



**IHSS Covid-19 Working Group
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Title: Evidence-informed policies and public trust during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Work on trust has repeatedly shown that public trust in government and public institutions is crucial for every governing system. From a public policy point of view, trust is essential for good governance (Blind 2007, p. 17) as it affects transactional costs. Governing systems with low trust levels require extensive documentation, strong contractual arrangements, and numerous control mechanisms in order to function. Given the centrality of this concept, a salient enquiry arising from the management of the pandemic is how trust in government developed during this period. The project 'A global mapping of the use of expertise and evidence-informed policies in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic', funded by Research England Quality-related Research Strategic Priorities Fund, aimed to address this question, and offer new insights on the matter.

Examining such a question for the Covid-19 pandemic is of particular interest as the virus has a global spread, while the response to the pandemic was very quickly politicised. Public institutions and experts in many environments already suffered from low credibility. The multiple crises of the last decade have led to an erosion of public trust towards governing institutions especially in countries that suffered most from the financial crisis (Drakos et al. 2016). As governments sought to manage the pandemic and its implications the question of trust became even more important. This is so as the efficiency of government measures and policies is to a great extent dependent on citizen compliance, and by extension, on public trust (Schomaker et al. 2020).

Scholars have argued that high levels of trust are seen as crucial for the implementation and the preservation of restrictive policies, like stay-at-home orders and the prohibition of mass gatherings (Van Bavel et al. 2020). Subsequently, trust leads to higher compliance and lower mortality rates (Oksanen et al. 2020). Some governments operating in high-trust societies opted to appeal to the citizens' sense of responsibility rather than putting hard measures in place (Toshkov et al. 2020). As governments rested assured that people would maintain self-protection measures without any coercion, and people trusted the government to take all necessary measures, the adoption of restrictive policies did not occur until the infection rate rose substantially (Devine et al. 2020, p.7). As Petridou (2020) suggests one of the main variables explaining Sweden's loose approach to the Covid-19 pandemic is its high levels of public trust towards the government (Petridou 2020, pp. 154-155).

Yet, trust does not only play a role with regards to citizen compliance. Instead, the pandemic is bound to also have implications for the level of public trust in the post-Covid-19 period. As already shown elsewhere, pandemics can have negative and long-lasting effects on public trust towards governments and scientists (Aksoy et al. 2020; Eichengreen et al. 2020). With respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, studies on the relationship between lockdowns and public trust to the government remain inconclusive (Devine et al. 2020, p.6). However, a number of scholars have argued that public trust to institutions increased during the pandemic (Schomaker et al. 2020, Jennings et al. 2020)

dwarfing all other determinants of public trust, like economic considerations (Schraff 2020). A potential causal mechanism explaining this phenomenon has to do with the ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect, i.e. the citizens’ need for leadership and central guidance in the face of severe uncertainty. Having said that, studies have also shown that the ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect seems to dissipate once political leaders seem unable to contain the virus or when they fail to take it seriously. This explains why trust in certain populist leaders decreased during the pandemic (Jennings et al. 2020, p. 6), as shown in the cases of former US President Trump and Brazil President Bolsonaro whose popularity suffered due to their management of the pandemic. On the contrary, Hungarian PM Orbán and the Czech PM Babiš, both seen as populist leaders, took the pandemic seriously and saw their popularity increasing.

The dynamic described above suggests a dual linkage between public policies and public trust during the pandemic. On the one hand, the proper implementation of policies is subject to high levels of public trust. At the same time, public trust is affected by the success of restrictive policies which in turn is linked with citizen compliance. This set of expectations would entail vicious and virtuous circles for low- and high-trust societies respectively. Yet, a review of the existing data reveals a more nuanced picture with certain low-trust countries having fared quite well vis-à-vis their response to the pandemic, e.g., Greece, while some high-trust cases having faced significant challenges, for instance Sweden, Belgium, and the UK.

In an effort to offer a response to the above puzzle our project explored the linkage between expert knowledge, government policy and public trust. In particular, the project created a database covering how twenty-four different governments across the globe employed expertise and evidence-informed policies to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. To increase the generalisability of our cases, we employed cases that i) could be treated as typical of distinct broader categories, ii) covered the full performance spectrum with regards to pandemic management, and iii) featured diverse economic conditions, geographical location, governance regimes and levels of public trust. The database brought together information on the institutions and bodies that provided expert knowledge to policymakers, the disciplines that informed policies, the decision-making bodies that were in position to apply evidence-informed policies, the role of experts in the government’s communication strategy, the role of regional/ subnational governments in translating expertise into measures, and lastly, shifts in public trust towards the government and experts during the pandemic.²

An overview of the collected data suggests that, overall, countries that employed evidence-informed policies and communicated their restrictive measures on this basis saw their levels of public trust rising. This implies that governments that framed experts and expert knowledge as trustworthy during the pandemic enjoyed a windfall gain on public trust. Adding to that, there is evidence

² For more information visit: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/gpi/projects/covid-map/>

indicating that countries with well-established scientific bodies and prior experience in managing communicable disease outbreaks (e.g., Korea, Taiwan and Japan), countries that immediately turned to experts and responded to the pandemic by implementing evidenced-informed policies (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Greece), and countries that consistently involved experts in their public communication strategies (e.g., New Zealand, Greece) enjoyed higher levels of trust towards both governments/ public institutions and the experts' community (Ladi, Angelou & Panagiotatou, 2021).

Of course, the use of expert knowledge in crises is not a new phenomenon. Facing severe uncertainty, politicians seek different types of input (Boin et al. 2005, pp. 29, 34), including input from experts (Haas 1992, p. 15). The latter are seen as better equipped to deal with highly complex policy questions, to cover knowledge gaps and attain better output (Boswell 2009, p. 5). As governments had to decide on the optimal measures to handle the pandemic they drew from the knowledge of experts on issues pertaining the severity and the contagiousness of the virus, the health sector capacity and treatment costs, and the economic, social and psychological implications of the different containment strategies.

Most countries under examination draw clear lines between policy advice and policy implementation. Around 80% of our sample had already established -or set up specifically for the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic- advisory bodies with little to no executive power. Only few cases featured bodies charged with both advising and executing capacity. Eminent examples in that regard are the Korean Disease Control and Prevention Agency and the Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing. While the distinction between advisory and implementing bodies is analytically useful, there is no evident connection between the former and the successful employment of expertise. In Brazil, for instance, where the division between the two was clear, expert advice was by and large ignored; instead, in Korea and Taiwan, where this division was unclear, expert advice was closely followed by the government.

Yet, governments use expert knowledge not only to improve policy efficiency but also to legitimise policy choices and to, subsequently, increase public trust. To achieve this, politicians strive to gain public support through a variety of ways, one of which is transparency over the decision-making process (Raaphorst & Van de Walle 2018) and the use of expert-based advice for the successful resolution of crises. As such, an important incentive for politicians to integrate expert input into their public communication strategy is to lend credibility and authority to the adopted policies thus reinforcing public support for the government's problem-solving capacity (Boswell 2009, p. 7). Our sample was divided with 58% of the countries bringing experts to the fore of their communication strategy and the other 42% opting for the political leadership to update the public and communicate measures. Evidence suggests that the decision of some governments of low-trust societies to place experts at the center of their crisis-management and communication strategy during the pandemic

brought positive results and improved the government's credibility. In other cases, however, the mobilization of expertise and evidence-informed policies was rather the product of effective lesson drawing from other countries, or an indication of the low state capacity. The latter led policymakers to attempt sharing the responsibility and the blame for delayed action and unpopular measures with the expert community. The case of Italy constitutes a characteristic example (Capano 2020; Vicentini & Galanti 2021).

Notwithstanding the drivers of the policymakers' turn to expert advice, early surveys confirm that evidence-informed policies have had a positive impact on public trust. In particular, it seems that citizens looked favorably to leaders that were visibly in close consultation with scientists, with the most eminent example here being New Zealand's PM Arden, whose decisions were always backed up -in official daily briefings- by the medical expertise of Health Director General Dr Bloomfield. By extension, political leaders with a more technocratic profile, for instance Italy's recent PM Conte, seemed to fare better in terms of popular approval compared to populist leaders, like Trump and Bolsonaro (Jennings et al. 2000, pp. 6-7). Aksoy et al. (2020), drawing data from previous pandemics, have shown that those infected tend to show lower trust to political institutions, leaders, and the healthcare system. Yet again these results appear to be tied with the government's performance. The analysis suggests that they are due to the perception that weak governments take ineffective measures with delay and are, subsequently, unable to deliver in the field of healthcare (Aksoy et al. 2020, p.35).

Building on the above expectations and mechanisms, our project conducted a public opinion survey covering four cases of our sample (UK, Greece, Germany, and Sweden). The survey results are currently under review. The data will allow us to further reflect on how the management of the Covid-19 pandemic changed public perceptions towards both the experts' community and governments. Data on i) the government's decision to rely or not on scientific advice, ii) levels of trust in the government, experts, public health authorities, the civil service, the police and the WHO, iii) the perceived efficacy of the government's effort to handle the pandemic, and iv) levels of compliance with the measures will enable us to explore whether public trust in experts grew during the pandemic and what type of experts and expertise appeared to be more credible.

The project finally offers insights on the interaction between the global, national, and regional/ local level during this period. Such an enquiry is based on the premise that differences in the strategy (centralised vs. decentralised approach) and incorporation of international organisations' advice (e.g., WHO, OECD, ECDC) has resulted in different responses and pandemic-related tools worldwide. In that respect, 58% of our sample, delegated substantial executive powers to the regional/ local level, which in most cases was the product of existing constitutional and/or institutional arrangements. This, yet, resulted in occasional problems of coordination and resources management, e.g. Italy and Japan, or even to open conflicts between regions and the central

governments, as has been the case in the USA and Brazil. Finally, in some countries, like Russia and the USA, local governments seem to have been placed at the forefront of the pandemic management effort as a blame-avoidance mechanism.

Overall, our project holds novel insights for the public policy literature that focuses on evidence-informed policymaking. More specifically, the Covid-19 pandemic is examined by innovatively bringing together three different research strands, i.e. evidence-informed policymaking, crisis-management, and public trust. By doing so we add to the emerging literature that has studied how crises, including pandemics, influence the levels of public trust in the medium and long-term. Moreover, the database operates as an initial source of data for scholars that seek to conduct research on the politics of the pandemic and on its governance implications. Its suggested typology and structure allow for the set-up of in depth comparative and single case-studies analysis. At the same time, it can serve as the basis of a matrix on how governments across the global made institutional and policy choices vis-a-vis the management of the pandemic. This matrix can then facilitate the analysis of a variety of research themes including linkages between the use of expertise and crisis-management performance and linkages between institutional features (centralised vs. decentralised management, ad hoc vs. permanent bodies, etc.) and crisis-management.

Finally, our enquiry also has practical policy implications as it offers insights into how evidence-informed policies can be used in order to improve the management of crises and to increase or repair public trust in governing institutions (Bachmann and al. 2015). This should allow policymakers to gauge measures that might increase compliance with public safety measures and the credibility of the ongoing vaccination campaign. More specifically, policymakers could benefit from insights into i) how to make better use of expert input for crisis-resolution, for instance through balancing expert advice with political considerations, ii) how to choose between types of expertise in order to better react to multi-faceted crises and provide a more resilient response, iii) how to use expert input to increase public trust and compliance given that experts can complement the political messaging, and iv) how to ensure intra-government communication and coordination between experts and different levels of government. All in all, the database facilitates lesson-drawing and the exchange of best practices between governments and levels of government providing an additional tool for the implementation of evidence-informed policies during and beyond the pandemic.

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