

Trust in COVID-19 government policies

GOVTRUST Centre of Excellence *

University of Antwerp

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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 and April 28, 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 224,437 times, and on April 28, 119,634 people participated in the study. The vast majority of respondents lives in Flanders: 207,304 and 108,415 respectively. We have therefore limited this analysis 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 recognise 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 both surveys, more than 94% of participants were rather strongly or totally convinced of the possible risks of a COVID-19 infection¹. Age plays an important role; the older, the higher the severity of the virus is assessed. It is striking that

* Written by prof. dr. Koen Verhoest, prof. dr. Wouter Van Dooren & Steven De Vadder, in collaboration with other members of GOVTRUST Centre of Excellence. For questions, please contact: koen.verhoest@uantwerpen.be. 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 in the survey of April 7 and 28, 2020.

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

respondents with a university degree estimate the severity of the disease slightly lower; although their score still remains very high (averages of 6.46 and 6.30 in the two surveys)².

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 or very low. On April 28, 30% estimated the risk to be rather low to very low that they or someone in their immediate environment will be infected. Quarantine has 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 with the most infections, also estimate the risk of infection to be significantly higher. Remarkably, participants under the age of 25 consider the risk to be significantly lower.

2 TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND EXPERTS

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

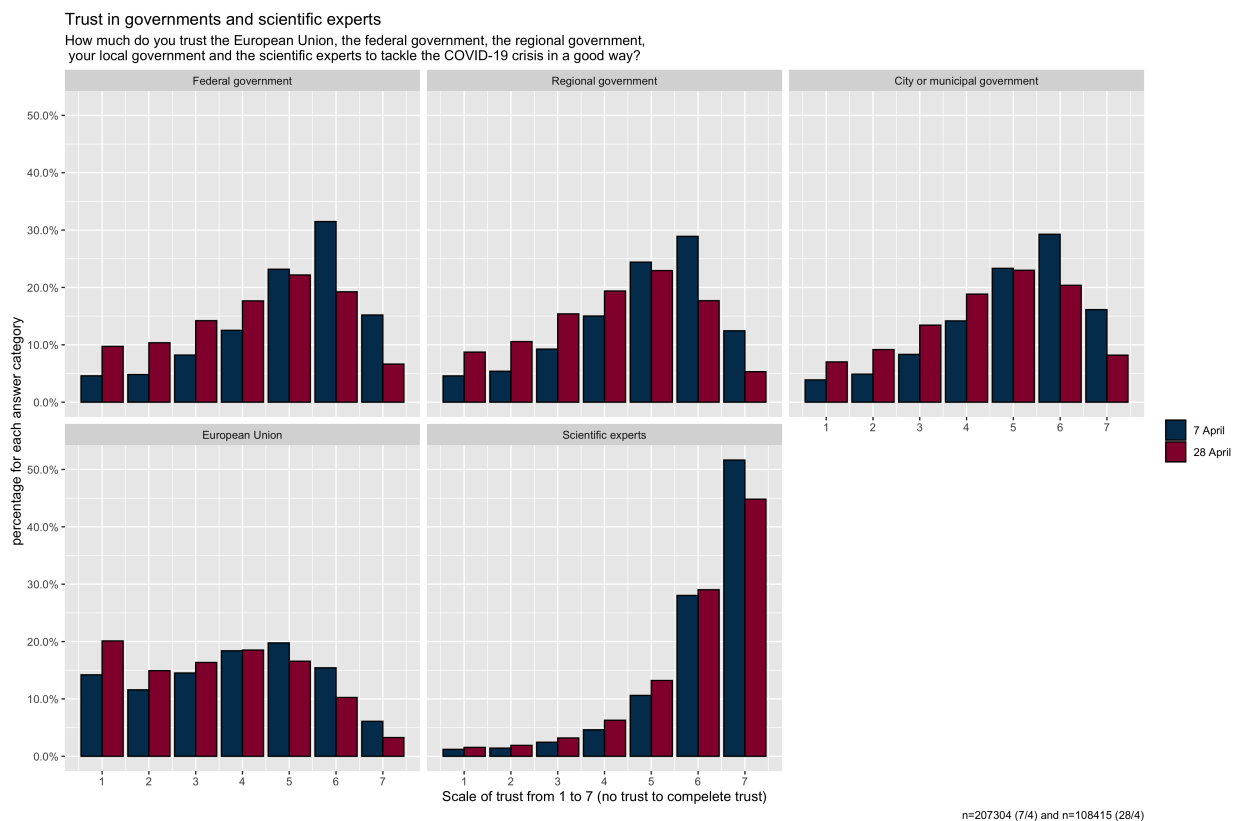


Figure 1

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

Trust in the scientific experts which advise the governments is very high. On April 7, about 90% of respondents (rather) highly or fully trust the experts to know what the best measures are to tackle the coronavirus crisis. Trust in those experts declined somewhat to 87% in the second survey on April 28. Fewer people completely trust the experts (score 7), 45% in the second survey compared to 52% in the first survey. Nevertheless, trust in the experts remains considerably high. In the developing and justifying Belgian VOCIVD-19 policies, governments relied heavily upon these experts.

Trust in the federal government was initially high as well. On April 7, about 70% indicated to trust the federal government (rather) highly or fully to deal with the coronavirus crisis. In comparison, 51% of Flemish respondents said they trusted the federal government in the 2017 Eurobarometer survey. However, the corona 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.

A similar evolution is observed with regards to trust 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 fully. In the second survey on April 28, these figures decreased to 46% and 52% respectively. 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 coronavirus crisis in a good way. On April 7, only 41% of respondents trust the European Union (rather) highly or fully. On April 28, this figure was down to 30%. Both findings are far below the 58% trust measurement in the 2017 Eurobarometer. In other words, it appears that the response of the European Union in this coronavirus crisis does not evoke much citizens' trust. Strikingly, people under the age of 25 have significantly more trust in the European Union than other age groups.

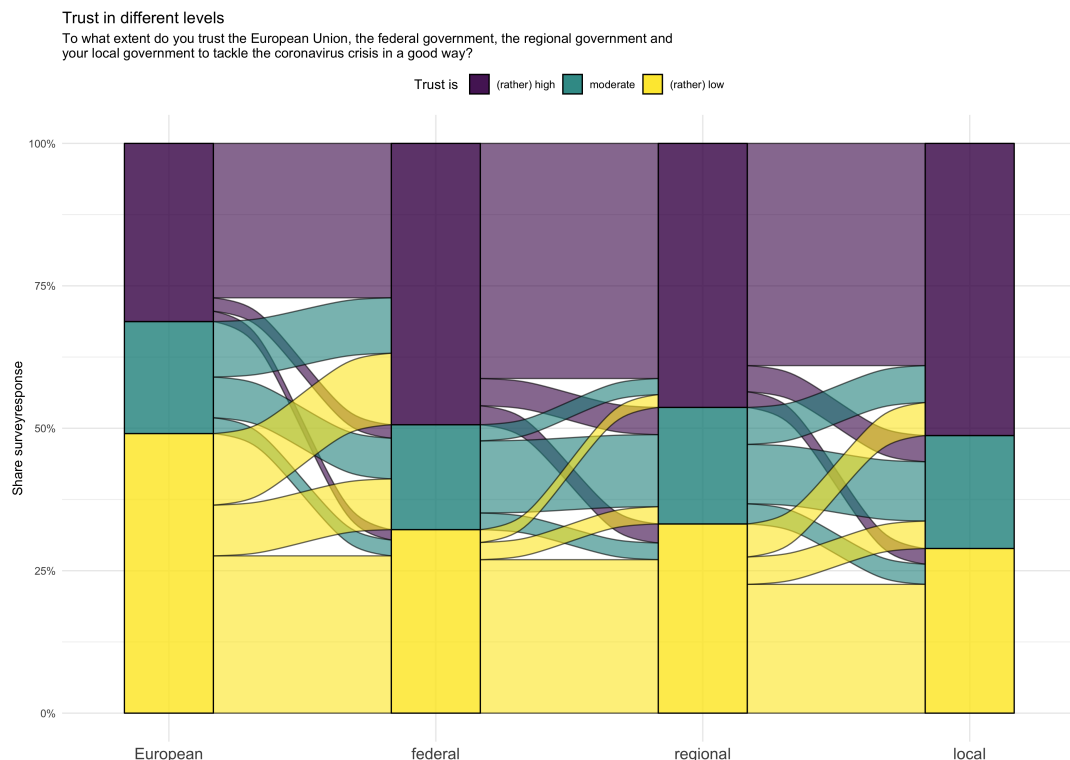


Figure 2

survey 28 April (n=98336)

Trust in the federal, regional and local governments correlate strongly. The vast majority of respondents seem 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, both to tackle the coronavirus crisis and to gain citizens' trust. However, this does not apply to the European Union, which is assessed very differently.

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. This shows that 53% of respondents had seen their trust to be decreased (rather) largely or fully, confirming the findings mentioned above.

In general, level of education and age are 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 indicate 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.

The communication of the experts (see figure 3) is considered to be very trustworthy 89% of the respondents have the opinion that the communication of the scientific experts through the media is rather high to completely trustworthy. Information from doctors, nursing staff and/or pharmacists is also deemed rather high to completely trustworthy on 7 April by 91% of the respondents. Scientific and medical knowledge and authority therefore seem crucial for the degree of trust in information sources about the coronavirus.

The trustworthiness of the communication by the authorities via television, website, posters, etc. (70% rather high to completely trustworthy) is also high. Communication by the governments may be perceived as trustworthy because their communication align 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 striking that respondents estimate the trustworthiness of information from individuals and groups which they know only 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 seem to be preferred over what people learn from social media.

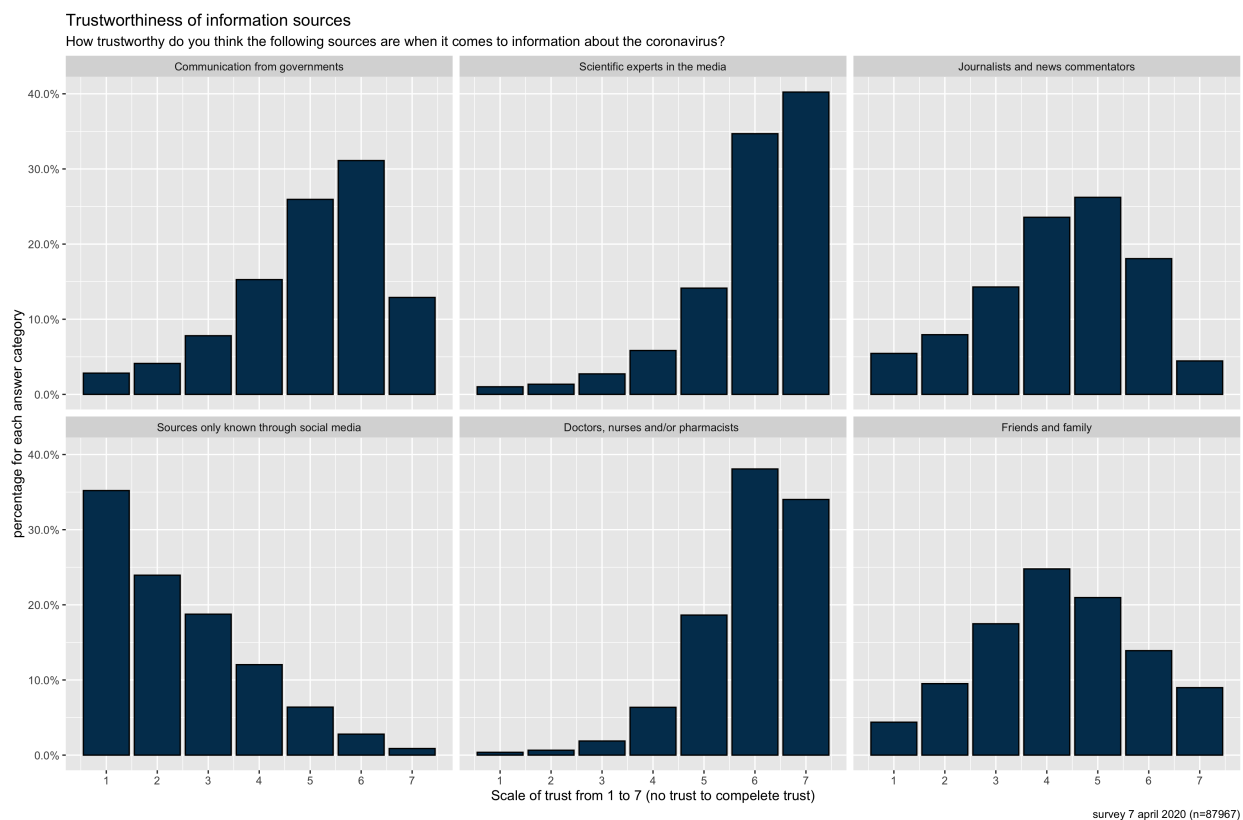


Figure 3

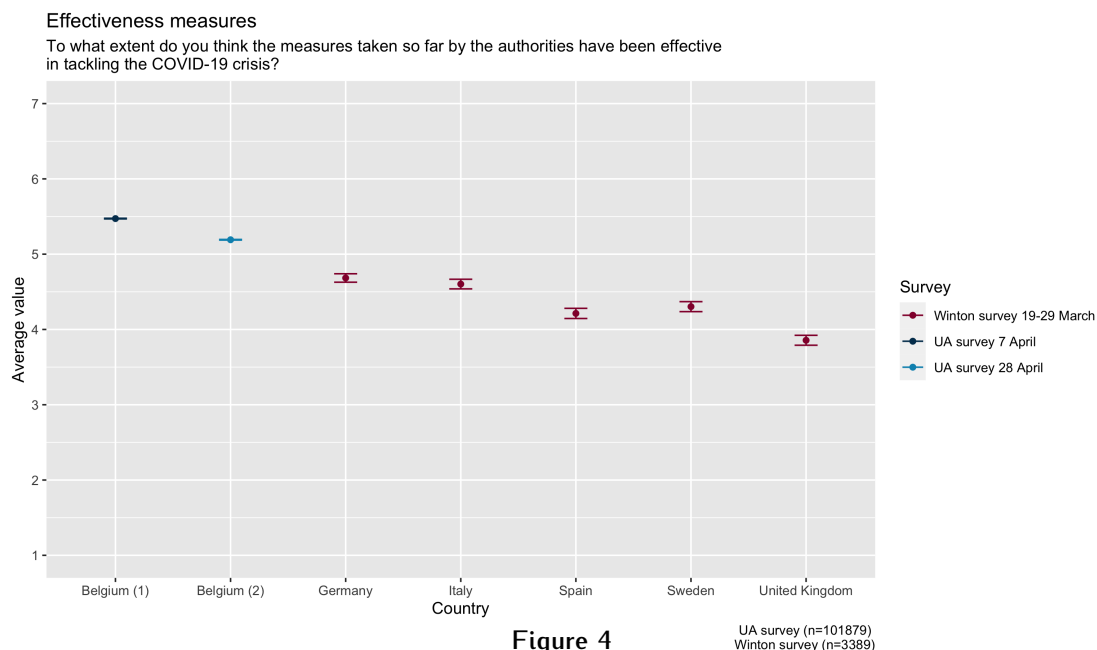
As before, education and age have an impact. For example, the higher educated consider the trustworthiness of information via government communication and scientific experts higher. Information from social media, friends and family or doctors, nursing staff and pharmacists is, in turn, considered less 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

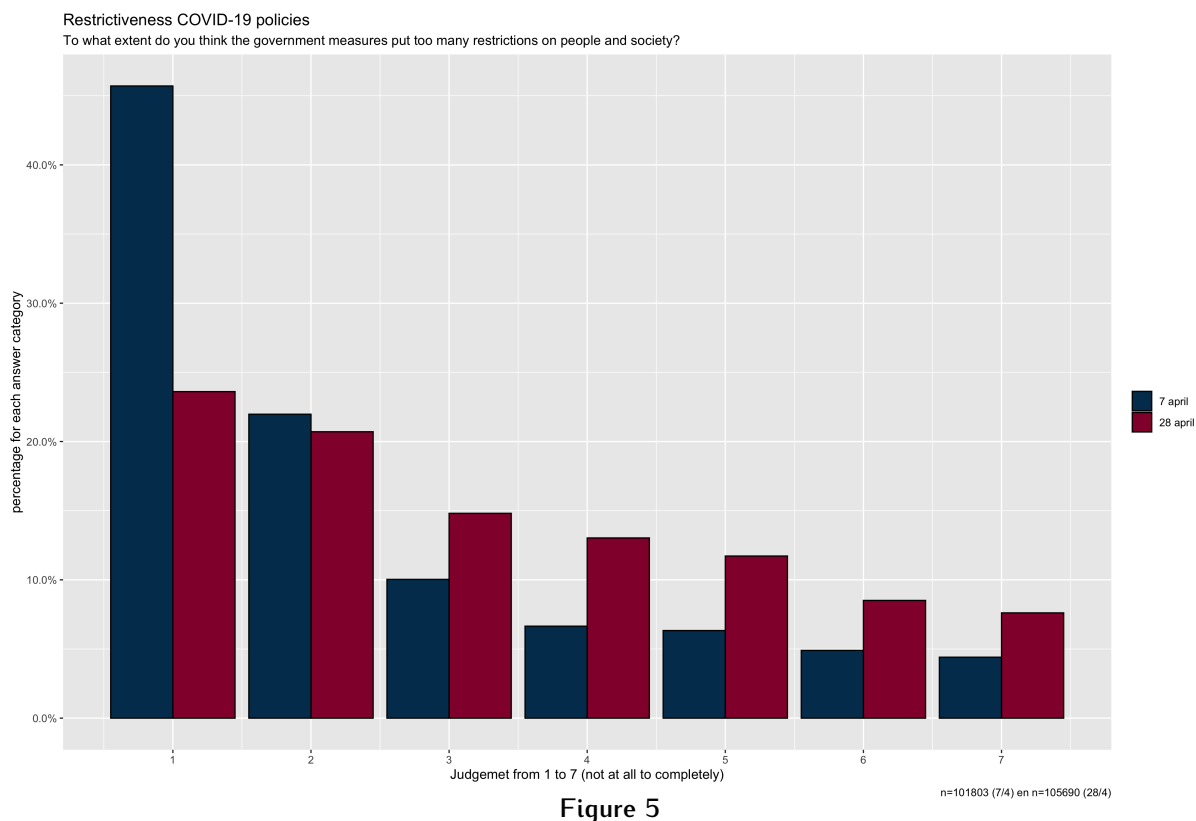
Belief in the effectiveness of government measures is an important predictor of compliance with those measures. In the survey, we asked the respondents to give their opinion about the effectiveness of the measures. On April 7, 80% of respondents indicate that they rather high or fully believe that the measures taken are effective in tackling the coronavirus 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 at 74% and an average value of 5.2. Once again, age and level of education influence the assessment of effectiveness. The higher the age/education, the more effective the measures are assessed.

For reference, we provide results from a comparable survey in several other European countries (figure 4). Belgium scores better than these other countries. We must take into account that our survey was conducted at another time in the crisis and that the methodology (self-selection versus internet panel and sample size) differs³.

³ 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



The corona policy must take effective measures, preferably without limiting social life to an excessive extent. In the survey of April 7 and April 28, 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, the evaluation is different. More people (28%) now find the measures too restrictive (see figure 5). Especially the lower-educated and young people find the measures more restrictive than other groups.



In the second survey on April 28, we discussed the effectiveness of government measures more deeply. We asked a separate assessment of measures aimed at limiting COVID-19 infections, aimed at mitigating negative economic consequences and aimed at mitigating negative social consequences. 75% of the respondents thought that the measures against the spread of the virus 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. 43% are sceptical of 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 effective, as shown in figure 6.

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

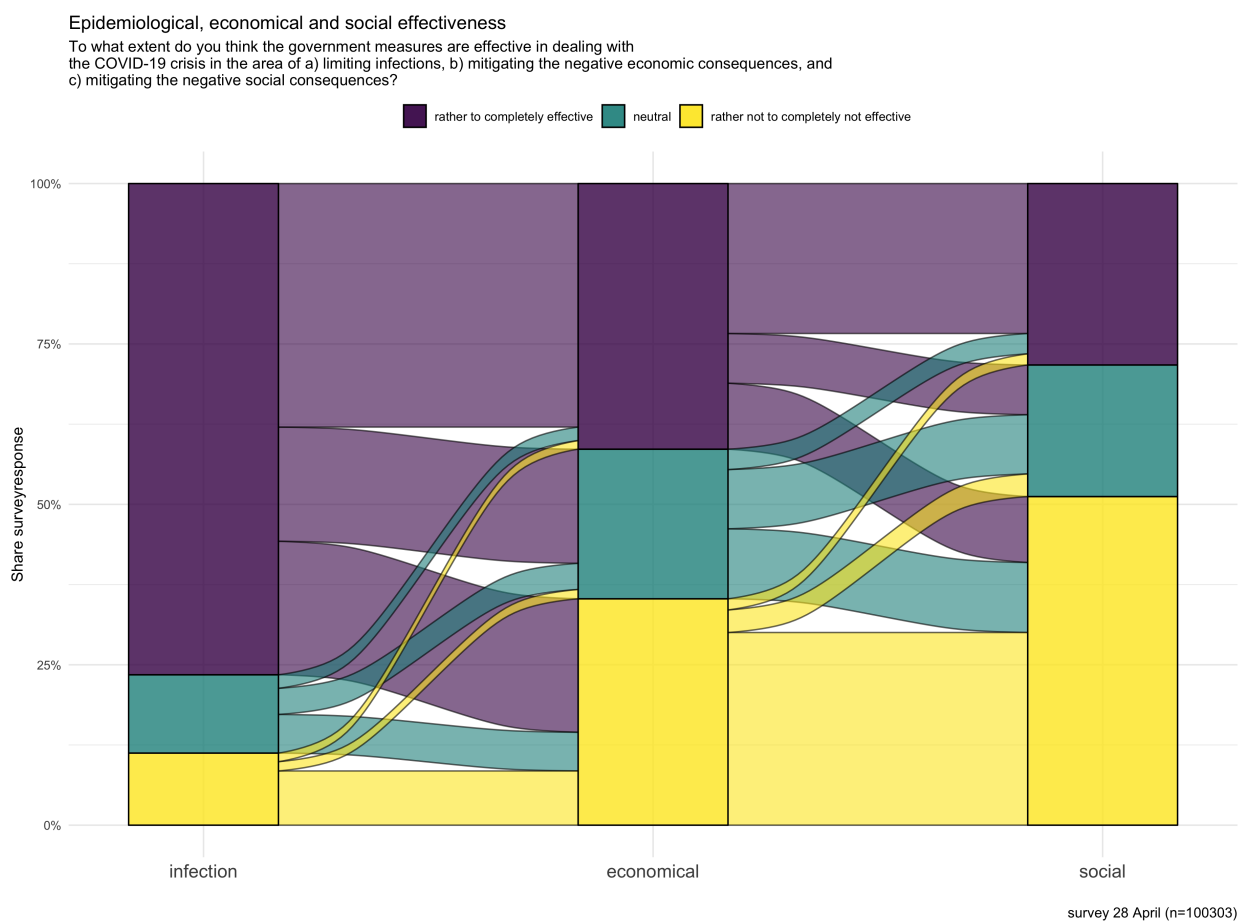


Figure 6

5 CONCLUSION

We conclude that on April 7, support and trust in Belgian governments was high, and trust in the experts was almost absolute. Citizens believed in the effectiveness of the measures taken and did not believe that the government imposed too many restrictions. In this epidemiological phase, everything was focussed on reducing the number of infections.

A few weeks (April 28) later, there are some noticeable evolutions: trust in the different levels of government has declined, more citizens believe that too many restrictions are being imposed, and the belief in the effectiveness of economic and social measures is limited. We are now in a new phase in which the exit strategy is taking shape. At this stage, the choices are more unclear and there is a greater need for political debate. The political and social uncertainty is reflected in the results of the survey on April 28.

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. The figures show that even far-reaching measures are accepted by the population if they are properly explained. The exit is more complex than the 'lockdown'. In addition to virological considerations, social and economic considerations also emerge. In the new phase it will be as important to inform citizens in all transparency about the steps that are being taken.

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

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/>