

# The Cummings Effect: the relationship between controversial political actions, trust and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic

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On 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2020, the Guardian and Daily Mirror newspapers in the UK published details of how Dominic Cummings, senior aide to the British prime minister, had broken lockdown rules by travelling 420km to a family estate with his wife (who had suspected COVID-19) and child. Whilst some other officials and senior figures had also broken the lockdown rules, this was the first transgression that was not immediately followed by an apology and resignation. The event prompted media condemnation with concerns about transparency, accountability, and equality<sup>1</sup>, and many scientists spoke out about the effect of Cummings' actions and the government's defence of Cummings in undermining essential public health messaging<sup>1,2</sup>. But it is only now with the benefit of hindsight provided by systematic data that we can see these negative effects in stark detail. New analyses of over 220,000 surveys from more than 40,000 individuals between 24 April and 11 June completed as part of the UCL COVID-19 Social Study show that these events undermined confidence in the government *to handle the pandemic* specifically.

In Figure 1a, we show change in ratings of confidence in the government to handle the pandemic from its level on 24 April. Confidence was measured on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). The sample was well stratified across socio-demographic factors and weighted to population proportions for core demographics (see Supplementary Material). There was a clear decrease in confidence starting on 22<sup>nd</sup> May and dropping quickly in the days following (with analyses of Google Trends showing that public searches of his name peaked 3 days later when he gave a televised statement, which coincided with confidence in the government hitting its lowest point; Supplementary Figure 1).

To ascertain whether this drop in confidence was as a result of the Cummings events (a "Cummings effect"), we carried out analyses using two types of negative controls. First, we compared the responses for people living in England (red line) to people living in the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales (blue and green lines) who were asked to rate their confidence in their own devolved governments. There was no evidence of a similar large drop in confidence in the governments of the devolved nations either descriptively (Figure 1) or statistically (Supplementary Figure 4). Second, we compared the data with questions identical in format that asked about confidence in the health service to cope with the pandemic, and confidence that access to essentials (e.g. food and medication) would be maintained (Figure 1c and Figure 1d; see Supplementary Figures 3 and 4 for results on raw scale and standardized scales, respectively). Again, there was no evidence of a drop in these measures over the same dates either in descriptive data or when applying statistical tests (see Supplementary Figure 5), further showing that this change was a significant departure from the weeks preceding it.

Public trust in the government's ability to manage the pandemic is crucial as it underpins public attitudes and behaviours at a precarious time for public health. Data from earlier in the lockdown show how closely public confidence is related to government announcements relating to COVID-19. After an initial increase in public confidence in the ability of the government to handle the pandemic well as lockdown came in, the government's announcement on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020 that it would begin to reopen society in England through a staged series of lockdown easing measures as part of a new COVID-19 alert level system was followed by a drop in confidence (Figure 1). Leaders of devolved governments who expressed concern that these measures were risky and premature and who did not change lockdown measures or messaging did not see any clear drops in confidence from their public<sup>3</sup>. Data show that confidence stabilised and even improved slightly in England in the fortnight following these events, until the "Cummings effect". This finding is echoed by data from weekly political surveys, which show that confidence decreased with these announcements but then remained neutral for two weeks until the Cummings events, when confidence suddenly decreased further (Supplementary Figure 2). Another reason for concern is that trust is related to people's willingness to follow rules and guidelines, both generally and during COVID-19<sup>4,5</sup>; something that is fundamental to

the control of COVID-19 infection and mortality rates. There had already been a gradual decrease in public adherence to guidelines prior to the publicity about Cummings's actions, but this decline grew in the weeks following, especially in England (Supplementary Figures 6-8).

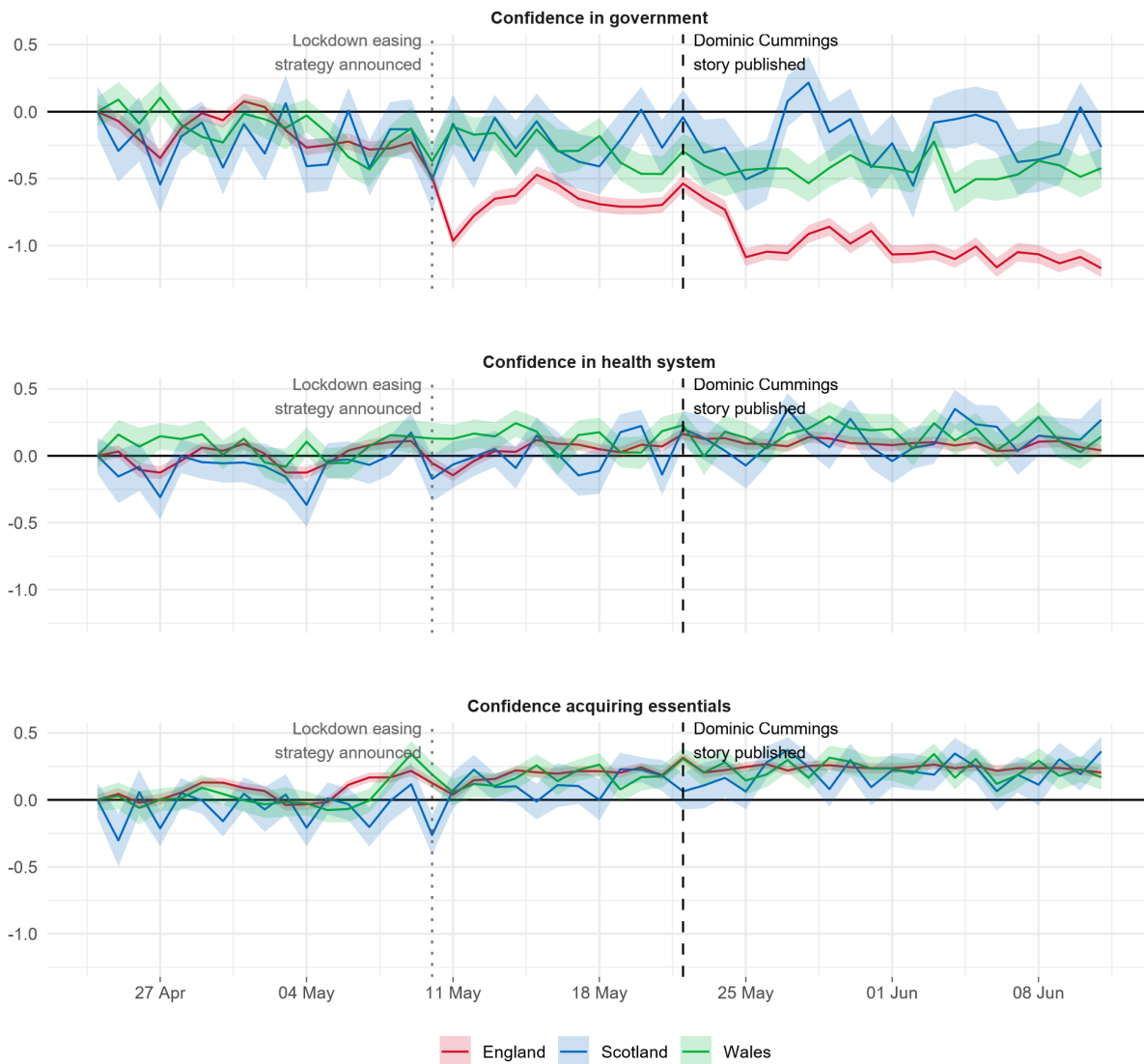
Whilst it is now more than a month since these events, data show there was been no recovery from the Cummings effect in the weeks since, with confidence in England remaining low and gaps in confidence between England and devolved nations growing (Supplementary Figure 9). Trust in government decisions and actions relating to the management of COVID-19 is a major challenge globally and these data illustrate the negative and lasting consequences that political decisions can have for public trust and the risks to behaviours.

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**Figure 1**

Figure 1: Daily average response (+ 95% CIs) to questions on confidence in (a) (devolved nation) government, (b) health system, and (c) acquiring essentials, relative to country-specific average response on 24 April. Dashed line at 10 May indicates date UK Government plans to ease lockdown in England. Dashed line at 22 May indicates date Daily Mirror and Guardian newspapers released information on Dominic Cummings' journey to Country Durham.