

OECD countries' politicians follow each other

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Karl Wennberg, professor Linköping University Credit: Annika Moberg

The more democratic a country is, the greater the probability that its politicians decide in the same way as in neighboring countries, without further analysis. This is according a research group that has studied political decision-making during the beginning of the Corona crisis.

Karl Wennberg and Abiel Sebhatu, professor and post-doctoral student, respectively, at the Institute for Analytical Sociology at Linköping University, together with colleagues in Uppsala and Gothenburg, have studied [political decision](#)-making in the OECD countries during the Corona crisis. Their results have now been published in the journal *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences)*.

The starting point for the research is that the majority of OECD countries introduced the same or similar restrictions (no large gatherings, school closures, [travel restrictions](#), curfews and lockdowns) during a few weeks in March, although the circumstances in the countries themselves were very different.

"We found that the decisions were not based on, or had a very weak correlation to, standard epidemiological indicators such as number of cases, number of deaths, ICU capacity etc. More important has been how many neighboring countries have already implemented measures," says Karl Wennberg.

The phenomenon whereby political measures spread without further analysis is called diffusion, and it usually appears when decisions are to be made in a highly uncertain environment.

It's true that during the pandemic, political decisions were made amidst considerable uncertainty. However the researchers conclude that timing, i.e. when measures are implemented, is important. Waiting too long leads to uncontrolled spread and overloaded healthcare, while acting too early or in the same way as others has disadvantages such as higher social and [economic costs](#) for mental ill-health and low economic activity, as well as the risk of a second wave when restrictions are eased. Also, restrictions are reliant on the population's willingness, ability and tenacity to follow them.

"One could expect that each country would conduct a detailed review of its own situation, and make decisions based on that. Considering how different the countries are, the phase of the pandemic they were in during the spring, their healthcare capacity, demographics, and how far the pandemic had advanced in each country, the homogeneity of the decision-making is striking," says Karl Wennberg.

The researchers also discuss the fact that the politicians are subject to internal pressure; they do not want to be blamed for being passive or behind the curve. They want to show decisiveness.

The research group also expresses concern about how the decision-making affects democracy. They have studied the degree of democracy in the country, in relation to the timing, i.e., when the restrictions were implemented. They conclude that the higher the level of democracy in a country, the slower the closure of schools and workplaces—all other things being equal. In [democratic countries](#), however, it is more probable that they copy each other.

"Our analysis also shows us that legislation can limit people's freedom and rights. In May 2020, more than 100 countries had introduced variations of legislation which negatively affect democratic processes. The V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg estimates that up to 82 of the countries face considerable or medium risk of continued damage to democracy," says Karl Wennberg.

More information: Abiel Sebhatu et al, Explaining the homogeneous diffusion of COVID-19 nonpharmaceutical interventions across heterogeneous countries, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2010625117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2010625117)

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