Title: The Political Scar of Epidemics

Authors and affiliations and contact emails:
Cevat Giray Aksoy (EBRD, King’s College London, and IZA)
Email: aksoyc@ebrd.com
Barry Eichengreen (University of California, Berkeley and NBER)
Email: eichengr@berkeley.edu
Orkun Saka (University of Sussex and LSE)
Email: o.saka@lse.ac.uk

Abstract:
We find that epidemic exposure during the formative years (18-25) has a significantly negative and persistent influence on individuals’ confidence in political leadership, government, and elections. These scarring effects do not exist for non-political institutions, in non-democratic countries, or for non-communicable diseases. On the other hand, we find similarly adverse effects on individuals’ confidence in the public health system, suggesting that the loss of confidence in political leadership and institutions is triggered by the healthcare-related policies at the time of the epidemic (and their limitations). In line with this argument, we show that our results are mostly driven by individuals who experienced epidemics under weak governments less able to act against the epidemic, disappointing their citizens. We illustrate this point by showing that weak governments took much longer to introduce policy interventions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Our results imply that the COVID-19 may leave behind a disruptive and long-lasting political scar.

Data:
Data for our main analysis are drawn from 2006-2018 Gallup World Polls (GWP), the EM-DAT International Disasters Database, and the International Country Risk Guide. GWP data are at the individual level. To get at the underlying mechanisms, we also use data from Google Trends, the European Center for Disease Prevention Control, the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, and the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.

JEL codes for the project: D72; F50; I19

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