Are impressionable years special?

The Effects Persist about Two Decades

The Political Scar of Epidemics

This paper

- Builds on impressionable years hypothesis (i.e. exploit variation across cohorts in exposure to epidemics in early adulthood)
- Suggests that attitudes and behavior are directly formed in what are termed "impressionable" and early adult years ("political scar")
- Glaeser and Spletstoesser (2014) show that individuals who experienced a recession when young believe that success in life depends more on luck than effort, support fewer government redistribution.
- We present the first large-scale evidence that experiencing an epidemic causes individuals to lose trust in their government and leaders.

Main findings (1)

- Individuals who experience epidemics in their impressionable years (age 18-25) display less confidence in political leaders, governments and institutions.
- Effects are large. High exposure is associated with 5 percentage points less confidence in government (relative to mean of 80%).
- Effects are persistent; they last for 2 decades.
- Effects are specific to communicable diseases for which a timely and effective public policy response is key.
- No effect on non-communicable diseases.

Main findings (2) - Mechanisms

- Effects larger when individuals experience epidemics under weak governments, which are least capable of effectively responding to epidemics (we document this point directly).
- Individuals exposed to epidemics in their impressionable years are less likely to have confidence in the public health system.
- We substantiate this conjecture by considering the role of government strength in the context of COVID-19: government strength is associated with improvements in policy (i.e. MPI) response time.

Main Results

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Treatment effect: Green = Red + Purple (Blue + Green)

The effect of exposure to an epidemic is more than twice as large if the epidemic is experienced under a weak government.

Individuals who experienced an epidemic show:

Country*Year fixed effects
Country*Age trends
Income decile fixed effects
Demographic characteristics
Individual income
Year fixed effects
Market controls

Main findings (3)

- Effects are larger for those who have experienced an epidemic in their impressionable years.