

Institutional trust and crisis management in high-trust societies

Rallies around the Nordic flags during the Covid-19 pandemic

Bengt Johansson,^I Jacob Sohlberg,^{II} & Peter Esaiasson^{II}

^IDepartment of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

^{II}Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

The so-called rally-around-the-flag effect, more succinctly known as the rally effect, has been prominently discussed in both academic and public discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rally effect entails spikes in support for and trust in political leaders, governments, and state agencies during a crisis. This chapter assesses the validity of this theory in the Nordics during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. By studying people's support for the government, institutional trust, and belief in the government's strategy, we identify a wide range of evident rally effects that occurred toward the beginning of the first wave of Covid-19, creating opportunities for successful instances of crisis communication. Overall, our results show similar basic patterns in the relationship between the citizens and the state across the Nordic countries, despite the different pandemic strategies adopted among them.

Keywords: rally effects, trust, crisis communication, crisis management, Nordic countries

Introduction

One of the most pronounced effects of the Covid-19 crisis was the early spike in support for and trust in governments and state agencies – the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect (Bol et al., 2021; De Vries et al., 2020; Van Aelst, 2021).

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The concept of the rally effect was introduced in Mueller's (1973) research on American foreign policies based on the observed spike in support for sitting presidents during international conflicts (Mueller, 1973); however, research suggests that this phenomenon is evident amid other types of crises as well (Dinesen & Jæger, 2013; Woods, 2011). Furthermore, the rally effect often extends past heads of state to include state agencies and government strategies. For example, various government agencies garnered significant increases in trust during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic (Esaiaasson et al., 2021; Ihlen et al., 2022).

Of course, while they may comprise substantial increases in support, rally effects are not permanent. Previous research indicates that early rises in support tend to ultimately result in similarly rapid declines after the most critical phase of the crisis has passed (Mueller, 1973). While there are some examples of long-lasting rally effects, they generally fade away (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003); in fact, rally effects can be thought of as "perturbation effects", as attitudes ultimately return to their pre-crisis baseline figures (Sniderman et al., 2019). There are several potential explanations for why this type of rise in support is temporary, with eventual evaluations of crisis-management performance being one of the most prominent (Johansson, Sohlberg et al., 2021; Van Aelst, 2021).

Rally effects can have a direct impact on crisis management, as institutional trust strongly influences the behaviour – and, in turn, the cooperation – of ordinary citizens (Christiansen & Lagreid, 2005; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). In the Nordics, however, which already exhibit high levels of institutional trust, rally effects may play a more limited role. This makes for an interesting dynamic, as Sweden, in particular, relied heavily on citizens' trust when implementing measures to address the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, one may expect there to be relatively weak rally effects in Sweden, on account of a potential "ceiling" on citizens' trust in the government. Such dynamics would make the Nordics a "least likely case" for experiencing rally effects. However, one could also argue that the Nordic countries would boast strong rally effects, as countries with low levels of institutional trust and high levels of political polarisation typically exhibit less prominent rally effects (Van Aelst, 2021). In this sense, the Nordics could even represent a "most likely case" for rally effects.

Against this backdrop, we aim to investigate the rally effect in the Nordics during two years of the Covid-19 pandemic: 2020–2021. Our overall aim is to investigate whether the rally effect – if detected – exhibited similar dynamics across the Nordic countries despite the governments adopting different pandemic strategies. Notably, the Swedish case constitutes somewhat of an outlier in terms of both adopted strategy and number of deaths (see Johansson et al., Chapter 1). Accordingly, we pose three empirical research questions related to the rally effect during Covid-19. The first two address all of the Nordic countries:

RQ1. Are rally effects observable across the Nordic countries in terms of citizen support for governing parties?

RQ2. Are rally effects observable across the Nordic countries in terms of citizens' support of their government's crisis-management approach?

To answer these questions, we consider public opinion data from academic surveys and commercial opinion polls. The third research question looks specifically at Sweden to detect whether the rally effects are uniform or if citizens make different evaluations depending on the state agencies' responsibility for handling the crisis.

RQ3. Are rally effects observable in terms of citizens' perceptions of state agencies not directly involved in crisis management?

To answer this question, we rely on data from an original Swedish panel survey with five waves collected between February 2020 and May 2021.

Trust, performance, and crisis management

Actions taken based on trust entail a leap of faith – the belief that the target of our trust will cooperate and live up to our expectations in the spirit of benevolence. In general, trust is a mechanism that serves to reduce complexity, as we cannot investigate and control all of our interactions with others. Trusting others – at least to a reasonable extent – makes our lives easier (Delhey et al., 2021; Luhman 1979). Trust is particularly important in situations that are difficult to understand – where knowledge is limited, and consequences are difficult to predict (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Thus, trust constitutes a shortcut in decision-making, especially in high-stake scenarios (Earle, 2010; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014).

Previous research emphasises the connection between institutional trust and citizens' compliance with protective measures. However, this trust–compliance relationship is partially dependent on how responsible organisations manage to handle the crisis and the effectiveness with which they communicate their decisions. Thus, institutional trust (i.e., trust in the government and state agencies) is often viewed as a critical aspect of crisis management (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005; Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2003). Lack of trust may impact risk perceptions, hindering citizens' willingness or ability to mitigate risks (Devine et al., 2020; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014; Van der Weerd et al., 2011). Results from studies on health communication during previous pandemics – such as the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2016 (Blair et al., 2017; Morse et al., 2016), the SARS pandemic, avian influenza, and the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014) – confirm that respondents with high government trust are more

inclined to take precautionary actions to mitigate their personal risk and the spread of the disease. Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, research indicates that trust is conducive to compliance with government recommendations (Johansson, Sohlberg et al., 2021), though there are exceptions (Ling Wong & Jensen, 2020). Studies from the early phases of the pandemic show that high trust in government institutions is associated with a willingness to adopt protective measures like social distancing, handwashing, testing, and wearing face masks (Devine et al., 2020). Furthermore, high trust is linked to a higher chance of obeying regulations and recommendations (Han et al., 2021; Olsen & Hjorth, 2020), lower mortality rates (Oksanen et al., 2020), and a greater intention to get vaccinated (Parsons Leigh et al., 2020).

Researchers argue that institutional trust partially depends on how citizens evaluate responsible institutions' ability to provide certain outputs (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Van Aelst, 2021). Therefore, the literature on crisis management and crisis communication often emphasises the importance of both management and communication efforts to ensure the maintenance of organisational reputation (Benoit, 2015). Various fields of risk and crisis communication research use trust or similar concepts to analyse how stakeholders (e.g., citizens, shareholders, and interest groups) evaluate the actors responsible for managing and communicating a crisis (Coombs, 2009). From a crisis-management perspective, trust constitutes an essential factor in effective political and administrative leadership (Boin et al., 2016; Györfy, 2018), while public distrust can delegitimise institutions' crisis-management strategies (Liang & Christensen, 2019). In fact, leaders and organisations entering a crisis with low trust or credibility often struggle to effectively handle the crisis (Boin et al., 2016); evidently, pre-crisis reputation shapes post-crisis assessments of institutions' managerial effectiveness (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Kim, 2017).

The rally effect: Explanations for rising and declining support

Even if the opinion phenomenon behind the rally-around-the-flag effect is well documented, researchers have yet to come to a consensus on why this effect exists. Hetherington and Nelson (2003) framed the literature as split into two schools of thought: "the patriotism school" and "the opinion leader school". The former focuses on various socio-psychological mechanisms, with one such mechanism entailing external threats triggering support for unifying symbols (Doty et al., 1991). Alternatively, some assert that increased feelings of insecurity prompt people to unify around entities that feel familiar and secure (Delhey et al., 2021). Additionally, there is some evidence that negative feelings, such as anger and anxiety, actively drive the rally effect (Lambert et al., 2011). The latter, in contrast, focuses on perceptions of societal problems and the ways in

which they are communicated. Politicians often set aside ideological differences during a crisis, and leaders tend to receive more attention. Thus, rising support can be explained by increased media attention paired with a lack of public criticism (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Hetherington and Nelson (2003) suggested that the patriotism school is more accurate in explaining the rise of the rally effect, while the opinion leader school more effectively explains the duration of the effect and its eventual decline. Studies on the rally effect during the Covid-19 pandemic have looked at both initial spikes in support and their eventual decline. Comparing rally effects in different countries, Van Aelst (2021) has concluded that there are both long- and short-term effects, depending, in part, on the country. There are also some examples of a “negative” rally effect, with support for political leaders decreasing during the early phases of the pandemic.

Such comparative approaches typically discuss the rally effect during the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of the opinion leader school, highlighting how perceptions of performance can, in a broad sense, explain rally effects (Van Aelst, 2021). In a study comparing 35 countries, Herrera and colleagues (2020) showed leadership approval to be negatively correlated with the number of infections. Overall, these studies suggest that citizens support their leaders when they are successful in protecting public health. This makes the Nordic experience interesting, as the rally effect was similar across the Nordics, despite the death toll in Sweden being a dramatic outlier (see Johansson et al., Chapter 1).

Of course, death toll is not the only important factor. Perceptions of effective crisis management also appear to influence public approval of leaders. Transparency (i.e., not lying about or downplaying the infection), visibility, and alignment with scientific experts can aid political leaders in gaining public support (see Rasmussen et al., Chapter 4), while high death rates, blatant mismanagement, and poor communication strategies can all hinder public support (Van Aelst, 2021).

Of course, perceptions of success or failure are driven by contextual factors, such as media coverage, personal media consumption, and predispositions. One comparative study of news coverage showed that the level of polarisation in news media is negatively correlated with the rally effect. Thus, countries with a more polarised media landscape tend to have weaker rally effects (Cardenal et al., 2021).

Studies on the declining phase of the rally effect have highlighted managerial performance – alongside political ideology – as an important driving factor behind the decline (Johansson, Hopmann et al., 2021). This study and previous studies have also pointed out a uniform – both from different levels – rally effect related to political ideology (Esaïasson et al., 2021), even if other studies have pointed out increased cleavages (Van Aelst, 2021).

In summary, the rally effect was clearly visible around the globe during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. The strength and duration of the effect

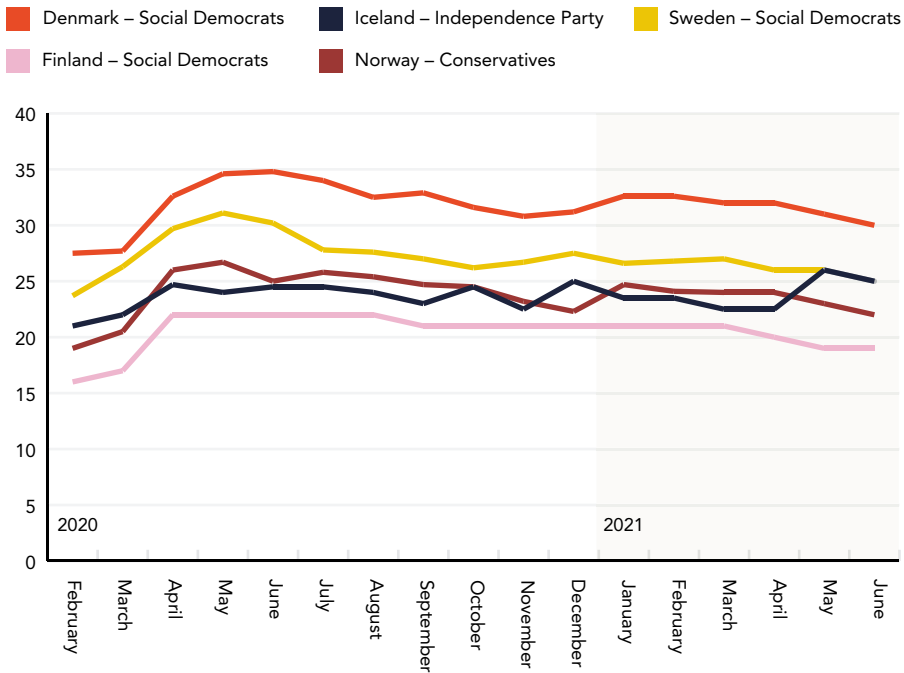
varied based on governments' managerial effectiveness and citizens' perceptions of their government's efforts. Previous studies have provided evidence of rally effects in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic, with rises in support for both the leading party and the state agencies responsible for managing the crisis (Ihlen et al., 2022). Furthermore, research points to a general rise in trust in government agencies during the first wave of the pandemic (Esaiasson et al., 2021). However, there is a lack of research on the scope of the rally effect and the degree to which managerial effectiveness influenced the rally effect in the Nordic countries specifically. The remainder of this chapter fills that gap in the literature.

Rally effects in the Nordic countries

This section aims to trace changes in support for leaders, state agencies, and their adopted strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic throughout the Nordic countries. To achieve this, we have collected open-source data from private opinion pollsters, government agencies, and academic research (see Figures 13.1 & 13.2). There is a notable lack of comprehensive, comparable data on these matters across all of the Nordic countries. The only metric that was universally available was opinion polls on political parties. However, we sought to use different sources to construct a brief overview of general trends in support and institutional trust.

Figure 13.1 illustrates government support during the Covid-19 pandemic by using support for its leading party as a proxy. All of the Nordic countries had coalition governments in 2020 and 2021 except Denmark, where the Social Democrats led a minority government. Social Democrats also constituted the biggest parties in Finland and Sweden, holding the prime minister position in coalition governments. Høyre (Conservative) was the dominant party in Norway's coalition government, with its party leader also serving as prime minister until September 2021. A coalition government governed Iceland with a Green Party prime minister until the general election in September 2021. However, while the prime minister was from the Green Party, we chose the largest party in government (the Independence Party) as the proxy for government support.

Figure 13.1 Support for the leading government party in the Nordics, February 2020–June 2021 (per cent)



Source: Politico, n.d.

Figure 13.1 shows a clear increase in support (4–8 percentage points) for the leading government parties across all five of the Nordic countries from February to April 2020. This increase is apparent regardless of how the pandemic affected the given country in terms of infected and death counts (see Johansson et al., Chapter 1). Following the initial spike, leading parties experienced a slight drop in the polls, though this was most evident in the cases of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

There are several points worth mentioning here. First, this universal rise in support strengthens the idea that a rally effect took place during the first months of the pandemic across the Nordics. Second, there was a decline in leading party support after the initial spike, supporting the general theory of rally effects. Notably, the magnitude of the polling drop appears to be correlated with the impact of Covid-19 in each country in terms of death count. The largest drop of support was faced by the Swedish Social Democrats. As Sweden experienced the highest number of deaths from Covid-19 – in the context of the Nordic countries – public discourse and criticism from opposition parties in the country became far harsher than it did in the other Nordic countries by June

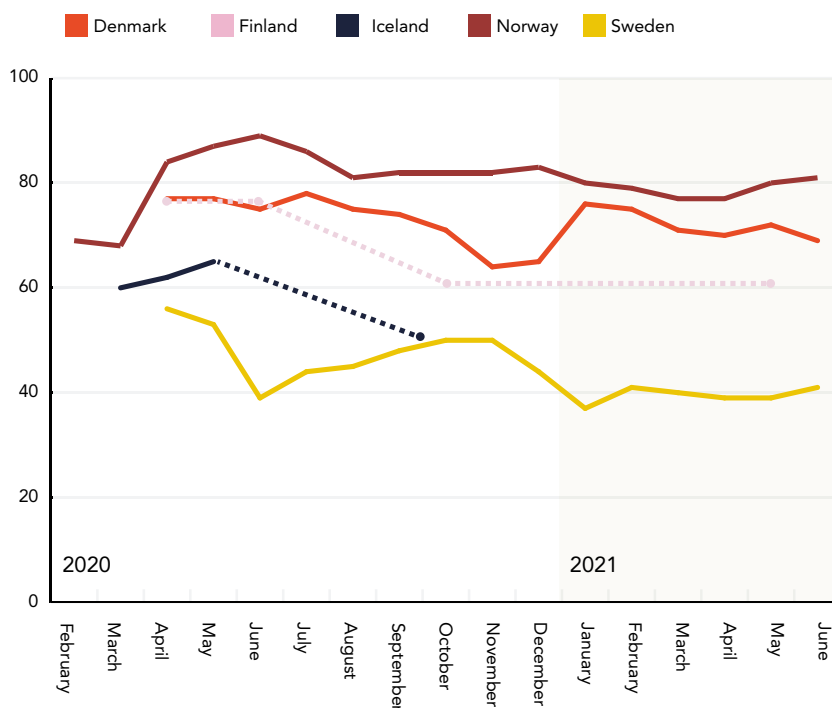
2020 (Johansson, Hopmann et al., 2021; Johansson & Vigsø, 2021). In sharp contrast to the Swedish Social Democrats, the Independence Party in Iceland saw no apparent decline in support following its initial spike.

There are less-clear fluctuations in support amid the second and third waves of Covid-19. There was a slight increase in support for leading government parties in December 2020 across the Nordics, aside from Finland, and this could constitute a weak second rally effect. Regardless, however, it should be noted that government support was at least marginally higher in June 2021 than it was prior to the pandemic.

Next, we consider citizens' perceptions of their government's performance, though this requires reliance on less comparable data. The HOPE Project (Aarhus University, n.d.) uses the same phrasing in a prompt aimed at both Denmark and Sweden: "the policy is necessary". In Norway, we have data from a question about people's trust in state agencies' crisis-management health strategies. Iceland has a Covid-tracker tool that follows public opinions on various topics, with one question asking about trust in the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management's [Almannavarnadeild ríkislögreglustjóra] (www.almannavarnir.is/english/) handling of Covid-19. However, this question was only posed during the first three months of the pandemic in 2020 and as a follow-up question in August 2020. For Finland, the closest data stems from a question about citizens' general trust in the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare [Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos] (<http://www.thl.fi/en>), collected by the Finnish Citizen Panel (Väliweronen & Jallinoja, 2021). Of course, these data are not comparable in a straightforward or ideal sense. However, this analysis aims to identify broad trends in rally effects, meaning that we can use these varied data points as proxies for public perceptions of how the Covid-19 pandemic was handled.

Figure 13.2 is less interpretatively intuitive than Figure 13.1 in terms of both data type and data availability. For example, we only have a few data points illustrated for Finland and Iceland. Still, there are signs of rally effects – especially in Norway and Iceland. If we consider data from other sources, there is a clear increase in support for the Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] (www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se) between March and April 2020 (Novus, 2022). The data in the figure does not completely capture the initial rally effect in Denmark and Sweden, as the only data available is from April 2020; however, data on trust in the Public Health Agency of Sweden from other sources indicate a similar decline in support (Kantar Sifo, n.d.).

Figure 13.2 Trust in and support for the strategy of responsible government agencies in the Nordics, March 2020–June 2021 (per cent)



Comments: Denmark reflects evaluation of the government response; Iceland, support for the government Covid-19 response; Norway, trust in health agencies' management of Covid-19; Sweden, evaluation of the government response; and Finland, trust in the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The dotted lines indicate missing data points from month to month.

Source: Denmark and Sweden (Arhus University, n.d.); Iceland (Social Science Research Institute, n.d.); Finland (Väliveronen & Jallinoja, 2021); Norway (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2022)

Thus, in addition to the changes being less obvious here, the only significant changes are the decline in support for the Swedish policy and the increase in support for the Danish policy during the second wave from November 2020 to January 2021. However, what should be noted in the Danish case is the steep drop in trust from October to November 2020, likely stemming from the “mink scandal”, where the legality of the cull of the country’s more than 15 million minks was criticised and debated.

Also worth noting is the generally lower levels of support for the policy in Sweden than the one in Denmark, which indicate that exogenous factors (e.g., death toll) and performance are key factors in public perceptions of crisis-management performance in the Nordics. This being said, one may have expected greater differences between the two countries (or, more generally,

between Sweden and all of its Nordic neighbours) in terms of public perceptions, given Sweden's unique strategy and far higher death toll (Johansson & Vigsø, 2021; see also Johansson et al., Chapter 1). Still, even if public support for the specific Covid-19 policy that Sweden adopted was lower than in other Nordic countries, support for the Public Health Agency seems to have been about the same in June 2021 as it was at the beginning of the pandemic (Ihlen et al., 2022).

The dynamics of institutional trust and the role of performance

To achieve a better understanding of the rally effect even in peculiar contexts, this section focuses on the Swedish case. Since Sweden has a clear division between government and government agencies, public trust in the government can be compared with public trust in individual institutions.

Survey data were collected before and during the Covid-19 pandemic on five occasions from the same individuals. The respondents belong to the Citizen Panel, which contains around 75,000 people and is maintained by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden (University of Gothenburg, n.d.). Our conclusions are based on two samples: One sample comprises 3,865 opt-in respondents, all of whom answered across all five survey waves, and the other is representative of the general Swedish population in terms of education, gender, and age. Of the representative sample, 572 individuals responded across all five survey waves. As there are no substantive differences in results between the larger opt-in sample and the smaller representative sample, this section simply focuses on the larger sample.

One advantage of panel data is that, since we are following the same individuals, we can be certain that changes over time are not driven by sampling issues, which can be troublesome in aggregated cross-sectional data.

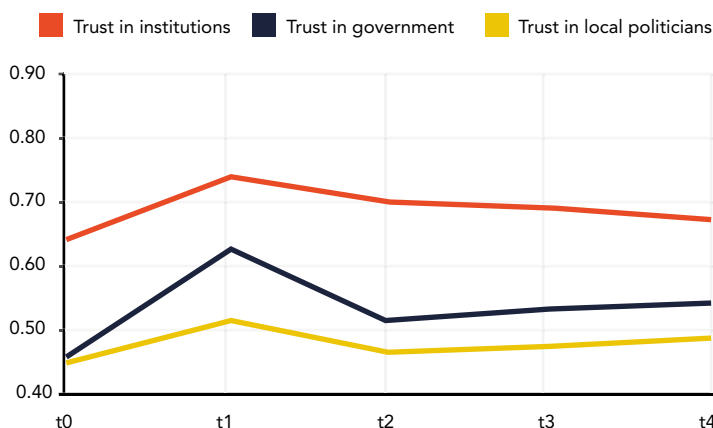
Our first survey (t_0) was conducted 24 February–19 March 2020. We view this as our “pre-pandemic” wave, though it is important to note that the spread of Covid-19 was already underway at this point, with the World Health Organization formally declaring the spread a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Only a small minority (2%) of our sample was initially interviewed after this date. There is no evidence that this portion of respondents significantly influenced our results. Importantly, since we collected data from the representative sample on institutional trust from December 2018 to January 2019 (roughly a year before our t_0 survey), we can assess the presence of a rally effect at t_0 ; as reported elsewhere, we find no such evidence (Esaiasson et al., 2021). In other words, we are fairly certain that we can deem the t_0 survey to be a reasonable baseline. We conducted subsequent surveys 31 March–14 April 2020 (t_1), 15 September–26 October 2020 (t_2), 3 December 2020–4 January 2021 (t_3), and

29 April–25 May 2021 (t_4). The entire period covers well over a year, from early 2020 to mid 2021, during which time fatalities in Sweden due to Covid-19 were low (t_0), high (t_1), low (t_2), very high (t_3), and low (t_4).

Below, we present the results of five survey questions. One measured government trust: “How much trust do you have in the way the government is doing its job?” One measured trust in local politicians: “How much trust do you have in the way municipal politicians are doing their jobs?” One measured trust in institutions: “Generally speaking, how much trust do you have in Swedish government agencies?” One measured trust in the police: “More specifically, how much trust do you have in the way the police are doing their jobs?” Finally, one measured trust in healthcare providers: “More specifically, how much trust do you have in the way healthcare providers are doing their jobs?” Respondents could answer these questions with one of five responses: “Very high trust”, “Rather high trust”, “Neither high nor low trust”, “Rather low trust”, or “Very low trust”.

Figure 13.3 shows several interesting results regarding trust in politicians and institutions. First, there was a large increase in trust in government during the early phases of the pandemic, echoing the findings shown in Figure 13.1. Second, there was a notable rally effect for local politicians, though it was less dramatic than that for national leaders. Moreover, institutional trust exhibits a similar trend, though its decline was more quickly cemented. Still, it showed a clear return to the baseline – in line with government trust. Overall, on these three general objects of trust, the rally effect aligns with previously established trends.

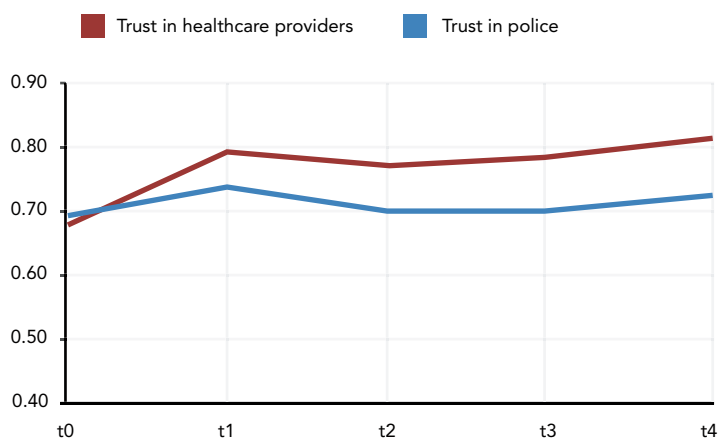
Figure 13.3 *Trust in institutions, the government, and local politicians in Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic*



Comments: Responses have been normalised to range from 0 to 1. Higher values are associated with higher levels of trust. $N = 3,865$. $t_0 = 24$ February–19 March 2020; $t_1 = 31$ 14 March–April 2020; $t_2 = 15$ September–26 October 2020; $t_3 = 3$ December 2020–4 January 2021; $t_4 = 29$ April–25 May 2021.

Next, we look at the potential rally effect pertaining to two specific institutions: the Swedish police and the Swedish healthcare sector. The Swedish police played only a marginal role in the government's Covid-19 response; yet, despite this limited role, they experienced a notable boost in trust. Healthcare providers, who were directly involved in the government's response, experienced an initial increase in support of the same magnitude as that experienced by the government as a whole. Evidently, this early boost extends to nearly all prominent state agencies – not just those involved in the crisis-management strategy.

Figure 13.4 *Trust in healthcare providers and police in Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic*



Comments: Responses have been normalised to range from 0 to 1. Higher values are associated with higher levels of trust. $N = 3,865$. $t_0 = 24$ February–19 March 2020; $t_1 = 31$ March–14 April 2020; $t_2 = 15$ September–26 October 2020; $t_3 = 3$ December 2020–4 January 2021; $t_4 = 29$ April–25 May 2021.

However, the most noteworthy finding, as seen in Figure 13.4, may be what happened after the initial increase. By t_2 , in September–October 2020, trust in politicians and police had receded to pre-pandemic baseline levels – but trust in healthcare providers remained at the t_1 level. Remarkably, trust in them continued to increase throughout the pandemic – ultimately rising even higher than it did following the initial rally effect. While there are many possible interpretations of this dynamic, one is that citizens selectively updated their trust in this specific institution. After all, medical professionals and hospital staff had worked tirelessly for a long period of time; while many lives were lost, healthcare providers successfully protected the public from a far worse outcome – perhaps the public took notice. If so, the conclusion by Sniderman and colleagues (2019) that rally effects are universally fleeting may need to be qualified: If an institution is directly involved in handling the cause of the

rally effect and performs well, it may result in a relatively long-term increase in trust. Before the pandemic, at t_0 , levels of trust in healthcare providers and the police were essentially identical; after the pandemic, at t_4 , there is a clear gap in trust between them.

Conclusions

In the introduction of this chapter, we presented two reasonable outcomes of rally effects in the Nordics during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first one claimed these countries should be a “least likely case” for rally effects, and if there were any, that they would be rather weak since the institutional trust is so high to begin with. The argument for the second one – there being strong rally effects – was based on high institutional trust and low levels of political polarisation in the Nordic countries, which made them a “most likely case” for rally effects. Our results clearly support the second claim, with documented existence of rally effects across all of the Nordic countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. These surges in support were broad, encompassing the government, state agencies responsible for handling the pandemic, as well as state agencies with no direct role in handling the crisis. These results answer our three research questions, suggesting that the beginning of the pandemic constituted an opportunity for authorities to garner support from citizens to handle the critical situation. Despite institutional trust already being high in the Nordics, the rally effect made people’s support for the government and trust in its strategies even stronger during the early phases of the pandemic. However, rally effects are generally short-lived, and these were no exception, with support indicators returning to pre-crisis levels within a few months. Given how the Nordic countries all adopted significantly different approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic (see Ihlen et al., 2022), government actions appear to have had little impact on citizens’ reactions, especially during the early stages of the crisis.

Our study presents four main takeaways. The first is that rally effects can be observable in countries that generally exhibit high institutional trust and low rates of political polarisation. Therefore, rally effects provide governments and state agencies with favourable conditions in which to conduct effective crisis management, even in those that already exist amid favourable, high-trust dynamics (Cornia et al., 2016).

Second, national differences in crisis-management strategies have little influence on the presence of a rally effect. Sweden, which adopted a highly criticised Covid-19 strategy and faced high death tolls during the first year of the pandemic, encountered a rally effect in line with those of its neighbours. While there were certainly differences in intensity that could be attributed to citizens’ evaluations of their government, these differences are minor, especially given that all of the countries witnessed a sort of regression to the pre-pandemic baseline.

Third, when analysing the rally effect of Swedish agencies with different levels of responsibility for crisis management, data shows a broad scope of the rally effect, with rising support levels (and eventual declines) extending to state agencies that played no role in crisis management. For example, Swedish police briefly enjoyed rising trust levels despite not playing a direct role in crisis management. Rally-around-the-flag effects extend throughout the whole of society, with threats from the outside world triggering unifying symbols of familiarity and security; all state agencies, regardless of their specific roles, seem to function as such symbols (Esaiaasson et al., 2021).

Fourth, there is an important exception to the rule of short-term rally effects. Healthcare was the only government agency that enjoyed a lasting and nearly continuous rise in trust among Swedish citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the importance of hard-working staff being rewarded with public support, this finding is theoretically relevant in at least two ways: 1) it shows that rapid increases in support have the potential to result in a lasting shift in dynamics; and 2) the healthcare sector in Sweden has the potential to act as a key player in crisis management and still come out stronger.

These four takeaways demonstrate the importance of the rally effect. The case of the Nordic countries during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that crisis managers, politicians, journalists, and citizens must all consider the rally effect – and its likelihood, especially in the Nordics – when forming policies or opinions during a crisis.

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