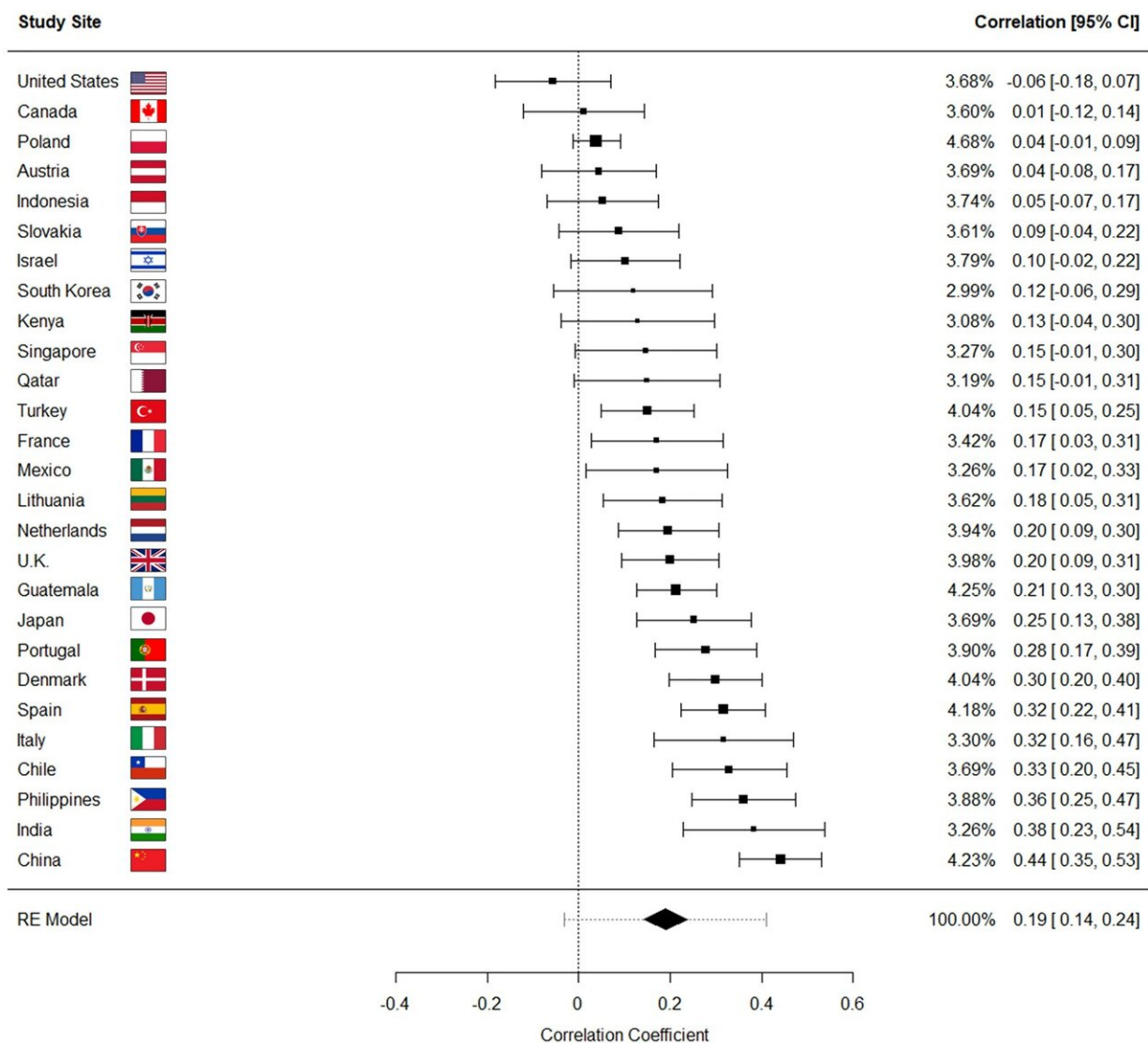


# Worldwide, those with 'traditional' values adhered more strictly to COVID precautions, finds study of 27 countries

April 11 2023, by Elizabeth Kivowitz



Results of a random effects, restricted maximum likelihood meta-analysis in which each study site was treated as a separate sample. Plot shows zero-order product-moment correlations between traditionalism and COVID-19 health precautions at each study site, ordered by effect size. For the individual country estimates, the location of the square along the x-axis corresponds with the correlation coefficient, the size of the square corresponds with the weight of that study site in the meta-analysis, and bands are 95% confidence intervals. At the bottom of the plot, an overall meta-analyzed point estimate is provided. The midpoint of the diamond corresponds with that point estimate, the width of the diamond corresponds with the 95% CI, and the dotted bands correspond with the 95% prediction interval. On the right side of the plot, weights, correlation coefficients, and 95% CIs respectively are numerically listed for both the site-specific correlations, as well as the overall estimate. Note that for the overall meta-analyzed point estimate, the 95% confidence interval does not overlap with zero, while the 95% prediction interval does. Credit: *Scientific Reports* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-29655-0

Given the battles over COVID-19 rules and recommendations in the United States over the past three years, the findings of a new UCLA-led study may come as a bit of a shock: Globally, those who professed to hold traditional values tended to adhere more closely to coronavirus-prevention measures than those who considered themselves more liberal.

"Across a wide range of countries, people who endorsed traditional cultural values—a position that often underlies socially conservative political philosophies—were more likely to report taking strict COVID-19 precautions, despite the opposite pattern being observed in the U.S.," said study author Theodore Samore, a UCLA doctoral student in anthropology.

The findings, published today in the open-access journal *Scientific Reports*, have important implications for understanding how people

around the world may respond to future disease outbreaks and measures designed to protect them from pandemics and other global threats. The results, the authors say, can help public health officials better craft policies that account for differences in values across populations.

Previous research on the intersection of politics and psychology has shown that social conservatives are more strongly attuned to threats and dangers than social liberals, who tend to view the world as a generally safe place. Conservatives and traditionalists, therefore, display a stronger inclination to embrace protective behaviors. Although the specific issues on which conservatives and liberals differ can vary from country to country, all societies have some values that considered traditional.

The COVID-19 pandemic allowed social scientists to examine this relationship between traditionalism and threat response on a global scale. To counter the threat of the virus in its early days, before vaccines were widely available, public health officials around the world recommended similar precautionary measures, including hand-washing, mask-wearing and physical distancing.

An international team of 44 scholars led by Samore and anthropology professor Daniel Fessler surveyed nearly 8,000 people in 27 countries across North America, South America, Europe, Asia and Africa. The researchers asked participants to respond to a series of questions and statements—for example, "Traditions are the foundation of a healthy society and should be respected"—to determine if they considered themselves to be "traditional." They followed up with queries about which precautionary measures people took in their efforts to avoid becoming infected with COVID-19.

In 21 of the 27 countries, the investigators found a strong link between traditional values and strict adherence to precautionary behaviors. In some societies, the effect was small but significant; in others, it was

more substantial.

Digging deeper, they found that individuals balanced the relative benefits of taking precautions to mitigate the risk of a hazardous disease against the social costs and missed opportunities entailed by being cautious—and that a person's values influenced how much weight they place on the latter.

The results did not seem to differ any way based on where the country was located or how economically developed it was.

## **Why the difference with American conservatives?**

In the U.S.—which has been shown to be something of a global outlier in this regard—the investigators found that factors like a distrust of science, concerns about the effects disease precautions may have on the economy and the desire to preserve personal liberties suppressed the predicted cautionary decision-making of social conservatives, even though that group is more likely to self-describe as "traditional."

"In countries where the discourse around science and trust was less polarized, traditionalists were more willing to embrace precautions than their more socially liberal counterparts," Fessler said. "The U.S., where these topics were highly politicized, suffered more COVID-19 deaths per capita than any other highly developed nation."

American social conservatives, for example, were more likely to attend a group religious observance at a church or temple even though public health officials had recommended avoiding large gatherings. However, after the investigators took into account that these social conservatives trusted science less and were more concerned about the economy than their socially liberal counterparts, the expected relationship between traditionalism and heightened precautions appeared in the U.S. too.

The researchers said that designing health policies that resonate with less traditional people, as well as with social conservatives in the U.S. and other countries who bucked against COVID-19 precautions, will be crucial to saving lives in the future.

"Marshaling broad support for policies intended to protect the public," Samore said, "will hinge on rebuilding widespread trust in science and crafting policies in ways that take differences in concerns and priorities seriously—and on encouraging influential information sources to provide accurate accounts of the pros and cons of those policies."

**More information:** Theodore Samore et al, Greater traditionalism predicts COVID-19 precautionary behaviors across 27 societies, *Scientific Reports* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-29655-0 , [www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-29655-0](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-29655-0)

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