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Why the NBA Shut Down First: How Partisan Polarization Informs Sports and Public Health

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CHAPTER

Why the NBA Shut Down First: How Partisan Polarization Informs Sports and Public Health

Andrew M. Lindner & Daniel N. Hawkins

INTRODUCTION

At 3:30 PM EST on March 11, 2020, National Basketball Association (NBA) team owners concluded a conference call regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. They believed that Commissioner Adam Silver would soon announce that games would proceed in empty arenas. While European soccer leagues had canceled matches, just the day before the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) had taken the more tepid step of announcing that the March Madness tournaments would be played without fans in the stands. There were only about a thousand confirmed cases of coronavirus in the United States at that time, and the NBA owners were divided on how to proceed. According to Ramona Shelburne's (2020) reporting for ESPN, the respective owners of the Golden State Warriors, the Oklahoma City Thunder, and the Houston Rockets argued for a temporary postponement of games. But the majority of owners prevailed in support of the less drastic plan in which the season would continue as scheduled, albeit without the presence of spectators.

Meanwhile, in Oklahoma City, Rudy Gobert, star center for the Utah Jazz, was confined to a hotel room, awaiting the results of a Covid-19 test he had taken that morning. As his teammates warmed up on the Thunder's court and fans took their seats, Gobert received the news that he had tested positive for the contagious and potentially deadly virus. Minutes from the 8:00 PM EST tipoff, as the general managers of the Jazz and Thunder, Oklahoma City public health officials, and Adam Silver scrambled to formulate a new plan, the arena announcer told fans that there would be a thirty-minute delay of game (Shelburne 2020; Cacciola and Deb 2020). The referees directed players to the locker room where they would don protective gear and wait. Shortly thereafter, arena loudspeakers reassured fans that they were safe, but informed them the game was postponed and they were to exit the arena.

For Americans at home, the evening of March 11 offered a startling line-up of television, beginning with a halting and hesitant declaration of a national state of emergency from the White House, followed by news of plummeting stock futures and an announcement that beloved Hollywood couple, Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, had contracted the disease. Finally, viewers watched a surreal scene unfold at Chesapeake Energy Arena in Oklahoma City as the NBA announced that an unnamed player had tested positive for the Covid-19 virus, leading to an immediate suspension of all games.

Silver characterized the suspension order as “a split-second decision” (Shelburne 2020). In the twenty-four hours that followed, the National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), and the NCAA all followed suit, but by early March, the conditions were such that it seemed pre-ordained that the NBA should be the league to lead the way. In this chapter, we argue that beyond practical considerations, the NBA’s position as the most socially and culturally progressive of the major U.S. sports leagues informed its decision to suspend games, even as both government officials and other sporting entities dithered.

WAS THE NBA SHUTDOWN JUST COMMON SENSE?

There were, of course, pragmatic reasons related to the timing of the outbreak and the particular circumstances of professional basketball that may have helped push the NBA toward an early shutdown decision. Unlike the NFL or MLB, the NBA in early March was on the homestretch of its regular season. Continuing to play, even in empty arenas, would mean exposing players, coaches, and training staffs three to four times a week to the risk of contracting the virus, putting the lucrative postseason playoffs in jeopardy. Furthermore, Commissioner Silver must have been aware that the powerful NBA Players Association could preemptively step in to protect player health (Coleman 2019). At that point, however, NBA union leaders—and leaders of similarly strong unions like the MLBPA—had not spoken out prominently about the Covid-19 threat.

Given the nature of the sport itself, the NBA also had fewer options than other leagues for protecting players from viral transmission on the court if play were to continue. By early March, it was already suspected that the Covid-19 virus, like other respiratory viruses, spreads more effectively in enclosed, climate-controlled environments (Schuchat 2020), so Silver may have viewed playing in indoor arenas (rather than the open-air stadiums of outdoor sports) as an unacceptable risk. While it is hard to imagine many professional athletes consenting to wearing a mask during competition, adding a version of a protective face shield to helmets—hypothetically possible in football, hockey, or even baseball—was not an option for basketball players. Furthermore, the smaller playing area and requirement of constant man-to-man defense likely puts NBA players in more continuous direct physical contact with each other than in any other major team sport. Still, every league faced risks and challenges related to the virus, and the idea of a sports league shutting down completely had not yet entered the public consciousness. It seems unlikely that these practical factors alone would explain Silver’s monumental decision to suspend the season effective immediately after a single positive test for Covid-19 among the players.

STERN, SILVER, AND THE CULTURE OF THE NBA

From the early days of the NBA, players were active in social and racial justice causes, from Elgin Baylor boycotting games in cities with segregated hotels to Bill Russell and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (still a college player at that time) supporting the Olympic Project for Human Rights ahead of the 1968 Summer Olympics (Woike 2020). Still, the NBA’s mid-March shutdown decision might not have happened absent the cultural sea change within the league brought about by its current commissioner, Adam Silver, and his immediate predecessor, the late David Stern. Although Stern’s and Silver’s leadership styles and league priorities differed substantially at times, both commissioners are responsible for the socially progressive climate in the current NBA. In particular, the two leaders established the NBA as a league that was unafraid to

address issues of racial justice, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights, helping empower its players to do the same (Coleman 2019; Devine 2020; Jenkins 2014). We acknowledge that the NBA's brand of "progressivism" does not necessarily extend beyond the aforementioned social issues into a more expansive leftist policy agenda, including universal healthcare, environmental justice, or deep structural changes to the free market system. Instead, we use the term "progressive" in this chapter to refer to support for social and cultural change that would bring about equality for minority groups, which is attractive to, if not demanded by, a politically left-leaning fan base.

As commissioner from 1984 to 2014, David Stern was a brash and sometimes authoritarian perfectionist who viewed his essential role as being the league's "bodyguard," protecting its reputation and economic growth at all costs (Ballard 2018). The financial success of the league during Stern's tenure is undeniable, with revenues increasing from \$118 million in 1983 to \$4.6 billion in 2013 (Badenhausen 2014). Certainly, had the NBA not become a global powerhouse under Stern, the public platform that today's NBA players enjoy in speaking on social issues would be much smaller.

As part of his plan to turn the NBA into an economic and cultural juggernaut, Stern did not hesitate to feature prominent Black players as the league's superstars and main attractions. Internally, he worked behind the scenes to help two of these superstars, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan, become among the first Black NBA owners after their playing careers had ended (Devine 2020). In league and team offices, the NBA received increasingly higher grades on racial and gender diversity in hiring from the Institute for Diversity in Ethics and Sport, with consistently better scores than other major U.S. sports leagues (Devine 2020). During this time, the NBA fan base became more racially diverse (Nielsen 2016; Silver 2014) as the league embraced hip-hop music and Black celebrities as part of their culture (Boyd 2008).

Of course, Stern's tenure as commissioner did not pass without deserved criticism of some of his more reactionary decisions. Non-superstar Black players like Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf—who challenged league and government authorities on political and social issues in the 1990s—saw their NBA careers end early without support from Stern (Devine 2020; Woike 2020). The dress code that Stern established in 2005 in response to the "urban" (i.e., not White, middle class, business casual) clothing preferences of many Black players was myopic at best and racist at worst (McDonald and Toglia 2010). To avoid the dreaded "thug" label being applied to the league, Stern had no qualms about severely punishing Black players for quasi-criminal acts such as the "Malice in the Palace" fight that spilled into the crowd or Gilbert Arenas's brandishing of a gun in his team's locker room (Abrams 2012; Leonard 2010; Lorenz and Murray 2014).

Adam Silver served as deputy NBA commissioner for over a decade under Stern until becoming his successor in 2014. In contrast to Stern, Silver is an empathetic leader, known for his tendency to seek out contrasting perspectives and willingness to make himself vulnerable (Jenkins 2014). Silver displayed his commitment to social justice before joining the NBA, working pro bono at a legal aid clinic in Chicago while in law school (*ibid*), and he has continued that commitment as commissioner. For example, in 2017, Silver moved the NBA All-Star Game away from Charlotte after the state of North Carolina implemented an anti-LGBTQ piece of legislation (Nadkarni 2017). In terms of gender equity, he continues to promote and invest in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), albeit without great financial success and to

a lesser degree than WNBA players and fans of women's basketball would like to see (Fader 2018).

Silver's defining moment as a socially progressive commissioner came very early in his tenure and in a very public way. He banned Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling from the NBA for life and essentially forced him to sell the team after Sterling's racist comments were caught on tape (Jenkins 2014; Nadkarni 2017). His ability to make such a decisive call after considering and integrating multiple viewpoints was a key to his success, as it was again in 2017 in the midst of the NFL anthem protests. Silver quietly reminded teams of the NBA's requirement (in place since 1981) that players and team personnel stand during the national anthem, but he accompanied that reminder with a memo encouraging players to pursue their social consciousness to find a "meaningful way to make [a] difference" (Mather 2020). Before and since, he has publicly supported protest statements by players inside and outside of NBA arenas, such as the photo of the entire Miami Heat team wearing hoodies in honor of Trayvon Martin, a Black unarmed teenager killed while walking in his neighborhood. In another incidence, players from multiple teams wore "I Can't Breathe" t-shirts during warm-ups in memory of Eric Garner, a Black man who died of suffocation after New York police applied a chokehold (Wulf, 2019). While leaders like Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James have spearheaded the recent renaissance of player activism, the NBA under Silver has been more supportive of protest and more willing to amplify players' voices than other leagues.

The one recent misstep that challenges Silver's progressive approach is his reaction to the Hong Kong controversy. On October 4, 2019, Daryl Morey, general manager of the Houston Rockets (the most popular NBA team in China due in part to its association with Chinese basketball star Yao Ming), tweeted in support of the anti-government Hong Kong protesters, who were challenging a new Chinese extradition law (Nguyen 2019). The tweet was met with immediate backlash from the Chinese government, as well as media, broadcast partners, and fans in mainland China (Schneider 2019). The NBA's business interests in China, where more people watch the NBA than in the United States, were clearly threatened (*ibid.*). LeBron James was critical of the tweet, which Morey had since taken down, while Silver issued a statement that supported Morey's right to free speech while clearly avoiding taking the side of the pro-democracy protesters over the Chinese government (Kharpal 2019). The commissioner was chastised from all sides for his noncommittal stance, including by Chinese state media, American sportswriters, and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence (Mangan 2019). When the pandemic hit, Silver likely considered that if the NBA appeared to value profits over human lives for a second time in a season by continuing to play, it may have lasting negative consequences for its image and its business.

THE PARTISANSHIP OF THE NBA

As the NBA has carved out a singular identity among U.S. sports leagues, the wider political context of the country has been changing rapidly. Since the late 1970s, Americans have grown increasingly polarized along party lines, meaning that people with the same policy preferences sort themselves more neatly into the two major national political parties, Republicans and Democrats (McCarthy et al., 2016; Sides et al., 2019). To a far greater extent than in the past, Republicans are more consistently conservative across a range of issues, and Democrats tend to be more uniformly liberal. At the same time, political scientists have noted the rise of "negative partisanship," in which Americans cast their votes based on antagonism towards the opposing party, rather than a genuine enthusiasm for their preferred party (Abramowitz and Webster

2016; Sides et al. 2019). The upshot of these changes is that politics are more sharply divided and more hostile than they have been in decades.

But politics do not stay confined to the political arena. Research has shown that party membership is now more likely to align with other identities than in past (Mason 2018). For example, Democrats are more likely to be urban, young, college-educated, and people of color, while the Republican Party skews toward rural and older White people without college degrees. As multiple identities stack up and get tied together, they become an even more powerful social dividing line. Today, Republicans and Democrats are likely to choose a neighborhood based on its political leanings (Sussell 2013), and a majority of people oppose their children marrying someone of another political party (Vavreck 2017). One study even found evidence that people modify their religious identities over time to be more in line with their political preferences (Margolis 2018). With so much tied to political identities, it is unsurprising that partisanship appears to influence our cultural tastes in things like preferred beers, restaurants, and leisure activities (Shi et al. 2017).

Sports have always been political. From athlete protests to political statements by fans to team executives' avoidance or engagement with issues of the day, sports are and have always been entangled with the political (Edwards 2018; Kaufmann and Wolff 2010; Mirer and Grubic 2019). Fans who argue that sports ought to be a politics-free zone are, ironically, engaged in a political act (Hartmann 2019). But sports are political even when they do not seem to be. Each of us has our own constellation of racial attitudes, political ideology, and partisan identity that shape the way that we think about the social world, including which sports leagues operate decently and fairly.

The pre-game military color guard that strikes a strong Republican as a respectful, patriotic gesture may seem like a gratuitous nationalistic display to a strong Democrat (Lindner and Hawkins 2020b). In our past research, we have shown that Republicans are significantly more likely to view soccer as “un-American” compared to sports like American football and baseball (Lindner and Hawkins 2012). Partisan identities are associated with not only preferences among sports, but also with beliefs about which leagues present their sport “the right way” (Paine et al. 2017).

In October 2017, we commissioned a nationally representative online survey of 1,089 respondents living in the United States conducted by SurveyMonkey Audiences to better understand the links among attitudes about sports, political beliefs, and individual sociodemographic characteristics. Because Whites and women were slightly overrepresented in the sample, we weighted all results to reflect national proportions in terms of race and gender. In the survey (margin of error: $\pm 3.1\%$), we asked respondents about how often they watch various sports when in season either on TV or in person with the options, “Never,” “Rarely,” “Occasionally,” “Frequently,” or “Never Miss A Game.” We also inquired about specific sports leagues and asked respondents to rate each league on a “feeling thermometer,” assigning it a number from 0 (“as cold and negative as possible”) to 100 (“as warm and positive as possible”), with 50 as the neutral point.

Figure 1 depicts the average frequency of watching various sports by political party. The sports are arranged vertically from the most watched sport (the NFL) to the least (any soccer). The colored dots indicate the average for Republicans (red), Independents (gray), and Democrats (blue). The typical pattern is for Republicans and independents to watch somewhat more of the major sports than Democrats. That is true of the NFL, MLB, NHL, college football, and college basketball. The exceptions to that general pattern are soccer—a sport which has only relatively recently developed a major league in the United States—and the NBA. Republicans tend to watch the NBA less than either Democrats or independents, but it is not because they don't like basketball. In fact, Republicans watch more college basketball than Democrats.

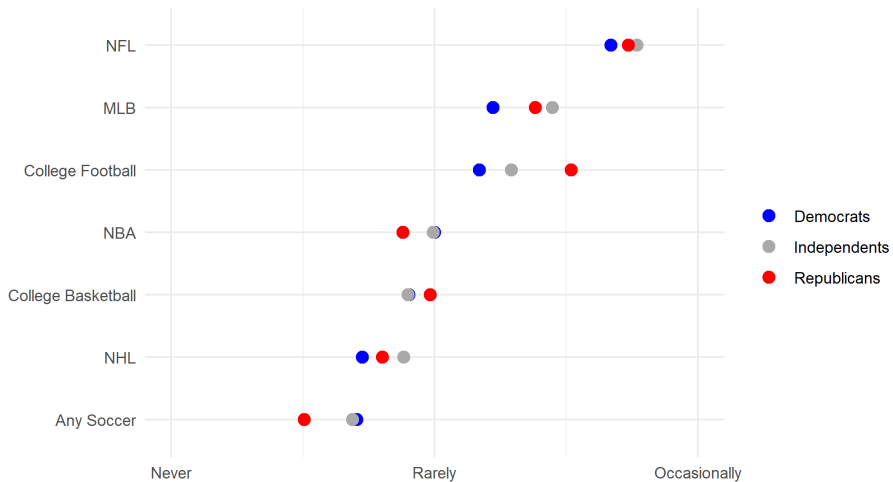


Figure 1: Average In-Season Sports Watching Frequency By Party
Source: Lindner and Hawkins, 2020a

When asked to rate their feelings about college basketball and the NBA on a scale from 0 to 100, the partisan disparity is even more pronounced. As Figure 2 reveals, a fair number of Republicans feel warmly about intercollegiate basketball, with a higher proportion of Republicans give it a “100” than Democrats. When it comes to the NBA, however, Republicans are much more likely to give the league a “0.” Democrats and independents account for the vast majority of the most enthusiastic fans of the league.

If news reports suggest the league itself has adopted a progressive stance in recent years, our findings show that the NBA fan base leans more Democratic than any of the other major sports leagues. In part, that may be because NBA fans also skew young, urban, and non-White – identities traditionally affiliated with the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, in a regression model, controlling for age, race, urban/rural/suburban context, gender, and income, Democrats still reported NBA feeling thermometer scores that were 7.5 points higher than Republicans and 6.6 points higher than independents.

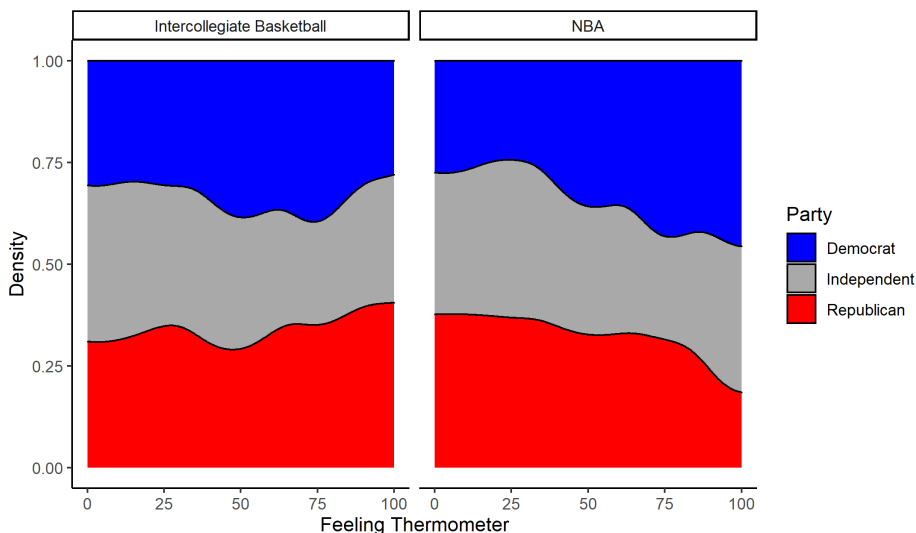


Figure 2: College Basketball and NBA Feeling Thermometer By Party
Source: Lindner and Hawkins, 2020a

The partisan lean of the NBA has become increasingly visible during the 2016 election and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump. Both as a candidate and since taking office, Trump has used racist language, spoken favorably of White nationalists, and repeatedly clashed with prominent Black journalists and public figures (Coates 2017; Graham et al. 2019). It is not surprising, then, that some Black players in a league context that has welcomed activism have been outspoken in their rejection of Trump’s rhetoric and policies. When the Golden State Warriors won the NBA Championship in 2017, Trump’s first year in office, All-Star guard Steph Curry and other members of the team said in interviews that they did not want to participate in the customary ritual of visiting the White House. In a hasty and petulant tweet, Trump rescinded the team’s invitation (Balthaser et al. 2017). Many other players immediately entered the social media fray, with Cleveland Cavaliers guard LeBron James calling Trump a “bum” and adding that “[g]oing to the White House was an honor until you showed up!” Retired NBA legend Kobe Bryant tweeted that Trump’s “name alone creates division and anger” (Reynolds 2017). In the years since, players and several coaches, including the Warriors’ Steve Kerr and the Spurs’ Gregg Popovich, have repeatedly criticized Trump in public. Though Adam Silver and the league office have tried to balance defending players and avoiding conflict with Trump, it is clear that, from the players to the fans to the league leadership, the NBA has taken on a strong identity as a progressive league, far more closely aligned with Democratic principles than those of the Republican Party.

HOW COVID-19 BECAME PARTISAN

Years before COVID-19 entered the national consciousness, Americans’ views on a wide range of issues—from immigration to healthcare to climate change—were polarized. Though partisan polarization had been increasing since the 1970s, the

election of President Trump in 2016 only deepened the division and rancor within the country. A majority of Americans disapproved of Trump's job performance for most of his term, averaging the worst approval rating of any U.S. President in the history of modern polling (Silver 2020). Blacks, Hispanics, young voters, and college-educated people all held strongly negative views of the President, while a proportionally large but demographically declining pool of White, older, rural, non-college educated voters formed the base of the Republican Party (Doherty et al., 2018).

As the 2020 Presidential Election year began, most of Trump's marquee initiatives had failed or become quite unpopular (Crowley 2019; Scott and Kliff 2017). The travel ban on majority-Muslim countries blocked by the courts. The nonexistent expansion of the wall along the Mexican border, intended to prevent an alleged "invading horde" of drug smugglers, human traffickers, and sick migrants. A massive tax cut, which disproportionately favored the wealthy. Friendly overtures to authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin of Russia and Kim Jong-un of North Korea, while eschewing traditional diplomatic ties with western European allies. And that is to say nothing of his Twitter account, which even his Republican allies in Congress were repeatedly forced to describe as "unfortunate" (Associated Press 2019).

The one bright spot, in a period that otherwise felt chaotic, was a robust economy with continuous job growth, historically low unemployment rates, and even modest growth in wages. Even with low approval ratings, an incumbent President with a strong economy stands a fair chance of reelection, and the Trump campaign had already built a 2020 strategy around the strength of the economy (Frazee 2020; Lowrey 2020). For both Trump and his ardent supporters, protecting the talking point of a good economy was crucial to the success of the campaign. It is against this backdrop that the public's unusual response to coronavirus in the United States must be understood.

Normally, emergency responses are not politically divisive, but rather offer moments of rare bipartisanship. Hurricanes, tornados, and immediate public health threats tend to concern politicians of all stripes. Memorably, in 2012, Republican Governor of New Jersey Chris Christie and Democratic President Barack Obama hugged after working cooperatively in the wake of Hurricane Sandy (Miller 2016).

Initially, the story about a novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China, was regarded with the same devout, bipartisan inattention that the American public pays to most international news. In another administration, regardless of public interest, the president, public health officials, the State Department, and the national security apparatus might have moved quickly and coordinated with other governments to contain the spread of the virus, while laying the groundwork for a potentially long mitigation battle.

But, in mid-February, with only fifteen known cases of Covid-19 in the United States, the Trump Administration, through some combination of isolationist impulses and a concern that the optics of a strong response might spook markets, deliberately slow-walked the response. "The 15 within a couple of days is going to be down to close to zero," said Trump at a February 26 press conference, urging Americans to travel, dine in at restaurants, and continue life as usual (Watkins et al. 2020). Despite the suggestion of public heedlessness, in private Trump received multiple briefings projecting "as many as half a million deaths and trillions of dollars in economic losses," calling for the immediate shutdown of major cities and requesting the rapid ramping up of testing capacity (Lipton et al. 2020). Yet, for weeks, the administration largely declined to take actions beyond limiting travel from China.

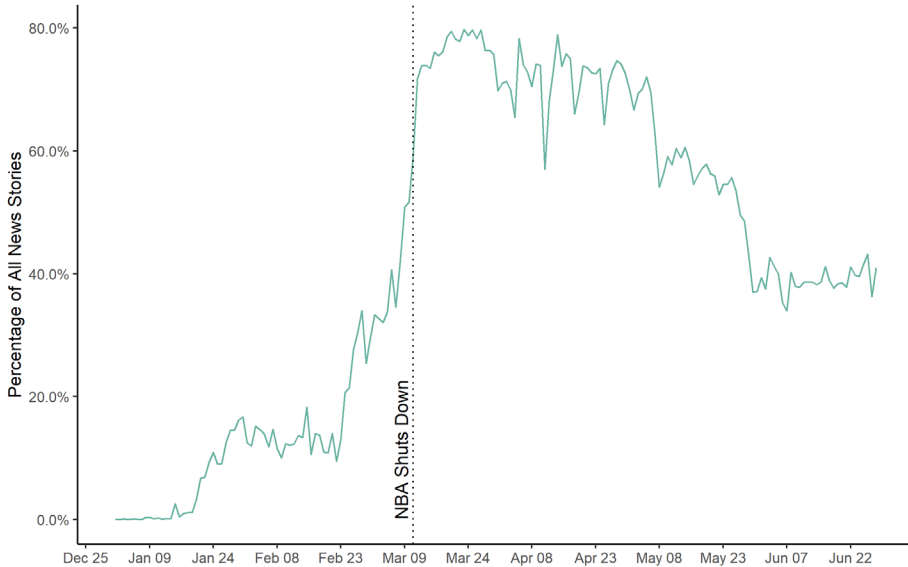


Figure 3: Coronavirus as a Share of Top Newspaper and Online News Sources
 Source: Lindner and Hawkins, 2020a

Though the Trump campaign had electoral incentives to keep the economy open and abuzz, the president was far from alone in minimizing the risk posed by Covid-19. According to Media Cloud’s collections of Top Newspapers and Top Online news sources, during the week of Feb. 17-23, stories including the term “coronavirus” accounted for only 9.3-13.7% of all news coverage. Much of the media coverage was, instead, intensely focused on the Democratic Presidential Primary race. Not until March 12, the morning after the NBA suspended its season, would the Covid-19 story leap to dominate 70%+ of all top newspaper and online coverage (see Figure 3). As late as March 2, even the Democratic Mayor of New York City Bill de Blasio said, “I’m encouraging New Yorkers to go on with your lives and get out on the town” (Watkins et al. 2020).

Still, concern about the virus that would spiral into a pandemic was not symmetrical on both sides of the partisan aisle. With Trump comparing Covid-19 to the seasonal flu and conservative cable news commentators downplaying the severity of the pandemic, everyday Republicans began taking cues from their fellow partisans. Figure 4 shows a weighted average from three different polls conducted in the week before March 11 by YouGov/*The Economist*, SurveyMonkey/*New York Times*, and YouGov/*Huffington Post*. In each poll, survey respondents were asked how concerned they were that they or a family member would contract the coronavirus. While 65.3% of Democrats and nearly half of independents were “very” or “somewhat” concerned, only 39.8% of Republican expressed similar concern. As the pandemic continued, researchers have found that Democrats are the most likely and Republicans the least likely to adopt safety precautions around the virus, including wearing masks, social distancing, and staying at home (Bird & Ritter, 2020). One study even found that counties with higher viewership of the popular Fox News television program *Hannity*—hosted by highly conservative political commentator, Trump ally, and periodic

conspiracy theorist, Sean Hannity—had higher Covid-19 infection and mortality rates (Bursztyn et al. 2020).

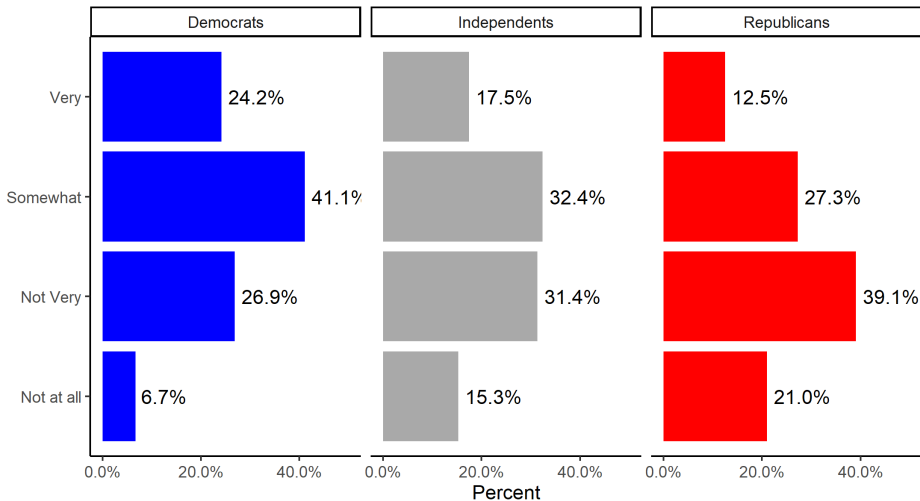


Figure 4: Americans' Concern With Contracting Coronavirus By Party
Source: Lindner and Hawkins, 2020a

With the growing partisan divide around the pandemic, almost any Covid-19 mitigation measure took on a political hue. Wearing a mask, for example, quickly became a tacit signal of resistance to the president who briefly claimed the virus was “a new hoax” (Clinch et al. 2020). To a less progressive entity like the NCAA, whose football fans skew strongly conservative and whose basketball fans skew slightly conservative, shutting down March Madness might be seen as caving to Democrats’ politically motivated fearmongering. Never mind that an organization devoted to intercollegiate athletics might concern themselves with student-athletes’ health above all else, the NCAA’s decision early in the day on March 11 to continue with the basketball tournaments in empty arenas was a careful threading of the political needle.

The NBA, by contrast, was perfectly positioned to demonstrate leadership in the fight to mitigate Covid-19 by shutting down. With a liberal-leaning fan base, as well as players and coaches who had openly feuded with Trump, the league could adopt a strong public health stance, which, even if interpreted as political, was unlikely to be met with backlash internally or externally. Furthermore, after four decades of forward-thinking leadership from David Stern and, subsequently, his protégé Adam Silver, the entire NBA community—from owners to fans—had come to expect decisive, socially responsible action from the top. Indeed, if anything, Silver was still smarting from the public lashing for his financially-minded response to the Hong Kong incident. He may well have been eager to demonstrate the NBA’s continued capacity for civic responsibility.

Of course, the practical considerations mattered, too, but the NBA’s leading role in the pandemic response was no coincidence. In a context of heightened partisanship, the NBA has become the leading bastion of progressivism in U.S. sports. When a divisive, racially incendiary President failed to muster an adequate response to a dire threat, the choice for the NBA to act boldly was an obvious one. Silver’s “split-second” decision had been decades in the making.

THE NBA STEPS UP

Silver's decision to suspend all games filled a leadership vacuum. After the NBA's announcement, in quick succession, MLB canceled spring training and delayed Opening Day, MLS announced a thirty-day suspension of games, and the NHL, citing the NBA's response, suspended the hockey season. Only after several universities and conferences suspended all athletic activities did the NCAA reluctantly cancel March Madness and other spring tournaments on March 12. As Roxanne Jones (2020) wrote in a CNN.com op-ed, "Silver didn't hesitate to make the right call for the NBA, and the right call for America. For me, Silver's decision is a sobering but inspiring reminder that true commitment to social responsibility means that capitalism doesn't always have to mean profits over people."

The plaudits for Silver and the NBA's decisive action extended beyond ESPN and sports radio. The decision was one of the first moments where it registered with the news media and the U.S. public that the pandemic was real and required drastic measures. As David Wallace-Wells (2020) would later write in *New York Magazine*, "...nearly all of the efforts we have seen...to produce social distance and cancel large group events have come from private organizations and even individuals—private schools, private companies, particular conferences, the NBA. There has been no meaningful centralized leadership of any kind..." The need for the NBA to step up was borne of the remarkable absence of leadership from the Trump Administration.

Some accounts of Silver's actions on March 11 valorize him as some kind of heroic, moral visionary. While Silver appears to be a smart, competent, and decent person, such "great man of history" accounts fail to envision him (and other less courageous sports executives) in the appropriate sociological context. Though the decision to suspend bears enormous financial consequences, with a potential loss of half a billion dollars in ticket revenue alone (Schaefer, 2020), the social conditions surrounding the NBA made it a much easier call for Silver than would be the case in several other leagues. The NBA announcement may have caught owners, players, and fans by surprise. But Silver could make the decision with full confidence not merely because it was "the right thing to do," but also because it was a palatable political act for most of the constituencies he serves.

The NBA is a business, not a social movement. Like any business, there have been episodes in the NBA's history where owners and league executives prioritized growing capital over the interests of labor. Nonetheless, over the past several decades, the NBA has become a business where players have a voice and power and where socially responsible, progressive values are espoused (if not always perfectly practiced). In an age of partisan polarization, that's enough to make the NBA a liberal context. As the Trump administration's electorally-minded denialism began to polarize the public on the response to the pandemic, it was the sports world's left-leaning uncle, the NBA that inevitably became the first mover in the shutdown of sports.

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