

# **The Politicization of Mask Wearing in America During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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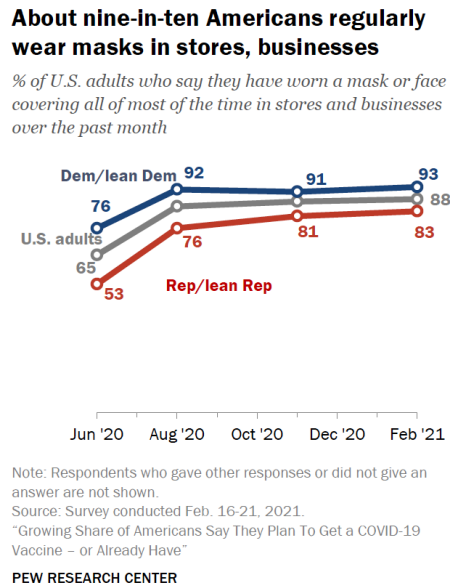
## **The Politicization of Mask Wearing in America During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most prominent issues affecting the world for more than a year, starting in late 2019 and still continuing through the time of writing in early 2021. As the pandemic came into being, containing and minimizing the spread of the virus quickly became a large concern for health experts and the general public. The consensus experts came to in time was that the virus was airborne and that wearing face coverings such as masks was one of the main ways to help prevent people from spreading the virus to one another, along with other social distancing measures. A large part of the responsibility of preventing viral spread was therefore put on individuals to follow these guidelines, as well as on institutions with power to inform people of these guidelines and enforce them; however, there has been much contention about mask wearing in American culture throughout the course of the pandemic, and mask wearing has never been adopted completely universally. Many Americans were hesitant to adopt mask wearing, and some still have not. There are many factors tied to a person's likelihood to wear masks in public, but a prominent one has been political affiliation, which has led to much political arguing on the subject. This leads to the question: if mask wearing is supported by science, then why did wearing masks become a political issue, and how does America deal with that? This paper explores the politicization of mask wearing as an example of the problems involved with intermingling uncertainty in scientific knowledge with political debate and examines the deeper political values and arguments tied to the public debate over mask wearing.

### **Background**

The issue of wearing masks has been tied to politics since the early days of the pandemic. Pew Research Center has conducted polling on public opinion and behavior regarding masks

throughout the course of the pandemic and broken much of it down by different demographic groups. Figure 1 below shows what percentage of Democrat aligned Americans and Republican aligned Americans have been wearing masks in stores and other businesses over about a nine-month period of the pandemic.



*Figure 1. Pew Research data on mask frequency of mask wearing by political party affiliation (Schaeffer, 2021).*

The percentage of mask wearers for both groups has generally increased over time, with Democrats more or less leveling out in the low 90s by August 2020 and Republicans settling in the low 80s around November of 2020. Democrats have consistently worn masks at a higher than average rate, while Republicans have worn them at a lower rate than average, and although the gap between the groups has narrowed some with time, it has settled at about a 10 percentage point difference (Schaeffer, 2021).

The political discrepancy in mask wearing also exists on the level of state government. In early November, immediately preceding the 2020 elections, a total of 16 US states did not have statewide mask mandates, and 15 of these states had Republican governors (*What U.S. States*

*Require Masks In Public? (Updated Daily)* (2020). The number of states with statewide mandates increased from 34 to 39 in the time following the election, leaving just 11 Republican led states with no statewide mandates. In the spring of 2021, some states began rolling back mask mandates. As of April 10, 2021, 12 of these states will have removed the statewide mandates making for a total of 21 states without statewide mask mandates, 19 of which have Republican governors (Markowitz, 2021). Republican led states were slower to implement mask mandates than Democratic led states and also quicker to repeal these mandates in spite of public health advice. On a federal level, masks were also an important part of the 2020 presidential election cycle, with the then incumbent President Trump arguing against the concept of mask mandates and now President Biden taking a more encouraging stance on mask wearing among the general public (Stolberg, 2020). Partisan politics evidently have a connection to the importance Americans on mask wearing in public both on the individual and governing levels, but the question of how this discrepancy developed remains.

## **Discussion**

### ***Social Construction of Technology and Masks***

Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), is a theory that examines how technology develops relative to different relevant social groups that interact with the technology in different ways. In a 1987 article discussing SCOT, Pinch and Bijker lay out how social groups are defined both by user groups with different relationships to a technology, in their example, a bicycle, and also by explicit non-users of the technology (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). Groups that are actively opposed to the usage of a particular technology are still interacting with that technology in a meaningful way that is important to examine. For the case of this paper, masks can be considered

to be the relevant technology, and social groups can be defined relative to masks in order to examine the divide in opinion on their adoption.

The relevant social groups for masks can be defined around people's general opinions and behavior regarding mask wearing. The three main groups for this discussion are the Pro-Mask group, the Anti-Mask group, and the Mask-Neutral group. The Pro-Mask group encompasses those who willingly wear masks in public spaces all or most of the time and may vocally express support for the principle of masks. The Anti-Mask group consists of those who actively avoid or refuse to wear masks in public whenever possible and may speak out against the principle of wearing masks. The Mask Neutral group on the surface fits in a space between this and covers people who may not be strongly against the concept of wearing masks but will also not usually make the choice to wear them in public spaces independently. While Mask Neutral users will wear masks in spaces where other people are wearing them or they are required to wear them, if there is no requirement or peer pressure they will abstain. This stance on masks positions itself as not Anti-Mask, but essentially places the burden of choice in regards to masks on other individuals or institutions. It cannot be claimed that any of these groups align exactly with party lines, but Republicans have been more likely over time to fall into the Anti-Mask group while Democrats have conversely been more likely to fall into the Pro-Mask category. Going forward, the political divisions around mask wearing can be examined by looking at the intersection of the Anti-Mask group and Republicans, as well as that of the Pro-Mask group and Democrats.

There is of course variation in what a mask can even mean for different people. The default of what a mask is can be assumed to be somewhere in current the CDC recommended set of cloth facemasks, disposable facemasks, or KN95 mask, but people self-reporting as wearing

masks in public may not be actually wearing one of these (Types of Masks, 2021). Other common face coverings include face shields, neck gaiters, and scarves or other similar cloths that people may use to cover their face. These varied types of masks or face coverings that are not explicitly recommended by the CDC may be less effective in actually stopping the spread of COVID-19 even though they can be literally counted as wearing a face covering. This variation in types of masks users may wear is not ultimately the focus of the debate in question, but is still useful to acknowledge to provide wider context to this discussion that people wearing masks may not be using a version deemed sufficient by the CDC. For the purposes of social groups, people wearing these variations can be functionally labelled as a sort of subgroup of Mask Neutral because they are making some attempt to follow mask wearing guidelines, but are not doing so in a way that is informed by CDC guidance.

The Mask Neutral position can be spun as a functional and moral middle ground between the two extremes of mask wearing, but in reality, it is more of a toned-down version of Anti-Mask sentiment. The scenarios where these users interact with others without masks or while wearing insufficient masks are still causing a risk of COVID spread, and the fact that wear masks in other scenarios does not eliminate this risk. The deferment of decisions regarding this risk can also contribute to undermining wider public opinion on the necessity of masks. It reinforces the idea that mask wearing should be a matter of individual comfort level rather than a joint effort made by everyone to protect society on the whole as is needed to minimize viral spread and serious illness.

### ***Scientific Knowledge, Uncertainty, and Policy***

An important element of understanding why masks have become a politicized issue is breaking down the interaction of scientific and political motivations of the different social

groups. One major factor here is how politics interact with specifically with uncertainty in scientific knowledge. In a 2004 article entitled *How science makes environmental controversies worse*, Sarewitz discusses how the interplay of politics and science can end up undermining scientific discussion. He argues that entangling science with the policy making disrupt the making of policy the relevant issues and harm the overall integrity of scientific fact. He goes on to assert that when uncertainty exists in scientific knowledge, groups with different interests, particularly political groups, are able to use these areas of conflicting scientific fact to support their own specific interests and moral positions. Sarewitz further argues that political debate over areas of scientific uncertainty can ultimately weaken the general belief in scientific facts. If different relevant social groups leverage these gaps and changes in expert opinions to support their own moral positions, they can end creating wider confusion about these discrepancies and weaken scientific support for an argument on the whole. It could from here be argued that policy should ultimately be formed without bringing science into the debate, but it is difficult to see a path where policy could be made and behavior could be defined regarding a major public health crisis without being informed by scientific information about the virus itself. This leaves the question of how information is conveyed to the public rather than whether or not it should be conveyed at all (Sarewitz, 2004).

Scientific uncertainty has been a major part of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the public often watching scientific facts about the virus develop in real time. While COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in the beginning of March of 2020, in the US, the CDC did not endorse the general public wearing masks until early April and did not openly recognize the virus as an airborne disease until late September (Dwyer & Aubrey, 2020; Laguipo, 2020). Before the April update to mask guidelines, the CDC discouraged the general public from wearing masks in

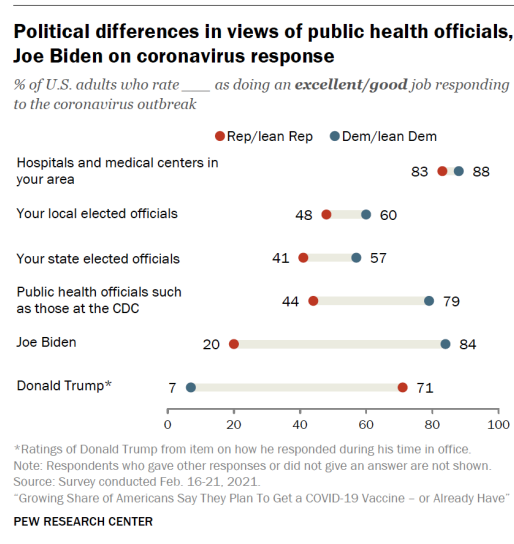
public and limited their recommendations for the use of mask to healthcare workers and those who were ill, making the April recommendation a large shift for Americans (*Transcript for CDC Telebriefing: CDC Update on Novel Coronavirus, 2020*). The CDC has further gone on to release updated research on the ideal fit of masks, which included the recommendation that some masks be worn two at a time (Wamsley, 2021). Because of the novelty of COVID-19, science has had to continuously develop and change in a very public way. This kind of change and uncertainty could have contributed to polarization of the issue of mask wearing.

Pew Research data from September of 2020 allows an insight into the relation of both Pro-Mask Democrats and Anti-Mask Republicans to scientific information about COVID and their attitudes about masks. Pro-Mask Democrats often expressed anxiety over others not wearing masks, considering Anti-Mask people to be putting them at risk even when they did their own part to wear masks in public. Particular concern was expressed by people with existing illnesses or jobs where they had to be around other people who refused to wear masks. This demonstrates a fear of the severity of the virus and feeling of trust in the efficacy of masks when they are worn by as many people as possible. Conversely, the Anti-Mask Republicans mainly express a disbelief in the danger of COVID and in the efficacy of masks to prevent its spread, therefore making them feel like being asked or forced to wear masks was an unreasonable imposition on their autonomy. Several specifically cited the belief that science supported the idea that masks were ineffective, and one quote even specifically cites the early CDC statement saying masks September 2020 stands as roughly the chronological midpoint of the pandemic and was about five months after the CDC had changed their position to support masks. Clearly the initial confusion about mask recommendations has played a part in continuing justification for



Anti-Mask sentiment, as well as general misconceptions or denials about the science being used to shape COVID guidelines (Kessel & Quinn, 2020).

Another Pew Research study from February of 2021 examined more specific beliefs of Democrats and Republicans on issues relating the pandemic. This survey included questions on which people and institutions each group felt were handling COVID well.



*Figure 2. Pew Research data on mask opinion of different institutions' COVID-19 responses by party affiliation (Schaeffer, 2021).*

As shown above in Figure 2, while both groups have similarly high trust in local hospitals, Democrats are consistently more supportive of elected officials and nearly twice as satisfied with the response of public health officials on the level of the CDC. This reinforces the idea that Republicans are less likely to trust guidelines passed down from political officials. It also shows a lack of trust by Republicans in the public health officials who are often help shape the COVID safety guidelines of the American public (Schaeffer, 2021). Whether this is shaped by an explicit distrust of science on principle or a dislike of scientists who are specifically tied to the government, it still represents a worrying lack of faith in a group of important advisors on mask

guidelines. This may then contribute to a distaste for following guidelines put forward by the CDC or institutions advised by them.

Another notable element of these responses is the major difference in opinion between parties on the presidents that have been in office during the pandemic. There is an approximately 60 percentage point gap between Democrats and Republicans for each president, with each having more support from their own party (Schaeffer, 2021). This emphasizes the danger of turning the pandemic response to a talking point during the presidential election and represents the sort of dangerous intersection of science and political rhetoric. Regardless of the actual content of either president's response plans, the opposing party believes that the response is incorrect. Boiling responses to a global health crisis down to pieces of opposing presidential platforms is essentially as political as science can get, and it has harmed people's trust in what the person responsible for leading the nation during the crisis.

### ***Political Values in Social Groups***

In a July 2020 article entitled *Masks, Culture Wars, and Public Health Expertise: Confessions of a Mask "Expert,"* Robert Kahn examines the politicization of masks from the perspective of someone who was involved in the public conversation about mask wearing relatively early in the pandemic. Kahn discusses Anti-Mask Republicans as people whose political values stand against social control by government institutions and who believe that individuals should be allowed to make moral and safety decisions on their own without government regulation. Kahn then positions highly Pro-Mask Democrats who intensely advocate for universal mask wearing and shame those who do not wear masking opposition to this. Kahn also views this aggressive Pro-Mask advocacy as problematic, as it can come across as authoritarian and therefore upset the people already unhappy with the concept of being ordered

to wear a mask. Although Kahn discusses the political extremes of mask wearing opinions, he also takes the position that many people who are both Republican leaning and Anti-Mask are not necessarily Anti-Mask because they are Republican. He argues that many people have pragmatic reasons for choosing not to wear mask, such a personal health issues that make it harder for them to breath with a mask (Kahn, 2020).

While Kahn is correct in the point that many political people cite apolitical reasons for their refusal to wear masks, these reasonings may not be as separated from political values as they appear on the surface. One may not consciously reject masks on the principal of being a Republican, but their decision can still be colored by their political values. The Pew Research public opinion data can give some insight on how this applies to the provided example of breathing issues. One man who falls is a Pro-Mask Democrat stated on how his breathing issues influence his view of masks, “I have chronic asthma so I am fearful of being exposed to the coronavirus. It makes me extremely angry to go out and see people not wearing masks or keeping social distance.” Conversely, an Anti-Mask Republican woman with a similar breathing issue stated, “Being forced to wear a completely useless mask when going into businesses. I have bad allergies and can’t breathe well. The CDC has reported that the masks are useless, which to me indicates they are virtue signaling items and are being used to control people” (Kessel & Quinn, 2020). While these two people do not speak for everyone in their respective social groups, they can stand as an example of how politics may be tied to the supposedly pragmatic decisions people make about masks. One person’s concerns about their own existing respiratory issues translates into a belief that the larger public should wear masks in order to protect them and others like them from getting an illness that could potentially worsen these issues. Meanwhile, another person has taken the position that because wearing a mask may make it

more difficult for them to breathe, the general concept of being made to wear masks in public is an unreasonable imposition. These attitudes, while both ostensibly about dealing with existing breathing difficulties, are influenced by the political values of each group: advocating for a group effort and government enforcement of public health measures versus rejecting social control by the government. The Anti-Mask sentiment here, as stated previously, also ties back into the issues of scientific uncertainty argument, as the survey was conducted five months after the CDC stated that masks do in fact help prevent the spread of the virus.

The main takeaway here is that the values associated with a particular political view can influence one's decision for when to wear masks or not. Someone of either position can take almost the same situation and spin it into a reason why masks should be enforced. While neither argument may specifically state that the reasoning is political, it is also not entirely separable from political values. Again, not every Anti-Mask person is a Republican and not every Republican is Anti-Mask, so stating that the only motivations for being Anti-Mask are political is reductive, but at the same time, it cannot be assumed that any argument claiming to be apolitical is fully separate from political influence.

Kahn paints the situational mask wearer, who in this paper would generally fall into the category of Mask Neutral, as someone who is potentially unclear about the scenarios where they need masks or who has pragmatic reasons for not wearing masks in certain places. He argues that shaming these people for not wearing masks or imposing hyper-strict guidelines on the government level will make these people feel like there is no point to wearing masks (Kahn, 2020). There is nuance to what situations where someone might not choose to wear a mask, as having small social bubbles where people can be more relaxed about distancing has become a generally accepted practice at this point in the pandemic, but going into a grocery store without a

mask (which is an example situation brought up by Kahn) is generally frowned upon (Nightingale, 2020). These situations are not necessarily weighted equally as everyone in a social bubble can make an informed decision to mutually consent to not wearing a mask within that space, but strangers working or shopping at the grocery store do not have this same luxury and are being put at greater risk by someone choosing not to wear a mask in that space. To argue that it is a purely a personal moral decision to not mask in a grocery store and that people who are uncomfortable with this should consider they do not know the reasoning behind this choice does not mix well with the argument that masking is a social responsibility that needs the majority of people to participate to be effective.

### **Conclusion**

There are clearly issues involved in the intermingling of politics and science, particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic. Polarization of COVID-19 response plans during the 2020 presidential campaign have led to Americans viewing the heads of state's ability to handle the crisis almost entirely through a political lens. Americans are more or less likely to trust scientific information from some of the highest public health experts in the country based on their political affiliation. There is a consistent disparity between political parties in who wears masks. This issue is clearly not divorced from politics, which is a problem for both science and related policy. Sarewitz's work as discussed in this paper examines how scientific and political discussion can negatively impact each other with respect to the specific issue of environmental controversy, which can be expanded to include the more recent issue of medical science and political debate around masks during the COVID-19 pandemic when put in conjunction with Kahn's writing on mask wearing. These two papers create a concerning image of the ability for mask wearing to be

adopted, as Sarewitz worries that too much political debate over scientific fact will both undermine science and political debate, and Kahn has concerns that pushing too hard for mask wearing will only further turn people with particular political values away from the responsibility. Together, these discussions bring back the question of how to handle situations like masks where there is an issue of public health and safety caught in the middle of all this public political and scientific debate.

It can become tempting to argue that, because science and politics can weaken each other when interwoven incorrectly, the two should never mix, but this is not a fully realistic path forward. Ultimately, in a public health crisis, policy and science cannot be completely disentangled. There has to be some kind of policy, guidelines, or other general leadership from the government in a crisis where the response must be shaped by science. The fact that science is still developing and knowledge will change with time cannot be helped. People who do not want to wear masks when they are mandated are not going to all suddenly decide they are okay with masks because the government or the other party is no longer telling them they have to wear them at this point. There is really no clean solution that this paper can offer. It would be nice if scientists could always say things in ways that resonate with the general public without intimidating them or invoking skepticism, if politicians would not reduce variations in scientific knowledge to petty political bickering, and if policy could always walk the line between enforcing guidelines based on science without coming across as authoritarian to certain people, but that is not how the world operates. Perhaps there were steps that could have been taken differently early in the pandemic to minimize politicization later on, but it is too late to change this. Society, politicians, and scientists need to learn how to balance scientific information and uncertainty with policy making and public information. Unfortunately, there is not necessarily a

clear answer on how to do this going forward, but the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly revealed some of the wrong ways.

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