

Consensus Secured? Elite and Public Attitudes to “Lockdown” Measures to Combat Covid-19 in England

Sofia Collignon, Royal Holloway University of London¹

Iakovos Makropoulos, University of Strathclyde

Wolfgang Rüdig, University of Strathclyde

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Abstract

Previous empirical social science research on Covid-19 has mainly focused on predicting compliance with behavioural instructions in terms of demographics and socioeconomic determinants. In terms of political variables, trust in government and left-right political orientation has been a major focus of research. One aspect that so far appears to have been ignored is the attitudes of political elites and how they compare with the attitudes of those they represent. Based on a survey of local councillors and members of the public in England in the early phase of the lockdown, we can show that the UK government lockdown measures enjoyed overwhelming support among local elites as well as the general public. However, we can also find sources of lack of support and consensus even at this early stage: While younger and male members of the public, as well as members of the LGBT community, were less enthusiastic about the lockdown, opposition among the public is mainly based on ‘populist’ attitudes that became prominent in the Brexit debate such as evaluations of immigration and scepticism about climate change. These sources of dissent could be expected to become more prominent as the pandemic unravels.

¹ Corresponding author. Email: Sofia.Collignon@rhul.ac.uk

Introduction

On March 2020, Prime Minister Johnson announced a range of restrictions on life in the UK in response to the coronavirus pandemic (BBC 2020). Compliance with these demands which essentially amounted to a mass curfew was very high (cf. Fancourt et al 2020). Despite the restrictions on people's social and economic activities, public approval of government policy on the coronavirus pandemic also was very high (YouGov 2020). All political parties represented in the House of Commons supported the government measures. There was, at least in the early stage, no political dissent.

This situation contrasted with the debate about Covid-19 in the United States of America which was characterised by a high degree of political polarization (Hart et al. 2020). There was a major disagreement between the two main parties and between the federal and state governments about the measures to be taken. Compliance with behavioural recommendations to limit the spread of the virus was influenced by political partisanship.

The comparison between the USA and the UK raises some intriguing questions. In the UK, the coronavirus pandemic arrived shortly after a period of strong polarisation on the issue of membership of the European Union and a General Election campaign which saw both major parties being further apart on traditional left-right issues than in most previous elections. The question thus arises: to what extent a political consensus on Covid-19 could be achieved in the context of a highly polarised British political culture?

Our analysis compares the attitudes of councillors and members of the public on measures to combat Covid-19. As elected representatives at the local level, councillors have an important role to play in implementing lock-down measures. Councillors also represent local party activists and their attitudes are an indication of the attitudes of middle-level political elites, which government parties need to keep on board. **Unlike voters, councillors need to reconcile their views and ideology with the party line and the practical difficulties of dealing with the pandemic.** How congruent are attitudes between councillors and the public? How important are party allegiance and political ideology, and the threat of Covid-19 experienced locally?

We analyse these questions with the help of a unique dataset, combining surveys of local councillors and members of the public in England conducted at the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 (N=2,151). We focus on determining the ideological drivers behind consensus between the public and middle-level political elites concerning support for the lockdown. Our findings suggest that ideology plays a key role in the politics of COVID-19 and that political attitudes of the populist right are key in explaining support for and consensus about the lockdown.

Background: elite and public consensus in support for measures to deal with the pandemic

Since the UK decided to leave the European Union and Donald Trump won the Presidential election in the USA in 2016, there has been little doubt that left- and right-wing populist attitudes are on the rise (Taggart, 2018; Noury and Roland, 2020). This manifests by the increasing popularity and proliferation of populist parties (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021) and

identity politics (Noury and Roland, 2020), but we know less about how populist attitudes shape people and elite's behaviours to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

The confrontational nature of populist attitudes may affect support for social distancing and other measures implemented to combat the spread of the coronavirus (Halikiopoulou, 2020). Populist attitudes, characterised by a disregard for expertise in favour of the common wisdom, pro-nationalism (Oliver and Rahn, 2016) and relish for the transgression of norms (Taggart, 2018), undermine the legitimacy of such measures. Moreover, the anti-elitism that characterises populist rhetoric pin political elites and voters against each other (Oliver and Rahn, 2016), contributing to a gap in their understanding, views and priorities. This gap is mediated by the elected officials' need to reconcile their views and ideology with the party line while dealing with the practical difficulties of managing the pandemic.

There is evidence that party allegiance and political polarization plays a major role in compliance with social distancing measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus in the USA (Allcott et al. 2020; Conway et al. 2020; Druckman et al. 2020; Kushner Gadarian et al. 2020; Painter and Qui 2020; Rothgerber et al. 2020). But in the UK, there is so far no evidence that partisan divides have had a major impact on compliance behaviour and other measures of COVID-19 related attitudes (Harper et al. 2020; Dryhurst et al. 2020; Kooistra et al. 2020; Pennycook et al. 2020). However, all studies use a simple left-right/liberal-conservative scale to test for the impact of political ideology which, in the contemporary UK context, may not be sufficient to identify more complex political factors. The high level of polarization in UK politics, particularly around Brexit, and the leading role 'populist' parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and, more recently, the Brexit Party, have played in political discourse (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021; Halikiopoulou, 2020) might suggest that phenomena not dissimilar to the situation in the USA could not be completely excluded.

Yet, in the UK, right-wing populist parties have not been able to win any seats in the UK Parliament and play a very marginal role at the sub-national level and therefore, play a marginal role in implementing COVID-19 related measures. Nevertheless, their underlying support may still be mobilised. On the other hand, the Conservative Party has embraced the Brexit agenda, raising the question of whether populist elements within the Conservatives might form the basis of opposition to more stringent lockdown measures. It is therefore important to determine if, beyond party alliance, the same political drivers constructing consensus at the individual level are also effective at the elite level.

A second important consideration to construct consensus relates to the role of scepticism about science, an important element of populist politics (Szabados 2019; Huber 2020; Lockwood 2018; Oliver and Rahn, 2016) which in Europe and the UK manifests in the rejection of the reality of climate change (Szabados 2019; Huber 2020, Lockwood 2018). Unlike the USA where opposition to science was mobilised from the very beginning (Motta et al 2020), there were no significant signs of of this during March and April 2020 in the UK. But this can be because scepticism about science in the UK correlates with a positive attitude to Brexit as a basis for resistance to scientific advice on how to combat COVID-19 (Maher et al. 2020).

The role of populist leaders and parties opposing measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic has attracted attention (Gugushvili et al. 2020). In the UK, the terms of the Brexit debate also included a strong anti-elitist element and mistrusts of “experts” (Mohdin 2016). The former UKIP party leader Henry Bolton sees Britain in the grip of a “pseudo-social elite” (Bolton 2020, p. 86) while Conservative MP Sir John Redwood regards climate change as the “elite’s religion” (Redwood 2020, p. 1). Thus, we may expect that attitudes towards science among political elites to be reflected among the general population.

Other possible sources of opposition to the lockdown could come from people’s concerns about the economic impact and the severe restrictions of civil liberties and the parties traditionally associated with protecting them. Would supporters of parties strongly committed to social justice, like Labour and Greens, or to civic rights, such as the Liberal Democrats and Greens, be more reluctant to support the government on its COVID-19 policies? Political elites from opposition parties might in general be more reluctant to embrace government policies enthusiastically, while Conservative Party elected officials, independent of other factors, could be expected to offer strong support for ‘their’ government.

The analysis of the influence of political allegiance and ideology on attitudes to measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic also has to take into account other factors that might influence support for the lockdown measures. Looking at the health risks arising from COVID-19, men, older people and members of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community have a particularly high risk of an adverse outcome (Platt and Warwick 2020). Considering the impact of the lockdown, women have had to carry a major burden and are more worried about the effects of the pandemic (Collignon 2020). Also, members of the LGBT community and people with disabilities faced particularly serious challenges during the lockdown (LGBT Foundation 2020; Ainslie and Foubert 2020; Research Institute for Disabled Consumers 2020). Based on the health risks and the impact of the lockdown on different communities, one might expect men, older people and members of the BAME community to be more supportive of the lockdown while women, people with disabilities and members of the LGBT community might be less enthusiastic about the prospect of a lockdown with severe restrictions to their daily lives. There is no reason why different effects of demographics will be observed between political elites and general members of the public.

Based on the previous discussion, we have the following expectations:

1. Differences between elites and public support for the lockdown will be observed between strong ideological divides commonly associated with Brexit (attitudes towards immigration and EU integration). We expect more consensus between the public and middle-level elites when they hold attitudes less associated with Brexit.
2. Differences between elites and public opinion support for the lockdown to vary with their attitudes towards science. We expect more consensus between public and middle-level elites when they hold positive attitudes towards science.
3. We expect men, older people and members of the BAME community to be more supportive of the lockdown than while women, people with disabilities and members of the LGBT community.

Data

Our analysis is based on two original datasets. First, data on public attitudes comes from an original online survey conducted by an independent opinion research company, Deltapoll, interviewing a representative sample of the adult UK population (N= 2,100) between 10 and 15 April 2020 (Karyotis et al. 2020). The elite data is based on an original online survey **conducted during the same period of time (March-May 2020)** among local councillors elected (or re-elected) in the English local elections on 6 May 2019. A total of 1,489 councillors responded, a response rate of 18.6%. **Both surveys included identical questions and were in the field roughly at the same time, offering a unique opportunity to collate attitudes towards different aspects of the pandemic among the general population and political elites²³.**

Results

We measure attitudes to the lockdown to combat the spread of the coronavirus that had been imposed in late March using a battery of questions specially designed to allude to the framing of the issue as a major threat of national importance. The same questions were asked to councillors and the general population. 82% of the public and 91% of councillors agreed with the statement that the measures taken by the government were necessary to prevent a major national catastrophe. We find significant differences, indicating that local councillors are, on average, more supportive of the measures.

We also asked them for their views regarding the economic damage potentially caused by the lockdown and the restriction of civil liberties associated with it. The results are shown in Table 1. While only fairly small minorities agreed to the proposal to relax the lockdown or with the statement that it represented a major threat to civil liberties, we observe that the differences between councillors and the public are significant. Councillors are less supportive to relax the lockdown measure to stay at home and less concerned about the threat posed by civil liberties limitations.

--- Table 1 about here ---

We used these three items to construct a measure of support for the measures using principal component analysis with varimax rotation. This resulted in one solution with an eigenvalue larger than 1 that takes more positive values for favourable attitudes towards the lockdown. This is, the larger the values of the dependent variable, the more favourable are views of the lockdown. A simple t-test of differences in means already shows significantly more support for the lockdown among councillors (0.19) than that observed among the general population (-0.26).

We then proceeded to model support for lockdown as a function of sex, political allegiance (future voting intention and having voted Conservative in the past 2019 General Election), age, being from an ethnic minority, having a disability or being a member of the LGBT community. We measure ideology using two items associated with the Brexit divide. Self-position with regards to preferences for more EU integration or protect the UK independence

² More details of the survey and merging process can be found in the appendix.

³ Both surveys comply with the necessary ethical requirements and procedures.

and attitudes towards immigration. We also account for attitudes towards science by including respondents' beliefs about the (un)truthfulness of global warming and climate change. We then interact each variable with the condition of the respondent as a councillor or member of the public to determine its impact in explaining different levels of support between councillors and the general population.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Results presented in Table 2 indicate that, in partial support for our third expectation, women and older people are more supportive of the lockdown measures. This is in line with other results that show both groups being more compliant with measures to combat the pandemic. Ethnic minorities and the LGBT group are less enthusiastic about the lockdown. People and councillors with disabilities are as likely to support lockdown measures as those individuals who do not declare to have any disability.

For the LGBT community, it is not entirely clear why there is perhaps less enthusiasm about the COVID-19 measures. Reports from the LGBT Foundation highlight a large number of challenges faced by members of the LGBT community, and concerns about these may be reflected in a lower level of support for the lockdown. For the BAME community, the evidence of significant adverse health effects is very strong and therefore it might surprise that members of this community are less supportive of government measures.

Turning now to political factors those who voted Conservative in the past 2019 GE are more supportive of the lockdown. This does not come as a surprise as at the time of the survey the national leadership (Conservative) was still mainly in charge of designing and implementing lockdown measures. Nevertheless, future voting intention does not have any significant effect in support of the measures.

Turning to political ideology, we find that in line with our second expectation, climate change sceptics are less supportive of lockdown measures. However, this effect is mitigated in the case of councillors (Figure 1). This is, councillors that are climate change sceptics are more supportive of the lockdown measures than the average climate change sceptic among the general population.

Also, in line with our first expectation, individuals who believe that immigration is bad for the British economy are less supportive of lockdown measures. Again, this effect is mitigated in the case of councillors. Since the coefficient of the interaction is positive, this indicates that councillors who believe that immigration is bad for the UK economy are significantly more supportive of lockdown measures than the population.

Besides, those who think that Britain should protect its independence from the EU are significantly less supportive of lockdown measures. However, we don't find evidence of differences between councillors and members of the public in this regard, indicating a fair consensus between elites and members of the public who think this way.

Finally, Model 5 shows that the coefficients and standard errors remain robust to the addition of all variables. This evidence provides support for the idea of a 'populist' element in COVID-19 attitudes. Even at this early stage of the pandemic, generally characterised by a high level

of political consensus, those sharing key beliefs associated with right-wing populism appear to be less enthusiastic about COVID-19 measures. Moreover, our results suggest a larger gap in support for lockdown measures between members of the public and councillors emerging among those who hold negative views of science and consider that immigration is bad for the economy (Figure 1).

--- Figure 1 about here ---

Conclusions

Our study demonstrates that support for government measures was strong in mid-April 2020, three weeks after the 'stay at home' measures were introduced, but we find a greater degree of variation comparing the elite and public opinion surveys. Some of our results are not very surprising. Women and older people are more supportive, and other studies have shown that they also tend to be more compliant with behavioural instructions. More surprising perhaps was the result that the LGBT community are less supportive of lockdown measures. Further research may be required to come to a better understanding of these observed effects. Also, the exact role of the BAME community in the COVID-19 pandemic requires further attention. BAME groups appear to be less supportive of government measures despite facing more adverse health impacts.

A key element of the politics of COVID-19 in the UK is the continued effect of ideology. There is evidence of political attitudes of the populist right that became very influential in the debate about Brexit providing some support for a degree of scepticism about the government measures, and these manifested themselves even at the stage of almost unbroken political consensus in the early of the pandemic. We also find that attitudes towards science and immigration are the main drivers for the lack of consensus between the public and councillors.

A key question for future research is how public and elite attitudes will develop at further stages of the pandemic. The period of broad social and political consensus still dominant in April 2020 increasingly gave way to a more diverse and volatile political landscape. The high death rate, problems with the supply of protective equipment and testing, and a range of other problems have seen the association of British approaches to COVID-19 change from national unity to "catastrophe" (Horton 2020). This has also caused a substantial loss of approval of the government's handling of the pandemic (YouGov 2020).

A key question will be the actions of political elites. The starting point of the pandemic saw Britain do well in establishing a consensus, but some seeds of dissent were already present even at that time which may grow into a more severe problem if efforts to contain the pandemic prove to be challenging.

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Table 1: Support for Measures to Combat Covid-19

Question	Public % Strongly agree/agree	Local Councillors % Strongly agree/agree	Significant differences (p<=0.05)
The measures taken by the government to combat the coronavirus pandemic are necessary to prevent a major national catastrophe	82	91	Yes
The 'lockdown' of the country asking people to stay at home needs to be relaxed in order to avoid a major economic recession	25	18	Yes
The severe limitations to civil liberties imposed by the government to contain the pandemic constitute a greater threat to Britain than the virus itself	22	9	Yes
N	1131	1188	

Table 2: Determinants of Support for Lockdown

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Sup Lock	Sup Lock	Sup Lock	Sup Lock	Sup Lock
Female	.212*** (.042)	.214*** (.042)	.214*** (.042)	.217*** (.042)	0.219*** (.042)
EU int. vs UK indep.	-.010 (.006)	-.021** (.010)	-.020*** (.007)	-.017** (.007)	-.030*** (.010)
Immigration bad for UK	-.030*** (.008)	-.036*** (.009)	-.049*** (.011)	-.033*** (.008)	-.051*** (.011)
Climate change not true	-.255*** (.040)	-.263*** (.040)	-.260*** (.040)	-.330*** (.049)	-.323*** (.049)
Cllr: EU vs UK		.024 (.016)			.016 (.016)
Cllr: Imm. Bad for UK			.048*** (.018)		.038** (.019)
Cllr: Climate Ch not true				.215*** (.082)	.168** (.084)
Councillor	.250*** (.048)	.120 (.100)	.096 (.076)	-.057 (.126)	-.198 (.148)
Age	.113*** (.013)	.112*** (.013)	.112*** (.013)	.112*** (.013)	.110*** (.013)
Disability	.020 (.059)	.018 (.059)	.017 (.059)	.016 (.059)	.013 (.059)
LGBT	-.216** (.085)	-.226*** (.086)	-.212** (.085)	-.213** (.085)	-.217** (.085)
Ethnic Minority	-.236*** (.081)	-.242*** (.081)	-.243*** (.081)	-.235*** (.081)	-.245*** (.081)
Vote Conservative	.327*** (.056)	.290*** (.062)	.321*** (.056)	.314*** (.057)	.288*** (.061)
Vote intention	.008 (.008)	.006 (.008)	.008 (.008)	.007 (.008)	.006 (.008)
(Intercept)	-.347*** (.095)	-.230* (.124)	-.200* (.110)	-.179 (.114)	-.021 (.140)
AIC	5985.947	5985.784	5981.166	5980.981	5979.689
BIC	6065.378	6070.890	6066.271	6066.086	6076.142
Log Likelihood	-2978.973	-2977.892	-2975.583	-2975.490	-2972.845
Var: council	0.015	0.014	0.015	0.015	0.015
Var: Residual	0.826	0.826	0.823	0.823	0.822
Num. groups: council	221	221	221	221	221
Num. obs.	2151	2151	2151	2151	2151

Standard errors are in parentheses

*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

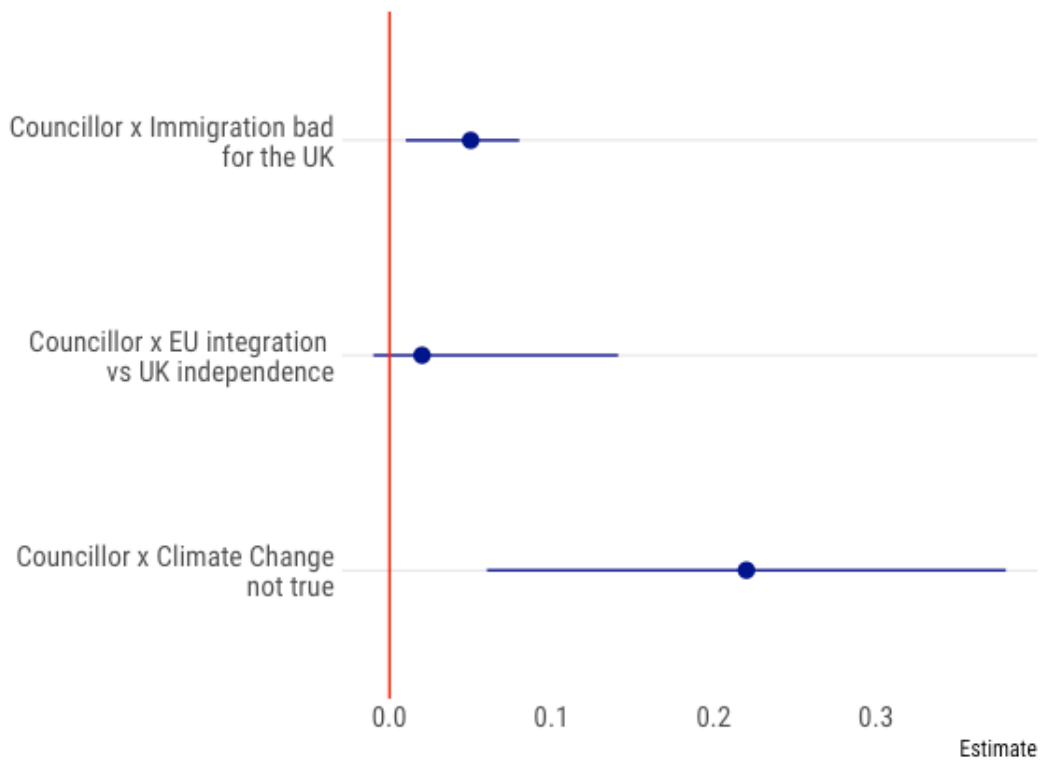


Figure 1. Interaction effects

Appendix

Survey and merging: additional details

The English local elections in May 2019 covered 266 councils. No elections took place in London, Birmingham and a range of other councils. To prepare a merger comparing elected representatives with voters only in areas represented by councillors, all respondents from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and areas in England where no elections had taken place in May 2019 were removed from the Deltapoll dataset. Furthermore, for some councils, there were no councillors who had responded, and for some councils with respondent councillors, there was no corresponding data from members of the public in the Deltapoll survey. Also, some councillor data had to be removed as none of the questions relating to Covid-19 had been answered. As a result, we constructed a combined dataset with data on 1,131 members of the public and 1,188 councillors from 221 councils.

The Deltapoll and Councillor datasets were merged based on the variables that were common to both surveys. This included a range of questions about Covid-19, political allegiance and ideology, and a range of socio-demographic variables including gender and age as well as ethnic minority, LGBT and disability status. The data was weighted according to the number of councillors elected in each council in combination with a weight for the public attitude survey supplied by Deltapoll.

As the councillor survey had been gathered over a longer period than the public attitude survey, we had a closer look at changes in councillor attitudes over time. There is a steady but slight decrease of support for lockdown measures from the first respondents in late March throughout April and May. This matches a decline in public support for the government as shown in YouGov attitudes survey over this time (YouGov 2020). The higher councillor support for the lockdown in March weights up the lower level of support in May. With almost 50% of responses received in April and a little more than a quarter in March and May respectively, overall, the results should thus match the average position of councillors at the time of the Deltapoll survey in mid-April.

Dependent Variables

Support for Lockdown

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the coronavirus pandemic?

(strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) (direction reversed)

- The measures taken by the government to combat the coronavirus pandemic are necessary to prevent a major national catastrophe
- The 'lockdown' of the country asking people to stay at home needs to be relaxed to avoid a major economic recession
- The severe limitations to civil liberties imposed by the government to contain the pandemic constitute a greater threat to Britain than the virus itself

Independent Variables

Female: Do you consider yourself to be ... ? Male (1); Female (2); Other (3) (Men/Other 0, Female 1)

Age: In which year were you born?
(recoded 2020 – the year of birth)

Disability/LGBT/Ethnic Minority: Do you consider yourself ... (Yes (1), No (2), Prefer not to say (3); recorded No 0, Yes 1)

- ... to have a disability?
- ... to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender?
- ... to belong to an ethnic minority?

Conservative

CLLr: Did you stand in the local council elections on 2 May 2019 representing a political party? IF YES Which party did you represent?

Public: If there were a General Election next Thursday, which party would you vote for?
0 Other 1 Conservative

EU: And where would you place yourself concerning the following issues?

Public: Britain should protect its independence from the EU 0 – 10 Britain should do all it can to unite fully with Europe 10 (Recoded direction reversed)

CLLr: Britain should do all it can to unite fully with Europe 0 - Britain should protect its independence from the European Union

Immigration:

Public: Immigration is bad for the British economy 0 – Immigration is good for the British economy 10

CLLr: Do you think immigration is good or bad for Britain's economy? On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means immigration is 'bad' and 7 means immigration is 'good' for the economy, where would you place your own views? *Bad for the economy* 1 (1) - *Good for the economy* 7 (7) (Recoded 0-10 scale)

Climate scepticism:

Recently, there has been a lot of debate about global warming and climate change. How true do you think the following statement is: '**Unless radical action is taken in the next few years, climate change will do great damage to the earth's environment?**

Completely true (1)

Partially true but exaggerated (2)

Completely untrue (3)