

4-2022

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Sydney McGovern

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Analyzing the effects of gender on public evaluation of elected officials' COVID-19 responses

by

Sydney McGovern

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. Nathan Kalmoe

Manship School of Mass Communication

Submitted to the LSU Roger Hadfield Ogden Honors College in partial fulfillment of the College

Honors Program

April 2022

Louisiana State University

& Agricultural and Mechanical College

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Abstract

Scholarship has noted how voters evaluate differently men and women in the political sphere, often assigning higher levels of competency to male public officials. However, some academics have identified the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for women leaders to leverage their supposed motherly instincts of empathy and nurturing with their perceived aptitude for decision making in “feminine” policy areas of health and education. My research looks at male and female political leaders in a Southern state who have had similar pandemic responses and compares public evaluations of their leadership. Using a combination of quantitative public opinion survey data and qualitative interviews with communication professionals, I determine how public evaluation of leaders interacts with how elected officials cater to these evaluations with strategic communication. From the survey data, I find that approval levels are highest in cities with Black women leaders. The interviews reveal that over the health crisis, communication professionals rely on diversity in messaging, emphasizing that people trust people who look like them. Thus, despite the inherent trust white men traditionally receive in the political sphere, Black women were able to build broad consensus and high levels of trust from their communities over the course of the pandemic.

Introduction

Research shows that men are inherently advantaged in the political sphere, having what many perceive to be natural leadership qualities, while women have a higher standard to prove their qualifications (Bauer, 2020; Mo, 2014; Johnson & Williams, 2020). Over the coronavirus pandemic, however, female leaders were praised for their handling of the virus. Media lauded the women heads of state in countries like New Zealand, Iceland, Germany, and Taiwan for the balancing masculine and feminine leadership traits. At the height of the pandemic, media outlets highlighted stories of Norway's prime minister reassuring the country's youth in a special press conference for children and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's use of Facebook Live to communicate critical COVID-19 messages in an accessible and relatable way (Fouche, 2020; McGuire et al., 2020). But has this international praise taken hold on a state and local level? How has the United States public viewed women leaders in their own states and municipalities?

In early months of the pandemic, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer was a victim of frequent personal attacks and harsh words from President Donald Trump, who called "the woman in Michigan" a failing governor, unappreciative of his efforts (Macklin, 2021). The president's calls to open the country and tweets to "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" were soon followed by several anti-lockdown protests outside the capitol building in Lansing (Mauger & LeBlanc, 2020). The series of protests and displays of contempt for the governor elevated to national prominence on October 8, 2020, when Michigan's attorney general announced the arrest of six men charged with conspiring to kidnap Whitmer and charges against seven other men affiliated with the militia group the Wolverine Watchmen with plans to attack the Michigan's Capitol building (Macklin, 2021). One of the men was later heard on tape describing his plans to carry out "a quick, precise grab" of the governor (Tarm & White, 2022). While these

insurrectionists represent a miniscule percentage of Michigan residents, this level of violence toward a public official during a public health crisis is unprecedented. Some researchers have pointed to Whitmer's gender as a major motivation behind the planned attack, asserting that the conspiracy was not only political in nature but also involved significant elements of sexism and misogyny (Krook, 2020).

In this study, I seek to identify if the public evaluated women leaders differently than male leaders over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. More specifically, did these evaluations remain consistent with the harsher evaluations that women traditionally receive or did women have an advantage during the public health crisis? Existing literature shows that women must display higher qualification levels to compete against men in the political (Bauer, 2020). This barrier to entry is reflected in the percentage of women in American politics today, with just 144 of 539 of U.S. House and Senate seats, or just 27%, held by women in the 117th Congress (Blazina & DeSilver, 2021). On the state and local levels, there are just 9 female governors and 31 female mayors in the 100 most populous American cities ("Current numbers," 2022). In the Southern state on which I focus my study, female elected officials are even more scarce. Of the seven statewide elected officials, none are women, of the eight congressional seats, one is a woman, and of the 144 state legislative seats, 28 belong to women ("Elected Officials," 2022).

My research explores if the qualification gap relevant during elections persists in the way the public evaluates women once they win their elections. Using the pandemic as a lens to analyze this concept is particularly interesting because women are perceived to be particularly apt to deal with more "feminine" policy issues like education, family, and health. The coronavirus pandemic, however, is not a common and persistent health issue like smoking or

mental healthcare. It is yet to be seen how this unprecedented health emergency shapes how voters perceive women in political leadership roles and if these effects have long-term impacts. Additionally, I am interested in how political communication professionals gauge what the public wants to hear from elected officials and how they accommodate these desires in their messaging. By combining public opinion survey data with interviews from two communication staffers, each representing a white man and Black woman, I can draw conclusions on how the public evaluates male and female leaders during the pandemic and how leaders use communication to influence their approval.

Literature Review

There is a broad understanding that men are more supported than women in most professional areas, but the academic literature regarding women in politics tells a more nuanced story. According to gender stereotypes, the typical woman is not very qualified for political office, while the typical man is viewed as having a relatively high level of political experience, providing a baseline advantage to male candidates (Bauer, 2020). Further, if the public has been primarily exposed to white men as their political representatives, this prototype likely informs their perception of what a typical politician should be (Mosier & Pietri, 2021). The result is that male candidates face less pressure to prove their competency for political leadership roles, while female candidates must provide more evidence of their qualifications (Bauer, 2020). While gender attitudes in the electoral process have grown more subtle, research has shown that both implicit and explicit biases affect voter choice, making gender a persistent factor in voters' calculations (Mo, 2014).

And women of color face bias not only on behalf of their gender, but also because of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. These intersecting identities contain unique elements that extend beyond the sum of individual gender stereotypes and racial stereotypes. Psychology research shows that unique stereotypical attributes emerge in evaluations of women than for men in Latino, Black, and Middle Eastern American ethnic groups (Ghavami & Peplau, 2012). In evaluating the category “Black women,” for example, respondents produced 10 unique attributes not included in the top 15 attributes for either “Blacks” or “women.” In recent experimental design to determine if Black women are perceived as less politically competent compared to white men, white women, and Black men, researchers have not found statistically significant evidence that voters assign lower electability and levels of competency to Black women (Mosier

& Pietri, 2021). However, these experiments have been criticized based on the presence of social desirability factors, in which survey participants overreport their willingness to vote for Black and female candidates (Krupnikov et al., 2015). In experiments that allow individuals to explain their choices, offering them a psychological ‘out’ from social desirability pressures, participants expressed a significant decrease in their willingness to vote for Black and female candidates, mimicking real-world voter behavior (Krupnikov et al., 2015).

In times of crisis, the public has shown a preference for aggressive leadership, generally stereotyped as masculine (Wu & Mackenzie, 2021). This tendency implies that voters are less likely to view women as competent at dealing with a national emergency compared with men (Bauer et al., 2020). However, some scholarship has found that in times of violence, low government trust, and high corruption, female leadership may see a greater level of appreciation from the public, as evidenced in some Latin American countries (Piazza & Diaz, 2020).

The theory of the double bind entraps women in displaying both masculine leadership traits like aggression and feminine traits like empathy. Although this phenomenon usually burdens women in politics, recent scholarship has pointed to the double bind as a mechanism that has improved public evaluation of women leaders during the pandemic (Windsor et al., 2020; Johnson & Williams, 2020). The same gender stereotypes that traditionally hinder women seeking political office may have brought a new sense of appreciation for female leadership during the pandemic. Scholars have noted that women leaders might receive more positive public evaluations because the pandemic falls under the more “feminine” policy area of public health (Piazza & Diaz, 2020). In fact, women political leaders even saw an increase in positive coverage of their leadership, as they were lauded for their ability to leverage their motherly

tendencies for empathy and nurturing during the public health emergency (Johnson & Williams, 2020).

Despite the recent praise for female national leadership, like that in New Zealand, Iceland, Germany, and Taiwan, it did not translate to statistically significant differences in the number of cases or deaths in their countries compared to those run by men (Windsor et al., 2020). A leader's gender also has little impact on broad policy compliance during the pandemic, including responsiveness to wear a face covering and social distance (Bauer et al., 2020). Instead, partisanship is a much stronger indication of policy compliance. Further scholarship has identified key differences in policy decisions during the pandemic, despite the similar health outcomes between countries led by men and women. Researchers have shown that a higher share of women in legislatures is associated with a delay in closing schools, pointing to the notion that women policy makers place a higher social and economic value on schools remaining open (Aldrich & Lotito, 2020).

Regardless of whether a direct correlation exists between leader gender and COVID-19 case and death rates, research notes that the same cultural elements that elevate women to their leadership positions – lower sexism levels, higher equity levels, and higher collectivism – may help a country do better in the pandemic (Windsor et al., 2020; Chamorro-Premuzic & Wittenberg-Cox 2020). Scholarship has also noted a similar correlation regarding governance quality and gender equity policy. Studies on legislative gender quotas in Latin America have found that higher governance quality indicates higher citizen support for gender quotas and other gender equality policies, such as fair pay, and equal access to employment (Barnes, 2016).

More analysis on the topic of female leadership during public health crises is still needed as the number of countries led by women is severely limited, with 16 of the 175 countries, or less

than 10 percent, led by women chief executives during the pandemic (Windsor et al., 2020). Further, there have not been significant studies in how the public has evaluated female leadership on a state and local level over the pandemic. We have yet to see whether the more positive press coverage of female world leaders' COVID-19 response points to a long-lasting improvement or just a temporary effect of the health emergency. In the future, an increase in women political representation during times of crises could create a foundation to sustain the advancements in the evaluation of female leaders (Piazza & Diaz, 2020).

Also of note, Democratic and Republican leaders placed value on different social, political, and economic factors over the course of their COVID-19 response, indicating partisanship still played an important role in leadership even amid a global health crisis. Across states, Democratic governors placed special emphasis on health and safety, while their Republican counterparts were particularly concerned with the economic costs of coronavirus mitigation measures (Baccini & Brodeur, 2020). Recent scholarship reveals that partisanship was also the means by which Americans evaluated political leaders' COVID-19 responses. For both Republicans and Democrats, partisanship influenced their evaluations of their state-level pandemic policies (VanDusky-Allen et al., 2021). After an initial period where Americans showed general support for their governors' responses, within months, the public became divided along party lines on mitigation measures like mask mandates and stay-at-home orders (VanDusky-Allen et al., 2021). The low information setting over the course of the pandemic prompted Americans to take cues from political leaders and partisan media, resulting in the polarization of attitudes surrounding COVID-19 policy and leadership.

Leadership styles and communication strategy over the pandemic also diverged across party lines. Analysis of the communication efforts of several elected officials at the early stages

of the pandemic showed that President Trump and Republican governors DeSantis, DeWine, Ducey, and Ivey demonstrated low context and low control leadership and communication styles (Watkins & Clevenger, 2021). The hands-off approach may have made them particularly vulnerable to political fallout and blame for their handling of COVID-19. Every Democratic governor evaluated in the study, governors Cuomo, Newsom, and Whitmer, demonstrated high-context and high-control styles with information-seeking, hands-on approaches, which the public deemed as competent and appropriate to the threat. Recent scholarship has also shown that dual-gendered leadership and gender-inclusive political communication can build trust, confidence, and compliance with the public (Wu & Mackenzie, 2021). More specifically, Canadian providences with both a woman chief medical officer and a man prime minister showed higher public education on the virus, advocacy related to vulnerable populations, and public compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures. Political communication that came from a combination of male and female leaders, then, led to positive public health interventions to flatten the curve (Wu & Mackenzie, 2021).

My research will focus on the public evaluation of pandemic leadership and evaluate whether the gender of political leaders affects these evaluations. While scholars have mostly analyzed international and national pandemic responses, I hope to fill in the gaps by focusing on state and local leadership in a single Southern state. While it is a red state, it is led by a Democratic governor, making it a particularly interesting subject. Considering that Republicans and Democrats have had distinct approaches in addressing the pandemic, I focus my analysis on the public evaluation of Democrat leaders on the state and local levels. I also conduct interviews with political communication professionals representing elected officials of distinct gender and

racial identities to better understand how they communicate to their constituents and tailor their message to the public perception of the political leaders they represent.

Based on existing literature, I formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: Men local leaders will see higher approval ratings than women local leaders, based on the public's perception of inherent masculine leadership ability during times of crisis.

H2: Political communication professionals representing elected officials of different racial and gender backgrounds account for different considerations when communicating to their constituents.

Methodology

To analyze the public evaluation of political leaders' pandemic response, I used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The public opinion survey data in this study was collected by Dr. Michael Henderson and distributed to a representative sample of 1,000 adult residents in a Southern state. Respondents were initially surveyed from April 15, 2020, to April 28, 2020, with 757 of those same respondents surveyed again from May 20, 2020, to June 1, 2020. To produce the dataset, "YouGov matched 1053 eligible respondents to a sample frame of known characteristics of 1000 [redacted state] residents using the 2018 American Community Survey." The analysis includes weights for 2016 Presidential vote choice, gender, age, race, and education. The two-wave panel focused on questions about individual behaviors, attitudes, and trust related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

From this survey, I will focus on the second wave responses regarding trust in the governor and respondents' approval ratings of their state and local governments' handling of the coronavirus. Further, when evaluating the local approval ratings, I compared the results across the gender and race of the mayors of the major city in the six most populous Democrat-led counties. To supplement the survey data, I identified the various local COVID-19 orders from these six mayors, leading up to the time the survey was distributed. Considering the variations in local government COVID-19 responses from each other and from the governor's response provides context for the public evaluation of their local leaders. The COVID-19 sickness and death rates also influence the public's evaluation of their local and state leaders. Thus, I also considered the peaks in coronavirus daily case averages at the time of the survey distributions.

The second approach to my research involves a pair of interviews from a communication staff member in both the office of the white man governor and the office of a Black woman

mayor of a mid-sized city. The purpose of the interviews is to better understand the strategies used to communicate political officials' COVID-19 responses during the pandemic. Questions gauged their experiences delivering messages regarding social distancing measures, masking, vaccinations, and other coronavirus information, as well as the responses they received from the public. I first asked questions related to their job responsibilities, then their communication strategies they employed over the ongoing pandemic response, and finally about their views regarding the public's trust and evaluations of the political leaders they represent. Before conducting the interviews, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board and written consent from the interview subjects. In consideration of their roles as public servants and the prominent positions of the officials they represent, I keep the identities of the interviewees anonymous. With both the survey data and the interviews, I hope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the public perception of political officials affects their communication strategy and how this perception and messaging varies across gender and racial identities.

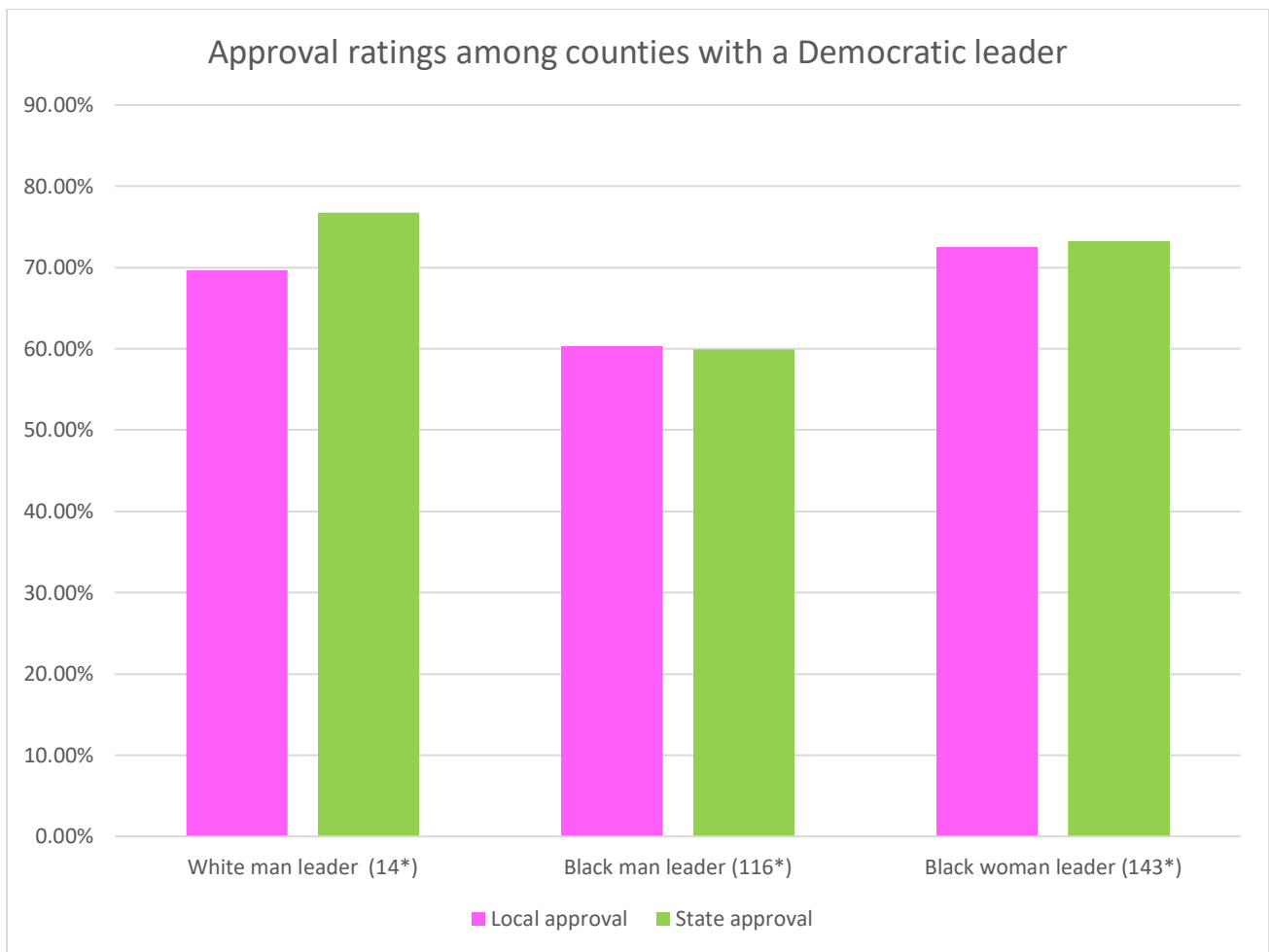
Presentation of Findings

Public opinion survey

In order to compare the evaluations of the governor's COVID-19 response with local leaders, I include only counties with a Democratic leader in my analysis. Respondents were asked to "Approve/Disapprove of how each of the following is handling the corona virus – The federal government; the state government; the local government" on a five-point Likert scale. The statewide survey data revealed a number of patterns regarding how individual respondents evaluated their local and state leaders. Black respondents approved of the local response by Black leaders in particularly high rates. The data also showed that both men and women approve of female local leaders at higher levels than male local leaders. Further, women liked Black- and woman-led local government responses, while men like Black woman-led responses; this pattern is consistent when isolating just white men and women respondents. Along party lines, Republican respondents dislike woman-led and Democrat-led counties at higher rates than Democrat respondents.

The next analysis groups individual respondents based on their county of residency and further groups these counties into clusters: white man-led, Black man-led, and Black woman-led. There are no counties in the state with a white woman Democratic leader. Interestingly, the local leaders with the highest approval ratings were Black women. The responses to this question, illustrated in the graph below, show that residents in the Democratic-led county with a white male local leader approved of the local response at a rate of 69.64% and the state response at 76.79%. In counties with Black male leaders, respondents approved of the local response at 60.34% and the state response at 59.91%. The approval rating for the local response in counties with Black women leaders was 72.55%, and the state approval rating is 73.25% in those same

counties. Of note, local approval is 7.15 points lower than state approval in counties with a white man leader, 0.43 points higher in counties with a Black man leader, and 0.7 points lower in counties with a Black woman leader. However, the differences between local and state approval in each category are not statistically significant. The approval rating of local leaders in counties with a Black man leader, however, is significantly lower than that in counties with a white man leader or Black woman leader. Further, the approval ratings in white man-led counties are not statistically significant from the approval ratings in Black woman-led counties.



*The number of observations represent the number of survey respondents in each category, not the number of leaders.

State and local COVID-19 policies

To better understand the public approval ratings for state and local COVID-19 government responses, I outline brief summaries of the orders and coronavirus mitigation measures issued at the state and local levels leading up to the survey distribution. Especially in Democrat-led counties, local leaders largely followed the Democrat governor's lead. While some municipalities moved before the governor on measures like mask mandates, only mitigation measures issued before the completion of the survey on May 1 are relevant in this study.

The governor declared a statewide public health emergency on March 11, 2020, updating the proclamation on March 16 to limit gatherings to no more than 50 people and to close casinos, bars, movie theatres, and indoor dining. He issued a stay-at-home order on March 22 until April 13, later extending the order to April 30 and then once again to May 15. With his announcement on April 30 to extend the stay-at-home order another 15 days, the governor also mandated that employees of essential businesses wear masks and strongly recommended residents to wear masks when in public. On May 15, the governor moved the state to Phase One, lifting the stay-at-home order and allowing most businesses to open at 25 percent occupancy. He did not issue a mandatory masking requirement until July 13, more than a month after the completion of the survey.

Municipality A is led by a white man Democrat; municipalities B, C, and D are led by Black men Democrats; and municipalities E and F are led by Black women Democrats. On March 13, 2020, Municipality A issued a state of emergency, but ordered county employees to report to work in-person on Monday, March 16. The next day, the county moved local operations online. On March 23, the municipality issued a stay-at-home order, echoing the governor's order. Municipality B followed the governor's lead, holding press conferences closely following each

statewide announcement to reiterate the state mandates and encourage compliance in his city. On April 2, the mayor issued an Emergency Public Health Declaration for the city, specifically limiting restaurant operations to curbside and drive-thru pickup.

Municipality C's first coronavirus-related order independent from the state was on March 12, 2020, when the mayor ordered a temporary halt of the disconnection of water services for residents and businesses due to non-payment. The city announced the temporary suspension of court operations on March 16, 2020. In addition to the state ban of gatherings of 50 people or more, the mayor announced the closure community centers, the civic center, and the local zoo on March 17. On April 7, the municipality announced stringent rules for public parks, taking down basketball goals, swings, and playscape areas. The mayor of Municipality D closely followed the governor's orders and urged compliance within his city. On March 13, the city closed all planned public events that would attract 250 or more people and all events at city-owned buildings, regardless of size. On March 20, the mayor closed City Hall to the public, and closed all city buildings to the public two days later. Before any local or state mask mandate, Municipality D distributed free cloth face masks to residents on April 27.

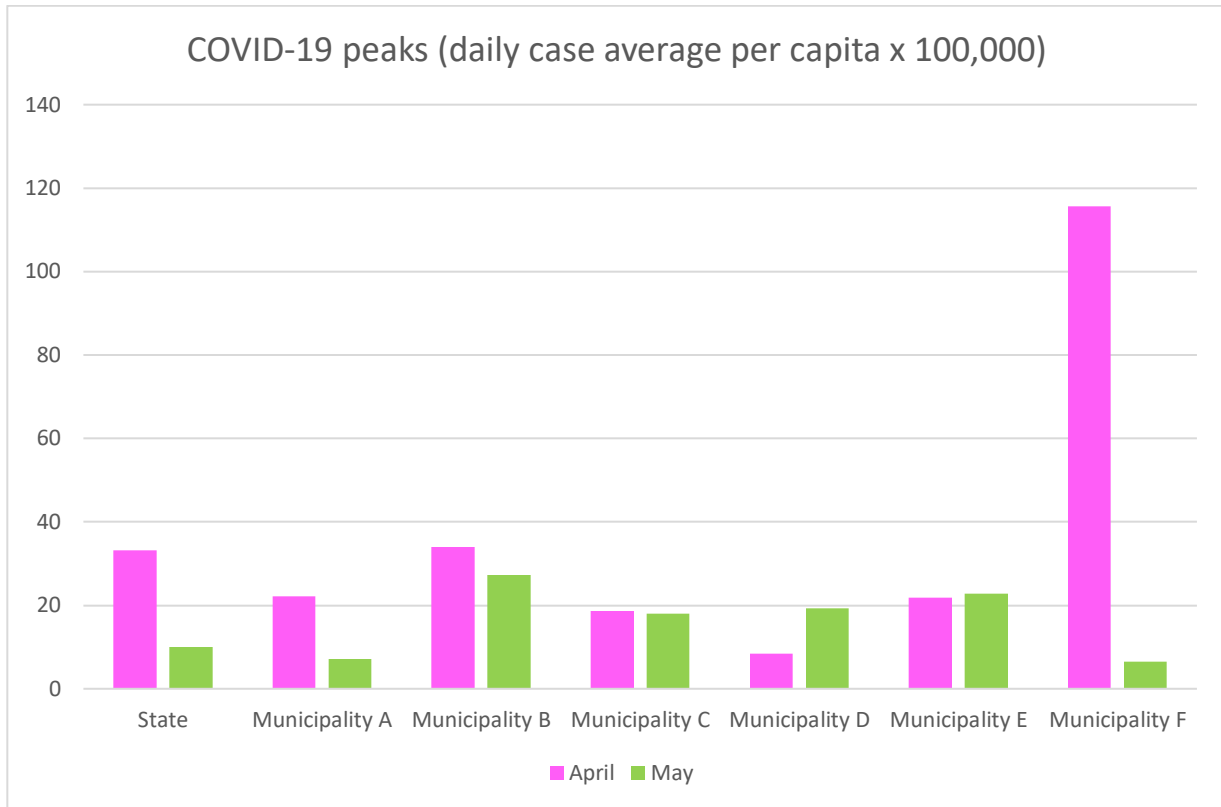
On March 12, 2020, the mayor-president of Municipality E issued a county-wide public health emergency, postponing all permitted events, providing for telework for municipal personnel, restricting travel, and prohibiting the discontinuation of public utilities. The mayor announced the first state community testing center on March 16. The county closed its public library locations on March 17 and all municipal buildings on March 19, shortly before the governor's stay-at-home order. On March 26, the mayor established a personal protective equipment distribution site for medical personnel. Municipality F saw the highest case numbers in the state in the early months of the pandemic, and thus, the mayor acted before the governor

on several mitigation measures. The mayor-president in Municipality F issued a state of emergency on March 11. On March 13, the mayor echoed the governor's emergency orders and further limited public access to City Hall and other city facilities, as well as cancelled city permitted events. In addition to the governor's restrictions issued on March 16, the mayor closed gyms and health clubs, limited all public gatherings to no larger than the size of a household, and encouraged businesses, colleges, and universities to scale down operations. The city opened two drive-thru COVID-19 testing sites for healthcare workers and first responders on March 19, opening the testing to anyone with symptoms three days later. The mayor issued a stay-at-home mandate two days before the governor, on March 20. Essential services, like healthcare operations, grocery stores, and gas stations, were allowed to stay open with social distancing guidelines. On April 20, the mayor issued a statement strongly recommending, but not yet requiring, residents to wear masks or facial coverings in public.

COVID-19 case peaks

Local sickness and death rates undoubtedly affected the public's perception of how well their governments responded to the coronavirus pandemic. The state experienced two spikes in COVID-19 case numbers around the time of the survey. There was a significant uptick in cases around the second week of April, a short time before the first wave of the survey was distributed from April 15 to April 28. With a statewide daily case average peak at 1,549 on April 6, residents saw the highest coronavirus levels since the start of the pandemic. The overall state daily case average was lower by the distribution of the second wave of the survey, from May 20 to June 1. The state's peak during this time was on May 27 with a daily case average of 465. The same is true in most of the individual counties, with a higher peak in April than in May. Municipality F experienced a dramatically significant spike in cases in April, driving the average

case rate for the entire state. To account for the variance in population across counties, I divided the daily average case numbers by the county population and multiplied by 100,000. The results are illustrated in the graph below.



Interviews

To describe the interviews while protecting the identities of staffers, I will identify the governor’s communication professional as CP1, and the staff member on the mayor-president’s communication team as CP2. I will default to masculine pronouns, though that is not indicative of the interviewees’ actual gender identities. CP1 began his work at the governor’s office in 2016, less than a year after he began his first term in office. In his position, he contributes to nearly every communication effort, including press releases, social media content, media relations, speaking engagements, crisis communication, and collaborative projects with other state agencies. CP2 joined the mayor’s communication team in 2019, less than a year before the

onset of the pandemic. He oversees and administers the communications for the mayor-president and the county as a government entity.

CP1 described the governor has taking “a very multilayered, broad approach” to coronavirus messaging. Much of that messaging manifested in press conferences; from the onset of the pandemic to February 2022, the governor held 123 COVID-19 press conferences, 91 of which were in 2020 alone. The staffer emphasized that during the press conference, his team made sure to “include medical professionals of various backgrounds – racial backgrounds, various genders and from various parts of the state.” Residents from the north, rural region of the state want to hear from people from that same area, he said. Throughout our interview, CP1 said that understanding that people trust people who sound and look like them was the key to building trust and increasing compliance with the governor’s orders.

“We have a very diverse population, and so that affects the ways in which we communicate. You have to match that because one message is not a one-size fits all kind of thing... you have to bring in different people to help communicate that message because the messenger is as important as the message.” – CP1

In fact, staffers from both teams emphasized the importance of inclusion in their communication strategies. In many ways, CP2 described his team’s communication strategy as a mirror of the governor’s. The mayor also brought in local doctors and health professionals at nearly every press conference. This was used to not only provide factual, scientific information, but to also decenter the mayor, a strategy to combat much of the politicization and misinformation that spread over the course of the pandemic.

He acknowledged that with representing a politician, some people will inherently distrust his communication. When trying to reach these people, he said, “We kind of point it back to ‘Yeah that’s fine, we’re politicians, we’re the government, you don’t trust us. That’s fine. Go talk to your doctor.’” Beyond providing objective, scientific information and recommending the public to talk with their doctors, CP2 said his team did not engage with those who attacked the mayor as a person or politicized her COVID-19 orders.

Both staffers likened their pandemic communication to that of emergency communication in times of severe storms and hurricanes, saying they went into overdrive with producing graphics, social media content, press releases, and stakeholder engagement efforts. With years of experience communicating for the governor in the wake of natural disasters that affected the entire state, CP1 said he felt more prepared to deal with the public health emergency. What differentiated the pandemic communication from generic emergency communication, however, was the additional challenge of battling the misinformation surrounding the virus. For the governor’s team, he said that working with dozens of community partners was essential “because it takes all of us to put good, solid information out there and understand how the messages are being received.”

CP2 said that his team took a more localized, focused approach in their communication. While the governor may have had to post about CDC guidelines, their focus was on what was happening in the city. He found this to be a successful strategy, saying that most of the mayor’s constituents appreciated the abundance of information around mitigation measures and COVID-19 testing in the early stages.

“What the public wants in a situation of uncertainty is to have faith that their leaders are on top of the situation. The mayor has always done that, and I

think that's how she's really navigated it despite some of the prejudices that may be out there just because of who she is. Also, because who she is, she was able to bring the community together." – CP2

CP2 described the mayor as the “convener in chief,” saying that her focus on collaboration and inclusion served well in building public confidence in her leadership over the pandemic. He described criticisms that she receives as “flimsy” because of the strong consensus she has built in the community across racial and party lines. CP2 pointed to the fact that despite the metro council comprising of seven white Republicans and five white Democrats, the mayor has been able to push many of her initiatives through thanks to her ability to work with both political parties. Social media trolls will always have something to say, according to the staffer, but he has not seen a big uptick in negative comments.

“I think that her being a Black woman, it's often that you hear these dog whistles of ‘Is she competent?’ ‘Is she tough?’ ‘Is she strong?’ – all that type of stuff – and she is all those things and displays it on a daily basis.” – CP2

CP2 acknowledged the biases that some residents have against the mayor, whether they are explicit or implicit, saying “If you are not a fan of Black women in leadership, you are probably not going to be a fan of her.” Despite these prejudices that complicate the mayor’s ability to build trust in some communities, CP2 also felt that she was less of a target than the governor. At the start of the pandemic, the city released a mask mandate a week before the state did, but after that, she followed suit in issuing restrictions on gatherings, bars, and restaurants. CP1 described that although some people are more inclined to trust the governor because of he is a white man, his identity was also limiting in some ways. Given that people trust leaders who look and sound like them, a large portion of the state may not inherently trust the governor.

Bringing on a more diverse representation was necessary to build trust in a diverse state, according to the staffer.

“For some people, hearing from the governor and hearing about his leadership over the course of the year, through this pandemic and through other weather emergencies, there obviously is trust there. For those people who need to hear and see someone different, someone of a different gender, someone of a different race, that’s okay. That’s the reality of it.” – CP1

Including healthcare professionals from a variety of backgrounds and building a coalition of more than 20 community organizations, each representing different interests and demographics, to help communicate the governor’s message was a success in CP1’s eyes. He pointed to a 2022 Kaiser Family Foundation study that found that white people had a higher vaccination rate than Black people in all but nine states, including his governor’s state (Ndugga et al., 2022). These results are evident of “intentionality when it comes to equity,” especially when it came to the distribution, accessibility, and education about vaccines, he said.

Discussion

In comparing survey responses across Democratic-led counties, those led by Black women had the highest local approval rating at 72.55%. Although not statistically significant from the local approval rating in the white man-led county at 69.64%, it is significantly higher than the local approval rating of 60.34% in counties led by Black men. Further, although the local approval rating was similarly high in the county led by a Democratic white man, there are only 14 available survey responses to formulate this approval rating, making it a relatively weak indicator of how the public evaluated white men over the pandemic. Regardless, the high approval rating that the Black women mayors received disproves my first hypothesis that men local leaders will see higher approval ratings than women local leaders. The significantly high first COVID-19 case spike in April seen in Municipality F makes the high approval rating even more remarkable.

Although research has shown that the public prefers male leadership during times of crisis, there are a few explanations why the Democratic women mayors received the highest approval local ratings. First, as mentioned in the literature review, female leaders may have been more primed to respond to the health element of the COVID-19 pandemic, as women are viewed as naturally more suited to the more “feminine” policy issue of public health (Piazza & Diaz, 2020).

A second possible reason for the high ratings in municipalities E and F lies in the counties’ demographics. These municipalities represent the two most metropolitan cities in the state and cities with the highest Democratic population. While 40% of voters in the state voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election, 56% of voters voted for him in Municipality E

and nearly 83% voted for the Democratic candidate in Municipality F.¹ In the other municipalities, only around a third of voters supported Joe Biden, making municipalities E and F significantly bluer than the other Democrat-led counties.² In general, Democrats are for more supportive of COVID-19 mitigation measures like stay-at-home orders and mask mandates than Republicans (VanDusky-Allen et al., 2021). Further, during the pandemic onset period, the same period in which the survey was conducted, partisanship, rather than policy, influenced Democrats' and Republicans' evaluations of their state- and local-level COVID-19 policy responses (VanDusky-Allen et al., 2021). This provides a logical rationale for why the approval of the Democrat local and state leaders are relatively higher in the more Democrat municipalities.

A third explanation for the high approval of the Black women mayors stems from the connection between public evaluation and strategic communication. When combing through press releases and coronavirus orders from the local officials to provide context for the survey data, I noticed that mayors in municipalities E and F clearly published much more material than any other local leader, releasing news releases, press conferences or graphics around once a day. This constant messaging, not unlike the governor's level of communication, likely helped residents in these counties feel that their local leaders were handling the pandemic with the appropriate level of care and concern, thus raising approval ratings. In this way, an argument can be made that the Black women leaders messaged their way to parity, making up for biases their constituents may hold. Although strategic communication does not negate or reverse prejudices the public holds against Black women politicians, the survey data point to the importance of effective strategic communication, especially during public health emergencies.

^{1,2} Citation redacted for anonymity purposes.

Another interesting result in the survey responses is how similar the local and state approval levels are in individual municipalities. In every category, the gap between local and state approval is not statistically significant. The onset of the coronavirus and the first few months of the pandemic could be described as a low-information time period. It is likely that when residents heard of a new stay-at-home order or mask mandate, they were not exactly aware of whether the governor or mayor issued the mitigation measure. To independently evaluate his or her local leader from his or her state leader, a resident would have to know how their COVID-19 responses were distinct from each other. Someone may have known that they had to stay inside until May 15 but may not have understood whether that mandate came from the mayor or governor. It is not unreasonable to believe that survey respondents evaluated their local and state leaders based on a single understanding of pandemic government response, without distinguishing local and state policies, which accounts for why approval levels for state and local COVID-19 responses are so similar in each category. Additionally, after analyzing the local pandemic responses, it was clear that most Democrat-led municipalities followed the governor's pandemic response very closely, allowing for more unified local and state evaluations.

My second hypothesis, "Political communication professionals representing elected officials of different racial and gender backgrounds account for different considerations when communicating to their constituents," is addressed primarily by the interviews. CP2 said that some of the public does hold biases against the mayor as a Black woman, whether they are conscious or subconscious prejudices. These biases sometimes manifest in targeted comments, but he said that he consistently responds with "careful, clear communication that addresses the matter at hand, and [doesn't] get emotional about it." In this sense, his approach is not much different than that of the governor's communication team. Although he acknowledges the

additional challenges the mayor faces as a Black woman, CP2 expressed that his messaging mirrored much of what the governor was doing, overcommunicating to constituents and keeping medical professionals and scientific researched-backed information at the center of his messaging.

There was one point that both communication professionals heavily emphasized when talking about communicating their boss' pandemic responses and building trust with the public – people trust people who look like them. In a state with a population makeup of little over half women and nearly one-third Black, while a white man has some inherent advantage in the political sphere, it is not a given that the public will trust his leadership (“U.S. Census,” 2021). When asked about how the governor's race and gender affected the public's trust in his leadership over the pandemic, CP1 expressed that a major part of his communication efforts was focused on decentering the governor from the pandemic response and bringing in “as many people as possible who reflect the diversity of our state to help get the word out about the importance of the vaccines and addressing the misinformation that is so widespread.” Trust and approval levels of state and local pandemic responses, then, are not solely reliant on the leader's identity if the leader is not the sole face of the response.

In this Southern state, Black women local leaders were particularly successful in effectively communicating to their constituents, building strong levels of trust and approval. In the low-information setting brought by the novel coronavirus, representatives for elected officials expressed the importance of overcommunicating and building a diverse coalition to build consensus in their communities. Black women politicians, who ordinarily put more effort into building consensus to overcome biases, were perhaps most prepared to communicate during this public health crisis.

Implications

The findings from the combination of public opinion survey data and interviews with political communication professionals points to the importance of strategic messaging. In the cities with the most robust communication, approval rates were highest, despite these cities being led by Black women who face rampant prejudice, especially in the political arena. This study fits into a larger conversation about how Black and women politicians must consider how the public perceives their leadership abilities and how these considerations shape their communication strategy. My findings also bolster existing research about the effectiveness of inclusive communication over the course of the coronavirus pandemic (Wu & Mackenzie, 2021). Conclusions from the interviews showed that building a diverse team to communicate to constituents during the health crisis was crucial in building trust and buy-in from the public.

As previously discussed, partisanship is likely a driving force behind how the public evaluated their local leaders' responses. As a result, the Black women leaders, who both live in the most Democratic counties, earned the highest approval ratings. When voters evaluate their elected officials, then, partisanship may overrule biases people have towards women and people of color. This finding is consistent with more recent research that shows that partisanship is a stronger indicator than gender on pandemic policy compliance and that voters are most reliant on partisan cues in evaluating political leaders' pandemic response (Bauer et al., 2020; VanDusky-Allen et al., 2021).

Limitations

There were a number of limitations that affected this study. Because of the relatively small number of survey respondents, especially in the single Democrat white man-led county with only 14 survey respondents, the conclusions from this study may be imprecise.

Additionally, the state does not have a single county led by a Democrat white woman, and thus, I am not able to identify differences between the public evaluation of a white woman leader versus Black woman leader, a comparison that could add valuable insight to the discussion of the intersection between race and gender in politics.

Further, the survey asks participants to rate their approval of how the local, state, and federal governments are handling the coronavirus, not how leaders individually are responding to the pandemic. A government's handling of the coronavirus is multifaceted with input from several stakeholders, including health department officials, leaders in education, and county and city councils. A more direct question about how well the governor or mayor is responding to the pandemic would be more useful for this study and would perhaps lead to slight differences in responses. The survey was also distributed in the early stages of the pandemic. Asking the same people the same questions later on in the pandemic would possibly lead to different responses and different conclusions. Only interviewing communication professionals of two of the seven elected officials included in this study is another limitation in my data collection.

Further research opportunities

Research into how gender has affected public evaluation of political officials' pandemic response would benefit from a larger-scale study. If a similar survey included more respondents, researchers could draw stronger conclusions, or potentially different conclusions. Future studies could also widen the scope of this evaluation, comparing leaders across states. Perhaps a study that analyzes the public evaluations of the COVID-19 responses of governors of the same party but distinct backgrounds, like Democratic governors Laura Kelly of Kansas and Roy Cooper of North Carolina, could more effectively compare the differences based on gender, as this comparison involves responses from state-level officials in areas with similar partisan makeup

("Political ideology," 2020). Further, research that draws on data from public opinion surveys conducted multiple times over the last two years could reveal if and how the public evaluated leaders differently at different stages of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic and its many implications have made way for an unparalleled social and political landscape. In studying how the public evaluates political leaders during this extraordinary time and how leaders communicate to their constituents, I have drawn two key conclusions. First, partisanship has proved to be a strong indicator of public trust and approval of COVID-19 government responses. Despite the biases employed when the public evaluates Black women leaders, Democrat voters approve of Democrat leaders, especially in the low-information environment set by the public health crisis. Second, communication professionals are keenly aware of the need for inclusive messaging over the course of the pandemic, and officials that kept this in mind and communicated often earned high approval ratings. Even as the coronavirus becomes a less urgent, more permanent fixture in our lives, it is unlikely that the importance of diversity in political communication fades with it. Each year the country grows more diverse, and perhaps the key to building significant levels of approval and trust in government leaders is curating communication strategies that include messengers of various gender, racial, geographical, and political backgrounds.

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