

Framing Covid-19: Constitutional Versus Demagogic Rhetoric in Presidential Messaging

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When Donald Trump was a candidate for president in 2016, his campaign rhetoric caused commentators to use a term they rarely applied to viable challengers for the country's highest office: "demagoguery." Unlike rhetoric studies, communication scholarship in general has not taken up demagoguery as a concept. "Populism" is used instead, with little attention to definitional distinctions. President Trump's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is an opportunity to propose a relationship between the two terms and develop a formal, operationalized approach to gauging demagoguery in a leader's communications. This article presents a content analysis study of Trump's speeches, statements, and social media posts to examine just how demagogic he was in the early months of the pandemic. The measure we developed shows promise. The findings are counterintuitive. Trump's demagoguery varies over time and between communication channels—his tweets versus his formal speeches in traditional venues.

Keywords: Donald Trump, demagoguery, populism, pandemic, Covid-19

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic to the United States in early 2020 brought about a national crisis. Cases of Covid-19, a highly contagious virus, escalated quickly. Local and state governments closed schools, limited businesses' operations, and announced stay-at-home orders. These measures stoked preexisting political-cultural divisions. While the majority of the country supported restrictions to fight the virus, a significant minority resented these steps, seeing them as hostile to individual liberties (Murray, 2020). They also felt that the economic costs made closure unjustifiable. Some denied that the disease was serious or felt that doing nothing would be the best course of action, since it would bring about "herd immunity." Although Americans have faced the spread of other viruses, such as HIV and SARS, this was the first in recent times that required collective sacrifices of such magnitude. It was a challenging time, exacerbated by confusion and shifting health and safety guidelines. At the same time, trust in institutions circulating public health information, from scientists to news media, declined. Naturally, many Americans looked to the president for guidance.

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When President Trump ran for reelection, his backers framed him as leading the nation through crisis. At the Republican National Convention in August 2020, his party highlighted his response to the virus as one of his successes. It aired a video that reran many of the president's quotes asserting that the World Health Organization (WHO) and China were at fault, while scientific experts made countless errors. Amid all this, the narrator proclaimed that the president "took decisive action to save lives" (Kenen, 2020, para. 5). The video cited Trump's travel bans to China and other countries as an example. Trump's supporters agreed with the president that the threat of the virus had been exaggerated as a conspiracy to hurt the U.S. economy and ruin his chances at reelection.

Over the course of the year, critics of the president rebuked him for stoking divisive xenophobia, issuing mixed messages about the seriousness of the virus, and prevaricating about the government's responsibilities. His tendency to personalize a global pandemic as some sort of secret scheme to undermine him politically alarmed many. Commentators characterized these rhetorical tactics as akin to demagoguery—a term that was reinvigorated in public discourse starting with Trump's candidacy for president (Mercieca, 2020). The increasing appearance of "demagoguery" in descriptions of Trump's political style raises several questions. First of all, is it a term that possesses scholarly utility, or is it irredeemably polemic? If it is viable as a concept for communication research, to what degree did Trump engage in demagoguery around Covid-19? Finally, did he express it more or less through social media channels as compared with traditional presidential venues, and what can we glean from any differences?

Literature Review

Presidents are expected to guide the nation during episodes of insecurity. The nature of their office gives them paramount influence shaping a national response and setting the terms of public opinion. They can exercise agenda-setting power and frame problems and solutions more efficaciously than just about any other single individual in the United States. This communicative power, however, incentivizes them to advance their policy aims by generating social and political pressure on Congress and other institutions. Through speeches, they try to break political deadlock or otherwise push measures in congruence with their preferences. That is the basis for the notion of the *rhetorical presidency* (Tulis, 1987, 2017). By contrast, the *constitutional presidency* builds and expresses consensus, working within the bounds of the governing institutions or law—a responsibility that might entail the politically difficult task of checking majoritarian urges and making compromises in negotiations. The president acting in this constitutional role conveys a unifying vision in service of good government.

What sorts of communication would characterize a *constitutional presidency* during an ordeal like Covid-19? A conventional head of state might respond to a public health emergency in several well-established ways that further what the constitution refers to as the "general welfare" of the population.² Gostin (2000) describes how the government has multiple tools to defend the public's health through law and policy. Adapting the baseline characteristics Gostin (2000) outlines, the constitutional president expresses a "population-based perspective of public health" (p. 2837) that clarifies the government's

² That said, it should be stated that the Constitution "imposes no affirmative obligations . . . to provide public health protection, including access to medical care" (Parmet, 1993, p. 274).

contribution to the people's well-being. Beyond funding programs or access to treatment, the government may further "the mission, core functions, and services" of the health-care system and assert "the power to coerce individuals, professionals, and businesses for the community's protection" (p. 2837), up to limitations inherent in the constitution, as adjudicated by the judicial branch. Along with such direct intervention, the government would also persuade the population through education campaigns to convey the best medical advice toward the prevention of harms. Although the president traditionally has the most communicative potency, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has evolved to institutionalize these functions and put them into practice through a range of regulatory powers assigned by Congress.

The *rhetorical presidency*, by contrast, is premised on popular appeals to generate public opinion that pressures legislators to defer to the president's preferences. Presidents since Woodrow Wilson have performed both the rhetorical and the constitutional roles to varying degrees over their tenure. Tulis (2017) stated that no president has been purely one or the other. What about President Trump? In the afterword to his book, Tulis (2017) predicted that Trump would go beyond modern boundaries of the rhetorical presidency to an unprecedented extent. He described Trump's rhetorical style, based on the president's early months in office, as exceptionally *demagogic* among U.S. presidents. Trump's extreme brand of rhetorical presidency, unlike that of his predecessors, was a generalized disposition rather than a "specific" instrument aimed at achieving a narrow policy objective (Tulis, 2017). He feared that Trump's demagoguery was so intense that it would degrade presidential discourse to its lowest point in American history (Tulis, 2017).

Demagoguery is a challenge to define for several reasons. Mercieca (2020) noted that the dictionary definitions of "demagogue" are complicated in that they include both the literal meaning, demagogue as "leader of the people," and the pejorative connotation, that a demagogue is "unprincipled" and an "agitator" who inflames popular prejudices and exploits ignorance. She clarified that the predominance of the second definition stems from the influence of philosophers who were skeptical about democracy (Mercieca, 2020). The first definition, and its classic usage, allowed the possibility of "heroic" demagogues who drew legitimacy from the people (Mercieca, 2020). Furthermore, demagoguery is difficult to define because it relies on few fixed principles; a demagogic speaker adjusts to whichever position brings him or her the most support, showing little regard for factual or logical consistency (Graber, 1976; Johannesen, 1978). It was seen at best as an aspiring leader's political pathology drawing on an assemblage of rhetorical tactics to gain power, rather than as a substantive, totalistic set of ideas.

Common identifiable traits pose it as a manner in which a political actor rhetorically relates to the public. Some have distinguished types of demagoguery. *Soft* demagoguery involves flattery and pandering to give the speaker the image of being a stand-in for the public's desires (Tulis, 1987). The demagogue in this case seeks to build a constituency by presenting his people as an authentic and pure force that he embodies. The *hard* version includes stoking us-versus-them divisions through oversimplified slogans, vilifying those who oppose the rhetor, and instigating anger toward those deemed enemies. Such a demagogue appeals to popular passions and fears to mobilize supporters; at the same time, he flaunts accountability by redirecting blame for problems elsewhere (Gilbert, 1955). Such rhetoric tends to dismiss legitimate opposition as traitorous and ruinous to the body politic. Demagogic rhetoric is principally aimed

at bettering the position of the speaker while casting criticism as driven by bad faith conspiracy. Such claims rest on "little concern for the truth" (Gustainis, 1990, p. 156).

Scholars of political communication have, for the most part, avoided demagoguery as a research concept. Demagoguery has not been mentioned in any *International Journal of Communication* articles; 35 of them, by contrast, refer to populism. This pattern holds for other journals in the field. "Populism" has more currency than "demagoguery" in communication research even though the etymological roots are similar. As Patapan (2019) notes, "Populist, from *populus*, or people, is a Latin version of the Greek demagogue" (p. 743). Yet, using them interchangeably abandons subtle, but important, conceptual differences.

Communication scholars avoid writing about demagoguery because it is "encrusted . . . with decades of casual use and rotten with imprecision" (Darsey, 2006, p. 470). It is loaded with the baggage of sounding inherently judgmental, thus limiting its analytical value (Goldzwig, 2006; Hogan & Tell, 2006). Rare is the defense of demagoguery or the positive description of someone described as a demagogue, giving it an overtly normative tenor. More often than not, it is used as a term of abuse, a pejorative directed against political rhetoric with which one disagrees (Roberts-Miller, 2005). Finally, as the various historical definitions and uses show, it contains multitudinous meanings. It is a messy term.

The decision by researchers to relate populism to American politicians at the expense of demagoguery is far from neutral. There is a theoretical, historical account for why "populism" has been ascendant in social science. The modern rendition of populism, Patapan argues, is demagoguery constrained by and channeled through state institutions, such as constitutionalism, the rule of law, and other built-in checks. Paradoxically, the very institutional constraints that contain the threat of demagoguery to regimes are related to innovations in ideologies and technologies of statecraft that empower the modern populist working within an established regime (Patapan, 2019). Modern governments are able to launder aspiring demagogues into statesmen, and give them legitimacy through the symbols and grammar of the state. To call a president a populist in the American context is to place him within a larger political phenomenon that, presumptively, the system can contain.

This insight should redeem "demagoguery" as a concept for U.S. political communication research. There is a historical basis after all. The framers of the American constitution were concerned about demagoguery's risk to democracy. *The Federalist*, Tulis (1987) notes, "begins and ends" with this concern because they saw it as a pathway to tyranny. Relaying concerns about demagoguery in the United States might seem obsolete in modern times: "We do not fear demagoguery today because the founders were so successful in institutionally proscribing some forms of it" (Tulis, 1987, p. 28). The design of a separated government was intended to preclude the possibilities of a demagogue capturing and redirecting the state. Thus, "populist" became the default descriptor for a politician in the United States who uses demagogic tools of rhetoric. Using "populism" internalizes and takes for granted institutional robustness, rather than accepting the possibility that demagogues could capture and reshape institutions. This is a largely unacknowledged assumption and ignores the historic concern with demagoguery among constitutional framers.

Our understanding of populism versus demagoguery is further informed by Berend's (2020) distinction. Although they are connected, populism refers to movements of people drawn together by shared, passionate resentments of enemies. Populism is a political phenomenon (Berend, 2020). Demagogues are those who act in positions of leaders to spawn, exploit, or stoke populist currents through the use of rhetoric and political acts. Leaders can use demagogic rhetoric without having a populist swelling to exploit, and there can be populist emergence without having identifiable demagogues giving populist movements expression in office. Merging this with Patapan's (2019) clarification gives us a productive basis for resuscitating "demagoguery" in communication research.

The pertinence of demagoguery became apparent as President Trump sought to diminish the institutional checks on his power. Countless observers writing in the press, seasoned political journalists and scholars alike, highlighted this facet of his rise to power and subsequent rule (Altschuler, 2020; Editorial Board, 2020; Ip, 2020; Wehle, 2020; Weiner & Kinsella, 2020). Without rehashing the contents of these pieces, just a few examples demonstrate the extent of Trump's strikes against the established separation of powers: issuing more executive orders than any president since Lyndon B. Johnson; breaking with custom to push through a Supreme Court justice nomination right before a presidential election; firing detractors from executive agencies, including (relatively) independent positions like the FBI director and attorney general. His consolidation of the Republican Party, which controlled the Senate and had the most appointees on the Supreme Court, is only part of the story. Still, it should be mentioned that constraints on executive power "have been eroding for decades" (Goldgeier & Saunders, 2018, para. 3). Legal scholars and political scientists have long written about the expanding administrative state and "presidential law-making" (Greene, 1994). Trump did not instigate the trend, but rather accelerated it to his advantage. It reached its pinnacle with Trump seeking to invalidate, and then delegitimize, the election results in the fall of 2020. These trends underscore the potential for demagogic emergence, especially in a crisis of similar proportion to the Covid-19 epidemic.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The first step to redeeming "demagoguery" from its *ad hominem* baggage is to clarify the scope. Following Lawler McDonough's (2018) advice, we examine the extent to which a particular rhetor expresses demagogic rhetoric; this is opposed to simply casting the rhetor as a demagogue (or not). Thus, we assess the frequency of Trump's demagogic messages in contrast to frames that are consistent with a constitutional presidency.

This study proposes that there are demagogic modes of framing. A frame is a countable "interpretive package" that reflects a unit of meaning (Gamson & Modgiliani, 1989). Texts, such as speeches, can contain a multitude of frames. Framing refers to how communicators strategically highlight aspects of a given reality while ignoring others in order to shape audience views and lead them toward particular conclusions (Entman, 1993). Frames are composed of identifiable language, "specific keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences" that are ordered to "provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). This study is an example of "emphasis" framing, which gauges how a speaker asserts "one set of considerations over another" (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016, p. 10) in public communications to move public opinion or incite

people to action. This is in contrast to equivalence framing, which involves the manipulation of logically equivalent information. Scholars of demagoguery, such as Berend (2020), have noted that framing is one tactic that demagogues call upon. They invent new frames to cast a given challenge as an enemy's plot that can only be defeated by directing loyalty to them (Berend, 2020).

This study extends research on Donald Trump's unique mode of political communication. In writing about Trump's rhetoric, several researchers have described his speech explicitly as demagogic (Knott, 2020; Lawler McDonough, 2018; Tulis, 2017). Mercieca (2020) found that Trump deployed classic strategies of demagoguery. Others have located Trump's demagoguery in his ongoing emphasis on his own victimhood at the hands of his enemies (Johnson, 2017; Skinnell, 2018). Others have described his rhetoric in ways that are consistent with demagoguery, but without using the term. Jamieson and Taussig (2017), for example, wrote that his prevailing "rhetorical signature" is characterized by hallmark traits like "seeming spontaneity laced with Manichean, evidence-flouting, accountability-dodging, and institution-disdaining claims" (p. 620). Trump's communication regarding the Covid-19 crisis was rife with examples of demagoguery, including vilification. For instance, his March 18, 2020, tweet stated, "We are at war with an invisible enemy" (Trump, 2020). Furthermore, Trump infamously sought to rebrand it as the "Chinese virus" (The White House, 2020, para. 3).

Therefore, we expect:

H1: Trump's framing around Covid-19 was predominantly demagogic as opposed to constitutional.

Through his social media accounts, the president enjoyed a direct communication line to millions of Americans. With more than 87 million followers on Twitter, Trump made increasing use of the platform over the course of his presidency. The period from January to June 2020, when Covid-19 reached the United States, was the period of Trump's most frequent tweeting during his presidency up to that point: a total of 986 posts or retweets. By contrast, his first, second, and third six-month periods as president only recorded 164, 243, and 441 tweets/retweets, respectively (Chinni, 2020). The informality, currency of outrage, and direct platform that Twitter affords would make it especially conducive to demagoguery, just as White House ceremonies and official public remarks lend themselves to formal presidential communication (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). Trump himself claimed, "It's so great that I have Twitter now, because I can knock the crap out of people. I have my own printing press now!" (Draper, 2018, para. 22). Although we expect his communications to be generally more demagogic than constitutional, we hypothesize that the difference is greater in his Twitter posting because of its more informal, spontaneous nature as compared with official White House communications:

H2: Trump's framing around Covid-19 was more demagogic in his tweets than in his speeches/statements.

This article further gauges whether the frequency of the president's frames via his Twitter account correlated with the levels in speeches and statements. What can this tell us? High correlation in frames between the formal and informal channels inherently suggests (a) a high degree of coordination in

communication efforts or (b) that Trump has a dominant style, such that increases and decreases in types of messages are shared across the two means of communication.

As for the possibility of coordination, news reporting offered insights on how his communication is managed. President Trump claimed, "Generally, I'll do my tweets myself" (Restuccia, Lippman, & Johnson, 2019, para. 29). However, he often deferred to Dan Scavino, a former golf caddy Trump befriended 25 years ago, who worked as Trump's senior adviser for digital strategy. Scavino was highly influential in Trump's social media communication, often composing tweets for his approval (Draper, 2018). A former White House staffer said that others can propose tweets to Scavino, who will reword them in Trump's voice before getting approval to publish (Restuccia et al., 2019). Still, Trump's social media use appeared to be more ad hoc and impulsive than in the formal statements and speeches for which speechwriters are utilized (Rogers, 2020). There has been little consistency in communication, however, with the rapid turnover of communications directors; there were five in Trump's first three years (Restuccia et al., 2019). These sorts of official functionaries would generally seek to enhance Trump's presidential image. Yet, Trump was known to tweet at odd hours, and his posts often included typos and grammatical errors, suggesting sole authorship. Given the lack of an established protocol for his social media use and the changing makeup of the sorts of professionalized communications handlers who would encourage a constitutional demeanor, it is likely that the *constitutional framing* of his formal speeches and tweets are not likely to be even moderately correlated or higher ($\rho > .5$).

H3a: There is no to low correlation ($\rho < .5$) for constitutional frames between Trump's tweets and speeches/statements.

Given the literature on Trump's rhetoric going back to his candidacy that is reviewed earlier, we test whether his core impulse would be toward a demagogic style. While his level of demagoguery in speeches/statements may not match tweets (H2), the increase/decrease in them week to week would be related if the narrative about presidential decorum tempering his instincts was accurate. If this is the case, our expectation is that:

H3b: There is a high correlation ($\rho > .5$) for demagogic-rhetorical frames between Trump's tweets and speeches/statements.

Method

We gathered *all* of President Trump's remarks (The White House, 2021) and tweets on Covid-19 over 13 weeks from January 29 to April 30, 2020 (Appendix A). Through inductive coding on a subset of the census population, we developed a codebook and refined it recursively as new codes emerged during analysis of the rest of the population; we went back to previously coded units to make sure the codebook was thoroughly applied.

Sentences about Covid-19 were coded if they fit into one of four framing categories, based on Entman's (1993) classic analysis on the topic: *definition of the problem* of this pandemic, claiming *causes* of the pandemic's spread in the United States, *moral judgments* of certain actors during the pandemic, and

solutions to the pandemic (excluding solutions to derivative problems such as the economy). The level of analysis was the phrase level, such that each sentence could contain multiple frames.

Organizing frames by the four categories mentioned helped us assess which ones were constitutional and which were demagogic. For the *definition* function, we found two sorts of frames: those that cast the virus as a technical or medical matter, and those that presented it in sociopolitical terms, as a foreign/Chinese virus or an enemy. We considered the former as reflective of a constitutional role because it was about the general welfare of the population, whereas the latter was demagogic because it was more rhetorical than informational. *Causes* were essentially about assigning fault for the origination or spread of the virus in the country. When fault was framed in such a way as to build consensus, such as suggesting that no one was at fault, it was deemed constitutional; demagogic frames suggested that others caused the spread, or denied presidential accountability. While causes center on fault for the spread, *moral responsibility* is about ascribing to particular actors a positive or negative tenor in assessing their role in the pandemic. The constitutional presidency would entail promoting goodwill by praising those contributing to the pandemic's containment, while the demagogic president scapegoats others, exaggerates their faults, and self-aggrandizes his own role. Finally, *potential solutions* are related to the definition of the problem. Constitutional presidency solutions are medical, in furtherance of the public health responsibility, whereas demagogic solutions are non- or quasi-remedies that fail to match expert guidance. The final codebook is summarized in Table 1. We interpreted half the frames as consistent with the constitutional role of advancing the general welfare, and the other half as demagogic.

Table 1. Codebook Showing Constitutional and Demagogic Frames.

CONSTITUTIONAL	DEMAGOGIC
Category A: Definition of the Problem	
<i>Medical/technical</i> Presents COVID-19 as a public health problem	<i>Sociopolitical issue</i> Presents COVID-19 as a social or political problem
Category B: Causes of the Pandemic	
<i>Nobody's fault</i> States that this pandemic is nobody's fault	<i>China/foreign</i> Blames China/foreigners for the virus and its spread in the United States
<i>Blames the virus</i> Attributes the pandemic to the nature of the virus, such as being exceptionally contagious.	<i>Disavows own fault</i> Denies or downplays own responsibility in particular.
	<i>Other domestic actors' fault</i> Blames previous administrations, media, or other domestic actors
Category C: Moral Judgments About the Pandemic	
<i>(+) China/foreign/the world</i> Praises China, foreign countries' or the world's response	<i>(-) China/foreign/the world</i> Criticizes China, foreign countries' or the world's response to the virus

<i>(+) Government responsibility for Americans</i> Assigns the U.S. government moral responsibility for Americans' well-being	<i>(+) U.S./Trump admin</i> Praises the U.S./Trump admin's response to the virus
<i>(+) Private sector</i> Hails the private sector's efforts to provide a solution to the virus	<i>(-) Governors</i> Blames governors for hindering the solution to the virus
<i>(+) Health-care workers</i> Champions the performance of U.S. health-care workers	<i>(-) Media</i> Depicts the media in a negative light or blames the media for making the situation worse
<i>(-) Situation</i> Discusses the issue of the virus as a difficult situation for the country	<i>(-) Democrats</i> Assigns blame to the Democrats
Category D: Potential Solutions	
<i>CDC guidelines/social distancing</i> Recommends CDC guidelines, such as limitations on social interactions or staying six feet apart	<i>Closing borders/international travel</i> Closing travel to/from China and elsewhere as a potential solution to the spread of the virus
<i>Developing a vaccine</i> Discusses scientifically legitimate vaccine research and therapies as a potential solution	<i>Pseudoscience</i> Promotes scientifically illegitimate therapies as a potential solution
<i>Increasing supplies</i> Calls for increasing medical supplies as a potential solution to the problem	<i>Doing nothing</i> Suggests that the best course of action is to do nothing
<i>Collaboration with states</i> Proposes that the federal government work with governors/other U.S. states to stop the spread of the virus	

Frame utterances were the study's units of analysis. On the whole, we analyzed all 88 statements published on the White House's website for this period, and all 246 Trump tweets on the pandemic. In these statements and tweets, 3,941 units of analysis were identified.

There were two coders: graduate student research assistants who have worked in collaboration with the authors on a range of projects. The first coder manually coded the entirety of the statements and the tweets. To measure intercoder reliability, a second coder using the same codebook independently coded 25% of the statements and all tweets that were already identified as being about Covid-19. Krippendorff's alpha coefficients were calculated as follows:

Statements: Category 1 (0.897), Category 2 (0.899), Category 3 (0.817), Category 4 (0.719)

Tweets: Category 1 (0.918), Category 2 (0.988), Category 3 (0.798), Category 4 (0.788)

In media and communication content analysis, coefficients above 0.70 are considered sufficient because they indicate a high level of agreement beyond mere chance (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002).

Findings

H1: Trump's framing around Covid-19 was predominantly demagogic, as opposed to constitutional.

The findings do not support H1. Across both tweet and speeches/statements, Trump's framing was more constitutional than demagogic: 2,224 to 1,717 frames, or 56 to 44%.³ Figure 1 shows the levels over time. While we assumed that President Trump largely employed demagogic rhetoric based on previous scholarship (Mercieca, 2020; Tulis, 2017), this finding suggests that his messaging is more mixed, with slightly more than half of the framing fitting into more traditional constitutional framing associated with presidential leadership during a national crisis.

H2: Trump's framing was more demagogic in his tweets than speeches/statements.

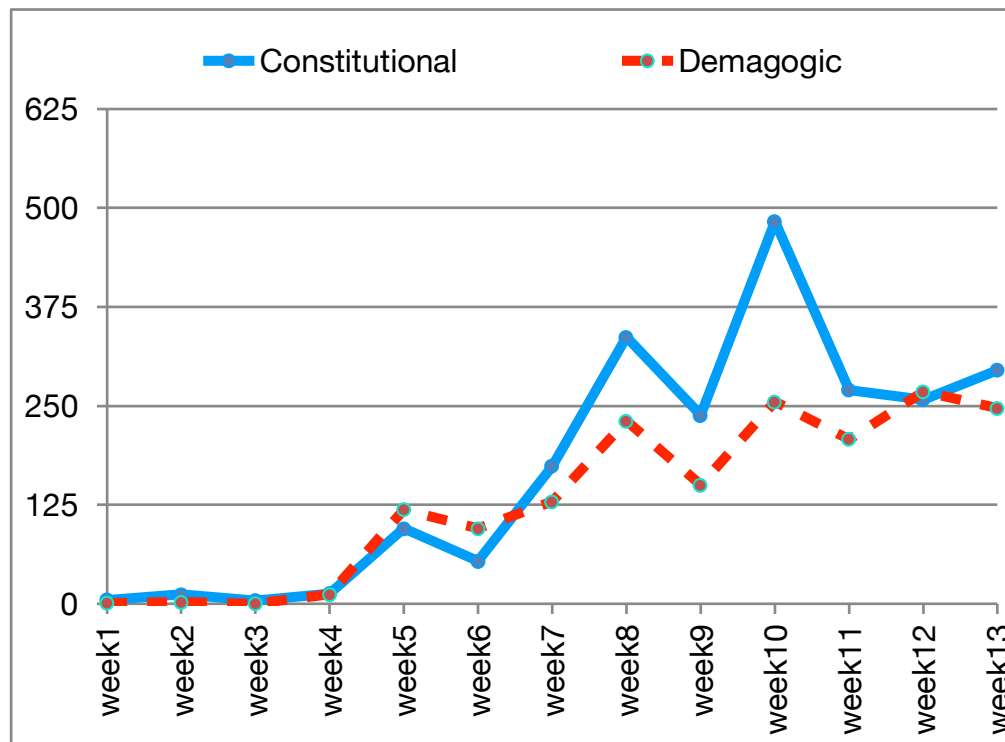


Figure 1. Trump's speeches/statements and tweets.

³ Because this study was based on a census of texts rather than a sample, there was no need for inferential statistics.

The findings somewhat affirm H2. When it came to official statements and question and answers settings, Trump was more likely to offer constitutional framing. The counts were 2,058 (57%) to 1,536 (43%) frames. On Twitter, there were slightly more demagogic frames: 181 (53%) to 166 (47%). This amounts to a difference of 10% in each type of framing through the two communication channels. Figures 2a and 2b show the absolute numbers over time through each platform. On Twitter, demagogic framing was more prevalent around half of the weeks measured, whereas that only occurred twice in speeches/statements.

H3a: There is no to low correlation ($\rho < .5$) for constitutional frames between Trump's tweets and speeches/statements.

H3b: There is a high correlation ($\rho > .5$) for demagogic-rhetorical frames between Trump's tweets and speeches/statements.

We partially accept these, but with serious caveats. We calculated the correlations between the tweets and public statements, the two channels of delivery, over 13 weeks. The numbers we correlated at first were weekly counts. For constitutional frames, $\rho = .4$ between tweets and public statements; however, demagogic frames correlated more robustly, at $\rho = .67$. Changes in the rates of his demagogic frames on Twitter and in speeches/statements matched to a higher degree. A visual analysis of Figures 2a and 2b shows that after Week 9, constitutional framing dropped in tweets while rising dramatically in formal messages. For Week 13, this framing shot up in tweets, but remained unchanged in formal statements. However, this is a small n correlation, so it is unreliable. We also calculated correlations for daily levels and two- and three-day clusters, and there were no significant correlations for either demagogic or constitutional frames.

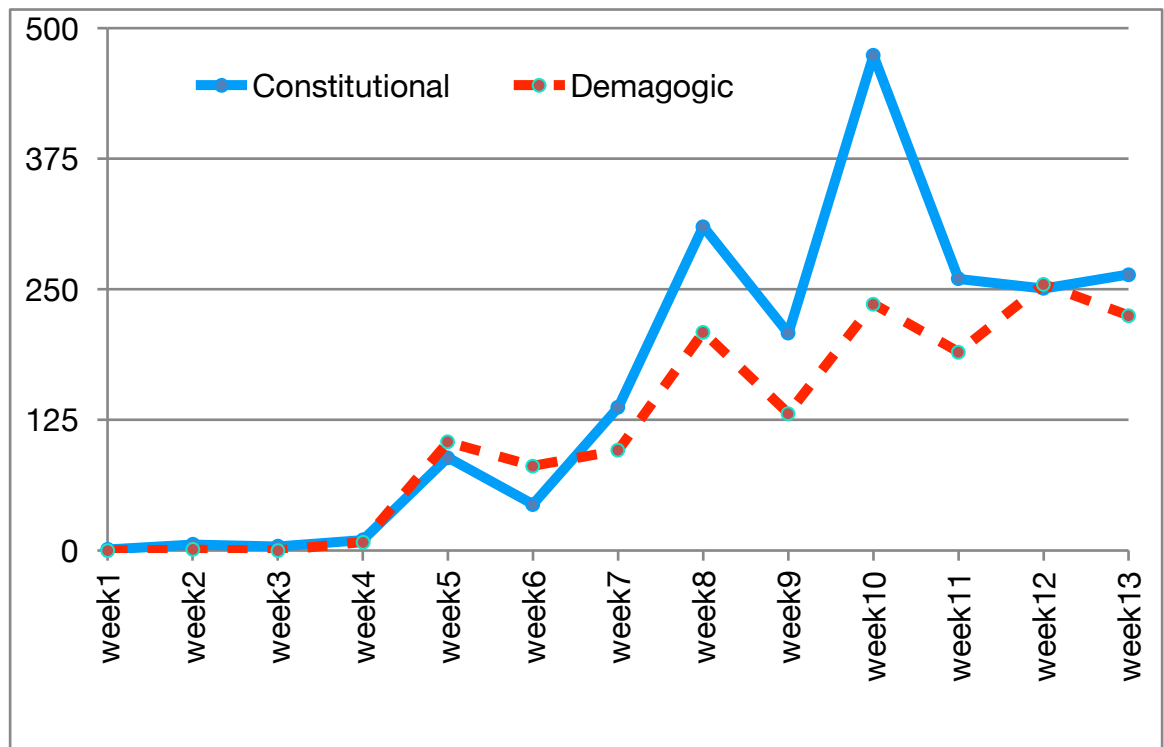


Figure 2a. Frames in Trump's speeches/statements.

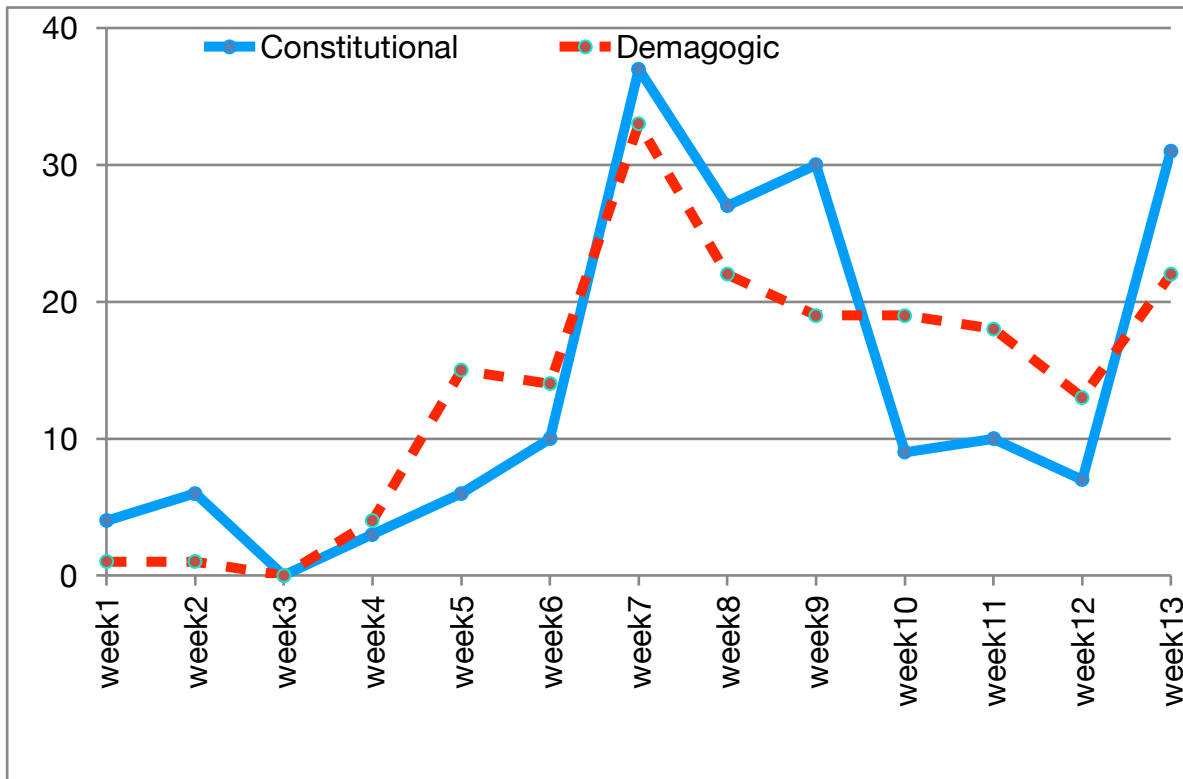


Figure 2b. Frames in Trump’s tweets.

Discussion

Our expectation that Trump was in aggregate more often demagogic when it came to Covid-19 did not bear out. From a purely frequentist perspective, Trump was somewhat more likely to express frames consistent with a constitutional presidency, advancing public health by giving information and making overtures to other authorities and allies. Still, the levels fluctuated over time; during three of the weeks, demagogic frames prevailed, while for a span of several weeks, constitutional communications were far more frequent. Notably, however, he espoused more demagogic than constitutional messages on Twitter.

This discussion is structured around several central points. First, these variations across time and between media forms illustrate shifts in Trump’s communicative approach. Second, even if demagoguery did not represent the majority of frames used, it still raises normative questions because significant levels of demagoguery threaten public trust and governance. This mix of messages sends conflicting signals about appropriate public behaviors and policy responses during a national crisis. Third, the findings justify the larger argument about the utility of “demagoguery” to political communication research.

Looking across time, Trump was more constitutional, relatively, in some of the weeks (Figure 1). Perhaps zooming in on his earliest responses tells us more about the nature of his presidency. During the

first weeks in which Trump routinely spoke about Covid-19, late February and early March, he was more often demagogic than constitutional across both tweets and statements/speeches. As one account related, President Trump's attention to the virus was heightened on February 26, 2020, as he returned from a visit to India. Anxiety about an impending pandemic started to reflect in the stock market. A precipitous drop led him to tweet, "Low Ratings Fake News . . . are doing everything possible to make the Caronavirus [sic] look as bad as possible, including panicking markets, if possible" (Dyer, 2020, para. 2). The tenor of these responses suggests that demagoguery is his core impulse.

Around March 11, 2020, when the WHO officially declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, Trump's tone shifted dramatically. Why did his framing become more constitutional during Weeks 7–10 of this study, between March 13 and April 5, as Figures 2a and 2b show? Looking at public opinion polls on Trump's favorability in handling Covid-19 over the same timeline offers one explanation (Appendix B). It is possible that Trump was encouraged by improvement in his ratings and felt presidential, or perhaps his administration nudged him to perform leadership at the start of the pandemic in the United States.

It is probable that the boost in support for the president was in response to larger events rather than any course of action he took. During the same time frame, many U.S. states and cities announced stay-at-home lockdowns as infection rates escalated rapidly.⁴ These actions indicated to the public that an emergency was afoot. There is a general tendency by the public to consolidate around political leadership during times of crisis. This was akin to a wartime rally-around-the-flag effect (Lee, 1977). Trump often analogized combating the virus to fighting an enemy (Benziman, 2020). One article found a similar public opinion boost across the board for governors and 11 leaders as cases and fatalities rose (Yam et al., 2020). One potential incentive for Trump assuming the style of a traditional leader was that the S&P 500 fell 30% between late February and late March. It could have motivated Trump to seek a confidence-building tone. However, public approval gains proved temporary. As Covid-19 cases and deaths rose precipitously, it became apparent that this virus was not going away soon. Public approval of his Covid-19 response dropped in early April. That was when the president escalated demagogic messaging, especially on Twitter.

The Covid-19 pandemic would seem to present an opportunity for demagoguery to flourish. Historically, it thrives in "periods of turmoil, division, and anxiety" (Gustainis, 1990, p. 157). Trump was unable to parlay the crisis to his political advantage, as an instrumental tactic would suggest, providing some support for Tulis's (2017) concern that Trump's presidency would be generally rhetorical and not contained as simply a legislative tactic. The result was a regulatory mess. Local and state governments had to act despite the president, rather than with his support. Trump came to be widely seen as mismanaging the health emergency (Abutaleb, Parker, Dawsey, & Rucker, 2020). This reached a sensational climax a month before the election, when the president and his wife were themselves infected with the virus. The president who had flouted the government's own guidelines was admitted to a hospital where he received experimental treatments (Weiland, Haberman, Mazzetti, & Karni, 2021). After his release, he played to cameras by dramatically removing his mask while standing on a White House balcony, as if to display his vitality.

⁴ For a list of stay-at-home orders per state, see Wu, Smith, Khurana, Siemaszko, and DeJesus-Banos (2020).

Social Media Demagoguery

Trump was more likely to express demagogic views through Twitter than formal through speeches and statements. Through Twitter, leaders communicate directly to audiences, both fans and detractors. It is likely that Trump's communication team assisted in preparing formal speeches during his White House Task Force daily briefings. As in other government institutions, many of the White House communication staff had professional training in communication and understood the importance of maintaining some semblance of ritualistic performance against the overwhelming color of Trump's personal style on social media. In addition, the traditional presidential venue, which was the site of the Coronavirus Task Force briefings, invites a sense of decorum that demands "presidentiality." He was more constitutional in rhetoric in moments he was more managed. This comports with what Patapan (2019) observed about institutionalism; liberal democracies have found ways to modulate demagoguery. A president taking to social media can more easily skirt some the regime's built-in controls.

Consequences?

The disproportionate spread of Covid-19 in the United States is, first, a policy disaster. What role did Trump's rhetoric play in shaping the government response? One of the more difficult questions facing any rhetorical analysis is gauging the linkage to public policy. Roberts-Miller (2005) admitted that she assumed that "policy depends upon rhetoric," even though that exact "relationship is unclear" (p. 472). Demagogic messaging from a head of state who worked to weaken institutional resistance, as with this case, risks moving the government in wayward directions, essentially incapacitating the machinery of the state. The incoherence of Trump's rhetoric asserting fundamentally contradictory frames mirrored federal and state governments' inconsistent policies around the pandemic. This worsened the problems of public confusion, rumors, and misinformation. The president's undermining of the top government expert on infectious diseases, Anthony Fauci—someone to whom a constitutional presidency would be more likely to give deference—exemplified this (Stolberg, Haberman, & Weiland, 2020). Similarly, in one revelatory leak, Trump political appointees in the Department of Health and Human Services censured CDC experts for contradicting the White House's political line (Sun, Abutaleb, & Bernstein, 2020). The normal course of institutionalism to contain demagoguery and channel it into mere populism appeared weakened by the extent of Trump's departure from modern precedent. Demagoguery has long been characterized by leaders who prioritize political standing over science.

Such demagogic rhetoric may have increased distrust of scientific authorities and spurred prejudice. Emerging survey research relates the Covid-19 epidemic to American distrust of the WHO and rising anti-Asian resentment. Bayram and Shields (2021) found that supporters of Trump were more likely to express skepticism of the WHO after the president blamed the organization. Dhanani and Franz's (2020) respondents who showed more trust toward Trump expressed less trust in science and expressed negativity toward Asians. Surveys do not gauge whether Trump's demagoguery had an impact beyond latent populist sentiments. However, some experimental research has identified an idiosyncratic Trump effect on the legitimacy of elections. In one multiwave survey experiment using Trump's tweets challenging the 2020 election's integrity, researchers found that respondents who supported Trump decreased their confidence in the vote after exposure to his messages; however, those who disapproved of Trump gained more trust in

the election (Clayton et al., 2021). Such studies reveal how demagoguery can be as polarizing in effect as in intention.⁵

This corrosion of trust speaks to the different structural impacts of demagoguery and populism that justify their conceptual distinction. It is necessary to understand the Covid-19 crisis in the context of Trump's assault on the institutional apparatuses that contain his authority, and his willingness to bypass custom, violate norms, and push legal limits, just as Tulis (2017) suggested. This question was at the heart of the anxiety around the 2020 election and whether Trump would concede gracefully; he did not. By raising doubts about electoral fairness, Trump sought to diminish the multilayered system that embeds presidential authority in popular sovereignty. When the mobs gathered outside the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and stormed Congress after hearing the president speak at the White House, it became apparent that Trump went beyond the bounds of the system. A demagogue would destabilize liberal democracy for his political benefit. He, more than any modern president, sought to sabotage the constitutional regime. The turmoil of the postelection months, from the unfounded claims of voter fraud to the riotous protests, revealed how a president could unleash the force of mobs through a sustained reliance on demagogic rhetoric (Mercieca, 2020).

Tulis (1987) remarked on the constitutional framers' vision of separation of powers as a means of curtailing demagoguery. They did not anticipate how Congress would delegate more authority to the executive branch or that political parties could arise to further diminish checks and balances; just as Republican lawmakers fell in line to enable Trump's impulsive acts, they weakened the legislative branch's ability to hold the executive responsible and to correct the course as the country's Covid-19 response proved to be in disarray. In the midst of a public health emergency, demagogic posturing—even at half—was costly. The Covid-19 pandemic threatened bare life; it is the sort of challenge that governments tend to take on as part of their pastoral care over the population. A lack of scientifically minded political leadership meant the state underperformed in its duty of care. That is why Trump could be seen as a "political determinant" of the virus's death count (Yamey & Gonsalves, 2020).

Trump's tenure exposed the fraught nature of the institutionalist presumption that demagoguery will always be checked. Even if institutions held up, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that a more effective and full-throttle demagogue who better exploits underlying populist tendencies in large swathes of the country may be able to will to power forces of de-democratization. Presuming institutional robustness by ignoring demagoguery or obfuscating it within safer terminology is not empirically accurate and reifies notions of American exceptionalism (presuming the country as a place where demagoguery does not apply). Political communication scholarship writ large must attend to the raw, pregovernmental sort of rhetoric Trump engaged in to self-aggrandize, deny science, and blame others to deflect responsibility. His political success will likely invite emulation.

⁵ Clayton and colleagues (2021) analyzed the tweets as "norm-violating," though they would have been coded as demagogic in this study.

Conclusion

Going back to the larger debates around the utility of “demagoguery” for research, this study is a step toward developing an approach to content analysis of demagogic rhetoric (Roberts-Miller, 2005). We inductively determined primary frames from a sample and then categorized them as either presidential or demagogic speech, drawing on both framing theory and studies of rhetoric. This is a playbook for further research on how leaders use communication to justify violating the boundaries of institutionalism. The research method was consistent with the standards of social science. It produced nonobvious results, despite criticism that “demagoguery” is too subjective, pejorative, and unverifiable to be used for scholarly inquiry. Although there were significant patterns of demagogic rhetoric in Trump’s statements and tweets on Covid-19, it was not the most common overall, in contrast with our expectations. That the measures produced analytically constructive variance across time and communication channels shows the promise of this conceptualization. Measuring demagoguery should be understood as a matter of degree.

Several limitations require noting. The first is that as a purely frequentist study of content, it cannot make claims on public opinion effects. Furthermore, counting does not take into consideration that some moments and remarks are more prominent—just as some speeches are more important than others, and some tweets are more widely shared than others. Each utterance is valued as equal to others. In addition, the coding scheme is based on a strategy of minimal interpretation, meaning that comments taken in a larger context might be arguably miscategorized. This presents two issues. First, we could not introduce an inherent distinction between demagoguery and populism into the coding scheme. The difference for our purposes was ultimately context-dependent: who is the speaker, a demagogic leader or a populist member of the public? Therefore, the method itself does not save us completely from the old demagoguery-populism quagmire. It can only be addressed definitionally. Second, some of the ambiguities in coding decisions are unaddressed. For example, talk of vaccine is, on its face, consistent with normal presidential communication, but what about when Trump overpromises a vaccine’s arrival? It is counted as constitutional in our parsimonious coding scheme. Similarly, we considered his claims that the virus is China’s fault to be demagogic on balance because he often used references to China disparagingly (“Chinavirus”), though at other times, he may have been descriptive about where the virus emerged. Limitations aside, the operationalization of demagoguery in this article could be used in research. Cross-national and historic comparisons around similar cases would be generative. Further research could also gauge the public opinion effects of such discourse.

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Appendix A. Dates of the Weeks for the Content Analysis.

Week	First Day of Week
1	January 29, 2020
2	February 5, 2020
3	February 12, 2020
4	February 19, 2020
5	February 26, 2020
6	March 4, 2020
7	March 11, 2020
8	March 18, 2020
9	March 25, 2020
10	April 1, 2020
11	April 8, 2020
12	April 15, 2020
13	April 22, 2020

Appendix B. Public Approval of President Trump's Handling of Covid-19.

Poll	Date	Sample	Approve	Disapprove	Spread
Reuters/Ipsos	3/2 - 3/3	1115 A	38	47	-9
CNN	3/4 - 3/7	1084 RV	42	48	-6
Quinnipiac	3/5 - 3/8	1261 RV	43	49	-6
The Hill/HarrisX	3/8 - 3/9	1001 RV	47	53	-6
Reuters/Ipsos	3/9 - 3/10	1113 A	39	49	-10
ABC News/Ipsos	3/11 - 3/12	502 A	43	54	-11
NBC News/Wall St. Jrnl	3/11 - 3/13	900 RV	45	51	-6
NPR/PBS/Marist	3/13 - 3/14	784 RV	45	49	-4
Gallup	3/13 - 3/22	1020 A	60	38	22
Axios-Harris	3/14 - 3/15	2050 A	51	49	2
Economist/YouGov	3/15 - 3/17	1129 RV	46	48	-2
Reuters/Ipsos	3/16 - 3/17	1115 A	47	44	3
Axios-Harris	3/17 - 3/18	2019 A	56	44	12
ABC News/Ipsos	3/18 - 3/19	512 A	55	43	12
Emerson	3/18 - 3/19	1100 RV	49	41	8
Reuters/Ipsos	3/18 - 3/24	3763 RV	49	44	5
FOX News	3/21 - 3/24	1011 RV	51	46	5
Economist/YouGov	3/22 - 3/24	1170 RV	48	46	2
ABC News/Wash Post	3/22 - 3/25	845 RV	52	45	7
Harvard-Harris	3/24 - 3/26	2410 RV	50	50	Tie
Grinnell/Selzer	3/27 - 3/30	777 LV	49	47	2
Economist/YouGov	3/29 - 3/31	1194 RV	50	46	4
Reuters/Ipsos	3/30 - 3/31	1114 A	48	46	2
ABC News/Ipsos	4/1 - 4/2	559 A	47	52	-5
Quinnipiac	4/2 - 4/6	2077 RV	46	51	-5
CNN	4/3 - 4/6	875 RV	44	54	-10
CNBC	4/3 - 4/6	804 A	50	45	5
FOX News	4/4 - 4/7	1107 RV	51	48	3
Economist/YouGov	4/5 - 4/7	1147 RV	46	51	-5
Reuters/Ipsos	4/6 - 4/7	1116 A	42	53	-11
ABC News/Ipsos	4/8 - 4/9	512 A	44	55	-11
The Hill/HarrisX	4/10 - 4/13	2854 RV	50	50	Tie
Economist/YouGov	4/12 - 4/14	1166 RV	43	53	-10
Reuters/Ipsos	4/13 - 4/14	1111 A	48	48	Tie
NBC News/Wall St. Jrnl	4/13 - 4/15	900 RV	44	52	-8
Harvard-Harris	4/14 - 4/16	2394 RV	51	49	2
Gallup	4/14 - 4/28	1500 A	50	48	2
ABC News/Ipsos	4/15 - 4/16	514 A	44	54	-10
Reuters/Ipsos	4/15 - 4/21	4429 A	44	52	-8
The Hill/HarrisX	4/19 - 4/20	958 RV	51	49	2

Economist/YouGov	4/19 - 4/21	1144 RV	45	51	-6
USA Today/Suffolk	4/21 - 4/25	1000 RV	45	52	-7
NPR/PBS/Marist	4/21 - 4/26	851 RV	42	57	-15
Economist/YouGov	4/26 - 4/28	1222 RV	46	51	-5
Emerson	4/26 - 4/28	1200 RV	39	51	-12
Reuters/Ipsos	4/27 - 4/29	2216 A	42	53	-11
ABC News/Ipsos	4/29 - 4/30	518 A	42	57	-15

Note. Adapted from RealClearPolitics (n.d.).