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# Political beliefs affect compliance with COVID-19 social distancing orders

Marcus Painter, Tian Qiu 11 May 2020

*Social distancing is vital to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus. Leveraging smartphone geolocation data, this column examines how political beliefs impact the effectiveness of state-level social distancing orders in the US. The findings suggest that Republicans and misaligned Democrats are less likely to adhere to social distancing orders. Bipartisan support for social distancing measures thus appears to be a key factor in how quickly we can mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus.*

38

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With few treatment options and no vaccine yet, the current fight against the novel coronavirus focuses on slowing its spread. One of the most effective ways to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is to practice social distancing (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro 2020). Early evidence from China shows that lockdowns substantially slowed the spread of the virus in Wuhan (Kraemer et al. 2020) and a study of the 1918 US flu pandemic suggests that social distancing does not have an adverse effect on the economy (Correia et al. 2020).

Leveraging cross-county data, Chudik et al. (2020) show that voluntary social distancing is less effective than government-sanctioned policy. Given the importance of social distancing, governments across the world have implemented various stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders.

## The political limitations of social distancing measures

These government-mandated social distancing orders are only effective if citizens comply with them. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic – as with many other topics – has become a partisan issue in the US, making political beliefs a potential factor affecting social distancing compliance.<sup>1</sup> For example, a Pew Research survey conducted in March 2020 found that 83% of Republicans agree that President Trump is “doing an excellent/good job responding to the coronavirus outbreak”, whereas only 18% of Democrats agree (Funk 2020).

This part of the press has accused Trump of initially downplaying the severity of the virus, suggesting that Republicans may not take social distancing orders seriously. This media evidence extends to observed behaviour regarding whether people adhere to social distancing orders in a partisan manner? Smartphone location data from

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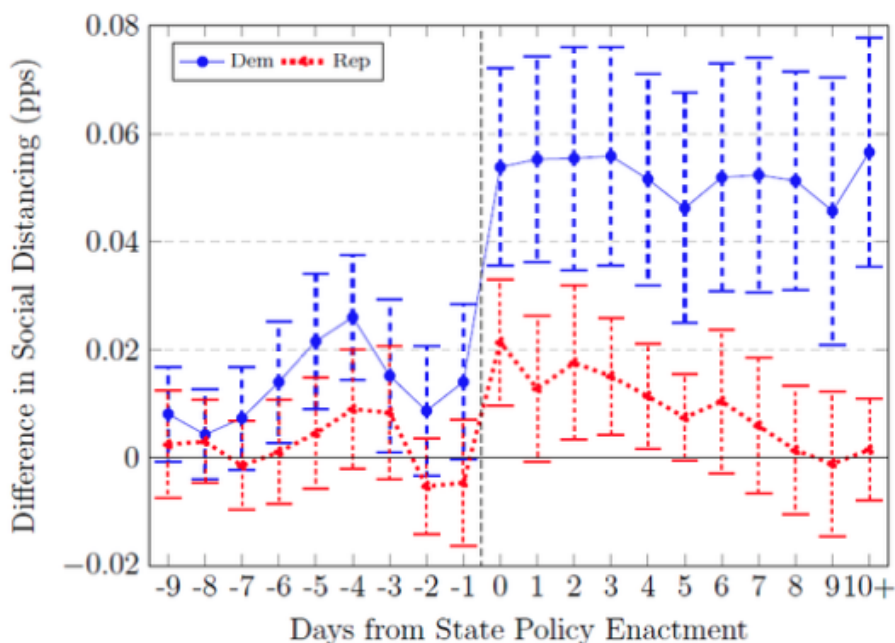
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SafeGraph allows us to study this question by analysing how the daily percentage of people who stay completely at home in Republican- and Democratic-leaning counties changes in response to state-level social distancing orders (Painter and Qiu 2020).

Figure 1 shows there is indeed a partisan divide in compliance with social distancing orders. Democrats increase their social distancing by over 5 percentage points more in counties with a state order compared to in counties without. In contrast, Republican counties with a state order increase their social distancing by only about 2 percentage points more than similar counties without an order, an effect that attenuates to zero nine days after the order is implemented.

**Figure 1** Partisan differences in social distancing



Source: SafeGraph and *The New York Times*.

This stark contrast in response to social distancing orders holds up to a battery of robustness checks (including adjustments for timing, population density, local COVID-19 cases and deaths, and more). All point to the same conclusion: political beliefs affect adherence to social distancing orders.

## Partisan differences in adapting to life at home

Practising social distancing requires a drastic change to our day-to-day behaviour.<sup>2</sup> One effective way to comply with social distancing orders is to switch consumption primarily towards e-commerce. It follows then that areas that shift their consumption towards things like online retail (e.g. Amazon) and grocery delivery services (e.g. Instacart) are making a stronger effort to comply with social distancing orders.

Using debit card transaction data from Facteus, we can see how consumption towards e-commerce changes in Republican versus Democratic areas. Figure 2 shows the evidence. Consistent with what we observe in the smartphone data results, Democrats shift their consumption towards e-commerce after a state policy is implemented whereas Republicans show no significant change in purchasing behaviour. Not only are Democrats complying more with social distancing measures now, but they are adjusting their spending behaviour so they can continue to socially distance going forward.

**Figure 2** E-commerce consumption

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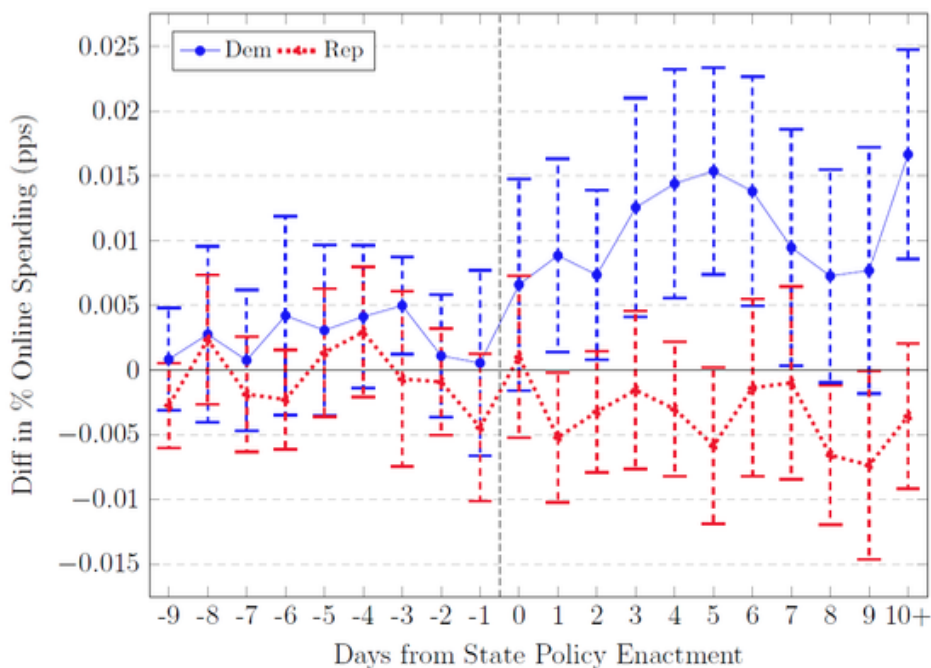
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Source: Facteus and *The New York Times*.

### Political misalignment affects social distancing compliance

At least two non-mutually exclusive channels could be driving the partisan differences in social distancing. Are Democrats more informed about the potential dangers of the coronavirus or do they simply find the government orders more credible? If the credibility channel is a driving factor, we would likely see Democrats complying more with state orders made by Democratic governors than with Republican governors.

We can analyse this conjecture in the smartphone-location data by comparing social distancing changes in ‘aligned’ Democratic counties (those with orders given by Democratic governors) and ‘misaligned’ counties (orders given by Republican governors).

Figure 3 shows that political alignment influences the response of Democrats to social distancing orders. Specifically, Democrats in aligned counties increase social distancing by 8–10 percentage points more after a state policy is implemented, whereas Democrats in misaligned counties increase social distancing by 4 percentage points.

Interestingly, we find no difference in behaviour when studying misaligned and aligned Republican counties, which would be consistent with the idea that Republicans primarily follow the advice of President Trump over any state officials. These results suggest the perceived credibility of the public official issuing a social distancing order is an important influence in that order’s effectiveness.

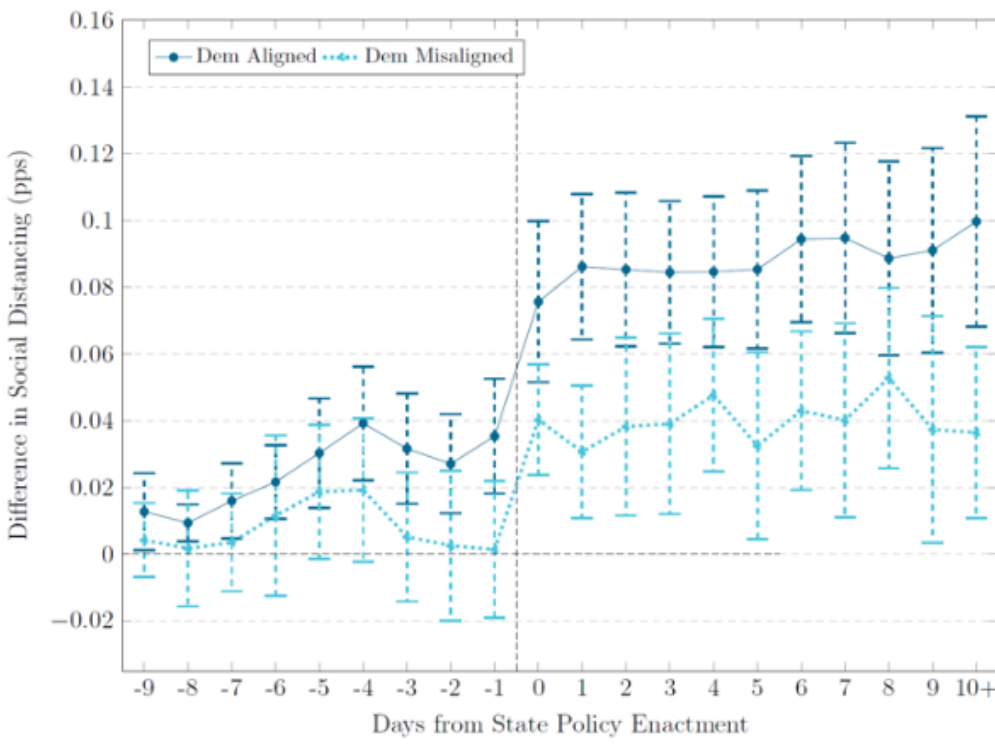
**Figure 3** Political misalignment and social distancing

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Source: SafeGraph and The New York Times.

### Conclusion

We are still in the early phases of the coronavirus pandemic and could see a resurgence in its spread in the fall (Reuters 2020), which means we need to learn how to maximise the effectiveness of social distancing measures today. Taken together, our results suggest that political polarisation is a major roadblock on the path to full compliance with social distancing measures.

Although our research focuses on the US, the current level of polarisation in America is similar to many developed countries including Australia, Britain, Canada, and Sweden (Boxell et al. 2020). Our results therefore have implications for many countries around the world. Republicans and misaligned Democrats are less likely to adhere to social distancing orders, suggesting that bipartisan support for social distancing measures is a key factor in how quickly we can mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Authors' note: Data provided by SafeGraph and Facteus.

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## Endnotes

1 There are several other factors that could affect compliance. For instance, using data from Italy, Durante et al. (2020) show that areas with higher level of civic capital comply more.

2 Focusing on the residents from Britain, Chronopoulos et al. (2020) find significant changes in consumer spending during the COVID-19 crisis.

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