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CHAPTER 13

THE SWEDISH WAY

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Adam Shehata, Isabella Glogger and Kim Andersen

Sweden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked extensive international attention. Based on voluntary social distancing rather than lockdowns, the strategy contrasted sharply with most other countries in Europe – generating both praise and criticism. With numbers of COVID-19-related deaths surging, however, discussions about "the Swedish way" quickly became polarized in Sweden and abroad.

In addition to being a polarized issue, the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by widespread uncertainty in all its aspects: uncertainty with respect to the nature of the virus; uncertainty with respect to public and personal health; uncertainty regarding the social, political and economic consequences of the pandemic; uncertainty about how to best contain further spread. This chapter focuses on how citizens make up their minds about a highly pressing issue characterized by uncertainty and polarization, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

To this end, this chapter examines public opinion formation in Sweden during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data come from a unique representative three-wave panel survey among Swedish citizens collected during this period. Three broad questions anchored in the literature on media effects and sociotropic beliefs are addressed. First, we describe how public opinion developed over time in response to media coverage and real-world developments. Second, we turn to the antecedents of beliefs. Based on theories of sociotropic belief formation, the analysis focuses on how citizens' ideology, personal experience, social networks and media use influence their beliefs about the coronavirus disease. Third, we study the importance of initial belief formation for subsequent opinion dynamics – looking specifically at the role of ideology and news media use as factors behind belief maintenance and updating over time.

The Formation of Sociotropic Beliefs

How citizens form perceptions about societal developments and problems has been a key issue in communication and public opinion research for a long time. On the one hand, so-called sociotropic beliefs are fundamental for political accountability and voting behavior. How citizens perceive the major challenges facing the country, their causes and consequences, ultimately shape how governments are held responsible during elections. On the other hand, few people have first-hand experiences or knowledge of most societal issues. As Lippmann succinctly noted almost 100 years ago, the world that we have to deal with politically is "out of reach, out of sight, and out of mind" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 18). Even when citizens do have personal experiences relating to specific problems, it remains unclear how these are generalized into perceptions of broader societal conditions. Thus, judgments about collective experiences constitute a foundation of public opinion – and such inferences are made constantly as part of people's everyday lives and interactions with their social surroundings.

Theories of sociotropic belief formation stress the significance of *media coverage* in shaping perceptions of society (Mutz, 1998; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). Media coverage is also believed to be specifically important when people lack alternative sources of information or personal experiences, as highlighted by media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 2010). More specific theories of media effects, such as agenda setting (McCombs, 2014), cultivation (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015) and framing (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2018), emphasize particular relationships between media content characteristics, issue characteristics and individual characteristics in shaping perceptions of societal conditions. In all cases, however, cues from the media play a distinct role in terms of influencing beliefs about collective experiences.

Apart from the traditional media, the literature on sociotropic belief formation outlines three other sources that matter: ideological or partisan rationalization, interpersonal communication and personal experiences. First, research shows that citizens' political identities color their perceptions of societal conditions. Political *rationalization* comes into play when people assess issues that are highly politicized and polarized. Research on motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), cultural cognition (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011) and partisan perceptual screening (Bisgaard, 2015) shows that these mechanisms cut across various issue domains. Second, *personal experiences* with everything from unemployment, health care and crime to less tangible issues, such as climate change, have potential to exert a great impact on sociotropic beliefs (Egan & Mullin, 2012; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Kumlin, 2004). Making inferences about societal conditions from personal experiences involves a specific type of generalization from the personal to the political. Third, everyday *interpersonal conversation* with family and friends is a key source of information and opinions as well. Not only do citizens learn about the experience of others

from everyday talk, but such discussions also serve a "filtering function" where perceptions and opinions are socially negotiated and validated (Gamson, 1992; Schmitt-Beck, 2003).

These factors potentially played an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic. In just a few weeks of February and March 2020, the collective media agenda quickly shifted in response to real-world developments and actions taken by international organizations and governments around the world. Intense media coverage, extensive public restrictions and lockdowns, massive mobilization of health-care services and profound economic downturn and layoffs have significant repercussions on people's lives. During these times of uncertainty coupled with great personal and societal risks, information (and misinformation) spread rapidly across media and social networking platforms – turning into a war of worldviews, where beliefs about the coronavirus and appropriate regulations were quickly politicized.

The Swedish Case: COVID-19 and the Great Uncertainty

Sweden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic drew international attention and became a topic of extensive discussions. While neighboring countries, such as Denmark and Norway, quickly implemented major lockdowns and restrictions in March 2020, the Swedish strategy relied on voluntary social distancing. Schools, shops, restaurants and workplaces were kept open – even though large groups of people also worked from home. The Swedish strategy was led by the *Public Health Authority* (PHA) while the government largely followed their advice from a "back-seat" position. This arrangement differed from many other countries and reflects a system of highly autonomous public agencies in Sweden. Thus, the left-wing coalition government led by the Social Democratic Party played a much less prominent role compared to many other countries:

> Already at an early stage of the crisis, it was clear that the core executive, i.e. the Prime Minister and other Cabinet ministers and their staff, would not be operationally involved in the crisis management. Instead, agencies like the PHA and the NBHW were to take the lead by virtue of their expertise on pandemics.
>
> *(Pierre, 2020, p. 483)*

Early discussions concerning the "Swedish way" were triggered by the different approaches taken by neighboring Nordic countries as well as the rest of Europe. In that sense, questions grounded in fundamental uncertainties – How severe is the current pandemic? How does the virus spread? How dangerous is it? Who is vulnerable? What is the best strategy for fighting it? – permeated public discussions and actions from the very beginning. At the same time, however,

public support for the Swedish government and the Public Health Authority was widespread initially. As in many other countries, Sweden witnessed a substantial rally-around-the-flag effect following the outbreak of COVID-19 (Johansson, Hopmann, & Shehata, 2021). Government approval increased significantly from 34% to 65% during the initial phase of the pandemic (Andersson & Oscarsson, 2020; see also Esaiasson, Sohlberg, Ghersetti, & Johansson, 2020).

Criticism toward the government and the PHA strategy gradually became more intense, however (Esaiasson et al., 2020). With rapidly increasing numbers of deaths, Sweden contrasted remarkably to the other Nordic countries not only in terms of the overall corona strategy, but with respect to mortality rates as well. These country differences were evident already at an early stage and Swedish mortality rates remained substantively higher throughout the year.

In light of the extraordinary circumstances that characterize the coronavirus as a societal problem, a few aspects may be of particular importance for belief formation and updating. First, COVID-19 quickly emerged as an entirely new issue on the political and media agenda. Most citizens had very little prior knowledge of the virus and its implications at the outset – and would therefore be highly susceptible to early belief formation influences. Second, the salience of the coronavirus on the media agenda during the initial months made it almost impossible for anyone to avoid it. Developments related to the coronavirus crowded out most other issues on the media agenda from mid-March and onward (Esaiasson et al., 2020). The combination of weak (or non-existent) prior beliefs and high salience on the media agenda is precisely the condition that should promote belief change rather than stability over time (Druckman & Leeper, 2012). Third, while COVID-19 dominated the media agenda for months, real-world developments also had profound impact on people's everyday lives. From a media effects perspective, we are dealing with an obtrusive issue, where people's personal experiences may either resonate or contrast with news coverage (McCombs, 2014; Mutz, 1998).

How citizens' perceptions are shaped in such exceptional and uncertain times is not very well-known. In this chapter, we therefore look specifically at the development of public beliefs about the coronavirus as a societal problem during the first six months of the pandemic. In doing so, we return to some basic questions in the public opinion literature. More specifically, three research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: How stable or sensitive are citizens' sociotropic COVID-19 beliefs over time?

RQ2: How does ideology, personal experiences, interpersonal communication and media use influence sociotropic COVID-19 beliefs?

RQ3: How do these factors influence stability and change of COVID-19 beliefs over time?

We rely on data from a unique three-wave panel survey conducted in Sweden between April and September 2020. The survey was conducted by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) at the University of Gothenburg, using a probability-based sample of web survey participants. A sample of 4,000 respondents, stratified on gender, age and education, was drawn from LORE's pool of probability-recruited participants. Wave 1 was fielded in late April (April 14–May 8), wave 2 in June 2018 (June 9–July 1) and wave 3 in August (August 17–September 9). In terms of respondents, 2,347 participated in wave 1 (58%), 2,229 in wave 2 (55%) and 1,985 in wave 3 (52%). A total of 1,716 respondents participated in all three waves.

Change and Stability of Sociotropic COVID-19 Beliefs in Sweden

One of the most fundamental issues in public opinion research concerns the stability and mutability of citizens' beliefs and attitudes. This question goes to the heart of the nature and characteristics of mass beliefs. Do people have "real", elaborated and strongly anchored opinions on various societal matters – or are beliefs on policy issues expressed in different social settings highly sensitive to contextual cues and what comes to people's mind at the moment (Slater, 2015; Zaller, 1992)?

Attitudes and beliefs are of course two separate concepts that may display distinct processes of stability and change. While beliefs refer to perceptions of social reality, attitudes are evaluations (positive or negative) toward objects (Potter, 2012). Perceptions are sometimes considered more sensitive and mutable – and thereby open for influence – than attitudes (McCombs, Holbert, Kiousis & Wanta, 2012). This is, however, a position that can be questioned on several grounds. First, if we think of beliefs not as isolated perceptual elements, but rather as anchored in citizens' cognitive schemas, the stability of beliefs may be much greater than commonly assumed. Cognitive schemas are typically considered highly stable over time – and human consistency mechanisms operate in ways that maintain and reinforce established schemas rather than change them (Matthes, 2008; Fiske & Taylor, 2017). Approaching beliefs from a schema perspective highlights a number of specific schema characteristics that condition belief stability, including level of schema development and abstraction (Shehata et al., 2021). Second, many beliefs are not pure perceptions but rather anchored in political values and attitudes. Whenever specific perceptions are strongly tied to political and social identities, they become more resistant to change (Slater, 2015).

Levels of belief stability and change depend on both individual and environmental factors. Looking specifically at opinion dynamics, Druckman and Leeper (2012) argue that attitude change/stability is a function of attitude strength and exposure to attitude-relevant stimuli. More specifically, change is most likely when individuals hold weak attitudes and are exposed to intense

communication (see also Zaller, 1992). In contrast, while strong attitudes are always resistant, weakly held attitudes remain intact in the absence of stimuli. In a similar vein, Wilson and Hodges (1992) note that "stable attitudes are those with stable contexts" (p. 53). But the context was definitely not stable during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Media coverage was massive. Events and developments were characterized by great uncertainties. And compared to most other issues that citizens are confronted with, people had no long-standing established beliefs or attitudes toward COVID-19 before these dramatic developments played out. As such, we could expect a substantial amount of belief volatility during the first months of the pandemic.

Figure 13.1 shows how beliefs about the coronavirus among Swedish citizens developed from April to September. Respondents were asked a series of survey questions on the impact of COVID-19 on Swedish society. More specifically, the sample was presented with a number of factual statements about the coronavirus. Response scale ranges from 1 to 7 and capture the extent to which they disagree ("Not true at all") or agree ("Completely true") with each statement. To also get a first glimpse of whether there are ideological gaps in perceptions about the coronavirus, Figure 13.1 displays trends among left-wing and right-wing citizens separately. The top row of the figure presents findings on what could be considered a first dimension of corona beliefs, perceptions about the scale of the coronavirus as a societal problem, while the bottom row focuses on a second dimension, perceptions of how Sweden has managed the coronavirus.
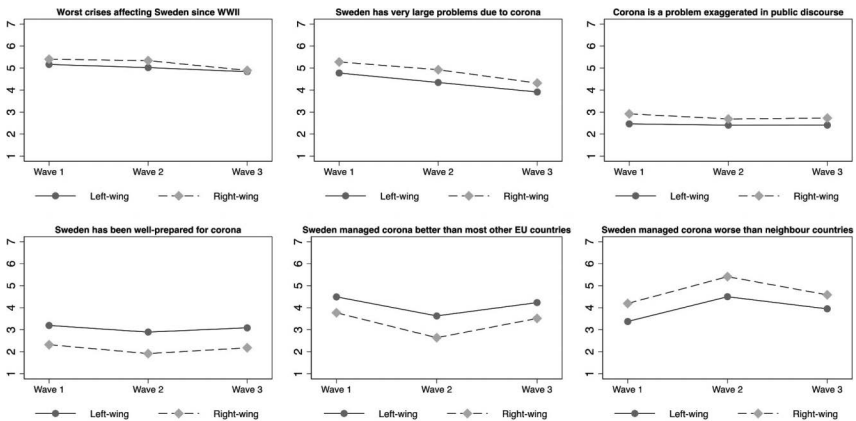

FIGURE 13.1 The development of beliefs about the coronavirus over time (mean values).

Note: Each graph presents mean values on the 1–7 belief scales, where 1 represents "Not true at all" and 7 "Completely true". Political ideology is measured in the first panel wave based on a 11-point left-right ideological placement scale. "Left-wing" represents respondents with a strong left-leaning position on the original scale (0–2) while "Right-wing" represents respondents with a strong right-leaning position (8–9).

Overall, there are indeed significant shifts over time with respect to some of the beliefs. For instance, agreement to the belief statement "Sweden has managed the coronavirus *better* than most other EU countries" decreases by an entire scale point from wave 1 (M = 4.21, SD = 1.49) to wave 2 (M = 3.20, SD = 1.53), in order to increase again in wave 3 (M = 3.92, SD = 1.62). A very similar non-linear trend characterizes the belief statement "Sweden managed the coronavirus *worse* than our neighboring countries". In wave 1, respondents tended to disagree with this statement (M = 3.69, SD = 1.84), but this changed significantly in the following wave (M = 4.84, SD = 1.86), in order to partly regress toward a baseline in wave 3 (M = 4.19, SD = 1.90). These changes are statistically significant. Thus, Swedish citizens responded by continuously updating their beliefs following real-world developments and media coverage. The statistical significance has already been noted.

Other beliefs displayed significant changes over time as well. Overall, there is strong agreement that "The coronavirus is the worst crisis affecting Sweden since World War II", but agreement fell gradually from wave 1 (M = 5.33, SD=1.76) to wave 3 (M = 4.89, SD = 1.81). There is, however, much less agreement on the belief that "Sweden has been well-prepared to handle the coronavirus". These numbers were low already in the initial phase (M = 2.89, SD = 1.55), but decreased further in wave 2 (M = 2.47, SD = 1.41) before increasing somewhat again in wave 3 (M = 2.67, SD = 1.50). The belief that "Sweden has very large problems today due to corona" is prevalent among Swedish citizens, but also decreased significantly over time – from wave 1 (M = 4.97, SD = 1.61) through wave 2 (M = 4.62, SD = 1.59) to wave 3 (M = 4.07, SD = 1.58). Few believe, however, that "The coronavirus is a problem exaggerated in public discourse" and mean values remain highly stable across wave 1 (M = 2.65, SD = 1.63), wave 2 (M = 2.54, SD = 1.55) and wave 3 (M = 2.61, SD = 1.57).

Speaking to ideological belief gaps, Figure 13.1 shows how beliefs differ between left-wing and right-wing citizens – but these gaps are more pronounced with respect to perceptions of how Sweden has managed the coronavirus (bottom part of the figure) than perceptions about the magnitude of the problem (upper part). Right-wing citizens have consistently more negative perceptions of how Sweden managed the coronavirus than left-wing citizens. These ideological gaps are evident already in the initial phase – and remain consistent over time. Thus, although substantial belief changes took place over time in response to real-world developments and media coverage, there are few indications of increasing belief polarization.

Factors Influencing Beliefs about the Coronavirus in Sweden

Theories of sociotropic belief formation suggest that societal perceptions are shaped by a combination of ideological predispositions, personal experiences,

interpersonal communication and media use. Figure 13.2 focuses particularly on these factors. In addition, we include corona-specific Facebook use as a source of information. Facebook is by far the most widely used social media platform for news in Sweden. Looking at each belief statement about the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden separately, the graphs display findings from six cross-sectional regression models based on data from the first panel wave.
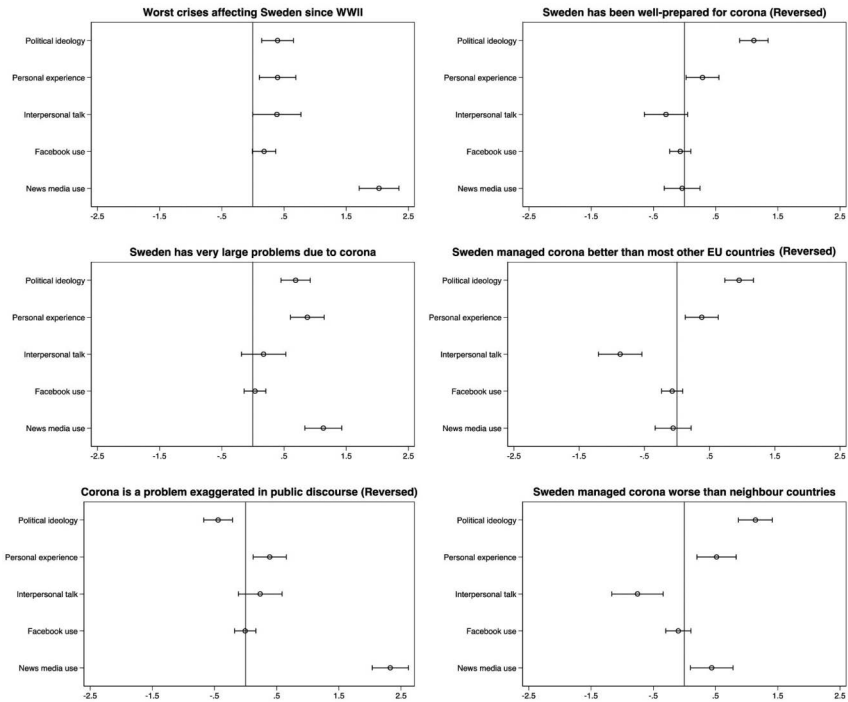

FIGURE 13.2 Factors behind beliefs about the coronavirus (unstandardized *b*-values).

Note: Estimates are based on six separate OLS regression models, with all predictors rescaled to range between 0 and 1. Dots represent unstandardized *b*-values with 95% confidence intervals. *Political ideology* is measured using a standard single-item survey question on left-right placement. *Personal experience* with COVID-19 is based on a three-item index focusing on the extent to which the coronavirus has affected respondents' (1) everyday life, (2) economic situation and (3) work situation. Corona-specific *interpersonal talk* is measured using three items on the frequency of discussions about the coronavirus with (1) family members, (2) friends or acquaintances and (3) people you don't know. *Facebook use* is measured using a single item tapping the extent to which respondents were exposed to news, information or discussions via Facebook. News media use is based on a four-item battery tapping the extent to which respondents (1) are uninterested in news about the coronavirus, (2) follow news about the coronavirus every day, (3) try to avoid news about the coronavirus and (4) try to follow news about the coronavirus as much as possible. When relevant, specific items were reversed before added into an index.

All variables are recoded to range between 0 and 1 in order to allow a comparison of maximum possible effects (see figure note for survey measures). Again, we present findings for the two dimensions of corona beliefs separately, with perceptions of the scale of the problem in the left column of the figure, and perceptions of how Sweden has managed the crisis in the right column.

A number of findings emerge from Figure 13.2. To begin with, there is a relatively consistent pattern of effects across the six belief statements. A right-wing political leaning, personal experiences and news media use tend to be related to having more negative perceptions about how the coronavirus has affected Sweden. The effect of interpersonal talk is mostly non-significant, apart from two instances where more frequent discussions about the coronavirus are related to a less negative view of how the coronavirus influences Swedish society. Using Facebook as a source of news and information about the coronavirus is, however, unrelated to corona-specific beliefs.

Furthermore, political ideology and news media use appear differently related to beliefs about the coronavirus. Where ideology matters more, news media appears as less important. For instance, ideology appears to have the strongest effect on the three belief items where the specific Swedish experience and coronavirus management is explicitly evaluated – i.e., "Sweden managed the coronavirus better than most other EU countries" ($b = 0.95$, $p < 0.001$), "Sweden managed the coronavirus worse than neighboring countries" ($b = 1.14$, $p < 0.001$) and "Sweden has been well-prepared for the coronavirus" ($b = 1.11$, $p < 0.001$). In these cases, news media use has a non-significant or marginal impact. This is in contrast to belief items focusing on the magnitude of the coronavirus crisis as a societal problem, where news media use has a substantially stronger effect than ideology – such as "the Corona virus is the worst crisis affecting Sweden since World War II" ($b = 2.03$, $p < 0.001$), "Sweden has very large problems due to the coronavirus" ($b = 1.13$, $p < 0.001$) and "Corona is a problem exaggerated in public discourse" ($b = 2.33$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, ideology and news media use appear to have clearly distinct influences on beliefs. With respect to overall perceptions of the coronavirus as a societal problem, news media use is the key factor. When it comes to assessing how Sweden managed the crisis, ideological predispositions become more important

The findings presented in Figure 13.2 are based on cross-sectional data. In Table 13.1, we turn to longitudinal analyses to estimate how different factors are related to *changes* in beliefs over time. The regression models presented include the lagged dependent variable from the previous wave of the panel, and findings are reported separately for each of the two time periods of the study.

Overall, these autoregressive models confirm the picture of an effect hierarchy noted above. Political ideology and news media use stand out as the key variables behind coronavirus beliefs, while personal experience, interpersonal communication and Facebook use turn out as less important or irrelevant.

TABLE 13.1 Effects on Sociotropic Corona Beliefs (Unstandardized b–Values)

	i) Beliefs about the Magnitude of the Problem			ii) Beliefs about How Sweden Has Managed the Virus		
	World War II	Large Problems	Problems Exaggerated[a]	iii) Well Prepared for Corona[a]	iv) Other EU Countries[a]	v) Neighboring Countries
Wave 1–Wave 2						
Lagged DV	0.46*** (0.02)	0.34*** (0.02)	0.44*** (0.02)	0.44*** (0.02)	0.47*** (0.02)	0.46*** (0.02)
Ideology	0.24 (0.13)	0.60*** (0.12)	0.03 (0.11)	0.80*** (0.10)	0.86*** (0.11)	0.79*** (0.14)
Experience	0.26 (0.15)	0.73*** (0.15)	0.42** (0.13)	0.09 (0.12)	−0.09 (0.13)	−0.10 (0.16)
Discussions	0.17 (0.19)	−0.34 (0.19)	−0.21 (0.17)	−0.23 (0.15)	−0.11 (0.17)	−0.20 (0.21)
Facebook	−0.13 (0.09)	−0.19* (0.09)	0.01 (0.08)	0.02 (0.07)	0.08 (0.08)	−0.11 (0.10)
News media	0.79*** (0.17)	0.24 (0.16)	1.03*** (0.15)	0.33** (0.13)	0.61*** (0.14)	0.69*** (0.17)
R² adjusted	0.26	0.16	0.28	0.29	0.26	0.25
N	1,898	1,902	1,901	1,906	1,894	1,900
Wave 2–Wave 3						
Lagged DV	0.50*** (0.02)	0.34*** (0.02)	0.48*** (0.02)	0.59*** (0.02)	0.55*** (0.02)	0.57*** (0.02)
Ideology	−0.08 (0.14)	0.34* (0.13)	−0.23* (0.12)	0.36*** (0.11)	0.29* (0.12)	0.35* (0.14)
Experience	0.26 (0.16)	0.55*** (0.15)	0.26 (0.14)	0.16 (0.12)	0.25 (0.14)	0.20 (0.16)
Discussions	0.24 (0.20)	0.33 (0.19)	0.06 (0.17)	0.01 (0.16)	0.08 (0.18)	0.01 (0.20)
Facebook	0.06 (0.11)	0.10 (0.10)	−0.05 (0.09)	−0.17* (0.08)	−0.02 (0.10)	−0.12 (0.11)
News media	0.74*** (0.17)	0.03 (0.15)	0.68*** (0.15)	−0.06 (0.13)	0.19 (0.15)	0.44** (0.17)
R² adjusted	0.28	0.15	0.29	0.33	0.28	0.33
N	1,763	1,766	1,699	1,766	1,762	1,765

Note: Estimates are unstandardized b–values with standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
[a] Item reversed.

For instance, ideology has an effect on changes in beliefs in nine tests out of 12. News media use has a significant effect in eight tests.

The effects of ideology and news media use are also consistent. Citizens with a right-wing ideology tend to develop a more negative view on how the coronavirus affects the Swedish society over time. The same is true for news media use. Higher level of corona-related news media use is associated with increasing negative perceptions in the subsequent panel wave. The differential effects of ideology and news media use across different types of beliefs are evident here as well, but not as crystalized as in the cross-sectional situation.

The Importance of Initial Belief Formation

Our findings so far suggest that there were some significant belief changes at the aggregate level during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic – and that political ideology as well as news media use had a significant impact on coronavirus beliefs.

How citizens form and update sociotropic beliefs in times of great uncertainty may, however, vary significantly at the individual level. Aggregate-level trends say little about individual-level dynamics. If we, for instance, look at each belief item separately and rely on a very conservative understanding of what counts as individual-level belief stability, approximately one-third of all respondents remain on the exact same position on the 1–7 scale between wave 1 and wave 3. The mean value is 32% across the six belief items, ranging from 22% ("Sweden has very large problems due to the coronavirus") to 37% ("The coronavirus is a problem exaggerated in public discourse"). This means that approximately 68% move between positions between wave 1 and wave 3.

These numbers are, however, likely to underestimate the amount of belief stability. Substantively, citizens' movements usually take place within a narrower latitude of belief acceptance. Very few respondents move from one extreme to the other. Methodologically, random measurement error is likely to generate illusory change in the sense that movements between two adjacent scale points do not necessarily mean real change.

Another way of looking at this focuses on the number of citizens who remain within a somewhat wider range of belief positions formed initially, compared to those who convert from one side of the scale to the other. By collapsing the original 7-point scale into a 3-level variable which distinguishes respondents who believe a specific statement is *not true* (value 1–2 on the original scale), *neither true nor false* (3–5) from those who think it is *true* (6–7), individual-level stability increases substantially. Doing so increases belief stability between wave 1 and wave 3 to approximately 59% across the six items. This means that about 40% of the sample moves between positions over time. In total, only 4% represents conversions – i.e., respondents moving from one endpoint of the scale
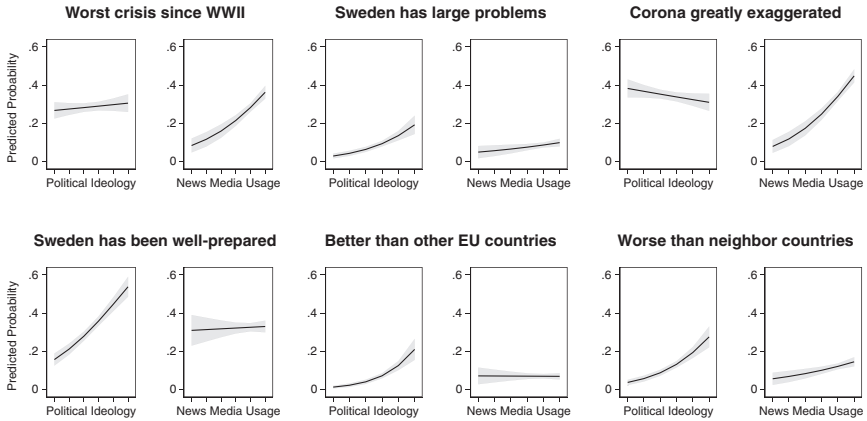
FIGURE 13.3   The effect of ideology and news media use on belief maintenance (predicted probabilities).

Note: Predicted probabilities from six logit models controlling for personal experience, interpersonal talk and Facebook use.

to the other (from *not true* to *true*, or vice versa). Thus, changes are certainly within a latitude of acceptance.

Figure 13.3 focuses on how the two most important factors from the previous analyses – ideology and news media use – influence belief maintenance over time. More specifically, the figure displays the probability that citizens initially form and consistently hold on to a negative belief on how the coronavirus has affected the Swedish society, throughout the three panel waves. Findings come from six logit models controlling for personal experience, interpersonal talk and Facebook use. Again, the top row of the figure shows findings for perceptions about the magnitude of the coronavirus as a societal problem, while the bottom section focuses on perceptions about how Sweden has managed the virus.

Taken together, both ideology and news media use are related to holding on to a negative belief formed in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The strength of the effects varies across items, however. In some cases, the impact of ideology is substantial. The probability of holding on to the belief that Sweden has not been well prepared to handle the coronavirus increases approximately from 0.2 to 0.6 along the left–right ideology scale. Correspondingly, news media use increases the probability of consistently seeing the coronavirus as the worst crisis affecting Sweden since World War II from about 0.1 to 0.4.

Taken together, Figure 13.3 largely supports previous findings that ideology and news media usage have somewhat distinct effects on corona beliefs. While news media use is more clearly related to negative beliefs of the magnitude of the problem, ideology matters more with regard to how Sweden has managed the crisis. However, ideology and news media use matter not only for what

beliefs people have about the coronavirus, but also for the likelihood of holding on to these beliefs.

Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter has focused on sociotropic belief formation in times of crisis and great societal uncertainty. How do citizens form and update perceptions of the "world outside" under such unusual and turbulent circumstances as the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic? Moreover, the chapter focused specifically on the Swedish case, which gained significant attention world-wide following the Swedish way of handling the coronavirus. When most countries imposed large-scale lockdowns and heavy restrictions, the Swedish strategy led by the *Swedish Health Authority* (PHA) relied much more on voluntary social distancing. At the same time, Sweden was severely hit by the coronavirus. The virus spread rapidly and mortality rates became exceptionally high compared to many other comparable countries – not least Denmark, Finland and Norway. How citizens make sense of a pressing societal issue under these extraordinary conditions has been the key question of this chapter. Let us therefore briefly highlight the main findings presented here.

First, in response to the dramatic real-world developments and intense media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, most citizens formed and updated their sociotropic perceptions continuously. Beliefs about how the coronavirus affected Swedish society formed early, but displayed substantial aggregate-level changes over time. While ideological belief gaps were distinct, left-wing and right-wing groups tended to update their perceptions in similar ways in response to real-world events and developments. At the individual level, however, it is clear that belief changes took place within a narrower latitude of acceptance. Very few citizens converted from one belief position to another.

Second, two individual-level factors stand out as particularly relevant for understanding sociotropic coronavirus beliefs: ideology and news media use. Neither corona-specific personal experiences, interpersonal talk nor Facebook's use appears to have any consistent impact on societal-level coronavirus perceptions. Rather, sociotropic perceptions were driven by citizens' political identities and news media use. To some extent, these two factors appear to have differential impacts on beliefs: while news media use was more clearly related to perceptions about the magnitude of the coronavirus as a societal problem, ideology played a larger role for perceptions about how Sweden had managed the virus. These effects were evident not only in the cross-sectional case, as ideology and news media use also influenced changes in beliefs over time.

Third, although belief changes took place over time, most citizens held on to perceptions formed in the early phase of the pandemic. As such, overall impressions of how Sweden was affected by the coronavirus were formed at the outset and remained within a narrow latitude of acceptance over several

months. Ideology and news media use also influenced such belief maintenance. The more right-wing a person and the more he/she closely follows news coverage of the pandemic, the higher the likelihood of forming and holding on to more pessimistic coronavirus perceptions.

In sum, the main take-away of this chapter concerns the role played by political ideology and news media use in the formation and updating of societal beliefs – especially in comparison to other sources of information highlighted by the sociotropic belief formation literature. Real-world perceptions about societal problems and collective experiences tend to be shaped by fundamental political identities and/or cues from the news media first and foremost. When issues are salient and media coverage is intense, these factors are particularly important not only in the belief formation process but also for maintaining and updating these beliefs over time.

Acknowledgment

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