DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD

Pandemic, Health and Democracy: The Political Dilemmas

Cesc Amat



The Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, speaks with the epidemiologist Fernando Simón at the Health Alerts and Emergencies Coordination Center in Spain. Picture by La Moncloa/Gobierno de España

What will be the political consequences of the pandemic caused by COVID-19? What are the most significant political dilemmas associated with the health crisis? To what extent will the pandemic be responsible for long-term changes in the political preferences of citizens? This article sets out to answer these questions. Not definitively, because these are long-term questions that will be answered over time, but it is important to begin to outline a theoretical and empirical framework for analysing these issues. This text is just a first attempt.

The pandemic and democracy

The financial crash of 2008, the last great economic crisis, undoubtedly had severe political consequences. In fact, it can be argued that the deep recession significantly transformed the political landscape: it led to the widespread emergence of new parties, and in many contexts, increased the public's interest in politics and motivated civil protest – sparking movements such as 15M and accelerating the independence movement in Catalonia. In general, it is well accepted that times of economic and political crisis tend to generate substantial political upheaval (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017). So much so, that comparative politics has pointed out that adverse economic shocks can actually create a favourable climate for the processes of transition to democracy in authoritarian regimes.

Prudence dissuades us from daring to offer early predictions on the repercussions of this pandemic. What we can do, however, is start by outlining the key questions and considering a range of future scenarios. We can ask, for example, the following: to what extent are citizens willing to sacrifice rights and freedoms in exchange for increased protection against the pandemic? Can delegating political decisions to experts hinder the standard accountability of democratic processes? Will populist leaders and demagogues in power face a more challenging future with adverse electoral prospects or, conversely, will they be able to use the pandemic, further consolidating their positions by granting themselves special powers, as Viktor Orbán did when he declared the state of emergency in Hungary?

To assess and monitor changes in the political preferences of citizens in Catalonia and Spain during the pandemic, Andreu Arenas, Albert Falcó, Jordi Muñoz and myself, all researchers from the Institutions and Political Economy Research Group (IPERG) at the UB, have begun to systematically compile data using online surveys. This empirical project, which has received funding from the La Caixa Foundation and the Grífols Foundation, aims to identify, first and foremost, any changes in democratic preferences, technocratic attitudes and levels of political trust in citizens. Secondly, we want to analyse the reasons and conditions behind these changes in preferences, as well as their persistence – whether or not they will endure.

The initial analyses and results do not provide grounds for optimism. On the contrary, we found that the technocratic attitude of citizens has significantly increased – and this is also reflected in the analysis of citizens' assessments of which attributes are most desirable in politicians. This change also seems to be persistent over time: the increase was detected in March during the first wave but was still in place in June. Concurrently, we found that levels of political confidence have decreased significantly among those most exposed to the pandemic. Furthermore, a series of experiments have revealed how the threat of the pandemic has induced a willingness to sacrifice individual rights and freedoms, as well as a preference for strong leadership and coercive response over cooperative response.

> A change in the democratic preferences of citizens which entails accepting lesser rights and freedoms can lead to a decline in

> political trust and to a more technocratic form of governance

The results obtained to date, which can be consulted in the Working-Paper "*Pandemics Meet Democracy. Experimental Evidence from the COVID-19 Crisis in Spain*", and which I will describe in more detail during this article, are consistent with those obtained by other research teams. For example, in the study "*Civil Liberties in Times of Crisis*", Alsan et al. have shown that citizens are indeed willing to give up (at least in the short term) individual rights and freedoms in exchange for increased protection from the pandemic – in a study that compared survey data from 15 countries. While Arceneaux et al. also confirm with experimental data (for the UK and the US) that citizens can support losses of rights and freedoms when asked to do so by experts or the political leaders themselves. In a recent empirical study, researchers have demonstrated that in the US, the pandemic could have significantly harmed Donald Trump's election results (Baccini et al. 2020).

A problem of collective coordination: coercion and cooperation

Clearly, the pandemic has been (and will continue to be for some time) a major challenge for democracies. And perhaps not just a short-term challenge but a more medium to long-term threat? We shall see. Whatever the future holds, the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably introduced a set of not inconsiderable political and democratic dilemmas.

Firstly, because the pandemic has demanded the urgent implementation of a set of public measures, decisions and policies by those in charge of governance. Decisions that have sometimes been debated between different regional, national and supranational governments. Secondly, because governance in a pandemic forces us to take into account a nation's health and economy, as well as other factors. And this has meant they have had to value and prioritise different dimensions when making decisions. Thirdly, because decision-making has been more or less directly transferred to experts, a phenomenon that can help dilute the usual accountability channels *a posteriori* – which are absolutely necessary and desirable in any democracy.

Theories of democratisation in comparative politics studies have suggested that adverse economic shocks can open "windows of opportunity", which can facilitate democratisation in authoritarian contexts. We know less, however, about the extent to which advanced democracies can be severely shaken by adverse shocks affecting both the economy and healthcare. It wouldn't be unreasonable, however, to imagine that the shock caused by the pandemic could also facilitate a shift towards a new political-economic scenario. Especially if there was indeed a persistent change in the political preferences of citizens. A change in the democratic attitudes and preferences of the citizenship, such as the acceptance of fewer rights and freedoms, could lead to a reduction in levels of political trust and a more technocratic type of governance.

In any case, given that the pandemic is a situation requiring the immediate management of negative externalities, what is relevant here is that we can analyse it as a problem of collective coordination. A negative externality occurs when an individual's behaviour adversely affects third parties. It is evident that during a pandemic, negative externalities take on a direct significance: the behaviour of individuals (in terms of mobility, basic hygiene measures, number of social interactions) can directly affect the number of infections and therefore the spread and exponential growth of the virus. Thus the pandemic calls for vertical coordination (between governments and citizens) and also horizontal coordination (between citizens) to limit negative externalities.

In the context of a pandemic, deciding to comply with social distancing or voluntarily reducing social interactions, can be interpreted as the individual's contribution to the overall public good – in this case, the public good is the reduced mobility and social interactions, which limit the negative externalities linked to the pandemic. From this perspective, the most pressing issue is how to make these individual contributions effective in curbing the incidence of the pandemic. Thus, individual behaviour, subject to regulation and even additional coercion by those in governance, becomes a critical factor. There are, after all, two primary instruments that can be used to achieve individual contributions: social norms, which by their very nature lead to voluntary cooperation and, on the other hand, coercion through the threat of sanctions and the enforcement of restrictions.

> In the case of Spain and Catalonia, the pandemic-led problem of collective coordination has emerged in a context where the levels of interpersonal trust and, above all, the levels of political trust, were already low or very low

In the case of Spain and Catalonia, this pandemic-led problem of collective coordination has emerged in a context where the levels of interpersonal trust and, above all, the levels of political trust, were already (i.e., before the pandemic) low or very low. If we take a look at the comparative data from the European Social Survey (ESS), we can see that Spain sits in the lower part of the distribution for levels of interpersonal trust, and has very low levels, behind most European countries, of trust in politicians. One can imagine that voluntary cooperation mechanisms would be more successful when levels of interpersonal trust are high (in countries such as Sweden). In contrast, the coercive mechanism seems to be employed more when social and interpersonal trust levels are low yet, conversely, political trust levels are high (in countries such as China). Trumpism, which is, in fact, tantamount to non-contribution to the public good, is most likely to be observed when both interpersonal trust and political trust are reduced or non-existent.

COVID, technocracy and democratic preferences: preliminary results

To analyse these issues, we implemented a systematic data collection with different rounds of online surveys and experimental designs. The first round, carried out before the onset of the pandemic itself, took place in January 2020. We surveyed 1,000 people, asking them a range of questions about democratic preferences and technocratic attitudes. Subsequently, in the second half of March 2020, just as the first wave of the pandemic hit, we re-questioned 800 of the people surveyed in January and added 800 more. In the second round, in addition to questions about democratic preferences, we also added a series of experimental designs to analyse responses to the pandemic. The third round was conducted in June 2020, with 1,200 respondents. The same questionnaire was used for all three rounds, but the third round included some additional questions. We built this individual data panel with the company Netquest; adopting quotas by sex, age and level of education to ensure the samples were representative.

One of the issues of most concern to us is the possible impact of the pandemic on the technocratic attitudes of citizens. Technocratic governance, based on the criterion of experts as a source of legitimacy, can be attractive in exceptional times when urgent measures are needed to limit the pandemic and tackle the economic crisis (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017). In fact, some authors such as Daniele et al. (2020) have pointed out that just as the 2008 recession led to a "populist moment" – if in both the containment phase and during the subsequent reconstruction – the criterion of experts in public health and economics takes centre-stage and ends up replacing or diluting ideological debates, the pandemic could foster a new technocratic impetus. The problem with technocratic governments, however, is that they prioritise expert criterion over the political pluralism inherent in a party democracy (Sánchez-Cuenca 2017, Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Caramani, 2017).

More importantly, if the pandemic favours a technocratic impetus, this could hamper the accountability processes needed in any democracy. In a party democracy, the ideological conflict is resolved through elections. Parties compete on the basis of different electoral platforms which represent political pluralism and, ultimately, citizens choose between diverse ideological options. Continued delegation to the discretion of experts, on the other hand, can result in a 'commitment problem', as politicians and rulers may be over-inclined to delegate decisions and policies to those experts. If this happens, politicians may end up *de facto* diluting their own responsibilities and thus escaping control by voters. Eventually, the public could end up with no guarantees that politicians will behave (and make decisions) in accordance with their previous electoral programmes and ideological commitments.

To analyse the change in the technocratic attitudes of the public, we ask the respondents the following: "Some people prefer to vote for a party that shares their ideas, even if they have not managed public affairs well, while others prefer to vote for a party that has managed public affairs well, despite not sharing their ideas. Which do you prefer?" (Scale 1

to 7); “Some people think that politicians should put aside their political agenda and address public issues from a technical point of view. To what extent do you agree with this view?” (Scale 1 to 7); “To what extent do you agree with the following statement? It is better to have technicians, rather than politicians, deciding which policies are best for the country” (scale 1 to 7).

Comparing the data from the second round (March 2020) with the first round (January 2020) allows us to identify the increase in the technocratic attitudes of citizens by analysing the responses of those who had been interviewed on both occasions – from a statistical point of view this is useful because it allows for the inclusion of individual fixed effects that serve to isolate unobserved heterogeneity. When we do this, a remarkable increase in technocratic preferences becomes apparent. As the pandemic took hold, respondents tended more towards the management vote, more in agreement with purely technical management, and had a generic preference for technocratic governments. This shift is to some extent reasonable, as it is understandable that in the initial days of the pandemic citizens were willing to sacrifice political pluralism and accountability. What is more surprising, however, is that when we analyse the third round (June 2020), we see that the change in technocratic attitudes persisted, remaining at the same levels as in March.

Another way to analyse the change in political preferences as a result of the pandemic is to look at whether the public has changed its thoughts on which attributes it deems most desirable in politicians. This is what we found when we compared the data from the second round (March 2020) and third round (June 2020) with that of the first (January 2020). While in January, the most desirable attribute in a politician was, by far, honesty, the valuation of honesty fell significantly between March and June. Instead, the second and third rounds of the survey revealed that the public had begun to place more value on the management capacity and preparedness of politicians. This result is not overly surprising and is consistent with the change in technocratic preferences. What is perhaps most remarkable is the persistence of the change in the third round (June 2020). Subsequent rounds will reveal whether these changes will be maintained or whether we will see a return to pre-pandemic average values.

To complement the panel-type design and the different rounds of surveys, we also added a series of online experiments to assess how the political preferences of citizens change in response to the pandemic. The results from these experiments are consistent with the shift to more technocratic positions. More specifically, we first compared the reaction to the pandemic with other global threats that also generate negative externalities: climate change and international terrorism. What we observed, is that respondents are more prepared to sacrifice individual rights and freedoms when they are mentioned in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and less so when they are mentioned in the context of climate change or international terrorism. Similarly, respondents said that in the context of the pandemic they preferred strong political leadership, significantly more so than in the context of climate change or terrorism. Finally, respondents are more willing to transfer authority and decision-making power to the central government in the context of the pandemic, and less so for climate change and international terrorism. By contrast, with regard to the pandemic, citizens seem less willing to transfer decision-making power to the

European Union.

Thus, the pandemic seems to have caused a significant shift towards more technocratic positions, a preference for a central government response, at least during the first round, a general preference for strong political leadership, and a strong willingness to sacrifice individual rights and freedoms in exchange for increased protection from contagion. Furthermore, to try and pinpoint the preferred type of response in relation to the theoretical framework we set out above, we also added an online experiment where we mentioned cooperation and discipline as necessary elements for tackling the pandemic. Here, we observed that respondents preferred a response based on individual discipline over individual cooperation. Interestingly, this difference persisted in the third round (June 2020). Although the first wave of the pandemic had already passed, citizens continued to be more in favour of discipline than cooperation. These results are perhaps less surprising if we put them in the previously highlighted Spanish context of medium-low levels of interpersonal trust and very low levels of political trust (trust in governments).

> An increase in technocratic behaviors doesn't necessarily have an adverse effect on democratic processes, as long as politicians retain ultimate responsibility for decisions and accountability mechanisms are preserved

We also wanted the surveys to help us analyse the correlation between exposure to the virus and levels of political confidence among respondents. To do this, we coded a person as exposed to the virus if they claimed to have a family member or friend (first-degree relationship) who had been infected and tested positive. Next, we analysed the correlation between the exposure to the virus variable and levels of trust in the Spanish Government and European institutions. In both cases, we observed a negative correlation: the more people are exposed, the lower their levels of political confidence. Moreover, and perhaps more alarmingly, we also identified a negative correlation between exposure to the virus and the democratic preferences of citizens. Similarly, we also found a positive correlation between exposure to the virus and a preference for a more authoritarian response to the pandemic. Notably, the shift towards more authoritarian attitudes, described above, is particularly significant among people who have been most exposed to the virus. For a more detailed description of the results of the individual panel and the experimental designs, please consult the article "*Els dilemes democràtics de la COVID-19* (The democratic dilemmas of COVID-19)" (recently published in the *Revista Catalana de Dret Públic*).

Tentative conclusions

To what extent could the pandemic be responsible for a persistent change in the political preferences of citizens? What mechanisms can favour this change of preferences and attitudes? Under what conditions will these changes be most likely? In this article, I have

tried to outline the set of results we obtain when we use the survey data to analyse changes in the political preferences of citizens over time.

So far, we have identified a very significant increase in technocratic attitudes, especially among those most exposed to the virus and among those with less political information. The change in authoritarian attitudes is also evident in the fact that citizens have changed the attributes or characteristics they deem desirable in politicians: they now place less value on their honesty and more on their ability to manage and prepare. We also see a willingness to sacrifice individual rights and freedoms in exchange for increased protection from the virus and a predisposition to accept strong leadership to tackle the pandemic. At the same time, citizens seem more willing to turn to discipline rather than individual cooperation in response to the contagion. Furthermore, we noted that many of these changes, rather than being limited to the initial stages of the outbreak, are persisting over time. To what extent can this set of results constitute a medium to long-term threat to democracy?

As previously stated, an increase in technocratic behaviors doesn't necessarily have an adverse effect on democratic processes. In fact, one could argue that an increase in expert agency can be a positive and desirable element to better public management and informed decision-making. It's necessary to highlight "evidence-based policy decisions" and the evaluation of public policy. That being said, the crucial element here is preserving accountability measures and thus, voter control. If governments and policy makers, in the exceptional conditions imposed by the pandemic, make decisions using expert advice and make themselves accountable for them, and are rewarded or sanctioned by voters *a posteriori*, then there is no problem: accountability measures are being safeguarded. However, if politicians and policy makers take advantage of the exceptional circumstances to dilute their responsibilities and evade responsibility for their decisions, then accountability mechanisms could be put in jeopardy.

There are at least two channels through which the COVID-19 pandemic can pose a challenge to democratic governance. Firstly, there is a more or less direct channel, which is represented by this change in citizens' political preferences and attitudes. With respect to this direct channel, we must continue to assess the evolution of preferences over time to document whether these changes persist and become chronic or, conversely, eventually return to pre-pandemic initial values. Clearly, the medium-term threat to democratic governance will be much more serious if these changes do persist because the "technocratic impetus" associated with the pandemic could significantly hamper accountability mechanisms and the attribution of responsibilities. In other words, ultimately, voter control, which is essential in a democracy.

> The pandemic can be a double-edged sword for populist leaders and demagogues: in some cases it may favour their consolidation; in others, it may negatively affect their electoral and re-election prospects. The effect of the pandemic on populist leaders and demagogues will depend on the degree to which they must

> internalise the electoral costs of pandemic management

However, there is also a second, more indirect channel; this change in preferences could open or constitute a "window of opportunity" that could be exploited by authoritarian political leaders and demagogues. To put it another way, some authoritarian leaders may want to ride on this shift in democratic preferences, taking advantage of it to consolidate their dominant position – abusing special powers and unduly limiting individual rights and freedoms. The actions of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, who used a state of emergency to overturn standard parliamentary control mechanisms, are a paradigmatic example. Authoritarian temptations have also been at play during the pandemic in Spain. For example, the usual mechanisms used for politicians' press conferences have been restricted, and there has been excessive zeal in limiting the legitimate exercise of the right to protest and demonstration.

It is true, however, that the pandemic can be a double-edged sword for populist leaders and demagogues. In some cases it may favour their consolidation. In others, however, the pandemic may negatively affect their electoral and re-election prospects. To a great extent, the effect of the pandemic on populist leaders and demagogues will depend on the degree to which they must internalise, or not, the electoral costs of pandemic management. Donald Trump, for example, according to empirical studies from the last US election, appears to have been significantly less likely to win votes in the areas of the United States that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic (see Baccini et al. 2020). Conversely, if other political leaders are able to dilute their responsibilities and thus escape voter control, they can take advantage of the pandemic to strengthen their position.

REFERENCES

Alsan, M., Braghieri, L., Eichmeyer, S., Minjeong K., Stantcheva, S., Yang, D. (2020). "Civil Liberties in Times of Crisis". NBER Working Paper 27972. Available online.

Amat, Francesc, Arenas, Andreu, Falcó, Albert & Muñoz, Jordi. (2020). "Els dilemes democràtics de la COVID-19". Revista Catalana de Dret Públic, (special issue), 1-19. Available online.

Amat, F., Arenas, A., Falcó-Gimeno, A., & Muñoz, J. (2020). Pandemics Meet Democracy. Experimental Evidence from the COVID-19 Crisis in Spain. SocArXiv Papers. Available online.

Arceneaux, K., Bakker, B. N., Hobolt, S., & De Vries, C. E. (2020). Is COVID-19 a Threat to Liberal Democracy?. Available online.

Baccini, L: & Brodeur, A. & Weymouth, S. (2020). "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election", IZA Discussion Papers 13862, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA).

Bertsou, Eri & Caramani, Daniele (2020). People Haven't Had Enough of Experts: Technocratic Attitudes among Citizens in Nine European Democracies. American Journal of Political Science. Available online.

Caramani, Daniele. (2017). Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government. The American Political Science Review, 111(1), 54. Available online.

Sánchez-Cuenca, I. (2017). From a Deficit of Democracy to a Technocratic Order: The Postcrisis Debate on Europe. Annual Review of Political Science. Available online.



Cesc Amat

Cesc Amat is a political scientist and deputy director of the Research Group on Institutions and Political Economy (IPERG) of the University of Barcelona (UB). He holds a doctorate in Political Science from the University of Oxford and is a researcher through the La Caixa Junior Leader Fellow scholarship. His main fields of research are comparative politics and political economy. He is the author of several academic articles, including "Democracy in Hard Times: Economic Shocks, Social Capital and Voting Patterns" (2020) or "*La redistribució a les democracies parlamentàries: els efectes de la politica multidimensional*" (2015).