

# COVID-19 and Politics: The Contrasting Influence of Political Rhetoric on Perceptions of the Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

*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, lockdown, 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? Memorandum 8 : overview of the studies and projects registered on WPRN database*

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 party 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 political motives. The speeches had an impact on citizens, influencing in particular the perception of the dangerousness of the virus.

## 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 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](#) reminds us that in South Korea and Taiwan, the government 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.

As this [study](#) available on WPRN 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 topic because the political 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 pandemic. 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 sanitary measures (social distancing, mask wearing...), 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 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 anti scientific 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 led to an increase in xenophobia towards Asian people and to evaluate whether it 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.