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**The Political Pandemic:
Investigating the Relationship between Political Ideology and COVID-19 Compliance**

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April 23, 2021

Author Note:

Study 1 was completed with Allison M. Bihl and Michael A. Humphrey for PSYC 311: Research Methods in Behavioral Science II.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction and Literature Review	4
Study 1	15
Method	16
Results	19
Discussion	21
Study 2	22
Method	25
Results	33
Discussion	37
General Discussion	39
Limitations	42
Applications and Future Research	43
References	46
Tables	55
Table 1	55
Table 2	56
Table 3	57
Figures	58
Figure 1	58
Figure 2	59
Figure 3	60
Figure 4	61
Appendix A	62
Appendix B	64

Abstract

One key to curtailing the health costs of COVID-19 is adherence to social distancing measures. Despite their importance, distancing measures seem to have proved divisive. The present research sought to identify ideological differences in behavioral compliance to distancing measures and to account for the psychological underpinnings of behavioral differences. A first study (April, 2020; $N=571$) using Amazon's Mechanical Turk revealed conservatives to be significantly less likely to obey social distancing recommendations than liberals. Differences among conservatives and liberals in adherence to self-reported social distancing practices were significantly mediated by perceived COVID-19 health risk and perceived media accuracy in covering the virus. A second MTurk study (November, 2020; $N=537$) replicated the previous finding that conservatives are significantly less likely to follow (and attitudinally support) COVID-mitigating measures than liberals. Differences in compliance and attitudes between liberals and conservatives were once again significantly mediated by perceived health risk and media accuracy, replicating the results found in the first study. The second study also identified additional significant mediators of the relationship between ideology and compliance: prioritization of the economy, belief in biased science, moral foundations (harm), and support for President Trump. Results from these studies have implications for responding to political polarization during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Keywords: COVID-19, social distancing, pandemic, political ideology, compliance

The Political Pandemic: Investigating the Relationship between Political Ideology and COVID-19 Compliance

In December 2019, a virus called the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was identified as the cause of a respiratory disease outbreak in Wuhan, Hubei Province, People's Republic of China (World Health Organization, 2020). The disease caused by the virus is called coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The virus quickly spread globally, infecting millions, and on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak to be characterized as a pandemic due to the rapidly growing number of confirmed cases and deaths caused by COVID-19.

The Federal Government, along with state and local governments, has taken preventative and proactive measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. President Trump proclaimed that the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States constituted a national emergency on March 1, 2020 (White House). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has worked tirelessly to provide information on how to help "flatten the curve" by practicing social distancing to reduce the number of patients overflowing the hospitals' across the nation. Such recommendations include maintaining a physical distance of at least 6 feet from others, avoiding crowded areas, and no group gatherings (CDC, 2020). The recommendations are for all people regardless of gender, age, or state residency. Though the virus has no preference for political affiliation, many Republican governors were resistant to ordering a state lockdown, and many others began lifting COVID restrictions before the risk of infection became insignificant. Republican governors in Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota had few to no restrictions for their residents at the outset of the pandemic (Mervosh et al. 2020); more recently, Republican governors in Texas, Mississippi, Iowa, North Dakota, and Montana lifted mask mandates in their

states while they were continuing to report large numbers of COVID cases (Lenthang, 2021). President Donald Trump himself frequently downplayed the severity of the coronavirus during his time in office, even as the United States recorded ever-increasing numbers of illnesses and deaths due to COVID-19 (Summers, 2020). While some Americans are strictly obeying the CDC's recommendations to help reduce transmission and infection, others have taken no precautionary efforts to help slow the spread of the coronavirus. The present research aims to understand how political affiliation influences social distancing behaviors during the coronavirus pandemic.

Members of the general public expect the news media to accurately report ongoing information about the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the number of confirmed cases, deaths, and recoveries, especially considering the possibility of rapid changes in this data on a day-to-day basis. They also expect the media to report on measures enacted by the government to combat the virus, most notably social distancing and mask mandates, as well as efforts to fight the disease through treatments and vaccines. The political divide in the nation should be reduced in an effort to overcome one common enemy: COVID-19. Now more than ever, trust in the media, science, and government measures may mean the difference between life and death. Given the severity and immediacy of the COVID-19 pandemic, one would expect that all individuals, regardless of political ideology, would adhere to mitigation measures such as social distancing. Unfortunately, not everyone is following government recommendations and mandates, and political ideology is a factor that could contribute to individuals' decisions about whether or not to comply with mitigation measures. There are multiple theories in psychology that can help predict how individuals of different political ideologies would respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, with multiple indicating conservatives would likely comply more due to underlying

associated characteristics that lead to increased disease avoidance behaviors, though others indicate that liberals would likely comply more as a result of the current situation where the pandemic has been politicized.

Theories Predicting Conservatives Would Comply

Moral foundations theory would seemingly suggest that conservatives would comply with mitigation measures more than liberals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moral foundations theory is based upon the idea that there are a number of principles (“foundations”) that people utilize in responding to various social situations (Clifford et al., 2015). This theory initially included five foundations: harm, which is characterized by concern for others and dislike of suffering; fairness, which is characterized by concern for proportionality and equality; loyalty, which involves obedience to a group with which one identifies; authority, which is characterized by respect for tradition and deference to those in charge; and sanctity, which involves concerns about purity and avoidance of contamination (Clifford et al., 2015). A sixth measure, liberty, was added later, which is concerned with freedom and avoiding domination (Clifford et al., 2015). Research has shown that those of different political ideologies vary in the importance they place on these values; for instance, liberty is uniquely strongly associated with libertarians, who tend to emphasize it above all other moral foundations (Iyer et al., 2012). Liberals and conservatives also differ in which moral foundations they utilize; liberals tend to use the harm and fairness foundations above the other three, while conservatives use all five original foundations more equally (Graham et al., 2009). The greater emphasis conservatives place on the sanctity principle as compared to liberals would predict that conservatives would demonstrate increased compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures since they would be more concerned with potential contamination by pathogens.

An additional construct that is related to the moral foundation of sanctity and avoidance of contamination is the behavioral immune system. As described in discussing the related concept of sanctity, research in this area also suggests conservatives would be more likely to comply with COVID mitigation measures than liberals. The behavioral immune system is a mechanism consisting of various psychological behaviors that evolved in order to help individuals avoid diseases (Terrizzi et al., 2013). Such behaviors, such as disgust sensitivity, are found to be higher in conservatives than in liberals (Inbar et al., 2009). There is evidence that this occurs not only on an individual, but also a national level, with countries that have a higher level of infectious disease burden, called “parasite stress,” also being governed by more conservative and authoritarian regimes (Tybur et al., 2016). While social conservatism is now connected to negative appraisals of purity-related political issues such as gay marriage and abortion (Inbar et al., 2009), its disgust sensitivity and other outgroup-avoidant characteristics may be rooted in evolutionary-devised pathogen-avoidance strategies (Terrizzi et al., 2013). This innate disease-avoidance propensity would suggest that conservatives would be more likely to adhere to COVID mitigation strategies than liberals who do not demonstrate behavioral immune system behaviors as strongly.

A final theory that would suggest conservatives would be more likely to comply with COVID mitigation measures than liberals is the right-wing authoritarianism aspect of the dual-process motivational model of political ideology. Right-wing authoritarianism is a preference for authoritarian values, such as obedience to authority and conforming to traditions (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Right-wing authoritarianism is of particular interest to this study as it has been found to have a positive relationship with conservatism (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), as well as the “ethics of community” moral foundations loyalty and authority, which conservatives utilize more

than liberals (Radkiewicz, 2016; Kugler et al., 2014). Those high in right-wing authoritarianism believe the world is inherently dangerous and threatening, which leads them to seek order and stability (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). As part of this “belief in a dangerous world” (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), conservatives would be expected to exhibit more avoidant behaviors and hostility toward threats, such as disease, in order to preserve safety and order; therefore, they would be expected to adhere to COVID mitigation measures more than liberals in an attempt to avoid the threat of infection.

Theories Predicting Liberals Would Comply

When taking the previously described theories into account, it would appear conservatives would be more likely to comply with COVID mitigation measures, such as social distancing, than liberals. However, these theories do not account for the potential impact of the politicization of the pandemic. Right-wing media personalities have used their platforms to spread misinformation about and downplay the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in March of 2020, Sean Hannity, a host at the conservative-leaning news network Fox News, indicated support of a statement that called coronavirus a “fraud by the deep state” (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020); during the same month, Rush Limbaugh, another prominent figure in right-wing media, indicated he believed that the pandemic was a plot created by China to “wip[e] out the entire U.S. economy” (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020). Donald Trump himself repeatedly downplayed the coronavirus pandemic during his time as President, even claiming in September of 2020 that the virus “affects virtually nobody” in spite of ever-increasing cases and deaths across the country (Summers, 2020). This polarizing messaging from conservative leaders may impact the amount that individuals comply to COVID measures.

Motivated reasoning is a theory that can help explain how the downplaying of the pandemic by high-profile conservative figures may decrease the amount that all conservatives adhere to mitigation measures, leading liberals to comply more by comparison. Motivated reasoning refers to the fact that individuals are motivated to evaluate information in a biased manner to support their initial opinions and beliefs (Stanley et al., 2020). Motivated reasoning is connected to confirmation bias, where individuals only seek information that supports their own beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Additionally, people tend to find arguments supporting their own points of view stronger than arguments that discredit them (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Even when presented only with information that contradicts their own beliefs, people are unlikely to change their opinions to correspond with the facts they were presented (Stanley et al., 2020). Motivated reasoning also leads individuals to support ideas and beliefs that are promoted by their ingroup (Taber & Lodge, 2006); in the case of conservatives, the Trump administration and right-wing media are ingroup influences that have downplayed the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020), likely motivating those who share the conservative ideology and support Trump to have the same opinion and be less concerned about the coronavirus than liberals and Biden supporters are. Additionally, there is evidence that suggests that the relationship between noncompliance and faith in ingroup figures is stronger in those who value the binding moral foundations, which consist of loyalty, authority, and sanctity and are associated with conservatives (Graham et al., 2020). This suggests a mechanism whereby moral foundations theory and motivated reasoning interact to create a larger likelihood of conservatives following ingroup rhetoric than liberals.

Media Trust and Accuracy

In addition to motivated reasoning, there are several other factors that could help explain why individuals from different ends of the political spectrum would vary in their compliance with COVID mitigation measures. One poll, conducted by the Pew Research Center early in the pandemic, found that more than 75% of Republicans believe the media has exaggerated the risk of COVID-19 while less than 50% of Democrats believe the risk has been exaggerated by the media (Cillizza, 2020). This would lend reason to believe that Republicans may also be following social distancing recommendations reported by the media less than Democrats due to less belief in the media's reporting.

Trust in the accuracy of the media does not solely depend on one's political affiliation, although it is associated with it, with conservative ideology and Republican partisan leanings both negatively predicting trust in the media (Lee, 2010). This relationship is impacted by trust in government, with individuals who trust the government more also being more likely to trust the media more, regardless of political ideology (Lee, 2010). According to Lee (2005), the best predictor of media bias perception is higher levels of political cynicism, where individuals are set in their beliefs and not open to new, potentially contradictory, information. The research on perceptions of bias in the media provides many sources that suggest a liberal bias (Brady & Ma, 2003; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005) and others pointing to a conservative bias (Nunberg, 2006). Regardless of the direction of bias argued in the research, these studies have no clear definition of media bias (see Eisinger et al., 2007) and are largely fueled by the political cynicism of the authors; there is no clear evidence that mainstream media is heavily politically biased in either ideological direction. Despite the lack of evidence of biased news media, conservatives are more likely to perceive media as biased (Lee, 2005; Lee, 2010), and they may be less likely to take information disseminated by the media seriously as a result. Disregarding the news due to lack of

trust in the media could have major implications for the impact of the pandemic, as individuals who do not trust the media to report accurately may perceive COVID-19 to be less of a health risk and decide not to take actions to mitigate its spread as a result.

Not only are conservatives less likely to trust the mainstream media than liberals, but they are also more likely to be exposed to fake news than liberals (see Grinberg et al., 2019). Additionally, conservatives have been found to share more fake news on social media than liberals or moderates (Guess et al., 2019). Since conservatives have more exposure to falsities presented as facts through their higher levels of consumption of fake news in comparison to liberals, they may be less likely to perceive the coronavirus as a threat. Indeed, the media sources conservatives tend to consume are more likely to downplay and spread misinformation about the pandemic, with some going so far as to call it a “fraud” (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020). This increased likelihood to listen to and believe distortions of the truth instead of the mainstream media may lead conservatives to perceive that the mainstream media is exaggerating the risk of COVID-19, which would also decrease their likelihood of complying with mitigation measures since they would not believe there is adequate reason to follow them.

Individual Knowledge

The level of knowledge individuals have about the COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to impact compliance with COVID mitigation measures, with those who demonstrate more knowledge about COVID also reporting increased rates of mitigation behaviors (Clements, 2020). However, it is unclear if the same relationship will be found with perceived knowledge. A study by Rothgerber et al. (2020) found that conservatives reported the same level of knowledge about COVID-19 as liberals in spite of the fact that many news sources conservatives follow spread misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic that encourage the audience to take the

pandemic less seriously. While actual knowledge about the coronavirus appears to predict mitigation behaviors, it is unlikely that perceived levels of knowledge will due to the spread of misinformation by conservative media sources.

Health Risk

The protection motivation theory (Rodgers, 1975) aims to describe motivations behind individuals' responses to threatening events. This theory is useful in understanding the logic behind social distancing behaviors during the pandemic as it relates to the *health risk* variable examined in the present research. The protection motivation theory suggests that individuals protect themselves according to the perceived severity, vulnerability, efficacy of the recommended preventative behavior, and self-efficacy (Rogers, 1975). These components can be categorized into threat appraisal (perceived severity & vulnerability) and coping appraisal (efficacy of the recommended preventative behavior & self-efficacy). The coping appraisal process involves an individual's ability to appropriately cope with the perceived threat. The coping appraisal process for an individual who does not feel that COVID-19 poses a significant health risk in their communities, as conservatives believe, may look significantly different than the coping appraisal process for an individual who believes COVID-19 to be a health risk in their communities. Teasdale et al. (2014) found coping appraisals to be the strongest predictor in adherence to social distancing recommendations in a pandemic scenario.

Trust in Science

An individual's trust in science can affect their behaviors, and the amount they trust science can be influenced by their political ideology. Conservatives are less likely to trust science regardless of the topic at hand (Hamilton, 2015). By nature, individuals are predisposed to be motivated reasoners and the stronger their belief, the more aggressive their rejection of

opposing opinions (Kraft et al., 2015). Additionally, research suggests that individuals who are the most politically involved and knowledgeable also tend to be susceptible to the strongest bias (Lodge & Taber, 2007), indicating the potential for people to believe science is biased against their ideology if it does not conform to their beliefs. A study by Nisbet et al. (2015) revealed that when individuals were presented with scientific information that was opposed to their ideological beliefs, they were less likely to believe the information. Since conservatives are currently being confronted with scientific experts who challenge the ideological beliefs espoused by right-wing figures that the pandemic is not a serious threat, a mistrust between conservatives and the scientific community has been created, likely leading conservatives to trust scientists less than if the pandemic had not been politicized.

Economic Importance

Even if conservatives do perceive a health risk and believe the scientific evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a real danger, it does not necessarily mean they would feel COVID mitigation measures are helpful or necessary; in fact, they may view them as harmful due to negative economic impacts, such as closed businesses and lost jobs. Conservatives feel that the economic impact of COVID mitigation measures must be considered and balanced against the health risk, and that the potential for more lives lost is not an adequate reason for harming the economy (Glickman, 2020). Christian nationalism, which is linked to far-right conservative ideologies, is positively associated with policies that would prioritize the economy rather than protecting the vulnerable from the spread of the coronavirus (Perry et al., 2020). The prioritization of the economy could lead conservatives to resist COVID mitigation measures, regardless of their belief in the severity of the pandemic.

Anxiety

The pandemic has entirely reshaped the daily environment for all U.S. citizens regardless of state, creating a hostile atmosphere for any public goers. The differences in individual choices for obeying social distancing orders are emotionally fueled: while some fear for their lives, others believe the pandemic is a hoax. Research has investigated the ideological divide in emotional and attitudinal motivations, showing differences in behavior. Porat et al. (2019) found when “under collective threat, liberals show stronger motivation to experience collective angst”. The stronger feelings of angst experienced by liberals may be related to the desire to obey social distancing recommendations in order to lessen the feeling of unease. Jost et al. (2003) labeled the defining beliefs of political conservatism to include resistance to change and acceptance of inequality. Porat et al. (2019) explains this motivated social cognition to stem from the internal need to “avoid the unpleasant psychological states associated with epistemic concerns about uncertainty and existential concerns about finitude and vulnerability to threat.” These cognitive differences indicate the potential of a gap between liberals and conservatives on anxiety measures, with liberals experiencing more anxiety than conservatives in general. The added stress of the pandemic coupled with liberals’ views that the coronavirus threat is real would serve to exacerbate the differences between liberals’ and conservatives’ anxiety levels.

Age

An additional aspect that may impact compliance to social distancing is age. This variable is one that is important when considering the impact of COVID-19 because the elderly population is at a disproportionate risk of developing serious complications and dying from the coronavirus (CDC, 2020). This could impact social distancing regardless of political ideology because the disease poses a greater threat to this demographic; people who are older adults may be more likely to social distance in order to protect themselves.

The Present Research: Study 1

The present study investigates further the relationship between political ideology and social distancing, as well as possible mediators of the relationship. Several researchers have investigated the relationship between political ideology and COVID-19 responses (see Jordan et al., 2020; Joseph Van Holm et al., 2020.; Conway et al., 2020; Rosenfield, 2020), yielding similar results about the ideology-COVID-19 relationship and finding that conservatism is negatively related with COVID responses. This research aims to bolster the relationship between political ideology and social distancing through a singular focus on social distancing as the variable of interest. Additionally, the present study considered other variables that may mediate the relationship between ideology and social distancing adherence, such as belief in media accuracy, belief in science, perceived risk, anxiety level, and age. The present research may be used to supplement the relationship between political ideology and overall COVID-19 behavioral response. The study may also help examine how ideological differences play a role in differing behavioral response to threatening stimuli. Due to the multitude of research discussed in this paper examining differences among liberals and conservatives on perceptions of risk, anxiety, belief in science and media accuracy, as well as the disproportionate negative impact of the virus on the elderly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Conservatives are likely to practice social distancing less than liberals.

Hypothesis 2: Conservatives are less likely to believe in media and science than liberals.

Hypothesis 3: As age increases, the likelihood of adhering to social distancing recommendations increases.

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between political ideology and social distancing is likely mediated by belief in media accuracy, belief in science, anxiety levels, and perceptions of health risk.

Method

Participants

Participants were adults living in the United States recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk website ($N=610$). All participants were compensated for their time with \$0.35. Of the 610 respondents, four were excluded after a failed attention check. An additional thirty-five participants were excluded because they had been diagnosed with COVID-19 which may have skewed their responses to social distancing measures due to quarantine orders. The remaining sample collected ($N=571$) had a mean age of 39.3 ($SD=12.6$), and 59% were males. The sample was slightly conservative ($M=3.20$, $SD=1.71$).

Design

This study had a correlational design based on self-report data, with ideology being the primary predictor variable and social distancing being the primary outcome variable. Other variables in the study were variables to be controlled for, with the possibility that some would mediate the relationship between ideology and social distancing.

Procedure

This study was approved by Bellarmine University's institutional review board (IRB). Participants were presented with a survey consisting of measures to assess political opinions, perceived personal and overall risk of COVID-19, sources of media consumed, how frequently information about COVID-19 was consumed, evaluation of the accuracy of the media, belief in science, anxiety levels, and social distancing behaviors. Participants were also asked

demographic questions about their gender, age, and state. The survey was delivered online using Survey Monkey's platform. The survey could be accessed using a computer, tablet, or other smart device. All survey items were presented in the same order for each participant. Responses were collected on April 1, 2020.

Measures

Attention Check. There were two attention checks included in the survey. The first attention check, presented after evaluation of political leanings of the participants' favorite news sources, asked participants to "choose choice 1." All participants successfully completed this check. The second check was the fourth item in the media accuracy measure and asked participants to choose the answer "strongly agree." Four participants failed this check and were excluded from data analysis.

Ideology. Participants were asked about their political ideology through a series of three items: "I generally take the conservative view on most issues," "I identify as politically liberal," and "I generally favor the Republican party over the Democratic party." Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The second item was reverse scored. The three items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .826$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Social Distancing. Participants were asked about their social distancing practices through a series of four items: "I have intentionally avoided social gatherings because of COVID-19," "I have avoided groups of 10 or more people because of COVID-19," "I have consistently maintained a distance of >6 feet from other people outside my immediate family because of COVID-19," and "In general, I have followed the government guidelines concerning appropriate social distance from others in response to COVID-19." Response options ranged from 1

(strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .914$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Health Risk. Health risk was measured by asking participants if they felt COVID-19 posed a significant risk to their communities. Specifically, participants were asked “I believe COVID-19 poses a large health risk to my local community,” “I believe COVID-19 poses a large health risk to my state,” and “I believe COVID-19 poses a large health risk to the U.S.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .920$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Media Accuracy. Media accuracy was assessed by having participants rate how accurate they believe the media has been in its reporting of COVID-19 related news. Participants were asked, “The mainstream media has been accurate in covering COVID-19,” “The mainstream media has exaggerated the severity of COVID-19,” “The mainstream media has overhyped COVID-19 to make President Trump look bad,” and “I trust the way the mainstream media has covered the COVID-19 story.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The second and third items were reverse scored. These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .826$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Belief in Science. Participants were asked about their belief in science through a series of five items: “Science provides us with a better understanding of the universe than does religion,” “The scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge,” “The only real kind of knowledge we can have is scientific knowledge,” “Science is the most valuable part of human culture,” and “Science is the most efficient means of attaining truth.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The five items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .931$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Anxiety. Participants were assessed on their anxiety levels when thinking about COVID-19 through a series of six items: “calm,” “tense,” “upset,” “relaxed,” “content,” and “worried.” Response options ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so). The first, fourth, and fifth items were reverse scored. The six items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .901$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Results

Data were collected for this research through Survey Monkey, hosted on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. SPSS statistical software was used to analyze the data. To begin the analysis of the data, correlations were calculated for each of the variables. The resulting correlation matrix showed that most variables are correlated with each other. See Table 1 for a summary. Strong correlations to the social distancing outcome variable were political ideology, risk of others exposure, health risk, how informed participants felt they were, media accuracy, belief in science, and anxiety. Variables of interest to the present study that were associated with social distancing include political ideology ($r = -.24$), health risk ($r = .58$), media accuracy ($r = .44$), anxiety ($r = .18$), belief in science ($r = .14$) and age ($r = .19$). Overall, our sample was slightly conservative ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.71$), practiced social distancing ($M = 5.39$, $SD = .87$), trusted the media ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.23$), perceived a health risk ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.08$), were slightly anxious ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .84$) and believed in science ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.30$).

Hypothesis 1

To test the first hypothesis that conservatives are likely to practice social distancing less than liberals, linear regression was used with political ideology as the predictor variable for the outcome variable of social distancing. An investigation of the relationship between political ideology and social distancing practices revealed that conservatives were less likely to socially

distance than liberals. The total effect for this relationship ($F(1,567) = 33.39, p < .001$) indicated a moderately strong negative relationship between conservatism and practicing social distancing.

Hypothesis 2

To test the second hypothesis that conservatives are less likely to believe in media and science than liberals, linear regression was used to determine if people who were more conservative were less likely to believe in science or the media. Higher levels of conservatism were negatively correlated with belief in science ($r = -.37$). Overall, people who reported being more conservative were less likely to believe in science than people who reported being more liberal ($F(1, 567) = 86.89, p < .001$). Higher levels of conservatism were also negatively correlated with media accuracy ($r = -.51$). An investigation of the relationship between media accuracy and conservatism yielded a total effect such that conservatives were less likely to believe the media than their more liberal counterparts ($F(1,567) = 199.67, p < .001$). See Table 2 for a summary of relevant statistics for the linear regression analysis.

Hypothesis 3

To test the third hypothesis that as age increases, the likelihood of adhering to social distancing recommendations increases, linear regression was used. Results indicate that older individuals are more likely to practice social distancing than younger persons ($F(1,567) = 199.67, p < .001$).

Hypothesis 4

An analysis of the relationship between political ideology and social distancing suggested possible mediators. To test the fourth hypothesis that the relationship between political ideology and social distancing is likely mediated by other variables, a mediation analysis was conducted using multiple regression on belief in science, health risk, media accuracy, and anxiety. Results

of the mediation analysis indicated health risk and media accuracy as mediators of the political-ideology-social distancing relationship. There was a significant effect for health risk that completely mediated political ideology ($B=.457, p<.001$), such that higher health risk increased social distancing practices regardless of political ideology. See Figure 1 for a summary of this model. Additionally, the effects of ideology became insignificant when taking into account perceived media accuracy ($B=.306, p<.001$), such that those who believed the media was accurate had increased social distancing practices regardless of political ideology. See Figure 2 for a summary of this model. Neither anxiety nor belief in science were found to be significant mediators of the relationship between ideology and social distancing.

Discussion

This study was intended to investigate factors that were related to individuals' decisions to social distance. The results of the present study both expand on previous literature and add new information concerning social distancing behaviors during a pandemic. Results for this study indicate that conservatives are less likely to practice social distancing. Conservatives are also less likely to believe in the media or trust in science. Age is a significant predictor of social distancing, with older adults social distancing more than younger adults. The political ideology-social distancing relationship is mediated by individuals' perceived health risk and media accuracy. There was no mediation effect for anxiety or belief in science. The present research adds to the growing literature around behavioral responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results from this study support research on behavior change in pandemic and epidemic scenarios. Early research has pointed to coping appraisals as an important factor in behavior change, however, these coping appraisals depend upon the health risk assessment (Teasdale et al., 2014). The present study supports this claim because the results find that health risk is a

strong factor in predicting behavioral change, in this case, social distancing. The findings from this study also support previous and continuous research on the COVID-19 pandemic (see Jordan et al., 2020; Joseph Van Holm et al., 2020; Conway et al., 2020; Rosenfield, 2020) due to the focus on ideology as a predictor of social distancing.

Conservatives in our sample were less likely to believe the media, trust in science, and practice social distancing than liberals. Ideological differences may be accounted for through a motivated reasoning explanation of the differences. Both health risk and mainstream media accuracy accounted for the differences in social distancing adherence between liberals and conservatives. The results of this study suggest that conservatives interpret media reporting and scientific experts through a different lens than liberals and are supported by prior research (Nisbet, Cooper, & Garrett, 2015). The lack of trust in the media could also be explained by conservatives increased exposure to fake news (Grinberg et al., 2019). False information about the virus threat or risk of exposure could also play a role limiting social distance guideline adherence among conservatives.

The Present Research: Study 2

A second study was conducted to further investigate the relationship between compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures and political ideology. This study improved upon the first study in numerous ways. First, a measure to control for population size was introduced to eliminate the alternative explanation that conservatives distance less as a result of the locations they tend to live rather than as a result of their ideology alone. Rural, sparsely populated areas where risk of disease transmission is lower tend to be more conservative, while urban, densely populated areas where transmission risk is higher tend to be more liberal. Since the first study did not control for population, it remained a potential confounding variable; this study eliminated

this confound through controlling for population size. Additionally, the measure of social distancing was expanded to include additional behaviors, such as mask wearing, that had been recommended after the conclusion of the first study, as well as items that measured attitudes toward COVID-19 mandates and recommendations. New potential mediators were also introduced to increase the explanatory power of the model. Of the additional potential mediators, ones of particular interest are the moral foundations, especially harm and sanctity, due to their potential to explain the applicability of moral foundations theory to the political ideology- COVID compliance relationship. Sanctity is of note as it is related to contamination avoidance behaviors (Clifford et al., 2015) and is utilized more by conservatives than by liberals (Graham et al., 2009), which would predict conservatives would comply with mitigation measures more in order to reduce risk of being contaminated by the disease. Harm is of interest as it is one of two values prioritized most highly by liberals (Graham et al., 2009) and is related to concern for others and dislike of suffering (Clifford et al., 2015), a focus that could lead to liberals distancing more in order to prevent others from getting the disease. Economic importance is also an important new mediator. It is possible that conservatives could no longer deny the severity and health risk of COVID as the toll of the pandemic became more severe and instead turned to concerns about the economic toll mitigation measures were taking to justify their continued lack of compliance with COVID mitigation measures. Additionally, the present study took into account other variables that may mediate the relationship between ideology and compliance, such as perceived health risk, how informed individuals believe they are, media accuracy, belief that science is biased, and opinions about presidential candidates. The present research contributes to the growing body of literature that indicates a relationship between political ideology and compliance with COVID mitigation measures (see Jordan et al., 2020; Joseph Van

Holm et al, 2020.; Conway et al., 2020; Rosenfield, 2020; Christensen et al., 2020; Xu & Cheng, 2021). Additionally, the study examined how aspects of moral foundations theory can help to explain the relationship between political ideology and COVID mitigation measures, particularly in conjunction with motivated reasoning. This study also investigated how partisanship relates to COVID compliance since it is possible that partisanship plays a larger role than ideology in explaining individuals' differences in compliance with mitigation measures; however, it was expected that the results would be very similar to the political ideology-COVID compliance relationship since political ideology and partisan identification have become extremely strongly related in recent years amid increasing political polarization (Lupton et al., 2020). Due to the multitude of research discussed in this paper examining differences among liberals and conservatives on perceptions of health risk, how informed about COVID individuals report being, importance of the economy, perceived media accuracy, belief that science is biased, and moral foundations – harm and sanctity principles, as well as the strong relationship between political ideology and partisanship, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Conservatives are less likely to adhere to or report favorable attitudes towards COVID-19 mitigation measures, such as social distancing and business closures.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between political ideology and COVID-19 mitigation measures is likely mediated by other variables, including perceived health risk, how informed about COVID participants felt, importance of the economy, perceived media accuracy, belief that science is biased, moral foundations – harm principle, moral foundations – sanctity principle, and opinions about presidential candidates.

Hypothesis 3: Partisanship will have a similar relationship to COVID-19 compliance as political ideology, with Republicans complying less than Democrats and the overall relationship

between partisanship and compliance mediated by the same variables as the relationship between ideology and compliance.

Method

Participants

Participants were adults living in the United States recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk website ($N=715$). All participants were compensated for their time with \$0.50. Of the 715 respondents, sixty-two were excluded after failing an attention check. An additional 116 participants were excluded because they had been diagnosed with COVID-19 which may have skewed their responses to social distancing measures due to quarantine orders. The remaining sample collected ($N=537$) had a mean age of 39.2 ($SD=11.8$), and 49% were males. The sample was slightly conservative ($M= 3.35$. $SD=1.61$).

Design

This study had a correlational design based on self-report data, with ideology being the primary predictor variable and compliance with COVID mitigation measures being the primary outcome variable. Other variables in the study were variables to be controlled for, with the possibility that some would mediate the relationship between ideology and social distancing.

Procedure

This study was approved by Bellarmine University's institutional review board (IRB). Participants were presented with a survey consisting of measures to assess political ideology, partisan alignment, perceived personal and overall risk of COVID-19, how informed they felt they were about COVID-19, evaluation of the political leanings of their preferred media sources, compliance with and attitudes towards COVID mitigation measures, their perceptions of the importance of the economy, evaluation of the accuracy of the media, belief that science is

politically biased, moral foundations measures, and opinions on presidential candidates.

Participants were also asked demographic questions about their age, gender, income, education level, ethnicity, the county and state in which they resided, and the population size and urban-rural classification of the city or town in which they lived. The survey was delivered online using Survey Monkey's platform. The survey could be accessed using a computer, tablet, or other smart device. All survey items were presented in the same order for each participant. Responses were collected on November 2-3, 2020.

Measures

Attention Check. There were four attention checks included in the survey. The first attention check, presented after evaluation of political leanings of the participants' favorite news sources, asked participants to "choose choice 1." Seven participants failed this check and were excluded from data analysis. The second check was the thirteenth item in the social distancing/COVID compliance measure and asked participants to choose the answer "strongly agree." Twenty-two participants failed this check and were excluded from data analysis. The third check was the fourth item in the media accuracy measure and asked participants to choose the answer "strongly agree." Ten participants failed this check and were excluded from data analysis. The fourth check was the sixth item in the candidate measure and asked participants to choose the answer "strongly disagree." Twenty-three participants failed this check and were excluded from data analysis. In total, sixty-two participants failed an attention check and were excluded from data analysis. With the additional 116 participants that were excluded due to a COVID-19 diagnosis, the sample size was reduced from 715 to 537.

Ideology. Participants were asked about their political ideology through two items: "I generally take the conservative view on most issues" and "I identify as politically liberal."

Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The second item was reverse scored. The two items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .801$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Partisanship. Participants were asked about their feelings towards the Democratic and Republican parties through two Likert scale items: “I generally favor the Republican party over the Democratic party” and “I usually prefer Democratic candidates to Republican candidates.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The second item was reverse scored. The two items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .808$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Partisanship was also measured through two sliding scale feeling thermometer items that asked participants to: “Please rate your feelings toward the Democratic Party, with lower numbers indicating more disapproval” and “Please rate your feelings toward the Republican Party, with lower numbers indicating more disapproval.” Responses were on a scale of 0-100, with lower numerical responses ranking “cold” on the scale and higher responses ranking “warm.” The first item was reverse scored. These two items were moderately correlated ($\alpha = .613$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

In this section, participants were also asked about their perception of President Donald Trump through the item “I support President Trump.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). This item was deemed to not be a direct measure of partisanship and was therefore excluded from the combined measures.

COVID Mitigation Compliance and Attitudes. Participants were asked about their compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures, including social distancing and mask wearing, as well as their attitudes towards mitigation measures, such as business and school closures,

through a series of twenty-two items (see Appendix A). Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Items three, twelve, thirteen, seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen were reverse scored. These twenty-two items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .966$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Infection Risk. Participants were asked to estimate their risk of becoming infected with the novel coronavirus. Specifically, participants were presented the items: “How likely are you to become infected with COVID-19 in the next few weeks?” and “How likely are you to become infected with COVID-19 in the next few months?” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly unlikely) to 6 (strongly likely). The two items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .921$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Health Risk. Health risk was measured by asking participants if they felt COVID-19 posed a significant risk to their communities. Specifically, participants were presented with the items “I believe COVID-19 poses a large health risk to my local community,” “I believe COVID-19 poses a large health risk to my state,” and “I believe COVID-19 poses a large health risk to the U.S.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These three items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .953$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Informed. Participants were asked about the level of information they had about COVID-19. Specifically, participants were presented with the items: “I have been closely following news stories related to COVID-19,” “I am well informed on the issues COVID-19 poses for society,” “I am well-informed on how COVID-19 is transmitted/spread,” and “I am well informed of the symptoms of COVID-19.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated (.856) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

In this section, participants were also asked about the political leanings of their preferred news sources. They were presented with the item: “How would you rate the political leanings of your favorite news sources?” Response options ranged from 1 (extremely liberal) to 6 (extremely conservative). This item was not directly related to how informed a participant felt they were about COVID-19 and was therefore excluded from the combined measure.

Economic Importance. The importance of the economy versus the lives and wellness of humans to participants was measured through four Likert scale items: “We must preserve life at all costs no matter how much it hurts the economy,” “Keeping people alive and well should be a higher priority than ensuring the strength of the economy,” “Some human lives will have to be lost in order for the economy to survive,” and “It is worth shutting the economy down entirely to save human lives.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The first, second, and fourth items were reverse scored. These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .836$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Importance of the economy was also measured through two sliding scale items: “When it comes to protecting human lives and protecting the economy, which do you think we should prioritize?” and “Which bothers you more, thinking about the lives lost from COVID-19 or the jobs lost from COVID 19?” Responses were on a scale of 0-100, with lower numerical responses favored “protecting lives” and “lives lost” on the first and second scale, respectively; higher responses favored “protecting the economy” and “jobs lost.” These two items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .912$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Media Accuracy. Media accuracy was assessed by having participants rate how accurate they believe the media has been in its reporting of COVID-19 related news. Participants were asked, “The mainstream media has been accurate in covering COVID-19,” “The mainstream media has exaggerated the severity of COVID-19,” “The mainstream media has overhyped COVID-19 to make President Trump look bad,” and “I trust the way the mainstream media has covered the COVID-19 story.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The second and third items were reverse scored. These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .842$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Science Bias. Participants were assessed on how much they believed science was politically biased through three items: “Politically motivated scientists have largely fabricated COVID-19,” “You cannot trust what scientists say about COVID-19 because of their political agendas,” and “Scientists have used COVID-19 as a way to attack the Trump administration.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The three items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .942$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Moral Foundations. Moral foundations were measured using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2009).

Harm. Participants were assessed on how much they valued the harm principle through four items. For the first two items, participants were asked how relevant the statements: “Whether or not someone suffered emotionally” and “Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable” were when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant). Participants were also presented two Likert scale items: “Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue” and “One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.”

Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .729$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Fairness. Participants were assessed on how much they valued the fairness principle through four items. For the first two items, participants were asked how relevant the statements: “Whether or not some people were treated differently from others” and “Whether or not someone acted unfairly” were when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant). Participants were also presented two Likert scale items: “When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly” and “Justice is the most important requirement for a society.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .709$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Loyalty. Participants were assessed on how much they valued the loyalty principle through four items. For the first two items, participants were asked how relevant the statements: “Whether or not someone’s action showed love for his or her country” and “Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group” were when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant). Participants were also presented two Likert scale items: “I am proud of my country’s history.” and “People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .771$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Authority. Participants were assessed on how much they valued the authority principle through four items. For the first two items, participants were asked how relevant the statements: “Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority” and “Whether or not someone

conformed to the traditions of society” were when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant). Participants were also presented two Likert scale items: “Respect for authority is something all children need to learn” and “Men and women each have different roles to play in society.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .805$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Sanctity. Participants were assessed on how much they valued the sanctity principle through four items. For the first two items, participants were asked how relevant the statements: “Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency” and “Whether or not someone did something disgusting” were when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant). Participants were also presented two Likert scale items: “People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed” and “I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .855$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Liberty. Participants were assessed on how much they valued the liberty principle through four items. For the first two items, participants were asked how relevant the statements: “Whether or not private property was respected” and “Whether or not everyone was free to do as they wanted” were when deciding whether something is right or wrong. Response options ranged from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant). Participants were also presented two Likert scale items: “The government interferes far too much in our everyday lives” and “Society works best when it lets individuals take responsibility for their own lives

without telling them what to do.” Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). These four items were moderately correlated ($\alpha = .634$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Opinions about Candidates. Participants’ opinions about the major 2020 Presidential candidates were assessed through seventeen items (see Appendix B). Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The first, second, and third items were not considered when consolidating into a single measure as they compared Joe Biden to Hillary Clinton, the 2016 Democratic nominee for president, rather than asking about factors directly relevant to the perception of the 2020 Presidential candidates. The fifth, ninth, tenth, twelfth, thirteenth, and seventeenth items were reverse scored. The fourteen items that were considered for consolidation were highly correlated ($\alpha = .953$) and were combined and averaged into a single measure.

Results

Data were collected for this research through Survey Monkey, hosted on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. SPSS statistical software was used to analyze the data, with Andrew Hayes’ PROCESS add-on utilized to test for mediators. To begin the analysis of the data, correlations were calculated for each of the variables. The resulting correlation matrix showed that most variables are correlated with each other. See Table 3 for a summary. Strong correlations to the COVID compliance outcome variable were political ideology, partisanship, infection risk, health risk to the community, how informed about COVID participants felt, importance of the economy, perceived media accuracy, belief that science is biased, all moral foundations measures (harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty), and opinion of presidential candidates. Variables of interest to the present study that were associated with COVID

compliance include political ideology ($r = -.45$), partisanship ($r = -.50$), perceived health risk ($r = .78$), how informed participants felt ($r = .43$), importance of economy ($r = -.73$), perceived media accuracy ($r = .70$), belief that science is biased ($r = -.64$), moral foundations – harm ($r = .42$), moral foundations – sanctity ($r = -.20$), and candidate opinions ($r = -.63$). Overall, our data was slightly conservative ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.61$), slightly Republican ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.72$), complied with COVID measures ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.12$), perceived a health risk ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.32$), felt informed ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 0.86$), thought the economy was less important than human lives ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.23$), thought the media was accurate ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.32$), believed that science was not biased ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.61$), valued the harm principle ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.90$), valued the sanctity principle ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.26$), and had higher opinions of Trump than Biden ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.39$).

Hypothesis 1

To test hypothesis one that conservatives are less likely to adhere to or report favorable attitudes towards COVID-19 mitigation measures, linear regression was used with political ideology as the predictor variable for the outcome variable of COVID compliance. An investigation of the relationship between political ideology and COVID compliance revealed that conservatives were less likely to comply with measures than liberals ($B = -.315$, $t(535) = -11.77$, $p < .001$). The total effect for this relationship ($R^2 = .206$, $F(1, 535) = 138.58$, $p < .001$) indicated a strong negative relationship between conservatism and practicing COVID mitigation measures, and that a significant proportion of variance in compliance could be explained by political ideology.

Hypothesis 2

An analysis of the relationship between political ideology and COVID compliance suggested possible mediators. To test the second hypothesis that the relationship between political ideology and COVID-19 mitigation measures is likely mediated by other variables, a mediation analysis was conducted on perceived health risk, how informed participants believed they were, importance of the economy, media accuracy, belief in biased science, harm, sanctity, and opinions about candidates. Results of the mediation analysis indicated perceived health risk, importance of the economy, media accuracy, belief in biased science, harm, and opinions about candidates as mediators of the political ideology-COVID compliance relationship. Age, gender, ethnicity, education level, income, and population of place of residence were control variables. The total effect of the relationship between political ideology and COVID mitigation compliance and evaluation was significant ($B = -.3274, p < .001$), with conservatives less likely to comply or agree with COVID mitigation measures than liberals. Next, the author regressed the eight mediators onto political ideology, revealing a significant relationship for perceived health risk ($B = -.3628, p < .001$), how informed participants were ($B = -.0683, p = .003$) importance of the economy ($B = .3828, p < .001$), media accuracy ($B = -.5245, p < .001$), belief in biased science ($B = .4592, p < .001$), harm ($B = -.1138, p < .001$), sanctity ($B = .2969, p < .001$), and candidate opinions ($B = .6804, p < .001$) The author then entered the mediators and political ideology as predictors of COVID compliance. This revealed that while the mediators were significant or marginally significant predictors (perceived health risk: $B = .3104, p < .001$; informed participants: $B = .0544, p = .102$; importance of the economy: $B = -.2143, p < .001$; media accuracy: $B = .1136, p = .001$; belief in biased science: $B = -.1331, p < .001$; harm: $B = .0988, p = .002$; sanctity: $B = -.0469, p = .042$; and candidate opinions: $B = -.0789, p = .029$), the relationship between political ideology and COVID compliance was not simply completely mediated, but changed direction ($B = .0706,$

$p=.005$). Examining the confidence intervals revealed that in total, six of the eight measures significantly mediated the relationship between political ideology and COVID compliance as evidenced by a 95% confidence interval which did not include zero: perceived health risk (-.1501, -.0765), economic importance (-.1169, -.0478), media accuracy (-.1022, -.0172), biased science (-.0852, -.0386), harm (-.0228, -.0018), and candidate opinion (-.1088, -.0029). This model is summarized in Figure 3. For the political ideology-COVID compliance relationship, neither how informed participants were (-.0106, .0015) nor sanctity (-.0306, .0019) were found to be significant mediators of the relationship between ideology and compliance.

Hypothesis 3

An analysis of the relationship between partisanship and COVID compliance yielded similar results to that of the relationship between political ideology and COVID compliance. The third hypothesis was that partisanship will have a similar relationship to COVID-19 compliance as political ideology, with Republicans complying less than Democrats and the overall relationship between partisanship and compliance mediated by the same variables as the relationship between ideology and compliance. To test this hypothesis, a mediation analysis was conducted on perceived health risk, how informed participants believed they were, importance of the economy, media accuracy, belief in biased science, harm, sanctity, and opinions about candidates. Results of the mediation analysis indicated perceived health risk, importance of the economy, media accuracy, belief in biased science, harm, and opinions about candidates as mediators of the partisanship-COVID compliance relationship. Age, gender, ethnicity, education level, income, and population of place of residence were control variables. The total effect of the relationship between partisanship and COVID mitigation compliance and evaluation was significant ($B=-.3303$, $p<.001$), with those who identified more closely with the Republican

Party less likely to comply or agree with COVID mitigation measures than those who identified more closely with the Democratic Party. Next, the author regressed the eight mediators onto partisanship, revealing a significant relationship for perceived health risk ($B=-.3612, p<.001$), how informed participants were ($B=-.0788, p<.001$) importance of the economy ($B=.3714, p<.001$), media accuracy ($B=-.4882, p<.001$), belief in biased science ($B=.4880, p<.001$), harm ($B=-.1153, p<.001$), sanctity ($B=.2536, p<.001$) and candidate opinions ($B=.6804, p<.001$) The author then entered the mediators and partisanship as predictors of COVID compliance. This revealed that while the mediators were significant predictors (perceived health risk: $B=.3116, p<.001$; informed participants: $B=.0565, p=.089$; importance of the economy: $B=-.2138, p<.001$; media accuracy: $B=.0997, p=.003$; belief in biased science: $B=-.1413, p<.001$; harm: $B=.0970, p=.003$; sanctity: $B=-.0387, p=.087$; and candidate opinions: $B=-.0905, p=.026$), the relationship between partisanship and COVID compliance was not simply completely mediated, but changed direction ($B=.0663, p=.012$). Examining the confidence intervals revealed that in total, six of the eight measures significantly mediated the relationship between partisanship and COVID compliance as evidenced by a 95% confidence interval which did not include zero: perceived health risk (-.1506, -.0787), economic importance (-.1133, -.0464), media accuracy (-.0876, -.0087), biased science (-.0934, -.0455), harm (-.0225, -.0011), and candidate opinion (-.1244, -.0013). This model is summarized in Figure 4. For the partisanship-COVID compliance relationship, neither how informed participants were (-.0124, .0017) nor sanctity (-.0237, .0031) were found to be significant mediators of the relationship between partisanship and compliance.

Discussion

This study was intended to further investigate and attempt to explain the relationship between political ideology and compliance with COVID mitigation measures. The results of the

present study both support previous literature and add new information concerning compliance behaviors and attitudes during a pandemic. Results for this study indicate that conservatives are less likely to practice social distancing than liberals. The political ideology-social distancing relationship is mediated by individuals' perceived health risk, importance placed on the economy, perceptions of media accuracy, belief that science is biased, the value they place on the harm principle of moral foundations, and opinions about candidates. There was no mediation effect for how informed participants believed they were or the sanctity principle of moral foundations. This relationship, including mediating variables, was also seen when using partisanship as the predictor variable instead of political ideology. The present research adds to the growing literature around behavioral responses to the COVID-19 pandemic while offering potential theoretical explanations for the relationship.

This study offers support for motivated reasoning being a key mechanism behind the differences found between liberals and conservatives in levels of compliance with COVID-mitigation measures; politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic by right-wing news media and prominent conservative political figures contributed to motivated reasoning in conservatives that lead them to comply less with mitigation measures than their liberal counterparts. Motivated reasoning leads individuals to conform to beliefs endorsed by members of their ingroup (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In this case, conservatives would be apt to listen to conservative political leaders and the right-wing media who presented a narrative that downplayed the dangers of the coronavirus (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020); this would help explain the evidence that people who consumed more right-wing media are less likely to take COVID seriously or follow mitigating measures (Motta et al., 2020). This theory could help explain why conservative individuals act against their own tendencies of disease avoidance – the subconscious trust and desire to conform

to their ingroup causes them to reject factual information from sources that contradict their ingroup.

Additionally, this study provided evidence that the moral foundation harm is an important predictor of COVID compliance. While this foundation is used equally with all other foundations by conservatives, liberals tend to utilize this foundation, along with fairness, above all others (Graham et al., 2009). Liberals prioritize care and concern for others above most other moral considerations, which potentially contributed to their increased compliance with mitigation measures since liberals would not want to cause others harm or suffering by potentially spreading the virus. This, along with the impact of ingroup messages emphasizing the dangers of the pandemic that lead liberals to engage in motivated reasoning, could contribute largely to the increased compliance with COVID mitigation measures in liberals versus conservatives.

General Discussion

Together, these studies contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding the relationship between political ideology and compliance with COVID-mitigating measures. The first study supported previous findings that social distancing during COVID-19 is related to political ideology (see Jordan et al., 2020; Joseph Van Holm et al., 2020; Conway et al., 2020; Rosenfield, 2020), with conservatives being less likely to social distance than liberals. This study also demonstrated that this relationship is mediated by perceived health risk and media accuracy, which, when taken into account, render the relationship between social distancing and political ideology insignificant.

The second study was conducted to further investigate the relationship between political ideology and COVID-19 mitigation measures and to provide support for theoretical explanations of the relationship. In this study, COVID mitigation measures were expanded beyond social

distancing in response to additional recommendations such as mask wearing; attitudes toward mandates and closures of businesses were also investigated. Additional potential mediators, notably importance of the economy and moral foundations measures, were also included. To address a weakness of the first study, questions were included that asked participants about the population in the location in which they lived and the type of area (urban, suburban, or rural) in which they lived. These measures were included to address the potential confound that those who live in large cities, which tend to have a higher population of liberals, will adhere to COVID mitigation measures more as a result of increased health risk posed by increased transmission that happens in densely and highly populated areas rather than strictly as a result of their ideology. Population size was a covariate in the final mediation model to control for such a relationship. Partisanship was also included as a measure in order to investigate if there was a difference between ideology and partisanship in relation to COVID mitigation compliance.

The second study replicated the finding that political ideology is related to compliance with COVID-mitigating measures, with conservatives being less likely to adhere to compliance measures or support them than liberals. This relationship was mediated by multiple variables, including perceived health risk, importance placed on the economy, perceptions of media accuracy, belief that science is biased, the harm principle of moral foundations, and opinions about candidates. The mediation was not only complete – it changed the direction of the relationship. When all the mediators are taken into account, this model suggests that conservatives would be slightly more likely to social distance than liberals. This relationship was also found when replacing the predictor variable ideology with partisanship, indicating that, while differences technically exist between partisanship and political ideology, they can be used fairly interchangeably for the purposes of investigating relationships with COVID compliance.

Additionally, this research lends support to the motivated reasoning theory (see Taber & Lodge, 2006). People conform to beliefs being pushed by members of their in-group; in this case, conservative individuals follow the direction of conservative leaders and right-wing media, which have largely pushed the narrative that COVID-19 is insignificant or even a hoax (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020). The relationship of the moral foundations measures of harm and sanctity can help to further explain this phenomenon. Harm has been found to be related to compliance with all mitigation measures (Chan, 2021). The present study found it is related to both liberal ideology and compliance with COVID mitigation measures. The news media liberals tend to consume emphasizes the dangers of the virus, including the impacts on those who are particularly vulnerable, activating the harm foundation and explaining the positive relationship between it and COVID mitigation measures. In a previous study that did not take political ideology into account, sanctity was found to be positively related to the mitigation measures of wearing masks and social distancing (Chan, 2021). These results were not replicated in the current study. While conservatism is indeed positively related to the sanctity foundation as described in Graham et al. (2009), it is not positively related to mitigation measures. A potential explanation for this phenomenon is found in the fact that the news media sources conservatives tend to consume frequently downplay the severity of the pandemic, which led to conservatives not fearing contamination and not taking measures to mitigate their chances of infection as a result. This is the opposite of what would be expected in non-politicized circumstances. Additional support for the interaction of these theories is found in Graham et al. (2020), which found individuals with high faith in President Trump were more likely to resist social distancing, particularly among those high in binding foundations, of which sanctity is one; those who put

more of their trust in an ingroup figure were more likely to adhere to rhetoric the figure supported, even if one of the traits they possess would predispose them to act differently.

The support for motivated reasoning does not necessarily discredit the other theories that would predict conservatives would be more likely to distance than liberals. Theories do not exist in a vacuum; in other settings without the impact of politicization, it is possible we would see conservatives complying more with COVID mitigation measures than liberals as would be predicted by the dual-process motivational model, the behavioral immune system, and the sanctity principle of moral foundations. For instance, Republicans were actually more concerned than Democrats about Ebola during the Obama administration, when media coverage and messaging from government communicated the seriousness of potential infection across the ideological spectrum (Tesler, 2020). It appears that these theories were overwhelmed by the impact motivated reasoning had on conservatives as the pandemic became politicized and conservatives' ingroup leaders made the virus seem less threatening than it actually is.

Limitations

A potential issue with these studies is respondents potentially overreporting compliance due to pressures of social desirability and dissonance reduction (Jordan, 2020). Regardless of belief of personal or overall risk, COVID-19 is portrayed by the mainstream media as a significant risk that should be combatted by following recommended social distancing measures. Non-compliance would be viewed negatively by a large number of people who believe the media reporting is accurate. For this reason, it is possible that people reported practicing social distancing more than they actually are to avoid being perceived negatively by the researchers. Additionally, those who do view COVID-19 as a risk may report more social distancing than they are actually doing in order to reduce their own dissonance. This issue is difficult to remedy

due to the self-report nature of this study and the impracticability of a study where social distancing is actively tracked on a large scale due to limited resources.

An additional limitation to this study is the fact that survey respondents were only located within the United States. The results of this study can only be generalized to the population of the United States, as it has been found that the Americans are more divided along partisan lines in their opinions about COVID-19 than residents of other countries (Mordecai & Connaughton, 2020). In order to get a more general idea about how ideology impacts compliance with COVID-mitigation measures across the globe, respondents would have to be located in various countries. This effort, while not impossible, would require more resources than the present research due to the need to host the survey in multiple countries; it would also require much time and effort in ensuring the survey would be applicable to all potential respondents as a result of the differences in partisan identification and government-imposed COVID mitigation measures across different countries.

Applications and Future Research

The findings of the present research have implications for our ability to cooperate across political lines on issues, both current and future. The COVID-19 pandemic is a current, ongoing health crisis with tangible impacts on life and health. Other pressing issues, such as climate change, are less immediate and more abstract, but still carry major consequences for the entire population. The results of the study leave one major question unanswered: How can we cooperate on any major issues going forward in a climate of politicization of issues and division along ideological lines if we cannot bridge these divides for an immediate public health threat that has killed hundreds of thousands and sickened millions of others? In order to successfully address major obstacles in the future, the country as a whole must actively combat politicization

of issues that impact all residents. Otherwise, we risk continued division and harmful, sometimes even deadly, consequences as a result of the motivated reasoning that leads individuals to agree with others with whom they identify, right or wrong. This study should encourage a unified front from government leaders and media organizations across the ideological spectrum to work together to share accurate and up-to-date information about the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues like it in order to get as many people as possible to agree on a course of action to mitigate harm. Failure to do so will result in ineffective government and increased polarization at best, and it could potentially lead to complete fracturing of society along ideological lines and more harm done or lives lost.

An area of research that could provide further explanations as to why the relationship between political ideology and compliance with COVID measures exists involves investigating belief in conspiracies as a potential mediator variable. Conspiracy theories have been pushed by conservative media sources to downplay the severity and distort the origins of the coronavirus pandemic (Peters & Grynbaum, 2020). These messages are targeted at an audience that is likely to accept them as true, as Republicans are more susceptible than Democrats to believing conspiracy theories (Enders & Smallpage, 2019). While not included in the present study, belief in conspiracy theories could be a significant mediator of the relationship between political ideology and compliance with COVID mitigation measures. Conclusions from such a study would provide further information about the responsibility media outlets bear when disseminating information that may alter perceptions and behaviors surrounding impactful events and situations.

Further research would also be recommended to investigate the effect of relaxed restrictions, increased vaccines, and potential treatments on compliance with still-standing safety

measures to combat COVID-19. As states individually begin to reopen their business and leisure sectors (USA Today, 2021), vaccine distribution increases (Romo, 2021), and promising treatments such as the antiviral drug remdesivir (Wamsley & Wroth, 2020) are identified, people from all political ideologies may begin to resist continued social distancing measures as perceived risk decreases. It would be worthwhile to explore if the findings in this study hold true in the face of the country reopening to a new normal.

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Tables

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of Relevant Variables

Correlations										
	Political Ideology	Likely Exposed (you)	Likely Exposed (other)	Health Risk	Informed	Social Distancing	Media Accuracy	Belief in Science	Anxiety	Age
Political Ideology	1	-.098 [†]	-.156 ^{**}	-.324 ^{**}	-.157 ^{**}	-.236 ^{**}	-.510 ^{**}	-.365 ^{**}	-.277 ^{**}	.092 [†]
Likely Exposed (you)		1	.742 ^{**}	.332 ^{**}	.104 [†]	0.037	.151 ^{**}	.103 [†]	.279 ^{**}	-0.004
Likely Exposed (other)			1	.389 ^{**}	.215 ^{**}	.180 ^{**}	.233 ^{**}	.111 ^{**}	.269 ^{**}	0.057
Health Risk				1	.486 ^{**}	.583 ^{**}	.550 ^{**}	.204 ^{**}	.329 ^{**}	.108 [†]
Informed					1	.550 ^{**}	.371 ^{**}	.116 ^{**}	.200 ^{**}	.164 ^{**}
Social Distancing						1	.439 ^{**}	.137 ^{**}	.175 ^{**}	.192 ^{**}
Media Accuracy							1	.254 ^{**}	.265 ^{**}	.091 [†]
Belief in Science								1	.191 ^{**}	-.144 ^{**}
Anxiety									1	-0.047
Age										1

[†]. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
^{**}. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: Table shows Pearson correlations between variables.

Table 2*Relevant Statistics for Linear Regression*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	<i>B</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Political Ideology	4.18	1.7	0.826	-0.12	33.389	-5.778	<.001
Health Risk	5	1.08	0.92	0.47	292.651	17.11	<.001
Media Accuracy	4.18	1.23	0.826	0.312	135.71	11.65	<.001
Belief in Science	4.41	1.31	0.931	0.091	10.89	3.301	<.001
Anxiety	3.53	0.84	0.901	0.183	17.981	4.24	<.001
Age	39.28	12.62	N/A	0.013	21.609	4.649	<.001
Outcome Variable							
Social Distancing	5.39	0.87	0.914				

Note: Each predictor variable was entered individually. Values shown are for single linear regression.

Table 3*Correlation Matrix of Relevant Variables*

Correlations											
	Ideology	Partisanship	Perceived Health Risk	Informed	COVID Compliance	Economic Importance	Media Accuracy	Biased Science	Harm	Sanctity	Candidate Opinions
Ideology	1	.860**	-.424**	-.101*	-.454**	.499**	-.633**	.458**	-.188**	.374**	.785**
Partisanship		1	-.460**	-.140**	-.501**	.524**	-.633**	.527**	-.214**	.344**	.844**
Perceived Health Risk			1	.463**	.777**	-.676**	.606**	-.482**	.399**	-.101*	-.535**
Informed				1	.434**	-.363**	.254**	-.267**	.419**	.048	-.184**
COVID Compliance					1	-.734**	.698**	-.639**	.415**	-.200**	-.633**
Economic Importance						1	-.687**	.472**	-.415**	.078	.615**
Media Accuracy							1	-.639**	.251**	-.244**	-.763**
Biased Science								1	-.188**	.409**	.647**
Harm									1	.184**	-.220**
Sanctity										1	.368**
Candidate Opinions											1

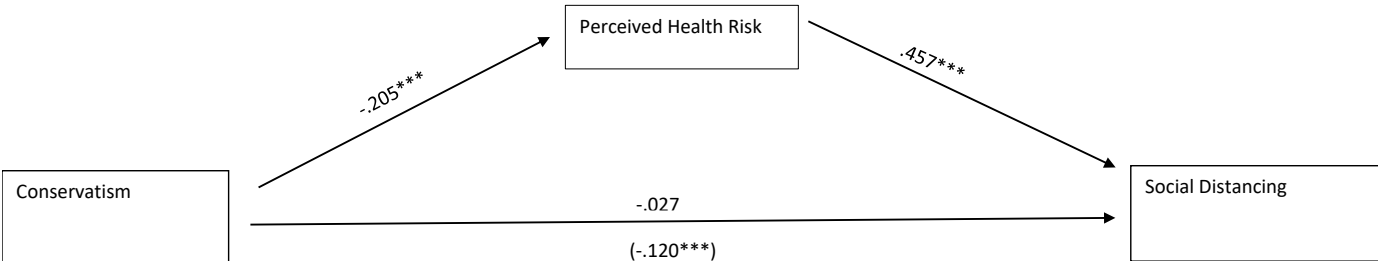
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
 * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note: Table shows Pearson correlations between variables.

Figures

Figure 1

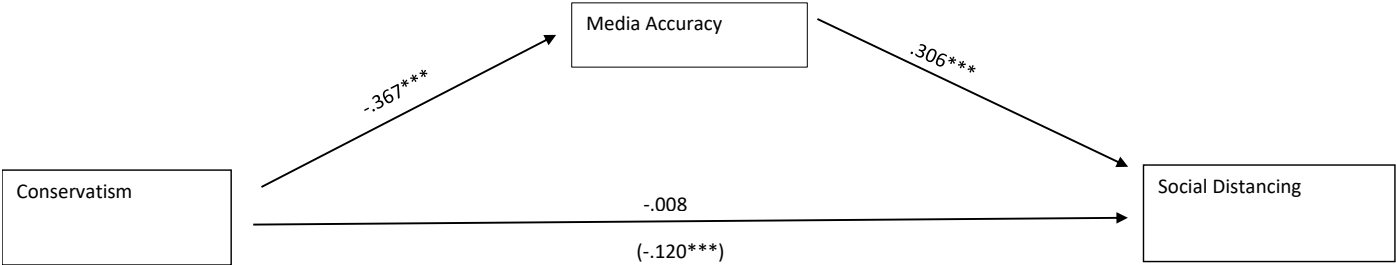
Relationship Between Political Ideology and Social Distancing Mediated by Perceived Health Risk



Note: Relationships marked with *** are significant at the .01 level.

Figure 2

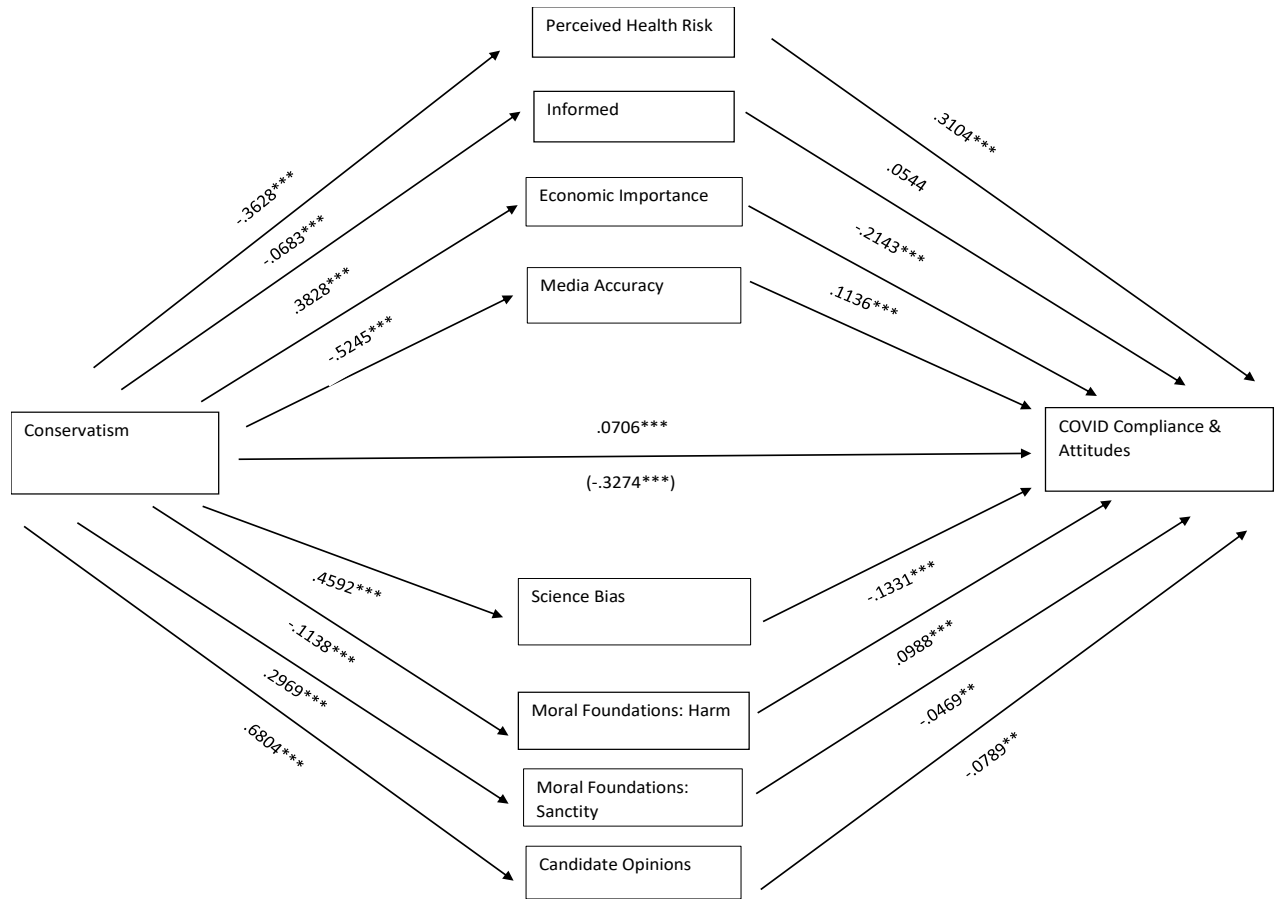
Relationship Between Political Ideology and Social Distancing Mediated by Media Accuracy



Note: Relationships marked with *** are significant at the .01 level.

Figure 3

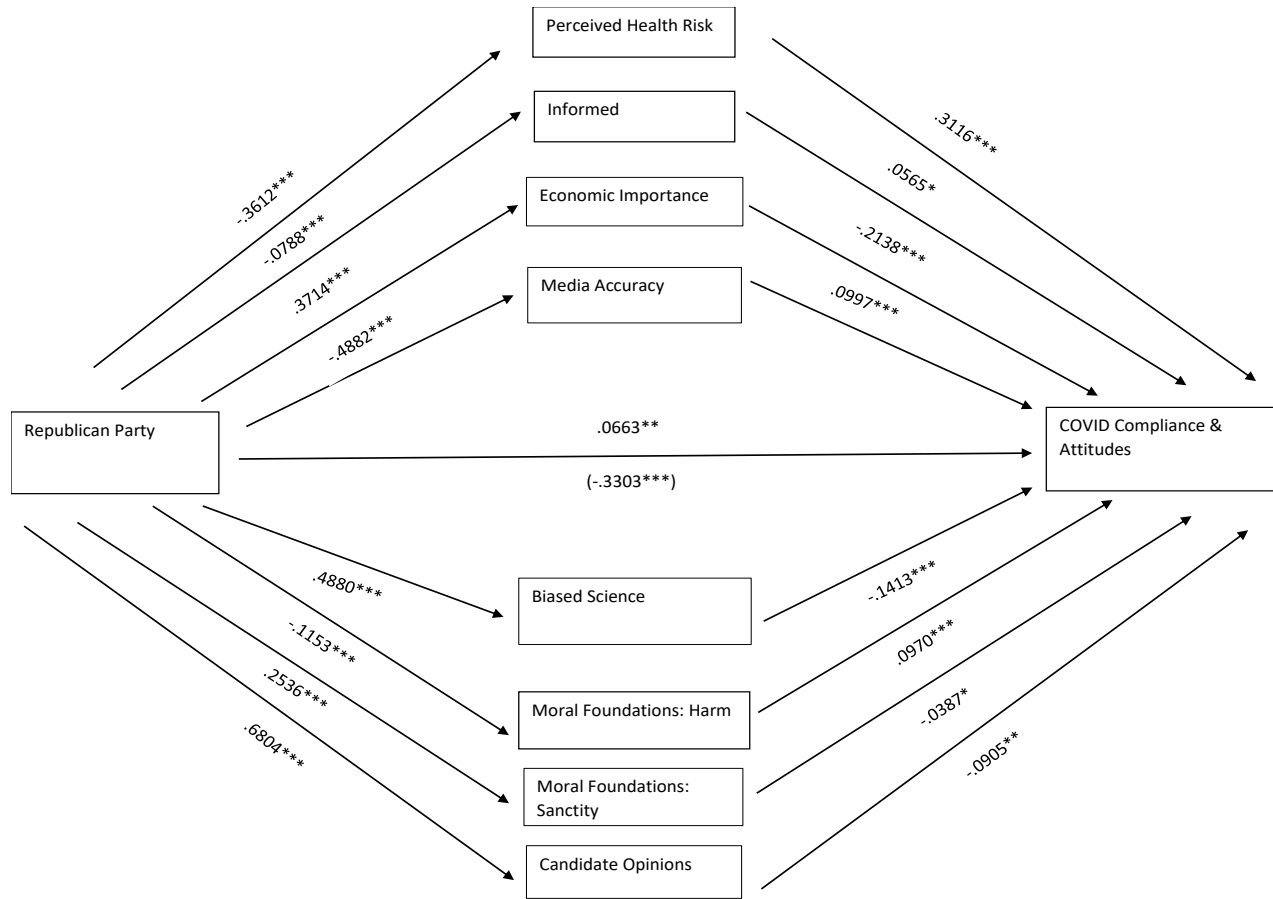
Mediation Model of the Relationship between Political Ideology and COVID Compliance



Note: Relationships marked with *** are significant at the .01 level. Relationships marked with ** are significant at the .05 level.

Figure 4

Mediation Model of the Relationship between Partisanship and COVID Compliance



Note: Relationships marked with *** are significant at the .01 level; relationships marked with ** are significant at the .05 level. Relationships marked with * are significant at the .1 level.

Appendix A

Items used to measure compliance with and attitudes toward COVID-19 mitigation measures

1. We need strong Federal government officials right now to take action to stop the spread of disease
2. We need strong State government officials right now to take action to stop the spread of disease
3. It makes me angry to think that the Federal government would tell me where I can go and what I can do, even when there is a crisis such as COVID-19
4. I am intentionally avoiding social gatherings because of COVID-19
5. I am avoiding groups of 10 or more people because of COVID-19
6. I am consistently maintaining a distance of >6 feet from other people outside my immediate family because of COVID-19
7. I am intentionally avoiding seeing relatives because of COVID-19
8. I am intentionally avoiding visiting friends because of COVID-19
9. I am avoiding large gatherings indoors with family during the holidays because of COVID-19
10. I wear a face mask whenever I go to public places where strangers are
11. In general, I am following the government guidelines concerning appropriate social distance from others in response to COVID-19
12. The social distancing restrictions being put into place to stop the spread of COVID-19 are doing more harm than good
13. We need to prioritize going back to our normal routines as soon as possible, regardless of COVID-19's spread

14. People should be required to wear a face mask or covering whenever they go in public places
15. Right now, the most important thing we can do is take all the measures possible to stop the spread of COVID-19
16. It is essential that we strictly practice social distancing as a nation, until health care experts suggest otherwise
17. I believe that elementary, middle, and high schools should be open where I live
18. I believe that restaurants should be open for dine-in eating where I live
19. I believe that 'nonessential' businesses (gyms, coffee shops, etc.) should be open where I live
20. At this point, I am willing to practice the recommended levels of social distancing for at least the next month
21. At this point, I am willing to practice the recommended levels of social distancing for at least the next three months
22. At this point, I am willing to practice the recommended levels of social distancing indefinitely until COVID-19 is over

Appendix B

Items used to measure opinions about major-party candidates in the 2020 Presidential Election

1. Joe Biden is a better candidate than Hillary Clinton
2. Joe Biden is more electable than Hillary Clinton
3. Joe Biden is more likable than Hillary Clinton
4. Donald Trump has handled the COVID-19 pandemic well
5. Joe Biden would have handled the COVID-19 pandemic better than Donald Trump has
6. The economy under Donald Trump is the best it has ever been
7. If Joe Biden were to win the election, the economy would suffer
8. Donald Trump's statements and Tweets are refreshing, regardless of the controversy they stir up
9. The way Donald Trump uses his platform to criticize others and spread misinformation is disrespectful to the office of the Presidency
10. Joe Biden would restore dignity to the office of the Presidency
11. The impeachment and investigations against Donald Trump were made up to make him look bad
12. Donald Trump should have been removed from office as a result of the findings of investigations into his government
13. Joe Biden has relatively few controversies compared to Donald Trump
14. Despite his lack of a background in politics, Trump has been a capable president
15. Joe Biden is an 'establishment candidate' that is out of touch with the American people
16. Donald Trump's refusal to separate himself from his family's businesses while president is the mark of a smart businessman and should not reflect poorly on him politically

17. Joe Biden's lack of business ventures that could cause conflicts of interest is a positive quality for a potential president