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Keywords: political ideology, polarization, identity development, microaggressions, mask-wearing.

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study aimed to examine college students (N = 237) perceptions of mask-wearing related to political ideology and the potential for microaggressions to arise due to these perceptions. Data were collected using an online survey through Qualtrics. Analyses revealed that conservative-leaning participants reported significantly higher instances of aggression toward people not wearing masks (M = 3.52, SD = 1.28) than those leaning liberal (M = 2.53, SD = 1.39), t (151) = 3.19, p < .001). Interestingly, no significant mean difference was found between conservatives and liberals regarding micro-aggressions toward mask and mask-less behavior. Finally, those leaning liberal are statistically more likely to believe that the reason that people do not wear face masks is that they do not care about others (M = 2.30, SD = 1.30, t(149) = 3.90, p < .001). Conclusions for why political ideologies affect perceptions of mask-wearing and potential microaggressions are provided.

Keywords: political ideology, polarization, identity development, microaggressions, mask-wearing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, and the first case of asymptomatic transmission was reported in Germany. The pandemic created a heightened sense of worry and safety behaviors. Following this, the Centers for Disease Control issued a recommendation that cloth masks be worn to combat spreading the disease and allow states to individually create mandates (Wang et al., 2020). Despite this, then President Trump called it the "Chinese virus," associating the coronavirus and China, fueling racist beliefs across social media, and influencing political and social perceptions (Xu & Liu, 2020). Additionally, the face mask and mandates became focal points of political polarization (Wang et al., 2020). We seek to investigate how and what perceptions people make about the usage of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this relates to the perception of political parties.

Political parties are among the most central elements of American politics, often taking up more space in mainstream media and dialogue than political figures themselves. The two-party system serves as the basis for political identification. Over the years, they have changed in composition, name, dynamic, demographic, purpose, and, most central to our research, in the degree of polarization. The liberal-conservative spectrum of conflict as well as the ideological divergence of parties has further polarized the binary of political parties in the United States and has led to increasing assumptions, microaggressi ons, and negative partisanship.

A political ideology is a collection of ideas, beliefs, values, and opinions that guides policy-making efforts to explain what transpires within a political community (Freeden, 2001). Dating back to the beginnings of American democracy, political influence and are influenced by groups of people arranged around common values. These groups, while made up of individuals, have become increasingly generalized as party opposition has grown. Political parties have centralized ideas of economic ideology and, more recently, cultural issues. The latter has seen even deeper division along party lines (Carmines et. al, 2016). Issues that center around the role of government in enforcing and maintaining behavior—moral, social, and economic—lie at the core of the party divide, and divisions within the parties

themselves. Though a two-party system generalizes the camps as having rigid ideological frameworks, parties are made of diverse individuals who are never in complete agreement, leading to the surge of subdivisions, coalitions, and third-party groups. Cultural issues surrounding race, religion, and gender, among others, have been integral factors in the rise of third-party coalitions and efforts of bipartisanship (Carmines et al, 2016).

1.1 Political Polarization

Polarization between political parties reached an antithesis in 2014 with those more politically engaged leaning farther left, or right, than center (Pew Research Center, 2014). This divide increased following the 2016 election and the presidency of Donald Trump (Pew Research Center, 2017). While not confined to contemporary politics, the Trump era propelled the rise of negative partisanship: voting primarily based on hostility toward the other party and its constituents (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). This suggests a binary not only rooted in ideological difference but in contention toward the other, as well as the people representing the other.

Disagreements of ideology have extended into contempt for the people comprising that party. Parts of the Republican party have driven right of center, leading many political scientists as well as the media to deem this a sort of 'party of Trump' within a fractured party. Rather than diversifying the GOP, Trump created a base within the Republican party, moving further in line with his political ideology (Galvin, 2020). Among the conservative voter base, Trump's ideology was particularly attractive to more conservative constituents (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019).

Further, Trump's association with the coronavirus and China (calling it the "Chinese virus") furthered racist beliefs across social media and influenced political and social perceptions (Xu and Liu, 2020). The platform of social and news media spread associations of the coronavirus and the country of China, generalized to much of Asia and the Pacific islands. These correlations and accusations spread across social media, further delineating party lines on issues of racism and culture. This has proved increasingly harmful, as seen in the rise of hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islanders (Tessler et. al, 2020).

Recent literature in biological psychology suggests neural bases behind ingroup/outgroup tendencies, including unconscious responses toward political ideology, political language, and faces of political candidates; the ability to take another's perspective lies among the greatest obstacles (Falk et al, 2012). This points to ideological and biological bases for the polarization that manifest into potential micro-aggressive behaviors toward the opposing party.

1.2 Micro-Oggressions

Broadly, there has been a shift from more apparent and obvious discrimination to hidden or more subtle forms such as microaggressions. Microaggressions are often categorized as both intentional and unintentional slight insults which potentially create hostility (Sue et al., 2010). Often, microaggressions are targeted toward marginalized communities such as the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, and women, which have the potential to create disparities in healthcare, employment, and education (Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggressions take place in a variety of forms including microassult, microinsults, and microinvalidation. Microassaults refer to both explicit verbal and nonverbal attacks towards another individual (Sue et al., 2007). Examples of microassaults include name-calling or using slurs privately and behavioral discrimination. Microinsults refer to smaller and insensitive insults, and the perpetrator may not understand its harm directly (Sue et al., 2007) Often, microinsults target one's heritage or culture and may appear as questioning one's successes based on a community, they are a part of. Microinvalidations refer to negating one's thoughts or experiences because someone from a different group did not face the same experience (Sue et al., 2007). For instance, questioning whether someone received a job offer solely

because of their race would be considered microinvalidation.

As microaggressions are less direct forms of discrimination, perpetrators often do not recognize them as harmful. For instance, the White Americans Complex suggests that good, moral human beings cannot be racist, and thus their microaggressions are not hurtful (Sue et al., 2010). This complex thus causes other dilemmas when defining and preventing microaggressions including intentionality and bias. One such dilemma includes the perception of a microaggression as harmful may differ from different social groups. For instance, a comment which may seem unharmful to someone of one identity may be offensive to another group. Due to the discrepancy in how harmful a microaggression may seem, many are told to look past it despite its potentially detrimental effects.

As stated earlier, during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, former President Trump heavily associated the coronavirus with its place of discovery in Wuhan, China, and used Racist rhetoric when describing the virus (Shang et al, 2021). For instance, he referred to COVID-19 as "The Chinese Virus," and many others have commonly referred to it as "The Kung Flu." As a result, Asian Americans have faced an increase in overt and subtle forms of discrimination. Thus far in the pandemic, Asian American healthcare workers reported facing an increase in microaggressions including patients asking for different doctors, patients questioning their health, or patients asking questions based on common stereotypes (Shang et al., 2021). A self-reflective essay presented by Choi (2020), provided further insight into the potential for microaggressions to arise when a particular ethnicity is threatened (Burson & Godfrey, 2018). This type of escalation was evidenced in the United States and throughout the world.

Mask Wearing, Polarization, and Micro-aggressions As the pandemic continues to affect daily living, the reasons for wearing a mask have increasingly become politicized both for and against, increasing polarization and the potential for micro-aggressive behavior to occur. Unlike Asian countries in which mask-wearing is typical social etiquette when ill (Burgess & Horii, 2021), before COVID-19, wearing a mask was not a regular practice in the United States. In fact, at the onset, wearing a mask frightened people and contradictory messages from the CDC and the White House confused the issue further (Kemmelmeir & Jami, 2021). Some felt guilty wearing a mask due to sparse supplies while others worried wearing a mask might further fuel negative stereotypes (Choi, 2018). As death tolls continued to climb and hospitalizations increased, Americans were encouraged to wear a mask to protect themselves, their loved ones, and those within their greater communities.

Liberals tend to view the pandemic as a public threat to health with wearing a mask indicative of social responsibility to oneself, others, and those who are tirelessly working in the healthcare fields. For example, a study by Bruine de Bruin, Shaw, and Goldman (2020), indicated that Democrats were almost twice as likely to wear a mask. When making a health-related decision, those who perceive a situation as riskier are more willing to implement protective factors and follow governmental protocols (Fischhoff, 2013).

Conversely, conservatives are questioning the experts in the medical field viewing mask-wearing as an overreach by the government (Kemmelmeir & Jami, 2021). Although both parties tend to engage in conspiratorial thinking, concerning political ideology conservatives may take a more psychological perspective (van der Linden et al., 2021). For example, the study by Nowlan and Zane (2021) found that although conservatives tend to be more sensitive when faced with risk, it depends on the agency of that threat. If the potential threat is seen as minimal, then less action is necessitated. For example, after the initial onset of COVID, conservative commentators started to refer to COVID as a conspiracy leading constituents to devalue vaccines and mask-wearing (Romer & Jamieson, 2021).

Mask-wearing has evolved into a symbolic representation of political ideology and researchers have sought to understand the

underlying factors. Milad and Bogg (2021) suggest that the politicization of the pandemic was a contributing factor. Hart et al. (2020), indicate that the newspapers and news media outlets influenced perspectives on COVID regarding the need to wear masks with certain news channels discrediting this messaging. The dilemma arises when these conflicting viewpoints surface daily such as wearing a mask when in public places such as college campuses.

1.3 College-aged Students and Mask-Wearing

On many U.S. campuses, students were compelled and eventually mandated, to wear masks and receive the COVID vaccination. Therefore, many college-aged students who returned to in-person learning wore a mask and had been vaccinated especially at those universities leaning more liberal. Most willingly complied and even if slightly or vehemently opposed to such mandates, students complied as their education was their primary goal. Another interesting component is also adherence to group expectations (citation).

As college-aged student transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood, they are less influenced by parental political ideologies and more so by socialization and policy preferences (Niemi & Jennings, 1991).

Within the phase of life where they are more likely to change their views, politically. May be more inclined to be swayed by the political beliefs of those around them. Might not have a solid understanding of where they stand, or what they believe, politically. Can be a huge influence! A recent study investigated political ideologies on college campuses and found that although most leaned more toward liberal ideology but even those leaning more conservative, tended to express more liberal-leaning social ideologies (Bailey & Williams, 2016).

1.4 Purpose

We seek to investigate how and what perceptions people make about the usage of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this relates to the perception of political parties and the potential for micro-aggressive behavior among college-aged students. This includes but is not limited to: making assumptive political identifications based on mask-wearing behavior, making ideological assumptions, generalizing behavior along political lines, and the relationship between moral and political values. We do so through a self-identified political affiliation, compared with perceptions individuals may have of others. We also seek to discover the moral and political values underlying the perception of a party, and how this relates to value judgments about mask-wearing. By gathering data about political perceptions, we seek to uncover any experienced or observed microaggressions in person or via social media. This allows for more investigation into the ways political polarization manifests itself in everyday life among college students and their respective social and familial circles, based in the southeastern United States.

This contributes to the growing literature on polarization, ingroup outgroup behavior, and particularly how the narratives of parties and their figures shape the actions of constituents.

III. METHODS

3.1 Participants

The present study included college-aged students (N = 237) from three universities within the southeastern United States. Participants included women (n = 192), men (n = 72), non-binary (n = 6), and those who preferred not to say (n = 2). The year in school included freshmen (n = 104), Sophomores (n = 100), Juniors (n = 36), and Seniors (n = 32). Ethnicity was also requested including White (43.01%), Black or African American (11.03%), American Indian or Alaska Native (.37%), Asian (34.56%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (.37%), and Other (10.66%).

Participants were also asked what their party affiliation was with those registered as Democrat (70.33%), Republican (9.89%), and Independent (19.78%). Finally, participants were also which political party they tended to lean more towards (Democrat: n = 251; Republican: n = 193).

Participants either participated voluntarily or were awarded extra credit in their psychology classes.

Table 1

Demographic Measures

Measures	Proportion
Gender	
Woman	.700
Man	.266
Non-binary	.025
Grade	
Freshmen	.363
Sophomore	.388
Junior	.127
Senior	.122
Ethnicity	
White	.435
Asian	.354
Black or African American	.093
American Indigenous	.004
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	.004
Other not listed	.110

3.2 Instruments

Face Mask Perceptions Scale (Howard, 2020). A modified version of this original scale was used but did not include all original questions. This scale sought to understand personal perceptions of why people wear face masks. For example, one of the questions asked included, "Facemasks infringe upon freedom and independence." A 5-pt. Likert-type scale was used with the first response being, "strongly agree," and the last, "strongly disagree."

Beliefs of US Consumers (Knotek et al., 2020). This scale consisted of a series of questions about perceptions of mask-wearing. The first three questions relied on binary responses of "yes," and "no." For example, participants were asked, "Where you live, is it required for most adults to wear a mask or face covering in public spaces, such as grocery stores?" The subsequent questions focused on feelings regarding wearing masks rated on a 5-pt. Likert-type scale with varying degrees of feeling comfortable. For example, participants were asked, "When at a store, do you feel more comfortable, less comfortable, or indifferent if other shoppers are wearing masks?" The final questions were related to perceptions of mask-wearing, also on a 5-pt. Likert-type scale rated on agreeability. For example, participants were asked, "Individuals who wear a face mask do so because they are following governmental protocol?"

Using the definition of microaggressions from Sue et al. (2007), we asked questions regarding potential microaggresions and mask-wearing and perceptions of potential microaggressions due to mask-wearing on a 5-pt. Likert-type scale. An example question included, "Have you witnessed microaggressions towards people NOT wearing a mask?" Participants rated answers as, "Definitely yes," to, "Definitely not."

3.3 Procedure and Design

Before implementing the survey through Qualtrics, researchers sought and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The survey was advertised through word of mouth, convenience sampling, and email announcements. Participants were asked to give consent before beginning the survey. The study sought to better understand college students' perspectives of mask-wearing so the criteria was to currently be enrolled and attending a university.

Participants were recruited by word of mouth, convenience sampling, and email announcements. using a survey implemented on Qualtrics. The survey first asked demographic questions, followed by a series of self-report questions

relating to political ideology. Participants then rated a series of statements relating to their mask-wearing behaviors and beliefs and their experiences witnessing microaggressions toward mask-wearing behaviors. Following the survey, participants were given a debriefing to ensure they understood the confidentiality of the study and to ensure the contents of the study were not shared with other potential participants. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

IV. RESULTS

This causal-comparative exploratory study used simple t-test analyses in addition to studying correlations between variables. All questions were worded in such a way as to avoid bias, with certain items reverse-coded.

4.1 Political Party Registration and Political Ideology

Data analyses revealed there is a significant correlation between political party registration and political ideology ($r(237) = .748$, $p < .001$, $r2 = .560$).

4.2 Political Ideology and Face Mask Wearing

There was a significant mean difference between political ideology leaning on face mask wearing. Wearing face masks in public spaces was significantly greater in those leaning liberal ($M = .87$, $SD = .34$) than those leaning conservative ($M = .57$, $SD = .51$), $t(151) = -3.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.47, -.14]. Those leaning liberal ($M = 4.85$, $SD = .52$) had higher beliefs in the effectiveness of masks in reducing the spread of coronavirus than those leaning conservative ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.36$) $t(151) = -6.10$, $p < .001$, , 95% CI [-1.29, -.66]. yet no significant mean difference in beliefs about social attention to wearing mask was found between the two.

Table 2

Political Party and Ideology

Measure	Proportion
Political Party Registration	
Democrat	.494
Independent	.118
Republican	.068
Did not report	.321
Political Ideology Leaning	
Leaning Liberal	.549
Leaning Conservative	.097
Did not report	.354

4.3 Microaggresions and Mask Wearing

There was a significant mean difference in beliefs about microaggressions and attitudes against those not wearing masks and attitudes towards others among conservative and liberal-leaning individuals: those leaning conservative ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.28$) reported higher beliefs about microaggressions toward not wearing a mask than those leaning liberal ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(151) = 3.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.38, 1.60].

Those leaning liberal ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.24$) are statistically more likely to believe that people do not wear face masks because they do not care about others than those leaning conservative ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(149) = -3.90$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.66, -.54]. Finally, those leaning more conservative ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.411$) are statistically more likely to believe that wearing a mask infringes on freedom and independence than those leaning liberal ($M = 1.55$, $SD = .916$), $t(151) = 6.789$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.09, 1.99].

Table 3

Political Party and Perceptions of Mask Wearing

Variables	Leaning Democrat		Leaning Republican				Confidence Intervals	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Wearing a Mask	.87	.34	.57	.51	-3.65	$p < .001$	-.47	-.14
Effectiveness of Masks	4.85	.52	3.87	1.36	-6.10	$p < .001$	-1.29	-.66
Aggressive Behavior: No Mask	2.53	1.39	3.52	1.28	3.19	$p < .001$	.38	1.60
Caring with Mask Wearing	3.41	1.24	2.30	1.30	-3.90	$p < .001$	-1.66	-.54
Freedom and Independence	1.55	.92	3.09	1.41	6.79	$p < .001$	1.09	1.99

V. DISCUSSION

This study sought to better understand how political ideology influences perceptions of mask-wearing. Analysis indicated that those individuals who lean more liberal are more prone to wearing a mask, believe in the effectiveness of mask-wearing to reduce the spread of the virus, and that mask-wearing shows you care. There was also a significant difference in how each political ideology viewed microaggressions. Given the current divisive political climate, findings help us better understand the differences in mask-wearing perceptions which could lead to potential difficulties or micro-aggressive behavior specific to college-aged students.

The research indicated that those leaning more liberal tended to have a more proactive view with regard to mask-wearing. Liu (2021) and Timpka et al. (2021) state this may be due to the liberal ideology that individuals have a social responsibility to adhere to government guidelines (e.g., mask-wearing) to protect the greater community. This is more in alignment with a collectivist type of perception. Although Kim et al. (2016) studied the increase in perceived vulnerability due to higher collectivism with Ebola and xenophobia, results may also be indicative of behaviors with regard to the latest pandemic.

The notion of competence may also factor into the desire to wear a face mask. For example, Bellezza et al. (2014) found that those who tended to wear face masks were perceived as having greater competence than those who chose not to. This relates to the idea that those who wear face masks, specifically during the time of COVID-19, are seen as being responsible and caring of others (Vazquez et al., 2020). This is further validated when those in authority, or those deemed as influencers, display such behaviors as mask wearing. This is potentially one reason for the declining poll numbers of former President Trump after he refuses to wear a mask. He was potentially seen as less competent. Those that adhere to these higher moral standards to protect the greater community are therefore perceived as being more competent citizens.

Conversely, individuals who tend to have a lower level of trust or need to follow those in authority or are influencers, tend to perceive that the government is not trustworthy and therefore less likely to practice social distancing rules (Xiao, 2021). This may be due to a more individualistic perception which tends to limit adherence to social-distancing practices (Biddlestone et al., 2020) even if better for the greater community.

This perception could also stem from the flip-flopping information provided by the CDC. At first, they minimized mask-wearing due to the effectiveness being inconclusive. In addition, due to the hoarding of masks and price gouging, the CDC stressed the need to save masks for healthcare workers and promoted the voluntary use of cloth masks or face coverings (Batova, 2021). Additionally, disagreements among doctors, scientists, and political authority figures caused those individuals leaning more conservative to question the gravity of COVID-19 and view it as similar to the flu virus, reducing the adherence to mask-wearing (Rothwell & Desai, 2020). Furthermore, more conservative-leaning news and social media outlets depicted the act of mask-wearing to suggest the government now owns you (Young et al., 2022).

Batova (2021) suggests that this may have led to psychological reactance meaning, a threat to behavioral freedom (Brehm, 1989), or one's

freedom of choice. In addition to political figures touting such threats, this might also explain why those leaning more conservative reported mask-wearing to be an infringement on their freedom and civil liberties. Research indicates those with higher psychological reactance, will resist restrictions more so than those with lower psychological reactance (i.e., those leaning more liberal) (Taylor & Asmundson, 2022). This can also, potentially, lead to microaggressions when feeling threatened. This may explain why those leaning more conservative reported higher levels of potential microaggressions concerning mask-wearing.

While there is no direct evidence to support the underlying cause of these findings, it is useful to think about college students' understanding of the political influence on public health concerns through the lens of groupthink in the context of a college environment. Precursors for such an occurrence on a college campus can include groups working cohesively, group isolation, directive leadership, high stress, and poor decision-making procedures (Esser, 1998; Park, 1990). Some of the symptoms include the illusion of invulnerability, unquestioned belief in the group's morality, rationalization, stereotyping view of the opponent, conformity to pressure, self-censorship, the illusion of unanimity, and mind guards (Richardson, 1994). This potential is especially likely to occur when students establish highly cohesive groups in which members all align with the group's perspective foregoing any independent critical thinking to maintain solidarity (Janis, 1973).

In looking at the beliefs and perceptions about the COVID-19 pandemic amongst college students, it is critical to consider the context in which the study takes place and the pressures of a college environment that these participants may face. Most college students are between the ages of 18-24, a developmental stage where they are most likely to begin to construct their own social, political, and personal values striving for shared meaning (Lewis et al., 2005). Coupled with the diversity of ideas, people, and perspectives one is exposed to in a college system, college students are exposed to ideas that differ from parental influences (Meyers et al., 2019). This poses challenges and insights to any student but is especially complicated with the public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Groupthink essentially refers to the tendency to agree with the majority opinion or ideology of the group one finds themselves in. Questions to consider with the mode of groupthink on college campuses include how students' face mask behaviors are affected by the majority actions of those around them. Future research into public safety behaviors including but not limited to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic should consider the effects of groupthink and related social conforming on how the American student population navigates the intersections of personal, political, and public health.

As we've demonstrated, the pandemic has punctured political, social, educational, economic, and personal spaces and has challenged, or perhaps made clearer, many people's perspectives. Safety behaviors, social distancing, and face mask usage have transcended from merely a public health issue to an issue of political rights and personal freedom.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of a college student's perceptions of mask-wearing, the relationship between mask-wearing and political ideology, and the prevalence of microaggressions related to mask-wearing. While this present study begins to address these issues, there were several limitations of this study which should be further evaluated in future studies. The first limitation would be the insufficient sample size. The majority of students who took this survey were psychology undergraduates, likely at the request of their psychology professor. This sample size does not accurately describe the whole college population with varying degree programs and majors which may influence political ideology, so future studies should aim to have a more comprehensive sample. Additionally, due to the novelty of the pandemic, and the changing CDC recommendations, the subject's opinions may

likely have changed based on those recommendations. A longitudinal study looking at the changing perceptions of mask-wearing could be a potential future step to deflect biases and changing opinions. Additionally, a new instrument reflecting the changes in the COVID-19 pandemic should be developed to reign more accurate results. If, as the present study suggests, there is political influence on mask-wearing, a public health initiative, then there is a need for future research on other public health crises including vaccinations, gun violence, and the politicization of science. Influence of Political Ideology on Perceptions of Mask Wearing .

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