Swarm AI finds Common Ground among Democrats and Republicans on Covid-19

A Summary of Findings from Swarm Insight® Research

May 2020

Across the country, many state and local governments have begun the process of reopening after a month or more of sheltering in place due to the novel coronavirus. And because this is a presidential election year, public policy related to the Covid-19 pandemic has taken on sharply political tones, especially on issues related to public health and economic recovery.

To explore public sentiment related to the pandemic and the US government's response, Unanimous AI and Bully Pulpit Interactive used Swarm® technology to generate AI-optimized insights from a diverse sample of American voters. Three voting cohorts were used in this research: (a) Democrats, (b) Republicans, and (c) a mix of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Each cohort used Swarm technology to assess an identical set of questions regarding (i) the coronavirus, (ii) public policy related to the pandemic, (iii) responsibility and leadership, and (iv) where the United States goes from here.

The data generated from this study enabled us to identify the contours of the new national narrative – *the story* Americans are telling themselves about the COVID-19 crisis, why it emerged, how to respond, and what the country will look like in its aftermath. Communities form narratives through the complex interplay of attitude and experience that traditional polling often misses. Swarm AI® technology solves this problem by focusing on the interactions within groups, empowering populations to work together and converge on sentiments that truly reflect the views of a community. Further, the Swarm platform enables researchers to quickly visualize the group-deliberation process, analyze decision-making behaviors, and determine the conviction a group has in its collective sentiments.

Given the severe differences of opinion expressed by voters in each party in the media, it is notable that there was **a significant amount of agreement** among the three voting cohorts. Much of that agreement stems from a common view of the crisis as primarily being a health care issue.

Lessons of the COVID-19 Crisis

When provided with the prompt, **"Most of all, the COVID-19 crisis has shown…"**, all three cohorts (Democrat, Republican, and Mixed) agreed most strongly with the sentiment that **"We haven't invested enough in public health protections"**. It is notable that although the Republican cohort ultimately agreed that the primary lesson was insufficient investment in public health protections, it had the lowest conviction (44%) of the three groups and Republicans showed the greatest support for the option, "We're too closely connected to other parts of the world".
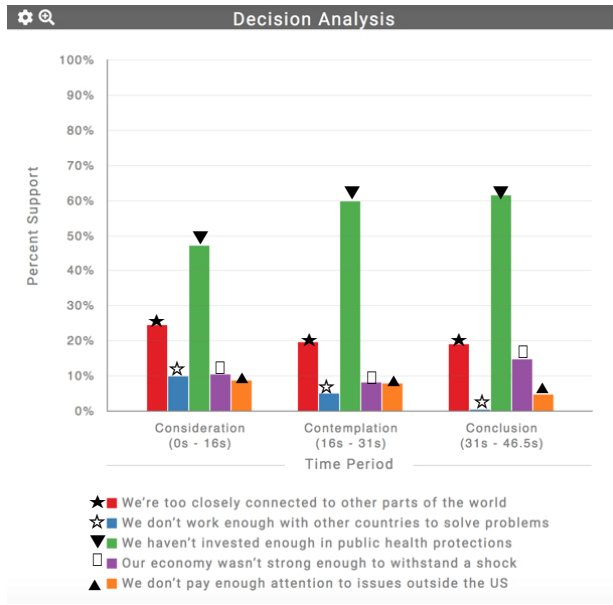
Figure 1: "Most of all, the COVID-19 crisis has shown…", Republican Voters

All three cohorts of voters also agreed that, prior to the crisis, **the country should have focused more on "Access and affordability of health care"**, indicating that in light of the pandemic, affordable and accessible health care is a bi-partisan issue and will likely gain new urgency in the presidential election. This does not mean that there are not partisan differences below the surface. Analysis of the behavioral data shows that although this answer received the majority of support in all deliberations, it was highest among Democratic voters. The second most supported choice in the Republican cohort was "Foreign affairs and international relations" (interesting in light of the sentiment among Republicans that we may be "too closely connected to other parts of the world"); and among Sanders supporters in the Mixed cohort, the second most supported choice was "Economic inequality".
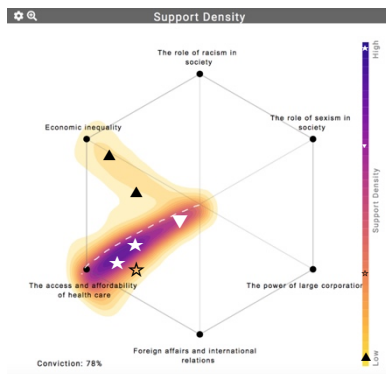

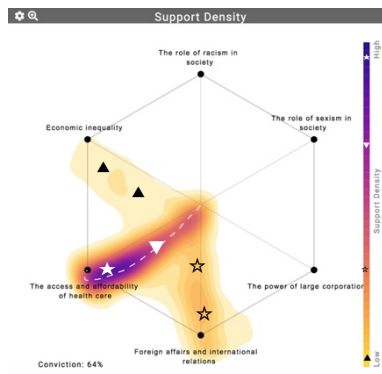Figure 3: "Most of all, the COVID-19 crisis has shown…", Democratic voters

Figure 2: "Most of all, the COVID-19 crisis has shown…", Republican voters
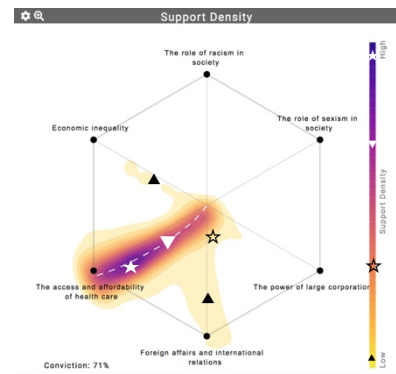

Figure 4: "Most of all, the COVID-19 crisis has shown…", Mixed voters

The Federal Government's Role

The outlook on the **Federal Government's role in managing a pandemic** may also be another area of common ground that has emerged from difficult circumstances. All three cohorts identified **"Coordinate a response that benefits the entire country"** as their optimal choice for the role of the Federal Government. This selection is particularly notable given the spectrum of governing philosophies represented by the other options available to the groups. While ultimately identifying "Coordinate" as the best overall choice, almost a quarter of support in the Democratic voter cohort was for the more activist role, "Define, direct & enforce a nationwide strategy" (23%) and more than a third of support in the Republican voter cohort was committed to the more limited role to "Ensure that states have adequate resources" (35%).
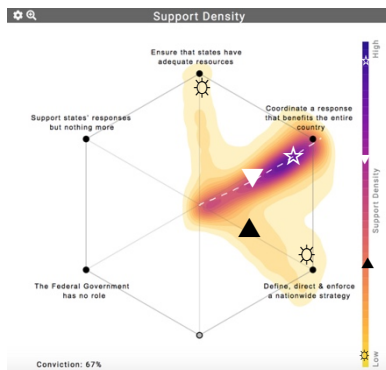

Figure 5: "What should the Federal Government's role be in managing a pandemic?", Democratic voters
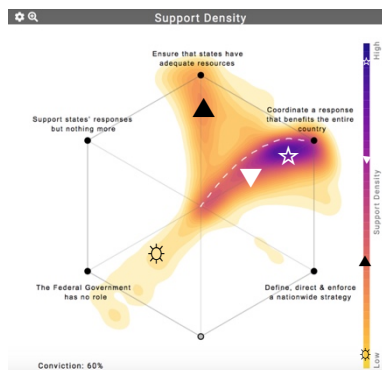
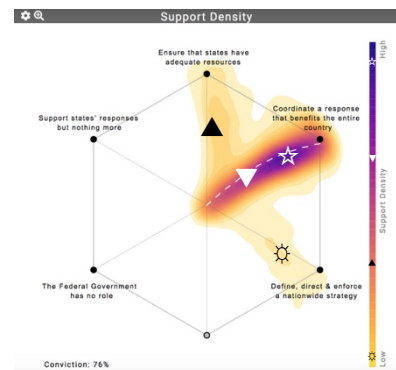*Figure 6: "What should the Federal Government's role be in managing a pandemic?", Republican voters*

Figure 7: "What should the Federal Government's role be in managing a pandemic?", Mixed voters

Leadership

One of the most striking areas of agreement among the groups came in their consideration of **what type of leader "has the most to tell us about how to strengthen our country?"** Not only did all three groups identify **"Scientists"** as their answer, all three groups expressed high conviction in their choices.
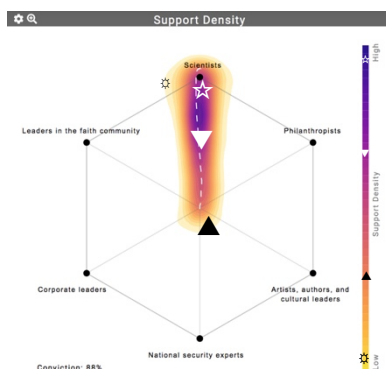

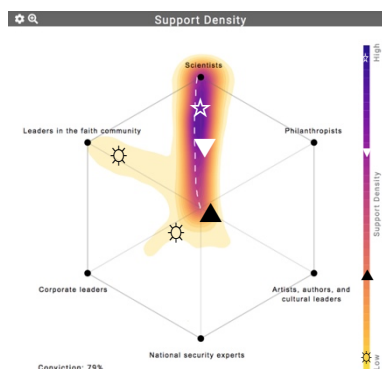*Figure 8: "Who has the most to tell us about how to strengthen our country?", Democratic voters*

Figure 9: "Who has the most to tell us about how to strengthen our country?", Republican voters
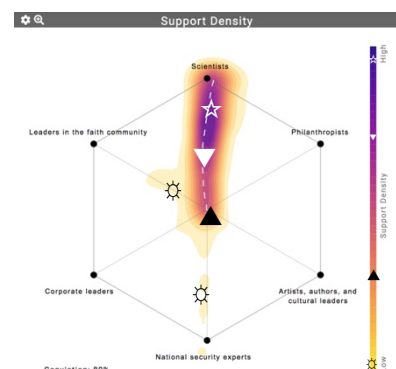
Figure 10: "Who has the most to tell us about how to strengthen our country?", Mixed voters

Clearly, there is a strong expectation that the policy response to the pandemic should be led by the available science. It also reflects the respect and authority that faces of the scientific community – Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Debora Birx, among others – are being given by the public and press in official briefings.

If scientists are considered important to a successful path forward due to an objective and clear-eyed consideration of facts, how those attributes are expected to be expressed by America's leaders differs by who you hope will lead America. In the response to **"Which quality will matter most from leaders and institutions?"** the cohort of Democratic voters identified **"Transparency, candor, and honesty"** as most important. Republican voters identified **"Doing what's right even when not politically popular"**. The Democratic outlook can be seen as a referendum on the failure of the current administration to be forthright in its communications and information sharing, while it is easy to hear the common line of support for President Trump as a "political outsider" in the choice of the Republican cohort. Both positions, however, are valued by both groups: "Doing what's right even when not politically popular" received the second-most support from the Democratic voters, and "Transparency, candor, and honesty" was the second choice for the Republican voters. They were also the top two options for the Mixed group of voters.

Figure 9: "Which quality will matter most from leaders and institutions?", Democratic voters [link to replay]

Figure 10: "Which quality will matter most from leaders and institutions?", Republican voters [link to replay]

Lasting Effects

All three voter groups were asked to consider the question: **"After the crisis has passed, Americans will be more…"**. For the Mixed voters and Democratic voters, the expectation is that Americans will be more **"careful about their interactions with other people."** When asked the same question, the cohort of Republican voters selected **"Worried about their financial security"** as their optimal response.

The results of the deliberations seem to indicate significantly different perceptions of the most impactful elements of the crisis – that Republicans are focused on finances and Democrats are focused on human interactions – perspectives that reinforce the competitive narratives of the political rivals. But a deeper examination of the deliberative behaviors of each group using Swarm reveals there is a great deal of **shared perspective** among these groups.

The similarities are most apparent when the deliberations are visualized as **Support Density** plots. Until the last few seconds, the deliberative paths of both groups are almost identical, splitting support between those two primary options. As the plots make clear, the final seconds of the Republican deliberation define the difference between the groups. But the difference in total support between "worried about financial security" and "careful about their interactions with other people" is only 5% for the Republican cohort (vs. 20% difference for the Democratic cohort).
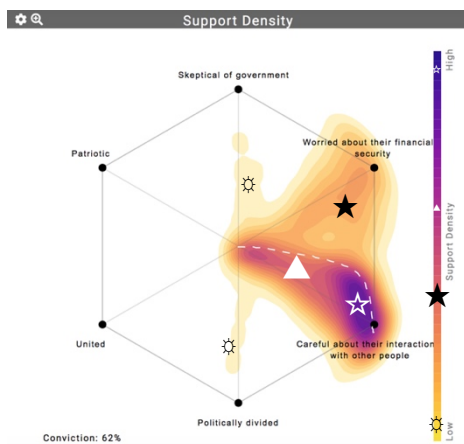

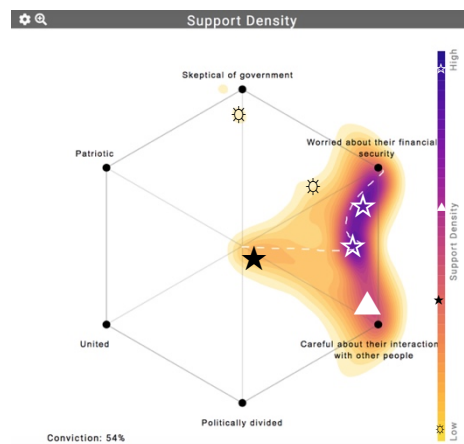*Figure 11: "After the crisis has passed, Americans will be more…", Democratic voters*

Figure 12: "After the crisis has passed, Americans will be more…", Republican voters

The Mixed group of voters arrives at the answer that maximizes the satisfaction of all its participants – that Americans will be more "careful about their interactions with other people" – more quickly and with greater Conviction (75%) than either of the other cohorts (62% for Democrats and 54% for Republicans).
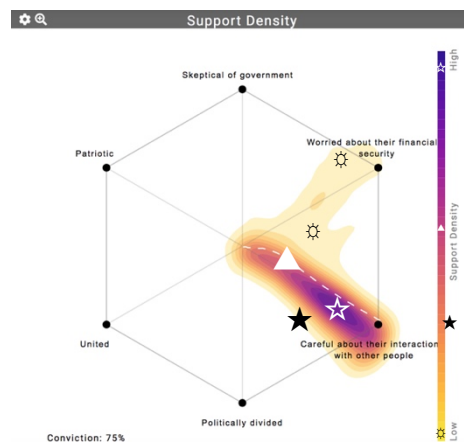

Figure 13: "After the crisis has passed, Americans will be more…", Mixed voters

"When will things get back to normal?"

The question everyone wants an answer to is **"When will things get back to normal?"** All three groups expressed relatively low Conviction in their answers (54% for the Republican and Democratic voters, 56% for the Mixed voters). Unsurprising given the high levels of uncertainty in every sphere of society.

All three groups expect longer timeframes than those being promoted by the Trump Administration, though there are differences based on party affiliation. The Republican group had the most optimistic estimate of **4-6 months**. This cohort also had the greatest support of the three groups for the 2-3 month period. The cohort of Democratic voters strongly considered 4-6 months, but ultimately converged on the longer view, **"Not until the end of the year"**. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Mixed group was the most divided. Although the cohort ultimately forecast **4-6 months**, the faction of Bernie Sanders supporters in that group were most likely to express the most pessimistic view, "things may never feel normal again".
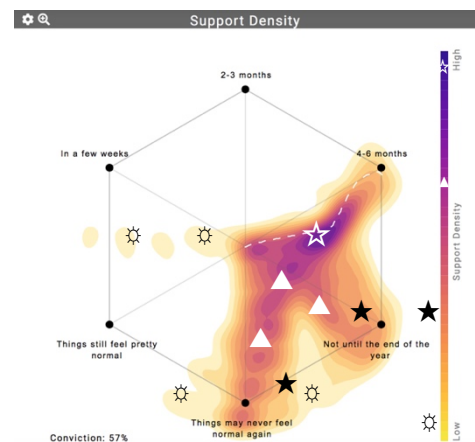

Figure 14: "When will things get back to normal?", Sanders supporters, Mixed voters

Conclusion

After years of bitter political division, Americans and their leaders have come to expect every issue to break 50/50 along partisan lines. But the COVID-19 crisis is creating a different dynamic because of the deep impact it has had on everyone's everyday life. For all the differences in where and among whom the disease is creating the most harm, the vast majority of Americans are sharing a common experience in ways perhaps not seen since World War II. As a result, there is a developing narrative about how the country should respond—more investments in health, more deference to science, an active federal response, and a greater expectation of transparency from leaders. It is notable that this common ground has been developed at a time when we are for the most part physically separate. Perhaps it is that separation that is allowing the perception of division to remain. Once Americans tentatively emerge from their homes and re-engage, even in a limited way, the similar contours of individual experience may lead to an appreciation of a stronger sense of shared interests and common purpose.