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COVID-19, Security Threats and Public Opinions

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Abstract: Throughout the coronavirus outbreak, politicians and commentators have often adopted a war-like rhetoric, invoking a language more often associated to terrorist violence, rather than epidemics. Although COVID-19 represents primarily a public health emergency, not inflicted by human agency, there are similarities in the type and scope of regulations governments have introduced to tackle the virus and to respond to terrorist attacks. In this article, we first ask what we can learn from the extant studies on the attitudinal and emotional consequences of terrorism, relating it to recent research on public opinions in the wake of COVID-19, in order to better understand and predict how the pandemic will influence public sentiments. We then analyze how attitudes can shift when a critical event not only threatens the population of a country as a whole, but directly affects its political leader. Leveraging recently released survey data, we show how the announcement of Angela Merkel's quarantine significantly dampened the trust in and the credibility of her government, although this effect was short-lived.

Keywords: COVID-19, threats, terrorism, public opinion

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated feelings of fear possibly unprecedented among the majority of the population, prompting national governments to introduce extraordinary measures in order to curb the spread of the virus. The political consequences of the pandemic, however, have not been limited to policy changes. Rather, the COVID-19 outburst has also affected approval ratings and public trust

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towards incumbent governments in a significant way, particularly in western democracies.¹ An important feature of the coronavirus emergency has been the adoption of a war-like rhetoric by politicians² and the media³ in reporting on the current health crisis, both as a way to describe the complexity of the challenges ahead and to praise national unity in the face of the current threat. In this sense, the public discourse around COVID-19 closely resembles the one used to frame acts of terrorist violence. Although the threat posed by the pandemic is primarily a public health one, not inflicted by human agency, there are undoubtedly several similarities in the type and scope of regulations and “defensive” measures governments have introduced to mitigate its consequences (including travel restrictions and bans on public gatherings), and those generally enacted to tackle different types of external threats, such as terrorism.

In this short piece, we first ask whether we can take stock of and build on the extant literature studying the attitudinal and emotional consequences of terrorism as a tool to better understand how the coronavirus pandemic is influencing public sentiments, in the short as well as in the long-run. Does this new – and arguably different – menace to the health and life of a community prompt the same reactions in sentiments as more “familiar” ones, such as terrorism? To provide a preliminary answer, we review very recent studies on how the COVID-19 outbreak has affected public opinions, in particular with respect to the political support for incumbent governments. Secondly, we present an original analysis showing some suggestive evidence on how attitudes rapidly shift when a critical event not only threatens the population as a whole, but directly affects its political leader, by focusing on the announcement of Angela Merkel’s quarantine on March 22, 2020, after a doctor who had administered her a vaccine tested positive for coronavirus.

2 Global Threats and Political Attitudes

Many politicians have resorted to a combative, wartime vocabulary in their daily briefings to describe the threat stemming from COVID-19 and the actions undertaken to counter it,⁴ in a fashion that resembles, in its framing, the debate characterizing the aftermath of terrorist attacks. This should not come as a surprise:

1 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/03/17/perception-government-handling-covid-19>.

2 See e.g., <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/07/we-re-all-in-a-war-against-covid-19-together>.

3 See e.g., <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/25/ny-governor-andrew-cuomo-hailed-wartime-president-joe-biden/>.

4 See e.g., <https://viraldiscourse.com/2020/04/13/is-the-war-rhetoric-around-covid-19-an-anglo-american-thing/>.

both events fuel anxiety and generate negative health and economic costs on the targeted country, creating potentially large cross-border externalities (Caruso 2020). Furthermore, in both cases, policymakers are presented with a difficult dilemma, between protecting the public health and security of their citizens and preserving their civil liberties. As a matter of fact, both terrorism and COVID-19 have prompted many governments to sacrifice the latter, resorting to the powers granted by the national constitutions in exceptional circumstances, which allowed them to circumvent ordinary checks-and-balance, limit fundamental civil liberties and increase surveillance and coercion.⁵

Finally, both threats bring about a backlash against the notions of open societies and economies, after decades of opening up to trade, migration and travel across borders. In fact, many commentators have argued that the pandemic could prove to be a gift to populisms and prelude to shifts towards authoritarian nationalism.⁶ The closure of international borders as a safeguard against the pandemic, and the increased role that the State has assumed to fight it, are in fact exploited by populist radical right parties to mobilize significant portions of the electorate around nationalist ideas. They are also held up as proof that radical right parties were right when pointing out the dangers of open borders. As in the aftermath of emblematic terrorist attacks, we are experiencing a revival of the political debate on closed vs. open borders, and around whether migration is a Trojan wooden horse for the diffusion of the risk within the country (Böhmelt and Bove 2020).

As language more suited to conflicts and political violence is commonly invoked around the COVID-19 pandemic, we wonder whether the scholarly literature on the attitudinal consequences of terrorism can help us grasping public reactions to the current health crisis. At the same time, although COVID-19 and terrorist violence are both a major source of public fear, the latter seem to pose very small risks of victimization. According to the Global Terrorism Database, the global death toll over this decade ranged from a minimum of 7827 in 2010 to a peak of 44,490 in 2014. At the time of writing (27 June 2020), the number of confirmed deaths from COVID-19 reached almost 500,000, just six months since the first case was reported in China.

A large and burgeoning literature has investigated the extent to which terrorism shapes public attitudes. The main consequence of terrorism that emerges across these studies is related to a “rally-around-the-flag” dynamic, with a sudden increase in trust towards the government’s action and increased approval rates for presidents and nationalist forces (e.g., Belmonte 2020; Dinesen and Jæger 2013;

5 Amat et al. (2020) argue that there are parallels to be drawn between terrorism and the COVID-19, but find that, whereas both push preferences towards a national response as opposed to a European/international one, the national bias is much stronger for the latter.

6 See e.g., <https://www.ft.com/content/0e83be62-6e98-11ea-89df-41bea055720b>.

Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2020; Nussio 2020). Terrorism also triggers hostility against out-groups and reinforces feelings of distrust and prejudice about immigrants (e.g., Böhmelt et al. 2020; Bove et al. 2020; Legewie 2013; Nussio et al. 2019). It can also increase popular support for non-democratic regulations and practices, as individuals urge their political leaders to introduce harsher security legislation (Bove, Rivera, and Ruffa 2020a; Huddy et al. 2005).

Can we expect the similar reactions in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak? Few recent quantitative studies have already helped us make some leaps in our understanding of how the pandemic is shaping public attitudes. Firstly, there is evidence that the health crisis has strongly affected individual behavior and beliefs. Using a global online survey answered by over 100,000 respondents from 58 countries, between late March and early April 2020, Fetzer et al. (2020a) show that respondents changed their habits and behaviors in the wake of the pandemic. Whereas the response from the government and the public was deemed as generally weak, decisive actions from the policymakers mitigated misperceptions and reduced anxiety and depression.

Secondly, Bol et al. (2020) leverage a representative survey fielded in Western Europe in March and April 2020 and compare vote intentions for the party of the incumbent before and after the start of a national lockdown. They find that, similar to terrorist incidents, lockdowns increased public support for the ruling party, trust in the government and satisfaction with democracy. Interestingly, the authors argue that the most likely mechanism behind these outcomes is retrospective performance evaluation – rather than a “rally-around-the-flag” effect triggered by the pandemic – as citizens accept that strict policies are necessary and hence increase their support for those enacting them. Leininger and Schaub (2020) ask how the spreading of the virus has shaped electoral outcomes using data on local elections in Bavaria, held right at the beginning of the crisis. They find that the pandemic strongly and consistently improved the performance of the dominant regional party (CSU) and of its candidates. They argue that the most likely mechanism at play is the presence of a forward-looking perspective, in which voters support the party they consider most capable of helping them. Taken together, the two studies support the view that unexpected threats to life and safety increase support for incumbent governments, both at the national and local level (see e.g., Aytaç and Çarkoğlu 2019).

Thirdly, as in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, the health crisis creates a fertile environment for more hierarchical and authoritarian societies. Taking advantage of survey experiments fielded in Spain in March 2020, Amat et al. (2020) convincingly demonstrate how the COVID-19 outbreak made citizens more willing to sacrifice civil liberties to fight the pandemic, as well as more supportive of a strong leadership. They also discover that the pandemic has increased the value citizens assign to the competence and training of politicians, at the expense of

other qualities, such as honesty, signaling an increase in the support for expert-rule and for a technocratic approach to the management of public affairs.

Finally, polarization on highly salient political issue such as terrorism is often the norm, and the current pandemic is not an exception. In fact, one could argue that this has only made more apparent the existence and depth of the inter-party hostility, fragmentation and polarization characterizing contemporary democracies, even on scientific issues, such as vaccines. For one, Cornelson and Miloucheva (2020) show that political fragmentation in the US reduces compliance with measures deemed to prevent the contraction of the virus. Allcott et al. (2020) also highlight partisan differences in the Americans' response to COVID-19 and suggest that messages from politicians have played a relevant role in magnifying partisan gaps in adherence to lockdowns and social distancing measures. Yet, the relationship between political polarization and the reaction to COVID-19 is not a given, and Merkle et al. (2020) provide evidence that, unlike in the US, response in Canada was not driven by partisanship, and that both political elites and the public seem to have reached a (possibly temporary) consensus on how to address the current crisis.

3 Public Reactions to the Health of Political Leaders: A Case Study

In this section of the paper, we estimate the impact of news about the leader's health on public opinion: an issue that we anticipate could become dramatically relevant throughout the crisis. Our empirical exercise focuses on the case of Germany, where, on March 22, Angela Merkel announced a two-weeks quarantine after her doctor had tested positive for coronavirus.⁷ The widespread attention devoted by the media to Merkel's health issues, earlier in 2020, might have compounded a sense of uncertainty around her figure, possibly amplifying the effect of the quarantine announcement.

Our study builds on newly released survey data on public perceptions from Fetzer et al. (2020a).⁸ As around 8500 German residents answered the questionnaire between March 20 and 31, we have sufficient statistical power to investigate how Merkel's confinement shaped trust towards her cabinet. We use an "Unexpected Event during Survey Design" (UESD) identification strategy (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2020), which relies on the assumption that the timing

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/merkel-quarantined-as-doctor-who-vaccinated-her-tests-positive>.

⁸ See Fetzer et al. (2020b) and <https://osf.io/3sn2k/> (latest retrieved: June 26, 2020) for more information.

of Angela Merkel's quarantine announcement is unexpected and randomly assigned relative to that of the interviews. As a result, individuals who completed the questionnaire after (before) the announcement constitute the "treatment" ("control") group. We exclude the day of the announcement from our estimation, as we cannot establish the exact time in which the survey was completed, and run three simple sets of regressions, where an individual belonging to the treatment (control) group was interviewed either 1, 2 or 3 days after (before) the announcement. We focus on three outcomes: trust in and perceived truthfulness of the government, and perceived appropriateness of the government response to the crisis. We build on Fetzer et al. (2020a) but focus on the German context and adopt a different type of news as treatment. Furthermore, we employ a UESD, rather than a difference-in-differences design.

Results presented in Figure 1 show that the announcement of Angela Merkel's quarantine on March 22 was associated with a significant drop in public perception towards the government's truthfulness, by about 0.09% points (p.p.) in the two-day specification. Such decline in the sentiment towards the executive is confirmed by the negative and significant impact on the perceived ability of Merkel's cabinet to take care of its citizens (-0.089 p.p.). Yet, the shock did not seem to alter the respondents' assessment of the "appropriateness" of the governmental response to the crisis, as all coefficients are insignificant at conventional levels. Coming to the control variables – not shown here due to space constraints, but available upon request – their associated effects are mostly expected. In line with previous research, respondents with more years of schooling tend to judge more favorably the trustworthiness and truthfulness of the government. Finally, we do not observe any significant difference in the evaluation of Merkel's cabinet by gender and self-reported income.

Overall, the results are not consistent with a "rally-around-the-flag" response to dramatic events, such as terrorist attacks, when the public tends to "rally" around their incumbents, giving a boost to their approval ratings. Instead, the estimates appear to be more compatible with an "accountability framework" (see e.g., Ferejohn 1986). Merkel's quarantine announcement was possibly perceived as a failure of her government in preventing the spread of the virus, sparking in turn a negative reaction by the public. In fact, few notable exceptions to the "rally-around-the-flag" narrative can be found in the literature. One example comes from the 2004 Madrid bombings, which occurred three days before the Spanish General Election. Despite a comfortable margin in most opinion polls before the attack, the public "blamed" the incumbent government for the attacks and ousted it in favor of the opposition (Bali 2007). Clearly, such negative reactions are usually mitigated by a number of factors, including the objective difficulty of preventing the threat.

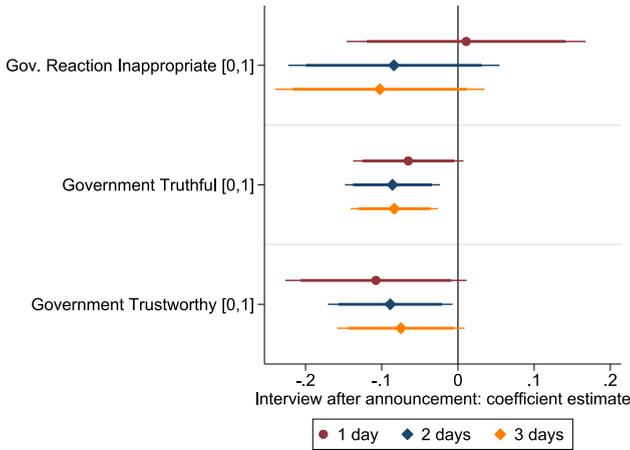


Figure 1: Attitudes towards Merkel's government after quarantine announcement.

Notes: The dependent variables are shown on the vertical axis. The survey questions (recoded as dummies) analyzed are: (1) *Do you think the reaction of your country's government to the current coronavirus outbreak is appropriate, too extreme, or not sufficient?* [five-point scale]; (2) *How much do you trust your country's government to take care of its citizens?* [five-point scale]; (3) *How factually truthful do you think your country's government has been about the coronavirus outbreak?* [five-point scale]. All specifications control for age, gender, income, education, health status of the respondent. Standard errors are clustered by Age x Gender. N.: 2066 (one-day window around March 22, 2020), 2875 (two-days), 3202 (three-days).

The impact of the announcement of Merkel's quarantine on public opinion appears to be short-lived, losing significance after four days (see Figure 2), mirroring results presented by earlier research on terrorism. The absence of symptoms, unlike Boris Johnson,⁹ as well as her prompt decision to go into self-isolation, unlike Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro,¹⁰ might have dampened the persistence of the effect on the popularity of Merkel's cabinet. A further mitigating factor could have been overall quality of the German response to the crisis, with the country being almost unanimously judged as a role model.¹¹ Finally, the decision

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/apr/05/boris-johnson-admitted-to-hospital-with-coronavirus>.

¹⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/de7f0c8a-6488-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>.

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/world/europe/with-broad-random-tests-for-antibodies-germany-seeks-path-out-of-lockdown.html>.

to undertake a “milder” lockdown, compared to other EU countries such as France, Italy or Spain, might have reduced the feeling of emergency perceived by the respondents, especially in lesser-hit regions in Germany.¹²

4 Conclusions

Terrorism and COVID-19 represent global threats with destabilizing and possibly devastating consequences in the affected countries, and a high potential to cause long-term global instability. Many western democracies have attempted to adopt a war-like response to the threat posed by both, reacting in remarkably similar ways. Emblematic terrorist attacks have stimulated academic research seeking to quantify the adverse effects of terrorist violence on political trust and attitudes, as well as on individual behavior. The literature finds that periods of more frequent and deadlier

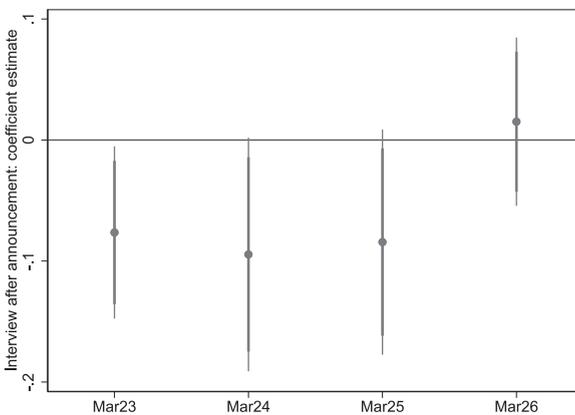


Figure 2: Attitudes towards Merkel’s government after quarantine announcement: daily breakdown.

Notes: The dependent variable is a dummy equal to one if the respondent judged the Merkel government somewhat or very truthful about the coronavirus outbreak, 0 otherwise. The variable is measured daily for March 23–26, while the control group is composed by interviewees on March 20 and 21 for each specification. All specifications control for age, gender, income, education, health status of the respondent. Standard errors are clustered by Age x Gender. N.: 2289 (March 23), 1878 (March 24), 1619 (March 25), 1391 (March 26).

¹² Unfortunately, the data does not allow us to identify the location of each respondent beyond the country level.

attacks increase support for incumbent governments. Terrorism also reduces tolerance, increases prejudice and boosts public support for non-democratic restrictions of freedom. Our brief – and by no means exhaustive – review of recent studies on the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak reveals that the public has so far reacted in very similar ways to this new menace. The indirect political effects of the epidemic may, in the long run, have a much deeper impact on policymaking than the highly visible, short-term policy responses enacted by governments so far, by influencing electoral outcomes worldwide and ultimately reshaping the nature of the political debate in a deeper way.

We present some suggestive and preliminary evidence that could pave the way for further research on how the exceptional threat posed by COVID-19 shapes support for leaders and for governments more generally, possibly beyond traditional “rally-around-the-flag” dynamics. We show how the announcement of Angela Merkel’s quarantine – even in the absence of any symptoms – exerted a temporary, though significant, negative effect on the trust towards her cabinet. The significance of the short-run negative effect we estimate is even more striking when we consider the almost universal consensus received by Merkel’s management of the crisis.¹³ In this sense, we believe that further analyses could be devoted to other, more dramatic “case-studies”: from Boris Johnson’s hospitalization to the debate around Jair Bolsonaro’s test.

In a situation – be it COVID-19 or terrorism – where information asymmetries are inevitable and wartime rhetoric becomes the norm, the language and actions adopted by political leaders play a crucial role in how democracies will reemerge from the crisis. Hence the way in which dramatic events, such as the illness of a leader, will be handled by political elites (what to reveal, what to be learned, who to blame...) is going to be extremely relevant in this process. The suggestive, preliminary evidence we presented in this paper can provide some useful insight on how leaders’ popularity might be impacted by such exceptional circumstances, hitting democracy at its very heart.

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¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-germany-politics/crisis-management-boosts-merkels-conservatives-in-poll-idUSKBN21D106>.

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