





How many democratic countries have conducted COVID-19 public inquiries? An exploratory study of government-led postpandemic reviews (2020–2024)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Many governments have initiated national inquiries into their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lessons drawn from them will matter for public health policies. While these inquiries represent an opportunity for policy learning, there may also be obstacles. This study helps to explore these opportunities and obstacles by providing an initial survey of COVID-19 inquiries.

Methods We collected a novel data set of national COVID-19 inquiries in democratic countries, taking note of their type, membership, timing, mandate and whether their terms of reference asked the inquiry to consider the adequacy of the government pandemic response as well as the collateral harms arising from government interventions. We conducted a series of panel logit analyses to examine the extent to which country-level factors—such as the level of democracy and executive oversight, centralisation of executive power and economic development—were associated with the likelihood of appointing a COVID-19 inquiry.

Results We found 32 national COVID-19 inquiries, held in 25 (32%) of the countries in our data set, which included 78 countries with a score of at least 0.6 on the 2019 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Electoral Democracy Index. Of the 32 national inquiries, 14 (44%) were public inquiries (proper), 15 (47%) were inquiries conducted by parliamentary committees and 3 (9%) were another type of inquiry. The earliest public inquiries (proper) were launched in the first half of 2020 in the Scandinavian countries. Generally, countries were slightly quicker to establish parliamentary committee inquiries than public inquiries proper. Many democracies, such as Canada, have yet to initiate one at all.

A country's probability of initiating a COVID-19 inquiry was positively correlated with its level of democracy, gross domestic product per capita and executive oversight, but negatively correlated with higher values of the V-Dem index of presidentialism. These correlations were significant once we controlled for multicollinearity. The vast majority of inquiries (77%) were appointed in 2020 and 2021. Most inquiries' terms of reference were relatively open-ended, with few specifically demanding an examination of policy adequacy and most urging some sort of investigation into the COVID-19 measures' collateral harms.

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ Little is known about the state of national COVID-19 inquiries across the world. COVID-19 represents an unusual opportunity for cross-country studies of national inquiries examining the same crisis.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

⇒ We collected and analysed a novel data set of national COVID-19 inquiries, focussing on key metrics for democratic countries (broadly defined) and providing the first survey of postpandemic policy reviews.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE OR POLICY

⇒ Pandemic policies will depend on the lessons governments draw from the COVID-19 experience. We find, however, that (1) only 25 (32%) of the 78 countries in our data set have initiated national inquiries into their government's COVID-19 response, although wealthy, highly democratic countries were more likely to have done so. Only 14 of these inquiries were public inquiries, proper. The remaining inquiries were conducted by parliamentary committees, government ministries, agencies or other semiofficial bodies (we excluded purely citizen-led inquiries from our sample). We also find that (2) over two-thirds of these inquiries (69%) are ostensibly examining the collateral damage of the non-pharmaceutical interventions.

Conclusion Although slightly less than a third of countries in our sample have initiated inquiries into their COVID-19 response, those that have tend to mention collateral harms in their terms of reference, but not policy inadequacy. Our exploratory study should be followed by fine-grained textual analyses of individual inquiries.

INTRODUCTION

The lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic will influence public health policies and practices in the future. National

inquiries into the government's pandemic response have the potential to shape those lessons. Inquiries reconstruct past events, gather evidence, assess the harms and benefits experienced by different groups, establish causation and allocate credit or blame. Their recommendations are forward-looking, proposing changes to the behaviour or priorities of government actors, restitution for those harmed, new policy directions or structural and institutional reforms.¹⁻⁴ They are also inherently political: governments may constrain their scope, avoid them altogether or use them instrumentally to deflect criticism.^{5,6}

Our study asks: Which democracies commissioned national COVID-19 inquiries? What forms did these inquiries take? And to what extent did they advance accountability and policy learning? We hypothesise that highly democratic countries with less centralised executive power and stronger accountability mechanisms were more likely to launch inquiries because their governments face greater pressures to act transparently. By contrast, countries where power is concentrated in the executive may be less inclined to initiate inquiries, given the higher risks of political exposure. We also expect variation in the types of inquiries: public inquiries proper, which governments often view as diminishing their welfare⁷ (referred to as *negative goods* in⁸), should be more common in systems in which transparency and independence are institutionalised. Parliamentary committees, by contrast, may arise under different political dynamics, including pressure from opposition parties.

To test these expectations, we compiled an original panel data set of national-level COVID-19 inquiries appointed between March 2020 and December 2024. We also investigated their terms of reference: whether they were broad or, instead, restricted the investigation to a few key issues; whether they instructed the inquiry to assess the adequacy of government responses, and whether they mandated study of the collateral harms of pandemic measures. These dimensions shed light on how far governments were willing to engage in critical self-reflection.

We define a *COVID-19 inquiry* as any major national investigation launched or officially recognised by a government, president or legislature to examine the pandemic response. This includes public inquiries proper, parliamentary and congressional committee investigations, and certain semiofficial initiatives. We exclude citizen-led, subnational and multilateral investigations, focusing on inquiries with the potential to influence national policy.

Our analysis is guided by three questions:

1. Which democracies launched national COVID-19 inquiries, and what institutional and political factors shaped their appointment?
2. What types of inquiries were established, and how did these vary across political systems?
3. To what extent were inquiries mandated to examine the collateral harms or the adequacy of pandemic measures?

METHODS

Sampling: identifying the inquiries

We carried out an extensive web search for national COVID-19 inquiries appointed between March 2020 and December 2024. Our search focused on countries that scored at least 0.6 on the 2019 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Electoral Democracy Index.⁹ The Index is a widely used measure, which assigns countries a value from 0 (highly undemocratic) to 1 (highly democratic) based on criteria representing core features of democracy. It operationalises electoral democracy as a political system with free and fair elections under universal suffrage, with protections for freedoms of association and expression.

We selected the cut-off value of 0.6 to approximate the 'full' and 'flawed' democracies categories by the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index. To give an idea of which countries made our list of democracies and which were left off, Guatemala was slightly above our cut-off, while El Salvador was slightly below it (see online supplemental tables A1 and A2 for a full list of countries.) We focused on democracies because democratic governments are expected to operate transparently and are more likely to face public scrutiny, making inquiries a meaningful mechanism for accountability and policy learning. In contrast, authoritarian regimes rarely establish inquiries. Where they do, their inquiries tend to be tightly controlled or largely symbolic, making meaningful comparison difficult. We used the 2019 V-Dem index values to ensure that our inclusion criteria reflected prepandemic conditions, avoiding distortions introduced by political developments during COVID-19 that may have affected later democracy scores. However, we use the index values from the pandemic period (2020–2024) in empirical analyses.

While both the EIU and V-Dem indices aim to measure democratic quality, they rely on different methodologies and yield divergent country rankings. In particular, India, the Philippines and Singapore fell below our selected threshold, even though they were categorised as flawed democracies by the 2023 EIU Democracy Index (the low ranking of India by the recent iterations of V-Dem has been a subject of controversy). Since the vast majority of COVID-19 inquiries occurred in highly democratic countries, this sampling discrepancy is unlikely to have influenced our main results. Nonetheless, due to the discrepant ranking of these three countries, we discuss their inquiries below (Malaysia was also classified as a flawed democracy but did not have a national-level inquiry).

We recruited language and country experts to assist us in our search and coding of data. In a few cases (eg, Armenia, Iceland, Latvia and Slovakia), we used translation software and English-language reports in local media. We made a reasonable attempt to identify all the national inquiries in our sample countries, but cannot exclude the possibility of omissions.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We included the following types of COVID-19 inquiries in our data set: (1) national-level public inquiries, (2) parliamentary committees and (3) other types of national inquiries which were recognised as legitimate by the government or otherwise influenced government policy.

Public inquiries are temporary bodies set up to investigate a particular event or series of actions, usually on the basis of statutory authority such as the UK's Inquiries Act 2005. In the absence of a specific statute, there are usually provisions for establishing them in the country's general administrative law. In some countries, inquiries may also (or instead) be conducted by commissions of inquiry (which are often called Royal Commissions in constitutional monarchies). Their hearings may be less public and their investigations may focus on broader issues than those of public inquiries. Their membership is often, but not invariably, drawn from outside of government bureaucracy and may include judges, experts and representatives of interested parties alongside senior public servants.¹⁰ Neither public inquiries nor commissions of inquiry are part of the permanent bureaucracy or a standing advisory group, but a 'separate part of government'.⁷

Parliamentary committees are not politically independent of their appointing body. Instead, they are appointed, chaired and run by elected politicians drawn from incumbent or opposition parties, or, most often, a combination of the two.¹⁰ They can exist on both a standing and an ad hoc basis.

Our third category comprises inquiries that did not fit neatly into the first two categories but nonetheless enjoyed some sort of official recognition. These include, for example, Japan's *Independent Investigation Commission on the Government's Response to COVID-19*, established by the Asia Pacific Initiative, a Tokyo-based non-governmental organisation, and acknowledged by senior officials, including then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.¹¹ In contrast, we exclude citizen-led investigations initiated by civil society groups. These efforts often arose in countries where governments resisted launching official COVID-19 inquiries. Examples include Canada's *National Citizens Inquiry*, initially led by former Reform Party leader Preston Manning,¹² and Mexico's *Independent Commission of Inquiry into the COVID-19 Pandemic*.¹³ (See also the discussion of India's citizen-led inquiry below.) Both inquiries were sharply critical of the government's COVID-19 response and were not recognised as legitimate by the government or ruling parties. The Mexican inquiry in particular faced sharp criticism from political leaders: former president López Obrador dismissed its findings as 'a filthy rag'¹⁴ and 'a despicable act of political manoeuvring',¹⁵ while current president Claudia Sheinbaum has dismissed it as politically motivated.¹⁶

We exclude subnational inquiries, such as those conducted by the governments of Alberta and Wallonia,^{17 18} as well as investigations led by multilateral organisations (eg, the WHO) and professional bodies

(eg, The Lancet Commission).^{19 20} We also exclude *the Special Committee on COVID-19 of the European Parliament*, as the product of a supranational entity.

Data set and other variables

Our data set is structured as a country-year panel, covering the period from 2019 to 2024. In addition to variables related to COVID-19 inquiries and their appointment, the data set includes yearly values of the *Electoral Democracy Index* and the *Presidentialism Index* (measuring centralisation of power) from the V-Dem Core data set,⁹ selected economic variables from the World Bank World Development Indicators,²¹ and the *gov_new* variable in the Comparative Political Data Set.²² This variable indicates a significant change in the party or ideological composition of the cabinet from the previous year, but is only available for 36 countries (including Hungary, which is not on our list of countries) and for the years 2019–2023. We also include two variables from the V-Dem data set—*Legislature investigates in practice* and *Executive oversight*—which provide ordinal scores (0–4) for the likelihood that the legislature or another official body would investigate and issue an unfavourable report on government or executive misconduct. These variables capture executive accountability more specifically than broader rule of law or transparency indices.

Data collection: coding the inquiry documents

Given the reports' considerable length and linguistic heterogeneity, we did not have the resources to conduct a full textual analysis of their contents. Instead, we examined their terms of reference, which set out the inquiry's rationale, mandate, approach and methodology.^{23 24} We also recorded key metrics for each inquiry, including the number of members, appointment date, number of reports and the date(s)—or expected date(s)—of report publication.

We assessed whether the inquiry's terms of reference were broad—allowing wide latitude to evaluate the government's COVID-19 response *in toto*—or narrow, restricting it to a single issue or limited set thereof. We also examined whether they mentioned pandemic response adequacy and recorded any mention of collateral harms from government action. Following Bardosh, we classified collateral harms into six groups: economic, educational, governance, health, social and other harms,²⁵ coding each as a binary variable (one if mentioned; 0 if absent). While terms of reference are open to interpretation, omitting policy-induced harms reduces the likelihood they will be addressed, even if inclusion does not ensure systematic examination.

RESULTS

How many countries have initiated a national inquiry into their government's COVID-19 response?

The V-Dem 2019 core data set includes 179 countries, 78 (or 43.6%) of which exceeded our cut-off of 0.6 on the 2019 Electoral Democracy Index. Out of these, 25

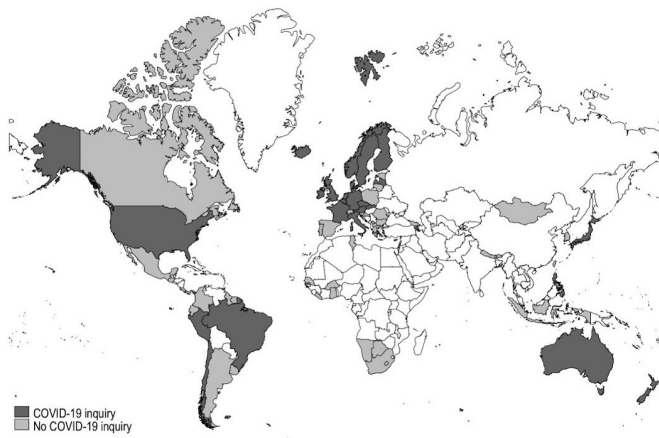


Figure 1 Shows countries with a value of >0.6 on the 2019 V-Dem Electoral Index that have initiated a national-level COVID-19 inquiry. [The grey areas include countries in our data set, the Philippines and Singapore. The map was created using the Mercator map and country ID files from https://www.stathelp.se/en/spmap_world_en.html]. V-Dem, Varieties of Democracy.

(32.1%) held at least one inquiry into their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (see figures 1 and 2, and the online supplemental appendix). Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Peru, the UK and the USA held more than one inquiry.

Although not in our sample, the inquiries in India, Singapore and the Philippines are noteworthy as these countries are classified as democracies by the EIU democracy index. In India, no national COVID-19 commission—governmental or statutory—was established.



Figure 2 Shows European countries with a value of >0.6 on the 2019 V-Dem Electoral Index that have initiated a national-level COVID-19 inquiry. [The map was created using the Mercator map and country ID files from https://www.stathelp.se/en/spmap_world_en.html]. V-Dem, Varieties of Democracy.

Instead, citizen groups and civil organisations launched *Covid Truths: The People’s Commission & Public Inquiry Committee*, inspired by South Africa’s *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. The Commission has been highly critical of the government’s pandemic response and released a report on the effects of COVID-19 on New Delhi’s waste-picking community.²⁶ In Singapore, the government issued a white paper on its COVID-19 response following an internal review led by Peter Ho, former Head of the Civil Service.²⁷ In the Philippines, *The House Committee on Public Order and Safety*—a standing crossbench parliamentary committee—has investigated excess mortality during the pandemic.²⁸

Inquiry properties: type, terms of reference and timing

Table 1 displays summary statistics for the inquiries in our data set. Of the 32 national inquiries we found, 14 (43.8%) were public inquiries, 15 (46.9%) were parliamentary committees and 3 (9.4%) other types of inquiry. The average number of members was 4.69 for public inquiries, 11.13 for parliamentary committees and 10.5 for other types of inquiries. The average inquiry length was 16.7 months for public inquiries, 22.6 months for parliamentary committees and 22.5 months for other types of inquiries. The shortest inquiry was Japan’s, spanning just the 4 months in summer 2020, while the UK’s Hallett inquiry, projected to last 5½ years (ending late 2026), is set to be the longest.

The WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, and ended the designation on 5 May 2023.^{29 30} Most inquiries in our data set occurred during this period. As of June 2025, only those in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the UK remain ongoing (we were unable to verify the end dates for the parliamentary inquiries in Armenia and Seychelles).

The terms of reference for 78% of inquiries were broad, directing them to assess the government’s pandemic response as a whole. Few explicitly required that government response adequacy be examined, and where such instructions existed, they were often confined to specific aspects of the response or formed only a minor part of the mandate. For example, Denmark’s Mink Commission was tasked with investigating the government-ordered mass culling of farmed minks (wrongly believed to spread COVID-19),³¹ and Peru’s inquiry examined irregular use of the State Procurement Law by public officials during the pandemic.³² Sweden’s Corona Commission,³³ by contrast, was explicitly instructed to explore structural factors behind high early deaths in elderly and municipal care, suggesting potential inadequacy, though this too was embedded within broader terms. Given the vagueness of many mandates, we found it too difficult to systematically code mentions of overreach or inadequacy and therefore report only on the overall scope (broad vs narrow). Slightly over two-thirds of terms of reference (68.8%, 22 of 30) mentioned some form of collateral harm from government COVID-19 measures, with economic impacts

Table 1 Summary statistics by type of inquiry

Type of inquiry				
Variable	Public inquiry	Parliamentary committee	Other	Overall
N	14 (43.8%)	15 (46.9%)	3 (9.4%)	32 (100.0%)
Length (months)	16.69 (7–56)	19.3 (5–47)	22.5 (4–41)	19.0 (4–56)
Nr members	4.69 (1–15)	11.13 (1–36)	10.50 (1–20)	8.36 (1–36)
Broad terms of reference				
0	4 (0.29)	3 (0.20)	0 (0.00)	7 (0.22)
1	10 (0.71)	12 (0.80)	3 (1.00)	25 (0.78)
Economic harms				
0	7 (0.50)	12 (0.80)	2 (0.67)	21 (0.66)
1	7 (0.50)	3 (0.20)	1 (0.33)	11 (0.34)
Educational harms				
0	10 (0.71)	12 (0.80)	1 (0.33)	23 (0.67)
1	4 (0.29)	3 (0.20)	2 (0.67)	9 (0.28)
Non-COVID-19 health harms				
0	10 (0.71)	12 (0.80)	1 (0.33)	23 (0.72)
1	4 (0.29)	3 (0.20)	2 (0.67)	9 (0.28)
Social harms				
0	8 (0.57)	13 (0.87)	2 (0.67)	23 (0.72)
1	6 (0.43)	2 (0.13)	1 (0.33)	9 (0.28)
Governance harms				
0	10 (0.71)	11 (0.73)	2 (0.67)	24 (0.75)
1	4 (0.29)	4 (0.27)	1 (0.33)	8 (0.24)

Missing start date for the German inquiry *Vulnerabilität und Resilienz in der Krise (2022)*, start month for Peru's report of corruption, end dates for Armenian and Seychelles inquiries, member information for Slovakia and the Netherlands Safety Board inquiry.

the most frequently cited. We found no evidence of time trends in these variables.

Table 2 shows the timing of different types of inquiries. Most (24 of 31, or 77.42%) were launched in the first 2 years of the pandemic, including 9 (64.3%) of the public inquiries. The earliest public inquiries appeared in Scandinavian countries, where commissions of inquiry are used routinely to evaluate crisis responses. Countries with Westminster-style systems—such as Ireland, New Zealand and Australia—as well as Austria and Slovakia, were slower to act. Canada, despite its strong tradition of

public inquiries,³⁴ has yet to initiate a governmental or parliamentary COVID-19 inquiry. Parliamentary committees were often appointed more quickly (with 13 out of 15 parliamentary committees initiated in years 2020–2021), likely because they can be launched by opposition parties.⁸

Which factors predict the appointment of a COVID-19 inquiry?

Table 3 reports the average marginal effects (population-average) from a series of random-effects panel logit regressions examining country-level predictors of

Table 2 Inquiries started by year and type/year

Year	Nr inquiries started	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Nr public inquiries started	Nr parliamentary committees started	Nr other inquiries started
2020	15	48.39	48.39	4	9	2
2021	9	29.03	77.42	5	4	0
2022	1	3.23	80.65	1	0	0
2023	3	9.68	90.32	2	1	0
2024	3	9.68	100.00	2	1	0
Total	31	100.00		14	15	2

German Ethics Council inquiry is omitted because of unknown start date.

Table 3 Panel logit with random effects, average marginal effects (population-average)

Variables/models	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ln GDP per capita, 2015 constant US\$, lagged	0.038* (0.022)	0.067*** (0.017)	0.043** (0.022)	0.048** (0.019)	0.059*** (0.017)	0.050*** (0.017)
GDP growth (annual %), lagged	-0.006** (0.003)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.006** (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.003)	-0.007*** (0.002)
V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index	0.167 (0.310)		0.354 (0.255)			
V-Dem Presidentialism Index	-0.084 (0.357)			-0.378 (0.259)		
V-Dem Executive oversight	0.000 (0.030)				0.031 (0.020)	
V-Dem Legislature investigates in practice	0.026 (0.024)					0.033* (0.018)
Likelihood-ratio test, χ^2	4.48		2.17	2.64	2.42	3.69
Prob> χ^2	0.3449		0.1407	0.1042	0.1197	0.0549
Observations (country-years)	384	384	384	384	384	384

Dependent variable: appointment of a COVID-19 inquiry on a given year (2020–2024).

SEs in parentheses.

Germany omitted because of unknown inquiry start date; two Peruvian public inquiries in 2021 combined as one data point, missing 2024 GDP for Bhutan.

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

GDP, gross domestic product.

national COVID-19 inquiry appointments. Key independent variables include the V-Dem *Electoral Democracy Index*; the V-Dem *Presidentialism Index*, two V-Dem measures of executive accountability (*Legislature Investigates in Practice* and *Executive oversight*); and economic indicators (gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in constant 2015 dollars and lagged GDP growth). The dependent variable is a binary indicator denoting whether a COVID-19 inquiry was launched in a given year. We hypothesised that wealthy, non-presidential democracies with robust accountability mechanisms would be more likely to appoint inquiries—particularly public inquiries proper. In contrast, parliamentary committees can be initiated by opposition parties and may reflect different political dynamics.

All the variates except for GDP growth are highly correlated with one another (see online supplemental table A5), resulting in severe multicollinearity in the full model (Model 1, uncentred $vif=36.34$). Consequently, the coefficients' significance is understated due to the inflated SEs. We proceed in two ways.

First, we start with logged GDP per capita and GDP growth as a base model (Column 2 of table 3), and extend the model by considering the addition of each V-Dem variable, one by one. This approach leaves the multicollinearity unaddressed and gives a worst-case estimate of the p values associated with each of the V-Dem variables individually. Because they are highly correlated with each other, we restrict attention to including them individually. As Column 6 of the table shows, the likelihood ratio

test from including the legislature investigates V-Dem variable is significant at the 0.1 level ($p=0.0549$).

Second, we address the multicollinearity by regressing logged GDP on the four political variables, saving the residuals. These residuals give us the effects of logged GDP that are not attributable to the political variables. We then repeat the same regressions as in table 3, replacing logged GDP with the residuals. The coefficients, shown in online supplemental table A4, all have the same approximate magnitude and the same signs as in table 3, and are now highly significant, as are all of the χ^2 likelihood ratio tests.

The appendix contains several robustness checks, which we summarise here. We restricted the dependent variable by inquiry type, each again showing the residual of logged GDP as a predictor. In online supplemental table A6, the dependent variable is appointment of a public inquiry (proper). In this case, the results are broadly similar to those in online supplemental table A3.

In online supplemental table A7, the dependent variable is the appointment of a parliamentary committee. All the likelihood ratio tests remain significant, except for the *Executive oversight*. This variable reflects the likelihood that a body other than the legislature (eg, an ombudsman) would investigate and potentially issue an unfavourable decision or report on executive officials' actions. Its lack of predictive power for parliamentary committees is therefore unsurprising.

As an additional robustness check, we test whether changes in the government's ideological composition

are associated with inquiry appointments. Online supplemental table A8 shows that the coefficient is insignificant, and the sign is in the opposite of the predicted direction. However, we advise caution in interpreting this finding, as the data are limited (34 countries, years 2020–2023, mostly Western democracies).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We find that a country's probability of initiating a COVID-19 inquiry rises with its value in the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index, its GDP, and its level of executive and legislative oversight, and falls in its level of centralisation of executive power and GDP growth. The orthogonalised GDP variable, based on residuals, remains significant, indicating that logged GDP effects are not fully explained by the political variables, suggesting that economic factors are at play. This is both true of inquiries in general and public inquiries (proper) in particular. By contrast, the appointment of a COVID-19 parliamentary inquiry is positively associated with the country's value in the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index but not with the level of executive oversight or GDP. Overall, 25 (32.1%) of the 78 countries with a 2019 V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index of at least 0.6 initiated at least one national-level COVID-19 inquiry. Most inquiries (77.42%) and 64.3% of the public inquiries were initiated in the first 2 years of the pandemic (2020–2021), suggesting openness to be held accountable and to learn from policy mistakes. However, only 14 of the 32 inquiries were public inquiries proper, suggesting limited public accountability and policy learning by the government. These were generally initiated in countries with a long tradition of public inquiries.

We also observed cases in which inquiries were weaponised against political opponents. In Brazil, a parliamentary inquiry commission was used to impugn the government for not implementing lockdowns, promoting herd immunity and delaying vaccine purchases. Latvia's parliamentary investigation bears the following inauspicious name: 'Parliamentary Inquiry Committee for investigating the erroneous actions of the Latvian government in the Covid-19 pandemic management process, naming the political officials who caused irreversible negative consequences for Latvia'.³⁵

A notable finding is that 68.8% of national COVID-19 inquiries reference collateral harms in their terms of reference, indicating potential for accountability and policy learning. However, terms of reference primarily reflect the structure of inquiries, and mentions of harm could either signal genuine intent or be used strategically to deflect criticism or target political opponents, without resulting in meaningful assessment.²³ Conversely, accountability may also be promoted through democratic processes beyond formal inquiries.

Our findings suggest that democratic governments are commonly reluctant to have inquiries, presumably because an inquiry may bring to light government

failures, though more democratic regimes appear either to be less averse to conducting reviews that signal accountability and policy learning or to face greater political pressures, making it harder to avoid scrutiny. Our findings are important because they call into question the model of democratic governments as uncompromising in their pursuit of knowledge and accountability. The reluctance to have COVID-19 inquiries warrants scrutiny and a search for alternative explanations.

Our study has two limitations stemming from resource constraints. First, our data are likely incomplete. Due to a lack of local expertise, we may have misinterpreted institutional details or overlooked inquiries that were not widely publicised. In some cases, we also have been unable to find certain information, such as the end date for the Armenian parliamentary committee. Second, our analysis was limited to the terms of reference documents. While these give us a sense of what the inquiries aim to investigate, they cannot replace a thorough examination of the individual inquiry documents or proceedings. To build on our findings, future research should include more detailed content analyses of specific inquiries, which could uncover strengths and weaknesses that this cross-country study could not fully address.

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