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How accepting is the British public of COVID-19 vaccine passports, and why?

Dominic Abrams, Fanny Lalot, University of Kent

Jo Broadwood, Kaya Davies Hayon, Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network



Introduction

This brief report uses data from the latest Beyond Us and Them survey of 9351 people to address the question of how much appetite the British public has for vaccination passports and why. We examine people's attitudes to their use and perceptions of their fairness. We explore possible demographic differences in these attitudes, and whether having received a vaccine makes a difference.

As the UK advances with its vaccination programme, debates about the moral, ethical and practical realities of vaccine passports dominate media and political discussions. Vaccine passports could allow people to show whether they had been vaccinated, had recently received a negative test for COVID-19, or had developed natural immunity as a result of contracting the virus. A few countries have started granting such passports or certificates to their citizens. Others have announced they plan on doing so in the near future, but it is still not clear how these passports would be used (for example for international travel only or also for national activities). Those arguing in favour of vaccine passports claim they would make it easier to exit the pandemic without having to maintain additional measures such as strict social distancing rules and restrictions on international travel. Those against vaccine passports argue they would increase levels of discrimination and infringe on people's civil liberties.¹ Just last week, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) stated that imposing a requirement to have a vaccine passport might contravene human rights. More recently, UK church leaders have warned against potential plans to introduce vaccination passports more widely.

¹ 'Coronavirus: Dozens of MPs criticise "divisive" Covid passports', BBC, 2 April 2021
< <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-56605598> >

Our latest findings

Amidst controversies surrounding vaccine passports, the latest findings from our research project, *Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19*, show that opinions on vaccine passports are quite divided. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted by *Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network* and the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent, this project examines the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on local communities and societal cohesion across the UK. In this brief report, we present data collected between 11 March and 12 April 2021 from 9351 people from different parts of the UK.

We measured respondents' perception of vaccine passports with two questions, the first assessing their global opposition/support for such documents, and the second related to the perception of passports as introducing unfair discrimination. Specifically, the questions read, *"Would you support a proposal to introduce vaccine passports?"*, and *"To what extent do you believe a vaccine passport could create unfair disadvantages for certain groups and individuals?"* (1 = Not at all, 5 = Completely).

How do people feel about vaccination passports?

We found that opinions on vaccination passports appear divided. 28.0% were somewhat or strongly opposed, and 51.8% were somewhat or strongly supportive. On whether passports would unfairly discriminate, there was a more even balance but still strong division of opinion. Overall, 41.6% thought passports would not discriminate and 35.1% thought they would do so. However, there was also a strong correspondence between the two attitudes so that 90.5% of those who strongly opposed passports also thought they would be unfair, whereas 73.1% of those who strongly supported passports also thought they would be fair (Figure 1). This tells us that support for vaccination passports is probably based more on people's perceptions of fairness than on the balance of practical or material advantages.

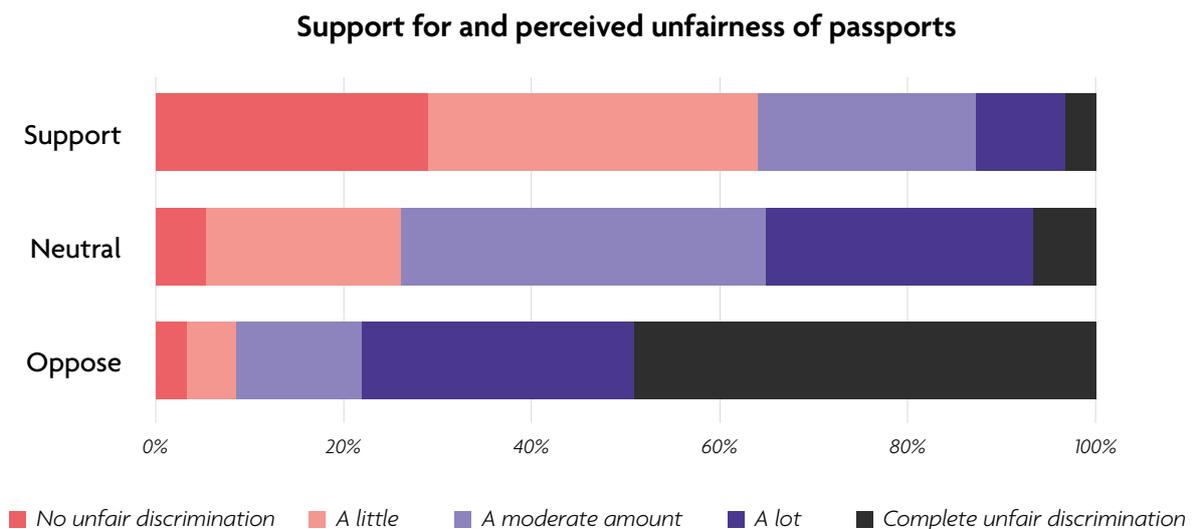


Figure 1: Support for and perceived unfairness of passports

Who supports vaccination passports?

We examined demographic and attitudinal factors that were associated with whether or not people supported passports or felt they would be unfair. Three different factors seem to be at work. First, the demographics of people's social status and whether they identify as Black or not are linked to differences in perceived unfairness. Black respondents (identifying as Black, Black British, African or Caribbean) were much more likely to oppose vaccine passports (29.3% support, and 50.4% opposition) and consider them as unfairly discriminating certain people and groups (58.4%; Figures 2 and 3).

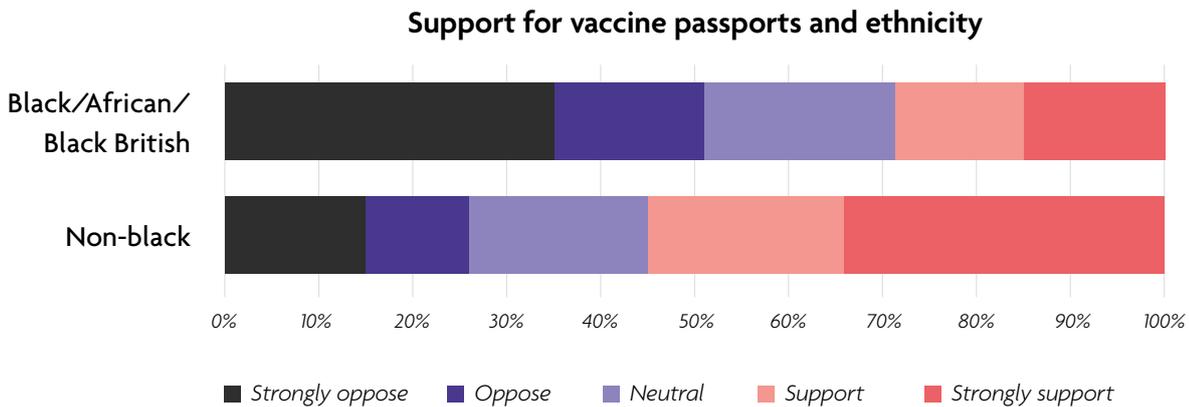


Figure 2: Support for vaccine passports and ethnicity

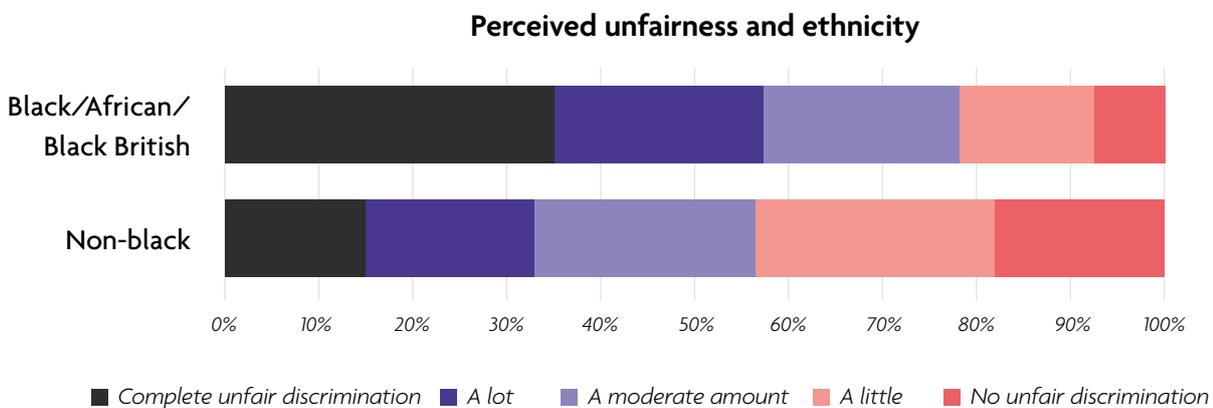


Figure 3: Perceived unfairness and ethnicity

Second, people's level of overall political trust is also linked. Amongst people reporting 'a lot' to 'complete' trust in the government, approval of vaccine passports was 64.5%, compared with only 43.1% amongst people reporting 'little' to 'no' trust in the government. Perception of the passports as unfairly discriminating was nearly twice as high (45.4%) amongst people who did not trust the government as amongst those who did trust the government (25.0%) (Figures 4 and 5).

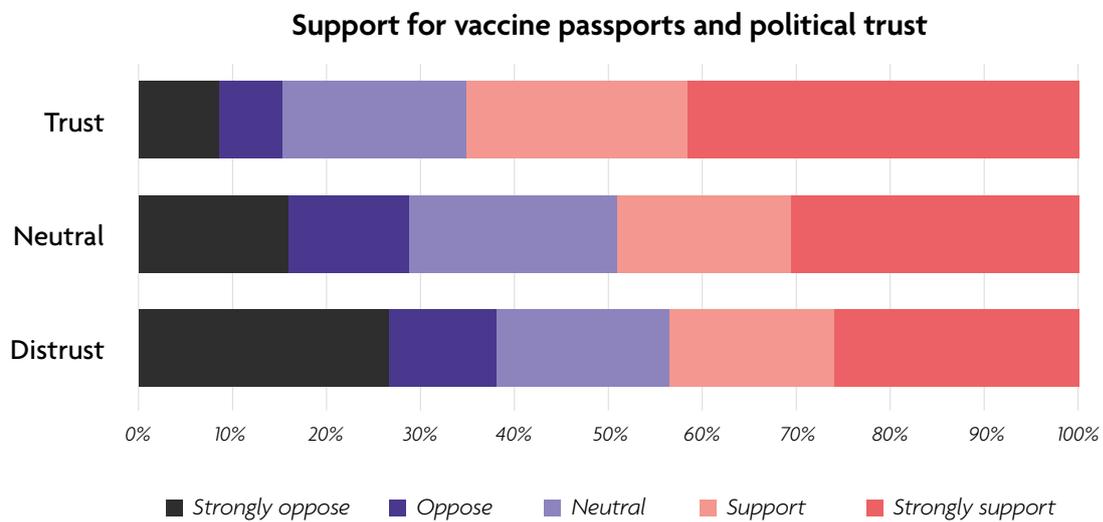


Figure 4: Support for vaccine passports and political trust

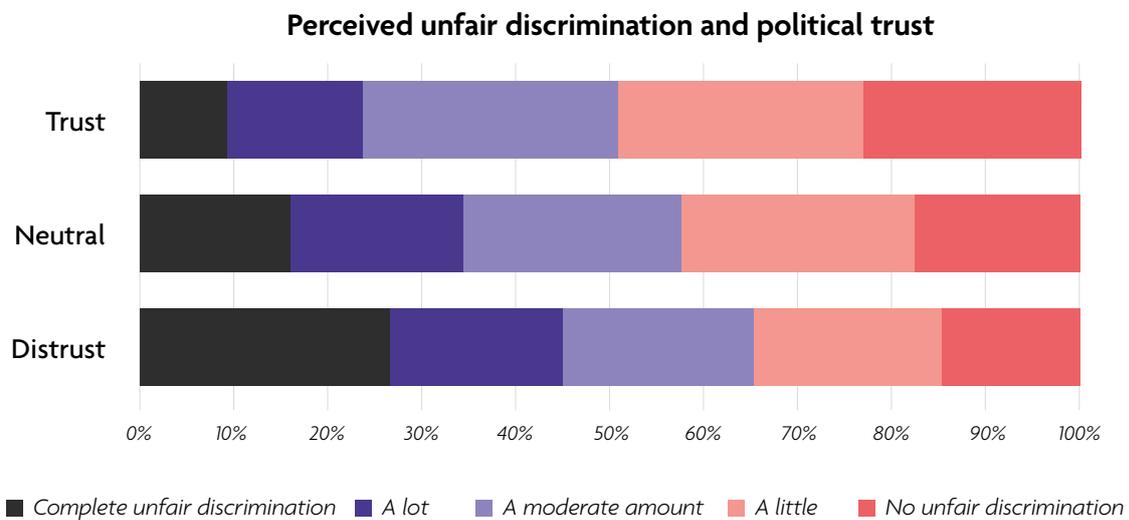


Figure 5: Perceived unfairness and political trust

The third part of our analysis considered whether having already received the vaccine made a difference (Figures 6 and 7). Those who had already received the vaccine were more positive about vaccine passports (67.6%) than those who had not (39.8%). Those who had already received the vaccine were also half as likely to say that passports would be unfair (22.4%) than those who had not received the vaccine (44.7%). But both amongst those who had and those who had not received the vaccine, perceptions that vaccine passports would be more unfair remained significantly associated with being younger, being Black, having lower social status and having lower trust in government.

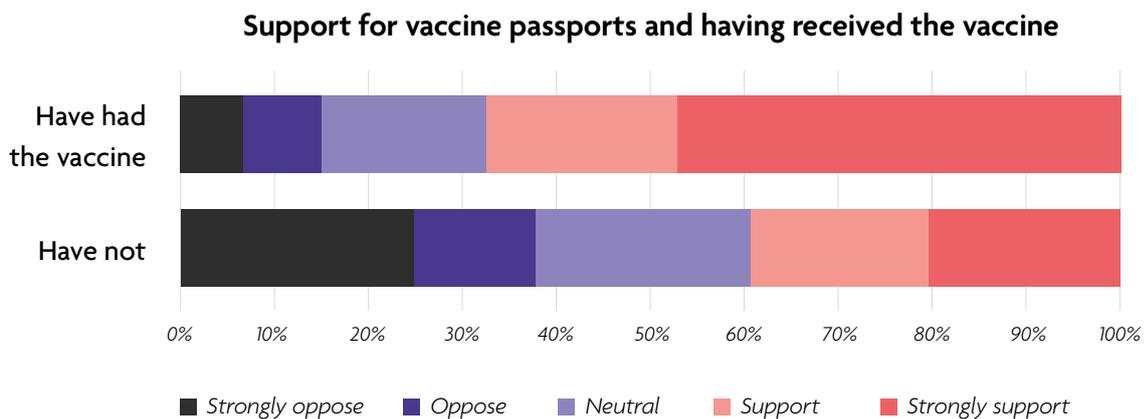


Figure 6: Support for vaccine passports and having received the vaccine

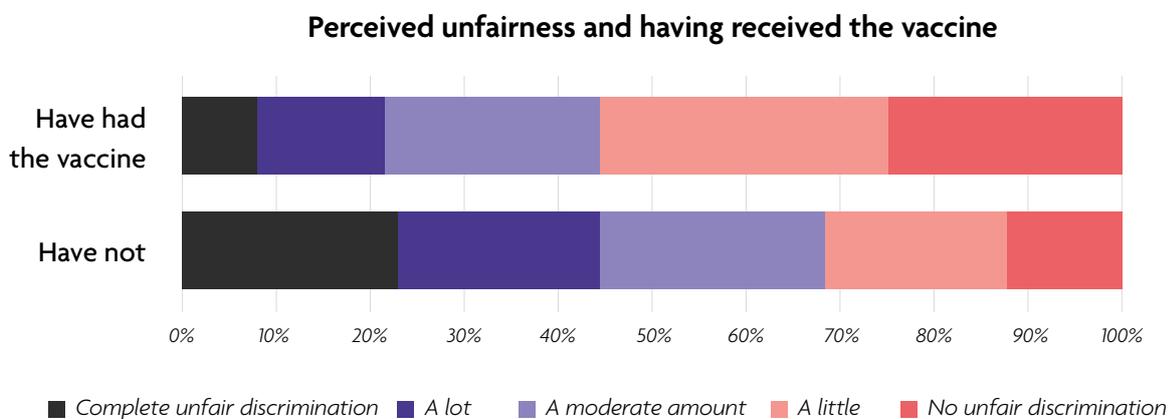


Figure 7: Perceived unfairness and having received the vaccine

Equally interesting is what we did not find. There were no differences in attitudes or perceptions of unfairness associated with respondents' gender, area of the country, disability, sexual orientation, or religion. Moreover, their political orientation made no difference to these perceptions.

Conclusion

Our findings show that opinions on vaccination passports are quite divided. Only a small majority of people support the introduction of vaccine passports, and that support is quite strongly linked to whether or not they themselves have had the vaccine. However, people's social status, age, whether or not they identify as Black, and how much they trust the government all make a difference to their support for vaccination passports and their perception of whether their use would be unfair.

Looking ahead, politicians will need to find strategies to address such divisions in opinion in order to achieve support for COVID-19 mitigation strategies amongst the population as a whole. Whatever approach the government chooses to adopt, political distrust and divisions between people will need to be tackled. Our own research shows that levels of trust are higher at local than national levels, and that trust is more resilient in areas that have invested in social cohesion.² The government will need to ensure that it harnesses trust at local and hyper-local levels to ensure that its strategies for implementing vaccine passports or exiting the pandemic without them are viewed as fair and non-discriminatory.

² Dominic Abrams et al., 'Community, Connection and Cohesion During COVID-19: Beyond Us and Them Report', January 2021
<https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Belong_InterimReport_FINAL-1.pdf>

Appendix: Sample demographics

Demographic categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	4037	43.2
Female	5250	56.1
Undisclosed	64	0.7
Age		
18-24	1060	11.3
25-34	1884	20.1
35-44	1917	20.5
45-54	1514	16.2
55-64	1536	16.4
65-74	1136	12.1
75+	304	3.3
Undisclosed		
Country of residence		
England	8091	86.5
Scotland	635	6.8
Wales	625	6.7
Ethnicity		
White / White British	7509	80.3
Asian / Asian British	854	9.1
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	601	6.4
Mixed / Multiple ethnicity	196	2.1
Other ethnicity	96	1.0
Undisclosed	95	1.0
Political orientation		
Left-wing	4295	45.9
Centre	2834	30.3
Right-wing	2222	23.8
Undisclosed		
COVID-19 vaccination		
Have received a first dose of the vaccine	4034	43.1
Have not received the vaccine	5317	56.9
Total	9351	100

Our sample included participants from Scotland, Wales, and in England the Greater London Area, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, West of England Combined Authority, West Midlands Combined Authority, the county of Kent, and 6 smaller local authorities: Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Calderdale, Peterborough, Walsall, and Waltham Forest). Data also included volunteers and boost samples of Black and Muslim respondents (non-overlapping) from across Britain.

Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network is a charity and membership organisation with the vision of a more integrated and less divided society. Belong connects, supports and mobilises people and organisations across sectors and neighbourhoods via its digital platform, events, training programmes and resources to improve the practice and policy of integration and cohesion.

The Centre for the Study of Group Processes (CSGP) at the University of Kent was founded in 1990 to consolidate the School's excellent international reputation for social psychological research into group processes and intergroup relations. The Centre includes a thriving international research community, involving twelve tenured academic staff, as well as its research fellows and PhD students. The Centre attracts visits and research collaborations from major international researchers, many of whom have formal affiliations with the Centre. **The University of Kent** is a leading UK university producing world-class research, rated internationally excellent and leading the way in many fields of study. Our 20,000 students are based at campuses and centres in Canterbury, Medway, Brussels and Paris.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org