Should you really call it the "Chinese Virus"?

How Trump's handling of COVID-19 connects to the perception of Asians

This past year, COVID-19 has hit many Americans hard. But it has been particularly hard for Asians, who have seen a rise in violence and discrimination during the pandemic. And the recent tragic shooting in Atlanta only added to the fear of growing anti-Asian sentiment.

Many attribute this sentiment to the rhetoric of former President Trump. For instance, he frequently called the coronavirus the "Chinese virus" or the "China virus" in his tweets and speeches. He also maintained that China was solely to blame for the virus's spread. So, does Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have anything to do with this anti-Asian sentiment?

The answer appears to be yes: people who approve of Trump's response to COVID-19 are less likely to perceive Asians favorably.
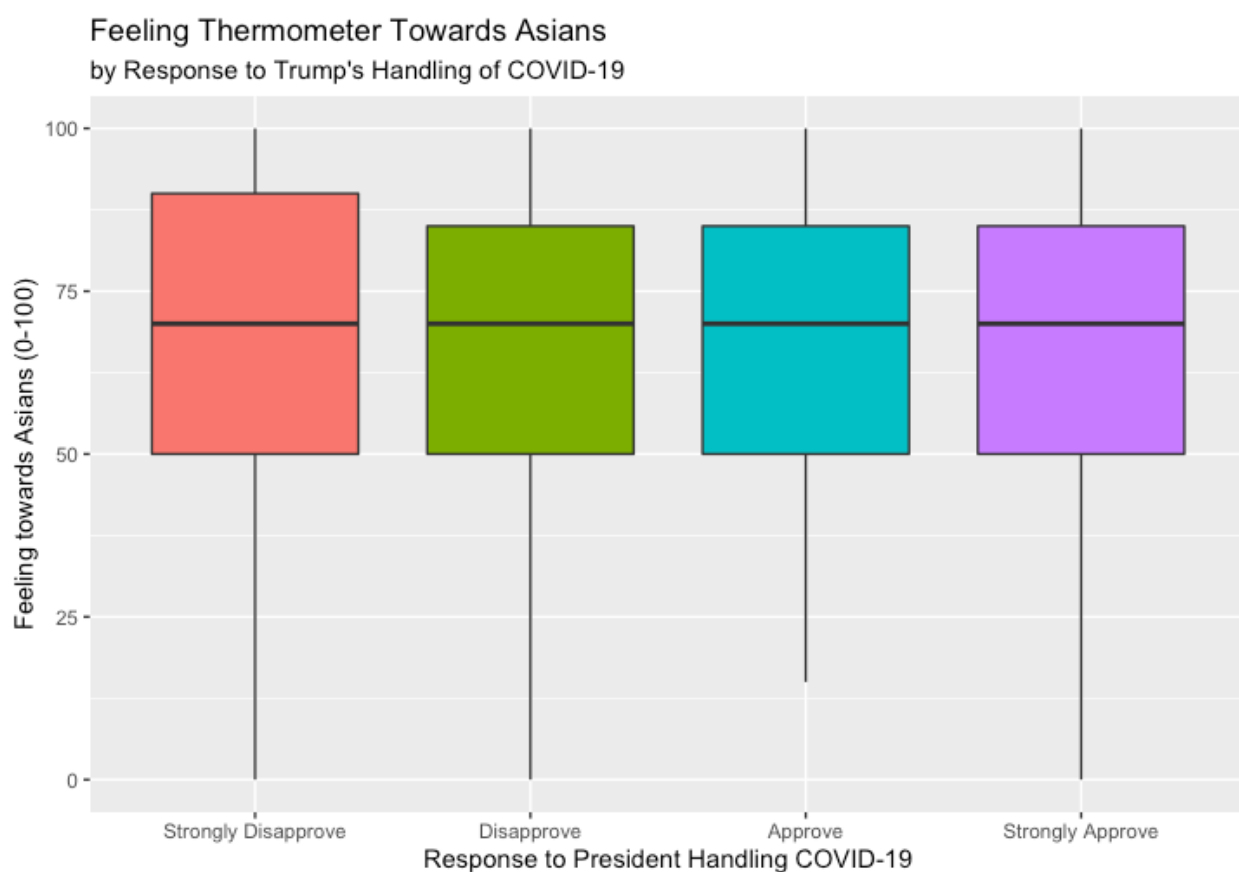
The data I used was the 2020 time-series survey from the American National Election Studies (ANES), conducted both pre- and post-election. Respondents were asked about the COVID-19 pandemic, perceptions of different demographic groups, and the 2020 presidential candidates, including the then-incumbent President Donald Trump.

To measure approval of Trump's pandemic response, I used a question which asked for the respondent's opinion on how the President was handling COVID-19, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."
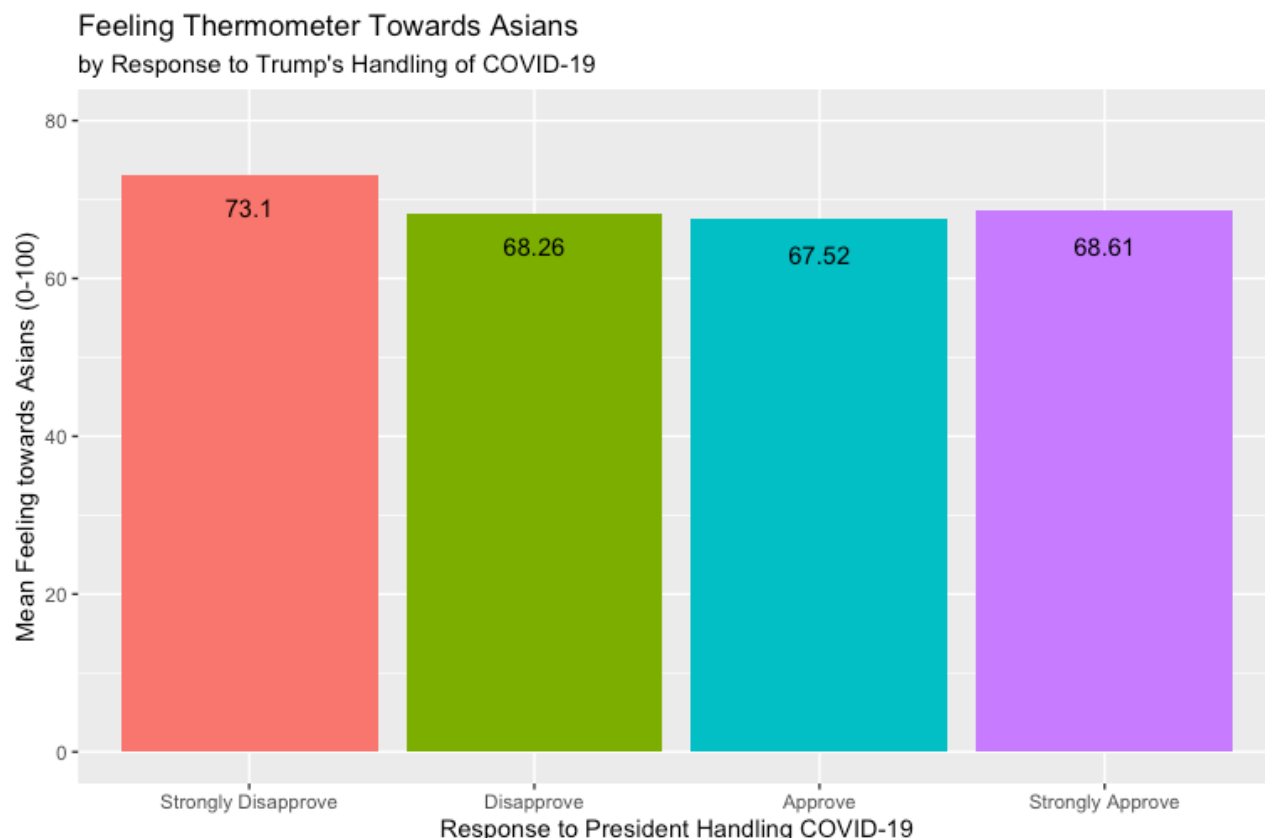
And to measure perception of Asians, I used a question which asked for the respondent's feelings towards Asians using a "feeling thermometer". With a scale from 0 to 100 "degrees",

the respondent would indicate a 50 for a neutral feeling towards Asians, 0 for "you don't feel favorable towards Asians" and 100 for "you feel favorable and warm towards Asians."

Notably, the response groups look very similar. Most ranged from 0 to 100 degrees, and all had a majority *above* 50 degrees, with a median of 70; not many people rate Asians unfavorably. Social desirability bias may be at play here—some respondents may be reluctant to say their actual feelings towards Asians if it seems socially unacceptable.

Feeling Thermometer Towards Asians
by Response to Trump's Handling of COVID-19

Looking further at the results, though, there is still meaningful variation between the responses. If someone strongly disagrees with Trump's handling of COVID-19, their average feeling towards Asians is around 73.1 degrees. Yet if someone strongly *approves*, their feeling towards Asians grows "colder" by 4.48 degrees—about 68.61.

Feeling Thermometer Towards Asians
by Response to Trump's Handling of COVID-19

Does this change when looking at different racial groups? Since respondents were asked about their feelings towards a particular racial demographic, their own racial identity might influence their response. Similar to the previous analysis, all racial groups have average "temperatures" that are higher than 50 degrees, and people who strongly disapprove of Trump's COVID management usually have higher temperatures than people who approve or strongly approve.

Consider a White respondent who strongly disapproves of Trump's COVID management; they rate their favorability at around 73 degrees, while a White respondent who strongly approves is colder at 68 degrees.

However, there is an exception. A Black respondent who approves or strongly approves of Trump's COVID management has *higher* feelings towards Asians than Black respondents

who disapprove or strongly disapprove. It is unclear why, but it shows that feelings towards

Asians vary across racial demographics. A Black respondent who approves may view Asians

differently than a White, or Asian, or Hispanic respondent who also approves.

Feeling Thermometer Towards Asians
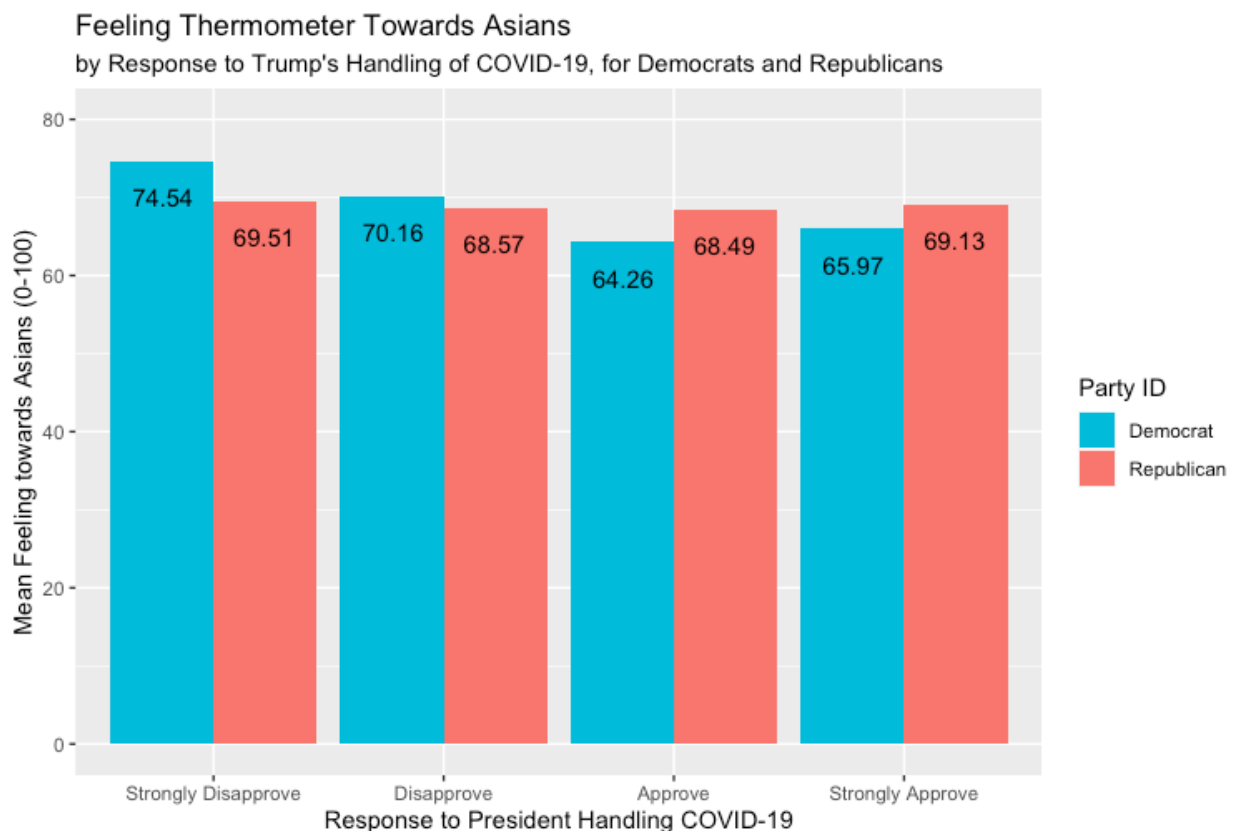### by Response to Trump's Handling of COVID-19, per Race

What about variation between the two major parties, Democrats and Republicans? Since

Democrat leadership has been more vocal about Asian discrimination during the pandemic,

respondents' feelings towards Asians may be influenced by their party.

If someone is a Democrat who strongly disapproves of Trump's handling of COVID-19,

then their feeling towards Asians is about 74.5 degrees. A Democrat who disapproves lowers to

70 degrees, and one who approves is even lower at 64 degrees. A Democrat who strongly approves has a marginally higher temperature than one who approves, at about 66 degrees.
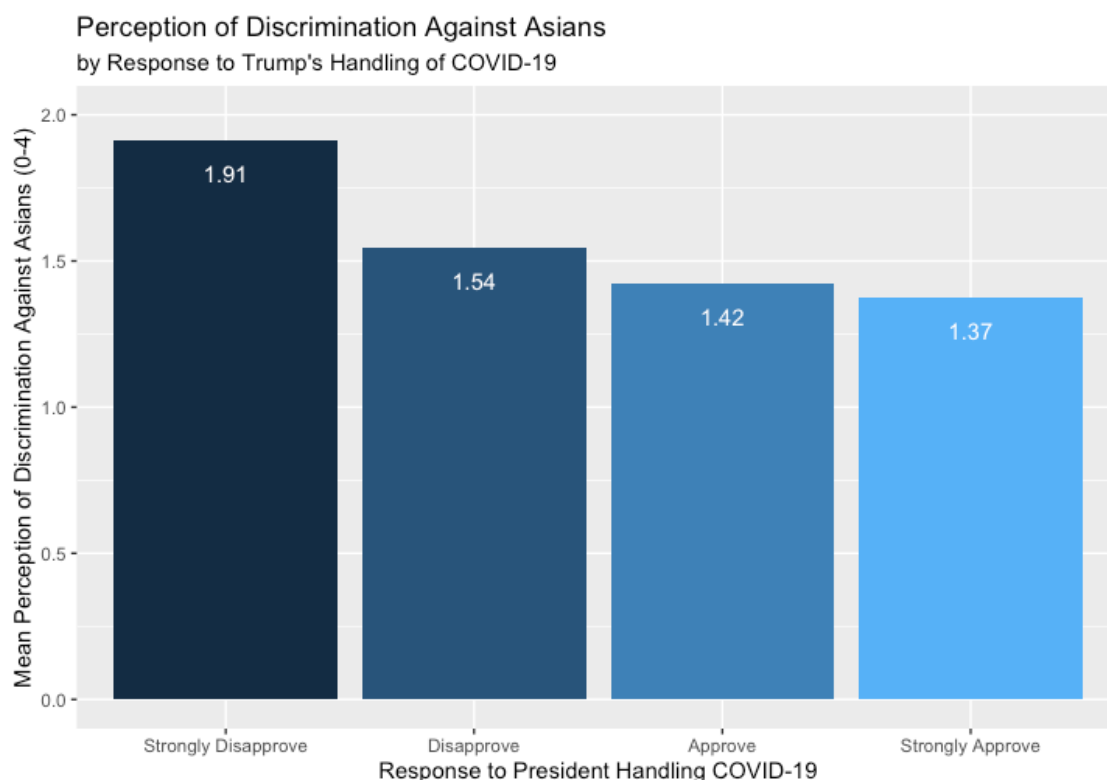
On the other hand, Republicans' feelings towards Asians remain pretty constant across all responses, at around 69 degrees. The Democrats, therefore, are most likely driving the variation between the response groups.

And though Republicans who strongly disapprove or disapprove are "colder" than Democrats in those same groups, those who approve or strongly approve are actually slightly *warmer* than Democrats. Perhaps this is due to the scarcity of self-identified Democrats in these categories, who may represent a "fringe" element of the Democratic party.

Feeling Thermometer Towards Asians
by Response to Trump's Handling of COVID-19, for Democrats and Republicans

Even though feelings towards Asians seem to decrease with approval of Trump's COVID-19 policies, many do not consider discrimination against Asians as a big deal. Trump himself denied any discriminatory intent when saying the "Chinese virus": "It's not racist at all…it comes from China…I want to be accurate." Likewise, it seems the more people approve of Trump's COVID response, the *less likely* they are to think that Asians experience discrimination.

In the same survey, respondents were asked "How much discrimination is there against Asians in the U.S. today?", with options ranging from "None at all" (0) to "A great deal" (4). On a 0 to 4 scale, none of the average perceptions of Asian discrimination exceeded 2—meaning "a moderate amount" of discrimination. Regardless of response category, no group thought that Asians experience "a lot" or "a great deal" of discrimination today.

Perception of Discrimination Against Asians by Response to Trump's Handling of COVID-19

However, those who strongly disapprove are more likely to think that Asians face "a moderate amount" of discrimination, with a score of 1.91. This differs from those who strongly

approve, who are more likely to think that Asians only face "a little" discrimination, at 1.37. So, someone who strongly approves may feel less favorably towards Asians *while also* thinking that Asians barely face any discrimination in the U.S. today—a disconcerting combination.

Although the data does not reveal dramatic differences between supporters and opposers of Trump's pandemic response, more appears to be happening than just random chance. Trump's rhetoric and COVID-19 policy positions may have exacerbated a more negative perception of Asians, and perhaps partly explain the rise in anti-Asian sentiment in America. Moving forward, policymakers and the President should recognize the gravity of the discrimination against Asians and address COVID-19 without targeting any racial or ethnic group.