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Observations | Opinion

Partisan Differences over the Pandemic Response Are Growing

Polling finds public trust in medical scientists has increased but only among Democrats—while optimism about a vaccine is broadly shared

By Cary Funk, Alec Tyson on May 30, 2020

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Credit: Anton Petrus *Getty Images*

Americans' trust in medical scientists has grown since the coronavirus outbreak first upended everyday activities at workplaces, homes and schools across the nation. But there are growing divisions between Republicans and Democrats in the confidence they have in medical scientists. These partisan divides extend to perceptions of the risk posed by the novel coronavirus to public health and to views on measures to control the spread of COVID-19. Nonetheless, both Democrats and Republicans are optimistic that scientific efforts to deliver a vaccine will come to fruition within a year.

The pandemic shines a spotlight on scientists—including medical scientists, public health experts and other scientific specialists—and their role advising government leaders, informing the public, working on the front lines of patient care and leading research efforts to find treatment and prevention options for the coronavirus.

A national survey from Pew Research Center conducted in late April with more 10,000 U.S. adults finds 43 percent of Americans say they have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of the public, up from 35

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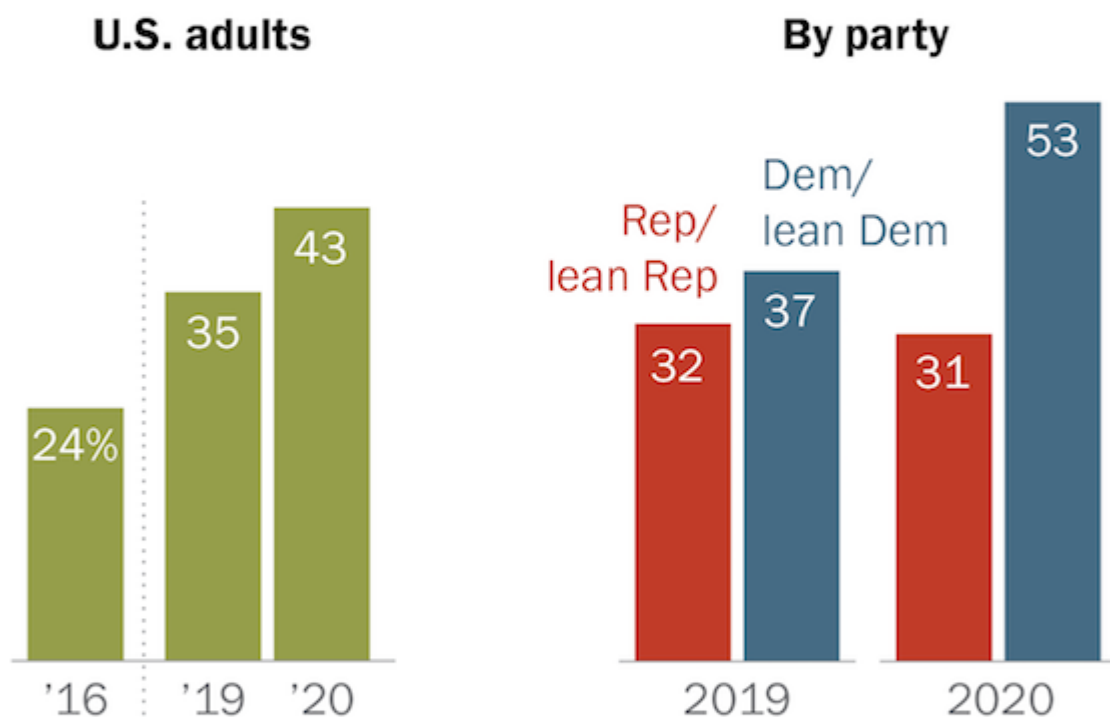
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% of U.S. adults who have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of the public



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April 20-26, 2020.

“Trust in Medical Scientists Has Grown in U.S., but Mainly Among Democrats”

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Today, partisan gaps over trust in medical scientists now echo past Center surveys that found Democrats express far higher trust than Republicans in climate scientists and the information they produce.

One of the striking aspects of Americans' initial response to the outbreak has been the degree of public support for unprecedented restrictions on public activity. For example, about nine in 10 Americans said measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 by imposing travel restrictions, canceling major sporting and entertainment events, closing K-12 schools and limiting social gatherings were necessary, according to a Center survey conducted March 19-24.

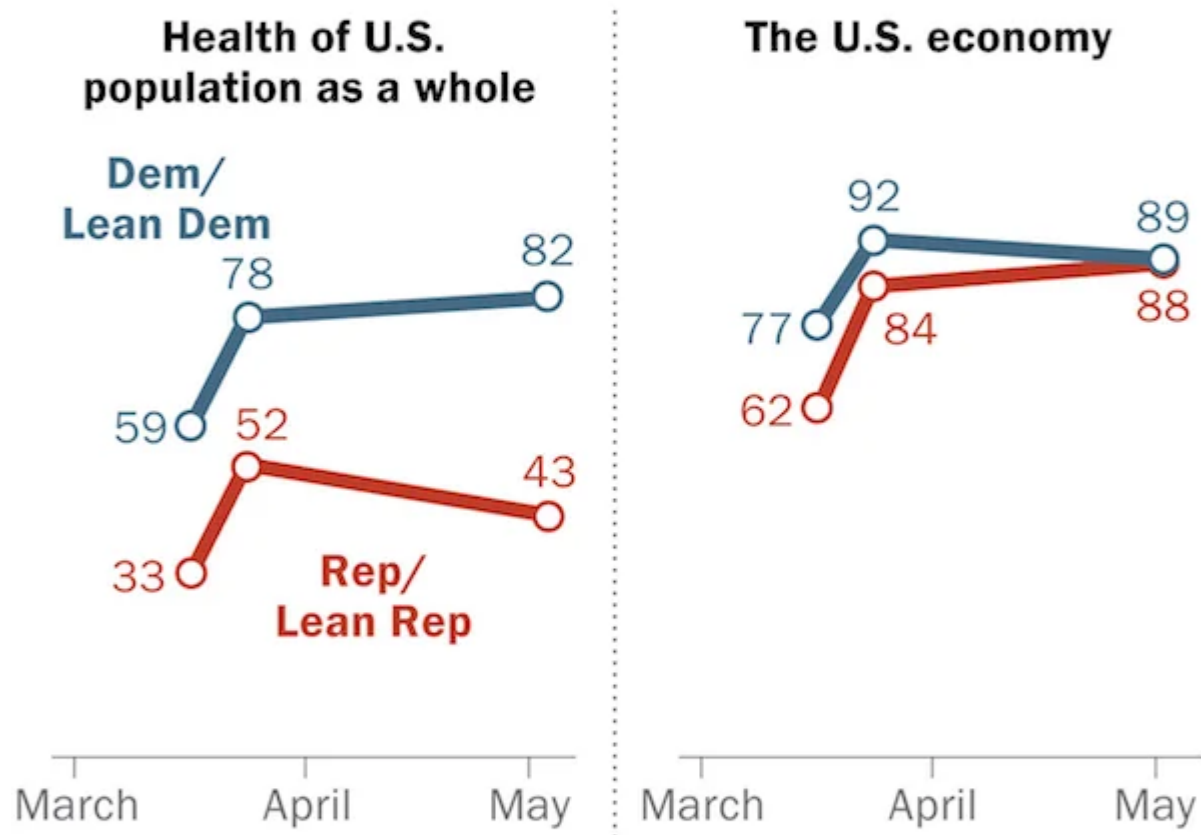
But public opinion has been shifting during the crisis. Pew Research Center surveys find growing partisan division over the risk the novel coronavirus poses to public health as well as over social distancing measures and restrictions on public activity aimed at slowing the spread of the disease.

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% of U.S. adults who say coronavirus outbreak is a major threat to ...



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or who did not given an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April 29-May 5, 2020.

“Most Americans Say Federal Government Has Primary Responsibility for COVID-19 Testing”

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About six in 10 Americans (59 percent) view social distancing measures—which were still in place across much of the country at the time of the survey—as helping a lot to reduce the spread of the disease, although this belief is more common among Democrats (69 percent) than Republicans (49 percent).



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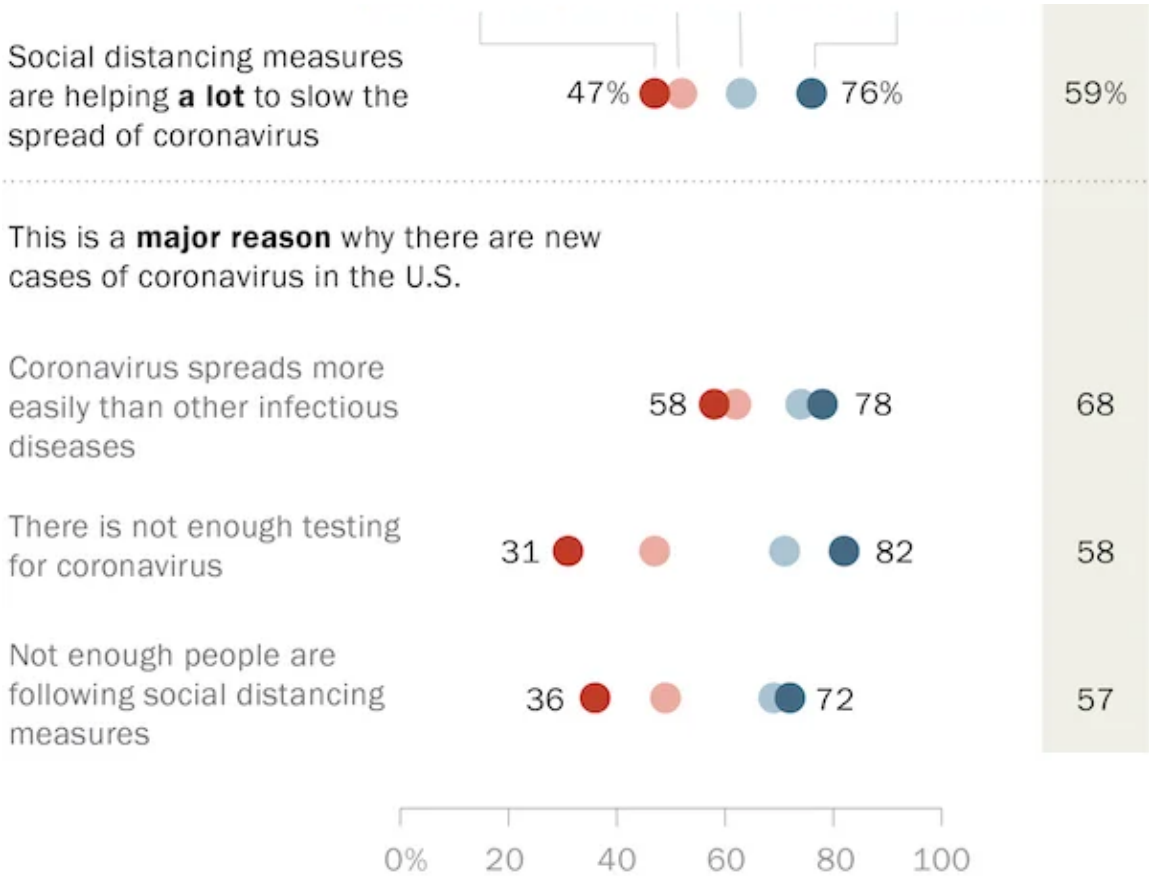
As states grapple with the process of lifting restrictions, the public strikes a cautious tone: 68 percent say their greater concern is that states will lift restrictions too quickly, rather than not quickly enough. But here again, the partisan gap in views is large, and Republicans and Democrats are moving in opposite directions. Since April, Republicans have grown more concerned that restrictions will not be lifted quickly enough, while Democrats have become increasingly concerned that restrictions will be lifted too quickly. In the most recent Center survey, nearly nine in 10 Democrats (87 percent) say their greater concern is that states will lift restrictions too quickly; Republicans are closely divided between concern that restrictions will be lifted too quickly or not quickly enough (47 percent to 53 percent).

Partisan groups also differ over the reasons behind continued coronavirus infections, particularly around the roles of testing and social distancing. Three quarters of Democrats (75 percent) consider too little testing a major factor behind new disease cases in the U.S. compared with 37 percent of Republicans. Seven in 10 Democrats believe a major reason for new cases of coronavirus is that not enough people are following social distancing measures. About half of moderate or liberal Republicans

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Note: Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown. Republicans and Democrats include those who “lean” toward the parties.
Source: Survey conducted April 29-May 5 2020.
“Trust in Medical Scientists Has Grown in U.S., but Mainly Among Democrats”

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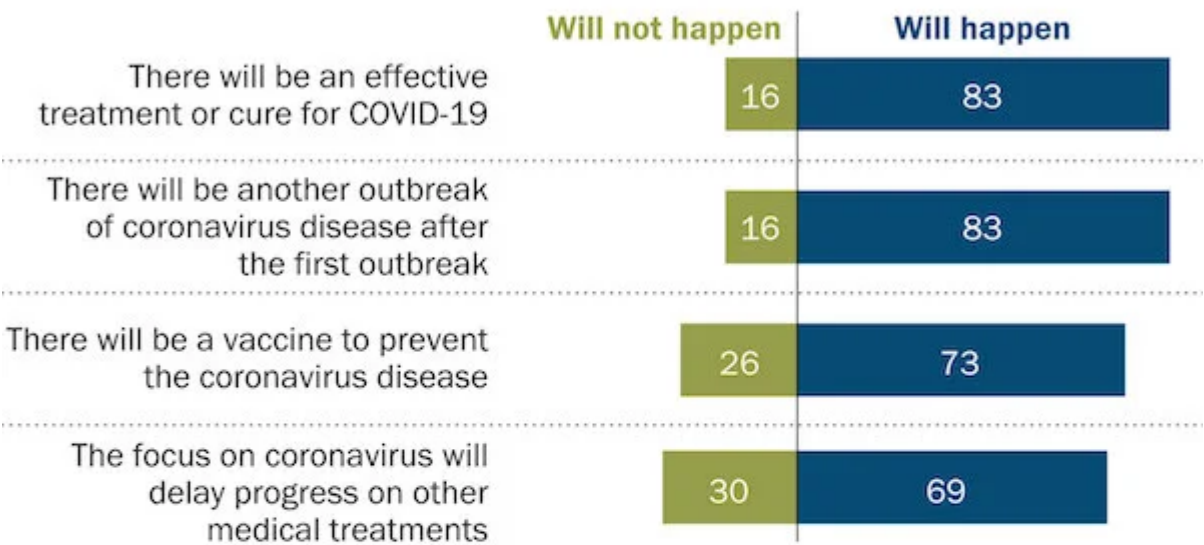
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Majorities in U.S. expect COVID-19 treatment and vaccine ahead – as well as another outbreak

% of U.S. adults who say each definitely/probably ____ in the next 12 months



% of U.S. adults who say if a vaccine were available today, they definitely/probably ____ get it



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted April 29–May 5, 2020.
“Trust in Medical Scientists Has Grown in U.S., but Mainly Among Democrats”

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Democrats say they would get vaccinated by a margin of 79 percent to 21 percent. Republicans are slightly less inclined; 65 percent say they would definitely or probably get a vaccine while 34 percent say they would decline.

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Cary Funk is director of science and society research at Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank" that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. The center is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, its primary funder. Follow her on Twitter [@surveyfunk](#).

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