



DOES DEMOCRACY AFFECT RESPONSE TO COVID-19?

JaDa Johnson, Briscoe Turner,
Daniel Ojo, and Lori Younisses.

Global Systemic Risk Final Project



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global problem that has not been met with a coordinated global response. While many countries have independently adopted a number of measures, including stay-at-home orders, travel bans, and relief packages to both curtail the spread of the virus and ameliorate its consequences, collective action remains limited. The United States in particular used a very individualistic approach, which has only exacerbated the spread of the virus. The rapid growth of confirmed COVID-19 cases has necessitated the creation of a global response team which would collaborate to more effectively address the spread of future pandemics and minimize the associated risk.

To better understand which countries are best suited to spearhead a global response effort, this report analyzes the government structure and COVID-19 policy measures of Vietnam, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Germany. These countries were chosen based on the region that they represent as well as their contrasting polity scores, or the degree to which they are strongly democratic or autocratic. More specifically, Germany and Nigeria represented the more democratic governmental structures, while Vietnam and Saudi Arabia represented the more autocratic governmental structures. Based on each country's varying implementation of stay-at-home orders, travel bans, and stimulus packages, it was evident that democratic countries had a more effective response to the pandemic. However, it is important to make the distinction between the overall structure of the government and the degree to which COVID-19 measures were more or less democratic in implementation. Additionally, the political legitimacy of a government in the eyes of its citizens was a better predictor of whether a country could more effectively address the virus rather than simply identifying the level to which a country was democratic or autocratic. Legitimacy grants a country the flexibility to combine features of

different governmental structures in its pandemic response, while maintaining the trust and cooperation of its citizens.

Given the findings from the four countries selected, this report outlines key policy recommendations to address future pandemics or global events, in a more coordinated and effective manner. First, a Global Response Unit composed of countries that have been effective in reducing confirmed COVID-19 cases should be created. To uphold political legitimacy, democratic countries should be at the center of this response collaborating on a collective plan of action as well as researching socialist measures that have proven successful. Alternatively, the UN should make use of an ad hoc committee to develop a protocol that countries should implement during future pandemics. This protocol should include the immediate implementation of travel bans, lockdowns, and government funded aid packages. Additionally, countries should consider adopting stricter practices during the initial stages of the outbreak to limit the spread of the virus. While this report provides comprehensive policy recommendations based on the four case studies chosen, increasing the scope of the study to include several other countries may provide a more extensive analysis.

Introduction

In the unprecedented times of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, also known as COVID-19, the response to curbing the spread of the virus has varied significantly between countries. In the absence of global infrastructure designed to stop the spread of pandemics, this unique time has allowed world leaders, in collaboration with their governing bodies, to create an action model to reduce the number of COVID-19 cases. The most common practices implemented across the globe are the use of lockdowns and quarantines through stay-at-home orders, and the use of face masks to protect individuals from droplets from other's respiratory systems. While these practices are the "base-line" approach, several countries, both democratic and autocratic alike, have created strategic plans, most suitable for their system's infrastructure, to address the spread of the pandemic. However, many obstacles have presented themselves in establishing a governmental response. An example of this is the increasingly difficult time in finding an approach that effectively curtails the spread of the virus in the West.

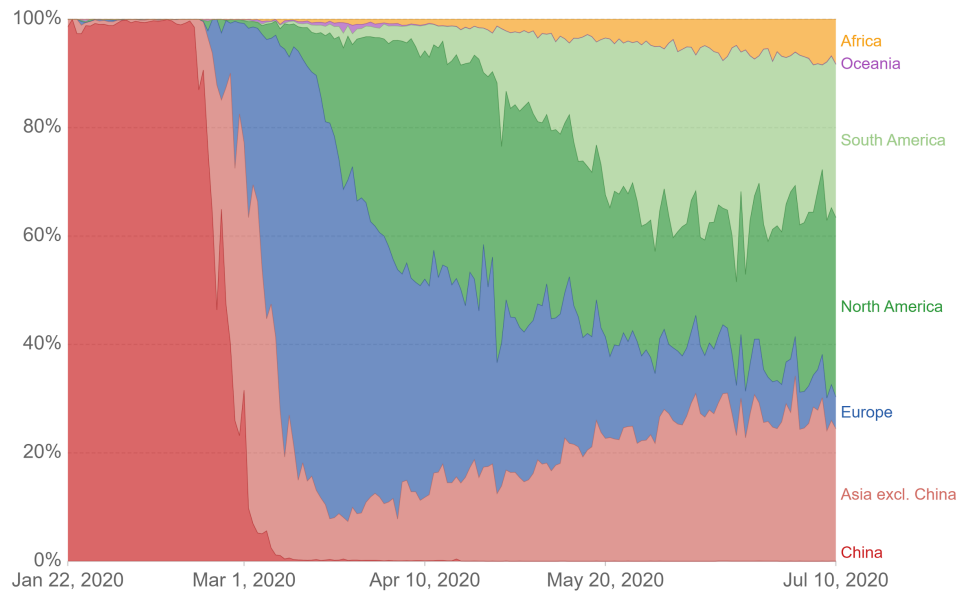
In the United States, the amount of COVID-19 cases has exponentially surpassed other countries. The personal autonomy exercised by citizens in the democratic countries like the US, shows an individualistic approach. The actions of an individual or group of people have the potential to hinder the plans that the government has established or speed up the healing of the nation. This phenomenon that is being mirrored throughout the world has shaped the lens of our research. The objective of our study is to evaluate which forms of government were most effective in implementing policies used to reduce the number of COVID-19 cases their nation experienced. By evaluating cross-national polity scores and the percentage of SARS-CoV-2 cases, the research intends to evaluate whether a correlation between levels of democracy and the amount of COVID-19 cases exists and which forms of government effectively reduced the number of cases the state experienced. To learn how a global response team for pandemics

should operate, finding which countries and leadership styles were most effective in reducing COVID cases, can set the guidelines for which countries and forms of government should spearhead a global response unit for future pandemics.

Daily confirmed COVID-19 cases

The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of total cases. The main reason for this is limited testing.

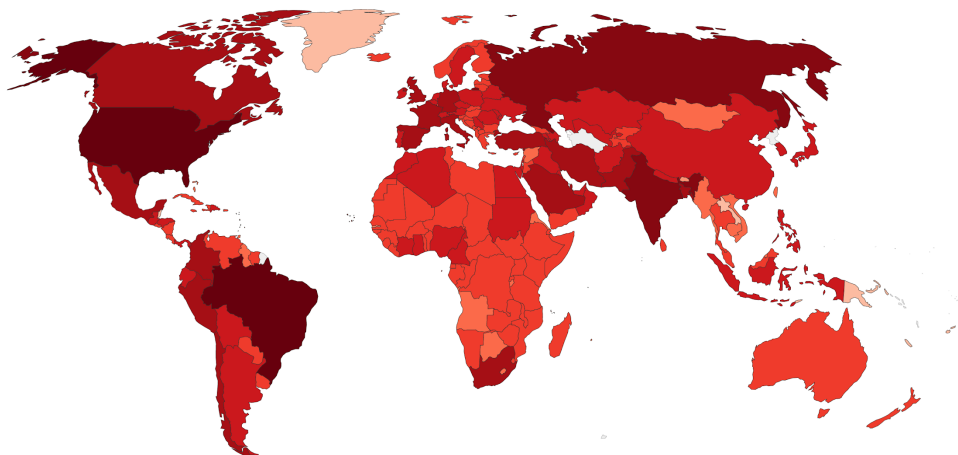
Our World
in Data



Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases, Jul 10, 2020

The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of total cases. The main reason for this is limited testing.

Our World
in Data



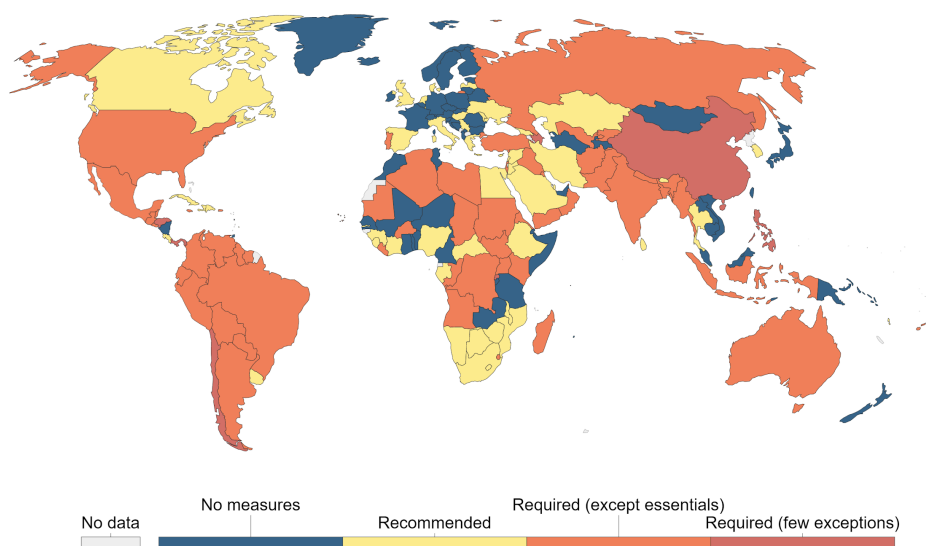
No data none 1 10 50 100 500 10,000 100,000 500,000 1 million 5 million

Source: European CDC – Situation Update Worldwide – Last updated 10 July, 11:22 (London time)

OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Stay-at-home requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jul 10, 2020

Our World
in Data

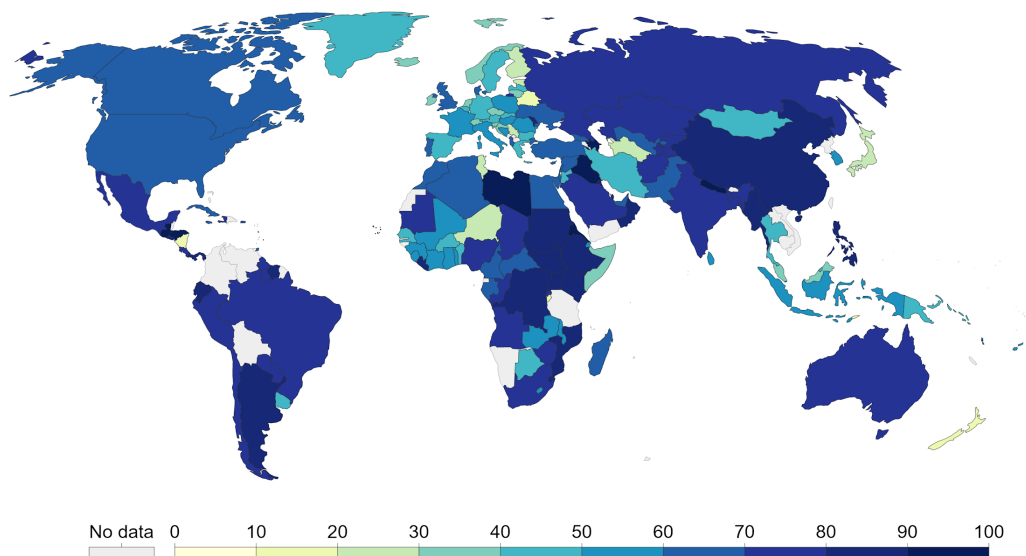


Source: Hale, Webster, Petherick, Phillips, and Kira (2020). Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker – Last Updated 10th July.
Note: There may be sub-national or regional differences in restrictions. The policy categories shown may not apply at all sub-national levels. A country is coded as having these restrictions if at least some sub-national regions have implemented them.
OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

COVID-19: Government Response Stringency Index, Jul 10, 2020

Our World
in Data

The Government Response Stringency Index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest response).



Source: Hale, Webster, Petherick, Phillips, and Kira (2020). Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker – Last Updated 10th July.
Note: This index simply records the number and strictness of government policies, and should not be interpreted as 'scoring' the appropriateness or effectiveness of a country's response.
OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

(This measures strictness of policy rather than government structure)

Data Sets

This report utilizes the Polity 5 dataset to measure the degree to which a country's governmental structure is either democratic or autocratic. The term "polity" describes a political or governmental organization, and is measured on a 21-point scale consisting of two separate 11-point democratic and autocratic scales.¹ To calculate the combined polity score, the autocracy score is subtracted from the democracy score with a resulting value ranging from +10 to -10.² A score of +10 signifies that a country is strongly democratic, while a score of -10 signifies that a country is strongly autocratic.³

The Polity 5 dataset classifies an institutionalized democracy as a governing body that (1) contains institutions and procedures in which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies and leaders, (2) exercises institutionalized constraints on the exercise of power by the executive, and (3) guarantees civil liberties to all citizens in their daily lives and in acts of political participation.⁴ Meanwhile, an institutionalized autocracy is more generally described as a governing body that restricts competitive political competition.⁵ This operational definition differs slightly from the Western concept of an "authoritarian regime" which further emphasizes the suppression of political freedoms.⁶

The percentage of reported Covid-19 cases are found using European CDC time series data, describing cumulative confirmed Covid-19 cases of countries across the globe. Additionally, the date in which a country declared stay-at-home orders is found using data from University of Oxford's Covid-19 Government Response Tracker. Oxford's Government

¹ Gurr & Marshall (2020), POLITY5 Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2018 Dataset Users' Manual, available at: <https://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/p4manualv2016.pdf>

² Gurr & Marshall (2020).

³ Gurr & Marshall (2020).

⁴ Gurr & Marshall (2020).

⁵ Gurr & Marshall (2020).

⁶ Gurr & Marshall (2020).

Response Tracker also compares a combination of other policy decisions implemented to contain the spread of Covid-19, such as the stringency of government response, income support provided during the pandemic, and overall number of cases that a country has experienced.

Case Study Analysis

In reviewing the given data, researchers chose to focus on the two extremes of the Polity scale, -10 and 10, and two milder cases on either side of the spectrum at -7 and 7. Saudi Arabia, Germany represented -10 and 10, respectfully; while Vietnam and Nigeria represented -7 and 7, respectfully. Each country represented not only one score but also a different region, and they collectively offered perspectives that would help to lead to more general policy recommendations for addressing Covid-19 and future global pandemics that will arise.

Saudi Arabia (-10), being an absolute monarchy, demonstrates an autocratic response to the virus with the second highest recorded amount cases amongst those studied in this analysis. The country received its first case on March 2nd, only to end up with 1435 cases (0.00424% of the population) by the end of the month, and by the end of June, cases were up to 186,436 (0.54404%). Leadership took its time in putting restrictions in place, and some argue that the restrictions were not taken seriously until some members of the royal family had contracted the virus themselves.⁷ Restrictions included an initial recommended “stay-at-home” order in March to a strict 24 hour lockdown by early April. The government did, however, put in place financial support for its citizens covering more than 50% of lost income for families experiencing unemployment beginning in April, yet cases had still risen to 186,436 by the end of June.⁸

⁷ Kirkpatrick and Hubbard (2020), *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/middleeast/coronavirus-saudi-royal-infections.html>.

⁸ KPMG (2020), *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/saudi-arabia-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Germany (10), a federal parliamentary republic, had the highest amount cases with 193,259 cases (0.23%) by June, jumping from 61,913 cases (0.074%) in March, yet their first reported case was January 27th. Germany went from restricting mass gatherings of people to closing borders mid-March, leading the policy to ban non-EU citizens from entering the European Union in for 30 days, and implementing a “contact ban” to easing restrictions early April.⁹ By June 15th, Germany opened its international border – apparently too early – and cases soared.

Vietnam (-7), a Socialist state located the closest to the pandemic epicenter out of the four states selected, handled the pandemic the best. The country starts with 206 cases (0.000214%) back in March and only manages to rise 355 cases (0.00037%) by June. Lockdown lasted for nearly the entire month of April, and they implemented a \$2.7 billion resolution that helped to support employers and employees affected by the virus. Additionally, they tested all citizens entering the country from elsewhere, requiring a 14 day quarantine? upon arrival, and foreigners entering the country were not allowed with very few exceptions.¹⁰ Vietnam’s government kept in place infrastructure from the the SARS pandemic from the previous decade, further establishing a stronger ability to confront the virus and maintain internal stability and safety.

Nigeria (7), a federal republic, had the second lowest amount of cases increase over the four-month span. In March, there were 131 cases (0.000065%), and by June, Nigeria had only experienced 25,133 cases (0.0125%). Stay at home orders began at the end of March, and only

⁹ The Berlin Spectator (2020), <https://berlinspectator.com/2020/07/11/chronology-germany-and-the-coronavirus-4/>.

¹⁰ Dizan Shira & Associates (2020), <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/covid-19-vietnam-travel-updates-restrictions.html/>.

essential worker were allowed out, and towards the end of April, all state governors decided to ban interstate travel for two-weeks. While there was not much monetary income support from the government, there was an Emergency Food Response Initiative that encouraged social distancing and gave households 5kg of rice, beans, garri (cassava root flour) and two loaves of bread.¹¹

Implications and Limitations

Types of government such as authoritarian or democratic leadership are often linked to issues of conflict and human rights. While access to healthcare services can be considered a human right, this memo does not focus on the level of access the public has to medical services. Instead, the memo analyzes the evolution of COVID-19 rates in various countries while also examining the type of government in each country. The purpose of this analysis is to determine whether there is a correlation between the type of government and positive or negative results of COVID-19 rates. The basis for this question lies in different hypotheses about the correlation between these two variables. Do democratic countries have a more successful rates of decreasing COVID-19 cases because citizens feel more of a sense of responsibility? Conversely, what if authoritarian countries are more successful because by the nature of their leadership, guidelines and enforcements of safety measures are a lot stricter and citizens follow these guidelines because they are aware of the repercussions if they do not follow the safety measures.

The implications of this study can help link what kind of government approach might be best to combat a global pandemic and ensure the safety of citizens and even other countries. It can help contribute to the different arguments for or against a certain regime type and can help

¹¹ Lagos State Government (2020), <https://lagosstate.gov.ng/blog/2020/04/14/covid-19-the-lagos-state-emergency-food-response-initiative/> .

policy makers, international organizations, and others push for a certain change in order to ensure that safety measures are followed.

However, as with all studies, this analysis also has its limitations. Since this study is done in a limited time-frame, enough data and variables could not have been collected. Furthermore, the COVID-19 situation is currently ongoing and evolving very rapidly. Therefore, there is no certainty that the evidence and recommendations of this memo will be applicable at a later time. Moreover, a more general limitation would be the lack of the ability to modify and control different variables in the cases as well as the lack of ability to repeat the experimental aspect of the study. Understanding the limitations of a study helps us identify what can be due to an experimental error, and what can be transformed into policies to combat the policy problem at hand.

Conclusions

After analyzing the data, the research finds that there is no significant difference in response to COVID-19 based on polity levels. In our data we observed that responses to COVID varied drastically from country to country and ability to effectively decrease cases and stifle the spread of the virus was not reliant on levels of democracy. For example, Vietnam, with a polity score of -7, saw less than 400 cases of coronavirus while Nigeria, with a polarity score of 7, saw more than 30,000 cases. Conversely, Saudi Arabia with a polity of -10, had a larger percent of their population had COVID-19 in despite their strict lockdown procedures in comparison to Germany with a polity score of 10.

These inconsistencies in establishing a strong relationship between levels of democracy and cases of COVID-19 allowed us to readjust our scope and analyze the methods each nation used. From this analysis we conclude that levels of de facto legitimacy affect the countries'

ability to respond effectively to the pandemic. In Germany, the methods used to reduce the spread of the virus were inherently socialist and not democratic. While the practices were not congruent with the polity score, the sense of legitimacy the German people have in their government allows for their leaders to exercise more autonomy in making decisions for the nation. Despite Nigeria having a polity score of 7, sense of de facto legitimacy in government among citizens is notoriously slow. For these reasons, recommendations made by the government were not taken into account and yield a steady increase in the number of cases since the outbreak of the pandemic. Similarly, Vietnam's experience with SARs in 2004 established credibility among their citizens to follow the heed of the government in measures to reduce the virus. Not only were citizens aware of the severity of the virus, the government was able to implement new strategies in response to it that would serve to reduce the amount of cases the nation saw.

Upon evaluating the levels of democracy and SAR-Cov-2 , it is important to note that democracy and government capability are extricable. Establishing democracy as the standard form of government, in a global aspect, delegitimizes the positive strides that non-democratic countries make. Aforementioned, in Germany, the ability to successfully impact a nation is not dependent on democracy but the collaboration and implementation of strategies that come from a wide range of government systems, especially in today's cultural milieu. Establishing legitimacy in a nation calls for an approach that is inclusive of people and varying forms of governing.