

The Limits of Partisan Motivated Reasoning in Congress

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Abstract

Downplaying the level of risk associated with COVID-19—along with opposition to public health measures aimed at containing the virus—became a rallying cry for the US Republican Party throughout the pandemic. Yet, to what degree are elites ‘blind partisans’, willing to take on the positions of their parties regardless of potential consequences? In this article, we argue that individual self-interest motivations transcend partisan motivated reasoning when individuals realize a risk that is otherwise perceived inaccurately. We demonstrate our argument in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the effects of COVID-19 infection on opposition to COVID-19 mitigation policies among United States’ legislators. We adopt a staggered difference-in-difference design and use both Bayesian and frequentist perspectives to illustrate that COVID-19 infection among legislators led to a reduction of around 32 percent in legislators’ expressed opposition to measures aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19. Our findings highlight the limits of partisan motivated reasoning for an issue as salient as COVID-19 and for an institution as polarized as the US Congress.

Keywords— COVID-19, polarization, partisanship, motivated reasoning, political behavior

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