

Paths to trust: Explaining citizens' trust to experts and evidence-informed policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forward new questions about the efficient implementation of arduous public policies. Drawing evidence from the pandemic, this article argues that, during crises, policymakers will often opt for evidence-informed policymaking, hoping for better results. In line with previous studies, we show that citizens trust more policies coming from experts rather than policymakers and elected politicians. We also add nuance to these claims as we attribute this tendency to the technocratic legitimacy thesis, referring to the symbolic significance of expert authority. Employing a public opinion survey conducted across four European countries, Germany, Greece, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, we show that independently of prior levels of political trust and each country's mortality rate, citizens welcomed evidence-informed policies during the pandemic's first wave. Politicians can leverage these insights to increase public compliance with crisis management policies.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments placed experts at the center of the policymaking process. They embedded them in the decision-making process by following an evidence-informed style of policymaking. Given the unknowns of the new virus, the public did not seem to contest the latter choice (Bol et al., 2020; Esaïsson et al., 2021; Lavezzolo et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021). Nevertheless, this dynamic raises questions about the intersection between evidence-informed policies and citizens' trust. Scholars have intensely debated whether the public welcomes technocratic forms of government, meaning the exercise of power by technical elites instead of elected politicians (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022). As such, a few studies have discussed the adverse implications of expert involvement in policymaking, focusing on its repercussions to accountability and inclusivity (Marien & Werner, 2019). On the other hand, another strand of research suggests that citizens occasionally welcome expert involvement in policymaking (Bertsou, 2021; Lee, 2022), while others argue that politicians and technocrats were considered equally credible vis-a-vis the management of the pandemic (Anderson & Hobolt, 2023: 306).

In view of this debate, the article poses a number of research questions to shed light on how trust toward experts develops during crises and what this means for public policy. As such, our focus is on citizen's trust toward experts and politicians. In particular, our analysis inquires whether we observe a change in trust toward experts during crises. How do trust levels toward experts and politicians differ during such periods? Which elements explain such variation, and what mechanisms are in work? For the sake of clarity, it is worth noting that we leave aside the debate about the trade-offs between health protection and liberal democracy—an issue already discussed in the literature (Vasilopoulos et al., 2022).

Policy analysis is combined with data from an original public opinion survey conducted during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in four European democracies that employed evidence-informed policies, that is Germany, Greece, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In line with some previous studies (Bundi & Pattyn, 2022; Lavezzolo et al., 2021), our study shows that citizens trusted more policies coming directly from experts rather than elected politicians. Our analysis adds nuance to previous research by delving more into the underlying mechanism driving citizens' trust. Our policy analysis shows that the output of expert advice (performance-based mechanism) is driving the governments' choice for evidence-informed policymaking. However, it is the symbolic significance of expert authority (technocratic legitimacy mechanism) that leads to such trust levels from the public. In other words, it is the perception of competence rather than the optimal results that mainly drives citizens' trust toward experts.

Our findings hold important public policy implications as high levels of citizens' trust have been repeatedly associated with higher compliance with policy measures (Ahluwalia et al., 2021; Zahariadis et al., 2021). As the proliferation of multifaceted crises will inevitably challenge state capacity in the future, state demand for measures that can be implemented efficiently will increase (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022). Even more importantly, as Western liberal democracies face declining public trust (Brezzi et al., 2021) and growing contestation by populist and anti-establishment movements, such research offers insights that might allow governments to remedy this fundamental weakness and achieve more efficient policy outcomes by making good use of people's trust toward experts. Of course, challenges such as the decline of expert authority in cases of policy failure or the limited influence of citizens in policymaking are still valid and should be taken into account.

The article proceeds by examining linkages between expert advice, evidence-informed policies, and citizens' trust during crises. It then, proposes two features that determine public perceptions and trust levels toward experts during crises. A description of the article's data and methodology follows. The next section analyses the results of our public opinion survey. The following part integrates the analysis of the survey's results with an analysis of the policy environment of the four countries under study. Conclusions summarize our theoretical argument and findings and underline their importance for future crisis management efforts.

2 | THE NEXUS OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING, CRISIS MANAGEMENT, AND TRUST

It is essential that we begin our discussion by providing working definitions for three central terms: trust, experts, and evidence-informed policymaking. Starting with “trust,” the concept remains elusive, with scholars providing different definitions and typologies; trust is usually separated into various conceptual components, thus rendering its definition and measurement difficult. Despite its theoretical fragmentation, trust always has a relational and a situational component (van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017: 5). The relational component refers to the subjects that are involved in the trust relationship, that is, who trusts what. In the empirical part of the article, we focus on whether citizens trusted experts and the policies that they proposed more than they trusted politicians and their respective policy proposals during the pandemic. The situational part refers to the fact that trust is given to organizations or individuals with respect to specific policy fields and actions and under certain conditions (Levi & Stoker, 2000: 476). In our case, we focus on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and on the restrictive measures that have been applied in four European democracies prior to vaccine development.

With respect to the operationalization of trust, we employ a concept that focuses on expectations of reasonableness, that is, the belief that policy decisions are justified by solid evidence in view of the public good (Barber, 1983). This definition encompasses two dimensions: a commitment to act in the best interest of the truster and a perception that the trusted will not fail to perform due to incompetence (Levi & Stoker, 2000: 476). Delimiting the concept of trust in such a way allows us to measure citizens' trust toward the sources and the process of policymaking. Finally, our conceptualization allows us to distinguish it from the concept of political trust, that is, trust toward the government and the political system at large—usually measured via support levels toward the government and incumbent politicians (Norris, 2017: 28). Our study goes beyond this, as it discusses trust comparatively juxtaposing trust levels between non-governmental and governmental actors, while also examining trust levels toward different policymaking modes.

Moving to experts we define the term as professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge. Subsequently, the term experts might refer to professionals like academics, bureaucrats, or think-tankers with a common interest and causal understanding of the main questions underpinning a scientific field (Haas, 1992: 3). Finally, we define evidence-informed policymaking as the employment of expert input to design and implement policies.

The relevant literature has mainly focused on how the involvement of experts in pandemic management increased citizens' trust, which, in turn, led to more effective policy implementation. A survey conducted in the United States suggests that the more citizens trusted experts, the more likely they were to adopt the protective measures advocated by the latter (Ahluwalia et al., 2021: 292). However, the reasons why citizens favored the participation of experts in policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic, and during crises more generally, need to be further analyzed.

Previous research links declining trust toward politicians and parties with increased public support for expert involvement in the policymaking process. Experts are seen as able to address complex problems without the political and electoral constraints that politicians usually face. Bertson and Caramani employed public surveys in nine European countries to show that a distinct amount (12%) of respondents harbor such technocratic attitudes (Bertson & Caramani, 2022: 20). Another article by Bertson suggests that citizens welcome the involvement of experts in the policy design and the implementation phase of policymaking. At the same time, they appear less opinionated vis-a-vis the decision-making phase (Bertson, 2021). Research further shows that with respect to environmental issues, such as carbon emissions and environmental change, the public seems willing to “outsource” the overall policymaking process to experts. This indicates a broader trend; citizens seem more inclined to welcome expert input in “hard” issues, that is, issues that are complex and require authoritative expert input, while they are less willing to do so in “easy” issues, meaning issues that have strong moral underpinnings and tend to provoke political contestation (Bertson, 2021: 10).

Examining citizens' preferences vis-a-vis evidence-informed policymaking during the pandemic, Lavezzolo et al. (2021) employed a longitudinal public survey and two survey experiments to show that Spanish citizens preferred that experts, rather than politicians, make decisions during the pandemic. The crisis favored the development of technocratic preferences, that is governance by experts, while citizens appeared to mistrust the usual operations of party government (Lavezzolo et al., 2021: 5). Following the same pattern, a survey in six Western democracies showed that positive attitudes toward experts are tightly linked with high levels of support for evidence-informed policymaking (Bundi & Pattyn, 2022: 11). Finally, Lee (2022) demonstrated that in South Korea ministers' with technical expertise enjoyed higher public support compared to ministers with other skills. Our analysis builds on these results and extends them by discussing the mechanisms driving public support toward experts and evidence-informed policymaking.

With respect to how government performance affected citizens' trust toward evidence-informed policymaking during the pandemic, Bundi and Pattyn (2022) suggest that citizens tend to be more supportive of evidence-informed policies when they have low trust toward the government and the latter's policies are performing poorly. On the other hand, if citizens trust the government, its poor performance will not necessarily lead them to support evidence-informed policies. Instead, they retain their faith that alternative policy solutions can be produced without the experts' input (Bundi & Pattyn, 2022: 14). In our discussion, we argue that the relationship between trust in government and trust in experts is more complex, especially in times of crisis.

Moreover, relevant research suggests that the framing of the crisis is important: how one frames the emerging crisis, as a public health problem or as an emergency with significant sanitary and economic implications, determines the type of decision-makers that the public wants involved. The former framing, that is, the crisis as a public health problem, favors the involvement of independent experts, while the latter, that is, the emergency, of elected politicians (Lavezzolo et al., 2021: 16). While insightful, these studies do not shed much light on the mechanisms that led citizens to favor the participation of experts in policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic and during crises in general.

This is so as crises bring forward new and complex questions that policymakers are called to manage in a short timeframe with scarce information (Boin et al., 2005: 4). They are called to quickly identify the causes of the crisis, plan and supervise operational solutions, communicate, and legitimize them in the eyes of the public (Boin et al., 2005: 1–3). At the same time, boundaries between policymaking phases become blurry and the policymaking process becomes faster, condensed, and less transparent than usual. In addition, the distinction between “hard” and “easy” issues, being already rather simplistic, becomes less relevant since everything is “hard” during crises. This is so as crises tend to be multifaceted and complex, requiring sophisticated technical solutions in a very limited timespan. In addition, these emergencies tend to provoke political debates on efficient management and post-crisis implications, thus becoming de facto politically contested.

Facing such elevated pressure, politicians usually resort to experts as they might be able to provide explanations on the cause-and-effect relationships that underpin the unfolding crisis and, subsequently, propose evidence-informed solutions (Haas, 1992: 15). In this sense, citizens and policymakers welcome expert input expecting it to lead to more efficient policies (Boswell, 2009: 7). According to this rationale, experts are better equipped to deal with complex policy questions (Boswell, 2009: 5) and as such trust toward them is contingent upon their performance and efficiency.

At the same time, experts are employed due to their “technocratic legitimacy.” In other words, they are employed in order to legitimize policy decisions because of the symbolic power of “knowledge” (Boswell, 2009). It is often the case that during crises, politicians see experts as better equipped to deal with emergencies, not only because of the complexity of the policy problem but also because of their symbolic leverage and their ability to communicate and persuade the public. As such, governments place experts at the forefront of their communication effort in order to obtain epistemic authority, that is, the perception that they possess reliable, relevant, and detailed knowledge that subsequently informs their policies (Zahariadis et al., 2021: 9). The logic underpinning this dynamic suggests that the public would trust policy decisions more when experts present and explain them (Ahluwalia et al., 2021). Such strategies might also help governments discredit alternative policy positions (Boin et al., 2005: 7) while allowing them to consolidate the legitimacy of their preferred policy response (Kettel & Kerr, 2021).

It is worth noting that the two mechanisms can be in place simultaneously. The performance-based mechanism can better explain policymakers' preference for expert involvement during crises. The "technocratic legitimacy" thesis can explain the policymakers' choice to involve experts in their communication campaigns, as well as citizens' trust toward experts. All in all, while policymakers may choose to involve experts because they believe that their services may improve government performance during crises, the experts' epistemic authority drives positive public perceptions and policy compliance.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians faced complex questions and dilemmas. These dilemmas spanned across numerous policy fields, entailing sanitary, social, economic, and political questions (Capano et al., 2020: 286). As such, governments faced a unique situation in which knowledge gaps and new information were unfolding in parallel with the emerging crisis. Despite facing severe cognitive limitations and high ambiguity, politicians had to decide on the optimal measures by taking into account an assortment of variables including the severity and the contagiousness of the virus, health sector capacity, treatment costs, and the economic, social, and psychological implications of the different containment strategies.

Given the high uncertainty that the COVID-19 pandemic entailed, there was much demand for expert knowledge and guidance (Capano et al., 2020: 289). Subsequently, the pandemic made the role of experts in policymaking more pronounced. Experts played a central role in advising policymakers in real-time. They appeared to be far more central to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to previous crises; some even became "super advisors" managing to influence the crisis management effort more than any other stakeholder (Ladi, Angelou, & Panagiotatou, 2021). As a result, evidence-informed policymaking became the norm within international organizations and national governments (Boin et al., 2021; Cairney & Wellstead, 2020) while also enjoying high levels of public trust.

We claim that, during crises, there are two main features determining public perceptions and, in turn, levels of public trust toward experts. The first one has to do with overall levels of political trust. As noted above, political trust refers to public trust toward the government, the democratic system, and public institutions (Blind, 2007: 17), with experts occasionally being perceived as part of this broader framework. Subsequently, we expect pre-crisis levels of trust to influence how a crisis affects trust toward experts and evidence-informed policymaking. The most common index measuring political trust is the respective OECD index. While the OECD does not measure public trust toward experts in particular, but instead focuses on trust in governments, it constitutes a fitting measurement of general levels of political trust, that is, whether they lie above or below the OECD average.

The second feature that affects public perceptions and trust toward experts during crises is the framework that governs expert involvement in decision-making. For example, if expert involvement is mandatory, experts become an inherent part of the crisis management effort, which also entails a public that is generally accustomed and receptive to their advice. Overall, the level of institutionalization of evidence-informed policymaking is contingent upon a number of properties, including the existence of a permanent body of experts, whether expert consultation is mandatory and how accustomed the public is to expert involvement in the decision-making process.

We argue that the constellation of these two features theoretically determines public perceptions and levels of public trust toward experts during crises and, in turn, during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, these two features also guide our case selection.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The article employs a mixed methods approach with three stages: first, it employs a global database on the role of experts during the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic; second, it selects four case studies for deeper analysis; and third, it conducts an original public opinion survey. The aim is to combine an analysis of the policy level with an understanding of individuals' perceptions about experts.

The analysis employs a database that covers 16 countries from across the globe, selected on the basis of their political and economic features and handling of the pandemic during both the containment and the vaccine rollout phase (Ladi, Panagiotatou, & Angelou, 2021). In this database, particular attention is given to the role of experts during the handling of the pandemic.

From these 16 countries, we selected the four countries discussed in this article: Germany, Sweden, Greece, and the United Kingdom. All four were subject to the same political fundamentals and limitations, being all European Western liberal democracies. As such, they were all similarly constrained from employing excessively restrictive policies—a limitation that non-democratic regimes like China and Russia did not face. At the same time, all four states openly employed evidence-informed policies to manage the pandemic; they leveraged the knowledge of experts to shape efficient policies and to attain legitimacy and, in turn, compliance.

However, our four cases lie at different intervals vis-a-vis the two features described in the previous section (Figure 1). In particular, Germany, Sweden, Greece, and the United Kingdom constitute different political trust environments based on the relevant OECD index on trust in Government. Germany (60.48%) and Sweden (63.35%) act as typical cases of high-trust environments lying above the OECD average (OECD, 2021). Greece (40.17%) and the United Kingdom (39.48%) both lie below the OECD average. While Greece lies closer to the OECD average, differences between the two countries are marginal, and as such they both act as typical cases for countries that lie below the OECD average.

With respect to the institutionalization of evidence-informed policymaking, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom all have bodies of experts that are well-embedded in their governance systems. As such, their public is accustomed, to a greater or lesser extent, to expert involvement in the decision-making process. In particular, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) in Germany is an independent permanent government agency responsible for monitoring and combating infectious and non-infectious diseases (Hallam, 2020). Similarly, the Swedish Public Health Agency is responsible for protecting the population against communicable diseases and coordinates communicable disease control at the national level. It also develops regulations and guidance for healthcare professionals to ensure effective communicable disease control (Petridou, 2020). Finally, the UK's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has an official mandate to provide evidence-informed scientific advice to support government decision-makers during emergencies (Hunter, 2020). While expert consultation is not always mandatory, all three states occasionally employ experts in policymaking. On the other hand, Greece constitutes a case in which expert involvement in policymaking is generally weak. Experts have traditionally been marginal in the decision-making process;

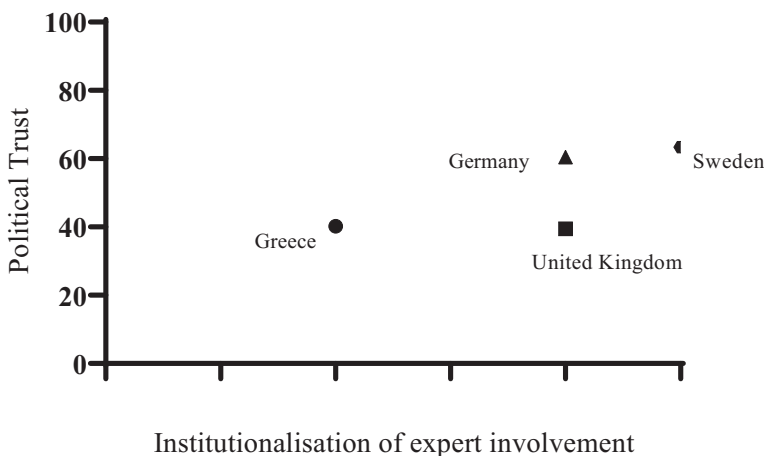


FIGURE 1 Perceptions on experts during crisis.

past efforts to apply some sort of evidence-informed policymaking had limited success, especially with respect to economic reforms (Tinios, 2013; Trantidis, 2016).

Given all the above, our cases differ in at least one of the dimensions analyzed in the previous section, meaning levels of political trust and levels of institutionalization of expert involvement. Such variation, while relevant mainly for the European democratic context, allows us to generalize our findings.

The third step of our study was to conduct an original survey that used stratified quota sampling with identical questions for all respondents. It was designed and tested in the four countries, to which we applied a two-way correlation across the entire dataset with Šidák check. The survey was commissioned by YouGov and conducted between 5 and 26 March 2021. In total, 4848 responses were obtained. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

In order to understand the general public's attitude toward experts, we asked respondents questions on the importance of evidence/advice from experts in policymaking, on the effect of experts' input in the decision-making process, and on their impressions on experts' accuracy, accountability, transparency, and care. We also asked respondents about their levels of trust retrospectively before the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to whether different actors acted in the best interest of the public. Furthermore, we posed questions about the importance of experts' advice when it comes to the containment of COVID-19. Moreover, in order to facilitate comparisons, we posed similar questions with respect to politicians and the management of the pandemic.

Overall, this survey provides a snapshot of public trust toward governments and experts at an early stage of the pandemic. In this sense, its results diverge from the respective OECD index on trust in government as they reflect trust in government at a very particular point in time, a time in which experts played a dominant role vis-a-vis the day-to-day management of an unprecedented crisis. As such, our survey results reflect public trust toward governmental crisis-management that follows expert advice, not toward governmental institutions in general.

4 | SURVEY FINDINGS: CITIZENS' TRUST TOWARD EXPERTS AND THE GOVERNMENT IN FOUR COUNTRIES

Our survey clearly shows that citizens trusted experts and welcomed their involvement in the policymaking process. More importantly, they seemed to trust experts more than politicians vis-a-vis the management of the pandemic.

We included several demographic variables in order to avail possible explanations with regard to citizens' trust. First, a positive correlation is detected between education and our trust variables, suggesting that the higher the education, the higher the likelihood of trust toward both government and experts. Second, we found a weak association with age, suggesting that the higher the respondent's age, the lower the likelihood of trusting experts and the government. Third, when it comes to gender, our analysis shows that males have less trust in government officials to receive and act on expert advice. In addition, males, along with younger population respondents, have more trust in experts not affiliated with the government. Finally, with regards to voting, data

TABLE 1 Overview of sample.

Country	N	Gender (m-f) %	Age group (mean)	University degree (%)	Importance of scientific/medical evidence from experts in policy making (%)
Germany	1628	51–49	40–54	37	88
Greece	503	48–52	40–54	29	93
Sweden	1001	50–50	40–54	19	89
UK	1716	49–51	40–54	21	91
Total	4848	49.5–50.5	40–54	26.5	90.2

TABLE 2 Matrix correlations on levels of trust on overall sample.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Trust in government officials before COVID-19								
2. Trust in experts before COVID-19	0.507 ^a							
3. Importance of scientific/medical evidence from experts in policy making	0.253 ^a	0.435 ^a						
4. Trust in government officials during COVID-19	0.431 ^a	0.381 ^a	0.237 ^a					
5. Trust in experts during COVID-19	0.582 ^a	0.610 ^a	0.424 ^a	0.618 ^a				
6. Trust in government officials to receive and act on expert advice on the situation and on policy measures during COVID-19	0.552 ^a	0.418 ^a	0.294 ^a	0.656 ^a	0.535 ^a			
7. Trust in experts to provide government advice on the situation and on policy measures during COVID-19	0.448 ^a	0.544 ^a	0.392 ^a	0.545 ^a	0.655 ^a	0.667 ^a		
8. Trust in experts that were not affiliated with the government and did not provide advice on the situation and on policy measures during COVID-19	0.191 ^a	0.292 ^a	0.225 ^a	0.162 ^a	0.300 ^a	0.310 ^a	0.349 ^a	
9. Age	-0.358 ^a	-0.214 ^a	-0.168 ^a	-0.808 ^a	-0.718 ^a			0.193 ^a
10. Education	0.662 ^a	0.498 ^a	0.698 ^a	0.696 ^a	0.501 ^a			
11. Vote	0.352 ^a	0.427 ^a		0.227 ^a	0.353 ^a			
12. Gender						0.210 ^a		0.688 ^a

^aCorrelation is significant at the 0.01 level.

suggests that the more liberal the respondent, the higher the likelihood of trust toward governments and experts (Table 2). Given existing research, this analysis of demographic variables does not reveal any new trends (Ahluwalia et al., 2021: 290; Bundi & Pattyn, 2022: 11).

However, in the analysis of our data, we identified a common pattern with respect to trust levels vis-a-vis experts and evidence-informed policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Expressly, respondents declared a higher level of trust when government policies came directly from experts rather than just the government. In more detail, when asked about trust in government policy coming from experts, 77.20% of the respondents gave a positive answer (completely trusting and trusting experts). In comparison, 13.20% responded negatively (completely not trusting and not trusting experts), of which only 6.06% reported complete distrust. Such findings point to a significant level of trust in experts' advice when the latter is incorporated into the government's pandemic management strategy.

When it comes to policies coming directly from the government, only 50.5% of the respondents answered positively (completely trusting and trusting the government), with 26.98% answering negatively (not trusting the government) and another 18.79% declaring complete distrust toward the government. From a combined analysis of descriptive statistics, it is evident that during the COVID-19 pandemic, government policies coming directly from the government were more distrusted compared to the ones suggested by experts.

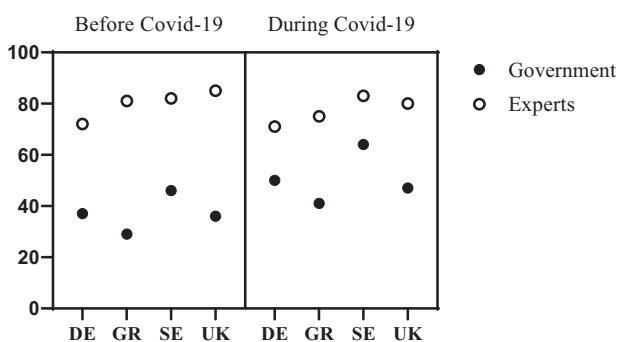


FIGURE 2 Level of trust in policies coming from government and experts before and during COVID-19.

Covering the periods both before (retrospectively) and during the COVID-19 pandemic and focusing on the country level, Figure 2 compares levels of trust toward policies coming from the government and policies coming directly from experts.

A cross-country comparison and overtime comparison (before/during COVID-19) validates the view that overall experts enjoyed higher trust levels compared to politicians, both before and during the pandemic, thus leading to higher trust levels toward evidence-informed policymaking. Sweden consistently notes the highest levels of trust both in government and in experts, followed by Germany and the United Kingdom, while Greece has the lowest levels of trust toward the government both before and during COVID-19.

Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that while experts are consistently more trusted compared to politicians, the overtime evolution of trust toward these two actors nuances this trend. In all four countries, data points to a significant increase in trust toward decisions coming directly from the government, compared to before the pandemic. At the same time, in Greece and the United Kingdom, there is a decrease of 5% in trust toward experts compared to levels of trust prior to the pandemic (Figure 2).

When looking at the relations between our variables, our data show significant positive associations between trust in government and trust in experts both before and during the pandemic, along with the role of experts in the decision-making process. However, some differences in levels of correlation are detected. More specifically, although positive, the relation between the importance of the input of experts in policymaking and trust in government is relatively weaker in comparison to trust toward experts. Comparatively, trust in experts before COVID-19 has a relatively weak positive correlation with trust in government during COVID-19, whereas it is strongly and positively correlated with trust in experts during the pandemic (Table 2). In other words, trust in experts before the pandemic does not seem to play an important role when it comes to trust in government during the pandemic but is consistently positively correlated with public support toward experts during the pandemic.

We include several other variables in order to account for a more detailed understanding of experts' input in policymaking. With regard to impressions of experts' attitudes, there are some slight nuances across countries. Compared to other countries, respondents from Sweden and the United Kingdom believe more in the accuracy of experts' input and their dedication to the public good, while in all four countries, experts' accountability for mistakes and the transparency of their advice are treated with more skepticism.

When looking at the association with regards to trust in government and in experts, before and during the pandemic, we find a common positive correlation that varies though in levels of strength (Table 2). In particular, respondents who trusted experts before and during COVID-19 are highly likely to trust experts to provide advice to the government and the government to receive and act on that advice, although less likely to trust experts not affiliated with the government. On the other hand, respondents who trusted the government before and during the pandemic are highly likely to trust the government to receive and act on experts' advice. Furthermore, they are more

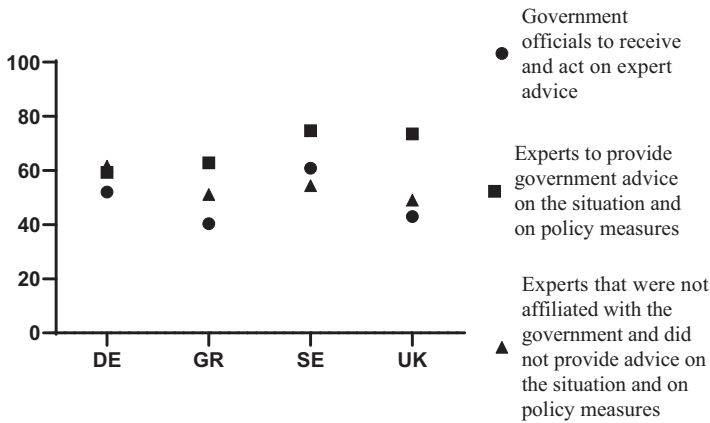


FIGURE 3 Trust on acting and/or providing experts advice.

TABLE 3 Attitudes toward experts.

Country	Accuracy (%)	Accountability (%)	Transparency (%)	Care (%)	Better policy decisions (%)
Germany	64	24	37	55	55
Greece	66	22	31	60	75
Sweden	82	28	41	64	65
UK	76	30	37	63	64
Total	72	26	36.5	60.5	65

moderately likely to trust experts to provide advice to the government and are less likely to trust experts not affiliated with the government. Respondents in three out of the four countries (with Germany being the exception) had lower trust toward experts not affiliated with the government (54.5%) compared to government-affiliated experts (67.8%; Figure 3).

When trying to explain the reasons citizens place high trust toward evidence-informed policies and experts, we find that respondents associated them with better policy decisions (Table 3).

Indeed, most respondents appeared to believe that experts advising the government had a good grasp of the evolving pandemic and that they provided adequate advice on government policies (Figure 4). In this sense, results point to the fact that experts enjoy high trust not only because they are seen as trustworthy vis-a-vis serving the public good, but also because they are seen as the most competent actors to do so. At the same time, further reflecting citizens' skepticism toward politicians and the government, respondents appeared divided over whether governments made sufficient use of this advice. These results might be attributed to the process's opacity, yet, they also constitute a negative assessment of governments' ability and willingness to embrace expert advice and, potentially, point to citizens' desire for further involvement of experts in policymaking.

The results presented above point clearly to experts enjoying more trust compared to politicians, partially based on the expectation that the former will perform better. Yet, these results are not enough to conclusively answer whether high public trust toward experts would decrease if their performance deteriorated.

To examine this question, we compare the mortality rates in the four countries with their respective levels of citizens' trust toward experts. The four cases lay at very different intervals vis-a-vis the effectiveness of their containment strategy. In particular, as of March 3, 2021, the day our survey began, the United Kingdom totaled 1816.07 deaths per million, Sweden 1275.96 deaths per million, Germany 849.64 deaths per million, while Greece reported

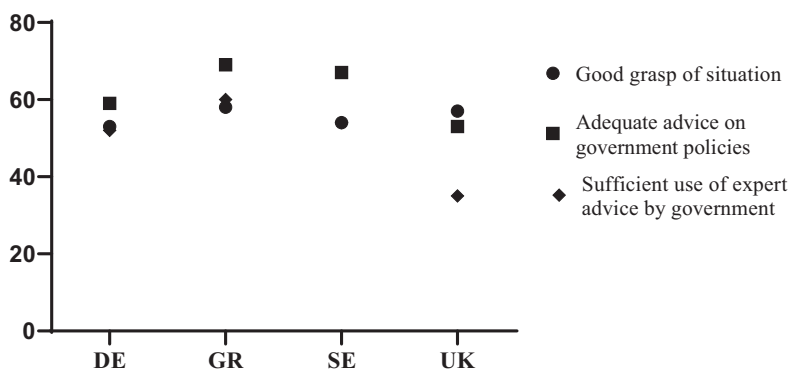


FIGURE 4 Perceptions of experts' input and its use.

636.12 deaths per million (Our World in Data, 2021). It is evident that Sweden and the United Kingdom performed worse than Germany and Greece during that period.

Many attribute such results to Sweden and the United Kingdom following relevant expert advice and adopting non-precautionary containment strategies to avoid early lockdown fatigue. Nevertheless, respondents in the two countries still showed high trust levels toward evidence-informed policies and experts. Citizens did not seem to prefer policies coming directly from the government, even when the results of policies employed by the government using experts' advice were suboptimal.

5 | DISCUSSION: POLICY CHOICES, CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS, AND THE DOMINANCE OF EXPERTS

In this section, we discuss our data on government policy choices in combination with our findings from the survey and the mortality rates in each country. Our results show that in all four countries, there was a strong demand for evidence-informed policies during the pandemic. In all four cases, citizens seemed to prefer government policies that were informed by experts' input. Interestingly, we observe this trend independently of the two features presented as determinants of trust toward experts during crises: institutionalization of experts' involvement in policymaking and political trust.

This suggests that independently of a country's experience with evidence-informed policymaking and the latter's level of institutionalization, the public showed more trust toward experts, rather than politicians. In Sweden, in the United Kingdom, and, to a certain extent, in Germany, there is an established culture of embedding experts in the policymaking process, thus rendering them an inherent part of the crisis-management effort. This would entail that the public is routinely seeking and trusting expert advice. On the other hand, Greece lacked such a culture and resorted to the creation of an ad hoc body of experts (Ladi, Angelou, & Panagiotatou, 2021). Nevertheless, even in this case, we observe a general demand for the greater participation of experts in crisis-management.

With regard to long-term trends in relation to surveys on trust, we compared our findings with the OECD data on trust in government (Figure 5).

As evident from Figure 5, the pandemic led citizens to trust their governments more, with all four governments of our study enjoying a substantial increase in political trust, thus moving closer, surpassing, or staying above the OECD average. Nevertheless, none of the four governments managed to surpass the public trust levels that experts enjoyed both before and during the pandemic. The latter's trust levels remained well above the OECD average of trust in government. With respect to overtime trust toward experts, the two countries lying above the OECD average, meaning Sweden and Germany, demonstrated relatively stable levels of public trust toward experts both before

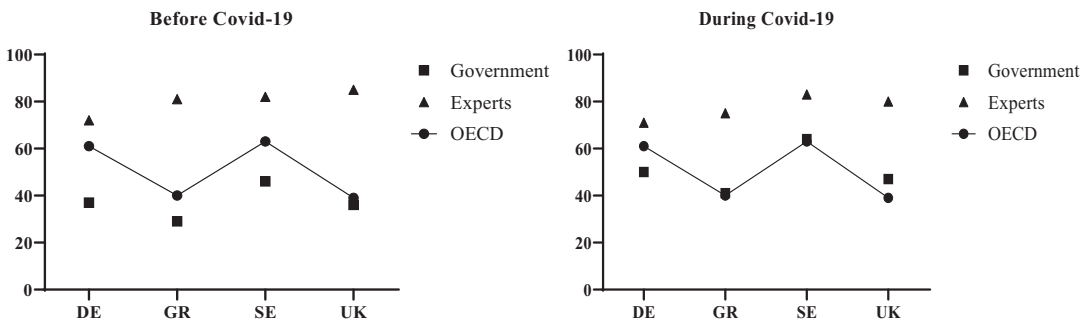


FIGURE 5 Comparison of trust surveys.

and during the pandemic. Yet, for the two cases that lie below the OECD average, Greece and the United Kingdom, we observe a slight decrease in trust toward experts, compared to pre-pandemic levels.

This slight overtime drop of trust can be attributed to the experts' extensive involvement in the government's communication campaign. Due to the fact that they were asked to present and justify restrictive policies, it is very likely that the public ended up linking them with arduous policy choices. At the same time, the occasionally shifting advice of experts, due to evolving research, might also have contributed to this slight drop of trust. Consequently, one can associate the observed drop of trust with the public's discontent for excessively restrictive measures, along with uncertainty over the validity of the evidence employed. While our survey and analysis do not render clear what drives this trend, it is clear that expert involvement in crisis management, and, in particular, their increased exposure to the public eye, entails reputational risks that might have an adverse effect on public trust. Finally, given that both Greece and the United Kingdom lie below the OECD average, one can argue that such an effect is more likely to occur in societies with low levels of political trust.

With respect to the mechanisms driving this trend, we argue that the “performance-based” mechanism can explain government preferences in favor of evidence-informed policymaking. All four countries opted for this policymaking style when confronted with an unknown virus and very little time to act. Although they used different structures for involving experts in the policymaking process, the rationale of their choice was the same, meaning they aimed to cover knowledge gaps in view of attaining better solutions. As such, we assume that, to a greater or lesser extent, all four governments ended up employing expert advice to inform their policies. In addition, our survey suggests that there was a general perception that experts' input would lead to better policy outcomes as they had a better grasp of the situation.

The technocratic legitimacy thesis explains why all governments gave a prominent role to experts in the communication of arduous measures to the public. This is supported by our survey results which confirm that the public trusts experts independently of the success of the policy measures or the rationale employed to justify them. To reach such conclusions, the analysis compares two somewhat different expert approaches to the pandemic represented by Germany and Greece on the one hand and by Sweden and the United Kingdom on the other hand.

On the one hand, Germany and Greece ended up employing evidence-informed policies that followed a more cautionary approach to the virus, meaning policies that favored restrictive measures like travel bans and curfews. This approach led to relatively low mortality rates at the beginning of the pandemic. On the other hand, Sweden and the United Kingdom, while still employing experts in the policy design phase and in their communication campaigns, ended up following a non-precautionary approach based on a rationale that aimed to avert restriction-related fatigue along with preserving civil liberties. This approach, as employed by their respective governments, led to the emergence of higher mortality rates compared to the rest of Europe.

Starting with Germany, its government-employed two permanent scientific bodies, the RKI and, to a lesser extent, the Paul-Ehrlich-Institut (PEI; Federal Institute for Vaccines and Biomedicines)—to receive scientific advice.

RKI mainly interacted with regional governments (Länder) as in the German legal framework, emergency management falls under the authority of local governments (Kuhn & Morlino, 2021: 5). RKI's overall approach favored restrictive measures that emphasized physical distancing and minimum social interaction. With German regional authorities receiving similar scientific advice and the central government playing the mediator's role, regional governments followed, at least initially, a strategy of coordination, thus uniformly interpreting and applying expert advice. Consequently, this led to similar restrictive measures like stay-at-home orders and curfews (Hattke & Martin, 2020: 620; Vampa, 2021: 613–614). RKI also undertook the communication effort, publishing daily situation reports, while its head held daily press briefings.

Greece also employed expert input to inform its initial approach to the pandemic, thus, adopting a proactive strategy that favored some of the most restrictive measures in Europe (Zahariadis et al., 2021). For the COVID-19 crisis, an ad hoc National Experts Committee on Public Health, composed of around 30 medical experts, was put into place already in early February 2020. The Experts' Committee was placed at the forefront of the crisis management effort while its recommendations were by and large uncontested by the government- at least during the pandemic's first wave. Furthermore, experts held a central role in the government's communication campaign. The Committee's head, Professor of Pathology and Infectious Disease, Sotiris Tsiodras, became the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health for COVID-19 and led the communication effort in collaboration with the head of the General Secretariat of Civil Protection and Crisis Management. This strategy has enabled the creation of a clear link between evidence and policy (Ladi, Angelou, & Panagiotatou, 2021).

All in all, Greece and Germany followed an approach that ended up being the standard policy response for most European governments, leading to relatively low mortality rates early in the crisis. At the same time, experts in Sweden and in the United Kingdom opted for a rather different approach to pandemic-related restrictions.

Sweden adopted an approach with few restrictive measures (Winblad et al., 2022; Zahariadis et al., 2021: 12–14). Its initial response to the pandemic, informed by the advice of the Public Health Agency, did not contain mandatory restrictions like lockdowns and opted for recommendations instead (Pierre, 2020: 484–485). The rationale underlying this approach was that intrusive measures would be at odds with Sweden's political and administrative culture and would not be sustainable in the long term as it would lead to early restriction-related fatigue and non-compliance (Bouckaert et al., 2020; Petridou, 2020: 153; Pierre, 2020: 486). Moreover, it appears that excessively restrictive measures would constitute violations of the relevant constitutional provisions (Engler et al., 2021: 1096). In addition, the Public Health Agency was of the firm belief that restrictive policies had to be balanced and moderate in view of safeguarding the mental health of citizens (Winblad et al., 2022: 51). Overall, Sweden's initial response to the pandemic has been characterized as fragmented (Maggetti & Trein, 2022: 61). This is so as the Swedish government was reluctant to combine restrictive measures with other pandemic-mitigation policies, such as investing in protective equipment, while it faced constraints due to its decentralized structure of governance (Winblad et al., 2022: 51). Conclusively, the Public Health Agency's strategy, in conjunction with the country's governing system, led Sweden faring much worse compared to its Nordic neighbors and other comparable cases worldwide, at least during the pandemic's first wave (Gustavsson & Taghizadeh, 2023: 2; Petridou, 2020: 148; Pierre, 2020: 486).

A similar pattern can be observed in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom also employed a non-precautionary approach, partially attributed to its relevant legal provisions (Engler et al., 2021: 1088–89) but also to economic and political considerations (Lavazza & Farina, 2020: 6–7). Following the advice of SAGE, the UK government postponed the implementation of restrictive measures during the pandemic's early days in an effort to avoid restriction-related fatigue (Hunter, 2020). It is important to note that SAGE received input from other independent scientific groups. Indeed, SAGE has been particularly influential given its wide membership and ability to bring the relevant scientific community together (Hanson et al., 2021: 5). This feature also explains why the administrations of the devolved nations, while having their own chief medical officers and chief scientific advisers, opted to coordinate with the chief medical officer of the UK government and the government's chief scientific adviser (Diamond & Laffin, 2021: 7). While such convergence ceased after May 2020, with the four administrations following distinct

approaches with respect to deconfinement (Cameron-Blake et al., 2020: 10–12), the four nations followed a similar approach during the pandemic's early days.

Following SAGE's advice, the whole of the United Kingdom adopted a non-precautionary approach that led to a higher number of deaths per million compared to countries that had weaker healthcare capacity in continental Europe. The United Kingdom decided to take a more active approach only in mid-March, after the publication of a relevant study from Imperial College London warning of the pandemic's adverse effects on the National Health System. In this instance, the UK government attempted to consolidate the view that its evolving approach to pandemic management was following expert advice; indeed, the research community played a significant role in the observed policy change (Hanson et al., 2021: 11).

Despite the fact that expert advice in Sweden and the United Kingdom led governments to adopt non-precautionary containment strategies, thus leading to higher death tolls in relation to the rest of Europe, trust in experts remained higher compared to politicians. For Sweden, studies have shown that high mortality rates did not influence trust toward the government and the health authorities (Gustavsson & Taghizadeh, 2023: 2; Hanson et al., 2021: 10; Helsingen et al., 2020: 3). Between March and April, trust toward the government and the Public Health Agency remained stable (Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021: 1193–1194), with another study even suggesting that citizens' trust toward the government rose (Esaiaasson et al., 2021: 753). In addition, a survey by Helsingen et al. in April (2020) showed that a clear majority of Swedes strongly agreed with the statement that they received credible information from their authorities, while they also believed that government decisions were based on scientific evidence (Helsingen et al., 2020: 3).

Our analysis confirms these insights; during the pandemic's early phases, the Swedish Public Health Agency enjoyed higher levels of trust compared to other knowledge sources, like experts not affiliated with the government. It appears that despite the death toll, citizens trusted the authorities, and especially the head of the Public Health Agency, due to their elevated institutional pride stemming from the country's strong track record vis-a-vis science, democracy, and welfare. Overall, the Swedish approach was presented as being based on scientific expertise instead of being subject to politically-driven panic (Gustavsson & Taghizadeh, 2023: 11–12, 19; Kuhlmann et al., 2021: 344).

In Britain, despite its deteriorating mortality rate during the pandemic's early days, our survey shows that SAGE experts enjoyed more trust compared to politicians. Such an outcome is surprising as a previous experiment concluded that advice from politicians and experts had roughly similar positive effects when it came to mask-wearing against COVID-19 (Anderson & Hobolt, 2023: 313).

All in all, even though the results of government policies based on experts' advice were suboptimal, public trust toward experts remained higher compared to politicians. As this was the case despite the varying mortality rates in the four countries, the analysis points toward the prevalence of the technocratic legitimacy thesis, meaning that it was the experts' authority rather than their effectiveness that drove public trust. However, the governments' choice to employ an evidence-informed approach to pandemic management derived from the policymakers' belief that experts were necessary for finding the optimal solution, thus lending analytical strength to the performance-based mechanism.

6 | LIMITATIONS

Our study faces a number of limitations. First, while we chose our cases in view of ensuring generalizability, we recognize that our insights mainly apply to states that are lying within the European democratic context. Another limitation has to do with the employed data. As our public opinion survey was conducted during the pandemic's early phase, the analysis is only covering a particular point in time. In this sense, it does not cover overtime changes in public perceptions. Consequently, our results did not capture the evolving debate within the scientific community and how this might have affected public trust toward experts. Moreover, our data did not allow us to capture divides in public opinion in great depth. While we have data on how demographics (education, age, sex, political orientation)

only marginally affected public perceptions toward experts, our results, being a snapshot of the pandemic's early days, do not highlight any major demographic divides that might have emerged later. All in all, our insights mainly apply to the crisis' early phase and might be less relevant for its later stages. As such, future longitudinal comparative research would be useful in order to confirm our findings and argument.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

Our research combined an analysis of the policy environment and public opinion trends regarding expert involvement in the management of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results highlight that during the pandemic, respondents trusted more evidence-informed policies and experts, compared to government officials and the usual policymaking process. Our analysis, then, employed a comparative perspective in view of disentangling the causal paths leading to such results. We showed that the public welcomed expert involvement in the crisis management effort, independently of the policy output it produced. Experts remained the citizens' preferred source of crisis management policies even when the government's application of experts' advice delivered results that seemed suboptimal in comparison to other countries.

These insights are significant vis-a-vis our understanding of experts' role in crisis management. We suggest that the public seeks expert input not only during periods of normalcy (Bertsou, 2021) but also under crisis conditions, especially with respect to complex issues requiring authoritative expertise. In this sense, we show that when the policymaking process is opaque and fast-paced, with citizens having limited knowledge of the transpiring events, experts are seen as the most suitable actors to deal with the evolving emergency. In effect, crisis conditions seem to lead citizens to favor evidence-informed policymaking. Interestingly, such increased trust in experts is observed even in countries in which the public traditionally shows high levels of trust toward the government and public institutions, that is, in Sweden and Germany. It is overall clear that during the COVID-19 crisis, citizens found expert input in policymaking more trustworthy, compared to the contributions and suggestions of elected politicians.

Furthermore, the article demonstrated that although the performance-based mechanism can explain governmental policy choices during crises, it is the "technocratic legitimacy" thesis that accounts better for citizens welcoming the involvement of experts in crisis management efforts. Experts are perceived as a more authoritative source of information and expertise; their input and advice can be employed to legitimize and foster compliance with crisis management policies. As such, the public welcomes politicians following experts' advice during crises.

Interestingly, this was the case in all our four cases despite the fact that they constituted different political trust environments. As such, our results seem to extend over a wide range of trust environments within the OECD framework, from low to high-trust societies. Moreover, our results seem to hold independently of the institutional arrangement within which experts operated (Jugl, 2022: 3). Even in cases in which experts operated within an ad hoc body with no public presence prior to the pandemic, they appeared to enjoy high levels of public trust.

Future research on the role of experts in different politico-administrative systems would further deepen our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of evidence-informed policymaking during crises. First, future research can explore further whether particular demographic groups are more or less receptive to expert involvement in policymaking and to evidence-informed policymaking in general. Moreover, studies can delve more into the conditions under which the increased role of experts might lead the public to change its positive attitude toward evidence-informed policymaking. A prominent research avenue would be to examine the drivers leading to a decline in citizens' trust toward experts within the crisis framework. Another area for future research is to examine how unsuccessful crisis management efforts might change citizens' trust toward experts in the long term.

Finally, our analysis offers numerous insights for politicians and policymakers. It is next to certain that they will be called to deal with severe crises in the future, while they will also have to build resilient mechanisms that allow them to manage such emergencies efficiently. Our analysis argues that consulting experts entails positive effects in terms of citizens' trust. More importantly, consulting experts may have the potential to foster greater compliance

with policy measures (Ahluwalia et al., 2021). A relevant point has to do with how governments communicate expert involvement to the public (Zhong et al., 2023). In all four countries, respondents appeared divided on whether the government made sufficient use of the experts' input and on whether it communicated experts' advice adequately to the public. It follows that governments may be able to reap substantial trust benefits by emphasizing the role and contribution of experts in the crisis management effort. Of course, in order to do so, they need to constructively embed experts' input in government policy by putting in place processes and platforms of co-creation (Scognamiglio et al., 2023). Only then will experts be in a position to fully support and publicly advocate government policies without jeopardizing their own credibility and epistemic authority.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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