

# Political Conflict and COVID-19: Evidence from the Machine Learning for Peace Dataset

Jeremy Springman and Erik Wibbels

University of Pennsylvania

## Objective

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, sparking a global wave of emergency measures designed to combat the virus's spread. Using data from the Machine Learning for Peace (MLP) project, we investigate the impact of COVID-19 on political conflict using high-frequency data on government declarations of emergency, civic action, and government coercion.

## The Challenge

Over the last 20 years, a large literature aiming to document and explain 'democratic backsliding' has emerged. This research has advanced broad theories of democratic backsliding, which often point to moments of crisis as critical junctures during which incumbents challenge democratic norms or institutions. The onset of COVID-19 gives researchers an opportunity to assess how a particularly dramatic crisis affected a critical pillar of democracy: civic space. Political competition is the lifeblood of democracy, and the extent of competition is largely determined by how open or closed civic space is in any given country. The COVID pandemic offered aspiring autocrats a unique opportunity to extend backsliding by restricting civic space under the guise of public health.

## Questions and Approach

In this memo, we investigate whether the onset of COVID-19, and the emergency measures that were enacted in response, allowed governments to increase coercive behavior towards citizens or caused a sustained reduction in civic action by citizens. To do so, we compare levels of reporting on civic action (protests and activism) and government coercion (arrests, security force mobilization, raids, lethal and non-lethal violence) in the months immediately before and after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. To better understand the dynamics on the ground, we conduct case studies of six countries (Serbia, Albania, Belarus, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka) to tease out the sequencing of civic action and government coercion after the onset of the pandemic.

## Findings

We have four key findings. First, every country in the sample implemented severe emergency measures during the pandemic, with the intensity of reporting on these measures increasing to unprecedented levels in many countries. In most places, these restrictions remained in-place for several months, and many countries experiencing multiple surges in reporting on emergency measures as measures were rescinded and re-enacted in response to different waves of the virus. Second, levels of government coercion decreased in most countries during the early months of the pandemic (see Figure 1). However, for a majority of countries, we observed spikes in coercion that resembled those in the months preceding COVID within one year of COVID's onset, suggesting that coercion returned to pre-pandemic levels relatively quickly. Third, civic action decreased significantly during the early months of the pandemic, but this decline was short-lived. Within six months, the majority of countries experienced levels of civic action similar to or higher than pre-pandemic levels, with a particularly strong resurgence in Eastern Europe. This rebound in civic activism was both larger and more rapid than that of government coercion. Fourth, the correlation between the size of the rebound in activism and that of coercion is relatively weak, suggesting that renewed civic action was tolerated by most governments. However, countries with the largest rebounds in civic action also saw large rebounds in coercion.

Case studies across six countries suggest that rebounds in civic action were usually unrelated to COVID restrictions, although repression was often justified by governments on public health grounds.

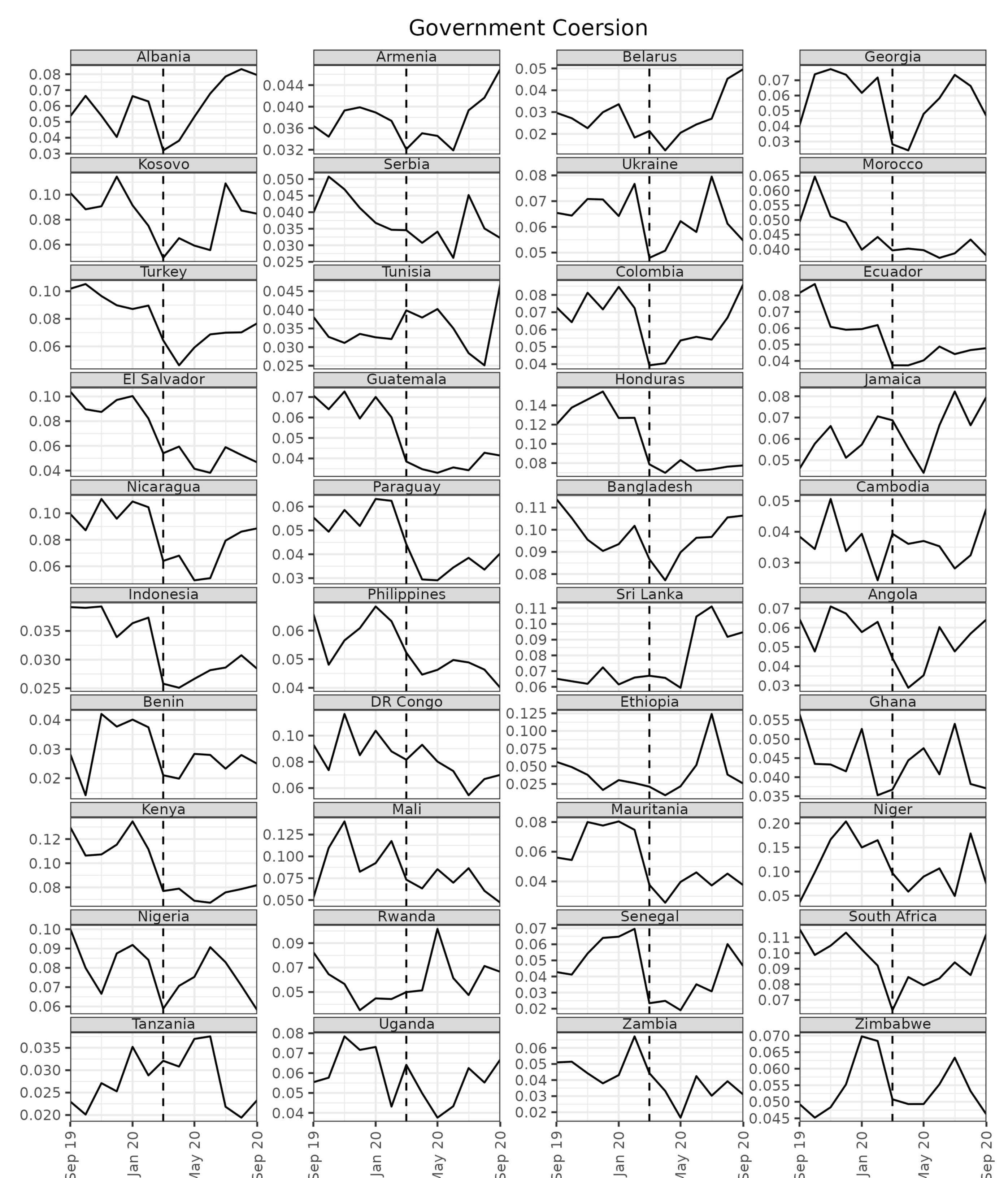


Figure 1: Reporting on events related to government coercion between the six-month period before and after the onset of the COVID pandemic in March 2020.

## Implications

The research exhibits how the onset of COVID dramatically reduced political conflict in the earliest months of the pandemic, as restrictions on assembly and concerns about public health dampened civic activism and reduced governments' use of state coercion. Importantly, these findings suggest that the ability of governments to use crises as a means to discourage political mobilization and restrict civic space may be more limited than thought.

## References

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## Acknowledgements

This study is part of the (INSPIRES) project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance.

## Additional Information

- Email us at [mlpeace-devlab@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:mlpeace-devlab@sas.upenn.edu)
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