

Public Opinion, Trust, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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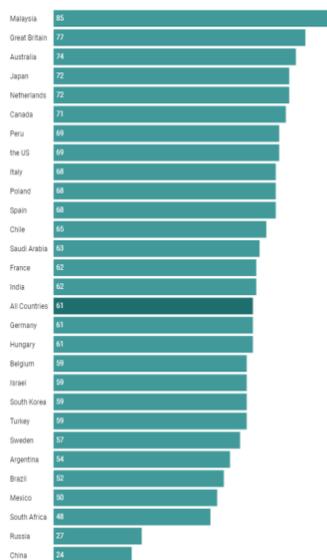
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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, policymakers must continue to navigate public perceptions of coronavirus risk and government responses. This task is all the more challenging given press coverage that may be non-representative (such as focusing on protesters who oppose lockdown measures that actually have majority support), polarization and disinformation on social media platforms, and the relative dearth of reliable public opinion polling. For example, Pew Global Research has [suspended most of its international survey work](#) in the face of the pandemic. The polling that has taken place post-COVID-19 has significantly less coverage of the Global South than the developed world, which further limits our picture of public opinion.

These constraints notwithstanding, understanding people’s perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 and their priorities emerging from this crisis will be crucial for helping us build back better. In this briefing, we pull together data from several global polls conducted over the past month and a half to provide a descriptive summary of trends in public opinion towards COVID-19, with a particular focus on levels of public trust in government and other institutions, and on public perceptions of the trade-offs involved in calibrating lockdown measures. Overall, the results suggest that most people around the world are highly concerned about the pandemic, supportive of a strong government response, and willing to suffer economic losses in order to contain the virus—although not without limit.

Section 1: COVID-19 is a Global Concern

Figure 1: Percentage who say COVID-19 is a top concern for their country today

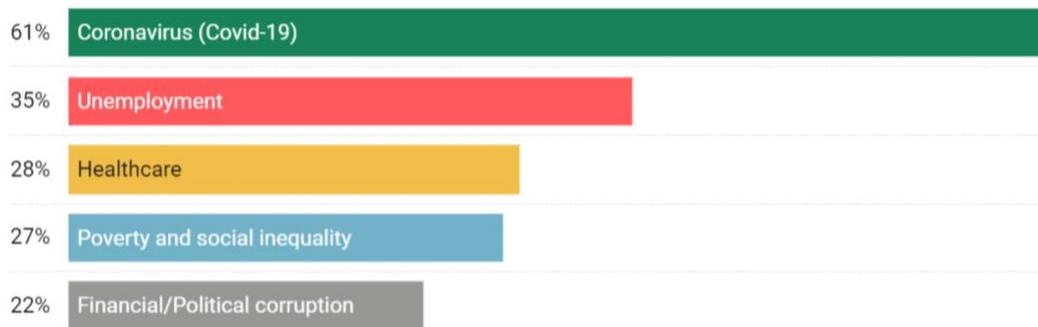


Source:
[Ipsos](#)

Recent polling conducted by Ipsos shows majorities in a wide range of countries naming COVID-19 the top concern for their country (see Figure 1). The scores recorded here are the highest seen for any issue in the ten years that Ipsos has been conducting its “What Worries the World” poll. A recent [Gallup International snap poll](#) of 28 countries also finds most people are worried about the pandemic, although many also believe the extent of the threat to be exaggerated.

The effects of the pandemic have also shifted the topics about which people are concerned (see Figure 2). In a ranking of the top five global concerns, worries about healthcare and unemployment are second only to direct concern about coronavirus itself.

Figure 2: Top 5 global concerns



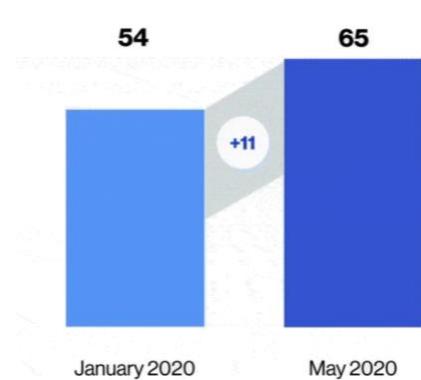
Source: [Ipsos](#)

Section 2: Trust in Institutions is High—For Now

Trust in governments has risen.

Despite the disruption the pandemic has caused, it has had a strikingly positive impact on trust in governments—as people recognize the crucial role of the state in COVID-19 response. A recent poll by Edelman surveying 13,000 respondents across the globe concluded that trust in government has spiked 11 points to an all-time high of 65 percent (see Figure 3)—the first time in 20 years of study that respondents ranked government the most trusted institution.

Figure 3: Double-digit rise in government trust



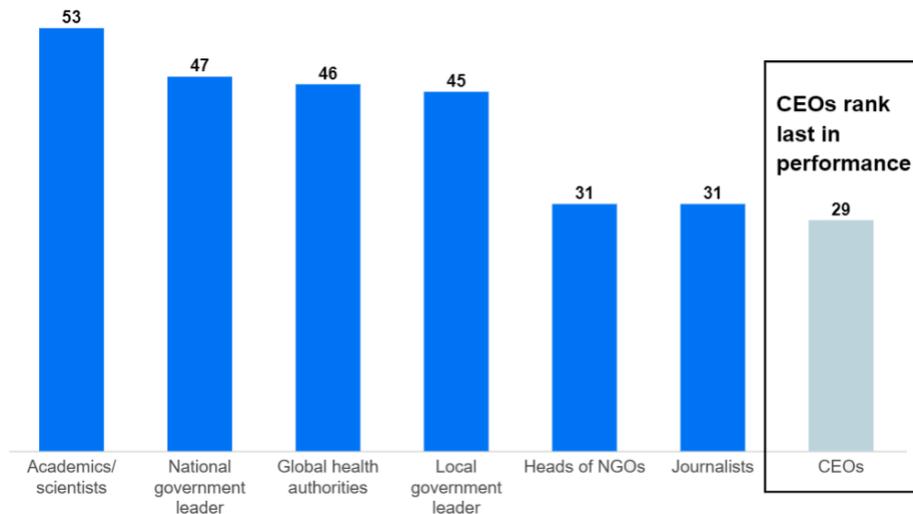
Source: [Edelman](#)

This increase in trust provides governments with an unusual chance to take decisive action backed up by public support—as CIC has [argued](#), the pandemic is an opportunity to build back better, and this data suggests leaders should seize the moment. However, they should also be mindful that this high degree of public trust may not last, especially if the response is ineffective. After the September 11th attacks, trust in government in the United States skyrocketed to [its highest point since the 1960s](#), but gradually [declined again in the following twelve months](#). According to Edelman’s Trust Barometer, of 17 countries that experienced double-digit gains in reported trust in institutions (media, government, business, and so forth) since 2012, 13 [also saw a trust loss within a year](#)—suggesting that this increase could be a temporary bubble. A swift and effective government response is important to sustaining high trust in the long-term.

Experts and national leaders are trusted more than NGO leaders, journalists, and CEOs.

Edelman also found that academics and scientists are the most trusted group, followed by national leaders (53% and 47% respectively), while business leaders and CEOs are the least trusted (see Figure 4).

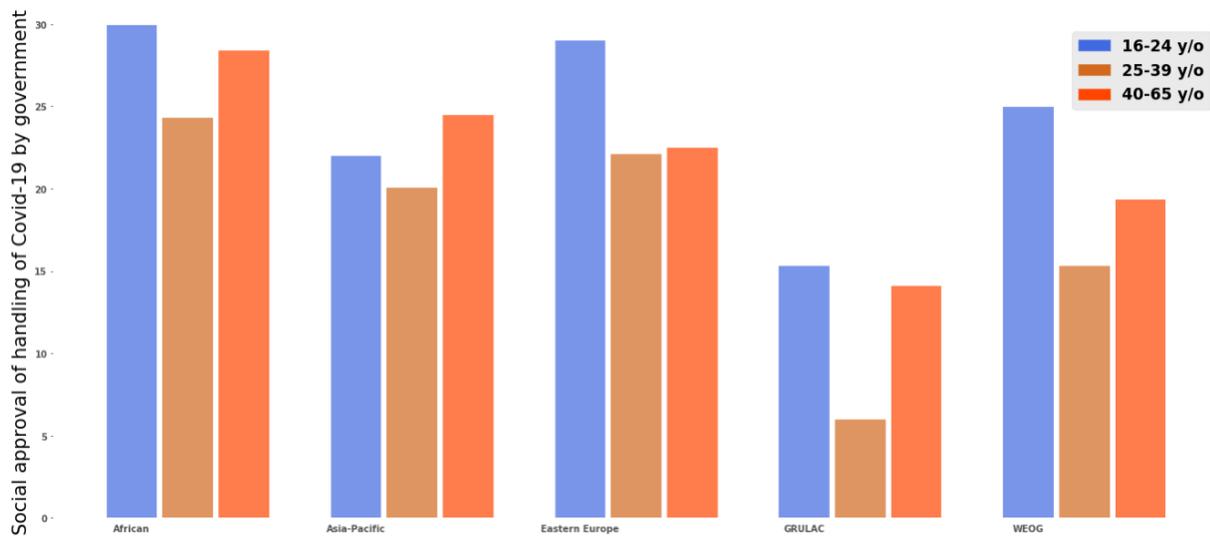
Figure 4: Percent who say each group are doing an outstanding job on the pandemic



Source: [Edelman](#)

A survey of 45 countries by the polling company [Dalia](#) presents an age and gender-disaggregated picture of citizen approval of government actions. Across the globe, the youngest cohort (age 16-24) is the most supportive of government policies on COVID-19, while those in the most economically active group—people between the ages of 25 to 39—are the least likely to express approval. People in the 40-65 age group fall in between, holding mostly positive attitudes. The size of the gap in opinion between age groups varies across world regions. In Eastern Europe and Asia-Pacific, people in the age 25-39 bracket are only slightly more frustrated, while in others, like Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Europe and North America, the wedge is more pronounced (see Figure 5). In all but one region, women are more likely to support government actions than men, but the difference in approval by gender are not large.

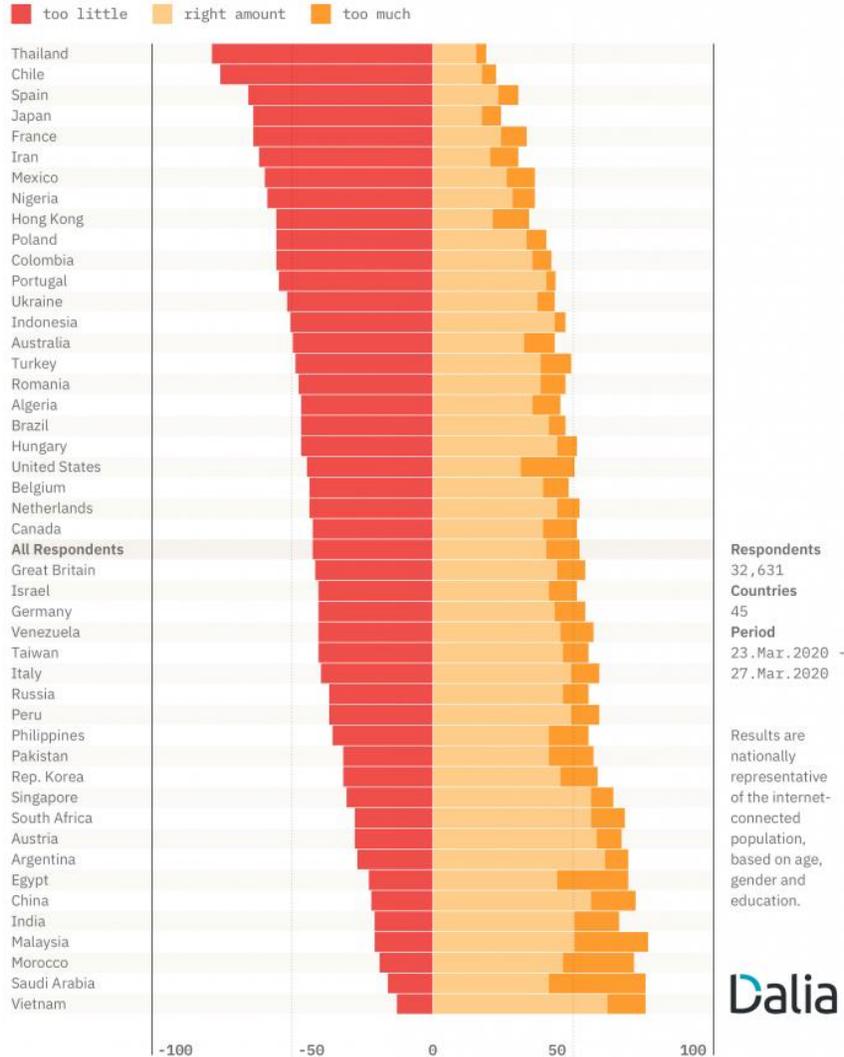
Figure 5: Average approval for government’s handling of the pandemic on a scale of -100 to +100 per age group in each of the UN Regions



Source: CIC based on [Dalia](#)

The Dalia poll also asked respondents whether governments have done too much or too little. Interpretation of these results is not easy, since “too little” could mean too little lockdown or too little public health action, communication, and social protection—and “too much” could equally mean any of these things. However, the results do show that popular criticism tends to veer in the direction of governments doing too little, rather than them doing too much (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Judgment by country about the government response to COVID-19

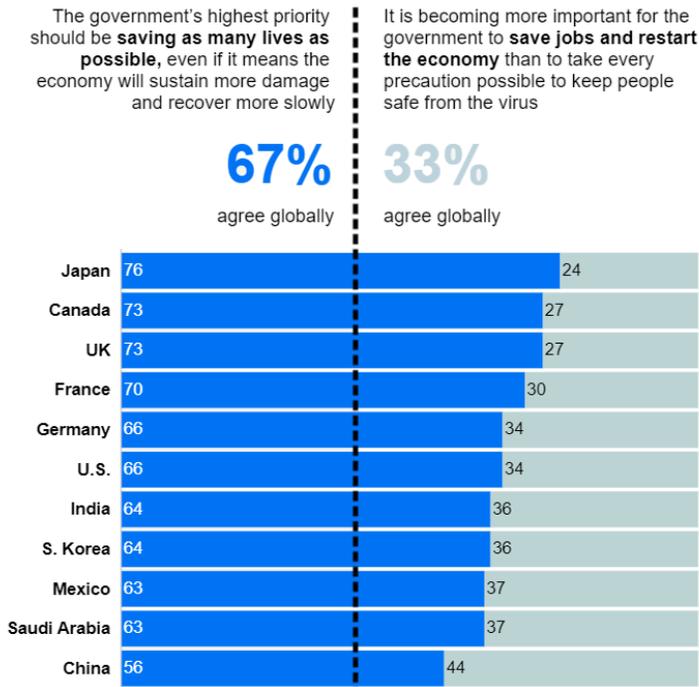


Source: [Dalia](#)

Section 3: A Global Majority Prioritizes Public Health over the Economy

Recent news reports, especially from the United States, have highlighted the ongoing debate about balancing the need to reopen the economy with the public health risks of ending the lockdown too soon. Edelman’s polling reveals that globally, an overwhelming majority of 67% believe that saving lives should be governments’ highest priority, despite the economic consequences (see Figure 7). Economic concerns are important, but most people see them as a lower priority than the immediate public health threat. As CIC’s [analysis has noted](#), lockdowns can also [risk health and lives](#), so this calibration remains a challenge.

Figure 7: Saving lives versus saving jobs and restarting the economy



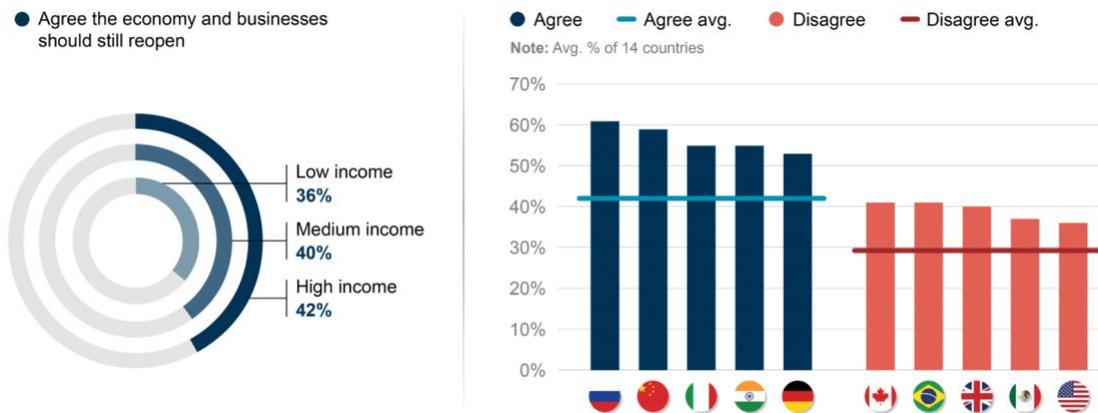
Source: [Edelman](#)

Opinions on whether or not the economy should reopen even if the coronavirus is not fully contained diverge from country to country. In an Ipsos poll covering 14 countries and over 28,000 respondents, a majority opposed reopening the economy if the virus is not under control. However, there are slim majorities in favor of reopening even if the virus is not fully contained in China, India, Germany, Italy, and Russia.

It should be noted that low income countries where the risks of hunger are particularly high are not represented in either the Edelman or IPSOS polls.

The Ipsos poll also showed that high-income households are more likely to want the economy to reopen (42%) than low-income households (36%), even if the virus is not yet contained (see Figure 8). There could be several reasons for this gap—for example, those with higher incomes have better access to remote work and healthcare, and as such feel their lives are in less danger, despite the risk to poor households.

Figure 8: High-income households more likely to support reopening even if COVID-19 is not yet contained

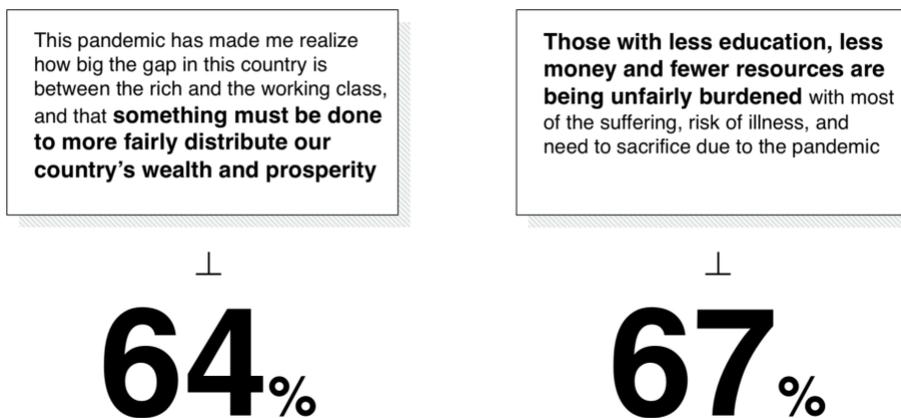


Source: [Ipsos](#)

However, the results of recent polling also show an increase in public awareness of social inequities, and a growing willingness to support pro-equality, redistributive measures. Roughly two-thirds of respondents across countries believe that the poor have been unfairly burdened with both illness and economic sacrifice, and that redistribution is necessary as a response. Figure 9 shows that more than two thirds of people polled in the Edelman Trust Barometer [found that 67 percent of respondents](#) agreed that the impact of the virus increased inequality, while 64 percent of respondents agreed that the pandemic has made them more aware of the gap between rich and poor and the need for redistribution. Moreover, [polls in a range of countries find support](#) for measures once deemed radical, from job guarantees and cash benefits to eliminating spending restrictions.

Figure 9: Growing recognition of socioeconomic inequality

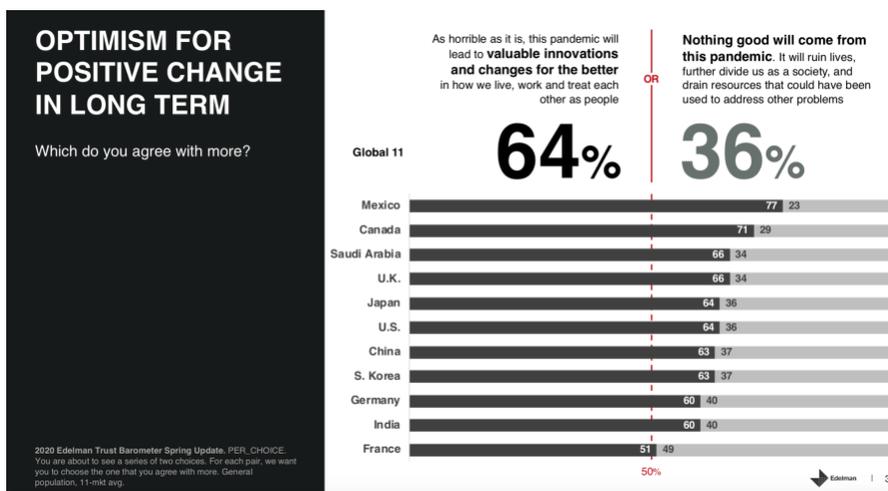
Percent who agree



Source: [Edelman](#)

These results provide grounds for optimism that societies will be able to muster the political will to build back better—and indeed, Edelman finds that globally, 64% believe that the pandemic can lead to innovation and change for the better, despite the suffering many are experiencing now (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Global optimism about the opportunity for long-term change



Source: [Edelman](#)