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Tamás Ginter

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Abstract

The internationalisation of Covid-19 in early 2020 pushed governments to introduce restrictive measures in order to minimize the spread and to stop the pandemic. Several types of measures were introduced (including curfews, school closures and bans on private and public events); however, these strategies varied from country to country. In order to better understand this variation, I reviewed the literature of political effects on restrictive measures. According to previous findings, several factors, such as institutional capacities, populist tendencies of governments and the timely proximity of general elections, could have influenced the stringency of the restrictive measures implemented. Populist governments and those who faced upcoming elections tended to introduce less stringent restrictive measures, while it is still debated if and how institutional preparedness and federal systems determined governments' respective lockdown strategies.

Keywords: Covid-19, lockdown measures

JEL Classification: F50, H12, I18

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic struck the entire world in late 2019 and early 2020. The majority of the developed world had not experienced a pandemic for decades. As a result, many of its countries lacked the institutional structure for a standardized procedure to prevent the spread of the virus. The reactions to the spread of the pandemic therefore showed significant variation between policies on the national level. This study aims to present and explain the variation in the stringency between the respective national restrictive measures reviewing the – despite the novel nature of the issue – highly extensive scientific literature.

Political and economic effects explaining lockdown policy variation

Restrictive measures across Europe

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the measures implemented, this section of the study reviews the restrictions that were in effect in Europe. The respective measures reviewed originate from the database of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2021). All such measures were implemented in order to reduce personal contact (and therefore assuming this would also reduce the spread of the pandemic).

The first category of such measures were stay-at-home orders. These applied either to the entire population or special social groups only (predominantly for those at risk, i.e. elderly and/or ill). They went into effect either for an entire country (e.g. Hungary) or could vary from region to region (e.g. Italy). Also, these orders varied in their legal nature, as both voluntary and compulsory stay-at-home orders were applied across Europe.

Second, the closure of educational institutions was ordered in the majority of European countries, ranging from nurseries to universities – the latter tended to be ordered to close more often than the former. Third, various restrictions applied to private and public gatherings. Separate measures tended to apply to outdoor and indoor events that could

range from a total ban to a limitation of the number of participants. These bans and restrictions could also apply to any kind of private events as well, by either a total ban or the limitation of persons and/or households meeting.

Fourth, severe restrictions of business operations were applied in order to tackle the pandemic. Most commonly, service providers such as restaurants, bars, cafés and entertainment venues were ordered to shut down. In addition, further leisure activities such as the usage of gyms and sports centres were restricted. In countries with more stringent orders even public transport, places of worship and non-essential shops were ordered to shut down.

Fifth, while less stringent than bans, further aspects of private and business life were regulated as a consequence of the spread of Covid-19. Among other things, several countries ordered or suggested partial or total remote work for businesses and public administration. In addition, the majority of European countries introduced the compulsory usage of masks in both indoor and outdoor venues.

Quantification of policy responses

As demonstrated above, several types of restrictive measures were imposed in order to tackle the pandemic. However, the comparison of the respective national measures taken is more problematic, as each country (sometimes even federal states and municipalities) introduced different strategies. Therefore, an appropriate quantification of policy responses was required in order to be able to compare the stringency of the restrictions introduced.

Hale, Angrist, Cameron Blake et al. (2020) developed an overall government response index including the effect of both economic and lockdown measures. The Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) is a compound index ranging from 0 to 100 (with 100 being the most stringent response) and is aggregated from four sub-factors. The respective sub-factors are

- (1) the lockdown stringency index (reflecting measures such as curfews and school closures)
- (2) the economic support index (reflecting economic measures such as debt relief or income support),
- (3) the containment and health index (reflecting i.a. contact tracing, testing policy and healthcare investment) and
- (4) an overall government response index (reflecting the tendency of governments to strengthen or loosen previous measures).

Contrary to the Covid-19 related economic stimulus indices (which are reviewed in depth in the second unit of this paper), the OxCGRT is an index that varies over time; therefore, comparisons are reasonable on a given day. Thus, the OxCGRT provides an opportunity for examining country differences on a daily basis and allows for examining the effect of lockdown stringency on Covid-19 related infections and mortality. As it is not only a thoroughly constructed index but also hitherto the only such indicator, studies on lockdown policies almost exclusively use it. Therefore, unless indicated otherwise, cited quantitative research is based on its numbers.

Political motives for varying stringency in lockdown measures

The following unit of the paper reviews the existing research explaining the variation in lockdown measures. Despite being a novel field of research, several political and economic models were set up in order to understand why certain governments imposed more stringent measures than others. These explaining factors cover a wide range of political concepts from the institutional to political ideology.

Institutional capacities

Capano, Howlett, Jarvis et al. (2020) examined the variation in overall policy (i.e. both economic measures and restrictions intended to slow down the spread of the virus) by country across the globe. The variation observed did not only occur in stringency and the size of the economic packages, but also on the speed of the respective government reactions. The

authors attempt to explain the respective differences in policy with pre-Covid responses to tackling pandemics, mostly examining relevant policies in regions with frequent health crises (i.a. East Asia and Africa). The authors use the framework of institutional capacities in order to explain variation in policy response. Citing Wu, Ramesh and Howlett (2015), they identify two core dimensions of policy capacity: skills (analytical, operational and political) and levels of resources (individual, organizational and systemic), resulting in altogether nine possible sub-categories. Having applied the respective Covid-19 measures on the above framework, Capano et al. introduce a two-dimensional model explaining the variation of policy responses, the factors being pre-existing levels of preparation and relevant past experience with pandemics. The model results in four distinguishable ways of reacting to Covid-19, represented in Figure 1.

Table 3. A capacity model explaining different country responses.

		Relevant past experience	
		High	Low
Pre-Existing Levels of Preparation	High	Prudent or realistic level of confidence in existing system capabilities to handle new disease. Well-Informed but wary of disease → intervened relatively early with a slow but steady and strong response. e.g. Many Asian Countries	Prepared but with no or outdated past experience. Somewhat justified (over) confidence in existing system capabilities to handle new disease. Well informed about resources but not epidemiology → late, slow, and weaker response. e.g. Some North American and European Countries
	Low	Realistic lack of confidence in existing system capabilities to handle new disease. Well-Informed about problems with system and disease and knowledgeable of weaknesses → early, fast and strong responses. e.g. Many African countries	Shocked. Not well informed or prepared and taken by surprise → late, slow but ultimately strong panic response. e.g. Some European, North American and Latin American countries

Figure 1. A capacity model explaining different country responses, Source: Capano, Howlett, Jarvis et al. (2020), pp. 299.

Contrary to many Asian and African countries, Europe had not experienced pandemics affecting a significant amount of her population since the Spanish flu in 1918-1920. In the case of the EU-27, the distinction becomes unidimensional with varying levels of preparation for potential pandemics. Capano et al. argue therefore that European countries with an efficient institutional background for health crises reacted relatively late, slow and weaker since they

felt confident in their efforts. Countries lacking well-prepared institutions reacted with shock: as they were not informed, they reacted late, but eventually very strictly in order to protect their dubious health capacities. The authors however do not specify the countries with certain levels of preparation, and so do not enable further analysis on explaining sub-category variation.

Ferraresi, Kotsogiannēs, Rizzo et al. (2020a) elaborate further on the above presented model. Analysing a set of 60 countries, the authors postulate a seemingly controversial statement: the higher the institutional capacities, the slower a country imposed lockdown measures (i.e. the more days passed between the first registered case and the introduction of restrictive measures). In addition, in countries with low-quality institutions (where human rights are also less respected) lockdown rules were complied with more than in their counterparts with high-quality institutions, especially if the citizens perceived the virus as a considerable threat. While Ferraresi et al. do not specify the underlying mechanisms, it is probable that well-functioning institutions mostly exist in highly democratic countries, while checks and balances of democracies necessarily increase the respective governments' reaction time compared to that of their less democratic counterparts. Furthermore, it is essential to note that the above findings are mere correlates: European countries with well-functioning institutions were first hit by the pandemic and the lack of measures of restricting protocol made them react significantly later than countries with low-quality institutions.

Toshkov, Yesilkagit, and Carroll (2020) conducted a comprehensive study analysing all possible covariance between political variables and policy reaction to the pandemic. It is however important to note that the dependent variable of the analysis was reaction time (i.e. how many Covid-19 cases there were in the country on the day restricting measures were introduced) and not the stringency of the respective lockdown measures. Toshkov et al. set up three separate models for explaining three sorts of government measures taken: school closure, lockdown and state of emergency, respectively. While there is some variation between the three models, more or less the same explanatory variables account for the respective differences in the speed of implementing policies.

The variables correlating significantly with the speed of restrictive measures can be grouped into two major categories. First, more democratic and well-functioning countries (i.e. those scoring high on rule of law, corruption control, freedom index, regulatory quality) tended to introduce lockdown measures significantly later than their less democratic and worse functioning counterparts. Second, countries' healthcare-related qualities (such as the number of hospital beds, separate health care ministries, and ministers being medical doctors) had a positive effect on the early introduction of restrictive measures. In addition, a high level of interpersonal trust significantly delayed the introduction of lockdowns, school closures and states of emergency.

As pointed out by the authors, these results may appear counter-intuitive at first glance: according to their findings, better-functioning countries introduced restrictive measures later, while countries with more hospital beds reacted relatively early. Toshkov et al. offer four possible explanations for these mechanisms. First, the pandemic did not spread simultaneously across all European countries: Covid-19 first hit Western Europe (i.e. more democratic and tendentially better functioning states) and due to the novel and unknown nature of the virus, these countries reacted relatively late. Second, less efficient countries of Europe (Eastern Europe in particular) reacted more quickly compared to their Western counterparts: Covid-19 arrived later to these countries and by that time, Western Europe had already introduced lockdown measures. In addition, these countries had to react immediately in order to protect their dysfunctional healthcare systems. Third, in countries with higher interpersonal trust it was possible to announce restrictions later as higher interpersonal trust correlated with the voluntary compliance with measures such as social distancing recommendations. Fourth, citizens of freer and more democratic countries would have considered lockdown measures as anti-democratic and initially there was a lack of societal consensus about the necessity of restrictive actions.

Political systems

The policy variation across political systems has caused widespread debates among both scientists and the public media. Due to the fact that several non-Western and non-democratic

countries have (claimed to have) had a significantly lower number of Covid-19 cases and deaths, a body of literature started to doubt the efficiency of Western democratic systems in tackling the pandemic (or any further future crisis requiring fast action from the respective government). The following unit examines if and to what extent there is variation in lockdown stringency between countries with differing political systems.

Due to the novel nature of the virus itself and its analysis, no wide consensus could have yet been attained regarding the causal relation of (the efficiency of) lockdown measures and political systems. Toshkov, Yesilkagit, Carroll et al. (2020) concluded in their comprehensive study that while institutional capacities do influence the speed of imposing restrictive measures, no significant causal effect can be proved in the relation between reaction time and political and economic ideology. Furthermore, no significant effect can be discovered regarding the frameworks of political institutions, such as unicameral or bicameral parliaments, federal and central governments, nor in the case of political pluralism (i.e. the number and diversity of political parties in a country).

While Toshkov et al. could not prove a significant correlation between lockdown measures and the characteristics of the respective political systems, the majority of the literature disproves the above. Cepaluni, Dorsch and Branyiczki (2020) postulate that policy responses intended to tackle the pandemic were late and inefficient in democracies compared to non-democratic countries, resulting in a higher death toll in the democratic world.

Ferraresi, Kotsogiannēs, Rizzo et al. (2020b) examine the relationship between lockdown stringency and the quality of democracy, using political stability as a proxy variable. According to the authors, countries where it is higher (and hence with a higher quality of democratic mechanisms) imposed significantly more stringent measures than their less democratic counterparts, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. However, it is important to note that political stability can be experienced in several authoritarian countries, too (particularly in China and Russia); therefore, a more valid conclusion may be that in countries where political consensus could be easily achieved, the characteristics or the political system allowed for the timely execution of stringent restrictive measures.

In addition, the results of Toshkov et al (2020) regarding the lacking effect of government structure (i.e. if federal governments or a central one governs countries) was disproved by Ferraresi et al. (2020b). Their analysis shows that countries with central governments responded to the appearance of the virus in a significantly more stringent manner than their federal counterparts. This difference in lockdown stringency was however only perceivable in the initial phase of the spread of the pandemic: two months after the first patient diagnosed with Covid-19, these effects disappeared and similar stringency applied. The authors provide a double explanation of the phenomenon. First, while federal governance may be efficient from the perspective of systemic economic competition, in cases where fast coordinated action is required, the federal nature rather turns disadvantageous. Second, the authors argue that decentralized countries may also show significant economic disparities. As a result, the economic interests of the respective regions or federal states may vastly diverge, and hence individual solutions are preferred for tackling the pandemic and the economic difficulties.

Populism

Kavakli (2020) suggests that not only institutional capacities, but also leadership attitudes may also have influenced policy responses to Covid-19. Specifically, Kavakli analysed the connection between populist leadership and reaction time and stringency to the pandemic, using the OxCGRT and the Global Party Survey (where countries ranked from pluralist to populist). According to Kavakli's findings, in countries with leaders described as populist, measures were tendentially less stringent and were introduced significantly later than in their pluralist counterparts. The author's explanation for the lag in populist leaders' reaction is the fact that populists tend to have distrust towards experts and their recommendations. While this is possible, I argue that there may be further underlying reasons. First, several populist leaders have good foreign relations with China (see e.g. Toplisek, 2020) and emphasizing the economic and health risks of the virus could have significantly worsened these bilateral relations. Therefore, foreign policy could overrule health and lockdown policies. Second, path dependency can also explain these trends: after some populist leaders hesitated to introduce

Covid-19 measures, others may have followed suit, having trusted their ideological fellow travellers. Third, due to international conflicts around populist leaders, internal legitimacy is crucial for them. Internal legitimacy can be best maintained by economic success, and introducing stringent and long-lasting lockdown measures were jeopardizing economic growth.

Adolph, Amano, Bang-Jensen et al. (2020) reach a similar conclusion after the analysis of a U.S. sample across all fifty states. The authors postulate that there is a significant difference in reaction speed between states with differing political preferences. States with Republican governors and more Trump supporters introduced social distancing measures later than their democratic counterparts (while controlled for other variables), proving Kavakli's statement regarding the less stringent preferences of populist politics. While in March 2020, the authors concluded that this would have caused increased mortality in Democratic states, this statement needs to be reviewed according the more recent data in course of the pandemic.

Electoral concerns

As stated above, policy-makers have to face a dilemma when introducing measures against the pandemic: lockdown measures jeopardize economic growth, while the lack of measures may result in a significant number of avoidable deaths. Governments were therefore facing a trade-off between saving healthcare systems and saving economies, considering the risks of losing voters caused by the collapse of either. Pulejo and Querubín (2020) argue that voters' decisions are more affected by a shrinking economy compared to the consequences of a health crisis. The authors measured the connection between Covid-19 measure stringency (using the OxCGRT index) and the temporal proximity of the next elections of the executive power. (The effects were controlled for the fact if the incumbent leader of the executive power can legally be re-elected.) Pulejo and Querubín found that in countries where the incumbent government is running in the upcoming elections and where elections are to take place in the nearer future, Covid-19 measures were significantly less stringent compared to their counterparts where elections would be held in the more distant future. According to the

authors' findings, the temporal proximity of the next elections explains a quarter of the variation in the stringency of pandemic measures.

Ferraresi, Kotsogiannēs, Rizzo et al. (2020b) however come to a different conclusion via a regression analysis examining the effect of the temporal proximity of upcoming elections on lockdown stringency (using the OxCGRT stringency index as well). Contrary to Pulejo and Querubín (2020), this paper clusters countries into a dummy-variable with the two categories being "pre-electoral year" and "no pre-electoral year", respectively. Ferraresi et al. conclude that countries with parliamentary elections in 2021, had significantly more stringent lockdown measures compared to countries not in a pre-electoral year. According to the argumentation of the authors, political consensus was characterized by pro-lockdown attitudes, and consequently by imposing such measures early, the incumbent leadership expected to maximize votes by introducing a stringent lockdown. This contradiction can easiest be explained by methodological disparities: while Pulejo and Querubín treat the proximity of upcoming elections as a scale variable, Ferraresi et al. use a binary approach. Nevertheless, further research is required to reach a scientific consensus if and to what extent close election dates contributed to the stringency of restrictive measures imposed.

Economic effects

While the characteristics of a political system, its institutions and the leadership's attitudes appear to have significant impact on the stringency of imposed lockdown measures, the determining power of economic factors is just as important. According to the analysis of Ferraresi, Kotsogiannēs, Rizzo et al. (2020b) significant differences appear between the stringency of respective lockdown measures between developed and developing countries, where the latter tended to restrict the movement of their citizens less. This phenomenon can be explained by several factors. First, the aforementioned institutional capacities (see Capano et al, 2020) are tendentially lower in poorer countries and their leadership is aware that executing strict measures is problematic with the existing capacities of the authorities. Second, the median age in developing countries is significantly lower than in their developed

counterparts (Ritchie & Roser 2019) and therefore the proportion of risk group in the society is smaller compared to that of developed countries. Third, the economic burden of lockdown measures is disproportionately greater for poorer countries. In such societies, a higher proportion of workers have a job where staying at home is physically impossible (e.g. factory workers) and thus the social and economic value of their work outweighs the risk of the victims of Covid-19 and of a health crisis. In addition, mortality caused by deprivation may have exceeded that of the pandemic in developing countries (Barnett-Howell & Mobarak, 2021).

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, several political and institutional factors can possibly explain the variation of lockdown measures introduced. First, their timeliness and stringency depended on institutional preparedness and capacities: paradoxically, well-functioning systems tended to introduce measures later, while countries with worse functioning institutions introduced measures earlier on. Second, findings regarding the effect of political systems are controversial. Democratic countries tended to impose more restrictive measures, but the role of a federal governance is dubious according to the research conducted so far. Third, political ideology could also have an impact with populist leaders imposing less stringent measures. Fourth, while the proximity in time of upcoming elections was proven to have a significant effect on lockdown stringency, data is unclear about the direction of the mechanism due to methodological differences. To conclude, political attitudes and structures did have an impact on the timeliness and stringency of lockdown measures; however, further research is needed in order to clarify the contradictions in the current literature.

It is of utmost importance to emphasize the methodological limitations of the body of research reviewed. Due to the nature of statistical analysis in social sciences, controlled experiments are extremely rare due to ethical and technical problems in their execution. Therefore, the findings above do not necessarily mean causal relations but may be mere correlations or even artefacts. This implies that it is highly possible that for example, it is not the democratic system that made the political leadership impose measures that are more

stringent. It could also result from the fact that countries that are more democratic are richer and older than their autocratic counterparts; therefore, in democracies the health and political costs outweighed the economic costs of lockdown measures. Conclusively, correlative findings should be treated as mere correlations and not as a proof of any causal relation.

The research of political effects on restrictive measures however still proves to harbour niches in need of further examination. While this paper primarily focussed on narrow political factors, further characteristics can be taken into account when aiming to explain the variation in lockdown stringency. Such factors can include demographic effects (as the mortality of Covid-19 is significantly higher in distinct age groups; see e.g. Bonanad et al, 2020) and geographic factors (i.a. population density, the international embeddedness regarding trade and travel; also, island countries such as Australia and New-Zealand could operate with highly different strategies). Furthermore, dynamic processes of political learning should be taken into account (as due to the early uneven spread of the virus, several countries adapted strategies implemented by countries who were first hit by Covid-19). The comprehensive analysis of such factors would offer not only a descriptive, but also an explanatory model of what happened in one of the most extraordinary times of modern political history.

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