

DRAMATISING CRISIS

Rhetorical Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic by Right-Wing Populist Leaders in the USA and UK

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Abstract – Building on the theoretical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper examines the rhetorical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic of two right-wing populist leaders whose management of the emergency has been viewed as controversial, namely former American President Donald J. Trump and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Through the critical examination of a dataset of speeches, press conferences and social media posts, and focusing on the discursive strategies employed in framing the pandemic, attributing responsibility, people-building, and policy-making, our study reveals that through different trajectories, the two leaders attempted to exploit the emergency to perform a “crisis within the crisis” in the typical populist style to serve their political interests, based on Moffitt’s (2015) framework. In his trademark style, Trump used the pandemic as a stage to call out and blame multiple enemies both at home (the Congress, the media) and abroad (China). On the other hand, Johnson, who, unlike Trump, did not lend an ear to conspiratorial thinking but still initially minimised the extent of the danger, framed the pandemic as the fight of a nation “walking alone” in a nationalist sense.

Keywords: right-wing populism; political rhetoric; COVID-19; crisis; metaphor; Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that spread exponentially across the globe, starting from January 2020, causing 540 million confirmed cases and more than 6 million deaths (WHO 2022a),¹ has been an unprecedented event whose dramatic impact in terms of human casualties² and economic recession will be felt over the long term. Despite not being the only pandemic that has hit the world in recent times (Snowden 2019), COVID-19 flared up and

¹ WHO data last updated as of June 2022.

² Based on recent WHO data (of May 2022) on excess mortality attributable to the pandemic, the global number of deaths directly or indirectly associated with COVID-19 may be closer to 14.9 million (WHO 2022b).

spread, taking advantage of the unpreparedness of modern societies (Nuñez Garcia Sauco 2020), thus exposing the weaknesses and fragmentation of our globalised world (Ritzer, Dean 2015) where constant social interconnectedness and increasing isolation coexist at multiple levels (Bauman 2012).

As an occurrence beyond the control of every actor, a pandemic is arguably one of the most severe and complex forms of crisis due to the range and depths of its possible effects and requires an immediate response to mitigate its impact (Coman *et al.* 2021). The role of leadership is thus paramount in taking the necessary decisions to tackle the situation, media management, framing the narrative (Coman *et al.* 2021; Lakoff 2014), and effectively communicating policies to the different groups of actors involved (Kahn 2020).

Kahn (2020) outlines two basic leadership models during crises: *The Politician Prominence Model* and *The Expert Appointee Model*. The former sees leaders accepting advice from experts but retaining primary decision-making and public communication role. By contrast, the latter presupposes delegation of primary decision-making and public communication to an expert committee while providing political support for general decisions. *The Politician Prominence Model* fosters personalisation of leadership and involves taking personal control of the situation, while the second model features a broad range of spokespersons selected based on their expertise.

Furthermore, owing to their role and preferential access to public fora, and thus to the minds of the public at large, political leaders may easily “establish common values, aims and concerns; [...] formulate common sense as well as the consensus, both as individuals and as leaders of the dominant institutions of society” (van Dijk 2002, p. 148). Therefore, language, as the primary instrument of political action (Edelman 1977; ‘t Hart 1993; Lorenzetti 2018), is essential in constructing the crisis, shaping collective conscience, fostering understanding, and creating a sense of shared social identity (Jetten *et al.* 2020), which in turn favours behavioural change aligned with policy measures (Ajzen 1988), while facilitating the acceptance of sacrifices (Edelman 1964, 1977). Conversely, failure to provide a clear message or develop a strong narrative of national unity may lead to uncertainty, causing people to look for alternative sources of information and eventually jeopardise the expected response (Greenaway 2020).

Due to the inherent heterogeneity of current populist outlets across the globe and the political spectrum (Mudde 2004), no uniform response by populist actors to the COVID-19 pandemic can be identified (Lilleker *et al.* 2020; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis 2020; Wondreys, Mudde 2020), nor is it possible to claim incompetence by populist leaders *tout court* in managing the crisis (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis 2020). However, political ideology and

partisanship often influenced how some right-wing populist leaders rhetorically framed the crisis and responded to it, at times contributing to the spread of coronavirus-related conspiracy theories by building their appeal on the indirect association with them (Papaioannou *et al.* 2022; Sutton, Douglas 2020) or fostering distrust of science (Boseley *et al.* 2018; Kennedy 2019; van Zoonen 2012). Moreover, such unclear narratives affected how citizens perceived the virus in many parts of the world (Bieber 2020).

This paper investigates the rhetorical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic of two right-wing populist leaders whose management of the emergency has been viewed as controversial, namely former American President Donald J. Trump and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Bieber 2020; Gardini 2020; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis 2020; Timsit 2021; Wondreys, Mudde 2020).

On a political level, the pandemic proved to be a disruptive element for both leaders at a moment when the focus of each of them was on prosperity and crucial future plans for their political career and country. When COVID-19 surfaced around the world in February 2020, Trump had just delivered a very optimistic State of the Union Address which included no mention of the virus already circulating Europe and the US. Instead, he boasted about the purported economic successes of his Administration, paving the way for his re-election campaign later that year. At the same time, the United Kingdom, following the referendum on EU membership in June 2016, was in the process of negotiating the terms for its planned withdrawal from the EU, a topic which had dominated the media debate in the last few years, and which was the desired outcome for Leavers, the faction of Johnson's Conservative Party.

Building on both the theoretical lens of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 2001, 2002; Wodak 2015) and conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff 2014; Lakoff, Johnson 1980) and starting from the two leaders' initial common downplaying of the virus, this work intends to examine how they discursively addressed the pandemic situation, in terms of a) responsibility attribution b) cohesion-creating strategies and c) policy-making. Moreover, it will unveil recurrent patterns and differences and observe whether the similarity in populist style (Moffitt 2016) that the two leaders exhibited through coarse language, aggressive rhetoric and disregard for political and socio-cultural norms is reflected to the same extent in their rhetorical responses to COVID-19.

This study complements and corroborates existing works on the strategic politicisation of crisis (Bennett 2019; Forchtner, Özvatan 2022; Zappettini, Krzyżanowski 2019) and the growing body of work on COVID-19 and metaphor (Charteris-Black 2021; Filardo-Llamas 2021; Olza *et al.* 2021; Semino 2020).

The analysis, based on a dataset of speeches, press conferences and social media posts, reveals that through different trajectories and across different genres of communication, the two leaders attempted to exploit the emergency to perform a crisis within the crisis in the typical populist style, to opportunistically serve their political interests (‘t Hart 1993; Moffitt 2015) and preserve the *status quo*. Although the two leaders emphasised different issues that resonate within the political culture in which they operate, after the initial similarity in the stance adopted and the vague downplaying of the virus’s significance, they exploited and dramatised the crisis as a discursive tool of self-promotion and self-legitimation (Chilton 2004; ‘t Hart 1993; van Leeuwen 2008). In his trademark style, Trump strategically used the pandemic as a stage to call out and blame multiple enemies both at home (the Congress, the media) and abroad (China). By contrast, unlike Trump, Johnson did not lend an ear to conspiratorial thinking, still initially minimised the extent of the danger and later framed the pandemic as the fight of a nation “walking alone” in a nationalist sense.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 introduces the core features of populism and right-wing populism, justifying the inclusion of Trump and Johnson among right-wing populist leaders, and presents Moffitt’s (2015) framework for discussing the relationship between populism and crisis. Section 3 outlines Conceptual Metaphor Theory and van Dijk’s socio-cognitive framework as the two main theoretical approaches informing this research. Section 4 presents the data and research methodology. Further, Section 5 puts forward the analysis of the rhetorical responses to COVID-19 by the two politicians in two distinct sub-sections. Finally, in Section 6, conclusions are outlined with a discussion and comparison of the relevant findings.

2. The core features of right-wing populism

Populism is pervasive across electoral cleavages. According to the ideational approach³ (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017; Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), which captures the essence of the phenomenon as a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview, in the populist argumentative frame, ‘the people’ is engaged in a Manichean contrast with an enemy alleged to have dishonoured a historically, culturally, or geographically constituted people (Lee 2006).

³ For an analysis of populism over time, across geographical areas and electoral appeals, see Canovan (1981); Panizza (2005) and Taggart (2000, 2002).

As an ideology, populism is defined as thin-centred (Freeden 1996; Mudde 2004), that is restricted to a narrow core and unable to offer comprehensive solutions for the full spectrum of societal problems that full-fledged ideologies (e.g., fascism, socialism) typically provide. Hence, it seldom exists in its pure form but borrows elements from other more stable and complex ideologies. The formation of the different types of populism stems from a) the combination of the thin-centred ideology with a host one, b) the selection of a specific enemy (typically the economic elite, the government, or immigrants) and c) the sense of ‘the people’⁴ placed in the foreground.

‘The people’ is inherently a construction, an empty signifier (Laclau 2005b), an unachievable totality that is addressed and “rendered present” (Arditi 2007) through a performative act of naming (Austin 1962) in a way that appeals to different constituencies at the same time. Three basic senses of ‘the people’ have been identified, which are often blended together (Canovan 1999):

- The people as sovereign, i.e., the political community as a whole.
- The people as a nation defined in either civic or ethnic terms.
- The ordinary people, defined by socioeconomic status, against the establishment.

Left-wing populism and right-wing populism emerge from the different interplay of these elements. Both are inherently anti-elitist and exploit the gap between promise and performance intrinsic to all liberal democracies to strengthen the right of the people to exercise their power. However, left-wing populists fight against inequalities in society and aim to empower ordinary people and involve them in the direct political-making process (Stavrakakis 2014). They emphasise a pyramidal view of society based on the UP/DOWN dimension, where the people at the bottom of the social scale (DOWN) as underdogs are set against a powerful antagonist (TOP). Conversely, right-wing populism stresses a nuclear view of society predominantly founded on the IN/OUT dimension, i.e., who rightfully belongs to the people as opposed to outsiders in a nativist sense (Lorenzetti 2020, p. 102). Hence, whereas left-wing populism embraces an inclusive view of society (Katsambekis 2017), right-wing populism champions nativism, and traditional body politics, emphasising cultural issues (Mudde 2019) and the need to defend an idealised homogenous community from the perceived threat of outsiders. Moreover, its defence of ‘the people’ is predicated on the exclusion of ‘the other’ and the instrumentalisation of political minorities as scapegoats for all

⁴ For an overview of the senses of *the people*, Latin *populus*, and Greek *dēmos*, see Lorenzetti (2016).

societal woes in an ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ fashion (Mondon, Winter 2020; Wodak 2015).

Right-wing populist parties, Mudde (2019) argues, have become increasingly mainstreamed in the last two decades when sociocultural issues and the so-called identity politics started to dominate the political debate in the wake of specific political events, like the rise of jihadist terrorism and the so-called refugee crisis. This process also produced the radicalisation of mainstream parties moving towards the right, especially on the issues of immigration and integration, eventually leading to increasingly fuzzy boundaries between right-wing populism and mainstream right and the resurfacing of racism and discriminatory discourse hidden behind liberal themes like free speech, political correctness, gender, and LGBTQ+ rights (Mondon, Winter 2020; Wodak 2015).

Combining *laissez-faire* liberalism with anti-elitism, populists often envisage some conspiracy between the political establishment and some dangerous others at the expense of the people. However, anti-elitism may also be directed against the scientific community, viewed as an untrustworthy and unlegitimised elite class (Motta 2018), threatening the people’s social identities (Merkley, Loewen 2021). Populists typically embrace anti-intellectualism since “the plain sense of the common man [...] is an altogether adequate substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise acquired in the schools” (Hofstadter 1963, p. 19). Conversely, they often promote a rhetoric of common sense and an arrogance of ignorance made by simplifying complex issues through stereotyping.

Antagonism between the populist worldview and scientific evidence has been indicated in the last few years as the source of climate change denial (De Pryck, Gemenne 2017; Lahsen 2013) and vaccine hesitancy (Kennedy 2019). Moreover, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become even more salient due to the role of scientific knowledge as the basis for policy decisions, the increasing media visibility of virologists, epidemiologists and other experts, and the fact that many policies, especially at the outset of the emergency have seemed “elite-driven-top-down policies with lower levels of parliamentary debate” (Eberl *et al.* 2021, p. 274).

Emphasising the centrality of leadership and the increasingly mediatised character of populist actors, who skillfully exploit the affordances of the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2003), where traditional and new media coexist, to construct their own public and private *persona* (Strömbäck 2008; van Aelst *et al.* 2012) to be competitive in a permanent campaigning environment, Moffitt (2016) outlines his framework of populism as a political style. Performance, he argues, has become a central element of politics and is “embodied, and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts” (p. 3). Populists do not simply rely on divisive rhetoric, seeking to blame a

designated ‘other’; they also utilise a sophisticated repertoire of performative tools to underline their role as outsiders or their radical status. Combined with the other typical traits of populism, one of the crucial elements of populism as a political style is reliance on bad manners, a broad category in which Moffitt (2016) conflates the disregard for appropriateness, the usage of a direct, uninhibited, and coarse language, calculated provocations and violations of socio-cultural and political norms, coupled with increasing personalisation in the name of “getting things done”, or the “antagonistic flaunting of the sociocultural low” (Ostiguy, Roberts 2016).

Neither Trump, a wealthy entrepreneur and celebrity, nor Johnson, a former Eton pupil with a career including journalism, a parliamentary role, the appointment as London’s mayor and head of government, can successfully claim to be “men of the people”. However, Trump exhibits many prototypical traits of the right-wing populist leader, including a divisive ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ rhetoric, scapegoating of ethnic minorities, discriminatory and racist overtones, and disregard for political correctness (Lorenzetti 2020; Ross, Rivers 2020) with his ‘gut-feeling’ tweeting often rooted in informal and anti-intellectual language. Johnson, by contrast, does not meet all the prototypical criteria of a populist (Canovan 1981; Mudde 2004; Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). He rarely speaks of an evil elite damaging the people. However, his willingness to embrace a no-deal Brexit fulfilling the people’s will matches Mudde’s (2004) definition. His main populist traits are the simplification of the political debate and his unconventional manners. Margulies (2019) argues that Johnson exhibits the characteristics of a maverick *persona*. Following Barr (2009), a maverick is defined as an unconventional politician with a rebellious attitude who rises to prominence within an established party and either abandons it to compete as an independent or radically reshapes the party. Mavericks critically seek to distinguish themselves from the mainstream “by adopting a performative strategy in which they are consistently seen to be breaking the rules” (Flinders 2019, pp. 237). His distracting dramaturgy of buffoonery and exaggeration is a carefully stage-crafted strategy that constantly attracts the media’s attention while simultaneously preventing in-depth discussions of policy-related issues. In this respect, it can be argued that, although populist leaders adapt their content from their host culture, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson display consistent similarities and embody two variations of the same overarching populist style.

Another essential element of populist style in Moffitt’s (2016) account is crisis performance. Due to its centrality in the rhetorical responses of the right-wing populist leaders analysed to the COVID-19 pandemic, this topic will be discussed in the following subsection.

2.1. Right-wing populism and the performance of crisis

Crisis is one of the most widely debated concepts in political science and an ineluctable part of the human condition (Mitroff 2004). It may refer to a highly transformative moment or “times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense” (OED 2022). From a symbolic action perspective (Edelman 1964, 1971, 1977), a crisis entails “the breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimating the pre-existing socio-political order” (‘t Hart 1993, pp. 39) due to some disruption or exogenous event.

The connection between populism and crisis is commonplace in the relevant literature (Bennett 2019; Forchtner, Özvatan 2022; Laclau 2005a; Taggart 2000; Zappettini, Krzyżanowski 2019; Zaslove 2008), and populism has been canonically viewed as thriving in moments of crisis (of values, of democracy, of political parties, or more generally, periods of economic recession or political turmoil). However, whilst this connection is presented as a general tendency, crisis is usually conceived as an external trigger or a precondition of populism, and the link between the two has often been taken for granted and underdeveloped (Moffitt 2015).

Despite their contingent nature, however, crises are also perceptual categories that exist as social constructions (Bennett 2019) in which the understanding of societal symbolic objects of reference is called into question via practices of recontextualisation that, in turn, may bring about processes of legitimation and delegitimation (‘t Hart 1993). Moreover, crises offer “dramaturgic opportunities” of exploitation that can be capitalised upon by leaders and have a bearing on agenda management dynamics as they present simplified forms of communication that may affect the articulation of demands, the representation of the crisis itself and the early stages of policy formulation (‘t Hart 1993).

In the last few years, Moffitt critically revisited the idea of crisis as an external trigger of populism, arguing that not all the current populist phenomena across the globe fit this idea. Conversely, he stressed that, in many ways, populist discourse is not merely a response to a pre-existing crisis but also an active (performative) creator of crisis at the level of representation, where its defining characteristics are socially and discursively constructed (Moffitt 2015, 2016). Populists, he argues, actively take part in the “spectacularization of failure”, that is, the elevation of failure to crisis, stressing the necessity to act at once. In such a process, they exacerbate divisions between ‘the people’ and the alleged dangerous others responsible for the crisis, offering simple solutions and legitimating their strong leadership.

Edelman (1971) argued that “people who are anxious and confused are eager to be supplied with an organized political order—including simple

explanations of the threats they fear—and with reassurances that the threats are being countered” (p. 65) while elsewhere he observed that it is common for many people not to tolerate complex situations, and prefer simplification, stereotypes and personalisation, especially in times of insecurity (Edelman 1964). The COVID-19 pandemic is precisely the kind of situation where people are more likely to look for a clear explanation of how to respond to it.

Moffitt (2015) indicates several steps of the populist performance of crisis, namely:

1. *Identity failure*, in which attention is drawn to a given failure as a matter of urgency.
2. *Elevate the level of crisis, by linking it into a broader framework and adding a temporal dimension*, where through mediated performance, the failure is framed within a broader context and related to a set of other alleged symptoms, stressing the need for immediate action.
3. *Frame the people versus those responsible for the crisis*, leading to the demonisation of specific social groups.
4. *Use media to propagate performance*. This step focuses on how populist actors exploit media affordances and their role as outsiders to promote and propagate a sense of crisis. Nowadays, the new hybrid media ecology enables them to pursue a double communicative strategy. On the one hand, they still rely on the visibility and ensuing popularity assured by the coverage of professional mass media, as they benefit from their newsworthy role as outsiders. On the other, social media platforms allow them to bypass the role of journalists or any gate-keepers to create a (seemingly) direct connection with the people, uncontestedly articulate their ideology (Engesser *et al.* 2017), and spread contents thanks to the logic of virality (Klinger, Svensson 2015).
5. *Present simple solutions and strong leadership*. Populist actors use several performative techniques to present themselves as saviours in times of perceived crisis, ranging from portraying opponents as incompetents to offering straightforward solutions with a focus on action (as opposed to empty words) with the intent to single out a culprit to blame.
6. *Continue to propagate crisis*, where the sense of precarity is perpetuated by reframing and extending the purview of the crisis. This may also have the function of deflecting attention and distracting the audience from the current problems (Ross, Rivers 2018).

These steps, we contend, are of crucial importance to explain the rhetorical responses of the two leaders analysed in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Our data indicate that, even in the downplaying of the pandemic crisis, both Trump and Johnson rhetorically exploited the situation to aggravate the sense of societal crisis and legitimise their leadership.

3. Polarised discourse from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective

The spread of misleading and untrustworthy information, including misinformation, disinformation (Wung *et al.* 2019), and fake news (Li, Su 2020; Ross, Rivers 2018) on both social media and other media channels, despite the different intent entailed by these labels,⁵ has the potential to polarise public opinion, and exacerbate existing tensions in society. The more so, when the propagation of false information concerns sensitive and high-impact fields like politics or health during a pandemic emergency, leading even the WHO to warn against an infodemic (Eysenbach 2002, 2020); or when false, inaccurate, or misleading information (either with malicious intent or not) is conveyed by political leaders with a bully pulpit through which they can reach a wider audience via traditional media coverage and social media (Papaioannou *et al.* 2022).

Claims that SARS-CoV-2, responsible for COVID-19, was artificially created in a China lab, blaming specific countries for its massive spread, or suggesting unproven therapeutic methods to cure the disease effectively, have the potential to manipulate the audience, illegitimately influencing them through discourse (van Dijk 2006). However, the label *misleading information* in a broad sense may also refer to conveying oversimplified or distorted interpretations of very complex phenomena or providing vague and straightforward solutions to them in an attempt to conceal some of their controversial aspects. Such moves may have a system-justifying function of supporting the *status quo* by redirecting the public attention towards some purported wrongdoers to blame, deflecting blame from society's problems and distracting from genuine threats (Jolley *et al.* 2018). Moreover, using stereotyped representations based on essentialist and prescriptive assumptions to depict foreign countries or people creates and reinforces symbolic boundaries across cultures (Pickering 2001) and may intensify hate speech and discrimination in society (van Dijk 2002; van Leeuwen, Wodak 1999).

⁵ *Disinformation* refers to false, incomplete, or misleading information spread with a malevolent intent. On the contrary, the term *misinformation* is typically employed to describe false information disseminated without the intent to deceive the addressee (Wung *et al.* 2019). The term *fake news* has a more complex history. In the 19th century it was applied to yellow journalism and sensational news (Li, Su 2020), while in the 1990s it started to be used to describe televised comedic programs devoted to political satire (i.e. *The Daily Show*) (Ross, Rivers 2018). The term rose to prominence with new nuances during the 2016 American Presidential Election, when it was weaponised by Donald J. Trump in his negative portrayal of news media. In the current understanding of the term, the expression refers to news that is either wholly false or contains deliberately misleading elements. However, Li and Su (2020) point out that, given its deployment in different partisan contexts with a consequent negative attribution, the term can now be considered a “floating signifier” (Laclau 2005a).

Through their mediatised institutional role, politicians have the power to exert a strong influence on the beliefs and actions of citizens (van Dijk 2002, 2013). Moreover, during an emergency, they are also the preferential source of information for the citizens and are assumed to set the example regarding policy measures (Kahn 2020; Lilleker *et al.* 2020).

This study sets itself within the Critical Discourse Analysis research paradigm, which sees politics and political discourse as social practices and aims at systematically investigating power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse and unveiling the role that the micro-level structures of discourse may play in such reproduction of power, dominance, and inequality at the macro-level (Chilton 2004; Fairclough 2010; van Dijk 1993, 2001; Wodak 2015).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff, Johnson 1980) and van Dijk's (2002, 2006, 2013) socio-cognitive framework inform our analysis of the rhetorical response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the discourse of the two right-wing populist leaders, Donald J. Trump and Boris Johnson.

In CMT, metaphors are structuring principles of thought that organise most of our experiences through mappings,⁶ creating ontological correspondences between entities from one familiar (source) domain and those from an unfamiliar (target) knowledge domain, and language presents evidence of the metaphorical nature of our conceptual system (Lakoff 2008; Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

Van Dijk's approach studies the relationship between discourse and society, arguing that it is cognitively mediated. In his framework, social and discourse structures can only be related through the mental representations of language users, in both their roles as individuals and as social beings. In this line of research, the linguistic structures of texts that contribute to their discursive component are interpreted and explained in terms of underlying, socially shared beliefs and ideologies, considering how they influence people's mental models (van Dijk 2002, 2006, 2013). Finally, the extent to which and how such discourses and their underlying cognitions are socially and politically functional in the (re)production and spread of ideological polarisation is investigated.

Van Dijk (2002, 2006, 2013) outlines several linguistic and discursive dimensions in which the system of domination can be linguistically enacted:

⁶ An example of metaphorical mapping is LOVE IS A JOURNEY, that goes from the source domain JOURNEY to the more abstract target domain LOVE, thereby creating ontological correspondences between entities such as travellers, vehicles, or destinations with lovers, relationship, or relationship difficulties. In CMT, mappings are conventionally written in capital letters with the mapping from source to target domain being presented in the reverse order, as TARGET IS SOURCE (Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

- At the macro speech-act level, with a focus on positive acts related to the in-group and the negative ones of the out-group.
- At the level of topic selection, with an emphasis on positive topics about the in-group coupled with a focus on negative topics about the out-group.
- At the micro-level of discourse, where positively connoted words are selected to talk about ‘us’ while pejorative words are chosen for ‘them’.
- At the syntactic level, de-emphasising negative acts by oneself while drawing attention to the opponent’s acts.
- At the global level of schemata or frames (Fillmore 1982), narrative argumentation is tailored to reinforce the dominant ideology. Frames are unconscious and often automatic mental structures that enable us to understand reality and shape our ideas and concepts. All words are associated with conceptual frames, which, in turn, depend critically on deep frames entrenched in our minds and constitute our moral worldview, shaping our ideas of what is morally right and wrong. The more they are activated through word repetition and reinforced, the more they become entrenched in people’s minds, pre-empting the activation of the opposite frame, blocking relevant concerns if those concerns are outside the scope of the frame, eventually constraining people’s worldview (Lakoff 2006, 2014).
- At the rhetorical level, devices such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, euphemism, and irony are highly effective in underlining the ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ dichotomy leading to the emergence of specific mappings. Metaphor is undoubtedly the most widely employed rhetorical figure and is particularly effective in political discourse. Not only is it used to simplify and make issues more intelligible, stir emotions and bridge the gap between the logical and the emotional, but, Charteris-Black (2011) argues, it is also effective for its ability to resonate with latent symbolic representations at our unconscious level. Moreover, it frames the debate, thus setting the political agenda (Lakoff 2014), and contributes to the formation of covert ideologies through myth-making by offering persuasive representations of social groups and social issues.

4. Data presentation and methodology

For the purpose of investigating the rhetorical response to COVID-19 of former American President Donald J. Trump and current United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson, two corpora were created, which include public speeches and press conferences of the two leaders about the COVID-19 pandemic, or in which the pandemic was one of the macro-topics. The

texts were retrieved from the Miller Center Archive of US Presidential Speeches and the UK Government website. In addition, tweets from the two accounts, @realDonaldTrump and @BorisJohnson, were collected by querying for specific keywords, namely *covid*, *coronavirus*, *virus*, *pandemic*, *emergency* and *crisis*, excluding retweets. The period under investigation ranged between February 2020 and November 2020. Each corpus includes approximately 40.000 words, and taken together with the tweets, the data available offer an overview of the stance adopted by the two leaders.

While the paper adopts a qualitative methodology, in order to keep the two corpora balanced from a quantitative point of view, the time frame goes up to November 2020. This choice does not merely have to do with the changing political situation following the election of Joe Biden as the new American President but is also practical. In January 2021, Trump's social media accounts, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, were permanently suspended, and the previous data was made unavailable except on other web repositories following the Capitol Hill riots by a mob of Trump's supporters and his accusation of having fomented the protests. Data from Trump's past tweets were thus searched through the Trump's Twitter Archive.

A few remarks are in order to clarify the choice of including data from Twitter in the analysis. Social media have proven strategic for populist politicians to increase their visibility, stress their message and reach a broader and diversified target audience while engaging in permanent campaigning (Engesser *et al.* 2017). It is since Donald Trump's 2016 campaign that their role as a new arena for political propaganda has become undisputed.

Trump constantly relied on Twitter as a preferred channel over press conferences due to his disdain for the alleged "fake news media" (see Footnote 5) since his 2015 candidacy. As President, he kept using his private account to disseminate his ideology in a coarse and straightforward language (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy, Roberts 2016), while media channels constantly reported his tweets as news (Demata 2018).

In turn, as a media-savvy journalist, Boris Johnson is well aware of the strategic role of social media platforms in maximising political consensus, primarily since much of the Brexit political campaigning revolved around them (Brändle *et al.* 2021). As a result, his account regularly reports his activities as Prime Minister conjointly with his official Downing Street account, while he also relies on Twitter to increase visibility and spread his ideology through simple hashtags like #GetBrexitDone, #Stayathome, or #BuildBackBetter.

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology combining insights from van Dijk's (2002, 2006, 2013) socio-cognitive research framework and CMT (Lakoff 2014; Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

Drawing on such a theoretical combination, the critical discourse analysis presented below aims to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic is constructed in the political discourse of the two politicians, exploring the key argumentative frames in terms of a) responsibility attribution, b) cohesion-creating strategies, and c) policy-making. First, the speeches and tweets selected were carefully read and then examined to discover the main discourse patterns implemented, starting from the relevant metaphorical mappings, argumentative frames (Fillmore 1982; Lakoff 2014) and an analysis of the lexicon and the syntactic structure of discourse. Relevant metaphors were also cross-checked with those present on the MetaNet web repository (UC Berkeley).

5. Analysis

Donald Trump and Boris Johnson have often been cited as examples of controversial management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gerbaudo 2020; Mudde 2020). In what follows, it will be argued that, despite their intermittent success in handling the crisis, both leaders, through different trajectories, communication genres and with specific rhetorical moves, exploited the emergency and their rhetorical response to it in the performance of a “crisis within the crisis”, based on Moffitt’s (2015) framework, as discussed in Section 2.1.

5.1. Donald Trump’s rhetorical response to COVID-19

Despite relying on scientists’ advice according to *The Politician Prominence Model* outlined by Kahn (2020), including renowned Dr Anthony Fauci, Trump’s assertions were often at odds with the physician, showing a radical downplaying of the danger.

- (1) We have it totally under control. It’s one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It’s going to be just fine. (Trump, 22/01/2020)

In fragment (1) from an interview of January 2020, when the first coronavirus cases were attested in the US, Trump framed the virus as an external force entering the country, licensing the mapping NATIONS ARE CONTAINERS, and indicating China as the source, even mitigating the power of the threat.

- (2) Many call it a virus, which it is. Many call it a flu. What’s the difference? (Trump 13/06/2020)
- (3) [...] As the weather starts to warm and the virus hopefully becomes weaker, and then gone. Great discipline is taking place in China, as President Xi strongly leads what will be a very successful operation. We are working closely with China to

- help! (Trump Twitter 10/02/2020)
- (4) The vast majority of Americans: The risk is very, very low. Young and healthy people can expect to recover fully and quickly if they should get the virus. (Trump 11/03/2020)

When the seriousness of the disease was already well known, during a campaign speech in June 2020 (2), he downplayed the virus as mere flu, while in (3), he suggested that its strength would diminish with the heat. In his simplification of the pandemic situation, the virus is presented as simply “going away” as an invader or an unwanted guest, thus licensing again the NATIONS ARE CONTAINERS mapping typical of anti-immigration discourse (Charteris-Black 2006). Moreover, in (4), during a televised message to strengthen emergency measures, Trump contradicted healthcare experts, arguing that only older people were at risk while there was no risk for the others, thus expressing an unscientific unsubstantiated remark.

Trump seldom recommends social distancing or other mitigation strategies to minimise the risk of contagion. At the same time, more emphasis is placed on deflecting responsibility for the crisis and ascribing it to some wrongdoer outsider with possible special interests in hurting the people (Jolley *et al.* 2018). Conversely, every action against the pandemic is described as a successful government measure to protect the people.

- (5) So, the Coronavirus, which started in China and spread to various countries throughout the world, but very slowly in the U.S. because President Trump closed our border, and ended flights, VERY EARLY, is now being blamed, by the Do-Nothing Democrats, to be the fault of “Trump”. (Trump Twitter 28/02/2020)

In (5), China is blamed for spreading the virus, while Trump's first measure to lower the risks of contagions is increasing border control, highlighting the view of COVID-19 as a foreign enemy and an invader (NATIONS ARE CONTAINERS and PANDEMIC IS WAR). Moreover, this excerpt displays Trump's shifting attitude towards China. While in (3), following some crucial economic deal, he had portrayed his relationship with China in favourable terms, as soon as infection cases started increasing in the US and across the globe, he turned to the blame-game against China.

This tweet works as a self-promotional strategy for Trump as a strong and capable leader, framing the US as a safe country thanks to himself, who, as commander-in-chief, acted quickly and efficiently to protect the American people (PRESIDENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER, an entailment of GOVERNMENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER and GOVERNMENT IS A PARENT). At the same time, rhetorical polarisation can be envisaged as the Democrats are portrayed as inadequate for leadership, “do nothing” instead of people of action.

- (6) We are getting great marks for the handling of the CoronaVirus pandemic, especially the very early BAN of people from China, the infectious source, entering the USA. Compare that to the Obama/Sleepy Joe disaster known as H1N1 Swine Flu. Poor marks, bad polls - didn't have a clue! (Trump Twitter 10/05/2020)
- (7) The third action I'm taking today will also provide additional support for Americans who are unemployed due to the China virus. (Trump 08/08/2020)

In (6), dehumanising and objectifying language is used about China and, consequently, Chinese people framed as infectious. Blame is laid on them for the virus, while they are stigmatised as contagious and people to remove. At the same time, he self-celebrates his management of the COVID-19 crisis as opposed to the ineffective response of the previous (Democratic) Administration to another pandemic. This comparison is strategic, as Biden, nicknamed “Sleepy Joe” by Trump, will be his primary opponent in the presidential election. Hence, he discredits Biden’s image as a strong leader. Finally, in (7), the phrase “China virus”, a distinctive feature of Trump’s rhetorical response to the pandemic, is employed. Trump ascribed China as acting duplicitously and with hidden motives, infecting the world with a severe disease, and depriving honest American citizens of their jobs. Such derogatory phrase, sometimes replaced by the ridiculing expression *Kung flu* that Trump used twice in his campaign speeches,⁷ is not merely designed to blame China for spreading the virus. Conversely, it is also related to a feud between the two superpowers on economic grounds. This is borne out by the fact that Trump often criticised China for gaining an unfair competitive advantage in international trade even before the pandemic.

Framing a virus as foreign defines “we-ness” in a nationalist and nativist sense and leads to the stereotypical representation of foreigners, implicitly validating elements of an existing social order or cultural hierarchy (Pickering 2001), intensifying their sense of otherness. Following Trump’s usage of such phrases and hashtags on Twitter, an alarming increase in racial discrimination and racially motivated violence against Asian-Americans online and offline was reported (Hswen *et al.* 2021), while anti-Chinese sentiment and hate speech were also directed to people of other Asian heritage due to prejudiced homogenisation that conflates otherised minorities as “all the same”. Moreover, arguing that the virus is foreign may imply that only people of specific origin are at risk. Such polarising rhetoric was ultimately responsible for delayed testing in the first part of the pandemic and led to the rapid rise of contagions (WHO 2022a).

⁷ “Oh, it’s COVID. It’s this again. By the way, it’s a disease without question, has more name than any disease in history. I can name, “Kung Flu”. I can name 19 different versions of its names. Many call it a virus, which it is. Many call it a flu, what’s the difference?” (Rally Speech in Tulsa, Oklahoma 20/06/2020)

In constantly self-promoting every measure implemented to address the pandemic and celebrating every improvement as the positive result of his own action to protect the country, Trump strategically exploits the crisis to discredit opponents on multiple grounds and takes advantage of growing discontent following lockdown measures. This allows him to refocus the debate on reopening the country and getting back to normal.

- (8) Totally Negative China Virus Reports. Hit it early and hard. Fake News is devastated. They are very bad (and sick!) people! (Trump Twitter 13/10/2020)
- (9) @NYGovCuomo should get his puppet New York prosecutors, who have been illegally after me and my family for years, to investigate his incompetent handling of the China Virus, and all of the deaths caused by this incompetence. It is at minimum a Nursing Home Scandal - 11,000 DEAD! (Trump Twitter 03/09/2020)
- (10) This election is a choice between a TRUMP RECOVERY or a BIDEN DEPRESSION. It's a choice between a TRUMP BOOM or a BIDEN LOCKDOWN. It's a choice between our plan to Kill the virus – or Biden's plan to kill the American Dream! (Trump Twitter 27/10/2020)

The primary enemy that he targets is certain media outlets labelled “fake news” in his trademark style (Ross, Rivers 2018) in (8). This phrase refers to the liberal media channels and press alleged to distort figures about lowering infection rates and withdrawing data to damage Trump's reputation.

Moreover, the tweet in (9) displays Trump's strategy of laying the blame on the state level for the mishandling of the pandemic. He singles out Democratic governors (and mayors) for the rise in contagions and deaths in Blue areas. While Democrats had already been framed as incapable in (5) and (6), in excerpt (10), he finally focuses on his direct opponent in the Presidential race, politicising the fight against the pandemic in ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ terms, as a war between the Republican candidate (himself) and the Democratic one (ELECTION IS WAR and NATIONAL POLITICS IS A BATTLEFIELD). In his coarse style, the onomatopoeic word *boom* symbolically frames an upward vertical movement. At the same time, Democrats are accused of wanting to keep the country under permanent lockdown, fostering depression as opposed to recovery (downward vertical movement), thus damaging the economy (WELLBEING IS VERTICALITY) and disrupting the American dream. Hence, by downplaying the health costs of the pandemic and emphasising its economic costs, Trump presents himself as the saviour of the US economy.

Despite its rhetorical strength and unifying potential (Charteris-Black 2011), in Trump's rhetoric, the American dream, suggesting that any motivated individual can reach any social position regardless of origin, race, or gender, becomes a divisive trope. The contrast between economic *boom* and *lockdown* and between *recovery* and *depression* hints at the two competing visions of the trope. While the Democratic Party wholeheartedly embraced a focus on equal rights and social cohesion, Republicans, and

Trump, in particular, crafted a personal gain and economic prosperity narrative for “the forgotten men and women of the country”.

Another significant element of Trump’s narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic is his reliance on war rhetoric and war metaphors. War metaphors are pervasive in discussing political and health issues (Charteris-Black 2021; Filardo-Llamas 2021; Flusberg *et al.* 2018; Olza *et al.* 2021; Semino 2020), where they have the potential to increase people’s perception of problems as serious and urgent to tackle, generating a collective sense of responsibility. Although representing a war of contrasting points of view is a common strategy in election times, political leaders usually experience an uptick in popularity and support in times of crisis, a phenomenon usually referred to as the “rally round the flag” effect (Mueller 1970).

- (11) With the courage of our doctors and nurses, with the skill of our scientists and innovators, with the determination of the American People, and with the grace of God, WE WILL WIN THIS WAR. When we achieve this victory, we will emerge stronger and more united than ever before! (Trump Twitter 28/03/2020)
- (12) We will ultimately and expeditiously defeat this virus. (Trump 11/03/2020)
- (13) The Invisible Enemy will soon be in full retreat! (Trump Twitter 10/04/2020)

Specific action words belonging to the war semantic field can be observed in examples (11) to (13), such as *win*, *achieve*, *emerge*, *defeat*, and *retreat*. Moreover, the virus is framed as an enemy and, more specifically, an invisible one since this is a different and symbolic war (PANDEMIC IS WAR). When metaphorical mappings are established (Lakoff, Johnson 1980), ontological correspondences between entities from one domain to the other are created, such as between the virus and the enemy (13), health professionals and an army on the frontline, while scientists are war strategists (11), and eliminating the virus corresponds to winning the war, as in (11) and (12). The creation of these correspondences enables Trump to stress his role as commander-in-chief, determined to overcome the pandemic.

5.2. Boris Johnson’s rhetorical response to COVID-19

Like Trump, Boris Johnson has often been criticised for initially downplaying the virus, described as a mild disease even when the number of contagions was rapidly increasing worldwide.⁸

- (14) I am deeply, spiritually reluctant to make any of these impositions, or infringe anyone’s freedom. (Johnson 22/09/2020)

⁸ “Let me be absolutely clear that for the overwhelming majority of people who contract the virus, this will be a mild disease from which they will speedily and fully recover as we’ve already seen.” (Johnson, 03/03/2020)

Despite several strategic changes in his stance, he persisted in this zigzagging attitude even in the following months, expressing reluctance for draconian measures to limit contacts and the spread of contagion, as implemented in many other countries, not to infringe people's freedom, thus licensing the GOVERNMENT IS A STRICT FATHER mapping, an entailment of the GOVERNMENT IS A PARENT mapping (14) (Lakoff 2016).

(15) Stay alert. Control the virus. Save lifes. (Johnson 10/06/2020)

(16) #StayatHome #ProtecttheNHS #SaveLifes. (Johnson 14/06/2020)

Since the outset of the pandemic, the United Kingdom has adopted measures distinctive from other countries, initially relying on the controversial concept of herd immunity (WHO 2020; Yong 2020). As observed in Section 5.1., Trump hardly ever provided guidelines for the population while simplifying (and underrating) the extent of the risk. Conversely, Johnson's pandemic narrative is based on simplifying the advised response to the crisis through very straightforward directions, in the form of imperative sentences that became slogan-like memorable hashtags on both his Twitter and the government accounts, as in (15) and (16). Despite their directness and action-orientedness, however, expressions such as *protect the NHS*, or *control the virus* are vague and hardly helpful in clarifying people what to do, leaving it to common sense. Moreover, these expressions indicate a shift in responsibility to individual citizens following UK Conservative rhetoric that citizens rather than the State are the responsible parties in public life. While these elements are meant as unifying guidelines for the population in the name of a common goal, people not aligned with that ideology are unlikely to agree with them. Consequently, what had been designed as a unifying message did not have the expected cohesion-creating power (Mintrom *et al.* 2021).

War rhetoric, an extensive feature of Boris Johnson's pandemic narrative, is, on the contrary, one of the main people-building strategies, fostering a sense of "we-ness" in pursuing a common goal.

(17) Yes this enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable – and we know how to beat it, and we know that if as a country we follow the scientific advice that is now being given we know that we will beat it. (Johnson 27/03/2020)

As with Trump, the virus is framed as an enemy (NATION IS A CONTAINER, and PANDEMIC IS WAR). However, unlike Trump, Johnson does not exhibit unscientific behaviour or distrust of experts (*we follow the scientific advice*). On the contrary, relying on advice from medical experts, according to *The Politician Prominence Model* (Kahn 2020), he often praises

healthcare workers and scientists as the heroes of the pandemic, as in (17) and (18), like soldiers on the frontline.

- (18) We can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks. We can send #coronavirus packing in this country, but only if we take the required steps to reduce the peak. Once we've achieved that, then the scientific progress that we are making will really come into play. (Johnson Twitter 19/05/2020)

Casual language defying conventions in Johnson's typical eccentric style (Flinders 2019; Moffitt 2016) is apparent in (18) with the expression *we can send coronavirus packing* in a variation of the 'flattening the curve' metaphor (Charteris-Black 2021), in which abstract measurement by numbers is represented by a visual image using the convention of a line graph. Such metaphor is also visually activated by the expression *turn the tide*, associating the virus with a natural force (PANDEMIC IS A NATURAL FORCE).

- (19) We're getting better at testing. This crisis is so difficult because the enemy is invisible. The answer is to remove the cloak of invisibility to identify the virus, and to be able to know which of us is carrying it and who has actually had it and got over it. (Johnson Twitter 19/05/2020)
- (20) If this virus were a physical assailant an unexpected and invisible mugger, which I can tell you from personal experience it is, then this is the moment when we have begun together to wrestle it to the floor. (Johnson 27/04/2020)

War rhetoric and the reference to an invisible enemy can be observed in (19) and (20). The phrase *invisible enemy* is intended to arouse emotions of fear related to the virus's ability to mutate, multiply and invade, all unseen by the human eye, that is relying on the weapon of its cloak of invisibility (Charteris-Black 2021). In excerpt (20), however, the focus shifts to a crime frame where the virus is described as a physical assailant and an invisible mugger, which requires a more robust physical response (*wrestle it to the floor*) to be overcome, thus licensing the mapping VIRUS IS PHYSICAL COMBAT.

- (21) We will support jobs. We will support incomes. We will support businesses. We will help you protect your loved ones. We will do whatever it takes. (Johnson Twitter 17/05/2020)

Excerpt (21) aims to counterbalance the idea of "responsible citizens" fighting the virus on their own based on vague but straightforward slogans, suggesting that the government is going to support them against the economic impact of the pandemic, thus activating the GOVERNMENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER/NURTURANT FATHER metaphorical mapping also related to the GOVERNMENT IS A PARENT mapping (Lakoff 2016). This message, which may recall Mario Draghi's speech pronounced in his

office as the ECB President in 2012, when he promised to do “whatever it takes” to save the Euro, helps Johnson present himself as a leader with the right intentions and integrity. Here, the reiteration of the syntactic structure and of the verb *support* convey strength and determination of the government to protect the citizens in all respects (jobs, incomes, business, and the personal sphere).

War rhetoric and references to common myths and elements fostering national pride have a unifying function in Johnson’s rhetorical response to COVID-19. Much of Johnson’s war rhetoric has been associated with Winston Churchill’s World War II rhetoric, a symbol of national resolve and unifying leadership to withstand foreign invasion.

- (22) We will beat it together we will come through this all the faster and the United Kingdom will emerge stronger than ever before. (Johnson 27/04/2020)
- (23) We will get through this, this country will get through this epidemic, just as it has got through many tougher experiences before if we look out for each other and commit wholeheartedly to a full national effort. (Johnson 19/03/2020)
- (24) I know we can succeed because we have succeeded before. (Johnson 22/09/2020)

Excerpt (22) recalls a well-known excerpt from Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches” speech⁹ delivered at the House of Commons on June 4, 1940, where repetition in the structure, use of unifying *we*, and volitional *will* are instrumental in delivering the view of Johnson as a new wartime leader and creating common ground.

Finally, fragments (23) and (24) reference the myth of British exceptionalism assuming British people’s presumed uniqueness and moral superiority. This idea adopted as a unifying element by Leavers during the Brexit campaign was also at the basis of UK policy decisions in the fight against COVID-19. Patriotic references to British resilience and strength are made to recall past victories and successes, potentially including wars or even the Brexit referendum (DIPLOMACY IS WAR and PANDEMIC IS WAR) that Johnson endorsed. The combination of war rhetoric and references to unifying elements of national pride enables Johnson to frame his rhetorical response to COVID-19 in a nationalist sense and the United Kingdom as a nation choosing its own path and “walking alone”.

⁹ “We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” (W. Churchill 1940)

6. Conclusions

In the rhetorical response to the COVID-19 pandemic of former American President Donald J. Trump and United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson, some common discursive patterns and practices emerge, which testify to a similar populist style according to Moffitt's (2015, 2016) framework. Both politicians simplified the complexity of the pandemic, downplaying its impact, relying on common sense and straightforward but vague slogan-like language to spread their message across traditional and social media channels, and offering simple action-oriented solutions as strong leaders. At the same time, they both sent controversial messages to the citizens, either by disparaging the scientific community with unscientific remarks, even after having chosen advice from medical experts as a form of self-legitimation (Trump), or not abiding by the rules that they had established (like wearing a face mask, or complying with lockdown regulations), and setting the model example (Johnson).

The analysis of their rhetorical framing of the pandemic in terms of a) responsibility attribution, b) people-building, and c) policy-making, however, reveals different discourse patterns consistent with the leaders' political agenda and with each country-specific contingencies, namely the American Presidential Election later that year and preserving a flourishing economy (which in turn might lead to a rise in electoral votes) for Trump, and boosting a sense of national unity (and uniqueness) in a nationalist sense following the Brexit referendum, for which the UK had just finalised the withdrawal agreement after years of negotiations and polarising debates, for Johnson.

As contexts of collective stress and insecurity due to the uncertain and mutable situation, crises also offer exploitation opportunities for populist politicians to 'set the stage' (Moffitt 2016, pp. 131) and gain a competitive advantage in the political arena. Whilst gaining consensus by pointing at inefficiencies by the establishment may be easier for populist politicians in opposition (Taggart 2000; Zaslove 2008) by stressing their role as outsiders and 'men of the people', populists in power need to resort to a different strategy to preserve the legitimacy of the *status quo* and boost their appeal.

Our analysis reveals that through different trajectories and across communicative channels, both Trump and Johnson dramatised the COVID-19 crisis, exploiting the pandemic situation to perform a "crisis within the crisis" by linking the contingent situation to a broader framework and reframing the debate as society-related in a broad sense (Moffitt 2016).

Trump exhibits the prototypical traits of right-wing populist leaders, namely a dichotomous view of society between 'the people' and 'the elite' (that for Trump are his political opponents, or the media termed 'fake-news' media) (Mudde 2004; Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) but also between

legitimate citizens in a nativist sense and outsiders, coupled with the use of coarse politically incorrect language and common sense rhetoric (Moffitt 2016). In his rhetorical response to the pandemic, he displays all six elements of Moffitt's (2015) framework. First, he elevates the pandemic as a world conflict in which China is the designed culprit alleged to act duplicitously and with hidden motives spreading the virus across the world. This enables him to deflect blame for any fault and popularise the distorted idea of the virus as foreign, using the same scapegoating language that he relied on in his anti-immigration propaganda (Lorenzetti 2020). Radically simplifying and polarising the political terrain, he singles out different types of enemies alleged to go against the interest of 'the people'. He delegitimises his political opponents as inadequate and unfit for leadership, and the press, alleged to distort and downplay the effectiveness of his responses to the emergency, thus reinforcing his 'us' *versus* 'them' populist rhetoric. While offering simple solutions to a complex issue, he perpetuates the sense of crisis as a political battle of Republicans *versus* Democrats and Trump *versus* Biden.

On the other hand, Johnson does not exhibit all the typical traits of a right-wing populist leader (Margulies 2019). Having been a professional politician for two decades, he can hardly claim to be a 'man of the people', nor does he speak about an evil elite. Flinders (2019) labels Johnson's form of populism as 'Upper-crust Populism', referencing its peculiar British and upper-class character. He advocated his nationalist no-deal Brexit in the name of the people's will, thus matching an emphasis on popular sovereignty, one of the main features in Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology.

However, his main populist traits lie in what Moffitt (2016) defines as the performative aspects of populism, including the demonstration of bad manners, as seen in the rejection of political conventions and polite discourse, usage of outlandish comments, and calculated provocations. Unlike Trump, in his rhetorical response to COVID-19, Johnson did not blame dangerous others for the pandemic. However, he was also able to strategically exploit the crisis for self-legitimation. Offering simple solutions and presenting himself as an upright leader (although not always abiding by the rules) with daily televised messages of updates, Johnson refocused the debate on UK's uniqueness, resilience and presumed exceptionalism as a cohesion-building strategy. By carefully crafting a rhetorical narrative in which the country, starting from the citizens up to NHS standing united, could overcome the pandemic, he reinforced the role of the UK as "walking alone" in a nationalist sense. Such dramaturgic strategy was also meant to distract the attention from the multiple faults in the UK's response to the virus in the first part of the pandemic.

Combined with the discursive strategies of ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ polarisation outlined by van Dijk (2002, 2006, 2013) at multiple levels of discourse, metaphor, with its power to stir emotions, frame the debate by eliminating alternative points of view, and simplifying understanding of complex issues (Charteris-Black 2011; Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Lakoff 2014) proved strategic in the rhetorical response to the pandemic of the two politicians. Table 1 summarises data from recurrent patterns in the data analysed from the two corpora.

SOURCE DOMAIN	Metaphorical Mappings in Trump’s COVID-19 Discourse	Metaphorical Mappings in Johnson’s COVID-19 Discourse
CONTAINMENT	NATION IS A CONTAINER licensing the more specific mapping PANDEMIC IS INVASION	NATION IS A CONTAINER PANDEMIC IS A NATURAL FORCE
WAR	PANDEMIC IS WAR ELECTION IS WAR NATIONAL POLITICS IS A BATTLEFIELD	VIRUS IS PHYSICAL COMBAT related to PANDEMIC IS WAR DIPLOMACY IS WAR
FAMILY	GOVERNMENT IS A PARENT licensing the more specific mappings GOVERNMENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER and PRESIDENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER	GOVERNMENT IS A PARENT licensing the more specific mappings GOVERNMENT IS A STRICT FATHER and GOVERNMENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER/NURTURANT FATHER
VERTICAL MOVEMENT	WELL-BEING IS VERTICALITY related to GOODNESS IS VERTICALITY	

Table 1
Metaphorical Mappings in Trump’s and Johnson’s rhetorical responses to COVID-19.

Several source domains drive the discourse for both politicians, often licensing similar or identical metaphorical mappings, which, however, may be differently deployed in their rhetorical narratives. A pervasive source

domain is CONTAINMENT, licensing the NATION IS A CONTAINER mapping employed by both politicians to create ontological correspondences between the virus and an invader (PANDEMIC IS INVASION). At the same time, Trump relied on it to frame the pandemic using the same rhetorical tropes as those of his anti-immigration discourse (Lorenzetti 2020). For Johnson, CONTAINMENT as a source domain is used to represent the pandemic as a natural force, like a tide that may be blocked or a curve that may be flattened (PANDEMIC IS NATURAL FORCE).

However, the WAR source domain is the most widely employed by the two politicians while playing a significant role in the rhetoric of many political leaders and the media worldwide. For Trump, the war scenario was strategic in framing his multiple enemies, the virus, China (PANDEMIC IS WAR), Democrats, the Congress, and the media (NATIONAL POLITICS IS A BATTLEFIELD) and his direct opponent in the presidential election (ELECTION IS WAR). People-building or creating cohesion among the citizens is possible for Trump only by excluding and singling out wrongdoers alleged to have betrayed the people.

Johnson also consistently relies on war rhetoric and war metaphors, referencing the virus as an enemy, an invisible antagonist but one that can be defeated. However, unlike Trump, he does not attempt to stress and increase perceived fractures in society or shift the blame. Conversely, metaphorical mappings like PANDEMIC IS WAR or DIPLOMACY IS WAR for him have a strong cohesion-building function through a scenario in which each Briton, from the average citizen up to doctors and nurses like soldiers on the frontline, can play their part to accomplish a common goal and regain national freedom.

Another related mapping he relies on is VIRUS IS PHYSICAL COMBAT, treating the virus as an assailant that must be wrestled to the floor. Vague references to past national successes and victories that may potentially include World Wars I and II, but also the Brexit referendum and the idea of British exceptionalism add to this. Moreover, lexical and structural choices that recall Winston Churchill's War rhetoric, a symbol of national resolve and strong leadership, enable Johnson to present himself as another wartime leader of a country ready to "walk alone" in a nationalist sense.

The contrast between Republicans and Democrats is highlighted in Trump's corpus also by the VERTICAL MOVEMENT source domain contributing to the metaphorical WELL-BEING IS VERTICALITY mapping, instrumental for the leader to shift the blame on Democrats for impoverishing the citizens by keeping them under lockdown, and refocus the debate on reopening the country to save the economy.

Furthermore, the FAMILY source domain is critical for both leaders' self-legitimation strategies. It enables them to emphasise their role as strong leaders who offer easy solutions to protect the citizens (CHILDREN) from the crisis, either by simply closing borders and focusing on security (PRESIDENT IS A CHILDCARE PROVIDER) or promising financial support (GOVERNMENT IS CHILDCARE PROVIDER/NURTURANT FATHER) as opposed to imposing unwanted restrictions (GOVERNMENT IS A STRICT FATHER).

The article complements and corroborates existing works on the strategic use of crisis in populist discourse (Bennett 2019; Forchtner, Özvatan 2022; Zappettini, Krzyżanowski 2019) and the growing body of research on COVID-19 metaphors (Charteris-Black 2021; Filardo-Llamas 2021; Olza *et al.* 2021; Semino 2020). The data analysed and many similar discursive patterns adopted, including metaphorical mappings, highlight that the two politicians embody two variations of the same overarching populist style (Moffitt 2016). Moreover, the analysis demonstrates how populists are prone to exploit critical situations to dramatise their message for self-legitimation, *status quo* maintenance and gaining competitive advantage. Finally, comparative findings highlight that, while both leaders initially adopted a similar intermittent attitude in tackling the COVID-19 emergency, still relying on the 'rally around the flag' effect (Mueller 1970), scapegoating strategies and blame-games without consistent cohesion-building strategies, including setting a model example, did not prove to be winning political strategies in the long run.

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Campaign Rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma – June 20, 2020

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