

The negative impact that political polarization and media reporting had on public health adoption  
during COVID-19 pandemic in the United States

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As stay-at-home orders and mask mandates are being lifted, some people may stop discussing the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily conversation topics may still include COVID-19 vaccinations however as time passes, the pandemic may not remain the focal point of conversation. In contrast, for those working in healthcare or a public health organization COVID-19 will remain the focus for some time to come. This is a very important time for healthcare and public health organizations; as the disease incidence decreases, more time can be allotted to discussing possible public health preventions for the future. Now is the time for analysis and discussion of what health policies worked during the pandemic and what went wrong. It is imperative to examine how this pandemic was handled by each sector to determine what could have been done differently for a better outcome. In the United States, public health recommendations were not uniformly adopted and negatively affected by political polarization and bias news media reporting.

The formal guidance for Americans to wear masks to prevent COVID-19 spread was announced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a press release on July 14, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020,). This public health recommendation came after several observational studies were published in Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) that showed evidence that cloth masks decreased the spread of COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020,). However this guidance of mask-wearing was not uniformly adopted by across the United States. One factor in whether a county or state would adopt this public health recommendation was their political affiliation. A survey done by a non-parison organization called The Pew Research Center found that Democrats were about twice as likely as Republicans to say that masks should be worn always (63% vs. 29%). Republicans were also much more likely than Democrats to say that

masks should rarely or never be worn (23% vs. 4%) (Pew Research Center, 2021). This public health recommendation that was intended to save lives, thoroughly researched, and proven to reduce the spread of the virus without adverse economic effects, became political (Makridis & Rothwell, 2020). This is problematic when political opinions and affiliations hold more merit when it comes to public safety recommendations than public health officials. Furthermore, the tension between the two groups, those wearing masks and those refusing, took away from the point of wearing a mask which was to stop the rate at which a lethal virus was spreading across the country.

Political polarization can be defined as the “divergence of political attitudes and ideas to the ideological extreme” (Pew Research Center, 2021). This is a difficult concept to quantify or measure however, a study done by the Pew Research Center was able to uncover one aspect felt by individuals in the United States. The Pew Research Center conducted a world survey to analyze citizens’ views of how their government handled the COVID-19 outbreak and how it affected their daily lives and civic unity (Pew Research Center, 2021). The 13 countries included in this survey were the United States, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK, Australia, Japan and South Korea from June to August 2020. The sample size was 14,276 adult participants and all surveys were conducted over the phone. In the United States this survey found that, 77% of Americans felt that their country is now further divided than prior to the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2021). This study highlights the amount of political polarization felt during the pandemic. The country, during times of crisis, wanted to turn to political figures for structure, allocation of resources, and guidance. However, in the United States there were inconsistencies of public health adoptions and contradicting statements made by political figures whose agendas were in line with their

political tie- not public health. The problem faced in America at this time can be best summarized by Seth Masket, the director of the Center on American Politics at the University of Denver, who stated “political polarization is killing people. People are choosing riskier personal behavior due to following the lead of people in their party” (Lopez, 2021).

A possible solution to the confusing and contradictory recommendations given by different states and news sources could be the creation of a national board of public health officials. These officials would be elected by each state and serve on a board that meets in conjunction with the surgeon general to come up with concrete recommendations for public health scenarios. The officials would have a background in public health and the minimum requirement of a Master’s in Public health. Each state needs an elected official in order for them to be acclimated with the unique needs of their state however this public health background could lead to better dissemination of accurate and scientifically backed information. According to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, each state has a “health official” but their titles and backgrounds are variable (The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, 2021). For example, Louisiana has a “Interim Assistant Secretary of Health” while New York has a “Commissioner of Health”. New York’s “Commissioner of Health” is Judith Persichilli RN, BSN, MA. To those who watched the local news in New York City during the pandemic, this public health official was not at the front line of reporting. In New York City, Governor Andrew Cuomo was doing the daily reporting on public health recommendations. While, his recommendations may have come from the Commissioner of Health, there should have been more a media presence of our Commissioner of Health during the pandemic. There needs to be more a uniform position across state lines and meetings between states to help report

a united front on public health. During a pandemic, political figures without formal training in public health should not be making decisions that could save or end lives.

Another factor that negatively impacted individuals' adoption of public health recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic was biased news reporting. Instead of distributing evidenced-based recommendations from public health sectors such as the CDC, news anchors' personal opinions were circulated. This is problematic as news anchors have no formal training in public health and their motivation might be notoriety instead of saving lives. In the United States, two of the biggest media outlets, Fox News and CNN, have consistently come under fire regarding the ethical principles of journalism (Stroud, 2021). However, there is no legally enforceable code of ethics for Journalism; there are only recommendations (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The first amendment awarding freedom of speech is often used as a shield when any journalism is caught under fire for unethical or prejudicial reporting. While large media sources such as CNN, FOX, Twitter and New York Times may have their own companywide code of ethics, it is unlikely to be without its own bias. There is no unprejudicial ethics committee overseeing whether information being dispersed to individuals during a crisis is true or without harm. This is an important aspect of public health as majority of people in the United States turn to news and medias for information on public health and safety.

In June 2020, Margaret Sullivan of The Washington Post reported that a particular news source "may have kept millions from taking the coronavirus threat seriously" due to misleading reporting. She stated that this news source reported inaccurate information about the virus and promoted false and harmful safety precautions (Kimble-Glover, 2020). When the world is being faced with a pandemic, the news stations should be informing the public on what public health officials are recommending not reporting misinformation that fits their political agenda. The

information regarding public safety should be without political rhetoric meant to perpetuate or stir the pot in opposing political parties or gain tv viewers. If doctors were giving people recommendations that were knowingly harmful to people's health, they would be reported to their state's medical board. This type of accountability is lacking in today's news media. While a doctor may reach a few hundred people, over 3 million people have the potential to consume the information on the news (Watson, 2021). There should be consequences and regulations on what can be said in terms of public health and guidance on news media sources during a pandemic.

A possible solution to unethical bias reporting on public health topics that could negatively impact people during a pandemic is the creation of a board of ethics for media reporting. This board of ethics would need to be individuals with an academic background in journalism and ethics, who were not inherently politically affiliated. The criteria for individuals on this committee could be like that of the supreme court. There should be individuals with differing backgrounds and differing opinions for true fairness in determining what is ethical. In addition, the forementioned State health professionals could be on the news to correctly report information during times of public health need. This reporting of evidence-based information could help remediate during times of need instead of creating division and hostility.

News outlets have a wide outreach and could have the ability to positively influence the nation in a time of need. The forementioned board of State health professionals could play an integral role on news media. Political figures and news casts have a duty to inform, facilitate and help, not induce fear and spread misinformation. This mentioned solutions of State Board of Public Health Officials and an unprejudiced ethics committee could help decrease the construct of political polarization as well by take away some of the power and influence news anchors when reporting on topics they have no formal training in. The entire world was impacted by the

COVID-19 pandemic, however the United States had unique barriers in the implementation of public health recommendations. Public health officials need to acknowledge the negative impact that political polarization and bias news media had on public health recommendations during the pandemic. These issues are not going to absolve themselves and it is unlikely we will never be faced with a global crisis again. Feasible solutions, like the ones mentioned, need to be adopted before another pandemic is blundered by the news media and political figures.

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