Title: Spreading the disease: The role of culture

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Abstract: This paper investigates the “cultural” transmission of the recent COVID-19 outbreak. Using regional data from West Germany we observe that in predominantly catholic regions with stronger social and family ties, the spread and the resulting deaths per capita were much higher compared to protestant ones. This finding could help explain the rapid spread and high death toll of the virus in the European South, as compared to Northern countries. Looking at differences within a specific country in a well-identified setting eliminates any biases resulting from differences in social structures, health care systems, specific policies, and testing that can confound estimates and hinder comparability across countries. These results could suggest the implementation of targeted mitigation measures in light of disease outbreaks.

Data: We combine data from several sources. Our data for reported COVID-19 cases and deaths come from the the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) which is a German federal government agency and research institute responsible for disease control and prevention. RKI provides daily data, starting on 28 February, with the current Covid-19 infections. The information is updated daily with the current number of cases, and it is reported at the regional (district) level, by gender and by age. These regional data are matched with aggregated individual-level information obtained from the European Social Survey, the German 2011 Census and the German Socio-Economic Panel in order to investigate the implications of social ties on potential transmission channels.

JEL codes: I10; J10; Z10

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