

“Coping with Crisis: A psychosocial investigation into democratic processes during COVID-19”

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Project description The COVID-19 epidemic has brought unprecedented restrictions to our social lives and daily routines. The financial burden caused by Canada’s economic shut down; the introduction of policy proposals restricting civil rights and liberties; and, the uncertainty surrounding when – and if – life can return to normal are all significant stressors in this time of crisis. How are Canadians adapting to the events surrounding the epidemic, and what are the implications for democratic citizenship post-COVID?

“Coping with Crisis” is a research program developed by members of the McGill CSDC community to understand how Canadians respond to the COVID-19 epidemic and specifically, how the unprecedented economic and personal stressors affect their attitudes toward democratic politics. Bridging political science, psychology, and public policy, our proposed research program investigates three overarching questions about how Canadians’ cope with newly-imposed government restrictions and the consequences of these measures for the country’s social, economic, and political processes.

First, do threat perceptions and feelings of anxiety motivate individuals to comply with COVID-19 measures? Research on authoritarianism, a deeply rooted, enduring personality trait, finds societal threats activate authoritarian predispositions, with significant consequences on citizens’ trust, tolerance, and democratic values (Feldman, 2003; Feldman & Stenner, 1997). Authoritarianism predisposes individuals to favour conformity and obedience as a means of maintaining security, cohesion and order in society. We thus expect reactions to the crisis to shape how individuals comply with government directives, leading some to support punishments against those violating quarantine, as well as condone undemocratic actions by governments. Our survey includes a series of questions to examine how perceptions of the crisis activate authoritarian tendencies and what consequences perceptions of threat have for citizens’ policy preferences.

Second, how do Canadians attribute responsibility (Rudolph, 2003) for the massive economic consequences of COVID-19 and how does this process impact democratic accountability? Moreover, how resilient is institutional trust and confidence in Canada’s response to the crisis? We are interested in how the attribution of responsibility impacts political behaviour and whether partisan biases still play a role in this context of crisis.

Finally, how do Canadians evaluate the policy initiatives proposed by the Government of Canada to combat COVID-19? The current pandemic necessitates a massive and costly response from governments and it will force governments to ask for sacrifices from the population. To what extent are Canadians willing to make trade-offs between support for economic initiatives, healthcare funding, and aid packages to individuals, communities, and provinces? We develop a set of questions about policy trade-offs to pay for the response to the crisis, as well as questions about the unique trade-off between public health, civil liberties, and the economy.

In sum, our project addresses three major dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis that are significant to democratic citizenship: psychological reactions and policy support; the role of responsibility attribution for vote choice, as well as how economic experiences during the crisis shape the different views for funding options. We plan to conduct a survey with about 1,100 respondents from the online panel of Dynata and Canadian social media. This is an entirely student-driven project. That is, the questions are developed and driven by student research interests and the study will lead to several collective products led by graduate students themselves as lead-authors. Overall, we anticipate that our data collection will at least lead to 4-5 publications. Prior to beginning data collection, an expedited review will be requested from McGill University’s Institutional Ethics Review Board. We anticipate a quick turnaround in the review process as none of the items are sensitive to participants or include deception.

References

Feldman, S. (2003). Enforcing social conformity: A theory of authoritarianism. *Political Psychology*, 24(1): 41-74. Feldman, S. & Stenner, K. (1997). Perceived threat and authoritarianism. *Political Psychology*, 18(4): 741-770. Rudolph, T. J. (2003). Who's responsible for the economy? The formation and consequences of responsibility attributions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(4), 698-713.

Narrated budget

Our research team is requesting the maximum level of funding for the proposed research. If approved for the CSDC Special Research Competition – COVID-19 grant, our team will have a project budget of \$4,850 to allocate to the present research. The majority of our funding (\$3,000) would be supported by the CSDC Special Research Competition. Matching funds of \$1,850 will be provided by the principal applicant (Dr. Dietlind Stolle) to support the project (from her James McGill research grant).

Funds for the present research will be used entirely for the hiring of research professionals and technicians to execute a nationally representative sample of Canadians. A quote provided by the research firm Dynata has indicated a cost of CAD\$3.50 per participant (plus taxes) to execute a 15 minute online survey with a final sample representative of the Canadian population with respect to age, gender and province of residence.

The total cost of the project is estimated at CAD\$4,830 for a sample of 1,100 Canadians over the age of 18.

Student-Involvement: I will add a note here on student involvement. This is a student initiative of six McGill graduate students (5PhD and one MA) and myself. We intend to develop a workshop style format of collaboration, which will further push this project into a unique training opportunity. I am here to facilitate the project and to consult with the graduate students and regularly meet with them to discuss question wording, analysis and paper set-up. But they will ultimately be the leaders of the project and especially of their specific sub-projects on which the questionnaire is built. Since this group of graduate students is relatively funded for the moment, I think that a collaborative project, with resulting lead publications and common discussions on a topic of utmost importance is a very good way to engage students. Whereas \$3,000 as a stipend could have helped one student to spend some parts of the summer, in this project we use the \$3,000 to benefit six students and we build a much-needed sense of academic community, which is also an important contribution to the difficulties of this time.

Outreach: We have also planned to contribute with the results of our study to a round-table on CSDC COVID-19 research activities online or in-person depending on governmental decisions. In addition, we plan to write short research briefs for our website at no additional cost.