

# Voters unlikely to blame politicians for their handling of the pandemic at next election

October 23 2020

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Politicians are unlikely to be punished or rewarded for their failures or successes in managing the coronavirus pandemic at the next election, suggests an analysis of survey data from the US, the UK and India, published in the online journal *BMJ Global Health*.

This is despite the fact that most survey participants think [health](#) is a key policy area and that their [government](#) is to blame for the spread of COVID-19, shows the study, which forms part of a [BMJ Collection on Democracy and Health](#) published for the World Health Summit this weekend.

Health is often politicised, but it's not clear if public health issues influence public opinion and if these opinions might translate into voting behaviour.

The researchers reasoned that because it is global in scope and the focus of intense media interest, the COVID-19 pandemic therefore offers a unique opportunity to observe the interplay between [public opinion](#) and electoral politics.

How [political leaders](#) and parties have handled the pandemic has been front and centre of news coverage, suggesting that if public health matters to voting intentions, COVID-19 would seem to be a perfect storm, say the researchers.

To explore this further, they ran surveys on the health and economic impacts of the pandemic in the US, UK, and India during mid April to early June, recruiting nearly 3000 participants, half of whom came from the US.

The format of the survey involved revealing key facts about either the [economic impact](#) of the pandemic or the health impact (2 'treatment' groups), or revealing no key facts (comparison group).

Respondents were then asked questions designed to uncover attitudes towards their government, including its leader, and potential voting intentions if an election were held that day. They were also asked if they held their government responsible for the spread of COVID-19.

The economic facts covered the scale of job losses, overall shrinkage of the economy, and the impact on the stock market in each of the three countries. The health facts covered the numbers of projected hospital admissions, including the need for intensive/critical care, and the numbers of deaths in each of the countries, emphasising the lack of a cure or effective vaccine for COVID-19.

The researchers expected that compared with respondents in the comparison group, those in the two 'treatment' groups would either favour or disfavour the incumbent government and blame it for the pandemic.

But that's not what the responses indicated. More than 85% of respondents agreed that health was a key policy area for which their government had some responsibility (90%+ agree).

Yet while more than half the respondents thought their government was to blame for the spread of the pandemic, those given key facts about the pandemic were no more likely to favour or disfavour the incumbent government, or blame it for the pandemic, than those in the comparison group—what is known as a 'null' result.

The researchers acknowledge that they recruited many fewer people than they had hoped in the UK, and the survey platform they used is biased towards young men in all countries and, in the case of India, relatively more educated men, so unlikely to be completely nationally representative.

The surveys were also carried out some time before elections were expected—years in the case of the UK and India.

But they write: "the null findings contained in this study suggest that politicians are unlikely to be punished or rewarded for their failures or

successes in managing COVID-19 in the next election."

They are tempted to conclude that public health issues have little influence on voter preferences in most election cycles. "It is not clear, for example, that the depression in life expectancies in the US, the continuing underperformance of the NHS in the UK, and the low-level of public sector health expenditure in India has had much impact on elections in those countries," they say.

"The urgency with which the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) has ripped through social, economic and political landscapes may challenge these complacencies—but only if [people en masse] make connections between the state of public health and what public officials can do," they suggest.

"If public health is politically inconsequential, this also raises questions about the impact of political institutions on health outcomes," they add.

**More information:** Is health politically irrelevant? Experimental evidence during a global pandemic? *BMJ Global Health*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004222](#)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Voters unlikely to blame politicians for their handling of the pandemic at next election (2020, October 23) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-voters-blame-politicians-pandemic-election.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.