

iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Daniel Zane on Getting Conservatives and Liberals to Agree on the COVID-19 Threat

Recorded Nov. 9, 2020. Listen to it [here](#).

- ANNOUNCER: 00:00 [music] This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
- JACK CROFT: 00:14 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the iLLUminate podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is November 9th, 2020. And we're talking with Daniel Zane about his research on the deep partisan divide over how Americans think about and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Zane is the co-author of [Getting Conservatives and Liberals to Agree on the COVID-19 Threat](#), which has been accepted for publication by the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research. Dr. Zane is an assistant professor of marketing who studies consumer behavior. His research interests include inference making, self-perceptions, and ethical decision-making. Thanks for joining us today, Dr. Zane.
- DANIEL ZANE: 01:02 Thanks, Jack, for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. And I'm excited to talk about this.
- CROFT: 01:07 Yeah. Obviously, this is a timely topic. We've just come through a very contentious, bitterly partisan, and close presidential election, in which the COVID-19 pandemic was a central issue. We now have a new President-elect in Joe Biden, who just today announced the formation of his coronavirus working group that will develop his administration's response plan to the pandemic. And also in the news today was that Pfizer announced that its early results from its clinical trials for its vaccine found it to be more than 90% effective in preventing the coronavirus disease. So the study you co-authored was conducted in May. And before we dive into the details of your findings, I'm just wondering what, if anything, the election results tell us about how conservatives and liberals view the pandemic threat.
- ZANE: 02:15 Yeah. So I think this is a really interesting time that you and I get to talk, just a few days after this day-long election process drew out with now President-elect Joe Biden presumably being the one headed to the White House in January. So anyway, first let me just give a quick shout out to my co-author Luke Nowlan, who is a researcher at KU Leuven in Belgium. So with this research that was sort of fast-paced and timely, as you mentioned, I couldn't have done it without him. So I just wanted to give him a shout out. But at the heart of our research, Jack, yeah, we're looking at this difference in response to the coronavirus between liberals and conservatives. And then really how we might get the two ideologies to align more in their response. And so, as you mentioned, we did conduct our studies we'll be talking about today back in May, again before the campaign and the election were really in the forefront at all. And so the first thing I'll say is that we've seen this divide across ideologies on the issue of the pandemic from the very beginning. And actually, there's research that's shown that political ideology indeed seems to be the biggest predictor of behavior during the pandemic above and beyond really any other factors you could think of.
- ZANE: 03:41 So I think the campaigning and the election, they really just sort of serve as this formal setting that highly, maybe intensified these differences, again, then contributing to this sort of contentious and partisan election that you described. And then I think, in terms of the results, with Joe Biden presumably being in the White House in January, we can also imagine, and we sort of already have early hints, that

the federal response to this virus is going to intensify come January when he's inaugurated. So at that time, I think it'll be really interesting to see especially how conservatives respond, since they, of course, differ from Biden's ideological stance. So will they support and help and advance any new measures put into place? Would they expect another shutdown of the economy if it came to that? And without getting into too many details of our research yet, we really do try to provide an actionable suggestion that policymakers and perhaps even his administration could consider in order to get maybe more support from conservatives who might be opposed to any of the new measures that he's putting into place.

CROFT: 04:57

And another kind of general broader question before we get into the details is one that I think-- frankly, this is probably one certainly that those on the liberal side would probably be more prone to be asking and have been asking, but it's that the COVID-19 pandemic is the worst public health crisis our country has seen in a century. And at this point, as of today, we've topped 10 million Americans infected with the disease and more than 235,000 dead across our nation. And the virus, at this time, is surging to new highs across the country, as we head into winter. Why aren't those staggering numbers alone enough to convince everyone of the perilous threat the pandemic poses?

ZANE: 05:54

Yes. So those numbers are truly staggering at this point. I agree. And so what I can say is that, as someone with a psychology background, the short answer is there are many different psychological factors that come into play here. So just to quickly name a few, we simply know that people become desensitized to things over time. And at this point, especially with the drop in media coverage about the pandemic, per se, as the election was really at the forefront of our media, I think people just simply don't take as much time to really reflect on it. It's not as sort of this heightened feeling as it was early on back in May when I was conducting my studies. So I think that's one part of it. We also know people have very different perceptions of numbers and statistics. So there's an incredible amount of research on perceptions of numbers. So to some, 10 million infections seems like an incredible amount. To other people, I think 10 million, especially if you take it as a percentage of an entire population, maybe doesn't seem as high. This especially might go for those death count numbers, which are in the hundreds of thousands, which a lot of people would say is staggering. But again, if you take it as a percentage, it's sort of easy to see these numbers in different ways. But what I'll say is that our current research, so my co-author Luke and I, we show that it goes beyond how people interpret the consequences of the virus. And it actually also largely depends on how people perceive the virus itself. So what we're going to show is that the psychological foundations of liberals and conservatives, they differ from another in a lot of ways. They actually determine when people conclude that something is threatening. And then we can use our understanding of the psychological differences across these ideologies to actually go and change people's beliefs about how much of a threat the virus is. So that's sort of a jumping-off point of our research here.

CROFT: 08:04

Yeah. And I think that gets us to probably the key first point, which is this idea of what's known as agency and its role in how people are responding, not just to the pandemic, but across the ideological divide. So let's start out, if you could just explain quickly what agency is, and what the scientific literature tells us about how it comes into play in the psychology of political ideology.

ZANE: 08:35

Yes. So agency simply refers to the ability to control one's own actions and behaviors. So think about a sports agent, right? They control the trades of a player they represent. And so it's very much the same. Like you and I, Jack, we have a lot of agency as adult human beings, right? We control our own actions and behaviors. Maybe we could say human babies have less agency. They're not in control of all of their actions and outcomes to as great of a degree. And so you can also think about it along the lines of free will. So you could sort of equate high agency to this notion of free will or having the power to make our own choices and create our own outcomes. So that sort of is what we mean by agency. So we'll sort of treat it as low versus high. And decades of research around the psychology of political ideology, it shows that conservatives tend to see free will as the primary driver of outcomes in life, whereas liberals are more accepting of the idea that these more deterministic factors, so things like randomness, chance alone, play into people's life outcomes. So I think what that really means is that, compared to liberals, conservatives tend to attribute outcomes to these purposeful actions. Liberals are more okay saying that uncontrollable forces might have contributed. And so given that, I think where it gets interesting is with things like the coronavirus. So do people perceive the virus itself to have high agency, to be in control of its thoughts and actions and behaviors? Or do people perceive it to sort of spread by randomness and chance alone? And then really I think where it gets interesting, and we can get into this, is how does a person's belief about whether this virus has high agency or not affect them, specifically based on whether they are a conservative or a liberal? And that's really what we're trying to look at in our work here.

CROFT: 10:44

Yeah. So let's talk about-- first, let's talk. What are some examples of threats that have agency?

ZANE: 10:56

So a list here that I've come up with, things like terrorists, thieves, aggressive animals, a criminal. And so I think the common theme here, right, is a lot of them are human. Yes. And I think that's a big element that maybe drives the agency. Humans are in control. Living things like animals, so yes, I think living things. But the virus itself is a living thing. And I don't know that people see it — and actually, we document that people don't, on average, see it — as having as much agency as, say, a terrorist. And then if you want to contrast it to some low agency threats, things like severe weather events. An ocean rip current is threatening, right, an asteroid. But I think it's easy to say, "Well, an asteroid isn't in control of its own actions and behaviors." It's sort of gravity and other statistical things that are beyond my knowledge that are dictating its path. Right?

CROFT: 11:54

Right. All right. Well, let's start getting down into some of the nitty-gritty here then. Your research paper's based on two online studies that you and your co-author conducted in May. Tell us a little about how those studies were conducted, what they looked at, and what the results suggest about the differences between the ways conservatives and liberals view the pandemic.

ZANE: 12:21

Yeah. So okay. I'll quickly back up for just a second to sort of preface these studies. I'll just say that I think the pandemic is interesting because, going back to this notion of high versus low agency threats, I think there's a lot of things in play that people could attribute negative consequences that they're experiencing to. Or in other words, there is a lot of things that people could blame for any bad things occurring in our lives right now, right? So yes, you could blame the virus itself. But you could also

blame policymakers for shutting down the economy, which has led to a lot of financial hardship. You could blame media organizations. You could blame other people for their actions during this time. So in that, the point I'm trying to make is that there's definitely entities involved that have high agency, right, policymakers, other human beings. The coronavirus, it seems as though people's beliefs about how much agency that has varied. But on average, it seems that the virus itself is seen to have lower agency than some of these other human entities. And so what that suggested to us was that conservatives might be more likely to blame the high agency entities, like policymakers and other people, instead of the virus itself, which again is seen to, on average, have lower agency. And so we predicted that, relative to liberals, that would make these conservatives see the virus to be less of a threat. Whereas on the other hand, liberals, because they're okay with this notion of randomness, would be willing to acknowledge the virus as threatening, even if they didn't perceive it to have agency.

ZANE: 14:11

So that as sort of our premise in study one, what we simply did was, we just surveyed a group of American citizens online. And we simply asked them to report their ideology, and specifically, their social ideology. So are you socially liberal or socially conservative? On a scale measure, so it wasn't one or the other, but sort of capturing degree of that, as well. We then asked them to simply report how much agency they believe the virus has. And then we went on to ask them, "Okay. How much of a likelihood do you think there is of a second wave of the pandemic occurring?" And remember, this study was conducted way back in May. "How threatening do you think a second wave would be if it occurred? And also what are your planned in-person consumption activities moving forward?" And so what we saw in this survey was that, if you look at people that we classify as liberals, regardless of whether they perceived this virus itself to have higher or lower agency, they were equally threatened by it. They said, "You know what? I think a second wave is likely. It could be a bad thing. I'm not going to go out and do this in-person consumption so much." Whereas conservatives, it was interesting. So conservatives who perceived the virus to have lower agency — and this seemed to be sort of the majority of them — they perceived the virus to be less threatening. So when they didn't believe this virus would control its own actions and behaviors, they said, "I don't know that it's going to be as likely we'll see a second wave." Or that the second wave, if it was to occur, would be as threatening. However, there were conservatives who perceived that virus itself to have high agency. And there, among that group of conservatives, we see that they actually do have this increased threat or feeling of threat towards the virus that's actually more in line with liberals. That was some early evidence that this notion of how much agency we believe a threat has, and specifically when conservatives believe the threat has high agency, it makes them feel more threatened by that thing.

ZANE: 16:37

So that was study one, again, just this survey. But where I think it gets really interesting is what we did in study two, where we then took that knowledge and tried to devise an intervention to see if we could actually move people on how threatened they feel by that virus. So what we did in that study, we took an experimental approach. And so we randomly assigned people to see one of two descriptions of the virus. So some people read this description of the virus that painted it to have really high agency. So this description, it described the virus as "seeking to infect any human it comes in contact with," saying other things like, "the virus has a strong motive to use humans as a means to spread." So using this language that almost allows you to

build this picture of this thing controlling its actions, being this palpable enemy to us humans, right? And then in the other condition, so the other half of participants we recruited for this study, they instead served as the control condition. And they saw a description of the virus that instead didn't suggest high agency. And it used terminology that is probably more common overall to what we've been seeing in the media. So things like, "the coronavirus can affect any human it comes in contact with. It spreads as more humans contract it." So not nearly as much painting this picture of this force in control of its own behaviors.

ZANE: 18:22

And then what we looked at was, okay, depending on what condition you were in, and depending on your political ideology, do we see anything interesting? So in that control condition, where they saw sort of this more normal language, not promoting high agency, conservatives were less threatened by the virus than liberals, which we would predict. And conservatives were actually more likely to say that society was overreacting. So again, when the virus wasn't painted to have high agency, conservatives seemed to feel less threatened by it. Presumably, because they're placing more blame on these other things like policymakers, other human beings. But interestingly, in that high agency conditions, so in that condition where the coronavirus was painted to have this strong motive, be this palpable enemy, conservatives actually came to align with liberals in how much of a threat they perceived that virus to be. And they actually came to conclude-- so conservatives came to conclude that society was no longer overreacting relative to liberals. So there is no longer one ideology over the other saying that we're overreacting here. So we do see this successful intervention based on painting the virus to have high agency, leading conservatives to become more threatened by it, which I think is pretty cool.

CROFT: 19:47

Right. And thank you for that explanation. Because it does seem to explain some of what we've seen. One of the main issues, of course, has been this divide over wearing face masks. And a lot of people ask, "Well, why don't they just wear a mask?" Well, if you think it's an overreaction, and that the virus doesn't pose a threat, then wearing a mask-- or not wearing a mask does not seem an unreasonable response from that point of view. Correct?

ZANE: 20:21

Correct. And so you have people arguing about, are individuals being irrational or not? But if you sort of accept rationality as being based on each person's internal framework, then I'd agree that people-- maybe perhaps conservatives not wearing masks if they don't perceive the virus to be that much of a threat, can we argue that they're being irrational? Perhaps not. The notion of wearing a mask, I think is a much more complex issue, as well. It's become this politicized symbol, which is sort of outside of my expertise. But my research at least would suggest that you maybe could get more conservatives to wear masks if you paint the virus to have high agency. So I've started thinking, "Is there any way that we could actually get people, when they go to stores, walking around, picturing these particles actually floating in the air and trying to attack them, and then seeing the mask as this physical barrier, which it is, right?" But this notion of making it more observable in some way, I think would give it higher agency.

CROFT: 21:31

All right. Just last week, and this really struck me when I read it in a newspaper article, Mike DeWine, who's the Republican governor of Ohio, said after the election last weekend, before the election was called, and this is an exact quote. "This virus doesn't care if we voted for Donald Trump. Doesn't care if we voted for Joe Biden. It's

coming after all of us." Now, is that the kind of messaging that your research suggests could resonate with conservatives?

ZANE: 22:09

Yeah. I think so. So that's really interesting. I think, though, the language, if I'm remembering correctly, he said the virus deciding that it doesn't care who we voted for. So to me that sort of suggests, right, this virus, it has the control to make this decision of, "I'm going to infect anybody. I don't care who you voted for, or what you look like etc." And then, yeah, this notion again of like-- it's kind of a doomsday scenario he's painting, right? It's coming after all of us. To me, I start picturing these movies, right, with this really vivid, again, palpable enemy. And so I would say that that language perhaps has the ability to make listeners believe, at least in the moment, that the virus has more agency. And so it's interesting, Jack, that you pointed out that's coming from the Republican governor of Ohio, as well. So we didn't look at this in our work, but I think it's really interesting to think about, does it matter who these messages are coming from? So you could think that a Republican governor using this message to assign high agency to the virus, might that actually sort of amplify and really get conservatives on board because it's somebody that they presumably align with in ideology using this language that my research shows can increase their threat perception towards the virus. And so it's interesting to think about, does the source of this message also matter? So a Republican policymaker versus a Democratic policymaker coming at you with this language to try to paint the virus as this palpable enemy, does that matter? And I don't have that question. But I think it's a really interesting one.

CROFT: 24:01

What your research really seems to be emphasizing most is that the way we communicate about this is really important, that regardless of whether your policy is right or wrong, if you're not communicating it in a way that's most beneficial to all people, then it's not going to be as effective as it could be. So I'm wondering what-- and we now have President-Elect Biden's working group that's going to be developing the pandemic response treading over some of these very controversial topics we've talked about, like wearing masks, whatever. I mean, what are some of the lessons from your research, do you think, that political leaders, public health officials, and policymakers may want to consider to alter the way people perceive the threat posed by the coronavirus?

ZANE: 25:08

Yes. So in our work, the one thing I think that's nice is there's no downside to using this high agency language among liberals. So it's not the case where you're facing a tradeoff. Where if you paint the virus as having high agency, you'll get conservatives to believe it's more of a threat, but sort of reduce perceptions of liberals. That's not what we find. We find that liberals, regardless of how much they believe the virus to have agency, they seem to respond the same. So really I just see this as, if your goal as a policymaker is to get more of the American public on board with any of these protection measures that you're looking to unroll, using this language that might make the virus seem like it has higher agency, it can only help by capturing perhaps some of the buy-in from the conservative side of the aisle. So that, to me, is promising. And then, in terms of specifics for these policymakers, I'd say, yeah, in all of your written communications, your verbal communications, any press releases or news conferences that you hold, if you can use some of this language that gives the virus maybe a sense of human-like action, so verbs, descriptions like, "it seeks," maybe "it has this strong motive," using phrases, again, that makes it sort of seem like an enemy to us, "seeking to infect us when it comes into contact." I think that would

be sort of the nuts and bolts of how to craft those messages. There is also some work - and again, this is outside of the context of my research. But there is work showing that, if you talk about things in first person versus third person, that can change how much agency you come to think something has. So imagine receiving a pamphlet in the mail that-- here is information about the coronavirus. But it has a picture of it and says, "I am the coronavirus. I do this. I do this." Versus, "This is the coronavirus. It does this. It does this." Does the former case increase your perceptions of how much agency the virus has? I think would be another interesting intervention to test.

CROFT: 27:36

All right. So it seems to really come down to that language really does matter a lot in this, the way that we talk to one another. Everybody for the past week now has been talking about, how do we bring these two warring sides together? How do we find unity? Where can we find common ground? And it sounds like one of the ways to do that is to just be a lot more careful and thoughtful about the way we talk about things.

ZANE: 28:12

Yeah. I would say, don't underestimate the power of language. So researchers, and not myself included per se, have devoted their entire careers to understanding the incredible impact that language can have in all sorts of contexts. We know subtle nuances in language that can be the difference between making a sale, having a satisfied customer in a customer service exchange, getting someone interested in you romantically, getting an interview, or to give you a job. Language is incredibly powerful. And I'm not in the boardrooms or in any other rooms with these policymakers. So I don't know if they're purposely thinking about it or not. But if not, I guess my recommendation, based on these empirical findings I have here in front of me, would be start thinking about it. Consider how you're molding the messages you're coming out with around the virus.

CROFT: 29:15

Right. I think that's a good place for us to wrap up. Dr. Zane, thank you so much for being with us today.

ZANE: 29:22

Thanks, Jack. It was really fun. I'm glad I got this experience to share my research, this opportunity. And I enjoyed our conversation.

CROFT: 29:31

I'd like to, again, thank my guest, Daniel Zane. His research has appeared in top marketing journals, including the Journal of Consumer Research and Journal of Consumer Psychology. You'll find a link to the study we discussed today in the accompanying blog post. This podcast is brought to you by iLUminate, the Lehigh business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh business thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. And don't forget to follow us on Twitter @LehighBusiness. This is Jack Croft, host of the iLUminate podcast. Thanks again for listening. [music]