In Science We (Should) Trust

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Abstract

The magnitude and nature of the COVID-19 pandemic prevents public health policies to rely on coercive enforcement. Practicing social distancing, wearing masks and staying at home becomes voluntary and conditional on the behavior of others. We present the results of a large scale survey experiment run in nine countries with representative samples of the population (by age and gender) and find that both empirical and normative expectations play a vast and significant role in compliance, beyond the effect of any other individual or group characteristic. In our survey experiment, when empirical and normative expectations of individuals are high, compliance goes up by 55% (relative to the low expectations condition). Similar results are obtained when we look at self-reported compliance among those with high expectations (37% higher). Our results are robust to different specifications and controls, and driven by an asymmetric interaction with individuals' trust in government and trust in science. Holding expectations high, the effect of putting trust in science is substantial and significant in our vignette experiment (22% increase in compliance), and even larger in self-reported compliance (76% and 127% increase before and after the lockdown). By contrast, putting trust in government generates modest effects. At the macro level, the country level of trust in science, and not in government, becomes a strong predictor of compliance.

Key words: social norms, pandemic, public health policies, trust in government, trust in science, compliance, stay at home, social distancing