Comparative Management & Learning Techniques

Why Do Countries Respond Differently to COVID-19? A Comparative Study of Sweden, China, France, and Japan

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Abstract

Nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) are important public health tools to fight against COVID-19. Governments around the world have instituted a variety of NPIs to modify individuals' behavior, giving rise to four distinct pandemic response strategies: nudge, mandate, decree, and boost. To better understand the different policy choices involved in these strategies, four countries including Sweden, China, France, and Japan were compared to identify the critical institutional and cultural determinants of national response strategy. The finding shows that various responses regarding same threat are dependent on the distinctive institutional arrangements and cultural orientation of each country, and thus, there is no One-Size-Fits-All strategy.

Keywords

COVID-19, institutional arrangements, cultural orientation, response strategy

Since December 2019, COVID-19 has become a global pandemic, quickly spreading to more than 200 countries and territories around the world. Changing individuals' behavior is critical to containing and mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic because the virus can spread via human-to-human transmission (Bavel et al., 2020). By March 2020, national governments had employed a series of nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), including isolation, quarantine, and social distancing, as well as community containment, to combat the transmission of the virus (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). Yet, there are noticeable country-to-country variations in regard to the scale and scope of these NPIs. Oxford University created a stringency index to track and compare the strictness of government policy interventions across countries (Hale et al., 2020). The Oxford index reveals that governments' responses to COVID-19 exhibit significant nuances and heterogeneity, especially with respect to policy interventions regarding containment and closure. Why do national governments respond differently to COVID-19? Many factors may shape government response strategies; for example, the severity of the pandemic in that country and the country's health care capacity (Kandel et al., 2020; Pillemer et al., 2015). We discuss how two critical contextual factors, institutional arrangements and national cultural orientation, impact the formation and adoption of four distinct national COVID-19 response strategies: a nudge strategy in Sweden, a mandate strategy in China, a decree strategy in France, and a boost strategy in Japan. We chose these four countries because their divergent COVID-19 response strategies have gained worldwide attention and sparked a global

debate, despite the fact that all of them are unitary states with identical levels of Health Emergency Preparedness, as ranked by World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018.[1]

Two Critical Contextual Factors: Institutional Arrangements and National Cultural Orientation

Understanding context is critical to analyzing and designing public policy (Geva-May, 2002). In addition to problem-specific factors, such as different types of crisis (Christensen et al., 2016), a multitude of contextual factors, such as cultural orientation, economic development level, and political institution, influence national governments' policymaking (Berkman et al., 2005; Carayannopoulos, 2017; Weible et al., 2020). Given that COVID-19 is a transboundary virus that can spread via human-to-human transmission, we argue that national government response strategies are contingent not only upon the state's domination and control, but also upon citizens' compliance and voluntary support (Migdal, 2009).

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The exercising of state power depends on both structural features within the political system and cultural factors in the broader environment (Jessop, 2010). We thus focus on two critical contextual factors, institutional arrangements and cultural orientation, to explain why four distinct response strategies were adopted by the chosen four countries.

Institutional Arrangements: Decentralized Versus Centralized Regimes

Institutional arrangements refer to the systems and processes that countries use to structure authority, attention, information flows, and relationships in addressing policy problems (May, 2015). They can be either formal government organizational structures or informal norms that are in place in a country for the sake of arranging and undertaking policy work. These formal system processes provide governments at all levels (central and local) with a framework within which to formulate, adopt, and implement policies. Informal institutional structures include the general public, nongovernmental organizations, and private sector groups that are not official institutions.

One formal institutional arrangement key to understanding different COVID-19 response strategies is the degree to which power and authority are centralized versus decentralized in a country. The extent of decentralization versus centralization varies even across unitary states. Centralized states emphasize the authority of the central government and blur the responsibilities between central-local ties, making it easier to adopt and implement policies in a top-down fashion (León & Orriols, 2019; Wimmer, 2018). In contrast, decentralized states share power with the governments at different levels and clarify the responsibilities among multiple tiers. Actual authority is put into the hands of local authorities when it comes to policy decision-making (Goel et al., 2017). Therefore, in a decentralized regime, either policy blockages or bargaining may set limits on the choice of policy strategy (Clune, 1993). Centralized countries with strong top-down mandates and a homogeneous governance structure, such as China and France, may find it easier to implement more stringent response policy measures nationwide, whereas decentralized countries, such as Sweden and Japan, prefer to provide recommended measures and lax restrictions on individuals.

National Cultural Orientation: Loose Versus Tight Cultures

Culture is generally understood as the shared meaning and values that distinguish one group of people from another (Hofstede et al., 2010). Culture, as a multi-dimensional construct, can be studied at individual, organizational, group, regional, and even national levels. We are interested in national cultural orientation along a tightness–looseness continuum, capturing two key components: the strength of social
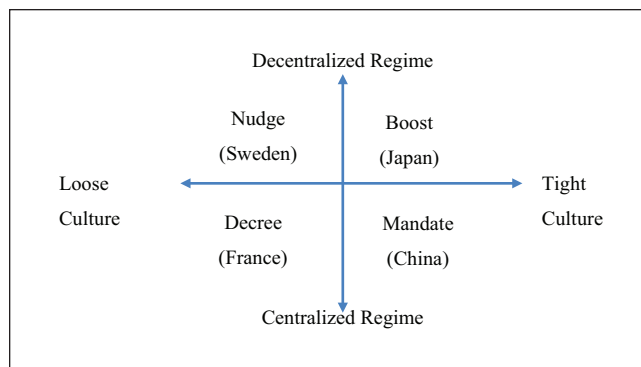

Figure 1. Two critical contextual factors shaping COVID-19 response strategies.

norms and the degree of sanctioning within societies (Gelfand et al., 2011).

People living in different cultural contexts have strikingly different senses of the self, of others, and of the interdependence of the two (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In a society with a tight culture, citizens are more likely to comply with government interventions (Gaenslen, 1986; Gelfand, 2012). They attach importance to group solidarity and orders (Poole, 2019), so as to attend to others and be harmoniously interdependent with each other. Furthermore, culture is instrumental to fostering people's normative commitments and psychological beliefs. Gelfand et al. (2011) have illustrated that the looseness–tightness cultural orientation can impact individuals' adherence to social norms and subsequently influence their perception of responsibility in state–citizen interactions (Gelfand et al., 2011; Trnka & Trundle, 2014). As suggested by behavioral public administration studies (Tummers, 2019; F. Zhang et al., 2018), the adoption of policy measures across different countries by and large depends on the public's attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and willingness to cooperate in regard to containing the pandemic (X. Zhang et al., 2020).

Asian countries, such as China and Japan, are mostly associated with a tight culture, as a result of Confucius's legacy. In these countries, a societal consensus has generally been reached to comply with the containment and closure measures during the COVID-19 crisis. In contrast, people in nations with a loose culture show less tolerance for behavioral intervention, value individuals' own preferences, and preserve the self through self-regulation and self-responsibility (Gelfand, 2012; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). National culture in both France and Sweden views the individual as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity who comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes; thus, these countries encourage individual flexibility and risk-taking, consistent with these loose cultural values (Luria et al., 2015; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

In Figure 1, we group together the four countries under study along vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical
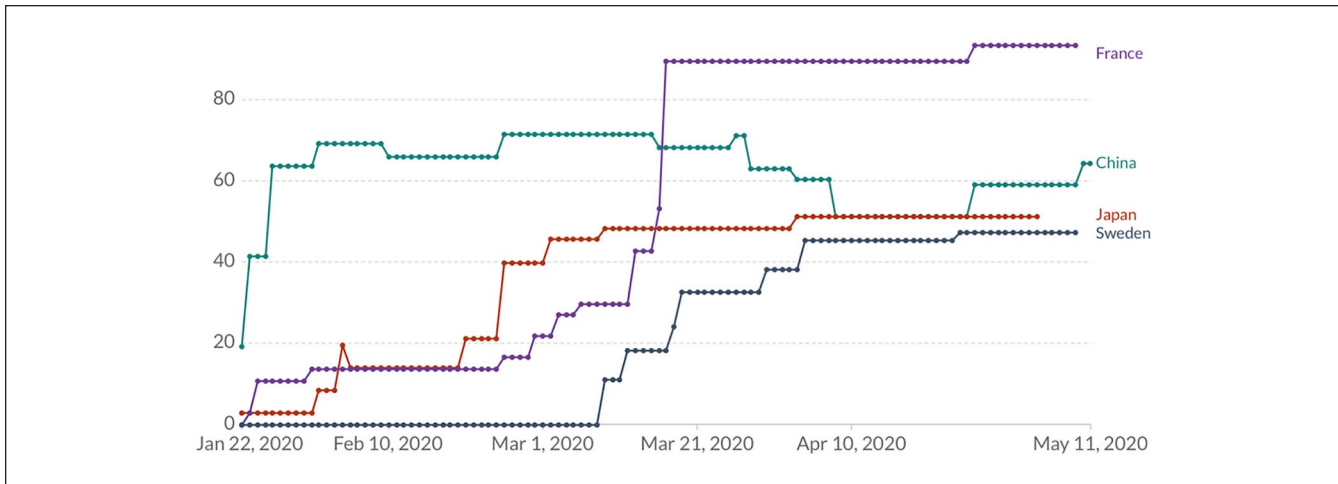
Figure 2. Four government response stringency indexes, January 22 to May 11, 2020.

dimension concerns institutional arrangements and ranges from "decentralized regime" at the top of the figure to "centralized regime" at the bottom. The horizontal dimension is concerned with national cultural orientation, moving from "loose culture" on the left of the figure to "tight culture" on the right. This simple framework reflects fundamental differences in institutional arrangements and cultural values. Sweden is a country with a more decentralized regime and looser culture, whereas China is a nation with a more centralized regime and tighter culture. The other opposing pair includes France, with a more centralized regime but looser culture, and Japan with a more decentralized regime but tighter culture.

On the basis of the scale and scope of policy interventions aiming to affect individuals' behaviors, the countries' response strategies can be further classified into nudge, mandate, decree, and boost categories. Accordingly, we posit that the two critical contextual factors jointly shape these countries' COVID-19 response strategies, which are nudge in Sweden, mandate in China, decree in France, and boost in Japan.

A Comparison of Stringency in COVID-19 Response Strategies Across Four Countries

NPIs targeting individual, community, and environmental levels, including social distancing measures and other behavioral modifications, are the interventions available to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Katz et al., 2019). Governments have adopted a number of policy measures aiming to alter the public's behaviors, including school and workplace closures, the cancelation of public events, restrictions on gathering sizes, shutting down public transport, stay-at-home orders, restrictions on internal movement and international travel, and public information campaigns. Yet, there are a great deal of variations in regard to the scale, scope, and strictness of these measures across countries.

The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) provides a systematic approach to tracking and comparing how government COVID-19 responses have evolved over time (Hale et al., 2020). The data involved were collected from publicly available sources and updated in real time by a research team based at Oxford University. The research team constructed a composite index to update the stringency of governments' responses across countries, longitudinally.

According to the OxCGRT, the trajectories of the stringency of policy interventions across the four countries are not synchronous. As shown in Figure 2, the stringency indexes regarding the response strategies are evolving over time, contingent upon the different stages of the pandemic outbreak. To compare their policy interventions on the same benchmark, we chose to focus our attention on the steady phase.

Table 1 displays information regarding the critical turning points and corresponding stringency indices of the four countries' COVID-19 response strategies at stable stages. Among the four selected countries, France has the highest stringency index (85–95), followed by China (60–70), Japan (40–50), and Sweden (35–45).

The Oxford stringency index does not provide information on how well policies are enforced or to capture institutional and cultural contextual factors. We thus collected data from publicly available sources, such as government press releases and briefings, as well as news articles, to engage in an inquiry regarding how institutional and cultural factors have shaped different countries' distinct response strategies.

"Nudge" Response Strategy in Sweden

Sweden's COVID-19 response is a good example of a nudge strategy, which is designed to change behaviors without prohibiting options or imposing upon individuals'

Table 1. Key Information about Response Strategies across Four Countries.

Countries	Critical turning points	Response stringency index at stable stages
China	January 23, 2020 and January 26, 2020	About 60–70
Japan	February 25, 2020	About 40–50
France	March 17, 2020	About 85–95
Sweden	Mar 9, 2020 and March 19, 2020	About 35–45

freedom of choice, so as to steer people in a particular direction (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017; Tummers, 2019). It ranks the weakest on the stringency index among the four countries. Sweden's COVID-19 response has been singled out as controversial for not imposing a full lockdown, as seen in most of Europe, to contain the pandemic. The Swedish authorities made it clear that managing the COVID-19 pandemic would not be a sprint but a marathon—a long-term undertaking.[2] Thus, policies need to be designed on a level that is acceptable to the people over a long period of time.

Although a temporary ban on all nonessential travel to Sweden was put in place on March 19, closure-related measures and restrictions on internal movement have not been fully implemented. Swedish gyms, schools, restaurants, and shops have all remained open throughout the spread of the pandemic. There have been no regulations regarding citizens' mobility. There are some recommendations regarding public health efforts, such as social distancing rules in restaurants, working online, and restricting the sizes of gatherings. The Swedish strategy to contain COVID-19 has relied on the voluntary social distancing and self-restraint of its citizens, who have received daily briefings and instructions concerning individually targeted self-protection techniques from the Swedish Public Health Agency and press conferences held by state epidemiologists, the Prime Minister, and other government representatives (Nygren & Olofsson, 2020).

Sweden is, by tradition, a unitary but conspicuously decentralized country in which the central government exercises only ministerial functions. Most public tasks are fulfilled by the two-tier elected local government structure, in which municipalities fulfill a broad scope of responsibilities, including education, social services, and public utilities (Wollmann, 2004). At the national level, Sweden' strategy focuses more on recommendations than requirements, to induce the public to modify their behaviors voluntarily to combat COVID-19. The key here is the sense of individuals' self-responsibility and high level of trust in Swedish society; these elements are highlighted in a loose culture.

"Mandate" Response Strategy in China

In contrast to Sweden, China's COVID-19 response strategy represents a mandate strategy, which involves authority-based coercive forces and social consensus. Since the COVID-19 outbreak was officially declared in China, policy interventions have been undertaken to mitigate the pandemic and prevent the persistence of the virus across the population (Kraemer et al., 2020). Besides the lockdown measures that took effect in Wuhan on January 23, by January 26, as many as 30 provinces had successively launched first-level responses to the major public health emergency.

The Chinese authorities nationally invoked wartime narratives to mobilize the public and emphasized group solidarity to contain the spread of COVID-19. The Chinese response to COVID-19 has featured the complete lockdown of cities with major outbreaks and mandatory social distancing for all populations (S. Zhang, et al., 2020). Specifically, all residents were restricted to staying at home in quarantine. The state delegated the power of monitoring the behavior of residents to massive grassroots community-based organizations. In addition, the vast majority of public places, such as shopping centers, schools, restaurants, and cinemas, were closed on a national scale. With the leadership of the central government, mandatory interventions have been imposed on the whole society. On the whole, citizens in China have demonstrated strong levels of obedience and a cooperative willingness to maintain social stability, which are key features of a tight culture.

Just as the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, declared fighting the virus a people's war, the Chinese authorities mobilized people to support the government's strict control of human mobility in the fight against COVID-19. China features tight cultural values and so Chinese individuals are willing to submit themselves to authority such as this with few complaints. The adoption of mandatory policy interventions to adjust individuals' behavior in China is partly due to its authority-based consensus, which was reached under a centralized regime.

"Decree" Response Strategy in France

Although both the mandate and decree strategies emphasize the prohibition and limitation of unwanted behavior, there are some distinctions between them (Keeler, 1993; Nasir & Turner, 2013; Zhao, 2009). The decree strategy in France is legally based in this sense.

France was the first country in Europe to detect COVID-19, on January 24. Yet, the largest-ever gathering of Smurfs,

Yellow Vest protests, and local elections were still continuing in March. During the initial stages of the outbreak, the public in France emphasized liberty and continued life as usual. Meanwhile, the authorities enacted soft measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. As the virus began to spread with unprecedented speed, France was in danger of a serious COVID-19 outbreak in mid-March. Correspondingly, the response strategy to the spread of the pandemic changed from mitigation to suppression.

President Emmanuel Macron employed wartime rhetoric to describe the crisis ("We are at war") when he declared a nationwide lockdown in his March 16 television address.[3] The whole of French society, including hospitals, the military, and the public, have been mobilized in an attempt to defeat COVID-19. France's confinement measures continued until May 11, which was the turning point in the fight against the pandemic.

The authorities imposed restrictions on individual freedom of movement in accordance with the decree.[4] Since the lockdown was instituted, residents have been instructed to stay at home, apart from for essential activities, such as shopping for food, seeking medical care, and exercising. Those who go out are required to obtain a written note explaining why. Moreover, if COVID-19 lockdown rules are violated, the individuals concerned can be fined an amount between €135 and €3,750, according to the severity of the violation. In addition, airport screenings, quarantines, bans on major events, and the closure of public places, including schools, workplaces, restaurants, and public transport, were put into place simultaneously.

France is a unitary and highly centralized state in which major public tasks are performed by the central state, acting through central ministries (Wollmann, 2004). Once the pandemic worsened on a national scale, the French authorities were able to transform policy interventions to quickly cope with the pandemic. Considering the relatively loose cultural orientation in regard to the French public's acceptance and compliance, the response strategy in France is a more coercive, legal-based one, aiming to change citizens' behaviors.

"Boost" Response Strategy in Japan

A boost strategy tends to foster people's competence in regard to making choices by altering their external environments and through the presentation of information (Bradt, 2019; Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017). These features have manifested in Japan's policy interventions in their battle against the COVID-19 virus. The Japanese government first issued *Basic Policies for Novel Coronavirus Disease Control* on February 25, 2020, which has been revised 4 times since its release,[5] especially after the state of emergency took effect in six designated prefectures (Saitama, Chiba, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka) on April 7.

Although Japan has a unitary government system, subnational governments have gained a fair amount of autonomy by law in the policymaking process (Jacobs, 2003). Thus, Japan has so far not enforced mandatory policy interventions, partly because the central government cannot enforce closures or fine citizens for breaking rules. Even after the areas under a state of emergency were expanded to all 47 prefectures on April 16, the Japanese government did not take compulsory measures, such as a lockdown (city blockade), which were otherwise implemented in other countries. Furthermore, the declared emergency is more of a symbolic gesture than a move that actually involves the delegation of extra power to local governments. For instance, specific to the COVID-19 crisis, local policy interventions guiding individuals' behavior in Tokyo and Hokkaido were issued much earlier than the national government's recommendations in the state of emergency.

The basic COVID-19 response strategy in Japan includes three pillars: early detection, intensive care and securing medical services, and the behavioral modification of citizens. The Japanese authorities released guidelines on "Three Cs" (closed spaces with insufficient ventilation, crowded conditions with people, and conversations at a short distance) to provide the public with vital information about how to avoid infectious environments, to guide and educate the public in terms of eliciting their cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hayasaki, 2020; Shaw et al., 2020). The risk of the occurrence of infection clusters is particularly high when the "Three Cs" overlap. Therefore, governments in Japan recommended that residents avoid the "Three Cs," with the aim of reducing human-to-human contact. The relatively less stringent index assigned to Japan is largely attributed to its decentralized regime and tight cultural orientation (Table 2).

No One-Size-Fits-All Strategy

As countries around the world are continuing their efforts to tackle the coronavirus, what can we learn from a brief reflection on the divergent response strategies applied to the four countries examined here? We suggest that there is no one-size-fit-all strategy that can be used to combat COVID-19 on a global scale. Although the experiences of the four countries examined in the present study can provide lessons for other countries, their distinct trajectories are contextually dependent and depend upon reflections regarding how pandemic response strategies have interacted with the response of the population, are shaped by institutional arrangements, and are informed by national cultural orientations. Our comparative analysis reaffirms the joint role of institutional and cultural contexts in the shaping of governmental policymaking.

Table 2. COVID-19 Response Strategies in Sweden, China, France, and Japan.

Countries	Narrative	Response	Scope	Containment and closure measures
Sweden	Marathon	Mild and advisory	Subnational	• Requirements regarding international travel control and the cancelation of public events • Recommendations regarding the restriction of internal movement • No measures regarding the closure of schools, workplaces, and public transport
China	War	Drastic and mandatory	National	• Lockdowns in cities with major outbreaks • Requirements regarding the closure of schools, workplaces, and public transport; restrictions on internal movement; international travel control; and the cancelation of public events • Grassroots organizations monitor individuals' behavior
France	War	Drastic and required	National	• Nationwide lockdown based on a decree • Requirements regarding the closure of schools, workplaces, and public transport; restrictions on internal movement; international travel control; and the cancelation of public events • Limitations regarding individual mobility (certification and penalties)
Japan	Emergency	Mild and recommended	Subnational	• Recommendations regarding the closure of schools and workplaces, public information campaigns, restrictions on internal movement, and the cancelation of public events • Requirements regarding international travel control • No measures regarding the closure of public transport • The behavioral modification of citizens (avoid the "Three Cs" and implement self-restraint)

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The World Health Statistics 2018 indicate that international health regulations (IHR) capacity and health emergency preparedness are similar in Sweden (93), China (100), France (89), and Japan (100). According to the 2019 Global Health Security Index, these four countries were all ranked as the most prepared countries in regard to the "Sufficient and Robust Health System to Treat the Sick and Protect Health Workers" indicator.
2. Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde believes that the country's coronavirus response has been pragmatic, not libertarian. Retrieved from https://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-coronavirus-leader-ann-linde-defends-approach-shrugs-off-far-right-embrace/.
3. France became the third European country to implement a lockdown. Retrieved from: https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/03/france-orders-lockdown-slow-covid-19-spread.
4. On March 16, 2020, France published a decree (No. 2020-260) regulating movement as part of the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Retrieved from: https://www.mwe.com/it/insights/covid-19-checklist-for-publicly-listed-companies-in-france/.
5. *Basic Policies for Novel Coronavirus Disease Control* in Japan has been revised 4 times, February 25, March 27, April 7, and April 16. Retrieved from: https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/newpage_00032.html.

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