

Support for populist politics 'collapsed' during the pandemic: global report

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Support for populist parties and politicians, and agreement with populist sentiment, has diminished during the pandemic, according to a "mega-dataset" taking in attitudes of over half a million people across 109 countries since 2020.

A University of Cambridge team say there are clear signs of a turning tide for the "populist wave", as the mishandling of coronavirus by populist leaders—along with a desire for stability and a decline in "polarizing" attitudes resulting from the [pandemic](#)—starts to move [public opinion](#).

The authors of the new report, from Cambridge's Center for the Future of Democracy (CFD), describe the study as the first global overview of how the COVID-19 crisis has affected [political beliefs](#).

They say that threats posed by the pandemic saw a "technocratic" shift in political authority worldwide, with increased trust in government, and in experts such as scientists and civil servants. Yet faith in the democratic process continued to falter.

"The story of politics in recent years has been the emergence of anti-establishment politicians who thrive on the growing distrust of experts," said Dr. Roberto Foa, Co-Director of the CFD and the report's lead author.

"From Erdogan and Bolsonaro to the 'strong men' of Eastern Europe, the planet has experienced a wave of political populism. COVID-19 may have caused that wave to crest."

"Electoral support for populist parties has collapsed around the world in a way we don't see for more mainstream politicians. There is strong evidence that the pandemic has severely blunted the rise of populism," said Foa.

The findings are published by Cambridge's Bennett Institute for Public Policy.

The first months of the pandemic saw many [political leaders](#) get a boost

in ratings—a classic "rally round the flag" effect in troubled times, say researchers.

However, the approval ratings of populist leaders the world over began declining almost as soon as coronavirus hit, and have continued to sink ever since.

On average, populist leaders have seen a 10 percentage point drop between the spring of 2020 and the last quarter of 2021, while ratings for non-populists—on average—returned to around pre-pandemic levels.

Electoral support also plunged for their parties—seen most clearly in Europe, where the proportion of people intending to vote for a populist party* has fallen by an average of 11 percentage points to 27%.

Overall, across Europe, early lockdowns saw voting intention for incumbent parties increase. Yet all the continent's governing populists—from Italy's Five Star to Hungary's Fidezs—bucked the trend with the largest declines in support.

Support for Europe's opposition populist parties also fell over the pandemic—by 5 pp on average to 11% – while it rose for "mainstream" opposition.

Researchers suggest several factors for populism's fading appeal. One is simply the botch job made of the pandemic by populist governments: from Bolsonaro's mask veto to Trump's "bleach injection" suggestion.

The report's polling shows the public considered populist leaders to be less trustworthy sources of virus-related information than centrist counterparts.

In June 2020, approval of government handling of the crisis was 11

percentage points lower on average in countries with populist leaders than in those with more centrist governance. By the end of 2020, this gap had widened to 16 points.

Researchers also found that political "tribalism"—fertile ground for populists—has declined in most countries. The percentage of party supporters expressing a "strong dislike" of those who vote for opposing politicians fell in most nations (although not the US) during the crisis.

"The pandemic fostered a sense of shared purpose that may have reduced the political polarization we've seen over the last decade," said CFD researcher and report co-author Dr. Xavier Romero-Vidal. "This could help explain why populist leaders are struggling to mobilise support."

Some of the ideas propagated by populists are losing ground. Levels of agreement with statements such as "corrupt elites" divide our nation or the "will of the people" should be obeyed fell in almost every nation surveyed.

For example, agreement with four such statements fell on average by 9 percentage points in Italy to 66%, 10 points in France to 61%, and 8 points in the UK to 64%, between 2019 and 2021.

Commitment to these ideas has also waned. Even among supporters, in almost every nation a smaller number now "strongly agree" than did in 2019. In developed democracies, this shift is predominantly among those aged over 55.

Moreover, areas with the sharpest drops in populist attitudes are some of the poorer "left behind" regions—from Eastern Poland to Southern Italy and Northern Hungary—that have been a focus for populist rhetoric and support.

"This may be down to some rebalancing of wealth as people escaped cities overrun with the virus," said Foa. "In addition, COVID-19 border closures stopped migration and globalized trade more effectively than any populist government."

However, some "illiberal" policies gained traction while populations were in the teeth of the pandemic. Majorities in all major nations surveyed in 2020 were content with banning handshakes, and much of the public—including majorities in Japan and Germany—supported restricting online discussions of the virus.

The consequence of populist decline has not been renewed faith in liberal democracy, say researchers. Perhaps tainted by the record of populists in office, support for democracy has also waned.

Instead, citizens increasingly favor technocratic sources of authority, such as having "non-political" experts take decisions.

By the start of summer 2020, belief that experts should be allowed to make decisions "according to what they think best for the country" had risen 14 points to 62% in Europe and 8 points to 57% in the US.

While trust in government has steadily climbed since the pandemic hit, increasing by 3.4 percentage points on average right across the world's democratic nations, faith in democracy as a political system barely changed.

"Satisfaction with democracy has recovered only slightly since the post-war nadir of 2019, and is still well below the long-term average," said Foa.

"Some of the biggest declines in democratic support during the pandemic were seen in Germany, Spain and Japan—nations with large

elderly populations particularly vulnerable to the virus."

In the US, the percentage of people who consider democracy a "bad" way to run the country more than doubled from 10.5% in late 2019 to 25.8% in late 2021.

Added Foa: "The pandemic has brought good and bad news for liberal democracy. On the upside, we see a decline in populism and a restoration of trust in government. On the downside, some illiberal attitudes have are increasing, and satisfaction with democracy remains very low."

More information: Report: [The Great Reset: Public Opinion, Populism, and the Pandemic](#)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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