

## Appeals to Consensus and Partisan Politics in Parliamentary Discourse on the Pandemic

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*This article explores constructions of consensus and unity and their potential implications on partisan politics and democratic decision making in parliamentary discourse on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece. The analytic corpus consists of transcripts of three debates on COVID-19 management in the Greek parliament, conducted in the period from April 2020 to October 2021. Analysis using tools and concepts of rhetorical and discursive psychology indicated that consensus was constructed as agreement on hard data, as compliance with health experts, and as national unity, and it was counterposed to partisan politics. Nevertheless, at the same time, appeals to consensus constituted a resource mobilized in the service of partisan politics, as both government and opposition parties appealed to the need of agreement in order to warrant their position and to ward off the position of opponents. The rhetoric of consensus, however, included the seeds of disagreement, since while its necessity was collaboratively accomplished, its parameters and boundaries were challenged. The implications of these findings for democratic governance and political decision making are pinpointed.*

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**KEY WORDS:** consensus, COVID-19 pandemic, democratic politics, parliamentary discourse, partisan politics

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This article 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 article focuses on (a) the different meanings that consensus takes in different argumentative contexts and (b) 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 (Tileagă et al., 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 the COVID-19 pandemic, extended behavioral change is needed, which can be possible only if political leaders effectively promote political consensus. Green et al. construct political polarization in the United States (during the presidency of Donald 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 United States 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 United States, most leaders developed a rhetoric of inclusivity and unanimity. Jetten et al., 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 et al., 2020). They also claimed that political polarization and political rhetoric that underscore 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 (e.g., the United States) affected not only people's health-related behavior but also intergroup relations. Higher levels of perceived polarization in society were linked to increased outgroup hostility and selfishness, as well as to reduced intergroup trust and pro-social behaviors (Enders & Armaly, 2019).

The construction of a shared identity is at the core of research findings by Bavel et al. (2020), who related societal resilience to the pandemic to the establishment of a common ingroup identity. These scholars argued that leaders must cultivate a sense of unanimity and shared identity among the public and bridge differences in values and potential interests, in order to materialize the targeted behavior change. In accordance with the core assumptions of self-categorization theory, this research maintained that if a shared ingroup/category becomes contextually salient, then people tend to act according to group norms (Abrams et al., 1990).

Other scholars depicted the construction of a coherent national (in)group as an implication of the widespread use of war metaphors in political communication on COVID-19. Castro Seixas (2021), drawing on critical discourse analysis and crisis communication literature, focused on the use of war metaphors in political communication regarding COVID-19 pandemic management and concluded that fostering national unanimity was among the main functions of wartime metaphors. Emmanuel Macron grounded his appeal for "our general mobilization" on the representation of the virus as an invisible and mysterious enemy. His "nous/we" formulations and the repetitive use of the possessive "notre/our" were oriented to strengthen his appeal for unity among French citizens and politicians against the common enemy. In the same vein, Gjerde (2021, p. 9), in his analysis of political discourse on COVID-19 in Norway, emphasized that the construction of the COVID-19 virus as a "war mongering outgroup actor" was used as a basis of "a common human identity." Berrocal and colleagues' (2021) comparative analysis of statements of 29 leading politicians across four continents revealed similar findings. Common ground between politicians constituted their appeal to national unanimity as a necessary condition in order to cope with the virus, which was depicted as an enemy entering the geographical space of the nation-state.

The potential of the rhetoric of shared identities to mobilize effective public responses against COVID-19 was also explored by Vignoles et al. (2021). In a relatively large-scale survey, the authors documented patterns of social identification that predicted protective behaviors during lockdown in the United Kingdom. In a second study, they contrasted Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's use of identity-based rhetoric to mobilize New Zealanders with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's appeals to the UK public. Their findings suggested that both leaders constructed the pandemic as a national crisis that could be overcome through consensus and synergy. Nevertheless, they found striking differences in the way in which the two leaders framed national consensus and in the way in which they positioned themselves in relation to their audiences. Ardern framed decisions on the pandemic as moral imperatives and positioned herself as both principal and recipient of the decisions taken. Johnson, on the other hand, framed decisions on the pandemic as technical issues using a vocabulary that explicitly located agency with the government rather than the public.

Up to this point, analyses seem to suggest that effective leadership during the pandemic necessarily involves different manifestations of what can be called "consensus" in political discourse. According to the studies cited above, consensus may take the form of sharedness (e.g., identities that include political leaders and citizens alike), agreement and nonpartisanship, and national unity and cohesion. In most studies, the ways in which consensus was constructed have not attracted adequate attention, and its (various) rhetorical aspects and implications were not explored. Exception constitutes the study by Vignoles et al. (2021), which approached appeals to shared identification as political rhetoric and documented flexibility in the boundaries of sharedness and differences in the discursive positioning of the leaders themselves.

Our study also aims at casting light on different constructions of consensus in political discourse and at exploring its various rhetorical uses and implications. Toward this aim, we adopt the principles of rhetorical/discursive approach, and we consider the discourse of political leaders as *political communication* (Demasi et al., 2020). In other words, recognizing the constitutive properties of political discourse and its argumentative nature, we explore appeals to consensus as argumentative resources oriented against alternative constructions of doing politics and managing the pandemic. Moreover, we consider these resources to be occasioned both by the local discursive/political context and the broader ideological context. Hence, before focusing on appeals to consensual politics for the management of the pandemic, we will first discuss the ideological origins of consensus as a liberal political ideal and research on political rhetoric conducted in other contexts.

### *Political Rhetoric and Appeals to Consensus*

According to Walzer (2002), consensus as a political ideal reflects the dominant liberal approach to politics. Politics in its reasonable and liberal version, he maintained, is a matter of calm deliberation leading to consensus and compromise, an image that seems to be closer to an anti-political fantasy. In the same vein, Mouffe (2000, p. 147) represented the rationalist/consensual approach to politics as "blind to the nature of the political" and argued that Enlightenment rationalism is an obstacle in any attempt to defend and deepen democratic procedures and institutions.

Despite the fact that it has been considered as a central trope of liberal politics, only a few analyses of political rhetoric and political communication focus on appeals for consensus. This research laguna is identified by Toye (2013) in his historical analysis of British politics. Toye explored the rhetorical use of consensus as part of the battle both within and between parties

in British politics. According to his analysis, Labour and Tory partisans were at different points in political history eager to claim that they occupied an ideological middle ground that represented a national consensus. Appeals to consensus were common even during the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, who did not abandon the rhetoric of consensus. She rather effectively repopulated it, albeit in exclusively “national” terms (excluding, though, the Labour Party from national consensus).

A study on the rhetoric of consensus in British local politics has been conducted by Weltman and Billig (2001). Rhetorical analysis of political interviews with 20 elected local officials in the Midlands of England documented a fundamental contradiction. Although interviewees were affiliated with certain political parties, they constructed a picture of themselves as being outside political conflicts. Moreover, they argued against the parochialism of the left–right division and for the need to support consensual politics. Weltman and Billig (2001) concluded that the tendency of political actors to prioritize consensual governance and effectiveness vis-à-vis political polarization serves to discourage radical politics and challenges to inequalities and vested interests.

Appeals to consensus in American politics has attracted the interest of a study by Beasley (2001). She considered how the ideal of the United States’ alleged ideological consensus has been invoked in presidential inaugurals. According to her, inaugurals tend to construct American people as a homogenous and unified group that shares a particular ideological vision. U.S. presidents, Beasley maintained, essentialize ideology in these speeches and formulate it as a shared attitudinal disposition that is the cornerstone of American character. Beasley also argued that this representation of ideological consensus needs an external “enemy” and a specific type of opposition in order to be meaningful and rhetorically effective.

In a recent study focusing on political discourse on the “refugee issue” in Greece, Figgou and Anagnostopoulou (2020) explored the rhetorical articulation of appeals for consensus and pragmatism. Analysis indicated that in the context of debating the recent refugee movement to Greece, leading Greek politicians, both of the governing and of the opposition party, warranted their policy choices through recourse to pragmatism, consensus, and *realpolitik*. Specifically, according to one of the common lines of argument identified, political leaders represented themselves as putting the national interest above their party interest (see also Dickerson, 1998). According to another common way of arguing, members of parliament (MPs) constituted political realism as an undisputable criterion of evaluating policy choices and portrayed their differences with their opponents as differences in effectiveness. Figgou and Anagnostopoulou (2020) pointed to the social exclusionary implications of such appeals to national interest with pleas to universal rationality and pragmatism in the context of discussing the refugee issue. They also emphasized that the rhetoric of consensual anti-ideological politics in this context may transfer the privilege of ideological positioning to the representatives of the far right, who tend to ground their anti-immigration rhetoric on ideological values.

The aforementioned studies explore appeals to consensus in different political contexts. They pinpoint some common aspects of political discourse and contribute to the understanding of its features by exploring particularities in the rhetorical formulation and action orientation of constructions of unity and unanimity. The present article aims to extend this research by exploring the rhetorical implications of appeals to consensus in political rhetoric on the government of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greek parliamentary debates. Focusing on discursive mobilization of consensus in the context of managing an unprecedented crisis and

documenting its potential implications on partisan politics and democratic institutions, the article also contributes to existing literature on political communication and political decision making in times of crisis.

## Methods

### *Background and Context: The Pandemic Crisis in Greece*

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Greece was reported on February 26, 2020. At this time, due to the outbreak situation in Italy, the danger for Greece was considered to be imminent. The initial measures, which included the closure of all educational institutions and the suspension of any kind of mass gatherings, were taken on March 13. On March 22, in a televised public address, the Greek prime minister, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, announced his decision to prohibit all unnecessary movement of citizens across the country. The lockdown measures were retained until early May 2020. During the summer of 2020, cases were kept low, and the main concern was to ease all restrictions to support tourism and to reopen the economy (Aspriadis, 2021).

The Greek government was deemed to have managed the first phase of the pandemic effectively. From very early on, an expert committee of epidemiologists was established to monitor the situation and to advise the government. The moral humanistic framing by the representative of the expert committee (Professor S. Tsiodras) in his daily press briefings has been considered one of the reasons for the citizens' support of the governmental management of the pandemic (Nikolopoulou & Psyllakou, 2020).

The second wave came in October 2020, when the daily number of confirmed cases started to increase drastically. With a record of 3,000 new daily cases in the beginning of November, the situation got out of hand, putting massive pressure on the health system. The whole country was put under lockdown, which lasted almost two months. The increased number of deaths together with the delayed imposition of containment measures replaced the success story of the first phase with the perception of a governmental failure (Aspriadis, 2021).

The third phase<sup>1</sup> of the pandemic started in January 2021 with optimism about the progress and the effectiveness of the vaccination program. However, the high rate of deaths in Greece compared to other European countries, combined with the relatively low vaccination rates (again compared to North European standards; see <https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab>), led to intense political debate.

### *Analytic Material*

This intense political debate in the Greek parliament, which was widely reported in the media, is the focus of our analysis. Specifically, we selected three parliamentary debates as our analytic corpus. These debates were chosen both because they took place around important milestones in the course of the pandemic in Greece (as indicated below) and because their agenda focused exclusively on the political management of the COVID-19 crisis. They were an ideal context for the study of political communication from a rhetorical/discursive psychology perspective. Due to their format (having a first and second round of speeches by each party), all

<sup>1</sup> 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 being recorded in Greece and across the world.

political parties were able to make their arguments and respond to criticisms and questions via a second cycle of speeches.

The first parliamentary session took place April 2, 2020, a few days after the announcement of the initial lockdown measures. The session involved discussion and voting on the draft law of the Ministry of Health concerned with “Urgent Measures to Avoid and Limit the Spread of Coronavirus.” The proceedings consisted of 50 pages (numbered from 11576 to 11626). The second parliamentary session of January 15, 2021, involved a debate (requested by the prime minister) that took place in the aftermath of the most dramatic phase of the pandemic in Greece. It also overlapped with the beginning of the vaccination program. The proceedings consisted of 46 pages (numbered from 5843 to 5889). The third parliamentary session of October 18, 2021, involved a debate provoked by the question of the leader of the opposition at a time when the vaccination program had slowed down considerably. The proceedings consisted of 79 pages (numbered from 1 to 79).

At the time of these parliamentary debates, the 300 Greek parliamentary seats were distributed to eight political parties: the governing right-wing party New Democracy, elected with 157 seats; the left-wing party Syriza, elected with 85 seats; the social-democratic party Movement for Change, elected with 22 seats; the Communist Party of Greece, elected with 15 seats; the Greek Solution (right-wing populist party), elected with 10 seats; and the MeRA25 (a newly born party with a postcapitalist, green-ecology agenda), elected with 8 seats. Three parliamentary seats belong to independent MPs.

The proceedings (transcribed mainly for content) are posted on the official website of the Greek Parliament (<http://www.hellenicparliament.gr>). The material used in the analysis that follows has been translated from Greek to English by the authors.

### *Analytic Procedure*

The initial research objective was to document potential regularities in parliamentary discourse on the pandemic. Reading and rereading the original corpus, we observed that appeals to consensus/consensual politics were commonly used in the discourse of leading politicians and decided to focus our analysis on this topic. We proceeded to select from the original transcripts all the relevant extracts and put them in a separate file. At this stage, the criteria of data selection were inclusive. We included explicit calls for agreement or compliance (with norms and principles) and unity based on rhetorical content. We also considered deixis (e.g., “we” formulations) and the construction of social categories.

After the initial stage of data management, we proceeded to identify common argumentative lines, which constitute the units of analysis. The subsection titles in the analysis section—abstracted from argumentative practices “in context” (Potter et al., 1990)—indicate the argumentative lines identified. To give an example, the argument that consensus on hard data is necessary has been analyzed in this study as an argumentative line.

According to scholars of discursive psychology and rhetoric, argumentative lines are constituted and constitutive. They inform us about “the wider discursive economy” in a particular historical and political context (Wetherell, 2015, p. 317) and about the common tropes and contradictions of lived ideology (Billig, 1991). The analysis that follows is structured on the basis of dilemmas and juxtapositions of ideological proportions (which contain more argumentative lines and opposing common places). To give an example, in liberal ideology, a vital contradiction between enlightened rationality and ideological politics is considered to inform both the argumentative line that predicates consensus on hard data and the argumentative line that represents consensus as compliance with the experts.

Argumentative lines, however, are also occasioned by specific accountability concerns and are action-oriented. Furthermore, as discursive perspectives of political communication (Demasi et al., 2020) have maintained, political leaders' accountability is related to the multiple audiences they address and to the nature of political communication as mediated social practice. Therefore, the next stage of analysis examined how discourse was oriented toward various rhetorical ends, such as fact construction, undermining alternative versions of reality and managing issues of stake and interest.

### Analysis

The analysis is divided in two subsections. The first includes extracts that illustrate argumentative lines developed around the dilemma between enlightened rationality and ideological politics. We show how political leaders ground their appeals to consensus on hard data and scientific reason. The second subsection includes argumentative lines in which appeals to consensus are articulated in moralistic terms (e.g., around the value of national unity) through the use of superordinate categories. In one line of argument, consensus is constituted as national unity and as a societal demand, and it is juxtaposed to partisan politics and party interest. In another line of argument, however, consensus is constituted in terms of unitarian and responsible (party) politics. The extracts quoted below are typical of the argumentative lines identified, with preference given to succinct exchanges.

#### *Enlightened Rationality vs. Partisan/Ideological Politics*

##### *Consensus as Agreement on Hard Data vs. Partisan Politics*

Extract 1 is derived from a session requested by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis that took place in the aftermath of the second phase of the pandemic. It is from the initial speech of the prime minister (PM) and mobilizes a line of argument in which policy decisions are legitimized through recourse to the power of statistics.

#### **Extract 1**

I would like at the outset of this debate to emphasize once more that in this hall we could disagree on political proposals and, obviously, opposition parties have every right to exert justified criticism on the Government. It is not possible, however, to disagree on data, on the real situation that occurs in our country today and on what has happened during the last ten months, from the beginning of March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 appeared in our country. So where are we today?

According to the official ECDC [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control] records—do you know that these maps are published weekly?—today, last week, the fifty-third week during which the ECDC records the relevant map, as you can see, all Europe is red except for two countries which are yellow and which have some green regions, Greece and Finland.  
(Mitsotakis, January 15, 2021)

Mitsotakis starts out by setting the limits of (dis)agreement and partisan politics while, by the same token, he paves the way for the representation of his policy choices as undoubtable. According to him, democratic politics are operated through disagreements (on political proposals) and through the justified criticism of the opposition. The PM's spatial reference (*this hall*) to the house of parliament works as a symbolic resource to foreground democracy as an institution

and a value and to emphasize Mitsotakis's own commitment to democratic values, which include giving voice to justified criticism.

The PM's claim that he respects the value of disagreement and criticism in democratic political debate serves as a disclaimer. A disclaimer is, according to Hewitt and Stokes (1975), a verbal device employed to defeat in advance potential criticism and unwanted identity inferences. In this case, the speaker's emphasis on the necessity of disagreement may serve to disclaim that the utterances to follow can be used as a basis for identity challenge, as a basis for challenging Mitsotakis's tolerance of diversity of opinions. By asserting the right of opposition to exert criticism and to argue against governmental policies, the prime minister attempts to establish for himself credentials that permit him to appeal to the necessity of consensus.

Having expressed his endorsement of the need to disagree, Mitsotakis proceeds to define the limits of disagreement. Dispute is not possible on numbers, hard data, and whatever determines the reality of a situation. According to Potter (1996, p. 121), there are two general ways of representing reality. The first involves discursive practices that assign agency to the speaker, whereas the second is constituted by rhetorical strategies that "externalize agency to matters 'out-there.'" Maps, graphs, and statistics have been widely documented as reality-constructing devices used to make particular versions to appear factual and independent of speakers. By posing a rhetorical question ("Where are we today?") and pointing to the location on a map produced by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, Mitsotakis sets the boundaries of reality that no one has the right to dispute.

The status of the maps is predicated on the institutional credentials of the European identity of the ECDC. Discursive psychology turns our focus to the cultural patterning of political communication (Tileagă et al., 2020). The taken-for-granted credibility of (Western) European institutions should be understood in the context of culturally specific representations of Europe and underpinnings of Greek national identity.

As it has been widely documented in other studies (Andreouli et al., 2017; Bozatzis, 2009; Sapountzis et al., 2006), Europe in Greek political and everyday discourse—(almost wholly) represented in terms of Western Europe—is being understood as the paradigmatic example of occidental progress and efficiency. Greece, on the other hand, is represented as occupying an ambivalent position (due to its location in the east of Europe and its history of Ottoman occupation). Therefore, the European source of the data presented (ECDC) may serve as a testimony of reliability. Furthermore, the fact that in the ECDC map Greece is presented next to a North European country (Finland) may serve as evidence of the efficient governing of the pandemic oriented to manage potential political accountability concerns (Demasi, 2019).

Extract 2 is from the statement of Yanis Varoufakis, the leader of MeRA25, a small (radical left) opposition party, during the same (with Extract 1) parliamentary session. Yanis Varoufakis responds to Mitsotakis's appeal to consensus and initiates a type of dialogue with the PM.

### **Extract 2**

Mr. Prime Minister, you said—and you are absolutely right—that we ought to have political confrontation in here and we ought to disagree on policies, on proposed policies not—as yet—implemented. Nevertheless, you also said that we do not have the right to disagree on numbers. I agree. Is it, then, true that you have spent the lowest amount for the NHS [National Health System] amongst the European Union countries and that there is a negative increase in its budget for 2021? Please answer. (Yanis Varoufakis, January 15, 2021)



Yanis Varoufakis starts out by stressing his emphatical agreement with the PM that politics is a matter of partisanship and disagreement. By a similar spatial formulation (“in here”), the parliament is constructed by Yanis Varoufakis as the appropriate place of political confrontation. He emphasizes the need for debate on policies that “have not ... been implemented,” implying that disagreement on decisions already taken may be futile.

Yanis Varoufakis proceeds to further agree that there are also issues, like numbers and statistics, on which disagreement is not allowed and consensus is a necessity. The construction of common ground between him and the PM, though, is used as a device that paves the way for dispute. By using numbers and the same comparison group (European Union), Yanis Varoufakis enlists the PM and addresses him directly with a question on the NHS budget for 2021.

In his pioneering work on rhetorical psychology, Billig (1987) emphasized the argumentative dimension of categorization. Social actors, Billig maintained, argue not only about the content and boundaries of a category but also about what a dispute is all about. Similarly, Demasi (2019, p. 1) put forward that the employment of facts is a “highly argumentative matter.” A fact may be challenged by being juxtaposed to another fact that serves to question its relevance. In Extract 2, Yanis Varoufakis, after having created common ground upon which to build his disagreement, alters the criterion of comparison between Greece and other European countries and provides another “fact” that he invites the prime minister to consider: Greece has spent the lowest amount of money for the NHS.

The two extracts considered so far come from the same session and in fact constitute some sort of dialogue between the PM and the leader of a small opposition party. Appeals to consensus in these extracts were predicated on a representation of pandemic’ statistics and data as having agency on their own and as constituting an unquestionable reality. The idea that numbers speak for themselves can also be oriented to manage accountability concerns, as leading political actors (e.g., PM in Extract 1) attend to potential charges for not having acted in the public interest (Demasi, 2019). In the extracts that follow, political leaders also castigate disagreement. In these cases, however, consensus is represented as compliance with health experts.

### *Consensus as Compliance With the Experts vs. Ideological Politics*

Extract 3 is from the parliamentary session in which the PM accounts for the measures taken in the first phase of the pandemic, which he had publicly announced a few days before. Taking place at the outset of the pandemic, this speech aims to legitimize measures of unprecedented containment of citizens and control by the state and, at the same time, prevent potential criticism from the opposition. Toward this end, Mitsotakis also refers to past political disagreements from the period of the Greek fiscal crisis, which he presents as “the years of the crisis and populism.”

#### **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, April 2, 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 attributed to unspecified others (“some have chosen”), by which he refers to the construction of the pandemic as having ideological aspects. 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 Syriza. This becomes obvious through 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 and 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 that 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, 1994) put forward, ideological politics presupposes 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 references to the 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, putting intense pressure on the health system while progress of the vaccination program was very slow. The session was provoked by questions from the leader of the opposition party Syriza, Chairman 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, October 18, 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 criticism from 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 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 emphasizes the importance and extent of Mitsotakis’s political inconsistency; he also subtly criticizes both his current disregard of expert opinions and his previous unthinking deference to them. Taking something as 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 government’s stance, the opposition leader asks who makes the decisions and whether the government’s decisions 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 does he position himself or his party as having the expertise needed to evaluate the policy implemented. Rather, he 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.

### *Appeals to Consensus in Moralistic Terms Through the Use of Superordinate Categories*

#### *National Unity and Consensus vs. 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, January 15, 2021)

Mitsotakis starts off by acknowledging what he presents as a basic fact: 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 to 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's 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 et al., 2011). Mitsotakis's 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 (Tileagă, 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 and 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, January 1, 2021)

Tsipras responds by agreeing with the PM on the paramount importance of unity and support for frontline workers, as well as 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, depoliticized. 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's 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 while 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, Fofi Gennimata,<sup>2</sup> 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, coronavirus. 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, January 15, 2021)

As presented 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”) that stresses her own and her party’s commitment to the values of solidarity and sharedness under the pandemic. Indeed, she includes the entire political spectrum, including the other parties, in the same superordinate ingroup (“Society, state and political system, we are all in the same camp”), with the outgroup being the external virus (“we have one enemy, coronavirus”). 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 who 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

<sup>2</sup> Fofi Gennimata died on October 25, 2021, at age 57, after a long battle with cancer.

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 who 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’s having been in government for much of the past decades (since the 1980s and up until the party lost its place to the Syriza Party during the Greek economic crisis of the early 2010s). 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 again shifts 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 criticize 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 human lives, she defends her responsibility as leader to criticize the government. Finally, in the last turn, Gennimata employs more traditional opposition party language (which is rhetorically easier in non-pandemic times) to criticize 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 an 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 article marks a departure 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 that political leaders, as identity entrepreneurs, build up and mobilize), political nonpartisanship, 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, this is despite the deepening polarization that punctured the dominant consensual politics of the long 1990s (Gilbert, 2013) in (neo)liberal democracies.

Against this background, this article, 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 article, show that constructions of consensus are often mobilized 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 (i.e., issues that are not considered political/ideological). However, it is also shown that rhetorically, this 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 (e.g., lockdowns). In the parliamentary data we analyzed, 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’s response to the pandemic, the aforementioned constructions of consensus were counterposed to partisan politics. Non-consensus meant disagreement and, more specifically, disagreement across party lines (i.e., 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 prioritize party political gain at the expense of health and human life). On the other hand, and in the context of an emergency that boosted a national unity narrative, for opposition parties it was rhetorically “troubling” to criticize 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 for 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 (Yanis 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 (Yanis Varoufakis) and undermining public confidence and unity (Gennimata). 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 nonideological 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 emphasized its inclination to put national interests above party interests 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 the 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 and 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 (e.g., they are accountable for not prioritizing the support of the public health system during a health crisis). Shared identities may be necessary in order to promote behavioral change and encourage pro-social behavior 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 northwestern Europe and the south; Hall, 1992) instead of promoting global solutions (Muldoon et al., 2021).

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