

# Trust in COVID-19 government policies

GOVTRUST Centre of Excellence \*

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In democratic regimes, trust of citizens in government policy is of great importance to ensure a successful policy implementation. It is impossible to put a police officer on each street corner to enforce compliance. Since successful COVID-19 policy also depends on the acceptance of that policy by the citizens, citizens' trust in these policies is crucial.

The University of Antwerp conducts a weekly survey, called "the Corona Study", every Tuesday to estimate the impact of the corona crisis. On April 7, April 28 and May 26 2020, a number of questions on citizens' trust in the different government levels, in the sources of information, and in the adopted policy measures were included. The survey on April 7 was completed 224437 times. On April 28, 119634 people participated in the study and 49036 citizens completed the survey on May 26. A large majority of the respondents lives in Flanders: 207304, 108415 and 46620 respectively. We have therefore limited the analysis for this research note to the Flemish Region.

The Corona Study uses self-selection. Participants are not randomly selected. As a result, respondents are not a correct reflection of society. For example, the study was completed more often by women, highly educated people and people under the age of 65. In addition, the province of Antwerp is particularly overrepresented. To ensure that the results are representative, we have weighed the data by age, gender, level of education and the province. The weighting factors were limited to a maximum of three.

## 1 PERCEPTIONS OF RISK PROXIMITY AND SEVERITY

In a first analysis, we ask to what extent people recognize the severity of the current corona epidemic. The sense of risk severity appears to be very high. Almost everyone is convinced that being sick with COVID-19 can be severe. In all three surveys, more than 93% of participants were rather strongly or totally convinced of the possible risks of a COVID-19 infection<sup>1</sup>. Age plays an important role; the older, the higher the severity of the virus is assessed. It is remarkable that respondents with a university degree estimate the severity of the disease slightly lower; although their score still remains very high (averages of 6.46, 6.30 and 6.29 in the surveys on a scale from 1 to 7)<sup>2</sup>.

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Some questions were inspired by, on the one hand, questions from the COVID-19 survey by the Winton Center for Risk and Evidence Communication, and on the other hand, questions from a survey developed by the University of Utrecht (Dominika Proszowska), for which we thank them. The researchers also thank prof. Pierre Van Damme and the other steering committee members of the Corona Study for agreeing to include questions about trust in government and information.

1 We take the scores above 4, on a 7-point scale, together and formulate these scores in this note as rather high to completely/totally.

2 Please note that especially the results of this item may be distorted by the self-selection method. People who estimate the severity to be low will be less inclined to complete the survey or even find out about the existence of the survey.

Hence, the Flemish citizens rate the severity of the coronavirus very high. However, not everyone is concerned about themselves or family and friends being affected by COVID-19. On April 7, 18% of respondents believed that the risk of themselves, their family or their friends being infected was rather low to very low. On April 28, 30% estimated the risk to be rather low to very low that they or someone in their immediate environment would be infected. In the third wave on May 26, 38% deemed the risk rather low to very low. Quarantine and other measures have indeed reduced that risk.

People seem to make a good analysis of their risk profile and also take into account their personal context. Health workers estimate the risk of themselves or family or friends being infected to be considerably higher. People who live in the province of Limburg, the province in which the most infections were observed, also estimate the risk of infection to be significantly higher. Furthermore, participants under the age of 25 consider the risk to be significantly lower.

## 2 TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND EXPERTS

In the surveys, we asked people about their trust in the governments and the scientific experts which advise the governments to tackle the coronavirus crisis in a good way. We present the responses according to the different government levels in Belgium, as shown in figure 1.

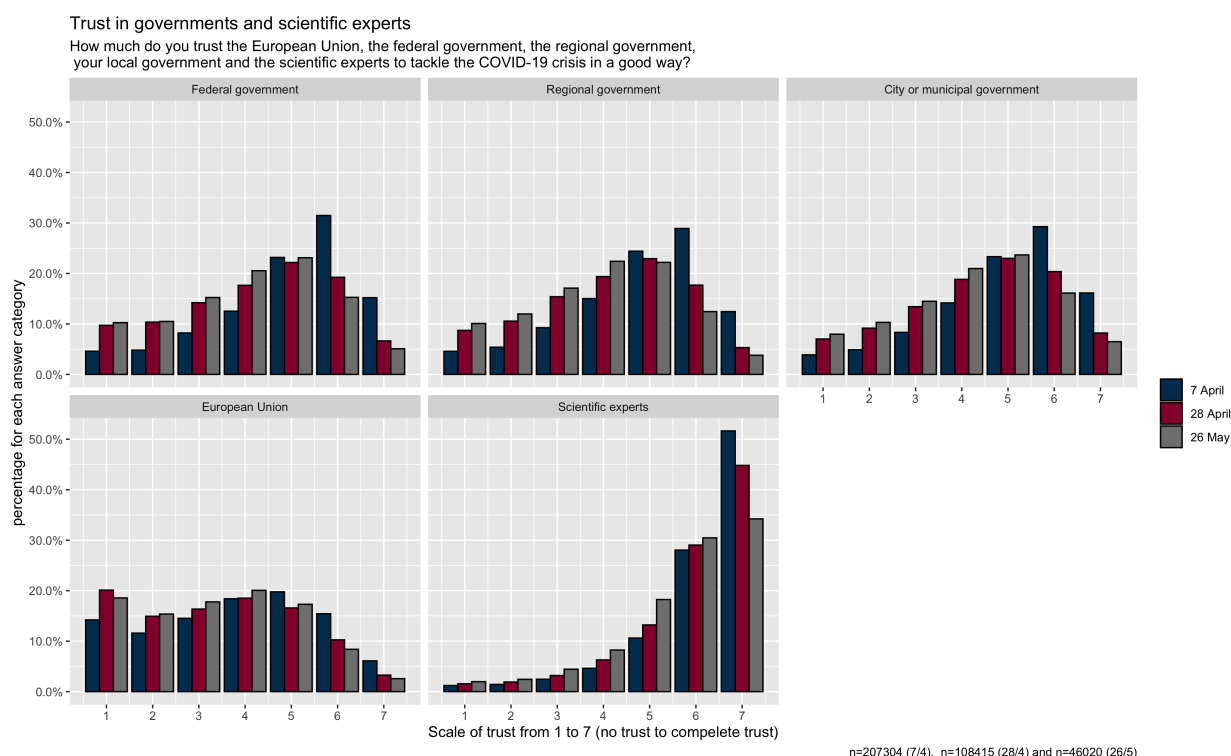


Figure 1

Respondents trust the scientific experts which give advice to governments, to know what measures are best to tackle the COVID-19 crisis; this trust is very high. On April 7, about 90% of respondents trust these experts rather highly or completely. Trust in those experts declined somewhat to 87% and 82% in the second and third survey. Fewer people completely trusted the experts (score 7), 45% in the second survey and 34% in the third survey, compared to 52% in the first survey. Nevertheless, trust in the experts remains clearly very high. For the development and justification of COVID-19 policies, Belgian governments relied heavily upon these experts.

Trust in the Belgian federal government was initially high as well. On April 7, about 70% indicated to trust the federal government (rather) highly or completely to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. In comparison, 51% of Flemish respondents said they trusted the federal government in the 2017 Eurobarometer survey. However, the survey of April 28 showed that trust in the federal government declined substantially. Only 48% trusted the federal government (rather) highly or fully on that moment. The trust in the federal government further declined to 43% on May 26.

A similar evolution is observed with regards to the level of trust respondents put in the regional and local governments. In the first survey on April 7, 66% and 69% indicated to trust respectively the regional and local governments (rather) highly or completely. In the second survey on April 28, these figures decreased to 46% and 52% respectively. One month later, on May 26, 38% and 46% had rather high to complete trust in the regional and local level. In addition, these figures are lower than the 65% of Flemish respondents who indicated that they trust the regional and local governments in the 2017 Eurobarometer.

The European Union is, however, clearly trusted less to tackle the COVID-19 crisis in a good way. On April 7, only 41% of respondents trusted the European Union (rather) highly or fully. On April 28, this figure was down to 30%, and even decreased to 28% on May 26. All three findings are far below the 58% trust measurement in the 2017 Eurobarometer, in which 58% of the respondents reported to trust the European Union. In other words, it appears that the response of the European Union in this COVID-19 crisis does not evoke much citizens' trust. Remarkably, people under the age of 25 have significantly more trust in the European Union than other age groups.

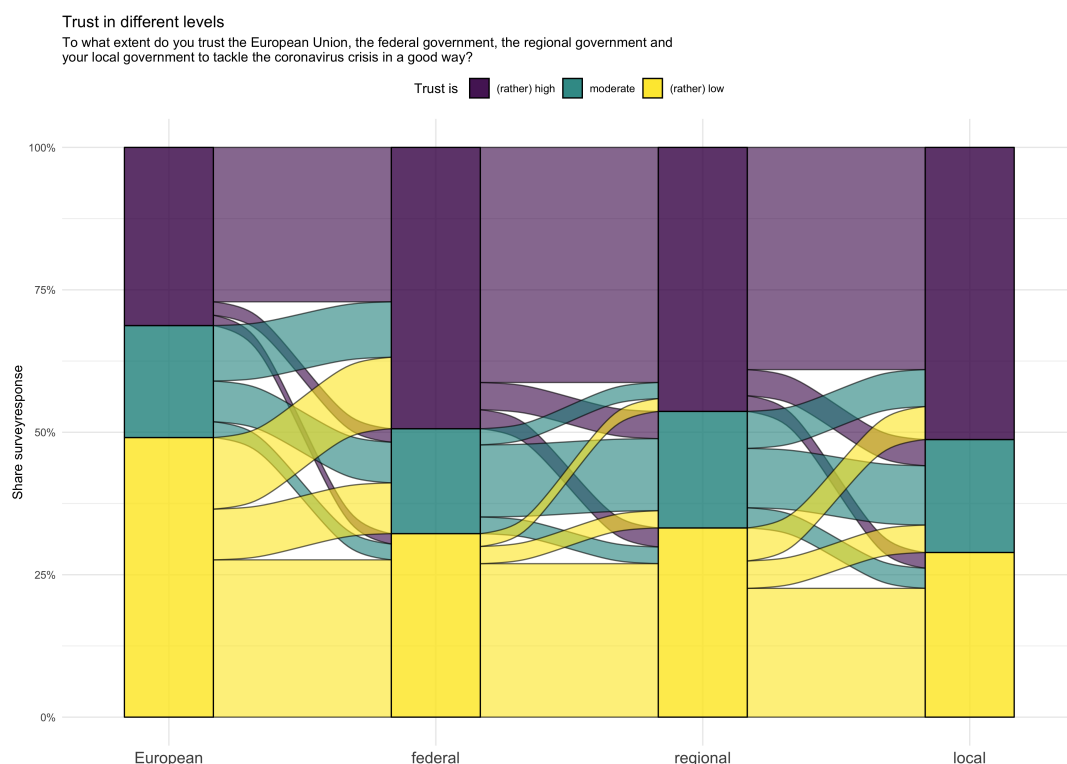


Figure 2

survey 28 April (n=98336)

Trust in the federal, regional and local governments correlate strongly. A large majority of respondents seems to assess the different Belgian governments more or less 'as a whole', without making a clear distinction between levels of government. This is shown in the flow chart based on the data from the April 28 survey (figure 2). Few people give a high score to one government level and a low score to another. The large flows remain stable within the response categories.

If trust is high, it is usually the case for all levels of Belgian governments. Hence, the Belgian governments are all in it together, to tackle the coronavirus crisis as well as to gain citizens' trust. However, this does not apply to the European Union, which is assessed very differently. We see similar patterns when assessing the data from the other two survey waves.

In the second survey on the 28th of April, we also asked participants whether their trust in the Belgian governments to tackle the coronavirus crisis in a good way had increased, remained the same or decreased in the past two weeks. The result show that 53% of respondents report their trust to have decreased somewhat to strongly, confirming the findings mentioned above. The same question was repeated in the third survey of May 26, however this time we asked if their trust had changed in the past month. Of all the respondents 54% again indicated that their trust had decreased.

In general, level of education and age were positively related to citizens' trust in government and experts. Often, a changing work situation also influenced the trust assessment. As such, people who became unemployed during the coronavirus crisis indicated a significantly lower trust in government and experts than employees with an unchanged labour situation.

### 3 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF INFORMATION SOURCES

The coronavirus crisis has also led to a flood of information. The government and media have warned against untrustworthy information that sometimes circulates on social media. But which sources of information do citizens trust? In the survey of April 7, we asked about the trustworthiness of information sources when it comes to information about the coronavirus.

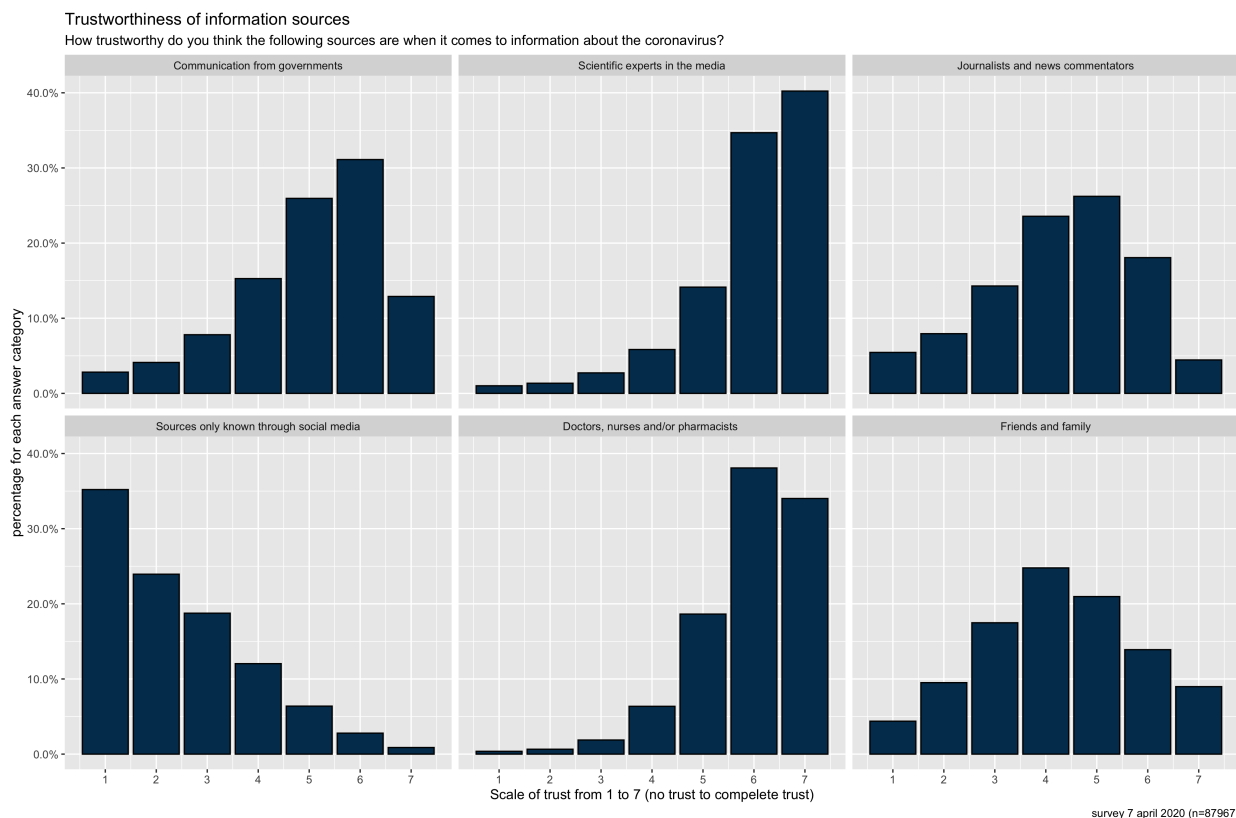


Figure 3

Communication of the experts (see figure 3) is trusted to a very high extent: 89% of the respondents have the opinion that the communication of the scientific experts through the media is rather highly to completely trustworthy. On April 7, information from doctors, nursing staff and/or pharmacists is also deemed to be trustworthy by 91% of the respondents. Scientific and medical knowledge and authority therefore seem crucial for the degree of trustworthiness of information sources about the coronavirus.

The trustworthiness of the communication by the governments via television, website, posters, etc. (70% rather highly to completely trustworthy) is also high. Communication by the governments may be perceived as trustworthy because their communication aligns closely with the communication of scientific experts.

The trustworthiness of journalists and news commentators (49%), on the one hand, and friends/family (44%), on the other, as a source of information about the coronavirus is clearly lower, possibly because the origin of that information is not always clear.

It is remarkable that respondents estimate the trustworthiness of information from individuals and groups which only they know via social media (Twitter, Facebook ...) and other online channels much lower. Merely 10% find these sources to be rather highly to completely trustworthy and 5% indicate that they do not use this source at all. In this crisis, traditional media still seems to be preferred over what people learn from social media.

Again, education and age have an impact. For example, higher educated respondents consider the trustworthiness of information via government communication and scientific experts higher. Information from social media, friends and family or doctors, nursing staff and pharmacists is, in turn, considered less trustworthy by higher-educated participants. Moreover, an older age usually leads to more trust in the various information sources.

#### 4 PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS AND RESTRICTIVENESS OF GOVERNMENT MEASURES

Belief in the effectiveness of government measures is an important predictor of compliance with those measures. In the surveys, we asked the respondents to give their opinion about the effectiveness of the measures taken by Belgian governments to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. On April 7, 80% of respondents indicate that they believe to a rather high or full extent that the measures taken are effective in tackling the COVID-19 crisis. The average value on a scale of 7 is 5.5. Three weeks later, this belief in the overall effectiveness of the measures taken is still very high (74% with an average value of 5.2). A month later 67% still beliefs in the effectiveness of the measures with an average of 4.9. Once again, age and level of education influence the assessment of effectiveness. The higher the age/education, the more the measures are assessed as being effective.

For reference, we provide results from a comparable survey in several other European countries (figure 4). Belgium scores better than these other countries in terms of how respondents assess the effectiveness of measures taken. We must take into account that our surveys were conducted at a later time in the crisis and that the methodology (self-selection versus internet panel and sample size) differs<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication. (2020, March). Risk perception of COVID-19/coronavirus. Retrieved from <https://osf.io/jnu74/> DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/JNU74

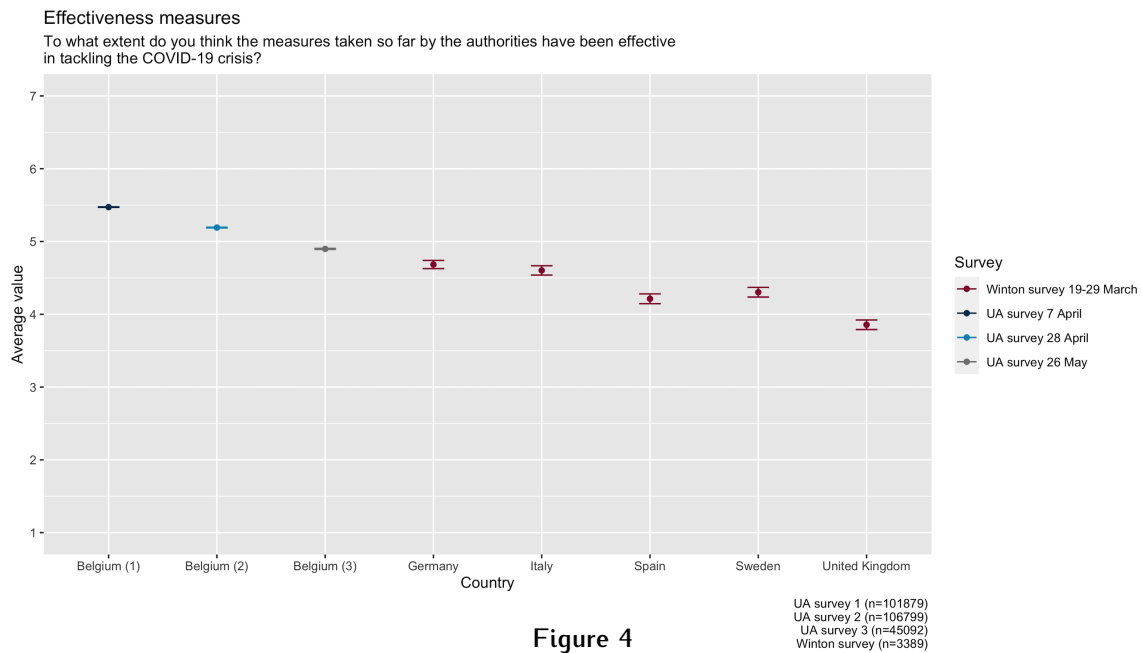


Figure 4

Ideally, the COVID-19 measures issued by the government should be perceived as being effective, while avoiding that people see them as being too restrictive, limiting social life to an excessive extent. In the surveys, we asked whether respondents thought that government measures imposed too many restrictions on people and society. On April 7, only 16% indicated that the government measures were too restrictive. On April 28 and May 26, the evaluation is different, as more people (28%) now found the measures too restrictive (see figure 5). Especially the lower-educated and younger people found the measures more restrictive.

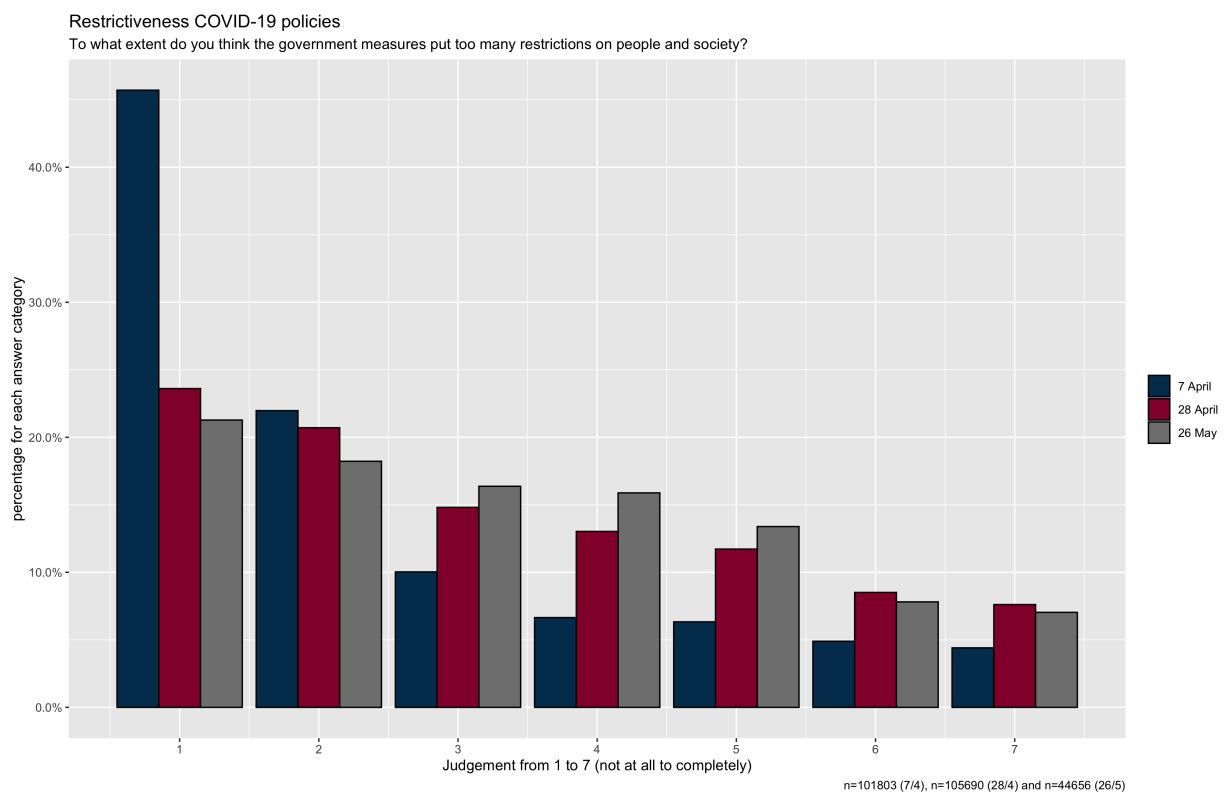


Figure 5

In the second survey and third survey, we discussed the effectiveness of government measures more deeply. We asked for a separate assessment of measures aimed at (a) limiting COVID-19 infections (epidemiological measures), (b) mitigating negative economic consequences, and (c) mitigating negative social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Figure 5 shows the results. On April 28, 75% of the respondents thought that the measures to limit the COVID-19 infections were effective (score 5, 6 or 7 on a scale of 7). About 13% found the measures rather not or completely not effective (score 1, 2 or 3 on a scale of 7). The effectiveness of economic and especially social measures is assessed less positively: only 43% believed in the effectiveness of the measures to counteract negative economic effects. Almost 50% of the respondents did not believe the social measures to be effective. Only 31% of respondents judges these measures to be rather or completely effective, as shown in figure 6. Similar results can be found on May 26. Measures aimed at limiting infections were deemed rather to completely effective by 67%, while economic and social measures were only positively assessed by respectively 39% and 27%.

Highly educated people consider the measures aimed at the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus crisis to be significantly less effective.

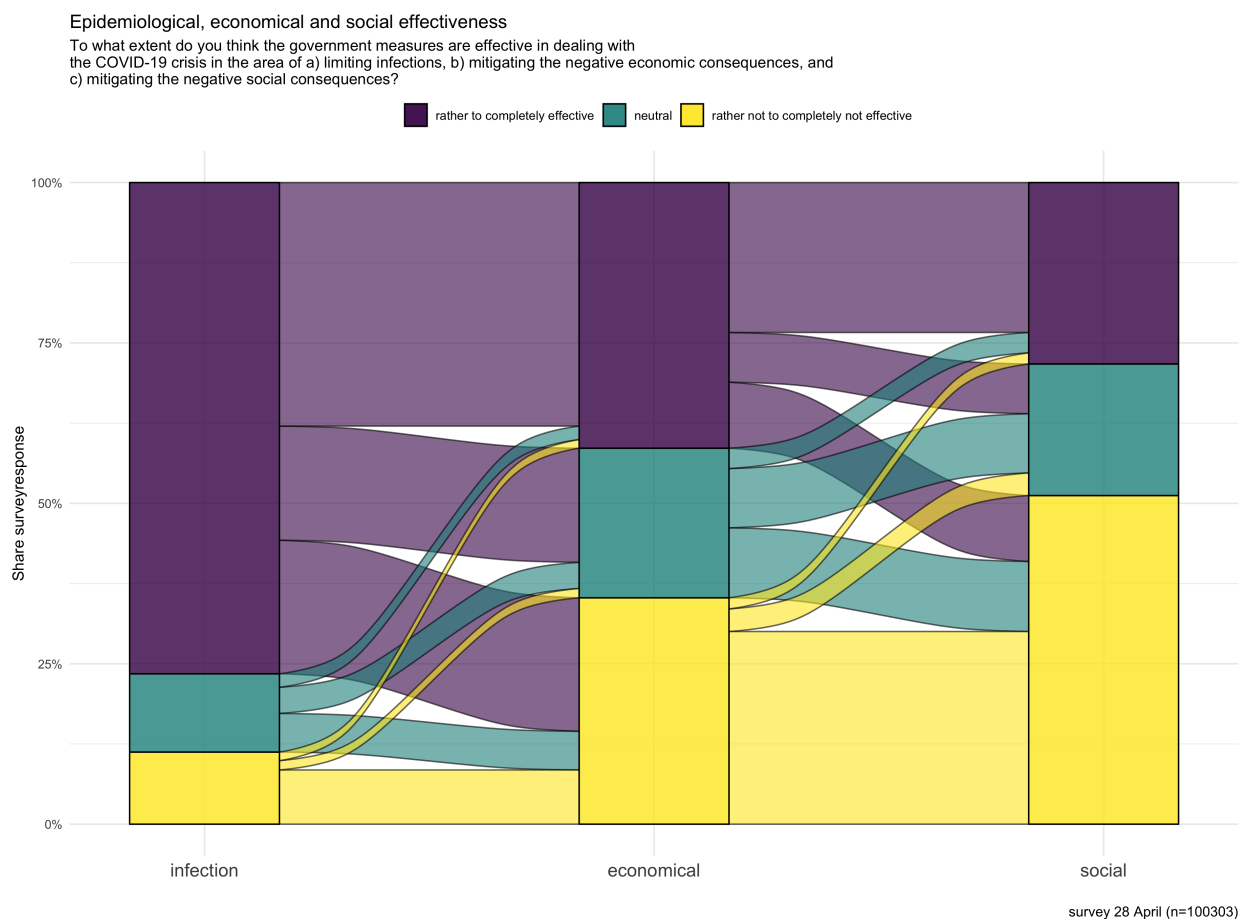


Figure 6



## 5 CONCLUSION

We conclude that on April 7, support and trust in Belgian governments were high, and trust in the scientific experts, advising the governments, was almost absolute. Citizens believed in the effectiveness of the measures taken and did not perceive them to impose too many restrictions on people and on the society. In this epidemiological phase, the government measures were mainly focused on reducing the number of infections.

A few weeks later (April 28 2020), there were some noticeable evolutions: trust in the different levels of government had declined considerably, more citizens believed that government measures imposed too many restrictions on society, and the belief in the effectiveness of economic and social measures was limited. In the following month, the evolutions continued in the same direction. Since mid-April, we entered a new phase in which the exit strategy is taking shape. In this phase, the policy choices were more unclear and there was a greater need for political debate. The political and social uncertainty was reflected in the results of the surveys on April 28 and May 26.

The high level of trust in the first phase of the crisis was probably also the result of the clear justification of the policy decisions, being closely aligned with the advice of scientific experts. The results seem to suggest that even far-reaching measures are acceptable for society in case their goal is clear, they are properly justified and when they are accompanied by high levels of perceived risk severity and risk proximity. The exit phase is more complex and political in nature than the 'lockdown'. In addition to epidemiological considerations, social and economic considerations also emerge. In the new phase it will be as important to inform citizens in all transparency about the considerations and the trade-offs that are made.

For more results from all past editions:

<https://corona-studie.shinyapps.io/corona-studie/>

For general questions about the Corona survey: [corona-studie@uantwerpen.be](mailto:corona-studie@uantwerpen.be)

*This blog was written by members of the GOVTRUST Centre of Excellence, one of the thirteen new centres of Excellence at the University of Antwerp. GOVTRUST combines expertise (Political science, Public administration, Communication science, public law and behavioural economics) from four participating research groups at three faculties (Social sciences, Law, business and economics), aiming to study trust in multilevel systems. Promotors are Koen Verhoest, Patricia Popelier, Peter Bursens, Michel Walrave and Carolyn Declerck. This blog was written together with prof. dr. Wouter van Dooren and Steven De Vadder. For more information, visit our website: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/research-groups/govtrust/>*