

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

The political scar of epidemics: why COVID-19 is eroding young people's trust in their leaders

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Dr Orkun Saka is a Visiting Fellow at the European Institute at LSE and a Research Associate at the Systemic Risk Centre, based at LSE. He is also Assistant Professor (Lecturer) in Finance at the University of Sussex. His main research interests are in financial intermediation, international finance and political economy.

Public trust is vital if governments are to effectively lead. Once lost, that trust is hard to win back. **Orkun Saka** has been researching the impact epidemics have on young people's confidence in those in power, with disturbing results.

Why some governments have had greater success than others in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is a complex question that the world will debate for years to come. Many policy specialists argue that one of the key factors is trust: whether citizens trust their leaders, and whether those leaders preside over a competent and effective state. So, the fact that the Nordic countries were better at containing the virus than Italy, for example, could be partly due to a greater trust in government.

But how has COVID-19 itself affected trust in political institutions and leaders? For young people, in particular, it may have had a remarkably negative effect.

In a new paper, we provide the first large-scale evidence on the effects of epidemics on political trust. Using data from the 2006-2018 Gallup World Polls, we analysed responses from 750,000 people in 142 countries to questions about confidence in the government, confidence in elections, and approval of national leaders. We then linked these individual responses to the incidence of epidemics since 1970 from the EM-DAT International Disasters Database.



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Epidemics can lead to a long-term loss of confidence in leaders amongst young people

Building on previous work suggesting that attitudes and behaviour are durably moulded in what psychologists and sociologists refer to as the “impressionable” late-adolescent and early-adult years, we show that young people who have been exposed to epidemics are likely to develop a lasting lack of confidence in political institutions and negative attitudes toward political leaders.

Specifically, we find that individuals who experience epidemics in their impressionable years (ages 18 to 25) display less confidence in political leaders, governments, and elections. The effects are substantial: an individual with the highest exposure to an epidemic (relative to zero exposure) is 7.2 percentage points less likely to have confidence in the honesty of elections; 5.1 percentage points less likely to have confidence in the national government; and 6.2 percentage points less likely to approve the performance of the political leader. We also see that these effects represent the average treatment values for the remainder of life – they decay only gradually and persist for at least two decades.

The data also gives us further insight into whose trust is impacted the most during epidemics. Less-educated individuals respond more strongly, adopting even more negative attitudes toward political institutions and leaders. Residents of urban areas respond more negatively than those residing in rural areas. Women display larger drops in confidence than men. A country’s wealth is also relevant, with the negative impact of epidemic exposure found to be larger in middle- and high-income countries than developing ones.



Citizens expect democratic governments to be responsive to their health concerns, and where the public-sector response is not sufficient to head off the epidemic, they revise their views in unfavourable ways. 

What does this mean for public health? Individuals may be less trusting and more hesitant to follow government health guidelines

Our findings further reveal that individuals exposed to epidemics in their impressionable years are less likely to have confidence in the public health system, which is indicative of trust in the overall health policies of the government.

These findings suggest that the perceived (in)adequacy of health-related government interventions during epidemics, both pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical, are important for trust in government more generally. In addition, the magnitude of the effect we identify depends on the strength of the government at the time of the epidemic. When individuals experience epidemics under weak governments, the negative impact on trust is larger and more persistent. This is

consistent with the idea that such governments are less capable of effectively responding to epidemics, hence leading to a long-term fall in political trust.

Finally, we show that our results are driven by the reaction to epidemic exposure by those living in democratic countries. In democracies, we find residents sharply and persistently revise (downward) their political trust in the event of impressionable-year epidemic exposure.

The same is not true in autocracies. Evidently, citizens expect democratic governments to be responsive to their health concerns, and where the public-sector response is not sufficient to head off the epidemic, they revise their views in unfavourable ways. In autocracies, in contrast, there may not exist a comparable expectation of responsiveness and hence no impact on political trust. In addition, democratic regimes may find consistent messaging more difficult. Because such regimes are open, they may allow for a cacophony of conflicting official views, resulting in a larger impact on trust when things go wrong.



One can envisage a scenario where... the spread of [an] epidemic reduces trust in government still further, hindering the ability of the authorities to contain future epidemics and address other social problems. ”

Epidemic exposure can have long-term impact on people's attitudes, beliefs, and political behaviour

Trust and confidence in government are important for the capacity of a society to organise an effective collective response to an epidemic. Yet there is also the possibility that experiencing an epidemic can negatively affect an individual's confidence in political institutions and trust in political leaders, with adverse implications for this collective capacity. We have shown that this negative effect is large and persistent. Its largest and most enduring impact is on the attitudes of individuals who are in their impressionable late-adolescent and early-adult years when an epidemic breaks out.

In addition, epidemic exposure in one's impressionable years matters not only for attitudes and beliefs but also for their actual political behaviour. In our study, we have found suggestive evidence that epidemic-induced distrust in the political system not only discourages electoral participation in the long-term, but also makes it more likely that individuals engage with alternative forms of political actions – including attending demonstrations, signing petitions or joining boycotts. Hence, once again, our findings imply that the imprint of the epidemic experience on the young generation may fundamentally change the way they perceive and engage with politics in their countries for decades to come.

The implications are disturbing. Imagine that more trust in government is important for effective containment, but that failure of containment harms trust in government. One can envisage a scenario where low levels of trust allow an epidemic to spread, and where the spread of the epidemic reduces trust in government still further,



hindering the ability of the authorities to contain future epidemics and address other social problems.

As the US political commentator Mark Schmitt puts it, “lack of trust in government can be a circular, self-reinforcing phenomenon: poor performance leads to deeper distrust, in turn leaving government in the hands of those with the least respect for it.” ■

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