

# Democracy Amid Pandemic: A Survey Experiment on How Covid-19 Affectedness Influences Support for Anti-Liberal Policies

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## Abstract

Do people support ostensibly effective policy measures that curtail liberal rights and civil liberties or instead stick to liberal principles when confronted with an unprecedented crisis? This article examines the relationship between individuals’ perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic and their attitudes toward democracy as they consider effective countermeasures. It asks (a) whether individuals’ sense of being affected by the pandemic shapes their attitudes toward democratic policymaking and (b) whether this relationship is moderated by trust and authoritarianism. The analysis builds on a customized survey in Austria that includes a conjoint experiment to test the acceptability of various illiberal policies. It shows that while feeling affected by Covid-19 does not have the hypothesized effect, there are strong interactions with respondents’ political attitudes. Citizens’ willingness to sacrifice democracy for more effective policies depends both on whether they perceive the pandemic as a personal problem and on their attitudes toward government and democracy.

## Keywords

Austria; Covid-19 pandemic; crisis; democracy; public policy attitudes; survey experiment

## 1. Introduction

In the literature on democratic backsliding, the rollback of freedoms and the rule of law is often associated with radical politics and the rise of non-mainstream parties. Radical parties and their supporters are said to engage in responsive but not responsible policymaking by testing the limits of liberal democracy and the rule of law (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). But what if the shoe is on the other foot? What happens if there is an unprecedented crisis, and the most effective response calls for curtailing

liberal rights and civil liberties? Importantly, what measures do citizens support when mainstream political actors pursue responsive but constitutionally suspect policies in the name of effectiveness?

The following example illustrates our point: Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz explained his approach to effective countermeasures by saying he did not want to deal with “legal niceties” (Rohrer, 2021). Besides, he explained, by the time his government’s decrees reached Austria’s Constitutional Court, “they would no longer be in force anyway.” The ensuing public debate about whether liberal democratic rights are a luxury in times of crisis was not only an issue in Austria, but also in countries as diverse as Hungary, Slovenia, the United States, Germany, and Ghana. Nonetheless, the academic debate on this issue was primarily conducted in law journals rather than political science literature (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020; Flander, 2022; Levine et al., 2022).

While responsiveness and effectiveness are core principles in the modern understanding of functioning democratic regimes (Goetz, 2017), crises like the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that these principles can also lead to pressures on fundamental democratic processes. Liberal democracy imposes limits on responsiveness and effectiveness when their implementation threatens democratic principles (for an overview discussion, see Michelman, 1997). However, a pandemic differs from most other political problems in that political decisions must be made quickly and directly impact people’s health and physical survival.

This tension leads us to investigate the following two-part research question: Which option do individuals support when confronted with the potential trade-off between liberal democracy on the one hand and effective but possibly less than democratic measures on the other? What explains the differences between such individual evaluations?

Therefore, we start from the individual experience of the crisis and examine its implications for government policies to combat the pandemic. In a dedicated representative survey and survey experiment in Austria, respondents were asked to choose between different policy responses that varied in their effectiveness and constitutionality. In the first step, we assess the extent to which this choice is affected by how people feel affected by Covid-19. We then turn to authoritarian attitudes and trust in government as political attitudes that might influence the relationship between feeling affected by Covid-19 and the trade-offs between effectiveness and liberal democratic principles. This survey was fielded when respondents experienced the pandemic’s consequences, but neither the crisis nor any policy responses had been colored by partisan rhetoric. As a result, we were able to conduct the survey at a time when efficiency considerations were primarily driving policy responses. We found that feeling affected by Covid-19 in their health or economic situation as a factor by itself did not significantly affect people’s willingness to accept illiberal and anti-democratic policies. However, when combined with respondents’ political attitudes, the individual perception of affectedness showed clear effects. Thus, in the early stages of the crisis and before the emergence of clear partisan divisions and specific political narratives, the crisis did not seem to turn people into anti-liberals or anti-democrats.

This article proceeds as follows: First, we outline the existing knowledge about the relationship between the Covid-19 crisis and its effects on democracy. We then develop our hypotheses and present our conjoint survey experiment and the other measures. Following a brief overview of the Austrian case, we present our findings and discuss their implications for understanding the relationship between crises and democratic stability.

## 2. Theory

Support for anti-liberal policies and disenchantment with democracy can have a variety of causes and have been explored in a rich literature. Scholars began discussing the legitimacy crisis of democracy as early as the 1970s (Crozier et al., 1975; Habermas, 1973). There has been considerable debate as to whether the support for democracy is based on universal principles that citizens share, or whether utilitarian attitudes drive it, with democracy being supported as long as it delivers to its constituents. Some, therefore, see the functioning of the democratic system as crucial to maintaining support for its existence (cf. Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Norris, 2017). Another debate revolves around the question of whether support for democracy has declined, while authoritarian and populist attitudes appear to be on the rise (Dalton, 2004; Schmitter & Trechsel, 2004; for a detailed discussion, see Thomassen & Van Ham, 2017). While we address this question, particularly the trade-off between commitment to liberal principles and support for more effective outcomes, we focus on a very specific context: the early stages of a global crisis, when many individuals faced challenging circumstances in which to evaluate policy choices. Thus, we focus on a situation where support for liberal democratic principles and effective policymaking are in sharp contrast. Hence, our research explores how, in a crisis such as a pandemic, people weigh the need for effective policy against the importance of preserving liberal democratic rights when these two goals seem incompatible. Under normal circumstances, representative politics has opted for a deliberative legislative process that maximizes the legitimacy of the input and serves as a filter to improve the quality of the policy output.

However, a pandemic is a unique situation for three reasons: First, it is a matter of life and death, so effective decisions save lives. Second, time is of the essence, as rapid action rather than a slow deliberative process may be indispensable to contain the spread of the disease. Third, policymakers and experts have yet to gain real first-hand experience dealing with the pandemic, so there may be a greater willingness to try new ideas and radical solutions. The case of Covid-19 thus differs from other crises, with their often diffuse and delayed effects at the individual level, by a much greater immediacy and directness of impact (Buščíková & Baboš, 2020). As a result, people with liberal orientations may adopt illiberal positions or follow radical policy proposals.

Although society as a whole was confronted with the pandemic, the threat and impact of the disease were not felt equally by all. People differ in their circumstances, physical and mental health, economic and social resources, and outlook. As a result, the urgency and perceived need for extreme measures vary and are shaped by people's attitudes toward democracy and the government (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020).

Although research on the political impact of Covid-19 is still ongoing, there is growing evidence that the pandemic has harmed the quality of democracy (see Heinisch & Werner, 2024; Thomson & Ip, 2020, p. 1356). In a survey experiment, Amat et al. (2020) found a demand for strong leadership, a willingness to give up individual freedom, and a sharp increase in support for technocratic governance. In addition, Arceneaux et al. (2020, p. 1) suggest that people's attitudes are relatively malleable and that "trusted experts" can shift support for policies that erode civil liberties. The corrosive effect of Covid-19 on democracy may explain the growth of conspiracy theories and their impact on politics (Eberl et al., 2021; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Žuk & Žuk, 2020). A related literature has pointed to the close correlation between the experience of crisis and democratic aberrations (Buščíková & Baboš, 2020; Moffitt, 2015).

In contrast, other research reports that lockdowns tended to increase vote intentions for the party of the government leader and satisfaction with democracy, pointing to the importance of political trust (Bol et al.,

2021). Another strand of the literature shows a growing resentment toward policy decisions driven and communicated by experts (Guasti, 2020; Hameleers, 2021; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020), while other work shows no uniform negative effects (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). The disease and government responses are often rapid, have immediate effects, and dominate public and political discourse, making it difficult for most citizens to escape their effects and the political debate about them. This includes questions about the responsiveness, effectiveness, and constitutional soundness of policies (Thomson & Ip, 2020, p. 1356). However, our theoretical discussion so far has made clear that people respond differently to responsiveness and effectiveness. We, therefore, focus primarily on the extent to which citizens' general political attitudes contribute to the trade-off between effectiveness and liberal democratic rights. We focus on effectiveness (achieving a superior outcome) rather than efficiency (achieving the same outcome with fewer resources; Huber et al., 2020). While the underlying argument about a trade-off with democracy also applies to efficiency, measures to combat a pandemic are generally viewed from the standpoint of effectiveness in containing and counteracting the disease. We must emphasize at this point that the concept of effectiveness here is not a scientific concept used to measure a certain degree of improvement objectively, but rather a subjective idea in people's minds that emerges from public discourse and suggests a better outcome. As a result, we derive a set of variables that we hypothesize will explain this relationship.

We turn first to our dependent variable, a person's willingness to sacrifice individual democratic rights and freedoms in a health crisis. With this trade-off between democratic principles and the effectiveness of policymaking in mind, when citizens face a major threat to their lives, livelihoods, and society, we designed a survey experiment, described below. We chose this approach for two reasons: First, it makes the nature of the trade-offs under investigation non-obvious; and second, any abstract questioning of democracy is normatively sanctioned in Western society. As a result, we will likely avoid untruthful or evasive responses that we would otherwise receive if we asked people directly about trade-offs between democratic principles and other preferences (Winstone et al., 2016).

In this experiment, we present a series of concrete policies, each of which touches on one of the following dimensions of democracy: the right to privacy, freedom of movement, freedom from unlawful search and seizure, and the rule of law. Therefore, the stimulus of the experiment aims at the liberal part of liberal democracy in that it underscores the principle of limited government. By implication, even highly effective policies are subject to constitutional limits. At least, this is the central issue. Thus, rather than viewing democracy as an abstract concept when we ask respondents about the Covid-19 pandemic, we want to determine to what extent respondents who feel affected by the pandemic would support extreme measures restricting these rights and freedoms. The policies we propose to respondents each have a constitutional and an unconstitutional component, the latter being incompatible with liberal democracy.

This is where we hope to find the line that people will draw when deciding whether to support or oppose each measure in the fight against the pandemic. The measures were designed to appear effective and were all loosely part of the public discourse during the first months of the pandemic in Austria.

Turning to our independent variables, we note that an extensive literature focuses on various emotional and psychological states as drivers of political radicalization. In a pandemic, the emotion of fear may be particularly important in generating support for radical politics (Wodak, 2015). Likewise, anger, e.g., about the government's response to the pandemic, has been found to increase support for radical politics

(Demertzis, 2006; Magni, 2017). Similarly, economic anxiety has featured prominently in recent literature on political choice and populism (Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Skonieczny, 2018). In Salmela and von Scheve (2018), economic anxiety and anger are shown as intertwined factors that strengthen a preference for radical populist parties, with the former evolving into the latter under certain conditions. Closely related to fear, the sense of lack of control has also been found to reinforce radical attitudes (Heinisch & Jansesberger, 2022). A pandemic is an extreme experience that induces strong emotions in most people. Arguably, fear of physical well-being and fear of economic well-being are the primary emotional drivers in an international health crisis in which people fear for their lives and livelihoods. This is why we have focused on these two factors as crucial.

Thus, our primary independent variable is the subjective sense of being affected by Covid-19. In line with the previous discussion, we follow the argument from political psychology that people who experience anxiety or a loss of control tend to favor authoritarian measures to regain a sense of security (Betz, 2002; Cramer, 2016; Eberl et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2019; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017, 2018). In the context of Covid-19, two impacts are most important: individuals' health and economic situation. Few things are more precious to individuals than their health, which is ultimately tied to physical survival. In a pandemic, this impact can occur in several ways: people may become seriously ill from the disease itself; they may suffer psychological trauma from the illness itself or the fear of it, particularly in vulnerable populations; or people with other health problems may receive inadequate or insufficient care due to an overburdened health sector. This is why we emphasize the importance of the subjective sense of being affected in one's health. We must leave it to the respondent to determine the degree to which they feel affected, no matter how "objectively" ill or not a person may have been. Individual perceptions are important because they influence attitudes and behaviors.

The other significant and widespread impact has been on economic well-being. Many individuals lost their employment, were required to work from home under less than ideal working conditions, or were forced to cease operations, leading to existential concerns. Once more, this has a significant subjective aspect, as some individuals are more resilient than others in similar circumstances and may assess their vulnerability differently. As a result, our concept of vulnerability is not limited to the disease itself or the loss of a job or business. Still, it remains at a subjective level that is susceptible to political influence and public discourse. Our expectation that people who feel affected will also accept constitutionally questionable measures is supported by research showing that people rally around the government, especially in the early stages of the pandemic expertise (Arceneaux et al., 2020; Bol et al., 2021). They also demand strong leadership and are willing to give up individual freedom (Amat et al., 2020). This tendency is motivated by the desire to feel safe and protected in times of fear and uncertainty. Thus, individuals who feel particularly affected by Covid-19 should prioritize the effectiveness of disease control over less immediate concerns about democracy.

H1a: An individual's sense of their health-related well-being being affected by Covid-19 increases the preference for policy effectiveness over democratic principles.

H1b: An individual's sense of their economic well-being being affected by Covid-19 increases the preference for policy effectiveness over democratic principles.

In terms of the role of political attitudes, we assume that in times of a pandemic, partisan political factors may not be as relevant compared with more traditional political issues that are shaped along party lines.

Instead, some voters are generally more comfortable with a strong top-down relationship between the state and society, while others reject such a view of government power. Under a strong authoritarian orientation, we understand the belief in a strictly ordered hierarchical society demanding submission to authority and social conventions (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2018), which in turn arises from an “uncritical, respectful, obedient support for existing societal authorities and institutions” (Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013, p. 843). In contrast, liberal orientations generally imply strong support for civil liberties and political rights, including minority rights and the rule of law.

Thus, individuals with authoritarian values are likely to find effectiveness-based, less democratic policies more compatible with their values than individuals with a liberal worldview. In other words, authoritarians would seem to be the least likely advocates of liberal democratic principles. Instead, we would expect them to value leadership and decisive, results-oriented action.

H2a: Individuals with authoritarian values are more likely to prefer policy effectiveness to democratic principles than individuals with liberal values.

H2b: An individual's liberal or authoritarian values affect the relationship between an individual's sense of feeling affected by Covid-19 and support for the effectiveness of the policy.

It should also be noted that support for effective measures against Covid-19 would likely depend on citizens being convinced that policymakers are competent and well-intentioned. Importantly, voters' belief in the competence and good intentions of those in power depends on their trust in their leaders and institutions (Guasti, 2020; Hameleers, 2021; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). Without such trust, power is seen as illegitimate, and decisions are deemed harmful and nefarious. Lack of trust is also a basis for conspiracy theories, especially in conjunction with expert-directed mandatory health policies (e.g., Silva et al., 2021), which in turn is believed to have negative consequences for democracy (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Žuk & Žuk, 2020). Thus, trust in government is expected to be a key variable in perceptions of action.

Nonetheless, the key question that arises is the direction of the effect of trust here. On one hand, a lack of trust is said to negatively affect democracy. On the other, trust in government may increase a person's willingness to support effective but constitutionally suspect measures of a “trusted” government. Thus, whether this would make such voters more or less likely to reject illiberal government measures remains an open question.

H3a: An individual's trust in government increases the preference for policy effectiveness over democratic principles.

H3b: An individual's trust in the government affects the relationship between an individual's sense of feeling affected by Covid-19 and support for the effectiveness of the policy.

### 3. Surveying Austrian's Attitudes During the Covid-19 Pandemic

To empirically test our hypotheses, we designed a representative survey in Austria that was conducted in early September 2020, with a sample size of 1,200 respondents. Table A1 in the Supplementary File shows the demographic sample composition. In 2020, Austria weathered the first wave of the pandemic quite

successfully, following the government's initial decisive response, which culminated in a strict lockdown in March 2020. Importantly, this survey captured public opinion before the more specific discussions of vaccine skepticism and dissent over anti-Covid-19 policies began to dominate the public discourse. This context, therefore, provides a rather unvarnished rare insight into the Austrian public's views before one specific aspect—vaccination—began to overshadow other issues. The survey was conducted online by the Market Institute, which randomly selected respondents from a pool of 25,000–30,000 Austrians, and occurred at a time when Austrians had experienced the health and economic impact of the pandemic but were in a period of relative calm.

The tailor-made survey contained two questions about the respondents' feelings about being affected by the Covid-19 crisis, one targeting their health and the other asking about their economic situation. As argued previously, we leave it to the respondents and their subjective assessment of whether and to what extent they felt personally affected. The question was: *On a scale of 0 to 10, how much did you feel negatively affected [in your health well-being OR economically] by the Corona crisis?* Respondents were also asked whether they felt that those close to them were affected in their health or economic wellbeing. These factors have no additional effect. We show this in the Supplementary File (Figure A2).

To measure individuals' level of authoritarian and liberal values, we refrained from directly inquiring about the preferred relationship between the state and society as such a measurement would be too closely related to the democratic nature of the policies we are investigating. Instead, we used a general measure of authoritarianism by asking for respondents' agreement with the statement: *The country would be better off if the young people were educated to be obedient and disciplined.* The response scale also ran from 0 to 10, with higher values denoting more authoritarian values.

The survey contained the standard question regarding trust in the government: *On the whole, you can trust that the government wants only the best for the country.* While the original response scale ran from (0) *strongly agree* to (10) *strongly disagree*, we reversed the answer categories so that higher values denote more trust in the government to facilitate interpretation. We also asked for respondents' trust in people, which does not affect our analysis, as shown in the Supplementary File (Figures A3a and A3b).

Finally, to measure our dependent variables of respondents' choices between effective and democratic policies, the survey included a conjoint experiment that simulates a decision-making situation by giving respondents a binary choice between two policy packages designed to combat the spread of Covid-19. Of course, a survey experiment cannot perfectly simulate a real policy decision with all its personal or societal consequences. However, our experiment comes as close to this ideal as possible, given that we ask respondents to make policy decisions and that the experimental setup hides the theoretically interesting decision parameters. Moreover, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) have shown that forced-choice conjoint experiments closely mimic real-world behavior, using field experiments as a benchmark. Thus, while our experiment is subject to the usual limitations, voters' responses in conjoint experiments are a functional proxy for real-world behavior.

The conjoint experiment asked respondents to indicate their preferences between two policy packages. Table 1 shows an example of an experimental decision. To set up this decision, we provide respondents with a situational context and the instruction to imagine a hypothetical situation. The text shown (in German) is as follows:

Please imagine the following situation:

After months of opening up the economy, with shops and restaurants finally recovering and tourists also flocking to the country again, there is an explosive resurgence of Covid-19 disease that can no longer be controlled by conventional measures.

In turn, the government again severely restricts freedom of movement in the country and announces additional measures as essential.

In September 2020, at the time of the survey, stable and low numbers of Covid-19 infections and hospitalizations marked Austria’s situation. At the same time, there were widespread discussions about the possibility of a second wave of infections. Thus, the hypothetical situation described above envisioned the not-yet-existent but realistic potential threat of another wave of infection and the resulting necessary policy measures. We introduced the policy packages with the following statement: “Below, we show you different packages of measures that the government can take. Please select the package of measures you would personally prefer.”

Each policy measure relates to a different aspect of liberal democracy. A technical device to reconstruct personal contacts interferes with people’s right to privacy while indefinitely isolating a specific social group impinges on their freedom of movement and conduct harsher law and order measures—especially in conjunction with calling on the population to report suspects—are closely connected to the type of social

**Table 1.** All potential Covid-19 policy options, that are randomly selected into packages and shown to respondents in the conjoint experiment.

<p>POLICY MEASURE 1</p> <p><b>Only people with a phone app</b> or chip for reconstructing personal contacts will be allowed to move around completely freely in the future.</p>	<p>POLICY MEASURE 1</p> <p>The government decides <b>not</b> to introduce a <b>phone app or chip to reconstruct</b> personal contacts</p>
<p>POLICY MEASURE 2</p> <p>Elderly people and special risk groups such as people with pre-existing conditions will be <b>required to remain in isolation</b> and other restrictions <b>indefinitely</b>.</p>	<p>POLICY MEASURE 2</p> <p>Elderly people and special risk groups, such as people with pre-existing conditions, <b>are allowed to move around like everyone else</b></p>
<p>POLICY MEASURE 3</p> <p><b>Violations</b> of Corona measures <b>will be punished more severely</b> and the population is urged to report so-called “<b>life endangerers</b>” to the authorities in the spirit of public protection.</p>	<p>POLICY MEASURE 3</p> <p><b>Violations</b> of the promulgated measures <b>will be punished at the same level</b> and there will be no specific call to report violations to the authorities.</p>
<p>POLICY MEASURE 4</p> <p>The government demands understanding for the fact that in times of need, <b>measures are taken primarily according to the criterion of effectiveness rather than constitutionality</b>.</p>	<p>POLICY MEASURE 4</p> <p>The government demands understanding that even in times of emergency, measures are <b>only taken according to the criterion of constitutionality</b>.</p>

Note: Bolded sections in Table 1 were bolded in the experiment.



control implemented by non-democratic regimes and impede the rule of law, especially the freedom from unlawful search and seizure. The final statement openly contrasts effectiveness and constitutionality. Although presenting the policies as packages is artificial, they are related to the debate mentioned above. It is worth noting that no party had issued ownership of any of these policies. Furthermore, we opted against proposing alternative policies beyond maintaining the status quo as this would have shifted the focus away from the choice between liberal and illiberal policies to questions of Covid-19 mitigation. It would also have blurred the clear choice between stark alternatives and instead created a situation that offered respondents a comfortable way out by having a second seemingly effective policy option.

To test our hypotheses, we investigate whether our independent variables (feeling affected by Covid-19, authoritarianism, and trust in government) affect the policy packages respondents choose in the survey experiment. Due to the nature of conjoint analysis, we must first transform all continuous independent variables into categorical ones. Thus, we split the variables of feeling affected by the Covid-19 pandemic into three groups: *not feeling affected* (0–3), *somewhat affected* (4–6), and *very affected* (7–10). We divided all other continuous variables into two groups, excluding the true middle value of five. For the effects of single independent variables, we calculate the average marginal component effects (AMCE), which represent each policy's independent effects on the probability that a respondent chooses a given policy package. In other words, AMCEs tell us whether respondents are more or less likely to choose a policy package if the more effective policy alternative is included instead of the more democratic version. This method determines the way we read the figures. If a policy has a negative impact, that policy package is less likely to be selected if the effective policy is included instead of the democratic policy. An effect crossing the zero line means that it does not matter whether the policy packages contain effective or democratic policies.

To analyze the interactions between feeling affected by Covid-19 and the attitudinal variables, we calculate marginal means (MMs) instead of AMCEs. Leeper et al. (2020) have shown that AMCEs are sensitive to the choice of the reference group when more than two groups are compared. MMs do not suffer from this limitation. Nevertheless, they are interpreted in the same way as AMCEs in cases where respondents are forced to choose between two alternative options, which is the case in our experiment. In a nutshell, MMs are the mean outcome across all appearances of a particular conjoint feature level, averaging across all other features. For conjoint experiments structured like ours, MMs of 0.5 are the general average effect. Statistically significant effects above 0.5 show that the feature increases, and effects below 0.5 decrease the favorability of a package.

#### 4. Analysis: Covid-19 and Democratic Policies

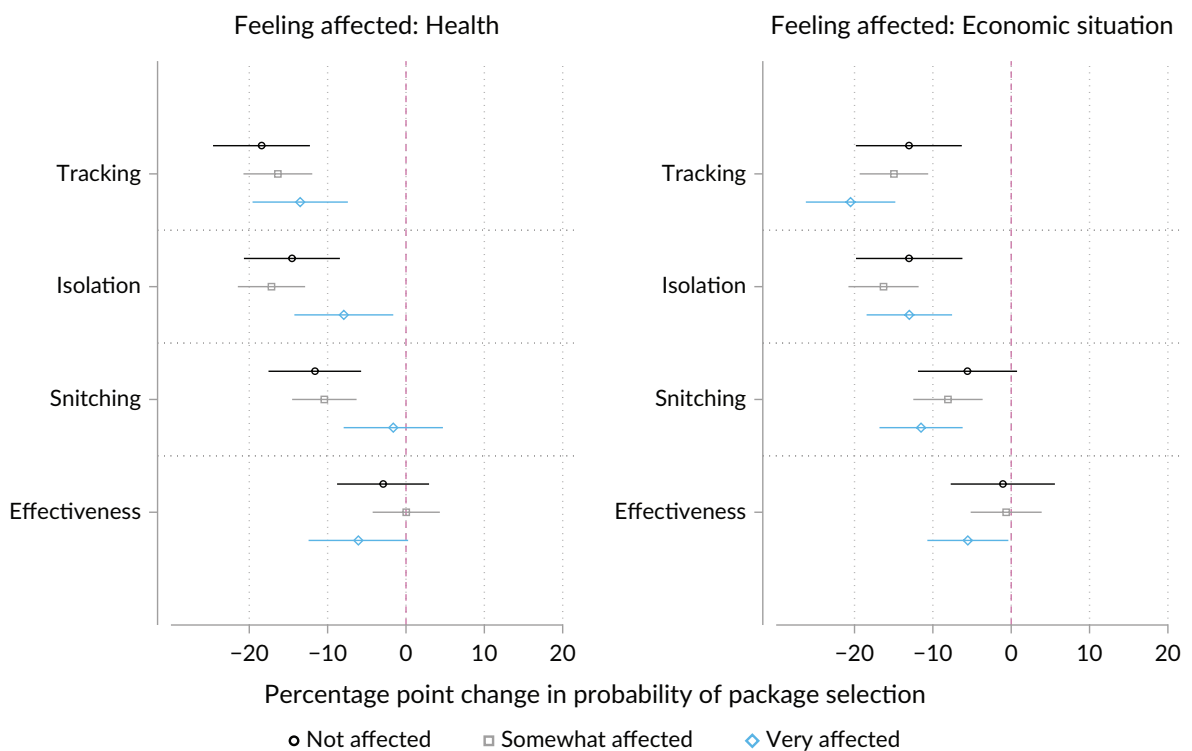
In this section, we investigate whether there are any differences in the effect of undemocratic policies being included in the survey experiment's policy packages depending on our independent variables. In the first step of our analysis, we ask whether the extent to which someone is affected by Covid-19 affects their receptiveness to effective but illiberal measures. As noted in Section 2, we assess health and economic effects separately. For ease of reading, we contrast only those who feel *not at all* or *very much* affected by Covid-19 in the visual representation of the interactions.

For completeness, we present the main effects of the four policies on general package selection in Figure A1 (see Supplementary File). It shows that the tracking app and isolation of vulnerable people have similarly

negative effects on package selection as their inclusion decreases the probability by about 15 percentage points. Including the “snitching” policy also has a clear negative effect (-9%), while “effectiveness over constitutionality” has no statistically significant effect. Furthermore, Figures A4a and A4b of the Supplementary File show the effect for all three levels of affectedness (*not*, *somewhat*, and *very affected*).

Figure 1 shows the extent to which respondents feeling affected in their health or their economic well-being react regarding support for the policies included in the experimental government’s policy packages to combat Covid-19. In general, we find that the inclusion of one of the (less democratic) effectiveness-based measures makes them less likely to be selected by respondents. However, there is little variation among respondents with different perceptions of Covid-19’s impact. The left panel of Figure 1 shows this for respondents who feel affected in their health. We see little difference in the negative effects of including a tracking app and forced isolation policies. Only the idea that effectiveness matters more than constitutionality has consistently no effect. From another perspective, however, violating this most liberal of democratic principles does not elicit a significant negative reaction either. This is surprising, given that we would expect to see a defence of democratic institutions in a long-established democratic society. However, feeling affected in one’s health does matter for accepting the policy designed to punish non-compliance and even encourage people to snitch on each other. Those feeling very affected by Covid-19 in their health see this policy as unproblematic.

The right-hand panel in Figure 1 shows that feeling affected in one’s economic situation also minimally affects respondents’ reaction to our experiment. Again, the only minor difference we note concerns the measure of reporting non-compliance, although it is here that those who feel unaffected show the least concern about this policy. An explanation may be that this group fears being targeted later and tries to avert this. However,



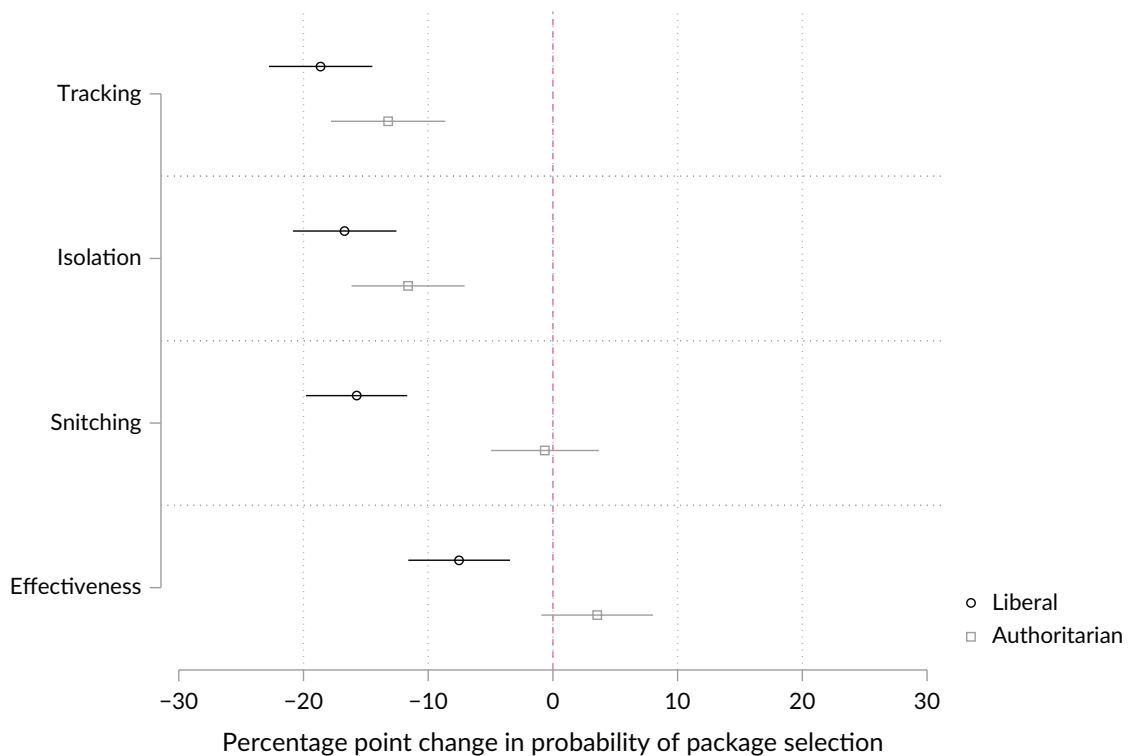
**Figure 1.** AMCE for package selection among different levels of feeling affected in own health and economic situation.

overall, we need to reject our hypotheses H1a and H1b that feeling affected by the Covid-19 pandemic has an independent effect on the choice of democratic or illiberal policies. Of course, feelings of being affected could still influence other variables.

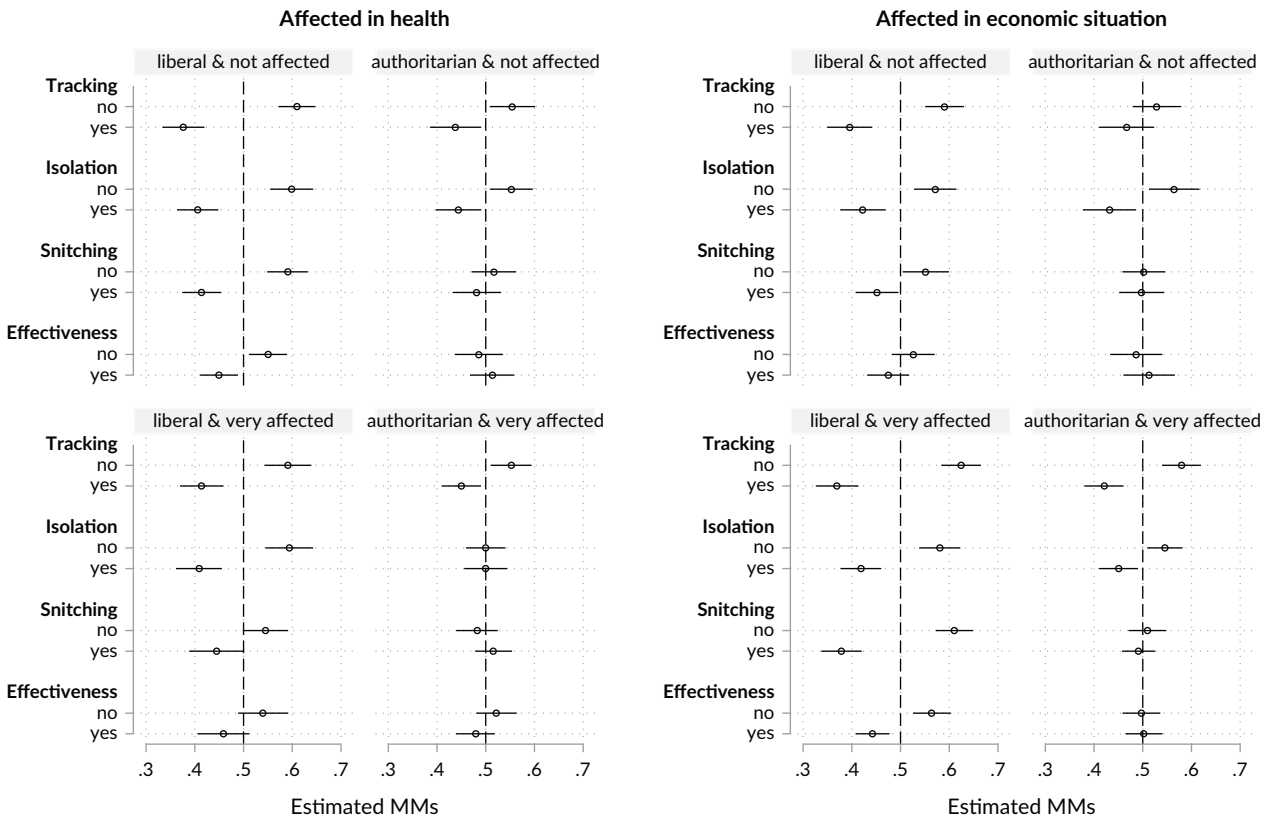
This finding is interesting because it rules out, relatively speaking, the least “political” variable included in this analysis, which we based on the rational premise that those who suffered were the most likely to seek remedy by any means possible. However, it is still possible that feeling affected by Covid-19 interacts with other causal variables by either strengthening or weakening their effect.

Turning to our attitudinal hypotheses, we investigate our second hypothesis that respondents with authoritarian values are generally more open to the idea of illiberal policies to fight Covid-19. Figure 2 tests this hypothesis in general by comparing the AMCEs among those with authoritarian and non-authoritarian (or liberal) values. It shows the hypothesized difference, albeit only for illiberal persecution of non-compliance and the appreciation of effectiveness over constitutionality. Thus, we only find partial evidence for H2a, as authoritarian values only make a difference if the rule of law is threatened.

Figure 3 shows the MMs when we interact authoritarian values with feeling affected in health (left) and in respondents’ economic situation (right). It confirms that the former moderates the latter’s effect (H2b). Both parts of the figure indicate that among those who do not feel affected by Covid-19, respondents with liberal values react significantly more negatively to illiberal policies than respondents with authoritarian values. This gap is particularly strong among those who do not feel affected in their health.



**Figure 2.** AMCE for package selection among respondents with authoritarian and liberal values.

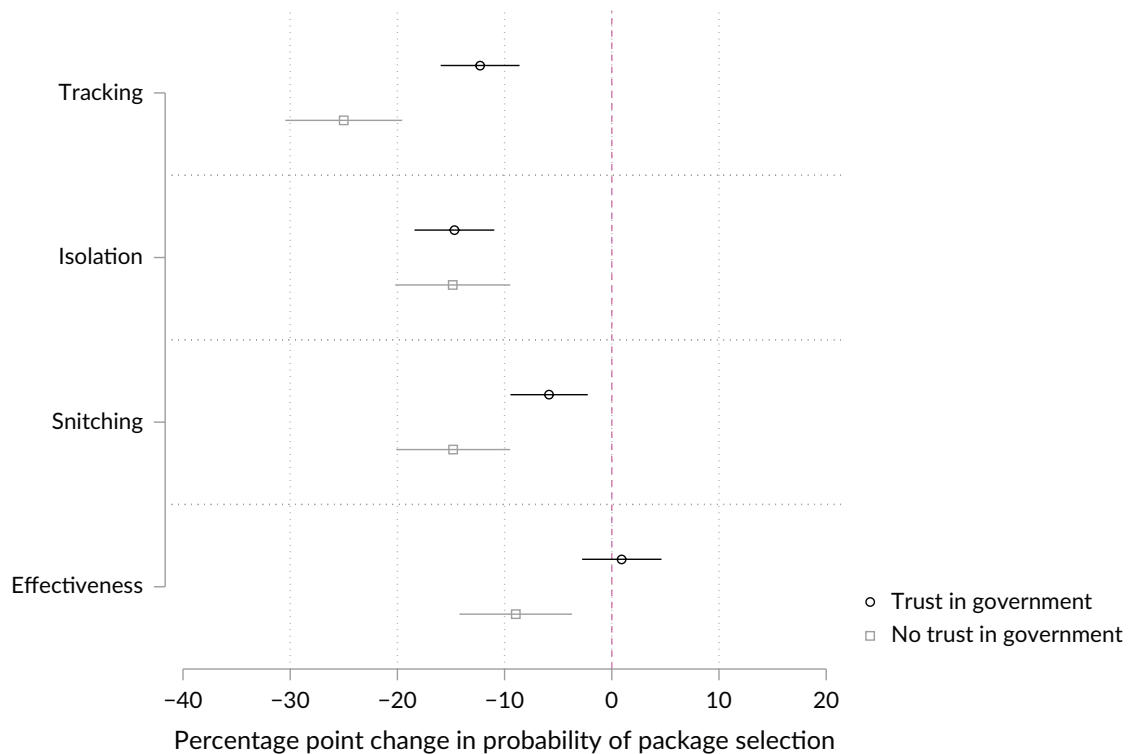


**Figure 3.** MMs for package selection among respondents with authoritarian and liberal values and different levels feeling affected in own health and economic situation.

The differences among those who feel very affected in their health reveal a more complex picture. Those with liberal values still strongly reject the tracking app and enforced isolation. Yet, neither the illiberal persecution of non-compliance nor the unconstitutionality of the measures results in the rejection of policy packages. However, only the tracking app elicits a negative reaction among highly affected respondents with authoritarian values. At the same time, the illiberal persecution of non-compliance increases the likelihood of package selection (albeit not significantly).

This gap is even more pronounced among those who feel very affected by Covid-19 in their economic situation. Those with liberal values reject all levels of illiberal policies, while those with authoritarian values mainly reject the app. Here again, the likely explanation is self-interest in the sense that those feeling affected may see themselves as the potential targets of measures that digitally provide authorities with information. Thus, we find evidence that authoritarian values moderate the effect of feeling affected in one's health.

Next, we analyze the effect of trust in government. Figure 4 shows the differences between respondents who trust and do not trust the government, testing H3a. We see that those not trusting the government are much less likely to choose measures that include the tracking app or the stricter law and order policy against non-compliance. Most striking, however, is that unconstitutional measures are negative for those who do not trust the government but are irrelevant for those who do trust it. This supports our hypothesis H3a.

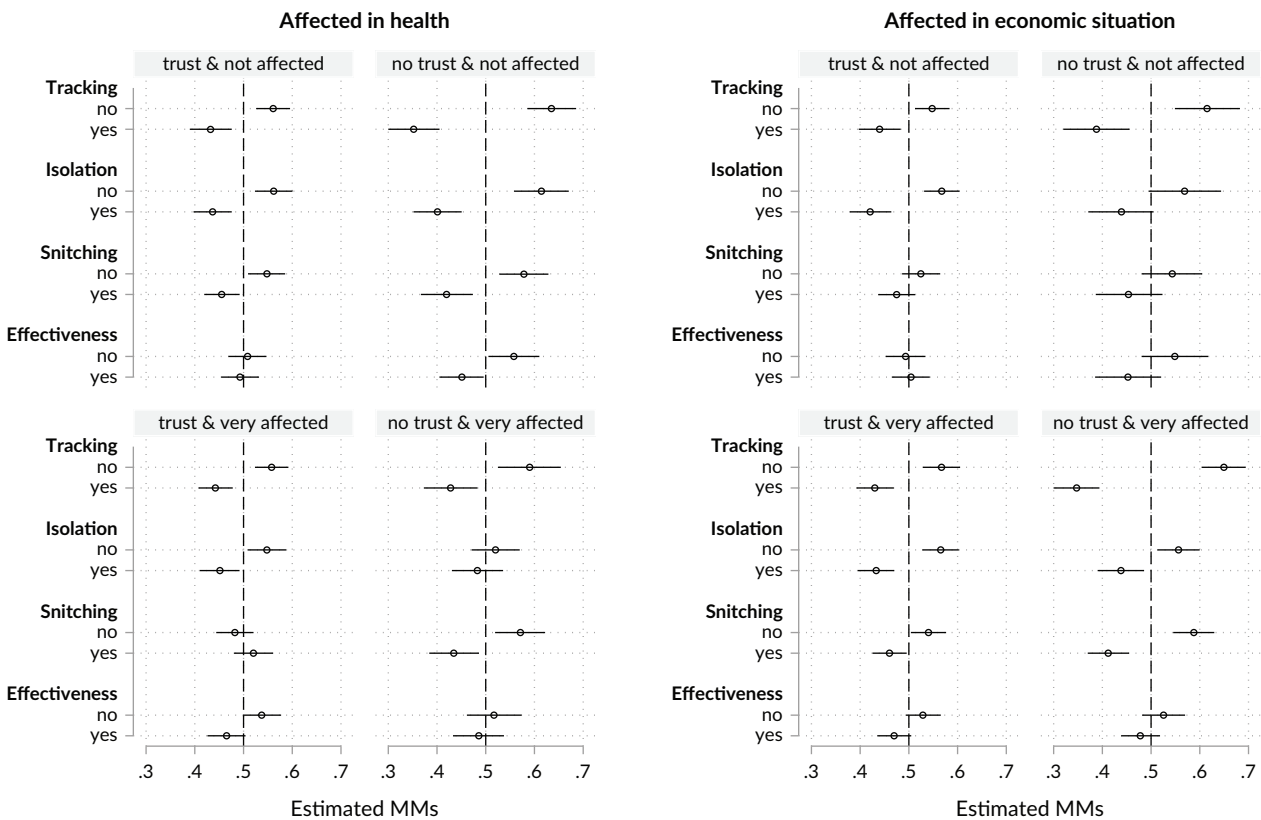


**Figure 4.** AMCE for package selection among different levels of trust in government.

Figure 5 shows how trust in government interacts with feeling affected in one’s health and economic situation. The left-hand panel of Figure 5 confirms that for those respondents not feeling affected in their health, trust in the government makes them more supportive of the illiberal policy proposals. However, the lower two lines in each policy show a more complex picture among the group of very affected respondents. For those impacted by Covid-19, there was no difference between those trusting and distrusting the government regarding the tracking app and trading constitutionality for effectiveness. However, among the very affected, only those who trust the government reject the forced isolation policy, while only those who distrust the government reject the illiberal persecution of non-compliance. Indeed, for those feeling very affected in their health and trusting the government, the illiberal persecution of non-compliance has a positive (albeit non-significant) effect on respondents’ policy package selection. Thus, we have a first indication that trust indeed moderates the effect of feeling affected by Covid-19, yet not in a uniform way.

The right-hand panel of Figure 5 also shows that trust moderates the effect of feeling affected in one’s economic situation. While we, again, find little difference between respondents who trust or distrust the government among those not feeling affected, there are differences within the group of the very affected. Those who trust and feel economically affected are less likely to reject a policy package because it includes a tracking app or the illiberal practice of citizens reporting non-compliance. In general, we find some moderating effect of trust in government, albeit only among those who feel very affected by Covid-19 and not for all policies.

Again, a possible explanation is that those feeling affected by Covid-19 see themselves as potential targets of government action. People who do not trust the government do not want to have their movements tracked, which is a rational position under the circumstances. Other measures seem more designed to enforce existing



**Figure 5.** MMs for package selection among different levels of trust in government and feeling affected in own health and economic situation.

rules, thereby improving order, protection, and stability, which seem to be more acceptable choices. Thus, it is not a general principle but self-interest that may be driving the evaluation of these measures.

## 5. Conclusion

What happens if the most effective response to a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic calls for sacrificing liberal rights and civil liberties? More specifically, what liberal or illiberal measures do citizens support when they feel particularly affected by the crisis in their health or their economic well-being? Our study investigates this question, using Austrian survey data collected at a very opportune time: during the early stages of the pandemic. At this point, respondents had been affected by the first wave of the pandemic and were facing concerns about their lives and livelihoods. However, entrenched partisan divisions and specific political narratives about the pandemic and its remedies had not fully emerged. This means that when we asked respondents to evaluate hypothetical policies that involved trading away liberal principles for greater effectiveness in mitigating Covid-19, we were not measuring partisanship, views on vaccinations, or attitudes toward conspiracy theories. As these other political factors had yet to emerge, the time point of our survey provides a unique opportunity to investigate the effect of a global crisis without confounding other developments.

The first general finding conveys a clear positive message: at no point did our Austrian respondents significantly and positively support the illiberal and undemocratic policies that we had proposed in our

survey experiment. Most emphatically, they rejected the proposal to enforce a tracking app. While this is arguably the least illiberal policy offered, it is also the most realistic measure as such devices existed and were being used. With all other policies, individuals may tell themselves that that policy, however problematic, does not necessarily apply to them personally.

Finding that this policy was most opposed suggests that when respondents vividly understand the negative consequences for their own freedom, they are more likely to oppose such policies. This interpretation is supported by the fact that respondents were generally weakest on the most abstract but most consequential policy measure of valuing effectiveness over constitutionality. Arguably, when a vague principle like “the Constitution” is compromised for a tangible benefit, respondents may not grasp the full consequences for themselves and their community.

Contrary to our expectations, feeling affected by the pandemic alone makes little difference to respondents’ willingness to adopt illiberal or anti-democratic policies. We see differences only when we factor in trust in government and authoritarian values, as our respondents are less likely to resist illiberal and anti-democratic policies if they are affected and if they are also authoritarian or distrustful of the government. Consequently, a crisis alone does not make individuals willing to sacrifice freedoms or democratic principles for effective policies. This leads to the conclusion that while we cannot derive a general threat to democracy from a global health pandemic or similar crisis, we must pay close attention to political attitudes. This is particularly relevant as governments consider responses to other global crises, such as climate change, that have widespread impacts on individuals’ livelihoods and lifestyles, and as we seek to understand the reactions in terms of support from segments of the public. What makes our findings so important is the fact that we have few opportunities to measure people’s political responses, especially in the context of a crisis, when people’s beliefs are arguably most tested before entrenched political discourses, party platforms, and consolidated narratives emerge and shape the way people evaluate policy proposals.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data will be made available on AUSSDA—The Austrian Social Science Data Archive: <https://aussda.at>.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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