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Public Trust, Policing, and the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Evidence from an Electoral Authoritarian Regime *

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Abstract

We examine how trust shapes compliance with public health restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda. We use an endorsement experiment embedded in a mobile phone survey to show that messages from government officials generate more support for public health restrictions than messages from religious authorities, traditional leaders, or international NGOs. We further show that compliance with these restrictions is strongly positively correlated with trust in government, but only weakly correlated with trust in local authorities or other citizens. The relationship between trust and compliance is especially strong for the Ministry of Health and—more surprisingly—the police. We conclude that trust is crucial for encouraging compliance but note that it may be difficult to change, particularly in settings where governments and police forces have reputations for repression.

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