

**The U.S. Opinion War Over Masking During the Age of COVID -
A Public Opinion Research Project**

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Research Questions + Issue Background

Few singular objects have caused more contention in the United States in the last 10 years than the piece of cloth or paper we stretch across our nose and mouth when we go to visit grandma, pick up milk at the grocery store or enter a classroom. Perceptions about wearing face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic for the last year and a half were the main focus of this research project. This project was most interested in how those masking perceptions aligned with political party or other cultural beliefs. In our quantitative study on masking perceptions in the United States, we hoped to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did American political affiliations align with their perceptions of masking in public during the COVID pandemic?

RQ2: How did Americans of different political affiliations perceive a risk of isolation when not wearing a mask in public?

The main reason for American resistance to masking, according to researchers Jeffrey Lyons and Luke Fowler (2021), is America's fierce individualist sensibilities, with some even resorting to calling the masks face muzzles. Lyons and Fowler (2021) said, "there is also the issue of control aversion, where individuals are less likely to comply with mandated behaviors because freedom of choice has been removed and/or a lack of trust in government" (Lyons & Fowler, 2021, p. 108). For pro-maskers, the face-covering is often seen as a badge of courage or as *The Washington Post's* Isaac StanleyBecker explained in 2020: "The coverings have taken on such potent social symbolism because, rather than being used solely for self-protection, they serve a more communal function: preventing users, including asymptomatic carriers, from infecting others. Some have chafed at shouldering that burden, decrying orders as government

overreach,” (p.1). Discovering linkages between political views and masking beliefs was the aim of this study.

Sampling Method

Research responses for the U.S. Opinion War Over Masking During the Age of COVID Public Opinion Research Project were collected online over one month through the Qualtrics survey platform from October 11, 2021 to November 11, 2021. The survey method was quantitative surveying with the goal of at least 100 responses to increase the likelihood of reaching statistical significance in the target question areas. Ads with survey links attached and QR codes embedded to allow anyone to access the survey from their phones or computers were distributed multiple times each week during the survey period via online social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Survey links were also sent out over a few email listservs to different political groups in Connecticut to increase sample diversity.

The sampling time period was crucial as people are still living with COVID mask mandates and suggested mask requirements daily, and their knowledge of the subject should be recent. I chose the quantitative survey method to gather as many responses as possible and see if there could be statistical significance in those answers to rejoin my targeted research questions. I defined my target audience as ages 25-55 because that was the age group who seemed most vocal about masking in national surveys through Pew Research Center. To analyze the data, I exported all 127 responses from Qualtrics to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) module through Central Connecticut State University’s interface for this program.

Questionnaire Design

The U.S. Opinion War Over Masking survey questionnaire consisted of 30 dichotomous and interval questions to glean the extent of my audience's feelings on masking. The first 10 questions were designed to collect demographics or political or religious ideological data. To protect the privacy of all 127 respondents, no specific identifying demographic information was collected. The final 20 questions of the survey collected data on different facets of masking belief, including multiple choice and Likert scale questions, which allowed me to see the finer points of a person's opinions on masking of themselves or of children, feelings on seeing someone unmasked in public or even who to trust on masking.

These questions, the heart of the research, used multiple choice and slider scales to show a range of emotions or opinions on a particular aspect of the masking debate. The survey measured feelings on certain masking debates on scales from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." It also measured the importance of certain statements on masking on a scale from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important." The survey also measured a person's trust of different cohorts of people on masking such as celebrities, scientists or the President of the United States on a scale from "Not at all" to "A great deal."

Data

Within SPSS, I ran tests of my survey questions to show descriptive percentage frequencies and explored the likely direction of my correlations through cross tabulations. Then I ran inferential T-Tests for Equality of Means and Levene's Test for Equality of Variances looking to prove the statistical significance of the associations I thought I was seeing in the cross tabulations.

Frequencies

The basic demographic make-up of my sample was important to allow me to differentiate answers to the finer points of how people feel about masking. Ethnicity was not tested in later cross tabulations of results because the majority of respondents, almost 90 percent, identified as white. In my survey, men represented 22 percent of the sample while women were 77 percent. In political ideology, the majority of respondents (52 percent) were Democrats, 11 percent were Republican, 20 percent were Independent, with the rest of the sample contained Libertarians, Moderate Democrats and Moderate Republicans. Many of my respondents (35 percent) were parents of two children, while 22 percent had one child and 19 percent did not have children. Most of the respondents skewed older with 47 percent the 50 and up group, 36 percent were 41 to 49 years old, 9 percent were 31 to 40, 3 percent were 26-30 and one person was younger than that age group. In one measure of religiosity, 27 percent of respondents say they believe in a higher power and pray throughout their days. The next lowest measure of religiosity was 9 percent of respondents who are middle-of-the-road believers and pray some and another 9 percent who said they had little belief in a higher power and did not pray.

As the survey began examining feelings on masking, a majority of respondents (43 percent) seem to believe that masks protect you against COVID-19, while the second lowest number (32 percent) said masks probably do protect you. Only 6 percent said masks offer no protection. Half of respondents said they wear masks most of the time, while 27 percent said they must always wear them and 4 percent never wear a mask. Some 66 percent of respondents said wearing masks makes them feel confident. A full 18 percent are sad about daily mask wearing, and having to put on a mask makes 6 percent of respondents angry. When it came to kids wearing masks in school, 64 percent of respondents believed they should, 17 percent said they

probably should, but 8 percent strongly disagreed with children wearing masks while learning. Interestingly, 35 percent no longer have children in K-12 schools, and 47 percent have one or two children in K-12 schools. When asked to rank the importance to them of the statement, “Wearing a mask protects you and it protects me,” 54 percent said it was extremely important, 24 percent said it was very important, and 8 percent said it held no importance for them. Similar statistics accompanied the question, “Wearing a mask is one of the best things I can do for my family and community.” But in response to the statement that “Wearing a mask is something I do because the government requires it,” the percentages were reversed, and 28 percent said it was not important at all, 33 percent said it was moderately important and 4 percent said it was extremely important. When it came to the statement, “Wearing a mask is an affront to my right to choose my lifestyle,” a large majority (75 percent) said that was not important to them, while 10 percent said it was slightly important, and 3 percent said it was extremely important.

To the question about the frequency of annoyance with mask wearing, 25 percent of people surveyed are never annoyed with it, 51 percent are sometimes annoyed, 10 percent are annoyed most of the time, and mask wearing always bothers 4 percent of respondents. But, love it or hate it, we’re all forgetful sometimes, and 57 percent of respondents admitted forgetting their mask when going out in public, while 40 percent said they never had forgotten to bring a mask. For those who were caught out without a mask, 28 percent said they had been shunned by others two or three times, and 53 percent said that had never happened to them.

In the questions testing levels of societal trust on the subject of masking, 79 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I will wear a mask in indoor settings. I trust the science,” and 13 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the phrase. The majority of respondents (61 percent) did not trust clergy at all on masking advice, and 29 percent trusted

church leaders a little or moderate amount. Only 6 percent trusted the word of clergy leaders a great deal on masking. Trust in the word of the President of the United States on mask mandates was low with 16 percent trusting him a lot or a great deal. Almost 50 percent trust the President a little or moderate amount on masking guidance, and 32 percent do not trust him at all on that subject. But in the case of the Centers for Disease Control, 80 percent of respondents said they trust the CDC a lot or a great deal. For Hollywood celebrities, 81 percent of respondents said they did not trust their guidance on masking at all.

Cross Tabulations

Looking for an increased likelihood of association between the many variables in this study, I ran 31 cross tabulations in SPSS. While 29 percent of the women have daily prayer routines, 19 percent of the men said they pray daily. But 12 percent of the men do not pray or believe in a higher power, and 7 percent of the women seemed to feel that way. About 84 percent of the women say they wear masks all or most of the time, and 65 percent of men wear face coverings in that same frequency. Just 8 percent of men and 3 percent of women said they never wear masks. The majority of both male (69 percent) and female respondents (71 percent) said that wearing a mask makes them feel confident. Men felt angrier about mask wearing at 12 percent, while women were sadder about wearing masks at 18 percent. Women (68 percent) were more likely to strongly trust the science and wear masks indoors than were men (50 percent). Of those people who were angry about mask wearing, 71 percent seem to also not believe masks can protect them in the pandemic. Of those who felt sad about having to wear a daily mask, 44 percent also seemed unsure whether or not the mask was effectual in protecting them.

Political ideology cross tabulation tests tended to follow predictable party lines. Of the Republicans surveyed, 21 percent see themselves as moderately conservative, while the majority (71 percent) see themselves in the hard core conservative range. With the Democrats, 52 percent rate themselves in the hardcore liberal range and 13 percent are moderates. Of the Independent respondents, 49 percent say they are moderates, 20 percent mark themselves as hardcore liberals and just 4 percent identify as hardcore conservatives. On mask wearing frequency, 29 percent of Republicans said they never wear a mask, and 36 percent sometimes do. With Democrats, 36 percent always wear masks, and 59 percent wear face coverings most of the time. Of the Independents, 50 percent wear masks most of the time, 29 percent wear them all of the time and 13 percent wear masks half the time. Neither Democrats nor Independent respondents admitted to never wearing masks. Republicans and Democrats were staunch opposites on the subject of students wearing masks – 50 percent of Republicans strongly disagreed, 83 percent of Democrats strongly agreed, and 68 percent of Independents felt similarly on kids wearing masks in school.

In cross tabulation tests for age ranges, 24 percent of people 50 and older said they had been shunned publicly for not wearing a mask. For those 41-49 years old, 28 percent said they had been shunned a few times for the same offense. Very few people below 30 had felt shunned for not wearing a mask in public and most respondents said they had not experienced social shunning at all. When they saw people in public not wearing their masks, 75 percent of 25-30 year old people said they felt angry, 17 percent of people 50 and older felt afraid and 25 percent of people 31-40 felt happy about it. In the measure of age versus the belief in mask protection, 80 percent of the eldest members of the survey felt masks definitely or probably protected them. Of those who felt masks definitely or probably did not protect them were 25 percent of the 31-40 age groups.

T-Tests

Searching for statistical validation of the seeming correlations I was seeing in my cross tabulations, I ran 31 Independent-Samples T Tests in SPSS. Within those tests, 19 results had statistically significant differences of less than 0.05. Comparing the means of gender and mask wearing frequency, men ($M=3.50$, $SD=1.24$) and women ($M=3.99$, $SD=.973$) had quite different mask wearing habits, $t(34)=-1.9$, $p=.009$. The degrees of masking belief in protection against COVID and respondent feelings when they saw someone not wearing a mask was significant between those who were positive masks protected them ($M=4.4$, $SD= 1.6$) to those who thought masks offered no protection ($M=1.9$, $SD=.641$), $t(23)=8.2$, $p<.001$. As in the gender test, there was a connection between those who believed masking protects them and whether ($M=4.8$, $SD=.664$) or not their children ($M=1.8$, $SD=1.17$) should wear masks, $t(8)=7.2$, $p=.009$.

But it was in the political party T Tests where we saw deep yet predictable associations. In the frequency of annoyance test for mask wearing, Democrats ($M=1.8$, $SD=.728$) were less bothered than were Republicans ($M=3.1$, $SD=1.3$) by wearing masks in public, $t(15)=3.8$, $p<.001$. More Democrats ($M=8.6$, $SD=.636$) than Republicans ($M=10.6$, $SD=1.3$) associated mask wearing with protection from COVID, $t(14)=5.7$, $p<.001$. The question of whether or not a mask impedes your rights as an American saw mostly Republicans ($M=3$, $SD=1.6$) agreeing with that statement and fewer Democrats ($M=1$, $SD=.173$), $t(13)=4.8$, $p<.001$. Democrats ($M=4.6$, $SD=.888$) tended to trust the science on masking and the advice of the CDC more than Republicans ($M=2$, $SD=1.6$), $t(15)=-6.08$, $p=.001$. By far, more Republicans ($M=1.4$, $SD=.633$) than Democrats ($M=2.9$, $SD=1.25$) trusted the President's word on masking, $t(39)=-6.68$, $p<.001$.

In the age T Tests, the most significant results came between ages 31 to 40 and 50 and older and between respondents with reported ages 31-40 and 41-49. The latter age groups, 31 to 40 ($M=2$, $SD=.953$) and 41-49 ($M=1.4$, $SD=.834$) saw a difference in how much each age group trusted clergy on masking, $t(16)=1.9$, $p=.040$. The eldest group of ages 50 and older ($M=2.6$, $SD=1.2$) tended to trust the President's word on masking slightly more than did respondents ages 31 to 40 ($M=2$, $SD=1.1$), $t(17)=-1.7$, $p=.05$. Tests on the results from respondents ages 18-25 did not yield strong results because of the low sample in that range.

Data Interpretation

In the beginning of this research project, I wanted to explore the disparate opinions around masking in the United States and how that might connect to different political affiliations. To refine the research results, I proposed two main research questions:

RQ1: How did American political affiliations align with their perceptions of masking in public during the COVID pandemic?

RQ2: Did Americans of different political affiliations perceive a risk of isolation when not wearing a mask in public?

After a month of collecting 127 completed surveys and another month running dozens of tests on the data in SPSS, I concluded the survey gave satisfactory answers to *RQ1*, but came up short when trying to answering *RQ2* in a statistically significant way.

In the Independent-Samples T Tests portion of my research, I found statistically significant results to suggest that Republicans have less trust in the science and scientists at the CDC on masking guidance but tend to trust the President's word on such matters. Democrats,

however, trusted the President very little on masking and trusted the science much more. Many of the Republicans surveyed also looked at masking as an impediment to their constitutional American freedoms, and most Democrats in the study did not consider that statement important.

These results underscore and update recent literature on masking in the United States. In July 2020, *The Washington Post* reported “three quarters of Americans favor requiring people to wear face coverings in public to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, including 89 percent of Democrats and 58 percent of Republicans, according to an Associated Press NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll,” (Fisher, 2020, p.1). Researchers Claudia Deane, Kim Parker and John Gramlich (2021) found a consistent opinion divide along political party lines that “76% of Democrats said they had worn a mask in stores [all or most of the time](#) in the past month, compared with 53% of Republicans,” (para. 24). But in September 2021, the Pew Research team of Alec Tyson, Cary Funk, Brian Kennedy and Courtney Johnson found that enthusiasm for mask wearing was cooling nationally as “Democrats are now more than twice as likely as Republicans to say they’ve been wearing a mask in stores and businesses all or most of the time in recent weeks (71% vs. 30%). In February, large shares of both Democrats and Republicans had reported frequent mask wearing (93% and 83%, respectively),” (para. 19-20).

In my research on mask wearing frequency along party lines, the survey showed 29 percent of Republicans said they never wear a mask, and 36 percent sometimes do. With Democrats, 36 percent always wear masks, and 59 percent wear face coverings most of the time.

Looking more closely at the Pew Research Center teams’ data demographics, Van Kessel and Quinn’s (2020) study featured a widening division on the willingness to wear masks between people who identified as Democrat versus Republicans. Democrats were more likely to worry about their health impacts from not wearing masks, and Republicans “expressed a belief that the

pandemic is being used to manipulate Americans for political gain,” (Van Kessel & Quinn, 2020, para. 14).

When it came to students wearing masks at school in my survey, the divide was clear and statistically significant. Republicans and Democrats were staunch opposites in how they felt about their kids wearing masks while learning, with 50 percent of Republicans strongly disagreeing and 83 percent of Democrats strongly agreeing. Though not statistically significant, it is important to note that Independents surveyed tended to align with Democrats on student masking and increased masking frequency, though ideologically, most Independents surveyed identified as moderates.

Though the survey successfully proved *RQ1*, it fell short in proving the second question with statistical certainty. Though cross tabulations showed indications that some respondents felt ostracized for not wearing or forgetting to wear their masks in public, the T Test statistics did not fulfill that question. Still, in the cross tabulation research, 24 percent of people 50 and older and 28 percent of respondents aged 41-49 said they had been shunned publicly for not wearing a mask in public. Because the overall numbers of those reporting these instances were a small part of the whole, that might prove these cases to be more of an individual experience and less statistically relevant in this study.

Though I was satisfied with the majority of the findings in this public opinion research study, there were a few weaknesses that bear reporting. My survey respondents were ethnically non-diverse, and the survey question scales were slightly too complicated for clear SPSS results in some cases. I believe a longer survey period would have allowed for more diversification of ethnicities and age groups in this survey. To collect and further study the experiences of those who felt shunned for not wearing a mask whether intentionally or by forgetfulness, research

using a qualitative interview approach might be employed to bring more clarity to that experience during this pandemic, which has altered all of our lives in cellular ways we are still uncovering.

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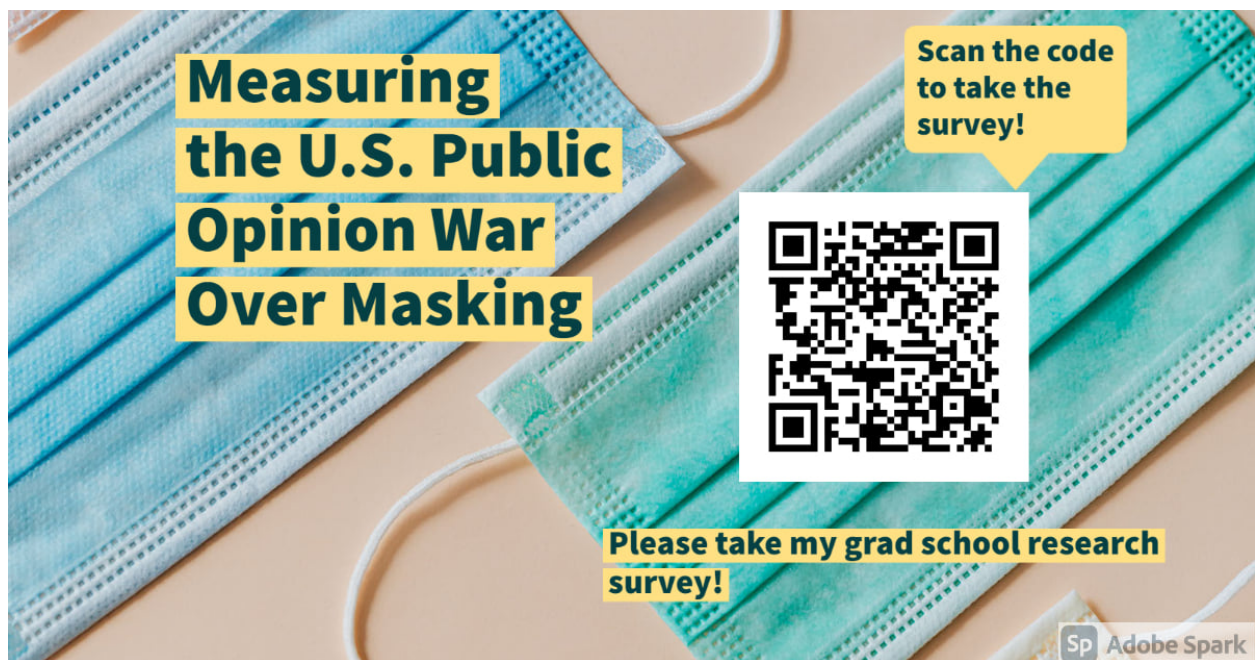
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Addendum, Part 1



Addendum Part 2 – The Survey -- attached as a .pdf