If Trump took responsibility for coronavirus missteps, it might actually help him.

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By David Ryan Miller and Andrew Reeves

As the coronavirus pandemic worsens in the United States, governors and other observers have been criticizing the federal response — and President Trump has been deflecting blame. On March 13, after a reporter asked him if he would take responsibility for a lack of tests, he said, "I don't take responsibility at all, because we were given a — a set of circumstances and … rules, regulations, and specifications from a different time."

A few days later, New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) spoke to the state's residents about complaints that his office had closed bars and restaurants for St. Patrick's Day and beyond. Cuomo told his constituents, "The buck stops on my desk. Your local mayor did not close your restaurants, your bars, your gyms or your schools. I did. I did. I assume full responsibility."

Traditional theories in political science suggest politicians should avoid taking blame lest they lose popular support. Even Machiavelli warned, "[P]rinces should have anything blamable administered by others, favors by themselves." By contrast, Harry S. Truman promoted the idea that, for executive officials like presidents, governors and mayors, "the buck stops here."

Which strategy is most effective — avoiding blame or taking responsibility?

Answering that question is difficult. The details of each crisis are unique. Accepting responsibility for closing bars and restaurants — and thus slowing a disease's spread — may have different implications than accepting responsibility for failing to supply the same tests for a pandemic — and thus failing to slow that same disease.

But survey experiments help us isolate the effect of leaders' public responses to crises. In studies, we found that in a crisis, avoiding blame is not the best way to maintain public support. Truman, not Machiavelli, offers leaders the better approach for turbulent times like the present.

Our experimental studies gauged the public response of what we call "blame claiming" and "blame deflecting" — the two strategies described above. "Blame claiming" is when a politician takes responsibility for something that's gone wrong. "Blame deflecting" is when a leader points the finger at someone or something else, particularly bureaucrats.

Citizens often form opinions of leaders based on party; Democrats think more highly of Democratic leaders while Republicans think more highly of Republican leaders. But they also evaluate their leaders' character traits. Learning whether a leader is competent or trustworthy can influence citizens' thoughts about that leader, above and beyond partisanship — especially during and after a crisis. When leaders deflect blame, the public sees them as evasive and unreliable. But if leaders instead accept responsibility for the government's role in the crisis, the public views them as honest brokers willing to own mistakes.

The power of claiming blame

In one study, we examined public reaction to former Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's statements about the Flint water crisis. We surveyed an online convenience sample of 851 people through Amazon's Mechanical Turk in March 2016, near the height of the crisis. In our survey, we described Snyder's response upon learning that Flint's supply of drinking water was contaminated with lead. Our descriptions drew from the actual public statements that the Republican governor had recently made.

We divided our respondents into four groups, each of whom read a short description of the crisis. One group read statements Snyder made in which he stated "the buck stops here with me" and took "full responsibility to fix the problem." A second group read a statement that a task force had blamed the crisis on the state director in charge of water quality, noting he had been appointed by the governor. The third group also read a statement about the task force blaming the state director, but this one noted instead that the director was an expert. A fourth group read a description of the crisis that did not mention blame or responsibility at all.

Our results indicate that claiming blame was the most effective strategy. In the groups where the task force shifted blame, Snyder's approval rating was 2 or 3 points higher than in the group that read the blame-neutral description. But respondents who read descriptions in which Snyder claimed responsibility approved of his performance by 23 points more than the baseline. This was even though in our descriptions the task force and not Snyder himself shifted the blame.

In four more studies, respondents read hypothetical scenarios in which governors or mayors offered public statements accepting or deflecting blame for crises like a deadly heat wave, flooding, a collapsed bridge and a fiscal shortfall. One of our studies used a nationally representative sample of over 1,900 people via The American Panel Survey (TAPS), a monthly panel survey that Washington University conducted from 2011 to 2018. The other three studies used online convenience samples of nearly 900 people through Mechanical Turk.

For example, in one of our scenarios, a devastating flood dumps several feet of water that trap citizens in their homes. We split our respondents into three groups, each of whom read a brief summary of the crisis. In the blame-neutral summary, the mayor pledges to "review the city's procedures" for severe weather. In the "blame claim" summary, the mayor also "accepts blame for his role in failing to anticipate" the devastating flood. In the "blame deflect" summary, the mayor "denies responsibility" and blames the city's emergency management agency.

Once again, across all these experiments, the leaders who accepted blame had an approval rating that was between 29 and 42 points higher than those deflecting blame. Respondents similarly said they'd be likely (or unlikely) to vote for these hypothetical officials in about the same percentages.

What this means for the coronavirus pandemic

Of course, our study has some limitations. Right now, the pandemic is hurting Americans in their daily lives — socially, financially and in some cases medically. Those who took our survey suffered nothing. Accepting blame for decisions currently causing real harm may reduce the respect and approval that can come from claiming responsibility.

In one of the United States' national myths, George Washington accepts responsibility for having chopped down a cherry tree — a story that's held up as a sign of how deeply honorable our founding president was. Our research finds that leaders who claim the blame for their governments' performance when crises strike also can reap rewards.

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