The impact of dramatized communications on public support for lockdown measures

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The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic will long remain an extraordinary case for the social sciences, as it provides quasi-ideal conditions for the analysis of socio-political mechanisms in contexts of extreme crisis and disruption of the social order. It is in fact in these exceptional circumstances characterized by uncertainty, fear and the loss of traditional references that the impact of communications is potentially highest; but these contexts also enhance the possibility that reality directly experienced by citizens in their everyday life imposes itself regardless of communication efforts. Through a survey experiment conducted in 5 European counties at the end of the first lockdowns, we find that the governments' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic tended to be more accepted by voters of the parties in office, especially in the presence of a dramatized frame emphasizing possible human losses, both in terms of jobs and lives. In the context of a harsh health and economic reality, however, the impact of communication proved to be limited.

Introduction

In this research note, a specific aspect of public reactions to the pandemic is investigated, namely, the extent and conditions under which dramatized communications about the country's situation can trigger support for government measures aimed at countering the pandemic. With such conflicting values as freedom of movement, economic subsistence, and health/life at stake, each national government took, during the first months of uncertainty around the nature of the virus, a combination of measures – all revolving around the scope and extent of the imposed "lockdown" – which could have always been both more and less restrictive than it actually was.

The research question is whether dramatized communication frames that emphasize concrete (rather than abstract) negative consequences on peoples' lives of both too soft and too restrictive measures increase citizen perception that the measures taken by the national government (in five European countries) during the first months of the epidemic were, on the whole, right as they were. A more specific expectation is that this increase in support for the way the government has handled the epidemic will be greater, for the reasons that will be indicated in the theoretical section, among those citizens who voted, in the last general election, for a party with current government responsibilities.

We find mixed evidence in relation to the first question, as the hypothesized pattern is found in France and Italy, but is statistically non-significant in the UK and the Netherlands and absent in Germany. As for the voter-specific hypothesis, it appears clearly confirmed only in the French case, but with such a strong magnitude that possible interpretations will be discussed in the final section.

1. Theoretical framework

According to classical psychological theories (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), "loss frames" – those elements of the information environment that emphasize the negative consequences of a decision – should produce more risk-oriented attitudes than the opposite "gain frames". Psychological studies on framing effects, however, have been criticized for their weak external validity, that is, the lack of realism of communication situations in which only one frame is provided and no political or partisan label is associated with it (Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007; Barisione and Iyengar 2016).

In fact, we know that the potential for framing effects is diminished by two important conditions: (1) the presence of a counter-frame or counter-argument that balances the overall information framework for decision making; (2) indication of who (i.e. what kind of political/ideological actor) supports a given frame, as this generally leads respondents to align themselves with the position held by their preferred political side and reject the opposite one (as illustrated by theories of "partisan motivated reasoning": Bolsen et al. 2014, Bisgaard 2015).[1]

Furthermore, communication and journalism studies have long established that so-called "human interest stories" (MacGill Hughes 1937) attract much more attention from the general audience than public issues treated and framed in abstract terms. This also applies, more generally, to how news is framed, for example according to "thematic" or "episodic" frames (Iyengar 1994), which also translates into different degrees of emotional involvement of the receptors.

In our experiment, we take all of these elements into consideration and ask whether, in the presence of a dual frame on government management of lockdown measures, the shift from an abstract to a humanized loss frame has some effect on respondents, conditional on whether, in the previous general elections, they had voted for parties that are currently at government or in opposition. Indeed, we expect the emotional surplus triggered by the humanized frame (1) to increase average support for how the national government handled the first months of the Covid-19 epidemic, and (2) to do so in particular among voters of the parties in office.

In the first case (1), the underlying mechanism is to be found in an individual's greater propensity to rely on state institutions when the country faces dramatic threats (an extension of the "rally around the flag" effect that has been often observed in connection with presidential popularity); in the latter (2), a sort of classic "activation" effect, such as the one theorized by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) as the main consequence of election campaigns, should affect voters of the parties that were in office at that time; their political loyalty, in fact, typically begins to erode as a mere consequence of the fact that these parties are in office (and therefore make decisions that are necessarily divisive or do not meet voters' expectations).

2. Data and methods

An online experimental survey was conducted in five countries (Germany, UK, France, Italy and the Netherlands) at the end of July 2020 on 5.265 respondents selected within the online community of Demetra (www.demetra.com/en) on basis of quotas by gender, age, and geographic area. An additional filter was applied to the selection of respondents based on whether they voted in the last general election and revealed the party they had voted for. The statistical universe consisted, therefore, of the national electorate (i.e. actual party voters).

Since the Covid-19 questionnaire section included two parallel experiments on randomized subsamples, however, only 50% of the overall sample participated in this specific experiment.

The two types of randomized frames were operationalized in our experiment as follows:

Abstract loss frame
(Qa) «In your opinion, the measures taken by the government since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (1) Should have been more restrictive, even at the cost of damaging the economy; (2) Should have been less restrictive, even at the cost of increasing the spread of the virus; (3) All in all, they were right»

Human loss frame
(Qb) «In your opinion, the measures taken by the government since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (1) Should have been more restrictive, even at the cost of leaving more people out of work; (2) Should have been less restrictive, even at the cost of letting more people get sick or die; (3) All in all, they were right».

In the following analysis, we will focus on the percentage gap in each country between those who opted for response (3) (pro-government) versus the sum of responses (1) and (2) (anti-government).

3. Results

Figure 1 shows the size of the average treatment effect in each country. Only in Italy and, even more so, in France does government support for pandemic management increase significantly when respondents are presented with a humanized loss frame (as opposed to an abstract loss frame).
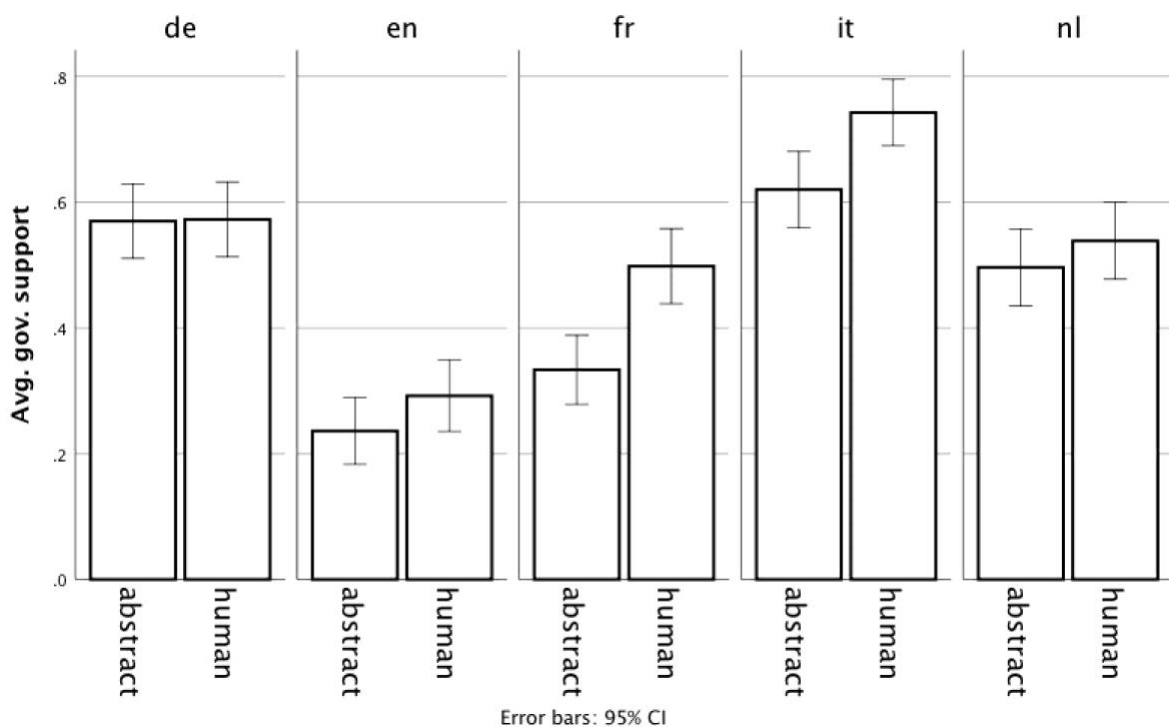

Error bars: 95% CI

Figure 1. Average support (on a 0-1 scale) for anti-Covid government measures in the first months of the epidemic, by country and type of framing ('abstract' vs. 'human' loss frame)

Of course, there is no easy explanation for the heterogeneity of this effect across countries. Indeed, we assume that each national public response is a function of several factors, such as the spread of the epidemic, the nature of the government response, the economic impact on the country, the time elapsed since the last general election, the more structured or volatile nature of national public opinions, and more. For example, the apparent total non-permeability of German voters to this type of framing effect may reflect a more structural feature of German public opinion, but no specific imputation of causality can be advanced here on the basis of these data alone.

Let us then investigate our second and more central question in this study, which addresses a more political type of conditionality to the impact of communication frames in a context of crisis. As shown in figure 2, government party voters always tend, as might be expected, to display greater support for government measures to tackle the pandemic. However, this tendency is not statistically significant in the Netherlands and, again, in Germany. But the key issue is whether the impact of a humanized loss frame is stronger on these voters. This would indicate a (partisan-motivated) activation of their support for the government's anti-Covid measures.
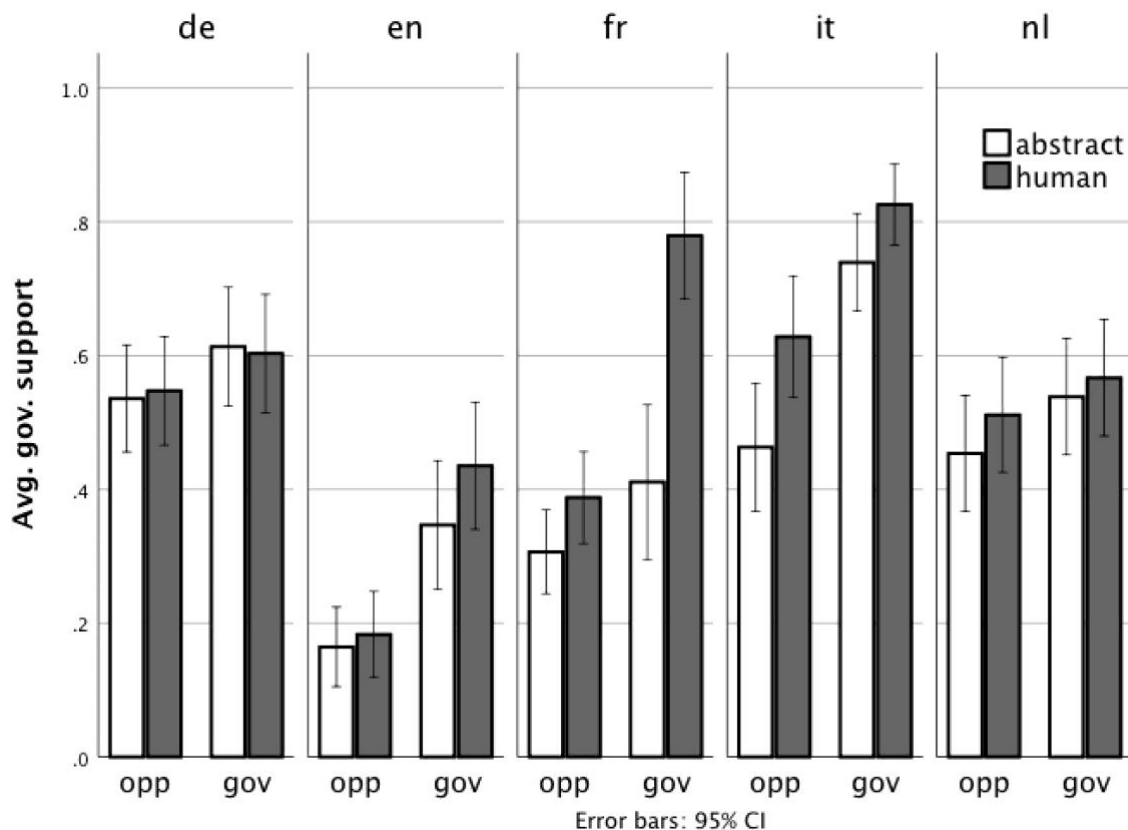

Figure 2. Average support (on a 0-1 scale) for anti-Covid government measures in the first months of the epidemic, by country, type of framing ('abstract' vs. 'human' loss frame) and vote choice in the last election (currently a government or opposition party).

Only in the French case does this hypothesis prove true, but in a rather spectacular way: among those who voted for Macron's *La République en Marche* in the last political elections (who here represent government party voters, along with a few voters of the centrist *Modem* party), support for government measures almost doubles as soon as the possible concrete consequences (in terms of people losing their jobs, getting sick or dying) of alternative – more or less restrictive – policies are evoked. While the emotional mechanism of activation of latent/eroded political loyalty appears clear, it is once again difficult to identify the specific causes of the French outcome.

A possible interpretation rests on the fact that the French government that handled the outbreak in the first months dissolved on July 3, 2020, i.e. 3-4 weeks before the survey was conducted. It is, therefore, possible that the retrospective judgment by Macron's voters of the previous government, which was generally quite negative (see results for the abstract loss frame), has become particularly susceptible to retrospective rehabilitation triggered by a humanized loss frame.

Another specificity of the French case could lie in the classic liberal ideological orientation of Macron's party, which may have made it particularly problematic for a portion of its voters to support illiberal measures, unless presented with a dramatized human-interest frame. The composition of the Dutch government, however, also included liberal (D66) and liberal-conservative (VDD) parties, which made the French case less distinctive in this respect.

Conclusion

Overall, the impact of these communicational frames in a context of acute social crisis appears limited, at least when a realist approach is adopted which includes strong counter-arguments (e.g. health vs. economy) and does not lose sight of the political conditionality of these effects.

The government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic tended to be more accepted by voters of parties in office, especially in the presence of a humanized loss frame that suspended skepticism and disappointment among voters of these parties.

In most of the 5 European countries considered, however, the effects were weak and did not reach statistical significance. Faced with a harsh reality, communication can make a difference, but only under particular conditions, the identification of which still poses a major challenge for the social sciences in the years to come.

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[1] For an interpretation of this mechanism more based on social identities and affective polarization, see Iyengar et al 2019.