The importance of policy narrative: effective government responses to Covid-19

Michael Mintrom and Ruby O’Connor

School of Social Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

The spread of Covid-19 and the variety of government responses opens space for policy learning. Traditional policy analysis tools would lead us to explain policy variation using population size, ease of closing jurisdictional borders, governance arrangements, available resources, and system capacity. Following the approach of the Narrative Policy Framework, we suggest narrative has played a key role in the relative effectiveness of responses to Covid-19. We illustrate the dynamics at play using evidence from the state level in the United States, where there has been considerable variation in policy actions and rates of infection and death. After reviewing the national context, we explain our selection of cases. We note differences in state-level policy narratives and how they influenced policy development and implementation. The findings provide compelling reason for policy designers everywhere to routinely integrate narrative development and control into their advising practices.

1. Introduction

The spread of Covid-19 which occurred in the first half of 2020 posed an unprecedented challenge to governments worldwide. The first case was reported by China to the World Health Organization on 31 December 2019. On 30 January 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared it a global pandemic. During these months in 2020, the virus traveled rapidly within and across countries, causing serious illness among many who contracted it, and leading to deaths for thousands of people. The social isolation imposed through government lockdown rules served to curtail the spread of the virus, but at massive costs to businesses, livelihoods, and economies. Many governments sought to reduce the severity of lockdown-induced economic downturns through a range of income-support and broader expenditure measures. Controversy ensued in many countries concerning how best to balance the government’s...
responsibility to protect the lives of all citizens with the responsibility to support economic activity and avoid the massive social dislocations that come with financial hardship.

Because the virus spread so quickly around the globe, it necessitated governments everywhere to devise and implement their responses more or less simultaneously. As the crisis unfolded, many governments were sharing information, learning from each other, and coordinating their responses (Goodman, Seigel, and Sobel 2020). That all governments needed to respond to the same phenomenon and that those responses took a variety of forms opens space for on-going policy learning. Traditional policy analysis tools would lead us to explain policy variation using indicators such as population size, ease of closing jurisdictional borders, governance arrangements, available resources, and system capacity. An extensive literature has developed to explain variations in state-level policy settings across the United States (Dye and Dyer 1966; Hwang and Gray 1991; Soss et al. 2001; Walker 1969). A similarly extensive literature has developed to explain variations in policy settings across nations (Hague and Harrop 2004; Marsh and Sharman 2009; Rose 2004; True and Mintrom 2001). While many different factors are used to explain policy variation in such studies, they tend to be factors that are readily measured (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Montez et al. 2020; Shipan and Volden 2012). Less attention has been paid to the role of influence strategies, framing, and narrative in the literature explaining policy change, although a shift has started (see, e.g. McBeth and Lybecker 2018; Petridou and Mintrom 2020; Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen 2009). In the case of Covid-19, there is much yet to be learned about what worked and how contextual conditions influenced outcomes. Knowledge of appropriate responses to a pandemic can be gleaned from studies of success and failure in addressing previous pandemics (Baekkeskov 2016; Boin and Lodge 2016; Keller, et al. 2012).

Following the approach of the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan et al. 2018), in this article, we suggest narrative has played a key role in the relative effectiveness of responses to Covid-19. In so doing, we contribute to a small body of previous research that has considered the role of narrative framing in pandemics (see, e.g. Berry, Wharf-Higgins, and Naylor 2007; Hume 2000; Wald 2008). Policy narratives can be thought of as the general story-lines that emerge and come to hold prominence in policy communities concerning particular phenomena. An especially important feature of policy narratives is how they can condition the thoughts and actions of broader populations. Those thoughts and actions can, and usually do, have material consequences for the effectiveness of policies. For example, efforts to restrict or ban specific behaviors will typically only be effective if they are viewed as consistent with prevailing social norms. That means policymakers seeking conformity with a specific policy must strive to achieve alignment between the goals of a policy and social norms. As evidence has shown concerning policies to reduce smoking, gambling addiction, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence, that alignment task can prove highly challenging (Anderson and Hughes 2000; Cook and Moore 2002; Humphries 2002; Korn and Shaffer 1999).

Effective management of policy narrative is important for two reasons. First, it reduces ambiguity and, hence, reduces a major challenge with respect to policy
implementation. Of course, it cannot ensure effective implementation. That depends on structural matters that can be summarized as “system capability.” No matter how good the narrative, if no resources have been devoted to establishing a public health care system, then a jurisdiction will not be well-placed to tackle a pandemic. Second, effective management of policy narrative increases the likelihood that citizens will appropriately interpret the policy measures that are being taken and the actions that they can take to support those policy measures. This action by citizens is fundamental to supporting implementation (Gofen et al. 2019; Weaver 2015). In the absence of clear narrative, messaging from political leaders can become ambiguous. This can lead to considerable confusion among citizens. With a highly contagious virus like Covid-19, we have seen many instances where complacency on the part of a small number of citizens can lead to rapid spread of the virus, to disastrous and often deadly effect.

The rapid and deadly spread of Covid-19 necessitated social-distancing policies to be quickly enacted. But research in compliance shows there are no guarantees that individual citizens and businesses will do what is asked of them (Parker and Nielson 2017). Indeed, Covid-19 presented jurisdictions with precisely the conditions that underlie the classic “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968). This meant many political leaders enacted emergency powers to enforce social distancing and lockdown measures in their jurisdictions, significantly disrupting social norms. But these legal powers also needed to be supported with powerful policy narratives. Some political leaders were much more effective than others at deploying those policy narratives. The differences are stark even among relatively wealthy countries that all had well-functioning health care systems prior to the pandemic hitting.

In the following sections, we illustrate the policy narratives deployed during the Covid-19 crisis and the dynamics at play using evidence from the state level in the United States, where considerable variation has been observed in policy actions and rates of infection and death (Scher 2020). After reviewing the national context, we explain our selection of cases. We note differences in state-level policy narratives and how they influenced policy development and implementation. The findings provide compelling reason for policy designers everywhere to routinely integrate narrative development and control into their advising practices.

2. Policy narrative and crisis response

We begin our discussion by considering a normative question and how we could answer it. That question is: Knowing what we know now, what would have been the most effective way for political leaders to manage the government response to Covid-19 in their respective jurisdictions? To develop a comprehensive answer, we could draw on knowledge that has emerged from recent observations of actual responses to the pandemic. But this pandemic and the challenges it has posed share characteristics with other crises that governments have had to wrestle with in the past. Consequently, in developing our answer, we could draw on knowledge accumulated from observation of previous crises where necessary responses involved both the implementation of existing public policies and the rapid development of new policies to meet the novel circumstances (Baekkeskov 2016; Salajan et al. 2020). Two extensive scholarly literatures
contain many relevant insights. These are the literature on the policymaking process
(see, e.g. Weible and Sabatier 2018) and the literature on crisis management (see, e.g.
Boin et al. 2016). Useful prior efforts have been made to systematically distill insights
for practitioners from those literatures (see, e.g. Boin and ‘t Hart 2010; Weible and
Cairney 2018).

For the present discussion, our motivating question is narrower, but it remains norma-
tive. It is: What common characteristics can be found in the policy narratives of political
leaders who presided over effective government responses to Covid-19 in their respective
jurisdictions? To answer this question, we need to review the policy narratives of political
leaders in a well-chosen set of jurisdictions. That review can be greatly assisted by first
establishing characteristics of policy narrative deemed to be effective for crisis manage-
ment. We turn to that task now, drawing from literature increasingly associated with the
Narrative Policy Framework (Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan et al. 2018). In so doing,
we set the stage for reviewing what political leaders actually did in terms of constructing
policy narratives to enable and support effective government responses to Covid-19.

Within policymaking processes, policy narratives are stories told to persuade key
decision makers and their constituents to support specific policy choices. Those who
study policy advocacy, framing techniques, and the psychology of persuasion have long
known that evidence and facts rarely speak for themselves (Cialdini 1993; Kingdon
1984; Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Stone 2002). The ways in which evidence, facts, prob-
lems, and solutions are presented can and do have material consequences for the attention
they receive from legislators, political leaders, and the general population. The
Narrative Policy Framework draws attention to these processes and is intended to
prompt systematic empirical testing of the claim that narratives play an important role
in policy processes (Shanahan, et al. 2018; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). Weible
and Cairney (2018) have neatly summarized the framework’s practical insights in one
imperative sentence: “Structure your stories into a full narrative that includes setting
the stage, establishing a plot, casting characters (heroes, victims, villains), and specify a
moral” (p.191).

Narrative construction requires taking great care over how policy work is conducted
and communicated. People from different cultures, generations, communities, and pro-
fessions typically view the world through frames that become so familiar to them as to be
all but invisible (Goffman 1974; Schön and Rein 1994). Those who wish to persuade
others to shift their preferences – including their preferences for specific public policies
– must develop arguments that facilitate this shift (Dewulf and Bouwen 2012; Mintrom
and Luetjens 2017). Indeed, effective argumentation stands at the heart of coalition for-
mation and maintenance (Mintrom and Vergari 1996; Sabatier 1988). There can be
times when it makes sense to limit the scope of conflicts. This is usually the case for
those who perceive themselves in positions of power. Those who stand to lose from a
conflict often face incentives to expand its scope (Schattschneider 1960). They may per-
ceive that in doing so they can upset the status quo to their advantage (Baumgartner
and Jones 1993). Policy implementation, an area where problems often arise (Pressman
and Wildavsky 1984), can become much smoother when efforts have been made in
advance to consult, listen to, and empathize with those who will be affected by policy
changes (Luetjens, Mintrom, and ‘t Hart 2019; Lu et al. 2020).
The importance of attending to narrative construction and clarity of communication has also served as a major theme in the literature on crisis management. When crises strike, there is a strategic need for political leaders, the heads of government agencies, and other senior public managers to rapidly make sense of the situation and then to engage in “meaning-making” so that others can appreciate what is happening. More specifically, meaning-making involves providing persuasive accounts of what is happening, why it is happening, and what can be done about it (‘t Hart and Tindall 2009).

At an operational level, it is also essential that those leading the charge – who are often senior public managers – are able to be effective narrators and communicators. In the words of Boin and ‘t Hart (2010), this means “[t]ransmitting accurate, timely and actionable information upward, outward and downward within the crisis response structure, as well as to relevant citizens and communities, designed to enable those actors to make informed crisis response decisions within their respective domains of involvement” (p.360).

From this discussion, we derive four characteristics to guide assessment of policy narratives of political leaders presiding over government responses to a crisis. Policy narratives created to support effective crisis response can be expected to:

1. Provide persuasive accounts of what is happening, why it is happening, and what can be done about it;
2. Create a broad coalition of support for policy actions to be taken, and minimize opportunities for conflict;
3. Encourage trust and cooperation among key actors and groups whose actions will be material to addressing the crisis;
4. Enable individuals and communities to make informed crisis response decisions within their respective domains of involvement.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Indeed, it is appropriate to expect that novel crises will elicit other behavioral regularities among political leaders. That said, the list offers a good starting point for assessment of policy narratives of political leaders during the Covid-19 crisis. Next, we discuss our selection of cases for the study of policy narratives and their impacts.

3. Studying government responses to Covid-19

All who study government responses to Covid-19 face a vast wealth of evidence and a broad range of choices concerning the jurisdictions to select as cases. Our study of policy narratives is informed by methodological considerations that have been recently enumerated and applied by the key proponents of the Narrative Policy Framework (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018; McBeth and Lybecker 2018). In studying policy narratives, there is a high probability that local social norms and political configurations will influence the ways that political leaders communicate with the broader population about their policy choices. We sought to reduce the susceptibility of our cases to what might be construed as local noise. At the same time, we sought to be comparative.
in our investigation, analyzing differences in the ways political leaders talked about the crisis and the governmental response.

At the time we began this study, the United States was emerging as the country with the most fatalities as a result of Covid-19. We also observed that there were stark differences in death rates across the states. Therefore, we decided to engage in a comparative analysis of policy narratives, as constructed by state governors when the Covid-19 crisis was setting in. Of course, all governors in the United States have had to work in a political context dominated by the daily utterances of President Donald J. Trump, a Republican. That context has been volatile (Elshaug 2020; Luce 2020). But that volatility started well before Covid-19 appeared on the scene (Chotiner 2020). It added to the challenges that governors had to work with. As we chose to examine the diversity of policy narratives at the state level, it made sense for us to analyze the speeches and interviews given by governors – the highest authority at this level. These public addresses are easily accessible and provide verbatim accounts of the messaging each governor delivered to their audience – the public and other policymakers. Speeches and interviews were analyzed for repeated themes and the inclusion of selected quotations in the sections that follow provide examples of each governor’s broader political narrative.

We decided to focus on the policy narratives of the governors of the four largest states by population size. These are: California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Together, these states hold over 30% of the 328.2 million people living in the United States (US Census Bureau 2019). These four states also display variety in terms of the party political identity of their governors. Table 1 provides a summary of key demographic and political features of these four states and the impact of Covid-19.

4. Analysis of policy narratives

In our analysis of the policy narratives used by state governors during the Covid-19 crisis, we did not find any example of a governor modeling all of the narrative strategies we expected to find. Instead, we found that some governors were very good at particular aspects of the task (while others were demonstrably not). Here, we present our analysis. We have organized it around our expectations. Therefore, we first consider the provision of a persuasive account, then the creation of a broad coalition, the encouragement of trust and cooperation, and the enabling of communities. In so doing, we

Table 1. Governors, population, and Covid-19 impacts for four states in the United States.

| State   | Governor and Year of election | Governor’s Party affiliation | State Population million, 2019 est.¹ | Date of First Covid-19 Case² | Deaths from Covid-19 as of June 30 2020³ | Death Rate per 100,000, as of June 30 2020⁴ |
|---------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| California | Gavin Newsom (2018)          | Democratic                  | 37.3                                 | January 26 2020            | 6082                                    | 16.3                                      |
| Florida  | Ron DeSantis (2018)          | Republican                  | 25.1                                 | March 1 2020               | 3505                                    | 14.0                                      |
| New York | Andrew Cuomo (2010)          | Democratic                  | 19.4                                 | March 1 2020               | 27,415                                  | 141.3                                     |
| Texas    | Gregg Abbott (2014)          | Republican                  | 25.1                                 | March 9 2020               | 2455                                    | 9.8                                       |

Sources: A: Estimates reported by US Census Bureau (2019); B and C: Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center; D: Authors’ calculation using data from other columns in this table: [Deaths from Covid-19]/[State Population/100,000].
Note: Some US states with smaller populations than those listed here experienced high rates of death from Covid-19. For comparison, we note six other states (with deaths from Covid-19 in parentheses) as of June 30 2020: New Jersey (14,975), Massachusetts (8054), Illinois (6923), Pennsylvania (6649), Michigan (6120), and Connecticut (4316). Sourced from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.
typically focus on the narrative of a specific governor, but we make comparisons across
the governors where that adds further insights. As we examined the four state cases, we
also found another practice that we had not expected, based on the literature on policy
narratives and crisis management. That is, all the governors were manifestly needing to
manage multiple agendas, while still seeking to align the actions of the broader com-
community with the measures needed to halt the spread of the virus. We anticipate that
managing multiple agendas is a common challenge for political leaders. Therefore, we
have also highlighted that narrative challenge, and analyzed how the governors man-
aged it as they responded to Covid-19.

4.1. Providing persuasive accounts of what is happening, why it is happening,
and what can be done about it

California’s Governor Gavin Newsom (a Democrat) led an early response to the
Covid-19 crisis that earned him praise. Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National
Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stated Newsom had been “ahead of the
curve” during the crisis.3 Newsom received generally favorable media coverage, and
President Donald J. Trump called Newsom’s response “terrific.”4 Governor Newsom’s
account of the crisis was persuasive because of his ability to define and engage with his
audience of Californians, as he implemented policies that effectively aligned with his
narrative. For instance, having emphasized the seriousness of the situation in his press
conferences, Newsom followed through by making California the first state to issue an
executive stay at home order on 19 March 2020.5 Further decisions and updates were
explained to Californians through frequent and clear public messaging conveyed in
Newsom’s live press conferences, in social media, and in public awareness campaigns.
The challenge posed by Covid-19, was discussed within the context of the actions that
would be required to meet it. When announcing the temporary closure of beaches in
Orange County, Newsom noted that people were doing a great job, but they could do
even better. Shutting the beaches was a result of this gap and he reminded Californians
that, “my job as Governor is to keep you safe.”6 This familial style of praise presented
Californians as a capable unit with Newsom presiding as the quiet protector, ready to
step in if and when needed.

The central focus of Governor Newsom’s speeches was the virus itself, and more
specifically, the effect of the virus on Californians. Unlike other governors who were
vocal about the politics of the federal government or other states, Newsom tried to
maintain an apolitical air in a bid to minimize conflict within the state.7 When discus-
sing his decision to work with non-profits to make masks (instead of continuing to
fight for federal resources), Newsom referred to California as his “nation-state.” He
used this phrase in reference to California many times over the following months. This
rhetoric served to strengthen internal ties within California, while asserting their inde-
pendence and separating Californians and their response to the virus from what was
happening across the rest of the United States.8

Throughout the crisis Governor Newsom’s public image relied on honest communi-
cation and a flexible leadership style. In a statement indicative of this approach,
Newsom responded to a question about the decision to essentially shut down the state
by asserting, “I think we’ve been very fluid as you know… We’ve been adjusting to changing conditions… Quite honestly, on an hourly basis, not just a daily basis.” His willingness to seemingly engage in open dialog with his audience and admit to a certain amount of uncertainty did not undermine the persuasiveness of his account of the virus or his calls to action, as the message remained consistent in its focus on Californians working together to “save lives.” These points were reflected in his actions as he consistently worked with, and took guidance from, local officials – for instance, following the lead of the six Bay Area counties who enacted stay-at-home orders prior to Newsom implementing the state-wide order – and in his refusal to re-open California as other states began to re-open. Although Governor Newsom established an eclectic taskforce in mid-April to assist in producing a plan for business and jobs recovery, when he was asked several days later if California was planning to re-open, Newsom stated “we’re not seeing yet the significant decline that we need to see ultimately to toggle back. But we are committed to a process… working with 58 counties across the state to make sure that we do it together in a thoughtful and strategic way.” In the early months of 2020, the policies being implemented (or not implemented) and the planning process consistently aligned with Newsom’s narrative of working collectively to control the spread of the virus and mitigate its health repercussions.

As mentioned, meaning-making involves providing persuasive accounts of what is happening, why it is happening, and what can be done about it (‘t Hart and Tindall 2009). While a story in a literary sense can have twists and turns, in policy, like in a court of law, inconsistencies, whether between narrative and action, or between narratives across time, can create distrust and confusion. A persuasive account may signpost changes, but it does so without breaking from the broader narrative. Newsom’s combination of clear messaging and unified action saw California flatten the curve in the initial stages of the virus faster and more effectively than other states. The contrast with New York in the early months of 2020 was stark.

In comparison to Governor Newsom, the governors in our other state cases – New York, Texas, and Florida – all had inconsistencies in their messaging. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s daily speeches were engaging and popular. But his policies and actions, especially his reluctance to initially issue a stay at home order, undermined the effort to rapidly address the virus. On March 18 2020 Cuomo stated that he, “wouldn’t approve shelter in place. That scares people, right?… The fear, the panic, is a bigger problem than the virus.” His subsequent readiness to reopen New York when the state had over 200,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 was again jarring when placed alongside Cuomo’s core message of working together to save lives. As we explore in detail below, the Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, frequently made statements that contradicted the reality of the case numbers and deaths within the state, and the Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, fluctuated between telling Texans to stick together and listen to guidelines – making statement such as “I ask that communities across the state continue to heed the guidance of local, state, and federal health officials” — and then undermining his own orders to support the reopening of businesses. In the early stages of the virus, none of these three governors provided consistent accounts of what was happening, why it was happening, and what could be done about it in ways that reflected changing conditions on the ground.
4.2. Creating a broad coalition of support for policy actions to be taken, and minimizing opportunities for conflict

During the first six months of 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (a Democrat) remained at the center of the Covid-19 response in the United States. In the absence of clear messaging from President Trump, Governor Cuomo’s daily briefings enabled him to step into the role usually reserved for the White House and serve as a unifying and trusted voice for the nation. Where Governor Newsom’s target audience was Californians specifically (his own “nation-state”), Governor Cuomo’s appeared to be the whole of the United States, as he continually affirmed the virus was a nationwide issue, not something that affected only one type of person, or one state. Cuomo also appealed to other states not to think of New York City as an anomaly, but to see the city as “a test case,” warning them, “look at us today ... we are your future.”

To create a coalition of support that traversed state and ideological boundaries, Cuomo’s narrative needed to be broadly applicable and generally recognizable. Calling for unity is part of creating or maintaining an alliance between groups of people. A coalition must work together in order to achieve shared, or “unified” goals. To do this, Cuomo drew on several key themes in his public dealings, advising people to listen to facts and remain rational, while encouraging them to practice compassion. He also frequently appealed to his audience using the metaphor of war – an effective and familiar trope that conjures images of national unity and underscored the gravity of the situation. An example of this rhetoric is Cuomo’s declaration in an early interview that, “we are seeing the enemy on the horizon, and they are approaching very quickly, and we don’t have our defenses in place.” In such statements, he identified two enemies for his coalition to be aware of and confront during the crisis. The first was the virus as the attacker with whom they were at war, the second the lack of organization and preparedness on the part of the federal government, which had to be overcome.

After using an op-ed published in the *New York Times* to criticize the federal government’s lack of national coordination, Governor Cuomo took matters into his own hands and set up a regional approach in the Tri-State area (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut). Announcing this initiative, Cuomo confirmed, “this is not a war that can be won alone, which is why New York is partnering with our neighboring states.” In a similar vein, he responded to President Trump’s suggestion that New York state might need to be quarantined by declaring, “this would be a declaration of war on states.” Emphasizing unity over division, and focusing on the need for neighboring states to work together, Cuomo created a policy narrative that enabled him to gain mass support, while deflecting attention from the enormous body count in his own back yard. Closing the state borders and quarantining New York would certainly have saved many lives elsewhere in the United States.

4.3. Encouraging trust and cooperation among key actors and groups whose actions will be material to addressing the crisis

The literature on effective leadership and crisis management emphasizes the importance of trust and cooperation among key actors and groups who will be material to addressing a crisis. Early evidence on the coordination of the medical response to
Covid-19 is consistent with this emphasis on how key actors and groups work together (Birch, Lindeblad, and Eileen 2020). Governors Gavin Newsom in California and Andrew Cuomo in New York both displayed the ability to encourage trust and cooperation among key actors and groups. In contrast, Florida’s Governor Ron DeSantis (a Republican) appeared to have deliberately created a counter-narrative designed to undermine trust and discourage cooperation among Floridians. His approach seemed jarring because it was unexpected. The narrative style DeSantis adopted reminds us that narratives are constructed, as political leaders intentionally choose how they frame specific policies.

Throughout the crisis, DeSantis would purport a deference to the White House when criticized for his actions, or lack thereof. When questioned why he had not yet issued a stay-at-home-order when many other states had already done so, he stated, “the [federal] task force has not recommended that to me. If they do, you know, obviously, that would be something that would carry a lot of weight with me.”26 At the same time, he pointedly ignored specific advice and requests for action from within his own state, leaving it up to local authorities to implement more stringent measures on their own,27 and only enacting a 30-day state-wide stay-at-home order on April 1 2020 after weeks of criticism.28 A widely publicized result of this lack of action was the images emerging amid the crisis showing Florida beaches filled with spring-break partyygoers. DeSantis had not yet issued a stay-at-home order at that stage and was continuing to defend this decision even as the situation escalated, stating, “I just spoke to the U.S. surgeon general about it. Here’s the thing. They want you to social distance, of course. But they actually encourage people to get fresh air.”29

In contrast with other governors, like Governor Newsom and Governor Cuomo, who carefully crafted narratives of their states as communities, able to withstand anything so long as they stuck together, Governor DeSantis posited the idea that his citizens would inevitably become bored and would not be able to maintain too strict measures. Placing his lack of guidelines within this context, DeSantis stated, “you’re going to see some fatigue on this mitigation in 10 days, two weeks. I mean you can mark my words on that….”30 He went on to explain this was why they were implementing the (minimal) social distancing policies as they were – he wanted them to be “sustainable.” This portrayal of Floridians suggested that DeSantis believed they would be unable to sustain the behavioral changes that medical experts and other authorities within his own state believed were necessary to save lives. Later, when discussing reopening the state, DeSantis asserted, “we also are going to protect people’s civil liberties and constitutional and individual rights. There’ve been wide ranging and punitive orders issued in various regions of this country. People have rights. The government needs to protect health, but we should not go beyond what is necessary to do that.”31 Again we see a focus on the individual and a subtle undermining of any perception that citizens have responsibilities toward each other. Ultimately, the effect of such statements was to trivialize the seriousness of the situation and condone a lack of adherence to policies designed to keep people safe.

Governor DeSantis also justified his lack of coordination of state actions by projecting the view that things were generally under control in Florida. When delaying shutting down at the beginning of the crisis (Florida’s shut-down was effective April 1
2020) and subsequently rushing to re-open amongst growing numbers of cases (initial phase effective May 4 2020), DeSantis frequently referred to discrepancies between predicted numbers of cases and the actual, lower, infection rates, labeling the former as “doomsday predictions.” This sentiment was repeated throughout his reopening strategy as he attempted to shift popular will in his favor by making disparaging statements about expert opinions and figures that did not conform to his reopening plan. That plan, he claimed, would be “based on our observed experience, not based on hysteria. And it would acquire a sober analysis of data, not panic inducing clickbait headlines.” The divergence between his narrative and the reality of the situation was again displayed as DeSantis declared “victory” over coronavirus on May 20, asserting, “We’ve succeeded… and I think that people just don’t want to recognize it because it challenges their narrative.” At the same time, cases were reaching record numbers across the state. Overall, the policy narrative that DeSantis constructed identified over-reaction and over-regulation as the enemies, rather than the virus. The intention seemingly was to encourage the community to accept and support his inconsistent actions while downplaying his own responsibility to mitigate the health crisis. His above reference to “narrative” leaves us in no doubt of the sophisticated political calculation underpinning the statements and policy choices the governor made.

4.4. Enabling individuals and communities to make informed crisis response decisions within their respective domains of involvement

In comparison to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Texas Governor Greg Abbott (a Republican) came across as less dismissive of the crisis. Governor Abbott offered statements such as, “the Lone Star State will remain vigilant to protect the health and safety of all Texans,” and later called for President Trump to issue a major disaster declaration asserting, “Texas is all-in on our response to COVID-19.” However, while Governor Abbott made reference to the need for Texans to follow social distancing guidelines and cooperate to reduce the spread of the virus, he also promptly played down the health repercussions for Texans and made it clear that business and economic loss was the driving factor behind his (and his citizens’) decisions. In portraying the crisis, Abbott continually prioritized livelihoods over lives making statements such as, “economic damage has hit even more Americans than the coronavirus itself.” Statements such as this formed his narrative that it was businesses that had suffered most through the crisis and, by implication, it was the regeneration of business that would enable individuals, and by extension communities, to rebuild themselves.

Some governors worked hard to build a unified community response and enhance access to care and services at the state level. We saw this emphasis on community and state resources and support in the cases of California and New York. In California, Governor Newsom encouraged citizens to support each other through the crisis by checking in on one another through campaigns such as “Stay Home. Save Lives. Check In.” Newsom was also actively involved in securing public and private funds to bolster social services throughout the crisis, such as food programs, housing initiatives, and support for domestic violence victims and services. In New York, Governor Cuomo frequently called for Federal coordination and intervention and ended up
creating his own state-based coordination efforts to combat the virus at a higher level. In contrast, Governor Abbott’s early approach in Texas was to try to maintain a small government stance, stepping in when he, or his constituents, felt bureaucracy encroached too far on individual rights – even when this bureaucracy was of his own making. For instance, when a Texas woman was sentenced to seven days in jail after she violated state government orders to keep her business closed during the crisis, Governor Abbott responded saying, “we should not be taking these people and putting them behind bars, these people who have spent their life building up a business.” Abbott subsequently removed jail time as a punishment for failing to keep a business closed and the woman was freed. With his primary focus on Texans supporting themselves financially, in mid-April Abbott established the Strike Force to Open Texas with the advisory component consisting of four medical professionals and 39 business leaders. By privileging the right to reopen business, Governor Abbott provided Texans with information that seemingly confirmed that a rapid transition back to the status quo was necessary, appropriate, and possible.

4.5. Managing multiple agendas

The persuasiveness of a policy narrative and the effectiveness of crisis management strategies are often both constrained by the need to balance multiple agendas. Across the world, leaders have had to try to balance the health and economic repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis. Within our four state case studies, we observe various approaches to addressing these twin issues. In California, Governor Newsom’s focus in the early months of 2020 was on minimizing the health repercussions of Covid-19. His early shut-down of the state, and reluctance to follow other states as they re-opened, and his implementation of numerous social policies intended to mitigate the financial and social aspects of the crisis worked in tandem with this broader narrative focus. In New York, Governor Cuomo also emphasized protecting health and saving lives as the core moral in his policy narrative. When Cuomo first began to shutter businesses he affirmed, “you are past the point of monetizing these decisions.” However, as already noted, Governor Cuomo was initially reluctant to issue a stay-at-home order, giving equal weight to “fear of the panic” as he did to the potential repercussions of the virus itself, and was criticized as being slow to take action at the beginning of the crisis, especially when compared to California. Discrepancies between his claimed moral standpoint about “saving lives,” and his actions and moves toward reopening the state created a gap in his narrative, making it less convincing and the material effects uneven. In Florida, these narrative gaps were even more apparent. Governor DeSantis attempted to explain away bad public management. He relied on blaming other states for the health crisis, such as his comments about New Yorkers coming and “seeding [the virus] in other parts of the country, including the state of Florida,” and shifted responsibility for action by continually claiming to defer to the federal government to take the lead in managing the crisis.” DeSantis’s true agenda – to keep the state economy open at all costs – made statements of concern for the health of Floridians seem disingenuous – such as his assertion that “as we mitigate against the spread of COVID-19, the health, safety and well-being of Floridians comes first.” In Texas, Governor
Abbott moved the balance of policies and the moral of his narrative firmly toward economic recovery efforts, potentially at the expense of the health of citizens. Even as cases continued to rise in Texas, and Governor Abbott paused some of his re-opening strategy, his statements remained carefully pro-business. On June 25 2020 he announced, “The last thing we want to do as a state is go backwards and close down businesses…. The more that we all follow these guidelines, the safer our state will be and the more we can open up Texas for business.”

Policy narratives must be more than just convincing in and of themselves. They must also resonate with the actual experience of their intended audiences. Further, if policy narratives are to motivate appropriate responses to a public problem, they must be able to maintain their relevance in the face of new challenges, new evidence, and conflicting ideas that will inevitably emerge and potentially undermine them.

5. Discussion and lesson-drawing

While none of the cases presented here fit neatly with the ideal of effective leadership as defined by the literature on policymaking processes and crisis management, each of the four governors had their own, distinct policy narrative that they used to varying effect. Three key aspects of these narratives appear to have influenced policy success. These are: (1) the consistency of the message, (2) the crafting of the message for the local context, and (3) the aligning of talk with action. We discuss each of these aspects in turn.

5.1. A consistent message

A convincing explanation for why a policy, or set of policies, has been (or should be) implemented, requires an overarching message that is consistent and easily identifiable. In the case of the Covid-19 crisis, that message has most commonly been that certain policies are necessary to save lives. Without a consistent message to connect with, it is more difficult for people to understand why something is happening, and to see where they fit within the narrative and why they should comply. We saw Governor Abbott initially stating that Texans would need to work together to save lives. But then, without a corresponding change in situation, Abbott shifted his core message to saying the health impact of the crisis was not that bad and emphasizing the economic impact as the key issue that needed attention. This type of inconsistent messaging creates confusion. A persuasive narrative (and narrator) acknowledges early on that situations evolve, and behaviors and policies may need to evolve as well. This does not necessarily mean that messaging will appear contradictory as policies shift to meet the conditions. But, certainly, the potential is there for policies to seem contradictory and, hence, confusing. Being open about current gaps in knowledge and committing to a level of flexibility enables political leaders to act quickly to address new aspects of a crisis without breaking the trust of their audience or coming across as incompetent. As we showed above, California’s Governor Newsom was able to maintain the balance between remaining open to addressing new issues as they arose and changing policies accordingly, while using his narrative framing to contextualize those decisions as he guided
his audience through an often-unpredictable situation. From here, we derive Lesson 1: *A narrative that has a consistent, overarching message about how and why a policy or set of policies is being implemented enables people to understand why changes are occurring and determine how they – and their actions – fit into the broader scheme.*

5.2. Crafted for the local context

To prevent deaths and address the long-term social and economic repercussions of Covid-19, leaders have been required to convince fellow policymakers and citizens that drastic policy measures were necessary and appropriate. The disruption to everyone’s daily lives via state intervention does not readily fit within the liberal democratic ideology of the United States. Cultural narratives and worldviews also vary within and between the states, meaning an argument for certain policies may be readily accepted in one area, but immediately rejected in another. The implementation of restrictive social distancing policies in states like Texas and Florida clashed with their particularly strong social norms around the role of small government and individual freedoms.

The literature on effective leadership in a crisis suggests that this process can be smoother if an effort is made to listen to and empathize with people that are going to be affected by policy changes. This may involve tailoring the policy message so it fits within the appropriate cultural framework and using language and examples that are familiar to the target group. Instead of simply tailoring his message, empathizing with Texans who had to radically shift their thinking in order to comply with invasive lockdown policies, Governor Abbott shifted his own narrative from an early focus on saving lives to an aggressive reopening of the economy in order to appease key constituents. In Florida, although Governor DeSantis eventually implemented a lockdown, he never encouraged adherence to it. Indeed, he discouraged belief that the virus would seriously affect Floridians. Neither Governor Abbott nor Governor DeSantis engaged in convincing or culturally appropriate “meaning-making” when it came to their lockdown measures. It is hardly surprising, then, that their policies were generally rejected by their citizens and fellow state officials. From here, we derive Lesson 2: *To be effective, policies need to be accepted within the local context into which they are being implemented. The narrative around these policies needs to be recognizable and appeal to a variety of people.*

5.3. Aligning talk and action

No matter how compelling a narrative is and how engaging the delivery, if the policies that are implemented contradict that narrative, then trust and cooperation will wane. The intended audience will be unable to make sense of the situation or make appropriately considered decisions. Crafting neat stories that are not reflected in actual decision-making is not a sustainable approach to effective leadership. During the crisis, New York’s Governor Cuomo cemented his status as an excellent and engaging orator. However, his narrative regarding the moral imperative to save lives was undermined by delayed action and the implementation of policies that clearly served another purpose. This comes down to the need to manage multiple agendas and relates back to
our first lesson about being able to be flexible within an overarching and consistent message. From here, we derive Lesson 3: The narrative that accompanies policy implementation must accurately explain the policy decision, while the moral elements of the narrative need to be reflected by the purpose and impact of the policy.

6. Conclusion

The spread of Covid-19 in the first six months of 2020 and the variety of government responses opened space for policy learning. Here, we have taken the crisis as an opportunity to explore the role that policy narratives played in shaping the relative effectiveness of responses. Our motivating question was: What common characteristics can be found in the policy narratives of political leaders who presided over effective government responses to Covid-19 in their respective jurisdictions? We illustrated the dynamics at play using evidence from the policy narratives and actions of the governors of the four largest states in the United States: California, Florida, New York, and Texas. We noted differences in state-level policy narratives and how they influenced policy development and implementation. From here, we derived three lessons. First, narratives that contain a consistent, overarching message about how and why a policy or set of policies is being implemented enable people to understand why changes are occurring and determine how they – and their actions – fit into the broader scheme. Second, to be effective, policies need to be accepted within the local context into which they are being implemented. The narrative around these policies needs to be recognizable and appeal to a variety of people. Third, the narrative that accompanies policy implementation must accurately explain the policy decision, while the moral elements of the narrative need to be reflected in the purpose and impact of the policies. We contend that these lessons, although they were derived from studying the response of four major public leaders to the Covid-19 crisis, are applicable in many policymaking contexts, and not just those where a crisis response is required.

Plenty of opportunities exist for further research on the subject of policy narratives and responses to Covid-19. We identified and analyzed variations in the narratives constructed by four US state governors and compared these to our expectations of effective narrative framing, but we did not examine how the public, the audience of these narratives, perceived them. We mentioned earlier that a core feature of policy narratives is how they can condition the thoughts and actions of broader populations. Therefore, this would be a useful extension of the study. Further, as a mainstay on news stations across the country in the early stages of the virus, New York’s Governor Cuomo held a national audience. It would be useful to examine public perceptions across such a broad audience, especially as Cuomo’s narrative attempted to bridge political divides. Further comparison could be drawn between the persuasiveness of Governor Cuomo and Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and other national voices that have been prominent in discussions of the pandemic. Much of analytical interest could also be revealed through examination of within-state narratives and points of convergence and difference between the narrative framing of governors and those of local authorities.
There are compelling reasons for policy designers everywhere to routinely integrate narrative development and control into their advising practices. Policy narratives do not necessarily have life and death impacts. But sometimes they do, as our cases here remind us. And, clearly, there is a lot of room for improvement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Please note, for the purposes of the following analysis, we assume the governor and the office of the governor are the same and that communications coming from the office of the governor are, indeed, communications approved by the governor to be viewed as his communications.

2. It happens that currently in all four of these states, the upper and lower houses of the legislature are controlled by representatives holding the same party affiliation as the governor. Differences in party control of the executive and the legislature would undoubtedly introduce more complexity to the challenge any governor faces when engaging in narrative framing. It would also add a layer of complexity and challenge for researchers seeking to identify and analyze dominant policy narratives (for a relevant discussion, see McBeth and Lybecker 2018).

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