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by
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Abstract

Public trust is important during an ongoing crisis as it determines people’s compliance with government mandates and laws. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Germany and the U.S. operated with different levels of public trust and people placed their trust in different public institutions. My thesis examines how political tactics such as fear, use of science, and expert pronouncements impacted public trust and the COVID-19 response in both countries.
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Introduction

In December of 2019 a strange outbreak of a disease, resembling an atypical form of pneumonia, occurred in Wuhan, China. The disease did not respond to typical treatments, and the doctors could not identify its origin. The disease spread like wildfire; and by January many countries around the globe were instituting travel bans to China. By the end of January, the disease had made its way to Germany and the United States. The spread of the disease in both countries started out slow but sped up quickly and began to overwhelm the public health institutions in both nations. By March 11, 2020 the disease had spread to 114 countries and had taken the lives of over 4,000. On this day Covid-19 was declared as a pandemic.¹

Germany chose to quickly lock down. The German Covid-19 case count went down drastically, and Germany was revered as the poster child of a proper Covid-19 response. The United States took a more relaxed approach. On March 16, 2020 the White House issued a stay-at-home order which was intended to last only two weeks but lasted until the end of April.² Afterwards the Covid-19 response was left mostly open to the states with little federal government oversight. Every state government had its own philosophy around Covid-19 and the decentralization of the issue led to a patchwork of policies that was not as effective at containing the virus as a streamlined federal response. Germany began to open up in late April after a substantial drop in cases after their first lockdown. Germany managed to keep case rates low until late August when cases and deaths began to rise fast. Although Germany recovered from

most of its spikes, its global reputation was tarnished, and people grew frustrated with the continuous lockdowns and their inconsistent approaches.

By January of 2021, Pfizer and Moderna developed a Covid-19 vaccine. This should have been the silver bullet towards the easing and relaxation of restrictions in both the U.S. and Germany. Initially the vaccine was very popular, and it was difficult to get appointments, but as time passed, fewer people got vaccinated. One would think this was because fewer people needed to get vaccinated. Unfortunately, the reality was that the U.S. had not nearly reached its goal of vaccinating 70% of the population to achieve herd immunity.³

Ever since its introduction I was always curious as to why more people did not want to get vaccinated against Covid-19. Because of my curiosity, I spent a summer researching how Germany and Sweden fought off Covid-19. During my research, I took a particular interest in how the right-wing communities reacted to vaccine mandates. The next summer I followed up on this interest and I set up an interview with an AfD politician in Germany, Jörg Schneider. From my research over the summer and the interview, it became clear to me that I would write about how public trust is essential for the functioning of society during a pandemic.

Public Trust is crucial for the essential functions of a democracy. To collect taxes, the people need to know whether their taxes will fund anything worthwhile. Government trust is also important when confronting a major issue, such as climate change. The government will never be able to convince the population that climate change is an issue of paramount importance if the people do not trust the government. This was particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic because people needed to heed to the government’s advice and regulations to contain

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the pandemic. At the start of 2021, when the Covid-19 vaccine was introduced, many people believed that the vaccine violated their bodily integrity, but governments needed to do all they could to contain the virus. Therefore, it was pivotal that people trusted the government and the vaccine. However, the vaccine proved that the public trust of many nations, including the United States and Germany, was limited.

Germany initially had a slow rollout of the vaccine due to the EU’s slow procurement. Initially, people in the U.S. were eager to receive the vaccine and appointments were booked out at every venue. However, as the summer months rolled in, the rate of vaccinations began to slow and fewer people received the vaccine. Today, the percentage of the population that has received at least one dose of the vaccine in the U.S. is 81.4% whereas in Germany only 78% have received at least one dose. Considering that Germany has a traditionally stronger trust culture this does not seem correct. When adjusted for a full vaccination (basic immunization), which most often needs two doses of the vaccine, Germany has a much higher rate with 76.4% as opposed to America’s 70%. This reality leaves one wondering what is behind the relatively low completion rate of the vaccination series in the U.S. There are very few direct answers to this question. However, the connection between vaccination rates and public trust is unquestionable. As discussed before, people will only follow government orders to vaccinate if they trust the government, and public trust largely depends on whether people believe the reasoning behind the government’s decision. Trust also depends greatly on whether the political landscape supports the government. However, I would argue that a government can do a lot to appease the political landscape, and in this paper I will argue that public trust comes from finding strategies that convince all people to do their best to slow the spread of Covid-19 regardless of political

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affiliation. The main strategy is transparency, and the secondary strategy is finding common ground between contrasting political parties. In this thesis I will define transparency as the government’s propensity to communicate to the public in a clear, open and honest manner.

This thesis will compare how Germany and the United States cultivated public trust during the Covid-19 pandemic. It will analyze public trust as a potential reason behind Germany’s higher vaccination-series completion rate. The paper is divided into three separate parts. The first part sets up the main argument and it introduces the link between public trust and political beliefs through a comparison of the two countries’ political landscapes. This section will address the reasons why having a government that takes into consideration the political beliefs of the people is an important component of trust, and the damage political polarization inflicts on the government’s credibility. My main argument will suggest that public trust is not limited to the political landscape of the country but rather that the response to the political landscape through transparent communication is what cultivated public trust in Germany and the United States. The first chapter discusses two topics. First, it examines how being transparent about the pandemic’s inherent danger was crucial to compliance and an effective response and how public fear is difficult for a government to control.

The second part of the main argument highlights how science, although useful, will not convince people to make changes unless it is communicated effectively. This section addresses the importance of transparency in communication, the reasons why public fear is better than science at mobilizing people towards a cause, and the health concerns about the vaccine.

The next section examines the efforts of Christen Drosten and Anthony Fauci’s, the two primary government Covid-19 communicators in Germany and the United States respectively.
This section will analyze their efforts to protect the public and their communication strategies to prove that consistent and accurate communication strengthened public trust.

This thesis’s argument will close with two sections. One section analyzes the news/media environment of Germany and the United States, to find whether this factor helped or hurt public trust in both countries. The last section highlights the common fear of an overbearing government and how governments need to develop a strategy that considers these fears.

The thesis will pose outreach as an additional but weaker argument to explain why people refused the first or second doses. Overall, this thesis makes a broader comparison of the trust cultures in the United States and Germany and it highlights how Germany and the U.S. can prepare for the next major crisis or pandemic.

I. The Basis of Public Trust: Government by the consent of the Governed

Political Polarization in the United States and Germany

To understand how the United States and Germany responded to their respective political landscapes one must first understand the political context of the two nations. The most important factor that dictated both countries’ responses was political polarization. Political polarization was a force that the two countries had to work against. A polarized government has two relatively equally sized political parties that run directly against each other. Polarized governments have less public trust because half of the population will always disapprove of their government’s actions. The U.S. and Germany are both polarized countries and the citizens of the United States and Germany are both fairly skeptical of their governments. America’s culture of personal freedom and the politicization of the news landscape during the 1980s has created a polarized and distrustful political landscape. Germany lacks these same mechanisms of distrust, but
political extremism and a populace that is less than satisfied with its government is starting to undermine people's trust in its public institutions. People's political partisanship and subsequent distrust of the government have fueled the rise of anti-vaccine and lockdown conspiracy theories. Political polarization is worse in the U.S. and it plays a role in the United States’ comparatively lower public trust and basic immunization rates. However, Germany has also become more polarized which may impact full vaccinations or partial vaccinations in a future pandemic.

This section will examine the intensification of political partisanship in the United States and Germany and how this political diffusion affects public trust and its people's compliance with the rules.

**Political Polarization in the USA**

In the United States, government distrust and political polarization have been part of its tradition since its founding. This is because the U.S. initially gained its independence from Great Britain which controlled people’s freedoms before U.S. independence. America’s split from the overbearing British monarchy has shaped popular opinion of the government ever since. Throughout the country's history, people have compared a powerful federal government to Britain's rule and many Americans have felt that they needed to protect themselves from the monarchy, which was viewed as the “greedy capitalist and government overlords.”

The capitalist elites, (bourgeoisie) and the working class citizens (proletariat), have been represented by either the Democratic or Republican parties. Throughout time the Democratic and Republican parties have flipped between taking care of the interests of the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. Populism and the fear of a domineering federal government are the fundamental reasons for

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political polarization in the U.S. The contrast between the leading parties has steadily increased over time but polarization became a bigger part of mainstream American politics in the 1980s.

The contrasting political positions of the democratic and republican parties in the U.S. government undermine public trust. In the 1960s people's trust in the U.S. government was much higher, at 77%. However, public trust waned during the successive crises under the Nixon administration, such as the Watergate scandal, and the oil shortage under Carter's administration. During the Reagan era in the 1980s, the Republican party began to shift much further to the right. Under Reagan’s administration, the fairness doctrine which required that major news networks devote time to different viewpoints on issues of importance, was scrapped. Following the repeal of the fairness doctrine, the news/media landscape became more politically polarized, with the introduction of Fox and MSNBC in the 1990s. Meanwhile, many more conservative southern democrats resonated more with Reagan's message and left the Democratic party. Under this more polarized government, the U.S. has never recovered its political trust to the level of the 1960s. Instead, political trust in the U.S. has been on a steady decline.

Political polarity acts as a limiter to public trust because when one party is in power, members of the other party will almost always disapprove of the opposite party’s actions. Moreover, under a polarized government, there is more gridlock in Congress and fewer laws and regulations get passed, especially in a government where each party accounts for roughly 50% of the seats in Congress. Thus, the issue of political trust also applies directly to the government's handling of the pandemic. Democrat and Republican positions on issues as fundamental as the

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role of scientific research are different enough that measures in line with one party's scientific viewpoints will not be trusted by the other. People’s political party membership (or inclination) influences their choices. Thus there was a partisan split concerning the uptake of the Covid-19 vaccines as 91% of Democrats said they were willing to take the vaccine whereas only 51% of Republicans were willing to do the same.\(^9\)

In the U.S. it is difficult to make compromises. Trump made some compromises during the pandemic. Most notably he supported Operation Warp Speed, which sped up the development of the vaccine.\(^10\) Trump supported Operation Warpspeed because it did not violate the conservative value of limited government as much as a lockdown, and he thought that support of such a measure would appease Democrats and the less conservative portion of his voter base. His support did little to boost his approval ratings amongst the electorate (this may also be because the vaccine was released to the public at the end of his term in office), and the Democratic Party was skeptical of this move by Trump.\(^11\) Political polarization was a danger during the pandemic because it made Democrats and Republicans skeptical of each other. Hence, they could not agree on a set of policies to follow during the pandemic. The core beliefs surrounding the two political parties’ behaviors in the U.S. lowered political trust and made it difficult to make compromises and conjure a streamlined approach.

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Partisan Politics and Political Trust in Germany

During the earlier phase of the pandemic, under Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership in 2020, the German government garnered significantly higher levels of public support than during the later phases of the pandemic under Scholz's administration. The German political system was less polarized than in the U.S., and, given the circumstances, the political parties in Germany were able to put their differences aside to pass legislation together.12 During the pandemic, the parliament passed several strict lockdown measures including the closure of schools, and businesses as well as a national mask mandate. Merkel's approach to the pandemic was met with widespread approval and success.13 During the summer of 2020, the Covid-19 case count in Germany was less than 5% of the U.S.'s. These were strict measures, but the parliament implemented these rules knowing that people would follow because of the high public trust the German government had under the Merkel administration.14 Germany’s public approval of the government ranged from 56-45% between 2020 and 2021, this number was not high but it also was not as low as public trust in the United States, which hovered around 20% during that time.1516

However, Germany’s government is one of rapid transformation, and political trust has been waning under Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s administration. According to a poll by

15 Brenan, “Two-Thirds of Americans Not Satisfied With Vaccine Rollout.”
Deutschlandfunk, trust in German political parties is at 13%.\(^{17}\) Even though Germany has a five-party coalition-based system, Scholz has struggled to unite the diverse viewpoints of the liberal SPD, the Green party, and the more libertarian FDP into his “Ampel (“traffic light”)” coalition, the first coalition government ever in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany to consist of three rather than just two parties.

Germany’s Covid-19 response suffered because of the waning popular support for the German government. During June of 2020, the Covid-19 incidence rate in Germany was only 2.5\% of that of the U.S.\(^{18}\) However, amidst lower case counts people grew frustrated with the lockdowns and other excessive containment measures, which led to an ease of regulations and a subsequent surge in cases. Ultimately, Germany gained more control of their Covid-19 incidence rate but the politics surrounding Covid-19 never recovered. The once-streamlined Covid-19 politics became politically divided. Merkel stated that the required measures were “treating the voters like children.”\(^{19}\) Scholz, who was the federal minister of finance at the time, said “This is the time for being very tough and keeping infection rates down.”\(^{20}\) The wide variety of opinions in the parliament only caused gridlock and lukewarm Covid-19 measures, such as the “lockdown lite” which didn’t reduce cases nearly as much.\(^{21}\) The lack of a streamlined response from the federal government put pressure on the states to issue their own regulations. The COVID-19 response in Germany became more fragmented with each state proposing its own way to solve the pandemic. Initially, Germany had what the U.S. lacked, which was a strong streamlined...

\(^{17}\) Glucroft, “Germans’ Trust in State Institutions Hits New Low – DW – 08/18/2023.”


approach. However, Germany’s response was not free from the political trend of a weaker national government. Therefore, people grew tired of the lockdown regulations and Germany switched to a fragmented state by state approach. Each state had its own approach, based on the specific needs and politics of the state. Germany did impose the emergency break regulations to make sure no federal state was falling out of line with the federal response. However, the damage was done and a weaker trust in the government meant that Germany had to rely on a state-by-state approach for the remainder of the pandemic.

Many Germans labeled their lockdown measures as overbearing; and because people disagreed with the government disagreements, Germans were willing to break rules and attend indoor maskless gatherings together, even during lockdowns. Although the responses of Germany and the United States were strikingly different at first, they became more similar over time because of the fallout caused by political fragmentation and polarization.

**Alternative Argument: Vaccine Distribution and Accessibility**

The polarity of Germany and America’s political systems lowered public trust and made it difficult to craft a response that pleased everyone. However, public trust is not the only factor to consider in an effective response. Accessibility also played an important role in both countries' vaccination efforts. Despite the slow rollout initially, Germany’s Covid-19 vaccine was more accessible overall. Nonetheless, both countries suffered from systemic factors that prevented people from taking the vaccine. This chapter will compare how affordability, inequalities, and the urban/rural divide led to the less-than-optimal vaccination rate in both the United States and Germany.
Overall the U.S. had less government involvement in the vaccination effort than Germany. Having less government involvement may help reach across party lines and facilitate public trust, but less government also means less public infrastructure and a less affordable vaccine. According to Shen et al., “a program similar to the Vaccines for Children program does not exist for under- or uninsured adults, leaving many without access to vaccination.”22 When funded by the federal government, the Covid-19 vaccine cost $29 per dose, which was rather expensive. However, when left to the commercial market, the Pfizer/Moderna vaccines cost upwards of US$ 110 per dose, a price that was simply inaccessible for many Americans. While this cost was covered by people’s health insurance, in 2021 over 8% of the U.S. population was uninsured, leaving some people without an option but to pay for the vaccine – or not get vaccinated at all.

The federal government purchased 1.2 billion Pfizer and Moderna vaccine doses to protect people from having to pay the commercial rates.23 This number was plenty. However, the number shrinks considerably when accounting for the shelf-life span of the vaccine which was only six months for the Moderna vaccine, when it is kept in a deep freezer, and shrinks to one month when kept in the refrigerator. Nonetheless, the price tag associated with the vaccine, even at $29/dose, was enough to discourage many people who were undecided, from getting the vaccine.

In Germany everyone is required to have health insurance and the statutory health plan covers over 88% of Germany’s vaccination needs. There is a tiny portion of the population that does not have access to health insurance due to bureaucratic hurdles. But even for the tiny uninsured population, vaccination at one of the vaccination centers was still free of charge. Therefore, cost was not a barrier in Germany. However, vaccine access in Germany did suffer from other obstacles, most notably the urban/rural divide.

Despite Germany’s comparatively small size, people in rural areas had to commute long distances to reach one of Germany’s 474 vaccination centers, which were not evenly distributed; and more of them were situated in urban and wealthier areas of Germany. In rural Germany, especially in the economically disadvantaged areas, it took an average of one hour to reach the nearest vaccination center by public transport. For 35% of these areas, a trip to the vaccination center via public transport was impossible. In more rural states, such as Brandenburg, the nearest vaccination center was more than two hours away by bicycle. In contrast, no vaccination facility in Germany was more than 33 minutes away by car. In combination with Germany’s lack of clinics in rural areas, the access difficulties disincentivized many people from getting vaccinated. Despite these factors, Germany maintains a high two-dose completion rate of the Covid-19 vaccine.

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24. “German Health System Information,” European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, accessed April 17, 2024, [https://eurohealthobservatory.who.int/countries/germany](https://eurohealthobservatory.who.int/countries/germany).
The urban-rural vaccine divide exists in the U.S. as well, with vaccination rates decreasing consistently in more rural areas.\textsuperscript{28} According to Sun and Monnat, by mid to late 2022 over 76\% of people living in urban areas had received a full dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, whereas only 63\% of people living in rural areas had done the same. People living in rural areas in the U.S. “are on average poorer, have lower rates of insurance coverage, have less robust health care infrastructure, and must travel further distances to venues where vaccines were administered.”\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, Hispanic communities in rural areas were particularly vulnerable because of a lower concentration of clinics and an inequitable distribution of vaccines at these clinics.\textsuperscript{30} Black Americans living in urban areas fell victim to the same issue, in that local clinics did not have an adequate supply of vaccines. The inequitable distribution thus further exacerbated the systemic healthcare inequalities and contributed to fewer second doses in the U.S.

America’s single-dose vaccination rate is 81\% which is much higher than other high-income-countries. However, the U.S. has struggled to inoculate nearly as many people with the second dose. Kuehn et al. believed that a single-dose vaccination would alleviate many of the structural barriers and would be particularly advantageous for “home-bound elderly, rural and transient populations.”\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, such a vaccine would be more affordable and could help ensure adequate vaccinations among the uninsured. At first, the Johnson and Johnson (J&J)

\textsuperscript{29}ibid
vacine seemed like the answer, it was cheaper, it only required one dose, and it could be stored in a typical refrigerator, making it much easier to transport and store than the Pfizer vaccine. Unfortunately, the J&J vaccine was linked to blood clots in women, which led to its subsequent discontinuation in the U.S. Currently the three approved vaccines in the U.S. - Pfizer, Moderna, and Novavax - need at least two doses for maximum efficacy.

Germany took a different approach and the Standing Commission on Vaccinations or STIKO, which is responsible for approving and recommending vaccines in Germany, acknowledged the importance of the J&J vaccine and kept it around despite its potential drawbacks (with the caveat that it only recommended the vaccine to people over 60). The calls for a one-dose vaccine in the U.S., together with Germany’s decision to keep the J&J vaccine, proved that accessibility factors had an impact on the number of second doses.

Both countries had a difficult time making the vaccine accessible to everyone. However, in comparison to Germany, the lack of a public healthcare plan and guaranteed free access to vaccination for adults in the U.S. made it difficult for the U.S. to vaccinate as many people as Germany with a second dose. The distance, the lack of good transport options, and the systemic difficulties that low-income and minority groups had to face made the vaccine less accessible.

The vaccine's accessibility helped determine whether one received a second dose and the U.S. did not have the infrastructure for vaccinations to match its size. Regardless, Germany with its smaller territory still had difficulties making the vaccine available to everyone but it still managed to inoculate most people with a second dose. Even though the U.S. does not require health insurance, 91.7% in 2021 were insured, and the vast majority got the vaccine free of charge. Therefore, the urban-rural divide and the vaccine price do not fully explain Germany's

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higher basic immunization rate. A lack of public trust caused by a government that did not respond to the political landscape was the main reason why Germany and the U.S. had different vaccination rates during the pandemic.33 Even though accessibility was not the main reason behind vaccine hesitancy, it worked in tandem with a lack of public trust to discourage people from receiving their first and especially their second doses.

II. Public Trust, Fear, and Science

Public Trust and Fear

Political polarization is a major determiner of trust because the political makeup of the country determines how much of the country supports the government. This determines public trust initially, but any well-functioning government can counteract this by creating a political environment that builds trust. The government's ability to be transparent to the public is the most important part of fostering this trust. One important aspect of transparency is communicating the danger of the virus, which Germany did to a higher degree than the U.S.

Trust stems from people's belief that the government takes the right action, whereas fear comes from the perceived threat of the virus. In Austria during the first three months of the pandemic, the level of fear increased and public trust increased in response. When public trust rises, compliance to regulations increases as well.34 Although fear and trust are two very different things, both factors work together to increase people's compliance with measures and

33 Sun and Monnat, “Rural-Urban and Within-Rural Differences in COVID-19 Vaccination Rates.”
recommendations. Fear helped governments achieve their objectives during the pandemic because people's fear helps them recognize that COVID-19 will hurt them or their loved ones if they aren’t careful. Thus, people who were more afraid of the pandemic were also more willing to follow recommendations and measures including the uptake of the vaccine, even if they generally disagreed with the government.

In March 2020, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor at the time, gave a speech about the gravity of the pandemic. To motivate a stronger response amongst the populace, Merkel emphasized that the pandemic was a serious matter. She clarified that there were still lots of unknowns and that “no challenge has demanded common united action as much since WWII.”

Despite her upbringing in the GDR and her distaste for draconian measures, she proclaimed that a strong unified response that was legally enforceable was necessary. Her broadcast incited both fear and action amongst the German public. Germany’s actions and people's willingness to comply initially led to the country's comparative success during the early stages of the pandemic.

The lack of fear has the opposite effect and leads to “a lower uptake of the vaccine, avoidance of healthcare workers, and the belief that Covid-19 is exaggerated.” Germany was initially very successful at mitigating the virus and as the pandemic waned in Germany, people became less afraid of its effects. During the “Day of Freedom” protests in Berlin in August of 2020, the protesters argued that German politicians were overestimating the threat of COVID-19 and that the regulations and the enforcement against the protests violated their constitutional

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Thus, people viewed the lockdown measures as violating their basic freedoms. Despite this, the German government insisted on having more regulations because of a little-known clause that gave the German authorities the ability to restrict the right to assemble when it goes against public safety or order. Therefore, Germany’s crackdown on the lockdown protests was not unconstitutional. Nonetheless, the protesters had a valid reason to criticize the German government not because of its actions during the protest but because the definition of what public safety and order means is vague, and to the protesters the actions of the police in Berlin went against what they believe is their right to assemble.

The protests were one of the first mass gatherings in Germany since the lockdown started. Their complaints against the excessiveness of the regulations and their willingness to break common rules such as a limit on the size of gatherings signified that the majority of the protesters weren’t afraid of the virus. The fear Germans had over the pandemic kept decreasing and with it the effectiveness of their government’s response. After the summer of 2020, Germany was subject to the same Covid-19 waves that all other countries faced, and its response was no longer the envy of other nations.

Unlike Merkel's response in Germany, the U.S. government downplayed the threat of COVID-19. According to Scientific American, Trump said that Covid-19 “is no worse than the flu and that it would be over by Easter” but Covid-19 was a big threat to the U.S. and it would cost the lives of over one million Americans. Underplaying the pandemic was dangerous as it

led to fewer incentives for the states to establish the necessary measures and thus fewer precautionary measures. The belittling of the pandemic only added to the stigma against the vaccine. Studies show that people who feared the virus in March of 2020 were more likely to get vaccinated when it was made available 14 months later.\footnote{Gaëtan Mertens et al., “Fear of COVID-19 Predicts Vaccination Willingness 14 Months Later,” \textit{Journal of Anxiety Disorders} 88 (May 2022): 102574, \url{https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2022.102574}.} The belittlement of the pandemic’s importance also explained why many people in the U.S. did not follow through for a second vaccination. Fear transcends the political spectrum and when disaster strikes both Democrats and Republicans are bound to agree on a common plan to contain the virus. Underplaying the pandemic only kept these tensions alive and disincentivized a common, unified response. Thus, it was important that governments remind their people that the pandemic was a serious danger.

Communicating the pandemic’s inherent danger was very important at the start of the pandemic. Unfortunately, this strategy did not work as well later in the pandemic for matters that were out of the government's control. Uncertainty was a determinant of fear during the pandemic, as people who are more uncertain about an issue tend to be more afraid of it as well. When the COVID-19 crisis first surfaced, there was a lot of uncertainty over the pandemic, and politicians put their political beliefs aside to protect the people. People didn’t know how long it would last, how deadly it was, or the means of preventing the spread. For example, before April 2020, in the USA, the CDC advised against wearing masks, and they didn’t become a recommendation until two months later.\footnote{Deborah Netburn, “A Timeline of the CDC’s Advice on Face Masks,” Los Angeles Times, July 27, 2021, \url{https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-07-27/timeline-cdc-mask-guidance-during-covid-19-pandemic}.} One year later, the government of Germany proclaimed that cloth masks were ineffective (The CDC wouldn't issue the same
recommendations for another year).\footnote{Tommy Beer, “Germany Mandates Medical-Grade Masks,” Forbes, January 20, 2021, \url{https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2021/01/20/germany-mandates-medical-grade-masks/}.} As more research came, governments were able to develop better strategies against Covid-19. Uncertainty is a big component of fear and each new finding lessened people’s perceptions of COVID-19’s threat. Less fear of the virus meant that more people were frustrated with pandemic measures. Hence, both the administration in Germany and the U.S. faced greater scrutiny of their handling of the pandemic as more information about the nature of the disease was uncovered. People’s fear of Covid-19 was a key driver of compliance and people heeded calls to isolate, mask, and get inoculated because of their fear. Unfortunately, fear was more difficult to control as scientific information emerged. Luckily, fear was only one building block of trust during the pandemic and there were many other strategies both governments employed to gain the citizens’ trust.

**Public Trust and Science**

Science is a key pillar of an effective response to a pandemic and a successful vaccine campaign. However, when science is communicated ineffectively it can hurt rather than help build an effective response. This section will analyze how the ineffective communication of science undermined the credibility of scientific institutions, rationalized the beliefs of conspiracy theorists, and led to a slower vaccine rollout.

The Robert Koch Institute and the Center for Disease Control

The public health research institutions of Germany and the United States were pivotal to both countries' respective responses. Both institutions ran with the assumption that science was enough to craft an effective response but as this turned out not to be the case, they both struggled with transparency and trustworthiness.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) is Germany’s main disease research agency and while it is not part of Germany’s government, it informed the government on the best measures to take against the virus. The RKI’s reports were received negatively amongst the political parties in parliament because the documents the institution released were difficult to understand unless one was a health expert. Thus, the political parties in Germany demanded that the RKI be more transparent.

Many Germans did not regard the RKI as a trustworthy institution because it recommended measures that restricted people's freedoms without sharing the reasoning behind the recommendations. The amount of conspiracy theories surrounding the RKI reflected the institution's inherent lack of trust. People made several theories against the RKI, one of which is that the relationship between the RKI and the government was backward and the German government was creating the information for the RKI. The Ministry of Health vehemently denied these allegations.\footnote{Lea-Katharina Krause, “Corona-Pandemie: Lauterbach will RKI-Protokolle weitestgehend entschwärzen,” Die Zeit, March 28, 2024, \url{https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2024-03/karl-lauterbach-corna-protokolle-rki-entschwaerzung}.} The suspicions against the government ran the highest when Germany was in lockdown, and this was contributing to the AfD, FDP, and CSU positions against lockdown measures in general, as they considered them a huge restriction of their freedoms. The RKI had to make these recommendations because the circumstances of the pandemic necessitated a
lockdown. Even though the RKI made the right recommendations, given the circumstances, it could have been more transparent about its response. Alice Weidel, the leader of the AfD at the time, was frustrated with the RKI because its research and policy documents were written in language that was not understandable to the general public.\footnote{Anna-Lena Scholz, Jan Schweitzer, and Ulrich Bahnsen, “RKI-Protokolle: Was wir über die RKI-Protokolle wissen,” Die Zeit, March 26, 2024, \url{https://www.zeit.de/gesundheit/2024-03/rki-protokolle-corona-pandemie-politik-faq#paywall}.} Fundamentally, lockdown measures will always be met with criticism. However, as as of recently (in the past few months) the SPD-led government in Germany has acknowledged that the difficult-to-read and inaccessible documents of the RKI were problematic, and Karl Lauterbach, Federal Minister of Health, has been leading efforts to make the RKI’s reports legible to the general public.\footnote{Krause, “Corona-Pandemie.”}

While the Center for Disease Control, America’s primary disease research and guidance agency, also struggles to communicate enough information to the public, trust in the CDC decreased by 10\% from March to October 2020.\footnote{Michael S. Pollard and Lois M. Davis, “Decline in Trust in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Rand Health Quarterly 9, no. 3 (June 30, 2022): 23.} The CDC, like the RKI, also suffered because of its lack of communication with the public. The CDC could have maintained its public trust if it had prioritized communicating information on the masks, the vaccine, and how the disease was spread rather than publishing peer-reviewed articles for health experts to decipher. The CDC did not direct its efforts into communicating as much information on the virus as possible. The little information that was coming out of the CDC was buried away amidst several false claims and fake news articles on social media. The CDC also could have had a more strategic approach to communication in which they would have directed current health information to at-risk
communities in a more targeted fashion.\footnote{Sandro Gallea and Lawrence O. Gostin, “POV: Four Reforms for a Renewed CDC,” Boston University, August 25, 2022, \url{https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/pov-four-reforms-for-a-renewed-cdc/}.} If the CDC had invested more in communication, it could have helped people get a better understanding of the pandemic sooner.

At its core, most conspiracy theories exist because of government distrust; but not all distrust comes from a fear of an overbearing government. This section will discuss how following Science which many see as the keystone to a good response can hurt public trust and facilitate conspiracy theories, particularly amongst those who are afraid of a stronger government.

**Issues about Scientific Accuracy**

Conspirators cite that the science around COVID-19 is flimsy. Although science is very useful during a pandemic, it can be manipulated to disprove the scientific truth. Almost every scientific fact has a community of experts who support it and a smaller community of scientists who disagree with the consensus. Authorities have used this fungible principle of science to manipulate and control the human relationship with scientific knowledge for thousands of years. Galileo and Copernicus’s idea that the Sun instead of the Earth was at the center of the solar system was seen as too radical by the church and was deemed as false. A few hundred years later Mendel’s theory of botany was denied by the scientific community at the time because it was too radical and needed a different theoretical horizon.\footnote{Nils Markwardt, “Was Wissen schafft,” Republik, May 7, 2020, \url{https://www.republik.ch/2020/05/07/was-wissen-schafft}.} Governments or companies occasionally hire scientists who disagree with the consensus when an issue is inconvenient to solve or to cover up. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump hired experts such as Dr. Scott Atlas who was a radiologist by trade and had opinions that matched Trump’s agenda rather than that of the majority of scientists. A government that supports dissenting scientists naturally affects people's
opinions. Since the government and the scientific community have a grasp over people's conscience, it was understandable why many were hesitant to trust the government, even when it is a democratically elected government. As we have seen, a science-backed approach is multifaceted and does not always direct people to take the right actions, nor does it always build public trust.

Even though science can be subject to manipulation a science-backed approach can still be effective, as long as it is one that is transparent to the public. To be more transparent, governments or public institutions could provide websites with trustworthy sources that discuss the science available or it could mean employing trustworthy experts who can communicate the science in an apolitical manner. Transparency helps reveal that the government is not imposing mandates or restrictions for its own agenda. More transparency would have helped ease some of the health concerns about the vaccine which would have made for a faster vaccine rollout.

**Health Concerns about the Vaccine**

After conducting research into Covid-19 for over a year, Pfizer and Moderna came out with a promise to lead society out of the lockdowns and precautionary measures. But the Covid-19 vaccine was developed (too) quickly and there were side effects associated with it. Thus, some people who were less afraid of COVID-19 deemed that the vaccine was not worth it for fear of side effects. A humble and transparent approach to the vaccine’s rollout would have helped Germany with its approach.

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One of the most concerning side effects of the vaccine was the post-vac syndrome. The symptoms included migraines, dizziness, weakness, and could, in some very rare cases, include brain thrombos, chronic fatigue, and even partial paralysis.\textsuperscript{52} Even though this occurred after only 0.029\% of vaccinations, the fear of the vaccine's side effects convinced many Germans, especially those who were right-leaning to reject the vaccine.\textsuperscript{53} Jörg Schneider, an AfD politician, believed that only the elderly should receive the vaccine because the risks of the possible side effects outweigh its benefits for the younger population. His argument made logical sense as the raw mortality rate for individuals under 30 remained extremely low throughout the pandemic.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, post-vac syndrome was under-acknowledged in Germany and it was difficult to find care for those who suffered from this condition. Health experts such as physician Jordis Frommhold stated to the public that “children and adults were affected by vaccine side effects. Acceptance for those affected was almost non-existent.”\textsuperscript{55} The concerns of Schneider and Frommhold were not unwarranted. As of 2023, the Paul Ehrlich Institute, a research institute that is part of the German Ministry of Health, had recorded over 50,000 cases of serious vaccine side effects in Germany. This number is only expected to grow as more people receive Covid-19 booster vaccinations. Despite this concern, vaccines were one of the key pillars to curbing the spread of COVID-19, but fears of the vaccine slowed the virus's containment in Germany.

\textsuperscript{52} ibid
What Germany did to address these Concerns

In response to the fears of the post-vac syndrome, the Paul Ehrlich Institute reminded the German populace that they should take Covid-19 seriously. This is because the risk of long COVID-19 is much more common than post-vac syndrome. The institute also reported that post-vac syndrome is not a medically proven condition because the symptoms resemble long COVID-19 and thus make it difficult to discern whether one has long-term COVID-19 or post-vac syndrome.

Using science to dispel concerns about the vaccine does not always encourage people to take the vaccine. Although the post-vac syndrome was not medically proven, its possibility of existence, combined with the lack of support and recognition for those suspected of having it, makes Germany’s response appear less transparent and therefore less trustworthy. To maintain public trust, especially amongst those who were skeptical of the German government, Germany could have taken a more transparent approach, where the government still encourages everyone to get the vaccine; but they acknowledge and provide support for those suspected of having post-vac syndrome.

What the United States did to address these Concerns

In comparison to Germany, the U.S. was less focused on communicating the science behind the vaccine. Instead, the U.S. used public endorsements to relay its message. Anthony Fauci, who garnered lots of trust amongst the American populace, got his vaccine publicly to let

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56 Bitzer, Reischl, and Kölbl, “Wie verbreitet ist das Post-Vac-Syndrom?”
57 ibid
others know that it was safe. Powerful figures including Biden and former Vice President Mike Pence went public about getting the vaccine. In turn, they spread the message that the vaccine was safe and trustworthy. Celebrities opening up about their vaccination is a tried and tested strategy that has made more people willing to receive a vaccine during previous disease outbreaks. When the polio vaccine reached the public in the 1950s, Elvis Presley got vaccinated on national television which convinced thousands of susceptible teenagers across the nation to get the vaccine. Just like Elvis’s vaccination encouraged American youth to get the polio vaccine, the U.S. was looking for (and was looking to) local leaders and celebrities who were willing to do the same. The U.S. launched a 250-million-dollar campaign that used celebrity endorsement to convince others that the vaccine was safe. The U.S. plan was not designed to sway the people who were directly opposed to the vaccine but rather the people who were hesitant to get vaccinated because of the possible side effects. The plan employed local figures with whom people in specific demographics could identify, in addition to national celebrities. This was because people were more likely to “trust their doctors, their own nurses or their own pastors.” The strategy of employing outside figures to promote the vaccine is a reminder that the U.S. government can not build public trust on its own. This strategy aimed to appease government skeptics, dispel rumors that the government was self-interested, and along the way build trust.

III. Drosten and Fauci

Throughout World War II, political leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill became symbols of hope for the Allied powers. After 9/11 President Bush's popularity skyrocketed because people needed a figure to lead them through the fallout of the attack. Political leaders are sworn in, knowing that they may have to pick up a country from disaster, and some politicians even embrace it. The popularity of Rudy Giuliani, who was the mayor of New York City at the time, rose after 9/11 and 78% of voters in New York said that he handled the crisis well.61 The positive perception of him as mayor helped his political career as he continued to reference 9/11 during his presidential campaign trail in 2008. However, not all disasters are the same and some scenarios require different sets of expertise. The COVID-19 pandemic did not just demand political leadership but it also asked for scientific leadership to guide people's actions during a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was an issue that demanded a global response, and many countries decided upon a celebrity scientist who could advise both the government and the people. Each COVID-19 science advisor developed their position vis-a-vis the pandemic. Daniel Koch, Switzerland's Covid-19 advisor, believed that school lockdowns were unnecessary and a human rights issue. Other scientists, including Anthony Fauci and Christen Drosten, the respective Covid-19 experts in the United States and Germany, believed that locking schools down was a necessary provision.62 Fauci and Drosten both advocated for similar provisions but the way they promoted such measures was wildly different. Drosten discussed the most relevant research and updates of the pandemic on his podcast with NDR info.

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His podcast attracted a loyal following and was by far the most followed pandemic podcast in Germany. In contrast, Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), had a more controversial role. Fauci did not have his own podcast but rather gave people advice through press briefings and appearances on popular news outlets. Most importantly, Fauci and Drosten communicated information from the RKI and the CDC that the public was otherwise not aware of. The Democratic and Republican parties of the United States are very polarized and Fauci had to appeal to both parties: he appeared on liberal and conservative news outlets, and he stressed that people have their own agency and will make their own decisions about following regulations. In contrast, Germany’s political culture, although diverse, generally supports the government. Drosten used this to his advantage when devising his approach.

Both Fauci and Drosten worked closely with their governments. Fauci was affiliated with the CDC, whereas Drosten was part of a committee known as the “Coronavirus Expertenrat.” Both of them gave direct advice to the sitting leaders of their respective countries. Fauci and Drosten helped both countries develop more informed strategies and the information they gave increased public trust. People were skeptical of the vaccine’s need, safety, and efficacy during its development. Fortunately, Fauci and Drosten did what the governments alone could not do and their efforts to communicate the science of COVID-19 to the public facilitated public trust and positively influenced the vaccine uptake.

This chapter compares Drosten’s and Fauci’s approaches amidst the divided political landscapes they lived in. To analyze the impact of the public trust they cultivated, this chapter

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will examine how their broadcasts influenced the uptake of the vaccine. A comparative analysis of the two nations reveals that Drosten’s podcast was met with much less political resistance and people respected him as a leader. Fauci, on the other hand, was up against a political landscape that was more hostile to his teachings which negatively influenced the effectiveness of his guidance. I will start with a comparison of the scientific background of both communicators, their approach to communicating and how that influenced others, and the cultural and political factors that limited their influence. After this comparison, I will examine how the media helped communicate information on the pandemic and how that could have influenced the success of each country’s Covid-19 campaign.

**Christian Drosten**

Drosten’s podcast garnered trust because he was an expert communicator with a very strong science background. Up to that point he had dedicated his life to researching coronaviruses and was regarded as the “world's foremost expert on Coronaviruses”\(^\text{64}\). He gained critical acclaim in 2003 when he first developed a test for the lethal SARS virus. In 2013 he developed a test for the MERS virus, another coronavirus, and he proved that the virus comes from camels. Only a few years after creating this test he was promoted to the head of the Institute of Virology in Bonn, and in 2017 he became the head of the famous Charité University Hospital Institute of Virology in Berlin. His expertise on coronaviruses has been met with praise amongst his audience. The knowledge he has accrued was one of the contributing factors as to why he developed a loyal following.

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\(^\text{64}\) Kai Kupferschmidt, “How the Pandemic Made This Virologist an Unlikely Cult Figure,” *Science*, April 28, 2020, [https://www.science.org/content/article/how-pandemic-made-virologist-unlikely-cult-figure](https://www.science.org/content/article/how-pandemic-made-virologist-unlikely-cult-figure).
Covid-19 Communicators in Germany

Although Drosten was by far the most popular COVID-19 communicator in Germany, the country had a body of podcasters who each had their own beliefs about the science of COVID-19. Hendrick Streeck was one of the most notable of these podcasters. Unlike Drosten, Streeck has limited experience with SARS viruses. Instead, he spent much of his career in the United States studying HIV/AIDS at the Harvard Medical School, and he led the U.S. AIDS research program at Walter Reed Medical Center. Today, he lives in Germany and since 2019 he has been the director of the Institute of Virology at the University of Bonn. His beliefs do not align with the German government outright, as he supports herd immunity and disagrees with the infection numbers as the government's main guideline for opening up the country. Streeck’s opinions on the virus made him a controversial figure in Germany and there is a wealth of information that criticizes his opinions. Nonetheless, his viewpoint serves a specific niche of people who support alternative protocols. Even though Streeck's opinion was not always the same as the government's, along with Drosten he was recruited as part of a committee that advised chancellor Olaf Scholz’s administration's response to Covid-19. The popularity of Streeck's podcast, along with Germany’s openness to his viewpoint, reveals how the country embraced a diversity of opinions in its Covid-19 response. Room for diverse opinions is a good sign of a healthy government as it shows that the government is critical of its own ideas — a key component of transparency. Germany may recommend or even act upon one strategy, but it still accepts criticism. Therefore, the German government was confident that people trusted their response.

66 Biermann, AFP, and Reuters, “Corona.”
Despite Streeck’s role as a consultant to Scholz, the impact of his podcast was minuscule in comparison to Drosten’s podcast. With 25 episodes that had more than 15 million streams, Drosten’s podcast was by far the most listened to among three major pandemic podcasts in Germany.\(^{67}\) Besides his scientific prowess, another factor that helped him reach across political boundaries and raise public trust was how he communicated.

**Psychology of Drosten’s Popularity**

Amidst the uncertainties of the pandemic, people were drawn to regular long-form podcasts. Drosten fulfilled this demand and was a consistent voice for those looking for answers. According to Jarzyna et al., “People who favored a specific virologist scored higher on subjective and objective knowledge, individual and collective efficacy, and preventative behaviors” regarding the disease.\(^{68}\) During the lockdowns, people had limited contact with family and friends. Listening to a podcast regularly provided a sense of security and fellowship with the host. Drosten’s broadcast was one of Germany’s most popular, and although he did not know most of his audience personally, many people who listened to his podcast felt they had a connection with him. This one-sided relationship is known as para-social bonding. To connect with his audience Drosten did not act as a scientist, but rather as a media personality or a TV character to whom the audience could relate.\(^{69}\) Para-social bonding is shown to reduce anxiety, and less anxiety is correlated with a higher likelihood of engaging in preventative behaviors.\(^{70}\)


\(^{68}\) Carol Laurent Jarzyna, “Parasocial Interaction, the COVID-19 Quarantine, and Digital Age Media,” *Human Arenas* 4, no. 3 (September 2021): 413–29, [https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00156-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00156-0).

\(^{69}\) Utz, Gaiser, and Wolfers, “Guidance in the Chaos.”

\(^{70}\) Franziska Gaiser and Sonja Utz, “‘My Daily Dose of Sedation’ The Secret to Success of the Science Communication Podcast ‘Coronavirus-Update’ with the Virologist Christian Drosten and Its Effect on
Drosten's regular presence and the connections people had with him, gave rise to a loyal audience of people who were motivated to follow his guidance regardless of their political affiliation. Besides para-social bonding, Drosten’s communicative success likely also had to do with his humble personality. He was open about questions he could not answer, and he had guests, who were experts in other fields, to answer questions that he was not qualified to answer. His humility reflected the German government’s science-based approach towards the pandemic and Drosten’s effort to present the most scientifically accurate information possible.

As an effective science communicator, he spread his message by using simple language. Even though the concepts he explained were complex, he interpreted them using language that the average person could understand, thereby opening his podcast to a wider audience of people.

Drosten's public modesty and his easy-to-follow episodes lowered anxiety, fostered a loyal following, and created higher levels of trust. Many listeners reported that “listening to his podcast seemed to inspire confidence in Drosten.” 71 Most of his followers had more confidence in him than they had in the German government, some of them even demanded that he should replace the minister of health. Throughout his NDR podcast, the specialists and Drosten repeatedly emphasized that the vaccine effectively limited the severity of the COVID-19 virus. 72 His podcast inspired compliance within his audience of over 15 million which might be a key reason for a higher completion rate of the vaccine series in Germany. 73

Anthony Fauci
As the main science communicator of the United States, Fauci had a well-established scientific career and was the director of NIAID. Over his career, he advised seven presidents on infectious diseases. Fauci was a pioneer in HIV/AIDS research. His findings were fundamental to HIV/AIDS therapies that have enabled people to live full lives with the disease. Fauci was the United States Covid-19 advisor. His campaign against the virus started amidst the Trump administration which had conflicting opinions on how to approach Covid-19. Thus from the onset Fauci’s campaign was met with obstacles that Drosten never faced.

Fauci’s Communication Style and Popularity

The contemporary United States is politically polarized which was challenging when responding to a pandemic that required definitive responses. Fauci faced a difficult question: how does one unite a polarized country to mobilize against a virus when the ideology around the virus in both parties differs greatly. As America’s primary science communicator, Fauci had to appeal to as many citizens as possible while also bridging the gap between liberals and conservatives. In general, many conservatives were against Covid-19 action because they perceived it as more government encroachment on their personal freedoms, while liberals favored a strong unified response from the government. As it turns out: his approach was more effective at swaying ideological conservatives than liberals or moderates.74 To unite liberals and conservatives in the U.S., Fauci appeared on a variety of news outlets across the political spectrum, ranging from CNN to MSNBC to FOX.75 He also stressed that the American public


should take their own measures to protect themselves. This approach aligned more with conservative values. Fauci’s more individualistic approach worked particularly well during the Trump administration as his audience was not yet alienated by him. Moreover, he rarely criticized the administration’s fragmented response, and in some cases, he would praise Trump’s successes such as Operation Warp Speed which resulted in the quick development and deployment of the vaccine.\textsuperscript{76} However, his approach was not perfect and a study from Taylor et al. argues that liberals and moderates were already likely to comply with most recommendations anyway.\textsuperscript{77} Nonetheless, Dr. Fauci’s approach, which respected individual rights, helped sway conservatives who would not otherwise follow government regulations; he therefore made more Americans trust the government’s approach towards COVID-19 which helped the country move forward during such unprecedented times.

Fauci’s guidance during the Trump Administration

Fauci’s message was challenged by Donald Trump, who was a fervent critic of Fauci. “As cases surged in April, he started to publicly question the need for Fauci’s measures, falsely stating that COVID-19 was going away”.\textsuperscript{78} In an attempt to undermine Fauci, Trump used the


\textsuperscript{77} Taylor et al., “Trust in Anthony Fauci Meant Americans Were More Likely to Wear Masks and Take COVID-19 Seriously – Even Conservatives.”

Twitter handle #firefauci to rally his supporters against Fauci. Since Trump did not trust Fauci he hired Atlas as a special Covid-19 advisor. His expertise in disease control was limited and he was against testing and lockdowns and believed that Covid-19 would go away on its own through herd immunity. Atlas’s beliefs and messages would influence the agenda and messaging of the White House. Despite his efforts to undermine Fauci, his impact on Fauci’s trust was limited. According to a Quinnipiac University survey “78% approved of Dr. Fauci’s handling of the crisis, compared with 46% who approved of the president's response.” Even though presidents can be excellent leaders in national security matters, few have the knowledge of handling a pandemic. People trusted Fauci not because of his political status but because of his scientific wisdom and his expert ability to communicate this knowledge.

Fauci garnered more trust than the government thanks to his scientific expertise and his ability to communicate across the political spectrum. In the U.S. Fauci was the credible source of information for Democrats and a number of Republicans. Fauci’s response united the people to mobilize against the virus. Despite his trustworthiness, Fauci was not always well received by the public. The lead pandemic advisor in Germany, Drosten made mistakes in his response to the virus as well.

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81 Parker and Stern, “The Trump Administration and the <span Style="font-Variant.">
82 Baker, “Trump Lashes Out at Fauci Amid Criticism of Slow Virus Response.”
Criticisms of the Science Communicators

Drosten and Fauci were experts in their field and their trustworthiness inspired collective action and helped contain the virus. However, both Drosten and Fauci were not without their flaws. While Drosten and his scientific podcast were mostly well-received amongst liberals, people on the far right were critical of him. *Bild*, a conservative-leaning tabloid newspaper in Germany, accused Drosten of “pushing facts and figures to push his political agenda.” Bild made this accusation after Drosten found that the virus could just as easily spread among children as in adults. Most of the right-wing criticism against Drosten boiled down to the central idea that he was limiting their freedoms, which is the main idea of libertarian/conservative ideologists. Bild would not have turned against Drosten if he had been promoting the opening of schools or another anti-lockdown measure.

But Drosten did not have a perfect record with the liberals either. During the swine flu epidemic in 2009, he had emphasized the seriousness of the outbreak and the need for vaccines. His message of urgency over the swine flu epidemic was met with much criticism because the epidemic quickly faded and was not regarded as a serious event in the history books. His response to the influenza (swine flu) outbreak was a reminder that it is difficult even for scientific experts to postulate the necessary actions to curb the spread of a disease, especially for a disease like Covid-19 about which there was little known before its inception. Since Covid-19 had only emerged a few months before it spread to Germany, not even Drosten knew the best

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84 Gaiser and Utz, “My Daily Dose of Sedation’ The Secret to Success of the Science Communication Podcast ‘Coronavirus-Update’ with the Virologist Christian Drosten and Its Effect on Listeners.”
steps to take at first. Initially, he thought that it was best to keep schools open. Only when he was given a flood of information countering his beliefs did he change his mind.  

Fauci also changed his views as the science of Covid-19 emerged. At first, Fauci believed that mask-wearing was not necessary, and he even advised against it so that professional-grade masks could be preserved for health workers. Upon finding information that masks helped curb the spread of the virus, he changed his mind. As disease experts, leaders, and communicators, Fauci and Drosten were ideally positioned for their roles. However, science is always evolving; and as a society, there was still a lot to learn about how diseases spread. COVID-19 was a novel disease that even the most distinguished scientists had no prior knowledge of. Therefore, it was difficult for experts to make clear and concrete recommendations. In the months following COVID-19’s inception, there was a lot of research done to determine the disease’s severity and how it spreads. The Covid-19 experts, including Fauci and Drosten, changed their recommendations to fit the new scientific consensus and the sociopolitical needs that emerged. Many people were disillusioned by the experts' flip-flopping and this negatively affected the public perception of those scientists which in turn meant lower compliance to their recommendations.

Drosten was a skilled Covid-19 communicator and the people of Germany trusted him more than they trusted their government. His regular podcast along with his humble character and transparent communication made more Germans willing to comply with his COVID-19 measures. Fauci did not have a regular briefing podcast like Drosten. Consequently he was more

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distant from the public, and he was viewed more negatively than Drosten. News outlets that had a bias against Fauci were free to criticize his message and over time some people turned against him. But still, more people trusted Fauci’s message on COVID-19 than that of the U.S. government.  

Fauci built trust by integrating his response to the politics of the United States. Although he did believe that certain actions were necessary to limit the spread of the pandemic, none of the measures he proposed were compulsory. Fauci’s response took the importance of bipartisanship into consideration. This emphasis and his approach that was mostly about communicating information and not about binding measures, made him the most trusted source of information on Covid-19 even when the Trump administration disagreed with much of his advice.  

Fauci’s press briefings and news appearances helped convey important information about Covid-19 to the American public but his attempts to appease both sides of the political spectrum is a reminder that transparency, while the main building block of public trust in a polarized country, is not the only requirement of a trustworthy government. His prioritization of personal freedoms is a reminder that public trust also means addressing the values of both sides of the political spectrum.  

Public trust and the approval of Fauci and Drosten was also facilitated by the relationship between the media and the state. This relationship gives insight into how the two countries relayed information on the pandemic and has lots to do with the political culture of both nations.

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87 Baker, “Trump Lashes Out at Fauci Amid Criticism of Slow Virus Response.”
IV. The Relationship of the Media and the State

The relationship between the media and the state has perhaps the most significant influence on the political culture in the U.S. and Germany. Thus, the reception perception of the news/media in Germany and in the U.S. likely has had a major effect on how the government and the health communicators (Fauci and Drosten) were received in their respective countries.

The U.S. supports some public broadcasting although their funding is rather indirect. According to an article by the Hill, “the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act is allocated to a nongovernmental agency the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. That corporation can support original programming produced by public television or public radio - but must direct much of its 445-million-dollar funding to local public radio or television stations across the country, via “community service grants.” Large news channels such as NPR take funding from this federal government contract. However, the vast majority of news that Americans consume comes from other sources, most notably MSNBC, CNN, and Fox. Thus, Fauci whose mission was to communicate information on the pandemic to as many people as possible, appeared primarily on private networks such as CNN, and CBS. The lack of funding in public news reflects America's values of smaller government and more personal freedoms. This has both positives and negatives. On the positive side, less public intervention in the news sector gives people more freedom to choose the news they would like to hear. However, this also means that there is more room for the news to distort reality and tell people what they want to hear instead of the objective truth. The private news environment in the U.S. also allows for a more divergent news

atmosphere in which people subscribe to only the news sources they trust instead of viewing both sides equally. This has created a news atmosphere that prioritizes political partisanship over accuracy. Thus, the news sector has reinforced political divisions and has further negated the trust people had in Fauci and the government's pandemic response.

German news/media seeks to find a balance between a free and a trustworthy news environment. As compared to the U.S., the German government has a much greater role to play in its news/media landscape. Although Deutsche Welle is the only news outlet that is owned directly by the German federal government, state governments determine how much the local news outlets should cost and they tax their citizens based on these goals. Many of the most popular German news networks, including ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen), Deutschland Radio, and ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands) fulfill their operating budgets through this tax.90 Christen Drosten's podcasts aired on Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) which is owned by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands (ARD).

The TV tax does not come without controversy in Germany. Many Germans believe that it costs too much to maintain and that the funds they are paying are going towards a service that benefits the government instead of the people. German news and media sphere leaders have been using taxpayer funds to fuel their lavish lifestyles. Most notably and most recently, Patricia Schlesinger, the director of Berlin's public broadcaster RBB, was accused of corruption as her employer found that they paid the tab for her expensive rented car and her lavish catered meals at her apartments. Schlesinger promptly resigned after this issue became known to the public. Although the news in Germany is generally trustworthy and strives for accuracy, the incident has

sparked skepticism and debate over the TV tax and the motives of public media in general with some people accusing the German government of using their authority over public media to push their agenda.\footnote{Patricia Schlesinger scandal}

However, direct German government authority over the media is limited as this landscape is more of a state and private cooperation, is heavily regulated, and has an official charge for accuracy and objectivity and neutrality. The system has historical roots: After WWII the Allies helped Germany create a public broadcasting system to reeducate the German population on democratic values. Thus, the German public broadcasting system was created to reflect a diverse set of viewpoints and is also protected from the influence of the government and the private market. The tax merely ensures that these news organizations can operate without commercial influence.\footnote{Ben Knight, “Germany’s Complex Public Broadcasting System – DW – 08/16/2022,” dw.com, August 16, 2022, \url{https://www.dw.com/en/understanding-germanys-complex-public-broadcasting-system/a-62825334}.} The German constitution bans censorship and guarantees that everyone has the right to express their opinions. Therefore, the ARD was established to make sure that all news media channels represent a “cross-section” of the population.\footnote{Eva Steinlein, “An Overview of Press Freedom and the Media in Germany,” deutschland.de, May 3, 2022, \url{https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/culture/an-overview-of-press-freedom-and-the-media-in-germany}.} Although it is not as prominent as in the U.S., Germany also has a strong private news sphere with some of the world's largest news/media conglomerates including RTL and ProSiebenSat 1 media. The strong public and private spheres of German news media allow for diverse opinions while maintaining the accuracy and fairness of the news.

Germany has one of the most trustful news systems in the world with an average of 70% of Germans trusting public broadcasters.\footnote{Knight, “Germany’s Complex Public Broadcasting System – DW – 08/16/2022.”} This runs in stark contrast to the United States where
66% say they have little or no confidence in news/media. Public trust is directly linked to a higher willingness to act.95 Thus people in Germany were likely more willing to follow the measures proposed by the TV or news personalities, including suggestions that people should get fully vaccinated to protect themselves against COVID-19. Therefore, some important factors were beyond the health experts' control. The general trust people had in the German news/media worked in favor of Drosten as his broadcast was on NDR, a public news outlet. Thus one can assume that Drosten had a more pronounced impact on his followers because people were already trusting of the news/media landscape in Germany. Whereas, in the United States the strong biases supported by most news outlets made it more likely that people would listen to news that stayed within their own bias bubbles. Fauci has appeared on news outlets across the political spectrum but considering people’s lack of confidence in America's news/media this had less impact on swaying peoples opinions than Drosten in Germany.

V. Fear of an Overpowering Government

The news/media environment in Germany and the U.S. put people in their own political echo chambers, making it even more important to craft a response that every political party could agree with. The enforcement of the vaccine and lockdown measures went against right-wing ideology. Therefore, it did not unite the Germans together nor did it unify the Americans. As stated by Jörg Schneider, many Germans consciously rejected the vaccine because they feared government encroachment. According to Oreskes et al., “Citizens protesting Covid-19 mandates have for the most part questioned the science but have carried placards equating mask mandates

with government tyranny and personal liberty.” The anti-vaxxers were skeptical of the science but much of their skepticism was rooted in their political beliefs.

The majority of the unvaccinated in the United States were conservatives. Generally, conservative and libertarian ideology calls for less government intervention. Thus, conservatives rejected the vaccine because the government's push for vaccinations violated their freedoms and went against their beliefs. Most conservatives were not against the vaccine, they simply feared that the government was forcing them to take something that was untrustworthy and could be dangerous. A lack of public trust amongst right-wing subscribers in the United States only strengthened their reasons not to get the vaccine.

The German government has a stronger connection to the people than is the case in the United States, and the population generally approves of government action more readily than the U.S. Nonetheless, many Germans, including people outside of the AfD party, believed that the German government's actions to enforce the vaccine violated their bodily integrity and their rights. Protests against the government peaked when there was a prospect of a vaccine mandate in early 2022. The proposed mandate was very unsuccessful in the parliament. Initially, Lauterbach, the German health minister, together with Chancellor Scholz proposed a rule that would make vaccinations compulsory for all adults. Citing its unpopularity, however, they loosened the rule to only apply to adults above the age of 60. Neither of the proposals were passed into law. The failure of both proposals highlights that strong government oversight is often unpopular in a democracy even when the country has a strong public sector and the

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proposition is for the benefit of the nation. Germany and the United States operate on a system of limited government. The SPD’s vaccine mandate challenged the status quo of limited government in Germany. Therefore, the mandate certainly did not win over more right-wing politicians who were hesitant to get the vaccine; in fact, it has contributed to Scholz and Lauterbach’s unpopularity. The mandate drew upon fears of government oppression and these fears strengthened COVID-19 conspiracy theories that made the same people who challenge the government even more hesitant to receive the vaccine.

Conclusion

In the end Covid-19 ravaged both countries, killing over 1.2 million in the U.S. and a little under 200,000 in Germany. Both countries managed to inoculate the majority of their populations with Germany vaccinating 78% with one dose and completing the basic immunization for 76% of the population and the United States with 81% receiving one dose, and less than 70% receiving a second dose. The U.S. would have been closer to Germany in basic immunizations (completing the vaccine series for Pfizer, Moderna or Novavax) if the government had invested into accessibility. Ultimately it was the people’s will to get vaccinated which was determined by public trust, which explains the difference.

Even though Germany’s response was hindered by people’s political beliefs, the government was overall more transparent about the science of the disease than the American government, which was ultimately what made Germany’s response appear more trustworthy. The German government response was also strengthened by a diverse public media landscape which expressed multiple viewpoints around the pandemic and disease experts such as Drosten.

who conveyed the necessary information to the public. It can also be said that the accessibility of the vaccine in Germany and the country’s less polarized political environment made for a less gridlocked and initially more streamlined response. Germany still could have improved upon its response: its overreliance on science, and the difficulty the RKI had communicating this science did not help. In contrast the U.S. government underplayed the pandemic, had an untrustworthy news/media environment, and had a divisive political culture, which was only compounded by the relative inaccessibility of the vaccine due to cost and logistics constraints. It would also be unfair to say that the U.S. had a response that was worse in all aspects: they tried to be transparent about the vaccine, and while the response relied less on science, Fauci was a trustworthy disease expert. Only when all factors are accounted for does it appear that the U.S. had a less trustworthy response.

The successes and failures of Germany’s and the United States’s response reveal some important lessons about public trust and pandemic preparedness.

These four lessons are:

1. The importance of humility,
2. Finding common ground,
3. Communicating the pandemic’s threat,
4. Science does not speak for itself

The first takeaway is Humility. Humility is at the core of a proper response, and was the reason behind a lot of the successes as well as failures of the German government in particular. As discussed above, one of the keys of Drosten’s success was his humility. If he did not know a fact he would either state that the science was not available yet or he would recruit a more
qualified professional to explain that particular aspect of the matter. Humility was important to building trust because it reminded people that the government was doing the best it could to protect people rather than establishing measures that only benefited the government.

The second key takeaway is finding common ground. The U.S. and Germany both have very dynamic and polarized governments. Thus, it was important to conjure a response with which everyone could agree. Although he failed to appease the far-right, Fauci convinced moderate conservatives to follow his advice by issuing recommendations instead of regulations. Capturing the support of both parties in the U.S. also could have been eased if the U.S. had a more fair and balanced news/media landscape. Perhaps the U.S. should have reinstated the fairness doctrine which requires news/media coverage to cover both sides of a given situation. Public German news media outlets are required to discuss all sides of an issue, and this helped prevent political bias in the public news/media sphere which also facilitated trust. Germany wasn’t perfect and the government had difficulty proposing regulations that appeased all the political parties. If both countries had invested into Covid-19 strategies that people from a diversity of political viewpoints could agree on, they would have also garnered the support of people from more political viewpoints.

The third key takeaway is communicating the danger of Covid-19. Merkel’s initial speech that declared the gravity of Covid-19 motivated Germany to mobilize and build a response that was initially one of the most effective responses on the globe. If people weren’t afraid of the pandemic, they would perceive it as another cold/flu and would complain that the

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99 Gaiser and Utz, “My Daily Dose of Sedation’ The Secret to Success of the Science Communication Podcast ‘Coronavirus-Update’ with the Virologist Christian Drosten and Its Effect on Listeners.”

pandemic was exaggerated. Thus people who did not fear the pandemic were less likely to follow measures or get vaccinated. This was seen in Germany, at the end of the summer of 2020 when thousands gathered to protest the reinstatements of Covid-19 measures after they had been lifted for a few months. The lack of fear had a particularly hard effect on the response of the United States as the U.S. government did not instill enough fear into the population which only made fewer people comply with the government’s Covid-19 measures.

The fourth key takeaway is that science cannot speak for itself. Following the science was very important for a well-crafted response, but in the case of the U.S. and particularly in Germany’s case it did little to appease people who disagreed and were not willing to comply with the government’s response. Instead, both governments should have changed the way they approached science. First, the CDC and the RKI should have done more to communicate the science behind the documents directly to the people. When the science is contained in documents that only experts can properly understand, people and political leaders will question whether the government is truly serving the people. Second, science does not take into account people’s political beliefs or fears. Many people feared that the vaccine would violate their bodily integrity, and some did not want to give in to a measure that was pressured by a government they did not agree with. Political beliefs are difficult to change, and science turns out to be a strategy that has very rarely worked to appease people who disagree or fear the government.

Possibilities for Further Research

This thesis explores what determines, and how the U.S. and Germany attempted to build, public trust during the Covid-19 pandemic. This proved to be a broader topic than anticipated and there are a few avenues of research that were left out of this thesis for the sake of continuity.
Thus, for future research I would recommend studying the impact of social media on trust. During my research, I also found out that Germany had an astonishingly low death rate despite its high Covid-19 incidence rate; and studying the EU’s slow vaccine rollout is also an interesting avenue for future research. Answering these questions would, in turn, open up still more puzzles that one could try to answer and write about.

We live in the era of social media - and social media played a pronounced role in how people responded to government pandemic measures. Social media is particularly insidious because the algorithms designed to keep people engaged confirm the preconceived political beliefs people have. Social media outlets likely will not recommend people news articles that go against their beliefs because they become less likely to engage with it, meaning spending less time on the app. In some cases, the compounding effect of the echo chamber, when all the news someone receives has the same perspective, will radicalize the viewer, and could cause them to rebel against the government, even when it has their best interest in mind.¹⁰¹ This could have caused people to refuse the Covid-19 vaccine, not follow government measures and so forth.

The pandemic itself also raises further puzzles and questions, one of which was why did Germany have a lower death rate per 100,000 than the U.S. This thesis does a lot to answer this interesting question, albeit unintentionally. However, to answer it fully, the thesis would need to undertake a deeper examination of alternative paradigms of research, including how testing worked and what effects it had, and analyze the role of the healthcare system in both countries more fully.

And while the thesis focused on Germany and the United States handling of the vaccine rollout, the EU policy surrounding vaccines was a crucial transnational context to Germany’s response. The EU feared that larger, wealthier countries would seek to vaccinate their populations first before distributing the vaccine to other EU member nations. Therefore, the EU sought a more equitable distribution, and because of the EU’s response each member state acquired and administered the vaccine at the same rate for the first months following the release of the vaccine. This put Germany behind the U.K, Israel, and the United States in vaccination rates initially and was met with widespread criticism and skepticism.102 There is a whole wealth of information surrounding the EU’s response to the pandemic and Germany’s position and relationship with the EU could help one draw important conclusions about Germany’s response.

This thesis focused on the determiners of public trust and how Germany and the U.S. cultivated it during the pandemic. What I hope the reader has taken away from this paper is an insight into the fragility and importance of public trust. Public trust was the key to an effective vaccine rollout in Germany and the U.S. but was also the broader context for a more or less successful response to the pandemic. Countries with higher political trust, such as Sweden were also able to craft responses that fit across the political spectrum because the people’s trust was enough to make them comply. When public trust was stronger in Germany, more people felt obliged to follow the government or disease experts’ guidance, and there were less political protests. Public trust is waning around the globe, as autocracies and government censorship is on the rise. However, it is also important that people have the wisdom to tell when an institution has their best interest in mind because public trust enables a democracy to function effectively. Without it there would be constant political unrest making an otherwise functioning democracy

102 De Maio, “EU Learns from Mistakes on Vaccines.”
unable to proceed with legislation. People should still be critical of their governments, of course, and the actions the government takes will never please everyone. However, strong democracies with a proper rule of law would fare much better during normal times and in times of crisis if they placed more trust into public institutions.

Bibliography


