

# The Erosion of Trust During a Global Pandemic and How Public Administrators Should Counter It

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## Abstract

This article argues that public administrators must advance a more equity-based assessment of vulnerabilities in American communities and more risk-based communication strategies. It provides an overview of partisan motivated reasoning, how this has influenced the response to the coronavirus pandemic. Experimental evidence then demonstrates how the framing of the pandemic can influence trust in various public messengers. The coronavirus pandemic is merely one of the many exigent threats humanity faces today. Public administrators are the planners, engineers, analysts, auditors, lawyers, and managers on the front lines of these existential crises. It is their job to sift through the information environment and—however boundedly—tackle problems. For the sake of the American democracy, public administrators need to regain the people’s trust. They could start by leveling with them about the challenges ahead.

## Keywords

risk communication, COVID-19, trust, motivated reasoning, climate change

“You don’t have to speak truth to power, because they know it already.”<sup>1</sup>

—Noam Chomsky

## Introduction

The American public could use some truth-telling, about the deficiencies in its governments, its economies, and its national civic dialogue.

SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2), the virus that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19), has exposed weaknesses—not in the United States’ federalist fabric (Adolph et al., 2020), but in its degraded administrative systems and capacities. This essay argues that individual citizens—as tribalized and fractious as they seem—have been poorly served by public officials with career incentives to avoid risks, downplay long-term threats, and enact administrative burdens. Public administrators must advance a more equity-based assessment of vulnerabilities in American communities and more risk-based communication strategies. Citizens have never had access to more information—and thus more difficulty in discerning facts from fallacy. Public administrators are the planners, engineers, analysts, auditors, lawyers, and managers on the front lines of this and future existential crises. It is their job to sift through the information environment and—however boundedly—tackle problems. For the sake of the

American democracy, public administrators need to regain the people’s trust. They could start by leveling with them about the challenges ahead.

Underequipped state and local government agencies have struggled to coordinate a consistent response to the pandemic, creating and exacerbating tensions between levels and units. State-level guidance on social distancing and sheltering has appeared to vary by partisan identification (Allcott et al., 2020; Kushner Gadarian et al., 2020). Problems with organizing a coherent response to the virus have fueled sweeping judgments of the suitability of federal systems of governance for responding to existential challenges (Connors, 2020; Haffajee & Mello, 2020; Perez & Ross, 2020).

The pandemic has given Americans a glimpse of the ramifications of a decades-long corrosion of federal, state, and local government administrative capacities. This is an investment opportunity, not just in green infrastructure or health care, but an opportunity to invest in social capital. We will need it more than ever in the coming years.

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## The Partisan Brain and Its Shortcomings

All human beings, regardless of political leanings, are motivated reasoners (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Public administrators need to understand this because it speaks to the credibility of public servants and evaluations that citizens form of governmental policies and programs. Motivated reasoning occurs when a person processes information *directionally* to arrive at a particular conclusion (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). A directionally motivated reasoner seeks out information that conforms to prior beliefs and avoids or argues against disconfirming information. It is a largely unconscious, affective (emotion-based) reasoning process (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Although *accuracy* goals may also shape evaluations when the reasoner is making a deliberative effort to arrive at an accurate conclusion (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Druckman & Nelson, 2003), most evidence suggests that human evaluations are dominated by directional goals.

As governmental responses to the pandemic have dragged on, motivated reasoning has fueled conspiracy theories on social media about the origins of the disease (Frenkel et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020), the role of technology in its spread (Ahmed et al., 2020), and the scientists and public health officials trying to combat it (Calisher et al., 2020). Connecting this to politics, partisan-motivated reasoning can bias citizen evaluations of public policies (Bolsen et al., 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006). There is also mounting evidence that partisan-motivated reasoning during the pandemic played a role in influencing behavior, with citizens in Democratic areas of the country being more likely to engage in social distancing than in Republican-leaning areas, accounting for demographic and socioeconomic influences (Allcott et al., 2020; Barrios & Hochberg, 2020; Grossman et al., 2020).

Also troubling for public managers, motivated reasoning can infect assessments of public organizational or program performance (Christensen et al., 2018; Nielsen & Moynihan, 2017; Olsen, 2017). Citizens have been shown to display dimmer views of government performance in politicized areas such as the U.S. Affordable Care Act (James & Van Ryzin, 2017) and discount the efficiency of an organization if they know it is public (Hvidman & Andersen, 2016). In a recent study, Danish voters engaged in stronger motivated reasoning when assessing local government performance depending on whether their preferred parties were in power (Jilke & Baekgaard, 2020). In another, informing U.S. citizens about the party-line passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 offset their otherwise positive assessment of program performance (Deslatte, 2020a).

As bleak as this sounds, there is hope for designing more effective public responses. Recent evidence suggests that citizens can engage in more accuracy-aimed reasoning

regarding COVID information on social media when they are given subtle accuracy nudges (Pennycook et al., 2020). One study found that Twitter users were more likely to retweet science-based information than false information about the pandemic (Pulido et al., 2020). Prior political psychology research has suggested that motivated reasoners may reach “affective tipping points” when presented with enough information conflicting with their prior beliefs (Deslatte, 2019; Johnston et al., 2015; Redlawsk et al., 2010). Moreover, social and behavioral science presents a number of insights relevant for helping public officials guide pandemic responses, including how prejudice and risk aversion influence threat perception, the influence of social context (norms, inequality, polarization), the desirability of working collectively, and how trust in leadership can influence individuals (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

Trust, in particular, is crucial, because existential threats such as COVID-19 can breed uncertainty and anxiety (Balog-Way & McComas, 2020). Although political ideology and other factors can also work to build or degrade trust (Hamilton & Safford, 2020), the actions of public officials—their empathy, charisma, and the messages they deliver—carry additional weight in times of crisis (Everett et al., 2020). The literature on affective tipping points suggests that they may also be willing to engage in accuracy-directed processing at these times (Deslatte, 2019; Redlawsk et al., 2010). These insights collectively point to the need for public officials to practice better risk communication. Risk communication is an interdisciplinary field which entails making risk comprehensible to different audiences, respecting audience values, and improving both collective and individual decision-making (Morgan et al., 2002). Risk communication failures have been on display in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, as well as the federal government’s COVID response (Krause et al., 2020). We see evidence of this with group-based differences in trust in government messengers. Risk communication requires providing timely, relevant, and accurate information—early and often—to engender trust in governmental responses. But it also means attempting to convey the reality of the current state of the world and its challenges while acknowledging the disparate racial, ethnic, economic, and other social vulnerabilities which exacerbate these challenges.

Public managers tend to be inwardly focused and reluctant to “get out in front” of bad news or take risks in the midst of uncertain circumstances (Deslatte, 2020b; Deslatte & Swann, 2020). Despite social equity labeled as the fourth pillar of public administration, government officials generally shy from justice issues. This mind-set needs to change in an era of disasters, pandemics, and exigent demands to help build trust (Balog-Way & McComas, 2020). The next section presents some evidence of the effect of public health information on trust in government officials during the initial response to the pandemic.

## Experimental Evidence: Linking Messaging and Trust

The COVID-19 messaging has been undeniably emotional, filled with disturbing images, daily death tolls, and heated debates over keeping sheltering orders in place versus restarting the economy (Balog-Way & McComas, 2020). Thus, it “hits all the buttons” for causing individuals to misjudge risks through biased reasoning processes.<sup>2</sup> Besides the biases of our prior beliefs, humans are also inherently poor at assessing risks amid uncertainty (Kahneman & Tversky, 2012). For instance, individuals may discount future potential consequences rather than enduring minor, present sacrifices—a concept referred to as “hyperbolic discounting” (Laibson, 1997). This highlights the importance of framing messages that build and reinforce trust in public officials, rather than fueling the views that the federal, state, and local governmental actors are partisan motivated, incompetent, or both (Boyne et al., 2009; Deslatte, 2020a; Nielsen & Moynihan, 2017).

To examine the role of information provision and trust, we conducted an online survey experiment over 24 hr during March 30 to 31, 2020. We used CloudResearch (formerly TurkPrime), an online platform designed for scientific research (Chandler et al., 2019). CloudResearch utilizes market research platforms with “opt-in” participant pools, with quotas for gender, race, and ethnicity used to achieve similarity to the U.S. adult population. Payments to participants varied depending on quota needs. In this case, 1,403 participants were paid US\$2.38 on average to complete the survey. After potentially fraudulent responses (bots and repeat respondents) were dropped, the study produced a panel of  $N = 1,346$ .

In the experiment, two alternative COVID-related communication issue frames—either positive encouragement to social distance or to resume shopping to help the economy—were transmitted to a panel of U.S. adult respondents via different messengers (see Deslatte, 2020c, for a detailed description of the survey; the experimental protocol and data are available on the Harvard Dataverse<sup>3</sup>). Drawing from the political psychology literature, issue communication frames represent substantively distinct arguments which can influence support for particular governmental policies or actions (Aarøe, 2011; Belardinelli et al., 2018; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2001; Druckman et al., 2012). The study found that public health frames positively influenced preferences for avoiding unnecessary travel, whereas the economic frame appeared to strengthen preferences to make unnecessary trips to shop (Deslatte, 2020c).

However, we were also interested in the influence that issue communication frames have on trust in the messenger.

Messenger effects occur when individuals give greater weight to information provided by an authority figure or expert (Dolan et al., 2012; Hafner et al., 2019). In this

experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to either a control group or one of four messenger groups—President Donald Trump, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a “state and local government officials” messenger, or a public health professor from Johns Hopkins University. The choice of messengers was inspired from the real-life daily briefings of President Trump, his White House coronavirus task force members, and state and local government officials throughout the initial closing of the country in March 2020. After the communication framing treatment and a question gauging respondents’ preference to avoid unnecessary travel, they were then asked “Would you consider the source of the information on COVID-19 to be trustworthy?” A second question asked whether they considered the source “knowledgeable.” Responses were coded on a five-point scale (ranging from “not at all” *trustworthy/knowledgeable* to “extremely” *trustworthy/knowledgeable*). Of the respondents, 81.3% indicated that they found the messenger they received to be either “very” or “extremely” trustworthy, and 83.1% found it to be either “very” or “extremely” knowledgeable.

To examine the likely drivers of this view, we estimated two ordered logistic regression models. The models included the alternative messengers, interaction terms for the communication frame and the different messengers, and controls for political affiliation, a measure of governmental support, gender, race, income, education, age, and whether their state had enacted a shelter-in-place order at the time of the survey (29 states had done so by March 30).

The results are reported in Table 1. They indicate that public health messaging—as opposed to pro-economic messaging—increases perceptions of the trustworthiness and knowledgeability of governmental messengers.

The results are more easily interpreted by examining the marginal effects of the messenger–frame interactions. Figures 1 and 2 plot the moderating effects of the CDC and president as messengers, respectively. In Figure 1, the predicted probability of respondents who found the CDC messenger “extremely” trustworthy moves from .36 to .59 when the message is shifted from an economic issue frame to a pro-public health frame.

In Figure 2, the predicted probability of the President being “extremely” trustworthy demonstrates a similar climb, from .28 to .49, when the health frame is presented. These messengers received similar bumps in “knowledgeability” as well. Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents—who were in the midst of an unprecedented public health emergency—were able to discern a message intended to save lives versus preserve the economy, and they placed greater trust in messengers presenting the former. Moreover, the presence of a state shelter order is positively associated with greater trust, controlling for other factors. The trust boost is consistent across both state and local governments, as well as health experts.

**Table 1.** Ordered Logistic Regression Models for Trust and Knowledge.

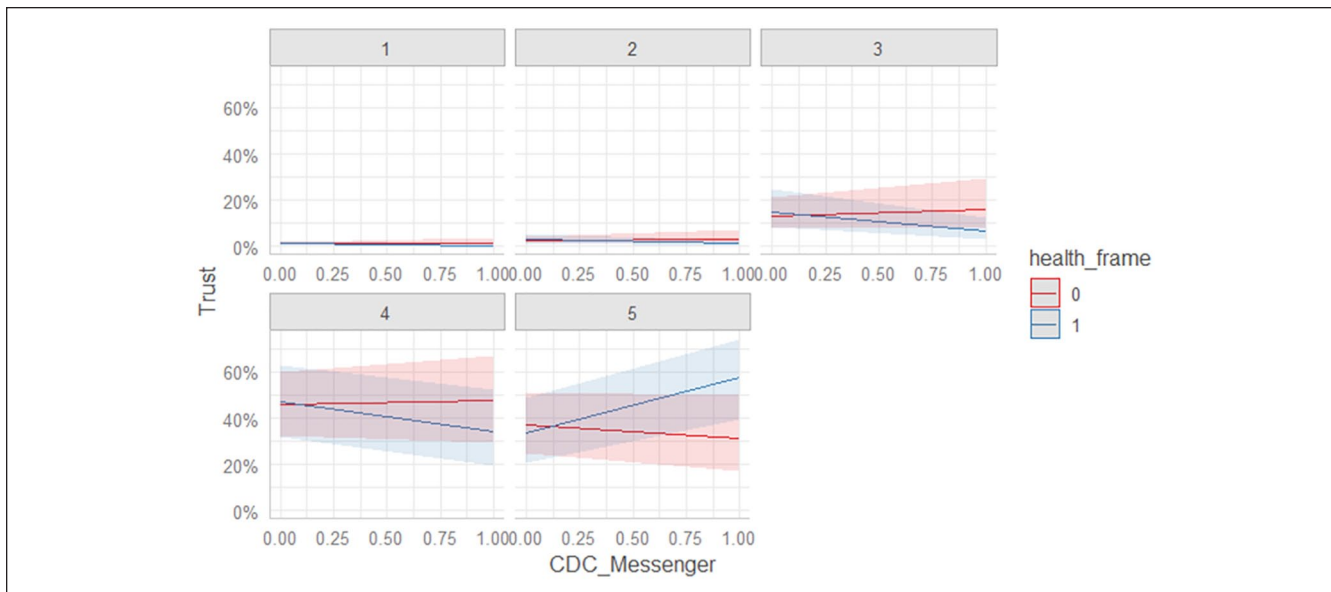
Trust model				
Parameters	Coeff. (SE)	z	95% CI	
CDC	-0.286 (0.226)	-1.27	[-0.729, 0.156]	
President	-0.546 (0.222)	-2.46	[-0.982, -0.11]	
State	-0.384 (0.223)	-1.73	[-0.821, 0.051]	
Expert	-0.175 (0.223)	-0.78	[-0.614, 0.263]	
Health frame	-0.69 (0.228)	-3.00	[-1.13, -0.237]	
CDC × Health frame	1.28 (0.333)	3.85	[0.631, 1.94]	
President × Health frame	1.04 (0.322)	3.25	[0.415, 1.67]	
State × Health frame	0.755 (0.327)	2.31	[0.113, 1.39]	
Expert × Health frame	0.748 (0.324)	2.31	[0.112, 1.38]	
Shelter	0.293 (0.128)	2.29	[0.042, 0.545]	
Job loss	0.176 (0.116)	1.52	[-0.05, 0.402]	
Gov. support	0.013 (0.002)	6.02	[0.009, 0.017]	
Gender	0.198 (0.106)	1.86	[-0.01, 0.407]	
%White	-0.03 (0.135)	-0.23	[-0.296, 0.233]	
Education	0.035 (0.041)	0.86	[-0.046, 0.117]	
%GOP	0.052 (0.128)	0.41	[-0.199, 0.305]	
Income	0.092 (0.027)	3.43	[0.039, 0.145]	
Obs.			1,346	
LR $\chi^2$			127.08	
$P > \chi^2$			.0000	
Pseudo $R^2$			.04	
Knowledge model				
Parameters	Coeff. (SE)	z	95% CI	
CDC	-0.259 (0.23)	-1.13	[-0.711, 0.191]	
President	-0.513 (0.223)	-2.30	[-0.951, -0.075]	
State	-0.415 (0.222)	-1.87	[-0.852, 0.02]	
Expert	-0.007 (0.226)	-0.03	[-0.451, 0.437]	
Health frame	-0.628 (0.232)	-2.71	[-1.08, -0.174]	
CDC × Health frame	1.38 (0.337)	4.11	[0.724, 2.04]	
Pres × Health frame	1.15 (0.326)	3.53	[0.513, 1.79]	
State × Health frame	0.585 (0.33)	1.77	[-0.063, 1.23]	
Expert × Health frame	0.711 (0.329)	2.16	[0.065, 1.35]	
Shelter	0.234 (0.129)	1.81	[-0.019, 0.487]	
Job loss	0.153 (0.116)	1.31	[-0.076, 0.382]	
Gov. support	0.014 (0.002)	6.61	[0.01, 0.018]	
Gender	0.241 (0.107)	2.24	[0.03, 0.451]	
%White	-0.114 (0.136)	-0.84	[-0.382, 0.152]	
Education	0.046 (0.04)	1.10	[-0.036, 0.13]	
%GOP	0.057 (0.129)	0.44	[-0.19, 0.31]	
Income	0.076 (0.027)	2.80	[0.022, 0.129]	
Obs.			1,346	
LR $\chi^2$			144.51	
$P > \chi^2$			.0000	
Pseudo $R^2$			.0475	

Note. CI = confidence interval; CDC = Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; GOP = Grand Old Party; LR = likelihood ratio.

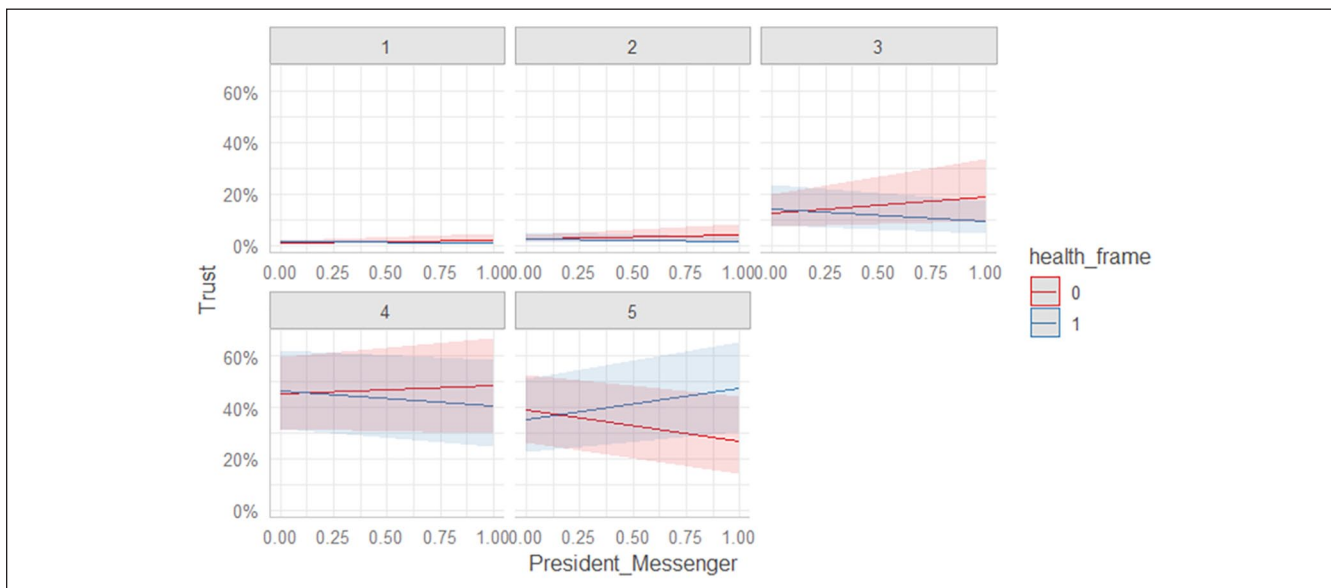
## Discussion and Conclusion: Speaking Truth to Power and People

We, as public administration scholars and practitioners, are still only in the early stages of this pandemic's social,

economic, and political life cycle. Its effects should—and likely will—fundamentally reshape the relationship between governments and citizens within the United States and around the world. The links between partisan identification, ideology, and pro-health behaviors in the COVID-19



**Figure 1.** A health frame had a positive effect on trust in the messenger. The predicted probability of respondents finding the CDC messenger “extremely” trustworthy (panel 5) moved from .36 to .59 when the message shifted from an economic issue frame (the red slope) to a pro-public health frame (blue slope).  
 Note. CDC = Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



**Figure 2.** Trust in President Donald Trump similarly increased from 28% to 49% when a public health frame is used compared with an economic frame.

pandemic are attracting significant scholarly attention across a range of disciplines (Adolph et al., 2020; Everett et al., 2020; Hamilton & Safford, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020). However, such partisan-motivated behavior is only one indicator of a larger disconnect. The hyperpartisan nature of American political discourse and resulting distrust of scientific and administrative expertise will continue to be a highly salient and normatively important topic for ongoing inquiry.

This is only one of multiple existential threats facing humanity, which require governmental capacity to act. The pandemic has produced inequality in human death and suffering, despite the efforts of hundreds of U.S. local governments to come to the aid of their low-income, minority, and immigrant communities.<sup>4</sup> Climate change is likely to further exacerbate these public health inequalities, through heat waves, disease, degrading air and water quality, flooding, sea level rise, and the

displacement of populations (Jones et al., 2020; Lopez & Sekaran, 2016). Questions about whether our federal system is up to the challenge are only going to grow louder as these threats multiply (Adolph et al., 2020; Haffajee & Mello, 2020; Perez & Ross, 2020b). Although thousands of local governments around the world, and hundreds within the United States, have started engaging in climate action, resilience or sustainability planning (Deslatte & Swann, 2020; Hawkins et al., 2016; Swann & Deslatte, 2019; Yi et al., 2017), hardly any of them attempts to identify social vulnerabilities within their jurisdictions. This is despite readily available tools such as the CDC's Social Vulnerability Index.<sup>5</sup>

States and the federal government have also seldom seen fit to empower local governments with the technical, managerial, and fiscal capacities necessary to tackle these problems (Tollefson, 2020). Extant research suggests that one of the fundamental ways for building organizational capacity is through problem-framing and stakeholder engagement (Deslatte, 2020b; Wang et al., 2014a, 2014b). Yet, this is often treated as the more eye-rolling and perfunctory part of local government strategic planning—the citizen engagement part.

Local governments need to do a better job at properly communicating the risks of future pandemics, floods, sea level rise, extreme heat, air pollution, and the myriad threats civilization faces as the earth's ecosystems continue to decline. Yes, they need to present a positive vision of what citizens and government can do to tackle these problems. However, they are more likely to build trust by being honest about where performance and preparedness are lagging. In one recent example from another trying time, consider the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) Program, which was funded as part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The program provided US\$3.2 billion to 2,187 state, local, and tribal governments and funded more than 7,400 energy efficiency projects. Launched in response to the Great Recession, the program produced a net job gain of 62,902 job years, avoided 25.7 million metric tons of carbon emissions, and led to US\$5.2 billion in total cumulative savings on energy bills (U.S. Department of Energy [U.S. DOE], 2015). It also helped hundreds of local governments take initial steps into sustainability through hiring staff and accruing expertise (Deslatte & Swann, 2020; Terman & Feiock, 2015). Despite this, research on the program found that local governments generally did a weak job of communicating these gains (Deslatte, 2020a). EECBG was not refunded and deemed a disappointment (Watson, 2020). The program succeeded, but the communication failed.

Public administrators can no longer be content playing the role of behind-the-scenes implementers of public policy. They need to be visible, communicate a reality-driven message to the public about risks and opportunities, and demonstrate competence (Newbold, 2011). Transparency may only have a loose coupling with trust in government (Cucciniello et al., 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Porumbescu, 2017); however, we have seen during the

pandemic how even the hint of its absence fuels the white noise of conspiracy theories and fake news.

No doubt, advocating for administrators to use their own bully pulpits is not an easy or novel prescription. Public managers have struggled for decades with how to discuss “the administrative state,” public service, and organizational needs without conjuring images of governmental bloat, overreach, or incompetence (Roberts, 2020). Messaging strategies can produce differing impacts for engaged and disinterested citizens (Piotrowski et al., 2019). Communication strategies can also be perceived as “spin” and backfire when governments pursue them too aggressively (Cucciniello et al., 2017).

Despite the evidence that citizens, politicians, and managers are biased information processors, the argument that public administrators should speak up rests on the inevitability of future pandemics, disasters, and the calamitous consequences of climate change. Existential is the new normal. We have no other choice but to adapt via our expertise, experience, the best available science, technological innovations, and yes, public administration. Leveling with communities about these threats and the shared sacrifices required to meet them is itself a public service, a form of engagement that is long past due.

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### Notes

1. <https://chomsky.info/20100603/>
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/world/asia/coronavirus-risk-interpreter.html>
3. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RF8HKP>
4. <https://covid19.nlc.org/resources/covid-19-local-action-tracker/>
5. <https://svi.cdc.gov/>

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