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Journal:	<i>Social Science Quarterly</i>
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A Democratic Emergency after a Health Emergency? Exposure to Covid₁₉, Perceived Economic Threat and Support for Anti-Democratic Political Systems

Abstract

Objectives. The urgency of the Covid₁₉ pandemic has led governments to impose restrictions on individual freedom and required citizens to comply with these restrictions. In addition, lockdowns related to Covid₁₉ have led to a significant economic crisis. We aimed to study how the pandemic and related economic threats have impacted support for anti-democratic political systems.

Method. We analysed data from a quota panel of the Italian adult population ($N = 1,195$), surveyed once before and once during the pandemic.

Results. A hierarchical regression model showed that exposure to Covid₁₉ and perceived economic insecurity were associated with support for anti-democratic political systems, independent of participants' predispositions toward a strong leader.

Conclusion. An authoritarian personality is not a necessary precondition for individual anti-democracy: when facing severe personal threats, anyone could restore a subjective sense of control over the social world by becoming anti-democratic, independently of their initial predisposition to support for anti-democratic political systems.

Keywords: Support for anti-democratic political systems; Economic insecurity; Covid₁₉

Introduction

The majority of the world population is facing threats stemming from the Covid₁₉ pandemic, a virus for which there is not yet a cure or vaccine. No fundamental scientific information on Covid₁₉ is available: we do not know enough about its contagiousness and speed of mutation nor whether those who have recovered from Covid₁₉ are immune to reinfection. This crisis has forced millions of people to cope with a severe and previously unknown existential threat to their survival and that of the people they love. The lack of reliable forecasts regarding when and how the threat will end has added further psychological distress.

Many nations have tackled this health emergency by adopting strict lockdown measures. Citizens' compliance with governmental restrictions on their individual liberties implies that they perceive these authorities as empowered to impose limitations on their civil rights. This climate of urgency, which has led to the imposition of measures that restrict freedom, raises questions about the impact of the current situation on citizens' proneness to submit to authorities. Moreover, the pandemic is concurrent with what could be the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. The suspension of a large portion of production activities for weeks or even months has provoked a significant drop in many countries' GDPs and has dramatically worsened the economic security of millions of people (Maliszewska et al. 2020).

How does this convergence of health and economic emergencies impact public opinion? In this study, we aimed to answer this question based on the social psychology literature on support for anti-democratic political systems. This literature indicates strong relationships between social threat and support for anti-democratic political systems, conceived as an individual's authoritarianism, support for anti-democratic governmental systems or intention to vote for extreme right-wing political parties (e.g. Altemeyer 1996; Russo et al. 2019). Social threat refers to situations where an outgroup threatens the ingroup – through, for example, criminality and terrorism (e.g. Asbrock and Fritsche 2013) – and where an outgroup is not easily visible: archival research has shown that social indicators of authoritarianism rise in times of economic crisis (Sales 1973). In general, the idea of support for anti-democratic political systems as a collective response to social threat is well established (Onraet et al. 2013).

A convincing explanation for this link is that the feeling of living in a random, chaotic and uncontrollable social world – as is the case with social threats – leads to high arousal and anxiety and reduces individuals' perceived control over their social world (Kay et al. 2009). When individuals feel unable to exert personal control over their social environment, they are driven to restore subjective order

and predictability by resorting to compensatory control mechanisms, such as religion, government and – most importantly in the context of this study – submission to anti-democratic authorities (Kay et al. 2011). Consistent with this idea, some studies have shown that non-authoritarians react to threats with the strongest endorsement of authoritarian attitudes. This conditional shift toward authoritarian attitudes is dependent on the use of authoritarianism as a coping strategy to deal with the uncertainty of threats. Previous studies have observed this pattern in response to different kinds of societal threats, including criminality, malicious outgroups threatening social order and exposure to natural disasters (Mirisola et al. 2014; Russo et al. 2020).

While this stream of research has focused on perceived collective threats, much less is known about the effects of personal threats, i.e. threats to an individual. Even the literature on the links between psychological reactions to crime and authoritarianism mainly focused on participants' worry for the crime as a social problem more than on their individual fear of crime (e.g., Dallago and Rocco 2010). To the best of our knowledge, there is no information about the effect of a large-scale health emergency – such as the Covid₁₉ pandemic – on the endorsement of support for anti-democratic political systems.

The Present Study

In this study, we analysed the endorsement of support for anti-democratic political systems in response to Covid₁₉ exposure and perceived economic threat. Based on previous research showing a positive link between perceived personal economic threat and authoritarianism (Rickert 1998), we hypothesised a positive relationship between perceived economic threat related to the Covid₁₉ pandemic and support for anti-democratic political systems (H1). Terror management theory (Solomon et al. 1991) posits that mortality salience pushes individuals to cope with the loss of subjective control by endorsing authoritarian leaders and worldviews. Thus, we hypothesised that exposure to Covid₁₉, which heightens mortality salience, would be positively associated with support for anti-democratic political systems (H2). We also explored the possibility that the link between threat and support for anti-democratic political systems is conditioned upon initial authoritarian disposition. We speculated that, if personal threats function similarly to societal threats, the association between Covid₁₉ exposure and perceived economic threat, on the one hand, and support for anti-democratic political systems, on the other, should be observed only (or more markedly) among participants with low predisposition toward a strong leader prior to the pandemic. On the contrary, if personal threats drive both low and high authoritarians to restore subjective control with the same intensity, we should observe no statistically significant interactions.

The study was performed in Italy, a country that is an extraordinary natural laboratory for investigating the public opinion consequences of the present emergency, due to both the severe impact of the virus on the Italian population's health (Dowd et al. 2020) and the dramatic economic consequences of Italy's lockdown (Fernandes 2000). When we wrote this paper (August 2020), Italy had the fourth highest number of Covid-19 cases in Europe, with more than 250,000 people ill, and the second highest number of deaths, with more than 35,000 dead (Dowd et al., 2020; <http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioContenutiNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=5338&area=nuovoCoronavirus&menu=vuoto>). The Covid-19 emergency brought the Italian healthcare system to its knees (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020), especially concerning the availability of intensive care unit beds (Lauterio et al., 2020). The Italian government tackled the emergency by resorting to a radical lockdown strategy. For roughly two months, Italians were not allowed to leave their homes except to shop for food in the shops closest to their homes. This dramatically affected Italians' quality of life and economic situation.

This health and economic emergency developed in a country often considered a "laboratory of populism" (Blokker and Anselmi 2019). In the early 1990, after decades of stability, the Italian political system crashed: traditional parties and leaders were substituted by new ones, Italian's trust in institutions became weaker and weaker (Chiaromonte et al. 2018). In the 2000s, the political crisis was exacerbated by a severe economic crisis and by a growing number of immigrants (Caiani 2018). Consistent with this picture, in recent years, Italy has experienced intense voter mobility, stronger than that of other European countries (Kriesi and Pappas 2015), and a growing success of populist parties (Vassallo and Shin 2018).

Method

Participants and Procedure

On two occasions, we surveyed via email a quota panel of the Italian adult population ($N = 1,195$; women = 50.7%; $M_{\text{age}} = 49.83$; $SD = 14.56$), stratified by gender, age, geographical area of residence and size of area of residence. The first survey ($T_0, N = 1,504$) was conducted between 26 May and 1 June 2019 and the second ($T_1, N = 1,195$) between 17 and 26 April 2020. Unless otherwise indicated, the measures below were assessed using data from T_1 .

We checked if the dropout from 2019 to 2020 was related to gender, age, education, predisposition toward a strong leader and perceived economic threat. We ran a logistic regression analysis to establish whether sample attrition (dropout = 0, retention = 1) was systematic. No significant differences emerged, with the exception of a positive effect of age (Wald = 22.50, $p < .001$) indicating that, as age increased,

the respondents were more inclined to participate also in the second wave. Generally, a low Nagelkerke R^2 (0.02) confirmed that the differences between the persons who participated in both the assessments and those who participated only in the first one were not substantial.

Measures

Dependent variable. Based on Russo et al. (2019), we administered participants two four-category items (1 = awful system, 4 = excellent system) asking them to report how good or bad the following political systems would be for governing Italy in a period such as the present: (a) a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections; and (b) a military government ($r = .51$; $p < .001$). Previous research (e.g., cf. Finkel et al., 1999; Weil, 1989) shows that the combination of these two items is a valid operationalization of participants' preference for anti-democratic political systems. We computed a mean index for these items, with higher scores indicating preference for anti-democratic political systems.¹

Independent variables. We measured participants' exposure to Covid₁₉ using the following question, developed ad hoc for this study: 'Did you or some person close to you (such as relative or close friends) contract Covid₁₉?', to which participants could respond 1 (*No*), 2 (*Not me, but some people close to me did*), 3 (*Yes, I did, but none of the people close to me did*) or 4 (*Yes, both me and some of the people close to me*).² We measured participants' perceived economic threat using the following item from the European Social Survey: 'Which of the following descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?', to which participants could respond 1 (*living comfortably on present income*), 2 (*coping on present income*), 3 (*finding it difficult on present income*) or 4 (*finding it very difficult on present income*).

Control variables. We controlled for participants' gender (1 = woman), age and years of education. Moreover, based on social psychological research showing that predisposition toward a strong leader leads to preference for anti-democratic political systems (Altemeyer, 1996), we controlled participants' predisposition toward a strong leader at T_0 by averaging the following five-category items: 'Some people think that the Parliament as a whole best represents the interests of society. Others think that the will of the people can be carried out only by having a strong leader. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?' and 'Some people think that in politics you need a strong leader to guide the people. On the other hand, others think that having a strong leader would be dangerous for democracy. Where would you place yourself between these opposing opinions?' (reverse-scored;

$r = .29, p < .001$; Roccato et al. 2019). Finally, we controlled for participants' perceived economic threat at T_0 using the same item on perceived economic threat described above.

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for the variables we used and the correlations among them. Consistent with the idea that the Covid₁₉ pandemic heightened the Italian's perceived economic threat, perceived economic threat mean level significantly rose between 2019 and 2020, $t(1192) = -14.65, p < .001$.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As a preliminary step, due to the nested structure of our data and the differences in Covid₁₉ spread throughout Italy, we checked whether our dependent variable varied across Italian counties and regions, using an unconditional multilevel model to examine variance in support for anti-democratic political systems, partitioning it into between-individuals and between-counties or -regions variances. The variance of the dependent variables was not significant between regions or counties. Thus, despite the nested nature of our data, there was not room to proceed with multilevel analysis.

Using SPSS 26, we subsequently tested our hypotheses using a three-step hierarchic moderated regression model, aimed at predicting support for anti-democratic political systems as a function of the control variables (Model 1), of exposure to Covid₁₉ and of perceived economic threat (Model 2) and of the interactions between exposure to Covid₁₉ and perceived economic threat on the one hand and predisposition toward a strong leader at T_0 on the other (Model 3).

Table 2 shows that, among the control variables, participants' gender was not related to support for anti-democratic political systems, while their age and education had a negative association with it. Participants' predisposition toward a strong leader had a positive effect on the dependent variable while the effect of perceived economic threat at T_0 was not significant. (see the first three columns of the table). The fit of Model 2 (that included the control and the independent variables) was significantly higher than that of Model 1 (that included only the control variables). Consistent with H1 and with H2, exposure to Covid₁₉ and perceived economic threat at T_1 showed a positive association with support for anti-democratic political systems (see columns 4 to 6 in the table). Finally, the fit of Model 3 (that included the control variables, the independent variables and the interaction between the independent variables and participants' predisposition toward a strong leader) was statistically equal to that of Model 2. Consistent with this, both the interactions between exposure to Covid₁₉ and perceived economic insecurity at T_1 with

the pre-disposition toward a strong leader at T_0 had a non-significant association with the dependent variable (see the last three columns of the table).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

The Covid₁₉ pandemic has undoubtedly created challenges in people's lives. Some have contracted the virus themselves, others have had people in their social networks fall ill and still others have stayed healthy but faced an unprecedented severe existential threat. Everyone has had to cope with the dramatic life changes resulting from the lockdown and many have had to face an additional serious economic threat. In this study, we analysed the increase in support for anti-democratic political systems as a political consequence of this unique convergence of health and economic personal threats. Exposure to Covid₁₉ and perceived economic threat were positively associated with the endorsement of anti-democratic political systems, and such associations were not moderated by participants' pre-pandemic predispositions towards a strong leader. The dependent variable did not show contextual variations. Thus, its prediction was a matter of social psychological variable and of personal threat more than of epidemiological variables and of threat to society.

These results are interesting because they show that the Covid₁₉ pandemic may have undesirable political effects in addition to its evident health and economic consequences. For example, in Hungary, the urgency of the pandemic gave Prime Minister Orbán the opportunity to take extraordinary power with no end date and the certainty of public support. In Italy, this event was applauded by Matteo Salvini (the leader of the League, an Italian right-wing extremist party) and some commentators highlighted the advantages of managing the crisis in a non-democratic state like China. Our findings substantiate these observations by revealing that in the Covid₁₉ crisis, people became more open to anti-democratic leaders independent of their initial predispositions toward such leaders. Moreover, this study contributes to the literature on the relation between threat and support for anti-democratic political systems. In line with previous studies showing that living situations involving societal threats lead people to endorse potentially anti-democratic preferences and behaviours (e.g. Asbrock and Fritsche 2013), our study highlighted that personal threats may also lead people to favour anti-democratic political systems, independent of their predisposition toward a strong leader.

When we performed our survey, the Covid₁₉ emergency was almost uniquely the focus of the Italian mass media, which systematically reported dramatic information about the growing numbers of the infected, the hospitalised and the dead. Emblematic pictures, such as those showing dozens of coffins piled in the Bergamo Cathedral, went viral and shocked the Italian public. Based on Ben-Zur et al. (2012), we believe that a direct exposure to Covid₁₉ produced a primary traumatisation and that those who remained healthy and did not have infected individuals in their social networks suffered a secondary traumatisation. Russo et al. (2020) showed that secondary traumatisation is sufficient in itself to foster support for anti-democratic political systems. Our study showed that primary traumatisation incontrovertibly adds to secondary traumatisation, which supports the relevance of the link between personal threat and support for anti-democratic political systems.

Our findings raise several new questions that could be tackled in future research aimed at addressing the limitations of this study. First, we performed our study in Italy, which paid one of the highest prices in terms of health, economy and lifestyle because of the Covid₁₉ pandemic. Moreover, Italy is traditionally characterised by low civic sense and low institutional trust (Gasperoni 2013), and in the last decades has become one of the European countries where the populist parties have become most successful (Blokker and Anselmi 2019). Future studies might perform a cross-national replication of this research in countries less severely impacted by Covid₁₉ and with different political cultures, as it is plausible that the rise of support for anti-democratic political systems could translate into actual anti-democratic behaviours and votes as a function of political culture and the efficacy of political measures used to tackle the effects of the pandemic (Klingemann 2018). Second, it is unclear how long the effects we detected will persist. A new wave of the study, performed when the most severe phase of the Covid₁₉ pandemic is over, could undoubtedly add new knowledge regarding the dynamics we have studied.

We believe that the limitations of our study are counterbalanced by some strong contributions. First, mortality salience is typically analysed in the context of lab studies, where participants are asked to think about their own death or their own death is subliminally primed (e.g. Pyszczynski 1996). Our field study focused on real-world existential threats, which increases its ecological validity. Second, our longitudinal approach allowed us to control for level of economic threat and initial predispositions toward anti-democracy, which ensures that the effects observed are actually due to threats related to Covid₁₉.

In conclusion, we showed that an authoritarian personality is not a necessary precondition for individual anti-democracy: when facing severe personal threats, anyone could restore a subjective sense of control over the social world by becoming anti-democratic. People tend to react to severe personal

threats in the same way, independently of their initial predisposition to support for anti-democratic political systems.

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Footnotes

1. This correlation was significantly higher than that found by Roccato and Russo ($r = .36$), $Z = -2.26$, $p = .02$.

2. Parallel analyses, performed after dichotomizing the variable assessing participants' contact with the Covid₁₉ (0 = the participants and the people close to him/her did not contract Covid₁₉, 1 = the participants or some people close to him/her contracted Covid₁₉) led to results analogous to those we published (available from the corresponding author).

1 (No), 2 (Not me, but some people close to me did), 3 (Yes, I did, but none of the people close to me did) or 4 (Yes, both me and some of the people close to me).

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Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Our Variables and Bivariate Correlations between Them

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Female gender	.51	.50	1	.05	-.11***	.06*	.10*	-.04	.11***	-.03	.02	.07*
2. Age	49.83	14.56		1	-.26***	.01	-.03	-.14***	-.00	-.02	-.01	-.10***
3. Years of education	13.85	3.62			1	-.17***	.18***	.08**	-.14***	-.01	.01	-.14***
4. Predisposition toward leader at T ₀	3.12	.99				1	-.02	-.05	.03	-.01	.03	.37***
5. Perceived economic threat at T ₀	2.65	.65					1	-.01	-.56***	.00	-.05	.03
6. Exposure to Covid ₁₉	1.27	.64						1	-.02	-.06	-.01	.12***
7. Perceived economic threat at T ₁	2.86	.72							1	-.02	-.06*	.08**
8. Exposure to Covid ₁₉ *Predisposition toward leader at T ₀	-.03	.53								1	.235	-.06*
9. Perceived economic threat at T ₁ * Predisposition toward leader at T ₀	.02	.74									1	.02
10. Support for anti-democratic political systems	1.93	.83										1

Note. The means of the variables we used in the interaction is computed before centring them. The “mean” of the gender variable is the proportion, on a 0-1 range, of women.

When gender is involved, the point-biserial correlation is involved. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 2.

Prediction of Attitudinal Anti-Democracy

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	beta	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	beta	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Beta
Intercept	2.61***	.18		2.71***	.18		2.71***	.18	
Female gender	.07	.05	.04	.06	.04	.04	.06	.04	.04
Age	-.01***	.00	-.14	-.01***	.00	-.12	-.01***	.00	-.12
Years of education	-.03***	.01	-.11	-.03***	.01	-.11	-.03***	.01	-.11
Predisposition toward leader at T ₀	.29***	.02	.35	.29***	.02	.35	.29***	.02	.35
Perceived economic threat at T ₀	-.00	.04	-.00	-.05	.04	-.04	-.05	.04	-.04
Exposure to the Covid ₁₉				.17***	.04	.13	.16***	.04	.13
Perceived economic threat at T ₁				.10*	.04	.08	.10*	.04	.08
Exposure to Covid ₁₉ *Predisposition toward leader at T ₀							-.02	.04	-.01
Perceived economic threat at T ₁ *Predisposition toward leader at T ₀							.00	.03	.00
Fit of the model	<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .16			<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .17			<i>Adj. R</i> ² = .17		
	<i>F</i> (5,1174) = 44.46, <i>p</i> < .001			ΔF (2,1172) = 14.39, <i>p</i> < .001			ΔF (2,1170) = .13, <i>p</i> = .88		

Note. *** *p* < .001. ** *p* < .01. * *p* < .05.