

# Politicising and depoliticising COVID-19: four narratives the government used to manage the balance between taking credit and apportioning blame



**Peter Kerr** and **Steve Kettell** examine the politicising and depoliticising effects of the various stories that were deployed by the government in its response to the coronavirus crisis during its daily press briefings over a 2-month period between 16 March and 16 May 2020. They identify four key narratives: unprecedented government activism; working to plan; national security, wartime unity and sacrifice; and scientific guidance.

How does a government manage a problem like COVID-19? Political scientists have long noted that governance is not just about managing the problem itself – in this case, through the provision of PPE, a wide-ranging furlough scheme, and the implementation of public safety measures. A core facet of governing – often referred to as ‘statecraft’ – is to manage wider perceptions and expectations of *how* the problem is being managed. A key aim here is to make sure that the apportioning of blame and credit is directed into politically favourable channels. A government’s ability to manage this balance effectively is as central to the governance of an issue as managing the issue itself.

In the UK, as in other countries, the management of the COVID-19 crisis threw up a wide range of successes and failures. The government drew plaudits for its furlough scheme and the vaccine roll-out but was widely criticised for presiding over comparatively high death rates, its failure to protect care homes and its botched attempts at a track and trace system (to name but a few examples). The government can, of course, rightly claim that the crisis unfolded at an unprecedented scale and pace, forcing ministers to make rapid decisions in a fast-moving environment without any clear road map for them to follow. All the more need, then, for a carefully managed statecraft strategy.

## Depoliticisation as statecraft

A key aspect of successful statecraft is ensuring that it is the government who control the narrative on where the balance between credit and blame should fall. Political scientists have long noted that a key tool at ministers’ disposal is their ability to ‘depoliticise’ actions that might damage their government’s popularity – and/or to ‘politicise’ those decisions that they want to claim credit for.

If, as the late Jim Bulpitt once said, statecraft is the ‘art of winning elections’, then depoliticisation can aid a government’s electability by deflecting responsibility for things that go wrong. Pete Burnham, whose work has done much to highlight this type of statecraft, has pointed out that UK governments have become increasingly prone towards depoliticising major decisions. This is partly because, over the course of the postwar period, most attempts at UK economic management have resulted in a notable lack of success. In this context, governance becomes as much about managing failure and public expectations as it is about trying to achieve results.

In recent years, our understanding of depoliticisation has deepened considerably. Early literature highlighted ways in which governments displaced responsibility for key decisions onto ostensibly independent institutions or ‘rules-based’ policy making procedures. These processes help governments to dilute, or even completely displace, blame for any policy blunders that might occur.

## Depoliticisation and story-telling

More contemporary literature has shown that depoliticisation can work in increasingly complex ways. At the forefront of recent scholarship has been a recognition that depoliticisation is not always a singular governmental act (as in the case of transferring responsibility for monetary policy to the Bank of England) but an ongoing and dynamic ‘discursive’ process. Political scientists have also come to recognise that processes of depoliticisation (shedding blame) often occur simultaneously with attempts at politicisation (taking credit). Thus, governments are often caught up in an ongoing process of discursively narrating this shifting balance of responsibility.

A [recent study](#) has brought together a number of these insights by showing that ministers often use 'storytelling' to help them create these politicising and depoliticising effects. Ministers will often narrate 'stories' that allow them to shift responsibility between various actors, allowing them to manage the balance between blame and credit.

Building on these insights, [we conducted a study](#) of the UK government's attempts to narrate their management of the pandemic. Through a detailed analysis of the government's daily press briefings, we examined the various stories that ministers used to manage the balance between taking credit and apportioning blame. Our study identified four key narratives, each of which had various politicising or depoliticising effects:

**Unprecedented government activism.** This narrative stressed that ministers were ready to take whatever measures were necessary to tackle the crisis. This was a politicising story that promoted and talked-up a number of (claimed) governmental successes, including the expansion of testing and the provision of a furlough scheme to protect the economy. This framing of the government's response to the crisis was prominent early on, but began to subside by the end of the briefings, as ministers grew increasingly keen to return to business as usual.

**National security, wartime unity, and sacrifice.** These combined narratives framed the crisis as a battle against a deadly opponent, requiring an urgent, wartime-type response from both the government and the public, with an emphasis on the need for national cohesion. This was a largely depoliticising story, which often sought to close down criticism of the government's response, given the need for the country to pull together. This narrative was also more prominent during the early part of the crisis, as ministers sought to prepare people for the worst effects of the outbreak.

**Working to plan.** This narrative framed ministerial actions as part of a rationally unfolding, coherent plan of action, thereby creating a politicising impression of governing competence, foresight, and readiness. This story grew more emphatic as time progressed, in response to growing perceptions of the government's mishandling of the crisis.

**Scientific guidance.** This depoliticising narrative helped to place decisions 'at one remove' from government by stressing that ministerial decisions were based primarily on the advice of their scientific advisers. By drawing on the epistemic status of science and medical expertise, ministers made repeated claims that their decision-making was being 'guided by the science', helping to displace potential blame for any problems that these decisions might incur. This framing was notable throughout the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis provides us with a unique case study of ministerial attempts to try to govern a range of highly complex policy problems in real time. The unprecedented scale of the problem and the rate at which it unfolded, created a crisis moment in which the government was forced to make quick decisions in response to an ever-changing set of immensely challenging problems. Our analysis highlights their constantly shifting attempts to 'hop' between these different stories as they attempted to balance their management of the crisis with the broader 'statecraft' aim of politicising their successes whilst depoliticising their myriad failures.

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Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

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