

DEMOCRACY AND PANDEMIC



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HOW TO PREVENT THE AUTHORITARIAN BANDWAGON EFFECT?

Ville-Pekka Sorsa

Director, [UHealth](#) / Uni. Helsinki

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THE CHALLENGE

- Emerging authoritarianism under emergencies involves path-creating features that threaten democracy and basic rights (Toelstede, 2019)
 - Under COVID, unlawful emergencies were common among democracies and within them more common among those with better rule of law (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2025)
- The authoritarian **bandwagon effect** of pandemic politics: excessively stringent responses become salient despite low effectiveness (Coccia, 2023) or negative impacts to basic rights (Sun et al., 2022)
 - Large groups of citizens are likely to demand stringent control measures
 - Policymakers are likely to be more responsive to calls for stringent measures
 - Crisis management is likely to maintain stringent measures
- Can we prevent the bandwagon effect in future pandemics?
- I will outline three key lessons from the partly unexpected features of COVID-19 based on emerging research



WHAT WE KNEW BEFORE COVID

- Pandemics as spectacles like no other (e.g., Aaltola, 2012a, 2012b)
 - Scare and anxiety causes popular demands for stringent measures – which broaden and last until pandemic fatigue hits (e.g., Holland & Blood, 2012)
 - Political responses are “national security dramas” with high degrees of performativity, reactivity, and improvisation
 - Media plays a key role in framing crisis perceptions and policy responses – in pre-covid pandemics sensationalism and political and policy cynicism typical
- The path dependence of stringency in crisis management
 - Experimentation, adaptation, and learning are difficult under crisis conditions
 - Ideational path dependence of pandemic control: early beliefs remain even when they become outdated (e.g., Baekkeskov, 2016)



THE LESSONS OF COVID: CITIZEN ATTITUDES

- Media reporting had low degrees of sensationalism (Mach et al., 2021), anecdotal evidence suggests that digital media usage contributed to higher levels of adherence to guidelines (e.g., Shorom & Yossi, 2022)
- Those rejecting abstract notions of authoritarianism and autocracy largely supported authoritarian and undemocratic control measures (Hirsch, 2022)
- Individuals holding more authoritarian attitudes typically rejected a stronger government response and embraced individual autonomy (Stevens et al., 2024) and supported dissidents (Ramirez & Wood, 2024)
- Authoritarian attitudes were conditioned by individual framing of the problems (Deason & Dunn, 2022) and identification with in-group elites (Arceneaux et al., 2025; Ollerenshaw, 2022)
- **Lesson:** individual construction of problems and identification may matter more than general attitudes and frames



THE LESSONS OF COVID: POLITICAL RESPONSIVENESS

- Along psychological factors, institutional and strategic factors were key in shaping policy responses (Maor & Howlett, 2020), and instrumental and political learning shaped policy change (Wang, 2025)
- However, democratic countries with highest degrees of preparedness and governance capacity reacted the slowest, leading to rapid improvisation (Toshkov et al., 2022)
- “Libertarian” responses performed worse than “authoritarian” ones in terms of public health outcomes in the control stage (Ha, 2024)
- Democracies were overall more resilient than autocracies thanks to improved adaptation and stronger recovery (Kaim & Kubbe, 2025)
- People with positive evaluations of the government’s initial pandemic control response and its legitimization were more likely to maintain support for the democratic system (Oana et al., 2025)
- **Lesson:** the initial response may be more important than overall strategy, legitimization may be as important as performance, and preparedness may be misaligned



THE LESSONS OF COVID: CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- Both autocracies and democracies demonstrated elasticity in centralised crisis management (e.g., Wang & Han, 2025)
- Public health authorities actively sought to maintain initial strategies in many countries (e.g., Brusselaers et al., 2022)
- Media discourses were largely supportive of early national strategies but remained monotonous (e.g., Baekkeskov et al., 2021)
- The divergent legitimization strategies adopted by leading policymakers for initial responses proved elastic (Boussaguet et al., 2021)
- **Lesson:** path dependence may emerge very early on, be stronger than anticipated, and result from internal as well as external factors



CONCLUSION

- Prepare for early responses, emergency governance, and their legitimization
- Mobilize in-group elites and key opinion leaders when communicating early responses
- Support individual problem construction through multiple legitimizations
- Strengthen the reflexivity of crisis management – improve governance of public authorities and training for crisis conditions, manage media expectations, insist upon multiple viewpoints



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THANK YOU!

ville-pekka.sorsa@helsinki.fi