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Lawrence C. Hamilton

University of New Hampshire, lawrence.hamilton@unh.edu

Thomas G. Safford

University of New Hampshire, tom.safford@unh.edu

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**The Worst Is Behind Us:
News Media Choice and False Optimism in the Summer of 2020**

Lawrence C. Hamilton
Department of Sociology
University of New Hampshire
ORCID: 0000-0003-1977-0649
Lawrence.Hamilton@unh.edu

Thomas G. Safford
Department of Sociology
University of New Hampshire
ORCID: 0000-0003-1171-4634
Tom.Safford@unh.edu

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, mitigation efforts slowed the first US wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts warned, however, that without coordinated, sustained mitigation—such as testing and tracing, limited travel or gatherings, social distancing and mask wearing—the worst could lie ahead. A July survey found majority (59%) agreement with the expert warnings, while a minority (27%) mistakenly thought that the worst was behind us, or that COVID-19 was not a real problem. Among frequent Fox News and conservative talk radio consumers, however, large majorities (67–80%) held such false optimism or denial views, in contrast with small minorities (9–16%) among public radio and local television audiences. News media effects on false optimism/denial remain substantial even after controlling for respondent political party and background characteristics. False optimism and denial correlate with lower support for mitigation steps, which worsened the pandemic.

Introduction

The first US case of COVID-19 was confirmed in January 2020; by late March the rate of infection reached tens of thousands per day. Infections peaked above 30,000 cases and 2,000 deaths per day in April, before mitigation efforts including stay-at-home policies slowed down this first wave. By late July, during the survey described in this paper, there had been 160,000 confirmed deaths nationwide. The rate of new fatalities remained below its spring peak, but infections were rising again. Epidemiologists warned that without mitigation on a much larger scale, there was nothing to prevent worse outcomes in the seasons ahead. Coordinated mitigation efforts did not happen, and the warnings came true. In winter 2020/2021, daily hospitalizations and deaths far exceeded their spring 2020 peak (**Figure 1**), and more than half a million had died.

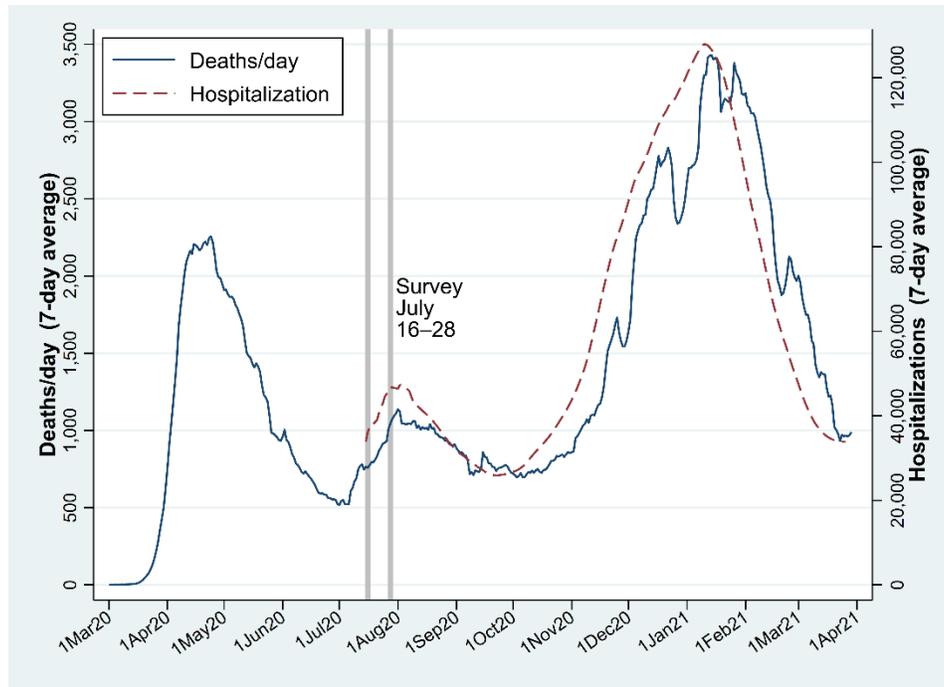


Figure 1: Daily U.S. COVID-19 deaths and hospitalization (7-day averages) from March 1 2020 to March 29 2021. Vertical lines enclose dates of our July 2020 survey. Data source: Roser et al. (2020).

Our survey took place from July 16 to 28, in the US state of New Hampshire. During this period, the state was experiencing comparatively mild impacts, averaging around 30 new cases and one death per day. As elsewhere, things subsequently worsened: in January the 7-day averages passed 700 new cases and 10 deaths per day. One question on the July survey had invited respondents to look forward: Did they think that for the US, the worst of the pandemic was yet to come? Or that the worst was behind us, or even that COVID-19 was not really a major problem? In hindsight, as in scientifically-informed opinion at the time, the latter two views expressed false optimism at best, or simply denial. They contributed to the disaster by implying less need for prevention, whether policy or individual behavior.

What were the social bases of false optimism? Aside from its demographic patterns, what can we say about the information sources supporting (or countering) inaccurate perceptions that the pandemic was waning or unreal, so preventive steps were not urgent? The July survey sheds light on these questions.

Data and Methods

Our summer 2020 survey was part of a series examining coronavirus-related beliefs and behavior (Hamilton & Safford 2020b,c; Safford & Hamilton 2020). Background and citations to related studies appear in previous articles on public trust in scientists regarding vaccines (Hamilton et al. 2015), the Zika virus pandemic (Hamilton & Safford 2020a; Safford et al. 2017), and topics such as climate change (Hamilton 2015; Safford et al. 2020). Other studies give evidence that on science-related issues, New Hampshire surveys approximate US nationwide responses (e.g., Hamilton et al. 2019).

Sampling for this online survey employed the University of New Hampshire Survey Center’s Granite State Panel, composed of residents recruited randomly from phone numbers across the state. A total of 959 people responded to the July 2020 survey. Weights adjusting for representativeness in terms of age, gender, education, political party and region have been applied to all analyses in this article.

Variables analyzed here are listed in **Table 1**, with response summaries and codes for regression. Independent variables include age, gender, education and political party, along with how frequently respondents watched or listened to four news sources: Fox News, conservative talk radio, a local TV station (WMUR, an ABC affiliate), or New Hampshire public radio (NHPR).

Figure 2 charts responses to our dependent variable, the *behind us* question. Although 59% agreed with expert warnings that the worst of the pandemic was yet to come, 21% took a more sanguine view that the worst was behind us, while 6% maintained that COVID-19 had not been a real problem. The latter two views proved badly mistaken. Combing the two responses defines a {0,1} indicator of false optimism or denial (27%).

Table 1: Variables in this analysis, with weighted response summaries and codes used for regression.

Independent Variables

Age — 19 to 91 years, mean 49

Gender — male (0, 48%), female (1, 52%)

Education — high school or less (1, 34%), technical/some college (2, 33%), college graduate (3, 21%), postgraduate (4, 12%)

Party — Democrat (1, 48%), Independent (2, 10%), Republican (3, 42%)

Fox news — watch never/DK (1, 58%), occasionally (2, 24%), frequently (3, 18%)

Conservative talk radio — listen never/DK (1, 74%), occasionally (2, 17%), frequently (3, 9%)

Local TV (WMUR) — watch never/DK (1, 21%), occasionally (2, 38%), frequently (3, 41%)

Public radio (NHPR) — listen never/DK (1, 45%), occasionally (2, 33%), frequently (3, 22%)

Dependent Variable

Behind us — Which statement do you think is more accurate concerning the coronavirus or COVID-19 in the United States?

- The worst is yet to come (0, 59%)
 - The worst is behind us (1, 21%)
 - COVID-19 has not really been a major problem in the US (1, 6%)
 - Don’t know/no answer (0, 14%)
-
-

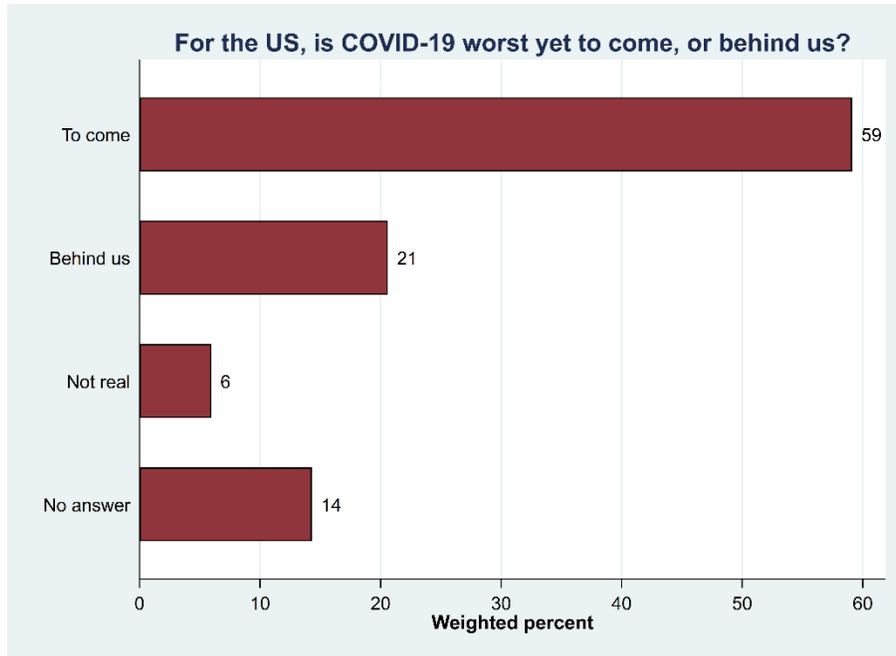


Figure 2: Which statement do you think is more accurate concerning COVID-19 in the United States?

Results

Figure 3 breaks down the percentage of false-optimism responses (*behind us* = 1) by respondent characteristics and media choices. Differences between age groups, men and women, or by education appear small compared with the 50-point gap separating Republicans (54% false optimism) from Democrats (4% false optimism). Independents (22%) stand closer to Democrats. Even wider gaps separate those who frequently (67%) or never (10%) watch Fox News, and frequently (80%) or never (13%) listen to conservative talk radio. Significant differences occur in the opposite direction among local TV watchers and public radio listeners. These news-media effects reflect information conveyed by each source—often downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic (in line with President Trump’s pronouncements) on Fox News and conservative talk radio, contrasting with more attention to infectious-disease expert perspectives on local TV and public radio. Recent studies explore the resulting impacts of conservative media on coronavirus conspiracy beliefs (Jamieson & Albarracin 2020), preventive behavior (Simonov et al. 2020) and COVID-19 infections (Bursztyn et al. 2020).

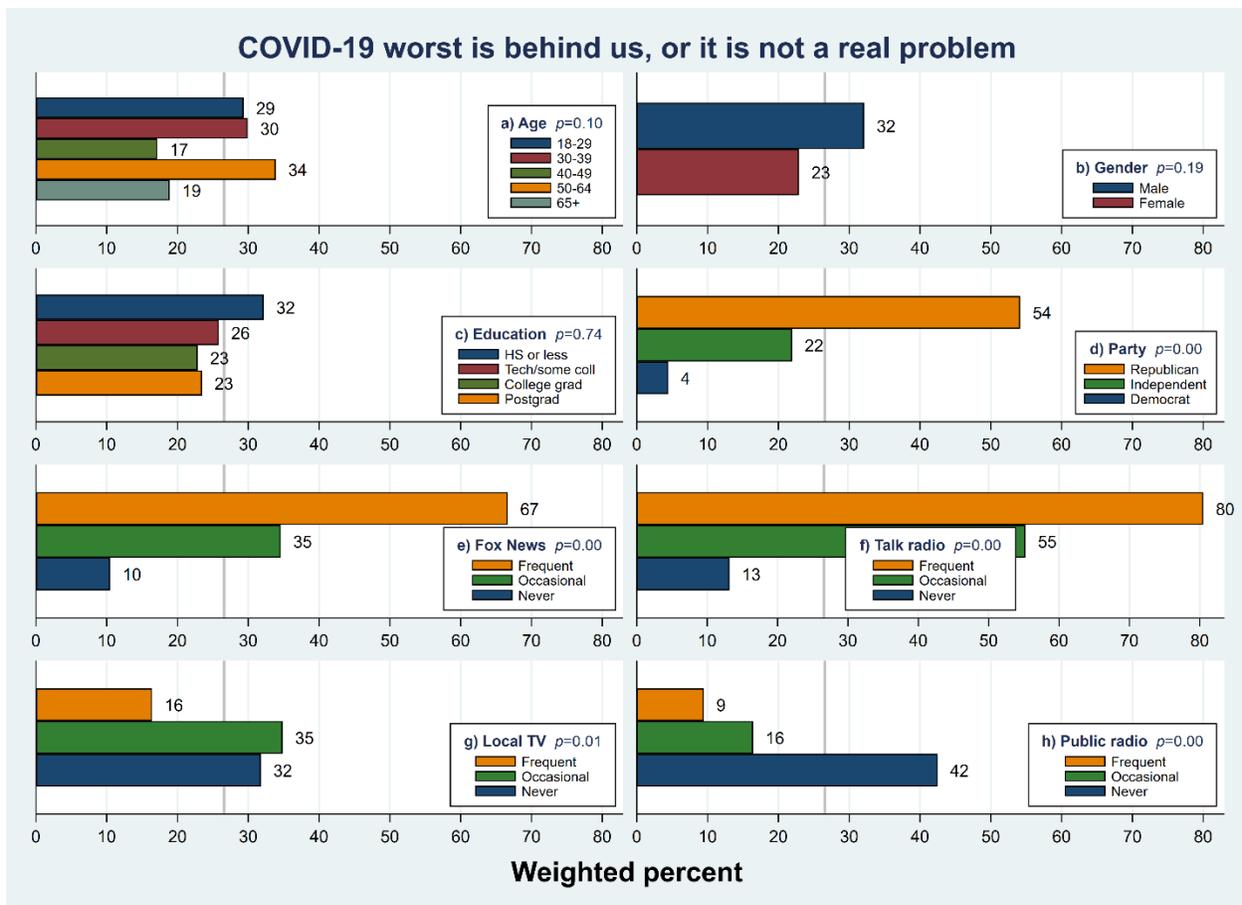


Figure 3: Percentages saying the worst is behind us or COVID-19 is not really a major problem (overall, 27%) by respondent characteristics and news media choices. Probabilities from design-based F tests.

Political identity is known to affect news media choices (e.g., Bolin & Hamilton 2018), so relationships in Figures 3e–h might be spurious. A multivariate analysis summarized in **Table 2** tests this possibility by entering all four media items, together with age, gender, education and party, into one logit regression predicting the odds of a false optimism/denial response (*behind us* = 1). While confirming the strong effect of partisan identity, and a weaker but significant effect from age (older respondents less inclined to false optimism/denial), this analysis finds significant additional effects from three of the four media sources. Other things being equal, the odds of false optimism are 374% higher (multiplied by $2.177^2 = 4.74$) among frequent Fox News viewers (*Fox News* = 3) compared with those who never watch that network (*Fox News* = 1). They also are almost 400% higher (multiplied by $2.227^2 = 4.96$) among frequent conservative talk radio listeners than non-listeners. Public radio audiences lean in the opposite direction: frequent listeners have 68% lower odds (multiplied by $0.565^2 = 0.32$) of false optimism than non-listeners. It bears emphasizing that each media effect compounds the effects of other media, and of partisan identity.

Table 2: Weighted logit regression of response that worst is behind us or COVID-19 is not a real problem (*behind us* = 1) on age, gender, education, political party and frequency of news media consumption—showing odds ratios, linearized standard errors, *t*-test probabilities and 95% confidence intervals (estimation sample *n* = 899). Colors highlight significant positive (blue, increasing false optimism) or negative (red, decreasing false optimism) effects.

Predictor	Odds	SE	<i>p</i>	ci lower	ci upper
Age (years)	0.976	0.012	0.046	0.954	1.000
Gender (F)	1.016	0.366	0.964	0.502	2.059
Education	1.271	0.238	0.201	0.880	1.835
Party (D-I-R)	2.411	0.534	0.000	1.560	3.725
Fox News	2.177	0.594	0.004	1.274	3.720
Talk radio	2.227	0.639	0.005	1.268	3.911
Local TV	0.656	0.169	0.103	0.395	1.089
Public radio	0.565	0.135	0.017	0.354	0.903
constant	0.047	0.043	0.001	0.008	0.280

Conclusion

On a statewide survey in July 2020, most respondents accurately suspected that the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic was yet to come. A substantial minority, however, unrealistically thought that the worst was behind us, or that COVID-19 had not really been a major problem. Attending to local TV news and public radio supported realism; attending to Fox News and conservative talk radio did the opposite, implying less need for prevention. Our survey's *behind us* indicator has tetrachoric correlations of -0.72 with mask wearing, -0.85 with prioritizing control of the virus, and -0.67 with concern that the respondent or their family might become sick. Through such connections, false optimism and denial contributed to worsening the pandemic.

Acknowledgments

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