

# Collective Action, COVID-19, and ‘Strategies of Engagement’

When responding to large-scale crises that require society-wide collective action, governments use various strategies to encourage citizens to fulfill the duties assigned to them. Although governments may have the political and legal basis for demanding exceptional duties of their citizens, this alone cannot ensure compliance. Governments also need to mobilise their citizens to embrace the cause. In other words, examining the constraints on civic duty formation is insufficient; it is also necessary to explore how citizen cooperation and commitment to common causes is fostered. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a useful case study. In this policy brief, we highlight some of the ways that governments attempt to engage their citizens in large-scale, collective-action agendas and we draw lessons for the future.

## Brief Points

- When responding to large-scale, collective-action challenges, liberal democratic governments cannot simply enforce a society-wide response; they must also motivate citizens to participate.
- Governments must thus traverse the line between promoting civic duty and inspiring political virtue.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments deployed three distinct strategies in traversing this line: First, they deployed deep-seated national narratives to legitimize a desired universal frame of response; second, they used differentiated arguments to manufacture the consent of particular groups within this universal frame; and third, they tended over time to adopt more targeted policies.
- The use of these strategies during the pandemic offers insights into how governments might be expected to mobilize society in the face of other large-scale collective action challenges, such as climate change.

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## Evaluating the Politics of Lockdown

In March 2020, Norway, France and the United Kingdom introduced national lockdowns in response to COVID-19. These lockdown orders, which included closing non-essential businesses and stay-at-home laws, imposed a range of burdensome civic duties. Literally hundreds of distinct pieces of legislation were passed in each country. These lockdowns, although nationally distinctive in some ways, shared the following features:

- They placed unprecedented restrictions on social life, work life and, in some cases, family life to slow or stop the spread of the virus;
- These rules and restrictions applied to the entire population (with some exceptions for essential workers and others);
- These rules were continually revised, resulting in a highly fluid legal and political framework often in tension with basic citizenship rights and responsibilities;
- Many of these rules were imposed at similar times in each country, leading to a ‘comparative economy’ within public discourse between states.

At the same time as overt policies were enacted and the public noisily debated them, governments engaged in a more subtle process of experimenting with different ways to *encourage* their citizens to perform the duties required of them. This process raises fundamental political questions: To what lengths might liberal democratic governments—which for the past several decades have sought to avoid demanding too much of their citizens—go in constraining the freedoms of citizens in the name of a greater good? And which modes would they prefer to use to articulate these constraints?

In this policy brief, we offer preliminary answers to these questions, focusing on what we term the ‘strategies of engagement’ that governments deployed during the pandemic. Strategies of engagement may be thought of as the discursive and policy commitments made by governments during a crisis, whose specific aim is to increase the extent to which citizens voluntarily perform the civic duties assigned to them.

## From Country-Specific Responses to Common Strategies

Despite important differences in the ways that Norway, France and the UK responded to the pandemic, the similarities in their approaches over time were notable. For example, all three countries simultaneously regionalised their lockdown policies at the same time that their central governments assumed responsibilities previously the province of local authorities.<sup>1</sup> Prior studies indicate the importance to COVID-19 policy outcomes of this interaction between political *scales*.<sup>2</sup> Our study of lockdown policies suggests that governments also tended to adopt one or another strategy of engagement: casting away one frame of response, as the pandemic and public debate around it changed, in favour of one that better resonated with public needs and demands.<sup>3</sup> While this differed according to national political culture (hierarchical in France, *laissez-faire* in the UK, and cooperative in Norway), the effect was to change the balance sheet among those being asked to do more or less and on what terms. Below, we outline how different strategies of engagement emerged to manage different ‘needs’ at various stages of the pandemic. We explore strategies that emerged in response to locking down (narratives), locking in (manufacturing consent), and locking out (rejecting society-wide, universal arguments in favour of a more tailored approach).

### Narratives of Lockdown: Locking (Society) Down

In all three countries, the imposition of lockdown was accompanied by discursive strategies of engagement that centred on particular narratives. These narratives tended to highlight **discourses of duty** to legitimise or gain support for the strict policies the governments were implementing. In the UK, this involved offering **historical analogies**, for example, evoking the trope of the Blitz during World War II.<sup>4</sup> Norway, by contrast, referred to its **cultural tradition** of ‘*dugnad*’ or cooperative community work.<sup>5</sup> France, in accordance with its highly centralised political system, used the image of the president as the ‘embodiment’ of the nation: Macron declared that France was not just under attack but at war, and that his job was thus to direct the response to the pandemic as Commander in Chief, which included securing multilateral alliances and international cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Whereas each of these tropes reflected national cultural distinctions, they also reflected distinct political

visions. The spirit of the Blitz, for example, is a collective rendering of what was originally conceived of as individual resilience, expressed in the saying ‘Keep calm and carry on’. The Norwegian concept of *dugnad*, in contrast, has a strongly communitarian emphasis.

The actual demands placed on citizens—including a full-fledged curfew in France, and long periods of lockdown in parts of Norway—were substantial, even remarkable. The debate over the appropriate use of government powers in an emergency is an important one. But the governments we studied did not just push forward and put democracy at risk by overextending their powers and issuing fiat during the emergency, as was sometimes portrayed. Governments also sought to secure citizen support for their policies, and the most common approach they took was to resort to well-tested national narratives.

However, by inviting their citizens to understand a major public health emergency in terms of existing national narratives, governments also changed the terms upon which their own response to the emergency was judged. In the UK, for example, initial school and workplace closures took place *before* the government mandated a lockdown, undermining its ability to claim a role in having helped shape the public’s resilience. The government was to the contrary seen as ‘slow’ to act. In France, the government played up the French tradition of centralisation to frame its response in quasi-militarised terms. But due to supply-chain problems, the government was forced to delay the introduction of certain measures (such as face-mask wearing and use of PPE) and downplayed their importance. It then relented in the face of mounting public pressure (which included public scepticism over government plans to push ahead with local elections on the grounds that normal democratic life must continue wherever possible).

### Manufacturing Consent: Locking (the Policies) In

During the more mature stage of the pandemic, the governments of Norway, France and the UK adapted their strategies. Their focus of became less about gaining control over the epidemic (by securing the near-universal consent and cooperation of their population) and more about managing the political and economic costs to society of living with the virus over a longer period than originally anticipated. This shift in strategy resulted in a different set of demands

being placed on the population and necessitated a different strategy of engagement. The task for the three governments was now not so much to secure citizen acquiescence in performing certain duties as to encourage citizen forbearance. One manifestation of this new emphasis was the attention each government paid to outcomes and data (e.g. number of masks distributed, number of patients in hospital) that could demonstrate the effectiveness of the government's political agency. Although this led to a grim comparison game, in which a society observed its own infection curve rising and falling in contrast to those in other countries, it allowed governments to draw attention away from the unknown and uncontrollable aspects of the pandemic. For example, official statistics focused on the numbers of hospitalised (including those in intensive care) rather than on the more diffuse but equally important indicators of mental and other health stresses resulting from living with COVID-19 rather than dying from it.

As a result, a growing sense of the importance of civic trust and distrust emerged in this phase of the pandemic and shaped the approaches adopted in each of the three countries. For example, France took a more authoritarian approach to policing regulations (e.g. national curfews). The UK made use of fines and public shaming. Norway emphasised self-policing and cultural togetherness. All three countries continued to treat the public as one group, but now, those publics were not being asked to agree with government policies but instead, public expectations were being managed in relation to them.<sup>7</sup> In France, where the major cities had curfews, policing became explicit. The UK and Norway, in contrast, focused on gaining citizen cooperation. In Norway, this meant rolling back some measures, such as the 'cabin ban' (*hytteforbud*), which had aimed to contain the regional spread of the virus by preventing people from travelling to their second homes. As this attests to, government's were not only trying to shape public sentiment during this period; they were also responding to it, frequently adjusting their tactics and approaches. One indicator of this is the number of legislative changes undertaken in each country (over 300 in Norway, 1600 in France and 1200 in the UK). If nothing else, such legislative energies attest both to the awareness of the three governments that civic patience was limited and to their desire to actively manage and reduce the burdens of lockdown wherever possible.

### Prevention or Proscription? Locking (the Problem) Out

As the pandemic wore on, the politics of duties in the UK, France and Norway thus continued to change. As time went on, all three governments increasingly sought to minimise public perceptions of the costs of lockdown in ways that were more in line with routine political-party preferences and positions. This included tolerating, or being blind to, the costs of lockdown for some more marginal groups, and showing heightened sensitivity to core constituencies (e.g. middle class, well-educated groups). Perhaps the single clearest expression of this was President Macron's outspoken critiques of the unvaccinated in France (who were predominantly non-white and less well-educated).<sup>8</sup> His intention may have had less to do with public health concerns than it did with the (then) upcoming 2022 French presidential elections. But his actions were emblematic of a strategy of engagement that all three countries adopted: namely, **politically and legislatively differentiating society**.

This third strategy is revealing not just of the politics of duties but also of state-citizen relations more broadly. A common assumption in the sociological literature is that civic duties are norms *ascribed* by legal actors working within political frameworks. However, focusing on the shifting governmental strategies deployed to foster the politics of duties during the pandemic, and in particular on the gradual politicisation of that initial 'common duty', reveals that the politics of duties are *co-determined* by states and citizens alike. That is, public preferences ultimately shape what governments are able to do, even during ostensible states of emergency. This finding corresponds with historical experience from other moments of society-wide crisis. For example, one study compares Britons' uptake of protective measures during the pandemic (the wearing of face masks, compliance with stay-at-home orders) with those during the Blitz (when planned deep bomb shelters proposed for London during the final wave of V2-bombing often went unbuilt because Britons had come to prefer home-based shelters). As this study noted, 'The most popular protective measures were those that reflected people's preferences, and not necessarily those that provided the greatest safety'.<sup>9</sup>

During COVID-19, too, we found that government policy was ultimately influenced by citizen preferences at the same time as it sought to influence them. Just as during the Second World War, for example, during COVID-19, the governments

commissioned studies to assess and manage the psychological and political burdens that resulted from the threat to normal life and to enable them to maximise their policy objectives in relation to this. In World War II, in the UK, the Committee of Imperial Defence identified stoicism as the critical attitude to foster in order to secure national resilience. During COVID-19, it was the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviour and Communication, that played this role: its Terms of Reference including to provide "the best possible behavioural science advice" and to advise on "strategies for behaviour change".<sup>10</sup> In both cases it is clear that strategies of engagement matter, and that the duties which, at the end of the day, actually *are* enacted in response to major crises, will be those that governments and their citizens can agree to live with, rather than those dictated in advance by the law itself.

### What Can Lockdown Tell Us about Collective-Action Problems Today?

History shows us that in moments of public crisis or national trauma, state-citizenship relations change, sometimes temporarily, sometimes more permanently. The question is, how? Our analysis shows that the popular understanding of lockdown as a predominantly legal response to a public health driven greater good requirement is imprecise and implies a relationship between a government and its citizens that is too static. In fact, governments try to persuade citizens via various strategies of engagement; citizens, in turn, seek to assume over time greater autonomy in relation to the civic duties that their government expects them to perform. In other words, while there is clearly a politics to duties there are no clear duties in politics.

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More work is needed to understand this politics of duties. For example, the impact of the lockdown on children was a challenge faced in all three countries. States were aware of the differential impact of lockdowns on this group. The Norwegian government, for example, explicitly stated its goal of protecting children as much as possible. But all three governments struggled to address the problem of how to protect children from the full effect of legally-mandated duties. For example, outdoor activity among a cohort of British school age children in Bradford during the pandemic was higher for white than for ethnic minority groups.<sup>11</sup> We know that laws which

apply equally to all may disadvantage some groups more than others. But if this inequality is further exacerbated in extreme cases by the processes of negotiation we have described here, in which more privileged groups are dominant, then socio-economic inequalities are playing a larger role in the politics of duty than the currently legalistic discourse acknowledges.

This development is worrisome. We have for several decades seen a trend towards a form of 'neoliberal' citizenship defined by ever more individually differentiated rights. Is that now being accompanied by a shift towards societies allowing ever more individually differentiated 'duties' in their midst. If so, then a disquieting future may lie ahead: one in which some citizens are able to opt out of the private costs of their fulfillment of public duties, while others bear a disproportionately higher burden of the costs of securing the greater good. ■

## Notes

1. Sean Molloy (2021) *Emergency Law Responses to Covid-19 and the Impact on Peace and Transition Processes*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 7. Available at: [www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/emergency-law-responses-to-covid19.pdf](http://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/emergency-law-responses-to-covid19.pdf).
2. Davide Vampa (2021) COVID-19 and Territorial Policy Dynamics in Western Europe: Comparing France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 51(4): 601–626.
3. In France, support was divided almost evenly among full support (38%), strong but critical support (31%) and limited support (31%). See: Patrick Peretti-Watel; Pierre Verger, Odile Launay & the COCONEL Study Group (2020) The French general population's attitudes toward lockdown against COVID-19: a fragile consensus, *BMI Public Health*. DOI: [10.1186/s12889-020-10048-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-10048-1). This may reflect the top-down style of policymaking in France.
4. 'Our generation has never been tested like this,' health minister Matt Hancock wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*. 'Our grandparents were, during the Second World War, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort. Today our generation is facing its own test, fighting a very real and new disease. We must fight the disease to protect life'. Quoted in Reuters (2020) UK government evokes wartime Blitz spirit for fight against coronavirus, 15 March. Available at: [www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-britain-idUSL8N2B80B1](http://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-britain-idUSL8N2B80B1).
5. An editorial in the Norwegian national newspaper VG declared, 'In Norway, a national dugnad is needed'. See: VG (2020) Corona-viruset: En nasjonal dugnad er nødvendig, 10 March. Available at: [www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/OpAz6q/corona-viruset-en-nasjonal-dugnad-er-noedvendig](http://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/OpAz6q/corona-viruset-en-nasjonal-dugnad-er-noedvendig). The significance of the cultural tradition of dugnad and its invocation in the COVID-19 response is discussed in: Thera Dal Prà Iversen (2020) Let them do 'dugnad': The fallacies of the Norwegian government's nationalist rhetoric during COVID-19, *Nationalism Studies Blog*, 18 November. Available at: [nationalism-studies.sps.ed.ac.uk/2020/11/18/let-them-do-dugnad-the-fallacies-of-the-norwegian-governments-nationalist-rhetoric-during-covid-19](http://nationalism-studies.sps.ed.ac.uk/2020/11/18/let-them-do-dugnad-the-fallacies-of-the-norwegian-governments-nationalist-rhetoric-during-covid-19).
6. Rym Momtaz (2020) Inside Macron's coronavirus war, *Politico*, 12 April. Available at: [www.politico.eu/interactive/inside-emmanuel-macron-coronavirus-war](http://www.politico.eu/interactive/inside-emmanuel-macron-coronavirus-war).
7. For example, 'The pandemic has had a huge impact on social relations and the stability and taken-for-grantedness of many institutions and organizations. To control the virus and its impact, governments have tried to create a new (temporary) social order, with new rules for interactions that have had direct consequences in almost every domain of our lives. This order has proved to be unstable, fragile and is in a permanent state of change, resulting in tensions and conflicts. Policing and control of this social order must be seen as core elements of the current corona crisis'. See: Jan Terpstra; Jacques de Mailard, Renze Salet & Sebastian Roché (2021) Policing the corona crisis: A comparison between France and the Netherlands, *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 23(2): 168–181.
8. In an interview with *Le Parisien* on 4 January 2022, President Macron said he wanted to annoy the unvaccinated by making full vaccination a requirement to receive the health pass that allowed access to many public spaces. See: Olivier Beaumont; David Doukhan, Pauline Théveniaud, Henri Vernet & Marcelo Wesfreid (2022) Europe, vaccination, présidentielle... Emmanuel Macron se livre à nos lecteurs, *Le Parisien*, 4 January. Available at: [www.leparisien.fr/politique/europe-vaccination-presidentielle-emmanuel-macron-se-livre-a-nos-lecteurs-04-01-2022-2KVQ3ESNSREABMTD-WR25OMGWEA.php](http://www.leparisien.fr/politique/europe-vaccination-presidentielle-emmanuel-macron-se-livre-a-nos-lecteurs-04-01-2022-2KVQ3ESNSREABMTD-WR25OMGWEA.php).
9. Edgar Jones (2020) The psychology of protecting the UK public against external threat: COVID-19 and the Blitz compared, *Lancet Psychiatry* 7(11): 991–996.
10. Government of the United Kingdom (2020) *Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B): Covid-19*, 1 October. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/926179/2020.10.01\\_SPI-B\\_Terms\\_of\\_Reference.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/926179/2020.10.01_SPI-B_Terms_of_Reference.pdf).
11. Daniel D. Bingham et al. (2021) Covid-19 lockdown: Ethnic differences in children's self-reported physical activity and the importance of leaving the home environment; a longitudinal and cross-sectional study from the Born in Bradford birth cohort study, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. DOI: [10.1186/s12966-021-01183-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-021-01183-y).

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## THE PROJECT

The project 'CO-DUTIES: Democratic Duties, Collective Action, and the Greater Good after COVID-19' is funded by the Research Council of Norway. It aims to provide novel insights into the performance of individual duties in order to better understand how voluntary engagement in democratic societies may address large-scale collective action problems.

## PRIO

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