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Covid 19 and Politics: The contrasting influence of political rhetoric on perceptions of the pandemic

Governments have responded to the pandemic with an arsenal of public policies certainly never before deployed on this scale in peacetime. To justify these measures (social distancing, confinement, etc.), the political figures in power have developed a variety of political rhetoric. What arguments have been put forward the most? By what means of communication? How were they received by voters? What role did partisan cleavages play in the perception of discourse and in the application of measures proposed by decision-makers?

Several studies in the WPRN database analyze the political rhetoric developed during the pandemic and its central role in citizens' perception of the dangerousness of the virus and their compliance with health measures.

Politicians used all the means of communication at their disposal to reach the population and inform about the pandemic, not without partisan ulterior motives (1). The speeches had an impact on the citizens, influencing in particular the perception of the dangerousness of the virus (2).

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Politicised communication on the crisis makes extensive use of social networks

The rise of new media

In addition to the traditional media (speeches or televised interventions), social networks have been strongly used. A study by a Czech university listed on WPRN highlights the central role of Twitter in the communication of political figures. The study, which analyzes more than 50,000 tweets from 143 heads of state, shows that 65% of the leaders of UN member states have tweeted about the pandemic, confirming the installation of Twitter as a central communication medium for politicians. The subject was by far the most covered by politicians during the period and political personalities have strongly gained in audience on the social network (+15% for several European leaders such as Giuseppe Conte or Boris Johnson). A study from the University of Leuven available on WPRN shows that politicians are strongly challenged on Twitter, making the social network a privileged tool for dialogue between citizens and politicians. If social networks seem to be at the center of interactions, all means of communication have been mobilized to inform about the pandemic. For example, a study available on WPRN reminds us that in South Korea and Taiwan, the government has used means of communication such as SMS to reach the population in real time. The launch of a WHO information service via WhatsApp is welcomed by the study and could inspire governments and politicians.

Politicized speeches on the crisis

In terms of speech content, studies have analyzed the detail of what the political figures say. The aforementioned study (in preprint) from the University of Leuven provided an in-depth analysis of the content of the political tweets of Belgian politicians. The authors selected 50 main accounts from 5 major political parties in French-speaking Belgium. 126 political figures among the 250 expressed themselves on Twitter producing 2305 messages over the period of the study. The study shows that the metaphor of the flow (wave, etc.) was widely used to characterize the virus. Moreover, the detailed analysis highlights a partisan vision of the pandemic: the different political parties put forward in their tweets on the pandemic a lexical field linked to their ideology (e.g. «independent, pension, liberal profession» as opposed to «food, proximity and prevention»). Comparative studies with the major European countries would help put the different national realities into perspective. Studies could also further investigate citizens' reactions to the different types of discourse used to evaluate the most impactful rhetoric.

reminds us, political discourse has given rise to the propagation of misinformation, errors or information perceived as stigmatizing. This information may have had an impact on society and citizens.

Polarizing effects of political rhetoric on citizens? the case of the United States

A limited impact of the US presidential speech

The United States is undoubtedly the most interesting country to study on this subject because the partisan polarization has been strong there, the two parties structuring the public debate having different, even opposed, perceptions of the dangerousness of the virus. The main available studies focus in particular on the impact of President Trump's presidential speech. An American study carried out in March 2020 with a sample of 989 people sought to highlight whether support for President Trump was a factor in social distancing, given that the President had publicly criticized scientists on several occasions and denied the dangerousness of the epidemic. The study shows that trust in Donald Trump is an important predictor of social distancing, even when the other variables are isolated. Indeed, the authors analyzed several sociological variables (political orientation, media monitoring and classic sociodemographic variables) and psychological variables (moral values, self-control, altruism, etc.), and consider that trust in Trump is, alone, a very important factor of non respect of barrier gestures, much more than support for the Republican Party for example. However, the study has methodological limitations, as the sample selected is not the most representative of the population.

These limitations are important because not all studies show such a strong impact of political discourse. A University of California study available on WPRN also analyzes the impact of Donald Trump's presidential speech and his criticisms of the scientific community on the American public's confidence in scientists. The study, carried out in May on a representative sample of 1,593 Americans, classifies confidence in the scientific community of different categories of Americans according to age, gender, education, ethnicity, religion, social class, income level, place of residence (urban, rural, suburban) and party affiliation. The study shows that people claiming to be Democrats are particularly inclined to follow scientific recommendations because of values shared with the scientific community. The «independent» or «republican» people share less the same values as those of the scientific community.

However, the study finds no obvious direct impact of President Trump's criticism of scientists. On the contrary, it shows that people with the typical socio-demographic characteristics of the Trump vote (male, white, working-class, not living in a big city), are no more receptive than others to antiscientific discourse. This allows the author of the study to broaden the discussion.

He believes that while the academic literature shows that the populist vote is characterized by a rejection of elite knowledge, this rejection of knowledge would not apply when «life or death» issues are at stake. In addition to criticizing scientists, President Trump also renamed Covid-19 as a «Chinese virus» in his speeches. A study reviewed on WPRN analyzed the scope of this categorization by the President with 2 objectives: to study whether this name has led to an increase in xenophobia towards Asian people and to evaluate whether this name has led to a decrease in the citizens' perception of the responsibility of the American government in the pandemic. The study studied responses from a sample of 1200 participants. It shows that the name «Chinese virus» is believed to have led to a 5% increase in xenophobia towards Asians, a figure that is not significant, and that this figure did not change for those claiming to be conservative, which would indicate a relatively limited impact of the presidential speech. Conversely, the study shows that this designation has not led to a decrease in the perception of the US government's responsibility in the pandemic.

Partisan affiliation and anticipation of the crisis

In the United States, the partisan divide has been central to the management of the pandemic, with the Democratic Party expressing more concern about the pandemic than the Republican Party. An American study accessible on WPRN, based on the observation that the pandemic was very quickly subjected to partisan cleavage and a process of emotional polarization, sought to evaluate the influence of individuals' political opinions on the evaluation of the dangerousness of Covid-19. The study analyzed the perception of the risks of the epidemic in a sample of large companies based on the transcript data of the strategic meetings of the management committees. These data were cross-referenced with the company's partisan index, which is based on various elements, such as donations to PACs (Political Action Committees, which finance parties), to assess whether the firm is leaning more towards the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. The results show that the more a firm is leaning towards the Democratic camp, the more it has anticipated the Covid crisis and taken action.

In summary, political figures have deployed significant communication and partisan discourse on the issue of the pandemic. These discourses have had an influence on citizens and on the perception of the danger posed by the pandemic, but this influence appears relatively moderate and is not the subject of consensus between studies. Most of the currently available studies on political discourse have been conducted in the United States, in the particular context of the Trump presidency, and have a very critical analysis of the presidential discourse. It would be interesting to be able to compare the different political rhetoric developed on the pandemic between countries, and particularly between France and other European countries. For example, what has been the impact of the war metaphor in the presidential speech in France? An ongoing NYU study available on WPRN aims to analyze the effects of the Covid's war metaphor and could offer a first lead for an answer.

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This note is based on a number of resources from the World Pandemic Research Network

Graham, Amanda. «Faith in Trump, Moral Foundations, and Social Distancing Defiance During the Coronavirus Pandemic.»
https://wprn.org/item/420652
This study from Georgia Southern University highlights the reasons for refusing to respect social distancing in the United States, using national data from a March 2020 survey of 989 Americans. Along with lack of self-control, trust in President Trump is the main factor in this behavior, according to the study. The study questions the President's minimization of the threat of the virus and the fact that he criticized measures such as social distancing and the wearing of masks.

Hargittai, Eszter. «Who Doesn't Trust Fauci? The Public's Belief in the Expertise and Shared Values of Scientists in the Covid-19 Pandemic.»
https://wprn.org/item/477952
This American study conducted in September 2020 tried to assess the trust Americans place in scientists on Covid-19 and whether the values of the scientists reflect those of the public. The survey was conducted among 1,593 people representative of the American population. In particular, it sought to assess the impact of the remarks of Donald Trump, who had strong disagreements with the scientific community. The study found little evidence of direct effects of the president's speech. It also reveals different levels of trust in scientists across social groups: Democrats support scientists; working-class men outside urban areas share less of the scientists' values; African Americans are less likely than whites to trust scientists on COVID-19; and Protestants and conservative Catholics have less trust in scientists' knowledge.

Xu, Chengxin, «Social Cost with No Political Gain: The «Chinese Virus» Effect»
https://wprn.org/item/434852
This Seattle University study sought to analyze the effects of President Donal Trump's characterization of the virus as a «Chinese Virus» with two objectives: to study whether this designation has led to an increase in xenophobia towards Asian people and a decrease in citizens' perceptions of government responsibility in the pandemic. The study is based on a sample of 1,200 people and notes that 16% of participants reported xenophobia towards Chinese immigrants, but does not see a significant impact of Donal Trump's discourse on this figure. Furthermore, the use of the term «Chinese virus» did not lead to a reduction in the perception of the U.S. government's responsibility in managing the pandemic. the health crisis, and conversely, the more it is leaning towards the Republicans, the less it anticipated this crisis.

Benton, Richard. «Firm Partisan Political Positioning and Perceptions of COVID-19-Related Risk»

https://wprn.org/item/432052

This U.S. study published in May seeks to assess the role of polarization due to partisan political cleavage on citizens' perceptions of the pandemic. The study analyzed the perception of the risks of the epidemic in a sample of large companies based on transcript data from strategic meetings of management committees or the study of company donations to Political Action Committees (PACs). The findings of the study are clear: the more a company is leaning towards the Democrats, the more it anticipated the health crisis, and conversely, the more it is leaning towards the Republicans, the less it anticipated this crisis.

Cougnon, Louise-Amélie and De Viron, Louis. «Covid-19 and Crisis Communication. Linguistic focus on tweets from French-speaking Belgium».

https://wprn.org/item/476752

This study carried out in French-speaking Belgium analyzes the discourse on social networks related to the Covid 19 crisis, particularly on Twitter. Three types of corpus are mobilized: 4000 tweets from politicians, 30,000 tweet from media, and 100,000 tweet from citizens. 3 themes are studied: the evolution of discourse over time, the impact of political discourse on the acceptance of measures by citizens, and the role of language used by the media in the acceptance of measures.

Haman, Michael. «The use of Twitter by state leaders and its impact on the public during the COVID-19 pandemic».

https://wprn.org/item/456552

This study from a Czech university analyzes the use of twitter by heads of state using mathematical models. 50872 tweets from 143 heads of state were analyzed. The study notes that 2/3 of the heads of states sitting at the UN tweeted about the pandemic, which was by far the first topic on twitter during the period studied. Also, political leaders saw their number of followers increase much more than normal and the increase was even greater for francophone leaders. The author believes that the pandemic has attracted a new audience on Twitter, to follow the news of political figures and that it will be interesting to know if this Covid effect will continue after the end of the epidemic.

Bikbov, Alexander. «Communication on COVID-19».

https://wprn.org/item/421452

This project bringing together a sociologist and an epidemiologist analyzes how government communication around Covid 19 reaches citizens and the relationships that different social groups have with regard to health measures. 2 articles have been published so far: one on health measures to prevent the second epidemic wave, the other on vulnerable groups during the pandemic.