

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF CANADIAN “NATION-NESS”
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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In fulfillment of the Parliament Internship Programme
Director: Dr. Anne Dance
6,847 words
(Feedback from the paper committee welcomed)

ABSTRACT

Communication and messaging are central in the management of a crisis and this quickly became apparent in the Canadian Liberal government's response to COVID-19. This paper traces the executive branch's strategic use of national identity through a qualitative analysis of the Prime Minister's public briefings between March 16-31, 2020. Ultimately, it is argued that the Prime Minister's messaging instrumentalized identity to encourage Canadians to take particular public health actions. The author aims to bridge nationalism and critical border studies with more applied areas of Canadian politics and political communication. Finally, a case is made for thinking about possible lasting impacts of this crisis and about best practices that could be relevant for addressing future public policy challenges, namely the centering of expertise and appeals to inclusive, decentralized forms of local membership in community.

1. Introduction

In the winter of 2019, a novel form of coronavirus was detected in China. It rapidly spread and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. The language of physical distancing, social isolating, and quarantine quickly entered lexicons around the world as governments shut down shops and advised – or in some cases, enforced – bans on non-essential travel outside the home. Without a vaccine in the foreseeable future, we continue to face what can only be described as a *crisis*. Comparisons, particularly at the outset, were drawn to 9/11 and the Great Depression in terms of the scope of government intervention and norm changing that will be required to manage the pandemic.

What does national identity look like in a time of crisis? More particularly, do governments use identity as part of their responses? The Canadian response to the COVID-19 at the outset of the pandemic provides an ideal platform to qualitatively trace national identity in the midst of crisis. Canadian national identity has often been defined as fluid (to put it generously) or as lacking a clear definition (to put it more critically). We might expect Canadian identity, then, to be malleable in the case of a rapidly changing context. A small, but growing, body of literature explores the impact of natural disasters and other crises on the development of a national brand.

Most of this literature has been confined to episodic disasters, which temporarily impact the ability of a country to compete economically, namely in terms of its ability to attract tourism and foreign direct investment. How a prolonged and global health crisis influences the articulation of a country's national identity, however, has been given less consideration. Ultimately, I argue that the federal executive branch instrumentalized Canadian identity in its fight against COVID-19 by both appealing to past understandings of Canadian-ness and to an optimistic, albeit un-defined, version of the future. The boundaries around Canadian-ness were thickened, with appeals to national duty and with restrictions on movement for non-citizens; this remained, contradictorily, couched in an understanding of the problem as spanning national borders. The particularity (in time and space) of this form of Canadian identity presents further evidence for understanding identity as episodic, rather than stable.

I advance a qualitative analysis of the Canadian response to COVID-19 by analyzing the public statements made by the Prime Minister during the height of the crisis in Canada (mid-March 2020). I then undertake a targeted analysis of Twitter commentary to understand whether Canadians use the language coming from elites. I begin with a brief theoretical discussion where I position myself first in the broader nationalism literature and secondly in the crisis and identity literature. From there, I develop a few expectations that guide the subsequent presentation of findings and discussion. In this final section, I highlight implications for political and public policy communication strategies.

2.Theory and Development of Hypothesis

a) In or out?: Theorizing nations

At its core, nationalism is about group interactions, the most central interaction being where and how thickly lines are drawn between “in” and “out” groups. This is the seminal argument

advanced by sociologist Fredrik Barth. One can easily see how nationalism becomes intertwined with the idea of Othering: the “in” group – or nation – needs an “out” group in order to define its boundaries. From there, an important debate in the literature has been whether national identity is primordial (essentially a natural state derived from ethnic, cultural, religious characteristics, etc.) or constructed (this could be by political elites, populations themselves or socioeconomic factors). By virtue of the questions I am asking – such as, how is nationalism *articulated* and *experienced*? – my analysis clearly falls in the constructivist camp, an approach which suggests that national identity has a lot to do with discourses, norms, and images of the Self. This does not mean that modern nationalism is not real; only that it is not inherent or present in all periods of history – past and (possibly) future.

The case of Canadian nation-ness during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a fascinating opportunity to explore some of the nuances, and debates within, the constructivist literature. Rogers Brubaker’s highly influential book, *Nationalism Reframed*, altered the very language that some scholars use when talking about identity. He suggests that nation-ness needs to be thought of as an “event” that crystallizes under particular situations (1996, p. 19). He calls for greater work that understands nation-ness as “a contingent, conjecturally fluctuating, and precarious frame and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of developmental trends in economy, polity, or culture” (*Ibid*). This runs in contrast to the developmentalist approach that sees national identity as a product of long-term socioeconomic factors. The most famous of these arguments is the one advanced by Ernest Gellner, who suggests that nationalism developed from unique characteristics of the industrial revolution that required a modern workforce who could communicate along the same linguistic lines (1983). Exploring identity in a time of acute crisis is a clear example of nation-ness as “event,” and my hope is that

a qualitative analysis like this one can answer Brubaker's call for more detailed analysis of the phenomenon.

Another debate is between those who see national identity as driven by the political elite and their strategy (Marx, 1998) and those who see it as developed, or at least informed by, micro-interactions (Adams, 1996). This is the classic top-down versus bottom-up discussion that seems to take place in most social science literature. The latter approach is most common in smaller scale analyses that study community generation and transmission of identity. My expectation would be that in a time of crisis, narratives coming from political elites will dominate. At the same time, my study also spends some time investigating whether the elite discourse is echoed by the population. The challenge with an elite-focused approach, in my view, is that it can sometimes neglect to connect the dots between the narratives from above and those who are receiving them.

b) National identity in crisis: Borrowing from crisis management literature

The literature on identity management during crisis is mostly based in the marketing and tourism spheres, but it provides some interesting avenues to better theorize the case of Canadian-ness during COVID-19. A core concept is the idea of "image crisis." Eran Ketter (2015) suggests that a catastrophic event, like a natural disaster or an act of terrorism, can create negative international perceptions that impact the "destination brand" of a country; this is an "image crisis" (p. 67). It then becomes incumbent on the government to restore their image (or rebrand) in the aftermath of the crisis. Surveying literature on post-disaster communication, Gabrielle Walters and Judith Mair highlight a series of approaches often used by governments: the "business as usual" message; language about communities being ready to welcome guests; and narratives about rejuvenation or regeneration (2012, p. 89). Some empirical cases that have been studied include the South African government's campaign to rebrand post-apartheid as an inclusive and tolerant

country (Aronczyk, 2008). The Nepalese government also underwent a deliberate re-branding campaign following the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, with the goal of restoring international confidence in the safety of their country. Identity played an important role in Nepal's response: the government underlined the inherently hospitable and welcoming nature of the Nepalese people to support the restoration of tourism (Ketter, 2015).

One will likely notice the focus of this literature: the international audience. "Image crisis" and restoration studies have largely been based in tourism studies, and therefore, focus on how political elites use identity to navigate crises that threaten their image internationally. In the case of COVID-19 in Canada, the focus of political communication is predominantly Canadians themselves; however, given the global nature of the pandemic, we can expect that the international context will also remain important.

From both of these literatures, then, we can glean three loose hypotheses that will inform the subsequent analysis. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, I present the following more as guiding expectations than as firm hypotheses. The main goal is to extract some policy-relevant implications from an exploration of Canadian identity during COVID-19. We might expect that:

E1: Political narratives in time of crisis will focus on restoring an old image of Canadian-ness.

E2: The global context will be important, albeit in a different way from that observed in the tourism literature.

E3: As a whole, national identity will be episodic, changing in content and intensity depending on the context.

3. Method

I advance a qualitative study of the Prime Minister's daily briefings (PM's briefings) between Monday, March 16, 2020 and Tuesday, March 31, 2020. The pandemic hit when the Liberal Party of Canada was newly into its second mandate. It was re-elected, this time as a minority government, in October 2019. Since the focus of my analysis is on thematic messaging – not on measuring the effectiveness or tracing the specificities of programming responses – I look at the PM's briefings, rather than at updates from senior public servants or health officials. By virtue of this focus on the Prime Minister, my analysis interrogates use of identity by the *executive* branch.

Beginning in mid-March, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered daily updates on the federal government's response to COVID-19 from outside his residence¹. These daily public appearances began with Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau's positive COVID-19 diagnosis, which required the Prime Minister also to self-isolate. At the outset, the briefings were a means to show Canadians that the Prime Minister continued to be working despite being in isolation, but they continued for weeks to come and became part of the "new COVID normal." At each briefing, the Prime Minister would speak for approximately five minutes about new funding announcements or public health guidelines and then he would take questions from the media, including members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The PM's briefings were generally followed-up with more details from relevant Cabinet Ministers, who held their own public appearances. The PM's briefings were televised on major news networks, including CBC and CTV. They tended to quite scripted, even in the question and answer period (Grenier, 2020). As has been documented in the media, the tone

¹ At the time of writing (June 27, 2020), these daily statements are still ongoing; however, the pace has decreased, viewership is down, and some pundits are beginning to question their public health (as opposed to political) utility (Grenier, 2020).

of the Prime Minister's messaging escalated considerably during the period under analysis (Cecco, 2020). Social distancing was first presented as a guideline and quickly became an enforceable requirement for travellers returning to Canada and those showing symptoms. The peak shift in tone towards greater gravity in the period under analysis was the Prime Minister's statement on March 23, where he told Canadians: "Enough is enough. Go home and stay home."

The second component of my analysis is a targeted survey of Twitter commentary. I look at relevant Twitter hashtags that were trending during the period under analysis, including #StayHomeCanada, #stayhome, and #Covid19. Much of the material that is generated from studying these hashtags is not relevant to a study of identity, so I focus on the ones that respond, either positively or negatively, to the narratives in the PM's briefings.

4. Findings

My analysis revealed an interesting combination of trends related to the political and public policy use of identity during a time of crisis. I first describe (*a*) how Canadian-ness is articulated; and secondly examine (*b*) how it engages with globalism and the global nature of the problem.

a) Characterizing Canadian-ness during COVID-19

A common approach in the brand crisis literature is the "business as usual" messaging, which essentially suggests that the country is continuing as normal – and in the case of tourism, that it continues to be open for business. This may work in the case of acute crisis, like an earthquake or flood, where the scope of the disaster is clear and where officials can point to a re-building phase that is underway. In contrast, COVID-19 poses an ongoing threat. During the period under analysis (mid-March 2020), it was not clear when the peak or second wave of the virus would occur. The refrain in the political discourse is that these are *unprecedented* times, and so,

emphasizing business as usual would be incongruous. Instead, what I see in the PM's briefings is a reformulation of the business as usual narrative. Rather than suggesting that the conditions in the country are as usual *etc.*, he suggests that longstanding characteristics of Canadians continue as usual. I will call this the "Canadians have always been X" strategy.

In every briefing studied, the Prime Minister made some form of reference to the need for Canadians to work together and, relatedly, to the idea that Canadians have historically taken this team approach. One can see shades of the "Team Canada" or "All Hands on Deck" messaging, which was also used during the negotiation period for the new North American Free Trade Agreement.² In a COVID-19 update on March 19, the Prime Minister stated that: "in times of crisis, Canadians come together." Similarly, "I know that together, we can protect Canadians, save jobs..." was the refrain on March 22. On March 25, he riffed on the social distancing measures by saying, "above all, the most important thing we can do together is to stay apart." The messaging of "working together" in and of itself is banal from an identity perspective, but we can gain greater insights from the more particular descriptions of what this cooperation looks like.

For one, the messaging appealed to a notion of Canadians as consistently having been compassionate and tolerant of difference. On March 20th, the Prime Minister suggested that, "It is in these challenging times that we also see what we're made of. This past week, no matter how difficult, was further proof that Canadians are generous, kind, and compassionate. And that should give us all hope." On the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, he similarly indicated:

Let's be kind to each other and stand up against discrimination wherever you see it. In the days and weeks ahead, as we continue to feel the impacts of this virus, it will be more important than ever to fight against fear, misinformation, and stigma. We must continue to

² The idea of a "Team Canada" in foreign affairs was used by Prime Minister Jean Chretien in the 1990s. He led a series of public relations and trade missions that were dubbed "Team Canada Missions" (Fong, 2010).

pull together. Because in times of need, our strength is defined by how we care for one each other as neighbours, as communities, and as a country.

This messaging reinforced that, despite the rapidly changing circumstances, Canadians continue to be defined by their tolerance, particularly of cultural diversity. Support for multiculturalism and the absence of one dominant ethnic, linguistic, or cultural group is a core element of the way that Canadian identity has been defined post 1960s (Triadafilopoulos 2012). Using a Gramscian lens, Grace-Edward Galabuzi talks about multiculturalism as a strategic “compromise” between the “English Canadian” and “French Canadian” identities (2011). Public opinion data also demonstrates that a relative “consensus” around the economic benefits of immigration developed in the 1990s. Keith Banting and Stuart Soroka argue that Canadians’ views on immigration were relatively unremarkable vis-à-vis the rest of the world until the mid-to-late 1990s when there was a marked increase in support for immigration, which correlated with an increase in the economic stream of immigration (2018, p.1; p. 7). Trudeau’s language of tolerance and acceptance, then, draws from a pre-existing canon of “inclusivity” and multiculturalism messaging³.

One can also pick up appeals to the entrepreneurial and hardworking nature of Canadians. On March 20, Justin Trudeau said: “Canada is home to some of the best innovators in the world and with this new initiative, we will harness their talent and know-how to get through these challenging times.” Similarly, when sharing a story about a Canadian business that adapted their manufacturing facility to produce dividers for hospitals, the Prime Minister argued that Canadians “don’t back down from a challenge. We roll up our sleeves and we get to work. I know that this pandemic has been incredibly challenging for people right across the country, but we’re also seeing

³ Both overt and subtle forms of racism exist in Canada. The inclusivity narrative can be interpreted as the way in which many Canadians wish to see themselves and their country. See the body of work on “democratic racism” for more detail about how post-war racism in Canada may be more subtle than its pre-war counterpart but continues as a thread in Canadian discourse (Zong, 1997; Li, 2001; Henry and Tator, 2002).

the best of what it means to be Canadian.” Throughout the PM’s statements, we see appeals to Canadians as being compassionate, community-oriented, hard-working, and entrepreneurial. These are clearly *strategic* attributes to highlight in that they directly correlate with actions that the government wants Canadians to take. Compassionate and community-focused Canadians stay home and help their neighbours. Entrepreneurial Canadians repurpose their businesses to produce materials that are useful in the fight against COVID-19 or develop innovative business planning models to keep their employees on the payroll.

The other identity characteristic that is worth discussing is the narrative of Canadians as being deferential to the law. “Peace, order, and good government” is a phrase that has been said to define how Canadians organize politics since the British North America Act. Referencing health care workers and other essential service workers, the Prime Minister appealed to Canadians’ respect for authority on March 23: “They need you to make the right choices. They need you to do your part... Enough is enough. Go home and stay home. And we’re going to make sure this happens, whether by increasing education or by enforcing the rules.” Without using the words order or law, the Prime Minister underscored his expectation that Canadians will continue to be rule followers, particularly when the lives of others are at stake. There was also the implication that if this is not done voluntarily, order would be enforced. The emphasis on authority was also present in the recurring refrain from all levels of governments about measures being driven by the advice of medical *experts*.

Being Canadian can mean different things at different points in time, and here, the most salient elements of Canadian-ness (or “Canadians have always been X”) which were highlighted by the government were those that relate to the management of COVID-19. **Image 1.0** is a tweet from a Canadian, which humorously demonstrates a strategic use of Canadian folklore towards public health aims. Here, Canadians are encouraged to follow social distancing by using an iconic Canadian item: the hockey stick.



Image 1.0: Canadian folklore

Overall, the PM’s statements focus on strategic characteristics, such as community spirit, tolerance, and respect for authority, in order to encourage particular types of action from Canadians.

b) Protectionism in the face of globalism

As Frederik Barth tells us (and as many others have later argued), identity has a lot to do with defining the boundaries around the in-group, the national community, and those who are outside of it. One way of characterizing identity, then, is about understanding how thickly membership is drawn around the political community and about how important the Other is in defining the national community. For instance: is there a focus on preserving the national core, possibly by keeping others out?

What is fascinating about the case under analysis is that the threat is truly a global one. Every country around the world is impacted, in most instances by cases of the disease and, at the very least, by the huge impact on the global economy, travel, and supply chains. Since its first election in 2015, the Liberal Party under Justin Trudeau has made a point of claiming to “restore”

Canada's international image, following what it characterizes as years of neglect of international commitments by the Harper government. To that end, the Trudeau brand has centred on global partnerships, multilateralism, and celebration of openness. The 2019 Liberal Platform section on global affairs states: "for all the challenges we've faced as a country, Canadians remain open, accepting, and generous – and the world is better for it." The PM's briefings under analysis *did* in some cases acknowledge the global impact of COVID-19. For instance, consider this comment on March 28: "We also have a role to play in ensuring the world gets through this together... particularly as this begins to hit countries that are less well prepared to cope." Here, the Prime Minister's global solidarity language was not dissimilar from pre-COVID-19 communication about tackling other global crises, such as climate change or poverty.

Unlike in those conversations, however, we also saw persistent appeals to national duty and to protectionist manufacturing, which harkened to wartime language and seemed jarringly out of sync with Trudeau's pre-pandemic brand. Most notably, the Prime Minister urged Canadians to follow social distancing with the following appeal: "Listening is your duty and staying home is your way to serve. Every day, there are more people who step up and heed this call." Or on March 20: "We are launching Canada's plan to mobilize industry to fight COVID-19 to ensure that we can quickly produce here in Canada the things we need." There is no doubt that the "we" discussed or the group for whom the call was being heeded was the Canadian national community, not the global community. This was reinforced by the idea that Canadians need to be self-sufficient by domestically producing the equipment needed to combat COVID-19.

Historically, manufacturing and wartime mobilization have been tied to national identity. In postwar Canada, a time where Canadian identity crystalized and become more assertive, a strong domestic manufacturing sector spurred by wartime efforts was framed as a sign of Canada's growth as an independent country. During the Second World War, Canada's Wartime Information Board created a series of propaganda pamphlets, which encouraged citizens to talk about a vision for postwar Canada. One of these pamphlets, *Looking Ahead: Canadian Hurdles* describes how Canadians met the demand for war-time goods by adapting manufacturing and how this led to an important sense of "confidence:" "now that we have met the demands of the war we are conscious of the efficient and huge production of which are capable" (1945, p. 6). In turn, the pamphlet suggested that work was necessary in the postwar context to "keep the nationwide production team in top form" (1945, p. 8). The pamphlet begins by stating: "we are Canadians and feel all the more conscious of it because of the war" (1945, p. 4). Similarly, propaganda was used to encourage rationing, and there were even appeals to particular foods as "patriotic" (Mosby, 2011). The

← Tweet

This poster was produced in 1918, during the First World War. Might be time to put it back in circulation.

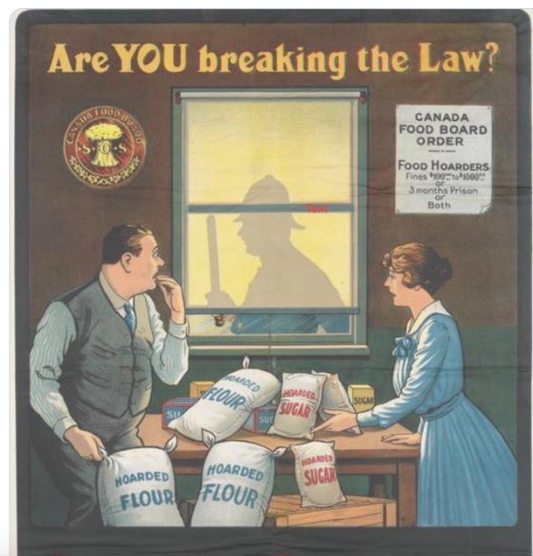


Image 2.0: Food Hoarders

language used by the Liberals in the response to COVID-19 – mobilizing to defeat a common threat – echoes Canada's wartime efforts. National pride stems from a sense of autonomy and resilience generated by domestic manufacturing and mobilization in both cases.

It is not only the Prime Minister who made these allusions to war efforts. **Image 2.0** is a screenshot of a tweet posted by a Global News producer, @mackaytaggart. The journalist repurposed a propaganda image from the First World War. Just like

during the war, present-day Canadians were told not to hoard goods and foods that they did not need. The smaller sign in the propaganda image indicates that those who hoard food could face monetary fines or prison time. There are parallels that can be drawn with fines being issued to those who do not follow social distancing rules. As of early May 2020, nearly six million dollars of social distancing related fines had been issued (Gerster, 2020).

The wartime language used by Trudeau during COVID-19 can be seen as assertive or prideful, but not overtly exclusionary. Looking at the language around border closures and migration during the crisis, however, we can see a tentative thickening of lines around the Canadian national community. On March 20, the Prime Minister announced that an agreement had been reached with the United States to close the borders for non-essential travel. He indicated that supply chains would remain intact, but in a reversal of a previous position, stated that “irregular migrants” who attempted to cross the border “would be return[ed].” At the same time, temporary foreign workers were granted an exception to the travel ban and were admitted to work on Canadian farms; they were required to self-isolate for 14 days but were not granted permanent residence status, which would give them the necessary tools to advocate for their safety and to access social services. The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change released a report in June 2020, titled “Unheeded Warnings,” that highlighted numerous health and safety concerns for migrant workers that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including crowded living conditions, lack of access to PPE, and poor access to food. At the time of writing, three Mexican migrant workers have died from COVID-19 while in Canada, and hundreds are reported to have been infected (Harris, 2020).

Critical border studies scholars, such as Nandita Sharma and Christina Gabriel (2006), emphasize a paradox of contemporary national borders: they are often porous for goods, services,

and money, but not for people and their associated (human) needs. COVID-19 – and Canada’s treatment of temporary foreign workers, in particular – only makes this divide more acutely apparent: eligibility to enter Canada as a temporary foreign worker is being determined based on *economic* necessity, while the human needs of the workers are de-centred from the narrative. Some analysts fear that the pandemic could deepen “North-South” divides and “justify” a retreat from international development aid (Igoe and Chadwick, 2020). In the PM’s briefings studied here, there are only two explicit references to global coordination: one about an upcoming call with G20 leaders and another about a call with two North African presidents.

To a large extent, some form of bans on movement and travel were expected in this type of situation – since they are part of pandemic management strategies recommended by many public health experts (Epstein *et. al.*, 2007). I do not aim to overplay what border closures mean for the long-term thickness of Canadian identity, given that they were likely necessary as opposed to strategic actions. That said, it is interesting to reflect that in the greyer areas where the government has room to manoeuvre – temporary foreign workers and asylum seekers – it has not hesitated to take a more protectionist approach. Nor has it felt required to justify the deferential treatment of nationals and non-nationals.

How Canadian identity engages with globalism in the Prime Minister’s statements is fascinating: on the one hand, there is a recognition of the global nature of the problem, but the need for national solidarity – couched in wartime language – comes to the forefront.

4. Discussion and Implications for Communication Strategies

a) *Do the findings support the hypothesis?*

Existing work examines the impact of acute crises, like natural disasters, on the development of a national brand, but my aim here has been to examine the identity implications

of a prolonged and global crisis. My other goal has been to engage with – and bridge – nationalism theory which may be less present in the existing tourism literature. Ultimately, my findings show that the federal executive branch instrumentalized Canadian folklore to incite actions that were in line with public health aims. Despite acknowledging the global nature of the crisis, the Liberals have drawn tentatively from protectionist understandings of national identity, which are easily comparable with use of identity during the First and Second World Wars. The guiding expectations that I enumerated at the outset are largely supported by my findings. My first expectation was that the PM's briefings would aim to restore an old image of Canadian-ness. This comes across clearly in virtually every statement under analysis: the Prime Minister consistently evokes what he characterizes as longstanding Canadian qualities, such as community spirit, tolerance, respect for the law, and aptitude for hard work. We also see a harkening back with the wartime language around civic mobilization and domestic production of equipment. My second expectation was looser: I expected that the global community would feature in the data but that statements would be geared toward a domestic audience, rather than to an international audience as they tend to be when being made by tourism-focused governments. The findings on the interaction between identity and globalism are mixed. Other than an acknowledgement of the global nature of COVID-19, the international community remained on the backburner during this period. In decisions about the treatment of temporary foreign workers and asylum seekers, we see a hardening of borders (physical and imagined). Taken together, there is considerable evidence to support the third expectation, which asserts that national identity is not stable or fixed, but rather comes into being at particular moments in time. The identity language used by the Prime Minister during the crisis is notably different from that used prior (for instance, recall the party platform statement about global engagement). This third conclusion is not intended to criticize the Liberals for being

contradictory or hypocritical. Rather, it demonstrates that Rogers Brubaker was correct: national identity becomes more salient at particular moments in time, whether during an Olympic sports game, at a rally, or during an emergency. We need to think about national identity as “episodic,” rather than as stable throughout time and history. Nation-ness is not static. What Canadian identity looked like – and meant – during COVID-19 is distinct from what it looked like a year ago.

a) *What are the implications for political and public policy communication?*

I want to dedicate the remainder of the discussion to unpacking what the findings mean for political and public policy communication strategies. What implications can be drawn for Canadian politicians and policy makers in the wake of COVID-19? Undoubtedly, it is too early to draw definitive conclusions; however, I think we can draw some interesting implications at this early stage. One implication is obvious: identity can be tailored towards the particular challenges facing a government or political party in either the domestic or global realm (Nye, 2019; Nimijean, 2005). This is not news for political operatives; the *raison d’être* of identity politics is to appeal to identity in strategic ways. Consider, for instance, how the phrase “Canadian values” has been used by politicians from different political stripes to reference very disparate identity characteristics. More interesting for those in the Canadian political sphere, I think, are the appeal of the domestic and the importance of experts.

Contemporary global challenges – like climate change, poverty, and wealth disparity – tend to be met by those in centre-left or broadly “progressive” circles by rallying calls to unite as a transnational community, to work together with our neighbours, *etc.* What I find interesting in the approach to managing COVID-19 is that calls for mobilization have been very domestic in their scope. It seems that the Liberals were aware that more immediate understandings of political or community membership are the ones that are most likely to instill action and sacrifice. Regular

Canadians – not the political elite who label themselves as cosmopolitans or as citizens of the world – are possibly more self-preservationist and tapped into domestic understanding of identity than one might think. In his statements, the Prime Minister frequently talked about the impact on “individuals” “communities,” and the “country” – these important spheres of impact and membership rarely expanded to include the “global.”

Could this more immediate approach to identity be translated to combatting other crises, like climate change? During the pandemic, environmentalists and public policy experts have asked why governments are able to mobilize so quickly and aggressively to fight COVID-19 when this urgency has been absent in addressing the climate crisis. The Public Policy Forum, for instance, released a podcast about climate (in)action, entitled “Why don’t humans take meaningful action sooner?” (Public Policy Forum, 2020). Clearly, the immediacy of human loss and suffering in Canada is a differentiating factor in the approach to COVID-19. Is it possible, though, that the framing of the fight against climate change as a global one detracts from urgency that might lead to change? How would Canadians respond if reducing greenhouse gases, for example, was framed as something that was a *national duty* or a *civic duty* as a resident of a city?

This kind of discussion connects with “glocalization,” the idea that as people get more interconnected in complex ways because of globalization, the local actually becomes more salient. With people across the globe becoming more and more similar – listening to the same music, buying the same products – local forms of membership (as differentiated from the global noise) can take on more relevance. Cities are also becoming more important actors. According to Michele Acuto and Steve Rayner, who write about city diplomacy, “there is today a global recognition that we live in an “urban age” of near-planetary urbanization where cities are at the forefront of all sorts of agendas” (2016, p. 1147). If we think about government spending and innovative policy

ideas in the last few years, we can see that cities (as opposed to multilateral institutions) are increasingly becoming important sites of change for some of our most complex contemporary challenges. Infrastructure Canada, for example, recently held a lucrative funding challenge, Smart Cities, which called for innovative and data-driven policy solutions that impact residents (Infrastructure Canada, 2019). Globally, city networks are popping up, such as the Open Cities Network or the Smart Cities Network. These constellations bypass nation-state lines and connect municipalities that have shared goals. As someone who is wary of identification along national lines, I would suggest that even more local and decentralized understandings of membership (like the community, the city, the region), which tend to be less exclusionary or identity-based than the national but still have “gut appeal,” could be important when tackling other urgent crises. Multilateral institutions and globalism were already trending downwards prior to the crisis and it is worth noting that the alternative does not have to be exclusionary nationalism: it can be a regionalized localism that acknowledges membership in community along non-ethnic and non-national lines. This is also an understanding of political membership that challenges methodological nationalism and provides space for those who are *illegalized* (as temporary, undocumented, migrant workers) to be treated with dignity and respect.

The second area I would draw attention to, that could inform how governments act in future, is the presence of experts in the management of the crisis. Across the country, Premiers and the federal executive have repeated that they are acting on the advice of public health officials. They also have emphasized that there are a certain number of things that we “know” about the virus and that we should act according to these *facts*. This stands out in what has been characterized a post-truth world, fraught by fake news, dis-information, and the rise of populist parties in Europe

and North America particularly.⁴ While the definition of populism is debated, most agree that populists tend to abhor elites and institutions, and instead emphasize “common sense” decision-making by and for regular people (Bonikowski, 2017, p. 185). Far-right populism is often connected with exclusionary tendencies discussed previously. The challenge for those campaigning against populist leaders and movements, clearly, is that populists can always say that their opponent’s position is elitist or out of touch. Pulling out experts and scientists does not tend to improve the situation.

In Canada at least, public health experts have taken on a very prominent public role in the management of COVID-19. Prior to the crisis, not many people knew the name Dr. Theresa Tam or Dr. Bonnie Henry, but they have now attained almost celebrity status (Holliday, 2020). In the midst of a health crisis, Canadians and politicians are clearly comforted to have experts make recommendations and inform public directives. This strikes me as an interesting antidote to some of the post-truth tendencies. I wonder, what would the world look like if we took the same approach to public policy writ large when it is no longer a time of acute crisis? One of the defining features of the strategy to address COVID-19 has been the repetitiveness of announcements and press conferences by public health officials: many of them are held daily and sometimes simultaneously. Graphs and charts have also been released to the public. Premier Doug Ford, for instance, indicated that Canadians “should have the same information he does” when he makes decisions for the public health of Ontarians (Gatehouse, 2020). I wonder if seeing experts *repeatedly* in public-facing roles and more citizen exposure to datasets in other policy areas could be ways of redirecting the focus towards evidence-based decision-making. This could also be the case for women in leadership

⁴ Consider publications from the University of Sydney’s research institute, Sydney Initiative for Truth, which studies the post-truth crisis: <https://sydneyinitiativefortruth.org/>

roles. The majority of current top public health officials in Canada are women and seeing female experts in these central roles could impact how Canadians think about who makes important policy decisions⁵.

b) Areas for future study and reflection during the rebuilding phase

The discussion of findings and implications raises some important areas for future study. As I have noted previously, it will be important to evaluate the effectiveness of the government's communication strategy following the crisis. In particular, it would be helpful to understand if the daily press conferences lent any accountability in the eyes of the Canadian public, particularly when other accountability mechanisms, such as Parliamentary debate, were absent in their usual form. Being unable to survey Canadians about their perceptions of, and trust in, the PM's briefings is a clear limitation of the current study. My analysis focuses on the beginning of the pandemic (mid-March period) and so future work could also examine how identity language has evolved into the reopening phases and longer-term management of the disease.

Another area to watch is whether the thickening of boundaries around the Canadian national community that I have described here remain in any ways following the crisis. I also will be intrigued to see if the "peace, order, and good government" understanding of Canadian-ness retains salience, particularly as we navigate a gradual easing of current measures which could still include important restrictions on liberties. More broadly, future work will need to unpack the legacy of COVID-19 for Canadian-ness – *e.g.* to understand whether this will become an important moment in the narrative that we tell ourselves about what it means to be Canadian.

⁵ Admittedly many of the experts have faced hateful commentary online so changes in this direction are by no means a given.

6. Conclusion

When Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered his first COVID-19 briefing, most observers likely did not expect that this would become a daily occurrence for months to come. The Prime Minister's daily briefings have provided an ideal platform to trace national identity during a time of contemporary crisis. In this analysis, I have drawn from nationalism studies and undertaken a close analysis of the PM's briefings from an identity perspective. Ultimately, I demonstrated that the federal executive branch instrumentalized Canadian identity to convey its messaging and to encourage Canadians to take appropriate public health actions. More particularly, the Prime Minister modified the "business as usual messaging," which is prevalent in crisis management approaches; rather than suggesting that Canada was open to business as usual (which it is not), he emphasized that the Canadian strengths of compassionate, tolerance, hard work, and adherence to the law continue to be present. Global collaboration and solidarity featured less prominently than appeals to national solidarity and mobilization, which bore great resemblance to the language of the First and Second World Wars. This unprecedented moment in Canadian history provided an ideal window to understand Canadian identity as episodic and fluctuating.

Many are beginning to think, write, and strategize about what lasting impacts COVID-19 will have on a host of areas – whether urban planning, the economy, social policy, travel, political institutions, workplace culture, health care, or trade. I urge us to add identity (in its fluctuating and unstable form) to the mix and to remember that it has always been an important factor in times of crisis.

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Video and Social Media Sources

All of the PM's statements were watched and transcribed from CPAC's video coverage:
<https://www.cpac.ca/en/cpac-in-focus/covid19/>

Image 1.0: <https://twitter.com/darynjones/status/1243997897240313856?lang=en>

Image 2.0: <https://twitter.com/mackaytaggart/status/1238968365529608192?lang=en>