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Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to Covid-19

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Leaders' Decision Framework	5
Classifying Populist Leaders and Their Responses	7
Conclusion	13

Executive Summary

- While the perception of populists is that they are anti-science and have downplayed the Covid-19 crisis, we find that this isn't generally true. Drawing on our Populists in Power database and series of reports, we find that 12 of the 17 populists currently in power have taken the Covid-19 crisis seriously.
- But not all populists who have taken the virus seriously have responded the same way. Some have taken an illiberal response, assuming excessive emergency powers and/or using the crisis to crack down on political opponents. Of the 12 populist leaders who have taken the Covid-19 crisis seriously, we identify five as having taken an illiberal response.
- We classify all five of the illiberal response leaders as cultural populists. For these leaders, the crisis has offered an opportunity to draw cultural dividing lines with opponents to strengthen their own positions. The leaders who have downplayed the crisis and those who have taken a liberal-serious response are more heterogenous with respect to the type of populism that they represent.
- While Covid-19 may hurt the populists who have downplayed it, it is unlikely to kill populism. There are at least two reasons for this. Leaders who have taken the crisis seriously have built their credibility and some have used it to consolidate their power. The ensuing economic crisis gives an opportunity to populists who are not in power to criticise their governments.

Introduction

Before the Covid-19 pandemic swept the world in early 2020, the rise of populism was arguably the biggest global political topic. As we argued in [our recent report](#), the number of populist leaders in power at the beginning of 2020 was near an all-time high. Right-wing cultural populists like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro are especially well-represented; they comprise 10 of the current 17 cases – an all-time high as a share of total populists.

But how have populist leaders around the world responded to the pandemic? Has there been a similar “populist style” of response to Covid-19? Is there any evidence about what the pandemic might mean for the future of populism?

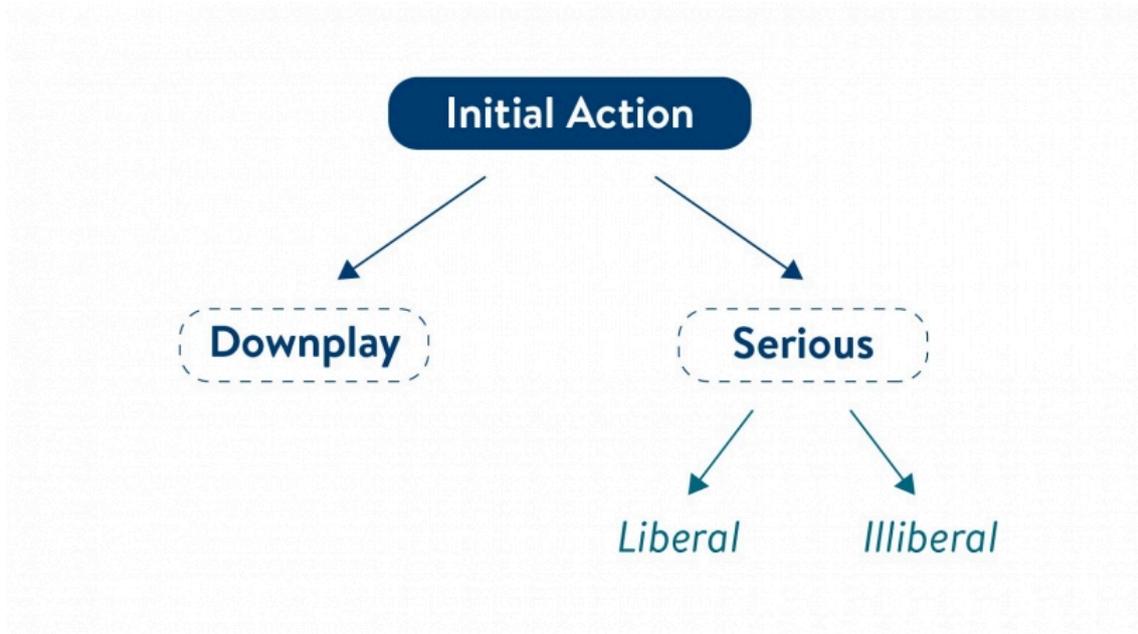
Early verdicts on how populists have responded to Covid-19 have varied. [Some scholars](#) have argued that the crisis has exposed [populism's weakness](#). But others have noted that the response from populists [has been mixed](#). As prominent populism scholar Cas Mudde noted in a recent [piece for the Guardian](#), populist responses to the coronavirus have differed. While some of the most prominent populists, like President Trump of the United States and President Bolsonaro of Brazil, have tried to downplay the crisis, other populist leaders, like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis, have taken the virus seriously and imposed extensive lockdown measures.

In this commentary piece, we argue that there is a lack of consensus on how populist leaders in power have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic because they have responded in very different ways. We develop a two-part framework for classifying these responses. We argue that: (1) leaders can downplay the crisis or take it seriously; and (2) if they take it seriously, they can take either a liberal or illiberal policy and enforcement response. We find that contrary to popular perceptions, only a minority of populist leaders, five of the 17 currently in power, have downplayed the crisis. Most populist leaders have followed the advice of public-health experts and have given them a prominent role in the public response to the crisis.

Of the 12 populist leaders who have taken the crisis seriously, however, we find variation in how liberal their responses have been. In our previous reports, we classified populists into three categories: cultural, socio-economic and anti-establishment. We find that only cultural populists have taken an illiberal response to the Covid-19 crisis. Cultural populists, like Viktor Orban and India's Narendra Modi, come to power by stoking cultural divides and have used the crisis as an opportunity to expand their powers and/or take an intolerant approach to government opponents. Liberal responses have been most common among anti-establishment populists, who come to power by opposing the previous regime's mismanagement rather than by stoking cultural divides. We argue that cultural populists are more likely to take illiberal responses because they realise that they can use the crisis to consolidate their power further and gain the upper hand on their cultural opponents.

Leaders' Decision Framework

Figure 1 –Leaders' decision tree for Covid-19 response



We have developed a two-part framework to describe populist leaders' Covid-19 response. The first decision that a leader makes is whether to downplay the virus or to take it seriously.¹ We determine this primarily by the leader's policy reactions rather than their public behaviour, but we do not entirely discount the latter. Policy actions that would count as downplaying the virus would include restricting publication of official case and death statistics, failing to initiate a lockdown as the number of cases grows, and firing or admonishing public-health officials who advocate for a stronger approach.

If the leader chooses to take Covid-19 seriously, they can still differ in the scope of emergency powers that they take or in the bias of their enforcement measures. If the scope of these powers is large or their enforcement is biased against groups with which the government has an ongoing conflict, we classify this response as "illiberal". If the response is similar to that of most non-populist democracies, we classify it as "liberal".

There are a variety of ways for a leader to take a serious but illiberal approach to the crisis. The first is if the leader invokes extensive emergency powers with few limits in scope and duration, like Hungary's emergency powers bill. A second type of illiberal response is one with excessively harsh enforcement, like Rodrigo Duterte's "shoot to kill" order for anyone violating the Covid-19 quarantine. A third type of illiberal response is one that uses enforcement in a biased way – such cracking down on the media or other government opponents. An illiberal response does not, however, preclude a science-based approach or a prominent role for experts in the response. If the leader relied on the advice of experts to

set policies but then imposed unusually harsh or inconsistent penalties for those violating those policies, this would still count as an illiberal response.

A liberal policy response is defined more by the absence of such illiberal measures than by certain policies or behaviour. While populist leaders may display more personality quirks and be more combative with journalists than non-populist leaders, liberal-response populists invoke emergency powers similar to those in non-populist democracies and put in place enforcement measures that are generally free of political bias.

We note that while we apply this framework to populist leaders, it could in principle be applied to any type of leader, democratically elected or authoritarian. Unlike populist leaders, non-populist democratically elected leaders would be very unlikely to take an illiberal-serious response to the crisis. Non-populist leaders try to bring their countries together in crisis rather than exploiting divisions. They may still try to downplay the crisis (as seen in Sweden) on the grounds that they don't believe that they will be able to combat it effectively. But they will do this in good faith – because they believe that it is the right approach, rather than because it seems to be the politically expedient one.

An authoritarian leader, however, could take any of the three types of response. In theory, we might think it is less likely that they would take a liberal-serious response to the crisis, but the measured responses of several authoritarian governments in the Middle East and Southeast Asia suggest that this may not be true.

Classifying Populist Leaders and Their Responses

In our [previous reports](#), we followed the [ideational approach](#) to populism, which classifies leaders as populist if they frame politics as an existential conflict between the “true people” on one hand and corrupt elites and lesser outsiders on the other. Our innovation on the ideational approach was to further classify populists into three categories: cultural, socio-economic, and anti-establishment, based on whom they classified as the true people and whom they classified as the other. Cultural populists see majority ethnic/religious-group natives as the true people and immigrants, ethnic/religious minorities and cultural elites as the other. Socio-economic populists see the working class as the true people and both domestic business elites and international capitalists/financial institutions as the other. Anti-establishment populists see average citizens without connections to the previous regime as the true people and political elites of the former regime and their allies as the other.

While we find examples of each type of populist trying to downplay the Covid-19 crisis, among those who took it seriously, only cultural populists appear to have taken illiberal responses. These cultural populists, including Narendra Modi, Rodrigo Duterte and Viktor Orban, have used the crisis to further the cultural conflicts that brought them to power. Anti-establishment populists typically come to power in opposition to an entrenched regime and neither try to create new cultural conflicts nor exploit existing ones. Because of the reduced role of cultural conflict for anti-establishment populists and their criticisms of the previous regime as corrupt and incompetent, anti-establishment populists will be more likely to take a measured policy response and administer these policies in an unbiased way.

Below is our list of current populist leaders, the type of populism that they exemplify and how we classify their Covid-19 responses. We have added footnotes with a brief description of the responses of leaders that we haven’t analysed in the body of this paper.

Table 1 – List of current populist leaders and their Covid-19 responses

Country	Leader	Populist Type	Response Type
Belarus	Alexander Lukashenko ²	Anti-Establishment	Downplay ³
Brazil	Jair Bolsonaro	Cultural	Downplay

Mexico	Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)	Socio-Economic	Downplay
Nicaragua	Daniel Ortega	Socio-Economic	Downplay ⁴
United States	Donald Trump	Cultural	Downplay
Bulgaria	Boyko Borisov	Anti-Establishment	Serious-Liberal
Czech Republic	Andrej Babis	Anti-Establishment	Serious-Liberal
Italy	Giuseppe Conte	Anti-Establishment	Serious-Liberal
Venezuela	Nicolás Maduro	Socio-Economic	Serious-Liberal ⁵
Israel	Benjamin Netanyahu	Cultural	Serious-Intermediate ⁶

Serbia	Aleksandar Vucic	Cultural	Serious-Intermediate ⁷
Sri Lanka	Gotabaya Rajapaksa	Cultural	Serious-Intermediate ⁸
Hungary	Viktor Orban	Cultural	Serious-Illiberal
India	Narendra Modi	Cultural	Serious-Illiberal
Philippines	Rodrigo Duterte	Cultural	Serious-Illiberal
Poland	Mateusz Morawiecki	Cultural	Serious-Illiberal
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdogan	Cultural	Serious-Illiberal

Next, we discuss several cases of populists fitting our three Covid-19 crisis response categories.

Downplay

Of the 17 leaders that we identified as populist at the beginning of 2020 in our [previous report](#), we've identified five who have continuously downplayed the threat of Covid-19. One of the interesting things about this list is that these five populist leaders represent each of our three categories; Trump and Bolsonaro are cultural populists, Obrador and Ortega are socio-economic populists, and Lukashenko is an anti-establishment populist. Each has been personally dismissive of the magnitude of the coronavirus and led a weak policy response to it.

Between his Twitter feed and the media, Trump's response to Covid-19 has been documented almost minute by minute. Infamous comments include his statement at the end of March that we should be able to open everything up by Easter. He has continuously clashed with public-health officials, most notably Dr Anthony Fauci. He has pushed for economic reopening throughout the summer, despite fears that the US is either entering a second wave or not done with the first one. Where he has acknowledged the death total, he has stated that without his leadership, it would have been several times that number.

Brazil has been one of the countries hit hardest by Covid-19. At the end of June, it had the second-highest number of cases after the US, although its case and death rates were similar to those of its Latin American neighbours. Bolsonaro has been personally dismissive of the virus and his government has been reluctant to mount a strong policy response. He has had repeated conflicts with federal officials and state and local governments that have adopted strong policy responses. He fired his health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, on 17 April after Mandetta repeatedly defended state and local governments' quarantine measures; Mandetta's replacement, Nelson Teich, quit after Bolsonaro signed an executive order reopening gyms and beauty salons.

Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, commonly known as AMLO, is the opposite of Trump and Bolsonaro on many issues. We classify him as a socio-economic populist in our previous report because he rails against business interests and sides with the poor. But AMLO shares much of Trump and Bolsonaro's personal style. As the pandemic spread around the world in March, he proclaimed that it "won't do anything to us" and continued to meet with large crowds of supporters. Even by the last week of March, as the virus had begun to spread throughout Western Europe and the US, he hadn't adopted a policy response. He continued to encourage people to go to restaurants and fiestas and to go shopping. As in Brazil, several state and local governments began to fill the policy gap by enacting their own coronavirus regulations.

Serious Responses

While much of the attention on populist responses to the Covid-19 crisis has focused on Trump and Bolsonaro, both of whom have downplayed the crisis, we find that most of our populist leaders, 12 of 17, have taken the crisis seriously. And while we find representatives of each of our three categories of populists among those who have downplayed the crisis, we find that the type of serious response is related to the type of populist. Only cultural populists have taken illiberal responses.

Liberal Responses

Three populist leaders who have taken the Covid-19 crisis seriously are the Italian coalition government led by the populist Five Star Movement under independent Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Prime Minister Andrej Babis of the Czech Republic, and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov of Bulgaria. All three have been proactive, acting at least as early as the major countries of Western Europe, and each has taken measures that have gone at least as far as most of those countries.

Italy⁹ faced one of the most difficult situations because it was the first western country to face a major Covid-19 outbreak. Although Prime Minister Conte initially tried to downplay the crisis at the end of February, he quickly changed course. The country placed travel restrictions and banned public gatherings in 14 northern provinces on 8 March, before the virus had begun to spread in other countries, and he closed all non-essential businesses on 11 March. While Italian officials could have acted sooner and their initial response was inconsistent and sometimes confusing, Italy's lockdown became a model for all other countries and there have been few complaints about the fairness of its administration.

Prime Minister Babis of the Czech Republic took rapid action in response to Covid-19. He initiated a lockdown before anyone had died. On 13 March, he closed the country's borders and restaurants and banned public events with more than 30 people. Along with neighbouring Slovakia, the Czech Republic was the only country in Europe in March to mandate mask-wearing in public. Babis publicly encouraged efforts to wear masks and even tweeted to Trump that the US should follow the Czech Republic and make mask-wearing mandatory. Unlike the leader in neighbouring Hungary, Babis did not assume any extraordinary powers beyond declaring a state of emergency similar to those in non-populist Western democracies.

One of the lesser-known populists in our database is Prime Minister Boyko Borisov of Bulgaria. Like our other anti-establishment populists, he hasn't focused on cultural threats from outsiders, but he has attacked institutions that have tried to check his power. Borisov has downplayed the crisis as a personal matter – he has rejected wearing a mask in public and was even fined for not wearing one in a church. But his policy response to the coronavirus has been in line with that of most non-populist European leaders. He declared a state of emergency on 12 March, then closed schools, restaurants and bars, and limited public gatherings and travel, preceding similar measures in Belgium, France and Spain. When cases started to rise in the middle of June, the government extended emergency measures until the end of the month, and Borisov appealed to the public to wear masks and continue social distancing. Overall, the Bulgarian government's measures have been similar to those taken in most Western European countries.

Illiberal Responses

While different types of populists are represented among those downplaying the crisis and those taking a liberal-serious response, only cultural populists have taken an illiberal-serious response. Some have invoked unmatched emergency powers while others have been more restrained in the scope of their emergency powers but have enforced them with extreme measures. In these cases, the targets of these measures have been groups with which the leader had been in conflict.

Like several other governments in Eastern Europe, the Polish government was early to take the Covid-19 crisis seriously. It closed schools, bars and restaurants and enacted travel restrictions in mid-March, when there were only about 100 cases in the country. It required face masks in public places. But what separates Poland from some of its anti-establishment populist neighbours is that it has used the Covid-19 crisis to push controversial legislation and further its grip on power. The parliament moved forward with controversial bills restricting abortion and sex education that were unrelated to Covid-19 and had drawn

large public protests, in part to prevent public protest of these bills. The Polish government has also continued its efforts to assert greater control over the judiciary, efforts which have drawn large protests and criticism from the EU.

For several years, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been accused of attacking the separation of powers and wanting to take dictatorial control. On 30 March, the parliament passed a bill that gave him the ability to circumvent indefinitely the separation of powers and to imprison anyone for up to five years for publishing false or distorted facts. While the opposition supported some of the emergency powers, it strongly opposed their unlimited duration. This aspect also prompted many commentators to declare that Hungary was no longer a democracy, with European leaders calling to expel Hungary from the European Union if the government did not back down. Although the parliament rescinded these powers on 16 June, there was still concern that the government had greater powers than before the crisis.

Other cultural populist leaders have enacted normal official policies but have been illiberal in their enforcement and have targeted groups that have opposed the government. The president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, initiated a countrywide month-long lockdown on 15 March, then encouraged the police to shoot dead anyone whose behaviour they felt put them in danger – even for not wearing a face mask. The police have arrested almost as many people for violating curfews as they have administered Covid-19 tests, forced curfew violators to sit under the hot sun, and cracked down on journalists and social media users critical of the government's response. While the Turkish government has been lauded for its targeted lockdown, the government has used the crisis to continue conflicts with the media, dissenters and opposition politicians. Police detained a truck driver who posted a video on TikTok about how he couldn't comply with the lockdown because he couldn't afford to feed his family. President Erdoğan has refused to work with opposition-led cities (most notably Istanbul and Ankara), giving them little notice of his lockdown policies.

Perhaps the harshest lockdown has been in India. With only four hours' notice on 24 March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that no one could leave their home for 21 days and restricted all travel, even though India's case total at the time was less than 500. This meant that India's numerous internal migrant workers were trapped in place and could not easily return to their home villages. While the Modi government has not invoked extensive emergency powers to respond to the crisis, the lockdown has worsened the problem of online vigilantism and violence against Muslims, who have been accused of intentionally spreading the coronavirus after an outbreak associated with the Tablighi Jamaat Muslim missionary gathering in early March. The government announced that some members of the group would be charged under India's National Security Act for violating the quarantine. Police have gone after journalists for reporting on these incidents and for being in public, even though journalism is considered an essential service.

Conclusion

Contrary to popular views, we have found that most populist leaders have taken the Covid-19 crisis seriously and have not been averse to listening to public-health experts and letting them lead the response. This is consistent with recent academic work, which has found no difference in case and death totals between populist and non-populist leaders, although there is some evidence that populists were slower to adopt health measures.

But when we disaggregate populists by our three categories, we do find differences in their responses. Among populist leaders who took the crisis seriously, we found that most liberal responses came from anti-establishment populists while only cultural populists took an illiberal response.

What do our findings mean for the future of populism? We believe that the threat of populism is unlikely to disappear as populists in power expand their powers and populists out of power learn how to exploit mainstream governments' policy mistakes in response to the virus. While we might think that most populist leaders' serious response should reassure us about their ability to govern, a competent but illiberal response causes great reason for concern. Populists who have downplayed the crisis, like Donald Trump and AMLO, have faced public disapproval for their actions, but populists taking a serious response, like Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Viktor Orban, have seen their poll numbers increase. This is a problem because these populists have "used the pandemic to take their countries further in an authoritarian direction," as leading populism scholar Jan Werner Müller has argued recently. And as we have found in a previous report, when populists take authoritarian measures, like eroding checks and balances, future corruption and the threat to democracy increases.

Furthermore, a prolonged economic downturn in the aftermath of the pandemic will likely improve the electoral prospects of populist parties not in power, as research covering the last 150 years in advanced democracies has shown. European populists who are not currently in power, like Marine Le Pen in France and both Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, have argued that their governments have not taken the virus seriously enough. They have figured out how to work the crisis into their political messaging, framing the virus as another foreign intruder from which establishment politicians have failed to keep the people safe. A prolonged downturn and especially a second wave of the virus could empower these populists.

Footnotes

1. ^ Several leaders who took the crisis seriously, like the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, initially tried to downplay it, but quickly changed course when they saw how rapidly it spread in Italy.
 2. ^ We classify Prime Minister Alexander Lukashenko as an anti-establishment populist because he was an anti-establishment populist when he first won the presidency in 1994. In our coding scheme, we classify leaders who have won consecutive elections based on which type of leader they were in their first election victory. Even though Lukashenko is clearly the political establishment in Belarus and is, according to [reputable sources](#), a dictator, we classify him as an anti-establishment populist because he was an anti-establishment populist when he first won the presidency and he has remained in the office since then.
 3. ^ Lukashenko continued to downplay the coronavirus and [encourage](#) mass gatherings throughout May, even as hospitals became overwhelmed.
 4. ^ President Daniel Ortega has downplayed the virus throughout the pandemic and [encouraged](#) people to attend mass gatherings, even in June.
 5. ^ Surprisingly, given its disastrous and often violent handling of its recent economic troubles, Venezuela, under its socio-economic populist president, Nicolás Maduro, has taken a fairly liberal response to the crisis. There has been [some cooperation](#) between Maduro's government and the parliamentary opposition led by Juan Guaidó.
 6. ^ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is difficult to classify. He has used the crisis to pass a law [giving](#) the security service Shin Bet the power to track cell phones and another to [limit](#) parliamentary oversight. Despite conflicts with protestors on these measures, he has not used the crisis to take harsh measures against them or the political opposition, so we classify his response as "intermediate".
 7. ^ While Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic enacted a strict lockdown in March, he lifted it quickly, including for large gatherings, in early May. This led to an immediate spike in cases, and Vucic's [attempt](#) to reimpose a strict lockdown led to mass protests, especially because it was seen as an attempt to manipulate the June elections.
 8. ^ There was some [concern](#) about President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's consolidation of power while the country was without a parliament in the run-up to new elections, which were originally scheduled for June but were postponed until August. But he doesn't appear to have made serious attempts to crack down on minority groups, which is significant given the country's recent history of ethnic violence.
 9. ^ We classify the Italian government as populist because the majority coalition partner, the Five Star Movement, is an anti-establishment populist party, even though its minority partner, the Democratic Party, is non-populist and the prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, is an independent.
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