

Long COVID and Political Party
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Introduction

Long COVID has been represented in many different ways over the short amount of time it's been around. It's a highly politicized condition from a highly politicized disease (COVID-19 or coronavirus), and it created an even bigger divide between America's two main political parties (Kaplan, Vaccaro, Henning, & Christov-Moore, 2023). Part of this divide stemmed from the debate around COVID vaccines and wearing a mask, which many conservatives (right-leaning) said was a threat to their personal rights (Kaplan et al., 2023). Because of the right-wing party's tendency towards distrust of science and being more likely to believe in conspiracy theories regarding science, conservatives believed that COVID-19 vaccines were ineffective, or worse, actively harmful (Romer & Jamieson, 2021). This also extended to mask wearing and social distancing, which American right-wing members saw as a threat to personal freedoms; a trait commonly associated with the right-wing party (Kaplan et al., 2023). The representations of long COVID by America's two main political parties are therefore useful to examine, due to both the divide between parties and the politicized nature of the condition.

Since the pandemic seemingly had two "periods" of time to it (the early pandemic, which generally had more confusion; and the late pandemic, where the condition was more well known), these two periods will also be part of the research. As a disclaimer, I have a personal connection to this topic as several of my friends and family have long COVID. While it is not something I suffer from myself, after hearing their stories and secondhand accounts it has in turn influenced my decision towards researching the language around this topic.

For a brief background, COVID-19 began late in 2019 (hence the 19 in the name) in China (CDC, 2023). The official "pandemic" in the US began in March of 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) made the official health emergency declaration (CDC, 2023). The emergency declaration was then ended as of May 2023 by the WHO (Staff, N. M., 2021).

Long COVID is a condition that some people get a few weeks after being infected with COVID-19 (Yale Medicine, 2023). Yale Medicine notes that “In addition to PCC, Long COVID goes by[...] long-haul COVID, post-acute sequelae of COVID-19 (PASC), long-term effects of COVID-19, and chronic COVID, among others” (Staff, N. M., 2021). In my research, it will be called long COVID, though these other terms may show up in quotes.

For the prevalence of the condition, in a CDC study conducted in 2022, they found that in the US around 6.9% of adults ever had long COVID (Adjaye-Gbewonyo et al., 2023, p. 1). The same study also found that women, people aged 35-49, people of lower income, and people who lived in more rural areas were more likely to have had long COVID (p. 6). The symptoms of long COVID include fatigue, brain fog, loss of smell or taste, sleep troubles, and a whole host of other unpleasant symptoms, which can last anywhere from a few weeks to years (Yale Medicine, 2023).

The field of rhetoric relating to health and medicine is one that seeks to understand and explain how our words influence and have power “in a world in which we act upon each other by influence” (Derkatch & Segal, 2005, p. 139). The research done here examines the way that long COVID is defined and how these definitions work to persuade and influence people, as well as the similarities and differences of these based on political party. Since the right-wing party is somewhat known for being skeptical of scientific and health related topics, I initially predicted there would be a bigger difference between left- and right-wing coverage, especially after how much vaccine coverage became politicized (Kaplan et al., 2023). Things like the length of articles, any image used, specific word choice, and repetition will be examined to see how each party represents long COVID, any connotations they imply, and if this differs over the two points in time. Because long COVID is so new, research on the topic is still very light especially in the world of the rhetoric of health and medicine. The findings of this research will better inform on how both parties define long COVID, and how these definitions work to persuade the reader of certain viewpoints.

Method of Inquiry

Eight total online news articles from a left-leaning US news source and a right-leaning US news source were analyzed. TV footage was left out in order to narrow down the scope of the inquiry. The research will include two important periods: one referring to the ‘early pandemic’, which will be interpreted as before the condition was defined and added to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26th, 2021, and the other will be called ‘later pandemic’, which refers to the timeframe from July 27th, 2021 to October 1st, 2023. The eight sources are all from within one of these two date ranges. CNN and Fox News were chosen as representatives of the left and right-leaning parties, respectively, as these are the most popular partisan news sources for the two main US political parties (Pew Research Center, 2020). All sources chosen are US based and centered around the US. The right-leaning party sources chosen were found by using the Fox News website search engine feature and searching the term “long COVID”, constrained by the filter of the above stated date range. The sources from CNN were also found using CNN’s website’s search function, though unfortunately there is not an option to constrain by date. In order to find the articles that would fit my above date range, then, a manual search for the correct article dates was necessary.

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has further information on Long COVID as a disability (as defined by the ADA), background information on COVID and Long COVID, and possible long term side effects and symptoms. It also has information on how it can affect one’s ability to do “major life activities”, what rights you have if you’re someone who has Long COVID as a disability, that Long COVID isn’t always a disability, and what federal resources there are related to the topic (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Since HHS defines long COVID as a disability according to official government sources, it was used in the research to separate the early and late pandemic time frames in relation to the amount of uncertainty regarding the condition.

As with any project, there are limitations with the main ones here being the scope. With only a total of eight sources being analyzed, the research will of course be limited in the kinds of broad generalizations and findings made. Added to this is the fact that long COVID, and even simply COVID itself, has not had time to be thoroughly researched, especially over long periods of time. Despite this, I'm hoping to shed some light on the kinds of representations and use of presence that the two main US parties used for describing long COVID.

In the following analysis, I suggest that over the two observed points in time, right-wing partisan news sources felt more comfortable with the topic of long COVID through the use of longer articles, more photos, repetition of medical-related words, and commentary on the condition. Finally, emotional appeals, repetition, and comparison to things like cancer imply the seriousness of long COVID in early *and* late left-wing articles.

Presence

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca define “presence” as what the author chooses to include and what they choose to exclude (1969, p. 116). These deliberate choices and use of presence tell us what the author intends the readers/viewers to understand and the viewpoints they favor (Landau, 2011, p. 42). This can be emphasized through things like use or lack of images, word choice, repetition, and the length of the article (Landau, 2011, p. 43). Presence also involves how the author frames the situation, and elements of exaggeration and hyperbole (Mader, 1973, p. 380).

Right-Wing News source- early pandemic

In [a Fox News article](#) from January 26th, 2021, “presence” is used to indicate a degree of doubt in the existence of the condition (Hein). The article, titled “WHO issues new clinical advice for coronavirus patients, plans to study 'long COVID'”, was published in our ‘early pandemic’ time frame. The article itself is very short, being only about 250 words, meaning the absence of information on the subject contributes to the connotation of doubt. Furthermore, it uses quotes around long COVID (stylized like "long-COVID"). This is known as a term called scare quotes,

which is defined as putting quotes around a word where they're not needed to cast doubt on whatever the subject is (Trask, 1997). They also use the accompanying words "so called" before most instances of long COVID in this article. The presence of these extra words also casts doubt on the existence of the condition. This particular article includes one picture which is located in the first third of the article. It depicts a doctor wearing a mask with a COVID swab (presumably testing for COVID-19). The image is from iStock. The presence of this picture in the article works to legitimize the idea of COVID, if not the legitimacy of long-COVID. In the last third of the article, they've embedded [a Twitter/X post from the World Health Organization](#). The actual post talks briefly about how the WHO has changed the current suggestions for COVID patient care, and [links an article](#) that talks more about how if people who have had COVID continue to have symptoms, they should have follow-up care to address this (WHO, 2021).

Furthermore, it's interesting to note what they *don't* include- those being a lot of words since the article is so short, and any other quotes or thoughts about it are also reserved only for the WHO (and aren't properly cited). It's clear they don't want to get into it too deeply or comment on the matter themselves. This lack of comment on the material they're reporting on presents the idea that they simply don't have a lot to say on the matter, or perhaps that since they don't have anything positive to say, they choose not to say much at all. This serves to preserve Fox News' reputation as a reputable news source by not saying information that contradicts official government bodies (Mehta & Guzmán, 2018, p. 105).

[In another early pandemic Fox News article](#), we see scare quotes around long COVID, though they use a slightly different term for the condition. The March 2021 article titled "Coronavirus 'long haulers' most often battle fatigue, 'brain fog,' study suggests", talks about a study that examines something they term "coronavirus 'long haulers'" (Rivas, 2021). It has a byline that says "Long haulers' improve with time, but some still report symptoms over nine months later, researchers say" (Rivas, 2021). Other well-established terms are also put into scare quotes. Terms like 'cognitive rehab' and 'therapeutic interventions' are put in quotes to indicate doubt of related health remedies. Even the term 'brain fog' gets quotes around it. There is no direct

commentary in the whole article, similar to other early pandemic right-wing articles.

“Symptoms” is used 10 times in the article, which perhaps indicates the bit of belief Fox News has in the existence of the condition (also indicated by how despite the general air of doubt in the article, there is no commentary *explicitly* disproving long COVID’s existence). The article is 413 words long and there are no images. It’s possible even as early as the end of March (two months after the previous Fox News article), there was greater acceptance of the existence of long COVID as a real condition.

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Left-wing news source- early pandemic

[A CNN article](#) published in February 2021 titled “Clinics are springing up around the country for what some call a potential second pandemic: Long COVID” uses presence to *legitimize* the existence of long COVID. This article details how “long haul COVID” or “long term COVID” is real based on the reported effects after having COVID as evidence (Waldrop, 2021). The article makes present the idea that long COVID exists through the use of repetition in words like “symptoms”, which appears 24 times, “doctor” which appears 15 times, and “patients” which also appears 15 times (Perelman et al., 1969, p. 144). The title calling it a “second pandemic” emphasizes the seriousness of long COVID and creates an alarming headline that draws you in.

The length of the article and the sheer number of words on the page also serve to legitimize the condition (being 1,356 words), unlike [the early pandemic Fox News source](#) which is less than a fifth of that length (Landau, 2011, p. 42). The sentence “at least doctors now know that long COVID is a real thing” (Waldrop, 2021) clearly states CNN’s position on long COVID’s legitimacy. Three large images of women are evenly spaced throughout the article. The text details how these three women have had long COVID, and the article includes liberal use of quotes by these women. It makes absent the idea of vaccines or treatment of the symptoms, and in fact does not bring this aspect of long COVID at all (Perelman et al., 1969, p. 144). Though there is a section in the article titled “Treating the Symptoms”, the section is somewhat short (only 271 words), and the only bit mentioned on actual treatment simply states that “currently,

there is no specific treatment for long COVID” (Waldrop, 2021). The rest of the section is solely about the specific case of a woman who got long COVID and her own personal experience with it (Waldrop, 2021).

The next item that will be analyzed is [a CNN article from January 2021](#) titled “‘Long COVID’ still puzzles doctors but treatment is possible” (Mascarenhas, 2021). It’s a total of 490 words, a departure from other CNN articles here examined, which all tend to be longer as well as a lack of photos.

Interestingly, this article also uses scare quotes around long COVID, as in the sentence “medical professionals are working to understand more about a condition they are calling “long COVID””(Mascarenhas, 2021). They indicate a degree of doubt around the condition, much like early right-wing news articles. This is tempered by the fact that after the scare quotes in the title and the first sentence, there are no more quotes around long COVID subsequently. This is also mitigated by the last sentence of the article, which is a quote from a doctor saying “While we don’t know what’s causing these symptoms, they’re very real for patients” (Mascarenhas, 2021). Even in early pandemic sources, they confirm here that despite the lack of knowledge around long COVID, it is ‘very real’.

Right-Wing news source- late pandemic

Presence in [an article from July 2023](#) suggest changed attitudes toward long COVID. The article (“What a new study reveals about long COVID, and what we can do about it” (Siegel, 2023)) again has an absence of images, much like the early pandemic right-wing article, though there are several linked videos of Fox News TV footage and interviews with the author of it (a doctor). It’s twice as large as the right-wing early pandemic article at around 570 words, suggesting that over time Fox News had more to say about long COVID. In contrast to [the January 2021 Fox News article](#), this one presents the use of commentary and opinion on long COVID rather than just using WHO quotes. Repetition is also used in the words impact which is mentioned three times in a short article, COVID which is mentioned six times, and loss mentioned four times,

which “emphasizes this visual presence” of medical legitimacy (Landau, 2011, p. 43). As time went on, this Republican-oriented news source became less hesitant to talk about long COVID.

[A Fox News article](#) from May 2023 talks about a study on Long COVID with regards to the omicron variant (Musto, 2023). There are three large images in this short article. One depicts an enlarged image of COVID particles from a microscope. Another shows human body cells infected with COVID virus particles. The third image is of people lined up to get the COVID-19 vaccine. These images legitimize the existence of COVID by showing it directly and illustrating for people exactly what they’re talking about, with the last image even possibly suggesting that one should get vaccinated. Also in opposition to [the early pandemic Fox News article](#) from March 2021, there are no quotes around the term ‘brain fog’, indicating they have accepted this related symptom as real. Just like the July 2023 Fox News article, there are no more quotes around long COVID, COVID long-haulers, or any other related term. There are also no words surrounding the terms, such as “so-called”. At the bottom of the article, it says “The Associated Press contributed to this report” (Musto, 2023). With a prestigious, non-partisan news source like AP News contributing to their article, there was less likely to be partisan opinions like the right-wing party’s distrust of science (Romer & Jamieson, 2021).

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Left-Wing News source- late pandemic

CNN’s [August 2023 article about long COVID](#), “Long COVID symptoms create a greater burden of disability than heart disease or cancer, new study shows”, is very text heavy, being around 1,100 words and has no pictures (Goodman, 2023). This works to evoke the presence of scientific articles, which are also dense and tend to not have any images. There are quotes from three different doctors in the article- another trait shared with many published scientific articles. I suggest here that the presence of these scientific-seeming features work to make their emotional appeal seem more grounded in science- as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note, “subjective feelings, can be transformed into judgments of fact through certain tricks of presentation” (1969, p. 180). The presence of words like “burden”, “heart disease”, and especially “cancer” in the title makes the reader feel a sense of fear and unease from the comparison to these emotionally-laden

terms. This “exaggeration to move people toward this ideal good” is done to get people to take long COVID seriously (Mader, 1973, p. 380). Repetition is also used in terms like “study” which is mentioned 17 times, and the word “problems”, which is repeated 10 times. The emotional appeal they are making with these rhetorical moves works to convince the reader that long COVID sufferers deserve empathy and disability benefits and that it’s a problem that is being studied, lending it a scientific air. Despite it being a health article, it uses a lot of emotional appeals and emotional language (such as comparing long COVID to cancer) to imply this connotation.

A late pandemic [CNN article from November 2021](#) continues this theme of evoking the presence of a scientific article. It is around 900 words, and like the August 2023 CNN article, has no images except a picture of the writer of the article. Despite this theme of scientific objectivity, there is a very clear presence of opinion as it's written in first person and uses words like “our”. The article takes a narrative style familiar stance with the reader by using the term “we” in phrases like “we must continue to take steps that will keep cases low” and “we’ll all be living in a COVID-19 reality for some time” (Spector, 2021). It’s written by Tim Spector, a professor and creator of an app that collects voluntary medical data (Spector, 2021). One should also note that before anything else, there is an editor’s note that says Mr. Spector’s qualifications, his connection with the ZOE health study, and a disclaimer that this is an opinion article and these are solely the views of Mr. Spector (and not CNN) (Spector, 2021). The last few paragraphs conclude with statements like “more research needs to be done” and “I would encourage anyone who is coping with long COVID to look up a nearby long COVID study and get involved” (Spector, 2021). “Long COVID” is used 24 times throughout the article, and the term “sufferers” is used six times. Expanding the term to “suffer” yields nine total instances in the article. “Symptoms” appears 13 times. Clearly, the article emphasizes the severity and again uses emotional appeals to show how people with long COVID deserve sympathy and our commiseration.

Conclusion

Over time, Fox News articles seemingly accepted the existence of long COVID through their lack of scare quotes in later pandemic articles, inclusion of more images, and longer articles. This was also probably because as time went on, more scientific research backing the existence of long COVID made it harder to doubt. After many official government and scientific publications confirming the existence of long COVID, they could no longer deny the existence of the condition in the face of overwhelming evidence. Another possible reason is that older people and people aged 35-49 are more at risk of getting long COVID (Adjaye-Gbewonyo et al., 2023, p. 1), and Fox News' user base is primarily older people (Grieco, 2020). Continuing to deny long COVID in the later pandemic would mean alienating a good portion of their user base. However, these are all just theories, and with my size corpus, they cannot be adequately proven or denied.

CNN articles that were analyzed all make emotional appeals through comparison and repetition to say how serious and devastating long COVID is. They emphasize the suffering and characterize long COVID as a disability akin to such devastating conditions as cancer or heart disease (Goodman, 2023), as well as the pity and sympathy we should feel for people with long COVID. All CNN articles are fairly long, and this time and attention devoted to covering the condition could be read as suggestive that they are taking it seriously. However, it might just be the style of CNN articles compared to the very short Fox News ones. Almost all CNN articles have a lot of commentary in their articles, even if not specifically labeled an opinion article. Even very early CNN articles which have more doubt than later ones, which are evidenced by shorter articles and use of initial scare quotes, still use emotional appeals and a liberal amount of source quotes to confirm long COVID's legitimacy. In the late pandemic however, both parties accepted long COVID, which we can see through lack of scare quotes, more pictures and sources, and longer articles.

Further research

There is much further research that could be done, especially in certain items from my corpus. From the CNN article from 2023 titled “Long COVID symptoms create a greater burden of disability than heart disease or cancer, new study shows”, they use the metric termed “a disability adjusted life year, or DALY. Each DALY represents one year of healthy life lost to illness” (Goodman, 2023). Put simply, there’s a lot to unpack there. A whole project could be done on the rhetorical implications of this one metric (which would also contribute to the rhetoric around disabilities and illness, making it a valuable addition to the field of the rhetoric of health and medicine).

Another source from my corpus titled “Long COVID is real. But there are ways to protect yourself” from 2021 makes frequent mention of the “ZOE Health Study”, which was created by the writer of that particular CNN article (Spector, 2021). An exploration of what terms the author uses to encourage people to join his study and other rhetorical devices used would be very interesting project indeed.

Finally, a more robust analysis with a much larger corpus would be able to find whether the timing of the ADA announcement affected news coverage of long COVID in any meaningful way. For this research, the addition of long COVID to the ADA served as a time marker to separate periods in the pandemic. The actual implications of whether this announcement significantly affected news coverage, however, is beyond the scope of this research and size of corpus. More research can and should be done on the topic of long COVID (especially within the realm of RHM) to understand how the definitions and persuasions used in long COVID affect our daily lives.

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