study and a doctoral student in [political science](#) at The Ohio State University.

"When members of Congress communicate with the public about the pandemic, there is not a 'rally around the flag' effect, suggesting a shift toward partisan politics," Moses said.

The study also found that Democrats posted more on COVID-19 than did Republicans, [negative posts](#) were shared more often than positive ones, and Republicans' posts attracted more engagement, such as "likes" and comments, than did Democrats' messages.

Moses conducted the study with Janet Box-Steffensmeier, professor of political science at Ohio State. Their results were published today (July 14, 2021) in the journal *Science Advances*.

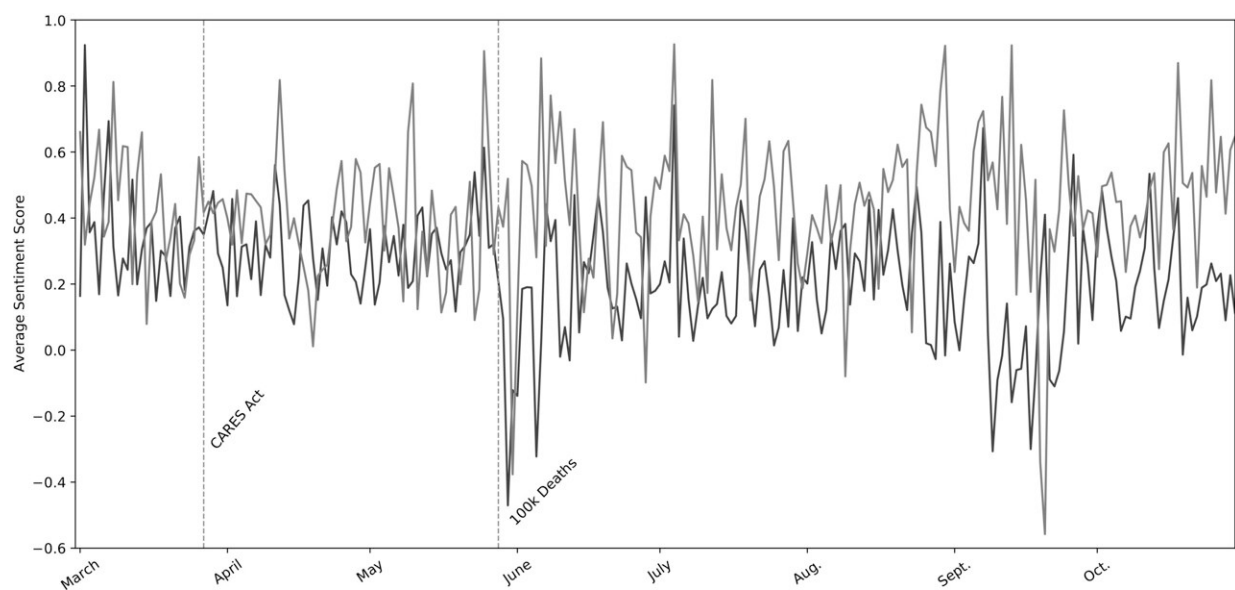
These findings reflect the overall fractured nature of politics in the country today, Box-Steffensmeier said.

"We find partisan tone differences in messaging, even at the outset of the crisis" she said.

The researchers measured the tone in members' Facebook messages using a state-of-the-art machine learning tool that analyzed the text in each message. The tool looked for the use of words that are positive or negative to give an overall "sentiment" score for each message.

For example, a post offering a resource guide to staying safe and healthy was labeled positive. A message that criticized a Trump administration official for comparing lockdowns to slavery was labeled negative. A post that urged readers to wear a mask was marked as neutral.

Results showed that Democratic members posted an average of 26 times about COVID-19 during the period of the study, compared to 18 times for Republicans. The only pandemic-related issue that Republicans posted more about than Democrats was social distancing.



The daily average tone by political party, values near 1 are more positive and values near -1 are more negative. Credit: Box-Steffensmeier and Moses, Sci. Adv. 2021; 7: eabg2898

While Democrats tended to have a more negative tone than did Republicans, they were still slightly on the positive side overall. The one issue about which Democrats were more negative than positive was the

postal service: Trump admitted to blocking funding for the [postal service](#), and some Democrats tied this to delayed delivery of medicines, as well as interference with mail-in voting.

Many of the more negative posts by Democrats were critical of the Trump administration's response to the pandemic.

Republicans were most positive when discussing resources and sharing information related to the pandemic.

"For example, Democrats use a more negative tone when discussing the pandemic and the Trump administration than Republicans discussing the same topic," Moses said.

Democrats' tone shifted drastically relative to Republicans' after milestones that marked the severity of the [pandemic](#), such as when COVID-19 deaths in the United States exceeded 100,000, the study found.

Overall, negative posts were more likely to be spread by Facebook users, meaning that Democrats saw an increase in their messages being shared. But Republicans saw an increase in engagement, meaning users commented on their posts or responded with one of the reaction emojis such as "like" or "love."

There was an increase in "sad" emoji reactions to the more negatively toned posts and to posts by more liberal members, results showed.

Negative tone also increased the use of the "haha" emoji, suggesting that users were replying with sarcasm or distaste.

The researchers noted that the study did not account for images or videos used in the posts, which may also affect the tone that Facebook

users take away from a message.

Even with just the text, the study showed that tone impacts engagement with messaging from members of Congress. This has important implications for understanding how government can connect individuals with crucial information in emergent or pivotal moments, Box-Steffensmeier said.

"Facebook messages about COVID-19 suggest that members of Congress were not amplifying the public health or medical professional information about the global health emergency," she said.

"The divergence in tone between Democrats and Republicans suggests that members of are crafting messaging to represent their opinions or political identity, rather than sending a unified government response."

**More information:** J.M. Box-Steffensmeier et al., "Meaningful messaging: Sentiment in elite social media communication with the public on the COVID-19 pandemic," *Science Advances* (2021). [advances.sciencemag.org/lookup ... .1126/sciadv.abg2898](https://advances.sciencemag.org/lookup...1126/sciadv.abg2898)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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