

Is the pandemic management response related to official populism? Lessons learned from COVID-19 so far

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has served the authoritarian governments and politicians that have proliferated in recent years. Although several of them initially did not believe in its seriousness, now it serves to curtail democratic freedoms, give more power to the military, close countries border to migration, and exalt nationalism interest instead of cooperation between countries. On the other hand, the political pluralism, democratic culture, and civil liberties of each country serve as a counterweight to the unilateral decisions of politicians or power groups on the handling of the pandemic. The purpose of this research is to show that the official government response of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, in some countries, has been deviated from health pandemic expert's advice to elected politicians. It is intended to show that in these cases the logic of political survival and the short-term vision, brought a poorer management to the response of the pandemic. Using databases of the COVID-19 pandemic behaviours, a statistical analysis has been performed against relevant variables of governance available in most OECD countries. As main results, some relationships with relevant significance have been found among information about the pandemic metrics (deaths per million) and other variables from databases such as the populism index of some countries' current leaders (The Global Populism Database) as well as the civil rights data. The information suggests that there is a relationship between the style of political leadership, specifically between populism and the results in the management of the pandemic, undoubtedly an issue that remains open and unanswered.

Keywords: Pandemic response, Populism, Governance, COVID-19, Civil rights.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has claimed more than 2.455.000 lives and infected more than 110 million people, so far (February 2021). The previous one has brought unprecedented health, socioeconomic, and humanitarian impacts (World Health Organization, 2021).

Short-term and electoral-biased political decisions have brought inadequate responses to the pandemic in some countries (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020)

Evidence supports the hypothesis that responses to pandemics are best managed by specialized agencies made up of experts in epidemiology and physicians. In fact, the 2009 swine flu pandemic demonstrated that experts in the field can be a source of real authority in public health disasters (Baekkeskov & Rubin, 2014).

There is no doubt that preparation is essential for a pandemic, coordination at all levels of government and between the various related entities can be a differentiating factor when facing an emergency of these characteristics. To save lives it is important that there are also containment and mitigation measures for the virus (Nicola, et al., 2020).

The main objective of this research is to determine the relationships among governance indicators of OCDE countries with some results over the pandemic metrics for some peculiar governments.

Specific objectives are:

1. To identify some social political differences that may influencing face the pandemic according to the government trends or movement of each country.
2. To measure relationships between government style with the impact of pandemic indicators.

The remaining content structure in article, is the following: The Theoretical Framework in section 2; Populism on the stage in the section 2.1, a review of the Political Survival logic in section 2.2, the Political survival logic applied to the COVID-19 pandemic in section 2.3, in section 3 Methodology: Identifying and collecting data, Variable selection in section 3.1, Approach to a statistical model in section 3.2, Statistical analysis in section 3.3, Findings and results in section 3.4 and finally, the conclusions and discussion in section 4.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Populism on the stage

As the name itself suggests, if the term populism has a single definitive characteristic, it may be the assertion of "the people" that they are helpless, betrayed, or otherwise abandoned to forces beyond their control. In fact, it can be found that populism is related to a scenario of deep crisis, real or perceived, in countries with democratic regimes (Gagnon, et al., 2018).

In this sense, a populist can be a person, a social movement or an established political party. Any of these agents receive the nickname of populist because they adopt a behavior or discursive framework in which everyday citizens are grouped with the purpose of somehow regaining control over the political institutions that were destined for their interests, institutions that feel corrupt or away from people; run by elites to serve the interests of the affluent minority (Gagnon, et al., 2018).

Some authors such as (Weyland, 1999), (Abts & Rummens, 2007) embrace a formal approach to define a populist system as a form of government in which power is not under the supervision of institutions or the rule of law (as it would be in a republic) but rather centered on the supposed "popular will". In this context, populism maintains the democratic vote as a means of electing government officials, but changes the source of government legitimacy, from the established rule of law to a direct mandate that emanates from a group with members at their convenience (Cachanosky & Padilla, 2019).

The early part of the 21st century has been marked by a revival of populist and nationalist governments in Europe, North America, and Latin America. Likewise, in the recent past, the only result of populism politics are institutional deterioration and economic failure (Cachanosky & Padilla, 2019).

The result of the populist mandates and their policies can be seen in the erratic institutional and economic results that took place during their historical periods. This notable deterioration in institutional quality is not accompanied by an improvement in economic performance. The costs associated with the decline in institutional quality that characterized the populist governments were not offset by a clear increase in the well-being of their citizens (Cachanosky & Padilla, 2019).

In this sense, it is worth understanding whether the decisions made by populist governments have had an impact on the handling of the pandemic.

2.2 The logic of political survival of the government authorities' responses to disasters

Gaining the approval of the electorate is the focus of elected officials in democracies, due to the opportunity for citizens to modify governments, with poor results, in subsequent elections (Baekkeskov & Rubin, 2014).

Citizens tend to be emotional and retrospective at the time of elections, therefore, they could punish governments that from their point of view did not do everything possible to mitigate the impact of the disaster during the governance period (Downs, 1957).

Therefore, the government's ability to respond in times of crisis is not motivated by good will, but by the fact that politicians are interested in reelection, so they will do everything possible to avoid a major catastrophe (Baekkeskov & Rubin, 2014); however, populists have a "non-institutionalized notion of the people" (Müller, 2015).

The populist leader "feels" what the people want, the rest of the intermediary organizations such as the congress, the autonomous organizations and the media are entities that are indifferent to the people and move for the interests of minorities (Urbanati, 2014).

These characteristics and governmental behaviors with respect to the vision of populism must be considered to face the analytical position on the relationship of management of the pandemic and the consequent impacts.

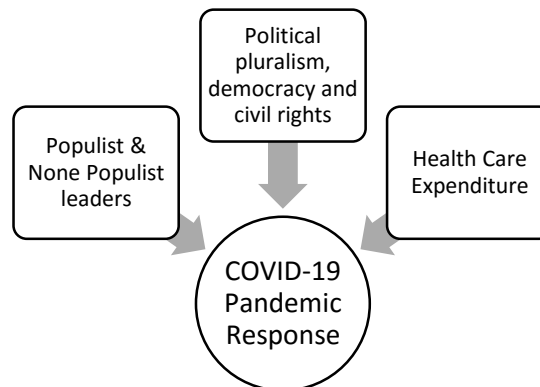
2.3 Political survival applied to the COVID-19 pandemic

The rapid spread of COVID-19, around the world, put the health infrastructure and to the populist movements into test (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). Several populist leaders initially denied the seriousness of the pandemic, reviled experts on the matter, politicized the use of masks, and pointed to the media as tabloid for exaggerating the effects of the crisis. Later they used the pandemic to attack democratic freedoms, bypass parliament and impose measures of national interest.

Based on the above, an attempt is made to validate the following assumptions: The relationship between the management of the pandemic in OECD countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) between political leaders with populist and non-populist features. Analyze the possible influence of democratic culture and health spending in relation to the quantitative data available on the evolution of the pandemic. As illustrated in Figure 1,

Political Survival Assumptions applied to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the main assumptions are shown.

Figure 1: Political Survival Assumptions applied to the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: Baekkeskov & Rubin (2014), Diamond (2008), Besley & Burgess (2002) (Sohrabi, et al., 2020)

3. Methodology: Identifying and collecting data

Considering the availability of information and prior analysis related to health care data, the core target information sample recovered from the OECD Health Data from 2019 for participant countries.

The information from the OECD database allows to have a comparison of the participating countries at the time of the pandemic. In addition to allowing the comparison of variables from other databases related to the information from the pandemic.

3.1 Variable selection

3.1.1 Populist & No Populist leaders

As a result of the growing interest in this topic, a consensus has been generated on the definitions of populism and several indicators have been created that can measure populist ideas with accuracy. In order to measure populist traits at a personal level, various academics have developed and used opinion polls specifically designed to indicate the presence of populist attributes in society (Akkerman, Cas, & Andrej, 2014) (Castanho Silva, 2018) (Schulz, et al., 2017). In general, these researchers are on agreement that populist traits are a conglomerate of beliefs that prevail in some segments of the population in most democracies and that these traits are related to political behaviours and specifically to voting choice (Akkerman, Cas, & Andrej, 2014) (Castanho Silva, 2018) (Schulz, et al., 2017) (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2017). Nevertheless, the most widely used and most robust techniques measure the populist eloquence of politicians through text analysis. The analysis of texts, whether of debates, dissertations, and other political manifestos, provide direct indicators of the ideas of politicians conveyed to the

public. Unlike polls, campaign messages, dissertations, and other political manifestos are designed to the electorate target and can be analysed in different time periods. Tests show that the indicators resulting from text analysis are accurate and reproducible. This gives opportunity to go into greater detail of the general indicators of the academic or historical literature (Hawkins, et al., 2019).

One of the tools recently developed by an academic group is known as the Global Populism Database (GDP), this is based on an integral assessment, designed at the time to review the College Board AP exam essays. Encoders are used to help identify attributes in each of the texts. The GDP allows to analyse a photograph of the populist attributes in each of the political messages or content of politicians at all levels, which can be compared with the preferences and the impact they achieve on citizens. Some of the limitation of the technic is that it ignores the opposition and offers an incomplete picture of populism at a detailed level. The academic network who analyses these discourses named itself as Team Populist. "Since we started the database, we and other colleagues in the Team Populism network have started a database focused on party leaders in campaign speeches and party manifestos in the coded countries" (Hawkins, et al., 2019).

3.1.2 Political pluralism, democracy, and civil rights

There is no universal scale to measure democracy. Definitions of democracy are currently being questioned and there is extensive controversy on the subject. Democracy is not only of academic interest. For example, although the promotion and protection of democracy is high on the priority list of well-known Western powers, there is no consensus within governments on what makes up or entails a democracy. As mentioned by Irving Horowitz in their study: "The world's only superpower is rhetorically and militarily promoting a political system that remains undefined and is betting its credibility and treasure on that quest" (Horowitz, 2006).¹

Several political and academic groups insist that democracy is de facto a dichotomy: a country can be democratic or undemocratic. It is possible to find that there are shades within the concept, since they may belong to diverse group of states, the existence of different conceptions of democracy.

To have standardized and quantitative information to measure democracy in states, the Democracy Index was developed by *the Economist* (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). It is a scale from 0 to 10, supported by the scores of more than sixty indicators, consolidated in five pillars: electoral commissions and pluralism; citizen freedoms; articulation of the government; civic participation; and political culture. Each category is scored on a scale of zero to ten, and the overall index is an average of the scores from the five categories (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). The category index is determined by the sum of the count of each indicator, converted to a rule of 0 to 10. If countries do not score at least one in the following critical areas for democracy, adjustments are made.

1. The electoral process is fair and equitable.
2. Voter safety.

¹ Horowitz, Irving (2006) "The Struggle for Democracy", *The National Interest*, Spring, p. 114.

3. Influence of foreign powers in the government.
4. The capacity of the civil service to implement policies.

The indicators are based on surveys that largely predominate in the categories of political participation and political culture. Surveys are also used in the categories of civil liberties and government operations.

In addition to these surveys, the World Values Survey is used. Other sources being tapped include Eurobarometer polls, Gallup polls, Asian Barometer, Latin American Barometer, African Barometer, and other national surveys. For countries for which survey results are lacking, survey results from similar countries and expert evaluation are used to fill in the information gaps (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019).

3.1.3 Health Care Expenditure

To have standardized measurements of this concept, various indicators were reviewed such as Health spending per capita and Health expenditure in relation to GDP. More detail about them in the following subsections.

Health spending per capita

Health spending is a measure of the total consumption of goods and services in this sector. This includes spending of all kinds such as: out-of-pocket spending, government programs, social security, health administrators, prevention programs and health of the population, as well as the general management of the health system. The spending division combines mandatory public and private financing schemes.

Regards to reviewing the level of spending between countries, the generally accepted way is to use the level of health spending per capita converted to a common currency, in this case US dollars. It must be adjusted considering the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) of each country or the Actual Individual Consumption (AIC). To estimate real growth rates, the effect of inflation must be discounted; this information can generally be obtained for each country. (OECD, 2019).

During 2018, it is estimated that total health spending in the United States was equivalent to \$10,000 USD per U.S. habitant. The level of spending (adjusting the PPP between nations) is above of all countries. Switzerland is the second biggest spender in the OECD, the rest of the OECD countries are below 40% in relation to the United States (USD 3,994). Developed countries like Japan, Canada, France, and Germany, spend about half of US per capita on health, while Italy and the UK were near the average of the OECD. The countries that spent the least on health in the OECD were Turkey and Mexico, with spending around of 25% of the OECD average, similar levels like the mentioned previously, correspond to emerging economies like Brazil, South Africa, and Russia. The most recent information on OECD indicators reveals that China spent near 20% of the OECD level, while India less than 10% (OECD, 2019).

Health expenditure in relation to GDP

This measure is the proportion of spending on health care goods and services compared to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it may vary over time considering the overall economic growth VS health spending growth. During the 90s and the early 21st century, health spending in OECD countries generally grew at a faster rate than the rest of the economy, causing a continuous increase in the health spending GDP ratio. Except for the period of economic crisis, the average

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ratio has been stable in the past decade, as growth in health spending in the OECD has broadly coincided with the average GDP growth.

In general terms, during 2018 it is estimated that the OECD countries spent 8.8% of GDP on healthcare, this figure has not changed significantly since 2013. The United States spent, most of it on healthcare, around to 17% of the GDP. The second country on the list is Switzerland with a spending of 12.2%. Next on the list is the group of high-income countries, including Germany, Japan, France and Sweden, with spending on health care close to 11% of their GDP. A next group of OECD countries including Australia, Chile, Korea, New Zealand, and parts of Europe, fit within a health spending band of 8-10% of GDP. On the other hand, the OECD countries that spent less than 6% of their GDP on health care were Luxembourg, Latvia, Mexico, and Turkey with 4.2%. Similar to health spending in Turkey are India and China (OECD, 2019).

3.1.4 COVID Intel Database

Beginning on December 31, 2019 and until March 21, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) accounted the number of positive patients and deceases of COVID-19 that were given in official communication channels and that complied with the provisions of the International Health Regulations (IHR), the foregoing was complemented with information from the health authorities, official sites and social media accounts of each country. As of March 22, 2020, global information is consolidated by the WHO regional and global databases and aggregated accounted information is transmitted to WHO head office on a regular basis.

The amounts include laboratory tested COVID-19 cases, recoveries, and deceases, as defined by the WHO. Each country establishes the mechanisms for detection, evaluation and testing, as well as the periods of confirmation of deceases. Therefore, the information presented by the World Health Organization may have considerable variability (World Health Organization, 2020).

3.2 Approach to a statistical model

3.2.1 Dependent variable

The following data have been selected as performance indicators about the pandemic management:

- Total COVID-19 cases per million
- Total COVID-19 deaths per million
- Total COVID-19 deaths

The data have been extracted from the COVID-19 Intel Database of each country. The date of the information cut-off was taken at the end of October 2020, as shown in Table 1: Cross-country table of Governance Indicators and COVID-19 data.

Each of the data have been compared with the independent variables (showed in following subsection) to validate whether there is any significant relationship between the variables.

3.2.2 Independent variables

As shown in Table 1: Cross-country table of Governance Indicators and COVID-19 data, based on the Political Survival Assumptions applied to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the following performance indicators have been selected:

1. The Average Populism Index from the Global Populism Database. The latest available information has used for each available country.
2. Current health expenditure Per Capita in USD, from the OECD country database. The latest data available has used as a cut-off prior to the pandemic (2017).
3. The Democracy Index by country. This index is developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit. Reported annually, the latest available (2019) has used.
4. The Civil Liberties Index by country, also this index is developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit. Reported annually, the latest available (2019) has used.
5. The Human Development Index (HDI) by country. This index is developed by the United Nations Development Program, latest available (2019) has used.
6. Regime Type, this classification is developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit. Reported annually, the latest available (2019) has used.

Table 1: Cross-country table of Governance Indicators and COVID-19 data

Country	Regime type	Current health expenditure PC USD	Average Populism Index	Democracy Index	Civil Liberties	HDI	Total cases per million	Total deaths per million
Argentina	Flawed democracy	\$ 7,621.46	0.04	7.02	8.24	0.83	25,603.41	681.30
Austria	Full democracy	\$ 45,338.13	0.08	8.29	8.82	0.91	11,263.44	119.80
Bolivia	Hybrid regime	\$ 1,359.78	1.46	4.84	6.76	0.69	12,133.18	746.59
Brazil	Flawed democracy	\$ 5,088.35	0.50	6.86	8.24	0.76	25,953.49	750.27
Canada	Full democracy	\$ 41,538.97	0.11	9.22	9.71	0.93	6,146.95	267.87
Chile	Full democracy	\$ 8,445.39	0.15	8.08	9.12	0.84	26,604.18	740.63
Croatia	Flawed democracy	\$ 7,937.85	-	6.57	7.06	0.83	11,338.36	129.35
Dominican Republic	Flawed democracy	\$ 4,329.74	0.38	6.54	7.06	0.74	11,645.75	206.12
Ecuador	Flawed democracy	\$ 2,889.46	0.19	6.33	7.06	0.75	9,473.81	715.98
Greece	Flawed democracy	\$ 9,053.17	0.25	7.43	8.53	0.87	3,568.63	59.48
Guatemala	Hybrid regime	\$ 1,452.86	0.15	5.26	6.47	0.65	5,991.38	207.31
Honduras	Hybrid regime	\$ 1,065.96	0.46	5.42	6.18	0.62	9,782.11	269.47
India	Flawed democracy	\$ 370.04	0.55	6.9	6.76	0.64	5,896.44	88.15
Italy	Flawed democracy	\$ 16,328.23	1.00	7.52	7.94	0.88	10,712.11	633.81
Japan	Flawed democracy	\$ 27,535.43	0.05	7.99	8.82	0.91	793.76	13.88
Mexico	Flawed democracy	\$ 4,323.89	0.96	6.09	6.18	0.77	7,126.28	708.04
Nicaragua	Authoritarian	\$ 1,084.26	0.85	3.55	4.12	0.66	832.36	23.55
Panama	Flawed democracy	\$ 6,356.46	0.25	7.05	7.94	0.79	30,793.54	622.98
Romania	Flawed democracy	\$ 5,056.07	0.28	6.49	7.65	0.81	12,246.07	356.96
Sweden	Full democracy	\$ 34,802.50	0.10	9.39	9.41	0.93	12,777.66	593.21
Switzerland	Full democracy	\$ 86,431.92	0.69	9.03	9.12	0.94	17,762.54	235.14
Switzerland	Full democracy	\$ 86,431.92	0.28	9.03	9.12	0.94	17,762.54	235.14
Switzerland	Full democracy	\$ 86,431.92	0.24	9.03	9.12	0.94	17,762.54	235.14
United Kingdom	Full democracy	\$ 22,539.55	0.49	8.52	9.12	0.92	14,579.52	680.98
Ukraine	Hybrid regime	\$ 975.23	0.75	5.9	6.47	0.75	8,659.88	161.00
Ukraine	Hybrid regime	\$ 975.23	0.03	5.9	6.47	0.75	8,659.88	161.00
United States	Flawed democracy	\$ 63,159.76	0.78	7.96	8.24	0.92	27,333.40	693.98
Uruguay	Full democracy	\$ 14,885.15	0.21	8.38	9.71	0.80	887.23	16.70
Venezuela	Authoritarian	\$ 486.51	1.64	2.88	3.24	0.76	3,220.89	27.89
Colombia	Flawed democracy	\$ 2,930.88	0.06	7.13	8.53	0.75	20,894.08	611.90
Czech Republic	Flawed democracy	\$ 13,908.61	0.15	7.69	8.53	0.89	30,224.44	287.42
France	Full democracy	\$ 27,542.28	0.15	8.12	8.53	0.90	20,406.20	560.18
Germany	Full democracy	\$ 47,511.08	0.04	8.68	9.41	0.94	6,191.56	124.75

Source: COVID INTEL Database (2020), The Human Development Index (2020), The Global Populism Database (2019), The Economist Intelligence Index of Democracy (2019), OECD Indicators (2019)

3.3 Statistical analysis

Multiple generalized linear regression models were performed to compare the degree of significance of the various independent variables versus the selected performance indicators of

the pandemic (dependent variables). An initial sample of 36 countries have been used, in which the same information it is available for each one. In countries like Switzerland where the populism index by region is contained, the data for each of the regions have been considered. The populism index is available for 31 countries at the cut-off of 2019, in these cases the regression analysis was adjusted to the size of this sample to have the same information for all countries.

For the case, of the Type of Regime variable, it has been quantified using a scale from lower to higher, considering the type of regiment (Democratic Regime=1 to Authoritarian Regime = 4). The P parameter <0.05 It has used as a threshold to detect statistical significance in all analyses. A 95% confidence level it has been set for each regression analysis.

Gretel and Excel software were used to these statistical analyses. All underlying unidentified data is available.

3.4 Findings and results

The dependent variables reported per million inhabitants reflected greater significance versus the indexed data.

Taking as an indicator of pandemic management the information reported at the end of October 2020 of Deaths per Million by COVID-19 is a Multiple R of .85129, as shown in Table 2: Regression Analysis. Within the independent variables that are with a high degree of statistical significance (P <0.05), It is possible to observe the Populism Index and the Civil Liberties Index.

As shown in Table 2: Regression Analysis, the remaining variables, in the multiple regressions that have been carried out, it shown not have a serious or representative degree of statistical significance to explain the indicators (dependent variable).

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.8513
R Square	0.7247
Adjusted R Square	0.6497
Standard Error	255.5027
Observations	33.0000

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	5	4811646.411	962329.2823	14.74119161	5.30361E-07
Residual	28	1827886.145	65281.64804		
Total	33	6639532.556			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Regime Type Scale	(71.5354)	75.4092	(0.9486)	0.3509	(226.0041)	82.9332	(226.0041)	82.9332
Average Populism Index	284.6734	141.8581	2.0067	0.0545	(5.9097)	575.2565	(5.9097)	575.2565
Democracy Index	(153.8535)	131.1778	(1.1729)	0.2507	(422.5592)	114.8521	(422.5592)	114.8521
Civil Liberties	211.6344	98.8730	2.1405	0.0412	9.1023	414.1665	9.1023	414.1665
Human_development_index	(209.7383)	798.3170	(0.2627)	0.7947	(1,845.0165)	1,425.5399	(1,845.0165)	1,425.5399

Source: COVID INTEL Database (2020), The Human Development Index (2020), The Global Populism Database (2019), The Economist Intelligence Index of Democracy (2019), OECD Indicators (2019)

4. Conclusions and discussion

Although a phenomenon as complex as a pandemic and specifically COVID-19, which

continues to cause great damage throughout the world, cannot be explained with a series of indicators; these can give us a clue of the context and the influence of certain political leaderships that have put short-term criteria above the welfare of the population.

Evidence continues to support the hypothesis that a key distinction in responding to pandemics and other natural disasters is the role of leaders who rely on experts, particularly in strong government agencies that have legitimacy from the population. This occurs in countries with a well-established civil rights culture and with counterweights in their governance systems.

While it is true that some styles of political leadership such as populism, are not new, the way to identify and measure it is evolving to a certain point where there is a degree of consensus in its definition and characteristics. The above could give us better elements to make comparisons and measure its effects.

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