COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Is the New Terrain for Political Division among Americans

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Abstract
Politically conservative Americans are less likely than those who identify as liberal to report a willingness to get a vaccine against coronavirus disease 2019. Using data from the Axios/Ipsos Coronavirus Survey from November 2020 to February 2021, the authors find that this partisan divide in vaccine hesitancy has increased over time. Recent scholarship has suggested that these differences can be attributed to personal characteristics, including varying levels of trust in institutions. The authors find that although the data supported this hypothesis in mid-November, by early February differences in demographics, concern about the pandemic, and institutional trust no longer explained the partisan gap. The authors explain the deepening divide by turning to recent evidence that political party affiliation has become a source of identity that shapes personal decision making.

Keywords
coronavirus, vaccine, political party, polarization

Despite increases over the past few months in the number of people who want a vaccine against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2, the virus causing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, a small group of Americans persistently report a lack of desire to get a vaccine. Although rates of hesitancy, that is, a desire to “wait and see” before getting a vaccine, have dropped significantly, the group reporting refusal has remained consistent, with those who identify as politically conservative having the highest rates of intent to refuse a vaccine. Prior to COVID-19, politically conservative Americans had a growing distrust of vaccines (Baumgaertner, Carlisle, and Justwan 2018; Hornsey, Lobera, and Díaz-Catalán 2020) and have been less accepting of public health responses to the pandemic than more liberal Americans, including stated intent to get a vaccine against COVID-19 (Kushner Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2021). Scholars speculate that the partisan divide is a proxy for trust in institutions or other personal characteristics (Kreps et al. 2020).

Using eight waves of data from the Axios/Ipsos Coronavirus Survey, a nationally representative cross-sectional survey, we estimate the evolution over time of willingness to receive a first-generation COVID-19 vaccine by political party identification. Figure 1A displays willingness rates from mid-November 2020 to early February 2021, with the line illustrating estimated trends over time and the points illustrating observed percentages. In Figure 1B, estimates are adjusted for demographic covariates, concern about COVID-19, whether the respondent knows anyone who tested positive for COVID-19 and whether the respondent knows anyone who died of COVID-19, trust in institutions, and trust in President Trump. Details on estimation procedures are available in the online supplement.

As expected, respondents identifying as Democrats were much more likely to report willingness to be vaccinated than Republicans, with independents somewhere in between. Additionally, willingness to receive a first-generation vaccine against COVID-19 increased over time, as vaccines were authorized for use in December 2020, and subsequently became more widely available.

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More surprisingly, the partisan gap widened over time, increasing from about 10 percentage points in mid-November to almost 25 percentage points by early February. After adjusting for covariates, the differences between Republicans and Democrats were not statistically significant during the early survey waves. But as the partisan gap widened over time, it was no longer explained by the covariates. This trend was also present when comparing Democrats with independents, though changes over time were less pronounced.

Prior research linking political party affiliation and vaccine refusal argued that the mechanism was trust in institutions and other personal characteristics. Although the data supported this hypothesis in mid-November, by early February differences in demographics, concern about COVID-19, and institutional trust no longer explained partisan division. How then to explain the persistent and deepening divide between Democrats and Republicans? Recent evidence suggests that political party affiliation has become a source of identity (Mason 2018) in which members hold increasingly hostile views toward those in other parties.

Getting a COVID-19 vaccine may have become “what Democrats do” whereas it is not “what Republicans do.” Vaccines may be yet another battleground in the political polarization battles in which group identity drives personal decision making.

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**Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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