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Covid and the 'Very Liberal'

9-11 minutes

The left-right divide over Covid-19 — with blue America taking the virus more seriously than red America — has never been the pandemic's only political divide. Each partisan tribe has also had its internal disagreements.

Republicans have long been [split over vaccination](#), with many eagerly getting shots while many others refuse. Democrats have their own growing schism, between those who believe Covid precautions should continue to be paramount and those who favor moves toward normalcy.

The key dividing line appears to be ideology. Americans who identify as “very liberal” are much more worried about Covid than Americans who identify as “somewhat liberal” or “liberal.” Increasingly, the very liberal look like outliers on

Covid: The merely liberal are sometimes closer to moderates than to the very liberal.

That is a central finding of a poll conducted last week by [Morning Consult](#) for this newsletter. The poll is a follow-up to [one from January](#). This time, to go deeper than partisan identification, we asked respondents to choose one of seven labels: very liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative or very conservative.

Among the results:

- Nearly 50 percent of very liberal Americans say that they believe Covid presents a “great risk” to their personal health. Other liberals, moderates and conservatives tend to be less worried.
- When parents were asked about the threat to their children, the pattern was similar.
- More than 60 percent of very liberal Americans believe that mask mandates should continue for the foreseeable future. Most moderates and conservatives see mandates as a temporary strategy that should end this year.

Personal safety

Why does political ideology so strongly shape Covid beliefs?

Donald Trump certainly plays a role. As president, he repeatedly made [false statements](#) downplaying Covid. Many Republican voters adopted his view, while many liberal Democrats went in the other direction. They came to equate any loosening of Covid restrictions with Trumpism, even after vaccines tamed the virus's worst effects.

But I don't think Trump is the only explanation. Every group of Democrats disdains him, yet Democrats disagree about Covid. Apart from Trump, the pandemic seems to be tapping into different views of risk perception.

Very liberal Americans make up almost 10 percent of adults, according to our poll and others. Many are younger than 50 and have a four-year college degree. They span all races but are disproportionately white, the Pew Research Center [has found](#).

In recent years, these progressive professionals have tended to adopt a cautious approach to personal safety. You might even call it conservative.

It is especially notable in child rearing. Parents seek out the healthiest food, sturdiest car seats and safest playgrounds. They do not let their children play tackle football, and they worry about soccer concussions. The sociologist Annette Lareau [has described](#) the upper-middle-class parenting style as “concerted cultivation” and contrasted it with a working-class style of “natural growth.”

A cautious approach to personal safety has big benefits. It has helped popularize bicycle helmets, for example. In the case of Covid, very liberal Americans have been eloquent advocates for protecting the elderly and immunocompromised and for showing empathy toward the unvaccinated.

Yet the approach also has downsides. It can lead people to obsess over small, salient risks while ignoring bigger ones. A regimented childhood, with scheduled lessons replacing unstructured neighborhood play time, may lead to fewer broken bones, but it does not necessarily maximize creativity, independence or happiness.

When it comes to Covid, there is abundant evidence that the most liberal Americans are exaggerating the

risks to the vaccinated and to children.

Consider that Democrats younger than 45 are [more likely](#) to say the virus poses a great risk to them than those older than 65 are — which is inconsistent with scientific reality but consistent with younger Democrats' more intense liberalism. Or consider that many liberals ([including Sonia Sotomayor](#)) feel deep anxiety about Covid's effects on children — even though the flu kills more children in a typical year and car crashes kill about five times as many. Long Covid, similarly, appears to be rare in both [children](#) and [vaccinated people](#).

The truth is that [the vast majority](#) of severe Covid illness is occurring among those Americans who have chosen not to be vaccinated and boosted.

Image

Credit...Mark Abramson for The New York Times

'Public Health 101'

I know that this newsletter's emphasis on liberals' Covid fears has [angered some people](#). And I understand why many Americans — including some

moderates and conservatives, as our poll shows — remain so focused on the virus. It has dominated daily life for more than two years, and some risk remains. Shifting gears is hard.

But trying to eliminate Covid risk, and allowing the virus [to distort daily life](#), has costs, too. That's why much of Europe, which is hardly a bastion of Trumpism, [has stopped](#) trying to minimize caseloads.

The American focus on Covid's dangers, by contrast, has caused disruption and isolation that feed educational losses, mental health troubles, drug overdoses, violent crime and vehicle crashes. [These damages](#) have fallen disproportionately on low-income, Black and Latino Americans, exacerbating inequality in ways that would seem to violate liberal values.

“Rather than eliminating the risk of Covid, you've got to manage the risk,” Elizabeth Howe Bradley, a public health expert and the president of Vassar College, told me recently. “If you really go for minimizing the risk, you're going to have unintended consequences to people's physical health, their

mental health, their social health.”

She added: “It’s Public Health 101.”

Many Americans seem to have adopted this view.

But there are still holdouts.

More on the virus:

- Moderna asked the F.D.A. to authorize a second booster dose [for all adults](#).
- Thirty-five manufacturers will produce [inexpensive versions of Pfizer’s pills](#) to sell in poorer countries.
- President Biden [named Dr. Ashish Jha](#), a dean at Brown University, as his new Covid policy coordinator.

THE LATEST NEWS

State of the War

Image

Credit...Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

- Russian forces remain stalled outside Kyiv, taking heavy casualties. The Ukrainian military yesterday claimed to have shot down 10 Russian planes and cruise missiles.

- Russia does control large sections of eastern and southern Ukraine. Many cities there are [desolate and ruined](#): “There is no one to bury the dead,” an official said.
- This morning, Russian missiles struck the outskirts of the western city of Lviv, which had been a haven, its mayor said.
- In Mariupol, a southern city that hasn’t fallen, rescuers are pulling survivors from a bombed theater. The death toll is unclear.
- The House voted [to allow higher tariffs](#) on Russian goods. The bill now moves to the Senate.
- Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that [the U.S. would punish China](#) if it gave Russia military aid.

More on Ukraine

- Vladimir Putin falsely claims that Ukraine is run by Nazis. [Here’s the origin of that myth](#).
- By labeling Putin a “war criminal,” [Biden personalized the conflict](#), The Times’s David Sanger writes.
- A Russian court extended the detention of the

W.N.B.A. star Brittney Griner by two months. [She was said to be “OK.”](#)

- Arnold Schwarzenegger [released an emotional video](#) directed at Russians and debunking misinformation.
- These photos capture the [desperation and resolve of Kyiv’s residents](#).

Politics

- Republicans are targeting [a crime wave that doesn’t exist](#): voter fraud.
- Biden wants to move away from fossil fuels. The largest federally owned utility [plans to invest in them instead](#).

Other Big Stories

- Three Doctors Without Borders workers were [executed by soldiers in Ethiopia](#), a Times investigation found.
- A [13-year-old was driving](#) the truck that hit a van in Texas, killing nine people — including a college golf coach and six players.

- Anthony Veasna So's "Afterparties" won the [National Book Critics Circle Award](#) for best debut.

Opinions

Russia's stumbles in Ukraine reveal [the weaknesses of autocracies](#), says **David Brooks**.

Michelle Goldberg profiles Peter Marki-Zay, the Hungarian politician [trying to unseat Prime Minister Viktor Orban](#).

Image

Credit...Adama Jalloh for The New York Times

Read like Ferrante

Elena Ferrante, the [pseudonymous](#) author of the Neapolitan novels and more, has [published a collection of lectures](#) about writing and reading. Here are a few takeaways:

She kept a notebook as a teenager. "The writer," her young self wrote, "has a duty to put into words the shoves he gives and those he receives from others."

She balances tidiness with disorder. "Love stories

become interesting to Ferrante at the moment when a character falls out of love; mysteries gain intrigue when she understands that the puzzle won't be solved," The Times's Molly Young writes.

She's a rereader. "To read a book is to absorb, consciously or not, all the other books that influenced *that* book, as well as the books that influenced *those* books, and so on; to interpret even one paragraph on a page is to vector endlessly back in time," Molly writes.

PLAY, WATCH, EAT

What to Cook

Image

Credit...Linda Xiao for The New York Times

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