

# Mask Wearing: How Can Comparative Political and Economic Factors Account for Differing Rates of COVID-19 Compliance Between Countries?

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## Introduction



**Figure 1:** Protective face mask.

Given the two authors' separate experiences of each living in a different country where individuals' reactions to COVID-19 regulations differed, the authors decided to focus on how comparative political and economic factors impacted rates of COVID regulation compliance. Understanding the political and economic factors that affected individual compliance serves an important purpose as it may serve as a generalisable benchmark for how citizens respond to state authority in times of crisis. Our hypothesis is that individuals' political and economic reality will influence their willingness and capacity to comply with regulations. In this paper, our hypothesis is first explored through a cultural analysis, focusing on the difference between collectivist and individualistic societies. Throughout the pandemic, broad depictions of individualistic cultures as being 'selfish' and collectivist cultures as being 'obedient' became a popular lens through which everyday observers would predict mask compliance. To demonstrate this point, this study uses South Korea and Brazil as examples of collectivist cultures that have endured several state-led health campaigns throughout H1N1 and SARS outbreaks (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Germany and the United States are taken as

examples of more individualistic societies as they score highly on the individualistic scale (Hofstede, 2001: 168). Through comparison, we deconstruct collectivist vs individualist explanations of COVID compliance and demonstrate its inability to provide complete rational explanations for why people choose or refuse to comply with mask mandates. Instead, we examine how political bearings and experiences provide a more nuanced understanding of regulation compliance. Finally, to better situate the discussion in wider considerations of political economy, we consider the role of economic factors in an individual’s risk assessment of COVID, as well as how economic factors influence people’s ability to comply with COVID measures.

## The role of culture: does it have a place?



Figure 2: Coronavirus prevention.

Undeniably, culture, with a focus on individualism and collectivism, does illustrate correlational significance when applied to general compliance rates of different states to COVID mandates. Collectivist cultures are societies in which ideas of collective identity, group success, and communal relationships prevail (Voronov and Singer, 2002: 462–63). In contrast, individualistic cultures favour the prioritisation of personal ambition, self-reliance and self-expression (Voronov and Singer, 2002: 462–63). Broadly, rates of individualism and collectivism correlate with group reactions to COVID mandates. This can be demonstrated through an examination of the compliance rates between countries categorised under Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as either individualistic or collectivist (Hofstede Insights, 2023). For instance, states categorised as highly individualistic – such as Germany and the United States (US) – suffered large-scale protests against COVID compliance due to the perceived threat these collectively beneficial laws posed to individual liberties (Lu *et al.*, 2021: 1–2). Inversely, states categorised as collectivist – like Korea, Thailand and Mexico – experienced high rates of mask usage, which can be linked to their greater perceived sense of societal obligation (Lu *et al.*,

2021: 1–2). However, while of correlational significance, individualism and collectivism as an explanation for, or as evidence why, compliance differs between states is dismissible for various reasons. Firstly, both individualism and collectivism paint culture with broad, generalised brush strokes that ignore the many ways these concepts may be complicated. For instance, collectivism seemingly encompasses all social behaviour and ignores the reality that relationships – whether social, familial or romantic – hold different values or are of different importance to individuals within a society (Wong *et al.*, 2018: 253). Moreover, the theory of individualism and collectivism inaccurately assumes that national culture is homogenous when innumerable sub-cultures may dictate one’s decisions, such as whether to comply with COVID restrictions. For instance, US priests were found to exhibit proportionally higher levels of collectivism than US petrol station workers; this directly contradicts our earlier assumption that the US was a homogeneously individualistic culture (Schwartz, 1990: 145–46). Consequently, when we apply collectivist and individualistic lenses to COVID compliance rates, we may produce correlation evidence, but we miss more nuanced understandings of individual motivations. For example, labelling South Korea as collectivist fails to consider that many young and urban Koreans, who are increasingly individualist, still exhibited high rates of mask-wearing, but did so based on concern for justice of others rather than unquestioned conformity (Chung *et al.*, 2022). Thus, when analysing compliance rates between countries, it appears adequate to dismiss cultural arguments based on individualism and collectivism, and instead focus on other factors that affect individuals and how these factors may impact their compliance rates.

## The reality of political orientation and structure



Figure 3: People wearing surgical masks.

Due to the incredibly politicised nature of the COVID pandemic, an analysis of regulatory compliance focused solely on cultural factors is insufficient. Political factors – such as the framing of information and pre-existing ideological commitments – similarly impacted compliance with state-mandated regulations.

Around the world, there has been a trend of increasing polarisation, heightened by handling the pandemic. For example, in the US, in August 2020, the 16 states that did not have a mask mandate had Republican governors (Kahane, 2021: 165). Not only is compliance with mask mandates associated with political leaning, but the existence of the mandate itself was also highly politicised across party lines. A study published in the *Eastern Economic Journal* suggested that a one-percentage-point increase in a county's vote for Trump was associated with a 0.011 deviation of a decrease in mask-wearing (Kahane, 2021: 176). It is evident that an individual's personal relationship with political commitments impacted their willingness to comply with mask mandate laws.

One of the most important factors that impacted compliance with COVID policy was risk assessment. Political orientation is a significant determinant of people's risk perceptions and values (Chung *et al.*, 2022: 3). The way that people performed these personal risk assessments was impacted by previous experiences they have had with the state, such as the success of preceding health campaigns. For example, in South Korea, mask mandates were well-received because of the earlier normalisation of mask use and their proven success in preventing illnesses. Since 2014, the South Korean government has been advising mask-wearing due to the negative health impacts of yellow dust in the spring (Lim *et al.*, 2020: 206). Over time, with proof of the success of masks, there has been a cultural shift in Korea that recognised mask-wearing as a sign of thoughtfulness long before the pandemic began (Lim *et al.*, 2020: 206). In contrast, the lack of previous experience with mask mandates, government mistrust, and inconsistent government responses and advice were reasons cited by US citizens as to why they did not comply with COVID measures (Wang *et al.*, 2021: 250–51). Koreans were able to complete risk assessments in a way that was less politicised because they had previous experience, resulting in stricter compliance with mask mandate laws.

## Economic impacts: inequality, equality and compliance



Figure 4: Economic consequences of the pandemic.

Another factor that is critical in understanding regulation compliance rates is income level. An individual's experience and position in the political economy greatly impact their willingness and ability to comply with state mandates. One study concludes that people in US counties with above-median income were more likely to comply with shelter-in-place policies by reducing their movement by an additional 60 per cent relative to median-income countries (Wright *et al.*, 2020: 545). As a result, economic relief programmes, such as unemployment benefits and stimulus transfers, had positive impacts on COVID regulation compliance (Wright *et al.*, 2020: 553). For example, there were real economic consequences of shelter-in-place policies. In a case study conducted in San Francisco, the poverty rate increased from 17.1 per cent to 25.9 per cent in the three-month period of the first shelter-in-place order (Martin *et al.*, 2020: 453). COVID regulation compliance is not just a political process, it is a process of rational decision-making. Many citizens could not rationally justify sheltering-in-place as they needed to leave their homes to make an income.

Economic factors impacted mask compliance less because compliance had a slighter opportunity cost when compared to shelter-in-place. Even so, states with higher-income averages tended to have higher mask-compliance rates. The added expense of regularly buying masks in an already strenuous economic situation impacted people's ability to comply. For example, in Brazil, a study showed that only 45.5 per cent of participants wore a face mask outside while 92.6 per cent adhered to the social-distancing rule (Faria de Moura Villela *et al.*, 2021: 3). By juxtaposing the compliance rates of mask compliance with shelter-in-place compliance, it is clear that a factor in state compliance is economic. The less expensive measures, such as handwashing and social distancing, were adhered to more consistently as they had a lesser opportunity cost than sheltering in-place. COVID compliance goes beyond national cultures of individualism and collectivism, as people are impacted by many factors of the political economy simultaneously. This ultimately leads them to make choices that are layered, going beyond strict ideological beliefs.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, individual actors have to complete multi-level risk assessments in order to comply with state-mandated regulations. An analysis of societies as simply individualistic or collectivist is reductive as it does not consider the multi-faceted dimensions of the greater political economy that impact individuals' decision-making. Instead, political and economic factors such as trust in government authority, political orientation and fiscal capacity play a greater role and provide a more holistic understanding of compliance. It is possible that an individual would believe in a more collectivist approach to pandemic management, but the political and economic restrictions created by the unique case of the pandemic do not allow them to realise this reality. This is most apparent when comparing compliance rates between low-cost measures, such as handwashing or even mask-wearing, to higher-cost measures, such as complying with sheltering-in-place orders – best demonstrated by the Brazil example. On balance, while cultural attitudes of individualism do provide correlational explanations for COVID compliance rates, the comparative political and economic factors of an individual are more significant indicators of compliance.

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