

The Political Scar of Epidemics

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This paper

- Builds on **impressionable years hypothesis** (i.e. exploit variation across cohorts in exposure to epidemics in early adulthood):
 - suggests that attitudes and behavior are durably formed in what psychologists refer to as the "impressionable" late-adolescent and early-adult years ("political socialisation").
 - Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2014) show that individuals who experienced a recession when young believe that success in life depends more on luck than effort, support more government redistribution.
- We present the first large-scale evidence that experiencing an epidemic causes individuals to vest less trust in their government and leaders.

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Main findings (1)

- Individuals who experience epidemics in their impressionable years (ages 18-25) display less confidence in political leaders, governments and elections.
- Effects are large: high exposure is associated with 5 percentage points less confidence in government (relative to mean of 50%).
- Effects are persistent: they last for 2 decades.
- Effects are specific to communicable diseases for which a timely and effective public policy response is key.
- No effect on non-communicable diseases.

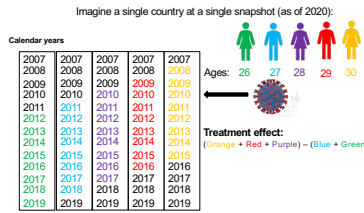
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Main findings (2) - Mechanisms

- Effect is largest when individuals experience epidemics under weak governments, which are least capable of effectively responding to epidemics (we document this point directly).
- Individuals exposed to epidemics in their impressionable years are less likely to have confidence in the public health system.
- We substantiate this conjecture by considering the role of government strength in the context of COVID-19: government strength is associated with improvements in policy (i.e. NPI) response time.

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How do we identify the effect?



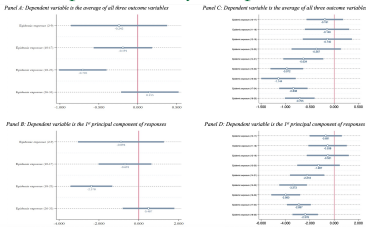
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Main Results

Outcome →	(1) Have confidence in national government	(2) Have confidence in national government	(3) Approval of the Leader	(4) Approval of the Leader	(5) Have confidence in honesty of elections	(6) Have confidence in honesty of elections
Exposure to epidemic (18-25)	-0.052** (0.022)	-0.056** (0.021)	-1.057** (0.335)	-0.563** (0.118)	-0.255** (0.035)	-0.193** (0.027)
The number of people affected x1	0.740 (0.442)	—	0.120 (0.712)	—	-0.027* (0.012)	—
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Age group fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual income	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Labor market controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country*Age trends	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Color fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country*Year fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	422523	394323	412051	412051	412051	412051
R ²	0.145	0.182	0.133	0.182	0.146	0.178
Mean of outcome	0.50	0.50	0.51	0.51	0.51	0.51

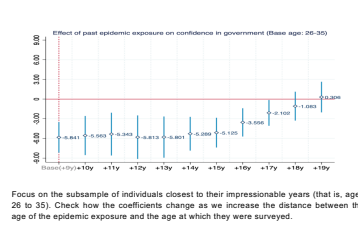
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Are impressionable years special?



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The Effects Persist about Two Decades



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The effect of exposure to an epidemic is more than twice as large if the epidemic is experienced under a weak government

Outcome →	(1) Have confidence in national government	(2) Approval of the leader	(3) Have confidence in honesty of elections
Exposure to epidemic (18-25)/Bottom Quartile Gov.Strength	-0.578** (0.748)	-2.027** (0.542)	-0.645** (0.521)
Exposure to epidemic (18-25)	-1.289 (0.889)	-2.657** (0.640)	-1.373* (0.800)
Bottom Quartile Gov.Strength	-0.000 (0.008)	0.010 (0.010)	-0.002 (0.008)
Observations	422523	394323	412051
R ²	0.136	0.115	0.136

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