Title: COVID-19 Pandemic, Public Attention, and Policy Responses

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Abstract:
Despite all countries being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the governments' responses have varied extensively in terms of speed, policy content, as well as the level of compulsion. We explore to what extent differences in the timing of the policy implementation can be explained by public attention in addition to other relevant factors, such as the number of cases in the own country and own continent. We present three sets of main results. First, our event study estimates show that the first case in the own country leads to increases in public attention (measured by Google trends) to the Covid-19 outbreak. Second, we find that public attention is an important determinant of the policy responses. Finally, we analyze whether variation in public attention predicts subsequent differences in the speed of pandemic’s spread and death rates, when controlling for other confounding factors.

Data:
The data used in this paper come from Google Trends, the European Center for Disease Prevention Control, John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center and the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker. The level of analysis is the country level, and the details on how the dataset was constructed are provided below.

Google Trends data
We use Google Trends data to measure the public attention to the Covid-19 pandemic based on users’ searches. More specifically, we collect data on the volume of Google searches for the following terms: “corona; korona; Wuhan virus; covid; covid-19”. We also translated all of these search terms into the official language of each country. We obtain these data on a daily basis at the country level for the period between January 1, and March 31, 2020. All observations range from 0 (lowest attention) to 100 (highest attention).
Data on Covid-19 cases, deaths and recoveries

We obtain the daily country level data on the coronavirus related cases, deaths and recoveries from two main sources: the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control and John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

Data on government policy responses

We use the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) to gather information on governments’ policy responses to the coronavirus outbreak. OxCGRT provides 11 indicators of government response ranging from policies such as school closures, travel bans to fiscal or monetary measures.

JEL codes for the project: D70; H12; I18

Keywords: COVID-19; Pandemic; Public attention; Google Trends; Non-pharmaceutical interventions