

Majority Think UK Government COVID-19 Response Worse Than Other Developed Countries, Almost Half Say Response Too Focused On Protecting the Economy

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Key findings

In this RISJ Factsheet we examine how people think about the coronavirus crisis and how different institutions in the UK have responded to it, based on a survey fielded from 2 July to 8 July.

We find that:

- A majority (57%) of the UK public say they think the UK government's response to the coronavirus pandemic has been worse than most other developed countries, up from 46% in late April. Concerns that the UK government may have handled the crisis worse than others has grown across the political spectrum, by 12 percentage points among people on the left, 10 percentage points among people in the centre, and 9 percentage points among people on the political right.
- Almost half (44%) feel that the government response is too focused on protecting the economy, with about a third (37%) saying the balance is right, and a small minority (9%) saying that the response is too focused on protecting people from coronavirus. This marks a shift since April, when 55% felt the government's response had found the right balance, and one-in-five (19%) found it too focused on protecting the economy.

Concern that the government's response is too focused on protecting the economy has grown across the political spectrum.

- Perception of news media coverage of the government is largely unchanged since April. One third (33%) say they feel the coverage has not been critical enough, 28% say they feel the news media have covered the government response fairly, and 26% feel the coverage has been too critical. Perception of news coverage is very polarised along political lines. Among those on the left, 64% say that the news media have not been critical enough of the government's response, whereas among those on the right, 67% say the news media have been too critical.
- Levels of public concern over different possible sources of false or misleading information about coronavirus are largely stable. But the share of people who say they are very or extremely concerned over false or misleading coronavirus information from the government has grown to 39%, up 7 percentage points since April. By now, more people in the UK say they are very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the government (39%) than say they have used the government as a source of information about coronavirus (31%).

- Concern over possible misinformation from the government is polarised along political lines. While one-in-five (20%) on the right say they are very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the UK government, the figure rises to six-in-ten (62%) on the left. The difference between right and left was 29 percentage points in April, but has grown to 42 percentage points in July.

Overview

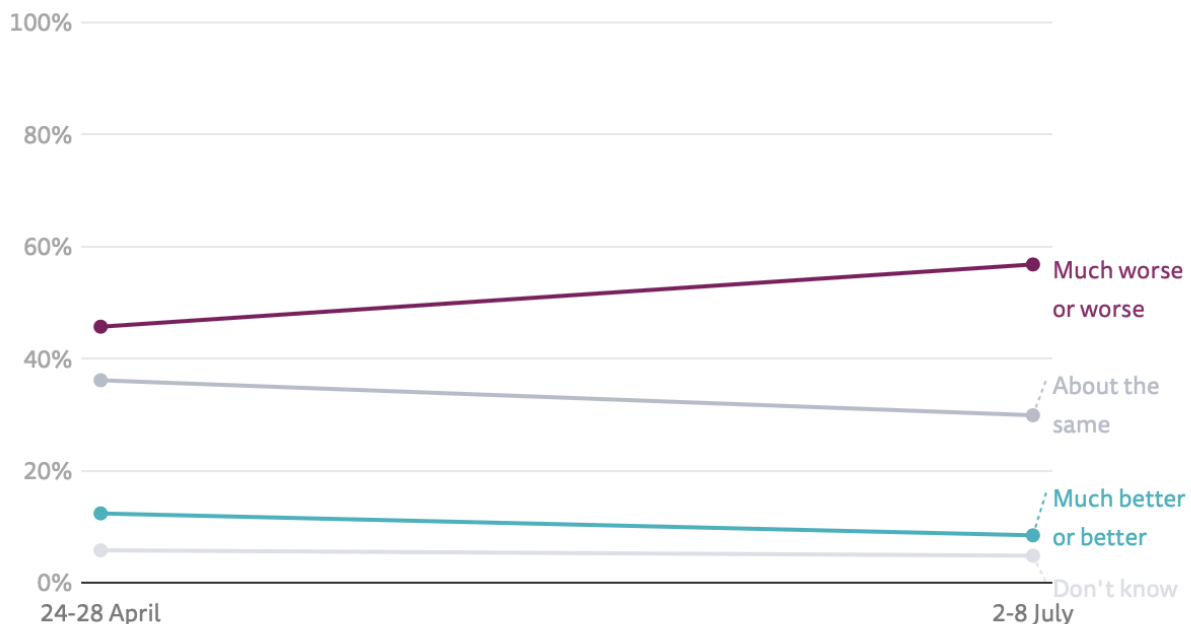
This is the seventh in a series of ten factsheets based on an ongoing online panel survey of a representative sample of the UK population. The survey was designed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford to collect data on how people navigate news and information during the coronavirus pandemic and was fielded by YouGov. Ten waves will be fielded at two-week

intervals, top-line findings from each will be published soon after in a factsheet, with more in-depth analysis to follow. More details about the project and the methodology can be found on the [project website](#). The survey is a mix of tracking questions and specific questions fielded only in some waves.

Findings

Even as the UK begins to ease lockdown restrictions and gradually reopen, a majority (57%) of the UK public say they think the UK government's response to the coronavirus pandemic has been worse than most other developed countries. 30% say the response has been about the same. 8% that it has been better. This is a markedly more pessimistic assessment than when we asked the same questions in April (see Figure 1). Ten weeks ago, 46% said the response was worse, 36% about the same, and 12% better.

Figure 1. Proportion that think the UK government's response has been ___ than most other developed countries

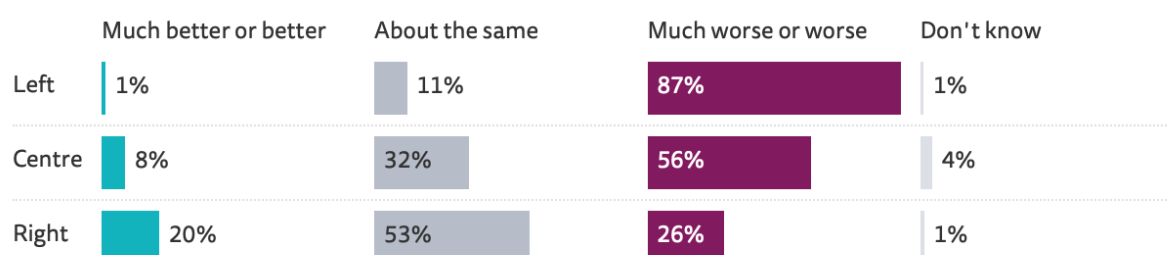


OtherCountries. Do you think that the UK government's response to the coronavirus pandemic has been better, about the same, or worse than most other developed countries? Base: 24-28 April = 2,291, 2-8 July = 1,338.

As we found in April, those on the political right judge the government less harshly than others. But the increase in the percentage of respondents who say the UK government response has been worse is broadly the same across the political spectrum (Figure 2). It is up 12 percentage points among people on the left,

up 10 percentage points among people in the centre, and up 9 percentage points among people on the political right.¹ The public perception of how well the UK government has handled the crisis, relative to other countries, has grown more pessimistic, but it has not become more polarised.

Figure 2. Proportion that think the UK government's response has been ___ than most other developed countries by political leaning



Other Countries. Do you think that the UK government's response to the coronavirus pandemic has been better, about the same, or worse than most other developed countries? Base: Left = 295, Centre = 665, Right = 222.

Our survey was in the field during 4 July, dubbed 'Super Saturday' by some, when hairdressers, pubs, places of worship, and many other institutions reopened, and the Prime Minister encouraged the public to 'enjoy summer safely'.² The easing of lockdown restrictions remained controversial, however, with Susan Michie, Professor of Health Psychology and Director of the Centre for Behaviour Change at UCL and member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) calling the easing 'too extensive' and 'highly irresponsible' in an interview with the BBC.³

To understand public perception of the many complex and sometimes partially contradictory concerns and interests that policy responses necessarily have to balance in this difficult

situation, we asked our respondents how well they feel the UK government response is balancing protecting people from coronavirus and protecting the economy. (While a false binary in some ways, because the health of the population and the health of the economy are intertwined, this is how the issues are often framed in political and public debate).

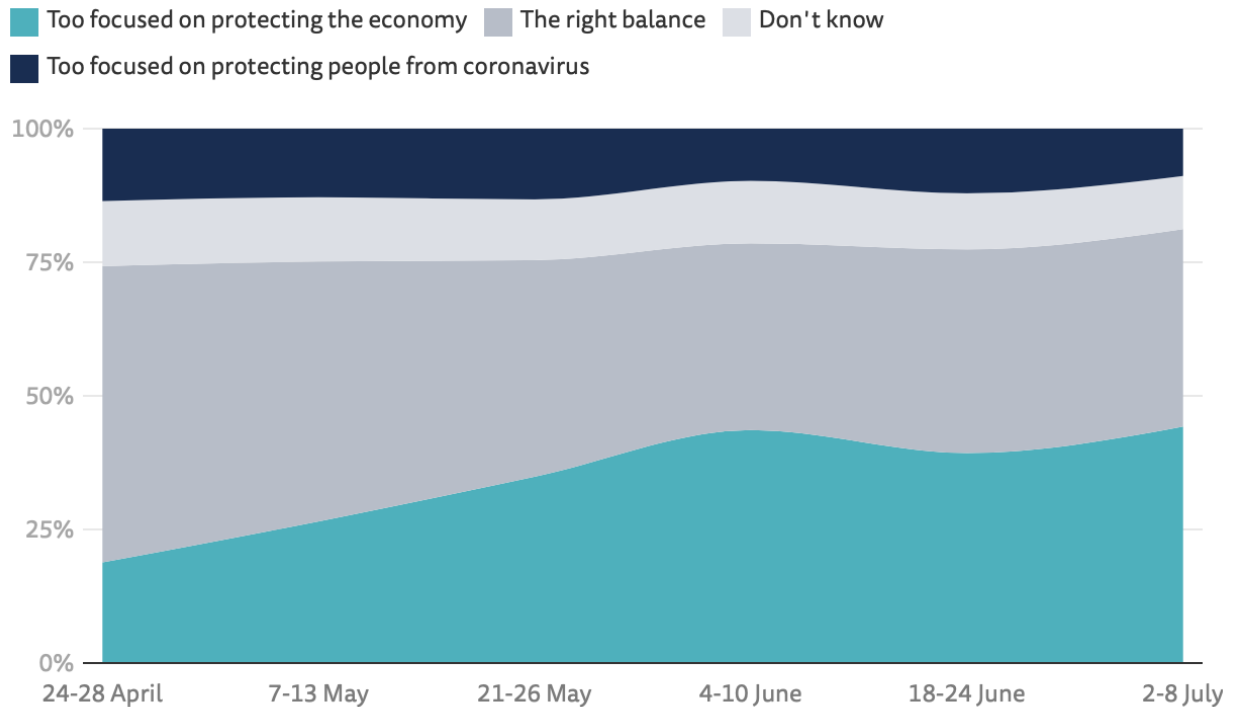
Overall, we find that almost half (44%) feel that the government response is too focused on protecting the economy, with about a third (37%) saying the balance is right, and a small minority (9%) saying that the response is too focused on protecting people from coronavirus (Figure 3). This is a big shift from April, where a majority (55%) felt the government's response had found the right balance, and one-in-five (19%) found it too focused on protecting the economy.

¹ We break our respondents into different political groups based on how they place themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from 'very left-wing', through 'centre', to 'very right-wing'. Those that selected either 'very left-wing' or 'fairly left-wing' were grouped as being on the left, with the process mirrored to group those on the right. Those that identified as 'slightly left of centre', 'centre' and 'slightly right of centre' were grouped as centre. Those that selected 'don't know' were excluded.

² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=283696229414111>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAMYVx8HVqE>

Figure 3. Proportion that think the UK government's current approach to coronavirus is ____



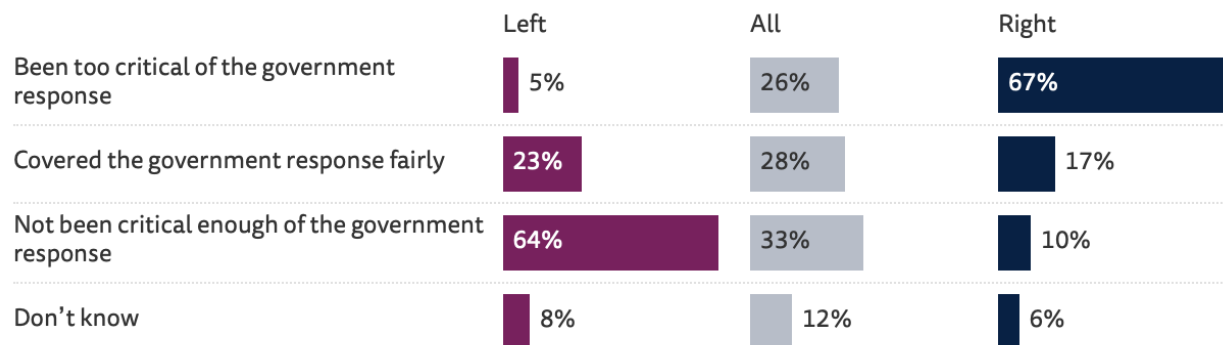
Economy lockdown. Which of the following comes closest to your view about the UK government's current approach to the coronavirus pandemic? Base: 24-28 April = 2,291, 7-13 May = 1,973, 21-27 May = 1,774, 4-10 June = 1,645, 18-24 June = 1,467, 2-8 July = 1,338.

Again, there are big differences across the political spectrum. Many more (73%) on the political left, and fewer on the political right (21%), say the government response is too focused on the economy. But concern has grown across the board, up 16 percentage points among those on the right since April, up 25 percentage points across the public as a whole, and up 34 percentage points on the left.

While we find big changes in how well the public thinks the UK government's response compares to other countries, and how well people feel the government has balanced protecting people's health versus protecting the economy, perception of news media

coverage of the government is basically unchanged. Public opinion is fairly evenly split between 33% who say they feel the coverage has not been critical enough, 28% who say they feel the news media have covered the government response fairly, and 26% who feel the coverage has been too critical. These numbers are basically unchanged since April. Here, too, views differ markedly across the political spectrum. Among those on the left, 64% say that the news media have not been critical enough of the government's response, whereas among those on the right, 67% say the news media have been too critical. As with the overall responses, these figures are almost identical to what we found in April (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Proportion that think the news media has ___ by political leaning



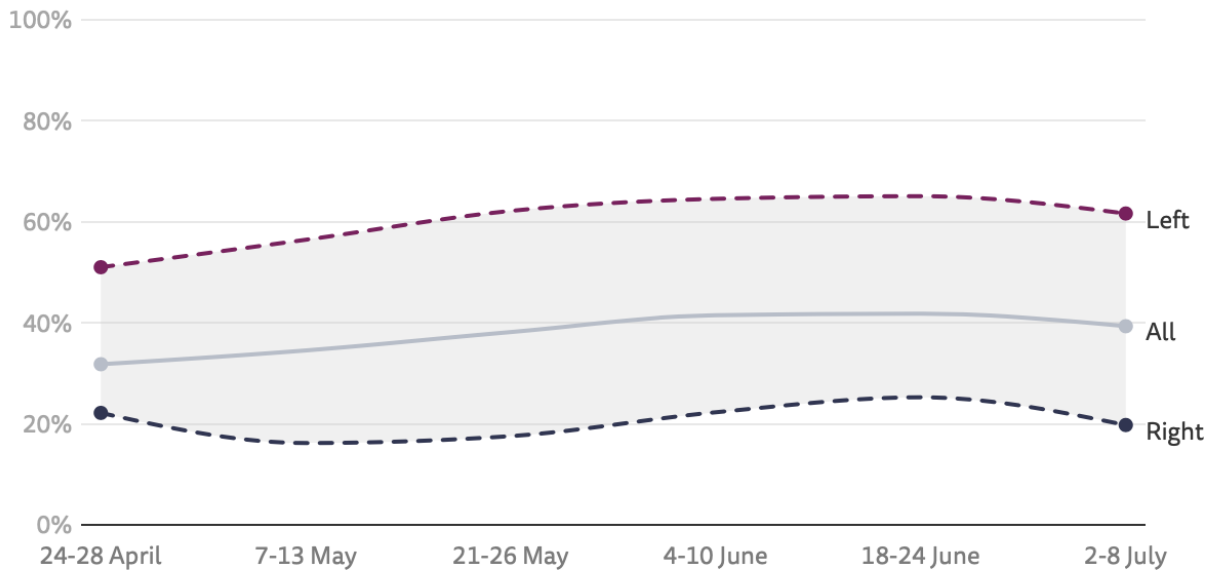
CRITICAL. Which of the following comes closest to your view about the news media's coverage of the UK government's response to the coronavirus pandemic? The news media has ___ Q1F. Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? Base: Left = 295, All = 1,338, Right = 222.

When asked how concerned they are about false or misleading information about coronavirus from different sources, politicians (39%) and the UK government (39%) are the sources most people say they are very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information from. The percentage of people who are concerned about misinformation from the UK government has grown by 7 percentage points since April, whereas levels of concern over possible misinformation from news organisations (29%) and ordinary people whom respondents do not know personally (27%) have remained stable. This is in line with what has been found elsewhere (Cushion et al. 2020) and in our own previous research (Fletcher et al. 2020), and with a wider recognition that political actors often are – and are recognised by the public as being – central to some misinformation problems (e.g. FullFact 2020; Newman et al. 2020). In parallel, we see a decline in the percentage of people who say they have used the government as a source of information about coronavirus, from 43% in April to 31% in July. Three months into the crisis, more people in

the UK express concern about false or misleading information about the coronavirus from the government (40%) than say that they rely on the government for information about coronavirus (31%). Clearly, people are relying on many other sources and platforms, most importantly news organisations, but also information they access from various sources online.

Concern over different possible sources of misinformation has grown a little more politically polarised since April – but mainly due to a change of opinion in early May. Looking at concern over news organisations, far more people on the political right are very or extremely concerned than on the left and across the whole public – and the figure has grown over time. Concern over the government in particular has grown. While one-in-five (20%) on the political right say they are very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the UK government, the figure rises to six-in-ten (62%) on the left (Figure 5). The difference between right and left was 29 percentage points in April (Nielsen et al. 2020), but has grown to 42 percentage points in July.

Figure 5. Proportion that are concerned about the UK government as a source of false or misleading information about coronavirus by political leaning

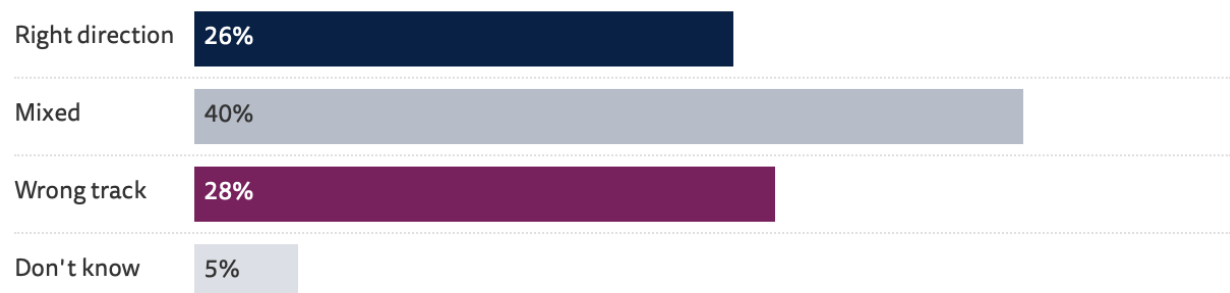


Q11. How concerned, if at all, are you about false or misleading information about coronavirus (COVID-19) from each of the following? Q1F. Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? Base: Left/All/Right 24-28 April = 555/2,291/366, 7-13 May = 471/1,973/313, 21-26 May = 419/1,774/285, 4-10 June = 380/1,645/266, 18-24 June = 329/1,466/214, 2-8 July = 295/1,338/222.

Finally, our survey was in the field from 2 July to 8 July, a period in which hospital deaths from COVID-19 in the UK grew from 43,906 to 44,391 (Roser et al. 2020), and where there was considerable news coverage of the easing of lockdown measures and the budget. Roughly equal numbers of people think that the

coronavirus situation in the UK is 'heading in the right direction' (26%) or off 'on the wrong track' (28%). However, 40% think that the picture is mixed (Figure 6). These figures are a little more pessimistic than what we found two weeks earlier.

Figure 6. Proportion that think the coronavirus situation in the UK is generally heading in the right direction



Q19. All in all, do you think the Coronavirus situation in the UK is generally headed in the right direction, or do you feel things are off on the wrong track? Base: Total sample: 1,338.

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