

# Infectious Moderation: Personal Experiences and Political Attitudes during Covid-19

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**Abstract:** Party elites in the United States sent drastically different messages about government priorities and who was to blame for the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the current era of hyper-partisanship, one would expect public opinion to diverge and follow partisan messaging faithfully. However, the Covid-19 pandemic provided citizens with personal experiences that were potentially powerful enough overcome partisan motivated reasoning and encourage voters to hold politicians accountable. Using a mix of cross sectional and panel data, I find that being personally infected with Covid-19 moderated the effects of partisanship in shaping political attitudes where citizens might otherwise be expected to follow partisan cues. Those same personal experiences carried electoral consequences for the 2020 presidential election. Although the events associated with the 2020 pandemic and presidential election are unlikely to repeat themselves, these results carry broader implications for citizens' capacity to hold attitudes independent of partisanship. Partisanship is certainly a powerful force, even in the face of a global pandemic, but its influence does have boundaries.

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## Introduction

The first confirmed case of Covid-19 occurred in the United States on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Barely two months later, the United States led the world in total infections. Yet, the Trump administration resisted mounting a federal response to the pandemic and instead downplayed its severity. By Election Day, hundreds of thousands of Americans had died from Covid-19 and millions more had been infected with the virus. Retrospective voting theory (e.g. Key et al., 1966) might have predicted a landslide loss for the incumbent administration given such poor outcomes under its watch. However, in an era of hyper-partisanship, partisan motivated reasoning is especially difficult to overcome (e.g. Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013). The combination of poor government performance and a relatively close election outcome would appear to call into question the capacity of partisans to play the role of “Gods of Vengeance or Reward” (Key et al., 1966) when their side deserves vengeance, due to the powerful influence of partisanship.

I argue instead that such an interpretation is not completely warranted. In this paper, I analyze the extent to which partisanship shapes politically relevant attitudes among the mass public during the pandemic. I focus specifically on citizens’ attitudes about what government should prioritize – addressing the public health crisis itself or its economic consequences – and who citizens’ blame for the severity of the Covid-19 crisis in their state – their state’s governor or President Trump. In both cases, there are clear partisan expectations about what attitudes members of each party should hold. Consistent with those expectation, I find that partisanship shapes attitudes for most citizens when it comes to Covid-19 and the 2020 presidential election.

However, even in a highly polarized era, personal experiences can both provide citizens with information and make considerations salient that might moderate the impact of partisanship. Specifically, I expect that having been infected with Covid-19 moderates the effect of partisanship on attitudes about government priorities and blame attribution for the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to account for both sides of the partisan spectrum. Although most

media focus has been on Republicans' underestimation of the threat of Covid-19, Democrats have also overestimated its severity (Rothwell and Desai, 2020). In both cases, personal experiences should serve as a corrective and shape relevant political attitudes. These personal experiences, in turn, ought to carry over to the 2020 presidential election and moderate the influence of partisanship on vote choice, although to a lesser extent.

The paper proceeds as follows: I first establish why we ought to expect that partisanship will shape the attitudes citizens should hold when it comes to government priorities, blame attribution, and vote choice. Next, I establish why personal experiences with Covid-19 might be sufficiently powerful to moderate the effect of partisanship on these attitudes. Using a mix of cross sectional and panel data collected in the lead up to the 2020 presidential election, I find support for my hypotheses. Although partisanship shapes attitudes for most citizens, being infected with Covid-19 moderates this effect to a substantively and statistically significant extent. Personal experiences with Covid-19 even reduces the effect of partisanship on blame attribution to be indistinguishable from zero. The results carry significant implications for explaining both the results of the 2020 election as well as voters' ability to hold attitudes independent of their partisanship, even in times of heightened polarization.

## **Partisan Divide on Covid-19**

From nearly the outset of the pandemic, Democratic and Republican leaders conveyed starkly different messages about how to handle the pandemic. While former President Donald Trump said the federal government had the situation under control and sought to downplay concerns (Woodward, 2020), Democratic leaders took a different tack as early as March. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of that month, the Democratic governors of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey held a joint press conference to announce restrictions due to Covid-19. They couched the need to coordinate their states' responses in terms of the Trump Administration's unwillingness to act. Just days later, several states ordered statewide shutdowns of all non-essential

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businesses. In stark contrast, Trump forecasted a return to normal by Easter Sunday, April 4<sup>th</sup>.

Competing partisan frames about whether governments should prioritize health outcomes or economic ones continued and even deepened through the summer and into the fall. Trump often called on governors to re-open their states, while Democrats remained steadfast in prioritizing public health over economic recovery. The same competing partisan frame manifested at the congressional level as well. Analyzing tweets sent by Members of Congress, Green et al. (2020) show that Democratic members prioritized messages focused on public health while Republican members prioritized messages focused on the economy.

Such partisan differences in elite rhetoric should have significant implications for citizens' attitudes (e.g. Zaller et al., 1992). Because citizens are not well versed when it comes to political matters, they draw many of their opinions about public policy and opinion from political elites. This is especially true of matters that are new to the policy agenda (Lenz, 2013), as Covid was. Moreover, partisans in this most partisan time are particularly motivated to follow their leaders' cues (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). In fact, even when exposed to counter-attitudinal frames, citizens still tend to follow the frame of their preferred political party (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013). Although the pandemic often killed thousands of people daily, theories of public opinion provide little reason to expect a massive interruption to partisan cue taking, especially given today's highly charged partisan environment. This leads to my first hypothesis:

**H1A:** Republicans should be more likely to say the government should prioritize the economic crisis than Democrats.

The impact of partisanship ought to extend beyond policy priorities. When it comes to blame attribution during crises, partisanship often shapes whom citizens decide to hold responsible. This is true when it comes to the economy (Aldrich et al., 2014), natural disasters (Malhotra, 2008), and terrorist attacks (Healy, Kuo and Malhotra, 2014). Effects are

especially strong when the officials in question are domain relevant to the crisis (Healy, Kuo and Malhotra, 2014), as state governors and President Trump both were during the Covid-19 pandemic. Especially relevant to the Covid-19 crisis, citizens tend to choose officials from the party opposite their own to blame when problems arise and responsibility overlaps between state and federal governments (Brown, 2010). In states with Democratic governors, then, citizens had leeway to choose which party executives to blame. Overlapping responsibilities for Covid could work in other ways as well. As the de-factor leader of the party, Trump is the most likely target of Democratic blame, which might insulate Republican governors from voter discontent. As such, it is reasonable to expect that citizens will follow partisan predispositions when deciding whom to blame. This leads to my second hypothesis:

**H1B:** Democrats should be more likely to say President Trump is to blame for the spread of Covid-19 than Republicans.

Opinions about what the government should prioritize and who is to blame are important political attitudes related to the 2020 presidential election. Elections can turn on both policy preferences and perceived performance. On policy, Joe Biden and Donald Trump afforded voters a clear choice relative to Covid: Biden prioritized the public health crisis while Trump prioritized the economy. As for performance, blaming Trump rather than your state governor for the Covid-19 crisis should be an important political attitude in vote choice when it comes to retrospective voting theories. If citizens follow party cues on both policy and performance, they will likely do the same with vote choice. As such, I propose a third hypothesis:

**H1C:** Republicans should be more likely to vote for Trump in the 2020 Presidential election than Democrats.

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## Overcoming Partisan Motivated Reasoning

The Covid-19 pandemic is ideally suited to test the potential boundaries of partisanship's influence. Not only are the two parties starkly divided on policy, hundreds of thousands of Americans died while millions more were infected, many probably unnecessarily according to Ambassador Deborah Birx, because of poor government performance.<sup>1</sup> Can such real world failures attenuate the impact of partisanship on attitudes where citizens are motivated to follow party cues?

In assessing potential mechanisms with the power to overcome the influence of partisanship, I argue personal experiences with Covid-19 ought to be important. When forming attitudes, personal experience can serve as an informational resources to draw upon, although its potential for influence depends on issue domain. For foreign policy, the impact of personal experiences is limited as few Americans have direct personal experiences. Hence, citizens must rely on elite cues and frames when forming opinions. But for many issues, such as affirmative action and local economic issues, citizens can use their own experiences to inform their views (Gamson, 1992). Scholars have shown the power of personal experience in shaping attitudes across a wide range of policies, including policing (Orr and West, 2007), the strength of the national economy (Hetherington, 1996), and healthcare (Larsen, 2020) to name but a few areas.

The influence of personal experience manifests even on policies when party elites have taken clear and opposing positions, suggesting that it has the potential to attenuate the effect of partisanship. On citizen's attitudes about climate change, for example, partisan identification and ideology are significant predictors of whether or not citizens believe there is significant evidence of climate change. However, as Egan and Mullin (2012) show, local weather patterns play a role in shaping citizens attitudes; a two standard deviation shift in local temperature above average increases respondents likelihood of indicating there is

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<sup>1</sup>*New York Times*. 2021. "Covid-19: Birx Lashes Trump's Pandemic Response and Says Deaths Could Have Been 'Decreased Substantially'." 11 June

solid evidence for climate change by 3.8 percentage points. Shifts in local weather patterns represent relevant information that might run against favored party cues, providing them direct evidence that the earth is warming. It is worth noting that this effect is especially strong among respondents who indicate they lean Republican, suggesting the moderating effect of personal experiences on political attitudes.

The same pattern emerges with attitudes about public health insurance programs like Medicare and the Affordable Care Act. Lerman and McCabe (2017) leverage a regression discontinuity design that accounts for sharp opinion change when citizens turn 65 and can enroll in Medicare. They find that those who have a personal experience with Medicare are more likely to support both the Affordable Care Act and are less likely to support cuts to Medicare. While they do not test underlying mechanism, enrolling in a public health care program undoubtedly provides information about the benefits of those two programs. In turn, such information likely contributes to shifting attitudes among having a new personal experience. Similar to local weather, the effect is especially robust among Republicans, indicating the moderating influence of personal experiences.

Given prior evidence demonstrating the political effects of personal experience across a wide range of issues, I argue personal experiences with Covid-19 ought to play an important role in moderating the effect of partisanship on political attitudes related to Covid-19. As discussed above, Democrats and Republicans adopted starkly different rhetoric when it comes to Covid-19. Democrats continually emphasized the severity of the virus and the need to prioritize public health while Republicans mostly downplayed its severity and focused on the economy. This rhetoric has contributed to polarized attitudes about the pandemic and has contributed to citizens from both parties holding inaccurate beliefs about Covid-19. For example, Rothwell and Desai (2020) found Republicans are less likely to identify correctly that Covid-19 can be spread by asymptomatic people. Republicans are also less likely to correctly identify that Covid-19 is more deadly than the flu. Democrats, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to overestimate the percent of those infected who are

hospitalized; 41 percent of Democrats said over 50 percent of people who are infected with Covid-19 are hospitalized when the true percent is between 1 and 5 percent. Only ten percent of Democrats correctly identified this number versus 26 percent of Republicans (Rothwell and Desai, 2020).

Given Democrats overestimation and Republicans underestimation of the severity of Covid-19, I argue that being infected with Covid-19 provides information that might run counter to elite rhetoric. A Democrat who has been personally infected out to be more likely to revise their beliefs downward about the severity of the disease if they themselves were not hospitalized. Similarly, a Republican who has been infected likely experienced that the disease is more severe than the flu. I expect these personal experiences translate to changes in political attitudes and makes the role of party less salient. As such, I propose the following hypotheses:

**H2A:** Personal experiences with Covid-19 moderates the role of partisanship in determinations of what government should prioritize.

**H2B:** Personal experiences with Covid-19 moderates the role of partisanship in blame attribution for Covid-19.

**H2C:** Personal experiences with Covid-19 moderates the role of partisanship in vote choice for the 2020 presidential election.

## Data and Methods

To test the hypotheses referenced above, I analyze both cross-sectional and panel data collected in the months leading up to the 2020 presidential election. Specifically, Qualtrics conducted for us separate 2,400 respondent surveys in April, June, September, and October balanced by census population benchmarks for age, gender, education, and race. Waves subsequent to wave 1 included between 33 and 50 percent of respondents who had answered the previous survey wave, with the rest of the sample fresh cross-sectional respondents to re-balance individual waves by the demographics above. Although each individual wave was



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diverse based on Census benchmarks for race, age, education, and gender, panel attrition differed across these characteristics. Hence the panel component is not representative of these population benchmarks. It is important to note, however, that the panel's less representative nature does not undermine the conclusions I seek to test in the panel data. I use the panel to confirm the direction of the relationship I find in the cross-sectional data, while controlling for unobserved heterogeneity among respondents. As for the number of panel cases, 1,331 respondents completed both waves 1 and 2, 998 respondents completed both waves 2 and 3, and 892 respondents completed both waves 3 and 4.

The first dependent variable captures the crux of the policy debate about priorities. In all four survey waves, respondents were asked "As of now, what is more important for the government to do? Contain the health threat of the coronavirus or manage the economic pain caused by the coronavirus." The second dependent variable measures blame attributions. In the third and fourth wave, respondents were asked "In your view, who is more to blame for the severity of the coronavirus crisis in your state?" Respondents could choose either "President Donald Trump" or "My state's governor".<sup>2</sup> The final dependent variable is vote choice. In the November wave of the survey, which wrapped up the day before the election, respondents were asked whom they intended to vote for.

I have two key independent variables of interest: partisan identification and personal experiences with Covid-19. Partisan identification is measured using binary variables for Republican and Independent with leaners included as partisans. Democrat is the omitted reference category. For personal experiences with Covid-19, respondents were asked on all waves of the survey "To your knowledge, have you been infected with the coronavirus/COVID-19?"

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<sup>2</sup>Although respondents might plausibly blame other actors as well, I asked people to choose between the president and governor, specifically, for several reasons. First, a question that allows people to assign responsibility to either a state or federal actor best reflects the real world debate that occurred throughout the pandemic, particularly the side presented by President Trump. Second, the variation in a respondent's governors' party makes it possible to test the degree to which partisan motivated reasoning depends on political context. I suspect it should. When respondents' governors are Democrats, Republicans in the electorate have the opportunity to blame someone who is not a co-partisan. To this extent, respondents from both parties possess the ability to follow partisan cues and ignore real world information when making judgments about who is primarily responsible for the spread of Covid-19.

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and given three response options: (1) Yes, a medical test confirmed I was infected with the coronavirus (2) Maybe. I have had symptoms consistent with the coronavirus/COVID-19 (dry cough, fever, shortness of breath), but I was not tested and (3) No, to my knowledge I have not been infected with coronavirus/COVID-19. Personal experience with Covid-19 is equal to 1 if people had a confirmed test and equal to 0 otherwise. Consistent with my second set of hypotheses on the moderating effect of personal experiences with Covid-19, I also include an interaction between being personally infected with Covid-19 and partisan identification.

There are two potential concerns for bias from self reports of personal experiences: non-random exposure to experiences and unreliable self reporting (Egan and Mullin, 2012). Regarding nonrandom exposure, a primary concern would be an association between partisanship and infection status. However, I find no such correlation between partisan identification and being personally infected with Covid-19. By focusing on only those with a confirmed positive test, I eliminate potential self-reporting bias in Covid-19 symptoms that may be associated with partisanship or political attitudes. Further, regarding the potential for unreliable self-reporting of Covid-19 positive tests, I find that self-reporting data in my survey is relatively consistent with data from the CDC on confirmed positive cases of Covid-19. On November 3rd, 2020, the last day Wave 4 was administered, there were over 9.2 million cumulative cases of Covid-19 in the United States with a confirmed positive test, 2.8 percent of the total US population. In wave 4, 3.8 percent of respondents indicated they had been infected with Covid-19. While the percentage in the survey is slightly higher, it is substantively similar and does not indicate widespread self reporting bias.<sup>3</sup>

I also control for demographic factors. This includes respondents' gender, race, education, income, and age. All variables are coded from zero to one. I also include a control for state governor's response to the Covid-19 pandemic – whether or not states implemented a mask

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<sup>3</sup>Further, the survey sample consists of only adults whereas CDC data consists of adults and children. This difference may also contribute to the higher percentage in the survey and should mitigate any concerns of over-reporting.

mandate. While there is variability in how governors responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, implementing a state wide mask mandate was seen as an evidence based response. This policy response is also presumably correlated with governors' rhetoric, helping to account for political context when it comes to attitudes about Covid-19 priorities.

## Results

The analysis proceeds in three parts. The first examines the role of partisanship and personal experiences relative to policy trade-offs – economic versus health. The second focuses on blame attribution for the spread of Covid-19. The third section tackles vote choice.

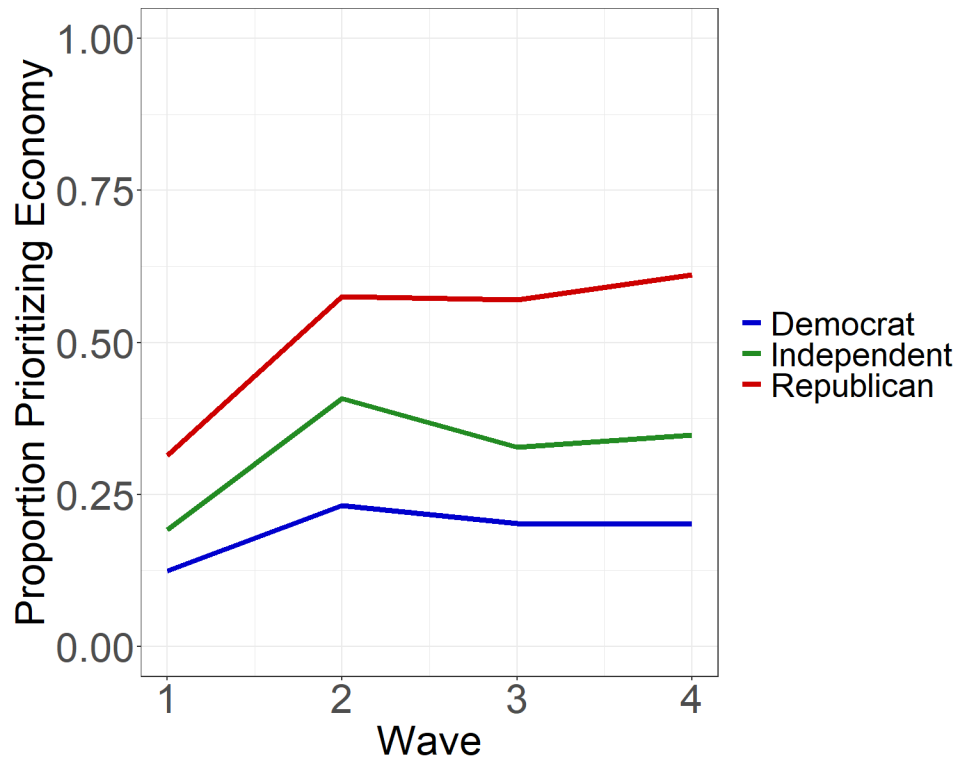
### Government Priorities

Whether to reopen the economy to promote growth or keep it shut down to protect public health was among the central debates between the parties throughout the pandemic. Although the Trump administration advocated for a short shutdown in March, many Republicans began to push to open state economies by late spring, arguing the cure cannot be worse than the disease. Many governors – mostly Democrats but a few Republicans as well – opted to prioritize public health considerations by maintaining shutdowns. Figure 1 plots the proportion of respondents who prioritized the economy by party and wave.

Consistent with **H1A**, clear partisan differences emerge. Across all four waves, Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to say the government should prioritize the economy over public health. At the beginning of the pandemic, neither side was especially enthusiastic about focusing on the economy, which reflect that elite party position taking had not yet crystallized. But, after the April wave, party differences widened. Prioritizing the economy increased by nearly 40 percentage points among Republicans between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Although the economy became a slightly higher priority for Democrats over time, prioritizing it never reached 25 percent. After the June wave, partisans remained

relatively consistent in their views, with prioritizing the economy the choice of around 60 percent among Republicans but only 20 percent of Democrats.

Figure 1: Proportion of Each Party Prioritizing Economic Crisis over Health Crisis



To test whether personal experiences with Covid-19 moderated the impact of partisanship, I turn to the Wave 4 data, which was collected in late October and early November. The dependent variable is equal to 1 if a respondent believes the government should prioritize the economic crisis and 0 if a respondent believes the health crisis should be prioritized.

I estimate a logit model to assess respondent's likelihood of prioritizing the economy. To test my hypotheses, I create interactions between dummy variables for partisan identification (Independent and Republican) and being personally infected with Covid-19.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 presents the results of the logit regression. I find significant evidence that Republicans are, as expected, more likely than Democrats to prioritize the economy over the health crisis, as indicated by the positive and statistically significant coefficient on the Republican dummy variable. Independents are also more likely than Democrats to prioritize the economy, although its coefficient is smaller in magnitude than Republicans. In contrast, older Americans and Hispanic Americans, two populations that proved to be most vulnerable during the pandemic, are both less likely to prioritize the economy.

Consistent with my expectations, being personally infected with Covid-19 also exerts statistically significant effects, as does its interaction with the Republican dummy variable.<sup>5</sup> The coefficient on being personally infected reflects its impact among Democrats, specifically. The positive and statistically significant effect indicates that Democrats who have been infected with Covid-19 are more likely than Democrats who have not been infected to prioritize the economy. Given Democrats tendency to overestimate the severity of the virus (Rothwell and Desai, 2020), this result is expected. As infected Democrats learned more information through personal experiences with Covid-19, they became more likely to ignore elite messaging that prioritized public health.

The interaction between being personally infected and Republican is, as expected, negative and statistically significant. The total effect of being personally infected for Republi-

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<sup>4</sup>The results and subsequent predicted probabilities are consistent when estimating the same model with a 7 point partisan identification scale.

<sup>5</sup>The large coefficient and standard error on the interaction between being personally infected and independent are due to a low number of Covid-19 cases for independents.

Table 1: Cross Sectional Analysis of Government Priorities

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Prioritize Economy
Personally Infected	0.708** (0.319)
Republican	1.913*** (0.115)
Independent	0.799*** (0.162)
Male	0.068 (0.103)
Black	-0.087 (0.160)
Hispanic	-0.340** (0.145)
Education	-0.290 (0.246)
Mask Mandate	0.240** (0.116)
Income	-0.105 (0.180)
Age	-1.346*** (0.231)
Personally Infected*Republican	-1.451*** (0.473)
Personally Infected*Independent	-13.601 (265.758)
Constant	-0.784*** (0.185)
Observations	2,201
Log Likelihood	-1,240.924
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,507.848

*Note:*

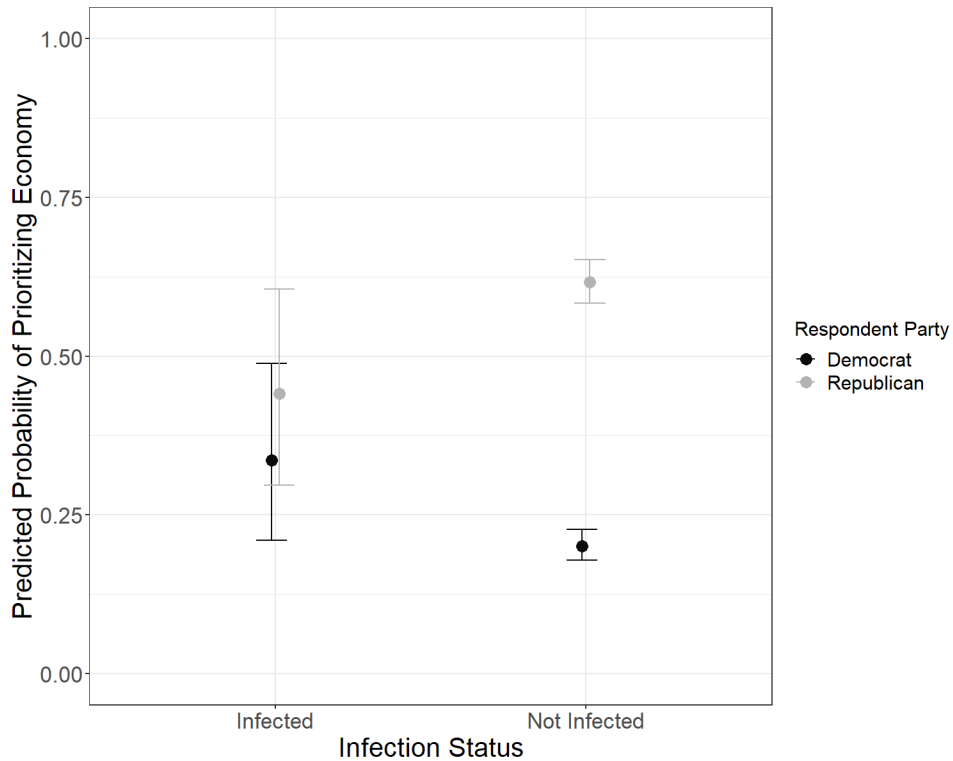
\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

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cans the sum of the main effect (0.708) and the interaction effect (-1.451), equal to -0.743 (standard error = 0.353;  $p$ -value  $\leq .05$ ). This shows Republicans who have been infected with Covid-19 are less likely to prioritize the economy than Republicans who have not been infected. Personal experiences with Covid-19 provide Republicans with a more accurate representation of the severity of Covid-19 than many Republican political elites had suggested. This additional source of information seems to have contributed to Republicans revising their beliefs towards prioritizing public health.

To provide a substantive interpretation of these results, Figure 2 plots the predicted probabilities of prioritizing the economy over public health using an observed values approach (see Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013) Having been infected narrows the partisan difference dramatically. Among those not infected, the difference in predicted probability between Democrats and Republicans is large, approximately 42 percentage points. But, among those who have been infected with Covid-19, there is only a difference of 11 percentage points between Democrats and Republicans. Importantly the shrinking party difference among the previously infected results both from Democrats becoming more supportive of prioritizing the economy than their un-infected co-partisans and Republicans becoming less supportive than their un-infected co-partisans.

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Prioritizing the Economy



One limitation of the above analysis is the use of cross-sectional observational data. It is possible that respondents who are infected with Covid-19 are different in some measurable way from fellow partisans who have not been infected with Covid-19. If so, unmeasured differences between respondents could be driving the results. To better mitigate the concern that unobserved characteristics are driving results, I leverage the panel component of the data collection to account for this unobserved heterogeneity. Specifically, I employ a lagged dependent variable model (LDV). In this LDV model, respondents' attitude on government priorities from the prior wave are included as an independent variable. By including a lagged dependent variable, I can account for these unmeasured differences that plausibly affect attitudes about government priorities across waves. If it is the case that these unmeasured differences are responsible for the effects found above, prior attitudes would account for and explain present attitudes; there would be not be a statistically significant effect of being personally infected with Covid-19 in the results. Although LDV models can produce biased



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estimates, the bias tends to concentrate in estimates for the lagged dependent variable, not the independent variables of substantive interest. Because I am primarily interested the coefficients on the interaction between party identification and being personally infected, LDV actually produces downward bias, making this a conservative test of the relationship (Keele and Kelly, 2006).

I include respondents in the panel analysis if they completed consecutive waves. In total, 1,858 respondents completed multiple waves of the panel. This creates a total of 3,222 instances in which respondents completed consecutive waves. Of the 3,222 consecutive responses, 76.9 percent held the same beliefs about what government should prioritize between consecutive waves, suggesting high stability of opinion. However, a substantial percentage of panelists did shift, with 7.7 percent moving from prioritizing the economy to prioritizing the public health crisis and 15.4 percent going in the opposite direction.

While attrition creates a panel that is not nationally representative and limits inferences that can be drawn on the broader population, this analysis is simply meant to confirm the direction of the relationship from the cross-sectional analysis while controlling for prior beliefs. The dependent variable in the model measures respondents' attitudes about government priorities at time  $t$ . For the independent variables, I interact the categorical dummy variable for partisan identification with being personally infected. PID and being personally infected were both measured at time  $t$  in the model. I also control for respondents' attitudes about government priorities at  $t - 1$ .

Table 2 presents the results from the lagged dependent variable model. Even after accounting for prior beliefs about what government priorities should be, both Independents and Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say the government should prioritize the economy. This is consistent with the time-series trend presented earlier in Figure 1. In addition, I again find a positive and significant coefficient on being personally infected, which indicates that Democrats who have been infected are more likely than Democrats who have not been infected to say government should prioritize the economy. Finally, the model re-

veals a statistically significant negative interaction between having been personally infected and identifying as Republican. Again, as with the cross-sectional results, Republicans who have been infected are less likely to prioritize the economy than Republicans who have not been infected. This replication ought to help to mitigate concerns that the results above are due to unobserved heterogeneity among respondents.

Table 2: Panel Analysis of Government Priorities

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Prioritize Economy
Prioritize Economy Prior	2.020*** (0.098)
Personally Infected	0.836** (0.403)
Independent	0.806*** (0.144)
Republican	1.579*** (0.099)
Personally Infected*Independent	-14.800 (332.051)
Personally Infected*Republican	-1.281** (0.624)
Constant	-1.981*** (0.078)
Observations	3,025
Log Likelihood	-1,492.984
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,999.967

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## Blame Attribution

The prior section establishes that partisanship shaped whether people thought the government should prioritize the economy or public health in dealing with the pandemic. That is as expected with clear party cues and a polarized political environment. More important, it also showed that personal experiences with Covid-19 moderated the impact of partisanship. I next turn to who citizens blamed for the government's response to Covid, federal or state executives. In states with Democratic governors, there are clear partisan cues for voters to follow in who they blame for the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic: Democrats should be more likely to blame Trump for the spread of Covid-19 while Republicans should be more likely to blame their state governor. Republicans and Democrats will, in some cases, have to choose between blaming a Republican president and Republican governor. With Trump as the leader of the Republican party during his time in office, Democrats should be still more likely to blame Trump for the spread of Covid-19 whereas Republicans should be more likely to blame their state's governor (**H1B**). However, as with government priorities, I hypothesize this difference between Democrats and Republicans in blame attribution will be moderated among those who have been infected with Covid-19 (**H2B**).

In both waves 3 and 4, respondents were asked "In your view, who is more to blame for the severity of the coronavirus crisis in your state?" and given the choice of "President Donald Trump" or "My state's governor". By focusing on blame between just governors and Trump, respondents are forced to make a choice on an evaluation where partisan expectations exist. Table 3 tracks the percentage of respondents who blamed Trump for the Covid 19 response, broken down by respondents' party and the party of their governor during wave 4. The results are consistent with motivated reasoning. Democrats overwhelmingly blame Trump, especially when they live in a state with a Democratic governor. Specifically, fully 80 percent of Democrats who live in a state with a Republican governor blame Trump, but an even higher percentage – 88 percent – blame Trump when they have a Democratic governor. As expected, Republicans tend to insulate Trump from blame, but they do it

equally regardless of the party of the governor in their state. If it is a Republican 26 percent blame Trump, while 24 percent do if it is a Democrat.

Table 3: Proportions of Respondents Blaming Trump for Covid-19 by Respondent Party and Governor Party in November, 2020

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Democratic Governor	0.88	0.56	0.26
Republican Governor	0.80	0.59	0.24

To test whether personal experiences with Covid-19 condition the effect of party identification on blame attribution, I again start with an analysis of cross sectional data from Wave 4. The dependent variable, blame attribution (Trump), is equal to 1 if respondents blame Trump for the severity of the spread of Covid-19 and 0 if they believe their governor is to blame. I again include an interaction between being personally infected and categorical dummy variables for Republican and Independent. I also control for respondents race, income, age, gender, as well as whether or not the respondent lives in a state with a mask mandate.

Table 4 presents the results from the logit regression assessing respondents' likelihood of blaming President Trump for the spread of Covid-19 in their state. I find significant evidence that Republicans are less likely than Democrats to blame Trump for the severity of Covid-19, as indicated by the negative and statistically significant coefficient. Independents are also less likely than Democrats to blame Trump for the spread of Covid-19.

There is a statistically and substantively significant influence of partisan identification on blame attribution: both Republicans and Independents are less likely than Democrats to blame Trump for the spread of Covid-19 in their state. This is consistent with my partisan expectation hypothesis. In addition, respondents who live in a state with a mask mandate, as well as black and more educated respondents are more likely to blame Trump for the spread of Covid-19.

Table 4: Cross Sectional Analysis of Blame Attribution

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Blame Attribution (Trump)
Personally Infected	-1.048*** (0.325)
Republican	-2.837*** (0.127)
Independent	-1.438*** (0.162)
Mask Mandate	0.443*** (0.125)
Male	-0.056 (0.114)
Black	0.585*** (0.185)
Hispanic	0.118 (0.153)
Education	0.652** (0.270)
Income	0.095 (0.199)
Age	0.386 (0.251)
Personally Infected*Republican	2.592*** (0.482)
Personally Infected*Independent	14.382 (264.353)
Constant	0.846*** (0.201)
Observations	2,200
Log Likelihood	-1,072.307
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,170.613

*Note:*

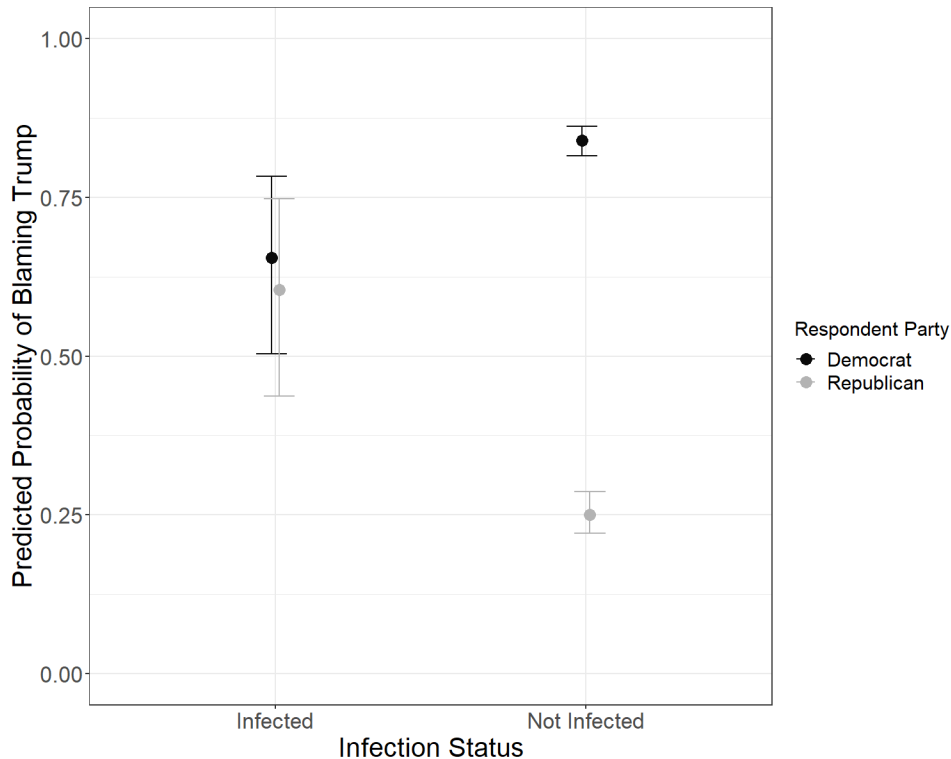
\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

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Similar to government priorities, being personally infected with Covid-19 has a statistically significant effect. As does the interaction between personal infection and Republican. The effect of being personally infected is negative and statistically significant, indicating Democrats who have been infected with Covid-19 are less likely to blame Trump than Democrats who have not been infected. This effect is the opposite for Republicans. Taking the direct effect of being personally infected and interaction term yields a total effect of 1.543 (standard error = 0.360;  $p$ -value  $\leq .05$ ). This shows Republicans who have been infected with Covid-19 are more likely to blame Trump than Republicans who have not been infected. Both results provide support for my hypothesis that personal experiences with Covid-19 attenuate the influence of partisanship on blame attribution.

As above, I plot the predicted probabilities using the results from Table 4 by party (Democrat or Republican) and infection status using an observed values approach. Among those not infected, the partisan difference in predicted probability of blaming President Trump between is 59 percentage points. Among those who have been infected with Covid-19, however, the effect of partisanship is only 5 percentage points, which is statistically indistinguishable from zero. Having had Covid makes a fundamental difference when it comes to partisan blame attribution.

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Blaming Trump for Covid-19



Recall from Table 3 that the pattern of blame attribution differed depending on whether a state had a Republican or Democratic governor. That is consistent with the literature; when responsibility for a crisis overlaps across levels of government, citizens blame policymakers based on their partisanship (Brown, 2010). In states where the governor is a Democrat, respondents can rely on party cues when making a decision on who to blame. Those cues disappear when the governor is a Republican. Therefore, in the case when respondents live in a state with a Democratic governor, this should represent an instance where polarization in attitudes regarding blame attribution should be the highest. To this extent, if personal experiences with Covid-19 still moderate the effect of partisanship on blame attribution in an environment with stronger party cues, it is further evidence about the strength of this moderating effect.

To test this, I estimate two models with the same variables as the model in Table 4. The first model will contain only respondents living in states with Democratic governors and

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the second model will contain only respondents living in states with Republican governors. Table 5 presents the results of both models. As with the aggregated model, there are clear partisan differences in who respondents blame regardless of what state they live in or not. As expected, the coefficient for Republican is larger for respondents in states with a Democratic governor, indicating a larger polarization in attitudes when the governor is a Democrat.

Where differences emerge between the two cases is in the effect of being personally infected with Covid-19. The direct effect of being personally infected with Covid-19 is negative but not statistically significant when the governor is a Democrat. This suggests there is a lack of evidence of Democrats who have been infected diverting from party cues when their governor shares the same party as them. However, in the case where the governor is Republican, this effect is negative and statistically significant, suggesting Democrats who have been infected are less likely to blame President Trump. In both cases, the interaction between being personally infected and Republican is positive and statistically significant. When the governor is a Democrat, the total effect of being personally infected for Republicans is 1.682 (standard error = 0.511;  $p$ -value  $\leq .05$ ). The total effect for Republicans drops to 1.461 (standard error = 0.512;  $p$ -value  $\leq .05$ ) when the governor is a Republican. This suggests, regardless of the party of the governor, Republicans who have been infected are more likely to blame President Trump than Republicans who have not been infected.

Taken together, these results further support the partisan hypothesis for blame attribution. When partisan cues are evident, citizens follow these partisan cues in who they blame. In absence of these party cues, out-partisans are still more likely to blame the president, presumably due to his role as de-facto leader of the party, while in-partisans insulate the president. In addition, there is mixed evidence for the effect of personal experiences in moderating the role of partisanship. After being infected with Covid-19, Republicans are still more willing to blame the leader of their party, regardless of the party of the governors. Democrats who have been infected, however, are only more willing to blame their governor when the governor does not share the same political party.



Table 5: Cross Sectional Analysis of Blame Attribution

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Blame Attribution (Trump)	
	(Democratic Governor)	(Republican Governor)
Personally Infected	-0.430 (0.576)	-1.481*** (0.429)
Republican	-3.098*** (0.181)	-2.631*** (0.183)
Independent	-1.752*** (0.224)	-1.117*** (0.241)
Mask Mandate	0.145 (0.677)	0.421*** (0.155)
Male	-0.314* (0.162)	0.203 (0.166)
Black	0.825*** (0.294)	0.451* (0.247)
Hispanic	0.012 (0.226)	0.236 (0.213)
Education	0.550 (0.383)	0.849** (0.393)
Income	0.285 (0.284)	-0.071 (0.288)
Age	0.380 (0.363)	0.318 (0.359)
Personally Infected*Republican	2.113*** (0.769)	2.942*** (0.664)
Personally Infected*Independent	14.714 (506.835)	15.167 (535.411)
Constant	1.373* (0.702)	0.642** (0.268)
Observations	1,194	991
Log Likelihood	-537.469	-514.294
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,100.938	1,054.588

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

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Last, I turn again to an analysis using panel data to evaluate whether these moderating effects for personal experience on partisanship are hold after controlling for prior attitudes. Panel respondents in both waves 3 and 4 were asked the blame attribution questions. Blame attribution questions were not asked in waves 1 and 2 which limits the sample of respondents who can be analyzed. In addition, waves 3 and 4 were conducted about a month apart, reducing the number of respondents who should be expected to change their views between waves. In total, 892 respondents completed both wave 3 and wave 4. As with attitudes about government priorities, respondents' attitudes for blame attribution were relatively stable. 790 of 892 beliefs about blame attribution remained the same. 45 respondents went from blaming Trump to blaming their governor and 46 respondents went from blaming their governor to blaming Trump.

I again estimate a lagged dependent variable model. The dependent variable is equal to 1 if respondents blame Trump and 0 if they blame their governor. I again include independent variables for whether respondents were personally infected, partisan identification, as well as their interaction. I also include the lagged dependent variable for respondents' beliefs about who is to blame for the Covid-19 crisis.

The results provide mixed evidence for the causal effect of personal experiences on moderating partisanship. Consistent with the cross-sectional results, both Independents and Republicans are less likely than Democrats to blame President Trump after controlling for prior views. When it comes to being personally infected, the direct effect is negative, consistent with the cross-sectional analysis, although not statistically significant. The interaction between personally infected and Republican is positive, consistent with the results cross sectional analysis, although not statistically significant. It should be noted both the direct effect and interaction for personally infected produce similarly sized coefficients to the previous panel analysis, albeit with larger standard errors. While these results are not statistically significant, the direction interaction effect is still consistent with the cross sectional analysis. This provides at least some support to the notion that being personally infected with

Table 6: Panel Analysis: Blame for Severity of Covid-19

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Blame Attribution (Trump)
Blame Prior	3.597*** (0.239)
Personally Infected	-0.630 (0.928)
Independent	-1.191*** (0.365)
Republican	-1.947*** (0.262)
Personally Infected*Independent	13.314 (624.195)
Personally Infected*Republican	1.539 (1.606)
Constant	-0.523** (0.226)
Observations	842
Log Likelihood	-248.516
Akaike Inf. Crit.	511.031

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

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Covid-19 has a causal influence, both direct and as an interaction with partisanship, after accounting for unobserved heterogeneity.

## Election Consequences

To this point, I have focused on the moderating role of partisanship on political attitudes. The previous two sections have shown partisanship is a powerful predictor of respondents' attitudes, but that being personally infected with Covid-19 moderates this effect. These political attitudes, opinions about what the government should prioritize and who is to blame for the severity of the Covid-19 crisis, should be closely tied to vote choice. An important next step explores whether personal experience with Covid moderates the effect of partisanship on presidential vote choice. To evaluate this possibility, I again turn to the Wave 4 data, which was conducted in the two weeks before the 2020 presidential election. Given personal experiences have a significant influence on political attitudes closely connected to vote choice, it stands to reason the same relationship exists when it comes to vote choice. To assess the moderating effect of personal experiences on votes choice, I estimate a logit model predicting the likelihood of respondents indicating they intend to vote for Trump.

The dependent variable, vote Trump, is equal to 1 if respondents indicate they would vote for Trump and 0 otherwise. I include the interaction between being personally infected and partisan identification as independent variables. I also control for respondent gender, race, education, income, and age. The results of this model appear in Table 7.

Not surprisingly, partisanship has a large effect on vote choice, as one would expect. The effect of partisanship is significantly larger than any of the prior analyses. Despite this, there is still a moderating effect of partisanship. Democrats who have been infected with Covid-19 are more likely than Democrats who have not been infected with Covid-19 to vote for President Trump. While the interaction effect for Republicans is statistically significant, the total effect of being personally infected, while in the expected direction, does not reach statistical significance (total effect = -0.583; standard error = 0.396).

Table 7: Presidential Vote Choice

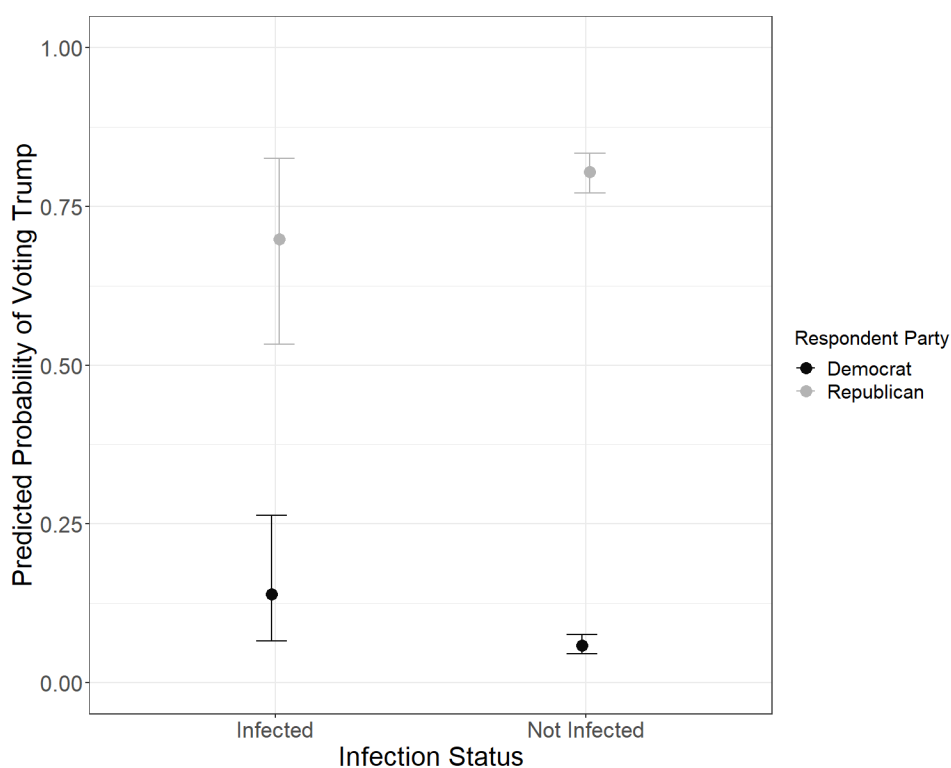
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Vote Trump
Personally Infected	0.965** (0.463)
Republican	4.313*** (0.169)
Independent	1.847*** (0.204)
Male	0.134 (0.142)
Black	-0.616** (0.246)
Hispanic	-0.644*** (0.202)
Education	-0.904*** (0.336)
Income	-0.238 (0.249)
Age	-0.093 (0.317)
Personally Infected*Republican	-1.548** (0.606)
Personally Infected*Independent	-0.028 (1.120)
Constant	-2.247*** (0.240)
Observations	2,201
Log Likelihood	-743.698
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,511.396

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Figure 4 presents the substantive interpretation of these results by partisan identification (Democrat or Republican) and infection status using an observed values approach. For those who have not been infected, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is 75 percentage points. Both Democrats (0.059) and Republicans (0.804) who have not been infected have an extremely high probability of following partisan cues. Being infected with Covid-19 significantly moderates this difference. The difference in predicted probability between Democrats and Republicans who have been infected decreases to 56 percentage points.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Voting for Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election



While the moderating effect of personal experiences is less than prior analysis, intuitively this should be expected. The political costs of changing an attitude are significantly lower than translating those attitudes to a vote against a co-partisan. This does however, provide some context about the power of personal experiences. Even in an election where the two candidates could not have presented themselves differently and partisanship was at an

all time high, personal experiences still overcame those factors. A decrease in predicted probability of voting for Trump of 0.105 among Republicans is still substantively significant. The same goes for the increase in predicted probability of 0.080 for Democrats in voting for Trump.

## Discussion

The results in this paper paint two pictures of the American public. Most Americans followed their partisan elites when it came to attitudes about the Covid-19 pandemic despite hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions unemployed, and a global pandemic the federal government failed to respond to. However, some did depart from partisan habits. Having had some personal experience with Covid-19 had a significant moderating impact on the role of partisanship about choosing political priorities during a pandemic, blame attribution, and vote choice. Although these observational results have their weakness, they consistently point in the same direction and carry substantively significant implications.

In an era where party brands have become clearer, straight ticket voting has reached an all time, and the effect of partisanship has become even more significant for vote choice and political attitudes, there is still more to voting behavior than just partisanship. While partisanship can explain the political attitudes and behaviors of *most* Americans, the closely contested nature of presidential elections and control for Congress merit study of these smaller but still significant effects. My analysis has shown citizens are still responsive to real world events in their political attitudes and behaviors, even when there are conflicting partisan forces. Although admittedly, it takes a very strong personal experience – becoming infected with a potentially fatal disease – to puncture partisanship’s impact, the results presented here nonetheless point to a substantial broader impact on election outcomes.

## Appendix

Replication of Cross Sectional Analysis with 7-point PID Scale

Replication of Panel Analysis Using Fixed and Random Effects



Table 8: Replication of Table 1: Government Priorities

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Prioritize Economy
Personally Infected	0.838** (0.338)
PID (7-point scale)	2.217*** (0.142)
Male	0.073 (0.102)
Black	-0.078 (0.161)
Hispanic	-0.363** (0.144)
Education	-0.272 (0.243)
Mask Mandate	0.230** (0.115)
Income	-0.108 (0.178)
Age	-1.226*** (0.227)
Personally Infected*PID	-1.801*** (0.542)
Constant	-1.008*** (0.189)
Observations	2,201
Log Likelihood	-1,259.663
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,541.327

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Table 9: Replication of Table 4: Blame Attribution

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Blame Attribution (Trump)
Personally Infected	-1.372*** (0.343)
PID (7-point scale)	-3.477*** (0.162)
Male	-0.062 (0.113)
Black	0.530*** (0.186)
Hispanic	0.133 (0.152)
Education	0.588** (0.267)
Mask Mandate	0.427*** (0.123)
Income	0.132 (0.197)
Age	0.245 (0.247)
Personally Infected*PID	3.393*** (0.556)
Constant	1.249*** (0.205)
Observations	2,200
Log Likelihood	-1,089.216
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,200.433

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Table 10: Replication of Table 7: Presidential Vote Choice

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Vote Trump
Personally Infected	1.456*** (0.518)
PID (7-point scale)	5.854*** (0.241)
Male	0.130 (0.143)
Black	-0.546** (0.255)
Hispanic	-0.669*** (0.205)
Education	-0.788** (0.337)
Mask Mandate	0.037 (0.156)
Income	-0.252 (0.249)
Age	0.129 (0.316)
Personally Infected*PID	-2.281*** (0.768)
Constant	-3.243*** (0.277)
Observations	2,201
Log Likelihood	-728.347
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,478.694

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

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