

Vukomanovic, Jelena; Barbieri, Carla; Knollenberg, Whitney; Yoshizumi, Alexander; Arroyo, Claudia Gil

Article

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Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights

Provided in Cooperation with:

Elsevier

Suggested Citation: Vukomanovic, Jelena; Barbieri, Carla; Knollenberg, Whitney; Yoshizumi, Alexander; Arroyo, Claudia Gil (2022) : To travel or not to travel during COVID-19: The influence of political ideology on travel intentions in the USA, Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights, ISSN 2666-9579, Elsevier, Amsterdam, Vol. 3, Iss. 2, pp. 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2022.100078>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/337734>

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To travel or not to travel during COVID-19: The influence of political ideology on travel intentions in the USA

Jelena Vukomanovic^{a,b}, Carla Barbieri^{a,*}, Whitney Knollenberg^a, Alexander Yoshizumi^b, Claudia Gil Arroyo^c

^a Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, College of Natural Resources, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA

^b Center for Geospatial Analytics, College of Natural Resources, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA

^c Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Cooperative Extension of Cape May County, Cape May Court House, NJ, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Editor: Kirilova Ksenia

Keywords:

Attitudes
COVID-19
Pandemic
Political ideology
Geospatial analysis
Willingness to travel

1. Introduction

Political forces have always shaped the tourism industry. From who is allowed to travel across borders to how destination marketing organizations are funded, political action influences the way the industry operates at macro and micro scales. Recently, political systems and public policy dynamics in the United States of America (USA) have resulted in major impacts on society and subsequently, on the tourism industry (Butler & Suntikul, 2019). Notable examples are the travel bans on targeted international visitors (national level) and the passage of North Carolina's House Bill 2 limiting the rights of transgender citizens (state level). Support for these policies reflects a need to understand the relationship between political ideologies and tourism.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent travel restrictions created a new relationship between politics and tourism, particularly in places like the USA where the political climate is polarized (Dolman, Fraser, Panagopoulos, Aldrich, & Kim, 2022; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020) and the pandemic has been politicized (Blow, 2021). Recent examinations of the tourism-politics relationship have revealed the value in understanding tourism stakeholders' political ideologies, particularly among residents (Litvin, Smith, & McEwen, 2020) and tourists (Severt &

Hahm, 2020). In response, we used a geospatial lens to investigate the intersection between political ideology and likelihood of travel during the pandemic across the USA by questioning whether political ideology (q1) and likelihood to travel if COVID-19 conditions remain the same (q2) differ by region. We further hypothesized that political ideology can predict future travel during COVID-19.

2. Research methods

The study sample was composed of 1075 adults living in the USA and with sufficient disposable household income (\$50,000+) to travel abroad (Bennet, Fry, & Kocchar, 2020). We contracted with a surveying company (Marketing Systems Group) to recruit panelists from across all regions of the USA. We collected data in January 2021, the pinnacle of the first-wave pandemic in the USA, through a web-based survey. We queried panelists' demographic attributes, political ideology using a continuous scale (0 = far-left; 21 = far-right; Kroh, 2007), and place of residence (ZIP Code). We also asked panelists about their level of concern about traveling (overall) during COVID-19 and likelihood of travel if COVID-19 conditions remain the same using 5-point Likert scales (1 = very unconcerned/unlikely; 5 = very concerned/likely).

* Corresponding author at: 3028D Biltmore Hall, Raleigh, NC 27695, USA

E-mail addresses: jvukoma@ncsu.edu (J. Vukomanovic), carla_barbieri@ncsu.edu (C. Barbieri), wgknolle@ncsu.edu (W. Knollenberg), ayoshiz@ncsu.edu (A. Yoshizumi), claudia.gilarroyo@rutgers.edu (C. Gil Arroyo).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2022.100078>

Received 8 December 2021; Received in revised form 12 October 2022; Accepted 11 November 2022

Available online 14 November 2022

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We used geospatial and relational statistical procedures for data analysis. For spatial analysis, we mapped responses to ZIP Code polygons corresponding to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 TIGER/Line shapefiles. To assess the participants’ political breakdown, we binned responses by political leaning and aggregated responses to the Census division level. Grouping intervals (bin sizes) for political leaning were selected to cover response value ranges of roughly equal size. Similarly, we mapped participant responses regarding travel concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic to the Census division. Mapping and spatial analyses were performed in ArcGIS Pro 2.9.1. We used a multiple linear regression ($p < 0.05$) to test whether respondents’ political affiliation, education level, age, and annual household income (independent variables) affect their likelihood to travel if COVID-19 travel conditions remain the same (dependent variable).

3. Results

The panel had a balanced gender and age distribution. Gender-wise, 50% self-reported being female, 49% male, and 1% non-binary. Age-wise, 20% were younger than 30 years old, 32% were between 30 and 44 years old, 23% between 45 and 59 years old, and 25% were at least 60 ($mean = 45.5$). Fifty-five percent reported a household annual income below \$100,000. Participants were distributed across the four national geographic regions as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau: South (35%), Midwest (23%), West (22%), and Northeast (20%).

In terms of political affiliation, the greatest proportion of participants indicated a centrist ideology (47%) while one-quarter self-identifying with a far-right (26%) or a far-left (26%) ideology. Most participants fell into the “Center” bin across all regions (Fig. 1). The distributions of political ideologies were consistent across regions, with a balanced representation between right and left; yet, New England reported a greater left inclination while the East South Central and West South Central regions showed greater right inclination.

Most participants were very concerned (57%) about traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 26% indicated being somewhat concerned; 17% indicated a neutral or lack of concern over traveling during the pandemic. A closer examination across the USA shows that

participants in the Middle Atlantic and New England Census divisions expressed proportionally greater concern compared to participants in other Census divisions (Fig. 2).

Most participants (61%) indicated they were unlikely to travel if COVID-19 conditions remain the same, either reporting to be somewhat (22%) or very (39%) unlikely to travel. When we analyzed participants’ likelihood to travel if COVID-19 conditions remain the same and political affiliation together, we found that the distribution among responses differed between those who identify as left-leaning and those who identify as right-leaning. Most (55%) right-leaning respondents (15–21 on the political ideology scale) indicated medium or high likelihood of travel if conditions stay the same, with 40% reporting they are “very likely” to travel. Conversely, 73% of left-leaning respondents (0–6 on the political ideology scale) are unlikely or very unlikely to travel under current COVID-19 conditions (Fig. 3).

A regression analysis confirmed that political ideology, along key demographics, influence willingness to travel if COVID-related restrictions remain ($R = 0.369$; $R^2 = 0.136$; $p < 0.001$). The farther right the political ideology ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$), the more likely panelists were to travel if restrictions were unchanged. Age ($\beta = -0.282$, $p < 0.001$) and education level ($\beta = 0.059$, $p = 0.041$) also influenced willingness to travel while annual household income did not.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This research note illustrates the intersection between political ideology and likelihood to travel amidst the COVID-19 pandemic using a geospatial lens. We conducted this study in the USA given the political polarization of the country, which has permeated to shape personal attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic (Blow, 2021; Dolman et al., 2022). Study results show a relationship between geographic location, political ideology, and likelihood to travel during COVID-19. For example, participants in New England were more left-leaning and expressed proportionally greater concern about traveling during COVID-19 while participants in the East South Central and West South Central regions were more right-leaning and expressed proportionally less concern about travel during COVID. These results hold implications for

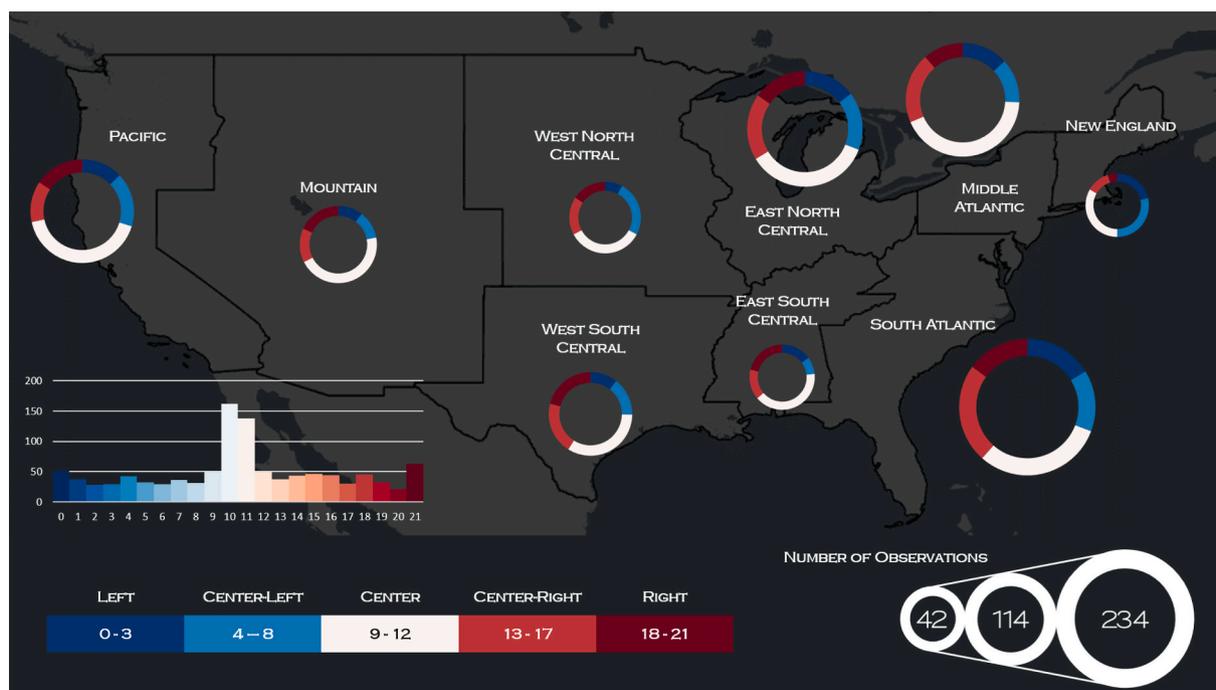


Fig. 1. Self-identified political ideology by U.S. Census division level. We grouped the 22-point political ideology responses (histogram) into five categories, with response value ranges of roughly equal size. The size of each donut graph indicates the total number of respondents in a given Census division.

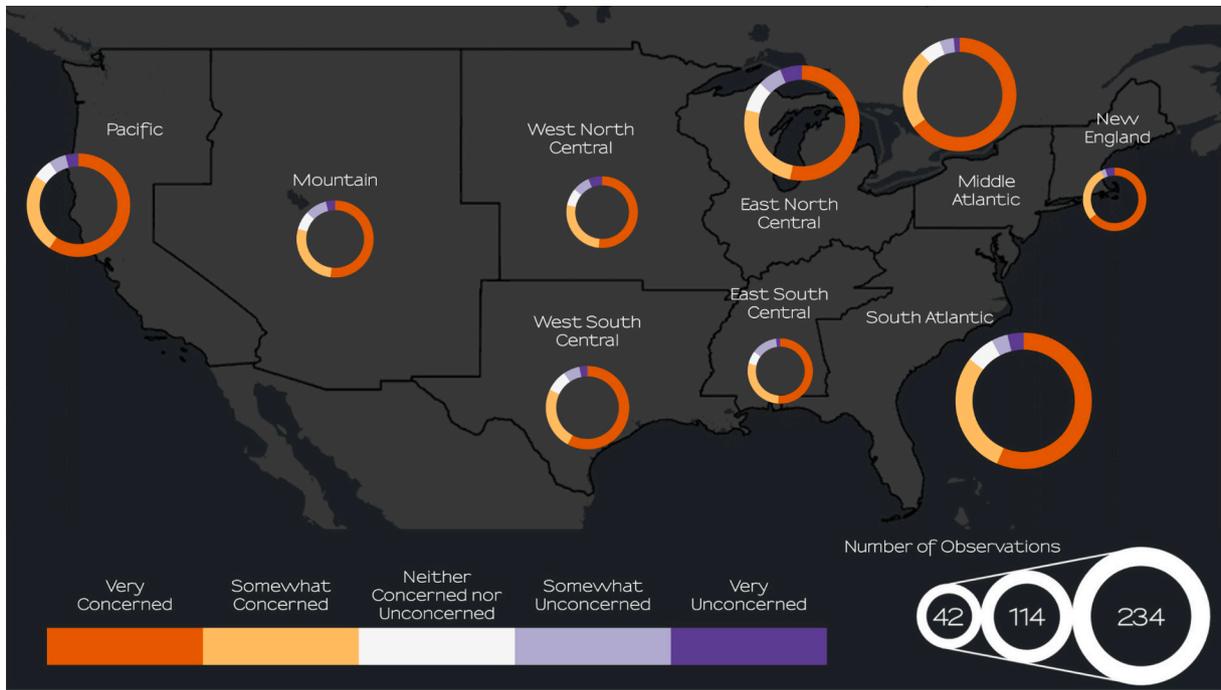


Fig. 2. Concern about traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The size of each donut graph indicates the total number of respondents from a given Census division.

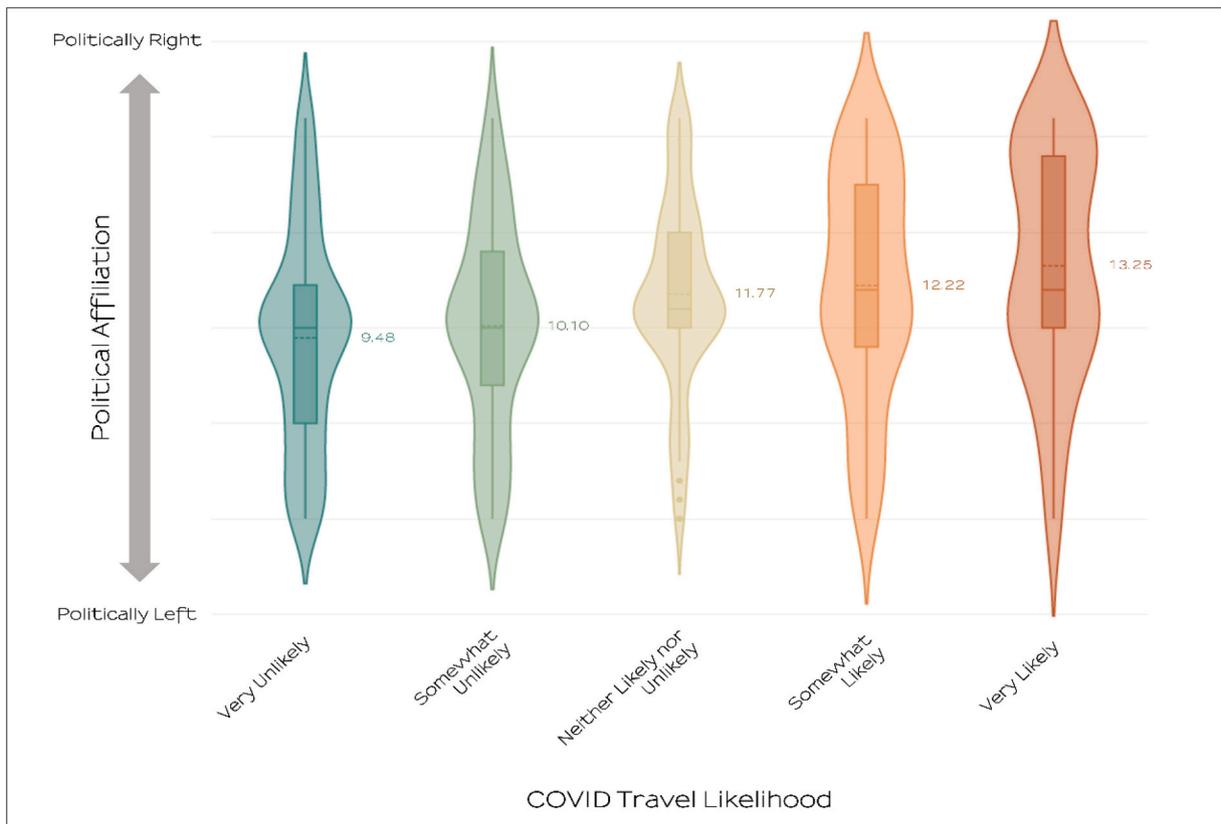


Fig. 3. Political ideology and likelihood of travel is COVID-19 conditions remain the same. The bivariate split for the 22-point political affiliation scale occurs between values 10 and 11 (higher values are more right-leaning). Internal boxes represent the first and third quartiles while the silhouettes the data distribution. Dashed lines and numerical values represent the mean, while solid lines the median.

leaders and commercial entities devising planning, policy and marketing strategies for the tourism industry.

First, this study reveals that political ideology plays a role in willingness to travel during a pandemic, providing insights on travel demand during major events like COVID-19. Considering that the political leanings of supply-side stakeholders (e.g., destination community residents) influence support for tourism development (Litvin et al., 2020), destinations should prepare to host tourists during global crises by assessing other stakeholders (e.g., residents, workforce), especially when their constituents hold more left-leaning political views. With our evidence that travel may continue during health pandemics, especially among those with right-leaning political views, we recommend investing in longitudinal systems to monitor stakeholders' sentiment towards receiving visitors. Yet, such efforts may be difficult considering the increasingly polarized climate in the USA (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020).

Secondly, and if destination's stakeholders show support for receiving travelers, it is imperative to delineate potential visitors. For example, our study indicates that USA's regions housing more residents holding right-leaning political views could become viable markets. While delineating target markets it is also important to consider other variables (e.g., age, education level) that we found interplay with political views when deciding whether to travel during a pandemic. For example, destinations may increase efforts to attract right-leaning younger visitors as they seem more likely to travel during COVID-19. When delimiting target markets, it is also critical to pay attention to travelers with right-leaning political ideologies who are more reluctant to adhere to pandemic guidelines such as being vaccinated (Dolman et al., 2022).

In reflecting on how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic shapes the tourism industry (e.g., traveler mobility, residents' safety), this study illustrates the need to acknowledge how political affinity informs policy decision-making. Yet, when interpreting these study results, it is important to consider key developments related to the pandemic, political sentiments, and the interaction between both in the USA. We assessed this panel's attitudes towards traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic soon after vaccines were approved for the general public, but before they were readily available due to prioritization based on age, job type, and underlying health conditions. Such timing may have raised the optimism for continuing travel if COVID-19 related restrictions remain (e.g., mask use, proof of vaccination). At the same time, the vaccines' approval also fueled an anti-vaccine movement that along with the dismissal of the virus and defiance of safety regulations (e.g., social distance, wearing masks) became deeply partisan (Blow, 2021).

A few limitations should frame results' interpretation. The survey queried likelihood to "travel" without specifying any particular type (e.g., geographic reach, purpose), which may not accurately predict likelihood to travel. For example, right-leaning people may be more inclined to travel domestically rather than abroad (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). We sought to illustrate the influence of political ideology

on likelihood to travel during the pandemic. Yet, other contextual factors not included (e.g., frequency of pre-pandemic travel) may also affect such relationship, which merits further investigation. Although the sample size precluded a statistical assessment of spatial clustering, this dataset provided a nuanced assessment of political ideology as compared to binary voting data.

This note illustrates how political ideology permeates willingness to travel even during a global crisis. Yet, the volatility of both, the pandemic (e.g., new variants, unpredictable effects) and political sentiments (e.g., antivax advocacy), calls for devoting efforts to longitudinally monitor the intertwined effects of social and political phenomena on travel. For example, it would be worth examining the interplay of shifts in political ideologies in travel attitudes and behavior over time. Evidence of these relationships could inform crisis response policy and communication efforts.

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- Jelena Vukomanovic**, Assistant Professor, investigates the human dimensions of landscape change through geospatial tools.
- Carla Barbieri**, Professor and Extension Specialist, investigates sustainable tourism and agritourism.
- Whitney Knollenberg**, Associate Professor, investigates the role of leadership in planning, policies, and partnerships for sustainable tourism.
- Alexander Yoshizumi**, doctoral student, investigates the best way to make energy and transportation systems more sustainable and efficient.
- Claudia Gil Arroyo**, County Agent III, specializes in community-based tourism, food tourism, and craft-beverage tourism.