

# Downing Street party: What behavioural science tells us about how the saga could affect adherence to Plan B

December 13 2021, by Simon Nicholas Williams

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The alleged [Downing Street Christmas party](#) held during last year's

COVID-19 restrictions is the latest in a growing list of incidents where those in government appear to have flouted their own rules.

The most obvious examples hardly need re-stating—from the prime minister's former aide Dominic Cummings' trip to [Barnard Castle](#) to, supposedly, test his eyesight, to former health secretary Matt Hancock [embracing a colleague](#) when the two-meter social distancing guidance was in place.

Many people may therefore not be surprised at another rule-breaking scandal involving key figures in the UK government. But it does beg the question of what effect, if any, this might have on people's willingness to comply with the [Plan B measures](#) newly announced in England, and any further restrictions that might be introduced in the future.

Although [research shows](#) trust in authority does affect behavior, there's also [evidence](#) the public have, for the most part, complied with public health directives throughout the pandemic.

In an article recently published in the [British Medical Journal](#) (written before the Christmas party scandal broke), my colleagues and I discussed what we've learned from behavioral science during COVID-19 that could help us manage future challenges in this and future pandemics.

Lesson number one? Trust in those setting the rules aids compliance. Research [shows](#) trust in authorities has been one of the biggest and most consistent predictors of compliance with public health measures to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

In [a study](#) we conducted last year, we found that one key reason for the loss of trust in the UK government's handling of the pandemic was indeed the well-publicized instances in which politicians were seen to be breaking or bending rules to their own benefit.

Last year the negative impact of declining [public trust](#) in government on adherence to COVID measures was even given a name—the "[Cummings effect](#)."

Many will probably be feeling a sense of déjà vu as the current Christmas party saga continues to unfold. The fact political figures were seen to be making light of the party in [a leaked video](#) makes the situation worse.

## Follow the leader?

In our [research](#), we've identified two main types of COVID rule-breaking: [violations and errors](#). Whereas errors are unintentional lapses or slips, such as forgetting or misunderstanding rules, violations are conscious deviations from known rules or guidance. People are likely to be much less forgiving of violations.

Although Prime Minister Boris Johnson [denies](#) that any rules were broken, the mockery in the video—where the prime minister's then press secretary Allegra Stratton role-plays a pretend press conference justifying the party—implies an awareness of wrongdoing.

Good leaders are also good role models. Leadership scholarship tells us [good leaders](#) represent an "[idealized influence](#)", where they not only follow group rules but also set positive norms, demonstrating high standards of ethical conduct beyond their own [self-interest](#) for the greater good.

So it wouldn't be surprising if many people thought, "if those in government aren't taking the rules seriously, why should I?"

## People do generally follow the rules

Despite this, it's important to note that people who break the rules have generally represented a minority. Research [from the UK](#) tells us that most people have been compliant with most of the rules most of the time throughout the pandemic.

Concerns over "[behavioral fatigue](#)" that were raised earlier in the pandemic—and which were used to [justify delaying](#) the first lockdown—have [not held up](#) to scrutiny. People have, by and large, remained motivated to comply with rules.

If people are experiencing fatigue, it's in the everyday sense—being [tired or burnt out](#) in the face of the stresses of the pandemic. They may be fed up with what many see as [an ineffective response](#) to COVID-19 by the UK government, and tired of constantly changing and often confusing rules and messages across the UK's four nations (something we call "[alert fatigue](#)"). People may also be tired of yet more examples of politicians breaking the rules.

But people are not necessarily tired of measures they feel can help reduce transmission of the virus. For example, a [recent poll](#) found six out of ten people would support bringing back the two-meter rule, while half would support the return of the "[rule of six](#)" on indoor mixing.

It's a misnomer that the public always oppose public health restrictions; [people](#) only tend to [oppose measures](#) that are not clearly communicated, insufficiently rationalized and not properly adhered to by those setting them. And even then, [most people](#) are following them most of the time.

Compliance has been achieved in spite of, not because of, the example set by some of those in power.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Downing Street party: What behavioural science tells us about how the saga could affect adherence to Plan B (2021, December 13) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-downing-street-party-behavioural-science.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.