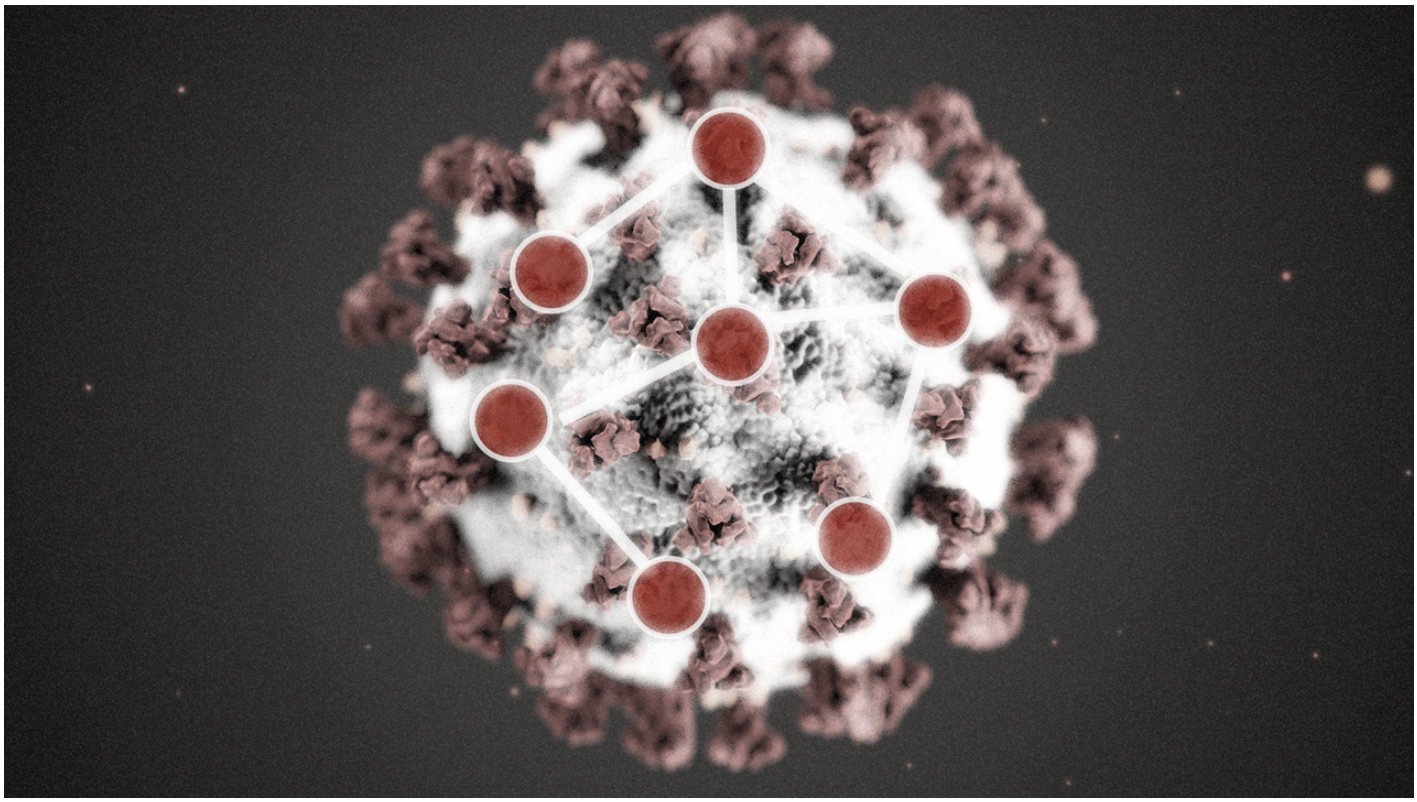

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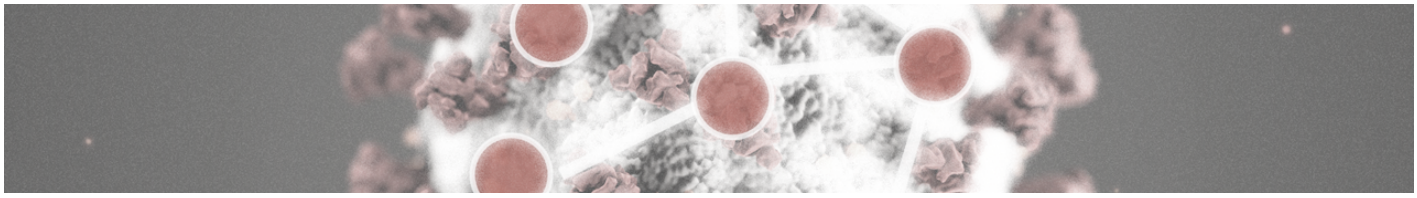
THE STATE OF THE NATION:
A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY
REPORT #19: PANDEMIC-RELATED FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CANDIDATE PREFERENCES

USA, October 2020

Jon Green, Northeastern University
David Lazer, Northeastern University
Matthew A. Baum, Harvard University
Adina Gitomer, Northeastern University
Alexi Quintana, Northeastern University
Katherine Ognyanova, Rutgers University
James Druckman, Northwestern University
Roy H. Perlis, Harvard Medical School
Mauricio Santillana, Harvard Medical School
Hanyu Chwe, Northeastern University
Jennifer Lin, Northwestern University
Matthew Simonson, Northeastern University

netsi | Northeastern University Network Science Institute
HARVARD Kennedy School SHORENSTEIN CENTER on Media, Politics and Public Policy
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
RUTGERS THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
Northwestern University



Report of October 30, 2020, v.1

***From*:** The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

A joint project of:
Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

Authors: Jon Green (Northeastern University); David Lazer (Northeastern University); Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Adina Gitomer (Northeastern University); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School); Hanyu Chwe (Northeastern University); Jennifer Lin (Northwestern University), and Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University)

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COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — October 30, 2020

The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States
Partners: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

Authors: Jon Green (Northeastern University); David Lazer (Northeastern University); Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Adina Gitomer (Northeastern University); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School); Hanyu Chwe (Northeastern University); Jennifer Lin (Northwestern University), and Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University)

From April through October, we conducted eight waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at covidstates.org.

Note on methods:

Over eight survey waves, we polled 119,530 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The data was collected between April and October 2020 by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on other waves, see covidstates.org). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. The data collection period for each included survey wave follows here. Late April Wave: 17/4/20-26/4/20, Early May Wave: 2/5/20-15/5/20, Late May Wave: 16/5/20-31/5/20, Late June Wave: 12/6/20-28/6/20, Late July Wave: 7/10/20-7/26/20, August Wave: 8/7/20-8/26/20, September Wave: 9/4/20-9/27/20, October Wave: 10/2/20-10/25/20.

Contact information:

For additional information and press requests contact:

- David Lazer at d.lazer@neu.edu
- Matthew A. Baum at matthew_baum@hks.harvard.edu
- Katherine Ognyanova at katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu
- James Druckman at druckman@northwestern.edu
- Roy H. Perlis at rperlis@mgh.harvard.edu
- Mauricio Santillana at msantill@fas.harvard.edu

Or visit us at www.covidstates.org.

Public Health Conscientiousness and Trump Support

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic fallout is the defining issue of the 2020 presidential election. Over 226,000 people in the United States have died from the disease as of this writing, and the daily lives of essentially everyone in the country have been disrupted in some way. It is unsurprising, then, that citizens consistently rated the pandemic as the most important problem facing the country throughout the summer (our team plans to publish a deeper dive into the issues voters see as most important later this week on covidstates.org).

Moreover, the major party presidential candidates have taken markedly different stances regarding the threat that the pandemic poses, and how to best address it through changes to personal behaviors and public policy. President Trump has generally downplayed the threat posed by the virus by encouraging the resumption of activities from in-person public school to major sporting events, repeatedly claiming that the virus will eventually go away on its own, and continuing to hold campaign rallies (even while he himself was at risk of infecting others with the virus). By contrast, Joe Biden has expressed skepticism that the country is ready to return to normal, endorsed more direct government intervention to mitigate the spread of the disease, and adopted a more socially-distant campaign in general.

While the pandemic has certainly commanded a plurality of attention during this campaign season, it remains unclear how it will influence the election's outcome. Levels of concern regarding the pandemic and support for pandemic-related public policy measures are sharply divided along partisan lines, which is likely at least in part due to the polarized messages communicated by partisan leaders regarding the severity of COVID-19. And while economic downturns of the scale we are currently experiencing would normally predict serious electoral problems for an incumbent president, the unusual nature of this recession – precipitated by deliberate changes to the domestic economy, with the goal of slowing the spread of a deadly disease – may make voters reluctant to blame President Trump for the poor economic conditions.

In this report, we provide preliminary evidence regarding one aspect of the relationship between the ongoing pandemic and the 2020 election. Specifically, we ask about the degree to which vote choice is associated with attitudes and behaviors regarding the pandemic, and whether the pandemic may be making voters who would otherwise be likely to support Donald Trump for re-election reluctant to do so. Throughout, our analysis is restricted to likely participants in the two-party contest this November – that is, respondents who say they are registered to vote, are very likely to vote in the 2020 election or have already voted, and are supporting Joe Biden, Donald Trump, or are undecided.

How Might COVID-19 Matter for the Election?

There are a variety of different ways that COVID-19 could influence voting. We focus on three possibilities here. The first is local exposure to the virus, or the degree to which the virus is prevalent in an individual's county of residence. It could be that, adjusting for other relevant factors, citizens who live in areas where a greater share of the population has recently been infected with the virus blame the incumbent president for failing to contain the virus more effectively. For instance, there is preliminary evidence that President Trump experienced a small but significant penalty associated with higher rates of COVID-related deaths in local areas.

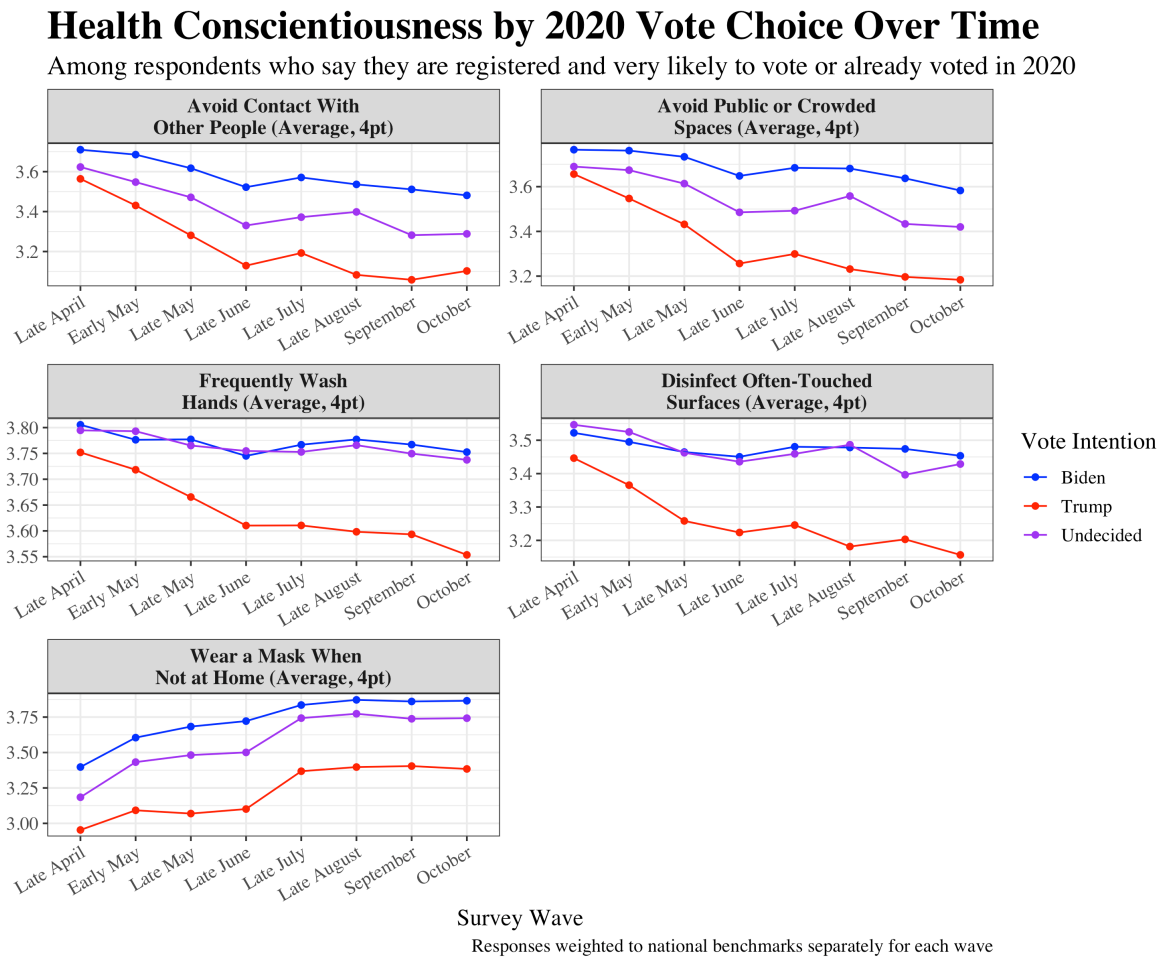

Figure 1. Trends in behaviors regarding the pandemic over time.

The second potential impact is behavioral response to the virus, or the degree to which an individual alters their daily life to avoid becoming infected with the virus. Perhaps citizens who are taking the threat posed by the virus more seriously – and adapting their behavior accordingly – penalize President Trump for displaying a lack of concern regarding the

virus. The third possibility concerns attitude toward the federal government's response to the pandemic. Individuals with negative evaluations of the federal government's performance with respect to the pandemic might hold President Trump responsible.

Our survey allows us to measure each of these potential factors. For the first, we employ data collected by the New York Times to identify the number of per-capita cases of COVID-19 in the respondents' counties at the times they take our survey. For the second, we draw on batteries of questions asking respondents how closely they have been following public health recommendations, and whether they have been engaging in particular behaviors, such as mask wearing and attending indoor events with people they don't live with. For the third, we rely on a single question that simply asks respondents to evaluate the federal government's reaction to the pandemic – namely, whether it is not taking the outbreak seriously enough, reacting about right, or overreacting.

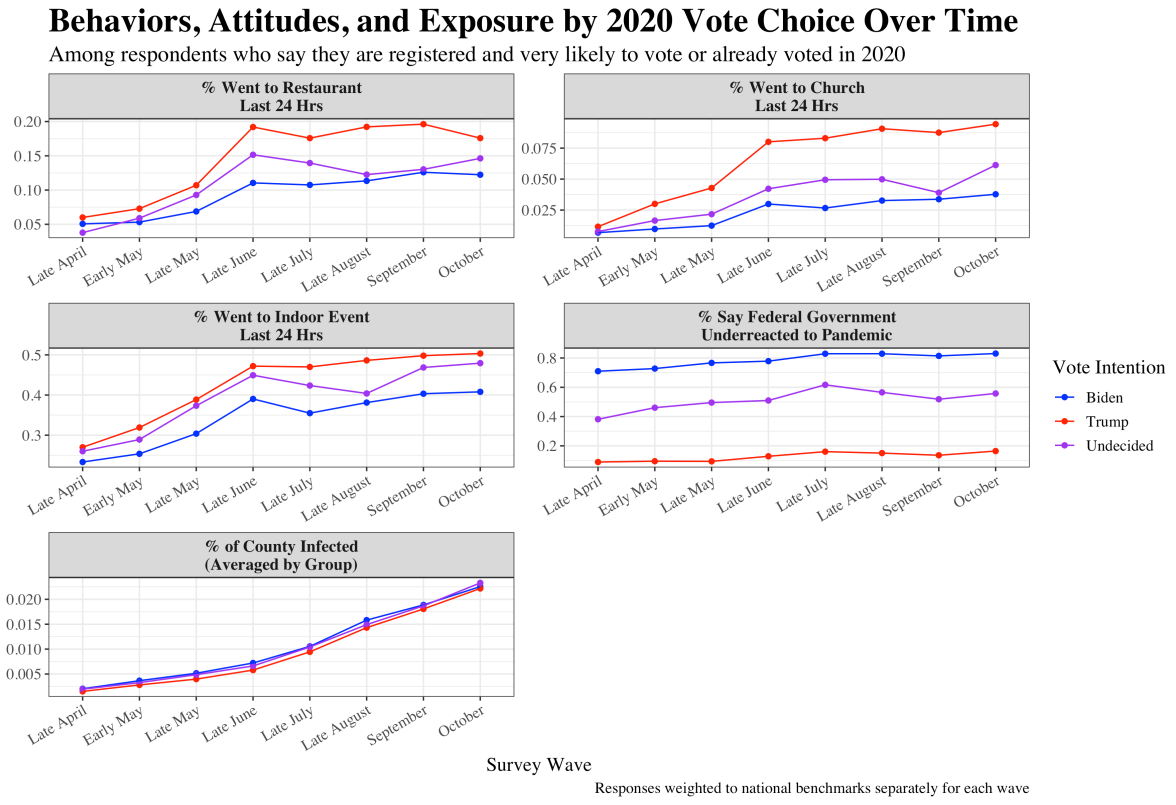

Figure 2. Trends in behaviors, views on the federal response, and local exposure over time.

In Figures 1 and 2, we show how these quantities vary over time, and by 2020 candidate support. As the figure shows, behavioral responses to the pandemic consistently vary by candidate preference, while early political differences in local exposure to the virus have become smaller – reflecting the spread of the virus into rural areas over time.

In April, Biden and Trump supporters reported similar behaviors with respect to avoiding crowds and indoor spaces with people from outside of their households. However, as the pandemic has continued into the fall, likely voters who say they are supporting Trump have become less likely to say they are engaging in these pandemic-mitigating behaviors.

Likely voters who report being undecided consistently fall in between Biden and Trump supporters with respect to public health conscientiousness, though they tend to be closer to Biden supporters than Trump supporters.

Pandemic Attitudes, Pandemic Behaviors, and Swing Voting

While the patterns above suggest a relationship between pandemic-related attitudes and behaviors and their preferred candidate, this doesn't necessarily mean that they have any bearing on vote choice in and of themselves. For example, they could instead reflect pre-existing political divides based on trust in public health expertise or local exposure to the pandemic. Alternatively, they could reflect respondents' pre-existing political identities, as they take cues regarding the pandemic from the candidate they favored before it struck. For the pandemic to be associated with candidate preferences beyond traditional partisan politics, we should see deviations in expected voting behavior based on more common factors associated with pandemic-related attitudes and behaviors.

To test for these relationships, we turn to the October survey wave and examine differences in these attitudes and behaviors based on who respondents say they are voting for now *and* who they say they voted for in 2016. This is shown in Table 1, which groups respondents by their 2016 and 2020 presidential vote and sorts these groups by their weighted proportion in the data. We highlight the rows for voters who report swinging from Trump in 2016 to Biden in 2020, and from Clinton in 2016 to Trump in 2020. (See Appendix for multivariate regressions elaborating these relationships.)

As the table shows, not only are there more Trump-to-Biden voters than there are Clinton-to-Trump voters (though both groups are relatively small compared to the electorate as a whole), these swing voters tend to exhibit pandemic-related attitudes and behaviors that track more closely to voters in the coalition they are currently part of than the coalition they were part of four years ago.

Trump-to-Biden voters report sensitivity to recommendations regarding personal and public health behaviors such as avoiding crowds, frequently washing hands, and wearing a mask when outside of the home similar to that of Clinton-to-Biden voters. Correspondingly, Clinton-to-Trump voters resemble consistent Trump voters in this regard. Swing Biden voters also report much higher levels of trust in Dr. Anthony Fauci to do the right thing in handling the pandemic, and are significantly more likely to say the federal government did not take the pandemic seriously enough, as compared to consistent Trump voters. It is finally worth noting that likely voters who did not participate in the two-party contest in 2016 (those who say they voted for a minor party candidate or not at all – about 7% of all likely voters) are breaking 3:1 to Biden. Of those breaking to Biden, 87% say the federal government has not taken the pandemic seriously enough, compared with only 11% of those breaking to Trump.

2016 Vote	2020 Vote	%	Avoid Contact (4pt)	Avoid Crowds (4pt)	Wash Hands (4pt)	Disinfect Surfaces (4pt)	Wear Masks (4pt)	% Went to Restaurant Last 24 hrs	% Went to Church Last 24 hrs	% Indoor Event Last 24 hrs	% Fed Gov. Under-react	Trust Fauci (4pt)
Trump	Trump	42%	3.15	3.18	3.56	3.22	3.35	0.19	0.10	0.54	0.19	2.70
Clinton	Biden	40%	3.46	3.53	3.78	3.54	3.86	0.13	0.04	0.44	0.82	3.50
Other / Didn't Vote	Biden	5%	3.37	3.44	3.73	3.47	3.84	0.17	0.03	0.51	0.87	3.45
Trump	**Biden**	4%	**3.50**	**3.52**	**3.66**	**3.51**	**3.81**	**0.15**	**0.09**	**0.55**	**0.63**	**3.49**
Clinton	Unde-cided	2%	3.21	3.33	3.81	3.47	3.76	0.16	0.05	0.45	0.58	2.93
Other / Didn't Vote	Unde-cided	2%	3.25	3.44	3.77	3.60	3.70	0.22	0.05	0.46	0.57	2.68
Trump	Unde-cided	2%	3.41	3.50	3.75	3.60	3.73	0.13	0.09	0.57	0.52	2.88
Other / Didn't Vote	Trump	2%	2.92	3.08	3.56	3.08	3.07	0.17	0.06	0.57	0.11	2.32
Clinton	**Trump**	2%	**3.30**	**3.38**	**3.76**	**3.34**	**3.72**	**0.26**	**0.05**	**0.47**	**0.38**	**2.95**

Table 1. October attitudes and behaviors regarding the pandemic by 2016 vote / 2020 candidate preference.

COVID-19 and Vote Switching

Nearly 82,000 unique individuals who are likely to participate in the 2020 two-party contest have taken our survey thus far. Of these, over 19,631 took our survey more than once – 1,528 of whom changed their reported candidate preference at least once. Here, we consider the ways in which candidate preference may have changed over time for individual likely voters.

Table 2 groups returning respondents by their candidate preferences in the first and last waves in which they took the survey, and shows those groups' average responses to the health behavior items in each of those waves, as well as the share who report believing that the federal government did not take the pandemic seriously enough.

Type	N (no weight applied)	Wash Hands Last Response (4pt)	Wash Hands First Response (4pt)	Wear Mask Last Response (4pt)	Wear Mask First Response (4pt)	% Attend Indoor Event Last Response	% Attend Indoor Event First Response	% Fed Gov. Underreact Last Response	% Fed Gov. Underreact First Response
Consistent Biden	9691	3.76	3.80	3.82	3.64	0.36	0.30	0.85	0.80
Consistent Trump	7835	3.60	3.70	3.29	3.09	0.46	0.36	0.11	0.09
Consistent Undecided	764	3.74	3.79	3.68	3.48	0.40	0.33	0.57	0.46
Undecided to Biden	400	3.77	3.79	3.79	3.57	0.44	0.32	0.74	0.59
Left Trump	345	3.71	3.79	3.70	3.45	0.38	0.31	0.51	0.25
Left Biden	335	3.73	3.77	3.67	3.52	0.43	0.32	0.50	0.52
Undecided to Trump	261	3.68	3.74	3.47	3.36	0.48	0.40	0.26	0.29

Table 2. Attitudes and behaviors regarding the pandemic across survey waves among returning respondents, averaging respondents' first response and most recent response, by candidate preferences. Respondents who left Trump or Biden are those who said they were supporting them in their first response and said they were supporting the other candidate or were undecided in their most recent response.

The table broadly confirms our earlier findings, wherein Biden supporters report closer adherence to recommended public health behaviors and greater belief that the federal government should have done more about the pandemic, while Trump supporters report lower adherence and less concern with the federal government's response. However, it also shows that voters who moved away from Trump (either to being undecided or supporting Biden), as well as previously undecided voters who later supported Biden, express less satisfaction with the federal government's pandemic response over time. Indeed, among likely voters who first said they were voting for Trump and later said they were not, belief that the federal government has not taken the COVID-19 outbreak seriously enough more than doubled – from 25% to 51%. This number also increased – from 59% to 74% – among likely voters who were at first undecided but say they are voting for Biden in their most recent response. By contrast, voters who moved away from Biden don't report significant changes in pandemic-related attitudes or behaviors relative to other groups of voters, suggesting that their preferences changed for other reasons.

It is worth noting that, as was the case when looking at changes in vote intention between 2016 and 2020, relatively few voters report changes in candidate preference over this election cycle, and we see roughly equal numbers of voters moving away from each major party candidate. However, we do observe Biden attracting a larger number of previously-undecided voters than Trump, and that these voters are similar to other Biden voters in their dissatisfaction with the federal government's pandemic response. Among previously-undecided voters who now support Biden, 74% say that the federal government has not taken the pandemic seriously enough. Among the smaller group of previously-undecided voters who now support Trump, this number is just 26%.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the defining issue of the 2020 general election, and the major party candidates have sent markedly different signals regarding its severity, how the federal government should respond, and which behaviors individuals should and should not be engaging in while the virus continues to spread. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a small but significant amount of movement between candidates – on net, away from Donald Trump – associated with levels of concern regarding the pandemic and perceptions regarding the federal government's response.

Of course, it is important to note that despite the patterns we observe here, the vast majority of voters' behavior has remained stable over time, and not all of the changes we observe are attributable to the pandemic. However, these results do suggest that, when provided with a strong signal regarding significant material differences between the major party candidates on an extremely salient issue, some voters are willing to update their candidate preferences accordingly. With days remaining until election day, and with the number of COVID cases surging, there is likely little the president can do to change voters' evaluations of his pandemic response.

Appendix: Isolating Relationships with Vote Choice

While the descriptive results above show that COVID exposure and behaviors vary by candidate preference, they do not establish that COVID-related factors are *independently* associated with candidate preference. That is, just because Trump voters and Biden voters differ in their adherence to public health recommendations, that doesn't mean that anyone who we might otherwise expect to vote for Donald Trump is instead voting for Joe Biden. It could very well be that respondents' demographics and partisanship account for both their health behaviors and candidate preferences, in which case the associations outlined above would be an artifact of more basic, common factors known to be associated with vote choice.

In order to test for this possibility, we model the degree to which COVID-related factors are associated with candidate preferences after accounting for other variables that are known to affect political behavior. These include respondents' political identities – partisanship and ideology – as well as their age group, gender, household income, race, education, and county urbanicity. We also include adjustments for respondent state and survey waves. As respondents tend to be consistent toward the health behavior items, we use principal components analysis to construct two scales of health behaviors – one for public behavior (avoiding contact with other people, avoiding crowds, wearing masks), and one for personal behavior (washing hands, disinfecting surfaces) – to use in regressions in lieu of including all five items separately. As Trump support and Biden support are not mutually exclusive, given the third category for those who are undecided, we cannot run one binomial regression estimating support for one candidate and infer that the inverse relationships hold with respect to support for the other candidate. This being the case, we model support for the two candidates separately – for example, the models estimating support for Trump take supporting Trump as the outcome compared to supporting Biden *or* being undecided.

In addition, we estimate these relationships for both all likely voters, and for the subset of likely voters who report having voted for Donald Trump in 2016.

The results of this procedure are shown in Figure A1. In the figure, points represent the coefficients for the relevant variables, with ranges around the points representing 95% confidence intervals for those estimates. Facets represent whether the outcome is support for Biden or Trump, and colors represent whether the subset of respondents considered is all likely voters, or only those who say they voted for Donald Trump in 2016. The figure shows public health behaviors emerging as the pandemic-related factor most strongly associated with candidate preference of the three we test. In addition, we find that respondents who report greater adherence to recommended personal health behaviors are significantly less likely to support Trump (while the relationship with Biden support is positive, it is not statistically significant). These patterns are overwhelmed by the relationship between candidate preference and the degree to which respondents report adhering to public health recommendations.

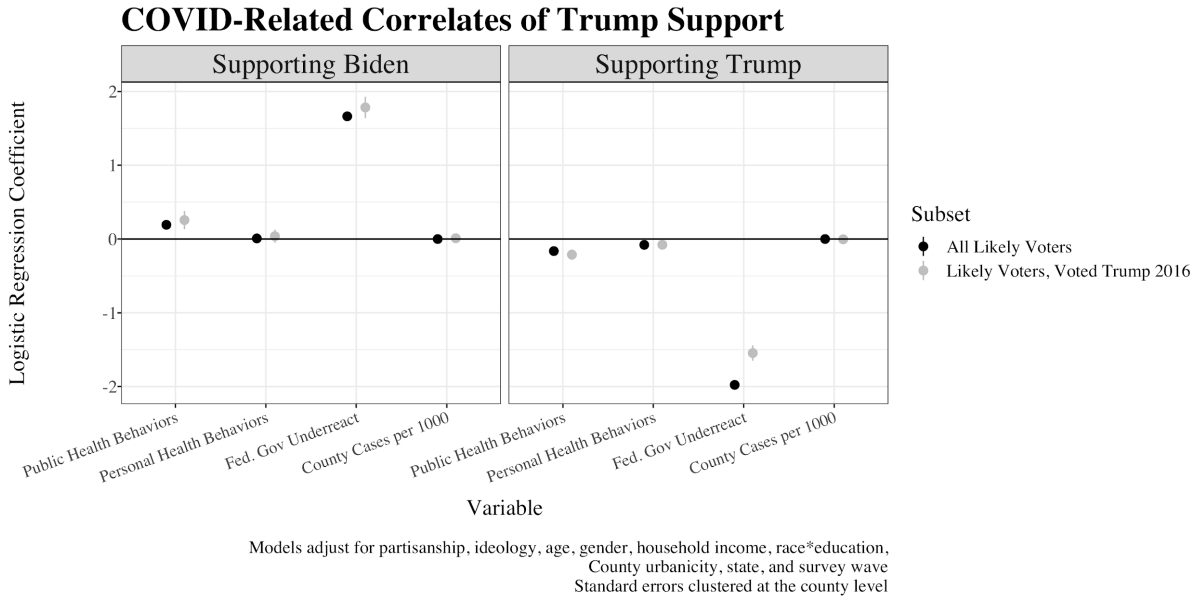

Figure A1. COVID-related correlates of Trump support.

It is important to reiterate that not only do these models account for political factors such as partisanship and ideological identity, but that these relationships are consistent among both all likely voters, and likely voters who report having voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. Thus, even among the subset of respondents *who have already voted for Donald Trump once*, those who think the federal government has not done enough to address the pandemic, or who are more sensitive to public health recommendations, are more likely to say they don't intend to vote for him again.