

Contesting Covid: The Ideological Bases of Partisan Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

How do political parties respond to external shocks? Using an original survey of political parties across Europe conducted in June 2020 and CHES data on partisan ideological positioning, we argue that the pre-existing ideological stances of Europe's political parties shaped their response to emerging Covid-19 policy issues, including the tension between economic normalization and containment, legal versus voluntary enforcement, and the role of science in policymaking. We find that party ideology powerfully predicts how parties, both in government and in opposition, responded to the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, Ideology, political parties, expert surveys

The onset of the Covid -19 pandemic was a shock to European societies and economies. As the virus spread across Europe in March and April 2020, politicians needed to react to the newly salient questions of whether and how to contain the infection, how to enforce any containment, and how to utilize scientific expertise in their decision-making.

A major exogenous shock, such as war, economic crisis, natural disaster, or a global pandemic, has the capacity to fundamentally reshape politics, as usual matters of political life are supplanted by urgent challenges. In the initial stages, these challenges are frequently seen as technical, best solved by non-political experts. Faced with a common, external threat, actors may seek a politically encompassing response that would produce a rallying-around-the-flag effect. Eventually, however, even exogenous, technical concerns entail decisions with the potential to rupture societies along new divides (Pierson 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). The outbreak of Covid-19 in Europe in March created great political urgency to make decisions about key issues: How to reduce viral spread, and how to treat the crisis most effectively. Soon thereafter, political actors were compelled to take vital decisions concerning the containment of the pandemic, the enforcement of distancing measures, and the engagement with scientific expertise in their decision-making. To what extent and how did partisanship reveal itself in these responses?

This article addresses how European political parties reacted to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in its first wave, from March to June 2020. Despite the disruptive and technical character of the onset of the pandemic, we show that the pre-existing ideological positions of Europe's political parties correspond with how they responded to emerging Covid-19 policy issues and public concerns. Furthermore, we demonstrate that although government status was a moderator of party responses, dampening the impact of ideology on some Covid issues, the reactions to Covid 19 from governing and opposition parties alike are strongly associated with their pre-existing ideological orientations. We report on an original survey of political parties across Europe conducted in June 2020, which asked experts to place parties on three Covid policies: economic normalization and containment, legal versus voluntary enforcement, and whether policymaking should be guided by science.¹

The findings contribute to our understanding of how political parties engage new political issues that arise from exogenous shock. First, it suggests that partisan reactions to Covid-19 are deeply informed by party ideology. While this is consistent with research that detects a strong effect of partisanship and party animosity on public attitudes and behavior with respect to Covid-19 (Druckman et al. 2020; Lipsitz and Pop-Eleches 2020; Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2020; Gollwitzer et al 2020), this article is, to our knowledge, the first widely comparative study of party-level responses to Covid-19. We assume parties in government to be the first responders, determining the rhetoric on Covid and the policies in response to Covid to which individuals react. In this context, the framing power of ideology is surprising, given the highly technical and uncertain nature of the policy problem, which biases the decision process towards epistemic communities of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in the specific domain (Haas 1992). Second, this paper shows how economic left-right ideology and cultural liberal-conservative ideology shape party positions on these three issues differently, yet systematically, across European countries. And third, it demonstrates that whether a party is in government or in

¹ The survey and data are available at chesdata.eu. Information on the survey is available in Supplementary Materials.

opposition significantly shaped responses to the pandemic. Governing parties tended to be more pro-active and science-guided with respect to Covid responses than their opposition counterparts.

We first outline our expectations concerning the ideological responses to the pandemic. We then introduce the expert survey and assess our expectations. Finally, we address how government versus opposition status influenced the partisan ideological responses to Covid.

Ideology and Covid Responses

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe immediately engaged national governments which had to decide whether and how to react to the rapidly rising incidence of infection and the resulting strain on hospitals. Given their position at the national helm amidst the first wave of the pandemic, we anticipate that governing parties are more likely to be active on containment and stricter on enforcement, and more likely to be guided by science than opposition parties. Simultaneously, though, we expect that prior ideological commitments will play an even more fundamental role.

There are two reasons why it seems plausible that political parties may engage and interpret a scientific-technical issue through pre-existing ideological lenses. First, ideological dispositions that reflect long-term value commitments are a prism for interpreting unanticipated events (Gerring 1997, 980; Marks, Wilson, and Ray 2002). Second, political competition is relational. How a party approaches an issue depends on the anticipated response of its competitors (Budge and Farlie 1983, Petrocik 1996, Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). This relational dynamic should be especially strong for challenger parties that seek to undermine mainstream party appeal by politicizing a new problem (De Vries and Hobolt 2020a). Although mainstream parties will attempt to use their reputation for competent governance in the short run, this strategy becomes more difficult when the new problem produces longer-term economic downturns (De Vries and Hobolt 2020b).

Political ideology in Europe can be simplified to two major political dimensions (Hooghe et al. 2002, Hooghe and Marks 2018, Kitschelt 1994). On the economic dimension, parties take positions on the role of government in redistributing market economy gains – for stronger redistribution on the left and for unconstrained market allocation on the right. On the cultural dimension parties take positions on values, rights, and liberties. On the one side are political parties that support traditionalism, authority, and nationalism (TAN), believing that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues. On the other side are political parties that support green, alternative, and libertarian outlooks (GAL), believing that the law should protect alternative lifestyles, minority rights, and cultural diversity.²

The political issues stemming from the initial impact of Covid-19 engage both the economic and cultural dimensions of political conflict. They include three important policy questions. First, faced with a health crisis as the virus spread through societies, how do parties propose to *contain* it? Do they prioritize keeping the economy open or do they prefer containing the virus? Second, what views do parties take on *enforcement* of containment measures? Do they believe that citizens should be trusted to self-enforce various barrier and distancing measures, or do they rather propose

² The correlation between GAL-TAN and Economic Left-Right is strong (0.427) but varies by country and type of party (e.g., the dimensions have stronger correlations for non government parties (0.429) than for government parties (0.30).

strict government enforcement? Finally, the responses to Covid-19 have shed light on important distinctions in how political actors view *scientific expertise* in policy making. Do parties seek scientific expertise to inform their policymaking, or do they rather downplay its relevance?

We expect that the positions that parties take on these three Covid-related issues in the first months of the pandemic are primarily a reflection of their economic and cultural ideology, but we also anticipate some influence from the national context and from government versus opposition status.

We expect economic ideology to be strongly associated with party positions on containment vs. open economy. Put simply, containment engages a question about the extent to which economic gains should be redistributed across economic actors. Economically left-wing parties that support greater redistribution of economic gains in general fear that keeping the economy open without containment concentrates health risks among the most vulnerable because they are the ones most likely to be forced to work in relatively unsafe (for Covid) environments rather than work from home.³ Economically right-wing parties that support free markets are, on the other hand, concerned that containment disrupts market mechanisms and imposes undue risks on the most productive sectors of the economy. Consequently, they prefer letting markets decide on the distribution of risks posed by the virus.

H1: Covid containment is likely to be primarily driven by economic ideology, with economically left-wing parties favoring containment.

For our second hypothesis, we look at enforcement, defined as the extent to which citizens should be allowed to self-enforce Covid containment rules or be subject to strong government control. As a matter of government control of individual behavior, it strongly engages civil liberties. We therefore expect party positions on enforcement to be largely shaped by cultural ideology. GAL parties focused on civil liberties should oppose strict enforcement, preferring citizen self-enforcement. TAN parties, on the other hand should be more in favor of stricter government control.⁴

H2: Enforcement of Covid measures is likely to be associated with cultural positions of parties with more GAL parties in favor of citizen self-enforcement.

For our third hypothesis, we look at the debate on whether policymaking should be guided by science. We expect that party positioning on the application of science in policymaking depends on cultural ideology. The key mechanism likely passes through education. Extant research indicates that a tendency to cultural liberalism and higher education are significant predictors of trust in science (Plohl and Musil 2021; Rutjens et al. 2018), and that highly educated and culturally liberal people have become the core constituency of GAL parties (Hetherington and Weiler 2018). Consequently, in line with their partisan supporters' preferences, we expect culturally GAL parties

³ A counter argument would be that workers' parties would be more concerned about massive job losses in service sector jobs, which would affect poor and working class citizens the most. Given the simultaneous call for redistributive efforts to protect these workers' employment and income during the pandemic with stimulus packages, we argue that the open market puts the workers' health and future income at greater risk.

⁴ Note that a counter argument is that GAL parties are more likely to follow the guidance of scientists, who recommended mask-wearing. We consider this in Hypothesis 3.

to be more willing to rely on scientific expertise than TAN parties.

H3: GAL parties are more likely to rely on science in policymaking.

Finally, we expect government participation to be a significant factor for responses to Covid. Given their position at the head of the state, the onus of first reaction, often taken by executive decree at the start of the pandemic, rests on governing parties. As such, we hypothesize that government parties will be more likely to support pro-active measures in terms of Covid-related policies than opposition parties. Further, we generally expect government status to moderate the influence of ideology.⁵ That is, we expect that ideological position will be less influential on government parties than opposition parties in terms of its effect on Covid responses. Even after including government status, though, we expect that party responses remain significantly shaped by their economic and cultural ideological views.

H4a: Government parties will be more supportive of proactive measures toward Covid-related policies. Governing parties thus favor more containment, favor more enforcement and more reliance on science than opposition parties.

H4b: Government status conditions the effect of ideology: the effect of ideology will be weaker for government parties than for opposition parties.

In order to test these hypotheses, we conducted an expert survey identifying party positions on these Covid related issues; we turn to it next.

Covid Responses – An Expert Survey

To assess partisan views on Covid related issues, we conducted an expert survey in June and July 2020 across the member states of the European Union plus the United Kingdom, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey. This survey covers the same political parties as the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2020) conducted between January and March 2020. The Covid survey can thus be directly connected with CHES 2019 which provides an independent assessment of partisan ideological placements. Core items in the CHES data have been cross-validated, across several waves of data, against party position estimates derived from manifestos, elite surveys, and measures derived from public opinion (see, e.g. Bakker et al. (2015)). Currently no other published data exist that provide as much detail about the Covid responses of European political parties.

The Covid survey focuses on three questions. The first addresses party positions on *containment* measures, juxtaposing keeping the economy open versus containing the virus. The second question addresses *enforcement* measures, opposing government enforcement with citizen self-enforcement. The final question asks whether parties consider *scientific expertise* as essential for policymaking. All responses range from 0 to 10. (See the appendix for details).

⁵ For robustness, we also model the Covid issues without the interaction and find that results remain consistent, in particular the sign and significance of the ideology and government variables. Those tables are available in the online appendix.

Analysis

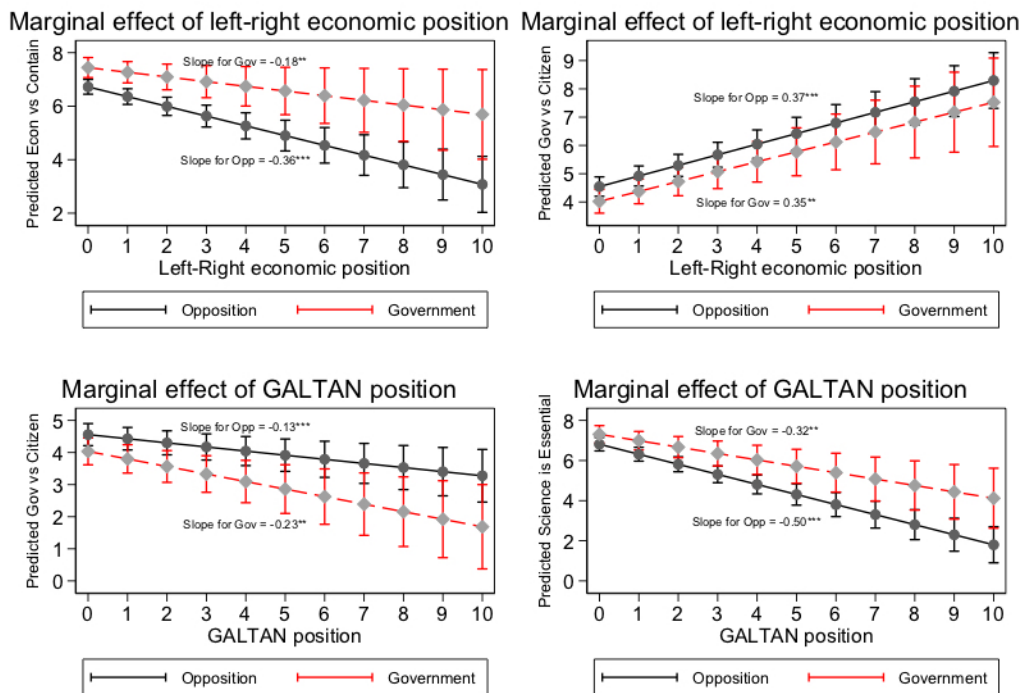
We explore the ideological correlates of party positions on Covid related issues. In light of our theoretical priors, we estimate sparse models using party positions on the left-right economic dimension, and the GAL-TAN cultural dimension. In addition, we interact these ideological variables with the government status of a party. We control for party vote share. Given the variation in both the political climate and the timing of the impact of the pandemic across Europe, we estimate multilevel linear models with random effects for country. These models assess both the within-country and between-country effects of our ideological variables. This allows us to evaluate whether ideology explains variation in the same way within and across countries. At level 2, we include country-level mean ideological positions, weighted by vote share, to estimate both within and between effects simultaneously. At level 1, we include group demeaned party positions to capture within-country effects (Bell and Jones 2015).

Table 1: Ideological Correlates of Covid Responses

	Containment	Enforcement	Science is essential
	Economy vs containment	Government vs citizen	Disagree -- Agree
Within Country Effects			
Left-Right Economic position	-0.36***	0.37***	0.16***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Left-Right Economic * In Government	0.19*	-0.02	0.05
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.04)
GAL-TAN	-0.04	-0.13***	-0.50***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
GAL-TAN * In Government	-0.02	-0.11	0.18**
	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Vote share	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Govt party	0.72***	-0.52***	0.49**
	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.22)
Between Country Effects			
Left-Right Economic position	-0.68***	0.60*	0.25
	(0.29)	(0.36)	(0.36)
GAL-TAN	-0.12	-0.11	-0.06
	(0.16)	(0.21)	(0.20)
Constant	10.96***	2.13	5.76
	(1.87)	(2.46)	(2.33)
Within R ²	0.33	0.37	0.49
Between R ²	0.25	0.10	0.04
Interclass Correlation	0.16	0.36	0.25
SD of REs	0.50	0.78	0.70
Observations	215	215	216
Number of countries	27	27	27

These models, summarized in Table 1 and depicted in Figure 1, support our expectation that party positioning on Covid related issues are significantly associated with economic and cultural ideology. First, supporting H1, containment is strongly influenced by economic ideology. Within countries, economically right-wing parties prioritize keeping the economy open over containing the pandemic. We also find a significant country-level effect: countries in which political parties lean to the left tend to support containment as the preferred path to recovery and long-term economic health. We find strong support for H4a, with government status leading to more support for containment. Turning to the interaction between ideology and government participation, we note that the model supports our expectations in H4b, as government participation moderates the effect of economic ideology on containment. The top left panel of Figure 1 demonstrates that while economic right-wing opposition parties tend to oppose containment significantly more than left-wing parties, this effect is weaker for government parties, as governing status attenuates the effect of ideology. Nonetheless, the partial slopes for both government and opposition parties are statistically significant, highlighting the significance of economic ideology.

Figure 1 Interaction effects of ideology and government status



Second, we find that party positions on enforcing Covid measures are associated with economic as well as cultural positions but, contrary to our expectations, economic ideology is substantively stronger. Parties on the economic right are more likely to support citizen self-enforcement than parties on the economic left. Simultaneously, and in line with our expectations, parties on the cultural left (GAL) are more likely to support self-enforcement than parties on the cultural right

(TAN), but this effect is weaker.⁶ Between-country effects are insignificant. H2 is thus supported only partly. We again find support for H4a, with parties in government favoring government enforcement of Covid measures, but we find no support for H4b as government status does not attenuate the effect of ideology. The top right of Figure 1 underscores that economically right-wing parties are significantly more inclined towards citizen self-enforcement than economically left-wing parties, no matter their government status. Concerning cultural GAL-TAN ideology, the bottom left panel shows that generally, TAN parties tend to support stricter government enforcement. This effect is slightly stronger for governing parties than for opposition parties, but again, both partial slopes are statistically significant, underlining the relevance of ideology.

Finally, in support of H3, trust in science in the context of policymaking is largely a function of cultural ideology. Parties on the cultural left (GAL) are significantly more likely to rely on science than parties on the cultural right (TAN).⁷ Additionally, we find that government parties are more likely to view science as essential to policy making and that the interaction of government status with GALTAN supports the hypothesis that governing parties are less prone to cross-pressures stemming from their ideological position than are opposition parties. These effects are within country, while between-country effects are insignificant. This effect is stronger for opposition parties, as the bottom right panel of Figure 1 depicts, but remains also significant and substantively meaningful for governing parties.

In sum, this party-level analysis supports our expectation that Covid responses are significantly ideologically driven. Party positioning on containment and enforcement are mainly a reflection of economic ideology, while positioning the value of science in policymaking is chiefly a reflection of cultural ideology. Most of these effects are within-country, while only economic left-right has significant between-country effects.

Conclusion

Covid-19 is a major exogenous shock causing great human suffering and daunting challenges for societies across the planet. In Europe as elsewhere, the onset of Covid brought a set of medical and governance issues requiring technical responses. Political parties, particularly those in government, needed to quickly react to the situation and engage new issues produced by the pandemic, taking stances on containment, enforcement, and scientific advice. In this article we illuminate how parties took positions on these basic issues in the first wave of the pandemic.

We demonstrate that political parties interpreted the Covid threat through their ideological commitments. Party responses to Covid in the first months of the pandemic can be substantially

⁶ The less pronounced effect of GAL-TAN could stem from diversity within the radical right party family, which, while consistently TAN, has taken diverse stances on Covid-19. France's National Rally and the Sweden Democrats, for example, have both advocated for more firm government backed measures, while other radical right parties in Europe pushed for relaxing Covid-19 restrictions. Out of sample TAN politicians, such as Donald Trump in the USA and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, highlight the need to examine further the complexities surrounding cultural ideology and Covid-19 responses in future cross-national research.

⁷ This finding, while consistent with our expectations, potentially runs counter to the evidence that right-wing voters favor expert-involvement in decision-making (Lavezzolo and Ramiro 2018).

predicted by their position on the economic left-right and cultural GAL-TAN dimensions. Containment and enforcement are more strongly associated with economic ideology with left-wing parties favoring containment and stricter government enforcement. Reliance on science in policy making is more strongly associated with cultural ideology as GAL parties are more likely to rely on science. Importantly, we also find that ideological differences within countries are more important in shaping Covid-19 responses than differences between countries.

Finally, we show that the pre-existing ideological lenses used by parties to respond to the pandemic are moderated by governing status for some issues. Government parties are generally more likely to take pro-active containment and stricter government-controlled enforcement measures, while also more likely to be guided by science in their decision-making. While government participation constrained partisan responses on some issues, our analysis underlines that partisan responses to Covid are consistently associated with their ideological positions.

This article contributes to a broader literature on how the pandemic has shaped European politics. Scholars show that mainstream parties in government across Europe have enjoyed a surge of popular support as the pandemic has created demand for competent and science-based leadership (Bol et al. 2020; Daniele et al. 2020; De Vries et al. 2020; Devine et al. 2020, Schraff forthcoming). Where culturally TAN and technocratic populist parties are in government in Central Europe, however, scholars show how strategic leaders have leveraged the crisis to amplify their power and even deepen democratic backsliding (Bustikova and Baboš 2020; Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2020; Vachudova 2020). This opens the door to new research about the resonance of different types of party appeals in response to the pandemic.

Our findings in this article expand our understanding of how parties respond to exogenous shocks and incorporate new issues into their issue portfolios (citation withheld). Indeed, positions on particular Covid related issues are closely linked to the economic and cultural commitments that motivate how parties position themselves on the broader set of issues they regularly take to the voters. How parties engage with novel political issues is associated with their pre-existing ideological lenses.

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