Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. Our guests today are David Beavers and Jennifer Hochschild. David Beavers is a PhD candidate in the government department at Harvard University and an affiliate of the Center for American Political Studies. Jennifer Hochschild is the Henry Labarre Jayne Professor of Government and Professor of African American Studies at Harvard University. She holds lectureships in the Harvard Kennedy School and the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Their recent paper, "Learning from Experience? COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Their Implications for Democratic Discourse," was published in the Fall 2022 issue of the journal *Social Research*, an issue that explores the concept of conspiracy theories. Their study looked at coronavirus-related conspiracy narratives in the United States across the continuum of political affiliation. They joined us today to discuss their research and how what they found surprised them.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Jennifer and David. I really appreciate your time talking about this really interesting research.

David Beavers

Thank you for inviting us. We're delighted. Happy to be here.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The first question we like to ask all our guests is, what is your academic origin story? How did you come to study your area of academic focus?

Jennifer Hochschild

Well, I've been in this business a whole lot longer than David, so I will start very quickly. I spent a fair amount of time as an undergraduate. I wanted to be a judge, but then I didn't want to be a lawyer. I wanted to be an ambassador, but I didn't want to work at the State Department. I wanted to be a psychologist, but I didn't get admitted to any graduate schools in psychology. So basically, I got admitted to the only political science department that I applied to in graduate school. There's a longer story behind that, but I'll spare you. And I've worked on a variety of issues over many years, mostly with a focus on racial and ethnic politics, both in terms of public opinion and belief systems, but also in terms of institutions and so on.

David Beavers

So I'm in my third year of grad school on the PhD program at Harvard in the government department. Before starting grad school a few years ago, I spent about five years at Politico in Washington, D.C., in various capacities, most recently as a senior web editor and as a contributor to *Politico Influence* newsletter covering lobbying and money in politics. I joined the newsroom, I think, about six days after

Donald Trump was inaugurated. So even though my tenure as a journalist was relatively short lived, in some ways, I feel like I have about two decades of experience in those four years in the newsroom.

And as you can imagine, I saw the word unprecedented in a lot of copy and a lot of conversations while I was at Politico. And over time in the newsroom, I kind of found myself wanting to understand this peculiar moment in American politics in a bit of a deeper manner and to situate it more firmly in American political history, both of which ultimately kind of drove me towards applying to grad school.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Your paper, which is titled "Learning from Experience? COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Their Implications for Democratic Discourse," is featured in the latest issue of *Social Research*, which the whole issue focuses on conspiracy thinking. What led you to want to examine conspiracy theories? Was this something that you were already investigating prior to COVID-19 or did the pandemic itself spark your interest in that topic?

Jennifer Hochschild

Well, I can start. I have been interested in the question—I published a book called *Do Facts Matter? Information and Misinformation in American Politics* five or six years ago, co-authored with a former student, now a wonderful colleague, Katie Einstein. And so I've been interested in the topic of misinformation, disinformation for many years. I think it goes out of my research on racial and ethnic politics, because I grew up in a good liberal family and things seemed fairly self-evident to me that people ought to be able to marry who they want to, they ought to go to schools that are good schools near their house, they ought to vote for the best candidate. I was a classic 1960s liberal kid.

And it turns out when you study racial and ethnic politics, a lot of people don't hold those same views. And so that—and a lot of people not only don't hold the same views, which is not surprising, but they hold what was clearly to me wrong views. And so that led me in the direction of studying misinformation, not just lack of information or biases.

And so the misinformation then, again, once the Trump era began, and particularly the COVID era, misinformation slides relatively quickly into not just knowing the wrong things, but believing that somebody out there is doing something terrible to us and that that's a factual statement about the way the world works. So from my perspective, misinformation, which I've been studying for years, slid pretty readily into conspiracies, which is kind of how I got to this. I think David got to it more straightforwardly.

David Beavers

Straightforwardly. Yeah, I think that's probably a fair word to say. I had certainly been following kind of public opinion about QAnon and other sort of conspiracy theories du jure in American politics before coming to grad school. I had, you know, not exactly unique to me, but like many others, I'd seen some of the, kind of ugly, effects of conspiracism run their course in personal relationships as well as from my time in DC. So when I started grad school and what was it, the fall of 2020, I came in with the intent of studying conspiracy theories, even—you know, this was just barely over two years ago that I started—I think I got a few raised eyebrows when I came in saying that I wanted to study conspiracy theories. And I feel like two years later, everyone is saying, oh, yeah, of course you want to study conspiracy theories.

So, in reality, I probably should have started grad school about four years earlier because then I would have been completing my dissertation at a time where this would be kind of a hot topic.

But no, in all seriousness, I very much came into grad school with the intention of studying conspiracy theories and other sort of projects that are in much earlier stages. I'm interested in voters evaluations of conspiracy endorsing candidates, folks like Marjorie Taylor Greene and whether the degree to which voters are attracted to such candidates, sort of because of or in spite of their call it peculiar belief systems. So this is certainly something that I hope to be a fairly central part of my research agenda.

Jennifer Hochschild

Let me add one last quick thing.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Of course.

Jennifer Hochschild

Having been a professor for many, many years, of course, I don't teach facts. I don't think any good teacher simply does that, but I do care a lot about my students knowing important information—at least knowing how to find it and knowing how to put it into context. And so, I mean, you know, I'm a teacher, right? So the whole question of misinformation, and especially the magnification into conspiracies, violates some core principles I hold about my own job and about what an—again, educated, not necessarily literally college educated—but a knowledgeable person in the world ought to be able to do, which is figure out not morally right from wrong, but factually, empirically right from wrong.

Does the sun rise in the east or the west? You know, is there a child slavery system going on in the basement of a pizzeria? And so there's some some very deep commitment that's just violated by conspiracies, except for the ones that I hold, which, of course, are entirely true. Right. (laughter) You know, so it's not an easy question, but there's some very deep—

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's deep. No, I completely agree with you. And it's frightening. It really is, kind of the more you read about it, the more for me, the much like realization—and, you know, I was raised in Montgomery County, Maryland, in my liberal bubble, but when you start to understand how deeply some people believe in these things that are just what you don't—you can't even wrap your head around. It does. It gives you a chill, I think. And so that I totally agree with what you're saying.

Jennifer Hochschild

And the scariest part of it, of course, is the joke that I was making. You know, I am not prepared that I don't hold any of these myself.

Mary Alice Yeskey

How did the two of you come to work together on this paper?

Jennifer Hochschild

Kind of by accident. I think David said he, and of course, the rest of his cohort came in the fall of 2020. And we hadn't worked together and spring of 2020, you know, everything fell apart. And I guess by the fall of 2021–I've lost the timing a little bit, David—I just sent a note around to a couple of the first and second year graduate students saying, "I don't know you, you know, we've never seen each other in person, anybody want to work on a paper?" And partly, it was just a way of trying to make connection. And partly, I'm a qualitative researcher, not a quantitative researcher ,and it turns out, I really need graduate students as co-authors—partly because they're smart as hell, partly because they know how to do work that I don't know how to do. So it was sort of an open invitation. And David responded.

David Beavers

That's right. I'll add one thing, though. It was the it was the fall of it was October 2020. I can remember the very specific timeline because I think Jennifer neglected to mention the one actual sort of onus behind this paper. It's an easy thing to forget because the paper has shifted in terms of our focus quite a bit since then. It was when then-President Trump was diagnosed with COVID in early October of 2020. I think Jennifer emailed—it must have either been that day or perhaps like the next day—it was really right after it happened, asking if anyone would be interested in working on a paper or some sort of project.

I mean, we even thought maybe this would just be kind of a Monkey Cage blog or something very short. And of course, here we are, you know, over two years later, and there are all kinds of projects in the works. So, you know, a blog post, it was not. But we were curious to see if Trump's own COVID diagnosis would act as sort of a come-to-Jesus moment for his COVID skeptic supporters. This was, of course, before we knew how serious his bout with COVID was. Was he going to make a full and speedy recovery in a couple days, was he going to be on life support for three weeks? I mean, we had no idea. And obviously, we had no idea what the kind of downstream effects in terms of public attitudes were going to be about COVID.

And when it seemed like the, you know, news cycle about Trump's relatively short bout with COVID kind of played its course within a week or two, it seemed pretty clear that it wasn't going to be this huge paradigm shift in terms of partisan alignments around attitudes about COVID-19. But it did kind of push us down this eventual path that led to this paper. And like I mentioned, another couple of projects we have on, kind of, broadly speaking, COVID-19, partisan motivated reasoning, mis and disinformation, and then conspiracism.

Mary Alice Yeskey

So, your study is a quantitative one—which, Jennifer, you just mentioned—which is actually pretty rare for this journal for social research. What led you to submit to this particular issue of the journal?

Jennifer Hochschild

I got an invitation.

Mary Alice Yeskey

(laughter) That's a good answer. (laughter) And the theme fits pretty squarely. But I think—but it's—I really—what I liked so much about the paper was how well it sits in both camps and how perfectly it sits among all the other papers in the issue. In your research, you examined the rate that people's beliefs

about certain COVID-related conspiracies changed alongside the infection and mortality rates of the disease in their actual immediate community. Also, their political affiliation and also national media messaging about COVID that was going on at the time, which is a lot of factors.

Can you tell us, how did you pull those data sets? Where did all that come from?

David Beavers

Sure. I'm happy to start tackling this one, and feel free to cut me off if I get too long-winded on this because like you said, basically three main sources of data that we used for this paper. The most important was this extremely rich survey data that we got from YouGov from a series of rolling cross-sectional surveys they conducted on behalf of the economists. We're deeply grateful and indebted to Doug Rivers at YouGov and to Joe Williams at YouGov, who both gave us permission to use this data, as well as helped compile it on our behalf.

These are a series of weekly surveys of about 1500 Americans each week that YouGov has been conducting for *The Economist*. To my knowledge, they're still ongoing. They've been doing these for every week for months and for several years now. They're just incredibly rich source of data that we're using in another project as we speak. In this paper, we really specifically used—in addition to individual level demographics—we focused on nine conspiracy items that measured respondents' support for, basically, belief that COVID-19 was a hoax, was a fraud perpetrated by the deep state, that the government was concealing the true scale of the COVID pandemic, et cetera. So that was the main source of data.

The other two sources were on local incidents of COVID cases and fatalities. This data came from Microsoft AI for Health. They in turn got their data from, I believe, *The New York Times* and the World Health Organization. Conveniently for us, Microsoft had compiled COVID-19 case and fatality data at the congressional district level, which was helpful because that was the level of geolocation that our survey data had. We had individuals' congressional district. So we were able to cleanly match the COVID incidents data from Microsoft on a daily level to survey respondents', kind of, local area in the form of congressional district.

Finally, for the media portion of the analysis, we decided to build a corpus of broadcast media transcripts from the two most popular shows in 2020 on Fox News, those being *Hannity* and *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, and the two most popular shows on MSNBC, which were *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell*. We used Factiva to download all of those transcripts, which mentioned the pandemic using keywords the COVID coronavirus pandemic for a total of a little bit over 800 transcripts. You can imagine, given just how historic this event was beginning in early March, just about every single day for each of those shows, they were mentioning the pandemic for the rest of the year.

Our actual analysis of that data set—the media transcript data set—is relatively simplistic for this project. We just performed keyword searches that corresponded to the kind of key terminology in each one of those conspiracy items from the YouGov surveys—words like hoax, bioweapon, man-made, deep state—just to see both to what degree Fox and MSNBC were using that language and then in kind of what form they were using that language.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And so after that immense, sort of, data curation, what were the most surprising findings that came out of the study?

Jennifer Hochschild

I want to add one very quick postscript to what David said, which is when he says we, he means he's too biased. He means I. (laughter) I was an enthusiastic backbencher to all of this. I was involved in figuring we, quote, were going to do. But I have to say, a very large portion, somewhere close to 100 percent, was him.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, thank you for that. And we should all be so lucky to have have someone advocate on our behalf.

Jennifer Hochschild

Well I've been having a wonderful time with these projects. I keep tempting him with the idea of turning all these various papers into a book, and he keeps backing off in horror. But I'm having a wonderful time. He's a great, great co-author.

Surprising. I think two things. And this goes back to my comment a while ago about how somehow I still after however many years expect people to respond in the way that I think they should respond to what I understand to be important factual information. Now, again, you know, there's as much of my naïveté here or socialization as an academic—as a professor. It didn't make much difference. Local cases and particularly fatalities, which, you know, I mean, again, back to the idea that Trump's COVID diagnosis was going to somehow change people's minds. It didn't. And so we could we found some effects. It's not like people ignored local incidents or particularly local fatalities. But it didn't transform much of anything.

Democrats were less likely to change to move away from conspiracies than Republicans were. Now, again, that partly has to do with where people started and the nature of the conspiracies. It's a slightly complicated argument, but it certainly wasn't—this is not a Republican story. It's a bipartisan story in certain different ways. And the other thing that was interesting, I think, is that Independents were the ones who were most responsive to local conditions—community, again, somewhat broadly defined as congressional district. And it's not because they are more attuned to what's going on in the world and less likely to filter through a partisan lens, I think. Maybe that's it. They're less dug in. They were, in fact, less knowledgeable.

They have lower levels of education, but the Independents who are the least engaged—so again, I teach democratic theory, all the things we're supposed to believe from a democratic theory lens, Thomas Jefferson and all that, you know, you should be a highly educated citizen of the world. You should be involved in—it's the people who are least involved, least educated in a conventional sense, who are most responsive to what was actually happening around them, who identify as Independents or have little ideology, turn out to have relatively low levels of education. So, good for them, and not so good for the rest of us. But, the segment of the population who are least like what the democratic theorists tell us citizens ought to be like, turn out to be the people who are, in some sense, most—least captured by conspiracy theories. Is that is that a fair description, David, you think?

David Beavers

Yeah, I think that was that was completely right. And yeah, that second point that Jennifer is just making about how the—call it the corrective effect of local COVID-19 incidents in the form of high case and fatality counts in one's local environments—that had a corrective effect predominantly on Independents. There is very little among Democrats, as Jennifer said. Part of that was perhaps sort of just a floor effect on a lot of these conspiracy items. Democratic endorsement of them was extremely low. So that moved from 10 percent to nine percent. You know, it just couldn't have gone down a lot. There were some instances of the same among Republicans. But yeah, consistently, we saw that when you moved from low levels of COVID-19 incidents to high levels of COVID-19 incidents, the greatest difference was consistently among Independents. That difference was still somewhat inconsistent and relatively noisy in our data. But, the fact that it was most pronounced was pretty clearly among Independents, which which I do think is striking, if not entirely surprising.

It certainly is consistent with some of the literature on kind of Zoller-esque information processing and partisan motivated reasoning, and that folks who have theoretically less firmly entrenched partisan priors should have their attitudes be most malleable. They should be the most open to opinion change. But, the theme of the broader issue, the implications of conspiracy thinking on democratic discourse, the implications are not necessarily straightforward or kind of normatively positive if the least engaged and least knowledgeable segment of the population is that segment that is kind of most willing or—I would add one other set of findings that I might not describe as surprising, but at least let's call it striking.

It's a descriptive finding from our analysis that some respondents endorsed what you might think of as seemingly mutually contradictory conspiracy theories about COVID-19. So for example, some respondents endorsed both that COVID-19 is a hoax and that it is a man-made disease, or that the pandemic is both a fraud perpetrated by the deep states and a foreign plot to attack the world. Now these are not maybe in the strictest sense mutually exclusive, but just kind of logically speaking, it doesn't make a lot of sense that one could simultaneously believe that the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic is being exaggerated by the quote unquote deep state in order to submarine Donald Trump's chances of re-election and that the pandemic was intentionally released as a foreign plot to attack the world if the latter is true, it would be basically impossible to overstate the geopolitical importance of that event, right? It would be it would be earth-shattering.

Mary Alice Yeskey

You couldn't sell that as a movie script. (laughter)

David Beavers

No, exactly, it would get thrown out basically at the door. And again, this is not exactly surprising as much as striking because it is consistent with a fair amount of, to my knowledge, existing research. I can think of one really excellent paper, for instance, by Michael Wood and some co-workers that demonstrates belief in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories about the death of Princess Diana that we referenced in the paper. Wood and co-workers basically point to this fact that people could believe simultaneously that Princess Diana is actually alive and living somewhere else and that she was murdered by the KGB or whatever it was that as proof that there is an underlying predisposition toward conspiracism among some individuals. Our data do not allow us to examine for this—we just don't have the sort of psychological battery of items that we would need to like point to—yes, look, this respondent

has sort of a heightened underlying predisposition toward conspiracism. But the pattern of kind of non-rational COVID conspiracy endorsements certainly are consistent with this explanation that there could just be a heightened predilection toward conspiracy thinking among some of our survey respondents that were tapping with these batteries.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Interesting. And this is not a question that I had told you I was going to ask, so I'm going slightly off script, but thinking about what you just said, I'm also—you know, the notion that Princess Diana is alive and well, which makes me think of like, Jimmy Hoffa and like Elvis, and it's like, at what point does a conspiracy theory kind of become a silly sort of urban legend, and where's the line, and do you know what I mean? Like if you hear something enough, you start to just—it becomes like a story, like a fairytale versus like a straight conspiracy theory. And it doesn't seem as dangerous, but I think your research is saying it was just so interesting, which is that it starts somewhere, do you know what I mean? Like there's definitely a place where this germinates and time turns these things into less sort of absurd, scary things, but it's still, it's still scary and absurd.

Jennifer Hochschild

Two very quick comments. One is—you've already said it—with time. I mean, Jimmy Hoffa was—John Kennedy was a very long time ago, Princess Diana relatively more recently. So, the sort of the edginess kind of dissipates as, you know, Jimmy Hoffa would now be, I don't know, 97. I mean, you know, John Kennedy, I mean, you know, that was—he'd be a very, very old man if he's still alive. And so time makes a big difference. I mean, it just all makes less sense. But, the other comment you made about it is dangerous. And again, I think one distinction that matters certainly for our purposes is that those are essentially apolitical, non-political urban myths or views. Maybe the Kennedy conspiracy theory around the, you know, the 1960s had a partisan edge, but Princess Diana pretty much doesn't.

Whereas deep state hoaxed, bioweapon, suppressing information—if you look at it from the left conspiracies—you know, those are very powerful, partisan tropes. And so one line—I don't know if it's a line to draw—but one way to think about them is kind of, you know, throwing salt over your left shoulder is in some sense of conspiracy. I mean, there are certain beliefs that are kind of goofy, but don't really matter.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Harmless.

Jennifer Hochschild

Harmless, that's a great way to put it. Whereas, partly because these are so current and partly because these are so clearly pointed, you know, so conspiracies aren't all alike, I guess.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, no, I totally agree. And yeah, a public health crisis is not the same thing as a celebrity death.

Jennifer Hochschild

Some of the literature points—and this is getting way off script—but some of the literature rejects the word conspiracy because, of course it builds in an assumption, a huge amount of assumptions, both moral assumptions. You believe in a conspiracy, I believe in a truth that other people don't know.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, there's a judgment on that word, yeah.

Jennifer Hochschild

So there's a judgment on the word, there's a assumption of a nefarious force in the background doing some terrible thing to us.

Mary Alice Yeskey

With intent of malice, yeah.

Jennifer Hochschild

Yeah. I mean, again, think of that the legal definition of what counts as seditious conspiracy. I mean, you know, it's not Princess Diana is living in Tahiti with her lover.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, right.

Jennifer Hochschild

So anyway, I think if one were to go further in this field—which I'm hoping David is going to do, I don't know if I am or not—is the concept of conspiracy and the language needs just a lot more unpacking and not building assumptions into the words themselves.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah.

David Beavers

I'll add two things briefly there. One is that I think Jennifer, perhaps out of modesty, didn't refer to her own book in this because I think the typology that you and Catherine introduced in *Do Facts Matter?* is actually a super useful one in kind of understanding this—the degree to which conspiracy beliefs or misperceptions are actually politically meaningful, right? I mean, you can be, you can believe in a conspiracy or not, and then you can act upon that belief and not.

So I think really what we're sort of interested in implicitly in this paper is that one square of the two by two typology of folks who both believe in politically relevant conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic, and who could theoretically be acting upon them, that could either be acting at the voting booth because they think that COVID is a hoax and they're going to vote accordingly, or they could be acting in their daily life by going about, even if they have a sore throat and a cough and not getting tested and not wearing a mask and putting others at danger. So I, you know, if one believes that COVID-19 is a hoax and yet acts in a self-protective and in a sort of a normatively good manner by wearing a

mask and by staying home when they're sick, then I guess to some degree it matters less than if they are kind of acting in accordance with that belief.

The second thing that I'll add, which gets both to this idea of how, kind of, conspiracy thinking can evolve over time on a given issue, or just the role of time period, and some of the ambiguities baked into the definition of what we would call a conspiracy theory, is that I believe a conspiracy theory is always kind of defined in relation to the best available evidence at that time, and sometimes the best available evidence changes over time. You can see that even to some degree with COVID-19, where social media companies initially labeled one thing misinformation or kind of blocked one thing that largely, I believe, had to do with the possibility that COVID-19 in its current form had anything to do with sort of gain-of-function research.

This seems to still be somewhat of a gray area, but the best available evidence does sort of change over time. It's easier to point to, kind of, historical examples of this as well, where call it information gets declassified decades later, and then perhaps what was considered a fringe belief, you'll have some people feeling a little bit validated that maybe it was somewhat less fringe than folks thought.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Hindsight being 2020 and then some. So, what practical implications do you think work like yours has for citizens, the media, public sector, public health, communications professionals—where do you see this sort of being applied?

Jennifer Hochschild

Well, that's probably your hardest question of the ones that I would say. I would say two things, none of which I have a whole lot of faith. I have to say the misinformation book that they were talking about that I wrote some years ago ends with a whimper rather than the bang. I mean, the last chapter says, well, "Here's a few things we might do to kind of contest this information, but actually fact checking doesn't really do very much. And actually this"—and you know, so it's not like we have an answer then or now, but I would say two things.

One is what—I've completely forgotten. Oh, one is just the public health community was really blindsided by the growth of conspiracies around vaccines. I mean, it seems to me that the hardest thing to understand, which this paper doesn't address because our data is from 2020 and we don't have the 2021 later data. Why would people not want to do something that is going to save their lives? I mean, it seems, you know, there's a kind of a naïve—and in fact, the Trump administration, the one good thing it really brilliantly succeeded at was, you know, warp speed. I mean, they created—they paid for, they pushed—they basically created vaccines decades before or at least years before anybody thought.

So one answer is just, you know, don't be as naive as Jennifer is kind of, you know, that sort of recognize that something that seems like a demonstrable and almost uncontestable public good—that's where the naïveté comes in—it doesn't have that quality for many people and, you know, blaming them for being idiots is not a useful response to that. I mean, you know, what's underneath the resistance to what seems to me like a fairly obvious self-protective measure. And it's not that people are dumb and don't want to protect themselves. So, one moral of this story—and you know, this is, I'm not saying this, I mean, hundreds of people are now saying it—understand what's going on better, whether this is a psychological proclivity toward conspiracism.

So, anyway, so one answer is we need to get more inside the skin, inside the social environment, the context, the family and personal environment of people who resist public health measures on the grounds, at least with conspiracies, a variety of other things. The second thing, which is a more mundane kind of answer, but I actually think would make some difference is follow media—follow a variety of different kinds of media. I mean, if you're in MSNBC bubble, you don't understand what's being said on Fox. And if you're in a Fox bubble, you don't understand—you know, and I mean, again, the analysis that quote, we did—which is to say that David did—of the meeting and presentations of the conspiracy, these two sets of media said really different things. They talked about different things, never mind what they said about them when they talked about them.

And, you know, I haven't done as much of this as I believe one should, but, you know, I watch Fox News more often. And Fox News viewers ought to watch *Rachel Maddow* more often, not in the expectation that people are going to change each other's minds—although that might be nice sometimes—just to hear what's being said. Again, both what's being talked about and how it's being talked about. Get outside the bubble, I guess is the way of putting it.

David Beavers

I only have one thing to add, and it's somewhat less in the spirit of the question. It's perhaps less of a practical implication as much as a relatively abstract or social scientific one. But I think that piggybacking on what Jennifer was saying earlier about how the kind of corrective effects of local COVID incidents were most concentrated among political independents—which is both Independents with kind of a capital I and those unaffiliated with either political party—I think that has some interesting implications for how we, sort of, conceive of Independents in American politics.

So, in popular depiction, I would say that Americans oftentimes like to kind of lionize Independents as principled, non-partisans, they're willing to listen to both sides, they're going to educate themselves and then form an unbiased opinion based on the merits of the facts. But political scientists, since at least the days of Philip Converse, really tend to view independents almost as polar opposites: they're uninformed, they're non-ideological. I think our findings, kind of, perhaps indicate to some degree that both conceptions have merits. I don't want to draw up too many conclusions from them, but we do on the one hand show that Independents and unaffiliated respondents were the least politically engaged, they were the least attentive to news about COVID-19, they were kind of Converse's disengaged Independents, and yet they were also the most responsive to local COVID-19 incidents.

So they were the ones who behaved in kind of a quote unquote "normatively correct" manner in the sense of they responded to objective information about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and made their beliefs more accurate. So I don't quite have an exclusion point on the end of that except just to say that perhaps it is certainly a bit of a puzzle, I think, for social scientists to work out in terms of what does it mean that American democracy kind of obtains a lot of its fluidity in terms of shifts in public attitudes from its least engaged citizens, either moving in a sort of correct or non-correct manner.

Mary Alice Yeskey

You've alluded a couple of times to some subsequent work that you guys are working on. So, I wanted as my last question to ask what you're currently looking at and if there's any upcoming papers or books that you'd like to share with our listeners.

David Beavers

I certainly hope there will be some upcoming papers. At the broadest level, the next, sort of, project that Jennifer and I are working on is we're seeking to examine the conditions under which misperceptions either are sustained or are attenuated in the presence of corrective information—again, using COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. So we're once again using this YouGov *Economist* data that we have for focusing on a different set of outcome variables in this project.

The biggest one is that we were kind of grappling with this empirical puzzle that's over time—over the course of 2020, we observe that survey respondents become less and less accurate in their assessment of the number of deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic, which felt surprising to us because if anything, there was just more and more media coverage. There was more and more lived experience to draw upon as more and more Americans either got COVID themselves, knew someone who got COVID, et cetera. So we want to try to understand why this misperception about the number of COVID deaths sustained. Is it just simply due to enumeracy? Is it due to partisan motivated reasoning? Is it exposure to misinformation? So we are doing a bit of a more sophisticated content analysis and a structural topic model on a broader corpus of cable TV news transcripts for this project that I'll be really excited to hopefully have some findings from soon.

Jennifer Hochschild

I just want to underline what David's already said, which is both Republicans and Democrats, Republicans more than Democrats, but both went the same direction. Republicans underestimated the number of deaths that are likely to happen this year, which is how the survey question is worded. The closer they got to the end of the December, i.e. the end of this year, not only did a higher proportion of them underestimate, but a fair number predicted a smaller number of deaths than had already occurred on the date of the survey. So if 200,000 people had died, a third to a half of Republicans said only 100,000 people are going to die. Even though, as of that date, you don't already know.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, I see what you're saying.

Jennifer Hochschild

Democrats overestimated the number of likely deaths. Fewer Democrats misperceived than did Republicans, but they also increased in their misperceptions over the year, even though the year itself, of course, was coming closer to an end and epidemiological models got better. So, Democrats overestimated, Republicans underestimated, way past the point at which this is simply innumeracy—the inability to distinguish—you know, which is truly part of the story. But anyway.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right. No, no. I hear what you're saying. Yeah. Consistently.

Jennifer Hochschild

So we're trying to see whether this is, again, a media story or whether local impact of the type that David was talking about earlier, you know, people extrapolate from what's happening in their own local communities. We don't know. So we haven't written the paper yet.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I'm looking forward to it. I'm very much looking forward to reading it. Thank you so much for joining us today. This has been a really fascinating talk. And I—again, best of luck with the rest of your research. And I wish you both a really happy holiday season.

David Beavers

Thank you so much for having us.

Jennifer Hochschild

Thank you very much.

Mary Alice Yeskey

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