

The Management of the Pandemic and its Effects on Trust and Accountability*

Monica Martinez-Bravo
CEMFI

Carlos Sanz
Bank of Spain

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Abstract

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic represented one of the greatest challenges that policymakers had to face in recent history. The rapidly changing reality and directives may have contributed to a popular perception of erratic management of governments in many countries. In this paper, we investigate how people process information regarding the quality of the management of the pandemic in their region. We conduct an online experiment in Spain in November 2020. A randomly selected treated group obtained information on the number of contact tracers in their region, a key policy to manage the pandemic. We find that individuals greatly over-estimate the number of contact tracers in their region. When provided the actual number of contact tracers, individuals experience a significant reduction in trust in governments and other political institutions. We also find a reduction on individuals' willingness to comply with government's recommendation of getting vaccinated. Finally, we also find evidence that individuals' ideological leanings affect how they process the negative news regarding the number of contact tracers. When the government is divided (different coalitions at the regional and central governments) those politically aligned to their regional government are more likely to shift blame to the central government for the deficient number of contact tracers. As a result, accountability is reduced in divided governments: vote intention for either the regional or the central government does not change after the information provision. In non-divided governments, by contrast, the governing coalition is electorally punished. These findings illustrates the difficulties in the exercise of political accountability when political preferences are polarized and when areas of responsibility are not well established.

*Monica Martinez-Bravo: mmb@cemfi.es. Carlos Sanz: carlossanz@bde.es. We thank seminar participants at Banco de España, CEMFI, CREST, EEA Congress, LSE, Simposio de la Asociación Española de Economía, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, University of Geneva, and University of Pittsburgh for valuable comments and suggestions. We thank Cristian Navarro, Sancho Pérez, Qianqian Shang, and Daniela Solá for outstanding research assistance. We thank financial support for this project from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (grant ERC2018092849) and the Maria de Maeztu Exploration Grant. The opinions and analyses are the responsibility of the authors and, therefore, do not necessarily coincide with those of the Banco de España or the Eurosystem.