

# **DEMOCRACY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A CROSS-COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE WITHIN CULTURAL CONTEXT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Our paper investigates the influence of democracy upon the spread of COVID-19. For the purpose of our study we use a sample consisting of 185 worldwide countries affected by the spread of the new coronavirus disease (54 high income and 131 low income countries). First, we find that in high income countries, higher levels of democracy reduce the spread of COVID-19 while in the low income countries its influence is exactly the opposite. Second, we find clear evidence that three dimensions of culture (individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity) influence people's behaviour in relation with the spread of COVID-19 in a large manner. This study's addressability is wide, from regular people to top policymakers, through their common goal of limiting this pandemic and all the negative effects it brings along. Our findings are important as their policy implications suggest that democracies perform badly for the poorest people and what can be done to improve their record.

**Keywords:** Democracy, COVID-19, Culture, High Income, Low Income.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The present paper investigates how the democratic rights of citizens affect the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), an ongoing pandemic crisis which creates a big worldwide chaos. There are numerous debates and studies that investigate the role expressed by democracy upon public healthcare, trying to answer the question: Does democracy help or hinder

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the physical health of the population? (Ruger, 2005; Gerring et al., 2012; Bollyky et al., 2019; Kavanagh, 2020). This question has gained a tremendous importance in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Still, according to Norrlöf (2020), COVID-19 pandemic related researches within a still evolving crisis represent first attempts of social scientific assessments and are rather limited. Norrlöf (2020) finds that liberal democracies have higher case fatality rates than other regime types.

Moreover, researchers have tried to assess the impact and emerging effects of a wide palette of elements upon the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from social health determinants (Ataguba & Ataguba, 2020) to globalisation (Zimmermann et al., 2020), governance (Gaskell & Stoker, 2020), business activities (Achim et al. 2021, Mirza et al., 2020), population mobility (Gondauri & Batiashvili, 2020), culture (Jovančević & Miličević, 2020) and many others. Nevertheless, even the impact of the pandemic upon several dimensions of our lives, such as governing forms (Rapeli & Saikkonen, 2020; Afsahi et al., 2020), has started to be empirically assessed. All these research directions are highly motivated by the current pandemic context, in order to be able to draw proper reform directions and adjust the policies, to the best of our benefit as individuals and nations.

However, to the best of our knowledge, there still are few studies in the literature which analyse the relationship between democracy and the spread of COVID-19 and this is the main original value of our research. A second element of originality of our work refers to the fact that the estimations are conducted on two groups of countries, as they greatly depend on their level of development (high or low income countries). Third, another element of originality relates to the fact that the heritage culture is taken into account in our analysis as being a factor which determines people's behaviour towards accepting the rules imposed by governments in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 (Hofstede, 2011).

We find clear evidence that high democracies correlate with the spread of COVID-19 but the results significantly differ between these two subgroups of countries. More exactly, in high income countries, higher levels of democracy reduce the spread of COVID-19 while in low income countries, its influence is opposite. In addition, three dimensions of culture, i.e. individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity, highly influence the behaviour in relation with the spread of COVID-19.

Second, the cultural heritage of each nation also contributes to these results. Thus, we find clear evidence that culture has a significant influence on the spread of COVID-19. As such, a more individualistic society is associated with a larger spread of COVID-19, in a context of high demands for freedom. In addition, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity highly influence the behaviour of nations in relation with the proxies of COVID-19 for the analysed samples. Our findings are important as the related policy implications support the idea that democracies perform badly for poorer people and their record has to be somehow improved.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reveals the literature review in the field of the relationship between the level of democracy and the managerial response to COVID-19 disease. Section 3 describes the applied methodology and the data. Section 4 presents the results of our analysis, presented as main results and robustness checks. Section 5 discusses our main empirical findings. Section 6 offers our conclusions and summarizes the findings, with a brief discussion on policy implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.