

Congregation-Based Vaccination Messaging in the United States

Kraig Beyerlein
Department of Sociology
Center for the Study of Religion and Society
University of Notre Dame

Jason Klocek
School of Politics and International Relations
University of Nottingham

Grace Scartz
Center for the Study of Religion and Society
University of Notre Dame

Between May 21 and June 1, 2021, YouGov administered a survey we designed to a representative sample of 2,500 American adults about religion, mask wearing, and vaccination opinions and behaviors. Those who were part of a religious congregation answered four separate questions about the extent to which—“often,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never”—their leaders or fellow members encouraged or discouraged vaccination against COVID-19. This report presents summary findings of this exposure to congregation-based vaccination messaging.

For our analysis, we collapsed the original responses for each of these questions into binary variables for no encouragement or no discouragement (choosing the “never” option) versus any level of encouragement or discouragement (selecting either “often,” “sometimes,” or “rarely”) for leaders and members. Then, we combined the variables for leader and member encouragement into a single congregation-based encouragement variable and did the same for the discouragement variables. Last, we coded the overlap (or lack thereof) between the binary variables to create an overall congregation-based vaccination messaging variable with mutually-exclusive categories, such as *all* encouragement (i.e., both leader and member encouraged), *all* discouragement (i.e., both leader and member discouraged), or *nothing* (i.e., neither leader nor member encouraged or discouraged).

In what follows, we first discuss the general distribution of congregation-based vaccination messaging for American adults who are part of a congregation. Then, we describe variation in this messaging by religious tradition (for example, Catholic versus Black Protestant), political party identification, and 2020 Presidential candidate vote choice. We conclude by analyzing the relationship between congregation-based vaccination messaging and individual congregants’ vaccination status at the time of our survey.

Figure 1 presents findings for the mutually-exclusive categories of exposure to vaccination messages from congregation-based networks captured in our survey. We see that nearly one-third of American adults in congregations hear uniform messages encouraging vaccination from leaders and fellow members. Only five percent, in contrast, receive uniform messages of discouragement. Roughly one out of every three American adults who are part of a congregation report either mixed or no messaging about vaccination.

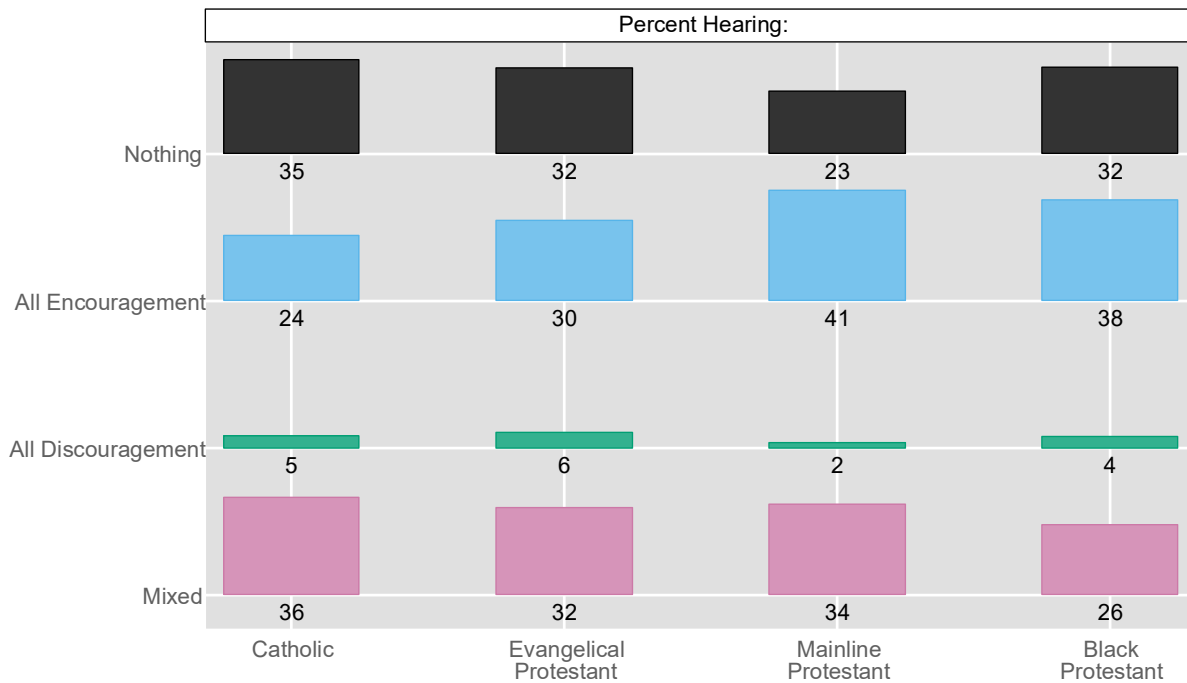
Figure 1. Congregation-Based Vaccination Messages



Note: Percentage does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Looking at Figure 2, we next show variation in exposure to congregation-based vaccination messaging by major Christian traditions in the United States. Twenty-five percent of Catholics and 30% of evangelical Protestants who are part of a congregation hear uniform messages of encouragement compared to over 40% of mainline and 38% of Black Protestant congregants. In contrast, Catholics and evangelical Protestants are more than twice as likely to hear only negative messages about vaccines than are mainline Protestants. A relatively equal number—about a third—of Catholic as well as evangelical and mainline Protestant congregants hear mixed vaccination messages from leaders or laity. Mixed messages of encouragement and discouragement about vaccination are, at roughly a quarter, least common among Black Protestants who belong to a congregation.

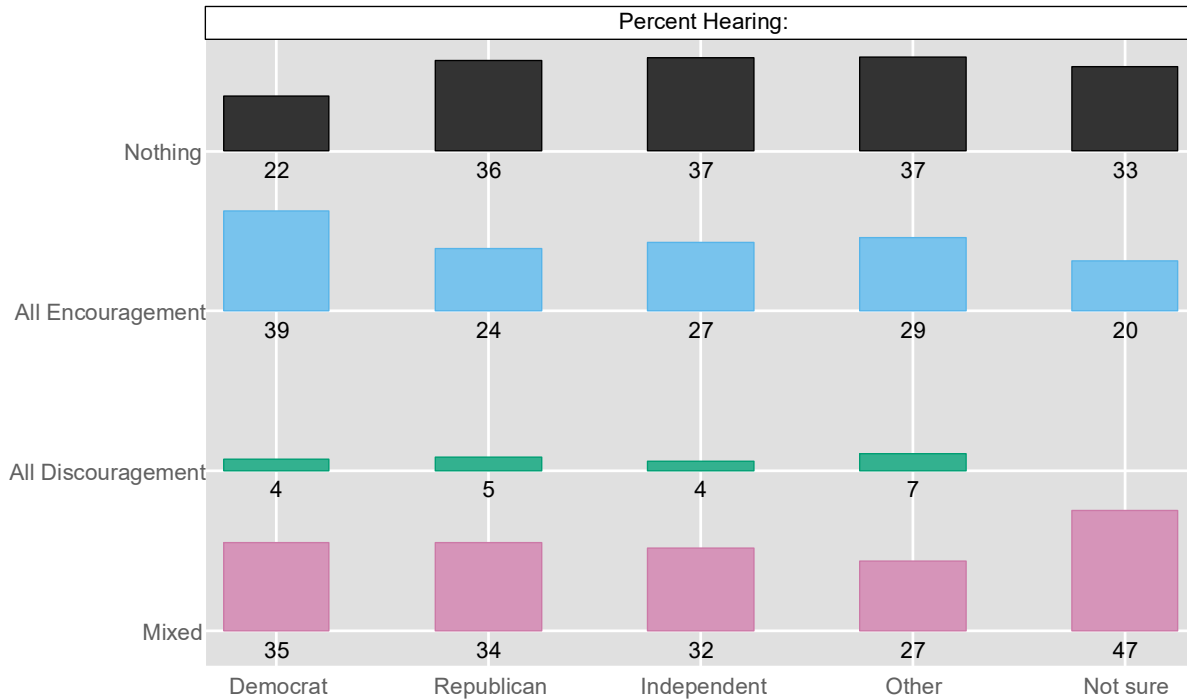
Figure 2. Religious Tradition Variation in Congregation-Based Vaccination Messages



Note: Overall differences are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level; results are not shown for congregants affiliated with other groups because of their small numbers; percentages do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 3 summarizes exposure to congregation-based vaccination messaging by political party identification. Nearly 40% of Democrats in congregations receive uniform messages of encouragement compared to less than 25% of their Republican counterparts. Republicans and Independents are more likely to hear nothing about vaccines (36% and 37%, respectively) than are Democrats (22%). And, we observe similar levels of exposure to mixed messages from leaders or laity among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents who are part of congregations.

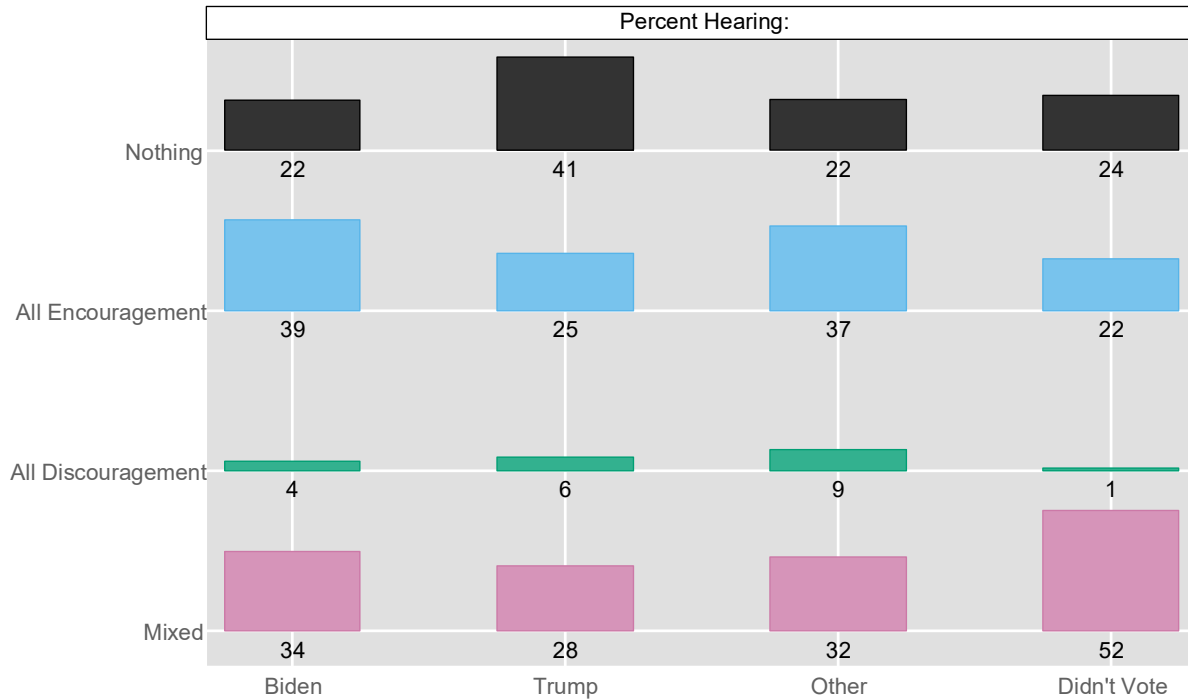
Figure 3. Political Party Variation in Congregation-Based Vaccination Messages



Note: Overall differences are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level; percentages do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 4 reveals that 2020 Presidential candidate vote choice largely overlaps with the prior findings. Biden voters in congregations, for example, are considerably more likely (39%) to hear uniform messages of encouragement about vaccination from leaders or laity than are those who voted for Trump (25%). By contrast, Trump voters in congregations (41%) are nearly twice as likely to hear no messaging compared to Biden voters (22%). Moreover, just over one-third of Biden voters in congregations report mixed messages about vaccines compared to 28% of Trump voters. Furthermore, just over one-third of Biden voters in congregations report mixed messages about vaccines compared to 28% of Trump voters.

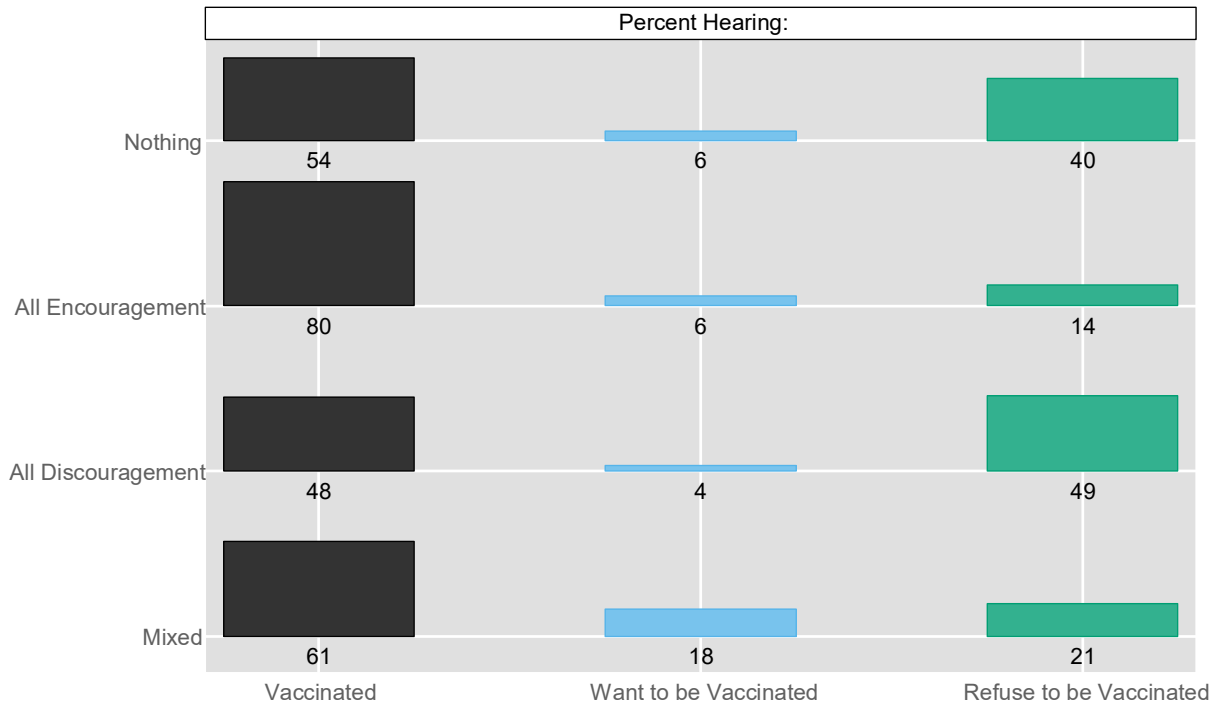
Figure 4. 2020 Presidential Vote Choice by Congregation-Based Vaccination Messages



Note: Overall differences are statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level; percentages do not always add up to 100 because of rounding..

Finally, we turn to the relationship between congregation-based vaccination messaging and individual congregants' vaccination status. Figure 5 shows that nearly 90% of congregants hearing *only* encouraging messages are or want to be vaccinated, while roughly half of congregants hearing *only* messages of discouragement refuse to get vaccinated. More than one-fifth of American adults in congregations who hear mixed vaccination messages also refuse to get vaccinated. This refusal rate jumps to 40% for those who are part of congregation-based networks in which no messaging about vaccination is communicated.

Figure 5. Relationship between Congregation-Based Vaccination Messages and Congregants' Vaccine Status



Note: Overall differences are statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level; percentages do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.