

Have democracies been more lax with lockdowns and testing?

A pandemic is a decisive test for any political system, but under the current conditions this is especially true for democracies. At a time of reduced citizen support for democracy, it is suggested that the response to the COVID-19 crisis from certain autocratic countries – China in particular – has been more effective in the fight against the coronavirus. But the fact is that this question, so raised, misrepresents the reality. With the data available to hand, it seems undeniable that China has been very effective in combating the pandemic. Testing millions of people in a matter of days is not something every country can do. However, we should also not forget that other clearly democratic countries have been able to produce great results in controlling the pandemic, such as New Zealand. Furthermore, other autocratic countries have shown little success in lowering the human cost of the crisis. In short, in order to objectively determine whether or not being democratic is a key factor in the war against the virus, we must be thorough in our assessment, in this case by using an empirical analysis.

What shape should an analysis on such a complex and ever-changing issue take? To start with, when we compare what different countries have done to combat COVID-19, it is clear that the response prior to the availability of the vaccines has essentially consisted of three elements: lockdowns (including restrictions on mobility and social distancing measures), the capacity to test and trace transmissions, and the reduction of mobility that eventually occurs. The first two are health policy tools, while the third is a result of the policies implemented.

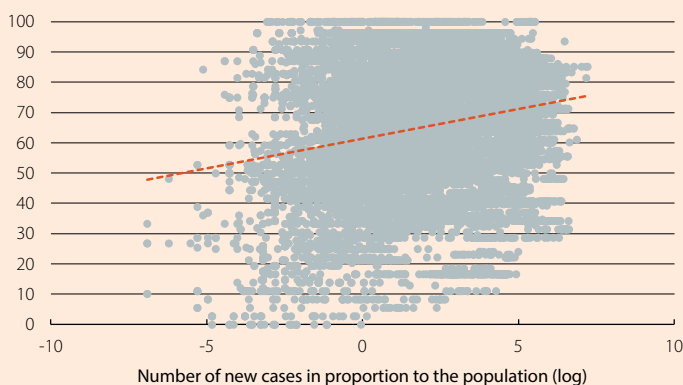
Lockdowns and testing, as we know, are aimed at preventing the virus from spreading beyond certain hotspots. Ideally they should be used together: the source of the outbreak is identified early, contacts are detected, and quarantines or lockdowns are imposed on small groups. Unfortunately, for most of 2020, with a low testing and contact tracing capability in many countries, lockdowns were imposed en masse rather than selectively.

Having established the different components of the response, we are now in a position to begin to ask ourselves the key questions regarding the relationships between democracy and the intensity of the use of these tools (lockdowns and testing), and also between democracy and the ability to control social interactions (mobility). The first of these issues will be analysed in this article of the Dossier, while the second will be the subject of the following article.¹

Thus, what we want to understand first is the relationship that exists between the political system and the stringency, or laxity, of the lockdown measures and the intensity of testing. In other words, what we first want to know is whether two countries equally affected by the pandemic (measured by the number of cases in proportion of the population)² have responded with

Relationship between the number of COVID-19 cases in a country and the stringency of restrictions in autocratic countries

Lockdown stringency index



Relationship between the number of COVID-19 cases in a country and the stringency of restrictions in democratic countries

Lockdown stringency index



Notes: Daily data from 102 countries between February and November 2020. Democratic countries are those with a value greater than 90 in the index by Freedom House.

Source: CaixaBank Research, based on data from Freedom House and the University of Oxford.

1. See the article «[Have democracies achieved better control over social interactions?](#)» in this same Dossier.
2. It is interesting to consider the extent to which autocratic countries may be reporting fewer cases than are actually occurring, either for political convenience (to reduce suspicions of inefficiency in the fight against the pandemic) or because their data collection systems are less developed than in democracies (which tend to be more advanced countries with better statistical systems). If this were generally the case, then the results would still be even more favourable towards democracies, since the «lukewarm» response from autocracies would be even weaker than suggested, due to the underestimation of the severity of the pandemic.

more or less stringent lockdowns depending on whether they were more or less democratic. Secondly, we will ask ourselves whether two countries equally affected by the pandemic have conducted different amounts of testing depending on their level of democracy.³

A first, illustrative glance at the data (see the trend lines in the charts of this article) already suggests a stronger relationship between the number of cases and the severity of the lockdown in more democratic countries. Using a panel regression analysis with controls⁴ statistically confirms that the response to the first question is favourable towards democracy: countries with a greater degree of democracy have responded with stricter lockdowns when affected to the same degree by the pandemic. This is an important result, as it contradicts the superficial view that democracies have been «weak» and that we must therefore consider how important it is to be more or less democratic.

Based on our estimate model, we can conclude that the institutional factor plays a rather important role. A practical example will help to understand the sensitivity. With 100 being the highest possible level of democracy, according to the indicator by Freedom House, Spain has a level of 92 and Colombia, a level of 55. Now suppose that the intensity of the pandemic (measured by the number of new cases per 100,000 inhabitants) were to multiply by a factor of 10 (as happened in Spain between 6 and 13 March, for instance). In this scenario, the result suggested by the model is that the change in the stringency of the lockdown would be 1.5 points higher in Spain than in Colombia. How should we interpret 1.5 points? It would be the increase in the stringency of the lockdown that would occur when the authorities go from recommending staying at home to imposing a compulsory residential lockdown with the exception of leaving home for work, school, exercise and essential purchases.⁵ This is by no means a minor jump.

The same result is obtained when using the second health policy tool, testing capacity. The model's results suggest a greater response from democracies than from autocracies. As was the case with the strictness of the lockdowns, being more or less democratic represents a significant difference.

Ultimately, contrary to that suggested by some criticisms, democracies have not been lax in their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic compared to autocracies. A different question, and indeed a more consequential one, is whether their responses have been effective in addition to «hard». In other words, we must return to the second question mentioned at the beginning and ask ourselves whether the desired social behaviour, namely control over mobility, has been achieved. We will explore this issue in the next article, allowing us to get closer to answering the complex question of whether democracies have measured up to this great health crisis.

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3. As a step prior to this analysis, it was studied whether the two key public health variables (i.e. how strict the lockdowns have been and the number of tests) have responded to the number of cases. The results are as expected: the authorities of the various countries have reacted by imposing stricter lockdowns and increasing the level of testing when the number of cases grows (and vice versa).

4. The relationship between the stringency or laxity of lockdown measures in a given country, the impact of the pandemic there and its political system is analysed using the following panel regression with fixed effects: $Stringency_{i,t} = a_0 + a_1 Covid_{i,t} + a_2 [Covid_{i,t} \times D_i] + u_i + u_t + \mu_{i,t}$, where $Stringency_{i,t}$ is a measure, developed by Oxford University, of how strict the lockdown measures have been in country i and on day t , $Covid_{i,t}$ is the number of daily new COVID-19 cases in proportion to the country's population, and D_i is a measure of the country's political system on a scale ranging from 0 to 100 from less to more democratic, based on a measure of the political rights and civil liberties in 195 countries developed by Freedom House. The coefficient a_2 can be interpreted as the difference in the stringency of the lockdown measures to curb the impact of the pandemic in democracies relative to authoritarian countries. The data cover 102 countries between February and November 2020. This model follows a similar approach to that used by C.B. Frey, G. Presidente and C. Chen (2020). «Democracy, Culture, and Contagion: Political Regimes and Countries Responsiveness to Covid-19», Covid Economics 18.

5. The index which measures the stringency of the lockdown is the aggregate of a set of social distancing metrics, one of which is the degree of residential lockdowns. When this metric shifts from being a mere recommendation to stay at home to an obligation to do so, the aggregate stringency index increases by 1.5 points.