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Charisma, ideology, and pragmatism: Unpacking leadership rhetoric in initial COVID-19 responses in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand

Charyzma, ideologia i pragmatyzm: analiza retoryki przywódczej w początkowych reakcjach na COVID-19 w Stanach Zjednoczonych, Wielkiej Brytanii i Nowej Zelandii

Abstract

Leadership rhetoric during crises is essential for fostering public compliance and trust. This study employs a rhetorical criticism approach to investigate the communication strategies of national leaders during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jacinda Ardern), utilizing the Charismatic, Ideological, and Pragmatic (CIP) leadership framework. Through a detailed analysis of speeches, it uncovers how each leader addresses the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, indicating that a mixed approach, exemplified by Ardern, is efficient in navigating complex crises, highlighting the significance of adaptable and context-sensitive communication strategies. This study contributes to the field of rhetorical criticism by offering insights into the effectiveness of diverse appeals during global challenges, underscoring the importance of flexibility. The analysis provides valuable perspectives for policymakers, communicators, and scholars.

Retoryka przywództwa w czasach kryzysu ma zasadnicze znaczenie dla budowania wspólnoty i zaufania społecznego. W badaniu zastosowano podejście krytyki retorycznej, aby zanalizować strategie komunikacyjne przywódców w początkowej fazie pandemii COVID-19 w Stanach Zjednoczonych, Wielkiej Brytanii i Nowej Zelandii (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson i Jacinda Ardern), wykorzystując ramy teorii przywództwa charyzmatycznego, ideologicznego i pragmatycznego (CIP). Szczegółowa analiza przemówień wskazuje, w jaki sposób każdy przywódca radzi sobie z wyjątkowymi wyzwaniami stawianymi przez pandemię, dowodząc, że mieszane podejście Ardern jest skuteczne w złożonych kryzysach i podkreślając znaczenie elastycznych i wrażliwych na kontekst strategii komunikacyjnych. Niniejsze badanie przyczynia się do rozwijania krytyki retorycznej poprzez wgląd w skuteczność różnych technik w czasie globalnych wyzwań. Analiza dostarcza cennych perspektyw dla decydentów, komunikatorów i naukowców.

Key words

COVID-19; rhetorical analysis; charismatic leadership; ideological leadership; pragmatic leadership
COVID-19, analiza retoryczna, przywództwo charyzmatyczne, przywództwo ideologiczne, przywództwo pragmatyczne

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Charisma, ideology, and pragmatism: Unpacking leadership rhetoric in initial COVID-19 responses in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand

1. Introduction

Effective communication strategies are crucial during a crisis, as they can either facilitate or hinder the implementation of vital policy measures (Bavel et al. 2020, 462; Spector 2020, 306). Clear communication that encourages collective action can increase compliance with public health measures and bolster public trust in government. In contrast, poor communication can cause confusion and undermine public confidence in institutions, hampering effective policy implementation (Wodak 2021). This study aims to explore the communication styles of national leaders in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and New Zealand during the initial stage of a health crisis. By analyzing their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Mumford's Charismatic, Ideological, Pragmatic (CIP) leadership model, we provide a framework for understanding how leaders can adapt their communication strategies to address the unique challenges posed by crises. As this study focuses on a single speech per leader, we do not claim it provides a complete account of their pandemic leadership. Instead, three inaugural addresses, delivered at critical moments of national urgency, offer valuable insights into each leader's initial communicative approach developed under pressure.

The paper is structured as follows: First, the relevant literature presenting leadership communication during crises is reviewed, tracing the evolution of

research and highlighting significant milestones and shifts in this field. Next, the theoretical framework is outlined, focusing on the CIP leadership model and its relevance to the study. The methodology section details the selection of case studies, data collection, and analytic approaches, followed by the findings from the rhetorical analysis of the leaders' communication, examining the character and appeal of each style. Finally, the CIP model is used to interpret the findings, and the paper suggests implications for future research and practice in crisis leadership communication.

2. Leadership speeches in crisis: a theoretical framework

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a multitude of global challenges, impacting public health, economic stability, and social cohesion on an unprecedented scale (Allain-Dupré et al. 2020). Navigating this complex crisis compelled leaders across the globe to make critical decisions, convey complex information, and foster public confidence amid intense pressure on health systems and economies (Häyry 2021). The rapid and profound effects of the pandemic underscored the vulnerabilities inherent within our interconnected, yet fragmented, global society (Garcia Sauco 2020) and highlighted the essential role of efficient leadership in crisis management. As Lloyd Bitzer (1968) has theorized, rhetorical discourse emerges in response to a specific exigence, constrained by the audience, and the situation. The pandemic represented a moment of intense exigence, demanding timely rhetorical responses from national leaders navigating uncertainty and urgency. Their speeches can therefore be understood as situated rhetorical acts, shaped by crisis conditions as well as by institutional expectations and cultural contexts.

In the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, many leaders prioritized crisis management that encompassed not only strategic decision-making but also the management of media narratives, effective communication with diverse audiences, and the implementation of rapid measures (Coman et al. 2021; Kahn 2020; Lakoff 2014). Through rhetorical strategies, they framed threats and cultivated a shared social identity, utilizing language to engender solidarity and establish common values (Edelman 1977; Hart 1993; Lorenzetti 2018; Van Dijk 2008). During different phases of the pandemic, different types of rhetorical responses were needed (Ihlen et al. 2024).

Leadership, whether during a crisis or under normal circumstances, is fundamentally rhetorical, relying on Aristotle's framework of rhetorical appeals: the persuasive use of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (reasoning) to achieve desired outcomes (McAdon 2007). Charismatic leadership

resonates with ethos by cultivating trust and moral authority; ideological leadership draws on pathos, evoking shared values, and emotional solidarity; and pragmatic leadership aligns with logos, emphasizing logical reasoning, and practical solutions. Leaders can seek to establish trust through ethos by demonstrating competence, empathy, and moral integrity, while pathos can enable them to connect with the emotional states of their audiences. In the context of COVID-19, logos became crucial as leaders navigated data-driven communication, balancing scientific evidence with accessible messaging (Jørgensen et al. 2021). These rhetorical principles lay the foundation for understanding how leadership communication influences public attitudes and behaviors during crises.

To further explore the dynamics of crisis leadership, Mumford's CIP leadership model—comprising Charismatic, Ideological, and Pragmatic leadership styles—offers a framework for examining how leaders respond to complex challenges. This model posits that leaders may adopt one or a combination of these styles depending on contextual demands (Mumford et al. 2008). Research by Hunter et al. (2011) further supports this, demonstrating that leaders who employ a mix of these styles are more successful in crisis management due to their ability to adapt their communication strategies to the needs of their audience. Additionally, Bedell-Avers et al. (2009) found that the integration of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic elements in leadership rhetoric enhances leaders' ability to inspire and mobilize their followers during times of crisis. This aligns with the CIP model's assertion that effective crisis communication requires flexibility and adaptability, as leaders can address both the emotional and rational aspects of their audience, fostering a more comprehensive and resilient response to crises. While the core features of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership remain consistent across contexts, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the rhetorical visibility of these styles. Under conditions of heightened uncertainty, charismatic appeals to emotional unity were often magnified, ideological framing became more explicitly value-driven and polarizing or solidarizing, and pragmatic rhetoric emphasized scientific legitimacy and operational transparency more than in typical political discourse (Grint 2020). By analyzing these styles through the lens of rhetorical principles, we gain deeper insights into the strategies leaders employed across varying political and cultural contexts to identify effective leadership responses.

The CIP model provides a framework for understanding leadership styles in crisis contexts by classifying leaders based on their rhetorical approaches. Charismatic leaders, according to Mumford (2006), inspire hope and mobilize broad support through a future-oriented, positive vision that seeks to unify followers under a shared goal. This style is often marked by emotional engagement (pathos), optimism,

and coalition-building, focusing on the inclusive establishment of a collective identity and shared norms (Griffith et al. 2015; Lovelace et al. 2019). Charismatic leaders use broad, visionary goals to invite resilience among followers, often breaking from traditional approaches to propose bold, sometimes controversial solutions (Conger and Kanungo 1998).

Ideological leaders, on the other hand, ground their rhetoric in core values, emphasizing the importance of adhering to certain beliefs to navigate crises. These leaders appeal to their followers' sense of duty and shared ideology (ethos), often using emotionally charged language (pathos) to reinforce their perspective (Banks et al. 2017). Scholars show that ideological leaders tend to use negative emotions more frequently, contrasting sharply with the charisma-driven optimism characteristic of charismatic leaders. By aligning crisis responses with deeply rooted values, ideological leaders reinforce group identity and loyalty, which is particularly effective in high-stakes contexts (Hunter et al. 2011).

Pragmatic leaders diverge from the vision-based approaches of charismatic and ideological leaders by focusing on realistic, problem-solving rhetoric. Pragmatic leaders approach crises with a rational, methodical mindset (logos), prioritizing evidence-based strategies and adaptability in the face of changing circumstances. Unlike charismatic leaders, who often seek to inspire large groups, pragmatic leaders concentrate their influence on smaller, skilled groups capable of executing specific, delicate solutions (Griffith et al. 2018). They are more likely to rely on scientific data and factual clarity, often refraining from emotionally charged or idealistic language (Hunter and Lovelace 2020). In complex and protracted crises, pragmatic leaders are often seen as the most effective, although their methodical approach may be resource-intensive and slow to deliver immediate emotional reassurance (Crayne and Medeiros 2021).

The CIP model outlines three distinct rhetorical pathways leaders use to interpret and respond to events, applicable across diverse leadership communication contexts. It does not claim superiority for any single style or pathway; rather, each may be appropriate depending on context. Hunter and Lovelace (2022) suggest that leaders often employ multiple approaches but tend to favor one in practice. These styles are not fixed traits but adaptable strategies that enable leaders to address specific challenges. This flexibility makes CIP valuable in dynamic environments, providing insight into leadership approaches and evaluations. Its multidimensionality and empirical grounding address leadership complexity more comprehensively than many theories, enhancing its utility as a framework (Lovelace et al. 2019).

3. Material and analytic approach

The selection of the US, the UK, and New Zealand for this rhetorical analysis is based on the disparity between their preparedness for pandemics, as assessed by the Global Health Security Index (GHSI, 2019), and their actual performance during the pandemic. The US and the UK, ranked as the most prepared countries according to the GHS, faced significant challenges during the pandemic, including inconsistencies in public health messages and a loss of trust in leadership (Adam 2021). Conversely, New Zealand, ranked 35th on the GHSI, performed relatively well during the pandemic, with successful communication strategies playing a key role (Cousins 2020; McGuire et al. 2020). These countries, while similar in their democratic governance structures, exhibit distinct cultural, political, and social characteristics that likely influenced the communication style the leadership adopted during the pandemic. With their global influence and diverse populations, the US and the UK present scenarios in which leadership communication has varied implications on a larger scale. Conversely, New Zealand represents a smaller, more homogenous society, where the impact of leadership communication can be observed in a more contained, and possibly more uniform, context.

To facilitate this analysis, the study employs a structured approach to examining speeches from the national leaders. The selected speeches reflect significant moments during the initial response phase of the pandemic, following the World Health Organization's official declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Specifically, the speeches included were: the Oval Office Address delivered by President Donald Trump on March 11, 2020, which marked a shift from downplaying the virus to acknowledging its severity by announcing travel restrictions; UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's National Address on March 12, 2020, which represented a critical moment in the country's early strategic approach; and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's National Address on March 21, 2020, in which she announced the alert level system and initial response measures. The official transcripts of these speeches were obtained from the respective government websites of each country: (1) the United States White House official website, trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov, (2) the Government of the United Kingdom's official website, GOV.UK, (3) the New Zealand Government's official website, Beehive.govt.nz. By selecting the speeches that coincide with similar milestones, we can conduct a comparative analysis of how each leader communicated the critical aspects of pandemic management, thereby reflecting their individual leadership styles and the respective national contexts. This focus on official communications ensures that the material analyzed is both authoritative and reflects the strategic intent behind the leaders' public messaging.

3.1 Analytic approach

The analytic framework employs rhetorical criticism guided by Mumford's CIP leadership model. This approach involves scrutinizing speeches and communications through the lens of the CIP model to identify the rhetorical strategies used by these leaders, drawing on the methodological principles outlined in Campbell and Burkholder's critiques of contemporary rhetoric (1997). The CIP model comprehensively categorizes leadership styles into three distinct types – charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic – each defined by unique approaches in emotional appeals, timeframe orientation, outcomes, causation, experience, and influence (Table 1).

Table 1: Analytic framework for the rhetorical criticism of selected speeches, adapted from the description of the differentiating factors of the CIP model of leadership (Mumford et al 2018)

Dimension	Question	Charismatic	Ideological	Pragmatic
Use of emotions	Does the leader's speech rely on emotional appeals? Which?	Positive appeals to inspire	Negative appeals to emphasize issues	Logical appeals for problem identification
Time-frame orientation	Is the leader's vision oriented towards the past, present, or future? Which?	Future-oriented, painting an attractive future	Past-oriented, emphasizing traditional values	Present-oriented, addressing current challenges
Nature and number of outcomes sought	What are the nature and scope of the goals set by the leader?	Forward-looking, future-oriented goals	Focus on returning to past successes	Present-focused, practical problem-solving
Locus of causation	How does the leader attribute success?	To people's efforts and ability to rally support	To situational circumstances	To the interaction of people and situations
Type of experience used	What types of examples does the leader use to illustrate their points?	Positive case examples for vision fulfilment	Negative case examples highlighting past failures	Combination of positive and negative case examples
Focus in model construction	What is the leader's focus in their approach?	Externally oriented, prioritizing broad vision	Internally oriented, adhering to values and beliefs	Balance of internal and external orientations
Targets of influence	Whom does the leader target to implement their vision?	Mass support	Target those who share similar beliefs, as essential to vision implementation	The elite, and individuals based on knowledge, skills, and abilities

Charismatic leadership, for instance, is marked by a focus on future orientation and positive emotional appeal, drawing primarily on pathos to inspire hope and optimism through forward-looking visions. Their rhetoric constructs a collective horizon of possibility, setting broad goals and attributing success to communal effort – mobilizing through affect and aspirational identification. In contrast, ideological leadership emphasizes the past and engages more explicitly with ethos, grounding its authority in shared moral convictions and historical continuity. These leaders invoke past triumphs or crises to legitimize present action, often through emotionally charged language that frames deviation as betrayal and loyalty as virtue – thus entwining pathos with ethical positioning. Pragmatic leadership, by comparison,

foregrounds logos, privileging diagnostic clarity, procedural rationality, and solution-oriented discourse. Here, persuasion rests on the credibility of expertise and the coherence of method, where authority is constructed less through identity or emotion than through demonstrable competence and responsiveness to real--time conditions.

The rhetorical analysis involved a detailed examination of the speeches by coding and an iterative process of identifying specific rhetorical strategies and language patterns that align with the characteristics of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership as defined by the CIP model. This approach not only provides insights into the rhetorical strategies of individual leaders but also facilitates analysis across various national contexts, thereby highlighting the impact of cultural, political, and social factors.

4. Background and rhetorical situation

In March 2020, the rapid global spread of COVID-19 prompted the World Health Organization to officially declare the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. This step created an urgent need for public communication to address escalating concerns, outline government actions, and prepare citizens for significant social and economic challenges (Ihlen et al. 2024). The speeches delivered by national leaders were essential in providing reassurance and guidance, as countries faced an unprecedented health crisis.

4.1 The pandemic situation in the United States

The COVID-19 situation in the US was escalating, with 1,267 confirmed cases amid limited and uncoordinated testing, obscuring the virus's true spread (CNN 2020). Major cities like Seattle and New York were emerging as hotspots, while healthcare systems prepared for a surge in patients. Although the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on the same day as Trump's speech, the federal response remained fragmented, with states beginning to act independently (Bergquist et al. 2020). Public health agencies had only just started urging social distancing, while political divisions shaped perceptions of the threat and the need for a unified response. At the same time, stock markets had fallen sharply, raising fears of long--term economic fallout.

4.2 The pandemic situation in the United Kingdom

The UK was in the early stages of COVID-19 spread, with around 600 confirmed cases (WHO 2020). As Europe tightened restrictions, the UK faced rising public anxiety over its comparatively lenient measures. Daily life continued largely as

normal, with schools and gatherings still permitted. The government, guided by scientific advisers, pursued a gradual, evidence-based approach emphasizing "herd immunity," which drew sharp criticism. Messaging focused on hygiene and self-isolation, though seen as modest next to Europe's lockdowns. The NHS was bracing for a surge in cases. Johnson's messaging was constrained by divided scientific advice, decentralized health systems, and growing public skepticism.

4.3 The pandemic situation in New Zealand

In contrast to the US and UK, New Zealand's geographic isolation initially delayed the virus's spread, resulting in few confirmed cases. Still, officials were acutely aware of the potential for rapid escalation, as cases surged globally. While schools and businesses remained open and daily life continued largely unchanged, authorities began preparing the public for stricter measures. The government were to announce a four-level alert system to provide a clear framework for potential future responses, should the pandemic worsen. Although only early steps had been implemented before the COVID-19 update was given, the cautious approach taken by the government aimed to prepare the country for more stringent measures if the virus spread further, while proactively conveying the seriousness of the situation. The government's communication was shaped by the constraint of preparing a low-infection country for drastic lockdowns, requiring persuasive rhetoric to overcome public complacency.

5. Analysis of leadership style in speeches

The communication strategies of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jacinda Ardern during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 reveal distinct rhetorical styles shaped by their political contexts and personal leadership characteristics. Donald Trump's rhetoric emphasized charisma through visionary and emotional appeals aimed at reassurance and optimism, though it often polarized audiences; according to Gallup polling from March 2020, approval of his handling of the crisis rose temporarily among Republicans but declined among independents and Democrats (Gallup 2020). Pragmatic elements, such as travel restrictions, surfaced but were framed reactively, while ideological messaging, centered on traditional American values, played a secondary role. Boris Johnson primarily adopted a pragmatic approach, emphasizing evidence--based reasoning and actionable steps to address the crisis, with occasional touches of his well-known charismatic style to foster unity and resilience. Jacinda Ardern effectively integrated pragmatism, charisma, and ideological rhetoric, delivering clear, structured guidance, fostering solidarity through inclusive language and

framing public health measures as collective ethical responsibilities rooted in New Zealand's national values. The application of the CIP model for each leader, supported by examples from their speeches, is highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2: CIP summary and examples from March 2020 speeches

Dimension	Trump (Charismatic)	Johnson (Pragmatic)	Ardern (Mixed styles)
Use of emotions	Positive: "this virus will not have a chance."	Logical appeals: "many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time"	Positive: "We know how to look after one another."
Time-frame orientation	Future: „Our future remains bright."	Present: "Stay home for seven days."	Dual: "Daily updates will guide us."
Nature and number of outcomes sought	Broad: "We will heal and emerge stronger."	Practical: "Delay the peak [of the virus] to aid our NHS."	Combined: "[we must take action] to slow COVID-19 into manageable waves."
Locus of causation	People: "Each has a role to play."	Interactive: "We need millions [of people] to help … the government will do all we can to help."	Combination: "[We must] support older New Zealanders. We are a country that is creative …"
Type of experience used	Visionary: "No nation is more prepared."	Factual: " this is not seasonal flu …"	Mixed: "Some countries managed this."
Focus in model construction	External: "[We are making an] aggressive effort to confront the virus."	Internal: "guided by science at all stages."	Combination: "[We are] announcing a COVID-19 alert system ... we need friends and family"
Targets of influence	Mass: "[We need to] unify as one nation and family."	Groups: "… mobilize millions to help."	Combined: "Be kind, unite against COVID-19."

5.1 Donald Trump: a charismatic leader

President Trump addressed the nation from the Oval Office – the core of American executive authority – underscoring the federal government's central role in the response. This form of communication typically signals a moment of national crisis or the implementation of a high-stakes decision. The speech heavily employs emotional appeals, particularly positive emotions to reassure the public and foster hope, describing the United States as uniquely equipped to overcome the pandemic. For example, he asserts, "The virus will not have a chance against us. No nation is more prepared or more resilient than the United States." By emphasizing the strength of the nation's economy, healthcare system, and institutions, Trump seeks to construct an image of resilience and capability, aiming to instill confidence in his audience. These boosting statements align with the charismatic tendency to use positive appeals tied to affirming examples of his administration's early measures, such as travel restrictions on China, as evidence of preparedness.

Another defining feature of Trump's rhetoric is its future-oriented vision, crucial to charismatic leadership. Throughout the address, he presents the pandemic as a temporary challenge that will ultimately be overcome through collective action and decisive leadership. Statements such as "Our future remains brighter than

anyone can imagine" seek to inspire optimism, despite the immediate threat. By emphasizing the long-term success of the nation, Trump seeks to direct his audience's attention away from present uncertainties and toward a vision of eventual recovery. This future-orientation not only helps establish a prescriptive mental model but also encourages the public to adopt a proactive and hopeful mindset.

Building on his vision, Trump emphasizes transcendent and positive goals to unify the nation. He speaks of healing, national solidarity, and shared responsibility, stating, "We are all in this together. We must put politics aside, stop the partisanship, and unify together as one nation and one family." Such language reinforces a collective identity, presenting the pandemic as a challenge that can be met through unity and mutual support. By focusing on broad, inspirational outcomes, Trump aims to mobilize the public's sense of purpose, which is a hallmark of charismatic leadership.

Another key element of Trump's rhetoric is his attribution of success to the American people. He stresses individual and collective agency, declaring, "Each of us has a role to play in defeating this virus." This focus on human effort parallels the charismatic leader's belief in people as essential to fulfilling a vision. In highlighting the government's securing $8.3 billion in emergency funding, Trump displays the strength of his leadership. This dual emphasis on collective effort and institutional support reinforces his message of shared responsibility and capability, ultimately intertwining personal agency with government action in the context of overcoming the pandemic.

Trump's use of case examples further illustrates his charismatic leadership style. He highlights positive actions, such as the implementation of early travel restrictions, to validate the administration and build public trust. For instance, he contrasts the efforts of the United States with those of the European Union, stating, "The European Union failed to take the same precautions ... as a result, a large number of new clusters in the United States were seeded by travelers from Europe." By framing the US response as swift and effective, Trump invites confidence in his leadership while reinforcing his optimistic vision. Trump's rhetoric primarily focuses on the internal demands of addressing the pandemic by calling for unity and shared action. He positions the virus as an external challenge that necessitates a decisive and collective response, describing it as "the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history." This framing aligns with the charismatic leader's external orientation, emphasizing the necessity of coordinated action to address systemic challenges.

Building upon this call for unity, Trump's appeal to the masses reflects the charismatic leader's reliance on having broad support to implement his vision. His repeated calls for national unity and focus on shared values aim to mobilize a wide

audience, reinforcing his message of collective resilience. His inclusive rhetoric, such as "Acting with compassion and love, we will heal the sick, care for those in need, and emerge from this challenge stronger and more unified than ever before," underscores the importance of solidarity in overcoming the crisis.

5.2 Boris Johnson: a pragmatic leader

The Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson, addressed the nation from Downing Street; he did so flanked by NHS symbols and scientific advisors, which served to convey a message of scientific credibility and unity and emphasize the government's collaborative, health-focused approach. He adopted a pragmatic approach with a focus on practical solutions and responsiveness to the evolving crisis. While Johnson is frequently classified as a charismatic leader, particularly due to his engaging public speaking and ability to rally support, his response to the pandemic illustrated a shift towards a blend of pragmatism and charismatic appeals.

Johnson's speech, in common with many of his COVID-related speeches and updates, prominently featured pragmatic rhetoric, emphasizing fact-based reasoning, rational appeals, and practical steps to address the crisis. His rhetoric relies heavily on logos appeals, a key feature of pragmatic leadership. For instance, he employs straight forward and rational language to underscore the seriousness of the situation, stating, "This is the worst public health crisis for a generation." By framing the pandemic as an unprecedented challenge, Johnson seeks to establish the necessity for a systematic and evidence-based response. In this context, he intentionally avoids emotional or overly optimistic rhetoric, instead prioritizing clarity and realism to build trust with the public. This pragmatic approach ensures his message resonates with an audience seeking reassurance through competence and rationality.

A hallmark of Johnson's speech is its present-oriented focus, concentrating on immediate measures and actionable steps to mitigate the spread of the virus. For example, he announces, "From tomorrow, if you have coronavirus symptoms ... you should stay at home for at least seven days." This emphasis on the here and now reflects the pragmatic leader's problem-oriented approach. By grounding his rhetoric in the present, Johnson sought to ensure his audience grasped the urgency of the situation and the need for their compliance.

In addition to prioritizing immediacy, Johnson's goals are practical and malleable, designed to adapt to evolving circumstances. He articulates achievable objectives, such as delaying the peak of the virus to reduce the strain on healthcare systems: "If we delay the peak even by a few weeks, then our NHS will be in a stronger state." This situational flexibility, coupled with a focus on minimizing

harm, demonstrates Johnson's pragmatic commitment to addressing immediate needs rather than presenting an overarching vision. His goals are narrowly tailored to the crisis at hand, aligning with the pragmatic leader's emphasis on situational challenges.

Finally, the locus of causation in Johnson's speech centers on situational factors rather than individual or collective efforts. He attributes the outcomes to systemic responses, such as the NHS's preparedness and the timing of interventions, stating, "The most important task will be to protect our elderly and most vulnerable people during the peak weeks when the NHS will be under the most pressure." This situational framing underscores his pragmatic perspective, which prioritizes external circumstances over internal or people-driven factors in achieving success.

To further illustrate his pragmatic approach, Johnson employs case examples that reinforce the urgency of the crisis. He draws attention to negative comparisons, remarking, "Some people compare it to seasonal flu. Alas, that is not right. Owing to the lack of immunity, this disease is more dangerous." By contrasting the pandemic with less severe scenarios, Johnson justifies the necessity of the government measures and prepares the public for potentially disruptive interventions. This reliance on negative case examples aligns with the pragmatic leader's tendency to focus on failures or risks to guide their decision-making.

Johnson's rhetorical model continues to build upon this framework by orienting his focus toward external demands, portraying the virus as a systemic threat that requires coordinated responses. He stresses the importance of government action in managing the crisis: "At all stages, we have been guided by the science, and we will do the right thing at the right time." This external demand orientation ensures that his audience understands the broader context of the pandemic and the rationale behind government decisions.

Finally, Johnson's speech targets specific groups that are essential to implementing his plan, reflecting his pragmatic leadership style. He emphasizes the importance of protecting vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, and mobilizing healthcare workers and community support systems: "We're going to need to mobilize millions of people to help and support each other." Unlike charismatic leaders, who often appeal to the masses, Johnson's targeted approach focuses on those whose actions are critical to the success of his strategy, such as health professionals and caregivers.

While pragmatism was a dominant theme in Johnson's speeches, he also incorporated charismatic elements to evoke emotional resonance and inspire confidence. His emotionally charged language and appeals for unity and resilience were designed to foster a sense of shared responsibility and collective action. He blended pragmatism with ideals and often shifted smoothly from practical measures

to inspirational messages, creating a cohesive narrative that addressed immediate realities while maintaining public morale. For instance, his pragmatic focus on "flattening the curve" through social distancing and lockdowns was coupled with an optimistic projection of a united society capable of overcoming adversity when he called "to mobilize millions of people to help and support each other." This dual focus allowed Johnson to tackle the immediate crisis with rational, evidence--based strategies, while also providing forward-looking aspirational ideals.

5.3 Jacinda Ardern: integrative charismatic, ideological and pragmatic leader

Ardern's speech blends pragmatism, charisma, and ideological framing. She started with a greeting in Māori, "Kia ora koutou katoa," establishing a connection with her audience through cultural respect and inclusivity. This appeal to emotion set a tone of solidarity and unity, demonstrating her recognition of the cultural diversity of her nation. Such emotional engagement evokes a sense of national identity, which is crucial during a crisis.

Building on this emotional foundation, a key feature of Ardern's speech is its pragmatism. She introduces New Zealand's four-level alert system, outlining actionable steps for each stage. This system is communicated with precision, ensuring that the public understands what is required of them as the situation evolves. For instance, when Ardern states, "We are now moving to Alert Level Four, which will impose a strict lockdown" she conveys the gravity of the situation while providing specific guidance. The logical step-by-step explanation of the alert levels establishes a clear framework for the public to follow, offering reassurance through clarity. As a result, this practical approach contributes to reducing confusion and anxiety by giving the public a sense of control in the face of uncertainty. Moreover, the detailed explanation of the alert levels appeals to logos, presenting the government's actions as rational and grounded in a structured response to the threat.

Another significant rhetorical strategy employed by Ardern is her combination of ethos and pathos. By establishing her credibility as a leader, and connecting emotionally with the public, she invites a sense of solidarity and collective responsibility during the crisis. Alongside her pragmatic approach, Ardern's speech is imbued with charismatic appeals that seek to motivate and inspire and she creates an emotional appeal through her repeated emphasis on kindness and unity. She urges New Zealanders to "be strong, be kind, and unite against COVID-19," framing the fight against the virus as a collective effort that transcends individual struggles. This use of inclusive, emotionally charged language invites a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. By positioning the crisis as a moral challenge that requires the cooperation of every citizen, Ardern seeks to transform the public health response into a national mission, where each person's contribution is vital.

Moreover, her charisma lies in her ability to inspire action through appeals to shared values, encouraging New Zealanders to see themselves as part of a "team of five million" working together for the common good. This theme of collective effort is reinforced by the ideological dimension of Ardern's speech, which underscores the importance of community. Throughout her address, she consistently appeals to New Zealanders' sense of identity, emphasizing the values of creativity, practicality, and community-minded spirit. Ardern reminds New Zealanders of their shared responsibility to look after each other, particularly the most vulnerable: "We need friends, family, and neighbors to support our older New Zealanders." Consequently, this ideological framing strengthens social cohesion and recasts public health measures into ethical imperatives. Ardern's rhetoric suggests that adherence to government guidelines is not just about following rules; it is also about fulfilling a moral obligation to protect others. This ideological appeal positions the government's response as part of a broader ethical framework that values community and collective welfare, encouraging compliance as a matter of social duty.

In addition to her emphasis on collective responsibility, another rhetorical strength of Ardern's speech is her ability to convey empathy while maintaining a pragmatic tone. She acknowledges the anxiety and uncertainty that many people feel, recognizing the disruption the pandemic causes to everyday life. Yet, she tempers this acknowledgment with reassurance, using a calm and empathetic tone to offer comfort: "I understand that all of this rapid change creates anxiety and uncertainty, especially when it means changing how we live." This balance of empathy and pragmatism enhances her ethos, presenting her as a leader who is not only competent and rational but also deeply concerned about the well-being of her citizens. Ultimately, her compassionate approach helps build trust, making it more likely that the public will follow her directives.

Ardern's empathetic tone and her use of inclusive language throughout the speech serve as a rhetorical device. By repeatedly using phrases like "we" and "us" she reinforces the idea that the fight against COVID-19 is a shared effort that requires participation from everyone. Her reference to New Zealand as a "team of five million" emphasizes the collective nature of the response, transforming every citizen into an essential player in the nation's success. This inclusive language invites a sense of unity and belonging, encouraging individuals to take ownership of their role in combating the pandemic. Additionally, it enhances pathos by appealing to the public's desire to be part of a larger, meaningful endeavour; this, in turn, motivates them to act in accordance with government guidelines. Although Ardern's speech was primarily pragmatic, focusing on systems, alert levels, and health measures, it also included charismatic elements through empathetic appeals and ideological language emphasizing unity and ethical responsibility.

5.4 Comparative narrative

When comparing Jacinda Ardern, Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump by their traits of charisma, ideology, and pragmatism (CIP), Ardern's communication was characterized by a high degree of pragmatism, charisma, and empathy, which she leveraged to foster a sense of unity and collective responsibility among New Zealanders. Her frequent use of inclusive language and metaphors, such as referring to the nation as a "team of five million," underscored a communal approach to the crisis, appealing to the public's sense of solidarity and shared sacrifice. This pathos-driven strategy not only galvanized public cooperation but also positioned public health measures as a moral imperative, reflecting New Zealand's strong sense of community and social cohesion.

In contrast to Ardern's empathetic approach, Boris Johnson's rhetorical style was marked by a pragmatic and urgent tone, emphasizing the need for immediate action and collective resilience. His use of war-like language, such as "lines of defense" and "deploy these at the right time," Johnson framed the pandemic as a strategic battle, with the British public and government working together to protect the NHS and save lives. The slogan "Stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives" (Johnson 2020) exemplified rhetorical simplicity and repetition, designed to reinforce the importance of following lockdown rules. This logos-driven approach, grounded in rational arguments and clear justifications, reflected the traditional British values of endurance and national solidarity, appealing to the public's sense of duty and resilience.

In the context of the United States, Donald Trump's speech was marked by assertiveness and nationalism, employing hyperbole and ethos to project an image of decisive governance. His rhetoric often intertwined celebrations of achievements with urgent warnings, framing the crisis through the lens of his administration's successes and the nation's capabilities. Phrases like "We are marshaling the full power of the federal government and the private sector" (Trump 2020) emphasized the unprecedented scale of the U.S. response, highlighting national strength. Furthermore, Trump's emphasis on economic recovery and national security, rather than solely on public health, reflected a priority of balancing economic stability with pandemic management. This approach resonated with his populist style, where themes of strength and American exceptionalism were prominent.

In contrast to Trump's assertive nationalism, the rhetorical strategies employed by Jacinda Ardern and Boris Johnson reveal how their distinct emphases shaped public responses to the pandemic. Ardern's empathetic appeals, Johnson's urgent calls to action, and Trump's assertive style not only reflect their personal leadership characteristics but also, we suggest, the national cultures they embody. Ardern's focus on inclusivity and collective responsibility resonated with New Zealand's

strong sense of community, whereas Johnson's appeals to duty and resilience tapped into traditional British values of endurance. Meanwhile, Trump's blend of confidence and urgency reinforced themes of strength and exceptionalism within his populist approach.

When analyzing key rhetorical moments, these distinctions become even more pronounced. Ardern's metaphorical use of the "team" encouraged unity and fostered a sense of belonging and collective effort. Similarly, Johnson's tricolon phrase, "Stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives," employed simplicity and repetition to create a memorable call to action, ensuring that the public grasped the importance of the lockdown. In contrast, Trump's hyperbolic statement about marshaling resources aimed to reinforce his ethos as a leader capable of commanding both the federal government and the private sector in a powerful response to the crisis.

In terms of thematic focus, each leader prioritized different aspects of the pandemic. Ardern emphasized collective responsibility and public health, focusing on government transparency and the moral obligation of citizens. Conversely, Johnson's speeches balanced public health with the need for resilience, while underscoring government preparedness and the public's role in protecting the NHS. Trump, however, concentrated more on national security and economic recovery, positioning his administration's actions as crucial to safeguarding both public health and the economy. Building on these thematic differences, each leader employed distinct rhetorical devices: Ardern heavily utilized pathos, crafting emotional appeals to connect with the public on a personal level; Johnson relied on rational arguments and clear justifications for his government's decisions, often referencing scientific advice and data to validate his strategy; Trump's speeches, though assertive, frequently invoked ethos – emphasising his administration's credibility and leadership – while also appealing to patriotism and national pride.

These results offer a snapshot of the rhetorical strategy under acute crisis pressure but cannot on their own support generalizations about each leader's sustained leadership style. The evidence presented here should thus be interpreted as indicative of immediate rhetorical positioning rather than a comprehensive typology.

6. Concluding discussion

In comparing Trump, Johnson, and Ardern's crisis communication styles we argue that leaders who dynamically incorporate a mix of charismatic, pragmatic, and ideological styles are better able to navigate complex health crises like COVID-19. This finding closely aligns with the CIP model's assertion that effective crisis communication demands flexibility and adaptability to meet

diverse audience needs. Specifically, while Trump's charismatic, populist approach resonated primarily with his supporters, and Johnson's pragmatism strictly conveyed scientific guidelines, Ardern's adaptable rhetoric exemplifies the CIP model's mixed-style approach, which we argue to be the most compelling and comprehensive. Her ability to balance all three styles and her rhetorical versatility supported both practical adherence to health guidelines and a unified national response.

Trump's communication during COVID-19, marked by confident, emotionally charged language that targeted his base leveraged populist rhetoric that emphasized national resilience and framed the crisis as a challenge the nation could overcome through strength and unity. However, this charisma often relied on exclusionary language that appealed to specific segments of the population rather than unifying the nation as a whole. Some scholars, such as Jin et al. (2016), argue that while charisma can effectively inspire, it must be inclusive to fully engage the public in a health crisis. Additionally, Trump's charisma, lacking pragmatic or ideological reinforcement, misses key elements that could have broadened his impact during the COVID-19 crisis. Charisma alone cannot replace guidance or ethical grounding required to sustain a complex public health response (Coombs 2014; Ulmer et al. 2018). Moreover, Trump's initial downplaying of the virus's severity and his delayed acknowledgment of the seriousness of the crisis may have reduced public compliance with safety protocols, as his followers received mixed signals regarding the pandemic's threat level (Biletska et al. 2023).

Boris Johnson's speech was notably pragmatic, focusing on clear, actionable guidance grounded in scientific data. His speeches emphasized the urgency of health protocols, outlined steps for public compliance, and reinforced the UK's reliance on scientific expertise. This approach, aligned with Mumford's (2006) literature on pragmatic leadership, provided clarity and structure, crucial for navigating the complex crisis. However, it lacked the charismatic or ideological elements that are often necessary to engage the public emotionally, limiting its ability to maintain morale and foster a sense of shared purpose (Seeger 2006). Johnson's reliance on scientific facts and expert-driven guidance, while effective in conveying clear directives such as "stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives," reflected his commitment to rational, problem-focused leadership. This aligns with the view that pragmatic leaders excel in addressing complex issues through evidence-based solutions (Lovelace et al. 2019). Yet, as research indicates, the absence of emotional resonance or visionary rhetoric can be a limitation during crises that demand both problem-solving and commitment (Hunter and Lovelace 2020).

By delegating responsibility to health experts, Johnson exemplified a pragmatic style (Griffith et al. 2015), which ensured a methodical response, but lacked the emotional depth or ideological vision that might have helped unite the public in a time of sustained anxiety. His reliance on science-based messaging appeared detached to some, hindering his ability to fully inspire public confidence. Reactions to his speech were cautiously attentive but increasingly critical as many felt that his calm and pragmatic approach did not match the urgency of the escalating COVID-19 crisis abroad (Honeycombe-Foster et al. 2023). Critics argued that the speech failed to galvanize the public and left many feeling unprepared for the severity of the pandemic (Alnatsha 2021). This highlights a potential shortcoming of pragmatic leadership: its focus on facts over fostering emotional engagement or a sense of collective resilience.

In contrast, Ardern's initial national address exemplifies the CIP model's integrated use of charisma, ideology, and pragmatism. Her empathetic appeals to unity and kindness, pragmatic directives, and ideological framing through national identity fostered a community-oriented response. This rhetorical strategy resonated strongly with the public; her acknowledgment of personal challenges during the lockdown demonstrated empathy, while clear directives provided direction and purpose. Additionally, her emphasis on collective responsibility and acting for the greater good further strengthened community solidarity (Wilson 2020). While based on a single speech, this case illustrates how the strategic interplay of emotional, ethical, and practical appeals – what Reynolds and Seeger (2005) identify as essential in health crisis communication – can enhance leadership credibility. The widespread international recognition of Ardern's rhetoric as a "master class" in crisis leadership further affirms its perceived effectiveness, highlighting her capacity to inspire trust, convey competence, and align public sentiment with national policy goals (Forrester 2020).

Ardern's approach, we claim, was a well-balanced, mixed style that contributed significantly to increasing both public compliance and trust in health crises by addressing the multifaceted needs of the audience. Her rhetorical flexibility – including appeals to collective responsibility and unified identity – and her clear guidance achieved a level of engagement that, we believe, the single-style approach of Trump and Johnson did not. Polls conducted shortly after the March 21 speech showed exceptionally high approval of her leadership, with more than 80% of New Zealanders expressing confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic (Manhire 2020). Media outlets such as *Stuff* and *The New Zealand Herald* highlighted her clarity and empathy. This adaptability supports the CIP model's emphasis on leaders treating rhetorical styles as situational functions, rather than as inherent traits, to match their communication to specific crisis

demands. Ardern's balance of pragmatic, ideological, and charismatic elements proves more inclusive and sustainable, establishing a model of adaptable crisis communication that future leaders could emulate (Hafner and Sun 2021; Liu and Fraustino 2014).

While Crayne and Medeiros (2021) argue that pragmatic leadership is best suited for managing COVID-19, particularly due to its structured reliance on expert advice and focus on situational complexity, we contend that Ardern's mixed rhetorical style offers a compelling alternative in certain contexts. Ardern's integration of charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic elements demonstrated adaptability to both the practical and emotional demands of a protracted health crisis. This blend enabled her to inspire public confidence, foster collective identity, and deliver clear, actionable guidance, showing that crisis communication is highly context dependent, which Wilson (2020) emphasizes as advantageous to foster a sense of collective identity among New Zealanders. This approach enhanced public engagement and compliance with health directives, demonstrating the power of creating a shared sense of purpose. Similarly, Voina and Stoica (2023), supports this view by highlighting her empathetic and decisive messaging, which inspired public confidence and unity. While Ardern's speech was primarily pragmatic, the blend set her apart from Johnson's more narrowly pragmatic and technocratic style, which lacked emotional resonance, and from Trump, who used a predominantly charismatic approach.

This study offers a snapshot of rhetorical tendencies at a critical inflection point, not a full portrait of each leader's communicative trajectory. Future research in the field of leader communication during crises may focus on refining and expanding the CIP model; to achieve this, researchers could investigate the impact of digital communication platforms on the CIP model. Understanding how different audience segments respond to charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic communication styles is also a critical area of exploration. In addition, examining the role of individual leader characteristics – such as gender, political ideology, and professional background – in shaping communication effectiveness within the CIP framework is crucial. While this study does not attempt to draw direct causal links between rhetorical style and crisis outcomes, future research should explore the relationship between rhetorical style and crisis outcomes to better understand this dynamic.

This study highlights the broader analytical value of the CIP framework, which breaks down rhetorical leadership into charisma, ideology, and pragmatism, enabling a deeper understanding of how leaders build legitimacy and public trust. The framework's applicability across various contexts emphasizes its ongoing relevance for both rhetorical criticism and practical leadership training. Future

research could further explore this by examining multiple speeches across different phases: onset, escalation, and recovery to assess rhetorical consistency or adaptation over time.

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