

Did migrants rally 'round the flag? The heterogeneous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on social trust between migrant and native-born populations

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath had devastating demographic and economic impacts around the world. Broader social and societal impacts including social harmony and cohesion is more nuanced but potentially also damaging and lasting. The nuance comes from the fact that at least in the early stages of the pandemic, there appeared to be a galvanising effect where people's emotional and social bonds and trust in others and in government were strengthened (e.g. Silveira et al., 2023). Such a response has been predicted by political, psychosocial and biological theories, including the Rally 'Round the Flag (Mueller, 1970), Psychosocial Gains from Adversity (Mancini, 2019) and Tend and Befriend (Shelley, 2006) theories. In theory, and seemingly in practice, positive effects are time limited and potentially give way to emergent and re-emergent social fissures (Abrams et al., 2021). A potential source of fissures is the population heterogeneity in the impacts of COVID-19, with, for example, migrant and ethnic minorities and deprived communities experiencing higher rates of infection, death, unemployment, discrimination and other adverse outcomes (O'Donnell et al., 2023).

In this study, we use a quasi-experimental design to estimate the social impacts of COVID-19 on migrant populations in Australia. Treating the pandemic and surrounding events as an exogenous shock and drawing on a longitudinal survey that interviewed respondents over a six-year period before, during and after the pandemic, we measure the extent to which trust in people (generalised trust) and trust in government changed during the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods for native-born and migrant populations. Generalised and government trust are key variables and indicators of social capital and social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006). The results therefore are critical to understanding the potential lasting adverse societal effects of inequalities and divisions during the pandemic and subsequent periods.

Data and methods

The data for this study comes from Australia and the 2018 to 2023 waves of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey (O'Donnell, 2023). This is an annual nationally-representative survey of Australian adults (aged 18 years and over) that measures and tracks attitudes, perceptions and behaviours related to social cohesion, immigration, multiculturalism and various topical social issues. Since 2018, the survey has been run on a panel known as 'Life in Australia', meaning the survey has been tracking individuals over time and allowing us to measure within-person changes in outcomes before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The outcome variables are generalised trust and trust in government. Generalised trust is measured from a widely question that asks 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people'. Respondents are given the response options 'Can be trusted' and 'Can't be too careful'. Trust in

government is measured from a question that asks 'To what extent do you think the Government in Canberra [the capital city and seat of the national government] can be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people'. Respondents can answer 'Almost always', 'Most of the time', 'Only some of the time' and 'Almost never'. We construct binary indicators for both items, indicating whether or not people think that a) most people can be trusted and b) that the national government can be trusted all or most of the time (combining the 'Almost always' and 'Most of the time' categories).

The key explanatory variables are the time period of the survey and the migrant background of respondents. Time periods are defined by the year of the survey wave in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019 are classified as the 'pre-COVID-19 period'. Surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 are classified as 'COVID-19 period' and surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023 are classified as 'post-COVID-19 period'. Migrant background is defined in several different ways. In the results shown below, we group respondents by whether they are native or foreign born and if foreign born, the decade in which they immigrated and whether or not English is their first language.

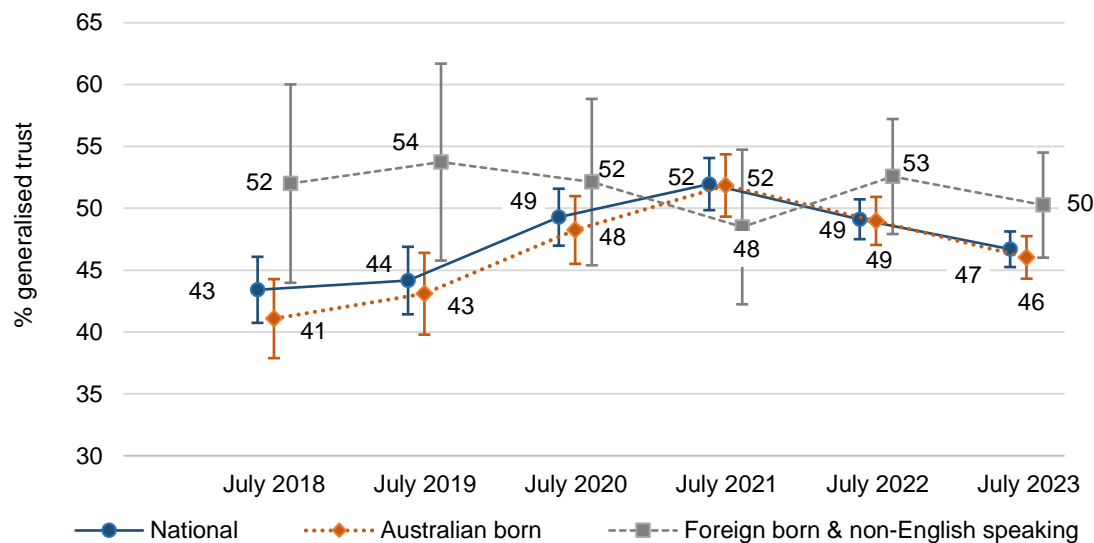
A difference-in-difference design is used to quantify the differential impacts of the pandemic on levels of trust between native-born and migrant populations. The design uses binary logistic fixed effects regression models where we regress within-person changes over time in generalised and government trust on the time period and an interaction with the migrant background of the respondent. A range of control and moderating variables, including employment status and experience of discrimination, are also used to test whether relationships between trust and migrant background can be explained by these other factors.

Results

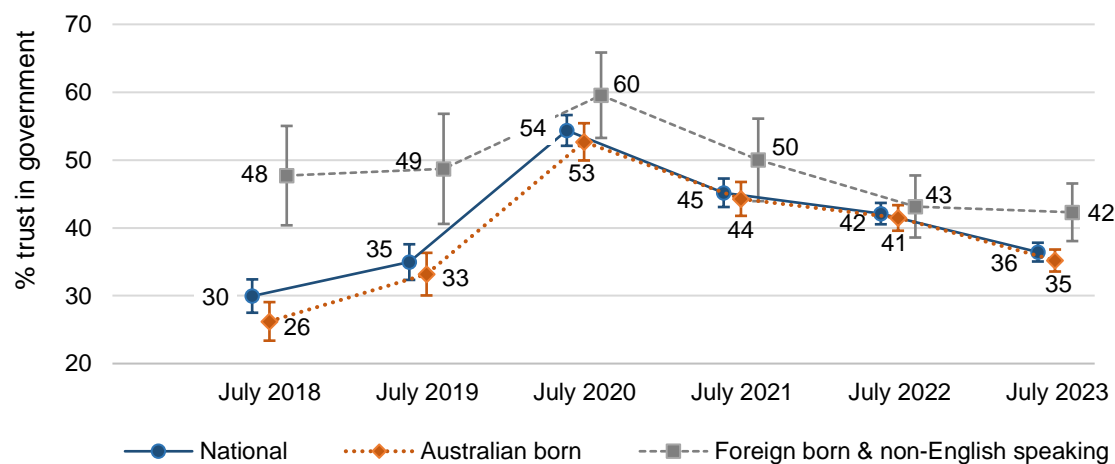
At a national-level, generalised and government trust increased significantly in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19. By 2023, trust had significantly declined from pandemic-related peaks. As shown in Figure 1, these spikes were recorded at a national level and for the Australian-born population. Migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds were significantly more likely to trust people and government than native-born populations prior to the pandemic. However, there was no evidence of a spike in generalised trust during the pandemic for these groups (Figure 1a). Trust in government among migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds may have spiked during the pandemic, though the increase was not significant and appears smaller in size. Comparing pre- and post-pandemic periods, the gap between migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and the Australian-born population declined from a statistically significant 11 percentage points in 2018 to a non-significant 4 percentage points in 2023 for generalised trust and from 22 points in 2018 to 7 points in 2023 (both significant differences) for government trust.

Figure 1 Predicted trust by migrant and language status, Australia, 2018-2023

a) Trust in people



b) Trust in Government



The results of the fixed effects regression indicates that the spikes in trust among the Australian-born population were significantly stronger than for migrant populations. The odds of an Australian-born person trusting government increased by 43% (95% confidence interval: [21, 68]) during the COVID-19 period and by 45% [23; 72] in the post-COVID-19 period. For government trust, the odds increased by a factor of 3.2 [2.8, 3.7] during the COVID-19 period and by a factor of 2.9 [2.5; 3.4] in the post-COVID-19 period. The difference-in-difference model indicates that any change in trust among non-English immigrants who have arrived since 2010 (or since 2000) was significantly smaller in the COVID-19 period (odds: .50 [.27, .95] for generalised trust and .44 [.22, .89] for government trust) and the post-COVID-19 period (odds: .41 [.21, .79] for generalised trust and .33 [.16, .67] for government trust).

Differences remained significant after controlling for a range of other factors including job loss, experience of discrimination, city of residence, neighbourhood deprivation, marital

status and housing tenure. This suggests that these factors cannot readily explain the differential social effects of the pandemic. Work is continuing though to try to identify potential explanations. Testing variations in how migrant and minority background is defined, for example, by examining changes in trust for first and second generation groups such as those from Asian and African background, suggests that recent immigration (e.g. since 2010) appears to be the factor most associated with a lack of an increase in trust.

Conclusion

In the face of adversity, populations can have a galvanising response, strengthening their social bonds and connections. In this study, we demonstrate this was the case for Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic at a national level. However, the heterogeneous and unequal impacts of the pandemic, including in terms of infections, deaths and economic outcomes, has coincided with a lack of a galvanising response among migrant populations. The reasons for this lack of response are still being investigated, though the particularly prominent differentials among recently arrived immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds could reflect the concentration of recent arrivals in local areas that were hardest hit by the pandemic, weaker access to government support, language and cultural barriers and other barriers associated with the nascent stage of the migrant integration process. The globally tumultuous period since the pandemic, involving economic and inflationary pressures, violent conflict and geopolitical tensions and anti-migrant sentiment may help to explain the lack of a post-pandemic corrective. Irrespective of the causes, the pre-pandemic migrant advantage in their levels of societal trust has declined or disappeared, potentially creating a social fissure that could strain social cohesion in coming years and undermine intercultural harmony.

References

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