Coronavirus Pandemic Response and Voter Choice: Evidence from Serbia and Croatia

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Disclosure statement: The authors have nothing to disclose.

Funding: Authors' research was supported by the ERC Starting Grant #714589 and internal funding from the University of Luxembourg's Faculty of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences.

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Does the public perception of governments' coronavirus pandemic responses actually make a difference to their electoral fortunes? In this research note, we answer that question by presenting the preliminary results of a survey of more than three thousand voters in Croatia and Serbia conducted on a dedicated mobile app and web platform directly preceding parliamentary elections that took place in these two countries during the summer of 2020. This survey was part of our larger project tracking political competition, public discourse, and conspiracy theories in Southeast Europe during the coronavirus pandemic. The preliminary findings presented in this research note demonstrate Croatian and Serbian voters were rationally retrospective and rewarded parties in power based on evaluations of their crisis management performance. We also find evidence of voters who have personally witnessed the health consequences of the coronavirus being more likely to support the parties in power. We believe this is evidence of the coronavirus pandemic increasing affected citizens' expectations of and trust in national governments where those governments respond strongly to the pandemic's first wave, as was the case in both Croatia and Serbia.

The coronavirus pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge for governments throughout the world. Policy makers have had to make difficult choices with immediate impact on people's lives and livelihoods. They have had to do that in the environment of heightened media attention, public pressure, and policy competition. However, does the public perception of power holders' policy choices on the coronavirus pandemic actually make a difference to their electoral fortunes? Many policy makers saw their popularity soar in the opening stages of the crisis, as the public came together and supported implemented measures. Since then, their approval ratings have moved with the ebb and flow of the virus and its economic consequences. Some policy makers, on the other hand, have seen little change in their approval ratings regardless of the devastating toll the pandemic took on their compatriots. President Trump's approval rating, for example, barely oscillated between 40% and 46% throughout the first eight months of the pandemic, although more than 200,000 Americans lost their lives and millions lost their jobs.

In this research note, we expose the connection between public perception of the policy makers' responses to the coronavirus pandemic and voters' electoral choices by analyzing the results of

a survey of more than three thousand respondents conducted in Serbia and Croatia directly preceding the parliamentary elections that took place in these two countries during the summer of 2020.[1] This survey was part of our larger project "Pandemic Politics: Voters, Parties, and Competition in Southeast Europe during the Coronavirus Crisis" examining the interaction between electoral politics and public health concerns in the region. The project tracks the evolution of governments' responses to the pandemic, the nature of political discourse and electoral competition, and the consequences of the crisis on public trust, as well as voters' ideological commitments and beliefs in conspiracies. Preliminary analysis presented in this research note provides convincing evidence of the coronavirus pandemic affecting voter choice in Croatia and Serbia in two ways. First, we demonstrate that, even when controlling for respondents' past electoral preferences, perceptions of governments' coronavirus pandemic performance had a significant impact on voters' intention to support the ruling parties. This held true not only for the past voters of the parties in power, but also for other voters, as well as those who previously abstained from voting – to such an extent that it could be contended that the Covid-19 pandemic swung the election in Croatia in favor of the incumbent government. We argue this is evidence of rational retrospective voting where voters reward the parties in power based on their performance (Fiorina, 1981). This is an important finding in light of the mixed record of retrospective voting literature in the post-communist context (cf. Lippényi, Maas and Jansen, 2013; Hernández and Kriesi, 2016), where incumbents have been generally found to be subject to "hyper-accountability" and have suffered electoral losses even after solid economic performance (Roberts, 2008; Jastramskis, Kuokštis and Baltrukevičius, 2021).

[1] Parliamentary elections also took place that summer in North Macedonia (15 July) and Montenegro (30 August). Due to difficulties with recruiting representative samples in these two countries, however, our study had to be limited to Croatia and Serbia.

What is equally important, however, we also find evidence of respondents' experience of coronavirus infection within their circle of family and friends boosting their intention to vote for the parties in power. This finding is in contrast with the literature on egotropic or blindly retrospective voting where voters affected by negative events are predisposed to vote against the incumbents regardless of whether these incumbents actually had any control over the events in question (e.g. Achen and Bartels, 2016). We believe this is an additional piece of evidence of the coronavirus pandemic increasing citizens' expectations of and trust in national governments (Esaiasson et al., 2020) where those governments respond strongly to the pandemic's first wave, as was the case in both Croatia and Serbia at the time. Voters who have personally witnessed the consequences of the coronavirus are more likely to support policy makers instituting strong measures mitigating the spread of the virus.

Voter choice and the pandemic as a natural disaster

We believe the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic can be best compared to natural disasters – at least from the perspective of countries like Croatia and Serbia where the advent of the pandemic was external and out of control of the local authorities. Pandemics do tend to be longer lasting than the usually short-term natural disasters like floods or earthquakes, and the coronavirus pandemic has proven to be longer lasting than many believed it to be. Nevertheless, due to the timing of the elections in the two countries – in the lull after the first wave, just a few months after the virus came to Europe – we believe this comparison to be useful and the insights from the literature on the effects of natural disasters on voter choice illuminating.

Research on the effects of natural disasters on voter choice usually comes in two forms. They can be distinguished based on whether scholars believe policy makers' responses to the disaster matter or not. The strand of literature that holds that the policy makers' response to the disaster

does not matter can be further split into those works which suggest disasters have a negative impact on incumbents' electoral fortunes due to voters' generally negative outlook caused by the adverse events, and those works which suggest disasters have a positive impact on incumbents' electoral fortunes due to the so-called "rally 'round the flag" effects. When it comes to the former, researchers have suggested that natural disasters beyond political control like earthquakes, floods, storms, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes or even just higher rainfall can damage electoral prospects of incumbents (Healy and Malhotra, 2010; Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Cole, Healy and Werker, 2012; Chang and Berdiev, 2015). Proponents of the "rally 'round the flag" hypothesis, on the other hand, have found that external threats like terrorism (Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014) and natural disasters like earthquakes (Boittin, Mo and Utych, 2020) can lead to an increase in popular support for incumbent governments, similar to the effects observed in the cases of international conflict (Mueller, 1973; Baker and Oneal, 2001). Such an effect has also been recently observed in Sweden in the context of the coronavirus pandemic (Esaiasson et al., 2020). Both of these schools of thought subscribe to the vision of voters as being blindly retrospective – basing their electoral choices on the (recent) past, but without much capacity to appropriately assign blame or reward.

In contrast to blind retrospection, another strand of scholarship on the effects of natural disasters on voter choice sees voters' decision making as rationally retrospective, i.e. directly impacted by the nature of the policy makers' response to the negative events. This literature sees natural disasters as prime testing environments where incumbents can show what they are capable of and reveal their (in)competence to the voters. Researchers have shown that voters can be quite capable of discerning incumbents' responsibility in crisis management across different levels of government, types of disasters, and geographic contexts. Arceneaux and Stein (2006) found voters in Texas punishing the local government after tropical storm flooding

if they believed the city was responsible for flood preparation. American voters in general have been found to reward the party of the president for delivering local disaster relief spending (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). Bechtel and Hainmüller (2011) found voters along the river Elbe in Germany rewarding the incumbent Social Democrats across two electoral cycles for their relief efforts after the 2002 flooding. And even in the Indian context, where voters were found to generally punish incumbents ostensibly for weather conditions outside their control, political power holders were shown to be able to limit electoral damage by responding vigorously to the crisis (Cole, Healy and Werker, 2012).

In spite of this cacophony of findings on the impact of natural disasters on voter choice, including those suggesting natural disasters have little to no effect (e.g. Bodet, Thomas and Tessier, 2016; Bovan, Banai and Pavela Banai, 2018), as well as the decidedly mixed record of research on retrospective voting in post-communist Eastern Europe (Jastramskis, Kuokštis and Baltrukevičius, 2021), we believe rational retrospection offers the most promise when it comes to understanding the effects of governments' initial responses to the coronavirus on their reelection chances. We hold this view primarily for one reason: the coronavirus pandemic has been the greatest public health crisis in living memory, with government policies having a clear, measurable, and relatively transparently tracked effect on human lives in terms of health and economic wellbeing. During the first wave of the crisis, voters did not only have their lives upended, but were also exposed to an unprecedented level of news coverage where policies of their governments were tracked in comparison to policies implemented in other countries and in comparison to casualty, infection, and economic figures. In other words, voters had plenty of information to draw their own conclusions about the links between government policies and their consequences. This leads us to propose two straightforward hypotheses.

First, we expect voters' satisfaction with the government's coronavirus policies to be positively related with their intention to vote for the ruling parties, even when controlling for their past electoral choices (H1). And second, we expect the voters' exposure to the pandemic's negative consequences to actually make them *more* likely to vote for the ruling parties, regardless of whether those negative consequences are related to health (H2a) or economic wellbeing (H2b). We propose this because we are cognizant of the local context in which the governments of both Croatia and Serbia implemented not only stringent measures of mediation of the social spread of the virus during its first wave, but also generous economic measures of social protection for workers and businesses affected by the pandemic. We believe voters who may have been the first-hand observers of the benefits of these proactive policies (or of the negative consequences of a lack of these proactive policies) rewarded the ruling parties, particularly since the governments of these two countries could hardly be blamed for the origin or the international spread of the virus that eventually brought it to the local population.

Setting the scene: Campaigns and elections during the pandemic in Serbia and Croatia

To say that the 2020 parliamentary elections in Serbia and Croatia were affected by the coronavirus pandemic would be an understatement. Most obviously, the pandemic altered the very dates of elections. In Serbia, elections were originally projected to take place in late April, but were postponed for 21 June due to the steep rise in infection cases. In Croatia, on the other hand, the elections were projected to take place sometime in the fall. However, due to fears of a stronger wave of infections projected to come after the summer, the government and the opposition agreed to dissolve the parliament on 18 May and the president called for the elections to take place on 5 July.

The coronavirus also shifted the dynamics of the two campaigns. Prior to the pandemic, Serbian politics was dominated by the clash between the ruling nationalist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Aleksandar Vučić and the parties of the opposition that were protesting against the government's rising authoritarianism, political violence, and control of the media. The opposition's campaign of peaceful demonstrations lasted for more than a year, but had to be suspended in March 2020 due to the pandemic. The largest opposition parties chose to boycott the parliamentary elections because of unfair campaign conditions and government control over leading media houses, leaving the SNS free to run against its junior coalition partner the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and a number of minor opposition parties and candidates. In Croatia, on the other hand, the elections were vigorously contested by the ruling center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the principal opposition coalition led by the Social Democrats (SDP), the rising rightist bloc around the newly formed Homeland Movement of Miroslav Škoro who finished third in the December 2019 presidential election, and a string of smaller opposition parties and coalitions covering the whole ideological spectrum. Unlike in Serbia, where the SNS was sailing smoothly to electoral victory, in Croatia the HDZ was actually predicted to lose the elections to the SDP by virtually all opinion polls. Just as in Serbia, however, the campaign was dominated by concerns raised by the pandemic, even though there was little open contestation over implemented policies among the main political players.

[Figure 1 about here]

In both countries, the governments reacted forcefully to the onset of the pandemic. As Figure 1 shows, the *Stringency Index* (Roser et al., 2020) measuring the severity of policy measures implemented in the two countries went up quickly in mid-March as both Croatia and Serbia went into strict lockdowns. The implemented measures were more stringent than those put in

place in most West European countries apart from measures implemented in West European countries that were hardest hit at the time. They resulted in a comparatively milder first wave of infections and deaths in Croatia and Serbia. The two governments also instituted generous social welfare programs in the form of tax payment delays, utility waivers, health insurance and pensions subsidies, unemployment benefits, and wage subsidies (50% of the minimum wage in Serbia and 100% of the minimum wage in Croatia) to mitigate the economic consequences for affected businesses and individuals (OECD, 2021; Shehaj, 2021).[2] With the disastrous images of the pandemic, particularly from neighboring Italy, dominating the news coverage, the implemented lockdown measures generally enjoyed public support, though with some crucial differences. In Serbia, the majority of those polled thought the national authorities were instigating panic (CMJP, 2020), whereas in Croatia national authorities were perceived as calm and competent (Nova TV, 2020). The dire economic consequences of the lockdowns, however, led to a relaxation of the measures in May and June and the resulting severe second and third waves of cases and deaths in the months after the elections.

Considering the boycott by most opposition parties in Serbia, it is unsurprising that the SNS-led coalition, officially called "Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children", won the election handily with more than 60% of the votes. This translated into 75% of the 250 parliamentary seats under proportional representation electoral rules where Serbia is one electoral district, voters vote for closed lists, and seats are allocated to lists crossing the newly lowered 3% threshold using the d'Hondt method. The SPS-led coalition came in second with 10% of the votes and 13% of the seats, with the rest of the National Assembly distributed among smaller parties, most of them representing ethnic minorities. The turnout was just shy of 49% – a drop of more than 7

[2] Detailed comparisons of the countries' economic policies can be found on the OECD Country Policy Tracker at https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/country-policy-tracker/.

percentage points in comparison to 2016 and the lowest election turnout in Serbia since the end of one party rule in 1990. We show the geographic distribution of electoral support for the SNS in Figure 2, with municipalities shaded according to votes for the SNS coalition as a proportion of the whole electorate in order to reflect vast regional differences in electoral turnout. As can be seen, the SNS had the lowest support in urban centers like Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, as well as regions with significant ethnic minority populations such as parts of Vojvodina and Sandžak.

[Figure 2 about here]

In Croatia, the HDZ-led coalition won a surprisingly decisive victory over the Social Democrats and their coalition partners. The media widely considered the electoral results to have been decisively affected by the government's competent response to the pandemic. The HDZ victory, however, came on a historically low turnout of just 46% – 6 percentage points less than in 2016. Just like Serbia, Croatia also has a system of proportional representation, but with ten relatively large electoral districts, 5% threshold, preferential voting, and the d'Hondt method of seat allocation. The HDZ won 37% of the votes cast, which translated into 45% of the seats, leaving the SDP-led coalition far behind on 25% of the votes and 29% of the seats. What is equally important for the HDZ and its pro-European Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, the ruling party managed to weather a strong challenge from the right in the form of the new Homeland Movement whose leadership was hoping to blackmail the HDZ into a post-election coalition and a resulting policy shift to the right, but managed to get only 11% of the votes and seats. Plenković instead formed a minority government with the support of representatives of ethnic minorities and several smaller liberal parties. What is particularly notable, the one HDZ candidate who earned the most preferential votes for his party was not Prime Minister Plenković, but the Minister of Health Vili Beroš. Beroš assumed office only in January 2020

and was largely unknown to the public prior to the pandemic, but earned plaudits for his leadership and crisis management in the months preceding the election. We show the geographic distribution of electoral support for the HDZ in Figure 3. As in the previous figure with the support for SNS, the municipalities are shaded according to votes for the HDZ coalition as a proportion of the whole electorate in order to reflect regional differences in electoral turnout. The regional pattern of support for the HDZ reflects the standard regional cleavages in Croatia, observed in all electoral contests held after the country's 1991-1995 War for Independence (Glaurdić and Vuković, 2016).

[Figure 3 about here]

Analysis results: Impact of the pandemic on voter choice

The analysis we present here relies on an online survey of voters in Croatia and Serbia conducted on a dedicated mobile app and web platform during the period of 12 days prior to the elections in Serbia (9–20 June) and 16 days prior to the elections in Croatia (19 June – 4 July). We provide the complete wording of the survey questions in the online appendix. As Figure 1 demonstrates, data collection in both countries took place during a lull in the spread of the coronavirus, on the eve of the second wave of the pandemic.[3] We identified 294 strata in Croatia and 400 in Serbia that were based on age, gender, education level, and region of residence. Our effort resulted in a sample of 2044 respondents in Croatia and 2261 in Serbia. After discarding respondents who did not fill out all relevant survey questions, as well as those who filled out the survey too fast, the final sample consists of 3179 respondents – 1580 from Serbia and 1599 from Croatia. We remove any remaining differences between the composition

[3] In both countries, we quota-sampled respondents with the help of Facebook's marketing API. According to www.internetworldstats.com, Facebook provides access to roughly half the population of these two countries. It also allows researchers to fine-tune ads to target specific demographic subpopulations, thus enabling them to produce representative national samples at much lower cost (Zhang et al., 2020).

of the samples and the populations of the two countries by applying survey weights (Ansolabehere and Rivers, 2013) in all models.[4]

In figures 4 and 5, we use alluvial diagrams to show the evolution of our respondents' voting choices and intentions between 2016 and 2020. Due to somewhat shifting electoral options in the two elections, we split voters based on their 2016 votes into four groups: 1) those who voted for the coalition of the main government party (i.e. HDZ or SNS); 2) those who voted for the second largest coalition (in Croatia this was the opposition SDP, and in Serbia the SPS which was in government with the SNS); 3) those who voted for other options; and 4) those who abstained from voting or cast an invalid vote. Particularly notable are the stability of the HDZ and the SNS voting blocs, the collapse of the SDP electorate in Croatia in 2020, and the dominant decision of opposition voters in Serbia to opt for a boycott.

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

We expose the determinants of voter choice in a string of four logistic regression models where our dependent variable is always the vote for the dominant government party commonly perceived as being in charge of policies related to the coronavirus. In the Croatian case, that is the HDZ; and in the Serbian case, the SNS. These parties share their center-right, broadly nationalist, ideological orientation, leading us to pool all respondents into one large sample with country dummies as controls. We also run the same analyses on separate country samples as a robustness check, but achieve substantively very similar results that are somewhat weaker

[4] Survey weights were calculated using iterative proportional fitting, better known as raking. They are based on the population distributions of age, gender, education, and the 2016 election results. Information on these distributions was obtained from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. The highest assigned weight in the analyses was 4 (with a mean of 1). This makes the weights used here comparable to those used in other surveys like the European Social Survey.

for Croatia. We report those results in the online appendix, where we also report the descriptives for all variables in the pooled and the separate country samples. Table 1 shows the results of our analysis for all four models.

[Table 1 about here]

Model 1 is essentially the baseline capturing voters' electoral choices in the immediately preceding parliamentary elections in 2016. As can be seen from Table 1, the baseline model coefficients are all in the expected direction and they remain rather stable across the remaining three models. In Model 2, we include a battery of socio-demographic (gender, age, education, income, employment status, ethnicity), as well as political variables. We control for political interest, and notably for what we see as the two dominant ideological cleavages in the region: the cleavage between the cosmopolitan and nationalist conceptions of society, and the cleavage between the liberal and socialist conceptions of economy. Both of these cleavages are rooted in the traumas associated with the violent end of former Yugoslavia and its socialist system. Our variables *Nationalism* and *Socialism* were thus created by averaging respondents' answers on a Likert-scale to a set of five policy statements for each dimension that can be consulted in the appendix. As the Model 2 results show, controlling for the 2016 electoral choice, vote intention for the government status quo (i.e. the center-right HDZ or SNS) was more likely among women, nationalists, and those who had a higher interest in politics. It was less likely among the highly educated and those subscribing to socialist economic policies. Considering the ideological orientation of the two ruling parties, this is unsurprising: the pandemic resulted in an ideological coalescing around the HDZ in Croatia and the SNS in Serbia.

In Model 3, we introduce the set of four variables we use to capture respondents' views of the coronavirus crisis: 1) *Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic*; 2) *Know someone who is infected*; 3) *Personal economic situation got worse due to the pandemic*; and 4) *Following pandemic news*. For the first of these variables, we asked respondents to grade the government's response from 0 (worst) to 10 (best). What needs to be noted is that this is a general question about the governments' response, i.e. it does not distinguish between public health and economic measures. Respondents gave the government an average grade of 5.53 in Croatia and 5.33 in Serbia. The second and third variable are binary variables capturing whether respondents personally knew someone who had tested positive for the coronavirus (or had themselves tested positive) and whether their personal economic situation worsened due to the pandemic. We should note that 10% of respondents (5% in Croatia and 14% in Serbia) personally knew someone who had tested positive (a reasonable figure, considering the number of official cases at the time) and 53% of respondents believed their personal economic situation worsened. Finally, the fourth variable captures how closely respondents were following the news related to the coronavirus pandemic from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("in great detail").

As Model 3 results show, controlling for their electoral choices in 2016, voters who positively evaluated government response to the pandemic were more likely to intend to vote for the government. The pandemic was a test of the government's competence and the voters retrospectively rewarded or punished the ruling parties based on how they believed the parties performed. This finding is in line with our expectations, as outlined above (H1). Our second expectation was that the voters' exposure to the pandemic's negative health (H2a) and economic (H2b) consequences would make them more likely to intend to vote for the ruling parties. This has been only partially confirmed. As expected, voters' exposure to the health consequences did make them more likely to intend to vote for the parties in power, but the

evaluation of their personal economic situation did not have an impact.[5] This could be a function of the economic measures not taking full effect by the time of the elections, or of voters perceiving the health consequences of the coronavirus much more acutely than its economic repercussions. It could also be seen as another testament of the mixed record of economic retrospective voting in post-communist Eastern Europe (Jastramskis, Kuokštis and Baltrukevičius, 2021). The importance of economic considerations has been found to be particularly limited in the context of Southeast Europe (Glaurdić and Vuković, 2016) and the finding of our analysis here fits that pattern.

What is particularly important, all of our findings are robust to the inclusion of socio-demographic and political controls in the composite Model 4. In other words, voter choice was in part based on the government's response to and on people's personal experiences of the pandemic. Voters who approved of the government's response and who experienced the healthcare side of the pandemic personally or through family and friends who got sick rewarded the government. What also needs to be noted here is that the electoral benefits of good pandemic performance for the two governments were present among most voters, i.e. regardless of who they voted for in 2016. Interactions between 2016 voter choice and *Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic* (not shown here) showed no real differences among our four groups of voters. Additional testing at low (i.e. one standard deviation below the mean) and high (one standard deviation above the mean) levels of satisfaction with the government response confirmed this finding, with one caveat: the difference between voting propensities for the government among the 2016 supporters of the second largest coalition were not statistically significant. In Figure 6, we show the predicted

[5] Here it should be noted that the variable *Know someone who is infected* loses significance in the Croatian sample, likely due to low figures of respondents who actually knew someone with a coronavirus infection.

probabilities of supporting the government in 2020 among respondents who either had low or high level of satisfaction with the government response, separated into four aforementioned 2016 groups of voters. As can be seen, positive evaluation of government response resulted in across the board electoral benefits for the government, though the overlapping confidence intervals for the second largest coalition (suggesting the aforementioned lack of statistical significance of their difference) need to be noted. To be more precise, the predicted probability that a government coalition voter from 2016 would support the government coalition again goes from 60% for those who had a low level of satisfaction with the government's response to the pandemic (i.e. one standard deviation below the mean) to 87.3% for those who had a high level of satisfaction (one standard deviation above the mean). For 2016 voters of the second largest coalition, those percentages are 1.6% and 5.9%; for the voters of other political options, they are 2.9% and 10.6% (i.e. more than tripled); and for the voters who abstained or cast an invalid vote in 2016, they are 7.7% and 15.9% (more than doubled). These are substantively significant results that explain on which strata of the electorate did the policies of the government have a particularly strong effect: government supporters, vote abstainers, and voters of third parties.

[Figure 6 about here]

To make these figures even more concrete, we present the predicted support for the parties in power in the 2020 elections (as a proportion of the whole electorate) based on the level of satisfaction with their pandemic response in Figure 7. As can be seen, this relationship is stronger for Serbia than it is for Croatia, but it is statistically significant for both countries. The weaker findings in Croatia likely had something to do with the more competitive nature of the elections. Popularity of SNS pandemic measures probably would not have made much of a difference to its victory in Serbia, considering the opposition boycott. However, in Croatia the

HDZ managed to just squeeze by and form a minority government with the votes of the ethnic minority representatives and members of smaller liberal parties. With just a marginal decrease in popular support for its pandemic response, this likely would have been impossible. We believe its electoral victory was critically determined by the voters' satisfaction with its coronavirus policies, though the lower turnout (also caused by the pandemic) likely also helped considering the fact that the HDZ voters are more disciplined than are the voters of the center-left.

[Figure 7 about here]

Conclusions

In this research note, we explored the relationship between public perceptions of governments' responses to the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic and the incumbents' electoral prospects. We side with those who see the pandemic as the perfect test of the political power holders' capacity to govern. In the eyes of Croatian and Serbian voters, governments' performance during the first wave of the pandemic had a direct and very strong impact on their electoral choices. Those who approved of the governments' policies, regardless of their own voting history or ideological commitments, were more inclined to support the parties in power. Additionally, those who had firsthand experience of the health consequences of the virus through infections in the immediate circle of family or friends were also more inclined to support the governing status quo, likely due to the two governments' proactive efforts at coronavirus spread mitigation. In some ways, our findings could be seen as good news in these troubling times and a confirmation of the classic proposition by V.O. Key (1966) that the electorates can be broadly understood as responsible. Croatian and Serbian voters electorally rewarded (or punished) incumbents based on their evaluations of the governments' crisis management of the most challenging public health disaster in a century. For some, this may be

an unexpected finding, considering the mixed results of the literature on retrospective voting in post-communist Eastern Europe. If democratic societies are to come out of this pandemic with at least the foundations of their representative institutions unscathed, it is imperative that this system of electoral accountability functions, though it is highly likely that the dynamics of electoral accountability during the subsequent waves of the pandemic worked differently. This is something that deserves further attention and we plan to address it within our larger project. More broadly, our findings also suggest that the discussion of retrospective voting in post-communist Eastern Europe should be broadened to include non-economic policies, particularly in areas such as public health that have been placed under tremendous strain in the region even before the coronavirus pandemic.

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Table 1. Determinants of 2020 vote for the principal government coalition

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
2016 vote choice												
Government coalition (ref. cat.)												
Second largest coalition	-4.75	0.47	0.000	-4.73	0.48	0.000	-4.83	0.44	0.000	-4.81	0.44	0.000
Other party coalitions	-4.19	0.26	0.000	-4.23	0.27	0.000	-4.16	0.27	0.000	-4.18	0.27	0.000
Abstain / invalid vote	-3.55	0.18	0.000	-3.52	0.19	0.000	-3.53	0.19	0.000	-3.51	0.20	0.000
Gender				0.32	0.16	0.040				0.28	0.17	0.094
Age				0.00	0.01	0.961				0.00	0.01	0.699
Income				0.01	0.03	0.683				0.03	0.03	0.384
Lower education (ref. cat.)												
Middle education				-0.06	0.18	0.763				-0.04	0.19	0.818
Higher education				-0.78	0.21	0.000				-0.76	0.21	0.000
Unemployed				-0.11	0.21	0.605				-0.12	0.22	0.584
Ethnic minority				0.19	0.26	0.457				0.19	0.25	0.449
Nationalism				0.36	0.11	0.001				0.30	0.11	0.008
Socialism				-0.30	0.13	0.019				-0.25	0.13	0.057
Political interest				0.08	0.02	0.002				0.07	0.03	0.006
Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic							0.20	0.03	0.000	0.20	0.03	0.000
Know someone who is infected							0.56	0.26	0.032	0.54	0.27	0.044
Personal economic situation got worse due to the pandemic							-0.17	0.17	0.312	-0.13	0.17	0.455
Following pandemic news							0.01	0.03	0.694	0.00	0.03	0.911
Intercept	1.13	0.18	0.000	0.33	0.64	0.609	-0.10	0.31	0.740	-0.90	0.71	0.204
Country controls		Yes			Yes			Yes			Yes	
N		3179			3179			3179			3179	
Pseudo R^2		42.11%			44.24%			45.86%			47.53%	

Note: Logistic regression throughout.

Figure 1. Evolution of the coronavirus pandemic and elections in Croatia and Serbia

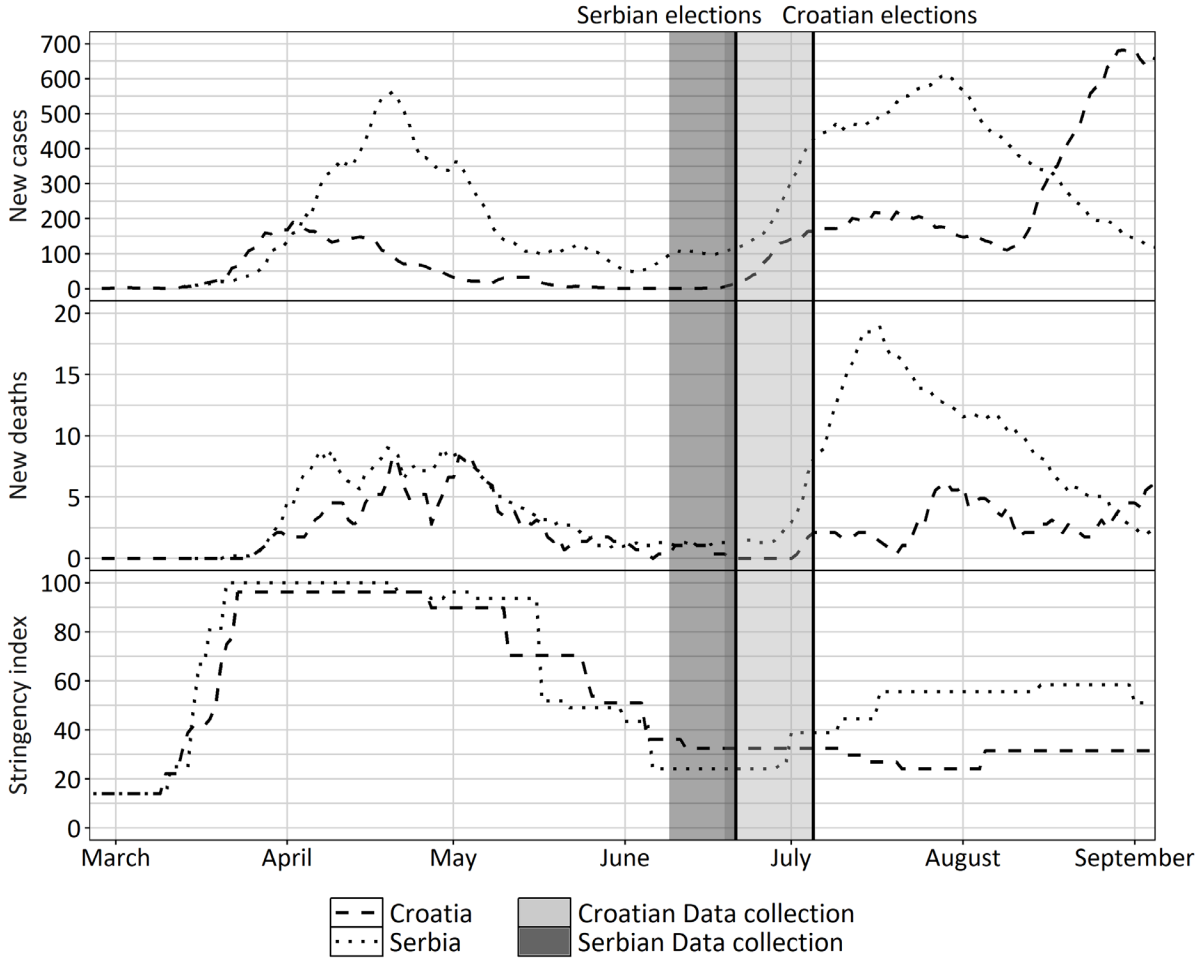
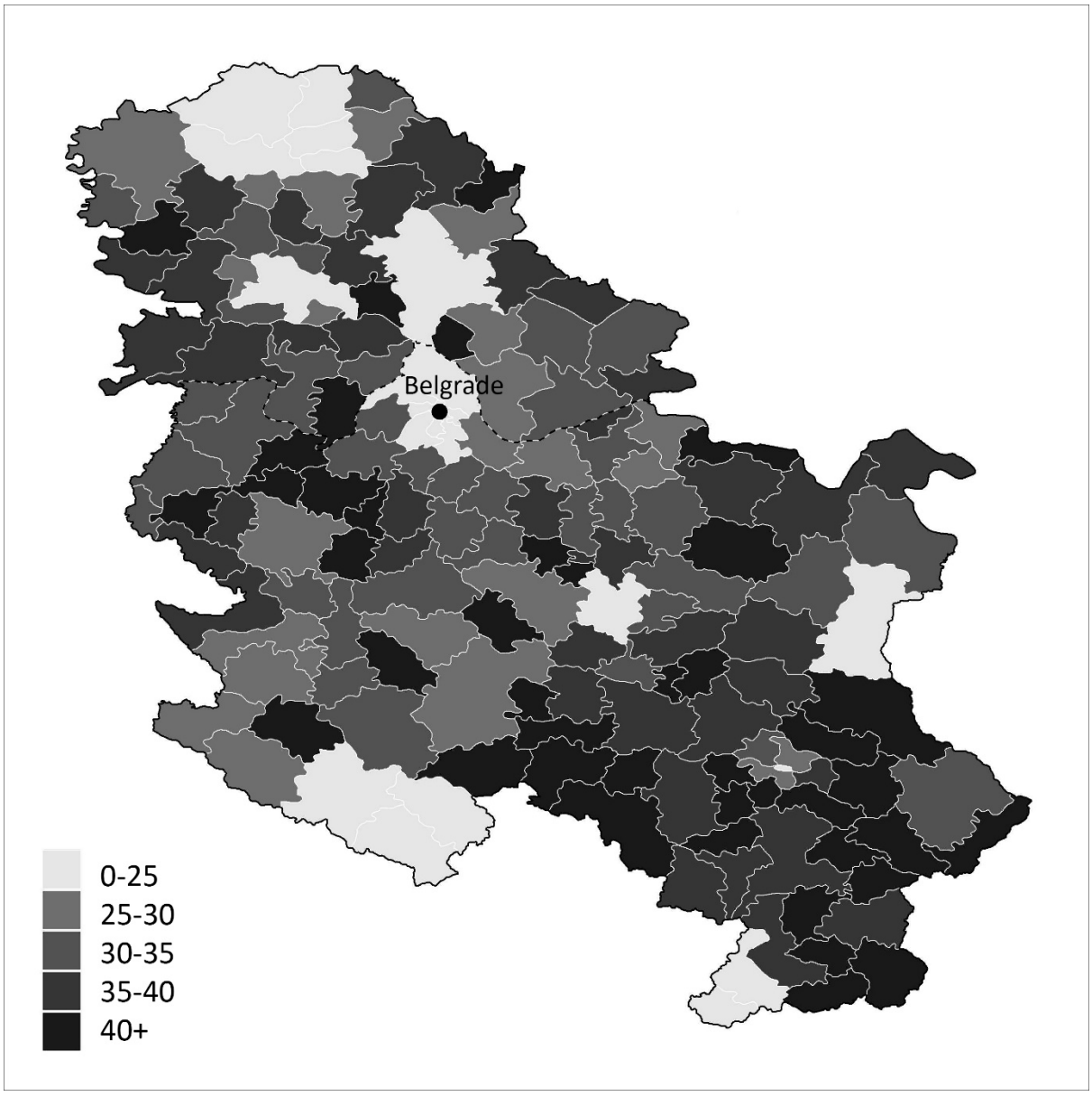


Figure 2. Support for SNS as percentage of electorate by municipality



Note: Results of elections among Serbian citizens in Kosovo not shown.

Figure 3. Support for HDZ as percentage of electorate by municipality

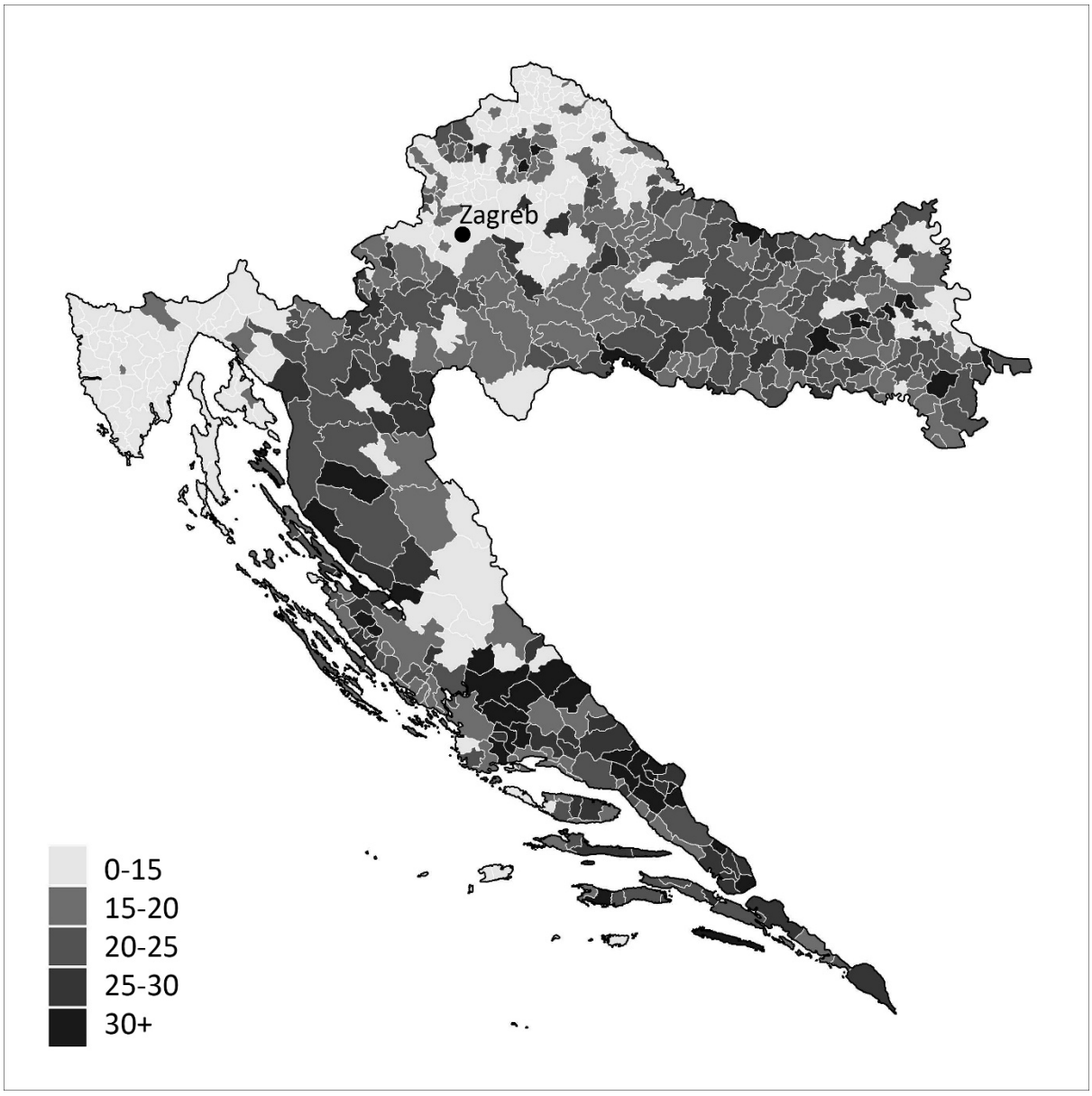


Figure 4. Evolution of respondents' voting choices between 2016 and 2020 in Serbia

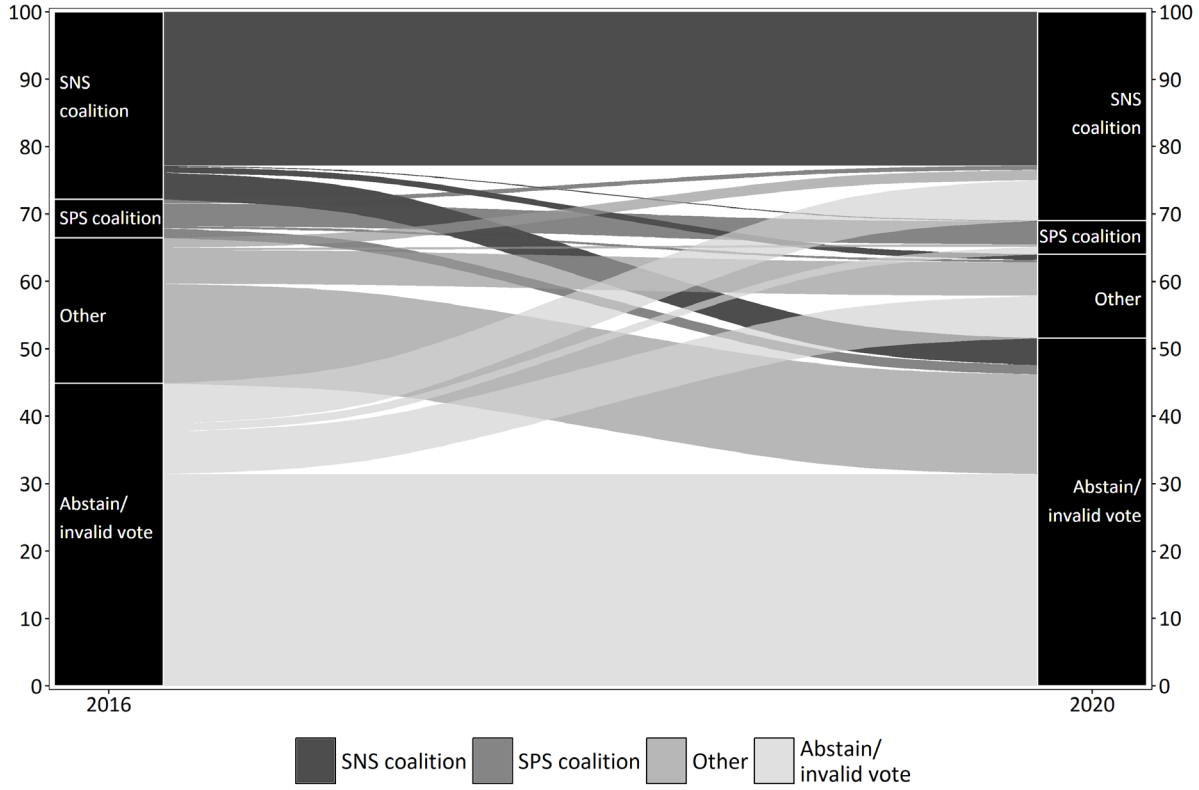


Figure 5. Evolution of respondents' voting choices between 2016 and 2020 in Croatia

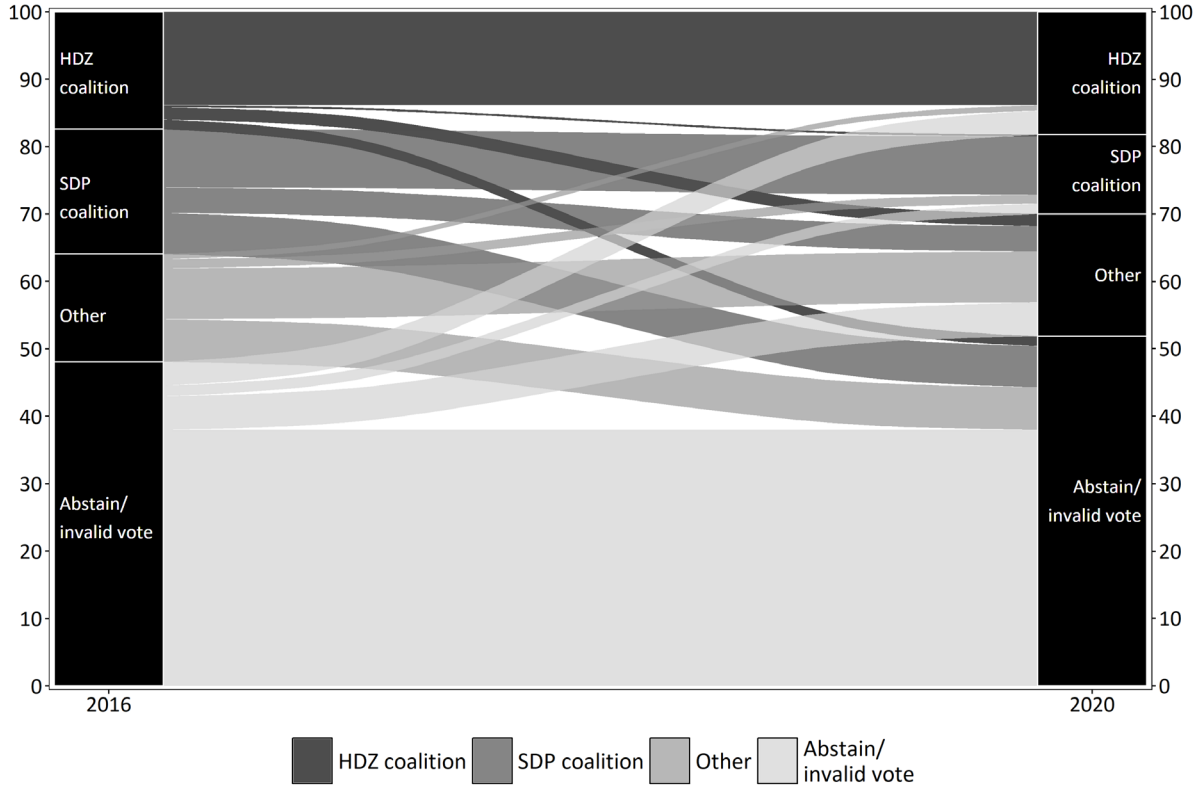


Figure 6. Influence of satisfaction with government response to the pandemic on the likelihood of vote for the government coalition

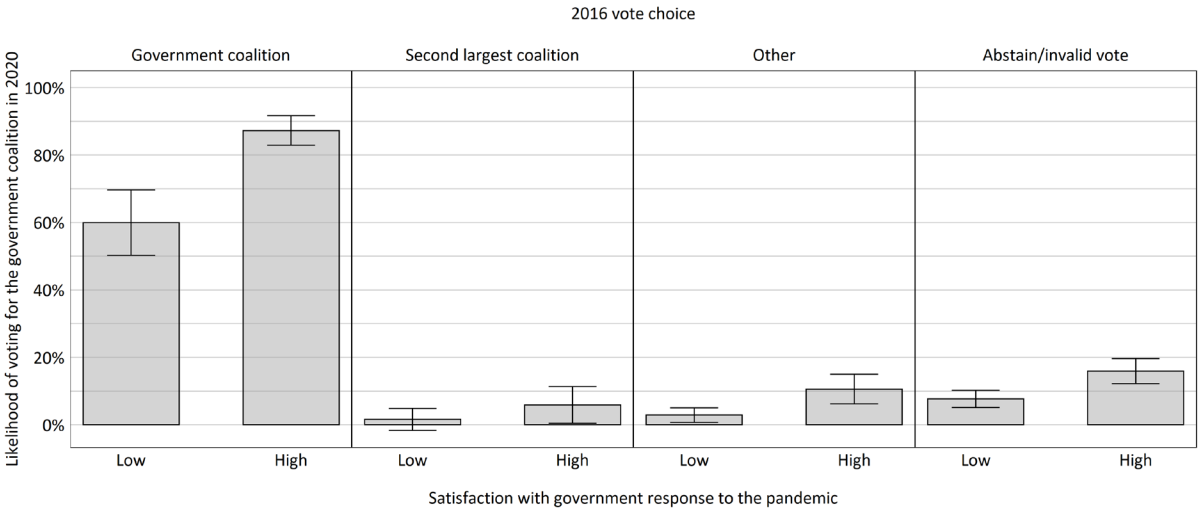


Figure 7. Predicted support for the government based on satisfaction with government response to the pandemic

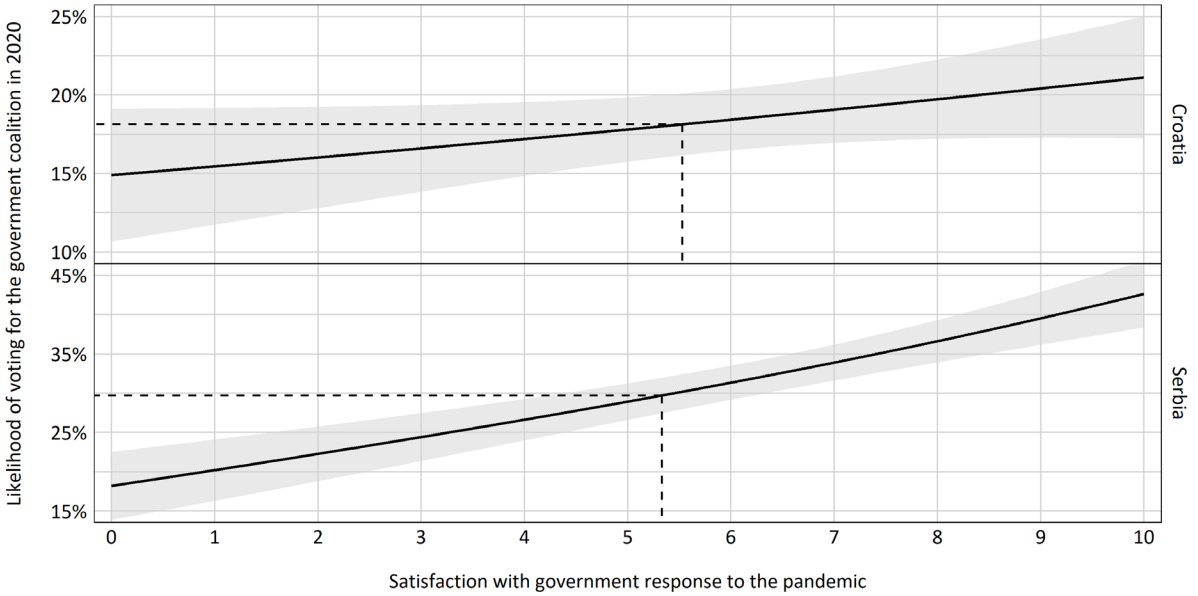


Table A1. Variable descriptives in the pooled and country samples

	Pooled Sample				Croatian Sample				Serbian Sample			
	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Vote for the dominant government party	0.25	0.43	0	1	0.18	0.39	0	1	0.31	0.46	0	1
2016 vote choice												
Government coalition	0.23	0.42	0	1	0.18	0.38	0	1	0.28	0.45	0	1
Second largest coalition	0.12	0.32	0	1	0.19	0.39	0	1	0.06	0.23	0	1
Other party coalitions	0.19	0.39	0	1	0.16	0.37	0	1	0.22	0.41	0	1
Abstain / invalid vote	0.46	0.50	0	1	0.48	0.50	0	1	0.45	0.50	0	1
Gender	0.50	0.50	0	1	1.48	0.50	1	2	1.51	0.50	1	2
Age	45.60	14.94	18	89	45.66	15.01	18	79	45.55	14.88	18	89
Income	5.29	2.76	1	10	5.59	2.52	1	10	5.03	2.92	1	10
Lower education	0.32	0.47	0	1	0.30	0.46	0	1	0.33	0.47	0	1
Middle education	0.50	0.50	0	1	0.50	0.50	0	1	0.51	0.50	0	1
Higher education	0.18	0.38	0	1	0.20	0.40	0	1	0.16	0.37	0	1
Unemployed	0.19	0.39	0	1	0.13	0.34	0	1	0.23	0.42	0	1
Ethnic minority	0.13	0.34	0	1	0.14	0.35	0	1	0.13	0.33	0	1
Nationalism	2.84	0.79	1	5	2.74	0.79	1	5	2.92	0.79	1	5
Socialism	3.74	0.64	1	5	3.61	0.67	1	5	3.85	0.59	1	5
Political interest	5.31	3.30	0	10	5.17	3.46	0	10	5.43	3.17	0	10
Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic	5.39	3.21	0	10	5.53	2.71	0	10	5.28	3.57	0	10
Know someone who is infected	0.10	0.30	0	1	0.05	0.23	0	1	0.14	0.35	0	1
Personal economic situation got worse due to the pandemic	0.53	0.50	0	1	0.52	0.50	0	1	0.53	0.50	0	1
Following pandemic news	6.94	2.92	0	10	6.91	2.87	0	10	6.97	2.96	0	10
Croatia	0.45	0.50	0	1								
Serbia	0.55	0.50	0	1								

Table A2. Determinants of 2020 vote for the principal government coalition in Croatia

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
2016 vote choice												
Government coalition (ref. cat.)												
Second largest coalition	-7.82	1.03	0.000	-8.12	1.06	0.000	-7.80	1.03	0.000	-8.08	1.06	0.000
Other party coalitions	-4.28	0.49	0.000	-4.38	0.51	0.000	-4.34	0.50	0.000	-4.37	0.51	0.000
Abstain / invalid vote	-3.85	0.33	0.000	-3.80	0.32	0.000	-3.85	0.33	0.000	-3.78	0.33	0.000
Gender				-0.05	0.29	0.863				-0.02	0.29	0.956
Age				0.02	0.01	0.052				0.02	0.01	0.036
Income				0.09	0.06	0.179				0.08	0.06	0.204
Lower education (ref. cat.)												
Middle education				0.11	0.31	0.724				0.07	0.32	0.832
Higher education				-1.34	0.39	0.001				-1.32	0.38	0.001
Unemployed				0.02	0.46	0.974				0.10	0.48	0.835
Ethnic minority				0.17	0.44	0.700				0.15	0.42	0.718
Nationalism				0.30	0.19	0.103				0.29	0.19	0.132
Socialism				-0.24	0.23	0.303				-0.21	0.23	0.363
Political interest				0.09	0.04	0.026				0.09	0.05	0.055
Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic							0.09	0.05	0.040	0.10	0.05	0.048
Know someone who is infected							0.55	0.48	0.260	0.35	0.49	0.476
Personal economic situation got worse due to the pandemic							-0.36	0.31	0.253	-0.24	0.31	0.432
Following pandemic news							0.02	0.06	0.693	-0.02	0.06	0.709
Intercept	1.34	0.25	0.000	-0.47	1.16	0.688	0.79	0.57	0.162	-0.90	1.16	0.439
N		1599			1599			1599			1599	
Pseudo R^2		47.26%			51.32%			48.28%			51.96%	

Note: Logistic regression throughout.

Table A3. Determinants of 2020 vote for the principal government coalition in Serbia

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
2016 vote choice												
Government coalition (ref. cat.)												
Second largest coalition	-3.62	0.52	0.000	-3.59	0.53	0.000	-3.79	0.49	0.000	-3.74	0.48	0.000
Other party coalitions	-4.11	0.29	0.000	-4.15	0.30	0.000	-4.03	0.31	0.000	-4.07	0.31	0.000
Abstain / invalid vote	-3.36	0.22	0.000	-3.35	0.23	0.000	-3.32	0.22	0.000	-3.33	0.23	0.000
Gender				0.49	0.19	0.009				0.38	0.20	0.061
Age				-0.01	0.01	0.159				-0.01	0.01	0.284
Income				-0.01	0.04	0.856				0.02	0.04	0.623
Lower education (ref. cat.)												
Middle education				-0.18	0.23	0.431				-0.09	0.24	0.701
Higher education				-0.49	0.23	0.031				-0.45	0.23	0.050
Unemployed				-0.14	0.23	0.529				-0.23	0.23	0.329
Ethnic minority				0.22	0.30	0.455				0.26	0.30	0.393
Nationalism				0.41	0.13	0.001				0.33	0.13	0.013
Socialism				-0.31	0.16	0.057				-0.26	0.17	0.126
Political interest				0.07	0.03	0.023				0.06	0.03	0.037
Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic							0.23	0.03	0.000	0.22	0.03	0.000
Know someone who is infected							0.55	0.28	0.050	0.56	0.28	0.048
Personal economic situation got worse due to the pandemic							-0.07	0.19	0.720	-0.09	0.20	0.664
Following pandemic news							0.01	0.03	0.721	0.01	0.04	0.840
Intercept	1.51	0.18	0.000	1.02	0.77	0.185	0.01	0.32	0.969	-0.42	0.86	0.626
N		1580			1580			1580			1580	
Pseudo R^2		38.04%			40.39%			44.11%			45.62%	

Note: Logistic regression throughout.

Appendix B

Below are the survey questions used in the analyses in the order they were shown to respondents. Please note that all questions were translated into Croatian and Serbian. Prior to beginning the survey, respondents were able to choose their preferred language.

What is your gender?	
Response options	
1	Male
2	Female

In what year were you born?	
*Dropdown with all years in between the following years	
1900	1900
2002	2002

What is the highest level of educational degree you completed?	
Response options	
1:	None
2:	Completed elementary school
3:	Vocational school degree
4:	Secondary school degree, 4 years (this includes both academic university preparatory education and the advanced technical schools which also allowed entrance to either universities or higher educational schools)
5:	Third level school – 2 years after secondary
6:	University education
7:	Doctoral degree

If you add up your income from all revenue sources, which category would accurately reflect your household's monthly total net income?	
Response options	
1	[decile 1]
2	[decile 2]
3	[decile 3]
4	[decile 4]
5	[decile 5]
6	[decile 6]
7	[decile 7]
8	[decile 8]
9	[decile 9]
10	[decile 10]
[decile 1]: For respondents from Croatia: "Less than 2000 Kuna"; For respondents from Serbia: "Less than 20,000 Dinar"	
[decile 2]: For respondents from Croatia: "Between 2000 and 3200 Kuna"; For respondents from Serbia: "Between 20,000 and 30,000 Dinar"	
[decile 3]: For respondents from Croatia: "Between 3200 and 4400 Kuna"; For respondents from Serbia: "Between 30,000 and 40,000 Dinar"	
[decile 4]: For respondents from Croatia: "Between 4400 and 5600 Kuna"; For respondents from Serbia: "Between 40,000 and 50,000 Dinar"	
[decile 5]:	

For respondents from Croatia: “Between 5600 and 6800 Kuna”; For respondents from Serbia: “Between 50,000 and 60,000 Dinar”
[decile 6]: For respondents from Croatia: “Between 6800 and 8000 Kuna”; For respondents from Serbia: “Between 60,000 and 70,000 Dinar”
[decile 7]: For respondents from Croatia: “Between 8000 and 9200 Kuna”; For respondents from Serbia: “Between 70,000 and 80,000 Dinar”
[decile 8]: For respondents from Croatia: “Between 9200 and 10,400 Kuna”; For respondents from Serbia: “Between 80,000 and 90,000 Dinar”
[decile 9]: For respondents from Croatia: “Between 10,400 and 11,600 Kuna”; For respondents from Serbia: “Between 90,000 and 100,000 Dinar”
[decile 10]: For respondents from Croatia: “More than 11,600 Kuna”; For respondents from Serbia: “More than 100,000 Dinar”

Which of the following categories best fits your current employment situation?	
Response options	(Randomize order)
1:	Full time employed
2:	Part-time employed
3:	Unemployed
4:	Retired, pensioner
5:	Stay-at-home spouse
6:	Pupil, student
7:	Sick, disabled
8:	Self-employed

In the country where you are currently living, do you consider yourself as belonging to an ethnic minority?	
Response options	
1:	Yes
2:	No

To what extent are you interested in politics in general? Give a value on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you are not interested in politics at all, and 10 means you are very interested in politics. Intermediate values allow you to nuance your answer.	
Response options	
0:	0: Not interested at all
1:	1
2:	2
3:	3
4:	4
5:	5
6:	6
7:	7
8:	8
9:	9
10:	10: Very interested

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?	
Statements	(Randomize order)
1:	Important sectors of the economy should be nationalized
2:	The government should reduce the differences in income

3:	The government should guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living	
4:	People should receive unemployment benefits until they find a new job	
5:	Public services would work better if they were privatized	
Response options		
1:	Completely disagree	
2:	Disagree	
3:	Neither agree nor disagree	
4:	Agree	
5:	Completely agree	

To what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?		
Statements		(Randomize order)
1:	Men can feel completely safe only when the majority belong to his nation(ality).	
2:	Among nations, it is possible to create cooperation, but not full trust.	
3:	I would rather be a citizen of this country than of any other country in the world	
4:	It is important that my country performs better than other countries	
5:	It is best that villages, towns, and cities should be composed of only one nationality.	
Response options		
1:	Completely disagree	
2:	Disagree	
3:	Neither agree nor disagree	
4:	Agree	
5:	Completely agree	

Asked only in Croatia		
In September 2016, you could vote for the Croatian Parliament. For which party did you vote back then?		
1:	HDZ Coalition (HDZ, HSLS, HDS, Hrast)	(Randomize order)
2:	People's Coalition (SDP, HNS, HSU, HSS)	(Randomize order)
3:	Bridge of Independent Lists	(Randomize order)
4:	The Only Option Coalition (Živi zid, UF, PH, AM, AD)	(Randomize order)
5:	For Prime Minister Coalition (BM 365, Reformisti, Novi val, HSS HR, BUZ)	(Randomize order)
6:	Even Stronger Istria Coalition (IDS, PGS, RI)	(Randomize order)
7:	Turn Croatia Around Coalition (Pametno, Za Grad)	(Randomize order)
8:	HDSSB Coalition (HDSSB, HKS)	(Randomize order)
95:	Other: [open text field]	(Fixed position)
96:	I casted a blank vote	(Fixed position)
97:	I didn't vote	(Fixed position)
98:	I don't want to answer	(Fixed position)

Asked only in Serbia		
In October 2016, you could vote for the National Assembly. For which party did you vote back then?		
1:	SNS	(Randomize order)
2:	SPS-JS-ZS	(Randomize order)
3:	SRS	(Randomize order)
4:	DJB	(Randomize order)
5:	DS	(Randomize order)
6:	Dveri-DSS	(Randomize order)

7:	SDS-LDP-LSV	(Randomize order)
8:	VMSZ-VMDP	(Randomize order)
95:	Other: [open text field]	(Fixed position)
96:	I casted a blank vote	(Fixed position)
97:	I didn't vote	(Fixed position)
98:	I don't want to answer	(Fixed position)

Asked only in Croatia		
In the elections for the Croatian Parliament on 5 July, which of the following lists will you vote for?		
1:	HDZ	(Randomize order)
2:	Restart Coalition (SDP, HSS, HSU, GLAS, SNAGA)	(Randomize order)
3:	Homeland Movement of Miroslav Škoro	(Randomize order)
4:	Most	(Randomize order)
5:	Koalicija Možemo! (Zagreb je naš, Nova ljevica, OraH)	(Randomize order)
6:	Pametno/Fokus	(Randomize order)
7:	Stranka Ivana Pernara	(Randomize order)
8:	Stranka s imenom i prezimenom	(Randomize order)
9:	Živi zid/Promijenimo Hrvatsku	(Randomize order)
10:	HNS	(Randomize order)
11:	HSLS	(Randomize order)
12:	BM365	(Randomize order)
13:	HDSSB	(Randomize order)
14:	IDS	(Randomize order)
15:	SDSS	(Randomize order)
95:	Other	(Fixed position)
96:	I will cast a blank vote	(Fixed position)
97:	I will not vote	(Fixed position)
98:	I don't want to answer	(Fixed position)

Asked only in Serbia		
In the elections for the National Assembly on 21 June, which of the following lists will you vote for?		
1:	“Aleksandar Vučić – za našu decu”	(Randomize order)
2:	Socijalistička partija Srbije – Jedinstvena Srbija	(Randomize order)
3:	Srpska radikalna stranka	(Randomize order)
4:	Savez vojvođanskih Mađara	(Randomize order)
5:	Srpski patriotski savez	(Randomize order)
6:	Pokret obnove Kraljevine Srbije	(Randomize order)
7:	Ujedinjena demokratska Srbija	(Randomize order)
8:	Metla 2020	(Randomize order)
95:	Other	(Fixed position)
96:	I will cast a blank vote	(Fixed position)
97:	I will not vote	(Fixed position)
98:	I don't want to answer	(Fixed position)

How closely do you follow the Corona crisis?	
Response options	
0:	I do not follow the Corona crisis at all
1:	
2:	
3:	
4:	

5:	
6:	
7:	
8:	
9:	
10:	I follow the Corona crisis very closely

To which extent has the Corona Crisis affected you personally?	
Statements	(Randomize order)
1:	You have been officially diagnosed with the Corona virus
2:	Someone of your close family or friends has been diagnosed with the Corona virus
3:	Your economic situation has gotten worse due to the Corona Crisis
Response options	
1:	Yes
0:	No

What do you think of the response to the Corona crisis of the national government?	
Response options	
0:	They are doing a very poor job of handling the crisis
1:	
2:	
3:	
4:	
5:	
6:	
7:	
8:	
9:	
10:	They are doing a very good job of handling the crisis
11:	Don’t know/Cannot judge