

EDITED BY NILS RINGE AND LUCIO RENNÓ

# POPULISTS AND THE PANDEMIC

HOW POPULISTS AROUND THE WORLD  
RESPONDED TO COVID-19

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY



# POPULISTS AND THE PANDEMIC

*Populists and the Pandemic* examines the responses of populist political actors and parties in 22 countries around the globe to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of their attitudes, rhetoric, mobilization repertoires, and policy proposals.

The responses of some populist leaders have received much public attention as they denied the severity of the public health crisis, denigrated experts and data, looked for scapegoats, encouraged protests, questioned the legitimacy of liberal institutions, spread false information, and fueled conspiracies. But how widespread are those particular reactions? How much variation is there? What explains the variation that does exist? This volume considers these questions through critical analysis of countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa by leading experts with deep knowledge of their respective cases. Some chapters focus on populist parties, others on charismatic populist leaders. Some countries examined are democracies, others autocracies. Some populists are left wing, others right wing. Some populists are in government, others in opposition. This variation allows for a panoramic consideration of factors that systematically influence or mediate populist responses to the pandemic. The book thus makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the intersection between two of the most pressing social and political challenges of our time.

The book will be of interest to all those researching populism, extremism, and political parties and those more broadly interested in political science, public policy, sociology, communications, and economics.

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# POPULISTS AND THE PANDEMIC

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Responded to COVID-19

*Edited by  
Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó*

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# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1 Populists and the Pandemic: How Populists Around the World Responded to COVID-19 <i>Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó</i>	1
2 The United States: Trump, Populism, and the Pandemic <i>Kenneth M. Roberts</i>	19
3 Mexico: A Politically Effective Populist Pandemic Response <i>Nicolás de la Cerda and Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo</i>	29
4 Brazil: “We Are All Going To Die One Day” <i>Frederico Bertholini</i>	44
5 Argentina: Peronism and Inclusionary Populist Adaptation to the Pandemic <i>Germán Lodola and Luisina Perelmiter</i>	57
6 The United Kingdom: The Pandemic and the Tale of Two Populist Parties <i>Tim Bale</i>	68

**viii** Contents

7	Spain: Different Populist Responses with Similar (and Limited) Outcomes	79
	<i>Carolina Plaza-Colodro and Nicolás Miranda Olivares</i>	
8	Italy: The Diverging Strategies of the Populist Radical Right During the Pandemic	92
	<i>Lisa Zanotti and Carlos Meléndez</i>	
9	Poland: When Populists Must Manage Crisis Instead of Performing It	105
	<i>Ben Stanley</i>	
10	Hungary: Creeping Authoritarianism in the Name of Pandemic Response	117
	<i>Agnes Batory</i>	
11	Turkey: Governing the Unpredictable through Market Imperative	127
	<i>Evren Balta and Soli Özel</i>	
12	Indonesia: From the Pandemic Crisis to Democratic Decline	138
	<i>Eunsook Jung</i>	
13	India: The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly Consequences of India's Pandemic Response	148
	<i>Saloni Bhogale and Pavithra Suryanarayan</i>	
14	The Philippines: Penal Populism and Pandemic Response	162
	<i>Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes</i>	
15	Russia: Muddling Through Populism and the Pandemic	173
	<i>Anton Shirikov, Valeriia Umanets and Yoshiko Herrera</i>	
16	Nicaragua: Populist Performance and Authoritarian Practice During COVID-19	184
	<i>Rachel A. Schwartz and Kai M. Thaler</i>	
17	Venezuela: A Populist Legacy and Authoritarian Response	196
	<i>Caitlin Andrews-Lee</i>	
18	Tanzania: Narrating the Eradication of COVID-19	207
	<i>Dan Paget</i>	

19	South Africa: From Populist Inertia to Insurrection <i>Ryan Brunette and Benjamin Fogel</i>	218
20	France: Balancing Respectability and Radicalization in a Pandemic <i>Marta Lorimer and Ethan vanderWilden</i>	228
21	Germany: The Alternative for Germany in the COVID-19 Pandemic <i>Marcel Lewandowsky, Christoph Leonhardt and Andreas Blätte</i>	237
22	Belgium: Against the Government and Its Parties, (Not So Much) with the People <i>Judith Sijstermans and Steven M. Van Hauwaert</i>	250
23	The Netherlands: Divergent Paths for the Populist Radical Right <i>Sarah L. de Lange</i>	262
24	Conclusion <i>Nils Ringe, Lucio Rennó and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser</i>	273
	<i>Index</i>	293



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# FIGURES

3.1	Total deaths per million in the Americas	31
3.2	GDP quarter-to-quarter percentage change	32
3.3	COVID-19 policy stringency in the Americas	33
3.4	Announced COVID-19 above-the-line discretionary fiscal support measures (percent of the GDP)	34
3.5	Presidential approval/Stringency index/Covid deaths	35
3.6	Populism in Latin America	37
4.1	Percent variation in historical average by week for commercial and leisure activities, Brazil 2020	47
4.2	COVID-19 daily deaths in Brazil, percentage of disapproval of Bolsonaro, pandemic phases, and health ministers of Brazil, November 2019 to June 2021	49
4.3	Stringency Index and Containment Index, comparison between national government measures, state government measures, and local government measures	52
7.1	Right now, what worries you more, the effects of this crisis on health or the effects of the crisis on the economy and employment?	86
7.2	Electoral polls of the main Spanish parties, March 2020–April 2021 (CIS)	87
7.3	As the coronavirus situation in Spain is currently evolving, do you think that more demanding control and isolation measures should be taken or that we can continue as we are now?	88
7.4	Would you be willing to get vaccinated immediately when the vaccine is available?	88
8.1	Number of infections and deaths in Italy (February 2020–June 2021)	94
8.2	Mean of electoral polls for the League (February 2020–August 2021)	99

**xiv** Figures

8.3	Mean of electoral polls for the FdI (February 2020–August 2021)	101
9.1	Impact of the pandemic, government response, and citizen response	109
9.2	The pandemic and pandemic response in Polish public opinion	113
15.1	Approval rating of Putin	179
21.1	Frequency of radical right and anti-establishment dictionary words in speeches per parliamentary group, October 2017–May 2021, COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 speeches compared	239
22.1	Timeline of political events and COVID-19 in Belgium (2020–2021)	252
22.2	Timeline of VB’s position on COVID-19 (2020–2021)	253
23.1	Electoral support for populist parties in the Netherlands during the pandemic	263
24.1	Populists’ support for public policies	276
24.2	Populists’ rhetoric and practices	277

# TABLES

4.1	Patterns of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in pandemic response	45
21.1	Parties in the German Bundestag, 19th legislative period (2017–2021)	240



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# 1

## POPULISTS AND THE PANDEMIC

### How Populists Around the World Responded to COVID-19

*Nils Ringe and Lucio Rennó*

The COVID-19 pandemic is a common external shock hitting countries across a world in which democracy has been stagnant or in retreat (Freedom House 2020; V-Dem 2020) and populists have been ascending (e.g., Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Brubaker 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). This shock is one that, in some ways, seems to favor the objectives of populists, since a pandemic has the potential to undermine trust in political, economic, and social elites; to reveal or exacerbate societal schisms; to increase individual anxiety and collective malaise; and to negatively affect the overall mood of a country. At the extreme, the COVID-19 crisis may strengthen politically and socially regressive forces and increase acceptance of authoritarianism. Yet, a successful response to the pandemic requires decisive state action, reliance on scientific expertise and data, and careful consideration of policy options at odds with populists' rhetoric and agendas. More than one commentator thus posed the question if the pandemic might spell the end of the populist wave (e.g., de Vries and Hobolt 2020; Gaston 2020; Horaczek 2020; Kleine-Brockhoff 2020; Mead 2020; Müller 2020; Zabala 2020).

Hence, while the current moment is extraordinary for political actors of all stripes, it may provide both opportunities and challenges for populists in particular. On the one hand, populists tend to thrive in times of crisis, so much so that some observers see an intrinsic connection between crisis, populists' crisis politics, and populism itself (Barros 2005; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005; Stavrakakis 2005). On the other hand, the nature of a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic may conflict with basic features of populism and standard populist approaches to crisis politics, especially when it comes to populists garnering public attention, linking the crisis to their preexisting framework of grievances, polarizing opinion, and offering apparently simple solutions to complex policy challenges to be achieved through decisive leadership. Investigating how

populists across the world have reacted and responded to *the same* exogenously triggered public health crisis thus offers a singular opportunity to shed light on the relationship between populism and crisis and by extension on the phenomenon of populism itself.

This volume seeks to accomplish just that, by examining populists' responses to the pandemic in terms of their general attitudes, rhetoric, policy proposals, and mobilization repertoires. In their contributions to this book, leading country experts with deep knowledge of their respective cases illuminate how populists across the world have reacted to the pandemic through rich description and analysis of populist responses in almost two dozen countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. To be inclusive and accommodating of this large number of diverse cases while at the same time not falling into the trap of casting the net too widely by equating everything outside the political mainstream with populism, we invoke the commonly relied "ideational" definition of populism as a:

thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.

*(Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6)*

This "minimalist" definition is useful for our purposes because it provides a general analytical basis. Our reliance on it does not, however, negate the possibility that the rhetoric, proposed policies, and efforts at mobilization of populists may reflect strategic considerations rather than their ideological orientations or genuine beliefs (e.g., Kriesi 2018; Weyland 2021; Kenny, *forthcoming*).

In some highly publicized cases – especially the USA and Brazil – the reaction of populists to the pandemic has been marked by some shared and, in the face of a pandemic, damaging traits: denial of the severity of the virus and the gravity of the public health crisis it entails; rejection of and active attempts at denigrating expertise and data; scapegoating; fueling political conflict; encouraging protests against lockdowns; presenting as a dichotomous choice the tradeoff between "closing down" to stop the spread of the virus and "opening up" the economy; questioning the legitimacy of liberal institutions; spreading false information and conspiracies; and politicizing vaccines. But how much variation is there? What explains the variation that does exist? How is the populist response affected and mediated by broader structural factors, such as state capacity, social and economic inequality, ideology, and political institutions? Ultimately, does the pandemic seem to help or hurt the political rise of populists?

Next to exploring the relationship between populism and crisis, a second overarching goal of this volume is to identify the factors that mediate populist reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and thus to account for variation in the responses we observe. After all, different contextual factors may condition populists' responses to the pandemic or they may shape how their responses are

received, interpreted, and evaluated (Moffitt 2015, 208). The diversity of our case studies is an important asset in this regard: some countries are democracies, other autocracies. Populists are in power in some and in opposition in others. Some cases are of populist parties, others of personalistic populist leaders. Some populists are left-wing, others right-wing. This variation allows for systematic consideration of different factors that may affect or condition populist responses to the pandemic. Our volume thus makes an important original contribution by identifying which institutional and structural factors shape populists' crisis performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, including variables such as regime type, electoral institutions, party system, federalism, political polarization, state capacity, and the type and state of the economy. Last but not least, we investigate differences between populists themselves and how they affect their crisis response, such as whether populists are inclusionary (left-wing populism that combines populism with socialist or socially progressive ideas) or exclusionary (right-wing populism that combines populism and nativism), whom they consider and target as their "other" and whether the relevant actors are populist leaders or populist parties.

Finally, we consider how populists' political fortunes are affected by their crisis performance. Do they gain in popularity? Are they successful in polarizing opinion? Are they able to perpetuate the crisis as it begins to wane? In so doing, we map not only populists' initial reactions to what was, at the outset, an exogenously driven event, but also how their responses over time begin to shape the dynamics of the crisis – and thus became endogenous factors in the crisis politics surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Populism and crisis

Populism and crisis are closely linked. For some observers, this link is correlational, in that there appears to be a general association between crisis and the political success of populist actors and parties; the relationship is not necessarily causal, however, and crisis is not inherent to populism (Mudde 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). But others maintain that crises are always mediated and "performed" by populists and that this "performance of crisis" is an essential and internal core feature of populism itself (Moffitt 2015). Among our objectives is not to adjudicate between these two arguments, but rather to leverage the nature of a particular crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – to shed new light on the relationship between populism and crisis.<sup>1</sup> Three aspects of the COVID-19 crisis are notable in this regard.

First, the pandemic itself is genuinely exogenous to populism. This is important because it is oftentimes difficult to fully separate populism from crisis when populist political action triggers or contributes to the onset of crisis. The incidence of crisis thus tends to be at least partially endogenous to the behavior of the populists themselves, who manufacture and stoke the crises they then exploit for political gain. The pandemic allows for consideration of how populists

react to a crisis they did not produce. We thus learn if *any* crisis gives populists opportunity to thrive or if this is less likely when a crisis is not (at least partially) manufactured.

Second, the pandemic offers a singular opportunity to explore the behavior of populist political actors across the world to *the same* exogenously driven crisis. It allows us to examine how populists of different stripes, in a wide range of countries and different institutional contexts, have reacted to a common crisis and the challenges it entails, while holding the event triggering the populist response constant across cases. How the crisis plays out from there is, however, at least in part driven by the “crisis performance” of populist actors. The pandemic thus allows us to posit the onset of this particular crisis as external to populism, while at the same time investigating systematically and comparatively how populists performed the same crisis. All this allows for a “cleaner” systematic comparative analysis of the relationship between populism and crisis. We can, moreover, investigate if and how the reactions of populists to a common exogenous shock are conditioned by other (institutional, political, social, and economic) factors. Hence, this project makes a contribution not only by investigating how two of the most pressing challenges of our moment in time intersect and interact, but also by allowing for an analysis of populist crisis strategies across a variety of political contexts.

Third and finally, the pandemic is a public health crisis that broadly affects everyone, which has implications for populist responses, crisis performance, and potential political gain. While a crisis situation often benefits populists, a universally felt public health crisis poses particular challenges for them, in that it has the potential to conflict with core features of populism itself as well as with key aspects of populist crisis performance – especially when it comes to linking the crisis to an overarching populist “grievance framework,” sowing division and polarization, presenting simplistic solutions to be achieved through strong, decisive leadership, and garnering popular and media attention (see Moffitt 2015 for details). These challenges for populists are not impossible to overcome, but they constrain their ability to use tried and tested strategies for exploiting crisis situations.

To start, linking a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic to a broader (structural and moral) framework of grievances decried by populists under normal political conditions is difficult when the crisis is exogenously triggered and felt across the world. At the outset, the pandemic is external to domestic politics and political competition and there is no obvious political “enemy” for populists to target. Hence, associating it with other political and policy failures – such that it is perceived as symptomatic of a wider problem or set of grievances – is not straightforward. This also complicates the populist strategy of sowing division and polarization between “the people” and “the elites” who must necessarily be (presented as) responsible for the crisis. Devising and propagating a narrative about how the elite’s crisis response ultimately hurts those considered to be part of “the real people” is difficult when *everyone* is impacted by the pandemic, and in particular as long as public health concerns are a valence

issue. Scapegoating becomes a risky strategy that might well backfire under those circumstances – yet creating and deepening polarization is central to both populism itself and to populist crisis politics. A successful response to the pandemic, moreover, requires reliance on scientific expertise and data, and thus reliance on experts that tend to be vilified by populists as part of the “corrupt elite.” Ignoring or denigrating medical experts during a public health crisis, however, runs the risk of exacerbating the consequences of the pandemic and, again, of inviting backlash, especially as long as an effective, science-driven approach is backed by a broad public consensus. Finally, a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic requires strong state action and reaction, which in many places have been quite decisive and intrusive. Such state action tends to be at odds with the rhetoric and political agendas of at least some populists, especially where “anti-elite” and “anti-establishment” sentiment means anti-government or anti-state, as is the case in the USA, for example.

Another standard populist crisis performance strategy revolves around offering simple (or simplistic) solutions. Aside from blaming “the corrupt elite” (as a stand-in for whoever is defined as “the other”) and charging it with being incompetent and willfully ignorant of the needs of the “real people,” those tend to involve disregard for and obliviousness toward substantive, political, and policy complexities as well as contempt for “the ‘slow politics’ (Saward 2011) of consensus and negotiation” (Moffitt 2015, 201). However, offering solutions devoid of policy content and oversimplifying the terms of political debate while deriding those with substantive or policy competence is a problematic strategy in the face of a worldwide pandemic.

Finally, populist messaging is more likely to fall flat when it is crowded out by coverage of the pandemic itself, which likely dominates and overwhelms all else. Catching public attention is a crucial part of populists’ crisis performance, however, and their preferred tactics are hampered by the pandemic and the policy responses it invites. Gatherings and marches – which are ideally presented and perceived as unmediated grassroots events that bestow a semblance of popular legitimacy upon populist claims (Moffitt 2015, 204) – are a particularly popular populist strategy. But mobilizing sufficient numbers to show up is difficult when potential supporters fear contagion or are prevented from attending rallies by crowd limits imposed to contain viral spread.

It is important to note that these challenges to populist crisis performance are general enough that they likely apply to some extent across the board; at the same time, however, there likely is variation across both space and time, which the contributions in this volume are sensitive to. Variation is likely across cases, for example, because some populists are in government and others in opposition. The former is charged with *managing* the pandemic, which requires a different “crisis performance” than would otherwise be the case. Populists in opposition, meanwhile, when reacting to decisive and intrusive government action, may feel compelled to decry the very kind of strong leadership and quick action they otherwise tend to advocate.

When it comes to variation across time, some of the constraints on the populist crisis responses discussed above likely subside as the pandemic endures. A strict response centered on public health may no longer be as much of a valence issue; state responses to the pandemic may come to be seen as ineffective or overly intrusive or both; as new data and information come in, experts may issue what appear to be contradictory recommendations over time, which provides opening for conspiracy theories and scapegoating; coverage of the pandemic as such may give way to coverage of competing political solutions, thus providing openings for populist messaging; and as “lockdown fatigue” sets in, people may be willing to participate in political gatherings and rallies that allow populists to garner media attention. More generally, the longer the crisis lasts, the more it becomes endogenous to the populist response itself, as the crisis performance of populists begins to shape the dynamics of what was an exogenously triggered crisis. Over time, their key crisis strategies of commanding attention and polarizing public opinion, linking the COVID-19 crisis to their preexisting framework of grievances, and pushing simple policy solutions to be achieved through strong and decisive leadership may well start to bear fruit.

### The politics of pandemic response

Like other disciplines, political science responded quickly to the threats and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a surge of studies on the politics of pandemic response. Many are in the working paper stage and have not yet gone through peer review; they nonetheless offer important insights into how the dynamics of external shocks and exogenously triggered crisis influence political behavior, governance, decision-making, and public policy. In our context, this work is valuable, first, because it allows us to distinguish the populist pandemic response from other types of crisis politics and, second, because understanding the politics of pandemic response writ large is necessary as both context and as a point of comparison for the reactions of populists. The emerging literature considers a variety of different aspects of the politics of pandemic response; given our focus, we briefly review studies that consider:

- 1 governments’ responses to the pandemic;
- 2 how the pandemic has spurred or reinforced political cleavages and patterns of political polarization;
- 3 the impact of COVID-19 on political mobilization; and
- 4 populists’ early reactions to the pandemic.

In the discussion of government responses to the pandemic, a first important topic is the effect of regime type. Petersen finds a nonlinear relationship between COVID-19 testing and regime type, such that countries with a medium level of democracy test less than those with *either* lower or higher levels of democracy. Some autocracies, moreover, also conduct significant testing (Petersen 2020;

Annaka 2021) and have been more successful in imposing stringent lockdowns and implementing effective contact tracing (Frey, Chen, and Presidente 2020; Toshkov, Carroll, and Yesilkagit 2021). Autocratic regimes also face significant challenges, however, making the impact of regime type ambiguous; Greer et al. (2021a) thus find that autocracies struggle with information dissemination and transparency, which hastens the spread of the virus. Democracies, on the other hand, are found to be more effective in reducing geographic mobility (Frey, Chen, and Presidente 2020).

Government responses to the pandemic also have a public policy dimension that is associated with state capacity, political institutions, and governance (Greer et al. 2021a). At issue are the timing, sequencing, and effectiveness of policy instruments used to limit the spread of the virus and to address its consequences. Contributors to a special issue on COVID-19 of *Policy and Society*, for example, carefully consider the policy inventories relied upon in several countries across the globe; analyze their policy designs, decision-making processes, and policy actions; and identify what led each to adopt a particular strategy. They find that even though policy responses to COVID-19 were somewhat standardized due to common recipes for confronting this type of public health crisis, the construction of policy solutions usually develops from input by specialists and epistemic communities, which then interacts with specific national policy styles to condition policy formation and implementation. Hence, there is variation in the start, speed, and scope of different countries' responses that cannot be accounted for by a single, general explanation (Capano et al. 2020). This is also the case because governments were more or less proactive and reactive in their early efforts to "flatten the curve" of infection, including the adoption of extreme measures such as curbing citizens' mobility, regulating social distancing at a mass level, and passing hugely expensive aid packages for businesses and individuals alike (Migone 2020). Even when policies are implemented, their adherence can vary given the existing social institutions. For example, Greer et al. (2021b) find that the effectiveness of these policies is mediated by the robustness of a country's existing social welfare state.

A second important topic for our consideration concerns the link between political attitudes and the COVID-19 crisis, in particular how attitudes are affected by the pandemic and how political polarization is engendered, intensified, or attenuated by it. While Heinzel and Liese (2021) show experimentally that trust in expertise grounded in public institutions correlates positively with support for restrictive COVID-19 measures, others highlight that this effect is conditioned by political factors. Bol et al. (2020), for example, examine the impact of lockdown measures on political support for governments and attitudes toward democracy in Western Europe and find that lockdowns increased vote intentions for incumbents, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in government, but that this did not soften or erase preexisting political cleavages. Nielsen and Lindvall (2021) conclude that ideology affects levels of public trust in government and health authorities, but observe that the timing of this effect varied in Sweden and Denmark.

While Pereira et al. maintain that “fear of death” alters and weakens patterns of political polarization in Brazil, as some right-wing and center-right voters do not endorse President Bolsonaro’s lax positions on social distancing (Pereira, Medeiros, and Bertholini 2020), most evidence from Brazil indicates that opposition to mainstream mitigation measures is driven by ideology (e.g., Ramos et al. 2020) and in particular by *bolsonarismo*, or popular adherence and devotion to Bolsonaro himself: supporters of Bolsonaro are generally supportive of his radical positions toward the pandemic (Rennó et al. 2021), opposed to vaccination (Gramacho and Turgeon 2021), more likely to maintain authoritarian attitudes when overall levels of authoritarianism among Brazilians have decreased since 2018 (Avritzer and Rennó 2021), and less knowledgeable about COVID-19 and more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Gramacho et al. 2021). The evidence is similarly clear-cut in the USA: it consistently shows that partisanship affects adherence to World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations to confront the pandemic. Gollwitzer et al. find that in counties where Trump defeated Clinton in the 2016 elections, there was 14% less physical distancing between March and May 2020. These results hold controlling for numerous factors, including consumption of conservative media (Gollwitzer et al. 2020). Other studies similarly identify a strong link between partisanship and attitudes toward the pandemic (e.g., Allcott et al. 2020; Barrios and Hochberg 2020; Kushner Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2021). The observed partisan differences are also related to higher levels of COVID-19 infection and fatalities, with a shift from Democratic to Republican strongholds as the pandemic progressed and worsened (Jones and Kiley 2020).

Third, what has been the impact of COVID-19 on political mobilization? Several studies look at the relationship between the pandemic and voting behavior and find that voters in areas more exposed to COVID-19 are less likely to participate in elections (Santana, Rama, and Casal Bértoa 2020; Fernandez-Navia, Polo-Muro, and Tercero-Lucas 2021; Picchio and Santolini 2021), while observing a lockdown elsewhere increases support for incumbents (de Vries et al. 2021). Pulejo and Querubín also show a reverse relationship between COVID-19 restrictions and elections: incumbents who can run for reelection implement less stringent measures when the election is closer in time (Pulejo and Querubín 2021).

But have the pandemic and the potential polarization of attitudes and behaviors it entails affected political mobilization beyond voting, including protests and rallies? The pandemic and the policies enacted in response pose important challenges to protest politics and social movements. Risk of contagion, social distancing rules, and the prohibition of gatherings require adaptation of contention repertoires, as Kowalewski argues (Kowalewski 2020). A particularly interesting point is that differences in attitudes between groups in favor of or against preventative measures affect their protest strategies: opponents of lockdowns and related measures simply defy sanitary rules, while those in favor shift their activism into other arenas, especially the internet (Kowalewski 2020). Overall,

Pleyers concludes that social movements have not been dissuaded from pursuing their causes; they have adapted to new circumstances and even shown heightened levels of activity (Pleyers 2020). For some, the crisis has become an opportunity to push social issues onto the public policy agenda. Such progressive movements compete with more reactionary mobilization, however. Brubaker focuses specifically on populist protests against Corona-related restrictions in the USA and points to a number of paradoxes, most importantly hostility toward experts and expertise at a moment when they are sorely needed and accusing mainstream politicians and media of exaggerating the gravity of the situation when populists usually embrace and thrive on crisis (Brubaker 2020).

While Brubaker focuses on populist protests in one particular country, others consider the responses of populist parties and leaders in a comparative perspective – the fourth and final theme in this review of recent studies on the politics of pandemic response. An early effort to understand populists' responses in the first stage of the pandemic is Meyer's (Meyer 2020), who finds that populist leaders in 5 of the 17 countries he looks at downplayed the crisis while the others took it seriously. In the former group are two dictatorships (Belarus, Nicaragua) and three presidential democracies (USA, Brazil, Mexico). The latter is notable because it is in line with Greer et al.'s conclusion that the pandemic response of populists in government during the first half of 2020 was decisively mediated by political institutions, in particular the extent to which they centralize power in the hands of the populist leader: while populists were constrained in systems that disperse political power across institutions, majoritarianism – and presidentialism in particular – afforded populist leaders the political agency to implement or to forego an effective pandemic response policies (Greer et al. 2021a, 19). Both studies thus highlight variation in the early pandemic strategies of populists in power. That variation also extends to populists in opposition, however, as Katsambekis and Stavrakakis show (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020). They offer brief summaries of populists' reactions during the earliest stage of the pandemic and conclude that left-wing populists have defended social protection of the most vulnerable, whereas their right-wing counterparts put the emphasis on economic recovery. Moreover, they argue that aspects of the so-called populist response may be better ascribed to underlying authoritarianism or nativism.

Other studies that build on the concept of “medical populism” (Lasco and Curato 2019) focus more specifically on the link between populism and health policy. They find that misinformation about the pandemic is connected to both higher cases and death rates for COVID-19 (Bursztyn et al. 2020); that populists have forged divisions by building on economic and health insecurities and pitting the poor against the medical establishment and specialists (Lasco 2020); that voting for populist parties in Western Europe is associated with negative views on vaccination (Kennedy 2019); and that populist leaders have generally reacted more slowly and implemented fewer health measures against COVID-19 (Kavakli 2020a), although Bosancianu et al. (2020) find that populist governments did not

perform worse than others in the early stages of the pandemic when it comes to COVID death rates.

The pandemic as a discursive opportunity for populists is examined by Bobba and Hubé (2021b), who offer an analysis of the rhetorical strategies pursued by populists – both in power and in the opposition – in eight European countries between January and May 2020. By examining the elite discourse, the book illustrates how populists generally sought to politicize COVID-19, but also highlights important differences in their responses. It emphasizes first that right-wing populists tended to demand closing borders and prioritizing helping nationals over migrants, while left-wing populists decried insufficient investment in health care and other social protections. Second, while populists in government tried to depoliticize the crisis by pointing to the importance of technical and scientific expertise, populists in the opposition sought to politicize the pandemic. Populist opposition parties with ambitions to govern, however, were more cautious in their rhetoric than more marginal opposition populists. The rhetorical differences matter in shaping public attitudes, as is demonstrated by Mariani et al. (Mariani, Gagate-Miranda, and Retzl 2020) and Ajzenman et al. (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020), who show that a speech by Brazilian President Bolsonaro denying the gravity of the virus undermined social distancing and entailed greater diffusion of COVID-19 in Brazilian municipalities.

Finally, several studies focus on policy and/or institutional changes pursued by populists as part of their pandemic response. The aforementioned research by Meyer thus finds that five of the 12 leaders who took the pandemic seriously early on sought an illiberal path toward concentrating power, restricting opposition, or limiting freedom of speech and mobilization (Orbán in Hungary, Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines, Morawiecki in Poland, and Erdogan in Turkey). Bárd et al. confirm these conclusions for Hungary, where Victor Orbán's Enabling Act further weakened the country's already beleaguered democratic institutions and rule of law by allowing him to rule by decree for an extended period of time, and Poland, whose electoral code was altered by its populist governing majority without consultation with the opposition and in a fashion that violated the ruling of the country's constitutional court (Bárd et al. 2020). Looking at democratic violations in 102 countries across the world, Kavakli concludes that populists in power committed significantly more democratic violations during the pandemic than did non-populists (Kavakli 2020b), although Maerz et al. find no relationship between violations of democratic standards for emergency measures and COVID-19 death rates (Maerz et al. 2020).

The intersection of populism and the pandemic has become an important focal point in considerations of crisis politics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, populists are among the most vocal deniers of the pandemic and have adopted some of the most controversial positions. Still, there is significant variation in populist responses that requires more detailed analysis of a greater number of cases than early research has been able to offer, consideration of populist responses not only at the initial stages but over the course of the crisis, as well as

a coherent analytical framework. In the next section, we develop such a framework as the basis for the case study chapters that follow.

## Analytical framework

The public perception of the populist response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been driven by a somewhat misleading focus on a small number of highly publicized cases where the reaction of populists was marked by shared traits. The focus on responses by populist leaders like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro masks a great deal of variation in populist responses both across and within countries, however. Hungary and Poland are led by right-wing populists, for example, but during the first COVID-19 wave in the spring of 2020, they enacted lockdowns similar to those elsewhere. In Germany, opposition right-wing populists have been critical of the government-imposed lockdown measures, but initially struggled to advance a coherent political message and strategy, while opposition left-wing populists have been largely supportive of prioritizing public health considerations. There is, in other words, more variation in populist responses to the pandemic than is often observed or acknowledged, which warrants empirical investigation. Indeed, there is arguably more variation to be explained in populist responses than in the responses of mainstream liberal-democratic political actors, who generally adopted some version of the well-defined script of pandemic confrontation as defined by epidemiologists of, among others, the WHO. Sweden's more lenient pandemic response received the attention it did because it was such a notable outlier. Populists, in contrast, are not only open to provocation, deviations from mainstream policy responses, and unorthodox policy alternatives, it is part of their political brand. Being less risk-averse and constrained by reality provides opportunities not open to mainstream politicians and thus for greater observable variation in populists' pandemic responses.

Our contributions individually and collectively seek to make sense of populist reactions to the pandemic as well as the variation therein across both space and time, such that they capture not only initial responses of populists to an exogenously triggered crisis, but also how populists may end up shaping the course of the crisis over time. Our outcomes of interest are the general attitudes, rhetoric, mobilization repertoires, and policy proposals of populists in reaction to COVID-19 and its consequences. We note, in particular, whether populists are actively dismissive of basic policy recommendations like extensive testing and contact tracing, and of individual-level strategies like mask-wearing, hand hygiene and cough etiquette, physical distancing, isolating when potentially symptomatic, and avoiding closed and/or crowded spaces and close-contact social settings. Recommendations by the WHO are a useful benchmark, in this regard<sup>2</sup>; they allow contributors to identify the extent to which populists adhere to or deviate from the standard recommended pandemic response (and are preferable to outcome measures like contagion, hospitalization, or fatality levels, which are generally outside the control of particular political actors).

In some instances, namely in those countries in which populists are in government, the populist response is largely equivalent to the *state response* to the pandemic, but in others that state response is a separate, contextual factor. In fact, where populists are in opposition, the state response is one of the variables populists are *responding to*, and thus one of the contributors to the variation we observe in populists' reactions to the pandemic.

Identifying factors that help account for variation in populist responses is one of the major objectives of our comparative approach, and our contributions purposefully and systematically account for a number of variables that may drive or mediate populist responses. The first major considerations are whether the country in question is a democracy or not and whether populists are in government or in opposition. Our cases thus fall into three broad categories: populists in government in democracies, populists in opposition in democracies, and populists in government in non-democracies. We do not investigate the responses of populists in opposition in non-democracies, since they are unlikely to be of sufficient political relevance.

The distinction between populists in power and populists in opposition is of particular interest. Populists in power "own" their countries' pandemic response, which puts their (in)action on display and may erode their popular appeal and support. The pandemic also offers opportunity for attacks on liberalism, pluralism, and globalization, however, and has the potential to strengthen authoritarian reflexes, especially if pain and suffering are prolonged. Populists in opposition may similarly benefit from drawn-out political, economic, and social crises, if broad societal agreement on the need to contain the spread of the virus breaks down, if pain and suffering can be blamed on unaccountable experts and "the corrupt elite," and if there is a loss of faith in the government or the political system writ large.

Beyond this, our explanatory variables fall into three broad categories. To start, we focus on general institutional factors like whether the political system is parliamentary, presidential, or mixed/semi-presidential; electoral system (plurality, proportional representation, or mixed); party system (single-party, two-party, or multiparty); type of government (single-party or multiparty); level of (de-)centralization; type of political economy (e.g., variety of capitalism, type and generosity of welfare state); and overall state capacity. The contributions also consider political factors that are less static, like public opinion, political polarization, the state of the economy, and the electoral calendar. Finally, we are interested in the impact of differences between populists themselves, such as whether they are inclusionary or exclusionary populists, their relative moderation or extremism, their political strength in relation to other political actors, and which groups are identified and targeted as part of "the corrupt elite." We also consider if the relevant political actors are populist *leaders* or populist *parties*.

It is, however, important to note that populism per se might not be the primary driver of populists' responses to COVID-19, although it is quite likely that at least some general aspects of populism, such as skepticism of experts and expertise, will factor into the equation. This volume's focus on populists' responses does not, however, preclude the possibility that factors other than populism itself

account for how populists have reacted to the pandemic, which would be a notable and important “null finding” that ought not be disregarded. It may be the case, for example, that authoritarianism drives how populists respond to the crisis; that their reaction reflects the socialist or nativist ideas associated with inclusionary or exclusionary populism; or that populists in opposition act much like regular opposition parties that challenge government policy. We therefore make a distinction between *populist actors*, a *populist crisis performance*, and *populists’ responses to COVID-19*, with the understanding that populists’ COVID responses need not be populist in nature. Moffitt (2015) highlights two general features of populist crisis performance: the invocation of “the people,” which are pitted against those allegedly responsible for the crisis, and the necessary perpetuation of crisis, which is crucial to the existence of continued success of populists. By considering whether populists invoke “the people” and seek to perpetuate the crisis (or crises) surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, our contributors are able to evaluate the extent to which their COVID responses have, in fact, been of a populist nature.

To observe whether there are attempts at the perpetuation of crisis, it is critical that the chapters in this volume examine several phases of populist crisis politics from the onset of the pandemic through several waves of transmission and infection (which hit countries at different times, as should be kept in mind when reading the chapters), to the moment in time when the administration of vaccines put the end of the pandemic on the horizon (even though the Coronavirus has also, over time, shown its resilience). The volume thus covers the time period from spring 2020 until summer 2021. This allows not only for general consideration of whether and how populists have adjusted their tactics in response to shifting opportunity structures over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, but also if and how they have sought to perpetuate the crisis as the pandemic slowly started to subside (as a case in point, Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro already began politicizing COVID-19 vaccines in December 2020).

The country experts assembled for this project consider the potential impact of the factors described above, with the understanding that not all matter to the same extent across cases and are afforded the same attention in the country chapters. The list of potential explanatory variables provides a common analytical framework, not an analytical straitjacket. It sets the parameters for analysis without getting in the way of contributors constructing investigative narratives reflective of their deep country expertise and appropriately tailored to their respective cases. Their empirical analyses rely on a variety of methods and approaches, as data availability varies by country, especially under the extraordinary circumstances of the ongoing pandemic. In general, however, the contributions build on a mixed method approach that relies extensively on the construction of investigative narratives and/or careful interpretation using distinct types of evidence extracted from a variety of data sources. The approach consists of thick description and analysis of contemporary events using archival data, interviews, polls, public policy documents, speeches, and media content as primary sources of information, in some cases supplemented with original survey data.

Our analytical framework provides a general structure for each contribution and establishes the order in which the chapters appear in this volume: we start with countries that have populists in power – first in democracies and then in autocracies – before examining democratic regimes with populists in the opposition.<sup>3</sup> It also offers the basis for the comparative analysis in the Conclusion chapter, in which we systematically identify commonalities and differences across our country cases and draw out conclusions and implications. For this, we rely on the case study chapters themselves and an expert survey completed by the contributors to this volume. To briefly summarize, we find that all populists invoked “the people” in their responses to the pandemic, but with a few notable exceptions only those in opposition sought to perpetuate crisis. They did so by linking the COVID-19 crisis to general crises of representation framed in reference to issues over which they have ownership. In other words, they tried to create and perpetuate a political crisis by conflating it with an exogenously triggered public health crisis. Only two populists in government, Trump and Bolsonaro, adopted a similar playbook. The other populists in power did not seek to perpetuate the COVID-19 crisis, but those in government in autocracies have in common that they engaged in data manipulation and used the pandemic to consolidate power. Our comparative analysis not only reveals such similarities, however, it also sheds light on important variation in populists’ responses to the pandemic, in particular when it comes to their “COVID radicalism.” Specifically, we find that there are more COVID radicals – who deny the severity of the pandemic and oppose public health measures – in presidential systems, when politics is more personalistic and in countries that are comparatively less wealthy and have lower state capacity. Moreover, those same factors (along with government or opposition status) also help explain continuity and change over time in the responses of populists to the pandemic. We close by outlining several avenues for future research, on the relationship between populism and democracy, the agenda-setting powers of populists, the impact of COVID-19 on globalization, and how the pandemic may ultimately affect the political fortunes and futures of populists around the world.

## Notes

- 1 See Bobba and Hubé (2021a) for further discussion of the relationship between populism and crisis.
- 2 See WHO (2020) for guidelines.
- 3 Note that some countries (e.g., UK, Spain, Italy) have populists in power as well as in the opposition. Given the centrality of governmental actors for a country’s pandemic response, we include these cases in the first group.

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# 2

## THE UNITED STATES

### Trump, Populism, and the Pandemic

*Kenneth M. Roberts*

Populist leaders are often said to flourish in crisis situations that allow them to mobilize their followers—“the people”—against a common threat. Effective populist leaders may even turn crises into political opportunities for bold and decisive leadership, when rules can be bent, institutional constraints are relaxed, major policy innovations can be adopted, support networks are activated, and political opponents can be targeted for blame. Crises are so politically useful that they may be manufactured where they don’t objectively exist. Whether “real” or constructed, crises are routinely “performed” by populist figures to advance their political goals, as Moffitt suggests. Indeed, Moffitt (2016, 118) characterizes the performance of crisis as a “central feature” of the populist phenomenon.

So conceived, US President Donald Trump’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was surely a curious expression of populist leadership. Trump’s management of the pandemic carried the imprint of his particular brand of populist leadership, but it also revealed its internal contradictions and its inability to mobilize a cohesive or effective national response to a crisis that was tragically real. Trump’s performance of crisis was laden with populist scapegoating, polarization, and disdain for expertise, but it engendered institutional paralysis rather than bold and decisive action as well as societal gridlock rather than mobilization to confront a common threat. Rather than mobilizing state resources and “the people” to address a public health emergency, Trump downplayed the threat of the virus, defied scientific and medical recommendations for testing, mask-wearing, and social distancing, abdicated responsibility to subnational state and local officials to contain the spread of the pandemic, and then politicized these subnational responses. As such, lockdown measures, or the lack thereof, were transformed into markers of political identity that polarized Trump’s supporters and detractors and blocked the development of a coherent national response.

The end result was a national tragedy. The US—a wealthy country with some of the world’s most advanced scientific and medical research capabilities—surged to the forefront of global rankings for the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths within months of the onset of the pandemic in early 2020. By the time Trump left office in January 2021, 24 million Americans were confirmed to have contracted the virus and over 400,000 deaths had been confirmed. With only 4 percent of the global population, the US accounted for over one-quarter of confirmed global COVID-19 cases and over one-fifth of confirmed fatalities during the first year of the pandemic (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021). The *Lancet* Commission on Public Policy and Health in the Trump Era (2021, 711) attributed this dismal performance to failures of political leadership and public policy, claiming that 40 percent of these deaths “could have been averted had the U.S. death rate mirrored the weighted average of the other G7 nations” (*Lancet* Commission 2021, 711).

This chapter examines how this failure of political leadership was rooted in the populist logic of Trump’s presidency and its peculiar form of crisis management. Trump’s performance of crisis revealed how his populist claims to defend “the people” entailed a disregard for scientific and medical expertise as well as contempt for the country’s political establishment and the “deep state” it controlled. The fusion of Trump’s anti-institutional populism with the Republican Party’s (also referred to as Grand Old Party [GOP]) market fundamentalist aversion to governance created a recipe for crisis performance that was singularly unsuited for harnessing state power to manage a public health emergency.

## Trump and US democratic institutions

The US is a singular case, to date, of a populist radical right (PRR) leader ascending to power in a wealthy and highly institutionalized Western democracy. Trump achieved this feat not by establishing his own PRR party, as is the norm in Europe (Mudde 2007), or by running an independent campaign for presidential office as a political “outsider,” as seen in Latin America. Although Trump was surely an outsider to the US political establishment—he harshly criticized and ran against traditional elites in both major US parties—he took advantage of primary elections to channel grievances at the grassroots of the GOP and capture the party’s presidential nomination in 2016. What began as a hostile takeover of a mainstream conservative party was quickly transformed into a type of personality cult as the GOP became a vehicle for Trump’s anti-establishment populist leadership. In a highly polarized partisan arena, the bulk of the GOP closed ranks behind Trump and allowed him to capture the presidency in the Electoral College, despite his loss to Hillary Clinton in the popular ballot. In his inaugural address—a vintage populist “performance” of crisis—Trump accused the establishment of abandoning “the people,” and he painted a grim picture of a country in decline, plagued by deindustrialization, urban crime, and uncontrolled

immigration. Upon his assumption of the presidency, he pledged, this “American carnage stops right here and stops right now” (Politico 2017).

Three turbulent years and one failed impeachment later (a second would follow before the end of his term), Trump was saddled with political responsibility for managing the COVID-19 pandemic. He could not, therefore, exploit the crisis as an opposition figure to attack incumbent elites. Nothing preordained his failure to turn the crisis to his own political advantage, however, as the virus was an exogenous shock that was hardly attributable to Trump’s leadership. An exogenous crisis often triggers a unifying “rally-around-the-flag” phenomenon that strengthens mass support for an incumbent president, especially one who effectively “performs” the crisis by taking resolute action to safeguard the public interest. Rather than unifying the country around a common purpose, however, Trump deepened the partisan divide in a hyperpolarized society, precluding any rally-around-the-flag phenomenon.

As president of a global superpower, Trump surely had ample material and institutional resources at his disposal to fight the pandemic, even factoring in the porous nature of the social safety net in the US—which leaves over 30 million low-income citizens without medical insurance—and the fragmented character of a democratic regime that disperses authority across three separate branches of the national government and 50 subnational states. The strength of US democratic institutions and their multiple checks and balances, however, played little role in *constraining* Trump’s freedom of action to respond to the pandemic; since Trump opposed stringent containment measures, other institutions were left in the awkward position of trying to fill the void or induce the executive branch to act. Trump delegated authority to state governors to contain the virus once it reached US shores, and he ridiculed or denounced many of the measures adopted by Democratic governors to protect public health. By contrast, when Joe Biden replaced Trump in the presidency, the US separation of powers and federal institutions *did* constrain his freedom of maneuver to manage the pandemic: the Supreme Court blocked Biden’s adoption of vaccine mandates for large employers, and GOP-led state governments often undercut federal efforts to promote vaccinations and mask-wearing. To understand Trump’s abdication of authority and active resistance to state-level testing, mask-wearing, and social distancing mandates requires a deeper look at his populist leadership and the ways it shaped his performance of crisis.

### Trump’s populism and crisis management

Trump’s management of the pandemic followed the basic logic of his populist script. In its construction of “the people” and the elite “other,” Trumpian populism was highly nationalistic, with nativist, isolationist, xenophobic, and white nationalist tendencies. It was also viscerally hostile toward political institutions, both national and transnational. Domestic institutions were alternately portrayed as a “swamp” filled with venal politicians that Trump pledged to drain, or a

“deep state” holdover from previous administrations that tried to block his populist agenda and wage a “witch hunt” to bring down his presidency. Likewise, transnational institutions and trade accords were understood to create obligations that tied the hands of the US, served the interests of foreign powers, and took advantage of American largesse and American workers. “America First,” therefore, was the centerpiece of Trump’s foreign policy and “Make America Great Again” his catchall nationalist slogan. Trump’s populism also tapped into a deep strain of anti-intellectualism in American conservatism, including the GOP and the Christian right, which was critical of “liberal” and cosmopolitan elite universities, skeptical of expertise, and prone to science denialism, as seen in the heated national debate over climate change. Trump’s populist appeal relied on simple solutions to complex problems, like slapping tariffs on foreign imports to protect US jobs or building a “big, beautiful wall” to keep immigrants out. Although Trump reveled in mass rallies that allowed him to seek the acclaim of “the people,” his populism did not mobilize citizens in pursuit of larger national goals or call on them to make sacrifices in the larger public interest.

This populist script sheds light on many of Trump’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, Trump’s nationalist and isolationist card was ready-made for foreign scapegoating or blaming outsiders for the crisis. Given preexisting tensions with China over trade and other matters, Trump routinely referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus,” declaring that “The world is now suffering as a result of the malfeasance of the Chinese government” (McNeil Jr. and Jacobs 2020). After initially denying that the virus posed any threat to the US, when it became clear in early 2020 that it had reached US shores, Trump’s first major response was to bar entry to the US starting February 2, 2020, of foreign nationals who had visited China in the preceding 14 days (Bollyky and Nuzzo 2020). This travel ban was followed in early March by new restrictions on travel from Europe. Trump also used the pandemic as leverage to pursue other nationalist policy goals, like denying green cards to family members of immigrant citizens and expelling asylum seekers without screenings on the southern border with Mexico. Reflecting his disdain for international institutions, Trump also accused the World Health Organization (WHO) of being under Chinese control and covering up China’s responsibility for the virus. Claiming that the WHO had mishandled the virus’ global spread, Trump pledged to cut off US funding and withdraw from the international organization (McNeil Jr. and Jacobs 2020).

Second, scapegoating was not limited to external actors, as Trump’s polarizing, binary view of politics—typical of populism—led him to accuse Democrats and the media of exaggerating the threat posed by the virus to undermine his presidency. The virus began its sweep across the US when Trump was fighting his first congressional impeachment, but basking in a record-long ten-year cycle of economic growth with record-low unemployment levels and a booming stock market—the cornerstones of Trump’s campaign for reelection in 2020. Fixated on the economic consequences of the pandemic in an election year, Trump consistently downplayed the threat of the virus and framed it as a political vendetta.

When the stock market plunged in late February, Trump attacked the media, saying they would do “everything they can to instill fear in people,” and he accused Democrats of “politicizing the coronavirus” and “trying to gain political favor by saying a lot of untruths.” After surviving his first impeachment, Trump called the virus the Democrats’ “new hoax,” and his chief of staff accused journalists of hyping the virus because “they think this will bring down the president; that’s what this is all about” (Baker and Karni 2020). “Just stay calm. It will go away,” Trump assured Americans on March 10 (Fallows 2020), as the number of cases was skyrocketing, domestic travel was grinding to a halt, and city governments, sports leagues, universities, and businesses were beginning to impose lockdown measures.

A mere three days later, Trump was compelled to issue an executive order declaring a state of emergency to allow the federal government to provide and coordinate relief assistance to states. In the weeks to follow, his administration took a number of steps to address the pandemic, assuming it was, at most, a short-term emergency, heavily concentrated in New York City and the northeast region. The federal government issued temporary guidelines for public health, sanitation, and social distancing measures on March 16, and Trump invoked the emergency powers of the Korean War-era Defense Production Act on March 18, which allows the government to require that private firms prioritize government contracts (NCSL 2020). Federal guidelines discouraged nonessential travel, shopping trips, nursing home visits, and social gatherings with more than ten people, while encouraging frequent handwashing and work and study from home where possible (Mangan 2020).

Notably, these federal guidelines did *not* include recommendations for wearing masks in public settings or private gatherings. And they took the form of best practice recommendations, not government-enforced mandates, as implementation measures were left to the discretion of state and local officials. The guidelines did not envision an extended shutdown of economic activities; Trump insisted that he wanted the country “opened up” by the Easter holiday in April to limit economic disruptions. Still minimizing the severity of the public health threat, Trump compared COVID-19 to the flu so as to justify not shutting down economic activity. “You are going to lose a number of people to the flu,” he said:

but you are going to lose more people by putting a country into a massive recession or depression... You can’t just come in and say let’s close up the United States of America, the biggest, the most successful country in the world by far.

*(Karni and McNeil 2020)*

This fixation on the economic side effects of the virus and their potential political fallout in an election year helps to explain the erratic and contradictory policies adopted by the Trump administration. Trump and the GOP were willing to throw money at the problem—relaxing the GOP’s reflexive hostility to

nonmilitary government spending—in order to provide economic relief and develop a preventive vaccine. They were highly resistant, however, to the recommendations of scientific and medical experts to restrain social interaction and economic activity in order to contain the virus' spread.

For example, with the economy in a free-fall in late March, Trump signed a law that injected \$2 trillion in relief and stimulus measures into the economy in support of families and businesses facing economic hardships. Some \$12.4 billion of this funding was subsequently channeled into a high-profile crash program for vaccine development, which Trump labeled “Operation Warp Speed” and compared to the World War II-era Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb (Simmons-Duffin and Davis 2020). This initiative provided government funding for biomedical research and vaccine development by private pharmaceutical companies—a rare example of the Trump administration partnering with the scientific and medical communities in its response to the pandemic.

In other areas, however, Trump clashed—repeatedly—with scientific and medical expertise, including the advice given by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and other medical experts on the White House Coronavirus Task Force. In daily press briefings—an integral part of his initial “performance” of the crisis—Trump was prone to touting miracle cures and quack remedies, including the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, which he claimed could be “one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine” (Bump 2020). The National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration eventually issued warnings about the questionable therapeutic benefits and harmful side effects of hydroxychloroquine, but Trump continued his musings over miracle cures, going so far as to suggest that disinfectants, sunlight, and ultraviolet light might be used to treat the virus:

Supposing we hit the body with a tremendous—whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light ... And then I said, supposing you brought the light inside the body, either through the skin or some other way ... And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute—one minute—and is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside, or almost a cleaning? Because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it would be interesting to check that.

*(Broad and Levin 2020)*

As the virus spread from the northeast corridor across the country in the spring and summer months, Trump also worked at cross-purposes with the medical community's efforts to expand testing. Trump denied that the federal government had any responsibility to address a shortage of test kits and even tried to discourage testing, claiming that the high number of US COVID-19 cases was attributable to testing itself. At a campaign rally in Tulsa, Trump said that he wanted to slow down testing to limit the number of new cases revealed. “When you do testing to that extent,” he asserted, “you're going to find more people,

you're going to find more cases. So I said to my people, 'Slow the testing down, please.' They test and they test" (Freking 2020).

Likewise, despite recommendations for mask-wearing from his administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Trump and other White House officials rarely wore masks, and the president was ambivalent in his public stands (Victor, Serviss and Paybarah 2020). Trump questioned the effectiveness of masks, insisted that mask-wearing was strictly voluntary, and mocked reporters and Democratic rival Joe Biden for wearing masks. The non-wearing of masks became a marker of political identity, while Trump's own refusal to wear a mask reinforced the tough guy personae he cultivated like other populist figures (Ostiguy 2017, 82). When Trump himself contracted the virus as it spread through his inner circle in the fall, he staged a triumphal return to the White House following a three-day stay at a military hospital, posing alone for a photo opportunity on the Truman Balcony and tweeting "Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life. We have developed, under the Trump Administration, some really great drugs & knowledge. I feel better than I did 20 years ago!" (Smith and Gregorian 2020).

Most dramatically, perhaps, when it became clear in the spring that the pandemic was not a mere short-term emergency, Trump and the GOP thoroughly politicized and pushed back against state-level efforts to impose lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus. In the absence of national mandates for testing, contact tracing, mask-wearing, and social distancing, state and local governments were left to their own devices to determine the stringency of protective measures. As early as April 19, Trump declared that some governors had gone too far, and he encouraged demonstrations against Democratic governors who had imposed strict lockdown measures. The president tweeted "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" and "LIBERATE MINNESOTA!" after heavily armed protestors surrounded the state capitol building in Michigan, chanting "Lock her up" in reference to Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who had clashed with Republican state legislators over lockdown measures (McCord 2020).

The combination of politicization and decentralized management of the pandemic produced considerable variation in policy responses across the 50 states. The data provided by Oxford University's COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) shows large gaps in responses between relatively stringent northeastern and Democratic-led states and more lax southern, Midwestern, and GOP-led states (Hallas et al. 2021, 18–23). Republican state governments adopted less stringent mandates for mask-wearing, closures, and social distancing, and they lifted these restrictions more quickly. Not surprisingly, as the virus spread from the northeast into the American heartland, GOP-led states overtook Democratic states in the number of per capita COVID-19 cases.

Stark partisan differences in attitudes toward the virus were also apparent in public opinion surveys. Republican respondents were far less likely than Democrats to express concerns over catching the virus or spreading it to others and

more likely to be comfortable with social gatherings. Sixty-three percent of Democrats, but only 29 percent of Republicans, said that masks should always be worn in public settings (Pew Research Center 2020). Only 11 percent of Democrats said they would choose not to be vaccinated, compared to 41 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Republican males (Marist Poll 2021). Even after Trump left office, highly politicized resistance to vaccinations and mask-wearing continued to frustrate the Biden administration's efforts to manage the pandemic.

This polarization of public attitudes clearly mapped onto preexisting partisan loyalties or antipathies for Trump himself. Indeed, partisan polarization helped mitigate the effects of Trump's bungled response to the pandemic on his bid for reelection. On the eve of the November 2020 election, 82.9 percent of Republicans approved of Trump's management of the pandemic, compared to 6.3 percent of Democrats and 34.7 percent of independents (Methani et al. 2001). Trump's 46 percent job approval rating just prior to the election was two percentage points *higher* than he received at the beginning of the year before the effects of the pandemic and the economic downturn (Gallup 2001). Although approval of Trump's management of the pandemic was lower than his overall favorability level, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the pandemic produced a major vote swing against the incumbent; Trump's electoral performance in 2020 actually *improved* relative to 2016 in states and counties hit more severely by the virus (McMinn and Stein 2020; Masket 2021). Trump's vote share in 2020, 46.8 percent, was up slightly from his 46.1 percent in 2016, and with voter turnout surging to the highest recorded level (66.7 percent) in 120 years, Trump received over 11 million more votes in 2020 than he obtained in 2016. Nevertheless, since Joe Biden's victory in the Electoral College relied on very narrow vote margins in five swing states—despite winning the popular ballot by over seven million votes—it is possible that a more effective response to the pandemic by Trump might have tipped the balance in these swing states and in the Electoral College.

## Conclusion

Despite its scientific and medical prowess, the US suffered more COVID-19 cases and deaths than any other country during the first year of the pandemic. A failure of governance lay at the heart of this abysmal performance. President Trump made little effort to mobilize and rally the public for a unified national response to a public health emergency. Instead, he downplayed the threat, scapegoated China, and blamed Democrats and the media for hyping the pandemic to undermine his presidency. Fixated on the pandemic's economic effects and election year political fallout, Trump defied scientific and medical expertise, proposed quack remedies, and refused to support protective measures requiring short-term economic sacrifices on the part of "the people." Responsibility for crisis management was delegated to state and local officials, while Trump

resisted and politicized their efforts to encourage testing, mask-wearing, and social distancing.

Trump's management of the COVID-19 crisis, therefore, exacerbated partisan polarization rather than providing a unifying collective purpose around which citizens could rally. Far from eliciting a commanding populist "performance"—one that would harness state power to develop a coherent response and mobilize human, material, and scientific resources behind it—the COVID-19 crisis revealed the social costs of the political gridlock intrinsic to Trump's brand of anti-establishment populism.

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# 3

## MEXICO

### A Politically Effective Populist Pandemic Response

*Nicolás de la Cerda and Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo*

There is no question that Mexico was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data from August 2021, Mexico's case fatality rate (8.19%)—the proportion of individuals diagnosed with COVID that die from the disease—was one of the highest in the world, topped only by Vanuatu, Yemen, and Peru (OWID 2021). Figures published in June 2021 by the Mexican government suggest deaths from COVID-19 could be as much as 70% higher than the official count (Gobierno de México 2021). The acute health crisis has produced, like elsewhere in the world, major economic hardship. Mexico's economy shrank 4.5% in 2020, urban unemployment soared from 3.7% in March to a high of 6.8% in August of that year, and the ranks of those working in the informal sector increased as well (INEGI 2021).

The response from President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (AMLO) government did not help control the spread of the virus. Widely seen as slow and ineffective, it generated confusion and chaos. Although the government held daily press conferences to communicate directly with the public, messaging about the virus has been inconsistent and opaque. The president and his COVID spokesperson, Deputy Secretary of Health Hugo López-Gatell, initially downplayed the severity of the virus, backed a strategy based on achieving herd immunity, and disincentivized the use of masks. Even as López-Gatell adjusted his recommendations to follow the World Health Organization (WHO) more closely, the president—his boss—continued to attend large gatherings, encouraged Mexicans to hug each other (Fonseco 2020), refused to use a mask, and downplayed the severity of the pandemic (La Jornada 2020). Even as late as summer 2021, AMLO and López-Gatell bucked scientific consensus to cast doubt on the need for vaccines in children, accusing big pharma of promoting them just to make profit (Carrillo 2021). Criticism of the government's strategy has come from

all sides: opposition governors, leaders of the opposition, and even the director general of the WHO, who in December 2020 asked the Mexican leader to “get serious” and heed to scientific advice about the virus.

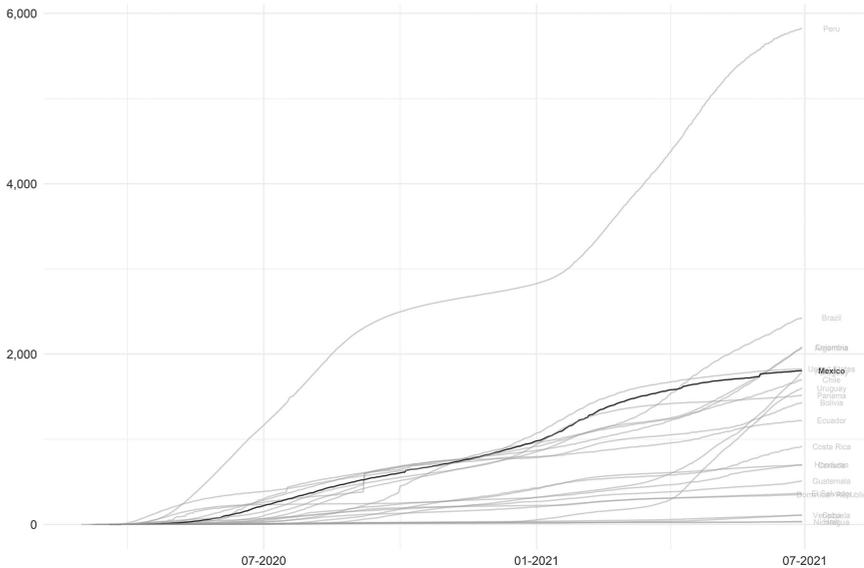
What is puzzling, however, is that despite the accumulating deaths from COVID, the contradictions, and missteps, President Lopez Obrador has not appeared to pay a political price, at least not when it comes to his political support. His approval has hovered around 55% throughout the pandemic, with slight fluctuations that are not always tied to his government’s policies or outcomes. Moreover, results of the June 2021 midterm election were mixed but hardly represented a clear repudiation of AMLO’s policies or politics. In the middle of a health, security, and economic crises, his coalition managed to retain a majority of seats in congress and won most of the 15 governorships at play. When it comes to his performance on COVID in particular, approval for the president’s performance has also remained relatively high, despite public disapproval of some of his specific actions, such as not wearing a mask, and despite high reported levels of fear of contagion and death from COVID (Moreno 2021a).

We argue that, at least in part, this disconnect is related to the president’s use of a populist political strategy to face the crisis. We focus specifically on three aspects of AMLO’s crisis response: a rhetorical campaign in which policies and rhetoric are weakly connected; a high level of centralization around him and his close political allies; and a polarizing discourse that seeks to delegitimize his “enemies,” including the scientific establishment. To be clear, the president’s populist response to the pandemic has been a continuation of the political strategy he has used throughout his presidency, not a departure from it. But during the pandemic, these features of AMLO’s response have allowed the president to shift blame and disconnect the government’s approval from its performance.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section we start by describing the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its health and economic consequences. Then, we describe the government’s crisis response and explain the government’s actions as an extension of AMLO’s populist strategy. We then show how some features of the response allowed the government to avoid the potential political consequences of managing a country in the middle of a sanitary and economic crisis. Despite the severe effects of the pandemic, AMLO’s approval remained relatively high and stable. We conclude by highlighting some relevant implications of these arguments.

## The pandemic in Mexico

The first case of COVID-19 in Mexico was reported on February 27, 2020; the first death from the virus happened on March 18. Five days later, on March 23, the government implemented the first policies to try to contain the spread of the virus. As we will show in this section, the pandemic generated a health crisis of unparalleled proportions in Mexico, with substantial spillover into the economic arena.



**FIGURE 3.1** Total deaths per million in the Americas.

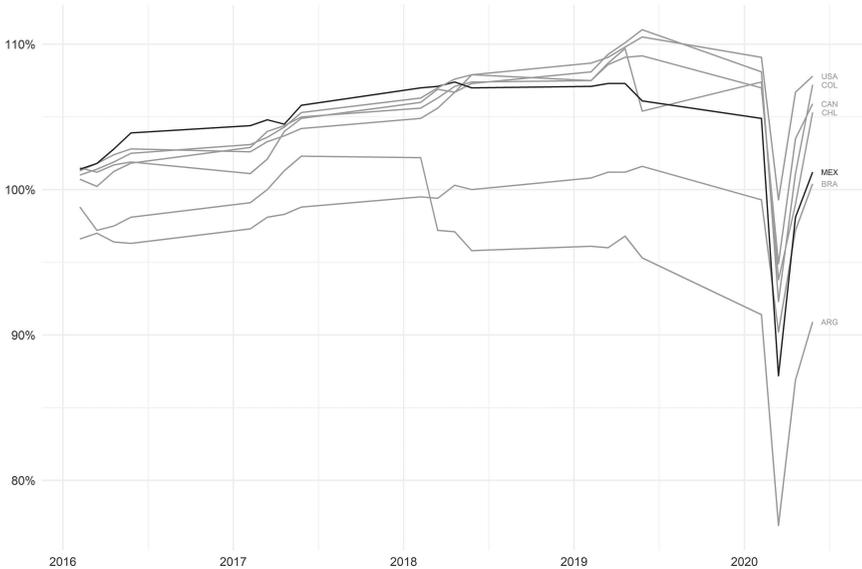
Source: Our World in Data (2021).

Note: Countries with population above 3 million.

Deaths from COVID rose rapidly through 2020. Mexico reached a first peak in late June, with around 5,600 weekly deaths from COVID. By late August, the number of cumulative deaths exceeded 60,000—a threshold that the government described at the start of the pandemic as a “catastrophic” worst-case scenario. The second peak was reached in early February 2021, with nearly 10,000 deaths confirmed in a week. In between these peaks, the number of deaths from COVID decreased but stayed at alarmingly high levels for months. The effects of the pandemic varied substantially at the subnational level. Mexico City was especially hard hit: with around 7% of the population, the city accounts for over 25% of deaths from COVID (DGE 2021).

In comparative terms, the severity of COVID in Mexico has been higher than in other countries in Latin America. Figure 3.1 shows Mexico among the countries with highest numbers of deaths per one million inhabitants in the region and the Mexican Health Ministry suggest that deaths from COVID could be up to 70% higher than the official count, given the estimates of excess deaths in the country. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, Mexico is surpassed only by the US and India in the number of excess deaths from COVID-19 (IHME 2021).

Although the health crisis has had significant consequences for economies around the world, the pandemic hit the Mexican economy particularly hard. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Figure 3.2) shows that, at least until August 2021, Mexico had been hit



**FIGURE 3.2** GDP quarter-to-quarter percentage change.

Source: OECD (2021).

Note: American countries available in the OECD database.

harder than any other country in the Americas. Quarterly gross domestic product (GDP) fell nearly 18 percent from its pre-pandemic level—more than contractions of GDP in Colombia (15.8 points), Argentina (14.5), and Chile (13.6). Consequences for the tourism sector and the informal economy have been particularly severe. Although tourism was affected everywhere, travel restrictions and social distancing measures took a dramatic toll on the Mexican economy which relies on tourism for over 16% of GDP and 16% of employment (World Bank 2021). The size of the informal sector in Mexico also posed important challenges. The rate of informal employment in the country is around 66%, higher than the average for Latin America (Baker et al. 2020). Taken together, the dependence of the Mexican economy on tourism and the high levels of informal employment posed an enormous challenge to Mexican workers and the economy overall.

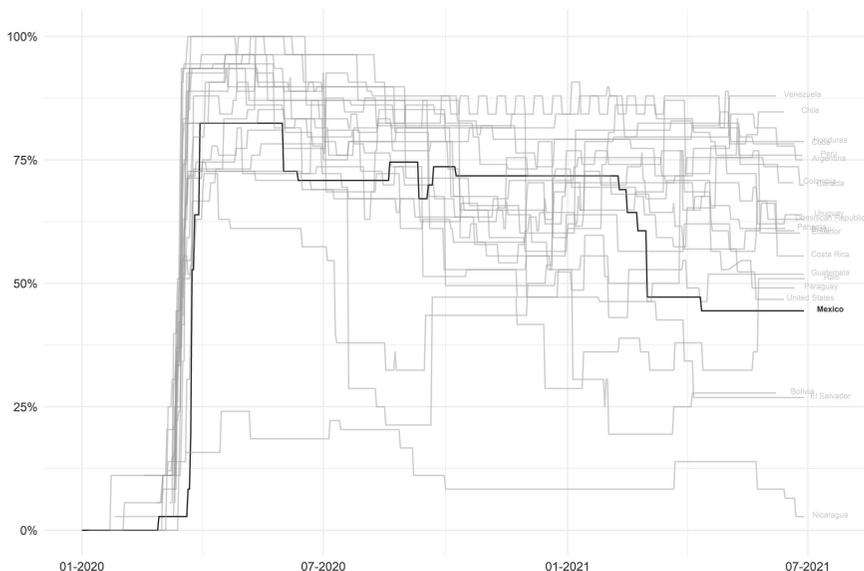
### Government's crisis response

The impact of the pandemic was to be expected. On top of the economic dependence on tourism and informal labor, other structural factors contributed to the spread of the disease. The Mexican public health care system is fragile, unequal, and underfunded and the high prevalence of diabetes and overweight among the population contributed to a high death toll. But the government's response to the pandemic was at best insufficient. On March

23, more than three weeks after the first case of COVID-19 on national territory, five days after the first death, and more than 50 days after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a worldwide health emergency, the Mexican government closed schools and put its social distancing program into effect. By then, ten states had already taken independent action and suspended classes—but it was not until March 30 that the federal government declared a national emergency and suspended all nonessential activities (Sánchez Talanquer et al. 2021).

The policy response to COVID-19 by the government of President López Obrador was slow, lax, and contradictory. To compare the timing of Mexico's reaction to the pandemic to other countries in the Americas, in Figure 3.3 we plot the Stringency Policy index developed by researchers at Oxford University. The index combines several indicators of government policies that restrict people's behavior, such as lockdowns, closures, and travel bans. Clearly, at a point when decisive action was essential, the Mexican government's reaction to the pandemic was days behind its counterparts in Argentina (where borders and schools were closed on March 11), Chile (where schools were closed on March 15 and a national emergency declared on March 18), Peru and Costa Rica (where a state of emergency was declared on March 16), and even Brazil (where borders were closed on March 19).

Not only was the response slow, but it was also lax relative to most countries in the region. Figure 3.3 shows that, overall, policies implemented by the



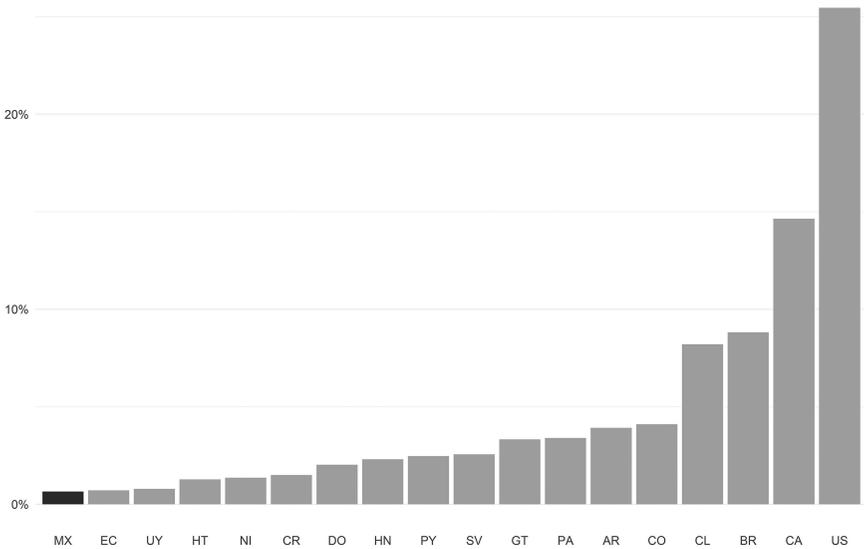
**FIGURE 3.3** COVID-19 policy stringency in the Americas.

Source: Our World in Data (2021).

Note: Countries with population above three million.

Mexican government were less stringent—and were scaled back earlier—than in most other countries. Significantly, the government refused to implement any major air travel restrictions, fearing the economic impact on tourism. The land border with the US was closed to nonessential visits, but there were no requirements imposed on air travel from abroad apart from a “risk assessment” form. According to data from the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in 2019 Mexico was the seventh country in the world with more international tourist arrivals; in 2020, Mexico rose to third place in the number of arrivals, despite a decrease of 47% in arrivals from the previous year. For reference, the average decrease for the three most visited countries in the world (France, Spain, and the US) was 74.3%.

The government’s response to the pandemic was also severely underfunded. Figure 3.4 shows Mexico had the lowest level of above-the-line discretionary fiscal support measures in Latin America. These measures can include additional spending, capital grants and targeted transfers, or tax cuts and other forms of relief which are reflected in the fiscal balance. While countries like Chile and Brazil implemented measures with costs above 8% of GDP, Mexico’s total above-the-line spending in response to the pandemic was below 1%. The refusal to increase spending in response to the pandemic is very much in line with the president’s rhetoric around “austerity.” But the lack of fiscal measures to guarantee Mexicans a minimum income severely undermined the efforts of the population to shelter at home.



**FIGURE 3.4** Announced COVID-19 above-the-line discretionary fiscal support measures (percentage of the GDP).

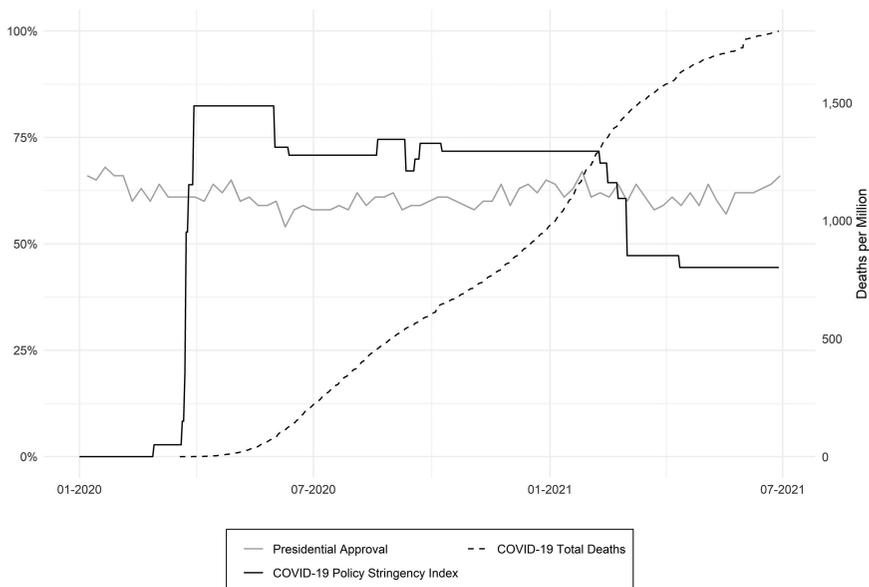
Source: International Monetary Fund.

Note: Available countries in the Americas. Mexico highlighted in black.

## A politically effective response

Despite being slow, lax, and underfunded, AMLO's government response to the pandemic has been politically effective. During an unprecedented health and economic crisis, AMLO was able to maintain high levels of presidential approval and to overcome a difficult legislative and gubernatorial election. Before the pandemic began, AMLO had one of the highest levels of presidential approval in the region. Although his approval varied slightly over time, Figure 3.5 shows that President Lopez Obrador was able to manage the most difficult months of the pandemic without a significant cost to his support. Data from Morning Consult shows that in January 2020, the president's approval rating was in the high 60s and it remained between 50% and 60% for most of 2020 and 2021. Moreover, AMLO's popular support also seems mostly uncorrelated with the COVID-19 policy stringency measures enforced by the government or the outcomes of the pandemic (see Figure 3.5).

AMLO's government was also able to successfully manage a difficult mid-term election during the worst months of the pandemic. Although the president's coalition *Juntos Hacemos Historia* (MORENA, PVEM, and PT) lost the congressional supermajority, they managed to retain a simple majority of seats. The president and his allies also won 11 of the 15 state governorships at play. These electoral results are outstanding when compared with the electoral fate of other ruling coalitions across the region in 2021. In Ecuador, ex-President Rafael



**FIGURE 3.5** Presidential approval/Stringency index/COVID deaths.

Source: Morning Consult (2021) (Presidential Approval) and Our World in Data (2021) (Policy Stringency and Total Deaths).

Correa's coalition suffered its first defeat in almost 15 years. In Peru, Peru Libre, an outsider left-wing party, won the congressional and presidential elections. Finally, in Chile, President Piñera's coalition was totally overwhelmed in the town hall, gubernatorial, and constitutional assembly elections.

We suggest that the relatively stronger political support for AMLO during the pandemic is in large part a product of the president's populist political strategy and rhetoric. In the next sections, we describe the main features of this response and explain how they helped the president separate accountability for policy outcomes from his own political support. We focus particularly on three features of President López Obrador's COVID-19 response: a loose connection between discourse and policies, centralized decision-making, and the president's polarizing rhetoric.

### AMLO's populist leadership

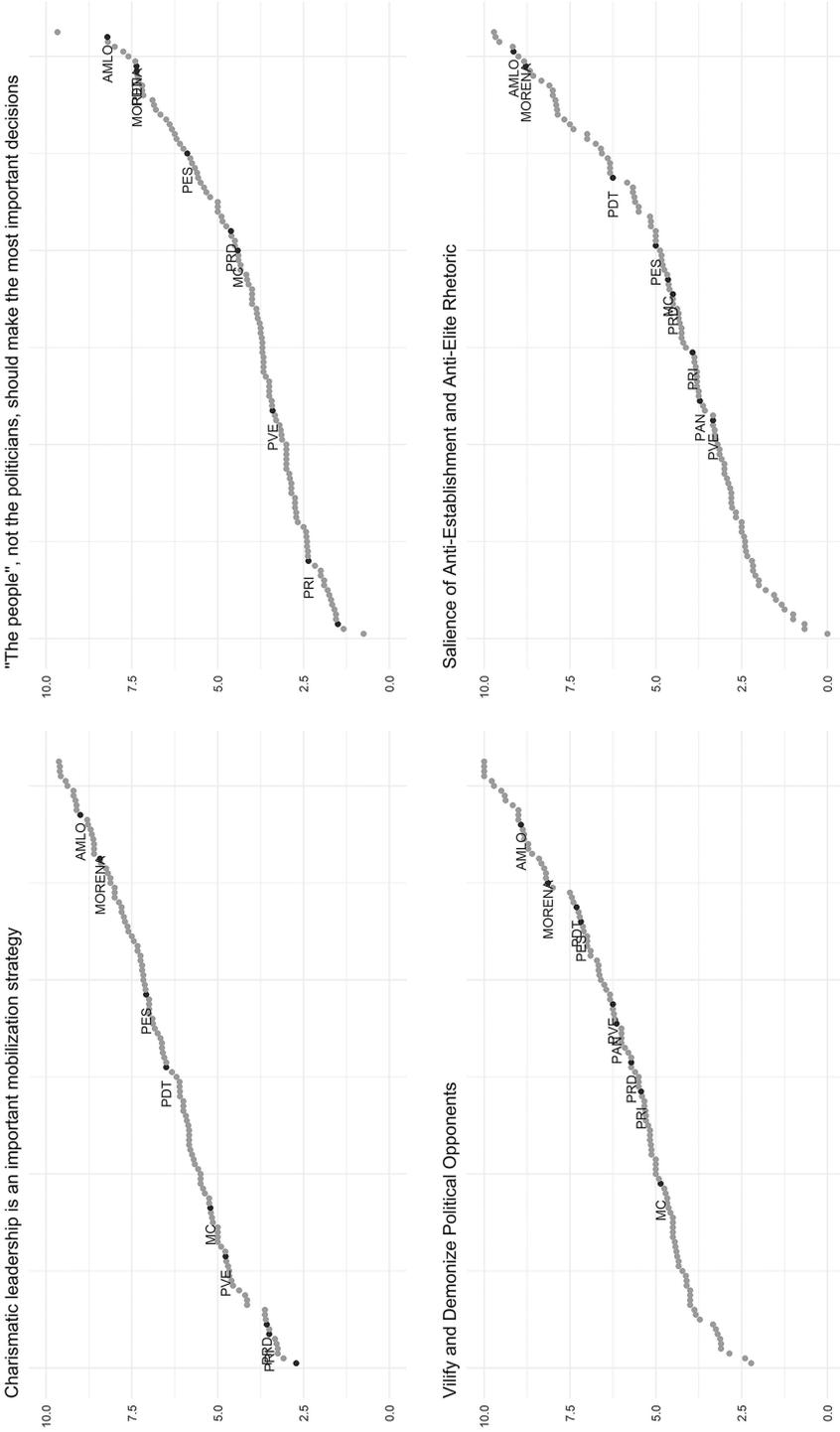
Andrés Manuel López Obrador can undoubtedly be characterized as a populist leader. Although populism is a highly contested term, we define it here as a "thin-centered ideology" characterized by two distinct features: plebiscitarianism and polarization (Carlin and Love 2020). *Plebiscitarian* populist leadership rejects the mediating role of institutions in favor of direct authorization by the "audience" (Urbinati 2019) and understands politics as "an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). Populism is also based on a *polarizing* discourse that divides the world into two antagonistic camps, typically "good" people and the "evil" elite (Hawkins 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Torre 2005).

AMLO's policies, rhetoric, and mobilization strategies fit this definition of populism very closely. In Figure 3.6, we use data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey-Latin America (Martínez-Gallardo et al. 2021) to compare him with other leaders in Latin America. From the top row in Figure 3.6, it is clear that AMLO and his party, MORENA, rank exceptionally high on plebiscitarianism. Compared to other regional leaders, AMLO and MORENA get high marks on the importance of charismatic leadership as a mobilization strategy and the importance of "the people" (and *not* politicians) in making political decisions.<sup>1</sup> The bottom row ranks leaders and parties on indicators associated with a polarizing rhetoric. Among the 125 parties and presidents ranked by Chapel Hill Expert Survey Latin America (CHES-LA) experts, AMLO ranks fifth in anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric and 14th in terms of the degree to which he vilifies and demonizes opponents (MORENA ranks 8th and 26th, respectively).

In the next sections, we describe the main characteristics of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and link them to these distinct features of President López Obrador's populist leadership.

#### *Thin-centered*

First, the response of the Mexican government to the pandemic can be characterized as populist in the sense of being *thin-centered* or based on a "set of ideas



**FIGURE 3.6** Populism in Latin America.  
 Source: CHES LA (2021).

that is limited in ambition and scope” (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2013, 150). AMLO’s response to the pandemic has been heavily based on a rhetorical campaign in which the connection between policies and rhetoric is weak at best. Although AMLO and Deputy Secretary of Health López-Gatell have had a strong media presence throughout the pandemic, the government’s response has lacked programmatic consistency and has often been undermined by the actions of political leaders themselves.

Starting as early as January 22, 2020, López-Gatell held daily televised briefings, becoming the (very) public face of the government’s response. Unfortunately, information disseminated through these briefings was inconsistent and was only selectively updated as scientific consensus evolved. At the beginning of the pandemic—and against scientific advice—the government’s strategy was to seek herd immunity; masks were not recommended; asymptomatic transmission was considered very unlikely; and aerial transmission was not fully considered. As evidence became available that put these assumptions in doubt (or disproved them completely), the government slightly shifted its discourse, but only rarely changed its policies (Sánchez Talanquer et al. 2021). For example, despite substantial evidence by mid-to-late 2020 about aerial transmission, the government continued to argue that modifications to the infrastructure that protected against transmission were too costly and there was not enough evidence to support policy changes (Sánchez Talanquer 2020, 62). Additionally, government recommendations for social distancing and mask-wearing were routinely ignored by the president, members of his cabinet (Agren 2020), and Lopez Gatell himself (Rivers 2021)—undermining trust among the population.

### ***Plebiscitarianism***

A second element of populism that characterizes AMLO’s leadership is its reliance on personalistic and plebiscitarian—as opposed to institution-based—leadership (Weyland 2001). Since the beginning of his administration, AMLO has gradually and successfully implemented a vertical and personalistic system of power, in which social policy has been transformed to bypass intermediary institutions and distribute cash directly to citizens (Sánchez Talanquer 2020) and the independence of autonomous institutions and the judiciary has been undermined.

The government’s response to the pandemic has also been substantially centralized and thus politicized. Instead of a response driven mainly by public health principles, the president entrusted the management of the crisis to López-Gatell, a political appointee who responds directly to the Minister of Health. This decision had several negative consequences. First, existing mechanisms of health policy-making were set aside and with them the advantages of multilateral and independent decision-making (Sánchez Talanquer et al. 2021). The General Health Council (*Consejo de Salubridad General*) was created precisely to decide on health measures in an emergency, but during the pandemic its role has been minimal. Although the Council also responds directly to the president and includes

members of the president's cabinet, it is designed to deliberate collectively with the input of medical experts.

Furthermore, putting political appointees at the center of the pandemic response inevitably led to decisions that did not always align with scientific consensus. The clearest (but not only) example is the debate over the use of masks to prevent the spread of COVID, which was unnecessarily politicized. Although the WHO recommended the use of face masks in healthy people on April 6, 2020, the Mexican government did not heed this recommendation and discouraged their use even into the summer. Although later in the pandemic the Mexican government started recommending the use of masks, this change was implemented late and timidly in order to avoid publicly contradicting the president who repeatedly cast doubt on the effectiveness of masks, rarely wore them, and insisted that only authoritarian governments need to impose measures that restrict people's freedom. Something similar happened regarding asymptomatic transmission, testing, and the importance of new variants in the management of the pandemic (Sánchez Talanquer et al. 2021).

### ***Polarizing discourse***

Third, populism is also based on a polarizing discourse that identifies good with the will of the people and it identifies the elite as conspiratorial and evil (Hawkins 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). AMLO's rhetoric has been extremely consistent with these characteristics: he portrays himself as the representative of the legitimate demands of Mexicans ("el presidente legítimo") and he describes his supporters as a homogeneous and virtuous group, "el pueblo bueno y sabio" (the good and wise people) (Rentería and Arellano-Gault 2021). His rhetoric pits this group against the corrupt political elite, which typically includes opposition parties but, depending on the issue at hand, can also include the private sector, the media, or even the middle class (Monroy 2021).

AMLO's response to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has been consistent with this antagonistic, polarizing rhetoric. From the start of the pandemic, the lack of a clear set of recommendations from the government generated strong criticisms from opposition governors, the medical community, and the president's political opponents. Existing party polarization was accentuated by disagreements over the severity of the virus, the response to the crisis, and the reliability of official data. The media's coverage of the pandemic and of the government's response has also been a source of polarization. In a morning presser in April 2020, the president dedicated a full 20 minutes to separating the media into "good" and "bad" sources. He has continued to call his critics in the "conservative" or mainstream media "scoundrels" (*canallas*) and "vultures" (*zopilotes*) that misinform "in bad faith."

Although divisive, AMLO's rhetoric differs in important ways from the rhetoric of other populist leaders during the pandemic. López Obrador's discourse and actions have often been at odds with the scientific consensus, but he has not

typically supported policies that are in stark opposition with it. Instead, he has taken vague positions that give his staff some room to maneuver. His position regarding the use of masks is illustrative. Despite his reticence to use masks and his insistence that it should be a voluntary decision, the president has said he “respects” the recommendation issued by López-Gatell to use them. This is in stark contrast to other populist leaders in the region, such as Bolsonaro (see the chapter on Brazil) who systematically defied scientific consensus and allowed little to no dissent among his staff (Savarese 2021).

### **A politically effective populist pandemic response**

Taken together, these three characteristics of AMLO’s pandemic response have allowed him and his government to avoid the worse political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the centralization of decisions in a small circle of presidential appointees allowed the government to create a strong sense of agency despite the shortcomings of the pandemic response and the reluctance to change policy in response to changing conditions. This sense of agency was reinforced by the constant (daily) media presence of the president and López-Gatell, which helped cement the idea that they were “in control.” The centralized response, together with the weakening of scientific and other autonomous institutions that was ongoing when the pandemic hit, inhibited deliberation and, importantly, discouraged criticisms of the president’s pandemic response (Sánchez Talanquer et al. 2021).

On the other hand, the president’s polarizing communication strategy allowed him to cast accountability for the crisis as a matter of morality rather than policy outcomes. He defined politics as the struggle between his “good” allies—humble Mexicans who he characterizes as “good, Christian human beings...with no malice”—and their “evil” adversaries—“conservative fanatics” who he considers “hypocritical,” “incapable of loving others,” and “susceptible to manipulation” (Morán Breña 2021). In this Manichean world, approval of the president’s performance is a test of loyalty to the moral leader (and the good people!) and not an evaluation of him as a mere politician or of his government’s specific policies.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in most polls, approval for the president’s performance on specific policy areas such as the economy, corruption, and crime tend to be much lower than his overall approval rating (Moreno 2021b). For example, in a survey conducted by *El Financiero* on August 2021, the president obtained a 60% approval rating overall, but while 51% approved his handling of the health crisis, only 40% approved his management of the economy, 38% his handling of corruption, and 31% his performance on crime. Moreover, approval for the president does not seem to be related to fear from the virus either. In a survey published in the same newspaper in July 2021, AMLO’s approval held steady at 56%, despite 76% of citizens expressing fear of getting COVID-19.

This moralizing and polarizing rhetoric also makes it easier for him to deflect blame for negative outcomes toward his “enemies,” including the “corrupt”

media, the “conservative” opposition, and the “amoral” middle class. In his daily press conferences, President Lopez Obrador has a section dedicated to exposing “fake” news, written in “bad faith,” or biased, and to list lies told about him by his enemies. He routinely accuses the press of having low moral standards and of responding to the economic interests of the upper classes (Monroy 2021). A significant consequence of this approach is the level of polarization in Mexico; in July 2021, approval of the president among those who voted for him was 88.6% and 32.7% among those who did not.

## Conclusion

What is particularly puzzling about the response to COVID-19 in Mexico is that despite the severity of the pandemic, its consequences on the health and economy of Mexicans, and the shortcomings of the pandemic response, AMLO’s government has been able to navigate the crisis without paying a severe political price. We argue that this is, in part, explained by the characteristics of Lopez Obrador’s populist response to the pandemic.

The crisis triggered by the pandemic in Mexico was not a complete surprise. Structural conditions, including the reliance on informal labor and tourism, high levels of diabetes and overweight, and a fragile, unequal, and underfunded public health system made Mexico particularly vulnerable to the severe consequences of the virus. Indeed, as we have pointed out here, most statistics point to Mexico as one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. But despite the dire outcomes, we have argued that AMLO’s pandemic response allowed him to evade a major political hit. By centralizing the pandemic response around him and his closest allies, AMLO was able to create a sense of government agency despite a context of low state capacity and a public system with limited scope of action. At the same time, the strong media presence coupled with the use of populist rhetoric made presidential approval a test of loyalty to the president himself instead of a performance evaluation. As a consequence, not only was AMLO able to sustain high levels of presidential approval, but he also performed relatively well in the 2021 midterm election.

In this chapter, we focused on the characteristics of the Mexican government’s response to the pandemic, but there are other important aspects of the pandemic response we did not address here. It is especially important to consider the subnational dynamics generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly in federal countries, such as Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and the US, the response to the pandemic was complicated by the interplay between federal and regional responses—especially where different levels of government were led by different political parties, as was the case in many Mexican states.

A second important element of the pandemic response has to do with timing. It is clear that AMLO’s response to the pandemic was shaped by the fact that there was a midterm election in the horizon. It is likely that the government’s reluctance to mandate lockdowns and the desire to focus instead on the economic effects of the pandemic were driven at least in part by electoral concerns. Future

research could focus on cross-national differences in the electoral calendar to evaluate the degree to which electoral considerations shaped the way different governments approached the pandemic.

## Notes

- 1 CHES-LA surveys include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
- 2 See Espino (2021) for a similar argument.

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# 4

## BRAZIL

### “We Are All Going To Die One Day”

*Frederico Bertholini*

This chapter addresses the populist (non)response to COVID-19 in Brazil, and it is organized into four sections. The first section depicts Bolsonaro as the only leader who actively went against international scientific consensus throughout the entire pandemic. This section describes how the Brazilian president developed a strategy based on the concept of herd immunity and the promotion of ineffective “miracle drugs” while blaming all who opposed him for the harm caused by COVID-19. The second section characterizes this strategy as a paradigmatic populist approach to the pandemic, where rulers engage in a blame game against unspecified enemies, channeling energies to mobilize supporters instead of establishing effective measures to avoid the spread of the virus. The third section discusses the consequences of upholding a divisive narrative that fosters federative conflict instead of promoting coordination. This section clarifies how the heterogeneity of the pandemic response at the subnational level allowed Bolsonaro to frame state-level political elites as the enemy. Finally, in the fourth section, Bolsonaro’s approach is defined as a typical populist “crisis performance” that promotes the perpetuation of crisis with considerable use of conspiracy theories as a form of (non)government.

#### **The last negationist**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock with unprecedented repercussions in the contemporary world. It quickly spread to Asia, Europe, and the Americas, leaving in its wake a specter of fear and death. In Brazil, despite possible underreporting, as of end June 2021, it had already infected more than 18 million people, leading to more than 520,000 deaths. When the COVID-19 outbreak reached global pandemic status, there were different reactions from leaders worldwide.

On the one hand, those most concerned with the speed of the spread of contagion and the severity of the disease expressed a preference for following the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendations. On the other hand, leaders like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil belittled the pandemic and its public health consequences, expressing utmost concern about the adverse economic effects of lockdown and social distancing measures. This health–economy dichotomy, although factually false, permeates the political discourses of those who opposed social distancing (Goolsbee and Syverson 2020; Hassel 2020).

At the beginning of the pandemic, Bolsonaro was not alone in rejecting WHO recommendations and dismissing concerns about the lethality of the virus. The presidents of Nicaragua, Belarus, Turkmenistan, Mexico, Russia, and the US, to name a few, were also reluctant. However, at some point in the pandemic trajectory, as the number of deaths increased, all leaders decided to take a step back and to understand the virus as a central challenge. Except for Bolsonaro. In this sense, his approach to COVID-19 can be considered unique.

Bolsonaro not only refused to follow every WHO recommendation on what is generally considered the standard pandemic response, such as extensive testing, contact tracing, social distancing, avoiding crowded spaces, and partial lockdown measures. In fact, the Brazilian president actively advocated against those measures, publicly blaming even those of his allies who defended social isolation, and often mocking those pursuing common non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to impede the spread of COVID-19 (Phillips 2020a).

Bolsonaro's rhetoric's virulence and violence are an integral part of his communication style, and during the pandemic, he just intensified this style (Silva 2020).<sup>1</sup> He imitated people suffering from shortness of breath on YouTube lives and even used homophobic slurs against those who followed WHO recommendations (Phillips 2020b). One of his most famous phrases during the pandemic was a rude response to a journalist commenting on the growing number of victims: "So what? I'm not a gravedigger" (*The Lancet* 2020).

Table 4.1 summarizes the NPIs (not) adopted by the Brazilian National Government in its pandemic response in different phases of the pandemic. Usually,

**TABLE 4.1** Patterns of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in pandemic response

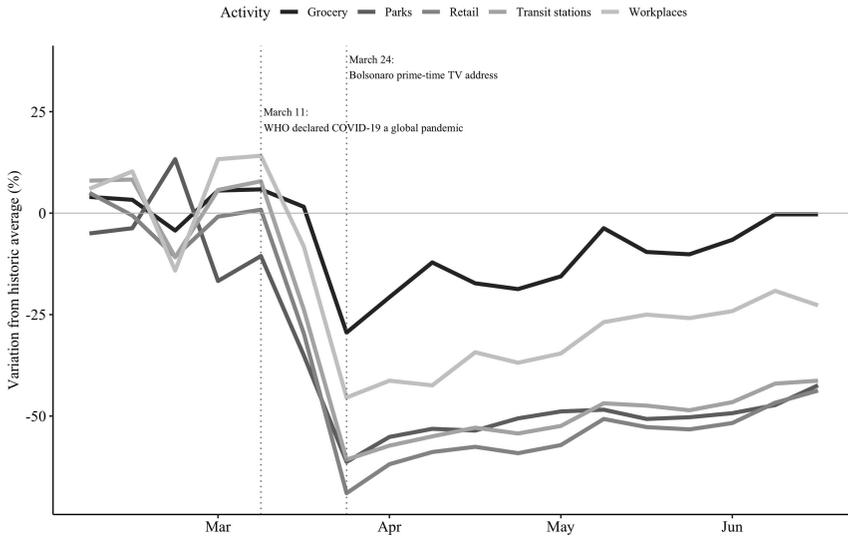
<i>Standard recommended pandemic responses (NPIs)</i>	<i>First phase Feb/20 to May/20</i>	<i>Second phase Feb/20 to May/20</i>	<i>Third phase Feb/20 to May/20</i>	<i>Fourth phase Nov/20 to ...</i>
<b>Extensive testing</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>Contact tracing</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>Borders' control</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>Use of masks</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>Social distancing measures</b>	No	No	No	No
<b>Lockdown measures</b>	No	No	No	No

we would divide the pandemic into epidemiological waves. However, as can be seen in Figure 4.2, strictly speaking, there were no distinct waves, because after the beginning of the pandemic, Brazil never reached a level of deaths low enough to characterize an end to the first wave. The first phase is the start of the first “peak,” going from February 2020 to May 2020. The second phase, which is a “first peak plateau,” went from May 2020 to August 2020. Unlike most countries, Brazil recorded a high level of deaths for an extended period, so there was no peak, but rather a peak plateau. The third phase, which is the decreasing of this first peak, goes from August 2020 to November 2020. Finally, the fourth phase is considered the growth of the second peak, starting in November 2020 and still ongoing. As one can see, there was no variation across time. Bolsonaro rejected all measures, from day one to today, July 2021. The Brazilian Government’s mistakes in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic are so blatant that for “those of the international scientific community who base their understanding on reliable data, the conclusion that Brazil has shown one of the worst responses to the pandemic is unequivocal” (Ferigato et al. 2020, 1).

The rhetoric against NPIs and especially against isolation was disruptive. Words promptly become actions because leaders’ speeches significantly impact the adherence to social distancing, as shown by Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata (2020). The authors combine electoral information and geo-localized mobile phone data for more than 60 million devices throughout Brazil to demonstrate that after Bolsonaro publicly dismissed the COVID-19 health risks, and advised against isolation, the social distancing measures taken by citizens in pro-government localities weakened compared to places where political support of the president was less intense. There is robust evidence that this impact is driven by municipalities with active Twitter accounts and a more significant proportion of evangelicals (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2020).

Using Google Mobility Data gives similar results regarding the relationship between public speeches and social isolation (Figure 4.1). On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. As a result, several state governors and mayors proposed partial lockdowns and there was a sharp decrease in general activities. Grocery retailing, for instance, was down 25% from normal levels, presence in retail stores decreased by almost 70%. However, on March 24, 2020, Bolsonaro made a prime time television address insisting that “our lives have to go on” and that people “must get back to normal” (BBC 2020a; HRW 2020). The general increase in activity was so fast and sharp that it is difficult to ignore, even lacking a causal design with a more robust model specification, as seen in Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata (2020).

In addition to ignoring WHO guidelines, the Brazilian Government actively promoted a so-called “preventive treatment” with unproven drugs as a public policy (Wessel 2020). Casarões and Magalhães (2021) explain how far-right leaders and alt-science preachers formed an alleged “hydroxychloroquine alliance” to promote the “miracle drug.” This network, sponsored by the Brazilian



**FIGURE 4.1** Percent variation in historical average by week for commercial and leisure activities, Brazil 2020.

Source: Google Mobility Report (2020).

Government, united businesspeople, celebrities, and even scientists who distrusted international organizations (especially the WHO), governments, and mainstream science. Bolsonaro tried to pit “the people” against “the establishment” by employing “medical populism” discourse. The president fostered “a loose movement of alleged truth-seekers who publicly advance scientific claims at a crossroads between partial evidence, pseudo-science, and conspiracy theories” while casting doubt on the credibility of doctors, scientists, and technocrats (Casarões and Magalhães 2021, 1).

Ventura and Reis (2001) use data on normative acts, regulations, and public speeches from Federal authorities, including the president himself, to demonstrate that the Federal Government promoted “herd immunity” as a means of responding to the pandemic. It chose to favor the free circulation of the virus so that it would naturally induce the immunity of individuals. This strategy was based on the idea that reducing economic activity would cause more significant damage than the deaths caused by the disease.

The “Brazilian national strategy of Covid-19 dissemination” was structured along three axes: (1) propaganda against the public health system, through gestures such as the continuous promotion of agglomerations, in a communication plan that mobilized ideological arguments, fake news, and pseudo-science in order to discredit health authorities, weaken popular adherence to WHO NPI recommendations and promote political activism against them; (2) the fight against governors’ and mayors’ initiatives that sought to contain the spread of the virus, delaying the transfer of resources, attempts to confiscate health supplies acquired

by states and municipalities, and a deliberate delay in rolling out the vaccination; and (3) intense regulatory action, including decrees that defined as “essential” a wide range of activities during the pandemic, and vetoes on the main laws aimed at curbing the spread of the virus, such as those relating to the mandatory use of masks (Ventura and Reis 2001).

The high turnover rate of health ministers is further evidence that the policy was in fact to have no policy. Mandetta and Teich—both doctors—resigned from their posts in the first phase of the pandemic due to disagreements with the president. Both ministers had tried to urge the population to observe social distancing and follow WHO recommendations. However, this never translated into public policies (Malta et al. 2020). Eduardo Pazuello, an army general with no expertise in the health sector, was first brought in as an interim measure, so there was no minister in charge from May 2020 to September 2020, when Pazuello was finally effectively in charge. Queiroga—the health minister in charge as of July 2021—assumed his post in March 2021, the fourth health minister in less than a year (Figure 4.2).

### Populist communication and identity

In some sense, Bolsonaro is a byproduct of a sharp rise in ideological polarization that started in Brazil in 2013 and which became particularly prominent during the 2018 elections. Brazil was divided. At one pole was the left wing, whose hegemony belongs to the center-left Workers’ Party (PT) and whose most relevant political figure is former President Lula da Silva. On the other pole was the right wing, whose hegemony was conquered in the 2018 elections by the far-right political group of Jair Bolsonaro. The Brazilian party system has been anchored since 1994 by the PT and the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) as rival parties. The center-right PSDB had secured almost 40% of the vote on average until 2014; however, in 2018, the dismantlement of the center-right and the emergence of a new far-right option implied major changes for this system (Hunter and Power 2019).

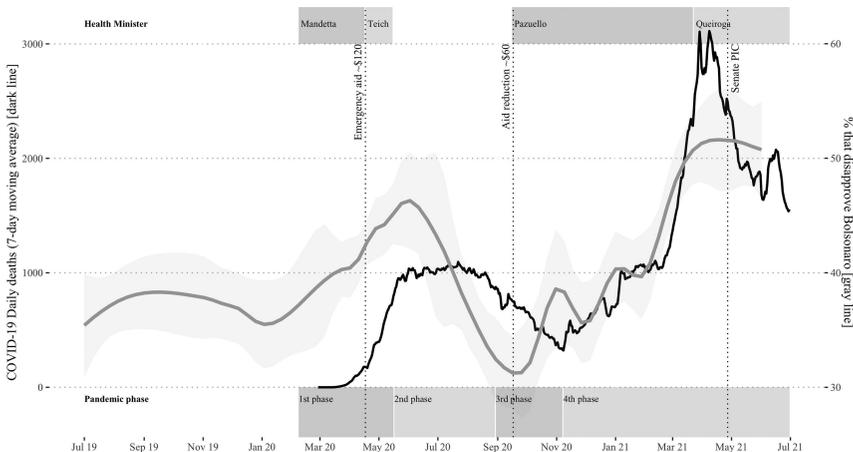
Bolsonaro, who openly praised the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985), ended up being elected president over Haddad (PT) in a runoff election with 55% of votes. His program promised a “new clean politics” based on an anti-establishment and an anti-PT political platform (*antipetismo*). During the campaign, the expansion of *antipetismo* into an antipartisanship flag accommodated a wider range of targets, advocating the idea that all political parties and their members are equally part of a corrupt elite. Samuels and Zucco (2018) credit this expansion to the prominence of the PT in the Brazilian political system, as if positive and negative attitudes toward the PT became mixed up with attitudes toward the party system itself. The vote for Bolsonaro in 2018 was strongly related to both *antipetismo* and negative attitudes toward political parties (Fuks, Ribeiro, and Borba 2020).

At the root of *antipetismo* was a memory of the *mensalão* scandal in 2005 and the growing notoriety of the anti-corruption taskforce Car Wash (“Lava Jato”) from 2014 onward with its revelations on the *petrolão* scandal. The PT was seen

as responsible for implementing a style of government based on corruption. Bolsonaro mobilized this sentiment in his favor, especially against the PT administration, managing to present himself as the strongest anti-PT candidate, galvanizing around his candidacy precisely those segments which were unhappy with the PT that held the Brazilian Presidency from 2003 to 2016 (Duque and Smith 2019). Soon, this discourse escalated to a complete denial of party politics and “coalitional presidentialism” was itself depicted as a synonym for corruption by Bolsonaro.

The electoral viability of Bolsonaro was fostered through the identity-based framework that denies institutions and praises the direct connection between the political leader and voters, with the homogenization and mythification of the categories “elites” and “people,” identified as antagonistic (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). As a president, Bolsonaro governed in a kind of permanent polarization campaign. A conspiratorial tone has been a fundamental part of this government’s crusade against unspecified enemies that arise every day and everywhere (Kovic, Caspar, and Raucheisch 2018).

During the pandemic, the uninterrupted and radical mobilization of his most loyal voters has continued to be Bolsonaro’s standard model of governance. However, as the pandemic advanced and as the disease began to affect more and more Brazilians, many voters began to withdraw their support for Bolsonaro. His core constituency of right-wing supporters then split in two, and the right/left cleavage, which was once the most relevant, gave space to a simpler division, between the ones that approve of Bolsonaro and the ones that disapprove of him (Pereira, Medeiros, and Bertholini 2020). The percentage of disapprovers of Bolsonaro began to increase as a consequence of the perception that the government was mishandling the pandemic.



**FIGURE 4.2** COVID-19 daily deaths in Brazil, percentage of disapproval of Bolsonaro, pandemic phases, and health ministers of Brazil, November 2019 to June 2021.

Source: Brasil.io and Wikipedia Opinion Polling aggregation.

The implementation of an emergency aid of approximately \$120 per person in April 2021 rather changed this pattern of disapproval increase. The level of disapproval of Bolsonaro's government went from roughly 45% to just under 30% in October 2020, reaching its lowest value since inauguration, whereas the approval rates (good plus excellent) reached 40%. Thanks to this aid, the number of Brazilians living below the extreme poverty line dropped to the lowest level in 40 years, and this initiative fueled the president's popularity (Pimentel 2020). However, this effect was not consistent over time, as the monthly cost of the emergency aid was almost twice the annual value of the Bolsa Família Program, and the government had to suspend it (Zucco and Campello 2021). The value was reduced to around \$60 per person, and, after this, in November 2020, disapproval rates experienced a new spike.

At the same time, there is still a hard-core contingent of supporters—around 25% of the population—that appear to be extremely resilient. Medeiros, Bertholini, and Pereira (2021) claim that it is a conservative identity that bonds those supporters together. The authors estimate the probability of voting for Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections and find that the more conservative the voters are, the greater the chances of them voting for his reelection. And the substantive impact of being conservative is even greater than the fear of death. In right-wing voters, having had someone close to them die of COVID-19 reduces the chance of them voting for Bolsonaro by 20%. However, being a conservative guarantees almost 90% of those respondents' support for Bolsonaro's reelection (Medeiros, Bertholini, and Pereira 2021).

The president has exploited a growing divide in Brazilian politics and managed to establish a new axis of polarization in the country—between his supporters and his critics. Bolsonaro supporters were less likely to support mask-use, social distancing, and were even more optimistic about the chances of becoming infected (Ramos et al. 2020): “supporters of the president are as likely as ever to ‘follow their leader’ and deny expert-backed scientific evidence” (Gramacho et al. 2021).

The populist approach implemented by the president seems to have been a strategy for reinforcing these conservative identity connections and thus protecting the core constituency against rival information. Identity fulfills two basic competing psychological and social needs—one of inclusion (being part of the group) and one of exclusion or differentiation (distinguishing oneself from others; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Feelings of attachment generate loyalty in the members of each group and provide feelings of security and prestige. On the other hand, individuals who do not belong to the group develop hostility and aversion to the values and beliefs of rival communities and may even see them as enemies. Intrinsic importance is given to sharing identities and reciprocal loyalties among individuals who belong to a group (in-group) and the distancing of individuals outside that group (out-group), evoking value biases in favor of their band and against the rival (Druckman and Bolsen 2011).

## Federative conflict

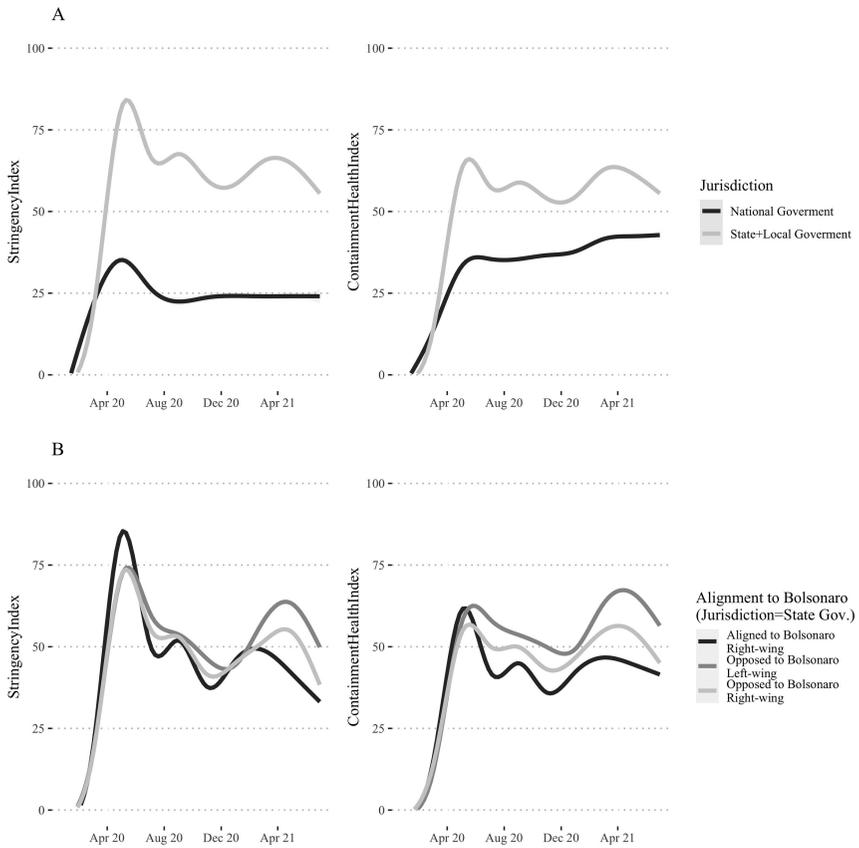
When populist leaders win elections, they attribute governance problems to the “establishment,” as if the political power conferred on the executive was not sufficient or strong enough to make the necessary changes (Hameleers, Bos, and De Vreese 2017). The problem with having populists in power is that once they become the reigning political elite, it becomes increasingly difficult to shift responsibilities for bad policy results. That is, they can no longer blame poor performance on the elites in power. However, conflicting views on how to deal with the pandemic opened up space for Bolsonaro to blame subnational elites. Thus, Bolsonaro anticipated the expected disastrous economic results and blamed state governors—who defended WHO measures—in advance. This approach fueled a sort of “federative populism” where state-level political elites are the “other,” the out-group, the enemy.

Bolsonaro saw the pandemic as an opportunity to create a distinction between himself and his political competitors (the governors, supposedly) by stimulating federative conflict and polarizing public opinion. This rationale is somewhat counterintuitive, because instead of choosing the virus itself as the “enemy of the people,” which might have allowed him to benefit from a “rally around the flag” effect, Bolsonaro chose to adopt a combination of medical populism and advocating chloroquine and federative populism with fierce rhetoric against former allies, such as João Doria from São Paulo.

Brazil is a federation composed of 26 states, the Federal District, and 5,570 municipalities. Each of these entities has a series of prerogatives and responsibilities. The institutional design proposed by the 1988 Constitution enacted a robust decentralization of public policies within the country, giving pronounced autonomy to states and municipalities. However, these entities do not have access to sufficient resources to put their autonomy into practice. This situation generated both a dependency on the part of subnational entities on policies formulated by the Central Government and the ability of the Federal Government to coordinate those policies (Arretche 2012).

Given the inaction from Federal Government, state governors tried to coordinate responses to the pandemic at the state level themselves. The measures taken by subnational governments, however, did not please the president and even became the object of a judicial review. In a session held on April 15, 2020, the Supreme Court had to uphold social distancing policies decreed by states and municipalities, which the Bolsonaro administration had tried to prevent judicially (Barberia and Gómez 2020). This decision was later instrumentalized by Bolsonaro and deliberately misinterpreted in an absurd way, to be used as an excuse for not dealing with the pandemic. The argument was that since the Supreme Court had granted subnational governments the autonomy to enact stringent policies, the Federal Government could not promote any policy at all.

Data from Hal et al. (2020) show that, in fact, local governments became the last frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic fight in Brazil. The “Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker” dataset compiles several indicators regarding Stringency and Containment. The comparison between national government measures and local government measures sheds light on how much those entities contributed to the adoption of measures (Figure 4.3A). There are also differences in the indexes between selected pro-Bolsonaro and anti-Bolsonaro state governments. States such as Santa Catarina, Rio de Janeiro, and Amazonas, governed by right-wing elites aligned with Bolsonaro, show lower values, especially for the Containment index. São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, and Pará, governed by right-wing elites opposed to Bolsonaro, perform slightly better. Finally, Piauí, Ceará, and Maranhão, with left-wing governments, show the highest values (Figure 4.3B).



**FIGURE 4.3** Stringency Index and Containment Index, comparison between national government measures, state government measures, and local government measures.

Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT 2021).

## A permanent crisis

As with most populists, controversy and crisis promotion are at the core of Bolsonaro's political strategies (Borges and Rennó 2021; Pappas, 2019). The Brazilian president engaged in a typical populist "crisis performance," fitting in each of the six aspects Moffitt (2015) enumerates to characterize such:

- 1 First, he identified a failure, perceiving there was dissatisfaction with parties and political elites among substantial segments of the Brazilian society.
- 2 Second, he elevated the level of crisis by linking into a broader framework and adding a temporal dimension, connecting the corruption scandals of the *Mensalão* and *Petrolão* and the worst economic recession in Brazilian history to an anti-party (and anti-PT) sentiment.
- 3 Third, he framed it as "the people" versus those responsible for the crisis and was able to mobilize the fight against corruption campaigns in his favor while managing to present himself as a savior.
- 4 Fourth, he used media to propagate performance—not traditional mass media, but rather YouTube channels, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram—creating a misinformation network (Ricard and Medeiros 2020).
- 5 Fifth, he always presents strong leadership and simple solutions, such as the chloroquine solution.
- 6 Sixth, he permanently propagates crisis.

This last aspect of populist "crisis performance" is worth mentioning in greater detail, since Bolsonaro has the ability to propagate crisis on a daily basis. He is now yet again mimicking Trump and questioning the fairness of the elections that he (Bolsonaro) won, so as to plant the seed of doubt in case of future need, showing signs that he will not concede if he loses in 2022.

The Bolsonaro administration was capable of politicizing even the COVID-19 vaccines. The Butantan Institute—a public institution affiliated with the São Paulo State Secretariat of Health whose governor is João Doria—worked to produce a viable vaccine in a partnership with the Chinese Sinopharm. The president declared that he was "not going to buy João Doria's Chinese vaccine" (BBC 2020b). Undoubtedly, the Bolsonaro government has engaged in a permanent polarization campaign.

Gramacho and Turgeon (2021) demonstrate that although vaccination acceptance is generally high in Brazil, Brazilians are less likely to get vaccinated when the vaccine's country of origin is mentioned, and that the rejection of the vaccine developed together with the Chinese is particularly strong among those who have a positive assessment of Bolsonaro. Although Brazil has had one of the most well-regarded immunization programs in the world since the 1970s, COVID-19 vaccination was delayed and slow-paced. Amid political struggles and disorganized planning, by July 2021, seven months after the beginning of the COVID-19

vaccination campaign, less than 13% of the Brazilian population were completely immunized.

As the 2022 elections approach, Jair Bolsonaro is under tremendous pressure and thus politically fragile. The deadly second peak that places Brazil just after the US in total deaths has had a substantial impact on his popularity. The release of Lula—with the Supreme Court annulling the corruption conviction and restoring the political rights of the former president—has put a serious contender in Bolsonaro’s way. And Bolsonaro’s rivals (which include former allies) have proposed more than 120 impeachment processes, the largest number in Brazilian history. Finally, the parliamentary inquiry committee, launched by the Senate to investigate the government’s responsibilities in the mismanagement of the pandemic, revealed not only details of the chloroquine/herd immunity government strategy but also found evidence of corruption in vaccine negotiation.

“We are all going to die one day,” Bolsonaro said once, when responding to a question about what the government could do to prevent preventable deaths. Brazilians are just hoping they can survive this turmoil.

## Note

- 1 It is worth mentioning that during his speech on the roll call voting of the impeachment process of Dilma Roussef, in 2016, Bolsonaro called upon the man that allegedly tortured Dilma Roussef during the military dictatorship, Brilhante Ustra, praising him as “the terror of Dilma Roussef.”

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# 5

## ARGENTINA

### Peronism and Inclusionary Populist Adaptation to the Pandemic

*Germán Lodola and Luisina Perelmiter*

In mid-December 2019, a grand Peronist coalition returned to power in Argentina after beating in the first round of a polarized presidential race a center-right and utterly anti-populist alliance led by Mauricio Macri, who was seeking reelection. In an unexpected move, the candidacy of the newly elected President Alberto Fernández—a mainstream party leader with no personal electoral base, who served as cabinet chief during the left-populist Peronist presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015)—was decided by the still very popular but also highly polarizing former president. Cristina Fernández relinquished the presidential position and decided to run as vice president, thus bringing together a mosaic of Peronist factions that had been fragmented in their opposition to Macri’s market-oriented policies into a powerful electoral vehicle, the Front of All (*Frente de Todos*).

Within the complex political space of Argentine Peronism and in a hyperpolarized context, Alberto Fernández was about as un-populist as one could find. His candidacy was a deliberate sign of moderation for the party and the electorate; it was an attempt to temper deep rivalries and then make Peronism a unified viable project. However, as moderate as he is, Fernández still had to navigate the storm at the head of a political party regarded as synonymous with Latin American populism, and he had to do so in alliance with the party’s key populist leader (and vice president) and the manifestly populist current that she leads.

Only four months after the government came to power, while it was initiating the renegotiation of the country’s sovereign debt and the annual inflation rate peaked at 54%, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a pandemic. Despite its populist credentials, the government’s approach to managing the crisis contradicts the textbook model that recent versions of right-wing (exclusionary) populism like Trump in the US and Bolsonaro

in Brazil mobilized. Critically, unlike them, Fernández promptly took on board health recommendations, adopted stringent measures, including compulsory nationwide lockdowns, condemned negationist practices and—claiming to represent “the Argentines” as a whole—established a science-driven and heroic discourse that convoked “the people” to fight against a common threat following experts’ advice. Although the lockdown measures had demobilizing effects, the government made explicit efforts to mobilize political, scientific, material and human resources to craft a unifying, national response. It was actually a liberal, more technocratic and pro-market fraction of the opposition which—supported by the media—deployed a radicalized discourse infused with anti-populist scapegoating characterizing the government as authoritarian and a rhetoric that questioned expert knowledge, dichotomized options into “health versus the economy,” fueled social discontent by encouraging demonstrations against lockdowns and expressed doubts about the vaccines’ effectiveness and safety.

The results of the government’s management of the crisis were mixed. In July 2020, within months of the onset of the pandemic, Argentina was in the middle of global rankings for the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, well below the Americas’ average and close to the global average (Our World in Data 2020, 2021). A year later, the country had moved up in both rankings. With around 0.5% of the global population, Argentina accounted for nearly 2.4% of cases and declared fatalities, more than four times the global average. Performance in terms of vaccination—and excess mortality—is notably better. With almost 58% of the population having received at least one dose, Argentina ranks at the forefront of the pandemic response in this respect.

This chapter examines how the Fernández administration followed a markedly different approach to the crisis from that of other well-known populist governments. However, we claim that the Argentine government’s response to the pandemic was still populist, but of a very different sort, rooted in the political logic and ideational framing of left-wing (inclusionary) populism.

The chapter first describes the nature of the Peronist governing coalition, then discusses the attributes of an inclusionary populist model adapted to the pandemic. Finally, it describes the policies and rhetoric deployed by the Fernández government in reaction to COVID-19 and its consequences.

## The grand Peronist coalition

Only four years after having been defeated by a right-of-center and deeply anti-populist coalition, Peronism returned to power in a country where politics has for decades been played out in a bipolar Peronist–anti-Peronist divide. President Alberto Fernández was the singular product of political polarization. In many countries, polarization gave rise to extremist and anti-political establishment competitive forces. But in Argentina, the resilient Peronist movement pragmatically adopted a more moderate stance than in the past, so as to assemble a winning coalition of left-populist organizations and insider party elites, and thus

make Fernández's own maxim a reality: "With Cristina, it is not [yet] enough and without her, it is impossible" (Página 12 2018).

Repeating a historical pattern, Peronism returned in a coalitional format, a federal magma of well-established factions in which four identifiable groups coexist (Longa and Vázquez 2020; Murillo and Zarazaga 2020). First, the left-populist *kirchnerista* camp, by far the dominant faction, includes territorially rooted social movements, dissident unions and *La Cámpora*, a powerful and combative youth wing led by the Kirchners' son. Second, a diverse group of conservative factions which includes labor unions and governors from local Peronist expressions and allied provincial parties. Third, there are a number of non-*kirchnerista* Peronist mayors from Buenos Aires province, who backed some Kirchners' challengers in the past. And fourth, there is a right-leaning faction led by the most important of those challengers, Sergio Massa, who returned to the fold to become president of the Chamber of Deputies.

This scheme of power in which authority is dispersed among partisan leaders with capacity for autonomous expression differs radically from populisms of Latin America's left turn in the 2000s, like the Kirchners, which concentrated power in the hands of a dominant personality (Levitsky and Roberts 2011). As a Pan-Peronist coalition, the Fernández government provided incentives for moderation, both in its discourse and policies. However, at the same time, its origins and identity were intrinsically linked to the majoritarian populist faction, which, rallied around Cristina Fernández's undisputable leadership, remained the core coalitional member, while the other factions—including that led by Alberto Fernández—were unable to expand politically. This particular fusion of moderate party elites and dominant populist organizations made the Argentine government's management of the pandemic an adapted version of the left-wing (inclusionary) populist script.

## The inclusionary populist model

Compared to other experiences in the continent, the case of Argentina during the pandemic deviates from the common populist libretto and in many respects is its reversed image. Nonetheless, we argue that the Peronist government mediated and "performed" its approach to dealing with the disease and that this "performance of crisis" (Moffitt 2015) carried the roots of Latin American left-wing (inclusionary) populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), which is statist, mobilizational and redistributive. Thus, the Argentine government's response entailed both a cultural and a political economy dimension of populism.

First, the Fernández administration assigned a decisive role to state action rather than personalistic leadership. In an unprecedented move, Peronism in power did not mobilize its supporters—"the people"—against a common threat. It actually demobilized them by taking some of the strictest measures in the democratic world to contain the disease and crafting public slogans such as "stay home" (*quedate en casa*). However, at the same time, the government harnessed the

power of the state apparatus to mobilize resources nationwide so as to strengthen the debilitated public health system, provide incentives to the local scientific community and promote mass vaccination. Second, it fed a heroic discourse, presenting a picture of an epic of confinement that sought to give sense to Argentines' collective suffering and illuminating the light at the end of the tunnel. The rhetoric employed was strategically pedagogical and science-driven rather than belligerent and negationist, at odds with the message of radicalized populists. Third and finally, this approach was coupled with a generous social policy package for low-income workers and those in the informal sector, a systemic electoral base of support for Peronism. These compensatory policies, which required a significant level of public spending, were adopted in an inherited environment of mounting inflation, economic stagnation and tremendous fiscal challenges that precluded macro-level populist redistribution.

## The response

The Argentine government reacted swiftly and decisively to the health crisis by adopting strict measures. The images of death in the boreal winter, the increasing global consensus that the virus represented a real threat (as confirmed by the WHO on March 10) and the certainty of community transmission in the country led Fernández on March 20 to decree a comprehensive and compulsory nationwide lockdown despite the fact that Argentina, a nation of 40 million people, had registered only 8,371 cases and three deaths (WHO 2020). The quarantine decree, named Compulsory and Preventive Social Isolation (ASPO), severely restricted circulation, canceled nonessential activities (i.e., all but healthcare-related, food shopping and delivery services) and prohibited people from leaving their homes except for emergencies and to buy provisions. Moreover, the government closed the borders, schools and universities, public spaces and most businesses. The WHO standard recommendations regarding social distancing and mask-wearing were strictly adhered to. Other recommendations, including extensive testing, isolation of those who had contracted the disease, contact tracing, quarantining of contacts and the role of asymptomatic transmission, were not fully understood by the authorities and thus more leniently adopted (Feierstein 2021). This may be a factor that potentially accounts for similar end results for Argentina and other countries which followed less restrictive policies.

The government's resolute action had the support of provincial governors and mayors. Unlike his federal colleagues in Brazil, Mexico and the US, Fernández neither abdicated responsibility for managing the COVID-19 crisis, delegating it to subnational and local executives, nor did he promote conflictual relations with them. Rather, he led efforts to impose a negotiated set of uniform responses nationwide (Giraudy, Niedzwiecki, and Pribble 2020). In a sign of federal coordination and political moderation, the first mandatory quarantine period was announced in a televised speech which featured the president accompanied by governors from the main opposition parties, the Kirchnerism and the so-called

Federal Peronism, that is, provincial non-*kirchnerista* Peronist forces. Later, continuing to promote the image of a consensual leadership, a “quarantine triumvirate” composed of Fernández, the *kirchnerista* governor of Buenos Aires province, Axel Kicillof, and his counterpart from City of Buenos Aires and leader of the opposition, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, used further televised broadcasts to announce the successive extensions of lockdown policies. As time passed, the national administration maintained an interventionist agenda but introduced a geographically “segmentation” of federal coordination (Goyburu 2020), gradually conferring to governors—first in the peripheral provinces and later in the metropolitan area—increasing autonomy to implement national restrictions and authorize the resumption of activities according to their different epidemiologic realities.

Although the opposition grouped together under the Together for Change (*Juntos por el Cambio* [JC]) coalition, which in 2015 for the first time allowed conservative and economic elites to win the presidency by democratic means (Murillo and Levitsky 2019), agreed that the country was facing an epidemiological crisis, it was divided over how to interpret events. The fear that the healthcare system could suddenly collapse moderated the increasing anti-lockdown posture of Rodríguez Larreta’s center-right faction. In contrast, the national leadership of JC and right-wing sectors led by Macri radicalized their attitudes and developed a negationist stance. With the support of an active group of journalists and media institutions, particularly *La Nación* and *Grupo Clarín*—with whom the Kirchners had experienced a radical confrontation, including a congressional law that limited the expansion of media conglomerates (Lodola and Kitzberger 2017)—the more conservative sectors organized a series of public demonstrations, promoted pot-banging in major cities and escalated an ideational dispute with the government. Using a conspiratorial and republican discourse, they interpreted regulations limiting mobility as being an erosion of economic and civil rights, a dangerous move toward communism, a sure path to becoming “Argenzuela” (in reference to Maduro’s autocratic regime). They accused the Fernández administration of leading an “infecto-dictatorship” (*infectadura*), a sort of autocracy led by epidemiologists, and exercising “sanitary terrorism” (La Nación 2020). Later on, in December 2020 when the government signed an agreement with Russia regarding the provision of the SPUTNIK V vaccine, the fiery JC national leader, Elisa Carrió, filed legal charges against the president and his Minister of Health, Ginés González García, accusing them of poisoning Argentines.

Contrary to other populist leaders who cultivated a confrontational and anti-scientific discourse, Fernández developed a science-driven communication style based on international medical recommendations and expert knowledge provided by a nonpartisan presidential committee of epidemiologists and infectiologists (Fernández Escudero 2020). As long as the strategy to contain the disease was successful, the president exploited his university professor image (he does, in fact, teach law at the university) in regular televised announcements (Cané 2021). It was common to see Fernández showing data and slide presentations in which

he compared the effects of Argentina's policies with those of other countries, and discussed forthcoming measures so as the population could be more prepared. At a certain point, these televised announcements became more sporadic and were eventually abandoned.

However, it was not only the pandemic that made the government adopt a science-driven approach. The emergency reinforced a legacy of major expansion in funding for public education and scientific research experienced under the Kirchners' administrations. It also brought to the forefront solid links established during the 2019 presidential campaign between the Front of All and the local scientific community, particularly from the realm of social sciences, which gathered to oppose Macri's adjustment policies and his openly manifested disdain for public education and national scientific institutions. Indeed, some of the government's highest officials and many other civil servants were recruited from the ranks of Argentine public academia.

Perhaps not anticipating the roughness of the days ahead, on March 1, 2020, during his speech to the opening of the 138th session of Congress, Fernández stressed this attribute as a distinctive feature of his administration and as the counterbalance to Macri's elitist government, stating (*emphasis added*):

We need to strengthen our scientific and technology system. We began by expanding the income of national researchers and increasing the number of scholarships for our young people. We are going to reverse the trend of budgetary decline observed in recent years. I am proud to have incorporated numerous Argentine scientists into the government. *We are a government with scientists, not with CEOs.* A government with the conviction that knowledge is key for public policies and development.

(Fernández 2020)

The strict shutdown policies gave rise to a discourse with heroic components, an "epic of confinement." However, this rhetoric, which may have been effective in generating the support of public opinion, at least initially, cannot be considered populist as it was not designed to divide the society, but rather to demobilize it, with explicit appeals to stay home. Indeed, more than fostering populist mobilization, in Argentina the COVID-19 pandemic operated as a "natural" limitation to it.

Demobilization had an effect on the political dynamics of the governing coalition, as social movements of informal workers and unemployed people—and, to a lesser extent, the labor unions—were severely restricted in their repertoires of contention and consequently in their capacity to help the government obtain credit for its policies and decisions. Emilio Pérsico, leader of the Evita Movement, one of the most powerful territorial organizations within the *kirchnerista* camp, highlighted the demobilizing impact of the pandemic, affirming:

We need to get out into the street...without the street it is difficult for us to mobilize...If we need to, we can mobilize 200,000 people in seconds, we

fill the highway with *negros*. If Vicentín [a bankrupt agro-export giant the government mentioned could be nationalized] were to happen today, there would be a million people supporting the expropriation...We are missing an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate our power in the street...but we cannot find a way around the pandemic.

*(Abal Medina and Santucho 2020)*

The health crisis also affected mobilization “in” the state, that is, the state apparatus’ working routines and the bureaucratic styles typical of socially rooted party organizations like Peronism, which require territorial presence and physical proximity (Perelmiter 2016). The closure of public welfare offices limited an everyday resource mobilization which consists in physically—and culturally—connecting the state with “the people.” This limitation was partially counterbalanced by the decisive action of territorial social movements, which gained influence over the implementation of social and health policies in poor neighborhoods (Vommaro 2019; Abers, Rossi, and von Bülow 2021). Moreover, new bureaucratic routines to counterbalance the breakdown of state normality were adopted, for example, enabling virtual contact with social beneficiaries (Arcidiácono and Perelmiter 2021).

At the same time, the government found state intervention to be an adequate tool for providing a populist response to the demobilizing effect of the pandemic. By exploiting state power, it mobilized sanitary and human resources across the territory. In this way, the government crafted an alliance with representatives of the local scientific network and the Argentine pharmaceutical industry, the biggest investor in research and development (R&D) of the country’s economy and a regional export leader with the technological capacity to produce COVID-19 vaccines. Moreover, resorting to state action was an obvious shortcut to polarize with Macri, who had drastically cut healthcare spending during his mandate and eroded the public system by dismantling the Ministry of Health, a symbol of social welfare, and downgrading it to a secretariat.

First, the national administration strengthened the debilitated and asymmetric public health system. It increased the number of intensive care units, centralized the purchase and delivery of ventilators for the provinces, built a dozen modular hospitals for the care and isolation of non-severe cases in universities, sport clubs and cultural centers, extended the network of COVID-19 diagnostics and assigned more than 1,000 itinerant health workers to subnational and local jurisdictions.

Second, the government relied heavily on the national scientific system. It created the interministerial Coronavirus COVID-19 Unit (which centralized projects, infrastructure and equipment required to carry out diagnostics and research), financed the development of clinical trials on treating the virus using a hyperimmune serum developed with antibodies from horses, promoted the production of a biocidal social chinstrap (known as the “CONICET chinstrap,” in reference to the national agency involved in its production) and supported the

development of six COVID-19 vaccines in national universities in cooperation with private laboratories.

Finally, more than anything, the government of Alberto Fernández aimed at implementing mass vaccination. Argentina is a country with a long tradition of vaccination, where the state finances a large number of free and compulsory vaccines. Furthermore, anti-vaxxers still constitute a small and silent minority. As in most Latin American countries, the success of the government's vaccination program was and continues to be associated with the conditions of the production and commercialization of vaccines worldwide (Luna 2021). There are dozens of vaccine projects in the region, but only the Cuban Sovereign 01 has reached the clinical trial stage so far. For this reason, Argentina played all its cards. It riskily signed an agreement with Russia on the SPUTNIK V vaccine, although it has been rejected by parts of the scientific community, participated with Mexico in the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine through the mAbxience laboratory and took part in clinical trials for the Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson and Sinopharm vaccines (Luna 2021).

The vaccination process experienced a series of ups and downs, including missteps associated with vaccines that did not arrive on time, and a political scandal linked to some known people jumping the queue for vaccinations, which led to the early resignation of González García and damaged the government's public image (Goldman and Picco 2021). All in all, the Fernández administration managed to launch a comprehensive health strategy that privileged the application of the first dose. As of July 2021, 40% of Argentines have received one dose of the vaccine, but only 18% have had both doses (Our World in Data 2021).

As occurred on the health front, the government also mobilized resources to support the implementation of social and labor policies to compensate its core constituents. These policies were rapidly implemented, comprehensive in scope and implied a significant budgetary effort given critical economic constraints (Etchemendy, Espinosa, and Pastrana 2021). As a result of Macri's largest International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in history—worth US\$57 billion—and consequent austerity measures, Argentina had fallen into a recession that had made it the worst performer in Latin America aside from Nicaragua and Venezuela (ECLAC 2019).

With regard to formal workers, as soon as the first lockdown was declared, the government announced the temporary extension of unemployment insurance, issued a decree to prohibit layoffs and unilateral work time reductions and set up the Assistance to Work and Production program (*Asistencia al Trabajo y la Producción* [ATP]), which included subsidies that amounted the equivalent of double the minimum wage. The ATP was often combined with furlough schemes organized jointly with business associations and unions that together covered 75% of the gross wage in critical sectors. The government also reduced employers' payroll contributions and granted 0% interest loans for self-employed workers.

Moreover, the Fernández administration extended existing programs and enacted new measures to protect informal workers. It announced extra payments

to those covered by noncontributory social protection programs, including conditional cash transfer program for children and adolescents, income support for the disabled and noncontributory pensions. Second, it established the Emergency Family Income (*Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia* [IFE]) for those in the existing non-contributory programs, the unemployed, the self-employed in lower-income categories and domestic workers. Both programs combined were estimated to have 10 million recipients. The International Labor Organization placed Argentina among the top 12 countries in the world in terms of job and income protection in its response to the pandemic (International Trade Union Confederation 2020).

## Conclusion

The case of Argentina deviates from the populist scrip written by rightist, exclusionary leaders; indeed, in many respects, it constitutes the polar opposite. Although the Fernández government's management of the crisis was also manifestly populist, it was of a quite different nature, anchored in the logic and beliefs of Latin American left-wing inclusionary populism. In the context of the health emergency, the government, a broad-based Peronist alliance of moderate party elites and a dominant populist organization commanded by the party's central populist leader, relied on the power of the state apparatus to harness political, material, scientific and human resources to develop a cohesive, national response with an inclusive coalition. Rather than trying to polarize and divide the society, the adapted inclusionary Peronism offered "the Argentines" a heroic collective reason to combat an external threat. As conceived, Argentina's case shows that there is not a single populist guide but a menu of populist templates, which express different—and sometimes opposite—ideological principles.

One as yet unsolved puzzle about Argentina should motivate future research, namely the fact that despite the aggressive measures and rather technocratic approach taken to contain the disease, the end result was a tragedy of substantial proportions.

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# 6

## THE UNITED KINGDOM

### The Pandemic and the Tale of Two Populist Parties

*Tim Bale*

The UK was hit relatively early and relatively hard by COVID-19. Its first cases were identified at the end of January 2020, and by the end of February, the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) was predicting hundreds of thousands of deaths unless politicians took action. It was not until the end of March however that a national lockdown – a full-blown, legally enforceable “stay at home” order and the closure of all but essential shops, venues and services – was announced. As a result, by the end of April 2020, the first wave (winter 2020 to late spring/early summer 2020) had claimed nearly 30,000 lives, rising to nearly 40,000 by mid-June, in spite of which the government – concerned about the financial cost of the support it was providing to individuals and businesses as well as the damage being done to the economy – had begun to ease restrictions. By mid-July, the prime minister was holding out the prospect of a “significant return to normality by Christmas.”

By mid-September, however, it was clear to most experts not only that this was unlikely but that a second lockdown – even if only a relatively brief “circuit-breaker” – was going to be needed, and needed soon. Yet, once again, the government refused to act, opting instead for tiered restrictions based on case levels in particular regions of the country. At the end of October, however, as it became clear that a second wave (autumn 2020 to late winter/early spring 2021) might overwhelm the country's National Health Service (NHS) and just two weeks after suggesting that it would be “the height of absurdity,” the prime minister announced a month-long national lockdown in order, he claimed, to “save Christmas.” At the end of November, in spite of a death toll that stood at around 60,000 and rising, and with a new strain of COVID (the so-called Kent variant) being detected, the prime minister claimed there was “every reason” to believe “the worst is nearly behind us” and continued to insist that restrictions

on household mixing could be relaxed over the festive season. He then went on to criticize skeptical opposition parties for supposedly wanting to “cancel Christmas” before having to admit that the hoped-for relaxations could not take place since it was obvious that the country was now firmly in the grip of a second wave. As a result, come the first week of January, the government announced another severe lockdown, banning nonessential travel, gatherings and household mixing and closed universities and schools for all except “vulnerable” children and the children of “key workers.”

In late February 2021, buoyed by the impressive progress of the NHS’s vaccine rollout program, the government published a four-stage “roadmap” by which restrictions would be lifted, culminating in the lifting of all of them by 21 June, although the prime minister promised to be driven “by data not dates.” That deadline was missed by a month: with restrictions (but not recommendations on mask-wearing, social gatherings, etc.) finally lifted on 19 July 2021. By then the UK’s COVID-19 death toll stood at 128,000 – easily one of the highest per capita totals in the world.

So far, so simple – if depressing. But analyzing the response of the country’s populist politicians is a little more tricky, primarily because the UK arguably boasts two populist parties that are worth talking about. One, Reform UK may now be very much on the fringes of politics, but it has its origins in two populist radical right outfits – the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Brexit Party, both led by Nigel Farage – which had on occasion enjoyed significant electoral success over the last decade or two. The other, led throughout the worst of the pandemic by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, is the governing Conservative Party – very much in the mainstream of British politics, having been around for over 200 years, during which time it has often flirted with populism, especially when it comes to immigration, without (until recently, perhaps) ever quite going “the whole nine yards” (Bale 2013). While this complicates matters, it also makes the UK an unusually interesting case study, particularly in terms of the impact of being in power rather than out of it and therefore facing a potential trade-off between “responsibility” and “responsiveness” (Mair 2009).

### **The Conservatives: occasional/*ersatz* populists in power**

Having won a comfortable overall majority at the 2019 general election on the back of a promise to “Get Brexit done,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson expected to spend 2020 celebrating the UK’s withdrawal from, as well as negotiating a trade deal with, the EU. Instead, he was hit broadside by COVID-19. Initially (though not altogether surprisingly, given his penchant for posing as a politically-incorrect libertarian), Johnson seemed not to take the threat as seriously as he might have done. Notoriously, he failed to attend a number of crucial meetings on the government’s response in late January and early February and then, in early March, boasted that he had visited a hospital and made a point of shaking

hands – this on the very day that SAGE had expressly warned against the practice. Johnson’s comeuppance was to fall victim to the virus himself in early April, necessitating a spell in intensive care before thankfully making a full recovery.

By then, however, Johnson had moved away from what the government (not particularly convincingly, it must be said) had always denied was initially a “herd immunity” strategy (see Walker 2021). And although the adequacy of its provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and “test, trace and isolate” was severely criticized, it remains true that the government largely followed the conventional public health measures implemented by its European counterparts – at least, that is, until the summer of 2020. At that point, it is increasingly desperate desire to reopen an economy on life support from the taxpayer arguably trumped its hitherto appropriately cautious public health approach, with the *Eat Out to Help Out* scheme (designed to boost the hospitality sector), encouragement (largely ignored it must be said) to return to offices and the promotion of out-bound and inbound tourism coming in for particular criticism.

Hitherto, Johnson had made a virtue of “following the science” and ensuring that he and other ministers taking daily press conferences were flanked by experts – in particular the government’s Chief Medical Officer and its Chief Scientific Advisor. But from August on, it became increasingly obvious that he and some of his colleagues (most obviously his finance minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, and what eventually became the self-styled “COVID Recovery Group” of more libertarian, free market Conservative MPs) were beginning to chafe at the continuing restrictions which following the science implied. The first clear breach came in late September 2020 when the prime minister initially went against his scientific advisors’ recommendation of a lockdown, only to have to concede one shortly afterwards – a decision which prompted him, it later transpired, to declare to colleagues that there should be “no more fucking lockdowns – let the bodies pile high in their thousands” (Walters 2021).

Given this, we should not be entirely surprised that Johnson then prompted considerable concern in the scientific community by insisting that he would not listen to the supposedly killjoy leader of the opposition Labour Party and “cancel Christmas” – only to be forced into doing so when it became obvious the UK was by then in the grip of a serious resurgence of the virus. And even then, a full lockdown was delayed until after the New Year. Johnson and the Conservatives then spent most of early 2021 emphasizing their plans for an easing of restrictions in the late spring/early summer as well as doing all they could to associate themselves with the NHS vaccine rollout, not least because it could contrast the latter so sharply with the situation in some member states of the EU, the UK’s withdrawal from which (with a trade deal signed in December 2020 as the pandemic raged) was, of course, the government’s signature achievement. Even that, however, did not allow it to entirely escape criticism for delaying the closure of the country’s borders to flights bringing in passengers from India, thereby contributing to the seeding and spreading in the UK of the “Delta variant” which forced Johnson into reluctantly delaying the lifting of virtually all restrictions. Once they were

lifted in mid-July 2021, albeit with the government recommending caution and its ministers arguing among themselves – often semi-publicly – about how far to effectively throw that caution to the winds. Johnson (as had apparently been the case right from the start) tended, temperamentally at least, to side with those keenest on the latter course. However, he was constrained, first by not wanting to be seen to stray too far from his scientific advisors and second by public opinion, which – in marked contrast to the country’s overwhelmingly right-wing print media that had consistently raged against restrictions – had never been anywhere near as keen on lifting them as many Conservative politicians routinely claimed (see McDonnell and Smith, 2021).

### **The Brexit Party/Reform UK: “real” populists in the wilderness**

Given the extent to which the Brexit Party, which was formally renamed Reform UK in January 2021, was established not as an internally democratic organization with party members but as an essentially web-based limited company backed by a combination of private capital and donations from subscribing “supporters,” it may come as no surprise that we have to focus primarily on the pronouncements of the parties’ leaders – Nigel Farage in the first instance and, from early March 2021, Farage’s long-term collaborator, the businessman Richard Tice. Doing so reveals a gradual shift from a broadly cautious stance at the beginning of the pandemic toward skepticism and even outright opposition to public health restrictions as it progressed. This evolution was not entirely unpredictable since Farage’s form of populism had always emphasized, alongside its support for draconian measures on “law and order” and “Britain’s borders,” its essentially libertarian opposition to “political correctness gone mad” as well as “red tape” and the “faceless bureaucrats” who supposedly insist on tying the rest of us (and particularly small businesses) up in knots.

Many of Farage’s positions on the pandemic were established on what was for a while his daily talk-radio show on LBC and in the welcoming pages of the right-wing, fanatically pro-Brexit and anti-immigration *Express* newspaper. His main focus in the very early stages was on the government’s failure to ban foreigners coming into the country by plane, presumably bringing COVID with them (Anderson 2020). Farage, who liked to think of himself as a bosom buddy of Donald Trump, also criticized China for suppressing “the truth about the nascent epidemic even among its own people, clamping down on whistle-blowers delaying a global response by month[s], at the cost of thousands upon thousands of lives worldwide.” And in more characteristically populist fashion, he went on to focus on the reticence to criticize its behavior in the West, declaring that “many members of our big business class, of the civil service, and indeed of our political class are increasingly in the pay of China. They ought to take their noses out of the trough and have a think” (Farage 2020a).

When the UK government eventually instituted a lockdown at the end of March, Farage professed himself glad to see the government move away from what he (along with many mainstream observers) claimed was its herd immunity strategy. But he was soon asking (in an op-ed published, tellingly, in the pages of the Conservative Party's "house journal," the *Telegraph* newspaper) whether "the Government and police" were "trying to prevent the spread of coronavirus or put the nation under house arrest?" It was, he argued, "madness. It is un-British and the public will turn against the authorities if this trend continues" (Farage 2020b). His next intervention, however, was a rather more conventional attack on the incompetence behind the government's ongoing failure to provide health workers with sufficient testing capacity and PPE – an attack that points to the fact that unlike some of his counterparts in other countries, he did not reject the panoply of conventional measures against the virus, arguing early on for instance that "if the wearing of masks means we can start to open up...businesses...then I think it will be a price worth paying" (O'Callaghan 2020). In so doing, however, he was also beginning to reject the idea that the virus could be largely suppressed in favor of enhanced protection that would allow the government to open up the economy.

Farage could not, of course, resist playing what had long been his trump card – immigration. Indeed, so concerned was he that he decided to go to the South East coast to file video reports on the issue, a trip that, ironically, earned him a visit from the police over breaking lockdown restrictions. It is not clear whether they spoke to him again when, a couple of months later in early July, he was reported to them after posting a picture of himself going to a pub (one of the ways he has always chosen to suggest that, however privileged his background, he is just like the rest of us), notwithstanding the fact that he was meant still to be self-isolating having recently returned from a Trump rally in the US. We do know, however, that the police had a word with the prime minister's chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, when it was revealed that he had broken the rules at the end of March 2020 by fleeing London with his family even as he was suffering from COVID-19. Yet, rather than mount a quintessentially populist "one rule for us, one rule for them" attack on Johnson and chums, Farage chose to give his fellow, equally zealous Brexiteer the benefit of the doubt (Adedokun 2020).

By the autumn, Farage and his sidekick Tice had traveled further in a libertarian direction. In the course of informing supporters that the Brexit Party would be relaunching as Reform UK (Farage and Tice 2020), they expressed support for the "Great Barrington Declaration" penned by a group of anti-consensus, anti-lockdown scientists sponsored by a free market, climate change skeptic American think tank. That the UK was then hit by an even more deadly second wave of COVID-19 over the winter of 2020/2021, however, seems – along with good news on the vaccine front – to have dampened Farage's enthusiasm for this fundamentally alternative approach, encouraging him instead to argue that the relative success of the NHS vaccine rollout provided "a brilliant justification of our country's decision in 2016 to quit" the "nasty, vindictive and nationalistic EU" (Farage 2021).

By that time, however, Farage had handed over the reins of Reform UK to Tice. The latter (more so than Farage at that point) had been making a name for himself as something of a lockdown skeptic since the summer of 2020, calling, for example, for the government to lead by example by obliging civil servants to get back to the office and claiming, “the majority of people, including myself, now feel that we can work out what represents a risk to other and will apply our own judgment. That is what you do in a free and democratic society” (Nanan-Sen 2020). By November, Tice was even suggesting that more people were dying as a consequence of lockdown measures than of COVID-19 itself, accusing health ministers of covering up supposedly “soaring suicide rates” (Di Santolo 2020). And not long after he took over the leadership of Reform UK in early March, he upped the ante by calling on the government to initiate the public inquiry it had vaguely promised, arguing that unless it did so, “the year of Lockdown, the destruction of our economy, the trashing of civil liberties and the impact on the health, both physical and mental, of our population will be held in contempt” (Tice 2021a).

From the spring of 2021 onwards, Tice’s interjections increasingly reflected his frustration with government policy across the board – nicely encapsulated by a tweet of his (Tice 2021b) in early April:

CRY FreeDOOM...vaccine rollout huge success yet more restrictions than ever: masks in class, vaccine passports, twice weekly mass testing, no overseas travel, no summer hols abroad, social distancing for years, Govt want to vaccinate children, protests banned....democracy?

With Farage gone, however, and the failure of Reform UK to make any impression at all in the large round of local elections in May (despite a “patriotic alliance” with an anti-lockdown, “anti-woke” fringe party, *Reclaim*, formed by the actor Lawrence Fox), media interest in what its leader had to say went from mild to, at best, occasional.

## Making sense of the responses

The Conservative government’s handling of the pandemic can hardly be described as ideal. Johnson downplayed it in the New Year of 2020, failed to act as quickly as he should have done in the early spring, opened up the economy too rapidly in the summer and then, as autumn turned into winter, conspicuously failed to learn the lessons of his earlier mistakes – with calamitous consequences for the hundreds of thousands who died or were left permanently scarred by catching a virus that spread to far more people than could or should have been the case.

There may be, then, a *prima facie* case that a government provided by a party that has often in the past flirted with populism and is run by a famously populist prime minister failed – at least at all times – to act responsibly. Yet it would be

hard to make a convincing argument that this was as a consequence of it responding, in true populist fashion, to what “the people” wanted – unless the only “people” it was responding to were a select group of its own MPs and their cheerleaders in the media. And even though those actors were clearly able – partly because, in the prime minister’s case (and that of his finance minister, the chancellor), they were pushing at something of an open door – to influence policy in a less restrictive direction, there is absolutely no sense whatsoever in which either they or the government were paying any attention to what the populist radical right party on their flank was saying or doing. Put bluntly, the Conservatives acted as they did because that is what they chose to do, not because they were worried about the resurgence of an insurgency that they had, to all intents and purposes, squeezed the life out of by electing Johnson as their leader and “getting Brexit done” at the end of 2019. Nor – unlike the response of the leaders of the Brexit Party/Reform – was their response marked by nativism. Authoritarianism played no part in either. Indeed, the government spent most of its time trying – arguably at great cost in terms of lives lost – to (time) limit restrictions and ignoring calls (until very late on in the pandemic) to close Britain’s borders.

If anything, one could argue that the COVID-19 crisis marked something of a retreat from the populism which both the Conservative Party and its leader had flirted with (and now and then did more than flirt with) in the wake of the 2016 EU Referendum. Certainly, there were no more claims from Conservative ministers as there were in that campaign that “this country has had enough of experts.” Nor – until the row with the EU and some of its member states over vaccines in early 2021 (and even then, any crowing was for the most part “off the record”) – was there any trash talk about other countries. Boris Johnson may once have been a favorite of Donald Trump, but the responses of their respective administrations to the pandemic were, in fact, markedly different.

True, there may have been an element of what one might term “man-of-the-people” and “anti-nanny-state” populism driving Johnson’s evident dislike of lockdowns. But, both for him and for some of his ministers, it was arguably motivated mainly by concerns about what restrictions meant for the economy and the huge increase in government spending and borrowing they entailed. It was, after all, apparently the Chancellor of the Exchequer who, worrying about the economic and fiscal impact of the immediate circuit breaker that SAGE was calling for in late September, encouraged Johnson to invite Great Barrington Declaration signatory Sunetra Gupta, lockdown skeptical medic Carl Heneghan and the apparent architect of Sweden’s relatively unimpressive pandemic response, Anders Tegnell, to a now-notorious Zoom meeting to give the other side of the argument. Concerns about the impact on the economy (and presumably their largely advertiser-driven business model) also meant that Johnson was subjected to fairly unremitting pressure not to lockdown (and then to ease restrictions) by ‘the party in the media’ – the proprietors, editors and columnists who have always exerted significant (and some would say undue) influence on Conservative politicians (Bale 2016).

Those concerns were also reflected by over 50 Conservative MPs, who in the second week of November 2020 finally organized themselves into the COVID Recovery Group coordinated (largely on WhatsApp) by arch Euroskeptic and civil libertarian, Steve Baker, and the party's former Chief Whip, Mark Harper, both of whom had for months been publicly criticizing (not least in the *Telegraph* and on the influential website *ConservativeHome*) what they saw as the government's cautious and draconian approach (Harper 2020). They continued making the argument to the government well into 2021, going so far as to vote against the renewal of restrictions in parliament on several occasions (PA 2021).

But while all this undoubtedly made life uncomfortable for Johnson, not least because he had considerable sympathy with what they were saying, it did not make life impossible. For one thing, he could rely on the country's Labour opposition to support him in any Commons vote on COVID-19 legislation; indeed, there were many occasions on which Labour called for quicker and tougher action. For another, although Johnson's more rebellious backbenchers routinely claimed to be speaking for their constituents, and although the party in the media purported to be speaking for "the country" or even "the British people," it was, as we have noted above, obvious from polling that this was far from being the case (see Ipsos 2021; YouGov 2021).

Polling also showed that once the "rally round the flag" effect (an effect possibly enhanced by sympathy for Johnson after he contracted COVID himself) began to fade, the public – for all that their views often ran along partisan lines – could be highly critical of the government's handling of the pandemic. This, and the fact that the same polling suggested a high degree of trust in medics, scientists and the NHS, undoubtedly helped (along with some of his Cabinet colleagues and close advisors) to curb the prime minister's appetite for risk. Besides, if he ever felt the needed to scratch his populist itch, the ongoing and often fraught trade negotiations with the EU provided him with plenty of scope. The same went for what soon became known as the government's deliberately polarizing "war on woke" – an attempt to drive home the wedge between Labour and the culturally conservative voters who had deserted it after 2016 by drawing attention to the supposedly excessive demands and deeds of progressives apparently so consumed by "identity politics" that they have lost sight of the liberalism and toleration that once drove them.

That same war on woke and the ongoing battle with "Brussels" frankly left very few crumbs for the country's "real populists" in the Brexit Party/Reform UK. In contrast to the Conservatives, who showed little if any enthusiasm for it, they may have tried desperately to indulge in what Moffitt (2015) calls "populist crisis performance" (linking their pronouncements to previous grievances, sowing division and polarization, proposing simplistic solutions through strong leadership and garnering popular and media attention), but they failed miserably. With the country's single-member plurality system affording them no parliamentary representation and a marginal presence in the opinion polls, they also struggled to persuade television news and current affairs programs to pay them any attention – in part

because the UK's broadcast media saw its role as reinforcing official public health messaging, in part because, like the government, it was well aware from polling that public sympathy for Reform's increasingly anti-lockdown, anti-mask position was extremely limited. The party's support for Lawrence Fox's London mayoralty bid in May 2021 probably did it few favors either: Fox won just 1.9% of the vote while Reform risked being tainted by association with a man widely seen as a joke by all save the frankly weird and whacky minority who, when they weren't linking vaccines to 5G and the like, enjoyed attending (sometimes in their thousands) anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests. Significantly, Farage and Tice appear to have shied away from endorsing or attending such protests, a decision consistent with Farage's original mission (one stretching all the way back to UKIP) of rendering the country's radical right respectable.

Reform UK, whether under Farage or Tice, could, perhaps, have chosen instead to make common cause with Conservative MPs in the Covid Recovery Group: at base, their criticism of the government, rooted as it was in libertarian (rather than particularly populist) concerns about the economy and an overmighty state, was very similar. That presupposes however that the CRG would have welcomed Reform's support. However, one of the main achievements (some would even say one of the main drivers) of Brexit was to eliminate the disruptive threat that UKIP and the Brexit Party posed on the Conservatives' right flank; dissident Conservative MPs (who, after all, enjoyed the support of the party in the media) therefore had no incentive whatsoever to lend Reform UK any legitimacy. In any case, not all their criticisms were held in common: for example, while Conservative skeptics professed to be equally concerned about the impacts of pandemic-related restrictions on mental health and hospital waiting lists for non-COVID treatment, they do not appear to have shared Farage's initial enthusiasm for closing borders, not least because of the negative impact on the aviation and travel industry.

## Looking ahead

The pandemic has not done for populism in the UK; but nor has it done it any special favors. Reform UK achieved next to no traction on the issue, although it would be going too far to suggest that it contributed hugely to its difficulties: they have more to do with Farage's departure and Boris Johnson co-opting the Brexit Party's "tough on Europe, tough on migration" position and therefore cannibalizing his support. It would be unwise to make too firm a prediction, but for the moment, the country's only true populist radical right party looks dead in the water.

As for the Conservatives, the ongoing need to respond responsibly to COVID-19, combined with the support for restrictions evinced both by opposition parties in the House of Commons and voters in the country, ensured that the populism that facilitated that co-option and cannibalization was unlikely to have much influence on its handling of the pandemic. This will not worry it unduly: there are, after all, plenty of other issues (most obviously immigration and other 'culture

war' causes) in which its populism – whether latent or manifest – can profitably find expression. What worries the Conservative Party more is whether a combination of the so-called vaccine bounce and what so far at least seems to be a relatively safe exit from the pandemic can continue to protect it from public anger over the country's equally extraordinary death toll and the “partygate” revelations of widespread flouting of public health rules at the heart of government – especially if it responds to the largesse forced upon it by the pandemic with a return to austerity in order to “balance the books.”

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# 7

## SPAIN

### Different Populist Responses with Similar (and Limited) Outcomes

*Carolina Plaza-Colodro and Nicolás Miranda Olivares*

Spain has been one of the countries most affected by the coronavirus in terms of infections and deaths, and it has implemented very strict measures to contend with the virus. It is estimated that the virus has caused more than 80,000 deaths in Spain—more than 51,000 of which have been confirmed to be due to COVID-19. Given the rapid spread of the virus, on March 14, 2020, the Spanish government decreed a “state of alarm” (the lowest form of the three degrees of state of emergency as set out in the Spanish Constitution) throughout the national territory and, as part of this measure, restricted the movement of its citizens to essential activities.<sup>1</sup> The Congress of Deputies authorized a series of successive extensions of the state of alarm, six in total, until June 21, 2020, when the state of alarm was lifted and Spain entered the so-called “new normal.” Throughout the summer, however, outbreaks multiplied in different parts of the country; they could not be contained, and this degenerated into community transmission. By October 21, 2020, Spain had exceeded one million cases, and four days later, on October 25, 2020, the government again proclaimed a state of alarm to contend with the second wave of infections. By October 22, the Interterritorial Council of the National Health System, a body created to coordinate the actions of the central government and regional governments to tackle the pandemic, agreed to allow each autonomous community to assess the risk, establish an alert level, and adopt measures proportional and adaptable to the situation and context of their territory. A further three days later, Congress approved a six-month extension of the state of alarm until May 2021.

Moreover, the country approaches the reconstruction phase with significant specific weaknesses inherited from the previous economic and political crisis that Spain has undergone during the past decade. These processes have been reflected in the Spanish party system, which has gone from bipartisan to multi-partisan

(Orriols and Cordero 2016). The transformation is intimately linked to the decline of bipartisanship, the emergence of new political parties, and the activation of populism on the political scene. The party system change in Spain was marked by the emergence of Podemos in 2014, a new left-wing populist party able to channel the discontent arising from the economic crisis and, in 2018, the entry into parliament of Vox, a radical right-wing party nurtured by the cultural and identitarian debates triggered by the Catalan demands for independence.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the debate around populism in Spain is complex and multifaceted and what aspects of the two parties (and thus, what type of populism) will thrive thanks to the coronavirus pandemic is difficult to discern. Our chapter argues that, although ideology shapes the framework within which each populist party articulates its main political positions related to the health crisis, it is the government-opposition dynamics that most influence the discursive elements Spanish populist parties have used to reconfigure and adapt their populist rhetoric in this period. Even so, Spanish populist parties, whether they are in the government or part of the opposition, have not managed to perform the crisis and have failed to polarize public debate around the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in their favor.

### **Populist responses to the pandemic and their explaining factors**

Spain has suffered significantly from the pandemic and is also facing the reconstruction phase with notable specific difficulties. To better understand the Spanish case, it is essential to point out that this crisis did not erupt in a period of political stability and economic boom, but instead has occurred in a polarized political climate marked by instability. The internal political climate of the past decade is characterized by government-opposition polarization, little harmony between territorial authorities, and a high level of distrust among citizens toward politicians (Powell, Molina, and Martínez 2020). Thus, in a scenario in which citizens feel a profound disenchantment with established politics, populism was (and probably still is) one of the main driving forces in the realignment process. This transformation has not only affected the party system but has also had an institutional effect. As of January 2020, Podemos has been the minor partner of a left-wing coalition government led by the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* [PSOE]). By its side, Vox is the third Spanish political force and, besides opposing the government, it is contending with the mainstream Popular Party (*Partido Popular* [PP]) to become the main opposition party.

Beyond describing the reaction of populist actors to the pandemic, the aim of this section is to clarify the relationship between populism and the COVID-19 crisis in Spain. In this light, first we combine the ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2017; Hawkins et al. 2018) to depict the core rhetorical points related to the minimum definition of populism (Manicheism, people-centrism, and anti-elitism) and Moffitt's scheme (2015) to ascertain how populist actors

actively create and extend the sense of crisis connected to the health crisis. Last, we will discuss the main factors that explain the political reactions of the Spanish populist parties.

First, it is necessary to consider that Podemos joined the coalition government in January 2020, two months before the start of the pandemic. Following the “incumbency challenge” of populist parties’ theory (Krause and Wagner 2019; Schwörer 2021), this means that its populist rhetoric is tempered, and following the model of how populist actors interact with crisis (Moffitt 2015), its ability to expand the crisis is therefore limited. During the pandemic, although Podemos still transmits a Manichean vision of the world, the party tempers its Manicheism by focusing on particular issues, which in this case are the health, social and economic measures to tackle the pandemic and its consequences. In this sense, Podemos takes advantage of its governmental position to advance its radical left agenda and push to adopt measures for “leaving no one behind,” such as a boost in public spending, the defense of the welfare state, rejecting the privatization of public services such as hospitals and healthcare, and guaranteeing labor protection (to know more about the specific economic and social measures fostered by Podemos to tackle the recovery phase, see Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2020; Magre, Medir, and Pano 2021).

Podemos insists on comprehensive public policies such as a moratorium on mortgages, rental assistance, and a minimum basic income, among others, that represent a shield for those affected by the pandemic (Marcos 2021). It is worth mentioning that Podemos is especially concerned with managing the way out of the economic crisis differently than the way out of the Great Recession was managed, especially regarding the “European” solution. So much so that the government partners, Podemos and the PSOE, at first do not have joint positions on Europe (Prieto 2020). In this sense, the main demand of Podemos in Europe was to consider the lessons learned from the management of the Great Recession of 2008, when policies promoted by institutions other than the democratically elected governments were very negatively received by the citizens. This concern also prevails in the discussion about the management and the administration of the European recovery funds.

In addition, their articulation of the people is typical of left-wing populism (Mény and Surel 2000; March and Mudde 2005) and is deployed around the social class: there is an evident concern for the working classes and the most vulnerable groups, and they emphasize the idea that no one should be left behind. Moreover, in Podemos’ public interventions, there is a particular recognition of essential workers and health workers in the fight against COVID-19. In this sense, it is important to highlight that the party blames the austerity and the cuts in welfare services implemented by the previous PP governments (2011–2018) for the deterioration of public services and the weakness of the Spanish health system when facing this crisis. Besides emphasizing their radical left profile calling for the strengthening of the welfare state, they expand their inclusive political stance (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013) to demand the naturalization of migrants

who have performed essential tasks, work permits for undocumented migrants, and the automatic recognition of any foreign qualifications of trained migrants and professionals working on the frontline against the pandemic (Riveiro 2020).

In terms of the anti-elitist component of populist rhetoric, although Podemos continues to oppose economic elites who do not pay taxes, the evil enemy of the people has partly changed, with the focus being transferred (to a certain extent) from the economic oligarchies previously referred to as the caste (*la casta*) to fascism, which in the Spanish political system is represented by the new right-wing party, Vox. In the same vein, it is interesting to note that Podemos has changed the empty signifier on which the party articulated its political position and vision from *la casta* to the monarchy. In this regard, Podemos is attempting to create a sense of crisis by using three of the six steps identified by Moffitt (2015), and thus perform the crisis in its favor. In Podemos' political view, given the various corruption scandals in which the Spanish royal family has been caught up in, it is no longer the defense of the Constitution but rather that of the Republic that will guarantee the systemic change needed to free the common people from the corrupt political and economic elites. By emphasizing this point, Podemos not only frames it as an "us versus them" political viewpoint, which is inherent to populist rhetoric, it also tries to elevate it to the status of a crisis by linking into a wider framework of grievances pursued by the aristocracy and the nobility (pure and anti-democratic elites) against the common people. To intensify the feelings of threat and crisis and to present "the people" as the central drivers of these concerns, in the first weeks of March 2020, in the context of a strict lockdown, the ruling party is the first to discontinue the popular "health services applause" (a spontaneous political expression convened on balconies every day at 8:00 pm to support essential services staff that were on the frontline of the pandemic), to ask for a *cacerolada*, a form of protest in which protesters make their dissatisfaction known through noise, typically hitting pans, pots, or other household utensils, to reject the monarchy and demand the abdication of Philip VI (Europa Press 2020a; El Plural 2020).

Although previous studies show contradictory evidence regarding Vox's populist nature (Ferreira 2019; Ortiz Barquero 2019; Rooduijn et al. 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Vampa 2020; Marcos-Marné, Plaza-Colodro, and O'Flynn 2021; Rama et al. 2021), our discourse analysis shows that Vox deployed a more coherent and consistent populist strategy during the coronavirus pandemic. This is also confirmed by the application of the Moffitt scheme (2015) of crisis performance, which reveals that the party took all the steps to perform the sense of crisis during the pandemic.

The analysis reveals Vox's Manicheism, exhibiting the strong moral and dualistic dimension of its political view. The notion of the people in Vox's discourse during the pandemic remains typical of the radical right (Mudde 2007), which is nationalistic. Vox frames the populist antagonism as "the People" versus those responsible for the crisis when talking about the pandemic and its consequences (step 3 in Moffitt's scheme). Although there is neither a clear popular subject nor a

reference to the general will in Vox's discourse, the pandemic context allows the leaders of the party to enhance the articulation of their populist rhetoric about corrupt and irresponsible elites and connect it with their previous political view. First, Vox's leaders clearly identify the national government as responsible for the failure (step 1). Since March 2020, Vox has held the PSOE-Podemos government responsible for the deaths and infections, all the negligence related to the lack of medical equipment and supplies, the delay in taking measures, and the impact on the economy. Moreover, Vox have leveled serious accusations against national political opponents, saying that they are totalitarian, financed by *narcos*, drug money, and terrorists, murderers—calling them *the mafia*—and elevating the level of crisis by linking into a wider framework. Moreover, Vox refers to the European and globalist elites and their multiculturalism as evil during the pandemic, blaming them for causing cases, and expanding its anti-establishment rhetoric from the national to include the supranational elites. The displacement of the anti-elite sentiment is one of the main innovations in the Vox rhetoric: when discussing the pandemic, the corrupt elite is more evident and defined, bringing Vox's anti-elitism closer to the typical European right-wing populism, which is nativist and Euroskeptic. This point is very well illustrated in the following excerpt, taken from a speech given by Santiago Abascal in Parliamentary debates about the state of alarm:

Of course, you are not the only problem, you are not the only culprit. The Europe of the bureaucrats also has a great responsibility and is proving to be against the interests of Spain and our sovereignty. We will not beg for money from Europe, we will demand it, and we will demand it because the European Central Bank also belongs to the Spanish people and because the European Union has also been built with the resignations of generations of Spaniards in the countryside and the industry.

They add moral significance to the items in their speeches by referring to specific historical episodes to justify the moral significance of their ideas and political positions, in line with what Moffit (2015) calls the second step of crisis performance, which is to locate the failures within a wider structural or moral framework and to add a temporal dimension. The more obvious references are found in social networks, where Vox calls for a repetition of the Dos de Mayo Uprising (1808)—a popular protest against the political uncertainty resulting from the Napoleonic governments that would lead to the war of Spanish independence. Furthermore, Santiago Abascal is equated with the apostle Santiago, patron saint of Spain, and the battle cry “Santiago and Seal Spain!” an expression used by Spanish soldiers before every offensive since the Reconquest.

Vox took advantage of the health crisis to fit its conservative stances regarding other political debates surrounding issues such as climate change and gender. In addition, Vox uses anti-immigration rhetoric and talks about the “Chinese virus” and blaming illegal migrants and European migration law for spreading the

virus (Cadena Ser 2020), thus expanding its profile as exclusive populists (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

In the expansion of the right-wing party's anti-elitism, Vox uses "grassroots" events to give feelings of threat and crisis a semblance of legitimacy. The media help it to propagate performance. Vox promoted several *caceroladas* organized on balconies as well as supporting several street protests during the strictest times of the lockdown, such as the May 2020 demonstrations against the new state of alarm, such as the one held in the Salamanca district of Madrid and other regional capitals (Campos 2020). Police sources link groups that deny the coronavirus pandemic with the extreme right-wing environment (Rodríguez Álvarez 2020). However, although Vox did not officially call the denialist demonstrations and rallies, the party leaders did encourage their participation, even when the protests became violent. This point is an illustration of the fifth step identified by Moffitt regarding crisis performance by populist actors, which is to present simple solutions, often articulated through a strong leadership. Vox's president, Santiago Abascal, set out Vox's official position on violent riots against government measures in a tweet:

There is more reason than ever to protest against this government that is ruining us. I call on the police to protect the right to demonstrate. And to identify the extreme left, the *menas* [the Spanish acronym for unaccompanied minors] and infiltrators who are causing riots and looting.

The conflict expansion instigated by Vox culminated in the presentation of a motion of censure against Pedro Sanchez, the Spanish Prime Minister in October 2020, to overthrow the "social-communist" government and call for new elections. Although the party leaders were well aware that the institutional plan to bring down the government would not succeed, Vox wanted to fire up its motion of censure with a "hot autumn" in the streets. Abascal confessed that they aimed to create a climate of social tension and discontent to make the government fall (Europa Press 2020b).

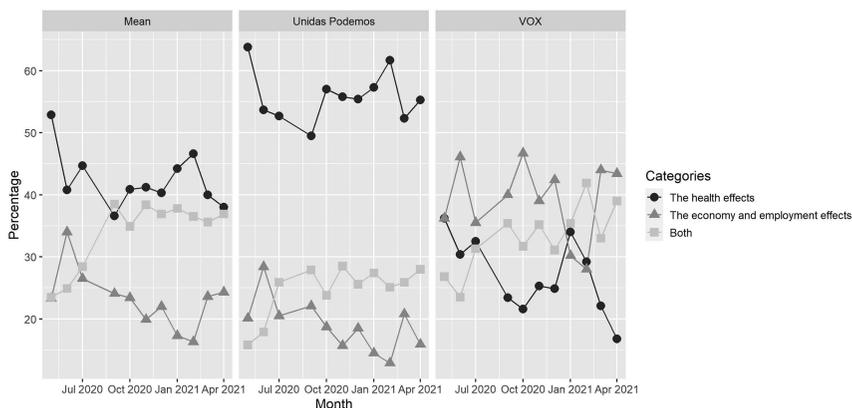
It is worth noting that the current health crisis favors the enemies of populism, since it privileges science and expert knowledge in public debates instead of populists, who are perceived as the great simplifiers of the political scene. However, we find different responses to the recommendations made by health authorities and scientists. Whereas Podemos, from March 2020 to date, has continued to give credibility and considers science a legitimate source of knowledge that should influence political decisions at times like the present, and recommends following expert recommendations (masking, testing, and distancing), Vox, for its part, not only challenges and criticizes the national health authorities and questions the experts working for the government (Varela 2020), it also aligned itself with Donald Trump's speech against the World Health Organization (WHO) (González 2020) and on multiple occasions, its leaders have not complied with the measures in public.

What explains the significant differences in the political responses to the pandemic of the two Spanish populist parties? The main factor shaping the framework with which each party articulates its main political position related to the pandemic and the discursive elements used to reconfigure their populist rhetoric have to do with the government–opposition dynamics and ideology.

First, when analyzing the Spanish case, it is essential to consider the dynamics of power and opposition and the relative position parties occupy in the system. Populism makes skillful use of the attribution of blame, and this is much more effective when populist actors are in the opposition. Podemos is part of the coalition government, neutralizing them as challenger party and favoring the right-wing populist actor Vox channel the discontent, allowing the party to designate blame and place responsibility on the government. In this sense, Vox's institutional relationship to the political system (being the third Spanish political force contending with the mainstream PP for the position of leading opposition party) largely explains its anti-institutional rhetoric, its rejection of all but the first extension of the state of alarm, a parliamentary offensive consisting of hundreds of initiatives and legal proceedings, and the promotion of political demonstrations against the government.

This way, the power–opposition dynamics has determined the differentiated political action of Spanish populist parties, even though ideology continues to determine the ideological frameworks from which both parties build their discourse and political response to the pandemic. At first sight, the health crisis brings a change in public conversations, and the big questions shaping current public debate are related to the economy (redistribution, taxes, public services, interventionist state, employment protection, etc.) and not identity, which could mean a time of prosperity for left-wing movements such as Podemos. However, the kind of language used by politicians and the media to discuss the virus favors authoritarianism, an essential feature of radical right-wing parties such as Vox. The “theater of war” (the “war against the pandemic”), whose final milestone is the declaration of a state of emergency and the imposition of a curfew, completes the replacement of the battery of health and preventive measures recommended by the experts, with public order measures and military metaphors. The initial, profoundly civic discourse, in which citizen participation and solidarity were paramount and workers who fought on the frontlines against the pandemic were treated as heroes, was gradually replaced by a militaristic discourse that reinforced an image of hierarchical order-and-control. This framework alienated critical discussion of the measures taken, made it easier for the partisan struggle against the government, and permitted Vox to entrench its authoritarian essence with its populist rhetoric.

In the same vein, ideology characterizes the social and political problems that Podemos and Vox consider the most urgent to resolve—health over the economy or vice versa, economy over health—and finds a correspondence with the main concerns of the voters of the respective populist party. Figure 7.1 shows that, according to data from the Sociological Research Center (CIS), during the period



**FIGURE 7.1** Right now, what worries you more, the effects of this crisis on health or the effects of the crisis on the economy and employment?

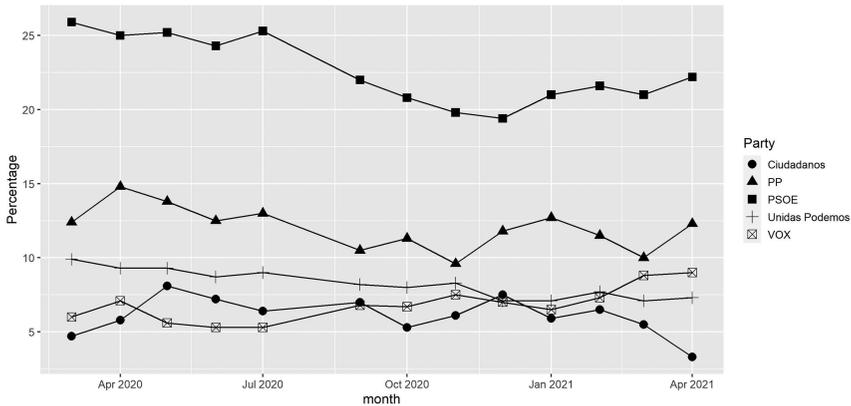
*Source:* Authors' elaboration from studies 3279, 3281, 3283, 3288, 3292, 3296, 3303, 3307, 3309, and 3313 from the Sociological Research Center (CIS, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).

between April 2020 and April 2021, the majority of Podemos voters consider the effects on health to be more important than those on the economy, whereas for Vox voters, the main concern has been the effects on the economy.

### Populist parties: opportunities during and beyond the pandemic

Finally, we consider how populists' political fortunes are affected by their crisis performance. In this sense and if we look at opinion polls, we can say that Podemos is immersed in a downward trend in its electoral expectations and Vox seems to have reached its limit as well. Vox and Podemos both place their electoral expectations in a national election below the results obtained in the 2019 elections (Figure 7.2). However, electoral results in regional elections during the 2020–2021 period show that certain factors related to the exacerbation of the center-periphery cleavages rather than the pandemic may still favor the populist parties' growth.

Four regional elections have been held during the pandemic so far: the Basque Country, Galicia, Catalonia, and Madrid. These elections all had disparate contexts and consequently differing results for Podemos and Vox. For example, despite being in the government and its main leaders being government ministers, Podemos obtained disastrous results in the Galician and Basque elections compared to past elections, while it managed to retain its influence in the Catalan elections. In the elections of the community of Madrid, the fact that Pablo Iglesias announced that he would resign as vice president and from his position at the Ministry of Social Affairs and become the candidate in the Madrid elections



**FIGURE 7.2** Electoral polls of the main Spanish parties, March 2020–April 2021 (CIS).

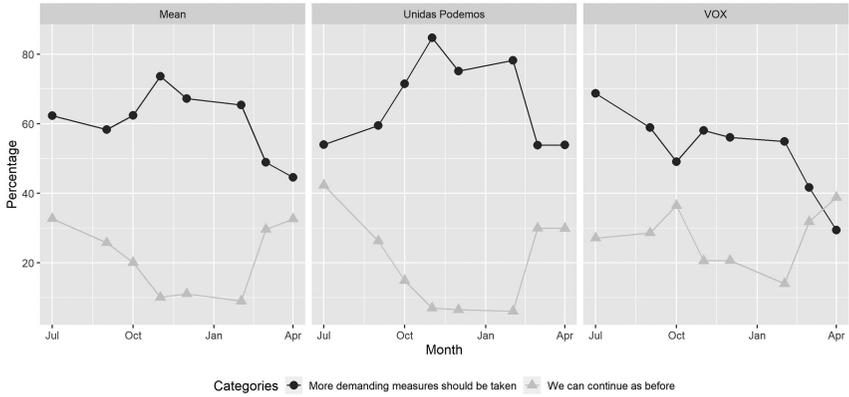
*Source:* Authors’ elaboration from studies 3279, 3281, 3283, 3288, 3292, 3296, 3303, 3307, 3309, and 3313 from the Sociological Research Center (CIS, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).

raised the coalition’s expectations in the community, and in total, they obtained ten seats and 7.21% of the votes, a better result than the 2019 elections. However, these results did not prevent Pablo Iglesias from resigning from all his representative positions as well as from those within the party.

Vox’s results in the Galician and Basque elections were not good either. In Galicia, Vox failed to obtain representation, while the Popular Party, their main ideological competitor, obtained an absolute majority. In the Basque Parliament, Vox obtained only one seat and though its influence is minimal, this achievement was read by the party as historic because it meant that there will be “a voice that will raise an opposition to radical autonomy for the first time” (Abascal 2020a). The big victory of the party during the 2020–2021 period came in the Catalan elections where, for the first time, Vox was able to enter the Catalan parliament with 11 deputies and establish itself as the first anti-independence force. However, the right-wing party failed to maintain the growing potential in the Madrid elections, where Vox managed to maintain its result of the 2019 elections.

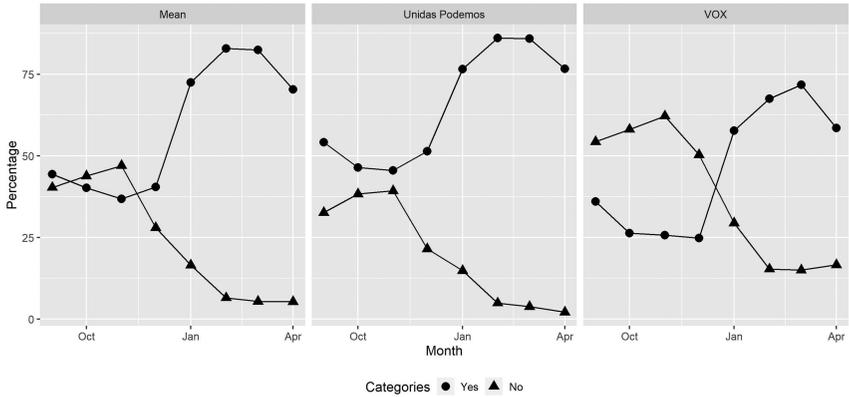
A partial explanation for this may be that Spanish populist parties have not been able to polarize public debates around pandemic-related issues in their favor. On the contrary, electoral results show that populist parties only succeeded in successfully polarizing the traditional divisions of the party system: left-right and particularly center-periphery. Similar trend preferences among populist parties’ voters on the restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the virus (Figure 7.3) and their orientations on vaccination (Figure 7.4) illustrate this point.

Regarding the control and isolation measures imposed by the government, both Vox and Podemos voters present a similar trajectory to the average, who agreed to an increase in the measures. This trend continues until February 2021,



**FIGURE 7.3** As the coronavirus situation in Spain is currently evolving, do you think that more demanding control and isolation measures should be taken or that we can continue as we are now?

Source: Authors’ elaboration from studies 3279, 3281, 3283, 3288, 3292, 3296, 3303, 3307, 3309, and 3313 from the Sociological Research Center (CIS, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).



**FIGURE 7.4** Would you be willing to get vaccinated immediately when the vaccine is available?

Source: Authors’ elaboration from studies 3279, 3281, 3283, 3288, 3292, 3296, 3303, 3307, 3309, and 3313 from the Sociological Research Center (CIS, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).

when voters of the radical right-wing party state a preference for maintaining the measures that were already in place—a state of alarm with a series of restrictions on mobility and control of people and restrictions on the economy—instead of increasing them. In terms of their willingness to get vaccinated, Figure 7.3 shows that Podemos voters have a similar trajectory to the average, although with a slightly greater willingness to get vaccinated. In contrast, Vox voters were less

confident and less willing to get vaccinated during the first few months. However, between November and December 2020, this trend changed, and as of January 2021, most Vox voters were willing to be vaccinated.

However, as mentioned, other factors related to the exacerbation of traditional cleavages and associated debates around central and peripheral nationalism and identities seem to be interconnected with Vox electoral support enlargement.

## Conclusions

As seen during this chapter, the coronavirus crisis is a scenario with growth potential for both ideological trends of populism in Spain, left and right. The Spanish case highlights the importance of the power–opposition division over the ideological one in the modulation of reactions to the pandemic of populist parties. Social class and the big economic issues such as employment protection, the expansion of the Welfare State, and the redistribution of taxes have gained prominence in the public debate, favoring left-wing populist actors. In contrast, the feeling of disappointment has a growing potential in a highly indebted state scenario, and thus a government with less room for maneuver. In this sense, Podemos’ position, as part of the coalition government, neutralizes it as a challenger party and tones down its populist rhetoric.

This scenario favors right-wing populist rhetoric, even when this crisis does not naturally favor the relevance of right-wing issues, such as identity, immigration, or Euroskepticism. Vox takes advantage of the pandemic crisis to deploy a strong populist strategy and uses the attribution of blame against the government. And although its positions concerning the management of the coronavirus crisis have not succeeded in polarizing public opinion, the traditional debates around identity issues continue to be the terrain in which this political party has all its growth potential.

## Notes

- 1 During this first period, Spaniards were allowed to leave home only to acquire food, medicine, and other necessities, for example, to attend medical appointments, to travel to and from their workplace, to provide assistance and care for dependents, and to go to financial and insurance entities.
- 2 To know more about the main milestones of Spanish party system transformation, see Plaza-Colodro (2021).

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# 8

## ITALY

### The Diverging Strategies of the Populist Radical Right During the Pandemic

*Lisa Zanotti and Carlos Meléndez*

This chapter addresses how populist radical right parties reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, one of the European countries most affected by the spread of the virus in terms both of infection rate and death toll. At first glance, given the very features of the health crisis, it was difficult for populists in the opposition to benefit from it. Globally, the most expedient way to manage the COVID-19 pandemic was by imposing state-led measures to restrain the spread of the virus. Implementing measures such as social distancing and lockdowns, limiting individuals' freedoms seemed to be the only way to limit the contagion. Italy subscribed to these restrictive policies since the first wave. However, when the initial emergency was somehow contained, populist leaders in the opposition had the chance to politicize different aspects linked to the consequences of the pandemic itself (see Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022). Our main argument is that populists are successful in taking advantage of a crisis when they can credibly frame it as a failure of representation. The case of Italy, which has been defined as a “country of many populisms” (Tarchi 2008, 84), is particularly insightful. Since the outbreak of the pandemic at the end of February 2020, there have been two populist radical right parties in the system: the League (*La Lega*; formerly Northern League) and Brothers of Italy (FdI; *Fratelli d'Italia*). It is worth noting that some scholars consider the Five Star Movement (M5S) to be a populist party. With respect to this, two points are in order. First, this chapter focuses exclusively on the populist radical right, and while M5S's populist ideology is very flexible, it is far from qualifying as “radical right” (see Manucci and Amsler 2018). Moreover, we maintain that since 2019, the M5S has gradually lost its populist rhetoric (see Zanotti 2021).

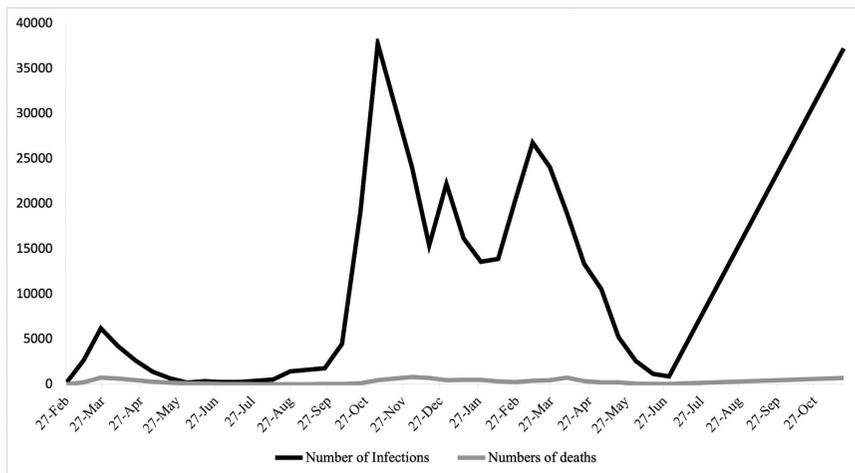
After an initial period known as “rally around the flag,” the two parties' strategy was similar, until they started to diverge substantially in February 2021.

Until the breakdown of the Conte II Cabinet, the League discursively attacked the government's handling of the pandemic, focusing mainly on two issues: immigration and the economy. When the League joined the government by supporting Mario Draghi's cabinet, its discourse shifted even if its loyalty to the government was markedly inconsistent. This strategy of keeping "one foot in and one foot out of government" (see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005) has been a trademark characteristic of the League since the 1990s. And while FdI shared the League's criticism of the government during the first year, since February 2021 it has changed its strategy, becoming the only relevant party in opposition to Mario Draghi's government. This allowed FdI to systematically challenge the government's actions and to depict itself as the only party acting in the people's interest, opposing the elite. Even if the pandemic is still unfolding, vote intention has ascended FdI to the largest party in the system. It has demonstrated that it has taken advantage of the crisis through a framing that was more functional with its populist appeal and which, in turn, was perceived by voters as more credible.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly outline the magnitude and characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. Thereafter, we briefly discuss the nexus between populism, crisis, and political representation. In the third section, we assess the reaction of the two radical right-wing populist parties, the League and FdI, at different moments of the pandemic. We close with some final remarks.

## The COVID-19 pandemic in Italy

Italy was the first European country to be severely hit by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In January 2020, after notification of an outbreak in the province of Hubei in China and a warning issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) of a moderate health risk, the Italian government set up a task force to handle a possible emergency (see Bertero and Seddone 2021). After the discovery of some Chinese tourists who were infected with the virus, the government suspended commercial flights from China. At that point, "the risk of an actual outbreak in Italy was perceived as remote, simply requiring prevention and monitoring" (Bertero and Seddone 2021, 67). However, a few days later, the first infections not related to trips to China were recorded, with two outbreaks in the Milan region and in a small town in Veneto—another Northern region—that were rapidly declared red zones by the national authorities. When the number of infections increased and the health system began to show signs of coming under pressure, the alert was extended to other Northern provinces.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, national authorities decided to extend lockdown measures to the entire country. This was to prevent the Southern regions from collapsing, as they historically presented a structural gap in terms of health facilities (Franzini and Giannoni 2010). Once the spread of the virus began to slow, a gradual reopening became possible from the beginning of May 2020. Toward the end of October 2020, COVID-19 cases again began to



**FIGURE 8.1** Number of infections and deaths in Italy (February 2020–June 2021).

Source: Elaboration of the authors based on Johns Hopkins CSEE COVID-19 and European Centre for Disease and Control data.

rise, reaching their peak (the second wave) in mid-November, and the number of infections remained relatively high throughout the Winter (with a third peak at the beginning of March 2021). Unlike the first wave, which primarily affected Northern regions, this second peak reached the South, leading to the collapse of the health system in various regions (Del Porto and Sannino 2020). Figure 8.1 shows the evolution of the number of infections and deaths between February 2020 and the end of June 2021.

### Populism and crisis: a matter of representation

The COVID-19 crisis was a sort of perfect storm, somehow unprecedented. While the pandemic was first and foremost a health crisis, it also affected the economy and other different societal aspects.

Although there are many academic publications about populism, the relationship between crisis and populism is, at best, undertheorized.<sup>2</sup> Crises conceived as critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007) are not in themselves events that are “ready” to be profited from by populist actors. On the contrary, we maintain that *populists capitalize electorally or politically on changes in the political opportunity structure when they can credibly frame crises as failures of representation*. Since populism assumes that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004), framing crises as issues linked to the inability or unwillingness of mainstream politicians and/or nonelected bodies to comply with the people’s will is particularly functional to the populist discourse. That is, by appealing to anti-establishment sentiments and/or anti-establishment political identifications

(Meléndez, *forthcoming*), populists discursively define two constructed entities: “the people” who are morally pure and “the elite” who are morally corrupt because they do not act in the interest of the people. Through a mechanism of blame attribution, populists achieve to simplify situations that usually are not that straightforward, transforming them into battles of *good* versus *evil*. In this way, they can create “new” (representation) crises that they usually discursively perpetuate in time. They can also use this to transform a critical juncture, which is by definition a brief period, into a prolonged crisis of representation.

This argument goes in hand with what many scholars have pointed out: that populism puts a strain on internal contradictions within liberal democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Zanotti and Rama 2021). If, on the one hand, democracy is the rule of the people by the people, then on the other, it also supposes both the protection of certain disadvantaged groups such as minorities and the existence of unelected bodies that function as controllers (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014).

This contradiction is the main reason why populists have issues, at least discursively, with the prevailing mechanisms of representation, preferring a more unmediated relationship with the masses instead (Mény and Surel 2002). How populists frame crises as failures of representation varies according to the host ideology with which populism is associated. Both “the people” and “the elite” are empty signifiers whose content is not fixed (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Therefore, populist actors, when framing a crisis as representation failure, fill these empty signifiers in a manner that achieves the mobilization of voters. This, in turn, means that, at least in principle, certain crises are a better fit for certain types of populism. For example, the migration crisis can be more easily taken advantage of by the populist radical right since immigration is crucial in their discourse. This explains why these same parties have tried to shift the focus of attention from a health crisis onto a migration (representation) crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The populist radical right and the pandemic in Italy

According to the ideational approach, populism is a set of ideas that conceives society as divided into two homogeneous but opposed and morally defined groups: the “pure people” versus the “corrupt elite.” Also, populism is characterized by the concept that politics should be the expression of the people’s general will (see also Stanley 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

As mentioned in the Introduction, both the League and FdI are populist radical right parties (Zaslave 2011; Vercesi 2021). According to Mudde (2007), these parties share at least two other ideologies besides populism: nativism and authoritarianism. As observed in the populist radical right in Europe, nativism appears as the core ideology. Nativism which can be defined as an ideology that relates state benefits solely to natives (Mudde 2007) usually results in anti-immigration rhetoric and policy proposals seeking stricter immigration rules (Ivarsflaten

2008). Authoritarianism, namely the belief in a strictly ordered society, results in the pursuit of “law and order” policy preferences (Mudde 2007).

Even if both the League and FdI share these communalities, they also display important differences. On the one hand, the League is the heir of the populist Northern League founded in the 1990s, which pursued federalism, even secessionist policies, in the Northern regions. Following major corruption scandals that involved the party’s leadership, Matteo Salvini took over as secretary of the party in 2014. This change in leadership led to a modification in the party’s ideology, which steered toward the radical right-wing spectrum of the system, maintaining the populist component. Thanks to this ideological shift, the League acquired a nationwide presence, focusing on immigration and law-and-order issues (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018; Zanotti 2019).

On the other hand, FdI can trace its origins back to the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a neo-fascist party founded in 1946. Since 1995, when Gianfranco Fini became its leader, this party has undergone a process of moderation, changing the brand into National Alliance (AN) and joining the center-right coalition in 1994, 2001, and 2006. Heir of AN, FdI in its current form have only existed since 2012 under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, continuing to a certain extent to garner support from Italian neo-fascist groups (Manucci 2020, 31).

When the pandemic hit Italy at the end of February 2020, the electoral coalition that supported the prime minister—the independent Giuseppe Conte—was primarily composed by the M5S and the center-left Democratic Party (PD).<sup>3</sup> The M5S has been defined as a movement party which is difficult to locate on the left-right axis of competition (Zanotti 2019). It emerged as a response to the austerity measures implemented to counteract the effects of the Great Recession. As briefly mentioned, it is a former populist party that has been increasingly losing its anti-establishment rhetoric since it has been in government with the PD. That is why it is worth mentioning, but not to fully analyze their reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic in this chapter.

When Giuseppe Conte lost the parliamentary majority, the current Italian President Mario Draghi—the former Director of the European Central Bank (ECB)—was invited to form a new government. The new executive was sworn in on January 13, 2021, and was supported by Silvio Berlusconi’s party Forza Italia (FI) and the League, together with the parliamentary parties that previously backed Conte (e.g., M5S, PD, Free and Equal [LeU], and Italia Viva [Iv]). The only party that stayed in opposition was FdI.

In assessing the reactions of populist parties to the pandemic, we can distinguish two different moments. The first goes from the beginning of the pandemic to the breakdown of the Conte II cabinet. The second period covers this first part of 2021, namely the tenure of Draghi’s executive. The main difference between those two periods was strategic. Whereas during the Conte II cabinet, both the League and FdI figured as part of the political opposition, during the second

period, the League decided to support Draghi's government while the FdI decided to stay with the opposition.

### ***The League and the pandemic: still "one foot in and one out government"***

In general terms, it can be said that the attitude of the League toward the COVID-19 pandemic was at best erratic. A newspaper article published on April 16, 2020, tracked all Salvini's statements which showed his contradictory stances (Mari 2020). For example, on February 21, 2020, Salvini asked for stricter border controls, implying that the contagion could have arrived from Africa through boats approaching the Southern border (Custodero 2020; Vicentini and Galanti 2021). Just a few days later, on February 27, 2020, he demanded a reopening of the Northern regions, the most affected during the first wave and administered by his party. Again, at the beginning of March 2020, when the situation began to worsen and the country was put in lockdown, Salvini supported the decision in the name of "national unity" (Segatti 2020).

However, when the pandemic was still considered a "Chinese issue" (sic) in early 2020, Salvini's discursive strategy consisted in framing the crisis by politicizing those aspects close to his ideologic worldview. As pinpointed, the COVID-19 pandemic began as a health crisis, putting a severe strain on health systems globally. A crisis of these characteristics was not functional to populist actors, since citizens in these circumstances tend to prefer a responsible instead of a responsive government (Mair 2009). In this sense, COVID-19 changed the political opportunity structure in a way that in principle was more functional to mainstream parties than to populists, since it was more about *competence* than *representation*. Yet, populist parties had the chance to reframe it as a failure of representation, conveying a credible message to their voters (Van Kessel 2015). The League, being a populist radical right party with a strong emphasis on nativism, attempted to shift the focus onto anti-immigration rhetoric.

A few months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the League began to strongly criticize Conte's government over its management of the health crisis. On August 14, 2020, on his personal Twitter account, Salvini claimed: "The only problem linked to the virus is not those who dance, but those who disembark." This was a clear-cut criticism of the government for closing clubs to avoid the spread of the virus, while allowing foreigners to disembark on the Southern coast of the country. For the League, the latter comprised those responsible for the spreading of the disease in Italy. Accordingly, Salvini defined "us" as the teenagers who danced while the out-group "them" was represented by those who disembarked, that is, foreigners. On several occasions, Salvini publicly asked the prime minister to resign "if not able to defend Italy and Italians" (Tondo 2020).

Framing what originally was a health crisis as a representation crisis, the League's leader aimed at mobilizing the electorate, making it easier for voters to relate to his

discourse. Moreover, the League started to advocate for those allegedly “left behind” by the government’s inaction, switching between demands to restore normality and resume economic activities, and protest for the lack of support for those categories heavily affected by the pandemic. At the end of April 2020, Salvini and 70 parliamentarians from his group occupied the Chamber of Deputies and Senate as a protest against what they considered a lack of response by the government to the economic difficulties stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic (La Vanguardia 2020). This tense situation changed when Draghi became prime minister. On this occasion, Salvini decided to support the government “without conditions and vetoes” (La 7 2021), in what was depicted as another demonstration of putting the country’s interest first. After this unexpected decision, Salvini stated:

what I care about are only actual facts like having more construction sites start up again around the country and very special attention given to our schools. About our future participation in the government, with specific ministries, I can tell that this has not been discussed yet. What we care about now is the future of our country.

*(Grandesso 2021)*

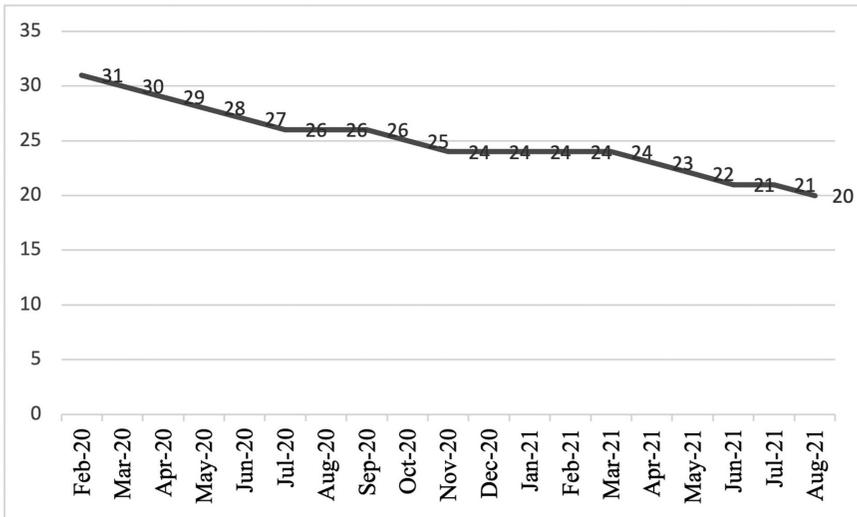
During Draghi’s government, the League’s strategy was very similar to that adopted while in government with FI (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). This strategy of maintaining “one foot in and one foot out of government” consisted in discursively supporting Draghi’s expertise while criticizing some of his political ministers—mainly those from the PD and the M5S, especially the Health Minister Roberto Speranza (Italy 24 News 2021). This strategy became more evident when the League, joined by FdI, confronted the government on its decision to make the COVID certificate a requirement for getting into cinemas, bars, and gyms from August 6, 2021, joining a protest that took place in 12 Italian cities (Lettig 2021). The party adopted the same inconsistent attitude concerning vaccines, attacking the idea of making the COVID-19 vaccine passport (Green Pass) obligatory for teachers, and pupils aged 12 and over to be able to access Italy’s schools when the new academic year starts in September 2021.

Looking at the polls, it looks like the League was not able to capitalize on the crisis, having suffered a setback since the beginning of the pandemic (Manucci 2020). Figure 8.2 shows variation in electoral support for the League.

### ***Brothers of Italy: between responsiveness and identity politics***

As mentioned above, while during the Conte II cabinet, the strategy of the FdI shared several aspects with the League. During the first year of the pandemic, as Manucci (2020, 31) underlined:

FdI has been extremely vocal in criticizing the government and recently protested in front of the parliament, wearing masks with the colors of



**FIGURE 8.2** Mean of electoral polls for the League (February 2020–August 2021).  
*Source:* Elaboration of the authors based on Europe Elects 2020.

the Italian flag, to ‘give voice to the common people,’ the ‘silent majority whose future is at risk.’

Also in line with the League, FdI’s leader Giorgia Meloni at the end of January 2020 demanded that the Chinese authorities provide reliable information about the virus and later insisted that those arriving from China should quarantine (Albertazzi, Bonansigna, and Zulianello. 2021 186). When the situation worsened and the number of infections rose, FdI also moderated its discourse for a brief period, backing calls for closing the country for two weeks at the beginning of March. In the regional elections, FdI experienced further electoral growth with respect to the previous regional elections. Meloni claimed that FdI was “the only party to have grown, from north to south, in each region where a vote was held,” and that no one could have predicted that a candidate from FdI would win in the Marche region (Albertazzi, Bonansigna, and Zulianello 2021). However, things changed when Mario Draghi took over as prime minister. In fact, whereas the League decided to enter government in an “act of responsibility,” FdI declined Draghi’s invitation and remained the only opposition party. The issue behind this choice was “political,” since the party’s leader—Giorgia Meloni—stated that “if FdI had also entered government, Italy would have been the only European country to have a person not legitimized by popular vote and a democracy without an opposition” (Meloni 2021). In the months that followed, Meloni often criticized the government for ignoring the opposition and undermining democracy. Being the only party in the opposition allowed the party to depict itself as the only faithful bulwark of the interests of Italians. Namely, while other parties chose “responsibility,” FdI framed its choice of remaining in

opposition as assuming the role of the only “true interpreter” and “caretaker” of the Italians’ interests. To sum up, being the only opposition party endorsed the FdI as the only “responsive” party. Undoubtedly, this context made this party much more visible compared to Draghi’s coalition. FdI has substantially deviated from the League discourse during the past months; it has also heavily relied on its conservative discourse opposing abortion rights and euthanasia as well as same-sex marriage. In its party manifesto, they seek a “safeguard[ing] of national identity against the process of ‘Islamization’ by opposing the removal of Christian symbols from school in addition to advancing other measures to defend Christianity both domestically and internationally” (Fratelli d’Italia 2018). With regards to the COVID-19 vaccine, Meloni developed a rhetoric aimed at interpreting the doubts of the common people. At an event in July 2021, she claimed:

yes, I got the vaccine, and I am not an anti-vaxxer. I am not against vaccines, I am used to saying things as I think them and it is very annoying that in our political debate anyone who has the courage to ask questions about things must be labelled, when your interlocutor doesn’t know what to say in answer to those sensible questions.

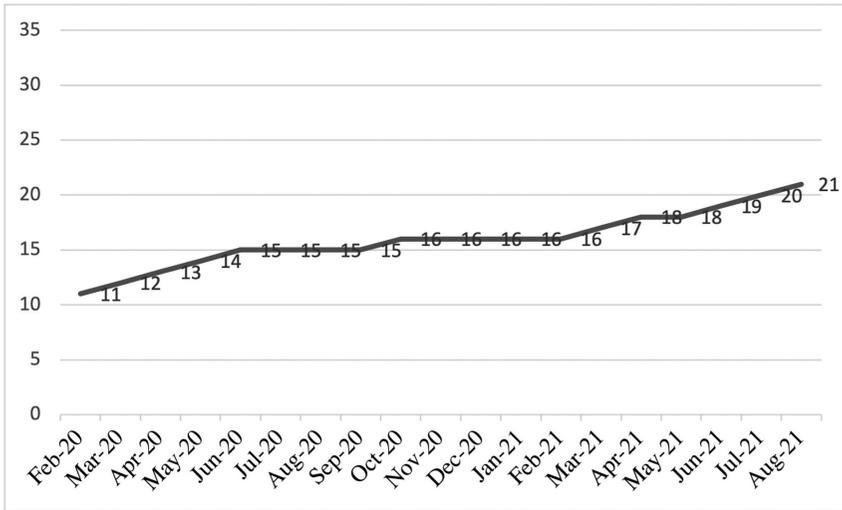
Also, on the Green Pass, in line with Salvini, she said, “I have already said that I disagree, because I consider it an ineffective measure, an economic measure that devastates our tourism” (Adnkronos 2021). Despite promoting similar narratives to Salvini’s party on some issues such as anti-immigration policies and against the restriction of freedoms, it looks as if being the only party in opposition seems to have paid off, and FdI, according to the polls, gained the most support since the beginning of the pandemic, managing to become the first party when we look at Italians’ vote intention. Figure 8.3 shows variation in electoral support for the FdI.

During the pandemic, FdI has been able to increment its vote intention due to its effort to simultaneously represent its traditional far-right electorate and moderate conservatives. However, this was possible only due to the moderation of the League, which pursued the strategy of entering government. As Urbinati argues:

in today’s hyperpolarized political landscape, moving to the center carries more risks than rewards. [Meloni] is popular precisely because she’s not moderate. When Salvini moved to the center, he lost consensus, and she’s too clever to make the same mistake.

*(Ferraresi 2021)*

Even if the health crisis was, in theory, not functional to populists (especially when in opposition), when populist parties successfully frame crises as a failure of representation, they might benefit electorally from them. In this regard, while the League entered government, still somehow criticizing it from inside, FdI was more electorally successful in being perceived as different from the parties of the “establishment.”



**FIGURE 8.3** Mean of electoral polls for FdI (February 2020–August 2021).

Source: Elaboration of the authors based on Europe Elects 2020.

## Final remarks

In this chapter, we analyzed how populist parties reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. After a short overview of how the pandemic evolved from February 2020 to June 2021, we briefly outlined the nexus between crisis and populism. We claimed that populist leaders profit from a crisis when they credibly frame it as a failure of representation. In our analysis, we observed that even if both the League and FdI fall into category of populist radical right party, they adopted different strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Until the breakdown of the Conte II cabinet in mid-February 2021—while they were both opposition parties, they harshly criticized the government and its handling of the crisis. They did this mainly by politicizing the disembarkation of foreigners on the Southern border and criticizing the lack of economic support for independent contractors. Yet, the discourse of the two parties began to diverge when Mario Draghi took over as prime minister. On the one side, the League supported the government even if it maintained its classic “one foot in and one foot out of government” strategy. On the other side, FdI decided not to join the government, becoming the only opposition party gaining much more visibility and successfully presenting itself as the last bulwark of democracy.

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## Notes

- 1 Conte's government passed emergency measures on March 8, 2020, extending the red zone mainly to the cities of Milan, Venice, Parma, Rimini, Padua, and the surrounding areas, given the exponential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hospitals and health facilities.
- 2 For a literature review on the relationship between populism and crisis, see Moffitt (2015).
- 3 The left-wing LeU and the centrist Iv were also part of the cabinet.

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# 9

## POLAND

### When Populists Must Manage Crisis Instead of Performing It

*Ben Stanley*

Populists thrive *on* crisis (Moffitt 2015). But do they thrive *in* crisis? The COVID-19 pandemic struck at a time when the increased prominence of populist parties as parties of power was already raising questions about the ability of populists to deal with the challenges of governing.

Just four months prior to the pandemic, the populist radical right-wing Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) party won a second term in office. During its first term, PiS carried out a policy agenda that combined economic redistributionism and social conservatism with radical political-institutional change (Bill and Stanley 2020). In its rejection of Poland's political, economic and cultural elites of post-1989 Poland and the broad premises of the liberal-democratic orthodoxy that had inspired them and in its implacable espousal of an intolerant monism, PiS was quintessentially populist. On taking power in 2015, it swiftly neutralized institutions of control, turning public media into an outlet of executive propaganda and transforming the Constitutional Tribunal into a politically compliant body tasked with granting retrospective legitimacy to acts of doubtful legality or straightforward illegality (Sadurski 2019; Pirro and Stanley 2022). These actions prompted conflict with international institutions, in particular the European Commission, which declared Poland in breach of its commitments to uphold the rule of law and commenced proceedings under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union.

With PiS commanding a slim but disciplined majority in parliament, much of its legislative agenda might have been achieved without the party's incessant attacks on independent institutions of control. However, identifying and purging "enemies of the people" in the form of alleged judicial cliques, business and media elites and liberal interest groups was crucial not only as a means to obviate

challenges to the government's authority and to speed up its agenda for change, but also to maintain a rationale for further radical actions.

Yet, while PiS *performed* crises of its own devising (Moffitt 2015, 198), it did not face an exogenous crisis of significant magnitude during its first term. The economy remained buoyant, reinforcing the party's claim to competent governance. Domestic protests against actions contrary to the rule of law and women's rights were effectively nullified. Internationally, while Poland's reputation plummeted, support of the like-minded Fidesz government of Hungary stymied EU's attempts to sanction Poland. At the beginning of PiS's second term in power, party leader and *de facto* Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński<sup>1</sup> could confidently look forward to at least four more years of the same.

The outbreak of COVID-19 was the first crisis PiS faced that was not of its own making and which it could not therefore be certain of controlling. As Bobba and Hubé (2021) have shown in a comparative study of populist governance in Europe during the crisis, populists-in-power could not deploy their typical instruments of "crisis entrepreneurship" and take narrative ownership of the crisis, particularly given the suddenness with which the crisis engulfed them. Moreover, as those responsible for governing, they were the first to whom the public looked for solutions. This was an unenviable position for any political actor to be in when the nature of the crisis precluded confident assurances about the ease with which it could be handled. It was thus particularly problematic for the populist, whose stock-in-trade is the avoidance of "needless" policy complexity. At the same time, the course of the crisis provided populists with the opportunity to exploit extraordinary circumstances to achieve – or at least attempt to achieve – political objectives unconnected with the crisis itself (Bušíková and Baboš 2020, 505).

The first section of this chapter describes Poland's experience of and response to the pandemic, identifying three distinct waves of the pandemic, explaining how the PiS government responded, and with what effects. The second section then turns to understanding these responses in the context of the broader political system, institutional factors, and shifts in public opinion. The concluding section draws on the experiences of the first three waves to offer some informed speculation about how the pandemic situation will continue to affect PiS's prospects.

### **Learning from mistakes: PiS's response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

By August 2021, Poland's experience with COVID-19 could be separated into three distinct waves. The first began at the start of March 2020, when COVID-19 infections and related deaths were first recorded.<sup>2</sup> Using daily confirmed deaths as a benchmark, the first wave began to ebb from the end of April onwards. Although the number of confirmed deaths remained relatively stable at around ten per day during the summer and early autumn of 2020, the relaxation

of restrictions from the end of May onwards created the impression that the first wave had come to an end.

The onset of the second wave can be dated approximately to late September 2020, when the number of daily cases and deaths began to climb. This wave peaked in mid-November. The third wave began in the third week of February 2021, when after a lull in the preceding two months the number of cases and deaths began to rise again, peaking in the first two weeks of April.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The first wave – March–May 2020***

Poland's first case of COVID-19 was reported on March 4, 2020. While the government had hesitated to take preemptive action, it swiftly implemented significant containment and closure policies, fearing that the Polish healthcare system would be overwhelmed. On March 10, public events were canceled. With some universities having preempted the government's decision a week earlier, all tiers of the education system were shut down on March 12. Two days later, some workplaces were forced to close, although a total closure was not instituted. International travel controls were imposed, first with heightened screening and then on March 15 with a total border closure. Initially, the government issued only a recommendation not to travel internally, but as the extent of the virus's spread became apparent toward the end of March, a significant lockdown was implemented. On March 31, restrictions on internal movement were imposed and a nine-day shelter-at-home policy was instituted, with a ban on leaving the house other than for necessities.

In mid-March, the government introduced an emergency package of measures for dealing with the immediate economic impact of the crisis, consisting in income support, credits and social insurance relief for businesses, and the use of public investment for stimulus purposes. This package also contained additional funding for the health service. The immediate healthcare response prioritized protecting the elderly. Testing during the first wave occurred only on a limited basis among key workers, those admitted to hospital, and those returning from overseas. Limited contact tracing was introduced at the beginning of April. Not until mid-April were face coverings made mandatory in public spaces.

In comparison with many other European countries, particularly those of Western Europe, Poland appeared to come through the first wave relatively unscathed, with credit for this outcome attributed to the swiftness of the government's lockdown (Walker and Smith 2020) and the discipline with which it was observed by the Polish society. The implementation of stringent measures to control the spread of the virus was reflected in a significant decline in community mobility,<sup>4</sup> and daily new cases and deaths remained at a low level in comparison with subsequent waves. As a result of Poland's apparent success in containing the virus, many of the measures were swiftly relaxed, although significant restrictions on international travel remained in place.

### ***The second wave: September–December 2020***

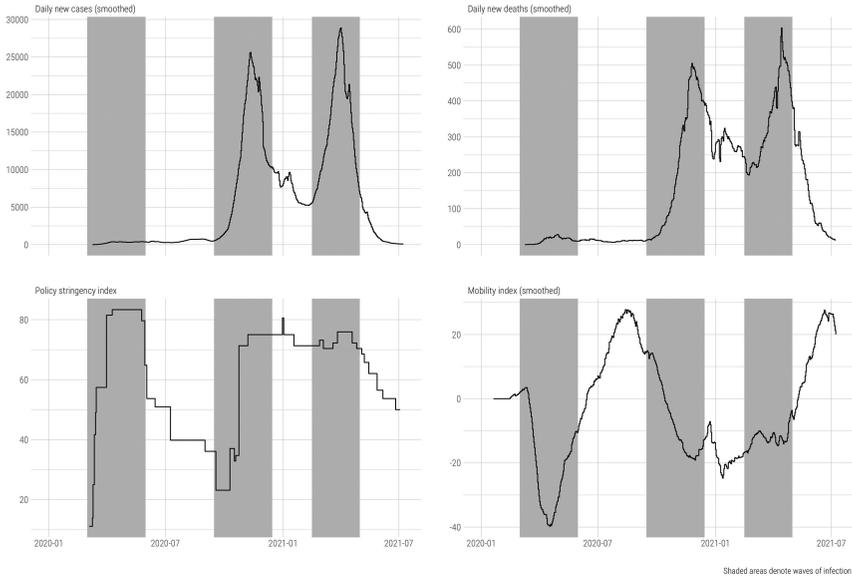
The resurgence of COVID-19 in the autumn of 2020 exposed complacency and lack of preparedness. Daily new cases rocketed to over 25,000 by early November, and by the end of that month, daily deaths attributable to COVID-19 were averaging well over 500 per day, putting Poland among the European countries with the highest proportion of deaths per million inhabitants. The severity of the situation was also underlined by the strain placed on the health system, with over 23,000 COVID sufferers hospitalized at the end of November, over 2,000 of whom required ventilation (Gadomska et al. 2021). To cope with the expected influx of patients, the government built temporary medical facilities, including a large field hospital at Warsaw’s National Stadium. However, the expansion of these facilities could not make up for shortages and inadequate distribution of medical staff and equipment.

The government responded by reintroducing containment and closure policies. From October 10 onward, public events were canceled and restrictions on gatherings reimposed. Schools were partially closed on October 19 and then fully closed on November 7. Workplace closures were reintroduced on October 24. Limited restrictions on public transport were reintroduced, but there were fewer limits on internal movement than during the first wave.

While containment and closure policies had been lifted during the summer, health measures largely remained in place. At the beginning of June, Poland shifted from limited testing to testing of anyone showing COVID-19 symptoms, a policy that remained in place thereafter. A policy of limited contact tracing was also implemented during the first wave and kept in place. After a period of less stringent rules regarding facial coverings, at the beginning of August the requirement to wear masks in shared and public spaces outside the home was reinstated. On the economic front, limited forms of debt and contract relief were maintained, and at the start of November an “anti-crisis shield” was introduced, extending targeted exemptions from social security contributions, subsidized loans, wage subsidies, and unemployment benefits.

### ***The third wave: February 2021–May 2021***

As the policy stringency index in Figure 9.1 suggests, the Polish government heeded the lessons learned after opening up too quickly after the first wave.<sup>5</sup> When the second wave began to ebb in December, many of the existing policies remained in place. This approach was to prove prudent, as after a lull during January the number of cases and deaths began to rise again, peaking in the last week of March and the first week of April. By the end of May, new daily cases averaged below 1,000 for the first time since late September 2020. By June, community mobility was well in excess of the baseline at the start of the pandemic; partly, this was a result of the onset of summer, but it also reflected the reopening of sectors of the service economy and confidence in the success of vaccination.



**FIGURE 9.1** Impact of the pandemic, government response, and citizen response.

*Sources:* Data on cases, deaths, testing, and vaccinations: Our World in Data (Ritchie et al. 2021). Data on government policies to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak and its consequences: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al. 2021). Data on aggregate mobility of citizens: Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports (Google 2021).

At the start of May, the government loosened bans on public gatherings of ten people or less, and by the end of June there were no restrictions on gatherings of 100 people or less. In mid-May, the requirement to close schools was lifted as was the requirement to cancel public events at the end of May. Mandatory wearing of facial coverings remained, although this was limited largely to enclosed spaces. The most significant health policy measure introduced during this period was the introduction of vaccination. From the beginning of the year, key workers and the elderly were prioritized for vaccination; with the availability of vaccination widened gradually until at the beginning of May, there was universal access for all adults wishing to avail themselves of the opportunity, with the Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine also available to children aged 12 or above. By the end of June, over a third of the population were fully vaccinated and more than four in ten had received at least one dose.

While the third wave was the most severe in terms of peak daily cases and deaths, these figures fell more swiftly and decisively than they did after the second wave. By the end of June, fewer than 20 deaths a day were attributable to COVID-19, and for the first time since the onset of the second wave there were less than a thousand patients hospitalized with symptoms of the virus. However, the emergence of the Delta variant and the likelihood of its arrival in Poland informed a cautious approach to further opening up.

## Prudent illiberalism rather than imprudent populism: understanding PiS's response to the crisis

At the outbreak of the pandemic, the political context was a curious blend of stability and instability. Since 2015, the quality of liberal democracy had descended to levels last seen at the beginning of transition from communism in 1989 (Coppedge et al. 2021), and Polish political life was characterized by the kind of vituperative and emotional elite-led polarization typical of populism. Yet, the supply-side ferment belied a striking stability on the demand side, with support for political parties relatively constant and overall attitudes to the government, the economy, the political situation, and quality of living remaining strongly positive (CBOS 2021).

Anti-lockdown forces were prominent enough to undertake high-profile protest actions aimed at discomfiting the government and promoting their own agendas, but were small enough not to pose a significant threat to the PiS.<sup>6</sup> While a certain degree of tension existed between the PiS and the minor parties – United Poland (*Solidarna Polska*; SP) and Agreement (*Porozumienie*) – with which it governed in coalition, the government could rely on a disciplined majority in the lower house of parliament. The opposition, while critical of many aspects of PiS's handling of the situation, was conscious of the risk of appearing to exploit an unprecedented crisis for political gain. In these circumstances, framing the response to the crisis in populist terms was inadvisable for PiS, as it would lend credibility to marginal radical voices while disrupting the consensus needed for their crisis response to be effective.

The response to the first wave was in any case conditioned less by party-political factors than by questions of state capacity. In Central and Eastern Europe, citizens' perceptions of the quality of government are lower than those of their Western European counterparts (Charron et al. 2021), and experts give lower ratings to these countries on measures of rigorous and impartial public administration (Coppedge et al. 2021). The overall quality of public services, including access to healthcare, is rated lower than in most Western European countries, the exceptions being Greece and Italy (Messner et al. 2020).

In common with several other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Poland's initial response to the crisis was thus governed by concern at the extent of state *incapacity* (Petrović et al. 2020, 16). According to the COVID-19 Tracker carried out by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Centre for the Study of Democracy 2021), perceptions of threat were particularly high at the outbreak of the crisis and remained so throughout. On a threat index from 1 (low) to 5 (high), the average respondent rated 4.17 in mid-April 2020 and 3.83 in mid-February 2021.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Poles remained skeptical of the effectiveness of measures taken by the government to deal with the economic consequences of the crisis: in the 12 survey waves conducted between April 2020 and February 2021, no more than a fifth of respondents thought that the measures were adequate, while over

a quarter regarded them as insufficient and over-bureaucratized. The majority of respondents saw them as at best a set of half measures.

Despite these concerns, in mid-April 2020 over half of Poles thought that the central government was doing an adequate job of responding to the crisis overall, with slightly fewer holding this opinion of local government and the EU (see Figure 9.2). By the end of the third wave of the pandemic in mid-May 2021, around half thought that the central government and the EU were responding adequately to the crisis, but less than a third were content with the actions of local government. Over the same period, a relatively stable minority of respondents thought that each of these tiers of government was not doing enough to deal with the pandemic, while a growing proportion of respondents felt that their response was exaggerated.

The Polish government thus operated in a context of relatively high acceptance of the need for containment and closure measures but deep skepticism about the capacity of the government to deal with the longer-term effects of the pandemic. This influenced the nature of the crisis response. The swift reopening after the first wave undoubtedly reflected complacency born of Poland's relative success in containing the spread of the virus, but also elite and public concerns about the ability of the economy to withstand the impact of the crisis. However, if party-political factors were initially unimportant, they quickly came to the fore. Presidential elections were due to be held in the spring of 2020, and with control of the veto power of the presidency (held by PiS loyalist Andrzej Duda) crucial to the realization of PiS's agenda, the need to win this election overrode questions of public health and legislative propriety.

While the Polish constitution allows certain liberties to be suspended following the declaration of a state of natural disaster, the PiS were unwilling to invoke this condition, which would automatically extend the president's existing term of office by at least 90 days. Party strategists anticipated that such a delay would mean conducting a reelection campaign for Duda in even less propitious conditions, with the social and economic consequences of the crisis beginning to be felt and the likelihood of a second wave of infections after the summer. Instead, PiS sought first to force through legislation mandating a constitutionally dubious postal-only election on the grounds of protecting public safety, and then when this was blocked by the minor coalition partner Agreement, the PiS switched to encouraging mass participation in traditional in-person elections held in late June and early July.

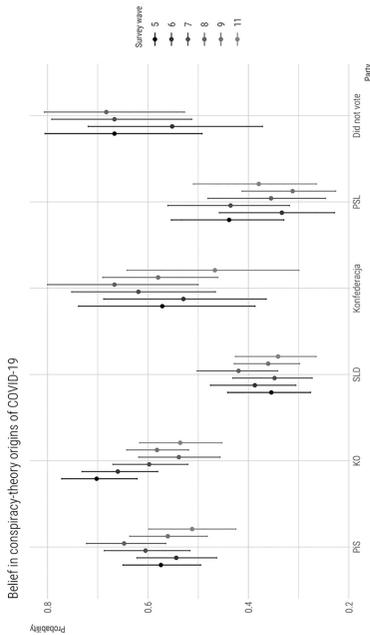
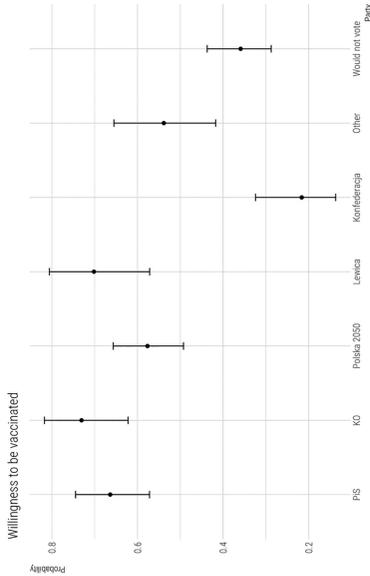
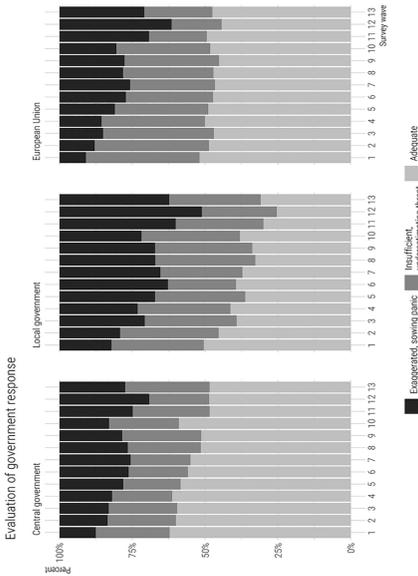
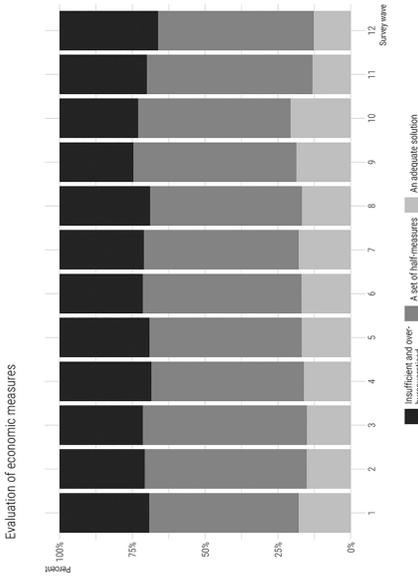
Even as Poland's health minister Łukasz Szumowski warned of a second wave (Polsat News 2020), Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki went as far as to encourage citizens – “particularly senior citizens” – to go “en masse” to polling stations, claiming that “the virus is in retreat...there is no need to be afraid” (TVN 24 2020). Following Duda's reelection in July, there was no need to maintain this pretense. While the sheer extent of the second wave clearly required the reimposition of containment and control measures anyway, the emergence of mass protests over the PiS-controlled Constitutional Tribunal's imposition of a near-total ban on abortion provided additional incentives for restricting public assembly.

The leitmotif of PiS's pandemic response was the illiberal executive decisionism it had increasingly resorted to since winning power in 2015. The swiftness with which PiS moved from insisting on postal elections to encouraging electoral "business as usual" reflected its prioritizing of political power over procedural consistency. The use of ordinances and ordinary legislation to impose confinement and closure policies in spite of concerns among constitutional scholars about their legality and the "legislative chaos" threatened by their introduction (Tuleja 2020, 19) was consistent with PiS's established practice of bypassing the constitution when its provisions collided with their political goals (Sadurski 2019).

PiS's populism is neither of overriding importance in understanding the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis nor is it entirely irrelevant. PiS's illiberal turn had, of course, been inspired by a populist critique of the post-1989 liberal order. In that sense, there was an indirect impact of populism on actions that PiS took during the pandemic. Where populism is *directly* relevant to the pandemic, two of the most potent sources of potential agitation are the attribution of blame concerning the origins of the virus (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020) and elite-level demands regarding forms of behavior such as mask-wearing and vaccination (Islam et al. 2021).

In successive iterations of the SWPS tracker, approximately equal proportions of Poles blamed the outbreak of the crisis on the deliberate agency of a foreign state or organization or regarded it as a natural phenomenon. Yet, while supporters of PiS were more likely than those voting for main opposition force the Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska* [KO]) to hold a more conspiratorial view of the pandemic, this was also a view shared by supporters of the opposition Polish Peasant Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* [PSL]) and the aforementioned Konfederacja (see Figure 9.2). It is unclear whether being in government led PiS to take a more cautious approach to exploiting potentially destabilizing narratives of blame and resentment or whether the split in their electorate on this question militated against their ability to craft a populist narrative around the origins of the pandemic. Yet, either way, while PiS continued to stoke narratives of crisis over issues such as "gender ideology" and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, it eschewed doing so in the case of COVID-19, with Konfederacja significantly more active in this regard.

At the start of 2021, the rollout of vaccines shifted attention to questions of vaccine safety and the consequences of choosing to be vaccinated or not. As Figure 9.2 shows, data collected in February suggested that Poles were divided on the issue, with just over half (53%) indicating a willingness to be vaccinated and just under half (47%) unwilling or reluctant. Significantly, a substantial majority of most parties' electorates had a preference for vaccination. The exception was Konfederacja, whose use of vaccine-skeptic and lockdown-skeptic rhetoric was reflected in the attitudes of its voters. There were similar levels of skepticism among the 30–40% of the Polish electorate which abstains from democratic processes. This significantly limited the potential for PiS to deploy populist



**FIGURE 9.2** The pandemic and pandemic response in Polish public opinion.

*Source:* SWPS COVID-19 Tracker (Centre for the Study of Democracy 2021).

*Notes:* The plot “Belief in conspiracy-theory origins of Covid-19” uses a retrospective question on voting that refers to the 2019 parliamentary election. The plot “Willingness to be vaccinated” uses a prospective question about a hypothetical vote on a coming Sunday.

arguments around anti-vaccine rhetoric, despite President Duda's periodic and rather vague expressions of skepticism about vaccinations (Kość 2020). PiS's recognition that the limits to state capacity required the achievement of a behavioral consensus among citizens raised the potential costs of populist agitation over the pandemic itself, leaving ownership of anti-vaccine arguments to Konfederacja and extra-parliamentary pressure groups.

### **Crisis management amid lockdown fatigue: the waves to come**

No pandemic ever comes at an opportune moment, but for PiS the timing was particularly inconvenient. Instead of pushing forward its agenda in the first half of a new parliamentary term, it lost over a year to crisis management. While the government's mismanagement of the second wave was a contributory factor to the fall in the polls PiS experienced toward the end of 2020, the electorate did not severely punish PiS for the crisis. However, at the beginning of 2021, the social mood was considerably less optimistic than it had been a year previously, with negative attitudes to the government, economy, and political situation outweighing positive sentiments (CBOS 2021).

The crisis also exacerbated existing rivalries within the coalition, particularly over the abortive postal elections for the presidency and the free market Agreement party's more skeptical view of ongoing restrictions on business. PiS attempted to restart its agenda by hitching its redistributive policy initiatives to post-pandemic stimulus funding in the form of a "Polish Deal" (*Polski Ład*) announced in May. However, tensions within the coalition gave rise to repeated speculation that PiS would opt for early elections in the autumn of 2021 with a view to refreshing its mandate and disposing of troublesome but independently unviable coalition partners.

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, PiS's stewardship of Poland during the pandemic refutes the idea that populists are incapable of dealing with a crisis that is not of their own making but supports the argument that they do not thrive *as populists* in conditions of exogenous crisis. While PiS attempted to innovate new narratives of crisis which they could take ownership of, most notably concerning the alleged threat of "LGBT ideology," COVID-19 remained the most salient locus of crisis in Polish politics. Toward the end of 2021, economic and social restrictions were gradually lifted and some semblance of normality began to return. However, while initial problems of vaccine supply were largely dealt with, new problems emerged: the reluctance of a large minority of skeptics to avail themselves of the opportunity for vaccination, the unwillingness of a lockdown-weary public to subject themselves to the same discipline they demonstrated over the first three waves, and the government's awareness that its slim majority would be vulnerable to rebellion by lockdown skeptics in its own ranks. Yet, further waves of infection are inevitable, ensuring that the second half of the parliamentary term

will be marked by the periodic return to crisis management rather than crisis performance.

## Notes

- 1 While Jarosław Kaczyński has preferred to operate behind the scenes since an ill-fated stint as prime minister in 2006–2007, his control of all important policy, personnel, and strategic decisions remains undisputed. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki lacks a support base within the party to challenge Kaczyński's authority, and although President Andrzej Duda possesses instruments of executive independence, he has largely facilitated rather than challenged Kaczyński's objectives.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, all information in this section comes from the following sources. Data on cases, deaths, testing, and vaccinations: Our World in Data (Ritchie et al. 2021). Data on government policies to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak and its consequences: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al. 2021). Data on aggregate mobility of citizens: Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports (Google 2021).
- 3 While cases and deaths are problematic as measures of the extent of the pandemic at a given moment, the use of these data to identify the approximate peaks and troughs of the second and third waves is corroborated by data on the number of ventilators reserved for COVID patients currently occupied by those patients (Gadomska et al. 2021).
- 4 The mobility index in Figure 9.1 is the smoothed average of data reporting the mobility of Polish citizens in the following categories: retail and recreation, grocery and pharmacies, parks, transit stations, workplaces, and residential areas.
- 5 The policy stringency index is a composite measure of the strictness of a country's containment, closure, and public information measures, calculated by the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker team (Hale et al. 2021).
- 6 Protest against COVID-19 containment and closure measures was dominated not by populist movements but by libertarian organizations. Chief among these was the political party Confederation (Konfederacja). Lipiński (2021) includes Konfederacja in his study of pandemic populism in Poland. However, consistent with the approach of The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2019), Konfederacja is understood here as a radical right party of libertarian rather than populist orientation. The only non-governing populist movement, Kukiz'15, was by spring 2020 a marginal and ineffectual political force.
- 7 This index contains variables asking respondents to rate their perception of the threat posed by COVID-19 to the Polish economy, the health of Poles, everyday life, their financial situation, and their personal health.

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# 10

## HUNGARY

### Creeping Authoritarianism in the Name of Pandemic Response

*Agnes Batory*

Reflecting on the political consequences of the greatest public health emergency in living memory, analysts are divided on whether populist forces have benefitted from the COVID-19 pandemic. “Populists love the pandemic” (Sierakowski 2020), claims one; “the Covid bell tolls for Eastern Europe’s populists” (Rambousek 2021), observes another, to mention just two contrasting views. Clearly, the urgency of a pandemic situation offers excellent opportunities for enterprising populist leaders: it allows them to portray themselves as men of action and provides a pretext not just for simplifying the terms of the debate—as Moffitt and Tormey (2014) argue, generally a defining feature of the populist political style—but also for sidelining or negating the institutions designed for debate. On the other hand, for populists in government, a narrative, however convincing, is unlikely to be sufficient for long in a genuine crisis; eventually, they do have to deliver on their promises to maintain electoral support. And in this context, populism’s traditional anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, and distrust of the foreign all sit uneasily with the need for scientific expertise and international collaboration effectively to combat the disease.

How this tension played out in the case of Hungary is the subject of this chapter. Hungary is a particularly interesting and well-suited country case for such an endeavor, since it has been governed by the EU’s arguably most successful populist party for a decade. How has Fidesz and its long-time leader Viktor Orbán responded to the crisis, both in terms of political narratives and mobilization strategies and in terms of policies proposed and implemented? How did this crisis response evolve over time? Was the crisis response distinctly populist in nature? And how can we make sense of Fidesz’ political and policy response? These are the questions this chapter sets out to investigate.

However, first a few clarifications are in order. Populism is a fuzzy concept, but sidestepping the scholarly debate, the definition adopted here, in line with the book

as a whole, is the widely used ideational one by Mudde (2007, 23) as a “thin-centered ideology” that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people. Populists come in many forms; an important distinction is between exclusionary populism, typically found in Europe—Fidesz clearly belongs to this category—and inclusionary populism, mainly in Latin America (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). The former is exclusionary, in the sense that they base their appeal on “the exclusion of all those who are not natives” be they (Muslim) immigrants, the Roma, or others considered as aliens (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). European radical right (exclusionary, nativist) populists are also Euroskeptic to a smaller or greater degree as they tend to see the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008; Vasilopoulou 2018).

Three other topics from the vast literature on populism should at least be mentioned here, since they are particularly relevant for a discussion on the pandemic response. One is how the relationship between populism and crisis should be conceptualized. The most influential argument in the recent literature is that “the performance of crisis [is] an internal core feature of populism”; populists not only utilize but also trigger and perpetuate crises for partisan advantage (Moffitt 2015, 189). In fact, some scholars argue that a sense of crisis is essential for populism to survive (Taggart 2004).

A second and closely related issue is whether there is a type of crisis response that can be conceptualized as distinctively populist in nature. Moffitt (2015) argues that there is, and it is defined by the invocation of the “people,” pitted against those allegedly responsible for the crisis and the intention to perpetuate the crisis (see also Rennó and Ringe’s Introduction chapter in this volume). Finally, the impact of governmental role on populism is controversial in the literature. While there are good reasons to expect that populists lose their electoral appeal once they can no longer portray themselves to be outside the establishment (“the self-limiting quality of populism” [Taggart 2004]), evidence in Europe and elsewhere points to populist parties successfully reconciling the responsibilities of office with continuing populist appeal (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015).

Following this short introduction, the next section provides some background to the country case and traces how the pandemic and the crisis management measures unfolded. The “Analyzing the response” section links the response to a range of factors found to be relevant in the comparative literature (Rennó and Ringe’s Introductory chapter). Finally, a brief concluding section offers an outlook on how the pandemic’s effects might shape Hungarian politics in the future.

## The pandemic and the government’s crisis response

Hungary’s political history since the 1990 regime change has been turbulent. Initially a poster child of postcommunist democratic transition and integration into the EU, more recently it has featured in political science scholarship as a textbook

case of democratic backsliding, lost momentum in economic development, and often a stumbling block for various EU initiatives. In 2020, V-Dem classified Hungary as an electoral authoritarian regime, that is, the EU's only non-democracy (V-Dem Institute 2020). In the same year, Freedom House rated Hungary as partly free and classified it as a transitional or hybrid regime (Freedom House 2021).

In no small part, these negative tendencies can be traced back to Fidesz' landslide electoral victory in 2010. Following the global economic crisis, numerous corruption scandals, and constant in-fighting within its ranks, the Socialist Party lost power and splintered, leaving Fidesz with a qualified majority in parliament. Fidesz and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Fidesz leader since 1993) lost no time in consolidating their power by adopting a new constitution that considerably weakened checks and balances, redrawing the electoral system to favor its candidates, curbing the freedom of the press, and appointing party loyalists to lead all significant, supposedly independent institutions from the central bank to the state audit office. Fidesz-friendly economic interests also acquired control of large segments of the print and electronic media. Individuals close to the governing party or the prime minister personally amassed large fortunes through favorable public contracts (David-Barrett and Fazekas 2020). For instance, Orbán's childhood friend Lőrinc Mészáros, by training as a gas fitter, was the richest person in Hungary in 2021 (Forbes Hungary 2021).

Meanwhile, the center-left opposition remained fragmented and largely unable to cooperate with Jobbik, an erstwhile extreme right party that slowly re-fashioned itself as Fidesz' "mainstream" challenger on the right. For much of the decade after 2010, Fidesz led the polls by very large margins and won qualified majorities in parliament in the 2014 and 2018 elections, capitalizing in the latter case on the 2015 refugee crisis, when large numbers of refugees fleeing turbulence in the Middle East crossed the country on their way to Western Europe. However, for the first time since 2010, the opposition parties performed well in the fall 2019 municipal elections, securing the Budapest mayoral office and winning a number of county seats by fielding joint candidates, and thus discovered a way to challenge Orbán—just as the memory of the refugee crisis and with it the popular appeal of Orbán's xenophobic "anti-migrant" message began to wane. This was the scene when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe, presenting Fidesz with the opportunity, and the challenge, to take control of the agenda.

And indeed, already in January, sometime before the first case was detected in Hungary, Viktor Orbán switched to full crisis mode. The prime minister convened a task force, headed by the minister of the interior, to coordinate measures. The task force included the minister for health and the chief medical officer, one doctor, and the head of the national ambulance service, but other members were drawn from law and order fields—disaster relief, the police, counterterrorism, and the aliens police (because, as the prime minister said on 31 January 2020, "the virus comes from abroad").<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the first measures focused on border control and essentially aimed at screening people arriving from high infection countries, chiefly among them, by then, Italy.

The task force developed protocols largely following World Health Organization (WHO) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) recommendations. The country ceased to admit asylum seekers into transit zones at the borders in February. The first cases were detected in early March, and after a few days' delay, the government closed first universities, then from mid-March also primary and secondary schools, and the borders. By the end of the month, all nonessential shops closed and a ban on all public events/gatherings was in place; the country essentially entered into strict lockdown. Military commanders or coordinators took charge of about half of the country's hospitals at the end of March, and in April, in anticipation of infections peaking during the month, the government ordered hospitals to free up 60% of total bed capacity, forcing them to discharge patients who would normally have needed hospital care. COVID-related hospitalization and fatality rates began to improve toward the end of April, and the lockdown measures were gradually lifted. By mid-June, the pandemic appeared to have subsided and life largely returned to normal.

With about 600 lives lost to the pandemic in a country of approximately ten million, Hungary weathered the first wave (March to May 2020) relatively well, essentially by implementing the standard policy measures other countries also introduced following WHO recommendations. One significant exception is the obligation to wear masks, which was introduced only in May and only with respect to closed public spaces (ECDC 2021a). Not surprisingly, Fidesz attributed "overcoming the first wave" to its own decisive and speedy crisis measures, made possible by the Authorization Act of March 30 that gave the government sweeping powers in all spheres of life and effectively introduced rule by decree. But Viktor Orbán also recognized the importance of "national unity/cooperation" and the "excellence of Hungary's medical professionals" in avoiding mass fatalities (April 29, 2020, radio interview).

However, the medical professionals themselves seemed less impressed with the government's actions. Initially, there was a persistent shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) in medical practices—the government countered with the claim that it was the general practitioners' own responsibility to secure PPE. The Hungarian Doctors' Chambers (2020) called on the task force to greatly step up testing (Hungary tested very little in comparison with other EU countries [ECDC 2021b]) and contact tracing (which remained rudimentary throughout the period and into the winter), require mask-wearing much more extensively, and monitor and enforce quarantine more strictly (checks were performed sporadically at best). Equally important, the doctors demanded more transparency and consultation instead of the missives issued by the task force: "the country's doctors are not soldiers and do not carry out orders" (Hungarian Doctors' Chambers 2020). The task force did not disclose (or perhaps did not have) infection data broken down by municipality, which made it very difficult for local governments—many led by opposition parties—to make or implement policy in an evidence-based manner in their own competencies.

From the summer months, the government's declared objective was to focus on restarting the economy. This meant essentially no significant lockdown measure, with some exceptions until November, which proved to be a grave mistake. After a summer of abandon, case notification and death rates started to pick up in early September and quickly surpassed the worst seen during the spring first wave. The government reacted, again, by banning the entry of foreigners to the country (with some exceptions), but put aside its own rule to allow thousands of football supporters to cross the border and attend the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Super Cup in Budapest at the end of September. Entertainment venues, shops, and schools remained open until November. Viktor Orbán justified this strategy by claiming first that "the people" wanted Hungary to stay open and work and second that the situation was different from the first wave: then, full lockdown was necessary to flatten the curve and prepare the country but "now [in September] we no longer have to worry that anybody would be left without adequate care, since the medical system is ready to treat mass infections" (September 21, 2020, radio interview).

By November, however, it became abundantly clear that at least the latter claim was on shaky grounds: medical professionals warned about a serious risk that the entire medical system would be overwhelmed by the rapidly rising number of cases. As a representative of the Doctors' Chamber said in early November, he believed soon doctors with COVID symptoms would be expected to go to work "simply because otherwise there will be no one to care for the patients" (Nyiri 2020). At this point, lockdown measures were finally introduced, alongside the obligation to wear a mask at all times in public places, even outdoors. But these measures seemed too little too late—for example, primary schools stayed open until March—and took time to have any effect: the second wave (October 2020 to January 2021) peaked in December, and an even worse third wave (March to May 2021) was to come, peaking in April 2021. In April and early May 2021, Hungary recorded the highest mortality numbers in the world, with 284 deaths per 100,000 (Johns Hopkins 2021). By the end of the third wave, almost 30,000 people had died of COVID-19 in Hungary—almost three times more than in similar-sized neighboring countries Austria or Slovakia and twice more than in Sweden, a country widely regarded to have mismanaged its crisis response (ECDC 2021c).

Not surprisingly, Orbán seemed less and less inclined to "own" the crisis as the situation got worse over time. Before the pandemic hit, he said that it was "the job of the government to defend the people against all dangers, including pandemics" (January 31, 2020). As already mentioned, he took credit for the relatively favorable outcome after the first wave—when, incidentally, most other postcommunist EU member states also did relatively well. But by December 2020, he clearly wanted to shift the blame for the rising death toll—for instance, to the European Commission for not being speedy enough with the procurement and rollout of COVID vaccines but, to some extent, also to his government's own task force, which was supposedly in charge of all operative decisions. "All

decisions about [Covid] defense are made by the task force. When, where, who we test is not a political decision, but a decision by the experts” (Hirklikk 2020).

Since the winter pandemic measures would have been difficult to present as a success, Orbán did his best to shift the attention to his government’s efforts to source vaccines internationally. Characteristically, this involved leaving behind (or aside) the existing joint EU effort to secure vaccines from Western pharma companies and involved ordering large quantities of the Sinopharm and Sputnik vaccines from China and Russia, respectively, neither of which was approved by the European Medicines Agency. However, thanks to the availability of especially the Chinese vaccine as well as, after some delay, the AstraZeneca and Pfizer–BioNTech vaccines distributed by the EU, initially vaccine rollout indeed proceeded faster in Hungary than many other European countries (although by the summer Hungary fell behind in comparison with other EU countries). The easing of pandemic measures was then timed to follow vaccination thresholds and, with five million people vaccinated in late May 2021, the pandemic was again declared to be defeated (Coronavirus Task Force 2021).

### Analyzing the response

The Orbán government’s response to the pandemic was distinctly populist in some respects. In line with Moffitt’s (2015) proposition, Orbán constantly invoked “the people” in his explanations of crisis measures—and in fact, often justified specific policy measures as responses that people want and rejected others as measures people would not endorse. For instance, he consistently claimed that in opening up and staying open in the fall, he was merely following the will of the people, expressed in a national consultation (a large-scale consultative exercise favored by the Orbán government [Batory and Svensson 2019]), which was “to keep the country going.” He justified keeping nurseries and primary schools open, as closing schools would “keep most people away from work, and the people don’t want this. When the majority of people want it, there will be a possibility for [closing schools]” (Orbán interview, TV2 Tenyek, November 11, 2020).

Also in line with Moffitt’s (2015) characterization of the typical populist crisis response, Orbán was quick to attribute responsibility for the pandemic to the “usual suspects”: migrants and international elites alleged to promote migration, notably US philanthropist investor George Soros and those claimed to be in his pay, including, at times, the EU institutions. A common theme in Orbán’s rhetoric during the pandemic was the supposed ineffectuality and alienation of the “bureaucrats in Brussels,” or just “Brussels,” from the daily problems his government faced and decisively tackled. As for perpetuating the crisis, another distinctive feature of populist crisis management (Moffitt 2015), Orbán was in a more difficult position. On the one hand, the pandemic created opportunities for blaming the opposition—for instance, Orbán claimed that the opposition parties aimed to create vaccine skepticism when they questioned his decision to roll out the Chinese vaccine without the European Medicines Agency (EMA)

approval—or the EU, for instance, when the promised vaccine distribution got delayed.

On the other hand, as a party of government, Fidesz desperately needed to bring the pandemic under control. Indeed, Fidesz' governmental role is a key explanatory factor for its endorsement of most of the “standard” pandemic control measures, including the introduction of lockdowns, distancing, stay at home orders, and the like. These measures were introduced relatively swiftly in the first wave (spring 2020), and eventually also in the second and third waves (winter 2020 and spring 2021), and then after a long delay, which was however more likely caused by a mistaken choice to keep the economy going than a principled opposition to the measures themselves. Given the need, for a party in government to “beat the virus,” Fidesz also did not engage in vaccine skepticism, nor was it in a position to mobilize against the lockdown or other control measures. On the contrary, Orbán very strongly promoted the vaccination campaign, urging everyone to register for the vaccine and when availability was no longer a problem, people were allowed to choose which vaccine to receive.

It is also likely that the reason for not following some of the other WHO recommendations, notably contact tracing, was not so much reluctance to fall in line as low state/administrative capacity and poor coordination among government agencies. The situation is somewhat different with testing: local political analysts commonly assumed that the reason for not investing in the expansion of testing capacity was the government's intention to hide the rate of infection. Reluctance to disclose the true gravity of the situation was also detectable in the government's handling of the press: the daily COVID press conference was moved online and inquiries from independent news outlets were regularly ignored (Végh 2021).

Overall, the strong impact of governmental responsibility on Fidesz' handling of the crisis is clear. A number of institutional features may have further reinforced this. Hungary is a parliamentary system, where any internally disciplined party holding a stable majority will control the government. In the case of Fidesz, the party held a supermajority in the National Assembly since 2010, allowing it to single-handedly change even laws of constitutional standing; moreover, the party was highly centralized and dominated by its long-standing leader, Viktor Orbán. The crisis, however, provided an opportunity for the ruling party to tighten its grip on power even more. Emergency legislation passed at the end of March gave the government the power to rule by decree. The so-called Authorization Act had no sunset clause and no mechanism of regular scrutiny, which many saw as particularly worrisome. These concerns were quickly proven well founded, in that the government adopted decrees on a wide range of matters that had little relevance for combating the pandemic but further weakened civil rights and liberties, for instance, in terms of granting access to citizens' personal data while limiting open access to public information (Végh 2021). The Authorization Act was eventually revoked by the Fidesz-controlled parliament in June, but only in conjunction with amendments to the regulation of exceptional legal

orders, and the state of emergency morphed into a “state of medical emergency,” with no significant impairment of executive power in practice (Eötvös Károly Institute 2020; Végh 2021).

All this suggests that the prime minister was in a uniquely strong position to make policy, but also that his responsibility for policy outcomes was difficult to obfuscate. Thus, not surprisingly, public confidence in the government’s handling of the crisis eroded over time. While, in March 2020, 75% of respondents were satisfied with the government’s pandemic response and only 24% was dissatisfied, by March 2021 only 45% was satisfied and the majority (53%) dissatisfied (Publicus polls for Nepszava, March 2020, 2021). However, these evaluations were strongly influenced by partisanship: although Fidesz supporters were also somewhat less impressed with how the government handled the crisis by the time the second wave hit, they maintained a strongly positive opinion (96% in March 2020 and 85% a year later). This contrasted sharply with the opposition parties’ supporters, only 13% of whom thought in March 2021 that the government had handled the crisis well (Publicus polls for Nepszava, March 2020, 2021).

## Conclusion and outlook

How these evaluations among the public evolve over time has great significance for the parties’ electoral prospects in the spring 2022 elections. As of May 2021, Fidesz maintained a huge lead over any single opposition party: 29% of respondents said they would vote for Fidesz, whereas the opposition parties all polled in the single digits. However, the largest single block of voters was undecided, and it seems that over the year of the pandemic, their numbers gradually decreased and many switched their allegiance to the opposition parties rather than to Fidesz (undecided: 40% in June 2020 and 31% in May 2021 [Publicus May 2021]). In the course of the pandemic, the opposition parties also intensified their efforts to overcome earlier divisions and formally agreed in December 2020 to jointly contest the 2022 elections to maximize their chances in the majoritarian electoral system that otherwise strongly favored the ruling party over a fragmented opposition.

At the time of writing, it is too early to tell which of the camps will win and thus there is no simple answer to the question if the pandemic benefitted or weakened Fidesz in purely partisan terms. Much will depend on whether another COVID wave hits in the fall and whether the economic consequences of the pandemic and lockdowns can be mitigated in time for the election campaign. It is, however, already clear that the pandemic’s most significant political consequence is to have reinforced and sped up the authoritarian drift of the Hungarian political system. Under the guise of the pandemic, Fidesz passed a great deal of legislation designed to weaken the opposition and strengthen the economic and/or political power of those close to Orbán and his party.

As to the pandemic response itself, while the government’s measures largely followed international practice in the first wave, later times they can be

characterized as an erratic mix which led to Hungary leading the mortality statistics globally during the spring 2021 spring wave. The response was distinctly populist in presenting the measures directly as the will of the people and in seeking to shift responsibility to actors outside the “nation”—be that the EU, migrants, or the opposition. However, being in office clearly limited the space for wanting to perpetuate the crisis; on the contrary, Fidesz’ electoral fortunes will depend on convincing the public that they successfully “beat the virus” without irreparable damage to the economy.

## Note

- 1 Viktor Orbán’s speeches are quoted from his official website, [miniszterelnok.hu](http://miniszterelnok.hu)

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# 11

## TURKEY

### Governing the Unpredictable through Market Imperative

*Evren Balta and Soli Özel*

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken both governments and citizens by surprise. With no prior experience on how to contain the virus or implement appropriate countermeasures, governments learned from each other and adopted what they perceived as successful measures in other countries. They also followed the recommendations of international institutions and experts. Even though international practices mattered, the response to the pandemic has been shaped by the limits of domestic politics. Leadership style, the design of political institutions, the strength of the health system, government, trust, and most importantly government capacity have all determined how countries adapted and attempted to counter the catastrophic effects of this global crisis.

These domestic factors that shaped governments' responses evolved during the past decade through the uniquely rapid ascent of various populist leaders into positions of significant power worldwide (Devinney and Hartwell 2020). This populist wave not only eroded accountability and institutions, but it also deepened political and social polarization, resulting in low levels of trust in leaders and political processes with pernicious consequences for democracy (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Turkey is a prime example of how populism in power reacted to the crisis (Balta, Kaltwasser, and Yagci 2021).

Since 2002, Turkey has been ruled by a populist political party (the Justice and Development Party [AKP]) with a strong religious-conservative leaning. Although the AKP followed a more liberal approach in the first decade of its rule, the party's key discursive strategy increasingly shifted toward a classic populist Manichean discourse as it tightened its grip on power. The party engineered an "us vs. them" divide, referring on the one hand to the people and on the other hand to the "republican elite," who represent the "establishment" embodied in

the main opposition party (Aydın-Düzgit and Balta 2018). The AKP was tremendously successful in achieving electoral dominance and political control, securing parliamentary majorities in 2002, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2018, and local election victories in 2004, 2009, and 2014. These successes were consolidated through a tight grip on the media; a punishment system relying on a co-opted judiciary; and a deeply rooted patronage system that redistributes state revenues and manipulates economic rules (Demiralp and Balta 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis first hit Turkey in March 2020. By May 2020, Turkey already had the seventh largest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people and was frequently cited as having the fastest-rising infection rates in the world (McKernan 2020). Two more waves followed: in October 2020 and around March 2021. Although Turkey became a COVID-19 hotspot in all three waves, the rapid spread of the infection did not overburden the health-care system and cause its collapse, in contrast to many other countries. This enabled the government to frame its handling of the crisis as a success story (Balta and Özel 2020a). In what follows, we analyze Turkey's handling of the crisis as it relates to Turkey's regime type.

### Populists in power confront the COVID-19 crisis

According to Benjamin Moffitt (2020), crisis performance is key for populist political actors. Rather than reacting to an external crisis, populist actors actively perform *a sense of crisis* to affectively divide population into “the people” and “the enemies of the people” while presenting themselves as strong leaders that represent the voice of people. Yet the COVID-19 crisis was not a typical crisis that the AKP government could control discursively and elevate to a level for further populist consolidation. In fact, for populists in government, a discursive framing of a genuine crisis is bound to fail. Eventually, what mattered was the performance to maintain electoral support. Indeed, having been in power for nearly two decades, healthcare provision and economic management were seen as being an exclusive achievement of the AKP. Thus, failing to deliver during a genuine health crisis could not be externalized as easily as other social and political crises.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis has been unlike any other. After 16 years in power that firmly established the AKP and its cadres as the new power elite, the party's antagonism toward “the corrupt elite” was increasingly defined in reference to a global cabal of international institutions, foreign governments, and undefined external forces that conspire against Turkey and/or Muslims (Çelik and Balta 2020). However, in this case, the government could not skillfully re-frame its management of the crisis as a burden inflicted by external actors on “the people.”

Health sector restructuring was a major cause of the AKP's initial political success and the consolidation of populism in Turkey (Powell and Yörük 2017). The old social security system operated through three main institutions serving different occupational groups and was neither universal nor equally accessible to

all citizens, as it offered the best protection to civil servants while significantly curtailing access to state-subsidized health services for the lower classes and the urban and rural poor (Buğra and Candaş 2011, 520). In 2008, the government combined the three social insurance funds with a declared aim of providing equal access to healthcare and enable the inclusion of marginalized segments of the population (Günel 2010). In actual fact, between 2002 and 2008, Turkey's health spending did rise significantly and rapidly (World Bank 2021), but then it began to decline sharply. Even though the AKP government followed a neo-liberal privatization scheme in the health sector, by eliminating the boundaries between occupational groups, and relatively strengthening coverage for low-income groups, it was able to claim to represent the people.

Thus, the health system's ability to cope with the COVID-19 crisis was very important for the AKP government and its claim to legitimacy. Throughout the crisis, health provision for COVID-19 patients remained free of charge, expansive, and quite centralized. A system based on neighborhood provision of primary health services was used to track COVID-19 patients and provide primary care for all. Home visits by COVID-19 teams and frequent phone calls by family practitioners assigned to every Turkish citizen prior to the pandemic made the health system more effective. Patient data were also kept centrally while quarantine compliance was monitored through an application called Life Fits Home, specifically designed for the COVID-19 crisis. Every citizen received a unique code which was mandatory for using public services and transportation. This relative success, specifically in terms of preventing the collapse of the health sector, vastly increased the confidence of the Turkish government.

However, what mattered was not only the structure of the health system which responded to the needs of the people who already had COVID-19. To be considered successful in handling the pandemic and to keep the tourism sector running, the government had to minimize the virus' prevalence and the number of infections. This required strict measures like full lockdowns, which were then deemed unacceptable and unsustainable for the economy. Thus, the government's main strategy to keep the prevalence low was to keep the workforce active as much as possible and simultaneously removing nonworkers from social life. Two measures were crucial in this regard: age restrictions and school closures—both of which had significant short- and long-term negative consequences on certain age groups.

## Containing the virus

Throughout the crisis, the government used various strategies to contain the spread of COVID-19. The first group of measures, which the government promoted as the major pillar of its pandemic response, included a mask mandate, social distancing, and hygiene behaviors (*maske, mesafe, hijyen*). Health Minister Fahrettin Koca constantly urged everyone to observe social distancing measures, follow hygiene guidance, and wear masks (Yener and Karaaslan 2020). Indeed,

this was labeled as *the new normal*, which enabled the government to gradually shift responsibility for controlling the pandemic from the state to the citizens. Government officials continuously upbraided citizens for ignoring protective measures, shared images of non-compliers, and accused the *society* of spreading the virus. Fines for not wearing a mask were very high, and TV screens were filled with images of police officers punishing or fining non-compliers.

The second group of measures was border closures. Turkey was among the first European countries to close its borders to travelers coming from China (on February 3, 2020) and from Iran (February 23). Despite stopping flights to China and Iran, Turkish pilgrims were allowed to travel to Saudi Arabia on an *umrah* visit (Muslim pilgrimage) coordinated by the Religious Affairs Directorate, and returning groups were quarantined rather haphazardly. Faced with growing criticism, the government closed all borders to everyone except for returning residents. In time, the policy became less strict. Turkey even allowed visitors coming from high-prevalence departure points, provided they were in possession of a negative PCR test taken within the previous 72 hours. Flights were occasionally suspended for certain departure points, such as Brazil, UK, and South Africa, amid rising cases of a variant of the novel coronavirus. In short, to protect Turkey's tourism industry, the government followed a relatively liberal border policy and used border controls haphazardly.

The third group of measures was limitation of mobility within Turkey, such as lockdowns and banning public gatherings. However, the government rarely used full lockdowns, opting instead for partial lockdowns, such as weekend and night curfews, to curb the economic impact of the pandemic while keeping the workforce active. The longest full lockdown of 17 days was imposed in May 2021 amid rising case numbers, which would result in Turkey being red flagged as a travel destination. The most unique and longest-lasting measure, however, was age-based restrictions on mobility. In the early days of the pandemic, the government banned all nonessential movement by people over 65 years old and people with comorbidities. This policy was later extended to include people under 18 unless they were employed. People over 65 were not allowed to go out at all for months; and when people of both age groups were allowed out, it was only for a limited number of hours per day. This ban clearly indicated that the government prioritized keeping the workforce on the production line in the middle of a deepening economic crisis. Some labeled this strategy "class immunity" in mocking reference to the concept of "herd immunity." The policy had long-lasting adverse physical and psychological effects on youth and the elderly.

Furthermore, to flatten the curve, the Turkish government continually opted for school closures—a measure which most European countries rejected in the second wave, arguing that it would be detrimental to the children's future (Eddy 2020). Although some grades, such as primary schoolers, occasionally received face-to-face education, starting on March 23, 2020, the country's 18 million students followed classes online and on TV. Turkey experienced one of the longest school closures in the world (Yıldırım and Öztürk 2020) and displayed the

worst education disruption among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (UNICEF 2021). Here, we also need to note that every attempt to open the schools created a backlash among parents and teachers' unions, claiming that reopening schools would risk students' and educators' health.

As for the institutional design, initially all containment measures were announced with reference to the newly established scientific committee. During the early days of the pandemic, President Erdoğan rarely took center stage to announce figures or government measures. Instead, the health minister, Fahrettin Koca, acted as the spokesperson for the scientific committee. Even though President Erdoğan later began to directly address the population more frequently when announcing measures and restrictions, the health minister and his references to the scientific committee continued to remain visible.

Apart from institutional and social measures related to public health, one of the most important aspects of COVID-19 measures was economic. The economic performance of populists in power is almost as important as their ability to contain the virus and significantly account for fluctuations in electoral support and approval. Opinion polls noted that support for Erdoğan declined significantly amid the population's growing economic concerns due to COVID-19 restrictions (Sözcü 2021). As elsewhere, the Turkish government announced fiscal, monetary, and financial measures to boost its approval ratings. It provided emergency credit to industry and partial relief to families impacted by the economic slowdown. However, most support was channeled through businesses and no expansive relief package was announced to decrease the burden for families hit by the pandemic (Tank 2020). Direct income support was provided to families as cash payments, unemployment payments, and part-time working allowances, albeit to a very limited amount. Various changes to worker rights were introduced, such as granting administrative leave to all public sector employees, banning the dismissal of employees, and publicly funding sick leave wages for workers who tested positive for COVID-19 (Tanca et al. 2020). However, because of the limited level of economic support, heeding the "stay home" call was only practical for the upper and middle classes who could work from home (Jurich and Işık 2021).

### **Opting for measures and reporting figures**

The Turkish government needed to show some success in containing the virus to boost its approval ratings, which were already declining before the COVID-19 crisis hit. It had to revitalize its already collapsing economy, which was particularly vulnerable to the pandemic-induced global recession (Tanca et al. 2020), and to reopen its borders to tourism, one of the main engines of Turkey's economy. The competition for international prestige has also been waged through statistics. The success story was dependent on the case numbers, and the government not only opted for containment measures to keep the cases down but also used various methods of data manipulation to portray a continuing success story.

During the first wave, the government only reported cases with positive tests, whereas it excluded patients who tested negative but were diagnosed as having COVID-19 based on computer tomography images and clinical findings. Later, although testing capacity increased as the pandemic spread, an extensive and aggressive testing policy was never put in motion and testing protocols constantly changed. During the summer of 2020, reports were leaking from hospitals about testing protocols having changed to prevent physicians testing the asymptomatic contacts of their COVID-19 patients. It also became almost impossible for an ordinary individual to get tested unless they had significant COVID-19 symptoms (Demir and Kılıç 2020).

However, the most unique and controversial strategy was a change in terminology in reporting figures. From July 29, 2020, the Health Ministry's daily COVID-19 briefing no longer referred to cases, but only to patients. Initially, only a few people noticed this change. However, irregularities began to emerge. Specifically, the proportion of deaths and critically ill patients in the overall figures was rising.

As pressure intensified, Fahrettin Koca revealed on September 30th that the official figures released since July 29 excluded those who had tested positive for the virus but were showing no symptoms. Koca further explained that all figures since then referred to patients not cases (Aydın-Düzgüt and Balta 2020). In other words, after July 29, 2020, the government completely altered its reporting without informing the Turkish public and did not list positive test results if the patient was believed to be asymptomatic. In relation to WHO's figures, this reporting change meant that Turkey had fewer daily cases than Austria, Hungary, and Serbia, which were reporting much higher infection rates despite having much smaller populations. Yet, most other countries were reporting asymptomatic positive cases, based on WHO guidance, which defines a confirmed case as "a person with laboratory confirmation of COVID-19 infection, irrespective of clinical signs and symptoms" (World Health Organization 2020).

This change in methodology and terminology and the ensuing irregularity made it impossible to reliably track the spread of the pandemic in Turkey or to compare it with other countries. On November 25, 2020, as the virus spread uncontrollably, Koca finally decided to announce the "true" number of cases rather than only symptomatic patients. This was followed by stricter measures, such as night curfews and weekend lockdowns, although these belated measures were more limited than those imposed during the first wave. For example, although schools and restaurants were closed, malls and mosques remained open. Under these conditions, in under a week, Turkey went from being a success story to having the world's highest number of reported cases. Turkey's response to the pandemic is thus a perfect example of post-truth politics in which the reality is disconnected from factual details and twisted to accommodate political interests and economic expediency (Balta and Özel 2020b).

The government's lack of transparency in reporting the figures and its haphazard application of measures generated a lot of criticism from civil society.

However, the government saw this criticism as a hostile effort to discredit its pandemic policies. Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the junior partner in Turkey's ruling coalition, even accused the physicians' professional organization (Turkish Medical Association [TTB]) of spreading unfounded and panic-inducing accusations and demanded its closure (CNN Türk 2020a). Such a demonization of critics, specifically of doctors calling for transparency in figures and public debate around measures, have become one of the hallmarks of Turkey's pandemic response. Although the government set up its own scientific team and discourse and referred to scientific information to frame its pandemic response, scientific recommendations were listened selectively. Alternative information was alleged to be detrimental to the "national interest" and the regime silenced those who contradicted its response.

Another problem was the egregious double standards that gave the wrong signals to the population. For example, despite a ban on large public gatherings and significant fines for ordinary people, the government organized large public gatherings such as the ostentatious inaugural Friday prayer at Hagia Sophia on July 24, 2020, to mark its conversion back into a mosque. Some 350,000 people from all over Turkey gathered in and around the mosque, and this may well have contributed enormously to the nationwide spread of the virus as the participating faithful returned to their provincial towns and villages (CNN Türk 2020b). In March 2021, as the third wave began, thousands of AKP members gathered at the party's fully packed convention. Despite the country being in full lockdown, President Erdoğan and the AKP cadres attended the funeral of AKP Mayor İsmet Yıldırım's father, who died from COVID-19. This caused public frustration, especially for the relatives of others who had died during the pandemic who were forbidden to observe the customary rituals (Duvar English 2021).

Perhaps even more importantly, there was a complete lack of coordination between the central government and the Metropolitan Municipalities. The opposition scored a dramatic success in the 2019 municipal elections against the ruling AKP, which lost control of major cities, including Ankara and Istanbul (Demiralp and Balta 2021). The COVID-19 crisis provided the opposition mayors with a golden opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to govern competently.

Knowing this, as early as March 2020, the Metropolitan Municipalities of Izmir, Ankara, and Istanbul, all led by Republican People's Party (CHP), announced donation campaigns to foster social solidarity among their denizens and contribute financially to the fight against COVID-19. However, one day later, the Ministry of the Interior issued a ministerial decree blocking all coronavirus emergency donation accounts. President Erdoğan then announced the "Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası" (National Solidarity Campaign) with the slogan "Biz Bize Yeteriz Türkiyem" (Turkey, we are enough for Ourselves). The campaign asked the public to donate to combat the virus (Tanca et al. 2020). Throughout the pandemic, the AKP has sought to centralize control over countermeasures, while rarely collaborating with local governments so as not to promote their public visibility. However, this has severely hindered Turkey's battle against the

pandemic (Tank 2020). On the pretext of fighting terrorism, the government banned municipalities from collecting donations and distributing provisions. President Erdoğan also accused local governments of forming a “parallel state” and using “terrorist” methods to undermine the national government’s efforts, emphasizing that all measures must be taken by the central government (Buyuk 2020).

## Making sense of the response

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen exogenous shock that presented a unique opportunity for political leaders and governments to forge certain narratives (Gülseven 2021). According to Lasco (2020), some common populist responses to COVID included simplification of the pandemic by downplaying the virulence or severity of the outbreak and promising quick fixes; dramatization of the crisis through the language of conspiracy; forging division by emphasizing threats coming from migrants, foreigners, and elites; and making false or incomplete assertions about the virus. Populists everywhere have heavily relied on conspiracy theories while using the pandemic as a pretext to increase their efforts against elites, whether domestic or global (Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2021).

Turkey’s political regime exhibits the main features of populist competitive authoritarianism (Demiralp and Balta 2021). However, competitive authoritarianism rather than populism per se has been the primary driver of Turkey’s response. The key features of Turkey’s response to COVID-19 were neither apparently denialist nor overwhelmingly conspiratorial. The government took the crisis seriously, and introduced strict measures that included severe fines for noncompliance. Under constant pressure from the opposition as well as declining approval rates, Erdoğan’s leadership was dependent on a success story. Under these circumstances, the crisis provided the ideal context for the government to show its commitment to deliver and for the opposition to make its case for the government’s incapacity to do so. Structural features of the Turkish health system, a family based welfare regime and demographics (a relatively young population), enabled Turkey to handle the treatment of the COVID-19 cases relatively well (especially in the first wave) and protected the health system from collapse.

However, as this chapter has shown, double standards, extensive data engineering, a lack of transparency, and suppression of dissent have become characteristic features of Turkey’s handling of the virus—all of which point to an authoritarian style in the management of the crisis. An international environment that focuses solely on case numbers as a measure of success rather than the quality of the measures also made these strategies rewarding. The statistical figures ended up as the (almost only) reliable references to objectively measure success. Thus, they turned into the arena where the political battle is taking place and a symbol of the country’s polarized politics. School closures and age-based

restrictions on movement as major violations of basic rights almost disappeared from public discussion.

As Altıparmakı et al. (2021) show, both the effectiveness of the measures and the public's approval of these measures depended strongly on trust in the government and were adversely affected by political polarization. In other words, political systems featuring high levels of polarization tend to undermine both the effectiveness of the measures and their level of acceptance as opposition voters almost never trust the government. In a significant way, Turkey began its struggle against the pandemic in a very disadvantageous position due to the presence of extreme levels of political and societal polarization (Aydın-Düzgıt and Balta 2018). Citizen attitudes to political and economic issues and their responses have been largely shaped by partisan identities as well as historical fault lines (Çelik, Bilali, and Iqbal 2017) and even success has become a polarized issue. The evaluation of the government's performance was based on partisan alignments rather than the reality on the ground.

To conclude, we would like to assert that the COVID-19 pandemic has clarified Turkey's governing logic. Stuck between two imperatives, to promote life or to promote the market, the government shut down the public space to everyone except those who were already in the workforce. Minimal economic protection was offered to those who are economically vulnerable, and the bulk of the economic support went to business. Parks remained closed throughout the first three waves of the pandemic, while malls, as the major hallmarks of AKP's developmental model, mostly remained open. Journalists were arrested for their reporting on the pandemic and hundreds of citizens were detained for discussing the issue on social media. As we have stated throughout this chapter, the neoliberal market imperative and the absolute prioritization of the economy/business are ultimately what shaped the policy choices of the Turkish government. In the process, in all but its polarizing, nativist discourse, the government's choices, particularly its obstructionism toward municipal administrations, undermined its material populist credentials.

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# 12

## INDONESIA

### From the Pandemic Crisis to Democratic Decline

*Eunsook Jung*

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim majority country, was badly hit by the outbreak of COVID-19. To exacerbate matters, the Indonesian government has handled the pandemic poorly. Joko Widodo (popularly known as and hereafter "Jokowi"), the president of Indonesia, has prioritized economic concerns over public health in his response to the pandemic. Jokowi's administration has been reluctant to respond to the pandemic swiftly while denying both the severity of the virus and the gravity of the public health crisis.

Inadequate and uncoordinated government responses were surprising, given that Jokowi has had significant success in the field of healthcare and other public policy areas in the past. Furthermore, his interest in ensuring the delivery of services or ordinary people was what got him elected in the first place. Until the pandemic hit Indonesia, he had been known for being a competent and pragmatic populist leader, representing ordinary people. However, his response to the pandemic has been the biggest policy failure of his two presidential terms combined. His failure to effectively respond to the pandemic has revealed both the true state capacity of the Indonesian state and the problems of his power-sharing style. During his time in office, Jokowi has enjoyed unprecedented political stability within his own very broad rainbow coalition, which is the description given to when many (if not all) of the major political parties represented in parliament are given a seat in the cabinet (Diamond 2009, 337). In other words, Jokowi has no opposition in his government.

Jokowi is considered a partial populist, in that he established direct connections with grassroots, but had neither strong connections nor authority within the political party (Kenny 2019, 54). Jokowi's humble background, styles, his concern for improving service delivery appealed to people, especially the poor and people in rural areas. He distanced himself from corrupt elites in his election

campaigns. Jokowi, with his own brand of populism, won against Prabowo Subianto, an authoritarian and oligarchic populist, in both the 2014 and the 2019 presidential elections (see Aspinall 2015). Prabowo Subianto was the commander of special forces under the Suharto regime. According to Marcus Mietzner (2014, 124), Jokowi's victory embodied "the desire of ordinary voters to be ruled by one of their own." Moreover, Jokowi's victory also dispelled the widely held notion that "only members of the country's bureaucratic, military, and business elites groomed under Suharto's rule can obtain top political positions" (Aspinall and Mietzner 2014, 366). However, Jokowi turned out to be no different from other elites under Suharto's rule in terms of how he has consolidated his power and how he has responded to the pandemic.

As the pandemic has unfolded, Jokowi's popularity has fallen, and citizens' approval of democracy have also decreased. Instead of dealing with the crisis, Jokowi has taken advantage of the pandemic to introduce laws and regulations that could threaten freedom of expression as well as human and labor rights. These responses to the pandemic have further accelerated Indonesia's democratic decline.

In this chapter, I will first discuss how severely the COVID-19 pandemic has hit Indonesia and how the Jokowi administration has responded, a response which has revealed Indonesia's weak state capacity. Next, I examine the problems of Jokowi's populist leadership and discuss how a populist leadership without any checks and balances has affected his responses, which have exacerbated the public health crisis as well as undermining the quality of democracy.

## **The spread of COVID-19 and Indonesia's low state capacity**

Indonesia declared its first COVID-19 case in Jakarta on March 2, 2020. Despite being informed about the spread of COVID-19 in other countries, the Indonesian government was not prepared to handle the pandemic. The number of cases has skyrocketed since the first case was reported, and Indonesia has the highest caseload in Southeast Asia and one of the worst in the region. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of August 10, 2021, Indonesia had around 3.85 million cases and 117,588 deaths. An average of 20,000 new cases have been reported daily in August 2021, and both hospitals and cemeteries have been overflowing. While the reported number of cases is extremely high, the actual numbers of infection cases and deaths may well be much higher than the official government data indicates, due to underreporting, concealed information, and intentional manipulation of data.

For example, the Health Ministry decided against disclosing important data on COVID-19 transmission chains for fear of causing widespread panic and social unrest (Amnesty International 2020). In April, according to the spokesperson for Indonesia's National Disaster Mitigation Agency, the Ministry of Health's data was incomplete and the Ministry's statistics did not match the figures reported

by provincial administrations (Amnesty International 2020). Moreover, data manipulation, both at the local level and at the national level, has been common in order to maintain business-friendly policies and to avoid complete lockdowns (Jaffrey 2021).

In addition to inaccurate data, one of the biggest problems in Indonesia is an inadequate testing and contact tracing, which have revealed the true level of state capacity. From the very beginning, the Indonesian government did not implement COVID testing and contact tracing effectively. According to a survey by Oxford University in August 2020, Indonesia ranked 83rd out of 86 countries surveyed for number of overall tests per capita (Reuters 2020). Testing laboratories and the capacity for contact tracing both have been manifestly insufficient. Moreover, the testing regime was initially monopolized by the Ministry of Health, whereas contact tracing was extremely decentralized to the local level without central coordination. For example, all the specimens were initially required to be sent to at the Central Laboratory of the National Institute of Health Research and Development operated under the Ministry of Health in Jakarta. This requirement created a significant delay in releasing results. Giving in to mounting pressure and criticism, the Ministry of Health then specified 12 laboratories for COVID testing. However, most of these laboratories are located on Java, leaving the outer islands have little capacity for testing. Although Jokowi's decree of April 2020 expanded testing facilities to state-owned and privatized laboratories across the country, the expansion was still not sufficient to meet the needs for testing (Reuters 2020).

By contrast, contact tracing was made the responsibility of government-mandated *Pukesmas* (Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat: Community Health Center) at the village level. Each *Pukesmas* usually covers about 30,000 people. However, *Pukesmas* were already overwhelmed by the number of patients, and they were underfunded even before the pandemic hit—and health workers did not have access to proper protective gear. Adding contact tracing to the responsibilities of the *Pukesmas* without providing them with proper support in terms of medical personnel and resources has adversely affected the overall quality of contact tracing. Moreover, contact tracing is challenging, since people are unwilling to talk about who they visited or what they did there due to the social stigma surrounding COVID infection, while workers in informal sectors who do not have fixed workplaces have difficulty in remembering all their contacts.

### **Inappropriate and inconsistent government responses**

Not only have both testing and contact tracing been incompetently executed by the government, the policies introduced by the Indonesian government have been inappropriate and inconsistent. Despite the rapid increase of COVID-19 infections in Indonesia, the Indonesian government did not take the disease seriously. When a Harvard University report mentioned in February 2020 that Indonesia should have reported any COVID case, the Minister of Health said

that the report was insulting. In his media interview, he thanked God and prayers for preventing any COVID-19 cases from happening in Indonesia (*Jakarta Post*, February 20, 2020). Since then, there have been numerous remarks by the Jokowi administration which stated false information and downplayed the risk. These remarks demonstrate how the Jokowi administration perceives the public health crisis. For example, the Minister of Health stated that “Corona is a self-healing disease”; Indonesian Vice President Maruf Amin said the prayers of the *kyai* and *ulama* (Islamic religious leaders) and reading a lot of *qunut* prayers had spared Indonesia from the COVID-19 outbreak; Jokowi affirmed, “against Corona, I drink *empon-empon* (spices consisting of ginger, turmeric or others) three times a day” (Noor 2020).

Even when the government introduced policies, its mechanisms for enforcing them were weak and often close to nonexistent. The first official physical distancing policy was announced on March 15, 2020. On that day, Jokowi said, “under the circumstances right now, it’s time for us to work from home, study from home, pray from home.” But he did not provide any specific instructions about physical distancing. In the absence of any clear policies from the central government and amid an increase of COVID cases, regional leaders such as governors and mayors pressured Jokowi to adopt a lockdown. Instead, Jokowi criticized regional leaders who tried to implement lockdowns, saying that they were taking advantage of the pandemic for political purposes.

Thus, regional leaders faced difficulties in implementing lockdowns against the president’s wishes. This was also because if they had decided to do so anyway, a civil emergency could have been declared in the locked-down areas—and when a civil emergency is declared, the power of the governor is transferred to the military commanders of that territory. These military commanders are directly under the command of the president (Suwignyo 2020). At the same time, governors would also lose their power to govern. For this reason, governors could not realistically go against the president (Tangkudung and Sugiharto 2020). Although a civil emergency is intended to be used for wars or widespread riots, Jokowi was willing to declare one during a public health crisis.

On March 31, 2020, Jokowi signed Government Regulation No. 21/2020, the “Large Scale Social Restrictions” (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar*, PSBB). However, this was short-lived. The PSBB include various measures, such as (1) closing schools and workplaces that are not deemed to be essential, (2) restrictions on public gatherings and religious activities that involve mass gatherings, (3) restrictions on transportation, and so forth. Although regional governments can restrict the movement of people and goods in and out of their respective localities, they were not implemented properly and there was no clear enforcement mechanism. For those reasons, this policy was not helpful in curbing the pandemic (Suraya et al. 2020). Moreover, regional governments had to receive permission from the Ministry of Health in order to enforce the PSBB; some regional leaders did not receive permission to impose social restrictions and had to reapply for permission.

Although the number of infections had not subsided, Jokowi announced the “new normal protocol” on May 15, 2020, due to the slowing economy and high level of unemployment. Under this policy, shops, malls, businesses, and schools were reopened, with health protocols such as masks and hand sanitizers. Although the government emphasized social distancing and wearing personal protective equipment (Sutarsa et al. 2020), people were concerned that this policy was implemented too early and was mainly designed for formal sector employees only. This emphasis on formal sector employees neglects the fact that 60–70% of Indonesian people work in the *informal* sector, where face-to-face interactions are involved. Moreover, many people do not have enough money to buy masks and other protective gear.

As COVID-19 infection cases continued to increase, the central government introduced the PSBB in both Java and Bali islands for the first time, starting from January 11, 2021. These include (1) 75% work from home for office workers, (2) fully online teaching and learning, (3) shopping centers and malls operating only until 19.00, and (4) restaurants operating with a capacity of 25% or takeout services. Even this policy was only implemented until February 11, 2021. The government’s intermittent policies have prolonged the public health crisis without producing economic recovery. Therefore, on July 1, 2021, in the face of an upsurge of the Delta variant of the virus, the Indonesian government imposed a full lockdown in Java and Bali for the first time.

The Indonesian government tried to compensate for its lack of testing and contact tracing as well as inconsistent social distancing policies with early vaccination. However, this effort seemed to have a rocky start and its progress has been slow due to limited access to effective vaccines and people’s perception about vaccines. The government started to distribute COVID vaccines in January 2021, prioritizing the 18–59 age group for vaccination. This prioritization is intended to ensure that the working population is safe for economic activities. Most of the people who have been vaccinated received doses of Sinovac which is produced in China. It is the first country outside China that uses Sinovac for mass vaccination, and although many countries have raised concerns about the efficacy of Sinovac vaccines, Indonesia continues to use them.

Despite the early start in vaccination, as of June 2021, Indonesia had vaccinated less than 5% of its population. Jokowi was the first person to receive his vaccination in a televised ceremony in January 2021 to encourage people to be vaccinated. Military, police, medical doctors, and other health professionals were among the first to receive their shots. Nevertheless, it has been still challenging for the Indonesian government to gain trust from people about COVID-19 vaccinations.

People’s perception varies regarding COVID-19 vaccinations, which has contributed to the slow rate of vaccination. Overall, many people expressed concerns about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. According to the survey conducted by WHO, the Ministry of Health, and UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2020), there is a variation in perceptions about COVID-19

vaccines based on region, class, and religion. For example, Aceh has the lowest level of acceptance for the vaccine, while West Papua has the highest rate; the poor have more concerns about the COVID vaccines than the middle class; and Muslims are likely to be more skeptical about the COVID vaccines than other religions. There was also concern about whether vaccines can be considered *halal* (allowed under Islamic law). Although the MUI (Islamic Ulama Council of Indonesia) issued a *fatwa* stating that receiving the COVID-19 vaccination was acceptable, the debate over whether vaccines are *halal* or *haram* (forbidden under Islamic law) continues.

### Jokowi's power-sharing

Apart from Indonesia's weak state capacity, Jokowi's broad power-sharing style was an important factor contributing to his lackluster responses to the pandemic. During the pandemic, Jokowi made an effort to please and benefit a circle of his powerful allies, including his close business elites and army generals. Instead of focusing on a public health crisis, he seemed to be more accountable to these allies than to the people.

Jokowi was a reform figure who represented the general will of people with no connection with the past dictatorship. His populism has carried adjectives like inclusive, pragmatic, or technocratic. Moreover, his election was initially welcomed in the hope that democracy would survive. He campaigned on a promise to rule with a slim coalition which opened up the possibility of forming a professional and technocratic cabinet. However, he was unable to follow through on his promise. Jokowi's power base was weak since he did not run with his own political party (unlike his predecessors) and also had some friction with the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan*), the political party which had nominated him. In order to defend his power, Jokowi formed a big coalition in 2016, which included appointing some of his close business elites and some generals to the cabinet (Warburton 2016). When Jokowi was reelected in the 2019 presidential election, he formed an even more "all-inclusive" rainbow coalition that allowed all the political parties that are represented in parliament to receive a ministerial post. He even appointed Prabowo Subianto, an authoritarian oligarchic populist and his rival, as the minister of defense, whose appointment was particularly troubling, given the atrocities and human rights violations that were committed by troops he had led under the Suharto regime. Despite these concerns, Jokowi has enjoyed unprecedented political stability without any opposition. However, stability comes at a high price.

Forging a large government coalition with many political parties has been a government structure in Indonesia since Indonesia's democratization. It is partly because forming an inclusive governing coalition can be conducive to stability and makes impeachment unlikely. However, many scholars argue that there are many problems with forging all-inclusive grand coalitions in normal times (Diamond 2009; Slater and Simmons 2012; Mietzner 2015a). First, it means that

reforms are unlikely to happen, as political parties want to keep the status quo and maintain their own fiefdoms of patronage. Second, there is no party left to check and balance government policies and make the government accountable to the people. When there is no opposition, ruling parties have weak incentives to govern effectively. Third, it is difficult for grand coalitions to have a well-defined, concrete-yet-manageable policy agenda. Furthermore, grand coalitions are likely to deal with superficial issues while avoiding difficult and complex issues. Overall, this type of coalition makes accountability low and makes reform difficult. Just as the rainbow coalitions of 2001, 2004, and 2009 have proven to be chaotic and dysfunctional, so, too, has Jokowi's rainbow coalition.

Jokowi has sacrificed public health to economic growth. He did this in part to maintain his popularity and cultivate a legacy of economic development. Jokowi was reelected on the basis of the success of his economic policies in his first term, particularly the heavy investment in infrastructure and social programs such as health and education (Parker 2019). Jokowi committed to consolidate his legacy by prioritizing his economic policy agenda while disregarding political and civil rights as well as justice (Warburton 2016). This was possible because his leadership was not challenged and there is no check and balance. Despite his intention to keep the economy alive, his responses to the pandemic have harmed him in both public health and economic development. According to a survey by *Kompas*, one of the widely read Indonesian language newspapers, Jokowi's approval rate has slipped below 50%, with 46.3% indicating that they are disappointed with the government's performance on the economy, political affairs, law enforcement, and public welfare, and 6.2% were very disappointed with the government's performance (*The Straits Times* 2020).

## Democratic decline during the pandemic

The pandemic has not only threatened public health and slowed down Indonesia's economy, it has also further worsened the quality of its democracy. The government's focus on economic development and securitizing the pandemic meant that public health concerns were sidelined for many months. Although the Indonesian government has been reluctant to introduce any consistent policies against COVID-19, it was quick to introduce laws and regulations that could adversely affect human rights and labor rights.

While democratic decline has been visible in many areas, three aspects are most concerning as a result of the pandemic. First, freedom of expression has been severely undermined, with the government quick to respond to any criticisms toward it. On April 4, 2020, the National Police Headquarters issued Telegram Letter No. ST/1100/IV/HUK.7.1/2020. This document instructed the police to monitor cyberspace and to take action against those who spread any false information. Moreover, it decreed that those who insulted the president and his administration would be punished. In implementing this policy, the police have often used excessive force. Human rights activists, students, and

journalists are often subjected to digital attacks and physical abuse. According to the Amnesty International Report (2021), more than 57 people have so far been arrested for criticizing the government.

In addition, the role of the military has been expanded during the pandemic while securitizing it. Jokowi's cabinet already had the highest number of military personnel since Suharto stepped down in 1998. Furthermore, Jokowi brought in the Indonesian National Armed Forces to help with COVID-19-related operations (Fealy 2020). According to Sana Jaffrey (2020), all personnel in charge of responding to the COVID-19 crisis are retired army officials. Retired army officials have filled high civilian positions, including the head of the disaster management task force, the national spokesman on the coronavirus crisis, the health minister, the religious minister, the minister of maritime affairs and investment, the defense minister, and the president's chief of staff.

The Indonesian army is meant to focus on external defense instead of being involved in any civilian functions. However, the Indonesian National Armed Forces have swiftly prepared to take control of many localities in case of any disturbances or socioeconomic conflicts if COVID-19 gets worse. Indonesia has a long history of military dictatorship, and the expanded and expanding role for the military is worrisome to many. In particular, the Suharto regime allowed the military to serve dual functions (*dwifungsi*): external defense and internal security (see Honna 2003). After Indonesia's democratization in 1998, the roles of the military were limited to external defense. Involving the military in internal security can strengthen its role in domestic civil affairs and also could possibly bring past authoritarian practices to the present.

Furthermore, Jokowi's government has demonstrated pro-corporate and anti-union tendencies during the pandemic. This approach is in line with Jokowi's inauguration speech about process not being important; it is the outcomes that matter. He said then that would remove any barriers to economic development, and has treated the pandemic crisis as if it were a simple barrier to his economic development plan. Since the pandemic began, many workers had already experienced worsening working conditions such as pay cuts and cuts in the number of vacation days, and with the introduction of the Omnibus Law that was passed in Parliament on October 5, 2020, it is expected that labor rights and working conditions will suffer further. Although the government stated that the Omnibus Law was intended to create jobs and attract overseas investment by cutting down on complicated bureaucratic procedures, it is unclear if this law will actually help to create more jobs and attract investors, with many environmental organizations raising concerns that the law would in fact let foreign investors take advantage of natural resources without adhering to proper environmental standards. Labor unions, too, strongly opposed the bill and called for a three-day strike to halt its passage. The bill includes longer working hours, cutting mandatory leave, and allowing contracting jobs, all of which could erode labor rights. Even long-standing, mass-based Islamic organizations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* (the Rise of Islamic Scholars) and *Muhammadiyah* (the Followers of Muhammad) were against this bill in the name of their members and try to put

pressure on the government. Nevertheless, this opposition did not prevent Jokowi from passing the bill. Jokowi, who is supposed to represent the voices of “ordinary” people, turned his back against those he was supposed to represent.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined Jokowi’s responses to the pandemic in Indonesia. Although Jokowi was considered a competent populist leader, his responses to the pandemic have been imperceptive, inconsistent, and confusing. Jokowi has downplayed the severity of the pandemic while prioritizing economic concerns over public health, and his response to the pandemic has revealed low state capacity and the true face of his leadership. Moreover, the fragility of Indonesia’s democracy has been exposed.

The Indonesian government has concealed COVID-19 data and refused to release them. Amid the lack of reliable information, police have arrested people for distributing false information and also for criticizing the president and the vice president. Moreover, as part of his handling of the pandemic, Jokowi has brought military forces into internal security to deal with COVID-19. This concerns many scholars and policy-makers alike, in that the military forces may thus seize the opportunity to come back and increase their role in the future. Overall, Jokowi’s intention to prioritize the economy during a public health crisis has harmed Indonesia’s public health, exacerbated its economic downturn, and accelerated democratic decline.

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# 13

## INDIA

### The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly Consequences of India's Pandemic Response

*Saloni Bhogale and Pavithra Suryanarayan*

As of August 2021, India, the world's largest democracy, had recorded over 32 million COVID-19 cases – a number surpassed only by the US. India and the US have shared more than a passing similarity through the pandemic. Both had right-wing populist leaders at their helm as they entered pandemic. At various points, these leaders underestimated the virus, and put electoral politics and political appeasement ahead of the strategic and forceful deployment of state capacity to combat the virus. Their parties also minimized the seriousness of the virus, deflecting blame on their political “enemies,” and willfully encouraged the spread of misinformation and “fake news” about the pandemic.

In this chapter, we describe India's pandemic response and provide a close reading of it through the lens of populism. We first explain why the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi should be viewed as a right-wing populist party. We then describe the response of the government and its performance during the crisis in the first and second waves. Each of these waves typifies in our view the way right-wing populists respond to crises – using them to build their image as strongmen, minimizing the influence of experts, prioritizing the needs of their political bases and weaponizing the crises to attack their ideological and political enemies. Finally, we ask whether other forms of populism prevalent in India at the subnational level differed in terms of pandemic responsiveness.

#### **Populism in India**

For most of the 20th century, the BJP (and its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh) was a peripheral player in Indian politics. It rose to national prominence in the 1990s by making an explicit appeal to upper-caste Hindu voters and by

stoking Hindu-Muslim communal tensions. The party briefly held national office between 1999 and 2004, but then fell out of favor for a decade.

The BJP made a remarkable comeback during the 2014 General Elections by emphasizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's life story as an experienced Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, an incorruptible volunteer (or a "pracharak") of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an organization that promotes *Hindutva* ideology, and as a backward-caste outsider who tirelessly worked his way up from a lowly party functionary to national prominence. The BJP was reelected to power in the 2019 General Elections with a resounding victory and currently holds a majority of seats in the lower house of the Indian Parliament, in addition to forming the government in several states at the subnational level.

After almost six decades of the Congress party's dominance in India, the political landscape has now decisively shifted to favor the BJP. The party draws support from three "elite" groups: the upper castes who are typically educated and urban (Suryanarayan 2019); small business owners and corporate houses who have strong links to party financing; and Hindu fundamentalists, who support an anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan and India-first *swadeshi* ideology (Venkataramkrishnan 2019). The party has also been able to mobilize and win support from poor lower-caste groups without upsetting its upper-caste supporters by offering social services through their affiliated organizations (Thachil 2014). For long, social scientists have viewed the BJP as a right-wing nationalist party (Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2007; Ruparelia 2006) with a clear majoritarian ideology that favors the large Hindu population of India (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017; Misra 2018). What then makes the recent incarnation of the BJP populist?

Right-wing populism has seen a resurgence across the world, be it Erdogan in Turkey, Bolsonaro in Brazil or Trump in the US. These leaders have adopted a common playbook: one that involves a rhetoric of anti-elitism, religious majoritarianism, and particular conceptions of "the authentic people," "the elites" and the "others" (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019).

The contemporary BJP posits a clear distinction between the "real, legitimate people" (the Hindu majority) and the enemies of the state (the Muslim minority, opposition and others). But a relatively recent development has been the rise of a singular leader to represent the "legitimate people." Prime Minister Modi has been cast as a "chaste/unsullied" leader who represents the chosen pure (Hindu) people. His supporters describe him as fighting against the constant threat of the "corrupt, dynastic, *sickular*, anti-national elites" – words used to characterize any political or institutional opposition. The "corrupt elites" not only include the political opposition, notably the Congress party and the Gandhi family, but also extend to nonconforming public institutions and third-party actors like the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), missionaries and academics.<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, the BJP government since 2014 has attempted to weaken leading national institutions. Similar to other populists, Modi has remade a

well-organized national party into his image and used it as a vehicle for his leadership. The BJP's rule has been associated with a weakening of the bureaucracy and courts (Bhuwania 2020) as well as a breach in the separation between politics and the military apparatus (Pai 2019). Finally, the party and its supporters have relentlessly attacked independent media, universities and public intellectuals, describing them as the “enemy,” “presstitutes” and the “Khan market gang.”<sup>2</sup> The prime minister chooses a direct form of interaction with the public, much like other populists, through monthly television programs and holograms, while refusing to provide interviews to the independent media.

The agenda of the Modi Government and its top leaders – notably Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of the most populous Indian state, Uttar Pradesh – also reflects a social project of marginalizing the Muslim minority. The passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the revoking of a special status to Kashmir (a contentious, Muslim-dominated state), the rise of cow protection<sup>3</sup> and *love jihad*,<sup>4</sup> each signify attempts by the party to vilify and target the minority. These developments under Prime Minister Modi's leadership have led to several scholars using populism and “nationalist populism” as the analytical lens to understand the BJP (Chacko 2018; Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017; McDonnell and Cabrera 2019; Singh 2021; Varshney 2019).

## The pandemic response

Controlling for its level of democracy and development, India scores poorly on a variety of state metrics, including the size of its bureaucracy, its ability to collect taxes and to provide adequate legal and administrative services (Kapur 2020). While the state excels in “episodic” activities like conducting elections and carrying out the census, its capacity to implement programs has been weak on account of an understaffed bureaucracy that struggles with absenteeism, weak incentives and corruption (Pritchett 2009). Moreover, India is one of the few countries where the state's bureaucratic capacity is worsening.<sup>5</sup>

India's weak state capacity posed two constraints for an effective response to the pandemic. First, health capacity could not be increased in the short run, and a deadly pandemic could overwhelm hospitals and set off a mad scramble for doctors, allied health professionals (AHPs), protective equipment and medical facilities.<sup>6</sup> It was therefore key that the federal government did everything possible to flatten the curve to give the state system a chance to care for its citizens and to build capacity in the medium term.

Beyond overwhelming the healthcare system, a debilitating pandemic would also strain the state's bureaucratic ability to perform basic functions such as collecting accurate information about its citizens, providing social and public services, and communicating with them through the pandemic. In practice, this meant that the Indian state potentially lacked the ability to care for millions of unemployed day laborers, provide aid to families affected by the pandemic or even count the dead.<sup>7</sup>

Given these stark constraints, the initial pandemic response in India was swift. On March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Modi announced a nationwide lockdown that severely limited the mobility of citizens. The measures continued in most parts of the country over the next three months. They applied to all citizens, except for essential workers, and restricted the movement of citizens outside their homes.

The lockdown came within days of the declaration by the World Health Organization (WHO) of a global pandemic, and observers viewed these measures as a strong and necessary response in a resource-constrained country. The government could take such aggressive measures in part due to its political position – having won a resounding second term the year earlier. Prime Minister Modi was praised for these actions and enjoyed some of the highest approval ratings among world leaders. Even at the peak of the lockdown in India, he had an approval rating of over 80%.<sup>8</sup>

The lockdown measures worked. The country's daily case counts began to drop in December, and by early March 2021, the country's health minister, Harsh Vardhan, declared that India was “in the endgame” of the pandemic. He lauded the prime minister's leadership and touted him as a shining example of international cooperation (Biswas 2021b).

The lockdown announcement created an unprecedented migrant crisis in addition to the loss of livelihood and employment for many. In the absence of any operating transport, migrants started making their way back to their native villages on foot (Panday 2020). The government safety nets for food and transport were insufficient, triggering UN independent human rights experts to chastise the Indian Government's response (United Nations 2020).

The second wave hit India in the second quarter of 2021. It had a much larger peak of cases and deaths – almost four times that of the first wave, so much so that states even ran out of crematorium slots amidst mass cremations and deaths (*The Guardian* 2021).

The second wave was exacerbated by several missteps. First, it struck at a time when only 10% of the population in India had been partially vaccinated (Biswas 2021c). Unlike vaccination rollouts of the past like the national polio immunization campaign that had relied on deploying large numbers of local healthcare workers to reach Indians of all socioeconomic classes, the new state vaccination policy relied on a complex technological application to secure an appointment. This allowed digitally literate populations and those with access to high-speed internet to book appointments, while rural populations were left out (Jain 2021a).

Second, authorities failed to enforce adequate norms for mask-wearing and social distancing at political and religious gatherings. For instance, a religious gathering called the “Maha Kumbh Mela” was permitted to take place on the banks of the Ganges River in early 2021. Millions of Hindu pilgrims gathered from all across the country, turning the pilgrimage into a super-spreader event. Elsewhere, in the state of West Bengal, the government held massive electoral rallies in early 2021 in order to win the state's legislative elections.

Third, a steep rise in cases during the second wave triggered an unprecedented medical crisis, as crucial life-saving resources like oxygen, medicines and hospital beds were in short supply (Dutt 2021). At its peak, more than 4,000 people were dying every day. Experts estimate that the actual number of deaths is almost ten times the reported number of 435,000 as of August 24, 2021 (Anand, Sandefur, and Subramanian 2021).

## Analyzing the response

In this section, we examine how the pandemic response in India can be framed as a consequence of a right-wing populist party's political and anti-institutionalist tendencies. However, this federal response needs to be evaluated against a much more varied subnational response, owing to diverse regional parties, some with their own history of populism, who were in power in several states. Here it becomes important to identify the *type* of populist response, as research has argued that policies are a derivative (and not constitutive) of the thin-centered populist ideology (Varshney 2021).

### *Populism and politics*

Modi's response in India exemplified several dimensions of Benjamin Moffitt's model of how populists "perform during crisis" (Moffitt 2015). Modi's initial response to the pandemic was a display of his strong leadership. The prime minister made the "people" a central part of his "pandemic as performance" strategy. The lockdown in India started with what was a 14-hour-long "Janata Curfew" (People's curfew, wherein the prime minister urged citizens to bang pots and pans for ten minutes in support of frontline workers fighting the COVID-19 pandemic [Dash 2020]). Millions of Indians took up the prime minister's request, and social media was rife with citizens displaying their eagerness to comply. Barely three days later, the prime minister announced a nationwide complete lockdown, which gave less than four hours' notice to citizens to comply.

What kind of policy response can one expect from a populist right-wing government? While a left-wing populist response would involve redistribution or nationalization of economic resources, a right-wing response may not involve specific economic policy per se, but "political projects" that weaken minorities (Varshney 2021). The Modi government's initial strong pandemic response and early lockdowns benefited the upper class, led to widespread loss of livelihoods and triggered a migrant crisis among the urban poor. A Pew study conducted in 2021 found that the middle class shrank as the number of poor doubled (The Hindu 2021).

Notably, there was a singling out of the "others" responsible for the crisis (Moffitt 2015). From March 2020, the right-wing narrative painted the Indian Muslim minority as somehow responsible for the distress caused by the pandemic, clearly delineating the "people" who were affected from those responsible

for the crisis. The first such incident was in early March 2020, when a Muslim religious organization, the Tablighi Jamaat, hosted a conference in a prominent Muslim neighborhood in Delhi. The conference attracted hundreds of attendees, and many stayed on after the conference, including 250 foreign travelers (BBC 2020). The event soon became one of the earliest “COVID hotspots” in India, and the state conducted an operation to “trace and isolate” the attendees as media reports surfaced citing their flouting of lockdown rules (Singh and Bhandari 2021). These narratives were frequently repeated by politicians from the ruling party – and soon adopted by the general populace. A study conducted in Uttar Pradesh confirmed this: over 66% of those surveyed, blamed Muslims for the spread of COVID-19 (Islam et al. 2021).

It is noteworthy that while the prime minister himself stayed away from such rhetoric, he did not take any action to dispel such rumors. During that time period, Modi maintained a strong media presence by regularly appearing on the “PM’s address to the nation” – where he appeared dressed like a Hindu ascetic with long hair and an unkempt beard. He continued to appear in ritualistic performances like taking part in the Bhoomi Poojan (groundbreaking ceremony) in August 2021 for the Ram temple to be built in Ayodhya, giving further legitimacy to his role as the protector of Hindus. The prime minister also avoided any detailed responses to questions over the governance and the handling of the pandemic and instead offered simple solutions, like urging NGOs and voluntary private organizations to help fight the pandemic, and delegating crucial vaccine-procuring responsibilities to the states (Sharma 2021b).

While the initial response was firm and swift, political prerogatives quickly came to dominate decision-making. Here, the Indian case deviates from the populist playbook that involves an attempt to perpetuate crisis (Moffitt 2015) – Prime Minister Modi began to tout the success of India through the first wave and declared victory over the virus, creating the illusion of the virus being vanquished by a strong leader (*The Times of India* 2021). He also acceded to the requests of religious leaders to hold the *Maha Kumbh Mela* earlier than planned. Instead of delaying the mass gathering of pilgrims, the government encouraged the religious gathering. Around nine million pilgrims gathered in the northern state of Uttarkhand, accelerating the second wave.

The failure to enforce mask-wearing and social distancing can also be attributed to the BJP government minimizing the dangers of the virus and advocating unscientific cures for the virus.<sup>9</sup> Numerous top-level BJP politicians, including Prime Minister Modi, participated in large social and political events. An “evidence-based cure for Covid-19” was touted by a yoga guru-turned business personality in an event presided over by two Union Ministers (Ojha 2021). The “cure” was extensively criticized by the scientific community, and its endorsement by top leaders delivered a blow to the scientific, evidence-based communication about the virus.

Populists tend to display a primacy for elections (Varshney 2019), and Prime Minister Modi largely confirmed this stereotype by calling unusually protracted

elections in several Indian states right at the beginning of the second wave. He held a massive rally in the state of West Bengal, a state that the BJP was trying to win for the first time. The rally flouted established COVID-19 protocols for large gatherings and mask-wearing. In a move reminiscent of President Donald Trump, Modi remarked “everywhere I look, as far as I can see, there are crowds,” while India recorded more than 200,000 cases on a single day (Slater and Masih 2021). The consequences of these politically motivated decisions were lethal. For example, local elections conducted in Uttar Pradesh required the deployment of hundreds of thousands of civil servants and an estimated 1,621, a majority of whom were teachers, likely contracted the virus and died (*The Economist* 2021).

### ***Populism and institutions***

Given India’s fragile healthcare system, a key failure of the government was not using the relative calm and time afforded by the smaller first wave to prepare for a future outbreak. The country failed to increase medical capacity – be it oxygen cylinders or adequate beds in hospitals. An important aspect of the country’s pandemic response had been the formation of “expert committees,” who were tasked with guiding and advising the pandemic response. Fifteen different panels had been formed in India, with members spanning experts from the scientific community, the civil services and government officials. However, conversations with anonymous experts from the panels suggest that decision-making was largely centralized (Ghosh 2021).

While there was no outright dismissal of experts during the crisis, the government chose to ignore the advice of experts at the onset of the second wave. For instance, the government missed the emergence of variants in Maharashtra while experts sounded alarm bells (Ghoshal and Siddiqui 2021) and failed to communicate and impose restrictions on large gatherings, fearing a political backlash (Ghoshal and Das 2021). According to *Caravan*, an Indian news magazine, the country’s national scientific taskforce created to monitor and advise the government on the pandemic did not meet during February and March, as daily cases increased rapidly (Krishnan 2021).

Other governing institutions also deteriorated through the pandemic. The Indian Parliament met only for 33 days in the year compared to an average of 70–80 days per year in the period before the pandemic (Roy 2020), which meant that there was little opportunity for elected members to hold the government accountable. This was a shortfall of over 50% and the lack of activity was exacerbated by house rules that disallowed committees to meet online. This was despite the fact that the prime minister continued to meet with the Cabinet Ministers online (Chatterji 2021) and other major institutions, including the judiciary and bureaucracy, had incorporated some form of digital communication (Mathur 2021).

Another major failure of the Indian state was its inability to deploy adequate manufacturing and procurement capacity for the vaccine. While other countries adopted a centralized system to obtain advanced purchase contracts with vaccine

manufacturers, India's performance on this was lackluster. This was partly due to its nationalist regulatory approach wherein the government relied on domestic manufacturers and limited the role of private players. As the devastating second wave hit India in March 2021 and the healthcare system was overwhelmed, the government belatedly announced reforms that permitted organizations other than the government to take part in the vaccine drive.<sup>10</sup>

Where the government was quick to react was in retaliating against the media and the opposition about its COVID response, and urged social media companies (like Facebook and Twitter) to curb negative coverage regarding the Delta variant (earlier termed as the Indian variant; *BusinessLine* 2021). Several individuals were booked for posting on social media about the failure of health facilities, including citizens, bureaucrats and journalists (Srivastava, Sen, and Trivedi 2021). During this period, India's regime was classified as a "partly free democracy" by Freedom House, as an "electoral autocracy" by V-Dem and a "flawed democracy" by the *Economist's* Democracy Index in 2021 (Biswas 2021a).

### ***Subnational variation***

The BJP is not the first national party emblematic of populism in India. Populism can be left wing, drawing its support from the lower strata of society, or right wing, when it is elite-led and accompanied by an attack on minorities (Varshney 2021). The Congress party government under Indira Gandhi could also be seen as a populist government (Kaviraj 1986; Varshney, Ayyangar, and Swaminathan 2021). In the 1970s and the 1980s, the Congress party government focused on social welfare schemes and pro-poor policies. The Congress too described the opposition as "the enemy" and questioned the legitimacy of anyone who criticized it. Indira Gandhi notoriously attacked independent public institutions (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017). The large size and political diversity of India has also given rise to populism at the subnational level.

The southern Indian region comprising of the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telengana has a history of alternate populist movements, wherein backward castes mobilized against upper-caste hegemony. In Tamil Nadu, the leaders identified the "dravidars" as the authentic people who were pitted against the marauding "northern aryan", and the upper-caste elites who dominated the bureaucracy, academia and the press emphasized regional identities against national elites (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017; Suryanarayan 2016). The Dravida Kazhagam came to power in Tamil Nadu on the heels of an older Dravidian movement, wherein movie stars and playwrights assumed the role of charismatic populist leaders who could reflect the moral will of the people. These politicians espoused social policies like affirmative action, developmental projects for backward castes and strong welfare politics. This became a template for other regional forms of populism (particularly in Andhra Pradesh) and subaltern politics across India in Bihar and Assam. Today, these movements have resulted in a large representation of backward castes in the political class (Verniers et al. 2021).

As a result of these divergent political trajectories at the subnational level and differences in state development (Rajagopalan and Choutagunta 2020), there is considerable variation in healthcare capacity within India. For example, states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh spend the least on healthcare on a per capita basis, whereas other states like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka do much better on this front. Particularly Tamil Nadu and Kerala boast among the highest number of doctors and nurses registered per 100,000 people respectively.<sup>11</sup>

A combination of political will, populist politics and greater state capacity led to greater preparedness for the pandemic in states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala (Taub and Suryanarayan 2020). States' willingness to deploy their healthcare resources was reflected in quantifiable parameters – for instance, the number of tests conducted per million in the small southern state of Kerala was almost three times the tests conducted in Uttar Pradesh. Kerala and Tamil Nadu also enforced extensive quarantine, track and trace protocols in addition to providing food and medical support. Proactive measures were taken to approach and inform risky communities reflecting strong state willingness, a social welfare contract and public trust. Tamil Nadu was also among the few states that declared journalists as frontline workers, a positive gesture that signaled trust in the *fourth pillar*, which was taken by only six state governments across the country (Pakrasi 2021).

These cases suggest that the specific forms of populism might shape institutional responses and the beneficiaries of governments' actions during a crisis.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that the divisive rhetoric, strongman tactics, political pandering and animosity to media criticism that characterize right-wing populism were each on display during the BJP's handling of the COVID-19 crisis under Prime Minister Modi. The party's response also diminished the role of experts and weakened pre-existing national institutions. By exploring subnational responses, we suggest that different forms of populist politics shape institutional responses differently, as their social bases of support vary. The subaltern populism in states like Tamil Nadu, which led to large numbers of backward-caste politicians and bureaucrats rising to power, may have been key to both the state's willingness to act and effectively deploy limited state capacity to tackle the pandemic.

As of August 2021, Prime Minister Modi's approval ratings had dropped to 24% (Scroll Staff 2021). The single biggest factor shaping people's perception of his performance was his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic during the second wave. The sudden drop in the prime minister's popularity suggests that there might be limits to the appeal of right-wing populism in India, especially when there are stark humanitarian consequences. These trends seem to support claims by scholars who have argued that Indians have a much lower appetite for populism than we perceive and that large numbers of BJP supporters should be viewed through the lens of nationalist support rather than populism (Varshney,

Ayyangar, and Swaminathan 2021). The consequences of the pandemic on the BJP's electoral fortunes and Modi's populist appeal remain to be seen.

## Notes

- 1 The idea of the “authentic people” is not limited to the Hindus, but also encompasses Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. One explanation is that because Muslims consider their sacred land to be in the Middle East and on account of the formation of a Muslim-majority nation (Pakistan) during India's independence from British rule in 1947, Muslims are considered “disloyal” in relation to other non-Hindu religions. This creates a basis for an alliance between these religious groups and Hindus (Varshney 2021).
- 2 A jibe used by several members of the BJP to mock political opponents and the English-speaking elite that ostensibly patronize an upper-class market in New Delhi (Bhardwaj 2019).
- 3 A practice that identifies “beef-eaters” (who are typically Muslim or those who belong to lower castes) as the enemy of Hindu customs. Vigilantism around cow protection has led to violence and death of several individuals accused of engaging in beef eating or cattle trade.
- 4 An alleged campaign by Muslim men to forcibly convert Hindu women under the pretext of love (Gupta 2009).
- 5 Between 1996 and 2012, the Indian state saw *negative growth* in state capability: in earlier years, state capacity was stronger and the state was more effective in achieving its normative goals (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2017).
- 6 For instance, against a demand for about two million AHPs in India, the country had an overall supply that was estimated to be about 80,000–90,000 (Kandhari 2021).
- 7 A situation that indeed came to pass – in one case, a survey of more than 15,000 respondents across six states computed that the death rate was almost seven times the reported number (Jain 2021b). In another case, journalists visited crematoriums in Ahmedabad and estimated that the actual deaths were ten times the number of reported deaths (Bhattacharya and Shendruk 2021).
- 8 According to data collected by Morning Consult Political Intelligence in India, around 2,126 respondents were interviewed for the data on India and weighted by “by age, gender, region”. According to the firm, the sample in India “is representative of the literate population.”
- 9 A study quoted by the Health Ministry in May 2021 showed that while only 50% of Indians wear a mask and only about 14% wear a mask correctly (among the 50% who do), indicating low awareness and compliance.
- 10 At the same time, the central government further abdicated responsibility by providing for individual states to enter into vaccine contracts with domestic and international suppliers independently. As of mid-2021, international suppliers remained hesitant in entering into contracts with individual states and maintained they would only enter into discussions with the national governments, and this policy was soon reversed (Sharma 2021a).
- 11 Data sourced from Central Bureau of Health Intelligence (India) (2019) as compiled by Rajagopalan and Choutagunta (2020).

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# 14

## THE PHILIPPINES

### Penal Populism and Pandemic Response

*Paul D. Kenny and Ronald Holmes*

As of mid-August 2021, there had been some 1.8 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and just over 31,500 deaths in the Philippines. Based on an estimated population of 110 million, these figures place the Philippines roughly in the middle of the global pack. Situated in the Asian epicenter of the outbreak, the Philippines has experienced three major spikes in the spread of the disease, the first beginning in July 2020 and extending through mid-September; a second, more intense surge beginning in March 2021 before declining and leveling out through mid-July; and a third rise beginning in late July, bringing the seven-day average of new daily cases to an unprecedented level of over 13,000 by mid-August.

The record of President Rodrigo Duterte's government in response to the crisis has been mixed. Initially dismissive of the threat, the administration soon adopted a hardline, if crude, approach to containment of the virus, emulating in some respects the law and order paradigm of the war on drugs—the military and police forces arguably playing more prominent roles than public health officials (Dizon 2020). Weak administrative capacity, manifested especially in the failure to develop a national agency to coordinate the public health response, more than any other factor, has meant an inability to progress from crude containment measures toward more effective track-and-trace approaches. The take-up of vaccinations against the virus remains slow, with the result that the Philippines remains prone to further surges amid the spread of more virulent strains of the disease.

In part, as a result of the reliance on crude instruments such as lockdowns, the Philippines has experienced an especially sharp contraction of economic growth over the course of the pandemic. Moreover, the government's August 2021 decision to restrict the emigration of the country's normally highly mobile healthcare workers in response to crisis will likely have further knock-on effects (Ratcliffe

2021). With remittances being one of the country's major sources of foreign currency, continued limits on international mobility into the medium term do not bode well for the Philippines' economy.

While other leaders worldwide with such mixed records in responding to the crisis have seen their popularity drop, President Rodrigo Duterte retains an enviable approval rating. In June 2021, it stood at 83%, slightly down from the February 2021 level of 87%, but ultimately not much changed from the level observed throughout his presidency.<sup>1</sup> Elected president in May 2016, a survey in September that year gave Duterte an 85% approval rating, while a December 2019 survey—just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak—put him at 86%.

This chapter seeks to explain the curious resilience of Duterte's support through the pandemic. We argue that Duterte's past record of being able to successfully take personal credit for achievements while attributing blame for failures to implementing agencies—not least in the course of his administration's war on drugs—has thus far served him well during the pandemic. Although Duterte remains very much in charge, he has looked to delegate to public health officials much of the response to the crisis. To the extent there have been failures, most people seem to absolve Duterte of responsibility. However, this is not to suggest that Duterte's popularity is fully detached from fundamentals. The state of the economy does appear to reflect directly on him; as a result, the political fallout of the epidemic for Duterte and his followers may therefore be felt more acutely through the indirect effect on the economy rather than in the area of public health per se.

## Populism in the Philippines

Although Rodrigo Duterte ran for president in part against what he described as a corrupt Manila establishment, coming from a recognized, if minor, political clan, he was only a partial outsider to the system. Thus, although he has deployed some anti-elite rhetoric over the course of his rise and his presidency (Miller 2018), it does not appear that populist ideology—as typically understood—has had much to do with his appeal (Webb and Curato 2019). In surveys conducted in September 2016 and September 2017, in which we included a common six-item instrument for populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013), we find no direct association between this set of beliefs and approval of or trust in Duterte, although these anti-establishment attitudes, along with the attribution of charismatic leadership traits to Duterte, are correlated with support for the war on drugs (Kenny and Holmes 2020).

Known for his simple tastes, crude manner, and misogynistic rhetoric (Miller 2018), there is a stronger case to be made that Duterte fits a stylistic understanding of populism (Moffitt 2020). He has repeatedly joked about rape, called each President Obama and the Pope a “son of a whore,” and consistently dehumanized drug addicts and other social outcasts. Certainly, voters appreciate Duterte's

directness and his assertiveness, but it is not clear that his crude rhetorical style or common man persona is what attracts most voters to him (Arguelles and Pantaleon 2020). Rather, Duterte's strongest support comes from better educated and better-off voters, those more likely to be put off by, not attracted to, his buffoonery (Holmes 2016).

Duterte is nevertheless a singularly populist leader, at least when the term is understood primarily in strategic rather than ideological or stylistic terms (Kenny 2019). Populists, according to the strategic approach, are "charismatic leaders who seek to establish unmediated links with otherwise unattached mass constituencies in their quest to gain and retain power" (Kenny forthcoming). The strategic approach to populism is neutral with respect to the content of mass appeals (e.g., law and order, nationalism, inequality). Charismatic leadership is theorized to be of greatest appeal when the alternative bureaucratic and patrimonial sources of legitimacy are weak—thus, periods of crisis are especially hospitable to the populist strategy.

Philippines politics are highly personalized, with parties counting for very little (Rood 2020). Party membership is almost nonexistent and electoral volatility is extremely high. Vote buying remains an important strategy at local levels, but as the role of clientelism has diminished in presidential elections (coinciding with the growth of the electorate), celebrity, or notoriety, has become an increasingly valuable political asset. Most recently, Joseph "Erap" Estrada was a popular actor who used his celebrity status to become president from 1998 to 2001. Despite his own wealth, often playing the role of the downtrodden hero, Estrada found his strongest electoral support from among the poor. Ferdinand Marcos, prior to the authoritarian Martial Law period, also sought to circumvent local political bosses by appealing directly to voters on the basis of a strongman image. Marcos was, in turn, refining techniques pioneered by Communist insurgent fighter, Ramon Magsaysay, president from 1953 to 1957 (Kenny 2019, 31–32).

Like that of several of his presidential predecessors, Duterte's populism is most evident in the charismatic nature of his appeal. By this, we mean that Duterte's followers attribute to him exceptional personal leadership qualities (Kenny and Holmes 2020). For his part, Duterte has cultivated a strongman image through direct appeals to voters on television and especially social media. Duterte's early 2016 presidential campaign was built on his record as the rough-hewn, tough-on-crime mayor of Davao City, the city he had personally run since the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

Duterte's main message in 2016 was the promise of an aggressive crusade against the sale and use of illegal drugs. With the economy still growing well in 2016 and little public interest in his proposal for constitutional reform, his campaign instead played on concerns over drug-related crime and portrayed Duterte as the only candidate with the will and the capacity to resolve the disorder. The issue of criminality was driven in part by Duterte, but Philippines National Police (PNP) data also show the real incidence of recorded crime rising in the two years prior to his election. Never one for political correctness, Duterte

pledged to dump the bodies of so many drug dealers in Manila Bay that the fish would grow fat. In office, Duterte has made good on his macabre promise. Official figures put the number killed in police operations at 6,165 (June 2021), but unofficial estimates, which include vigilante and related killings, are many times higher (Lalu 2021). This heavy-handed approach has attracted considerable criticism from liberal quarters, with Duterte, in turn, responding by cracking down on the press and the political opposition.

## The COVID-19 response

### *Early response*

Although the Duterte government has come to adopt a hardline containment approach to the virus with curfews, lockdowns, harsh penalties, and the suppression of dissent being widely deployed, the early response to the outbreak was muted. Despite the growing number of COVID-19 cases in China by the end of January 2020, with the World Health Organization declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, Duterte was initially dismissive of the risk. As late as January 28, the Department of Health (DoH) reported no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines, but acknowledged that it was closely monitoring the condition of 22 persons. On January 30, a 38-year-old female Chinese national arriving from Wuhan via Hong Kong was admitted to a government hospital showing pneumonia symptoms. In a public appearance in early February 2020, Duterte still appeared dismissive, cursing the virus and quipping that he would “slap” it once he sees it (Lopez 2020).

### *Lockdown*

This early dismissiveness aside, once the DoH confirmed the first local transmission of COVID-19 on March 7, the government—and Duterte—began to take the virus very seriously. The DoH raised the alert level to Red sublevel 1 and on March 8, Duterte issued Proclamation 922, declaring that the National Capital Region (NCR), home to about a fifth of the Philippine population, would be put in a State of Public Health Emergency. The declaration of a state of national emergency, Red sublevel 2, was declared on March 12. Duterte, flanked by members of his cabinet and with the high brass of the military and the police behind him, acknowledged the seriousness of the crisis, asking the public not to panic and invoking obedience to the quarantine regulations. On March 17, Duterte expanded the scope of the lockdown to cover the entire island of Luzon on which the NCR is located.

From March 2020 to the time of writing, the NCR was yet to exit from quarantine or semi-lockdown conditions. The new surge of cases in mid-March 2021 brought back strict community quarantine conditions across the archipelago. Under the most stringent lockdown conditions, so-called *Enhanced Community*

*Quarantine*, residents are required to remain indoors unless they have a permit that enables them to leave to purchase essential items. Businesses classified as nonessential must be closed and public transportation is limited. Under less severe levels of restriction, some businesses are allowed to remain open, but vulnerable groups, including the elderly, must remain inside. In spite of the apparent comprehensiveness of the lockdown, especially in metro Manila, the highly virulent Alpha (UK), Beta (South Africa), and Delta (India) strains of the virus have proven impossible to contain.

### ***Testing, tracking, and tracing***

The lack of capacity in the public health system has limited the use of more technologically intensive tactics such as location tracking, regular testing, and contact tracing. For instance, although Duterte ordered a temporary ban on travelers from Wuhan at the end of January 2020, it was clear that the government was administratively ill-prepared to combat the spread of the virus; a hearing in the Philippine senate revealed that fewer than a fifth of the passengers on the flight arriving from Wuhan that carried the first recorded Philippines case of COVID-19 had been tracked. Much of the implementation of advanced protocols was left to local government units which vary in terms of their capacity. Cities (c. 146) are better equipped with the financial resources necessary to mobilize human and other technological resources compared to municipalities (over 1,480) and provinces (80). The national government for its part failed to coordinate testing, tracing, and treatment during the first lockdown in March 2020. Indeed, never particularly effective, fully a year after the outbreak began, contact tracers were having greater, not lesser, difficulty in identifying close contacts beyond the household (Talabong 2021). As of June 2021, the Philippines had 226 testing laboratories and a testing rate of 407 per million. Regionally, this puts it above Indonesia at 259, but well below Malaysia at 2,308. The scale of the August 2021 surge, many due to community transmission, has strained an already overburdened system.

### ***Masks, social distancing, and medical interventions***

Following his initially dismissive attitude toward the virus, Duterte has been consistent in mandating social distancing, the wearing of masks, hygiene, and in complying with public health advice. We cannot fail to note Duterte's bizarre advice to citizens to disinfect face masks with gasoline, but generally Duterte has gone along with, rather than resisted, the scientific consensus. For instance, in April 2021, despite political pressure, Duterte took the advice of public health officials to wait for the results of a controlled trial before allowing the use of ivermectin as a treatment for COVID-19. At the height of the outbreak, Duterte, unlike Trump, wore a mask in public, and in mid-2021 even went as far as to threaten to imprison those caught wearing masks improperly (Ranada 2021).

The Philippines performance in treating those who have contracted the virus also places it somewhere in the middle of the pack, given its level of development. The ratio of deaths to reported cases in the Philippines is 1.7% compared to a global mean of 2.2%, which suggests that the Philippines has been more effective than average in treating those who have contracted the virus. However, given the inaccuracies in these numbers due to underreporting of cases with mild or no symptoms in countries with low testing rates—including the Philippines—these figures should be interpreted with caution.

### ***Vaccines***

Vaccine rollout has moved very slowly due to supply shortages, with the Philippines initially reliant on the less effective Chinese Sinovac vaccine. Almost every Filipino (95%) was worried about contracting the virus at the time of writing (based on data from June 2021). Vaccine hesitancy poses a significant public health challenge for the Duterte administration in its final year in government, with the majority of those refusing to get vaccinated having concerns about safety. Given this problem, Duterte has repeatedly urged people to get vaccinated, even threatening coercion: “You choose, vaccine or I will have you jailed,” said Duterte in a live television address (Reuters 2021). As of this writing, vaccine take-up appears to be improving, with the proportion of Filipinos willing to get the vaccine if available increasing from one in five in February 2021 to nearly one in two in June.

### ***Welfare and economic fallout***

The economic fallout from the crisis has been severe. In 2020, the Philippine economy declined by 9.6%, the highest level of contraction among Southeast Asian economies (ABD 2021). The longer-term path to economic recovery remains unclear, although the economy is expected to return to growth in 2021 with further strengthening in 2022. Unemployment sat at 7.7% in June 2021, down from its peak of 8.8% in February, although further lockdowns could see this rate rise again before the vaccination rollout is completed. Inflation rose to 4.2% in early 2021, in part due to global supply chain problems, but with further lockdowns in mid-year, this had fallen back to 3.2% by June.

In personal terms, some 56% of the population reported losing a job or source of income as of February 2021. The government has sought to deploy some welfare measures in order to alleviate the economic pain incurred by restrictions on movement. In March 2020, repeating his admonitions to obey the restrictions, Duterte assured the public that the government had the funds to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis. The government has spent funds on individual health and income support or what is referred in the vernacular as *ayuda* (help). In surveys fielded by Social Weather Stations (2021b), around 70% of the population reports receiving help from the government.

Although the government had some funds available to support business directly, with the president given authority by Congress under the *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act* to realign items in the 2020 national budget, and with the additional appropriations made under the *Bayanihan to Recover as One Act*, it has chosen not to do so. Rather, Duterte has leaned on big business to subsidize the state's response to the crisis by extending assistance to their employees and to the government. By way of compensation, the government has pushed for and secured the passage of a law that provides tax relief to beleaguered firms or in general reduces the rate of corporate taxes within the medium term. It is likely that only Duterte's unique stature, his ability to leverage his popularity and control over the reins of government, has made this pseudo-corporatist response possible.

### ***Constitutional implications***

Although on paper the Philippines has one of the strongest presidencies in the world, this authority has often lain dormant in the face of an oligarchic elite that is defensive of its prerogatives (McCoy 2009). Known for his federalist ambitions, well before the onset of the pandemic Duterte had been accused of seeking to centralize power and curb dissent. Under the exigency of the crisis, these trends have become more pronounced. Since March 2020, critics of Duterte have argued with justification that an already cowed Congress has ceded to the president almost unlimited legal and financial powers to address the crisis (Hutchcroft and Holmes 2020).

Duterte has hardly been slow to appreciate the inability of the judiciary or the legislature to function as restraints. Most recently, in one of his almost weekly addresses to the public, Duterte warned that he will refuse to follow the court if it interferes in the executive's action in addressing the pandemic. His comments came as a reaction to a case filed before a Philippine court asking for relief from the quarantine restrictions imposed on returning Filipinos. This again appears to be an exacerbation of preexisting trends rather than a new departure. Duterte's rejection of the power of the judiciary echoes earlier statements about closing Congress, which demonstrated his lack of regard for horizontal accountability and the rule of law.

It is notable also that operations against illegal drug use and distribution and against domestic terrorism have proceeded throughout the period of the pandemic. Indeed, the heavy role of the military and the police in the pandemic response—primarily in the form of enforcing compliance with lockdowns—suggests a complementarity between public health and security from the administration's perspective. Just months into the spread of the virus, the government passed the Anti-Terror Act of 2020. The legislation provides the military and police with even freer rein to surveil suspects and their networks and to detain individuals for questioning without charge. Continued curfews and lockdowns, especially in the NCR, have enabled an even more robust prosecution of the anti-illegal drug campaign. Figures from the PNP show that killings may even have increased following the outbreak of the virus.

## Politics of the pandemic

As we noted above, Duterte's popularity has remained astonishingly resilient through the crisis, despite the early missteps and continuing deficiencies in the handling of the pandemic. His approval ratings have remained at around the 85-point level throughout his presidency. As of June 2021, survey data show that just under two in three Filipinos approve of the government's performance in containing the spread of the virus, down from three in four in February 2021. It is, however, noteworthy that accountability for public health tends to fall on local agencies rather than the national government. During the pandemic, Duterte has leveraged this tendency by calling on the public to report to him directly when they encounter problems with their local governments or bureaucrats. Moreover, survey data show that a significant majority (79%) of the population believes that the public's lack of compliance with health protocols is the "real cause" of the spread of the virus in the Philippines (Social Weather Stations 2021a).

Another possible explanation for the absence of blowback for the government's mixed record is the relatively low salience of the pandemic vis-à-vis other issues. Even as some 95% of the population reports being at least somewhat concerned about contracting the virus, once other issues such as wages, unemployment, taxes, welfare, and economic concerns are considered, the virus pales in comparison in terms of salience—at least, according to data that precede the late July 2021 surge in cases. On the back of the early 2021 jump in consumer prices, a February 2021 survey showed that more people believed inflation (18.8%) to be the most urgent concern facing the country (compared with 7.8% for the spread of COVID-19). These ratios hardly changed even after the March 2021 surge in new cases, with June data giving figures of 17.1%–8.3% for respective concerns over inflation and the virus.

Given the weakness of the economy since the onset of the pandemic, this raises the question of why Duterte's approval ratings have not particularly suffered. The apparent lack of response is not due to voter ignorance. In fact, the one notable vulnerability in Duterte's approval ratings is with respect to inflation. Early on in his presidency, high food price inflation was sufficient to dent his approval ratings. Following a doubling of inflation to 6.2% in the third quarter of 2018, survey data show that between June and September disapproval of the Duterte government's handling of inflation shot up from 29% to 47%. The connection between other economic indicators, such as job growth, and Duterte's approval rating is, however, much weaker. Thus, at the same time that the pandemic has induced a general recession, aside from a temporary jump in early 2021, inflation itself has fallen, sitting at only 3.2% in June 2021. This return to low inflation may have mitigated some of the political fallout for the president despite other economic headwinds.

We cannot also discount the effect of Duterte's image management. Throughout the crisis, Duterte has astutely curated his own reputation, projecting himself as resolute, stern, and compassionate, much as he has in the course of the campaign against illegal drugs. A highly experienced politician, Duterte knows

his own spheres of competence, beyond which his habit is to delegate to cabinet members or allies. To avoid being held accountable in the case of failure, he allows his subordinates to take charge of crisis situations and to carry out the necessary interventions. This strategy leaves room for Duterte to subsequently arbitrate, if needed, should the public's reaction to the decision of his subordinates turn negative.

In the case of the pandemic, Duterte has thus far managed to avoid being held to answer for the continued spread of cases or, thus far, for the impact on material well-being. The altogether exogenous nature of COVID-19 as a public health crisis may have worked to absolve Duterte of direct blame for its effects—at least thus far. At the same time, Duterte, from around late March 2020, has stressed the government's limited resources, calling on the private sector to help out and fulfill its social responsibility. Even blame for the delay in the vaccine rollout has been displaced onto big pharma and supply problems in vaccine-producing countries.

### Political prognosis

Leading into an election year at the time of writing, given the scale of the public health crisis, continuing tensions in the West Philippine Sea, and the death toll of the drug war, Duterte is likely to face substantial political opposition in determining his successor. Some erstwhile allies, including boxer and Senator Manny Pacquiao, have already begun to turn against him as the presidency approaches its lame duck period. Notwithstanding these criticisms, however, unless his domestic performance approval and trust ratings significantly drop, the fragmented opposition will still find it difficult to defeat whomever he anoints to run in 2022. With the tight control that Duterte enjoys over public financial resources, he possesses a huge carrot that he can dangle to solicit support from patronage-hungry subnational politicians.

Whatever happens at the 2022 elections, however, the legacy of the Duterte administration will have been to completely or substantially emasculate the institutions that typically ensure the accountability of the executive branch: a subservient Congress, a sluggish judiciary, a publicly emasculated supreme audit institution, a cowed electoral commission, and a self-censoring media. In short, Duterte has bequeathed Filipinos a presidency devoid of any significant institutional opposition, an inheritance that any successor with a similar illiberal bent would be free to exploit.

### Note

- 1 We report survey data from Pulse Asia, Inc., unless otherwise stated. Links are provided to published reports. Unpublished data, where not embargoed, is available on request. We note that one of the authors, Ronald Holmes, is the president of Pulse Asia, Inc.

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# 15

## RUSSIA

### Muddling Through Populism and the Pandemic

*Anton Shirikov, Valeriia Umanets and Yoshiko Herrera*

#### **Vladimir Putin as populist?**

For many Russians, Vladimir Putin is synonymous with the state (Greene and Robertson 2019). Putin does not squarely fit the definition of a populist; instead, his regime until the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 might have been described (at best) as pragmatic and technocratic, and embracing statist nationalism and the preservation of the status quo (Lassila 2018).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in maintaining public approval and the legitimacy of his rule, Putin often relies on populist tactics such as offering simplistic solutions based on strong personal leadership. In the early 2000s, Putin often presented himself as someone who speaks for ordinary people and fights corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen. Russian state propaganda extensively exploited the memories of World War II, featuring Putin as a central protective figure in annual war-related celebrations (Wood 2011). Propaganda commonly highlights Putin's heroic (obviously staged) stunts, such as hang gliding with cranes, saving a TV crew from a tiger, or diving to the bottom of the sea to recover ancient amphoras. A recent study suggests that Putin regularly relied on populist rhetoric when managing terrorist attacks or challenging US global power (Burrett 2020).

Putin's populist appeals intensified in the 2010s in response to the growing liberal opposition to his regime, which after two decades in power was facing a stagnating economy, rampant corruption, low trust, and dwindling legitimacy. In this later period, the Kremlin increasingly focused on alleged internal and external threats to Russia, promoting a "conservative-traditional populist discourse" (Robinson and Milne 2017). Several major policy decisions made by the Kremlin in this period, such as the annexation of Crimea and anti-LGBTQ laws, clearly appeased popular sentiment (Fish 2017). This combination of technocratic policy-making, authoritarian political style, and populist appeals, which some

scholars call “populism from above” (Casula 2013), also characterizes the Kremlin’s response to the COVID pandemic.

## The pandemic in Russia

Russia is the world’s largest country by territory and is ninth by population. Hence, the response to COVID-19 was likely to be challenging for any government, but nevertheless the Russian government’s response has been lackluster. On January 21, 2020, a high-level official called COVID-19 a “biological threat” to Russia (Starikova et al. 2020). On January 27, the government established a crisis center (RIA Novosti 2020a) and limited passenger trips to and from China. According to official records, the first cases of COVID in Russia were identified on January 31, 2020 (RIA Novosti 2020a), and the spread of the virus in the first couple of months was slow.<sup>2</sup> In March 2020, only 2,335 cases were registered. Nonetheless, in February and March 2020, the Russian government gradually introduced restrictions on international travel, denying admittance to foreigners coming from South Korea, Iran, Italy, other EU countries, and then the US. On March 27, all air and overland travel to and from other countries came to a halt (RIA Novosti 2020a). By April, as the official number of new cases jumped to over 100,000, various domestic restrictions were rolled out.

In particular, wearing masks in public places and in some cases gloves became mandatory in all Russian regions (RIA Novosti 2020b). Overall, mask mandates have been in place since May 2020 and throughout the beginning of 2021 across all of Russia. While Russia is an authoritarian regime and regional governors are subordinate to the Kremlin, there is some decentralization of governance generally, and some of the COVID response was delegated to regional and city authorities.

At the end of March 2020 and in early April, most Russian regions also introduced mandatory “self-isolation” (RIA Novosti 2020a). Typically, citizens could only leave their homes to do grocery shopping, to walk their dogs, or for medical emergencies. Some regions implemented strict control measures to limit movement within cities. For example, in mid-April 2020, the governments of Moscow and various other cities introduced digital permits for the use of public or private transportation, and citizens had to file for such permits in advance. Theaters, museums, restaurants, and various other public places were closed, religious services were halted. Regional governments also insisted that employers transfer most employees to remote work. Moscow introduced some of the most elaborate restrictions, including “walking schedules” for each apartment building: the government designated certain days of the week when residents were allowed to go outside for a walk (Interfax 2020a). In April-May 2020, schools and universities across Russia switched over to virtual learning (RIA Novosti 2020b), and it was introduced again in the fall of 2020 for certain periods of time or for certain categories of students.

After the summer of 2020, mask mandates were eased somewhat, allowing exceptions for outdoor activities (BBC 2020b). Most of the harshest restrictions, such as “self-isolation” described above, were lifted by the end of the summer. The federal government also started lifting travel restrictions in August 2020 and flights to most European countries resumed by the spring of 2021. By early 2021, Moscow maintained “stay-at-home” orders for residents over 65 years old and some limitations on restaurants and other public places, but remote work was no longer required from employers (*Izvestiia* 2021).

In many ways, the Russian government’s response to the pandemic adhered to internationally recommended pandemic responses, and the measures it took relied on sound scientific advice (even if restrictions were not always properly enforced). In addition, the federal government has contributed substantial funds to fight the pandemic: more than RUB 600 billion (approximately USD 8.2 billion) were spent to subsidize healthcare for COVID-19 patients and to increase pay for doctors (Tkachev 2021) and RUB 8.8 billion (approximately USD 120 million) were allocated to build new hospitals (Interfax 2020b). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Russia was able to rapidly develop its own COVID-19 vaccine, called Sputnik V, which was officially approved in the fall of 2020 and was found to be safe and effective by a study published in *The Lancet* (Jones and Roy 2021).

At the same time, there were four notable issues in the Russian government’s response to the pandemic: politicized information; decentralization as blame-deflection; contradictory measures in the vaccination drive; and the use of the pandemic to justify a further power grab by the regime.

First, consistent with Soviet era tactics, information about the pandemic was politicized. Various news outlets and experts, both in Russia and abroad, have suggested that the Russian government misclassified a substantial number of COVID-19 deaths, attributing them to other causes. In November 2020, *Mediazona* reported that mortality among patients diagnosed with COVID was at least twice as high as the official statistics (Zelenskiy et al. 2020). Later in the year, Russia’s deputy prime minister, Tatiana Golikova, admitted that the actual COVID-19 death count in 2020 could be around 186,000 (BBC 2020a). But even that was probably an undercount. According to an analysis by the *New York Times*, total excess deaths (a common way to assess COVID-related mortality) in Russia from April to December 2020 amounted to more than 360,000 (Troianovski 2021). The politicization of information probably also affected other problems with the pandemic response, namely that while the authorities implemented a variety of restrictive measures, COVID testing was not always easily available (Balakov 2020), and contact tracing was not systematically implemented. Part of the problem was the lack of tests and personnel (Napalkova and Reiter 2020), but another reason might have been that the government was also actively attempting to downplay the extent of the pandemic.

A second important aspect of the government’s response was that most of the restrictions described above were introduced (and then withdrawn or moderated)

by regional or municipal authorities. For example, the federal government mandated travel bans and several weeks of stay-at-home days for most organizations in April, but it did not introduce a federal emergency declaration, leaving that to regions. Social distancing rules and other measures were delegated to governors and mayors. In particular, school closures were only recommended, not mandated, by the federal Ministry of Education (*Izvestiia* 2020). At a government meeting in March, President Putin asked employers to “consider” remote work (Prezident Rossii 2020). The prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, called on regions at the end of March to pay attention to restrictions introduced in Moscow and to work out possible plans to introduce similar measures (RIA Novosti 2020b). According to one report, Vladimir Putin considered such measures unpopular and thus tried to distance himself from the restrictions (Rustamova and Pertsev 2020), placing the responsibility for these measures on governors and other bureaucrats. The Kremlin even avoided using the word “quarantine,” replacing it instead with “self-isolation” or “non-working weeks.”

On May 11, 2020, Putin announced that pandemic-related restrictions would be shortened and that social support of the population would be increased. In his public address, he said that the situation varies a lot across regions and the governors would continue to be able to make decisions on supplementing, softening, or maintaining specific measures at the regional level (Kremlin.ru 2020). Putin also emphasized that the regions now have all the necessary resources to help COVID patients. Such an approach, however, was not meant to empower regional governors because they would still need the Kremlin’s consent for any substantial restrictions. Moreover, in November 2020, Putin reminded regional officials that they had “received broad powers” to combat the pandemic, and he asked them to “take measures and decisions responsibly” and not “to embellish the situation” (Interfax 2020c). Thus, the apparent decentralization might have been a way to push the responsibility for the growing number of cases to regional officials, and it could be seen as a manifestation of populist tactics by Putin, in which he could criticize an “inefficient government bureaucracy” in case things went wrong.

Third, the rollout of the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V, was also subject to similar tensions. Developing a vaccine and making it available to the Russian public by December 2020 clearly reflected substantial investment on the part of the Kremlin, and the vaccine was undoubtedly a major achievement by the Russian authorities, even though questions remain about the results of clinical trials (Yasnyi 2021). Russia had also begun supplying the vaccine to other countries in an effort to strengthen its international influence (Serhan 2021), although at the time of writing, the vaccine was not yet approved in Europe because of a lack of transparency related to the clinical trials.

At the same time, the domestic rollout of Sputnik V has been painfully slow. By May 2021, only 14 million Russians, about 10% of the Russian population, had received at least one dose (Baklanov and Kartsev 2021). To some extent, the delays could be explained by early production difficulties (Churmanova and

Dyakonova 2021) and by Russia's international "vaccine diplomacy" in which vaccine doses were exported to other countries. However, a major factor has been a lack of interest by the public and a lack of will or capacity of the government to compel the population to get vaccinated. In May 2021, 62% of Russians said they would not get the Sputnik V vaccine (*Novaya Gazeta* 2021). More than half of the respondents said they were not afraid of COVID-19; others may have believed that they do not need a vaccine after having survived the disease or simply did not trust the vaccine.

By June, a few more million Russians got the vaccine, but it became clear that the vaccination drive was failing and that more drastic measures were needed. The government response to this problem featured the same patterns as already described above. On the one hand, the Kremlin made every effort to take credit for the vaccine, for example, state television promoted this victory for months in prime time while misleading the public about the actual rate of success; in May 2021, Putin claimed that almost 22 million had been vaccinated, exaggerating the actual number by half (Baklanov and Kartsev 2021). On the other hand, when in June 2021 officials started discussing the possibility of mandatory vaccinations, the Kremlin once again publicly distanced itself from these discussions, deferring decisions to the regions. By August 2021, about 40 Russian regions had mandated vaccination for a certain percentage of individuals employed in retail and some other sectors (Yushkov 2021). Still, the federal government continued to emphasize that there would be no Russia-wide mandatory immunization and that such decisions are to be made by governors, while informally recognizing their necessity (Yakoreva et al. 2021).

Thus, despite having an effective vaccine, Russia has not successfully combated the COVID-19 spread. As yet, there is no definitive explanation to Russia's unwillingness to introduce compulsory vaccination, but various observers link it with the low trust and backlash against vaccination and possibly insufficient production capacity along with the prioritization of the international over the domestic market. As a result, even by January 2022, despite various attempts to accelerate the vaccination, only 51% of Russians, according to the government statistics, had received at least one shot of the vaccine; this percentage was substantially lower than in Europe or the US.

The fourth notable issue in the Russian government's response to the pandemic was the use of the situation to justify a further power grab by the regime. The government used the pandemic as a pretext for a constitutional referendum, which extended Putin's time in office, and changes to the Russian Criminal Code, which allowed for greater political repression.

Initially, the Russian government announced April 22, 2020, as the date for a constitutional referendum that would allow President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036. With hesitation and amid a ballooning crisis in spring 2020, the referendum was delayed until the summer (Ilyushina and Hodge 2020). According to Putin, the date was postponed to July 1 to save the lives and for the health of Russian citizens (*Sputnik* 2020). The authorities claimed that the

COVID-19 situation had improved sufficiently to proceed with a referendum (conveniently, a number of restrictions introduced earlier were lifted right before the referendum in order to show that life was going back to normal). This messaging, however, relied on government data about COVID cases, which undercounted the seriousness of the crisis. In fact, the COVID situation in the country in late spring and early summer 2020 was getting worse, especially in the regions.

At the same time, the pandemic was used to promote voting for the constitutional changes. In addition to the pre-pandemic arguments, for example, protecting Russia from the foreign influence, Putin claimed that the constitutional changes were necessary for the improvement of Russian healthcare system (Latuhina 2020). Some regions released controversial referendum campaign videos with medical professionals claiming that the constitutional amendments were essential to fight COVID-19 (Litvinova and Galanina 2020). Other state-affiliated media even argued that the global pandemic proved the importance of Russia's constitutional amendments (Novitskii 2020). However, the constitutional amendments, which were written before the pandemic started, mainly aimed to boost the president's powers with regard to the parliament, the court system, and the regions; the referendum did not bring any substantial change to the state healthcare system.

The Russian government also used the pandemic to increase the prosecution of its opponents. In January 2021, thousands of Russians took part in protests to demand the release of the jailed opposition leader Aleksei Navalny, who returned to Russia five months after a near-fatal nerve agent assassination attempt (BBC 2021). Several opposition activists were detained and charged with a criminal violation of COVID-19 sanitary and epidemiological standards (Barysheva and Mylnikov 2021). Such charges were made possible due to changes to the Criminal Code of Russia in spring 2020, adopted, as the authorities maintained, because many Russians did not comply with the social distancing rules. The pandemic was used to dampen the protests more generally as well. For example, Human Rights Watch's annual World Report showed that under the pretext of fighting the pandemic, individual protests had been practically banned in Russia even when protesters were wearing masks and stayed socially distant (Romashenko 2021).

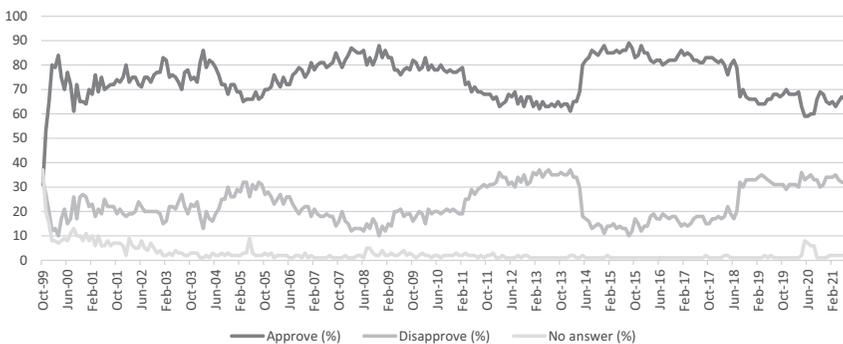
## Explaining the government response

The Russian government's response to the pandemic was in many ways decidedly non-populist, even though the Kremlin and Putin himself had frequently used populist tactics before. This response was still politicized, but it was driven by limitations of the domestic political context rather than by the logic of populism. When the pandemic struck, Putin had been in power for 20 years. He had successfully navigated several earlier crises, but by the late 2010s, his legitimacy and popularity had started declining and the Russian economy had gone into stagnation. In this context, as the longtime incumbent, extensively relying on populism

by rallying against the establishment and the elites, as other populists might have done in a crisis, may not have been an option. Instead, even in the pre-pandemic years, the Kremlin was increasingly using violence and other hardline measures to address emerging problems, cracking down on the opposition, independent media, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); this tendency continued and intensified during the pandemic. Moreover, this context explains why the government's approach to pandemic-related restrictions was not always consistent and why the Kremlin was unwilling to take responsibility for such measures (which undoubtedly reduced their effectiveness) or for mass vaccination. Putin clearly understood that both restrictions and vaccinations were unpopular, and he was concerned that promoting a more comprehensive approach would cause long-term damage to his approval rating. At the same time, a more comprehensive approach might have revealed that the crisis was really serious, which would have contradicted the propaganda narratives.

Public opinion surveys conducted by the independent polling organization "Levada Center" show that Putin's approval rating between March and May 2020 went down by 10 percentage points, but it did not fall below 59% during the global pandemic and remained consistent with pre-COVID-19 numbers (see Figure 15.1).

The necessity to conduct a referendum to expand and prolong Putin's powers also shaped the government's response. While the extension of Putin's term most likely had been years in the making, 2020 was a convenient time to implement it. And once the referendum was announced, postponing it by more than several months was risky for the regime. This power grab had to be done in advance of the 2021 parliamentary election, as both would require substantial resources and heavy manipulation. Moreover, if the COVID-19 situation worsened, it could have undermined Putin's approval rating and thus the willingness of the public to support his constitutional amendments. Thus, holding the referendum in the early months of the pandemic probably became the only option (and it might



**FIGURE 15.1** Approval rating of Putin.

Source: Levada Center (2021).

have made the COVID situation worse, as the authorities lifted a number of restrictions just before the referendum). At the same time, COVID-19 enabled Putin to proceed more smoothly; fewer citizens were willing to protest during the pandemic, and the government could more easily stop the remaining protesters for “health” reasons.

Thus, in many ways, Russia’s response to COVID-19 could be seen as a “normal” authoritarian response to a crisis, for example, downplaying negative news, claiming to have managed the crisis successfully, and using the crisis to bolster government power. However, one of the factors that made this response peculiar was Russia’s state capacity. Given Russia’s extensive administrative and public health infrastructure as well as scientific capabilities inherited from the Soviet times, it could have addressed the COVID-19 crisis much more effectively, substantially reducing its human cost. For example, several prominent Russian economists have estimated the total number of COVID-19 deaths in Russia between March 2020 and May 2021 as 532,000, and by their calculations, about 220,000 of those deaths could have been prevented with a more effective policy response (Rogov et al. 2021). Such an effective response did not materialize—partly because of ineffective governance and partly because of the politicized approach discussed above. However, this more extensive capacity still allowed Russia to avoid a complete public health disaster and to develop a functioning vaccine.

## Conclusion

Overall, the public health response to the pandemic in Russia could have been much worse, but with the politicization of information and the undercounting of cases and deaths, it is hard to say exactly how Russia compares. It is probably not vastly better than Europe, as the official statistics suggest, but it also may not be that much worse than the UK or the US (some of the hardest hit countries) in terms of total number of deaths. Perhaps nothing exemplifies the contradictory response as much as Russia, on the one hand, being among a handful of countries to have developed a vaccine, and on the other, having among the lowest vaccination rates for countries in which the vaccine was available.

The pandemic did not change the regime trajectory in Russia. It was and remains an authoritarian regime in which political opponents are violently repressed. To some extent, Vladimir Putin took advantage of the pandemic to strengthen his rule, but the general institutional context did not change. In addition, the media manipulation with regard to COVID-19, that is, highlighting successes and downplaying or hiding problems, has been a consistent tactic of the Putin regime for some time. Populist tactics appeared to some extent in the promotion of the idea that Putin and the central government were responsible for successes, while regions or others, namely the West, were responsible for the problems (Olisashvili 2021).

Hence, the pandemic presented a major challenge to the Putin regime, but overall, the regime handled it in the way it has done with previous crises, namely

via a combination of media manipulation, pressure on subordinate regional elites, institutional changes that benefit the regime, violence, and hope that enough of the population remains sufficiently complacent. At the time of writing, this hope had been vindicated, as the pandemic had not substantially undermined support for the regime, and Vladimir Putin's approval rating was approximately at its pre-pandemic level, until the war in Ukraine started in February 2022.

## Notes

- 1 The invasion of Crimea put politics above economy and was somewhat of a departure from Putin's focus on economic growth.
- 2 Official COVID-19 statistics in Russia are reported at <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/>. However, as discussed earlier, the official numbers severely undercount the actual number of cases and deaths.

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# 16

## NICARAGUA

### Populist Performance and Authoritarian Practice During COVID-19

*Rachel A. Schwartz and Kai M. Thaler*

While the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged Latin America as a whole, nowhere in Central America was the response to it more puzzling than in Nicaragua, the region's poorest country. Home to some 6.7 million people, Nicaragua confirmed its first positive COVID-19 case on March 18, 2020, and witnessed the rapid acceleration of infections thereafter, peaking at over 300 reported cases per day by June (Observatorio Ciudadano 2021). By some counts, at the height of Nicaragua's first COVID-19 wave in mid-2020, the country's excess mortality rate was a staggering 59%, the third highest in the world (Harlow et al. 2020).

It would be easy to blame underdevelopment, weak public health infrastructure, and the lack of healthcare access for the COVID-19 crisis' devastating toll on Nicaragua. Yet this overlooks the disastrous government response, which researchers in the medical journal *The Lancet* deemed among "the most erratic of any country in the world" (Mather et al. 2020).

How did the Nicaraguan government respond to the COVID-19 crisis? And what explains its approach? We argue that the regime of President Daniel Ortega and influential Vice President Rosario Murillo, also Ortega's wife, adopted a strategy premised on three pillars: the denial of the pandemic's severity, the distortion of COVID-related information, and the criminalization of medical community and citizen-led response efforts. In so doing, the Ortega-Murillo regime not only demonstrated its highly authoritarian character, but also the key features of populist crisis performance: (1) the invocation of "the people" as a means of criminalizing opposition and rejecting a stronger pandemic response as economically disastrous for the masses, and (2) the perpetuation of the crisis to further consolidate regime power. Downplaying the severity of the pandemic and resisting preventive measures was driven by economic considerations; however, increased repression amid waning support reflects regime attempts to eliminate

any alternative sources of popular legitimacy and preserve the ruling family's grip on power and wealth.

### **Authoritarianism and populism under the Ortega-Murillo regime**

For observers of Nicaraguan politics, the erratic nature of the government's pandemic response was no surprise. Ortega and Murillo have a long and tumultuous history, characterized by increasing corruption, authoritarian governance, and, since 2018, violent repression.

Ortega and the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) party originated in the guerrilla struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, taking power through a successful revolution in 1979. The revolutionary government's leftist character led to strong US opposition under the Reagan administration, which sponsored the Contra rebel forces during the 1980s. The FSLN, under Ortega as president beginning in 1984, was successful militarily against the Contras, but the war's economic and human toll and unrelenting US pressure led to a negotiated settlement and democratic elections in 1990.

The FSLN and Ortega unexpectedly lost the 1990 elections, initiating a series of center-right and right-wing governments that rolled back revolutionary social programs and implemented neoliberal reforms. Ortega centralized control of the FSLN, but he and the party were unable to regain power until 2007—after Ortega made a pact with right-wing ex-President Arnoldo Alemán to create a party duopoly and reduce the vote threshold needed for a first-round presidential victory (Jarquín 2016; Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler 2017).

Ortega and the FSLN gradually dismantled democratic institutions and electoral freedom after regaining power, using the National Assembly and Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) to delegitimize opposition parties and actors. These dynamics escalated in 2016, when Ortega ran with First Lady Rosario Murillo as his vice presidential candidate and barred top opposition candidates from running, leading to high levels of abstention. Ortega and Murillo's government then removed two opposition parties' deputies from the National Assembly, ensuring that beyond the FSLN, only weak and puppet parties retained seats (Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler 2017).

Since 2007, Ortega's repression of opponents had primarily been through political and legal maneuvers, but this relative restraint was abandoned in 2018. In April 2018, pro-government mobs and police beat protesters demonstrating against proposed social security benefit cuts, sparking new backlash mobilization. Amid police killings of students, protests spread nationwide, expanding to a broad anti-Ortega-Murillo movement to end repression and restore genuine democracy. Despite initial dialogue, the Ortega-Murillo regime reverted to even more brutal repression. Over 300 people were killed and thousands more were wounded, imprisoned, or forced into exile (Cabralés Domínguez 2020; Mosinger et al. 2022).

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit Latin America in early 2020, the Nicaraguan government had outlawed protest, further suppressed independent media and civil society, alienated international actors, and passed new laws to prosecute opponents for treason or spurious accusations of being “foreign agents.”

The Ortega–Murillo regime belies any easy ideological categorization and is motivated primarily by maintaining the ruling family’s grip on power and wealth. Yet, it also evinces many key characteristics of populist governance—in rhetoric, if not in substance—with parallels to the Bolivarian regimes that have ruled in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Though far from a political outsider during the 2006 campaign, Ortega attacked neoliberal economic policies (McKinley 2006), only to work with business leaders and constrain unions’ bargaining power once in office (Spalding 2017; Walters 2019). He railed against US imperialism, but worked with the US on free trade, anti-narcotics operations, and migration. With massive Venezuelan economic assistance until 2016, Ortega and Murillo were able to offer popular, pro-poor social welfare programs and infrastructure improvements—though the ruling family and top FSLN officials used the aid to enrich themselves, too (Jarquín 2016; Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler 2017). Cultivating support among Catholic and Evangelical leaders, the FSLN worked with conservatives to ban abortion and co-opted and restricted the LGBTQ community, mixing right-wing populist gender politics with left-wing economic rhetoric (Kampwirth 2008; McGee and Kampwirth 2015; Steigenga, Coleman, and Marenco 2017).

It is difficult, however, to say that the Ortega–Murillo regime has a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) of populism. Rather, it has adopted the rhetoric and performance of populism (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2020) to delegitimize opponents and to present itself as shepherding Nicaragua’s people. There is no universal battle against a corrupt elite, but instead an appeal to the FSLN’s revolutionary heritage among older supporters and the promise of “mediatized recognition, righteousness, and power” for younger supporters in exchange for submitting to the government’s authoritarian control (Chamorro 2020; Chamorro and Yang 2018). Leveraging the discourse of its revolutionary past, the Ortega–Murillo regime has fused its dated populist tropes with a highly centralized and repressive governance style.

## Nicaragua’s COVID-19 response

The Nicaraguan government’s COVID-19 response contrasts with those undertaken by its Central American neighbors. While other regional governments mandated preventive measures like physical distancing, lockdowns, mask-wearing, and bans on travel from COVID-affected countries, the Ortega–Murillo regime instead adopted an approach premised on the denial of the crisis, the distortion of information on its severity, and the criminalization of medical community and grassroots responses.

The rest of Central America had declared states of emergency by April 2020, but the Ortega-Murillo regime resisted similar action, instead declaring a “national alert.” Moreover, the government refused to shutter businesses and schools, while Nicaragua’s sports leagues continued uninterrupted—moves meant to feign normalcy and signal government competence amid the crisis.

Beyond foregoing preventive action, FSLN officials encouraged large regime-organized gatherings. One notable instance was a national march known as “Love in the Time of Covid” on March 14, 2020, organized by Vice President Murillo to show solidarity with COVID-19 victims abroad. Between Nicaragua’s first confirmed COVID-19 case on March 18 and the beginning of August 2020, there were a reported 919 mass gatherings overseen by public institutions, most unrelated to public health campaigns (FUNIDES 2020, 46).

Denialism was accompanied by government claims that Nicaragua’s health system was prepared for the pandemic, despite evidence to the contrary. Experts have long noted the weakness of the Nicaraguan health system, but in the face of growing infections, the government repeatedly touted public health sector strengthening since Ortega’s return to power. For example, the government’s official COVID-19 strategy (known as the “white book” [*libro blanco*]) indicated that the regime had increased public health expenditures fourfold and trained some 14,000 additional health workers and 3,500 doctors since 2006 (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 4). It declared that in late January 2020, the Ministry of Health (MINSA) had created an interinstitutional commission to direct the pandemic response, designated 19 hospitals for treating COVID, and acquired sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), claiming preparedness for the pandemic (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 5). MINSA also promoted the so-called “Swedish model,” premised on “providing information to the population about the preventive measures that they should exercise without establishing concrete lockdown measures so as not to affect economic dynamism” (FUNIDES 2020, 43).

By the summer of 2020, and as citizen-driven efforts to distribute PPE and close spaces like private schools accelerated, there were some shifts in the government’s posture toward COVID-19 prevention. For example, the annual celebration commemorating the 1979 Sandinista Revolution (July 19), normally a huge gathering in Managua’s old city center, was more subdued as the government opted for constructing a new monument and holding a virtual concert (Associated Press 2020a). Around the same time, in one of his few public appearances during the early months of the pandemic, Ortega finally acknowledged the severity of the crisis, recognizing that COVID-19 is a “war” that “no one escapes” and that some healthcare personnel had died due to the pandemic (Munguía 2020b). The government also introduced strict COVID-19 testing requirements for flight crews, effectively restricting international air travel (Olivares 2020).

Yet these muted acknowledgments came amid a systematic campaign to suppress information related to COVID-19 and its human toll in Nicaragua. By undercounting and misrepresenting fatalities, strictly controlling information

around diagnostic testing (and in 2021, vaccinations), and silencing the voices of doctors and health experts, the government extended into the public health realm its longstanding practices of spreading misinformation and silencing critics—even as COVID-19 decimated the FSLN’s own local and national leadership (Confidencial 2020b).

In the year after Nicaragua’s first confirmed case, MINSA recorded 6,582 COVID-19 infections nationally and 176 deaths. Meanwhile, the independent Citizen’s Observatory on COVID-19, an anonymous group of 90 doctors, epidemiologists, and other public health volunteers, estimated that the national case count was actually 13,304, with a death toll of 3,010—roughly 17 times that of state-reported figures (Observatorio Ciudadano 2021). In mid-August, the Citizen’s Observatory estimated that MINSA covered up between 64% and 98% of positive cases each week (Observatorio Ciudadano 2020), while there were often extended gaps between its release of reports. Meanwhile, a leak of MINSA information by the hacking group Anonymous revealed that the government hid over 6,000 positive tests between March 18 and July 24; during this time, the Ministry conducted over 17,000 tests, which yielded a 56% positivity rate (Confidencial 2020a).

Alongside underreporting practices, MINSA attributed COVID deaths to “atypical pneumonia” to keep them out of official pandemic fatality counts, resulting in some of the world’s worst COVID-19 death undercounting (Karlinsky and Kobak 2021). It also relied on so-called “express burials,” the rapid nighttime interment of bodies to avoid family and media scrutiny (Bermúdez and Robles 2020).

Diagnostic testing was highly centralized, further abetting the regime’s strategy of manipulating information. Only public health facilities, which are strictly controlled by MINSA, had access to COVID-19 tests. Meanwhile, Nicaragua’s private hospitals and clinics could not access tests themselves, even after a major Central American Development Bank donation in May 2020 (Navas 2020). Nicaragua in the summer of 2021 was the only Central American country not to provide data on COVID-19 variants (Confidencial 2021b), and the government also remained tight-lipped about the extent of its (slow) vaccination progress (Torrez 2021).

Beyond limiting access to critical testing supplies, the Ortega-Murillo regime utilized another longstanding practice: silencing and criminalizing critical voices, this time from the medical community. Even as cases and fatalities escalated, dozens of doctors, deemed “coup plotters in white coats,” were fired for speaking out against government negligence. In one case, a doctor in Estelí was reportedly terminated for distributing masks in her hospital (Córdoba 2020). The onslaught against the medical community was unrelenting throughout the pandemic, with the regime using legal avenues to abolish 24 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—15 of which were medical associations—in the summer of 2021 (Confidencial 2021c). Unsurprisingly, this scorn for expertise extended to the international community, too. The government refused to allow officials

from organizations like the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) to enter Nicaragua, despite their pleas.

Amid this three-pronged response of denial, distortion, and criminalization, the Ortega–Murillo regime displayed the two key elements of populist crisis performance: (1) invoking “the people” as pitted against those allegedly responsible for creating a crisis and (2) perpetuating a crisis to serve other political ends. Official government pronouncements wielded the figure of “the people” to reify the divide between the FSLN and the political opposition—a practice characteristic of Sandinista governance more generally and which escalated after 2018’s crackdown.

This rhetoric is clearly articulated in the government’s official COVID-19 response strategy in the *libro blanco*. For example, the document describes the decision to forego a lockdown as “not the only time Nicaragua has adopted unique policies in accordance with the interests of the people of Nicaragua, in contrast with the majority of the world,” which opted for “draconian” pandemic measures (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 12). The document further claims that criticisms of the regime’s COVID-19 response were driven by *golpistas* (“coup plotters”), code for the political opposition, “who want to see in the pandemic an opportunity to weaken the government and the national economy” (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 43). The regime further tied this group to a supposed global smear campaign meant to deceive “the people,” tapping into the FSLN’s anti-imperialist heritage:

Disinformation terrorism [*el terrorismo desinformativo*] developed in the United States and which the media in many countries [...] follow to the letter is brutal, criminal, and xenophobic [...] the coup-plotting opposition of Nicaragua and their sponsors in the United States have mounted a massive disinformation campaign with the same practice of lying on a daily basis to the Nicaraguan people.

(Government of Nicaragua 2020, 44)

The government also used the pandemic as a pretext to tighten its grip on power, particularly as the general elections scheduled for November 2021 approached. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis provided cover for numerous irregularities in criminal proceedings against protesters and opposition figures imprisoned in the aftermath of the 2018 anti-government protests (Munguía 2020a). Further, in July 2020, the Supreme Court, filled with Ortega cronies, changed the electoral law to allow more time for individuals to register their candidacies for political office. While the regime claimed this allowed for greater political participation amid the obstacles posed by the pandemic, critics argued it was designed to give the FSLN more time to co-opt opposition candidates—a key regime strategy since Ortega’s 2007 return to power (Associated Press 2020b).

Meanwhile, the state’s repressive apparatus was unleashed on anyone contradicting the regime’s denialist COVID-19 strategy. The Nicaraguan police

criminalized citizen-led solidarity groups distributing masks, hand sanitizer, and educational materials (Luna 2020). FSLN propaganda campaigns warned citizens not to accept masks from these groups on the street because they were infected. And in one notable instance, MINSA prohibited the bishop of the northern department of Matagalpa from creating a project to raise COVID-19 awareness and build telehealth infrastructure (Romero 2020). Such actions underscore the regime-promoted divide between the authentic Nicaraguan “people” and anyone who contradicts the government’s policy approach, even at the expense of actual popular welfare.

### Explaining Nicaragua’s COVID-19 response

A combination of economic and political factors helps explain the Ortega-Murillo regime’s pandemic strategy of denial, distortion, and criminalization. Economically, a preventive shutdown was perceived as further threatening Nicaragua’s already contracting economy. The 2018 protests and crackdown came amid a cutoff of Venezuelan assistance and the global downturn in primary commodities demand, though these macro-level factors had not yet fully impacted everyday life, beyond raising fuel prices. The broad anti-government protests, however, led to significant economic disruptions, including damaging Nicaragua’s burgeoning tourism industry. While the economy did not fully collapse as many had feared, economic contraction continued, eroding the gains from years of consistent, if unequally distributed, growth.

Between reestablishing control of the streets in mid-2018 and confirming the first positive COVID-19 case in mid-March 2020, the Ortega-Murillo regime ensured that opposition organizations and opportunities for protest remained suppressed. They also won back wavering supporters and convinced many key business leaders that they were better off keeping quiet and continuing to profit rather than challenging the government again. Implementing economically harmful COVID-19 prevention measures, however, might have undone all of this, undermining Ortega and Murillo’s self-aggrandizing claims to being the only guarantors of stability and prosperity in Nicaragua.

Moreover, Nicaragua’s large informal sector increased the risks of any potential shutdown. Many lower-income Nicaraguans have little economic safety net and depend on informal trade; it would be impossible for them to “work from home.” This dilemma, faced by many lower-income countries (e.g., Mahmud and Riley 2021), rendered a hard lockdown impractical and potentially devastating without government aid. In the short term, it may have been possible to enact a lockdown *and* provide social welfare payments, following the model adopted in El Salvador. But the ruling family and FSLN elites were unwilling to tap into their ill-gotten riches to aid the population; so, keeping the economy open was presented as the only choice (Thaler 2021). Ortega and Murillo’s ironclad control of the government ensured there was no debate or questioning of this path.

Relatedly, Nicaragua's denialist response also stemmed from the country's political conditions and the regime's political strategy. Ortega and Murillo's ability to weather the unanticipated 2018 protests only emboldened their populist rhetoric and violent crackdown on dissent—principles applied to the COVID-19 response. With general elections on the horizon, it is possible that, at least initially, the decision to forego a shutdown was driven by concerns that further economic decline would affect electoral support. By August 2021, however, the government had brazenly taken out its political rivals, arresting seven opposition presidential contenders and dozens of civil society leaders on treason and financial crimes charges. These acts illustrate that the Ortega-Murillo regime's electoral calculus extended beyond avoiding a shutdown-induced economic crisis. Having survived its greatest political challenge in 2018 through brutal repression, it remained willing to wield the state's security apparatus to eliminate competition entirely.

The politicization of the relatively weak healthcare system further hobbled pandemic response capacities, with the government purging healthcare workers who had treated protesters in 2018 (others fled into exile) and then firing those speaking out about COVID-19 in 2020 (Córdoba 2020). The government retained a strong capacity to mobilize its core supporters and government employees through coercion, so it could have tapped into the legacy of the Revolutionary era public health brigades and popular vaccination campaigns to catalyze the COVID-19 response; yet, its denialist stance and popular distrust of the Ortega-Murillo regime meant that this opportunity fell by the wayside.

It was therefore left to civil society to organize a popular public health response to COVID-19 and provide social support as the pandemic hit Nicaragua (Thaler 2021). With its own popularity diminished after the violence of 2018 and elections looming, however, Ortega and Murillo did not want any chance for opposition actors—who now include the Catholic Church and most civil society organizations—to gain further popular legitimacy, and therefore blocked grassroots response efforts.

## Conclusion

With the spread of the Delta variant, Nicaragua experienced a second wave of COVID-19 in late summer and early fall 2021 after the virus's rapid and devastating spread in mid-2020; however, this did little to change the regime's approach of denial, distortion, and criminalization. Ortega and Murillo's gamble to prioritize short-term economic and political interests over public health appeared to have paid off, in that Nicaragua's economy did not crash and there was no resurgence of protest, despite the pandemic's toll on thousands of Nicaraguans, including government supporters. Unsurprisingly, Nicaragua had the lowest vaccination level in Latin America, making the population even more vulnerable amid spreading variants.

Failing to take action against COVID-19 in 2020 further damaged the Ortega-Murillo regime's international reputation and increased Nicaragua's isolation, but

the ruling couple remained largely unfazed by international condemnation and targeted sanctions. Ortega and Murillo demonstrated that they need not be accountable to the Nicaraguan people nor to international actors to maintain control. While the November 2021 elections were always unlikely to be free and fair, with the detentions of the top prospective presidential candidates and widespread abstention, the regime secured a fourth consecutive term in office. Ortega and Murillo retained strong enough command over state security forces and pro-government paramilitaries to continue exercising despotic power and enforcing their will on the country.

This clampdown also took a toll on the already limited civil society efforts to mount a grassroots pandemic response. By June 2021, Nicaragua's most reliable and independent source of COVID-19 data, the Citizen's Observatory, experienced a swift decline in reporting due to increasing fears that "expressing any opinion contrary to official [government] information will bring with it accusations with unknown consequences" (Confidencial 2021a). Medical organizations and healthcare workers, battered by the pandemic and government persecution, struggled to continue responding to COVID-19 (Divergentes 2021).

The 2018 anti-regime protests were unexpected, and the COVID-19 pandemic also emerged as an exogenous shock to Nicaragua, along with the rest of the world. It would take further unexpected events to shake Ortega and Murillo's hold on power, which remains firm and endangers popular welfare amid Latin America's persistent COVID-19 threat. For now, the "will of the people" in Nicaragua remains whatever Ortega and Murillo think will keep them in charge and their financial interests protected.

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# 17

## VENEZUELA

### A Populist Legacy and Authoritarian Response

*Caitlin Andrews-Lee*

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Venezuela on March 15, 2020, with the positive diagnosis of three people who had recently traveled to Europe and the US (Wyss 2020). The virus hit Venezuela later and spread more slowly than it did in most other Latin American countries. As of August 2021, Venezuelan official statistics had registered just 264,511 total positive cases (11,257 per million people) and 3,799 total deaths, a fraction of the cases and deaths reported in neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, medical professionals, and opponents of Venezuela's disputed president, Nicolás Maduro, question the validity of Venezuela's claims to a superior pandemic outcome (Galindo and Manetto 2020; Kurmanaev et al. 2020).<sup>2</sup> The country remains in the throes of Latin America's worst economic and humanitarian crisis in decades, rendering it poorly equipped to manage a pandemic (Rodríguez 2021, 3). Despite scant popular legitimacy and catastrophic mismanagement of public policy and the economy, Maduro has sustained his grip on power through authoritarian means. It seems doubtful that an unpopular autocrat governing in the midst of a historic economic collapse would possess the skills and resources to effectively manage a serious public health crisis.

In short, while the impact of COVID-19 has appeared relatively limited in Venezuela, many observers anticipate that Venezuelans' ongoing suffering will be further compounded by the virus' continued spread, especially as variants of concern proliferate across Latin America (Moleiro and Singer 2021). A sense of foreboding about COVID-19's future course has taken hold in light of the incompetence and repression that have characterized Maduro's response to the pandemic as well as every other governance challenge.

The present chapter reviews the situation in Venezuela over the course of the pandemic, focusing on the political context and humanitarian crisis that preceded

it, the virus's trajectory since March 2020, and the government's response. Using a framework of path dependence, it then explains the government's response and compares Maduro's actions with those of other populist leaders in the region. This brief analysis demonstrates that the enduring legacy of Maduro's charismatic predecessor, Hugo Chávez, made Venezuela especially vulnerable to economic crisis, authoritarianism, and societal collapse in the years leading up to the pandemic; in turn, these factors shaped Maduro's response to COVID-19. The chapter concludes by reflecting on future prospects for a national recovery and political transition.

## Overview of the case

### *The populist rule and legacy of Hugo Chávez*

Hugo Chávez rose to power in February 1999 after winning the December 1998 presidential election in a landslide, promising to deliver salvation to a weary, crisis-battered citizenry by rooting out corrupt elites and delivering prosperity to the virtuous “people.” During his 14-year rule, Chávez harnessed overwhelming popularity, ever-growing executive powers, and an unprecedented oil boom to concentrate personal authority, marginalize institutions, and enact seemingly miraculous—yet mismanaged and unsustainable—programs (Maingon 2016). To achieve this, he tightened his control over state-run oil company PDVSA, stacked the company with loyalists, and funneled the revenues to his social “missions.” The missions initially gave the illusion of extraordinary performance, yet they started to deteriorate just a few years after launching (Aponte 2014, 155). To complement these ambitious yet haphazardly implemented policies, Chávez cultivated a quasi-religious narrative that deepened his personalistic authority, delegitimized his opponents, and accelerated democratic erosion. The narrative, which his followers came to internalize as a sacred creed, construed him as the ultimate redeemer of the Venezuelan people, demonized those who questioned his authority, and proclaimed his mission to vanquish these evil opponents in order to bring about a profound societal transformation that would bestow physical and spiritual transcendence upon his followers (Andrews-Lee 2021, chapter 3).

In short, Chávez's bold policies and polemic narrative helped him consolidate charismatic authority and establish a formidable populist movement. Yet, while bolstering his own power, his leadership set the stage for economic crisis, societal collapse, and hardened authoritarianism after his death in early 2013. Programatically, Chávez's flagrant mismanagement of PDVSA and profligate spending invited corruption, undermined investment, and caused his flagship social programs to deteriorate (Aponte 2014). His neglect of non-oil industries made the country exceptionally vulnerable to fluctuations in international oil prices and economic sanctions (Corrales and Penfold 2015), while his prioritization of programs that yielded short-term political benefits caused wide-ranging institutions,

including healthcare, public utilities, and education, to disintegrate (Maingon 2016). Symbolically, Chávez's populist narrative intensified his followers' profound distrust of politicians who questioned his authority, disempowering his opponents and sowing extreme polarization along a cleavage defined by loyalty or opposition to Chávez rather than by programmatic principles.

Throughout his rule, Chávez proclaimed these policies as necessary for the transformation of Venezuela into a truly participatory democracy. However, they left the country with little capacity to address unforeseen external shocks such as an international drop in oil prices—or a global pandemic. Furthermore, the affective, polarizing, and zero-sum nature of Chávez's narrative gravely threatened democracy by increasing the stakes of power and incentivizing authoritarian tactics by leaders on both sides.

### ***Maduro's anointment***

In addition to Chávez's deeply flawed policies and narrative, his reluctant anointment of a weakling successor, a move typical of charismatic leaders, set the stage for unrelenting crisis and worsening authoritarianism in the years leading up to the pandemic (Andrews-Lee 2021, 141–142). Facing terminal cancer in December 2012, Chávez publicly declared Maduro as his chosen heir. A sycophant with little trace of domestic political experience, appeal, or ambition, Maduro did not threaten to overshadow Chávez; instead, he devoted his rule to upholding the founder's heroic legacy. After narrowly defeating opposition candidate Henrique Capriles in the March 2013 presidential election—and aware that his sole source of legitimacy rested on his symbolic bond with Chávez—Maduro refused to reform Chávez's dysfunctional policies, including gross underinvestment in oil production and massive overspending, in the name of carrying out the founder's increasingly delusional mission to transform society into a paradise for the virtuous “people.” Maduro failed to relax controls over the oil sector, neglected to close the chasm between official and unofficial exchange rates, declined to adjust prices for public goods and services, and monetized budget deficits (Rodríguez 2020, 1). Combined with a drop in oil prices and crippling sectoral sanctions imposed by the US and other international actors from 2017 to 2020, Maduro's economic mismanagement caused a contraction of about 67%, a deficit of over \$150 billion, and hyperinflation currently estimated at over 6,500% (Cheatham and Cara Labrador 2021).

Unable to generate popular appeal of his own or pin the escalating crisis on others, Maduro relied on alternative strategies to maintain power. First, he leaned on his *Chavista* credentials, especially his status as the chosen “son of Chávez,” by plastering visual displays of the founder across Caracas, appearing next to Chávez's image in public, and revering the founder as a miracle worker. The strategy helped Maduro sustain an approval rating as high as 25% well into 2019 (GBAO Strategies 2019), but it also deepened his commitment to Chávez's policies, which had long since collapsed. Additionally, Maduro reinforced *Chavista*

distrust in the opposition by continuing the founder's scathing, relentless attacks on critics. Third, whereas Chávez had primarily relied on charisma to consolidate mass support, Maduro unapologetically turned to authoritarian tactics to defend his position, including holding fraudulent elections or canceling them altogether, jailing opponents, creating ad hoc institutions that propped up his rule and further disempowered the opposition, and repressing civilians who publicly questioned his authority (Freedom House 2020).

In sum, Chávez's unsustainable policies, polarizing narrative, and anointment of an incompetent, insecure successor led to a devastating crisis and a hardened authoritarian regime that refused to address it. This combination of crisis and authoritarianism unleashed a complex humanitarian emergency of historic proportions (HRW 2019). By early 2020, just before the pandemic, 96% of Venezuelan households lived in poverty, 74% of households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, and roughly 30% of children under five suffered from chronic malnutrition (UCAB 2020). Much of the population lacked access to basic sanitation and hygiene supplies, including clean water, soap, and chlorine. Additionally, the healthcare system collapsed, causing rising maternal and infant mortality rates and the spread of preventable diseases, including malaria, diphtheria, and tuberculosis (HRW 2019). The economic crisis and humanitarian emergency spurred a mass exodus, with over 5 million Venezuelans fleeing the country between 2015 and 2019 (UCAB 2020).

### ***COVID-19 and Maduro's response***

Counterintuitively, the preexisting crisis delayed the spread of COVID-19 in Venezuela. First, the crisis drastically reduced travel to and from Venezuela, largely isolating the country from international visitors (Mines 2020). Second, unlike other populist leaders in the region such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, the US' Donald Trump, and Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Maduro took proactive measures to contain the pandemic as early as mid-March, including mandatory mask usage, a strict lockdown, a screening strategy to detect the spread of the virus using a biometric citizen-tracking scheme (the "Fatherland system"), an abundance of rapid antigen tests imported from China, and a mandatory 14-day quarantine in state-sponsored facilities for infected individuals (González et al. 2021; Rodríguez 2021, 56). These aggressive measures suggest that Maduro perceived the virus as a serious threat—and an opportunity to display stronger leadership—and they likely contributed to the relatively lower rates of COVID-19 infection and death in Venezuela.

However, there are several reasons to suspect that the virus's true impact in Venezuela has been dramatically underestimated (Galindo and Manetto 2020). First, extreme levels of poverty and food insecurity, which have worsened during the pandemic, make quarantining virtually impossible for most Venezuelans. Although Maduro implemented strict stay-at-home orders early on, many people have regularly left their homes in search of economic opportunities and staples

such as food, clean water, and soap—necessary supplies for maintaining good health, especially during a public health crisis (Rodríguez 2021, 65). To improve compliance, Maduro has cracked down on violations through a militarized (albeit unevenly enforced) response, in which law enforcement officers punish and publicly humiliate violators, but he has not provided economic incentives to remain at home (HRW 2020; Kurmanaev et al. 2020). These blunt forms of coercion have been ineffective, as the desperate economic situation has prevented vulnerable populations from remaining at home—likely contributing to higher rates of community spread than have been reported.

Second, while the virus initially infected elites, including the country's few international travelers and high-ranking government officials, it has since spread throughout Venezuelan communities, due in part to the return of vulnerable migrants from nearby countries where COVID-19 had spread unchecked—especially Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Chile (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2021). Many of these refugees, who fled Venezuela before the pandemic, began returning when the economic dislocation produced by the pandemic caused them to lose jobs, homes, and social protection in their host countries. While Colombian and Venezuelan officials attempted to slow cross-border traffic by imposing weekly limits, tens of thousands of return migrants have crossed into Venezuela using formal and informal routes (Rodríguez 2021, 68–69). Moreover, these individuals have suffered precarious conditions that increase the risk of infection and undermine containment efforts, including mandatory stays of at least 14 days in crowded, squalid, state-sponsored facilities after crossing into Venezuela (Yapur et al. 2020).

Third, the humanitarian emergency has left Venezuela's healthcare infrastructure in shambles, compromising the system's capacity to diagnose and care for individuals infected with COVID-19. Despite initially receiving more rapid tests than many other countries in the region, the government procured very few of the higher-quality polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests; moreover, just two laboratories in the entire country are equipped to process PCR tests, suggesting that many positive infections have gone overlooked (González et al. 2021). Meanwhile, hospitals lack basic supplies to treat patients, including clean water, soap, electricity, and disinfectant—much less, adequate personal protective equipment for healthcare personnel (ARI 2020). Furthermore, because many young medical professionals fled Venezuela prior to the pandemic, most healthcare staff are older and more vulnerable to the virus. Thus, despite a reportedly low overall positivity rate, Venezuela's medical personnel constitute an estimated 22% of the nation's total deaths from COVID-19, the highest such proportion among healthcare professionals in Latin America (Tal Cual Digital 2020). Compounding these concerns, Maduro's punitive pandemic response has instilled fear, undermined transparency, and discouraged people from speaking candidly about the virus' true impact (Yapur et al. 2020).

Finally, political challenges, including crippling US sanctions and the ongoing stalemate between Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaidó, have stymied

access to international humanitarian aid. Ever-broadening sectoral sanctions on oil imposed by the US have further strangled Venezuela's economy without achieving their intended purpose of forcing a democratic transition. From the imposition of sanctions in August 2017 until October 2020, state revenues fell by an estimated total of \$17–\$31 billion and the value of monthly public imports, including food and medicine, was halved (WOLA 2020).<sup>3</sup> Though US sanctions contain exceptions for the provision of humanitarian supplies, many financial institutions have “over-complied” with the sanctions regime by freezing bank accounts of humanitarian organizations and private companies doing business in Venezuela (WOLA 2020). Meanwhile, due to Guaidó and Maduro's dueling claims to the presidency, multilateral institutions, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank, have refused to release humanitarian aid without a joint agreement from the two claimants (Rodríguez 2021, 72). While the two sides have inched toward such negotiations, high stakes and profound polarization have resulted in little progress.

In short, despite Venezuela's crisis-induced isolation and Maduro's efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19, the country's complex humanitarian emergency and Maduro's repressive tactics offer reasons to suspect the disease is more widespread than official statistics indicate and is poised to inflict even greater damage in the future.

### **Making sense of Maduro's response**

Maduro's draconian response to the pandemic represents a continuation of the leadership strategy he embraced prior to the arrival of COVID-19. The central features of this strategy—the refusal to acknowledge the underlying crisis and the use of populist-inflected authoritarianism to remain in power—stem from the legacy of his charismatic predecessor. As described previously, Chávez's reckless policies and divisive narrative left Venezuela with a flawed economy and badly damaged democracy. Moreover, his followers' unquestioning devotion facilitated the rise of a sycophantic successor who failed to reorient the country, instilling a pattern of instability and chaos (Collier and Munck 2017, 7). As the economic and political situation have deteriorated during Maduro's rule, the successor's support and legitimacy have declined, yet adoration for Chávez has remained widespread (Castillo 2019). Rather than defy his beloved predecessor, Maduro has doubled down on his strategy of crisis denial and brazen authoritarianism as a means of political survival.

Since the start of the pandemic in early 2020, Maduro has reinforced this pattern by refusing to address the crippling effect of Venezuela's complex humanitarian emergency on efforts to contain COVID-19 and using the situation as an opportunity to consolidate power. First, while acknowledging the existence of the virus and enacting several World Health Organization (WHO)-backed policies, Maduro's failure to confront the underlying crisis, especially

Venezuela's dilapidated public health infrastructure, has rendered his pandemic policies largely ineffective. His (alleged) underreporting of positivity and death rates, blaming of outsiders and opponents for spreading the virus, and promotion of scientifically unsubstantiated "miracle" cures also cast doubt on the genuineness of his efforts to contain the pandemic.

Second, Maduro has used COVID-19 as an opportunity to strengthen his position despite far-reaching societal collapse. Already mired in economic crisis, the arrival of the pandemic posed an existential threat to his regime. Similar to other struggling executives (Lupu and Zechmeister 2021), Maduro quickly launched a strong offensive—aided by powerful allies, including China and Russia—to shift attention away from the economic crisis and recover a degree of legitimacy. He seemed keen to compare his response to that of other strong authoritarians such as Xi Jinping who, upon acknowledging the reality of the virus, acted swiftly and effectively (Ang 2020). As COVID-19 has worsened in Venezuela, the holes in Maduro's response have become more obvious, incentivizing him to further exaggerate claims of his policies' effectiveness and, like other authoritarians, intensify his use of fear, intimidation, and repression to deter Venezuelans from criticizing his administration (Kavanagh 2020; Yapur et al. 2020). The severity of the pandemic has provided a legitimizing cover for his draconian tactics, which have further weakened his opponents and suppressed popular dissent.

Some elements of Maduro's response, including distorting statistics, pinning blame for the pandemic on outsiders and opponents, and peddling bogus COVID-19 treatments, mirror those of other populists in the region such as Bolsonaro, López Obrador, and Trump. However, other tactics, including Maduro's swift acknowledgment of the virus, authoritarian enforcement of policies, and unabashed use of repression distinguish him from his populist neighbors. One reason for these differences could be the extent of democratic erosion in Venezuela prior to the onset of the pandemic. Unlike Brazil, Mexico, and the US, Venezuela had already slid into full authoritarianism when COVID-19 hit, leading Maduro to use the virus as an opportunity to recover legitimacy, repress detractors, and safeguard his position. This authoritarian approach would likely have been much costlier for his populist counterparts in more democratic countries, who could be sanctioned more easily by unhappy voters. Unlike Maduro, the stronger electoral constraints facing these leaders likely incentivized them to downplay the threat in the first place, as other authors have explained in this volume.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Maduro's response to COVID-19 has been shaped by the populist legacy of Chávez, his charismatic predecessor. By enacting bold, unsustainable policies, cultivating a polarizing narrative, and choosing an insecure—yet fiercely loyal and overtly authoritarian—successor, Chávez set the country up for an economic collapse, a devastating humanitarian emergency, and

a repression-dependent authoritarian regime. In turn, these factors shaped Maduro's response to the pandemic, including his acknowledgment of the virus and his launching of a deeply flawed and under-resourced yet harshly enforced response. While Maduro's response has failed to adequately address the pandemic, it has deepened the underlying crisis and strengthened his autocratic regime.

As of August 2021, the pandemic threatens to worsen before it improves in Venezuela. Maduro exacerbates this prognosis by denying the severity of the underlying socioeconomic crisis and overstating the effectiveness of his response. Furthermore, his use of repressive tactics continues to increase human suffering and complicate attempts by politicians on all sides to secure additional humanitarian aid. These problems strengthen Maduro at the expense of the political opposition, postponing any potential recovery or democratic transition.

Despite this grim outlook, recent developments offer a glimmer of hope. First, given the expanding global supply, Venezuela's access to a greater stock of COVID-19 vaccines should increase. In February 2021, Maduro and Guaidó expanded a preexisting agreement with the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) to access vaccines for 6 million Venezuelans through the WHO's COVAX program (Ramsey 2021). While political motivations drove Maduro to block the entry of AstraZeneca vaccines through this program (Martinez-Gugerli 2021), such reluctance will become increasingly difficult to defend as the pandemic persists and a wider variety of vaccines becomes available. It is also possible that Russia and China, who view Venezuela as a geopolitically significant ally, will increase shipments of their own vaccines in exchange for oil (Cohen 2021).

Second, while Maduro and Guaidó remain entrenched in a political stalemate, the worsening humanitarian crisis has driven both sides to the negotiating table. In May 2021, the sides agreed to reform the National Electoral Council by placing two opposition representatives on the five-member board—a painstakingly small yet significant step toward a nonviolent political transition supported by both the opposition and important international actors (see, e.g., Meeks 2021). Two months later, both sides agreed to restart negotiations exploring potential solutions to the current crisis, with the Norwegian government as facilitator (Martinez-Gugerli and Ramsey 2021).

Third, other countries have taken steps to provide greater assistance to Venezuelans. In February 2021, Colombian President Iván Duque granted protected status to nearly one million Venezuelan refugees and migrants currently residing in the country, making these individuals less vulnerable to COVID-19 and exploitation on both sides of the border (BBC News 2021). In the US, the Biden administration and Democratic members of Congress have also signaled greater support for a negotiated transition. In March 2021, Biden granted temporary protected status to Venezuelans living in the US. His administration has also intimated its willingness to reconsider the oil sanctions imposed by Trump, privately acknowledging the sanctions have exacerbated the humanitarian emergency without advancing the goal of a democratic transition (Jakes and Kurmanav 2021).

In sum, the pandemic in Venezuela has exacerbated preexisting economic, political, and humanitarian crises. Maduro's response has been shaped by this crisis and his determination to maintain a firm grip on power. Although these contextual factors are not unique to populist regimes, I argue that their influence in Venezuela stems from Chávez's populist rule and legacy. Importantly, Maduro and the opposition have inched toward negotiations to access greater humanitarian aid and allow dissenters a small yet potentially meaningful role in politics. Nevertheless, the underlying crisis and unresolved pandemic suggest that recovery and democratic transition remain in the distant future.

## Notes

- 1 By contrast, as of August 2021, Brazil reports 95,047 positive cases per million people and 569,218 total deaths; Colombia reports 94,538 positive cases per million people and 123,459 total deaths; and Peru reports 63,723 positive cases per million people and 197,393 total deaths (Worldometer 2021).
- 2 Currently, the presidency of Venezuela is disputed by Nicolás Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaidó. Maduro won reelection in 2018 in an election the opposition declared fraudulent; subsequently, in January 2019, the opposition-controlled National Assembly declared Juan Guaidó president. While Maduro continues to enjoy de facto control over Venezuela, opposition leaders and a majority of countries recognize opposition leader Guaidó as the legitimate president.
- 3 Note that the estimated loss in revenue is on top of what Venezuela was already losing due to the government's mismanagement of PDVSA.

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# 18

## TANZANIA

### Narrating the Eradication of COVID-19

*Dan Paget*

President John Pombe Magufuli's pandemic response stands out. Magufuli contested the severity of the virus, the accuracy of tests and the efficacy of lockdowns and vaccines alike. For this, he was folded into a constructed set of renegade world leaders, purportedly populists, who disputed the science and broke with pandemic response good practice. Magufuli's place of prominence alongside Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, among others, was secured by his death on March 17, 2021. Officially, he died of heart failure, but many allege that COVID-19 killed him. If true, this would make him either the first or the second head of state to die of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> It would also mean that, in a spectacle of hubris, his own pandemic response contributed to his death. This chapter is about the response to the pandemic – discursive and substantial – developed by Magufuli and the ruling party he led: *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (CCM; the Party of the Revolution). At least outwardly, they acted in unison during the pandemic, so I study them together and refer to them interchangeably for brevity.

The parallels between Magufuli and these populists are notable, but his response to the pandemic stands out from theirs too. First, while his ideology contained aspects of populism, it was hybridized with elitism. This formed an ideology that constructs “the (virtuous) elite,” which acts against “the corrupt (middle)” on behalf of “the people.” I call this elitist plebeianism (Paget 2021a). Second, he and his party did not only dispute the severity of the virus or the merits of responses to it. They disputed whether it was still present in Tanzania at all. From May 2020 onwards, they began a narrative intervention which took discursive control of the progress of the pandemic in Tanzania. They continued to close the communication system so that they could dictate the official truths about the pandemic. In this context, they created a fiction that over five

weeks, the pandemic was eradicated in Tanzania, and they established this as official reality. They publicly justified the subsequent relaxation of preventative measures on the grounds that the virus was absent and therefore such measures were no longer necessary. While some may act out populist crisis performances of COVID-19, Magufuli and his party performatively ended the COVID-19 epidemic in Tanzania. This alternate reality-making has no parallel among science-contesting populists. Bolsonaro, for all his denialism, never claimed to have eradicated COVID-19. Narendra Modi declared the defeat of the virus, but this declaration was not based on censorship or mass manipulation of COVID-19 data.

This extraordinary narration of the defeat and subsequent absence of COVID-19 was made possible by the authoritarian architecture which Magufuli and CCM inherited and extended. However, the driving force behind this strategy was ideological. First, they turned to his ideology to provide scripts and context to discursively reconstruct the virus' trajectory in Tanzania. Second, the rationale for avoiding lockdown and minimizing preventative measures emanated from their wider ideology: developmental nationalism. Third, they chose this response so that they could vindicate the ideological project on which CCM had embarked under Magufuli's leadership. This might not have so informed his response to the pandemic were it not for the point in the electoral calendar at which it broke. A general election, the first which could be framed as a referendum or indeed a celebration of Magufuli's leadership, was scheduled for October 2020. Narrating the defeat of COVID-19 enabled CCM to run an election campaign that both focused on Magufuli's innumerable achievements and presented Tanzania as a nation for which things were only getting better.

## Narrative as pandemic response

### *Magufuli's ideology*

Magufuli was elected president in October 2015. He assumed the leadership of Africa's longest-ruling party. Since independence from British colonialism in 1961, CCM and the parties that merged to form it have ruled Tanzania continuously. Until 1992, they ruled through a one-party state. Since then, CCM has ruled Tanzania through an electoral authoritarian regime (Makulilo 2012). Tanzania's regime gives the president enormous powers, but the party remains an institutional site of power, which has chosen five new presidential nominees since 1985.

Under Magufuli's leadership, CCM reworked its ideology. By 2015, CCM's ideology had already undergone several major revisions. Under the leadership of founding President Julius Nyerere, CCM and its predecessor parties developed an African socialism. In the 1980s, CCM forswore this socialist platform. In its stead, it elevated developmentalism and national peace as its chief themes within a neoliberal settlement. The ideology that Magufuli and CCM revised

in 2015 wove in a mixture of populism and elitism which I call elitist plebeianism (Paget 2021a). It constructed “the corrupt” (*mafisadi*) or “the rich” (*matajiri*) who had profited illicitly at the expense of “the downtrodden” (*wanyongé*) or “the citizens” (*wananchi*). This partially resembled the populist construction of an antagonism between “the people” and “the elite.” However, it differed from it in one vital respect: it imagined the party and politicians that represent “the people” not below “the corrupt,” but above them. This imaginary did not elevate the status of CCM’s leadership by imbuing it with noble ancestry or upbringing. On the contrary, it attributed to them humble origins and easy affinities with “the people.” Instead, drawing on CCM’s Leninist intellectual heritage, it imagined them as a vanguard of “the people.” It separated these “leaders” (*viongozi*) from “the people” by their expertise, their abilities and their positions of power, which they used to fight “the corrupt” on “the people’s” behalf. Magufuli and his lieutenants acted out such struggles against “the (covertly) corrupt” by following a script of discovery, which remerged in their COVID-19 response. In this script, they performatively happened upon corruption, publicly revealed it and then executively punished wrongdoers. Altogether, this ideology constructs these leaders as “the (vanguard) elite.” Therefore, it does not divide society into two groups, as populists do, but three: “the people” below, “the corrupt” above and “the (virtuous) elite” above them, in turn (Paget 2021a).

This hybrid of populism and elitism was, in turn, subsumed within CCM’s wider revised ideology. In it, CCM imagined a transformative path for Tanzania which would lead to an industrialized and self-reliant future (Paget 2020). Tanzania, it claimed, had trodden that path before under Nyerere’s leadership, but since lost its way. CCM insisted that to resume that path, it had to restore Nyerere’s policy agenda (Paget 2020) and made Magufuli Nyerere’s (constructed) successor (Andrews-Lee 2020). However, it selectively remembered this path as state-directed development, shorn of its original socialism. It articulated this restorationist developmentalism with a nationalism which imagined a frontier of imperialists – including transnational gold mining companies – who militated against Tanzania’s transformation. This “economic war” was overlaid with a struggle between the globally subjugated and globally powerful, putting Tanzania below and imperialists above. In this respect, as I have analyzed elsewhere (Paget 2020, 1250; Paget 2021a, 12), this revised ideology hybridized nationalism and populism in one of the ways theorized by Benjamin de Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

As such, Magufuli’s ideology bears *some* resemblance to those of the populist radical right. However, ultimately the resemblance is partial. Granted, both involve nationalism, authoritarianism and restorationism. Equally, as I discuss below, both involve contestation of COVID-19 science and policy. Nevertheless, Magufuli did not fully embrace the nativism associated with the radical right, let alone, of course, the latter’s commonplace white supremacism or

anti-black racism. He presented foreign enemies as not below the nation, but above it. He constructed the corrupt not above him and his party, but below them.

### ***Good practice?***

Until the beginning of May 2020, Tanzania's pandemic response adhered in large part to good practice. The CCM government stockpiled medical equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE) (MoHCDEC 2020b). It developed testing and treatment capacity. It screened international arrivals. It introduced public health campaigns on social distancing, hand hygiene, masks and within-country travel (The Citizen 2020a). More widely, it introduced a comprehensive set of policies related to, among other things, testing, tracing, self-isolating, hand hygiene, mask-wearing, quarantining, using PPE, screening, treating, decontaminating, waste and sanitation management, transportation, burial and health worker safety (MoHCDEC 2020b, 2020c). After the first case was confirmed on March 16, the government closed schools and universities, suspended major sporting events and mandated 14-day quarantining for international arrivals (MoHCDEC 2020a).

Tanzania could turn to an experienced healthcare system to execute this response. It managed several endemic communicable diseases (WHO Tanzania Country Office 2020). Moreover, it had managed recent outbreaks of cholera and Ebola virus, on which it modeled its COVID-19 test-and-trace system (Taylor 2020b). More broadly, it began the pandemic after 15 years of increasing health expenditure in absolute (but not relative) terms (Ally and Piatti-Funfkirchen 2021), especially investment in (frontline) primary healthcare centers (Kapologwe et al. 2020).

CCM also departed from good practice, but disputedly. Magufuli was criticized for claiming that COVID-19 was "the devil" and that church and prayer could eradicate the virus. However, others have argued that this reimagining offered agency and resolve (Kirby, Taru, and Chimbidzikai 2020). Perhaps more importantly, CCM imposed few lockdown measures. However, for context, the efficacy of these measures in a context like Tanzania was and remains contested (Fairhead and Leach 2020). Some argue against lockdowns in Tanzania specifically (Mfinanga et al. 2021; Tarimo and Wu 2020). Others have argued that the viability of such outcomes turns on their design and/or successful combination with test-and-trace schemes (Chachage 2020; Minja 2020b).

Through April 2020, the mediated context of COVID-19 in Tanzania changed. Claims emerged that the real rate of infection might be far higher than that reported (Juma 2020), not least because testing rates were so low (Minja 2020a). This came alongside parallel claims that the state was covering up the scale of the outbreak (Munishi 2020). These allegations were given dramatic credence by widely circulated videos of apparently covert night burials (Mutahi and Mtulya 2020), the arrest of whistleblowers and the suspension of media houses

that gave them platforms (Juma 2020). Together, this produced a mediated narrative of viral outbreak, government cover-up and alarm.

### ***A discursive intervention***

In this context, Magufuli endeavored to rewrite the discursive progress of the pandemic in Tanzania. In a speech delivered on May 4, first he hardened his opposition to lockdown, saying “Someone says lockdown Dar es Salaam, lockdown Tanga, lock- I won’t!” (Magufuli 2020). Second, he advocated herbal medicines to COVID-19 as not only palliative but curative, in the absence of supporting scientific evidence. Third, and most significantly, he revealed results of a covert experiment to check the government’s own COVID-19 testing regime (Magufuli 2020). Supposedly, a team applied swabs to nonhuman samples, tubed them and sent them disguised by human pseudonyms to the National Health Laboratory (NHL). The results for these (nonhuman) samples showed implausibly that they had COVID-19. Magufuli inferred from this test-of-tests that the NHL was systematically producing false positives. He suggested that these false results were the product not of error but subversion. He reasoned that “either the staff of that particular laboratory, have been bribed by the imperialists, or they have no expertise,” before dismissing the latter possibility (Magufuli 2020). He continued: “it could also be a sabotage, because this is a war.” He asked not only health but defense and security agencies to investigate goings-on at the laboratory. In doing so, he read from the same dramatic script he and his party had developed in their prior elitist plebeian discourse. More widely, he presented manipulation of COVID-19 statistics as another front in the constructed war against imperialism.

By constructing this moment of revelation, Magufuli and CCM created a pretext to fire, retire, suspend or transfer a slate of senior officials and replace them with staff of his choice (Taylor 2020c). Magufuli fell into his well-thumbed script of corruption discovery and replaced not only the director of the NHL but a deputy health minister, the government’s chief medical officer and the ministry’s permanent secretary. This enabled him to assert direct control over pandemic response, especially COVID-19 statistics production.

Moreover, it threw the reliability of prior COVID-19 statistics into doubt. Far from being too low, it suggested that they may have been too high, inflated by false positives. President Magufuli specified that most of those who had been told that they had COVID-19, in fact did not (Magufuli 2020). In effect, it enabled past statistics to be rewritten. This discursive context discredited and vilified those that contested the government’s line as politically opportunistic or unpatriotic by suggesting that they were the agents of imperialists fighting “another kind of war” (Magufuli 2020). This, in turn, was invoked as a justification to censor discussion of COVID-19, especially by media outlets. The government promulgated regulations under the Electronic and Postal Communications Act that prohibited sharing information about the outbreak of any deadly disease

without prior government approval. Therefore, dissent about coronavirus was not only delegitimized, but silenced. Having taken control of the sole permitted voice about COVID-19, CCM narrated the rapid elimination of the virus. Through the month of May, it reported a steady decline in cases. On June 8, Magufuli declared that Tanzania was completely free of COVID-19. CCM's actions created an evermore closed communication ecology in which it made a fictitious course of the virus in Tanzania official truth (Taylor 2020a).

Evidence suggests that this narrative of elimination was only accepted in its entirety by a minority. A rare nationally representative survey shows that only 33% of respondents agreed that "Covid-19 was eradicated in this country" (Macdonald 2021). However, it also shows that Tanzanians considered COVID-19 to be either largely absent or rarely fatal. When asked "how concerned are you that you or somebody in your household might contract Covid-19?" 86% reported that they were "not too concerned" or "not concerned at all" (Lihuru, Macdonald, and Molony 2020). Tanzanians answer surveyors cautiously, mindful that sounds of dissent reach government ears. Nonetheless, this suggests that CCM had considerable success in shaping perceptions of COVID-19.

In this manufactured context, CCM ended COVID-19 restrictions. They relaxed border controls, reopened schools and universities and relaunched major sporting events. Televised public officials stopped wearing masks and socially distancing. Test results ceased to be published. In February 2021, Magufuli said that Tanzania would not acquire or administer COVID-19 vaccines, which may have been manipulated by imperialists to harm Tanzania.

In February 2021, CCM buckled. A series of public figures died in quick succession and COVID-19 anxiety rose on social media. Coded references to "pneumonia" began to seep into official discourse. Officials suggested that while Tanzania had eradicated COVID-19, it might reenter from abroad. On February 17, Magufuli said that Tanzania had defeated "respiratory diseases," but acknowledged that it would have to again. On February 21, he asked people to wear masks. He appeared in public for the last time on February 27.

Altogether, Tanzania's response to the pandemic stands out among others. Almost uniquely, it created and maintained a fiction that COVID-19 had been wiped out nationwide. This volume inquires whether populists have enacted populist crisis performances in response to the pandemic. Such crisis performances, as conceptualized by Benjamin Moffit, act out constructed crises and sustain them in perpetuity while invoking "the people." In contrast, CCM and Magufuli did not sustain a performed crisis about COVID-19. On the contrary, from May 2020 onwards, they played down the COVID-19 epidemic and performed its rapid conclusion.

However, they did integrate the pandemic into a constructed nationalist struggle between Tanzania and imperialists described above. Magufuli and CCM did not use "crisis" to describe this struggle, but they did frequently use the term "war" (*vita*). As described above, this war was over Tanzania's attempt to transform itself, and Magufuli characterized this war as one in which Tanzania

could be destroyed (*kuharibu*; Magufuli 2020). Altogether, then, Magufuli and CCM (1) placed this struggle at the threshold between a past age and some age as-yet-unborn and (2) portrayed the outcome of this struggle as indeterminate. This meets the twin meanings of crisis excavated by Reinhart Koselleck (Koselleck and Richter 2006) and deployed by Moffit (2015). Therefore, while CCM expedited the performed conclusion of COVID-19, in doing so it elevated the performance of another crisis which it did sustain.

### Prioritizing the Magufuli project

CCM was able to create and sustain the fiction that COVID-19 had been defeated because of the increasingly authoritarian context in Tanzania. In the transition to multipartyism, CCM preserved much of the authoritarian apparatus (Makulilo 2012). Furthermore, it took an authoritarian turn in early 2015, which Magufuli embraced upon his election (Paget 2017) and intensified during the 2020 election (Paget 2021b). Most pertinent to this chapter, the party subordinated state officials to its interests. It made state media partisan. It created legal instruments which gave officials multiple ways to control mass media and restrict citizen speech online and offline. The new regulations about disease outbreaks only broadened these powers. Altogether, this created a system that enabled party-state control of what was said publicly. Without this authoritarian apparatus, it would have not been feasible to maintain the fiction of COVID-19 defeat. More widely, CCM's script of discovery and nationalist ideology provided a script and discursive context that it utilized to construct its narrative of victory over COVID-19.

While authoritarianism and ideology are enabling features, they do not explain *why* CCM chose to thus narrate the end of COVID-19. CCM's elite operate under a shroud of secrecy and so any analysis of their reasoning is speculative. With this proviso, this chapter proposes that CCM's probable rationale emanated from its revised ideology in two ways. First, it led CCM to aver preventative measures and fear of COVID-19 as inimical to the Magufuli project. In this view, narrating the defeat of COVID-19 provided a pretext to minimize such measures and that fear. Magufuli portrayed fear (*hofu*) as ruinous. He said that "in this program many died of fear. We must overcome fear" (Magufuli 2020). He placed such fear in opposition to religious faith and national purpose. More broadly, he stressed the consequences of lockdown for the goal of economic transformation (Magufuli 2020). He said, "Our economy must come first. It must not sleep" (The Citizen 2020b). He made further sense of fear and lockdown by drawing on his nationalism. He suggested that Tanzania's imperial opponents were using the pandemic to introduce them and make Tanzania destroy itself. This rhetoric may have been only skin-deep, but it is possible (perhaps likely) that Magufuli and his party truly saw preventative measures as detrimental to national order and economic transformation. Insofar as they did, their COVID-19 fiction provided a means to preserve them both and protect the Magufuli project. This is largely

consistent with the interpretation of CCM's approach by sympathetic parties before (Nyamsenda 2020) and after (Golooba-Mutebi 2020) his May 4 speech.

Beyond this construction of prevention as opposed to order and economic transformation, Magufuli and CCM may well have been motivated by one other chief consideration: their message in the general election scheduled for October 28, 2020. This election was particularly important for Magufuli. CCM had presented Magufuli's presidency as a break with the past and the charting of new course. This made the forthcoming 2020 election the first in which they could demonstrate that this new course had restored CCM's popularity and won the public's support. In other words, the outcome of this election would be interpreted to gauge the success of the Magufuli project.

Part of shaping how the election reflected on this project was about the result. To this end, CCM resorted to oppression and election-rigging (Paget 2021b). Yet, it was also about the platform on which CCM contested the election. CCM ran an election campaign in 2020 that celebrated the achievements of the Fifth Phase government of 2015–2020. At CCM's inaugural campaign rally, Magufuli said, "I have done a lot and you all are witnesses to this" (Masare 2020). In an archetypal incumbent election campaign, it presented those past achievements as an unfinished project which they would continue. He asked citizens for their "votes once again so that we can finish the job that we have already started" (Mugarula 2020). This emphasis on continuity compounded the message that the course had taken since 2015. CCM summarized this celebration of past and continuity through its 2020 slogan. Its 2015 slogan was "only work here" (*hapa kazi tu*). Its 2020 slogan was "work continues" (*kazi inaendelea*).

This sunshine message would have been incompatible with an accelerating epidemic. It would have jarred if the ostensible context for this campaign had been one of infection rates rising, the economy contracting and the government losing control. Indeed, insofar as the pandemic remained the principal context, it might have displaced Magufuli's achievements between 2015 and 2020 as the campaign's central issue. In contrast, the narration of the end of the pandemic in Tanzania, which was interpreted as both religious salvation and national triumph, could be folded into the host of achievements which Magufuli's reelection would celebrate. Moreover, if CCM had not spun its COVID-19 fiction, it would have deprived its campaign of an air of celebration. Tanzania has the most rally intensive election campaigns in the world, and at these rallies, parties "produce" mass festivals (Paget 2019). If CCM had continued to recognize the onset of the pandemic and banned mass events, it could not have thus produced festivity.

Altogether, under Magufuli's leadership, CCM had embarked on a reworked ideological project. The 2020 election constituted a crucial opportunity to present that project as a success. However, doing so involved making its election campaign platform a celebration of its past achievements and a pledge to continue them. The acceleration of the pandemic in Tanzania would have made such a campaign contextually inappropriate, if not ridiculous. This constitutes a second ideological rationale for CCM's pandemic response. Magufuli informally

launched his reelection campaign just nine days after he announced that Tanzania was free of COVID-19 (Kolumbia 2020). The official campaign began 11 weeks later.

## Looking ahead, looking back

Interpretations of Magufuli's legacy are contested, polarized along partisan lines. His COVID-19 fiction may transpire to be one aspect of his legacy on which most agree; a scar on his record which even many of his most avid supporters recognize. Three reasons will increase how much it colors his legacy. First, it is wrapped up with his death. Second, it can be read as emblematic of several of his (contestable) flaws. It unites in one policy his authoritarianism, his willingness to use falsehoods to move public opinion and his apparent belief that the state but not citizens had the right to information. Third, it was the most ostensible departure from his policies that his successor took upon assuming office. President Samia Suluhu Hassan dismantled several of Magufuli's positions on COVID-19. She recognized that COVID-19 was present in Tanzania. She encouraged mask-wearing and social distancing, restarted the publication of test statistics, oversaw testing and treatment capacity building and ordered vaccines en masse.

Nonetheless, Magufuli's COVID-19 fictions live on in limited concerns about the virus (Minja 2021) and vaccine skepticism. Some CCM politicians – who I will not reward by naming – broke with the new government's position by warning that foreign vaccines were ineffective but dangerous, in a close imitation of Magufuli's rhetoric. They were roundly condemned by government, party and media. However, perhaps unwittingly, these condemnations acted out the suppression of dissent and constructed this politician as an outsider. Ironically, this voicing from below and silencing from above gave these claims populist form which they never achieved when articulated by Magufuli.

## Note

- 1 The cause of death of President Pierre Nkurunziza (Burundi) remains contested.

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# 19

## SOUTH AFRICA

### From Populist Inertia to Insurrection

*Ryan Brunette and Benjamin Fogel*

South Africa has a number of conditions that might lead observers to predict a strong populist response to the pandemic. It is a new democracy, where high expectations following the end of apartheid have been frustrated by continuing racism, limited development and redistribution, increasing levels of unemployment and inequality, along with a crisis of state dysfunction and corruption. These failures are often blamed on a framework of accommodation and cooptation, formed in the transition from apartheid, between the leadership of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the country's old white corporate establishment. Given this background, analysts have often argued that populism is an emerging political force in the country (e.g. Mathekga 2008; Vincent 2011; Hart 2013; Mbete 2015). The groups ordinarily understood to be leading the charge are former President Jacob Zuma's faction of the ANC, now styled the RET (radical economic transformation) forces, and a breakaway party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). These formations have a record of formidable strategic and organizational capacity. Survey data, collected around the start of the pandemic, also suggests fertile ground for populist appeals. Sixty-seven percent of South Africans strongly agree that "the country is divided between ordinary people and the corrupt elite who exploit them," and 55% that "the power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress" (YouGov-Cambridge 2020).

Crisis, it is often suggested, benefits populists. In South Africa, however, the populist response to the pandemic has been relatively inconspicuous. The national government, now led by Cyril Ramaphosa, a president who has sought to define his administration in terms of good governance, adopted a broadly science-based pandemic policy. The first to move against this policy was an avowedly liberal party, which has long centered its platform on claims of technocratic

competence, the Democratic Alliance (DA). The RET faction and the EFF by contrast have spent much of the pandemic broadly supporting the government's approach. They only moved against it belatedly, but then in ways that subordinated pandemic policy to other concerns.

More than a year into the South African pandemic, in June 2021, the EFF threatened to break lockdown regulations, but in a bid to expedite authorization of Russian and Chinese vaccines, which were presented as preferable to the "Western" products. These efforts were quickly overshadowed by the events of July, when the RET faction orchestrated the single most deadly outbreak of political unrest since the end of apartheid, mobilizing its structures and ordinary citizens to block roads, raid logistics hubs, and loot malls. Characterized by Ramaphosa as an "insurrection," organizers claimed it was a spontaneous uprising of poor people, against an ANC elite who had consigned them to poverty, after bribing its way into power using funds from white-controlled corporations. They demanded an end to lockdowns, identified as an example of elite indifference to the plight of the people, and an attack on civic freedoms. However, this message was secondary to the immediate cause of freeing Jacob Zuma, who was held in contempt of court for refusing to appear before a commission of inquiry into corruption during his administration.

In South Africa, then a country seemingly primed for a populist response to the pandemic, it was the liberals who led the way against a scientific pandemic policy, while those most often identified as populist moved late and equivocally. In this chapter, we explain this apparently paradoxical pandemic politics.

## **Populism in post-Apartheid South Africa and the Zuma presidency**

South Africa's politics creates challenges for any precise identification of populism. The country's powerful currents of ethnic and racial nationalism, always constructed in antagonism against an economically dominant ethnic or racial group which is accused in some sense of being foreign and imperialistic, are strongly homologous with populism. Afrikaner nationalism, defined in opposition to English South Africans, especially as it was expressed in the National Party and its more right-wing offshoots, was often understood to have a populist orientation (e.g. Stadler 1970; O'Meara 1996). In their turn, the extra-parliamentary resistance to apartheid often drew on an explicitly populist strategy, draped in calls for "people's power," which articulated shop floor and wider community struggle, marshaling a complex array of traditionalist, African nationalist, social-liberal, socialist, and communist tendencies into a broad, multiracial liberation coalition (see Howarth 2005). The repertory residues of this strategy in contemporary times make distinguishing populism and establishing its concrete articulations with nationalism difficult (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). The ANC, when it returned from exile in 1990, took leadership of this coalition.

The ANC's theory of "national democratic revolution" called for a basically liberal republic, dedicated to uplifting the racially oppressed in a capitalist framework, understood as a necessary stage on the road to socialism. The theory has facilitated coalition maintenance, underwriting the ANC's continuing electoral dominance, but it has also defined the party's basic tensions and fueled its more populist manifestations. ANC leaders converged with white captains of industry around a program of "black economic empowerment" and Washington Consensus economics. ANC cadres would be "deployed" into business, taking ownership of corporate assets and positions on company boards. A working link, thus forged, between the post-apartheid state and white corporations would facilitate a process of capitalist development, underpinned by a neoclassical orthodoxy of fiscal restraint, inflation targeting, and economic liberalization.

The "elite pact" was from the outset condemned as a betrayal of the revolution and held responsible for all the disappointments of the post-apartheid era (see Bond 2000; Marais 2011). Jacob Zuma's rise to the presidency involved a strategy of articulating popular antagonism against it (see Hart 2013). In 2005, after being cited in a court judgment, where an associate was convicted for corruption, he was removed as deputy president by Thabo Mbeki. The personal-political styles of the two men could not have been more different. Mbeki often quoted Shakespeare. Zuma, more comfortable cracking jokes and singing and dancing to struggle songs, contrasted himself with Mbeki's patrician comportment by presenting himself as a man of the people. With a strong ethnic Zulu base in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, he assembled a broader coalition of those aggrieved by Mbeki, who were marginalized for disloyalty, "ultra-leftism," or corruption, and who in various ways desired a more vigorously redistributive state. These had a strong presence in subnational machines of the ANC and associated emerging businesses, in the party's women and youth leagues, as well as in the allied structures of COSATU (the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Their stated goal was to remove Mbeki, undo the compromises of the transition, and finally deliver on the promises of the national democratic revolution.

Zuma, once president in 2009, reneged on these policy commitments, and so his faction began to pull apart. Julius Malema, then leader of the Youth League, who had adopted a program of "economic freedom in our lifetime," was purged and formed the EFF in 2013. At around the same time, a number of prominent unionists started registering dissent. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which had advanced a socialist critique of Zuma's economic policy, was expelled from COSATU in 2014. Zwelinzima Vavi, COSATU's general secretary and a vocal critic of corruption in Zuma's administration, was removed in 2015. In early 2016, whistleblowers revealed that Zuma had ceded presidential appointment powers to an émigré business family, the Guptas, a fact that defined the complex series of corruption scandals that became known as "state capture." At this point, COSATU and the SACP, along with a range of prominent figures and structures of the ANC, came out

into open opposition. A broad anti-Zuma campaign united them with organized civil society, big business, swathes of the middle and working classes, and most opposition parties. These, mobilizing into large street protests, aligned around the presidential bid of Zuma's then deputy, Cyril Ramaphosa.

Zuma attempted to characterize this campaign as orchestrated by an elite establishment and he again moved to mobilize popular antagonism against it. The Guptas employed the British public relations (PR) firm Bell Pottinger to bolster the narrative that Zuma was being persecuted for fighting for black people by promoting "radical economic transformation" against the interests of "white monopoly capital." In this way, Zuma's faction gained a new title, RET, and was able to consolidate the support of a radicalized segment of emerging black businesses, parts of the ANC patronage machine and organized crime, some traditional authorities and charismatic churches, and smaller black radical parties. At the same time, however, the scale of Zuma's corruption, the consequent erosion of crucial state institutions, became clear. His government was increasingly unable to meet basic social commitments, including a potentially catastrophic collapse of the social grant system, which transfers cash to over 17 million of South Africa's poorest citizens. Polls suggested that Zuma's overall popularity had tanked to the point of threatening the ANC electorally (Everatt 2017; Mattes 2018). Ramaphosa narrowly beat Zuma's preferred successor at the party's national elective conference in December 2017. In February, promising the country a "new dawn," he ascended to South Africa's presidency.

### **The Ramaphosa administration's response to the pandemic and the liberal opposition**

South Africa's response to the pandemic was in many ways predefined by this earlier populist cycle. The legitimacy of populist forces has been eroded, opening the way for a more moderate and responsible government. Ramaphosa's presidency has worked to reconstruct the state's integrity and capacities and to negotiate a new social compact between business and unions to unblock more inclusive economic growth. His management of the pandemic has therefore aspired to an aura of competence and scientific respectability. When the pandemic began, the government acted early to impose a strict lockdown. It foregrounded the role of medical experts by establishing an advisory council, including internationally acclaimed specialists with a track record in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The president, however, had inherited from Zuma a fiscal crisis. He had taken command of an incapacitated and ill-disciplined party and public administration.

As a result, business and social support was miserly. The fiscus committed to a new system of state-guaranteed loans for business, a special dispensation on unemployment insurance to furloughed workers, top-ups to existing grants, and a monthly ZAR 350 (\$25) social relief of distress grant for those otherwise uncovered. The lockdown regulations were developed in an ill-advised and haphazard way, closing beaches and parks, setting curfews, and prohibiting the sale

of a detailed list of items, including alcohol, tobacco, rotisserie chicken, and even open-toed shoes. Lockdown enforcement became a form of political theater for cabinet members such as Police Minister Bheki Cele and Transport Minister Fikile Mbalula, who performed state power and political will by broadcasting the punishment of violators. Drinkers, smokers, and surfers were rounded up and paraded in front of the media. The police and army arrested over 270,000 people and killed several dozen others. The government's pandemic-related emergency procurement was riddled with corruption. Pushed by public outcry, the President's Special Investigating Unit (SIU) flagged over 70% of COVID-related contracts worth ZAR 14.2 billion (\$1 billion) (SIU, 2021). In the course of the lockdown, the government failed to establish an effective test, trace, and quarantine regimen. In many parts of the country, it did not sufficiently expand public health capacity, actually undermining these efforts by maintaining hire freezes which had been implemented as part of austerity measures (see Seekings and Natrass 2020).

Support for the lockdown may have frayed soonest among people with lower incomes, with only 51% supporting its first extension, compared with over 70% among those with middle and high incomes (HSRC-UJ 2020). Yet it was the liberal DA, mostly supported by South Africa's wealthier white, Indian, and coloured populations, which first came out into vigorous opposition. Under Zuma's presidency, a range of political tendencies, some tied into his faction, had adopted an increasingly aggressive stance against these racial minorities. In this period, the DA was attempting to make inroads into the black vote by appointing its first black leader, Mmusi Maimane, who moved to adopt racial quotas in party appointments and to back policies like affirmative action and black economic empowerment. These developments produced a backlash within the DA's traditional constituencies, who increasingly turned to more ethnically and racially defined parties, such as the Afrikaner Vryheidsfront Plus, the coloured-led Patriotic Alliance, and the Muslim Al Jama-ah. The DA worked to staunch the bleeding when it removed Maimane, replaced him with a new white leader, John Steenhuisen, and began pandering to the interests and fears of racial minorities.

The DA initially supported the government's pandemic response. It even moved to get out ahead of it by publishing its own pandemic response plan informed by international best practice, then taking credit for the government decisions that inevitably followed. As the lockdown wore on, however, the liberals moved to capitalize on growing discontent, probably also among poorer segments of the population, but in terms designed to rally their base. They characterized government policy in conspiratorial terms, as designed by a corrupt "racial-nationalist" and communist elite, bent on securing totalitarian control of South African society. The party took the lockdown regulations to court. Some of its councilors actively mobilized small businesses, such as hairdressers and nail salons, to contravene these regulations by reopening. The party's approach, when compared with the likes of Trump or Bolsonaro, was restrained. The DA holds government in the province of the Western Cape, which remained responsible

and informed by science for the duration of the pandemic. The liberals, however, offered the most robust opposition to South Africa's first lockdown.

### The response of the RET faction and the EFF

The RET faction and the EFF had plenty of material with which to forge a populist response to the pandemic. The economic damage of the lockdown was extraordinary. The gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by 7% over the course of 2020. After the second quarter of 2021, the unemployment rate still lingered at 34.2%, rising to 44.4% on the expanded definition. South African social media has swirled with conspiracy theories about the pharmaceutical industry, seen as linked to foreign powers and racialized medical experimentation. A range of fake "African" remedies have been promoted, with posters sometimes circulated by ANC branches. As many as 33% of South Africans could be described as vaccine hesitant (Cooper 2021). Yet, unlike many right-wing movements in the West, the RET faction and the EFF, making a show of national unity against a shared threat, generally supported scientific government policy. When the government, in light of the economic costs, with the support from top public health experts, began gradually to lift the lockdown, plunging into the first wave of COVID-19 in June, South Africa's major populist formations argued for its extension. They mirrored parts of the Western left in framing this as a fight for black lives against a white-controlled economy, an argument perhaps provoked and certainly bolstered by the early opposition of white liberals, whose actions are always anathema to African nationalist sentiment. They even sometimes argued for the bans on alcohol and tobacco to be made permanent.

It is unlikely that the RET faction and the EFF saw advantage like Orban and others in promoting lockdown and related measures as an authoritarian expansion of state power. They do not control the commanding heights of the state and have much to fear from the Ramaphosa government that does. They do, however, maintain a foothold in government resource allocation. They likely benefited from the corruption that surrounded emergency COVID-19 funds. As the lockdown suppressed formal industries, it generated demand for black markets in illegal cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. There is evidence of relationships between prominent leaders of the RET faction and the EFF and key players in the criminal underworld. Most prominently, the RET faction's 2017 presidential bid as well as Julius Malema's home were reportedly funded by the cigarette smuggler Adriano Mazzotti, giving rise to allegations that the bans were promoted in order to profit from illicit sales (e.g. Sarakinsky 2020; for an alternative interpretation, see McLaggan 2020).

Beyond facilitating accumulation and the dispensation of patronage, the RET faction and the EFF thrive on stoking racial polarization and their survival rests on staving off prosecutions, both of which ultimately detracted from pandemic politics. The pandemic has been difficult to articulate in racial terms. In the months after the first lockdown, instead, the EFF found other ammunition,

mobilizing around a series of racial incidents in corporate advertising, schools, and small towns. Ramaphosa's ANC, since its ascent in 2017, has purged several of the RET faction's leading figures from positions in government and party. The ANC's powerful Secretary General Ace Magashule, the chairperson of its largest region, Durban's Zandile Gumede, and the North West Province's Premier Supra Mahumapelo have all been removed. The National Prosecuting Authority has been freed to pursue charges of corruption, with Jacob Zuma, Magashule, Gumede, and others finding their way to the dock. These moves have weakened and distracted the RET faction. The EFF is itself beset with corruption investigations. The political drama surrounding these developments has tended to overshadow their response to the pandemic.

In the course of Zuma's rise to power in the 2000s, facing prosecutions for rape and corruption, his faction successfully turned court dates into mass mobilization events. The RET faction has tried to replicate this tactic in the present. In November 2020, when Ace Magashule appeared at the Bloemfontein Magistrate Court, his supporters contravened pandemic restrictions by holding a rally outside. They did this again in February. In June 2021, as South Africa entered its third lockdown, the EFF, having promoted an extension of lockdown a year earlier, now made an about-turn. South Africa's vaccine roll-out has been slow, launching months after most other middle-income countries. The EFF suggested that this was due to the government's reliance on "Western" vaccines, which was due to "imperialism" and the existence of corrupt relationships with Western pharmaceutical companies. They therefore launched a campaign of civil disobedience against the lockdown, but as a tactic for extracting fast-tracked regulatory authorization of Chinese and Russian alternatives. The party's leader, Julius Malema, framed this as a broader rebellion against Ramaphosa's administration, which had taken the state out of the hands of the people. He said that:

The Russians have offered vaccines, but [the government] refused it. We want our country back. Let us go and reclaim our country from Ramaphosa. If it means death, so be it. If it means prison, we will wait with honor because prison for revolutionaries is an honor.

*(Njilo 2021)*

The EFF's drive, however, was quickly eclipsed.

On the evening of July 7, Jacob Zuma submitted himself for incarceration after a tense standoff with the authorities. The RET faction responded by launching a social media campaign demanding Jacob Zuma's freedom and threatening to shut down the KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces until this demand was acceded. They sought to portray this as a spontaneous uprising of the people in opposition to Zuma's arrest, but with the former president presented as a lightning rod for broader revulsion at a corrupt South African elite, represented by Ramaphosa's government and subservient to white corporations, which was indifferent to the suffering of the masses. An end to the lockdown, held responsible

for immiserating the people, was now raised as an explicit demand, but in a way that was obscured by the headline of freeing Jacob Zuma and promoting RET (Niehaus 2021).

The unrest, not particularly spontaneous but actually highly orchestrated, was visibly promoted and operationalized by RET-aligned ANC branches, organized crime, private militias in the form of the uMkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans' Association (MKMVA) and some Zulu regiments along with rogue elements of the South African Police Service and the State Security Agency. These forces blocked major roads, attacked logistics hubs, malls, and government buildings, and opened opportunities for wider looting and arson. Their overarching goal appears to have been to foreclose any attempt to leverage Zuma's arrest into a more general law and order crackdown, to maintain their access to state patronage, and their hold over the illicit economy.

This has not been the first incident of mass unrest and political violence in post-apartheid South Africa. The 2008 xenophobic violence and the 2012 Mari-kana Massacre are cases in point. The July unrest, however, in terms of loss of life, economic damage, and potential long-term political impact dwarfed these incidents. It claimed over 350 lives and caused at least ZAR 50 billion (\$3 billion) in losses. Thousands of people, mostly ordinary citizens with little role in actually fomenting the violence, were arrested. The RET faction, however, has not generated national traction for its efforts or any sustained momentum. Their argument against government pandemic policy has faded from view. In the course of the unrest, private citizens, primarily in white and Indian neighborhoods, formed into self-defense groups and engaged in vigilante violence. The populists have focused attention in this direction, especially by mobilizing against the Indian community of Phoenix in Durban, where vigilantes allegedly killed dozens of people (see Brunette 2021; Fogel 2021).

## Looking forward

At the start of the pandemic, South Africa's major populist tendencies were in decline. A more moderate stance was ascendant in the ANC. The liberal DA moved first against government policy. In this context, despite the immense social and economic crisis, notwithstanding the continuing fact of governmental dysfunction and corruption, populists in the RET faction and the EFF struggled to develop a coherent response to the pandemic. They hewed instead toward other concerns, including the augmentation of informal channels of accumulation and patronage, the promotion of racial polarization, and avoiding prosecution for corruption. Ramaphosa appears to remain popular, with a recent survey suggesting that 57% of South Africans view him favorably (Hartley, Sands, and Mills 2021). Given their ongoing challenges, it seems unlikely that the populists will be able to launch an effective response to the pandemic now.

Slow vaccine uptake and the rise of new variants, however, means that the pandemic continues. The government is careening from scandal to scandal. The

economy is devastated. There are millions of desperate people living in a reality in which public services are collapsing and poverty is rising. Three quarters of youth, between the ages of 16 and 24, are unemployed. The ANC, which remains fractious, its electoral organization divided and in disrepair, was brought to 57% of the vote in the 2019 national elections, which in present conditions pushes South Africa toward a future of declining ANC hegemony and unstable multi-party coalition government. The RET faction and the EFF, although bloodied, still have a significant political base. They maintain the ability to generate major political and economic resources. They wield considerable disruptive power. While most South Africans rejected their uprising, they are entrenched and able to reproduce themselves in the interstices of a formal political economy that fails to provide for its people. As the sins of the Zuma presidency are forgotten, as Ramaphosa enters his second term and his popularity wanes, as new leaders rise up through the ranks, they may revive themselves as a force capable of claiming the summit of the state. As party politics becomes more open and competitive, opportunities will present themselves to new and as yet dimly perceived populist formations, emerging from the world of xenophobia, charismatic churches, and organized crime. In the longer run, the systemic impact of the pandemic, its legacy of social and economic degeneration, gestures in this direction.

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# 20

## FRANCE

### Balancing Respectability and Radicalization in a Pandemic

*Marta Lorimer and Ethan vanderWilden*

The pandemic has hit France, like many of its neighbors, particularly hard. The country has moved in and out of lockdown three times, as caseloads, hospitalizations, and deaths have varied throughout 2020 and 2021. In this chapter, we focus specifically on the pandemic response of the *Rassemblement National* (RN, formerly *Front National*), a populist radical right party under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. The RN is one of the most well-known and well-studied far right parties in Europe. It was originally founded in 1972 with the aim of bringing the different currents of the French far right together (Camus 1989). The party's first national-level success came in the European Parliament elections of 1984, when it won 10% of the vote and elected its first Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). While it has since struggled to gain representation at the national level, the RN has grown into an electoral force representing over one-fifth of the French electorate since Marine Le Pen took over the helm of the party in 2011. When appropriate, we also consider the reactions of the left populist *La France Insoumise* (LFI). However, while the party made a notable electoral debut in the 2017 presidential election under Jean-Luc Mélenchon, it has since dwindled.

We argue that while COVID-19 did not necessarily present the right type of crisis for the RN, the party and its leadership tried to make the most of a “bad” crisis. Throughout the pandemic, the RN sought to link COVID-19 to its ideological messaging as well as discredit governing (though not scientific and technical) elites through a techno-populist critique. This strategy, we show, fell in line with Marine Le Pen's broader attempts at “de-demonizing” the RN and making it into a party of government. The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, we outline the development and state of the pandemic in France. We then explain the RN's rhetoric and actions throughout the pandemic. In the second section, we identify the contextual incentives that motivated the RN's

response. In the final section, we reflect on the impacts of COVID-19 on French politics and the RN.

## France, the pandemic, and the Rassemblement National

### *The trajectory and state of COVID-19 in France*

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in France on January 24, 2020. The crisis, however, was yet to be taken as a serious domestic threat. Instead, in the early months of 2020, political attention was focused mainly on the upcoming municipal elections in March as well as debates over pension reforms, which drew mass demonstrations (Schofield 2020). It was not until February 26 that France recorded its first COVID-related death.

In early March, the French government, under President Emmanuel Macron, began to take some, albeit relatively light, measures. The government banned large group meetings, fixed the price of sanitizing gels, began to prepare its face mask stock, and closed the annual agricultural fair (Baloge and Hubé 2021). Macron made his first television address on the state of COVID-19 in France on March 12, announcing that the school system would be closed on March 16, but that the first round of municipal elections, scheduled for March 15, would go on. On March 16, Macron announced a strict lockdown that would begin the following day and compared the challenge at hand to a “war.” At this time, the French government began a process of centralizing authority, convening two scientific committees in March to advise the government and somewhat sidelining existing health agencies (Rozenblum 2021).

Despite these initial measures and Macron’s strategy of centralized control, the virus spread quickly in the spring of 2020. By mid-April, France had the fourth highest caseload and the third highest death toll of any country, prompting an extension of lockdown. After May 11, restrictions were eased as cases and test positivity rates declined. Like many of its West European neighbors, cases again spiked in the autumn. The government announced another nationwide lockdown to last one month beginning on October 30. In early 2021, Macron’s government decided, despite some debate, to avoid another lockdown, though there was concern over new variants of the virus presenting a possible threat to the country. By late March, those concerns were realized as hospitals were again overwhelmed, and the government announced yet another partial lockdown, including school and nonessential shop closures and a curfew. Renewed caseloads dominated by the Delta variant of the virus emerged in the summer. On July 12, the government announced that vaccines would be mandatory for hospital, nursing, and retirement home workers and health passes that certify vaccination or negative test status would be introduced to regulate access to (indoor) public spaces.

As of August 2021, France is home to the tenth most COVID-related deaths of any country in the world (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine 2021). The

country has had over 6 million confirmed cases since the onset of the pandemic. The data suggests that France has been hit by COVID-19 in a manner somewhat between its European neighbors, while not quite reaching the same level of death and relative cases as Italy and Spain; France is well above Germany in these same statistics.

### ***The Rassemblement National's response***

Two main trends have defined the RN's response to COVID-19 and the French government's handling of the pandemic. First, the RN has sought to link the crisis to its nativist ideology and key issues from before the pandemic. Second, as would be expected of a populist party, it has criticized the government and "elites." However, the critique is distinct in its willingness to embrace technocratic ideas and policy prescriptions.

The RN is ideologically rooted in nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, not health management (Mudde 2007). However, the party did not shy away from discussing the pandemic, dedicating similar attention on Facebook to COVID-19 as *En Marche!* and *les Républicains* (vanderWilden and Lorimer 2021). When it did discuss the pandemic, it often sought to connect it with more long-standing "crises" familiar to the RN. Early on, several party figures (unsuccessfully) sought to link the COVID-19 crisis to migration, a key issue for the party (Camus 2020). For example, on April 15, Marine Le Pen wrote a Facebook post lamenting "masks for migrant centers and not for our retirement homes" (Le Pen 2020). The linkage continued throughout different policies and time periods. For example, in August 2021, Le Pen tweeted, "very quick to stop any measure against illegal immigration, the Constitutional Council finds no fault with a law hindering the freedom of movement of the French, in their own country, on the basis of vaccination" (Le Pen 2021).

Immigration was not the only issue linked with the crisis. In July 2020, the party published a "Black Book on Coronavirus." Central to this booklet was the perceived connection between French suffering throughout the pandemic and open borders, the political and economic decline of France, and the ill effects of globalization and the EU. The party writes:

The failures of the State's political machinery observed during the crisis [...] are caused by the ideological idiosyncrasies that the *Rassemblement National* has been condemning for years: the abandonment of industrial and political sovereignty, the ideological opposition to borders, an excessive and paralyzing bureaucracy, the ultraliberal functioning of the state, the ceding of powers to the European Union....

*(Rassemblement National 2020b, 59)*

These points directly align with the key political issues that the RN has been advancing for decades. Whether through bureaucratic inefficiencies, the voluntary remission of sovereignty, or the unwillingness of leaders to prioritize French

citizens above liberal and globalist ideals, concern over the decline of France has been a foundational part of the RN's message since its inception (Lorimer 2019). Relatedly, criticism of the EU and the negative effects of globalization have become increasingly central to the party's stance since the early 1990s (Ivaldi 2018; Lorimer 2021). This discourse was recycled throughout the pandemic, with the party claiming that France chose to align with the ineffective, sovereignty-stripping, and burdensome EU. It even claimed that projects such as the recovery fund were just another way to restrict France's national sovereignty (Rassemblement National 2020a).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to connecting the COVID-19 crisis to its core ideological issues, the RN deployed a "techno-populist" critique of the government. The term is here used to convey a combination of populist and technocratic appeals that reflect Manichean worldviews pitting "the people" against "the elite" as well as inherently "good public policy" against "special interests" (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2021, 34). Accordingly, a techno-populist critique need not suggest a government by experts, but rather a government that listens and adheres to the *right* experts at the *right* time. Since the onset of the pandemic, the RN advocated for testing, masking, and adherence to distancing measures. It directed blame toward Macron and his government, but not toward the scientists and experts supplying information and recommendations for dealing with the crisis. For example, the RN accused the government of failing to quickly and effectively follow scientists advocating for compulsory mask-wearing and the imposition of a test and trace system (Rassemblement National 2020b, 34–35). The party did not minimize or cast doubt on the seriousness of the crisis, but rather cast doubt on the competence and trustworthiness of Macron and his government.<sup>2</sup>

The critique aimed at Macron and his government took multiple forms. First, the government was accused of mismanaging the supply chain to ensure a proper preparedness for a surge in COVID cases and hospitalizations. It was also criticized for its unwillingness to explore alternative treatments for the coronavirus such as chloroquine. While not generally peddling conspiracy theories throughout the pandemic, Le Pen supported the use of chloroquine and one MEP for the party accused the government of silencing early advocates of it (Collard 2020). Lockdowns were also later criticized, but not necessarily for their value as a health measure, but rather for the ways in which the government implemented them, which the RN argued, "took away important freedoms of the people" (Rassemblement National 2020b, 70). Similarly, the RN (and LFI) has been a vocal critic of health passes, claiming that they discriminate against the unvaccinated and increase a worrisome trend of government surveillance. The RN's grievance is thus not with scientists, but rather with what it deems to be fundamentally bad public policy implemented by an incompetent political elite.

Aside from these more policy-oriented critiques, Le Pen and her party accused the government of mismanaging information and being guarded in its

relationship to the French public. From the beginning, Le Pen advanced a narrative of a “State Lie,” in which Macron’s government had more interest in hiding its incompetence than protecting the French (Camus 2020). Accordingly, the party was unwilling to support Macron’s calls for national unity throughout the pandemic. The President’s perceived failure to deliver the truth and adequate policy solutions reflected both an untrustworthy political elite and an inability to deliver the proper public policy to handle the crisis.

Summing up, the RN’s response to COVID-19 was broadly consistent with its pre-pandemic ideological commitments, both in terms of drawing on nativist arguments and on anti-elite sentiments. To some extent, the party’s response is a “typical populist (radical right) response” in the ways that Moffitt (2015) outlines. The RN invoked aspects of “the people”—for example, consider Le Pen’s narrow definition of who is worthy (nursing home residents) and unworthy (those in migrant centers) of personal protective equipment—against an incompetent political elite. However, while it was highly critical of governing elites, the party was also willing to draw on the expertise of the scientific community to construct its critique. In this way, the RN distinguishes itself from other populists around the world (see chapters on Brazil, the Netherlands, and the US in this book). While some populists may seek to “perpetuate” a crisis for their own strategic political aims (Moffitt 2015), the RN, from the onset of the pandemic, mostly avoided such a practice. Instead, it largely supported policies and measures put forward by scientists and argued that Macron’s government failed to follow this expert advice. In the next section, we examine why the RN engaged in this response, drawing out the contextual incentives present for Le Pen to pursue her strategy.

## Understanding the pandemic response

The RN’s decision to link the COVID crisis to its core ideological message and deploy a techno-populist critique of the government fits with Marine Le Pen’s broader strategy of “de-demonizing” her party while still maintaining the allegiance of the RN’s base voters. Since taking over in 2011, Marine Le Pen has sought to turn the RN into a party of government. To achieve this, she has softened the rhetoric of her party compared to its harsh quality under the leadership of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. She embraced republicanism, backtracked on some of the party’s more controversial stances, and expelled militants holding exceedingly radical views. Following a series of comments by Jean-Marie Le Pen about the Holocaust, she went as far as breaking with her father and expelling him from the party. Finally, in an attempt to symbolically complete the transition from “eternal opposition” to “government in waiting,” in 2018 she changed the party’s name to *RN*.

Le Pen’s choice to de-demonize the RN should be understood in the context of the French electoral system. The country uses a two-round majoritarian system. In the first round, several candidates bid to pass a critical threshold to advance to the second round. In the presidential election, only the top two

candidates from the first round advance. While the first round features disparate candidates and a normally fractionalized vote, in the second round candidates are rewarded for attracting a broad swathe of voters and gaining the endorsement of their opponents from the previous round. Accordingly, the system tends to favor more moderate candidates. The RN has historically been disadvantaged by this system. When an RN candidate advances to the second round, they are often faced with a “republican front,” whereby the remaining parties and movements are willing to coalesce around the RN candidate’s opposition. For example, in 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen advanced to the second round after winning 16.9% of the vote. He gained only one percentage point in the subsequent round while his opponent, Jacques Chirac, went from winning 19.9% in the first round to 82.2% in the second round. Marine Le Pen and the more modern RN’s de-demonization strategy attempts to address this electoral obstacle.

De-demonization, however, carries risks for Le Pen and the RN. Excessive moderation on its part may indeed alienate some of its most faithful voters, requiring that the party perform a careful balancing act between moderation and radicalization (Dézé 2015). The dominant trends identified in the previous section (linking the pandemic to the RN’s issues and creating a techno-populist appeal) helped the party strike this balance. Framing the pandemic in terms of familiar issues, for example, made it possible for the RN to speak to its traditional electorate. It also offered opportunities to advance its agenda without being labeled “extremist.” Because elements such as the closure of borders were justified based on accepted practices in health management, or opposition to the EU’s intervention was connected to less divisive issues of state sovereignty (Lorimer 2020), the RN managed to appear less radical while still pushing forward its key ideological agenda.

The RN’s techno-populist critique of the government served a similar purpose. By criticizing President Macron and his government while still respecting and deferring to scientific experts, the RN struck a balance between the poles of radicalization and moderation. On the one hand, the party’s reputation could be softened, and its respectability could grow: it was advancing mostly responsible and expert-advised recommendations. On the other hand, the RN could maintain its core populist message of anti-elitism, though here specifically critiquing *governing* elites. Surveys taken during the pandemic show that while RN voters are significantly more distrusting of governing elites, they trust scientists at a similar rate to other partisans (Brouard and Foucault 2020). Accordingly, pursuing this rhetorical strategy would not risk alienating the party’s existing voting core. Framing the pandemic through a techno-populist lens, in this sense, aligned perfectly well with the electoral incentives and strategic aims of the RN.

### **The pandemic’s long-term influence on French politics and the RN**

It is difficult to say whether the pandemic will have much of an impact on the RN’s actual chances. At first glance, the results from the 2020 municipal

elections and the 2021 regional elections present a grim picture for both Le Pen and Macron. In the municipal elections, which were held on March 15, 2020, and after a delay, June 28, 2020, Macron's *En Marche!* performed poorly and the RN also failed to make significant inroads. While it won the mayoral race in Perpignan and secured reelection in several smaller cities, the RN ended up with only 840 council seats in 258 municipalities, down from 1,438 seats in 463 municipalities in 2014 (Baloge and Hubé 2021). In the regional elections held in June 2021, the mainstream right-wing *les Républicains* came out of the elections as the best performing party, with the RN falling well below expectations and Macron's party clearly struggling. However, these elections are likely not the best assessment of how the pandemic has shifted electoral fortunes, as the RN generally does not perform well locally and Macron's party lacks local implantation. Both elections have also been marked by record low turnout, a potential signal of widespread institutional dissatisfaction.

National-level polls for the 2022 presidential election suggest that the pandemic has had little to no effect on the electoral fortunes of the RN. While Politico's *Poll of Polls* shows Macron and Le Pen as clear frontrunners for the first round, with each hovering close to 25%, these figures have barely shifted since the onset of the pandemic (Politico 2021), offering little reason to believe that partisan pandemic responses have advantaged one side or the other.<sup>3</sup>

So far, then, it would seem that the RN has not received an electoral boost from its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While populists might generally thrive on crisis, COVID-19 was the "wrong" type of crisis for the party. It required scientific expertise and complicated technical solutions rather than stoking grievances and ideological tensions. Accordingly, the RN sought to shift discourse surrounding the pandemic toward its own familiar territory, but its effort was likely overshadowed by the urgency to address COVID-19 rather than examine the root causes of the pandemic (which might better link to the RN's agenda). Furthermore, a rally around the flag effect, in which Macron's approval rating rose from around 34% in February 2020 to 41% by the end of March 2020 (Politico 2021), may have pushed some to view the RN's critical stance as inappropriate.

Nonetheless, Le Pen and her party have also not suffered electorally from the pandemic. Its response of ideological linkages and a balance of populist and technocratic critiques demonstrate a commitment to its strategy of "demonization," which could prove useful come 2022. Furthermore, the long-term outlook of the pandemic may actually begin to present a "better" crisis for the party. As concerns shift from health-related to economic and social, attention may shift toward issues better related to the RN's key ideological messaging. From a retrospective position, French voters may be more inclined to devote attention to the root causes of the pandemic rather than simply considering the necessary policy prescriptions in the short term. Here, the RN's talking points would likely gain more relevance, as the salience of issues like migration, redistribution, and the EU would rise.

Much remains to be seen regarding the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on French politics. The 2022 general and presidential elections offer an important test case to begin to evaluate the consequences of pandemic strategies. Nonetheless, COVID-19 at least did not appear to hurt the party's standing. The RN will likely emerge from the pandemic intact, with plenty of opportunities to continue advancing its ideological agenda and critical stance toward the government.

## Notes

- 1 Similarly, *LFI* framed the pandemic in terms that reflected the questions and doubts that fueled the party's early success, dedicating significant focus to how the pandemic relates to economic security and national debt (Baloge and Hubé 2021).
- 2 While *LFI* also was not shy to criticize the government, their response was less focused on “blaming” elites as failures rather than “naming” the problems at hand (Baloge and Hubé 2021).
- 3 Additionally, these polls should be read with skepticism. For example, François Fillon of *les Républicains* was leading many opinion polls in 2016 and early 2017, though failed to even advance to the second round in 2017.

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# 21

## GERMANY

### The Alternative for Germany in the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Marcel Lewandowsky, Christoph Leonhardt and  
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Since the Alternative for Germany (AfD) came into existence in early 2013, the face of the party has constantly changed. Whereas it started out as a Euroskeptical party, it has adopted a successively more radical right profile. Its anti-immigration stance helped the AfD to establish itself in the German party system at a time when Germany was experiencing high levels of immigration. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Germany in early spring 2020, the party was represented in all state parliaments (*Landtage*) as well as in the federal parliament (*Bundestag*).<sup>1</sup> Its strategy quickly conformed to the typical approach of populist parties to crises (Moffitt 2015). First, the AfD presented itself as the voice of the people, claiming to represent those who were suffering under the government's anti-COVID measures. Second, the party redefined and perpetuated the crisis, shifting the focus away from the public health issue to a crisis of democracy itself in which the measures imposed by the federal government were depicted as a quasi-dictatorial abuse of power.

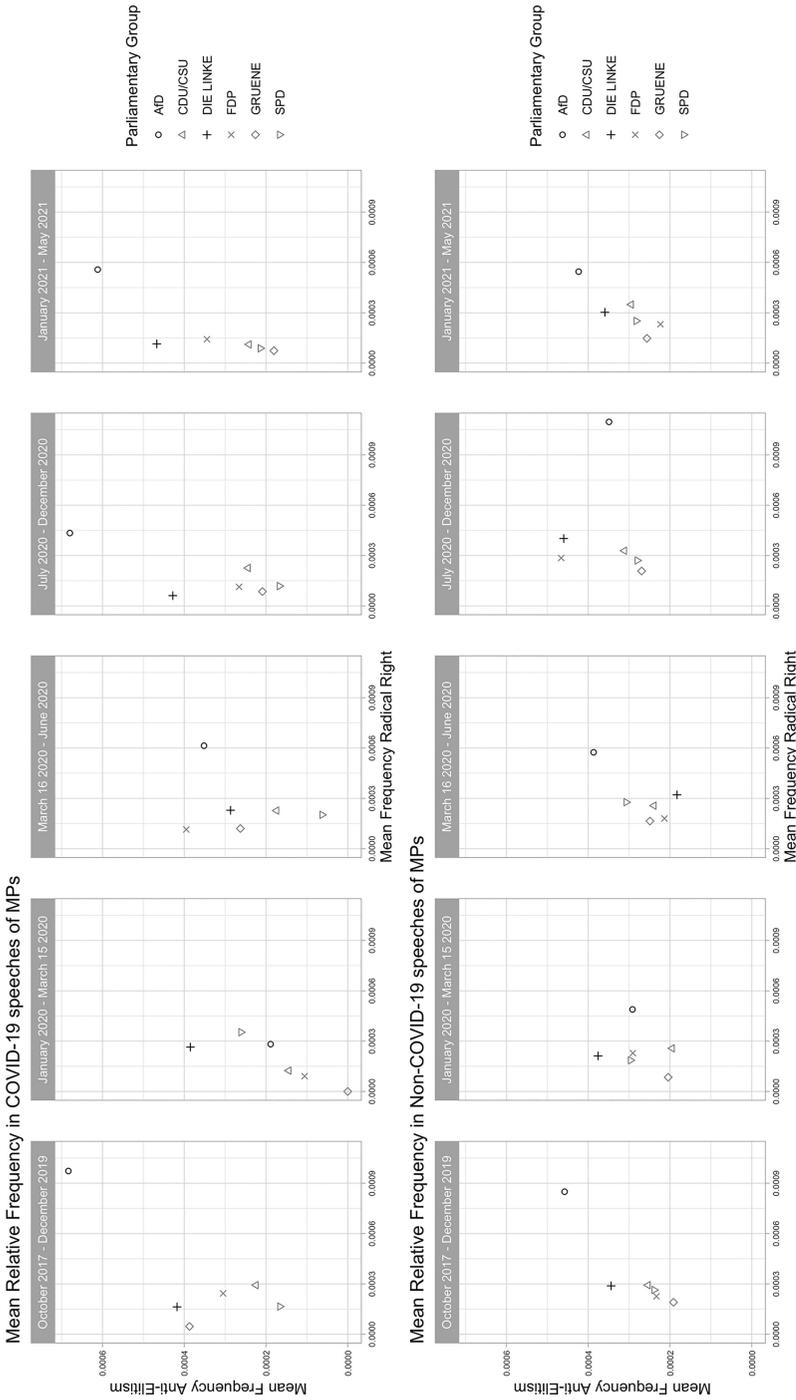
This chapter will examine the AfD between the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and its apparent waning after the “third wave” in spring 2021. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part will describe the AfD's approach, utilizing qualitative and quantitative data. The second part will interpret the actions of the AfD in the context of the situational and institutional conditions that characterized the situation in Germany as well as the intraparty factors at play within the AfD. Finally, we will summarize the findings and speculate on how the pandemic might further influence the fate of the AfD. Although this chapter is an in-depth study of the AfD, The Left (*Die Linke*) represents a left-wing populist competitor in the German party system and, wherever useful, references and brief comparisons to The Left will be included.<sup>2</sup>

## The performance of the AfD in the pandemic

Although the AfD rejected measures to counteract the pandemic and advocated a general reopening, this position had become clearer over time. Figure 21.1 visualizes a quantitative evaluation of parliamentary speeches and illustrates how the position of the AfD has changed compared to that of the other parties in the *Bundestag*.

Using a dictionary-based approach to measure populism,<sup>3</sup> the figure displays the relative share of formulations indicative of populism in speeches of the respective party group's Members of Parliament (MPs) across two dimensions: anti-establishment (y-axis) and radical right (x-axis). To learn whether populist phrases were more prevalent in speeches in a COVID-19 context than otherwise, we analyze these thematic contexts separately. In the bottom row of plots, we show the positions of the party groups in plenary discussions which did not focus on the pandemic, and the upper plot evaluates only COVID-19-related statements.<sup>4</sup> It shows that the position of the AfD has a pattern distinct from that of other parties: higher mean values on both dimensions convey a quantitative grasp on its populist profile. With regard to debates on the pandemic, several findings stand out. In the first half of 2020, the AfD's approach can be said to have been temporarily relatively close to the other parties. This also applies to the period between March and June 2020; thus, the first months after the government began to take action against the spread. Although the overall picture presents the AfD as the most anti-elitist and right-wing party (bottom row), it apparently embraced a more moderate, more muted approach when COVID-19 first hit Germany, particularly with regard to the anti-elitist dimension. In the summer of 2020, this changed drastically. The AfD MPs maintained the radical right stance and made more use of anti-establishment framings. Regarding anti-elitism, the picture for The Left is similar. Whereas the left-wing populists make relatively frequent use of anti-establishment framings in general, the share of anti-elitist vocabulary in COVID-19 specific debates steadily increased from July 2020 onwards after being rather moderate at the beginning of the pandemic.

A qualitative inquiry into the AfD's behavior sheds more light on these findings. When the virus arrived in Germany, the initial stance of the party in parliament was to side with the government. In the plenary debate on March 25, parliamentary coleader Alexander Gauland expressed support for the government's financial aid bill as long as it was limited in duration, at the same time emphasizing the need for national solidarity and closed borders (*Deutscher Bundestag* 2020). Yet, it was not long before the AfD took a more distinct and critical stance toward the government. In fact, the AfD's initially rather supportive stance did not last for even two months (Fiedler 2020). Although the AfD sought to display a more supportive role in public as well, this moderate profile soon provoked conflict within the party: several MPs successfully demanded a meeting of the parliamentary group, expressing their discontent with the strategy, and downplaying the severity of the virus.



**FIGURE 21.1** Frequency of radical right and anti-establishment dictionary words in speeches per parliamentary group, October 2017–May 2021, COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 speeches compared.

Source: GermaParl.

**TABLE 21.1** Parties in the German Bundestag, 19th legislative period (2017–2021).

<i>Party</i>	<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Votes (%)</i>	<i>Seats (2017)</i>	<i>Seats (2021)<sup>a</sup></i>
CDU/CSU	Christian Democratic	32.9	246	245
SPD	Social Democratic	20.5	153	152
AfD	Populist radical right	12.6	94	88
FDP	Liberal	10.7	80	80
The Left	Populist radical left	9.2	69	69
Greens	Ecologist	8.9	67	67

Source: German Bundestag.

<sup>a</sup>Distribution of seats as of March 9, 2021.

Within the first months of the pandemic, the AfD parliamentary group, which represents the biggest opposition in the 19th *Bundestag* (see Table 21.1) published two position papers: one on April 8, 2020, and the other on May 7, 2020. These pamphlets reflect the conflict that was occurring within the party at the time. In its first position paper (AfD 2020b), the AfD expressed its support for screening and testing, incentives for the production of medical supplies, prioritization of the development of a vaccine, the protection of high-risk groups, social distancing, and hygiene rules. At the same time, it criticized the shutdown of the economy and stressed its demand for closed borders and measures of isolation and specifically opposed the admission of refugees. Furthermore, the AfD requested an audit of the measures on a weekly basis with the involvement of the *Bundestag*.

In its second position paper (AfD 2020a), the AfD demanded an immediate end to the shutdown, the reopening of the economy as well as for leisure activities and tourism to be permitted, while it still supported rules related to hygiene, social distancing, and masks—the last on a voluntary basis. At the same time, it reiterated some of its main focal points, opposing climate protection measures in the context of economic support as well as any form of institutionalized shared responsibility within the EU, including “Corona bonds,” common debts, and financial aid to member states by the EU. Most importantly, the AfD emphasized and expanded its demands for a democratic review of the measures to counteract the virus by requesting a parliamentary board of inquiry. The AfD insisted that “measures and decisions of this magnitude must not remain without democratic control and parliamentary processing,” claiming the existence of a crisis not caused by the virus itself but by the government’s reaction to it: “The massive restrictions of fundamental rights and the dramatic economic consequences are of the greatest importance for the people of this country” (AfD 2020a).

As early as spring 2020, “anti-Corona” demonstrations began to take place in Germany. Without the official support of the AfD leadership, members of local and regional branches quickly joined the protesters. This included co-organizing demonstrations of the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA) movement, a series of radical right demonstrations taking place in the city of Dresden (Volk 2021, 241).<sup>5</sup> One prominent slogan under which the AfD

members promoted and participated in the demonstrations was “Our basic rights are not negotiable.” For instance, the local party branch in the city of Leipzig participated under this motto in a demonstration on May 1, 2020.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the summer, the AfD, although hesitant at first, positioned itself more forcefully as the voice of those who felt oppressed by the government and believed that the Merkel administration was taking advantage of the virus to implement increasingly restrictive measures (Lange and Monscheuer 2020, 9). The peak of this development took place on August 29, 2020, when a group of anti-COVID-19 protesters attempted to storm the *Reichstag* (the location of the federal parliament). During a demonstration on November 18, 2020, in the context of parliament passing the “Third law for the protection of the population in the event of an epidemic situation of national concern” (third Civil Protection Law), several visitors to the *Bundestag*, who had been invited by AfD MPs, harassed and berated MPs of other parties (Spiegel Online 2020).

At the beginning of 2021, the parliamentary party published a new strategy paper in which it focused on four aspects: ending the lockdown, protecting vulnerable groups through specific schedules in gyms and at retail outlets, remedying the “democratic deficit,” and voluntary vaccinations (AfD 2021b). In March 2021, the party further refined its approach, concentrating on vaccinations (AfD 2021c).

In times of crisis, populists respond in a specific way that distinguishes their approach from that of their competitors (Moffitt 2015, 208). First, the concept of “the people” is of central importance to their strategy. Populists present themselves as the protectors of the people against “those ostensibly responsible for the crisis—whether that is the elite, some dangerous other or a combination of both” (Moffitt 2015, 208). Second, their strategy relies on the perpetuation of the crisis in order to provide constant justification of their self-display as “saviors.”

Despite its very brief *staatstragende* (supportive of the state) reaction in the early days of the pandemic, in which it emphasized the need for national unity and supported the government’s initial reaction, the AfD is indeed a typical case and has been following a “populist” performance pattern ever since. Interestingly, only at the beginning did the AfD’s nativist platform (e.g., in the context of refugees) play an important role. Although it remained a crucial aspect of its ideology, it was less present in its approach during the COVID-19 crisis. With regard to authoritarianism, the AfD strived to present itself anti-authoritarian by describing “ordinary citizens” not only as losers in the crisis, but as victims of an allegedly increasingly authoritarian government. For instance, in a plenary debate on the fourth Civil Protection Law on April 16, 2021, the coleader of the parliamentary group, Alice Weidel, responded to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s address as follows:

Never before has a federal government dared to include so many assaults on the basic rights and freedoms of citizens, on the rule of law and democratic principles in so few sentences as in this bill. [...] You distrust the citizens; that’s why you want to patronize them during the day and lock them up at night. [...] You distrust the courts [...]. That is why you are neutralizing the

local and administrative courts through centralization—possibly because they recently overturned some of your encroachments on civil rights.

*(PIPr 19/222; translation by the authors)*

Instead of referring to the danger presented by the virus itself, the party focused on the federal government's response, claiming the emergence of a "Corona dictatorship" (e.g., Bayerischer Rundfunk 2020). For example, MP Stephan Brandner reacted to the government's tightening of the measures in November 2020 by demanding that a stop be put to the "harassment of citizens":

[Angela] Merkel and her quasi-dictatorial epidemic cabinet (*Seuchenkabinett*) are completely out of control and take decisions as if there had never been fundamental rights in Germany. [...] Ever deeper intrusions into the private life of citizens are unacceptable. Bringing the government right into the living room and snooping around in the private sphere must stop immediately!

*(AfD 2020d, translation by the authors)*

Specifically, the party claimed this was a fundamental threat to civil liberties, conjuring up images of an Orwellian dictatorship drastically intervening in people's private lives. In a press release on January 5, 2021, deputy parliamentary group leader Peter Felser presented the party as the stakeholder of small- and medium-sized businesses and used images of totalitarianism:

In the struggle for survival against government restrictions, there are now the first open rebellions. This shows the clear superiority of the creative market economy over socialist prohibition politics—morally and practically.

*(AfD 2021a, translation by the authors)*

These examples illustrate how the AfD made use of the elite–people divide, its content including alienation between the government and the people as well as, overall, an alleged conspirative assault on democracy (see also Karavasilis 2020, 24).

Along with the narrative of democracy under threat by the elites, the AfD portrayed the government as utterly incompetent, a total failure in terms of ending the pandemic. In this context, the party contrasted the actions of the Merkel cabinet with the interests of the people, describing the elites as out of touch. The distinction between the government and other opposition parties often became blurred, when the AfD insinuated there was a concealed cooperation of the political class, that is, when it demanded a parliamentary board of inquiry that was opposed by all the other parties (AfD 2020c).

The actions of the AfD do indeed represent a perpetuation of the crisis. Every measure taken by the government and the parliamentary majority to counteract the pandemic was considered as one further step toward the abolition of democracy. And here, the AfD's approach was different to that of its populist

competitor, The Left. Whereas the AfD quickly embraced antagonism toward the government, The Left has been supportive of countermeasures against the pandemic. Despite anti-elite sentiments in parliamentary speeches, The Left did not issue warnings about democracy being in danger due to its responses. In fact, The Left supported lockdowns but demanded they should be in a context of “solidarity,” for example, by proposing increases in welfare benefits and higher taxation of the wealthy (Die Linke 2020a, 2020b).

## Explanations

As the chapter has shown, the performance of the AfD in the pandemic was characterized by two elements: first, the invocation of the people, who were portrayed as being stripped of their civil rights by the government; second, it was shaped by a redefinition of the crisis by shifting the focus to the alleged threat to democracy. At the same time, the AfD has been prone to internal conflicts over strategic questions from the beginning. To explain its behavior, three intertwined factors will be taken into consideration: (1) the responses of the government to the pandemic and support received by the other parties, (2) the dynamic of the protest movements, and (3) conflicts within the AfD’s party organization.

### *Responses of the government to the pandemic*

In the course of the pandemic, many laws were ratified rapidly, yet the most prominent and extensive initiatives were the four major Civil Protection Bills (*Bevölkerungsschutzgesetze*), introduced by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU)/Social Democratic Party (SPD) in March, May, and November 2020 as well as in April 2021. Among others, these bills included the following measures to counteract the pandemic<sup>7</sup>:

- 1 Authorization granted to the Federal Ministry of Health to implement measures (e.g., concerning the distribution of medicines) without the consent of the *Bundesrat* when the *Bundestag* determines an epidemic situation of national urgency (first Civil Protection Law).
- 2 Authorization granted to federal agencies to access and process private data, even without the consent of the persons affected (first Civil Protection Law).
- 3 Amendments to the Infection Protection Law, such as the right of the *Bundestag* to order social distancing and mask mandates in public spaces, restrictions on gatherings as well as travel bans (third Civil Protection Law).
- 4 Automatization of specific restrictive measures, such as curfews, in the case of an aggravation of the pandemic situation (fourth Civil Protection Law).

The responses of the government defined the context in which party competition took place. This concerns the nature of the measures, which at least temporarily

strengthened the executive and the intrusion into citizens' private life. This enabled the AfD to utilize its narrative of "democracy in crisis" in a manner redolent of its strategy in the Euro crisis and in the refugee crisis.

These actions took place in the context of a consensus democracy, particularly low polarization between mainstream parties and a tradition of coalition governments, which provides a favorable opportunity structure for populist radical right parties (Hakhverdian and Koop 2007). In this environment, the AfD shared opposition status with three other parties (Greens, Free Democratic Party [FDP], The Left). In terms of the protection of the rule of law, the AfD competed with the Liberals (FDP), who took a critical stance toward the government. As for the socioeconomic consequences, the AfD's main competitor was The Left. Hence, due to pluralism among the opposition parties, the AfD had to take a unique position. It was in this environment that the AfD not only criticized the measures but presented itself as the sole defendant of democracy while portraying the other parties as "co-conspirators."

As mentioned, this narrative did not emerge solely in the context of the Corona crisis. In fact, the perception of an existential threat to (national) democracy characterized the strategy of the party from the beginning and was a defining feature of its Euroskepticism even before its radical right turn in the wake of the 2015 "refugee crisis" (Ketelhut et al. 2016). In the course of the pandemic, the AfD perpetuated the crisis by reframing it. Hence, a shift of focus can be observed. At first, the party tried to revive its formerly successful strategy by attributing the spread of the virus to the influx of refugees, which coincided with its moderate and rather cooperative approach to the government responses in the early days of the pandemic. Yet in the course of the spring and summer, the party focused more on the measures themselves and thus radicalized while, for the most part, giving less salience to its "classical" topic of migration. In this regard, the strategy of the AfD during the COVID-19 crisis reflects its general approach. The invocation of the people and the perpetuation of the crisis as well as the distinction between criticism (failures of the government) and delegitimization are analytical rather than empirical differentiations: As the examples have shown, the narrative of democracy being assaulted by the government serves as an umbrella for both elements. However, the party's strategy did not fall on fertile soil. A majority of citizens constantly supported the measures or demanded even stricter responses (Brandt 2021), and the AfD needed to find its audience among the significantly smaller group of those who opposed the measures. Considering voters of the major parties, only among the FDP supporters was there a slight majority that opposed to the measures, whereas AfD voters stood out in this regard, with an increasing and overwhelmingly high share rejecting the government's response (Wagschal et al. 2021, 11).

### ***The dynamics of protest movements***

The anti-COVID-19 demonstrations represented both a risk and a window of opportunity for the AfD. On the one hand, many of the protesters represented

the radical right base of its electorate (Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020), and the AfD's emphasis on the "dictatorial" measures spoke to the criticism and demands articulated during the anti-COVID-19 demonstrations (Reuband 2021). On the other hand, the AfD was in danger of losing moderate potential voters. A dossier by the AfD parliamentary group in November 2020 illustrates their strategic dilemma (Schmidt 2020): the party was aware that criticism of the measures, particularly shutdowns, was widespread—and not just among radical right voters. However, the AfD wanted to avoid being seen as too radical by siding with conspiracy theorists. Therefore, the leadership recommended emphasizing voluntarism and personal responsibility while opposing mandatory mask-wearing and compulsory vaccinations even before they were considered by the government. Despite these efforts of establishing a critical but moderate strategy, prominent AfD members, such as Thuringian leader Björn Höcke, sided with extremist groups and participated in the respective rallies (Serif 2020).

### ***Internal conflicts***

Since its formation, the AfD had been torn between the adversarial coexistence of moderate and radical factions.<sup>8</sup> The party's shift at the very beginning of the pandemic is—at least in part—most likely the outcome of pressure by radicals, especially in the powerful East German branches. Whereas the AfD's overall strategy in the remainder of the pandemic was relatively uncontroversial, the internal conflicts disrupted the party's cohesion at times, for instance, with regard to vaccinations. The AfD was the parliamentary group with the lowest number of vaccinated members (Tietze 2021). Some regional branches even openly opposed vaccination (BR24 2021). When leadership members Gauland and Jörg Meuthen decided to get vaccinated, they received massive criticism from other AfD representatives (n-tv 2021).

### **Outlook**

The AfD's strategy in the Corona crisis was primarily to portray the government's actions as an assault on democracy, thus shifting the focus of the health crisis to the political sphere while criticizing the core measures taken to contain the spread of the virus. While the strategy appears typical according to Moffit's (2015) theory, it also entailed individual aspects pertaining specifically to the AfD, first and foremost the conflicts within the party, which were mirrored in its cautious approach to the early anti-COVID-19 protests. Whether or not the AfD can benefit from the Corona crisis is likely to depend on the degree to which the government's response is accepted within the population. So far, there is no majority call for the government to abandon its strategy for containing the virus. At the same time, congruence between the AfD and its voters is still high with regard to opposing the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. As a result, it

appears that the AfD has been able to stabilize bonds with its supporters, even if it failed to expand its vote share.

## Notes

- 1 While the AfD managed to enter parliament in the 2017 federal election as well as all *Länder* elections, its parliamentary groups have split in several states, resulting in a loss of status and rights.
- 2 Whether The Left (*Die Linke*) is indeed a populist party is disputed among observers. For this chapter, we refer to the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2019), where it is listed as a far-left populist party.
- 3 This approach, described in more detail in Schwanholz et al. (2020), uses contextualized dictionaries to capture the occurrences of words which are indicative of the dimensions of anti-elitism and radical right. The key terms of the dictionary for the anti-elitist dimension are based on the populism dictionary by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011, 1283). The key terms for the dimension of radical right were developed in Schwanholz et al. (2020). To make the dictionaries more problem-specific and increase the validity of the approach (Grimmer and Stewart 2013, 275), query terms are selectively flanked with additional terms which must or must not occur in the same sentence. This is a move beyond a pure dictionary-based approach toward a more comprehensive rule-based approach. The reported scores are the means of the relative frequencies of query matches within speeches made by members of parliament, aggregated by parliamentary group and temporal interval. To separate speeches addressing COVID-19, a latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) topic modeling approach was used (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). The text corpus comprises all speeches of the 19th legislative period of the German *Bundestag*. The data was downloaded from the website of the *Bundestag* in XML format and was processed similarly to the GermaParl corpus of parliamentary protocols (Blätte and Blessing 2018).
- 4 Since we include also speeches relating to public health, we are also able to integrate speeches that took place before the virus was discovered (October 2017–December 2019).
- 5 The abbreviation PEGIDA stands for *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (“Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident”). In early 2015, several exponents of the radical right faction had demanded that the AfD aligns with PEGIDA, but the then leadership hesitated, mostly for strategic reasons (Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018).
- 6 See <https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Landkreis.Leipzig/posts/zum-thema-unsere-grundrechte-sind-nicht-verhandelbar/2571772636397206/> (retrieved July 29, 2021). As early as April 3, 2020, Birgit Bessin MP, a member of the state parliament (*Landtag*) of Brandenburg, called upon their supporters to participate in a rally in Dessau. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtYbiS0NNrE> (retrieved July 29, 2021).
- 7 At the same time, due to the federal structure of Germany, a large number of competences remained with the states (*Länder*). Hence, the federal government and the *Länder* governments cooperated in numerous conferences (*Bund-Länder-Konferenzen*). Despite agreeing on common measures, several states insisted on the right to deviate from those measures, and many did so throughout the course of the pandemic.
- 8 The AfD started out as a Eurosceptic party but attracted more radical individuals from the beginning (Lewandowsky, Giebler, and Wagner 2016). Since its foundation in 2013, the party has included several factions: the relatively moderate Euroskeptics, social conservatives, and radical right members. Due to the successive radicalization of the party in summer 2015, conflicts between a more moderate faction and the radical and extreme right groups within the party remained and culminated in two

events, one internal and one external. As early as January 2019, the *Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) had categorized the AfD as a case to be audited (*Prüffall*), which led to reviewing whether anti-constitutional activities were taking place within the party. On April 30, 2020, the radical right faction *Der Flügel* (The Wing) dissolved under pressure by the leadership. Even if this was rather symbolic and did not substantially remove the radical right faction from the party, it illustrates how the AfD tried to avoid being the subject of further surveillance by the authorities even during the pandemic. On March 3, 2021, the authorities went a step further and categorized the party as a suspected case (*Verdachtsfall*), which would have enabled the *Verfassungsschutz* to collect information by means of surveillance methods; yet, this was soon suspended by a court decision (Tagesschau 2021)

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# 22

## BELGIUM

### Against the Government and Its Parties, (Not So Much) with the People

*Judith Sijstermans and Steven M. Van Hauwaert*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on Belgium. While its case fatality rate is in line with that of most West European countries ( $\pm 2.2\%$ ), in the summer of 2020 Belgium holds the record for the highest number of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 population in Western Europe ( $\pm 220$ ) (Johns Hopkins 2021).<sup>1</sup> An intricate sequence of government responses followed the first reported cases in February 2020, alongside an ongoing complex government formation process throughout 2020. This chapter highlights the role of Belgium's only populist party, the Vlaams Belang (VB), throughout this period: How did it respond to the pandemic and how can we understand/explain its responses?

Ever since the late 1970s, the VB has been the principal right-wing populist force in Belgian politics. While its history has been rather eventful and its electoral parkour one of relative ups and downs, its ideological core has remained relatively stable. The VB's rhetoric and political stances have always been primarily embedded in Flemish nationalism, social conservatism, and a rejection of immigration. The party's ideational changes over time are ones of degree and style rather than substance. Under the current leadership of Tom Van Grieken, the VB has moderated its communication strategy and nuanced its stances in key policy areas, such as social welfare, as part of what we can describe as a mainstreaming process.

This chapter primarily argues that, reflecting this recent moderation in its image, many of the VB's responses to COVID-19 resemble a more typical anti-government position rather than a populist one. The two are close conceptual cousins, but the latter includes a clear and homogeneous reference to the people. This is something we see much less in the VB's responses to the pandemic. Similar to the *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France, the VB opportunistically

links the COVID-19 crisis to its key rhetorical frames (see Chapter 20). The party conflates various crises to portray the COVID-19 pandemic as part of a long-standing crisis of the Belgian state and to discredit democratic functioning. This response illustrates the tension within the party: between more moderate traditional opposition politics and the crisis-driven rhetoric seen as typical of right-wing populism.

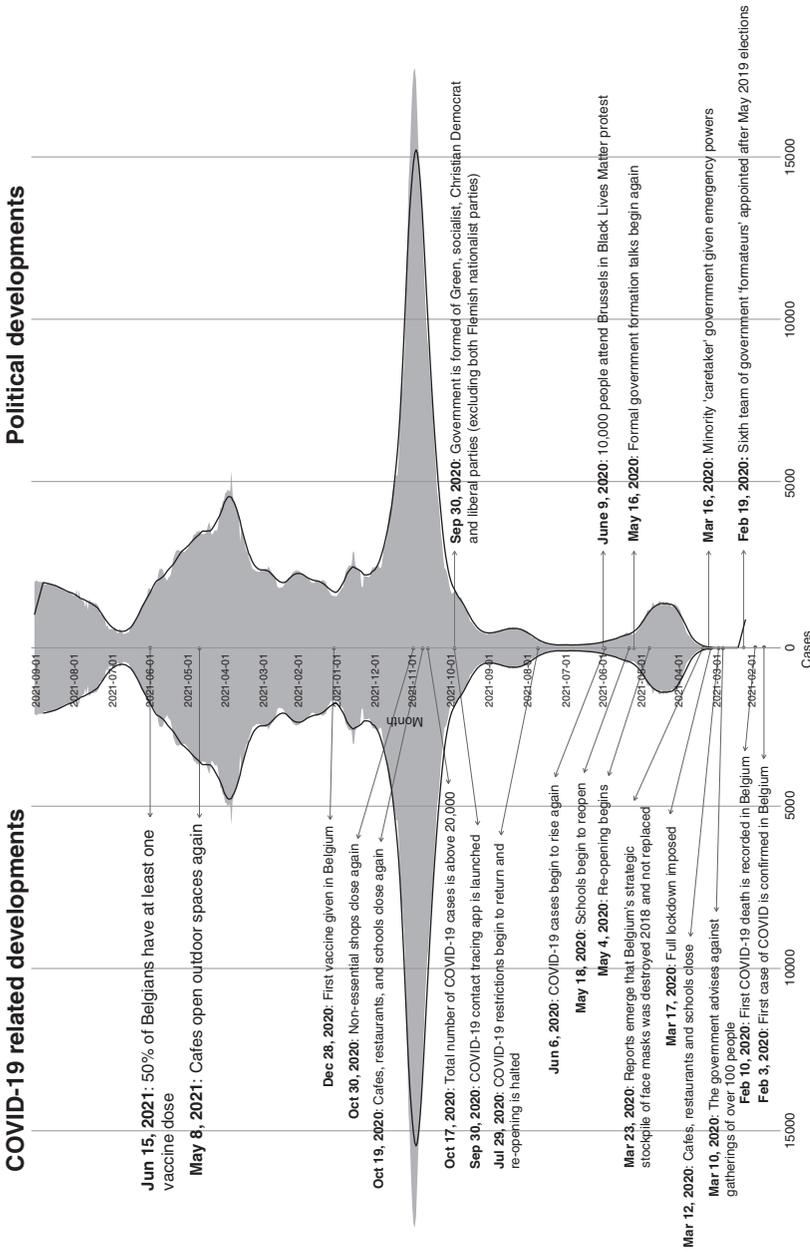
## Overview of the VB's response to COVID-19

While the VB has been represented in Belgium's Chamber of Representatives since 1981, it has always been in opposition. In large part, this is due to the so-called *cordon sanitaire*, an agreement between (mainstream) parties to systematically exclude the VB from any coalition formations. Together with the state structure in Belgium, these coalition formation processes are often quite complicated. This complexity can be neatly illustrated by Belgium's political situation throughout the pandemic. Figure 22.1 gives a concise overview of some of the more important political events since the May 2019 federal election as well as the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium.

More than the other countries in this volume, the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium was preceded and accompanied by a political crisis, as shown in Figure 22.1. This kind of political standstill and complexity is becoming ever more common in Belgian politics, with the previous three government formations lasting 494 days, 139 days, and 589 days, respectively. Naturally, this affects the responses of political outsiders, like the VB, to governmental measures to deal with the pandemic. In Figure 22.2, we summarize how the VB responded to COVID-19 and the government's handling of it.

The VB predominantly and regularly opposed the government's choices related to lockdown policies, at first the slow implementation of the measures and then the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies (Van Overbeke and Stadig 2020, 311). The VB also supported stricter border policies, testing, face masks, and sanitary measures, lockdown policies, and vaccine uptake and criticized the Belgian government's handling of each of these issues. By July 2020, the party had produced a Coronavirus "Blunder Book," enumerating the numerous failures of the Belgian government in its response to the pandemic. The party proposed that it would serve as an "archive" of VB opposition against the Belgian government (VB Magazine July 2020, 14).

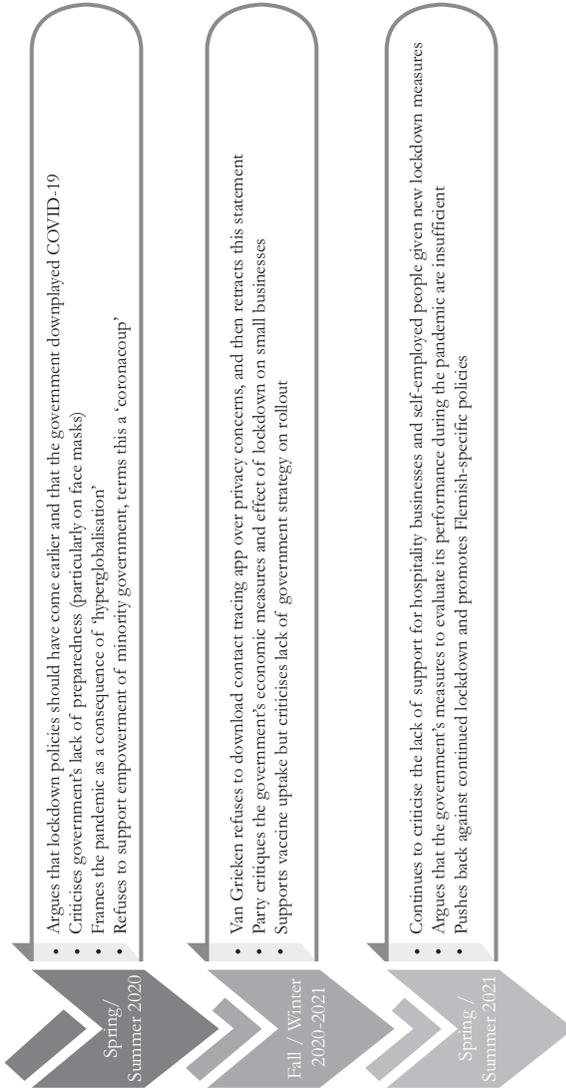
Over time, the party began to emphasize the economic effect of lockdown and to call for more support for small businesses, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors. On this basis, the party suggested that corona measures had become disproportionate and that they unfairly targeted specific layers of society. This is typified by the campaigns against the curfew led by the VB Youth. The party's discourse during this time increasingly moved toward calls that it was now "time for freedom" (VB Magazine May 2021, June 2021).



**FIGURE 22.1** Timeline of political events and COVID-19 in Belgium (2020–2021).

Source: Our World in Data (<https://ourworldindata.org>) and authors' own data.

Note: The shaded area represents a rolling seven-day average of the daily new confirmed cases of COVID-19. The actual violin (black line) represents a 14-day rolling average. Both sides of the zero line are mirror images of each other.



**FIGURE 22.2** Timeline of VB's position on COVID-19 (2020–2021).

Source: VB's monthly magazines and press releases: <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/vbmagazine/>; <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/category/nieuws/>.

### ***Understanding the VB's response and framing***

The VB frequently argues that the ongoing political crisis, that is, the perceived failure of Belgian government in handling COVID-19, is the direct consequence of a wider crisis of representation in the country. Crisis can be exploited by political actors since its disruption provides space for more radical, non-incremental change; this happens, in part, through a process of blaming and taking responsibility (Boin et al. 2009). Moffitt (2015, 195) further claims that the propagation of crisis is internal to populism and that “populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis.” Kriesi and Pappas (2015) similarly argue that crises can serve as catalysts for populism. The COVID-19 pandemic is unique in the sense that it is an external crisis largely beyond the control of traditional political actors. That is, it was never a crisis fully perpetuated by populists.

We find no clear evidence that the VB has *prolonged* attention to the pandemic or that it has *sensationalized* the ensuing health crisis. Rather than discussing the pandemic as a health crisis, the party frequently and fluently employs crisis language to *conflate* the COVID-19 crisis with those crises traditionally called upon by their more ideological stances. As such, the VB exploits the pandemic to emphasize its key messages. In the following sections, we show that these messages provide frames for interpreting the new challenges of COVID-19.

To a large extent, the VB's responses and framing are in line with those of populist radical right or far right parties. That is, the VB frames the pandemic and the corresponding health crisis in terms that align with its main ideological stances: opposition to immigration, (Flemish) nationalism, strong law and order, and populism (Mudde 2007). While we cannot be all-comprehensive in this chapter, we briefly illustrate in the following chapter how the party intertwines these frames into its responses to COVID-19.

### ***Opposition to immigration and (to a lesser extent) law and order framing***

The VB's 2019 electoral manifesto was infused with anti-immigration positions, often framing other positions around hardline opposition to immigration (e.g., welfare chauvinism). This is something we also see throughout the pandemic. For example, in May 2020, the VB highlighted the “double standards” of some of the government's regulations, referring to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, where “immigrant youth” rioted without consequences, whereas Flemish elders who gathered in smaller groups received fines. Van Grieken noted: “This country can apparently work efficiently, but only when it's against our people” (VB Magazine May 2020, 3). The VB argues that BLM protests and the political actors allowing them to happen betray the “hardworking people,” framing the issue in terms of the defense of the natives. The BLM protests were seen as:

a slap in the face to the thousands of people who have worked in recent months to keep our country running and to the people in care, as well as all citizens who have been complying with the strict rules for months.

*(VB press release, 7 June 2020)*

The party's promotion of law and order was less obvious, but most noticeable during the BLM protests which drew thousands of attendees to Brussels. This allowed the VB to criticize the government's supposed lack of enforcement of the COVID-19 measures. Yet, overall, law and order policies were difficult to mobilize in this environment. The principal goal of the VB remained opposing the supposedly corrupt and incompetent parties and the government's handling of the crisis. Encouraging strict enforcement of that government's rules was not strategically advantageous.

### ***Flemish nationalist framing***

The VB has its roots in the Flemish nationalist movement and the party continues to call for greater regional autonomy and a reformed state structure. The COVID-19 pandemic and the supposed government failures in handling the pandemic were seen as emblematic of a "broken" Belgian state which has been unable to deal with the (health) crisis. The disproportionate number of Intensive Care admissions and deaths in Belgium as well as regional differences served as fuel for substate nationalist demands.

Building on this fundamental demand for state reform, the VB's quest for more regional autonomy came early in the pandemic. An article in the party's members' magazine in April 2020 argued: "The federal level must act decisively now. But when the crisis is over, Flanders must finally be given powers so that the mess of the last few days cannot be repeated" (VB Magazine April 2020, 16). The VB leader in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives Barbara Pas called the distribution and fragmentation of powers "the Belgian disease" and called for Flanders to be given maximum powers in advance of claims for full self-government (VB Magazine July 2020, 17).

The VB systematically blames Belgium's disintegrated power structure for the government's impotence and indecisiveness in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis is thus entirely conflated with a wider state crisis, which forms the core of the VB's platform. As the VB's magazine proclaimed: "Flanders not only needs a well-considered exit plan from the corona crisis, Flanders also needs an exit plan for the minority government Wilmès [II], and even more: an exit plan from Belgium!" (VB Magazine June 2020, 7).

### ***Populist framing?***

While the VB criticizes various elites (e.g., virologists) and international actors (e.g., China, the World Health Organization [WHO]), its principal focus when

critiquing the “corrupt” elite is on Belgian political parties. Much like in the UK, political parties have been portrayed as corrupt and the VB has long decried Belgium’s “particracy” (see Chapter 6). As early as March 2020, the VB warned that the government would exploit the pandemic to execute a “coronacoup,” that is, an opportunistic grab for power by mainstream parties. The VB noted, “When one of the greatest crises of this century—the human, economic and social consequences of which we cannot even fully understand yet—is insufficient to place the people’s interests above party interests, it will never end” (VB Magazine April 2020, 2).

The failure of mainstream parties has been seen as one component of a wider broken state. The party noted: “Anyone who thought that the highest tax burden in the world was synonymous with a well-functioning welfare state will be disappointed” (VB Magazine June 2020, 6). Simultaneously, Belgian political elites were seen as exploiting the crisis to “open the tap even further” and to create a “new world order with more [financial] solidarity from north to south [Flanders to Wallonia]” (VB Magazine May 2020, 2).

While similar parties in other countries tend to dismiss (epidemiological) experts because they are part of a distant elite, the VB’s main target throughout the pandemic has always been and remains the Belgian government. For example, the VB has criticized prominent virologist Marc Van Ranst. However, the animosity does not explicitly target Van Ranst’s role as an expert. Rather, it stems from before the pandemic started, when Van Ranst was quoted as saying he was “simply allergic to the extreme-right” (Moens 2021; Winckelmans 2021).

The VB actively sought to unite and mobilize sections of the Flemish people, especially those from societal sectors facing economic difficulties, around this anti-elitist or anti-government frame. In that regard, VB leader Tom Van Grieken noted:

Lockdown after lockdown, Flemish people continued to work in sometimes very difficult circumstances... The list of Flemish people who made a difference in their own way last year is endless. One thing binds them all: they could not count on the government.

*(VB Magazine January 2021, 3)*

At the same time, the VB portrays itself as a “social people’s party” that recognized the importance of small businesses, including hospitality and tourism, and called for further support for these small businesses (VB Magazine July 2020, 8). Statements in support of the ordinary businessman and specific groups negatively impacted by the lockdowns have increased over time. In this sense, the VB takes part in an “invocation of the people” (Moffitt 2015). Yet, while the VB has clearly targeted the government, they have less frequently called upon general images of the “ordinary” Flemish citizen.

From the outset of the pandemic, the VB has also blamed ruling EU elites, accusing them of being unable to deal with a multifaceted health crisis. It notably

highlighted that the EU's economic, budgetary, and financial responses to the pandemic were a failure, which, in turn, was emblematic of a broader crisis within the EU and its institutions. In past crises, populist parties across Europe have made similar appeals to the (il)legitimacy of the EU and used the crisis to "lend credence to their dismissal of the EU as a malfunctioning apparatus" (Pirro and van Kessel 2018, 338).

This type of anti-elitist framing makes frequent reference to a large-scale crisis of representation and democratic functioning. The conflation of a perceived political crisis and a perceived economic crisis is common among populist actors. Kriesi and Pappas (2015, 324) found that when there is a convergence between political and economic crisis, populism unsurprisingly becomes more intense. However, this is not exactly what we observe. The VB's responses to the pandemic are embedded in a systemic anti-government rationale that is amplified by the increasing hostility and fragmentation in Belgian politics. The intensification of political rhetoric in Belgium preceded and accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic rather than being caused by it. In that sense, the VB's critiques and responses to government inertia and incompetence can—to a large extent—be interpreted as traditional opposition stances.

Drawing on the distinction made by Stavrakakis et al. (2018), we see that the VB constructs COVID-19 as a *crisis* "of" the Belgian system rather than a *crisis* "within" the system. Van Grieken wrote in the June 2020 edition of the party's magazine: "One would like to forget it, but Belgium was also a country in crisis before the corona crisis...The total mismanagement of the corona crisis has confirmed that mistrust of the people" (VB Magazine June 2020, 3). In other words, for the VB, the crisis is (yet another) vehicle to illustrate and amplify its opposition. However, as we mentioned before, the party does not *prolong* the COVID-19 crisis, as Moffitt (2015) suggests would be typical of a populist actor. Rather, the party's attention to the issue dropped off considerably after July 2020.

While the party's response is founded in its primary ideological constructs, it closely resembles traditional anti-elite or opposition politics. The question that remains is how to explain these responses.

## Explaining the VB's response

The VB opposes the Belgian government's responses to the pandemic, allowing the party to emphasize the wider crises and democratic challenges they perceive in Belgium, namely the corrupt elite/s and the Belgian state structures. This balance between conflation of crisis narratives and relatively ordinary opposition politics reflects the VB's dual purpose. The party aims to serve as the unmoderated voice of the man in the street, outbidding its main political competitor, the conservative Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), while simultaneously focusing on moderation and increasing its viability as a governmental partner (see also chapter on France).

### ***Moderation and governance: breaking through the cordon sanitaire***

Since the late 1980s, Belgian parties have refused to enter any coalition with the VB. This so-called *cordon sanitaire*, while deemed undemocratic by many (both within and beyond the party), means the VB remains in a position of permanent opposition. In some ways, the VB has grown comfortable in this role. Abts (2015) posits that the *cordon* is truly incorporated into the organizational and ideological ethos of the VB. Filip De Winter argues that:

(...) as a protest party, we have a strong discourse, that isn't always nuanced, and it can't be, because you have to create an opening for yourself. You don't do that with a lot of difficult nuanced and balanced stories. You do that by getting the ramrod out and breaking the door down, it's that simple.

The party's early and unrelenting criticisms of the government illustrates this ramming rod approach (see Figure 22.2).

At the same time, permanent opposition was a key cause of the VB's loss of support in the mid-2000s (Pauwels 2011). With that in mind, the current leadership explicitly states its goal of breaking the *cordon sanitaire*. Both Flemish nationalist parties came close to a Flemish majority following the 2019 election and their projected vote share has grown since. A national study from May 2021 indicates more than 46% of Flemish respondents intend to vote for either the N-VA or the VB, with the leaders of both parties ranking second and third most popular Flemish politicians, respectively.<sup>2</sup> To capture this electoral potential, key VB strategies heading toward the 2024 election are rhetorical moderation and party professionalization.

These two dynamics shape the party's more traditional and ordinary opposition approach to COVID-19. Ongoing research provides some insights into this perspective.<sup>3</sup> For example, a VB representative highlights the party's moderation as follows: "We are on the way, in 2024, to a sort of more right-wing N-VA. I think that old period is totally behind us under Tom van Grieken." Another representative confirms, "it doesn't always have to be about immigration and security, however important those issues are to us. We also have to put our party on the map with the 'softer' themes."

Rhetorical moderation is paired with a focus on office-seeking behavior. One party staff member explained:

If I look back five to ten years ago, there was not as much support, not as much training...but now we are busy with building up towards 2024. For that we want to ensure that all the people on that [electoral] list are people who can govern.

A party representative further highlights: “In the last few years, especially with Tom in the lead, there is a professionalization going on. One good example I think, is that there is media training given. That is happening now.”

The party’s strategic plan is typified by a new way of communicating, one that is “softer” and more professional. This softer style can be seen in the party’s early support of COVID-19 measures. Despite trends elsewhere in the world, the party did not engage in denying the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, nor does it align with the typical anti-vaxxer positions we observe at the far ends of the political spectrum. This approach, paired with the party’s consistent role in opposition, contributes to the strong anti-elite message and simultaneously more moderately populist response to COVID-19.

### ***Party competition and permanent crisis***

We identified that the VB used crisis language to conflate the pandemic with other crises, particularly those for which the VB has *clear issue ownership*. This may be part of the party’s competition with fellow Flemish nationalist party N-VA, which competes for ownership of substate nationalist, socially conservative, and anti-migration issues.

Throughout the pandemic, the VB has consistently polled as the largest party in Flanders, which suggests it may unseat the N-VA as the largest Flemish party following the 2024 election. While the VB initially lost many voters to the N-VA, contributing to its electoral low in 2014, the reverse movement is now not uncommon, with even traditional party voters considering either the N-VA or the VB as viable options for 2024. A recent study claims that nearly three out of four voters from other parties stated they would consider voting for either the N-VA or the VB.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the pandemic, VB leaders called on the N-VA to consider forming a joint government with them after the next elections as part of the party’s “Mission 2024.” Competition with and pressure on the N-VA is thus crucial to break through the *cordon*.

As noted in the previous section, the VB linked COVID-19 and the substate nationalist issue, arguing that the pandemic illustrates a clear need for greater Flemish autonomy. They thus contested the default framing of traditional parties that solidarity—within Belgium and within the EU—would help combat COVID-19. Framing contests may particularly emerge during crises because political actors may make use of “the disruption of ‘governance as usual’ that emergencies and disturbances entail” (Boin et al. 2009, 82). The pandemic, therefore, provided an opening for the VB to restart the conversation about and obtain ownership of Flemish nationalism, using this to “outflank” the N-VA (Huyseune 2017). Emphasizing the crisis “of” the Belgian state and how this has (negatively) affected the government’s handling of the pandemic is thus imperative to the VB’s party competition strategy.

## Final thoughts

The VB's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in many ways has reflected its strategic plan since its 2014 electoral defeat. This strategy is two-sided. On the one hand, the party has sought to outflank its conservative party competitors and act as the main opposition force. This led the VB to vehemently oppose the government's approach to the pandemic. It heavily relied on traditional populist radical right framing in its response to COVID-19, portraying this latest health crisis as simply a part of an ongoing institutional, democratic, and political crisis. On the other hand, the party perceived permanent opposition and the *cordon sanitaire* as key hindrances to its image as a potential governmental partner. As such, more moderate or traditional forms of anti-government positioning became more common in the party's political approach.

It is not surprising that the response to COVID-19 is part of a longer-term strategic plan—namely “Mission 2024,” devised by leader Tom Van Grieken, which will be tested in the 2024 election. It is likely that COVID-19 will play a part in this election, as the VB will highlight this as just one of many crises highlighting the lack of representation by traditional parties and the government. They will set themselves up as the only legitimate choice to contend with these *conflated* crises.

In many ways, the VB's office-seeking behavior and relatively moderate strategy places it within the center of a wider European approach to COVID-19 by populist parties. In interviews, the VB leadership named Austrian populist leader Sebastian Kurz as an inspiration and also referred to close friends Thierry Baudet, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini. The latter gave a speech to a crowd of VB members just prior to the pandemic, while Dries van Langenhove disregarded travel restrictions to protest alongside identitarian groups in Paris. Throughout these countries, as their respective chapters in this book highlight, Europe's populists have walked a careful tightrope. They have balanced an exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis and use of crisis language, emphasizing the crisis of representation that is so fundamental to their platforms, with an overarching need to perform competence, either in government or as aspiring governing parties. In this sense, the populist response of the VB—or rather the lack thereof—should not be all that surprising.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Tim Bale, Sarah de Lange, Marcel Lewandowski, and Marta Lorimer as well as the editors for their insightful comments on previous versions of this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 It is important to note that, in part, the elevated numbers can partially be explained by the nature of reporting in Belgium (Desson et al. 2020, 438).
- 2 This is based on *De Stemming 2021* (The Vote 2021) by Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) and Jonas Lefevere (VUB, Free University Brussels) commissioned by the VRT and the Standaard.

- 3 Interviews were conducted in 2020–2021 with VB representatives, staff, and activists. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/R011540/1).
- 4 This is based on “*De Stemming 2021*” (The Vote 2021) by Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) and Jonas Lefevere (VUB, Free University Brussels), commissioned by the VRT and the Standaard.

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# 23

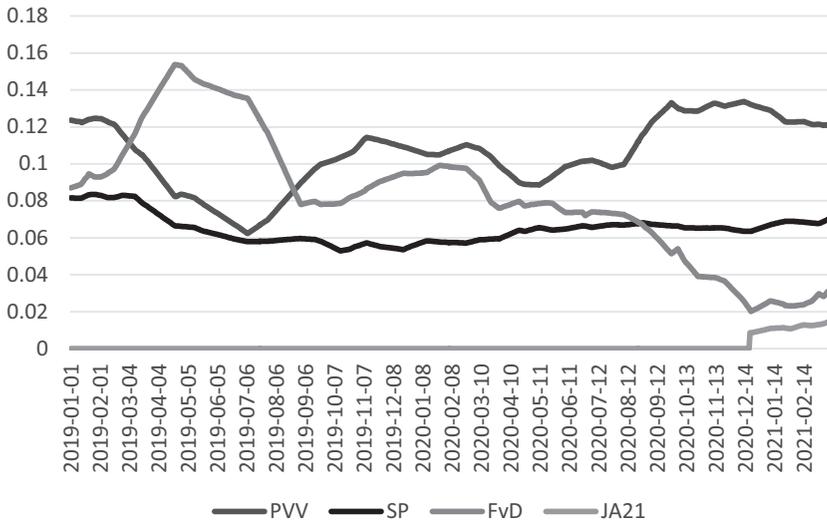
## THE NETHERLANDS

### Divergent Paths for the Populist Radical Right

*Sarah L. de Lange*

On March 17, 2021, the Netherlands was the first West European country to hold parliamentary elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the elections showed that populism has become a permanent fixture in Dutch politics. Four populist parties were elected to the Lower House: the PRR *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) with 10.8% of the vote, *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD) with 5.0% of the vote, Right Answer 2021 (JA21) with 2.4% of the vote, and the populist radical left *Socialistische Partij* (SP) with 6.0% of the vote.<sup>1</sup> Although jointly these populist parties have almost a quarter of the votes cast, their vote share was lower than that predicted in the polls published prior to the pandemic (see Figure 23.1). Moreover, the individual performance of the parties varied, with the more established PVV and SP losing support and the newer JA21 and FvD gaining voters.

The election results raise important questions about the way in which the populist parties in the Netherlands have approached the pandemic. To what extent have they used a populist discourse, for example, by accusing the elite of mishandling the outbreak of COVID-19 and by glorifying ordinary citizens efforts to control it? To what extent have they used the existence of an actual crisis, with severe health and economic consequences, to perpetuate a sense of crisis (Moffitt 2015)? And how has their approach to the pandemic affected their success at the 2021 elections? Due to the fragmented nature of the party system in the Netherlands and the existence of an array of populist parties, this chapter cannot discuss the approach of each of these parties in detail. Instead, it will focus on the two PRR parties that have been represented in parliament throughout the pandemic and whose success has been most clearly affected by its occurrence: the FvD led by Thierry Baudet and the PVV led by Geert Wilders.<sup>2</sup>



**FIGURE 23.1** Electoral support for populist parties in the Netherlands during the pandemic.

Source: The Peilingwijzer (<https://peilingwijzer.tomlouwse.nl>).<sup>3</sup>

## Overview of Dutch populist radical right response to COVID-19

After its arrival in February 2020, the COVID-19 virus spread quickly in the Netherlands, with infections peaking three times: in the spring of 2020, the fall and winter of 2020, and the spring of 2021. Over the course of the pandemic, the virus infected almost two million Dutch citizens and claimed the lives of 18,000 of them (RIVM 2021). Compared to other West European countries, the Dutch government took a reticent approach to fighting the virus. In the first months of 2020, it stressed the importance of regularly washing hands, sneezing in your elbow, not shaking hands, and social distancing by 1.5 meters. It decided against other personal protective measures, such as wearing a face mask, on the basis of advice of Dutch experts.<sup>4</sup> From mid-March 2020, the Dutch government opted for what it called an “intelligent lockdown,” prohibiting gatherings, house visits and the exercise of contact professions, closing private and public venues, encouraging citizens to work from home, and asking that they stay home if they have symptoms.<sup>5</sup> Shops, however, remained open during the intelligent lockdown and no restrictions were placed on how often citizens could leave the house. Only in December 2020, at the height of the second wave of the pandemic (September 2020–May 2021), the Dutch government enforced a hard lockdown and the mandatory use of face masks, followed by an evening curfew in January 2021.

### ***The initial response of the PRR: a non-populist opposition to the government***

During the first wave of the pandemic (March 2020–May 2020), the Dutch PRR parties were most critical about the absence of government measures of all opposition parties (Louwerse et al. 2021), arguing that the government was underestimating the seriousness of the pandemic. In January 2020, Thierry Baudet was the first parliamentarian to request an emergence debate in the Lower House on the basis of the virus outbreak in China, a request that was denied by the governing parties. In March, the FvD and PVV took issue with the intelligent lockdown proposed by the government, claiming that it was too lax, and tabled a parliamentary motion demanding a full lockdown. The motion was defeated, with 125 of the 150 parliamentarians rejecting it. In the following weeks, the two parties heavily criticized the government for not imposing stricter measures, advocating in favor of widely using face masks, and blamed the government for the lack of testing capacity, protective equipment for care workers, and intensive care unit (ICU) capacity, and for the absence of support packages for closed businesses.

Despite the PVV's and FvD's criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic during the first wave and the articulation of a few nativist stances (e.g., opposition to Eurobonds, call for closing of EU internal borders), populism was not a prominent feature of their opposition strategy. The two PRR parties did not appeal explicitly to "the people" in their contributions to debates in parliament. Instead, they focused on the groups that in their view were most affected by the pandemic, such as essential workers, elderly citizens, and business owners, and criticized the government for failing them. However, despite their vivid portrayal of its incompetence, the PVV and FvD did not agitate against the broader elite. Their criticism concentrated on the cabinet members and governing parties rather than on the so-called establishment parties in general. Moreover, in this period the parties also did not rally against scientists or journalists, often using World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations, research findings, and media coverage of COVID-19 to back up their claims that the government was mishandling the pandemic.

### ***The subsequent response of the PRR: a populist opposition to the government and divergent approaches***

However, once the idea took hold that the pandemic was coming to an end in April 2020, the PRR started to politicize the pandemic more intensely (Steenvoorden 2020). Moreover, it made a U-turn in the focus of their criticism of the government, arguing that the government was not doing too little, but too much to fight the virus. In May 2020, the PVV and FvD advocated for a loosening of the restrictions, stressing the importance of reopening society in order to save the economy and preserve freedom. They advocated in favor of face masks, testing, and ventilation, all on a voluntary basis, to enable social and

economic activities to resume. More specifically, the parties rejected the idea that the pandemic represented the “new normal of the one-and-a-half-meter society,” a notion that gained traction when Prime Minister Rutte uses this term during a press conference in April 2020 (Bloemhof 2020). Instead, they claimed that the pandemic would soon be over. Hence, contrary to what could be expected on the basis of Moffitt (2015), the parties did not seek to perpetuate the health crisis. However, the parties did stress that freedom and democracy were being hollowed out under the pretext of the pandemic, creating a discourse of democratic crisis. When the government proposed that the COVID measures, up till now arranged through emergency ordinances, should be enshrined in an emergency corona law, the parties were up in arms. They argued that emergency law would reduce the role of parliament in formulating the COVID-19 response and would therefore lead to democratic backsliding. In response to the proposal, Wilders fulminated that “What also cannot be explained, is this terrible totalitarian corona law that will restrict the rights of the Dutch people and that will enshrine into law the one-and-a-half-meter dictatorship of the prime minister” (Wilders 2020a).

In the context of this new opposition to the government measures, the nativism and populism of the PVV and to a lesser extent that of the FvD also became more pronounced in their parliamentary discourse. When the mayor of Amsterdam allowed Black Lives Matter protests to take place after the murder of George Floyd, even though permissions to protest against the COVID measures had previously been refused, Wilders was furious. He demanded that she resign, stating that “She has spat in the face of all those people who have obeyed those terrible but necessary corona rules in the time that has passed” (Wilders 2020b). His stance was supported by Theo Hiddema, an FvD Member of Parliament, who contended that “it has become painfully obvious that the emergency ordinances are being misused to completely arbitrarily discriminate against groups in society” (Hiddema 2020). In a similar fashion, when the ICUs were overflowing in October 2020, Wilders tweeted:

So the treatments and operations of Henk and Ingrid [Joe and Jane] with cancer, renal failure, or other diseases are being postponed again because the ICUs are primarily populated by Mohammed and Fatima who do not speak our language and completely ignore the rules?

*(Wilders 2020c)*

And when Minister of Justice Grapperhaus’s violated the 1.5 meter rule at his own wedding, Wilders talked about “elitist class justice,” arguing that the Minister should make sure that “all court cases against ordinary citizens, the so-called plebs [...], who haven’t respected the 1.5 meter rules, are immediately dismissed and that all fines are reimbursed” (Wilders 2020d). The incident led Baudet to file a motion of no confidence against the minister, which was supported by the PVV.

However, despite their nativism and populism resurfacing, the COVID-19 positions of the FvD and PVV increasingly diverged from the summer of 2020 onwards. While the PVV continued to take the pandemic seriously, the FvD became increasingly COVID skeptic. The PVV, on the one hand, promoted wearing face masks in certain circumstances and was in favor of the closure of certain venues when infection rates soared in the fall of 2020. Moreover, it believed that mass vaccination was the way out of the pandemic. Nevertheless, it opposed some of the more drastic measures the government took on the grounds that their effectiveness was not supported by research, such as the hard lockdown that was imposed in December 2020 and the curfew that was announced in January 2021. The party also opposed making vaccines mandatory and denying the unvaccinated access to events or facilities, arguing that COVID-19 measures should, where possible, rely on voluntary compliance. The FvD, on the other hand, claimed that COVID-19 was “just a flu,” disputing existing research on its mortality and infectiousness. Increasingly, the party also pushed COVID-19 conspiracy theories, with Baudet becoming an important proponent of the Great Reset theory in the Netherlands (O’Connor 2021) and claiming that COVID-19 vaccines will be used to implant microchips that will control citizens’ lives.<sup>6</sup> It also actively associated itself with the anti-lockdown movement *Viruswaanzin* (Virusnonsense), supporting their protests and appearing on their social media channels. And it did not respect the existing COVID-19 measures during its ground campaign for the 2021 elections, with attendees not social distancing nor wearing face masks, or on the parliamentary floor, with FvD representatives hugging on camera after debates.

The radicalization of the FvD has led to two split-offs, further fragmenting to PRR in the Netherlands. In December 2020, the majority of party representatives broke away and founded the new PRR party JA21.<sup>7</sup> The new party adopted an approach to COVID-19 that was similar to that of the PVV, taking the virus seriously but arguing the government measures were too restrictive, and gained three seats in the 2021 elections. Less than two months after the 2021 elections, three parliamentarians also left the FvD, reducing its representation in the Lower House from eight to five seats. The parliamentarians claimed to disagree with the FvD’s references to the Second World War, with the party releasing a poster for Liberation Day that compared the COVID-19 measures to the German occupation. The representatives now constitute the fourth PRR party in parliament, going by the name *Belang van Nederland* (BV NL).

## Explaining the (difference in) FvD and PVV responses

### *The dynamics between government and opposition and the impact of the “rally around the flag” effect*

The Dutch political system is known for its consociationalism and premised on the idea of cooperation between parties with ideologically divergent backgrounds.

In recent years, this trend has been reinforced due to the fragmented nature of the party system, which has led to the formation of broad coalitions consisting of three or even four parties. The increasing divergence between the composition of the Upper and Lower House has necessitated government coalition with a majority in the Lower House to make deals with the opposition parties in the Upper House. As a result of these developments, an opposition has emerged in the Dutch parliament between constructive opposition parties, on the one hand, and permanent opposition parties, on the other hand (Otjes et al. 2018). The PVV and FvD belong to the latter category, despite the PVV's role as a support party to the minority government that was in office from 2010 to 2011. The parties are not considered *Salonfähig*, and therefore follow a strategy of principled opposition. On balance, this strategy favors responsiveness over responsibility, as has often been documented for populist parties (Mair 2002). These dynamics are also reflected in the approach of the FvD and PVV to the pandemic, with the parties permanently opposing the government and criticizing it for either not taking enough or taking too much action. The principled nature of the campaign is best illustrated by the fact that the two parties filed six motions of no confidence during the pandemic, none of which received broad parliamentary support.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their permanent opposition to the government's handling of the pandemic, the PVV's and FvD's campaign initially was not particularly populist. Only when the first wave in May 2020 subsided, populist invocations of the elite and the people became part of their opposition strategy. This development should be understood in light of the feeling of existential crisis COVID-19 created during the first months of the outbreak and the "rally around the flag" effect this generated. At the start of the pandemic support for the measures taken was markedly high, and trust in the government and support for Rutte's People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) soared (Den Ridder et al. 2020). These developments were closely related, with the implementation of lockdown measures in the Netherlands positively affecting institutional trust (Oude Groeninger et al. 2021). Importantly, FvD and PVV voters were among the citizens experiencing the biggest boost in their political trust during this period (Steenvoorden 2020). As a result, the support for the PRR in the Netherlands declined by a couple of percentage points in the first months of the pandemic (see Figure 23.1). However, when the first wave of the pandemic gave way to a period of relaxation of the rules in May 2020, trust in government among PRR supporters declined again (Steenvoorden 2020), and the "rally around the flag" effect for this group of voters diminished. It appears as though the FvD and PVV were aware of these developments and concluded that a populist strategy would be ineffective in the context of increased trust and the "rally around the flag" effect. In other words, the occurrence of a real-life crisis and its attitudinal consequences made it difficult for the parties to rely on their populism and to propagate the sense of crisis, which is more perceptual than actual, which has been described by Moffit (2015). However, once the situation normalized, both in terms of the health crisis and its electoral impact, the parties returned to their populism.

Hence, the opposition strategy of the PRR during the pandemic fits with existing patterns of party competition in the Netherlands, and the “rally around the flag” effect can explain why this strategy was initially not populist. However, these factors cannot explain why the approaches adopted by the FvD and PVV diverged from the summer of 2020 onwards. To understand why the two parties opted for distinct strategies, the ideological and electoral competition between the two PRR parties needs to be examined.

### ***Ideological and electoral competition within the populist radical right***

The PVV and FvD both belong to the PRR family and, by and large, compete for the same voters (Otjes 2021). In fact, the gains of the FvD in 2019 provincial elections, by and large, came from voters that had previously cast a ballot for the PVV (Harteveld 2019). Thus, the parties are in direct competition for electoral support and have to find ways to set themselves apart from their main PRR rival. One of the ways in which they have attempted this is by taking up distinct positions on socioeconomic issues, with the PVV promoting a more centrist program than the FvD. This ideological difference is reflected in the voter profiles of the two parties in the period 2017–2019, with FvD voters on average being better educated and more right wing than PVV voters (Otjes 2021). During the pandemic, this difference in socioeconomic orientation came to the fore, most notably through the selection of societal groups that the parties defended. The PVV campaigned for care sector workers, whereas the FvD fought for the interests of independents and entrepreneurs.

However, once the “rally around the flag” effect subsided in the summer of 2020, the PVV and FvD were confronted with more fundamental questions about the way in which they would approach COVID-19 (e.g., how central it would be to their political agenda and what kind of substantive positions they would take on the outbreak of the virus), taking into account their electoral rivalry. The PVV opted to integrate the issue where possible in its existing political strategy, which consists of focus on immigration, more specifically Islam (Vossen 2016), since that has led to sustained success for the party. It stressed, for example, the low vaccination rate among immigrants and the high share of Muslim immigrants being hospitalized. Moreover, the PVV has a strong profile on health care issues, continuously campaigning in favor of more investments in this policy area over the past years. Since it is also particularly popular among older and lower educated voters, who were generally in favor of stricter COVID measures (I&O Research 2020), taking COVID-19 seriously was a self-evident choice.

For the FvD, the strategy to follow was less clear-cut, with the party being relatively new and lacking ownership of specific political issues. In previous elections, it had campaigned on a wide range of issues, such as climate skepticism and a Brexit. Moreover, since the 2019 elections, the party had been undergoing a radicalization process, flirting often with white nationalism, racism, and

anti-Semitism. It had increasingly espoused a Trumpian style of politics (Schoor 2019), rallying against the “mainstream media” which it accused of disseminating “fake news” and alleging the existence of electoral fraud. It was in this context of ideological differentiation that the FvD opted for a COVID-skeptic strategy, a strategy that became more and more radical throughout the second half of 2020.<sup>9</sup> This strategy closely followed Trump’s take on COVID-19, with the FvD, for example, promoting hydrochloroquine as a treatment for its symptoms.

The two approaches to COVID-19 were not equally successful. From the summer of 2020 onwards, support for the PVV grew, while that for the FvD shrank (see Figure 23.1). By the time of the 2021 parliamentary elections, the difference in support for the two parties was considerable, with the PVV obtaining 17 seats and the FvD 8 seats. In addition to a shift in support toward the PVV, the 2021 elections also demonstrated that the pandemic resorted PRR voters over the two rivaling parties. Significant groups of voters switched from FvD to PVV, and perhaps more surprisingly given its poor performance, from the PVV to the FvD vice versa (Harteveld and Van Heck 2021). One of the defining characteristics of these switchers was their levels of political trust, with PRR voters with higher levels of trust opting for the PVV and PRR voters with lower levels of trust supporting the FvD (Kaal 2021). Moreover, dissatisfaction with the government’s measures turned out to be a “precondition” to vote for the FvD in the 2021 parliamentary elections. At the time of these elections, 92% of FvD voters were opposed to these measures compared to 57% of PVV voters (Sipma 2021), and FvD voters were also much more inclined to believe COVID-19 conspiracy theories.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the pandemic constituted a “critical disruption” of voter-party links that redistributed voters over PRR parties on the basis of their COVID stances.

## Looking ahead

Although the FvD and the PVV have always been competitors rather than PRR allies, the relationship between the two parties has become increasingly acrimonious as a result of their views on COVID-19. On August 14, 2021, party leaders Baudet and Wilders even had a public spat on Twitter about vaccinations. After Baudet scolded Wilders for having been vaccinated, arguing that he has legitimized the lockdowns and other measures by getting inoculated, Wilders responded by declaring Baudet “absolutely bonkers” (De Telegraaf 2021). Hence, the pandemic has in many ways transformed the PRR in the Netherlands. It has led to the emergence of two new movements (JA21 and BV NL) with parliamentary representation, to a reversal of the electoral dynamics of FvD and PVV, with the latter now being more successful than the former, to a resorting of voters on the PRR on the basis of their COVID-19 attitudes, and to the acceleration of the FvD’s radicalization, with the party now being closer to the extreme than the radical right. It remains to be seen whether these developments will reduce the impact of the PRR on politics in the Netherlands. Since 2002, the PRR

has had a tremendous influence on Dutch mainstream parties' positions as well as on party competition in the Netherlands (Pellikaan et al. 2019). Given the continuing dominance of the PVV, which remains significantly larger than its competitors on the PRR, this influence is likely to persist.

## Notes

- 1 Identification of populist parties in the Netherlands is based on Rooduijn et al. (2019).
- 2 The other populist party that was also represented in parliament throughout the pandemic, the populist radical left SP, will not be discussed in this chapter, because its support remained stable throughout 2020 and 2021. However, its approach by and large resembles that of the PVV, with the party criticizing the government for its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak throughout the pandemic, but only resorting to an explicitly populist strategy after the first wave of the pandemic had passed.
- 3 The Peilingwijzer combines the polls of I&O Research, Ipsos/EenVandaag and Kantar into one estimation of the projected vote shares of parties in the Dutch Lower House.
- 4 Throughout the pandemic, the Dutch government relied heavily on the advice of two scientific councils: the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and the Outbreak Management Team (OMT).
- 5 The venues included amusement parks and museums, bars, clubs, and restaurants, sport facilities, and schools and universities.
- 6 As a result, a number of the FvDs YouTube videos as well as tweets by Baudet were removed from social media for breaking COVID-19 disinformation guidelines.
- 7 In addition to the COVID-19 stance of the FvD, a scandal about racist and anti-Semitic communications in the party's youth wing also contributed to the party split.
- 8 The FvD two motions of no confidence and the PVV four motions of no confidence. Moreover, the two parties also jointly tabled a motion of no confidence after the elections of 2021 to remove Rutte's caretaker cabinet from office.
- 9 Another cause for the radicalization of the position of the FvD with respect to COVID-19 that has been cited in the Dutch media is Baudet's personal problems with the restrictions, which have prevented him from being celebrated by his followers.
- 10 FvD voters were also less worried about the virus than PVV supporters (15% of FvD voters concerned about family members or themselves catching the virus compared to 37% of PVV voters), were more reluctant to get vaccinated (26% of FvD voters saying they will refuse it compared to 19% of PVV voters), were more likely to believe that the coronavirus was produced in a laboratory (51% of FvD voters versus 28% of PVV voters), and that the coronavirus was developed to globally suppress citizens (50% of FvD voters versus 27% of PVV voters) (IPSOS-Nieuwsuur 2020; IPSOS-NOS 2021; Sipma 2021).

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# 24

## CONCLUSION

*Nils Ringe, Lucio Rennó and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser*

Much coverage of the populist response to the COVID-19 pandemic—generalizing from a few prominent cases like Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil—suggests that populist leaders and parties deviate from mainstream public health recommendation, reject expert advice on the protocols and measures to attenuate the impact of pandemic, and deny the severity of the public health crisis. They also downplay the disease, advocate questionable alternative treatments, invoke God and religious practices as a cure, blame China, stoke political conflict, and claim that lockdowns are more deadly than COVID-19. The chapters in this volume have shown that this is true for some populists, but that their reactions to the pandemic have in fact varied widely, including what would generally be considered a “responsible” pandemic response.

This concluding chapter provides a summary of the findings from this book along with comparative analyses that rely on two sources of data: the case study chapters themselves and an expert survey completed by the contributors to this volume. We begin by summarizing key findings from the survey, which captures populists’ positions toward public policies aimed at mitigating the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and the extent to which they are “denialist” in their rhetoric and practices. Next, we classify the cases according to populists’ response patterns, which reveal important similarities among populists in opposition in democratic countries, among populists in government in democratic countries, and among populists in government in nondemocratic countries (i.e., those countries with a Perceptions of Electoral Integrity value of below 60 according to the 2019 Electoral Integrity Project). The analysis also allows us to evaluate whether populists “performed” the COVID-19 crisis in quintessentially populist terms, in that they invoked “the people” while seeking to perpetuate crisis (Moffit 2015). What we learn from the case studies in this regard is that all

populists invoked “the people” in their response to the pandemic, but only those in opposition actively sought to perpetuate the COVID-19 crisis, which they did by conflating it with general political and representational crises that they frame in reference to issues over which they have ownership. The only two populists in government who adopted a similar approach are Bolsonaro and Trump; otherwise, populists in government (in both democratic and nondemocratic regimes) have sought to avoid perpetuating the monumental health, social, economic, and political crises they were charged with managing. In that sense, the response of populists in opposition has been distinctly “populist” as conceptualized by Moffit (2015), in that they both invoked “the people” and sought to perpetuate crisis, while that of populists in government only involved the former.

The classification of cases according to regime type and government status reveals important similarities but also notable variation, which we explore by systematically considering how political, institutional, and social/economic contexts shape populist responses to COVID-19. We proceed inductively by establishing which factors help account for the variation we observe, first by zooming in on the “COVID-radicals” who were consistently denialist and opposed to public health measures. This reveals that there are more COVID-radicals in presidential systems, in comparatively poorer countries, when state capacity is low, and when politics is more personalistic. The same factors (presidentialism or parliamentarism, personalistic or collective leadership, varying levels of economic development and state capacity) also shed light on continuity and change over time in the responses of populists to the pandemic, along with government or opposition status. We conclude the chapter and the book by considering the implications of these findings for our understanding of the relationship between populism and crisis, the trajectory of populism, and its potential consequences for democracy.

## The contributor survey

To effectively and systematically summarize, compare, and analyze our cases, we relied on a brief expert survey completed by the contributors to this volume. The data from this survey reflect the populist leaders and/or parties discussed in the case study chapters and thus comprise 29 populist parties and leaders in 22 countries from five continents. Of the 29 cases, 25 are coded as populist by the 2019 Global Party Survey (GPS, Norris 2020). Only the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, the *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) in Italy as well as the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the African National Congress’s (ANC) “radical economic transformation” (RET) faction in South Africa are not unequivocally populist, although the country chapters illustrate that all have distinctly populist tendencies. While not a complete or representative sample of populists around the world, ours is the most encompassing data on populist responses to the pandemic to date, which adds to the in-depth and rich analyses offered in the individual country chapters.

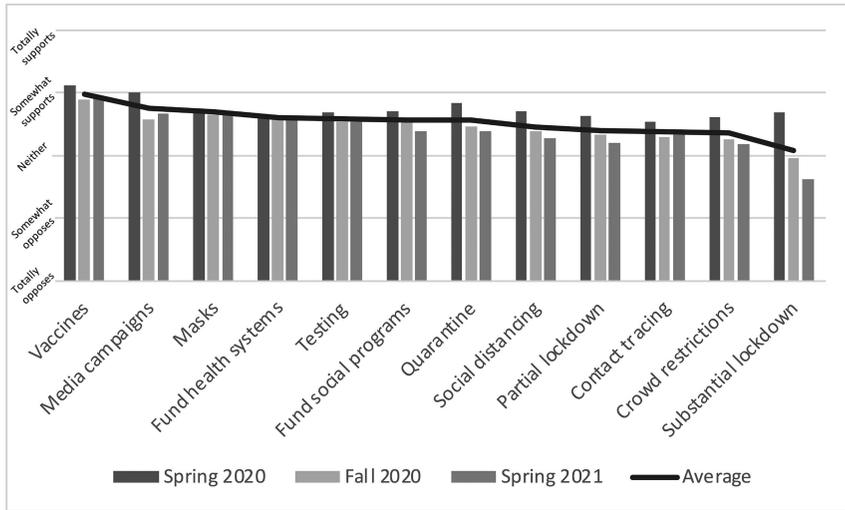
The contributor survey focused on measuring populist parties' and/or leaders' responses to the pandemic along two dimensions: first, attitudes toward benchmark public health policies aimed at mitigating COVID-19 (which largely reflect World Health Organization [WHO] recommendations and have been widely accepted as standard responses to the pandemic) and, second, rhetoric and practices that downplay or deny the seriousness of the disease. To account for variation over time in populists' attitudes, rhetoric, and practices, contributors responded to batteries of questions relating to each dimension in reference to three moments in time: January to June 2020, July to December 2020, and January to June 2021. While these time periods do not align perfectly with the different "waves" of the pandemic, they provide a standardized approach to capturing the dynamism in responses over time. Indeed, using the virological progression of the pandemic might make sense when examining a single case; it would complicate efforts at comparison, however, because the pandemic did not evolve consistently across our sample of cases. Broad, general time frames thus ensure comparability when investigating how populist responses varied across time and space.

Questions relating to the first dimension focused on populists' attitudes toward the following public policies aimed at mitigating the pandemic and its consequences, with responses coded on a five-point scale ranging from "totally opposes" to "totally supports":

- 1 Use of masks in public
- 2 Substantial lockdown measures (including commerce, educational institutions, and public services)
- 3 Partial lockdown measures
- 4 Media campaigns promoting sanitary measures
- 5 Extensive testing
- 6 Contact tracing
- 7 Social distancing
- 8 Restrictions of crowd sizes
- 9 Mandatory isolation/quarantine after exposure
- 10 Vaccines and vaccinations
- 11 Increased funding for social assistance programs
- 12 Increased funding for public health systems

Figure 24.1 shows the mean responses.<sup>1</sup> To capture changes in populists' positions, alternatives are ranked by their average at all three moments in time (spring 2020, fall 2020, spring 2021).

First to note is that, on average, populists supported most of these policy measures. They were most supportive of vaccines and vaccination, media campaigns promoting sanitary measures, and the use of masks in public, and least in favor of contact tracing, restrictions of crowd sizes, and substantial lockdown measures. Notably, however, populists' support of these public policies aimed at mitigating the pandemic and its consequences has decreased over the course of



**FIGURE 24.1** Populists' support for public policies.

Source: Expert survey of the contributors.

the pandemic. They have grown steadily opposed to measures that constrain the movement of people, as support for substantial lockdown measures declined the most (by  $-21.4$  points), followed by support for quarantine after exposure ( $-9.1$ ), partial lockdowns ( $-8.8$ ), social distancing ( $-8.6$ ), and crowd restrictions ( $-8.5$ ). In contrast, their support has declined the least for increased funding for public health systems ( $-0.4$ ), masks in public ( $-1.2$ ), testing ( $-3.1$ ), and vaccines ( $-4$ ).

While average levels of populists' support for public policies aimed at curbing COVID-19 have dropped, variation therein has increased. When we examine the coefficient of variation in attitudes toward different policy measures, we find that they vary between 30.37 (support for vaccines) and 45.3 (substantial lockdown) in the spring of 2020, with an average of 37.43. In the spring of 2021, coefficients of variation range from 33.89 (vaccines) to 63.20 (substantial lockdowns), with an average of 43.89. In other words, populist positions regarding public policies were more similar early in the pandemic and diverged over time, as the pandemic ebbed and flowed, as lockdown fatigue set in, and as the salience of economic concerns began to rival that of public health considerations. Our analyses below shed light on some of the drivers of this divergence.

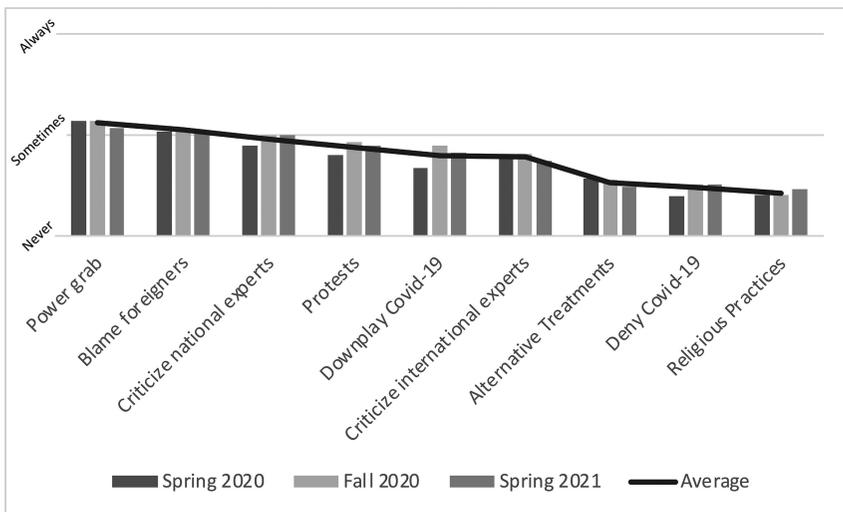
A second battery of questions in the contributor survey focused on rhetoric and practices that downplay or deny the seriousness of the disease. This dimension is captured by responses on a three-point scale ("always," "sometimes," "never") for the following items:

- 1 Downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic
- 2 Denying that COVID-19 and/or the public health crisis are real

- 3 Participation in protests, rallies, and so on in disregard of social distancing measures
- 4 Promoting alternative treatments (chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, ozone, bleach...)
- 5 Blaming COVID-19 and its consequences on outside/foreign actors
- 6 Criticizing national experts
- 7 Criticizing international (e.g., WHO) experts
- 8 Promoting religious practices as protection from the pandemic
- 9 Pursuit of measures that increase power centralization

Figure 24.2 presents the mean responses.<sup>2</sup> It shows that the most frequently employed tactics are measures that increase power centralization (consistently across all three time periods), blaming COVID-19 and its consequences on outside/foreign actors, and criticizing national experts. Least frequent were promoting alternative treatments, denying that COVID-19 and/or the public health crisis are real, and the promotion of religious practices as protection from the pandemic. There is not much variation in these tactics over time, but it is notable that criticizing national experts, participating in protests in disregard of social distancing measures, as well as downplaying or denying COVID-19, became somewhat less common over time. It is important to notice however that most populists were not strongly denialist.

The extent of variability, as captured by the coefficient of variation in this set of variables, is much greater given their narrower range, meaning that rhetoric and practices varied more widely among populists than did their attitudes toward



**FIGURE 24.2** Populists’ rhetoric and practices.

Source: Expert survey of the contributors.

public policies aimed at mitigating the pandemic. They range from 26.28 to 45.67, with an average of 35.33, in spring 2020 and from 27.32 to 44.47, with an average of 34.96, in spring 2021.

## General populist response patterns

One major takeaway from the chapters in this volume is that there is not one populist response to the COVID-19 crisis and that the sensationalist cases that have received the most widespread attention are not in fact typical. The significant variation we observe in populist responses masks some important general patterns, however. Indeed, the broad categorization of cases outlined in the introductory chapter—populists in opposition in democracies, populists in government in democracies, and populists in government in nondemocracies—allows us to capture several important patterns across cases.

To start, populists in the opposition in democratic countries adopted a similar playbook: they politicized the pandemic by linking the COVID-19 crisis to their established narratives of grievances, by attempting to connect it to issues over which they have ownership (such as immigration or anti-globalism), and by designating politically convenient targets against which to mobilize (which was facilitated by the pandemic being an exogenously triggered public health crisis without an obvious *a priori* “political enemy”). They also invoked the social and economic plight of “the people” caused by overly stringent lockdown and public health measures and conflated their government’s pandemic responses with broader crises of representation and democracy they alone are willing and able to expose and address. In this way, they invoked “the people” and criticized “the corrupt elites.” Notably, however, they did not perpetuate the public health crisis as such; rather, they framed the social, economic, and political consequences of the pandemic as indicative of the more general systemic failures they have been identifying and decrying all along. Opposition populists across our cases followed some variation of this script in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, and the UK (see also Bobba and Hubé 2021). There are some exceptions (such as Germany’s Left Party, which did not conflate the COVID-19 crisis with a broader crisis of representation or tied it forcefully to its traditional catalog of grievances) and varying levels of success (the messaging of ReformUK, for example, has not gotten much traction), but the general strategies of populists in opposition have been remarkably similar overall, and they match Moffit’s conceptualization of a typical populist crisis performance (Moffit 2015).

Many opposition populists pursued this approach after initially supporting government-imposed public health measures at the outset of the pandemic. Ten of the 13 populists in opposition became less supportive of public health measures between spring 2020 and spring 2021, however, while two did not change their positions and only one, the League in Italy, became more supportive—but only after giving up its opposition status to join Mario Draghi’s government coalition

in January 2021. We also observe a greater degree of denialism over time, for example, increasingly downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic, denying that COVID-19 and/or the public health crisis are real, participating in protests in disregard of social distancing measures, promoting alternative treatments, or criticizing experts. Seven of the opposition populists increasingly engaged in such behaviors, while five stayed the same.<sup>3</sup> With two exceptions—the Italian FdI and the Dutch *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD)—opposition populists did not, however, make radical turns away from supporting public health measures. Instead, several took the position that they ought to be voluntary rather than mandatory, allowing them to differentiate themselves from other parties while maintaining the support of their core supporters, but without appearing so irresponsible that more moderate voters would necessarily be turned off (see also Bobba and Hubé 2021).

Notably, the two parties that became less moderate over time seem to have done so at least in part to distinguish themselves from another populist far right competitor that remained overall more moderate, respectively the League in Italy and the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) in the Netherlands. In this regard, Peter Mair's distinction (2002) between responsible parties (willing to engage in policy-making through compromise) and responsive parties (primarily concerned with constituency representation) is usefully referenced in both the Italy and the Netherlands chapters to shed light on different responses by opposition populists in the same country.

Unlike their opposition counterparts, most populists in government in democracies have not sought to perpetuate the COVID-19 crisis as either a health or political crisis. In that sense, their crisis performance is not distinctly populist in Moffit's terms, even though they generally invoked "the people" and highlighted or politicized the economic fallout from the pandemic to justify their policy choices. This has been the case in Argentina, Poland, Spain, the UK and, perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, in Mexico. Notable exceptions are Brazil and the US, where populist presidents adopted a similar script as opposition populists in that they linked the COVID-19 crisis to their existing narratives of grievances and to a more general crisis of representation and democracy. But they went even further by sensationalizing the crisis, peddling conspiracies and quack treatments, and by engaging in the brand of denialism that has received much attention across the world. Indeed, the Brazilian and American populists in government have been the most denialist and opposed to public health measures in this group, and they have moderated their positions only slightly when other populists in government in democracies became overall more "responsible" over time (i.e., less denialist and more supportive of public health measures).

Finally, populists in power in countries with a Perceptions of Electoral Integrity value below 60 have used the COVID-19 crisis to consolidate power (an effort that was also evident in Poland, a country that has been undergoing democratic backsliding; see also Kavakli 2020). This was generally successful, in that institutional checks and balances, especially constraints on the executive, have

become weaker in Hungary, India, Indonesia, Russia, Philippines, and Venezuela, while they remained at already very weak levels in Nicaragua, Tanzania, and Turkey. Populist leaders in two of the most autocratic countries (Nicaragua and Venezuela) have sought to bolster their power by actively perpetuating the crisis through linkage to their traditional grievance narratives, while Tanzania under Magufuli took the unusual path of trying to consolidate power by denying the very existence of the virus in the country. This was not the case in the other countries in this group, however; hence, while all populists in power in nondemocratic regimes have invoked “the people” as part of their crisis performance and to justify their decisions to pursue or not to pursue policy options, only some have sought to perpetuate the crisis.

It is important to emphasize, however, that while populists in power in non-democratic regimes have all engaged in fudging or manipulating COVID-19 data, there is variation within this group when it comes to their commitment to public health measures and in their levels of denialism. While some have been committed to public health measures throughout the pandemic (Venezuela, Turkey, Russia, Philippines), others initially were (Indonesia), became (Hungary, India, Tanzania), or remained (Nicaragua) less so. Similarly, some populists in power did not, or tended not to, engage in significant denialism (Hungary, Philippines, Russia, Turkey, to a lesser extent Venezuela), while others were denialist throughout (Tanzania) or became less (Indonesia, to a lesser extent Nicaragua) or more so (India) over time.

In sum, consideration of regime type and government status offers significant analytical leverage in explaining similarities (within types) and differences (across types) of populists. It also helps shed light on the extent to which populists have “performed” the COVID-19 crisis in a distinctly populist fashion. They all did in that they invoked “the people” either to justify their policy choices (populists in government) or to criticize the government’s pandemic response (populists in opposition). But while virtually all populists in opposition sought to perpetuate the moment of crisis by framing the dynamics and consequences of the public health crisis as indicative of a more general *political* crisis, most (but not all) populists in government in both democratic and nondemocratic countries were eager to avoid such perpetuation of crisis. Overall, populists across the board invoked the people in their crisis performance, but not all relied on messaging that was unambiguously populist in response to COVID-19 and just over half engaged in attempts at crisis perpetuation.

## Explaining variation in populist responses

### *The COVID-radicals*

We begin a more thorough investigation of variation in populist responses by considering which populists were most extreme and most consistent in their opposition to public health measures and in their denialism of the pandemic. To

identify them, we considered which populists were more than average opposed to public health measures and more than average in their denialism at all three periods in time under consideration (spring 2020, fall 2020, spring 2021).<sup>4</sup> This produced six data points (two indicators at three points in time). The cases with at least five above-average values are the “COVID-radicals”<sup>5</sup>:

- Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil
- John Magufuli in Tanzania
- Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua
- Donald Trump in the US
- Vox in Spain
- Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) in Indonesia
- Andrés Manuel López Obrador (“AMLO”) in Mexico
- FdI in Italy
- The League in Italy

Our number of observations is too small to allow for meaningful statistical analyses, but it is instructive to look at the proportion of radicals across a range of variables. There is, for example, a pronounced difference in the proportion of COVID-radicals in presidential (50%) and parliamentary regimes (17.7%; see also Greer et al. 2021). This likely relates to two factors. First, politics under presidentialism is more personalized and greater power is vested in the executive. Hence, the buck stops with the president, who may therefore be inclined to downplay the pandemic and eschew potentially unpopular policy measures. Indeed, the idea that more personalized politics contributes to greater COVID-radicalism is also supported by another finding: there are no radicals among populists that were coded by the respondents to our contributor survey as being a “populist party.” In contrast, the percentage is 45.5% among cases coded as “populist leaders” and 40% for observations that were coded as “both.” Personalistic politics and leadership—as opposed to institution-based politics (Weyland 2021)—are thus associated with greater COVID-radicalism. This stands in contrast to parliamentary systems, which tend to feature stronger parties and less personalized leadership and to encourage moderation over polarization.

The second feature of presidentialism that may explain a greater proportion of COVID-radicals is that, unlike in parliamentary systems, executive-legislative relations are not designed to be cooperative. Indeed, the separation of power between executive and legislature produces rival centers of authority and decision-making and reduces incentives for compromise (Linz 1990). Politics tends to be more antagonistic, especially when polarization is high. In this context, presidents might pursue a policy of blame avoidance by downplaying the severity of the pandemic and blaming the legislature for unpopular mitigation policies. Indeed, it is notable that the two cases in our sample of populists in government in presidential systems with divided government (i.e., the president’s party

does not hold a majority of seats in the legislature) are the two most (in)famous COVID-deniers: Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the US.

The case study chapters and several indicators in our quantitative data suggest, moreover, that state capacity and economic development factor into the equation. We first consider three proxies for state capacity and find a greater proportion of radicals in countries with higher-than-average corruption (41.2% compared to 16.7% in those with lower-than-average corruption),<sup>6</sup> with a lower-than-average level of public service provision (41.7% compared to 23.5%),<sup>7</sup> and with lower-than-average government effectiveness (41.2% compared to 16.7%).<sup>8</sup> There is also a greater proportion of COVID-radicals in countries with low gross domestic products (GDPs; 41.7%) than in countries with high GDPs (23.5%),<sup>9</sup> and in those with above-average inequality (45.5%) than in those with lower inequality (23.3%).<sup>10</sup> These variables are highly correlated, however, such that all capture the same group of eight countries (Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania) plus a smaller number of others depending on each specific measure. Of the eight, five feature COVID-radicals (Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Tanzania) and three do not. It is again noteworthy that two of the three that do not are parliamentary regimes (India, South Africa).

Our case studies also reveal the importance of these factors. Lower levels of development, macroeconomic constraints, limited fiscal capacity, and high levels of poverty and inequality mean that countries are less able to cushion the economic shock of the pandemic through either established social safety nets or temporary relief measures. This is a problem when poverty and high levels of job market informality prevent large numbers of citizens from taking part in lockdowns or social distancing as they threaten their very livelihood. Furthermore, implementing successful mitigation policies requires levels of state capacity that many countries lack, especially when the central government faces significant subnational variation both in the levels of development and in its political reach. In the face of these challenges, the ability of leaders to pursue what is generally considered a “responsible” pandemic response is severely constrained, although examples like Argentina or the Philippines suggest that high levels of wealth are not a prerequisite.

In sum, five of the nine COVID-radicals combine all elements the above analysis associates with radicalism: Bolsonaro (Brazil), Magufuli (Tanzania), Ortega (Nicaragua), Jokowi (Indonesia), and AMLO (Mexico) are populist leaders in countries with presidential systems and below average economic development and state capacity. This combination is not a sufficient condition for COVID-radicalism, however, as the cases of Argentina and the Philippines show. The other COVID-radicals feature certain particularities that pushed them toward the extremes: the US under Donald Trump (a populist leader in a presidential system) did not lack the necessary wealth or state capacity to confront COVID-19, but had a political leadership unwilling or incapable of harnessing the necessary state power to manage the pandemic. Moreover, the already highly polarized

country found itself in the midst of a bitter presidential election campaign, which contributed to the politicization of COVID-19 and the measures intended to curb the pandemic. Meanwhile, the few COVID-radicals in parliamentary regimes (Italy and Spain) stand out in that they were competing with other domestic populists in the opposition, which apparently pushed them toward positions outside the mainstream.<sup>11</sup>

### *Change over time*

Political institutions and varying levels of economic development and state capacity are also the key factors that explain continuity or change over time in the responses of populists to the pandemic. To start, in the spring of 2020, we observe notable deviations from a consensus in support of public health measures in only a handful of countries, including Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the US. Those same cases, along with Tanzania, are also among the most denialist in our sample. What they have in common is again that all have presidential systems as well as comparatively low levels of economic development and/or state capacity (or a leadership that failed to harness state power, as in the case of the US). The only deviations from this pattern were Vox in Spain, which was comparably opposed to public health measures as well as denialist in the spring of 2020, and the League in Italy (when it was not yet part of Italy's governing coalition), which generally did not oppose public health measures but had some denialist tendencies. The Dutch FvD is the only case that became substantially more denialist, however, and it also grew notably more opposed to public health measures, a trajectory it shares with the Italian FdI. For each of these parties, it is once again notable that they faced domestic populist competition from which they needed to distinguish themselves (in the Netherlands PVV and FvD, in Italy the League and FdI, and in Spain Vox and Podemos). Otherwise, only Modi in India and Magufuli in Tanzania became increasingly opposed to public health measures, in Modi's case as part of an attempt to tout the success of his strong leadership in mitigating the health crisis during the first wave of the pandemic and in response to his declining popularity, and in Magufuli's as part of his fiction that Tanzania had eradicated COVID-19 by the summer of 2020. However, low economic development and state capacity again factor into the explanation.

It is, finally, instructive when examining change over time to come back to the distinction between populists in government and opposition, because all populists who became more supportive of public health measures (if only marginally so in some cases) have in common that they were in government: Bolsonaro in Brazil, Johnson in the UK, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) in Poland, the League in Italy (after having joined the government in the spring of 2021), Ortega in Nicaragua, AMLO in Mexico, and Jokowi in Indonesia. With the exception of Vlaams Belang (which is in the opposition in Belgium), the same is true for all those that became less denialist over time. Some, however, became only moderately less denialist (Magufuli in Tanzania, Trump in the US, Duterte

in the Philippines, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Johnson in the UK, Orban/Fidesz in Hungary, the PiS in Poland), while for others the change was more pronounced (AMLO in Mexico, Ortega in Nicaragua, and Jokowi in Indonesia). In several cases, the shift toward more moderation seems to be driven by increasing support for vaccines and vaccinations to leave the pandemic behind, namely in Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and to a lesser extent in Brazil, where Jair Bolsonaro has softened his opposition to vaccines but remains a skeptic. Russia, meanwhile, took the extraordinary step of developing its own vaccine, although domestic distribution has been lagging.

### ***Other institutional factors***

The primary explanatory factors revealed in our comparative analysis as driving differences in populists' responses to the pandemic are parliamentarism or presidentialism, personalistic or collective leadership, and different levels of economic development and state capacity. Moreover, while regime type as such does not explain variation in the level of denialism or commitment to public health measures, we find that the pandemic responses of actual or aspiring autocrats have in common are that they all engaged in data manipulation and used the COVID-19 crisis to consolidate their power. Finally, government or opposition status helps explain how populists "performed" the crisis.

Some noteworthy factors do not have a discernable systematic relationship with populist responses to the pandemic, however, such as the electoral system, the effective number of parties, or general levels of political support for populist parties or leaders. Others do matter, but we are either less confident in their effect than for the primary explanatory factors above or they help explain dynamics in some of the country cases but have less of a general effect. Ideology falls into the first category, in that the comparatively small number of left-wing populists in our sample or of those that can be classified as "inclusionary" means that we must be more cautious in the interpretation of our findings. It is notable, however, that while 33.3% of right-wing populists are COVID-radicals, Mexico's AMLO is the only one among the six left-wing populists among our cases (16.7%). The other five were generally or totally in favor of public health measures and for the most part eschewed denying the severity of the pandemic (Maduro in Venezuela, Podemos in Spain, Germany's Left Party, the Peronist government of Alberto Fernández in Argentina, and the Economic Freedom Fighters [EFF] in South Africa). The picture is more varied when we consider the cases categorized by the contributors to this volume as "inclusionary populists," which entails that the EFF is dropped from the list of left-wing populists above and Indonesia, Russia, and Tanzania are added. Categorized this way, 37.5% of inclusionary populists and 35.7% of exclusionary populists are among the radicals. When we only consider inclusionary and exclusionary populists in democracies, however, 25% of inclusionary populists and 45.5% of exclusionary populists are COVID-radicals. It is these nuances that lead us to avoid sweeping claims about the role

of ideology in explaining populists' pandemic responses and to suggest, instead, careful consideration of lessons to be learned from particular case studies, such as the insightful analysis of Argentina's Peronist government.

Argentina is also notable when it comes to the impact of political polarization on the country's pandemic response. Political polarization, the Argentina chapter explains, did not give rise to extremist or anti-establishment forces, but to the creation of a pragmatic, moderate government that was able to unite different political factions into a ruling coalition. The government's moderation is, in turn, evident in how it reacted to the COVID-19 crisis. This stands in stark contrast to other countries identified in the case study chapters as highly polarized: Brazil, Italy, Mexico, Spain, and the US. In all five did populists take COVID-radical position, which suggests that the populist pandemic response was at least in part driven by polarization or by the desire to polarize society further.<sup>12</sup>

Elections and electoral considerations also play a role in explaining populist pandemic responses in some countries; populist crisis performance was, for example, aimed at rallying core constituencies (e.g., Brasil, Mexico, US) or it allowed populist parties to differentiate themselves from mainstream competitors (e.g., Germany) or other populists (e.g., Netherlands, Italy). In others, the pandemic response aimed at both rallying core voters *and* signaling moderation (e.g., Belgium, France). In those countries where elections actually took place during the pandemic, they crucially shaped the measures populists in government put into place (or not), such as in Poland, where the PiS prioritized winning the election over public health considerations, or in India, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) held large electoral rallies in an effort to win elections at the state level. In Tanzania, Magufuli's intention to win a landslide in 2020 cemented the (fabricated) narrative that COVID-19 had already been defeated and mitigating measures therefore unnecessary.

Also interesting is the impact of federalism on the pandemic responses considered in the case studies. In federal countries with populists in power, their pandemic response was at the least complicated by the interplay between federal and regional responses when the partisan makeup for federal and state governments differed (see, for example, the Mexico and India chapters). In some cases, this allowed populists in power to deflect blame for inadequate COVID-responses, as in the US, Brazil, and Russia. Such conflict was not inevitable, however, as the Argentina chapter again demonstrates. For populists in opposition, a federal framework provided opportunities to tie their traditional grievances to the government's COVID response, such as in Belgium (where the Vlaams Belang sought to connect its call for regional autonomy with the policy failures of the federal government) or in Germany (where the AfD pointed to the federal government's response as indicative of general executive overreach).

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global tragedy. At the time of writing, 225,680,357 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide had been reported to the WHO and,

unfortunately, 4,644,740 deaths (WHO 2021). When we look at the top 20 countries with the highest number of deaths by COVID-19, 15 have a strong populist presence and are among those studied in this book. Twelve have (or had) populists in power. The most prominent cases, the US and Brazil, lead worldwide in the cumulative death count. These countries failed terribly at containing the spread of the disease and its most dramatic consequence—loss of human life. We do not intend to make causal claims about populism and pandemic death toll—although other studies identify a link (Bayerlein et al. 2021)—but there is a clear overlap between countries governed by populists and COVID-19 death rates, which underscores the importance of understanding how populists have reacted to the pandemic and which institutional, political, and structural factors have mediated their response.

The 22 countries analyzed in this volume provide new data and information on how populists—across the world, in democracies and autocracies, in government and opposition—have responded to the exogenous shock of COVID-19 and its repercussions and how different institutional, social, and economic contexts have shaped their responses. The chapters reveal significant variation among populists, and that the denialism associated with populist reactions to the pandemic is limited to a minority of cases, with Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil as most prominent examples. Most populists, however, were more moderate in their attitudes and rhetoric toward the pandemic and favored or implemented policies guided by mainstream WHO recommendations. Indeed, their rhetoric and behaviors varied more widely than did their attitudes toward public health policies aimed at mitigating the pandemic and its consequences. Still, the chapters in the book illustrate that populists sought to politicize the pandemic by linking it to their existing repertoires of grievances, by deepening conflicts and polarization, or even by attacking and undermining liberal and democratic institutions. Instead of “rallying around the flag” and promoting unity in the face of a common threat to everyone’s health, most populist pursued strategies of division and disruption, even if they did not turn to COVID-radicalism. Our analyses not only help identify those strategies but also shed important light on variation therein.

The most radical cases in our sample are populist leaders in countries with presidential systems, personalistic politics, high levels of poverty and inequality, and comparatively low levels of economic development and state capacity. This constellation of factors shaped populists’ pandemic response, but it also points more generally to the importance of insufficient quality of governance and potentially vicious cycles of interwoven political and economic instability. In contrast, more moderate are populists in opposition, in parliamentary systems with stronger and more institutionalized parties, and in wealthy countries with strong state capacity. In those contexts, only populists competing with other domestic populists assumed positions far outside the mainstream—either concerning public health policies only (e.g., AfD in Germany, ReformUK) or in combination with a degree of denialism (e.g., FvD in the Netherlands, Vox in Spain,

Fdi in Italy)—in efforts to differentiate themselves through their willingness to challenge the depoliticization of the pandemic, to attribute blame, and to serve as the only true voice of “the people.” In general, populists in opposition (plus Trump and Bolsonaro) used distinctly populist rhetoric and tactics, in particular by conflating—and thus perpetuating—the COVID-19 crisis with general political and representational crises they framed in reference to issues over which they have ownership. In this way, they sought to manufacture a political crisis out of an exogenous public health crisis that was, as such, difficult for them to capitalize on. This approach combined populism, their core ideologies, and standard opposition behavior.

There is a pronounced difference between populists in government and opposition when it comes to their crisis performance, however, in that few populists in government responded in ways consistent with Moffit’s (2015) propositions. Most importantly, they generally eschewed crisis perpetuation, even if they invoked “the people” to justify their policy choices. This stands to reason as they were charged with leading their countries through a public health crisis with tangible consequences for their citizenry, including for their core supporters, and when the threat of ultimately being held responsible for pain and suffering loomed large. It matters a great deal, in this regard, that the COVID-19 crisis was sudden and exogenous, only manageable through a particular set of measures that imposed significant economic and social costs on citizens, and that those costs would likely become less tolerable over time as people would tire of the restrictions placed on them. This makes the pandemic quite different from the crises populists generally excel at manufacturing, propagating, and performing. That it was a genuine public health emergency further complicated the crisis management of populists in power, in the first place because they had to acknowledge policy complexity and rely on rather than vilify experts and expertise. More importantly, however, relying on their standard crisis playbook would cost more lives, which most populists in power were reluctant to accept. But some were. For Trump and Bolsonaro, in particular, the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity to feed division and polarization. For these would-be authoritarians, the pandemic offered the potential for sowing enough discontent, resentment, anger, and distrust to allow for rules and norms to be ignored, for institutional constraints to be relaxed, for electoral integrity to be cast into doubt, and for political opposition to be denigrated. Their COVID-radicalism served the broader purpose of deepening the crisis of democracy in their countries by advancing an agenda of power centralization and neutralizing checks and balances—in other words, an agenda of pursuing illiberal democracy with a distinct authoritarian bend.

Trump’s and Bolsonaro’s approach were reflective of their authoritarianism and of their exclusionary right-wing nativism. It was also plainly populist, by propagating simple solutions, conflating the crisis with their existing catalog of grievances, vilifying “liberal elites,” and rallying core supporters behind their “strong leadership.” This sets them apart from populists in power in already

autocratic regimes, whose populism was far less tangible. They may have projected strong leadership and invoked “the people,” but rather superficially and transparently as a justification for power grabs, for example, in Hungary, Nicaragua, Russia, Tanzania, Turkey, and Venezuela (see also Buřtíková and Baboř 2020). These efforts were successful, in part, because an effective pandemic response required strong, intrusive state actions, which could readily be exploited for consolidating power.

These successful power grabs suggest that populists in consolidated autocracies have come out of the pandemic politically stronger than they were before. This is less obvious in countries still undergoing democratic backsliding; populist leaders have suffered a drop in support in India and Indonesia, for example. Assessing whether or not populists’ pandemic responses have advanced their political and electoral fortunes in the democracies examined in this volume is difficult, as the pandemic is still ongoing. As of summer 2021, most populists seem not to have been able to exploit the pandemic for political gain: about half have lost support and the other half stayed steady. We can only conclude with some confidence that three populist parties have increased their popularity over the course of the pandemic: the PVV in the Netherlands, Vox in Spain, and the FdI in Italy. All three are opposition parties in parliamentary systems and all three compete with other populist parties whose standing in the polls has suffered (FvD in the Netherlands, Podemos in Spain, and the League in Italy). Most opposition populists have not been able to take advantage of the crisis to gain additional political support, however. Indeed, just over half have seen their fortunes decline. A slight majority (four of seven) of populists in government also lost support (Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in the US, the PiS in Poland, and Podemos in Spain). Overall, it appears that the pandemic has lowered the demand for populism, at least in the short term. This may change, however, as politics return to “normal” and the social, economic, and political problems that have facilitated and contributed to the rise of populism in the first place remain unresolved. Indeed, it is conspicuous that the political fortunes of many populists have not suffered as a result of a crisis that did not easily lend itself to their standard “crisis performance.” Their comebacks might well be just around the corner.

## Future research

In the absence of obvious common trends in how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the political fortunes of populist forces, scholars will have to continue pursuing comparative studies on this topic. We close, therefore, by pointing to some avenues for future research, focusing on four areas we see as particularly relevant.

The first topic deserving of increased scholarly attention is the ways in which the pandemic affects the difficult relationship between populism and democracy. There is a growing academic literature showing that contemporary democracy is being challenged in a similar way by both elitism and populism (e.g., Bickerton

and Invernizzi Accetti 2017; Caramani 2017). While the former speaks in favor of giving more power to “the elite”, the latter argues for the necessity of giving a major say to “the people”. Despite this crucial difference, both elitism and populism rely on the Manichean distinction between “the people” versus “the elite,” which not only fosters a moralization of the public debate but also complicates the possibility of reaching agreements between different political actors who represent the diversity that is inherent to contemporary societies. Interestingly, the evidence presented in this book shows that populist forces are not necessarily becoming more powerful because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet there is little doubt that the pandemic has given increasing power to certain elites, particularly to health and scientific specialists who, based on their expertise, pushed for the implementation of different mitigating actions (e.g., lockdown measures, social distancing, etc.) that more often than not were implemented by the executive. Given the necessity to act rapidly, there has been little space for democratic deliberation of the pros and cons of such actions. In other words, the institutions and mechanisms of representative democracy played a minor role during the pandemic, since experts often had enough influence to induce the implementation of measures that were neither widely debated nor properly controlled by the legislative branch, or by other institutions that characterize liberal democracy. The more the pandemic gets under control, however, the more one can expect that the power of experts should diminish so that democratic institutions and practices can recover their central role. Nevertheless, the power of experts during the pandemic sets a precedent that can be used by both (sectors of) the establishment and populist forces to argue in favor of disrupting some of the procedures that are inherent to contemporary democracy, with the aim of obtaining certain results that are said to be either necessitated by a given situation or demanded by the people. Simply put, it remains to be seen how well and how fast democratic institutions and norms recover after the pandemic.

A second topic worth analyzing in more detail relates to the impact of the pandemic on the globalization process. Before the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, most elites were willing or eager to diminish the role of national borders and to give more power to global markets and non-majoritarian institutions at the supranational level. This development partially explains the increasing relevance of populism, which gives voice to those parts of the electorate who demand the emergence of a “responsive” government over a “responsible” one or who want to put globalization on hold (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Zürn 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic altered the globalization agenda abruptly as governments across the globe started to close borders, thus opening the door to debate about the advantages and disadvantages of the globalization process. Although few voices suggest that the latter should be completely abandoned, actors of different stripes now advance ideas about the necessity of having a stronger state and/or more national sovereignty. Such arguments are an old hat for inclusionary and exclusionary populist forces alike, who have been emphasizing the necessity of “taking back control” and were therefore increasingly at odds with

the delegation of power to supranational institutions in particular and to the globalization process in general. Seen in this light, the pandemic has paved the way for the pursuit of measures that put at least some aspects of globalization on hold. Populist forces will surely try to defend this trend toward less globalization. It is, therefore, crucial to examine the extent to which mainstream political actors will continue to favor empowering global markets and non-majoritarian international institutions after the pandemic.

The third topic concerns the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agenda-setting capacity of populist actors. Because of their inflammatory rhetoric and ability to politicize topics that, deliberately or not, have been ignored by the establishment, populist forces are particularly talented when it comes to taking center stage in political discussion (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 2018). The very rise of the COVID-19 pandemic changed this dramatically, however. Very abruptly, the political debate became focused on how to deal with the health crisis and the economic consequences of the measures implemented to cope with COVID-19, so that populist actors lost their ability to place their own views and topics on the public agenda. After all, the COVID-19 pandemic can be thought of as a critical juncture that deeply affected the normal functioning of the economic and political system across the world. As several chapters of this edited volume show, some populist actors tried to politicize certain issues (e.g., lockdown measures or the use of masks in public) so as to present themselves as defenders of “freedom.” Whether this strategy allowed them to set the agenda is doubtful, because in most places, populations tended to believe in the necessity and legitimacy of the mitigation measures recommended by experts and implemented by national governments. It is thus worth investigating if populists face new challenges giving saliency to their ideas after the pandemic.

The fourth and final research agenda asks more generally if the post-pandemic world will offer new opportunities for or impose new constraints on populist forces. Answering this question is anything than simple, since we do not yet have enough clarity about what this post-pandemic world will look like. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that we will go back to business as usual. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous economic impact, as a result of which political actors across the world will have to think about the best strategies to secure both economic recovery and fiscal consolidation. On the other, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced patterns of socioeconomic inequality both within and between countries—a development that represents an enormous threat to the generation of a legitimate political order for the 21st century. Seen in this light, the electoral rise or decline of populist forces will depend to a large extent on the capacity of current governments and supranational institutions to successfully address the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic. If they do not, populist forces can thrive by criticizing “the establishment” for its failure to solve the problems of “the people.” The potential success or failure of populist actors, therefore, hinges not only on themselves, but also—or perhaps mainly—on the ability of mainstream/non-populist actors to master the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the years to come.

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## Notes

- 1 The Cronbach's alphas for these summary measures are all above .96.
- 2 The Cronbach's alphas for the summary measures are .91 (spring 2020), .9 (fall 2020), and .84 (spring 2021).
- 3 The Vlaams Belang in Belgium somewhat less frequently criticized international experts and blamed COVID-19 and its consequences on outside/foreign actors in the spring of 2021 compared to the spring of 2021, but it otherwise maintained a similar degree of denialism.
- 4 Here and throughout the remainder of the chapter, the sample for calculating averages are the cases included in this volume (i.e., they are not universal averages).
- 5 The RET faction in South Africa's ANC also meets this criterion, but as a party faction rather than a populist leader or party is difficult to group with the other observations. For example, the ANC is South Africa's government party, but the RET faction acts as an intraparty opposition to President Cyril Ramaphosa, which makes it difficult to categorize as being either in government or opposition. We thus exclude it from this part of the analysis.
- 6 Measure: Transparency International's 2018 Corruption Perception Index.
- 7 Measure: Quality of Government's "Public Services" indicator (ffp\_ps) (Dahlberg et al. 2019).
- 8 Measure: Quality of Government's "Government Effectiveness" indicator (wbgi\_gee) (Dahlberg et al. 2019).
- 9 Countries with GDPs equal to or greater than Turkey's (GPD: 25357.7222) were coded as high GDP and those with GDPs equal to or lower than Argentina's (18288.2446) as low GDP. Data are from GPS.
- 10 Measure: Standardized World Income Inequality Database's "Estimate of Gini index of inequality in equalized (square root scale) household disposable (post-tax, post-transfer) income" (gini\_disp) (Solt 2019).
- 11 There is also domestic competition between populist opposition parties in Germany, the Netherlands, and South Africa. While none made our list of COVID-radicals, it is notable that one populist party in each country remained fairly moderate (Left Party, PVV, and EFF, respectively) while the other assumed comparatively more extreme positions (AfD, FvD, and DA), which is suggestive of a similar dynamic.
- 12 In Germany, however, it is low levels of polarization among mainstream parties that explains the AfD's move toward greater opposition to public health measures and greater denialism, as it was a way for the party to distinguish itself from the others.

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# INDEX

Note: **Bold** page numbers refer to tables; *italic* page numbers refer to figures and page numbers followed by “n” denote endnotes.

- Abascal, Santiago 83–84, 87  
African National Congress (ANC, South Africa) 218–226  
agenda-setting powers 14, 81, 233, 235, 287, 290  
aid packages 7, 50, 186, 190; humanitarian and international aid 201–204  
Alternative for Germany (AfD, Germany) 237–247, 285–286, 291n11  
alternative treatments 46, 166, 202, 231, 269, 273, 277–279  
antagonistic rhetoric *see* polarization  
anti-elitism 2, 4–5, 12, 22, 36, 39, 44, 48–53, 82–83, 93, 95, 105, 118, 122, 127–128, 138, 149, 155, 163, 179, 186, 209, 218–224, 228–233, 235n2, 241–243, 255–259, 262, 264, 278, 287–289  
anti-establishment/government 5, 9, 20, 27, 47–48, 51, 58, 83, 94, 96, 127, 163, 179, 238, 239, 285, 289–290  
anti-globalism 83, 230–231, 253, 278  
anti-institutionalism 2, 10, 20–22, 49, 62, 81, 85, 105, 117, 122, 128, 149, 152, 155–156, 170, 185, 201  
anti-intellectualism 22, 117, 150  
anti-vaxxers 64, 100, 259; *see also* vaccines, skepticism  
Apartheid 218–220, 225  
approval rating 26–27, 30, 35, 40–41, 49–50, 131, 134–135, 139, 144, 151, 156, 163, 169–170, 179–181, 198, 234  
Argentina 32–33, 41–42, 57–65, 279, 282, 284–285, 291n9  
asymptomatic transmission 38–39, 60, 132  
Austria 121, 132, 260  
authoritarianism 1, 8–9, 12–13, 39, 58, 74, 85, 95–96, 119, 125, 134, 139, 143–145, 173–174, 180, 184–186, 196–203, 208–209, 213, 215, 223, 230, 241, 287  
Baudet, Thierry 260, 262–265, 269–270  
Belarus 9, 45  
Belgium 250–261, 274, 278, 283, 285, 291n3  
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, India) 148–157, 285  
Biden, Joseph 21, 25–27, 203  
blaming: China 22, 26, 71, 273; elites 5, 12, 40, 83, 235n2, 256, 277; enemies and political opponents 19, 26, 40, 44–45, 81, 121–122, 148, 202, 231; government 85, 89, 231, 264, 281; immigrants and outsiders 22, 83, 153, 277; institutions 121, 163, 170, 255–256; subnational governments 51, 175  
bleach *see* alternative treatments  
Bobba, Giuliano 10, 14n1, 106, 278–279  
Bolivia 42n1, 186  
Bolsonaro, Jair 8–14, 40, 44–54, 149, 199, 202, 207–208, 222, 273–274, 281–288  
Brazil 2, 8–14, 33–34, 40–41, 42n1, 44–54, 58, 60, 130, 149, 202, 204n1, 232, 273, 279–288

- Brexit 69, 71–77  
 Brexit Party *see* Reform UK  
 Brothers of Italy (FdI, Italy) 92–101, 274, 279, 281, 287–288  
 Brubaker, Rogers 1, 9  
 bureaucracy 63, 71, 83, 111, 122, 145, 150, 154–156, 169, 173, 176, 230  
 bypassing institutions 38, 112
- case fatality rate *see* death rate  
 cash disbursements 38, 65, 131, 221  
 centralizing power 9–10, 30, 36, 38, 40–41, 133, 168, 185–188, 229, 277, 287  
 Chapel Hill Expert Survey 36, 37, 42n1  
 charismatic leadership 36, 155, 163–164, 197–202  
 Chávez, Hugo 197–204  
 checks and balances 21, 119, 120, 139, 279, 287  
 Chile 32–36, 42n1, 200  
 China 71, 77, 93, 99, 122, 130, 142, 165, 174, 199, 202–203, 255, 264; blaming China 22, 26, 71, 273; China virus 22  
 chloroquine *see* alternative treatments  
 clientelism 164; *see also* patronage  
 climate change 22, 72, 83, 240, 268  
 Clinton, Hillary 8, 20  
 closing borders 10, 22, 33–34, 60, 70–71, 74, 76, 97, 107, 119–121, 130–131, 233, 238, 240, 251, 264, 289  
 coalition governments 35–36, 57–59, 80–81, 85, 87, 89, 96, 100, 110–111, 114, 133, 138, 143–146, 226, 244, 252, 258, 267, 278, 283, 285  
 Colombia 32, 42n1, 200, 203–204  
 common external shock *see* exogenously triggered crisis  
 compromise 220, 279, 281  
 conflating the COVID-19 crisis with other political issues 14, 251, 254–260, 274, 278, 287; *see also* linking COVID-19 to other grievances and frames  
 Conservatives (party, United Kingdom) 69–77  
 constitutional amendments and reform 119, 123, 164, 177–179  
 contact tracing 7, 11, 45, 60, 70, 107, 120, 123, 140–142, 153, 162, 166, 175, 210, 222, 231, 252, 275  
 Conte, Giuseppe 96; Conte Government 93, 96, 98, 101  
 contributor survey 14, 274–281  
 core constituency/voters 49–50, 60, 64, 220, 232–233, 245, 285
- Correa, Rafael 35–36  
 corrupt elite *see* anti-elitism  
 corruption 48–49, 53–54, 82, 96, 119, 125, 150, 211, 219–220, 223–224, 282  
 Costa Rica 33, 42n1  
 courts 10, 21, 51, 54, 150, 168, 178, 189, 219, 220–224, 230, 241–242, 247, 265  
 COVID–radicalism 14, 281–287  
 crisis performance 3–6, 13, 19–21, 24, 44, 53, 59, 75, 80–84, 86, 106, 115, 118–120, 128, 152–155, 184–186, 208–209, 212–213, 232, 241, 254, 260, 273, 278–280, 285–288; *playbook* 14, 149, 278, 287  
 crowd sizes 11, 45, 154; restrictions of 275–276; *see also* large gatherings
- da Silva, Lula (Brazil) 48, 54  
 data: accuracy of 140, 150, 167, 207; manipulation of 14, 131, 140, 179–181, 188, 208, 211–212, 280, 284  
 death count 20, 30–35, 44–49, 54, 58, 68–69, 77, 79, 92, 94, 106–109, 115n2–3, 121, 139, 151–152, 157n7, 162, 175, 180, 181n2, 188, 196, 200, 204n1, 229, 205, 252, 286  
 death rate 9–11, 20, 29, 92, 120–121, 157, 184, 188, 202, 250, 286  
 decentralization 25, 51, 140, 174–176; *see also* federalism  
 delegation of authority 21, 26, 60, 153, 163, 170, 174–176, 290  
 demand for populism 110, 255, 288–289  
 demobilization 58–63  
 democratic backsliding/decline 10, 119, 144–116, 265, 279, 288, 292  
 Democratic Alliance (DA, South Africa) 219, 222, 225, 274, 291n11  
 Democratic Party (United States) 8, 21–26  
 denialism 2, 22, 84, 134, 184–191, 201, 208, 273–274, 277–286, 291n3, 291n12  
 depoliticization 10, 287  
 dictatorships 9, 48, 54n1, 61, 143, 145, 164, 237, 242, 245, 265  
 discursive opportunities and strategies 10, 95, 97, 127–128, 207–208, 211  
 divergent behavior 92, 101, 156, 262, 266–268, 276  
 divisive rhetoric *see* polarization  
 downplaying the threat of the virus 9, 19, 22, 26, 29, 73, 134, 141, 146, 175, 180, 184, 202, 238, 253, 273–281  
 Draghi, Mario 96, 99, 101; Draghi Government 93, 96, 98, 100, 278  
 Duda, Andrzej 111, 114, 115n1

- Duterte, Rodrigo 10, 162–170, 283–284
- economic class 39–41, 71, 81, 89, 129–131, 143, 151–152, 157n2, 221
- economic crisis 30, 35, 80–81, 119, 130, 191, 197–199, 202–203, 225, 257
- Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF, South Africa) 218–227, 284, 291n11
- Ecuador 35, 42n1, 186, 200
- elections 8, 51, 285; European Parliament elections 228; municipal and local elections 73, 119, 128, 133, 154, 229, 233–234; national elections 30, 36, 41, 48, 69, 84, 86–87, **113**, 119, 124, 149–151, 179, 185, 189–192, 208, 213–215, 226, 246n2, 251, **252**, 258–260, 262, 266, 268–269, 270n8; nominations and primaries 20, 143; presidential elections 8, 22, 26, 36, 48, 50, 53–54, 57, 111–114, 138–139, 143, 164, 170, 197–199, 204n2, 228, 232–235, 283; regional elections 30, 35, 41, 86–87, 99, 153–154, 234, 246n1, 268
- electoral calendar 12, 42, 208
- electoral/competitive authoritarian regime 119, 134, 155, 182, 208
- emergency aid *see* aid packages; cash disbursements
- end of a populist wave 1, 13, 290
- Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip 10, 131–134, 149
- Eurobonds 240, 264
- European Union 69–70, 75, 83, 105–106, 111, 118–120, 122, 230, 234, 240, 256, 264; European Central Bank 83, 96; European Commission 105, 122; tension with 118, 125, 230–231, 256–257
- Euroskepticism 75, 83, 89, 118, 237, 244, 246
- excess deaths 31, 58, 175, 184
- exclusionary populism *see* right-wing populism
- executive–legislative relations 12, 281
- exogenously triggered crisis 2–6, 11, 14, 21, 106, 114, 134, 170, 192, 278, 286–287
- expert survey *see* contributor survey
- extremism 12, 58, 233, 245, 285
- Facebook 53, 155, 230
- false information 2, 9, 39, 53, 141, 144, 146, 148, 188; conspiracy theories 2, 6, 39, 44, 47, 49, 61, 112, **113**, 128, 134, 222–223, 231, 242, 245, 266, 269, 279
- Farage, Nigel 69, 71–73, 76
- fascism 82, 96
- federalism 3, 96, 168, 285; *see also* decentralization
- Fernández, Alberto 57–65, 284
- Fidesz (Hungary) 106, 117–125, 284
- flatten the curve 7, 121, 130, 150
- Flemish Interest *see* Vlaams Belang
- flu 23, 266
- Forum voor Democratie (FvD, Netherlands) 262–270, 279, 283, 286, 291n11
- France 34, 228–235, 278, 285
- freedom of speech and expression 10, 119, 139, 144
- Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) 185–191
- Front of All (*Frente de Todos*, Argentina) 57, 62
- funding; for healthcare systems 107, 275–276; for scientific research and education 24; for social programs 62, 131, 275
- Gauland, Alexander 238, 245
- Germany 11, 230, 237–246, 278, 284–286, 291n11–12
- globalization 12, 14, 230–231, 289–290
- God 141, 273
- governance/policy responses *see* laws and policies to curb the spread of the virus
- government effectiveness 7, 110, 203, 282, 291n8
- government–opposition dynamics 3, 5, 9–14, 80, 85, 266–267, 273–274, 278–280, 283–288
- Great Recession (2008) 81, 96
- Green Pass 98, 100
- Greer, Scott 7, 9, 281
- gross domestic product (GDP) 32, 34, 223, 282, 291n9
- hand hygiene/washing 11, 129, 166, 199, 210, 240
- healthcare workers 151, 162, 191–192, 200
- health–economy dichotomy 2, 45, 58
- herd immunity 29, 38, 44, 70, 72, 130
- hospitals 25, 63, 69, 76, 81, 102n1, 107–108, 120, 132, 139, 150, 152, 154, 165, 175, 187–188, 200, 228–231
- Hubé, Nicolas 10, 14n1, 106, 278–279
- Hungary 10–11, 106, 117–125, 132, 280, 284, 288
- hybrid regimes *see* electoral/competitive authoritarian regime
- hydroxychloroquine *see* alternative treatments

- ideational definition of populism 2, 80, 95, 118
- identity politics 75, 98
- ideology 2, 7–8, 36, 80, 85, 92, 95–96, 112, 114, 118, 149, 152, 163, 186, 207–209, 213, 230, 240, 241, 284–285
- Iglesias, Pablo 86–87
- illiberalism 10, 110, 112, 170, 287
- immigration 20–22, 69, 71–72, 76, 83, 89, 93, 95–97, 100, 118, 230, 237, 250, 254, 258, 268, 278
- inclusionary populism *see* left-wing populism
- incumbents 8, 21, 178, 214; incumbency challenge 81; support for incumbents 7–8, 21, 26
- India 10, 31, 70, 148–157, 166, 222, 225, 280, 282, 285, 288
- Indonesia 138–146, 166, 280–284, 288
- Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) 143
- inflation 57, 60, 167, 169, 198, 220
- informal employment 29, 32, 41–42, 60, 62, 64, 140, 142, 190
- information dissemination 7, 38, 47, 269
- institutional: changes 10, 105, 181; constraints 19, 187; paralysis 19; weakness 43, 81, 187
- Iran 130, 174
- isolating/isolation 11, 45–46, 60, 63, 72, 87–88, 153, 174–176, 191, 199, 201, 210, 240, 275
- Italy 14n3, 92–101, 110, 119, 174, 230, 261, 274, 278–281, 283, 285, 287–288
- Johnson, Boris 69–76, 283–284
- Jokowi *see* Widodo, Joko
- Junto Hacemos Historia (Mexico) 35
- Justice and Development Party (AKP, Turkey) 128–136
- Kaczyński, Jarosław 106, 115
- Kavakli, Kerim 9–10, 279
- La France Insoumise (LFI, France) 228, 231, 235n1, 235n2
- Labour Party (United Kingdom) 70, 75
- large gatherings 29, 154; *see also* crowd sizes; protests
- Law and Justice (PiS) 105–114, 283–285, 288
- laws and policies to curb the spread of the virus 2, 7–9, 30, 33, 40, 48, 51, 60–64, 92, 107–109, 112, 115n2, 133, 140–142, 144, 202, 210, 230, 232, 251–255, 273, 275–276, 278, 281–283, 286
- Le Pen, Marine 228–235, 260
- leaders contracting the virus 25, 75, 207, 215
- The League (*Lega*, Italy) 92–101, 278–279, 281, 283, 288
- The Left (*Die Linke*, Germany) 237–238, 240, 243–246
- left-wing populism 3, 12–13, 43, 48, 55, 57–59, 65, 118, 126, 155, 284, 289
- legitimacy 2, 5, 39, 76, 84, 99, 105, 129, 149, 153, 155, 164, 173, 178, 185–186, 191, 196–198, 201–202, 204n2, 212, 221, 244, 257, 269, 290
- LGBTQ community 112, 113, 173, 186
- liberal democracy 12, 95, 110, 112, 220, 289; liberal institutions 2, 286
- linking COVID-19 to other grievances and frames 1, 4, 6, 14, 53, 82–83, 92, 94, 228, 230, 232–234, 251, 259, 269, 278–280, 286
- lockdown: lockdown fatigue 6, 114, 276; partial lockdown 45–46, 130, 229, 275–276; substantial/full lockdown 25, 70, 82, 107, 120–121, 129–130, 133, 136, 199, 221, 229, 252, 264, 275–276; *see also* quarantine; stay-at-home
- López Obrador, Andrés Manuel (AMLO) 29–41, 281–284
- Macron, Emmanuel 229–234
- Maduro, Nicolás 61, 196–204, 284
- Magufuli, John Pombe 207–215, 280–285
- majoritarianism 9, 59, 124, 149, 232, 289
- Manichean worldview 40, 80–82, 127, 231, 189
- manufacturing a political crisis 3–4, 19, 212, 287
- mask wearing 11, 19, 21, 23, 25–27, 29–30, 38–40, 45, 48, 50, 69, 72–73, 76, 84, 98, 108, 112, 120–121, 129–130, 151, 153–154, 157, 166, 174–175, 178, 186, 188, 190, 199, 210, 212, 215, 229–231, 240, 243, 245, 251–253, 263–266, 275, 278, 290
- media: coverage 9, 13, 73, 75–76, 153, 211, 222, 26, 264, 275; strategies 4, 6, 39, 53, 105, 178, 180
- medical experts 5, 20, 24, 39, 188, 221, 223
- medical populism 9, 47, 51
- Mélenchon, Jean-Luc 228
- Meloni, Giorgia 96, 99–100
- Merkel, Angela 241–242
- Mexico 29–41, 60, 64, 281, 285
- migrant crisis 119, 151–152, 240–241, 244

- military 120, 139–142, 145–146, 150, 162, 165, 168, 192; military dictatorships 48, 54, 145
- minorities 95, 149–150, 152, 155, 212, 222
- miracle drug *see* alternative medicine
- misinformation *see* false information
- mobility 7, 46, 61, 88, 107–108, **109**, 115n2, 115n4, 130, 151, 163; *see also* freedom of movement
- moderation 12, 57–60, 96, 99, 221, 225, 233, 238, 245, 250, 257–260, 279, 281, 286, 291n11
- Modi, Narendra 10, 148–157, 208, 283
- Moffitt, Benjamin 4, 13, 19, 53, 75, 80–84, 102n2, 117–118, 122, 128, 152, 212–213, 232, 245, 254, 257, 265, 267, 278–279, 287
- Morawiecki, Matuesz 10, 111, 115
- MORENA (Mexico) 35–36
- Mudde, Cas 2, 36, 38, 95, 118
- Murillo, Rosario 184–192
- Muslims 118, 128, 130, 138, 143, 149–153, 157n1–4, 268
- nativism 3, 9, 13, 21, 74, 83, 95–97, 118, 135, 230, 232, 241, 264–266, 287
- Netherlands 232, 262–270, 278–279, 283, 285–286, 288, 291n11
- New Flemish Alliance (N-VA, Belgium) 258–259
- Nicaragua 9, 45, 64, 184–192, 280–284, 288
- non-governmental organizations (NGOs) 149, 153, 179, 188
- opening up 2, 23, 27, 70, 72–73, 93, 97, 108–109, 111, 131, 212, 222, 238, 240, **252**, 264
- opportunity for populists 1–4, 9–13, 19, 51, 86–89, 94, 97, 106, 117, 119, 122–123, 133–134, 199, 201–202, 226, 233, 235, 244, 285–290; *see also* discursive opportunity
- Orbán, Viktor 10, 117–125
- Ortega, Daniel 184–192, 281–284
- overwhelmed healthcare systems 68, 107, 121, 140, 150, 155, 229
- ownership 14, 106, 114, 220, 259, 268, 278, 287
- ozone *see* alternative treatments
- Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Netherlands) 262–270, 283, 289, 291n11
- Party of the Revolution (CCM, Tanzania) 207–215
- party publications on crisis management 69, 187, 222, 230, 241
- party system 3, 12, 48, 79–80, 87, 89–91, 237, 262, 267
- patronage 129, 144, 221–225
- Peronism 57–65, 284–285
- perpetuation of crisis 3, 13–14, 44, 118, 122, 125, 153, 184, 189, 232, 237, 241–244, 254, 262, 265, 273–274, 278–280, 287
- personal protective equipment (PPE) 70, 72, 142, 187, 200, 210, 232, 263–264; shortages 120, 140, 251
- personalistic politics 2, 14, 38, 59, 197, 274, 281, 284, 286
- Peru 29, 33, 26, 42n1, 200, 204n1
- Philippines 10, 162–170, 280, 282, 284
- plebiscitarianism 36, 38
- pluralism 12, 244
- Podemos (Spain) 80–89, 283–284, 288
- Poland 10–11, 105–115, 279, 283, 285, 288
- polarization 3–8, 12, 19–22, 26–27, 39–41, 48–51, 57–58, 63, 65, 75, 80, 87, 89, 100, 104, 110, 127, 134–135, 198, 201–202, 215, 223, 225, 244, 281–282, 285–287, 291n12; polarizing rhetoric 30, 36, 39–40
- political institutions 2, 7, 9, 21, 127, 283; electoral institutions 3, 12, 119, 124, 232, 284
- political mobilization 6, 8–10, 36, 29, 62, 95, 117, 185, 224; activism 47, 178; internet activism 8; *see also* protest
- politicization of COVID-19 10, 13, 23, 25–27, 38–39, 53, 92, 175, 178, 264, 278–279, 283, 286–287, 290; *see also* vaccines, politicization of
- populism and crisis 2–4, 14n1, 21, 94, 102n2, 118, 274; crises benefitting populists 4, 92, 100, 117, 124, 181, 218, 245; *see also* Moffitt, Benjamin
- populists in government 3, 5, 9–12, 14, 273–274, 278–288, 291n5
- populists in opposition 3, 5, 9, 12–14, 273–274, 278–280, 285–287
- poverty 50, 199, 219, 226, 282, 286
- presidential democracies 9, 14, 274, 281–283, 286
- propaganda 47, 105, 173, 179, 190
- protests 2, 8–9, 25, 73, 76, 82–84, 98, 106, 110–111, 115n6, 178, 180, 185–186, 189–192, 221, 240–245, **252**, 254–255, 260, 265–266, 277, 279
- public health capacity/infrastructure 68, 81, 107, 121, 140, 150, 155, 180, 184, 187, 190, 202, 222, 229
- public opinion 5–6, 11–13, 25, 45, 51, 54, 62, 71–72, 75–76, 89, 106, 111, **113**, 133, 135, 179, 214–215, 233

- pure people 2, 95, 118  
 Putin, Vladimir 173–181
- quarantine 60–61, 68, 123, 99, 120,  
 129–130, 156, 165–168, 176, 199,  
 210, 222, 275–276; *see also* lockdown;  
 stay-at-home
- Radical Economic Transformation (RET,  
 South Africa) 218–226, 274, 291n5
- rally around the flag 21, 51, 75, 92, 234,  
 266–268, 286
- Ramaphosa, Cyril 218–226, 291n5
- Rassemblement National (RN, France)  
 228–235, 250
- recovery fund 81, 114, 167, 175, 233, 231
- redistribution 59–60, 85, 89, 105, 114, 128,  
 152, 218, 220, 234, 269
- referenda 74, 177–180, 208
- Reform UK 69–76
- refugee crisis *see* migrant crisis
- regime type 3, 6–7, 128, 274, 280, 284
- relationship between populism and  
 democracy 14, 288
- religion 143; Christianity 22, 40, 100;  
 Hinduism 148–149, 151–153, 157n1;  
 Islam 100, 141, 143, 145, 246n5, 268;  
 religious practices as a cure 273
- remote work 131, 141–142, 174–176, 190,  
 263
- repression of opponents 177, 180, 184–6,  
 189, 191, 199, 201–203
- Republican Party (United States) 8, 20,  
 25–26
- responsible pandemic responses 97, 221,  
 233, 273, 279, 282, 289
- right-wing populism 3, 12–13, 50, 57, 84,  
 92, 118, 155, 284, 287, 289
- Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal 2–3, 36, 38
- rule by decree 10, 120, 123
- Russia 45, 61, 64, 122, 173–181, 202–203,  
 219, 224, 280, 284–285, 288
- Salvini, Matteo 96–100, 160
- Sanchez, Pedro 84
- scapegoating *see* blaming
- school closures 33, 60, 69, 108–109,  
 120–122, 129–132, 134, 141–142, 174,  
 176, 187, 210, 229, **252**, 270n5
- scientific consensus 29, 38–40, 44, 166
- severity of COVID-19 2, 14, 23, 29, 31, 29,  
 41, 25, 108, 134, 138, 146, 184, 186–187,  
 202–203, 207, 238, 259, 273, 281, 284
- shifting the focus 237, 243–245
- social distancing 7–11, 19, 23, 25, 27, 32–33,  
 38, 45–45, 48, 50–51, 56, 60, 73, 84,  
 92, 123, 129, 141–142, 151, 153, 166,  
 176–178, 186, 210, 215, 231, 240, 243,  
 263, 275–279, 282, 289
- socialism 3, 13, 208–209, 219–220
- social welfare state 7, 12, 63, 81, 89, 134,  
 155–156, 167, 169, 186, 190, 250, 256
- Socialistische Partij (SP, Netherlands) 262,  
**263**, 270n2
- South Africa 130, 166, 218–226, 274, 278,  
 282, 284, 291n5, 291n11
- Spain 14, 34, 79–89, 230, 278–279, 281,  
 283–286, 288
- state capacity 2–3, 7, 12, 14, 41, 110, 114,  
 138–140, 143, 146, 148, 150, 156, 157n5,  
 180, 274, 282–284, 286
- state of emergency/alarm 23, 33, 79, 83–85,  
 88, 124, 165, 227
- state of the economy 3, 12, 163
- stay-at-home/shelter-at-home 59, 68,  
 131, 175–176, 199; *see also* lockdown;  
 quarantine
- strongman 156, 164
- subnational governments 21, 41, 60, 220,  
 282; blaming subnational governments,  
 governors, and mayors 19, 51; variation  
 in health outcomes of 31, 155–156;  
 variation in policy responses of 44, 51,  
 148, 152, 155–156
- Suluhu Hassan, Samia 215
- Sweden 7, 11, 74, 121
- taking credit 62, 121, 163, 177, 222
- Tanzania 207–216, 280–285, 288
- technocratic policymaking 47, 58, 65, 143,  
 173, 230–231
- testing 3, 6, 19, 21, 24–25, 27, 39, 45,  
 60, 72–73, 84, 107–108, **109**, 115n2,  
 120, 123, 132, 140, 142, 166–167, 175,  
 187–188, 210–211, 215, 231, 240, 251,  
 264, 275–276; reporting tests 44, 115,  
 131–132, 139, 167, 188, 192, 202, 260n1
- Tice, Richard 71–76
- tourism 32, 34, 41, 70, 100, 129–131, 190,  
 240, 251, 256
- transparency 7, 120, 132–134, 176, 200, 288,  
 291n6
- travel ban 22, 33, 176, 243; *see also* closing  
 borders
- Trump, Donald 8, 11, 14, 19–27, 53, 57,  
 71–72, 74, 84, 149, 154, 166, 199,  
 202–203, 207, 269, 273–274, 281–283,  
 286–288

- trust: in government officials 1, 7, 80, 127, 135, 163, 170, 173, 191, 198, 199, 231–232; in scientists 7, 75, 233, 267, 269, 287; in vaccines 142, 177; undermining trust 38
- Turkey 10, 127–135, 149, 280, 288, 291n9
- Twitter 25, 46, 53, 73, 84, 97, 115, 230, 265, 269, 270n6
- unemployment 22, 29, 62, 64–65, 108, 131, 142, 150, 167–169, 218, 221, 223, 226
- United States 2, 5, 8–9, 19–27, 189
- vaccines: access to 109, 142, 203; for children 29, 73, 109; development and manufacturing of 24, 63–64, 154–155, 176, 180, 240, 284; implementation of 64; mandates 21, 177; politicization of 2, 13, 26, 53; priority recipients 109, 142; rollout of 69, 72–73, 77, 112, 121–122, 151, 167, 170, 176, **253**; skepticism 112, 114, 122–123, 143, 215, 284
- Van Grieken, Tom 250, 253–260
- variants (of COVID-19) 39, 68, 70, 109, 130, 142, 154–155, 188, 191, 196, 225, 229
- Venezuela 42n1, 64, 186, 196–204, 280, 284, 288
- ventilators 63, 108, 115n3, 264
- Vlaams Belang (VB, Belgium) 250–260
- Vox (Spain) 80–89, 281, 283, 286, 288
- war 24, 75, 83, 85, 162–163, 170, 185, 209, 211–212, 216, 229, 266
- waves of transmission and infection 11, 13, 46, 68–69, 72, 79, 92, 94, 97, 106–111, 114–115, 120–125, 128–135, 148, 151–156, 184, 191, 223, 237, 263–264, 267, 270, 275, 283
- WhatsApp 53, 75
- white nationalism and supremacy 21, 209, 268
- Widodo, Joko 138–146, 281–284
- Wilders, Geert 260, 262–270
- World Health Organization 11, 22, 30, 33, 57, 84, 93, 132, 139, 142, 151, 203, 255, 264, 277, 285; WHO recommendations 8, 11, 14n2, 29, 39, 45–48, 51, 60, 120, 123, 201, 275
- work from home *see* remote work
- xenophobia 21, 119, 189, 225–226
- YouTube 45, 53, 270n6
- Zuma, Jacob 218–226



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