

- Speaker 1: New Jersey has always had a history of division and
- Speaker 2: Everyone needs to be respectful of other people's
- Speaker 3: Decisions. Either side of the mainstream media have polarized opinions.
- Speaker 4: I don't think COVID 19 is a political issue. I consider it a public health issue. It
- Speaker 5: Definitely is political.
- Speaker 6: Welcome to on the pandemic. I'm Mary mark CHTA ode today. I'm joined by Ashley coning director of the Eagleton center for public interest polling. The oldest statewide university [00:00:30] based survey research center in the country. Ashley is here to share her insights on how political the pandemic has become and how polling can help us better understand our current situation. Ashley, thanks for joining us.
- Speaker 5: Thanks so much for having me, Mary.
- Speaker 6: So one of the things that I have heard many people talk about during the pandemic is how political it's become. And certainly we saw this, um, evidenced in the presidential [00:01:00] election and here in New Jersey and our governor's reelection campaign. Um, we've heard a lot about how our country is divided over issues around the pandemic from your polling data. Do you think that our state is divided as well?
- Speaker 5: Most certainly. I think, you know, the word that we can use for the past several years is unprecedented. We had an unprecedented pandemic amidst, an unprecedented political scene that really goes back to 2016. And you know, this is something [00:01:30] that has bled into our state politics as well, uh, where we've seen, you know, this kind of, um, uh, first a, a triumphant support of Murphy as this pandemic first started, uh, and everything was, was new and mysterious and scary and tragic. And that kind of, we, we can even say a rally effect or rally around the flag effect quickly faded as the pandemic continued on. And the division that we see nationally, we [00:02:00] also see on a statewide level, um, especially when it comes to first and foremost partisanship, the, the pandemic has become something extremely not only political, but partisan. We see this in, you know, the, the behaviors and attitudes of Democrats versus Republicans on different issues and behaviors of the pandemic.
- Speaker 5: We see this in governor Murphy's favorability and approval ratings, reaching sky high favorability and approval ratings back in May, 2020, having an approval [00:02:30] high of any governor in the state at 77%, even about half of, uh, Republicans behind him then, and then this very quickly tapering off in the months that followed and by fall coming back down towards his numbers with the deep partisan and divide all the way to today now past a gubernatorial election in 2021. So we've certainly seen a, a big change fueled by politics during this pandemic. In fact, the two have just become inextricably intertwined at this point. [00:03:00] I don't think we can talk about one without talking about the other.

Speaker 6: So let's take a little bit of a step back here in my mind. There's a difference between things being political issues versus partisan issues. So for me, I think it, it, an issue is a political issue if our government or our politicians, they're talking about it and are working on it and see it as part of their job. Um, and so therefore if doing a good job or messing something up is going to either [00:03:30] make or break a reelection campaign in my mind, that's a little bit different than something that's a partisan issue, which is when I see things where people take a particular position, according to either being a Republican or a Democrat or an independent. And I guess my question is, are when you're polling on these kinds of topics, how do you draw conclusions on is something political or partisan? Like, what's the difference?

Speaker 5: Yeah, so I, I think you really gave a, a great [00:04:00] definition of what we could say is political versus partisan. I mean, when we look at the political science literature, if we talk about something being, being political, um, we, we can even talk about this a little bit later, but like a natural disaster, like hurricane Sandy political implications, you know, being whether or not citizens decide to vote for a particular politician or so part of particular politician because of their actions and their policies. But now we're in this era of hyper-partisanship and polarization, which arguably we can say we've [00:04:30] been in this really hyperpartisan state since 2000. So, you know, for the, the past two decades at this point, that really only escalated from 2016 onwards. So for re pandemic, we have a, a historic election, 2016, um, you know, unexpected results, uh, especially when it comes to the, the pre-election polling.

Speaker 5: And we have another election that we are of in the middle of primaries for when a pandemic hits. And so, you know, everything [00:05:00] become partisan given that this pandemic is overlaid, uh, on sitting on top of a, another monumental election, kind of a, a fight to the death type of election between these two parties. And so, you know, I, I think where we see these divisions and splits from the very beginning of the pandemic indicates how highly polarized and partisan everything is. I mean, I was looking back at our numbers from May, 2020, which seems like forever ago [00:05:30] at this point, asking about if there were a vaccine, what would you do? And of course, Trump was president at the time and Democrats actually were, were more hesitant about getting a vaccine than, and Republicans, especially when it's worded as a first generation vaccine, um, or just a vaccine when, when it was worded as safe and effective, the Republicans and Democrats alike were about equally likely to say they would get it.

Speaker 5: But it's so funny as we've seen and, and not funny haha, but, but just funny, [00:06:00] interesting that we've seen this progress now to Republicans being the ones who are the group most, uh, or the least likely rather to be vaccinated and to say that they would not be willing to be vaccinated. And so that, that is a clear indication of how much partisanship has played a role in this pandemic. And we see it on everything. We see it not only on vaccines, but on masking on ways that were living life. You know, in the very beginning we saw that everybody was washing their hands. Everybody was using [00:06:30] disinfectant. Everybody was wearing a mask according to our polling, but we always saw Democrats slightly more worried than and Republicans and the 2020 election has just exacerbated this difference, uh, especially between Republicans and

Democrats and really flipped a lot of attitudes on their head because of who the party in power is both nationally and within the state.

Speaker 6: So let me see if I have this right. So you're saying early on when Trump was the president and, [00:07:00] um, you know, you were polling if, if he was sort of seen as the leader advocating for the vaccine, it was more likely that Republicans would be supportive of getting vaccinated, but when it switched and Biden was the president, then Republicans were of switched their opinion because of who was delivering the message. And that is essentially the partisanship that you're talking about.

Speaker 5: Yeah, very much so. And, and obviously, you know, we, we [00:07:30] do this kind of stuff and know this kind of stuff all the time. In terms of you add a politician's name to a question in a survey, or you talk about a particular or political party and that's going to influence or reframe the it's going to frame the question and influence the results of, of what a respondent respond. And this has become no different. The pandemic has become so partisan in terms of the actions taken and the policies supported and just the way in which different partisans are living their lives, [00:08:00] um, that who's in power makes a big difference. Um, and, and obviously, you know, if we saw this monumental election in 2020, so when we were under a president Trump at the time and vaccines weren't even on the market yet, we actually saw, like you said, more support from the G O P or from, from individuals who identified as Republican and then fast forward six, eight months later when we're talking spring 20, 21, the ones who had been getting the vaccines more so, and to this day [00:08:30] have been more likely to be Democrat.

Speaker 5: And, and we find that that one in six in New Jersey, at least according to our polling numbers who have yet to be vaccinated there for about half of them, there's absolutely nothing you can do. And some of them, in fact, even mentioned things like president Trump being the only reason or the only thing that would get them to get vaccinated. So definitely living in a time of, of hyper hyper-partisanship on every level, even when it comes to the pandemic.

Speaker 6: Okay. So [00:09:00] taking another, uh, step back, tell me a little bit about how polling works. How do you get this information out of people and what are the sort of strengths and weaknesses of the data?

Speaker 5: Yeah, so, you know, I like to be a hopeless, romantic and think about, uh, going back, George Gallup in the 1930s and forties and the, the, uh, birth of, of scientific public opinion, polling and George Gallup used to say that this is really the only way we can assess the public and portray that those attitudes and [00:09:30] those practices and behaviors back to policymakers and make ourselves live a truer democracy. So to me, public opinion, polling really connects the, the public, the press and policy makers altogether. And it's, it's really the political participatory act that requires so few resources on behalf of the individual. We talk about voting requiring time donations, requiring money, rallies tests, writing letters, all of that requiring resources. A lot of times that citizens [00:10:00] or individuals don't have, but for polling, we call you and we do it in a or pollsters are supposed to do it in a scientific and representative fashion.

Speaker 5: So your voice is being represented in the public the way it in the poll, the way in which it's represented in public. And so we do something that's called on the telephone random digit dialing. And so we, we scientifically randomly pull a sample of our target population. For me, that would be New Jersey, um, as someone who pulls within [00:10:30] New Jersey and we can then take those results we get because they are scientifically done and based on sticks and probability, we can take those results and translate them back to the general public. So I can say, you know, 57% say they're still wearing a mask or, you know, 75% say that they're vaccinated. Um, and because we uphold that gold standard of pulling by pulling that scientific, random sample P selecting people at random waiting that data [00:11:00] to the census parameters that we know are true population parameters. We have a good survey estimate within some certain band of confidence that we call the margin of error that we could say. If we actually talk to every single person in the population, we would be somewhere around this survey, estimate this number for any particular attitude, behavior practice and so on. So it really is a good scientific measure, especially for things that never get their day at the ballot box. We [00:11:30] vote on elections, but there's so much we don't vote on that is necessary to know public opinion for.

Speaker 6: So let's talk a little bit about something you mentioned earlier, which is the rally effect and how people rally around their leader during times of emergency. You've talked about COVID, you've co talked about Superstore in Sandy. How do you measure what that effect is?

Speaker 5: So typically when we talk about rally around the flag effects, we've the, the literature mainly places it, you know, in, in [00:12:00] the social sciences, within the context of national figures, usually the president times of crisis, times of war boots on the ground on foreign soil, the definition shifted slightly with nine 11. If we think back to nine 11 and the sky hide 90 something percent approval ratings, president George W. Bush had, but now, you know, there there's been so much that has gone on in the past several decades, rally around the flag effects can be applied to other things. Sometimes they've been applied to natural disasters, [00:12:30] although there's, there's a lot more about NA natural disasters, um, with politicians being punished for natural disasters. And so governor Murphy can be seen as somewhere in between when it comes to the governor and the pandemic. It's funny because actually with the previous governor, governor Christie, we saw a, another very, uh, tragic interesting unprecedented moment in Superstorm Sandy.

Speaker 5: And so it becomes even more interesting when we juxtapose the natural disaster with [00:13:00] the health crisis, with one another, and these two governors and how the public responded back in, in the days, uh, uh, immediately following Superstorm Sandy, we saw sky high approval ratings for governor Christie, the highest of any governor on record with us in the state. Um, and this carried through to his reelection in 2013, the only, well, the biggest reason that brought those, those, uh, ratings of approval and favorability down was frankly, Bridgegate when the Bridgegate scandal broke in January, 2014. [00:13:30] But up until then, uh, Christie had high work from partisans of all stripes, fast forward to the pandemic and governor Murphy. We saw this rally around

the flag effect with his approval rating, even best in governor Christie in May, 2020, but with a, a much more rapid decline than governor Christie saw.

Speaker 5: Again, given hyper-partisanship given the, the politics and the partisan partisan ship inherent in the pandemic, governor Murphy was [00:14:00] continually having to make policy and action and decisions on the pandemic that by the time we reached fall 20, 20 partisans kind of receded back to their sides, Democrats, of course still strongly report supporting Murphy Republicans, not, uh, whereas, you know, rewind a couple months before then. And we saw Republican support, we saw bipartisan support, but that, like I said, quickly faded as we continued with the pandemic and as decisions continually had to be made that had political [00:14:30] implications.

Speaker 6: So how do you think that has impacted governor Murphy, um, into terms of, I mean, he had to also run for reelection during that time and arguably we're still working through policy decision making in the pandemic response now and recovery theoretically.

Speaker 5: Yeah. You know, I, I think we see this nationally, we see this in other states and not just New Jersey, obviously every political figure, especially those in executive [00:15:00] offices have had to make decisions that impact their political futures, the future of their, their parties. Uh, and they, they have had to do this in real time. And this has become a very difficult, uh, both health exercise and political exercise. And now we're kind of, I think of it as we're on two different roads now, a political pandemic and, and an actual health crisis pandemic and that political pandemic by, by many leaders by many administrations across the country has kind [00:15:30] of been declared essentially over. I, I mean, we, we have most, if not all of our regulations lifted in New Jersey and, and an urge to kind of return to a, a sense of normalcy politically because the pandemic has had real political implications. We were coming off of a New Jersey, a gubernatorial election, which was rather close more than anyone had predicted, um, mainly fueled by a lot of that frustration and, and grief and the, the upset feelings of voters who [00:16:00] were growing tired with a pandemic and pandemic, uh, regulations. And instead were going back to bread and butter issues of taxes and especially property taxes and cost of living in affordability.

Speaker 6: I remember one strong issue was opening schools. Um, yes, that was, and as a mom of three kids that was close to my heart as well. I really did wanna see a plan for getting schools and my children out of my house. Um, but I do, you know, that was a really strong conversation. [00:16:30] I think that was happening during the, the re election campaign.

Speaker 5: Right. And, and those were issues that governor Murphy had to think about carefully throughout the months, uh, you know, uh, leading up to the election because every decision he made was in real time and had consequences for the election contrast that was super storm Sandy. If we talk about Sandy, there were certainly decisions that governor of Christie had made. Um, but you know, those, those, the, the hurricane or the, the storm happened, and then there was an aftermath, [00:17:00] the pandemic keeps happening, it keeps evolving, things keep changing. And so that's kind of the, the big difference, the big key difference here with, with governor Murphy leading during

this particular time of crisis, you know, so I, I think, think that's why his rally around the flag effect dissipated so quickly and why we see for many political figures, including the president himself, this turned from talking about the pandemic as a public health crisis to more learning [00:17:30] how to live with it. It's because voters are ready to move on after, after two years of this, um, which, you know, had originally been two weeks.

Speaker 6: So one of the things that your polling data, um, has been asking, or the questions that you've been asking is whether or not people feel like the pandemic is over or not, and whether or not they feel it's technically over, or just want it to be over and are moving on from it. And that's kind of what you're talking about. So what does the polling tell us about how new jersey's [00:18:00] feel New Jersey and feel about whether or not this pandemic is over?

Speaker 5: Yeah, so I looked back at our may 20, 20 numbers, and man, we were so hopeful, um, 75% thought that the pandemic was going to end by the end of 2020. And, uh, boy, I, I wish that had been true. Um, you know, a 25% thought it would last longer when we fast forward to November, 2020, when we did our next poll, uh, we actually saw that about two thirds, say that be another year before [00:18:30] the pandemic were over 30% said longer. Um, now fast forward all the way, uh, to March, 2022, when we did our last poll and about 12% think the pandemic's completely over now, 30%, mostly and 20% halfway. And actually most people aren't either very or somewhat comfortable turning to some sense of normal, 50, 54% say Barry, 33% say somewhat comfortable. So, you know, those numbers indicate that, that people are kind of ready. They're, they're kind [00:19:00] of ready to enter a more normal chapter of life, uh, in our polling. There's been more and more comfort with doing things like indoor dining and indoor concerts and seeing to people outside of your household. Um, you know, I, I think it's one of these things where the, the anecdotes and what we observe empirically in the outside world as an individual really, really mirrors what we see in the scientific estimates on a poll. Um, people are ready and people are doing it

Speaker 6: Another interesting, [00:19:30] fine in your reporting has been around vaccinations. And you've mentioned that a little bit, and sometimes I think it seems like that plays into whether or not people are ready to move on to normal. Um, in terms of some of the national data, um, when we look at New Jersey, we're a very highly vaccinated state, um, with nearly 90% of our pro population having had at least one shot. Now the recommendations around vaccines have continued to evolve, you know, and adding additional shots. [00:20:00] That continues to be, um, a question for the future as well. Um, but you know, one of the things that you had seen, um, is sort of variability in terms of who is getting vaccinated, and if they are UN vaccinated, will they change their mind? And so I'm interested if you could just share with us a little bit about, you know, for those people who remain UN vaccinated, what, [00:20:30] why are they taking that position and are they malleable or is it just something set in stone?

Speaker 5: Yeah, I, I think we're really left with the segment of the population that will not budge. And I think that's why we've seen such a shift in political language and tone as well when it comes to vaccinations most New Jersey and say, they're, they're vaccinated reflecting the actual numbers in the state. Um, you know, and, and, uh, a portion say

they're vaccinated and boosted. We [00:21:00] have about one and six still. And, and this has been now for a year who are UN vaccinated and among the only 12% say they would definitely, or probably get vaccinated in the near future 4%, definitely 8% probably, uh, 19% probably will not 64% say they definitely will not. And, you know, we we've asked reasons time and time again. And it's, you know, there's always been a concern about side effect. Um, over half don't trust, the government, [00:21:30] half over half say it was developed too quickly over half don't think they need it. Um, you know, these are all major reasons, uh, you know, but, but when it comes down to it, half of these UN vaccinated individuals say nothing will get them to be vaccinated 8% say more inform might 7% say time, 25% say something else, but you're, you're really dealing with a, a segment, you know, albeit gratefully a small segment, but, uh, and a notable segment, nonetheless, [00:22:00] that will not budge. Um, and they are more likely to be again, looking at that partisan divide Republican,

Speaker 6: And is some of that also related to kids because, you know, the availability of childhood vaccine has been a shorter amount of time. And yet also still the zero to five are uneligible because there's no vaccine available to them. So how does it look when you look at kids?

Speaker 5: So our surveys are of adults who are 18 years or older. And so that was among the adult [00:22:30] population. When we look at kids, um, you know, we, we now are breaking it down into five and older and, and under fives because of the, the disparity in vaccine availability. And so among those with children, five or older, almost half have say, say that they've vaccinated their child, um, among those with children of any age, age, under 18, almost three and 10 who have yet to vaccinate their child against COVID 19 say they will definitely, or probably do. So, one third on the other hand say they probably, or [00:23:00] definitely will not the number of parents or guardians with children under five was, was small in our sample. Um, admittedly, uh, but the, we do see that about three and 10 or more say they definitely are, probably will get their, their under five child specifically vaccinated. So again, you know, we, we have, uh, we have a split among parents and guardians in terms of child vaccination status, but of course those numbers will increase somewhat once [00:23:30] the, the under five vaccine will become available. And we do see some, some willingness, a good number who are willing to do so for their, their toddlers.

Speaker 6: So from your sort of political science perspective, what's the message to our public health, um, leaders and workers who are still working to increase vaccination rates. And also, um, not just the fundamental rate, but get people boosted because that's an area where New Jersey has actually lagged behind many other states. Um, you know, when [00:24:00] you, what, what can they glean from this information about strategies might help them in their efforts to increase vaccination?

Speaker 5: Yeah, we, we actually have, and I know this is pretty off from the, the real number. Um, we have about 55% in our last poll who say they have been boosted now, you know, polls are subject to human error, um, measurement error of all kinds, including humans necessarily telling the truth. Um, uh, you know, if, if they, uh, you know, we call it [00:24:30] social desirability bias. If they're talking to a live interviewer, a, a live

interviewer will call them on a phone. So this is a stranger they're talking to, and sometimes they want to seem socially desirable, uh, acceptable. And so they may have said, oh yeah, of course I got my booster. And so, you know, we have over half saying that they've already received their booster, but even among those who have been vaccinated, but even in a poll, you know, that, that seems like a relatively known low number among those vaccinated.

Speaker 5: And so I, I would say, you know, uh, as a pollster, [00:25:00] I hope that the administration and public health officials take these numbers and that they inform the public dialogue and also the dialogue going on with, within politics and within the public health realm to decide what to do next. I think we've already seen some of those shifts, um, in public health and, and within the, the current administration in terms of, you know, uh, targeting certain groups, um, to get back, uh, who are, are perhaps more malleable, [00:25:30] um, you know, talking about treatments as well. Um, talking about availability for children, talking about booster shots. Um, again, I, I think we're really down to before that, that under five category opens up, we are down to a very, uh, uh, very UN unbudging segment of the population, um, that it becomes harder and harder to message to, and, and try to flip opinions among, um, [00:26:00] you know, I, I think it, it becomes a very difficult task, a very difficult road ahead, especially as surprise, we head into more elections with, of the midterms and, and in New Jersey, we frankly have elections literally every year because of how our, our system works.

Speaker 5: It becomes harder and harder for those in power to do that because it could very easily get them voted out. Um, if, if the voices are loud enough and strong enough to do so, that oppose what they're doing,

Speaker 6: Any final thoughts that you wanna share with Ashley,

Speaker 5: [00:26:30] Uh, you know, just that this has been one of those kind of monumental topics. Again, I'll use that word unprecedented that I think we're going to be asking questions about in the survey research field for a long time and have reverberated among all issues, uh, that we, that we pull on, whether we're talking about statewide or national polls, and this is something that is certainly going to have a ripple effect into politics well into the near future, uh, [00:27:00] including 20, 24 for the next president.

Speaker 6: Thank you so much for joining us here today.

Speaker 5: Thanks for having me, Mary,

Speaker 6: Thank you for joining us for this episode of on the pandemic. This is Mary odod executive director of health systems and population health integration for Rutgers university. For more information on the Rutgers Eagleton poll, please visit Eagle EDU.