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Jim Logan

The Politics of COVID

If a politician you dislike supports a COVID policy, there's a good chance you'll oppose it. But if a politician you like backs the same plan, it's likely you will, too. Not all is lost, though. Policies proposed by nonpartisan experts tend to be supported by the public despite political affiliation.

Those are the key takeaways in a new study co-authored by a UC Santa Barbara researcher and published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

And they're not confined to the notoriously divided United States.

David K. Sherman, a professor in UCSB's Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, said the international team of researchers found that politicization of COVID is a global phenomenon.

"The consistency of results across countries was noteworthy," Sherman said. "The public views — with a great deal of evidence — the U.S. as particularly polarized, but the tendency to put party over policy occurred in all the countries we studied, and was not particularly strong in the U.S."

Sherman, along with Leaf Van Boven, the senior author of the paper and a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado, has studied political polarization over climate change. He said this new study demonstrates the persuasive power of nonpartisan experts. Although there are plenty of examples of experts being reviled by one political side or the other, a majority of the study's participants were more persuaded by a policy that was advocated by nonpartisan

experts than by partisan politicians.

The research team conducted surveys of 13,000 people across seven countries — Brazil, Israel, Italy, Sweden, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the U.S. — between August and November 2020.

Respondents were asked to evaluate one of two proposals to manage the pandemic based on real plans, including severe restrictions and prioritizing "keeping COVID-19 case numbers down." The other emphasized "recovery of the economy as much as possible while preventing a resurgence in COVID-19 cases."

In a follow-up experiment, 3,300 American respondents evaluated international vaccine distribution plans, with one prioritizing Americans and another taking a more global approach.

In both experiments, respondents were told that the policy was supported by either liberal elites, conservative elites, a bipartisan coalition or nonpartisan scientific experts. Names of the elites were adjusted for each country.

In every country, liberals and conservatives backed a policy when told elites from their party endorsed it. But when they were told the policy was supported by a bipartisan or neutral coalition, it earned the most support.

"This study demonstrates that when it comes to COVID-19, as with other contemporary issues, people are much more swayed by who the policy represents than what the policy actually is," said Van Boven. "It also shows that people trust and like experts more than politicians — even those from their own party."

The seven nations sampled ranged in cultural values, form of government and effectiveness at addressing COVID — yet showed consistent effects. For example, both the United States and South Korea showed the divisive effects of polarization and the unifying effects of expert communication.

The Korean data collection was directed by [Kimin Eom](), a professor at Singapore Management University.

"This consistency between the U.S. and South Korea is particularly striking," said Eom, who received his Ph.D. from UCSB in 2018. "These two countries are contrasting in many ways and numerous studies have reported significant psychological differences between the U.S. and South Korea. Our findings (or null

findings for cultural difference) highlight the fundamental influence of social categorization and the critical role of leaders and experts to promote cooperation among citizens across cultures."

As we've seen in the U.S. over the past two years of the pandemic, politicization can happen rapidly.

"When communication comes from politicians before the public really gets a chance to evaluate the relevant goals and outcomes, it can politicize things quickly and contribute to a spirit of uncooperativeness," said Alexandra Flores, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Colorado who was co-first author with Jennifer Cole of Vanderbilt University. "A good way to combat that is to have nonpartisan experts be the ones to weigh in first."

The study, Sherman added, demonstrates the persuasive power of nonpartisan experts. "Partisan politicians did get a great deal of support for their policy proposals from people on their own side," he said. "But to the extent that political leaders want everyone to buy in, our work suggests that they may be hurting their own cause — and the people they represent who would benefit from their health and economic policies— by being the main spokesperson."

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