Health politicization is when political cues become integrated into the public presentation of a health issue. COVID-19 is a political-communication and health-communication crisis. The pandemic has been communicated in diverse ways - through conflicting science, downplayed threats, emotional arousal, and fragmented media. Republican politicians publicly downplayed the threat, while Democratic politicians responded with more concern, signalling different public cues. Due to the novelty of this virus, science is rapidly evolving which gives rise to the appearance of expert disagreement and conflicting information. This provokes strong emotions, particularly fear and anxiety, that makes people seek out information to resolve them leading to biased searching, thus exposure to partisan-oriented and/or misleading information.

Prior work has suggested that when the public perceives conflict and controversy about health issues, confusion is generated and the following decrease in trust of health recommendations is seen. It is important for us to understand the effects of politicization and media coverage of COVID-19 on confusion about health policies and scientific findings, thus the corresponding trust and support in science, government, doctors, and journalists. We fielded two studies that give us insight into public’s perception of the pandemic and its severity through media and credibility priming. We examined confusion as a function of question wording, partisan affiliation, ideology, demographics, and the priming of politicization.

## Methods

### Study 1 – June 3, 2020

| Table 1: The participants were randomly assigned to two different treatment groups (open ended questions with multiple choices). Follow-up questions were asked about their confusion with regards to social distancing and its guidelines and about their perception of disagreement amongst health experts and politicians about prevention of spread, guidelines, and severity of the virus (which coincides with scientific uncertainty, politicization, and media representation). The sample is nationally representative as information was collected from Dynata. |

| Table 2: The participants were randomly assigned to two different treatment groups (COVID base and COVID politicization). According to the assignment, the participants were required to read an article. The base group article was an informative article highlighting CDC and WHO updated guidelines on face coverings. The politicization group article used words and phrases like “heated debate”, “contraversial”, “proponents of broader mask usage”, “opponents of mask usage”, “much is unclear about how much asymptomatic spread there actually is”, “state senator cast doubt on scientific evidence”, “partisan disagreement”, and “Trump’s public declaration that he won’t wear a mask” to prime participants into thinking there is scientific uncertainty and disagreement amongst politicians which covers the three dimensions of politicization. The sample is nationally representative as information was collected from Dynata. |

## Study 1 – Interesting Findings

- In most of the perception of disagreement amongst health experts and politicians about who is most at risk, how dangerous it is, effectiveness of regular handwashing, and effectiveness of social distancing recommendations, being a Strong Republican was correlated with decrease in perception of disagreement.
- In almost every case, people were less likely to mention specific answer options (e.g., keep six feet, connect virtually, and so on) when they were assigned to the open-ended question. However, if we look at the social distancing confusion questions and we include an indicator for having received the open-ended question in a regression model with other demographic and partisanship predictors, we see that respondents do not report being more or less confused depending upon the version of the question they received. This is somewhat reassuring from a public health lens.
- There are statistically significant differences between the means of the social distancing recommendations (six feet, virtual connection, mask usage, close schools, close business, stay home, and self quarantine when sick) using the 95% confidence interval when running t-tests.

## Results and Summaries

### Study 2

| Table 5: Predicting confusion about effectiveness of mask wearing for preventing COVID-19 spread by setting covid base treatment group as the base level here. For every unit increase in control, there is a 0.62108 unit increase in confusion which is statistically significant as the P-value is 0.000. For every unit increase in exposure to politicization, there is a 0.2719 unit increase in confusion which is statistically significant as the P-value is 0.000. |

## Future Directions

- Figure out ways to mitigate the effects of politicization and confusion about health policies. Some potential ways could be to communicate clearly and filter out unnecessary confusion caused by the spread of misinformation via media and to disseminate messages from credible sources.
- Further exploratory analysis and post estimation of the results in relation to spillover behaviors with and without inoculation conditions.
- Examining backlash and support variables for the health policies and their adaptations by private corporations.

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## References