

The Politics of Perception: How the White House Manipulates National Crisis Narratives

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Since its institution, the office of the President of the United States has expanded its power, prestige, and attention with the sitting president coming to symbolize the nation (Pika, Maltese, and Rudalevige, 2019). The sitting president has also become perceived as responsible for the state of the nation (Pika, Maltese, and Rudalevige, 2019). With this responsibility, a presidential administration's ability to maintain a positive perception of its performance is key as public approval is an indicator of both its political capital (Christenson and Kriner, 2020) and its reelection prospects (Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1982). With public attention focused on the White House, an administration's success in shaping how the public perceives it can make or break its future, particularly during crises when people look to the president for safety and reassurance (Pika, Maltese, and Rudalevige, 2019). We also considered partisanship, which ensures a stable attachment to a party and shapes how individuals respond to information (Campbell, et al., 1960), and polarization, the increasing divergence in partisan ideology (Bartels, 2002), as significant influences on public approval.

We analyzed the Trump administration's attempts to shape public perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, tracking the administration's statements from the virus' public emergence in January 2020 to the presidential election of November 2020. We then compared the Trump administration's narrative strategies to those of the Reagan administration during the Iran-Contra Affair to better understand how different narrative approaches and audiences shape outcomes related to how presidential administrations manage (or not) a crisis of national significance.

President Trump's use of Twitter to communicate directly with the US public offered a unique and unprecedented window into a president's attempts to influence public perception of a national crisis. In this

paper, we investigate the Trump administration's narrative manipulation efforts primarily through President Trump's tweets, which are supplemented with relevant public statements to contextualize the Trump administration's strategies. Tweets were filtered for the keyword's "coronavirus", "COVID", "COVID-19", and "pandemic" to maintain content relevance.

We used public approval ratings to assess the administration's success in shaping public opinion, as well as the administration's situation as they cast their narratives. As we only needed general data trends, we used public approval data from Gallup.com, which provided the Trump administration's approval ratings in approximately 2-week intervals. We have selected and analyzed representative tweets from each public approval data window, which were typically the first two weeks and the last two weeks of each month. Tweets that did not fall inside a defined public approval window are grouped with the next data set. We classified the Trump administration's approaches into four categories: (1) downplaying the virus and reassuring the public, (2) diverting attention, (3) blaming others, and (4) the no spin zone.

As the virus emerged in January, Trump leaned into the first three narratives, dismissing and distracting from the virus. When WHO declared a pandemic in mid-March, the No Spin Zone narrative was used in an attempt to unite the public behind his administration with an honest, nonpartisan approach that took the virus seriously. Trump also continued to use his other narratives, with the only adaptation being that he refrained from casting Democrats as the opposition but tried to unite them against "common enemies" like WHO and China.

- Downplaying and reassuring
 - "It's one person coming in from China. We have it under control. It's going to be just fine," (CNBC, 2020).
- Diverting attention
 - "The Fake News Media refuses to discuss how good the Economy and Stock Market, including JOBS under the Trump Administration, are doing. We will soon be in RECORD TERRITORY. All they want to discuss is COVID 19, where they won't say it, but we beat the Dems all day long, also!!!" (Trump Twitter Archive).
- Blaming others
 - "First of all, we have done a great job. We've gotten the governors everything they needed. They didn't do their job. Many of them didn't and some of them did. ... But the governors do it. We gave them massive amounts of material" (Sanford, 2020).
- No Spin Zone
 - "It's absolutely critical for the American people to follow the guidelines for the next 30 days. It's a matter of life and death," (WION 2020).

Fig. 1 Examples of Tweets exemplifying narrative categories.

This non-partisan mixed strategy ended in late May, when, after weeks of stagnant approval, Trump’s approval dropped 10 points (Gallup, 2021). More tellingly, Trump’s Republican approval dropped 7 points to 85 percent—the only time during the pandemic that his support among Republicans was under 90 percent (Gallup, 2021). After stagnant approval and copartisan wavering, Trump returned to partisan narratives and his support among Republicans recovered. For the rest of the time before the election, Trump used all four narratives as his approval recovered (Gallup, 2021).

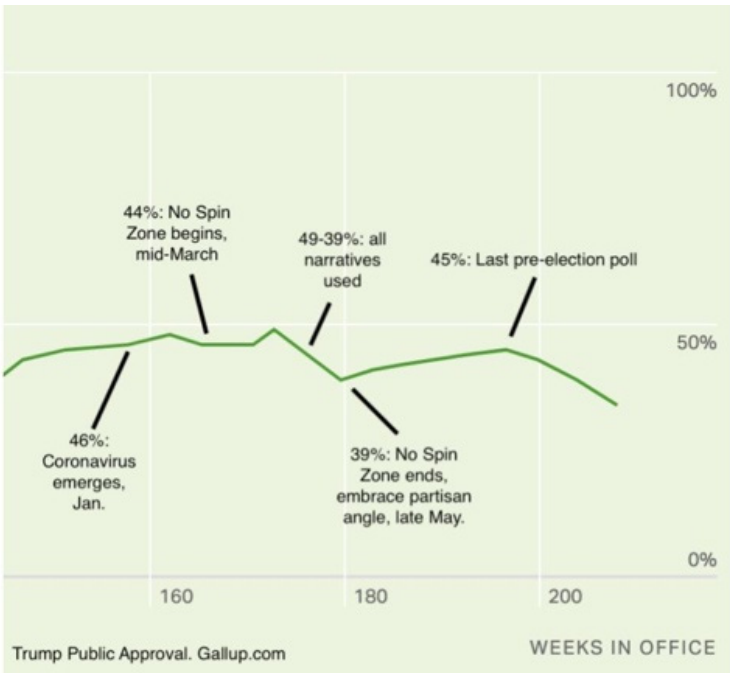


Fig. 2 Timeline of Trump administration’s public approval (Gallup, 2021).

Reagan’s approach to the Iran-Contra Affair differed distinctly. The Iran-Contra affair was when the Reagan administration secretly sold arms to Iran and used the

proceeds to illegally fund the Contras, a Nicaraguan paramilitary organization. Initially, Reagan denied the scandal’s existence. When the story came out and this narrative was no longer viable, Reagan, while insisting on his personal innocence, took responsibility, apologized, and publicly supported multiple independent investigations. After this narrative, Reagan’s public approval eventually made a full recovery. Reagan stuck to a single narrative despite the risk of committing to a losing one. We found this a risk worth taking when compared to Trump’s alternative: inconsistently employing multiple disparate narratives to try to mobilize public opinion and retreating to his base when these attempts failed.

It is possible that polarization would have kept Trump’s approval at the same levels regardless. Yet, it is still worth exploring the strategic differences in presidents’ strategies for what this can tell us about presidents’ narrative responses to crises moving forward. The polarized environment also provides context for Reagan and Trump’s approaches and success. Reagan consistently and Trump for a time used non-partisan narratives. While Reagan made a full recovery, Trump was unable to unite even half of the public. We found that our now hyper-polarized electorate made it easier for Trump to shape the perceptions of his co-partisans, as evidenced by his consistently high support from Republicans.

Yet, the same polarization that united Republicans made it difficult for Trump to find a message that he could use to unite Democrats and Republicans. After failing to realize this support and even losing support from his own party, Trump fell back on partisan narratives and consolidated support among his base. This supports the idea that, at a minimum, narrative manipulation will be more difficult in an era of polarization. This also lends support to the idea that, in hyper-polarized political environments, presidents will focus their narrative manipulation attempts on consolidating and mobilizing their party’s half of the electorate, rather than risk this support by reaching out to members of the opposition party.

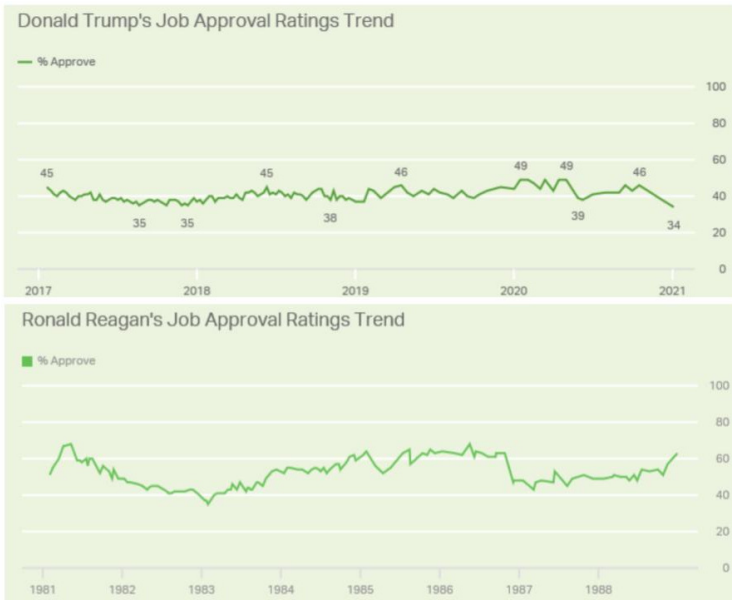


Fig. 3. Comparison of the Trump and Reagan administrations' public approval trends (Gallup, 2021).

Statement of Research Advisor

The results of this project add to the growing literature and collective understanding of how leaders, most notably US presidents, strategically wield communication to attempt to shape, control, and/or manipulate the narrative regarding a crisis of national significance. In comparing and contrasting the cases of the Reagan Administration's response to the Iran-Contras Scandal and the Trump Administration's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we now have a clearer understanding of the communication tactics and strategies that are used by American leaders and which tend to be most effective at shaping or manipulating a national crisis narrative and which ultimately have proven ineffective.

-Matthew Clary, College of Liberal Arts, Political Science

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Authors Biography



Jordan Windham graduated summa cum laude in spring 2022 with a B.A. in Political Science at Auburn University. Her undergraduate research has focused on public opinion and electoral politics. She is a 2022 Teach For America corps member teaching special education in Idaho.