

## **Life in Hampton Roads: Politics, Policy and COVID-19 Response**

This report is one of a series of reports based on the 2020 Life in Hampton Roads survey conducted by the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at Old Dominion University. Other reports examine education and COVID-19, the economy and COVID-19, natural disaster response and COVID-19, the quality of life in Hampton Roads, presidential election politics, and policing in 2020. As they are released, all reports will be available on the SSRC website at <https://www.odu.edu/al/centers/ssrc>.

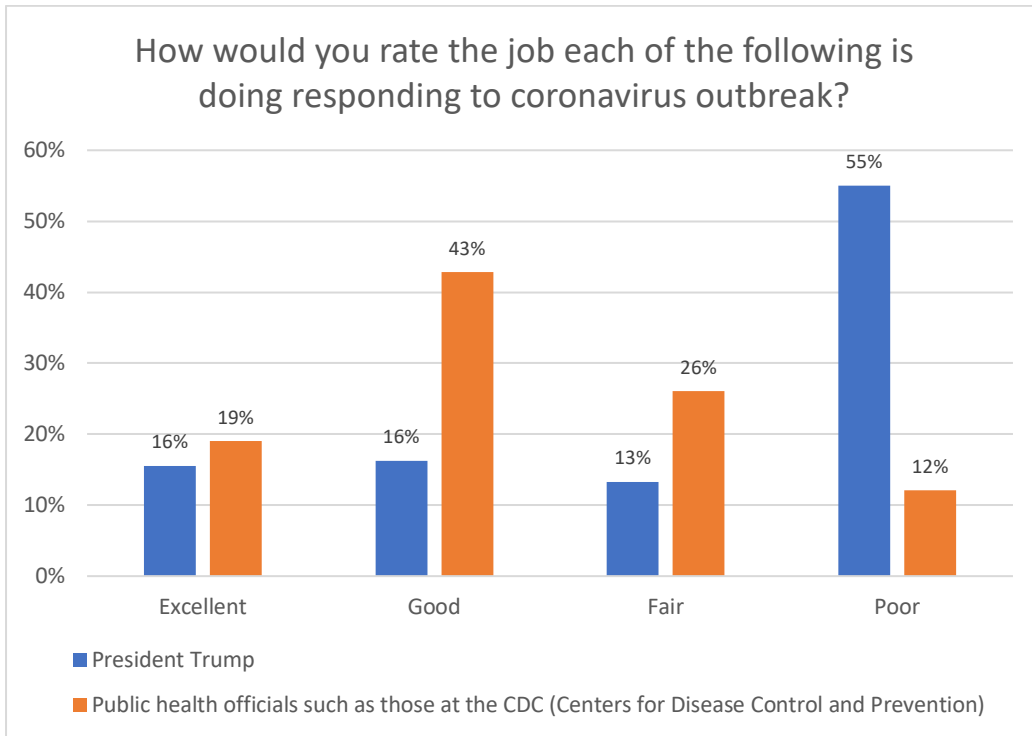
The survey included several questions that provide a window into the views of Hampton Roads citizens concerning policy choices and leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic response. Overall and on most issues the public was quite divided, with divisions often falling along party lines, but President Trump and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) seemed to elicit the strongest negative and positive responses, respectively. A substantial majority approved of Governor Northam's timing on the initial stay-at-home order, and respondents leaned toward the view that additional restrictions on public activity should be imposed in their area now.

### **National Response**

Opinion about the national government's response to the pandemic was split, with public health officials receiving relatively positive ratings and President Trump receiving decidedly negative ratings. When respondents were asked to rate the job being done by "public health officials such as those at the CDC," a majority (62%<sup>1</sup>) gave an "excellent" (19%) or "good" (43%) rating. About one in four (26%) gave public health officials a "fair" rating, and 12% gave a "poor" rating. Only about one-third gave President Trump an "excellent" or "good" rating (16% for each category). By contrast, 55% gave the president a "poor" rating on the question: "How would you rate the job each of the following is doing responding to the coronavirus outbreak?"

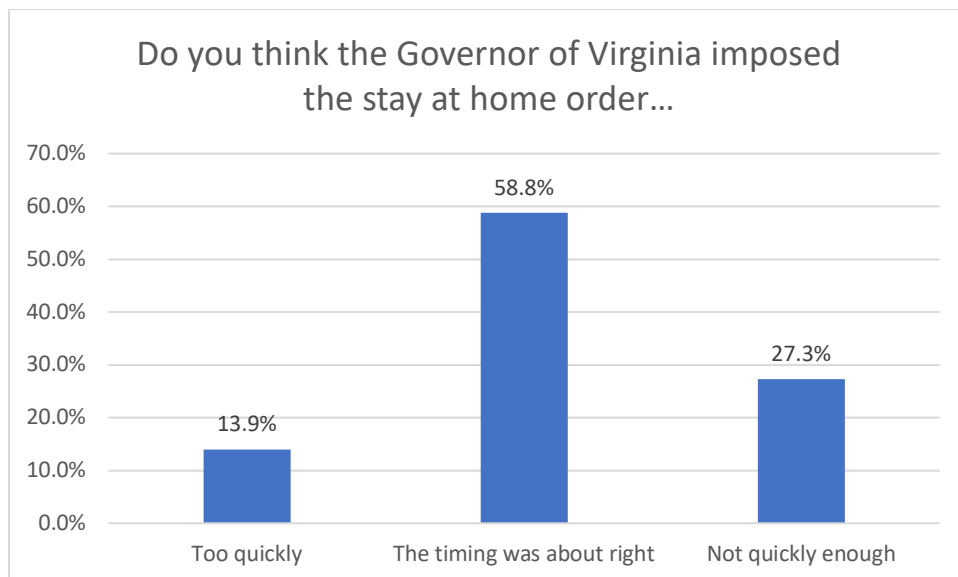
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<sup>1</sup> Given the amount of data presented in some of the charts/graphs, some of the percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number to improve readability.

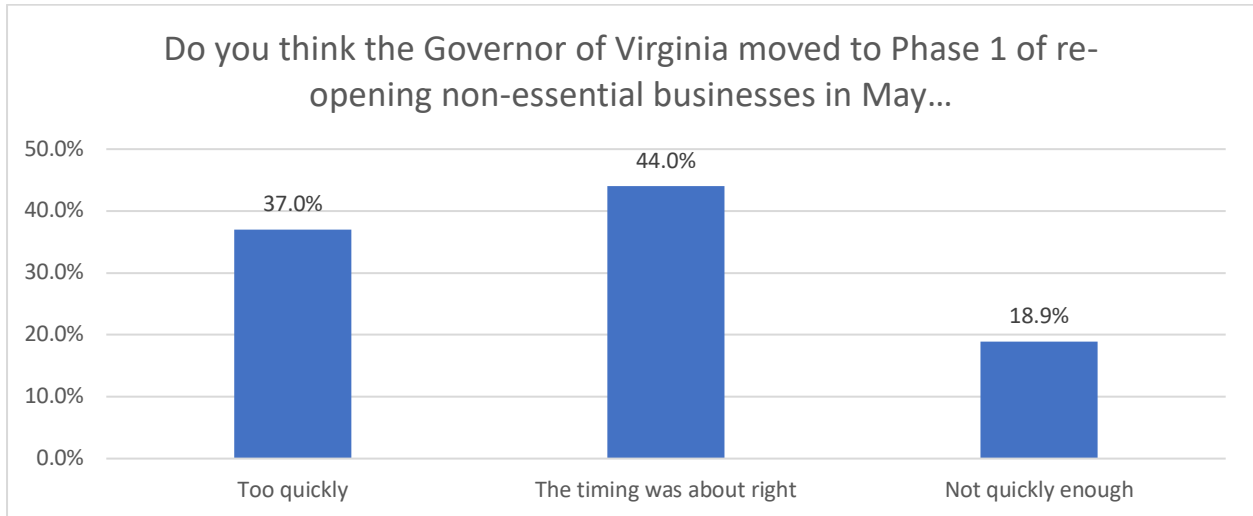


**State Response**

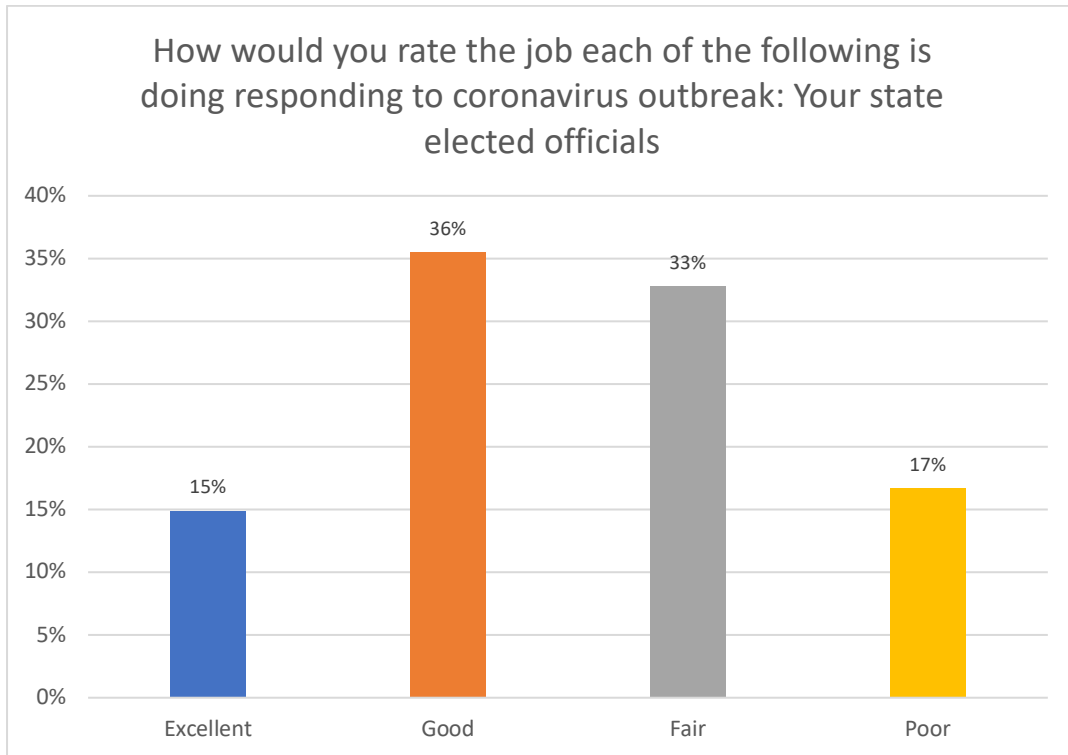
One controversial issue in many states has been governors’ decisions to impose and lift stay-at-home orders. Respondents were asked whether they believed the governor of Virginia had imposed the stay-at-home order too quickly, not quickly enough or with timing that was just about right. Very few respondents (14%) thought the governor imposed the order too quickly. Roughly twice as many (27%) thought that the order was not imposed quickly enough. A majority (59%) thought that “the timing was about right.”



Opinion was slightly more divided but again leaning toward more caution about the decision to “move to Phase 1 of reopening nonessential businesses in May,” with slightly less than one-fifth of respondents (19%) expressing the view that the move was not done “quickly enough,” whereas 37% indicated that it was done “too quickly.” Additionally, 44% indicated that the opening “timing was about right.”



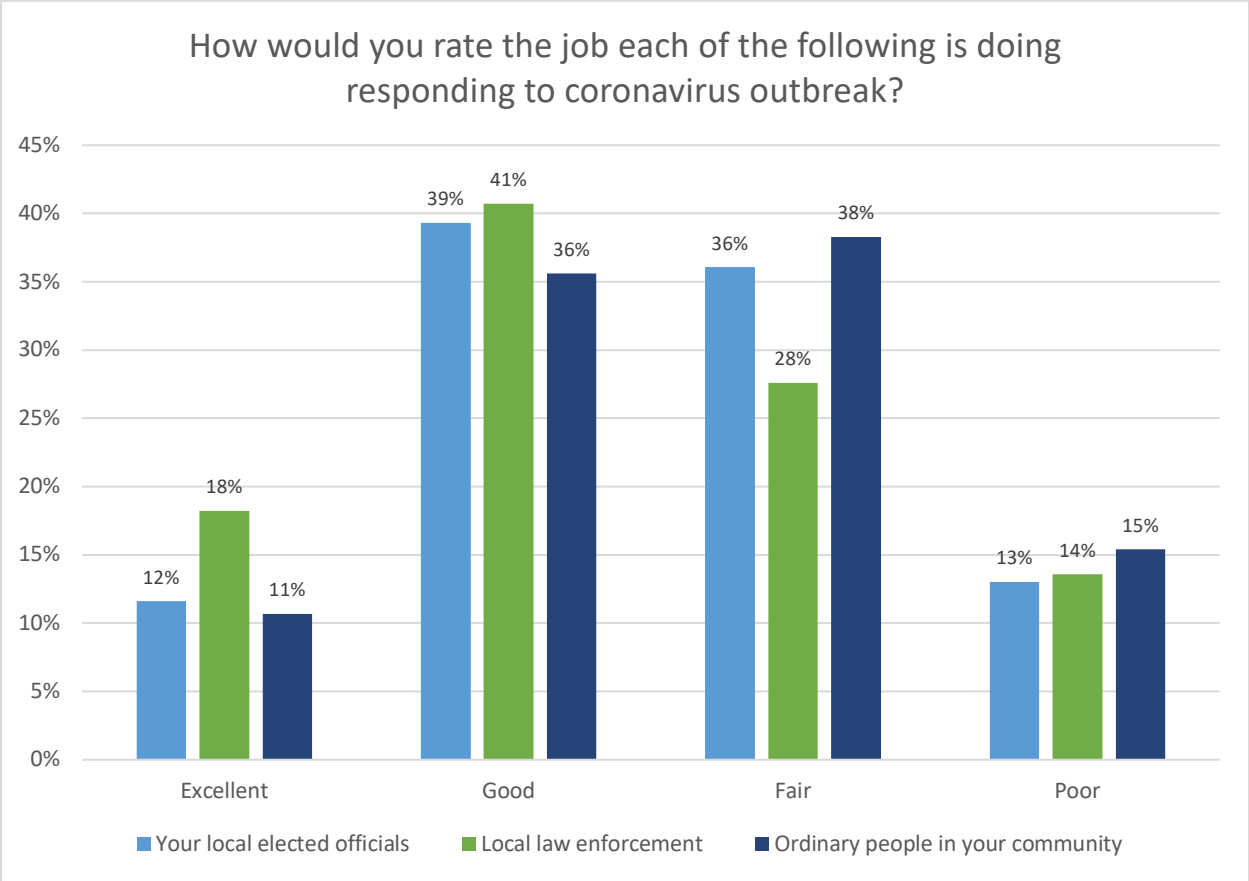
Overall, state elected officials received mixed grades on the question: “How would you rate the job each of the following is doing responding to the coronavirus outbreak?” About 15% of respondents gave “state elected officials” an excellent rating, and nearly 17% gave them a poor rating. Most respondents were in the middle, with 35.5% giving a “good” rating and nearly 33% giving a “fair” rating. Just over half of respondents (50.5%) gave state elected officials an “excellent” or “good” rating.



**Local Response**

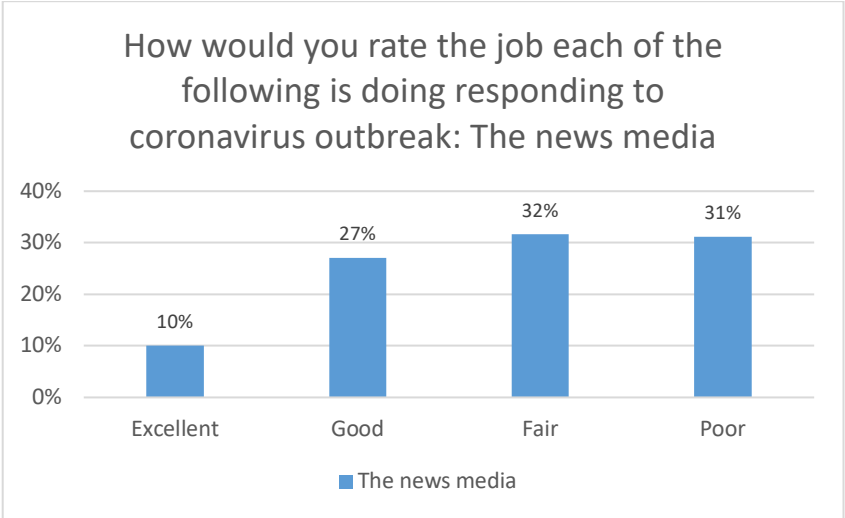
Local elected officials received mixed ratings similar to state elected officials. “Excellent” and “good” ratings totaled 51% (12% “excellent” and 39% “good”), while 36% gave a “fair” rating and 13% gave a “poor” rating. The coronavirus response by “local law enforcement” received similar ratings, with 18% giving an “excellent” rating, 41% a “good” rating, 28% a “fair” rating, and 14% a “poor” rating.

Respondents were somewhat less positive about “ordinary people in your local community,” with only 47% giving an “excellent” (11%) or “good” (36%) rating and 15% giving a “poor” rating.



**Media Information and Attention**

Respondents gave low marks to the news media. Just 10% gave an “excellent” rating, whereas 31% gave a “poor” rating, and 32% gave a “fair” rating. With 27% giving the media a “good” rating, just over a third (37%) gave the media a positive rating.

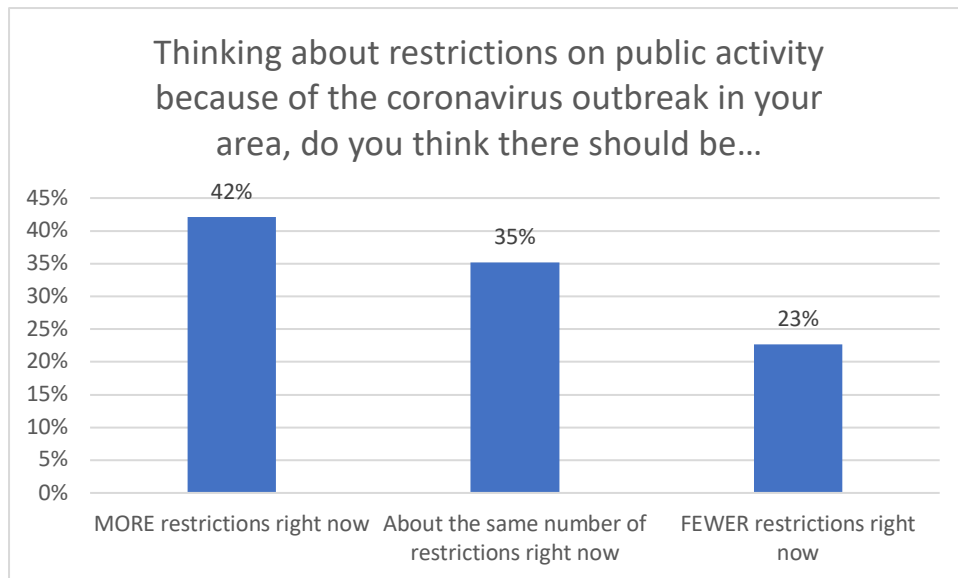


Perhaps related to the low ratings for the media, a majority of respondents (56%) indicated that when they “get news and information about the coronavirus outbreak” they generally found it “difficult to determine what is true and what is not,” while 44% indicated that they found it “easy to determine what is true and what is not.”

Respondents were equally divided concerning the question of how much emphasis should be placed on the coronavirus outbreak. When asked “All in all, do you think the coronavirus outbreak has been “made too big a deal or too small a deal,” 31% selected the response that it has been “made a BIGGER deal than it really is,” a slightly larger number (35%) indicated that it has been “made a SMALLER deal than it really is,” and the remaining 33% took the view that it has been “approached about right.”

### More Restrictions?

There was no consensus among respondents about the best direction for public policy in their area, but the lean seemed to be toward more restrictions. Respondents were asked: “Thinking about restrictions on public activity because of the coronavirus outbreak IN YOUR AREA, do you think there should be” more or fewer restrictions. The modal response (42%) was that there should be “MORE restrictions right now” with only slightly more than half as many (23%) selecting the option that there should be “FEWER restrictions right now.” About 35% felt that there should be “about the same number of restrictions right now.”

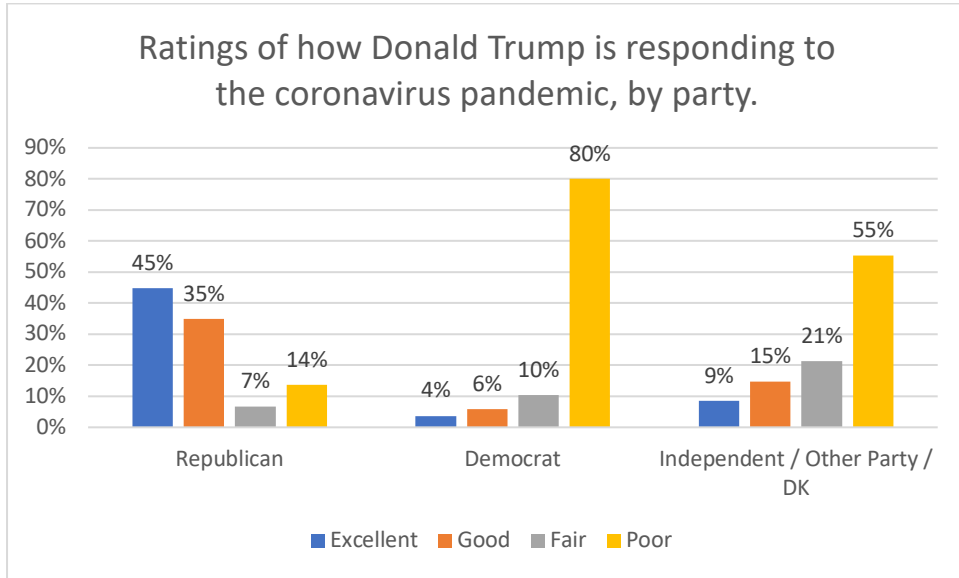


### Detailed analysis: party, city of residence, and other factors

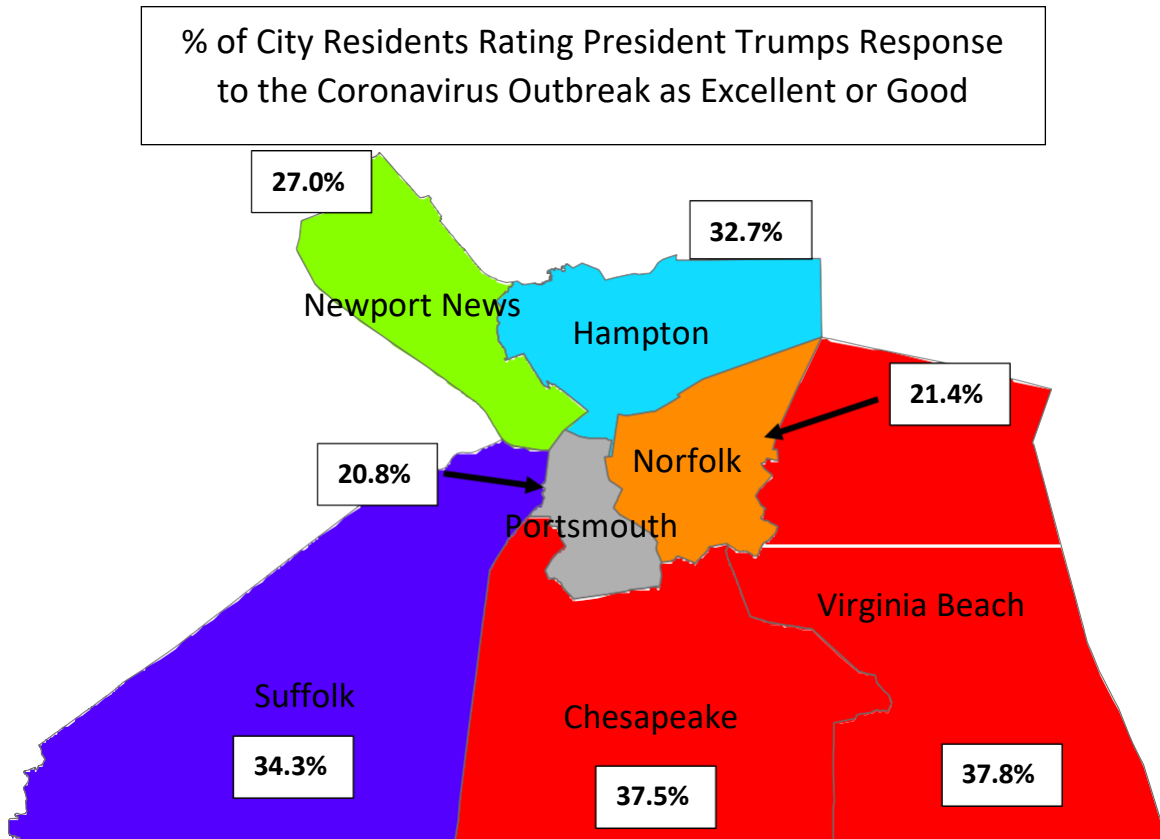
#### *Trump pandemic response*

While Trump received low marks overall on his coronavirus pandemic response, views were very polarized by party. Eighty percent of Republican respondents gave Trump an “excellent” or “good” rating, while 80% of Democratic respondents gave Trump a “poor” rating. Respondents who did not

indicate an affiliation with either of the major parties also gave Trump quite negative marks, with 55% giving a “poor” rating.

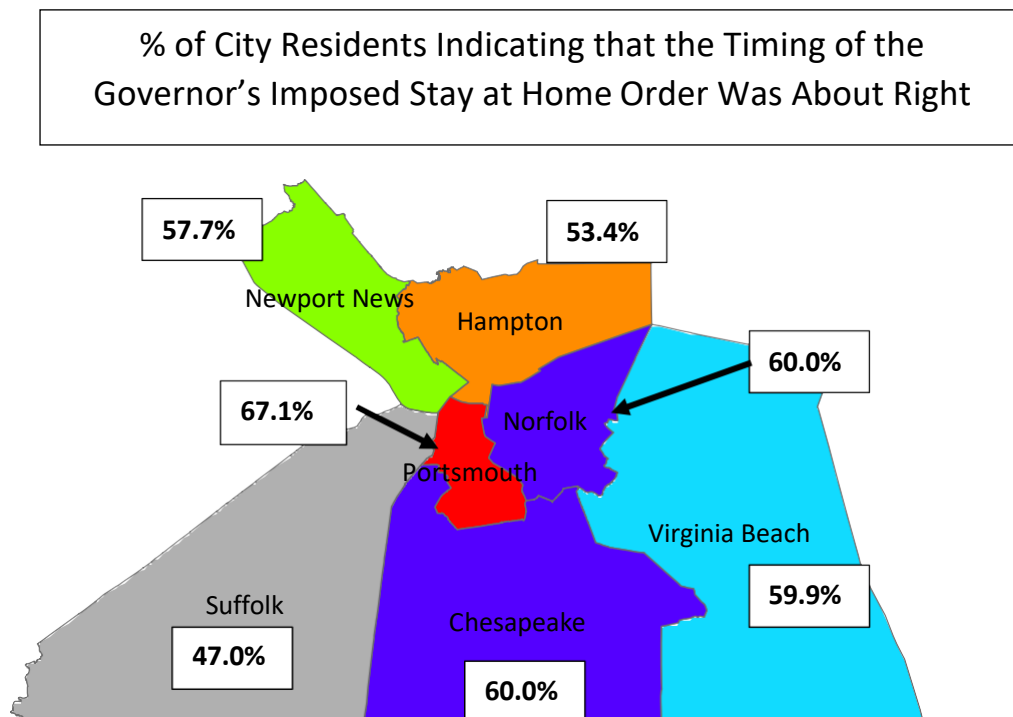


Ratings of President Trump’s response to the coronavirus also varied by city, with low percentages of residents rating him as excellent or good in Norfolk and Portsmouth (21.4% and 20.8%, respectively) to higher ratings of 37.5% in Chesapeake and 37.8% in Virginia Beach.



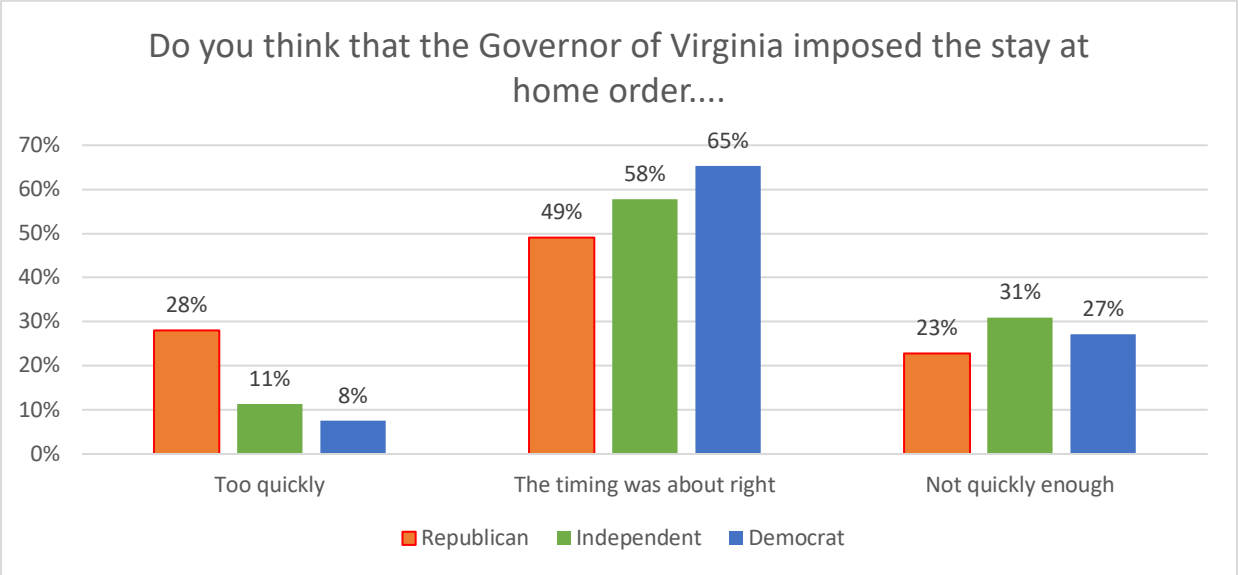
*State closing and opening orders*

The residents of individual Hampton Roads cities reacted somewhat differently to the question of the timing of the state stay-at-home order. With the exception of Suffolk (47.0%) a majority of respondents in each city believed that the timing of the governor's stay-at-home order was about right. Other cities ranged from 53.5% in Hampton to 67.1% in Portsmouth. Respondents from Suffolk were also the most likely to assert that the order was imposed too quickly (21%), and respondents from Virginia Beach were the least likely to assert that it was not imposed quickly enough (22%). The difference between Virginia Beach and the rest of the cities is statistically significant. Suffolk was the most polarized, with the smallest portion (only 47%) responding that the timing was right, and larger portions indicating that the governor took action either too quickly or too slowly.

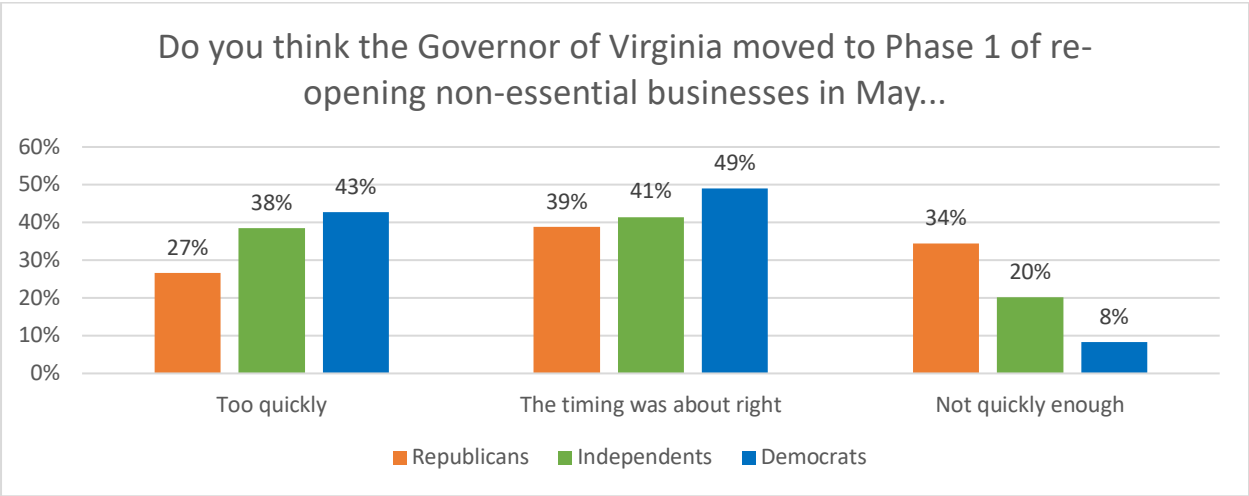


Views of the stay-at-home decision also divided on party lines. Democrats were the most likely to believe that the order timing was about right, while Republicans were the most likely to believe that the order was imposed too quickly, and independents were the most likely to believe it was not imposed quickly enough.



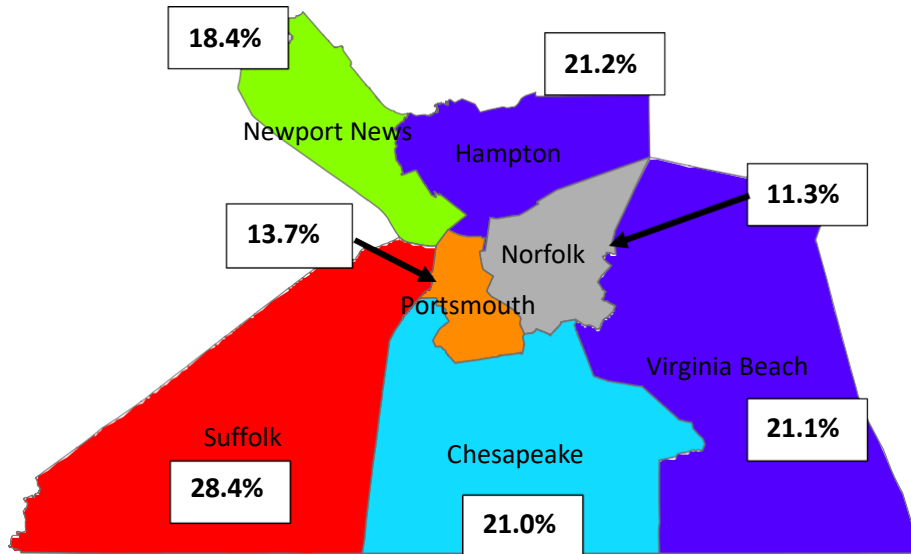


Similar divisions emerged concerning the reopening of nonessential businesses. Here too, there were substantial divisions on party lines. Republicans were the most likely to think that the action was not taken quickly enough, and Democrats were the most likely to think that the timing was either too quick or about right.

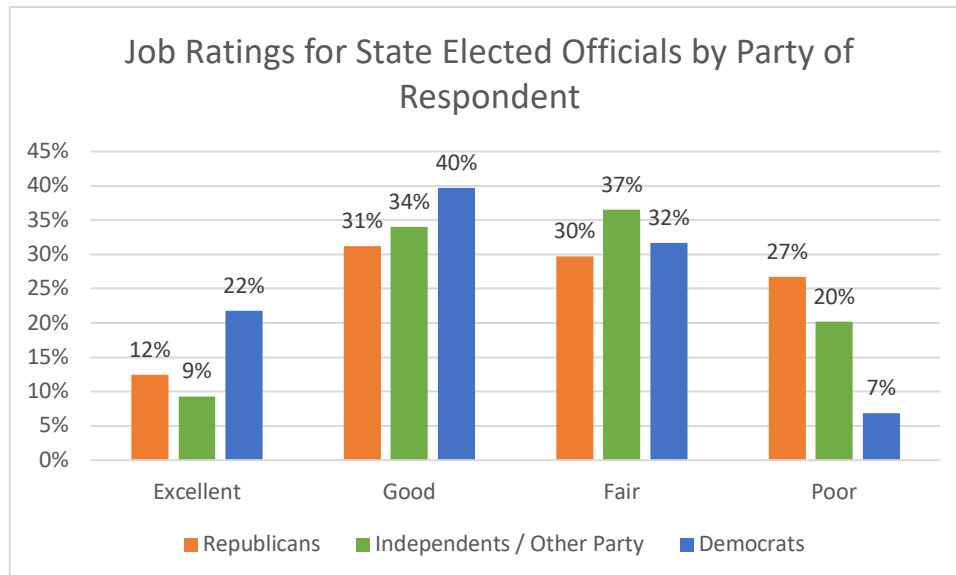


There was less variation across cities in terms of the governor's decision to reopen businesses, with a large proportion in each city believing that the timing was about right. This response ranged from 41.9% in Newport News to 46.4% in Norfolk. There were differences by city in concerns that the governor's decision was not quick enough. Respondents from Norfolk and Portsmouth were the least likely to believe that the opening process was not quick enough, and respondents from Suffolk were the most likely to assert that the opening did not proceed quickly enough.

**% of City Residents Responding that the Governor's Decision to Reopen Businesses Was Not Quick Enough**



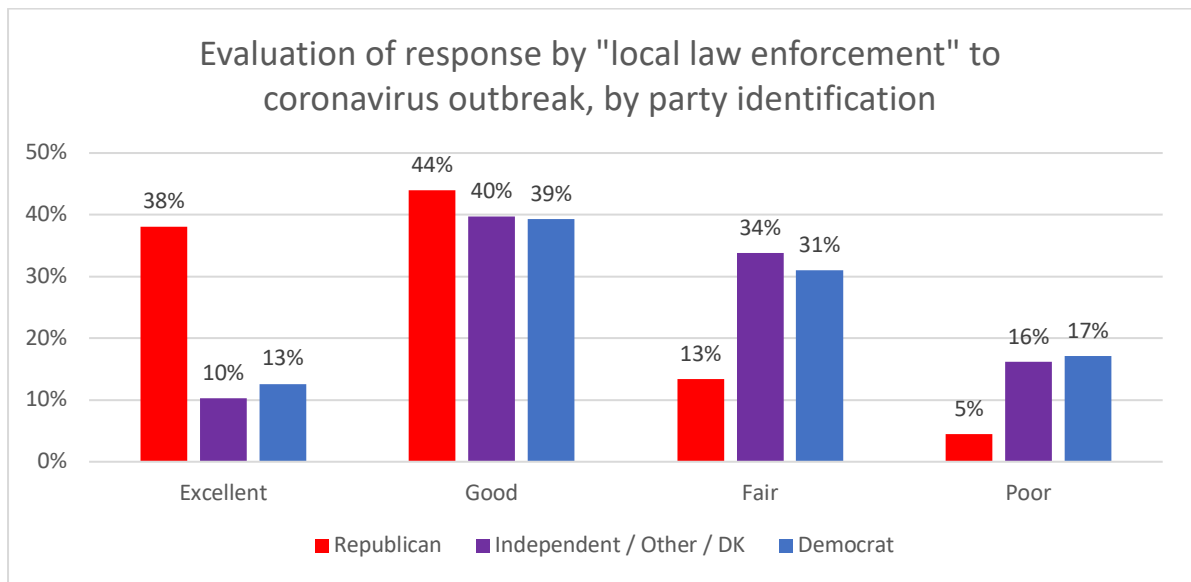
On the overall pandemic response job performance question, state elected officials received higher marks from Democrats than from other groups. Republicans and independents, on the other hand, were more likely to give negative evaluations of fair or poor.



*Local response*

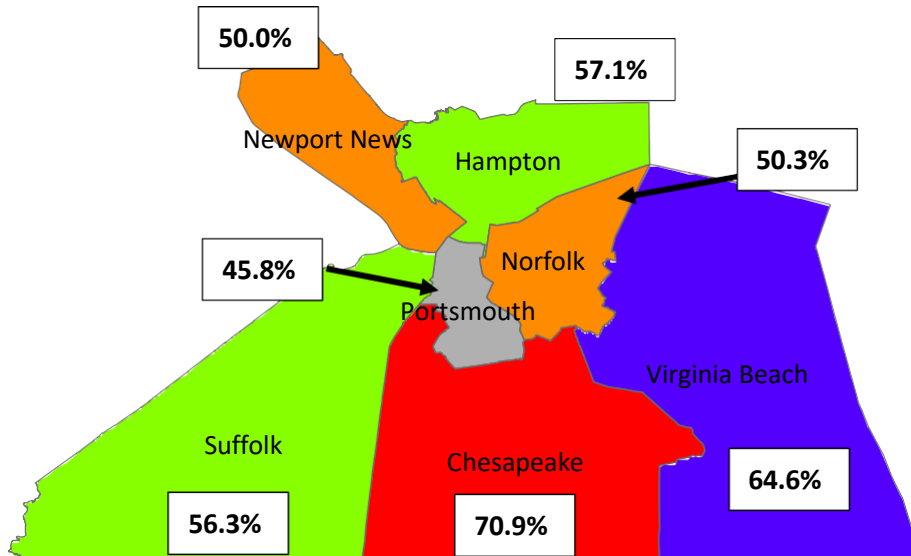
Ratings of the local government response did not vary significantly by city. Respondents from Suffolk and Hampton gave the highest frequency of “poor” ratings, and respondents from Norfolk and Suffolk gave the highest frequencies of “excellent” ratings.

Response to local city leadership also did not vary systematically by party, but evaluation of the job being done by “local law enforcement” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was divided sharply by party. While 38% of Republicans gave an “excellent” rating, only 10% of independents and 13% of Democrats gave excellent ratings. This likely reflects broader polarization of attitudes toward police on party lines that are reflected on a variety of other questions in the survey.



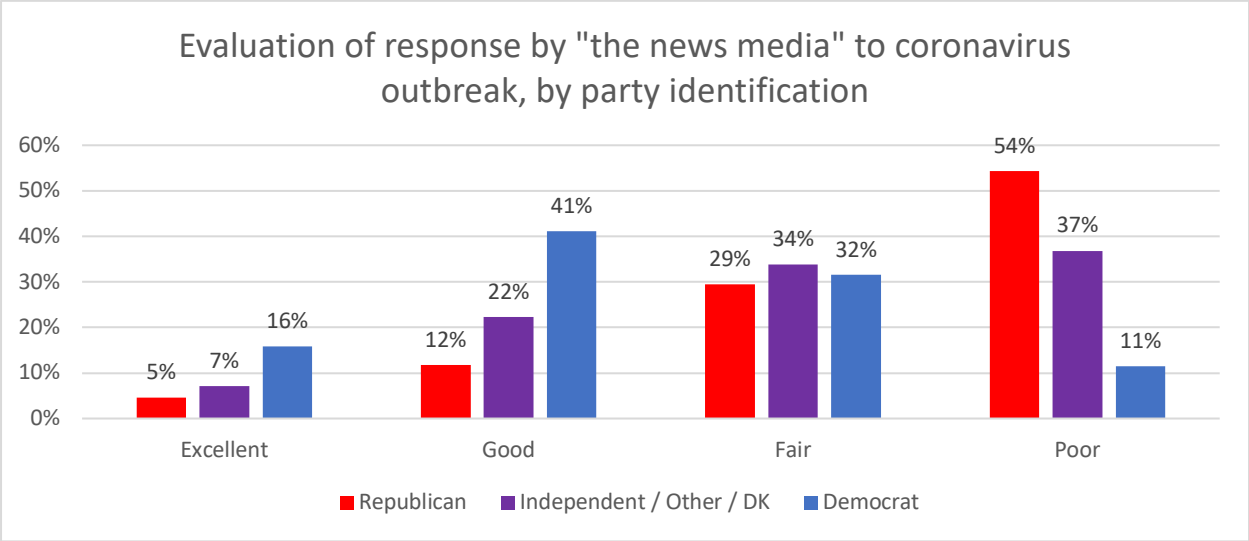
Ratings of local law enforcement also vary significantly across the cities of Hampton Roads, and the differences are quite dramatic. Less than half viewed the response to the coronavirus as either excellent or good in Portsmouth (45.8%), and it was as high as 64.6% in Virginia Beach and 70.9% in Chesapeake.

% of City Residents Rating the Response of Local  
Law Enforcement to the Coronavirus Outbreak as  
Excellent or Good

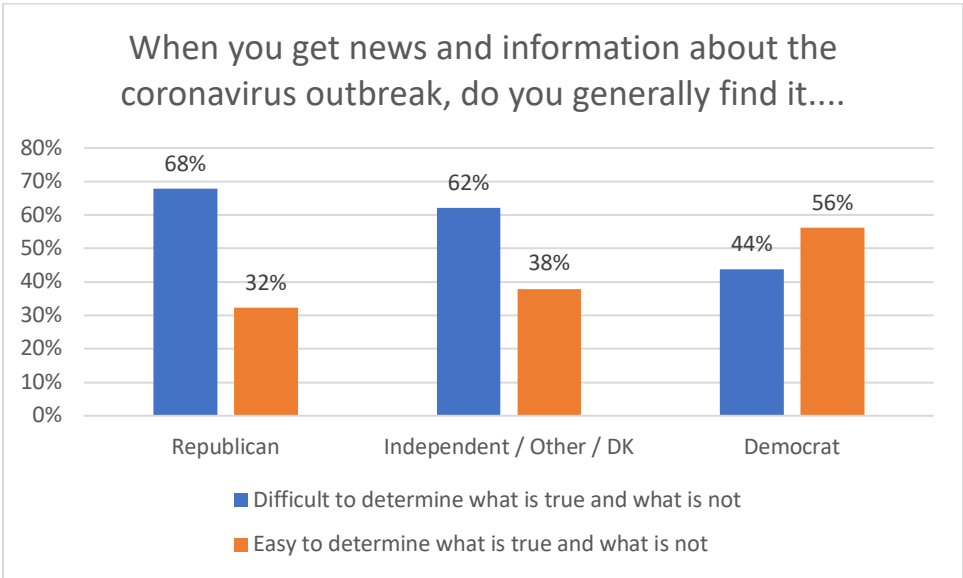


*The media*

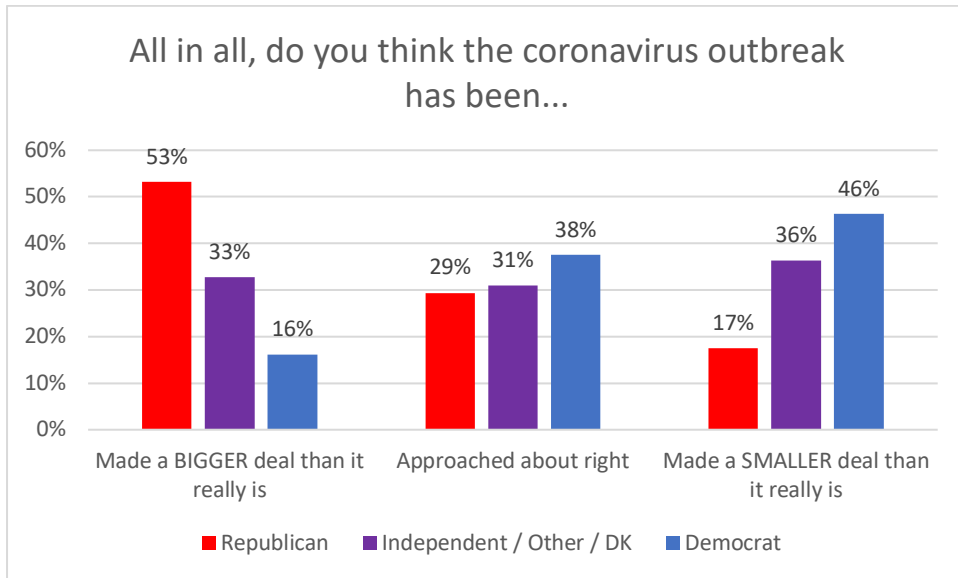
As is typically the case in national surveys, views of the media were sharply divided on party lines, with Republican respondents much more likely to give the media negative marks, and Democratic respondents more likely to give the media a positive evaluation. Fifty-four percent of Republicans gave the media a “poor” rating, while only 11% of Democrats gave this rating. Conversely, 57% of Democrats gave a good or excellent rating, compared with only 17% of Republicans.



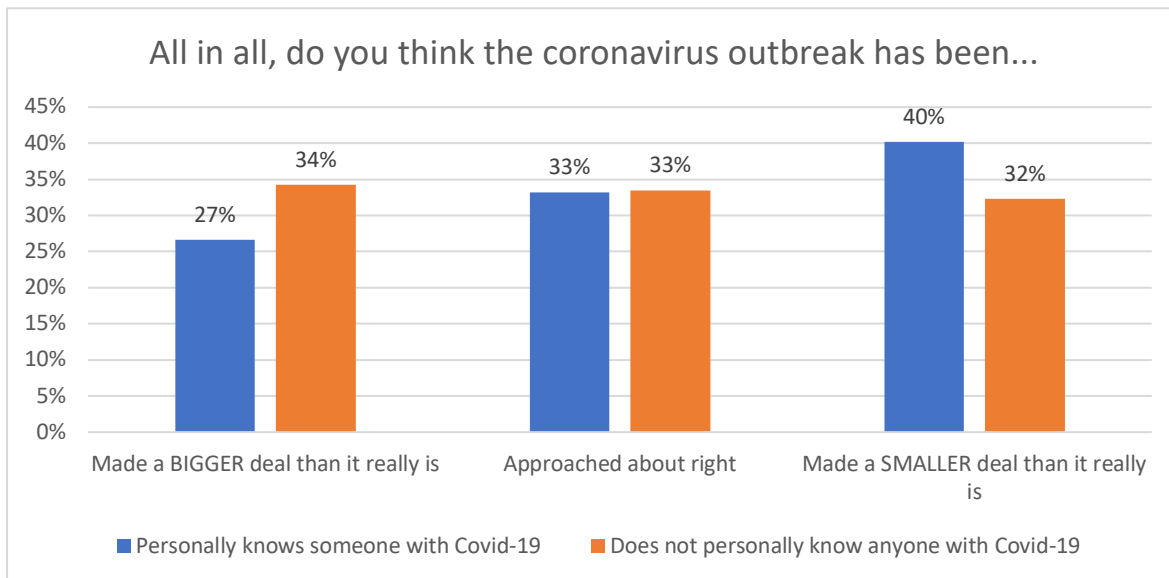
Republicans were also much more likely to report that it was difficult for them to determine what was true than Democrats, though even among Democrats, 44% indicated that they had difficulty.



Respondents were equally divided concerning the question of what sort of emphasis should be placed on the coronavirus outbreak. As one might expect, views on this question were strongly associated with party identification and views of the media. Those who thought that the media had done a poor job of covering the pandemic tended to think it had placed too much emphasis on it. And a majority of Republicans indicated that the pandemic had been made too much of, while a plurality of Democrats thought that it had been “made a smaller deal than it really is.”



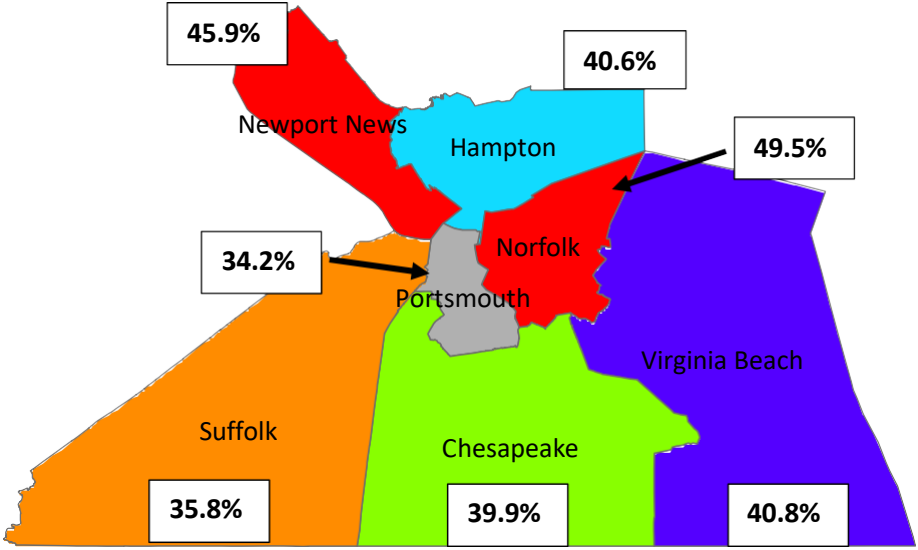
Personally knowing someone who has contracted COVID-19 had a modest impact on views concerning the response to the pandemic, although those who know someone who has had the virus were modestly more likely to think that the pandemic has been made a smaller deal than it really is.



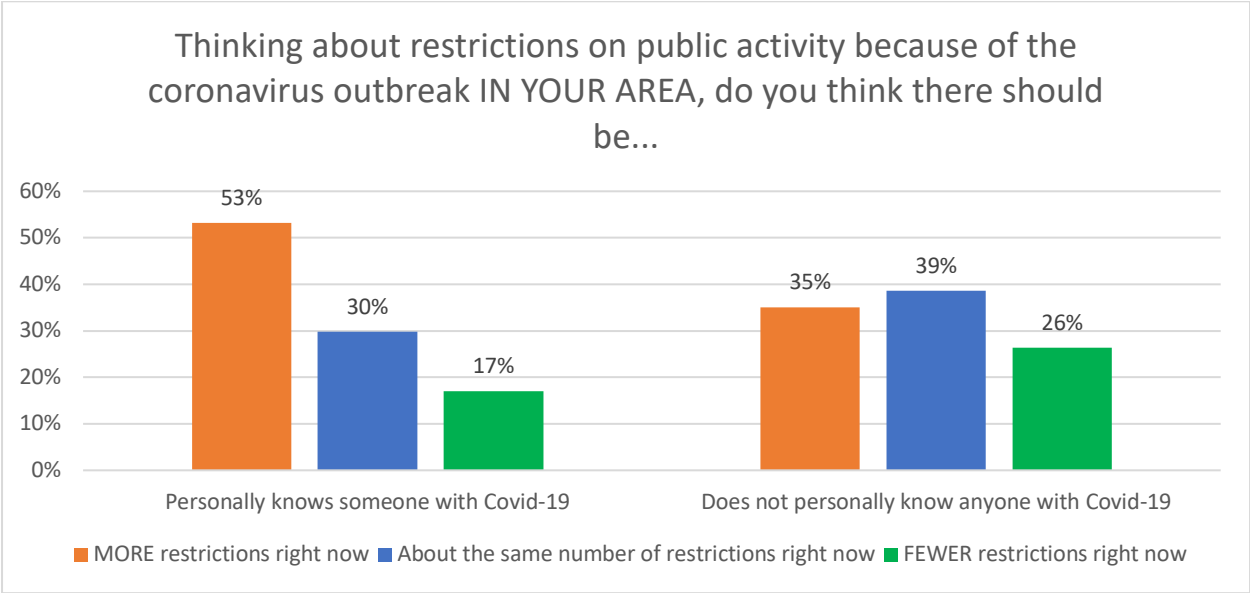
*More restrictions needed?*

Respondents from Newport News (45.9%) and Norfolk (49.5%) were the most likely to indicate that they thought there should be more restrictions, while respondents from Portsmouth (34.2%) and Suffolk (35.8%) were least likely to indicate that there should be more restrictions.

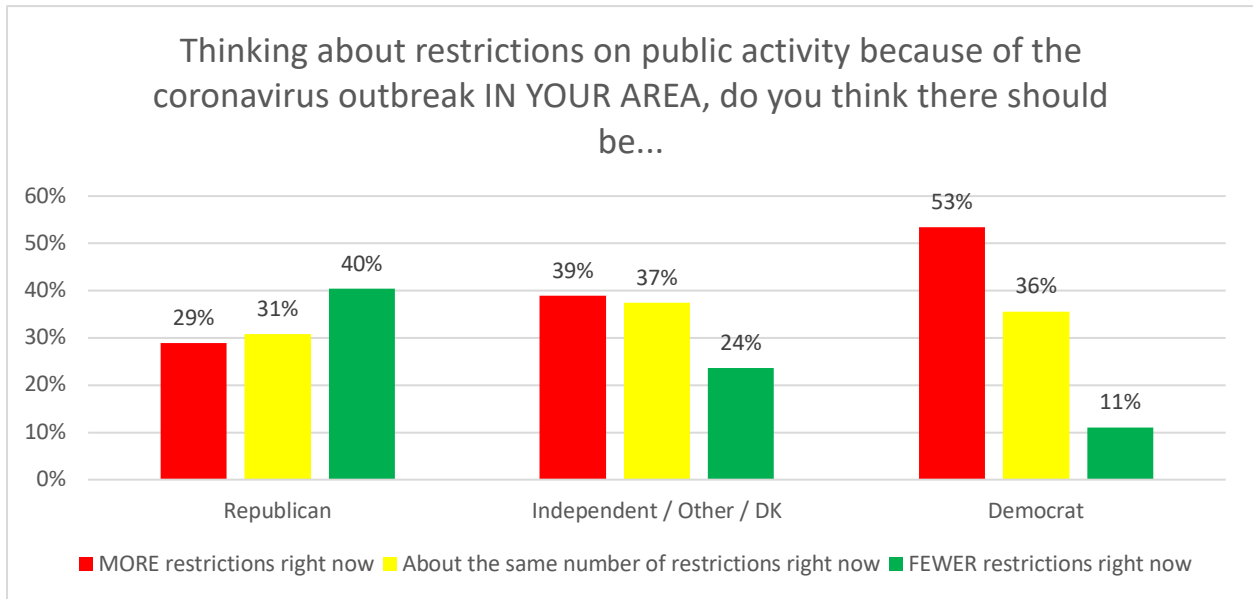
**% of City Residents Indicating that There Should be More Restrictions Right Now Due to the Coronavirus**



Those who personally knew someone who had COVID-19 were much more likely to support more restrictions: 53% wanted more restrictions, compared to 35% of those who did not personally know anyone with COVID-19.



Views concerning restrictions were also sharply polarized on party lines, with Republicans much more likely to want fewer restrictions than Democrats. A plurality of Republicans wanted fewer restrictions, while a majority of Democrats preferred to see more restrictions.



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