

Ideology versus crisis management

Why the Corona crisis is particularly difficult for right-wing populist governments

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Whether it is US president Donald Trump, who initially talked down the risks of the Sars-CoV-2 virus for the US or Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro, who dismissed the virus as a media trick and temporarily prevented the publication of infection numbers – right-wing populist governments are currently not distinguishing themselves through effective crisis management. The fact that right-wing populist leaders face serious problems in dealing with the corona crisis effectively lies in the inability to reconcile effective crisis management with the essence of the populist worldview.

For times of disruptive crises that affect all areas of social interaction, research on crisis management identifies six central expectations that the general public have of political decision makers. They should (1) prioritise public safety in all decisions, (2) prepare for worst-case scenarios, (3) heed warnings to prevent a possible deterioration of the crisis, (4) take charge and provide clear direction to crisis-management operations, (5) be compassionate towards victims of the crisis and (6) learn lessons from the crisis. Right-wing populist governments have difficulties to meet these expectations.

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There are several reasons for this: firstly, anti-elitism is at the heart of the populist worldview. Elites are accused of being corrupt and neglecting the “will of the people”. In the eyes of the populists, experts and scientists are part of the elite and bear joint responsibility for betraying the majority society. Scientific findings are therefore fundamentally regarded with suspicion, especially when policy recommendations could be derived from these. So far, this has been illustrated most clearly with the denial of the existence of man-made climate change. In the current pandemic, scientific data analysis, forecasts and recommendations for action are of central importance when it comes to recognising warning signs at an early stage and initiating the right measures. Right-wing populist decision makers therefore find themselves in the difficult situation of having to listen to experts that they would normally depict as the enemy.

Secondly, forward-thinking crisis management requires political leaders to be able to face their own vulnerabilities. For right-wing populists claiming to embody the personified will of the people, a pandemic is a blow to their self-conception. They have stylised themselves as the saviour of the ordinary

man; but now they have to make difficult decisions that can only sustain one thing in the short term – public health or economic growth.

Thirdly, right-wing populists use polarising rhetoric as a strategic tool and rarely give evidence-based arguments in their statements. Polarization leads to a decline in trust amongst various sections of the population and promotes the spread of fake news. Researchers have investigated how an emotional identification with political camps influences the way in which information is processed in the human brain and can lead to altered perceptions. Other studies have shown that access to broadband internet increases polarisation, as citizens increasingly acquire their information from echo chambers in social media. Polarisation can result in the formation of political camps in society, for whom party loyalty is prioritized to truth. This has an impact on the prospects of success in stemming the coronavirus. When populist leaders dismiss the pandemic as a plot generated by the opposition or external powers, or trivialise its seriousness, the likelihood that all sections of the population will practice behavior changes such as social distancing or wearing masks will decrease. Therefore, polarising rhetoric is difficult to reconcile with politically responsible action in the Corona crisis.

In countries such as the USA or Brazil, the number of corona infections and corona deaths has increased significantly in the past weeks and months. Research on the strategies and ideologies of right-wing populist politicians on the one hand and the conditions for effective crisis management on the other hand suggests that effective crisis management is incompatible with right-wing populists' leadership style. The impact of right-wing populist governments on the containment of the Corona pandemic and the role played by institutional structures and underfunded health systems have yet to be examined. The political consequences of the pandemic for right-wing populist politicians are also difficult to predict. One thing is certain: The Corona crisis is an immense stress test for governments worldwide and changes the parameters by which successful political leadership is measured. Against this background, the crisis brings to the fore the contradictions of right-wing populists in government.