

## How Partisanship Affected Public Reaction to Potential Treatments for COVID-19

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*President Trump mentioned the potential antiviral benefits of hydroxychloroquine as the COVID-19 crisis became evident in the United States. Politics and mass media in the United States have been undergoing a process of partisan polarization over the last 20–30 years. While partisanship has long affected reactions toward news or information, particularly when it comes from an elected official, the situation appears to be worsening in American politics. Even a search for potential cures or useful medication in the face of a public health crisis is hampered by partisanship and polarization.*

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In this short commentary, we examine the reaction among the public and the mass media to President Trump's early assertions that a possible treatment for COVID-19 existed. Objectively, one would expect the public, in the face of a crisis like this, to respond positively to the news that there may be an effective drug against the virus. However, this was not the response. In fact, there were a slew of stories that were highly suspicious of the president's claim. Of course, over the last three years, the public has been conditioned to not trust what President Trump says given his proclivity toward misinformation, so some amount of disbelief is warranted. There were many stories accusing the president of spreading false hope on an unproven or even dangerous drug in the media. Opponents of the president almost instantly were suspicious of the touted drug—this comports with the previous research (Nicholson, 2012) showing that out-party cues are far more important than in-party cues. In reaction, opponents of the cue-givers become immediately suspicious, while supporters of the cue giver show significantly less effect from the cue.

Modern American politics are characterized by partisan polarization—where the ideological distance between the two parties is significantly higher than in the recent past (Abramowitz, 2010; McCarty, 2019). Elected officials have steadily been undergoing the process of polarization for several decades. There is no disputing the fact that political elites are polarized; however, there is some disagreement among scholars about the extent to which this polarization extends to the mass public (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006). The media, including social media, add fuel to the fire by positioning themselves on either side of the issue. By extension, the media's political agenda emboldens the public to

embrace deeper cleavages in public discourse. The full spectrum of underlying causes of political polarization, however, is not perfectly clear and certainly stems from multiple sources.

The public is so polarized now that common features of public opinion in the past are no longer present. For instance, there are well-documented cases of “rallying around the flag” in which the vast majority of the American public would support the president in difficult times. For instance, after the attack on 9/11, President George W. Bush enjoyed a period of time in which over 90 percent of the country approved of the job he was doing (Moore, 2001). The current pandemic is a different animal than an attack on American soil, though the country does have a common enemy—the coronavirus. President Trump’s approval rating did rise ever so slightly as it became clear the United States was facing a serious crisis; however, it peaked at 49 percent in late March 2020 (Jones, 2020). This was his highest approval rating in office, though it certainly did not move much given the scope of the crisis. Trump is perceived as more polarizing than past presidents, but even if that is the case, his time in office is both a symptom of underlying polarization and a proximate cause for further polarizing.

Political polarization led the public to interpret the hydroxychloroquine drug announcements as suspicious. The COVID-19 crises compounded the extant burgeoning divide when President Trump announced he knew of a “game changer,” the drug hydroxychloroquine, on March 19, 2020 (Ebbs, 2020). Hydroxychloroquine, or Plaquenil, is a prescription antimalarial drug also used for lupus, and was initially found to alleviate symptoms in COVID-19 patients (Gautret et al., 2020). The same day, the *New York Post* offered the following headline, “Sales of fish tank additive skyrocket after studies say it could treat coronavirus” (Lapin, 2020). On March 22nd, a man died after ingesting chloroquine phosphate, a fish-tank cleaning substance not related to hydroxychloroquine (Mansfield & Davies, 2020). Immediate media reports surfaced indicating the wife of the deceased was being investigated for murder (Mansfield & Davies, 2020). To date, no arrest has been publicized. The political public embraced either side of the fish story as fodder to feed pre-existing beliefs for or against President Trump. Confirmation bias in this sense seems to correlate well with deepening political polarization.

The media messages, not surprisingly, broke down partisan lines as well, with more liberal news outlets publishing warnings about lethal side effects and doubts about the effectiveness of the drug, hydroxychloroquine, while conservative outlets were outraged at the outrage from the other side and more positive about the potential positive impact of the drug (see, e.g., Hains, 2020; Harsanyi, 2020; Lovelace, 2020; Waldrop, Alsop, & McLaughlin, 2020). The *New York Times* went so far as to suggest that President Trump’s endorsement of the drug might have been due to his financial stake in the drug’s manufacturer (Baker, Rogers, Enrich, & Haberman, 2020). The content and the reception of disease and treatment-related information were largely adopted through a political lens.

The current crisis is clear and presents a danger to the country, its economy, and the public in general. And while President Trump has a higher approval rating than in the past, the effect is not comparable to crises-induced increases in years gone by. The empirical realities of hydroxychloroquine were originally positive

(see Velthuis Aartjan et al., 2010; Yao et al., 2020; for some scientific studies of the drug) but clinical trials of hospitalized patients showed limited or no benefit from the use of the drug. Rather, updated studies and clinical trials pointed to remdesivir and convalescent plasma as promising treatments for those already admitted to a hospital. Later, another antimalaria drug, Malarone, was incorporated into the fold in addition to numerous other treatment possibilities (UT Southwestern, 2020).

Beyond the deeply divided politics, clinicians and scientists fought their own battles while Americans sat ringside claiming victory for or against one drug, seemingly only for the reason that Trump touted it and later took it himself. One of the most influential studies on hydroxychloroquine, published in the *Lancet* on May 22 (Mehra, Desai, Ruschitzka, & Patel, 2020) found that the drug resulted in an increase in hospital deaths with no benefit to patients. Yet, on May 29, over 100 scientists and clinicians signed an open letter to the *Lancet*, questioning the authenticity of the Mehra et al. (2020) study, which was ultimately retracted (MacNamara, 2020). To date, studies on any treatments to reduce symptom severity among those who are COVID-19 positive, but who do not require hospitalization, are lacking. However, as this commentary goes to print, the latest study demonstrated once again that hydroxychloroquine may not be the panacea, noting that the drug also did not show promise as a prophylactic (Grady, 2020). In other words, science continues to elude effective treatment confirmation while politics plays on, fueling more conflict over the “right time” to open the economy.

Voters have always viewed news from a partisan point of view, but as voters have been polarized both in terms of ideology and also in terms of effect, the “facts” of a story matter less and less, while the source of the story has an outsized impact on how a voter will feel about the story (Nicholson, 2012). This phenomenon is not only true for important public policy issues, but also extends to almost anything associated with the source. Kam (2005) picked food irradiation as a non-salient policy and then primed respondents with fictitious news stories about one party or another endorsing this policy and found that the source of the endorsement did indeed affect the respondents’ attitudes toward the policy.

The public health of a country relies, at least in part, on effective governance. The current state of American politics in which compromise between the major parties and their supports is extremely difficult poses significant risks to the American public. This is particularly true for a fast-moving health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. If our leaders remain polarized and unable to fashion compromises even in the face of serious, fast-moving, and deadly threats, we should not expect leadership or solutions to come from our government.

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## Notes

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

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