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# THE STATE OF THE NATION: **A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY** REPORT #20: PUBLIC OPINION AROUND FEDERAL AND STATE REACTIONS TO COVID-19

USA, October 2020

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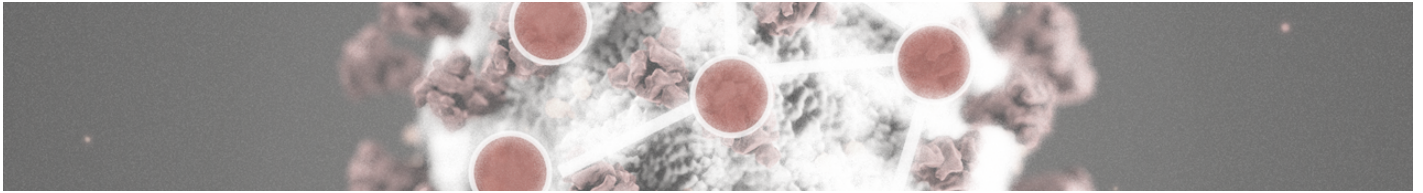
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## **Report of October 30, 2020, v.1**

**From:** The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

*A joint project of:*

Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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# COVER MEMO

## Summary Memo — October 30, 2020

*The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States*

**Partners:** Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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From April through October, we conducted eight waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at [covidstates.org](https://covidstates.org).

### Note on methods:

Over eight survey waves, we polled 119,755 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The data was collected between April and October 2020 by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender. In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. The data collection period for each included survey wave follows here. Late April Wave: 17/4/20-26/4/20, Early May Wave: 2/5/20-15/5/20, Late May Wave: 16/5/20-31/5/20, Late June Wave: 12/6/20-28/6/20, Late July Wave: 7/10/20-7/26/20, August Wave: 8/7/20-8/26/20, September Wave: 9/4/20-9/27/20, October Wave: 10/2/20-10/25/20

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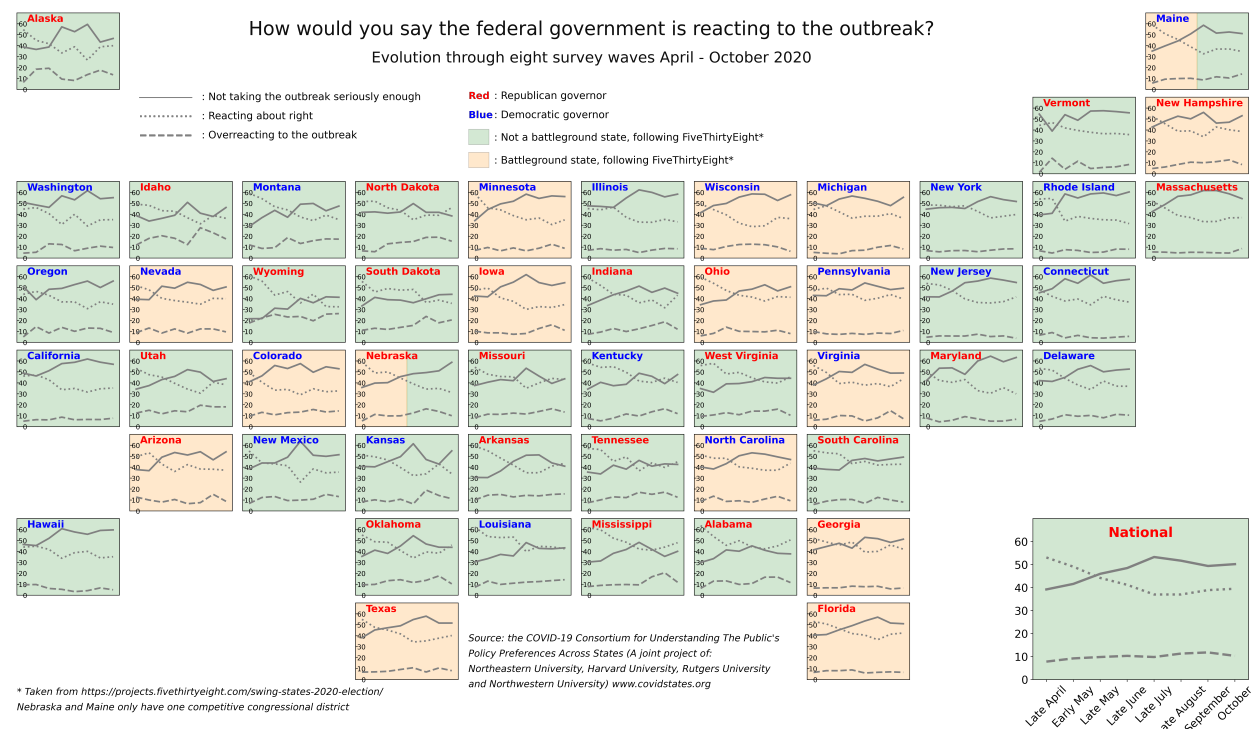
Or visit us at [www.covidstates.org](https://www.covidstates.org).

# The dynamics of public opinion around federal and state reactions to COVID-19

In every month, April through October of 2020, we surveyed individuals in every state about how federal and state governments are reacting to the pandemic. We found a remarkably consistent picture of public opinion: respondents prefer state governments over the federal government when it comes to COVID-19. Out of 8 waves in 50 states & DC – a total of 408 surveys at the state level – in 402 state-level surveys more people in the state felt the state government was reacting “about right” to the COVID-19 outbreak as compared to the federal government; and only 6 times did people in a state choose the federal government over their state government.

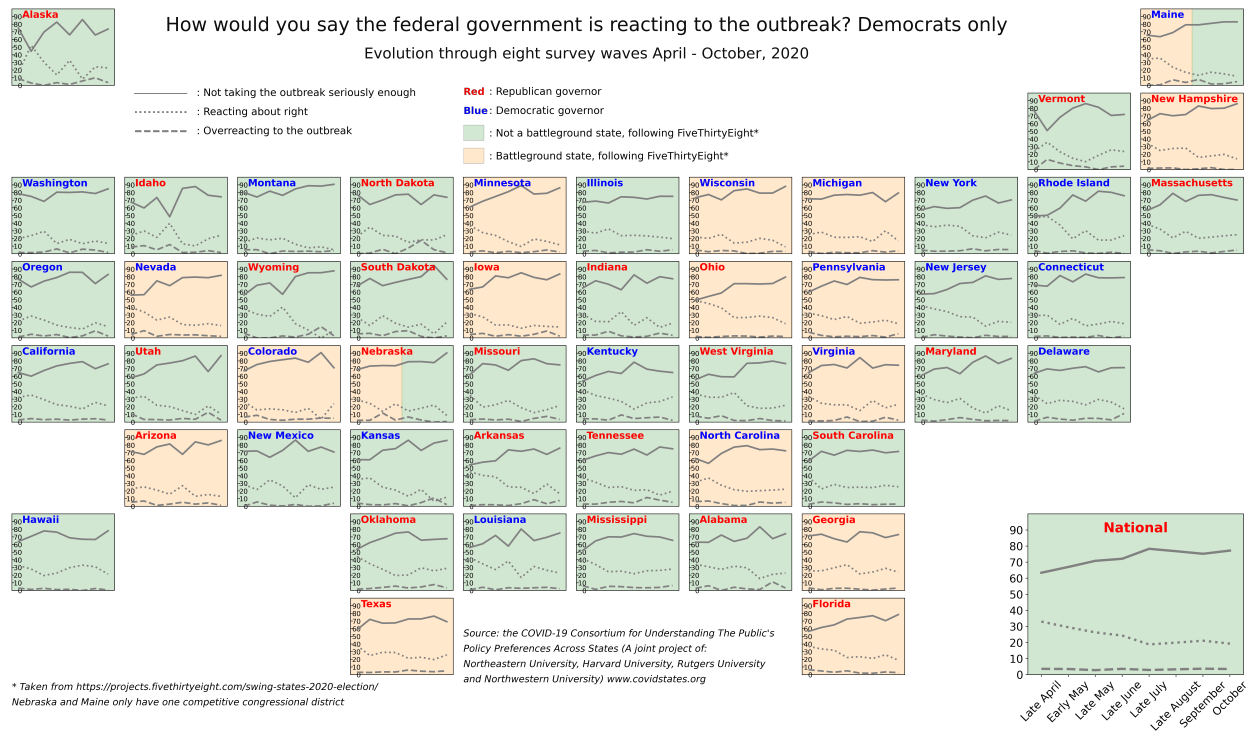
## The dynamics of public opinion around the federal reaction to COVID-19

The high-water mark for the federal government was in the first wave of our survey, in late April, where 53% of respondents said the federal government was “reacting about right” to the pandemic. Since July, most respondents indicate that the federal government was “not taking the outbreak seriously enough,” a shift that has been surprisingly uniform across the country.

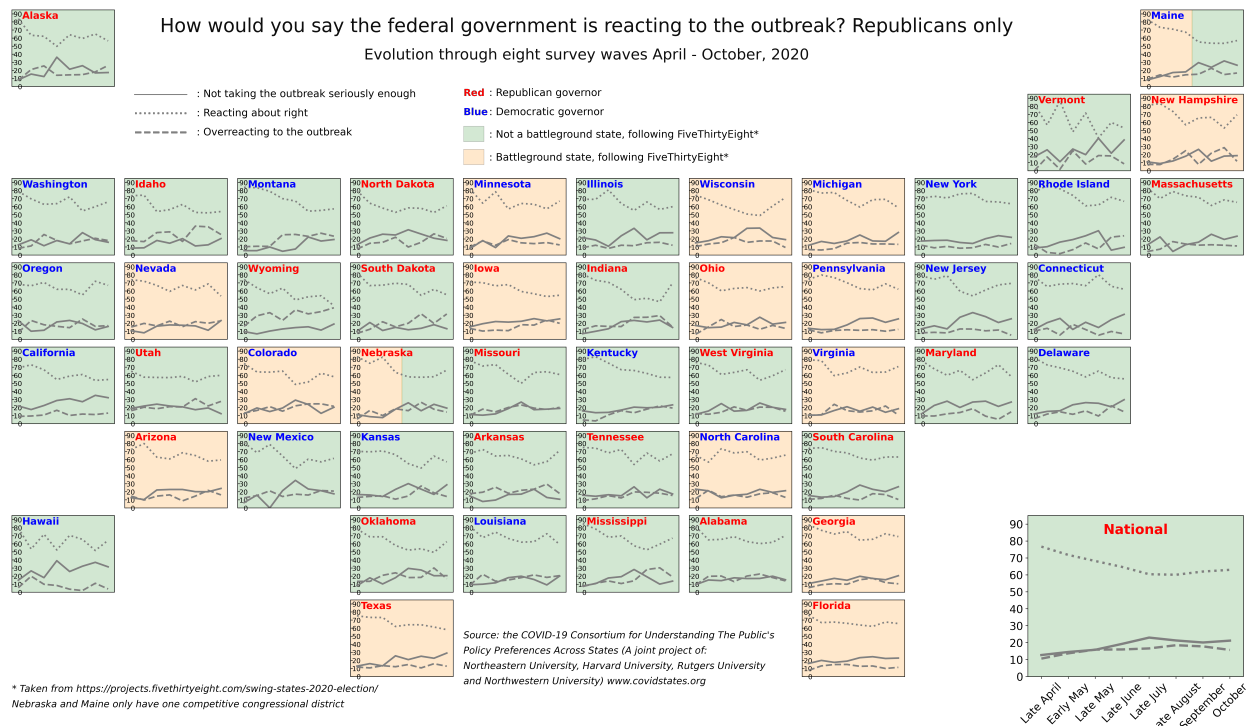


**Figure 1:** Opinion about the federal government reaction to the outbreak for every state All respondents. [Download high resolution image](#)





**Figure 2:** Opinion about the federal government reaction to the outbreak for every state, Democrats only. [Download high resolution image](#)



**Figure 3:** Opinion about the federal government reaction to the outbreak for every state, Republicans only. [Download high resolution image](#)

There are notable partisan differences in perspective. Unsurprisingly, Democrats are much less likely to say that the federal government has reacted about right throughout our survey waves, dropping from 33% in April to 19% in October, with large (and increasing) majorities saying that the federal government has underreacted. More interesting, fewer Republican respondents are saying that the federal government has reacted about right, dropping from 77% in April to 63% in October.

Republican opinion regarding the federal response has begun to splinter. In every wave, somewhat more Republicans say that the federal government is not taking COVID-19 seriously than say that it has overreacted – but both ends of the spectrum have grown substantially from April, with about one in four now saying that the federal government has underreacted, and one in six overreacted. This is creating stress in the Republican coalition leading into election day: in our October wave, if we look just at respondents who indicate that they preferred/voted for Trump in 2016, across these three categories, we find that Trump wins 96% of the two party vote of those who say the federal government is reacting about right; 95% of those who say the federal government is overreacting; and only 78% of those who say that federal government is underreacting to COVID-19 (25% of Trump supporters in 2016 fall in the third category). In contrast, Trump is winning a smaller fraction of the 25% of former Clinton supporters who are satisfied with how the federal government has reacted or think it has overreacted: he is winning about 11% of Clinton supporters who feel the federal government has reacted about right, and 16% who feel the federal government has overreacted. The net result is that Trump defectors to Biden outnumber Clinton defectors to Trump almost 2 to 1.

Looking at voters who supported a third party or did not support either Clinton or Trump in 2016, we see a similar pattern – those who believe that the federal government is either reacting about right or over reacting are overwhelmingly supporting Trump; and those who feel the federal government is underreacting support Biden by an even larger margin (See Figure 4). The problem for Trump is that the latter category outnumbers the former, by 54% to 46% (See Table 1). That is, Biden is improving upon Clinton's margin among the voters who voted for Trump or Clinton and winning voters who did not support Trump or Clinton, where those shifts are strongly associated with assessments that the federal government has underreacted to COVID-19.

The interesting question regarding the last few days of the election is whether Trump's assertions that the pandemic is "rounding the corner," as cases are climbing in almost all states, will persuade wavering supporters that the pandemic is indeed fading or further convince them that the administration has not taken the pandemic seriously enough.

Figure 4: Proportion of two party vote for Trump in the 2020 election following candidate supported in the 2016 election and opinion about how the federal government is reacting to the outbreak.  
October Wave

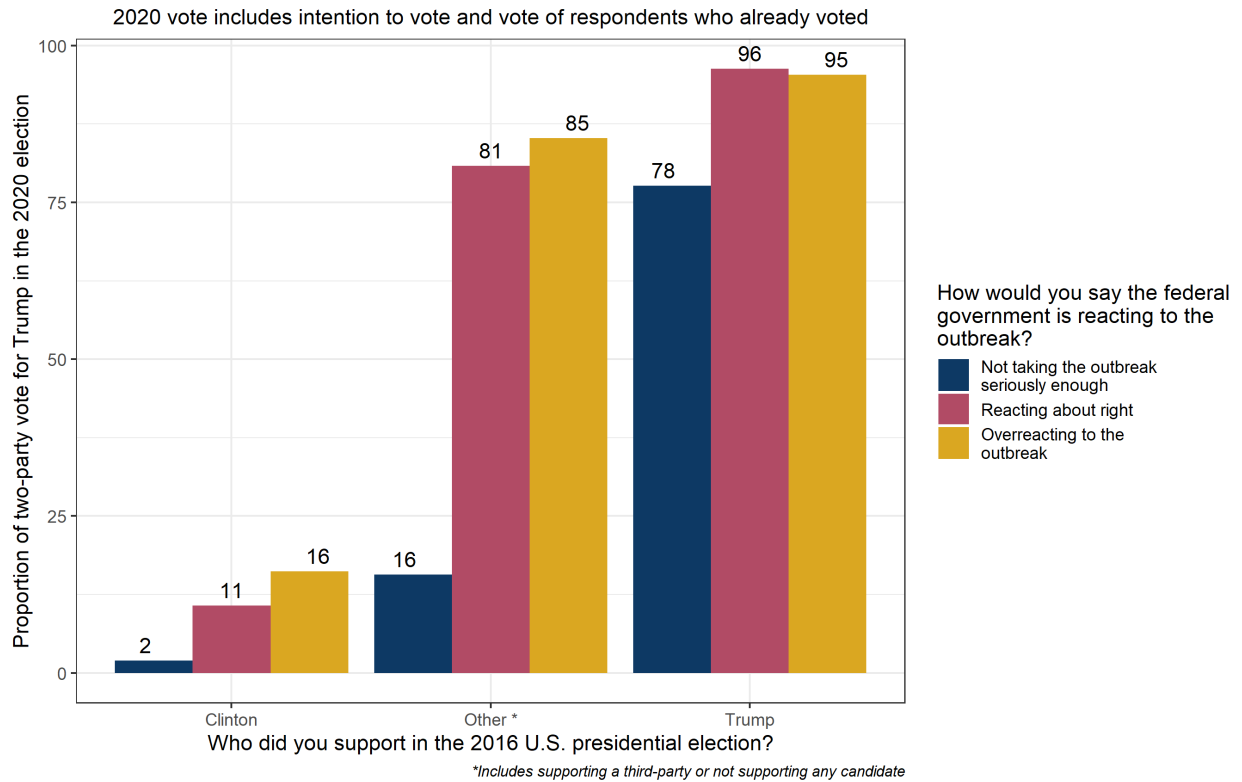


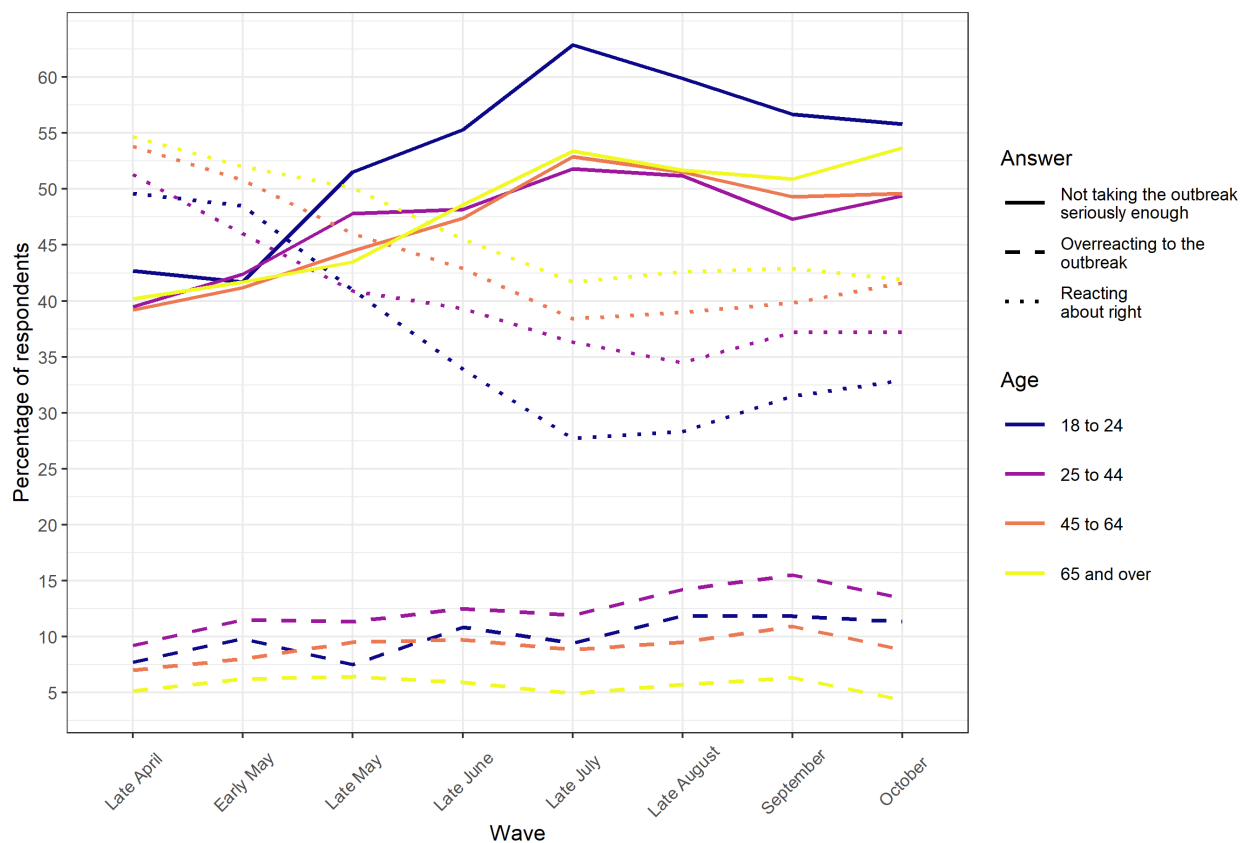
Table 1: Who did you support in the 2016 U.S presidential election by how would you say the federal government is reacting to the COVID-19 outbreak? (October wave)

	Not taking the outbreak seriously enough	Reacting about right	Overreacting to the outbreak	N
<b>Donald Trump (Republican)</b>	25%	57%	19%	8367
<b>Hillary Clinton (Democrat)</b>	76%	20%	4%	7648
<b>Did not support any candidate or supported a third party</b>	54%	34%	12%	6251

There are some striking generational consistencies and contrasts. Every generational cohort is much more likely to believe that the federal government is not taking the outbreak seriously enough than the federal government is overreacting. Every age cohort has seen an upward trend from April through July in believing the federal government has not taken the outbreak seriously. All but the oldest cohort has also seen an upward trend in believing the federal government has overreacted.

In our April wave, all of the age cohorts started out fairly close in terms of believing the federal government is underreacting to COVID-19. While all cohorts saw increases in the proportion of respondents that believe the federal government is underreacting through July, the youngest and oldest cohorts had the largest shift. The youngest cohort (18-25 years old) saw a dramatic increase in assessments that the federal government is not taking the outbreak seriously that peaked in July. The remaining cohorts tracked each other closely until September, when the oldest cohort separated from the middle cohorts, reaching its apex of dissatisfaction in October. As a result, in October, there has emerged a dispersion of opinion. Ranking the cohorts in order by which they feel the federal government has underreacted to the COVID-19 outbreak: the youngest, the oldest, and then the two middle cohorts tied.

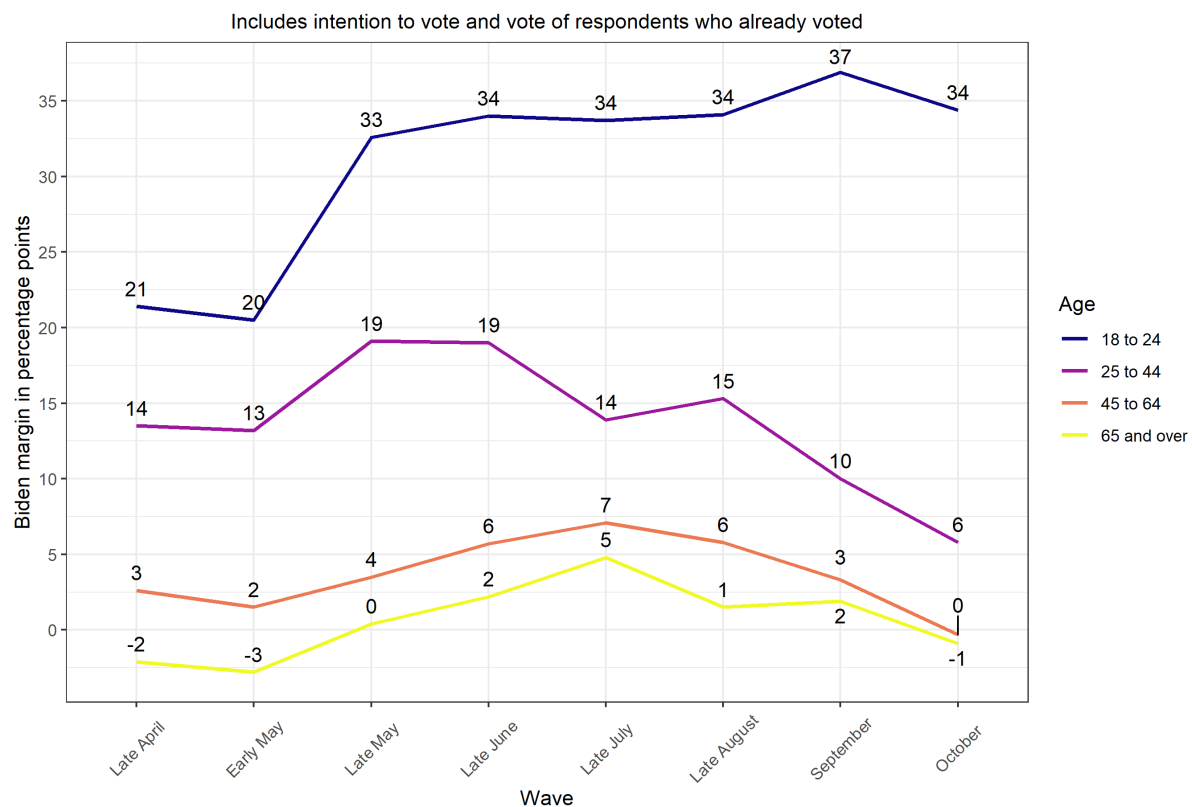
Figure 5: How would you say the federal government is reacting to the outbreak?





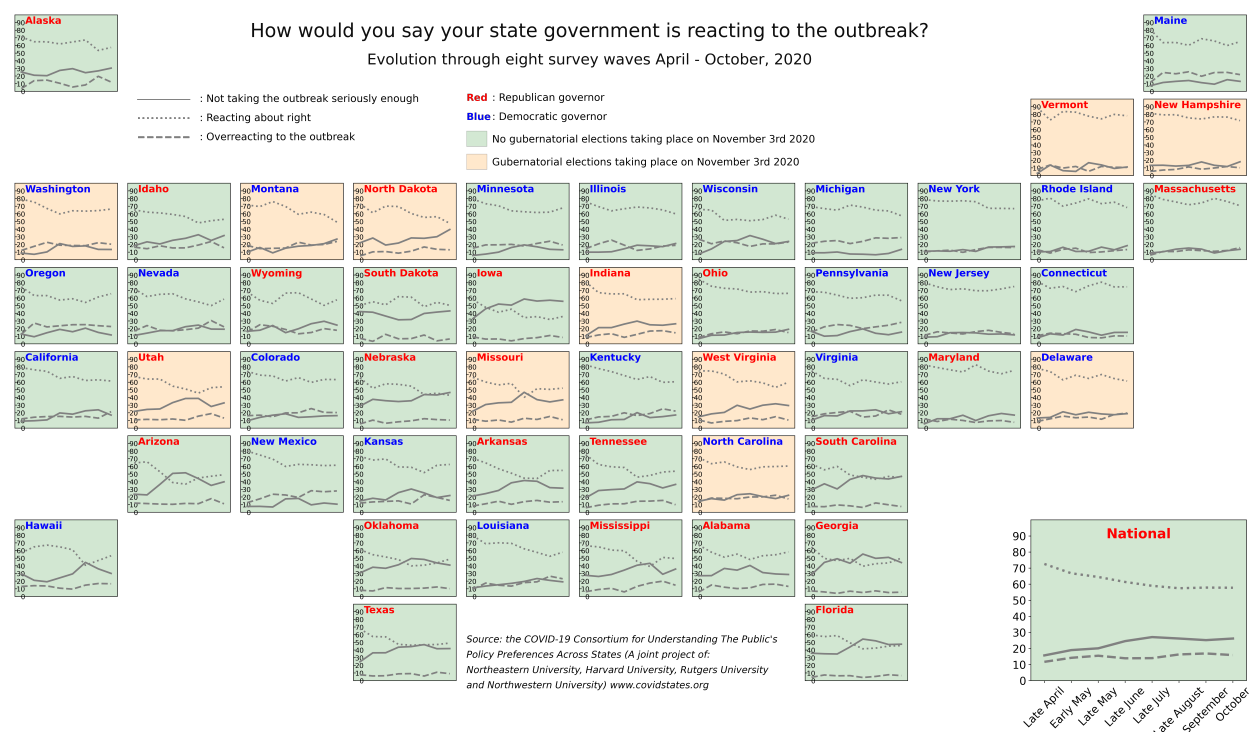
These dynamics regarding the assessment of the federal government may be driving Biden versus Trump polls. Biden leads in all cohorts in all waves of the survey, except among the oldest cohort in the first three waves and in the October wave, and among the second oldest cohort also in this last wave. However, he has dramatically improved his electoral standing in the youngest cohort, jumping from a lead in the low 20s in April/early May, to mid 30s by late May, where it has roughly held steady since. The second youngest cohort also saw a jump in support for Biden in late spring (14 point margin in April to 19 point in June) and has gradually faded to just a 6 point lead% in October. Biden's margin in the next oldest cohort is more stable: it reached its peak in July and ebbs to 0 in October. The oldest cohort shifts to Biden from April through July and fades back to roughly where it was in April in October. Interestingly, while there is a fairly substantial age gradient in support of Biden in April, while the youngest cohort has become more pro Biden, the remaining three cohorts have compressed; perhaps because younger workers (the second youngest cohort) may be bearing the brunt of the continued economic impacts of the pandemic. This may be the cohort (and to a lesser extent, the 45-64 cohort) most open to Trump's message that we are "turning the corner" on COVID-19 and need to reopen the economy and schools.

Figure 6: Biden margin of two party vote in the November 2020 elections



## The dynamics of public opinion around state reactions to COVID-19

The picture at the state level is more complicated. The most common opinion in every state in April was that the state government was reacting “about right” to the coronavirus outbreak. That is still the dominant opinion in most states, but there are two clusters of states with Republican governors—one in the South & Southwest (Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas) and the other in the upper Midwest (Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota)— where there has been a rough balance between “not taking the outbreak seriously enough” and “reacting about right.”

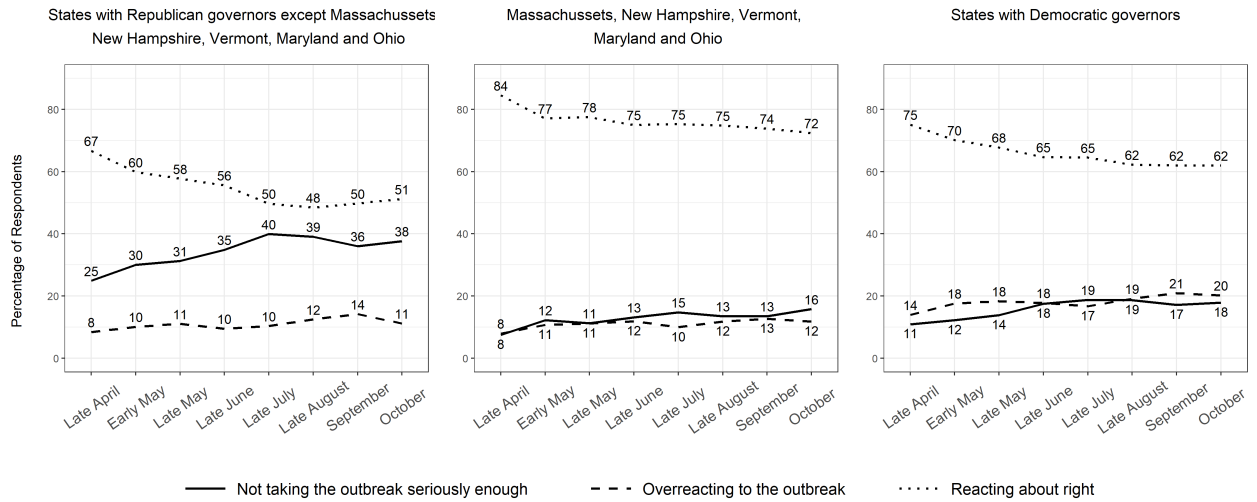


**Figure 7:** Opinion about state governments reaction to the outbreak

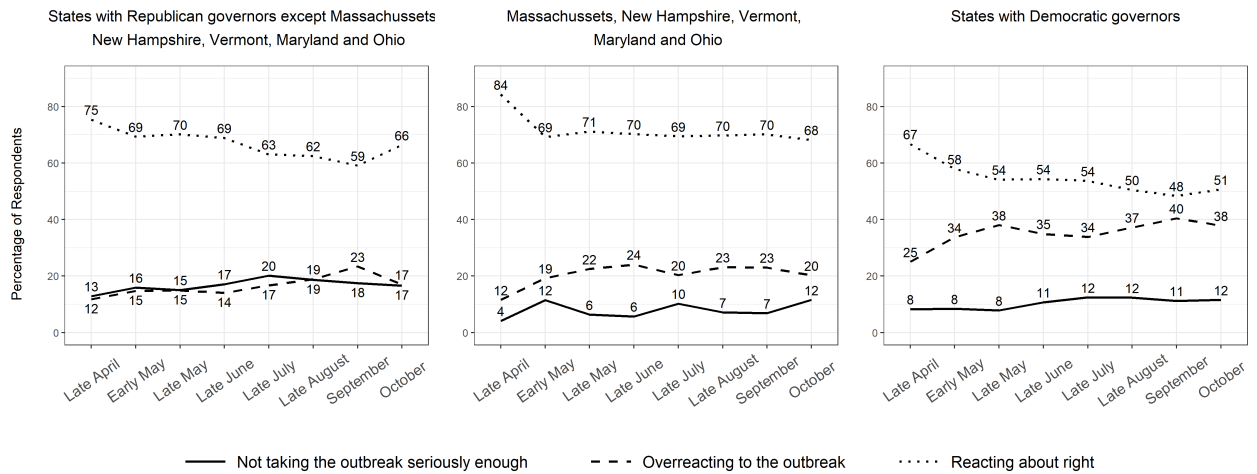
All respondents. [Download high resolution image](#)

If we break the 50 states into three categories: those with Democratic governors; those with Republican governors who have been more aggressive in their response to COVID-19 (OH, NH, MD, VT, MA); and those with less aggressive Republican governors, we see three very different dynamics.

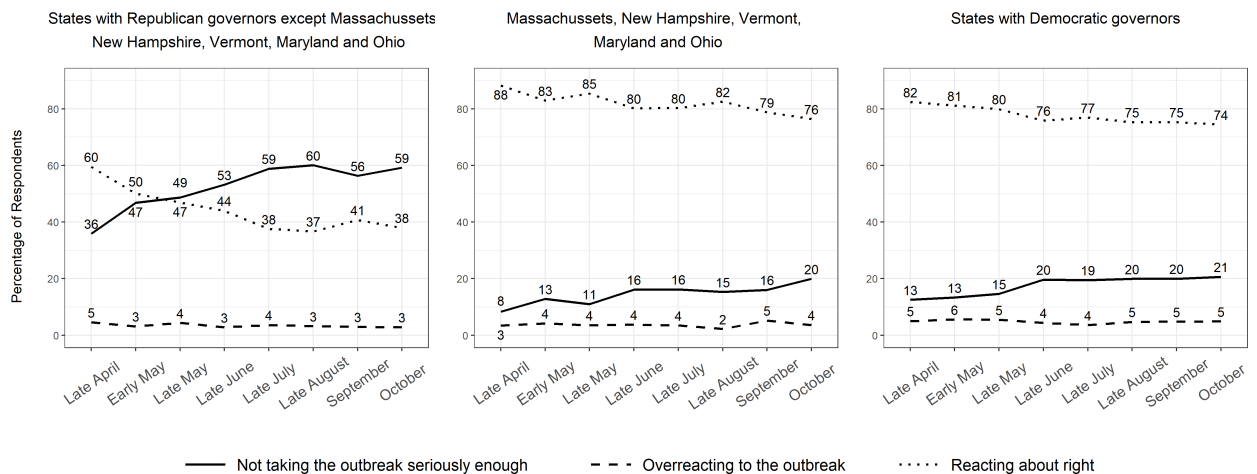
**Figure 8: How would you say your state government is reacting to the outbreak? Average across different states.**



**Figure 9: How would you say your state government is reacting to the outbreak? Average across different states for Republicans only.**



**Figure 10: How would you say your state government is reacting to the outbreak? Average across different states for Democrats only.**



The states with activist Republican governors have systematically had the highest levels of “about right” responses, above 70% since early May; the states with Democratic governors have had lower level of responses (e.g., 10 points lower in October) indicating “about right”; and the states with the non-activist Republican governors have the lowest level of “about right responses” (11 points lower than Democratic governors in October), with about three times as many respondents saying that the state government is not taking the outbreak seriously as overreacting.

The states with activist Republicans have maintained high levels of responses of “about right” from Democratic respondents (remarkably, in every wave higher than those of states with Democratic governors). Non-activist Republican governors face a similar splintering of Republican respondents that was noted above for the federal response – decreasing “about right” responses, coupled with roughly equal numbers of Republicans saying that the state government is doing too much and too little.

## Appendix

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**Table A1: How would you say the federal government is reacting to the outbreak?**

**October wave**

Margins of error in parentheses

State	Not taking the outbreak seriously enough	Reacting about right	Overreacting to the outbreak
National	50 (1)	40 (1)	10 (0)
AK	47 (9)	40 (8)	13 (6)
AL	38 (6)	51 (6)	12 (4)
AR	41 (8)	44 (8)	16 (6)
AZ	54 (7)	37 (6)	9 (4)



CA	57 (5)	35 (4)	8 (2)
CO	53 (8)	33 (8)	14 (6)
CT	58 (8)	37 (8)	6 (4)
DC	58 (7)	35 (7)	8 (4)
DE	53 (8)	37 (7)	10 (5)
FL	51 (4)	42 (4)	7 (2)
GA	51 (6)	42 (6)	7 (3)
HI	60 (5)	35 (5)	5 (2)
IA	54 (6)	35 (6)	11 (4)
ID	46 (8)	36 (8)	18 (6)
IL	58 (5)	33 (5)	9 (3)
IN	45 (5)	43 (5)	12 (3)
KS	55 (8)	34 (7)	11 (5)
KY	48 (6)	40 (6)	12 (4)
LA	43 (7)	42 (7)	14 (5)
MA	54 (7)	37 (6)	9 (4)
MD	63 (6)	30 (6)	7 (3)
ME	51 (7)	35 (7)	14 (5)
MI	55 (5)	36 (5)	8 (3)
MN	56 (6)	35 (6)	9 (3)
MO	44 (5)	43 (5)	13 (4)
MS	40 (6)	48 (6)	12 (4)
MT	48 (7)	35 (7)	17 (5)
NC	47 (5)	44 (5)	9 (3)

ND	39 (6)	46 (7)	15 (5)
NE	59 (6)	31 (6)	10 (4)
NH	53 (7)	39 (7)	8 (4)
NJ	55 (5)	41 (5)	4 (2)
NM	51 (8)	35 (8)	13 (5)
NV	51 (7)	40 (6)	10 (4)
NY	52 (4)	40 (4)	9 (2)
OH	51 (5)	41 (5)	8 (2)
OK	44 (7)	46 (7)	10 (4)
OR	56 (7)	35 (7)	9 (4)
PA	49 (4)	40 (4)	11 (3)
RI	60 (7)	32 (7)	8 (4)
SC	49 (6)	43 (6)	8 (3)
SD	44 (7)	36 (6)	21 (5)
TN	43 (5)	45 (5)	13 (3)
TX	52 (5)	40 (4)	8 (3)
UT	44 (9)	38 (9)	18 (7)
VA	49 (6)	44 (6)	7 (3)
VT	56 (8)	36 (8)	8 (5)
WA	55 (6)	35 (5)	10 (3)
WI	58 (5)	36 (5)	6 (3)
WV	44 (6)	45 (6)	10 (3)
WY	41 (8)	33 (8)	26 (8)

**Table A2: How would you say your state government is reacting to the outbreak?****October wave**

Margins of error in parentheses

<b>State</b>	<b>Not taking the outbreak seriously enough</b>	<b>Reacting about right</b>	<b>Overreacting to the outbreak</b>
National	26 (1)	58 (1)	16 (1)
AK	30 (8)	57 (9)	12 (6)
AL	29 (5)	58 (6)	13 (4)
AR	32 (8)	55 (8)	14 (6)
AZ	40 (7)	49 (7)	11 (4)
CA	17 (3)	62 (4)	22 (4)
CO	16 (6)	63 (8)	20 (6)
CT	15 (6)	75 (7)	10 (5)
DC	22 (6)	68 (7)	10 (4)
DE	19 (6)	62 (7)	20 (6)
FL	48 (4)	46 (4)	7 (2)
GA	44 (6)	50 (6)	6 (3)
HI	30 (5)	53 (6)	17 (4)
IA	56 (6)	36 (6)	9 (3)
ID	32 (7)	53 (8)	16 (6)
IL	21 (4)	60 (5)	19 (4)
IN	26 (5)	59 (5)	15 (4)
KS	22 (6)	63 (7)	16 (5)
KY	17 (4)	61 (6)	22 (5)

LA	19 (6)	58 (7)	23 (6)
MA	14 (5)	71 (6)	16 (5)
MD	17 (5)	75 (5)	8 (3)
ME	13 (5)	65 (7)	22 (6)
MI	14 (4)	58 (5)	29 (5)
MN	13 (4)	68 (6)	19 (5)
MO	37 (5)	52 (5)	11 (3)
MS	36 (6)	50 (6)	15 (4)
MT	27 (6)	49 (7)	24 (6)
NC	22 (4)	60 (5)	17 (4)
ND	39 (6)	47 (7)	13 (4)
NE	47 (7)	43 (7)	11 (4)
NH	18 (6)	72 (7)	10 (5)
NJ	12 (3)	75 (5)	13 (4)
NM	11 (5)	61 (8)	28 (7)
NV	19 (5)	58 (7)	22 (6)
NY	17 (3)	67 (4)	16 (3)
OH	19 (4)	66 (4)	15 (3)
OK	41 (7)	49 (7)	10 (4)
OR	12 (4)	66 (7)	23 (6)
PA	15 (3)	56 (4)	28 (4)
RI	18 (6)	68 (7)	13 (5)
SC	47 (6)	46 (6)	8 (3)
SD	43 (7)	50 (7)	6 (3)
TN	36 (5)	54 (5)	10 (3)
TX	42 (5)	49 (5)	9 (3)



UT	33 (9)	54 (9)	13 (6)
VA	21 (5)	61 (6)	18 (4)
VT	11 (5)	78 (7)	11 (5)
WA	13 (4)	66 (5)	20 (4)
WI	24 (5)	53 (5)	23 (5)
WV	30 (5)	60 (6)	10 (3)
WY	25 (7)	58 (8)	18 (7)