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# Compliance in crisis: Concern, trust and distrustful complacency in the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

Two studies tested a *distrustful complacency* hypothesis, according to which either concern or political trust would be enough to sustain law-abiding attitudes and compliance with health-protective policies during the COVID-19 pandemic; but the absence of both concern and trust would result in markedly lower support and compliance. Study 1 supported this hypothesis with NatCen nationally representative sample of Great Britain ( $N = 2413$ ; weighted regression analyses), focussing on law-abiding attitudes. Study 2 (preregistered) replicated these findings with a representative sample ( $N = 1523$ ) investigating support for COVID-19 policies and compliant behaviour. Participants who were less concerned about the consequences of the pandemic (for themselves and for others) and simultaneously less trustful of the government expressed weaker law-abiding attitudes and reported less compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. These findings have implications for policy and public health strategies in time of crisis.

## KEYWORDS

concern, compliance, COVID-19, distrustful complacency, health-protective behaviour, pandemic, political trust

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic it became clear that people's acceptance of, and compliance with, non-pharmaceutical interventions such as social distancing and lockdowns would be key. Thus, behaviour change, and ultimately psychological science, were of central importance. The present paper contributes to this effort to understand the psychological factors underpinning compliance. We report two studies that tested a *distrustful complacency* hypothesis, according to which trust and concern are two routes that can separately sustain compliance, while the absence of both reduces compliance significantly.

### 1.1 | Concern and compliance

Across many domains, including health, people are more willing to change their behaviour when they are concerned (i.e., more worried and directly involved) about an issue (e.g., Betsch et al., 2018; Iversen & Rundmo, 2002; Tamers et al., 2014). Similarly, people are more supportive of government protective policies when a global threat (such as a pandemic) elicits high levels of anxiety (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). This willingness is not only driven by self-concern but also by concern for others (Betsch et al., 2018; Vietri et al., 2011). Self-concern and other-concern—although theoretically independent—can be strongly intertwined, especially in times of crisis when people might experience identity fusion with their wider social group (Gómez et al., 2020). Concern can also extend to embrace larger social issues (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018). Therefore, during a pandemic people who are more concerned could be expected to be more supportive of, and compliant with, health-protective policies.

### 1.2 | Political trust and compliance

Political trust (the confidence people have in their government and the extent to which they see their government as trustworthy and competent; Levi & Stoker, 2000) provides a further underpinning of law-abiding attitudes, compliance and behaviour change (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Tyler, 2001). For example, during the 2014 Ebola epidemic in Liberia, low trust in the government was related to less compliance with public health policies (Blair et al., 2017). Low political trust also undermines support for strong policies such as quarantine and mandated vaccination by raising fear of abuse of power and unfair treatment of citizens (Taylor-Clark et al., 2005; see also Leavitt, 2003; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic lower political trust was related to lower acceptance of and compliance with health-protective policies (Devine et al., 2021, 2023; Han et al., 2023; Pagliaro et al., 2021).

### 1.3 | Distrustful complacency

Generally, it may be when policy does not appear to serve personal interests that political trust is particularly crucial for public compliance (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). Consistent with this idea, Lalot, Heering, et al. (2022) proposed the distrustful complacency hypothesis that people who are both complacent (about the consequences of the pandemic) and distrustful (of the government) would be least compliant with COVID-19 regulations. Data from small opportunity samples of respondents in France and Italy during lockdown in spring 2020 supported the hypothesis (see also Lalot, Abrams, et al., 2022; Seyd & Bu, 2022; Vasilopoulos et al., 2023).

The present research tests and extends evidence for the distrustful complacency hypothesis using two large and representative samples of the population of Britain. Both studies measured political trust and concern about COVID-19, as well as attitudes towards compliance (or law-abiding attitudes). Study 2 additionally assessed participants' self-reported compliance with COVID-19 regulations.

We expected significant main effects of both concern and political trust, so that lower concern and lower trust should each be associated with weaker law-abiding attitudes (and less compliant behaviour). More importantly, we predicted an interactive effect of trust and concern, so that attitudes should be significantly less positive when both trust and concern are low than when at least one of them is high.

## 2 | STUDY 1

### 2.1 | Method

#### 2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Study 1 relies on data from the first wave of the project 'Will Covid-19 Change What the Public Expect of Government, 2020–2021' by the National Centre for Social Research (Curtice & NatCen Social Research, 2022). This is a nationally representative sample of adults living in randomly sampled households in Great Britain (multi-stage stratified random sample). All demographics are reported in Electronic Supplementary Material ESM1. Data were mostly collected through an on-line questionnaire ( $n = 2212$ ) complemented with phone interviews for those participants who were initially invited to participate in the research online but had not completed the survey after 2 weeks ( $n = 201$ ), resulting in a total  $N = 2413$ . The data collection period spanned 2–26 July 2020 (for further details see NatCen Social Research, 2022).

#### 2.1.2 | Materials

##### *Political trust*

All items are reported in ESM2 alongside a correlation matrix. Two items (also used in past British Social Attitudes surveys) measured political trust (e.g., 'How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?'; 1 = *Just about always*, 4 = *Almost never*). Items were aggregated and reversed-coded so that higher scores represent higher political trust,  $r(2404) = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$  ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ).

##### *Concern about COVID-19*

Three items (specifically developed by NatCen for the COVID project) measured concern about COVID-19 pertaining to (1) The health of yourself and your family, (2) The UK economy, (3) Law and order (1 = *Not at all concerned*, 4 = *Very concerned*). However, the items did not form a reliable aggregate ( $\alpha = 0.47$ ). Investigating the correlation matrix revealed that concern about the economy was only weakly related to the other two. We therefore excluded this item and created an aggregate measure of concern based on the health and law-and-order items,  $r(2354) = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$  ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ). Additional analyses probed for the effect of each item of concern separately and yielded similar results to that of the aggregated score (see ESM3).

##### *Dependent variable: Attitudes towards compliance*

Finally, two items (also used in past British Social Attitudes surveys) measured attitudes towards compliance and potential sanctions for noncomplying individuals (e.g., 'People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences'; 1 = *Agree strongly*, 5 = *Disagree strongly*). Items were aggregated and reversed-coded so that higher scores represent attitudes more supportive of complete compliance,  $r(2400) = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$  ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ).

#### 2.1.3 | Analysis strategy

We conducted a weighted linear regression, using the weights provided in the NatCen dataset. The analysis included political trust (standardised), concern about COVID-19 (standardised) and their interaction. All analyses were conducted on RStudio 2022.12.0 + 353 using packages *stats*, *lm.beta* and *compute.es*.

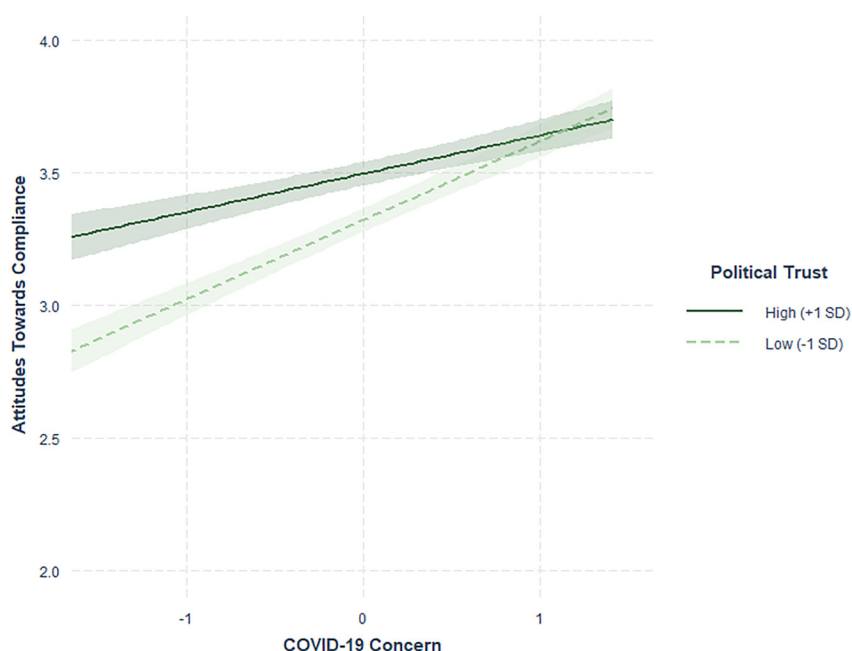


FIGURE 1 Attitudes towards compliance as a function of concern and political trust in Study 1.

## 2.2 | Results

The analysis on attitudes towards compliance ( $F[3, 2394] = 89.08, p < 0.001, R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.10$ ) revealed two significant main effects so that positive attitudes towards compliance increased when political trust increased,  $b = 0.088, SE = 0.016, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.056, 0.119], t(2394) = 5.42, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.106$ , and when concern increased,  $b = 0.219, SE = 0.016, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.187, 0.249], t(2394) = 13.95, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.264$ . More interestingly, the interaction was also significant,  $b = -0.077, SE = 0.015, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.106, -0.047], t(2394) = -5.18, p < 0.001, \beta = -0.094$  (Figure 1).

Decomposition of simple effects revealed that amongst respondents with higher levels of concern (+1 SD), attitudes towards compliance were high and did not depend on level of political trust,  $b = 0.011, SE = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.023, 0.053], t(2394) = 0.49, p = 0.63, \beta = 0.013$ . Amongst respondents with lower concern (-1 SD), attitudes strongly decreased when they also had lower levels of political trust,  $b = 0.165, SE = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.121, 0.208], t(2394) = 7.46, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.200$ . Put differently, amongst respondents who felt more distrustful (-1 SD), there was a strong link between concern and attitudes towards compliance,  $b = 0.296, SE = 0.021, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.254, 0.336], t(2394) = 14.10, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.357$ , whereas this was reduced by more than half amongst respondents who felt more trustful (+1 SD),  $b = 0.141, SE = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.097, 0.185], t(2394) = 6.36, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.171$ .

## 2.3 | Discussion

Results from Study 1 are consistent with our hypothesis that either high concern or high trust is sufficient to induce positive attitudes towards compliance, but that attitudes would be significantly less positive if both concern and trust were low. However, the study only assessed attitudes towards compliance in general and not specifically pertaining to the COVID-19 restrictions. One could also argue that focussing on concern about law and order is too close in content to the outcome (support for stiffer sentences). Nonetheless, analyses focussing on concern about health yielded identical results, strengthening the findings' reliability. In addition, Study 2 extends these initial findings by focussing on attitudes specifically towards COVID-19 regulations as well as participants' own compliance behaviour.

## 3 | STUDY 2

### 3.1 | Methods

#### 3.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Data for Study 2 were collected as part of a large-scale survey of social cohesion in the UK during COVID-19. The distrustful complacency hypothesis was preregistered alongside the measures for concern and political trust, analysis strategy, sample size and rules for exclusion (<https://aspredicted.org/yp3pd.pdf>).

Sample size was determined prior to data collection based on feasibility and available funding. An external research partner (Qualtrics Panels) distributed the online survey, recruiting and remunerating the participants directly. The sample was stratified to be representative on gender and age categories. Data were collected between 7 and 19 May 2020 while the UK had effectively been under its first national lockdown for more than 6 weeks.

1546 participants completed the study but 23 failed an attention check embedded in the questionnaire. As preregistered, they were excluded from analysis. The final sample size was therefore  $N = 1523$  (751 men, 762 women, 10 other or undisclosed,  $M_{\text{age}} = 56.03$ ,  $SD = 14.78$ ). All demographics are reported in ESM1.

#### 3.1.2 | Materials

##### *Political trust*

All items are reported in ESM4. Three items measured political trust (e.g., 'Politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community'; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*), and were aggregated in a single score ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ,  $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ).

##### *Concern about COVID-19*

Three items measured concern about COVID-19. Different from Study 1, these items did not focus on specific sectors (health, economy) but asked about consequences in general (e.g., 'How concerned are you about consequences of the pandemic for the people in your local area?'; 1 = *Not concerned at all*, 7 = *Extremely concerned*). They were aggregated in a single score ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ,  $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ).

##### *Dependent variables: Attitudes towards compliance and self-reported compliant behaviour*

Two items assessed *attitudes towards compliance with COVID-19 restrictions*. The first focused on people in general and the second on the participants themselves ('How important do you think it is that [you/everyone] respect[s] the restrictions enacted by the government?'; 1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Extremely*). To avoid response bias, the items were presented in different sections of the questionnaire (although the order of presentation was kept constant). As they were strongly correlated we aggregated them in a single score,  $r(1544) = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$  ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ).

In addition, *self-reported compliant behaviour* was assessed with a single item ('In all honesty, if you think about your behaviour this past week, how much would you say you respected the government rules about restrictions on movement and distancing [i.e., lockdown and social distancing]?';  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ).

#### 3.1.3 | Analysis strategy

As preregistered, we conducted a linear regression analysis, including political trust (standardised), concern about COVID-19 (standardised) and their interaction. We also conducted an additional analysis (non-preregistered) controlling for all demographics, which yielded identical results (see ESM5). Finally, we conducted a path analysis

(non-preregistered) to explore a mediation effect through attitudes. All analyses were conducted on RStudio 2022.12.0 + 353 using packages *stats*, *lm.beta*, *compute.es* and *lavaan*.

## 3.2 | Results

### 3.2.1 | Preregistered analyses

*Attitudes towards compliance* were regressed on political trust (standardised), concern (standardised) and their interaction,  $F(3, 1519) = 122.00, p < 0.001, R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.193$ . Consistent with Study 1, the analysis revealed two significant main effects so that positive attitudes towards compliance increased when political trust increased,  $b = 0.083, SE = 0.015, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.054, 0.112], t(1519) = 5.56, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.128$ , and when concern increased,  $b = 0.244, SE = 0.015, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.214, 0.273], t(1519) = 16.10, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.376$ . More interestingly, the interaction was again significant,  $b = -0.079, SE = 0.013, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.104, -0.053], t(1519) = -6.01, p < 0.001, \beta = -0.141$  (Figure 2(a)).

Decomposition of simple effects revealed that amongst respondents with higher levels of concern (+1 SD), attitudes towards compliance were high and did not depend on level of political trust,  $b = 0.004, SE = 0.021, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.036, 0.045], t(1519) = 0.21, p = 0.83, \beta = 0.007$ . Amongst respondents with lower concern (-1 SD), attitudes strongly decreased when they also had lower levels of political trust,  $b = 0.163, SE = 0.019, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.124, 0.200], t(1519) = 8.43, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.250$ . Put differently, amongst respondents who felt more distrustful (-1 SD), there was a strong link between concern and attitudes towards compliance,  $b = 0.323, SE = 0.018, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.286, 0.359], t(1519) = 17.53, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.497$ , whereas this was reduced by half amongst respondents who felt more trustful (+1 SD),  $b = 0.165, SE = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.122, 0.207], t(1519) = 7.63, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.254$ .

Second, we turned to *self-reported compliant behaviour* with a similar analysis,  $F(3, 1519) = 45.09, p < 0.001, R^2_{\text{adj}} = 0.080$ . Very consistent with the previous analysis, it revealed two significant main effects so that self-reported compliant behaviour increased when political trust increased,  $b = 0.060, SE = 0.018, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.025, 0.095], t(1519) = 3.37, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.083$ , and when concern increased,  $b = 0.185, SE = 0.018, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.149, 0.220], t(1519) = 10.23, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.255$ . The interaction was again significant,  $b = -0.043, SE = 0.016, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.073, -0.011], t(1519) = -2.72, p = 0.007, \beta = -0.068$  (Figure 2(b)).

Decomposition of simple effects revealed that amongst respondents with higher levels of concern (+1 SD), compliance did not depend on level of political trust,  $b = 0.018, SE = 0.025, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.030, 0.065], t(1519) = 0.72, p = 0.47, \beta = 0.024$ . Amongst respondents with lower concern (-1 SD), compliance decreased when they also had lower levels of political trust,  $b = 0.103, SE = 0.023, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.057, 0.148], t(1519) = 4.48, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.142$ . Put differently, amongst respondents who felt more distrustful (-1 SD), there was a strong link between concern and compliance,  $b = 0.228, SE = 0.022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.184, 0.270], t(1519) = 10.36, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.314$ , whereas this was reduced amongst respondents who felt more trustful (+1 SD),  $b = 0.142, SE = 0.026, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.091, 0.192], t(1519) = 5.53, p < 0.001, \beta = 0.196$ .

### 3.2.2 | Non-preregistered: Mediation through attitudes

In an exploratory manner, we investigated the plausible expectation that the interactive effect of trust and concern on compliant behaviour would be explained by attitudes towards compliance (i.e., mediated moderation). A path analysis (full output in ESM6) showed that attitudes were positively related to compliant behaviour,  $b = 0.660, SE = 0.025, Z\text{-test} = 25.92, p < 0.001$ . When attitudes were included in the model, the residual direct effect of trust  $\times$  concern on compliant behaviour was no longer significant,  $b = 0.009, SE = 0.013, Z\text{-test} = 0.72, p = 0.47$ . Its indirect effect through attitudes was significant (i.e., the bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals did not include zero),  $b = -0.052, SE = 0.009, \text{bootstrapped } 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.070, -0.035]$ .

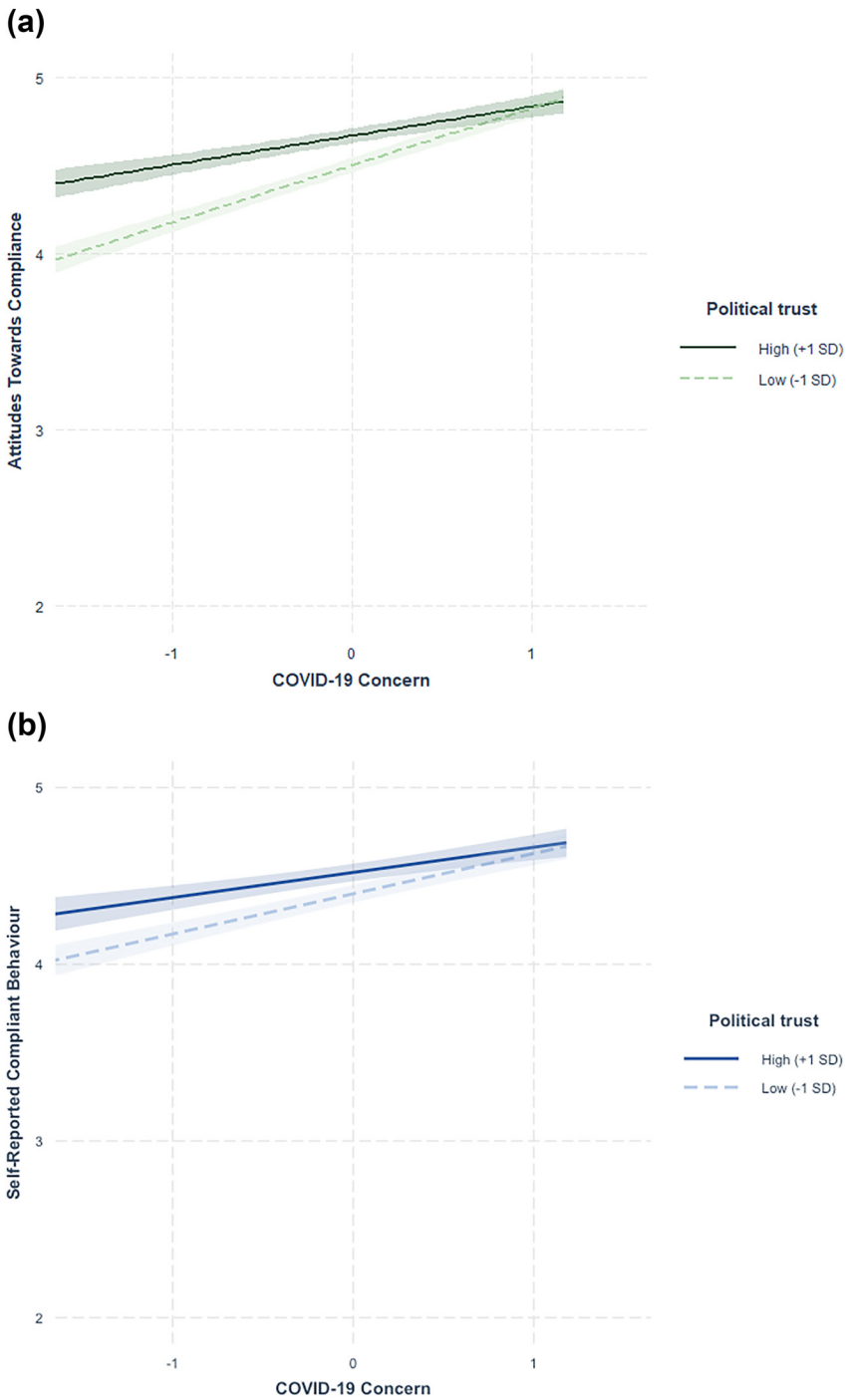


FIGURE 2 Attitudes towards compliance (a) and self-reported compliant behaviour (b) as a function of concern and political trust in Study 2.



## 4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Two studies tested the distrustful complacency hypothesis, according to which either concern or trust would be enough to sustain law-abiding attitudes and compliance with health-protective policies during the COVID-19 pandemic; but the absence of both concern and trust would result in markedly lower attitudes and compliance. Study 1 found support for this hypothesis in a nationally representative sample of Great Britain, focussing on law-abiding attitudes. Study 2 (preregistered) replicated these findings on a second representative sample, investigating support for COVID-19 policies as well as compliant behaviour.

The present research included large and representative samples and timely data collection. However, space limitations in the questionnaires meant that most constructs could only be measured with two or three items, potentially reducing their reliability. Compliant behaviour (Study 2) was measured through self-report, possibly being subject to social desirability bias. It was also fairly high, potentially due to the fact that compliance was, at this point in time, a legal requirement (see Lalot, Heering, et al., 2022). The cross-sectional nature of both studies also limits a causal interpretation of the results. During the pandemic, it would have been unethical to manipulate trust or concern levels. However, future studies should consider alternative experimental designs to explore the interplay between concern and trust.

The findings add substantially to an emerging body of literature pointing to positive effects of both concern and political trust during the pandemic (Lalot, Abrams, et al., 2022; Lalot, Heering, et al., 2022; Seyd & Bu, 2022; Troiano & Nardi, 2021; Vasilopoulos et al., 2023). Crucially, they consistently reveal the importance of considering the interactive rather than simply separate, additive, role of these factors. This opens avenues for future research, as the underlying mechanism (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018) is likely to apply to other areas such as environmental activism, collective action, and reactions to social change.

For policy and public health campaigns this evidence suggests two different strategies for sustaining health protective behaviours. One is to attempt to increase concern amongst those who distrust the government; a second, among those who lack concern, is to bolster trust in government competence. Both strategies have potential downsides. Increasing concern could be unethical (if not based on factual, objective reasons for people to be worried) and could backfire if people focus on coping with fear rather than addressing the problem itself (Witte & Allen, 2000). Increasing political trust is difficult to achieve quickly (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2017). However, it does often increase at the onset of a crisis (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Jennings, 2020), so politicians could capitalise on the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon by using clear and consistent communication (Abrams et al., 2021; Karafillakis et al., 2022), and visibly abiding by their own rules (Davies et al., 2021; Fancourt et al., 2020), thereby maintaining the public's trust and preventing distrustful complacency.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data are publicly available on the OSF page dedicated to the project: <https://osf.io/ym75v>.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

Study 1 was reviewed by NatCen's internal ethics committee. Study 2 received approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Kent.

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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