Coronavirus Communication Could Make or Break Politicians

By Scott Shafer  Apr 16
Political fortunes of elected officials and candidates often rise and fall on how well they react in a crisis.

President George W. Bush soared after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, but his response to hurricane Katrina was deemed distant and ineffective. Remember, "Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job"?

Many pundits think Barack Obama defeated John McCain in 2008 in part by showing a calm, steady "I got this" demeanor as the economy was melting down.

Now, with the coronavirus pandemic upending our lives, our leaders' responses could help define their images and political future.

On March 11, President Trump spoke to the nation from the White House. Trump insists he took the pandemic seriously from the start, but that night he seemed to be sharing some wishful thinking.

"We will significantly reduce the threat to our citizens, and we will ultimately expeditiously defeat this virus," Trump said with an oddly flat tone in his voice.

The stock market crashed, and the president has been on the defensive for weeks.

For a president used to bragging about his accomplishments and mocking his opponents, the coronavirus is a different kind of adversary.

"One of the hardest parts about this is you're having to give people a lot of bad news, which is normally not what a politician wants to do," said Matt James, former communications director for the Kaiser Family Foundation. He also worked for several elected officials and said the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique set of challenges for all politicians.
Communications strategist Chris Lehane has managed his share of political crises, guiding Bill Clinton, Al Gore and many others through very choppy waters. He says in a situation like this, it’s all about an elected official’s credibility — and that people are drawn to leaders who are confident, realistic and focused on the common good.

"Really understanding that we are in a moment where people are going to be looking for solutions, answers, leadership from government. And in particular, I do think that there is a togetherness here," Lehane said.

Lehane and many others say more than the president, it is the governors — like Andrew Cuomo in New York, Maryland's Larry Hogan and Gavin Newsom in California — who are transcending the usual political lines by sticking to facts without sugar coating them.
Since then, Lehane says Newsom's daily press briefings have shown discipline and focus while avoiding distractions, like arguments with President Trump.

"Balancing, giving people optimism and hope, while still grounding them into reality and then giving them optimism and hope. I mean, we will get through this. There will be another side. Our institutions will be intact," Lehane said.

"The organizing principle of everything that you're doing has to be anchored around public health and safety. And that is really the prism by which everything that you're doing needs to rise and fall around," he added.

Lehane, citing Winston Churchill during World War II, said effective handling of a crisis either changes the way leaders are perceived or brings new appreciation for qualities people didn't especially find likable before.

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James said the most effective communicators are those who show their humanity in a crisis — by letting down their guard a bit.

"The Chris Cuomo/Andrew Cuomo exchanges that they've had about everything from playing basketball and how terrible Andrew apparently is to, you know, their mom's spaghetti sauce recipe," James said of the Cuomo brothers. (CNN anchor Chris Cuomo occasionally has New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on his program.)

"That takes a political figure from being just a figurehead or somebody that you don't trust, because maybe they don't represent the party that you represent or they're too liberal or they're too conservative, and all of a sudden they become a different person and become real to you," James said.

By contrast, President Trump has stuck to his usual playbook — a litany of misstatements, opinions and grievances — against China, Democrats and most recently the World Health Organization.

Shanto Iyengar, who studies political communication at Stanford University, says it doesn’t seem to be working. While presidents usually enjoy bipartisan approval bumps during a crisis, he says this time only Republicans are mostly pleased with the president.

"So this idea that all you need is a crisis for the partisan divide to go away, I think that's history," Iyengar said, adding that research shows this remains true even when it endangers one's health.

"There is a partisan divide on the questions like the efficacy of social distancing. How soon should the country reopen? And so that to me is indicating that people are willing to follow the party," Iyengar said.

Come November, voters will judge how well they think their elected officials performed. The COVID-19 pandemic may create political heroes and victims as well.