

Politics Rules Everything Around Me? A Review of *Pandemic Politics*

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Abstract

Although COVID-19 is still very much around, we have reached the stage of the pandemic where we begin to look back and analyze our response to this crisis. It is, however, a monumental task to piece information together from thousands upon thousands of published articles about the pandemic from different academic disciplines. Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky's book, *Pandemic Politics*, is an authoritative guide that walks us through the American pandemic response, using state-of-the-art multiwave panel data. The argument of the book tells a compelling, coherent, and, ultimately, depressing story about how America's four "preexisting conditions"—political polarization, Donald Trump, a troubled health care system, and systemic inequalities—set the stage for a perfect storm in which the politics dominated public health, culminating in a disastrous pandemic response. In this review article, I situate the book's argument in a broader literature on politicization of science, the importance of populism and anti-intellectualism, misinformation, and trust, filling in some of the considerations the authors omitted from their analyses.

Keywords: COVID-19; polarization; partisanship; inequality; misinformation; trust; populism

Just as our collective trauma of living through COVID-19 is winding down and life is slowly returning to normal, the time has come for reflecting and analyzing how the United States handled the coronavirus pandemic. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, it has arguably been the most studied pandemic of all time, with *Google Scholar* indexing more than one million academic articles mentioning COVID-19 or coronavirus since 2020. That attention, of course, was clearly warranted. As of this writing, more than 6 million Americans have been hospitalized with COVID-19, and more than 1.1 million have died of it.¹ It is easy to get lost in all the COVID-19 studies, with scholars approaching the topic from different academic disciplines and methodological approaches, and with different kinds of data. This is where the new book, *Pandemic Politics. The Deadly Toll of Partisanship in the Age of COVID*, by Shana Kushner Gadarian, Sara Wallace Goodman, and Thomas Pepinsky, helps cut through the noise and offers a comprehensive look at the pandemic response through the prism of American polarized politics. In this review essay, I first focus on discussing the content of the book

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¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "COVID Data Tracker," CDC, accessed 28 March 2020, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker>.

in detail. I then situate *Pandemic Politics*' argument in a broader literature on politicization of science, as well as highlight the importance of populism and anti-intellectualism, misinformation, and trust, filling in some of the considerations the authors mostly omitted from their analyses. The goal here is to provide helpful context for the argument that Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky make and offer a companion to the book that sheds even more light on the pandemic response in the United States.

What Is Pandemic Politics About?

The detailed account of the pandemic is the book's biggest strength. We think we remember how the pandemic played out because we lived it. But the reality is that historical narratives about COVID-19 are motivationally biased, and we need books like *Pandemic Politics* to ensure we remember how things actually unfolded.²

The book by Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky is a remarkably comprehensive account of how the pandemic played out in the United States, and how "we," as a country, responded to it, ranging from examining a variety of public attitudes and behaviors to analyzing the federal government's response and the politics of that response. Of the million or so studies that examined COVID-19 that are indexed in *Google Scholar*, many were snapshots of a particular point in time, focusing on a specific aspect of the pandemic—engaging in social distancing, mask wearing, or, later, vaccine uptake.

The book is distinctly different on that front. First, the authors relied on a high-quality YouGov panel, which allowed them to extrapolate population-level statistics about things like mask wearing, because YouGov's sampling frame is matched to the American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census.³ Second, the authors surveyed the same Americans six times throughout the pandemic every few weeks, starting in March 2020 as the pandemic was ramping up and concluding a year later, when vaccination efforts were proceeding in full steam. That allowed the authors to track changes among their respondents over time, as the pandemic raged on. In the last wave, they also oversampled nonwhite respondents to focus on minority communities more thoroughly. If anything, I wish the authors leveraged that part of their data more in the book, mapping and explicating some of these attitudinal changes. For example, on page 96, the authors describe how partisan differences in health behaviors began to grow by the summer of 2020, but they did little to examine in more detail why and how these changes happened. That omission is understandable, given the book is already 300 pages, but it would, nonetheless, be good to see them leverage the panel nature of the data they collected.

The main argument of the book is right there in the title. The authors argue that the "core explanation for America's disastrous response to COVID-19 is partisanship."⁴ Although there are different conceptions of what partisanship is in the political science literature, Gadarian et al. define partisanship as a social identity, and not just a person's policy, issue, or candidate preferences.⁵ Notably, however, the

² Philipp Sprengholz, Luca Henkel, Robert Böhm, and Cornelia Betsch, "Historical Narratives about the COVID-19 Pandemic Are Motivationally Biased," *Nature* 623, no. 7987 (November 2023): 588–93, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06674-5>.

³ Shana Kushner Gadarian, Sara Wallace Goodman, and Thomas B. Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics: The Deadly Toll of Partisanship in the Age of COVID* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 290.

⁴ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 10.

⁵ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 6.

authors do not actually measure partisanship this way, using a standard battery of questions measuring identities, but instead using a traditional American National Election Studies partisanship measure. (It is unlikely that this measurement choice affected any substantive findings, but it does show a certain disconnect between theory and operationalization.) Because of this identitarian nature of partisanship, coupled with the “us” versus “them” polarizing nature of American politics, the authors argue that there were two, conflicting, pandemic realities in America, one where it was taken seriously (“Blue” America) and one where it was an inconvenience (“Red” America).⁶

The authors argue that there are four unique “preexisting conditions” that contributed to how the “partisan pandemic” unfolded in the United States. These are the partisan polarization of American politics, President Donald Trump and his flawed leadership style, a troubled health care system inaccessible to the less well-off, as well as systemic inequalities, both economic and racial. The partisan pandemic was not inevitable, because there is nothing inherently partisan or ideological about whether one should mask up or accept a vaccine. But through the interaction of these four conditions, the authors argue, the pandemic response in the United States was a disaster.

Focusing on Donald Trump specifically might sound like a bit of overkill, but as Gadarian et al. persuasively argue, he played an oversized role in politicizing the pandemic, spreading COVID-19–related misinformation, and generally putting politics above public health. I sometimes find myself thinking about the counterfactual pandemic, during which Hilary Clinton or Marco Rubio is the president. Does *Pandemic Politics* get written? I think the answer is yes, because of the strength of the other three preexisting conditions. And, as I outline below, even with better choices made by Donald Trump, the pandemic still likely ends up polarized and politicized. But we should not underestimate the damage done specifically by Donald Trump, and it is good to see the authors grapple with that fact.

One could also argue that federalism was a preexisting condition that directly affected the messy response to the pandemic that we saw. Gadarian et al. do discuss this a bit in chapter 2,⁷ but the problem warrants a bit more context, given how deeply it affected the pandemic response. The American federalist structure of government has historically allocated the domain of public health as a prerogative of each state. We are not just talking about the 50 states: it is also the 3,489 local health departments across these states, each with different goals, rules, and priorities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, that situation severely complicated pandemic governance, the ability to share information and collaborate on responses, and, ultimately, lay the groundwork for an abysmal pandemic response, especially during the early stages of the pandemic.⁸

In each chapter, Gadarian et al. look at a different substantive topic, from how the pandemic got politicized (chapter 2); to the partisan divide in health behaviors like masking (chapter 3); the role emotions like anger or fear played in attributing blame for the pandemic (chapter 4); public attitudes about different policy responses to COVID-19, like school closures or government-mandated contact tracing (chapter 5); economic consequences of the pandemic (chapter 6); effects of

⁶ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 8.

⁷ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 67–68.

⁸ Cary Coglianese, “Pandemic Federalism,” *Wayne Law Review*, accessed 1 January 2022, https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/2867.

COVID-19 on Trump's signature issue: immigration (chapter 7); how racial inequalities shaped the pandemic response and the growth of anti-Asian prejudice (chapter 8), how COVID-19 affected American democracy and the contentious nature of the 2020 election (chapter 9); as well as how politics influenced vaccine uptake (chapter 10). Every chapter is filled with information about different aspects of COVID-19, ranging from how many people bought hand sanitizer in March 2020 to how many people visited a food pantry during the pandemic. But, in each chapter, consistent with the book's overarching argument, partisanship plays a crucial role in explaining the variety of different outcomes, above and beyond other potential explanatory factors.

Science Was Politicized in the United States Long before the Pandemic

Gadarian et al. make a very strong case, corroborated by countless other studies, showing the disastrous effects of the politicized pandemic in the United States. But the story of how the pandemic became politicized, outlined in chapter 2, makes it seem that politicizing science was a new development, unique to COVID-19. Given the centrality of this argument to the book, the context for how science became politicized before the pandemic could have been much deeper, showcasing that COVID-19 was far from the first scientific issue that was politicized, but instead it was politicized on a very accelerated schedule due to the confluence of unique circumstances of a global pandemic.

Politicization of science in the United States has been a process that has unfolded over several decades. In the 1970s, it was conservative Americans who expressed the highest trust in science. By 2010, conservatives trusted science the least.⁹ The polarization along partisan lines on trust in science accelerated in 2018 and even more so during the pandemic. By 2021, there was a 30-point trust gap in science between Republicans and Democrats.¹⁰ And although the pandemic lowered trust in science among Americans across the board, including among Democrats, there was still a massive partisan gap in that trust in 2023.¹¹ These numbers are a reflection of the changing composition of the political parties, educational polarization, and consistent attacks on science by prominent conservatives on issues like climate change and evolution. Furthermore, Americans increasingly view scientists as politically liberal, which simply makes them unpopular among conservatives.¹² When thousands of scientists took to the streets across the country in the spring of 2017 to participate in the March for Science rallies, that cemented the view among many conservatives that scientists are part of the Democratic coalition.¹³ These views

⁹ Gordon Gauchat, "Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 2 (April 2012): 167–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412438225>.

¹⁰ University of Chicago News, "Trust in Science Is Becoming More Polarized, Survey Finds," accessed 28 January 2022, <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/trust-science-becoming-more-polarized-survey-finds>.

¹¹ Brian Kennedy and Alec Tyson, "Americans' Trust in Scientists, Positive Views of Science Continue to Decline," *Pew Research Center Science & Society* (blog), accessed 14 November 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/11/14/americans-trust-in-scientists-positive-views-of-science-continue-to-decline/>.

¹² Marlene Sophie Altenmüller, Tobias Wingen, and Anna Schulte, "Explaining Polarized Trust in Scientists: A Political Stereotype-Approach," *Science Communication* 46, no. 1 (January 2024): 92–115, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/tdukx>.

¹³ Matthew Motta, "The Polarizing Effect of the March for Science on Attitudes toward Scientists," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 4 (October 2018): 782–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000938>.

only got reinforced when leading scientific journals endorsed Joe Biden prior to the 2020 Presidential election and condemned Trump for being hostile to science and scientists.¹⁴ Several well-known scientists even asserted that “science was on the ballot” in that election.¹⁵ Aligning of science and politics, regardless of the justifiable nature of the specific grievances that the scientific community might harbor toward Donald Trump and other conservative leaders, resulted in a situation in which many scientists were viewed as an out-group among Republicans, which set the stage for a disastrous way in which the pandemic played out.

It is illustrative to think back to 2019 and another dangerous disease outbreak in the United States. Few people remember that before there was COVID-19, Americans were experiencing the largest measles outbreak in a quarter of a century. The response to that development foreshadowed some of what we saw with COVID-19. As states began to tackle the measles outbreak with policy action, mostly through elimination of religious- and personal-belief vaccine exemptions, many Republicans began to reflexively oppose these bills, mostly because it was often Democrats introducing them. This negative partisanship was not reflected in strong partisan nature of vaccine views: majorities of Republicans and Democrats were pro-vaccine policies at the time.¹⁶ But the media were choosing to amplify extreme, conflictual voices of Republicans pushing against vaccinations, instead of highlighting Republican voices who were promoting it.¹⁷

This highlights the importance of elite cues in public opinion formation, which Gadarian et al. spend a considerable amount of time discussing in the book, providing anecdotal examples of toxic and polarizing rhetoric from Donald Trump and other political figures. It is undeniable that this is a crucial mechanism through which public views are formed, but here, too, more context would have been useful for the readers. Both crude¹⁸ and more comprehensive¹⁹ analyses found that the coronavirus pandemic news coverage in the United States has been politicized to an unprecedented degree. It was not just that politicians were dominating the news about COVID-19. To a certain extent, that is to be expected during an event as destabilizing as a global pandemic. But even from the earliest days of the pandemic, Republican and Democratic elites were talking about the pandemic in different ways, highlighting different things (Democrats emphasizing public health, Republicans emphasizing business and the economy), setting the stage for the polarization of the public early on during the pandemic.²⁰

¹⁴ Matt Motta, “New Activism by Scientists Can Lead to Partisan Backlash,” *Scientific American*, accessed 17 January 2024, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/new-activism-by-scientists-can-lead-to-partisan-backlash/>.

¹⁵ Stephen Hilgartner, J. Benjamin Hurlbut, and Sheila Jasanoff, “Was ‘Science’ on the Ballot?” *Science* 371, no. 6532 (February 2021): 893–94, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abf8762>.

¹⁶ Dominik A. Stecula, Ozan Kuru, Dolores Albarracin, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Policy Views and Negative Beliefs about Vaccines in the United States, 2019,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 10 (October 2020): 1561–63, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305828>.

¹⁷ Dominik A. Stecula, “Vaccines Should Not Become a Partisan Issue | Opinion,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, accessed 10 July 2019, <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/vaccines-outbreaks-exemption-bills-democrats-republicans-20190710.html>.

¹⁸ Mark Pickup, Dominik A. Stecula, and Clifton van der Linden, “American Exceptionalism: Determinants of Spreading COVID-19 Misinformation Online in Five Countries,” SocArXiv, doi:10.31235/osf.io/z547j, April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/z547j>, preprint: not peer reviewed.

¹⁹ P. Sol Hart, Sedona Chinn, and Stuart Soroka, “Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage,” *Science Communication* 42, no. 5 (October 2020): 679–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547020950735>.

²⁰ Jon Green et al., “Elusive Consensus: Polarization in Elite Communication on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Science Advances* 6, no. 28 (July 2020): eabc2717, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abc2717>.

In *Pandemic Politics*, the authors highlight two things. First, they place the blame for politicizing the pandemic on Trump.²¹ That makes sense given that, as president, Trump likely enjoyed more news coverage than any other individual in the United States. But, as the preceding paragraph highlights, it was not only Trump who politicized the pandemic, it was other Republican elites as well. Second, the authors argue that having “multiple conflicting messages” also contributed to the polarization of opinion among Americans.²² That was partly because, they argue, Americans were hearing from politicians and not health experts early on during the pandemic.²³ Some data highlight that health experts were, in fact, getting airtime on major cable news outlets, though they were featured less prominently on Fox News than on other networks.²⁴ Different kinds of elites were also amplified on social media.²⁵ Here, it is illustrative to examine another prominent example of a politicized science issue: climate change.

Politicization of climate change played a key role in polarizing the issue. In the late 1990s, the partisan gap on climate change opinions was minimal, but it grew as climate change grew in salience and coverage increasingly focused on politicians, especially polarizing ones like Al Gore. That was not to say that experts were not present in the news coverage: they featured prominently in it. But they also increasingly had to share the stage with politicians and, in a polarized world where partisan attachments color peoples’ perceptions of reality, messaging from politicians tends to be more powerful than messages from scientists. Much like with COVID-19, the messages on climate change were conflicting, not just in terms of different messages coming from Republicans and Democrats but even in terms of the messages coming from Republican elites, which, until 2010 or so, tended to be divided on climate change.²⁶ But that was enough to polarize the public, because negative partisanship is a powerful force in American politics. And it was enough for many Republicans to polarize in response to what they saw from Democrats, regardless what the message from Republicans was.²⁷ All of this is to say that, even though Donald Trump clearly played a leading role in politicizing the pandemic, it was likely inevitable that the pandemic would have been polarized. In a world with strong negative partisanship and a strong incentive for the parties to take opposing views on any issue, consistent messaging from Democrats about wearing a mask, social distancing, or getting a vaccine would have likely been enough to turn many Republicans against these behaviors.

²¹ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 49.

²² Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 10.

²³ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 54.

²⁴ Dominik A. Stecula, “What Do We Know about Misinformation during the Coronavirus Outbreak?” *Mischiefs of Faction*, accessed 6 April 2020, <https://www.mischiefsoffaction.com/post/what-do-we-know-about-misinformation-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>.

²⁵ Ryan J. Gallagher, Larissa Doroshenko, Sarah Shugars, David Lazer, and Brooke Foucault Welles, “Sustained Online Amplification of COVID-19 Elites in the United States,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 2 (April 2021): 20563051211024957, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211024957>.

²⁶ Eric Merkley and Dominik A. Stecula, “Party Elites or Manufactured Doubt? The Informational Context of Climate Change Polarization,” *Science Communication* 40, no. 2 (March 2018): 258–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547018760334>.

²⁷ Eric Merkley and Dominik A. Stecula, “Party Cues in the News: Democratic Elites, Republican Backlash, and the Dynamics of Climate Skepticism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (October 2021): 1439–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000113>.

Here, the case of Canada might be illustrative of this dynamic. Canada is slightly less affectively polarized than the United States, but it is still an affectively polarized society.²⁸ During the early stages of the pandemic, just like in the United States, there were notable partisan differences among Canadians of different political persuasions, notably about their confidence in the government to handle the crisis.²⁹ But there was also a considerable difference between Canada and the United States: Canadian political elites, across the political spectrum, sent a unified message to the public about the seriousness of the pandemic and the importance of taking action to address it, which tamped public polarization on this issue.³⁰ But that consensus was short-lived, and the backlash to COVID-19 still came to Canada. First, in the form of Maxime Bernier and his People's Party of Canada's (unsuccessful) anti-COVID-19 policy campaign, and later in the form of a monthlong trucker "freedom" convoy and protest.³¹ The unified messages from the Canadian elites show us what could have happened in the United States with more thoughtful political leadership. But it also showcases a certain inevitability of polarization of public attitudes about COVID-19, especially as the pandemic drew on, and people's lives were turned upside down by the virus.

Finally, it is worth pondering the importance of both the supply and demand for polarizing political rhetoric. As scholars have shown, the news media not only influence public opinion, but also reflect it.³² Similarly, elite rhetoric shapes public opinion, but it also reflects a certain demand for particular kind of language and discourse. Donald Trump, in an interview with Fox News in June 2023, discussed the success of his Operation Warp Speed, arguably his biggest accomplishment while in office. "I got them [vaccines] done in nine months, and it was supposed to take anywhere from 5 to 12 years." Trump bragging about vaccines would have likely increased vaccine uptake among his supporters. But he chose to not talk it about during the 2020 campaign or after. He revealed, "I really don't want to talk about it because, as a Republican, it's not a great thing to talk about, because, for some reason, it's just not," Trump said. "Because people love the vaccines and people hate the vaccines. But conservatives aren't—and I understand both sides of it, by the way."³³ That showcases that even Donald Trump, who is perhaps not the most disciplined messenger, still tailors his rhetoric to the demands of his supporters.

²⁸ Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, "American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective," *Elements in American Politics* (November 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914123>.

²⁹ Mark Pickup, Dominik A. Stecula, and Clifton van der Linden, "Novel Coronavirus, Old Partisanship: COVID-19 Attitudes and Behaviours in the United States and Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 53, no. 2 (June 2020): 357–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000463>.

³⁰ Eric Merkley, Aengus Bridgman, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, Derek Ruths, and Oleg Zhilin, "A Rare Moment of Cross-Partisan Consensus: Elite and Public Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 53, no. 2 (June 2020): 311–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000311>.

³¹ AP News, "Canada Police Fear Violence at Trucker Vaccine Protest," accessed 27 January 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-canada-ontario-united-states-cafc3d41154a38b8a2685f9baff8ed5d>.

³² Christopher Wlezien, "News and Public Opinion: Which Comes First?" *The Journal of Politics* 86, no. 1 (January 2024): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1086/726940>.

³³ Brett Samuels, "Trump Won't Say If COVID Vaccines Work: 'Not a Great Thing to Talk about' as a Republican," *The Hill* (blog), accessed 20 June 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/4059468-trump-wont-say-if-covid-vaccines-work-not-a-great-thing-to-talk-about-as-a-republican/>.

Anti-Intellectualism and Populism Influenced the Pandemic beyond Partisanship

Beyond contextualizing the decades-long process of politicizing science in America, as well as elaborating on the mechanics of how elite cues can polarize the public, *Pandemic Politics* seems to be missing some important ingredients that played a role in America's disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, these ingredients are political, but do not easily map onto partisan politics, suggesting that there might be more to the political nature of the COVID-19 pandemic than partisanship.

First is the importance of populism and anti-intellectualism to how people sought and processed information pertaining to the pandemic, and the broader impact of misinformation on public attitudes and behaviors. Gadarian et al. discuss the similarity of Donald Trump's handling of the pandemic to that of Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil.³⁴ That comparison makes sense, given that both leaders are widely considered to be populist. But populism affected the pandemic not only at the elite level but also at the popular level.

Populism, in its most basic form, is a worldview that pits average citizens against corrupt "elites."³⁵ Although in recent years it has been associated primarily with the political right, due to politicians like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, or Victor Orbán, as well as campaigns like Brexit, populism can (and does) robustly exist on both the political right and left (e.g., in the United States among the supporters of Bernie Sanders).³⁶ An important component of populism is anti-intellectualism, or the generalized distrust of experts, scientists, and intellectuals.³⁷ Anti-intellectualism is related not only to opposition to issues like climate change or nuclear power, it also affects how people process information that comes from scientists and other experts.³⁸ Importantly, in the context of the pandemic, populism and anti-intellectualism are strongly correlated with embracing conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19, as well as decreased likelihood of adapting public health behaviors aimed at mitigating the pandemic, above and beyond partisanship.³⁹ Populism and anti-intellectualism are also negatively correlated with news-consumption habits and seeking COVID-19 information from experts.⁴⁰ In short, there are factors that are political but that do not neatly map onto left-right politics that help to explain the dynamics of how the pandemic unfolded in the United States.

³⁴ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 2022, 73.

³⁵ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism* (London: Penguin, 2017).

³⁶ J. Eric Oliver and Wendy M. Rahn. "Rise of the *Trumpenvolk*: Populism in the 2016 Election." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667, no. 1 (September 2016): 189–206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216662639>.

³⁷ Matthew Motta, "The Dynamics and Political Implications of Anti-Intellectualism in the United States," *American Politics Research* 46, no. 3 (May 2018): 465–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X17719507>.

³⁸ Eric Merkley, "Anti-Intellectualism, Populism, and Motivated Resistance to Expert Consensus," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (July 2020): 24–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz053>.

³⁹ Dominik A. Stecula and Mark Pickup, "How Populism and Conservative Media Fuel Conspiracy Beliefs about COVID-19 and What It Means for COVID-19 Behaviors," *Research & Politics* 8, no. 1 (January 2021): 2053168021993979, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168021993979>.

⁴⁰ Eric Merkley and Peter John Loewen, "Anti-Intellectualism and the Mass Public's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Nature Human Behaviour* 5, no. 6 (June 2021): 706–15, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01112-w>.

Pandemic Misinformation Made Pandemic Response More Difficult

A second missing ingredient is the quality of the information environment, and especially the impact that misinformation had on the pandemic. The information environment was a crucial component of how the public responded to the pandemic, for a variety of reasons. Most people learn about the news through the consumption of the news media. With lockdowns in place and people staying home, unprecedented numbers of Americans were paying attention to the news (Pew estimates almost 90 percent of people in the United States followed COVID-19 news closely in the early stages of the pandemic).⁴¹ Most Americans, especially in the early days of the pandemic, turned their attention toward reliable sources: mostly local news and evening broadcast news.⁴² During the third week of March 2020, 32 million Americans watched evening news broadcasts on one of the three network channels (ABC, CBS, and NBC), absolutely dwarfing prime-time viewership of cable news.⁴³

But as the pandemic went on, people returned to their traditional news-consumption habits. For many, that meant following partisan cable news. Fox News, in particular, covered the pandemic very differently from other sources, downplaying the pandemic and its associated risks and spreading COVID-19 misinformation, something Gadarian et al. allude to in the book.⁴⁴ This was not just a harmless journalistic digression. Fox News viewership was causally related to non-compliance with stay-at-home orders in the early stages of the pandemic⁴⁵ and correlated with vaccine hesitancy in the later stages of the pandemic.⁴⁶

Importantly, the media environment also encompasses social media platforms, which increasing number of Americans rely on for news every day.⁴⁷ It was no different during the pandemic. Unfortunately, social media sources were also a cesspool of misinformation, wreaking havoc on pandemic response. Research found that social media exposure, especially platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X), was associated with misperceptions about COVID-19 during the early stages of the pandemic⁴⁸ and vaccine hesitancy in the later stages of the

⁴¹ Amy Mitchell and J. Baxter Oliphant, “Americans Immersed in COVID-19 News; Most Think Media Are Doing Fairly Well Covering It,” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project* (blog), accessed 18 March 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/03/18/americans-immersed-in-covid-19-news-most-think-media-are-doing-fairly-well-covering-it/>.

⁴² Elisa Shearer, “Local News Is Playing an Important Role for Americans during COVID-19 Outbreak,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed 18 January 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/02/local-news-is-playing-an-important-role-for-americans-during-covid-19-outbreak/>.

⁴³ John Koblin, “The Evening News Is Back,” *The New York Times*, accessed 24 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/business/media/coronavirus-evening-news.html>.

⁴⁴ Matt Motta, Dominik A. Stecula, and Christina Farhart, “How Right-Leaning Media Coverage of COVID-19 Facilitated the Spread of Misinformation in the Early Stages of the Pandemic in the U.S.,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 53, no. 2 (June 2020): 335–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000396>.

⁴⁵ Andrey Simonov, Szymon K. Sacher, Jean-Pierre H. Dubé, and Shirsho Biswas, “The Persuasive Effect of Fox News: Non-Compliance with Social Distancing during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” Working Paper 27237, Working Paper Series, National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27237>.

⁴⁶ Matt Motta and Dominik Stecula, “The Effects of Partisan Media in the Face of Global Pandemic: How News Shaped COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy,” *Political Communication* 40, no. 5 (September 2023): 505–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2187496>.

⁴⁷ Mason Walker and Katerina Eva Matsa, “News Consumption across Social Media in 2021,” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project* (blog), accessed 20 September 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/>.

⁴⁸ Aengus Bridgman, Eric Merkley, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, Derek Ruths, Lisa Teichmann, and Oleg Zhilin, “The Causes and Consequences of COVID-19 Misperceptions: Understanding the Role of News

pandemic.⁴⁹ There are countless other instances of misinformation spreading on social media and influencing the public.⁵⁰ For example, a widely circulated rumor on social media, which suggested that drinking alcohol-based cleaning products might be a cure for COVID-19, resulted in more than 5,800 people being hospitalized in the early months of the pandemic.⁵¹

To be clear, a major super-spreader of misinformation about COVID was Donald Trump himself. The authors discuss in detail many examples of how President Trump spread falsehoods, downplayed the pandemic, and shared misinformation. An analysis of 38 million English-language media articles from the first 5 months of the pandemic shows that Trump was single-handedly the largest driver of COVID-19 misinformation.⁵² But there were also other spreaders of misinformation, on social media and in other venues, like Joe Rogan, the host of the most popular podcast in America,⁵³ or even physicians and medical professionals who leveraged their credentials to share misinformation and false cures.⁵⁴ In short, misinformation and the broader information environment interacted with political polarization, the uniqueness of Donald Trump, and also things like populism and anti-intellectualism to affect pandemic response. By ignoring that part of the pandemic, we miss a lot of context about how and why the pandemic played out the way it did in the United States.

What about Trust?

A third missing ingredient is trust. To be clear, the authors do mention trust in the book.⁵⁵ But given its broad importance, trust is significantly underplayed in *Pandemic Politics*. An effective pandemic response relies on persuading people to protect themselves and their fellow citizens through behavior changes that are not easy to compel or monitor by the government in a democratic society. Because of that, trust is a vital component of effectively responding to a pandemic.⁵⁶ That is bad news for a low-trust country like the United States.

and Social Media,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, no. 3 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-028>.

⁴⁹ Jon Green, James N. Druckman, Matthew A. Baum, Katherine Ognyanova, Matthew D. Simonson, Roy H. Perlis, and David Lazer, “Media Use and Vaccine Resistance,” *PNAS Nexus* 2, no. 5 (May 2023): pgad146, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad146>.

⁵⁰ Ferreira Caceres et al., “The Impact of Misinformation on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *AIMS Public Health* 9, no. 2 (January 2022): 262–77, <https://doi.org/10.3934/publichealth.2022018>.

⁵¹ Frank Otto, “COVID-19 Misinformation: The Flip Side of ‘Knowledge Is Power,’” accessed 18 January 2024, <https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-blog/2022/october/covid-misinformation-the-flip-side-of-knowledge-is-power>.

⁵² Sarah Evanega, Mark Lynas, Jordan Adams, and Karinne Smolenyak, “Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 ‘Infodemic,’” Alliance for Science, October 2020, <https://allianceforscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Evanega-et-al-Coronavirus-misinformationFINAL.pdf>.

⁵³ Dominik A. Stecula and Matt Motta, “Joe Rogan Told His Millions of Listeners Not to Take His Anti-Vaccine Advice Seriously. Is It Too Late?” *Washington Post*, accessed 3 May 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/03/joe-rogan-told-his-millions-listeners-not-take-his-anti-vaccine-advice-seriously-is-it-too-late/>.

⁵⁴ Sahana Sule, Marisa C. DaCosta, Erin DeCou, Charlotte Gilson, Kate Wallace, and Sarah L. Goff., “Communication of COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media by Physicians in the US,” *JAMA Network Open* 6, no. 8 (August 2023): e2328928, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.28928>.

⁵⁵ Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*, 2022, 282–83.

⁵⁶ Thomas J. Bollyky, Ilona Kickbusch, and Michael Bang Petersen, “The Trust Gap,” *Foreign Affairs*, accessed 30 January 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trust-gap-fight-pandemic-divided-country?check_logged_in=1&utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=email_1&utm_content=20240119.

An examination of 177 countries and their COVID-19 performance in the first 18 months of the pandemic found that trust in government and interpersonal trust were correlated with lower infection rates, controlling for other important predictors.⁵⁷ A year-long panel study of eight countries found that polarization in COVID-19–related opinions and behaviors was less about political partisanship and ideology and more about levels of trust in the “system.” Differences in pandemic behaviors were larger between those who support the system and those who do not than between conservatives and liberals.⁵⁸ Trust also plays a role in misinformation seeking and acceptance, and how those influence behavior. For example, it was low-trust individuals who believed more COVID-19 misinformation and were more likely to report using alternative COVID-19 treatments, such as ivermectin or hydroxychloroquine, not sanctioned by trusted health agencies.⁵⁹

Building and maintaining trust, therefore, are crucial. Trust is “the best predictor of vaccine acceptance and an antidote to misinformation.”⁶⁰ But many governments distrust their people to do what is right and so focus on what not to do instead of clearly communicating what the public should be doing.⁶¹ Some governments, by engaging in condescending communication involving downplaying of negative or complicated facts or issuing vague reassurances, actually lower trust in the authorities and negatively affect vaccine acceptance.⁶² Instead, a clear communication strategy that tackles difficult questions, such as potential vaccine side effects, with explicit descriptions of trade-offs boosts trust in health authorities and increases vaccination support.⁶³ This is the opposite of the muddled messaging, ranging from masks to vaccinations, that agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration engaged in.⁶⁴

In short, trust undoubtedly played a role in the pandemic response, and does not fully and cleanly map onto partisan politics in the United States.⁶⁵ Omitting it from

⁵⁷ Thomas J. Bollyky et al., “Pandemic Preparedness and COVID-19: An Exploratory Analysis of Infection and Fatality Rates, and Contextual Factors Associated with Preparedness in 177 Countries, from Jan 1, 2020, to Sept 30, 2021,” *The Lancet* 399, no. 10334 (April 2022): 1489–512, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)00172-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)00172-6).

⁵⁸ Louise Halberg Nielsen and Michael Bang Petersen, “Beyond the Polarized US: Ideology and System Trust as Drivers of COVID-19 Attitudes and Behaviors across Eight Western Countries,” PsyArXiv, November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/b84wr>, preprint: not peer reviewed.

⁵⁹ Roy H. Perlis, Kristin Lunz Trujillo, Jon Green, Alauna Safarpour, James N. Druckman, Mauricio Santillana, Katherine Ognyanova, and David Lazer, “Misinformation, Trust, and Use of Ivermectin and Hydroxychloroquine for COVID-19,” *JAMA Health Forum* 4, no. 9 (September 2023): e233257, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2023.3257>.

⁶⁰ Michael Bang Petersen, “COVID Lesson: Trust the Public with Hard Truths,” *Nature* 598, no. 7880 (October 2021): 237, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-02758-2>.

⁶¹ Frederik Jørgensen, Alexander Bor, and Michael Bang Petersen, “Compliance without Fear: Individual-Level Protective Behaviour during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *British Journal of Health Psychology* 26, no. 2 (2021): 679–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12519>.

⁶² Michael Bang Petersen et al., “Transparent Communication about Negative Features of COVID-19 Vaccines Decreases Acceptance but Increases Trust,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 29 (July 2021): e2024597118, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024597118>.

⁶³ Kim Mannemar Sønderskov, Peter Thisted Dinesen, and Søren Dinesen Østergaard, “Sustained COVID-19 Vaccine Willingness after Safety Concerns over the Oxford-AstraZeneca Vaccine,” *Danish Medical Journal* 68, no. 5 (March 2021): A03210292.

⁶⁴ Jay Varma, “How Public Health Failed America,” *The Atlantic* (blog), accessed 15 May 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/how-public-health-failed-america/629869/>.

⁶⁵ Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, “Trust and Distrust in America,” *Pew Research Center—U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), accessed 22 July 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.

the analysis deprives the readers of more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the pandemic response.

Learning Lessons from the COVID-19 Response

In *Pandemic Politics*, Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky arrive at the conclusion that, due to the preexisting conditions that were present, the American response to the pandemic has been a disaster. It is hard to argue with that assessment. A generous observer might suggest that some aspects of the response were adequate. On the fiscal side, for example, the U.S. response was generous, with more than \$5 trillion allocated to addressing the pandemic (and that encompasses action taken by Donald Trump, not just Joe Biden).⁶⁶ That placed the U.S. response among the largest in the developed world.⁶⁷ But the only statistic that should matter is that more than one million Americans perished during the pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic, the American cumulative mortality rate was 28 percent higher than that of the European Union. If the American response during that time looked more like the response of some of the East Asian countries, experts estimate that more than 400,000 American lives could have been saved.⁶⁸ Operation Warp Speed was a huge success in developing vaccines in record time, and these vaccines helped save about 2.4 million lives globally.⁶⁹ But better leadership and communication efforts could have helped to get vaccine shots in the arms of more Americans.

Overall, the pandemic helped dispel conventional wisdom about how our system would respond to such a crisis. For example, that in an emergency, politics takes a back seat to policy, that science advisors enable policymakers to choose the best policies, or that indicators of success and failure are clear, and the outcomes can be easily defined and objectively measured. The U.S. record in responding to the pandemic, according to some scholars, has been among the worst in the world.⁷⁰ This is a damning indictment and *Pandemic Politics* is an invaluable resource in helping us understand why we have done so poorly as a nation in addressing this crisis.

The authors end the book with lessons for the future and highlight the importance of science and health communication efforts going forward. This is a worthwhile call. Politicians and public health experts did not use the expertise of social scientists enough during the pandemic. An analysis of behavioral social science research from early stages of the pandemic shows that policy recommendations in

⁶⁶ Alicia Parlapiano, Deborah B. Solomon, Madeleine Ngo, and Stacy Cowley, "Where \$5 Trillion in Pandemic Stimulus Money Went," *The New York Times*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/11/us/how-covid-stimulus-money-was-spent.html>.

⁶⁷ Alex Durante, "U.S. Fiscal Response to COVID-19 among Largest of Industrialized Countries," *Tax Foundation* (blog), accessed 4 January 2022, <https://taxfoundation.org/blog/us-covid19-fiscal-response/>.

⁶⁸ Jaime Sepúlveda, Neelam Sekhri Feachem, Kelly Sanders, and Forrest Barker, "The United States' Response to COVID-19: A Case Study of the First Year," University of California, San Francisco Institute for Global Health Sciences, December 2020, https://globalhealthsciences.ucsf.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/summary_us_case_study5.pdf.

⁶⁹ Virat Agrawal, Neeraj Sood, and Christopher M. Whaley, "The Impact of the Global COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign on All-Cause Mortality," Working Paper 31812, Working Paper Series, National Bureau of Economic Research, October 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w31812>.

⁷⁰ Sheila Jasanoff, Stephen Hilgartner, J. Benjamin Hurlbut, Onur Özgöde, and Margarita Rayzberg, "Comparative Covid Response: Crisis, Knowledge, Politics," accessed 12 January 2021, https://compcore.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Comparative-Covid-Response_Crisis-Knowledge-Politics_Interim-Report.pdf.

these publications were largely correct.⁷¹ Leveraging expertise and helping public health experts and politicians craft messages that resonate with the public should certainly be the most important lesson we draw from the pandemic.

Of course, there are broader issues at play, too. Communicating science is hard, because science is not a collection of stale facts but, rather, a process that can be messy. Science, as a process, involves a lot of uncertainty, and that certainty is difficult to communicate effectively to the public. Scientific findings can change on the basis of new evidence. That is particularly relevant when the world is dealing with a new virus. There is no easy way to communicate science when scientists are in the process of finding out what the truth is. Here, the lesson should be to promote science literacy, not from the standpoint of the public being familiar with a set of scientific facts, but to better educate the public about what *science* as a process actually means. Even some people who followed the public health recommendations did so for identitarian reasons, not really understanding what science is. If anything, the pandemic has shown the limits of slogans like “follow the science” or “trust the science,” because those do not tell you what to do, why to do it, and why a given recommendation can change on the basis of new evidence.

It is also worth highlighting that more expert voices do not necessarily translate to more clarity or more trust. Even within the expert community, for example, different considerations could have resulted in different calculations and recommendations. Take the case of Sweden, which, unlike the United States or Brazil, was not led by a populist leader but rather a governing coalition led by Social Democrats. Swedish state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell prioritized voluntary measures and personal responsibility over more intrusive policy interventions, like lockdowns. Sweden never closed its elementary schools, for example. Because of this, the country was deemed a “pariah state” because of its dramatically different approach from that of most other developed democracies.⁷² Some of these voluntary measures worked well and others less so, especially the measures aimed at protecting elderly Swedes.⁷³ This showcases that even within the expert community, there were different voices and different sets of considerations guiding them, rather than a single approach.

But even if there was uniform agreement among experts, many in public health thought parking Dr. Anthony Fauci in front of television cameras while repeating scientific facts would persuade Americans to wear a mask or get a vaccine. In reality, messengers matter as much, if not more, than the message. So, when conservative politicians and media began to push back against Dr. Fauci, his ability to persuade anyone on the political right disappeared.

Furthermore, when the message itself is convoluted and confusing, no messenger can save it. Perhaps this was on display the most when discussing school closing or mask mandates. In the spring of 2022, the CDC eliminated mask recommendations for everyone except children aged 5 years or younger, despite that age group

⁷¹ Kai Ruggeri et al., “A Synthesis of Evidence for Policy from Behavioural Science during COVID-19,” *Nature* 625, no. 7993 (January 2024): 134–47, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06840-9>.

⁷² Johan Norberg, “Sweden during the Pandemic,” Cato Institute, accessed 29 August 2023, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/sweden-during-pandemic>.

⁷³ Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, “Sweden’s Coronavirus Strategy: The Public Health Agency and the Sites of Controversy,” *World Medical & Health Policy* 14, no. 3 (September 2022): 507–27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wmh3.449>.

being the least likely to be infected with COVID-19.⁷⁴ It is inconsistencies like this that likely contributed to erosion of public trust in scientists during the pandemic.⁷⁵

School closings, in particular, demonstrate how viewing the pandemic policy responses in terms of trade-offs, with a bit more humility, might have been a more effective communication strategy. There was no one correct way to respond to the pandemic, and many policy choices we implemented were not neutral. Closing schools had negative consequences, by devastating learning outcomes among students, particularly those less well-off.⁷⁶ Students who spent the most time learning at home lost the equivalent of about 50 percent of what they would have learned in math classes if school had been held in person.⁷⁷ These are generational losses that will affect students in poverty the most, for decades to come. Other COVID-19 policies also had negative consequences. Social isolation, pandemic-related anxiety, and associated factors contributed greatly to mental health issues, increased alcohol use, and even suicidal ideation.⁷⁸ This is not to say there were better policy alternatives. But more clarity about communicating potential negative effects of these policies in the long term would have likely helped the public deal with these issues.

We will likely be grappling with these questions for years to come. Only understanding what went wrong during the COVID-19 pandemic will help us better prepare for the next pandemic. And as we wrestle with these questions and try to learn our lessons, *Pandemic Politics* will continue to serve as an invaluable resource to anyone interested in what happened during the novel coronavirus pandemic in the United States. The only hope is that public health experts, politicians, policy-makers, and other practitioners read this book and understand and implement the lessons it offers.

⁷⁴ Alex Tabarrok, “The Big Fail,” *Marginal Revolution*, accessed 28 November 2023, <https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2023/11/the-big-fail.html>.

⁷⁵ Ryan Cross, “Will Public Trust in Science Survive the Pandemic?” *Chemical & Engineering News*, accessed 25 January 2021, <https://cen.acs.org/policy/global-health/Will-public-trust-in-science-survive-the-pandemic/99/i3>.

⁷⁶ Megan Kuhfeld, Jim Soland, Karyn Lewis, and Emily Morton., “The Pandemic Has Had Devastating Impacts on Learning. What Will It Take to Help Students Catch Up?” *Brookings*, accessed 3 March 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-pandemic-has-had-devastating-impacts-on-learning-what-will-it-take-to-help-students-catch-up/>.

⁷⁷ David Leonhardt, “Not Good for Learning,” *The New York Times*, accessed 5 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/05/briefing/school-closures-covid-learning-loss.html>.

⁷⁸ Mark É. Czeisler, “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation during the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020,” *MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (2020): 1049–57, <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>.