

Did the COVID-19 crisis inflame populism and conspiracy beliefs?

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The policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic nourished partisanship and polarization throughout the world (Allcott et al., 2020; Barrios et al., 2020; Bursztyjn et al., 2020b). Though most governments adopted draconian measures to contain the spreading of the viral disease (Dehning et al., 2020; Flaxman et al., 2020), many populist leaders manifested skepticism about scientists' warnings, downplayed the risk of contagion, and encouraged their followers not to comply with restrictive measures (Allcott et al., 2020; Ajzenman et al., 2020; Simonov et al., 2020). Hoaxes about the origins of the virus rapidly blossomed, challenging the officially-provided information about the outbreak¹. Even though conspiracy theories are pushed from people all along the political spectrum, COVID-19-related misinformation most widely circulates among populist and far-right information networks (DeCook, 2020; Graham et al., 2020; McQuillan et al., 2020).

This paper studies the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) against the outbreak on the public's demand for populism and conspiracy theories. Measuring how attitudes and beliefs react to the implementation of restrictive measures is challenging for several reasons. Real-time survey data are scarce and not always reliable, as support for extremist ideas and curiosity for conspiracy theories tend to be taboo and are hardly revealed in interviews and polls. Also, it is difficult to distinguish the effect of NPIs from that of other

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¹Hoaxes claimed that the novel coronavirus was engineered in a laboratory as a biological weapon (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020). The spreading of the COVID-19 has also been associated with the distribution of 5G networks, the administration of polio vaccines, and hidden population-control programs, to name just a few examples.

policies and events occurring in the same period. To address these issues, we use high-frequency data on online searches for a set of sensitive keywords as a proxy of the public’s interest in populist claims and conspiracy theories. The use of online searches allows us to uncover the public’s interest in potentially taboo issues. The daily frequency of the data helps to disentangle the short-run impact of restrictive measures from that of other events that may have occurred in close succession.

We match information on the policy actions taken by U.S. State governments to address the pandemic and its labor market outcomes with daily searches for a set of sensitive keywords capturing interest in populism and conspiracy theories. Exploiting variation in the timing of NPIs and other policy actions across the American States, we first assess how demand for populism and conspiracy theories reacted to the following measures: closures and reopening, stay at home and shelter in place orders, the prohibition of social gatherings, quarantine for out-of-state visitors, face mask duties, targeted unemployment programs, and healthcare delivery schemes during the first six months of the outbreak (from March 1 to August 31, 2020). We assess the impact of the closure (and reopening) of schools, daycares, nonessential businesses, restaurants, gyms, movie theaters, and bars separately.

As a government’s reaction to the pandemic may also depend on the electorate’s propensity for populism and conspiracy theories, we perform a robustness check by exploiting the intensity of nursing homes connections as an exogenous driver of the timing of COVID-19 penetration in each State in an instrumental variables setting. Nursing homes have played a crucial role in spreading the disease in the first stage of the epidemic, with home’s staff-network connections and its centrality within the broader network strongly predicting COVID-19 cases in the U.S. (Chen et al., 2020) and Italy (Alacevich et al., 2020).

We then provide evidence on how NPIs, labor market policies, and healthcare schemes aimed at addressing the pandemic and its outcomes relate to daily searches denoting interest in the Republican party, Trump’s nomination for the 2020 presidential election, and far-right oriented news sites and online forums such as Breitbart and Stormfront across the American

States.

In the second part of our empirical inquiry, we move the analysis to the cross-country dimension by combining information on national NPIs drawn from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) with daily online searches for our set of sensitive keywords in each country. We assess how the public’s interest in populist keywords and conspiracy theories reacts to the closure of schools and workplaces, the cancelation of public events, the prohibition of gatherings, stay at home requirements, restrictions of internal movements, and international travel controls. We also test the potential impact of health policies such as information campaigns, testing policies, contact tracing, emergency investments in healthcare, and investments in vaccines across countries.

Finally, we match our dataset with Google’s Community Mobility Reports to assess how interest in populist claims, conspiracy theories, and far right information sites and forums correlate with mobility before and after the establishment of NPIs across the American States and cross-country. Mobility is an indicator of compliance with containment measures that has been proven to remarkably vary with partisanship and polarization in the first stage of the pandemic (Allcott et al., 2020; Barrios et al., 2020; Durante et al., 2019).

Our work contributes to several strands of literature. Many studies address the sources of populism, focusing on peer effects and social norms (Burszтын et al., 2020a), economic insecurity (Fetzer, 2019) and unemployment (Algan et al., 2017), perceived immigration (Levi et al., 2020; Mayda et al., 2020) and the exposure to media over-representing the involvement of minorities in crime (Mastrorocco and Minale, 2018; Couttenier et al., 2019). Populism-driven policies have a huge economic and societal impact, as they favor the concentration of political power and erode trust in institutions, leading to poor provision of public goods and subpar economic performance (Acemoglu et al., 2013). Understanding the roots of populism is key to preventing the economic and societal disruptions it brings about. We add to this field by studying how the coronavirus crisis impacted the demand for populism and conspiracy theories across countries and the American States.

A growing literature at the intersection between economics and political science studies the political outcomes of catastrophic events. Previous work shows that the electoral consequences of natural disasters substantially depend on how the incumbent manages the crisis (Betchel and Hainmueller, 2011). Ashworth et al. (2018) and Gualtieri et al. (2019) suggest that adverse shocks provide voters with the opportunity to learn new information about incumbents. In recent months, new work has assessed how the policy response to the pandemic affects political consensus (Bol et al., 2020; Daniele et al., 2020; Fazio et al., 2020; Hargreaves Heap et al., 2020). Pulejo and Querubín (2020) highlight the role of incumbents’ electoral concerns by documenting that leaders who can run for re-election have implemented less stringent restrictions when the election is closer in time. Aksoy et al. (2020) consistently find that weak governments took longer to introduce a policy response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The authors also show that exposure to epidemics in “impressionable years” has a persistent negative effect on trust in political leaders and institutions. We add to these studies by documenting how the public’s interest in populists’ claims and anti-scientific theories relates to the policy measures enacted to contrast the pandemic and its health and labor market outcomes.

We also connect to the cross-disciplinary literature on trust in science and confidence in the truthfulness of officially-provided health information (Larson, 2016; Pechar et al., 2018; Krause et al., 2019), which are a fundamental driver of risky behaviors and compliance with preventive measures (Gilles et al., 2011; Fluckiger et al., 2019; Battiston et al., 2020). We add to this field by documenting the drivers of the demand for anti-scientific explanations of the COVID-19 crisis, which presumably contributes to further eroding trust in science. Finally, our exploration of how anti-establishment sentiments correlate with mobility across countries and the American States also contributes to the recent literature on the drivers of compliance with social distancing measures (Allcott et al., 2020; Ajzenman et al., 2020; Barrios et al., 2020; Briscese et al., 2020; Durante et al., 2019).

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