

# Political Accountability and Selective Perception in the Time of COVID

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**ABSTRACT:** Did COVID damage Trump's approval ratings and re-election prospects? One of the most venerable findings of political science is that people punish the incumbent president in bad times, and reward them in good times. Despite the coronavirus crisis representing a once-in-a-generation catastrophe, Trump's approval ratings remained relatively flat throughout 2020, particularly when compared to other world leaders. What explains this puzzle? We argue that in order for the public health crisis to adversely affect Trump, people must perceive there to be a crisis in the first place. Using a two-wave panel immediately preceding the 2020 election, instead of finding that the crisis affects support for Trump, we find the reverse – the very perception of crisis depends on one's prior political predispositions. Trump supporters are more likely to underestimate COVID fatalities and case-rates, and less likely to perceive the crisis as worsening between survey waves (even though daily infections doubled in this time frame). Those who perceived the crisis to worsen, but continued to support the President, generally expressed unwillingness to attribute the worsening crisis to the government's response. A public unable to acknowledge disaster, or attribute its severity to the actions of elected officials, cannot hold its government accountable.

**SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT:** In the lead-up to the 2020 election, political commentators believed the coronavirus crisis would hurt Donald Trump at the polls. Yet Trump's approval, unlike other world leaders, remained stable throughout 2020, and a "blue wave" of Democratic wins never materialized in the elections. We interviewed Americans multiple times before the 2020 election – a period when COVID cases sky-rocketed – to explore this puzzle. We find that prior support for Trump heavily conditioned people's perception of the crisis. People that already supported the president under-estimated COVID deaths, case rates, and over-time change of the crisis' severity. We argue that citizens cannot punish their leaders for a crisis that they do not perceive, or are unwilling to attribute to their mismanagement.

In the lead up to the 2020 presidential election, the news media, politicians, political operatives and late-night entertainers believed the coronavirus pandemic, and particularly its acceleration in the weeks and days before the election, would hurt Trump. In the Washington Post, opinion columnists argued just before election day that “[Biden’s lead in Michigan and Wisconsin in pre-election polling] suggest concerns about the coronavirus are weighing heavily on President Trump’s candidacy, particularly in Wisconsin, which has seen case counts climb to record levels in recent weeks.” Likewise, Michael Bloomberg focused his pre-election advertising blitz “chiefly on the coronavirus, highlighting the new spike in cases across the country under Mr. Trump’s watch.” Even late-night entertainers weighed in; Stephen Colbert told his audience on *A Late Show*, “Trump is being hurt by his total shanking of the pandemic and things are getting worse. On Friday [October 16, 2020], for the first time since July, the United States reported over 70,000 coronavirus cases.” (See table SA 1 for 10 quotes from reputable figures in the news media expressing similar sentiment.)

These journalistic depictions echo one of the most venerable findings of political science: voters punish or reward incumbent administrations based on macro successes and failures (e.g., the well-being of the economy, success of foreign-interventions). While voters notoriously pay little attention to politics and lack knowledge of even basic political facts, “voters typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent administration” (Fiorina 1981). This theory, which political scientists refer to as retrospective voting, has served as a bedrock for theories of democratic accountability (e.g. Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Converse 1964; Kramer 1971; Fair 1978; Kiewiet 1983; Lewis-Beck 2005; Lock and Gelman 2010; Blumenthal 2014).

Retrospective voting, though, has faced a variety of critiques. Some scholars argue that voters are myopic, focusing only on outcomes felt just prior to the election (Mackuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Alesina, Londregan, and Rosenthal 1993; Achen and Bartels 2004). Others argue that voters often punish politicians for events out of their control, such as shark attacks, floods, droughts, and more (Healy and Malhotra 2009; Healy, Malhotra and Mo 2010; Achen and Bartels 2016). More recently, scholars have found that both perceptions and attributions of economic performance are increasingly colored by partisanship, greatly reducing the number of people willing to vote against a poorly performing incumbent co-partisan (Tilley and Holbolt 2011; Enns, Kellstedt and MacAvoy 2012; Weinschenk 2012; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Bisgaard 2015; Bisgaard 2019; Druckman et al 2020; Freeder n.d.).

The coronavirus pandemic offers, in many ways, a once-in-a-generation stress test for theories of retrospective voting. Millions of Americans became infected, and hundreds of thousands have died. This is in addition to significant disruptions to the economy and everyday life that have upended all aspects of American life.

To what end did the coronavirus crisis affect voter's evaluation of the president? The evidence is unclear. Unlike other world leaders, Donald Trump's approval ratings remained relatively flat during the initial shock of the COVID-19 crisis. Trump did not enjoy a "rally around the flag" effect that buoyed world leader's approval ratings in Canada, Australia or Great Britain. Nor did Trump's approval substantially decline as did Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's or some U.S. state governors', such as Florida's Ron DeSantis (Binder and Shino 2020). As has been true for much of his presidency, Trump's approval ratings throughout 2020 were remarkably stable, particularly when compared to other world leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The early post-mortem of the 2020 election echoes these trends. Despite massive increases in infections in the weeks and days before the 2020 election, Trump actually seemed to do *better* in the hardest hit areas (Still and Mellnik 2020). Furthermore, the blue wave of Democratic victories that so many predicted --- partially because of the coronavirus crisis' presumed toll on the Trump presidency and down-ballot Republicans --- did not materialize.

While there are many explanations, we offer one simple but powerful explanation for COVID's minimalist effect: in order for the public health crisis to adversely affect the incumbent administration, people must perceive there to be a crisis in the first place and, if they do, they must attribute that crisis to insufficient government response. We present evidence that, rather than the severity of the COVID crisis significantly influencing vote choice or approval, the process appears to work in reverse: the perception of the existence or severity of a public health crisis is a function of people's pre-existing partisan and political predispositions.

We argue partisan polarization inhibits retrospective voting on COVID in two ways. First, Republicans are less likely to perceive the depths of the current crisis (e.g., how many people have died). This differs from past pandemics where knowledge of a crisis' severity was evenly distributed across party lines (See table SA 2). Second, even if Trump supporters perceive the crisis to be bad or worsening, they are more likely to indicate Trump is already doing everything within his power to combat the crisis, and more likely to attribute America's enormous death per capita rate to factors beyond Trump's control.<sup>2</sup> About a third of these respondents reject the legitimacy of official statistics altogether (John Hopkins University 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Morning Consult tracks world leader approval by country: <https://morningconsult.com/form/global-leader-approval/>. See figure SA 1 for graphs.

<sup>2</sup> The US per capita death rate, as of December 2, 2020 is 83/100k which is the 12th highest of 170 countries, and over three times the global mean.

## DATA AND METHODS

To evaluate the relationship between the coronavirus pandemic and support for Donald Trump, we use a convenience sample of Mechanical Turk workers.<sup>3</sup> We first surveyed 1,312 MTurk workers on October 1, 2020 and asked respondents about their perceptions of the coronavirus including whether they thought the crisis was getting better, worse or stayed the same in the past month; how many Americans they believed died since the start of the crisis; and how many Americans they believed had died in the previous calendar month. We also asked a series of questions gauging respondent's approval of Trump and Biden, who they were going to vote for, and how well they thought Trump was handling the crisis.

We then invited respondents back to be re-surveyed between October 30 and November 3 (closing the survey right before polls closed on the east coast). We re-asked respondents their perceptions of the crisis, this time including perceived COVID cases per day, and feelings towards various candidates, as well as Donald Trump's handling of the crisis. We also asked respondents whether they thought Trump was doing everything he could do to stop the crisis, how much the federal government could do to slow the virus, and an open-ended question on why the United States had such a high death rate compared to other nations. Of the 1,124 initial respondents invited back who had passed an attention check, 504 responded and passed a new attention check (see figure SA 2 for details on these checks).

## RESULTS: TRUMP VOTERS UNDERESTIMATE THE COVID CRISIS

Did Biden and Trump voters perceive the severity of the coronavirus crisis differently? Figure 1 breaks down perceptions of the crisis, asked in different ways, by whether respondents indicated they preferred Trump or Biden.<sup>4</sup> On each measure, those that say they will vote for Biden are much more likely to perceive the crisis, both in the short and long-run, to be more severe.

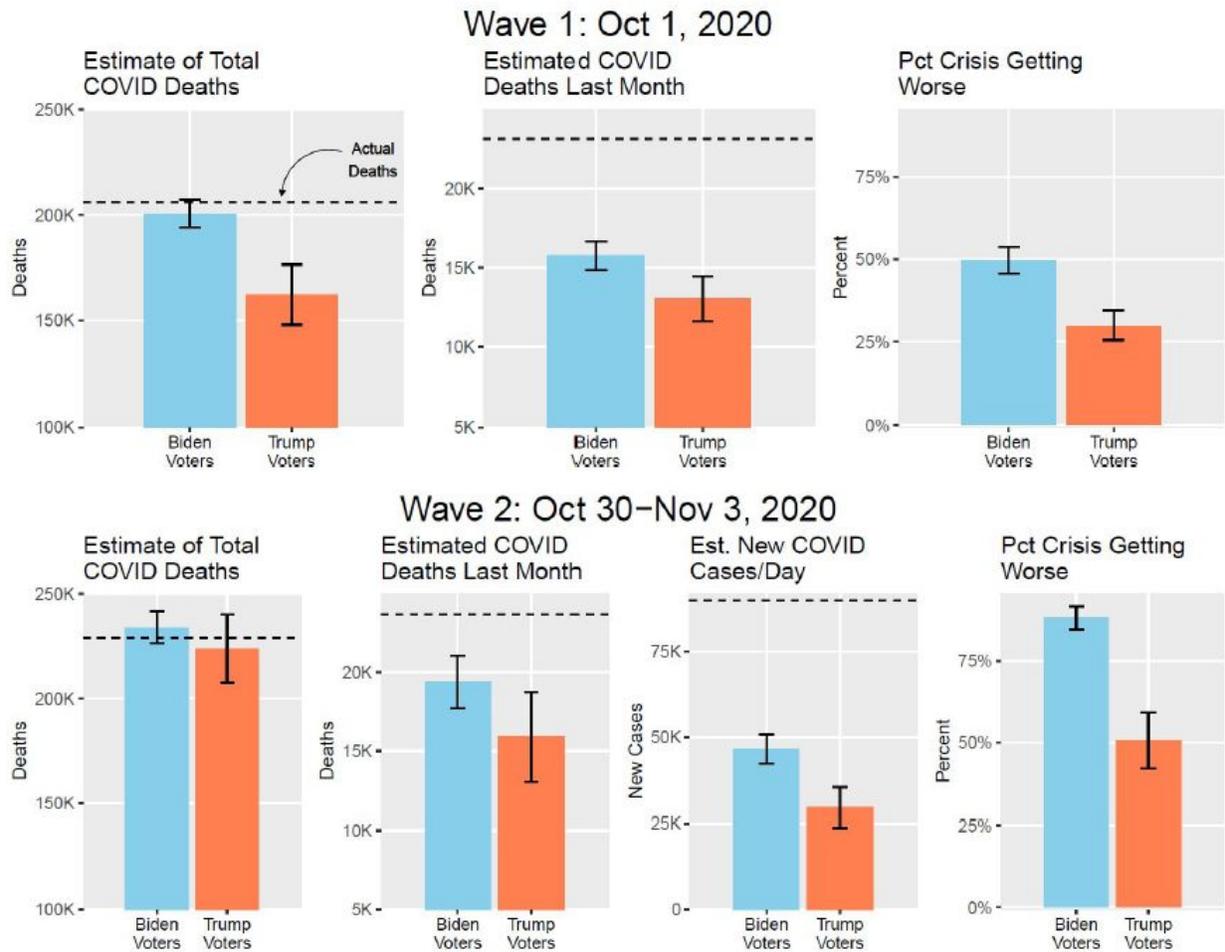
For example, the first panel of figure 1 shows that Biden voters estimated that about 200 thousand Americans had died since the beginning of the year, while Trump voters estimated about 159 thousand deaths. Similar patterns emerge when asked about the total deaths in the past month. Likewise, in wave 2, we asked how many new people were being infected in the average day of the past week. Compared to the average Biden voter, Trump supporters thought about half the number of people were infected per day. Finally, when asked in more general terms whether the crisis was getting worse, better, or stayed the same, Biden voters in both waves were much more likely to say it was getting worse (more on those who changed their perceptions between waves in a moment).

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<sup>3</sup> See table SA 3 for a demographic summary of these respondents.

<sup>4</sup> Results are substantively similar if sample is broken down between vote choice or partisan identification.

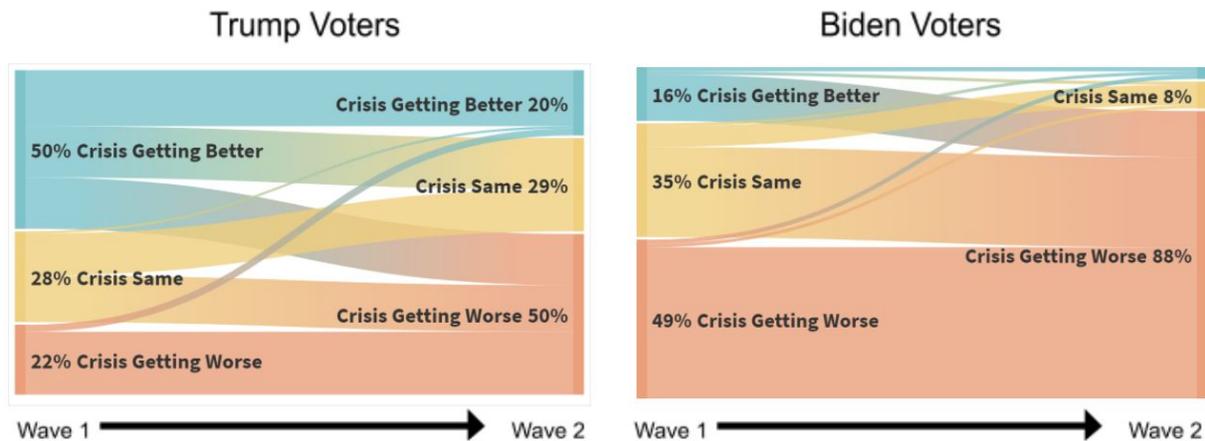
**FIGURE 1. Perceptions of the COVID-19 Crisis, by Candidate Preference**



*Note: Perceptions of the severity of the COVID-19 crisis are dependent on which candidate a respondent supported. Each graph above breaks down these perceptions, measured several ways, by candidate preference. Top-row respondents are from wave 1. Bottom-row respondents returned from wave 1 to participate in wave 2. Dashed lines represent actual values as reported by the Washington Post. N=1,124 in wave 1, 504 in wave 2.*

This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that people's factual understanding of the severity of the crisis (total deaths) is tainted by their political predispositions. However, this data does not establish the causal direction of the relationship between COVID perceptions and partisanship. Do people think the crisis is getting worse and therefore indicate a lower willingness to vote for Trump – as conventional wisdom suggests – or, as our account suggests, do people think the crisis is improving or declining based on their opinion of Trump?

**FIGURE 2. Changes in Perceptions of COVID-19 Crisis, by Wave 1 Candidate Preference**



*Note: Change in perception of crisis between waves, by candidate preference indicated in Wave 1. Figure tracks changes in perception between Wave 1 (Oct 1, 2020) and Wave 2 (Oct 30 - Nov 3). For example, 22% of wave 1 Trump voters thought the crisis was worsening in wave 1, and 50% thought the crisis was worsening in wave 2. In actuality, over this month, infection rates roughly doubled. N=504.*

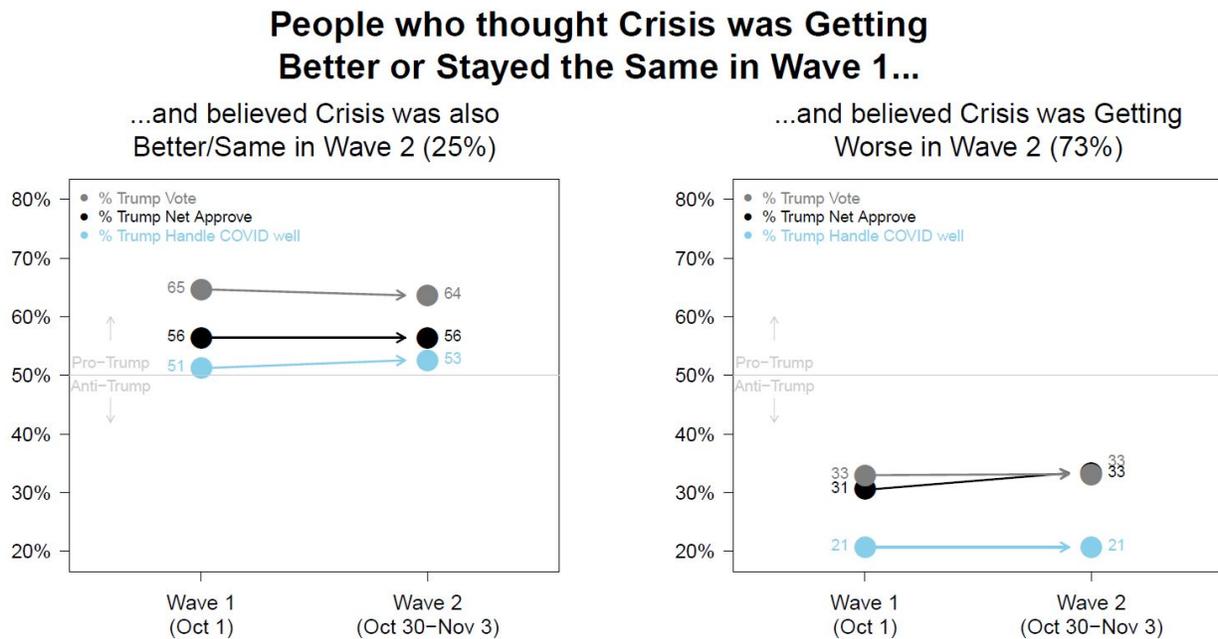
The timing of the panels captured important variation in the ebb and flow of the crisis. During the first wave (October 1, 2020), infection rates had been falling and actually had remained fairly steady after a surge in cases over the summer. However, between our first and second wave (we conducted our second wave October 30 to November 3), the crisis had clearly worsened. By late October, infection rates had roughly doubled compared to a month earlier, and were hitting all-time highs (for that time) of about 100,000 cases per day (Johns Hopkins 2020).

While respondents across political predispositions perceived the crisis to be worsening, Figure 2 shows that the perception that things were getting worse was noticeably more concentrated among voters that favored Biden in Wave 1. In wave 1, 22% of Trump voters believed the crisis was getting worse, but in wave 2 that number had jumped to 50%. Among Biden voters, 49% of voters already believed the crisis was worsening in wave 1, but in wave 2 that skyrocketed to 88%. As we are comparing perceptions in both waves using wave 1 candidate support, this helps us eliminate the explanation that people's support for Trump or Biden is a consequence of their prior perception that things are going well or poorly. Rather, this evidence aligns with our selective perception hypothesis that prior support for candidates influences later perceptions of the crisis.

Figure 3 then breaks down how support for Trump changes based on respondents' changes in perceived severity. The left panel shows those who perceived the crisis was getting better or stayed the same in wave 1, and believed the crisis continued to do so in wave 2, while the right panel shows those in wave 2 who now believed the crisis was worsening. The x-axis displays

three measures of attitudes towards Trump – intent to vote, net approval, and handling of COVID – from 0% to 100%. Consistent with our selective perception hypothesis, people who perceived the COVID crisis to worsen between wave 1 and wave 2 were already more likely to disapprove of Trump, and less likely to vote for him, in wave 1. Furthermore, people who believed the crisis to be worsening already thought Trump was doing a poor job handling the pandemic.

**FIGURE 3. Changes in Candidate Preference by Changes in Perception of Crisis**



*Note: Panels plot respondent attitudes towards Trump of those who said in wave 1 that the crisis was “getting better” or had “stayed the same” over the previous month. The left panel includes respondents in wave 2 (N=114) who perceived the crisis had continued in the same direction (stayed the same as before or was getting better). The right panel includes wave 2 respondents (N=190) who perceived the crisis had gotten worse, a change from their wave 1 response.*

It is worth pausing on this last point: a common belief prior to the election was that increased cases would further accentuate the perception that Trump bungled the crisis, and thus lead to decreased support. Yet, the very perception the crisis was getting worse is correlated with the belief that Trump is already handling the crisis poorly, and perceptions that things were staying the same, correlated heavily with the reverse. Over the prior month, daily cases had doubled, but regardless of whether respondents noticed, their decision to vote for Trump had already solidified. The nature of the crisis shifted significantly, but attitudes towards Trump did not.

This now brings us to our final point. Some Trump voters thought the crisis was already bad during our first wave, and 60% of those that came back to our sample thought the crisis had

worsened since they were first interviewed in October. However, despite perceptions the COVID crisis had gotten worse, voters did not appear to shift their support or approval. Why?

We think the best explanation is one of attribution; people are unwilling to blame their co-partisans. For example, 65% of wave 1 Trump supporters who think the crisis got worse between the first and second wave said that Trump was doing everything in his power to control the virus, compared to just 3% of Biden voters that believed similarly.

To investigate this further, at the end of the survey, we showed respondents statistics from the John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, and told them that the deaths per capita rate of coronavirus was over ten times higher in the US (at the time, 68 per 100k) compared to country averages worldwide (6 per 100k). We then asked them to tell us in an open-response box what they thought explained this disparity. As seen in table 1, which summarizes the responses by vote-choice and partisanship, we found respondents' answers could be organized into seven categories. The two "overall" rows reflect the percentage of respondents who gave any response in either categories 1 or 2, and those who gave responses in categories 4 or 5, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

We find that 60% of Democrats indicated that Trump or the federal response was to blame, while only 15% of Republicans said the same. On the other hand, 60% of Republicans found excuses for the federal response, while only 20% of Democrats mentioned any (and 25% of these Democrats still blamed the federal response). About a third of Republicans indicated distrust in the statistics presented to them. Interestingly, Republicans were also three times more likely than Democrats to leave their response blank, or say they didn't know what explained the difference.

This divide in responses is similar but even more stark when comparing Biden voters to Trump voters. The percentage of independents who blamed Trump was in between that of Democrats and Republicans, though significantly closer to Republicans, indicating a general unwillingness to place the blame on national leadership. One in six independents doubted the statistics, about half that of Republicans, but eight times that of Democrats.

These data are consistent with critiques of retrospective voting where attributing blame in the wake of natural disasters is necessary for punishing the incumbent administration (Achen and Bartels 2017, 140). Trump voters perceived COVID-19 as a force of nature that the government can do only so much to control --- and Trump, even among those that were well aware about the state of the natural disaster, was perceived as doing everything in his power. Still, that about a third of Republicans were unwilling to trust the official statistics suggests that a weakened retrospective response is often not just about selective attribution, but selective perception, and a willingness to disregard aspects of reality that are inconsistent with one's identity and beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on coding and categorization, and alternative measures, see tables SA 4, 5 and 6.

<sup>6</sup> A handful of Trump supporters believed the crisis was both worsening and the president was not doing everything he could. These voters did lower their perceptions of Trump, but the changes were quite small.

**TABLE 1: Reasons for High COVID Death/Capita Rate in United States Relative to World**

	Democrats Only	Republicans Only	Independents Only	Biden Voters	Trump Voters
<b>Trump/national leadership was poor</b>	34%	6%	11%	34%	2%
<b>Federal policy response has been poor</b>	34%	12%	17%	35%	8%
<b>Response by American public has been poor</b>	30%	20%	30%	37%	21%
<b>US is more vulnerable than other countries</b>	18%	31%	30%	17%	34%
<b>Statistics are incorrect or manipulated</b>	2%	32%	17%	3%	36%
<b>Miscellaneous responses</b>	10%	4%	2%	10%	3%
<b>DK / Refused / Unintelligible</b>	2%	6%	4%	2%	7%
<b>OVERALL: Federal response was poor</b>	60%	15%	24%	60%	10%
<b>OVERALL: Diff not explained by Trump</b>	20%	60%	43%	19%	67%
<b>Obs.</b>	288	160	53	303	136

*Note: N=504. Response categories are based on coding open-response answers from respondents in wave 2, in answering the question: “Of the 169 countries for which the World Health Organization has data, the United States has a worse death/population rate than all but 10 of them. The median death/population rate for these countries is just 6.4, but in the United States, this number is 68.36, over ten times higher. What do you think explains why the United States’ death/population rate is so much worse than the vast majority of other developed nations?” Columns do not sum to 100%, as respondents could be coded as having more than one type of response. See appendix for discussion of categories. The “Overall” categories at the bottom summarize the itemized response categories above – anyone who indicated Trump specifically or the federal gov’t generally had done poorly was included in “Federal response was poor”; anyone who suggested the US was more vulnerable or the statistics were bad was included in “Difference not explained by Trump”. Partisan categories include leaners.*

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION: WHAT EXPLAINS SELECTIVE PERCEPTIONS?**

We argue that COVID had a minimalist effect on Trump's approval and vote share because the very perception that there was a crisis was correlated with prior Trump support. Furthermore, even if Trump supporters had negative perceptions of the crisis, they were less likely to blame the administration for the crisis. In such a polarizing election, with relatively few undecided voters, selective perception and attribution prevented any widespread electoral punishment.

But what causes selective misperceptions? One explanation is that people who like Trump have less political information, and therefore know less about the severity of the crisis. However, political information has an uneven effect on perceptions. Furthermore, when we ask about unemployment, Biden voters over-estimate unemployment, and Trump voters guess closer to the true amount. Similarly, self-reported media exposure does not wholly explain this trend: Republicans who have high and low media exposure estimate the severity of the crisis at fairly similar rates (see figures SA 3, 4 and 5).

A second explanation is that Republicans, for whatever reason, may underestimate risk generally, and therefore would be more likely to underestimate the severity and impact of all sorts of public problems. To test this, we asked our sample to estimate the number of automobile fatalities in a given year; estimates did not vary by partisanship (see table SA 7).

A third explanation is that the crisis is abstract for some, and very real for others. However, we asked respondents whether they or anyone in their home had contracted COVID and found that proximity of COVID correlates with having a more optimistic view of the crisis. In fact, we find that identifying as a Republican and indicating that Fox News was your preferred news source both positively correlate with being in a household that has already contracted COVID-19. (See table SA 8.) This aligns with other work which finds that partisanship strongly correlates with willingness to engage in habits, such as social-distancing or masking wearing, that have been shown to limit exposure (e.g., Clinton et al., 2020; Guntermann and Lenz, n.d.). This plausibly contributes to higher case rates among Republicans.

A final set of explanations focuses on motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990). Trump voters may hope that things are going well because their party is in power, and doing so relieves cognitive dissonance. Conversely, Trump voters may think because their candidate is in power, things must be going well because their party/candidate is highly competent. Though we are unable to directly test this explanation, it is consistent with past work on partisanship and motivated reasoning. Partisans routinely engage in motivated reasoning and as partisanship has increased considerably in the United States in recent decades, it becomes an increasingly significant predictor of perceptions of government performance (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Flynn, Nyhan and

Reifler 2017; Donovan, Kellstadt, Key and Lebo 2019; Freeder n.d.).

As perceptions of government performance in the United States become increasingly linked to partisanship, elected officials may be held to dangerously low levels of public accountability. In this case, the incumbent was ultimately voted out of office, but the risks of selective perception and attribution remain. These dynamics will likely continue to shape our ability to manage the pandemic, insofar as those of us who do not acknowledge the extent of the crisis may be unwilling to take the vaccines to help bring the crisis to an end.

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