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Californians’ Views Towards President Trump Shape COVID-19 Attitudes

The latest Berkeley IGS Poll finds that Californians’ views towards President Trump are a powerful predictor of their attitudes towards COVID-19. Californians who either strongly approve or disapprove of the way that President Trump is handling his job have dramatically different opinions on the risks posed by COVID-19 to themselves and their neighbors, and on the usefulness of social distancing and other policies to limit its spread. IGS Co-Director Professor Cristina Mora commented that “it is striking the way that polarized political attitudes even affect everyday behaviors. That Trump supporters are much less likely to believe in the efficacy of practices, such as social distancing, and are generally much less worried about contracting COVID-19, denotes just how powerfully politics can shape understandings of health and safety.” IGS Co-Director Professor Eric Schickler added that “Unlike many past national crises, important partisan divisions have quickly emerged about the appropriate government response. Trump supporters are following the President's lead in pushing to reopen the economy, while those who disapprove of Trump are much more willing to continue shelter-in-place.”

Between April 16 and 20 the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS), in conjunction with the California Institute of Health Equity and Action (Cal-IHEA), polled 8,800 registered voters about a variety of issues concerning the current state of politics and COVID-19. Results show that most respondents, about 74% of them, fall at the poles - they either strongly approve or disapprove of President Trump’s performance in office. Nearly 55% of California voters strongly disapprove of the President, while 20% strongly approve.

Table 1: Approval of President Trump’s Job Performance

	Proportion
Strongly approve	0.197
Somewhat approve	0.101
Neither	0.065
Somewhat disapprove	0.092
Strongly disapprove	0.545

Where supporters fall on the question of Trump’s performance is connected to how concerned they are about the pandemic. Among all respondents, 48% say that they are very concerned that they will spread the virus to others. However just 24% of strong Trump supporters are very concerned about this as compared to 57% of strong Trump disapprovers. Nearly half of strong Trump supporters are not concerned about spreading the virus, while only 13% of those who strongly disapprove of Trump are not concerned.

Table 2: Concern about Spreading COVID-19 to Others by Trump Approval

	All respondents	Strongly approve	Strongly disapprove
Very concerned	0.476	0.238	0.574
Somewhat concerned	0.290	0.279	0.290
Not too concerned	0.154	0.279	0.103
Not at all concerned	0.080	0.204	0.033

We also asked Californians about the individual behaviors connected to COVID-19 and found striking political differences there as well. Among respondents who strongly disapprove, 90% say that staying at home is extremely effective at preventing spread of the disease, while just 57% of strong Trump supporters take that view. Trump supporters are also significantly less optimistic about the impact of social distancing and staying six feet away from others and wearing a mask than are those who disapprove of the President. By contrast, we found that Trump supporters have somewhat more faith than Trump opponents in the notion that taking vitamins and eating healthy can be an effective preventive measure. We found little differences in opinions concerning hand-washing and glove wearing.

Table 3: Rated Effectiveness of Preventative Measures by Trump Approval

	All respondents	Approve strongly	Disapprove strongly
Staying home as much as possible			
extremely effective	0.801	0.573	0.902
somewhat effective	0.158	0.302	0.088
not effective at all	0.031	0.101	0.006
not sure	0.011	0.024	0.005
Staying 6 feet away from other people			
extremely effective	0.576	0.477	0.627
somewhat effective	0.366	0.407	0.342
not effective at all	0.037	0.090	0.016
not sure	0.021	0.025	0.015
Wearing a mask			
extremely effective	0.431	0.336	0.455
somewhat effective	0.480	0.487	0.489
not effective at all	0.064	0.145	0.036
not sure	0.025	0.032	0.021
Taking vitamins			
extremely effective	0.194	0.257	0.144
somewhat effective	0.377	0.412	0.353
not effective at all	0.296	0.213	0.359
not sure	0.133	0.118	0.145
Eating a healthy diet			
extremely effective	0.352	0.412	0.312
somewhat effective	0.424	0.401	0.443
not effective at all	0.157	0.136	0.174
not sure	0.068	0.051	0.071
Washing hands regularly			
extremely effective	0.838	0.795	0.855
somewhat effective	0.152	0.183	0.138
not effective at all	0.004	0.013	0.002
not sure	0.007	0.009	0.005
Wearing gloves			
extremely effective	0.310	0.271	0.312
somewhat effective	0.506	0.464	0.531
not effective at all	0.149	0.224	0.122
not sure	0.035	0.042	0.035

The political and ideological split is also striking with respect to government policy towards the epidemic. The IGS poll asked residents: “Which is a bigger concern for you: that “shelter in place” is ended too soon, causing COVID-19 to spread more, or that “shelter-in-place” is continued for too long, causing greater economic damage?” While overall the data shows that Californians are more concerned about shelter-in-place ending too soon, Trump supporters had a notably different pattern: just 22% of those who strongly approve of the President were worried that shelter-in-place would end too soon, while 78% had the opposite concern, that the economy would suffer unnecessary damage by keeping shelter-in-place for too long. By contrast, 91% of those who strongly disapprove of Trump were more concerned with shelter-in-place ending too soon, as were 69% of voters overall.

Table 4: Concern about Length of Shelter-in-Place (SIP) by Trump Approval

	All respondents	Approve strongly	Disapprove strongly
More concerned about health effects of ending SIP too soon	0.693	0.222	0.912
More concerned about economic effects of ending SIP too late	0.297	0.776	0.083
Don't know	0.009	0.002	0.005

Last, Trump’s approval rating was also connected to the sources of information that Californians trust. Specifically, we asked registered voters about the extent to which they trusted the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and scientific experts to provide accurate information about COVID-19. The results show that only 19% of strong Trump supporters express high trust in the CDC and just 18% place such trust in scientific experts. By contrast, 50% of those who strongly disapprove of Trump express high trust in the CDC and 75% trust scientific experts.

Table 5: Trust in Information from Institutions by Trump Approval

	All respondents	Approve strongly	Disapprove strongly
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)			
completely trust	0.409	0.191	0.500
somewhat trust	0.458	0.505	0.426
somewhat distrust	0.092	0.181	0.061
completely distrust	0.040	0.124	0.014
World Health Organization (WHO)			
completely trust	0.314	0.037	0.455
somewhat trust	0.393	0.127	0.460
somewhat distrust	0.129	0.210	0.070
completely distrust	0.164	0.626	0.015
Scientific experts			
completely trust	0.558	0.177	0.752
somewhat trust	0.364	0.559	0.234
somewhat distrust	0.055	0.179	0.011
completely distrust	0.022	0.086	0.003

Overall, the results show that Trump supporters and Trump disapprovers have polarized views about the behaviors, policies, and sources of information relevant to COVID-19. Given that most registered voters are split on the President’s performance, the findings indicate that presidential approval ratings have the ability to shape the way that Americans see and understand a health pandemic.

For media inquiries or further questions, please contact igs@berkeley.edu

About the Survey

The findings in this report are based on a Berkeley IGS Poll completed by the Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) at the University of California, Berkeley in conjunction with the California Institute of Health Equity and Access. The poll was administered online in English and Spanish between April 16 and 20 among 8,800 voters statewide.

The survey was administered by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of the state's registered voters. Once the questionnaire and email invitations had been finalized, they were translated into Spanish and reviewed for cultural appropriateness. Each email included an invitation for voters to participate in a nonpartisan survey and provided a link to the IGS website where the survey was housed. Reminder emails were distributed to non-responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to participate and not wanting to receive future emails from IGS about the survey.

Samples of registered voters with email addresses were provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc., a leading supplier of registered voter lists in California. The email addresses of voters were derived from information contained on the state's official voter registration rolls. The overall sample of registered voters with email addresses was stratified in an attempt to obtain a proper balance of survey respondents across major segments of the registered voter population.

To protect the anonymity of survey respondents, voters' email addresses and all other personally identifiable information were purged from the data file and replaced with a unique and anonymous identification number during data processing. At the conclusion of the data processing phase, post stratification weights were applied to align the sample to population characteristics of the state's overall registered voter population. The sampling error associated with the results from the survey are difficult to calculate precisely due to the effects of sample stratification and the post- stratification weighting. Nevertheless, it is likely that the results are subject to a sampling error of approximately +/-3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Results based on subgroups of this population would be subject to larger margins of sampling error.