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Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the level of trust on behalf of the public towards scientists and/or research in general, for the case of Italy.

Abstract

This Research paper will be assessing the level of trust by the public towards the scientific community is rather high in Italy. The COVID-19 pandemic had affected this in a few distinct ways and which are analysed in this paper. I) Political Differences II) The need for leadership. Explaining these two reasons was done by comparing data from pre-covid statistics and during the actual COVID-19 pandemic. Methodology used in the paper varies from questionnaires, surveys to newspaper articles. Preliminary findings suggest that the individuals holding right-wing views indeed held mistrust for the scientific community and public institutions. However, these individuals represent only a small sample of the total Italian population and indeed trust has very much increased as evident by high vaccination rates and low mobility rates.

Introduction

Dr. Ashisha Jha, the Director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, was on Tuesday 16th June, 2020, quoted as saying, "*We may be done with the pandemic, but the pandemic is not done with us*". The COVID-19 pandemic has placed the scientific community on the spotlight, seeing it be used by governments to assist in drawing a path through the pandemic, whilst seeing it become criticised by so-called "no-vaxxers". The scientific community itself has had its level of trust impacted towards the public and this can be argued to have created barriers towards the implementation and success of anti-COVID-19 policies. Specifically, this essay will be looking at how the level of trust on behalf of the public towards scientists has been affected in Italy.

Italy was one of the first European countries to suffer the devastating effects brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, with two Chinese Tourists in Rome being the first in the country to have tested positive. This makes it an interesting case for the understanding of public trust to the scientific community as COVID-19's impact is longer and thus, greater. Italy's government, at least in the beginning stages of the COVID pandemic, acted out in an unorganised manner due to regional governors either going against Rome's directives or going down their own path. The public was left in the dark. However, Italy was also one of the first governments to implement severe lockdown measures, with the government placing a great

reliance on the scientific community to direct and influence government policy.

Since the first lockdown on the 9th of March 2020, existing literature has claimed that Italian public trust towards scientists and research has been rather mixed, with at times being rather high and at others being lower (depending at the stage of the pandemic in which the research was taken). The difference in trust is also related to political reasons, where right-wing populist parties have been trying to undermine COVID-19 protocols implemented by health authorities. Such right-wing opposition is shown with today's 'Green-Pass' protests (in which citizens protest the government's policy for COVID-19 containment) have sprouted all over Italy, such as in Trieste and in Rome. Levels of trust have also been found to differ between age groups and due to a lack of proper leadership.

It is vital and necessary to have better understandings behind the loss of public trust towards the scientific community and health authorities to better predict future behaviours of the public in future pandemics. Furthermore, understanding reasons for loss or gaining in trust is crucial for health authorities to better communicate their reasoning towards the general public.

This research paper will be identifying the Italian 'scientific community' with the Public Authorities, because since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian State essentially incorporated Scientists into their own government policy making. Thus, when this research paper mentions

“institutions” or “state”, it also relates to trust towards claims made by scientists through public institutions.

Thus, this paper will be assessing the general trust towards scientists, and governmental policies based on COVID; and will be attempting to find whether public trust has fallen or not during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Based on the literature found on the topic, the level of trust in Italy differs differently between age groups, locations, exposure to lockdown and political differences. General literature on the subject suggests that public trust towards scientists is either affected by political ideologies such as the study conducted by Kreps and Kriner in “Model uncertainty, political contestation, and public trust in science: Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic”. An assessment of political differences in Italy and how it affects public trust towards scientists which aimed to understand the reason for virus spread in difference regions and to create a future prediction of spreading. Barbieri et al. found, in the period between February 24th to June 26th of 2020; right-wing populists associating themselves with the political parties of Lega Nord and M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle) exhibit lower civic duties which affects to how they comply towards lockdown rules. These individuals assist the spreading of the virus and undermine the ability of health authorities to keep lockdown measures intact. Assessment of trust from

citizens towards public institutions found high levels of trust, especially within the elderly parts of the population,

Methodology

Data will be interpreted in a quantitative manner, analysing surveys of different researchers; data will also be interpreted in a qualitative manner by analysing previously stated arguments and adding my own analyses on the matter to add to its reliability to the subject area. Surveys from annual reports of Italian Political Reasoning was used to discuss and elaborate on the differences of Italian citizen's trust towards Institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) and pre-Covid (2019). Discussing political reasoning for change in trust levels towards the scientific community saw this paper use 2nd hand sources such as Barbieri and Bonini which used quantitative sources to gain understandings of the share of the Italian electorate which voted for right-wing parties (Lega Nord). This data was then compared using Pepe et al's data on social mobility between certain regions of Italy through the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Week of the pandemic; thus, this data was used to compare with regions of 'high' right wing votes to social mobility to come up with a triangulated argument. Age gaps in the civilians trusting public institutions was taken by comparing findings of Falcone et al. and also surveys presented by Gardani and Natascia. Newspaper articles from *La Repubblica*, a reliable Italian national newspaper was used to discuss populist protests of 2021 and Buzzfeed,

which is not as reliable as that of *La Repubblica* but highlighted the anti-COVID-19 messages by Matteo Salvini.

Data Analysis

Political divisions in Italy can be argued to have had a mostly negative effect towards the general consensus of the scientific community and health authorities. There have been many different enticements for the disobeying of lockdown measures, and thus also an ignoring of the scientific community. These include i) the fact that Italian political messages have been mixed and inconsistent with a general plan dictated from a central authority (Adolph et al. 2020). Moreover, regional scientists and local medical experts (e.g pharmacists) have been reported presenting different views on social distance measures, and the efficiency of face masks (Barbieri and Bonini 494). These problems, compounded by the psychological problems which have arisen due to "COVID-fatigue", can be argued to have left civilians in a confused environment; where each individual has their own opinions on their situation and has created the basic fundamental building blocks for a more divided society. Barbieri et al's. research found that provinces in Italy whose electorate found themselves to be voting right-wing parties such as Lega Nord were found, in the period between February and June of 2020, to have a major reduction in social proximity percentages in respect to other provinces who voted other parties (i.e Movimento 5 Stelle and PD (Partito Democratico)).

Through this, it was concluded that provinces with higher electorate support for Lega Nord held a lower respect for civic duties and a down-playment of the severity posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Barbieri and Bonini 494). To put things further in perspective, the Lega Nord party, led by Salvini has been recorded with sending mixed messages of both pro-lockdown and anti-lockdown rhetoric. Lega Nord's ardent supporters have stuck with Salvini's rhetoric throughout the pandemic and when he was criticised by Health Authorities and the general scientific community (excluding no-vax scientists), Lega Nord's supporters were naturally inclined to act against "big government" and "fake science" (Barbieri and Bonini 494). However, the regions listed Barbieri and Bonini to show the majority Lega Nord vote shares in the 2018 national elections (498, Fig. 1) whose regions include Lombardia and Veneto can be argued to have had the opposite affect and not hold more 'anti-lockdown' behaviour. Pepe et al. in their Figure 3 which shows the median radius of individual mobility before and after the pandemic in three graphs, each representing Week 1, Week 2 and Week 3 since the outbreak shows that the regions of Lombardia and Veneto (who hold highest voter share in the 2018 national elections) actually have a low level of individual mobility. Furthermore, Pepe et al. states that 49% of mobility had been reduced nationally by Week 3. Yet, the findings found by Pivetti et al. supports Barbieri and Bonini's argument that individuals which identify themselves with right-wing parties or consider themselves as right-wingers have less trust in science by exhibiting conspiracy related beliefs; and thus a hesitancy to also take the COVID-19 vaccine (9). Pivetti et al.

found, from their sample of 600 Italians, found that individuals holding right-wing political identifications had an average negative thought process towards the scientific community and also faith (8). Still, these findings are also relevant to pre-pandemic levels as evident by Mancuso et al. (2017) which investigated the amount of conspiracy theories within the Italian population and found that beliefs in conspiracy theories are strongly related with right-wing affiliation. This analysis holds strength, since these populist parties are, by nature, anti-establishment and will always look to go against government policy. Political leaders such as Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord), is but one of these populist leaders in Italy pushing conspiracy theories and unsupported arguments, such as claiming that the COVID-19 virus was created by the Chinese (Nardelli and D'Urso 2020). As of writing, 'populist' no-vax protests have occurred in Trieste and in Rome; these protests came to be as a result of the government trying to impose the "Green Pass" initiative which sees only those who are vaccinated or hold a 24-hour PCR test to enter indoor areas. The massive reaction by the citizenry shows that right-wing populist thoughts towards the crisis has increased considerably. (Ziniti 2021) Possibly also due to "COVID-19" fatigue, where individuals simply become too fatigued to deal with the virus and/or following guidelines set out by local authorities.

Yet, Italians can be seen as holding high degrees of institutional trust towards their government and/or regional governments, which in turn

means they hold trust in the scientific community and the health authorities. Falcone et al., through their questionnaires of 4260 Italians and questioning them on their opinions of the: I) "Competence of public authorities", II) "Intentions of public authorities", III) "Purposes and Effectiveness of safety measures", IV) "Overall trust toward public authorities" and V) "expectations on the crisis long-term effects on trust" (4). It was found that for dimension I, the majority of the responders had a positive outlook towards the measures and guideless undertaken by Public Authorities (79.3%), compared to the minor 6.3% of skeptics (Falcone et al. 5). Dimension II showed that respondents also had a positive view in the intentionality of public institutions in creating measures (90.2%) and creating guidelines for behaviour (89.1%) (Falcone et al. 5). Dimension III also showed the same positive characteristics, with 85% of the sample stating that the measures and guidelines instilled by Public Authorities for the COVID-19 pandemic have been proven to be purposeful and effective. (Falcone et al. 6). Finally, the fifth dimension in Falcone et al's research found that 72.8% of "respondents believe that the current crisis will strengthen the trustworthiness of scientists and public figures" (Falcone et al 8). Falcone et al further argues, in comparison with the political argument proposed by Barbieri and Bonini (2020), that the high rate of institutional trust can be attributed to the lessening of partisanship of Italian politics, where politicians took their institutional roles more seriously and placed political disagreements and ideological disagreements on the side-lines for the sake of dealing with a national emergency (Falcone et al. 7). However,

this high level of trust seen during the pandemic must be taken with a grain of salt; and low trust towards public institutions will probably dissipate following the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason for this logic goes back to political trust found during pre-COVID times; where during 2019, from a sample of N=1212 Italians, only 22% trusted the State, the majority being 15 years of age.

Thus, we can argue that there is an age gap between the number of trustees towards Public Institutions. Falcone et al found that respondents aged between 56-58 years old had shown 86.1% level of trust towards Public Authorities whereas participants between 18-40 years old had their percentage drop down to 69.6% (Gardani and Porcellato, 2019). While the gap between 18 to 40 is arguably rather large compared to the latter age gap, we can still reliably conclude that a significant amount of the population which is considered as 'young' to have more negative thoughts towards Public Authorities and their regulations towards behaviour in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, we must also compare the current trust towards institutions to trust levels in the pre-pandemic society. Political parties in the pre-pandemic levels were low in rates of trust with only 9 out of 100 Italians trusting them. (Falcone et al. 12). Interestingly, this same result was also found during the actual pandemic which can possibly show that distrust towards politicians and their parties has remained at a steady level (Gardani and Porcellato 2020). It must also be dually noted that ever since the

constitution of the Italian Republic, political distrust could be argued to be an inherent character of the Italian people (La Palombara, 1965). Falcone et al. goes on to argue that the trust found during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic of March 2020, is one which has not been seen for a long time in Italy; yet it is a "fragile belief, because it is massively based on assumptions: should the public authorities subsequently fail to prove themselves equal at the task at hand, this huge "trust credit" would come due", producing an even bigger "backlash" towards the government by the citizens and could assist to even furthering ties between the two groups for decades to come (Falcone et al. 15). Falcones et al's research is also supported by Gardani and Paorcellato's *Rapporto Gli Italiani e Lo Stato* from 2020, which found that Italians levels of trust in institutions had changed from from 2019 levels (the European Union(from 34% to 39%), the President of the Republic (from 55% to 58%), the Municipality (from 38% to 43%), their own provincial government (from 30% to 36%), the Parliament (from 15% to 23%), the Church (from 38% to 42%) and the State (from 22% to 33%)). As is evident, nearly all bodies which make up the Italian State have gone up, except for trust levels towards authorities such as the police which from a higher 73% in 2019 fell to 69%. (Gardani and Porcellato 2020) It is interesting that high trust levels were seen in the President of the Republic, who is only a moral figure similarly to Queen Elizabeth II in the UK. Possibly, this might be an effect of further political disillusionment; yet this can be countered by the fact that actual political institutions which have an active role in government policy have also gone

up. Gardani and Porcellato argue that these increases in institutional trust is a result of the future uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, it could be argued that civilians did not know where else to put their trust on and to lead them through this time of crisis and since the only logical institution or persona which could be trust would be the state or members of the state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has touched upon some of the reasons for differing levels of trust, by the Italian public, towards the scientific community and their stances on lockdown measures and vaccines. By analysing secondary and primary sources, this paper has found that political differences, mainly people supporting right-wing extremism. It is important to note though that most data used (that is primary data from questionnaires and sources) was conducted in 2020; and considering the constantly changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic it can be considered that at least some of this data is unreliable due to not keeping up with the timeline. Yet, research dictates that the majority of evidence found correlates to the fact that there is a rather high degree of trust in Italy when it comes to listening to guidelines created by Public Authorities and the current vaccination rate (22/12/2021) is 88.6% of the country's total population (Reuters). Such a high amount of vaccination is pure evidence

for high levels of trust in the majority of Italy's population. Trust also increased due to people's psychological need for a leader in such a time of crisis, explaining the levels of trust to institutions from pre-covid. Thus, this research paper has found that the level of trust on behalf of the public has indeed increased throughout the pandemic.

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