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# HEALTH CRISIS: PUBLIC OPINION IN FRANCE SHOWS OPPOSITION TO USING MOBILE PHONES

## Results from an online experiment

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For several weeks now, the French government has been discussing the possibility of using mobile phones as a tool to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. Several countries, including India, Hong Kong, Israel, Austria, Belgium, Germany and Australia, have already started using this technology. In Singapore, the government has launched an application called “Trace Together” that enables mobile phone users to voluntarily share their locations. Clearly, the use of mobile phone technology has become a highly topical issue worldwide. Two companies with a near duopoly on smartphone operating systems, Google and Apple, have taken the unprecedented step of working together to develop contact tracing technology in order to help public authorities create a common software tool.

Although initially hesitant, the French government has changed its position on mobile phone technology by indicating it would study the feasibility and effectiveness of various technical devices and their consequences for civil liberties. On April 5, a number of media outlets reported that French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner suggested that the government would be in favor of using this kind of device. Various political opposition parties expressed hesitation and indicated that their support would depend on the implementation of a number of safeguards to protect civil liberties if such an application were launched. Public opinion is still strongly opposed to mobile phone tracing (39%), even though this percentage has decreased over the past month and, for the first time, a large number (40.5%) do support the measure, according to the results of the IPSOS survey conducted on April 7 and 8, 2020 as part of the project “Attitudes towards COVID-19”.

Because the application being considered is presented as being voluntary, and because any effective policy would require the consent of the general public, the question must be asked as to whether the support of public opinion is an essential condition for the application to be effective. It also needs to be determined whether citizens, especially those who are opposed to tracing, might decide to alter their behavior in order to avoid surveillance. To answer these questions, we conducted an online experiment as part of the above-mentioned survey to assess the possible behavioral changes that would ensue from the implementation of phone surveillance.

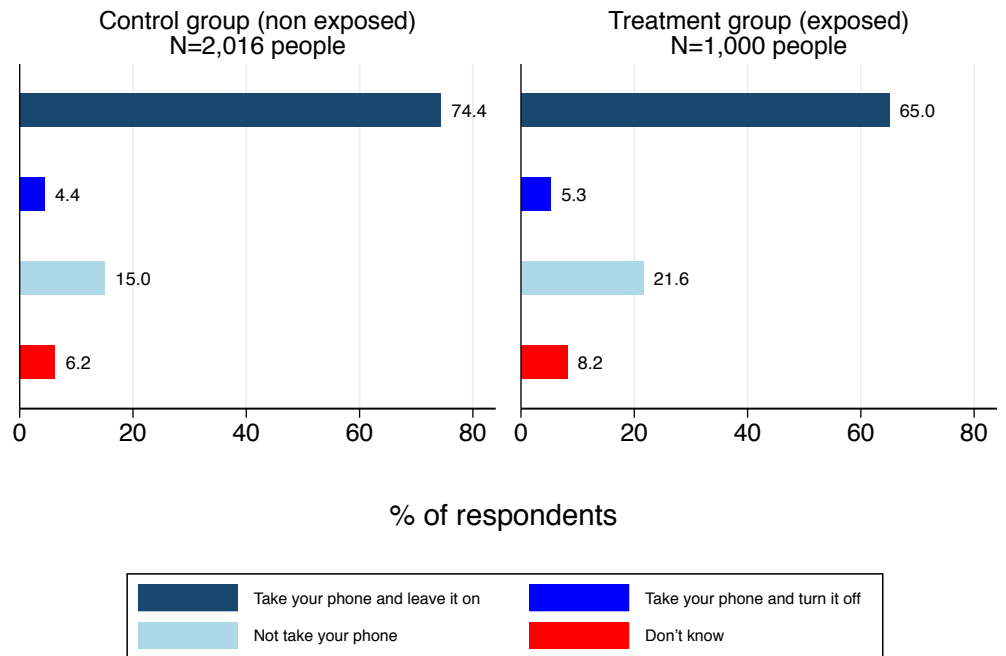
In order to do this, we provided half of the respondents (i.e. 1,000 randomly-selected individuals with the following information: “On April 5, 2020, French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner indicated that mobile phone tracing for medical reasons ‘is one of the solutions used by a certain number of countries.’ Thus, the government has ‘decided to work together with those countries to examine these solutions. If the device makes it possible to fight the virus while protecting civil liberties, the government will use the tool.’”

We then asked the selected respondents whether they had heard of these announcements or not. Fully 84% answered that they had. We then presented the entire sample of 2,000 people with the following scenario: Imagine that you are about to leave your home. Which of the following four choices would you make: a) you would take your mobile phone and leave it turned on while outside; b) you would take your phone and turn it off or put it in airplane mode; c) you would leave your phone at home; d) don’t know.

Using this method, we were able to compare two different groups: a treatment group, who received the information suggesting that it was likely that tracing would be used, and a control group, who did not receive the information. We then looked at whether the behavior of each group differed or not. Did the reported behaviors differ between these two groups?

The first result (Figure 1) showed that the mere fact of having been told of Christophe Castaner’s declarations diminished the likelihood of leaving home with the mobile phone turned on by 9% (65 % compared to 74 % for the control group).

Figure 1. Change in Support Between Wave 1 and 4 (in %)



Source: Citizens' Attitudes towards COVID-19. A comparative study, CEVIPOF.

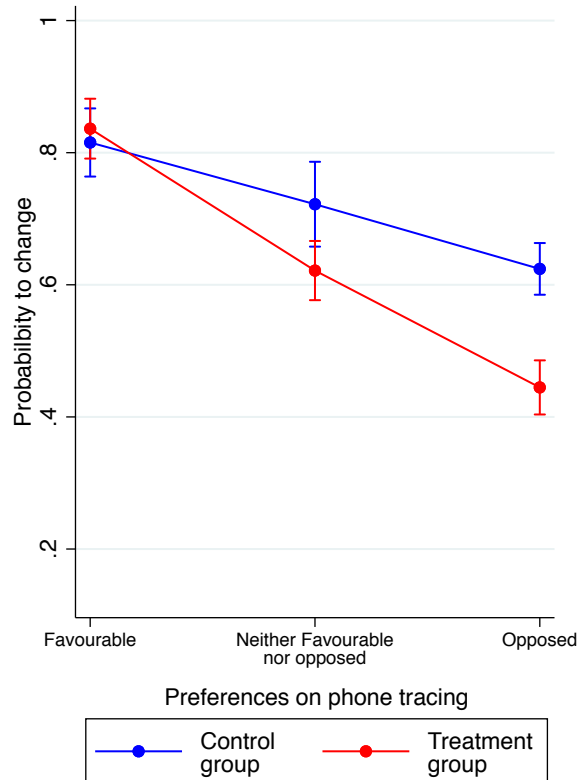
The second result showed that merely mentioning the use of mobile phone tracing changes people’s attitudes towards phone use. In the same survey, but prior to the experiment, we asked the respondents to tell us whether they supported the use of mobile phones for surveillance purposes. As previously discussed in the introduction, there was no strong majority of respondents either in favor of nor opposed to the technology. When these pre-dispositions are compared with the results of the experiment, the conclusion is that the probability of taking one’s phone outside does not vary among respondents who were initially in favor of tracing. Yet, the likelihood decreases by 9 percentage points among people who have no opinion and by 18 percentage points among those who are opposed to the technology (Figure 2).

Thus, individuals who are opposed or indifferent to tracing are likely to change their behavior to avoid mobile phone surveillance.

To be effective in the fight against COVID-19, any mobile phone surveillance measures must be paired with safeguards so as to form a large public consensus which is currently lacking. If not, the measures will trigger avoidance strategies that will undermine their purpose and will raise suspicions about the real intentions of authorities implementing this policy. Using new technologies to fight the pandemic cannot be considered without guaranteeing that basic civil liberties are protected. Is mobile phone tracing the only way? What health benefits will it actually lead to? Are such benefits worthwhile if they negatively impact citizens’ trust towards the government. Yes, this crisis is unprecedented. Yes, this crisis calls for exceptional measures. We must nonetheless remember

that collective efforts to help us emerge from this crisis cannot be made to the detriment of civil liberties.

Figure 2. Results of the experiment: the likelihood of changing preferences about “leaving home with one’s mobile phone turned on”



Source: Survey on Citizens'Attitudes towards COVID-19, CEVIPOF, 2020.

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