

# Once we're past the fear stage, where do we place the blame for the COVID-19 pandemic?

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In a recent study, conducted in Poland in 2020 and published in the peer-reviewed journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*, scientists concluded it was the government and the system that most of the participants attributed

responsibility to for the COVID-19 incidence rates. Furthermore, political views and party preferences are reported to play an incomparably more significant role in their responses than factors such as anxiety, stress and depression levels or overall self-reported well-being.

In a time of a global crisis such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is easy to note how people move through different phases to buckle up for such unprecedented and arduous times.

In the very beginning of the pandemic last year, we observed "an epidemic of fear," where it was all about the calamitous nature of a totally unknown virus and its worrying contagiousness and mortality rate. A few months later, with lockdown and restrictions already in place across the world, the fear was replaced by "an epidemic of explanations," where people, even in their naivete, started to seek a sense of comfort by placing the blame on someone or something out of their control.

This is why a research team at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities and the Polish Academy of Sciences sought to figure out whether the government was indeed the main culprit for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the eyes of the public. After all, it fitted best the role of an actor of higher authority, allegedly powerful enough to protect the community and resolve the issue at hand and provide the necessary comfort. In the meantime, it comes as an easy target to point a finger at for "not doing enough." On the other hand, the public could as well be explaining the situation with the virulence of the virus or with the irresponsible behavior of others in the society. Regardless of the answer, the team was interested in understanding what's behind one's reasoning: Was it their political views, well-being, or emotions?

To test their hypotheses, the researchers chose to conduct their study in

Poland: a country currently politically divided between Liberalism and Communitarianism, with the latter being the ruling party at the time of the survey, which took place between May and June 2020. A total of 850 Polish adults fully diversified in terms of gender, age, and education participated. The findings are now published in the open-access, peer-reviewed scientific journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*.

As a result, the study concluded that not only was it the government and the system that most of the participants attributed responsibility to for the COVID-19 incidence rates, but that the [political views](#) and party preferences of the participants played an incomparably more significant role in their responses than factors such as anxiety, stress and depression levels or overall self-reported well-being. In fact, amongst the mental health symptoms, the study found that only increased anxiety was statistically significantly related to the tendency to blame the government and its decisions. This could be explained by the fact that people experiencing higher anxiety levels are more likely to exaggerate external responsibility, note the scientists. Curiously, the more educated participants were found to be more likely to emphasize governmental responsibility.

Furthermore, the people with liberal views who did not support the ruling communitarian party blamed the government to a higher degree than their counterparts, who would often place the responsibility for the spread of COVID-19 on non-governmental factors.

In their study, the research team uses several theories to explain this finding, including the Terror Management Theory, which notes that reminding people of their mortality induces an existential threat that also leads to an increased need for protection provided by worldview-based beliefs. On the other hand, the theories of attribution and social roles suggest that people see the "adequate protection against epidemic" as part of the government's duties.

In conclusion, the authors remind that their observations during the survey are consistent with previous reports as a result of natural disasters.

"Citizens observe governmental activities during the epidemic period and evaluate government responsibility. In the light of the results of previous studies on the social perception of natural disasters, we think that this is a rather general phenomenon. Looking for an explanation of the epidemic effects, people tend to blame salient external causes," say the researchers.

**More information:** Krystyna Skarżyńska et al, Under or out of government control? The effects of individual mental health and political views on the attribution of responsibility for COVID-19 incidence rates, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2021). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.4395](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.4395)

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