Crisis Narratives in Crisis? A Comparative Investigation into National COVID-19 Narratives

Mouse D. Bennett

Old Dominion University, dmousebennett@outlook.com

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CRISIS NARRATIVES IN CRISIS?

A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO NATIONAL COVID-19 NARRATIVES

by

Mouse D. Bennett
B.A. December 2013, Christopher Newport University
M.A. December 2017, Old Dominion University

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
December 2023

Approved by:

Regina Karp (Director)
Angelica J. Huizar (member)
Matthew DiLorenzo (member)
Tatiana Rizova (member)
On January 31, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency for only the sixth time in its history. On March 11, 2020, it was stated that COVID-19 constituted a pandemic. How did countries respond? This dissertation traces the evolution of national crisis narratives in four states and assesses their relative success. The findings of this study are that pandemic crisis narratives are not generalizable to all crisis situations but require a high level of compliance to be effective in stopping the crisis. There is no formula for government success, there are no decisive variables determining outcomes. The evidence shows that COVID mitigation measures were viewed as deeply personal, and compliance evaluated from cultural and identity perspectives. Neither carefully crafted national crisis narratives nor conspiracy theories appear to shape popular response to compliance demands.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who have contributed to the successful completion of my academic journey and to the manuscript which you see before you here. I am deeply indebted to my director, Dr. Regina Karp, whose endless patience and insights were invaluable to me as I conceptualized and completed this dissertation. I extend my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Angelica Huizar and Dr. Matthew DiLorenzo, for the hours they spent reviewing and contributing to my work. I want to express my unending admiration and gratitude to Dr. Tatiana Rizova who inspired me to pursue this degree and supported me throughout as my friend and eventually as my committee member. I thank those among my friends and family who were my sounding boards, my reviewers, and my editors. Finally, to my long-suffering husband who walked through the many phases of the process by my side, I express my appreciation and love.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

On January 31, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency for only the sixth time in its history\(^1\). The extent of the threat the new coronavirus posed, exactly how it spread, and a solid account of its origins remained without consensus as it began to spread around the globe in early 2020. On March 11, 2020, WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, announced that COVID-19 constituted a pandemic\(^2,3\). He expressed that WHO was “deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction”; calling on countries to take immediate action to contain the virus\(^4\).

Governments were forced to improvise; starting from assumptions and scientific speculation they moved forward with public health measures and encountered global backlash\(^5\). This improvisation set off a seemingly catastrophic at times failure of governments to gain and hold onto public attention and trust when it was arguably imperative that they did. As the pandemic dragged on, the WHO highlighted a new growing concern, the Director General posited that the world was not just fighting a pandemic; “we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake

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\(^3\) COVID-19 is the WHO’s shorthand for the disease initially known as the “2019 novel coronavirus”\(^3\), for the remainder of this work, the virus will be referred to as COVID-19.
news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and it is just as dangerous”⁶. Even as the director made such statements, the World Health Organization was criticized for adding to the confusion with inconsistent guidance on things like wearing masks and the likely method through which the virus spread⁷.

In this dissertation, I follow the evolution and relative success of four governments as they attempted to craft a cohesive narrative for the COVID-19 crisis throughout the first 20 months of the pandemic – from the declaration of the start of the crisis in each country (in Australia the government preempted the WHO’s declaration by many weeks) to the availability of vaccines and the subsequent campaign to vaccinate the populations. The key question of this dissertation is: what factors determine the relative success of national crisis narratives? The answer is succinctly: we do not know. The pandemic seemed to present an unusual opportunity to study national crisis narratives with a universally experienced phenomenon, something one might expect to have findings concerning that would be generalizable.

Despite the crisis being in common, and common tactics in crafting narratives, the pace of the narrative changes from governments were not uniform and measuring their success by the public response produced nothing universal among the case studies. There were commonalities in how segments of the populations responded to narratives, with a typically substantial minority that remained unreachable by government narratives; however, the behavior of these minorities relative to compliance with government mitigation measures varied widely and these responses did not trend with trust in the government or institutions

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broadly, as might have been expected. Responses to government narratives from a comparative standpoint, that is creating a research design that seeks systematic ways to predict and or explain a phenomenon, seems impossible.

My research in four democracies (Japan, the United States, Australia, and Germany) ultimately illustrates that in most cases, even when governments gain and hold ground on crisis narratives, many cannot arrive at a dramatically high degree of acceptance; averaging about 60% of the population buying what the government is selling message wise. This becomes problematic when discussing ending a pandemic specifically. Autocratic governments of course have a myriad of ways of shutting down counter narratives, none of which require competing with them on their merits, which is why the country case studies are all democracies.

This study has contributed to the understanding of the unique nature of what I will term ‘natural crises, that is a government contending with something that is not constructed by governments in the first place. Pandemic narratives proved to be somewhat unique creatures, therefore the findings here are limited to analogous crises, which generally excludes crises such as terrorism or war, and includes crises such as impending natural disasters. These findings primarily wind up helping with managing expectations relative to constructing future crisis narratives concerning natural crises. The existence of any crisis is not an objective truth. There are plenty of people who ignore orders to evacuate ahead of a hurricane or decide to drive a vehicle through flood waters, deeming the government’s labeling an event a crisis to be an overreaction or thinking that the best practices in these cases do not apply to them. So too was the case with COVID-19; many of the people who accepted the existence of the virus chose not
to accept the government’s estimation of the severity of the virus, while others chose to deny the existence entirely.

There was a great deal of criticism and declarations of the utter failure of government narratives to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from the start. These critiques came from every direction: government officials, the media at large, specific pundits, outside agitators, budding politicians, and the public more generally. In retrospect, this study suggests these criticisms are overblown; the extent to which the choices of governments as they constructed these narratives and their mitigation tactics were determinate in outcomes relative to the infection and death rates is debatable and a point for future research. What the study as executed here has shown is that even the most lax and unpopular government response (as measured by public opinion polls in the countries) among those studied was able to stave off some of the worst impacts of the virus. The ever-growing body of COVID-19 literature, which will be touched on in the second chapter and intermittently throughout the case studies, consistently points to pre-existing identities as key in extending, assisting, or limiting the reach of government narratives and increasing the odds of counter narratives ringing true for a given individual, and this study’s findings are adding to that growing consensus. If identities are the only predictive factor in which segments of the population fall in with the government narrative versus reject it, there is the inherent problem with study design that identities can be fluid and are certainly not shared across countries or even consistent within them.

There are several definitions offered of narrative throughout this chapter and the literature review that follows to build first a working, and then a progressively more nuanced understanding of the subject of this study. The term narrative colloquially is used
interchangeably with ‘story’ and this is not an incorrect understanding, just a less specific one than we will progress to for this study. At their most basic level political narratives can be understood as a working justification for the actions of governments’, politicians’, or other political actors’ actions as they seek to gain approval from the populace to implement their preferred policies.

As research by epidemiologists produced new insights during the early days of the pandemic the narratives of governments necessarily evolved their narratives to better communicate the known details of the crisis and justify their chosen responses to it. The bulk of countries did not find themselves with adequate advanced plans for dealing with public response and compliance during a pandemic, nor did they have extensive knowledge about how their communications would be received. In fact, given research done during a recent pandemic, they may have assumed there would be no politicization of the response at all.

Baekkeskov and Rubin claimed in 2014 that governments can use science led arguments during pandemics and avoid politics entirely. This finding did not hold during COVID-19. In the case studies in this project a science-based narrative most certainly did not avoid politicization, in fact in many cases it seemed to invite it. The institutions of medicine and science became a part of the political debate. Baekkeskov and Rubin further reported that the media remained neutral, perhaps because the government did, during the H1N1 influenza pandemic; they found that media covered “vaccination and other pandemic response as mostly a medical and

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technical issue...coverage focused on information rather than critique”\textsuperscript{10}. It is impossible to suggest, based on the media coverage of COVID-19, that these results are generalizable to all pandemics. Looking back much further to polio or the Spanish flu might have granted more insight into what to expect, but governments were not prepared to address mass politicization from the start of the crisis.

McLaughlin et al. (2022) argued that the scientific method, a cycle of trial and error, left a huge amount of space for alternative explanatory narratives to essentially beat science to the punch\textsuperscript{11}. It was not as if science could move faster than hearsay and rumors on the internet. Public discourse was speculative in nature and in the beginning no one had clear evidence to back up their assertions; this aided in creating a public mood that one interpretation of events at that time was just as likely to be correct as another. Public institutions struggled under the enormity of the challenges the pandemic presented while (relatively) small but loud groups of demonstrators demanded that governments roll back what they saw as tyrannical measures like wearing masks, maintaining social distance, and lockdowns\textsuperscript{12}. What might have been an opportunity for an open exchange between a democratic government and its citizens transformed into a contentious political battle with firm lines in the sand.

\textsuperscript{10} Baekkeskov, “Pandemic Response.”
\textsuperscript{12} McLaughlin, “Storytelling of a Virus,” 86.
Narratives

A narrative is built around connecting events and ascribing the roles (often blame versus praise) of characters within them\(^\text{13}\). Whoever originates a narrative, the purpose is to explain something by couching it in an understandable context that walks a person to an inevitable feeling conclusion. Construction of a narrative involves intentionally highlighting some information while limiting or omitting other information to achieve a desired frame of a given issue\(^\text{14}\). Narratives are historically extremely top down in nature, coming from governments or the politically powerful, and rarely bottom up, started at the grass roots. Typically, grassroots narratives are only made popular when picked up by some prominent celebrity or political figure. Increasingly, and certainly on display during COVID-19, counter narratives can launch into the public awareness without sponsorship from the top, arising from some niche part of the internet and gaining a following with no clear attribution. A critical theorist like myself might mark this as progress in equalizing power, but the grass roots counter narratives during COVID-19 when picked up only served to amass more power for the politicians who co-opted them for their own purposes.

Governments’ official narratives must compete with outside narratives to establish theirs as the most credible (and therefore influential) one. To achieve the desired response rate among the public, they will need to exclude all competitors from earnest consideration, thereby achieving a *dominant narrative*\(^\text{15}\). Democratic countries had an additional burden to bear that


\(^{14}\) Bacon, Edwin. "Public political narratives: developing a neglected source through the exploratory case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev era." *Political Studies* 60, no. 4 (2012): 72

autocratic counterparts did not with their COVID-19 narratives, they needed to frame their actions as legitimate leadership in keeping with democratic values and freedoms. Gaining initial legitimacy was not the only challenge for governments relative to their policies; measuring progress or lack thereof was difficult when governments internally could not agree on which metrics they would use or apply any with consistency.16

This study builds on the analysis of legitimacy seeking in crisis narratives that was published in 2015 by Robert Krebs. In Narrative and the Making of US National Security Krebs detailed how the United States government owned and controlled the dominant narrative concerning the Afghanistan and Iraq wars in the wake of the 9/11 crisis. He defines a dominant narrative as one that “excludes others from the zone of respectable and legitimate.”18 Throughout COVID-19, the prospects for governments holding the dominant narrative looked exceedingly bleak when measured against the myriad of counter narratives and conspiracies, but Krebs argues establishment is not incompatible with competing narratives of “dissent existing at the margins.”19 At first glance it may be hard to argue that opposition regarding COVID-19 measures was relegated to the margins, but the hard numbers suggest that while dissenters were prominent, they were solidly in the minority in most countries.

This study draws on considerable polling data, much of which was collected from The YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project, which found that percentages of populations that had

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16 Ott, "Global Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic."
17 Krebs, The Making of
18 Krebs, The Making of, 21
19 Krebs, The Making of, 21
20 The YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project is a survey launched in 2019 and conducted annually in 23 countries exploring attitudes relative to populism, globalization, travel and technology, immigration, cultural beliefs, and the environment. Data was collected and analyzed by YouGov pollsters and University of Cambridge academics at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy. Countries: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Britain,
bought into COVID-19 counter narratives varied, but among the most popular conspiracy theories adherents topped out at around 40% in the 23 countries that they surveyed\textsuperscript{21}. The polls also found significant overlap between COVID-19 conspiracists and those who believe that climate change is a hoax and that the moon landing never took place, which helps make the case that there was a certain percentage of people primed to accept COVID-19 conspiracies, that identity matters a great deal\textsuperscript{22}. Conspiracists loudly and repeatedly proclaimed this to be a manufactured crisis with no basis in reality – making the governments’ first hurdle simply convincing people that a crisis existed at all.

**What Constitutes a Crisis?**

Rosenthall et al. (1989) defined crisis as “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances, necessitates making vital decisions”\textsuperscript{23}. People seek meaning during crisis, they need to know the nature of the threat and how it will change their lives and want to be able to project what the future holds. The nature of crisis leads to a multitude of challenges in creating the most influential narrative. In an article from 2021, Heinzel and Liese explain that “the combination of time pressure and high uncertainty during times of crisis leads to many voices that vie for the attention of policy makers and support of policy measures”\textsuperscript{24}.

\textsuperscript{22} Henley, “Survey.”
\textsuperscript{24} Heinzel, Mirko, and Andrea Liese. "Expert authority and support for COVID-19 measures in Germany and the UK: a survey experiment." West European Politics 44, no. 5-6 (2021): 1263.
In terms of existing literature, the space for this study’s analysis exists in part because crisis narratives are discussed in multiple publications hinging on a central idea - they assume crisis to be objective. This study dispenses with that idea outright. Many public policy scholars, like the afore mentioned Erik Baekkeskov and Olivier Rubin, equate government communication during a hurricane as following the same kind of pattern that it should (prescriptively) during a pandemic. Narkilar and Sottilotta (2021) explained the goal of crisis communication as “making meaning” during a crisis; governments must in an appropriate and relatable fashion explain and simplify events in order to influence people’s behavior. Whatever path governments choose to take, as mentioned before, there are plenty of people who ignore orders to evacuate ahead of a hurricane, which is just the most high profile example of the fact that crisis is not objective, but subjective. The argument that crisis is objective would lead one to believe that any government would obviously at least acknowledge that a crisis exists when a pandemic is announced, which is demonstrably not the case when one examines the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study.

During a global pandemic it is necessary for legitimate sources of information and government messages to be well understood and for potentially lifesaving instructions to be followed. McLaughin et al. (2022) explain that a crisis narrative provides stability and guidance during the following sequence of events: the target audience accepting that the relative calm has been disrupted, their experience of massive upheaval during the crisis, and dealing with the relative uncertainty of what is to come. The COVID-19 crisis had governments scrambling to

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26 McLaughlin, "Storytelling of a Virus," 90
effectively communicate necessary information to their people during this sequence and own the narrative in a sea of competitors that suggested the upheaval was being caused by governments themselves as they claimed an overblown or outright false crisis was afoot.

**Dominant Narratives and Securitization**

Given the afore-mentioned subjective nature of crisis, governments must seek to shape the public’s understanding of the situation to match their own. David Campbell (1992) established that *securitization* is a particular kind of dominant narrative utilized by governments to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public in the face of threats. A more complex definition of securitization is the process by which governments identify something as a threat, then convince the public that it is on an order of magnitude that only government action could address appropriately. Once established to be of that magnitude, the next step is to prescribe a remedy and implement it. If a government successfully frames the threat and supplies effective solutions, then counter narratives – which offer alternative analyses to that of the government during the crisis (typically without offering solutions) - should fall flat. What people claimed most consistently via counter narratives during the pandemic was that there was no threat or that governments were the real source of threat. Unfortunately, these counter narratives were accompanied on some occasions by arguments that violence against the government was the solution, but more commonly they were accompanied by no solution or plan relative to their claims.

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28 Campbell, *Writing security.*
To boost their credibility among competing messages, many governments made an appeal to science and other institutional authorities’ expertise. This strategy was challenged by the fact that authority, like crisis, is also subjective. Authority is a voluntary deference to an entity or person viewed as qualified and legitimate. A percentage of the public decided that scientific experts were not legitimate, neutral, or reliable authorities on the topic of COVID-19. Heinzel and Liese (2021) found that invoking institutional authority had a polarizing effect; among some groups it strengthened support while among others it alienated actors who questioned authority or questioned the nature of expertise. In one of their studies, conducted in Germany, on average endorsements from public experts did not increase support for COVID-19 mitigation measures; in fact, in the case of endorsements from universities, it disaffected support.

Synthesizing the work of Campbell and Krebs is the most comprehensive explanation of the subject of the study so far: narratives normalize a particular truth and create consensus around it for political purposes. When a narrative achieves the status of accepted truth, in such a way to exclude others from gaining any level of credibility, it can be labeled a dominant or hegemonic narrative. Bernhardt (2004) studied strategic health narratives which focus on “scientific development, strategic dissemination, and critical evaluation of relevant, accurate, accessible, and understandable health information, communicated to and from intended

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33 Krebs, The Making of, 2.
audiences to advance the health of the public"\cite{Bernhardt2004}. In the case of COVID-19, the public separating a strategic health narrative from the larger political narrative was, for many, impossible.

Governments had a choice to make about what they identified as the threat, and that activity does not stand entirely apart from politics. There are two relevant aspects that a crisis narrative had to convey in the COVID-19 situation; the virus itself and the way it propagates is the first. The second was the variety of things a government could do to mitigate the first. The key to securitization is communicating not only what a threat is, or why it is a threat, but what it is that is being threatened; the thing, person, or persons threatened are the referent object\cite{Campbell2001}. Some states chose the referent object of individual or public health, thus securitizing the virus and making a public appeal to follow specific mitigation measures. Other states chose one or more of the following as the referent object: the economy, individual freedom, or (perhaps more ambiguously) the status quo; those states typically chose to identify the potential mitigation measures as the threat, rather than the virus itself. Some tried to walk the line, Australia for example chose to paint the virus as the threat to both public health and the economy, rather than suggesting mitigation measures were the threat to the economy that outranked public health, which was indirectly the message that the Japanese government sent.

There are many specific examples of how these choices in securitization were initially made in various countries. In the case of Sweden, which took a sort of ‘Swedish exceptionalist’ approach to the COVID-19 narrative, the State Epidemiologist justified the government’s choice of referent object by explaining that they saw human casualties from the virus as inevitable and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{Bernhardt, Jay M. "Communication at the core of effective public health." \textit{American journal of public health} 94, no. 12 (2004): 2051-2053.}
\footnotetext{Campbell, \textit{Writing security}, 498.}
\end{footnotes}
likely to be the same regardless of measures, therefore it was the economy that could be saved, not the people. Meanwhile, in Finland it was the economic costs of the pandemic that were considered inevitable, and the government sought to construct a narrative convincing the public that virus mitigation measures would not be the cause of that downturn. Some governments lead with a narrative that COVID-19 would disproportionately or only impact certain groups, as did Macron in France, where the government struggled to regain the attention of the populace to change that narrative when it proved incorrect later. In each of these cases securitization was used effectively, in some so effectively that changing course with full public buy in was all but impossible.

Government narratives at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis relied heavily on storytelling, a strategy carefully detailed in Robert Krebs book. This strategy serves the need for a crisis narrative in terms of a progression through phases of departure from the norm into an uncertain future by creating a temporal expectation through comforting promises of restoring the status quo in the near term. As the pandemic dragged on, storytelling on its own was failing as a tool to establish a dominant narrative. Governments increasingly employed narrative strategies which were complimentary, but story telling was always an integral part of the narrative.

These complementary narrative strategies included evoking values and norms, emphasizing identity politics, and appeals to nationalism. As governments faced an ever-steeper climb to contend with the changing political and economic landscape during the study

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36 Narlikar and Sottolotta, “Pandemic narratives,” 1251.
37 Narlikar and Sottolotta, “Pandemic narratives,” 1247.
38 Narlikar and Sottolotta, “Pandemic narratives,” 1247.
period of January 2020 to September of 2021 (the beginning of the pandemic to the ready availability of vaccines in wealthy countries), they employed these different strategies with varying levels of success. Being the sole voice to pierce through crisis and establish an unquestioned narrative is an intense battle, one all governments were waging against competitors with some distinct advantages.

**Counter Narratives**

Government crisis narratives in many countries struggled to achieve their aims; each new iteration needing to incorporate new scientific findings and political goals as well as account for the shifting health and economic situation in the country, meanwhile counter narratives offered stability. Multiple counter narratives, facing none of the challenges of governments in terms of evolving with science and public needs, began to arise with various levels of support. As government narratives tried to keep pace with the evolving COVID-19 crisis, those narratives were easily challenged by the relative stability that unchanging counter narratives offered. Counter narratives were able to build on long standing conspiracy theories and specifically appealed to the populist crowd\(^{40}\). In the past, traditional media was a gatekeeper of sorts, filtering what made it into the awareness of the population and becoming a mechanism that shaped what was seen as legitimate in terms of messaging and government action, but in present times the media often only serves to magnify the reach of fringe ideas wherever they arise from\(^{41}\).

The task of governments building a dominant narrative while adjusting to a public health crisis and a subsequent growing economic crisis would have been hard by itself, but many other

\(^{40}\) Heinzel and Liese, "Expert authority,” 1264.

\(^{41}\) Heinzel and Liese, "Expert authority.” 1264.
factors steadily piled on. The addition of a flurry of initially contradictory scientific studies, a 24-hour news cycle, and a mass spread of disinformation created an unprecedented storm. Further challenging were departures from official messaging from both local and prominent national government officials as counter narratives took hold among populists. Whether a given person bought into the government’s narrative did not solely measure its merits, most were actively responding to the new internet battle cry: “do your own research”.

There was relatively easy access to news from around the world and summaries of emerging scientific studies. While one might assume this was a boost to a government’s narrative efforts, from a psychological point of view too much information can be a disadvantage. Time and attention are limited, and no one can possibly take in all sources of information, thus humans resort to shortcuts and cognitive biases to aid them in understanding. In sum, the previously mentioned study by Heinzel, Mirko, and Liese (2021) adds to existing scholarship findings that people are hard wired for the current era of gathering information through memes and sound bites that are easily digestible. Further, these people will be most swayed by those that confirm a belief they already hold. Those who were more likely to ascribe authority to scientific and academic institutions were primed to accept their conclusions and the opposite holds true as well.

Narratives that run counter to mainstream consensus are called counter narratives. Often they are referred to as conspiracy theories and the two terms will be used somewhat interchangeably throughout this project as the form counter narratives took during COVID-19.

was most commonly conspiracies. There needs to be a small adjustment around the term \textit{conspiracy theory} however, before we go any further. As explained by Sturm and Albrecht (2021), what proliferated during COVID-19 was largely \textit{conspiracism}, which is “conspiracy without the theory”; that is, what we saw was conspiracy with no supporting evidence whatsoever\textsuperscript{44}. Their journal article explains that \textit{conspiracism} is not the result of one person’s delusions, rather it refers to conspiracies that are a “broadly shared and accepted version of a narrative”\textsuperscript{45}. Grounded in this explanation, the scope of the list and accompanying explanations of counter narratives throughout the case studies will generally focus on those which had a transnational following.

Unlike conspiracies like ‘no one has ever landed on the moon’ and ‘the earth is flat’, COVID-19 conspiracies were often championed from within the government itself, creating inconsistencies and elevating wild theories into the realm of broad public discourse. This created more uncertainty about the “truth” regarding the crisis. Counter narratives offered information to quell anxieties which naturally arise from crisis, with various attempts to supply alternative answers to every issue at hand from the likelihood of success of measures to mitigate the disease to the extent of the threat posed by it.

Counter narratives entered into the public record an incredible amount of \textit{disinformation} and \textit{misinformation} about the science surrounding COVID-19 and the vaccine; creating popular conspiracy theories about nefarious motives for government measures including a worldwide plot to force a global autocratic government on the people and detailing


\textsuperscript{45} Sturm and Albrecht, “Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 125.
the scope of the power of a shadowy global organization that could perpetuate a COVID-19 “hoax”. Singh et al. distinguishes between disinformation and misinformation in the following way: disinformation is knowingly spreading misleading or false narratives while misinformation is unknowingly spreading misleading or false narratives. What is commonly referred to as misinformation must then assume that most are innocent victims, and it is difficult to say what percentage of those who promulgated conspiracies were misled versus knowingly originated or perpetuated lies. What can be known is that both played a role in the successful worldwide dissemination of COVID-19 counter narratives.

Popular COVID-19 conspiracies crossed borders and cultures with surprising ease, as is detailed in the introductory chapter to the case studies. Wherever narratives began, they managed to “mutate” in such a way as to easily build on any anti-establishment sentiment in any given country; meaning that conspiracism about Bill Gates, COVID-19 vaccines, and 5G that originated in the United States managed to find itself right at home in Germany. The YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project survey found that among the most believed COVID-19 conspiracies was that the death rate of the virus was greatly exaggerated; more than 40% of people in Greece, South Africa, Poland and Mexico and between 28-38% of those in the United States, Hungary, Italy, and Germany concurred. That the virus had been intentionally created and launched by the United States or Chinese government was only slightly less popular, ranging from 13-40% of respondents, with greater proportions believing that it was China that

49 Henley and McIntyre, “Survey uncovers.”
was responsible versus the United States\textsuperscript{50}. More than 20\% of those surveyed believed that 5G mobile technology was to blame for the spread of COVID-19 or that it created COVID-19 symptoms as part of some larger government plot\textsuperscript{51}.

Counter narratives had a ready base for their acceptance at every stage of the pandemic after decades of a steady rise in polarization around scientific claims concerning climate change and vaccines as well as a global rise in \textit{populism} and anti-establishment politics\textsuperscript{52}. The anti-vaccine movement has persisted for decades, and in the case of Japan had permanently undermined the government’s ability to make vaccine recommendations via the courts in the 1990s. The movement has proved resilient to and entirely undeterred by the substantial body of medical research that affirms that vaccines are safe, effective, and valuable to managing health\textsuperscript{53}. These pre-existing conspiracy followings and platforms for dissent during the pandemic provided a challenge in every country case study.

\textit{Populism} is an ideology that pits the everyday citizens of a country against a conception of the “political elite”; the central belief is that governments are out of touch and corrupt and every institution that can be linked to them is corrupt as well\textsuperscript{54}. Populism did not prove to be a problem in every country case study, but it was certainly a substantial factor in the direction of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Henley and McIntyre, "Survey uncovers."
\item Henley and McIntyre, "Survey uncovers."
\end{thebibliography}
the counter narrative movement in the United States and Germany. Several high-profile populist or neoconservative figures picked up counter narratives and ran with them to great political advantage. Populism’s us against them argument has appeal under many circumstances but found itself particularly influential during a time when the people were being asked to adjust and sacrifice while living with constant uncertainty. Declarations that the media or government is hiding things from the populace, but this one guy in this corner of the internet just like you and me found the truth, were seen as credible “one of us” type claims by a large minority of people.

In a 2013 article, Groshek and Englebert wrote that social media helps populists to circumvent traditional, verifiable journalism, offering a platform to frame the media as part of the political elite that populists seek to overturn. The internet offered anonymity for any originators of counter narratives that desired it as well as ease of access for potential believers. Blogs, social media, and other types of online publications eliminated any barrier to quickly disseminating the kind of simplified, dichotomous version of the world that populism thrives on. Previous pandemics have all experienced counter movements, but these messages were more limited in their reach and less able to find their desired receptive audience. With a ready base and cheap methods of propagation, purveyors of counter narratives had experienced

great success before COVID-19 came along. Vogoughi et al. (2018) found that news consisting of “false information disseminates nearly ten times faster than that of legitimate news”58.

The stage was set for an intense fight for dominance in COVID-19 narratives that continues to play out years after the declaration that it was a pandemic. By the time social media giants attempted to limit the use of their platforms for dangerous conspiracism some argued that it was too late to have any significant impact on the COVID-19 conspiracy community. To include a tiny relevant ray of hope here, one study found that all may not be lost: Porter et al. (2021) reported that while years of unfettered access to social media platforms enjoyed by the conspiracy community worked in its favor, fact checking COVID-19 myths proved at least somewhat effective in a comparative study of Argentina, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Nigeria59.

Summary of Parameters of the Study

As previously explained, this dissertation is a comparative study of four country cases which examines the battle to create a dominant crisis narrative relative to COVID-19 between official governments and alternate sources (sometimes also within the government). It asks: what factors determine the relative rate of success of national crisis narratives? I define success as establishing the dominant narrative. It is challenging to draw the line as to what amount of public buy in constitutes relegating counter narratives to the margins, but fifty-one percent of the population believing the government’s narrative is a rather obvious floor and closer to sixty percent of the public seems to be a fully reasonable majority. What percent of public buy in

was achieved has been measured in polls conducted in each country relative to specific
government narratives and specific counter narratives/conspiracies.

The case studies are all democracies which are varied in, among other things size,
government institutions and health cultures: Australia, the United States, Germany, and Japan. I
do not extensively discuss health cultures beyond what is presented in the methodology
(chapter three) but there are four different health care systems, to include three different
partially or entirely public payment systems and one primarily private healthcare system,
provide another facet of diversity among the case studies. Each had concurrent crisis to cope
with, either environmental, governmental, or unrelated domestic dissent; only one of the
concurrent issues was clearly a factor in the response of the public regarding COVID-19, which
was the case of the Tokyo Olympics in Japan.

This study uses public polls primarily collected from The Cambridge YouGov Project,
Reuters, and Deutsche Welle (abbreviated to DW) supplemented by limited smaller in country
polling from reputable media outlets, to measure the prevalence and popularity of counter
narratives in public discourse and evaluate the extent to which the government established a
dominant narrative during the COVID-19 crisis. The ultimate research design, which overcame
the failures of an original design to capture and account for what it intended to (which will be
explained in the methodology, chapter three) compiles data which corresponds to something
like three phases of the pandemic.

The initial narrative is pulled from sources dating between January 2020 and August
2020 and the corresponding polling is primarily from April of 2020 and August of 2020. This sort
of phase one spans what in some countries was largely denial of the scope of the crisis, when
governments focused on a story telling narrative that this situation would be short. The next set of data comes from the second half of 2020 when governments touted future vaccines as the impending end of the pandemic, running from September to December of 2020. The public mood in the second phase balanced doubt and hope, though some veered more toward outrage, as the original tactic of three of the studied governments to lock it down and get through the pandemic quickly all began to fall entirely flat. The final set of data is from January of 2021 to September of 2021 and captures the trials and tribulations of the reality of vaccines and an intensifying struggle against anti-vaccine narratives, government rollout hiccups, and reckoning with evidence that vaccines would not, in fact, be the definitive end to the pandemic.60.

Independent variables for the study were selected in part by looking at the conclusions of early research. If we were to do a literature review of only studies conducted on and in the United States during the pandemic period in question for example, it would become clear that many consider the question of why and how counter narratives gained a foothold to be an open and shut case of political polarization61. This conclusion from a variety of studies will be

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60 Ott, Edwards, and Boonyarak, “Global responses.”
tested across the case studies and has relevance to the question to determine whether such a conclusion explains the shared phenomenon of COVID-19 conspiracism globally (spoiler alert, it does not). Iyengar and Westwood (2015) explained that from a social identity perspective, affective polarization (which refers the negative views one holds of members of opposing parties) is part of belonging to a group identity. In places where we see partisanship overlap heavily with identity there is a higher weight to affective polarization in terms of a variable than in countries where it does not so neatly overlap.

In addition, there are two more variables that logically may have proven key to government success or failure in constructing a dominant narrative; the pre-existing level of trust in the government and institutions in a given country and the number of counter narratives in direct competition with the government narrative. The discussion concerning trust as an indicator is moving right along in the COVID-19 literature, with John Agley finding that “low trust in science was substantially and significantly predictive” of whether a person was likely to endorse a narrative that was definitively or “likely to be misinformed”.

Where institutions are least trusted, as they were in Japan, one might expect the poorest outcome in terms of buy in to the government narrative, and this panned out. This was not however remotely linked to levels of compliance, as is also on display in Japan where the population was fully compliant with all mitigation recommendations from the government while simultaneously reported they trusted little to nothing the government said or did. The

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potential for this phenomenon was not necessarily knowable in advance, but the problems with using compliance as a variable was. The reasons for the exclusion of compliance entirely as a variable are enumerated and further hashed out in the methodology (chapter three) as well as mentioned in the context of the case studies. Despite excluding it as a variable, it is obviously worthy of discussion and is featured in the case studies across the study time frame.

The measure of success for government narratives relies on this compiled essential definition: a dominant narrative must assign privilege to a particular interpretation of select events, accomplish this such that no narrative is able to directly compete on merits, be set on a version of a causal timeline, and allow leaders to implement their preferred policy (and acquire the necessary resources) with *legitimacy*. Here the term legitimacy means that the citizenry acknowledges that the government is acting appropriately in light of the narrative and has the right to implement the policies that they are proposing as part of their narrative.

Multiple governments (or specific leaders of governments) chose to downplay the pandemic or to deny its existence altogether (for example President Trump of the United States, Brazil's president Bolsonaro, and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador)\(^\text{64}\). Other governments chose to jail or otherwise punish dissidents and purveyors of false information regarding COVID-19 (Turkey, China, Cambodia, Thailand, Venezuela, and Bangladesh)\(^\text{65}\). Whether they chose to securitize COVID-19 or the methods of mitigation of the impact of the virus is not relevant to the study of whether the government established the

\(^{64}\) Kenneth Roth, "How authoritarians are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to grab power," *Human Rights Watch* 3 (2020).

\(^{65}\) Roth, "How authoritarians."
dominant narrative – the dominant narrative only requires that whatever the government’s narrative, it effectively excluded all others from the realm of mainstream acceptance.

This research speaks to several literatures, but makes its strongest contribution in pointing out that there is no effective formula currently to study narratives of this kind. This is a hugely complex issue, and it is almost impossible to predict the level of buy in from the public regardless of the narrative choices of a government relative to a natural crisis. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, more than one strategy was developed here and failed to produce the kind of findings that one might hope for when a comparative study of this nature is executed. The choice in case studies proved to be an excellent spread to illustrate the lack of quantitively measured variables that explain the relative success of government crisis narratives.

What one is left with, particularly when measurable variables fall flat on their face in Japan, is only identity being a primary factor in what narrative appeals to individuals. Identity lands the findings here as perhaps best situated in constructivist literature. It will obviously add to the multi-disciplinary and ever-expanding literature on narratives specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic and perhaps crisis narratives more broadly (though with the afore mentioned limitations to analogous crises only).

The fact that securitization is discussed as well as dominant narratives broadly could situate this in critical theory literature, as the research design was initially built on the back of understandings of national crisis narratives relative to security. Without the critical theory work of Krebs on crisis narratives my work would never have come to fruition, but it departs starkly with the findings in his security crisis narratives despite the pattern of securitization being
found throughout the narratives. The likelihood is that this does little to forward things in the critical theory perspective specifically.

The final literature that this study could speak to is that of public policy, which is where my findings can contribute a “so what?”. This dissertation is a launch pad for those looking to answer questions about the failure of narratives to translate into successful compliance with government measures during the pandemic, though as mentioned I did not measure compliance due to a myriad of attributional problems. Findings point to the conclusion that governments would do well to acknowledge that a consistently large minority is inaccessible to them via narrative, but this does not necessarily prevent them holding the dominant narrative. The question becomes by how great a margin do they require dominance to achieve their aims during any given crisis? This is also an area for future research, though the margins by which a government must prevail in the case of a pandemic are straight up math determined by the epidemiology of the given contagion.

Conclusion

The existence of a crisis is not an objective truth, and even when the bulk of the public concedes there is a crisis, the extent to which they will tolerate certain measures will vary. There were people protesting the closing of schools during the polio outbreaks in France and the United States and in Switzerland people rioted in the streets when bars and bowling alleys were closed during the Spanish flu. There are important questions for further research related to the fact that the existence of a crisis is not an objective truth; given this can governments

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66 Arnold, Pandemic 1918.
reliably convince people to follow their lead during a crisis like a pandemic in great enough numbers to end it?

Governments need the public to buy in to their account of a crisis and their proposed course of action – their narrative. The necessary political goal of a government is to own the unquestioned account of the crisis, to have their narrative be the clear winner out of all possible ways of framing and communicating the threat and the necessary course of action; to achieve this is to achieve a dominant narrative. Counter narratives offer alternative versions of the event in question, departing from the mainstream consensus and directly challenging some, if not all, of the government’s narrative. The popular term for counter narratives as they related to COVID was “conspiracy theory”, but the far better term for these counter narratives is conspiracism.

During the COVID pandemic, government crisis narratives were in constant motion; each iteration needed to incorporate new scientific findings and political goals as well as account for the shifting health and economic situation in the country. Meanwhile conspiracies offered stability amidst the crisis, they did not have to adjust their narratives. The level of certainty that a clear and unchanging message offers is exactly what humans are psychologically built to seek out and the fast-moving and ever-changing crisis made government narratives vulnerable.

The findings of this study suggest that pandemic crisis narratives are not generalizable to all crisis narratives for multiple reasons, an important one is that the goal of the narrative is not just to acquire enough legitimacy to implement a preferred policy, but to achieve a level of necessary compliance to end the crisis. This study seems to demonstrate that the odds are
rather good that a government can establish the dominant narrative – relegating the alternatives to the fringes of a large minority, but a minority nonetheless. This was the case in three out of the four country case studies. Despite the failure of the fourth government (Japan) to achieve the dominant narrative, compliance levels with COVID-19 mitigation were high and caseloads and death tolls were low, a matter for future research to be sure.

This is massively interdisciplinary study. The next chapter will attempt to explain and summarize relevant literature from fields including sociology, psychology, public policy, and political science divided into relevant topics. Each of these fields contributed pieces of theory that became indispensable to understanding the nature of the quantitative and qualitative data collected. This chapter contains a primer on narratives, literature on trust in government and institutions, further information on conspiratorial thinking, constructivist and identity literature, and a review of some of the major findings in the COVID-19 narrative specific literature to date. Admittedly the COVID-19 literature, driven by both novelty and necessity, is being churned out a little too fast to be completely kept up with; therefore, there is no way that my overview could be considered comprehensive, but an earnest attempt was made to include all major findings which hit closest to home on this topic that were published prior to the completion of this dissertation.

The third chapter explains the methodology for the study and outlines the parameters for the selection of country case studies as well as the ways in which those chosen fit the prescribed parameters. The original research design is outlined, as are the reasons why it failed to achieve the aims of the study when put into practice. The chapter also explains how polls are incorporated and how polling questions were selected. After the initial research it became
necessary to include a section on what approaches seemed reasonable or intuitive to consider and yet were not appropriate to the task of answering the research question.

The chapter immediately following the methodology is an introduction to the four case studies with subsequent chapters on each individual case study covering both the evolution of the narratives and the public response. At the beginning of each country case study chapter there is a section specifically to discuss the two independent variables political polarization and trust in institutions before moving on to cover the narratives. It seems that in the only country case study where the dominant narrative failed to be established (Japan), there was a clear indicator in the pre-existing levels of trust in institutions broadly that would have predicted that as the outcome, but there were also only two fairly complementary and consistent counter narratives that achieved broad consensus and this could suggest that fewer counter narratives do hurt the government more, as was hypothesized and explained in the methodology. It is far from a definitive finding as it was only the case in one country.

The final chapter analyzes the case studies to determine how generalizable they are and whether the hypotheses panned out. The conclusion also attempts to adequately wrap up the topic, discuss the enormous potential for future research, and ponder the extent to which the research question has been answered. The original research question started down one path, but that path diverged into many and there are so many more places to go than one might have imagined from here.
CHAPTER II

THE ROAD SO FAR

Narrative as a valid subject of academic studies has been established across multiple fields since the 1970s. Government narratives, specifically, require a sort of inevitable and accessible, if not overt, logic and are imbued with specific political intention. Their design is often to reinforce people’s level of comfort and security by reassuring them that the government has things well in hand or would if the public would back them completely.

Governments deliver a one two punch when they utilize securitization and storytelling. The first strategy focuses on identifying a threat and selling the government’s solution to that threat to the general populace. Following that up, storytelling narratives during a crisis serve the purpose of reassuring the public that the crisis is temporary in nature, they are meant to be comforting and emphasize a sense of calmness and assure that there will be a swift and orderly return to the status quo. These concepts are the building blocks for this dissertation and the works they are found in will be detailed in this literature review.

This literature review beings with an introduction to narrative analysis as a form of inquiry. There is then a discussion of narrative strategies followed by an overview of relevant work that has been done on trust in government and institutions. Some relevant work on counter narratives completed before the COVID-19 era serves as a precursor to the final section, which is an overview of the growing but disjointed body of COVID-19 narrative literature. Coming after the section on COVID-19 literature, much of which has linked identity with conspiracism, literature on identity serves as a transition into the chapter on methodology as it is key in the selection of relevant variables, indicators, and case studies.
The Academic Narrative Debate

Despite decades of groundbreaking work on narratives, the debate about the veracity of claims regarding narratives and studies of them continues. There may be some narrative strategies that are considered winning for governments, but narrative studies have generally been seen as a lesser form of scholarship by political scientists. Edwin Bacon (2012) made the case that political science has made a mistake in broadly dismissing the study of narratives in favor of “the modern empiricist approach” which focuses on “classification, correlation, and functionalism”67. In discounting political actors and the impact of their narrative choices, one dismisses an entire dimension of analysis which can further understanding of a given political phenomenon68. Bacon continues the argument, “the notion that for scholars to resort to narrative explanation is unscientific threatens to spill over into the idea that the identification and study of narratives in the political world similarly lacks the methodological capacity to deliver insight”69.

Notwithstanding the controversy, ‘narrative’ is a popular word in COVID-19 literature to date, albeit often poorly defined and so overused in various forms popular media that it has been reduced to a buzz word, which threatens to lend credence to the questions of scholars concerning the viability of narrative studies. Narratives are not only able to be studied, but it is also important that they are studied by political scientists; a narrative is an inherently political act and that is key to understanding government messaging in the case of crises70.

67 Edwin Bacon, “Public political narratives: developing a neglected source through the exploratory case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev era,” Political Studies 60, no. 4 (2012): 769
68 Bacon, “Public political narratives,” 769.
69 Bacon, ”Public political narratives,” 769.
70 Bacon, ”Public political narratives,” 769.
Roland Barthes was among those who broke ground on narrative as a style of analysis, explaining both the ubiquity of forms of narratives and a structure under which to analyze them. Barthes describes the way in which narratives are constructed as ordered and intentional; they are designed to guide a person through them in a particular fashion so that they arrive at certain meanings. Every narrative begins with an intent and progresses with a frame. In Robert Cox’s words: “theory is always for someone, and for some purpose.”

A Primer on Government Narratives

David Campbell (1992) argued that that purpose of government narratives is inherently political; Bacon and myself continue in this vein. He challenged the idea that ‘danger’ is an objective term, and arguably if it were, we would expect to see states with identical security priorities and strategies. If the security focus of a state were always based in objective and material circumstances one would assume every government would have a standing military that was the same size relative to the country or their means for example, but we know that is not the case. Governments select their threats; that is officials form an argument that a given phenomenon is a threat in need of adequate attention and resources while leaving other similar or objectively existential threats unattended to. As Campbell explains “The key idea underlying securitization is that an issue is given sufficient saliency to win the assent of the

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74 Campbell, *Writing Security*. 
audience, which enables those who are authorized to handle the issue to use whatever means they deem most appropriate”75.

Campbell (1992) argues that the way in which a state interprets danger and constructs it into threats is rather unique to the state. The interpretation and construction are in the context of the identity of the state and reciprocally form the state’s identity, justifying its policies and existence as a separate entity in the world76. In his book Writing Security, Campbell specifically theorizes that the United States has built their identity around threats, and that without something to be in opposition to, they have no clear identity77. Using the concept of securitization, one can see that individual states have their own lens through which they interpret danger, which helps to account for the variability between state approaches to COVID-19 policies and their narratives. While this is a relevant insight to note, it is not the variability of approaches that this dissertation seeks to account for, but the variability in success in owning the dominant narrative. Securitization is a tool that governments use to establish the dominant narrative and respond to a crisis, but we see counter narratives taking up at least part of the securitization framework. While they may not be justifying solutions, both conspiracies and competing institutions are generally identifying threats on the behalf of their audience.

Krebs’ (2015) claims add to the discussion that narrative building is an everyday political tool, not just a tool reserved for times of crisis. Leaders must regularly engage with their public audiences to “provide public justification”, but the stakes are much higher during a crisis when they must convince the public to allot them the resources required and allow for the policies.

75 Campbell, Writing Security, 498.
76 Campbell, Writing Security, 498.
77 Campbell, Writing Security, 498.
preferred to address national threats. Under Krebs’ (2015) framework, a narrative is inherently and “intentionally selective” in presentation of facts and events, it must create a platform to build its version of truth on and any information that distracts from the platform is either unnecessary or undermining the goals. Narratives create a timeline to situate these selected events and facts in to shape the logic of an argument for causality from one point to the next. Governments seek to convince their constituencies that a given problem is a threat, that the cause of the problem is known, and that their solution to the threat is correct and legitimately within their power to deploy.

Governments pursue dominant narratives during the best or the worst of times, but the most challenging time to achieve the goal is during a crisis. Krebs’ (2015) work addressed a missing piece in the literature: the study into dominant narratives in, as he put it, “unprecedented times.” He selected the U.S. national narrative about the attack on the United States on 9/11 and the subsequent policies adopted – that is the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - as the subject of his inquiry. His study concluded that successful construction of a dominant narrative under the conditions of a crisis requires a “storytelling mode” in which a speaker invokes language which provides “orderly messaging” and returns the general population to a state of relative certainty about the world. This mode proved incredibly effective for the United States government establishing and holding the dominant narrative on the crisis narrative in his study.

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78 Krebs, The Making of.
82 Krebs, The Making of, 42.
83 Krebs, The Making of, 44.
One can observe in the COVID-19 case studies presented in this project that a storytelling strategy, characterized by promises of a fast and orderly return to a pre-COVID-19 normal, was a common tool of governments; however, when the speedy return to order and normalcy failed to materialize, this narrative strategy stopped resonating generally and it was difficult to get similar levels of public buy in to subsequent narratives. Arguably it was a good way to prevent panic but did not achieve the desired result in the long term.

Krebs’ (2015) findings are perhaps limited by the kind of crisis that was studied. I would argue that the narrative concerning the specific case study Krebs chose, the case of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, was able to succeed in part owing to the distance that the United States geographically possessed from most of the policies that were implemented. Even as the wars dragged on for years, life in the United States normalized as promised (aside from taking off one’s shoes at an airport and a few other security additions) and the families that it continued to impact dropped to a tiny fraction of the overall population. The government made good on the promise they made in the storytelling narratives in the country they were intended for, despite no such return to normalcy elsewhere in the world where policies were being carried out. This narrative also did not call for any kind of complex understandings of the way the world worked like COVID-19 narratives did, the national security narratives during Krebs’ study required no one to understand any science or ask questions about economics, meaning there was less room for certain types of confusion.

Trust in Government and Institutions Broadly and Historically

The COVID-19 pandemic allows for a modern study of governmental handling of a global crisis, which is of course on a different scale than the national crisis in Krebs’ study. As
pandemics go, it may not be unusually significant – the infection and death rates are overshadowed by the Spanish flu, which began in 1918 and sickened as much as 40% of the world’s population. During the pandemic periods of Polio and then the Spanish Flu, the United States and Europe put in place a variety of similar measures to one another in terms of limiting gatherings and closing businesses and schools constructing their health orders and narratives around “their understanding of how the influenza microbe spread through the air by coughing and sneezing, and their conception of the pathogenesis of influenza.” This was in short a very science-based approach, though that does not exclude politicking.

Closing many public institutions including schools during both of those pandemics resulted in the same kind of backlash that has preoccupied governments since the beginning of COVID-19. In 1918 in Switzerland closures of theaters, cinemas, etc. led to panic and even riots. School closures occurring both times led to a great deal of controversy, exactly like that seen during COVID-19 school closures. During past pandemics some countries experienced more controversy than others, an account of this from Stanford University contends that “the variation in response was most likely due to differences in authority of the public health agencies and societal acceptance of their measures as necessary. This necessitated a shared belief in the concept of contagion and some faith in the actions of science to allow them to overcome this plague.” This is relevant to the criticisms of government’s COVID-19 narratives,
the criticism exists without any historical context of the likelihood of these reactions. Arguably the blowback is not as significantly determined by national narratives as these arguments imply; historical cases demonstrate that trust in the institutions of science has never been total and to argue otherwise is to be revisionist.

Work on trust in government and institutions in the context of vaccines had been done prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Jamison et. al. (2019) contributed an article concerning the role of trust in government and medical institutions in cases of what the World Health Organization (WHO) labeled “vaccine hesitancy” in 2014. The WHO defined vaccine hesitancy as the “delay in the acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite availability of vaccination services”\(^90\). The WHO frames the problem of vaccine hesitancy around trust in institutions, professionals, and policy makers\(^91\). Jamison’s study concluded that for most adults, trust in a vaccine requires a complex network of trust in government agencies, medical professionals, and pharmaceutical companies\(^92\).

This finding is perhaps to be expected, trust is a complex thing. The Edelman Barometer was used by the WHO during the pandemic to determine what institutional entities were trusted\(^93\). During COVID-19 trust in various official entities and experts waxed and waned, but trust in scientists remained the highest among the surveyed groups at 83% while government


\(^{91}\) Jamison, Quinn, and Freimuth, “You don’t trust,” 87.

\(^{92}\) Jamison, Quinn, and Freimuth, “You don’t trust,” 89.

\(^{93}\) The Edelman Trust Barometer is an annual global survey completed for the last 22 years of more than 36,000 respondents in 28 countries. The report is published in January and covers a range of societal indicators of trust among business, media, government and NGOs. https://www.edelman.com.
officials fared far worse, around 48%\textsuperscript{94}. A study by Jon Agley and Yunyu Xiao (2021) concerning the role of beliefs during COVID-19 found that “trust in science was substantially and significantly predictive of whether a person was likely to endorse a narrative that was definitively or likely to be misinformed”\textsuperscript{95}. Understanding that trust in science is not a given contributes to the understanding of the adoption of counter narratives. Science was seen as an institution intertwined with government rather than apart from it which led to a mixed reception of narratives that relied on appeals to scientific authorities and institutions\textsuperscript{96}. In the middle of societal upheaval and in the absence of trust in science to be politically neutral and true, a large minority turned to conspiratorial thinking.

**Pre-COVID-19 Counter Narratives**

Understanding the construction, allure, and impact of counter narratives is key as they are what might be called the governments’ primary adversaries during this crisis. Myths have long been used by humans to explain the unexplainable, creating elaborate explanations for anxiety causing phenomenon\textsuperscript{97}. Despite advances in science and the presence of public education, it appears that humans will still rush to rationalize inexplicable or anxiety invoking events with whatever explanations are most understandable to them\textsuperscript{98}. Pandemic conspiracy theories are common, during the Spanish Flu (1918-1920) multiple conspiracy theories emerged...


\textsuperscript{95} Agley and Xiao, “Misinformation about COVID-19,” 16.

\textsuperscript{96} Agley and Xiao, “Misinformation about COVID-19,” 16.


concerning its origins and spread, including that Bayer aspirin contained the flu and that German subs planted the disease along coastlines99.

There was perhaps good reason for conspiracism at the time, the pandemic was coined the Spanish Flu because Spain, being neutral during the war, had a press free to discuss the contagion whereas other governments were suppressing the information or choosing to be unconcerned in the face of what they saw as much greater existential threats100. In this case conspiracism was occasionally the only narrative available to explain what would become, as Catharine Arnold (2018) said it, “the greatest medical holocaust in modern history”. Despite the many similarities between the pandemic conspiracism of the past and present, the ways in which these conspiracies could travel were limited when compared with the avenues for similar theories to spread today. The case of the Spanish Flu speaks to case study choice here; both a free press and access to the internet, to include social media, are likely to increase exposure to conspiracies and therefore a country which has neither is less likely to see mass dissemination of them.

The advent of electronic communications, specifically the media sites which play on human’s disposition to be socially connected, brought a new dimension to pandemic communications. An article by Constantinou et al. (2021) argued that for those individuals “who may be more prone to stress, a bombardment of conspiracy theories from social media may feed their fears, provide plausible solutions, and render them more susceptible to believing in”

99 Arnold, Pandemic 1918.
100 Arnold, Pandemic 1918.
conspiracies\textsuperscript{101}. Electronic communication presents numerous challenges to the perception of truth versus fiction, for example well-presented electronic communication can easily look professional, visually appealing, and well organized, lending it an element of credibility regardless of its accuracy\textsuperscript{102}. A 2018 study discouragingly found that tweets containing falsehoods were 70% more likely to be circulated than truthful tweets\textsuperscript{103}. Who will find such things credible, and who will not, is complicated.

Swami et al. published an article in 2015 connecting belief in conspiracy theories to maladaptive personality traits\textsuperscript{104}. Belief is also connected to levels of education and one’s social group\textsuperscript{105}. In keeping with this, whether a given person fell into the camp of conspiracy during COVID-19 relied heavily on preconditions. Piotrowski et al. (2019) posited that whether a person was engaged (politically active, well informed and educated) versus unengaged (low interest in politics, lower level of education) would predict the extent of the impact of government narratives on citizens\textsuperscript{106}. This is demonstrably (and perhaps disturbingly) not always the case during COVID-19, as multiple doctors were willing to come out in favor of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, but strictly by the numbers education played a role in the


\textsuperscript{104} Swami, Viren, Laura Weis, Alixe Lay, David Barron, and Adrian Furnham. "Associations between belief in conspiracy theories and the maladaptive personality traits of the personality inventory for DSM-5." \textit{Psychiatry Research} 236 (2016): 86-90.

\textsuperscript{105} Constantinou, "COVID-19 Scientific Facts vs. Conspiracy Theories: Is Science Failing to Pass Its Message?"

acceptance of them. A pew research poll in the United States in July of 2020 found that those with an education level of a high school diploma or less, 48% thought that COVID-19 either definitely or was probably a planned pandemic while among those that had graduated college only 24% agreed.

To depart from pre-COVID-19 counter narratives for a moment, for the sake of countering Piotrowski et al. (2019), were the findings of Dagnall et al. (2020), which argued that the 1966 Brehm theory of Psychological Reactance proves more accurate when attempting to explain the phenomenon of citizen buy in or lack thereof to narratives concerning COVID-19. This might bridge those findings with the confusion one experienced when so called “experts” came out strongly against the scientific consensus and is a throwback to past conspiracism literature. The theory argues that some individuals have a high drive for autonomy, an overdeveloped sense of freedom being infringed on, and a low level of concern for adherence to societal norms. These qualities are also accompanied by a high level of defensiveness. Assumptions about intellect and political engagement do not adequately prepare governments for the level of pushback during a time of crisis. Things are further complicated when one looks to make up lost ground by governments, it is not likely that they will regain followers of any narrative once lost.

Lewandowsky et al. (2012) found that once someone accepts a false narrative as a solid belief, contradictory information not only often fails to correct it, but can inadvertently

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110 Brehm, A theory of.
reinforce it. This information helps to frame the uphill challenge of governments facing strong counternarratives and identifies it as an important variable to understand when studying what relative factors account for governments gaining the dominant narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further adds to the understanding of populations that accepted the governments’ original narratives and were unable to shift into acceptance of subsequent narratives, this sort of entrenched thinking is not reserved for false narratives alone.

To revisit one of the narrative original scholars, Roland Barthes (1975) shed light on discourse which boils a person’s life down into essentially a one-dimension cartoon, able to be inserted into whatever narrative one wishes. In his essay “The Brain of Einstein”, Barthes discusses reducing Einstein as a person into a series of attributes that one would expect on a list of computer functions. The process which stripped Einstein of his life to create his myth is seen in the creation of multiple counter narratives throughout COVID-19, attributing malice and schemes to what have become the myths of Bill Gates and George Soros among others. They are now the equivalent of literary devices, stand ins for the idea of a feared and hated figure behind everyone’s suffering.

To make an important point before moving on to the COVID-19 specific literature, narratives, as discussed before, are intentionally selective in nature; they emphasize some events and facts while cutting out others to paint a specific intended picture. This definition means that counter narratives are not inherently false or conspiratorial in nature. Examples of

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112 Barthes, "S/Z (translated by R. Miller)," 68.
counter narratives which are not conspiracism are included in the following overview of COVID-19 specific literature.

The Growing Body of COVID-19 Narrative Literature

The furious pace of the release of articles on COVID-19 led the body of literature specific to COVID-19 narratives to grow quickly. The literature has largely focused on public policy and bridging the gap between the governments’ mitigation plans and the level of public compliance, generally assuming it is a problem with communication that has led to backlash. Some research has discussed the implications of COVID-19 from an international relations standpoint, arguing that COVID-19 mitigation and the choices of narratives are both explained by great power competition. The big picture of COVID-19 narratives is not as straightforward as either of these camps implies, there is a growing literature explaining the expansive following of the COVID-19 conspiracy movements, which arguably would exist with or without some imagined kind of “perfect” government messaging. This literature review will cover some of the major findings relevant to this dissertation but is far from an exhaustive survey of the publications to date as new inquiries into COVID-19 narratives are being published almost daily. It is divided into headings: public policy, great power politics, COVID-19 conspiracism, and identity.

Public Policy

To begin the public policy discussion, Dagnall et al., previously cited in the counter narratives section, did their study in 2020 investigating the gap between government narratives and public behavior in the United Kingdom during the first few months of COVID-19. The article explained the concept of narrative momentum, which exists for both mainstream and counter
narratives\textsuperscript{113}. In their discussion concerning the ability of counternarratives to persist (achieve lasting momentum) relative to government narratives in the specific case of COVID-19; the study found that the government could not achieve momentum due to the rapidly evolving situation on the ground\textsuperscript{114}. The article sought to create a framework for a more effective strategic narrative and ultimately identified the barriers to compliance as a “lack of message potency”, a “lack of shared identity”, and the Herculean effort it takes to shift people out of their habitual behaviors and beliefs\textsuperscript{115}. Focusing on the “lack of shared identity” one can perhaps extrapolate that incredibly diverse publics are less inclined to buy into the government narrative, but it seems that shared identity and a sense of unity explains at least part of why groups buy into counter or mainstream narratives equally.

The study by Narkilar and Sottilotta (2021) is a thorough starting point for a discussion about COVID-19 narratives. Their discussion of the purpose and strategy of crisis narratives accounted for both their role in creating understanding and meaning with the public and persuading and influencing behavior\textsuperscript{116}. The study identified the differences between government COVID-19 narratives as either a political approach that weighed public health against the economy and opted to protect the economy or an ethical approach that chose to emphasize protecting human life. While this was a somewhat overly dichotomous approach, the study followed what kind of measures were introduced subsequent to each category of chosen referent object. When leaders emphasized economic costs in their early narratives,

\textsuperscript{113} Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, and Walsh, “Bridging the gap,” 11.
\textsuperscript{114} Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, and Walsh, “Bridging the gap,” 11.
\textsuperscript{115} Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, and Walsh, “Bridging the gap,” 11.
\textsuperscript{116} Narlikar and Sottilotta, "Pandemic narratives," 1240.
their policy responses lacked stringency\textsuperscript{117}. Those countries which led with more subdued mitigation strategies had a higher number of casualties (per population) in Europe than European countries which introduced stringent measures immediately (Italy was the exception to this rule)\textsuperscript{118}. A correlation matrix showed that there was significant correlation between the kind of narrative the government espoused (economic considerations first versus preservation of life) and the accompanying level of stringency in mitigation measures\textsuperscript{119}.

Great Power Politics

Woods et al. (2020) argued that there was an overreaction to COVID-19 that indicated what Baekksekov and Rubin (2014) had concluded governments avoided in the previous pandemic was not the case in this one, that the entirety of the government’s response was political in nature. Of course all of the things that governments do are political in nature, but the specific claim here was that this was not a crisis at all. This is a counter narrative that has significant following, albeit it be in a simplified version, beyond academic circles. These scholars posit that states wildly overreacted to the pandemic\textsuperscript{120}. They cite the death rate relative to previous pandemics, such as the Spanish flu, being negligible as well as the implementation of stringent measures at a point that was incredibly premature in their minds, given the limited information available about the virus at the time\textsuperscript{121}. These same things are cited by various groups that have been labeled conspiracists. Theses scholars further argue that the west’s reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic was part of a nationalist competition with China; given that

\textsuperscript{117} Narlikar and Sottilotta, "Pandemic narratives," 1245.
\textsuperscript{118} Narlikar and Sottilotta, "Pandemic narratives," 1245.
\textsuperscript{119} Narlikar and Sottilotta, "Pandemic narratives," 1245.
\textsuperscript{121} Woods, "COVID-19, nationalism," 811.
China had a “zero COVID-19” policy, which was likely to be successful due to the tools available to an autocrat, the west felt the need to prove that democracies could be just as effective at stemming the tide\textsuperscript{122}. This is an argument at a level elevated over that of the conspiracists groups as it relies on international relations theory.

Christopher Hughes (2021) concurred with Woods et al. (2020), essentially arguing that this is a Cold War style competition, being used to mutually construct identities among the global powers, making it impossible to view science as politically neutral rather than complicit\textsuperscript{123}. Broadly both Woods et al. and Hughes divided the players in their game theory scenario into the “west”, referring to wealthy western liberal democracies, and China. While Hughes’ argument applies a critical theory and constructivist lens in its appeal to identity, both articles use realist-based arguments that ignore many factors that have shifted since the Spanish flu was on the scene. The world has become a smaller place since those pandemics. States are much more economically interdependent; Europe has open borders and today’s extensive business air travel is one way that contagions can quickly spread. There is also a large amount of migration, in the two decades prior to COVID-19 the world saw 281 million people living outside of their country, up from the count of 173 million in 2000\textsuperscript{124}. In addition to these rather large, overlooked factors, some countries did wait to determine exactly how dangerous the virus was before implementing measures (Sweden and France) and some countries not


\textsuperscript{123} Christopher Hughes, “How should we understand the relationship between nationalism and COVID-19?” Nations and Nationalism 26, no. 4 (2020): 807-825.

considered part of such a Cold War divide (India and Argentina) instituted strict measures early on\textsuperscript{125}.

There is another way to explain what these scholars saw as a great leap into mitigation measures made on minimal evidence: states with universal healthcare systems (which were in their infancy in a small selection of European states during the Spanish Flu and relatively unconsidered elsewhere) worried that their health infrastructure could collapse while trying to figure out what the risks were, so they did not delay measures. There is at least some evidence that COVID-19 revealed infrastructure and staffing issues within universal healthcare systems, which was an immediate challenge for governments balancing their narrative and public opinion during the pandemic\textsuperscript{126}. It’s worth noting that both Woods et al. (2020) and Hughes (2020) painted many well-known COVID-19 theories as pure conspiracism while introducing their own counter narrative with their selected evidence. They do make an excellent point about science in all of this, medical and other scientific institutions were often not seen as neutral, but as a political tool being wielded by governments at best and a complicit party to lies at worst.

\textit{COVID-19 Conspiracism}

Sturm and Albrecht (2021) published a comparative study on apocalyptic millennium COVID-19 counter narratives that found that conspiracy theories were not as limited in reach by group as one might have expected\textsuperscript{127}. While this is one of seemingly million publications on the

\textsuperscript{127} Sturm and Albrecht, "Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses," 122.
subject since the start of COVID-19, it is one of the most complete pieces written on it. One might recall from the first chapter that these scholars differentiated between conspiracy theories and conspiracism. They argue that the label “theory” means that there is evidence and conspiracy theories do have evidence, however dubious it may seem to some. Sturm and Albrecht coin a different term for the bulk of the counter narratives during COVID-19, that of “contagious conspiracism”128.

The label contagious conspiracism is a nod to the viral nature of misinformation during COVID-19 while accounting for the lack of evidence supporting COVID-19 counter narratives129. The scholars further identified that most counter narratives were formed broadly around the belief that there is a great deal of corporate and government overreach, which united people across multiple seemingly disparate demographics, strengthening the reach and following of conspiracy counter narratives130. The study was interdisciplinary and did an amazing job of explaining the complex nature of conspiracism, though more in depth psychological inquiries were left for other publications to explore.

Lam, in 2021, attempted to build a psychological predictive model for narrative receptiveness based on personalities131. Lam identified 16 different personalities, don’t worry, they are not all listed out here to sort through. The thrust of the findings is that these personalities can be broken down into just three categories: compliant, non-compliant, or partially compliant132. While compliant and non-compliant are as straightforward as they sound, partially compliant described a group likely to see some call for mitigations as

130 Sturm and Albrecht, “Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 133.
131 Lam, “United by the global,” 1.
132 Lam, “United by the global,” 3.
legitimate, but either inconsistently followed them or questioned some aspects of them strongly\textsuperscript{133}. For each group, their pre-existing identities were reinforced by COVID-19; requests for action from governments concerning the virus were seen as in keeping or against an individual’s political and social identities\textsuperscript{134}. This adds to the justification for applying the lens of identity frequently while addressing the research question at hand.

Narratives that appealed to a sense of identity were broadly more likely to achieve a greater following regardless of whether they were a mainstream or counter narrative\textsuperscript{135}. Arguably who someone was dictated how they reacted to the virus more than incoming information did. This would seem to indicate that identity politics was a smart play on the part of the constructor of a narrative, however it threatens to only work to one’s benefit if they do not care who is alienated. Ultimately wholesale buy in is not necessary to the success of a counter narrative, giving them another edge over governments. Those who launch counter narratives might seek wholesale buy in, but there is a general understanding and even espousal that counter narratives will never be the dominant narrative. Some of what makes counter narratives appealing is the idea that those in the know are smarter than the average person who is taking factual information at face value\textsuperscript{136}.

\textsuperscript{133} Lam, “United by the global,” 3.
\textsuperscript{134} Lam, “United by the global,” 3.
\textsuperscript{135} Lam, “United by the global,” 3.
Identity and Narratives

Identity is a complex factor which can shift over time and applies to entire countries, individuals and groups therein\(^{137}\). Conspiracism is strongly linked to identity. The study of narratives is a study of the intentional construction of messages for political purposes, acknowledging that counternarratives have as much political purpose as mainstream narratives. This meant that in countries where identity overlapped heavily with political ideology, counter narratives were featured prominently within mainstream political discourse. In “Morbid Polarization: Exposure to COVID-19-19 and Partisan Disagreement about Pandemic Response”, Rodriguez et al. (2022) conclude that for the United States the partisan divide over COVID-19 was consistent with social identity theory – “partisans” were “resistant to change in the face of novel information or experiences”\(^{138}\). Counter narratives were picked up on according to the identities which they were compatible with, meaning that not all narratives were compatible with all identities. The exploration and explanation of the role of identity in this study will be continued in the methodology chapter, where it is exceedingly relevant to variable considerations.

Identity is heavily intertwined with narrative, particularly in the case of pandemic narratives. A study done in Australia by Edwards et al. (2021) before a COVID-19 vaccine was available, in August of 2020, found that 59% would definitely get a vaccine, were it available.

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while 42% had varying levels of hesitancy, the bulk (29%) having only low levels of hesitancy\textsuperscript{139}. The conclusion of the study was “vaccine hesitancy, which accounts for a significant proportion of the population can be addressed by public health messaging but for a significant minority of the population with strongly held beliefs, alternative policy measures may well be needed to achieve sufficient vaccination coverage to end the pandemic”\textsuperscript{140}. The findings of the Edwards et al. (2021) study fit with the larger discussion here about identity: “In this study, attitudes about too much fuss being made about COVID-19, lack of confidence in state or territory government, and having more populist sentiments” were all strongly correlated with vaccine hesitancy. The findings continue: “other studies have also independently reported that religious beliefs associated with declining a COVID-19 vaccine”\textsuperscript{141}. Those with ideological pre-dispositions were expected to be resistant to any form of messaging and it seems that there needs to be some level of trust in the messenger to suggest that a shift in messaging itself or dissemination of new information is adequate to change minds.

**Conclusion**

Early COVID-19 narrative literature was focused on public policy with a smattering of articles focused on various other aspects. While they all use the term narrative in their studies, the ways they discuss narrative and the extent to which it could be called a methodological study of narratives vary. Most public policy pieces assumed that narrative is a straightforward term and that crisis narratives are objective in nature. By approaching the puzzle from this direction, they spin their wheels trying to understand why people do not automatically ascribe


\textsuperscript{140} Edwards, Biddle, Gray, and Sollis, “COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy,” 8.

truth value to government crisis narratives and are overly focused on a subtle shift in narrative style being the answer.

On the topic of the scholarship which addressed narratives from a viewpoint of great power conflict, well known conspiracies were dismissed and replaced by their own narrative which runs counter to every government that addressed COVID-19 as a legitimate crisis. These works are in keeping with specific schools of international relations theory and so contribute to those bodies of work, such as realism, however whether their work fits into scholarship concerning narratives is not clear. Their claims do not forward the understanding of the success of national crisis narratives or fit into literature concerning conspiracism; they do bolster the conspiracists claim in an academic paper by eluding to, if not outright stating, that conspiracists are completely correct in their rejection of COVID-19 as a legitimate crisis.

The conspiracism literature as well as associated identity literature offer the greatest insight into the future of crisis narratives. This chapter will not be the end of the COVID-19 conspiracism literature in this work. Each case study in this dissertation will incorporate articles to include those on conspiracies and counter narratives in that country. The takeaway is that the crisis that hits close to home, that requires adjustments to a person’s habits and life directly, is the crisis that the government cannot easily manage the narrative or outcome of. It is precisely this kind of crisis that we confront in this text.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

When considering my research question: what factors determine the relative success of national crisis narratives; qualitative comparative case studies best addressed the dimensions of this puzzle. For the specific crisis narrative study, the universal phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic created a rare opportunity to study crisis narratives across the world on a seemingly objective crisis. These case studies utilize primarily document review and polls to determine the extent to which a dominant narrative was established from January of 2020 to September of 2021. Factors considered will include the relative political polarity in a country (relative to the other country case studies and increasing versus decreasing), the pre-existing levels of trust in the institutions of the government, science, and the media, and the number of counter narratives competing with the government’s narrative. An understanding of whether the government established the dominant narrative, and what factors influenced that relative failure or success, requires a nuanced and interdisciplinary approach. Just as the literature review was multifield, the case studies will also rely on publications and theories from the fields of psychology, public policy, international relations, and political science.

The interdisciplinary approach helps to eliminate confounding variables from contention. Many forms of measurement were discarded during the early stages of research as it became clear that they would not be reliable. The benefit of comparative case study is that there is no manipulation of variables at play; the action is taking place in the wild so to speak and the data is being drawn from several sources to include discourse, which helps to capture
the complex social phenomena that is occurring\textsuperscript{142}. This was certainly a case of complex phenomena and even arguably phenomena for which there is no direct comparison to other kinds of crisis narratives.

To avoid bias and account for wide array of social constructions and the differing degrees of challenges to each government that any given factor posed, case studies were selected to vary the size of the state and population, general social practices around health, and varying types of government institutions. The case study choices also vary the kind of serious challenges facing each government concurrent with that of COVID-19. No crisis happens in a vacuum, and each of the case studies had at least one serious concurrent challenge for the government in addition to the pandemic.

This chapter is organized into sections and subheadings. First, I explain what methods were not appropriate to the study and why, this was an evolving section as research moved forward, ruling out measures that initially seemed promising. These ideas were previewed in the introductory chapter. This section also touches heavily on what polls were not used and which ones were, so it is followed with the rest of the relevant information about how and what polls are used. The third section explains the timetable for the study, which moved from that of an artificially constructed one intended to work around the inconsistent availability of data at any given point in the pandemic to one which rolled through the universal stages of the pandemic for each country in a more flexible style. The fourth explains what documents and sources were reviewed relative to collecting the official government and counter narratives. This is followed by a section explaining what factors are being examined and the hypotheses

\textsuperscript{142} Robert K Yin, \textit{Case study research: Design and methods}. Vol. 5. (Sage, 2009).
relative to each factor. The parameters for case study selection and justification appear next and the final section lays out the limitations of the study.

**What I Did Not Do, and Why**

On the choice to not use a quantitative measure such as that of rate of compliance with mitigation, there were two major factors. As explained in the literature review, ‘identity’ and ‘habit’ were likely to confound the variable of compliance, meaning that compliance was unlikely to be a measure of the merits of the government’s narrative alone or possibly at all. The second was an issue of data, many governments avoided punitive measures for non-compliance meaning the government had little hard data to account for it and rates of compliance were sometimes measured with self-reported polls, but not in all countries. Therefore, there is a lack of consistent data available for rates of compliance.

Rates of compliance are not the only measure that would be nearly impossible to use and know for certain that one was not actually measuring identity or habit or even what might be a socially acceptable response. While this uncertainty limits the findings of the study, there was a concerted effort to address it with the choice of poll questions included. Polling questions that relied on self-reporting of behaviors, such as whether a person wears their mask frequently or always in public or whether they complied with other mitigation guidelines were avoided for two reasons.

The first is that in polls that asked about one’s intentions for following best practices versus their actual practices separately, their intentions did not consistently mirror their
practices. A question about only practices may therefore reflect lofty goals, but not actions, and miss what it attempted to measure altogether. Alternatively, responses concerning practices, even those which are accurate, could indicate fear of social or other reprisal driving compliance with mitigation measures, rather than the extent to which the given person accepted the government’s narrative.

The second is that self-reported practices concerning failure to follow mitigation strategies were not necessarily connected to the success of the government or counter narratives. In a study of 1733 U.S. adults, conducted by Levy et al. (2022), nearly half of participants reported lack of adherence to COVID-19 public health measures with the most common reasons being things like “wanting life to feel normal”, which is not a condemnation nor outright rejection of the government narrative. The choice of poll questions to involve in this study attempted to account for these issues by avoiding all questions about practices and compliance and sticking to perceptions and opinions of politicians, mitigation measures, levels of trust, and belief in conspiracies.

The final strategy that was duly considered and ruled out during the initial phase of research was measuring the success of narratives by the approval poll ratings of politicians espousing the government narrative versus those espousing various counter narratives; or, alternatively, weighing in election outcomes during the 20-month study period. There was an effort to choose case studies that all reflected serious governing challenges in addition to

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COVID-19, as no crisis narrative happens in a vacuum. The approval ratings of politicians suffered in many countries, including Australia and Japan, due to their handling of things like the Olympics (in Japan) and bushfires (in Australia). While I will discuss the two prime ministers that Japan went through during the course of the study period, it would be impossible to claim to know to what extent the handling of COVID-19 or the narratives relative to it impacted the approval ratings versus the handling of concurrent crises. Polling questions relative to politicians were therefore limited to approval or disapproval of the handling of COVID-19 and trust or mistrust in information from each country’s respective leaders.

**Polling Data**

The successful creation of a dominant narrative, the formula for which was defined previously as: must assign privilege to a particular interpretation of select events, accomplish this such that no narrative is able to directly compete on merits, be set on a version of a causal timeline, and allow leaders to implement their preferred policy (and acquire the necessary resources) with legitimacy; will be measured by public polls.

This study draws on waves of a nationally representative panel survey of populations in each of the country case studies conducted by the YouGov-Cambridge globalism project for a consistent methodology across all four case studies on many of the most salient topics. This primary source of polling was supplemented with additional relevant polling from Pew, Reuters, and Deutsche Welle as well as some smaller in country reputable media outlets. Relevant polling questions from the chosen 20-month time frame were sorted to focus on only those which directly address COVID-19; these polls include conspiracies, trust in government and institutions, trust in specific spokespersons from the government or institutions, trust in varying
sources of information, the perceived legitimacy of government actions, the perceived efficacy of the government relative to COVID-19, or the perception of the necessity or efficacy of mitigation methods such as mask usage or vaccines.

Polls concerning the government’s mitigation and other performance indicators relative to COVID-19 will indicate the level of concurrence with the government narrative; conspiracy belief polls will be the primary indicator the popularity of prominent conspiracies. Questions concerning what sources of information regarding COVID-19 were trustworthy were indicative of whether the government’s narrative was broadly seen as credible. As COVID-19 is the crisis narrative in question, polls concerning things like economic markers during COVID-19 are not considered useful to the question at hand. Poll data was stored in, managed, and turned into visuals using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

The Time Table

In order to draw enough observations to make a causal claim of any kind, there would ideally be set intervals investigated across all variables for chosen time periods. Unfortunately, available data does not all coincide at regular intervals. This is a limitation on the study, though the original design attempted to create some regularity by pulling data from periods of time that are grouped together. The original research design for this study called for a 16-month study divided into four equal quarters to compensate for the irregularity of intervals at which polls, narratives, or other data appeared. Observations were intended to be taken from the period between March 11, 2020, when the WHO announced that COVID-19 constituted a pandemic, to July, 2021, when the bulk of wealthy countries gained access to vaccines. This time frame was meant to allow for a careful analysis of the evolution of narratives from both
the government and the peanut gallery from the beginning. This design ran into many problems in practice.

The first problem was that polling in Japan lagged considerably behind that of polling in every other case study. Second, even in those countries which were polled early and often, the first international polls asking consistent questions that might have provided an apples-to-apples comparison were in April of 2020, a time period well after Australia’s full blown COVID-19 narrative established and while the U.S. narrative was in its infancy. An attempt to force every case study to have a uniform appearance was a liability to the study, not an asset.

The final issue was that countries came upon the need for creation of any narrative at all or a major shift in narrative and mitigation measures at different times, though often for similar reasons, this was not uniform in nature. This made the approach of attempting to identify something like phases of the pandemic, although that was applied as a very loose construct to when the data was taken from and the kind of topics that were relevant at the time, more intelligible than attempting to force set time periods across the board.

In the ultimate research design, the first round of data to include narratives and polls are drawn from sources dating between January 2020 and August 2020 a sort of ‘phase one’ of the pandemic. This era of COVID-19 narratives in some countries was very matter of fact (Australia) and in others was much more contentious and cautious from day one, but broadly governments focused on a story telling narrative that this situation would be short lived and there was a gradual imposition of mitigation measures.

The next set of data picks up after governments have come to grips with the virus broadly and shift their storytelling to touting future vaccines as the cure for the pandemic, the
time period from August of 2020 to December of 2020. Not all governments shifted strongly during this time period, Japan remained fairly constant in their focus while the United States had minimal rhyme or reason for most shifts, but chose this time period to at least commit to COVID-19 being real. It was during this time period that the original promises to lock it down and get through it fast or, in the case of the United States, that COVID-19 would disappear any day now\textsuperscript{145}, all began to fall entirely flat.

The final set of data will be taken from January of 2021 to September of 2021 and will capture the narrative around of vaccines once they existed and began to be distributed. The third phase also encompasses a stark challenge to the Australian government in their rollout of the Astra Zeneca vaccine and an intensifying struggle against anti-vaccine narratives as well as emerging consensus that vaccines were not a quick fix to the pandemic.\textsuperscript{146}

**Narrative Sources**

There is an apples-to-apples problem when gathering the whole of government narratives as the standard bearers and participants in the narrative varied from country to country and, to complicate things further, in some cases these people contradicted their own narrative altogether. This is another place where there was an attempt to at least force a set number of sources of the narrative or type of sources to line up, with mixed results. Government narratives are pieced together in a large part via the communications of the state’s leader and their respective office; be that a president or a prime minister, and also include important political actors beyond these that vary by country. Each country has a version


\textsuperscript{146} Ott, Edwards, and Boonyarak, “Global responses.”
of a department of health and related offices, often having a spokesperson, which was a player in forming and disseminating the narrative in many cases and those contributions will be noted. Both government narratives and counter narratives come from document reviews of transcripts of official statements, interviews with the executive/leader and the heads of the departments of health published by reputable media sources or by the government, interviews and commentary captured by reputable media sources of other relevant authority or political figureheads, and finally from political op-eds and government websites.

The problem of which politicians below the level of the top offices to consider of note runs into some apples-to-apples problems as well. Obviously not every country has the same number of political parties or the same structure of central versus local governments. One would think it is as easy as only considering high profile politicians, but there is no good way to define and operationalize that. Relevant prominent politicians’ positions regarding COVID-19 are drawn from op-eds, interviews, and official statements from their offices as appropriate to augment or clarify the larger narrative picture.

Many counter narratives, and particularly conspiracies, have been collected from scholarly articles where they have already been logged and analyzed in addition to official transcripts and various national media sources. While social media is a part of the discussion, no counter narratives will be drawn directly or exclusively from social media. All counter narratives have appeared in national or international media; this is in part due to the definition of a competing narrative - for any narrative to be considered a true competitor to the government narrative it must have a high-profile presence. Narratives of note are picked up by multiple media sources (as opposed to transient narratives that gain no traction). Various
media mediums to include articles and interviews by politicians or popular pundits supplied counter narratives.

There is one side note necessary here about Japan; no major media or politician in Japan picked up on the bulk of the conspiracies, but one of Japan’s major social medias – Line – was the site of a great many reposts of U.S. tweets concerning Qanon conspiracy theories and appears to be the only reviewable source of information that led to conspiracy beliefs in polls.

Factors and Hypotheses

_Hypothesis one_: a high level of _affective political polarization_ decreases the likelihood that the government establishes a dominant narrative.

As mentioned earlier in the text, there are many studies now published with claims that specific factors contributed to or detracted from the proliferation of conspiracism during the COVID-19 crisis, with a core factor being political polarization. The question here is whether this was a factor that inhibited or enabled the relative success of the government narrative. While these publications slowly pushed the specific factor of polarization to the forefront to assess, they did not trample directly on this study. They did necessitate that I test their finding as one of my hypotheses. Political polarization in and of itself has no scholarly meaning, instead there are multiple dimensions of polarization to discuss in the political realm, of which two seemed to be applicable and therefore defined below.

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Elite and affective political polarization are examined in many studies which have utilized The Manifesto Project data sets. Elite polarization is essentially the extent to which political parties can find common grounds and is also sometimes referred to as ideological polarization. Elite polarization is lower in the United States relative to Japan – largely owing to the multi-party system in Japan allowing for both a conservative party (the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan) and a Japanese Communist Party, with variations of center and left in between. That is to say that when it comes to elite level polarization, the difference in the governmental systems themselves lead to a higher relative score of political polarization, and therefore is not the most meaningful comparison between country case studies as there is one two party system and the rest are multi-party parliamentary systems.

Affective polarization is defined by Boxell et al. (2020) as “the extent to which citizens feel more negatively toward” members of other “political parties than toward their own”.

This seems to be the more relevant measure to consider across all country case studies equally as Boxell et al. compare shifts in polarization relative to a country’s past levels of polarization and, in doing so, supply a good relative starting point for all four case studies at the beginning.

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148 The Manifesto Project collects and analyzes parties’ platforms (manifestos). The data sets includes platforms and electoral information from over 1000 political parties in 50 countries from 1945 to present day. The data collection is publicly available. Since 2009, the Manifesto Project is funded by the German Research foundation under the name Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR). The original research group goes back to 1979. https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/.


of the pandemic\textsuperscript{152}. Here I have discussed affective polarization as relative to each of the other case studies. How is this more useful than a specific table of numbers?

Numbers correlating to a level of polarization in and of themselves vary on different indices, and to take those numbers out of context and expect them to speak for themselves does not seem practical or useful in the current discussion. No widely used master index exists for affective political polarization currently, and polarization itself was not the subject of this study. It is difficult to say whether it would have been a factor up for consideration at all if it were not the go to answer for the proliferation of conspiracism and public doubt during COVID-19 in the United States. This factor could and should be studied further.

The ranking of the case studies from most to least polarized (on the dimension of affective polarization) are: the United States, followed by Australia, then Japan, and then Germany. Within the case studies the state of affective polarization within the country is discussed, that is if it is a rising or falling phenomenon and any specific aspects that were highlighted by or during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Hypothesis two:** If the preexisting levels of trust in public institutions is high, then the government will experience greater relative success in establishing the dominant narrative. Conversely if it is low there will be less relative success.

Having accounted for relative levels of affective political polarization, next up is the topic of trust, an area of inquiry already in progress via the work of John Agley among many others\textsuperscript{153}. The preexisting trust value in public institutions in each country is taken from the

\textsuperscript{152} Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, "Cross-country trends in affective polarization," 9.

\textsuperscript{153} Agley and Xiao, “Misinformation about COVID-19.”
2019 collected from the Edleman Trust Barometer. I expect that in countries with a high level of trust in government and institutions, to include science and medical institutions, there is greater relative success for the government’s establishment of a dominant narrative. If there is a (relatively) higher level of trust in the media than the government, one might expect that counter narratives proliferating there to hold more ground than if that is not the case. The most relevant measure of trust is that prior to the start of the pandemic – this level could be a handicap or a boost to a given government’s efforts to establish the dominant narrative.

**Hypothesis three:** governments facing only one or two counter narratives will fare worse in establishing the dominant narrative than those facing a multitude.

The final factor under consideration, which has not yet appeared elsewhere in scholarly publications, is the sheer number of competing narratives. It may not have appeared because deciding what goes into a tally, what exactly will count and what will not, seems impossible. That is a fair assessment, so here another relative discussion is to be had. Relative among the case studies, if some had more counter narratives circulating than others, or certainly more ground held across a greater amount of them than others, this should matter.

Intuitively a multitude of competing counter narratives, particularly if they contradict one another, might split the competition. If there is only a portion of the population likely to buy into counter narratives, and that portion cannot get on the same page, the government narrative might win by default. Either no counter narratives or too many to count might be the best-case scenario for the government. Many counter narratives might cause the government

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154 The Edelman Trust Barometer has been conducting surveys for twenty years to measure people’s trust in four key institutions – Government, Business, Media and NGOs. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer measured trust at multiple points of the COVID-19 Pandemic, surveying more than 13,200 respondents in 11 states: Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, S. Korea, U.K. and U.S.
narrative to be the sole narrative with any broadly perceived legitimacy, while the others are relegated to the sidelines. Rather than attempt to count multitudes of counter narratives, I posit that if there is only one or two consistent broad counter narratives with a solid base, then the government is less likely to be able to establish a dominant narrative. For the purposes of this variable, conspiracism is not counted as a counter narrative – as all country case studies had some following of the same broad conspiracies – instead those recognized as reputable by national media will be counted. These tend to fall into major narrative themes, like government incompetence or corruption, in three out of the four case studies. The United States was the case study with an exceptional number of counter narratives by comparison.

Country Case Studies

The literature review transitioned into this chapter with discussion of the impact of identity on the choice of variables that were examined. Both identity and a related concept influenced the choice of case studies equally. The logic of habitual and unexamined behaviors\(^\text{155}\) posed a challenge for some governments and was a boon for others. One can see in the case study of Japan that there were long-standing habits around contagious illness that made the burden of some instructions from the government relatively painless as compared to the same request being made of the population of the United States or Germany or Australia. A collection of case studies that these factors are considered close enough to compare directly would increase the level of understanding of this phenomenon as it relates to crisis narratives. For the purposes of this study, variety was what was chosen to look for any sort of universally useful findings.

All case studies are necessarily democracies with a high degree of freedom of information and a free press and all have at least 90% of the population using the internet\textsuperscript{156}. Free access to all the ideas floating around about COVID-19 is important so that people had exposure to any counter narrative that competed with the government narrative, whether they believed them or not. The case study population size vary as do their regions. There are two case studies where the country shares no borders and two where there are multiple borders at play, which posed a different challenge for the government and therefore impacted their choices of securitization, the construction of their narratives, and created different challenges for their narratives.

National health systems are built around elements of social and cultural beliefs and behaviors, expectations of sanitary and other physical conditions under which people live, economic policy, and education systems\textsuperscript{157}. With so much complexity these systems will serve as a stand in for the purposes of cultural diversity among case studies. These systems did not overtly influence how every government crafted their initial or subsequent narrative, but at some point the idea of occupied versus available hospital beds and how to cover medical care for the sick became an unavoidable topic. Counter narratives too were impacted by the sort of health cultures that defined the given system. There are three main types of healthcare systems: welfare state, hybrid, or market systems\textsuperscript{158}. Alternatively, one might use the terms: state provided, public-private partnership, and private systems. The alternate terms, being


more straightforward language, will be those used in the case studies. The case studies cover all the categories of healthcare systems.

One final dimension needs to be noted; each case study had unique challenges presented both around and unrelated to COVID-19. All had protest movements directly related to COVID-19 and two saw the emergence of political upheaval; the United States had the civil rights movement Black Lives Matters and the extreme right movement “Qanon”, while Germany had its own extreme right movement, “Querdenker”. Japan dealt with the international challenge of moving and then holding the Olympics during the pandemic while Australia contended with the fallout of natural disasters that had left a stain on the approval rating of the Prime Minister. The point here is that COVID-19 crisis did not happen in a vacuum, governments are always multitasking, and the chosen case studies varied the type and extent of those additional challenges. This fact is not a substantive topic of discussion in any chapter except the case study of Japan, where the pressures relative to the Olympics had a demonstrably huge impact on the viability of the government narrative. For the rest of the case studies this is more of a footnote designed to assure the reader that no government had a significantly easier hill to climb than another.

The United States

In terms of the parameters for country cases listed above; the United States is a large democracy, with a population of 331,893,745 people and 91% of the population uses the internet, according to the World Bank. The government census reported that in 2020, private health insurance coverage, the dominant form of coverage in the United States, covered 66.5

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159 All population and internet access statistics were sourced from the World Bank and are as of 2021.
percent of the population while 34.8 percent were covered by public options\textsuperscript{160,161}. In 2020 91.4% of people had health insurance coverage\textsuperscript{162}.

There is no insurance mandate and no public option for most people. The costs of healthcare in the United States are significantly more than that of healthcare in the other three case studies. In May of 2020, Health Affairs lobbied congress to create low-interest federally guaranteed loans as a “backstop for health insurers and self-insured Employers” to help cover the roughly $35,000 per COVID-19 hospitalization that would not be covered by insurance\textsuperscript{163}.

This different culture around healthcare and resulting individualistic healthcare system with hospitals and doctors’ offices run privately and primarily funded privately as well meant that the stakes for the government narrative as it related to healthcare varied from the other case studies.

Geographically large and mostly geopolitically remote, the U.S. shares two exceptionally long borders with other countries with immigration along the southern border being both a cause of contentious politics and argued as a specific vector for infection. The plurality of competing issues, political interests of those in power, and extent of elite polarization certainly hindered the government’s adoption of a single-minded focus on the pandemic, if not its establishment of a dominant narrative. Gerbado (2020) found that the U.S. protest movement


\textsuperscript{161} According to the source above: Of the subtypes of health insurance coverage, employment-based insurance was the most common, covering 54.4 percent of the population for some or all of the calendar year, followed by Medicare (18.4 percent), Medicaid (17.8 percent), direct-purchase coverage (10.5 percent), TRICARE (2.8 percent), and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) coverage (0.9 percent).

\textsuperscript{162} Keisler-Starky and Bunch, “Health Insurance.”

\textsuperscript{163} Gregg Bloche and Daniel Wikler, “Could Coronavirus Cause the Collapse of Our Health Care Financing System?” Health Affairs Forefront (2020).
of Black Lives Matter that arose in 2020 took advantage of the disruption of society; it put the focus on pre-existing deep-seated issues such as inequality, racism, disenfranchisement, and government corruption. This movement, as well as the rise of the Qanon movement, unrelated to the pandemic itself but unfolding in real time alongside it, divided both the government’s and the public’s attention throughout the crisis.

**Japan**

Japan is a state with a population of 125.7 million. There are strong democratic institutions with a free press and it fits the parameter for the amount of people using the internet. There is a national health insurance system which provides universal coverage by a mandate for either an employment-based or residence-based health insurance plan which is funded by both taxes and individual contributions. Most residents have private health insurance. There is a 30% coinsurance for most services as well as some out-of-pocket copayments, both of which have capped maximums. Fees scale with both age and income and the national government sets fees for the insurance rates and healthcare.

Geographically Japan is obviously an island, making controlling entrance into the country straightforward and the extent to which Japan was victim to bordering countries inefficacy or indifference is nonexistent. There is a (relative to other case studies) low trust in government and institutions and a historically low incidence of protest movements. Hosting the Olympics during COVID-19 brought on a host of challenges and complaints, and both that and

166 The entirety of the overview provided here of Japan’s national healthcare comes from The Commonwealth Fund; and organization founded in 1918 which seeks to promote an “equitable health care system” and catalogues the particulars of the healthcare systems in 56 countries.
COVID-19 vaccines faced an unusual amount of open protest. Two prime ministers were replaced over the course of the study time frame and no other case study disapproved of their government’s response at such a high rate. The summer Tokyo Olympics were moved from 2020 to July of 2021 by the Japanese government and the narrative trials domestically and internationally around this are unique among possible case studies.

Germany

Germany has a population of 83.13 million. There are strong democratic institutions and a free press with a level of internet usage in keeping with the parameters for the case studies. According to the National Library of Medicine, Germany has a universal healthcare system built on compulsory insurance\textsuperscript{167}. It is funded through premiums paid by employees and their employers and is subsidized by federal taxes. Premiums scale with income, but not age as in Japan and have a cap as to how much a person can be required to pay in who has a high income. It is governed and regulated by the Federal Joint Committee and the Federal Ministry of Health.

This is a case study from the European Union, meaning there was the challenge of shared open borders, which is unique among the chosen case studies. The major protest movement to arise during COVID-19 was “Querdenker” (which roughly translates to “one who thinks laterally or outside the box”)\textsuperscript{168}. This movement has picked up political steam and has aligned itself broadly with the right, despite some parts of the disparate group traditionally belonging to the left. As described by NYU’s Center for European and Mediterranean Studies:


“The intensity and scope of protests against the government measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in Germany has surprised many observers. Self-stylized "lateral thinkers" have forged a coalition that encompasses far-right extremists but also anti-vaxxers who historically have aligned with the left. At both ends of the political spectrum, protesters seem to share a deep-seated distrust in government”\(^{169}\).

Australia

Australia is a country of 25.74 million people with a strong democracy, a free press, and 90% of the population uses the internet, as reported by the World Bank. The healthcare system is a hybrid of public and private\(^ {170}\). Citizens, permanent residents, and refugees can all buy insurance privately to subsidize the public insurance that they all have, which gets them access to both public and private medical institutions. The public insurance focuses on preventative care and primary care doctors, with paid versions covering much of the specialist care. The public coverage is automatic for citizens and free, paid for by taxes. Approximately half of Australians purchase private supplementary insurance, and the federal government pays a rebate toward this premium and charges a tax penalty to high income households which do not purchase private supplementary insurance.

Sharing no borders with other states, like Japan, there were no border issues to speak of. The protest movements during the study time period were more narrowly focused on COVID-19, though co-opted by the far right as they were in the case of Germany. Australia’s


government was dealt a massive blow with an additional crisis heading into that of COVID-19: bushfires. During the Black Summer bushfires an estimated 11 million people were impacted by the bushfire smoke, which put a major strain on the healthcare system going into the pandemic crisis. This additional crisis created a need for a split focus by the government and a balancing act between dealing with the two crises at hand, but a specific criticism of how it was handled by Prime Minister Scott Morrison provided an additional challenge of low approval numbers going into the COVID-19 crisis. How or if this impacted the crafting of the initial government narrative and response, by far the most aggressive of all countries on the topic, is an interesting topic for future research.

The Shape of Things to Come

The case study chapters have a bit of a mini preface or introductory chapter, which will discuss popular conspiracies during the study time period across all four case studies. Most conspiracies originated in the United States and spread across the world, which makes it the cross section that all case studies have in common. The prevalence of belief (or disbelief) in these theories is measured by polls. This chapter also introduces the Edelman Trust Barometer and compares the levels of preexisting trust across all four states as of 2019 side by side.

Next, in separate chapters, are the country case studies spelled out in turn. The broad strokes of the narratives along with the twists and turns of scandals and missteps and the response of the public to it all are put together into this dissertation’s own narrative flow.

Broadly, even as there were competing goals for narratives, governments did espouse a desire

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to limit mortality and case numbers, and one might expect that if they were successful the polls reflected approval of the government and buy in to some portion of the narrative. When this is not the case, one circles back around to the idea that nothing is purely objective in nature; there is no bar by which the government is being held to that improved or hurt the odds of narrative acceptance, rather there was a preexisting likelihood that the narrative would or would not gain traction.
CHAPTER IV
INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE STUDIES

This chapter introduces the reader to the relative commonalities among the case studies. The topics are trust, to include an explanation of the trust index used, and conspiracism. There is a visual of the levels of trust in government and institutions relative to the other case studies based on the findings of the Edleman Trust Barometer of 2019. The Barometer reported on the broad heading of trust in the “system” – which is defined as the institutions of government, non-government organizations, business and the media. The Barometer divided those polled into the “informed public” and the “mass population”\(^{172}\). The Edleman Trust Barometer defines the “informed public” as being between the ages of 25-64, in the top 25% of household income per age group in each market, college educated, and reporting significant media consumption and engagement in business news and public policy. The Barometer defines the “mass population” as all respondents not including the “informed public”\(^{173}\).

Relatively speaking, the United States and Germany were on par for trust in the system in 2019, going into the first year of the pandemic. Australia’s population had slightly less trust in government and institutions and, again relatively speaking, Japan’s public had significantly less trust in government and institutions than any of the other case studies. If trust were a key factor one would expect Japan to have the least successful government narrative and, as the case study will show, that pans out. Problematic however is that Australia, with the second


\(^{173}\) Edelman, "Edelman trust."
lowest level of trust in the system, as measured by public polling, achieved a much higher level of buy in from their population than Germany or the United States; which leaves the hanging implication that there is some kind of intervening variable that mitigates or magnifies trust as a factor that has not been identified in this study.

Figure 1 – A graph showing the level of trust in “systems” broadly

The final hypothesis discussed in the methodology chapter is the number of counter narratives as an independent variable in whether the government was able to establish the dominant narrative. As it turns out, there were the same number of broad iterations of COVID-19 conspiracies across all three case studies and only one Japan escaped the veritable onslaught of additional counter narratives aside from the conspiracism, with only two major counter

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narratives that were incredibly consistent, making the differences between Japan and the other states concerning this variable important.

It's worth mentioning here that there were consequential global narratives from governments that were a part of the mainstream narrative for a long time; one such narrative that has received a great deal of criticism in retrospect was that COVID-19 was transmitted by droplets rather than being airborne; prompting measures aimed at an assumed to be spread by droplets pathogen (handwashing, surface cleansing, physical distancing)\(^\text{175}\). Measures to reduce airborne transmission (improving indoor air quality, reducing indoor crowding and time spent indoors, and high-grade respiratory protection) were either not mentioned at all or under emphasized at the beginning of the pandemic and this global misinformation contributed to the woes of governments\(^\text{176}\). Dyani Lewis explained in *Nature*, that the World Health Organization overlooked—and at times overtly denied—airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 for over two years, despite early evidence indicating that this was an important, and perhaps the dominant, route of transmission\(^\text{177}\). In this case the counter narrative, that COVID-19 was airborne, proved to be the one based in fact while the accepted mainstream narrative was not. That said, the bulk of this short chapter covers the level of following of global conspiracies to save us all from having to review them in each and every chapter individually.

There are three giant pots of similar conspiracies. The first is the sort of “tech” pot, covering 5G and microchip related conspiracies. The second is the hoax/global plot pot of COVID-19 conspiracies. The final is pot is all conspiracies related to vaccine safety and efficacy.


\(^{176}\) Greenhalgh, Ozbilgin, and Tomlinson, "How COVID-19 spreads."

Every case study had at least some following out of each of these broad pots of conspiracy theories, no government was immune, and no government escaped competing with them. While there is a substantially greater following for vaccine conspiracies, the following for conspiracies across the other two categories is not insignificant.

Sturm and Albrecht (2021) break down the infamous 5G conspiracy theories, which argued that the advent of a fifth-generation mobile network was nefarious and linked in some way to COVID-19, into three categories. The first grouping of 5G conspiracies argued that the government is using lockdowns to install 5G networks to more thoroughly surveil the public or control or kill citizens. The second argued that 5G was spreading the virus to create a market for pharmaceutical companies’ vaccines. The third argues that 5G created COVID-19 symptoms, but the virus itself did not exist. All of these conspiracies had iterations that credited Bill Gates, an ultra-wealthy American computer programmer, businessman, and philanthropist, with being the architect of the 5G plan. Installing microchips via vaccines was an offshoot conspiracy, which also claimed Gates was at the center of the effort.178

In an August 2020 poll179 Cambridge YouGov asked respondents to rate the truth value of the statement “The symptoms of Coronavirus are caused or enhanced by the direct, physical effects on the human body of the “fifth generation” wireless communication networks, also known as 5G”. One can see the relative spread of belief in a 5G conspiracy across the four countries. The highest net true is the United States at 15%, which is certainly the margins of the population, but it’s worth noting that a response of “Don’t Know” is not exactly a point for the

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178 Sturm and Albrecht, "Constituent COVID-19 apocalypse,” 130.
consensus view and some percent of the public believed or suspected this conspiracy was true in every country.

On March 20, 2020, the U.S. based broadcaster Alex Jones of ‘Infowars’ declared that the COVID-19 crisis was a “global scheme” to introduce a communist one-world government, and just like that, the ‘COVID-19 is a hoax’ narrative was off and running\textsuperscript{181}. To credit Jones too much would be disingenuous, there were many similar conspiracies coming from multiple sources, he was just higher profile than others. Jones’ skepticism can be broadly situated among populist theories that argue that there is a great deal of government overreach, and that the elite of the world are plotting against the masses\textsuperscript{182}. Poll data was collected concerning the conspiracy that COVID-19 was staged for political purposes in August of 2020. The question

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{conspiracy-graph.png}
\caption{Conspiracy graph one \textsuperscript{180}}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{181} Strurm and Albrecht, “Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 133.

\textsuperscript{182} Strurm and Albrecht, “Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 133.
asked respondents to rate the truth value of the statement: “Coronavirus is a myth created by some powerful forces, and the virus does not really exist”.

The final pot, anti-vaccine conspiracies, seemingly held the greatest power. The doubt and skepticism present in the public concerning vaccines is reflected in a multitude of polls. An article in *HealthLine* listed the major vaccine conspiracy theories. Among them is that the COVID-19 vaccine makes you infertile, or contains a micro-chip, or can rewrite your DNA\(^\text{184}\). In the poll graphed below, vaccine theories were approached through one specific question. In the August 2020 poll respondents were asked to rate the truth value of the statement: “The truth about the harmful effects of the vaccine is being deliberately hidden from the public”. The


question was asked again in September of 2021 and the results of that are in the second of the following two bar graphs.

![Bar Graph](image)

**Figure 4 – Conspiracy graph three**

This final poll, the one angled at the most general of the anti-vaccine conspiracies, stands out as having the most traction. Not only that, as this graph shows, the conspiracy gained traction as the pandemic dragged on, with more following in 2021 than in 2020. The general uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the government relative to the vaccine in Japan is extremely high. Vaccine conspiracies and vaccine hesitancy had been prevalent in Japan since the 1990s when a slew of class-action lawsuits were brought against the Health

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Ministry by a small group of parents concerning side effects of the MMR vaccine\textsuperscript{186}. The government lost the lawsuits, so leaders were understandably concerned about advocating vaccination of any kind\textsuperscript{187}. In 2018, media reports in Japan led the government to withdraw its recommendation concerning the HPV vaccine – despite its universal recognition as both safe and effective\textsuperscript{188}. Less than 30% of people in Japan felt that vaccines broadly were safe going into the pandemic\textsuperscript{189}. This was arguably the steepest hill for the government to climb, but the lack of trust in institutions and the government in Japan was a close second.

\textsuperscript{186} Justin McCurry, “Japan ranks among the most Covid-immunised countries, but only months ago the story was very different.” \textit{The Guardian}, November 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/15/anxious-japan-covid-vaccine-hesitancy-immunised.

\textsuperscript{187} McCurry, “Japan ranks.”

\textsuperscript{188} McCurry, “Japan ranks.”

CHAPTER V

JAPAN

Articles concerning Japan’s response to COVID-19 have a sort of measured feel to them. The Council on Foreign Relations produced a brief titled, “Japan Has Weathered COVID-19 Better Than Many, but Problems Persist”\(^{190}\). It appeared that Japan’s technocratic approach had managed outbreaks much better than the United States and European countries, though two prime ministers stepped down amidst harsh criticism from the public\(^{191}\). An article in *Nature* written by Hitoshi Oshitani (2022)\(^{192}\), an officer responsible for emerging diseases at the WHO, warned that the public’s resistance to organized government measures and restrictions was a challenge that Japan’s government was not up to the task of navigating\(^{193}\). Then again, it appeared they might not have to; William Sposato (2020), a Tokyo based journalist, noted in May in *Foreign Policy* that “despite indifferent lockdowns and poor testing, Japan seems to be skipping the worst of the pandemic”\(^{194}\). The government’s coronavirus response was assessed by its people as the worst among the case studies, with only 20% believing that the government was performing “very well” or “fairly well” as of August of 2020; a number which dropped to a more abysmal 12% by mid-2021, a position with seemingly little evidence to back it that Prime Minister Abe questioned in a speech toward the end of his tenure.

\(^{191}\) Smith, “Japan Has Weathered.”
\(^{192}\) The officer responsible for emerging diseases at the World Health Organization, Western Pacific regional office at the start of the pandemic.
While the other three case studies have a bi-cameral legislature and federal system with local governments that interacted with the executive branch of the government and various agencies on messaging and policies, in Japan we see a unitary state with a direct line from the Prime Minister to bureaucratic agencies and minimal issues streamlining the main COVID-19 narrative\textsuperscript{195}. It is worth explaining that politics in Japan often revolve around an ideal that political party platforms (preferably only two of them) should be all that are voted for; that is, politicians should be interchangeable, and the most popular ideology is what should govern\textsuperscript{196}. In practice this is not the case, individual candidates run expensive campaigns heavily hinged on personality and ideological platforms are far from uniform\textsuperscript{197}. One challenge to cohesion of messaging from within Japan’s government is that popular political personalities will often depart from the stated policy goals of their political party, to include close advisors to the prime minister, though this was not a prevalent issue during the COVID-19 crisis\textsuperscript{198}.

The compromise between the people’s ideals and reality is that of an increasingly technocratic approach to governing. A technocratic government differs from a more traditional profile of democracy in that major policy decisions are not made by political parties or political debate, instead it is handled primarily by the government bureaucracy\textsuperscript{199}. A truly technocratic government would render political parties relatively powerless, and that is not the case in Japan, but the Prime Minster has broad policy making power. This allowed for a streamlining of

\textsuperscript{197} Curtis, "DP-RIETI Discussion," 2.
\textsuperscript{198} Curtis, "DP-RIETI Discussion," 13.
\textsuperscript{199} McDonnell and Valbruzzi, "Defining and Classifying," 656.
the narrative, which one might have thought would create a narrative that was superior or at least without major hiccups, but ultimately competing priorities made a mess of Japan’s narrative and kept them the government from successfully creating a dominant narrative.

**Polarization**

Sakamoto and Takikawa’s (2017) article concerning polarization in Japan points out that between 1994 and 2016, the Japanese Diet was more polarized than the U.S. Congress, but this was reflective of a multiparty parliamentary system, which means that it is difficult to draw a clear comparison between the two. On the affective level, that is one person looking at the political views of another as indicative of the person themselves being inherently problematic, Japan has some mixed results. Since the year 2000, the affective polarization in Japan has been on the rise, though subtly so, until narrowing polling respondents to only the two largest parties in the country, at which point the increase in affective polarization (note this is not the overall total) since 2000 surpasses that of the notoriously polarized U.S. While the increase relative to before the 2000s was greater than that of the United States, overall Japan’s affective polarization rate remains lower than that of the United States and Australia.

**Trust and Mistrust**

The Edleman Trust Barometer of 2019 reported on the broad heading of trust in the “system” – which is measured by trust in the institutions of government, non-government organizations, business and the media – with finding that 53% of Japan’s “informed public”...
reported trust in the system, which contrasts with the “mass population’s” 37% reporting the same trust. This level of trust in the listed institutions was lower across both populations than those in Germany, the United States, and Australia.

Given the pre-pandemic trust values and comparisons, the findings of polls concerning trust in sources of information during the COVID-19 pandemic should be unsurprising. In a poll commissioned by Reuters Institute taken in April of 2020 and again in April of 2021, conducted by YouGov-Cambridge, the most trusted source of COVID-19 information in Japan were those who fell in the category of ‘scientists, doctors, and health experts’, with the trust of 66% of the population, while trust in news organizations came in at 48%, the national government at 41%, and politicians at only 24%.

The Narratives

The design of the public campaign concerning COVID-19 came from the Prime Minister’s office and was coordinated with and through the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW). In some senses, or at least according to critics, Japan should have had an edge over many other governments at the start of the pandemic. A journalist with The Japan Times reported that this government has had experience with contagious diseases and should have anticipated and planned for this type of crisis, particularly given that Japan is “home to five of the 20 most dense metropolitan areas in the 300-city OECD metropolitan database” meaning

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204 The Edleman Trust Barometer defines the “mass population” as all respondent not including the “informed public.”
205 Edelman, “Edelman trust.”
the “high population density and international exchanges increase the risk of infectious disease outbreaks”\textsuperscript{207}.

Objectively the outcomes in terms of COVID-19 case load at any given time, as well as the death toll, was superior to most other countries. While many would interpret this as an indicator that the government was performing well on COVID-19, many of the media sources included in this chapter implied, or outright stated, that such positive outcomes were practically a fluke when weighed against actual government policies. These messages comprised the bulk of the media reported counter narrative.

There were two major counter narratives in Japan throughout the period of this study. First, that the government was incompetent, which was a broad criticism levied at every government in every case study in this dissertation. The second may not seem specific to Japan, since there were conspiracies in all case studies that the government was using COVID-19 as a cover for any number of nefarious intentions; but this was a specific iteration of the counter narrative that the government was obfuscating its intent with a reasonable amount of evidence to back it up. This counter narrative maintained that the government valued economics over lives and was misleading people with narrative attempts that claimed otherwise. The espoused government narrative seemed to promote public health and safety, but a major economic policy launched during the pandemic was incongruent with that messaging.

Despite the first cases being recorded in on January 16, 2020\textsuperscript{208}, the narrative on the part of the Japanese government got a late start. On March 10, 2020, the government

introduced the “Act on Special Measures” for COVID-19. This outlined a “the formulation of action plans by national and municipal governments” called for the stockpiling of medical supplies and the implementation of border control measures including quarantine periods\textsuperscript{209}. On March 11, 2020; \textit{the Japan Times} published an opinion piece decrying the actions of the Japanese government on COVID-19 because they had yet to declare a pandemic or release public measures:

“The war against the new coronavirus is being fought on three fronts: medical professionals are on the front lines working to beat the infections; governments are trying to secure domestic public support for difficult measures; and those same governments compete in the court of international public opinion for credibility and leadership. Japan should be winning all three fights; instead, the government is struggling, failing to effectively combat the infections and unable to win the confidence of publics at home and abroad”.

When the narrative developed in earnest, the government focused their mitigation narrative on a sense of personal responsibility and daily habits\textsuperscript{210}. A \textit{Foreign Affairs} article characterized the measures as depending on the “goodwill of the individual, along with a little social shaming”\textsuperscript{211}. Authorities sought a 70-80% reduction in social interaction through entirely voluntary measures\textsuperscript{212}. The public awareness campaign instructed the population to avoid three


\textsuperscript{209} Kikuchi, Machida, Nakamura Saito, Odagiri, Kojima, Watanabe, Fukui, and Inoue, ”Changes in.”

\textsuperscript{210} Oshitani, ”COVID lessons from.”

\textsuperscript{211} Sposato, “Japan’s Halfhearted.”

\textsuperscript{212} Sposato, “Japan’s Halfhearted.”
situations: closed environments, crowded conditions, and close-contact settings. The intent was to have straightforward and consistent messaging, which was then popularized by a well-known television announcer and Tokyo Governor, Koike Yuriko. The narrative was emphasized repeatedly via trusted news channels, the internet, social media platforms, and even announcements on public transport to raise public awareness on practical ways to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Shortly after the introduction of these guidelines, then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo declared a state of emergency.

On April 7 the Prime Minister announced: "I have decided to declare a state of emergency because we have reached a point at which the spread of infections has become rapid and widespread across the country and is threatening to have a grave impact on people's lives and the economy." The state of emergency was later extended countrywide (April 16, 2020). The remainder of April was filled with messages that projected something like existential dread: "Unfortunately the number of those infected keeps rising," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said, "The situation remains severe." Accompanying this warning was an alarming statement from the Japanese Association for Acute Medicine, "We feel that the collapse of the emergency care system is already here." There was a quick turnaround on this narrative, reeling back in all of the concern, at the Prime Minister’s press conference on May 25, when he

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213 Oshitani, “COVID lessons from.”
214 Oshitani, “COVID lessons from.”
215 Oshitani, “COVID lessons from.”
217 Ryall, “Can Japan’s.”
218 Sposato, “Japan’s Halfhearted.”
219 Sposato, “Japan’s Halfhearted.”
announced an end to the COVID-19 state of emergency and released a new narrative implying that the virus was no longer a threat.

In a retrospective on the government response to COVID-19, Jeremy Howard, a researcher at the University of San Francisco, said: “Japan, I think a lot of people agree, kind of did everything wrong, with poor social distancing, karaoke bars still open and public transit packed near the zone where the worst outbreaks were happening”220. What success had been had relative to infection rates Howard credited to the general preexisting cultural practices around wearing masks to prevent spreading illnesses221.

As reported in the Tokyo Review, his speech touted the effectiveness of what he termed the “Japan model.” The article characterized this as “touching upon the notion of Japanese exceptionalism to which his rhetoric so often returns” and continued an assessment that he proclaimed that “the virus is all but under control and suggested that the country’s success meant it should now play a leading role in global infectious disease measures”222. The fact is the government was able to keep all restrictions voluntary, a feat that was not repeatable in any other of the countries studied here. While he admitted lifestyle changes were still necessary, he made an appeal to give credit where credit was due as the country maintained the lowest death toll among G7 countries223.

221 Hyashi and Rich, “Is the Secret to Japan’s.”
223 Fahey, “Abe Shinzo Enters.”
The next steps by the government muddled any remaining sense that the virus was a threat with the unveiling of the government’s “Go To Travel” domestic subsidy\(^{224}\). Announced in late July of 2020 to compensate for the loss of tourism revenue,\(^{225}\) the campaign was meant to stimulate the flailing tourist industry from within, creating funds to drive to travel in country as the borders remained closed\(^{226}\).

The “Go To Travel” subsidy package of $12 billion (1.3 trillion yen) was ultimately linked not to the outgoing Prime Minister Abe, by to the new Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, who had promoted it as Chief Cabinet Secretary under former Prime Minister Abe\(^{227}\). Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stepped down amidst health concerns in August of 2020\(^{228}\). At the time he was under heavy criticism for his efforts surrounding COVID-19. Prime Minister Abe asked, “why haven’t we been able to earn the public’s support even though we have managed to control the spread of the infection better than other developed countries?”\(^{229}\) This the question alluded to previously in this chapter, and one that no one seemed to know the answer to.

On August 30 \textit{The Tokyo Review} reported: that removing Tokyo from its original position as excluded from the “Go To Travel” program due to high infections signaled to the public that it was safe to resume their previous level of social and economic activities\(^{230}\). The program remained a thorn in the side of the government’s narrative throughout and the Olympics joined in as evidence used to continue the narrative that the government had its priorities skewed.

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\(^{225}\) Lee, “Lost in Communication.”

\(^{226}\) Lee, “Lost in Communication.”

\(^{227}\) Lee, “Lost in Communication.”


\(^{229}\) Shimuda, “A legacy slipping away.”

\(^{230}\) Shimuda, “A legacy slipping away.”
This second of the major counter narratives, and more prominent narrative, decided that focus on retaining and holding the Olympics was the nail in the coffin on the idea that the government had any real concern for public health.

As reported by Deutsche Welle, skepticism of government motives started early on. School closures in February of 2020 were deemed to a political move to protect the possibility of holding the Olympics despite the pandemic\textsuperscript{231}. The idea that children were at risk was unequivocally countered by an infectious disease exert, Kentaro Iwata stating: “Children are at little risk and don’t get seriously ill”\textsuperscript{232}. Critics argued that the motives here were linked to courting international, rather than domestic, favor as the country was considered particularly lax in any measures until the Canadian vice president of the International Olympic Committee expressed concern that Japan may not be able to move forward with the Olympics\textsuperscript{233}. With limited testing as of February of 2020, Masahiro Kami, head of the Medical Governance Institute in Tokyo stated: “For every person who tested positive, there are probably hundreds of untested people with mild symptoms”\textsuperscript{234}.

The Prime Minister was further criticized for delaying the announcement of the state of emergency until after the International Olympic Committee concluded that the 2020 summer Tokyo Olympic Games had to be delayed. "There is no leadership being demonstrated in Japan today," said Mieko Nakabayashi, a former politician with the Democratic Party of Japan and now a professor at Tokyo's Waseda University. "Certainly, Abe is not exercising any leadership,

\textsuperscript{232} Fritz, “Coronavirus: Nationwide.”
\textsuperscript{233} Fritz, “Coronavirus: Nationwide.”
\textsuperscript{234} Fritz, “Coronavirus: Nationwide.”
and I would say that this crisis has shown up his lack of a spine. The sum of this narrative accused the government of paying only lip service to public health while focusing on the economy as the true referent object. "The Olympics were Abe's last way of salvaging his 'Abenomics' policies," said Nakabayashi, referring to the ambitious economic revitalization that Abe had promised during his campaign in 2012.

In the article from the introduction published May 14, 2020 in *Foreign Policy* by William Sposato, a Tokyo-based journalist, he called Japan’s measures “halfhearted,” pointing out that Japan seemed to be doing everything wrong, but weirdly seemed to be finding success. This take on things seems to sum up the attitude found in polls. The polling in Japan concerning COVID-19 had the consistent feature of more “I don’t know” responses than in any other case study, where typically those who responded that way were such a slight number that it barely seems worth recording. In the case of Japan, it is important that it is mentioned that the number is comparatively high, as it often reflects that both the government and those touting counter narratives failed to convince a great many people of anything in particular, but there’s a good chance that the counter narratives were at a minimum a source of doubt.

More than 80% of people responding to a survey conducted in late April of 2020 said that the government’s declaration of a state of emergency (on April 7) was too late, perhaps not a sign that there was certain buy in to the alternative motives counter narrative, but not an agreement that the government had things well in hand. When it came to the job that the

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236 Ryall, “Japan losing patience over COVID-19 response.”

237 Sposato, “Japan’s Halfhearted.”

238 Sposato, “Japan’s Halfhearted.”

239 Ryall, “Japan losing patience.”
government was doing broadly regarding COVID-19, what Japanese respondents did know was that they were not happy. The Prime Minister’s cabinet rating was below 30% in 2020. About 60% of respondents said they weren’t happy with actions taken by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration to tackle caseloads in a poll conducted on July 18, 2020 by the Mainichi newspaper and Social Survey Research Centre. Other findings from the same poll include two-thirds of the respondents saying that preventing infections should take priority over economic activities and 64% said the government should declare a localized state of emergency – this is months after the May end of the state of emergency. Respondents also address the “Go To Travel” subsidy after Tokyo was excluded from the program, with 69% saying the campaign should be suspended entirely, not for just one part of Japan.

Concerning measures implemented by the government, in August of 2020 a Cambridge YouGov poll asked, “How effective, if at all, do you think facemasks are at stopping the spread of coronavirus in” a variety of indoor public spaces. 82% of respondents agreed they were “very” or “fairly effective”. The New York Times featured an article on June 6 of 2020 with the headline asking, “Is the Secret to Japan’s Virus Success Right in Front of Its Face?” and noting that “in America, masks have become a weapon in the culture wars. In Japan, wearing one is no big deal, and deaths have stayed low.”

This same article saw Tokyo based journalist Motoko Rich reporting:

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240 Fahey, “Abe Shinzo Enters.”
242 “More in Japan.”
243 “More in Japan.”
245 Hyashi, “Is the Secret”
“With paper masks sold out everywhere, the Japanese government sent cloth masks in the mail in April. The initiative, which cost about $400 million, became the butt of jokes, when people discovered the masks were too small to cover most adults’ mouths and noses.

The masks became a symbol of failings in the government’s coronavirus response. In the early months of the pandemic, Japan seemed not to follow much of the conventional epidemiological wisdom, deliberately restricting testing and not ordering a lockdown.”²⁴⁶

The challenges for the Japanese government in messaging, as well as the actual narrative from the government, remained largely stable throughout 2020. The public opinion that the government was failing to effectively address COVID-19, and that the government travel program remained too risky, remained constant as well. Reported by Reuters, in a poll conducted in December of 2020, 48% of respondents wanted the government to halt the “Go To Travel” subsidy campaign, arguing that it was increasing the spread of the virus; a second one found that 57% wanted the campaign suspended²⁴⁷. This was a reduction in the number of respondents who thought it should be suspended over July of 2020, but still off the mark of the government narrative being well accepted.

The final study time period in Japan spanned both the slow roll out of the vaccination campaign and the long-awaited Tokyo Olympics. By this time approval for Abe’s successor, Suga, had plummeted, with disapproval of the response to COVID-19 hitting a near-record

²⁴⁶ Hyashi, “Is the Secret”
Disapproval of the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis rose 6 percentage points to 64%, according to the weekend Nikkei/TV Tokyo poll in late August of 2021. In the same August poll, 70% of respondents believed that the government’s roll out of vaccines was not meeting the government narrative that of “proceeding smoothly.”

In April of 2021 35% of people in Japan backed cancelling the Olympics entirely with an additional 34% wanting to delay them another year. These numbers increased in May of 2021, when The Guardian reported that more than 80% of people in Japan opposed hosting the Olympics in 2021; with 43% of respondents answering that they should be cancelled altogether and 40% believing they should be further postponed. Only 14% supported holding the games in the summer of 2021. In the event that the games were held, 59% of respondents said there should be no spectators. This is perhaps evidence that the population was convinced of the severity and risks of COVID-19 at this point, but not convinced of the government narrative at the time.

A poll in May of 2021 that asked, “What level of threat, if any, do you think COVID-19 poses to you personally” and separately “to your family”. While roughly 10% didn’t know, the majority was convinced that the virus remained a threat to their family at 69% and 68% responding that it was a threat to themselves.

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249 Mizorogi, “Japanese disapproval.”
250 Mizorogi, “Japanese disapproval.”
252 “Tokyo Olympics: more.”
Taking a step back to January of 2021, this month saw global conspiracism gaining a foothold among some parts of the Japanese population. The kinds of conspiracies that extended their reach from the United States to Japan are rather astonishing. A study was done by Fujio Toriumi, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo, analyzing twitter messages in January of 2021. The study reported that the number of postings related to the attack on Capitol Hill, including retweets, reached about 3.3 million in Japan. Among these, a posting of a Trump supporter conspiracy theory was retweeted slightly less than 10,000 times²⁵⁴.

While the January 20, 2021 attack on Capitol Hill in the United States seems not relevant to the topic at hand, the information is here to illustrate the peculiar nature of the conspiracy movement in Japan in 2021 and helps explain why the methodology that captured such movements in the other case studies did not exactly translate. Reputable national media was not reporting on transplanted Qanon conspiracy theories, rather these media outlets limited their reports on counter narratives to the anti-vaccine movement and general criticism of the government motives – consistently arguing that the economy was being protected by putting the population’s health at risk.

Vaccines became a point of contention on two very different fronts, the anti-vaccine movement and a delayed rollout of vaccines for those willing to take them due to the decision to have trials for mRNA-based vaccines in country (rather than deferring to studies which had already been conducted in other countries)²⁵⁵. Japan struggled to implement plans for COVID-

²⁵⁵ Smith, “Japan Has Weathered.”
19 vaccination and while the push was on to vaccinate as many as possible, books written by doctors opposed to the vaccination hit best seller lists\textsuperscript{256}.

Among the less popular (and certainly not published in national media) vaccine conspiracies was that the government was attempting to enslave the people and that they were trying to reduce the population\textsuperscript{257}. While protest movements in the streets of Japan are rare (which is an understatement), in late June of 2021, local lawmakers and doctors held a news conference calling for a suspension of vaccinations\textsuperscript{258}. In mid-July 2021, they hosted a rally and demonstration. At both events, many ignored mask-wearing rules at venues and had fathered to celebrate the newly minted celebrity speakers: “a doctor who authored a best-selling anti-vaccine book and a national university professor emeritus specializing in immunobiology”\textsuperscript{259}.

While the Japanese public broadly pans the government’s response and began 2020 with a very anti-vaccine consensus, it is undeniable that somehow a narrative regarding vaccines being safe and necessary was successful. Seven weeks before the Olympics were held, only 3.5\% of Japan’s population was fully vaccinated\textsuperscript{260}. A Tokyo based BBC reporter stated: “With the Olympics about to open, it seemed astonishing the Japanese government had bungled the vaccine rollout so badly”\textsuperscript{261}. Just six months later however, 76\% of Japanese were

\textsuperscript{256} Kimoto Harumi, “What factors have driven belief in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories in Japan?” \textit{The Mainichi}, September 9, 2021. https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210908/p2a/00m/0na/027000c
\textsuperscript{257} Harumi, “What factors?”
\textsuperscript{258} Harumi, “What factors?”
\textsuperscript{259} Harumi, “What factors?”
\textsuperscript{261} Wingfield-Hayes, “Japan: From.”
fully immunized. This was done largely through mobilization of the army in July to administer one million doses a day, an exercise which a BBC article reported came from fear that if the Olympics did bring about a feared spike in cases, the government would face ever growing unrest.

This surprising apparent disappearance of vaccine hesitancy could be seen, by some, as evidence that the government narrative finally prevailed, this is not the case. Professor Kenji Shibuya of the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research thought that the scarcity of vaccines combined with the large elderly population in Japan seeing people in other countries dying culminated in fear driving early vaccination rates. He argued that given the shortages in vaccines, elderly were largely first in line to receive them, meaning the younger people in the country had plenty of time to see that vaccines were safe, having been administered to millions of people in other countries and their own without a high incidence of side effects. This is also not the whole answer to why vaccination rates were so high, but it is safe to say that public opinion and trust had not been with the government from the beginning to the end of this study.

While the bulk of the Japanese public continues to view the idea that Japan is a success story with extreme skepticism, the Australian public is happy to embrace such reports of their country.

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262 Wingfield-Hayes, “Japan: From.”
263 Wingfield-Hayes, “Japan: From.”
264 Wingfield-Hayes, “Japan: From.”
265 Wingfield-Hayes, “Japan: From.”
CHAPTER VI

AUSTRALIA

Australia was a bit of a forgotten continent when it comes to the academic discussion around COVID-19 at the start of 2022. When COVID-19 came, the island state was able to close its borders and buy some time before coping with large case numbers. Though popular media introduced some stories calling Australia a “model in how to handle COVID” (CNN), there had been less interest from the scholarship sources that have touted the successes of Germany and condemned the failures of the United States. It wasn’t until after Australia’s election in May of 2022 that the BBC reported in an article that “Australia’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic - incredibly tight border controls, movement restrictions and free vaccinations - earned it the nickname Fortress Australia. But it now has one of the lowest death rates globally”266.

It matters little to Australians that they were ignored throughout, they were happy to toot their own horn in the absence of accolades from others. In a Cambridge YouGov poll in August of 2020, 79% of respondents in Australia felt that their government had done “very well” or “fairly well” in handling coronavirus. That number remained higher than in all other case studies at the mid-2021 poll, with 52% of respondents taking that position267.268

Australia’s is a federal state (rather than unitary like Japan) and a parliamentary system with three arms of government, the Parliament, the executive government, and the Judicature.

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268 In an interesting case of my case studies being pitted as rivals by a poll, in a different Cambridge YouGov poll in August of 2020, 78% of Australians believed their government had done better handling COVID-19 than the U.S. and 49% believed they had done better than Germany. There was no question concerning their performance relative to Japan.
The power players relative to COVID-19 were members of the National Cabinet, “a streamlined intergovernmental forum established on 13 March to manage and coordinate the federal, state and territory governmental response” and Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Morrison was the leader of the conservative Liberal-National coalition government which governed at the national level. Unlike in other case studies, Australians by and large favored stronger government actions in areas like vaccine requirements and for ideas like vaccine passports, with net support for mandatory vaccination coming in at 56% and support for vaccine passports being required at various public venues in the mid-50% across the board.

The global pandemic came on the heels of the Black Summer Bushfires, “the most extensive and damaging in Australian history”. Prime Minister Morrison’s support was dwindling in light of public perceived missteps during the Bushfires, including reluctance to link them to climate change and an ill-timed family trip to Hawaii. This meant some other proxies became important standard bearers for the public, but public trust interestingly increased in the Prime Minister after the start of the pandemic.

Polarization

Political polarization is a bit of a footnote in this chapter as the studies in Australia show no upward movement in levels of polarization. Between 2000 and 2020, affective polarization
levels in Australia fell\textsuperscript{274}. Australia ranks higher than Japan and Germany in affective polarization, and behind the United States. The 2020 level of affective polarization in the United States is substantially higher than that of Australia in the same year\textsuperscript{275}. Given that the levels of affective polarization are higher in Australia than that of Japan or Germany, if that were a key variable one would be looking for the government to do poorly in public perception of their narrative and for a great deal of conspiracism to be taking root, but that is not the case.

Trust and Mistrust

The Edelman Trust Barometer of 2019 reported on the broad heading of trust in the “system” – which to recap is measured by trust in the institutions of government, non-government organizations, business and the media – with the finding that 59% of Australia’s “informed public” reported trust in the system and 46% of those fitting under the category of “mass population’s” reporting trust\textsuperscript{276}. This level of trust in the listed institutions was lower than those in Germany and the United States, though not significantly so among the informed population. In the case of the mass population, it was higher than that of Germany and only one percent lower than in the U.S.

Given the pre-pandemic trust values, the findings of polls concerning trust in sources of information during the COVID-19 pandemic might be surprising. In a Cambridge YouGov poll in August of 2020, 73% of Australians found the national government to be a credible source of information about COVID-19, 65% found the national broadcasting corporation of Australia to

\textsuperscript{274} Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, "Cross-country trends in affective polarization."
\textsuperscript{275} Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, "Cross-country trends in affective polarization."
\textsuperscript{276} Edelman, "Edelman trust."
be credible on the topic, and 60% found national news sources broadly to be trustworthy concerning information on COVID-19 as well\textsuperscript{277}.

The Narratives

Australia’s first pass at a COVID-19 crisis narrative began with official government statements in January of 2020. The first spokesperson for the government to address the COVID-19 crisis publicly was the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Brendan Murphy. Greg Hunt was the Australian Minister for Heath and Aged Care at the time and took on the role of another primary official in the spotlight next to Prime Minister Morrison. Nearly all communications were uniform among these actors with the mouthpiece varying among Murphy, Hunt, and Prime Minister Morrison, who called COVID-19 “an unmitigated calamity”\textsuperscript{278}. There was no overarching denial or downplay of the pandemic, nor did the government delay action as was seen in Japan.

In a study published in the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* in 2020, scholars examined what they called the “framing” of messaging coming from the Australian government between January and April of 2020 concerning COVID-19. They determined that, The ‘political and economic context’ was the most dominant frame of the transcripts analyzed... in press conferences, information expanded on economic impacts and control measures that

were/would be taken during the pandemic, financial allocation, creating and maintaining jobs, priority areas of reform and budget matters”\textsuperscript{279}.

The Australian Parliament has catalogued a chronology of their government’s announcements concerning COVID-19 from the start of the pandemic through June of 2020\textsuperscript{280}. The government appeared to arrive at many conclusions early and in a matter-of-fact way. They called COVID-19 a pandemic weeks before it the WHO did the same\textsuperscript{281}. On January 21, the first “enhanced screening measures” for those arriving via direct flights from Wuhan, China, began, effectively beginning the securitization of the virus\textsuperscript{282}. On the 29\textsuperscript{th} of January the government announced that it was seeking approval to evacuate Australians from Wuhan, planning to take them to Christmas Island for 14 days of quarantine before entering the mainland\textsuperscript{283}. Further, the government announced that it would be releasing a million masks from the national medical stockpile on the same date\textsuperscript{284}.

Australia initially adopted what has been termed a “zero covid” strategy, which relied on quickly stamping out outbreaks on the spot through whatever means were necessary\textsuperscript{285}. To that end, the government immediately set up quarantine hotels to keep the virus from


\textsuperscript{281} “COVID-19 a chronology.”

\textsuperscript{282} “COVID-19 a chronology.”

\textsuperscript{283} “COVID-19 a chronology.”

\textsuperscript{284} “COVID-19 a chronology.”

spreading from people entering the country. On February 27, the Prime Minister announced that government policies were being guided by expert medical advice and that the government had a plan: the “Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)” Subsequent announcements contained policies supporting mitigation measures, including expanding national health care coverage to telehealth visits for all of those at home in isolation or quarantine, prescriptions delivered to homes, quickly rolling out electronic prescribing nationally, funding dedicated respiratory clinics, and issuing grants for research and education.

March was the beginning of what Reuters called “mixed messaging” between the state and federal governments in Australia. While Prime Minister Morrison did not downplay the seriousness of the threat of COVID-19, he was seen by many to be prioritizing economic concerns, while the states enacted public health measures that he often openly argued with. The Prime Minister declared that schools would remain open, while states moved to close them. As states moved toward a strategy of lockdowns, Prime Minister Morrison warned Australians not to back complete lockdowns, as they would be unlikely to ease for six months and would severely hurt livelihoods.
On the 12th of March a business subsidy was put into place for businesses expected to struggle amidst COVID-19 restrictions as well as stipends directly paid to individuals292. On March 19th, Australia closed its borders to all non-residents or citizens293. The Prime Minister attempted to calm the panic that ensued, including panic buying of groceries saying, “There is no issue with food supply in Australia, but there is an issue with the behaviour of Australians in supermarkets”294.

Lockdowns began on the 22nd of March; Pubs, clubs, gyms, indoor sporting venues, cinemas and other entertainment venues, religious institutions, and restaurants were all closed or limited in capacity295. Travel restrictions both in and out of the country were instituted along the way. On March 30th, the government continued to combine their focus – with an economic focus predicated on a health measures existence - announcing that it would pay wage subsidies to keep all Australians home whenever possible296.

In a public address on March 24th, Prime Minister Morrison (2020) attempted to employ a storytelling narrative. He preemptively bookended the pandemic, arguing that for Australians it was going to be a tough year, but only a year297. He pleaded with Australians to self-regulate, to follow “common sense rules” and “do the right thing”298. To do so would help to limit the “economic harm” that further measures would bring299. He outlined the current scope of the

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294 Knowlton, “A timeline of COVID-19.”
296 “COVID-19: a chronology.”
298 “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
299 “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
limits to public life, to include no dining out, no public entertainment or sports venues would be open, and limited forms of retail\textsuperscript{300}. Everyone was to “stay at home unless it is absolutely necessary to go out”\textsuperscript{301}. He also detailed the federal government’s position that it was safe to continue to send children to schools adding, “It’s going to be a tough year in 2020 and one of the things I don’t want to have yielded is a year of a child’s education”\textsuperscript{302}. Beyond the needs of kids, he argued, “for all those workers who need to send their children to school, that’s why the school needs to remain open”\textsuperscript{303}.

In the same speech Morrison (2020) took issue with the idea of “essential workers” in other’s narratives, “Now if you ask me who is an essential worker? Someone who has a job. Everyone who has a job in this economy is an essential worker”\textsuperscript{304}. In a briefing on May 14, Prime Minister Morrison emphasized that his priorities were to flatten the curve and “reset” the country’s economy\textsuperscript{305}. He pushed the “re-opening” of Australia and the goal of seeing “Australian get back into those jobs”\textsuperscript{306}. In June of 2020 lockdowns start to ease, allowing for 100 people per re-opened indoor venue and for sport and community events to resume\textsuperscript{307}. In July, lockdowns resumed. The first public mask request, not mandate, was made in July of 2020. In August of 2020, masks are mandated\textsuperscript{308}.

\textsuperscript{300} “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
\textsuperscript{301} “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
\textsuperscript{302} “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
\textsuperscript{303} “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
\textsuperscript{304} “Read Scott Morrison’s full statement.”
\textsuperscript{306} Morrison, “PM Scott Morrison Briefing Australia May 14.”
\textsuperscript{307} Knowlton, “A timeline of COVID-19.”
\textsuperscript{308} Knowlton, “A timeline of COVID-19.”
In an interview on August 5, 2020, Prime Minister Morrison (2020) emphasized that the government had worked hard to address the public health crisis, but what he seemed most proud of was his work concerning the economic response. He argued that COVID-19 as a public health crisis and as an economic crisis were in “quite considerable strategic competition” for attention and resources. The bulk of his attention for the remainder of the interview was on the economy, calling the situation “the biggest economic recession if not depression since the Great Depression”.

A standout among our case studies, the Prime Minister of Australia managed to preempt other governments’ vaccine gaffs with a good showing in early August of 2020, when he manages to stir up controversy with comments related to vaccines. Speaking about a future plan to vaccinate Australians, Prime Minister Morrison said that he would “expect it to be as mandatory as you could possibly make it,” with some medical exemptions. His health minister Karen Andrews reiterated the sentiment later, suggesting they were “looking into it being a mandatory vaccine.” Within days the Prime Minster was forced to backtrack amidst the backlash, stating “it’s not going to be compulsory to get the vaccine ... there are no compulsory vaccines in Australia.”

While the following of conspiracies was notably low in Australia, relatively speaking, the counter narrative of measures such as lockdowns violating civil rights mirrored that in the U.S.,

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309 Morrison, “Australia’s Prime.”
310 Morrison, “Australia’s Prime.”
311 Morrison, “Australia’s Prime.”
313 Griffiths, “Controversy over Australian PM’s vaccines.”
314 Griffiths, “Controversy over Australian PM’s vaccines.”
taking the issue to the courts. Polls during the first part of the pandemic asked whether Prime Minister Morrison and the government in general (as well as the national broadcasting corporation) were trustworthy sources for COVID-19 information in August of 2020. Morrison was either trusted “a great deal” or “a fair amount” by 65% of people, this was substantially up from a general measure of trust in senior government officials from March of 2019, when only 34% said the same. The same August 2020 poll put the net trust (“a great deal” added to the percent citing “a fair amount” of trust) at 73% for the national government as a whole and 65% for the public broadcasting corporation.  

The Australian government’s initial narrative consistently painted the virus as the primary threat to both individuals and the economy, as opposed to measures being the primary threat to the economy. A Lowy poll published June 24, 2020, reported that three-quarters of Australians said COVID-19 (76%) posed critical threats to Australia’s vital interests in the next ten years. The same percentage (76%) of Australians agreed that as long as the COVID-19 pandemic lasted, it should be mandatory by law to wear a face mask in enclosed places. Amid the quarantine, talk of new lock downs, and other measures in August of 2020, 75% of Australian’s believed that the government had not been too restrictive of people’s personal freedoms.

The latter part of 2020 seemed to be wildly successful for the Australian government’s narrative. A study done by Saich and Martiniuk (2021) on Prime Minister Morrison’s narrative

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between August of 2020 and September of 2021 analyzed themes and storytelling narratives relative to COVID-19 vaccines. They interpreted “storytelling narrative” differently than it has been interpreted and described in this project. Their definition overlaps in that stories are designed to comfort and reassure people, as well as to gain political advantage, but there was less emphasis on the idea of returning to the status quo and more emphasis on an actual storyline; as in who are the heroes and who are the villains rather than what was securitized and what legitimacy did it buy\(^{318}\). The scholars argued that Morrison cast COVID-19 as the villain in his storytelling and he and the government were the heroes as they worked to procure vaccines for the people\(^{319}\). The Prime Minister continued what one might call the victory tour he started in the first phase of this study, emphasizing “the heroic nature of Australia having heeded the medical advice of experts and controlling COVID-19 infections earning it a ranking among the leading economies in the world”\(^{320}\).

It was true that the campaign to sell the solution of vaccination to COVID-19 went significantly better in Australia than in any other country studied here. In a poll in December of 2020, 64% of Australians said they intended to be vaccinated as soon as a vaccine became available, with 56% supporting a legal mandate for it from the national government.\(^{321}\) This success was short lived however as the actual rollout of vaccines was problematic on many levels.


\(^{319}\) Saich and Martiniuk, "Government messaging,” 5

\(^{320}\) Saich and Martiniuk, "Government messaging,” 5

When vaccines hit delays in approval in Australia, with Pfizer the first to gain approval in January of 2021, Prime Minister Morrison painted those countries giving vaccines emergency authorization as victims of the villain COVID-19; with COVID-19 out of control in those countries, the government could not take the time to be sure that the vaccines were safe. Meanwhile, the afore mentioned study notes that Australia continued to be cast as “the hero” because of the stated “amazing efforts” and “2020 achievements” where the virus was successfully suppressed and controlled relative to these other countries. The message that Australia was taking time to make sure vaccines were safe clashed with later confusion, growing the anti-vaccine movement.

Morrison continued a narrative of “Australian exceptionalism” according to the study, a familiar style of appeal in narratives in each of the country case studies. Even in the face of vaccine failures, the Prime Minister touted that “the Australian way through this pandemic” had led to unmatched success and that to “continued on the successful path” people needed to be vaccinated. As Australia began to catch up with other countries’ levels of vaccination in progress in April, Morrison suggested that Australia was doing better than had comparable countries at the same stage in their own rollouts.

Shortly thereafter the Australian government found itself dealing with controversy after controversy concerning their victory lap on their home-grown AstraZeneca vaccine. After 60

324 Saich and Martiniuk, “Government messaging,” 5.
cases of blood clots linked to the vaccine, with two deaths among them, on April 8, 2021, Prime Minister Morrison held a late-night press conference in which he announced that the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (ATAGI) had advised that people under 50 get vaccinated with Pfizer, rather than AstraZeneca. In June the ATAGI updated its recommendation to Pfizer being preferred for people under 60 years of age. It was mostly downhill from here for the government’s vaccine narrative.

On June 23, 2021, the federal government announced plans to stop giving the AstraZeneca vaccine unless it was specifically requested, effectively shelving it for good by October. On June 30, 2021, Queensland’s Chief Health Officer Jeannete Young countered a statement made by Prime Minister Morrison that anyone under 40 could request AstraZeneca. Her remarks were, “I don’t want an 18-year-old in Queensland dying from a clotting illness who, if they got COVID, probably wouldn’t die.” Prime Minister Morrison did not abandon his line of logic after this, in July he made a statement that he was making a “constant appeal” to the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) to review its advice on AstraZeneca according to the balance of risk.

Morrison stated: “It’s my job as Prime Minister not to just simply accept advice uncritically.” The political upshot here was that the ATAGI’s advice about AstraZeneca was

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327 “Australia limits use of AstraZenea.”
332 Zilman, “Queensland’s Chief.”
333 Zilman, “Queensland’s Chief.”
believed to be feeding broad vaccine hesitancy and Pfizer’s vaccine was in short supply at the time, but concern that the Prime Minister was meddling in the affairs of an independent expert advisory board did not help him control the narrative. Critics worried the revelation would weaken the position of the board to be seen as credible on the topic of any vaccine. This risk of labeling the advice of experts as politically motivated was being realized at the state level, but to this point, the federal level had escaped relatively unscathed.

Amidst the controversy, Dr. Karen Price, president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, said in an interview with the BBC, “we’re going to have to regroup and regain confidence in it, as it’s really important to keep the vaccination programme rolling out. We still have elderly people unvaccinated, and we’re seeing community transmission again.” Throughout outbreaks on the east coast of Australia in July of 2021, and constant grilling on the controversy concerning AstraZeneca, Prime Minister Morrison kept a consistent story-telling narrative, describing vaccines as the “light at the end of the tunnel” and “doses of hope.” On August 23rd Prime Minister Morrison defended a policy shift away from a zero-covid strategy, from that point forward cases would be permitted to rise assuming hospitals were able to cope with them. The plan was to drop most restrictions entirely once 80% of adults were vaccinated, which he projected would be by the end of 2021. At the time of the announced change, only about 25% of Australians were fully vaccinated.
In an August 2021 survey, the doubts of the people concerning PM Scott Morrison were beginning to show up. While a total of 74% of people thought that he was handling the pandemic “very well” or “fairly well” in August of the prior year, only 45% thought the same now, with those choosing “very well” among the respondents dropping from 30% to only 13%. The government as a whole was taking a similar hit; in August of 2020 79% of respondents had agreed that the government was doing “very well” or “fairly well” in their handling of COVID-19, dropping to only 52% in August of 2021\(^{341}\).

In spite of overall approval ratings declining, the measures the government put forth were broadly backed. In August of 2021, 57% of Australians agreed that the government had not been too restrictive on people’s personal freedoms concerning COVID-19 measures\(^{342}\). September of 2021 had Australians pushing for stronger measures than the government intended to roll out, as the idea of a vaccine passport was either strongly or somewhat supported in most of public life by north of 50% of the public\(^{343}\). The segments of the public that felt the government had overreached at any given point were in an extreme minority, meaning the government faced no widespread complications on that topic; this was not the case for Germany and the United States, countries that faced a contentious and constant uphill battle on that front, finding these objections coming from a larger (and louder) minority of the population.


CHAPTER VII

GERMANY

Among the case studies here, it is the German government with the most pieces published online and in journals analyzing their response and narratives concerning COVID-19 as of January 2023. The conclusions tend to come down on the side of singing the praises of the government’s response, with articles like that written in Our World In Data titled: “Emerging COVID-19 Success Story: Germany’s Strong Enabling Environment” as well as Exemplars in Global Health featuring Germany as one of their success stories344. In a retrospective sense, Germans remain skeptical of such claims. A Cambridge YouGov poll asking Germans in August of 2020 how well the government had done in handling the issue of coronavirus came in at a whopping 67% believing that the government had done “very well” or “fairly well”, but by the middle of 2021, just 44% felt the same345.

Germany’s government is a federal system with a parliament, executive, and judiciary. Power is divided among multiple branches and four top officials; the Federal President, the President of the Bundestag (parliament), the President of the Bundesrat (a council of the states which participates in legislation alongside the Bundestag), and the top political policy maker, the Federal Chancellor346. It was the Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who was the face of the official public narrative concerning the COVID-19 crisis. Germany also belongs to the European Union, a fact which one might have expected would impact their COVID-19 policies significantly, but

European Countries turned inward during the pandemic, each choosing their own approach to the challenges presented.

In an interview with international studies professor Matthias Matthis (2020), published online by Johns Hopkin’s University, explored what went awry with the Union during the pandemic. The expectation is that the European Union would play a coordinating role during a shared crisis, but in April of 2020 the European Commission (the executive branch of the European Union) had been slow to respond to needs to coordinate across borders and share resources. In the absence of that action, China and Russia stepped up to offer to provide additional resources, creating “the perception that the EU couldn’t do it themselves, which was a PR disaster.” It was not just a “PR disaster” for the European Union however, the fact that people were looking east instead of west made the American government look remiss as well.

Polarization

Adding to the government’s COVID-19 woes was the conspiracism of the right in in Germany, as the pandemic lockdowns fueled far right extremist groups narratives concerning government overreach and tyranny. There was not a rise in affective polarization, however it might have been skewed to look like it. While the rise in the profile of the extreme right may have added fuel to the conspiracy movement, the right was on the rise before the pandemic and thus studied in advance of it.

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348 Matthijis, “COVID-19 and a splintered European Union.”

349 Matthijis, “COVID-19 and a splintered European Union.”
Some argued that the 2017 Federal elections in Germany, which saw the far-right party Alternative Fur Deutschland (AfD) become the third largest party in the federal parliament, signaled an increase in political polarity in the country. A study completed after that election concluded that the bulk of the voters for the AfD had sat out prior elections, making the election outcome a sign of mobilizing voter turnout rather than being primarily explained as a phenomenon of increased political polarization\textsuperscript{350}. Overall, Germany’s level of affective polarization is not considered high and not considered on the rise.

Trust and Mistrust

The Edleman Trust Barometer of 2019 reported on the broad heading of trust in the “system” – which is measured by trust in the institutions of government, non-government organizations, business and the media – with the finding that 60% of Germany’s “informed public” reported trust in the system, which contrasts with the “mass population’s” 42% reporting the same trust\textsuperscript{351}. These numbers are virtually identical to that of the United States in the same survey.

Given the pre-pandemic trust values and comparisons, the findings of polls concerning trust in sources of information during the COVID-19 pandemic might be a bit surprising. In a poll commissioned by Reuters Institute taken in April of 2020 and again in April of 2021, conducted by Cambridge YouGov, the most trusted sources of COVID-19 information in Germany were those who fell in the category of ‘scientists, doctors, and health experts’, with the trust of 67%


\textsuperscript{351} The Edelman Trust Barometer 2019
of the population\textsuperscript{352}. Trust in news organizations as a source of information concerning COVID-19 came in at 52%, which is higher than in the other case studies. The national government was a credible source of information on COVID-19 according to 45% of the population and politicians broadly came in at only 27%\textsuperscript{353}.

In case study by Bromme et al. (2022) on trust in science before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, based on the annual publication of the \textit{Science Barometer}, was published in February of 2022. The findings were that “German’s trust in science increased substantially after the pandemic began,” in April of 2020, and then “slightly declined in the months thereafter, still being higher in November of 2020 than in September of 2019”\textsuperscript{354}. In the years between 2017 and 2019, trust in science and research hovered around 50% (+ or -4%)\textsuperscript{355}, whereas in April of 2020 it was at 73%\textsuperscript{356}. This happened in tandem with the relative superstardom of key scientists during COVID-19, including Christen Drosten, the head virologist of the Charite Berlin. While Drosten was lauded for his skills as a public communicator, a survey in Germany in May of 2020 found that only 25% of respondents were influenced by endorsements of experts such as he\textsuperscript{357}.

Trust in politicians and journalists followed the same pattern of an increase in April of 2020 (relative to 2019) and a decrease by November of 2020 while remaining higher than that

\textsuperscript{352} Neilsen, Schulz, Fletcher, “An ongoing infodemic: How people in eight countries access news and information about Coronavirus a year into the pandemic.” \textit{Reuters} Institute, May 27, 2021. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/ongoing-infodemic-how-people-eight-countries-access-news-and-information-about-coronavirus-year#header--5
\textsuperscript{353} Neilsen, Schulz, Fletcher, “An ongoing infodemic.”
\textsuperscript{356} Bromme, Thomm, Kremer, Ziegler, “dAn anchor in troubled times ,” 8.
\textsuperscript{357} Heinzl and Liese, "Expert authority."
of 2019. Notably the Bromme (2022) study found that the trustworthiness of information acquired from friends and family had declined over this same time period, with a large pool of people who were undecided as to how to rank their trustworthiness at all (about 41%)\textsuperscript{358}. The scholars initial attempted regressions to identify explanatory variables for levels of trust in science and research found that level of education was a stronger predictor than other variables in November of 2020 while “endorsement of science-based politics” was a better predictor in April and May of 2020\textsuperscript{359}.

Along with trust in science, public endorsement of science-based politics increased significantly when the pandemic started. “In April 2020, over 80% of respondents agreed that science should inform politics. This proportion was even larger than the proportion of respondents who claimed to have trust in science, and it did not decrease between April and November”\textsuperscript{360}.

The Narratives

In a televised address, with the Reichstag parliamentary building behind her and German and EU flags to her side on March 18, 2020, Angela Merkel delivered the first speech on COVID-19. “Take it seriously,” she urged. “Since German unification — no, since the Second World War — no challenge to our nation has ever demanded such a degree of common and united action”\textsuperscript{361}. From the beginning she made it clear that transparency concerning every step of the government’s policy making would be foremost on her mind\textsuperscript{362}. Her televised

\textsuperscript{358} Bromme, Thomm, Kremer, Ziegler, “An anchor in troubled times,” 10.
\textsuperscript{360} Bromme, Thomm, Kremer, Ziegler, “An anchor in troubled times,” 15.
\textsuperscript{362} Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
appearances would become something of a viral internet phenomenon as she used her science background to break down the complexities of the virus and the studies on it. Germany’s government, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany - CDU) throughout the period of this study, faced consistent pushback from within the government for the control of the narrative, and yet the government did not falter. The Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) chose the position of harshly criticizing the government’s actions as a power grab, or at a minimum overreach. Their narrative argued that increasingly threats to freedom came from the executive rather than parliament, making the overreach even more egregious and less legitimate. The opposition party also made repeated claims that the government could not be trusted, primarily communicated via social media rather than in formal interviews that focused on the overreach narrative. This counter narrative coming from populist and neoconservative parties was standard fare in all the country case studies and polls show that it did little to dampen overall support for the government narrative and policies.

The written reports on the government’s measures outline a four-part approach to prevent, detect, contain, and treat the virus. Germany’s public health agency, the Robert Koch Institute, mobilized funding and research to understand the epidemiology of the pandemic beginning in early January of 2020, thought major statements concerning COVID-19 were not yet being made to the public. The previously cited study by Narlikar and Sottilotta

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363 Lopez, German. “Germany contained Covid-19.”
364 Leschzyk, Dinah K. “Infodemic in Germany and Brazil: How the AfD and Jair Bolsonaro are sowing distrust during the Corona Pandemic.” Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik 51, no. 3 (2021): 477-503.
365 Leschzyk, "Infodemic in Germany and Brazil."
(2021) used a database which collected information on policy responses such as travel restrictions, school closures, and restrictions on gathering to assess policy responses after the first 30 daily cases were confirmed.\(^{368}\)

The findings concerning the early narrative in Germany in the above mentioned article was that it was focused on the economic impacts above the impacts on life and health, and the policy responses were found to lack stringency across the kinds of mitigations listed above.\(^ {369}\) The article did not dive into the case study of Germany and break down these narratives as will be done here, it focused broadly on mitigation themes across various European case studies, but the idea that the government had an economic forward narrative is not reasonably backed by evidence. Arguably the fact that the policy making, rather than a narrative, of the German government was economic forward at the beginning of the pandemic was par for the course; that is where a lot of governments focused their attention to get measurable results amidst what was otherwise something of an uncomfortable social experiment.

Economic policy trumping public health policy entirely is not an accurate representation of the narrative as communicated to the public. Economic policies are necessary and complimentary to the public health initiatives as “the most commonly deployed government tools were economic in nature” across states globally.\(^ {370}\) Multiple public health policies and investments were simultaneously in the works. Scientists at Germany’s Charité hospital developed the first widely used test for COVID-19 in January of 2020, the country successfully developed a method of contact tracing to limit the spread of the virus, and a rigorous testing

\(^{368}\) Narlikar and Sottilotta, "Pandemic narratives and policy responses," 1244.
\(^{369}\) Narlikar and Sottilotta, "Pandemic narratives and policy responses," 1244.
plan was implemented; these efforts on the back of an already strong healthcare system are lauded as the public health measures that pulled Germany through the pandemic successfully.

In a study published in June of 2021, Mintrom et al. studied policy narratives concerning COVID-19 in the United Kingdom and Germany. The study identified 19 speeches from Angela Merkel made between the beginning of March 2020 and the end of July 2020 that, taken together, represented a reasonably complete account of the official state narrative. Their narrative policy framework focused on four elements: setting, characters, plot, and moral, making it not dissimilar to the study cited in the chapter on Australia which categorized story telling as something much closer to the construction of an actual story with heroes and villains than a political tool to promise a speedy resolution and return to relative calm. The study found that Merkel focused on the “moral” of “minimizing loses through science” – this was a clear theme in 84% of the 19 analyzed speeches. “She imbued her addresses to the German public with a call for collective effort in the name of saving lives, protecting, encouraging, and supporting one another, and noting the need for a partnership between the government and citizens.”

In this excerpt from opening speech featured in the study clearly counters the idea that the narrative was focused on economics over human life:

371 “Emerging success story: Germany’s strong enabling environment.” Our World In Data.
373 Mintrom, Rublee, Bonotti, and Zech, “Policy narratives,” 1225.
374 Mintrom, Rublee, Bonotti, and Zech, “Policy narratives,” 1225.
375 Mintrom, Rublee, Bonotti, and Zech, “Policy narratives,” 1225.
“Everything I tell you about this comes from the Federal Government’s ongoing consultations with the experts from the Robert Koch Institute and other scientists and virologists. These are not just abstract numbers in statistics, but this is about a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner – this is about people. And we are a community in which each life and each person counts”.376

The core theme of the government’s narrative was about, in Merkel’s words, “nothing less than people’s lives and health377”. This became a familiar refrain in the ongoing narrative. She also made it clear that mitigation measures were meant to save lives, not curtail freedoms in the country378. She referred to both the supremacy of science and the need for government transparency in all 19 speeches that were analyzed379. No other government studied here can boast such a universal respect for scientific data lacing the entirety of their early narrative.

Merkel also attempted to account for the inevitable pivots that would come with emerging science, in a speech on March 19 she said: “[t]his is a developing situation, and we will ensure that we continue to learn from it so that we can adjust our thinking and deploy new instruments at any time. If we do so, then we will explain our reasons once again”380.

On April 5, 2020, The Guardian published a story arguing that “with 400 public health offices forging ahead with testing, the country is a model for others to emulate”381. This article credited the federal system, specifically the devolution of power to the states, for the success

of the testing and contact tracing program relative to other European countries\textsuperscript{382}. The federal government appeared initially toothless, as recommendations were made to states but were not able to be mandated. There were other challenges presented by the state system as well, similar to what was seen in the other two federal systems. The situation was dissimilar to Australia, where the states uniformly tended toward more stringency than the Prime Minister preferred, and more analogous to the United States, where there were discrepancies between the lockdown policies of the 16 states\textsuperscript{383}.

By the end of April, all 16 of Germany’s states made mask wearing compulsory. A published study, by Wälde (2021), found the nationwide adoption of mask mandates worked: The policies “reduced the cumulative number of registered Covid-19 cases between 2.3% and 13% over a period of 10 days after they became compulsory” and reduced “the daily growth rate of reported infections by around 40%”\textsuperscript{384}. A July 2020 \textit{Cambridge YouGov} poll asked “How effective, if at all, do you think facemasks are at stopping the spread of coronavirus in” a variety of public settings; 73% of respondents in Germany agreed that masks were at least somewhat effective\textsuperscript{385}.

August of 2020 brought challenges for the government and somewhat wild protests (resulting in the injury of 45 police officers in Berlin)\textsuperscript{386}. On the first of August protestors stormed the Reichstag building in Berlin, prompting a very strange discourse for German officials (strange because German officials are typically quite steadfast in their devotion to the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{382} Oltermann, “Germany’s devolved logic is.”
\bibitem{383} Oltermann, “Germany’s devolved logic is.”
\bibitem{384} Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
\bibitem{386} Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
\end{thebibliography}
ideals of relatively unfettered freedom). Organizers of the demonstration in Berlin in front of the Reichstag in August, who called it the “Day of Freedom”, argued that the German government was intentionally overestimating the threat of COVID-19, meaning most of the estimated 17,000-20,000 protestors made no attempt to wear a face mask or consider social distancing\(^\text{387}\). Despite how large the protest was, a *Cambridge YouGov* poll in taken between July 30 and August 24 found that just 27% of respondents thought that the government’s COVID-19 policies were too restrictive of people’s freedoms, while 65% thought that they had not\(^\text{388}\).

This protest was partially in response to narratives like that of Economy Minister Peter Altmaier with his call for tougher penalties for those not adhering to government COVID-19 guidelines\(^\text{389}\). Altmaier attributed the climb in cases to some sections of the general public becoming negligent on hygiene and physical distancing rules\(^\text{390}\). "What we are currently experiencing in terms of an increase in risk is essentially due to the careless and sometimes irresponsible misconduct of a very small number of people," Minister Altmaier continued, "We have to prevent this more effectively than before and act effectively in cases where there are infections and outbreaks: This includes fines and penalties if it is a matter of intent or gross negligence."\(^\text{391}\)

Berlin police chief Barbara Slowik responded to the demonstration describing the threat of COVID-19 as adequate to suspend treasured freedoms such as the right to assemble, “the

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\(^{388}\) *YouGov* poll


\(^{390}\) “German minister.”

\(^{391}\) “German minister.”
right to life and to avoiding unnecessary injury outweighs the fundamental right to free assembly in this legal balancing act” she stated\(^{392}\). Two court rulings however disagreed, setting protestors free on the streets again\(^{393}\). The Mayor of Berlin also weighed in, adding to the number of officials communicating the government narrative that securitized COVID-19 as a broad threat to public health and individuals, referring to the Berlin protests as ignoring “basic hygiene rules”, an important wording that attempting to downplay the idea that such requirements were extreme\(^{394}\). In fact, there was a concerted effort to keep the language overall somewhat neutral. It was a threat yes, but it was not characterized as a war as was the case with some other country’s narratives.

The government was not exactly struggling to own the narrative as they combated the counter narrative that nothing should ever infringe on basic freedoms, rather they addressed it head on. Pre-existing laws stated that authorities can shut down protests should they be a danger to public security – which was the case when given the thus far identified threat of COVID-19 – but there is a competing threat involved with shutting down such public protests that officials referenced, that is the threat to the constitutional or legal rights of the people\(^{395}\). Such clashes, like those between the narratives surrounding COVID-19 and the long-standing narratives surrounding democracy in Germany, were addressed by Chancellor Merkel in her speeches; she worked to make it clear that temporary restrictions were about preserving life, not subverting democracy.


\(^{393}\) Furstenau, “Berlin coronavirus protests trigger.”

\(^{394}\) Furstenau, “Berlin coronavirus protests trigger.”

\(^{395}\) Furstenau, “Berlin coronavirus protests trigger.”
Aside from the previously discussed claims of tyranny and the uniform criticism of
government incompetency seen across all of the case studies, Germany was home to a minority
following of some transplanted (as discussed in the introduction to the case studies chapter)
and some unique conspiracies. One conspiracy was attributed to an antisemitic and populist
politician named Wolfgang Gedeon. He popularized the conspiracy theory that the United
States was the one to design and release COVID-19 on the world; this particular conspiracy did
not gain much traction outside of Germany. Yet another conspiracy claimed that the
government’s COVID-19 mitigation measures and modern communication technologies were
being used to make Germans compliant with a rising “evil puppet government”. Subsequent
counter messaging went out from prominent figure Attila Hildmann, a self-described “ultra-
right winger”, claiming that the Berlin protests regarding COVID-19 measures were a way to
“unchain German people from the suppression of the alleged satanic German government” as
well as to stop the influence of the United States and or Russia (they were used almost
interchangeably). Protestors subsequently attacked the Russian embassy and attempted to
storm the Reichstag.

Despite the narratives competing with the government for their attention, the bulk of
the German people subscribed to the government’s narrative. In April of 2020, a Cambridge
YouGov poll found that 54% of Germans thought that COVID-19 posed between a moderate
and high threat to themselves personally, the largest portion of which found it to be a

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396 Eric Langenbacher, Eric, “Has the Coronavirus Pandemic Broken the Populist Fever?” American Institute for
397 Sturm and Albrecht, "Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 132.
398 Sturm and Albrecht, "Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 132.
399 Sturm and Albrecht, "Constituent COVID-19 apocalypses,” 132.
threat to their families, with the largest proportion of these believing it was a moderate threat (36%). In April of 2020 a Cambridge YouGov survey found that 49% of Germans thought that finding solutions for COVID-19 was a critical priority for the government, with an additional 32% agreeing it was a high priority.

By October of 2020, the public seemed to tire of the mitigation measures and began to abandon them altogether. As often is the case with the German language, the people found the perfect word for COVID-19 fatigue; coronamüde. In a Vox interview, Christian Karagiannidis, a researcher and ICU doctor at Witten/Herdecke University, explained that he second set of lockdowns was only “50 percent [as effective] as that from the first wave.” He added, “People are more or less fed up. They are tired. They are not adherent to the measures that were implemented by the German government” 

State leaders were called on to relax mandates by their constituents. Throughout September and October, the population began wearing masks less and gathering in large groups indoors and out more. As the weather got colder and more were forced indoors, the case numbers, previously held back by masks and social distancing, began to rise again. In early November, in response, state governments would only commit to what was dubbed “lockdown lite”, closing bars, restaurants, and other indoor gathering places.

In November of 2020, 51% of Germans still thought that finding solutions to coronavirus was a critical priority for the government, with another 33% finding it a high priority. The government attempted to meet these demands with familiar solutions. December of 2020 saw

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400 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
401 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
402 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
403 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
Germany in a very different place than the other country case studies. The government narrative was not only focused on the possibilities that vaccines would bring, instead they were justifying the return of policies long since abandoned by other case studies in favor of the ‘end in sight’ promises.

It wasn’t until the end of November that the states were willing to answer Chancellor Merkel’s call for a lockdown to stem the rising tide of cases. In her public announcement at the beginning of December, Merkel chose to defer to science in an appeal to authority on this narrative as she had many times before, citing the recommendations of Germany’s National Academy of Science, Leopoldina. The academy was calling for an early release from schools for winter break (to begin on December 14), a full closure of all but the most essential businesses, and a mandate to work from home for all who could. Merkel’s narrative doubled down on the virus being the primary threat, stating: “The most important key to us successfully fighting the virus is the responsible behavior of every individual and the willingness to cooperate.” This speech came on the heels of the Robert Kock Institute announcing a record daily death toll.

Merkel’s early December commitment to new lockdowns was met with ongoing, and ever consistent, counter narratives from the AfD. The party’s co-leader in parliament, Alice Weidel, called the lockdowns “counterproductive” and referred to Merkel’s remarks and handling of the pandemic as “aimless and grotesque.” AfD members of the parliament

404 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
405 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
406 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
408 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
insisted that Merkel’s claims about the virus were entirely unproven\textsuperscript{409}, a common anti-science narrative that amounts to a misunderstanding of the way in which science iteratively tests theories and forwards knowledge, a misunderstanding that was used throughout the pandemic to question the entirety of science any time new findings replaced old in both Germany and the United States.

The AfD’s blanket attack on the statements coming from the administration were not the only counter political party counter narratives at hand in December. The Free Democrats (FDP) argued that the referent object at this stage of the pandemic should be the economy. Leader Christian Lindner argued that more lockdowns threatened personal freedom and would be ineffective against the virus while doing significant harm to businesses and the economy\textsuperscript{410}.

\textit{The New York Times} reported on Merkel’s last New Year’s Speech as Chancellor, noting that such an address typically covered a range of topics, but this time was narrowed to only discuss COVID-19\textsuperscript{411}. Her address touched on the harsh realities of the impact of conspiracism in the country, “I can only imagine how painful it must be for those who are mourning for loved ones lost to coronavirus or are themselves struggling with the lingering effects of this illness to see willful deniers disputing the virus’s existence,” she said, calling conspiracy theories about the virus “cynical and cruel.”\textsuperscript{412}

In late December of 2020, the mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccine by BioNTech/Pfizer had been approved for use. Germany’s experience with the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines happened

\textsuperscript{409} Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
\textsuperscript{411} Schuetze, “Coronavirus Dominates Merke’s Last.”
amidst the election year trials and growing political contention. As of July 2021, about 9.2 million people over the age of 18 in Germany remained ‘vaccine hesitant’. The WHO included vaccine hesitancy in its list of the top ten global health threats. Data was collected that discovered a 22-point difference between the population’s self-reported willingness and actual vaccination rates. This means that polls recording vaccination intent were broadly misleading and this is an excellent example of one of the reasons why this dissertation does not rely on self-reported behavior around compliance. Vaccination rates in each country offered a hard number to evaluate the government narrative by, but as with everything else compliance related, this does not measure agreement with the government narrative alone; the behavior could have many contributors as mentioned in the methodology, ranging from culture to habit to social expectations.

The bulk of the counter narratives concerning the COVID-19 vaccine, at least those that were not in the same league as the conspiracism concerning installing control chips in people via the shots, were based in fear of side effects and distrust of the new (to the public awareness) mRNA-based vaccine technology. A campaign was mounted in Germany to dispel myths and educate people regarding the new vaccines with mixes results. Several sources offer insight into the successes and failures of this campaign.

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414 Sterl, Stelzmann, Luettschwager, and Gerhold, “COVID-19 vaccination status.”
415 Sterl, Stelzmann, Luettschwager, and Gerhold, “COVID-19 vaccination status.”
416 Johns Hopkin’s University reports that the first mRNA flu vaccine was tested in the 1990s and the first broadly given mRNA vaccines, for rabies, were tested in 2013. Chris Breyer, "The long history of mRNA vaccines." *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health* 6 (2021).
417 Sterl, Stelzmann, Luettschwager, and Gerhold, “COVID-19 vaccination status.”
An analysis appearing in Vox in 2021 categorically disagreed with the 2020 Guardian article that suggested federalism was a source of Germany’s strength. The Vox article declared that in the end, Germany’s once successful COVID-19 narrative of 2020 was undone by political competition, partially owing to the politics of the states.

“Germany’s federalist system — in broad strokes, similar to the US’s division between federal and state governments — allowed discord among the country’s leaders to have a major impact on the country’s response, slowing down major decisions. Politics played a growing role as well: In 2018, well before the pandemic, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced she would retire in 2021; the political jostling to replace her featured politicians trying to draw contrasts, often with a less cautious approach to Covid-19 than Merkel’s.”

While the claim that political pot stirring did cause tensions to flare relative to COVID-19 in new ways in 2021 is objectively current, poll data shows that the government did not fail to retain a following on the broad strokes of their COVID-19 narrative at the time. In May of 2021 40% of Germans still thought it was a critical priority that the government find solutions to COVID-19 and another 32% thought it was a high priority. Meanwhile coronamüde may have been at play when 26% thought that easing COVID-19 restrictions was a critical priority with another 34% finding it a high priority (meaning roughly 60% of people were fully over it all).

In February 2021, Reuters reported on vaccine hesitancy and Merkel’s response to it, “If more than 40% or 50% of people refuse a coronavirus vaccine then we’ll be wearing masks for a

418 Lopez, “Germany contained Covid-19.”
very long time,” she told German lawmakers in a debate last year, referring the threshold needed for vaccines to end the pandemic. The German state Baden-Württemberg was considered the home state of the anti-vaccine movement, with the capital Stuttgart being referred to as “the anti-vaxx movement’s ground zero” in Germany by Reuters. According to the Robert Koch Institute for Infectious Diseases, rates of vaccinations for common diseases in this state, preexisting the COVID-19 pandemic, were among the lowest in Germany.

The state is the home base of the virulently anti-vaccine “Querdenker” - Unconventional Thinker - movement, which has been responsible for the large anti-lockdown rallies across the country. Those more moderate in the movement espoused the counter narrative that the country should shield and even vaccinate the vulnerable, but let the virus run its course among the rest of the populations as if it were the flu. Partially owing to this movement, vaccination levels lagged behind those of Japan and Australia. As of December 2021, 70% of the population had been fully vaccinated.

In a hopeful sign for the government narrative that Vox reported the complete failure of beginning in 2021, in a May of 2021 Cambridge YouGov poll, 52% of Germans thought it was a critical priority for the government to get everyone in the country vaccinated for COVID-19, with another 29% thinking it was a high priority. Its notable that that puts 81% of people in

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421 Escritt, “Wealthy German high-tech hub.”
422 Escritt, “Wealthy German high-tech hub.”
423 Escritt, “Wealthy German high-tech hub.”
424 Escritt, “Wealthy German high-tech hub.”
favor of the government pushing to vaccinate everyone, but the total numbers vaccinated as of
December of the year demonstrate the continued gap between polling and reality.

In a Cambridge YouGov poll in June of 2021 the public thought that the crisis was either
correctly represented by the government or understated; 30% of poll respondents thought
the ongoing narrative had the level of threat about right and 36% thought it was understated.
This seems to tell the story that the counter narratives claiming the virus was not a threat and
that this was a case of government overreach and overreaction were still not gaining significant
traction, despite pandemic fatigue. With 66% of respondents in June of 2021 total finding that
the threat was at a minimum very real, the German government’s narrative appeared to be
experiencing an ongoing level of success that one might think the next case study, the United
States, categorically did not; but by the poll numbers the U.S. did much better than is often
reported.
CHAPTER VIII

THE UNITED STATES

Much of the conversation about the United State government’s response to COVID-19, particularly during 2020, was ripe with criticism over incohesive, and at times incoherent, messaging from President Donald Trump and other government officials. The bulk of the most infamous communications from the President were tweeted out over twitter, leading to things like the United States Food and Drug Administration going out of their way to tell people “You are not a horse” when it came to taking the livestock version of the drug Ivermectin recommended by President Trump, given that even the human version of the drug was debunked as a treatment for COVID-19 despite ongoing claims to the contrary\(^4\). \textit{Cambridge YouGov} polls taken in August of 2020 showed an underwhelming 34% of the U.S. population felt that the government was performing “very well’ or “fairly well” at handling the coronavirus. The following administration fared little better in the eyes of the public; the mid-2021 poll found that only 39% felt that the government was handling it “very well” or “fairly well”\(^5\).

This chapter for the U.S. case study has a different flow than the others. The primary reason for this is that President Trump himself was competing for attention with the COVID-19 crisis, which means that the narrative is convoluted while he is in office and complex to sort out. As David Altheide (2020) explains in an article in \textit{Symbolic Interaction}, “President Trump engaged in attention-based politics, or the use of media to draw attention of the largest


audience to himself, at the expense of an efficient response to a major public health crisis."  

The examples of his leadership throughout this study includes that of the counter movement which ultimately led to an insurrection attempt on January 6, 2021 in the United States.  

There was also a clear change in narrative language and tone between the two presidential administrations that spanned the study period, which is not something we saw in the other case studies.  

In addition to the challenges of the President and his followers, there were large scale concurrent issues facing the government which got injected into parts of the narrative, some related and some not. First, there were widespread protests concerning civil rights in the form of the ‘Black Lives Movement,’ seeking justice for the deaths of people of color at the hands of law enforcement and broad reforms that would help prevent future deaths. The movement drew criticism from all sides, including those who argued that the associated protests were “super spreaders” of the virus, despite many of these same people arguing against mitigation measures broadly. Studies showed that there was no statistically significant increase in cases in those counties where protests took place versus those that they did not within the same state, which further muddled the messaging on what did and did not contribute to the spread of the virus.

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432 Neyman and Dalsey, "Black Lives Matter protests."
Second, President Trump made several statements characterizing COVID-19 as being of Chinese origin, which were broadly accurate, but constant references to China were blamed for the follow-on epidemic of violence against Asian Americans which garnered little government action at the time, but created yet another group disenchanted (reasonably so) with the government. In a 2021 poll published in Health Affairs in 2022, Asian Americans were asked to “give major reasons for discrimination against the Asian American and Pacific Islander community”; 64% of Asian Americans cited COVID-19 cases first being reported in China, followed by 57% additionally attributed the discrimination to statements made by President Trump. Hatred and deep divisions in the United States were broadly blamed for all that ailed the U.S. concerning COVID-19 narratives.

Polarization

While political polarization is not universal among the case studies, and conspiracism and similar other counter narratives are, meaning political polarization is not a key variable in the study, it would be absurd to suggest that affective polarization is a non-factor in the United States relative to the COVID-19 narrative. With a charismatic populist leader in place at the start of the pandemic, the COVID-19 narratives in the U.S. have been a global topic of conversation and, for scholars, a ripe field for study. This has led to many early academic conclusions regarding the proliferation of counter narratives within the United States, with the primary finding that it is polarization at work. The populist leader of the United States stoked division, that’s true, but as explained by Amy Skonieczny (2018), it is the sense of identity and

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434 Findling, Blendon, Benson, and Koh, “COVID-19 has driven racism and violence.”

belonging that populism offers that causes the followers of such leaders to have such a heavy emotional investment in their opinions. Again, this puts identity as what is universally tied to which narrative appealed to people, identity just tends to align with partisanship for many Americans.

Individuals that typically find themselves at opposing ends of the U.S. political spectrum, neoconservatives and populists, were suddenly in lock step with one another as “both discourses are ripe with symbols that fulfill, at least partly, a subject’s desire for identification. It is this desire (for wholeness) that is the driving force that connects subjects with identifications as they seek meaning”. A similar sense of identity derived from membership in an elite group of individuals, that are uniquely able to see “the truth” throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, is found in Germany and Australia.

Druckman et al. (2021) published a piece on affective polarization in the United States that highlights how polarization fuels alignments; “partisans with high levels of animus toward the other party are more motivated to distinguish themselves from their political opponents. They do so by taking positions on new issues that differ from the other (disliked) party and match those of their own preferred party”. This is in keeping with the findings that identity dictated who aligned with ideas during COVID-19, but the affective polarization added an element of what seemed like desperation to reject anything at odds with one’s political party.

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436 Skonieczny, “Emotions and political narratives,” 64
437 Skonieczny, “Emotions and political narratives,” 64
Trust and Mistrust

One way that affective polarization has manifested is relevant to another variable in this particular case, that of trust. In an article published in February of 2020, Michael Dimock shared the Pew Research Poll that Almost 8 in 10 Americans believed that knowledgeable voters are important to the U.S. democracy, but only about 4 in 10 believe that voters are knowledgeable. About 60% of adults say that they have little or no confidence in other American’s ability to make wise political decisions, which is almost the reverse of the 57% who were confident in that ability in 2007.

The Edelman Trust Barometer of 2019 reported on the broad heading of trust in the “system” – which is measured by trust in the institutions of government, non-government organizations, business and the media – finding that 60% of the “informed public” reported trust in the system, which contrasts with the “mass population’s” 47% reporting the same trust. This level of trust in the listed institutions was higher than that of Japan and Australia and very close to the trust values in the same populations in Germany.

Given the above statistics, the findings of polls concerning trust in sources of information during the COVID-19 pandemic may be surprising. In a poll commissioned by Reuters Institute, conducted by Cambridge YouGov, in April of 2020 and again in April of 2021, the most trusted source of COVID-19 information in the United States were those who fell in the category of ‘scientists, doctors, and health experts’, with the trust of 65% of the

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440 Dimock, “How Americans view trust, facts.”
441 Edelman Trust Barometer 2019
442 Edelman Trust Barometer 2019
population. Trust in news organizations came in at 43%, the national government tied with news at 43%, and politicians at only 20%.

The National Library of Medicine conducted a poll in December of 2020, finding that the largest proportion of respondents trusted government websites for information about COVID-19 at (43.3%) with specific news outlets like CNN and Fox News trailing behind at 24% and 19% respectively. These numbers were up over April of 2020 when “participants were markedly less likely to use and trust government sources.” As of February 2021, the trust landscape had shifted, when Cambridge YouGov reported that trust in the government as a source for COVID-19 had fallen to 35%, with trust in President Biden at 24%.

One more note on trust relative to COVID-19 comes from an article from May of 2021, Michael Peters concluded a study of narratives during COVID-19 in the United States with the following: “there is no way that the government – however well organized and professional – can address challenges like this pandemic without a civic minded citizenry that trusts the public health advice of its government and is committed to the rule of law.” In a July 22, 2019 report, the Pew Research Center found that 75% of Americans believed that trust in the federal government was falling, and 64% believed that trust between citizens was falling.

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443 Nielsen, Klieis, Schulz, and Fletcher. “An ongoing infodemic.”
444 Nielsen, Klieis, Schulz, and Fletcher. “An ongoing infodemic.”
This might help to explain the huge disparity between people’s self-perception and their perception of others in polls concerning mitigation. In a poll in December of 2020 in the U.S., 77% of respondents claimed that they had been generally following the COVID-19 rules, including staying home, wearing masks, and socially distancing, while reporting that they believed only 47% of others were doing the same\textsuperscript{449}. There are likely a myriad of other contributors to this, an area for future research.

The Narratives

The authors of the official COVID-19 narrative in the U.S. spanned two different Presidential Administrations from opposing political parties, a bureaucratic chain of command that included members of the Center for Disease Control (CDC), various advisors to the President to include a Chief Medical office, and the leading representatives in the two houses of the legislature of each political party. Many of these authors co-authored, or at a minimum reified, several of the most popular counter narratives as well. Reification\textsuperscript{450} is a constructivist term that, in this context, means made something concrete; a variety of high profile actors took ideas from the fringe and helped shape them into a meaningful construct for general consumption in a way that we did not see in the other case studies. While neither administration received high marks for their actions relative to COVID-19 from the population, the bulk of the public did accept that COVID-19 was some level of threat and did support many mitigation measures put in place.

\textsuperscript{450} Wendt, Alexander. “Anarchy Is What.”
President Trump declared that the virus was of little concern early in 2020, being similar and of no more concern than “the flu”\textsuperscript{451}. The most difficult thing to ascertain in the case of the United States is what belongs to the government narrative and must be included in this analysis, and what does not. Rather than caution Americans to safeguard themselves against the virus, the President announced on January 22, 2020, “we have it all under control”\textsuperscript{452}. Next, the President, along with Republican leadership and media friendly to his party, all argued that COVID-19 was a hoax; often claiming it was targeted at the otherwise very healthy economy and that the Democrats were actively perpetuating the hoax to hinder President Trump’s reelection bid for the year 2020\textsuperscript{453}.

On March 15, 2020, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading infectious disease expert in the U.S. government, and a budding celebrity personality at the center of the pandemic in the United States, made a public statement that the U.S. “should be overly aggressive and get criticized for overreacting” to COVID-19\textsuperscript{454}. Later in March a briefing by Fauci attempted to bridge the appearance of a divide between his own statements and those of the President, including praise for the President’s policies and a defense of the chasm between the things that President Trump and he were saying about COVID-19, “I was taking a purely medical, scientific standpoint, and the president was trying to bring hope to the people”\textsuperscript{455}.

\textsuperscript{451} Altheide, "Pandemic in the.” 521.
\textsuperscript{453} Altheide, David L. "Pandemic in the,” 522.
\textsuperscript{455} Doherty, “A timeline.”
Dr. Fauci and the CDC were high profile in what would become one of the biggest global missteps in the COVID-19 narrative. In a retrospective on the start of the mask debate in the United States published in the *New York Times*, Japan based journalist Motoko Rich recalls, “Advice on masks that I was reading from international experts was mixed, if not outright skeptical. The surgeon general of the United States implored the public in a tweet to “STOP BUYING MASKS!” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention initially said it was not necessary to wear one if I wasn’t sick”\(^456\).

The messages calling COVID-19 a hoax or reification of other conspiracies from President Trump’s social media were reported on daily by national media. These tweets conflicted with several public statements made at White House briefings. At one such briefing on March 30, 2020, Trump spent time praising various members of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and various up and coming drug treatments. The vaccine narrative came from the executive of the U.S very early on.

“The vaccines are moving along very rapidly. The vaccines are an answer” which he followed with, “other viruses, like the one in this outbreak — this is a very tough one. This is a tough one because it spreads so quickly, like nothing we’ve seen. It spreads so easily, so quickly. We’re unleashing every tool in our nation’s vast arsenal — economic, medal [sic] — medical. If you look, medical, and scientific, military. Homeland Security is working very, very hard with all of them in order to vanquish the virus”\(^457\).

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\(^{456}\) Rich, “Is the secret”

\(^{457}\) Trump, Donald, “Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing,” Transcript of speech delivered at the White House, March 29, 2020, White House archives.
He then sang the praises of the country at large, invoking nationalistic pride at America’s unmatched efforts toward containing the virus\textsuperscript{458}. At this same briefing, Trump solidly laid out an unusually specific story-telling narrative – much more specific than that what characterized the first pass of the narrative in other case studies - having alluded to guidelines that would slow the spread of COVID-19, he argued that if everyone followed them for the next two weeks, “by June 1\textsuperscript{st} we will be well on our way to recovery”\textsuperscript{459}.

Various bureaucratic agencies and officials within the government were left to form a sort of side narrative, stepping around many of the public statements by the President while doubling down on the ones that conveyed the best practices for mitigation, to include future vaccines, that science was backing. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported a 1000-fold increase in cases in the three weeks between late February to early March, attempting to convince the public that this was both a real and growing threat\textsuperscript{460}. The CDC and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released several media statements throughout the course of the pandemic that served as what one might call the medical narrative, but often it intermixed with the political narrative that called for relative calm and predicted the end being in sight.

\textsuperscript{458} Trump, “Remarks by.”
\textsuperscript{459} Trump, ‘Remarks by.”
With little substantive action having been taken to date, the narrative refrain became “flattening the curve”, as anything else was impossible\textsuperscript{461}. In the *Voices in Bioethics* journal, Wang (2022) explained “flattening the curve” as “keeping the number of cases that needed hospitalization low enough to not overwhelm the healthcare system”\textsuperscript{462}. In public statements on April 2, 2020, Dr. Fauci took on the gap between federal and state narratives, urging all states to implement stay at home orders to curb the virus; countering President Trump’s narrative of the same time period that states should be flexible and avoid this if possible\textsuperscript{463}.

On April 3, 2020, the CDC announced that it had launched ongoing tracking and surveillance of cases of COVID-19 as well as issued their recommendation that people start wearing face masks\textsuperscript{464, 465}. The first state mask mandates followed on April 8\textsuperscript{th} in New Jersey\textsuperscript{466}. Follow on mask mandates accrued in 33 states, which broadly all stated that the entire population was subject (with exceptions for medical disorders and the young – varying from age 2-12 across states with the bulk exempting only those under 5)\textsuperscript{467}. The response to mask mandates was measured by polls. In August of 2020 a poll of U.S. residents asked, “How effective, if at all, do you think facemasks are at stopping the spread of coronavirus” in a variety of public settings; 68% of respondents believed masks were “very effective” or “fairly effective”.

\textsuperscript{462} Wang, “Early Response.”
\textsuperscript{463} Doherty, “A timeline of.”
\textsuperscript{466} Jacobs, “The enforcement.”
\textsuperscript{467} Jacobs, “The enforcement.”
While there are many statements concerning the mitigations that the government sought legitimacy for the implementation of, the debate concerning their necessity and efficacy of any mitigation measures began to align closely with partisanship in the United States. On May 12, a joint statement by the CDC director, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) commissioner, and Dr. Anthony Fauci stated that following their own positive tests for COVID-19, they were in line with all the official guidelines. Such a statement making it clear that the guidelines applied to the people creating them may have been meant to back the narrative concerning the dangers presented by COVID-19, but this did not seem to impact the spread of opinions on the matter.

The Pew Research Center published a report in March of 2021 titled “A Year of U.S. Public Opinion on the Coronavirus Pandemic” in which they recorded the opinion divide increasing between the politically right party of the United States (the Republicans) and the center-left party (the Democrats).

“Americans could agree on a few things at that early stage of the U.S. outbreak. With restaurants, stores and other public spaces around the country closing their doors, most saw COVID-19 as a serious economic threat to the nation. Most approved of their state and local officials’ initial responses to the outbreak. And they generally had confidence in hospitals and medical centers to handle the needs of those stricken with the virus”. This common ground did not hold.

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469 “A Year of.”
“The biggest takeaway about U.S. public opinion in the first year of the coronavirus outbreak may be the extent to which the decidedly nonpartisan virus met with an increasingly partisan response. Democrats and Republicans disagreed over everything from eating out in restaurants to reopening schools, even as the actual impact of the pandemic fell along different fault lines, including race and ethnicity, income, age and family structure”. 470

Results from the Pew Research Center polling in mid-March were that only about a third of U.S. adults expected to see the virus post a major threat to their day-to-day life471. By late March and early April that number had changed to closer to 2/3 of Americans472. The polling results in the case studies here have not been divided down partisan lines in part because while partisan identity influences what narratives any given individual bought into, it is not necessarily a universal factor in how successful any government narrative is and there is not much to be learned about crafting future narratives if there is a focus on a temporal thing like political alignment. Still, it seems noteworthy to share how great the gap is in this instance as illustrative of the struggles of this particular government in their attempt to create a dominant narrative.

The Pew Research Center broke down across political party lines throughout the year. The gap between the opinions of each party on any given question concerning how COVID-19 was being handled was roughly 20 to 30 percentage points. As an example:

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470 “A Year of.”
471 “A Year of.”
472 “A Year of.”
“In early April, around two-thirds of Republicans (66%) said Trump was quick to take the major steps needed in response to international reports of the outbreak; 92% of Democrats said he was too slow off the mark. In the same survey, 69% of Republicans said Trump was accurately characterizing the severity of the COVID-19 situation; an even larger share of Democrats (77%) said he was making it seem better than it really was.”

In May there was a turn of events that no other country case study has an equivalent for, President Trump went from occasional conspiracist and fervent dissenter to subscriber to COVID-19 and prescriber of “cures” when he began to back hydroxychloroquine and other obscure drugs as the answer to COVID-19. Though hydroxychloroquine was subsequently found to be both ineffective and in some cases deadly to patients, President Trump stated on May 18th that he was taking it: “All I can tell you is that so far I seem to be okay...what do you have to lose?” On May 5th he continued his insistence that the virus was all but over when he commented: “I think we are doing very well on the vaccines, but without a vaccine, it’s going to pass, and we’re going to be back to normal.” In June, Dr. Fauci attempted to counter this unmitigated hope, stating: “the efficacy of vaccinations and American’s opposition to the shots make herd immunity unlikely.”

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473 “A Year of.”
474 Altheide, "Pandemic in the,” 526.
475 Altheide, "Pandemic in the,” 526.
476 Many of Trump statements that COVID disappeared have been removed from the White House archives. CNN catalogued these statements before they disappeared, providing links to each which are now inactive but ostensibly were active at the time that they reported the story. These statements are still largely available in recorded interview format on various news websites.
477 Doherty, “A timeline of.”
Though typically the media focused on those politicians on the right who eschewed mask wearing and fought mandates, the leadership of the two houses of legislature in both major political parties, Congressmen Nancy Pelosi and Kevin McCarthy, as well as the Senate leadership Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer, supported wearing masks and expressed belief in their efficacy. By August 1, 33 states had statewide mask mandates, but despite other high-ranking officials backing such measures, President Trump closed out this half of his year one narrative by securitizing the mitigation measures in progress in many parts of the country.

In a White House briefing on August 19, 2020, the president made false claims about the rapid spread of the virus in other countries with stronger mitigation measures being far worse than that in the United States and returned to his narrative that COVID-19 was little more than a flu for anyone who was not elderly or had an underlying condition. President Trump’s (2020) narrative next focused on the human element as impacted by the mitigation measures:

“The shutdown thing is causing tremendous depression for those places that are still shut down. You look at certain areas that — in all cases, Democrat-run — still shut down, and the numbers there aren’t even good. But causing tremendous depression, suicide, drugs, alcohol abuse. A lot of problems are being caused — probably far more, I would say, Scott, than is caused by the virus itself, now that we understand the virus.”

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479 Jacobs and Ohinmaa, “The enforcement of.”


481 Trump, “Remarks by.”
He then closed his remarks with: “In our path forward, we will continue to follow a science-based approach to protecting the high risk while enabling health Americans to safely go back to work and school. Our country will be open.”

Summer of 2020 also saw President Trump’s repeated claims that the growing number of cases was primarily due to increased testing, rather than an increase in actual cases. Despite this new argument, the President was seen wearing masks for the first time during the surge of cases that summer.

All follow-on versions of the U.S. narrative built on this complete mess of an initial narrative, and so here I will summarize the story to date. The first eight months of the U.S. narrative employed a variety of narrative tools, most commonly storytelling and securitization. The initial story-telling phase, characterized by Dr. Fauci as the president “giving people hope,” departed from the norm of other case studies when multiple high-ranking members of the government, to include the highest-ranking member of the government, denied that the virus existed at all. While it took time to get momentum, as of April the bulk of the official government narrative was focused on securitizing the virus and arguing the need for government attention and funding as the answer to the problem. Federal government agencies, including the CDC, issued guidelines for mitigation measures including face masks and social distancing and at the local and state levels lockdowns were employed as a way to limit the spread in many states.

Popular counter narratives included COVID-19 is a hoax, COVID-19 is not dangerous, COVID-19 is dangerous to only the elderly and those with underlying conditions, mitigation

482 Trump, “Remarks by.”
483 “A Year of.”
484 “A Year of.”
strategies are politically motivated, and that face masks are ineffective and unnecessary. The challenge of sorting the mainstream from the counter narrative is intense, as President Trump had a strong tendency to spout both. There is perhaps a question of whether the narrative of the highest-ranking member of the government is automatically the mainstream narrative and everything else is counter, but given that he was on both sides that question seems impossible to answer here. In light of that, the mainstream narrative was defined as the most commonly repeated consensus among government officials, to include President Trump on the occasions he aligned with other bureaucratic agencies and the bulk of high-profile politicians on both sides of the partisan divide.

There was a clear attempt to undermine the narrative of securitization of the virus by securitizing the mitigation measures instead. The thread of counter narratives that drove many protests was that COVID-19 restrictions were broadly unconstitutional, tyrannical, or restrict people’s freedom too much. In fact, all of these counter narratives carried over to all three phases, in addition to the conspiracies that have been lumped into the three broad categories at the beginning of this chapter. The banner carriers for these narratives broadly included niche right wing media, both corporate and social media.

To the extent that a cohesive counter narrative was offered, the political party on the right chose the economy as their referent object, and securitized lock downs as the threat. While lock downs were under the purview of states, national lawmakers often weighed in on these decisions. Kevin McCarthy, leading politician for the Republicans in the lower house of the legislature, was willing to conceded that COVID-19 was real in March of 2020, but not that a

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lockdown was anything other than severely damaging. “You know how serious the virus is and how contagious it is,” but he argued that essential production would not be taking place and that would hit the already struggling U.S. economy487. For those politicians who did not fall in line behind COVID-19 as a hoax entirely, Senators like Lindsey Graham488, downplayed the severity of the virus and emphasizing the economic costs of mitigation measures489.

If one wanted to discuss which portion of the population bought into the government narrative by party there might be a different conclusion about the government establishing the dominant narrative and it might be a useful discussion to have in a different research project. For the purposes of this one, the major polls adopted to answer the research question consider the population monolith, but there is no avoiding the topic of political parties and narratives generally without likely being accused of ignoring a very large piece of the puzzle. I contend that partisanship is not as substantial a piece of the narrative puzzle as most argue, it just overlaps heavily with identity in some countries.

A poll conducted in both April 2020 and June 2020 by Cambridge YouGov asked two questions related to the threat of COVID-19. The first, “what level of threat, if any, do you think COVID-19 poses to you personally?490” The second, “what level of threat, if any, do you think

COVID-19 poses to your family? The percent of the population that considered the virus a level of threat between moderate and high to themselves in April was 62%, and to their families was 67%. In June those who considered COVID-19 to be between a moderate and high risk to themselves was 52%, and to their families was 57%. It seems likely that the emergence of counter narratives, and likely the internal government struggle for a narrative, eroded early success with securitizing the virus.

When President Trump made an attempt to soften the edges of COVID-19, arguing that rather than cases being on the rise it was only testing on the rise, Pew Research Polls conducted a survey which found that 60% of respondents believed that COVID-19 infections were actually rising. The attempt to securitize the economy was not ineffective, but the winning argument for the core of the problem went to the government’s central narrative, that the virus was the threat. In summer of 2020 a Pew Research Poll found that 73% of respondents agreed that the most effective way to help the U.S. Economy recover was by significantly reducing coronavirus infections.

A Cambridge YouGov poll asked how much of a priority, if at all, should finding solutions to COVID-19 be for the government of the United States. In April 64% of the population found it to be a critical government priority, and in June the number was 52%. An additional 21% in April and 20% in June found it to be a high priority for the government. Concerning mitigation measures, when discussed broadly as infringement on freedoms, in a poll conducted in the U.S.

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493 “A Year of.”
494 “A Year of.”
between July 20 and August 24, only 29% agreed that the government’s response to coronavirus had been too restrictive on people’s freedoms while 58% believed it had not. Regarding a widespread specific mitigation measure, in a poll conducted in the U.S. between July 30 and August 24, 2020, 65% of people agreed that “for as long as the coronavirus pandemic lasts” it should be “mandatory by law to wear a facemask in enclosed public spaces” (which included shops, medical facilities, and public transportation). This would seem to indicate that a majority of the population bought in to the narrative that face masks were appropriate and necessary, on this the government held the dominant narrative. Another Cambridge YouGov poll from the same time asked about the efficacy of facemasks in stopping the spread of COVID-19; 73% agreed that they were at least “fairly effective” at stopping the spread with only 20% finding them “not very effective” or “not effective at all”.

In December of 2020, CDC Direct Robert R. Redfield summed up the narrative going forward on vaccines with, “This is the next step in our efforts to protect Americans, reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and help restore some normalcy to our lives and our country.” It was a full circle, coming back around to storytelling from every level of the government by December. The story was that vaccines would end it all, and the sooner the better. This was the latest in the narratives that appeared to attempt a kind of reckoning with

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the initial missteps in narrative between January and April of 2020. In recorded interview with journalist Bob Woodward (2020), President Trump said, “I wanted to always play [the virus] down. I still like playing it down, because I don’t want to create a pandemic.” This seeming admission to an intentional subverting of known facts got no traction with President’s followers and conspiracy base, but the national party that had chosen to downplay the virus appeared to take note.

In September of 2020, the President’s political party laid out their new platform, which included a clear adjustment to their previous COVID-19 narrative that moved it solidly into being focused on vaccines rather than denial or damning the mitigation measures. At the rollout event for it congressman Kevin McCarthy, minority leader in the lower house of the legislature, stated: “We’ve worked with this president to make sure there’s funding at the National Institutes of Health and there’s funding at CMS [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services], HHS [Department of Health and Human Services] and other agencies that are working feverishly to find a vaccine and other remedies.”

As in the other case studies, counter narratives remained constant throughout. Conspiracists were not inclined to abandon their conspiracies and many politicians challenged the mainstream narrative by continuing to downplay the severity of COVID-19 and focus on the economic drawbacks to mitigation measures such as lockdowns despite the larger party machine attempting to leave such narratives behind. A growing movement related to concerns over civil rights relative to mitigation measures took the counter narrative arguments to the


499 Marquette, “House GOP.”
streets and the courts. Lawsuits challenged mandatory mask wearing and stay at home orders in multiple states\textsuperscript{500}.

As of November 2020, multiple courts struck down emergency public health orders\textsuperscript{501}. On the other side, some left leaning groups sued state governments for not doing enough to slow the spread of the virus\textsuperscript{502}. While courts broadly removed the authority of governors to create and mandate measures, some left the door open for departments of health at the state level to reinstate such measures, and they did so\textsuperscript{503}. In effect, lawsuits did not enjoy as much success as the headlines implied in overturning mandates, rather they shifted the power relative to mandates to the bureaucracy from the elected officials\textsuperscript{504}

In December of 2020, a \textit{Cambridge YouGov} poll found that 60\% of Americans considered COVID-19 to be between a moderate and high threat to themselves personally. The same poll found that 64\% found COVID-19 to be between a moderate and high threat to their families. A Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) poll in December found that the share of the public concerned that someone in their family would get sick was at 68\%, the highest number since the firm began asking the question in February of 2020\textsuperscript{505}. Also in December of 2020, a \textit{Cambridge YouGov} poll asked how much of a priority finding solutions to COVID-19 should be for the government, this poll showed 59\% agreed it was a critical priority while another 20\% found it to be a high priority.


\textsuperscript{501} Quinton, “GOP Lawsuits.”

\textsuperscript{502} Quinton, “GOP Lawsuits.”

\textsuperscript{503} Quinton, “GOP Lawsuits.”

\textsuperscript{504} Quinton, “GOP Lawsuits.”

The Kaiser Family Foundation further found in a December 2020 poll that 68% of the public showed willingness to wear masks and follow social distancing, citing “worry that they or someone in their family will get sick” from COVID-19. A STAT-Harris poll from the same time period found that 75% of Americans believed that the incoming Biden administration should mandate masks in public and banning gatherings of more than 10 people.

There were wildly different findings of responses through a variety of polling outlets to the question of the success of the vaccine narrative in the United States. In a November 2020 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, which presented respondents with a variety of choices regarding their likelihood to get the vaccine, 29% of Americans stated that they would definitely get the vaccine with another 31% stating that they would probably get the vaccine, a good sign for they buy in to the vaccine narrative at the time. Another poll, completed by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 71% of respondents to the late November to early December 2020 survey said that they would get the vaccine. A gallop poll in November of 2020 found that 63% of Americans were willing to be immunized.

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The poll finding the least support for vaccination came also came in December 2020 when a *Cambridge YouGov* poll in the United States asked, “If or when a vaccine becomes available, will you get yourself vaccinated,” to which only 47% of respondents replied that they would with 28% responding that they did not know. Perhaps owing to the wording of the question the poll diverges a good deal from the other polls above, but what was learned in Germany was that polls made up of self-reported willingness (or not) to get the vaccine does not mirror the reality of how many people get it.

For the U.S., there was a very clearly defined start of a new narrative from the top with the inauguration of a new president in January of 2020. While President Trump’s vacillation between calling a COVID-19 a hoax, engaging in a nationalistic celebration of unmatched efforts to combat the virus, and repeating that “it will all go away soon” all tended to fall solidly in the category of a story telling strategy; President Biden’s (2021) subsequent narrative could be called the cure to all optimism. He did not abandon all narratives in motion, but he made a nationalistic narrative his centerpiece by arguing that following COVID mitigation protocols, including being vaccinated, were signs of patriotism and that the country needed such unity. He called those spreading mis and disinformation “wrong” and “immoral,” deeming them “purveyors of lies” and ultimately chose to consistently frame the government’s efforts against COVID-19 as a war. It was not as if the government narrative had never invoked war like

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imagery in 2020, but as the previous iterations of the narrative were competing with themselves a good portion of the time, it was not a notable cohesive feature of them.

President Biden’s (2021) first briefing on January 26 began with: “I’d like to update you on the aggressive steps we’re taking to meet our goal of administering 100 million COVID-19 vaccine shots within — within a hundred days, and to ramp up the vaccine supply as fast as we can.”513 He continued the briefing with his account of “the brutal truth”; “It’s going to take months before we can get the majority of Americans vaccinated. Months. In the next few months, masks — not vaccines — are the best defense against COVID-19”514. He also found a way to renew the discussion about masks, albeit it more likely to speak to the sentiments of those who were already wearing masks than those who refused: “One congressman pointed out — I could — well, he used a very, anyway, colorful term to say wearing a mask — “I tell him to kiss my ear; I’m not going to wear a mask” - Well, guess what? Not very American. The fact is, you want to be patriotic; you’re going to protect people”515.

On the one-year anniversary of the declaration of the pandemic, March 11, Biden summarized the perceived failures of the phase one narrative. “A year ago, we were hit with a virus that was met with silence and spread unchecked. Denials for days, weeks, then months that led to more deaths, more infections, more stress, and more loneliness”516. He continued to securitize the virus, emphasizing his constant eye on the death toll, while acknowledging the

513 Biden, “Remarks by.”
514 Biden, “Remarks by.”
515 Biden, Remarks by.”
cost to people’s everyday lives inherent in implementing and following mitigation measures\textsuperscript{517}.

“A mask”, he said, “the easiest thing to do to save lives – sometimes it divides us”\textsuperscript{518}.

It was not as if the new president entirely reinvented the wheel when it came to the U.S. narrative, but the new administration brought together the threads of securitization across the previous year with very strong language and imagery. The official narrative securitized the virus itself and the government was necessary to manage the rollout of vaccines and continued testing, as well as to manage the ongoing economic fallout. Vaccines were the way into the future, but no promises were made on when that future would arrive and, in the meantime, mitigation measures put in place by government agencies were paramount to follow.

This period unsurprisingly saw the beginning of the right leaning parties (President Biden being a Democrat) being in opposition to the White House, and this led the rhetoric of the narrative regarding the perceived tyranny of the mitigation measures to escalate. A New York Times article published in November of 2021 sums up the failures of the vaccine narrative and the role that politicians played in it. Members of the Republican party spent the year “flouting mask ordinances [and] blocking the President’s vaccine mandates” while the party’s supporters “undermined vaccination drives while rallying around those who refuse the vaccine”\textsuperscript{519}. All this while “Intensive care units and morgues have been strained to capacity by the unvaccinated”\textsuperscript{520}. Still, anyone paying attention would notice that the leaders of both major political parties and both the former and current presidents were all vaccinated.

\textsuperscript{517} Biden, “Remarks by.”
\textsuperscript{518} Biden, “Remarks by.”
\textsuperscript{520} Weisman, “G.O.P.”
While the anti-vaccine movement relative to COVID-19 had remained consistent, 2021 was the year that the anti-vaccine sentiment became most salient in all country case studies. In August of 2021, *The New York Times* published an essay written by Tara Haele (2021), a science journalist who covers vaccine hesitancy and author of a book about vaccines. Vaccine hesitancy has existed since the development of the first vaccine over 200 years ago, but vaccine refusal being framed as a choice that each parent should make for their own child was new to the 2000s\(^\text{521}\). Vaccines had been framed as a public health issue by the government, not a choice, since the first vaccine mandate for smallpox in 1850 in the United States\(^\text{522}\). The narrative that the COVID-19 vaccine was deadly or would fundamentally alter one’s DNA was certainly an intense upgrade from pervious anti-vaccine narratives concerning the safety of vaccines in the United States. In April of 2021, UNICEF published an article fact checking the claim that the COVID-19 vaccine changes human DNA; that it needed to be fact checked was concerning\(^\text{523}\). The CDC published several pieces also countering this mis- and disinformation.

Polling in 2021 did not have the people feeling much better about government performance or buying into COVID-19 as a more significant threat, although it is not possible based on the data collected here to accurately attribute this change to a source. In May of 2021 the level of personal perceived threat dropped dramatically, with only 38% of respondents agreeing COVID-19 was between a “moderate” and “high” threat. The rates of vaccination were rising at this time, and if the public was buying into the narrative around vaccines, they should


perhaps have been feeling less threatened personally if they had been vaccinated. In the same poll, 44% responded that COVID-19 still posed a “moderate” to “severe” threat to their family, again far below that of previous polls.

What was the perceived need for government involvement in COVID-19? In May of 2021 Cambridge YouGov found that 38% of Americans considered finding COVID-19 solutions to be a critical priority for government with another 32% calling it a high priority (in total 70% considered COVID-19 to be a priority for the government). In the same poll, 32% thought it was a critical priority for the United States government to get everyone globally vaccinated for COVID-19, with another 29% citing it as a high priority (which would seem to speak to success on the vaccine narrative as well as establishing the need for government action).

The image of mitigation measures did not do too badly during this time period; in May of 2021 Cambridge YouGov found that 15% of Americans thought that easing COVID-19 restrictions was critical, with another 30% labeling it a high priority for government. That makes just 45% of the population focused on dropping mitigations.

On the topic of vaccines, the same poll found that 37% of Americans thought it was a critical priority for government to get everyone in the country vaccinated, and an additional 28% found it a high priority. The CDC reported that as of August 26, 2021, 61% of the total U.S. population had received at least one dose of vaccine, with 51.9% having been fully vaccinated\(^\text{524}\). In an account by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 72% of U.S. adults self-reported that they were at least partially vaccinated by September 28, 2021, which continues the trend

of some level of gap between self-reporting on willingness to be or actual vaccination and hard data here in the United States, as was seen in Germany, albeit in the other direction there\(^525\). The further polling reported in the article gave insight into ongoing and future issues around COVID-19 vaccines; concerning booster shots 35% of those vaccinated found the topic confusing while 45% of the unvaccinated through the same\(^526\). Among the unvaccinated adults polled, most saw the booster discussion as a sign that the vaccines are not working as well as promised\(^527\). No one needed reminding that the end of these case studies was far from the end of the pandemic, but if such a thing were required, this end note points out the need for other studies to pick up where this left off and confirm or refute the conclusions.


\(^{526}\) Hamel, Lops, Sparks, Krizinger, Kearney, Stokes, and Brodie, “KFF COVID-19.”

\(^{527}\) Hamel, Lops, Sparks, Krizinger, Kearney, Stokes, and Brodie, “KFF COVID-19.”
CHAPTER IX

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The only potentially significant measure among the variables tested concerning the factors impacting a government successfully creating a dominant narrative during a natural crisis, such as a pandemic, is pre-existing levels of trust in institutions in the country. The number of counter narratives may be a second variable to consider again, it was simply impossible to appropriately test. According to polling from the Cambridge YouGov Project, the majority of potential case studies had similar numbers of conspiracies circulating widely and Japan might just be an outlier in terms of having only two counter narratives to speak of. Importantly the outlier among the case studies emphasizes that systemically evaluating the likelihood of governments creating or holding a dominant narrative relative to a given set of variables may be an impossible task, and predicting whether this will lead to broad compliance is an even tougher one.

While political polarization as a blanket term has been a popular answer for the proliferation of counter narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not a universal explanatory factor for the likelihood that the government will establish a dominant narrative during a crisis. It is a factor that predicts who buys into what narrative in some countries perhaps, but it does not stand alone, rather it is heavily intertwined with a much broader identity and may or may not give clues to the likelihood that a given government is able to motivate a population toward a consensus regarding a crisis. This is illustrated when considering that the bulk of the criticism in the case of the United States was targeted at the Trump administration’s narrative (owing in part to the inconsistencies), yet the subsequent
administration’s narrative had no such inconsistencies and had an even smaller following despite being elected by a recent majority, indicating that the factors impacting the likelihood of buy in to the government narrative were evolving. There were no other studied countries where partisanship was both attributed heavily with the lack of success of government narratives and so clearly tested by a complete change out of the governing party at the midpoint of the study. It is so much more complicated than political polarization, and despite the polarization, the United States government broadly established the dominant narrative as measured by polls and the essential definition applied in this study.

The government that failed entirely to establish a dominant narrative, was Japan; this did not happen on the basis of political polarization as there is little affective political polarization to speak of, but rather the population had low trust in institutions to begin with and a low opinion of their government throughout, no matter how effective the virus mitigation measures appeared to be. There was something else in play in Japan, the only major counter narratives (there were two) were consistent and obtained a very large following, but one case study is not enough to suggest this is a substantial piece of the puzzle and finding similar enough experiences with counter narratives in other case studies is unlikely given the results of the broader global polling at the time.

Thinking about what I set out to achieve with this dissertation, I have concluded that my research question is purely academic, and I mean that in a bad way. Political narratives, crisis narratives, have aims of differing levels of importance. A more useful real-world question might be: is it likely that government holds the dominant narrative amidst a fast-moving crisis with a lot of counter narrative interference? Holding to the technical definition that I laid out at the
beginning of my study, yes it is likely, though the factors that contribute to that success are wildly varied and have not been established here. The far more important follow-on question would be: is a dominant narrative enough to accomplish the needed buy-in to actually deal with the problem at hand in a natural crisis? If this study is any indication, absolutely not; the nature of a public health crisis for example requires a wildly high level of buy in to the government narrative where the goal is for the public to (sometimes radically) shift their patterns and behavior.

As an example of what I mean by “wildly high,” the minimum percent of people who must be vaccinated to wipe out a pathogen varies, dependent on the nature of the contagion, but is always what might be termed a substantial percent of the population. The number is 95% for measles and 80% for polio, a matter of simple mathematics according to epidemiologists\textsuperscript{528}. For COVID-19, that percent is lower, coming in at 75\textsuperscript{529}. The average percent of the population that failed to buy into the government narrative – which might be concluded here to only be based on their pre-existing identities, topped out at around 38% and averaged 25% across countries included in global polls\textsuperscript{530}. While this study did little to clear up the factors contributing to the following of government narratives, it did sort of veer unexpectedly into what to expect when it comes to pandemics; and populations of liberal democracies appear to be in jeopardy.

The narrative in Japan having little to no following and the efficacy of vaccine effectively having no consensus at all surprisingly (if you are expecting anything to make logical or intuitive

\textsuperscript{529} “The Relationship Between.”
\textsuperscript{530} “The Relationship Between.”
sense here) did not stop the population from being vaccinated against COVID-19 in numbers far above the minimum to end the pandemic. If narrative alone cannot achieve a high enough threshold of buy in, and the kind of elusive success of some unknown variable in Japan is not the norm, it would seem that the evidence points to mandates as the way to contend effectively with pandemics; which means that the outlook on containing and fighting pandemics in the democratic world is pretty grim. Vaccine mandates had very little support in any country case study other than Australia, where even at greater than 55% supporting them, they still did not come to fruition.\footnote{“Australians support mandatory COVID-19 vaccine: survey.” The University of Sydney. May 10, 2021. https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2021/05/10/australians-support-mandatory-covid-19-vaccine-survey.html.}

Thinking about the success that the government had in the Krebs study regarding national security crisis narratives, there was a great deal of distance between the narrative’s target population and the crisis at that point. A small percentage of the American public had ongoing personal ties to the fallout of 9/11 and the resulting wars in Afghanistan and later Iraq. A study of other countries involved in the ongoing action abroad might reveal similar cases, but at this point I have none to reference. What one could hypothesize might be a notable difference between that crisis narrative and natural crisis narratives is distance. This is worth following up on in future studies. The choices mentioned in the introduction of driving into standing flood waters or ignoring calls for evacuations ahead of a hurricane are personal choices made at the moment of crisis, not a situation in the periphery of a person’s life.

This personal connection is the case in natural crises across all countries; these crises are up close, and decisions are being made in real time by individuals with an evolving personal
calculus. While a systemic way of studying narratives seems elusive, and predicting or explaining exactly how a public will react to a given narrative based on the varied outcomes of this comparative study is impossible; one could take away that the crisis that hits close to home, that requires adjustments to a person’s habits and life directly, is a crisis that the government cannot easily manage the outcome of even with the most organized and appealing of narratives.

Every government in the study hit the snags of counter narratives, and three certainly had moments of their own inconsistency to contend with (the United States in 2020 broadly and the vaccine narrative issues in Australia in 2021 as well as the travel initiative in Japan); but the most organized of government narratives among the case studies, found in Germany, had a public response that mirrored the experience in the United States. The finding of the exceedingly low trust in government and institutions in Japan, where the government had little to no success in bringing the people along with the narrative regardless of their apparent success at managing the virus, is a finding to take into another comparative study to be sure, but clearly even governments with higher levels of trust among their people need to manage their expectations.

In the case of a natural crisis the problem is seemingly not that a crisis is fast moving and ever evolving, nor that the crisis is not managed by thorough and fact-based narratives or by carefully crafted storytelling. It appears that a dominant narrative is not enough to ensure compliance and a lack thereof is not enough to predict there will be none; the missing and arguably impossible to measure factor is the extent to which it strikes the public as deeply
personal, and therefore falls into the nebulous territory where choices are governed by a sense of identity that each group or person sorts out for themselves.


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VITA

Mouse D. Bennett

Education:

Doctorate of Philosophy in International Studies, Old Dominion University, Norfolk Virginia, 5115 Hampton Blvd, Norfolk, VA 23529, 2023

Major fields: Conflict and Cooperation
Interdependence and Transnationalism

Master of Arts in International Studies, Old Dominion University, Norfolk Virginia, 5115 Hampton Blvd, Norfolk, VA 23529, 2017

Major field: Comparative Politics

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Christopher Newport University, 1 Avenue of the Arts, Newport News Virginia, 2013

Magna Cum Laude

Graduate Assistant at Old Dominion University in Graduate Program for International Studies Spring Semester 2018 - Fall Semester 2021.

Teaching:

Spring Semester 2018 - Fall Semester 2023
Christopher Newport University

Political Science 215, Comparative and International Politics
Political Science 201, U.S. Power and Politics
Sociology 201, Global Social Problems

Current Research: The impacts of government narratives on population compliance during pandemic periods.