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### **COVID-19's impact on United States' public trust towards scientists and their research**

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#### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a stark new reality with the United States: a diminished level of trust on behalf of the public towards scientists and their research. Due to the ever-growing political divide between Democrats and Republicans, each political party has expressed differing emotions towards the science behind the pandemic, with right-wing Republicans expressing less trust in the published research and the measures required to prevent the spread of the contagion. Through political leadership, conservatives are least enthused of adhering to new restrictive measures that do not coincide with their vision of America and their lives. As societies perception becomes intertwined with that of scientific research, mis/disinformation runs rampant through American communities causing many Americans to be misinformed on the current pandemic which can have serious repercussions. However, the ever-growing realm of

mis/disinformation is fueled by various conspiracies that continue to negatively impact the American public's trust towards scientists and their research. My research is intended to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public trust toward scientists within the United States and how political ideologies and the spread of false information are prominent issues for the American scientific community.

### **Introduction**

Within the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the public's trust towards scientists and their research. The political agendas of the two most dominant political parties in the country, Democrats, and Republicans, has highlighted the contrasting values and ideologies between the two groups; as a result, the level of support towards the field of science, when discussing the pandemic, has illustrated less trust on the Republican's side as their political ambitions continue to override the research pertaining to informing the American public, and preventing, combating, and eliminating the viral infection. From international to domestic outlets, populism possesses the power to spur members of society who feel unheard or forgotten to side with populist leaders which in the case of America was former, right-wing, President Donald Trump. Unlike, left-wing Democrats, Republicans are more focused on maintaining the economy which has become weakened by the global pandemic ravaging the entire global economy. Fueled by the populist agenda, mis/disinformation runs rampant plaguing the scientific community:

reasons include the falsification of data, the spread of mis/disinformation throughout individual's social groups to reject scientific research and guidance (Roozenbeek, Schneider and Dryhurst 12).

Their unfortunate reluctance to accept and aid scientists has furthered the lack of trust between the two sides: being right-wing Republicans and scientists. Furthermore, due to the massive variety of attainable information/data regarding COVID-19, mis/disinformation is crippling the scientific community and their ability to serve the American public; mis/disinformation is a combustion of society's beliefs/opinions, shared and manipulated information/research to confuse the public and derail scientists' mission, and the creation of conspiracies to destabilize communities within the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced many issues which have negatively impacted the American public's trust towards scientists and their research. The research I have conducted will highlight the issues addressed which currently pose as obstacles for scientists and researchers to connect and inform the American public to end the current pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

The objective of my paper is to analyze how "the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted public trust towards scientists and research within the United States". Based on my evaluation of the literature, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected American society's perception of scientists and has

crippled the amount of public trust towards COVID-19 related research.

When it comes to evaluating the influences on the American public's beliefs and behaviors, political affiliations, racial background, and the dissemination of mis/disinformation through various outlets has shown, through my research, to impact America's perception of the Covid-19 pandemic. Obviously, there are differences between the two prominent political parties in America, being the Democrats and Republicans, which ultimately shapes each party's opinions toward COVID-19 related findings with conservatives likely to be against scientists and their research and Democrats more supportive due to differences in party ideologies, agendas, and values. Regardless of the person, people whose political beliefs align with conservatives are more susceptible to conspiracies and negligence of implemented measure that combat/control the global pandemic (Plohl and Musil 9). While Democrats are more probable to accept and adhere to scientists and their findings, Republicans perceive modern COVID-19 related science to infringe on their rights and cripple the American economy (Kerr, Panagopoulos and van der Linden 2) & (Druckman, Klar and Krupnikov 225). However, while political influences are prominent in affecting the American public's perception of scientists and their research in the United States, their distrust is further fueled by the rampant dissemination of disinformation that attempts to undermine, refute, and expel the efforts of scientists' research. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic until now, false information that exists convinces ill-informed receivers to ignore medical findings regarding vaccines, protective

measures (Roozenbeek, Schneider and Dryhurst 12), and knowledge about the virus in general; in addition, social media is posing a massive threat to American public trust of scientists and their research because of intentional malice to spread false research that will provoke and incite fear in the American people.

### **Methodology**

The public trust in American societies throughout the United States has been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic due to political influences and the vast spread of mis/disinformation. Using a qualitative method to collect my research thoroughly supported my findings in examining the impact of the pandemic on public trust towards scientists within the United States. Mixed between scientific/academic journals, their research and findings bolstered my own research by providing analyses of the various affects the pandemic has had on public trusts towards the field of science: distinguished sources to include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) providing further understanding when defining key topics regarding the spread of falsified information within the United States. By collecting data from various researchers, I cross examined published articles within journals and various sources which provided important information regarding the subject being researched. Furthermore, through data triangulation, valid/credible material was retrieved with the additional further step of validating the sources used in my retrieved material. While textual evidence

sufficed, numerical data could expand my findings further when analyzing the difference between Democrat's and Republican's perception of scientists and their research. However, my retrieved sources proved credible with the added support of most being peer-reviewed and published in academic journals.

### **Analysis**

With the COVID-19 pandemic plaguing the entire international community, it has become prevalent, specifically within the United States, that political influences play an important role in shaping public trust towards scientists and their research. Evidence shows, the further right a person's political views are on the political spectrum the more susceptible they are to external influences on their trust towards pandemic findings and measures (Plohl and Musil 9). Due to their conservative beliefs, right leaning Republicans are more likely to reject scientific findings: this is effectively illustrated when analyzing the behaviors and beliefs of Trump administration supporters. Former Republican President Donald Trump, who intentionally criticized the World Health Organization (WHO), scientists critical to the scientific mission of understanding, combating, and protecting against the pandemic, for failing to successfully prevent the pandemic and achieve their new mission possesses great ability to fuel the diminishing levels of trust between the American people and scientists such as Chief Medical Advisor to the United States, Dr. Anthony Fauci (Bayram and Shields 2313). As Commander and Chief, charismatic President Donald

Trump has the ability to rattle his followers to neglect and disregard the scientific community who is responsible for helping humanity persevere through the deadly pandemic. Donald Trump's criticisms of the WHO diminishes a significant portion of the American public's trust, considering the number of Republicans who support the administration or are drawn to his beliefs, of one of the world's leading scientists. Before the 2019 pandemic, the WHO was not popular conversation amongst the American public, or in the world, but has now blossomed in regard to international notoriety, however, due to their initial low profile and the fact that many Americans lack the interest to seek out personal knowledge on the subject, many Americans remain(ed) un-informed on the WHO's credibility/capability, which results in the significant impact 'heuristic' forces have on manipulating their perceptions when it comes to trusting prominent scientists within the organization (Bayram and Shields 2313).

Most Americans, like many people in the world, focus on subjects that impacts their day to day lives, to include motivators and role models, and before the pandemic, no interests were given towards scientific organizations or their research; this ultimately makes them susceptible to what their role models say, in that, followers or listeners are under the impression that the speaker is well-informed on the subject when they are not, which in the case of the United States is Donald Trump to the American people.

Despite the Democrats of America being much more accepting and adhering to scientists and their research, Republicans have illustrated a willingness to negate and disobey science related to the pandemic. While scientists emphasized the importance of protective measures against the coronavirus and the implementation of various policies to do just that, Republican officials were keen on maintaining the country's economic achievements and continuing its success in order to avoid the devastating economic ramifications experienced worldwide in other countries (Evans and Hargittai 1). Rather than adhere to the warnings of scientists, the Trump Administration opted to continue as normal, putting the lives of the American people at risk and increasing the detriments caused by the coronavirus, in order to keep businesses alive and further the capitalist agenda. While the United States' economy remained stronger in comparison to the rest of the world's economies, it was done at the expense of American lives; yet, the allure of a strong economy, meant money in the pockets of the people, which translated to more Republicans supporting the Trump Administration due to their financial desires. Republican officials within the Trump Administration and those involved in the country's economic sectors pertaining to businesses enriched their arguments by discrediting and slandering scientific research and by connecting to their supporters' hearts which includes job retention (Evans and Hargittai 1). Trump's Administration and various Republican officials knew how to connect with their targeted audience: through their pockets. For the Republican audience, the strength of their economy is a key objective, and

if the American people are following the preventive measures to fight the pandemic, employment will decrease, and households will lose money, as witnessed in other countries.

The Trump Administration had an interesting way of connecting with people: most of the targeted audience was Republican and following the economic crisis of 2009, various sectors important to the American economy had collapsed making American societies breeding grounds for populism (Jacobs 23). While no one could foresee the pandemic, the economic crisis of '09 still rang deep in the United States and Trump's brief reign during the COVID-19 era continued projecting the same message of keeping the American economy strong. Again, during a crisis like that of '09 and the current pandemic, crises is where populism flourishes and populist leaders are made. Whether left-wing or right-wing, populism comes in all forms, however, for the American people, it came in the form of Donald Trump; in the case of the former President, the American people who wanted a voice found that in the Republican party against who they saw as the authority: scientists (Evans and Hargittai 3). With scientists now (to include the newly elected Democrat Party), during the pandemic, at the helm of society, most Republicans feel oppressed as new measures and changes in society conflict with their conservative ideologies to include: the loss of 'human rights' from lockdowns and mask mandates, the government controlling more aspects of their lives with the aid of scientists, and a divergence from their political agendas

(Kerr, Panagopoulos and van der Linden 2). Republicans no longer possess power within the government, and with a Democrat Administration and Scientists dictating domestic policy, Republican's trust in their government and scientists and their research is bound to decrease more than it already had. American's form their values, morals, and ideologies most often through the prominent speakers in their society and their nationalist directives that influence the level of trust they have towards prominent scientists similar to the WHO (Bayram and Shields 2313); so, when scientists are enforcing international restrictions and sharing their research to the global community, this can infringe on the Republican's agenda. On the other hand, for the left-leaning Democrats of America who are usually more open to international cooperation and are less fueled by nationalistic qualities, a stronger sense of trust is instilled in the scientific community and are more likely to accept their research with less of a belief that society is merely conforming to scientist's personal agendas (Bayram and Shields 2314). The political objectives of liberals often align with the scientific community due to their lack of conservatism. This is evident in the current Biden Administration where the government works in tandem with scientists, much better than the previous administration, in order to combat the disease. As illustrated in researchers Yann Algan, Daniel Cohen, Eva Davoine, Martial Foucault, and Stefanie Stantcheva's graph "Trust in Government", various countries' level of trust in their governments and how it reflected on compliance level placed the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Brazil with the lowest level of trust

(Algan, Cohen and Davoine 10). The four countries in the study all had (the United States no longer) conservative political administrations which is reflected in their level of trust, but, unlike the United Kingdom and France, the political leadership under the previous Trump Administration and the current Bolsonaro dictatorship exposed their societies to their criticisms against protective measures in limiting the spread of COVID-19 (Algan, Cohen and Davoine 9). If the American public trusted scientific guidance on wearing masks, adhering to lockdowns and social distancing, and receiving the vaccine, the cases would be much lower, however, having not followed scientific findings, the United States and Brazil are among the countries with the highest number of cases (Eichengreen, Aksoy and Saka 2). The negligence on behalf of right-wing Republicans for scientific findings of the pandemic and their reluctance to accepting health measures advised by the scientific community highlights another prominent issue when assessing the American public's trust toward scientists and their research: misinformation and disinformation.

As described by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on their website under the section titled, "How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation", one must differentiate between misinformation and disinformation: people who spread misinformation do not do so with evil intentions while disinformation is intentional wrongdoing on behalf of the spreader/creator (CDC); with the abundance and easy access to mis/disinformation in the everyday lives of Americans, the scientific

community is jeopardized in their goal of ending the pandemic. The impact COVID-19 related mis/disinformation has on the American public deters many Americans from accepting scientific research which diminishes vaccine rollouts, and the implementation of measures becomes obsolete as the information continues to disseminate throughout society (Roozenbeek, Schneider and Dryhurst 12). Misinformation plays a prominent role when factoring in the reasons for nonadherence to said preventive protocols, and as more people receive the information, those vulnerable to external influences, given the importance of the source, are more inclined to sharing this information. As this information continues to circulate throughout various networks of communication, the fiction becomes clouded in the actual facts. In the month of February 2020 alone, over 360 million videos and about 19,000 articles relating to the pandemic were uploaded and distributed around the world with the majority being misinformation and lacking scientific knowledge/support (Rudra and Kautish 334). Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) explains how the dangerous spread of false information around the world resulted in the hospitalization of an estimated 6,000 people from January 2020 to March 2020 alone (WHO). Much of the factual information published by scientists was thrown into disarray with the fiction and resulted in a misinformed America. As the information became overwhelming to most Americans, the sense of trust in science diminished due to their confusion with the influx of various COVID-19 related information which included factual and fictional information.

Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube contribute the most to the spread of mis/disinformation as people are able to pose their thoughts/attained data from another source, share it at will, or even participate in discussions/verbal exchanges (Allington, Duffy and Wessely 1763). These platforms provide false information with a seamless route through the global network to reach all corners of American society and the international community. With the massive virtual population amongst varying platforms, the masses share their perceptions regarding the pandemic which may often conflict with that of science, essentially resulting in a combustion of falsified material. For example, as described in researchers Carlos Cuello-Garcia, Giordano Perez-Gaxiola, and Ludo van Amelsvoort's article, "Social media can have an impact on how we manage and investigate the COVID-19 pandemic", a table titled "Impact of fast information exchange through social media for different stakeholders within clinical epidemiology" explains the advantages, disadvantages, and various methods to combat the disadvantages, however, despite social media allowing for patients to expand their decisions regarding proper healthcare, medical officials having the availability of new and constantly developed research and/or the ability to consult colleagues, and scientists able to participate in their field of study virtually to create, spread, and analyze research, the disadvantages have much more extreme consequences such as the spread of false medical advice to both patients and medical officials, fake publishers with little to no credibility, weak/low-quality material, and an extreme abundance of material to digest

(Cuello-Garcia, Perez-Gaxiola and van Amelsvoort 200). The challenges posed to the field of science in combating the spread of mis/disinformation is a matter of life and death: a misinformed America can contribute to incorrect medical advice towards the virus. The more Americans understand/perceive scientific findings as false/fabricated research, the less they will be willing to put their trust in them; furthermore, most of American society is already unknowledgeable with regard to the research pertaining to COVID-19 and with the scientific community already releasing conflicting findings, the effects of mis/disinformation further the distrust instilled between the American public and scientists (Eichengreen, Aksoy and Saka 2).

Their lack of knowledge pertaining scientific research has become apparent in the current conspiracies that have developed from the spread of mis/disinformation; conspiracies include, but are not limited to: COVID-19 being used by an unknown country as a weapon of mass destruction (WMD), a tactic for elites to control the masses through forced vaccinations and measures, the intentional or accidental release of the virus of a lab in China, and falsified numbers to dramatize the seriousness of the pandemic (Lynas). Conspiracies, as the previously mentioned, are constantly circulating through social media platforms along with the scientific findings of distinguished scientists; ultimately, these two counterparts the former being fiction/the latter being non-fiction, meddles with the imaginations of the receivers and creates new/falsified information. With external and

domestic threats, scientists are constantly dealing with intentional malice towards their findings and research to sabotage their efforts in ending the global pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The problems that have arisen within the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted how scientists and their research are perceived in the public eye. Politics has risen to the forefront of the challenges facing the scientific community as they have become entangled between the political rivals of Democrats and Republicans. During the initial stages of the pandemic, the distrust of right-wing Republicans was illustrated through various policies that ignored scientific advising which was reflected in their disregard for public safety. Additionally, the impact of political leadership's influence diminished their follower's trust towards scientists and their findings. Not limited to political leadership, mis/disinformation is highly responsible for the number of misinformed Americans who are constantly exposed to invalid/false information. Circulating through various platforms and being created by enemies of the American people, misinformation and disinformation is meant to destabilize American communities and instill fear/distrust towards the scientists and their research. As a result, the American public's trust towards scientists continues to decrease and with the pandemic still raging on, there seems, for the time being, to be no end in sight.

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