

Political Competition during a Crisis: A Politicization or Rally-Round-the-Flag Effect among Norwegian Party Leaders during COVID-19

Roy Aulie. Jacobsen

Kristiania University of Applied Sciences
Oslo, Norway

Abstract: When a crisis strikes, political leaders can either unite or continue their political battles. While social media often sustains adversarial dynamics, the public opinion literature highlights a concept labelled rally-round-the-flag, where citizens temporarily unite behind leaders during crises. In times of crisis, Facebook is an important communication platform due to its large user base, with between 65% and 69% daily users, making it an important platform for reaching citizens with information during a crisis. This study analyzes Facebook messages from twelve Norwegian politicians across nine parties, covering a period ranging from September 2019 to January 2022, including three COVID-19 lockdowns and a national election. Empirically, a linear probability model and descriptive analyses are used to examine changes in communication strategy. Results show a temporary decline in criticism and a rise in accommodative and trust-oriented messaging during the first two lockdowns among opposition politicians. However, as the crisis subsided, political competition resurfaced, illustrating how digital platforms mediate short-lived unity and accelerate the return to routine contestation.

Keywords — Politics, Lockdown, Governmental risk and crisis communication, Social media, Facebook

SUGGESTED CITATION: Jacobsen, R. A. (2025). Political competition during a crisis: A politicization or rally-round-the-flag effect among Norwegian party leaders during COVID-19. *Proceedings of the 2025 International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference*, 13(1) 5-8. <https://www.doi.org/10.69931/001c.142447>

INTRODUCTION

In times of societal crisis, citizens often rally around their political leaders, producing what is known as the “rally-round-the-flag” effect. This phenomenon is well-documented in the public opinion literature, with empirical evidence emerging from periods of war, terrorist attacks, and COVID-19 lockdowns [1]. However, the rise of social media has changed the dynamics of political communication, potentially disrupting traditional rally effects. Platforms like Facebook facilitate continuous interaction and confrontation between political actors, potentially sustaining political competition even during national emergencies.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the evolving communication strategies of governing and opposition politicians in Norway from six months before the COVID-19 outbreak until the end of the third lockdown. Analyzing political messaging on social media, this study explores whether the emergence of a crisis foster a temporary communicative unity or whether digital platforms amplify ongoing political contestation. Specifically, the current study addresses two research questions: (RQ1) To what extent do governing and opposition politicians shift their messaging strategies during crises compared to non-crisis periods? (RQ2) How do these messaging strategies and public trust changes evolve over time as the crisis progresses or recedes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Competition or Rally-round-the-flag

Social media platforms allow for the continuous spread of political information through direct citizen-politician interaction. These relationships are often cultivated on platforms such as Facebook, where politicians share “behind-the-

ISSN: 3068-6539

© 2025 Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

Publication rights are licensed to ICRC.

<https://doi.org/10.69931/001c.142447>

scenes” glimpses, discuss policy, and openly criticize political opponents [2].

Negative campaigning has become a persistent feature of social media, with political actors strategically highlighting their opponents’ weaknesses to underscore their own competence. While the intensity and tone of such criticism may vary depending on timing—such as during election cycles or moments of heightened attention—the underlying dynamic is one of ongoing political competition [3]. This competition does not pause during non-election periods but is increasingly embedded into digital communication. Popular and scholarly accounts point to the rise of perpetual campaigning, where the lines between routine communication and special event responses such as crisis are blurred, making social media an arena for constant partisan positioning and rivalry.

The rally-round-the-flag effect originates from the seminal work of Mueller [4], who examined shifts in public support for the U.S. president during the Korean War. According to Mueller [4], exogenous shocks—such as wars, terrorist attacks, or national emergencies—can trigger a short-term surge in public support for incumbent political leaders. During such moments, citizens tend to set aside partisan divisions and unite around their government, seeking stability and decisive leadership when facing a crisis. However, these effects are typically temporary and do not eliminate political contestation in the long run. One of the most widely cited examples of this phenomenon is the dramatic increase in approval ratings for the U.S. president following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. More recently, rally effects have also been documented during health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to lockdowns in numerous countries.

Over time, rally effects have become an established empirical phenomenon in the public opinion literature, with considerable scholarly attention being directed toward understanding when they occur and how long they persist [1,5]. For example, Johansson et al. [5] explore why political leaders struggle to maintain high levels of support over time, emphasizing the temporal nature of rally effects. A key reason for the decline in public support is the gradual reemergence of political competition as opposition parties resume their critical role in the democratic discourse. Particularly in multiparty systems, opposition actors—including right-wing populist parties—often seek to reassert their relevance by challenging government decisions and refocusing attention on contested political issues. As the sense of crisis diminishes, the space for politics reopens, transitioning back to routine communication.

The Norwegian Context

Norway is a stable multiparty system with nine parliamentary parties constantly competing for power [6]. In March 2020, Norwegian political leaders were faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, a dual challenge encompassing public health and political communication [7]. Political leaders responded swiftly by implementing stringent public health measures, leading to three distinct lockdowns between March 2020 and January 2022. These periods of crisis signified a break from routine political communication and governance. Instead, crisis management, public reassurance, and strategic use of communication platforms became central to the role of political leadership [8]. Notably, the early phase of the pandemic was marked by high public trust and cross-party consensus, situating Norway as a case where institutional legitimacy and political cooperation shaped the initial response [9].

Over time, however, the communication environment changed as the pandemic moved through different stages. According to Fiskvik et al. [8], the crisis unfolded in three major lockdown phases, reflecting distinct societal and political dynamics. While the first lockdown emphasized centralized, state-led communication and information control, the second phase saw increased public fatigue and a growing need for participatory engagement. Politicians began using social media to solicit feedback and maintain public connection, echoing broader trends toward interactive governance [9]. By the third lockdown in November 2021, the political focus shifted again toward restoring political competition in a context marked by high vaccination rates. Communication became more symbolic and strategic as politicians balanced pandemic messaging with efforts to maintain visibility and assert political leadership [8,9]. This evolving communication trajectory highlights the adaptability of political actors navigating the intersection of crisis and routine politics in a high-trust Nordic context.

Analytical Framework

Politicians’ communication strategies on social media are still evolving, yet specific patterns have remained consistent across contexts and over time. This study draws on three key communicative strategies—criticism, accommodative messaging, and summoning trust—to construct an analytical framework for understanding whether political actors engage in perpetual competition or temporarily suspend adversarial rhetoric during times of crisis. These strategies are central to political and crisis communication research and provide insight into the shifting nature of political discourse during exceptional events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Criticism refers to negative messaging, often directed at political opponents or institutions, and is a concept rooted in election research. Scholars have long emphasized the prevalence of negative campaigning in contemporary politics, particularly on social media platforms where fast-paced and attention-grabbing content receive most engagement. Criticism may highlight government shortcomings or signal partisan disagreement, and its presence or absence is a useful indicator of whether opposition leaders challenge the governing coalition or adopt a more unifying stance during a crisis [2,3].

Accommodative messages are defined as communication strategies aimed at protecting or enhancing stakeholder efficacy [10]. These messages play a crucial role in crisis communication by fostering reassurance and building confidence in political leadership. Accommodative content often includes appeals to national unity, expressions of empathy, and morale-boosting language. By emphasizing collaboration and shared responsibility, such messaging can help maintain social cohesion and reinforce public compliance with preventive measures.

Trust serves as a key lens to assess the broader communicative environment. In the political communication literature,

trust is often positioned as a counterbalance to adversarial politics, with prolonged political competition linked to declining trust in institutions [1]. Research has shown that negativity in public discourse—whether driven by media dynamics or partisan conflict—can fuel a "vicious cycle" of political cynicism and disengagement. A vicious cycle can eventually lead to a state of political malaise with little support being given to political leaders.

DATA AND METHOD

Facebook posts were gathered using CrowdTangle in the end of December 2022. Posts from twelve Norwegian party leaders, representing governing and opposition parties, were collected from September 1st, 2019, to January 31st, 2022. A total of 7266 posts covering three lockdowns and a national election are included in the data. Messages containing criticism and accommodative information were identified using a manual content analysis. In addition, a trust measure based on natural language processing are included. Empirically, a descriptive approach is combined with results from a linear probability model (LPM).

Empirically, three outcomes were used to determine the presence of a rally-round-the-flag effect. The presence of criticism and accommodative messages guide whether the analysis related to whether each of the lockdown periods were characterized by political competition with ongoing critic, or if politicians used accommodative messages to establish support toward preventive measures by attempting to boost morale and showing empathy. Both measures were dichotomous and coded as 0 (not present) or 1 (present). A manual coding of posts showed respectively a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 and 0.87. In addition to these two measures, a measure of trust was developed using natural language processing to create a baseline. Examining fluctuations in trust have been the standard approach to detect rally effects, but since this study rely on a text-oriented approach consisting of social media messages from different politicians, a lexicon approach was combined with the use of OpenAI's GPT4o large language model (LLM) to detect ratio of trust evoking words in messages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trends in communication between governing and opposition politicians

Before presenting the results related to the effect of being an opposition politician, a descriptive approach was used to examine the trends in use of the three strategies increasing either political competition or a rally effect. A graph showing how the quantity of messages map out over time reveals a clear event-driven pattern with changes happening around the three lockdowns. Looking at the raw numbers of messages, a decline in criticism occurs during the first lockdown, with an increase in messages providing an accommodative message and using words summoning trust. A similar pattern occurs during the second lockdown with a decreasing number of messages providing criticism, while leading to an increasing number of messages providing an accommodative message.

Examining the results shows that there is a notable overlap in how governing and opposition leaders respond to crisis-related events. When criticism decreases among governing leaders, it tends to decline simultaneously among opposition leaders—suggesting a form of synchronized rhetorical adjustment in the face of evolving crisis dynamics. Similarly, peaks in trust-related messaging and accommodative strategies tend to occur at the same time across both groups, most prominently around the onset of the first lockdown. This convergence points to a broader pattern where political actors, regardless of institutional role, align their communication styles during periods of uncertainty. Rather than engaging in adversarial messaging, both governing and opposition leaders appear to move toward more unifying messages—indicative of a temporary communicative unity mirroring what the literature refer to as a “rally-around-the-flag” effect. These findings underscore how crisis contexts can prompt not only shifts in individual strategies but also collective recalibrations in political discourse.

Overall, patterns are event-driven with lockdowns leading to an increase in accommodative messages and messages contributing to higher levels of trust. Despite finding a pattern in the raw data signaling a rally effect for the first and second lockdown, during the third lockdown, there seems to be an increase in criticism with a decrease in accommodative messages and trust. Therefore, based on descriptive results, a rally effect seems to be present, but its short lived and only emerges during the first two lockdowns.

Interaction Effects Between Political Position and Lockdown Period

The interaction terms in the linear probability models provide insight into how opposition politicians adjusted their communication strategies across different stages of the pandemic. With regard to criticism, opposition leaders were significantly less likely to post critical messages during the first and third lockdowns. The probability of posting criticism decreased by 0.12 ($p < 0.01$) during the first lockdown and by 0.17 ($p < 0.05$) during the third lockdown. These findings suggest that opposition politicians adopted a more restrained rhetorical style in moments of acute crisis, aligning partially with the expectations of a rally-round-the-flag effect. However, these effects appear temporary. By the period following the second lockdown, criticism began to re-emerge, though not significantly. Even after nearly two years of crisis, political competition had not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Turning to accommodative messaging, the models reveal a consistent pattern: opposition politicians were significantly less likely to post accommodative messages during both the first ($-0.11, p < 0.05$) and second lockdown ($-0.16, p < 0.01$). This trend continued into the post-lockdown periods, with slight but negative effects across the board. These results indicate that, even during a public health emergency, opposition leaders were less inclined to adopt messages aimed at building

morale or reinforcing public efficacy. This may reflect the structural position of opposition actors, who typically have less incentive—or fewer political rewards—for expressing support for government-led crisis management.

The third dimension—trust—shows a different trajectory. Trust-related language increased across all politicians during the second and third lockdowns. Specifically, opposition leaders were more likely to use trust-evoking language after the second lockdown, with an interaction effect of 0.04 ($p < 0.01$). This trend may reflect the shifting political context in late 2021, as parties began preparing for the national election. Increased use of trust messaging may have been a strategic move to re-establish credibility and visibility, particularly after prolonged periods of restraint. Notably, the opposition remained significantly less likely to use trust-based language across the full period ($-0.13, p < 0.001$), underscoring the tension between crisis unity and political positioning.

In sum, these results reveal a multifaceted and dynamic communicative response. While moments of crisis initially suppressed traditional patterns of political competition—especially through reduced criticism and limited accommodative messaging from opposition actors—these effects were neither uniform nor sustained. Instead, what emerges is a gradual recalibration of political communication, shaped by evolving lockdowns and an upcoming election.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dynamic nature of political communication during a prolonged crisis, revealing how governing and opposition politicians in Norway adapted their messaging across three lockdowns. The evidence points to a temporary rally-round-the-flag effect during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, with communication becoming more accommodative and trust-oriented across party lines. However, as the crisis progressed, signs of renewed political competition reemerged, particularly in the lead-up to the 2021 national election. These findings have important practical implications for political actors and communication strategists. In high-trust democracies, moments of crisis may open brief windows for unified messaging and cooperative tone—but sustaining public trust and minimizing polarization requires deliberate efforts that extend beyond the immediate threat. Social media, while enabling rapid outreach, also reinforces the return to adversarial dynamics. Policymakers and communicators should be mindful of this trajectory when crafting crisis responses that aim to balance political accountability with societal cohesion.

Author Biography

Roy Aulie Jacobsen is a PhD research fellow currently working at Kristiania University College (Norway), RoyAulie.Jacobsen@kristiania.no.

REFERENCES

- [1] Knudsen, E., Nordø, Å. D., & Iversen, M. H. (2023). How Rally-Round-the-Flag Effects Shape Trust in the News Media: Evidence from Panel Waves before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis. *Political Communication*, 40(2), 201–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2168322>
- [2] Boulianne, S., & Larsson, A. O. (2023). Engagement with candidate posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook during the 2019 election. *New Media & Society*, 25(1), 119–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211009504>
- [3] Klinger, U., Koc-Michalska, K., & Russmann, U. (2023). Are Campaigns Getting Uglier, and Who Is to Blame? Negativity, Dramatization and Populism on Facebook in the 2014 and 2019 EP Election Campaigns. *Political Communication*, 40(3), 263–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2133198>
- [4] Mueller, J. (1973). *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- [5] Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-around-the-flag effect disappears, or: When the COVID-19 pandemic becomes “normalized.” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31, 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>
- [6] Karlsen, R., & Aardal, B. (2016). Political values count but issue ownership decides? How stable and dynamic factors influence party set and vote choice in multiparty systems. *International Political Science Review*, 37(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512114558456>
- [7] Wilson, S. (2020). Pandemic leadership: Lessons from New Zealand’s approach to COVID-19. *Leadership*, 16(3), 279–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020929151>
- [8] Fiskvik, J. T., Bjarkø, A. V., & Ihlen, Ø. (2023). Trustworthiness Over Time on Twitter: Three Critical Periods for the Norwegian Health Authorities and Political Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Social Media + Society*, 9(2), 20563051231179689. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231179689>
- [9] Lindholm, J., Carlsson, T., Albrecht, F., & Hermansson, H. (2023). Communicating Covid-19 on social media. Analysing the use of Twitter and Instagram by Nordic health authorities and prime ministers. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm, & M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.), *Communicating a Pandemic: Crisis Management and Covid-19 in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 149–172). Nordicom.
- [10] Jacob, C., Hausemer, P., Zagoni-Bogsch, A., & Diers-Lawson, A. (2023). *The effect of communication and disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic* (p. 74). European Parliament.