

Who can convince Americans to follow the science on coronavirus? Religious leaders.

They can get people to look beyond partisanship.

By **Bryan Schonfeld** and **Sam Winter-Levy**

May 8, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. CDT

Like so much else in U.S. politics, the response to the coronavirus has broken down along partisan lines. As news of the coronavirus outbreak spread, President Trump, several prominent Fox News hosts, and other conservative elites downplayed the risks, while the leading Democratic presidential candidates and their advisers expressed alarm. In several states, conservative protesters have urged governors to relax stay-at-home orders, while Democrats lead 16 of the 19 states (plus D.C.) that are keeping such orders in place.

Citizens seem to have followed these cues. Although majorities still support social distancing measures, Republicans have been less likely to believe that the virus would disrupt their lives or infect them or their loved ones. They have been far more likely than Democrats to trust Trump to handle the crisis, and far less likely to report washing their hands more often, avoiding gatherings, or self-isolating.

Those differences have shown up in other data as well. Smartphone location data have suggested that areas with more Republicans engage in less social distancing, even after controlling for other factors such as state-level policies, population density, and local coronavirus cases and deaths. In states that have issued stay-at-home orders, residents in Republican counties have been staying home less than those in Democratic counties.

These findings shouldn't be surprising. Political scientists have known for a long time that partisan cues have a huge influence on public opinion — especially when it comes to novel issues like the coronavirus pandemic. Once a threat has become politicized, voters often look to their preferred political party or leader for guidance.

As more people fall ill, the partisan gap has closed — but Republicans are still much less likely to support public health measures and more likely to approve of opening businesses. Drawing on original survey data, Shana Kushner Gadarian, Sara Wallace Goodman, and Thomas Pepinsky find that even with the coronavirus crisis, “[p]artisanship is a more consistent predictor of behaviors, attitudes, and preferences than anything else that we measure.” If it's to work effectively, they conclude, “public health messaging must deliberately transcend political cleavages.”

New research suggests one way to do this.

In a new paper, we argue that religious figures can transcend these political cleavages, and, perhaps counterintuitively,

encourage the public to accept scientific realities. We studied the influence of Pope Francis on the issue of climate change, another scientific issue that's especially polarized along partisan lines. Republicans are much less likely than Democrats to believe global warming is caused by human behavior or to support climate change mitigation policies.

In June 2015, Francis became the first pope to dedicate an encyclical to the environment. Encyclicals are rare letters, or teachings, distributed from the pope to the Roman Catholic Church's clergy and parishioners. This encyclical, titled "Laudato Si," or "Praised Be to You," declared that climate change "represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day." In this, Francis wrote, "There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced."

The encyclical had two primary goals. On the one hand, it sought to convince people of the scientific consensus on the reality of climate change. But it also sought to persuade Catholics to see protecting the environment as a religious and moral duty.

The encyclical succeeded on both these fronts. We analyzed data from a survey conducted on the same respondents before and after the encyclical's release. Compared with non-Catholics, American Catholics who regularly attended church became disproportionately more likely to express confidence in the scientific evidence for global warming and more convinced that climate change was a religious issue. Respondents who became more convinced of the science also became more likely to support political action to respond to climate change.

Of course, not all religious leaders have come out in favor of fighting climate change. But our findings suggest that religious leaders can influence public attitudes — even on highly polarized political issues.

So far, religious leaders are sending conflicting signals on the pandemic

These findings suggest that religious figures, when they choose, can help close partisan divides and reinforce scientific and public health messaging. During the pandemic, religious leaders could encourage followers to comply with social distancing to prevent the virus's spread and amplify public health messages about best practices.

So far, religious authorities' coronavirus messages have been mixed. The Roman Catholic Church suspended church services in Italy "in coordination with the measures launched by the Italian authorities." Pope Francis urged governments to put people ahead of the economy to prevent a "viral genocide," before praying to an empty St. Peter's Square in March. In Saudi Arabia, authorities closed the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina; in other Muslim-majority countries, religious leaders suspended Friday prayers. Across the world, synagogues have been closed; the "Torah obligation to protect the sanctity of life transcends all other considerations," Britain's chief rabbi reminded the country's Jews.

But other religious leaders have responded very differently. In ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel, where reporting

suggests the virus is spreading as much as four to eight times faster than elsewhere in the country, some religious leaders held large Passover gatherings, in violation of emergency coronavirus regulations. In the United Kingdom, some conservative Muslim scholars have rejected the closure of mosques, while in Florida and Louisiana, pastors have defied state orders and repeatedly held large church services. Churches in California, Kentucky, and Michigan have filed lawsuits against the governors of their states, claiming that the lockdown impinges on religious liberty.

Containing coronavirus will require collective, unified action. In a country as polarized as the United States, that seems unlikely. Given their potential influence, religious leaders may wish to choose their words carefully.

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