Title: Stereotypes and political attitudes in the age of Coronavirus: empirical evidence from Italy

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Abstract: The novel coronavirus has led to increasing concerns about racial discrimination and anti-EU sentiment in various European countries. We use a newly-developed bot that works through Facebook Messenger to conduct a longitudinal online survey in Italy and empirically study how stereotypical beliefs about “infectiousness” of various nationalities and political attitudes towards China evolve in response to local exposure to the Coronavirus. With this new tool, we also conduct an online experiment to evaluate how information about EU cooperation affects pro-European sentiment and support for nationalist parties. Results could inform policymakers on the design of effective information campaigns against racist attitudes and a reactionary political fallout. Our measures of beliefs and attitudes were collected over six waves during the spread of the pandemic, beginning in February 2020. Sampling was done using geo-localized ads in municipalities in which the virus had not spread.

To estimate the causal effect of the spread of the virus on beliefs about the “infectiousness” of different nationalities and political attitudes towards China, we exploit individuals’ quasi-random variation in exposure to the virus at the municipality level using a dynamic difference-in-difference estimation. Our main independent variable takes value 1 at the time in which the municipality experiences a Coronavirus outbreak (and 0 otherwise). We document a number of preliminary results: (1) Respondents’ beliefs about infectiousness are overestimated for all nationalities. However, there is a disproportionate overestimation towards Chinese relative to Europeans (Germans and Italians). (2) The presence of local infections lowers peoples’ beliefs on the likelihood of infection of Chinese and increases those of Italians and Germans. We argue that this may confirm representativeness bias and, particularly, the context dependency of stereotypes formalized by Bordalo et al. (2016): when people realize more Italians (or Europeans) have the virus, they adjust their beliefs towards Chinese by attenuating stereotypes. (3) We find that the presence of local infections makes respondents’ stances towards Chinese presence in Africa and on EU trade with China become more conservative.

In the second part of the study, we randomly assigned participants to different information treatments (vignettes) in order to examine the causal impact of information about cooperation amongst EU countries on peoples’ support for pro-European policies. The experiment is currently ongoing and the results are pending.

Data description: Survey data on beliefs, attitudes, and demographics are gathered in six waves using an online survey administered through Facebook Messenger (N=1,000) using geo-localized targeting. Administrative data on municipal characteristics are from ISTAT.

Keywords: Covid19, Stereotypes, Political Attitudes

JEL code: C8, C9, D7, D8