

## MESSENGER IN CHIEF: PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND PUBLIC RESPONSE TO COVID 19 IN THE U.S.

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### Abstract

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Party identification is an important factor when considering public responses. Individuals with opposing party identifications often react differently to political messaging. In 2020, this expectation extended to the Covid 19 pandemic. Public responses to pandemic messages quickly began to divide. Why did party identification become relevant in explaining public reactions to Covid 19 messaging? The analysis seeks to answer this question by examining two interconnected factors: political ideology, and the role of the messenger in explaining public reactions to Covid related messaging. Face masks represent the first aspect of Covid 19 over which public opinion in the United States became strongly divided. Public opinion data related to mask-wearing is presented, including differences in mask usage between Republicans and non-Republicans in the spring and summer of 2020. The implications of divided opinions about mask usage extended well beyond 2020. The analysis recommends government officials understand and consider the significance of political ideology and party identification when crafting and disseminating information about public health.

**Key words:** Partisanship, Political Parties, Public Opinion, Political Ideology

### INTRODUCTION

Party identification has long been understood as an important factor when considering public responses to political issues. It is expected people with opposing party identifications will react differently to political messaging across a multitude of topics. In 2020,<sup>1</sup> this expectation extended to an area of public life less obviously

connected to political messaging – the Covid 19 pandemic. The virus became a matter of public health in the United States in January of 2020. In the months that followed, both public health leaders and elected officials began to craft messaging to inform the public about the virus. Interestingly, public responses to these messages quickly began to divide among individuals with differing views about the role of

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government. Why did party identification become relevant in explaining public reactions to Covid 19 messaging?

The following analysis seeks to answer this question by examining two interconnected factors; political ideology, which often serves as the root of party identification, and the role of the messenger in explaining public reactions to Covid related messaging. The analysis will explore the development of political ideology, its significance in predicting party identification, and explain why party identification is important to understanding reactions to public health recommendations. Next, Covid 19 messaging is examined. Specifically, the analysis presents a content analysis of former President Trump's Covid 19 messaging about face masks between January and July of 2020. The president's messaging during the first six months of the pandemic is especially useful because it was during the early months of the pandemic that public opinions about Covid 19 were established, and then divided. Face masks represent the first aspect of Covid 19 over which public opinion became strongly divided. The implications of these divided opinions extended well beyond 2020.

Public opinion data related to mask-wearing is presented, including differences in mask usage between Republicans and non-Republicans in the spring and summer of 2020. The analysis concludes by recommending government officials understand and consider the significance of political ideology and party identification when crafting and disseminating information about public health.

## **POLITICAL IDEOLOGY**

The United States is dominated by a strong 2-party political system. The tradition of two parties has existed since the country's conception. President George Washington, in his 1796 Farewell Address cautioned:

"However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion."

Despite Washington's concerns, a strong 2 party system, has provided the framework for American politics since Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson defeated Federalist John Adams in 1800. These two political parties represented different opinions about the proper role of government. Beneath these differing opinions were differing values. The values that informed these opinions developed across generations and included views toward a variety of propositions about the proper structure of government, the role of individuals, and their relationship to government. These opinions, which were organized and published as a series of essays in *The Federalist Papers* and in the *Anti-Federalist Papers*, represented competing political ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

Political ideology can be defined as the sum of values and attitudes toward any number of policy areas, political leaders, or other political issues.<sup>3</sup> Political ideology is described as a deep psychological attachment because it develops from values.<sup>4</sup> Values are strongly held beliefs,

and they have been shown to have a significant influence on political predispositions.<sup>5</sup> This is important in the current context because it indicates deeply held values may predict attitudes, toward multiple areas of politics and government.<sup>6</sup> General values inform, for example, attitudes toward specific government policy: An individual's general values toward the concept of human rights informs their attitudes about a variety of government policies relevant to human rights. General values also inform attitudes toward specific political leaders. An individual's general values toward qualities like integrity or experience inform their attitudes when choosing among candidates in an election. The two main political parties in the United States represent these different values and attitudes through their differing agendas and policy proposals. The parties are led and supported by political leaders, candidates, and officeholders who represent these differences. The strong relationship between political ideology and party identification suggests it is important to understand the development of the attitudes individuals have toward political parties and political leaders.

Attitudes can be categorized as long term and short term. Long term attitudes are those that remain stable across a long period of time. For example, in the United States public opinion polling indicates a majority of Americans have long held a positive attitude toward the concept of individual liberty.<sup>7</sup> Short term attitudes are those that change across time.<sup>8</sup> Attitudes toward marriage laws represent an example of an issue toward which attitudes have changed across time. Scholars have found individuals' attitudes toward political parties typically represent long-term attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

Attitudes have both a cognitive and affective component.<sup>10</sup> In other words, attitudes are based on both information and emotion. The cognitive component of attitude develops from information learned. It is necessary to note individuals, when seeking information, tend to turn toward sources that reinforce existing attitudes: psychology scholars have labeled this concept confirmation bias.<sup>11</sup> It must also be noted whether the information is accurate or inaccurate, it can influence the cognitive component of an individual's attitude about related government action. This point is particularly relevant to a discussion of Covid 19. Recent scholarship notes both misinformation (information that is untrue or misleading) and disinformation (information that is purposefully untrue or misleading) has influenced media coverage of Covid 19.<sup>12</sup>

The affective component of attitude refers to the emotional component. The emotional component can be especially influential on attitudes when combined with salience. Individuals are more likely to have strong feelings about a government policy if the policy is perceived to affect their lives personally.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have found when an individual views a policy as salient, emotional appeals to influence the person's attitude can be quite powerful.<sup>14</sup> Covid 19 represents an issue that has been salient to individuals in multiple ways. Thus, individuals should be expected to have strong emotions about Covid related policy.

The relationship between deeply held values and resulting attitudes toward government suggests it is important to understand how ideology develops. Individuals are not born with values. Rather, the development of values is influenced by the environment in which individ-

uals mature, and the manner in which they are socialized. Political socialization refers to the long process of “largely informal learning that almost everyone experiences throughout life as a consequence of interactions with parents, family, friends, neighbors, peers, colleagues, and so forth.”<sup>15</sup> Agents of socialization refer to the institutions, processes, and people that influence each individual, and scholars have demonstrated agents of socialization have a powerful influence on the development of political ideology.<sup>16</sup> Each person has a unique life experience, and no two individuals are socialized in exactly the same manner. At the same time, individuals are socialized in ways that correspond with values that may be typical of a given group.<sup>17</sup>

The first agents of socialization for most individuals are family members, particularly parents and other primary caregivers. The socialization process starts early, and children are socialized by both words and actions.<sup>18</sup> Some families address the political world regularly while in other families, politics is rarely mentioned. The amount of exposure to politics is in itself an act of socialization.<sup>19</sup> The ideological expressions to which children are exposed are numerous and can range from reactions to media reports to participation in the political process. Children are exposed to an increasing number and variety of agents of socialization as they move into adulthood: religious institutions, schools, teachers, friends, community leaders, and media are all examples of individuals and entities that contribute to the ongoing socialization process. Scholars have long understood socialization as a lifelong process.<sup>20</sup>

The values and attitudes individuals develop through socialization result in political ideol-

ogy. Political ideology in the United States is commonly measured along a liberal – conservative spectrum. It is important to emphasize not every individual develops a coherent political ideology or identifies as liberal or conservative. For example, an individual may have what can be described as liberal attitudes toward some policies while holding more conservative attitudes toward other policies. Data, however, suggest the majority of Americans do identify with a coherent set of values. The identification is observable. In 2020 35% of Americans identified as moderate, 36% identified as conservative, and 25% as liberal.<sup>21</sup> These data are evidence that the majority of Americans identify as liberal or conservative: 61% of Americans do not identify as ideologically moderate.

In 1960, the seminal study *The American Voter* described party identification as the long-term psychological attachment to a political party. The authors argued party identification, like ideology, is a result of socialization.<sup>22</sup> 59% of Americans reported alignment with either the Republican or Democratic parties in 2020: 29 percent of Americans identified as Republican, 30 percent as Democrats, and 39 percent as Independent.<sup>23</sup> It is theoretically interesting to consider reasons why an individual identifies as an Independent as opposed to a Republican or a Democrat. On a practical level, Americans must make ideological evaluations about information within the framework of the 2- party system that dominates politics and government in the United States: Independents must typically choose between voting for Republicans or Democrats.

Trust in political leaders is correlated with party identification. Members of the public are more likely to trust information from a political

leader with whom they share political values.<sup>24</sup> This may be especially true in low information settings; when the public is receiving information related to topics about which it has little knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Covid 19 represents a low information setting; the vast majority of the public has little knowledge of best practices in a pandemic. Trust in government by the public has been in a downward trend since the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> When the White House made the first public comments about Covid 19 in January 2020, 35% of Americans reported a great deal or fair amount of trust in the federal government to handle domestic problems.<sup>27</sup>

A wide body of research indicates an understanding of political ideology is useful to understanding party identification, and it is useful to understanding public opinion toward the government's messaging related to Covid 19. President Trump was the primary messenger of the federal government's response to Covid 19 in 2020. The president's messaging about Covid 19 is observable. The president delivered information about the virus to the public primarily through the *White House Coronavirus Task Force*. The president also delivered Covid related messages through public statements, during exchanges with reporters, and via *Twitter*. The following section presents a content analysis of the president's direct comments related to mask-usage.

#### **PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGING: THE WHITE HOUSE CORONAVIRUS TASK FORCE BRIEFINGS**

Presidents are the de facto leaders of their political parties and enjoy what President Theodore Roosevelt termed the bully pulpit. This term, which refers to a president's unique ability to communicate to a wide audience, is still

widely used by scholars to express the power of the president's ability to transmit messages, particularly with the aid of media.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the words and actions of a president are important when seeking to understand public reaction to government action. Covid 19 became a public agenda priority for the Trump administration in January of 2020. One of the first Covid related actions taken by the former president was to appoint a Task Force. President Trump announced the establishment of the WHCTF on January 29, 2020. Four weeks later President Trump appointed Vice President Mike Pence to lead the Task Force, which also included a variety of public health professionals and individuals from various government agencies.<sup>29</sup>

The WHCTF began to give daily on-camera briefings March 14, which were televised live most days through April 24.<sup>30</sup> The structure of the WHCTF briefings typically included prepared remarks followed by questions from members of the White House Press Corp and other reporters in attendance. Nearly all the briefings began with prepared remarks from the president. Next, the president typically asked the Vice President and other members of the WHCTF to deliver remarks. The president then returned to the podium and led a call on reporters, who asked questions of both the president and members of the Task Force.

The topic of face masks became relevant to U.S. government response to Covid 19 on February 12, when the Center for Disease Control advised the public to not wear masks.<sup>31</sup> The CDC advice was based on two factors: protecting the supply of masks, particularly N95 masks, among health care workers, and limited evidence about the efficacy of masks in stopping the spread of Covid 19 among symptom-

atic individuals. Rather, early guidance focused on social distancing, and the self-quarantine of symptomatic individuals.<sup>32</sup> The president directly spoke to the use of masks by the public on March 30 in response to a reporter's question about recommendations:

"...So we'll take a look at it. For a period of time, not forever. I mean, you know, we want our country back. We're not going to be wearing masks forever, but it could be for a short period of time. After we get back into gear, people could – I could see something like that happening for a period of time, but I would hope it would be a very limited period of time. Doctors – they'll come back and say, "for the rest of our lives, we have to wear masks."<sup>33</sup>

The president then gave a lengthy statement about the number of masks being produced and questioned why hospitals in New York City were using so many masks. The next day the president was asked if masks were being preserved for health care workers or if Covid 19 did not transmit primarily through the air. The president called on White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator. Dr. Deborah Birx, who reemphasized then current guidelines, which focused on mask use by those in infected households.<sup>34</sup> The president added:

"And just about masks, you can get a mask, but you could also do – I mean, most people have scarves, and scarves are very good. And they can use a scarf. And we're only talking about a limited period of time. But – and it says in the recommendations, you can use – you can substitute a scarf for a mask. So, if people feel that – and I think, you know,

some people disagree with the mask for various reasons, and some people don't. But you could wear a scarf. You can do the masks if it makes you feel better. We have no objection to it, and some people recommend it."

The new public health recommendation about masks took place at the beginning of the WHCTF briefing on April 3. The president said in his prepared remarks:

"And today, also, the CDC is announcing additional steps Americans can take to defend against the transmission of the virus. From recent studies, we know that the transmission from individuals without symptoms is playing a more significant role in the spread of the virus than previously understood. So, you don't seem to have symptoms and it still gets transferred. In light of these studies, the CDC is advising the use of non-medical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure... So, it's voluntary; you don't have to do it. They suggested for a period of time. But this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it. So, with the masks, it's going to be, really, a voluntary thing. You can do it. You don't have to do it. I'm choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it, and that's okay. It may be good. Probably will. They're making a recommendation. It's only a recommendation. It's voluntary."

After members of the WHCTF finished their prepared statements, the president took questions from members of the White House Press Corp and other reporters in attendance. The first question asked for clarification about the

new mask recommendations, and why the president opposed wearing a mask. President Trump responded:

“Well, I just don't want to wear one myself. It's a recommendation; they recommend it. I'm feeling good. I just don't want to be doing – I don't know, somehow sitting in the Oval Office behind that beautiful Resolute Desk – the great Resolute Desk – I think wearing a face mask as I greet presidents, prime ministers, dictators, kings, queens, I don't know. Somehow, I don't see it for myself. I just – I just don't. Maybe I'll change my mind, but this will pass and hopefully it'll pass very quickly. Now, with that being said, if somebody wants to -- I mean, most people can just make something out of a certain material. So, it's very well designated, it's very simple to do. I won't be doing it personally. It's a recommendation. Okay?”

President Trump attended all 20 of the WHCTF briefings between April 3 and April 24, the last daily briefing. The content analysis of the Briefing transcripts indicates the president included messaging about masks in his prepared remarks during 16 of the 20 briefings. The content of the president's prepared remarks did not typically focus on the public health recommendation to wear a mask. Rather, the president's messaging focused on mask production and distribution, and regularly addressed the federal government's role in producing and distributing masks. The president did reference the public health recommendation to wear masks on April 4, as part of a statement about the delivery of N95 masks. The president stated, “But we need the masks. We don't want

other people getting it, and that's why we're – that's why we're instituting a lot of Defense Production Act, you could call it, retaliations because that's what it is; it's a retaliation.”

The president did not discuss masks in the context of the April 3 public health recommendation in his prepared remarks again until April 22 when he stated, “Wash your hands, avoid close physical contact as much as possible, and wear a face covering when distancing is impractical.” The next day the president stated, in his prepared remarks: “To keep America gaining momentum, every citizen needs to maintain the vigilance. And we all understand that very well; we've gone over it many, many times. This includes practicing good hygiene, maintaining social distance, and the voluntary use of face coverings.” Finally, during his prepared statement on April 24, the last day of the daily Task Force briefing, the president noted in his prepared remarks, “We ask every American to maintain vigilance and hygiene, social distancing, and voluntary use of face coverings.”

Analysis of the president's messaging about masks during his prepared remarks at the WHCTF briefings is important due to its potential cognitive and affective influence on public attitudes. Following the April 3 recommendation, the president addressed masks as a public health recommendation during his prepared remarks on four occasions: April 4, 22, 23, and 24. It is important to note the president's lack of prepared remarks about the public health recommendation to wear a mask is a form of messaging. In addition, it is important to note the content of president's messaging included language that can be interpreted as mixed messaging. The president did advise the public to wear facial coverings, and framed masks

as a retaliation against the virus. However, the president's statements included language that could be interpreted as contradictory. This language includes the president's statement suggesting doctors wanted individuals to wear masks for the rest of their lives, his indication that masks should be worn to make an individual feel better, his statement that he was choosing to not wear a mask, and repeatedly framing mask-usage as voluntary and an individual choice.

#### **QUESTIONS FROM REPORTERS: THE WHITE HOUSE CORONAVIRUS TASK FORCE BRIEFINGS:**

The president did not address the public health recommendation about masks in most of his prepared remarks throughout the 20 briefings. Members of the *White House Press Corp*, however, regularly asked questions about the use of masks.<sup>35</sup> The president's responses to reporters' questions provide additional content to analyze and also provide an opportunity to analyze the tone of the WHCTF briefings. Recall attitudes are influenced by both cognitive and affective components. The tone of the WHCTF briefings is important in helping to explain public attitudes about the information presented. The tone of the briefings potentially influenced the affective component of public attitudes.

It is relevant to note the tone of the WHCTF briefings was typically contentious. President Trump's interactions with reporters were often hostile. For example, on April 3, the day the new guidance about wearing masks was presented, President Trump responded to a question about the strategic national stockpile from CBS reporter Weijia Jiang by stating: "It's such a basic simple question and you try and make

it sound so bad. You ought to be, you ought to be ashamed, you know what? You ought to be ashamed." On April 6, *Fox News* reporter Kristin Fisher asked the president a question about testing limitations. The president admonished Fisher for ""being so horrid in the way you ask a question." Later in the same briefing the president told ABC News Jon Karl "Look, you're a third-rate reporter. And what you just said is a disgrace, OK?" The president concluded his statement to Karl by adding "You will never make it." The president's relationship with the press is beyond the scope of the present analysis. At the same time, as previously stated, tone can influence the affective component of attitudes. Thus, it is reasonable to acknowledge the tone of the exchanges as a part of an analysis of affective and cognitive information.

The president received a question from reporters about the use of masks at the April 6 briefing. The president was asked if members of the WHCTF were considering wearing masks, noting the Department of Defense was moving in the direction of wearing masks, and that former Vice President Joe Biden was wearing masks. The president responded:

"Well, it was voluntary, as I saw it yesterday. And certainly, if they'd want to, I would – I would encourage it. I would have absolutely no problem with that if they wanted. We had a long meeting today. There's good separation. But the Task orce meets, and I would certainly have absolutely no problem if they wanted to. I think, frankly, it's something, at least for a period of time, where it might be advisable. And you know, it's adviso-



ry. And we'll see what happens.”

A reporter followed up the question by asking if the First Lady had advised the president to wear a facial covering. The president responded:

“No, she feels that way. She feels that – I – I would wear one. I mean, I just – generally, I'm not in a – like, I should – would you like me to wear one right now and answer your question? That would be a little awkward, I guess. But, no, I mean – again, I would wear one if it was – if I thought it was important. She – she thinks – she likes the idea of wearing it, yeah. She does. A lot of people do. Again, it's a recommendation, and I understand that recommendation and I'm okay with it.”

Both statements reinforce the message that masks are advisable and recommended. However, the president also noted he would wear a mask only if he thought it was important. He suggested wearing a mask while answering questions would be awkward, and he again emphasized the voluntary nature of the recommendation.

Reporters at the WHCTF briefings asked the president specific questions about wearing masks on April 16. This briefing is especially relevant to messaging about masks because the focus of the April 16 meeting was how to safely reopen the states. The president specifically called on citizens to use “all their weapons in this war” throughout the process of reopening the states. The president defined these weapons as:

“Vigorous hygiene, teleworking when possible, staying at home if you feel

sick, maintaining social distance, sanitizing commonly used surfaces, and being highly conscious of their surroundings. Those are our weapons, and they're very powerful weapons indeed.”

The president did not include masks in his list of weapons against Covid 19. The president did address masks during the question-and-answer portion of the briefing in response to a more general question about reopening the states. The president stated:

“But we have large sections of the country right now that can start thinking about opening. There'll be some mitigation and they'll keep it going for a period of time – including masks, by the way – in areas that you wouldn't even think. “I asked a question today. I said, “Why would they wear masks in Wyoming or Montana or North Dakota?” And that's if somebody should come in from an area that isn't so successful, in terms of what they've done.”

The following day, the president responded to a similar question from a reporter with similar language:

“That's one of the reasons I was asking Tony, two days ago, about masks. Well, why in Wyoming or Montana would they have to wear masks? Their numbers are very good. The reason is, if somebody comes from outside - you know, which is very severe. But it's, again – and it's going to be up to them. It's a recommendation, but we'll see.”

The president's responses demonstrate his understanding that the reason to wear masks in less populated areas is due to people traveling

to less populated areas from areas more impacted by Covid 19. He also continued to frame mask usage as a recommendation, and an individual decision – in this example the individual states of Wyoming and Montana.

On April 20, President Trump was asked a specific question about the influence of his messaging toward masks. C-Span reporter Yamiche Alcindor questioned the president about a family she had recently interviewed, who implied President Trump's views toward the virus had influenced their behavior. Alcindor stated:

“They went to a funeral in mid-March, and they said mainly because the President wasn't taking it seriously. He said, "If the President had had a mask on, if he was saying we should stay home, then I would have stayed home. Instead, I had family members...I just want to - and he said his family members were sick because they were - they were listening to you. Do you feel like or are you concerned that downplaying the virus may be - got some people sick?”

The president responded:

“And a lot of people love Trump, right? A lot of people love me. You see them all the time, right? I guess I'm here for a reason, you know? To the best of my knowledge, I won. And I think we're going to win again. I think we're going to win in a landslide. But just so you understand, you're talking about March, right?”

The president went on to provide a lengthy response outlining his administration's efforts prior to March, focusing on travel bans against China and Europe. The president did not men-

tion masks nor the impacted family in his remarks. The president did not respond directly to any question about the recommendation to wear a mask during the remaining three Task Force briefings.

Messaging, as previously indicated, can include both words and actions. Thus, it is relevant to note in the weeks following the April 3 briefing, neither the President nor the Vice President wore masks at any WHCTF briefing. Other members of the Task Force, particularly Dr. Deborah Birx and Dr. Anthony Fauci, regularly wore masks at the briefings. The imagery of the contrast between public health officials wearing masks and political leaders not wearing masks can be interpreted as a form of mixed messaging.

The daily briefings ended without notice after April 24. Media reports suggest the daily briefings ended due to controversial statements made by the president on April 24 in reference to the use of disinfectants intravenously to combat Covid 19.<sup>36</sup> President Trump announced the resumption of daily briefings to the press on July 20. The new set of briefings were structured differently than the original WHCTF: the president was the only speaker and he addressed multiple policy areas as opposed to focusing on Covid 19. In addition, neither public health officials nor other advisers were invited to attend or deliver remarks.

The information presented during the WHCTF briefings, and the tone of the briefings, are important in lending understanding to public reaction to Covid 19 and mask usage. Before examining the potential influence of these statements, it is useful to analyze the president's actions and comments in other settings, including attendance at public events,

exchanges with reporters at these events, and via social media. All of these formats for messaging provide content that is useful to gaining further understanding about what was developing among the public, escalating division in attitudes about the use of masks.

### **PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGING: PUBLIC EVENTS AND TRAVEL**

President Trump attended public events throughout the spring and summer of 2020. Each on camera appearance gave the president the opportunity to demonstrate, through actions and words, messaging about the use of face masks. The president's public schedule during the period of analysis is presented in *Appendix A*. A content analysis of the president's public schedule indicates the president attended and spoke at 86 events beyond the WHCTF briefings between April 3 and the week ending July 25. The content analysis indicates President Trump appeared on camera with press present at six events in April, 53 events in May, 27 events in June, and 29 events between July 1 and July 25.

The president did not travel beyond the White House grounds for the first five weeks following the April 3 recommendation. However, during this time period the president hosted 16 press-attended events at the White House.<sup>37</sup> The president did not wear a mask at any White House event. The president resumed travel beyond the White House May 9 with a visit to the Lincoln Memorial. The president traveled domestically throughout May, June, and July. Presidential trips are accompanied and documented by the traveling press corps and present an additional opportunity to examine the president's messaging about masks.

Appendix A demonstrates President Trump traveled to 23 events beyond the White House between May 9 and July 25.<sup>38</sup> He traveled to multiple states including Arizona, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Florida, Maine, Texas, New York and Oklahoma, Wisconsin, South Dakota, Florida, and Georgia. The content analysis of the president's public schedule indicates the president spoke with the press a total of 115 times across the 86 events. The president did not wear a mask in public at any event until he wore a mask to Walter Reed Medical Center July 11. The president, by not wearing a mask during 114 of 115 public appearances outside the WHCTF briefings did not model behavior consistent with the April 3 recommendation.

The president's comments at public events contained mixed messaging about the mask recommendation. For example, April 28, five days after the WHCTF briefings ended, President Trump hosted an event in the East Room to support small businesses and discuss the *Paycheck Protection Program*.<sup>39</sup> Most attendees did not wear masks. The president, in asking a small business owner and her family to approach the podium, made a joke about one family member's use of a mask. "Put that mask on, the way you had it," said the president. He then smiled and shook his head, leading some attendees in the room to laugh.<sup>40</sup> The levity the president used when he referenced masks can be interpreted as mixed messaging.

Mixed messaging at public events continued in May. President Trump visited a Ford plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan May 21. Reporters asked the president why he was not wearing a mask. "I wore one in this back area, but I didn't want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it," replied the president.<sup>41</sup> The comment can be

interpreted as a signal it was more important to the president to prevent media from capturing his image in a mask than to model the April 3 recommendation for the public. The president, during an interview with *Fox Business* was asked why he did not wear a mask. The president noted there was less reason for him to wear a mask because he was tested often, as were the people around him. The president went on to emphasize that he was not against masks, stating:

“Actually, I had a mask on. I sort of liked the way I looked, okay? I thought it was okay. It was a dark, black mask, and I thought it looked okay. Looked like the Lone Ranger. But, no, I have no problem with that. I think – and if people feel good about it, they should do it.”<sup>42</sup>

The president's positive messaging about the look of masks can be interpreted as reinforcing the April 3 recommendation. However, the president's statement that people should only wear masks if they feel good about it reinforced the message that the decision to wear a mask should be based on individual preferences.

As previously stated, the president was photographed in a mask for the first time during his trip to *Walter Reed Medical Center* July 11. The president stated to reporters,

“I think when you're in a hospital, especially in that particular setting, where you're talking to a lot of soldiers and people that, in some cases, just got off the operating tables, I think it's a great thing to wear a mask. I've never been against masks, but I do believe they have a time and a place.”<sup>43</sup>

This comment by the president can be interpreted as messaging that supports the April 3 recommendation.

## **PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGING: SOCIAL MEDIA**

President Trump was the first U.S. president to use social media as a primary way of 'going public' – the political strategy of speaking to the public directly.<sup>44</sup> The president's primary means of communication through social media was *Twitter*. A content analysis of the president's posts during the spring and summer of 2020 provides additional opportunity to analyze the president's messaging about the use of face masks. The majority of the president's tweets about masks, like the content in the messaging in the WHCTF briefings, focused on the administration's success with mask production and distribution.<sup>45</sup> The president's tweets also, both during the period of analysis and in latter part of 2020, often contained partisan statements, including criticism toward his political opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden. On May 25 President Trump retweeted a post from *Fox News's* Brit Hume, which showed a photo of then presidential candidate Biden wearing a mask during a visit to a war memorial. The caption read: "This might help explain why Trump doesn't like to wear a mask in public."<sup>46</sup>

The president was asked about the tweet the next day and responded that he found it "very unusual" the Vice President had worn a mask outside. "I wasn't criticizing him at all," Trump said of Biden. "Why would I do anything like that?"<sup>47</sup> The president then asked the reporter if he was being "politically correct" for not removing his mask to ask his question. The president made multiple negative references to Biden's use of his mask during the period of

analysis. For example, in a July 9 interview with *Fox News* host Sean Hannity the president said, about Biden, “(He has) got the largest mask I think I have ever seen. It covers up a big proportion of his face.”<sup>48</sup>

During the weeks following the July trip to Walter Reed, President Trump used *Twitter* to send a message consistent with the April 3 public health recommendation. On July 20 President Trump posted a photograph of himself on *Twitter* wearing a mask. The president described wearing a mask as patriotic, stating: “We are United in our effort to defeat the Invisible China Virus, and many people say that it is Patriotic to wear a face mask when you can’t socially distance. There is nobody more Patriotic than me, your favorite President!” In sum, the content analysis of the president’s tweets during the spring and summer of 2020 indicates the president used the platform to support the April 3 public health recommendation, while at the same time injecting politics into the messaging.

The above content analyses of the president’s messaging in multiple settings reveal politicization in the president’s messaging during the first six months of 2020. These messages were directed at medical professionals, members of the press, and political opponents – in-

cluding the president’s opponents in the 2020 presidential election. The president communicated directly with the public via the WHCTF briefings, through responses to reporters’ questions while traveling and attending public events, and through his social media posts. The following section of the analysis examines public response to the use of face masks, and differences in public response based on party identification.

#### **PUBLIC OPINION AND PARTISAN DIVISION: FACE MASKS**

Public opinion toward mask usage is observable. Polls related to mask usage show a difference in attitude based on party identification. Table 1 presents public opinion data about attitudes toward masks from April 6 through August 2, 2020. These data capture public opinion in the weeks and months following the April 3 public health recommendation about masks. The data presented in Table 1 indicate during the week following the April 3 recommendation, the majority of Americans were not wearing masks. By the end of April 2020, the majority of Americans did report wearing masks, and the majority continued to report wearing a mask throughout May, June, and July. Reported usage among Americans increased the most between late April and early May.

**Table 1: Mask Attitudes and Public Opinion Spring & Summer 2020**

Polling Period	% Who Report Wearing Masks by Party Affiliation		
4/ 6 – 4/12	D 61	I 46	R 42
4 /27 – 5/3	D 90	I 78	R 61
5/18 – 5/24	D 96	I 82	R 67
6/8 – 6/14	D 98	I 80	R 67
6/29 – 7/5	D 99	I 83	R 74
7/20 – 8/2	D 99	I 91	R 80

Table 1 also indicates there are significant differences in reported use based on party identification. 61 percent of Democrats, 46 percent of Independents, and 42 percent of Republicans reported wearing a mask the week following the April 3 public health recommendation. In other words, in the week following the recommendation Democrats were 15 percent more likely to report wearing a mask than Independents, and 19 percent more likely to report wearing a mask than Republicans. A marked difference in reported mask usage based on party identification can also be observed during the two-week period that included the highest percentage increase: 90 percent of Democrats reported using a mask during this period, which represents a 29 percent increase. Independents reported a 32 percent increase during these two weeks, while Republicans reported a 19 percent increase in mask use.

Following the large percentage increase in mask usage among all three groups in early May, the difference in reported usage among the three groups continued. Reported mask usage among Democrats stayed above 95 percent after late May. Usage reported by Independents varied during the remaining period of analysis, with reported usage dipping a bit

in mid-June before increasing to 91 percent in early August. Republicans' reported mask usage increased the slowest, and remained the lowest, out of the three groups. Following the increase in early May, reported usage among Republicans stayed below 70 percent until early July, and remained under 75 percent until early August. The percentage of Republicans who reported wearing a mask did not exceed 80% percent during the polling period.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

The preceding analysis demonstrates a difference in response to Covid 19 information that correlates with party identification. The divisions that unfolded in the spring and summer of 2020 led to a variety of behaviors that have had long term implications for both public health and American politics and have impacted policy in a variety of settings in the public sphere. The Covid 19 pandemic presented President Trump with a crisis involving national and international implications. His words and actions had a worldwide audience and thus an understanding of these words and actions is important to our understanding of public response.

No president can deliver a message, including a public health recommendation, that is com-

pletely divorced from politics. Messaging does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in an environment in which ideological divisions exist. In the case of wearing masks, behavior varied depending on the political identity of the listener. Correlation is of course not causation. A variety of factors must be further explored to claim the president's words caused Republicans to behave differently than non-Republicans. Yet the data presented do point to a relationship between party identification and acceptance of the April 3 public health recommendation to wear a face mask, and this correlation deserves ongoing attention.

Approximately 20 to 30 percent of Republicans reported not wearing masks in the summer of 2020, which indicates the majority of Republicans did accept the April 3 public health recommendation. These data may reflect division in the Republican party. It is possible a subset of Republicans most responsive to President Trump account for the Republicans who reported not wearing a mask. A small percentage of Independents, and a very small percentage of Democrats reported they did not wear masks. These percentages, while small, are not zero and similarly deserve ongoing analysis. Future studies might also build on the current analysis

by exploring the decision of who should be the public face of information, and how to manage instances when the messaging of political leaders differs from the messaging of public health officials.

It is unlikely Covid 19 will be the last public health crisis to face the United States. It is also unlikely deep psychological attachments to ideology will abate, or the socialization process. Thus, public health officials and others seeking to understand the public's reaction to messaging can benefit from a thorough understanding of the potential influence of political ideology. The data presented indicate individuals may react to public health recommendations through the lens of their party identification, assigning a level of trust to the messenger based on their party label, and their underlying political ideology. This assignation can influence whether and how the message itself will be accepted. The data suggest it may benefit public health officials to consider political ideology when crafting and disseminating messages for public consumption. Public health recommendations cannot be crafted in isolation. Evidence suggests messaging from the government, even messages regarding public health, must be considered through the lens of political ideology.

**APPENDIX A – PRESIDENTIAL EVENTS WITH ON-CAMERA REMARKS**

<b>Week Ending</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b># of On-Camera Remarks</b>	<b>Location</b>
4 – 11	America Cares: Small business relief update Participates in Easter blessing	2	Roosevelt Room Oval Office
4 – 18	Meeting with recovered Covid patients. Remarks celebrating American truckers	2	Cabinet Room South Lawn
4 – 25	Tree planting ceremony Signing ceremony: HR 266	2	WH Lawn Oval Office
5 – 2	On camera news conference Meeting with Florida Governor Remarks on small business: Paycheck Protection Meeting with Louisiana Governor Round table with industry executives Meeting with New Jersey Governor Remarks on protecting U.S. seniors Remarks and departure for Camp David Presidential Recognition Ceremony Announces FDA approval of Remdesivir	10	Rose Garden Oval Office East Room Oval Office Dining Room Oval Office East Room South Lawn Blue Room Oval Office
5 – 9	<b>Participation in America Together: Returning to work. 13</b> <b>Trip to Honeywell Mask Production Facility: 6***</b> Signs proclamation in honor of National Nurses Day Meeting with Iowa Governor Meeting with Texas Governor Remarks at White House National Day of Prayer Service <b>Wreath laying ceremony 75th anniversary of VE Day</b> Meeting with Republican members of Congress. Meeting with Military Leadership, National Security Team.		Lincoln Memorial Phoenix, AZ Oval Office Oval Office Oval Office Rose Garden WW II Memorial State Dining Room Cabinet Room
5 – 16	Remarks on Covid 19 testing. Meeting with Colorado and North Dakota Governors. <b>Trip to Owens &amp; Minor Inc. Distribution Center: 2</b> Remarks on vaccine development. Remarks on US Space Force flag, Armed Forces Day Proclamation Remarks at Hard Work, Heroism, and Hope ceremony.	8	Rose Garden Cabinet Room Allentown, PA Rose Garden Oval Office Rose Garden



	Departs White House for Camp David.	South Lawn
5 – 23	White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council Meeting. 10 Round table with restaurant executives and industry leaders. Remarks on farmers, ranchers, and food supply chain. Policy lunch with Republican senators Cabinet meeting. Meeting with Arkansas and Kansas Governors. <b>Trip to Ford Rawsunville Components Plant: 3</b> Rolling to Remember Ceremony honoring Veterans and POW/MIA	Cabinet Room State Dining Room Roosevelt Room Hart Senate Office East Room Cabinet Room Ypsilanti, MI Blue Room Balcony
5 – 30	<b>Wreath Laying Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery</b> <b>Memorial Day Ceremony at Fort McHenry National Monument.</b> Remarks on protecting seniors with diabetes. Signs Executive Order on social media. Press Conference Round table with industry executives on reopening. <b>2 Trips to Kennedy Space Center for Space X Mission Launch: 6</b>	12 Arlington, VA Baltimore, MD Rose Garden Oval Office Rose Garden State Dining Room Merritt Island, FL
6 – 6	Remarks in response to killing of George Floyd. <b>Leads officials on walk to St. John's Episcopal Church.</b> Press Conference <b>Trip to Puritan Medical Products: 2</b>	5 Rose Garden Washington, D.C. Rose Garden Guilford, ME
6 – 13	<b>Trip to Gateway Church for economic recovery round table: 2</b> <b>Remarks at 2020 West Point Graduation Ceremony.</b>	3 Dallas, TX West Point, NY
6 – 20	Round table on "Fighting For America's Seniors." Remarks and Executive Order: Safe Policing for Safe Communities. Announces PREVENTS Task Force: Veterans and suicide. Round table with Governors on reopening of small businesses. Departs White House for Joint Base Andrews. <b>Trip to BOK Center for Make America Great Again rally: 2</b>	7 Cabinet Room Rose Garden East Roo State Dining Room South Lawn Tulsa, OK
6 – 27	<b>Trip to border wall and Dream City Church: 3</b>  Bilateral meeting with President Duda, Republic of Poland. Joint press conference with President Duda. <b>Wreath laying ceremony at Korean War Veterans Memorial.</b> <b>Trip to Fincantieri Marinette Marine: 3***</b> Remarks at American Workforce Policy Advisory Board Meeting.	12 Yuma, San Luis, and Phoenix, AZ Oval Office Rose Garden Washington, D.C. Marinette, WI East Room

7 – 4	Press conference.  Remarks at Spirit of America Showcase. <b>Trip to Mt. Rushmore 2020 Fireworks Celebration: 3</b> 4th of July 2020 Salute to America event.	6	Press Briefing Room Grand Foyer Keystone, SD South Lawn
7 – 11	Participates in 'National Dialogue to Safely Reopen Schools. Joint Declaration with President Obrador, United Mexican States. Joint statement with President Obrador, United Mexican States. Signs Executive Order: White House Hispanic Prosperity Initiative. <b>Trips to Southern Command. Doral Jesus Worship Center: 5</b> <b>** Trip to Walter Reed Medical Center</b>	10	East Room Rose Garden Rose Garde Rose Garden Doral, FL Bethesda, MD
7 – 18	Participates in round table: Positive impact by law enforcement. Press Conference <b>Trip to UPS Hapeville Airport Hub: 3</b> Delivers remarks on rolling back regulations.	6	East Room Rose Garden Atlanta, GA South Lawn
7 – 25	Participates in discussion of Covid 19 planning with media. Press Conferences: 7/21, 7/22 Remarks on Operation Legend: Combatting violent crime. Remarks on MLB Opening Day. Remarks on lowering drug prices. Executive Order Presents Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jim Ryun	7	Oval Office Briefing Room East Room South Lawn South Court Auditorium Blue Room

**Total # of Events: 86**

**Total # of On-Camera Remarks: 115**

**\* Bolded events are those during which the president made multiple on camera appearances with remarks.**

**\*\* Events during which the president publicly wore a mask.**

**\*\*\* Number of public appearances at an event.**

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