How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted global trust in government

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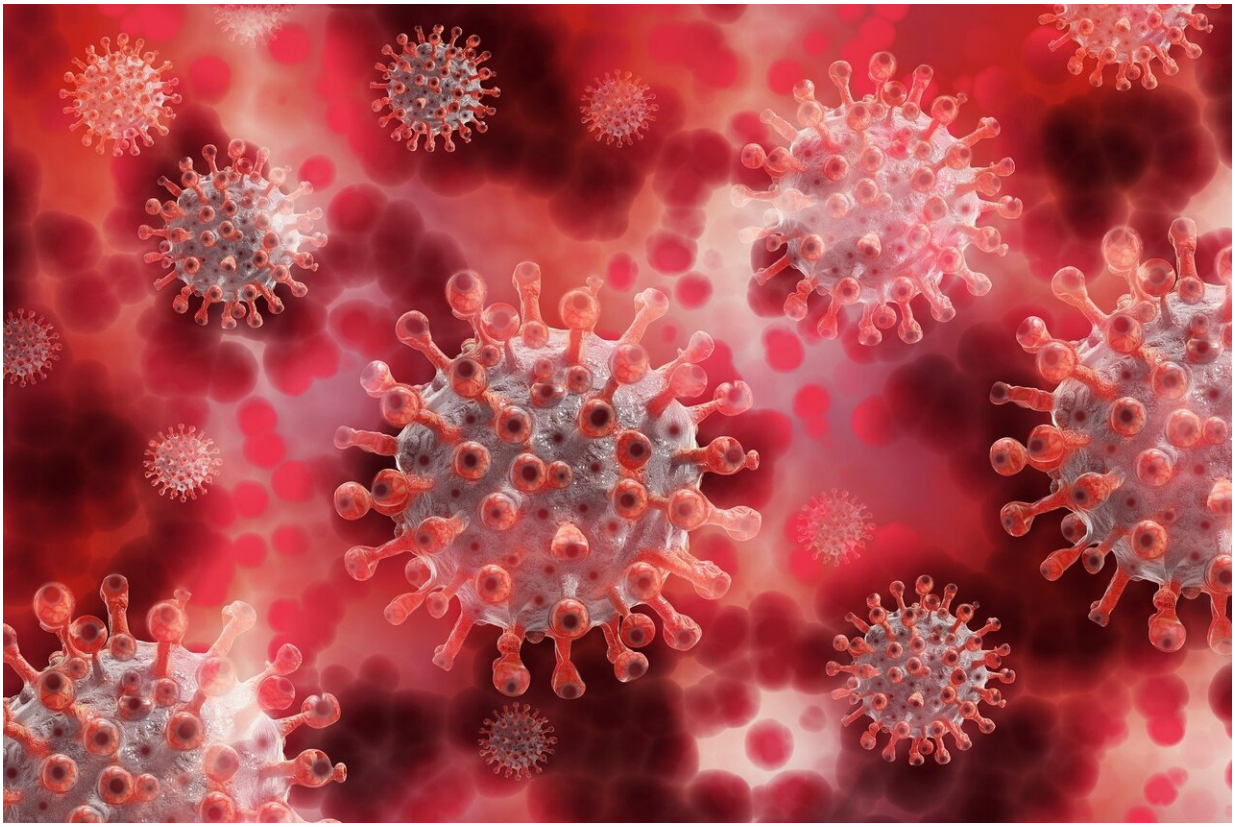

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In a week when the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has admitted to breaking COVID-19 lockdown rules, a new study has found that impartial, transparent and truthful government communications are

fundamental for achieving and maintaining government trust during public health emergencies.

The research, led by the University of Portsmouth, found that in public health emergencies, governments must be accountable, act quickly, and establish frank and timely dialog with the public to encourage trust and cooperation, and alleviate fear.

Professor Jia Liu from Portsmouth Business School, Dr. Yasir Shahab from Xijing University, and Hafiz Hoque from The University of York explored how well the public trusted government to take appropriate measures to combat public health emergencies, and how this trust might impact them in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

The study, published by the *British Journal of Management*, analyzed global data from the International Coronavirus Survey made up of 111,196 respondents across 178 countries between 20 March and 8 April 2020. This research provides the first global evidence that integrated government response policies in conjunction with containment health measures and economic relief are crucial to winning public trust and support.

The researchers found that the effectiveness of these measures and restrictions depended on cooperation from individuals, founded in public trust.

Professor Jia Liu says that "trust has been researched extensively, in different settings from diverse perspectives, however government measures and how they impact public trust have not been studied on a global scale, nor in the context of a public health emergency."

"We investigated what factors determined public trust when governments undertook counteractive measures at the outset of the

COVID-19 pandemic, providing vital insights for managing the crisis and its aftermath."

"We found that individuals are positively influenced by the fairness, effectiveness and accountability of government agencies, plus public information campaigns. Honest communications keep citizens informed, help them to understand the pandemic, prevent skepticism and strengthen trust in government."

Policies introduced to contain outbreaks including restrictions, testing, and contact tracing, mitigated the perceived threat of the virus and reduced the public's sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. Economic support for employees and businesses also increased public trust, relieving fears that individuals would be unable to survive financially during the pandemic. These measures demonstrated a commitment from governments to meet citizens' expectations to safeguard their health and economic wellbeing.

Researchers found that containment of the disease was hugely impactful on public trust in government. Countries that enforced strict restrictions, including China, were found to have an increased sense of public trust, as they enabled effective containment of the virus from the outset. However in places that did not strictly enforce lockdowns and restrictions, such as Sweden, public trust was seen to decrease. The government's hands off approach, suspension of contact tracing and delays in government responses all contributed to this shared distrust.

While restrictions initially increased public trust, the more they went on the further they impacted people's social freedoms causing stress, anxiety and even resentment, provoking rebellious behavior, and sparking a distrust in the government.

Countries who have experienced previous public health emergencies

including SARS and Swine Flu, were found to be far more compliant in the effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Government and the public had learnt from previous crises, reconfigured their welfare systems, and become more equipped to counter pandemics, including making citizens aware of the need to have severe restrictions placed upon them in times of crisis.

Professor Jia Liu says that "to overcome the global nature of the crisis and stimulate economic recovery, nations must work together openly and honestly with politicians, indicating unprecedented levels of mutual trust."

"The 'we are all in this together' mantra must never be forgotten and the spirit of communitarianism this invokes must become the coordinated international responses to pandemic."

"The creation of such a global alliance will empower countries in struggles against all future public emergencies, including threats to mankind posed by global warming."

More information: Jia Liu et al, Government Response Measures and Public Trust during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Around the World, *British Journal of Management* (2021). DOI: 10.1111/1467-8551.12577

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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