

VoxEU: Covid-19 and the future of democracy

While autocratic regimes have tended to take more stringent policy measures to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic spread, such measures appear to be less effective in reducing mobility when compared to those adopted by democratic countries, [writes Carl Benedikt Frey, Giorgio Presidente and Chinchih Chen for VoxEU.](#)



Have autocratic countries been more successful than democracies in reducing mobility?

The Covid-19 pandemic is unfolding at a time when democracy is in decline.

According to data compiled by Freedom House (2020), democracy has been in a recession for over a decade, and more countries have lost rather than gained civil and political rights each year. A key concern is that Covid-19 will turn the democratic recession into a depression, with authoritarianism sweeping across the globe like a pandemic.

As the New York Times puts it, “China and some of its acolytes are pointing to Beijing’s success in coming to grips with the coronavirus pandemic as a strong case for the authoritarian rule”

(Schmemmann 2020). Even the World Health Organization (WHO) has called its forceful lockdown “perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment in history”. This raises the question: Is China an exception, or have autocratic regimes in general been able to take more stringent policy measures to restrain people from moving around and spreading the virus? And if so, have they been more effective?

To explore these questions, we examine the institutional and cultural underpinnings of governments’ responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (Frey et al. 2020). To measure the strictness of the policies introduced to fight the pandemic across countries, we use the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT), which provides information on several measures, including school and workplace closings, travel restrictions, bans on public gatherings, and stay-at-home requirements.

To capture the effectiveness of these responses in reducing travel and movement in order to curb the spread of the virus, we employ Google’s Covid-19 Community Mobility Reports.

A key quote from the article:

We find that more autocratic regimes have indeed introduced stricter lockdowns and have relied more on privacy-intrusive measures like contact tracing. However, our regression analysis also suggests that when democracies employ the same mobility restrictions as autocratic regimes, they experience steeper declines in mobility.

This result also holds when we add a host of controls, like state capacity, GDP per capita, latitude experience with past epidemics, as well as country and time fixed effects. Using a complementary measure on political and civil rights, we similarly find that greater freedom is associated with greater reductions in movement and travel (Frey et al. 2020).

Though these correlations cannot be interpreted as causal, they provide suggestive evidence that while autocratic regimes tend to introduce stricter lockdowns, they are less effective in reducing travel. Indeed, while China’s strict lockdown has received most media attention, other East Asian countries have arguably mounted a more effective response to Covid-19.

[The full original article first appeared on VoxEU here on 20 May 2020](#)

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