

How politics played a key role in the impact of COVID-19 in democratic countries

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As the UK enters a new phase of government-imposed measures designed to combat COVID-19, a team of experts from Kingston University has released a report examining the initial response of eight democratic countries to the pandemic, and how local, national and international politics played a pivotal role in the outcomes.

The report, "COVID-19 and Democracy, First Cut Policy Analyses: Country Case Studies," looks at how the eight countries responded from April to June 30, during the early stages of the [pandemic](#). The UK, Germany, Bulgaria, Israel, Japan, Taiwan and the U.S. were all included in the study.

Project lead Dr. Peter Finn, from the University's School of Law, Social and Behavioral Sciences, said one of the main aims was to look at the way policies had, or hadn't, been implemented and how these decisions fed into the outcomes for each nation and impacted their death tolls. "Each country has its own narrative around coronavirus. In the UK there have been some economic successes, such as the furlough scheme, but the death toll from the virus has been tragic," Dr. Finn said.

"This report illustrates the political nature of the way the COVID-19 pandemic has been handled to date, demonstrating why the political ramifications of the pandemic will take years, if not decades, to play out."

One area of focus was how [democratic countries](#) prepared for the pandemic—by obtaining PPE, establishing a test and trace infrastructure, developing nuanced communication campaigns, and how the capacity of their healthcare systems enabled them to cope once it hit.

The researchers observed that Germany had benefited from a robust healthcare system and early intervention—working quickly with scientists and leaders at different levels. "Germany engaged very early on, designing and stockpiling tests during the time lag between the outbreak being identified and hitting its population," Dr. Finn said.

"When the first outbreaks occurred, the government and health authorities were immediately able to roll out testing. As a consequence, its death rate, although in the thousands, is currently far below the UK. Leaders such as Angela Merkel seemed to get a grasp of the situation

much earlier, indicating strong leadership appears to have been key, although this is a moving picture."

Prior experience of pandemics also appeared to help inform preparedness, the report found. Countries such as Taiwan that had endured similar crises before, such as the SARS outbreak in Asia from 2002 to 2004, seemed better placed to face the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Interestingly, Bulgaria had also been better prepared because its government often closed schools when the country was hit by seasonal flu outbreaks, Dr. Finn said. That meant the public adjusted more easily when COVID-19 arrived.

Examining politics and policy at local, national and international level, the study found that regional healthcare management had contributed to poor responses in some countries, while coordinated responses between [local authorities](#) in others resulted in better outcomes. At a national level, pre-existing political divisions, national prestige and geopolitics were extremely influential, it found.

One of the over-arching themes was that politics mattered and could not be separated from COVID-19 and the outcomes for each nation, Dr. Finn explained. "There were a lot of calls early on, and you still hear them now, to take the politics out of COVID-19," he said. "But the politics around how different countries are run, how governments are put and held in place and politics around the funding of healthcare sectors are really important. This has influenced the pandemic to date and is going to continue to do so."

Once a successful vaccine for COVID-19 was found, the global politics around its funding and distribution, particularly in the face of anti-vaccination campaigners, would be immense, Dr. Finn predicted.

In the meantime, with Europe entering a second wave of [coronavirus](#), Dr. Finn and the contributors to the report have warned that all countries need to continue to prepare. "Until there is a vaccine there is very little place for complacency in Europe. As we have witnessed, COVID-19 takes hold very quickly within communities. Unless there are measures put in place, leaders at different levels are coordinating responses and the public are listening, then the figures just exponentially grow," Dr. Finn said.

"The recent tightening of restrictions announced by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson demonstrates the perilous situation many countries, including numerous democracies, find themselves in, he added. "At present, leaders need to think about how they maintain a balance between managing behavior to mitigate against a second wave and protecting the openness and accountability that should define democratic governance."

More information: COVID-19 and Democracy, First Cut Policy Analyses: Country Case Studies: www.kingston.ac.uk/documents/uncertainty-first-cut.pdf

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