Political Leadership During the Coronavirus Crisis

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: During major crises, those in power have increased advantages over their opponents. A structural handicap of those leading the opposition is that the only tool they have at their disposal is their words. Furthermore, during a crisis the media mainly focus their attention on those who are in charge and the measures they are taking.

During major crises, those in power have an advantage over their opponents if they perform even halfway reasonably. To be more accurate, it is not that leaders objectively have to perform very well during a crisis to enhance their popularity. They only have to be perceived as doing so.

With the deadly coronavirus pandemic in full swing, an intermediary analysis of how leaders' performances are perceived may help us better understand future political developments in various countries. Parliamentary committees of inquiry on the handling of the crisis may play a role in how perceptions of leadership develop in some countries.

A structural handicap of those in opposition is that the only tool they have at their disposal is their words. They also have the problem that during a crisis, the media mainly focus their attention on those who are in charge and the measures they are taking.

It is helpful to look at one past case—the run-up to Germany's parliamentary elections in 2002. In early polls, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a socialist, trailed behind his Christian opponent, Edmund Stoiber, leader of the Bavarian CSU.

In the summer of 2002, huge rainfalls started in the Czech Republic and eastern Germany. The Elbe River overflowed and there was massive destruction. Schröder showed leadership in the crisis while Stoiber could only talk. Schröder had another crucial advantage: during the crisis: he virtually monopolized TV. This greatly enhanced the way he was perceived. Schröder won the election by a slim margin.

An assessment of the current situation in a number of countries shows that the coronavirus crisis has helped boost the popularity of several leaders, though not all. In the German 2017 parliamentary elections, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) grouping, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, remained the largest. They received 33% of the vote, a loss of 8%. The substantial fall in popular support was ascribed mainly to the irresponsible immigration policies of Merkel from 2015 onwards. Later polls showed a further decline in support for the CDU/CSU to around 25%.

Yet in the three latest polls taken in March 2020, this figure jumped to approximately 35%, even higher than what it was in the 2017 elections. In many of the pre-coronavirus polls, the Christian parties received only a few percentage points more than the Green party. It now has about twice as much support in the polls than the Greens.

Merkel has announced that she will not be a candidate for chancellor in the 2021 elections. In 2018, she gave up the chairpersonship of the CDU. Her successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, was not very successful and resigned her position in February of this year.

It is not only the top position that has a volatile effect on popularity polls. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, elections for a new CDU chairperson were planned. The leading candidate seemed to be economics expert Friedrich Merz, a German and European ex-parliamentarian. From 2000-02 he was chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary faction in the Bundestag. At present, however, he holds no political position and cannot particularly distinguish himself.

The second most favored candidate, Armin Laschet, is minister president of the largest federal state of Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia. He is thus in a somewhat better position than Merz. Initially it was thought that Minister of Health Jens Spahn would also run for the chairpersonship, but Laschet has arranged with him that if he were to be elected, Spahn will become his deputy.

As minister of health, Spahn has had much opportunity to be in the limelight, and is now very positively perceived.

Often the chairperson of the CDU, the bigger of the two Christian parties, is the preferred Christian candidate for the chancellorship. The coronavirus crisis has changed this perception. Bavarian PM Markus Söder has been a key figure in this crisis in his home state. He appears very determined and is frequently on TV. In the past, Söder has said he sees his place in Bavaria and not as a candidate for the chancellorship in Berlin, but he has become the favorite for this position of many in the CDU. The question is whether he will give in to the pressure and run.

In France, the popularity of President Emmanuel Macron has greatly improved during the crisis, though different polls give somewhat different figures. According to the daily *Le Figaro*, at the end of March 2020, 43% of the French public were satisfied with his performance. This is the highest figure since April 2018. At the end of February, the figure was 32%. PM Edouard Philippe has also gained in popularity. Currently, 42% are satisfied with his performance as opposed to 36% one month earlier.

There are many precedents of the French population becoming more satisfied with their leaders at times of crisis. The popularity of President François Hollande, a socialist, rose after the attacks by Muslim terrorists in Paris in 2015. Similarly, the popularity of center-right President Jacques Chirac increased substantially after September 11, 2001.

In the US, the situation is less clear as far as the general election is concerned. Democratic challenger Joe Biden still leads polls with varying percentages over President Donald Trump. A Grinnell College poll on April 1 found that 49% of the public approves of Trump's handling of the coronavirus crisis and 47% disapprove. An Economist/Yougov poll on the same day found 50% approving and 46% disapproving. (Trump's approval rates are very volatile.)

In the UK, the conservative government of PM Boris Johnson, who is currently hospitalized with the virus, has high approval ratings overall: 73% as opposed to 24%. The same is true of its handling of the coronavirus outbreak: 72% versus 25%. Among cabinet members, Chancellor Rishi Sunak has the highest public approval at 77%. Fifty-four percent of the population are dissatisfied with the performance of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who was replaced on April 4.

Even in Italy, which has been very heavily hit by the coronavirus pandemic, there is a huge increase in satisfaction among the public of PM Giuseppe Conte and his government: 71% in March 2020. In February satisfaction with Conte was at only 52%.

According to a poll carried out by the Israel Democracy Institute, 60% of the Israeli population is satisfied with PM Netanyahu's handling of the coronavirus crisis. Health Ministry DG Moshe Bar Simantov had an even higher satisfaction rate of 68%. Other public figures were seen far less positively by the public. Health Minister Yaakov Litzman's activities were considered positive by 40% of respondents. Blue and White leader Benny Gantz received 34% and former Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein 31%. Incoming opposition leader Yair Lapid was viewed positively by only 18% of the population.

The Israeli poll also asked for opinions on institutions. Hospitals received a positive score of 83%, the media 58%, and the finance ministry 39%.

This is a period of high volatility of opinion. It is thus important to consider these figures as a snapshot of the moment. Current public perceptions offer a basis from which to analyze the way opinions evolve during and in particular after the end of the coronavirus crisis. At that time, these leaders will face a huge number of challenges in many areas.

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