

New research: Populist governments lagged behind in fight on COVID

Study on 94 countries from Bocconi University shows populist distrust in expert advice caused delays in implementation of health & safety measures and closures

MILAN, ITALY , July 10, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Ideology is among the main determinants of a government's reaction to COVID-19, according to new research for the COVID Crisis Lab by Kerim Kavakli, Professor at Bocconi University's Department of Social and Political Sciences, analyzing 94 countries. Strongly populist governments, he finds, implemented fewer health measures at the onset of the pandemic (February 2020) and fewer mobility restrictions soon after (March 2020). Economic ideology also seems to matter: rightwing governments were slower to respond to COVID-19, but this effect is weaker than populism. All the differences are stronger in high-income countries and tend to decrease over time. When all countries began to record large numbers of infections, policy responses converged.

Populist distrust towards elites and expert advice, Prof. Kavakli argues, led populist governments to resist calls to take strong and costly measures. "At the initial stages of a crisis the costs of preventive measures are real, but the damage and deaths that will be prevented are based on experts' projections. Governments that do not trust experts are more likely to refrain from action", he explains.

The behavior of, for example, Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil confirm the hypothesis, whilst there are some exceptions like the swift reaction of Erdogan in Turkey and Orban in Hungary. In an effort to overcome anecdotal evidence, Prof. Kavakli collected information on the governments in power and their party affiliations in 94 countries and combined it with party ideology data from the Global Party Survey. Data on state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic come from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker and are rearranged in two indices: closures and mobility restrictions, on the one hand, and health measures such as contact tracing or testing, on the other. Both indices range from 0 to 100 points.

The level of health measures implemented by strongly populist governments lagged other countries by 10 points in February, with a similar gap in closures in mid-March. In high-income countries, though, strongly populist governments' health measures lagged other governments' by an estimated 30 points in February. To put these into context, among high-income countries, the average level of health measures in February was 32.

Rightwing parties, with their emphasis on economic growth and their opposition to state involvement in the economy, were slower at embracing economy-disrupting measures such as closures and mobility restraints, at least in high-income countries. In mid-March, they lagged behind by 20 points, with a dramatic reversal in May, when they recorded more closures than the rest. In fact, they probably had to maintain closures for longer while governments that acted earlier began to lift their restrictions.

Professor Kavakli's study does not only interpret the past, but can also be used for understanding the future. "Although populist governments' COVID-19 measures have caught up to other governments' eventually", he concludes, "the next task is to reopen the economy safely. In phase two populist governments may relax restrictions too quickly despite experts' warnings, which will put more lives and economic stability at risk".

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