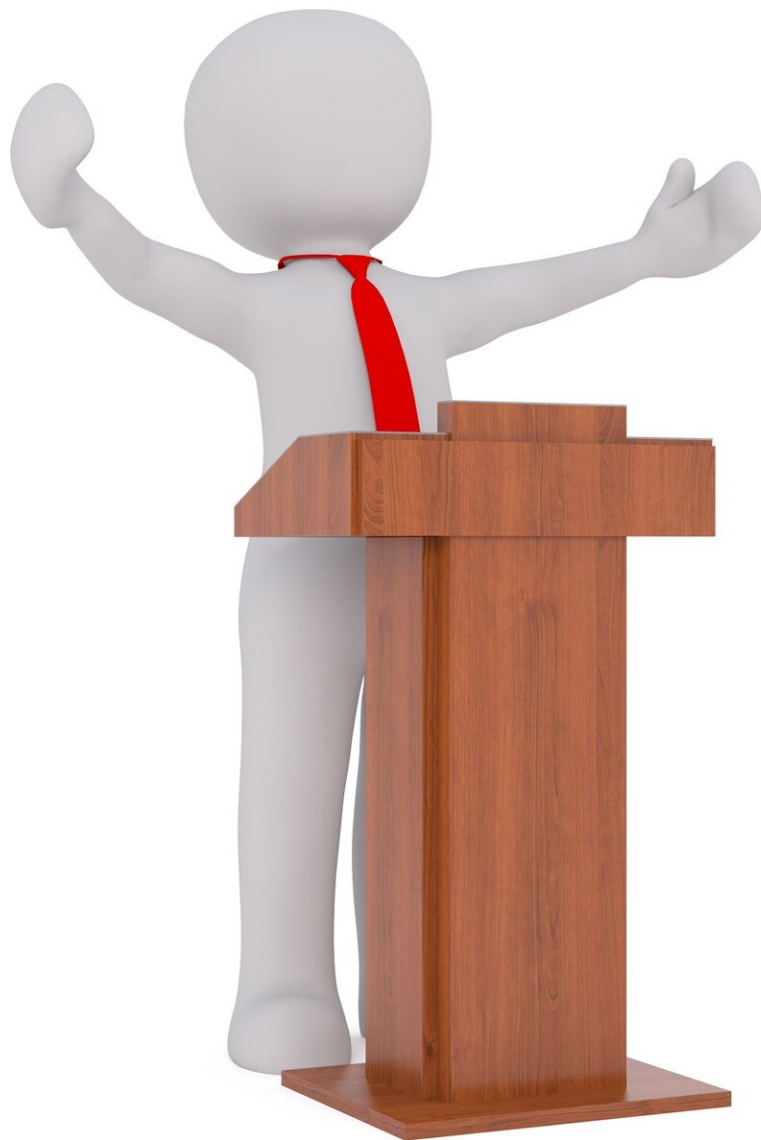


# Research suggests COVID-19 beliefs influenced by politicians, not scientists

March 9 2022, by Hannah Stevens, Karen Nikos- Rose

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As COVID-19 upended societal norms when it swept through the United States in 2020, a second pandemic—or "infodemic"—was also on the rise. An analysis of Twitter users by researchers at the University of California, Davis, and University of Texas, Austin, suggests that Republican-identifying individuals who believe their local government has positive intentions are vulnerable to believing politically fueled COVID-19 misinformation. The study did not find the same trend among Democrat-identifying Twitter users.

The article, appearing in *JMIR Infodemiology* in February, aims to shed light on the [cognitive processes](#) that determine the relationship between partisanship and health misinformation, researchers said. The findings can help state and local health officials improve COVID-19-related messaging in the future, researchers said.

"Our research shows that [public health officials](#) can be most successful with their appeals to the public by taking into account pre-existing political views and testing what will or won't resonate with their constituents because of this," said Hannah Stevens, co-author of the study and a doctoral student in the UC Davis Department of Communication.

"Consumers of health information should be cautious about automatically trusting information broadcast by elected officials based on shared [political views](#)—even if they instinctively want to trust them," said Stevens.

From Aug. 10 through Dec. 23, 2020, researchers collected data via a [cross-sectional survey](#) in all 50 states of U.S.-based Twitter users who

followed their state's official public health department Twitter accounts. They then surveyed the individuals about party affiliation and other information, collecting more than 250 responses.

Researchers measured inferences about local governments' goals, demographics and beliefs in COVID-19 misinformation.

"Our data speaks to the reality that health information and 'facts' can be subjective and manipulated in service of political agendas rather than public health goals, which is problematic if we ever want to get out of this pandemic," said Nicholas A. Palomares, co-author and professor in the Department of Communication Studies at UT Austin.

"It's encouraging, however, that constituents who are more critical and skeptical of their local government seem to be less susceptible to misinformation and perhaps even agendas employing it."

**More information:** Hannah Stevens et al, Constituents' Inferences of Local Governments' Goals and the Relationship Between Political Party and Belief in COVID-19 Misinformation: Cross-sectional Survey of Twitter Followers of State Public Health Departments, *JMIR Infodemiology* (2021). [DOI: 10.2196/29246](https://doi.org/10.2196/29246)

Provided by UC Davis

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