Wave 2: When and how the U.S. should reopen is a matter of politics, trust in institutions and media, survey says

Strong majority of Democrats, 45% of Republicans favor continuing the lockdown; more than 50% of all Americans think geotracking should be voluntary

By Marianne Bertrand, Guglielmo Briscese, Maddalena Grignani, and Salma Nassar

Wave 1: How are Americans Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis? 7 Key Findings from a Household Survey

Researchers at the Poverty Lab and the Rustandy Center for Social Sector Innovation at the University of Chicago are releasing the second wave of results from a longitudinal survey, which studies a representative sample of American households to understand the impact the COVID-19 crisis is having on their lives. Preliminary results from the first wave of the survey, conducted on April 6-11 in partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago, showed how the crisis had disproportionately negatively impacted (both financially and emotionally) lower income households, and in particular women within these households. Findings from the first wave also

revealed that most respondents were supportive of (and compliant with) the lockdown measures, except for a proportion of contrary respondents who believed the media was exaggerating the situation.

In the second wave of the survey, which was administered in the week of April 13-18, researchers further probed respondents about their support for extending lockdown measures in order to save lives, as well as support for policies that would help ease the restrictions and speed up the reopening of the economy. These policies include the use of a geotracking app to monitor COVID-19 contagions like the ones adopted by South Korea, Singapore, and, more recently, Italy.

The data reveals that politics is the overwhelming force dividing Americans in their level of support for these policies, with how households have been economically impacted by the COVID-crisis so far playing only a minimal role.

When should the U.S. government relax the lockdown measures and reopen the economy?
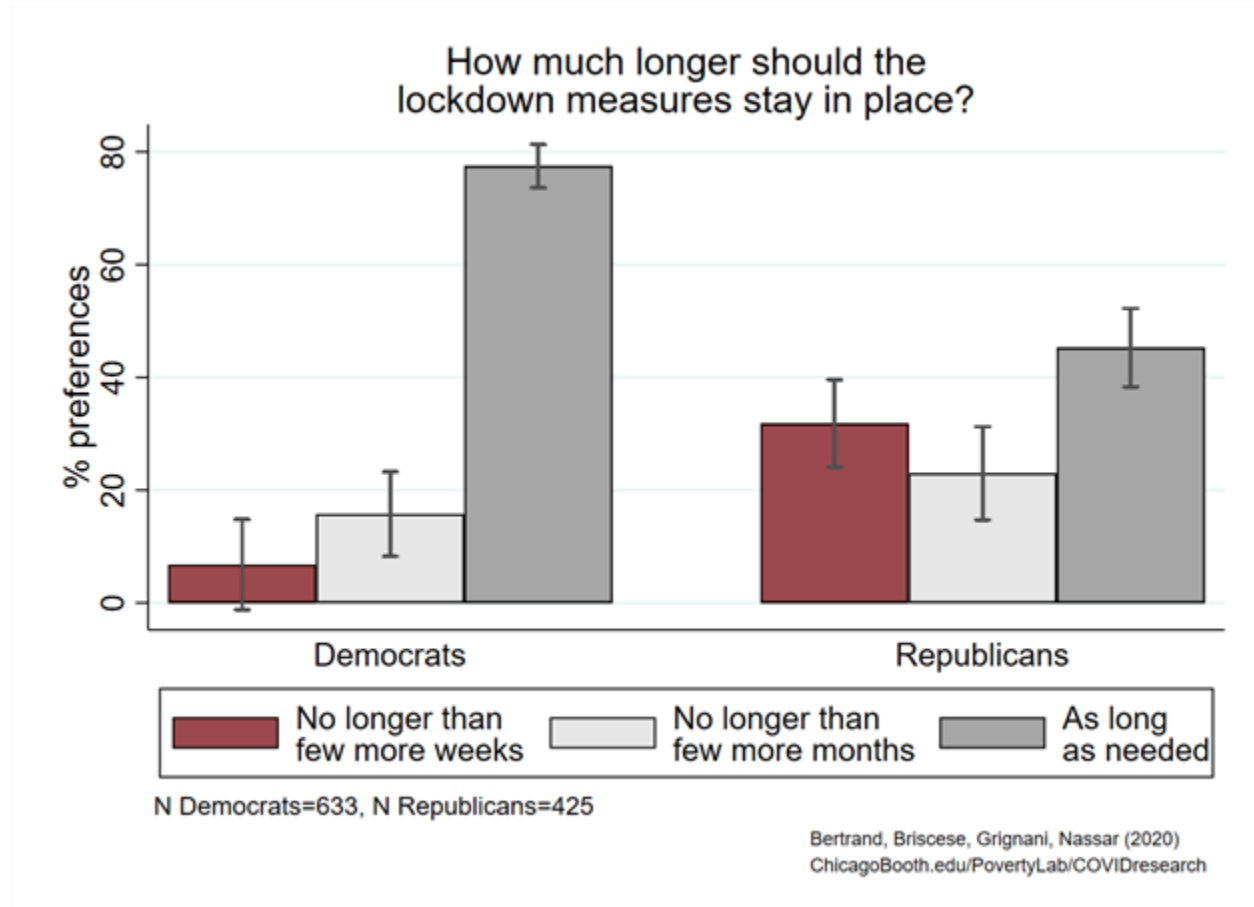
Survey respondents were asked to first read a short paragraph about the hypothetical trade-offs between saving more lives and the negative impact on the economy of longer lockdowns.[1] They were then asked to choose what they thought was the "morally right thing to do for the government" and could pick one of three options: keep measures in place but no longer than a few more weeks; no longer than a few more months; or as long needed.

Results show sharp differences in the answer to this question across party lines, which are robust to multivariate regression analysis. Some 77 percent of Democrats favor lockdown measures to stay in place as long as needed, while only about 45 percent of Republicans share this view. In contrast, the data reveals no strong association between having lost income due to COVID-19, or fear of losing one's job, and views about the right length of the lockdown. Among survey respondents, 41 percent indicate having been negatively impacted financially by the
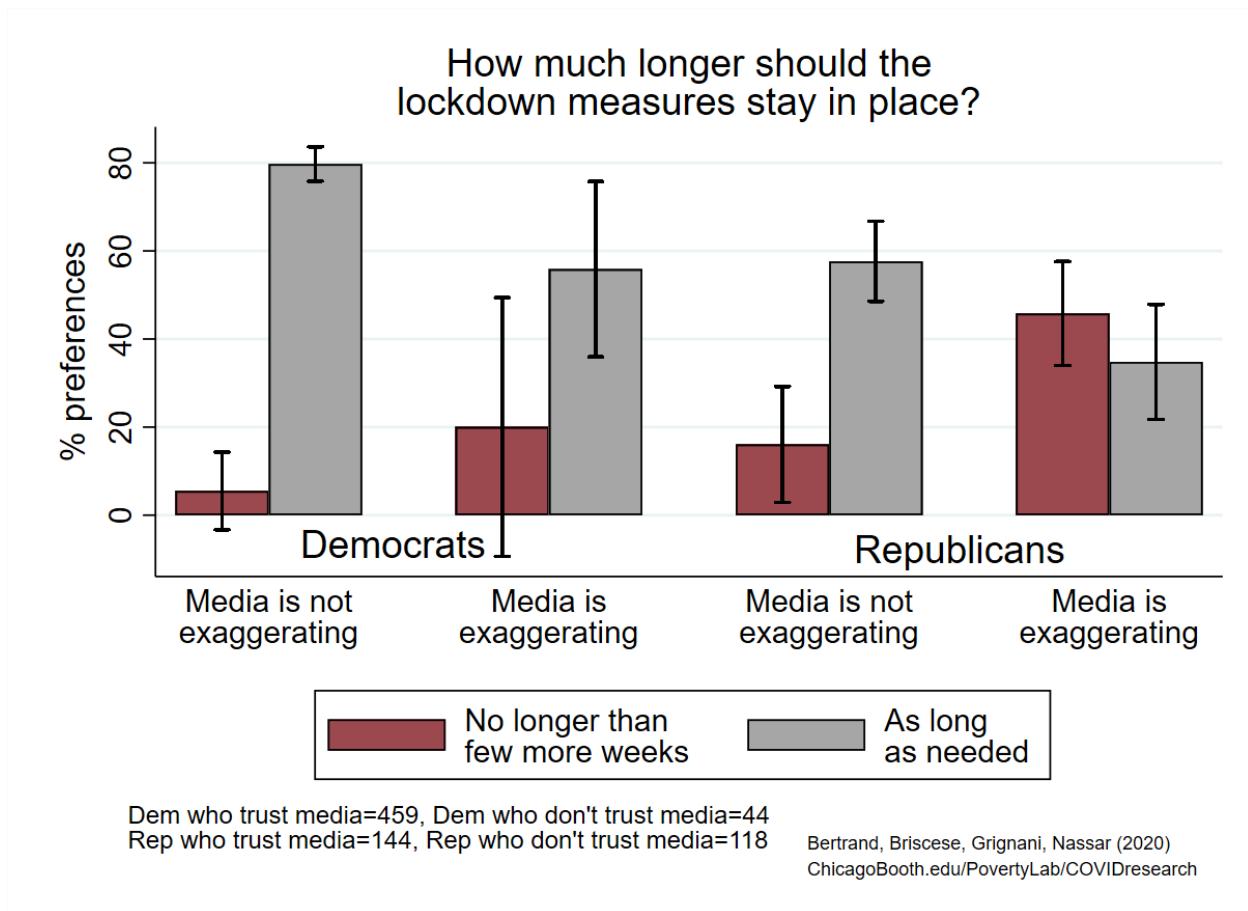
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[1] The paragraph stated: "*Existing data shows that the coronavirus epidemic has so far cost the lives of more than 22,000 people in the U.S. Physical distancing measures, such as stay-at-home orders, are being put in place to help contain the spread of the virus. However, some of these measures could have a negative impact on the economy.*"

COVID-19 crisis. Yet, all else being equal, these respondents were not more likely to favor a quick reopening.

In other words, politics more than economics is dividing Americans when it comes to what is the right trade-off our government should make between saving lives and hurting the economy.

How much longer should the lockdown measures stay in place?

N Democrats=633, N Republicans=425

Bertrand, Briscese, Grignani, Nassar (2020)
ChicagoBooth.edu/PovertyLab/COVIDresearch

Another key factor in the level of support for a longer lockdown is trust in the media. Individuals who believe the media is accurately reporting on the extent of the COVID-19 threat are much more likely to favor a longer lockdown than individuals who believe the media is exaggerating the extent of the threat, as shown in the figure below. While this is true both among Republicans and Democrats, a much larger share of Republicans than Democrats believe the media is exaggerating: while 35 percent of Republicans believe the media is exaggerating the threat, only 9 percent of Democrats do.

How much longer should the lockdown measures stay in place?

Dem who trust media=459, Dem who don't trust media=44
Rep who trust media=144, Rep who don't trust media=118

Bertrand, Briscese, Grignani, Nassar (2020)
ChicagoBooth.edu/PovertyLab/COVIDresearch

More than 40 percent of Republicans that report not trusting the media's COVID-19 coverage favor a quick reopening of the economy, likely because they do not believe the drastic public health implications of such a policy. Besides trust in the media, trust in the U.S. president is another important correlate of preferences for an earlier reopening of the economy. Individuals who have low confidence in the president are much more likely to favor a longer lockdown. While this is true both among Republicans and Democrats, not surprisingly, a much larger share of Democrats have low confidence in the president (80 percent of Democrats compared to 24 percent among Republicans).
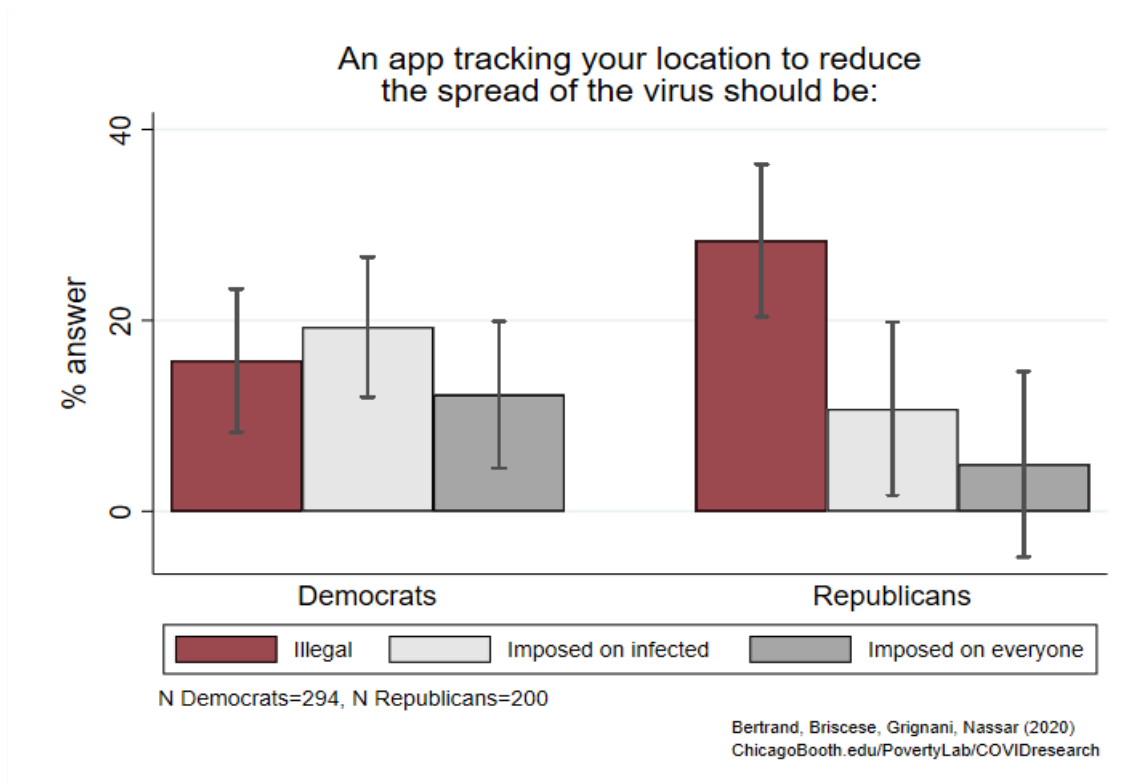
How should the U.S. government manage the transition to reopening the economy?

Countries around the world that were impacted by COVID-19 earlier than the U.S. are now managing the transition to a staggered reopening of the economy. The U.S. federal and state governments have a number of policies available at their disposal to manage this transition while minimizing the risks of a second wave of preventable deaths. These include mandating the use of masks, limiting accessibility of public spaces, or implementing a geotracking app to
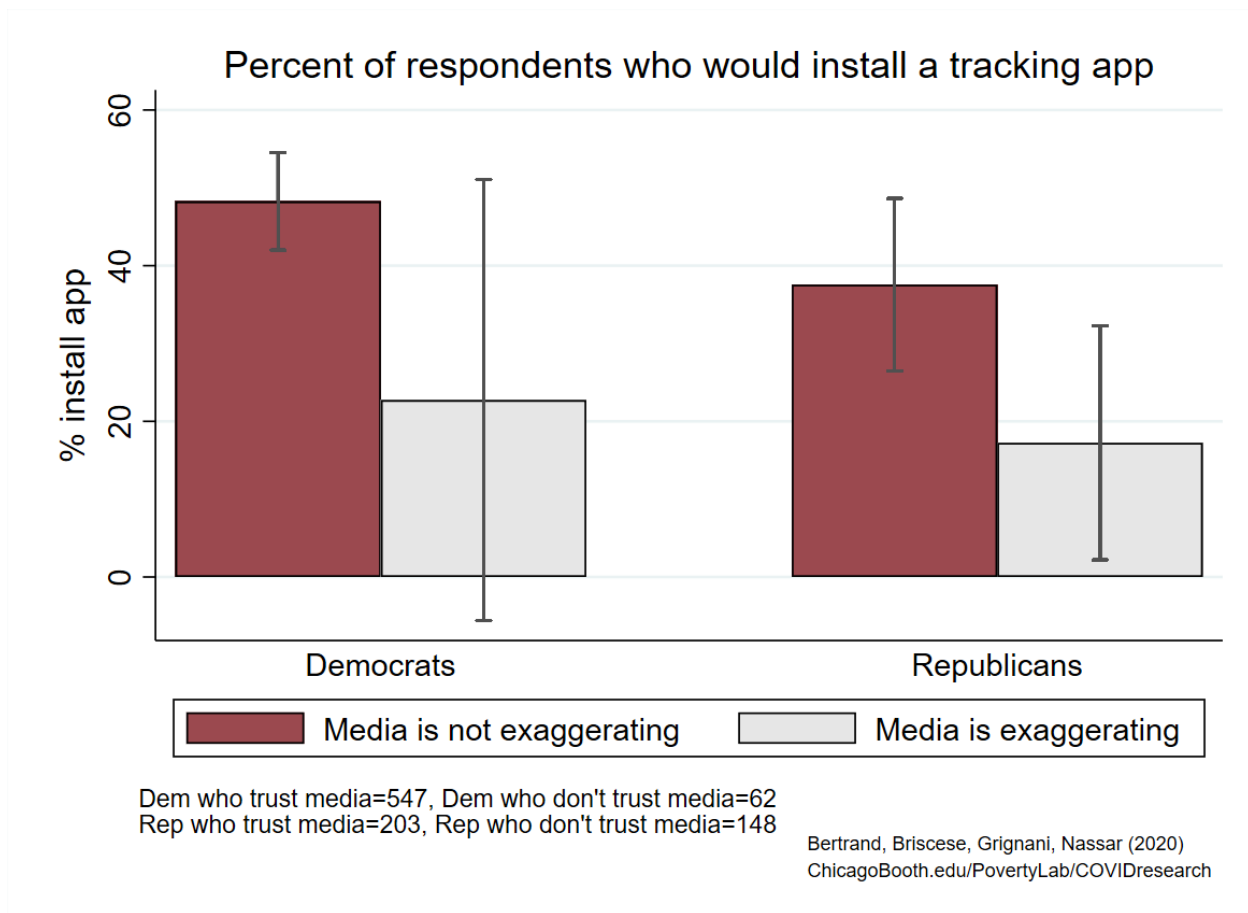
help target citizens who came in close contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19, similar to those implemented by South Korea and Singapore.

However, the success of these measures crucially depends on the level of public support and willingness to comply. Efforts such as the aforementioned app, for instance, would require either a strong mandate from the government to impose it on the population or rely on a large majority of citizens to volunteer to participate for it to be effective.

Our survey reveals again a strong political divide in the level of support for, and likelihood of complying with, a tracking app. Overall, most Americans (55 percent of respondents) think that installing the app should be voluntary (53 percent of Democrats and 56 percent of Republicans, which we exclude from the figure below for legibility). About 20 of Americans believe that such an app should be illegal, while a lower 10 percent believe that it should be imposed on everyone. A much greater share of Republicans than Democrats (28 percent versus 16 percent) believe that such an app should be illegal. Only 5 percent of Republicans believe such an app should be imposed on everyone if it helps control the spread of the virus, compared to 12 percent of Democrats.

An app tracking your location to reduce the spread of the virus should be:

N Democrats=294, N Republicans=200

Bertrand, Briscese, Grignani, Nassar (2020)
ChicagoBooth.edu/PovertyLab/COVIDresearch

All respondents were asked whether they would voluntarily install this app on their own phone to help reduce the spread of the virus. Again, the data reveals a large political divide, with trust in the media's coverage playing an important mediator of these political differences.

Percent of respondents who would install a tracking app

Dem who trust media=547, Dem who don't trust media=62
Rep who trust media=203, Rep who don't trust media=148

Bertrand, Briscese, Grignani, Nassar (2020)
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Respondents who use their phones more frequently to make online purchases are more willing to install such an app on their phones, perhaps due to lower levels of privacy concerns. Interestingly, women also report being more willing to install the app, while African Americans report being more hesitant. This is true even after controlling for their age, income levels, political preferences, education, and trust in the media and institutions.

Researchers will continue unpacking some of these results, but early evidence suggests those who experienced a loss of income due to the COVID-19 crisis were more likely to consider installing the app on their phones, suggesting that Americans might be more willing to give up some of their privacy after an economic shock. Further, trust in the media and the federal government seem to drive differences in views across America: the lower the trust, the higher the likelihood of opposing the app.

Note: The survey was administered using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population.

—Check back to the [COVID-19 Social Impact Research Page](#) for the latest results

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