

1. Title: “Pandemics meet democracy. Experimental evidence from the COVID-19 crisis in Spain”

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3. Abstract:

The COVID-19 outbreak poses an unprecedented challenge for contemporary democracies. Despite the global scale of the problem, the response has been mainly national, and global coordination has been so far extremely weak. All over the world governments are making use of exceptional powers to enforce lockdowns, often sacrificing civil liberties and profoundly altering the pre-existing power balance, which nurtures fears of an authoritarian turn. Relief packages to mitigate the economic consequences of the lockdowns are being discussed, and there is little doubt that the forthcoming recession will have important distributive consequences. In this paper we study citizens' responses to these democratic dilemmas. We present results from a set of survey experiments run in Spain from March 20 to March 28, together with longitudinal evidence from a panel survey fielded right before and after the virus outbreak. Our findings reveal a strong preference for a national as opposed to a European/international response. The national bias is much stronger for the COVID-19 crisis than for other global problems, such as climate change or international terrorism. We also find widespread demand for strong leadership, willingness to give up individual freedom, and a sharp increase in support for technocratic governance. As such, we document the initial switch in mass public preferences towards technocratic and authoritarian government caused by the pandemic. We discuss to what extent this crisis may contribute to a shift towards a new, self-enforcing political equilibrium.

4. Data Description:

We study citizens' reactions to the democratic dilemmas posed by the COVID-19 crisis using a survey fielded in Spain in March 20-28, 2020. During the days of the fieldwork, Spain witnessed one of the fastest escalations in number of COVID-19 positive tests and deaths in the whole world. At the same time, Spanish authorities issued a restrictive stay-at-home order, that entered into force in March 14. The Spanish government made use for the second time since the transition to democracy of the 'state of alarm', a constitutional device that allows the government to impose strict limitations on civil liberties and centralize power in the Spanish executive. The military started to patrol the streets, and the central government seized power from the autonomous regional and local authorities in order to impose a unified strategy against the virus.

Our data collection was based on an on-line survey that we fielded through the survey company Netquest. In order to limit self-selection, participants cannot self-register into the panel, and membership is solely based on invitation. Respondents receive a fixed compensation to answer each survey.

Our full sample is composed of 1,600 individuals, that were recruited using age, gender, region and education quotas in order to mirror the actual distribution of these variables in the voting-age Spanish population. A reduced sample of 818 of our respondents had been interviewed two months earlier, before the outbreak hit Europe (January 27-30), and the rest are new respondents.

Our empirical strategy is twofold. On the one hand, we use observational evidence combining data collected right before and right after the outbreak for the same individuals on the reduced sample. Using individual fixed-effect models we can estimate the effect of the outbreak on a number of attitudes while controlling for inter-individual differences. On the other hand, we embedded a number of randomized survey experiments within our survey to the full sample. These randomized experiments were designed to test citizens' reaction to the various democratic dilemmas outlined above. We provide details below.

5. JEL codes: D70; H11; H12; H41; H77

6. Keywords: democracy, COVID-19, trust, technocracy, authoritarianism

7. URL link to the paper: <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/dkusw/>

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