

THE MORNING NEWSLETTER

U.S. Covid Deaths Get Even Redder

The partisan gap in Covid's death toll has grown faster over the past month than at any previous point.



By David Leonhardt

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As 2020 wound down, there were good reasons to believe that the death toll during the pandemic's first year might have been worse in red America. There were also good reasons to think it might have been worse in blue America.

Conservative areas tend to be older, less prosperous and more hostile to mask wearing, all of which can exacerbate the spread or severity of Covid-19. Liberal areas, for their part, are home both to more busy international airports and more Americans who suffer the health consequences of racial discrimination.

But it turned out that these differences largely offset each other in 2020 — or maybe they didn't matter as much as some people assumed. Either way, the per capita death toll in blue America and red America was similar by the final weeks of 2020.

It was only a few percentage points higher in counties where Donald Trump had won at least 60 percent of the vote than in counties where Joe Biden crossed that threshold. In counties where neither candidate won 60 percent, the death toll was higher than in either Trump or Biden counties. There simply was not a strong partisan pattern to Covid during the first year that it was circulating in the U.S.

Then the vaccines arrived.

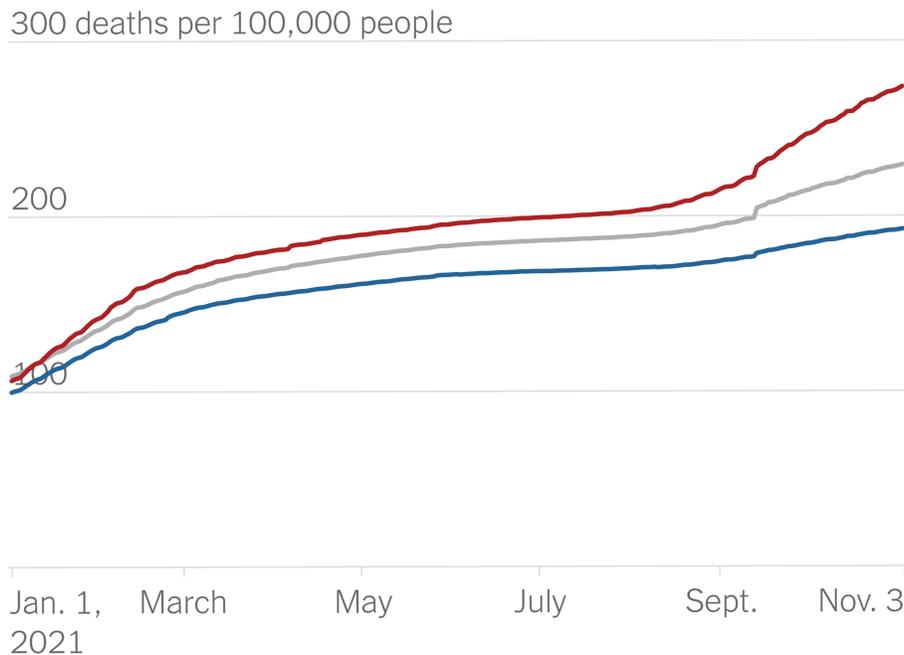
They proved so powerful, and the partisan attitudes toward them so different, that a gap in Covid's death toll quickly emerged. I have covered that gap in two newsletters — one this summer, one last month — and today's newsletter offers an update.

The brief version: The gap in Covid's death toll between red and blue America has grown faster over the past month than at any previous point.

In October, 25 out of every 100,000 residents of heavily Trump counties died from Covid, more than three times higher than the rate in heavily Biden counties (7.8 per 100,000). October was the fifth consecutive month that the percentage gap between the death rates in Trump counties and Biden counties widened.

Cumulative Covid deaths

Counties where ■ Trump, ■ Biden, or ■ neither won at least 60% of the vote



Data unavailable for Alaska and Washington, D.C. Source: New York Times database, Edison Research

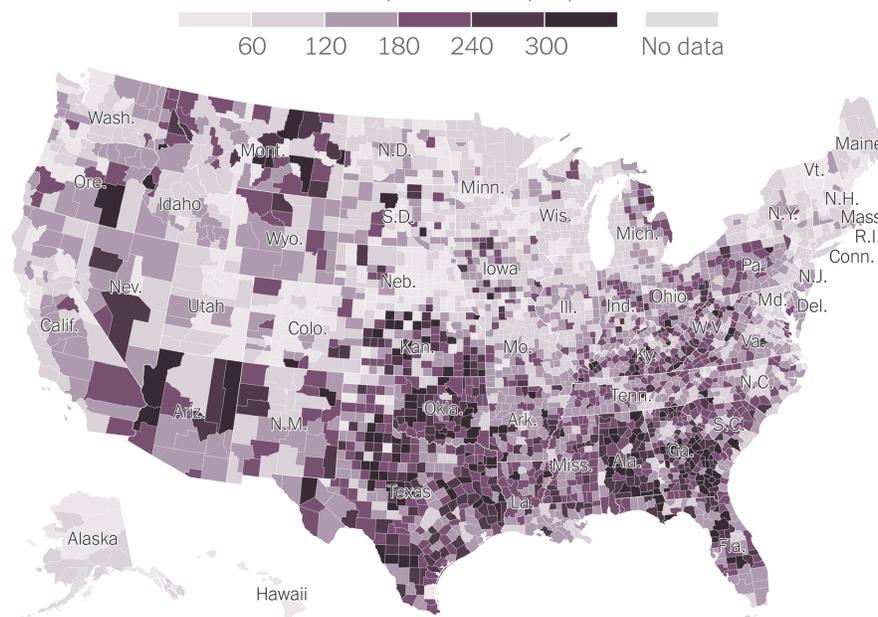
Some conservative writers have tried to claim that the gap may stem from regional differences in weather or age, but those arguments fall apart under scrutiny. (If weather or age were a major reason, the pattern would have begun to appear last year.) The true explanation is straightforward: The vaccines are remarkably effective at preventing severe Covid, and almost 40 percent of Republican adults remain unvaccinated, compared with about 10 percent of Democratic adults.

Charles Gaba, a Democratic health care analyst, has pointed out that the gap is also evident at finer gradations of political analysis: Counties where Trump received at least 70 percent of the vote have an even higher average Covid death toll than counties where Trump won at least 60 percent. (Look up your county.)

As a result, Covid deaths have been concentrated in counties outside of major metropolitan areas. Many of these are in red states, while others are in red parts of blue or purple states, like Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Virginia and even California.

Covid deaths in 2021

Deaths per 100,000 people



Data as of Nov. 3. Source: New York Times database

This situation is a tragedy, in which irrational fears about vaccine side effects have overwhelmed rational fears about a deadly virus. It stems from disinformation — promoted by right-wing media, like Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, the Sinclair Broadcast Group and online sources — that preys on the distrust that results from stagnant living standards.

A peak?

The future of Covid is uncertain, but I do think it’s possible that the partisan gap in Covid deaths reached its peak last month. There are two main reasons to expect the gap may soon shrink.

One, the new antiviral treatments from Pfizer and Merck seem likely to reduce Covid deaths everywhere, and especially in the places where they are most common. These treatments, along with the vaccines, may eventually turn this coronavirus into just another manageable virus.

Two, red America has probably built up more natural immunity to Covid — from prior infections — than blue America, because the hostility to vaccination and social distancing has caused the virus to spread more widely. A buildup in natural immunity may be one reason that the partisan gap in new Covid cases has shrunk recently.

Data unavailable for Alaska and Washington, D.C. Source: New York Times database, Edison Research

Death trends tend to lag case trends by a few weeks, which suggests the gap in deaths will shrink in November.

Still, nobody knows what will happen next. Much of the recent decline in caseloads is mysterious, which means it may not last. And the immunity from vaccination appears to be much stronger than the immunity from infection, which means that conservative Americans will probably continue to suffer an outsized amount of unnecessary illness and death.

More on the virus:

- Starting today, international travelers may enter the U.S. with proof of vaccination and a negative Covid test.
- Housing advocates expected an eviction crisis to hit the U.S. like a tsunami. Instead, it is unfolding slowly, especially in places with few tenant protections.
- Romania, where religious figures have pushed anti-vaccine disinformation, has the world's highest Covid death rate.
- After a woman died with long Covid, her family feared her organs were unsafe to donate. It points to gaps in protocols for organ donation in the pandemic.
- Covid is worse for men on average than for women, and vaccination rates don't explain the difference. What could?

THE LATEST NEWS

Politics

Capt. Geoff Ball and Capt. Andres Rodriguez were in Kabul when a suicide bomber struck. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

- After Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, the Marines guarding Kabul's airport had to decide who could leave. Those frantic days still weigh on them.
- Afghan military pilots who worked with the U.S. are on the run, while others are hiding from the Taliban. They say they're feeling abandoned.
- Eric Adams was the center of Somos, a nonstop tropical party that hundreds of New York's elected officials, lobbyists and labor leaders attend every year.

Economy

- Retailers, expecting a bustling holiday shopping season, are scrambling to find workers. So they're offering perks.
- Inflation could hike up your heating bill.

Other Big Stories

Peres Jepchirchir of Kenya crossing the finish line. Uli Seit for The New York Times

- Peres Jepchirchir, who won gold at the Tokyo Olympics, took first at the New York City Marathon among women. Albert Korir, also from Kenya, won the men's race. (Here are this year's celebrity runners.)
- Officials had worried about crowd control before this weekend's fatal Travis Scott performance in Houston. The victims included high school and college students.
- To steer China's future, Xi Jinping is rewriting history. He comes off well.

Opinions

What happens when polar bears flee the Polar Bear Capital of the World? A dispatch from **Binyamin Appelbaum**, with photos from **Damon Winter**.

Wokeness has derailed the Democrats, says **Maureen Dowd**.

Gail Collins and **Bret Stephens** discuss Biden's infrastructure bill and Facebook.

MORNING READS

Meryl Streep as President Orlean in "Don't Look Up." Niko Tavernise/Netflix

Behind the role: Meryl Streep doesn't want to be president, but she'll play one in a movie.

Sniffles: Does everyone have a cold right now?

Seafood: How religion brought sushi to America.

Quiz time: The average score on our latest news quiz was 8.6. Can you do better?

Advice from Wirecutter: Quality extension cords are worth the price.

Lives Lived: Julie Green, whose art memorialized the last suppers of death-row inmates for over two decades, died at 60.

The National Rifle Association used to dominate discussions of gun control. Mark Glaze, the former executive director of Everytown for Gun Safety, helped change that. He died at 51.

ARTS AND IDEAS

Marian Anderson and the pianist Franz Rupp. Bettmann/Getty Images

The singer with the ‘voice of the century’

Marian Anderson etched her place in American history when she performed on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. A new box set of her recordings, stretching from 1924 to 1966, offers a view of her career beyond her most well-known performance, Anthony Tommasini writes in *The Times*.

The Lincoln Memorial concert was an important moment for civil rights. After the Daughters of the American Revolution had barred Anderson from performing at Constitution Hall because she was Black, federal officials offered her the new venue. In her contralto — the lowest range for a female voice — she sang to a crowd of 75,000 people, and millions more over the radio.

Anderson performed across Europe, earning adoration from crowds — and from the famed conductor Arturo Toscanini, who said she possessed a voice heard “once in a hundred years.” After returning to the U.S., her recordings and tours made her wealthy, though segregation forced her to live as a second-class citizen.

In *The New Yorker*, Alex Ross highlights a standout track from the new collection: the Easter hymn “Crucifixion,” which in 1935 left an audience in Salzberg in “a silence instinctive, natural and intense, so that you were afraid to breathe.”— *Claire Moses, a Morning writer*

PLAY, WATCH, EAT

What to Cook

Christopher Testani for The New York Times

This is the platonic ideal of macaroni and cheese.

What to Watch

Here's a guide to the upcoming movie season, including "House of Gucci" and "The Matrix Resurrections."

What to Read

Times editors recommend these 13 new books.

Late Night

"Saturday Night Live" debuted a new Trump.

Now Time to Play

The pangram from Friday's Spelling Bee was *excavated*. Here is today's puzzle — or you can play online.

Here's today's Mini Crossword, and a clue: Pandemonium (five letters).

If you're in the mood to play more, find all our games here.

Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. — David

P.S. Meghan, Duchess of Sussex. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Tim Cook of Apple. And others. Register for free for DealBook's summit, which starts tomorrow.

Here's today's print front page.

"The Daily" is about a Second Amendment case. On the Book Review podcast, Huma Abedin and Gary Shteyngart.

Claire Moses, Ian Prasad Philbrick, Tom Wright-Piersanti, Ashley Wu and Sanam Yar contributed to The Morning. You can reach the team at themorning@nytimes.com.

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