The Impact of COVID-19 on Elected Official Rhetoric and Framing of Healthcare Issues

Catherine C. Pollack, BS [1,2]

Divya Ramjee, MS [3]

Jessica Malaty Rivera, MS [2]

[1] Dartmouth College (Departments of Biomedical Data Science & Epidemiology)

[2] The COVID Tracking Project at *The Atlantic*

[3] American University (Department of Justice, Law & Criminology)

Background

- Universal access and affordability of healthcare continues to be a contentious topic in the country, particularly during COVID-19 and the 2020 U.S. Presidential election

- Previous research has indicated that while some pandemics can create and foster hate and blame, others can promote unity and cooperation amongst the electorate

- There continues to be a constant struggle in the social sciences, particularly in political science, for finding reliable measures of public sentiment toward respective elected officials, but it is clear that there is a growing disparity amongst the public regarding political participation and vote choice

Purpose: Understand the impact of **information exchange** and engagement with **elected officials** on social media, which may provide insight into **how rhetoric can impact voting behavior based on issues such as health policy**

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"Official" Page: n = 11,180 posts

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The American Jobs Plan will put Americans to work fixing the roads you drive on every day, getting rid of the lead pipes that harm our children, and expanding broadband so every American has access

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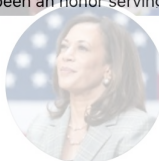
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Democrats posted more healthcare related posts on their official accounts but less on their personal accounts

Number of Posts Related to `Health` or `Healthcare` since January 1st, 2019
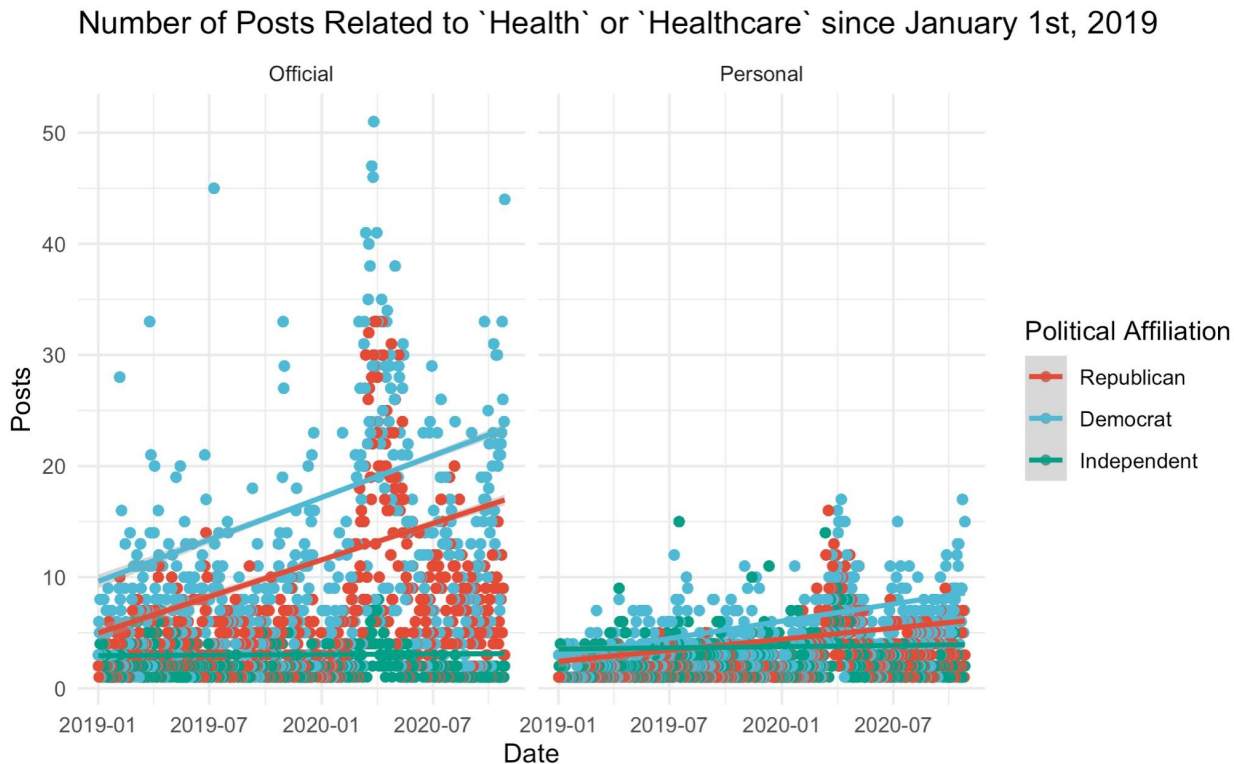
Both Democrats and Republicans posted significantly more healthcare-related posts during the pandemic (March - October 2020) compared to the same time in 2019

Distribution of Daily Posts Related to `Health` or `Healthcare` Pre- or Peri-Pandemic
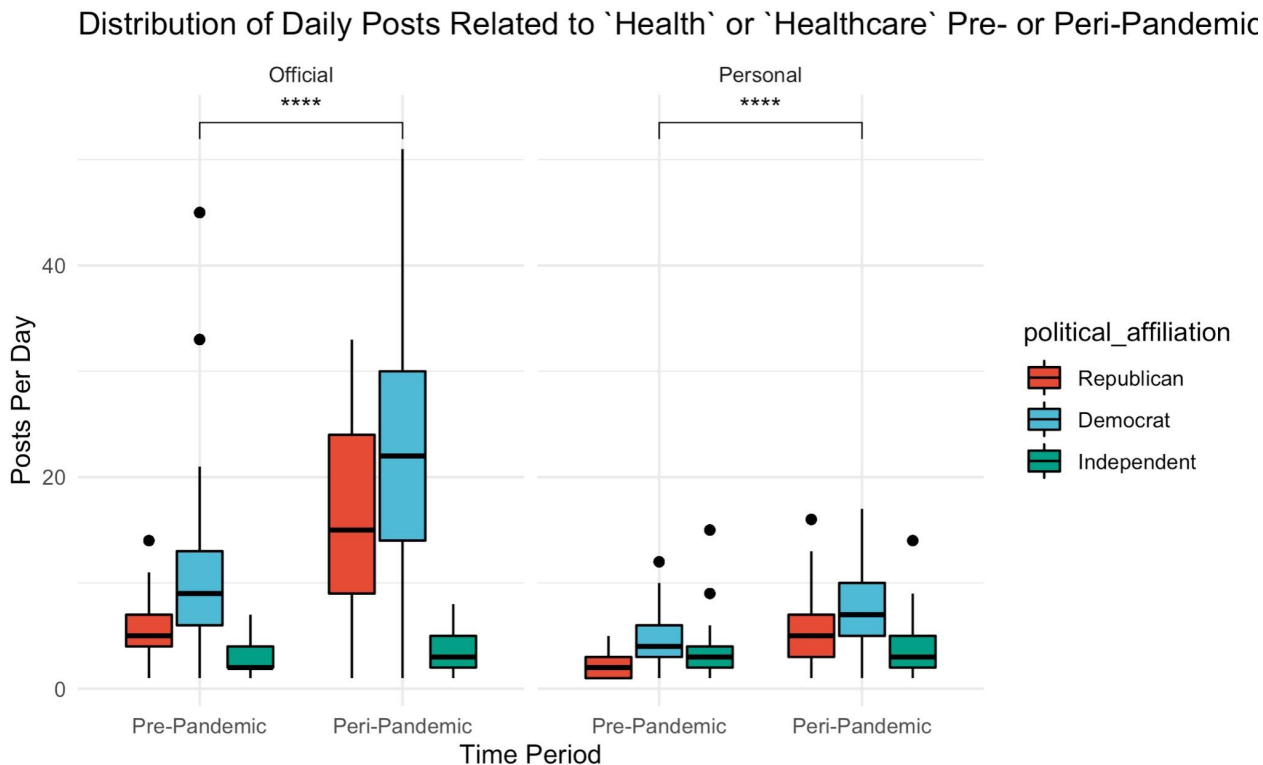
Democrats had significantly fewer "positive post interactions" compared to Republicans on both account types
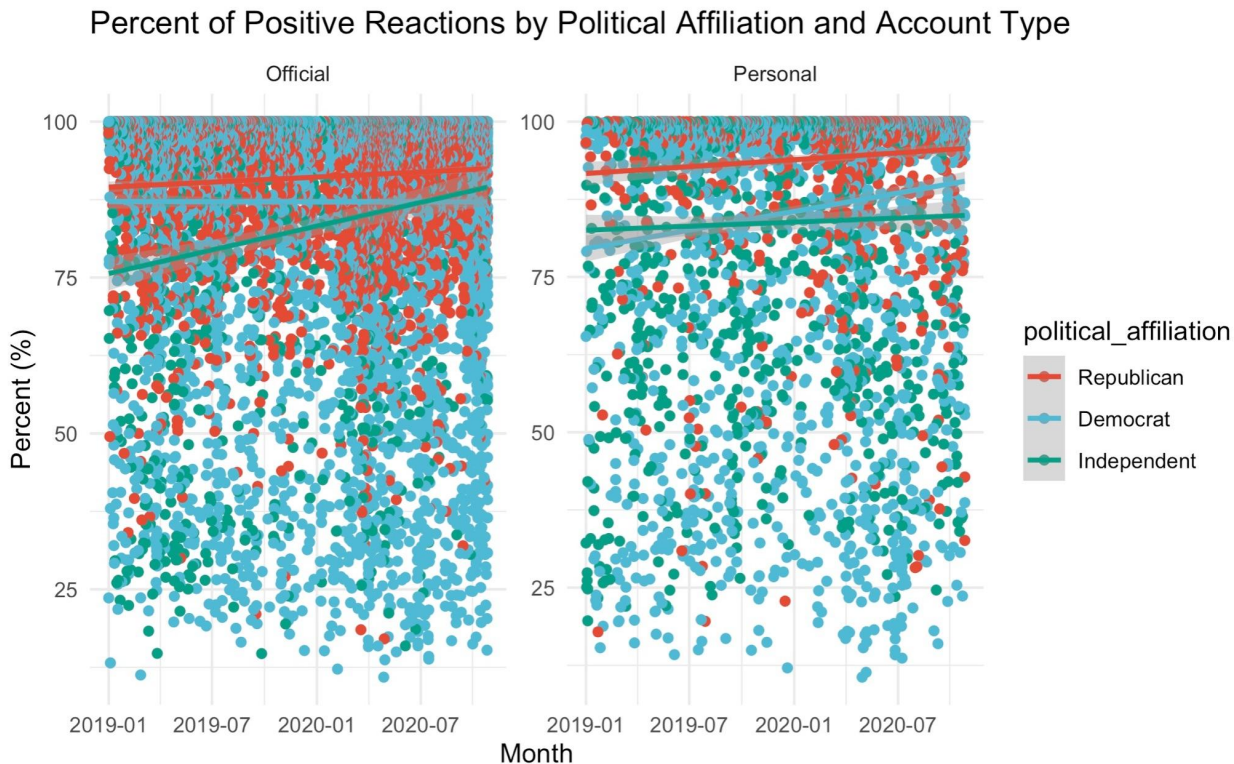
Percent of Positive Reactions by Political Affiliation and Account Type

There were distinct variations by political party and time period in select key summary measures derived from the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Summary Variables

There were distinct variations by political party and time period in select key summary measures derived from the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program
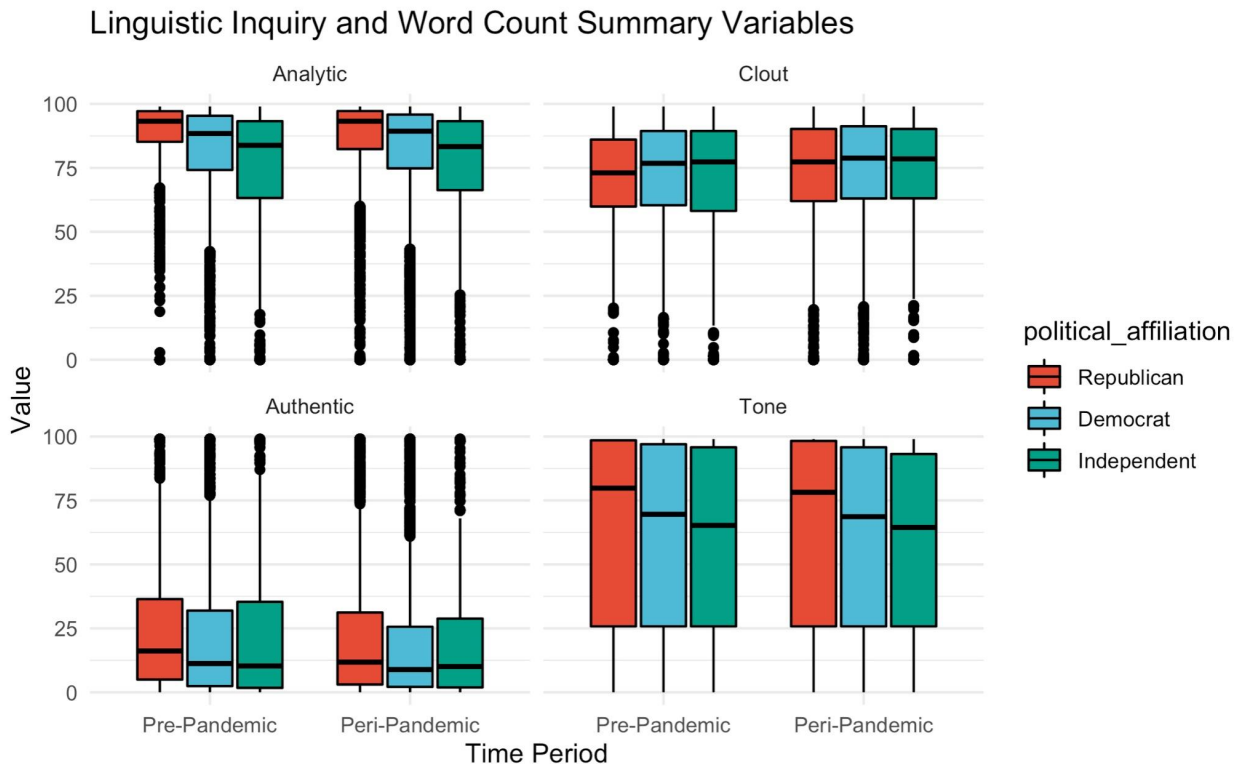
Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Summary Variables
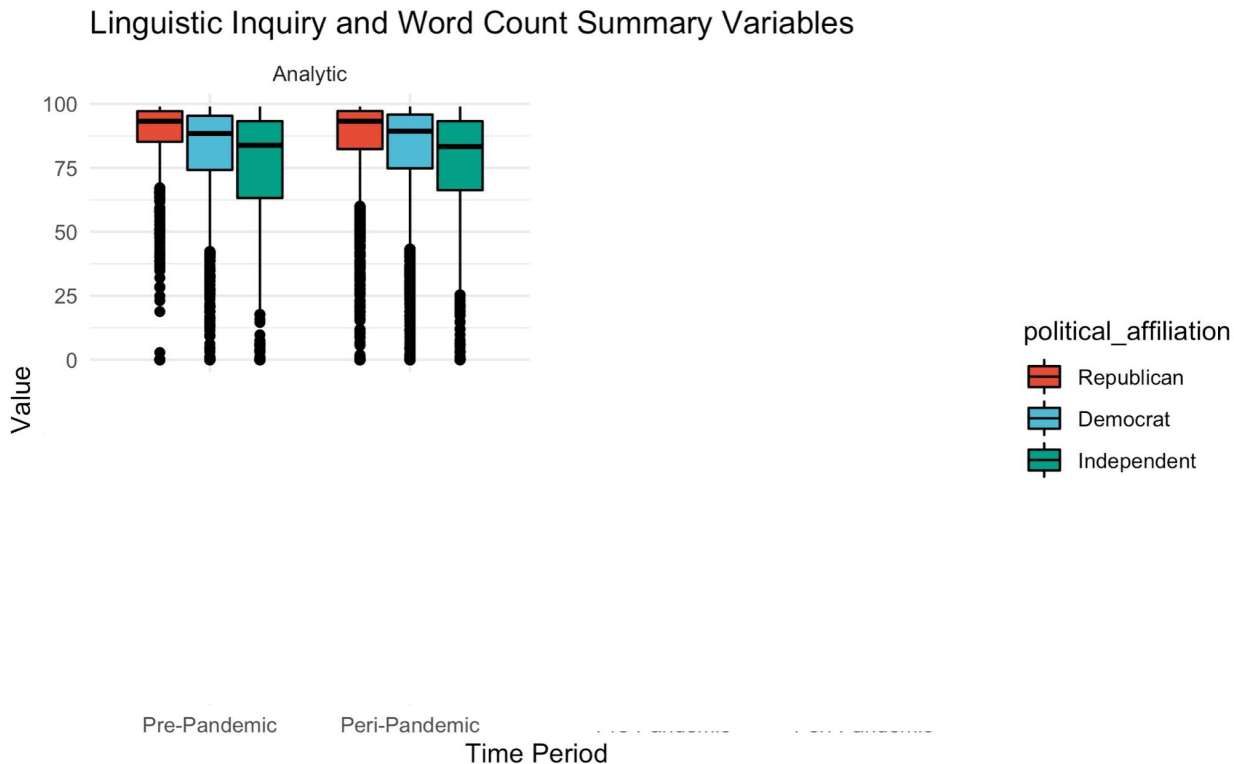
Both parties had more terms related to "anticipation" during the pandemic compared to prior, but other emotions varied by party.
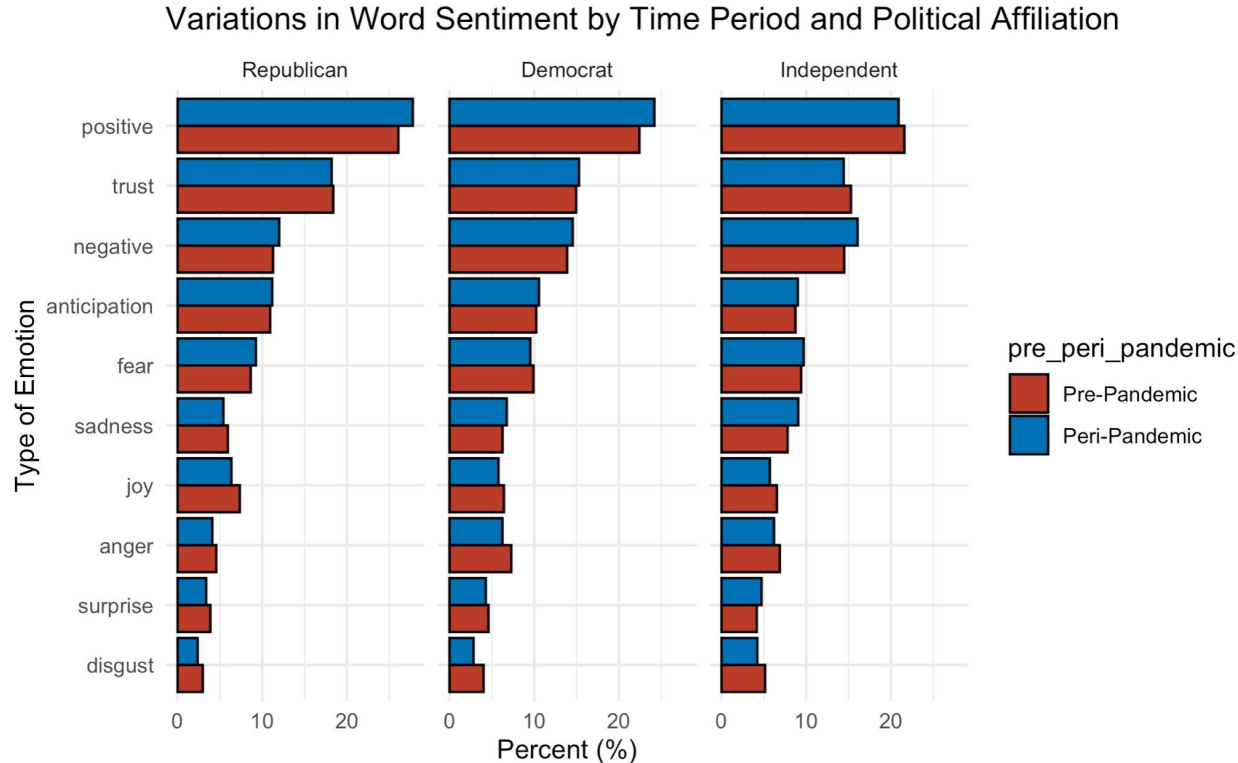

Variations in Word Sentiment by Time Period and Political Affiliation

Discussion

- As people increasingly seek information online, access and exposure to more sources of conflicting information and political infighting has also increased.

- Since public engagement is a qualitative feeling that is inherently difficult to measure, the number and variety of interactions with the post by other Facebook users was used as an empirical measure for public engagement.

- Preliminary study suggests that elected officials have changed the frequency, content, and tone of their healthcare messaging since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - Sentiment analysis suggests that there were significant pre- and peri-pandemic differences in how both Republicans and Democrats discussed health and healthcare ($p < 0.01$).

- During the pandemic, more words in Republican posts had a connotation of **anticipation** (11.2% vs. 10.9%) and **fear** (9.25% vs. 8.64%) compared to pre-pandemic. In contrast, more words in Democrat posts during the pandemic contained a connotation of **anticipation** (10.6% vs. 10.2%), **sadness** (6.76% vs. 6.26%), and **trust** (15.3% vs. 15.0%).

Discussion

- Analysis in progress for this paper will expand the time period of interest back to 2008 in order to compare messaging during two administrations.
  - This will also expand the set of elected officials whose pages are analyzed, including members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

- Additionally, extension of the study time period will allow for comparative analysis with past outbreaks and epidemics for healthcare policy response, including the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic and the 2015-2016 Zika epidemic, among others.

- Preliminary results indicate that topic modelling methodologies should be employed to expand beyond the sentiment and content analysis and provide relevant context in regards to healthcare policy in general, the Affordable Care Act, and the Supreme Court of the United States.

- Given the limited number of Independent elected officials, future work will also combine Independent officials into either the Democratic or Republican parties depending on their voting history.

- Other limitations of these methodologies will be explored in the full-length research article.

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Divya Ramjee, MS[2]
Jessica Malaty Rivera, MS[3]

[1] cpollack.gr@dartmouth.edu

[2] dr1208a@student.american.edu

[3] jessica.malatyrivera@covidtracking.com