**Mask-wearing and Public Figures**

 No sooner had COVID-19 arrived to American shores, than it became one of the greatest political flashpoints of recent memory. As a result, the governmental response to the virus has been chaotic and muddled. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the government’s policy on mask-wearing, which has gone through many different permutations and erupted into a nationwide partisan showdown. In March and April, when the virus first touched down in America, the government— or at least the Surgeon General— discouraged the wearing of any non-N95 masks. Evidence of this information is now quite difficult to find online, but documents of it still exist. In a 60 minutes interview from early March, NIAID director Dr. Anthony Fauci unilaterally declared that US citizens did not need to be wearing masks unless they were sick, despite the fact that the Chinese and South Korean publics had both embraced the mask as a safety measure[[1]](#footnote-1). Public policy surrounding masks has since gone the complete opposite direction and for months now public officials have insisted on their vital importance. Certain figures, such as Fauci, have even publicly discussed a mask mandate[[2]](#footnote-2). Despite this blatant policy reversal, the issue is by no means resolved. In fact, it has only become more controversial as the US election approaches; it served as a notable touchstone in the second debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. In the debate, the two presidential candidates argued over lockdown policy, vaccines, and whether a possible end to the pandemic was on the horizon, another major flashpoint of the mask debate has been Donald Trump’s personal stance towards wearing the mask publicly and his decision to host events without masks.

 Trump’s political opponents have claimed that his reluctance to endorse and don the mask has created a mixed-message for the American public, especially considering that his administration is officially in favor of mask wearing. This mixed message, Trump’s opponents further, has misled the American public and served to foster the spread of the virus and cause more American deaths. Although Donald Trump has since softened his stance on masks, especially in the wake of his experience with COVID-19, he is far from warmly embracing the face mask. Among world leaders he is not alone; heads-of-state the world over have also been seen in public without wearing masks, including China’s Xi Jinping, South Korea’s president Moon Jae-in, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Russia’s Vladimir Putin, Germany’s Angela Merkel, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro and majority of Sweden’s government. Not all of these leaders have taken an outspoken stance against masks, per se, but they all have decisively not worn the mask in public at different times, including during official events. Considering all of these examples and the accusations levelled against Trump by his political opponents, the question remains, does the personal attitude of a country’s leader towards masks affect caseload and fatality of the COVID-19 virus? Further, if so, how much? Of course, it will be impossible to establish any strict causality between a leader’s mask-wearing and the number of cases and deaths, so we are looking more for correlations.

 According to the most recent statistics, in the United States there have been over 200,000 deaths caused by COVID-19 and over 8,000,000 recorded positive cases of the virus[[3]](#footnote-3). That means that of America’s 328.2 million citizens, roughly .06% has died and roughly 2.4% of the population has been infected by COVID-19. These numbers are by no means exact and will surely shift and change in the future but for not they give us a good sense of how America has fared throughout the pandemic. It is also important to note that the C.D.C. has officially advised widespread mask-wearing since early April, so it has been a policy for the majority of the pandemic. Further, through all of this time Trump had made it clear that he would not flat out state the efficacy of masks; as late as September 29th he said, “I think masks are OK. You have to understand, if you look — I mean, I have a mask right here. I put a mask on when I think I need it”[[4]](#footnote-4).

Despite Trump’s messaging, certain polls show that 92 percent of Americans said they wear a mask when leaving the home at least sometimes while 74 percent claimed to wear masks all the time[[5]](#footnote-5). This data suggests that the majority of Americans have not based their mask-wearing habits on those of Donald Trump. Nevertheless, as we have said above, it is impossible to draw a clear link between Trump’s personal attitude towards masks and the number of deaths and cases. However, if Trump’s opponents are correct that his reluctance to wear a mask has had a large negative impact on the numbers of infections and deaths, then the above percentages of cases and deaths should seem high when compared to those of other countries with more consistent mask-wearing policies. Further, the numbers of cases and deaths in countries whose leaders have not worn masks or maintained stringent mask policies should appear higher than those of other countries.

 First, let’s compare America’s numbers to those of Sweden. As the COVID-19 pandemic began sweeping across the globe in early 2020, Sweden very notably diverged from the policy of most other country by deciding not to enter any lockdown whatsoever. Daycares and schools for those 16 and younger have remained open throughout the Pandemic as have bars and restaurants. While its restrictions have generally remained very loose, Sweden has put a 50-person limit on social gatherings. Otherwise, however, the country has remained almost the same as before the pandemic. One reporter noted “an alien landing in Sweden would have difficulty knowing there is a pandemic whereas in England or France, with face masks prevalent, they would realise [sic] immediately”[[6]](#footnote-6). Almost all of Sweden’s public officials, including its prime minister, have not worn masks publicly throughout the pandemic. Yet more striking is the fact that Swedish authorities have not encouraged people to wear masks at any point during the pandemic and still have not budged on that position. When asked about Sweden’s stance on masks, its chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell has even said that face masks are “more of a statement than actually a measure”[[7]](#footnote-7). As a result, certain research shows that “86 percent of people in Sweden never wear masks”[[8]](#footnote-8).

 In Sweden we find a clear case in which messaging about masks from the government has strongly affected the numbers of people wearing masks in public. That is partly because of the Swedish public’s “high trust in the authorities”[[9]](#footnote-9). That is, ‘“When the Swedish health agency says there’s no reason to wear face masks, people don’t wear face masks”[[10]](#footnote-10). Whereas in America the vast majority of people wore masks regardless of what the government said— and even when the government urges against masks— in Sweden people actually followed the example of their leading officials. If we take the arguments against Donald Trump’s lax attitude towards masks as true, we would expect Sweden to have drastic percentages of cases and COVID-19 deaths. To date, Sweden has had 121,167 cases of COVID-19 and 5,934 deaths[[11]](#footnote-11). Of Sweden’s population of 10.23 million, that means that 1.18 percent has been infected with the virus and that about .06 percent of its population has died. Compared to America, this means that Sweden has about 1.2% fewer cases for its total population and about the same percentage of deaths.

 According to Donald Trump’s opponents, when leaders don’t wear masks, they signal to their citizens that mask-wearing is not mandatory, which can lead to increased infection and death. However, based on the Swedish example, this does not seem to be the case. Despite Sweden’s very lax mask-wearing policy, there numbers are not only quite similar to those of the United States; in fact, Sweden has a smaller percentage of cases relative to its population than the United States does. Further, the evidence we have seen suggests that Donald Trump’s personal habits and attitudes towards mask-wearing did not have nearly as great an effect on the American population as did Swedish officials’ mask-wearing habits on their populace. Based on this first comparison, then, we have not seen a consistent correlation between the mask-wearing habits of elected officials and the number of cases and deaths in a country’s population.

 Furthering the evidence for a lack of consistent correlation between mask-wearing habits of elected officials, as well as official stances taken by governments, and case and death numbers are the examples of two other nations, Italy and Japan. Italy is a useful example when considering the causes and effects of differing pandemic responses like masks because of the size and scale of the outbreak that it faced as well as the fact that it was earliest country outside of China, where the virus originated, to face such an influx of the pandemic. Italy’s outbreak began at the end of February, and, within one month, the country had already experienced 10,000 coronavirus deaths and surpassed China to become “the deadliest hotspot of the global coronavirus pandemic.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Moreover, not only did Italy surpass China in total deaths, it also had a significantly death rate from coronavirus cases, which was three times higher than China’s and nearly six times higher than that of the United States at the same moment in time.[[13]](#footnote-13) With these facts in mind, one could easily imagine that perhaps this was because the Italian government had pursued comparatively lax policies towards masks and security in response to the spike in cases and deaths. Perhaps Italy was slow to adopt restrictions on movement and encourage masking?

In fact, quite the opposite was true. From the beginning of its outbreak, Italy pursued an aggressive response, locking down the entire country within less than three weeks of its first recorded case.[[14]](#footnote-14) Measures enacted included “steep fines of up to 3,000 euros ($3,350) for defying government orders of only going outside for essential items like food”[[15]](#footnote-15) and prohibitions against public gatherings. Even as cases and deaths continued to ravage the country, masks did not become mandatory in public spaces until April.[[16]](#footnote-16) Yet the official policy on masks seems not to have affected their adoption because, despite shortages throughout the country, by early April over 80% of Italians reported that they were wearing masks for protection.[[17]](#footnote-17) Perhaps it was for this reason, widespread adoption of masks by the population without an official order, that Italian PM Giuseppe Conte, who appeared at a parliamentary hearing without a mask, was heckled by fellow politicians.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Thus, despite a lack of an early mask mandate and the public appearance of their prime minister without a mask two months into a terrible outbreak, Italians seem to have adopted masks on their own. Further, at the beginning, at least, the strategy of severe government lockdowns and widespread masking seemed to vastly flatten the curves of daily new cases and deaths, with Italy experiencing a relatively mild summer of cases and deaths. It is important to note that this drop in cases and deaths came amidst a relaxation of lockdown measures, both in Italy and the rest of Europe, as Italy began to reopen restaurants, bars, hairdressers, and more businesses as early as May.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Moreover, just as cases begin to climb again throughout the United States and other regions of the world, Italy too seems to be experiencing the dreaded “second wave,” and is once again re-imposing strict measures to curb the virus. Whereas during Italy’s first wave the government did impose lockdowns but was comparatively less strict with masking, this time around the government is both imposing mask mandates as well as making sure its messaging is consistent with those measures. On the policy front, as of October 8th, masks became mandatory in all indoor and outdoor spaces in Italy besides private homes,[[20]](#footnote-20) and, on the messaging front, the government has gone beyond politicians and enlisted the help of celebrities to encourage the public to wear masks.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, despite its aggressive policy and messaging dating back to the beginning of October, Italy is still seeing record high daily new case numbers,[[22]](#footnote-22) further confounding the correlation between government policy, masking among politicians and among the population, and cases and deaths.

Finally, we come to the example of Japan, whose experience with covid19 provides an interesting contrast with that of the United States. Japan, despite being a highly developed and, in many areas, densely populated nation of over 126,000,000 people, has, to date, seen just under 2,000 coronavirus deaths, giving it the *113th* highest per capita death rate of any country in the entire world.[[23]](#footnote-23) Indeed, precisely because Japan stands out so much among developed nations, it is very useful to consider its government and prime minister’s attitudes towards masks and how they may have affected the population and correlated with coronavirus cases and deaths.

Although prime minister Shinzo Abe has widely praised the country’s strategy in responding to coronavirus, which has included a unique contact tracing strategy and government distribution of masks to the public,[[24]](#footnote-24) his tactics, especially those surrounding masks, have been the subject of much criticism. While Abe did create a plan to ship masks to all Japanese citizens, this plan was considered to have been “botched,”[[25]](#footnote-25) with only two cloth masks being sent to each household, regardless of size, and the masks being ridiculed for being too small to be effective for the prevention of transmission.[[26]](#footnote-26) Moreover, in addition to its well-intended but ineffective messaging and plan on masks, Japan also eschewed strict lockdown measures throughout. However, as seemed to be the case in all of the other countries considered, the Japanese people appear to have responded based on factors other than government messaging and dictates. Indeed, one of the possible reasons credited with helping Japan to have such a low caseload and death count is “Japanese culture, and a common mask-wearing tradition in East Asia.”[[27]](#footnote-27) It is not that the Japanese people ignored the prime minister but still managed to contain the spread of the virus, nor was the prime minister’s messaging particularly effective, becoming the butt of many popular internet memes.[[28]](#footnote-28) Instead, what mattered more was the people’s own desire to wear masks and to respect social distancing.

What is interesting about the comparison of Italy and Japan to the United States is that, unlike Sweden, which has consistently had very low proportions of mask wearing and a lack of encouragement towards mask wearing by leaders, both Italy and Japan have had intermittent but not extremely effective policies and messaging on masks yet also very high proportions of mask wearing. Consistent with where we began, it is very hard to establish causation between leaders’ mask wearing habits and those of the populations, as well as between leaders’ mask wearing habits, populations’ mask wearing habits, and case and death numbers. Italy, on the one hand, has had late but fairly strong encouragement towards masking, coupled with some of the strictest lockdown measures in the world, yet has faced one of the highest case fatality rates from the coronavirus and continues to see climbing cases. Japan, on the other hand, has had similarly intended but not supremely effective messaging regarding masking but is among the most successful countries in combatting the virus. The divergence of the experience of both of these countries from that of the United States, as well as that of Sweden, further compounds the difficulty of establishing either causation or even correlation when it comes to the link between the mask wearing habits and messaging of world leaders, the response by the populations, and ultimately the countries’ case and death numbers.

To return to where we began, the case of the United States, it is well worthwhile to consider the unique position of our nation because of its federalist system. The division of powers between the various state governments and federal government makes allows us to further subdivide our examination of messaging by leaders, responses by populations, case and death numbers, and how all of those things connect to each other. Although much attention has been paid to president Donald Trump and his idiosyncratic messaging surrounding the pandemic, most of the significant policy decisions such as mask mandates, business closures and capacity restrictions, and quarantine rules have fallen in the hands of mayors and governors across the nation.

On the surface, as one might expect given how polarized our country is, the pandemic has often been viewed by the media as a tale of two parties, with state policies to combat the pandemic seeming to fall along partisan lines. Take as one example an article from CNN, which speaks of “Covid denial”[[29]](#footnote-29) taking place in “red states,” or those with Republican leadership. While it would be foolish to generalize based on one article, this one is fairly representative of the tone taken by most mainstream news outlets when discussing the different pandemic responses of politicians from the two political parties. Articles like this one have served to create a narrative that red states deny science and don’t take the pandemic seriously enough and hence are endangering their citizens and the country. To further this narrative, media outlets have seized on what they see as insufficiently strong rhetoric or messaging from red state politicians

“Blue states,” those with democratic leaders, have tended to favor both much stricter policies as well as much stronger and more forceful messaging around their policy preferences. One of the best examples to consider for this discussion is governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, whose daily covid briefings in March and April quickly became the stuff of legend, so much so that he recently earned an Emmy and published a highly anticipated book on leadership based on his experiences as governor during the pandemic. Cuomo has been widely lauded by the media for his “aggressive” messaging and “acerbic delivery,” which combined to make him “the country's most recognizable Democratic leader in the struggle against COVID-19.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, based on the plaudits heaped upon Cuomo that culminated in this very visible recognition of accomplishment in handling the pandemic, one could easily be led to believe that Cuomo’s messaging and policy choices that followed have prevented a severe outbreak in his state. The data, however, tell a very different and more complicated story.

Cuomo was, at the very least, consistent in pairing aggressive policy with his aggressive messaging. Governor Cuomo was quite early in declaring a state of emergency to combat the pandemic on March 7th, when his state had fewer than 50 cases, and just five days later, when the entire state of New York had only 328 confirmed positive cases, the governor began limiting gathering sizes. It was not long before the governor issued the “New York State on Pause” executive order, which shut down all non-essential businesses and effectively locked down the state. These were obviously policy decisions, but, as previously mentioned, Cuomo’s messaging from the briefing room was consistently strong. He coined the slogan “New York tough,” which later adorned a graphic poster for sale on the ny.gov website, and he regularly implored New Yorkers to stay home, wear masks, social distance, and take other appropriate precautions.[[31]](#footnote-31)

However, despite the consistently aggressive messaging and policies, New York has endured the second most deaths per capita of any state and most deaths in absolute numbers in the country to date,[[32]](#footnote-32) and, despite increasingly strict policies such as recent school closures and fines for not wearing masks, cases and deaths have steadily increased since bottoming out in August.[[33]](#footnote-33) In fairness to Governor Cuomo, his strong messaging may have played some role in the high prevalence of mask wearing throughout New York, as one *New York Times* article suggests.[[34]](#footnote-34) But key policy missteps like New York’s famously disastrous nursing home policy, with which the governor effectively forced nursing homes to re-admit residents who had tested positive for coronavirus, placing them in the most vulnerable population, undoubtedly contributed to the state’s outbreak, with nursing home deaths accounting for over a quarter of death’s statewide.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Standing in contrast to New York is California, another blue state that has a democratic governor and democratic mayor of its largest city, yet has seen very divergent results than New York. California has the third highest number of absolute deaths from coronavirus in the nation, but when adjusted per capita it ranks 38th,[[36]](#footnote-36) behind such states as Montana, Idaho, and many other significantly less densely populated regions. So the natural question is: what did California do differently than New York, and can we see a clear relationship between the messaging of executives, their policy choices, the response by the population, and the case and death numbers in the state?

When it came to aggressive policy stances early on, governor Gavin Newsom was ahead of governor Cuomo by only three days when it came to both declaring a state of emergency and issuing a stay at home order.[[37]](#footnote-37) Newsom was quicker to close businesses back in March, and he has been quicker to do so as cases have once again been on the rise in his state, with new stay-at-home orders in place in the hardest hit regions of California once again.[[38]](#footnote-38) Moreover, despite Cuomo’s Emmy win for his presentation around coronavirus messaging, in some cases Newsom has perhaps been even stronger. His office recently recommended that diners wear masks “in between bites”[[39]](#footnote-39) of food while eating, and back in July it also issued a video PSA on proper mask use.[[40]](#footnote-40)

However, despite Newsom and his state’s rapid action and consistently strong messaging, their recommendations seem not to have been heeded. An *LA Times* study, for what it’s worth, found a staggering 47% of people not wearing masks, and an even larger proportion wearing them improperly.[[41]](#footnote-41) Clearly, as we saw in the countries around the world we previously examined, there is a disconnect between what’s coming from the executive offices and what people are actually doing. Moreover, while it would be foolish to place too much weight on the governor’s personal actions without further evidence, governor Newsom has been the subject of much probably deserved criticism for not following his own strong messaging, receiving his flu vaccine on television without a mask,[[42]](#footnote-42) and, to add insult to injury, violating multiple regulations while eating at one of the fanciest restaurants in the nation along with corporate lobbyists and public health officials.[[43]](#footnote-43) And yet, to reiterate, despite the governor’s personal failings to live up to his messaging and policies, and despite California citizens comparatively lax mask wearing compared to New York, the state remains firmly in the bottom twelve for per capita death rate in the nation.

Because of the disconnect between media coverage and actual policies and messaging by state executives, it will also make sense to consider two prominent red states, which have pursued different messaging and policy strategies than New York and California, and have experienced different results. While many red states pursued and are still pursuing different policy tracks than New York and California, two states that stand out in particular are Florida and South Dakota due to the massive media attention that they and their governors have received during the pandemic. Recently, both Florida governor Ron DeSantis and South Dakota governor Kristi Noem have faced massive backlash in the media for their respective handlings of the covid situation. DeSantis has been accused of attempting to coverup his mishandling of the pandemic by raiding the house of an analyst who claimed to be a whistleblower on DeSantis’s manipulation of covid statistics.[[44]](#footnote-44) On the other hand, Noem has been lambasted throughout the pandemic for her lax approach, and certain media outlets have misleadingly connected her own grandmother’s death to the pandemic.[[45]](#footnote-45) This recent media attention makes these two governors apt figures to be examined in comparison to the notable governors we have looked at from blue states.

To date, Florida has recorded 19,377 total covid related deaths and 1.07 million cases of the virus. These numbers give Florida the 18th highest number of covid-related deaths per capita of all the states in America. With a population of 21.5 million people, which makes Florida the third most populace state in America behind California and Texas, Florida’s per capita death rate is slightly on the higher end. Further, with this death rate Florida comes in almost directly between New York (second highest death rate) and California (38th highest death rate). As we have done with New York and California, we must ask again with Florida, can we see any correlation between the messaging coming from the state’s executive branch around masks and the virus and the state's deathrate?

On March 9th, a little over a week after the first covid case was reported in Florida, governor Ron DeSantis had declared a state of emergency throughout Florida. About a week later, on March 17th, DeSantis issued an executive order reducing all state activities to only those considered essential. That executive order meant in effect that bars and nightclubs had to close for at least 30 days, and around this time gyms also closed voluntarily. It was also around this time that DeSantis lifted a Florida law forcing retired workers to wait at least six months before returning to jobs so that he could effectively maximize the amount of medical and frontline workers available to the state. Quite notably, on March 30th DeSantis signed an executive order for members of three of Florida’s most populace counties to stay at home. This order was soon followed by a statewide stay-at-home order which applied to all Florida residents, sick or healthy, old or young.

Based on this course of policies alone, DeSantis seems to have handled the early part of the pandemic not dissimilarly from his counterparts in California and New York. Just as Cuomo and Newsom, DeSantis reduced state activity to what was considered “essential” quite early on. DeSantis also took a strong stance on masks early on. A transcript from one of DeSantis’ press briefings from March 25th suggests that he placed important emphasis on masks and mask-wearing. Speaking of masks, he said, “Personal protective equipment is probably our number one issue” [[46]](#footnote-46). He furthered that “We’re also distributing them to nursing homes and assisted living facilities so that any staff that comes into contact with our elderly residents is wearing a mask and we can mitigate any transmission in those centers and that is really important”.[[47]](#footnote-47) Here DeSantis seems to be incredibly clear on both the importance of masks for healthcare workers and the elderly, although during this briefing he himself did not wear a mask and also commented that “not every sheriff’s deputy will need”[[48]](#footnote-48) a mask, a statement which could easily be taken as mixed messaging.

Further accusations of DeSantis’ mixed messaging came during the very same press briefing, when one member of the audience asked, “What would you say to people who are seeing this patchwork… and seeing mixed messages”[[49]](#footnote-49) with reference to the fact that different parts of Florida were experiencing different policies with varying degrees od strictness. DeSantis defended this approach to policy as relying on data rather than imposing draconian measures on counties that did not require them. Later during the pandemic, Florida began experiencing rapidly rising case numbers in June and July. By this point, governor DeSantis had already begun rolling back some of the harsher shutdown policies and received pressure to change the course of his policy.[[50]](#footnote-50) At that time, however, DeSantis stuck with his original course of action and refused to halt Florida’s steady reopening, claiming that “shutting down the economy again would do more harm than good”[[51]](#footnote-51).

In that DeSantis has maintained the position stated in July even when Florida’s new case numbers were some of the highest in the nation, he has remained extremely consistent with his messaging. Regardless of DeSantis’ personal take on masks, since June a majority of Floridians have been reported as responding to masks quite favorably, with eight of ten Floridians apparently saying that masks are important.[[52]](#footnote-52) All in all, DeSantis seems to have been consistent with his messaging and to have implemented policy similar to that of governors Cuomo and Newsom in the beginning of the pandemic. The fact that Florida’s per capita death rate falls between New York and California represents a confounding factor in the correlations between executive action and case numbers we have looked at so far, as DeSantis’s actions and policy seem to have had little to do with the virus’ spread through his state and with the opinions toward masks of his constituents.

Lastly, we turn to South Dakota, which has the ninth highest per capita death rate by state with 1,111 total deaths and 87,038 total cases, which positions South Dakota below New York but above California and Florida.[[53]](#footnote-53) Just as the other governors we have looked at so far, South Dakota governor Kristi Noem attempted early on to take executive measures to halt the spread of the virus. On March 23, after South Dakota started seeing community spread of the virus in multiple areas, Noem held a press conference in which she established a set of guidelines with which she urged businesses in the state to comply.[[54]](#footnote-54) She earned criticism, however, because she did not specify what specific consequences businesses or individuals would suffer for not following these guidelines, leading many to accuse her of being far too lax with her restrictions. Noem defended her policy decision by claiming that policies should be decided by local government and should use a data-based approach for fear that too harsh restrictions would adversely affect South Dakota’s economy and the mental health of its citizens.

Throughout April Noem maintained her lighter approach to covid, encouraging businesses and schools to begin holding limited gatherings while maintaining social distancing protocols. Noem acknowledged that this lax policy may indeed lead to greater flare ups in the virus but claimed to be pursuing this policy track in order to continue “putting decision making ‘into the hands of the people’”.[[55]](#footnote-55) She justified this approach by citing the importance of “social interactions, the economy and education”.[[56]](#footnote-56) South Dakota seems to be one of the most extreme states in terms of the levity of its approach. In a December op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, Noem provided more details about her approach. She explained that “The state hasn’t issued lockdowns or mask mandates. We haven’t shut down businesses or closed churches. In fact, our state has never even defined what an ‘essential business’ is”.[[57]](#footnote-57) In this approach, Noem differs greatly from all the governors we have seen in many respects and is by far the most relaxed and, by extension, the most “extreme” in her approach towards covid.

As with the other states we have seen, one way to measure how a governor’s messaging has affected a state’s population is to examine a state’s views on mask-wearing. As of October, a South Dakota State University poll “found a majority of South Dakotans support the idea of a mask mandate”.[[58]](#footnote-58) Further, South Dakota’s largest city, Sioux Falls, already approved such a mandate back in November. Both the poll and the actions of the Sioux Falls government demonstrate that the governor’s messaging has had little direct effect on the feelings or actions of people within the state, as she has refused to take a public stance in favor of masks. And, if we extrapolate from the polling data, we can conclude that a majority of South Dakotans also do wear masks; otherwise, they likely would not support a statewide mask mandate. Thus, the case with South Dakota mirrors that of other states we have looked at, with governor messaging and personal habits having little effect on the views of a state’s inhabitants and on the covid rates of those states.

To conclude, we have examined the correlations (or lack thereof) between the mask-wearing and general covid messaging of political executives and the caseloads and recorded deaths of their respective polities. It appears that regardless of country or state or the degree of strictness with regards to policy, covid will take its course. Perhaps we will only understand why this appears to be the case after we learn much more about covid, for many questions remain that will be vital to our understanding of any future pandemics. What is the best way to halt the spread of covid and any potential future viruses like it? Is there an effective way to stop the virus short of a vaccine? And what types of actions, if any, can political leaders take to best help their constituents weather the difficulties of such catastrophes? While all of these questions still remain unanswered, it is actually Kristi Noem who perhaps best sums up our understanding of the virus so far. In the same Wall Street Journal op-ed mentioned earlier, she speaks of covid in the context of America, although her words apply equally to how covid has affected the entire world. She says, “As we continue to see spike move throughout the country, the course of the virus doesn’t seem to be quantifiably different in the states that, according to the media, did everything ‘right’”.[[59]](#footnote-59) Such is the case with covid the world over, and only more research and time will allow us to understand how this virus and other ones like it can best be contained.

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