



Strengthening Democratic Governance  
for Climate Transitions

## **D2.2 Learning lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis responses (D5)**

WP2 – Analytical and empirical underpinnings



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## EC Summary Requirements

### 1. Changes with respect to the DoA

*[Describe here any changes made with respect to the Description of Action (DoA) with justification or insert the following phrase in case there are no changes:]*

No changes with respect to the work described in the DoA.

### 2. Dissemination and uptake

*[Explain here who will/could use this deliverable, within the project or outside the project.]*

### 3. Short summary of results (<250 words)

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis of far-reaching societal, economic, and political impacts. Responses to the pandemic were no less far-reaching. This report presents a systematic literature review of 150 peer-reviewed articles on how European democracies responded to the COVID-19 crisis with the aim of drawing out useful learnings for climate democracy. In this review, we thus build upon the RETOOL analytical framework to distill lessons about the effectiveness and democratic quality of governance responses to the pandemic in Europe, and what these experiences teach us for future crises – notably the climate crisis. Key lessons show that robust democratic institutions, anchored in legal safeguards against executive overreach and sustained by cultures of consensus, pluralism and tolerance, are crucial to withstand crises. This is a relatively rare combination however, and one that cannot be guaranteed during times of crisis. This points to a need for new participatory forums to bolster existing democratic institutions. The review also looks at issues of justice, since democratic governance should produce just decisions and this is a key issue in climate democracy discussions. The reviewed literature sees justice dimensions as deeply intertwined: threats to recognitional justice often coincide with distributive and procedural injustices, again pointing to a need for more meaningful and inclusive participation. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic is also read as a critical juncture, exposing institutional weaknesses while also opening space for democratic innovation. However, most studies focus on resilience over renewal, and justice aspects are rarely addressed explicitly. Future research should clarify the meaning of democracy and what democratic innovation, especially concerning non-majoritarian, deliberative, and prefigurative democratic movements, and examine how diverse justice dimensions can be integrated into emergency governance.

### 4. Evidence of accomplishment

This report.

## Preface

The overall goal of the RETOOL project is to advance our understanding of how to address the twin challenges of responding to the climate imperative while strengthening and reinvigorating democratic governance. The project has four overarching objectives: (i) To deepen our understanding of the relationship between democratic governance and the climate imperative by developing a novel analytical framework and creating new empirical underpinnings, including important new open-access datasets; (ii) To understand how a variety of democratic institutions across Europe are responding to the climate challenge, including learning lessons from history and studying new and innovative democratic practices; (iii) To contribute to reinvigorating democratic governance in Europe by developing and synthesising new knowledge and insights on climate democracy, and presenting them in a range of high-impact formats; and (iv) To serve as a bridge between academic research on climate democracy innovations and policymakers and practitioners, as well as civil society and the wider public. RETOOL brings together an international and interdisciplinary consortium, with partners from Western Europe (Ireland, UK, Belgium, Austria), Northern Europe (Finland), Eastern Europe (Estonia), and Southern Europe (Italy, Greece), combining expertise in political science, political sociology, deliberative democracy, environmental law, European studies, and public administration. The consortium includes a democracy practitioner foundation (DDF), and all partners are closely associated with practitioner and civil society networks and involved in hands-on activities. RETOOL will be undertaken by a mature, settled consortium that has significant experience of working together, with six of our nine partners core members of the EU-funded Jean Monnet Network GreenDeal-NET.

Consortium Partner	Acronym	Country	Logo
Dublin City University	DCU	IR	
Vrije Universiteit Brussel	VUB	BE	
Università degli studi di Trento	UNITN	IT	
Universiteit Gent	UGent	BE	
Universität für Bodenkultur Wien	BOKU	AT	
University of Eastern Finland	UEF	FI	
HOLISTIC S.A.	HOL	EL	
Foundation for Science and Liberal Arts Domus Dorpatensis	DDF	EE	
London School of Economics and Political Science	LSE	UK	

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis of far-reaching societal, political, and economic impacts. Emergency responses were equally wide-ranging, often implemented through exceptional instruments that, at least in the short-term, bypassed established democratic procedures. While these responses sometimes delivered effective crisis management, they also exposed vulnerabilities in democratic governance, sometimes leading to the erosion of established democratic norms. During the pandemic, policymakers reacted to developments on a day-to-day basis with limited knowledge and high uncertainty. By synthesising knowledge on how European democracies navigated these challenges, this systematic literature review offers lessons for future crises, notably the climate crisis, which similarly demands urgent policy choices amid uncertainty and a politicisation of knowledge. The experience of COVID-19 provides transferable insights into how democracy and justice can be safeguarded and strengthened under pressure.

This review builds upon the analytical framework of the RETOOL project (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2024) to assess what existing literature reveals about the effectiveness and democratic quality of COVID-19 governance in Europe. The work is guided by the following overarching research question: what lessons can we draw from the literature studying COVID-19 responses for democratic governance responses in crisis conditions? This systematic literature review draws upon 150 peer-reviewed journal articles and follows PRISMA reporting guidelines for a transparent and replicable approach. The review was guided by a codebook with three components: (1) descriptive metadata (publication year, field, methods, geographic focus); (2) democratic governance definitions, determinants, challenges and outcomes; and (3) justice dimensions (distributional, recognitional, procedural, etc.).

Of the 150 articles included, 81% were empirical studies (of which 59% qualitative) predominantly published in political science journals. Just over half the articles (52%) offered an explicit definition of democratic governance: most referred to notions of liberal democracy, based on values such as pluralism, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights. Others refer to representative democracy, while only seven articles specifically refer to deliberative and participatory governance. This points to an underlying tendency in the literature to treat democracy as a given, rather than as an evolving concept.

The review identifies a range of political, institutional, and cultural determinants that shaped democratic responses to COVID-19. Robust democratic institutions, protected by constitutional safeguards, cultures of consensus, pluralism, tolerance, and public trust helped uphold democratic norms and weather the crisis in some established democracies. Yet institutional strength alone, particularly in the absence of cultures of political trust, is not sufficient to protect democratic governance according to the articles we review. Weaker or younger democracies faced greater democratic decline due to executive overreach or technocratic drift. Where cultural and normative determinants such as consensus, pluralism, tolerance, and political trust are lacking, sustained attention to public attitudes, pluralism, and inclusive practices is needed. These elements are crucial to counteract public distrust, often stemming from executive aggrandisement, technocratic shortcuts, centralised decision-making, restrictive decisions, and weakened accountability – all straining elements that arose from the review.

The pandemic revealed that crises can also act as critical junctures, exposing and intensifying vulnerabilities within democratic governance, but at the same time providing opportunities for democratic resurgence and innovation. Our review shows that trust, transparency, broad and inclusive participation, and genuine deliberation emerge as key determinants of strengthened legitimacy and justice in crisis governance. Strengthening transparency and participation also helps protect recognitional justice (by avoiding stigmatisation), distributive justice (by bolstering solidarity and inclusive decisions), and procedural justice (by providing new forums). The review further shows how justice dimensions are deeply interconnected, and how crises can allow authorities to magnify existing injustices, whether consciously or not.

In the context of climate democracy, bolstering existing democratic institutions with new participatory spaces is key for delivering a just transition. These spaces allow for the inclusion of diverse voices and a better understanding of how costs and benefits are distributed. The literature we reviewed shows distrust stemming from restrictive, undemocratic decisions, a circumstance that is mirrored in public reactions to some climate

policies. This highlights the urgent need to strengthen democratic institutions. While many of the threats to democratic governance during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed with reference to weaker democracies, some articles also warn how strong and established democracies are not immune in the longer term. The rise of exclusionary political forces, such as right-wing populism, and their subsequent backtracking on climate objectives in these very countries, underlines the need for continued attention to how democracies respond to crisis conditions.

However, the review found relatively little detailed attention to democratic innovations, deliberative democracy, and other complementary participatory approaches. Most studies focused on how democratic governance unfolded during the pandemic, with an emphasis on democratic resilience rather than renewal. In addition, most focused on established institutions and procedures and public opinion rather than citizen-led or bottom-up forms of participation. Therefore, future work should assess how existing democratic institutions can be shored up with new forums for participation to combat threats to trust in democracy and create a long-term culture of democracy. This highlights a need for more research attention on what "democracy" means in a crisis context, moving beyond traditional liberal representative democracy to include non-majoritarian, deliberative, and prefigurative democratic movements.

The review further identified a striking lack of explicit attention to aspects of justice in crisis contexts. Only one third of articles engaged meaningfully with any justice dimension. Most articles were primarily interested in the effectiveness of governance responses or public support for stringent policy measures, rather than evaluating how just those governance responses were. This is a significant oversight given that trust is frequently identified as a key determinant for democratic interventions. Understanding the interplay of these justice dimensions is critical, especially as rising conflicts over the just transition underscore the need for more research on justice in democratic decision-making. Future work should thus focus on understanding and integrating various dimensions of justice within crisis policymaking.

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# 1. Introduction

This report provides the results of a systematic review of academic literature that aimed to draw out the lessons from research on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in European democracies. Its principle aim is to highlight what, if any, lessons can be learnt about democratic governance responses during crises from the literature on the response to COVID-19 in Europe?

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis of far-reaching impacts, in terms of geographic scope, and political, societal and economic implications. The responses to the pandemic were no less far-reaching, with new, emergency policy instruments adopted. The emergency politics of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted, at least over the short-term, in the breakdown of previous ways of governing in democratic contexts (Alteri et al 2021). Yet it also saw the rise of new forms of governance processes, sometimes leading to effective policy implementation, and sometimes leading to the erosion of established democratic norms.

In this review, we build upon the foundational analytical framework of the RETOOL project (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2024) to assess what existing literature teaches us about the effectiveness and democratic quality of the governance responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide crisis, and policymakers reacted to developments on a day-by-day basis, relying on incomplete knowledge on the causes of the virus and solutions to halting its spread. Synthesising knowledge on the varied responses to the pandemic through a systematic literature review promises to reveal important insights that can be applied in future crisis contexts, including how the climate crisis can be governed in democratic countries.

The main purpose of this review is twofold. First, we aim to identify and draw on lessons learned from the management of the COVID-19 pandemic to underpin our study of the democratic responses to the climate crisis across the RETOOL project. Second, we aim to highlight key practical lessons for governance and policymaking to address the twin challenges of the governance of the climate crisis and of strengthening democracy. An additional outcome of this review is the identification of research gaps and research questions for future exploration. Although this outcome was not an explicit aim of our review, we provide our assessment of the state of research knowledge as a foundation for the RETOOL project and also to the wider research community.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a critical opportunity to learn how democracy can be strengthened in the context of the climate crisis. Beyond the fact that the nature of the COVID-19 virus is itself linked to climate change and biodiversity loss (IPBES 2020), the pandemic raised a host of governance challenges that are parallel in some respects to those posed by climate change. First, like climate change, the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in a context of considerable uncertainty, fast emerging, and politicised information and knowledge. Considering how democratic institutions in different European contexts responded, where they proved resilient, and where they faltered, can thus inform ideas of climate democracy. More specifically, existing literature may tell us how policymaking institutions can deal with emerging knowledge, with the politicisation of knowledge and its effects on democratic institutions and trust, and where they may need to be strengthened, invigorated, or reformed to be better placed to cope.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic raised questions about the provision of justice in crisis contexts. Justice is a key element in the RETOOL analytical framework that addresses the normative side of climate democracy. In the pandemic, justice issues like those explored in our project framework came to the fore in the clearly differentiated experiences of the virus and the governance of the pandemic in different societal groups, along lines of geography, ethnicity, gender, class, and more. These differentiated experiences around issues ranging from access to democratic processes, healthcare services, economic support, vaccines, green spaces, and more, mirror the claims of literature on environmental justice included in our analytical framework under the classifications of distributional, recognitional, corrective, transitional, and procedural justice. Thus, by considering how existing literature on management of the pandemic deals with questions of democracy and democratic institutions, on the one hand, and on questions of justice, on the other, this report informs various future tasks within the RETOOL project.

The report is structured as follows. In section 2, we present the methodological approach of this systematic review. We describe the process of agreeing upon our search string and establishing our codebook, and how



we carried out our review of the articles included in our database. In section 3, we provide an overview of the results of our analysis. This is divided into three subsections. We first provide an overview of the descriptive results, highlighting the types of articles, the field of study and the methodological approach of the articles reviewed. Second, we discuss the results of our review of democratic governance interventions, paying particular attention to the key lessons identified in the literature. Third, we provide the results of our review of the presence and application of concepts of justice in the literature studying governance interventions during COVID-19. In section 4, we discuss our results, place them within the context of wider lessons for strengthening democracy and advancing the climate transition. Finally, we conclude by highlighting key lessons from the review and identifying gaps in knowledge that require attention.

## 2. Methodology and approach

We followed a standard systematic literature review process, using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews) reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Figure 1 below shows the PRISMA flow diagram, explaining the choices made to include or exclude articles from our study.

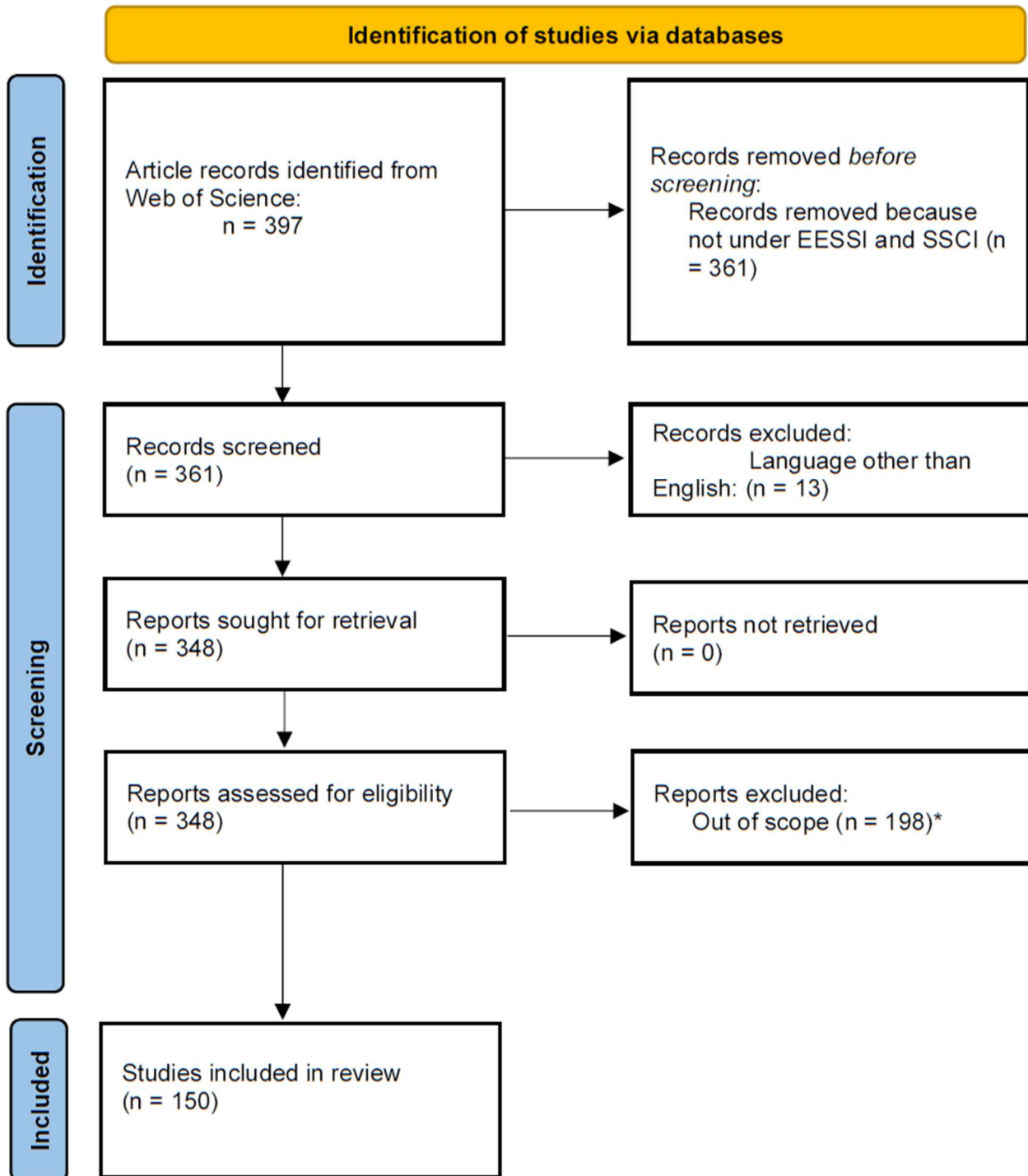
A systematic literature review is a structured method for integrating the best available research on a given question or topic through a transparent, replicable, and bias-minimising process (Siddaway et al., 2019; Lame, 2019; Chapman, 2021). It follows a comprehensive and clearly documented approach, including the specification of search terms and databases, the use of the PRISMA flow diagram to track inclusion and exclusion decisions, and the development of a codebook, supported by intercoder reliability checks (Siddaway et al., 2019; Shaffril et al., 2021; Gavine et al., 2018). SLRs are particularly valuable for synthesising large and diverse bodies of literature, integrating various forms of evidence, and identifying directions for future research (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Zaki et al., 2022; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2024; Mangas-Vega et al., 2018). Despite their strengths, SLRs are time- and resource-intensive, and their findings are shaped by the quality of the underlying studies (Gavine et al., 2018; Chapman, 2021). Nonetheless, this approach is highly suitable for the present report, as it enables us to draw robust lessons on democratic governance in crisis contexts. It also contributes to shaping a new research agenda and supports the broader aims of the RETOOL project.

### 2.1 Selecting the articles and building our database

The team of researchers working on this task developed a protocol for establishing a database of articles for systematic review based on the objectives of the RETOOL project. With the focus on democracy in Europe, the need to focus on literature studying governance responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and an interest in crisis response in democratic systems, we proceeded by searching for the following terms in Web of Science, under all categories: 'COVID-19' or 'COVID19' AND 'democratic' or 'democracy' AND 'Europe' or 'European', filtered to include only scientific journal articles (aiming for peer-reviewed scientific literature only). The search was carried out on 26 September 2024, and we received 397 results.

We then filtered our search further by opting for results from the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and the 'Emerging Sources Citation Index' (ESCI), reducing the relevant results to 361. These 361 articles formed our core database (see figure 1).

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram



\*Articles were considered as falling outside the scope of this review if they focused on non-democratic countries; if they mentioned COVID-19, but did not study governance responses; if they looked only at democratic countries outside Europe.

## 2.2 Developing our codebook

Once our database of articles was built, the team of researchers discussed and established the codebook of analysis for the screening and review stages. The codebook was built in an iterative process, requiring several meetings of the research team and an engagement with wider literature to establish joint understanding among the team, with the following aims.

First, the codebook needed to gather sufficient descriptive information about the articles to learn about the fields, methods, and units of analysis frequently examined in the literature. Second, the codebook needed to assess how democracy and democratic governance were conceptualised in the articles studied, to ensure that meaningful results would be available to the RETOOL project. Together, these form the two main categories of codes that are necessary to identify and understand the key lessons from literature studying the responses to COVID-19. These two categories of codes are therefore the main focus of this report, and respond to the overarching research question: what lessons can we learn for democratic governance responses during crises from the literature studying COVID-19 responses?

However, we went a step further in the development of our codebook to look also at a third category of codes: those related to justice. Building on the researchers’ own knowledge of wider literature on democracy and climate change as discussed briefly in the introduction, and relying to a great degree on RETOOL’s analytical framework (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2024), the codebook included codes related to the consideration of justice because we wanted to find out if justice was a point of analysis or research in the democratic governance responses in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1.** Codebook terms

<b>Code category</b>	<b>List of codes</b>
Descriptive codes	Article title – publication year – authors – publication/source title – article type – journal field – method – analytical method – data sources – region of study – main theoretical lens – policy domain
Democratic governance codes	Democratic governance definition – determinants of democratic interventions – outcomes of democratic governance – challenges
Justice codes	Distributional (in)justice – recognitional (in)justice – corrective (in)justice – transitional (in)justice – procedural (in)justice

Simply listing the codes alone was insufficient before starting our review. The research team therefore also agreed on how to complete the codebook, ensuring we had a shared understanding of the definitions for each code. While many codes required no discussion (e.g. article title, etc.), we made several decisions on how to report on the data for the second and third categories of codes. Codes on democratic governance, such as the definition for democratic governance used in the article, or the (implicit or explicit) understanding of the determinants of democratic innovations in the article, etc., required closer reading of the text, and free text data entry. We also recognised that some of our codes would not be easy to identify, as not all scholars or articles present their understanding of all of these points explicitly. Therefore, not all codes could be completed for all articles. This was even more the case for the third category of codes. As a team, we relied on the definitions for the dimensions of justice as outlined in RETOOL’s analytical framework (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2024): on distributional, recognitional, corrective, transitional and procedural justice.

To operationalise the definitions for our review, we discussed and identified some elements or examples for each justice code that we could search for in our review of the articles in our database. Some of these elements were identified before coding processes began while others were fleshed out following initial rounds of coding and follow-up meetings with the research team. These elements, or examples, were particularly helpful for coding for different dimensions of justice when these were not explicitly defined in the articles we reviewed. Table 2 lists the definitions for the justice codes, as provided in the RETOOL analytical framework, and our identified coding elements or examples.

**Table 2.** Justice code definitions, and elements or examples

Justice code	Definition from RETOOL framework	Elements/examples
<b>Distributional justice</b>	"Distributional justice (or equity) scholarship grew from concerns about inequitable distribution of environmental 'bads'. Equity is what most people think about when they envision justice (Schlosberg 2013). This type of justice is seen as being essential to good democratic governance, and to achieving a just transition for a climate-changed world (Shue 1992; Fiorino 2018)."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vaccine distribution: equitable or unevenly divided amongst segments of the population?</li> <li>• Awareness of lockdown campaigns, vaccine availability, public health measures: some segments of the population left in the dark?</li> <li>• Disproportionate burdens of lockdowns on some segments of the population</li> <li>• NGOs helping those most vulnerable to COVID-19/lockdown measures: elderly, migrants, disabled, domestic violence victims etc.</li> <li>• Community efforts assisting those most vulnerable to COVID-19/lockdown measures (Elderly, migrants, disabled domestic violence victims etc.)</li> <li>• To what degree did governments consider social impact on those most vulnerable to COVID-19 and its lockdown measures? Lessons beyond those of an economic nature.</li> </ul>
<b>Recognitional justice</b>	"A recognitional justice-oriented concept of representation also includes decolonising decision making in a way that equally values feminine, indigenous, non-western, traditional, queer and other forms of seeing, valuing, and communicating that have been, and are still currently, marginalised in democratic institutions (Cini & Felicetti 2018; Pickering et al. 2022)."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement of social science or humanities voices in crisis governance cells (sociologists, philosophers/ethics experts, historians etc.)</li> <li>• Consideration of gender, ethnic minority, LGBTQ, and other perspectives and experiences in lockdown and COVID-19 restriction measure policies</li> <li>• Recognition of the intrinsic worth of nature for human wellbeing?</li> </ul>
<b>Corrective justice</b>	"Corrective justice is tied to accountability because of the focus on redress of past wrongs and attempts to compensate those harmed (Zimm et al 2024)."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of lockdown, restriction, inaction policy failure</li> <li>• Reform of policies as a result of acknowledged failure</li> </ul>
<b>Transitional justice</b>	"Transitional justice, related to how actions are sequenced, relates to effectiveness, as the transition will only occur if policies work as intended (Zimm et al 2024)."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any reforms of covid-19 policy measures?</li> </ul>
<b>Procedural justice</b>	"Procedural justice is associated with participation when participation is widely and fairly available to all regardless of beliefs and identity characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (Zimm et al 2024)."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence of public consultations</li> <li>• Participation in crisis governance bodies -- which perspectives are considered (natural or life science, social science, humanities?)</li> <li>• Anti-lockdown protests: feelings of disenfranchisement from various segments of the population?</li> <li>• Deliberative Fora? Referenda?</li> <li>• Public involvement in multiple areas of crisis response?</li> </ul>

Table 2 source for definitions: *RETOOL Analytical Framework, Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2024.*

## 2.3 Screening the articles

Once we had established and agreed upon the codebook, and once we had agreed on the definitions for each code term, we began the article screening process. In a first trial step, each team member reviewed 10 articles as a means to test the ease by which we could complete the codebook. After this first trial review, we met and discussed the results in detail. We found that the codebook as established was appropriate and useful, with additional examples/elements added under some of the categories. We then continued with our analysis, with each team member reviewing an agreed number of articles before a monthly team meeting to discuss progress and address any challenges that arose. The most frequent challenge was accessing some of the articles. However, as the team members were based at different universities, we were able to redistribute reviewing responsibilities to make sure that the coder with access was responsible for reviewing that article.

In the screening round, we paid close attention to which articles should be included or excluded in our final review. Articles that were not published in English were excluded (see Figure 1), but this was not a large portion of our original article database. Articles that were clearly out of scope, or of highly questionable quality, were also excluded. Articles were deemed out of scope if they did not study COVID-19 responses (e.g. if COVID-19 was mentioned in the article as a background variable but not the focus of study); if they did not study democratic countries; or if they studied only democratic countries outside Europe. Articles that carried out a comparative analysis that included at least one democratic European country were included, if deemed relevant.

As a result of the screening process, 150 articles were included in our final database. These 150 articles were then analysed and reviewed in more detail, with the code categories 'democracy' and 'justice' completed.

## 2.4 Intercoder reliability check

All articles were analysed and reviewed separately by one member of the research team. The results of the review were discussed in monthly meetings, meaning that there was already high confidence on the reliability of the review results.

Nevertheless, the research team developed a procedure for a further intercoder reliability check. We assigned a random selection of between 10 and 15 coded articles for a second review by another coder in the team. These checks took place between April and May 2025, with the result that the majority of reviews and analyses aligned with the original coder's assessment. In those cases where there were differences between the coders this usually concerned the decision about whether the article was suitable for inclusion in the sample or not. In these cases, it was decided to exclude the articles from the final review.

As a result, we have high confidence that the 150 articles included in our final database are of good quality and highly relevant for our purposes.

### 3. Results

We present the results of our review across the three categories of coded terms: (1) codes providing key information on the articles in our database; (2) codes providing data on how the articles approached democratic governance; (3) codes providing data on whether or how the articles engaged with key justice concepts.

#### 3.1 Analysing the types and approaches of the articles reviewed

This section provides the results of the analysis of our first category of codes: the descriptives of the articles that fall within the scope of our review, including field of study, approach and main theoretical lens.

Given the focus on policy responses to COVID-19, the earliest publication date for the articles was in 2020 (15 articles, 10%). Since we carried out our search in September 2024, the latest publication date is 2024 (30 articles, 20%), meaning that articles published after September 2024 were not included in our review. In the final database, 32 articles (21%) under review were published in 2021, 40 (27%) in 2022 and 33 (22%) in 2023.

The overwhelming majority of the articles were empirical in nature (121, 81%), with 25 articles (17%) published being entirely conceptual and 4 articles (3%) taking a conceptual approach supported by empirical analysis.

Of the 150 articles included in our full review and analysis, the majority were published in political science journals. Table 3 shows the distribution of articles across different journal disciplines. Under the category 'other', we include articles from journals in political economy (5); European studies (4); interdisciplinary social sciences (4); area studies (3); economics (3); international relations (3), and many other fields that are recorded just once in our database (such as education studies, accounting, and public health, among others).

**Table 3.** Study field of reviewed articles

Political science	Law	Policy and governance studies	Sociology	(Political) Communication and media studies	Other
58 (39%)	14 (9%)	17 (11%)	8 (5%)	11 (8%)	42 (28%)

In addition, the majority of the reviewed articles employed qualitative methods (88 out of 150, 57%), while 55 (38%) employed quantitative methods and 7 (5%) used mixed methods approaches. The analytical approaches employed and the sources of data used varied greatly. Table 4 shows the distribution of the most frequent analytical methods used. Surveys were a main source of data for many quantitative studies, with survey analysis being an important analytical approach that includes a variety of statistical analytical approaches. Other quantitative studies carried out statistical regression analysis or employed other statistical analytical approaches to study national statistics across many countries, or to study a database of statistics on the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and policy responses. In the qualitative studies, there was a much higher variety of analytical methods applied, drawing on different types of data. Fifteen studies in our review carried out comparative case study analyses, the majority comparing two or more countries. One comparative case study approach included a comparative study across different policy domains in the European Union. In addition, nine articles focused on a single case study (one country, or the EU). Literature review was used as the main approach in 8 articles, with another 8 employing discourse analysis. The large category of 'other analytical methods' includes legal analysis (7, 5%); regression analysis using statistical databases (7, 5%); experimental surveys (7, 5%); policy analysis (7, 5%); media analysis (4, 3%); narrative analysis (3, 2%), among others. In addition, a high number of articles in our database (21, 14%) provide no clear indication of their analytical method. This overlaps considerably with articles providing a conceptual contribution, and thus relying on argumentation based on (selected) literature and previous studies.

**Table 4.** Analytical method

Survey analysis	Comparative case study	Content analysis	Case study	Literature review	Discourse analysis	Other analytical methods
23 (15%)	15 (10%)	14 (9%)	9 (6%)	8 (5%)	8 (5%)	82 (55%)

The geographic focus of study of the articles in our database is dominated by European countries and the European Union. This is simply because of the scope of our review and our early decision to limit the review to articles that relate to or study one or more countries in Europe, or the European Union (34 articles, 23% focus on the European Union). However, there are several studies that have a wider geographic scope. Thirteen articles claim a global scope for their research, five of which are conceptual articles. Six articles (4%) focus on democracies both inside and outside the European Union. Three conceptual articles (2%) provide no geographic scope, but relate only to democratic countries, while two articles (1.3%) study 'Western democracies' without defining the geographic limits of this region. Except for three articles (2%) that focus on Iran, the US, and (not always democratic) Western Balkans countries that have been included in our review for their conceptual contribution, all remaining articles study either one or more countries, of which at least one is a European democratic country (89 articles, 59%). This does not necessarily reflect any concentration in the literature on COVID-19 on European contexts, but rather reflects our selection criteria.

In terms of the theoretical lenses applied in the articles in this review, not all articles presented a clear theoretical perspective. Some articles provided no theoretical framework and did not discuss their presented results in relation to theoretical or conceptual literature. We therefore could not code for theoretical perspectives for 23 articles (15%). However, for the remaining articles, we could either identify explicit theoretical perspectives, or we could identify variables of theoretical interest in the articles studied. Many articles employed several theoretically relevant themes or variables in their studies. Because of this, articles were often counted under multiple codes for theoretical perspective, meaning the final count is more than the total 150 articles. In table 5, we present the most frequently mentioned theoretical perspectives and/or themes or variables of theoretical interest. Themes and theoretical perspectives not listed in table 5 include deliberation (6, 4%); legal theory (4, 3%); executive aggrandizement (3, 2%); misinformation (3, 2%); feminism (2, 1.3%); democratic resilience (2, 1.3%); historical institutionalism (2, 1.3%); authoritarian governance theory (2, 1.3%); social movements or social theory (2, 1.3%); regime change (2, 1.3%); public acceptance (2, 1.3%); technocratic governance (1, 0.6%), among others.

**Table 5.** Theoretical lens or theoretical variable of interest

Populism (and far right politics)	Crisis (of democracy or governance)	Trust	Legitimacy and accountability	Deliberation	Politicisation, polarisation, and/or securitisation
10 (7%)	14 (9%)	29 (19%)	10 (7%)	6 (4%)	7 (5%)

Finally in this category of descriptive codes, we also coded the articles for the policy domain or empirical policy focus of study. Not all articles included were empirical studies, and many articles did not explicitly focus on specific policy domains. Many of the comparative case studies or single case studies, for example, focused on a wide range of policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, while many other articles studied the wider democratic context of COVID-19 responses (18 articles, 12%). All articles study COVID-19 as a policy domain to some degree. But we have articles that also focus on the following policy domains: broader (public) health policy (7, 5%); budget and/or fiscal policy (4, 3%); economic policy (4, 3%); sport policy (1, 0.6%); competition policy (1, 0.6%); climate policy (1, 0.6%); and social welfare (1, 0.6%), among others.

## 3.2 Understanding democratic governance responses to COVID-19

Our second category of codes covered various aspects of democratic governance. They are: (1) the definition of democratic governance applied in the article; (2) the understanding in the article of the determinants (or key elements) of democratic governance; (3) the outcomes of democratic governance interventions; and (4) any challenges to democratic governance reported. While the first two of these codes inform us about how democratic governance is understood in the sample, the second two codes inform us about learnings from governance responses in the COVID-19 crisis. We discuss these two themes in turn.

Regarding the understanding of democratic governance in the literature reviewed, only 78 of the 150 articles include some more or less explicit definition of democratic governance. Among those that do define it, 22 articles work with a liberal definition of democratic governance, based on values such as pluralism, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights, among others. About 8 articles refer to representative democracy through discussions on elections, party politics, and parliamentary oversight and debate. Some articles approach democracy through its institutional underpinnings ( $n = 6$ ), refer to trust in and respect for institutions, institutional strength, the separation of powers ( $n = 2$ ), and checks and balances ( $n = 4$ ). We coded only 7 articles that specifically refer to deliberative and participatory governance, while others discuss other alternative or emerging models, such as a caring democracy as described in ID188 or non-human inclusivity as mentioned in ID160 and ID211. Five articles were coded specifically on the EU-level, describing it as a democracy built on solidarity, the redistribution of wealth, free movement, equity, and sovereignty. For the remaining 72 articles no specific definition of democratic governance was offered.

Regarding learnings from governance responses, we coded for what the literature identified in terms of determinants for democratic governance, as well as any specific challenges to these, and their outcomes. Overall, the literature points to two general types of determinants: political and institutional aspects on the one hand, which are shaped by normative, cultural, and public attitude determinants, on the other. In addition, the literature also suggests a view of the COVID-19 crisis itself as a critical juncture and determinant for governance.

### Political and institutional determinants for democratic governance

First, the literature highlights political and institutional determinants. The quality of democracy (ID4 251, 271), state capacity, robust solidarity institutions (ID232), and democratic resilience (ID12) are all key factors that emerged in how states respond to crises. Additionally, several articles point to the role of the institutional set-up (ID27, 31, 154), including constitutional protections (ID106, 161), the rule of law (ID75, 169, 249), and parliamentary and judicial oversight mechanisms (ID49, 55, 58, 290) in upholding the accountability and transparency of the executive. The Finnish case, in particular, stands out for how its combination of strong legal norms, a political consensus culture (also highlighted as the value of compromise in ID154), and a limited use of emergency laws helped safeguard democracy during the pandemic (ID76).

Second, trust and legitimacy emerged as central institutional themes. Citizens' satisfaction with democracy and its perceived legitimacy influence their willingness to defend it (ID41). This legitimacy rests partly on input legitimacy and government responsiveness to public opinion (ID64, 178). Yet crisis framing also matters: depoliticising the pandemic by framing it as a technical issue undermined trust in government, particularly in weak democracies (ID89). Building on this, two articles emphasise the value of deliberation and truthful engagement as core elements of democratic governance (ID142) or call for deeper democratic exchange to both inform and invite critical debate, referring to agonistic pluralism (ID297). Various sources highlight the importance of broad-based participation and the right to be heard in shaping crisis responses (ID198, 221). In practice, mini-publics are proposed as a method for revitalising democratic engagement and rebuilding trust (ID310). Finally, some articles reflect on how the pandemic impacted civil society and activist movements. While lockdowns created isolation and disrupted collective organising, they also gave rise to new forms of bottom-up democracy, such as mutual aid efforts (ID74). Activist trajectories did not fundamentally shift but rather adapted, drawing on existing networks and a strong sense of collective efficacy to persist through the

crisis (ID183).

Third, EU level dynamics revealed both risks and opportunities. Concerns centred on weakened accountability and technocratic drift, as delegated rule-making continued with little parliamentary scrutiny (ID191). This added to existing legitimacy challenges tied to the EU's institutional incompleteness, alongside an ongoing legitimacy crises, emergency-driven governance, and broader turbulence politics (ID3). EU soft law mechanisms offered flexibility and helped uphold core principles, but were also seen as lacking democratic legitimacy (ID64). Moreover, the pandemic exposed deeper structural strains, including a crisis of care, pressure on social solidarity, and the persistence of a dependence on capitalism (see also ID80, 145), all of which were linked to signs of democratic erosion (ID7). While the crisis risked exposing rule of law and solidarity vulnerabilities in the EU (ID75), citizen trust in EU institutions rose during the pandemic, surpassing trust in national authorities (ID186). This suggests that when a crisis is met with visible and effective EU-level action this may renew support for the European project. The case of NextGenerationEU (NGEU) also showed how national governments can navigate domestic politics to open spaces for decisive EU action in a crisis context (ID179).

### **Cultural and normative determinants for democratic governance**

Democratic governance is also shaped by normative values, public attitudes, and cultural conditions. Fundamentally, the role of trust in institutions, often socially constructed (ID28, 53), is a frequently cited determinant supporting both compliance and the quality of democracy (ID22, 28, 83, 136, 148, 154, 174, 178). However, trust erodes when governments are seen as unfair, restrictive, or unresponsive (ID22, 85, 129). Data indicates that trust is unevenly distributed; one study (ID102), for example, found that individuals with higher trust in others and greater knowledge about the pandemic were more likely to support emergency measures, while others with sceptical attitudes required different types of engagement (ID114). In weakened democracies, people were concerned about democratic restrictions only when they personally felt affected (ID148), suggesting that democratic values are not equally shared or mobilised. Legitimacy is also an important democratic value, upheld, among others, by stakeholder engagement and fostering participation (ID64).

In terms of political culture, tolerance of different views is seen to underpin freedom of expression and mobilisation (ID167, 171, 234). Despite challenges, younger and more educated populations often saw the EU as a free space for peace, democracy, and solidarity (ID173). Another remarkable cultural element relates to symbolic leadership, drawing on civic duty, used to reinforce democratic solidarity and manage public compliance with emergency measures (ID67). Further, democratic attitudes are also shaped by emotions. Fear and anger, particularly during periods of high uncertainty, lead to different attitudes toward democracy – anger is particularly associated with support for non-democratic responses (ID82, 120). Personal worldviews and ideology, as well as how citizens perceived the threat of the COVID-19 crisis are also noteworthy (ID148, ID149, 226).

### **COVID-19 as a critical juncture and a determinant for democratic governance**

As a final determinant, the COVID-19 pandemic is portrayed as a critical juncture, fundamentally shaping how democratic systems respond to crises. While many emergency measures were intended for short-term crisis relief, the literature warns of their long-term consequences (ID71, 104, 105, 126, 141, 181). Several articles note that crises can open up windows of opportunity for authoritarian turns or democratic backsliding (ID5, 61, 92, 135), particularly in already weakened democratic contexts such as Slovakia and Hungary (ID7, 143, 192, 208, 231). Path dependency plays a key role here, as pre-existing institutional conditions heavily influenced crisis responses (ID61). Rather than directly eroding democratic governance, the pandemic created opportunities to bypass accountability, strengthen the executive, and allow power grabs (ID78). Importantly, however, the risk of democratic decay also exists in consolidated democracies (ID72). Crisis often means radical change and high uncertainty; given how citizens sometimes have shaky faith in democracy, crisis situations provide fertile ground for attack on democracy (ID41, ID7).

In practice, democratic backsliding often took form as a centralisation of power (ID92). Executive branches extended their authority to implement emergency measures (ID86), often via technocratic tendencies (ID5, 92, 119), a tendency linked to the need for procedural safeguards (ID58). While the intentions of such measures were interpreted as genuine attempts to mitigate crises by some, in other cases they were seen as deliberate moves to hollow out democratic checks and balances (ID12, 144, 300). Various contributions thus warn of executive aggrandisement in crisis management (ID49, 144, 187) or the dangers of bypassing parliaments (ID49, 55, 144). Parliaments, as well as courts, played a key role in checking executive power and avoiding closed-door decision-making, and fared best where oversight was constitutionally grounded or long established (ID48, 49, 55, 58, 86, 144, 290).

Other elements feeding into risks of democratic backsliding are more discursive, including the use of democracy as an empty signifier in ‘performances of control’ (ID91), and populist rhetoric, which can undermine trust and democratic norms (ID32). War-like framings of the pandemic were used to justify restrictions on freedoms and centralising authority (ID46, 202). In Slovakia, two successive populist leaders used the pandemic to consolidate power and reshape institutions to their advantage, risking a longer-term populist trap (ID32). More broadly, populism thrives on the uneven effects of draconian policies, which can intensify societal polarisation (ID32, 120, 127). This is especially problematic when tied to conspiracy theories (ID50), which were especially widespread in Eastern Europe (ID48, 50, 187, 234). Such discursive erosion can thus destabilise democratic governance under crisis conditions. Paradoxically, however, ID255 discussed how far-right politics appeared to infuse more transformative promises for political life than governing parties, revealing how exceptional moments can create shifts in the political landscape. Nevertheless, some articles highlight how crises can open spaces for democratic resilience (ID5, 61, 12, 41), for example through civic education, emphasising democratic values, efforts for democratic persuasion, and more. Others push further, such as ID160 and ID211, which call for rethinking democracy to include non-human interests—suggesting a broader reconfiguration and human de-centring of democratic frameworks.

Finally, the role of science and expertise in crisis governance is both crucial and contested. While scientific knowledge is essential for effective and legitimate decision-making (ID240), several contributions caution that its use must not come at the expense of democratic principles. The information landscape changed rapidly during COVID-19, with misinformation and disinformation surging (ID166, 170, 294). Social media allowed politicians to bypass traditional media, while citizens increasingly relied on news sources aligned with their own worldviews (ID215). In such conditions, ID81 argues that science communication should aim to bolster democracy, not simply deliver strategic outcomes. Meanwhile, ID63 argues that there is no excuse for sidelining democratic debate since doing so risks eroding trust and weakening democratic legitimacy. Concerns also rise over the politicisation and control of scientific knowledge, by populist governments in particular (ID202). Science was also used discursively to depoliticise pandemic management in the name of reason and responsibility (above politics), while sidelining dissent and avoiding democratic scrutiny (ID237). Yet, some evidence shows that expert input gains more legitimacy when channelled through deliberative formats like mini-publics (ID150), highlighting the need to rethink how expertise is shared and embedded in democratic processes.

### **3.3 Analysing justice in literature on COVID-19 responses**

To analyse understandings of justice in the dataset, we drew on categorisations identified in the RETOOL analytical framework to break down the broad idea of justice into distributional, recognitional, corrective, transitional, and procedural components. We discuss these in order, giving an idea of the frequency with which these themes are touched upon in the literature analysed as well as a qualitative overview of how they are discussed and particularly, how they relate to aspects of democratic governance. We also point to interlinkages with the RETOOL analytical framework and begin to highlight how the issues raised may be of relevance in questions of climate democracy, discussed in more detail in Section 4.

Of the 150 articles included in our full review and analysis, 33 refer to ideas of distributional (in)justice, 35 to recognitional (in)justice, 9 to corrective (in)justice, 3 to transitional (in)justice, and 24 to procedural

(in)justice. The first observation to underline is thus that justice is not a particularly salient theme in the articles we analyse: the focus on democracy, as discussed in the previous section, is perhaps more procedural, while the production of justice is given less attention or assumed as an implicit outcome of functioning democracy in a European context. Given the smaller number of texts involved, the following discussion is qualitative and aims to give an overview of emerging themes that are linked to different types of justice drawn from the RETOOL analytical framework.

### **Recognitional Justice**

An overall picture emerges from these justice codings of the COVID-19 crisis as a moment where threats to recognitional justice are connected primarily to distributive and procedural injustices. COVID-19 is seen in the literature we reviewed either as a multiplier for existing injustices (an idea also applied to climate change - Goodman and Baudi 2023): sometimes this is attributed to the nature of the emergency itself, at others the emergency is seen as creating the conditions for political opportunism that increase injustices, or attempts to govern the emergency created injustices in more inadvertent ways. For a smaller sample of the literature reviewed, COVID-19 is also seen as a moment of opportunity - a destabilizing moment that allowed the robustness and resilience of some democratic institutions and the justice they guarantee to be proved, and, on a more theoretical level, a moment for common assumptions about the inclusivity of justice and solidarity to be questioned and adjusted (ID211, ID289). The core themes around justice echo those raised in the discussion of results on democratic governance in the previous section.

To build on this broader picture, the literature reviewed engaged with questions of recognitional (in)justice for the most part with reference to the themes of information and expertise. Regarding recognitional (in)justice and information, the literature points to the ways in which restrictions in the provision of information in terms of curbs on freedom of communication (ID4), the languages in which information is provided (ID75), access to information for journalists (ID171), or the flattening out of representations of individual experiences of the pandemic in communications (ID297) are seen as threats to the recognition of different groups. Recognitional injustice is also discussed through governance decisions that affected oppositional voices, including moves to restrict protest (ID22) and moves to counteract conspiracy theories, which are seen ultimately as strengthening polarisation (ID50, ID187). Similarly, the increased role of expertise and the idea of making expert-led decisions in a crisis situation is linked to the possibility of acting to exclude (or further exclude) oppositional voices, justifying this in the name of scientific expertise, a trend that is connected to right-wing populist authorities in particular (ID7, 76, 111, 123, 202, 286, 310). In this argument, withdrawing recognition from groups by framing or otherwise excluding their positions as unconnected to expert knowledge is seen to magnify pre-existing recognitional injustice.

Academic work also draws attention to the recognitional injustice done to women during the COVID-19 pandemic, where assumptions about women's caring roles led to their doing more unpaid work without recognition with knock-on effects on redistributive and procedural justice (ID 188, 282). Solutions to the creation or amplification of these injustices is suggested in work that points to positive recognitional justice outcomes during the pandemic. The importance of traditions of pro-democracy activism including protest and civic activism are linked to recognitional justice as mechanisms for shoring up democratic resilience (ID48, ID78), along with cultures of political tolerance (ID234) and robust or consolidated democracies (ID126, ID182). Securing recognitional justice in times of crisis is thus linked to democratic cultures of cosmopolitanism (and thus inclusivity and tolerance) and freedom of assembly.

### **Distributive and Procedural Justice**

Taking a deeper look at themes emerging from the review around distributive (in)justice, these can be connected to the view of COVID-19 as a multiplier of injustices. This may be deliberate, an instrumentalisation of the crisis by right-wing populist authorities to advocate for exclusions (ID5, ID159, ID286), as an opportunity to undercut workers' rights and shift burdens of care from the State to the family within a capitalist logic (ID80) and especially women (ID210, ID211), and more generally to allow for spending without

accountability checks (ID78), including through the NGEU (ID85). The magnification of existing redistributive inequality is also found to be a larger risk in countries with weaker welfare states, supported by findings that death rates were lower in countries with strong welfare states (ID7, ID42). Solutions or safeguards to these risks are thus seen in robust accountability mechanisms for spending, and strong welfare states (ID122, ID218, ID232). In a broader view, some work also points to COVID-19 as a crisis that allowed new attention to redistributive justice to emerge: through bottom-up initiatives for the collection and distribution of food outside market models (ID74), or as a moment that led to new views on solidarity connected to redistributive justice, including lower opposition to international solidarity (ID250), NGEU (ID352), and help for workers (ID121, ID129). These points on distributive (in)justice are instructive for reflecting on a core idea for climate democracy - the just transition - and suggest that without shared definitions or concepts of both justice (ID289) and who is included within it, robust institutions alone may not be enough to avoid the threat multiplier scenario.

The final more substantive discussion of justice found in the literature reviewed regards procedural (in)justice. Procedural (in)justice arises in the literature reviewed in connection to the sacrifice of some democratic governance procedures during a crisis or emergency (ID3, ID286). Different restrictions are discussed, but one more prominent theme is the concentration of power in the executive and the suspension of parliamentary procedures for scrutiny, also discussed as the idea of executive aggrandisement (ID3, ID4, ID5, ID75, ID123). This is discussed in the previous section as a problem for democratic governance, and can also be understood as a problem for procedural justice. If the centralisation of power is a problem for democratic governance in that it reduces institutional checks and balances, it is a problem for procedural justice because elected representatives lose powers of scrutiny and amendment. More direct questions of procedural justice and participation are linked to the implications of restricting the right to assemble and to protest (ID3, ID61, 122), restrictions on media and information (ID5, ID61, ID171, ID202), and new forms of state surveillance (ID5). These themes are also linked to opportunism by authorities seeking to reinforce or create exclusions.

Expertise is also mentioned as shaping procedural (in)justices via the increase of societal polarisation as mentioned in the section on recognitional justice: by creating new scientised or expert-led procedures democratic debate is closed off (ID159) or politically motivated decisions can be sold as neutral (ID237). These restrictions are then connected to different risks including democratic backsliding (ID4) and opaque decision-making (ID75) with effects for the perception of procedural justice. In addition, these restrictions are argued to provide ripe ground for the spread of conspiracy theories - themselves then connected to the theme of exclusions from justice of different types on the basis of political beliefs or other grounds (ID234). Safeguards against these restrictions and accompanying risks are seen in robust democratic institutions in general (ID78), strong parliaments (ID122), and political cultures with strong traditions of power sharing and institutional designs that limit the powers of different actors, like Finland (ID76). Another theme in this vein is in work that points to the need to bolster accountability with meaningful consultation and participation (ID289, ID347), tying back to ideas of the need for shared and inclusive ideas of justice and to work about democratic innovations for climate democracy.

The remaining categories of justice we coded for yielded few examples, with arguments in line with the themes already highlighted: corrective justice is discussed in relation to the ways in which authorities responded to protests and calls from the public (ID5) and possible longer term effects on public perceptions of authorities and their justice track record (ID122). Transitional justice also seems to relate to the idea of perceptions of failure and the difficulty of feeling justly treated in a crisis characterised by high uncertainty and frequent new decisions (ID22, ID188, ID75).

## 4. Lessons for strengthening democracy in climate transitions

The ultimate aim of this review is to draw out key lessons for democratic climate governance from the responses to COVID-19. In this section, we relate the key findings that emerge from the results of our systematic review of the literature on democratic governance, justice, and COVID-19 and highlight how these relate to the RETOOL analytical framework, which identifies seven cross-cutting characteristics of democracy: participation, representation, knowledge and expertise, accountability, deliberativeness, effectiveness, and justice (Brawley-Chesworth et al 2024). We also reflect on the limitations of the review and where this might indicate paths for future research.

The literature review revealed that the main findings around democratic governance of the pandemic concerned political and institutional determinants, cultural and normative determinants, and the idea of crisis as a critical juncture and a source of both threats and opportunities for democracy. Many of the themes that emerged from the analysis of democratic governance codes also appear in the analysis of discussions of justice in the governance of the pandemic, including the central idea of the critical juncture and a destabilising moment. Justice categories emerged as inter-related, with threats to recognitional justice connected to distributive and procedural injustices. Overall, the governance of the pandemic was most often seen as allowing authorities to multiply existing injustices, whether consciously or not.

The findings on political and institutional determinants speak to themes of accountability (and legitimacy) and participation as well as representation. Institutional strength, legal regimes, political culture, trust, legitimacy, and the way crises are framed all emerged as factors that were decisive as to whether democratic governance was upheld or undermined in different contexts (see, e.g., Engler et al., 2021; Wuttke & Foos, 2024; Larsson, 2022; Bieber, 2022). On one hand, established democracies were found to have more robust democratic institutions: where these institutions' powers were curtailed during emergency governance, they did prevail over the longer term (Becher et al., 2024; Griglio, 2020). A particularly interesting case is Finland, where a combination of constitutional safeguards, consensus politics, and limited use of emergency powers helped to uphold democratic standards during the crisis (ID76); or Sweden, where reliance on democratic principles and trust guided a voluntary approach to pandemic management (Knaggård & Triantafillou, 2024; Larsson, 2022). On the other hand, younger or weaker democracies were found to have greater issues around democratic decline as a result of executive aggrandisement or technocratic drift during the pandemic (Bolloyer & Salát, 2021; Kovanic & Steuer, 2023; Värttö, 2024; Suzansky, 2024). This suggests that **while robust institutions are a necessary component to the democratic governance of crises, they are not sufficient** in all contexts (ID72). This is so because of the questions of cultural and normative determinants: robust institutions might appear sufficient, at least for the duration of a crisis, in political cultures of consensus, pluralism, tolerance, and thus **political trust** (see, e.g., Bitonti et al., 2023; Hellmeier et al., 2021). Yet in the absence of a culture of political trust, sustained **attention is needed to public attitudes, pluralism, and inclusive practices** (Stefan, 2022; Poma & Pistoresi, 2024). This can counteract rising distrust in emergency governance, which may arise from emergency decision-making that bypasses democratic checks and balances, or situations where crises are knowingly used to drive forward discourses of exclusion and distrust, as discussed in the literature with reference to right-wing populist forces (Guasti, 2020; Värttö, 2024).

Concretely, the literature we reviewed suggests that **attention to transparency (and thus accountability) and participation can improve trust and thus the perceived legitimacy of decisions. This is also linked to cross-cutting themes of knowledge and expertise**. Governments in democracies are better off being transparent about the limitations, for example, of available expert evidence and knowledge when choosing between governance options: they should be open about uncertainties for decision-making (Knaggård & Triantafillou, 2024) and avoid technocratic framing that seeks to depoliticise decisions (Kovanic & Steuer, 2023). Trust is also found to be reinforced through deliberation and participation for the production of knowledge: mini-publics and citizens councils can be an important means to enliven democracy and reinforce trust, even in difficult times (Dienel et al., 2024; Muradova et al., 2023). These lessons are key if

democracies are to be crisis-ready and resilient (Youngs, 2023). Also key is the usefulness of **new participatory institutions or forums that may be added to existing traditional institutions to boost democratic accountability and trust via increased democratic legitimacy** in crisis governance. Experiences with bottom-up, horizontally organised and non-market based service provision also point in this direction.

The review of the findings in the literature about justice also point to the importance of robust democratic institutions and political trust, and to the need to strengthen and ensure these through new spaces for participation to improve perceived legitimacy. The literature reviewed suggests that **these solutions also protect recognitional justice by avoiding stigmatisation** through the strengthening of in/outgroup frames (for example between those in favour of and against face masks or vaccines) (e.g. Gonda et al 2022, Kermani 2022), protect **distributive justice by bolstering solidarity and inclusive decisions** (e.g. Esu and Dessì 2022, Cárdenas and Villanueva 2022) and thereby also protect **access to existing procedural justice as well as adding to it** by introducing new forums for participation (Abram et al 2022, Dienel et al 2024). Reflections on how these findings about justice also relate to questions of climate democracy: beyond institutional solutions, the RETOOL analytical framework points to the fact that climate democracy should produce justice, or just decisions. The idea that bolstering existing democratic institutions for representation with new spaces for participation speaks in this vein to work on environmental justice and the inclusion of plural forms of knowledge and standpoints in decision-making (e.g. Schlosberg 2007). These spaces can be better designed to ensure just decisions (and thus a just transition) are undertaken by allowing the inclusion of voices who feel a policy is unjust towards them, or others, and potentially allow a better distribution of costs and benefits, as well as a better understanding of how a decision is made about this distribution. The literature we reviewed points to decisions about lockdowns, about mask-wearing, or about the consequences of not being vaccinated in this vein. The literature on just transitions and local struggles points to decisions about new 'green' infrastructure or extraction, on carbon taxes, and more in the same logic (e.g. de Simone, Nicolò and Parks 2025, Gustafsson and Schilling-Vacaflor 2022). **The emergence of conspiracy theories and opposition to action to contain the virus was found, in our literature review, to thrive where decisions were distrusted because they were understood as opaque and undemocratic (Stoeckel and Ceka 2023). The same dynamics appear to be arising around some climate policies, urging the need to act to bolster and add to democratic institutions.** The rise of right-wing populism in countries like Sweden and Finland, and their backtracking on climate objectives, underlines this - even strong and pluralist European democracies are not remaining as resilient in the longer term (e.g. Bäckstrand 2025).

A final key finding from the review of the literature on democratic governance under COVID-19, for both the democracy and the justice themes, is that a crisis can also be understood as a critical juncture. **A critical juncture exposes and intensifies key tensions and vulnerabilities within democratic governance.** The urgency of the pandemic crisis often led to technocratic shortcuts, centralised decision-making (often in the form of executive aggrandisement), and weakened accountability, underscoring the fragility of democratic checks under pressure. At the same time, the politicisation and framing of the crisis—as war, as technical, or as a moral necessity—shaped public perceptions, trust, and democratic legitimacy, highlighting the importance of contestation and open debate. The role of expertise proved both vital and problematic: expert-driven responses risked eroding legitimacy when detached from participatory or deliberative processes. All of this mirrors core elements discussed in the RETOOL framework as democratic challenges related to the governance of climate change. Yet the literature on the pandemic also sees **critical junctures as moments of disruption that can open windows of opportunity** for fresh and innovative action (e.g. Guasti 2020, Hajnal, Jeziorska, & Kovács 2021). The pandemic highlighted the limitations of existing institutions, which in turn opened up spaces and the will for democratic resilience, civic innovation, and even the conceptual expansion of democracy itself. These dynamics underscore the need for democratic crisis preparedness that combines institutional safeguards, inclusive communication, and reflexive engagement with expertise.

## 5. Conclusions

Overall, the key lessons relating to the RETOOL analytical framework and climate democracy that emerge from this systematic review of literature on democratic governance during COVID-19 are that robust democratic institutions are crucial to weather crises. Robust democratic institutions are those with safeguards against (long-term) executive aggrandisement, and they are also protected by political cultures of consensus, pluralism, and tolerance. Since not all states can boast this combination, and even those that do are seeing the rise of exclusionary political forces, these existing institutions also need to be shored up with new forums for participation to combat threats to trust in democracy. These forums for democratic innovation not only boost specific decision-making processes, but can also build longer term democratic culture and are crucial to the production of just decisions in complex and challenging crisis contexts.

Our review also revealed a lack of explicit attention to aspects of justice in COVID-19, both in practice and in research. In most cases, articles were interested in studying governance response effectiveness, public acceptance or support for stringent policy measures, but not in understanding how just the governance responses were. Given the finding that trust is frequently mentioned as a key theme and a determinant for democratic interventions, while a lack of trust is deemed a key challenge to democratic governance interventions, this lack of attention to dimensions of justice is striking. Few studies specify that distributional, recognitional, corrective, transitional, and procedural justice in democratic governance systems can provide the means to ensure legitimacy and enhance trust. Given rising conflicts over the just transition, more research on justice in democratic decision-making is warranted.

These reflections are certainly useful for informing ideas of climate democracy, but the limitations of the systematic literature review should be borne in mind, as well as future areas for research. First, there is relatively little attention to democratic innovations, deliberative democracy, citizens' assemblies and other complementary participatory approaches in the literature we reviewed, in contrast to the understanding in the RETOOL project that such democratic processes hold high potential to strengthen democracy in the context of climate transitions (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2024). As a result, there are few targeted or empirically-based learnings on this theme in the work on COVID-19 we reviewed. This is likely related to the fact that democracy was not often defined in the studies we analysed, rather existing liberal representative democracy appears as an assumed backdrop within which to study resilience rather than renewal. This may also be a function of the time span our review covers, as much of the literature sought to reflect on how democratic governance was unfolding in the midst of the pandemic itself. In addition, the majority of the articles we reviewed are from the field of political science, which tends to focus less on citizen-led and bottom-up forms of participation, and more on established institutions and procedures, as well as public opinion. Democratic governance thus largely remains unspecified, especially in the face of crisis.

This demonstrates the need for more research paying attention to what democracy means in the context of a crisis. While representative democratic institutions are indispensable, they are just one domain of how the RETOOL project identifies (climate) democracy in addition to non-majoritarian, deliberative, and prefigurative democratic movements. More research is also needed on these forms of participatory democracy, and how they might contribute to produce just decisions and rejuvenate democracy. Work packages in the RETOOL project address these themes and will produce more defined contributions, moving beyond the question of how to safeguard democracy in a time of crisis to discover how democracy can be refreshed, reinvented, and revived.

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## Appendix 1: Full list of included articles

<b>ID</b>	<b>Article Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Source Title</b>
3	COVID-19: a dual challenge to European liberal democracy	2021	Goetz, KH; Martinsen, DS	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
4	Democracy in times of the pandemic: explaining the variation of COVID-19 policies across European democracies	2021	Engler, S; Brunner, P; Loviat, R; Abou-Chadi, T; Leemann, L; Glaser, A; Kubler, D	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
5	The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe The Rise of Autocracy and Democratic Resilience	2020	Guasti, P	DEMOCRATIC THEORY-AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
6	The Covid-19 Pandemic and the European Union: State, Democracy, Deception. And hope?	2020	Alvarez, MV	TEMAS Y DEBATES
7	East Central Europe in the COVID-19 crisis	2022	Bohle, D; Eihmanis, E	EAST EUROPEAN POLITICS
8	Democratic Erosion and Democratic Resilience in Central Europe during COVID-19	2021	Guasti, P	MEZINARODNI VZTAHY-CZECH JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
11	COVID-19 stressors, mental/emotional distress and political support	2022	Bernardi, L; Gotlib, IH	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
12	Government Performance and Democracy: Survey Experimental Evidence from 12 Countries during COVID-19	2024	Becher, M; Longuet-Marx, N; Pons, V; Brouard, S; Foucault, M; Galasso, V; Kerrouche, E; Alfonso, SL; Stegmüller, D	JOURNAL OF POLITICS
13	COVID-19 and democratic resilience	2023	Youngs, R	GLOBAL POLICY
14	Human rights and democracy in economic policy reform: the European COVID-19 response under scrutiny	2020	Goldmann, M	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS
15	Who is afraid of emergency politics? Public opinion on European crisis management during Covid-19	2023	Ganderson, J; Schelkle, W; Truchlewski, Z	COMPARATIVE EUROPEAN POLITICS
16	Expectations About Future Economic Prospects and Satisfaction with Democracy: Evidence from European Countries during the COVID-19 Crisis	2022	De Simone, E; Cicatiello, L; Gaeta, GL; Pinto, M	SOCIAL INDICATORS RESEARCH
17	The effect of COVID-19 lockdowns on political support: Some good news for democracy?	2021	Bol, D; Giani, M; Blais, A; Loewen, PJ	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL RESEARCH

<b>18</b>	FIGHTING THE DISEASE OR MANIPULATING THE DATA? Democracy, State Capacity, and the COVID-19 Pandemic	2024	Knutsen, CH; Kolvani, P	WORLD POLITICS
<b>19</b>	Political regimes and deaths in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic	2022	Cepaluni, G; Dorsch, MT; Branyiczki, R	JOURNAL OF PUBLIC FINANCE AND PUBLIC CHOICE
<b>22</b>	Government Support Measures, Trust in Institutions and Effects on Satisfaction with Democracy During the COVID-19 Outbreak	2024	Poma, E; Pistoresi, B	COMPARATIVE ECONOMIC STUDIES
<b>27</b>	Kinder, gentler - and crisis-proof? Consensus democracy, inclusive institutions and COVID-19 pandemic performance	2023	Freiburghaus, R; Vatter, A; Stadelmann-Steffen, I	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>28</b>	Covid-19 Crisis: Government's (Dis)Trust In The People And Pitfalls of Liberal Democracies	2021	Snieckute, M; Gaizauskaite, I	PARTECIPAZIONE E CONFLITTO
<b>29</b>	Buying time for democracies? European Union emergency politics in the time of COVID-19	2021	Truchlewski, Z; Schelkle, W; Ganderson, J	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>31</b>	The European Parliament put to the test by COVID-19: voting dynamics and coalition patterns of the EP's first response to the global pandemic	2022	Braghiroli, S	JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN STUDIES
<b>32</b>	Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Slovakia	2021	Figulova, A; Dénesova, M	PARTECIPAZIONE E CONFLITTO
<b>33</b>	'All hands on deck' or separate lifeboats? Public support for European economic solidarity during the Covid-19 pandemic	2023	Bauhr, M; Charron, N	JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY
<b>35</b>	Austerity and its alternatives in the European parliament: from the Eurozone crisis to the COVID-19 crisis	2024	Elomäki, A	COMPARATIVE EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>41</b>	Making the case for democracy: A field-experiment on democratic persuasion	2024	Wuttke, A; Foos, F	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL RESEARCH
<b>42</b>	The influence of democracy, governance and government policies on the COVID-19 pandemic mortality(sic)(sic)(sic)Palabras clave	2022	Wagschal, U	EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS
<b>45</b>	The antinomies of sovereigntism, statism and liberalism in European democratic responses to the COVID-19 crisis: a comparison of Britain and France	2022	Benoît, C; Hay, C	COMPARATIVE EUROPEAN POLITICS

46	The Strategic Use of Narratives and Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Major Autocratisers in Europe	2024	Soyaltin-Colella, D; Sert, D	JOURNAL OF BALKAN AND NEAR EASTERN STUDIES
48	Conspiracy Theories and the Crisis of the Public Sphere: COVID-19 in Slovenia	2021	Horvat, KV	JAVNOST-THE PUBLIC
49	Parliaments in times of crisis: COVID-19, populism and executive dominance	2021	Bolleyer, N; Salát, O	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
50	The virus of polarization: online debates about Covid-19 in Germany	2023	Schmid, F; Treib, O; Eckardt, F	POLITICAL RESEARCH EXCHANGE
53	Restrictions to civil liberties in a pandemic and satisfaction with democracy	2024	Graeber, D; Meister, L; Poutvaara, P	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF POLITICAL ECONOMY
55	Parliamentary oversight under the Covid-19 emergency: striving against executive dominance	2020	Griglio, E	THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LEGISLATION
56	Identities in flux? National and other changing identities during the COVID-19 pandemic	2023	Stevens, D; Banducci, S; Horvath, L	FRONTIERS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE
58	Information and deliberation in the Covid-19 crisis and in the climate crisis: how expertocratic practices undermine self-government and compliance	2023	Frincken, J; Landwehr, C	ACTA POLITICA
61	Understanding drivers of illiberal entrenchment at critical junctures: institutional responses to COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland	2021	Hajnal, G; Jeziorska, I; Kovacs, EM	INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES
63	Monotonous or pluralistic public discourse? Reason-giving and dissent in Denmark's and Sweden's early 2020 COVID-19 responses	2021	Baekkeskov, E; Rubin, O; Öberg, P	JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY
64	THE FUTURE OF EU SOFT LAW: A RESEARCH AND POLICY AGENDA FOR THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19	2020	Stefan, O	JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE LAW
67	Performing Crisis Management: National Repertoires of Symbolic Action and Their Usage during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Europe	2023	Boussaguet, L; Faucher, F; Freudlsperger, C	POLITICAL STUDIES
69	Social Media and Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Switzerland	2021	Gilardi, F; Gessler, T; Kubli, M; Müller, S	SWISS POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW

<b>70</b>	How education and GDP drive the COVID-19 vaccination campaign	2022	Ngo, VM; Zimmermann, KF; Nguyen, PV; Huynh, TLD; Nguyen, HH	ARCHIVES OF PUBLIC HEALTH
<b>72</b>	Emerging fiscal health and governance concerns resulting from COVID-19 challenges	2021	de Jong, M; Ho, AT	JOURNAL OF PUBLIC BUDGETING ACCOUNTING & FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT
<b>74</b>	Recasting solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study	2022	Esu, A; Dessì, V	SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES
<b>75</b>	The Limited Role of the European Union in the Management and Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic	2021	Grogan, J	INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS LAW REVIEW
<b>76</b>	What makes democratic institutions resilient to crises? Applying a novel analytical framework to the case of Finland	2024	Poyet, C; Niemikari, R; Raunio, T	JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN STUDIES
<b>78</b>	Pandemic power grab	2022	Guasti, P; Bustikova, L	EAST EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>80</b>	Riding the Covid waves: authoritarian socio-economic responses of east central Europe's anti-liberal governments	2022	Bohle, D; Medve-Bálint, G; Scepanovic, V; Toplisek, A	EAST EUROPEAN POLITICS
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<b>82</b>	Leaving democracy? Pandemic threat, emotional accounts and regime support in comparative perspective	2023	Erhardt, J; Freitag, M; Filsinger, M	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>83</b>	The Extreme Right as a Defender of Human Rights? Parliamentary Debates on COVID-19 Emergency Legislation in Slovakia	2022	Steuer, M	LAWS
<b>85</b>	ACCOUNTABILITY AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY IN EUROPEAN UNION ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE: FROM THE EURO CRISIS TO THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND	2023	Markakis, M; Kafka, C; Papadopoulou, L	IRISH JURIST
<b>86</b>	The COVID-19 emergency in the age of executive aggrandizement: what role for legislative and judicial checks?	2020	Petrov, J	THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LEGISLATION
<b>89</b>	Fighting against COVID-19: With or without politics?	2023	Kovanic, M; Steuer, M	SOCIAL SCIENCE & MEDICINE

<b>90</b>	The strange bedfellows of populism and liberalism: the effect of populist attitudes on the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic and policies to contain it	2024	Heinisch, R; Werner, A	COMPARATIVE EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>91</b>	Political Performances of Control During COVID-19: Controlling and Contesting Democracy in Germany	2021	Volk, S	FRONTIERS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE
<b>92</b>	The Italian government response to Covid-19 and the making of a prime minister	2021	Bull, M	CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN POLITICS
<b>100</b>	Communicating About COVID-19 in Four European Countries: Similarities and Differences in National Discourses in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden	2020	Sjolander-Lindqvist, A; Larsson, S; Fava, N; Gillberg, N; Marciano, C; Cinque, S	FRONTIERS IN COMMUNICATION
<b>102</b>	Public support for government responses against COVID-19: assessing levels and predictors in eight Western democracies during 2020	2021	Jorgensen, F; Bor, A; Lindholt, MF; Petersen, MB	WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS
<b>104</b>	The Debudgetisation of Public Finances in Poland After Covid-19 and the War in Ukraine	2023	Serowaniec, M	POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE
<b>105</b>	Euroregions as political actors: managing border policies in the time of Covid-19 in Polish borderlands	2022	Opiola, W; Böhm, H	TERRITORY POLITICS GOVERNANCE
<b>106</b>	The Swedish Covid-19 strategy and voluntary compliance: Failed securitisation or constitutional security management?	2022	Larsson, OL	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY
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