



The Political Divide Over the Coronavirus

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March 18, 2020

A Pew Research Center study released Wednesday found deep divisions between Democrats and Republicans, with 59% of Democrats – and 33% of Republicans – calling the virus a major threat to U.S. health, despite the fact that medical experts and epidemiologists have warned that the virus could affect many millions of Americans, regardless of political party or state.

The same survey found that 12% of Democrats believe President Donald Trump is doing a good job handling the crisis and 23% believe Vice President Mike Pence is doing a somewhat or very good job. Republicans were far more generous, with 82% saying Trump was doing a somewhat or very good job, and 78% giving those same marks to Pence.

A separate tracking poll by Civiqs shows similar trends, with 79% of Democrats in the polls saying they are concerned about the virus affecting their community, while 39% of Republicans share that concern.

And when it comes to how the government is handling things, "it's night and day," says Drew Linzer, director of Civiqs. Nine out of 10 Democrats say they are not satisfied with the government response, while 85% of Republicans are satisfied.

Even as the polling has shown increasing concern as the crisis has worsened, "the trendlines are basically flat for Democrats and Republicans," who seem set in their views about the seriousness of the illness and the way the Trump administration has been handling it, Linzer says.

Meanwhile, states and localities themselves are showing a divide, with blue cities and states moving more aggressively – and more quickly – than more conservative communities. New York Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo, for example, has taken a number of steps, including banning gatherings of 50 or more people and most recently, on Wednesday ordering businesses to cut on-site workforces by half (people could work from home). San Francisco is under a "shelter in place" order, while Washington's governor, Jay Inslee, a Democrat, ordered a statewide shutdown of bars and restaurants.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, a Republican, was castigated on social media for tweeting a photo of himself going out to dinner with his family – and for saying he would continue to do so despite the outbreak. Other red states are only recently tightening restrictions to address the crisis. Alabama's Department of Public Health, for example, only on Tuesday said bars and restaurants should cease on-premise consumption of food or drink for one week.

When it comes to individual states, public opinion also varies according to political hue, the Civiqs data indicates. For example, a plurality of blue-state Vermonters, 39%, said they were not at all satisfied with the government response to the crisis. The state has 10 cases of the virus, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). In red-state Arkansas, which has 24 cases of coronavirus, a plurality, 31%, say they are "mostly satisfied with how the government has responded.

The disconnect, experts and pollsters say, are a function of demographics, ideology and where people get their information.

Blue states and cities were the first to get hit hard with coronavirus, notes Christopher Mooney, professor of state politics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, which is part of the reason those areas acted first and most dramatically. But that translates into a political divide as well, he says.

"We're really seeing this in Illinois – downstate, they are thinking of this as a Chicago problem," Mooney says. People in conservative areas of the state think, "This is an urban problem. This is a foreign problem," he adds.

Enter Trump, who repeatedly refers to the virus as the "Chinese virus." Trump told reporters Wednesday that "it's not racist at all. ... It comes from China." But his comments are a signal to his supporters that this is not his fault but a foreign nation's. Trump has also slammed Cuomo and Democratic Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm for their responses.

Trump is looked to by his backers as a reliable source of information, especially as those Americans feel skepticism toward the new media, experts note. That makes GOP officials more likely to toe the Trump line on the virus.

"It's fair to say the president did not take this issue seriously enough," says Clark Neily, vice president for criminal justice at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "To the extent that some people may have been taking their lead from the president, or not wanting to contradict the president ... it may have cost us some time" in addressing the crisis, he says.

Some of it is ideological as well, with conservatives balking at what they see as government intrusion in their lives – even if it might mean saving lives, experts say. "You can look back to Ronald Reagan, who said, 'Government isn't the solution. It's the problem.' Democrats think it is the solution," Mooney says.

That has fed canards that the virus is either not real or exaggerated. Former Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, on his website, declared the virus a "hoax" and said it was an effort to justify a government power grab. Trump himself earlier called the virus Democrats' "new hoax" and told a rally in South Carolina Feb. 28 that it was a Democratic effort to damage his presidency. There is a sharp party divide, as well, on the very gravity of the virus itself, even as cases and deaths increase daily. The Pew poll found that 77% of Republicans thought the media was exaggerating the risk, while 49% of Democrats shared that view. Meanwhile, 78% of Democrats said Trump was not taking the matter seriously enough, while 68% of Republicans said he was "about right" in his characterization of the virus.

Nearly a third – 30% – of Republicans believe the virus was intentionally created in a lab, a view shared by 16% of Democrats.

Even on Capitol Hill, there is a stark party difference in approach. Republicans held their weekly policy lunch on Tuesday. Democrats instead conducted their "lunch" by conference call to avoid unnecessary personal contact.

"There is a meaningful gap in the attitudes between Democrats and Republicans," Linzer said. A gap, epidemiologists say, will not occur when it comes to who gets sick or dies.