

To Mask or Not to Mask? Public Opinion Factors in Mask-Wearing Behavior in a Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Despite confusion early in the pandemic (Asmelash 2020), science agrees that wearing face masks limits the transmission of COVID-19 in the population (Feng, Shen, Xia, Song et al. 2020); Howard 2020; Howard 2021a; Howard, Huang, Li, Tufekci et al. 2021). The public health benefits of wearing a mask did not seem to ensure that mask-wearing would not become a political issue. In the United States, Republicans were hesitant to wear face masks (Bender 2020; McKelvery 2020; Greene, Hetherington, Maxwell, and Ryan 2022). A number of observers noted that leaders and adherents of right-of-center parties in other countries (such as Great Britain and Spain) also eschewed masks (Keeley 2020; Walsh 2020). In several examinations, it is not clear if partisanship hinders the wearing of masks *per se* or the mandating of the wearing masks. In the British and Spanish cases, it is likely the punitive nature of the mask mandates. Of course, if masks benefit public health, how does a government advance public health but by mandating masks?

HYPOTHESES

There are two primary hypotheses to explain mask-wearing patterns in the United States. The first is partisanship (Adolph, Amano, Bang-Jensen, Fullman, et al 2021; Kahane 2021; Milosh, Painter, Sonin, Van Dijcke, and Wright 2021). Again, it is not clear if Republicans oppose wearing masks or oppose forcing people to wear masks. It was clear for former President Trump, as reported by Bender (2020): "Mr. Trump said testing for Covid-19 was overrated and allowed for the possibility that some Americans wore facial coverings not as a preventive measure but *as a way to signal disapproval of him.*" We would expect to see that people who identify as a Republicans would be less likely to wear masks. It may be possible that party matters less than ideology: conservatives don't like masks while liberals are less likely to find masks challenging.

Party identification is the best predictor of mask-wearing behavior of WTAMU students surveyed in 2020 and 2021.

Additional analysis, and even more contemplation, is needed.

The QR code links to the full paper at the WTAMU DSpace Repository maintained by the Cornette Library.

The paper originally was presented at the 2022 annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in San Antonio in January 2022.

Citations appear in full with the original paper held by the repository.



HYPOTHESES (cont.)

The second hypothesis posits that people wear masks for demographic reasons (see Cunningham and Nite 2021). We learned early in the pandemic that older Americans were more susceptible to COVID and also more likely to die from its effects. Age could be a predictor of mask wearing. Gender may play a role (Vershbow 2020; Howard 2021b). There also may be an interaction effect of age and gender.

METHODS

Using data collected from two annual surveys of students at West Texas A&M University, a public regional university in the American Southwest, this paper assesses both hypotheses. The online survey collected data from students attending class on the campus in a recognized conservative area of the country as well as online students who could be located anywhere in the country. The use of data collected from two surveys, one administered in the Fall 2020 semester and the second administered in the Fall 2021 semester, helps control for the effects of the pandemic as well as the larger political environment. It must be noted that the surveys were primarily designed to gauge students' ideology and level of political participation. The mask wearing question was included in the 2020 survey because it would provide some interesting data on current events (see Keenan 2020). The question was repeated on the October 2021 survey because of continuing interest in the political effects of the ongoing pandemic.

The October 2020 survey link was emailed to 10,037 students. The survey was answered by 841 students. The October 2021 survey link was emailed to 9,548 students. That survey was answered by 780 students. While it is not optimal, some completed questionnaires are deleted based on responses to particular questions.

RESULTS

The best determinants of regular mask wearing in 2020 was Republican party identification. The model appears underspecified, however, with a Nagelkerke R-squared of 0.278. There are more explanatory variables present in the sample drawn in 2021. While Republican identifiers are less likely to wear masks, older respondents taking more online courses are more likely to wear masks. The Nagelkerke R-square is .290.

DISCUSSION

Party identification is the best predictor of mask-wearing behavior if students at West Texas A&M University are any indication. The paper examines only a small portion of the available data. Additional analysis is needed.