

Research Proposal

Outcome-Based Evaluation of Leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Empirical Study

Callum Clarke

Supervised by **Dr Margherita Negri** and **Dr Luc Bridet**

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has amounted to drastic change in every area of life, ranging from the observable to the unobservable. Through this project, I aim to conclude whether the unobservable changes extend to the polling booth, testing the hypothesis that the pandemic has created changes in individuals' evaluation of political leadership.

II. Methodology

This will be an empirical project applying statistical methods to real-world data. I will first identify a sample of world leaders that have stood in a minimum of two *completed* elections, one prior to and one during the pandemic. Several variables specific to the leader will then be calculated including standard measures of economic performance (GDP, unemployment, inflation etc), and measures of their personal ability such as education level.

These variables will then be regressed against a measure of the leader's electoral performance in order to identify correlation between the leader standing for election during the pandemic and their vote count. I will then incorporate further measures of performance – such as pandemic death tolls, infection rates and vaccination numbers at the time of election (all relative to population) – to identify further trends in voting behaviour.

On completion of the preliminary regressions, further statistical methods will be applied to similar datasets – however the direction of the project at this point is dependent upon its initial results.

III. Hypotheses

At the outset of this project, it is my expectation that there exists weak negative correlation between an election occurring in the pandemic and the leader's electoral performance – that is to say, a tendency for voters to turn against the incumbent at the polling booth. I also anticipate that the extent of this shift will be associated with the leader's handling of COVID-19 spread, i.e., their country's death rates, infection rates and vaccination rates.

I also expect that countries that have faced harsher (or longer) lockdown protocols will have a greater tendency to vote in favour of the incumbent, or a greater prominence of Mueller's *rally 'round the flag* syndrome¹ whereby political leaders see greater popularity in international crises. This effect may extend to all aspects of leadership (and disprove my first hypothesis), however I believe that this will only apply to leaders seen as *active*, meaning those enforcing lockdowns and controlling infection rates.

¹ Mueller, John E. "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson." *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 1 (1970): 18-34