

The Impact of Bipartisan Bifurcation on Corona Vaccination in the United States

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Abstract. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has brought disastrous impact to people globally. The United States has been among the most affected. COVID-19 and vaccine decision have evolved to a hotly debated topic among American public, as well as Democratic and Republican politicians. While ample research has been conducted on how politicians shape public opinion and behavior, only a few have dove deeper into the specific influence of Democratic and Republican politicians on public views regarding COVID-19 and vaccine decisions. This paper aims to evaluate the impact from these politicians by analyzing the previous research on partisanship, political theory, public opinion and behavior. The paper finds out that contrasting party ideology between Democratic and Republican politicians contribute to differing vaccine decisions. The paper also pinpoints party affiliation as a factor influencing people's opinion on COVID-19 and vaccine decision. In response, the paper proposes public awareness campaign by NGOs to address the influence of party ideology; promotes bipartisan dialogue and collaboration on COVID-19 to mitigate the effect of party affiliation. Both Democratic and Republican politicians must work together to minimize the political perception of COVID, ensuring it remains a health decision.

Keywords: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), partisanship, party ideology, polarization, party affiliation.

1. Introduction

The declaration of COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern was first made by the head of World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020. On May 5, 2023, this declaration came to an end. There were hundreds of millions of confirmed cases and millions of lives had been taken away globally. The United States had the highest confirmed cases and death cases. The impact of COVID-19 is self-evident, and vaccine is often considered as an effective tool to mitigate the impact from pandemic. According to CDC, over 140 millions of vaccines have been distributed in the United States. 81.4% of U.S. population have been vaccinated with at least one dose and 69.5% of the population have completed primary series [1]. The process of reaching this vaccination rate in the U.S was not easy. Normally, vaccine decision is a health decision that protects recipients and people around them.

However, whether to get vaccinated or not has become a controversial political topic in the United States. In 2021, David R. Jones and Monika L. McDermott conducted surveys focusing on whether respondents have been vaccinated; respondents' vaccination willingness; and what suggestion they would offer a friend who inquired about vaccination. The results revealed that it is more likely for Democrats to favor vaccination than for Republicans [2]. Just like gun control and abortion, vaccine decision becomes one of the political topics that polarize Americans. There is nothing wrong with holding different opinion on a topic; however, polarization on vaccine decision will largely impede government's efforts in reaching mass immunization and controlling the spread of disease.

But what is causing divergence of vaccine decision? Is it caused by parties' policy and position on vaccines? Is it caused by people's party affiliation and party identification? Or is it caused by speech from political leaders or media reports on vaccines? This paper aims to identify and analyze in what ways Democratic Party and Republican Party are influencing people's vaccine decision. More specifically, the paper evaluates different causes of the influence, relationships between the influence and political ideology of the two parties. Then, the paper discusses ways to reduce the causes of the influence, making vaccine decision less a partisan issue. The purpose of this paper is understanding

the impact of Democratic Party and Republican Party to people's vaccine decision. Thus, the political nature of vaccine decisions can be successfully reduced so that vaccination rates can be raised more quickly, and people's health and lives can be better protected in the future.

2. The Influence of Party Divisions on Vaccination

It may seem strange how people's partisanship can predict their vaccine decision. Partisanship is about politics and vaccine is about medicine. It will make sense after understanding two theories about how partisanship affect people's opinions, beliefs, and behaviors. Jones and McDermott argued that individual's partisanship led to biases when processing information. People are more likely to trust and agree with the ideas from the party they identified with and distrust and disagree with opposite party [2]. This theory can be tested in the case of the U.S. in which Democrats-controlled executive branch encourages people to take vaccine. Then, those people who identified with Democratic party are more likely to trust and agree with the advocates.

In contrast, those people who identified with the Republican party are more likely to distrust and disagree with the advocate from Biden Administration. Jones and McDermott proposed second theory which categorize partisanship as a social identity. This theory stated that being part of a political party is like being part of a club or group. People tend to adopt the beliefs and positions from your group because you want to fit in and feel a sense of belonging. For instance, a strong Democrat will want to know what other Democrats think about an issue and is likely to adopt that position to feel connected with fellow Democrats [2]. If one applies this theory to the case of vaccine decision, a Democrats will support COVID vaccination to fit in because other Democrats held such position. A Republican will oppose COVID vaccination also for the sake of fitting in. And this explains how partisanship is affecting people's vaccine decision and how vaccine decision becomes so political polarized in the U.S.

3. Analysis on the Problems

3.1. Party Ideology

As the two major ruling parties of the United States, the Democratic Party and Republican Party have been competing at the executive, legislative, and judicial levels. The two parties are opponents to each other on a lists of policy stance, such as abortion, gun rights, healthcare, climate change, etc. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, whether to get vaccinated or not became another topic that splits Democrats and Republicans. This essay argues that divergence on vaccine decision is an epitome of conflicting ideology between Democratic and Republican parties.

It is widely acknowledged that Democrats lean towards a liberal ideology, while Republicans tend to favor a conservative ideology. According to James E. Campbell, the key issue that sharply divides liberals and conservatives is their stance on the role, size, and power of the government. Campbell conducted a related survey which shed light on this divide, revealing that liberals tend to support a strong and active government, whereas conservatives are more inclined towards a limited and constrained government [3]. This ideological distinction is fundamental to understanding the contrasting policy preferences and political priorities of these two major political groups in the United States.

This antagonistic ideology on the role of government is carried out in the U.S. politics in which the Democratic Party proposes policies that requires a strong government involvement, while the Republican Party advocates for policies that require minimal government intervention. For instance, the Biden administration aimed to increase COVID vaccination rate by implementing vaccine requirements for federal employees, contractors, and CMS certified facilities, etc.

In contrast, Republican politicians tend to oppose vaccine mandates. According to Bolsen, Republicans criticized vaccine requirements as a violation of constitutional rights and an attack on personal freedom and liberty [4]. Consequently, there is a noticeable correlation between a health

choice and political ideology if comparing the vaccine preferences and government preferences from Democrats and Republicans. Democrats' liberal preference of an expanded government entails a vaccine mandate from Biden administration which means a strong government involvement into people's vaccine decision.

However, Republicans' conservative preference of a limited government entails an opposition to vaccine requirements in which if the executive branch is Republican party, there was little intervention into people's vaccine decision. In summary, people's support or opposition on COVID vaccine is practically a representation of liberals or conservatives' preference over the role of government.

3.2. Party Affiliation

The liberal and conservative ideology of Democrats and Republicans is not the only factor that influence people's stance on COVID vaccination. The following section discusses how party affiliations shape public opinion on COVID-19 and decision on vaccination. Before diving into this problem, it is essential to establish consensus on the definition of party affiliation which is how people currently viewed themselves in politics. For instance, surveys from Pew Research Center question people's party affiliation by asking whether they identify as a Republican, Democrat, or Independent [5]. Some may doubt the relationships between individual's party affiliation and vaccine decision. A 2020 survey research conducted by Marc T. Kiviniemi and his colleagues provides sufficient evidence that will address the suspicion. To measure people's political affiliation, respondents were asked to identify themselves from these six categories: Strong Democrat, Weak Democrat, Independent-Lean Democrat, Strong Republican, Weak Republican, and Independent-Lean Republican. The research revealed that people who identified as a strong Democrat assessed COVID-19 risk as being higher for themselves and others and took more preventive actions than people who identified as a strong Republican [6]. The results present a logical relationship: when individuals show more concern about a disease, they are also likely to take more preventive measures against infection. The results also indicate a correlation between individual's party affiliation and risk perception and prevention action towards COVID-19.

While individuals' perceptions of risk and preventive behaviors regarding COVID-19 do not directly equate to their opinions and vaccination choices, the former can offer valuable insights into anticipating the latter. Specifically, an individual's risk perception of COVID-19 can predict their opinion on the virus, while their preventive behavior can foreshadow their vaccination choices. For example, based on the research result, a strong Democrat had a higher risk perception about COVID-19 than a strong Republican. This suggests a strong Democrat is more concerned with the risk and harm from the virus, and a strong Republican is less concerned with these negative effects of virus. In addition, a strong Democrat will take more preventions against COVID-19 than a strong Republican. Although vaccination is not listed among the ten preventive measures in the study, it is widely regarded as a means of protection against viruses. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that a strong Democrat is more likely to get vaccinated than a strong Republican.

Based on the analysis on the survey research, this paper build upon the findings of the research and argued that party affiliation shapes the public opinion on COVID-19 and decision on vaccination. More accurately, a strong Democrat tends to be more apprehensive about the risks and repercussions of the virus, while a strong Republican may be less concerned with its potential negative impact. Consequently, a strong Democrat is more likely to pursue vaccination compared to a strong Republican. The following paragraph presents more evidence that will explain why party affiliation shapes people's opinion on COVID-19 and vaccine decision.

A strong Republican may be less concerned with the negative impact of COVID-19 than a strong Democrat. The party affiliation shapes this kind of risk perception and opinion due to politically biased media coverage of the pandemic. Matt Motta, Dominik Stecula, and Christina Farhart conducted research about COVID-19 misinformation from right-leaning media in the U.S. The research suggested that right-leaning media such as Fox News and Breitbart were more prone to

disseminate COVID misinformation. As a result, viewers of these media were more inclined to accept such misinformation. This led many of these individuals to believe that the CDC had overstated the risks of COVID-19 [7]. The research brought meaningful implication in which the right-leaning media coverage of COVID misinformation made its viewers to be less concern with risk of the pandemic. Precisely speaking, these viewers were most likely politically right-wing/conservatives and were most likely to be Republicans. A Pew Research Center survey stated that 93% of Republicans and lean Republicans named Fox News as their main political news sources compared to 6% if Democrats and lean Democrats [8].

Combining the Motta, Stecula and Farhart's research and survey data from Pew Research Center, this paper is able to explain how party affiliation shapes risk perception and opinion about COVID-19 using media. The media and its target audience are mutually reinforcing. For instance, Republicans are motivated by their party affiliation to consumed right-leaning media sources. In the same time, these right-leaning media are motivated to produce media sources with conservative agenda to attract more Republican viewers. In the case COVID-19, most Republicans consume and accept right-leaning media that tends to spread COVID misinformation. In the end, misinformation makes Republicans to distrust CDC's emphasis on the risks of pandemic, and consider COVID-19 as a less threatening disease. This entire process illustrates why a strong Republican may be less worried about the negative effects of COVID-19 than a strong Democrat and how party affiliation shapes people's opinion on virus accompanied with media coverage of COVID misinformation.

A strong Republican may be less likely to take vaccines than a strong Democrat. The party affiliation shapes this divergence of vaccine decision due to polarized cues from political elites. Cues are defined as messages that unite or divide public. Political elites are the sender of cues and public is the receiver of cues. The receiver is responsive but reliant on the cues which requires the senders to be consistent and accurate [9]. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S, an ideal cue would be a bipartisan and timely statement that mobilizes Americans to take preventive measure against the pandemic. Unfortunately, this did not happen and Democratic party and Republican party remain polarized regarding preventive measures against the pandemic. Jon Green and his colleagues examined the cues from current members of the U.S. House and Senate during COVID-19 pandemic and found out that early in the pandemic, Democrats often spoke about the crisis, highlighting concerns for public health and American workers.

Meanwhile, Republicans focused more on China and the interests of businesses. Researchers argued that polarization in cues might have hindered public's response to the pandemic [9]. The public, regardless of the party affiliation, will acknowledge the cues that derived from the consensus of political elites. However, when political elites and cues are polarized, people's party affiliation will determine which cues to accept. For example, a Republican voter will be less alarmed by the pandemic since Republican politicians send cues that prioritize China and economy over risk of virus. Consequently, Republicans will be less inclined to get vaccinated. On the other hand, a Democratic voter will be more concerned with the pandemic because Democratic politicians deliver cues that emphasize on risk of pandemic. Thus, Democrats are more likely to choose vaccination.

This correlation between party affiliation, cues and vaccine decision can be further tested based on another intriguing research survey about the politicians' endorsement of vaccination and Republicans' vaccine willingness. The findings indicated that unvaccinated Republicans who were exposed to endorsements from Republican elites expressed a 7.0% higher intention to vaccinate compared to those who saw endorsements from Democratic elites, and a 5.7% higher intention than those in the neutral control group [10]. This result indicates that party affiliation and political cues influence individuals' vaccination decisions. Specifically, if a Republican voter receives pro-vaccination cues from Republican politicians, they are more inclined to get vaccinated than if the cues come from Democratic politicians. The character of cues and result from the research helps to explain why a strong Republican may be more hesitant to get vaccinated compared to a strong Democrat given that the majority of Democratic politicians advocate for COVID vaccination.

4. Suggestions

This section provides suggestions to the problems that are identified above. To address conflicting party ideology's impact to diverged vaccine decision, the paper proposes NGOs to launch public awareness campaign in the U.S. that educate people to ditch the political perspective in vaccine debate and keep vaccination as a pure health decision. This awareness campaign should be both digital and physical to the public. According to research on effectiveness of a COVID-19 public education campaign, *We Can Do This*, the first-does COVID vaccination was successfully promoted using digital campaign in which the likelihood of getting vaccination increased by 125% due to an increase in digital campaign [11]. The positive effective of digital campaign in advocating is visible. In the case of party ideology and vaccination, NGOs should establish public awareness campaign that is tailored specifically to encourage public to view vaccination solely as a health decision, rather than through a political lens. The non-partisanship character of NGOs will cause less suspicion and appears to be nonpartial among public with different political views.

To mitigate the impact of party affiliation to public opinion of COVID-19 and vaccine decision, this paper promotes bipartisan dialogue and collaboration on COVID-19 pandemic. A divided group of people will find it challenging to collaborate and make any achievement. This also applies to politicians in the U.S. Polarized Democratic politicians and Republican politicians should engage in more practical dialogue regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Both sides should recognize their difference but come up with a bipartisan statement or legislation that informs the public about the actual risk of pandemic and encourage the public to take preventive measures (such as vaccination) against the pandemic. Policies issued by a unified government are more widely accepted and more likely to be trust by public.

A Pew Research Center survey shows that 75% of Americans feel trust in the federal government has diminished. Additionally, 64% believe that this reduced trust impedes effective problem-solving. Some respondents attribute the growing political polarization as a contributing factor to this distrust in the federal government [12]. This survey result shows a casual relation between political polarization and distrust in government which further indicates the importance of a unified government in gaining public trust. A bipartisan statement or legislation from a unified government is the premise for public to trust the government and accept the advocates regardless of their party affiliation. Thus, it is critical for American politicians to craft bipartisan statement or legislation that clearly communicate the genuine risks of the pandemic to the public and advocate for preventive measures, such as vaccination, to combat its spread. This approach enhances the possibility of public support irrespective of their party affiliation.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on examine the impact of bipartisan polarization on COVID-19 vaccination in the United States. Specifically, this paper seeks to explore causes of the impact and connection between the parties' political ideologies and their impact. Further, this paper proposes strategies to mitigates these impacts with an ultimate goal to depoliticize vaccine decision and to increase vaccination rate. After analyzing multiples sources, this paper identifies that ideology clash between the Democratic and Republican parties cause divergence in people's vaccine decision. In response, the paper recommends NGOs to initiate public awareness campaigns in the U.S., urging the public to set aside political biases in the vaccine debate and view vaccination solely as a health decision. The paper identifies that party affiliation shapes public opinion on COVID-19 and decision on vaccination.

Consequently, the paper suggests both Democratic and Republican politicians to engage in dialogue and collaboration on COVID-19 pandemic. A bipartisan statement or legislation that transparently conveys the risks of the pandemic and champions preventive measures can gain public acceptance on vaccination, regardless of party affiliation. This paper aims to bring meaningful understanding on how politicized the pandemic and vaccine decision have been. This paper aspires to offer helpful suggestions to American public and Democratic and Republican politicians when

dealing with COVID-19 pandemic and potential future crisis. Imagine these two parties are two train carriages guiding American public. Effectively combating the pandemic and future crisis requires both carriages to move in the same direction. It is crucial to recognize that this paper is founded upon analysis of theories and evidence. This paper also preestablish COVID vaccine as an effective tool against virus. Future research could challenge the argument of the paper using designed experiment or survey.

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