

Appeals to consensus and partisan politics in parliamentary discourse on the pandemic

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This paper explores the ways in which political leaders appeal to consensus and unity in parliamentary discourse on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece. The paper focuses a) on the different meanings that consensus takes in different argumentative contexts, b) on the mobilization of (different constructions of) consensus as a discursive resource oriented to different rhetorical ends. Moreover, it considers the potential implications of appeals to consensus on partisan politics, anchoring the whole discussion both in approaches to political discourse as rhetoric (Billig, 1987) and political communication (Tileaga, Demasi & Burke, 2020), as well as, in research regarding political leadership during COVID-19.

Political leadership during the pandemic and the invocation of consensus

Analyses of political responses to the pandemic have largely underscored the necessity of political consensus in different political/national contexts and manifested the unwanted implications of political partisanship and polarization. According to Green et al (2020), in order to cope with crises of the nature and scale of COVID-19 pandemic, extended behavioral change is needed, which can be possible, only if political leaders effectively promote political consensus. The authors construct political polarization in the United States (during the presidency of D. Trump) as a paradigmatic example of how lack of political consensus may discourage citizens from changing their behavior in ways that correspond to public health experts' suggestions. In the same vein, Merkley et al (2020) juxtaposed the political response to the pandemic in the United States with the one in Canada, arguing that elite polarization on the severity of the pandemic in the US undermined public compliance

with social distancing, while cross partisan consensus of Canadian political elites provoked societal compliance with the necessary measures.

According to Jetten et al (2020), as the pandemic crisis deepened, it became clear that there was a requirement for national leaders to put shared national identities above their party interest and political allegiances. With some notable exceptions like Brazil and the U.S., most leaders developed a rhetoric of inclusivity and unanimity. The authors, who adopt a social identity perspective, maintained that leaders who promote shared identities serve as “identity entrepreneurs”, aiming to build a shared sense of ‘us’ within the groups they lead (see also Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2020). They also claimed that political polarization and political rhetoric that underscores partisan differences not only decelerate societal response to COVID-19, but they could also endanger social cohesion. Partisan perceptions of the virus in certain contexts (like in the U.S.) affected not only people’s health-related behavior but also intergroup relations. Higher levels of perceived polarisation in society were linked to increased outgroup hostility and selfishness, as well as to reduced intergroup trust and pro-social behaviours (Enders & Armaly, 2019).

Extract 3

I will personally insist on the language of truth and I will continue to trust the experts, the scientists, the technocrats, all those who were so much undervalued during the years of the crisis and populism. Some have chosen, rather unfortunately, to give ideological color to the pandemic. We have been told that the end of neoliberalism is taking place. Others rushed to speak about the triumph of statism. I'm sorry, but all these analyses are just out of place. In these moments the only ideology is the protection of public health. There is no greater salvation of a homeland, there is no greater "salus patriae" than the salvation of its citizens.

(Mitsotakis 2/4/2020)

The PM draws a hard and fast line between truth, scientific expertise and technocracy, on the one hand, and populism, on the other. Mitsotakis mobilizes a widely used -since the very early days of the pandemic- interpretative resource according to which the health crisis would defeat populist politics by emphasizing the importance of impartial expertise (which is contrasted to the manipulating power of populism) (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). Using a first-person formulation, Mitsotakis represents his alignment with the truth of the experts and technocrats as a personal choice. The construction of belief in scientific truth as an adamant personal stance is followed by the distant footing (*some have chosen*) by which he refers to the construction of the pandemic as having ideological aspects, attributed to unspecified others. Although the Prime minister does not specify the populist ‘other’ who is juxtaposed to his rational politics, his audience could easily assume that he portrays the Opposition party of Syriza. This becomes obvious through the reference to the period of the Greek fiscal crisis, during which the two parties confronted each other with New Democracy prioritizing the technocratic management of the crisis and accusing Syriza (being in government between 2015-2019) of populism (Andreouli & Figgou, 2019).

According to discursive psychologists (Edwards & Potter, 1992), rhetorical contrasts tend to distinguish the normative from the non-normative and they constitute flexible discursive resources for situated occasions of use. The contrast between science and technocracy, on the one hand, and ideology, on the other, is mobilized to represent ideology as irrational and as interfering with political decision making at crucial times. It is also used to deflect criticism and to attend to issues of political accountability. Mitsotakis depicts his political opponents as using the pandemic crisis to promote ideological conflict (represented as a conflict between neoliberalism and statism) and partisan politics. On the contrary, he mobilizes an argumentative thread which is typical in the discourse of technocracy and anti-politics. He denies ideology by obscuring ideological alternatives (*the only ideology is the protection of public health*). The protection of public health is represented as a point of non-negotiable consensus, as the only ideology. Nevertheless, as

other commentators (Ferguson, 1990) put forward, ideological politics presuppose the existence of alternative structural or political solutions to social problems. Moreover, the construction of ideology as censure and the concealment of political alternatives is a deeply political stance. After all, the war metaphor articulated by the prime minister through the references to homeland's salvation (*salus patriae*) is grounded on the assumptions of one of the most successful ideologies, the ideology of nationalism (Billig, 1995).

Extract 4 is derived from a parliamentary session that took place in October 2021, when Greece was hit by the third wave of the pandemic that put intense pressure to the Health System whilst progress of the vaccination program was very slow. The session was provoked by the question of the Leader of the Opposition and Chairman of the party of Syriza, Alexis Tsipras who is quoted in the extract that follows.

Extract 4

Really, since I mentioned scientists, what happened to these famous experts' committee? Do you consult them at all when you make decisions? Do they keep arranging meetings, making decisions, delivering opinions? At the beginning of the pandemic, you said in many ways that you take the recommendations of this committee as "gospel". What happened now? Have you put them aside because they have been unpleasant to you? And finally, if this is the case, the question is who makes the decisions for the pandemic. Who has actually decided on the removal of containment measures that was announced a few weeks ago? Is there a scientifically competent person who was asked and consented to these decisions? Because we have a plethora of statements made by scientists which range from strong concern to open disagreement. We are not experts to judge whether it is wrong or right. I am just asking who suggested the (removal of the) measures and if there has been approval. I am also asking you who is planning - this is a second crucial question - and implementing the vaccination strategy.

(Tsipras, 18/10/2021)

In extract 4 Tsipras invites the Prime Minister to account for the lack of interventions on the part of the expert committee, during the third phase of the pandemic. Rhetorical questions and lists (*arranging meetings, making decisions, delivering opinions*), serving as tools of fact construction (Edwards & Potter, 1992) are mobilized to frame and establish the criticism of the Opposition leader. The PM is not only represented as making decisions without the appropriate expert opinion and advice; he is also rendered accountable for having changed his policy in relation to the committee's role in advising the government. Hence, he is accused not only of taking policy decisions which are not sufficiently grounded on scientific knowledge but also of political inconsistency. By representing his political opponent as taking the scientific body of knowledge as 'gospel', Tsipras emphasises the importance and extent of Mitsotakis' political inconsistency; he also subtly criticizes both his current disregard of expert opinions and his previous unthinking deference to them. Taking something as a gospel means to consider it to be unmediated, unaccountable, and above reproach and as such, it may raise democratic legitimacy concerns.

Having castigated the change in the stance of the government, the Leader of the Opposition asks who takes the decisions and if the decisions of the government have the consent of a scientifically competent person. He does not question the authority of *expert* committees to make decisions or to give advice on the pandemic. Neither he positions himself or his party as having the expertise needed to evaluate the policy implemented. He rather constructs the need of the experts' approval of policy measures and political consensus on experts' opinion as a rhetorical resource to exert criticism on government policy in the same way in which he has been accused by the prime minister of ignoring experts, in the previous extract.

2. Appeals to consensus in moralistic terms through the use of superordinate categories

National unity and consensus versus partisan politics

Extract 5 is derived from the same speech as extract 1. In this extract, the PM builds up a critique to the Opposition on the basis of its reluctance to encourage national unity.

Extract 5

Through all this period of time, many things have changed in our lives. One thing which, unfortunately, has stayed the same is the critique we hear from the opposition party, which systematically insists to say the exact opposite from what the Government is doing. I do not hold much hope that this attitude will change with today's discussion. But I must remark in advance that this constant denial of reality conflicts with what I think Greek society asks for, which is unity and, of course, creative proposals.

(Mitsotakis, 15/01/2021)

Mitsotakis starts off by acknowledging what he presents as a basic fact: that through the period of the pandemic many things have changed in people's lives. Through the use of the first-person plural (*our lives*) in this introduction to his argument, Mitsotakis adopts a national footing and positions himself as part of the Greek citizenry; for him, as for everyone else, life has changed. One can argue that there is an assumed implication underlying his opening statement that dealing with the pandemic requires adaptability. Against this need for adaptability, Mitsotakis juxtaposes the Opposition's inflexibility, which, in this account, is manifest in its systematic opposition of the Government. The Opposition's attitude is represented as stubborn (*I do not hold much hope that this attitude will change*) and also as unconstructive and hindering creative problem solving. What is more, according to Mitsotakis' argument, the Opposition's attitude conflicts with and undermines what Greek society asks for, which is national unity.

Discursive social psychological work has underscored the sequential and flexible nature of constructing superordinate identities, in general, and national identities, in particular, in political discourse (Augoustinos, Hastie & Wright, 2011). Mitsotakis' call for national unity is rhetorically oriented to blame the Opposition and to position himself as the

‘reasonable’ politician who serves the interests of the country (Tileaga, 2008). It also constitutes, though, political life and politics in a particular way. The Opposition’s attitude is represented, on the one hand, as a moral failing, as a failure of responsible/mature leadership, to rise up to the demands posed by the pandemic and the expectations of Greek society. On the other hand, the Opposition is also constructed as “being in constant denial of reality”, that is, its critique is not based on real facts – the assumption being that the Opposition lacks the capacity to understand the current situation and/or that its stance is based on political calculation. Hence, in the extract, the Opposition is presented as both irresponsible and incapable. At the same time, the Government is positioned as taking the role of a mature leader who is able to adjust to the challenges of the moment.

In extract 6, the leader of the Opposition, Alexis Tsipras, responds to the Prime Minister’s criticism (part of) which is presented in Extract 5.

Extract 6

In what concerns me, I want to make it clear, because I listened to your introduction and the conclusion of your statement. I deeply believe that honesty, dedication, without party and petty party considerations in the effort to save as many human lives as possible, have to be today the priority for us all. Our duty not to let society sink in fear and insecurity must today be our paramount duty. Enlisting every public resource [to support] all those who are fighting in the frontline for the life and health of our fellow human beings, doctors and nurses first of all, has to be the constant concern for us all.

(Tsipras, 15/01/21)

Tsipras responds by agreeing with the PM on the paramount importance of unity and support for frontline workers, and on the need to leave aside partisan politics. He refers to ‘petty party opposition’ and suggests that the pandemic calls for rising above such trivial matters. As in Extract 5, the political response to the pandemic is, somewhat paradoxically, depoliticised. Indeed, politics is constructed as tainted, because it opposes, or at least hinders, “honesty and

dedication”, which the pandemic calls for “in the effort to save as many human lives as possible”. This representation of the political seems to draw on a (neo)liberal ideological frame, which juxtaposes the merit of a supposedly value-free technocratic governance with political ideology as a source of conflict and disagreement.

In Tsipras’ account – in common with extract 5- superordinate categories work rhetorically to depoliticize responses to the pandemic and to position the speaker as a ‘reasonable’ politician vis-à-vis his political opponent. The category of universal humanity (*fellow human beings*) coexists with a banal nationalistic frame indicated by references to “*society*” and “*public resources*”. Tsipras not only claims for himself a rational humanistic identity but also, like Mitsotakis in Extract 5, he positions himself as a responsible national leader whose “paramount duty” and “concern” is to protect and support the healthcare professionals “who are fighting in the frontline” to save lives. The implication of this line of argument is that political leaders should be left to govern without opposition and without critique. The depoliticization of responses to the pandemic, thus, functions to render illegitimate the process of democratic opposition, whilst inoculating politicians from any critique. Needless to say, this framing of the pandemic makes it rhetorically difficult for opposition parties to challenge the governance because this can potentially be construed as a challenge to national unity for the benefit of partisan interests.

In the extract below, Gennimata², then leader of the Movement for Change Party, which until the rise of Syriza, was one of the two major parties in Greece (under the name of PASOK), attempts to navigate this tension between partisan critique and national unity, constructing her party politics as unitarian and responsible.

Consensus as unitarian (party) politics

Extract 7

Ladies and gentlemen of the House, we will all together win or lose this fight against the pandemic. Let us finally understand this. Society, state and political system, we are all in the same camp, and we have one enemy, corona virus. We, in the Movement for Change [Party],

do not politically invest to destruction and ruins. We have been and we will always be a force of social responsibility, social sensitivity/sensibility and justice, a force of political responsibility. But to be useful at this time, we have to be, first and foremost, honest. No cover-up, no silencing. Everything [should be] exposed. Because every mistake, every omission, every day of delay, every single one of back-and-forths that happened have a cost and their cost is in human lives. Unfortunately, the Government would [only] remember our proposals at the latest possible moment, usually with much delay and many inefficiencies in their implementation.

(Gennimata, 15/01/21)

As in Extracts 5 and 6, Gennimata uses here an inclusive national unity trope (“we will all together win or lose this fight against the pandemic”) which stresses her own and her party’s commitment to values of solidarity and sharedness under the pandemic. Indeed, she includes the entire political spectrum, including the other parties, in the same superordinate in-group (“Society, state and political system, we are all in the same camp”), with the outgroup being the external virus (“we have one enemy, corona”). At this point Gennimata’s discourse has apparent parallels with social psychological discourse, according to which superordinate identities are key for enhancing solidarity in crises such as the pandemic (Jetten et al., 2020). Also in common with the accounts of Mitsotakis and Tsipras quoted previously, the mobilization of superordinate categories in Gennimata’s talk seems to be oriented to a positive self-presentation (positioning herself as a leader that unites the nation) and to her political opponents’ criticism (Augoustinos et al, 2011). What is more, the phrase “let us finally understand this” implies that her party has been saying that from the beginning – with the implication that the other parties have been playing politics. This is confirmed in the next turn where Gennimata changes footing, from being positioned as a leader of a united nation to taking up the position of a party leader which rises above political calculations (*We, in the Movement for Change [Party], do not politically invest to destruction and ruins*). She further argues that her party has always been a “force of social responsibility”, here, possibly

alluding to the history of the party having been in government for much of the past decades (since the 1980's and up until the party lost its place to Syriza party during the Greek economic crisis of the early 2010's). The Movement for Change party is, in other words, positioned as the 'grown up in the room'.

Having established her party's credentials as a responsible political actor, Gennimata shifts again the framing of her argument: from the need to build national unity to the need to be 'useful', as a responsibility of political leaders. This means being "honest" and exposing any "cover-up". This enables her to criticise the government in a way that inoculates her, and the Movement for Change, from being accused of creating divisions and conflict. On the basis that mistakes, omissions and delays cost in human lives, she defends her responsibility as leader to criticise the government. Finally, in the last turn, Gennimata employs more traditional opposition party language (which is rhetorically easier in non-pandemic times) to criticise the Government's inefficiency in their handling of the pandemic on the basis that it is reluctant to adopt, in time, her party's proposals. So, while the government is positioned as inefficient leader, the Movement for Change party is positioned as unitarian, honest and capable of leading the country in these difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

Our data and analysis point to different ways in which political leaders in Greece construct 'consensus' during parliamentary debates in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on three important milestones in the pandemic trajectory as it unfolded in Greece.

Conceptually, our paper marks a depart from previous work on the notion of consensus in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. As we showed in our literature review, social psychological studies have stressed the need for effective leadership in order to unite national populations and ensure compliance with unprecedented restrictive measures, what have come to be known as "lockdowns". In this body of work, the concept of consensus is treated in terms

of sharedness (i.e. shared national identities which political leaders, as identity entrepreneurs, build up and mobilise), political non-partisanship; and national cohesion against the virus as the nation's common enemy. With few exceptions, the very construct of consensus has not been interrogated – indeed, that is despite the deepening polarisation which has punctured the dominant consensual politics of the long 90s (Gilbert 2013) in (neo)liberal democracies.

Against this background, this paper, adopting a discursive approach to political communication (Demasi et al, 2020), examines the discursive construction of consensus and its rhetorical manifestations, in political debates in Greece. Previous work on rhetorical constructions of consensus in political talk, discussed earlier in the paper, show that constructions of consensus are often mobilised in political talk in order to highlight a politician's leadership credentials (because they rise above societal divisions and can, therefore, represent the entire nation) and their pragmatism and ability to deal with 'real' issues and problems (that is, issues that are not considered political/ideological). However, it is also shown that rhetorically, this also serves to mask the very ideological foundations of such supposedly neutral political communication. Indeed, as we showed in the introduction, consensus is, in itself, a valued political principle in liberal societies because it is seen as supporting the liberal ethos of objectivity, reason and neutrality in decision making, in politics as well as other domains of public life.

In the context of COVID-19, the value of consensus became much more pronounced due to the wide risk posed by the virus (directly threatening entire societies, not simply individuals) and the need for governments to respond rapidly with blanket measures (such as lockdowns). In the parliamentary data we analysed, appeals to consensus constituted -among others- an important rhetorical resource available to politicians engaged in the rhetorical management of 'leadership' and were rhetorically effective especially when used in conjunction with other devices and in the service of debating "truth", "evidence" and "fact" (Demasi, 2019). Consensus was constructed as agreement on hard data, as compliance with the experts and as national unity. As Billig (1987) has argued, concepts are understood against their opposites. In the context of parliamentary discourse on the government of the

pandemic the aforementioned constructions of consensus were counterposed to partisan politics. Non-consensus meant disagreement and, more specifically, disagreement across party lines, partisanship. In the Greek Prime Minister's talk, disagreement was constructed as a partisan critique of the government, and it was, in turn, represented as false (when counterposed to hard data), prejudiced/biased (when they are linked to ideology and counterposed to scientific expertise) and even inappropriate and immoral (because they prioritise party political gain at the expense of health and human life). On the other hand, and in the context of an emergency which boosted a national unity narrative, for opposition parties it was rhetorically 'troubling' to criticise the Government and advance an alternative approach. This could be seen as pursuing petty political gain at the back of a massive public health crisis.

Therefore, appeals to consensus constituted a resource mobilized in the service of partisan politics. The Prime Minister appealed to the need of agreement on hard data and compliance with the experts in order to warrant his decisions and to ward off potential critique by the opposition. Critique (from a different ideological background) was castigated as populism, being opposed to science and rationality. Finally, any challenge to the governance was depicted as a challenge to national unity for the benefit of partisan interests. Members of opposing parties navigated this discursively difficult terrain by stressing both their agreement with and support for science and data (Varoufakis) and their credentials as national unity leaders (Gennimata). They were careful not to challenge the ideal of consensus in terms of agreement on scientific facts and national unity, but, rather, to accuse the governing party of misusing scientific facts (Varoufakis) and undermining public confidence and unity (Genimmata). Hence, it could be argued that consensus was accomplished collaboratively (Condor & Figgou, 2012) by the political actors involved in the debate. By the same token, the dominant liberal representation of politics and political decision making as non-ideological and objective was reproduced.

To conclude, the rhetoric of consensus included the seeds of disagreement (Billig, 1987). Consensus was not unqualified. The boundaries of consensus (as unity) varied, as each party

emphasizes its inclination to put national above party interest by redrawing the boundaries of the national ingroup. Accepting the validity of hard data did not necessitate agreement on the prioritization of, and investment in National Health System. Hence, although consensus itself was not questioned, its parameters and the criteria upon which consensus can be sought were challenged. This finding underlines the contribution of rhetorical/discursive approaches to political communication which have the potential to document the argumentative nature of political discourse that can both reveal as well as obscure what is at stake ideologically (Billig & Marinho, 2017). It can also serve to contribute to the discussion of political leadership and decision making at times of crisis by underscoring the need to consider what actions (or inaction) may be legitimated in the name of an emergency situation and by appeals to consensus. Expert committees may undoubtedly have a very important role in the management of a global health crisis. They may still remain accountable, however, at different levels (they are, for example, accountable for not prioritizing the support of the public health system during a health crisis). Shared identities may be necessary, in order to promote behavioural change and in order to encourage pro-social behaviour and solidarity. Nevertheless, the construction of the common-ingroup may differ in terms of content and boundaries and may serve to reproduce banal and fierce nationalistic distinctions (through war metaphors) and to create (more) binaries between the West and the Rest (in our data between the developed North-western Europe and the South) (Hall, 1992), instead of promoting global solutions (Muldoon, Liu, & McHugh, 2021).

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¹¹ Our brief outline of covid-19 waves in Greece considers only the years (2020-2021). At the moment of writing, the pandemic is still ongoing and more waves are recorded, in Greece and across the world.

¹² Fofi Gennimata died on the 25th of October 2021 at 57, after a long battle with cancer.