

## 21st Century Pathology

Commentary

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# Support for Trump and COVID-19 Death Rates

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#### Abstract

Abstract From March 1, 2021 until March 1, 2022, COVID-19 death rates in U.S. counties where Trump received more than 75% of the vote in the 2020 presidential election were more than 3 times higher than in counties where he received less than 25% of the vote. In Republican leaning counties, people were much less likely to be vaccinated and take other precautions to keep themselves safe from the disease. As a result, there were thousands of unnecessary deaths. To truly benefit from the tremendous medical breakthroughs that are occurring, it is critical that knowledge of and trust in science be substantially improved.

Keywords: COVID-19; Infectious diseases; Human death

### Introduction

For most of human history, infectious diseases have been a primary cause of human death. Since the 19th Century, a growing understanding of the role of microbes in infectious diseases has allowed a dramatic reduction in the impacts of these diseases. As a consequence, human lifespan and the quality of life have increased extensively [1]. Despite major advances in combatting infectious diseases, scientists and health experts have long recognized that there was a chance that a new disease could emerge for which humans had little or no natural defense [2-5]. Health experts hoped that if or when this new disease emerged, it could be contained more quickly and with less severe outcomes than previous pandemics because of vastly improved medical knowledge and the capacity of health experts to quickly communicate accurate and timely information to the general public.

Pandemic concerns became reality in December 2019 with the emergence of COVID-19. The disease quickly spread around the world and by March 20, 2022, the worldwide death toll was over 6.1 million people. In the United States, more than 970,000 people had died. The hope that improved medical knowledge and communication capacity could limit disease impacts was largely dashed by misinformation and science denial, which resulted in many people failing to follow best medical practices. Misinformation and science denial had a much greater impact in some places and among some segments of the population than

others. As a consequence, disease consequences have been far worse in places where more people failed to follow medical best practices. For example, among OECD countries on March 20, 2022, deaths per 100,000 residents ranged from 460 in Hungary to 21 in Japan. These huge differences cannot be explained by medical factors alone and much of the variation is a result of large segments of the population in some places choosing to ignore recommended health practices.

Political views are a major factor in the widespread misinformation and science denial that have plagued some sectors of the population during the COVID-19 pandemic [6, 7]. To explore the relationship between political views and COVID-19 outcomes, this commentary will provide an overview of this relationship across more than 3,000 U.S. counties. U.S. counties provide an excellent platform to explore the relationship between political views and COVID-19 outcomes because both vary extensively from one county to another.

### Politics and COVID-19 in the United States

Despite having all of the medical and communication advantages of an advanced country, pandemic responses in the U.S. were largely ineffective. As of March 20, 2022, the COVID-19 death rate in the U.S. was about 296 per 100,000, more severe than in most other developed nations. A major reason for the inadequate response in the U.S. is that the pandemic quickly became political. The reactions of the two major U.S. political parties to the pandemic were very different from one another, and common ground was difficult to find [8]. As with many other issues, Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to trust science [9-12] and thus take the threat of the COVID-19 virus seriously and respond accordingly [13-15]. In addition to the usual disagreements over individual freedoms vs. implementation of government restrictions, the COVID-19 pandemic was suffused with misinformation, scientific denial and conspiracy theories, often spread by elected officials. Consequently, federal policies were lacking, and state and local policies were disjointed and uneven [16, 17].

During the early months of the pandemic, while awaiting vaccine development, the only defense people had to combat the virus was to social distance and wear masks. Since Republicans tended to have lower perceptions of the danger of COVID-19 than Democrats, Republican controlled counties were much less likely than Democrat controlled counties to implement mask mandates and impose school and business closures to keep people apart [18]. The behavior of individual Republicans also tended to be riskier [13]. Fridman A, et al. (2020) found that persons consuming right-wing media had lower perceptions of disease risks and were more likely to believe conspiracy theories about the disease and vaccinations developed to combat it [19].

Later in the pandemic, vaccines provided a strong defense to disease spread and have saved vast numbers of lives [20, 21]. In the U.S., vaccines were first approved in December 2020, and by March 2021, most American adults had the opportunity to be vaccinated. Despite strong evidence to the contrary, misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines was rampant and included claims that the vaccine would alter one's DNA, would negatively affect fertility, or the government was placing microchips in people to monitor and control their behavior [22]. Again, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to believe this misinformation, and thus less likely to get vaccinated [6, 23-26].

Because Republicans are less likely to be vaccinated and take

other precautions to keep themselves safe, it is expected that the COVID-19 death rate per 100,000 residents will be greater in counties where the Republican candidate, Donald Trump received a larger share of the vote in the 2020 presidential election than in counties where he received fewer votes. It is expected that this relationship will be stronger following the availability of vaccines.

## Methods

This analysis is based on all U.S. counties for which data is available (N=3,112). COVID-19 deaths for each county are obtained from the New York Times. The New York Times COVID-19 database consists of the cumulative number of deaths from COVID-19 for each county on a daily basis. These data are available to the general public and can be easily downloaded and analyzed. For this manuscript, data were downloaded on two dates, March 1, 2021 and March 1, 2022. This allows exploration of the first two years of the pandemic. The first year (until March 1, 2021) is prior to the time that vaccines were available to most people. The second year (from March 1, 2021 until March 1, 2022) is after most American adults had access to COVID-19 vaccinations. The actual dependent variable used in the analysis is the number of deaths from COVID-19 per 100,000 residents for each year of the study.

The independent variable is the percent of voters in each county that cast their ballot for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. Counties are placed into 5 categories based on the percent of the votes that Trump received. The categories include 1) 75 % or more; 2) From 55 % to less than 75 %; 3) From 45 % to less than 55 %; 4) From 25 % to less than 45 %; 5) Less than 25 %.

## Findings

Figure 1 presents the results of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 residents by percent voting for Trump from the beginning of the pandemic until March 1, 2021. Figure 2 shows this same relationship from March 1, 2021, until March 1, 2022.



**Figure 1:** COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 residents by percent voting for Trump from pandemic beginnings until March 1, 2021 for U.S. counties (N=3,112).

During the first year of the pandemic, the relationship between political views and COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 was not especially strong, although death rates were highest in counties where Trump received more than 75 % of the vote. Since the availability of vaccines, the strength of the relationship is extremely strong (Figure 2). The death rate per 100,000 residents is more than 3 times higher in counties where Trump received more than 75 % of the vote than in counties where Trump received less than 25 % of the vote.



Figure 2: COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 residents by percent voting for Trump from March 1, 2021 - March 1, 2022 for U.S. counties (N=3,112).

## Conclusion

Persons in Republican leaning counties were much less likely to take advantage of life-saving medical practices than persons in Democrat leaning counties. The consequence was that during the second year of the pandemic, death rates were more than 3 times higher in counties where Trump received more than 75 % of the vote relative to counties where he received less than 25 % of the vote. Thus, thousands of lives were lost unnecessarily. While advances in science and medicine have brought untold benefits to human societies, large segments of the population continue to reject science and fail to adhere to best medical practices. The world will likely face many other crises in the years and decades to come and it is vital to find ways to reduce misinformation and increase trust in science so that we can more effectively combat these crises.

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