August | 2021

Understandings of State and Federal Pandemic Policies Among University Students in Tampa, Florida

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3

Introduction 7

Methods 7

Sample 8

Results 9

- Understanding of COVID-19 9
- Knowledge about COVID-19 14

Discussion 32

Conclusions and Recommendations 34

References 36

Executive Summary

1. **The issues:**

   This report evaluates the impact of COVID-19 pandemic policies on students (n=148) at the University of South Florida (USF) during the fall 2020 semester. We evaluated knowledge of COVID-19, its spread, and the precautions taken (or not taken) by university students. We also explored where participants accessed information on COVID-19 and the effects of the pandemic on their educations, jobs, and home lives. By analyzing responses by self-described political party affiliations of Republican and Democrat, this project offers a unique look at how political perspectives shaped students' understandings of the virus, as well as attitudes toward mandated precautions and protocols.

2. **Goals:**

   a. To document understandings of and behaviors in response to pandemic policies among USF students.

   b. To identify any specific student needs or challenges and communicate these to appropriate services/offices at USF.

   c. To recommend policies and programs that will address issues identified by the evaluation.

3. **Methods:**

   Data were collected using a 54-question interview guide. Interviews were conducted remotely by students enrolled in fall 2020 courses taught by Dr. Roberta Baer and Dr. Dillon Mahoney at USF. Previous reports on the impacts and understandings of pandemic policies in Tampa Bay (Mahoney et al. 2020; Harb et al. 2021; Ninesling et al. 2021) focused on how vulnerable communities, such as refugees, understand social distancing and public health recommendations, education and workplace disruptions, and other new policies and procedures. While vulnerable in their own way as a young population, the students who participated in our evaluation are a representative sample of mainstream US societal behavior against which the findings from more vulnerable populations such as refugees, as well other data on political perspectives on pandemic

policies can be compared. All questions were analyzed by political party, and some by census category and gender.

4. Key demographic characteristics:

The sample of 148 students contained slightly more Democrats (54%) than Republicans (46%). There were more women (60%) than men (38%; 2% identified as non-binary). The sample was 55% White. The 45% of the sample identifying as Minority is higher than in the general USF population. Most participants (93%) were between 18 and 25 years old.

5. Results/Conclusions

Knowledge about COVID-19:

Most students demonstrated epidemiologically sound knowledge of COVID-19 and pandemic guidelines. Republicans seemed less concerned about COVID and thought it had been blown out of proportion. Fear of politicized misinformation was a major challenge that affected these university students (and much of their behavior around pandemic policies could be interpreted as an attempt to confront and cast that fear aside, making for dangerous pandemic-era behavior). Most students are adept at seeking and finding information via the Internet and social media and reported actively seeking out multiple sources to compare information (97/148; 66%). There was, however, also a noticeable amount of conspiracy theory and misinformation verbalized by Republicans.

Precautions:

Throughout the pandemic, Florida university students have made headlines for neglecting to wear masks and ignoring social distancing guidelines and other precautions (Marcus 2020; Alexander 2021). When asked about what they knew about COVID, most (111; 75%) spoke about symptoms and the impacts of COVID, while only 18% (27) mentioned prevention (mainly masks, other precautions, and the possibility

of a vaccine). Overall, 41% (60) of students reported following pandemic social distancing guidelines, although not following guidelines was more common among the Republican students. As others found among university students (Cohen et al. 2020), few with symptoms reported getting tested or staying at home.

Financial/Employment Issues:

Students were generally food secure and nearly all had access to reliable internet and internet-ready devices for remote learning. However, 28% of students either lost their job or had someone in their family who did, with no significant difference by party. Further, 33% of students reported receiving financial assistance from family or a lender.

Education:

Students gave mixed responses to preferences around online and in-person classes. Although students were divided by learning styles, there was no party difference when asked which was easier or harder. However, when asked which they preferred in general, more Republicans (60%) mentioned in-person classes than Democrats (35%).

Testing and Vaccines:

The evaluation found levels of hesitancy to testing and a possible vaccine. Central to the hesitancy was a lack of trust in the media, in politicians, and in doctors and public health professionals. Many discussions of a possible vaccine showed the influence of 2020 election politics in their decision-making.

6. Recommendations:

A. University:

Our findings indicate that students make health decisions based upon political bias rather than by following university guidance or that of medical professionals. With Florida at the center of national politics, political divisions in the state have not dissipated, and we feel our fall 2020 findings are indicative of the continued impact of

partisan political messaging and social media-based misinformation on students' understandings of and decision making around the pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative that the university *not* allow the public health of the university to be based on the personal responsibility of individual students. For fall 2021, the university must mandate protocols and procedures similar or more restrictive than those in place in fall 2020. These include daily check-ins and temperature checks, on-campus mask mandates, mandated social distancing, and remote learning. Long-term the university needs to help students learn how to evaluate and find reliable information, particularly in the health realm.

B. Health Educators and Providers:

Our findings show that misinformation and conspiracy theories abound among our students, particularly, though not exclusively, among self-described Republicans. It is important that this issue is not addressed in a partisan manner, nor repeats conspiracy theories, even as it may try to disprove them. Rather, medical providers and health professionals must re-develop trust with students by framing pandemic information in practical ways. For example, protocols and procedures must be amenable to the diverse lifestyles of students and be customized for a working and highly stressed (and often medically vulnerable) population.

C. City and County:

County mandates early in the pandemic were successful in containing coronavirus spread. Students need continued support from the city of Tampa with respect to affordable housing and an increase in the minimum wage. To protect affordability of housing, livable income, and safe communities, the following policies are recommended: freeze in rent increases, action against predatory housing investors and loan companies, review of policing in minority neighborhoods, increased minimum wage, and mandates for sick leave/health insurance benefits within "informal employment" and low-wage jobs. Efforts must be made to reinstate mask and other social distancing mandates to address the current threat posed by the delta variant. Actions of, and illness among USF students will affect all country residents.

Introduction

This report discusses the impact of COVID-19 pandemic policies on students (n=148) at the University of South Florida (USF) during the fall 2020 semester. We evaluated knowledge of COVID-19, its spread, and the precautions taken (or not taken) by USF undergraduates. We also explored where participants accessed information on COVID-19, and some of the effects of the pandemic on their educations, jobs, and home lives. As the sample design was for equal numbers of Democratic and Republican students, this project offers the unique perspective of the impact and influence of different political party affiliations on American college students' perceptions and understandings of COVID-19.

Specific goals of the project were:

a. To document understandings of and behaviors in response to pandemic policies among USF students.

b. To identify any specific student needs or challenges and communicate these to appropriate services/offices at USF.

c. To recommend policies and programs that will address issues identified during the evaluation.

Methods

Data were collected during the Fall 2020 semester by students enrolled in Applied Anthropology, and Health, Illness, and Culture directed by Dr. Dillon Mahoney and Dr. Roberta Baer, respectively. Students conducted remote interviews with other college students enrolled at the University of South Florida. Sampling was by political party; each student conducted one interview with a Democrat and one interview with a Republican. Each interview consisted of a mixture of open-ended short response and multiple-choice questions that were shaped by previous experiences conducting similar projects with other populations in the same geographical area (Mahoney et al. 2020, Harb et al. 2021, Ninesling et al. 2021). The questions assessed knowledge about COVID-19, its spread, how the students follow policies and recommended health practices, where they were accessing information on COVID-19, the effects of the pandemic on their educations.

The data were collected in September and early October of 2020, before a COVID-19 vaccine was available. However, this was a hyper politicized period, as the 2020 election campaigning was in progress, and then President Trump was eager for an announcement of a COVID vaccine before the elections, leading many to feel that the vaccine was being politicized and rushed (Kertscher 2021). The data set included demographic information on age, gender, ethnicity, and political party. First year students were not included to ensure that all participants had experienced at least one year of college education. Our sample consisted of 148 interviews, which were entered into Qualtrics and analyzed by coding common themes in responses. Codes were agreed upon by multiple members of the team. Answers were categorized as epidemiologically correct/incorrect based on Johns Hopkins website data (Johns Hopkins Medicine n.d.).

Sample

The final sample of 148 was slightly skewed toward Democrats (54% to 46% Republicans) and women (60% to 38% men, and 2% non-binary). Minority (Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Mixed) participants made up a larger percentage of respondents than is representative of the general USF students; 45% identified as Minority and 55% identified as White. Ninety-three percent of participants were 18-25 years old. We did not find any other significant demographic differences between the Democratic and Republican samples.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the Sample

		Democrats	Republicans	Total (100%)
		80 (54%)	68 (46%)	148
Gender				
	Male	20 (36%)	36 (64%)	56 (38%)
	Female	57 (64%)	32 (36%)	89 (60%)
	Non-binary	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	3 (2%)
Age Group				
	18-20	39 (54%)	33 (46%)	72 (49%)
	21-25	34 (52%)	31 (48%)	65 (44%)
	26-30	6 (67%)	3 (3%)	9 (6%)
	40+	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2 (1%)
Census Category				
	White	36 (44%)	45 (56%)	81 (55%)
	Black/ African American	10 (77%)	3 (23%)	13 (9%)
	Hispanic/ Latinx	21 (75%)	7 (25%)	28 (19%)
	Asian	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	10 (7%)
	Mixed	8 (50%)	8 (50%)	16 (11%)
School Year				
	Sophomore	18 (47%)	20 (53%)	38 (26%)
	Junior	29 (64%)	16 (36%)	45 (30%)
	Senior	33 (51%)	32 (49%)	65 (44%)

Results

Understanding COVID-19

All but two answers to the questions of what the students called the “new illness” included some version of the official name "Covid" or "Coronavirus.” A Latinx female referred to it as "the killing virus" and a white male Republican referred to it as "human malware." Two students, both Republicans, also provided additional names: the “Kung Flu,” (white male Republican) and “the Chinese virus” (Black female Republican).

Most students expressed at least some concern about COVID-19 (78%), although Democrats were three times as likely to be very or extremely concerned (73%) compared

to Republicans (26%). While 31% of Republicans stated that were not concerned about the pandemic, only 3% of Democrats expressed a lack of concern.

Democrats tended to be concerned about the effects of the virus on others. Of the Democrats who answered the question, 48 (60%) mentioned people other themselves, including vulnerable populations and family members. Nine (11%) spoke about their own concerns, as they themselves were part of a vulnerable community, immunocompromised, or asthmatic. Six (8%) spoke specifically about the government failing to control the pandemic, while three mentioned concerns over the economy. None mentioned concerns about school or their educations. Only three (4%) Democrats were not very concerned.

In contrast, of the Republicans who answered the question, only 30 (44%) reported concern about others, including vulnerable populations, the elderly, and family members. Twenty-three (34%) Republicans said that Covid was either a hoax or that they were not concerned. Three (4%) Republicans said that the pandemic was politically motivated. One Republican, a 21-year-old female Latinx student, was concerned about others' disregard of the virus. Five (7%) expressed concerns about finances, jobs, or the economy, while two Republicans mentioned school/their education as a concern.

> **"I know it is controversial... but I think that this virus is a conspiracy. I think it's a hoax that it is something to get Trump out of office. If you think about it more people die from the flu than the "virus". The virus is not real, you know? There's something in the air but it's not serious. You only live once. You have to live life. You can't go out and be scared for the rest of your life. I'm not really concerned."**
>
> 20-male-R-White

> **"I'm not really concerned. Myself and my whole family already had it and were completely fine and asymptomatic the entire duration. I feel those who it affects, elderly and pre-existing health individuals, should be concerned, however. I am a healthy young female, so it didn't affect me."**
>
> 21-female-R-White

> **"The flu kills more people every year. It's very minor. I think it's just a big deal because of the election. I know it's real, but I feel like people just want to use it as leverage for the election. I think it's bullshit, personally. I feel like if you're so scared of it, you can just stay inside."**
>
> 19-male-R-White

"No, I am not concerned because of my age and physical health. When you look at the numbers, college age students aren't dying unless they have underlying health conditions."

25-male-R-White

"It has an effect on demographics… which I am not in."

19-female-R-Latinx

"I do not believe it's a hoax but I do believe it is overblown. I understand people are dying but a limited amount of people."

30-male-R-White

"Nope. Um I guess just like uh zero known infections in my community."

29-male-R-white

"Actually I'm not concerned, given the state data and death rate. We should def take precautions, but the media has definitely blown it out of proportion. Especially because this is an election year. Wear a mask around your grandparents and stuff, but this has been blown way out of proportion."

19-male-R-Latinx

Fears varied by political affiliation. While Republicans were more likely not to be concerned or to be concerned only for themselves or their families, Democrats were more likely to be concerned for others and concerned that others were not taking the pandemic seriously. Of the 80 Democrats who answered the question of what they were most afraid, many had difficultly saying only one thing. Their most common response was concern for others; 54 (68%) were primarily concerned about others/passing it to others (including family members and vulnerable populations). Two students spoke specifically about being asymptomatic:

"My biggest concern is becoming an asymptomatic carrier of the coronavirus and spreading it to my loved ones."

20-male-D-Black

Eleven Democrats (14%) said their biggest fears related to "the future," there being "no end in sight," or the "long-term impacts" of the pandemic. Thirteen Democrats (16%)

spoke specifically about getting sick themselves and their own personal health or lifestyle changes. Nine Democrats (11%) mentioned political or other cultural issues as being their primary concern:

> **"People are not treating it like an actual illness."**
>
> 19-female-D-White

> **"I am worried that people will be making foolish decisions due to the ones in charge doing the bare minimum, making them feel like they don't have to do all the steps."**
>
> 22-female-D-White

But in general, students had many fears:

> **"I'm worried about catching it myself and spreading it to my family members because I live at home with them. Then my friends, and other people around me. I would feel really guilty if I spread it to someone else. I'm worried about the way America is handling it. It is as if Americans think there's no deadly disease present or something. And I'm worried about school because it's harder to feel more productive at home, and as an architecture student, not being able to access some of the essential resources at school makes it more difficult to complete assignments for my classes. Students seem to not be treating COVID seriously, and they're endangering others by not doing so."**
>
> 21-male-D-Asian

While this student expressed concern about his education, only three (4%) mentioned school or online classes as a primary concern. Similarly, only three Democrats (4%) mentioned the economy or the impact on their jobs. The one Democrat to not express concern said:

> **"I'm not too concerned since cases are going down. My biggest worry is vaccines not being available for a long time and anti-vaxxers."**
>
> 20-female-D-Asian

Only one other Democrat mentioned the lack of a vaccine as their primary concern.

Many Republicans' fears were for other people (35, 51%), including three (4%) who mentioned the fact that they might be asymptomatic and pass it on to others who are more vulnerable.

> **"I wouldn't say I'm worried for myself, but I don't want to be asymptomatic and unknowingly pass it on to somebody who is high-risk."**
>
> 21-male-R-White

But thirteen Republicans (19%) spoke of being primarily concerned about getting sick themselves, or having their lives disrupted. Only one Republican had no concerns. Six Republicans (9%) were primarily concerned that things would not go back to being the same. Some Republicans did express concern about the vaccine:

> **"I am concerned about the time it takes to find a vaccine. My hope is that it's in the next six months. If it's too long that would be my biggest worry."**
>
> 21-male-R-Latinx

Eight Republicans (12%) were primarily concerned with the political nature of the pandemic, and several spoke at length about this:

> **"I guess people in power using this for their own personal gain and restricting everything, where there are clearly solutions put in place. At least like, possible solutions. There are disagreements in medicine all the time, but for example, when they're talking about Hydroxy – chloride… or whatever it is… and it worked, and all these people discredited it. No one ever dismisses medical opinions, but now since it goes against the narrative, and they're giving this one person no chance whatsoever. That's just one example. There's like, plenty of opportunities to get past the pandemic, but you don't really hear about it because it sort of goes against what people in power would want to use it for."**
>
> 19-male-R-Latinx

> **"I am most worried about mandatory shutdowns from the government and the economy going to crap--which it isn't right now."**
>
> 25-male-R-White

> **"The unnecessary and draconian power trip exercised by the government, both on state and local levels, throughout the pandemic concerns me the most.**

All too many governors have been openly discriminating against the congregation of certain groups of people (i.e. religious organizations) while remaining silent on, or even in explicit support of, other groups of people (i.e. rioters and protestors). They imposed lockdowns and extensive restrictions of overall movement, forcing numerous people out of business—many of which are small businesses—and driving up the number of deaths from suicide and drug abuse due to isolation. A whole year and students will fall behind in education as a result of these unnecessary restrictions in school re-openings and far too many people are struggling to continue to place food on their table because certain states refuse to reopen. It is undoubtedly a political tool of the opposing party to overturn the incumbent's chances of winning the upcoming election by stirring up turmoil and discontent within the working-class people of America, and it's deeply disturbing that the suffering of families is being exploited for a power grab."

19-female-R-Asian

Eight Republicans (12%) mentioned school as their primary concern (far more than Democrats):

"I don't like online classes, they're really hard and annoying. I wished I could take more physical classes right now."

20-male-R-White

Fifteen Republicans (22%) mentioned the economy or jobs as a primary concern:

"I'm worried about getting the virus from attending school in the fall. The university does not properly check the survey and doesn't clean places immediately after it has been used."

21-female-R-Asian

Knowledge about COVID-19

Most (129; 87%) students gave information about COVID-19 that was epidemiologically correct, while 12% (18) either gave information that was epidemiologically incorrect, or simply said they knew nothing about COVID. Most (111; 75%) spoke about symptoms and the impacts of COVID, while only 18% (27) mentioned prevention (mainly masks, other precautions, and the possibility of a vaccine). Only a small number (16; 11%) of students spoke about politics or mismanagement of the pandemic, although 20% (30) of all students mentioned China in their answers.

Of the 80 Democrats, 75 (94%) gave epidemiologically correct information about the pandemic, and no one gave incorrect information (although 5, 6%, said they knew nothing about COVID). Sixty-nine (86%) Democrats gave responses that mentioned the impacts or symptoms of COVID, while 16 (20%) mentioned modes of prevention. Of these 16, eight mentioned vaccines and five mentioned wearing masks (those were the only to mention those modes of prevention).

Fifteen (19%) Democrats mentioned COVID-19 came from China, and nine (11%) Democrats felt the pandemic was not being handled well or had been politicized.

> **"It's being poorly handled by the government and is out of control."**
>
> 21-female-D-White

Most of the Republicans (54; 79%) gave epidemiologically correct information. Nine (13%), however, stated things that were epidemiologically incorrect.

> **"As a whole, the whole deal with the issue is, if you're asymptomatic, you don't really spread it. The way it's described, it's just like… it just seems "okay, make sure you don't drink out of the same cup as your friend" or something like that."**
>
> 19-male-R-Latinx

> **"It's a strain of the cold, a mutated version of the common cold."**
>
> 20-male-R-White

Another four (6%) Republicans did not know anything about COVID.

Most (41;60%) Republicans focused on symptoms of COVID or overall impacts of the pandemic in their answers. Ten (15%) Republicans spoke specifically about prevention and prevention techniques in their answers, four of whom mentioned masks, and two of whom mentioned a possible vaccine. Seven Republicans (10%) spoke of COVID being politicized, based on misinformation, or it being a hoax.

> **"I know it has caused a global pandemic and could have been tackled way sooner with a national quarantine and regulations set forth."**
>
> 19-female-R-Latinx

"I know that it's overhyped, and the CDC doesn't really know what's happening, and neither do a lot of Americans."

21-male-R-White

While 15 (19%) of Democrats mentioned China in their answers, 15 (22%) Republicans also mentioned China. The Republican answers, however, tended to focus more on conspiracy theories related to China:

"The Chinese sent it over here and now everyone is losing their shit."

19-male-R-White

"I know that it did originate in a biolab. I know that China covered up a bunch of information about it and hoarded PPE before they released information about it to other countries. I know that it's been heavily politicized across the world, and that there's been a lot of suspect information coming from professionals and experts in the relevant fields."

29-male-R-White

When specifically asked what caused COVID-19, 80% (118) of all students answered with epidemiologically correct information while 7% (10) gave incorrect information. Of the 80 Democrats, 66 (83%) gave epidemiologically correct answers. Many Democrats focused on the irresponsibility of others being a primary cause:

"It's caused by people not washing properly, people not being cautious, people's ignoring science, people not caring about other people."

21-female-D-Latinx

Eight Democrats (10%) said that they did not know what caused the pandemic, and 11 (14%) were not sure or still had questions:

"I don't know the exact origin of it. It's a viral infection, not a bacterial. I understand sanitizing your hands. But I thought sanitizer was to combat bacteria not viral things?"

22-female-D-Black

"I don't know exactly. But I know there is a lot of controversy. I know the real problem that's causing the pandemic is globalization and population movement."

19-female-D-White

"Um. Well, I think it like mutated from an animal. That's just what I've heard. Then there's other things they're saying that's not true. So I'm not exactly sure."

19-female-D-White

In relation to causes of the pandemic, there was also some discussion of China, bats, and conspiracy theories among Democrats. Six (8%) Democrats mentioned China in their answers, and additional six (8%) mentioned bats:

"Causes? Like the start of it? I don't really think I know the actual cause. The bat soup? I don't think that was real, but I genuinely think it is man-made."

21-female-D-White

Of the 68 Republicans, 53 (78%) gave epidemiologically correct information, while eight (12%) offered incorrect information. Four Republicans (6%) did not know what caused COVID, and another six (9%) expressed a lack of certainty:

"I still don't understand what started the spread, you know, since media and others over-exaggerate things. But I do know that it spreads from person to person."

19-female-R-White

"I don't think anything causes it. It just happens, like nothing causes the flu, you just catch it."

19-male-R-White

Conspiracy theories were common in Republican responses:

"I think it was being studied and got out, but it's the natural circle of things."

21-male-R-White

"Covid was bio-engineered and transmitted through the consumption of a bat. The virus later spread through contact."

20-female-R-White

"What caused it? If we're gonna get technical, someone in a Chinese lab created a bioweapon and I think injected the bats and sold the bats and it became a virus through the wet markets and through the selling and production of it."

22-female-R-White

One quarter (17; 25%) of Republicans mentioned China in their answers, and 24% (16) also independently mentioned "bats" in their answers (24% of Republicans mentioned bats compared to 8% of Democrats):

"It's China's fault."

20-male-R-Latinx

"The Chinese people ate the bats and gave it to people and caused it to spread."

20-male-R-White

"Somebody ate bat soup in China. That's what I heard anyway."

20-male-R-White

"It's caused by the negligence of the WHO and China because the evidence they had and the doctors were suppressed. This slowed the response of the world. A study was done saying the WHO should have been more adamant that China release information."

25-male-R-White

There were few differences by political party when asked to name symptoms, and all participants named some correct symptoms. But only five Democrats and three Republicans (5% of the total sample) mentioned that COVID is often asymptomatic for college-aged people. The most common response regarding treatments for COVID was that there were no current treatments available (64;43%). 93% (138) of respondents stated some people were more likely to get COVID, with no differences by political party.

When asked to specify those most susceptible to COVID, 82% (121) indicated the elderly, minorities, frontline workers, those who are immunocompromised, or people with preexisting conditions. Of interest, 15% (13) of Democrats and 13% (9) Republicans mentioned either "irresponsible people" or "those who do not follow the rules" as those most likely to get it. 18% of all respondents gave an epidemiologically incorrect answer about those most susceptible, commonly, "young people."

Democrats were more likely to wear masks always or most of the time, while a fifth of Republicans only wore a mask some of the time.

Table 2: Do you wear a mask?

	Democrats	**Republicans**	**Total**
Always or Most of the Time	79 (99%)	53 (78%)	142 (89%)
Sometimes	1 (1%)	15 (22%)	16 (11%)
	80 (100%)	68 (100%)	148 (100%)

Table 3: When/Where do you wear a mask?

	Democrats	**Republicans**	**Total**
Generally follows rules	72 (99%)	57 (89%)	129 (94%)
Difficulty or sometimes follow rules	1 (1%)	5 (8%)	6 (4%)
Flouted/could not follow rules	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	2 (1%)
Wore only because of mandates	3 (5%)	21 (29%)	24 (18%)
Total Respondents:	80 (100%)	68 (100%)	148 (100%)

Twenty-one (31%) Republicans stated that they usually wore a mask wherever they were required to, or in some cases, responses focused on the negative social repercussions of not wearing a mask. This compared to only three Democrats (4%) who answered by speaking about being mandated to wear a mask.

> **"I wear a mask in the places that require me to wear a mask because they yell at you if you don't."**
>
> 20-male-R-White

Only two Republicans openly spoke about flouting the rules or refusing to wear a mask:

"I do not like to wear it because I feel it violates individual rights. I wear it only in public spaces that require it."

19-female-R-White

"When I hang out with friends I don't [wear a mask] because I trust my friends, and we're young. So, I'm sure we'll be fine."

20-male-R-White

While only 5% (4) of Democrats wore masks only if they were mandated, the figure for Republicans was 29% (20).

Most (71;89%) Democrats said they were always able to follow mask rules. Seven (9%) gave questionable responses to when they could not, such as when at friends' houses, or when no one else is close. Only one Democrat said she often did not follow suggested masking rules:

"Living in a sorority house, they do not wear their masks. It is too difficult to control that many individuals."

19-female-D-White

Seven (11%) Republicans who answered the question gave questionable answers for when and why they did not follow mask rules, and 6% (4) said they simply did not follow the rules.

"I wear it about half the time I am supposed to."

24-male-R-White

Two Republican females (3%) complained of their masks being uncomfortable. As one said:

"Sometimes I don't because I'll forget to bring one somewhere."

20-female-R-White

Outright refusal to wears a mask was 6% among Republicans, versus 1% among Democrats.

"I don't like to wear it because it violates my individual rights."

19-female-R-White

"I refuse to wear my mask when I am outside."

20-female-R-White

"I wear it when I go into public places. Masks make sense, and my mask is really cool anyways."

24-male-R-White

Similar patterns were seen in responses about following other pandemic guidelines. Most Democrats (64; 80%) said they never broke the rules or had epidemiologically reasonable answers for what they would do if they could not follow the rules. Nine (11%) had borderline answers, saying they had sometimes become lax about following the rules, especially with close friends:

"I usually don't follow the rules when I'm at my friend's house. I usually feel pretty safe."

25-male-D

Seven (9%) Democrats reported "blowing off" the rules at certain times:

"Since being back at USF, I have loosened up on following rules to social distance when I am with my friends and have started eating at public restaurants."

20-female-D

Half of Republicans (32; 51%) reported that they always followed the rules about masking. Nineteen (30%) Republicans gave borderline reasons, mostly having to do with discomfort of the mask, being with friends, or eating out. Three (4%) reported regularly pulling their masks down under their noses, while six (9%) said they regularly pull their t-shirts over their noses rather than wearing masks. No Democrats gave any answers of this type.

"I try, but if I can't force others to, then I let them be. It's their health."

25-male-R

Twelve (19%) Republicans reported completely "blowing off" other "rules" at times, saying they simply do not follow them.

"The Florida Department of Health advises that we social distance within the house, like maybe separate rooms, but I didn't really do that. I didn't want to do that."

21-male-R

"I sometimes don't follow the rules in my hometown of Palm City because they don't follow the rules there."

21-female-R

"I just suck it up. If I get it, I get it."

20-male-R

"I just keep doing what I'm doing. It's really not that serious."

19-male-R

An important issue for the students was seeing friends. But even when asked when they did not follow guidelines, 41% (60) reported always following pandemic guidelines, although not following guidelines was more common among the Republican students:

Table 4: What are you doing about seeing your friends? Are you still seeing them?

	Democrats	**Republicans**	**Total**
Following guidelines	41 (30%)	19 (28%)	60 (41%)
Somewhat following	27 (35%)	26 (38%)	53 (36%)
Not following	12 (15%)	23 (34%)	35 (24%)
	80 (100%)	68 (100%)	144 (100%)

"I mostly just text them or call them. I've only seen my family so far."

19-female-R

"My classmates and I are doing weekly- biweekly girls' nights to get together and work on upcoming assignments"

21-female-D

"Hahaha I facetime them that's about it, I live with my boyfriend and I see him every day, A lot of my friends are in frats or sororities and I just can't trust them"

22-female-R

We asked how the students could tell which information about COVID is true and which is not. Most (62; 78%) Democrats said that they knew how to find verified information. However, many (29; 36%) expressed skepticism or difficulty finding trusted information. Twelve (15%) said either, "I don't know," or "You can't."

In contrast, only 38 Republicans (56%) said they knew how to find trusted information, while 59% (40) expressed skepticism or difficulty identifying information they could trust. Eighteen (26%) Republicans said either that they did not know or that you cannot know what is true and what is not. Seven (10%) Republicans explicitly mentioned politics or political agendas when discussing their answers while 5 (6%) Democrats mentioned politics.

"I trust pretty much nothing on Facebook or anything that's a .com or .net website. Pretty much nothing without an official government domain or trusted news source."

25-male-D

"Honestly, I usually don't know what to believe. As with a lot of other things, there is so much fake stuff out there, and it's hard to verify things are correct and true. There are lots of biases in the medial nowadays, too, and Covid has been highly politicized, so it's really hard for me to find news and info I trust about it."

26-female-D

"I think that we are at point in which information about COVID-19 is still being discovered so no one truly knows anything beside the basic facts we have been given. For example, CDC is always changing guidelines in-regards to COVID-19."

20-male-D

"If it's coming from the President [Trump], it's probably fake."

21-female-D

"I really trust Fox News and the government. I have been watching Fox News since I was little with my parents. They know what they're doing because they have experts covering this topic. It should be fine now because they're opening stores back up again."

20-male-R

"I guess there's really no way to tell because they are not scientists who have been studying it. But I try to use my best judgement when I'm looking at sources. Like, if it's just someone saying something about it online whose whoever, I would not believe that necessarily. I would take that with a grain of salt. But news programs I tend to believe, especially if like they present the same information for like a long period of time."

20-female-R

"It's hard to decipher; what you see the most is true maybe? Really no way to tell depending on where you get your information. The CDC is probably more trustworthy than Facebook."

20-male-R

"It's all bullshit and skewed, on both sides. It's definitely real but not as terrible as it's made out to be. People usually recover well. It's being used for political agendas for both sides.

19-female-R

"I immediately ignore any information presented by the mainstream media, CNN, MSNBC, The Washington Post, New York Times, Vox, etc."

19-female-R

"You can't tell what's true. You just kinda gotta use personal judgement for some info. Like I'll see something on Twitter and then see it talked about on Fox or something, and I'll assume the information is pretty credible.

19-male-R

"The President [Trump] is well informed. I trust our leaders and the university."

25-female-R

Democrats were more likely to have epidemiologically reasonable answers to why or not they would get tested.

Table 5: Would you get tested if you thought you had COVID-19?

	Democrats	Republicans	Total
Epidemiologically Reasonable	68 (91%)	54 (82%)	122 (87%)
Epidemiologically Questionable	7 (9%)	12 (18%)	19 (93%)
	75 (100%)	66 (100%)	141 (100%)

"If I could...I should I think my fear right now with the testing sites is that you go there and don't know who has it. You go there to get tested but you don't get the results back for maybe, a week.. I heard about in Florida that they had results they didn't report until months after these people got tested. I don't trust them to get that information out in time. For it to be effective it has to be in like two days. You can get infected within that week time span and then receive a negative test."

23-male-D

"As of right now no [laughs]. Part of the reason I say that is because I don't know how bad it is, but I've seen the test where it goes back into your sinuses. I saw the picture for it, and it's just like, no."

20-male-D

For those Republicans who had epidemiologically questionable answers, expense was one concern, even though the tests were offered free on campus:

"I can't afford $100 testing. I know a friend that had to pay that much to get tested. That's a waste of money."

20-male-R

"If I was at the hospital then 'sure, why not' since I'm already here. But would I drive out of my way to get tested? Absolutely not. You are likely to get sick when around other sick people so it seems redundant to drive to get tested."

25-male-R

Others were worried about false negatives:

"False negatives and false positives. I've seen articles about bad labs. It might not benefit me to get a test if I can just stick it out at home."

23-female-R

The pain of getting tested also was an issue for some:

"I have no confidence in the numbers and misinformation being spread. I would be willing to test for the antibody to see if my assertion was correct."

40-female-R

"The reason I wouldn't get it is the nose swab is extremely uncomfortable, and just being that close to so many people waiting to get tested would gross me out. There's also long wait times, which is really annoying."

24-female-R

But like Democrats, the majority of Republicans said they would not mind getting tested, and several said they had been tested before and would not mind being tested again.

"It's important to know so you do not infect others."

21-male-R

Nearly all (98%) respondents gave epidemiologically reasonable answers for what they would do if they tested positive. These focused primarily on quarantining, treating their symptoms, seeking medical help, and informing others. Twenty-one people (14%) would inform others (mostly roommates, friends, and family), but only one said they would inform USF. One other said they would "tell everyone."

A few epidemiologically questionable responses from Republicans included:

"Pretty much the same thing I would do if I got any symptoms"

24-female-R

"I would still go about my day,"

19-male-R

"I would take the test again"

19-male-R

Sixteen (24%) Republicans said they would inform someone immediately, although as with Democrats, their responses focused on family and friends. Three (4%) said they would "inform/tell everyone." A 21-year-old female Republican was the only respondent to

say she would inform her professors, and an 18-year-old female Republicans said she would tell the RA in her dorm.

> **"Since I moved back home because of the pandemic, I now live with my elderly grandparents, parents and siblings, so it would be difficult to quarantine away from them. What I would do is wear my mask in my house and stay sectioned off in one area of my house."**
>
> 20-male-D
>
> **"I'd probably tell people if they wanted to hang out. I think I would ultimately tell people. I would keep track of how I'm doing, like any symptoms I have. Hopefully sleep through it [laughs]."**
>
> 20-male-D
>
> **"I would have to go isolate somewhere on or off campus because my boyfriend has asthma and stay away from the people I care about."**
>
> 20-female-D
>
> **"I would go on with my life for the most part. Because people say I should quarantine, I would try to". "Unless it's really bad and I can't function, I would take myself to the hospital and maybe call a family member like my mom for advice. But I think I would be fine."**
>
> 20-male-R

While no COVID vaccine was approved at the time of the study, we found only slightly more vaccine hesitancy among Republicans than among Democrats.

Table 6: Would you get the vaccine if it were available?

	Democrats	**Republicans**	**Total**
Yes	49 (61%)	38 (56%)	87 (59%)
No	12 (15%)	16 (24%)	28 (19%)
Maybe	19 (24%)	14 (21%)	33 (22%)
	80 (100%)	68 (100%)	148 (100%)

A majority (87;59%) of students indicated that they would probably or definitely get a vaccine if one became available. Less than one quarter (33;22%) expressed some hesitancy about a vaccine, while 19% (28) stated they would probably or definitely not get

vaccinated. There was little difference by political party, although 24% (16) of Republicans said they would *not* get a vaccine compared to 15% (12) of Democrats. This is significant because Donald Trump was still president at the time of the evaluation and was promoting efforts to develop a vaccine quickly. Vaccine hesitancy appears higher, despite politics, among Republicans (although politics and media clearly play a role in the hesitancy as correlated to pandemic-related conspiracy theories more broadly).

When asked why they would or would not get vaccinated, 81% (114) gave epidemiologically reasonable explanations, including wanting to protect others, trusting vaccines, and waiting to see research and side effects before getting it (70;90% of Democrats and 44;70% of Republicans). 30% (19) of Republicans and 10% (8) of Democrats gave answers that were coded as epidemiologically unreasonable.

> **"I mean, yeah, absolutely. The worse that could happen is that it doesn't work. So on the off chance it does I'd be willing to take it to protect those around me"**
>
> 22-female-D
>
> **"Honestly, if it's Trump approved…. Because there are all sorts of hoaxes out there. You can't just trust everyone. It could create another form of virus for all I know"**
>
> 20-male-R
>
> **"Wouldn't be super comfortable getting it, but I work in the medical field and would be required to"**
>
> 23-female-R
>
> **"I would want to get the vaccine but not at first, I want to wait a couple months before getting it. I don't want to be a guinea pig"**
>
> 21-female-D
>
> **"I don't trust a lot of vaccines because of past experiences of others who have had flu vaccines, for example, and they have still contracted the flu"**
>
> 20-female-D
>
> **"Yes, because it is part of living in a society and working together."**
>
> 21-male-D

Students were split on their preferred method of instruction for the school year with 46% (68) wanting face to face and 41% (61) wanting online. More Republicans wanted face to face instruction (40;60% R to 28;35% D). A slight majority of Democrats (41;51%) wanted online instruction compared to 30% (20) of Republicans.

About a third of students (50;37%) mentioned that online classes were safer, including 49% (37) of Democrats and only 22% (13) of Republicans. Half (67;50%) expressed other concerns, such as learning better with face-to-face instruction, which was more common for Republicans (48;70%) than Democrats (28;35%). Democrats were twice as likely to state that they were generally comfortable with online instruction or that they could adapt (12;16% Democrats versus 5; 8% Republicans). Republican students were more likely to want face to face instruction because they missed social interaction and being on campus (10;17% Republicans versus 2;3% Democrats).

> **"I miss my friends and I can't learn with these online classes. I don't learn too well online because it's not the same and I can't concentrate."**
>
> 20-male-R

> **"I wanted to go face to face, because I miss social interaction and talking to my friends. I hate doing homework at home because if I'm not in the school environment I have a hard time feeling motivated and lose that concentration at home. Being at school keeps my motivation and energy and focus. Being at school also gives me easier access to things like talking with my professor and attending clubs and meetings and such."**
>
> 24-female-R

> **"Online! Online! Fuck that, I am not doing in person."**
>
> 25-male-D

Twenty-one percent (36) of students had health concerns about returning to face-to-face classes, 50% (84) had other concerns, and 29% (49) were not worried, which was a more common response among Republicans (30; 40% not worried) than Democrats (19; 20% not worried). Twenty-eight percent (26) of Democrats expressed health concerns compared to 13% (10) of Republicans.

"I worried about F2F because I didn't trust the USF population to be smart, but online is also worrying because I don't learn well online."

22-male-D

"Yes, I was worried that USF would make the decision to have in person classes, because that would have meant I would have to find living arrangements and with me losing my job because of the pandemic I would not be able to afford it."

20-male-D

"Yeah. It's more of, like, the inconsistency of it all. I'm worried about proper safety precautions for f2f – and how long will that last? Will they just go back to online? And then are we going to get the best education for our money with online classes?"

21-female-R

"Absolutely not. I was pissed. I found a few in-person classes, and they all got switched online like last minute. I even asked my advisor to help me find some in-person classes, and the dude said they were 'few and far between'."

19-male-R

Table 7: Did you worry about going back to school (online or face-to-face)?

	Democrats	Republicans	Total
Health Concerns	26 (28%)	10 (13%)	36 (21%)
Other Concerns	49 (52%)	35 (47%)	84 (50%)
Not Worried	19 (20%)	30 (40%)	49 (29%)
	94 (100%)	75 (100%)	169 (100%)

Although most students were confident about doing online class work, 63% (121) found it harder to do their classwork online, primarily Republicans (69% of Republicans versus 57% of Democrats).

Table 8: What makes online classes easy? Difficult?

	Democrats	Republicans	Total
Easier to attend class	40 (39%)	24 (27%)	64 (33%)
Harder to do class work	59 (57%)	62 (69%)	121 (63%)

Neutral	4 (4%)	4 (4%)	8 (4%)
	103 (100%)	90 (100%)	193 (100%)

“The STEM classes at USF, a research university, were never designed to be taught online. Studying and understanding concepts has become almost impossible.”

20-male-D

"What makes it easier, is it is less of a time commitment, and there is not as much stress involved as the courses are not very rigorous anymore."

20-female-R

"The professor makes it easy by setting teams meeting up and telling us when things are due, it just sucks if you have covid because it’s hard to make up clinicals because if you get it, you fall behind and have to make up clinicals."

22-female-R

"The only things that are hard are, when you wake up for an 8 AM or something, and you're doing the class in bed, it's hard to concentrate because you're tired, you're not really waking up and getting out. Also, I have a couple labs this semester, and those don't really work online, like it doesn't make a lot of sense. It's kind of redundant."

19-male-D

Democrats were less likely to have gotten assistance with schoolwork than were Republican students.

Table 9: Have you received extra assistance with your classes?

	Democrats	Republicans	Total
No	59 (74%)	47 (69%)	106 (72%)
Yes	21 (26%)	21 (31%)	42 (28%)
	80 (100%)	68 (100%)	148 (100%)

Almost all (99%,146 of 148) had reliable internet access where they were currently living. All respondents had or had access to at least one internet-capable device. Further, almost all students (99%) reported that their families had enough food to eat, but one third

reported receiving some sort of help, with no difference by political party. A quarter of students (42;28%) reported that someone in their household had lost their job. More than half of students (82;55%) were also currently employed. Their work tended to be in the service sector, and thus high risk during the pandemic.

Table 10: What kind of work do you do?

	Democrats	Republicans	Total
High risk	29 (62%)	22 (60%)	50 (62%)
Some risk	8 (17%)	6 (16%)	14 (17%)
Low risk	10 (21%)	9 (24%)	17 (21%)
	47 (100%)	37 (100%)	81 (100%)

Discussion

This evaluation's sample of 148 university students highlighted several differences in understandings of and responses to pandemic policies based on political party affiliation. With Florida at the center of national politics, political divisions in the state have not dissipated, and we feel our fall 2020 findings are indicative of the continued impact of partisan political messaging and social media-based misinformation on students' understandings of and decision making around the pandemic. We found that most students demonstrated epidemiologically sound knowledge of COVID-19 and pandemic guidelines. Most expressed at least some concern about COVID-19 (78%), although Democrats were three times as likely to be very or extremely concerned (73%) compared to Republicans (26%). Democrats were more concerned about COVID-19 because they felt that people were not doing enough to address the outbreak. Republicans seemed less concerned about COVID-19 and thought it had been blown out of proportion. Democrats were more likely to be concerned for others, and concerned that others were not taking the pandemic seriously. Republicans were more likely not to be concerned or to be concerned only for themselves or their families.

Overall, 41% (60) of students reported following pandemic social distancing guidelines, although not following guidelines was more common among the Republican

students. As others found among university students (Cohen et al. 2020), few with symptoms reported getting tested or staying at home.

An important issue for the students was seeing friends, which was a primary reason for students not following safety protocols. Half of Republicans (32; 51%) reported that they always followed the rules. Nineteen (30%) Republicans gave borderline reasons, mostly having to do with discomfort of the mask, being with friends, or eating out. Three (4%) reported regularly pulling their masks down under their noses, while six (9%) said they regularly pull their t-shirts over their noses rather than wearing masks. No Democrats gave any answers of this type. Twelve (19%) Republicans reported completely "blowing off" rules, saying they simply do not follow them.

Democrats were more likely to wear masks always or most of the time, while a fifth of Republicans only wore a mask some of the time. In contrast, of the Republicans who answered the question, only 30 (44%) reported concern about others, including vulnerable populations, the elderly, and family members. While only 5% (4) of Democrats wore masks only if they were mandated, the figure for Republicans was 29% (20). Democrats were more likely to have epidemiologically reasonable answers to why or not they would get tested. Democrats tend to have more epidemiologically correct information and act on it. Republicans cannot be assumed to behave in ways that favor public health versus person liberty/concerns.

Fear of politicized misinformation was a major challenge that we found affecting university students today (and much of their behavior around pandemic policies could be interpreted as an attempt to confront and cast that fear aside, making for dangerous pandemic-era behavior). Most students are adept at seeking and finding information via the Internet and social media and reported actively seeking out multiple sources to compare information (97/148; 66%). There was, however, also significant conspiracy theory and misinformation verbalized by Republicans. Trust was a major issue identified during interviews. Students lack trust in the media, in politicians, and in doctors and public health professionals – a theme central to many interviews and conversations about pandemic policy. This speaks to other findings of low knowledge of disease and vaccination among university students (Graupensperger et al. 2021). For example, when asked, "How can you tell which information is true about COVID-19 and which is not?" only 26 percent

(38 of 148) named doctors or medical experts as trusted sources (of these 38, 27, or 71%, were Democrats and only 11, or 29%, were Republicans). Further, 24% (35 of 148) reported that they did not trust social media or the news in general, even though these were also reported to be our sample's primary sources of information, and 43% (64 of 148) replied that they did not know how to tell which information was true and which was not.

Most students (97; 66%) still reported regularly seeking out multiple sources to compare information as a solution. This is, therefore, not necessarily a passive population, but one adept at seeking and finding information via the Internet and social media. Most students demonstrated an epistemology based on fact-checking through multiple sources or mentions rather than via "experts," which leaves the students to make their own determinations as "experts." When asked specifically about the type of social media they used to access information, 35 (24%) said Twitter (23, or 29%, Democrats to 12, 18%, Republicans), 22 (15%) said Instagram (13, or 16%, Democrats to 9, or 13%, Republicans), and 16 (11%) said Facebook (7, or 9%, Democrats to 9, or 13%, Republicans). Reliance on social media can, however, lead to the seeking out of information that simply supports one's own behaviors and opinions, which is at the root of the issues with college students understanding of and following of pandemic policies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The university student sample assessed in this project demonstrated that Democrats were more concerned about COVID because they felt that people were not doing enough to address the outbreak. Republicans seemed less concerned about COVID and thought it had been blown out of proportion. Fear of politicized misinformation was a major challenge that we found affecting college students today (and much of their behavior around pandemic policies could be interpreted as an attempt to confront and cast that fear aside, making for dangerous pandemic-era behavior). Trust was a major issue identified during interviews. A lack of trust in the media, in politicians, and in doctors and public health professionals was a central theme of many interviews. While most students are adept at seeking and finding information via the Internet and social

media, there was a noticeable rate of conspiracy theory and misinformation among Republicans.

2. There was a clear difference by political party on knowledge and misinformation of COVID-19, the causes of the pandemic, and necessary precautions. While the political party analysis revealed significant differences in perceptions of COVID-19, it also identified areas of overlap that could be useful for government and public health officials to utilize to enact more effective policies and curtail the spread of COVID-19. As political divisions and misinformation about vaccines and the pandemic remain rife in Florida, it is important that this issue is not address in a partisan manner nor repeats conspiracy theories even as it may try to disprove them. Rather, medical providers and health professional must re-develop trust with students by framing things in practical ways that they understand. For example, protocols and procedures must be amenable to the diverse lifestyles of students and be customized for a working and highly stressed (and often medically vulnerable) population.

3. **Our findings indicate that students make health decisions based upon political bias rather than by following university guidance or that of medical professionals. The Democrats had epidemiologically correct information and acted on it. Republicans cannot be assumed to behave in ways that favor public health versus person liberty/concerns. Therefore, it is imperative that the university *not* allow the public health of the university to be completely based on the personal responsibility of individual students. For fall 2021, the university must mandate protocols and procedures similar or more restrictive than those in place in fall 2020. These include daily check-ins and temperature checks, on-campus mask mandates, mandated social distancing, and remote learning.**

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