Title:
Words can hurt: how political communication can change the pace of an epidemic

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Abstract:
Citizens’ compliance with measures enacted by health authorities can have an important effect on the state of public health, particularly during epidemics. How much can political leaders influence compliance with such measures? In this paper, we analyze this question in the context of Brazil, where the president Jair Bolsonaro disrespected the recommendations and measures implemented by health authorities during a country-wide pro-government demonstration that took place amid the COVID-19 outbreak. By comparing pre and post-trends in new daily COVID-19 cases at the municipality level, we conclude that Bolsonaro’s behavior on that day increased the pace of COVID-19 diffusion. In particular, 3 to 4 days after the day of the demonstrations, the daily number of new COVID-19 is 19% higher in cities that concentrate Bolsonaro’s voters as compared to cities that concentrate opposition voters. The impact is verified even in cities where no demonstration took place, which indicates that the quicker spread of COVID-19 was not only due to people agglomerating during the manifestation, but also due to the changed behavior of Bolsonaro’s supporters regarding social distancing measures. We directly test this later mechanism exploring an index of social isolation and find that citizens’ compliance with social distancing decreased among pro-Bolsonaro cities on the day after the demonstrations

Link to paper:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g6nGBDu2gcqjH0iNmA7nSjUjtKYPBAKV/view

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