

With Covid infections rising, the Tories are conducting a deadly social experiment

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The 'personal responsibility' mantra has gone hand in hand with more deaths. Why has England gone along with it?

A pandemic is a political event. It exposes who is vulnerable and who can afford to escape, who is prioritised for treatment and who is neglected. The politics of a pandemic are both large-scale and intensely personal. How we behave towards each other, what balance is struck between safety and freedom, how blame is distributed, what a country considers an acceptable level of illness and death: questions that may once have been philosophical have become frighteningly real.

In Britain, the politics of Covid have been thought about and discussed almost entirely in party terms: the relative caution and competence of the SNP government in Scotland and its Labour counterpart in Wales; the recklessness and lethal mistakes of the Conservatives in England, and whether Labour can make the Tories pay for them. The pandemic has been seen as a potential turning point for all the main parties.

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That it has not worked out like that – so far – has been a huge disappointment for the Conservatives' enemies. But this focus on the parties has also been convenient for voters. Uncomfortable questions about whether our individual behaviour during the pandemic has matched our political values have not been asked.

These questions particularly matter now. Since Boris Johnson declared “freedom day” on 19 July, almost all the previous restrictions on everyday life in England under Covid have been removed. “Personal responsibility”, as Johnson and his ministers like to put it with a libertarian relish, has replaced emergency legislation as one of the main weapons against the virus. In effect, a giant experiment in individual ethics has been under way.

The results look increasingly alarming. In pubs, in shops, on public transport and in other enclosed spaces where the virus easily spreads, many people are acting as if the pandemic is over – or at least, over for them. Mask-wearing and social distancing have sometimes become so rare that to practise them feels embarrassing.

Meanwhile, England has become one of the worst places for infections in the world, despite a high degree of vaccination by global standards. Case numbers, hospitalisations and deaths are all rising, and are already much higher than in other western European countries that have kept measures such as indoor mask-wearing compulsory, and where compliance with such rules has remained strong. What does England's failure to control the virus through “personal responsibility” say about our society?

It's tempting to start by generalising about national character, and how the supposed individualism of the English has become selfishness after half a century of frequent rightwing government and fragmentation in our lives and culture. There may be some truth in that. But national character is not a very solid concept, weakened by all the differences within countries and all the similarities that span continents. Thanks to globalisation, all European societies have been affected by the same atomising forces. England's lack of altruism during the pandemic can't just be blamed on neoliberalism.

Other elements of our recent history may also explain it. England likes to think of itself as a stable country, yet since the 2008 financial crisis it has endured a more protracted period