

WHERE MOTIVATED REASONING WITHERS AND LOOMS LARGE: FEAR AND PARTISAN REACTIONS TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Contemporary American politics has been largely characterized by hyper-partisanship and polarization, with partisan motivated reasoning a thematic concern. Theories of emotions in politics suggest that anxiety might interrupt partisan heuristics and encourage citizens to reason more evenhandedly—but in what domains and to what extent? We use original panel data to assess how anxiety about becoming seriously ill from Covid-19 interacted with partisan attachments to shape political judgment during the Covid-19 pandemic. The structure of our data allows us to assess large-scale implications of politically relevant emotions in ways that so far have not been possible. We find large effects on policy attitudes: Republicans who were afraid of getting sick rejected signals from co-partisan leaders by supporting mask mandates and the like. Effects on vote choice for Republicans were muted in comparison, but fear's large effect on independents may have been pivotal.

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American voters tend to assign disproportionate weight to conditions that prevail *close* to an election (Achen and Bartels 2016). In a stark departure from this reliable pattern, exit polls indicate that Donald Trump won a higher percentage of Republican voters in 2020 than even Ronald Reagan did in his 1984 landslide victory, despite nearly 200,000 dead from Covid-19 in the eight months preceding the election.¹ One possible explanation is that Republicans provided Trump such lockstep support because so many agreed with him on the campaign's most salient issue: how best to deal with Covid-19. Another possibility, consistent with a large literature on partisan motivated reasoning (e.g. Lodge and Taber 2013), is that the pull of partisanship was sufficiently strong that Republicans simply ignored or discounted the loss of life. Instead, we find that while a large proportion of Republicans expressed deep concern about Covid-19 and disregarded elite cues on mitigation policies, the polarized context of the present day seemed to make it all but impossible for most partisans to consider defecting on presidential vote choice.

Indeed, many Republicans—sometimes most—departed from the president's posture toward Covid-19. While Trump argued the threat was exaggerated, polls from the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group revealed the share of Republicans expressing concern about Covid-19 never dropped below 75 percent in the second half of 2020. Republican support for empowering state and local governments to cancel large gatherings, close businesses and schools, and restrict travel consistently topped 40 percent and was often much higher (Democracy Fund Voter Study Group 2021). Trump routinely eschewed wearing a facemask in public and openly mocked Joe

¹ Presidential exit polls archived at the Roper Center (“US National Election Day Exit Polls” 2022) reveal that Trump's 94 percent is the highest percentage ever recorded. The 2012, 2004, and 1984 elections are tied for the second-highest percentage—93 percent.

Biden for doing so (e.g. Chiu 2020). But polls at the time showed nearly 60 percent of Trump supporters approving of mask requirements in public (Guntermann and Lenz 2022, 551). Lockstep Republican electoral support in the presidential election occurred *despite* significant policy disagreement.

Why, then, did so many Republicans prefer policies starkly different from those suggested by their leaders but so few vote against those leaders? We examine a factor that has been posited to constrain the effects of partisan motivated reasoning: anxiety. Scholars have found that emotional reactions to political stimuli are central to understanding why partisans depart from their normal tendency to mimic leader cues (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). In particular, anxiety—an emotion in abundant supply during the first year of the pandemic—can induce citizens to seek out more information, rely more on subject experts, and process information more deeply (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). The combination might encourage partisans to consider more carefully—and perhaps even reject—arguments being promulgated by co-partisan elites. Because the pandemic was a genuine, possibly mortal threat for millions of Americans and because it remained so for months, the fears it spawned had the potential to interrupt partisan pathways in impressive fashion.

Using panel survey data collected between April 2020 and Election Day, we find it did, but its impact was asymmetric on policy preferences relative to vote choice. This asymmetry helps explain why massive policy defection coexisted with paltry vote defection. After validating our measure of anxiety by tracing it to pandemic-related events and a variety of individual differences, we find strong evidence that anxiety helps account for why so many Republicans departed from the party line on Covid-19 policies. Republicans fearful of becoming seriously ill supported mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, and other protective measures at rates similar to

Democrats. Anxiety was also associated with increases in self-reported information search about Covid-19 and more accurate knowledge about it, including a fact (whether Covid-19 is more dangerous than the flu) that was subject to politicized dispute. These findings establish that the influence of partisanship on political reasoning has limits even in this polarized time.

However, anxiety did less to interrupt partisan pathways on vote choice. On one hand, this attenuation is expected. Covid-19 was not the only issue in 2020. Trump might have been out of alignment with a large chunk of Republicans on it, but he was in sync with them on many others. On the other hand, we did not expect vote choice to stand so far apart from policy preferences. Bad times are not ordinarily so partisan. In the last two elections when incumbents ran and lost, defection rates were several times higher than the six percent recorded in 2020. In 1992, 27 percent of Republicans defected from George H.W. Bush, and 33 percent of Democrats defected from Jimmy Carter in 1980. That Donald Trump, presiding over a massive loss of life, lost only 6 percent of Republican votes appears to be a stark outlier.

We also examine the role political independents played in the 2020 election. Not subject to the pull of party loyalties, independents behaved as both theories of emotions in politics and voting behavior during bad times would predict. Fear affected their issue preferences on Covid-19 and their vote choices, the latter probably accounting for Biden's 13 percentage point edge among this group in the exit polls, the largest such advantage since 1980. We estimate that independents who expressed the highest level of fear of Covid-19 were approximately 45 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump than those who expressed the lowest level of fear, nearly three times the effect as for Republicans.

Overall, this pattern of influence reveals outcomes for which motivated reasoning withers under pressure—and others for which it looms large. Anxiety about real-world events can

decouple partisans' policy positions from those of their party leaders. Once citizens enter the voting booth, however, their ability to assess accountability and mete out electoral reward or punishment remains deeply affected by partisanship even under pandemic conditions.

Partisanship and its Emotional Limits

Partisanship is a formidable force in political belief systems. Early in life, most Americans come to identify with one of the major parties, an identity that often strengthens with time (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). Partisanship, in turn, informs a wide range of political opinions, evaluations, and behaviors (Gerber and Huber 2010; McConnell et al. 2018; Ryan and Aziz 2021). Especially when issues are complicated or new—as was the case with Covid-19—people can overcome informational or motivational shortfalls by looking to their party leaders for cues about which side they should take. Early scholars of mass politics identified this regularity (e.g. Converse 1964) and more recent ones have uncovered a marked increase in the strength of the party leader-follower dynamic of late (e.g. Lenz 2012).

The strengthening results, in part, from how the parties present themselves. Because party elites have grown more internally homogeneous in their position-taking, partisans in the electorate both receive and reflect an increasingly clear signal (Hetherington 2001). Equally important, however, are information processing and psychological considerations. With Americans grievously divided with respect to the media they consume (Prior 2007), the social groups with which they affiliate (Mason 2018), and their feelings toward parties (Iyengar et al. 2019), the psychological costs of taking positions opposite one's party have grown. To avoid such costs, partisans often engage in motivated reasoning, uncritically accepting congenial

political messages while dismissing uncongenial ones (e.g. Lodge and Taber 2013; Stroud 2011; Zaller 1992).

While it is normal for partisanship to influence public opinion, researchers have identified conditions that induce citizens to depart from habit and place more weight on information and expertise. An important factor appears to be the emotions that circumstances cause citizens to feel. Emotions serve a directive function, orienting people toward contextually appropriate adaptive behavior (Tooby and Cosmides 2008). As Albertson and Gadarian write, “not only do emotions make us feel something, they also encourage us to *do something*” (2015, 5). Smelling rotten meat might, for example, cause a person to experience disgust, which in turn would induce them to avoid eating or touching the meat (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008). To flesh out the political significance of emotions, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) developed the theory of Affective Intelligence. Combinations of enthusiasm and fear (posited to be associated with mental “disposition” and “surveillance” systems, respectively) influence the extent to which people rely on habit or engage in effortful thinking about current events.

Although subsequent work contested some specifics of the Affective Intelligence model, including whether it is better to conceptualize emotions discretely rather than as the output of two overarching systems (Lerner and Keltner 2001), the precise consequences of anger (Ryan 2012), and the exact conditions that induce specific emotions (Steenbergen and Ellis 2006), these studies affirmed that emotions can shape the processes by which citizens arrive at their political judgments, some of which may challenge and some of which may reinforce existing predispositions.²

² See Brader and Marcus (2013) for a review.

Scholarly agreement is especially strong about the role of anxiety.³ Anxiety is conceptualized as an unpleasant, aversive emotional state—the emotional response to threat—that causes people to take protective measures (Eysenck 1992). Anxiety can influence both information *gathering* and information *processing*. On information gathering, Valentino et al. (2009) use a writing task to induce anxiety and document large increases in subjects’ propensity to broaden their search for political information. Similarly, Valentino et al. (2009) and Albertson and Gadarian (2015, ch. 3) find that anxiety increases the amount of threat-related information that study participants read. After inducing anxiety by exposing participants to news stories about economic costs of Latino immigration, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008) document heightened desire for information about immigration.⁴

In addition to changing how people approach information gathering, anxiety can also affect information processing—attention and depth of consideration—with the potential to interrupt partisan habits (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). For example, MacKuen et al. (2010) show that presenting participants with counter-attitudinal information induces anxiety and causes them

³ Like previous authors (e.g. Marcus et al. 2006; Watson 1988), we use the words “anxiety,” “fear,” “worry,” and “concern” interchangeably. “Anxiety” is most common when referring to underlying psychological processes, but survey items measuring anxiety commonly use other words, since they are more common and since “anxiety” can (unintentionally) connote a kind of nervous, eager excitement.

⁴ We note two departures from the broader trend. In an online field experiment, Ryan (2012) finds null effects of an anxiety treatment on information-seeking. Brader (2006) finds induced enthusiasm—but not anxiety—to stimulate interest in a political campaign.

to read more deeply (see also Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau 2007). Brader (2006) finds that adding anxiety-inducing scary music to a campaign advertisement decreases the impact of long-held predispositions on participants' vote choices and increases their reliance on current issue evaluations. One implication of the change in processing style appears to be an increase in reliance on expertise. After inducing anxiety about a breakout of H1N1 and a new smallpox variant, Albertson and Gadarian (2015) find increased trust in relevant experts, like doctors and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Findings like these map nicely onto the distinction from psychology between accuracy goals (using the best available information to reason one's way toward a correct answer) and directional goals (using information to corroborate a preferred, likely partisan, conclusion) (Kunda 1990; see also Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014).

Theoretical Objectives

We take a recurrent pattern—that anxiety induces an information-gathering and information-processing approach with the potential to interrupt partisan habits—as our main theoretical reference point. Our study can begin to inform answers to several questions the scholarly literature has not yet had the opportunity to engage.

Because research on the political effects of anxiety draws predominantly from randomized experiments,⁵ it is unclear how its effects might scale to a real-world threat (e.g. Barabas and Jerit 2010). Acknowledging this point is not to suggest a preference for observational over experimental data. Each have their own advantages. When their results

⁵ Cf. Marcus et al. (2019).

corroborate each other, however, it increases confidence that hypothesized relationships do exist. In addition, ethical considerations restrict experiments to inducing a *small* degree of anxiety, generally delivered in the course of a single experimental sitting (often just a few minutes).⁶ Given that anxiety's political effects might mount if the dose is larger (Silverman, Kaltenthaler, and Dagher 2021) or endures over a longer period of time (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010), its influence in the context of Covid-19 might unfold in ways that experiments would be hard-pressed to detect.

Also noteworthy, the political environment has changed considerably even in the few years since much of the emotions-in-politics research was conducted, with the pull of partisan directional goals no doubt much stronger. When Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) introduced AIT, they characterized partisanship as a standing decision with both emotional and performance-focused components. But recent research on partisanship suggests increasing primacy of the emotional component. Over the past twenty years, partisanship has morphed into a social identity freighted with hatred for the political outgroup (Mason 2018), which may make deviating from one's partisan habits much harder than it used to be, less like revisiting a standing decision and more like revisiting one's core sense of self.

Perhaps the most convincing over-time evidence of this contextual change is the plummeting feeling thermometer scores that partisans give the other political party. Between 1980 and 2000, neither mean score ever fell below 38 degrees and often the averages were much higher than that. According to the 2020 ANES, partisans' feelings about the opposite party were

⁶ Thus, at least some researchers explicitly limit their theoretical predictions to the "low levels of uneasiness associated with typical public policy debates" (MacKuen et al. 2010, fn. 3).

unprecedentedly negative. The modal feeling thermometer score Republican identifiers gave the Democratic Party was 0 degrees, with a mean of 17.7 and a median of 15. This likely makes it more difficult for partisans to depart from leader cues and, especially, to vote for the other party. Can anxiety still attenuate its influence and, if so, what are its limits?

The Covid-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented opportunity to test the posited link between anxiety and interruption of partisan habits. It presented a genuine threat to Americans for more than a year, meaning it likely represents a rough upper bound on anxiety's effects. At the same time, it unfolded during a time of heightened political hostility, allowing us to assess the emotion's theorized capacity to serve as a counterweight to political polarization. While our study will not always be able to pinpoint reasons that observational patterns differ from those achieved in tightly controlled experiments, we can provide a rare view of how anxiety influenced a real and critical political episode.

Hypotheses

We examine anxiety's effect in three distinct domains: policy support, information acquisition, and vote choice. The standard operating procedure partisans employ when processing new political information is to accept that which is consistent with their existing predispositions and to ignore or counter-argue that which is contrary to them (e.g. Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Because party elites took clear and opposing positions on mitigation (Summers 2020), Democratic and Republican identifiers naturally possess partisan directional goals on mitigation policies, with Democrats encouraged by their leaders toward support and Republicans toward opposition. We seek to assess the extent to which accuracy motives induced by Covid-related anxiety can alter those baseline tendencies.

Undertaking this task requires us to consider what it looks like to pursue accuracy goals in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Kunda describes accuracy-driven reasoning as a processing style in which people exert more effort to reach correct conclusions. They “attend to relevant information more carefully,” “process it more deeply,” and “[consider] more alternatives” (1990, 481-482). Similarly, people in an accuracy-oriented mindset do not “ignore potentially relevant arguments in order to form an evaluation consistent with one’s partisan identity” (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014, 238). That is not to say that those with accuracy goals inevitably arrive at opinions that are objectively correct. Accuracy is a goal, not an inevitability. In pursuing accuracy goals, people expend more cognitive effort to raise the probability that they adopt opinions consistent with accurate information (see also Kahneman 2011; Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

These explications lead us to expect, first, that fearful individuals will be more supportive of pandemic mitigation policies such as mask mandates. To hold this expectation, we need not stipulate that mitigation policies were the more “accurate” position. Policies are not, themselves, accurate or inaccurate. Indeed, the novel coronavirus reminds us that science is hard and experts are not infallible. For example, the CDC only started to recommend wearing masks in public on April 3, 2020, after insisting they were unnecessary for two months before (Netburn 2021).

Although the uncertainty surrounding Covid-related information in the early days of the pandemic renders this an imperfect test of accuracy motives, citizens still had a clear signal to follow by the time our first survey entered the field in April. The CDC and public health researchers—the most credible sources of information about Covid-19—overwhelmingly recommended actions to mitigate the spread of the virus such as wearing masks, getting tested, and temporarily closing non-essential businesses. Moreover, even if experts were not always

consistent on the policy particulars, they did give consistent signals about the dangers of Covid-19—such as Covid-19 being more contagious than the flu—that were objectively verifiable and buttressed by thousands dying from the infection worldwide. Individuals in an accuracy-oriented mindset would likely find this information compelling and integrate it into their own preferences.

Second, we expect fearful individuals’ accuracy motivations to be visible in the information they consult. They should seek more information, including from sources they do not habitually use.

Third, we expect fear to be associated with a greater likelihood of voting for Joe Biden. Again, holding this expectation does not require us to stipulate that a Biden vote is the more “accurate” position. We can imagine an array of considerations—preferences about abortion, taxation, or immigration to name just a few—that could lead a person to conclude that they should vote for Donald Trump. Instead, our argument is a *ceteris paribus* one: To the extent a person feels pandemic-related anxiety, they should assimilate more accurate information about the pandemic. Because this information was more often endorsed by Biden, anxiety should be associated with a greater likelihood of voting for him, all else equal.

If voters have internalized partisan directional goals, these patterns should unfold differently for Republicans and Democrats. On mitigation policies, accuracy-driven motives might well lead Democratic voters right to where they started (e.g. supporting a more aggressive pandemic response) because Democratic politicians mostly endorsed them. But many Republicans would find the new information they encountered leading them in a direction different from their leaders’ messages. Compared to Democrats, then, fearful Republicans should move further toward support for mitigation policies simply because their attitudes have more room to change in that direction. Although our theoretical framework applies to both Democrats

and Republicans, the observable implications of a shift from directional- to accuracy-driven reasoning are often greater for Republicans.

A remaining question is what the effects of anxiety should be among independents. Pure independents, by definition, will lack partisan directional goals for or against mitigation. As such, we expect fear's effect on their policy preferences to be smaller than for Republicans but larger than for Democrats. By contrast, because vote choices are more firmly anchored by partisanship, we expect independents' negative emotional reactions to the pandemic to affect their vote choices more than the same will for Republicans.

Data and Methods

To examine how pandemic-induced anxiety shaped opinions and modified partisan habits, we employ survey data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2020, we contracted with Qualtrics to collect a sample of American adults, targeted to meet Census benchmarks for race, gender, education level, and income. We conducted follow-up interviews in June, September, and October. For each follow-up, Qualtrics invited individuals who had completed one or more prior waves, with approximately half responding. Next, Qualtrics attempted to minimize attrition bias by replenishing the sample, again with attention to Census targets (see Deng et al. 2013; Hirano et al. 2001 on using refreshment samples to handle attrition). While several of our analyses use the panel structure of our dataset, we also use the separate cross-sections for additional tests where appropriate.

Although each cross-section aligns with our Census targets, differential attrition may cause our panel sample to diverge from those targets.⁷ Such divergences are of lesser concern when, as is the case for our study, the inferential focus is on understanding cause-and-effect relationships and the dataset has coverage on key variables that might moderate these relationships (Franco et al. 2017). Table 1 clarifies how many participants in each wave participated in prior waves. Together, the four waves provide an unbalanced panel of 2,318 verified respondents, including 469 who participated in all four surveys.

Table 1 about here

Using all four survey waves, we examine support for five pandemic-related policies: mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, lockdowns requiring businesses to close, monitoring of public spaces by police, and mandatory Covid-19 testing even for asymptomatic individuals.⁸ Next, we assess the influence of anxiety on information search and knowledge about Covid-19 based on analysis of survey waves 1 and 2. Alongside this analysis, we again use all four waves to evaluate how anxiety altered respondents' approval of President Trump and the CDC on their performance related to the pandemic. Finally, we use our wave 4 sample to examine respondents' vote intentions in the 2020 presidential election. These data were collected from October 22 through November 3, 2020, with collection ending the day of the election.

Validating a Measure of Anxiety

⁷ See Supplementary Information pages S5-S7 for distributions of all demographic and dependent variables among both cross-sectional and panel samples.

⁸ See Supplementary Information pages S2-S5 for full item wordings.

Critics of survey-based emotions-in-politics studies argue that a strong correlation between expressed emotions and partisanship undermines the endeavor (Ladd and Lenz 2008).⁹ Hence we must establish that our measure of fear depends on factors other than politics. To measure fear of getting sick from Covid-19, we ask respondents, “How concerned are you that you will become seriously ill from the coronavirus outbreak?” with four ordered response options ranging from “not at all concerned” to “very concerned.” We estimate variation in anxiety as a function of party identification (with Democrats as the excluded category¹⁰) as well as other potential antecedents: demographic characteristics reflecting groups hit particularly hard by Covid-19, including age and race; personality traits like neuroticism and perceived vulnerability to disease (Duncan, Schaller, and Park 2009); personal experiences such as knowing someone who died from Covid-19; and contextual factors such as cases and deaths per capita in a respondent’s home county (The New York Times 2020).

The results appear in Table 2. The four columns on the left include estimates for all respondents. The four columns on the right reflect an analysis of Republicans only. Starting with the full-sample models, we find that although party identification is consistently associated with fear of Covid-19, so too are knowing someone who has died from it, being older, and being either Hispanic or Asian American relative to being white. When personality items are available in specific survey waves, they are strongly associated with fear. People who score higher on neuroticism and agreeableness traits express more fear, while those who score higher in

⁹ Anxiety is correlated with our measure of party identification. The association, however, is not especially strong, ranging from $r = -0.147$ in Wave 1 to $r = -0.29$ in Wave 4.

¹⁰ Following common practice, independents who lean toward one party are coded as partisans.

conscientiousness express less. Those who perceive they are more vulnerable to getting sick in general also express more fear about Covid-19 specifically. In waves 2 and 3, the number of per capita deaths in the respondent's home county is positively associated with fear of Covid-19. In short, partisanship matters, but it is far from the only thing that matters.

Table 2 about here

Because our study is animated by whether anxiety about Covid-19 attenuates the impact of Republicans' partisanship in particular, we next assess whether expressions of fear are based in nonpartisan factors among Republicans, specifically. We estimate the same models but replace the categorical party identification variables with strength of Republican identity. The results on the right side of Table 2 demonstrate that fear of serious illness is based in a wide range of factors for Republicans. Moreover, the effect of Republicans' strength of identity varies widely across waves and is only statistically significant in wave 3, when fear was at its lowest point in our panel.¹¹ In short, Republicans' worries about getting sick are rooted in their personalities, their social characteristics, their personal experiences, and sometimes their local conditions, but likely *not* in the strength of their party ties.

Expanding Divides in the Mass Public

Having validated our measure of anxiety, we begin our analysis of the politicization of Covid-19 and the degree to which anxiety moderated the impact of party. Elite messaging about Covid-19 became increasingly divided between April and October, with President Trump and

¹¹ Supplementary Information page S7 displays levels of anxiety over time, broken down by partisanship.

many Republican officeholders minimizing the threat while Democratic elites expressed fear about the virus and support for mitigation (Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2022; Brownstein 2020; Flynn and Iati 2020). That pattern of elite messaging should polarize voters. Indeed, Kam and Sides (2020) find a wider partisan divide among individuals who pay more attention to politics—the individuals best positioned to reflect their party leader cues.

The amount of fear people express about becoming seriously ill also reflects these differences in elite messaging to some degree. During the sliver of time when Trump embraced the need for mitigation in April 2020, 62.6 percent of Republicans expressed being “somewhat” or “very concerned” about becoming seriously ill—only fifteen percentage points less than Democrats. By October, the gap had grown to 27 points. The widening gap was driven mostly by a nine-point drop in anxiety among Republicans. Nevertheless, a majority of Republicans (53 percent) still expressed being at least somewhat concerned about becoming seriously ill from Covid-19 despite persistent cues from their party leaders that its dangers were overblown.

Figure 1 shows support for specific policies related to the pandemic: mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, closing non-essential businesses, police enforcement of park and beach closures, and mandatory Covid-19 testing. We track the percent who reported strongly supporting or supporting them and break down the results by partisanship while examining trends over time.

Figure 1 about here

As with fear of getting sick, the gap between Democratic and Republican citizens on mitigation preferences widens over time. On mask mandates, Republicans and Democrats were 13 points apart in the April survey but 26 points apart in October, a change driven mostly by decreasing support among Republicans. For the other four policies, both Republican and

Democratic support waned over time, with the rate of change much faster among Republicans. Regardless, on the two mitigation policies that received the most attention—stay-at-home orders and mask mandates—Republican support remained consistently above 50 and 70 percent, respectively. In short, the disconnect between elite leadership cues on mitigation and the preferences expressed by mass partisans was large.

Does Anxiety Temper the Effects of Partisanship?

Much analysis to date has focused on these widening partisan differences (Clinton et al. 2021; Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2022), findings our Figure 1 confirms. However, it bears emphasis that droves of Republicans supported Covid-19 mitigation strategies despite the elite cues they were receiving. We turn next to anxiety’s role in characterizing which Republicans departed from the party line.

Figure 2 depicts how fear of becoming seriously ill correlates with mitigation policy support among Democrats, Republicans, and the full sample. The points represent means, calculated by pooling observations across all four waves. Results show a clear, positive relationship between fear and each dependent variable. As expected, this relationship is especially strong among Republicans; across all five variables, lines representing Republican support display steeper slopes than lines representing Democratic support.

Figure 2 about here

Take support for government-imposed stay-at-home orders, for example. Among Republicans declaring they were “very concerned” about becoming seriously ill, about 88 percent supported stay-at-home orders, compared to just 25 percent who were “not at all concerned.” Indeed, Republicans and Democrats who expressed high anxiety were almost

statistically indistinguishable in their support for stay-at-home orders, while partisans who expressed no anxiety differed by nearly 50 points. Across all these policies and behaviors, party differences shrink as anxiety increases. While low-anxiety Republicans adopt party messaging and policy preferences in line with their partisanship, high levels of fear appear to weaken that link, as high-anxiety Republicans employ more critical processing strategies.

Of course, examining the association between levels of anxiety and support for specific policies, as we do in Figure 2, can take us only so far. Some of the association between fear and policy support could arise from unexamined confounders. Panel data affords us an opportunity to consider a stricter test: We can identify within-respondent *changes* in anxiety and examine the extent to which they predict contemporaneous changes in policy support. Doing so does not remove limitations inherent in observational data altogether. But it does restrict the range of possible confounders; in order for a variable to confound our estimate of anxiety’s effect on policy support, it must have a *time-variant* component correlated with changes in anxiety. Additionally, since our panel models rely on changes in anxiety, rather than levels, they allow us to estimate effects of anxiety even if the overall level of anxiety were to be suppressed by external factors, such as partisans taking cues from elites seeking to downplay the threat posed by Covid-19.

We begin with the two-way random effects model where the effect of fear is conditional on party and a vector of demographic covariates X :

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 F_{it} + \beta_2 P_i + \beta_3 F_{it} P_i + \beta_4 X_{it} + \eta_{it}. \quad (1)$$

Assuming unit and time effects are independent of all covariates, the compound error term η_i takes the form $\eta_{it} = U_i + \theta_t + \varepsilon_{it}$ and terms are defined as:

Y_{it} := individual i 's position on policy Y at time t ,

F_{it} := individual i 's fear of virus at time t ,

P_i := individual i 's party identification,

X_{it} := vector of covariates for individual i at time t ,

U_i := unit effect of individual i ,

θ_t := time effect of time t ,

ε_{it} := random error for individual i at time t .

As we foreshadow above, this modeling approach draws inferential leverage from over-time, within-subject changes in fear. As others have correctly noted (Ladd and Lenz 2008), cross-sectional inferences about political emotions are vulnerable to endogeneity concerns. An unexamined factor such as age or population density in a respondent's locality might explain effects attributed to anxiety. Because random effects models directly estimate baseline differences in fear and evaluate changes in fear relative to these individual-level baselines, the approach we use here ensures that effect estimates do not depend on non-random differences in fear that are driven by unobserved time-invariant variables.

The results from the random effects models appear in Table 3. The main effect associated with Republican identity, which represents the effect of Republican identity when respondents are “not at all concerned,” is consistently negative and statistically significant, suggesting unfearful GOP identifiers are less likely to support mitigation policies than Democrats (the reference category). The main effect of fear, which reflects fear's impact among Democrats, is positive and significant; those more fearful are more likely to support mitigation policies.

The key test for our purposes is the interaction between Republican identification and fear since it represents anxiety's capacity to moderate motivated reasoning. Here we expect

positive effects, which would indicate that the negative effect of Republican identity on support for mitigation policies is offset by the positive effect of being afraid of getting seriously ill. It would also indicate the effect of fear is significantly larger among Republicans than Democrats. Consistent with expectations, the interactions are consistently positive and statistically significant. Fear of becoming seriously ill reduces Republican identity's negative impact on all our dependent variables and increases fear's positive impact on them.¹² The interactions between fear and independent identification are positive and significant as well. Also as expected, the coefficients on these interactions are smaller than the interactions between fear and Republican identity. This suggests that fear's effect is consistently largest among those with directional goals that run counter to accuracy goals and consistently smallest when directional goals and accuracy goals are in concert.

Table 3 about here

One limitation of a random effects approach is that, although it accounts for baseline differences in fear, it does so by assuming these are uncorrelated with regressors in the model. A more conservative approach is to employ fixed effects models, which rely exclusively on within-subject variation in the explanatory variables and thus exclude confounders that are constant over time (party identification, race, education, personality traits, and many other things generally meet this condition). However, fixed effects models have lower statistical power, and they preclude the estimation of interactions that include stable traits such as partisanship. On

¹² Our instruments also measured anger, which is posited to have distinct political consequences. When we incorporate anger into our models (Supplementary Information pages S16-S17), we find that coefficient estimates associated with the fear variables are virtually unchanged.

Supplementary Information pages S7-S16, we present a parallel fixed effects approach to estimating the relationships above. It leads us to the same conclusion: Fear of getting sick increased support for mitigation policies, especially among Republicans.

Observational data have inherent limitations relative to randomized experiments. The key one we cannot fully expunge is that over-time *changes* in anxiety could be associated with some variable that affects support for pandemic policies via a different mechanism. This caveat acknowledged, the results presented above lead us to conclude that, insofar as policy opinions are concerned, anxiety can attenuate patterns associated with partisan motivated reasoning. Substantial proportions of Republican identifiers supported mitigation policies, contrary signals from party leaders notwithstanding. Fear about what the virus might do to them appears to be a key reason.

Sources, Cues, and Knowledge

To recapitulate, we have thus far argued that anxiety induced by real-world events—in this case, fear of getting sick with Covid-19—can lead citizens to adopt policy positions contrary to party cues. A complementary test of anxiety’s capacity to promote accuracy goals relative to directional goals would be to examine the sources citizens turn to and what they learn. We expect anxiety to be associated with 1) reliance on a broader range of news sources (as in Valentino et al. 2009), 2) greater trust in expert sources, 3) lower trust in partisan sources that contradict the experts (President Trump in our case), and 4) more accurate pandemic-specific knowledge. These relationships should be particularly potent for Republicans, whom anxiety should orient to reject inaccurate beliefs.

Our dataset affords some opportunities to examine these relationships. We asked respondents in waves 1 and 2 how often, in the previous three days, they had checked a news source that was *different* from what they normally read. We designed this question to capture the degree to which people have recently engaged in the type of information search that might reveal new facts and details (consulting a source different from normal), rather than relying on their usual sources, which are more likely to reinforce existing (mis)information. Responses ranged from “never” to “very often” on a four-point scale.¹³

We also asked respondents in all four survey waves to evaluate, on a 0-100 scale, the performance of various public figures and agencies. Among these were the CDC and President Trump. These performance items are not synonymous with trust per se. But insofar as people tend to trust institutions they perceive as performing well (Citrin 1974), it stands to reason that these items represent a workable proxy for trust and could help reveal how citizens modify what sources they rely on as a function of anxiety.

The first column in Table 4 presents the results of a random effects model of information-seeking. Fear’s main effect, which reflects its impact among Democrats, is positive and statistically significant. Those who experienced more anxiety were, as expected, more likely to seek out news sources different from those they would typically check. Neither of the fear-party

¹³ We also asked respondents which national news sources they checked for trustworthy information about Covid-19, allowing us to control for variation in the source and ideological slant of respondents’ news sources. We include this information in models of both information search and knowledge accuracy. Full model results appear on Supplementary Information pages S18-S19.

interactions are significant, suggesting that fear increases information search comparably among all partisan groups, which is what our theory predicted. Recall from above that the effect of anxiety among partisan groups should differ only when Democrats and Republicans have internalized differing partisan directional goals. Simply checking a different source because you are afraid does not have an inherent partisan valence, so there is no reason to expect partisan asymmetry. How partisans process that information ought to differ by partisan group, which we demonstrate next.

Table 4 about here

When it comes to fear's ability to decrease reliance on a habitual cue (e.g. Trump) and increase reliance on a public health authority (the CDC) that provided information running counter to the habitual cue, partisanship moderates the effect of fear. Relative to evaluations of the CDC's performance, the estimated effect of Republican party identification is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that unfearful Republicans provide more negative evaluations. But the interaction between fear and being a Republican is positive and significant, suggesting that more fearful Republicans evaluated the CDC more positively than did less fearful Republicans. Similarly, the negative and significant effect of the fear-Republican interaction in the Trump approval model suggests that fearful Republicans rated him less positively than did unfearful Republicans.

Finally, we expect that eschewing partisan cues in favor of scientific ones will result in more accurate knowledge about Covid-19, as fear should mitigate the tendency of Republicans to reject factual information running counter to their partisan directional goals. Our wave 1 instrument posed a series of (true) factual statements about Covid-19 designed to reflect readily available information supported by scientific consensus: "coronavirus is more deadly than the

flu,” “coronavirus is more contagious than the flu,” “you can be infected with coronavirus and not show symptoms for up to 12-14 days,” and “getting the flu shot does not make you less likely to get the coronavirus.” Respondents ranked the accuracy of each statement on a four-point scale. We coded “very accurate” and “somewhat accurate” responses as accurate and “not so accurate” and “not at all accurate” responses as inaccurate. We then counted how many statements respondents correctly identified as accurate.

The final column in Table 4 presents the results from an ordered logit model where the dependent variable is the number of statements correctly identified as accurate.¹⁴ The main effects of fear and party are statistically significant and carry the expected signs. As in Table 3, the main effect for fear captures its effect among Democrats; more fear is positively associated with more accurate content knowledge. The main effects for both party dummies are negative, indicating that both independents and Republicans answer fewer questions correctly than Democrats. Most important, the positive fear-Republican interaction suggests that anxiety again moderates the association between party and knowledge accuracy. Specifically, fear narrows the difference in the number of correct answers provided by Republicans and Democrats, and the impact of fear is significantly larger among Republicans than Democrats. The cross-sectional nature of the analysis makes us more cautious in construing this relationship as causal. Still, the results suggest that anxiety does encourage individuals to pursue accuracy-motivated reasoning, even on a highly politicized issue.

¹⁴ We estimate this relationship via ordered logit because the outcome variable takes on a small number (five) of ordered outcomes.

The results in this section build on the policy results we report above: Anxiety encourages individuals to seek out new information, to eschew habitual elite cues, and process what they learn with the goal of achieving accuracy, rather than rationalizing partisan talking points. We next turn to the broader electoral ramifications of pandemic-related anxiety.

Anxiety and the Vote

Last, we turn to fear's influence on presidential voting. One important finding from the emotions-in-politics literature is that anxiety can decrease the extent to which voters rely on predispositions—partisanship chief among them—when they decide for whom to vote (Brader 2006; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). On one hand, this pattern seems quite likely to play out in 2020. After all, we show above that anxiety influenced considerations that likely undergird vote choice, shaping both knowledge about Covid-19 and mitigation-based policy preferences, with effects especially large among Republicans. But on the other hand, even voters whose anxiety oriented them to attend closely to current circumstances might find things they like about President Trump: his opposition to immigration, his pro-life judicial appointments, or his preference for low taxes, for example. Moreover, the evidence supporting this prediction draws substantially from an era in American politics when partisan identity was less influential and crossover voting was more common (Jacobson 2019). Therefore, an important objective in this final section is to assess anxiety's potential to shape voting choices during a period of acute political polarization.

To do so, we turn to our Census-benchmarked wave 4 sample to estimate a binomial logit model of vote choice among those who voted for the two major-party candidates, Donald Trump and Joe Biden.¹⁵ This model takes the form:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 F_i + \beta_2 P_i + \beta_3 F_i P_i + \beta_4 X_i + \varepsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where Y_i takes a value of 1 if individual i intended to vote for Donald Trump and a value of 0 if they intended to vote for Joe Biden. The other terms are defined similarly to (1). As in previous models, we account for a range of social characteristics: race and ethnicity, gender, education, age, income, and whether the respondent lives in the South. To account for policy-based reasons for supporting or opposing the incumbent, we also control for immigration policy preferences, level of racial resentment, assessment of the economy, and self-reported ideology.¹⁶

Figure 3 presents the predicted probability of voting for Donald Trump given the respondent's level of fear, broken down by party, with tabular results on Supplementary Information page S21. At the lowest levels of fear, respondents' vote intentions were strongly associated with their party identification. Republicans and Democrats both toed the party line, with overwhelming majorities intending to vote for their party's nominee. As fear increased, the picture changed. The predicted probability that Republicans voted for Trump dips, but the effect

¹⁵ We also estimate multinomial and ordered logits to assess the possibility that voters may simply abstain rather than vote for a major party candidate. Results, which appear in Supplementary Information pages S19-S20, are consistent across all models.

¹⁶ We consider alternative specifications, including models with only demographic controls. Substantive results, presented on Supplementary Information pages S21-S22, remain consistent throughout these analyses.

is much less dramatic than the effect of anxiety on Republicans' policy preferences that we documented above. Even with fear of getting seriously ill from Covid-19 at its maximum, Figure 3 shows a predicted probability of voting for Trump over 65 percent, a decrease of less than 20 points compared to the least fearful Republicans. A change of that size was probably sufficient to move some Republicans who were near the midpoint of the vote preference distribution. However, even Republicans suffering from the highest level of anxiety were, on average, about twice as likely to choose Trump over Biden.¹⁷

Figure 3 about here

Independent voters, on the other hand, appeared more responsive to fear. Independents expressing the highest level of fear were about 45 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump compared to independents expressing the lowest level of fear, and this effect was reflected in final vote tallies in our sample. Thirty percent of wave 4 independents were “very concerned” about becoming seriously ill, and Biden won these fearful voters by a margin of 72-28. It seems fear contributed mightily to the much-larger-than-usual advantage Biden had in the exit polls among independent voters, a group Trump won by 4 points four years before. In that sense, anxiety about Covid-19 may have had a pivotal impact on the election.¹⁸

¹⁷ Our data reveal that Trump enjoyed an 81-19 advantage among the most fearful Republicans. With 18 percent of Republicans “very concerned” about getting seriously ill from Covid-19 in October 2020, it would appear that fear made only a small dent in Republican voter support.

¹⁸ AIT also implies that anxiety would increase reliance on current evaluations in making vote choices. Our ability to test this is limited by the measures available to us but, on Supplementary Information pages S22-S23, we attempt to characterize reliance on habits and find that among

Discussion

We have elucidated how the emotions Americans experienced about the Covid-19 pandemic did and did not interrupt their political habits. In some contexts, we document large and consistent departures. Although Republican leaders often downplayed the pandemic's severity and opposed public health measures, many Republican citizens reached a conclusion different from the one their leaders tried to propagate. Because they were afraid of getting sick, they sought out independent information, were less repelled by scientifically driven experts like the CDC, learned true facts about the pandemic and, as a result, supported policy measures even though they were endorsed by Democrats.¹⁹

And yet, fear of severe illness did little to attenuate the effect of partisanship on vote choice. Parties seldom cede control of the presidency after a single term, which means Biden's victory was far from routine. But even with nearly a quarter million Americans dead from Covid-19 on Election Day 2020, Joe Biden improved on Hillary Clinton's proportion of the two-party vote by a mere 1.1 percentage points, a modest net gain for the Democratic candidate. This result is somewhat puzzling, given that some previous findings suggest that anxiety can loosen partisans from their standing vote decisions (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). But this research predates the extraordinary levels of affective polarization that exist today. When partisans loathe the

Republicans, anxiety is associated with a 22 percentage point decrease in the proportion of variance explained by predispositions.

¹⁹ These deviations can matter. For instance, we suspect they gave Republican governors of states like Ohio the leeway they needed to break from Donald Trump and enact mask mandates and business closures. In turn, they likely saved lives.

alternative and find it dangerous to the nation's future well-being, departing from their usual partisan pathways will be especially difficult.

Our wave 4 data provide a hint of polarization's potential role in diminishing defection. Fearful Republicans who voted for Biden gave the Democratic Party an average feeling thermometer score of 54.8 degrees. That is about the average score for out-party partisans in the 1980s and 1990s when voting against one's party was more common. Among similarly worried Republicans who voted for Trump despite their anxiety, the mean Democratic thermometer was a frigid 16.5 degrees. With feelings that negative, it seems the Democratic candidate was hardly an alternative no matter how dire the circumstances.

Our results also offer something new for the study of emotions in politics. Especially of late, this literature has relied heavily on lab- and survey-based experiments, leaving open questions about how much genuine calamities can induce emotions that interfere with partisan reflexes. Because it palpably influenced life for so long, the pandemic allows us to examine the influence of emotions in circumstances under which they are most likely to have an effect. And they do have an effect—though one that, in the context of a presidential campaign, must compete with other priorities, values, and loyalties. As such, even in the extreme scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic, anxiety played a large role, but not a singular one.

Finally, the studies herein add new brush strokes to the portrait of an American public that is deeply divided. Even when they take a dreadful human toll, national tragedies can lead a nation to rediscover its shared identity, values, and sense of purpose (Levendusky 2018). So it was with the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, and the terrorist attacks of September 11. So it might have been with Covid-19. In another version of history, one can imagine facemasks and vaccine cards becoming the modern-day analogs to victory gardens and American flag lapel pins.

Instead, the nation remains mired in disputes over matters of ground truth, not to mention the legitimacy of its political leadership. It is a testament that much has changed, and that an acute threat to democratic accountability remains.

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Table 1: Field Dates and Observations in Panel Survey

	Completed wave 1 (April)	Completed wave 2 (June)	Completed wave 3 (September)	Completed wave 4 (October)	Completed all waves after initial enrollment
Started in wave 1	2,194	1,330	874	706	469
Started in wave 2		512	230	162	126
Started in wave 3			1,294	557	557
Started in wave 4				1,016	1,016
Total	2,194	1,842	2,398	2,441	2,168

Note: Entries are number of respondents completing each wave, according to the wave in which they started.

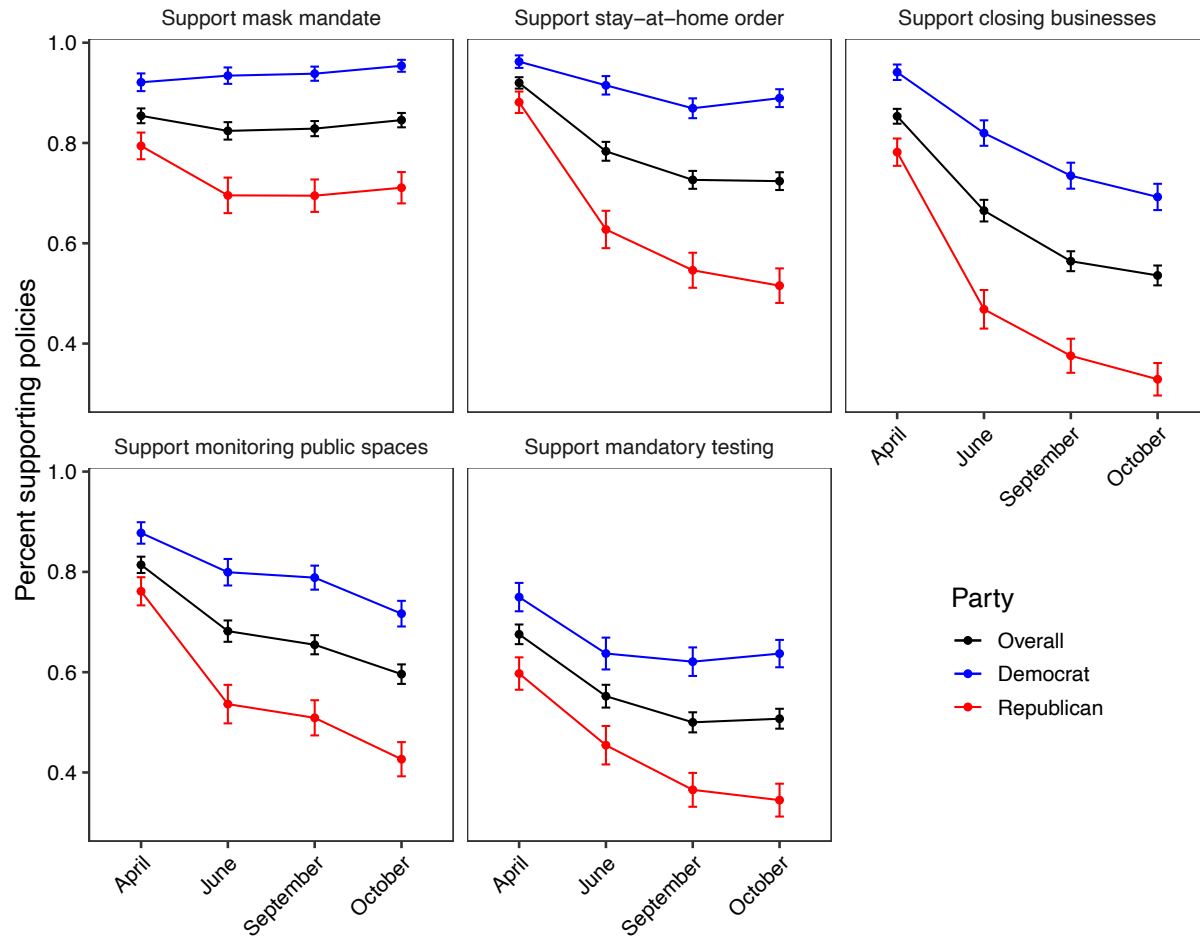
Table 2: Determinants of Fear among Republicans and All Respondents

	<u>Full Sample</u>				<u>Republicans Only</u>			
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
Extraversion	0.039 (0.044)				0.009 (0.068)			
Agreeableness	0.196** (0.052)				0.255** (0.077)			
Conscientiousness	-0.187** (0.051)				-0.216** (0.080)			
Neuroticism	0.269** (0.052)				0.497** (0.087)			
Openness	0.036 (0.047)				0.138 [†] (0.075)			
Perceived vulnerability		0.625** (0.053)				0.716* (0.092)		
Independent	-0.581** (0.147)	-0.629** (0.153)	-0.816** (0.144)	-0.475** (0.146)				
Republican	-0.392** (0.097)	-0.689** (0.113)	-0.853** (0.100)	-1.033** (0.099)				
Party strength					-0.127 (0.529)	0.586 (0.666)	-1.251* (0.551)	-0.099 (0.527)
Know victim	0.635** (0.135)	0.566** (0.177)	0.494** (0.139)	0.470** (0.144)	0.717** (0.212)	0.614* (0.302)	0.869* (0.243)	0.348 (0.259)
Cases per capita	0.037 (0.068)	0.031 (0.122)	-0.034 (0.071)	0.016 (0.044)	0.227 [†] (0.118)	-0.287 (0.237)	-0.077 (0.099)	0.013 (0.079)
Deaths per capita	0.021 (0.041)	0.476** (0.154)	0.382** (0.148)	0.052 (0.161)	-0.048 (0.067)	0.484* (0.244)	0.492* (0.204)	-0.054 (0.227)
Asian	0.688** (0.188)	0.602** (0.176)	0.770** (0.195)	0.291 (0.193)	0.344 (0.352)	1.070** (0.340)	0.985** (0.349)	1.085** (0.384)
Black	0.189 (0.184)	0.245 [†] (0.144)	0.001 (0.132)	0.230 [†] (0.132)	0.447 (0.620)	0.914* (0.453)	0.477 (0.422)	1.127** (0.406)
Latinx/Hispanic	0.401* (0.191)	1.008** (0.237)	0.728** (0.128)	0.822** (0.126)	0.929* (0.394)	1.619** (0.530)	1.049** (0.237)	1.269** (0.256)
Female	0.092 (0.103)	-0.004 (0.104)	0.162 [†] (0.087)	0.254** (0.090)	0.070 (0.155)	-0.128 (0.169)	-0.082 (0.144)	0.298* (0.151)
Age: 35-54	0.484** (0.129)	0.295* (0.144)	0.470** (0.115)	0.301** (0.114)	0.370 [†] (0.207)	-0.457 [†] (0.270)	0.400* (0.196)	0.487* (0.190)
Age: 55-74	0.345* (0.140)	0.325* (0.145)	0.608** (0.119)	0.484** (0.117)	0.280 (0.224)	-0.231 (0.270)	0.754** (0.193)	0.609** (0.193)
Age: 75+	0.155 (0.212)	0.207 (0.224)	0.192 (0.189)	0.208 (0.186)	0.151 (0.309)	0.022 (0.362)	0.497 [†] (0.298)	0.824* (0.299)
HS or less	0.087	0.033	0.127	-0.000	-0.121	0.210	-0.026	-0.073

	(0.119)	(0.122)	(0.102)	(0.102)	(0.181)	(0.206)	(0.166)	(0.169)
Some college	0.054 (0.132)	-0.043 (0.148)	0.016 (0.118)	-0.084 (0.116)	-0.166 (0.220)	-0.022 (0.267)	-0.246 (0.201)	-0.269 (0.202)
<i>Observations</i>	1896	1487	1845	1936	808	541	684	707

Note: [†]p < 0.1, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, standard errors in parentheses. Democrat is baseline category for party. 18-34 is baseline category for age. College degree is baseline category for education. All non-categorical variables, including all dependent variables and the key explanatory variable, fear, are unit normalized. Table entries give the results of ordered logit models testing the effects of a variety of psychological, contextual, and demographic variables on respondents' level of fear.

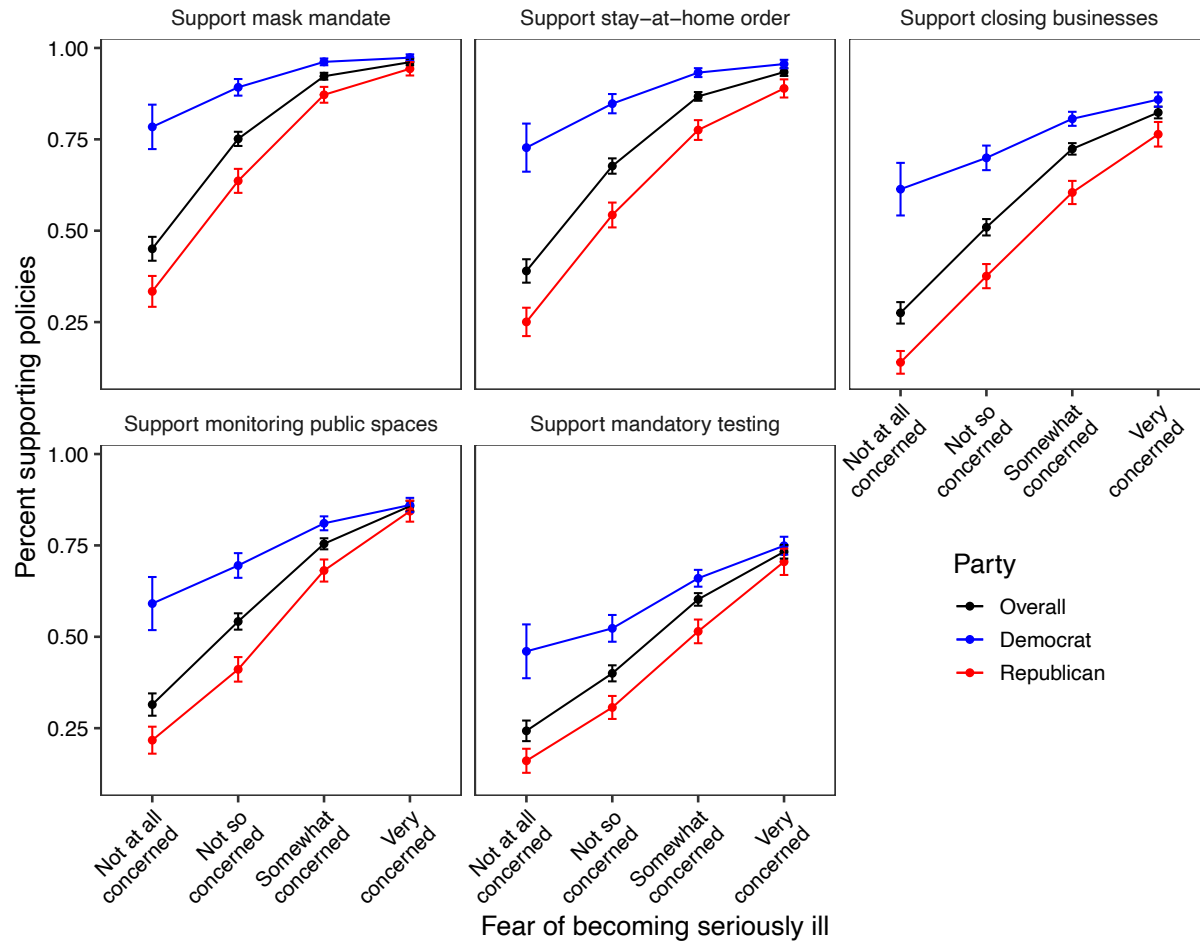
Figure 1: Change in Policy Support over Time



Note: The figures display the percent of each party's members who support each Covid-19 mitigation measure in each survey wave. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

"Overall" measure includes independents. Estimates calculated using cross-sectional samples targeted to meet Census benchmarks.

Figure 2: Policy Support by Level of Fear



Note: The figures display the percent of each party's members who support each Covid-19 mitigation measure, separated by level of fear and pooling observations across survey waves. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. "Overall" measure includes independents.

Table 3: Two-Way Random Effects Model Results

	Mask Mandate	Stay-at- Home Order	Close Businesses	Monitor Public Spaces	Mandatory Testing
Fear	0.158** (0.017)	0.190** (0.017)	0.191** (0.017)	0.167** (0.017)	0.195** (0.018)
Independent	-0.342** (0.039)	-0.323** (0.039)	-0.355** (0.040)	-0.228** (0.041)	-0.212** (0.043)
Republican	-0.535** (0.026)	-0.552** (0.026)	-0.550** (0.027)	-0.405** (0.028)	-0.408** (0.029)
Fear × Independent	0.239** (0.034)	0.160** (0.034)	0.146** (0.034)	0.167** (0.036)	0.091* (0.037)
Fear × Republican	0.330** (0.023)	0.251** (0.023)	0.213** (0.023)	0.245** (0.024)	0.136** (0.025)
Contact	0.085** (0.023)	0.033 (0.023)	-0.028 (0.023)	-0.006 (0.024)	0.035 (0.025)
Cases per capita	0.005 (0.012)	0.008 (0.012)	0.021 [†] (0.012)	-0.020 (0.013)	-0.009 (0.013)
Deaths per capita	0.001 (0.011)	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.015 (0.011)	0.019 [†] (0.011)	0.004 (0.012)
Female	0.086** (0.025)	0.136** (0.025)	0.084** (0.025)	0.123** (0.026)	-0.017 (0.027)
Age: 35-54	-0.002 (0.031)	-0.027 (0.031)	0.011 (0.031)	0.066* (0.032)	-0.066* (0.034)
Age: 55-74	0.199** (0.032)	0.072* (0.031)	0.110** (0.032)	0.142** (0.033)	0.022 (0.035)
Age: 75+	0.347** (0.054)	0.155** (0.054)	0.123* (0.054)	0.237** (0.057)	0.150* (0.059)
HS or less	-0.111** (0.028)	-0.070* (0.027)	-0.072** (0.028)	-0.045 (0.029)	-0.069* (0.030)
Some college	-0.125** (0.032)	-0.081* (0.032)	-0.076* (0.032)	-0.105** (0.034)	-0.107** (0.036)
Intercept	0.090* (0.043)	0.636** (0.043)	0.768** (0.043)	0.434** (0.046)	0.506** (0.047)
Observations	7094	7094	7094	7094	7094

Note: [†]p < 0.1, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, standard errors in parentheses. Democrat is baseline

category for party. 18-34 is baseline category for age. College degree is baseline category for

education. All non-categorical variables, including all dependent variables and the key explanatory variable, fear, are unit normalized. Table entries give the results of random effects models testing the effect of fear on respondents' support for Covid-19 mitigation measures. All models are estimated on panel data.

Table 4: Anxiety Influences Information-Seeking and Knowledge Accuracy

	<u>Random Effects, Waves 1 and 2</u>	<u>Random Effects, Waves 1-4</u>	<u>Random Effects, Waves 1-4</u>	<u>Ordered Logit, Wave 1</u>
	Checked Different News Source	CDC Approval	Trump Approval	Knowledge Accuracy
Fear	0.147** (0.028)	1.241** (0.471)	-0.019 (0.473)	0.389** (0.102)
Independent	0.074 (0.063)	-9.518** (1.169)	18.411** (1.419)	-0.434* (0.191)
Republican	0.076 (0.048)	-6.916** (0.809)	53.984** (0.985)	-0.412** (0.150)
Fear × Independent	-0.099 (0.056)	2.387* (0.967)	-1.956* (0.983)	0.018 (0.180)
Fear × Republican	-0.017 (0.038)	4.529** (0.649)	-3.007** (0.652)	0.264* (0.129)
Asian	-0.056 (0.078)	-7.202** (1.509)	-5.805** (1.833)	-0.061 (0.262)
Black	-0.003 (0.064)	1.714 (1.091)	-3.443** (1.306)	-0.054 (0.251)
Latinx/Hispanic	0.041 (0.065)	0.021 (1.016)	-2.637* (1.166)	-0.509* (0.224)
Female	-0.105** (0.040)	0.497 (0.734)	-0.576 (0.880)	0.313* (0.128)
Age: 35-54	-0.060 (0.052)	0.960 (0.892)	0.982 (1.042)	0.227 (0.161)
Age: 55-74	-0.348** (0.055)	4.914** (0.937)	0.004 (1.114)	0.459** (0.178)
Age: 75+	-0.333** (0.086)	8.890** (1.600)	1.477 (1.890)	0.568* (0.274)
HS or less	-0.215* (0.048)	1.386 (0.831)	5.622* (0.993)	-0.294 (0.157)
Some college	-0.033 (0.054)	-1.588 (0.944)	1.956 (1.096)	-0.505** (0.165)
Intercept	0.159* (0.063)	69.761** (1.063)	20.368** (1.234)	
<i>News source controls</i>	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	3381	7234	7234	1933

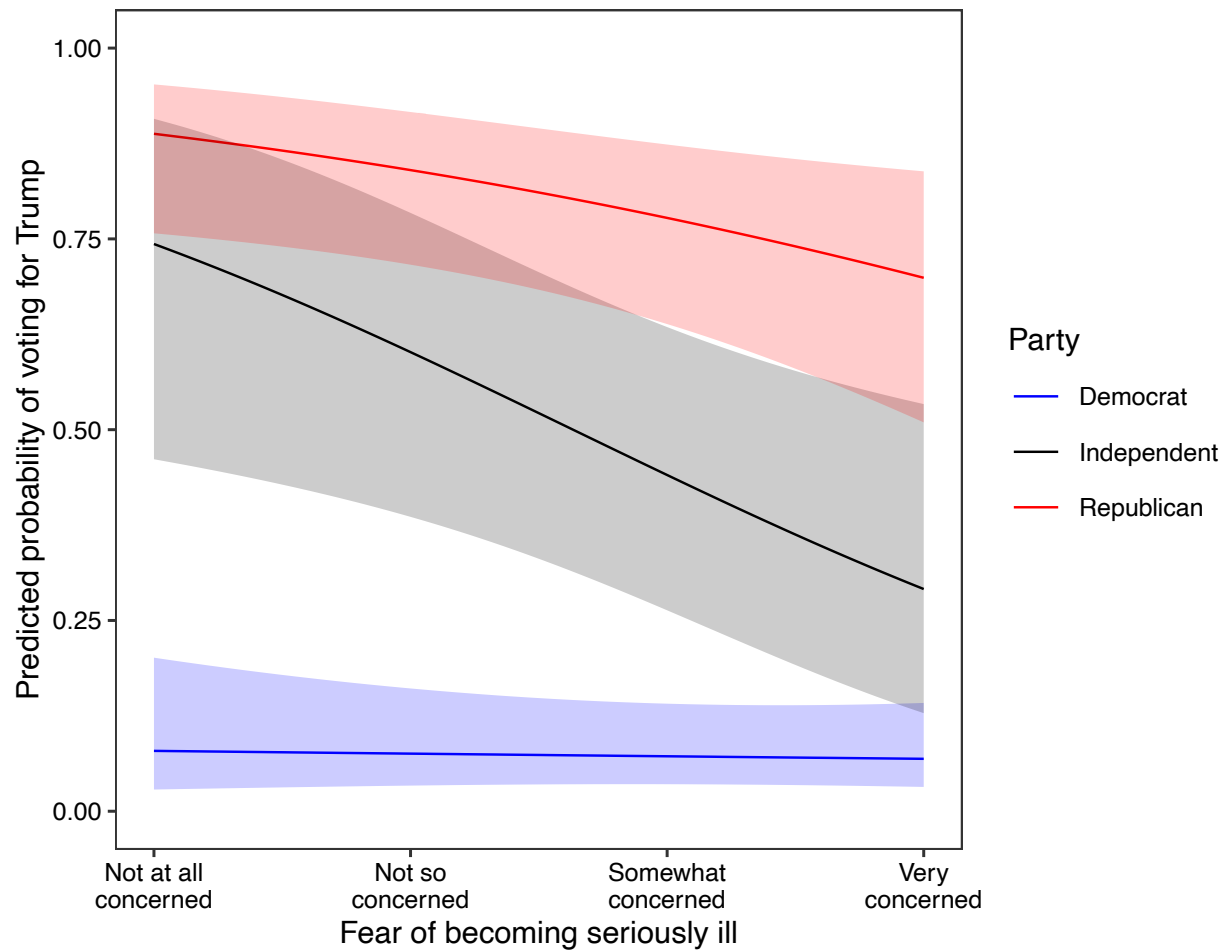
Note: †p < 0.1, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, standard errors in parentheses. Table entries give the results

of random effects and ordered logit models testing the effect of fear on respondents' likelihood

of checking different news sources, respondents' approval of the CDC's and Trump's

performance during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the accuracy of respondents' pandemic-related knowledge. All non-categorical variables are unit normalized.

Figure 3: Effect of Fear on Predicted Probability of Voting for Trump



Note: The figure shows predicted probabilities of voting for Trump among members of each party, estimated from binomial logit model of vote choice between Trump and Biden. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are calculated using the wave 4 sample targeted to meet Census benchmarks. Full model results are reported on Supplementary Information page S21.