

**Students' Perspectives on the Politicization of COVID-19**

Senior Thesis  
Angela Payne  
April 22, 2022  
Advisor: Professor Tan

## **Introduction:**

Politicization, “the act of making something a political issue” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries 2022), can occur during any major event, from hurricanes to natural disasters to diseases. Politicization can have varying impacts on reactions to specific major events which can, among other responses, cause people to question experts’ guidance on how to react to the specific event, as well as choosing to go against this guidance and putting others in unnecessary danger. For example, there has been much politicization surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. This politicization, stemming from politicians’ speech and actions, media coverage of the virus, and partisan public discussions, can be at least partially attributed to people’s hesitation to receive the COVID-19 vaccine (Bolsen and Palm 2021). As this example shows, this politicization of COVID-19 can cause significant, lasting damage, including causing people to not believe in the science of the disease and, therefore, continuing the rise of hospitalizations and deaths across the United States and around the world.

In this thesis, I seek to identify the mechanisms through which the COVID-19 pandemic became politicized. I will specifically be focusing on the perspectives of college students in New York State to help me answer my research question of “What are the mechanisms through which the COVID-19 pandemic became a politicized form of science?”. This is a unique population with a wide variety of political and social views. College students of today have had access to information at their fingertips for their entire lives. Through this, they have been exposed to a wider variety of information from a younger age than older generations. As found by the Pew Research Center, in 2005, just five percent of the American adult population used social media (Pew Research Center 2022). Today, that percentage has increased to 72%, with 84% of young adults ages 18-29 reportedly using at least one social media platform (Pew Research Center

2022). I studied this specific population because I wanted to understand the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic from their points of view. They are exposed to many types of news sources, including a variety of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, and these may have influenced this population's thoughts on the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studying college students' perspectives on the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic could help us understand how the process of politicization impacts younger generations. It could also help us see how young adults understand politics, government action (or inaction), and the divide between accepting scientific fact versus polarizing, biased fiction. This is important because it could teach us how this population accesses information, what they do with this information, and how to make credible information more readily accessible to them. Finally, it could also help us to understand social media's impact on politicization better. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook allow for the ability to spread information quickly to millions of people. This information is not always credible, but, nevertheless, it can influence people's beliefs and lead to the creation of conspiracy theories and the questioning of scientific facts. According to the PEW Research Center, in a survey of people in eleven different countries, a median of 28% of people reported social media outlets as being very important sources of news for them (Smith et al. 2019). Yet, in many of these countries, a majority of social media users reported seeing false or misleading content at least some of the time (Smith et al. 2019). This study also reported that social media served as a source of new ideas for people (Smith et al. 2019), which, when these ideas come from the viewing of false information, can lead to the belief in conspiracy theories.

## **Literature Review:**

Different sources of information can lead to the spread of misinformation. This is especially important because, as we stray from reporting factual, scientific information into reporting that which is polarized and biased, an “infodemic” (Cinelli et al., 2020) occurs where the spread of misinformation becomes so great and creates lasting damage. As seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of misinformation has caused people to not believe in the pandemic’s existence, to not follow CDC public safety guidelines such as masking and social distancing, and to refuse to get vaccinated once they became eligible.

#### POLITICIZATION OF SCIENCE

The politicization of science began shortly after the conclusion of World War II when people started to realize that not all scientific achievement was beneficial and that, in some cases, it could be dangerous and cause mass destruction (Haberer 1972). During this time, scientific advice-giving started to become more commonplace and more widespread in the United States, and this has continued into the present day (Jasanoff 2009). This advice from scientists became increasingly influential in our daily lives, affecting how we chose what to eat, how to act, and what to buy (Jasanoff 2009). A large reason for this increase in the influence of scientific advice was that policy-makers began relying more heavily on what scientists had to say when shaping United States policy (Jasanoff 2009). With this increasingly influential scientific advice, people began to doubt that what scientists were recommending was really in their best interests. The political decision-making process relies heavily on the deconstruction and critique of scientific information, which, in turn, can threaten science’s cognitive authority and legitimacy (Jasanoff 1987).

This intertwining of science and politics in the political decision-making process is still commonplace today. The politicization and doubt of science can be attributed to the increasingly

turbulent political climate (Haberer 1972). Once the political climate becomes turbulent, this volatility and turbulence affects science's social system (Haberer 1972). This debate and volatility have particularly affected what Gil Eyal refers to as "regulatory science" (Eyal 2019). Regulatory science is the science upon which policy-makers draw when drafting new legislation (Eyal 2019). It is the science that concerns itself with safety, efficacy, and quality that then informs policy-makers how to act in such ways as banning or promoting certain substances or actions that can either be harmful or beneficial to daily life (Eyal 2019).

Science is never-ending; it is supposed to be built upon as more information becomes available (Eyal 2019). However, the legislative process does not happen in this same way. It is finite and is supposed to happen within a distinct time frame (Eyal 2019). Therefore, the challenge of regulatory science is to make policy recommendations within this finite time frame, even if further study of an issue is necessary (Eyal 2019). Because of this, some policy recommendations by scientists can be flawed and may need revisions as more information is learned. This is what leads to doubt in scientific expertise (Eyal 2019). When policy-makers on one side of the aisle create and pass legislation that ultimately needs to be changed or revised, people on the other side are quick to cast doubt and skepticism on scientific expertise and become increasingly politically volatile. When the political climate becomes increasingly volatile, people on both sides of the aisle can tend to move further to the right and the left, ideologically speaking (Gauchat 2012). Gauchat notes that this phenomenon has increasingly been evident among those identifying as politically conservative (Gauchat 2012). They view the science informing a policy as untrue and choose to cast doubt upon scientific expertise as a whole (Eyal 2019).

This doubt surrounding science is furthered by those who profit from it. These “merchants of doubt” take advantage of people’s dissatisfaction with scientific and regulatory agencies and amplify this distrust to attack scientific expertise (Eyal 2019). The merchants of doubt who further the skepticism over scientific data do so to protect the political and financial interest of large corporations and industries (Oreskes and Conway 2010). These corporations and industries, in turn, provide funding for the people who further scientific doubt (Oreskes and Conway 2010). In this way, doubt becomes a politically valuable commodity.

#### POLITICIZATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH

We can see the politicization of regulatory science spill over into the field of public health. Politicization within health and medicine is not a new phenomenon, and it deals with numerous different connecting aspects, including the questioning, controversy, and uncertainty surrounding new medical innovations, the broader legal problems within societies, and the larger societal events occurring at the time, such as those dealing with people’s social rights and different economic needs (Numerato 2021). One key source of the politicization of health and medical issues is the way the communication about the health issue or medical advancement first happened (Fowler and Gollust 2015). Aspects of medical science become politicized when their communication to the public comes from partisan sources (Fowler and Gollust 2015). Politicians can be merchants of doubt, using doubt to promote their own political and legislative agendas. When they are the ones interpreting and communicating the scientific data to members of the public, scientific data can become warped and unnecessarily politicized (Fowler and Gollust 2015), and politicians can cloud the scientific data in partisan language, obscuring the truth about a particular issue (Gostin 2018).

The more that the science involved in public health becomes intertwined with policy-making and political decisions, the more doubt is cast on the scientific data. This doubt of and the lack of trust in public health has become increasingly salient today, especially around medical advancements such as vaccines. With the widespread anti-vaccine movement, an increasing number of people have begun refusing vaccines for themselves and their children. The MMR vaccine, which was once revered for its protection against three dangerous diseases, is now a vaccine that some parents refuse to allow doctors to administer to their children (Lerner 2017). The COVID-19 vaccine has also been a subject of scrutiny by the anti-vax movement. Even before an effective vaccine was produced, people chose to forgo receiving the vaccine out of fear that it would not be safe (Ward et al. 2020).

The discussion surrounding this decision to forgo the COVID-19 vaccine is especially important because we continue to see partisanship going hand in hand with vaccine hesitancy throughout much of the world. Now that we have produced a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, many people identifying as politically conservative refuse to become vaccinated because they have been told that the vaccine was not safely and ethically produced (Brumfiel 2021). Fringe anti-vaccine speakers endorsed by members of the Republican party have told party members a range of falsehoods, from claims that the vaccine was killing people and posing an existential threat to humanity to the claim that they contained microscopic technology designed to turn humans into cyborgs (Brumfiel 2021). These claims, however, are untrue. The CDC has collected data from tens of thousands of clinical trial participants and concluded that they are safe and effective (CDC 2022). The vaccines also met all of the FDA's strict scientific safety, effectiveness, and manufacturing quality requirements (CDC 2022). However, even though scientific data proves that the vaccine is safe and effective, Republicans continue to

believe the misinformation presented to them by Republican-sponsored sources. This is evident in the fact that, as of October 2021, only about sixty percent of Republicans received their first vaccination dose compared to over ninety-one percent of Democrats (Yang 2021).

## THE POLITICIZATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Along with the politicization of public health issues and advancements comes the politicization of disease. Many diseases have been politicized throughout history, and this politicization has presented itself in a number of ways, including blaming other countries for the mishandling and spread of the disease (Abbas 2020). It has been interesting to see this politicization play out throughout the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic can partially be traced back to news sources. Hart et al. (2020) note the highly politicized nature of newspaper publications and how those led to the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can contribute a high degree of polarization in the news coverage of the early stages of the pandemic to the polarizing attitudes and the politicization that have since been observed (Hart et al. 2020). The more often a news source features politicians giving polarizing views on the pandemic instead of scientists who state the facts, the easier it is to politicize the pandemic quickly (Hart et al. 2020).

This polarization in news sources is not purely an American phenomenon. Abbas (2020) observed that the New York Times focused on articles blaming the Chinese government for their poor initial handling of the pandemic and their inability to contain the virus's spread, while the Global Times, a newspaper based out of China, emphasized articles blaming Trump, the US government, and the CDC for their weak, slow, and unprofessional pandemic responses. Instead of promoting scientific advancements in the effort to stop the spread of the disease, news sources focused on creating divides and placing blame, enhancing the political nature of the pandemic.



### *Social Media's Role in the Politicization of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

One of the sources particularly responsible for this politicization is social media. Because of its lack of supervision compared to other news sources, it is not always easy to distinguish true information from misinformation (Luo et al. 2021). As the global interest in information related to the pandemic increased, so did the misinformation surrounding it (Tsao et al. 2021). Social media platforms have spread misinformation throughout the pandemic (Hussein 2020), and they have been seen to spread more misinformation and conspiracies than traditional news media sources, which tend to reinforce public health data and recommendations (Bridgeman et al. 2015). Social media usage has been shown to have a positive correlation with the belief in conspiracy theories, and these beliefs lead to less participation in health-protective practices that have been proven to prevent the spread of the virus (Allington et al. 2020).

Twitter, in particular, has contributed to the politicization of COVID-19 through the spread of misinformation about the pandemic and COVID-19 vaccines. Findings show that an increase in the heated political debate over the disease was associated with an increase in the number of tweets sharing anti-vaccine information, conspiracy theories, and hyperpartisan and blacklisted sources (Righetti 2021).

These findings are especially important because an increasing number of people are using social media as sources of information and news. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 86% of Americans reported receiving at least some of their news from digital devices, with 52% of these respondents claiming to prefer digital platforms over television, radio, and print publications (Shearer 2021). On these digital devices, over half of American adults (53%) received their news from social media outlets at least some of the time (Shearer and Mitchell

2021). With more people using social media, there is a continued risk of the spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and politicization.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

When deciding on my specific research question, I considered what the literature did not already cover. While it discusses the cause and spread of politicization, as well as some theories about the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, I wanted to see if this data held true among college students. I also wanted to further study all of the different ways that people access information, and how the same basic fact can be portrayed in different ways based on which news source is reporting it. How specific sources present news can affect how people choose to respond and which sources they choose to believe. I have seen examples of the information that people choose to believe affecting their actions in regards to pandemic safety measures, so I wanted to study this politicization surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, I wanted to study how it began and how it continues to spread. Therefore, I chose the research question of “What are the mechanisms through which the COVID-19 pandemic became a politicized form of science?”.

## Methods:

### PROCEDURE

To answer my research question, I chose to conduct surveys and interviews with undergraduate students from five different New York State colleges and universities. When deciding on which schools to include in my sample population, I selected schools with different political ideologies reflected by their student populations. To determine this, I conducted research on the traditional political ideologies of students at different New York colleges and universities and picked my schools according to the information I found. For example, I chose

Clarkson University because it was reported as being the most conservative college in New York State (Niche 2022).

When choosing which colleges and universities to study, I followed the theoretical framework outlined by Kristin Luker in her book *Salsa Dancing Through the Social Sciences*. In this book, she describes guidelines to follow when choosing a sample population. First, she mentions how the sample population should come from a diverse setting; the variable that you are trying to explain should vary in this location (Luker 2008: 108). After this, she states that this sample population must be accurately representative of the larger population of study (Luker 2008: 108-109).

Keeping Luker's guidelines in mind, when selecting the schools from which to draw my sample population, I chose schools with different geographic locations within New York state, not just those concentrated within one region. New York State, while leaning liberal in its total population, has some regions whose people identify as politically conservative, especially towards the northern and middle portions of the state. Therefore, I made sure that as many of these regions as possible were represented so that I could get a more accurate representation of college students in the state as a whole. All of the choices I made when deciding which schools to study were made with the intention of having the most representative sample possible. As a result, the five schools I studied are Vassar College, Clarkson University, the University at Buffalo, Colgate University, and Hamilton College.

For my methodology, I conducted the surveys first and then the interviews. Conducting surveys first allowed me to create a foundation of knowledge upon which I could build with the more specific information that I received during the interviews. Also, conducting the surveys before the interviews allowed me to make the initial contact with students at each of the schools

and find people to interview. The final question of my survey asked respondents if they were interested in being interviewed by me, and, if so, to include their email address so that I could contact them. For those students who agreed, I contacted them through email and worked with them to schedule times to conduct Zoom interviews.

To disseminate my surveys across the student bodies of each of these schools, I contacted various clubs and organizations at each of these schools, asking them to distribute my survey throughout their organization and with the larger student body. I initially chose to contact organizations with political affiliations, such as the College Democrats and the College Republicans clubs. Then, because students do not have to be a member of these organizations to be political and have opinions about politics, I reached out to other organizations including club sports, Greek life organizations, academic clubs, and organizations related to community service, volunteering, and public outreach.

In the surveys, I first asked respondents to answer questions regarding their demographic information, including their age, race, and gender identity. Then, I asked about their political leanings. After this, my survey was broken down into three sections. The first section asked about influences on these students' views regarding the pandemic. I asked about the news sources from which they received their information, and then I asked the participants to state whether these news sources, as well as their schools' policies and their families and friends, influenced their views about the pandemic completely, a lot, somewhat, a little, or not at all. The second section asked about students' actions during the pandemic, asking them if they still wore masks indoors and when they decided to stop socially distancing themselves from others. Finally, the last section of the survey asked about the participants' vaccine status. Then, based on their responses, I asked why they chose to receive or to not receive the vaccine.

The interview questions were structured so that they started out broad and became more focused as the interview progressed. I first asked students how they decided to attend the school that they are currently attending. Then, I started to ask about their politics, their political engagement, and what it means to them to be politically active. After this, I asked the students if they consider themselves to be politically active. If they answered yes to this question, I asked them to provide me with an example of their political activism.

From here, I focused on how these students access information pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, I asked the participants to tell me how they first learned about the pandemic. Then, I asked them to tell me where they receive their information about COVID-19. I also asked about how the student determines whether or not a source is credible.

In the next section of the interview, I asked about how the people in these students' social circles influence their views and actions regarding the pandemic. I asked whose opinion mattered most to them in regards to the pandemic and why, as well as how the people around them discussed COVID and if these conversations had any influence on participants' own views and actions.

Finally, I moved on to the questions about the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions asked participants about how their thinking of the roots of the disease changed over time, how they would describe the conflicting perspectives regarding the pandemic, why they think the pandemic became so politicized, and how they think the United States should have initially handled COVID-19. My last interview question asked if the interviewee is happy to be back to in-person learning. This question was meant to be an easy, more light-hearted question to close out the interview.

## **Results:**

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

### Research Subject's Reported Demographic Information

Age	Race	Gender Identity
20	White	Man
23	White	Man
21	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
Did not answer	Asian and White	Woman
21	White	Woman
21	Black, Multiracial, White Father	Man
20	White	Woman
20	Hispanic	Man
21	White	Non-Binary
22	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
20	White/Caucasian	Woman
20	Multiracial	Woman
21	White	Non-Binary
20	Mixed (Asian and White)	Woman
18	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
21	White (Non-Hispanic)	Woman
21	White	Woman
18	White	Man

20	White (caucasian)	Man
18	White	Man
19	South Asian	Woman
24	Asian	Woman
18	White and Asian Indian	Woman
18	Mixed	Man
19	White	Woman
19	White	Woman
19	White	Woman
18	Indian American	Woman
21	Mestizo Latine	Woman
20	White	Woman
20	White	Man
20	White	Woman
18	White	Woman
19	White	Man
18	White Hispanic	Woman
19	White	Woman
21	Asian	Man
18	White	Woman
18	Asian	Man
18	White	Man
19	White	Man
20	White	Woman
21	White	Man

18	White	Woman
19	White	Woman
18	White	Woman
19	Asian and White	Woman
20	White	Woman
20	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
22	White	Woman
20	White	Woman
20	White	Woman
19	White/Caucasian	Woman
19	White	Woman
20	White identifying Latina	Woman
20	White	Woman
21	White	Woman
20	White	Woman
20	White	Man
29	American	Woman
19	White	Man
18	White	Man
20	100% European White and not a drop of anything else	Man
20	White	Woman
20	White	Woman



### *Age*

Of the 71 participants, the mean age was 20 years old. Fourteen of the students who responded to the survey were 18 years old, twelve were 19 years old, twenty-two were 20 years old, seventeen were 21 years old, two were 22 years old, one was 23 years old, one was 24 years old, and one was 29 years old. One participant chose not to answer this question when they responded to my survey.

### *Race*

Most of the students who responded to the survey stated that at least part of their racial identity included identifying as White. 85.9% of students identified as at least partially White, 11.2% of students identified as at least partially Asian, 5.6% of students identified as at least partially Hispanic, and 1.4% identified as at least partially Black. 2.8% of students identified as multiracial but did not describe the different components of their racial identities.

### *Gender Identity*

Most of the students who participated in my study identified as female. 70.4% of respondents identified as female, 26.8% identified as male, and 2.8% identified as nonbinary.

### **PARTICIPANTS' POLITICAL LEANINGS**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Political Ideology</b>
Man	Very Liberal
Man	Moderate
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Liberal

Man	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Man	Liberal
Non-Binary	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Non-Binary	Did Not Answer
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Man	Very Liberal
Man	Very Liberal
Man	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Lean Liberal
Man	Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal

Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Man	Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Man	Very Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Lean Liberal
Man	Very Liberal
Woman	Lean Liberal
Man	Liberal
Man	Very Liberal
Man	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Man	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Lean Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Lean Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Lean Liberal
Woman	Very Liberal

Woman	Liberal
Woman	Lean Conservative
Woman	Very Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Woman	Liberal
Man	Conservative
Woman	N/A
Man	Very Conservative
Man	Conservative
Man	Very Conservative
Woman	Conservative
Woman	Conservative

At the beginning of my surveys and interviews, I also asked students how they perceive their political leanings. In the surveys, I gave them the option of choosing either “very liberal,” “liberal,” “lean liberal,” “moderate,” “lean conservative,” “conservative,” “very conservative,” or “N/A.” 43.7% of respondents identified as very liberal, 33.8% stated that they were liberal, and 8.5% described themselves as leaning liberal. 1.4% of student respondents identified as politically moderate. 1.4% of respondents described themselves as leaning conservative, 5.6% of respondents identified as conservative, and 2.8% of respondents identified as very conservative. 1.4% of respondents chose the option “N/A,” and 1.4% of respondents did not answer this question. In the interviews, I built upon this survey question by asking students to describe their

political leanings. All of the students interviewed described themselves as to the left of the political spectrum. Most of the students who chose to be interviewed described themselves as “very left-leaning” or as a “socialist.” Some students described themselves as “liberal” or as a “Democrat,” and one described themselves as politically “moderate.”

From these results, I found that a larger proportion of female respondents identified themselves as lean liberal, liberal, or very liberal compared to male respondents. Roughly 96% of female respondents reported that their political leanings fell to the left of the political spectrum, compared to about 73.6% of male respondents. All non-binary-identifying respondents who answered this survey question reported identifying as very liberal. These findings align with the trends demonstrated by the larger United States registered voting population. In fact, a recent Pew Research Study revealed that in 2018 and 2019, 56% of female registered voters identified with or leaned toward the democratic party compared to just 42% of male registered voters (Igielnik 2020).

## POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVITY

In my interviews with students, I asked them about their own levels of political engagement and activity. Most of the students with whom I spoke did not consider themselves to be very politically engaged nor politically active. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they do participate in politics in some ways, including through voting, giving donations, and signing petitions. However, they did not consider these actions enough to call themselves politically active.

In the interviews, I also asked what being politically active and engaged meant to each student. The most common responses were voting, attending rallies and forums, donating time and money to causes and candidates, educating themselves and others about political and social

issues, participating in political activities on campus, working for campaigns, and engaging in political discussions.

#### WHERE STUDENTS ACCESS THEIR INFORMATION

The news outlets from which students received information most often aligned with their political ideologies. Students who identified as “lean conservative,” “conservative,” or “very conservative” most often received their information about the pandemic from sources considered to be conservative-leaning, such as FOX News, 4 chan, the New York Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Students who identified as “lean liberal,” “liberal,” or “very liberal” most often received their information from liberal-leaning sources, such as the Washington Post, CNN, and the New York Times. However, what was interesting about the New York Times was that a range of students with political ideologies spanning from “very liberal” to “conservative” reported using it in their search for information. The New York Times was the most commonly mentioned source from which students receive their information in both the surveys and the interviews.

Social media sites were less often used, but still used fairly frequently as sources of information. The most commonly mentioned social media site from which participants received information was Twitter. Many students reported first hearing about the pandemic on social media, specifically twitter, and they reported still using these sites to access information about COVID-19 today. Other social media sites used by participants for receiving information included Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit.

Word of mouth was also mentioned as another source where students received their information. This was most commonly through family members or friends, although some students reported hearing about the pandemic from others in their communities. The family members from which participants described getting their initial information about the pandemic

were most often their parents, especially from parents who work in healthcare or with the government. For example, one student mentioned how their mom works in a hospital, so they were hearing about the seriousness of the pandemic from her.

Finally, some participants stated that they get some of their information about the pandemic from their schools. This includes obtaining information from email updates sent out by the president or administration of their college or university, from the different classes they took or are currently taking, from their school's newspaper, or from different organizations in which they participate while at school. Many students at Vassar specifically stated how they rely on President Bradley's Sunday emails for much of their information about COVID-19. A student at another school mentioned how they were a member of Model UN, and they first learned about the pandemic because they were supposed to go to Tokyo for a conference in March of 2020. Because of this, the president of their organization began tracking the virus in January of 2020 and was updating the organization's members, telling them that the virus would probably inhibit their travel.

## HOW STUDENTS ASSESS THE CREDIBILITY OF INFORMATION

When asked how they assess the credibility of information that they come across, all of the students stated that they do their own research to judge the credibility of sources. Overall, most students described checking multiple sources for the same information before believing it to be credible. One student mentioned looking at websites that rank the amount of bias that each online news source has to determine which source gives the most unbiased, credible reporting of information. Another student said that they judge a source's credibility based on how the author wrote the article and the sources that it references. Many students also said that they look at

peer-reviewed scientific articles, as well as what the CDC and other health organizations are saying about a topic, to judge another source's credibility.

There were some sources that students commonly recognized as less likely to be credible. These included word of mouth conversations and political information on social media sites such as TikTok, Reddit, and Twitter. With these sources, students acknowledged the need to put more effort into assessing the sources' credibility, including fact-checking the information with information from sources that they deem to be credible.

Most of the students interviewed said that there are some sources that they automatically believe to be credible. These sources are generally those that are more well-recognized. They include online and cable news sources such as the New York Times, the Associated Press, and CNN, as well as information presented by national and international health and governing bodies and by President Biden and Vice President Harris. However, many students specifically noted that it depends on who the political leader is as to whether or not they automatically assume the information to be credible. These students noted that while they believed the information coming from President Biden and Vice President Harris, they did not tend to consider the information coming from President Trump to be factual until it was corroborated by a more credible source.

#### DISCUSSIONS ABOUT COVID-19 IN PARTICIPANTS' SOCIAL CIRCLES

Many students reported that their friends, family members, and hometown communities talked about the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways. Of the students interviewed, all who mentioned their friends at college reported that those friends took the pandemic seriously and wanted to keep themselves and each other safe. One student stated that "my friends, because we're pretty close, we believe it's, you know, a real thing; it's a serious concern." Another reported that their friends at school "obviously don't think [COVID] is a hoax."



On the other hand, when discussing how family members viewed the pandemic, some of the students interviewed reported that their family members took it seriously. One student described the seriousness with which her family took the pandemic, stating that her family is “pretty serious about it. We don't really mess around. Like, for example, my brother became a close contact on Friday. He is currently restricted to his bedroom and the hallway and his bathroom. And I have to use a different bathroom. And so we're pretty serious about it. They talk about it, you know; they take it seriously.” On the other hand, some students observed that members of their immediate family thought the virus was either fake or nothing to worry about. One example of this was from a student who stated that her “mom is still kinda in denial about it, like she kinda thinks it's fake. Um, and my dad feels similarly.”

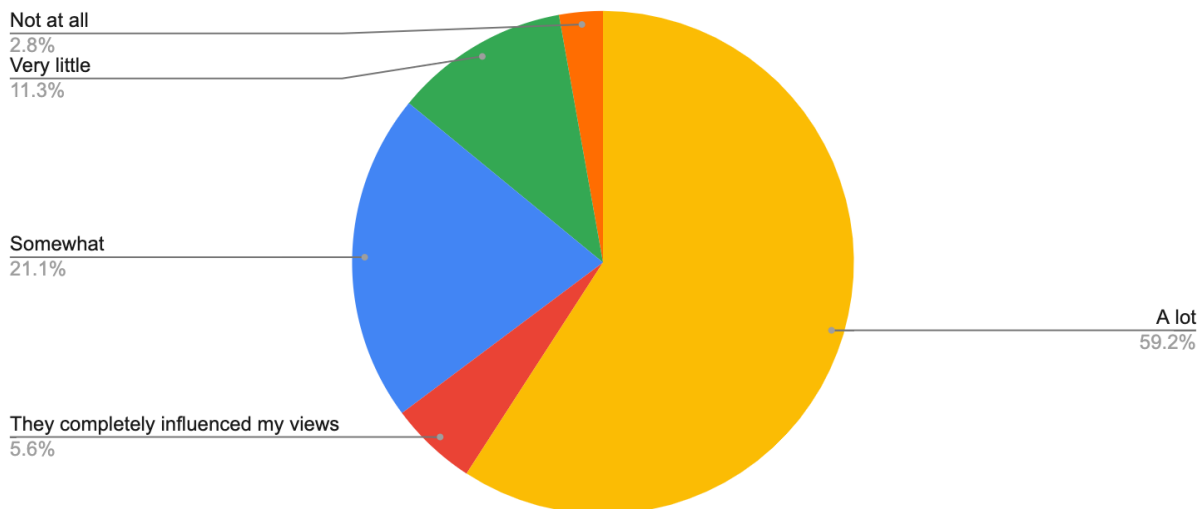
Finally, of the students interviewed who mentioned how the people in their hometowns viewed the COVID-19 pandemic, all of them stated that their communities were not taking the pandemic seriously. Many students mentioned the common belief in conspiracy theories or the refusal to follow public health guidelines, with a student describing how they were from a very small town, so “we don't believe in COVID. Um, ‘COVID's not real.’ ‘It's a scam by the democrats to take over the world.’” Another student even mentioned that there was an “Unmask Our Kids” rally in their hometown. This student described this event and their feelings towards it by saying that “there was a movement in my hometown... people had signs up that said ‘unmask our kids.’ Like, that reads to me like if I went to school on the international space station and there were signs saying ‘open the airlock,’ you know?”

## INFLUENCES ON STUDENTS' ACTIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

### *Family and Friends*

Family members and friends played the most important role in influencing participants views and actions during the pandemic. 5.6% of respondents said that their family members and friends completely influenced their views and actions during the pandemic. 59.2% of respondents said that family members and friends had a lot of influence on their views and actions. 21.1% responded that family members and friends had somewhat of an influence, 11.3% responded that family members and friends had very little influence, and 2.8% responded that their family and friends did not influence their views and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic at all. A likely reason for families and friends having such an important influence over students' views and actions during the pandemic was because the people who we surround ourselves with shape our ideas and how we experience certain situations. Our family's views are the first to which we are exposed, so we grow up understanding the world according to what they tell us. Then, as we make friends, we seek out people who are similar to us. This continues to reinforce the beliefs that we have developed.

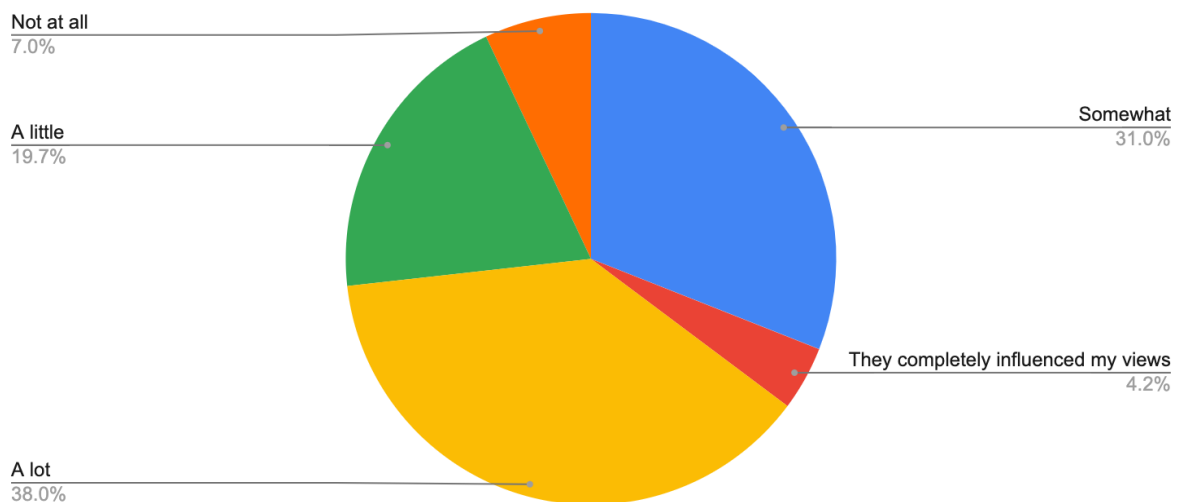
Family/Friends' Influence on Students' Views and Actions During the Pandemic



### *Schools' Policies*

Schools' policies regarding COVID-19 mitigatory practices played the second most important role in influencing participants' views and actions during the pandemic. 4.2% of respondents said that their school's policies completely influenced their views and actions during the pandemic. 38% of respondents said that their school's policies had a lot of influence on their views and actions. 31% responded that their school's policies had somewhat of an influence, 19.7% responded that their school's policies had very little influence, and 7% responded that their school's policies did not influence their views and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic at all. The most likely reason for schools' policies having the amount of influence over students' views and actions during the pandemic was that students had to follow certain criteria to return to campus, including masking indoors and, once it became available, becoming fully vaccinated and boosted unless they had a medical or religious exemption to this requirement.

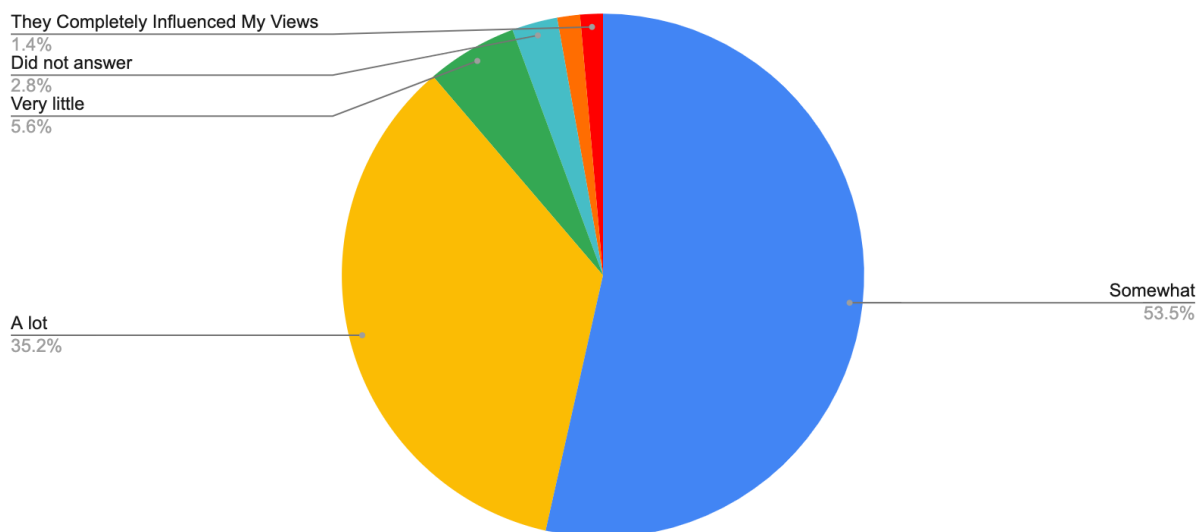
School's Influence on Students' Views and Actions During the Pandemic



### *News Sources*

News sources played the least important role in influencing students' views and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. 1.4 % of respondents reported that information from news sources completely influenced their views and actions during the pandemic. 35.2% of respondents stated that information from news sources had a lot of influence on their views and actions. 53.5% responded that information from news sources had somewhat of an influence, 5.6% responded that their school's policies had very little influence, and 1.4% responded that their school's policies did not influence their views and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic at all. 2.8% of respondents did not answer this survey question. A reason for news sources having influence over people's views and actions during the pandemic is because these sources can provide people with information. From these news sources, people make informed decisions about how to proceed in certain situations, including how to act during a pandemic.

Influence of News Sources on Students' Views and Actions During the Pandemic



## PANDEMIC ACTIONS

### *Masking*

Scientists have stated that masking is one of the most critical health measures that can be taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, in my survey, I asked students if they were still masking indoors when they were not eating and drinking. Of the 71 students surveyed, 85.9% of students were still masking indoors, and 14.1% responded that they were no longer wearing masks indoors.

### *Socially Distancing*

Most of the survey respondents are no longer socially distancing from others. 93% have stopped this pandemic mitigatory practice, while 7% are still socially distancing from others. Of the 93% of respondents who are no longer maintaining social distance, 25.4% of them stopped during the summer of 2021, 35.2% stopped during the spring of 2021, 11.3% stopped during the winter of 2020-2021, 11.3% stopped during the fall of 2020, 4.2% stopped during the summer of 2020, and 5.6% did not socially distance past the spring of 2020.

### VACCINATION

Of the 71 students that participated in my study, all but one had been vaccinated against COVID-19. The most common reason given for receiving the vaccine was out of societal obligation. Most students reported that they saw it as their own responsibility to get vaccinated so that they could not only protect themselves but also protect friends, family, and others in the community from serious illness, including those who were immunocompromised or who had other pre-existing conditions that would make them more susceptible to the virus. Other reasons for receiving the COVID-19 vaccination included believing in and following the scientific data, the desire to help the population of the United States reach herd immunity and end the pandemic, because the vaccine was mandated by their schools or their jobs, and simply because there was a

COVID-19 vaccine was available. One student also wrote that they received the vaccine out of spite, and another wrote that they saw no reason to not get vaccinated.

### *Vaccine Hesitancy and Misinformation*

One of the participants in my study had not been vaccinated when they answered my survey. This student's reason for not receiving the vaccine was that they believed they would not be seriously affected by COVID-19 were they to get sick. They stated that they were in good health, they were young, and they believed that illness from the disease would not cause them to be hospitalized. Another important reason they noted for not receiving vaccination was that they disagreed with the way the vaccines were manufactured, stating that the use of fetal tissue was against their religious beliefs.

While the rest of the participants received the vaccine, this unvaccinated student was not the only one who expressed concern about the vaccine. One other student wrote that the only reason they got the vaccine was because they were planning on joining the military and that they “genuinely regret” getting vaccinated because they believed that it was not a safe and effective vaccine. In their survey responses, they commented that “this is the only vaccine that makes you sick for 2 days and nobody is talking about it. Use your own two eyes, not CDC statistics. There is something wrong here. The ‘scientific’ reason is because they overdid the dosage to be sure it would work, but this vaccine also has the lowest effectiveness rates. Use your eyes, not ‘science.’” This student's quote highlights the common misunderstanding that the COVID-19 vaccine is unsafe. Many in the anti-vaccine community believe that researchers rushed the vaccine's development, calling its safety into question (Johns Hopkins Medicine 2022). They also believe that the vaccine can harm women's fertility and that the vaccine can give you the COVID-19 virus (Johns Hopkins Medicine 2022). However, none of these misconceptions have

been proven to be true. Numerous clinical trials have proven the vaccine to be safe and effective, and, since the vaccine does not contain the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it cannot make someone sick with COVID (Johns Hopkins Medicine 2022).

## PANDEMIC CONTROVERSIES AND THE POLITICIZATION OF COVID-19

When asked why they thought the COVID-19 pandemic became so politicized and how they would describe the different conflicts surrounding its politicization, the ten students interviewed had many theories, from people having “a hard time accepting it and try to find reasons to justify it” to the overall “fear of China” to “having such a reactionary president,” Donald Trump, in office during the start of the pandemic. However, the most common response referenced the United States’s unique emphasis on individual freedoms. According to the students interviewed, people in the United States began to see the government imposing restrictions, mask mandates, and other COVID-19 mitigatory practices, and they panicked and believed that the government was trying to take away their individual freedoms. One student connected the politicization of COVID-19 to this fear of government restriction, saying that it was a “gut reaction to the government trying to instate more control in our lives.” The uniquely American emphasis on individual freedoms contradicts the ideas of social responsibility that are needed to combat a disease as virulent as COVID-19. One interviewee described this conflict by saying that “in America, we are always told that you always have to focus on individual [freedoms]. But with something like the pandemic, you have to think about your society, and we don’t know how to deal with that.” On this topic, another interviewee said “I think a lot of the individualism that is almost celebrated alongside nationalism in this country really led to [COVID] being highly politicized when it shouldn’t have been.” These conflicting values were described by another student who said that “Americans have an ingrained idea that freedoms,

personal freedoms, and getting to choose what we want is important.” Therefore, “you have a lot of right-leaning people who are saying ‘I shouldn’t have to wear a mask or get vaccinated if I don’t want to.’ They very much ignore the people who are trying to tell them what to do, versus the people who are saying ‘hey, maybe we should listen.’” One interviewee simply stated that they “don’t know how to convince [other people] that they should care about people.” The students interviewed described how this conflict between individual rights and social responsibility is one of a moral nature. Ultimately, this argument comes down to whether or not people choose to prioritize their own needs or those of others who may be more affected by the pandemic, and a large portion of the country still chooses to act in their best interests, even if that means putting others at risk for serious disease or death by doing so.

Another reason that students mentioned as to why the pandemic became so politicized was the harsh divide between political parties that already exists in this country. There is currently a severe divide between Republicans and Democrats, with both parties moving towards opposite ends of the political spectrum and becoming less inclined to engage in bipartisan action. Many of the students interviewed recognized the partisan nature of politics within the United States. One student stated that “Americans now are so caught up in partisan politics.” Another student said that they thought that “in America, we have a very black and white political system with Republicans and Democrats. People are always looking for something to oppose the other with, and [the pandemic] fed the fire, so people used it.” Many of the interviewees also recognized how both presidents Trump and Biden have used the pandemic as a device to further political action.

Because of the partisan nature of politics in the United States, many students described how this politicization was bound to happen. One student explained that they thought the



politicization of the pandemic was inevitable, saying that “I think everything becomes politicized. I think if you bring it up as a politician, there’s going to be a way that it gets politicized.” Another student shared this sentiment, stating that “I think [the COVID-19 pandemic] became politicized because it could be. I don’t exactly have a high opinion of politics, and so, in my opinion, both sides, especially the Republican party, saw it as an opportunity to criticize [the other party].”

Finally, one other reason that students mentioned as the cause of the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic was many people’s lack of scientific education and the widespread belief in misinformation throughout much of the population. One student stated that “Some of [the politicization] has to do with the lack of education that exists in certain pockets of red communities where the education system has just failed people time and time again, and it’s not giving them the quality of education that others have that lets them be able to deconstruct [the pandemic] and separate it from the political.”

#### THE UNITED STATES’S HANDLING OF THE PANDEMIC

When asked what they think about how the United States handled the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the students interviewed thought that more could have been done to prevent the massive amounts of devastation that we have experienced. These students agreed in their beliefs that policies implemented by the national and state governments were too lenient, and, overall, these students believed that the country as a whole failed to do enough to protect the American people. This failure was summed up by one student who stated that “we should have acknowledged it as a threat from Day One and taken a national approach to mandates instead of delegating power to states.” Respondents believed that, with each state having their own set of

mandates and restrictions, the United States was never able to have a cohesive response to the pandemic, hindering its ability to protect the American people.

The results of this interview question show that students believe that the United States should have invested more money into a pandemic response plan before this pandemic even began. The students interviewed describe this plan as including the investment in universal healthcare and in public health in general, setting aside an increased amount of funding for scientific research, and the creation of a plan for how to provide the necessary medical care and supplies to all who need it. As we have seen thus far, healthcare workers have struggled with a shortage of beds, oxygen, masks, and other medical supplies necessary to treat the increasing number of COVID patients. As listed by the FDA, these shortages included supplies such as “dialysis related products, personal protective equipment, testing supplies and equipment, and ventilation related products” (U.S. Food and Drug Administration 2022). On top of that, healthcare workers, themselves, are getting sick or burnt out, reducing the number of qualified individuals to help care for the sick. Also, if the United States government had had a better pandemic response plan, millions of people would not have had to stop their life-saving treatments for other diseases because hospitals had to drop everything to treat those sick with COVID-19. One student mentioned how they’d argue that “a lot of political leaders haven’t taken enough sociology classes” in the sense that they think “a lot of decisions that were made were made, at least looking at it from the outside in, in a vacuum of not really considering, or maybe not even wanting to consider, the actual implications of the problems that would be created by making sure that nobody could go to the doctor for anything but COVID.” Making this same point, some students noted that many of the unnecessary casualties of the pandemic came from the healthcare systems being overwhelmed by patients sick with COVID-19 to the

point that they had to invest all of their time and resources into those patients and stop caring for those with chronic illnesses or other health issues. These students argue that if there had been better preparation by the government in ensuring that there would be enough resources available to treat everyone regardless of their ailments, these casualties may have been avoided.

Also, from their responses to this question, I gathered that students believe that the United States began to consider the pandemic as a serious threat too late after it began. They believed that the United States government was not listening to the scientists and disease experts who were imploring them to consider the seriousness of the virus and the amount of damage it could do to the world as a whole. This belief by students is supported by the fact that the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency on January 30, 2020, but the Trump administration did not declare a state of emergency until March 13 of that year (Peters 2020).

Once the country began to take the pandemic seriously, students attributed much of the misinformation that followed to the lack of a cohesive and centralized dissemination of information. One student stated that “medical systems should have been communicating with each other to make sure that they were saying the same or similar things about the pandemic.” Respondents noted that information about the disease and the measures taken to respond to it were not presented in the same way to people across the country, and when people begin to question who is right and who is wrong, misinformation can result, impairing the nation’s pandemic response and causing unnecessary illness and death.

Students also stated that they believe not enough money was invested in the people. This includes investing in small businesses, creating easy, nationwide access to free COVID-19 testing, and giving money and food to those in need. As the country has seen throughout the

pandemic, millions of people lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, and, without a steady income, people could not afford rent, food, or other necessities to keep themselves and their families healthy and safe. The students interviewed believe a number of measures should have taken place to avoid the hardship faced by so many families during the pandemic. These measures include a complete moratorium on rent for the duration of the pandemic, a steady supply of high quality masks and COVID-19 testing kits routinely being sent to all Americans, and the establishment of a program to send food to those in need. One student mentioned how other countries already had a system of food distribution in place during the lockdown and that we should look to them as an example.

Also in regard to investing more money and resources into the American people, some students stated that more stimulus checks should have been sent to small business owners and workers to avoid the closure of businesses and the firing of millions of workers. Many of the students acknowledged the agitation that the financial hardships have caused millions of people and their families, with one interviewee stating that “there should have been a way to make it easier for people to receive their stimulus checks to prevent social unrest.”

Finally, the students interviewed believe that the pandemic mitigation measures taken by the United States were too lenient. In regard to the initial shutdown in the spring of 2020, one student stated how “there should have been a better way of acknowledging that the shutdown hasn’t just ended because of summer or the holiday season.” In regard to mask mandates, almost all of the students interviewed stated that mask mandates should have been introduced earlier, enforced more strictly, and should have lasted throughout the duration of the pandemic. One student wished that the United States government had handled mask mandates in the way that the New York State government had, saying that New York did a decent job with enforcing mask

mandates and that the US government “should have stepped in and done that on a national level.”

Students also believe that COVID-19 vaccines should be required for the majority of Americans. One student wrote that, at this point in the pandemic, there should be “mandatory vaccinations except for a very strict religious or medical exemption.” Some of the students interviewed also expressed that the country should have had stricter international travel restrictions, with one student stating that there should have been “no international travel to the United States unless it was people fleeing violence.” If all of these measures had been introduced and enforced by the federal government as opposed to each state having its own set of rules and regulations, the students interviewed believe that the United States’s pandemic response would have been stronger, and we would not have had the number of deaths that we are currently experiencing. They noted that because each state was left to their own devices to create a pandemic response that best suited them, many states, more specifically many conservative states, leniently enforced mitigatory measures and ended mandates quickly after they began.

### **Discussion:**

#### **ACCESSING INFORMATION**

I found that students most often sought information from sources that reinforced their own views. Students identifying as politically liberal tended to gather information from liberal-leaning sources such as CNN, the Washington Post, and BuzzFeed News, while students identifying as politically conservative tended to gather information from conservative-leaning sources such as FOX News, Ben Shapiro, 4chan, and Steven Crowder. This way of seeking news sources that reinforce one’s own beliefs causes people to not question what they are hearing and seek out more data. This, in turn, can be a vehicle for politicization because, when people do not

question the information they are exposed to, it is easier for them to believe information that is not based in facts and research.

## INFLUENCES ON PANDEMIC ACTIONS AND VIEWS

What I found most interesting in my results was that students' families and friends had the most influence on their actions during the pandemic. Before starting conducting surveys and interviews, I thought that the most significant influence would come from news sources such as cable and online news sources and social media platforms. However, a reason for families and friends having the most influence is because students are surrounded by these people the most. They grow up hearing the opinions of their family members, and, when they are at school, they are constantly surrounded by their peers. Therefore, students are more often exposed to the ideas and beliefs of the family members and friends with whom they constantly surround themselves. They may be less so influenced by different news sources because they value the opinions of those they love more than what they see being reported on various platforms.

Schools also played more of a role in influencing students' actions and beliefs during the pandemic than I originally expected. The biggest reason for schools having such a significant amount of influence on students' views and actions was that vaccines, masking, and social distancing were mandatory for all members of the schools' communities. Had schools not mandated these protective measures, they may not have had as much of an influence on students.

## THE POLITICIZATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The students participating in this study agreed that the cause of the politicization was politicians, the contentious political climate, and politically biased news sources. Throughout the pandemic, politicians have been using different aspects of it, such as how it began in China, the death toll that we have had in the United States, and the changing public health recommendations

as scientists continuously learned more about COVID-19, to promote their own agendas and spread fear and hatred throughout the country. All of these different actions by politicians have contributed to the already contentious political climate in the United States that has been worsening throughout the last decade, and we have reached a point where there is little to no trust between Democrats and Republicans. When there is a lack of trust between both parties, it becomes almost impossible for any beneficial bipartisan action to occur. Finally, some news sources have followed the direction of the overall political climate and have also moved to become more partisan. These sources have become less reliable and no longer report unbiased facts. All of these different causes of politicization are important because they compound upon one another and contribute to the lack of trust and animosity between people of different political ideologies in the United States. Because of this, people feel so strongly about refusing to believe anything said by a member of the other political party that they choose to believe misinformation while ignoring facts based on extensive scientific research.

From the results of the surveys, I have also found that the main source of the continued spread of this politicization came from families and friends, those whose opinions we trust most. Before conducting the surveys and interviews, I thought that most people would be influenced by news sources and social media. However, since we love and trust our family members and friends, it makes sense that participants would value their opinions most and base our own thoughts and actions on those of others in our social circles. Also, we grow up surrounded by our family's views. From a young age, they tell us what is right and wrong, and these views influence our own thinking about certain issues.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

One of the aspects of my study that could limit its representativeness was that most of the respondents identified themselves as very liberal. These students were also mostly from liberal-leaning schools. Also, none of the participants who identified as conservative volunteered to be interviewed by me, so all of my interview data was from students identifying as politically liberal and politically moderate. Therefore, both my survey and my interview data were heavily skewed toward the left of the political spectrum, and I was not able to get as much representation from people identifying as politically conservative.

One reason for the lack of representation of students with conservative political views could be that the demographic I have chosen to study is generally more politically liberal than that of older generations. Today's college students are mostly members of Generation Z, and this generation has a higher percentage of its members identifying as politically liberal than millennials, members of Generation X, and Baby Boomers. Also, college educated individuals tend to be more liberal than those without a college education. According to a New York Times article entitled "How Educational Differences Are Widening America's Political Rift," sixty percent of college-educated voters voted Democrat in the 2020 presidential election (Cohn 2021). Finally, New York is, overall, a liberal state. While there are some portions of the state that have conservative populations, such as counties in the northern, central, and western portions of the state, the population of New York State as a whole is more liberal than conservative. Therefore, because of this liberal population, many politically liberal students choose to attend colleges and universities in New York.

During the process of conducting my research, I also had a difficult time finding people willing to be interviewed by me. While I received 71 responses to my survey, I had ten people who allowed me to interview them. And, of the five schools I incorporated into my study, two



schools did not have any representation in my interviews because none of the students responding to the survey volunteered to be interviewed. Of the ten people I interviewed, one student attends Colgate University, three students attend the University at Buffalo, and six students attend Vassar College. I was not able to interview any students from Clarkson University and from Hamilton College. While the surveys were a great way to gather my initial data, the interviews allowed me to go more in depth in my research and hear students' individual perspectives. Without the representation from Hamilton and Clarkson, my study lacks this greater, more specific knowledge from these schools.

Also, while collecting data, I had many more survey responses and interviews from Vassar than any other school. This, in part, was due to the fact that I attend Vassar and have more direct access to different groups from which I can find people to participate in my study. While trying to find participants from Vassar, I was able to directly reach out to my teammates as well leaders of different clubs. With other schools, I had to rely on club leaders to disseminate the information about my study to the rest of the club.

### **Conclusion:**

In this thesis, I have sought to answer the question of “What are the mechanisms through which the COVID-19 pandemic became a politicized form of science?”. Throughout this paper, I have discussed students' perspectives of the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. These students came from five different New York State colleges and universities, Vassar College, Hamilton College, Colgate University, University at Buffalo, and Clarkson University. The students participating in my study also represented a number of different races, ages, and political ideologies. Most of the students participating in my study identified themselves somewhere to the left of the political spectrum, as either “lean liberal,” “liberal,” or “very

liberal,” which led them to come to similar conclusions about what caused the politicization of this pandemic.

The results I received about what caused the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic were similar to what I initially expected. Most of the students interviewed mentioned politicians, news sources, and the country’s already contentious political climate as reasons for politicization. Many interviewees specifically cited Donald Trump’s rhetoric and actions while serving as the US President and the effects they had in further polarizing Republicans and Democrats as specific causes of the pandemic’s politicization. However, the results I received about which factors continue to influence the spread of this politicization the most were not what I expected them to be. I thought that news sources, whether they be social media, cable news sources, or online news sources, would be the most significant contributors to the continued spread of the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, my research has shown that the most significant factor influencing the spread of this politicization are members of people’s social circles, more specifically, family members and friends. This result shows that we are most influenced by the people with whom we continuously surround ourselves. Because these people are so important to us, and because our connections to them are strong, we have deep levels of trust in them. Therefore, we tend to value our family members’ and friends’ opinions above others with whom we have less personal relationships.

Moving forward, governing bodies can take steps to work towards reducing the levels of politicization around future pandemics. These actions include creating a more unified approach to disseminating information to the people and having the dissemination of information come from scientists and public health figures instead of politicians. Also, they can invest more resources in the people. As some of the students participating in this study witnessed in their

hometowns, many individuals lost faith and trust in the government when their businesses were forced to shut down or when they could no longer afford to support themselves and their families. This lack of trust contributed to the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to avoid this same situation from happening during future pandemics, governments should provide relief and financial aid for low-income families, small business owners, and other working-class people. When people believe that their governments care about them and are working in their best interests, they are more likely to believe what they are reporting and to follow the guidelines, mandates, and other safety measures that they put in place.

#### Works Cited:

- Abbas, Ali Haif. 2020. "Politicizing the Pandemic: A Schemata Analysis of COVID-19 News in Two Selected Newspapers." *Int J Semiot Law*.
- Allington, Daniel, Bobby Duffy, Simon Wessely, Nayana Dhavan, and James Rubin. 2020. *Psychological Medicine* 51:1763-1769.
- Bolsen, Toby and Risa Palm. 2021. "Politicization and COVID-19 vaccine resistance in the U.S." *Progress in Molecular Biology and Translational Science* 188(1):81-100.
- Bridgeman, Aengus, Eric Merkley, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, Derek Ruths, Lisa Teichmann, and Oleg Zhilin. 2020. "The Causes and Consequences of COVID-19 Misperceptions: Understanding the Role of News and Social Media." *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1(3).
- Brumfiel, Geoff. 2021. "Inside the Growing Alliance Between Anti-Vaccine Activists and pro-Trump Republicans." Retrieved March 22, 2022 (<https://www.npr.org/2021/12/06/1057344561/anti-vaccine-activists-political-conference-trump-republicans>).
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. "Safety of COVID-19 Vaccines." Retrieved March 22, 2022 (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/safety/safety-of-vaccines.html>).
- Cohn, Nate. 2021. "How Educational Differences Are Widening America's Political Rift." Retrieved Feb. 5, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/us/politics/how-college-graduates-vote.html>).
- Eyal, Gil. 2019. *The Crisis of Expertise*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fowler, Erika Franklin, and Sarah E. Gollust. 2015. "The Content and Effect of Politicized

- Health Controversies.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 658: 155-171.
- Gauchat, Gordon. 2012. “Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974-2010.” *American Sociological Review* 77(2): 167-187.
- Gostin, Lawrence O. 2018. “Language, Science, and Politics: The Politicization of Public Health.” *JAMA* 319(6): 541-542.
- Haberer, Joseph. 1972. “Politicization in Science.” *Science* 178(4062): 713-724.
- Hart, P. Sol, Sedona Chinn, and Stuart Soroka. 2020. “Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage.” *Sci Commun.* 42(5): 679-697.
- Hussein, Wajahat. 2020. “Role of Social Media in the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *The International Journal of Frontier Science* 4(2): 59-60.
- Igielnik, Ruth. 2020. Men and Women in the U.S. Continue to Differ in Voter Turnout Rate, Party Identification.” Retrieved April 21, 2022.  
(<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/18/men-and-women-in-the-u-s-continue-to-differ-in-voter-turnout-rate-party-identification/>).
- Jasanoff, Sheila S. 1987. "Contested Boundaries in Policy-Relevant Science." *Social Studies of Science* 17(2):195-230.
- Jasanoff, Sheila S. 2009. *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policymakers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Johns Hopkins Medicine. 2022. “COVID-19 Vaccines: Myth Versus Fact.” Retrieved April 4, 2022  
(<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid-19-vaccines-myth-versus-fact#:~:text=of%20our%20facilities.,MYTH%3A%20Getting%20>

- the%20COVID%2D19,vaccine%20gives%20you%20COVID%2D19.&text=The%20CO  
VID%2D19%20vaccine%20does,cause%20infection%20of%20any%20sort).
- Kraemer, John D., and Lawrence O. Gostin. 2009. "Science, Politics, and Values: The Politicization of Professional Practice Guidelines." *JAMA* 301(6): 665-667.
- Lerner, Barron H. 2017. "When Public Health Becomes Politicized." *The Hastings Center Report* 47(5).
- Luker, Kristin. 2008. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-glut*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Luo, Han, Meng Cai, and Ying Cui. 2021. "Spread of Misinformation in Social Networks: Analysis Based on Weibo Tweets." *Security and Communication Networks* 2021.
- Niche. 2022. "2022 Most Conservative Colleges in New York." Retrieved March 15, 2022 (<https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/most-conservative-colleges/s/new-york/>).
- Numerato, Dino, Petra A. Honová, and Tereza Sedláčková. 2021. "Politicisation, Depoliticisation, and Repoliticisation of Health Care Controversies: Vaccination and Mental Health Care Reform in the Czech Republic." *Social Science and Medicine* 227: 1-8.
- Oreskes, Naomi and Erik M. Conway. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Oxford Learner's Dictionary. 2022. "Politicization." *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*. Retrieved March 14, 2022. (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/politicization/>).
- Peters, Cameron. 2020. "A Detailed Timeline of All the Ways Trump Failed to Respond to the

- Coronavirus.” Retrieved April 2, 2022  
(<https://www.vox.com/2020/6/8/21242003/trump-failed-coronavirus-response>).
- Pew Research Center. 2022. “Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States.” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*. Retrieved March 15, 2022  
(<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>).
- Righetti, Nicola. 2021. “The Impact of the Politicization of Health on Online Misinformation and Quality Information on Vaccines.” *Italian Sociological Review* 11 (2): 443-466.
- Shearer, Elisa. 2021. “More Than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices.” Retrieved March 22, 2022  
(<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>).
- Shearer, Elisa and Amy Mitchell. 2021. “News Use Across Social Media Platforms in 2020.” Retrieved March 22, 2022  
(<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/>).
- Smith, Aaron, Laura Silver, Courtney Johnson, and JingJing Jiang. 2019. “Users Say They Regularly Encounter False and Misleading Content on Social Media—But Also New Ideas.” Retrieved March 30, 2022  
(<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/05/13/users-say-they-regularly-encounter-false-and-misleading-content-on-social-media-but-also-new-ideas/>).
- Tsao, Shu-Feng, Helen Chen, Therese Tisseverasinghe, Yang Yang, Lianghua Li, and Zahid A. Butt. “What Social Media Told Us in the Time of COVID-19: A Scoping Review.” *Lancet Digit Health* 3(3): e175-e194.

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. 2022. "Medical Device Shortages During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency." Retrieved March 30, 2022  
(<https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/medical-device-shortages-during-covid-19-public-health-emergency#shortage>).
- Ward, Jeremy K., Caronline Alleaume, Patrick Peretti-Watel, and theCOCONEL Group. 2020. "The French Public's Attitudes to a Future COVID-19 Vaccine: The Politicization of a Public Health Issue." *Social Science & Medicine* 265: 1-5.
- Yang, Maya. 2021. "Over 91% Democrats Vaccinated, While Only 60% Republicans Have Taken One Shot, Data Reveals." Retrieved March 22, 2022  
(<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/17/counties-voted-trump-higher-covid-death-rate>).