

COVID-19 and Inequality – Arguments and Findings

Authors

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End the lockdown? Why restrictions are being lifted too fast for some and not fast enough for others

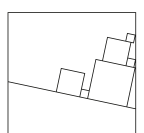
Abstract

Trust matters more than self-interest: That is the result of an online survey we conducted among roughly 4,800 participants in April and May 2020. Individual attitudes towards easing restrictions to contain the coronavirus pandemic are not primarily shaped by whether people fear economic or family-related consequences for themselves or for society. Rather, it is perceived infringements on basic rights that motivate respondents to demand that restrictions be lifted. Respondents from East Germany and those who tend not to trust public institutions in the first place are especially critical of the containment measures. The discussion about easing restrictions, therefore, is not so much about the varying degrees to which individuals are affected, but rather about the degree of trust in public institutions generally.



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Introduction

Should clubs reopen, should festivals and other cultural events take place again towards the end of the (partial) lockdown to contain the pandemic—and if so, when? The answers to such questions are distributed along well-known political lines. This may be surprising, considering that the scenario is primarily a medical and scientific one that should be dissociated from day-to-day politics. And yet, polls such as ARD Deutschlandtrend show clear preferences among voters of the parties represented in the German parliament, the Bundestag: In mid-May 2020, only 37 percent of the followers of the right-wing populist AfD and the pro-market FDP were in favor of keeping up containment measures, compared to 74 percent among followers of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). This means that attitudes towards contact bans and other restrictions imposed for epidemiological reasons are not distributed randomly across the population. Instead, they mirror, to some degree, existing political preferences in society.

Although the link to party preferences is particularly striking, it is probably not the only regularity in people's attitudes towards measures to ease the lockdown. In this policy paper, we explore the question of who argues for or against an early relaxation of restrictions, and why. Given the research perspective at the Konstanz-based Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality", this also involves a crucial general question: Are political attitudes shaped by objective inequality or personal circumstances—or are they shaped by ideological convictions largely disconnected from empirical facts? As we shall explain, the answer to this question is important when thinking of ways to increase support for certain public policies.

Three explanations: Self-interest, perceived threat to society, and political attitudes

From a social science perspective, there are three possible explanations to account for the differences in people's attitudes towards easing lockdown restrictions. First, these differences may reflect the varying degrees to which people are personally affected. For example, they may have a higher health risk due to preexisting conditions or suffer massive economic losses because of the lockdown. Individuals who are likely to experience severe financial or health-related hardships as a result of the containment measures may be particularly strong proponents of lifting restrictions sooner rather than later.

However, as we know from research on other types of attitudes (e.g., attitudes towards immigration), personal circumstances have surprisingly little influence on political attitudes.¹ What seems to be more important is whether people perceive a threat to society. This distinction between personal and "sociotropic" threat perceptions may also play a role in discussions about containment measures in the coronavirus pandemic. Unlike the extent to which individuals are personally affected by a political intervention, perceived sociotropic threat depends less on personal experiences and more on how that intervention is embedded in societal discourses.²

¹ Quillian, Lincoln (1995): Prejudice as a Response to Perceived Group Threat: Population Composition and Anti-Immigrant and Racial Prejudice in Europe. *American Sociological Review*, 60 (4), 586–611.

² Blumer, Herbert (1958): Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 1(1), 3–7.

About the survey

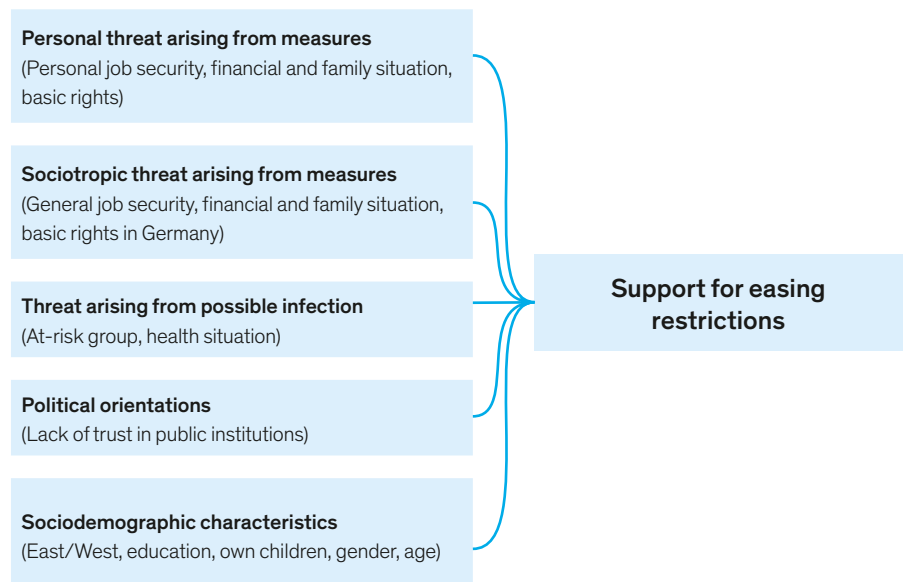
In this paper, we present the results of a survey of 4,800 respondents across Germany conducted by the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality” at the University of Konstanz from late April to early May 2020. For more information on the survey program of the Cluster of Excellence, see exc.uni-konstanz.de/en/inequality/research/covid-19-and-inequality-surveys-program/

Finally, more general political attitudes may also play a role, irrespective of individual experiences and perceptions. That is because containment measures are imposed by the government, not by virologists and epidemiologists. And those who generally distrust the government or believe it should keep restrictions on citizens to a minimum presumably do not want the government to tell them to stay away from the beer garden.

Lastly, it is reasonable to presume that certain sociodemographic subgroups are more likely to demand a relaxation of restrictions, irrespective of the considerations described so far. The fact that women generally tend to be somewhat more risk-averse than men might play a role,³ for example, or the fact that highly educated individuals tend to identify more strongly with science and hence with policies based on scientific evidence. Likewise, East and West Germans may have different political attitudes because of their different historical experiences of “coercive measures” imposed on them by the government. We therefore expect people’s attitudes towards relaxation measures to mirror five influencing factors, which are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

Perceived threat, trust in public institutions, and demographic characteristics: What influences people’s attitudes towards easing containment measures?



What are the areas where people want to see restrictions lifted most urgently?

First of all, we need to ask whether it is possible to draw such a clear-cut line between those in favor of lifting restrictions and those against it. On the one hand, surveys like Deutschlandtrend do ask the general question whether respondents want to keep up restrictions and shutdowns or not. On the other hand, reopening schools, national borders, and fitness studios are very different things. This should become especially evident if self-interest were the main driver of people’s attitudes towards easing the lockdown. Parents, for example, should be most supportive of reopening schools and less so of reopening bars and restaurants. That is why we begin by investigating whether there really is such a thing as all-out “opponents of lifting restrictions” or all-out “supporters of lifting restrictions” before asking who is for and who is against lifting restrictions in specific areas.

³ See Hartog, J., Ferrer-i-Carbonell, A. & Jonker, N. (2002): Linking Measured Risk Aversion to Individual Characteristics. *Kyklos*, 55(1), 3–26.

To this end, we surveyed roughly 4,800 individuals about their attitudes towards easing lockdown restrictions in various areas (see box “About the survey” – page 3).

Respondents were asked to use a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (“lift lockdown restrictions immediately”) to 10 (“lift lockdown restrictions only when a vaccine or suitable medical treatment become available”) to specify their attitudes towards the shutdown of daycare facilities, schools, restaurants, and national borders within the EU, the cancellation of major events, and the imposition of curfews and contact restrictions.

Respondents voice their strongest support for lifting restrictions immediately when it comes to reopening schools (average value of 6.3 on a scale of 1 to 10). A similar average level of support emerges for easing the shutdown of daycare facilities and restaurants, as well as lifting curfews and contact restrictions (average value of 5.9 to 6.1). Average support for reopening national borders within the EU is only slightly lower (average value of 5.7). Respondents are least in favor of allowing major events such as festivals and sports events (average value of 4.0). With respect to the latter, a majority of respondents (about 68%) thinks sports events should only be resumed once a vaccine or a suitable medical treatment becomes available, whereas only 39 percent believe the same when it comes to lifting curfews and contact restrictions. Overall, there are strong positive correlations between all areas. In other words, individuals in favor of lifting restrictions in one area are very likely to support the same in other areas.

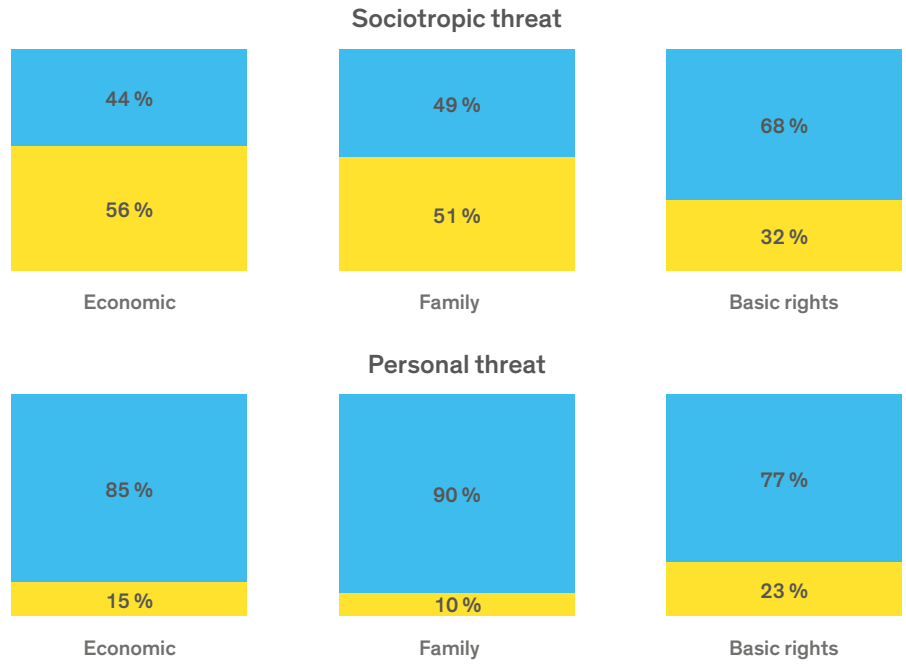
Who wants restrictions to be eased – and why?

To find out why someone is in favor or against easing restrictions, we asked respondents to what extent they believe the effects of the restrictions represent a threat – either to themselves or to Germany as a whole. We proposed four areas: respondents’ own job security and general job security in Germany, respondents’ own financial situation and the general financial situation in Germany, and, in the same manner, family life and basic rights (Figure 2 – page 5).

The answers show that respondents believe the restrictions will have a much more serious impact on society at large than on their personal circumstances. Only 10 percent feel personally threatened by the containment measures in the area of family life, only 15 percent perceive a personal economic threat (job loss or financial hardship), and about 23 percent fear an infringement on their own basic rights. The corresponding values for perceived sociotropic threat are much higher: 51 percent (family), 56 percent (economy), and 32 percent (basic rights), respectively. The difference is especially striking when it comes to the economy and family life. With respect to basic rights, the discrepancy is less pronounced, which probably has to do with the fact that this type of threat is much more “subjective” at the individual level as well compared to the “quantifiable” question of whether someone experiences financial hardship because of the containment measures. As a consequence, this assessment is inseparable from people’s assessment of the measure as such.

Figure 2:
Perceived personal and sociotropic threat from containment measures

● little/no danger
● moderate/great danger



In the next step, we wanted to know who generally tends to support or oppose the immediate lifting of lockdown restrictions. To do so, we looked at the various influencing factors simultaneously to avoid spurious correlations—between age and opposition to easing restrictions, for example, when ignoring the fact that older people are more likely to be at-risk patients.

Figure 3:
Who wants restrictions to be eased?

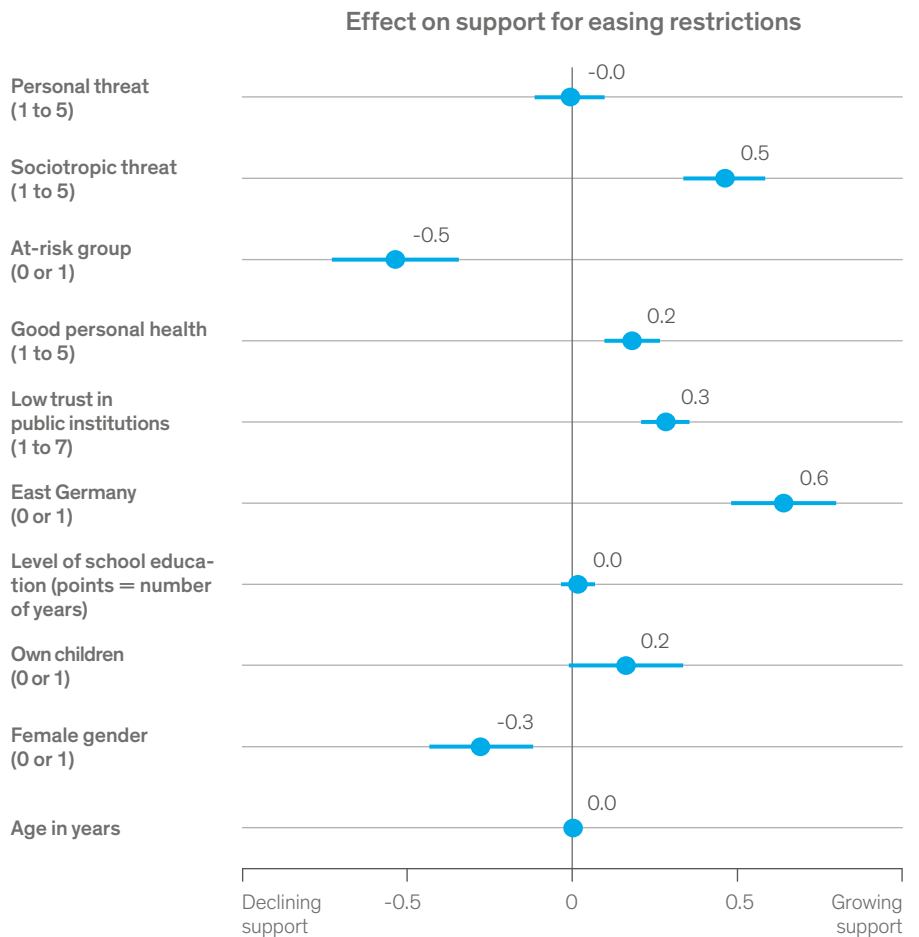
Depicted is the degree to which different factors are influential for advocating that restrictions be eased, on a scale from 1 to 10.

A 1-point change in a given influence factor (span of influence factors in parentheses) results in an average change of support for easing restrictions by the depicted value.

Example:

When answering the question whether restrictions should be eased, respondents who assess their mistrust in public institutions at “2” points average 0.3 higher than do respondents who assess their mistrust at “1” point.

The horizontal bar represents statistical uncertainty.



The first thing to note here is that no correlation exists between the call for easing restrictions and the extent to which containment measures are perceived as threats to respondents' own financial, family, and legal situation. By contrast, respondents who fear the measures will have serious consequences for society at large are more likely to demand that restrictions be lifted immediately. Conversely, opposition to lifting restrictions is voiced primarily by respondents who belong to at-risk groups, for instance because of preexisting health conditions, whereas respondents in good health tend to be in favor of easing restrictions.

Respondents' degree of trust in public institutions has an influence on their attitudes towards easing restrictions: Those who generally have little trust in public institutions such as the government, parliament, political parties, the healthcare system, the police, or science tend to support an early lifting of lockdown restrictions.

East Germans are much more likely to call for easing restrictions than West Germans. Apparently, this finding is not based on the infringements on personal freedoms that East Germans experienced during the GDR dictatorship, as West and East Germans do not differ in their assessment of shutting down national borders. Neither is the large difference between East and West Germans caused primarily by the lower numbers of infections in East Germany. Unfortunately, our analyses on this issue cannot be presented in more detail here.

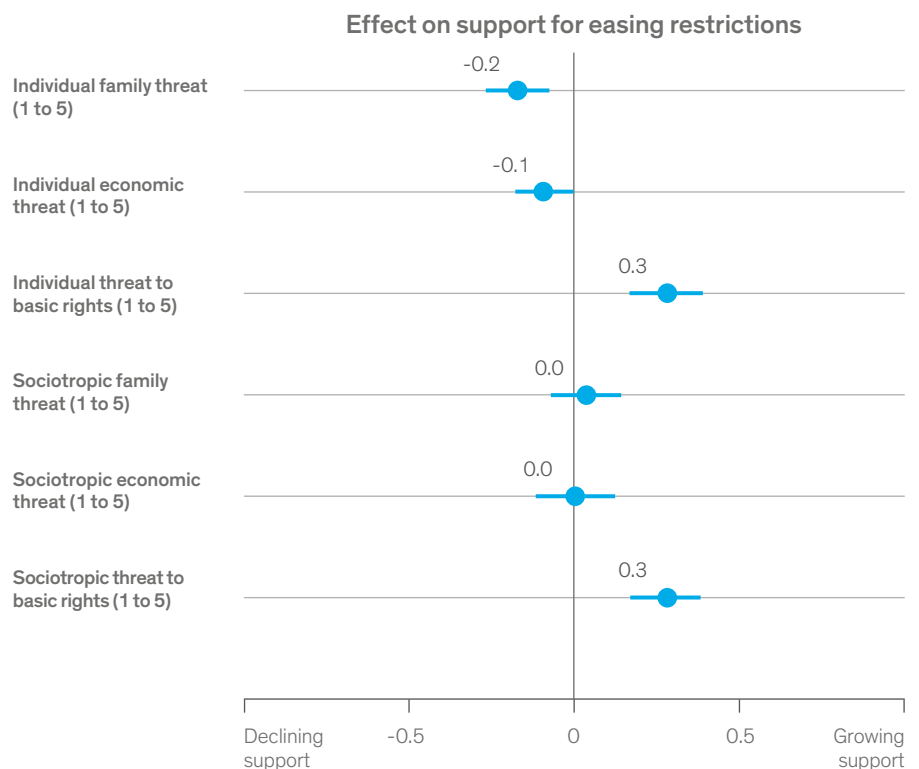
Age and level of education do not influence respondent's attitudes if all other factors are considered. Respondents with children, however, tend to be more in favor of easing restrictions, whereas women tend to be against it.

Finally, we analyze whether the extent of perceived personal or sociotropic threat resulting from the various containment measures is correlated to varying degrees with calls for easing restrictions, depending on the area considered (economic, family, legal) (Figure 4).

Figure 4:
Perceived threat by area and call for easing restrictions

Depicted is the degree to which different factors are influential for advocating that restrictions be eased, on a scale from 1 to 10.

Please refer to the explanations accompanying Figure 3.



The clear and astonishing picture that emerges is that perceived family-related and economic threats, regardless of whether they concern respondents' personal circumstances or Germany as a whole, hardly have an influence on their attitude towards easing lockdown restrictions.

By contrast, the feeling that basic rights are under threat is a crucial factor: If respondents see rights endangered in their personal sphere or in society at large, they are much more likely to support the early lifting of restrictions.

Conclusion: Trust in the state matters more than self-interest

The impact of lockdown restrictions on families and the economy has little or no influence on what people think about them—that is arguably the most important finding of our study. Direct self-interest only matters for the difference between at-risk groups and the healthy population: The former are largely opposed to easing restrictions; the latter tend to be in favor. But anybody who believes that lockdown restrictions infringe on basic rights both in their personal lives and in society at large wants to see those restrictions lifted. The same is true of respondents from East Germany or those who have little trust in public institutions. In that case, characteristics such as education or age do not matter anymore.⁴

Accordingly, the discussion about lifting restrictions is only to some extent a reflection of the varying degrees to which people are personally affected by the lockdown. Rather, it is about the degree of trust in public institutions. To understand this fact, it is helpful to remember what these measures are really about: Guided by medical evidence, governments impose severe restrictions on people's personal freedoms in an effort to contain the spread of a dangerous virus. Most citizens accept these restrictions, but some are more willing to do so than others. This act requires trust in the government. As with comparable restrictions of individual freedoms, those who tend to be most uncomfortable with this situation are those who have little trust in public institutions. The wide variation in the extent to which the same curfews and contact restrictions are perceived as a threat by different respondents also points in that direction.

These findings are relevant with respect to the general enforceability of public policies that serve collective goals, such as efforts to contain climate change, speed limits to further reduce accidents, or car bans to curb fine dust pollution in the inner cities. Despite a broad scientific consensus regarding the effectiveness of policies to avert such threats, parts of the population are reluctant to comply with these policies. Even if the individual costs associated with a policy are small, this fact alone will do little to generate broad-based support. That is because what matters is not so much people's personal circumstances but their opposition to government interventions as such.

Currently, there is much debate about what causes the polarization of society. Our findings may serve as a small insight into the consequences of such polarization: They stand in the way of collective efforts to avert threats affecting all of society.

⁴ The same applies to party identification, as further analyses show (not included here).

Recommendations

1. Providing information about the relevant cause-and-effect relationships is essential. If it had not been for the reports on the desperate situation in hospitals in Northern Italy, the drastic measures to contain the virus in Germany would probably have met with less acceptance. However, it is easier to attribute overcrowded hospitals to a pandemic than it is to attribute extreme local weather events to climate change, fatalities in road accidents to driving speed, or respiratory diseases to inner-city air pollution. Providing information about the mechanisms at work becomes even more important if cause-and-effect relationships are less obvious.
2. To some extent, it is up to policymakers themselves to increase acceptance of their policies. As we have seen, problems of acceptance are rooted not so much in the policies themselves or their consequences but rather in a lack of trust in government actions generally. Ultimately, this is good news. But it means that policies must be the result of transparent, broadly-based democratic decision-making processes guided by scientific evidence. In the best case, these factors will increase acceptance even among those who tend to distrust the government, parliament, and experts.
3. Clear crisis communication is key. Stakeholders must explain, for example, why some powers are in the hands of the federal government whereas others rest with the state governments. Or that imposing measures locally makes sense if infection rates vary from community to community. Otherwise, the decision to close or reopen beer gardens may come across as arbitrary. In Germany, instances of inept crisis communication may have been one of the reasons why such questions have become a political issue. Again, transparency should be the number one priority.

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Imprint

The Politics of Inequality Perceptions, Participation and Policies

is an interdisciplinary Cluster of Excellence at the University of Konstanz within the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments. The gap separating the poor from the rich, the worldwide rise of populism, the division of burdens in the fight against climate change, unfairly distributed access to education – many current debates are as much about inequality as they are about other issues. These topics pose highly complex questions, yet scientifically grounded answers are still few and far between. This is where we come in to investigate “The Politics of Inequality”: the political causes and consequences of inequality.

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