

Leader Types and (Liberal?) Narratives of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This project compares the key decision-makers in the pandemic, with a focus on leaders, their health ministers, and their finance ministers and the narratives used during the pandemic. We take into account the role of health and finance ministers because much political and public debate on the pandemic has revolved around the issues of life versus livelihoods. We consider the degree to which these persons are “experts” in the relevant policy area, which is measured by both their education and their occupational background. We further take into account the extent to which leaders and ministers refer to scientific expertise; when they did so, we are interested to learn which particular disciplines they cite.

We explore the linguistic structure of political communication and persuasion among experts, politicians, and voters/citizens. This project measures the degree of engagement with the liberal script in expert rhetoric surrounding decision-making. Are “experts” more or less likely to engage with evidence (data-driven decision-making) in their political communication? Is it likely to reinforce liberal norms? To what degree is populist and evidence-free rhetoric challenging liberal norms? Do ministers who come from authoritarian populist parties rely on evidence and discuss these parts of the liberal script differently than ministers from more mainstream parties? Is there greater variance across autocracies, where some rely only on experts while others appoint cronies to key positions?