

POLICY AND POLICY COMMUNICATION IN POLARIZED TIMES

The COVID-19 crisis won't be over until science delivers effective anti-virals, devises a vaccine, or we reach a point of herd immunity. Until then, minimizing the public health and economic effects of COVID-19 will largely be a social scientific problem. An effective public policy response requires knowledge about what public health practices prevent disease spread—and what are effective ways to promote those practices. We propose an ambitious data collection effort to identify 1) which public health guidelines minimize disease transmission while limiting negative economic effects and 2) what public messaging strategies by state and federal officials are most effective in helping citizens understand the health- and economic-related tradeoffs they face.

The first part of our effort will examine relationships between government interventions and public health and economic outcomes. States and localities have varied widely in their approaches to limiting commercial activity, prohibiting social gatherings, and discouraging travel. They also vary widely in terms of their existing public health infrastructure, economic context, and the number of vacancies in the state-level bureaucracy. All of this variation is useful for drawing inferences about what policies prevent people from getting sick—with minimal economic fallout. Of course, any analysis of such relationships should be attentive to the likelihood that “one size fits all” solutions are rare. Our effort will pay particular attention to the reality that effective public policy responses hinge on sociopolitical, economic, demographic, and other contextual factors.

Any effective policy response requires public buy-in. Hence, the second part of our effort will examine what messaging strategies are most effective at achieving adherence. A major obstacle in the present context is political polarization. Because the Coronavirus pandemic will clearly be a focus in the upcoming presidential election, we fear that many of the visible actions that a person might take—wearing a mask in public, reopening a nonessential business, or going to the movies, for some examples—will be perceived as political expressions akin to wearing a campaign button. Such politicization would be tragic, since citizens should make such decisions on the basis of the best-available public health advice and their own risk calculus, and not worry about their choices being evaluated as political acts. Thus we also propose research examining what messaging strategies diminish the role that political predispositions play in citizens' health-related choices.

The research we propose requires, first, gathering data on what actions state and local governing bodies have taken, and when (as well as tracking these decisions going forward). We are requesting support for graduate student research assistance to aid these efforts. Second, we are requesting half the funds required to carry out a four-wave panel study to test messaging strategies (via survey experiments), with particular attention to how messages interact with political predispositions. We will use endowed chair funds to pay for the other half of the panel study. By interviewing the same respondents at different points in time, these surveys will be particularly well suited to respond to developments caused by the 2020 presidential election campaign. Finally, we are requesting resources to purchase access to Leadership Connect, a database that will facilitate research on state bureaucracy vacancies (an important contextual factor).

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Budget:

EHRA Salary	\$0
SHRA Salary	\$0
Grad Student	\$30,440
Temps	\$0
Fringe Pool	\$14,010.96
Non-Personnel Expenses	\$28,500
Total	\$72,950.96

