

The Politics of Coronavirus in Chile

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1 A worldwide pandemic

This project analyzes political decisions regarding Covid-19 made by central governments and the effect of these decisions on the behavior and choices of infected individuals. This is not an epidemiologic research. As the following sections show, this pandemic is also an outcome of social structures and individuals' behavior. National and local political decisions play an important role in the recent behavior of Covid-19.

The 2019 year ended with the emergence of a previously unknown disease, Covid-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) received reports of a “pneumonia of unknown cause” spreading in China. By the end of January there were already nearly 1,000 cases across East Asia. The swift outbreak of the “novel coronavirus” [1] motivated the WHO to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30th [2]. From that day on, the world has changed. Isolation, social distancing, and the infection and death of thousands of individuals now characterize the “new normal.”

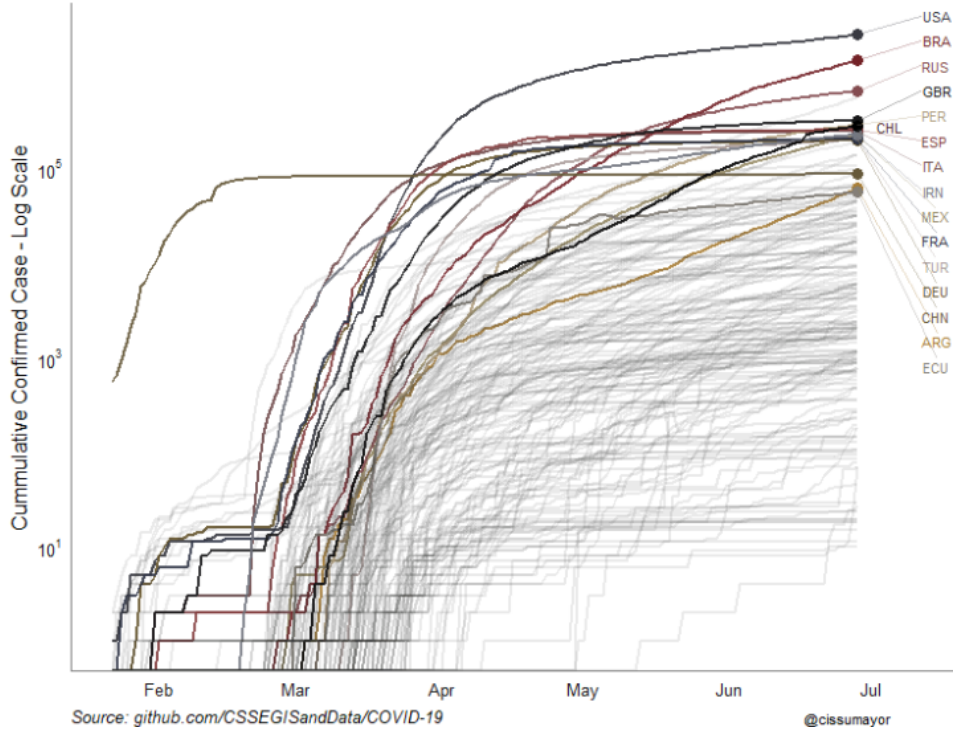
As of June 30 2020 the world has more than 10 million confirmed cases and more than 500 thousand deaths. Those shocking numbers hide the crude reality of governmental decisions that may have slowed or sped up those rates. Using publicly data available from John Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and Engineering data [3], figure 1 shows the worldwide spread of cases from the beginning of 2020 until June 30.

There are multiple ways to describe and explain the global spread of the virus. Looking at the pandemic with a comparative institutional approach, this study argues that in addition to epidemiological characteristics, politics play an influential role in the behavior of the virus. The path of the pandemic is determined by the choices of individuals, particularly political appointees. Individuals base their decisions on empirical data, such as number of confirmed cases, but also on political constraints and incentives.

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Figure 1: Number of confirmed cases (log) worldwide



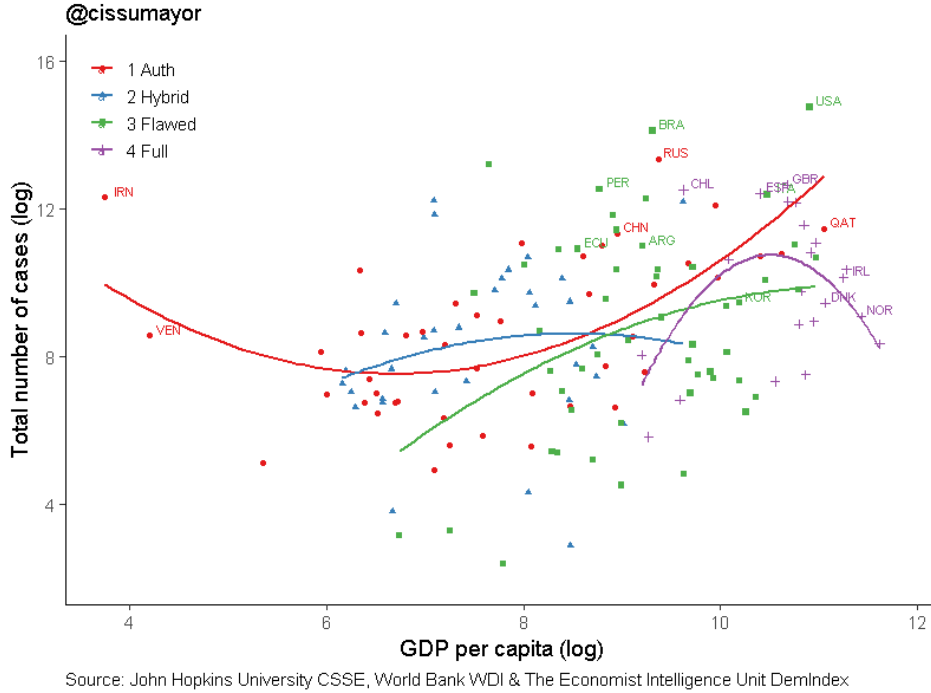
1.1 Institutional explanations

Looking at the global pandemic, one starts to wonder about countries' different experiences. One alternative explanation for this global variation points to differences in political institutions and economic performance. Since political institutions, and institutions in general, determine the way individuals behave and make decisions that set the rules of the game [4], countries with different institutions should behave differently. In other words, institutions matter [5].

Democracies are better at allocating resources than other political regimes, because constituencies can hold democratic political authorities accountable [6]. Following this, one would expect that democratic regimes would have better responses to Covid-19. Similarly, richer countries should have higher state capacities to react to the pandemic.

Figure 2 shows the highest number of cases and GDP per capita [7] and The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index (EIU) [8]. In general terms, higher the per capita income tracks with higher total confirmed cases. Even though this finding could seem counterintuitive, the following sections show that the pace of the virus outbreak is higher in more populated communities. Because more populated countries also have higher incomes on average, the relationship between covid19 and income is positive.

Figure 2: COVID19 confirmed (log) cases in the World



Source: John Hopkins University CSSE, World Bank WDI & The Economist Intelligence Unit DemIndex

Regime types tell a different story about the spread of Covid-19. Democracies have a higher distribution of Covid-19 than autocracies, despite the presence of autocracies along the span of both axes. Considering that hybrid regimes have a narrower range of GDP per capita than democratic or autocratic regimes, the relationship between economic performance and total cases is more subdued in these hybrid regimes.

Of these regime types, flawed democracies display the clearest positive relationship between Covid-19 and economic performance. The United States, Italy, and Brazil, all of which are rated as flawed democracies by EIU, have the highest number of cases in the world. Full democracies are concentrated on the far right of the plot, which means that they have better economic performance on average. The high number of cases in the United Kingdom, Spain, and Chile moves the distribution to the top.

This study also empirically tested the relationship between the spread of Covid-19 and political institutions and economic performance. Table 1 shows different specifications of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models where the dependent variable is the logged highest number of confirmed cases by countries. Column N1 measures the effect of regime type on the number of confirmed cases. As also seen in the previous figures, regime type plays an important role in the spread of Covid-19. Full democracies have a significantly higher number of cases than autocracies. This finding is misleading because the model assumes

Table 1: Institutional explanations

	Number of confirmed cases (log)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Hybrid Regime	-0.344 (0.546)	-0.275 (0.412)	0.163 (0.342)
Flawed Democracy	0.144 (0.488)	0.330 (0.368)	-0.796** (0.330)
Full Democracy	1.265** (0.619)	1.700*** (0.469)	-0.769 (0.482)
Population (log)		0.989*** (0.094)	1.043*** (0.077)
GDP per capita (log)			0.950*** (0.112)
Constant	8.584*** (0.357)	-7.670*** (1.562)	-16.158*** (1.626)
Observations	150	150	150
R ²	0.042	0.459	0.639
Adjusted R ²	0.023	0.444	0.626

Category of reference is Autocracy
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

that there are no other variables, or institutions in this particular case, that explain the spread of Covid-19.

Column N2 adds logged population to the equation in order to take into consideration population size. With population included in the model, the size of the effect (beta) for full democracies increases, meaning that the number of cases with respect to authoritarian regimes is even bigger. This result shows that not only do more populous countries experience faster infection rates, the speed of contagion is faster in full democracies than autocracies.

Column N3 incorporates economic performance to the model, which changes the previous results. National economic performance, measured as GDP per capita, plays an important role in the rate of infection, but economic performance also diminishes the effect of democracy. Once the economy is added to the equation, flawed democracies performed better than full democracies with respect to autocracies when controlling the Covid-19 outbreak.

Flawed democracies have more successfully controlled the spread of Covid-19, yet richer and more populous countries struggled to address the pandemic. The econometric analysis not only confirmed the trends displayed in figure 2 but also introduced a comparative measure of the importance of institutions. The following section focuses on the case of Chile in particular.

2 The Chilean case

The Chilean Health Ministry (MINSAL, for its initials in Spanish) issued a Sanitary Alert [9] on February 8 2020 in response to the WHO’s international alert on January 30. The Chilean government instituted the first Covid-19 precautions on January 31 at the Chilean International Airport, distributing hand sanitizer and opening a sanitary check point for all international arrivals. The first Covid-19 case in Chile was confirmed on March 3.

The first Covid-19 cases in Chile were mostly located in the wealthy northeastern communes of Santiago. This geographical distribution makes a lot of sense. Santiago’s communes generally map onto socioeconomic divides, and poverty increases with distance from the northeastern communes. It is thus no surprise that the northeast had the first Covid-19 cases, as wealthy residents travel more frequently than residents of poorer neighborhoods. As the number of cases increased and began to spread to other areas of the city, the government implemented a national curfew followed by local quarantines. Quarantines started in the northeastern Santiago communes that saw the first cases, and were followed by a wider set of restrictions intended to reduce the movement of the individuals.

The following sections examine the spread of cases at the national level and the effect of quarantines on communes.

2.1 The politics of Covid-19

This study registered all political, economic and administrative decisions and policies by the Chilean central government regarding Covid-19. Beginning with MINSAL’s Covid-19 update to its annual immunization plan on January 14, the government made more than 400 announcements, administrative rules and policies. These announcements were classified into three categories: mobilization, economic, or misleading political announcements. A complete list of the events and its categorization can be found [here](#)

One quarter of the records are categorized as “economic.” These are mainly policies intended to ease the economic disruption to industries and individuals due to mobilization restrictions and the unprecedented number of job losses. 37% of the policies were created to regulate and decrease the mobilization of individuals locally and nationally. The third category, labeled as “misleading,” is defined as events and statements that increased the population’s confusion and uncertainty. Unfortunately, there are an abundant amount of misleading political announcements and they played an important role in the spread of the virus.

Politics impacts the spread of Covid-19 by influencing an individual’s expectations of their own behavior and their mobilization. If a national authority promotes a “new normal,” people will behave accordingly and act normally, which basically means not stay at home. In the same fashion if authorities promote reopening commercial centers, people will think

that the pandemic is under control and will lower their defenses, which again basically means not to reduce social interaction, promoting the propagation of the virus.

Yet, as data has shown, when authorities made these misleading statements, the virus was far from under control. This created an environment conducive to the continued spread of Covid-19, resulting in more than two hundred thousand confirmed cases and seven thousand lives lost. How many of these cases can be explained by those misleading political decisions? The following sections provide a partial answer to this question.

2.2 Economics, mobilization reduction and misleading directions

The analysis now moves to a political explanation for the Chilean experience with Covid-19, focusing in particular on misleading statements and the administrative decisions of national authorities.

Figure 3: Confirmed new cases in Chile

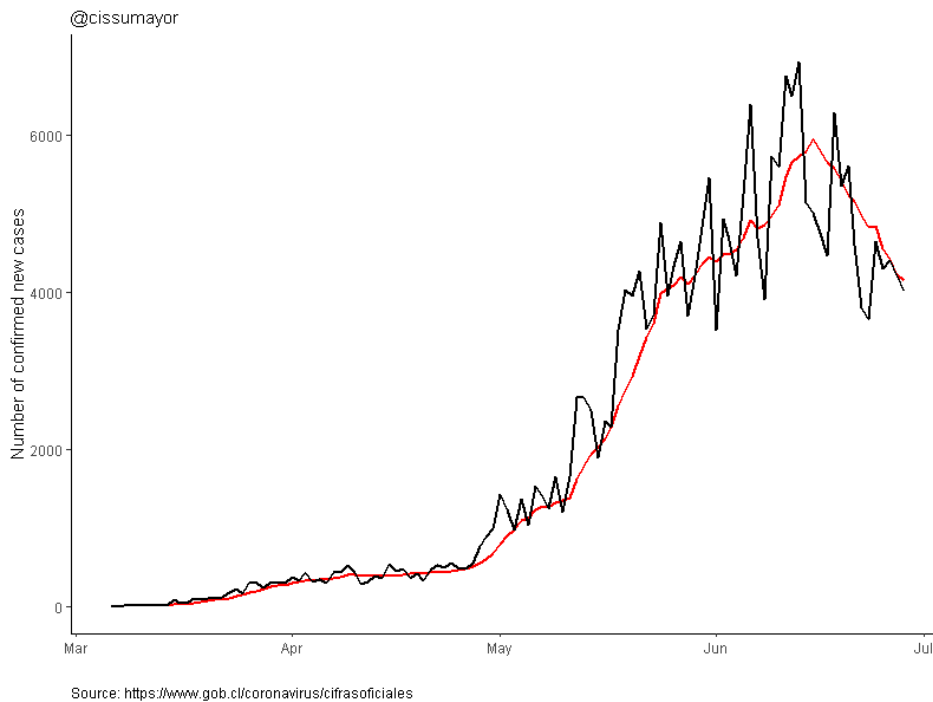


Figure 3 shows trends in new confirmed cases in Chile over the past months. The red line represents the moving average of the past seven days, which avoids the daily abrupt increases or decreased of new cases, helping to visualize the trend of new cases.

There are multiple ways to analyze time series data. Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 illustrate that the distribution of the data is explained by polynomials of the number of days since

the beginning of the analysis, allowing for nonlinear trends with multiple inflection points.

It is important to highlight that since the nature of the data and the way PCR exams are reported in Chile, a lagged effect of the data is already taken into consideration. The cases reported by days already have a delay of 7 to 10 days since that is the average time to process and contact the recipients of the results. Other research has already shown that the delay may even reach to 13 days [10].

Table 2: Explaining new cases in Chile

	Number of confirmed new cases		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
N. of Days	-125.953*** (19.662)	132.207*** (28.439)	
N. of Days 2nd poly	3.387*** (0.393)	-6.527*** (0.991)	
N. of Days 3rd poly	-0.017*** (0.002)	0.115*** (0.013)	
N. of Days 4th poly		-0.001*** (0.000)	
Economic			-140.434 (183.240)
Misleading			509.483*** (141.369)
Mobility			-302.401 (182.400)
Constant	1,014.616*** (264.511)	-540.986** (240.296)	1,939.567*** (318.970)
Observations	115	115	115
R-squared	0.899	0.949	0.119
Adjusted R-squared	0.896	0.947	0.0948

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

This approach to explaining the behavior of the virus in Chile relies on politics. A time series analysis including the already defined number of events shows that the Covid-19 contagion pattern in Chile responded to politics. Column N3 on Table 2 shows the results of the political events analysis.

New cases reacted directly to the number of misleading political decisions and announcements made by democratically-elected representatives and not necessarily to economic or mobility policies. It is striking that for each misleading announcement, the number of new cases increased by around 500 new cases, on average. The implications for this finding are tremendous, but it is also important to highlight its scope and limitations.

As shown in Table 2, the data behaves in an autoregressive and a weekly moving average way. This explains most of the variance of the new cases. Empirical evidence shows that

part of the variance is explained by politics, and not just by any political decision or policy. Misleading announcements in particular are accountable for a significant and relevant number of new cases.

2.3 The toll of “the new normal”

The announcement of what the government called “the new normal” was one of the most detrimental of all misleading announcements of this period. On April 19 political authorities announced a new stage of the pandemic and told people that they could start returning to a “new normal” [11] while retaining some of the measures to reduce contagion. On April 24 the government also announced a “safe return” for all public employees coming back to their work stations [12]. It later became clear that the authorities misread the situation and erroneously assumed that the Covid-19 contagion was under control.

As can be expected, people followed the directives of the government and started leaving their homes more often. This research article presents a way to measure the importance of these political decisions and national announcements and identify their impact on the total number of cases in Chile.

As discussed earlier, there are different ways to measure time series. In this case, the behavior of the cases are modeled after the political announcements, taking into consideration case patterns until April 24 using an ARIMA (6,0,7). This enabled prioritizing the autoregressive capability of the data while also considering the weekly moving average.

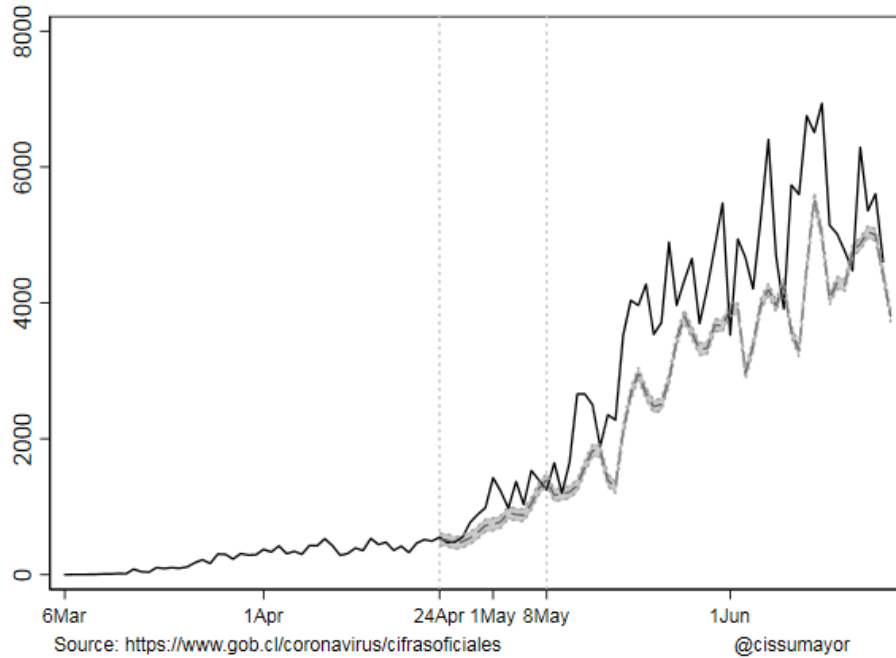
Figure 4 shows how the predicted cases would have behaved if everything else stayed constant after April 24. The dotted line shows how the new cases behave following the pattern previous to that date. Confidence intervals are also generated to model uncertainty.

Using these estimates, the number of new cases that resulted from the “new normal” announcements can be identified. Considering case patterns in the two weeks following April 24, the analysis estimates that the number of new cases explained by the announcement is near 3,100, or with a 95% confidence level, 1,800 to 4,400 cases. On the other hand, if one were to assume that the effect of that announcement lasted for just one week and that notifications are more than a week delayed, in a more modest time span from May 1 to May 8 the “new normal” could explain 970 to 2,280 new cases. Both the former and the latter scenarios show that, once again, politics do matter.

3 Quarantines

Most of the policies implemented by the government aimed to reduce individuals’ mobility. As mentioned in the introduction, quarantines were introduced first as an exceptional measure for a handful of communes, but eventually more than 60 communes had full curfews. There were other types of stranding policies, such as the sanitary curfews that contained

Figure 4: Explaining “the new normal”



sections of one or multiple communes, but due to the difficulty of estimating case numbers for these policies, they are not analyzed here.

Table 3 explains the number of new cases by communes. Column 3 shows the results for the 345 communes in the country, while column 2 analyzes the communes that had a quarantine at any point in time. The last column shows the results for communes in the Santiago Metropolitan Region with quarantines, which contain more than 80% of all Covid-19 cases in Chile. The columns also display interaction terms between the % of residents under the poverty level and the extent of overcrowding with the imposition of curfew orders. These interaction terms can isolate the effect of those two variables under quarantine.

It is important to highlight that even though the coefficient for quarantine is always positive, due to the constant increase in the number of new cases, the size of that beta reduces as the table moves from left to right. When considering the most affected communes, the beta reduces almost 3 times, which implies that even though the number of new cases increased, the increase was smaller in communes with the highest infection rate once they were quarantined. On average, quarantines did not reduce the number of new cases, but they were able to reduce the speed of contagion.

The % of poor people by commune only had a statistically significant effect at the national level; however, a completely different story emerges with the % of households

Table 3: Quarantines analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	All communes	Under quarantine	Metropolitan Region
Quarantined	45.241*** (1.149)	33.825*** (2.656)	18.592*** (3.389)
% of poor	13.822*** (5.184)	0.689 (35.357)	-123.009 (77.636)
Overcrowd	14.706 (13.558)	190.174*** (58.623)	249.701*** (67.252)
Q* %Poor.	318.994*** (13.694)	129.946*** (31.920)	-127.462** (50.248)
Q*Overc.	-234.111*** (9.560)	-103.903*** (22.188)	377.720*** (59.325)
Population	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Date	0.102*** (0.003)	0.653*** (0.021)	0.991*** (0.036)
Constant	-2,253.847*** (67.449)	-14,413.856*** (458.731)	-21,850.428*** (790.241)
Observations	31,740	5,244	3,588
Number of communes	345	57	39
Rho	0.180	0.131	0.0553
R-Sq Overall	0.563	0.561	0.614
R-Sq Within	0.406	0.490	0.547
R-Sq Between	0.793	0.768	0.889

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

with more than 2.5 individuals by bedroom, which is one of the measurements used by the National Census [13]. This finding is relevant since takes into consideration household-level characteristics rather than solely individual-level variables. Covid-19 cases spread more quickly as the overcrowding situation by household increases. This implies that reduced mobilization initiatives also played a negative effect, since they promoted individuals staying at home. In other words, the more crowded the household, the higher the likelihood of contracting Covid-19.

Interaction terms also provide an interesting description. The interaction term between quarantine and % of poor was always statistically significant but positive in column 3. Which means that on average, poor communes saw a dramatic increase in their number of new cases while under quarantine.

The interaction between quarantine and overcrowding not only was mostly positive but the sign changed in column 3, when tunnel vision is applied to the Santiago Metropolitan Region. This is a counterintuitive finding, as it demonstrates that quarantined communes in the greater Santiago area had a reduction of new cases as the level of overcrowding increased.

Using a mixed effects structure and taking into consideration the time series within each commune, we can identify that the Inter Class Correlation (ICC) for column 1 is 18%, which means that one-fifth of the variance of the dependent variable is explained by the differences between communes. On the other hand that value diminishes moving to the right on the table. This means that communes within the Santiago metropolitan region have greater similarities to each other than to the rest of the country.

This last finding provides evidence to support the use of local policies over nationally determined “dynamic quarantines”, as the government called them. Vast evidence supports the argument that these quarantines worked in some communes, but not necessarily in all of them. Since one size does not fit all, in order to be successful, quarantines must take into consideration local characteristics, such as the % of poor people and overcrowded conditions.

Previous findings pose a new set of questions since they show that quarantines have had heterogeneous results in different communes. The results presented here show that a quarantine in a poor and overcrowded commune has completely different results than in an opposite commune. Perhaps it is the time to stop applying the same quarantine policy to different communes and start taking into consideration their differences and promote local and more applied policies.

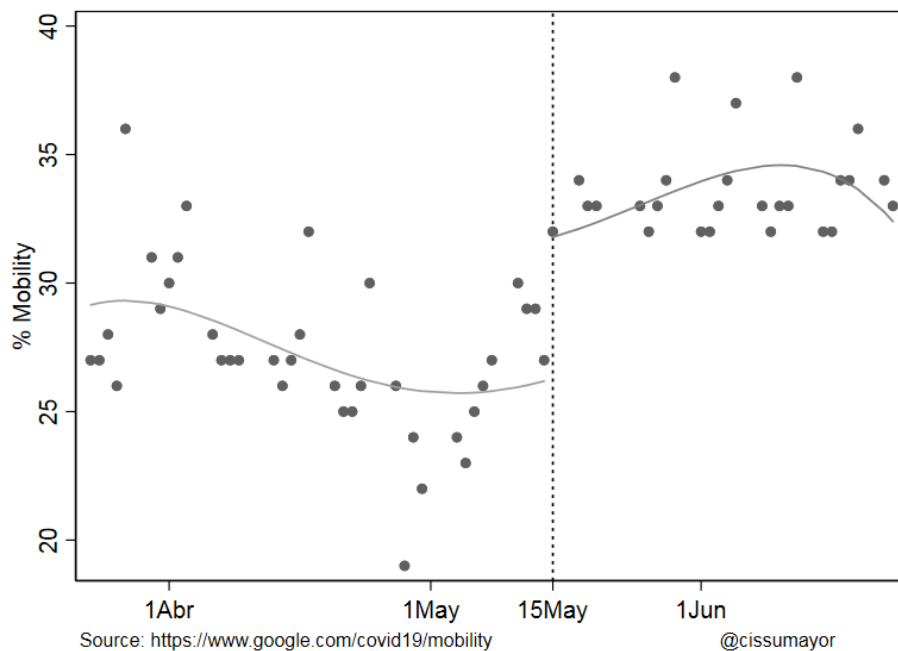
3.1 Quarantines and mobility reduction

Another way to measure the effect of quarantines is to analyze how quarantine policies have affected individuals’ mobilization. Google published information of “movement trends over time by geography, across different categories of places such as retail and recreation, groceries and pharmacies, parks, transit stations, workplaces, and residential” [14]. The publicly available information for Chile is aggregated at a regional level, which makes it impossible to analyze the effects of quarantines on communes, but for a comparative standpoint data can be analyzed regionally.

This analysis focuses on the Santiago metropolitan region, which contains almost 80% of all confirmed cases. One of the most extensive and more recent quarantine decisions (May 15) included 39 of the 52 communes of the Metropolitan Region. The Google Mobility Report enables the identification of whether or not people reduced their mobilization. It is important to keep in mind that aggregating results have some limitations, as it requires observing information at a general level and is not able to identify local or individual patterns.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of mobilization from the residency. A higher percentage means that people stayed at home more often. A Regression Discontinuity Analysis measures a reduction of 6% with the May 15 quarantine. The same figure shows that beginning in April, people started going out more often and that the quarantine effectively reduced individuals’ mobilization in the metropolitan region, which is a substantive policy to help

Figure 5: Mobility in the Metropolitan Region



reduce new cases.

4 Conclusions, scope and limits

Covid-19 brought more than social distancing and tragic loss of life. The worldwide pandemic has made institutional differences visible to the public. As elected officials are held accountable for their capacity to control the outbreak, or lack thereof, pessimism has been increasing over the past months.

Multiple surveys have described a society that, beyond being directly economically and emotionally affected by the pandemic and mobilization reductions, does not believe that things are going to get better in the short term [15]. This is an important alert to political authorities and they should pay particular attention to it. As experienced last October, social movements that are ignored by political institutions and political actors ultimately manifest their demands outside of the political realm.

This research aimed to describe how the pandemic affected Chile beyond an epidemiological approach and show that politics matter. The evidence presented and analyzed here is substantive. People listen to political authorities and change their behavior in response to government announcements. This research describes this mechanism with two different

examples.

Politics matter and this analysis of misleading political announcements supports that argument. When considering all the political announcements made by political appointees over the past months, it is clear that the number of new cases reacted too. The mechanism that assumed that Covid-19 spreads faster when people interact with each other, in contrast to avoiding physical interaction, was proven when explaining the variation of new cases at the national level. As demonstrated in the case of misleading polices, the announcement of economic or mobilization policies did not have a direct measurable effect. This finding highlights the responsibility of elected officials. Higher and better responsiveness between them and the rest of the people is needed, because the voters who elected them pay attention and follow their decisions.

A second unit of analysis measured the importance and significance of quarantines at the level of communes. On the one hand, quarantines did not stop the increase of new cases, but they did reduce the speed of the spread. At the same time, other characteristics also matter. These results show that state capacity played an important role in the spread of Covid-19.

The % of poor people and the level of overcrowding enabled the virus to spread more quickly. This is not new or good news under any circumstances, but it is an important fact to take into consideration for future policies. None of the previously described conditions are endogenous or a result of the attitude of the individuals, but the outcome of decades of ineffective public policies. This is an area where the state and political authorities have plenty of room to improve.

These findings shed light on future policies, yet it is important to be aware of the limits and restrictions of them. As argued at the start of this document, this is not an epidemiological research project and does not diminish the value of such research. The way new cases behaved responded mostly to a time-series structure, which follows certain structure and patterns that can be better explained by an epidemiologic approach. At the same time, there is more variance to be explained.

Only after taking into account public health measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 is it possible to talk politics and design policies. But there is no doubt that if these conversations do not occur in the near future and no policies are implemented, there will be no institutional barriers to contain any new pandemic in the future. Politics will help the world to be better prepared for that event, not to avoid it.

4.1 The relevance of data availability

On a final note it is important to highlight the fact that it is impossible to conduct research, or even make policy decisions, without a systematic and proper information system that help researchers and decision makers have access to reliable data. This research project

spans the beginning of 2020 through June 30, drawing on worldwide and local information up to June 28.

Nevertheless, the time period analyzed for quarantines at the commune level ends abruptly on June 15 because a new system to report data was implemented. Thanks to an investigative report from CIPER [16], it became public that MINSAL had a parallel count for death and infected cases that is reported to the WHO. Due to the problematic finding, MINSAL decided to include all cases within one day on the following epidemiologic reports, breaking the time-series in order to make it comparable across dates.

Finally, the Health Information and Statistics Department (DEIS for its initials in Spanish) has just made available a dataset with anonymized information while the final reviews of this paper are completed. The information comes three or four months late, but at least it sheds some light on the future and the hope that more reliable information will be publicly available soon.

5 Colophon

I am grateful for the support and academic challenge provided by the Society and Health Research Center in Universidad Mayor. Dr. Álvaro Castillo, Dr. Antonia Díaz-Valdés, Dr. Nicolás Montalva, Dr. Sergio Peña and Dr. Teresita Rocha, under the leadership of Dr. Esteban Calvo, were always great research partners that helped the project in many ways. I am also grateful for the Research Assistantship of Ariel Becerra and Andrés González. Nevertheless, all errors and omissions are my own.

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