

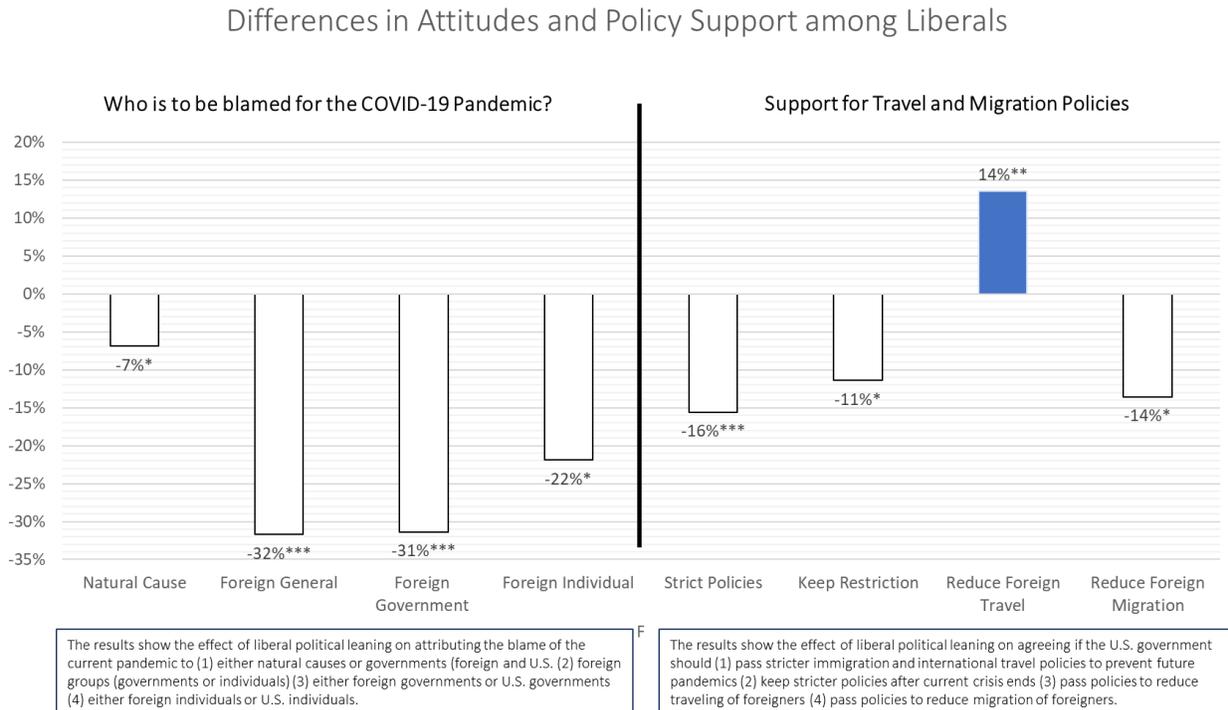
# Coronavirus Blame Game and its Future Implications

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COVID-19 rapidly swept the globe and sent an unprecedented shock, interrupting the usual rhythm of our daily lives and risking the health and livelihood of millions. Due to the ongoing investigation of the virus’s ambiguous origin, people began to anxiously navigate themselves through the informational obscurity with dubious, oftentimes baseless, sources. With the increasing panic of the virus, some anxious sentiments have mutated into animosity toward certain nations or demographics, specifically ostracizing Chinese and Asian communities.

In the face of the social crisis of othering and xenophobia stemming from the current pandemic, this paper examines the emerging coronavirus blame game and its potential impact on future international relations using recent survey data and regression analysis.

Figure 1 Liberal Political Leaning on Attitudes of Blame and Future Policy



Results show that people with liberal political leaning are less likely to attribute the blame of the current pandemic to foreign governments and individuals. Controlling for other socioeconomic variables such as age, gender and education, the share of people blaming foreign

entities (governments, individuals, or both) for the health crisis is 32 percentage points (89%) lower among liberals. Although liberals generally disagree with passing and keeping stricter migration policies to prevent future crises, they are 14 percentage points more likely to favor reducing foreign travel. This points to a potential conflict of interests between protecting public health and upholding liberal political values of internationalism.

Overall, the difference in attitudes between liberals and conservatives highlights that the current pandemic has not just medical but also political dimensions. The topic of public health and global participation will thus likely be a contentious issue in the upcoming election. The emerging culture of distrust and swift finger pointing among people and nations also casts a shadow on post-pandemic international relations. The political dimension of scapegoating and xenophobic attitudes suggests that the outcome of this year's election will be crucial for how this and future crisis will be handled.

## Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease, commonly known as COVID-19, rapidly swept the globe and sent an unprecedented shock, interrupting the usual rhythm of our daily lives. Closing of borders and imposing indefinite national lockdowns fostered people's heightening fear toward the microscopic organism. Further, due to the ongoing investigation of the virus's ambiguous origin, people began to anxiously navigate themselves through the informational obscurity with dubious, oftentimes baseless, sources. With the increasing panic of the virus, some anxious sentiments have mutated into animosity toward certain nations or demographics, specifically ostracizing Chinese and Asian communities. Like the disease, fear and aggression toward targeted groups have a viral nature of their own, spreading across continents and infiltrating people's minds within seconds. In the face of the social crisis of othering and xenophobia that is happening concurrently with the current pandemic, this paper examines the emerging coronavirus blame game and its potential impact on future international relations. Specifically, the paper identifies the characteristics of individuals who blame certain groups and or individual for the pandemic. Subsequently, the impact of the pandemic on future international relations is estimated through analyzing the level of support in current and future migration and travel restrictions.

## Background

Despite being a recent event, the surge in anti-Chinese and anti-Asian hate crime suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is as much a medical crisis as a social one. This is neither a novel finding nor speculation. One does not have to look far back into history to find a forerunner of this pandemic. For instance, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic of 2003 was a prelude to the social impacts that we see in today's crisis. SARS was a respiratory illness caused by a coronavirus that affected over 8,000 people worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the physical damages, SARS caused psychological and emotional damages to Asian communities around the world. Mass media capitalized on the fear of the virus and continuously highlighted certain Asian populations in a derogatory light through constant references to China in their articles. Consequently, China and, in turn, anyone with an Asian appearance faced stigmatization,

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, "SARS and Its Resonating Impact on the Asian Communities."

profiling, and discrimination and became a scapegoat for the epidemic.<sup>2</sup> Due to the disproportionate blame that was put on Asian communities, they were often shunned in public spaces such as schools, offices, restaurants, and modes of transportation which shows an eerie similarity to the experiences of individuals of Asian descent in the current crisis<sup>3</sup>. The synergy between the fear of the virus and the portrayal of specific individuals as virus carriers promoted stress and panic within the targeted community which continues to exist today.

Unfortunately, even seventeen years after the epidemic, the practice of zeroing in on certain demographics continue in current media sources. A recent review of 433 COVID-19 related news articles (from Proquest Global Newstream database) between January 28 and February 24 reported 1,034 cases of xenophobia, stemming from government policies and media representations<sup>4</sup>. Public figures such as Senator Tom Cotton asserting a conspiracy theory that the virus was developed as a biological weapon in China,<sup>5</sup> and President Donald Trump labeling the virus as the “Chinese virus” blatantly regionalized and racialized the virus, fostering xenophobia at Chinese and Asian individuals.<sup>6</sup>

The spread of these xenophobic sentiments has been impacting regions beyond the United States. Citizens in South Korea and Malaysia have demanded their governments to ban Chinese from crossing their borders<sup>7</sup> while a recent Chinese cartoon depicting foreigners as “trash” circulated within Chinese media, further stigmatizing foreigners as dirty and dangerous.<sup>8</sup> The portrayal of foreign or foreign-seeming individuals as dirty and dangerous has been an empirical inquiry. In fact, a recent research looking at participants from the United States and Denmark found that the fear of disease is correlated with anti-immigration bias, supporting the common racist and xenophobic portrayal of foreigners as dirty disease carriers.<sup>9</sup>

Through historical and contemporary examples, disease outbreaks have exhibited obvious signs of xenophobic finger-pointing toward specific groups and thus, similar behaviors are reasonably

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jeung, Gowing, and Takasaki, “NEWS ACCOUNTS OF COVID-19 DISCRIMINATION 2/9-3/7/20.”

<sup>4</sup> Jeung, Gowing, and Takasaki, “NEWS ACCOUNTS OF COVID-19 XENOPHOBIA Types of Xenophobic Reactions, January 28 – February 24, 2020.”

<sup>5</sup> Stevenson, “Senator Tom Cotton Repeats Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins.”

<sup>6</sup> Somvichian-Clausen, “Trump’s Use of the Term ‘Chinese Virus’ for Coronavirus Hurts Asian Americans, Says Expert.”

<sup>7</sup> Kim, “‘No Chinese’: In Petitions, Signs and Tweets, Fear Is Spreading Faster than the Coronavirus.”

<sup>8</sup> Feng, “Chinese Cartoon Depicts Rule-Breaking Foreigners as Trash to Be Sorted.”

<sup>9</sup> Aarøe, Petersen, and Arceneaux, “The Behavioral Immune System Shapes Political Intuitions.”

expected during the current pandemic. Hence, this paper contributes to the growing literature documenting the current pandemic and its social implications.

## Methodology

The data used in this paper is from an online experimental survey designed by Professor Martin Abel, Tanya Byker, and Jerry Carpenter in the Department of Economics at Middlebury College. After collecting general sociodemographic and employment information, the questions of interest first asked which group is the most blameworthy for the current pandemic: 1) Natural occurrence 2) Foreign governments 3) U.S. government 4) Foreign individuals and 5) U.S. nationals (see fig. 1).

Afterward, the survey collected responses regarding should the U.S. government pass stricter immigration and international travel policies to prevent future pandemics (see fig. 2). Those who supported stricter policies were asked to choose among the types of restrictions (see fig. 3). The collected responses were then used in multiple regressions using the linear probability model in which the estimated coefficients measured the predictability of the specified outcome.

Is the current health crisis in the U.S. mainly the result of a **natural occurrence** or are **governments or individuals** mainly to blame?

- Individuals
- Natural occurrence
- Governments
- Not sure

*Figure 1 Survey Question Regarding Blame.*

Should the U.S. government pass stricter immigration and international travel policies to prevent future pandemics?

- YES, restrict now and MAINTAIN tough restrictions after crisis ends
- YES, restrict now but RELIEVE tough restrictions once the crisis is over
- NO, do not pass tough restrictions.
- I'm not sure

*Figure 2 Survey Question Regarding Stricter Policies.*

What restrictions should be included in that policy? (check all you should support)

- Reduce traveling of foreigners
- Reduce migration of foreigners
- Expel foreigners currently in the U.S.
- Reduce imports from foreign countries

Figure 3 Survey Question Regarding.

## Results

### Who is Blaming Who for the Pandemic?

Table 2 Who is Blaming Who for the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Who is Blaming Who for the COVID-19 Pandemic?

	(1) Natural Cause	(2) Foreign General	(3) For. Government	(4) For. Individual
Age	0.003** (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.004)
Male	0.013 (0.027)	-0.012 (0.036)	-0.036 (0.038)	0.087 (0.090)
White	0.126** (0.039)	0.075 (0.049)	0.091 (0.050)	0.141 (0.134)
College Education	0.005 (0.027)	-0.082* (0.035)	-0.078* (0.037)	-0.192* (0.086)
Liberal	-0.069* (0.035)	-0.317*** (0.051)	-0.314*** (0.057)	-0.219* (0.108)
Conservative	0.007 (0.039)	-0.025 (0.057)	0.008 (0.066)	-0.158 (0.107)
Observations	1375	706	572	134
Sample Mean	0.54	0.36	0.31	0.60
Std Dev	0.50	0.48	0.46	0.49
Pv: liberal=conservative	0.011	0.000	0.000	0.536

Note: Linear probability model regressions. Description of dep. variables: Attributing the blame of the pandemic to... (1) either natural causes or governments (foreign and U.S.) (2) foreign groups (governments or individuals) (3) either foreign governments or U.S. government (4) either foreign individuals or U.S. individuals.

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

### Natural occurrence vs. Government

This blame variable presents whether the COVID-19 pandemic is mainly attributed to a natural occurrence or to governments. With an additional 10 years of age, the likelihood of

relating the current pandemic to natural causes increases by 3 percentage points (6%). With respect to the participants' race, those who identified as white are 12.6 p.p. (23.3%) more likely to believe that the crisis is due to a natural occurrence. On the other hand, those whose political leaning was somewhat to very liberal are 6.9 p.p. (12.8%) less likely to attribute the pandemic to a natural occurrence than those with moderate or conservative leanings.

### *Blaming Foreign Governments and/or Individuals*

This blame variable explores who among those who believe the COVID-19 pandemic is not mainly due to a natural occurrence is attributing it to foreign entities (either governments or individuals). Participants who at least have a college education show an 8.2 p.p. (22.8%) decrease in the odds of attributing the blame to foreign groups. Similarly, people with liberal political leaning show a decrease in blaming foreign groups but had a greater magnitude of 31.7 p.p. (88.1%).

### *Foreign Governments*

This blame variable specifically separates the previous variable and looks at the subset of people who blame governments. The outcome is an indicator variable for blaming foreign governments. Being white is associated with a 9.1 p.p. (29.4%) increase in directing the blame to foreign governments. The college education and liberal political leaning variables both have an inverse relationship with the blame variable, showing a decrease of 7.8 p.p. (25.2%) and 31.4 p.p. (101.3%), respectively.

### *Foreign Individuals*

This blame variable measures who, among those that think individuals are responsible for the crisis, is blaming foreign, or non-U.S., over U.S. individuals. The college education and liberal variables continues to exhibit negative coefficients, indicating a decrease in the likelihood of blaming foreign individuals. The liberal political leaning reduces the chances of blaming foreigners by 21.9 p.p. (36.5%) and the effect of college education—a decrease of 19.2 p.p. (32%)—is the greatest compared to its previous coefficients.

## Impact of COVID-19 on Current and Future Travel and Migration

Table 3 Impact of COVID-19 on Current and Future International Travel and Migration Policies

Impact of COVID-19 on Current and Future International Travel and Migration Policies

	(1) Strict Policies	(2) Keep Restriction	(3) Foreign Travels	(4) Foreign Migration
Age	0.002 (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)	0.003 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)
Male	0.024 (0.036)	0.042 (0.035)	-0.048 (0.034)	-0.016 (0.043)
White	-0.044 (0.038)	-0.048 (0.039)	0.155*** (0.041)	0.131** (0.046)
College Education	0.036 (0.037)	0.112** (0.036)	-0.164*** (0.032)	-0.026 (0.044)
Liberal	-0.156*** (0.047)	-0.114* (0.045)	0.135** (0.045)	-0.136* (0.055)
Conservative	0.064 (0.045)	0.201*** (0.051)	-0.042 (0.048)	0.006 (0.055)
Observations	671	671	563	563
Sample Mean	0.71	0.34	0.78	0.58
Std Dev	0.46	0.47	0.42	0.49
Pv: liberal=conservative	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.002

Note: Linear probability model regressions. Description of dep. variables: Polling if the U.S. government should... (1) pass stricter immigration and international travel policies to prevent future pandemics (2) maintain stricter policies after current crisis ends (3) pass policies to reduce traveling of foreigners (4) pass policies to reduce migration of foreigners  
 \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

### Passing Strict Travel Restrictions During the Current Pandemic

This variable pertains to the participants' position on the U.S. government passing stricter immigration and international travel policies. Overall, 71% of people are in support. Having a liberal political leaning decreases the chances of supporting this policy by 15.6 p.p. (22%). By contrast conservatives are 6.4 p.p. (9%) more likely to support travel restrictions. The difference to the group of moderates is marginally significant and the difference between conservatives and liberals is significant at the 1% level.

### Continue to Keep Restrictions After the Current Pandemic

This variable captures whether individuals are in support of the U.S. government maintaining strict travel and migrations restrictions after the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent

similar crises in the future. 34% of respondents agree. Liberal political leaning decreases the probability of agreeing with keeping the restrictions by 11.4 p.p. (33.5%) while a conservative political leaning increased the probability by 20.1 p.p. (59.1%), highlighting the divergent opinions of political attitudes. Further, with an additional 10 years in age, the chances of supporting the restrictions increased by 4 p.p. (12%). Interestingly, participants who had an education at the collegiate level or above are 11.2 p.p. (32.9%) more likely to support keeping the restrictions.

#### *Reduction of Foreign Travelers*

This variable measures the support or rejection of a specific restriction policy suggested in the survey: limiting the travel of foreigners. Overall, there is broad support (78%) for this policy. Similar to its effect on the previous dependent variable, age has a positive coefficient on supporting the reduction of foreign travelers in which an additional 10 years in age increases the odds by 3 p.p. (4%). Likewise, participants who identified as white are 15.5 p.p. (19.9%) more likely to support the restriction. However, contrary to its previous positive effect, the college education variable decreases the probability by 16.4 p.p. (21%). Similarly, the liberal variable has a change in signs which suggests a positive effect of 13.5 p.p. (17.3%) in the likelihood of supporting foreign travel restrictions.

#### *Reduction of Foreign Migration*

This variable is another policy recommendation: reducing the migration of foreigners, which 58% of participants support. The white race variable continues to show a statistically significant positive coefficient, indicating that being white has an increase of 13.1 p.p. (22.6%) in supporting the recommendation. On the other hand, liberal political leaning lowers the chances of supporting foreign migration restriction by 13.6 p.p. (23.4%).

### Discussion

Based on the regression results of both tables, the participants' age, race, education level, and political leaning have significant results across outcome variables assessing the liability for the current pandemic and the potential impact of the crisis on future policies regarding foreign travel and migration.

Although a participant's age has a positive effect on assigning the pandemic to natural causes rather than to governments, they are more likely to be in favor of maintaining stringent policies following the pandemic and reducing the travel of foreigners. The positive effect of age may be attributed to the fact that a person becomes more vulnerable to the coronavirus with age, and thus older survey participants are expressing their caution through supporting these hypothetical policy recommendations.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, participants who identified as being white are more likely to classify the cause of the pandemic as a natural occurrence and to support the reduction of both foreign traveling and migration. It should be highlighted that the results simply suggest a correlation between the participants' race and the outcome variables. Hence, conjecturing a person's level of xenophobia solely on the basis of one racial identity is both ambiguous and premature. Consequently, it will be worthwhile to further scrutinize the race of the participants in order to examine if there are differential effects within different racial identities.

College education shows a consistent effect on the reduction of directing the blame to foreign governments and individuals. Possibly, those with college education might utilize their experiences in academia to better identify and dismiss news articles whose narratives unduly denounce foreign governments or individuals. The higher magnitude of rejecting the blame placed on foreign individuals suggests that the more educated can also discern between the government and its people to a greater degree. Likewise, later results propose that the college-educated are more likely to support keeping restrictions after the pandemic but are against restricting foreign travelers which goes against the widespread belief that the less educated are more supportive of stricter international migration and travel. Although the results seem contradictory, it could be argued that while the college-educated recognize a need for concrete policies after the pandemic, they are striving for measures to improve the country's preparedness for future crises—such as enhancing airport health and safety protocols—without severely hindering foreign travels.

The political leanings of participants also yield consistent and intriguing findings. Those who associated with liberalism are less likely to attribute the blame to foreign governments and individuals. Likewise, these individuals are against passing and preserving restrictions which reflects their political ideals of internationalism, multilateralism, and individual rights. These

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<sup>10</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "People Who Are at Higher Risk for Severe Illness."

results noticeably differ for conservatives who are more likely to support the continuation of firm restrictions on international travel, implying its values of individualism and defense from external threats. Interestingly, however, liberals are in favor of limiting foreign travel but are against passing tougher measures, namely reducing foreign migration. It is plausible that among the presented policy recommendations (see fig. 3), the reduction of foreign travel could have been the least restrictive and most effective method that participants with liberal political leaning could endorse. That is, similar to the behavior shown among the college-educated, the liberals could be seeking a middle ground where they can continue to uphold their political values while protecting the country from future crises. Alternatively, this finding could suggest that the perceived risk of the coronavirus entering across international borders does not outweigh their political ideals.

Granted, the survey's responses on blame and travel restrictions are not certain measures of xenophobia; however, the support for austere migration policies could reflect the cultural changes of caution and distrust toward foreign governments and individuals which often correlates with xenophobic sentiments. Hence, these results could propose a wary glimpse into how nations and their citizens could engage in post-corona international relations.

## Conclusion

Although the minuscule virus is invisible to the naked eye, its impact on today's society has been ruthlessly and disturbingly graphic; it has plunged the way people study, work, and socialize to unimaginable territories. Unfortunately, the virus's foreboding presence signals that the likelihood of the world coming out of this global pandemic unscathed is highly unlikely. Beyond the medical crisis, the ongoing debate on who should bear the brunt of the current pandemic has kindled a wildfire of finger-pointing, aggravating people's animosity and scapegoating targeted groups. Hence, this paper sought to identify the characteristics of the finger-pointers in today's crisis, and to whom are they directing their fingers. Through data analysis, participants' age, race, education level, and political leaning exhibits significant effects on ascribing the burden of the pandemic to foreign governments and individuals. Even though the continued exploration of the data indicates that these traits have the potential to influence future attitudes and policies of international travel and migration, it should be reiterated that no causal relationships are established between these traits and the likelihood of expressing

xenophobia. However, the strong correlations from the preliminary findings already convey that the current medical crisis is rapidly transforming into racial, social, economic, and political concerns. As views and opinions frequently disseminate through the news media, in ongoing research I conduct an experiment to test for causal links between news coverage of the pandemic and xenophobia through which I hope to offer further insights into how the consumption of partisan news narratives induces xenophobia.

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