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POLITICAL TRUST AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS:

PUSHING POPULISM TO THE BACKBURNER?

**A study of
public opinion in Australia, Italy, the UK and the USA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The emergence and spread of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 and the response of both government and citizens to its impact has created a powerful challenge to politics as usual. Our evidence – drawn from nationally representative surveys conducted by Ipsos in Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA during May and June – reveals that politics has been transformed, sometimes in unexpected ways. It remains unclear how long-lasting these effects on public opinion will be. A crisis of this existential nature cannot be shaped by elite cues and framing in the same way as many other policy issues, since citizens experience it directly and powerfully. As a consequence, COVID-19 has proved harder terrain for more populist leaders to ply their trade – and more broadly has offered a challenge for effective governance.[1]

Based on what we know from studies of past pandemics and events that pose collective existential risks to citizens beyond their control, it is to be expected that political attitudes and behaviours will be affected. Faced with a threat to their lives, financial circumstances, and the functioning of society, citizens are quick to adjust and shape their own new normal politics. The evidence from our surveys reveals that public opinion has shifted in response to the crisis, but in contrasting ways in different countries. Populist leaders have tended to fare worse in the eyes of the public, seemingly linked to assessments of their performance in handling of the crisis.

- Various cross-national polls have established that there has been a surge in trust for political leaders and government institutions, consistent with the well-established 'rally-around-the-flag' effect.

- These trends vary across countries, with President Donald Trump in the USA doing least well, receiving a much smaller boost in public approval of his performance compared to his counterparts in Australia, Italy and the UK, and even declining in recent months.

- Italy seems to have, at least for the time being, ceased to be the archetypal 'low trust' political culture, a status it has held for several decades, with that dubious honour now falling to the USA.

- Experts now seem to be back in fashion, with citizens' tending to look more positively on those politicians who listen to extra governmental views in organising their response to the pandemic.

Past research has suggested that when faced with extreme and heightened risk, citizens respond emotionally and develop 'coping strategies' that do not rely on overt rational or empirically driven calculations.[2] In this, they tend to blindly put their faith in strong leaders and look to blame outsider groups. However, the evidence from our analysis suggests that most citizens have stuck with reasoned judgements of competence in the context of COVID-19.

- Trust in government and political leaders reflects *actual experiences* in the four countries – with the personal threat highest in the UK (where the rate of deaths per capita is highest); concerns about economic threat are highest in the UK and Italy (countries subject to tighter containment measures than others), and concern about national threat

1. J. Gaskell, G. Stoker, W. Jennings and D. Devine (2020). 'COVID-19 and the blunders of our governments: long-run system failings aggravated by political choices.' *The Political Quarterly*.

2. Albertson, B. and S. Kushner Gadarain. (2015). *Anxious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Merolla, J.L., and E.J. Zechmesiter. (2009). *Democracy at Risk*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

are highest in the UK (reflecting the scale and severity of the outbreak to date), but notably lower in the USA, despite its inability to get the virus under control.

- The relative performance of leaders in terms of the impact of the pandemic is therefore reflected in their respective ratings: Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison is well ahead in terms of being viewed as competent and efficient in his handling of the outbreak, followed by Giuseppe Conte, then Boris Johnson, and then, Donald Trump.

The process of judging the competence of political elites in the context of COVID-19 is more than a crude judgment about threat and outcomes. It reflects how the leader is perceived to have managed the process and their relationships with other stakeholders and interests. Do they consult with experts, express themselves clearly, work across governmental and political divides? The leader that citizens seem to be looking for in the age of the coronavirus is not a blustering populist, but a decisive, reflective, and even technocratic type.

- The more technocratic style of Italy's Prime Minister, Conte has won him greater public approval than the more populist response of President Trump in the USA or the slightly stumbling approach of the UK's PM Johnson; while the ability of Australia's Prime Minister Morrison to work across political and federal divides has won him plaudits, for the moment at least.

- Of the cases we consider, President Trump stands out as receiving the lowest marks from the public. Majorities of the public in Australia, Italy and the UK viewed their leaders as consulting with experts and others in government in their handling of the pandemic, but only a third consider listening to experts to be a feature of Trump's way of working.

COVID-19 has complicated the global political landscape, especially for leaders with a more populist style of governing. But the partisanship and polarisation on which populist politics thrives has not gone away.

- While the headline figures tend to suggest high levels of trust in the competence and benevolence of political leaders in handling the coronavirus, beneath the surface there are deep partisan divides.

- These tend to be sharpest in the USA, especially in terms of the perceived threat of the virus and worry about the economy: Democrats are significantly more concerned about COVID-19 than Republicans, while belief that the media has exaggerated the outbreak is widespread among Republicans.

- There are also substantial partisan divides in evaluations of the handling of the pandemic by Prime Ministers Conte, Johnson and Morrison, and President Trump – these are observed for assessments of the *competence, benevolence*, and *integrity* of political leaders. Only in Australia do a majority of both government and opposition party supporters think that the government's leader is handling the coronavirus well.

1 POLITICAL TRUST IN THE AGE OF THE CORONAVIRUS

It has been argued in many quarters that trust is crucial for societal and governmental efforts to bring COVID-19 under control. Trust in both scientific expertise and government matters for securing the compliance of citizens with restrictive containment measures put in place to combat the virus. In the early stages of the crisis, many world leaders and governments enjoyed a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect as citizens placed their trust in political authorities to protect them.[3] But has COVID-19 transformed the politics of advanced Western democracies or have its effects been ephemeral? It is too soon to say for certain, but in this report we highlight how the crisis has temporarily at least challenged cross-national patterns of political trust. Despite this, trust remains polarised along partisan lines in many countries. There are signs, too, that politics-as-usual has been put on hold rather than replaced permanently.

Our evidence from four countries – Australia, Italy, the UK and the USA – also hints at how citizens make judgements about politics more widely. Performance and elite cues matter – citizens update their evaluations in response to the severity of the threat posed by the virus and handling of the crisis by government. In this report, we highlight how the crisis has intersected with existing societal and political divides to create distinctive patterns of public opinion in each country.

To explore how citizens view the response of their governments and leaders to COVID-19, and the consequences for political trust, we conducted online surveys in Australia, Italy, the UK and the USA during May and June 2020. In the report that follows, we first outline the course of the pandemic in each country in terms of public health and the stringency of government responses. We then proceed to summarise findings from our surveys on citizens' trust in government and various public institutions, as well as public opinion towards the threat posed by the virus and their governments' handling of the crisis.

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3. Jennings, W. (2020). "Covid-19 and the 'rally-round-the flag' effect." *UK in a Changing Europe blog, 3 March 2020.* Accessed 6 August 2020 at: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/covid-19-and-the-rally-round-the-flag-effect/.

2 THE TRAJECTORY OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN AUSTRALIA, ITALY, THE UK AND USA

It is possible that we are just in the foothills of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much uncertainty remains as to the proportion of the population to have been affected so far, whether and when a vaccine will be found (and who will be able to access it), and if effective therapies might yet be found. There has been substantial debate over the reliability and comparability of data on cases and mortality – due to national variations in testing regimes, classification of COVID-related deaths, and inclusion or exclusion of deaths outside hospital. As a result, the rate of community transmission ('the R'), the number of cases and the impact on mortality rates provide indicators of the performance of national governing systems to *date* – late July 2020 at the time of writing – but these may yet be cast in better or worse light by the subsequent national and global trajectory of the virus.

National varieties of the COVID-19 crisis

Nevertheless, the trajectory of the pandemic seems to be taking different paths in different contexts – with potential ramifications for public trust in government. We start with data from *Our World In Data* for our four countries (Australia, Italy, the UK and the USA), on the number of reported cases, deaths and population-adjusted deaths.[4] Here we can see that Australia barely figures in terms of number of reported cases or deaths (see Figures 1 and 2), being of a completely different order of severity compared to the other countries – though it has recently experienced a surge of cases in the state of

Victoria that is giving cause for concern. The figures highlight how Italy was an early casualty of the virus, suffering a higher number of cases than the far more populous USA until late March, and a higher number of deaths until early April. In the USA, New York was the initial epicentre of the outbreak (following a smaller outbreak in Washington state) before spreading across the country in the weeks and months that followed – with cases now rising sharply in Texas, Arizona, Florida and other states. The UK followed its own distinct path, with the number of cases lagging Italy until early May, and reported deaths overtaking its European counterpart around the start of May.

Taking population-adjusted deaths as the reference point (see Figure 3), it was only in late May that the UK death toll exceeded that in Italy (with both countries ahead of the larger USA). The abnormal path taken by the USA is exemplified by the figure depicting its seven-day rolling average of reported cases (see Figure 4). This hit an initial peak in early April – mainly due to the large number of cases in New York – but declined steadily up until around early June as many states put measures in place to contain the spread of the disease. However, the rolling average has increased sharply since early June, following the earlier easing of restrictions. One key feature of the USA case is that the national picture conceals a number of divergent experiences at the state-level, with some states stabilising COVID-19 and others seeing it run out of control. In this regard, federalism has facilitated a range of policy

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4. Our World In Data. (2020). *Our World in Data COVID-19 dataset*. For data see: https://github.com/owid/covid-19-data/tree/master/public/data. Accessed 6 August 2020.

experiments in handling of the crisis. To date, some states and some governors have fared considerably better than others.

In terms of national experiences of COVID-19, we have one case – Australia – enjoying comparatively good outcomes so far – measured against total cases and deaths (around 8,000 and 100 respectively as of the start of July), though it has stumbled recently with the number of cases nearly doubling during the month of July. We have one case – Italy – that experienced a poor start to the pandemic (reaching nearly 1,000 deaths a day at one point) but has turned its fortunes around, as the number of cases and deaths have steadily diminished (from a high of over 6,000 new cases a day in March to around 200 in July). We have one case – the UK – that has seen high numbers of cases and deaths, eventually overtaking the

other countries in terms of deaths per million in late May. And we have one case – the USA – that has seen the most severe outbreak in absolute terms, and continues to see its numbers rise exponentially, though the total number of deaths relative to its population size has not yet reached the level of Italy and the UK.

Figure 1: Number of reported COVID-19 cases in Australia, Italy, the UK and USA
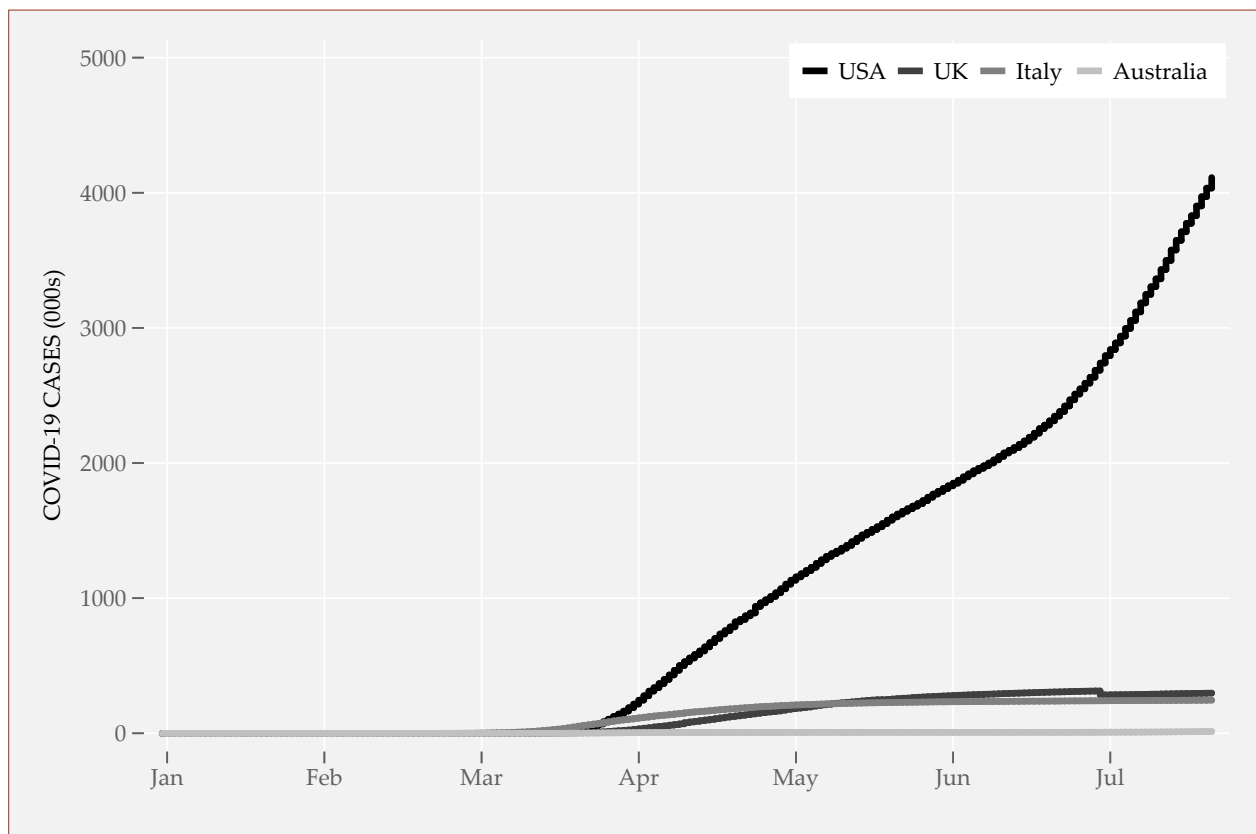
Figure 2: Number of reported COVID-19 deaths in Australia, Italy, the UK and USA
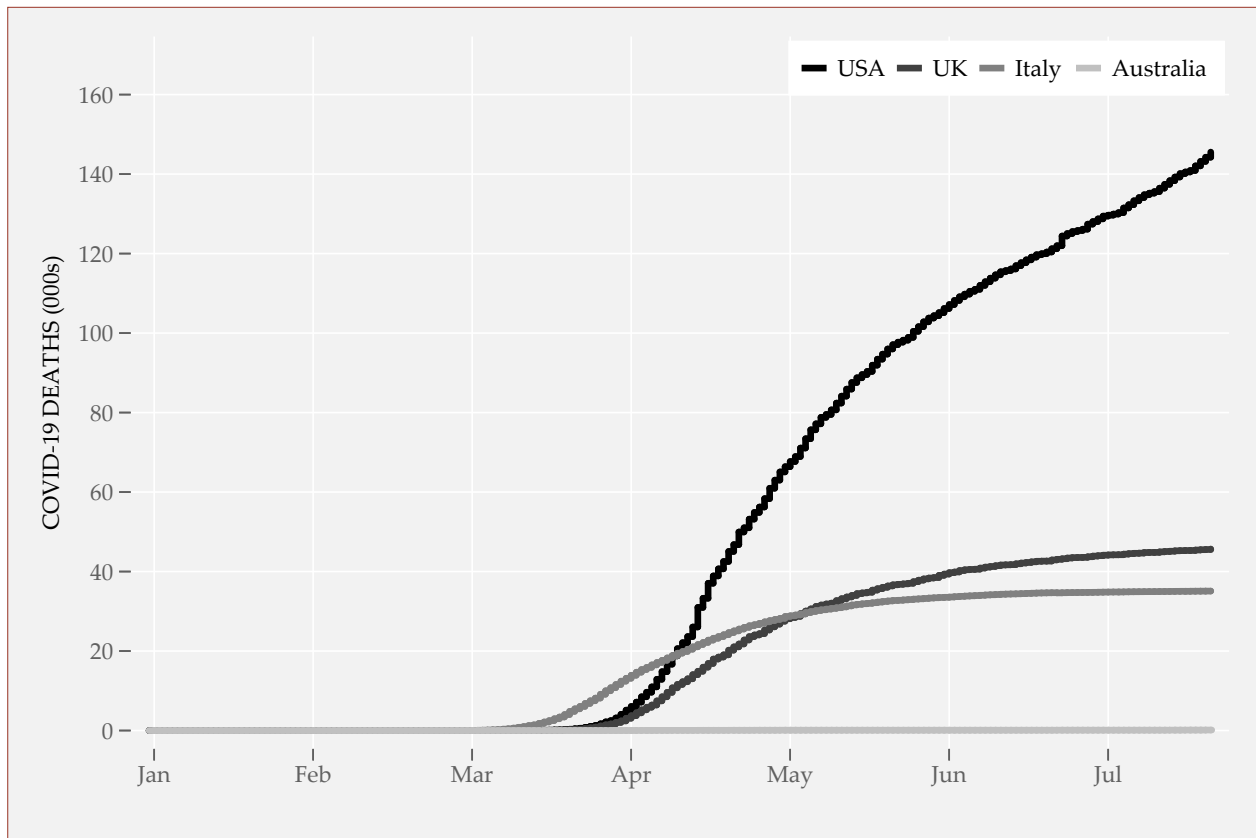
Figure 3. Number of reported COVID-19 deaths per million people in Australia, Italy, the UK and USA
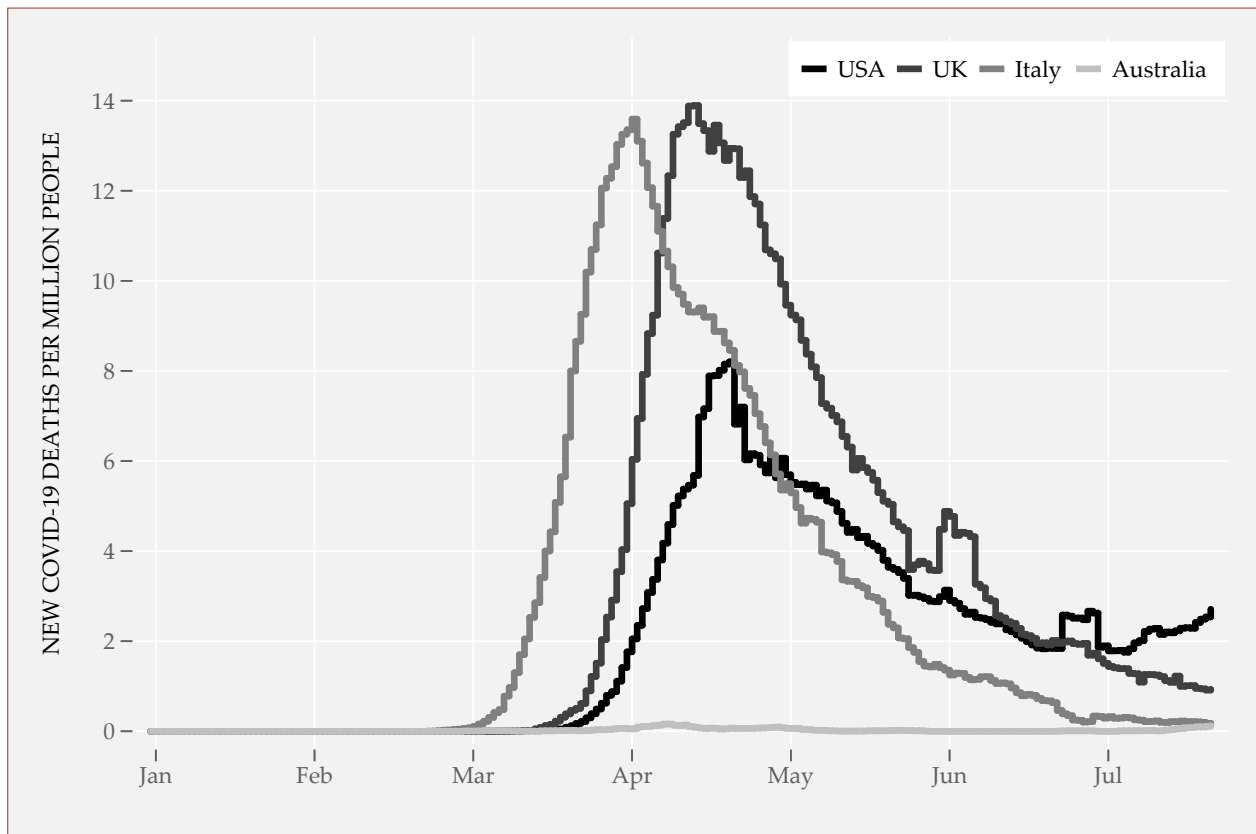
Figure 4: Number of new reported COVID-19 cases (7-day average) in Australia, Italy, the UK and USA
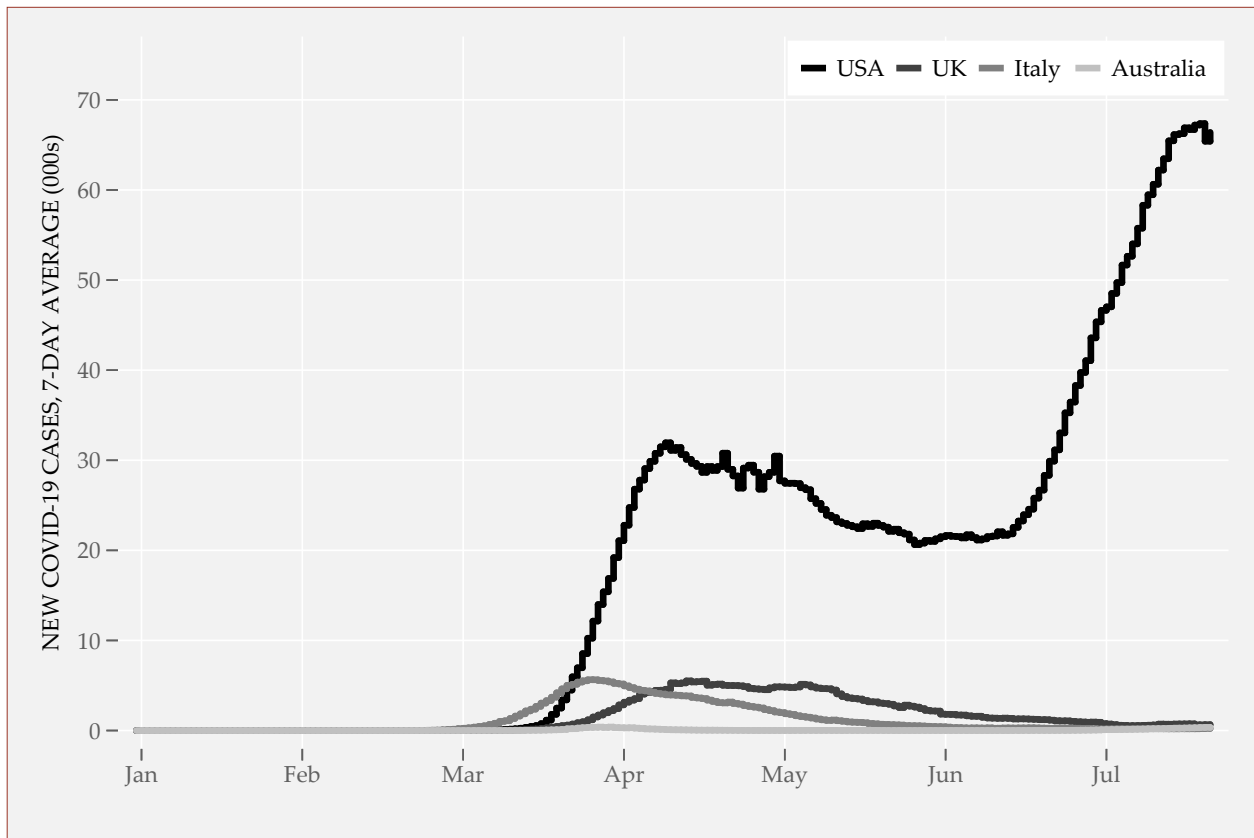
Policy responses

It is also possible to compare the timelines and restrictiveness of the containment policies put in place by the governments of these countries, using the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT).[5] This systematically collects information on common policy responses and calculates a standardised scale of the stringency of government measures. The index is plotted in Figure 5 and highlights the different timings and levels of stringency of containment measures across the four countries. These tell us how quickly the country shut down, and how this coincides with the severity of the outbreak at the time.

What is most striking from this graph is that Italy was far quicker to take major steps to shut down (around a month before the other countries), introducing local quarantine restrictions in hotspots in Northern Italy on February 21st along with event and school closures, and enacting a lockdown of the Lombardy region on March 8th, followed by a nationwide lockdown on March 11th. The USA was next to follow, especially focused on the outbreak in Washington state, with many states closing schools and declaring states of emergency in the first half of March. Australia took initial steps ahead of the UK, before the latter introduced stricter restrictions on March 23rd. Italy's success in suppressing the virus enabled it to significantly reduce restrictions at the start of May.

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5. Hale, T., Webster, S., Petherick, A., Phillips, T. and Kira, B. (2020). *Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.* Blavatnik School of Government. Accessed: https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker.

Figure 5: Stringency index of government containment measures (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker) in Australia, Italy, the UK and USA
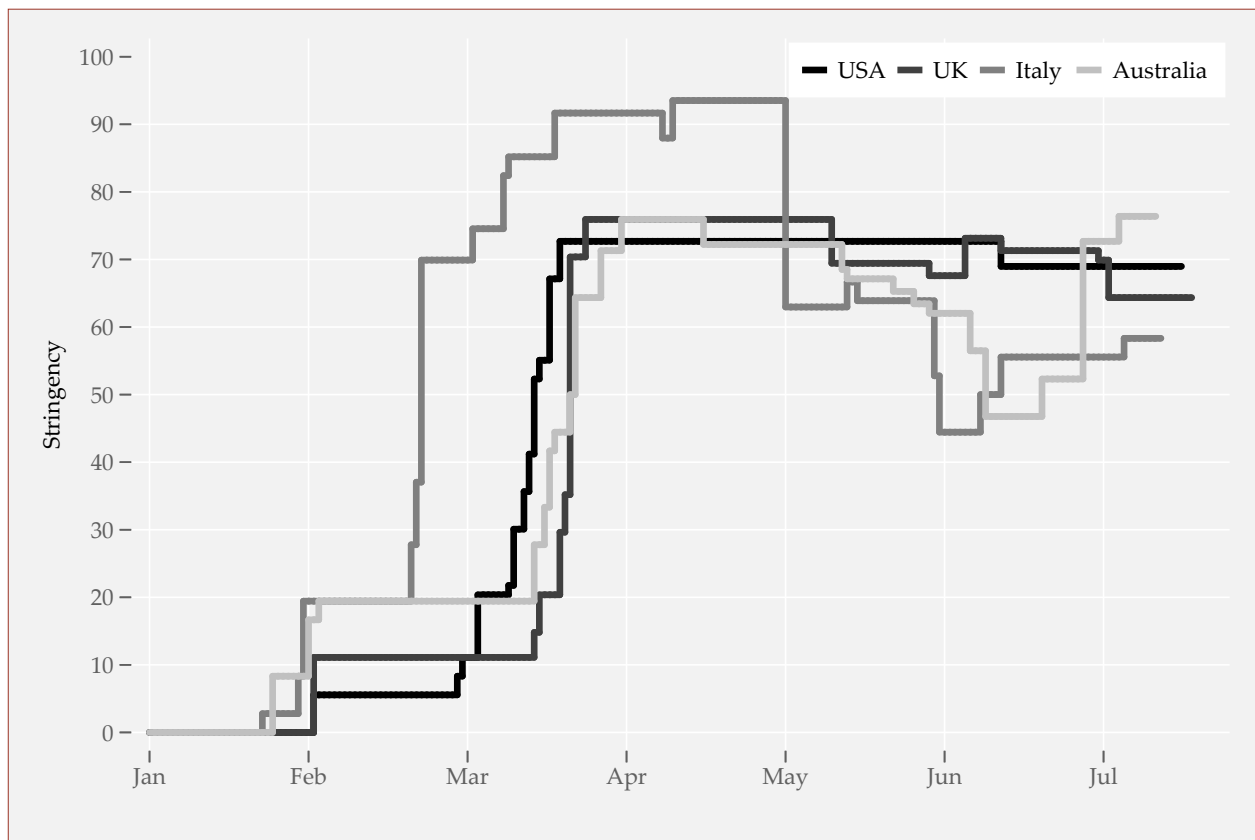
Leader approval and the 'rally-around-the-flag' phenomenon

Before proceeding to the details of our survey, it is helpful to consider the dynamics of approval of government leaders in the four countries. We use regular surveys of public satisfaction with Prime Ministers Morrison, Conte, and Johnson, and President Trump. The percentage of people expressing approval of each leader is shown on the y-axis of Figures 6 to 9. The x-axis indicates the middle day of fieldwork of the corresponding survey. The dashed red lines on each figure indicate the start and end fieldwork dates of the surveys we commissioned from Ipsos relating to trust and COVID-19. This helps clarify the context in

which our data collection took place, indicating the time point during the COVID-19 crisis and 'rally-round-the-flag' phenomenon that we surveyed citizens (i.e. whether public trust in leaders and government was at a relatively high or low ebb).

The figures confirm that all leaders experienced something of a 'rally-around-the-flag' in their ratings, but that President Trump's rally was considerably smaller than his counterparts (amounting to just a few percentage points in March and April, and having vanished altogether by June). Of the rallies, those experienced by Conte and Johnson were largest (reaching close to thirty points higher than their approval before the countries shut down),[6] while Morrison has

6. Bol, D., Giani, M., Blais, A. and Loewen, P.J. (2020). 'The effect of COVID-19 lockdowns on political support: Some good news for democracy?' *European Journal of Political Research*; De Vries, C.E., Bakker, B.N., Hobolt, S. and Arceneaux, K. (2020). 'Crisis Signaling: How Italy's Coronavirus Lockdown Affected Incumbent Support in Other European Countries.' Accessed 6 August 2020 at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3606149.

seen his rally last longer than the others (having now been sustained for around three months). In all the cases bar Australia, approval of the leader was declining when we conducted our surveys, but relatively higher than in 'normal' times. It will be interesting in the weeks ahead to see whether Morrison's approval ratings are hit by the recent spike in cases in Australia.

Figure 6: Approval rating, PM Giuseppe Conte (Italy)
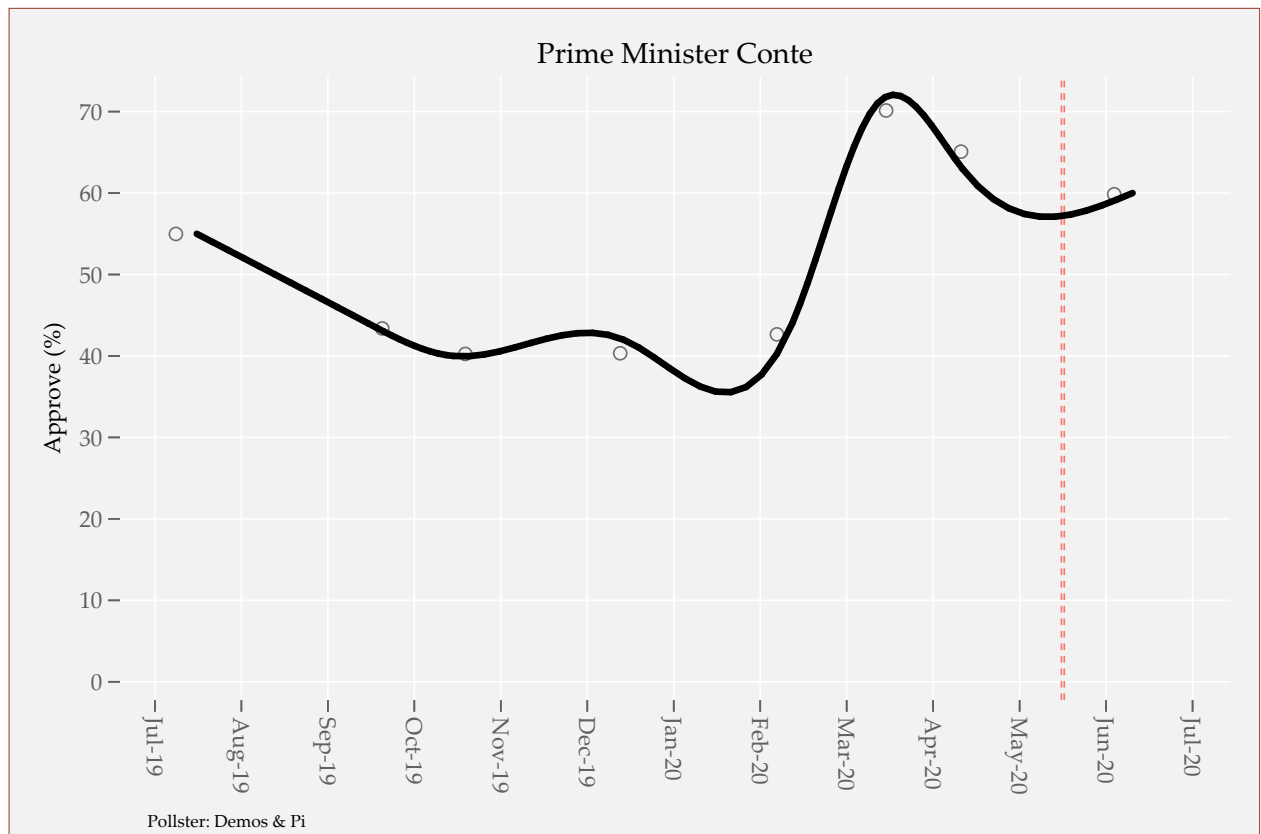
Figure 7: Approval rating, PM Boris Johnson (UK)

Prime Minister Johnson

Pollsters: Opinium, YouGov, Deltapoll, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, Survation
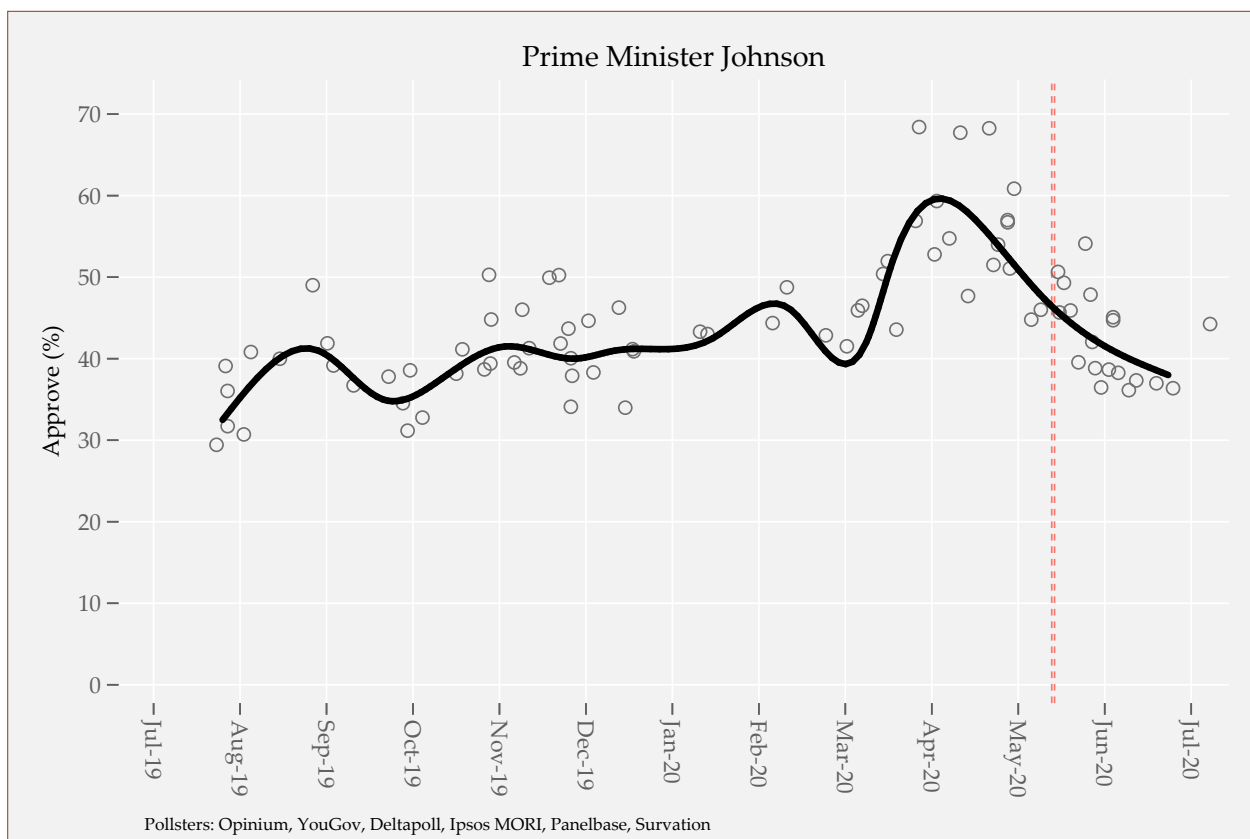
Figure 8: Approval rating, PM Scott Morrison (Australia)

Prime Minister Morrison

Pollster: Essential
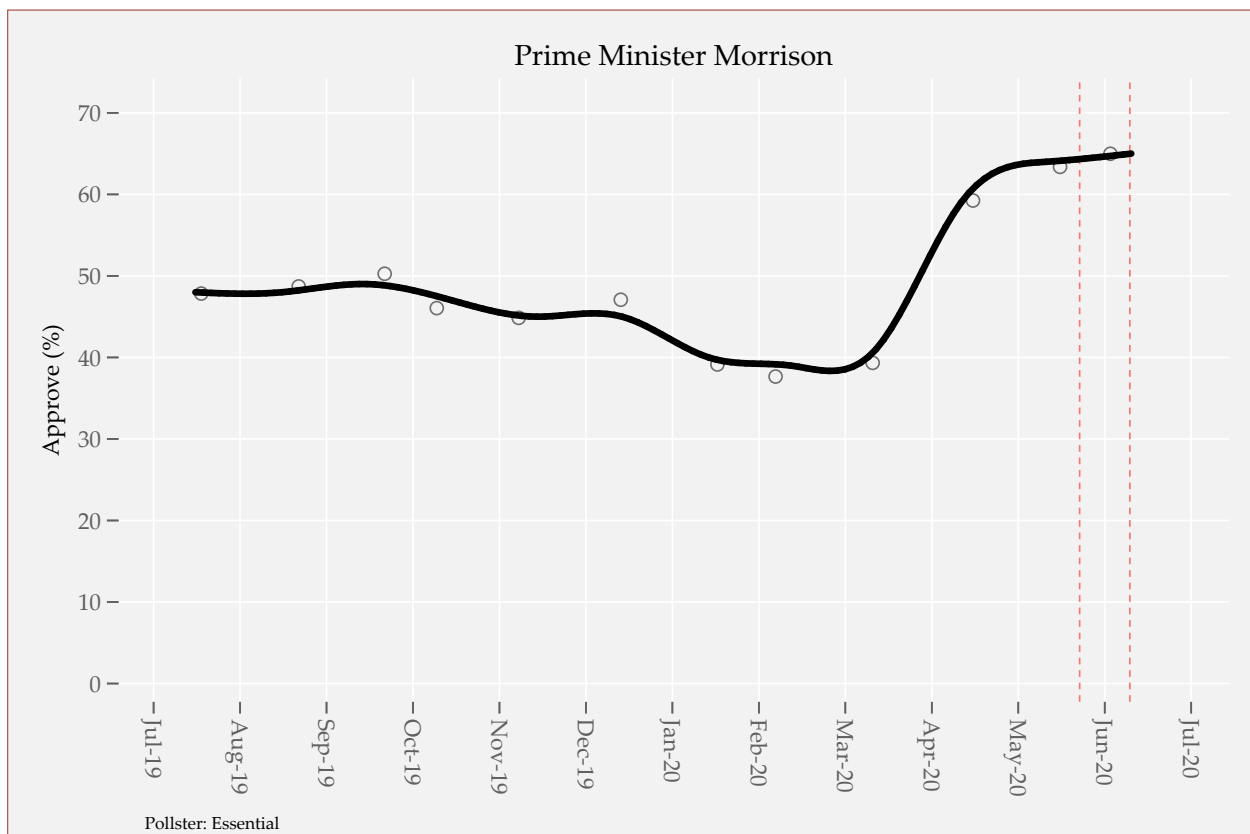
Figure 9: Approval rating, President Donald Trump (USA)
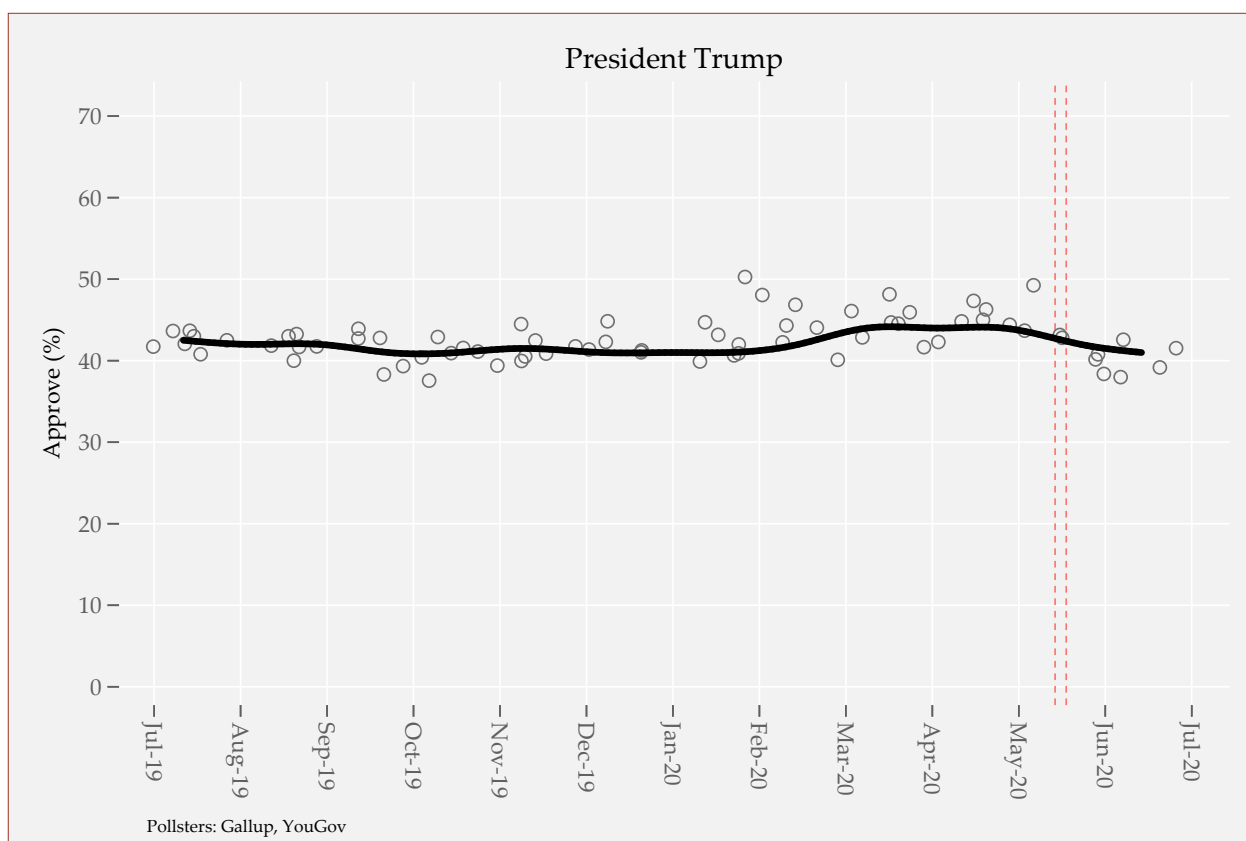
Political trust in the four countries before COVID-19

To understand the effects of COVID-19, it is necessary to consider how trusting the political culture was in each country prior to the pandemic. We do not have directly comparable survey data on trust in government from immediately before the outbreak, but are able to draw upon a cross-national survey carried out by the Wellcome Trust in 2018, which provides a baseline measurement of political trust in the four countries.[7] It asked the question "How much do you trust each of the following? Do you trust them a lot, some, not much, or not at all?", with "the national government in this country" listed among the options. In Figure 10, we see that in 2018, among our four countries

trust in government was highest in the UK, with 53% expressing some or a lot of trust, followed by Australia (51%), and the USA (49%), with the differences between the countries so small as to be statistically indistinguishable. Italy, by contrast, suffered comparatively from much lower levels of political trust – with just 34% expressing some or a lot of trust in national government. This finding repeats the seminal insights of Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (published in 1963 and the original survey fieldwork dating back to 1959-60) of Italy as a 'low trust' political culture.

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7. Wellcome Trust. (2019). *Wellcome Global Monitor 2018*. London: Wellcome Trust.

Figure 10: Trust in national government, Wellcome Global Monitor 2018
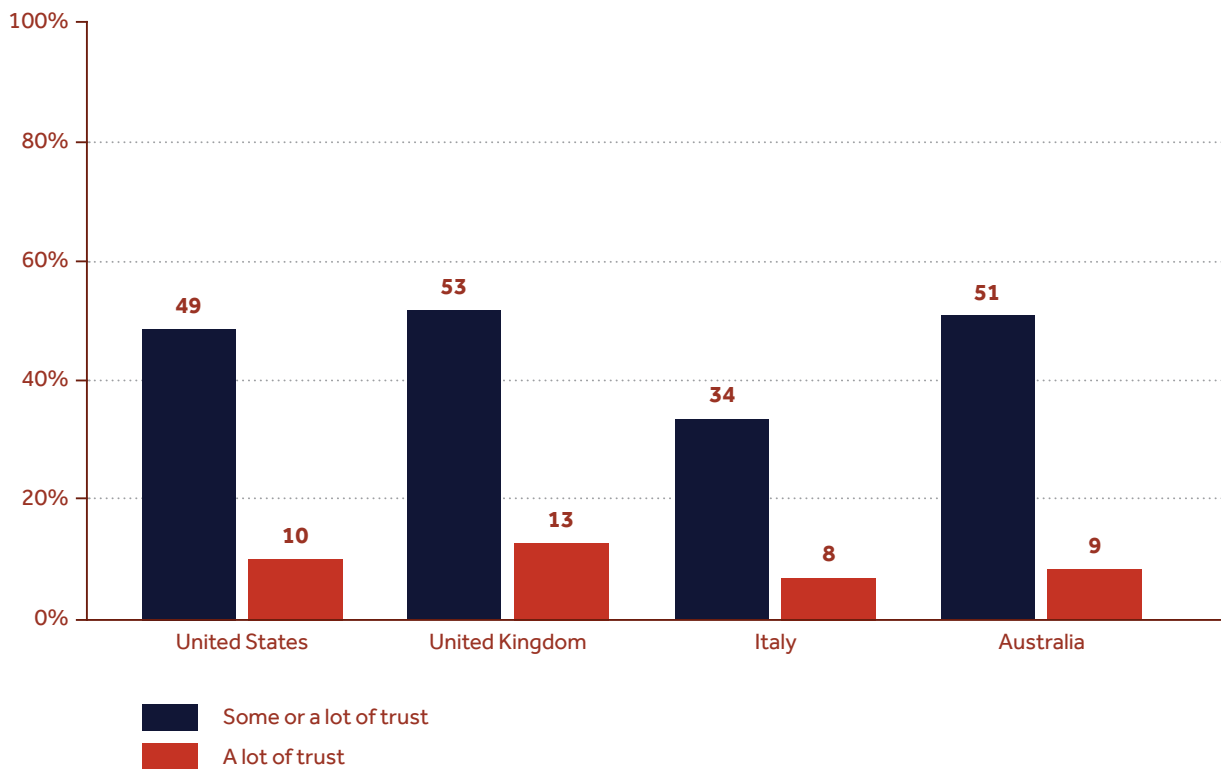
Based on the evidence presented to this point, we can summarise the four cases according to their underlying levels of trust, contextual and institutional factors that have made their exposure to and handling of COVID-19 more or less problematic, and the outcomes that might inform how citizens evaluate the performance of their governments (see Table 1).

Table 1: The COVID crisis in four countries

Country	Political trust	Covid context	Political environment	Outcomes	Total
Australia	Moderate trust	The 'lucky country' – vulnerability and/or exposure favourable due to low density and geographically dispersed population, with restrictions imposed early	Federal system with capacity for co-operation but with political churn and failings among established political elite challenged by populist minor parties and independents	Low cases, low deaths, comparatively contained (at present, though seemingly at risk of surging)	62
Italy	Low trust	Early exposure to the virus via international travel (and demographic profile of the Italian population that made it vulnerable), stringent containment measures	Coalition government led by a technocrat, fragmentation and populism present in national politics	High cases early, high deaths, improving trajectory of suppression (at present)	57
UK	Moderate trust	Slow to lockdown, vulnerable populations concentrated initially in London and then in areas of urban deprivation	Newly elected government with strong populist tendencies and focused on delivering Brexit	High cases, high deaths, slow trajectory of suppression (at present)	27
USA	Moderate trust	Early outbreaks in New York and Washington state before growth of cases in other parts of the country	Partisan polarization and federal politics, highly populist president	High cases, high deaths, currently on exponential growth curve for cases (due to some states)	36

3 SURVEYING PUBLIC OPINION ON COVID-19 AND TRUST IN FOUR COUNTRIES

The TrustGov project and Museum of Australian Democracy teamed up to conduct online surveys, fielded by pollsters Ipsos in May and June 2020. We asked nationally representative samples of the Australian, Italian, UK and US publics a series of questions about their perceptions of the coronavirus pandemic, their general trust in a number of institutions, and their evaluations of the performance of political leaders in handling the crisis. Details of the fieldwork dates and sample sizes of the four surveys are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Online surveys on trust and COVID-19 in four countries

Country	Fieldwork	Sample
Australia	28 May – 15 June[8]	1,061
Italy	21-22 May	1,134
UK	18-19 May	1,167
USA	19-23 May	1,150

Public perceptions of the pandemic

To gauge how citizens perceive the threat posed by COVID-19, we asked respondents whether they believed it posed a "very high threat", "high threat", "moderate threat", "low threat" or "very low threat" to them personally, their job or business and their country (see Table 3). Here we see that responses tend to correspond to actual exposure of people to the virus – with the highest level of perceived personal threat of COVID-19 observed in the UK, which has the

highest number of cases and deaths per capita of the four countries, and the lowest perceived threat in Australia, which has had the least cases. Interestingly, concerns about the economic threat of COVID-19 (to jobs and businesses) are highest in those countries subject to the tightest containment measures to date – Italy and the UK. Notably, the highest level of concern about the threat to the country is observed in the UK, with the lowest recorded in Australia – again reflecting the differences in cases and deaths per capita, although it is notable that respondents in the US seem substantially less concerned than in the UK despite the similar (and rising) deaths per capita there. There is little difference, in contrast, across the countries in terms of agreement that COVID-19 will "have a financial impact on you and your family", which could reflect the general (expected) economic effects of containment measures in all countries, regardless of the actual spread of the virus. Lastly, around just a quarter of the Australian, Italian and UK populations agree with the statement that the media have exaggerated the extent of the virus. In contrast, however, mistrust of the media is considerably higher in the USA – where two-in-five people agree with the suggestion of media exaggeration. As we will see, this reflects deep partisan divides in perceptions of the COVID-19 crisis.

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8. The main fieldwork (N = 1051) ran from 28th May to 5th June, with a top-up sample (N = 267) added from 5th to 15th June.

Table 3: Perceptions of COVID-19 in Australia, Italy, the UK and USA

	UK	USA	Italy	Australia
	"High" or "very high" level of threat (%)			
COVID-19 poses a threat to you personally	31	26	27	19
COVID-19 poses a threat to your job or business	33	28	34	25
COVID-19 poses a threat to your country	66	60	61	33
	"Agree" or "strongly agree" (%)			
The coronavirus will have a financial impact on you and your family	59	60	59	59
The media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak	25	39	23	24

Figure 11: Perceived threat of COVID-19

Legend:
- Financial impact of COVID
- Threat to country
- Threat personally
- Threat to job

The media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak
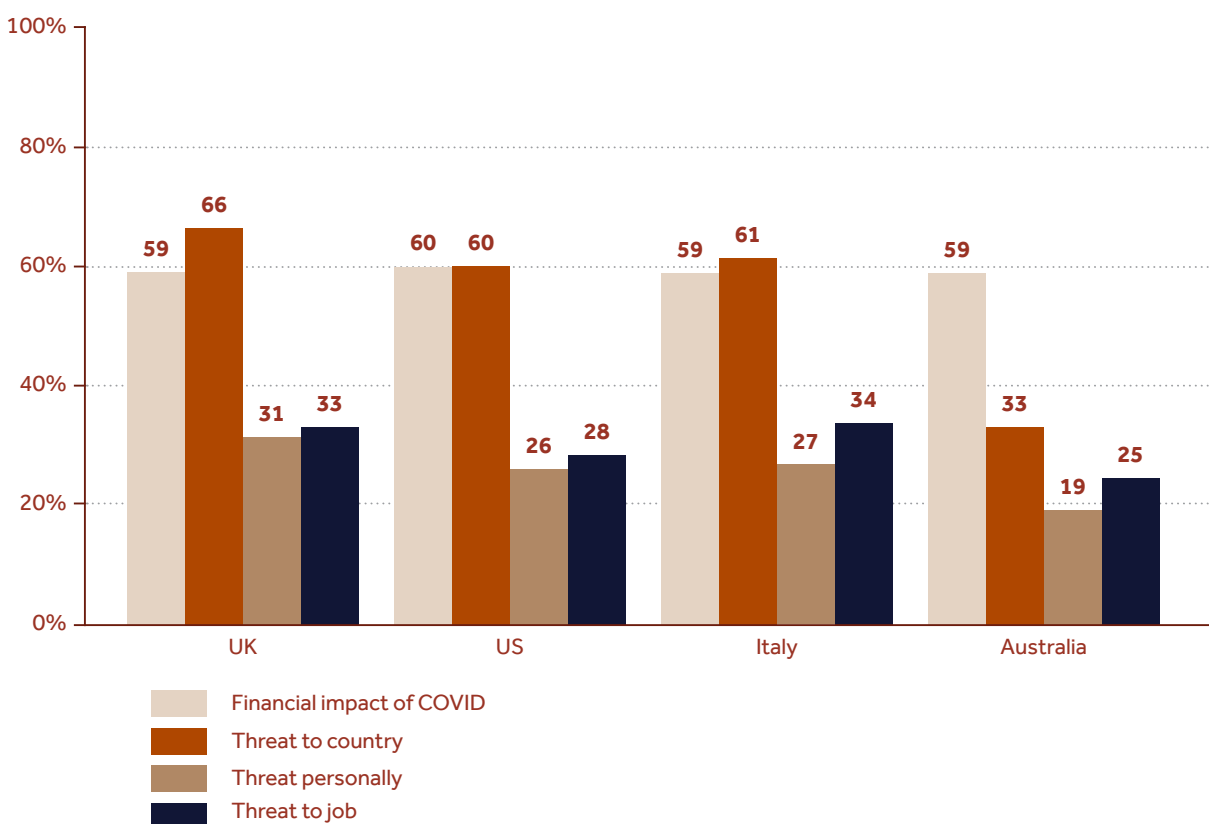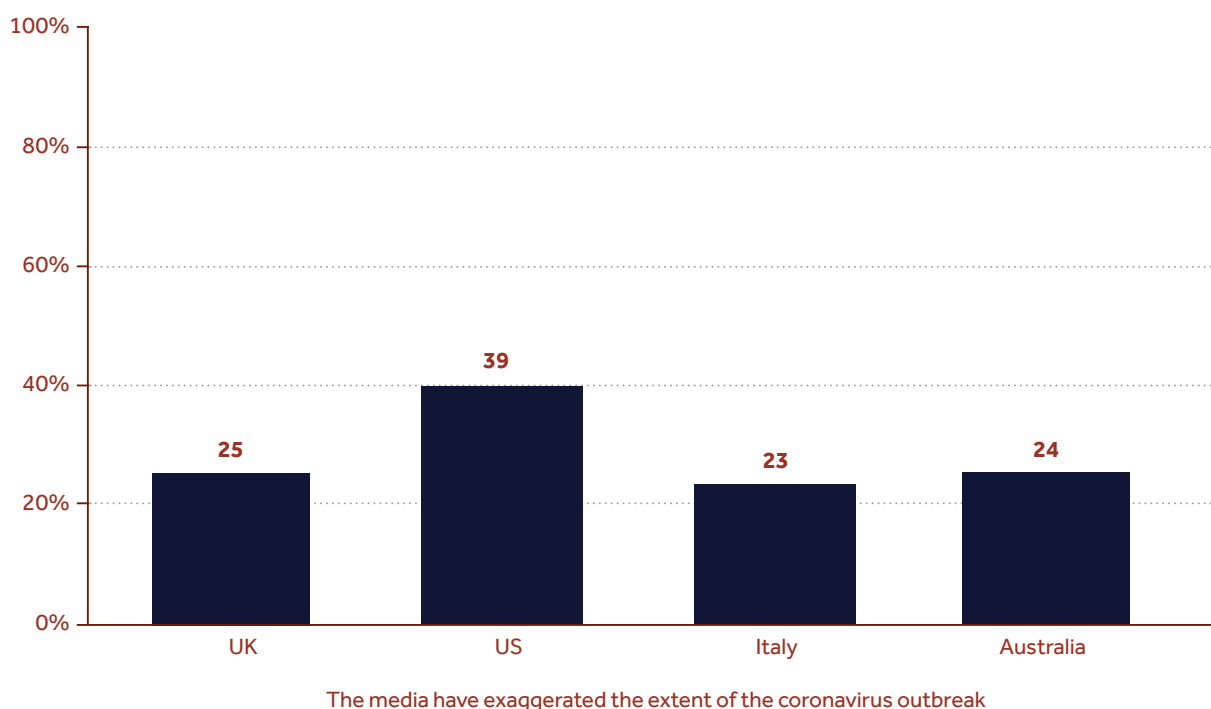
Political trust in the age of COVID-19

How has COVID-19, and the response of national governments, impacted political trust? We cannot directly compare figures reported earlier from the Wellcome Global Monitor (2018) and our Ipsos (2020) survey.[9] It is possible, however, to note how trust in national government has changed in the period since in relative terms. Notably, there has been something of a reordering of high and low trust countries. As of May 2020, Italians no longer express the lowest level of trust in their government –challenging the observation of Almond and Verba, at least for the time being. Instead, political trust among Italians is almost on a par with the British. Australians are now the most trusting, by a significant margin (with 10 points higher saying they have a great deal or a lot of confidence in national government there compared with the UK). By contrast, Americans appear to be in the midst of a crisis of faith in their government – reflecting the country's failure to get to grips with the coronavirus and President Trump's divisive leadership throughout the crisis.

9. Our survey uses a question based on the wording developed by the World Values Survey, "Here is a list of organizations. How much confidence do you have in each of the following: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? The national government".

Table 4: Confidence in institutions

	UK	USA	Italy	Australia
	"A great deal" or "quite a lot" (%)			
Government	42	34	39	52
Parliament	38	26	23	
Political Parties	18	12	8	24
Your country's health system	84	47	73	72
World Health Organisation	62	55	56	51
European Union	37	34	36	
The armed forces	81	81	73	72
Press	17	35	34	30
Television	46	34	28	34
Courts	59	51	42	51
Police	69	70	76	72
Civil Service	52	54	30	49
Universities	67	61	75	56

Across other institutions, we see particularly low levels of trust in political parties in Italy (with just 8% expressing confidence in them), highlighting that citizens there seem to distinguish between government on one hand and politicians and partisan politics on the other, probably facilitated by the leadership of a nonpartisan technocrat. Public confidence in the UK's health service is considerably higher than in other countries (reflecting the deep reservoir of public support for the NHS in Britain). Interestingly, trust in the press is lowest in the UK, not the USA – despite President Trump's frequent attacks on the media – but trust in TV is highest. Citizens appear to distinguish between information sources.

Figure 13: Confidence in institutions

- Government
- Political Parties
- Healthcare System
- WHO
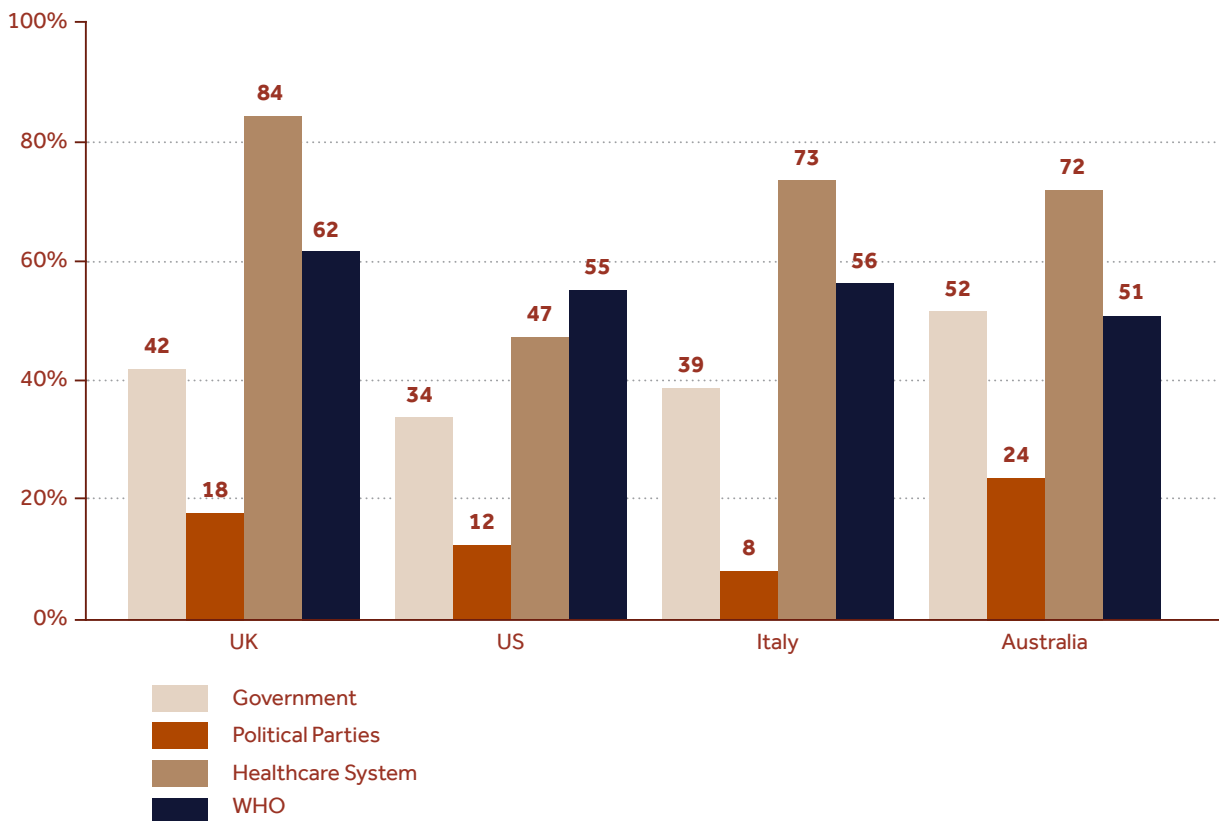
Trust in the political management of COVID-19

How do citizens consider political leaders to have handled the COVID-19 crisis so far? Our survey asked respondents how they felt Prime Ministers Morrison, Conte, and Johnson, and President Trump had performed in different aspects of handling the pandemic – as relating to competence, benevolence, integrity and a consensual style of leadership. In terms of perceived competence in handling COVID-19, Australia's Scott Morrison is well ahead of the other leaders, with 66% of people saying he is handling the outbreak competently and efficiently, followed by Italy's PM, Giuseppe Conte, on 50%. President Trump has the lowest ratings on this measure, just 35%. In terms of assessments of benevolence in the general context of COVID-19 ("cares about people like me"), there is little difference between Conte, Johnson and Trump, but Morrison is viewed more positively, with 45% agreeing with that statement about him. 68% of respondents also consider that he wants to do his best to serve his country in handling of the crisis, while there is widespread support for the view that President Trump usually acts *in his own interests* in his handling of the crisis (57%).

Table 5: Perceptions of political leadership during the COVID-19 crisis

	UK	USA	Italy	Australia
	Johnson	Trump	Conte	Morrison
	"Agree" or "strongly agree" (%)			
Competence				
Handling the coronavirus situation well	37	35	49	68
Is handling the coronavirus outbreak competently and efficiently	37	35	50	66
Is handling the coronavirus outbreak poorly	45	53	30	19
Benevolence				
Cares about people like me	32	34	33	45
Usually acts in his own interests in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak	37	57	20	31
Wants to do his best to serve the country in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak	57	44	60	68
Openness				
Is open and transparent in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak	36	36	47	55
Is generally free of corruption in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak	44	32	44	53
Consensus				
Listens to experts in how to handle the coronavirus/ COVID-19 outbreak	55	34	65	71
Listens to politicians from opposition parties	21	15	22	32
Listens to other politicians from government party/ parties	46	39	45	52

Another notable feature is how consensual the leadership on COVID-19 has been. A far larger part of the Australian (71%) and Italian (65%) public consider that Prime Ministers Morrison and Conte have listened to experts in how to handle the virus than is the case for Trump and Johnson among their respective publics. Morrison is also considered most likely to listen to politicians from other parties (32%). In contrast, President Trump is widely considered to not listen to experts (just 34% saying he does) or to politicians from other parties (only 15% holding this view). As we shall see, considerable partisan divides remain – and are obscured by this focus on the headline figures.

Overall it appears that the leadership styles of Morrison and Conte are viewed as benevolent and competent, whereas Trump's reputation is of self-interest. Strikingly, both Johnson and President Trump score relatively poorly in terms of being "open and transparent" in their handling of the outbreak. This arguably reflects their respective reputations among opponents for lying.

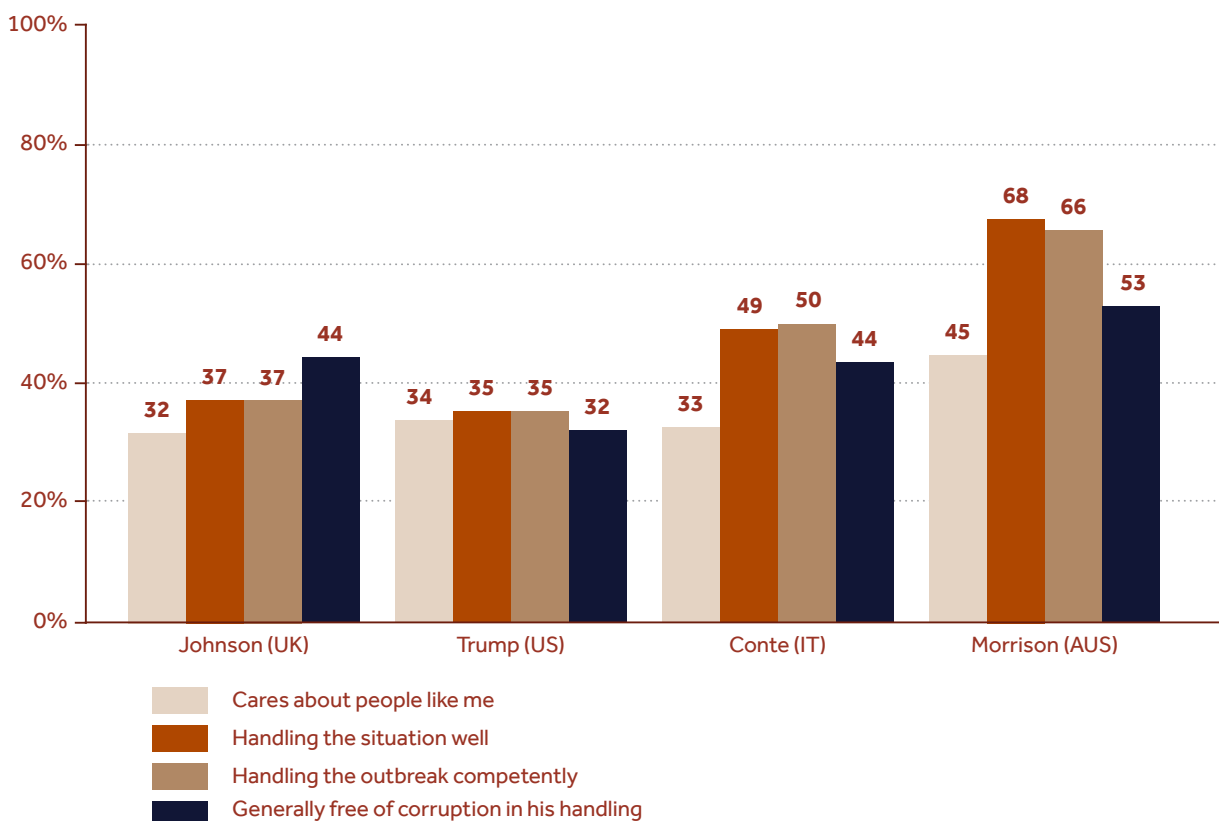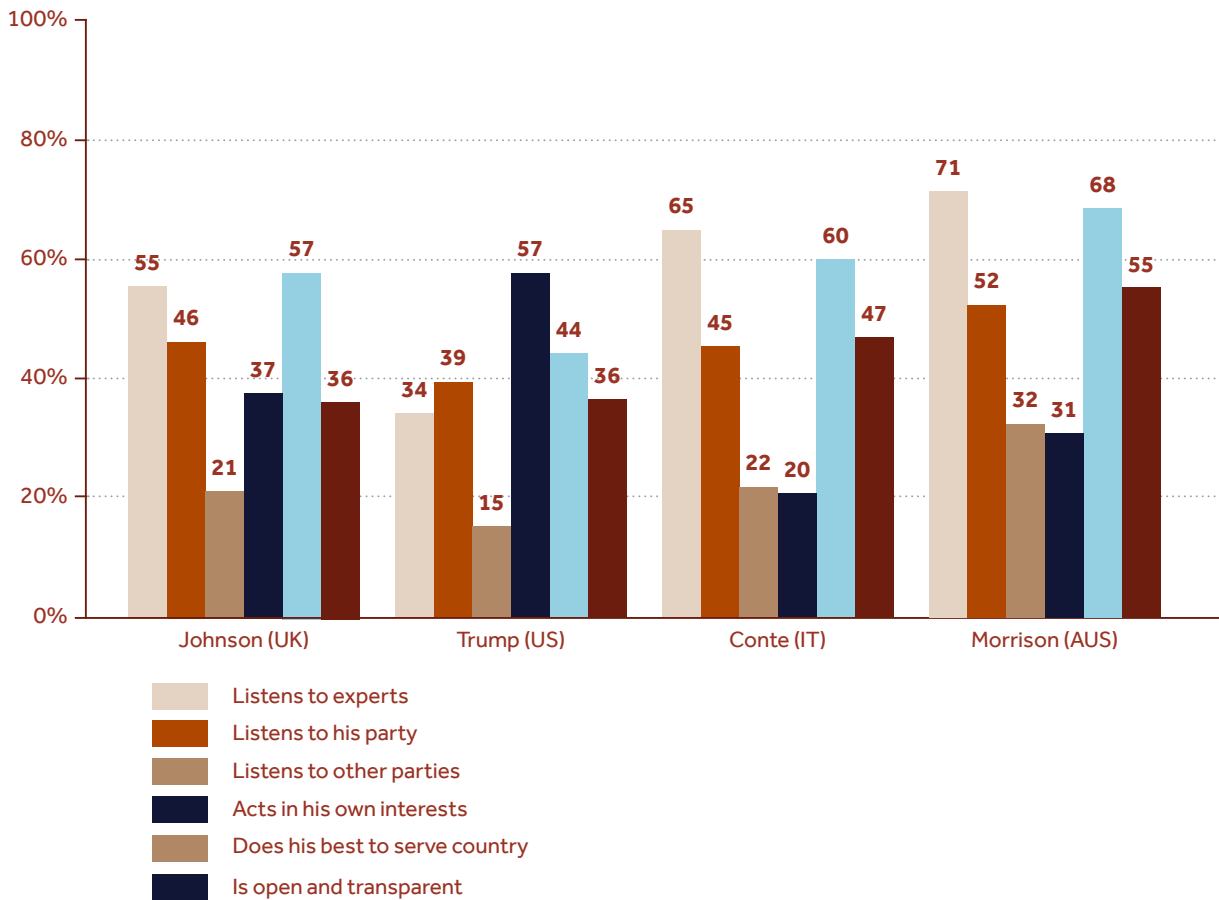Figure 14: Evaluation of leaders' handling of COVID-19 (I)

- Cares about people like me
- Handling the situation well
- Handling the outbreak competently
- Generally free of corruption in his handling

Figure 15: Evaluation of leaders' handling of COVID-19 (II)

Legend:
- Listens to experts
- Listens to his party
- Listens to other parties
- Acts in his own interests
- Does his best to serve country
- Is open and transparent

	Johnson (UK)	Trump (US)	Conte (IT)	Morrison (AUS)
Listens to experts	55	34	65	71
Listens to his party	46	39	45	52
Listens to other parties	21	15	22	32
Acts in his own interests	37	57	20	31
Does his best to serve country	57	44	60	68
Is open and transparent	36	36	47	55

Partisan divides

There are, however, deep partisan divides in perceptions of the COVID-19 crisis and evaluations of its handling by government and leaders. In Italy and the UK, perceptions of the threat of the virus to people personally is relatively even between supporters of the government and opposition parties. There is a slight partisan difference in Australia where supporters of the opposition Australian Labor Party are more likely to consider themselves at threat (24% compared to 16%). The largest partisan gap is however in the USA, where Democrats are significantly more likely to express personal fear of the virus (34% Democrat identifiers vs. 21% Republicans). We see larger gaps in Australia and the UK on the threat posed to people's jobs or businesses, while in both countries supporters of the Labo(u)r Party are concerned about the threat COVID-19 poses to their economic livelihood. There is a larger partisan gap in the USA, with Democrats again more concerned than their Republican counterparts. Turning finally to the threat posed to the country as a whole, while Italy remains unpolarised, and the UK and Australia see slight partisan differences (where opposition partisans express higher levels of concern), the partisan divide in the USA has become a thirty-seven point chasm – with 79% of Democrats concerned about the threat posed by COVID-19 and just 42% of Republicans. These partisan divides are broadly replicated in concerns that the economy is getting

worse – with the largest gap again observed in the USA, where 57% of Democrats believe it is getting worse compared to 31% of Republicans (with the next largest gap found in Australia, where 56% of opposition ALP supporters consider the economy is worsening compared to 38% of Liberal/National coalition supporters).

These partisan divides are replicated in the belief that the media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak. While this is a fringe view in Australia, Italy and the UK, it does tend to be slightly more common among supporters of right-wing parties (the Conservative Party in the UK, LN-FI-FdI in Italy, and the Liberal-National coalition in Australia). By contrast, 71% of Republicans believe the media have exaggerated COVID-19, compared to just 15% of Democrats. At the same time, Democrats are much more likely to believe that the economy is getting worse (57%, compared to just 31% of Republicans). This latter figure is remarkable in the context of the severe economic downturn that followed the shutdown measures introduced in the USA in response to the pandemic. This highlights the fundamentally different outlooks of partisans in the USA in particular, well beyond the pattern observed in other countries.

In terms of assessments of the handling of the pandemic by the leader in each country, much wider partisan divides are observed. In Figures 21 to 31, we present the percentage of respondents within each partisan (and country) group who agreed with each individual statement about their leader's handling of the crisis. In the USA, 74% of Republicans believe President Trump is handling the coronavirus situation well, compared to just 9% of Democrats. In the UK, 69% of Conservative supporters think Prime Minister Boris Johnson is handling it well, compared to 17% of Labour

supporters. In Italy, 79% of coalition M5S and PD supporters consider Prime Minister Conte to be handling the situation well, and 16% of supporters of the Lega (Nord) (LN), Forza Italia (FI) and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) opposition parties. Only in Australia do a majority of both government (Liberal and National) and opposition (Labor) party supporters think that the Prime Minister is handling the coronavirus situation well, though even here there is a large gap (with some 92% of coalition supporters giving a positive assessment, compared to 55% of opposition supporters). Interestingly, we see similar partisan divides in whether political leaders are considered to listen to experts in handling the crisis. 70% of Republicans believe President Trump listens to experts, compared to 10% of Democrats. Some 85% of Conservatives believe Prime Minister Johnson listens to experts, in contrast with 34% of Labour supporters. Again, only in Australia do a majority of partisans on both sides agree that their country's leader listens to experts in his handling of COVID-19.

The smallest divides are found in the belief that the leaders listen to opposition parties in their handling of COVID-19 – with government supporters tending to view their side as more accommodating of opposition views but in all countries except Australia, this applies to a minority of both groups. This is particularly interesting, because as described above, the 'rally-around-the-flag' effect experienced (to varying degrees) in each of our cases, and the relatively high levels of trust in government during the crisis, remain, below the surface, divided along partisan lines. These divisions are likely to also impact the response to the pandemic in terms of public behaviour, as each nation faces the prospect of trying to rebuild economies and societies whilst still contending with the virus for the foreseeable future.

Figure 16: Partisan divides in perceptions of the national threat of COVID-19 (percentage 'high' or 'very high' level of threat to the country)

THREAT TO COUNTRY

Figure 17: Partisan divides in perceptions of the national threat of COVID-19 (percentage 'high' or 'very high' level of threat to them personally)

THREAT PERSONALLY
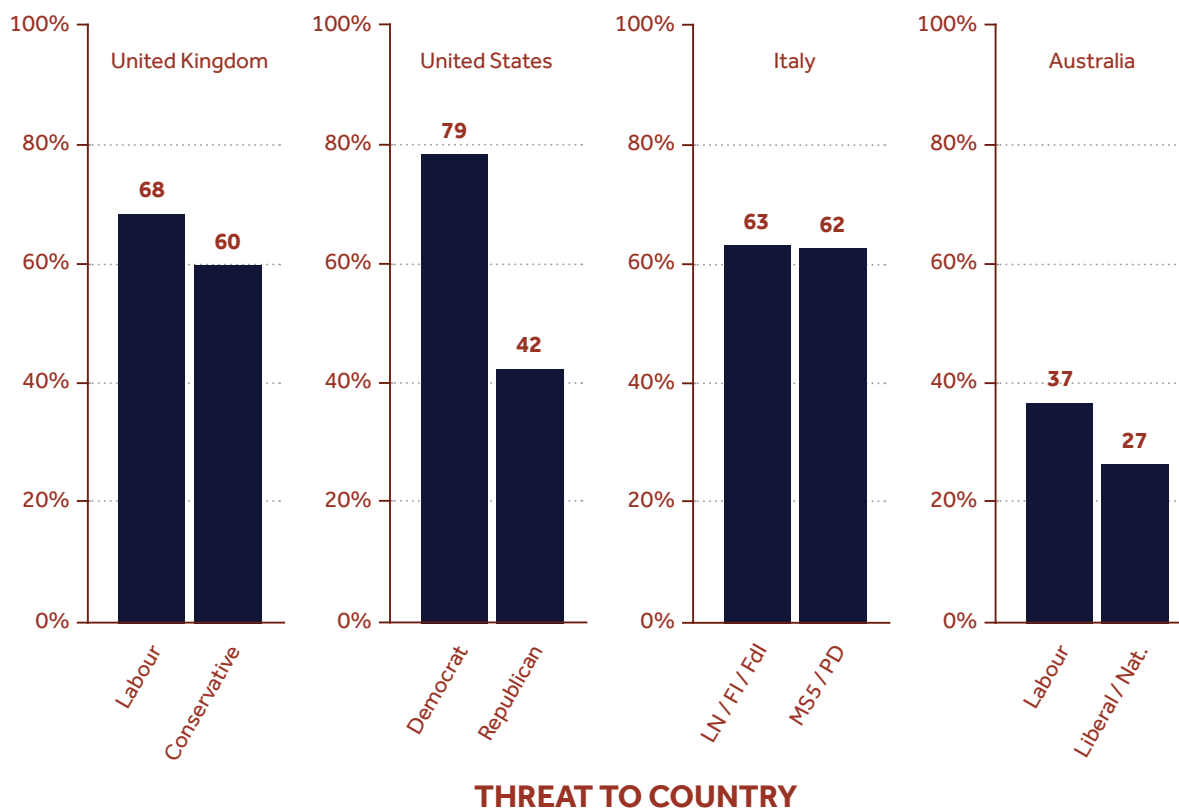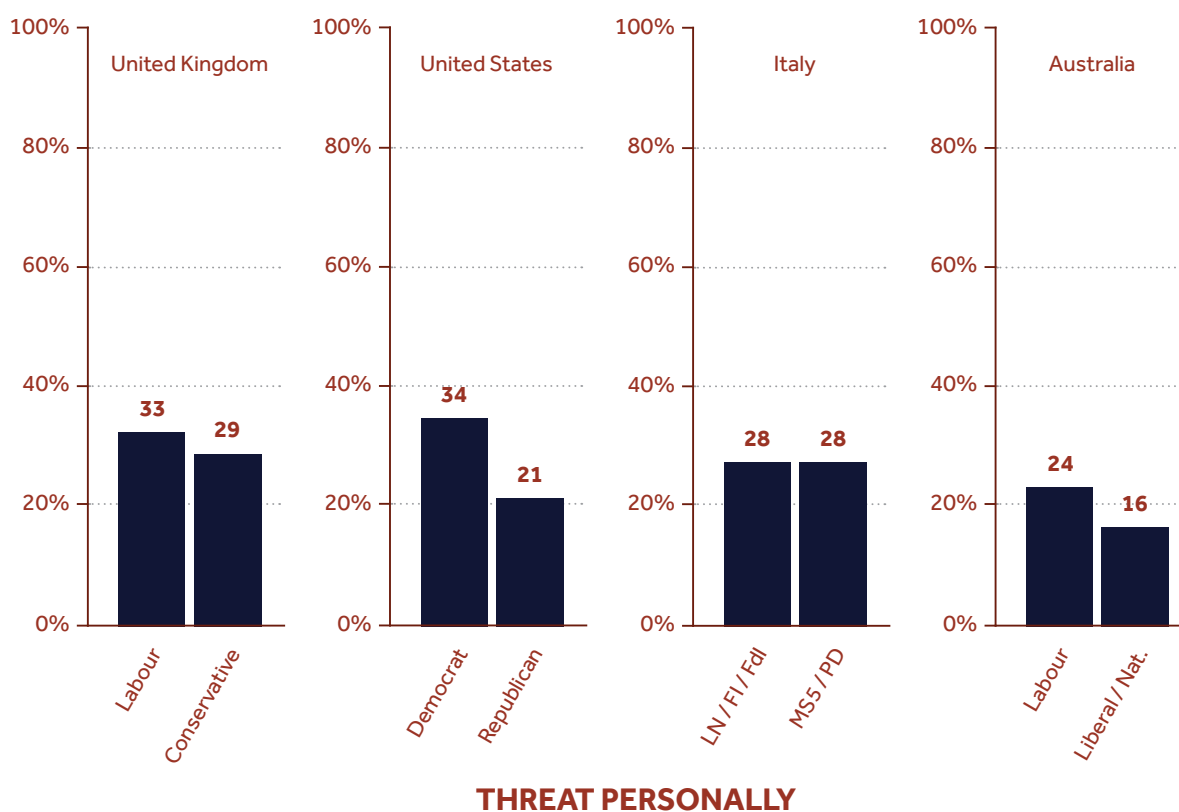
Figure 18: Partisan divides in perceptions of the threat to job/business of COVID-19 (percentage 'high' or 'very high' level of threat to their job or business)

THREAT TO JOB
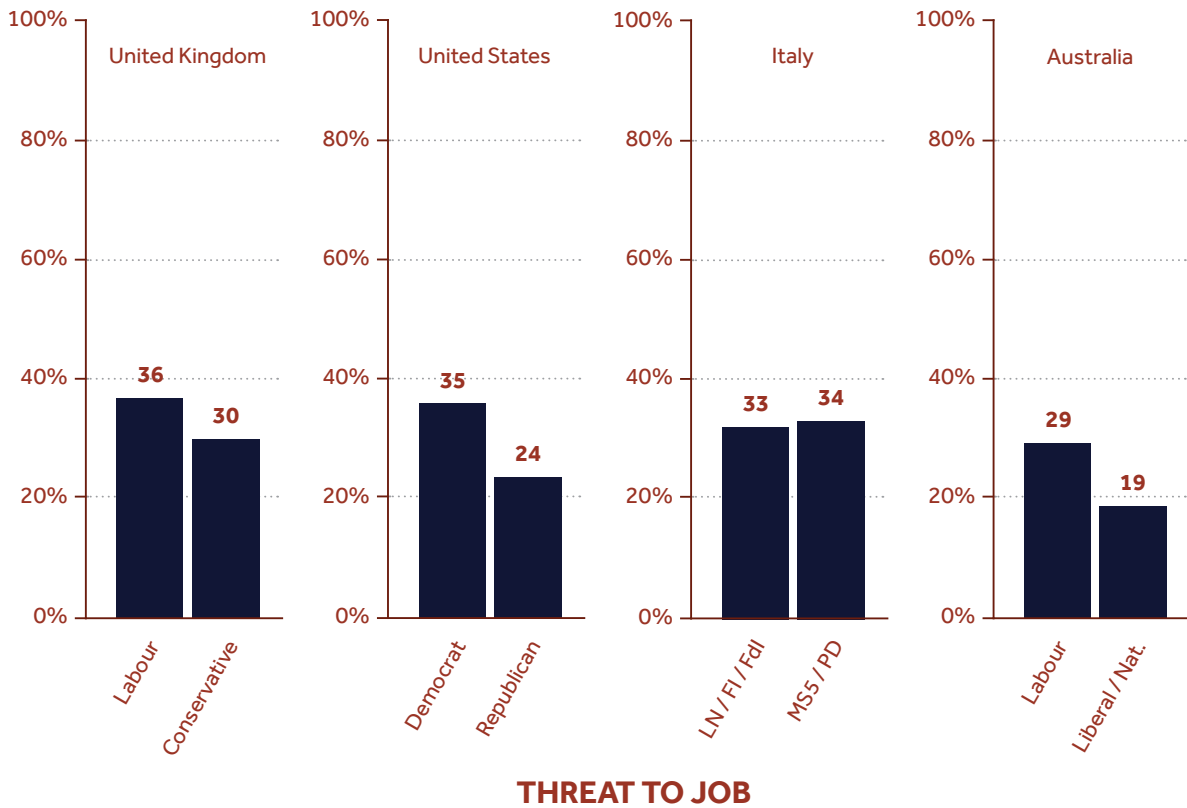
Figure 19: Partisan divides in perceptions of media exaggeration of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' media have exaggerated the 'extent of the coronavirus')

THREAT EXAGGERATES COVID
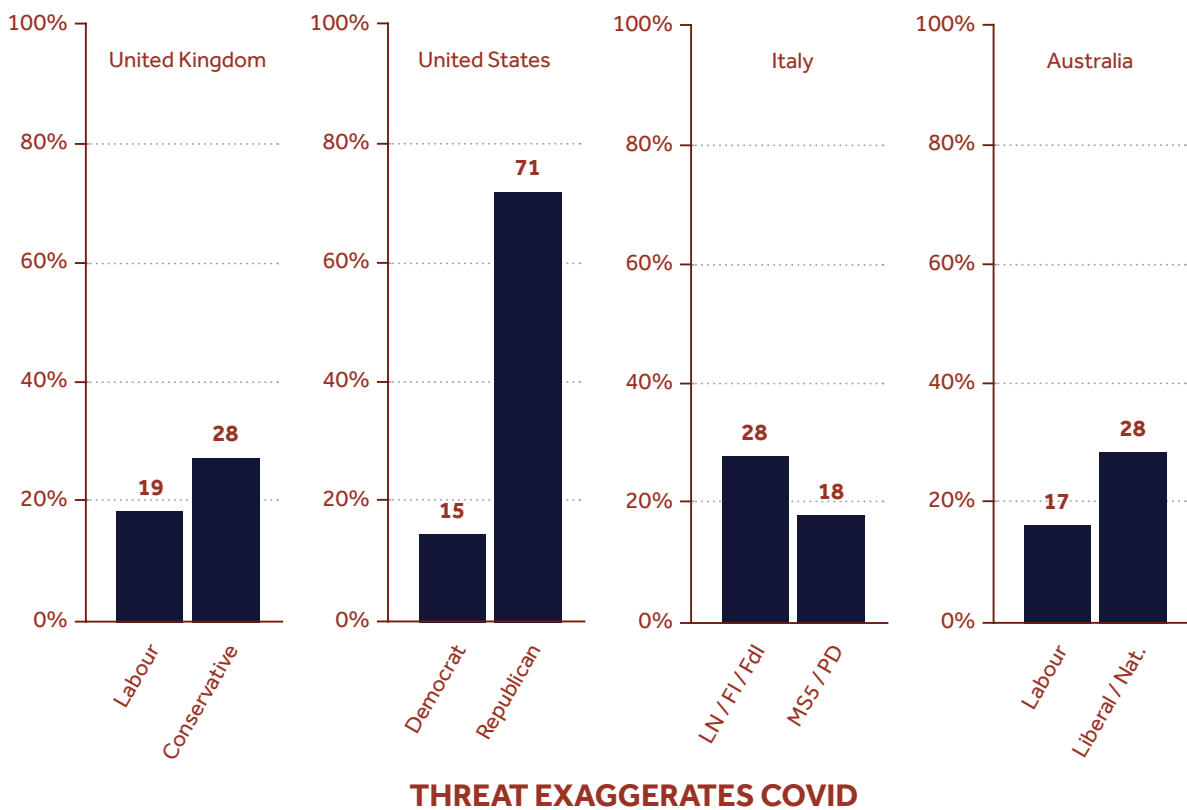
Figure 20: Partisan divides in economic perceptions (percentage saying they expect the economy to 'get worse' in the next 12 months)

ECONOMY WILL GET WORSE
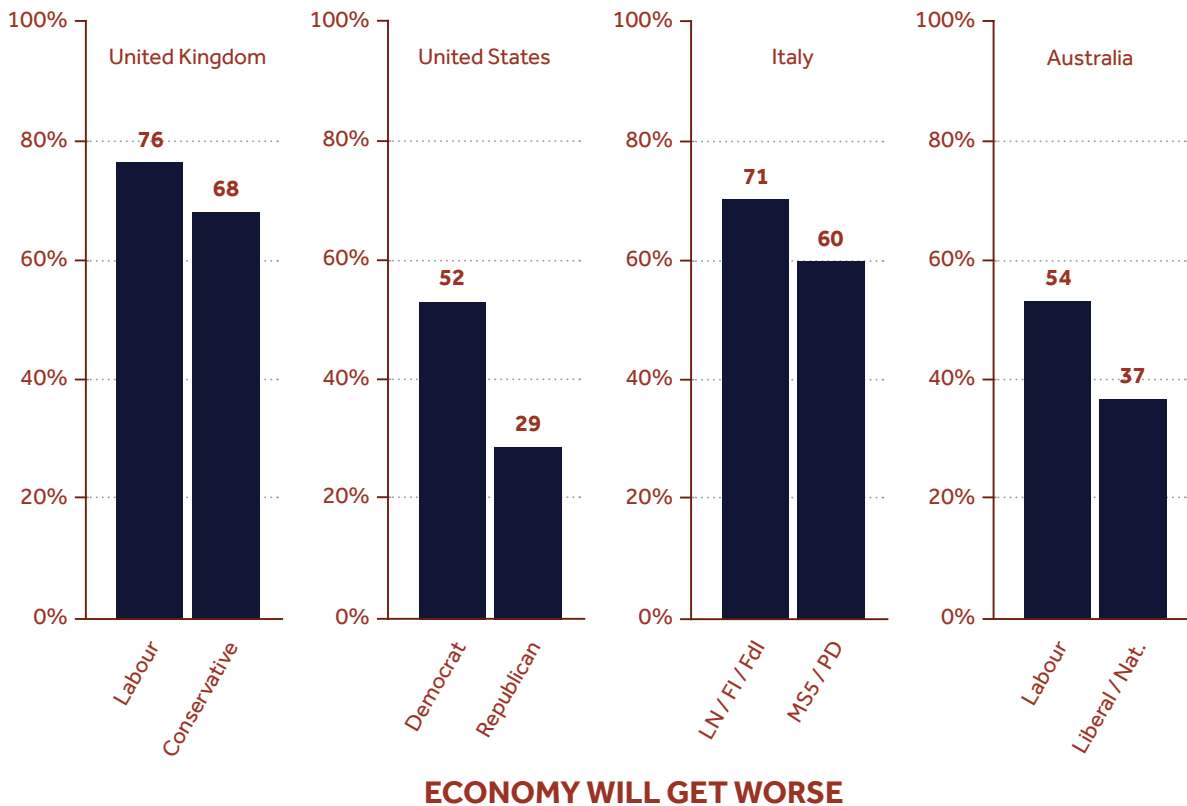
Figure 21: Partisan divides in evaluations of leader handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader has handled the coronavirus situation well)

LEADER IS HANDLING THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION WELL
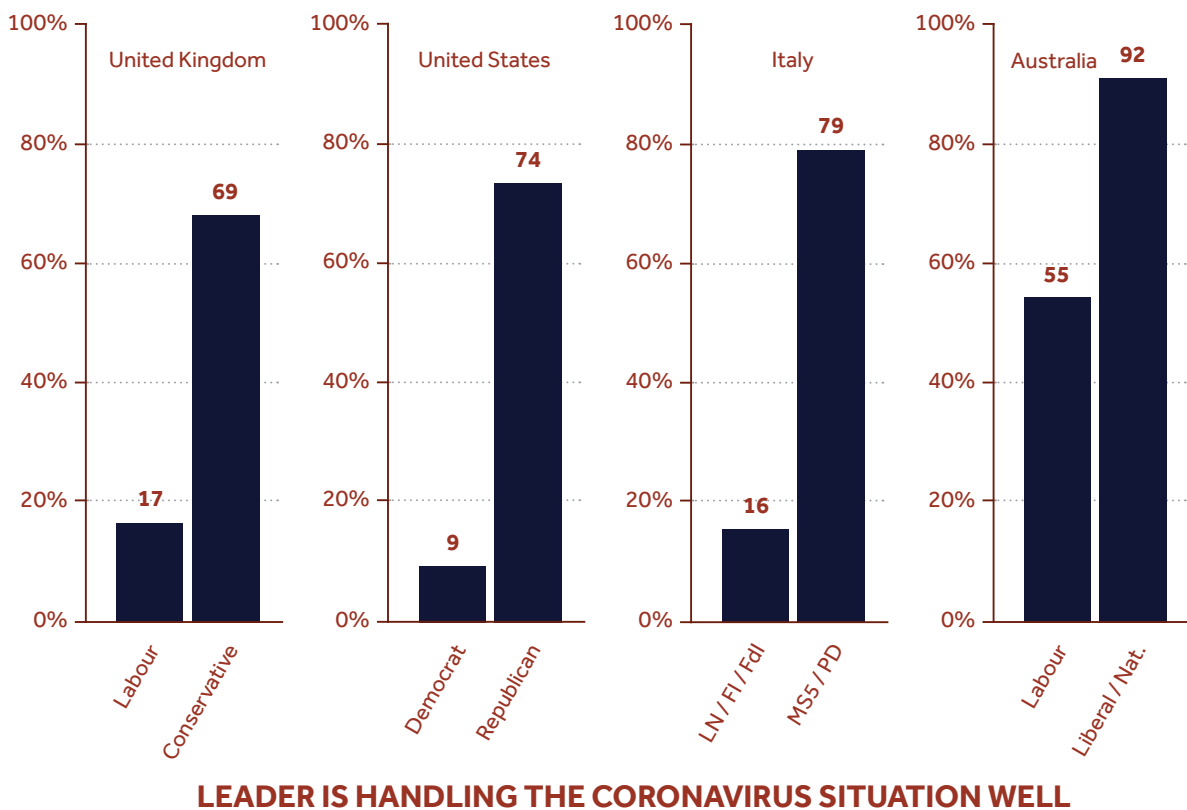
Figure 22: Partisan divides in evaluations of leader competence in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader has handled the outbreak competently and efficiently)
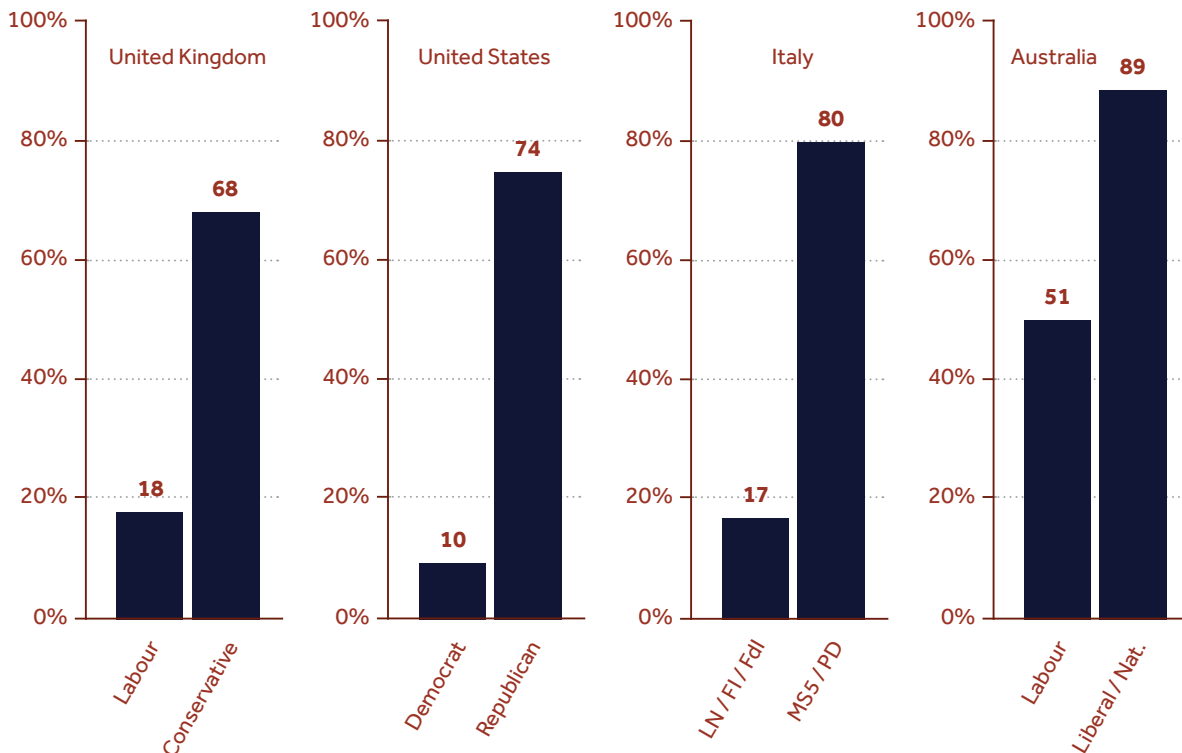
LEADER IS HANDLING THE OUTBREAK COMPETENTLY AND EFFICIENTLY

Figure 23: Partisan divides in evaluations of leader handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader has handled the coronavirus outbreak poorly)
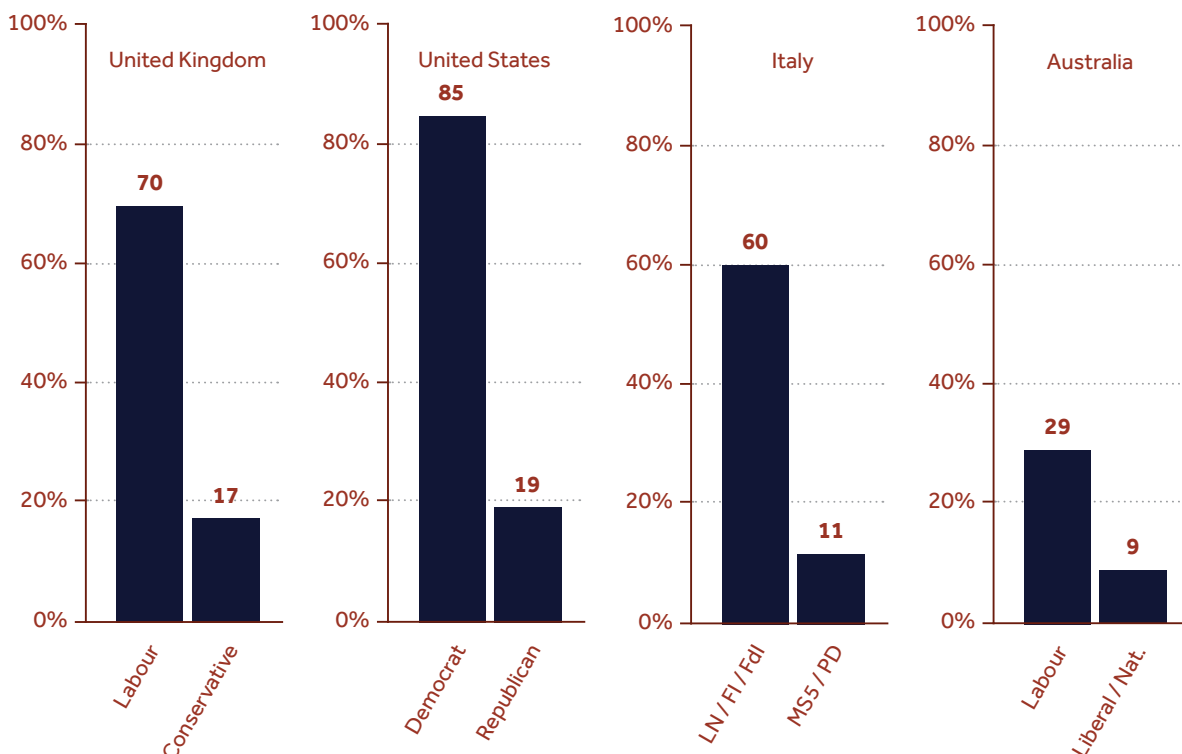
LEADER IS HANDLING THE OUTBREAK POORLY

Figure 24: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader listens to experts in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader listens to experts)
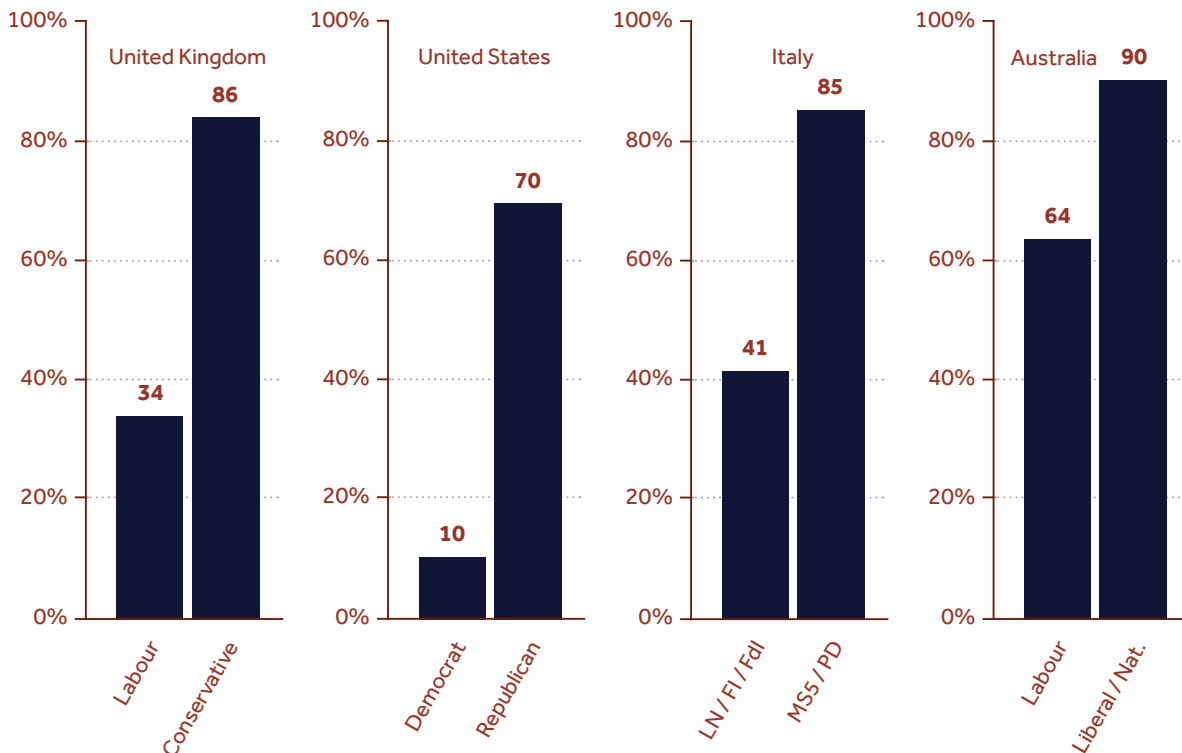
LEADER LISTENS TO EXPERTS

Figure 25: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader listens to own party in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader listens to own party)
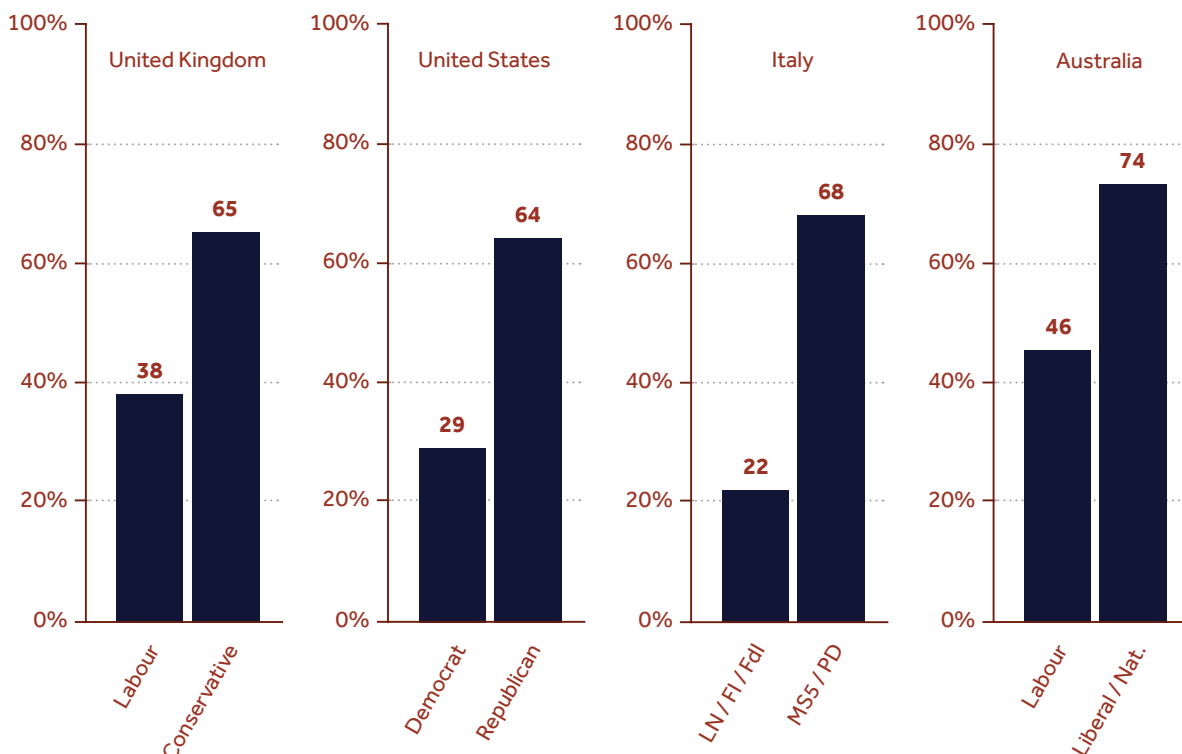
LEADER LISTENS TO HIS OWN PARTY

Figure 26: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader listens to opposition party in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader listens to opposition party)
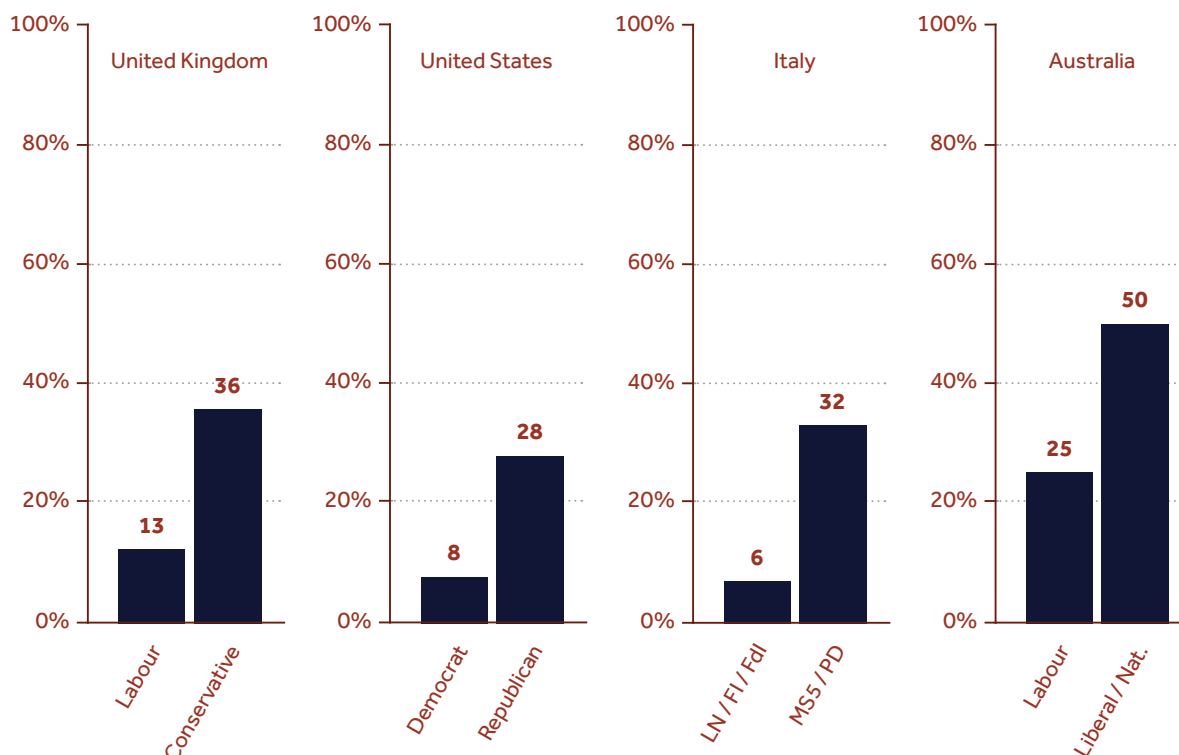
LEADER LISTENS TO OPPOSITION

Figure 27: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader acts in own interests in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader usually acts in own interests)
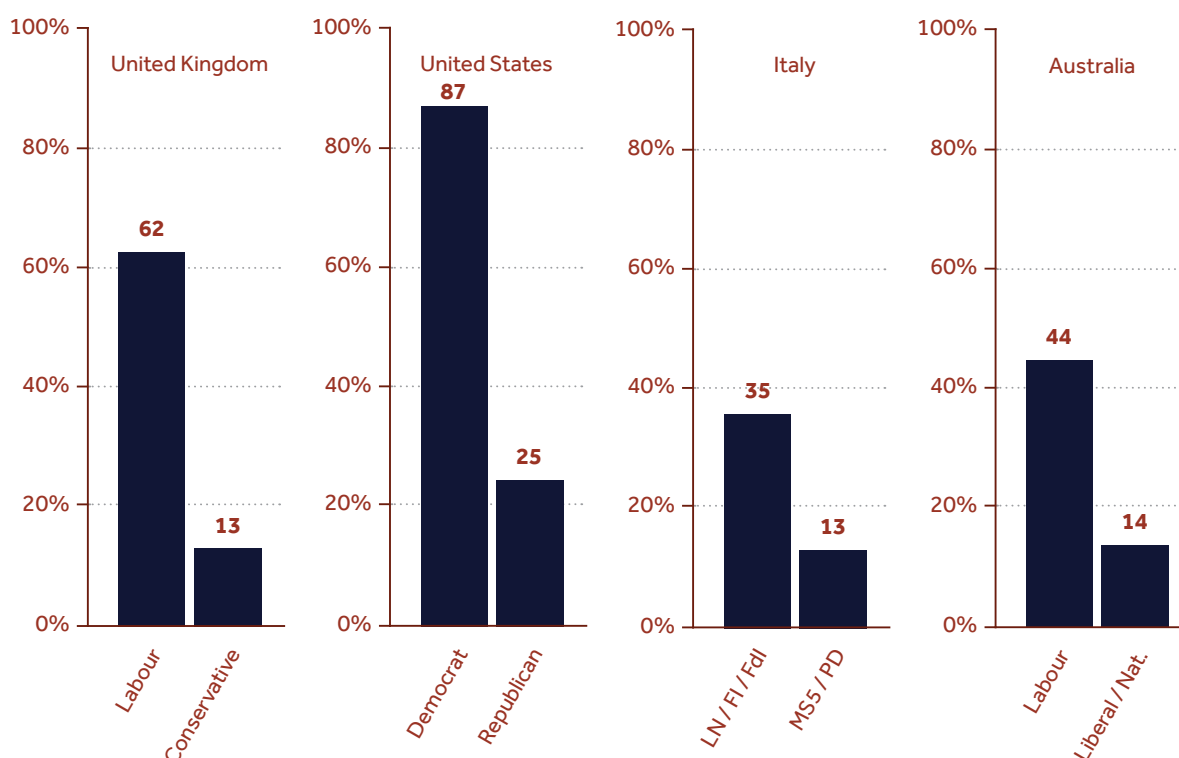
LEADER IS USUALLY ACTS IN HIS OWN INTERESTS

Figure 28: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader does their best to serve country in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader does best to serve the country)
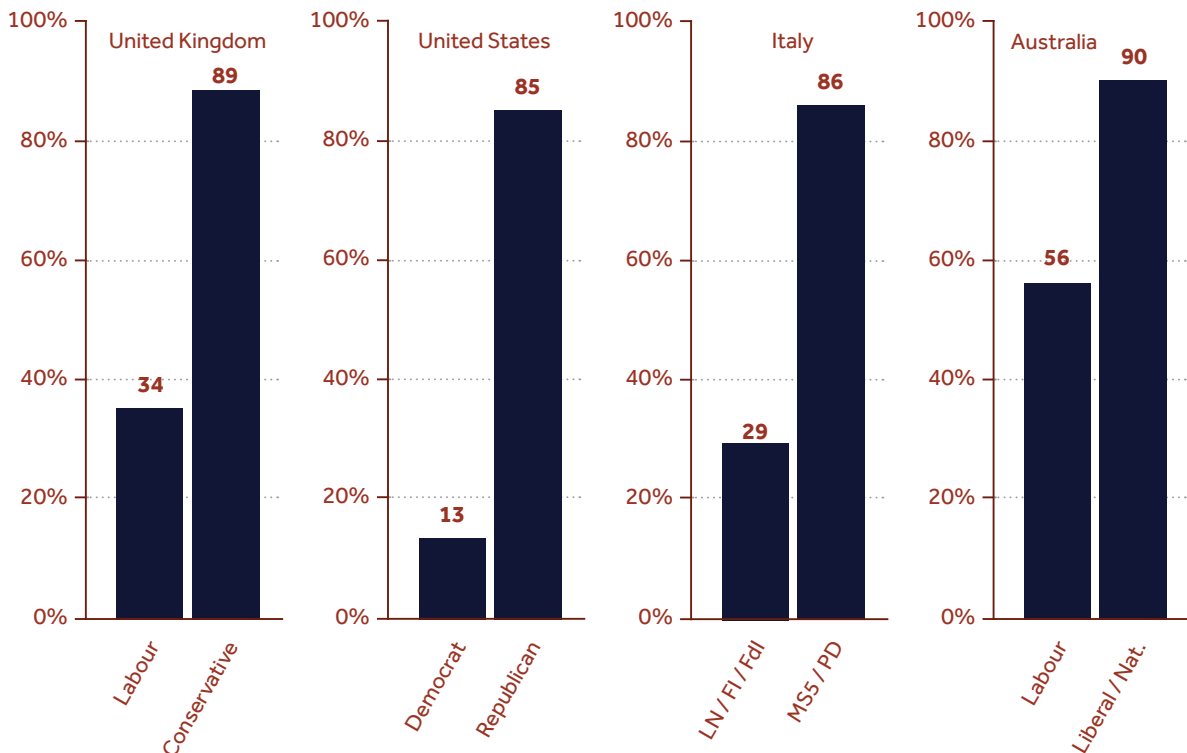
LEADER DOES HIS BEST TO SERVE THE COUNTRY

Figure 29: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader is free of corruption in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader is generally free of corruption)
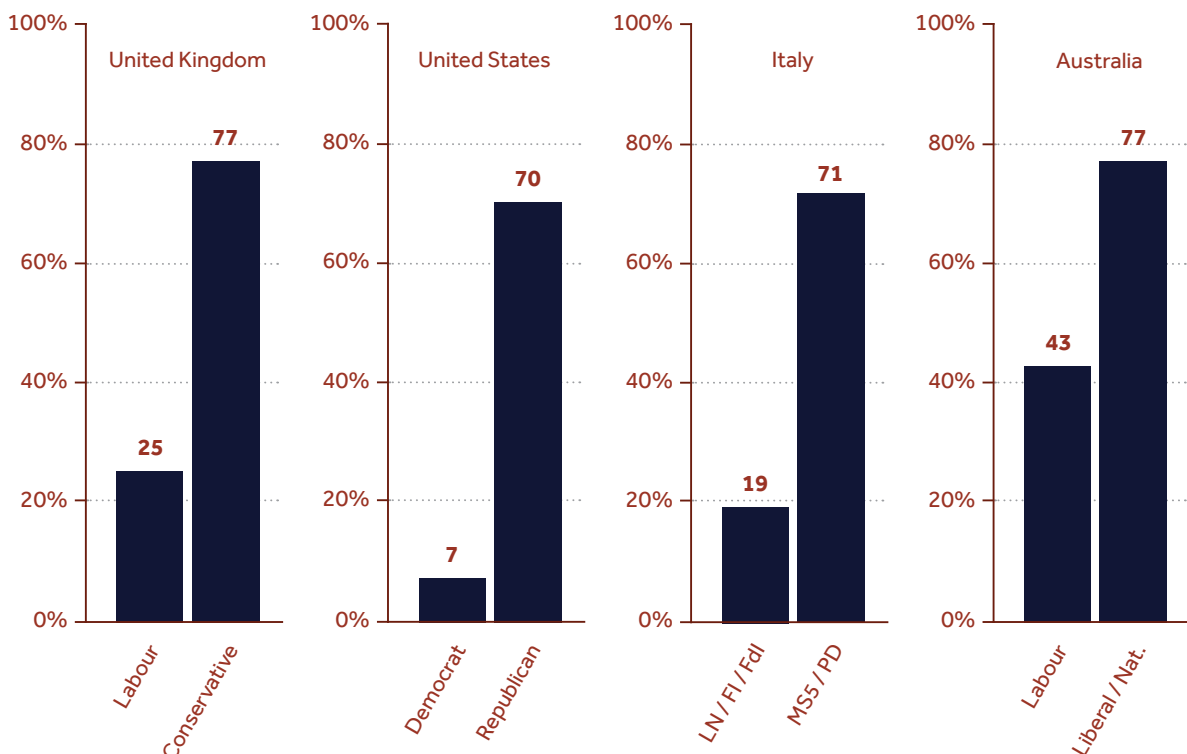
LEADER IS GENERALLY FREE OF CORRUPTION

Figure 30: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader is open and transparent in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader is open and transparent)

United Kingdom
- Labour: 21
- Conservative: 63

United States
- Democrat: 11
- Republican: 71

Italy
- LN / FI / FdI: 18
- M5S / PD: 73

Australia
- Labour: 41
- Liberal / Nat.: 83
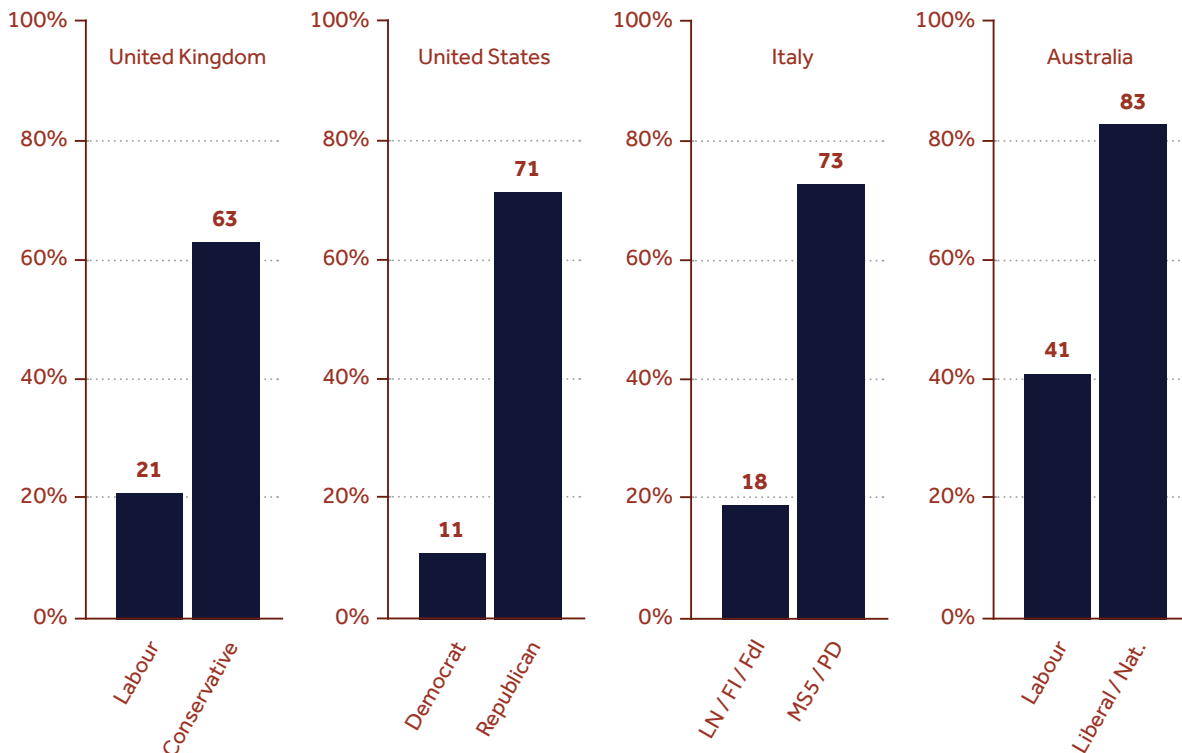
LEADER IS OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

Figure 31: Partisan divides in evaluations of whether leader cares about people like me in handling of COVID-19 (percentage 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader 'cares about people like me')

United Kingdom
- Labour: 13
- Conservative: 62

United States
- Democrat: 8
- Republican: 72

Italy
- LN / FI / FdI: 10
- M5S / PD: 57

Australia
- Labour: 29
- Liberal / Nat.: 77
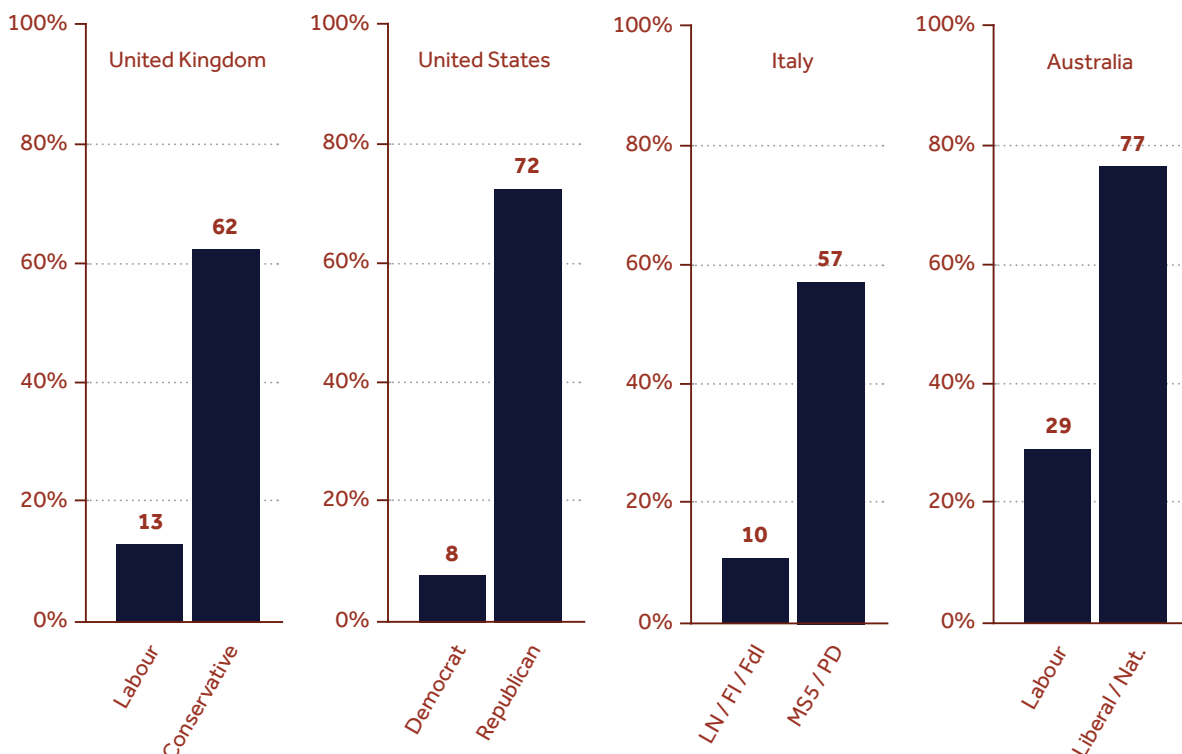
LEADER CARES ABOUT PEOPLE LIKE ME

APPENDIX

Table A1. Agreement with COVID-19 threat statements ('high' or 'very high' level of threat) by age, income and education in Australia, Italy, the UK and US

United Kingdom	Age group			Income group			Education	
	18-34	35-54	55+	Low	Medium	High	No Uni.	Uni.
The coronavirus will have a financial impact on you and your family	59	65	53	58	60	58	56	63
COVID-19 poses a threat to your country	65	68	65	72	61	69	65	68
COVID-19 poses a threat to you personally	28	31	34	35	29	28	30	34
COVID-19 poses a threat to your job or business	39	40	22	29	33	38	30	37
The media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak	29	25	22	24	25	26	26	23

United States	Age group			Income group			Education	
	18-34	35-54	55+	Low	Medium	High	No Uni.	Uni.
The coronavirus will have a financial impact on you and your family	62	59	59	59	60	60	55	62
COVID-19 poses a threat to your country	63	60	58	60	61	59	58	61
COVID-19 poses a threat to you personally	25	29	25	27	26	27	25	27
COVID-19 poses a threat to your job or business	34	30	22	29	27	29	28	28
The media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak	45	39	36	37	43	39	41	39

Italy	Age group			Income group			Education	
	18-34	35-54	55+	Low	Medium	High	No Uni.	Uni.
The coronavirus will have a financial impact on you and your family	59	67	53	63	58	50	59	59
COVID-19 poses a threat to your country	61	69	56	57	61	70	63	59
COVID-19 poses a threat to you personally	23	32	24	29	27	23	27	26
COVID-19 poses a threat to your job or business	43	44	21	35	33	30	32	37
The media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak	30	23	19	27	19	23	23	23

Australia	Age group			Income group			Education	
	18-34	35-54	55+	Low	Medium	High	No Uni.	Uni.
The coronavirus will have a financial impact on you and your family	66	58	54	59	61	56	55	62
COVID-19 poses a threat to your country	35	33	30	32	35	31	32	33
COVID-19 poses a threat to you personally	18	20	19	19	20	20	18	20
COVID-19 poses a threat to your job or business	35	26	14	16	30	30	18	31
The media have exaggerated the extent of the coronavirus outbreak	29	23	22	23	27	24	25	24

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniel Devine (PhD) is a Research Fellow on the TrustGov project at the University of Southampton. Daniel has recently taken up a research position at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on the impact of global and European integration on political attitudes, in particular political trust and democratic satisfaction. He also works on political behaviour more generally. He is interested in quantitative methods, methods for causal inference, and advancing open and transparent science. He has worked extensively with non-academic institutions to enhance the impact and dissemination of his research, mainly with the Open Society European Policy Institute and the Institute for Government. His academic research has been published in the *British Journal of Political Science and The Political Quarterly*.

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Will Jennings (PhD) is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton. His research is concerned with questions relating to public policy and political behaviour – such as how issues get onto the policy agenda, how people form their vote preferences over time (and how polls do or don't line up with the eventual outcome as election day approaches), how voters judge the competence of parties, and why major projects and sports events go over budget so often. Previously he was a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Research Fellow at the University of Manchester. Will is Co-Director of the UK Policy Agendas Project, and a member of the Comparative Agendas Project research network. His recent books include Olympic Risks (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), *Policy Agendas in British Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), The Politics of Competence: Parties, Public Opinion and Voters (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and The Good Politician (Cambridge University Press, 2018). He is also elections analyst for Sky News in the UK.

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ABOUT DEMOCRACY 2025
– STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Democracy 2025 – strengthening democratic practice was established by the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD), together with the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra (UC-IGPA), in October 2018.

It was launched in the context of the lowest level recording of public trust and satisfaction with Australia's democratic arrangements and set against the global rise of debased semi-democracies.

Democracy 2025 audits and celebrates the qualities of Australian democracy, investigates and experiments with what works in terms of renewing our representative system of government and facilitates non-partisan conversations on how to improve our democratic practice and be the best democracy that we can be.

MoAD holds a unique position on the frontline of democracy, civic agency and change. We are a museum not just of objects but of ideas. We seek to empower Australians through exhibitions, schools' learning programs and events that both stimulate and inspire. Trusted by the public, government, public service and business alike, we are uniquely able to advance national conversations about democracy, past, present and future.

This report, the second of three written in collaboration with TrustGov on the theme *Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus*, investigates whether attitudes towards democratic institutions and practices have changed as a consequence of COVID-19 in Australia, Italy, the UK and the US.

It will add fresh and unique insights to the growing body of comparative research that underpins our activities helping us drive a process of national reflection, understanding, and renewal of Australia's democratic practice.

Find out more at: democracy2025.gov.au.

Daryl Karp AM
Director
MoAD

Professor Mark Evans
Director
Democracy 2025
 – strengthening democratic practice

ABOUT TRUSTGOV

The TrustGov Project was established at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom in 2019 through a grant from the British Economic and Social Research Council and support from the University of Southampton and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. It has five key aims and objectives.

1. To reframe theoretical debates. The project uses a 'trust but verify' notion as the normative yardstick to assess how far rational citizens form judgments about the trustworthiness of the agencies and the institutions of national and global governance.

2. To develop innovative concepts and expand scientific evidence. We do so by developing and gathering data for novel and innovative indices of trust in, and trustworthiness of, political institutions that complement the existing measures that form the basis of much of our knowledge. We document patterns and trends of trust in political institutions around the world – especially using survey data to map public confidence in the executive, judicial and legislative branches of national governments and in global governance agencies like the UN, World Bank and IMF. Comparisons are extended far beyond the boundaries of contemporary democracies to examine the evidence in a global context, covering a spectrum of regimes from the authoritarian to the democratic. The TrustGov project uses a multimethod and multilevel research design to examine new empirical evidence available from (i) exploratory focus groups, (ii) cross-national time-series survey observational data gathered in many countries, sub-regions, and types of regime worldwide, and (iii) randomized experimental data.

3. To expand knowledge about the drivers of trust. We do so by analyzing and comparing public evaluations of procedural and policy performance with governance indices at global, national and regional levels, along with processes of communication and information, to assess how far the public is capable of making knowledgeable judgments about the trustworthiness of national and global government agencies. What are the reasons why Type I and Type II errors occur?

4. To test empirical evidence about the spatial drivers of political trust. In addition, we seek to determine how far trust in political institutions varies by place – such as among nations, regions within a country, and among rural and urban communities. In particular, we seek to explore the relationship between support for national and global agencies of governance and place-based cultural identities and economic divides among citizens.

5. To inform multiple stakeholders about our findings. The project uses the lessons of our research to reframe public debate about trust, trustworthiness, and critical citizens who 'trust but verify', sharing evidence-based knowledge about practical reforms and best practices that multiple stakeholders can use to restore trust.

The core team of Principal Investigators for the TrustGov Project includes Professor **Will Jennings** (University of Southampton), Professor **Pippa Norris** (Harvard University and the University of Sydney), and Professor **Gerry Stoker** (University of Southampton and the University of Canberra).

For further information see: https://trustgov.net/

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