

ARTICLE

# Crisis, Rhetoric and Right-Wing Populist Incumbency: An Analysis of Donald Trump's Tweets and Press Briefings

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## Abstract

How do right-wing-populist incumbents navigate rhetorical strategic choices when they seek to manage external crises? Relevant literature has paid increasing attention to the role of 'crisis' in boosting the electoral success of right-wing populist candidates. We know a lot less about the rhetorical strategies used by right-wing populist incumbents seeking re-election. We draw on literatures on populism, crisis management and political rhetoric to conceptualize the rhetorical strategic choices of right-wing populist incumbents in times of crisis. We propose a framework for the choice of rhetorical strategy available to right-wing populist incumbents and illustrate it with a qualitative content analysis of Trump's tweets and White House press briefings during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We find limited rhetorical adaptation to crisis and high degrees of continuity with previous rhetoric grounded in right-wing populism. This challenges prevalent assumptions regarding the likelihood of incumbent rhetorical flexibility in the face of crisis.

**Keywords:** elections; political rhetoric; crisis; populism; COVID-19; Donald Trump; Twitter

Recent research on right-wing populists has often focused on their paths to power and the causes and consequences of their electoral success. We know a lot less about the rhetorical strategies used by right-wing populists once they are in power and seek re-election (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016; Verbeek et al. 2017). One of the greatest challenges for incumbents, including for right-wing populist incumbents, is the management of large-scale, external crises. When such crises occur during an electoral campaign, they are often consequential for election outcomes. *Crisis*, whether real or perceived, is central to populist rhetoric across the

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political spectrum (Agerberg 2017; Brubaker 2017; Caiani and Graziano 2019; Carreras 2017; Handlin 2018; Homolar and Scholz 2019; Moffitt 2015; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). However, large-scale, external crises need not fit with what populist incumbents offer and may adversely affect their electoral chances (Ahlquist et al. 2020; Brubaker 2017).

How do right-wing populist incumbents react to such crises? How is their rhetorical strategy affected by them? Following Arjen Boin et al. (2016: 5–6), we define crises as situations that combine (perceptions of) threat to key values, institutions and everyday life with an urgency to ‘do something’ quickly and unpredictability about how the threatening situation evolves and is supposed to be handled. By rhetorical strategy we mean ‘the purposeful assemblage of arguments for a particular occasion and setting in light of its anticipated effects and by means of available techniques’ (Martin 2015: 29). We focus on crisis communication and the required rhetorical strategic choices as the backbone of overall crisis management. When crisis occurs during an electoral campaign, incumbents’ rhetorical strategies play a central role in balancing crisis response with managing electoral expectations. Finally, following an ideational approach, we understand populism as a type of discourse in which particular ideas, especially anti-elitism, are combined with transgressive rhetorical styles (Canovan 1999; Hawkins et al. 2019; Maurer and Diehl 2020; Mudde 2004; Rooduijn 2014). In right-wing populism, anti-elitism and transgressive rhetorical style are complemented with ‘thicker’ political ideas focused on the exclusion of cultural, religious, linguistic and/or racial minorities (Bonikowski 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013).

Our analysis is based on two generalizable assumptions: that, first, like other incumbents, right-wing populist incumbents try to maximize their chances for re-election and that, second, they choose their rhetorical strategies accordingly. Based on literatures on political rhetoric and incumbent electoral behaviour, we may expect right-wing populist incumbents to adapt their rhetorical strategy to a crisis to mitigate mid- to longer-term electoral risks (Ahlquist et al. 2020; Boyne et al. 2009; Cheibub and Przeworski 1999; Hager and Hilbig 2020). However, we suggest that rhetorical adaptation may be constrained by two interconnected factors – the existing electoral platform and voters’ expectations of consistency – which incentivize right-wing populist incumbents to continue previous rhetoric even if this damages their electoral prospects. This can explain fine-grained movement between adaptation and continuity as leaders navigate concurrent and contrasting incentives.

How did Donald Trump navigate these incentives in the USA? Standard crisis response rhetoric, focused on precision, cooperation, science and empathy, contradicted Trump’s right-wing populism, which had been dominated by anti-elitist, anti-science positions, exceptionalist and exclusionary rhetoric, and aggressive criticism of his political opponents. Based on a qualitative content analysis of tweets and White House press briefings from March to May 2020, we find limited evidence of initial rhetorical adaptation. While Trump reluctantly acknowledged the crisis, his rhetorical strategy quickly centred on wishing it away, on discursively replacing its dire material consequences with increasingly over-the-top optimism and outright lies while allocating blame for failures of crisis management elsewhere. This indicates the pervasiveness of tried and tested political ideas and style in

shaping a right-wing populist incumbent's rhetorical strategy. It suggests that expectations of adaptation to crisis based on accountability concerns and electoral risk may be misplaced for right-wing populist incumbents.

### Right-wing populism and rhetorical strategy

Different authors disagree whether populism is best understood as a strategy of political mobilization (Weyland 2001), a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008) or a type of discursive, sociocultural frame (Aslanidis 2015; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Rooduijn 2014). Despite differences in approach, scholars usually identify shared features – that is, that populism is a type of discourse which combines ‘thin’ ideational commitments with a particular type of rhetoric (Hawkins et al. 2019; Mudde 2004). This approach is well suited to empirical analysis because it is easily operationalizable (Mudde et al. 2017: 39) and allows a combining of the ‘thin’ veneer of populism, especially its anti-elitism, with context-specific, ‘thick’ political ideas (Mudde et al. 2017: 30). Populists claim to promote the interest of a virtuous ‘people’ by curbing a dangerous ‘other’, especially corrupt elites, which constitutes a threat to the people’s sovereignty. Populists challenge the dominant order, give voice to the collective will and promise a new order that resonates with the longings of the ‘people’ (Moffitt 2015; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Rooduijn 2014). Populists use a transgressive rhetorical style that allows them to portray themselves as ‘authentic’ outsiders, and that is often direct, emotional and indelicate (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; McDonnell and Ondelli 2020; Montgomery 2017). To supporters, this style signals a commitment to protect their interests even when it requires breaking rules (Oliver and Rahn 2016).

We focus on populists on the (far) right of the political spectrum (hereafter: right-wing populists) who complement this ‘thin’ veneer with a set of exclusionary political ideas. They advance a racialized, nativist view of the ‘people’ that perceives cultural, religious, linguistic and racial minorities as threatening (Bonikowski 2017; Canovan 1999; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). They attack ‘out-of-control’ government while maintaining economically interventionist and authoritarian, socially conservative positions (Lacatus 2019; Mudde 2007). Some right-wing populists reject mainstream scientific expertise as part of their opposition to an establishment that includes supposedly liberal-leaning scientists and technocrats (Callahan et al. 2021; Mede and Schäfer 2020; Rutledge 2020).

### *The effects of external crisis on right-wing populist rhetorical strategy*

How does the advent of a crisis affect the rhetorical strategy of populist incumbents? Contrary to literatures on political rhetoric and crisis management, we suggest that populist incumbents cannot simply flexibly adapt their rhetorical strategy to large-scale, external crises. Instead, we argue below that populist incumbents may be limited by two factors: underlying political ideas and voter expectations that incentivize a ‘homestyle’ rhetorical strategy (Druckman et al. 2020: 24). This creates a problem if appropriate responses to the crisis contradict the populist’s previous positions.

The concept of ‘crisis’ is contested (Ansell et al. 2014; Gundel 2005). As we described above, our definition of crisis has three components: (perceptions of) threat to key values, institutions and everyday life; the urgency to ‘do something’ quickly against this (perceived) threat; and pervasive uncertainty about how it evolves and should be handled (Boin et al. 2016: 5–6). These three elements combine material factors with rhetorical ‘levers’ that actors can pull for strategic purposes. Crises exert pressure on incumbents to frame and manage them, but they may also provide opportunities for political gain. They can disrupt ‘politics as usual’ to directly affect what voters need and want – that is, their interests, livelihoods and primary concerns (Ahlquist et al. 2020: 2; Carstensen 2017: 140). As Ansell et al. (2014: 9) write, in a crisis, ‘people expect their leaders to ... provide an authoritative account’ of what is going on, why it is happening and what is being done to avert negative effects. Thus, crisis management consists of ‘actual’ response policies as well as, and interwoven with, crisis ‘meaning-making’ through rhetoric (Masters and t’Hart 2012: 762). Communicating crises ‘constitutes a crucial battleground for stakeholders in the political and policy struggles that major disruptions elicit’ (Masters and t’Hart 2012: 759). What the incumbent *says* makes up a considerable part of overall crisis management and is consequential for voter evaluations of the incumbent’s performance (Hatcher 2020), especially as the responsibility for crisis-response policies often remains shared among several actors across government, even as media and voter attention is focused on political leaders (Boin and t’Hart 2003: 547).

It is often suggested that populists thrive on crisis and crisis narratives (Brubaker 2017; Caiani and Graziano 2019; Homolar and Scholz 2019; Moffitt 2015; Rooduijn 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2018), as crises bring urgency to their diagnoses (Aslanidis 2015: 99; Pirro and Taggart 2018: 257). Once in office, populists may, rather than address whatever crisis (narrative) brought them electoral success, seek to perpetuate it to sustain their appeal. This may be done by switching the identified ‘crisis’, or by extending its domain and scope (Moffitt 2015: 207). However, this is challenging in a crisis not of their own making, especially if the nature of the crisis and/or required responses do not match with the incumbents’ political positions (Brubaker 2017: 374). Importantly, with the COVID-19 pandemic, we focus on a large-scale, external crisis, more comparable with natural disasters than with, for example, Trump’s self-made ‘Access Hollywood’ crisis (Edwards 2011).

Like other political actors, populist incumbents in principle have considerable leeway in flexibly choosing and changing their rhetorical strategy. Faced with expectations to offer an authoritative crisis narrative, they may therefore choose to (re)frame the crisis, justify, claim credit for or otherwise communicate ideas and policies in hopes of garnering sufficient public support (Ansell et al. 2014; Boin et al. 2009; Condor et al. 2013: 2; Rogowski and Stone 2020: 328). They may tailor their rhetoric to a specific audience or context, side with one audience, appeal to unity or remain ambiguous (Condor et al. 2013: 18; Tomz and Houweling 2009). Given this range of options, adapting rhetorical strategy to crisis may be expected to mitigate electoral risks and pursue opportunities for political gain.

In the short term, incumbency advantages may offset ineffective crisis management as citizens look to their leaders for compelling crisis narratives and/or

response policies (Ansell et al. 2014; Druckman et al. 2020; Mueller 1973). However, crises do not consistently make it easier for incumbents to convince voters of their interpretations of events (Masters and t'Hart 2012: 760). In the longer term, popular support for incumbents depends on the (perceived) quality of crisis management, of which, as outlined above, rhetoric is a crucial part. This presumably holds more to the extent that the crisis (increasingly) affects material, economic conditions, livelihoods and voter preferences (Ahlquist et al. 2020; Cheibub and Przeworski 1999; Hager and Hilbig 2020). When things go badly, incumbents are obvious targets of blame for failures of crisis management (Masters and t'Hart 2012: 760).

If rhetorical adaptation increases the overall quality of crisis management, and thereby mitigates electoral risks and presents political opportunities, we might expect populist incumbents to seek a fit between the nature of the crisis, their crisis response policy and their rhetoric. Indicators for rhetorical adaptation might include relying on experts and bureaucrats to guide crisis communication, promoting non-partisan solutions and expert taskforces, stressing togetherness and social cohesion, signalling empathy for the weak and the sick, praising the bravery of first responders and essential workers, or focusing on practical problems and solutions (Boin and t'Hart 2003; Hatcher 2020; Jong and Dücker 2019). Citizens would be 'framed as statutorily responsible for the nation', which 'contrasts rather sharply to campaigns, where politicians appeal to voters' quotidian needs (as private persons) or cast them as observers' (Hart et al. 2002: 425).

However, we suggest that populist incumbents are limited in their flexibility to adapt their rhetorical strategy to external crisis by two factors. First, to specify their rhetoric, incumbents use underlying ideas that define their platforms and presumably speak to voters (Billig 1991: 43–44; Finlayson 2007: 552; Martin 2015: 26). For right-wing populists, underlying ideas involve the anti-elitist, anti-science and exclusionary positions that brought them electoral success in the first place. Depending on the degree or depth to which the incumbent believes in these ideas, we may formulate two slightly different expectations. On the one hand, because they fully believe in these ideas, they may be unwilling to abandon them even when faced with information to the contrary (Ansell et al. 2014: 6). This would imply consistent continuity with previous rhetoric – even large-scale, external crisis does not change the message. On the other hand, incumbents may also simply *prefer* these ideas to different degrees – for example, because they have already once survived the electoral test (Jerit 2004). This suggests that limited forms of adaptation may be possible depending on the crisis's scale and impact. In either case, populist incumbents may not adapt their rhetorical strategy to crisis although doing so would produce electoral benefits.

Second, the populist incumbent's flexibility to adapt is also limited by voters' expectations of consistency. Inconsistency has negative electoral effects on approval, trust and leadership perceptions (Sorek et al. 2018). Inconsistent incumbents have a harder time convincing the electorate of their authority, character or suitability for the presidency, including at an emotional level (Jerit 2004: 568). This is problematic for populist incumbents whose electoral strategy hinges on continued supporter mobilization. Consistency expectations can be conceptualized differently: some focus on the alignment of political rhetoric, and public and private personas,

which was particularly the case for Trump (Hahl et al. 2018). For incumbents, consistency can also relate to the (mis)match between rhetoric and governmental policy. We may expect rhetoric to match response policies to increase crisis management effectiveness, for example (Hatcher 2020). However, mixed strategies, such as saying and doing *different* things while seeking to obfuscate inconsistencies, may also be possible to some extent (Ismail et al. 2019; Liu et al. 2011; Stier et al. 2018). Finally, the candidate's previously held positions matter for voter assessments of consistency (Ahlquist et al. 2020: 2; Luebke 2020). High thresholds are associated with switching core positions even when crisis hits (Hummel 2010; Sorek et al. 2018: 660–661). The populist incumbent might therefore favour consistency with past rhetoric and explain the crisis in familiar terms – for example, by blaming elites for its onset or (mis-)management.

### ***Trump's rhetorical strategy and crisis***

COVID-19 presented the Trump campaign with a challenge – the crisis and the government's response did not easily match Trump's tried and tested right-wing populism. Given concurrent incentives to adapt and continue existing rhetoric, what effects would we expect a large-scale, external crisis to have on Trump's rhetorical strategy?

In the USA, the rise in support for right-wing populism, and Trump's variant in particular, is often understood as a 'Jacksonian' revolt against supposedly misguided, corrupt elites, and linked to the Tea Party movement (Lacatus 2020). 'Jacksonianism' is motivated by 'resentment of the well-bred, the well-connected, and the well-paid', by mistrust in the motives and methods of government and revolt against the political order (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Lowndes et al. 2017). As a candidate, Trump railed against what he characterized as morally flawed, 'liberal' ideas (Jamieson and Taussig 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016). He spoke of the 'American people' having everything to lose from trusting corrupt elites who had led them into crisis (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018; Lacatus 2019). He opposed 'big government' and helping 'freeloaders' – including immigrants, lower-income earners and the young (Skocpol and Williamson 2016). He promised to establish a new order that resonated with the 'true people' (Tucker et al. 2019; Weyland and Madrid 2019). Importantly, Trump's populism has been characterized by a disregard for scientific processes and results contradicting his positions, in favour of blanket scepticism vis-à-vis mainstream experts perceived as part of the elite (Callahan et al. 2021; Mede and Schäfer 2020; Rutledge 2020; Ylä-Anttila 2018).

Trump's rhetoric has been marked by an idiosyncratic delivery style and aggressive language (Lacatus 2020; Wang and Liu 2018). He has preferred to score political points rather than appeal across the aisle even when doing so might have benefited his agenda (Jamieson and Taussig 2017). Once in office, Trump continued this rhetorical strategy, which reflects a populist tendency of governing as permanent campaigning (Müller 2017: 43). This proved successful with key supporters (Tucker et al. 2019). It kept his polling numbers steady at rates that meant renewed electoral victory was within reach, and presumably therefore also dominated his re-election campaign (Lacatus 2020).

We might expect Trump to adapt this baseline rhetorical strategy insofar as his electoral support depends on the (perceived) quality of crisis management, of which rhetoric is an important part. While it is possible that Trump may not have been willing or able to choose strategically what he says – because of his worldview or mental disposition (Drezner 2020), for example – we assume that Trump was capable of considering what might best serve his electoral interests. The Trump administration was focused on campaigning, and Trump consistently considered his choices in terms of electoral gain, seeing himself as uniquely flexible in approach (Woodward 2020). This upholds Trump's personal responsibility for these choices. It facilitates generalization and comparison to other political leaders who, while they may not share Trump's beliefs or character, are grappling with similar incentives for adaptation and/or continuity in the face of crisis.

Evidence of adaptation could be seen in the extent to which the standard crisis script replaced Trump's rhetoric, or other ways in which he demonstrated responsiveness or directly engaged with the crisis and its management – for example, the rhetorical promotion of taskforces consisting of bipartisan or non-political experts (Hatcher 2020; Traber et al. 2020: 48). Such adaptation was inconsistent with the ideas underlying Trump's tried and tested rhetorical strategy, however, which might demobilize supporters. He had endorsed conspiracy theories and 'alternative facts', and interpreted research-based opposition as partisan and biased. Crisis communication relying on exactly those political opponents, experts and scientists he had previously derided would betray his populist ethos. Key supporters might be alienated because they could no longer distinguish Trump's anti-elite, anti-science opposition from the political establishment (Heinisch 2003:102).

## Methods and data

To examine Trump's rhetorical strategic choices, we offer a case study centred on the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2 March to 3 May 2020. This timeframe captures the transition from electoral campaigning in early March, immediately prior to the recognition of COVID-19 as a pandemic, to the realization that a response was necessary and the choice of what this response would be. Given the pandemic's impact on US voters across all regions and social strata, it presents a least-likely case for continuity with rhetoric that runs counter to effective crisis management. It allows us to probe into the conditions limiting the right-wing populist incumbent's rhetorical flexibility. The case is useful to investigate rhetorical choice dynamics, not least because the US political system incentivizes incumbents to prioritize them (Stuckey 2010). Notably, despite its idiosyncrasies, the case may be illustrative of rhetorical strategic choice dynamics of right-wing populist incumbents elsewhere. COVID-19 will continue to impact political, social and economic life, and thus challenge incumbents to integrate it in their rhetorical strategies in ways that do not impede their re-election chances.

We perform qualitative content analysis on tweets from @realDonaldTrump and Trump administration press briefings (Table 1; for similar approaches: Lacatus 2019; Stier et al. 2018). The inclusion of two types of textual data increases confidence in our analyses of Trump's rhetoric. Coding was carried out using NVIVO, a computer-based content analysis software that generates qualitative and quantitative

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Sources for Textual Data

	Press briefings	Twitter
Time frame	2 March 2020–3 May 2020	2 March 2020–3 May 2020
Identified themes (nodes)	279	264
Coded items	245 paragraphs	582 tweets
Total units	258 paragraphs delivered by Trump in 9 press briefings	590 tweets from @realDonaldTrump

data after coding text (QSR International 1999). The Online Appendix includes details on coding schemes, frequency tables and inter-coder reliability.

Press briefings consist of daily updates on the administration's policy in response to the pandemic, intended for traditional media. We selected nine press briefings distributed equally across the period under investigation and focused on Trump's remarks. By contrast, Twitter has become a tool for politicians to communicate directly with the public, which populists tend to favour over 'corrupt' mainstream media (Clarke and Grieve 2019; Ernst et al. 2019; Stier et al. 2018). Through his personal Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, Trump targeted not only other Twitter users, but also traditional media reporting his Twitter activity. Until the account's suspension in 2021, it proved a rich source on presidential decision-making, policy views and personal opinions.

### COVID-19 and Trump's rhetorical strategic choices

Trump's press briefing statements and his Twitter account demonstrated a rhetorical strategy that grappled to take a position on COVID-19 consistent with both (1) the administration's overall crisis management and (2) Trump's interest to advance his electoral campaign (Figures 1 and 2). These incentives might not appear contradictory – an appropriate, policy-consistent rhetoric could decrease electoral risks because it contributes to effective crisis management (Traber et al. 2020: 48). However, as outlined, rhetorical strategic choice might be limited by incentives to consistency with previous rhetoric.

Trump's rhetorical strategy was dominated by the same four themes, although their relative prevalence differs depending on the channel (Figures 1 and 2): COVID-19 and presidential crisis management, campaigning, media reporting and exceptionalist-nationalist rhetoric. Indeed, how these themes were presented was largely consistent with previous rhetoric both in content and style. Press briefings contain more evidence of discontinuity – that is, rhetorical adaptation – than Trump's Twitter activity. This may indicate a bifurcated rhetorical strategy as pressures to adapt are answered only in some settings.

### COVID-19 and crisis management

As president, Trump had to lead on crisis management. To benefit overall crisis management in the face of a large-scale public health crisis, he would have had



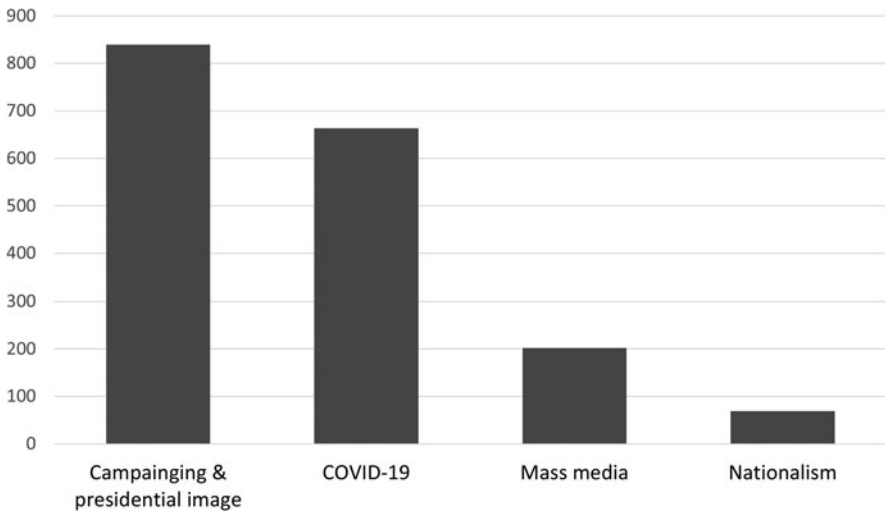


Figure 1. Main Clusters of Themes, @realDonaldTrump (aggregated values of coded nodes), March–May 2020

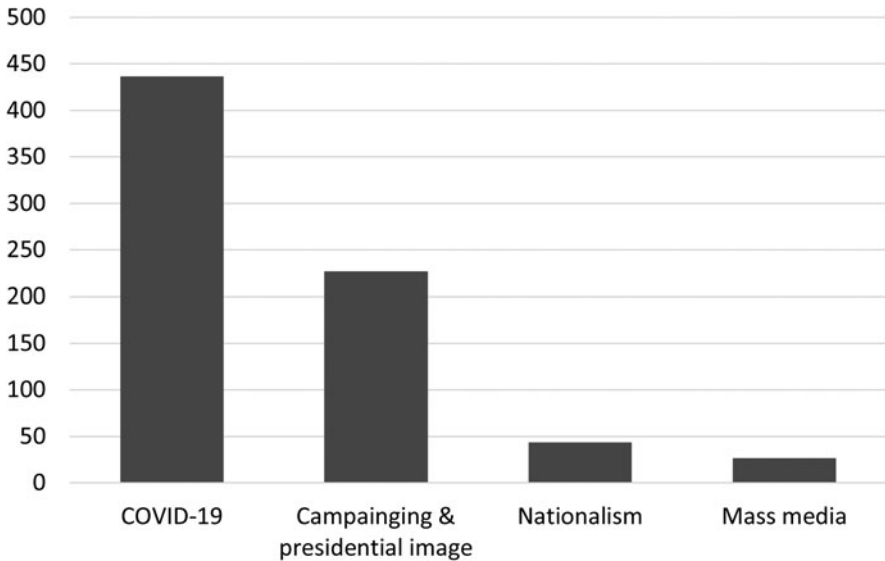


Figure 2. Main Clusters of Themes in White House Press Briefings (aggregated coded nodes), March–May 2020

to rely on the advice of public health specialists, scientists and medical researchers to support and propose response policies, relay them to the population and offer guidance on following them. However, this required promoting messages that contradicted the right-wing populist ideas underlying his previous rhetoric, particularly

his anti-elitist and anti-science positions. To mitigate this tension, Trump oscillated between consistency with his tried and tested rhetoric while projecting personal competence based on selected medical and pseudo-scientific advice.

The pandemic's increasing impact fuelled public demand for competent response policies, which exerted pressure on the administration. Correspondingly, in addition to introducing policies, press briefings in early March started to contain messages of sympathy to the American people in the common fight against an 'invisible enemy'. Trump also sought to provide encouragement regarding the country's later recovery:

We ask every American to maintain vigilance and hygiene, social distancing and voluntary use of face coverings. We're opening our country. It's very exciting to see. We have a lot of talent involved, from governors down to people that just stand there and help you with the doors. There's been tremendous talent involved and tremendous spirit from our country. The country is a great place, and it's going to be greater than ever before. I really believe that. I think there's going to be a tremendous upward shift. (Administration of Donald J. Trump 2020)

With such responsibility came the risk of attributing failure to the administration and, therefore, diminishing Trump's chances for a second term. Therefore, the actions taken by the federal government, such as closing borders, were portrayed as exceptional and overwhelmingly successful. Trump's communication also often focused on a unified, apolitical effort. Press briefings even indicated favourable views of the involvement of representatives on both sides of the aisle, and at the federal and state levels. Indeed, lauding other politicians was part of highlighting the administration's ability to encourage unity across party lines. In these regards, Trump's rhetorical strategy confirms our expectation of rhetorical adaptation, albeit sometimes using excessive praise and centring on Trump's personal leadership. It was also consistent with the Trump administration's attempts to manage some elements of the crisis competently (Woodward 2020).

Trump used conflicting information to balance this adaptation with continuity. This was evident in his selective treatment of public health information on COVID-19. He advanced policy based on medical experts and, in the same breath, made recommendations which would appeal more to his anti-science and anti-elite base. Given the president's political position and the importance of clear communication to overall crisis management, this type of obfuscation effectively thwarted his official crisis response policy. On 3 April he stated, 'In light of these studies, the CDC is advising the use of non-medical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So it's voluntary; you don't have to do it. They suggested for a period of time. But this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it.' Trump selectively used medical expertise where it aligned with his rhetoric or legitimized his competence and leadership. There is evidence to suggest this was a conscious choice, as Trump demonstrated reasonable understanding of pandemic dynamics in private conversations (Woodward 2020). Evidence that he behaved as recommended by experts, bureaucrats or even political opponents, or that he contained himself rhetorically, could indicate to his followers his own

corruption and co-optation by political rules and elites he promised to disrupt. This would risk losing their continued electoral support.

Where advice contradicted his rhetoric, it was subsumed as evidence of the ‘deep state’ working against him; as illustrated by his unhappiness with several scientific advisers who contradicted him publicly (D’Antonio 2020; Rutledge 2020). For example, he started characterizing Anthony Fauci, who was not aligned with a political party, as a ‘Democrat’ (Woodward 2020). Jared Kushner described this strategy as ‘getting the country back from the doctors’ (Warren et al. 2020). It did not prevent Trump from integrating scientific advancements to combat the virus into a personal badge of honour to substantiate his rhetoric of American exceptionalism. On 17 April, he tweeted,

Ultimate victory in this war will be made possible by America’s scientific brilliance. There is nothing like us. There is nobody like us. Not even close. I wish I could tell you stories – what other countries, even powerful countries, say to me – the leaders. They say it quietly and they say it off the record, but they have great respect for what we can do.

### ***Campaigning and personal leadership***

The choice of continuity with previous rhetoric, particularly the underlying ideas driving his tried and tested electoral agenda, is also evident in how Trump discussed the politics of crisis management and leadership. He focused on presenting his administration’s crisis management in a positive light irrespective of the crisis’s aggravation. In press briefings and tweets, Trump described a federal government both leading and not responsible for the eventual impact of COVID-19, with the responsibility for crisis management resting with individual governors and states. The federal government’s role was to assist with protective equipment, such as ventilators, tests and masks, to mobilize the military to build hospitals, or to secure materials from abroad. On 15 March (17:54), Trump tweeted, ‘The individual Governors of States, and local officials, must step up their efforts on drive up testing and testing sights, working in conjunction with @CDCgov and the Federal Government!’ By placing the burden on the states and positioning the federal government in a supporting role, he absolved his administration of any possible culpability.

This approach led to inconsistency. Part of Trump’s right-wing populist appeal required stressing his personal authority. It was not enough, however, to suggest that the federal government did a good job of supporting the states. It was necessary to demonstrate Trump’s successful leadership. Trump himself had to be presented as a well-respected leader who could bring together many strategic actors – politicians from across the aisle, researchers and private corporations – to personally lead successful pandemic management. Press briefings also presented a positive view of the Trump administration and its crisis management. More unexpectedly, he ‘spun’ all policy responses as a personal victory due to his capacity to unify political will and galvanize efforts to protect the American people and their economic interest. In Trump’s eyes, the pandemic hit the US at a moment of exceptional economic growth attributable to his skilful leadership. He promised his electorate a return

to prosperity once the pandemic ended, a triumph rooted in Trump's personal qualities. Although intended for crisis communication with the public, press briefings became a campaigning tool.

### ***Trump's attacks on mainstream media***

The last two themes – media and exceptionalism – appear less frequently across Twitter and press briefings but are crucial to Trump's populist appeal and continuity with previous rhetoric. Trump's criticism was directed at 'lamestream media' or 'fake news media', usually in reference to the *New York Times*, CNN or the *Washington Post*. This was problematic to the extent that a successful crisis response relies on the effective spread of information. He accused the outlets that his own administration had to rely on, if reluctantly, to share relevant crisis-related information and policy, of misinterpreting facts and using unreliable sources. This is a common theme for populists who may feed off (negative) media reporting to supplement outsider status. On 29 March (17:50), he tweeted, 'Polls are showing tremendous disapproval of Lamestream Media coverage of the Virus crisis. The Fake News just hasn't figured that out yet!' Perhaps surprisingly, he also criticized Fox News and encouraged his followers to watch news from more clearly Trump-supporting far-right outlets, such as One America News Network.

While Trump oscillated between adaptation and continuity, he showed a clear preference for the latter. On Twitter, Trump presented his interpretation of the pandemic as an alternative to the biased views presented in mainstream media or by political opponents. He renounced the objectivity of facts to advance a positive image of his administration's response and his effective leadership in times of global crisis. To 'expose corruption and dishonesty in the Lamestream Media', Trump interpreted reporting on his crisis response as a conspiratorial pursuit of misinformation. Trump claimed to hold mainstream media accountable by divulging that their intention was to sabotage his re-election, as in a tweet from 25 March (20:05): 'LameStream Media is the dominant force in trying to get me to keep our Country closed as long as possible in the hope that it will be detrimental to my election success. The real people want to get back to work ASAP. We will be stronger than ever before!'

### ***American exceptionalism and COVID-19 as national 'enemy'***

Trump's rhetorical response to COVID-19 was interspersed with martial analogies, nationalism and American exceptionalism. This links with right-wing rhetorical elements. Trump depicted COVID-19 as the 'invisible enemy' originating in China and waging war on the USA. Facing this foreign threat, Trump encouraged Americans to turn to patriotism and religion, finding reassurance in the promise of a great future for the country. On 18 March (14:16), he tweeted, 'I want all Americans to understand: we are at war with an invisible enemy, but that enemy is no match for the spirit and resolve of the American people.'

Trump reassured his electorate of his administration's exceptional crisis management strategy and of the admiration the USA commands in the international arena. In his view, the USA not only worked bilaterally with other nations but was also

well prepared to ‘defeat the virus’ and come out stronger. On 12 March (23:34), he tweeted, ‘We have the greatest healthcare system, experts, scientists and doctors anywhere in the world. Together, we will PREVAIL!’ He linked American exceptionalism with his personal success: ‘The whole world is watching us. You have 184 countries out there that have been hit, and now it’s probably higher than that. But they’re all watching us. They’re all watching and they’re calling, and they respect what we’re doing, so much.’ Trump’s interpretation of the crisis was increasingly at odds with the pandemic’s scale and his actual crisis response.

Similarly, foreign policy served right-wing populist goals of controlling migration to protect the American people from additional exposure to the ‘foreign’ virus. In line with his previous rhetoric in 2016 and ahead of the 2018 mid-term elections, he highlighted his administration’s successful crisis management on border control and migration-curbng. The populist rhetoric that drove his successful presidential campaign in 2016 was grounded in an ‘us versus them’ attitude towards immigrants, viewed as a threat to America’s economic growth and security. In the context of COVID-19, he reverted to vilifying migration not only as a threat to post-pandemic economic recovery, but also as a source of cross-border viral transmission (Figure 3).

### ***Adaptation and continuity over time***

During the pandemic’s first months, Trump oscillated between limited adaptation to the crisis and continuity with previous rhetoric, measured in terms of variation over time of the four themes’ prevalence. He integrated crisis management into his campaign by tying his administration’s pandemic response to voter expectations and the ideas underlying his previous platform: right-wing, exclusionary populism combined with a focus on individual leadership, permanent mobilization and anti-science, anti-expertise positions. Below, we focus on Trump’s Twitter output to highlight these dynamics, but they are also visible in the press briefings.

In February and early March, Trump downplayed the possibility of COVID-19 spreading, ostensibly not to create a ‘panic’, as he later explained (Woodward 2020), and continued his previous rhetoric (Figure 4). He opined on the elections and criticized Democratic primary candidates. Trump focused on a positive image of himself and his administration’s domestic and foreign policies, promoting his ‘Make America Great’ campaign, highlighting his supposedly impressive economic record and stressing his delivery on prior promises.

By mid-March, Trump’s Twitter account integrated more references to COVID-19. The pandemic had become a reality not easily narrated away as ‘alternative fact’. Trump showed some willingness to adapt in aligning his rhetoric with crisis management efforts. On 11 March (20:48), he tweeted, ‘Our CoronaVirus Team has been doing a great job. Even Democrat governors have been VERY complimentary!’ Despite his idiosyncratic delivery style, this limited rhetorical adaptation coincided with Trump closing in on parity regarding general approval, which he had not achieved in years (Silver 2017). But his administration’s crisis management was not presented simply as appropriate to the pandemic’s impact. Rather, all policies were made possible by Trump’s efforts to mobilize against flawed policies promoted by the Democrats. Here, we see evidence of continuity: Trump

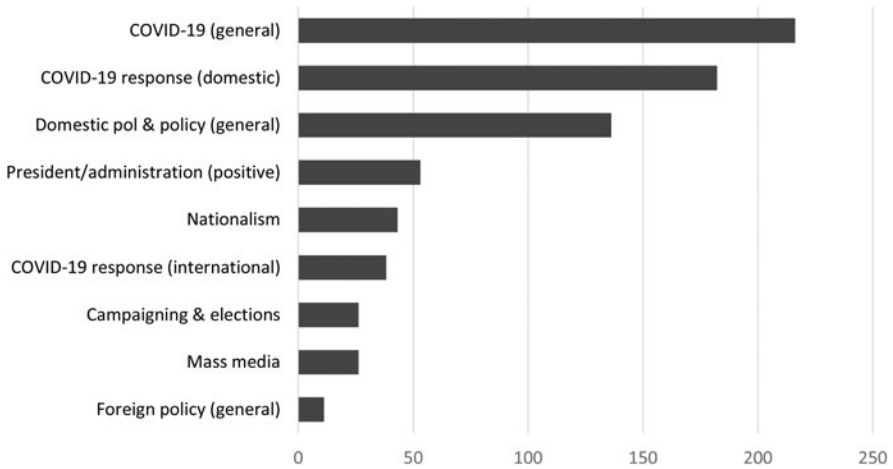


Figure 3. Disaggregated Categories of Nodes in White House Press Briefings, March–May 2020

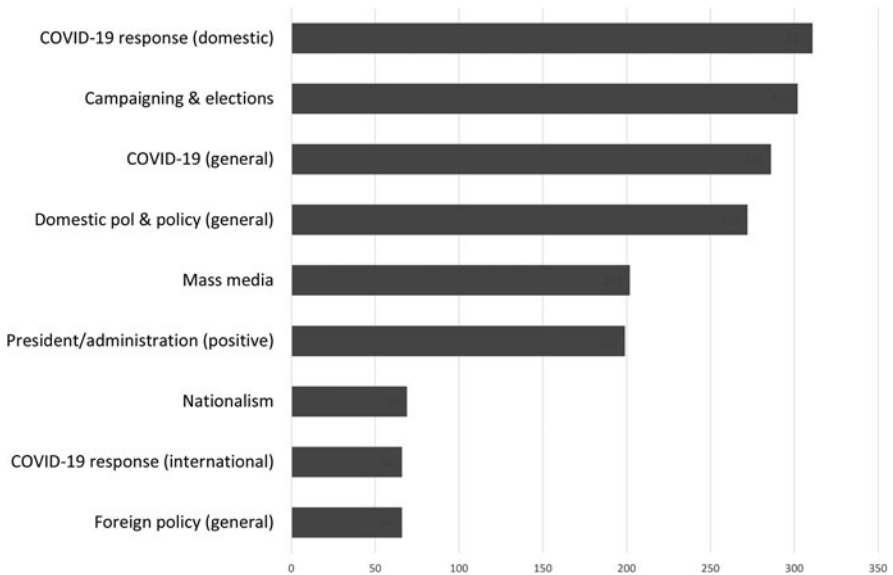


Figure 4. Disaggregated Categories of Nodes by Theme, @realDonaldTrump, March–May 2020

downplayed unity across the political spectrum in the crisis response. Similarly, Trump started to shift blame for the pandemic to China in mid-March to underline its otherness (Woodward 2020).

By April, Trump’s rhetorical strategy was fully back to business-as-usual. Rather than adapt to the impact COVID-19 was having on American society (millions of newly unemployed by late March, 10,000 deaths by 5 April), he politicized the crisis and attributed it to Democratic congressmen unwilling to do their jobs, and

incompetent Democratic governors portrayed as a threat to freedom. On 17 April (14:54), Trump tweeted, ‘Today people started losing their jobs because of Crazy Nancy Pelosi, Cryin’ Chuck Schumer, and the Radical Left, Do Nothing Democrats, who should immediately come back to Washington and approve legislation to help families in America. End your ENDLESS VACATION!’ Around the same time, Trump fully pivoted to oppose lockdowns he had previously tentatively supported (Woodward 2020). Although the period covered by our data ends before the mass demonstrations in response to George Floyd’s death, these tweets foreshadowed Trump’s reaction to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests.

Trump was limited by the ideas underlying his previous rhetoric and by voter expectations of consistency. Given his crisis management’s ineffectiveness, Trump could not profit electorally from it in the longer term and did not try. Once his support fell to the 35–40 % he held for most of his presidency, he shifted back to mobilizing supporters with the same rhetoric employed previously. This reversal to right-wing populism was remarkable precisely because the crisis was not over – the effects of the pandemic worsened throughout April. This rhetorical strategy gambled on the sustainability of partisan mobilization even as the crisis continues to have pervasive material effects on Trump’s supporters. It gambled that a large enough percentage of voters valued consistency with right-wing populist ideas more than competent crisis management.

## Conclusion

We draw on literatures on populism, crisis management, electoral behaviour and political rhetoric to conceptualize the rhetorical strategic choices of right-wing populist incumbents in times of crisis. We argue that, contrary to expectations from literatures on political rhetoric and crisis management, right-wing populist incumbents’ flexibility to adapt rhetorically to crisis is limited by their homestyle rhetorical strategy and voter expectations of consistency. To illustrate how right-wing populist incumbents navigate concurrent incentives to adapt and continue their rhetoric, and make rhetorical strategic choices, we examine President Donald Trump’s early response to COVID-19. We find that, despite incentives to adapt his rhetorical strategy to the crisis and contrary to expectations from relevant literature, Trump largely opted for continuity with previous right-wing populist rhetoric. This included anti-elitism and anti-science positions, personalized authority and criticism of media, as well as exceptionalist language. Our analysis shows the pervasiveness of tried and tested political ideas and style in shaping a right-wing populist incumbent’s rhetorical strategy, suggesting that expectations of adaptation to crisis based on accountability concerns and electoral risk may be misplaced for right-wing populist incumbents. This produces new propositions for comparative research into the rhetorical strategic choices of right-wing populist leaders elsewhere as they seek to shape compelling narratives of their in-office performances in the face of crisis.

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