Further Readings

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Attitudes Towards Migration and Democracy in Times of Intertwined Crises

Eva G.T. Green, Anita Manatschal and Juan-Manuel Falomir Pichastor

A project of the nccr – on the move

This project examines attitudes toward migration and democracy in the Global North and South in the context of international crises (e.g., COVID-19, climate change, and the rise of anti-democratic norms). Combining the perspectives of social psychology and political science, we use cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data as well as experiments.

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nccr — on the move

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Elie Michel, Anita Manatschal, Eva G.T. Green

Border Closure Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Politics as Usual?

in a nutshell #25, June 2025

The effectiveness and legality of border closure policies during the COVID-19 pandemic remain contested.
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Citizens are responsive to government policies in times of crises; public opinion and citizens' preferences should be considered when enforcing drastic policies in times of crisis.
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Crisis management requires coordinated, evidence-based international responses that balance risk management with fundamental rights.

What is meant by …

…border closure
Border closure refers to the temporary or indefinite restriction of cross-border movement imposed by governments during crises. Unlike targeted immigration controls, border closures during crises—such as pandemics, security threats, or economic shocks—often apply bilaterally, affecting both entry and exit.

…public opinion
Public opinion refers to the collective attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions held by the general public or specific segments of society on particular issues. Shaped by factors such as media, political discourse, and personal experience, public opinion can influence policymaking, in normal times but also in times of crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered unprecedented border closures, often framed as emergency health measures, which curtailed and reshaped global mobility. Public support for border closure policies followed established political patterns, with political preferences and policy responsiveness as key drivers. As border controls resurface in political debates—from pandemic measures to migration management—it's important for policymakers to recognize how public opinion on these issues is shaped by political processes and individual reactions to adopted policies. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for future crisis governance and for upholding democratic freedoms.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented wave of border closures, restricting mobility on a global scale. Unlike previous crises, these measures were often comprehensive and bidirectional, limiting not only immigration but also citizens' ability to leave their own countries. The result of these measures has been a dramatic reduction of all forms of human movement during this crisis (work and family migration, business travels, tourism, cross-border mobility, etc.). Such extensive restrictions had no modern precedent in democratic societies during peacetime, raising critical questions about how the public perceived them. Did citizens view these measures as exceptional public health policies, or did they see them through the lens of broader political attitudes on mobility, migration, and security?
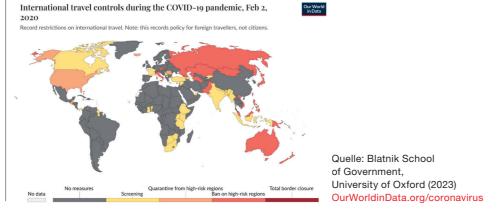
—
"Public support for border closure policies followed established political patterns, with political preferences and policy responsiveness as key drivers."
—

Public Attitudes Follow Political, Not Health-Based, Logics
Despite being framed as a response to an immediate health emergency, support for border closures was not primarily driven by fear of infection or the salience of the pandemic in terms of Covid-19 cases or deaths per country. As a matter of fact, early travel restrictions may have slowed the initial spread of the pandemic, but the domestic constraint measures (social distancing, lockdowns, mask mandates) were far more effective in controlling COVID-19. Public support for border closure measures is instead driven by pre-existing political attitudes such as right-wing ideology and distrust of foreigners. This aligns with long-standing trends in public attitudes toward migration, suggesting that many citizens perceived border closures less as a temporary pandemic response and more as a continuation of restrictive border policies.

Beyond political beliefs, citizens' evaluation of their government's overall policy response to the pandemic also played a key role to determine their views on border closures. Individuals who considered their government's COVID-19 response insufficient were more likely to support strict border controls, highlighting the role of policy responsiveness in shaping attitudes. Public opinion is thus influenced by both, ideology and policy responsiveness.

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"Despite being framed as a response to an immediate health emergency, support for border closures was not primarily driven by fear of infection or the salience of the pandemic."
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Policy Feedback: How Government Action Shapes Support
The pandemic further revealed a self-reinforcing dynamic between border policies and public opinion. In countries that implemented strict travel restrictions, public support for closures tended to be high, suggesting a positive policy feedback loop: once restrictive measures were in place, they became more normalized, making the public more accepting of continued mobility constraints.

However, this effect was not necessarily long-lasting. Over time, a form of policy fatigue set in: support for border closures declined as the crisis persisted. This suggests a negative feedback effect where prolonged restrictions eroded initial acceptance. Policymakers should recognize that crisis policies are not static and uniformly accepted, and that support for restrictive measures is time-sensitive, with citizens becoming less willing to tolerate constraints as emergencies persist.

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"It is crucial to distinguish legitimate emergency measures—based on clear, evidence-based risk assessments—from politically motivated restrictions, which often try to address perceived political demands, and risk reinforcing pre-existing biases against mobility."
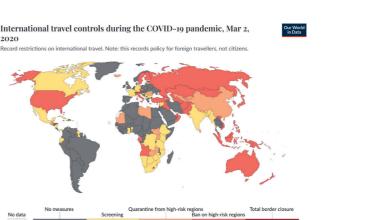—

Border Closures Beyond COVID-19: Crisis Management or Political Strategy?
While government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic were unprecedented to match a global and multifaceted crisis, the resulting border closure policies fit within a larger trend of increasing mobility restrictions worldwide. In recent years, crises—including economic shocks, security threats, and migration pressures—have been used as justifications for reinforcing border controls, limiting human movements, or fully closing borders. The second Trump administration in the U.S., as well as heightened border securitization in Europe, illustrate how temporary border crisis measures can blur into long-term political strategies. It is crucial to distinguish legitimate emergency measures—based on clear, evidence-based risk assessments—from politically motivated restrictions, which often try to address perceived political demands, and risk reinforcing pre-existing biases against mobility. While border closures may sometimes be necessary in a crisis, the pandemic showed that their effectiveness and legality are highly debated. Some consider these closures even illegal according to international human rights law. Our study shows that these policies directly influence public opinion, with possibly far-reaching consequences on democratic norms and individual freedoms.

Crisis Policymaking: Ensuring Responsiveness Without Reinforcing Polarization
The adaptability of democratic systems in crises depends on maintaining public trust and legitimacy. The COVID-19 experience demonstrated that crisis policies must be designed based on clear justifications, transparency, and time-limited objectives to prevent them from becoming permanent fixtures of political discourse. Beyond COVID-19, this should encourage policymakers to consider public opinion and citizens' preferences when enforcing drastic policies in times of crisis. Even more, public health crises, security threats, and migration challenges require coordinated international responses that balance risk management with fundamental rights. It is capital for democratic governance that governments focus on adaptive, evidence-based approaches that preserve both public safety and democratic freedoms.

Figure 1: Snapshots of international travel controls during the Covid-19 pandemic between February and April 2020

International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic, Feb 2, 2020
Record restrictions on international travel. Note: this records policy for foreign travellers, not citizens.

Our World in Data

No data · No measures · Screening · Quarantine from high-risk regions · Ban on high-risk regions · Total border closure

Quelle: Blatnik School of Government, University of Oxford (2023)
OurWorldinData.org/coronavirus

International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mar 2, 2020
Record restrictions on international travel. Note: this records policy for foreign travellers, not citizens.

Our World in Data

No data · No measures · Screening · Quarantine from high-risk regions · Ban on high-risk regions · Total border closure

International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic, Apr 2, 2020
Record restrictions on international travel. Note: this records policy for foreign travellers, not citizens.

Our World in Data

No data · No measures · Screening · Quarantine from high-risk regions · Ban on high-risk regions · Total border closure