



TARTU UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences
Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

MA thesis

Political Discourses of the Pandemic in the United States: A Comparative Study of the Causal
Stories of COVID-19 in Alabama and Iowa

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Authorship Declaration

I hereby declare that I have prepared this thesis independently. All contributions and views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been referenced. The thesis has been written in accordance with the requirements for final theses at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies.

Word count of the thesis: 21,287

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Date: 13.01.2025

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges globally, necessitating quick policy responses from governments worldwide. This thesis examines the role of political discourse in forming and justifying policies during crises, focusing on the early first-wave responses of the U.S. states of Alabama and Iowa. Using Deborah Stone's (1989) causal stories framework, the study identifies four causal story types: intentional, accidental, inadvertent, and mechanical. Through qualitative content analysis of public communications by Governors Kay Ivey and Kim Reynolds, this thesis explores the relationship between crisis communication and policy stringency, highlighting divergences between theoretical expectations and empirical findings. Contrary to expectation, the intentional causal story was overwhelmingly dominant across both states, irrespective of policy stringency. This suggests that leaders may employ intentional narratives universally in crises to convey a sense of control and action. Also unexpectedly, the accidental causal story appeared more frequently in Alabama, a state with higher policy stringency, than in Iowa. The inadvertent causal story, while limited to Governor Ivey's rhetoric, emerged earlier than initially anticipated. Lastly, while mechanical causal stories were deemed unlikely to appear in the theoretical framework, they nonetheless appeared in Alabama through religious invocations, adding an unforeseen dimension to the analysis. The results of the analysis contribute to the existing literature through the framework of how political leaders use certain narratives to legitimize policy decisions. Focusing on regional executives fills a gap in the literature left by the predominant study of national executives. These insights deepen the understanding of crisis communication by executives while highlighting the potential for future research to investigate broader contexts, mixed-methods approaches, and comparative analyses across political systems and party affiliations. The study's limitations in scope reveal possible avenues for future research into the dynamics of crisis communication, testing the universality of intentional causal stories indicated in this study and the conditions under which accidental, mechanical, or inadvertent causal stories might emerge.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the world by surprise in the early months of 2020 and has had widespread and long-lasting consequences across the globe. Most countries saw some mixture of lockdowns, school closures, mask mandates, expedited medical research, remote work and study, emergency powers, and social gathering prohibitions, just to name a few of the sweeping changes ushered in by the pandemic. With the rapidly changing climate, disasters and crises will become even more prevalent. One potentiality is that “climate change could aggravate more than 50% of known human pathogens” (De Oliveira & Tegally, 2023), making a repeat scenario of a global pandemic far more likely to happen with increasing frequency. While we live in a world with increasingly common cases of non-hierarchical public governance arrangements ushered in by new technologies such as the internet, those at the tops of traditional governmental hierarchies still hold much sway over policies that directly affect people’s daily lives. Hence, an understanding of these hierarchical governance traditions is essential in the context of the exercise of emergency powers and the consolidation of power in general. More specifically, with an increasing risk of pandemics, there is a growing need to understand how political discourse can justify specific policy actions taken by government officials.

The objective of this thesis is to explore and understand the political discourse used to justify or explain different policy decisions. That fact that there were different outcomes is indisputable, but now an exploration of why were there different outcomes and how different outcomes were justified through political rhetoric is justified. The causal stories framework adapted from Deborah Stone (1989) will be used as it allows me to categorize the discourse of politicians in terms of human agency or lack thereof and can thus help to glean insight into the decision-making processes of political leaders. The study will focus, then, on governmental responses from the top levels of traditional governance arrangements in the early COVID-19 pandemic in the US, the country that has the highest total coronavirus cases and deaths (Mathieu et al., 2020). Given that the US operates under a unified federal system, the thesis will focus on a regional form of governance paying attention to the state-level organizations. The research question I am thus attempting to answer is:

RQ: How did the disparities in political discourses affect COVID-19 crisis management responses across the US states of Alabama and Iowa from March to May 2020?

The logic of selecting the cases of Alabama and Iowa will be explained more thoroughly further on, but the methodology used for this analysis should apply to a broader set of cases than just those two states. The states were selected using the most similar systems design (MSSD) as the overarching governmental structure lends itself nicely to such a design, and it allows for important variables such as the ruling party to be taken into account in the case selection process. Globally and domestically, policy responses to the pandemic varied widely both in the extent of power wielded and in the quickness with which a policy decision was made. The general lack of uniformity across local municipalities and regional governments renders it perhaps unsurprising that virtually all policy responses were highly contested in public discourse. Whether about lockdowns, school closures, or masking policies, any decision was likely to start a political dispute, most often across party lines, even among individuals of similar political inclinations. These factors are essential to reflect on for this study, as in the US, many of the decisions about policy responses were made at the state level by governors and/or state legislatures, leading to variation all across the country. The data for the analysis of this topic is comprised of press releases, public statements, and other official communications to the public from the governors being analyzed. The data will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA), the meaning and methodology of which will be explained further in Chapter 3.

This thesis is structured in five chapters, plus this introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter will provide an overview of the literature about crisis communication and crisis response in the COVID era and explain how the research question fits into the existing literature. The second chapter will explain the theoretical background and conceptual framework that this thesis will use to approach the analysis. The third chapter will be the methodology, which will discuss the chosen research design, case selection, data sources, and analytical procedure for the empirical analysis. The fourth chapter will be the empirical analysis, which will provide a detailed view of the relevant findings. The fifth chapter will provide a discussion regarding the interpretation of the results, how the results fit into the broader literature, and the ways in which limitations may have influenced the findings. The thesis will then end with the conclusion.

Chapter 1. Crisis communication in the COVID pandemic

Throughout the reviewed literature, the importance of the communication styles and strategies of political leadership, and of political executives in particular, was heavily emphasized across crisis situations. Leading political figures are looked to in times of crisis to manage complexities and uncertainties competently, promote public health measures, and build trust in the public in whatever policy decisions or health guidelines must be introduced (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023; Mohamed Nour & Kisa, 2024). Beyond the public's need for a leader, the government itself needs a central place for interdepartmental coordination and quick decision-making, leading to cases where "presidents or premiers become the centre of public and scholarly attention" (Boin, Hart, & McConnell, 2008; Boin & Hart, 2003; Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023). Indeed the importance of research focusing on political leadership is well justified throughout the literature, but this speaks nothing of the breadth of political leaders available for examination. The most obvious and most often best covered and understood leaders will be, in many situations, national leaders who are prominent on the world stage, perhaps leaving local and regional leaders understudied. Further, despite the agreement in the literature about the overall importance of this topic, "the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that more recent developments in crisis communication may have been missed." (Mohamed Nour & Kisa, 2024:11). The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an entirely new context for crisis communication after many years of technological evolution. Older explorations of crisis communication thus may insufficiently understand how crisis communication works in the context of this pandemic, and more research and exploration is necessary (Mohamed Nour & Kisa, 2024:2). Repurposing methodological frameworks of analysis may then garner us not only deeper insight into the pandemic itself but also into the applicability of existing frameworks to situations involving new and ever-changing communications technologies.

The authors made various arguments to justify the relevance of their research on politicians' crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most popular strands of argumentation detected within the literature were the impact that policymakers have on crisis outcomes, the novelty and contextual specificity of COVID-19 (as mentioned above), and the political nature of the crisis communication of politicians. On the impact of policymakers, Kneuer and Wallaschek

(2023:705) stress their crucial role in handling turbulent times, as many important aspects of crisis management, such as public understanding, support for different societal sectors and implementing solutions, and even scholarly debate are dependent on their ability to handle turbulent times; therefore, they advocate for a thorough analysis of such topics (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023:691). As COVID is seen as a cause for an emergent and novel topic for exploration, the scholarship can be seen as instrumental, playing an essential role in reminding the public of the inherently political nature of crisis management, where practitioners might prefer to present their measures as mere responses to a natural event (Bauwens et al., 2021; Mohamed Nour & Kisa, 2024:11).

While existing literature does some work to position crisis response as a political act, it does so in contradiction to many political actors themselves, creating a gap to be filled in exploring the positioning of the pandemic as a natural event from the point of view of the politician through their rhetoric. For example, Liu and Boin (2020:4) do this by pointing out that crisis management extends beyond merely minimizing the effects of a catastrophic event, emphasizing its inherently political aspect, as governments are responsible for directing and resolving crises. Here, more research can be done to assess not just the end goal of crisis management during the pandemic but also the rhetorical methods of blame assignment, a project to which the causal stories framework is well suited (Stone, 1989). In more extreme cases, politicians can also frame crises in a manner that endorses their repressive policies and consolidates power (Soyaltin-Colella & Sert, 2024). While the study of the consolidation of power is outside of the scope of this thesis, it nevertheless feeds into the tendency in the broader literature, as well as in this thesis, to focus on political leaders as an important subject of analysis. Similarly, the idea that crisis communication may be used as a tool to legitimize repressive policies is important to consider but is outside the scope of this particular research (Soyaltin-Colella & Sert, 2024).

The literature demonstrates multiple assumptions, arguments and conclusions on the more general topic of crisis communication, which facilitates conducting further research on this topic. For example, Kneuer and Wallaschek (2023:686) argue that even though communication is always under considerable attention in public leadership, it is heightened during times of crisis due to general uncertainty. In addition to the expectations of taking adequate measures, this also creates additional pressure to justify and explain each step to maintain trust in the government

and generate allegiance to the measures (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023:686-87). They also point out that this heightened attention is mainly focused on the executive, which is important to keep in mind for further research (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023:686-87). Taking all these points together, crisis communication is revealed to be highly versatile, filling many purposes in both a societal and a political sense. As crisis communication is thus crucial in several ways, it is an appropriate topic of analysis. It can help give shape to research focusing on multiple avenues of research - from understanding the means by which crisis communication creates certainty and allegiance to the patterns of rhetoric that may appear within the communication.

The previous literature has focused on many different types of leaders and actors, so it is helpful to provide an overview of the aspects they have highlighted about these leaders. Some papers researched conservative actors. For example, Kermani (2022:18) looked into the regime in Iran, and his study included an analysis of how ultra-conservative figures in Iran interacted with the COVID-19 pandemic discourse. In their research on the US, Kirgil and Voyer (2022:10) uncovered some patterns in Republican administrations, like the fact that they tended to “focus more on the collective (we, our, people, home), unemployment and businesses, compared to democratic administrations,” (Kirgil & Voyer, 2022:10). Similarly to my research, there is pre-existing literature on regional governance in the COVID pandemic. Peci et al. (2023:72) identify subnational politics as a relevant strand of research on the COVID-19 pandemic. Even more, Kirgil and Voyer (2022:10) also researched US governors in a mixed-methods approach and described differences between republican and democratic administrations in how they tended to discuss the pandemic, such as republican administrations speaking more collectively during press conferences. Notably, another prevalent theme in the literature was gender analysis, like those conducted by Montiel et al. (2021) and Dada et al. (2021). This research drew conclusions, for example, on the expressiveness of feelings such as empathy and perceived confidence levels of female governors (Montiel et al., 2021:749).

Even though qualitative frameworks were prevalent in the relevant body of literature, they did not typically focus on press releases or quotes directly from the authorities, which could be seen as a gap in the research. Methodologically qualitative frameworks were the most commonly used tool in the research regarding political leadership and crisis communication during the pandemic, with all but three texts using exclusively qualitative methods (Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020;

Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023; Peci et al., 2023), and the remaining three using qualitative and quantitative methods in a mixed-methods approach (Peci et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Montiel et al., 2021). While social media seemed to be the most popular data source for analysis (Hobbs & Allen, 2023; Mohamed Nour & Kisa, 2024; Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020), researchers in the field have also spent time dissecting speeches, press conferences, and in a few cases even statements released directly on government websites, though never as the sole focus. Watkins and Clevenger (2023) use a double-axis, four-quadrant framework for analysis adapted from Boin et al. (2010), Tornero et al. (2021) adopt a metamorphization framework, and other authors use a combination of other frameworks for identifying and analyzing narratives within the political discourse of speeches, social media posts, and interactions with journalists and the public, usually at press briefings. This highlights a gap in the existing literature as very little attention has been paid to press releases and other announcements directly on political leaders' government websites.

A focus on narratives, framings, and rhetoric is widely applied to this body of literature as it sheds light on important aspects of crisis management. According to Peci et al. (2023), "Studying the policy narratives political leaders have developed to frame the Covid-19 pandemic as a policy problem... is key to understanding national policy responses" (Peci et al., 2023:84). Several articles analyze the ways leaders framed the pandemic and constructed narratives to shape public understanding and response. For example, Kirgil and Voyer (2022) explore the use of collective intentionality in framing messages about COVID-19. This could be helpful if you are interested in how leaders appeal to a sense of shared purpose and solidarity. Multiple frameworks shed light on these issues: The Boin et al. framework puts political leadership on the axes of personal involvement and control and sensitivity to context (Watkins & Clevenger, 2021:9), essentially, in theory, predicting how vulnerable a leader is to political fallout, and how well their competence as leaders will be perceived by their constituents. Soyaltin-Colella and Sert (2024) researched narratives and governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in major autocratisers in Europe. They emphasized narratives such as those of war, crisis, and decline in their findings. Peci et al. (2023) distinguished between "denialist" and "strategic" narratives, for example. In a related manner, Kneuer & Wallaschek (2023) provide an in-depth examination of the framing processes by Angela Merkel during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany.

Qualitative methods were most common, with 11 of the 14 reviewed articles employing discourse analysis, thematic analysis, or content analysis to examine speeches, press conferences, or social media posts. Three other studies employed a mixed-methods approach of both qualitative and quantitative methods, and none of the studies reviewed in this section adopted a purely quantitative approach to their research. However, quantitative studies were involved in developing the theoretical frameworks and expectations. The lack of quantitative methods throughout the literature is not unsurprising, however, as the topic of crisis communication deals in most aspects with rhetoric and discourse and does not easily lend itself to quantitative approaches. Kneuer and Wallaschek (2023:688) found that qualitative content analysis allows for an in-depth examination of framing processes. Gesser-Edelsburg and Hijazi (2020:2988) combined content analysis and thematic analysis, with content analysis revealing the ways of communicating guidelines and thematic analysis to identify the more general main themes in COVID-related texts. Montiel et al. (2021), in turn, focused on lexical features of speeches to identify tone and feelings. The arguments from these authors undergird the idea that through various methods of qualitative analysis, researchers can uncover more and deeper understandings of crisis management and communication during the pandemic. Essentially, the wide usage of these qualitative methods demonstrates their usefulness and applicability for this type of research and does not at present represent some kind of methodological oversaturation in the current state of the research.

Given the extended ebbing and flowing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, different data collection and analysis timeframes could be used. One prevalent idea of a timeframe was that of the “first wave” of the pandemic, which could roughly align with the initial cases and case spikes in the first half of 2020. Dada et al. (2021) framed the pandemic from February 26th to April 6th to “capture the month of March, the beginning of when COVID-19 was spreading rapidly around the world and when international leaders began to respond actively” (Dada et al., 2021:2). Kirgil and Voyer (2022) analyzed “between March and April 2020” as the pandemic had not yet been decidedly defined upon political lines (Kirgil & Voyer, 2022:3). Other authors followed similar lines, March-June 2020, March to July 2020, keeping the scope of the “first wave” typically centered around the month of March, and stretching at most only a few months from March (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023:693; Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020:1; Kermani, 2022). While

further waves or phases of the pandemic were described within the literature, anything beyond the first wave or phase of the pandemic was not often the subject of direct analysis, either because the research goals required it or because there simply was not enough content to build a corpus for analysis past the first or second wave (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023; Hobbs & Allen, 2023; Kermani, 2022). Given the findings in the literature, the initial wave of the pandemic does appear to yield the greatest amount of data, making it a natural focal point of examination as it has excellent potential to yield meaningful results.

There are certain acknowledged limitations to help guide future research and foster additional avenues pointed out within the literature, some of which also apply to this paper, while my research may address others. In many cases, researchers pointed out limitations with their breadth of research, which might not allow for wide generalisability. This possible limitation applies to my research given the small number of cases and short analysis timeframe. In the case of Kneuer and Wallaschek (2023:705), they point out a limitation in focusing only on the first phase of the pandemic and state that further studies with an extended time period and more public communication could enhance generalisability. Other authors might point out that the first wave of the pandemic is not necessarily a poor choice of focus. However, it still stands that research such as my own that focuses only on the first wave may have issues generalizing findings to cover the entire pandemic. Hafner and Sun (2021:3) also point out a similar limitation, but about limiting the research to press briefings and linguistic interactions, adding that other modes or other media could be included in this type of analysis. Similarly, Liu et al. (2023:17) highlight the limitation of researching only six countries, encouraging similar studies for additional countries. Montiel et al. (2021:764) add some more interesting points by saying that “while leaders’ words have power, they certainly do not capture a complete politico-psychological picture of pandemic leadership” and emphasize that their research is aimed to uncover patterns of meaning-making but should not be used for claiming causal impacts. This mainly demonstrates that even though pandemic discourse is widely researched, the widening of analyzed cases, types of media, leaders, etc, is seen as a valuable addition to the body of literature. My research will address these limitations not by adding breadth of selected text types but by deepening the understanding of how publicly available press releases might clue us into meaningful functions of crisis communication.

Various trends and principles have been visible throughout the literature, as the previous paragraphs have covered. Political leaders, and executives more specifically, have a significant influence on societal reactions and political and governmental responses to crises, both because power becomes consolidated and because crisis communication is inherently political, and therefore executives are a worthy subject of analysis (Liu & Boin, 2020; Soyaltin-Colella & Sert, 2024; Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic is also discussed broadly as a novel and emergent topic for exploration due in part to its global impact and in part to the current context of technological advancement (Mohamed Nour & Kisa, 2024). The global impact of the pandemic has also directed much academic attention towards global leaders, leaving a notable gap in research and inquiry into regional political leaders' crisis management and communication (Kermani, 2022; Kirgil & Voyer, 2022). Further, we have seen how qualitative research can be an appropriate tool for analyzing data and answering questions about the pandemic and that focusing the timeframe within the beginning months of the pandemic can help capture some of the most meaningful elements of Covid-19 crisis responses and political discourses (Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020; Watkins & Clevenger, 2023; Dada et al., 2021; Kirgil & Voyer, 2022). Considering all of these previous points, I have thus arrived at the following research question, as established in the introduction:

RQ: How did the disparities in political discourses affect COVID-19 crisis management responses across the US states of Alabama and Iowa from March to May 2020?

Understanding the answer to the research question will reveal what patterns of discourse might emerge to explain or justify, whether explicitly or implicitly, the eventual policy decisions a governing body takes. In the following, I will describe the research design and methods, the empirical data and sources, and the overall thesis structure I propose to use to answer the research question.

Chapter 2. Theoretical background

2.1. Causal stories framework

The analysis will be conducted from a constructivist epistemological perspective, under the assumptions of the conceptual framework of Deborah Stone’s causal stories. This framework opens up descriptions of causes by distinguishing between guided and unguided actions, and intended and unintended consequences, illustrated in Table 1. This framework is applied in an analysis of the discourse of political leadership in order to analyze the meaning-making that is involved in policy discourse by defining problems and attributing cause, blame, and responsibility in a policy-as-discourse approach (Bacchi, 2000:46; Stone, 1989:282). Through using this approach while applying the causal stories framework, we can see the actual shaping and framing of problems “in the very policy proposals that are offered as ‘responses’” (Bacchi, 2000:48), thus policy responses are not distinct from political discourse, but shapes and is shaped by discourse. Causal stories build a “causal relation” between political discourse and the policies that that discourse supports (Stone, 1989:285; Kutter, 2014:451-452). In essence, the framework can help guide the analysis by identifying and interpreting how political actors go through the process of defining, narrativizing, and strategically portraying what they see as a problem in a political sense (Stone, 1989).

Table 1. Causal stories typology

		<i>Consequences</i>	
		Intended	Unintended
<i>Actions</i>	Unguided	Mechanical Cause	Accidental Cause
	Purposeful	Intentional Cause	Inadvertent Cause

Source: Stone (1989:285)

By adopting the causal stories framework, I will be able to analyze and interpret political discourse in a well-organized and complex way that can add new insights to the preexisting

literature that has used other frameworks. This theoretical perspective offers a multifaceted approach to understanding how the problem definition of the pandemic is structured in political terms. First, it allows for an examination of how actors construct narratives to advance their interests or agendas regarding the pandemic response. As Bruce (2016:186) explains, causal stories in the political sphere can serve various purposes, including challenging or protecting existing rules, assigning responsibility to specific policy actors, legitimizing their roles as problem solvers, and creating new political alliances among affected individuals. In this fashion, by focusing on how individual actors attribute causes to events, I can uncover any underlying assumptions and ideological commitments that inform political arguments in crisis framing. Additionally, the thorough analysis demanded by the causal stories framework encourages the evaluation of narrative credibility, coherence, and plausibility, uncovering inconsistencies or logical fallacies. Overall, the causal stories framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex interplay of narratives, interests, and power dynamics surrounding the politicization of the pandemic.

The analysis will be given important structure and context using assumptions along the lines of constructivism. Important to the structure of this analysis is the idea that “policy is the product of a process in which discourse, narrative, power and knowledge are key factors in that constitutive process, this sets limits on what can be authoritatively said and heard and indeed upon what is ‘thinkable’,” (Atkinson, Held, & Jeffares, 2010:126). This idea signifies that while the political discourse of a governmental official is not the only important factor in their policy decisions, it still plays a key role in the process of political decision-making, and is thus an important aspect to be studied. Political discourse can in fact help to build the framework, “within which different discourses and narratives are articulated by actors who are embedded in organizations/institutions seeking to advance particular definitions of and solutions to problems that are congruent with and further their interests,” (Atkinson, Held, & Jeffares, 2010:126). From this point of view, we can see that policy outcomes, political discourse, policy goals, and political desires are not distinct concepts for a particular actor within a governance arrangement (especially a hierarchical arrangement), but are all part of the same system of policymaking and have an influence on each other. In the following sections, the different aspects of the causal stories framework will be explored and explained in greater detail.

2.1.1. Mechanical causal story

Mechanical causes within the causal stories framework refer to unguided actions with intended consequences, as represented in the top left box on the matrix (Table 1). In other words, it describes phenomena driven by non-autonomous entities programmed or influenced by humans, devoid of inherent will. Mechanical causes can include machines, trained animals, brainwashed individuals, or any intervening agent orchestrated by human agency. Even though it is always created deliberately by humans, such instances often manifest differently from the exact way they were originally intended, for example when the intended purpose of a mechanism is subverted or misapplied, leading to unforeseen consequences. Stone (1989:285) provides illustrations ranging from malfunctioning machines to manipulated individuals. It can be seen in situations where one person frightens another, prompting them to act “reflexively, almost mechanically, in a way that creates a harm,” (Stone, 1989:286) for example when a frightened reaction to someone else causes one to recklessly dash into oncoming traffic or inadvertently steer their vehicle into another's path. What is often interesting and adds analytical value, is the way this typology illustrates the complex interplay between human design and the unpredictable behavior of mechanized or influenced entities. Despite meticulous programming or training, these mechanisms can veer from their intended course, leading to unplanned outcomes. Thus, mechanical causes serve as a reminder of the intricate dynamics between human agency and the unpredictable behavior of non-autonomous agents.

The analytical value of the typology becomes clear when we look at how this has been applied in research. In his research on school turnaround policy in low-performing schools, Torres (2023) examined actors' beliefs about the causes and solutions, using framing theory and the concept of causal stories. For his analysis, he situates the narrative of students underperforming because of poverty in the mechanical cause type, given an understanding of poverty as the result of a system designed to produce these results, but not with specific people as contributors to poverty. That causal story is infrequent in his findings. He explains it by referring to Stone's idea, that in situations of shifting responsibility for a problem, using the logic of mechanical causation can be used to attribute responsibility more strongly to particular actors, because it implies intended consequences. For this thesis on the COVID-19 discourse, examples of mechanical causes could in theory be an idea of the virus being man-made and released, at which point it is no longer

possible to guide it purposefully. It could also include stories of testing systems or any algorithm included in counteracting the spread or deadliness of the virus, which is left to its own devices after programming. In addition, similarly to the idea of poverty in Torres's work, it could manifest in narratives of different parts of society being influenced differently if it would be based on the assumptions of that being a result of a system designed in such a way without referring to specific culprits.

2.1.2. Accidental causal story

Accidental causes encompass phenomena that are devoid of any higher purpose and occur beyond human intervention or control, as represented in the top right box on the matrix (Table 1). They can take the form of natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes, as well as technological errors referred to as “machines run amok,” such as a car losing control, or some other manmade equipment somehow breaking down and ending up causing harm (Stone, 1989:284). In essence, then, accidental causes are found entirely within the realm of fate, a realm without purpose or agency. It is worth considering, though, that while such incidents comprising accidental causes may historically be considered acts of god, advancements in technology have blurred the line between accidental and preventable events. For instance, earthquake-proof infrastructure mitigates the impact of seismic activity, lending credence to the notion that the typologies of causal stories are never fully distinct from one another (Stone, 1989). Authors such as Bobba and Hubé (2021) echo this sentiment, noting the complexity of politicizing accidental causes such as pandemics, which lack direct human responsibility or political purpose, yet which seem to demand an intentional societal response.

Looking at how accidental causes have been operationalized and discussed in literature can elucidate how the typology can function within a framework of discourse analysis. Bobba and Hubé (2021) provide an illustration of the challenges of politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift toward framing it as a natural phenomenon. They argue that pandemics lack direct political purpose or responsibility for their origin, contrasting with previous European crises driven by intentional causes like financial and migrant issues. Instead, pandemics are characterized by accidental causes, stemming from unintended and unguided shocks beyond human control (Bobba & Hubé, 2021:7). Responsibility for the situation is thus difficult to

delineate which complicated the politicization process, so many governments have largely responded by managing the COVID-19 crisis as a non-political and science-based task, reframing it within the realm of nature (Bobba & Hubé, 2021:7). In a media landscape characterized by high choice, public awareness of the situation is higher than ever, which allows citizens to observe the situation at the same pace that governments can, causing demands for transparency in governmental decisions across Europe (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). With this example, the typology can be observed through the framing of the pandemic as a natural disaster affecting the whole society, leading to a context wherein citizens and governments expect and aim for increased transparency and lessened politicization through a scientific approach to crisis response.

2.1.3. Intentional causal story

Intentional causes are, as the name suggests, the most firmly situated within the realm of human intentionality as they involve actions deliberately taken by human beings to successfully achieve specific intended outcomes. They are represented in the bottom left square of the matrix (Table 1), combining purposeful actions and intended consequences. Stone (1989) lists examples such as assault, oppression, conspiracies, and successful programs as instances of intentional causes. These actions can range from malevolent acts, like oppression inflicted by oppressors upon their victims, to benevolent endeavors, where rational actors take rational action to solve a problem or improve a situation. An illustrative example given by Stone (1989) is the case of the Johns Manville company, which knowingly concealed the dangers of asbestos exposure from its employees, resulting in harmful consequences. Whether motivated by malevolence or benevolence, intentional causes entail direct action taken, successfully bringing about specific desired outcomes, reflecting the agency and intent of human actors. Understanding intentional causes is essential for analyzing human behavior, decision-making processes, and the ethical implications of actions undertaken to achieve desired ends.

In political analysis, that type of causal story is likely to be prevalent and therefore more thorough reflections on its implications have been forwarded. For example, Ban, Bohle, and Naczyk (2022:106) point out the instrumentality of intentional causal stories, as they move the conception of the situation from the realm of fate/accident to the realm of human intent, therefore

forwarding a narrative of identifiable villains who purposefully caused harm. Their research also shows a further implication by this, as the focus that is drawn on the villain, in their case a deceptive businessman that victimized migrant workers, shifts the focus away from the fates of the main victims (migrant workers), placing the broader community in the victimized position (Ban, Bohle & Naczyk, 2022:106). Additionally, they point out how the intentional causal story presents actors as bundles of villains, victims and heroes with an overarching story arc (Ban, Bohle & Naczyk, 2022:106). This causal story could therefore have various manifestations in the context of the pandemic, for example, the political leaders presenting themselves as the heroes, illustrating how they took purposeful action with a certain COVID issue and it produced the intended results. This is likely to be seen in times of crisis, which could be seen as instrumental for the adherence to future measures.

2.1.4. Inadvertent causal story

Inadvertent cause within the causal stories framework refers to the overlap of purposeful action, but unintended consequences, on the bottom right of the matrix (Table 1). Therefore, it is about the unintended repercussions of direct human action. These causes emerge when individuals or groups undertake deliberate actions, but the ensuing outcomes differ from their original intentions. A good example given by Stone (1989) of a spectacular miscalculation like that is Richard Nixon's imposition of wage and price controls as a measure to curb inflation. Unforeseen by Nixon was the fact that in the context of expansionary fiscal and monetary policies, these controls would cause price increases to go out of control upon their eventual removal—an outcome predicted by economic theory. Stone (1989:285) lists examples such as intervening conditions, unforeseen side effects, neglect, carelessness, and omission, all illustrating instances where human action leads to unintended consequences. In essence, inadvertent causes shed light on the inherent fallibility of human decision-making and lack of ability to predict the future, wherein despite intentions, actions may produce undesirable outcomes due to oversight, miscalculation, or unforeseen circumstances. Thus, the responsibility for these unintended consequences rests squarely on the shoulders of the actors involved, highlighting the lack of guaranteed accord between intentionality and outcome for human-directed actions.

This typology could be assumed to be very prevalent in speech and has the potential to open up different kinds of situations analytically because the lack of guarantees in human planning is widely known and assumptions or claims of good intentions are commonplace. As an example, in Torres's (2023) work on the beliefs on the issue of school turnaround policy, the narratives around the issue being stemmed in leadership were categorized as the inadvertent cause, as the participants did not believe leaders to cause harm intentionally (as it would be in the case of embezzling, for example), but instead, leadership issues such as lack of ability or resources and rapid leadership turnover, was believed to create harm unintentionally (Torres, 2023:6). Inadvertent cause was the most prevalent belief in his findings (Torres, 2023). In the COVID-19 discourse analysis in this thesis, it could (and is likely to) manifest in many ways, for example, all types of claims emphasizing positive intentions and the underlying logic of the decisions when they were made after their weaknesses were uncovered in time. It is especially likely in the context of the pandemic, as it was widely understood that there is a general lack of information on the topic and the usefulness of different approaches was unrolling in real-time. Therefore, these types of causal stories can be considered likely to be accepted.

2.2. Theoretical expectations

With the reviewed literature and the descriptions of the causal story framework in mind, in general, multiple manifestations and propensities of each type of causal story could be expected to present themselves in the analyzed text corpus. Firstly, there is a set of expectations derived from the nature of the crisis. Mechanical causal stories are the least expected type, owing to the themes within that might increase fear and mayhem, such as the idea of the man-made virus tearing through society out of control. Accidental causal stories could be quite prevalent as they would include stories that take a science-based and technocratic view of the matter, which could be seen as attractive to politicians as it might increase trust, cohesion and an "us against the virus" mindset. The intentional causal story can be considered to be likely to come up in situations where politicians take credit for the successes of their decisions to reinforce further support, or if not personal credit, then credit to government programs or policies seen as necessary and functional in some way, such as stay-at-home orders. Similarly, the inadvertent causal story can be used in the opposite case, where things do not go according to plan, or blame is intended to be shifted away from the politician or government in question.

Another set of expectations can be derived from the different aspects of the context of the speakers and their political landscape. Both speakers are American, operating in the same federal system, and both are also members of the Republican Party. The small government ethic of the republican party would suggest a greater focus on more inadvertent or accidental causal stories, decentering human action and centering the nature of the crisis as outside of direct human control (Janoff-Bulman, 2023). Thus, I would argue that no strong narrative supporting government action is expected, and intentional causal stories, especially those emphasizing government action or the need for collective action, could be less prevalent than other causal story types, though still scaling to policy stringency. As seen in the literature review, some authors have pointed out the tendency of the Republican administrations to focus more on the collective “us” (Kirgil & Voyer, 2022:10). Therefore, it can be expected that the emphasis on the collective is one of the ways that aspects of the pandemic are brought into the realm of human intentionality.

Further, there are expected to be differences in the causal story representations between the two speakers based on their policy approaches in response to the crisis. This is based on the assumption from Stone (1989) that causal stories build a “causal relation” between discourse and policies. The expectation here is that a government with a more stringent policy platform will employ rhetoric that falls under the intentional causal story and possibly more mechanical causal stories, as well. The correlating expectation is that a government with less stringent policies employs accidental or even inadvertent stories more often in its rhetoric. These expectations come with the assumption that rhetoric is used to support policy choices; intentional stories better support more government action as a means to combat the crisis, and accidental stories better support less government action. The underlying logic of this expectation is that subscribing to an intentional (purposeful and intended) rhetoric comes with one set of implications, and subscribing to accidental (unintended and unguided) rhetoric comes with a different set of implications. If an administrator bases their discourse on purpose and intentionality, it creates a set of expectations for them to take action, for example, in the form of official measures. At the same time, basing discourse on unintended and unguided factors creates

no such expectations and might even suggest that there is nothing to be done on the part of the administration.

The specifics of policy stringency as a concept will be explored more fully in Chapter 3, but as a basis for the theoretical expectations, it is important to keep in mind that it includes differences in the timing, the severity, and the longevity of policy responses to the crisis. For example, a mask mandate could be introduced sooner or later, apply to more or fewer spaces, and last a longer or shorter amount of time; all of these are included aspects in the overall policy stringency of a government, though stringency includes many more policies than just masks (Roser, 2021). If there are significant differences discovered, then that could indicate that it would be a meaningful avenue of further or more extensive research, and if we could not observe such differences, then that could indicate that it may not be such a meaningful avenue of further research.

Chapter 3. Research design and methodology

3.1. Most similar systems design

The setup of this comparative analysis will be a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), whereby I identify multiple units for analysis that exist under a similar framework with similar inputs, but include a case with a disparate output from those other similar systems (Anckar, 2008:395). By examining and comparing all of these cases, conclusions as to what differentiated one case from the others can hopefully be drawn to garner a broader understanding. Since I will be comparing two regional governments' executives existing under the same federal rubric, this study arguably could be said to implicitly incorporate MSSD methods, making it a natural methodological choice given my research topic and research question (Anckar, 2008:390). However, while this argument certainly applied to this research design, I will still be making this implicit application of the methodology more explicit by finding two regions with "as many background characteristics as possible", which will still allow the potential for unexplored similarity and difference among all 50 states in the scope of this research (Anckar, 2008:390). With that said, as mentioned, the units of analysis will be state-level executives (governors) in the United States of America. The US offers a unique array of governments for study, as each state exists within the same federal framework under the banner of the Federal US Government, but also, each state has its own constitution, laws, traditions, and styles of governance that create unique and diverse sites of analysis. Thus, the case selection process will need to whittle down the options from the 50 states that currently exist, down to an individually manageable two states, represented by their respective governors, for analysis.

3.2. Conceptualization of policy stringency

Policy stringency as a concept refers to the extent, timeliness, and longevity of a policy response or set of policy responses to a particular crisis. In this case, the crisis in question is the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy responses have been measured and evaluated globally by several institutions, notably the University of Oxford. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) collected information on COVID-19 policy responses from 2020-2022, first functioning as a tracker and by 2023 shifting into a research focus (Hale et. al,

2021). In employing this data in the conceptualization of policy stringency for this paper, it is important to note that the index “simply records the strictness of government policies. It does not measure or imply the appropriateness or effectiveness of a country’s response” (Roser, 2021). The OxCGRT focused on 24 potential policies when calculating COVID policy stringency, with nine policies holding the most weight, those being: “school closures; workplace closures; cancellation of public events; restrictions on public gatherings; closures of public transport; stay-at-home requirements; public information campaigns; restrictions on internal movements; and international travel controls” (Roser, 2021; Hale et al., 2021).

Important for this thesis are a couple of different examples regarding the policy stringency of Alabama and Iowa that should demonstrate how and why policy stringency is applied within this thesis. First of all, throughout March and part of April of 2020, Iowa remained the only state in the US to have “recommended closing or open with significant alterations (general)”, while Alabama and 48 other states were at “require closing all levels (general) (Hallas et al., 2021:20). In other words, Iowa remained an outlier both in the timeliness of response and in stringency, contrasting with Alabama. When analyzing the text corpus, then, this should affect in some way how the pandemic response is portrayed and rationalized. Similarly, while Iowa and Alabama ended up with similar stringencies by May, the difference in the beginning is meaningful, and thus, in March, where there is the most data, and perhaps in some of April as well, I would expect to see the most differences in their rhetoric and use of different causal stories (Hallas et al., 2021:22). These facts are also present in the stringency data reported by OxCGRT, as depicted in Table 2. While Iowa almost catches up by the first of May to Alabama in stringency, it nevertheless remains lower than Alabama even when comparing Iowa on May 1st to Alabama on April 1st. These numbers are the basis for the differences theoretically expected to be present in the analysis of the text corpus.

Table 2. Policy stringency per state

Date	Iowa Stringency Index (0-100)	Alabama Stringency Index (0-100)
March 1st	0.00	5.56

April 1st	42.59	59.72
May 1st	58.33	60.19

Source: Hale et al., 2021

3.3. Case selection and data

Following the most similar systems design, I examined the party control of each state and eliminated states with divided control using data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), which resulted in 14 exclusions. Next, along the lines of other authors, I used some aspects of the stringency index standards discussed earlier in this thesis to filter – initially a mask mandate causing 15 exclusions, then stay-at-home orders were used to make a table of maximal differences, excluding 14 (Reimann, 2020; Mervosh, Lu & Swales, 2020; Roser, 2021). Two states had neither mask mandate nor stay-at-home order, and five states had both. Of these states, Iowa and Alabama had the most similar inputs, importantly population size and proportion of elderly population, and thus at higher risk from COVID-19 (Kilduff, 2021; Education Week, 2021). All of these factors are laid out in Table 3.

Table 3. MSSD for Iowa and Alabama as of 2020, compiled by the author

	Governance structure: state in US federal system	Party Control: singular party trifecta	Total population	Elderly population proportion	Explanatory factor: Dominant causal stories	Outcome: mask mandate and stay-at-home orders
Alabama	+	+(Republican)	4.922 million	17.8%	-	Yes
Iowa	+	+(Republican)	3.164 million	17.9%	-	No

Sources: (National Conference of State Legislatures 2020; Reimann, 2020; Mervosh, Lu, and Swales, 2020; Roser, 2021; Kilduff 2021; Education Week 2021)

In both Iowa and Alabama, COVID policies were decided in large part by the executive branch, specifically the governor. This in itself is not altogether uncommon in the United States, but it is

important for this analysis as it means that the comparison will not have to account for differing political status such as an executive versus a legislator. With that in mind, I will be examining all gubernatorial press releases, statements, executive orders, state of emergency declarations, and proclamations within a given timeframe for the governor of Iowa and the governor of Alabama. I will exclude the texts that do not include a meaningful paragraph about COVID or COVID measures, and continue analyzing texts under this rubric until eventual saturation. These texts will consist entirely of publicly available documents pulled from the official websites of the governors, or the affiliated YouTube videos of speeches which are linked on the websites (as detailed further in Appendix 1) from which I have taken the transcript to analyze as texts.

To assemble and sort through the possible corpus of texts to use in an analysis of this nature, I followed a set of decision rules to include or exclude texts based on some relevant criteria. The first rule is the timeframe, as mentioned elsewhere in this paper, being between March and April of 2020. This timeframe was selected along the lines of previous literature because it captures a snapshot of the “first wave” of the pandemic including the first cases and first spikes of cases, and because it allows me to uncover the initial causal framings of the pandemic (Dada et al., 2021:2; Kirgil & Voyer, 2022:3; Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023:693; Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020:1; Kermani, 2022) The second criterion is the inclusion of the keywords “COVID” and “Coronavirus,” selected to find the most immediately relevant releases to the research topic. From this, 229 texts – 93 for Ivey, 136 for Reynolds – were compiled for a final stage of screening for relevancy before the remaining texts could be analyzed under the analytical procedure to be described later in this chapter.

3.4. Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a research method used to systematically describe qualitative data, such as text, but also images or audio, in order to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. It is commonly employed in various fields and was by far the most common methodology used within the literature on COVID-19 crisis management discourse. It is employed by classifying material as examples of categories that have been outlined in a coding frame (see Table 4) (Schreier, 2012:1). QCA is appropriate for this research as it offers a systematic approach to making sense of qualitative data, allowing me in my research to uncover

rich insights into the governors' discourse and perceptions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic that could not be achieved without a systemic and detailed approach.

The analysis of selected texts shall be conducted by the technique of coding, which provides a means to establish links between data and concepts (Schreier, 2012: 37-39). It is a prominent method in qualitative data analysis and can be used for a variety of frameworks and methods. Coding is interpretative, as it goes beyond summarization and can also distill or condense data, adding value to the research (Saldaña, 2013:4). The analysis will be conducted with a previously determined preliminary coding frame, consisting of coding categories built on the causal stories framework by Stone (1989). This approach to qualitative data analysis is best suited for this research because of its analytical qualities which facilitate a stronger connection to the theoretical framework. The first step of the coding process is reading the sample, in order to gain an understanding of the discourse. Thereafter, the second step is retrieving relevant extracts of the text and thirdly, a code will be attributed to them. The coding will be conducted in two cycles, as the second cycle allows further depth to the interpretation and highlights the most important features, which helps to put together the themes and grasp meaning (Saldaña, 2013:8). The preliminary coding frame, as well as emerging themes as a result of the second cycle, guide the writing of the analysis.

3.5. Analytical procedure

Analyses must be given proper framing to guide its usage and avoid an author offering a simple summary of a discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2022:79). I will be engaging in the systematic thematic analysis of the material using the specific angle of my research question guided by the previously described causal stories framework, and then go further to apply that analysis in the form of emergent themes (as causal stories), to the real-world outcomes to uncover any meaningful findings (Schreier, 2012:1-3). Using a coding frame (Table 4) adapted using the previously described causal stories to guide my thematic coding, I will thus analyze the documents looking for the ways in which causal relationships, narrative structures, chronological order, language, and implicit assumptions, are all explicitly or implicitly laid out in the text, and the ways in which they interconnect to build the story being told by the political actor in question, in this case, Governors Kay Ivey and Kim Reynolds. The material will first be read to gain a basic

understanding of what it contains, and relevant material will be pulled and assigned a code based on the coding frame.

The process of building the coding frame, and in fact compiling the text corpus to be analyzed in this thesis, was done as a process rather than as a task. Cyclical corpus building is an iterative approach to selecting and analyzing texts in which the steps of selecting and analyzing texts are done both in tandem, and done repeatedly (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:29). In particular, this process is carried out while paying special attention to the overall “relevance, homogeneity, [and] synchronicity” of the texts being analyzed (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:31). In terms of relevance, the text corpus must be material of one particular thematic focus, which in the context of this thesis means public communications from the governors during the selected timeframe of the COVID pandemic (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:31). Homogeneity refers to the type of material being analyzed, which in this case is only textual; to that end, even videos of press conferences were analyzed through text by focusing solely on the transcripts and not any other aspect of those speeches (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:31). Synchronicity refers to a text corpus being gathered within a “single cycle”, which while it can be of varied lengths depending on the subject, in this case refers to the initial months of the pandemic hitting the United States as a whole (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:31-32).

This previously described process was followed to build the text corpus and eventually, the coding frame depicted in Table 4. The process started with a pilot project done by the author on the same topic as this thesis. In the pilot project, an initial 20 texts from March and April were sampled, and of the selections, 3 texts were more thoroughly analyzed per governor to demonstrate the function of the framework. This was done through the frame of the causal story types from Stone (1989) but without specific indicators having been formulated for each causal story type. As the theoretical expectations were developed, the indicators of each theme and causal story type emerged and were clarified through iterations of analysis. Based on this project, and still heavily incorporating Stone’s (1989) causal stories framework, the initial themes associated with each causal story type were identified within the analyzed texts and used to both expand on the text corpus and to do further rounds of coding of the texts. Eventually, a comprehensive screening of every document on each governor's website was performed, resulting in 202 separately analyzed samples pulled from the text corpus. Finally, example quotes

were pulled from the text corpus by the author which contained easily identifiable examples of the indicators, themes, and causal story types for which they were coded in the analysis, illustrating the culmination of the iterative analytical process; the coding frame informed the analysis which informed the final development of the coding frame.

Table 4. Causal Stories Coding Frame

Causal Story Type	Themes	Indicators	Example quote
Mechanical	Unguided actions with intended consequences, indirect human influence	Mentions of systemic issues or processes that are described as having a predetermined or automatic nature, references to non-human intervening factors in human systems, “god”, “prayer”, “prevent the spread”	“And in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, I can think of no better time to pray for our country, our state, and for one another. I certainly believe that prayer changes things. As your governor, I ask you to join me in praying for our state.” (07.05.2020: Gov. Ivey Delivers National Day of Prayer Message)
Accidental	Unguided actions with unintended consequences, no human influence	Events that are framed as beyond human control or as unexpected occurrences, “disaster”, “pandemic”, “unavoidable”, “risk”, “vulnerable”	“... the number of cases that have now tested positive in Alabama just during the past few days is a good reminder that this disease is having a profound effect on the entire world. No one is immune from its impact...” (20.03.2020: Gov. Ivey Encourages Alabamians Amid Coronavirus Pandemic)

Intentional	Purposeful actions with intended consequences, direct human action	Deliberate actions or policies that are described as intended to produce specific outcomes, “measures”, “decisions”, “purpose”, “caution”, “precaution”, “mitigate”, “effort”, “work”	“These measures taken by the Alabama Department of Public Health are out of an abundance of caution in order to contain the area where the most cases of the COVID-19 are present.” (17.03.2020: Governor Ivey Issues Statement on Updated Public Health Precautionary Guidelines)
Inadvertent	Purposeful actions with unintended consequences, indirect human action	Mentions of unintended consequences resulting from deliberate actions, “mistake”, “accident”, “try”, “attempt”, “failed”	“And while your leaders are called on to make important decisions dealing with a virus that we didn't even know existed three months ago, we're going to make some mistakes along the way. My hope and prayer is that we will get it right more than we will get it wrong.” (20.03.2020: Gov. Ivey Encourages Alabamians Amid Coronavirus Pandemic)

Source: developed by the author based on Stone (1989)

As a demonstration of how causal stories can work in my analysis of political discourse, in a statement made on March 3rd, 2020, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey states that “Alabamians are smart and savvy, and I know they will continue taking appropriate precautions to prevent the spread to themselves or others.”. In this single sentence, multiple aspects of causal stories are at play. In one view, the spread of a virus would be an unguided, unintentional, accidental cause outside the purview of human control (Table 1, top right). But Kay Ivey brings the spread back into the domain of human control by invoking the intelligence of humans and their ability to follow specific actions to prevent the spread - thus illuminating the story as intended and purposeful in the control of humans. Moving forward, I will group subsections of each document

under the four pillars of causal stories – mechanical, accidental, intentional, and inadvertent causes – as outlined previously in this paper and provide an overview of the stories and meanings behind it that can be ascertained based on the prevalence of each grouping in a particular governor’s political discourse.

In the selected documents, arguments used to establish a relationship between the pandemic and the chosen response most often took the form of a problem-solution pattern, starting with a description of the issues being faced. Past actions are taken and followed up with the proposed or decided steps to be taken to solve the problem or respond to the issues at hand. Throughout the texts, the analysis identifies recurrent and concurrent stories that arise and along whose lines the study can be focused.

3.6. Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations that constrain its scope and findings. While the study seeks to explore theoretically expected links between the political discourse analyzed and the policy outcomes of the respective states, the limited scope of the study leaves room for more work to be done to reinforce any linkages that may be identified. The emphasis of this work is on testing a particular methodological framework of analysis, which can be explored and tested more thoroughly in future research. The findings may not be conclusive, but they will test whether correlative results are found.

Other limitations come from this research's Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), which was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The study's scope is limited to two executives within the same country and even political party due to time and resource restraints, and based on the chosen framework and methodology, all are within a limited timeframe. This is not out of line with the aim of the research, but similarly to limitations in exploring causal linkages, it does lead to limited generalizability of the findings.

With this design comes also the problem of "many variables, small number of cases" (Lijphart, 1971:685; Anckar, 2008:390). MSSD requires that similar cases are picked, but there will always be other criteria that could be used that were not considered in the initial design. This does not

mean that the information in the design is wrong or even misleading, only that there could be, based on other inputs, different cases selected to test the relationship between causal story types and policy outcomes. Further, relationships between variables different from the focus of this research could be tested with a similar design. This does not change the process for the rest of the study.

Chapter 4. Findings and analysis

The analysis is divided into two main sections. The first reports the findings on Alabama and the second one on Iowa. Within the main sections, there are subsections based on the causal stories framework. The intentional and accidental causal stories, which were expected to be most prevalent will be reported first. The intentional causal story focuses on arguments related to preparedness and mitigation, but also on who is the human agent whose actions lead to the consequences in the story that is told - the individual, the community or the governing elite, and to what extent. Thereafter, the focus on the accidental causal story is explored. The findings demonstrate an unexpected scarcity of this line of thought, but is still present and has implications for the way information is presented by the speakers. This entails both the content and the form of the rhetoric, such as passive forms or using non-human entities as the actors, such as “COVID-19” itself. Thereafter the inadvertent and mechanical causal stories are discussed in cases where they were present. In the case of inadvertent stories, that includes policies that have not delivered the expected consequences. Regarding mechanical stories, there was an unexpected focus on religion, more specifically prayer, which had characteristics of a mechanical causal story.

4.1. Alabama

In the analysis of Governor Ivey’s discourse, all four causal stories could be seen to an extent, but the intentional causal story clearly had the most important place in her discourse. Within that, the dominating themes were preparedness and mitigation on the part of the government, with the goal of guaranteeing safety. It was also notable that she frequently expressed her belief in individual and community action on the part of the public, thus constructing a positive and hopeful narrative of the public with the assumed purpose of inspiring compliance. Other causal stories were less prevalent, most surprisingly the accidental causal story, meaning that the un-human aspects of the pandemic were not emphasized excessively and the focus was more constructive than blame-shifting to natural forces could have been. Regarding the mechanical causal story, the most notable aspect was the focus on religion and prayer. The inadvertent causal story was also present to an extent, mostly where the governor discussed previous measures with hindsight.

4.1.1. Intentional: preparedness, mitigation, individual action and community action

Governor Ivey's speeches displayed the intentional causal story to the greatest extent of the four primary causal story types. The main themes of the intentional causal story were preparedness, mitigation, individual action and community action.

Preparedness emerged as a key theme in the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 response, supported by the expertise and resilience of the financial sector. Early on, the emphasis on preparedness was highlighted with statements such as, "While there are no known cases in Alabama, I have gathered the experts in an effort to be as prepared as possible should the Coronavirus affect Alabama" (Ivey, 06.03.2020 A). While some claims were vague, they aimed to reassure, as seen in: "As a state, we have taken precautionary measures... the safety and health of Alabamians is paramount" (Ivey, 13.03.2020 D). In a continued effort to convey a reassuring message to the public, Governor Ivey expressed confidence in the financial sector's resilience, stating, "I have significant confidence in the underlying health of our financial services industry to weather the economic storms..." (Ivey, 17.03.2020 F). She emphasized planning, noting the importance of continued and uninterrupted access to financial services (Ivey, 17.03.2020 G). As the situation evolved, she maintained that there was no immediate need for formal assistance while highlighting preparedness measures for potential future needs (Ivey, 20.03.2020 L). In that same vein, she assured citizens that "our National Guard stands ready to be part of this team effort to combat this invisible enemy" (Ivey, 20.03.2020 M), projecting an image of a proactive government ready to respond to the crisis with whatever resources it could spare, while holding back enough both in rhetoric and response to not create a sense of panic.

The themes of preparedness and mitigation are central to Governor Ivey's response to the COVID-19 crisis, with a strong emphasis on safety and the proactive deployment of resources. Ivey highlights the state's role in strengthening efforts to support healthcare, schools, and citizens, stating, "The state of emergency will strengthen our efforts and plans already in place" (Ivey, 13.03.2020 B). This reflects a communicated commitment to manage not only the health crisis but also its broader impacts, such as economic fallout and increased healthcare needs. As the pandemic unfolded, Ivey shifted her focus from preparedness to the real-time effects of the crisis. In April, she introduced a resource aimed at providing accurate information about COVID-19 to help Alabamians make informed decisions: "My priority as your governor is

making sure that every Alabamian has access to accurate, up-to-date information about COVID-19” (Ivey, 08.04.2020 B). She underscored the importance of knowledge, stating, “We are living in uncertain times, but knowledge is power” (Ivey, 08.04.2020 C). By May, Ivey's speeches focused less on new preparations and reiterated her previous emergency proclamations, reinforcing that initial measures were intended to prevent the virus's spread and mitigate its consequences (Ivey, 08.05.2020 H).

Governor Ivey continually emphasized the importance of mitigation in her speeches regarding COVID-19, stating, “The safety of Alabamians is paramount, and we will do everything we can to limit exposure to this illness” (Ivey, 06.03.2020 B). In this and other examples, she actively called for measures to prevent infections, particularly highlighting the role of mitigation measures in protecting vulnerable groups: “Folks, let's take a common-sense approach...[and] use common sense to watch out for ourselves and for others” (Ivey, 13.03.2020 C). Ivey repeatedly reinforced that safety must be prioritized, declaring, “As a state, we have taken precautionary measures...the safety and health of Alabamians is paramount” (Ivey, 13.03.2020 D). She expressed confidence in Alabamians' ability to take the situation seriously, urging them to maintain a calm and sensible approach to prevent the virus's spread, hammering in this point even in the early stages of the pandemic, before cases became widespread in the state (Ivey, 13.03.2020 E). The safety measures for mitigating COVID-19 often target specific locales or groups. For instance, the Alabama Department of Public Health took measures "out of an abundance of caution" to contain areas with the highest case counts (Ivey, 17.03.2020 A). However, even with adherence to recommendations, larger gatherings present challenges, so social distancing and limiting public gatherings to under 25 individuals were strongly recommended, highlighting the risks of events like election day as potential “hotbeds” for virus spread (Ivey, 18.03.2020 A).

Despite the significance of changing an election date in a democratic context, Governor Ivey decided to do just that. To justify this decision to the public, prioritizing safety is framed as crucial: “The safety and wellbeing of Alabamians is paramount as we mitigate the virus's spread” (Ivey, 23.03.2020 B). Ivey's rhetoric urges people to adopt health recommendations from herself and other government officials, stating that these adjustments can be “life-saving” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 C). This emphasizes the importance of individual decision-making in responding to

the crisis. While the government can make plans, set systems in place, and take all the measures that Ivey has thus far introduced, there is a prevailing idea that the final line of defense is the people themselves. Governor Ivey goes on to acknowledge the public's efforts: "I am pleased that many citizens are self-regulating and practicing social distancing" (Ivey, 19.03.2020 B), reinforcing the goal of flattening the curve through self-regulation. Throughout March, Ivey consistently stressed that her regulations aimed to minimize the pandemic's impact: "The decision to place regulations upon Alabamians living in Jefferson County and its surrounding counties was an effort to contain the area in which the virus has been prevalent in our state." (Ivey, 19.03.2020 A). All in all, narratives of individual action to protect oneself and others comprised a large portion of the rhetoric that Ivey presented to the public in the first weeks of the pandemic reaching Alabama. Tactics such as self-isolation, social distancing, and others were encouraged more than once as salient decisions that people could make to respond appropriately in the face of the pandemic.

As the pandemic progressed into April and May, the focus shifted from strict regulations to effective mitigation strategies. Governor Ivey emphasized the importance of providing Alabamians with accurate and current information about COVID-19, stating, "My priority as your governor is making sure that every Alabamian has access to accurate, up-to-date information about COVID-19 so that you can make decisions that will keep you and your family safe." This initiative included a partnership with the private sector to create a special COVID-19 search engine, complementing the official resource site, "All Together Alabama" (Ivey, 08.04.2020 B). The governor reinforced the idea that knowledge is crucial, remarking, "We are living in uncertain times, but knowledge is power. The more we know about this virus, the better equipped we are to defeat it together" (Ivey, 08.04.2020 C). Alongside disseminating knowledge, she underscored the importance of public safety, stating, "The health, safety and well-being of all Alabamians is paramount during this evolving health pandemic" (Ivey, 13.04.2020). Governor Ivey also acknowledged the role of businesses in mitigating the virus, highlighting grocery stores' safety measures, including plexiglass shields and frequent cleanings. She reiterated that regulations were designed to control the spread of COVID-19 and emphasized their significance for Alabama's well-being (Ivey, 13.05.2020 B). This consistent messaging throughout April and

May reflects a commitment to equipping individuals and businesses with the tools needed to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The theme of individual action was emphasized in press releases from March to May, focusing on the necessity of personal responsibility during the pandemic. Governor Ivey addressed Alabamians, expressing confidence in their ability to make informed decisions to prevent the virus's spread (Ivey, 13.03.2020 E). She urged residents to follow regulations, stating: "I ask that Alabamians who live in these counties adhere to these regulations" (Ivey, 17.03.2020 C). Ivey highlighted the importance of self-regulation, encouraging citizens to practice social distancing and make choices that prioritize safety. She remarked, "Choosing to be safe rather than sorry is always the smart move" (Ivey, 17.03.2020 D), affirming that voluntary compliance contributes significantly to flattening the curve. Ivey also recognized and praised those engaging in responsible behavior, noting, "While I am pleased that many of our citizens are self-regulating and are practicing social distancing, we want to ensure that Alabama is doing our part to flatten the curve" (Ivey, 19.03.2020 C). Ultimately, she expressed gratitude to the people of Alabama for their patience and commitment to taking care of themselves and each other during the pandemic, reinforcing a community-oriented approach to health and safety (Ivey, 19.03.2020 C).

The praise did not last forever as the virus reached the state and eventually started to spread more rapidly. Governor Ivey cites her State Health Officer to remind her constituents that each person is responsible for maintaining a 6-foot distance: "... we should practice social distancing and refrain from public gatherings of more than 25 individuals. Maintaining a 6-foot distance between one another is paramount," (Ivey, 18.03.2020 A) and goes on to directly ask for people to continue respecting the guidelines. The governor continues reminding her constituents in consecutive days of press releases and public statements of the temporariness of the measures, calling them "temporary adjustments" (Ivey, 20.03.2020 C) and mentioning that "We will resume our daily lives in the near future once we defeat this illness," (Ivey, 20.03.2020 D). Moving into April, the pleas to constituents continue along the same lines (Ivey, 01.04.2020). They are matched with an acknowledgment that these measures, and the pandemic, are very difficult and taxing on every single person: "We know we need to abide by these social distancing guidelines for the benefit of us all, but it has made many people feel isolated and lonely." (Ivey, 10.04.2020)

which is important as it is the only mention of isolation and loneliness that appears in the selected texts - a departure from the usual upbeat attitude.

The community action theme refers to the invocation of communally/societally taken actions as necessary or important for responding appropriately to the pandemic. It is often found alongside individual action themes or elements, but the difference is found typically in the call to interact with others, for example: “I ask that you practice encouraging texts or calling to express your concern for one another. As you connect to one another on social media, use good judgment and promote positive messaging rather than the alternative” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 L). It can be seen here that what is being called for is community-wide engagement for the purpose of uplifting the entire community, and not simple individual action for the sake of the individual taking action, such as social distancing, etc. A repeated theme throughout many of the speeches which could refer to community action is to take care of oneself and others, such as in this quote: “Don't hesitate to let a friend, neighbor, or someone from church or work help you get the groceries, medicine, and supplies you need,” (Ivey, 30.03.2020 B) but there are more specific instances of community action that are discussed throughout the press releases.

Appeals to non-human entities such as businesses are a common example of community action themes, such as when the governor speaks directly about businesses' roles in upholding the guidelines to fight against COVID-19: “In order to keep Alabama going, we must keep Alabama businesses going to the best of our abilities... however, employers should take all necessary steps to meet these standards for employees and customers” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 H). Here, we can see that according to the narrative brought forth in the governor's rhetoric, businesses that interact with many members of the community have an important role to play in daily lives to reduce the risk of infections. Further, those industries that create necessary supplies for people to get by and reduce infections are framed as a centerpiece in the fight against COVID-19 as they are the main suppliers of things such as personal protective equipment required by everyone (Ivey, 20.03.2020 I). Continuing in the frame of business in March, Governor Ivey also speaks of businesses not only in reference to helping the community get through the pandemic but also as entities capable of being harmed by the pandemic, albeit in economic terms: “This was a team effort that will help many small business owners in Alabama make it through this crisis and move forward to thrive once again,” (Ivey, 21.03.2020). This principle applies especially to small businesses,

which are often discussed as being backbones and irretractibly important aspects of local communities. The specific topic of businesses is the sole topic that stretched from March into April and May as well in the press releases, especially in terms of “protecting customers and employees by implementing safety features” (Ivey, 10.05.2020 C; Ivey, 28.04.2020 A) which shows that when discussing business, it is the community level, while discussing individual action tended to focus more on humans apart from their roles in broader organizations.

Another repeatedly available strain of speech within the press releases relating to community action comes in the form of “we” when discussing the government from Governor Ivey’s perspective, such as: “The safety and wellbeing of Alabamians is the paramount priority as we do everything within our power to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus” (Ivey, 23.03.2020 A). The “we” there and in many other places refers to the organization, the non-human entity of the government, much in the same way as business was discussed throughout all three months of analysis. The only difference is the use of inclusive language instead of the third-person, as the speaker under question included herself within the organization of the government.

4.1.2. Accidental: unexpected scarcity

The accidental causal story, primarily indicated by topics framed outside of human intervention or action, tended to focus on topics such as COVID-19’s effects or dangers, facts or inevitabilities about the world, or unavoidable risks and consequences. These occurred far less often in the analyzed texts than did the intentional causal story, and had less variety as well, with many specific phrases or topics being repeated.

Starting in March, the pandemic itself was framed in terms outside of human intervention before the first case reached the state of Alabama: “The appearance of COVID-19 in the State indicates the potential of widespread exposure to an infectious agent that poses significant risk of substantial harm to a large number of people” (Ivey, 13.03.2020 F) immediately framing the virus as potentially devastating and widespread. This leads very well to the discussion of a reaction from the public: “it’s easy to let all of this strike a note of fear and create a sense of panic.” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 A) which would mean essentially that rational action would no longer be taken, and people would start to act erratically and perhaps even add to the harm. After the initial infections, the pandemic was still discussed in terms of being outside of human control or

influence: “this disease is having a profound effect on the entire world. No one is immune from its impact...” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 B) where the pandemic is seen and broadcasted as being unavoidable, dangerous, impactful, and imminent. Further, the reaction to the virus is also seen as not entirely in control: “we’re going to make some mistakes along the way. My hope and prayer is that we will get it right more than we will get it wrong.” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 E) the novelty of the pandemic and the sheer amount of unknown variables make any sort of true human influence over the unfolding of the pandemic questionable, perhaps.

A significant portion of the rest of the analyzed texts referred back to the original claims putting the pandemic at least partially outside the realm of human influence. There is a repetition throughout April and May of: “the appearance of COVID-19 in the State poses the potential of widespread exposure to an infectious agent that poses significant risk of substantial harm to a large number of people” (Ivey, 03.04.2020 A; Ivey, 06.04.2020 A; Ivey, 08.05.2020 D; Ivey, 15.05.2020 A; Ivey, 21.05.2020 A). Further along those same lines is the repeated notion that: “the State Board of Health has designated COVID-19 to be a disease of epidemic potential, a threat to the health and welfare of the public, or otherwise of public health importance” (Ivey, 03.04.2020 B; Ivey, 28.04.2020; Ivey, 08.05.2020 E; Ivey, 15.05.2020 B; Ivey, 21.05.2020 B) which is significant in that even an official governmental body beyond the governor who makes most of the big decisions talks about the potential damage and harm that the pandemic will cause. Not unimportant in the context of this discussion is the somewhat limited, but still present, mention of potential lethality for large numbers of people by the pandemic. The discussion of lethality underscored the importance of the rhetoric around COVID-19, with the governor discussing not only the virality of the pandemic and the total number of people affected but also the fact that the disease would potentially cause the widespread death of people in Alabama (Ivey, 08.05.2020 F).

4.1.3. Inadvertent: admitting to shortcomings

The inadvertent causal story in the context of the pandemic refers typically to a sense of negligence or the unforeseen extent of the problem. In essence, the system in place was either not good enough in itself in responding to the pandemic or was not followed closely enough to be effective. It is characterized most strongly as uncertainty or a general lack of knowledge about

the crisis and the best responses to it. Human action is centered in this story, but it is framed typically in a bundle with consequences unwanted based on the actions themselves.

Early on in the lifespan of the pandemic, Ivey recognizes the shortcomings of the regulations set in place at first: “Despite our best efforts, the threat of the COVID-19 virus continues to spread and, unfortunately, we have not yet reached peak impact.” (Ivey, 19.03.2020 A). The regulations quickly proved insufficient for meeting the explicit purposes set out, in this case preventing further spread, and the situation was recognized as likely to become even worse (Ivey, 19.03.2020 A). In this sense, the early efforts can be seen as insufficiently careful, not taking into account the conditions of the pandemic. Along those lines of clarifying the issue, Ivey says publicly the very next day “And while your leaders are called on to make important decisions dealing with a virus that we didn't even know existed three months ago, we're going to make some mistakes along the way. My hope and prayer is that we will get it right more than we will get it wrong.” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 E). She directly calls out here something akin to carelessness or neglect - insufficient knowledge or an insufficiently executed plan is somewhat inevitable, but the effort will always be to move towards a program that works, an intentional plan of action.

Implicit in Ivey's speech is an attempt as well to explain the reasons for the inadvertent causal stories - it could be said that the “virus that we didn't even know existed three months ago” is an intervening condition, and an act of nature, that in conjunction have lead to a breakdown in the correct functioning of government, at least in dealing with this particular crisis. The lack of knowledge leads to neglect, even if not on purpose. This thread of thought continues: “we are making decisions based on the best information we have in the moment...decisions will need to be evaluated and amended.” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 G) acknowledging that the lack of information will lead to unintended consequences. Even though every thought and action is supposed to be building a working system to intentionally respond to the needs of the pandemic, the nature of the crisis is itself an intervening condition stopping Ivey and the government at large from always making good decisions and avoiding the worst side effects. Ivey employs this very knowledge about the incomplete picture of the crisis to implore certain behavior, saying “these are uncertain times for sure, so now and for the foreseeable future, please, please consider staying safe at home” (Ivey, 30.03.2020 A). Interestingly, earlier in the month she had already

made a similar imploration to her constituents, “staying at home...means avoiding interacting with others as much as possible. Everyone, at every age, is vulnerable... even if you aren't thinking about yourself.” (Ivey, 30.03.2020 C), indicating that there is a recognition that not everyone is already aware of the unintended consequences of their actions as individuals, on the greater society of the state. Ivey’s rhetoric is a direct recognition and repudiation of the neglect and carelessness that people can display, in response to a breakdown of the system of regulations she has tried to put in place, mainly that of the stay-at-home order.

4.1.4. Mechanical: focus on religion

One other aspect of themes of unguidedness in the rhetoric of the press releases is the invocation of the Christian god and the Christian religion. This falls under the unguided theme even when there is a direct appeal to individuals, as god can be seen here as a type of intervening agent in the narrative, regardless of any impact prayer may or may not have on events. Governor Ivey calls on people to pray: “And speaking of prayer, as a personal faith, I certainly believe in the power of prayer. I urge the good people of this great state to join me in praying for one another.” (Ivey, 20.03.2020 F) citing it as a helpful thing to do. Later, Ivey sets up a campaign to put out ribbons in public to show support for frontline workers, and invokes the bible: “These ribbons will serve as a reminder to the people of our state that we are lifting each other in prayer, and that just like after the great flood in Genesis, we are mindful of the hope and promise of God during this pandemic,” (Ivey, 07.04.2020 A) here we can see that the reminder of past catastrophe and god’s response is supposed to provide hope.

Ivey cites scripture as well: “Scripture reminds us [...] Jesus' death on the cross is the promise that Christ will make all things new, and he can work all things for his good,” (Ivey, 10.04.2020 B) in which we can see that regardless of human action, there is the notion that the Christian god is in control and can influence what will happen in terms of the pandemic. In fact, everything, including the pandemic and all of humanity's decisions regarding how to handle the pandemic, could be seen in the frame of being part of god’s plan. Christianity is also spoken about as a connecting tissue for Alabama and society broadly: “As you join others in faith this Sunday through your electronic device, let us give thanks to the Lord for his blessings on our lives and remember each other in our prayers. Remember, we'll get through this together, even if we are

standing six feet apart. May God continue to bless you and the great state of Alabama,” (Ivey, 10.04.2020 D) indicating that social distancing, staying at home, and other precautions do not stop society from being cohesive through religious practice.

4.1.5. Coinciding causal stories: from unguided to purposeful and vice versa

Present throughout all of the press releases were paragraphs containing multiple themes that spanned multiple categories of causal stories, going both from unguided to purposeful, and purposeful to unguided. A lot can be learned from these examples both about the part humanity is thought to play, and the part the virus is thought to play, as they are contrasted right next to each other.

To start, unguided to purposeful was most prevalent in March. Governor Ivey describes the vulnerability of certain populations: “Alabamians living in Jefferson County and its surrounding counties are currently the most vulnerable to contracting the Coronavirus.” (Ivey, 17.03.2020 B) and immediately follows it up with a call to action: “I ask that Alabamians who live in these counties adhere to these regulations and would urge the rest of our state to do so as well, in order to mitigate the impact of the virus.” (Ivey, 17.03.2020 C) from one sentence to the next. In this way, the virus itself is a force of its own, not easily controlled or avoided entirely by human intervention, but individuals can take certain actions to try to lessen the danger to themselves and those immediately surrounding themselves. Next, Governor Ivey invokes an idiomatic phrase: “We should not take precautionary measures for granted, but I encourage everyone to remember the old adage ‘this too shall pass.’” (Ivey, 17.03.2020 E) signifying that no matter what anyone does, the situation will end either way. She brings the narrative back into the realm of human control, saying: “Adhering to smart protocol and practicing a little patience will pull us through this.” (Ivey, 17.03.2020 E) which firmly plants human action as being able to help the situation “pass”.

A similar situation arises when Governor Ivey admits that COVID-19 continues to spread even with regulations in place: “Despite our best efforts, the threat of the COVID-19 virus continues to spread and, unfortunately, we have not yet reached peak impact.” (Ivey, 19.03.2020 A) and in a way, using that narrative as argumentation for the need of regulations, saying that although the

decisions aren't always easy, which tacitly acknowledges or predicts a negative response, this particular policy decision was made with a very specific goal of containment of the virus in mind before it can spread to multiple counties and infect the entire state (Ivey, 19.03.2020 A). as the spread of COVID-19 could be seen as needing to be met with even more regulations to mitigate harm. In a softer message, both in terms of purposeful and unguided stories, Governor Ivey describes the opening month of the pandemic as uncertain following it up with another plea for action, putting the onus back on the residents of Alabama to take action to prevent further spread of the virus and prevent further uncertainty (Ivey, 30.03.2020 A).

Going the other way around in March, from purposeful to unguided, was only detected a single time. Governor Ivey clarified a pre-existing regulation with a message meant to reinforce the need to follow government regulations as a means to mitigate the pandemic, in this case through social distancing and avoiding unnecessary interactions with those outside one's household as it seems that her constituents were not all following the recommendations she had put in place (Ivey, 30.03.2020 C). To try to remedy it, she brought back the idea of vulnerability, stipulating the vulnerability of the entire population, regardless of age or other demographics, and people should worry about both themselves and their loved ones (Ivey, 30.03.2020 C). This serves as a reminder to her constituents that the pandemic was not entirely under human control, and that only by being careful and following recommendations can the damage be mitigated and the vulnerable members of the population kept safe.

As the effects of COVID-19 were already visible in March, it's no surprise that some negative news would come in April as well. Governor Ivey shares that vulnerable populations are still falling ill with COVID-19 even while she continues to advocate for the people to take action and to prioritize safety as the regulations could be seen as more vital than ever now that some worst-case scenarios of vulnerable people falling ill were becoming reality, all while acknowledging that the policies can make daily life less pleasant (Ivey, 10.04.2020 A; Ivey, 10.04.2020 B). In an effort to boost morale, Governor Ivey then shares some good news while continuing to narrativize the pandemic. She announces that as a side-effect of people successfully following regulations, fewer miles are being driven, and thus automobile insurers are paying back some of the savings from fewer car crashes with Alabamians showing that even

if self-regulating hasn't been able to completely avert the COVID-19 crisis, at least some good has come of people following the safety recommendations (Ivey, 24.04.2020). Providing more hope, Ivey explains that economic development continues in a purposeful manner (Ivey, 30.04.2020 A) contextualizing it within the pandemic as they must first get through all of the unavoidable results of the pandemic before any potential economic recovery can be achieved: "providing a potential spark for economic revival once the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic ease" (Ivey, 30.04.2020 A).

4.2. Iowa

In the case of Governor Reynolds's discourse, only intentional and accidental causal stories were identified. The intentional causal story played the main role here as well, however, the main focus appeared to be on personal action, with the purpose of mitigation. Community action and preparedness were less pronounced, the intentionality was shifted more towards the public as individuals, which was also seen in the lack of concrete measures being communicated. The accidental causal story was once again not as prevalent as expected, but it was still present, most visibly in the use of passive voice and the lack of detail that the information was often passed on with. In many cases, the speaker presents herself seemingly at a distance from the developments and the solutions related to the crisis.

4.2.1. Intentional: mitigation and overwhelming focus on personal action

Governor Reynolds's speeches were coded along the same themes as Governor Ivey's, so I will start by discussing the themes of preparedness, mitigation, individual action and community action under the purposeful causal story umbrella.

Starting with preparedness, the beginning of March saw Governor Reynolds announcing the assembly of a response force, titled the State Emergency Operations Center, as a first reaction against the threat of the looming pandemic showing the start of preparing to respond to the pandemic (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 A). Still in the line of preparedness partial measures, Governor Reynolds singles out specific groups to prioritize in terms of safety: "the health and safety of our students, teachers, and faculty is a top priority," (Reynolds, 12.03.2020 C) but does not go so far as to make any enforceable measures or recommendations, as at this time they are still being

deliberated. There are certainly steps being taken for preparedness, but actual measures are slow in coming. Governor Reynolds signed an order granting general authorization for any relevant government body to put into action any plans they have to respond to COVID-19:

Gov. Reynolds today signed a Proclamation of Disaster Emergency, activating the disaster response and recovery aspects of the Iowa Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management's Iowa Emergency Response Plan. The proclamation authorizes state agencies to utilize resources including personnel, equipment and facilities to perform activities necessary to prevent, contain and mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 virus. (Reynolds, 09.03.2020 A)

She further acknowledged that the beginning of the pandemic before cases became widespread was a critical time and that all people should be prepared to take necessary steps and plan ahead and keep up to date so they'll know the best ways to act. She advocates for people to know the role they should play, to practice preventative measures, and to remain vigilant for themselves and their families (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 I). Preparedness rhetoric all but disappeared after March as the focus shifted toward mitigation and dealing with consequences that were actively occurring.

Moving on to the theme of mitigation for Reynolds, it should be said that this theme was perhaps the most commonly occurring theme among the texts analyzed for this governor. One notable example of the prevalence of this theme was a single message reiterated over half a dozen times word for word: "Iowans can help prevent the spread of illness by following simple daily precautions including washing hands frequently, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill." (Reynolds, 10.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 10.03.2020 B; Reynolds, 11.03.2020 B; Reynolds, 12.03.2020 C; Reynolds, 13.03.2020 B; Reynolds, 15.03.2020 E), demonstrating that every single Iowan should carry out a very important mitigation technique during the pandemic - and it is a simple, preexisting measure used to combat many common illnesses. Those exact mitigation measures were reiterated alongside the first cases that appeared in Iowa itself (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 C), and further, it was emphasized in the beginning that these measures alone should be enough to stop the spread of COVID-19, and specifically said that "No additional or special precautions are recommended" (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 E). She additionally,

without creating any specific regulations or laws to follow, recommended many mitigation techniques and measures and cited other guidance to follow to mitigate COVID-19, such as those with underlying conditions staying home, working remotely whenever possible, and so on (Reynolds, 15.03.2020 C). However, these were generally only vague recommendations for Iowans to keep in mind, not strict policy decisions.

Reynolds continues to reinforce the overall message that good practices and decision-making are paramount: “I want to continue to assure you that the actions taken today are critical in our ability to reduce the risk to Iowans and to slow the spread of the virus.” (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 D), and that taking action now and not waiting will indeed slow the spread of the virus, even if it cannot stop the virus. She draws that message of action from the governmental level down to the individual level: “We all have a role to play and right now is when our actions matter the most... please be vigilant about your health... we will get through this together.” (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 I) demonstrating that the narrativization of the pandemic focuses strongly on the individual level for mitigation efforts. There is also a small mention of mitigating the economic impacts of the virus, as well as of the responses to the pandemic that may have caused damage, showing that mitigation efforts are not focused only in medical terms but in economic terms as well (Reynolds, 21.03.2020 C).

Moving forward to April, Governor Reynolds authorizes law enforcement action to help mitigate COVID-19 (Reynolds, 06.04.2020), spreading the sphere of mitigation influence from individual and government actions. Concrete mitigation efforts are introduced, in this case with the ushering in of school closures for the rest of the school year, including sporting events, which by this point meant a couple of months, which covers canceling physical schooling and sports activities, moving anything online that can be done online to support mitigation efforts (Reynolds, 07.05.2020). In support of school cancellations, Reynolds speaks about prioritizing health and safety and how these steps will help prepare for a return to school in the fall, presumably after the virus has already been beaten (Reynolds, 08.05.2020 A). In May, Reynolds reiterates multiple times the need for limiting some activities to mitigate infections for vulnerable people in particular, citing that elderly folk and those with preexisting conditions should self-regulate and

avoid even some events that were not expressly prohibited for the population at large (Reynolds, 13.05.2020 A; Reynolds, 20.05.2020 A).

The theme of individual action shares a lot of space with the theme of mitigation in the case of Iowa, owing in large part to the focus on individual Iowans being in charge of mitigation measures for themselves. For example, the oft-repeated line: “Iowans can help prevent the spread of illness by following simple daily precautions including washing hands frequently, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill” (Reynolds, 10.03.2020 A) along with reminders that frequent washing of hands, taking sick days at home, and using tissues to cover coughs and sneezes (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 C) and emphasizing again that these precautions would be enough for most people, all speak to the prevalence of individual action being central in Reynold’s communications about dealing with COVID-19 (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 E). Reynolds also appeals directly to vulnerable populations, putting the onus on them to take whatever measures they need for their health and safety, especially if they are above the age of 60 or have some other health risk (Reynolds, 15.03.2020 C). This goes along with similar messaging to all Iowans urging them to at least consider following recommendations and guidelines to mitigate the harm of COVID-19, whether through staying home when sick or even working remotely if at all possible (Reynolds, 15.03.2020 C). The call to action for individual Iowans continues throughout the middle of March, with the governor stressing the role every Iowan can play, the need to self-regulate to protect yourself and others, and the need to stay calm and informed, centering individuals in the fight against the pandemic (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 B; Reynolds, 18.03.2020 B; Reynolds, 18.03.2020 C). This centering continues during the organized “15 days to slow the spread” plan from the Trump administration during this time:

I'm asking Iowans to take a lead role in the President's 15 days to slow the spread plan. Our efforts right now will make a difference here at home and across the United States. If you feel sick, stay home. Don't go to work. Call your doctor if you're sick. Keep them at home and call your doctor if someone in your household has tested positive for coronavirus. Keep the entire household home and call your doctor. (Reynolds, 18.03.2020 B)

This did not introduce new measures but did more strongly implore Iowans to follow the guidelines in a bid to stop the pandemic in its tracks. This was coupled with more rhetoric about vulnerable populations, including the elderly and those with underlying conditions, to stay home whenever possible unless they are an essential worker, such as in healthcare (Reynolds, 18.03.2020 C). Reynolds further addresses Iowans who have recently traveled, identifying them as a population with a higher risk of having contracted the disease: “Iowans who have traveled recently for business or spring break vacations... should strongly consider self-isolating for 14 days” (Reynolds, 21.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 22.03.2020 A). She argues repeatedly over the course of several press releases in this vein that self-isolation is important for making sure a spike in infections doesn’t overwhelm the state: “Iowa has implemented many provisions to emphasize social distancing, and self-isolation after travel is another measure we can take to slow the spread of the virus and avoid quickly overburdening our healthcare system” (Reynolds, 21.03.2020 B; Reynolds, 22.03.2020 B).

In April, Reynolds asked Iowans to complete individual health assessments to help the state respond better to the pandemic and ensure that each individual stays informed: “...starting today I am encouraging Iowans to go to testIowa.com to complete their own health assessment... This type of information will help Iowans assess eligibility for testing and further inform the state’s response to COVID-19” (Reynolds, 21.04.2020 A). In May, some of the original messaging from March is once again repeated in two separate press releases regarding vulnerable people and preexisting conditions, mainly reemphasizing the need to stay home and follow recommendations and guidelines (Reynolds, 13.05.2020 A; Reynolds, 20.05.2020 A).

The community action theme seems to focus more on organizational or institutional aspects of the pandemic response, with little mention of collective action beyond vague statements such as “We will get through this together” (Reynolds, 18.03.2020 B), “we can do this” (Reynolds, 18.03.2020 D), etc. It starts with some talk about government organization: “The state of Iowa has been coordinating plans across state agencies, including a partial activation of the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), to protect the health of Iowans and assess our operational needs” (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 A) coordinating across departments to set up emergency operations. Governor Reynolds also released a proclamation in a press release allowing

government agencies to use emergency resources in their respective response plans, activating disaster response funds, the Emergency Response Plan, and other funding for healthcare and related systems that need funding (Reynolds, 09.03.2020 A). Reynolds then goes on to include employers alongside government agencies in her rhetoric regarding the broader response to the pandemic: “The state of Iowa is doing everything we can to ease the process and shorten the time it will take for Iowans to receive unemployment benefits. All of our state agencies continue to work as one team to lessen the impact COVID-19 will have on our economy and our people.” (Reynolds, 16.03.2020 A). Reynolds also implores collective action to slow the spread, saying that at this point, while things are still not widespread, individual actions can have the most impact on mitigating the spread of the virus (Reynolds, 18.03.2020 D). She mentions specifically that the healthcare system has limits, and collectively, Iowa must be careful to ensure it doesn’t get overwhelmed, as that would have the most considerable negative impact and should, therefore, be avoided if at all possible by slowing the spread (Reynolds, 21.03.2020 B).

In April, the talk of the healthcare system continues, and frontline healthcare workers are specifically mentioned. Reynolds discusses that frontline workers collectively are at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19 and that the state must support them: “Our health care workers are on the frontlines battling the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have the State of Iowa’s full support” (Reynolds, 04.04.2020) and thus the contributions of financial support from the federal government can help the state in supporting the workers. The educational system is another site of community action, as Reynolds eventually stopped suggesting individual choices to stay home and closed all schools, both public and private, throughout the state by canceling all scholastic events, including extracurriculars, the pandemic could hopefully be somewhat mitigated (Reynolds, 07.05.2020). In support of these decisions, Reynolds doubles down on the decision to close schools: “While I would like nothing more than to open up our schools and classrooms in May, we have to prioritize the health and safety of Iowans” (Reynolds, 08.05.2020 A) and reminds everyone that safety must come first if the pandemic is to be adequately dealt with. She closed the school near the end of the school year and accompanied the decision with the hope of returning to school in the fall (Reynolds, 08.05.2020 A).

4.2.2. Accidental: passive voice and lack of detail

Governor Reynolds starts out her pandemic communications with a reiterated and heavily reinforced narrative about the disease, starting on the eighth of March 2020: “COVID-19 was first linked to an outbreak in Wuhan, China, but cases have subsequently been identified in several countries, including the U.S.” (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 D). She reiterates this exact phrasing several more times (Reynolds, 09.03.2020 C; Reynolds, 10.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 11.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 12.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 13.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 15.03.2020 A; Reynolds, 16.03.2020). This narrative could be seen to substantiate a couple of different things relating to an accidental causal story. First, the use of passive voice refers to the lack of human agency and action in the spread of the virus. Second, the scope and scale of the pandemic is reinforced. Governor Reynolds uses this phrasing in conjunction with the identification of the arrival of the pandemic in Iowa; “COVID-19 was first linked to an outbreak in Wuhan, China, in Dec. 2019, but cases have subsequently been identified in several countries including the U.S. The first presumptive positive cases in Iowa were identified on March 8.” (Reynolds, 09.03.2020 B). She does this again a few days later (Reynolds, 12.03.2020 C).

There is a strong and repeated narrative, then, of the disease being entirely foreign, entirely unrelated to everyday life, something external being inflicted upon Iowa by its arrival. COVID-19 grew within days to a community spread situation, wherein the governor admits to the public that the spread is untraceable by authorities and thus the situation is not entirely under control (Reynolds, 15.03.2020 E). Only a couple of days later, the surprising speed and efficiency of the disease in its initial spread are also highlighted by the governor, making it clear through this rhetoric that this crisis is firmly outside of the control of human intervention, or at least, outside of current capacity and knowledge to fundamentally deal with (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 C). The disease arrived, and the spread not only continued but increased in intensity, and thus mitigation factors were introduced on the seventeenth of March. As we can see already by the twenty-fifth of March, even these mitigation efforts are insufficient, with the governor saying that “this outbreak is an unprecedented crisis for the entire nation, and it’s going to take a whole-of-government approach to limit the spread of the virus...” (Reynolds, 25.03.2020).

There is no mention of reversing the trend, only of limiting the spread and trying to respond to external factors introduced by the pandemic and the pandemic response plans. The recognition of this fact came around the same time as the recognition that it was already impossible to trace the path of the disease from patient zero to the entire widespread outbreak occurring in well under a month: “As we have seen in other countries and across the United States, COVID-19 can spread quickly and out of control unless critical preventive measures are taken.” (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 E) and further, this substantial spread, well out of control already, posed a significant, imminent, and very real threat to the systems of the government: “A sudden spike in positive COVID-19 cases in a short amount of time could quickly overwhelm our health care system.” (Reynolds, 17.03.2020 G). Notably, accidental causal stories only appeared once in April 2020. However, the use of passive language demonstrates that there is no admission to poor planning on her government’s part, and it remains in the sphere of the accidental causal story.

4.2.3. Lack of inadvertent and mechanical causal stories

In the case of Iowa, there are no obvious cases of inadvertent or mechanical causal stories. The lack of mechanical causal stories was expected. The lack of inadvertent causal stories is also not overly surprising, but it might be an indicator of the lack of stringent policy - when there are no plans, there cannot be many planned things that go wrong. In April, Governor Reynolds comments on the health risks in different populations.

More than 10% of all positive cases in Iowa are occurring among long term care staff and residents. More than 40% of all deaths in Iowa are associated with outbreaks in long-term care facilities. This statistic underscores that COVID-19 poses the most risk for older adults above the age of 60 with chronic health conditions, resulting in more severe illness and death, (Reynolds, 05.04.2020)

This quote points towards the fact that some are more vulnerable than others, and the systems and mitigation factors have not been entirely successful in protecting those more vulnerable populations from infection. However, that remains a vague reference - there is no admission of poor planning.

4.2.5. Coinciding causal stories: taking control

Notably, Governor Reynolds shifts between different rhetorical frames in several instances, often using one point to reinforce another. For example, she stated, “While these are the first cases, it may not be the last, and it’s why Iowans must continue to practice safe habits like hand washing and staying home from work when sick” (Reynolds, 08.03.2020 B). Here, Governor Reynolds transitioned from discussing the natural forces at play—like the emergence of new cases—to emphasizing the importance of individual responsibility. This shift suggests that following safety regulations is not just recommended in isolation but, when read in context, could be seen as crucial in the collective effort to mitigate the pandemic. Furthermore, a similar pattern emerged when she addressed the crisis's unprecedented and widespread nature, for example, saying, “This outbreak is an unprecedented crisis for the entire nation, and it’s going to take a whole-of-government approach to limit the spread of the virus and provide economic relief to all of those impacted” (Reynolds, 25.03.2020). Her mention of a government-wide response is resonant as it highlights the interconnectedness of public health and economic policy within the analyzed rhetoric. It seems she could be aiming to unite the community by reinforcing the idea that both individual actions and government interventions are vital to overcoming such a significant challenge. This blend of focusing on personal responsibility and the necessity for coordinated government action reflects a holistic, comprehensive strategy to address the pandemic.

4.3. Discussion of findings

This section will summarise the findings from the qualitative content analysis of political rhetoric, focusing on intentional, inadvertent, mechanical, and accidental causal stories based on Stone (1989). The empirical analysis yielded some interesting results for the comparison of the crisis response rhetoric engaged in by each of the governors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their rhetoric holds some implications for the expectations that can be derived regarding the relationship between types of causal stories and policy stringency, which might help reveal some aspects of crisis management. The theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for the dissection and understanding of the results, highlighting the main themes and revealing the unexpected nature of some of the results.

The intentional causal story was expected to be more prevalent in a higher policy stringency environment that was more proactive and widespread in its enforcement. This expectation comes from the nature of a crisis situation itself - intentional causal stories include themes of preparedness, mitigation, individual action and community action, all of which center and support human action as both a necessary and efficacious response. This expectation proved not to be well substantiated in the empirical analysis. A stark difference was expected between the cases of Iowa and Alabama in the prevalence of the intentional causal story and its corresponding themes. More specifically, it was expected to be the most prevalent story in Alabama and not the most pervasive in Iowa due to their difference in policy stringency, especially between March and April of 2020. This finding could indicate a number of things. Perhaps political rhetoric in itself will tend to include intentional themes in times of crisis automatically as a way to provide a sense of security through action-oriented words. Maybe it is something endemic to a natural disaster, as opposed to manmade disasters like war or terrorism. The original expectation remains now inapplicable to the findings, and further study is needed to elucidate precisely how and why.

Even though this expectation did not materialize in the difference between the prevalence of the intentional causal story, a similar logic to what was expected can be seen in the content of the intentional rhetoric. Where Governor Ivey portrayed the government or the community as the agent of human intentionality, Governor Reynolds tended to portray the individual in the same role. The expectation was that subscribing to and espousing an intentional causal story (purposeful and intended) rhetoric comes with a set of expectations to take action, whereas an accidental causal story (unintended and unguided) rhetoric comes with no such expectations. It could be said, however, that Governor Reynolds achieved a similar effect of not creating expectations even when her rhetoric could have been seen as part of the intentional causal story. This effect was achieved precisely because even though human intentionality was emphasized, it was most often not the human intentionality on the part of the administration; therefore, the expectations were created not for her administration but for the individual listener. This reflection suggests that the “causal relation” between the discourse and the policies is indeed

significant, but the framework of causal stories on its own is not sufficient to pinpoint the most relevant parts of this relation.

The accidental causal story was expected to be more prevalent in a less stringent policy environment, emphasizing themes of unavoidable risk and disaster. This expectation was based on the idea that a less stringent policy response would not come from apathy and would still need to be justified in political rhetoric, necessitating a mode of explanation of the crisis that emphasizes the accidental causal story outside of human control. The actual findings dismissed this expectation in its entirety. Not only did the accidental causal story and the identified themes make fewer appearances in the rhetoric in the case of Iowa, which has less stringent policies than Alabama, but in fact, Governor Reynolds spoke more within this theme than Governor Ivey. Thus, the reality of the findings flipped the expectation exactly around; the governor with more stringent policies spoke more overall with themes relating to the accidental causal story. This outcome, while unexpected, does open up more avenues for research based on what the outcome could indicate. It could then be the case that the accidental causal story will be avoided more during times of crisis overall, inversely correlating with an uptick in the prevalence of the intentional causal story. Again, more study would be necessary to find further answers beyond these initial results.

The inadvertent causal story was expected to be more prevalent where there was more stringent policy, simply by virtue of policy being a probable prerequisite for an inadvertent causal narrative to arise. This is because, as can be seen in the themes of the inadvertent causal story being based on unintended consequences, mistakes, accidents, and the like, a policy decision must be made before that policy decision can lead to inadvertent outcomes. The expectation, then, was specifically for the inadvertent causal story to appear almost entirely in later examples after policies are introduced and as stringency continues to rise. In this case, that is mostly what was observed in the empirical analysis, though there are some notable exceptions. Firstly, in line with expectations, the inadvertent causal story was only observed in the analysis of the rhetoric of Governor Ivey of Alabama, the case which also had the highest policy stringency throughout the analysis. The observation broke with expectations, though, with the timing of when inadvertent causal story narratives would appear. While they were expected to occur more in

April or May, most instances came from the latter half of March, with one instance observed in early April. April and May had fewer overall speeches for analysis than March, so that can account for somewhat more being observed on the front end, but it still falls outside of the theoretical expectations.

The mechanical causal story was not expected to be prevalent at all due to the nature of the crisis. Perhaps this was a failure of imagination, but the reasoning behind not expecting any uses of the mechanical causal story boils down to two main factors. First, the presence of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can be said to create a paradigm of external risk internal response. In this study, corresponding to the accidental and intentional causal stories, inadvertent causal stories were expected to arise out of failures or shortcomings of responses. The mechanical cause did not seem to fit naturally into this paradigm. Second, the nature of the mechanical causal story as being about human intention but non-human execution did not appear to lend itself in any obvious sense to political rhetoric or crisis communication, which was expected to focus solely on proper actions, policies, and outcomes. All that said, the mechanical causal story was among the least identified story types for both cases; Reynolds had no identifiable uses in the examined speeches, and Ivey has fewer of this type than of any other causal story type. Still, the use of prayer and appeals to the Christian god present some interesting aspects for consideration, that could be seen as an interesting addition to the literature on causal stories if more explicitly researched as such.

Overall, the empirical analysis revealed some nuances and insights into the role of political discourse on crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the original research question was framed around finding the disparities between political discourses and how these disparities relate to outcomes, the findings of the analysis diverged in many ways from the original expectations and presumptions. Across the four causal story types identified in the analysis, there were more intriguing outliers than there were full alignments with expectations, all of which could warrant further exploration in future studies. Most notable was the overwhelming presence of the intentional causal story throughout the rhetoric of both governors in the analysis. From this, we can infer that intentional causal stories might just be the most frequently occurring causal stories in crisis communication, and further exploration could help to

identify to what extent this is a natural occurrence throughout crisis communication and perhaps uncover why it is or is not so. That research would also help understand the relationship policy stringency might have with accidental causal story appearance in rhetoric. Additionally, the governor associated with stronger policies exhibited a higher prevalence of mechanical causes, a striking contrast to the governor who avoided supernatural attributions yet implemented weaker policies. These findings offer rich avenues for dissecting the interplay between causal framings and crisis management strategies.

Ultimately, while many of the findings of this analysis did not conform to the theoretical expectations laid out at the start, the findings are still helpful in clarifying avenues for future research on this and related topics. The causal story framework adapted from Stone (1989) has made some appearances in crisis communication literature, but rarely with such a heavy focus on the identification and interpretation of each causal story type's themes, prevalence, and forms within political speech. By directly applying this framework, this study has been able to push forward somewhat the understanding of how different political speeches are used to frame or justify policy decisions. This is an intense form of study, and thus, the results are limited and far from comprehensive on the subject, but they can still be used to frame and guide future research to gain an understanding of political rhetoric during a crisis. Toward that aim, from the current results, a few hypotheses can be directly derived that could be used to shape some of the next steps in the research of this topic.

Hypotheses:

1. The intentional causal story will be the most common causal story type appearing in any crisis communication, regardless of policy stringency
2. Accidental causal stories will remain more common at lower policy stringency and tend towards not appearing with high policy stringency

By diving deeper into the understanding of individual causal story types, more can be understood about the paradigms, patterns, and various usages of certain narratives within crisis communication. A broader understanding will also help draw, or clearly eliminate, lines of causality between political rhetoric and political action taken in times of crisis.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to explore the relationship between policy stringency and the emergence of causal story types in crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research puzzle comes from a body of literature that seeks to understand political rhetoric as a tool not only for policy legitimation but also for policy as a form of discourse. The theoretical framework comes from Deborah Stone's (1989) concept of causal stories given form through Bachhi's (2000) conceptual approach of policy-as-discourse, which shows that policy and discourse shape and are shaped by one another. Essentially, the framework guided the analysis by identifying and interpreting how the governors defined, narrativized, and strategically portrayed their chosen policy responses to the crisis. The primary focus, then, was on understanding, through the causal stories framework, the observable differences in political discourse in environments of different political stringencies. The empirical analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis using thematic and iterative coding. The text corpus for the analysis included publicly available communications from the governors' websites, such as press releases, public statements, and press conferences. The expectations, in general, were for the intentional and inadvertent causal stories to be employed more in a higher stringency context, for accidental causal stories to appear in a lower stringency context, and for mechanical causal stories not to appear. So, while Iowa could be expected to have more accidental causal story narratives overall and more intentional later on as stringency increased, Alabama would have more intentional causal stories, especially in March, and then transition more into inadvertent causal stories.

The empirical analysis yielded results that mainly fell outside of the theoretical expectations. Perhaps the most striking result was the overwhelming presence of the intentional causal story across nearly all months of the analyzed texts for both governors, even when policy stringency was as low as it could be. The accidental causal story also defied expectations in making fewer appearances in the rhetoric in the case of Iowa, which has less stringent policies than Alabama. Still, Governor Reynolds spoke more about this theme than Governor Ivey. The inadvertent causal story was only observed in the analysis of the rhetoric of Governor Ivey of Alabama, which was more or less in line with expectations. However, it was also an outlier in some specific respects, especially since it appeared earlier than expected in March. The mechanical

causal story was not expected to be employed in the political discourse at all. Still, it appeared in similar numbers to the inadvertent causal story, also only from Governor Ivey's rhetoric in Alabama, and was only identified in religious terms, which had not been thought about during the formation of the expectations. Even though the analysis did show signs of tendencies somewhat similar to what was expected in their basic idea, the causal stories framework alone did not distinguish these nuances as expected

The findings of this thesis on the topic of crisis communication have some significance that is in line with the existing body of literature. By applying the causal stories framework, the research highlights the ways in which governors rhetorically framed their pandemic responses, revealing patterns of narrative credibility, coherence, and inconsistencies that can inform our understanding of crisis communication. For instance, the dominance of intentional causal stories underscores how leaders might prioritize assigning responsibility or control, even in low-policy-stringency contexts, to reinforce their authority or justify decisions. Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader discourse on executive crisis management by focusing on regional political leaders, an area often overlooked in favor of global leadership analysis. This regional focus uncovers nuances in crisis rhetoric, such as religious framing within mechanical causal stories, that might otherwise remain unexamined. By exploring publicly available press releases, the research fills a gap in understanding regional leaders' communication strategies and demonstrates how these texts serve as key tools in shaping societal reactions, assigning blame, and consolidating power during crises. Overall, this study branched into a slightly different direction than most of the preexisting literature. Thus, the results not only illuminate a portion of the subject material being studied as per the analysis but also avenues for further research that can be conducted based on these results.

As mentioned before in the section on the limitations of this study, as well as in the discussion of the results, many potential questions are left unanswered. This study was partly due to time and resource constraints and was small in scope. Just within the US, there are dozens more regional executives, as well as local politicians, whose rhetoric and political discourse might be studied to broaden and clarify the findings of this study. A comparative analysis could also be done on similar politicians between different countries with comparable political positions held by US

governors. This study also focused on a qualitative methodological approach, but the nature of the crisis and the breadth of politicians, discourses, and policy outcomes could also enable a mixed-methods approach to better attempt to draw causal links between policy stringency and crisis communication strategies. By broadening the scope of this study to include executives tied to multiple political parties instead of choosing from the same party, exploration of the differences in all of these variables between parties could also be carried out. Through these means and more, the applicability of the results and generalizability of the findings of this type of analysis could be expanded.

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Appendix 1: primary sources for coding and analysis

Kay Ivey - Alabama

MARCH

Governor Kay Ivey (06.03.2020): Governor Ivey Establishes Coronavirus (COVID-19) Task Force

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-establishes-coronavirus-covid-19-task-force/>

Governor Kay Ivey (13.03.2020): Gov. Ivey Holds State Coronavirus Press Conference

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/gov-ivey-holds-state-coronavirus-press-conference/>

Governor Kay Ivey (13.03.2020): Governor Ivey Releases Statement on Alabama's First Confirmed Coronavirus Case

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-releases-statement-on-alabamas-first-confirmed-coronavirus-case/>

Governor Kay Ivey (13.03.2020): State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/state-of-emergency-coronavirus-covid-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (17.03.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Statement on Updated Public Health Precautionary Guidelines

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-issues-statement-on-updated-public-health-precautionary-guidelines/>

Governor Kay Ivey (17.03.2020): Governor Ivey Proclaims Confidence in Alabama Financial Institution Precautionary Measures

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-proclaims-confidence-in-alabama-financial-institution-precautionary-measures/>

Governor Kay Ivey (18.03.2020): Gov. Ivey Announces New Primary Runoff Election Date
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-announces-new-primary-runoff-election-date/>

Governor Kay Ivey (18.03.2020): First Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (19.03.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Statement on Statewide Public Health Order
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-issues-statement-on-statewide-public-health-order/>

Governor Kay Ivey (20.03.2020): Gov. Ivey Encourages Alabamians Amid Coronavirus Pandemic
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/gov-ivey-encourages-alabamians-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Governor Kay Ivey (20.03.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Statement on Updated Statewide Public Health Order
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-issues-statement-on-updated-statewide-public-health-order/>

Governor Kay Ivey (20.03.2020): Second Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/second-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (20.03.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Statement on Authorization of Alabama National Guard on As Needed Basis
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-issues-statement-on-authorization-of-alabama-national-guard-on-as-needed-basis/>

Governor Kay Ivey (21.03.2020): Gov. Ivey: Alabama small businesses can seek SBA COVID-19 disaster loans
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/gov-ivey-alabama-small-businesses-can-seek-sba-COVID-19-disaster-loans/>

Governor Kay Ivey (23.03.2020): Governor Ivey Delays State Tax Filings
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/governor-ivey-delays-state-tax-filings/>

Governor Kay Ivey (23.03.2020): Third Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/third-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (26.03.2020): Fourth Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/fourth-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (30.03.2020): Gov. Ivey Reminds Alabamians to Practice Social Distancing
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/03/gov-ivey-reminds-alabamians-to-practice-social-distancing/>

APRIL

Governor Kay Ivey (01.04.2020): Governor Ivey urges Alabama Small Business Owners To Prepare Now by Applying for Federal Financial Relief
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-urges-alabama-small-business-owners-to-prepare-now-by-applying-for-federal-financial-relief/>

Governor Kay Ivey (01.04.2020): Gov. Kay Ivey: Census 2020 now more important than ever
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/gov-kay-ivey-census-2020-now-more-important-than-ever/>

Governor Kay Ivey (02.04.2020): Fifth Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor

<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/fifth-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (03.04.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Stay at Home Order
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-issues-stay-at-home-order/>

Governor Kay Ivey (03.04.2020): Sixth Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/sixth-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (06.04.2020): Governor Ivey Launches State's Guide to COVID-19 Relief Efforts
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-launches-states-guide-to-COVID-19-relief-efforts/>

Governor Kay Ivey (06.04.2020): Gov. Ivey Announces ALtogether Alabama Website
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/gov-ivey-announces-al-together-alabama-website/>

Governor Kay Ivey (07.04.2020): Governor Ivey Announces Ribbons of Hope Campaign
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-announces-ribbons-of-hope-campaign/>

Governor Kay Ivey (07.04.2020): Governor Ivey Announces Deadline Extension for Alabama Prison Program Proposals Due to COVID-19
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-announces-deadline-extension-for-alabama-prison-program-proposals-due-to-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (08.04.2020): Gov. Ivey Launches New COVID-19 Search Engine Tool
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-launches-new-COVID-19-search-engine-tool/>

Governor Kay Ivey (10.04.2020): Gov. Ivey Shares Encouraging Easter Message
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/gov-ivey-shares-encouraging-easter-message/>

Governor Kay Ivey (12.04.2020): State of Emergency: Severe Weather
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/state-of-emergency-severe-weather/>

Governor Kay Ivey (13.04.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Supplemental Emergency Proclamation to Allow Parole Hearings to Resume
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-issues-supplemental-emergency-proclamation-to-allow-parole-hearings-to-resume/>

Governor Kay Ivey (13.04.2020): Seventh Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/seventh-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (16.04.2020): Governor Ivey Launches New COVID-19 Drive-Thru Testing Sites
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-launches-new-COVID-19-drive-thru-testing-sites/>

Governor Kay Ivey (21.04.2020): Gov. Ivey Supports Alabama Restaurants
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/gov-ivey-supports-alabama-restaurants/>

Governor Kay Ivey (24.04.2020): Governor Ivey Announces Auto Insurers Return More Than \$100 Million in Premium to Alabama Policyholders
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-announces-auto-insurers-return-more-than-100-million-in-premium-to-alabama-policyholders/>

Governor Kay Ivey (28.04.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Safer at Home Order
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/governor-ivey-issues-safer-at-home-order/>

Governor Kay Ivey (30.04.2020): Gov. Ivey: New investment across Alabama topped \$7 billion in 2019
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/04/gov-ivey-new-investment-across-alabama-topped-7-billion-in-2019/>

MAY

Governor Kay Ivey (07.05.2020): Gov. Ivey Delivers National Day of Prayer Message
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/gov-ivey-delivers-national-day-of-prayer-message-2/>

Governor Kay Ivey (08.05.2020): Eighth Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/eighth-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (08.05.2020): Ninth Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/ninth-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (08.05.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Amended Safer at Home Order
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/governor-ivey-issues-amended-safer-at-home-order/>

Governor Kay Ivey (10.05.2020): Gov. Ivey Shares National Hospital Week Message
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/gov-ivey-shares-national-hospital-week-message/>

Governor Kay Ivey (13.05.2020): Gov. Ivey Applauds Grocery Retailers
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/gov-ivey-applauds-grocery-retailers/>

Governor Kay Ivey (14.05.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Statement in Response to SB161
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/governor-ivey-issues-statement-in-response-to-sb161/>

Governor Kay Ivey (15.05.2020): Gov. Ivey Congratulates the Class of 2020
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/gov-ivey-congratulates-the-class-of-2020/>

Governor Kay Ivey (21.05.2020): Governor Ivey Issues Amended Safer at Home Order
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/governor-ivey-issues-amended-safer-at-home-order-2/>

Governor Kay Ivey (21.05.2020): Tenth Supplemental State of Emergency: Coronavirus (COVID-19). State of Alabama: Proclamation by the Governor
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/tenth-supplemental-state-of-emergency-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Governor Kay Ivey (22.05.2020): Flag Memo for Victims of the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic
<https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2020/05/flag-memo-for-victims-of-the-novel-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Kim Reynolds - Iowa

MARCH

Governor Kim Reynolds (08.03.2020): 3 COVID-19 Cases in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-08/3-COVID-19-cases-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (09.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs Disaster Proclamation following additional COVID-19 Cases in Iowa
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-09/gov-reynolds-signs-disaster-proclamation-following-additional-COVID-19>

Governor Kim Reynolds (10.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 Cases in Iowa
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-10/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (11.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 Cases in Iowa
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-11/additional-COVID-19-case-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (12.03.2020): State of Iowa provides COVID-19 update
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-12/state-iowa-provides-COVID-19-up
date](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-12/state-iowa-provides-COVID-19-update)

Governor Kim Reynolds (13.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 Case in Iowa, Reynolds signs proclamation to waive transportation weight requirements
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-13/additional-COVID-19-case-iowa-re
ynolds-signs-proclamation-waive](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-13/additional-COVID-19-case-iowa-reynolds-signs-proclamation-waive)

Governor Kim Reynolds (15.03.2020): COVID-19 community spread confirmed in Iowa, state agencies take additional measures to limit spread and assist Iowans
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-15/COVID-19-community-spread-conf
irmed-iowa-state-agencies-take-additional](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-15/COVID-19-community-spread-confirmed-iowa-state-agencies-take-additional)

Governor Kim Reynolds (16.03.2020): Governor Reynolds announces assistance for employees and employers affected by COVID-19 related layoffs
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-16/governor-reynolds-announces-assist
ance-employees-and-employers-affected](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-16/governor-reynolds-announces-assistance-employees-and-employers-affected)

Governor Kim Reynolds (16.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds recommends Iowa schools close for four weeks, will hold a press conference tomorrow
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-16/gov-reynolds-recommends-iowa-sc
hools-close-four-weeks-will-hold-press](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-16/gov-reynolds-recommends-iowa-schools-close-four-weeks-will-hold-press)

Governor Kim Reynolds (17.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds issues a State of Public Health Disaster Emergency
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-17/gov-reynolds-issues-state-public-he
alth-disaster-emergency](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-17/gov-reynolds-issues-state-public-health-disaster-emergency)

Governor Kim Reynolds (17.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs legislation to fund key services, combat COVID19 spread
[https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-17/gov-reynolds-signs-legislation-fund
-key-services-combat-COVID19-spread](https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-17/gov-reynolds-signs-legislation-fund-key-services-combat-COVID19-spread)

Governor Kim Reynolds (17.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-17/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (18.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs legislation expanding roles for physician assistants
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-18/gov-reynolds-signs-legislation-expanding-roles-physician-assistants>

Governor Kim Reynolds (18.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds will hold a press conference tomorrow afternoon
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-18/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-will-hold-press-conference>

Governor Kim Reynolds (19.03.2020): ADVISORY: Gov. Reynolds to hold a Press Conference on COVID-19 at 3:30 p.m.
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-19/advisory-gov-reynolds-hold-press-conference-COVID-19-330-pm>

Governor Kim Reynolds (19.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds held a press conference today at 3:30 p.m.
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-19/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-held-press-conference-today-330-pm>

Governor Kim Reynolds (20.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs additional State Public Health Emergency Declaration, will hold press conference today
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-20/gov-reynolds-signs-additional-state-public-health-emergency-declaration>

Governor Kim Reynolds (20.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 case in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference at 2:30 p.m.
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-20/additional-COVID-19-case-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-230-pm>

Governor Kim Reynolds (21.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-21/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (21.03.2020): U.S. Small Business Administration Issues Economic Injury Disaster Loan declaration for Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-21/us-small-business-administration-issues-economic-injury-disaster-loan>

Governor Kim Reynolds (22.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-22/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (22.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-22/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-today>

Governor Kim Reynolds (23.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds announces unemployment insurance tax extension to assist small businesses

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-23/gov-reynolds-announces-unemployment-insurance-tax-extension-assist-small>

Governor Kim Reynolds (23.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-23/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-today>

Governor Kim Reynolds (24.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-24/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-today>

Governor Kim Reynolds (24.03.2020): First COVID-19 Death Confirmed in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-24/first-COVID-19-death-confirmed-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (25.03.2020): Iowa's Disaster Declaration approved by President Trump

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-25/iowas-disaster-declaration-approved-president-trump>

Governor Kim Reynolds (25.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-25/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-today>

Governor Kim Reynolds (26.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-26/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-today>

Governor Kim Reynolds (26.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-26/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (27.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, 2 additional deaths confirmed, Reynolds holds press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-27/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-2-additional-deaths-confirmed-reynolds>

Governor Kim Reynolds (28.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-28/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (29.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional death confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-29/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-death-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (30.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, Reynolds to hold press conference today

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-30/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-reynolds-hold-press-conference-today>

Governor Kim Reynolds (31.03.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional death confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-31/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-death-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (31.03.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-03-31/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

APRIL

Governor Kim Reynolds (01.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-01/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (02.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-02/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (02.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-02/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (03.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-03/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (04.04.2020): Iowa receives \$44 million for reimbursement of COVID-19 response costs

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-04/iowa-receives-44-million-reimbursement-COVID-19-response-costs>

Governor Kim Reynolds (04.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-04/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (05.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases and deaths in Iowa, state taking all measures to protect at-risk population

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-05/additional-COVID-19-cases-and-deaths-iowa-state-taking-all-measures>

Governor Kim Reynolds (06.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-06/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (06.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration, ordering additional closures

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-06/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (07.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-07/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-death-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (08.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-08/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-death-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (08.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds Proclaims “Day of Prayer” in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-08/gov-reynolds-proclaims-day-prayer-iowa>

Governor Kim Reynolds (09.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-09/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (10.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-10/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (10.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration to provide regulatory relief

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-10/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (11.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-11/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (12.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-12/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (13.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-13/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (15.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-15/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (15.04.2020): State of Iowa releases updated Coronavirus Dashboard, additional cases and deaths confirmed in Iowa

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-15/state-iowa-releases-updated-coronavirus-dashboard-additional-cases-and>

Governor Kim Reynolds (16.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing State Public Health Emergency Declaration, requiring additional protective measures in RMCC Region 6

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-16/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (17.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-17/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (17.04.2020): Iowa schools to extend closures through end of school year

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-17/iowa-schools-extend-closures-through-end-school-year>

Governor Kim Reynolds (18.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-18/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (19.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-19/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-death-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (20.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-20/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (21.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds launches Test Iowa Initiative to expand testing capacity to limit the spread of COVID19

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-21/gov-reynolds-launches-test-iowa-initiative-expand-testing-capacity-limit>

Governor Kim Reynolds (21.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-21/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (22.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-22/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (23.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-23/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (24.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-24/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (24.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing the State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-24/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (25.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-25/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (26.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-26/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (27.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-27/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (27.04.2020): Iowa Leaders Urge ‘Immediate Assistance’ from Administration to Support Pork Producers

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-27/iowa-leaders-urge-immediate-assistance-administration-support-pork>

Governor Kim Reynolds (27.04.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing the State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-27/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (28.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-28/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (29.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-29/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (30.04.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-04-30/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

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Governor Kim Reynolds (01.05.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-01/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (02.05.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-02/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (03.05.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-03/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (04.05.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-04/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (05.05.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-05/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (06.05.2020): Additional COVID-19 cases in Iowa, additional deaths confirmed

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-06/additional-COVID-19-cases-iowa-additional-deaths-confirmed>

Governor Kim Reynolds (06.05.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing the State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-06/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (13.05.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing the State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-13/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (14.05.2020): Governor, House Speaker and Senate Majority Leader Request REC Meeting

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-14/governor-house-speaker-and-senate-majority-leader-request-rec-meeting>

Governor Kim Reynolds (20.05.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing the State Public Health Emergency Declaration

<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-20/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Governor Kim Reynolds (22.05.2020): Gov. Kim Reynolds orders flags lowered to half-staff in honor of Coronavirus Victims in the United States
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-22/gov-kim-reynolds-orders-flags-lowered-half-staff-honor-coronavirus-victims>

Governor Kim Reynolds (22.05.2020): State of Iowa announces new Test Iowa locations as testing criteria expands
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-22/state-iowa-announces-new-test-iowa-locations-testing-criteria-expands>

Governor Kim Reynolds (23.05.2020): Additional cases and deaths confirmed in Iowa, state's coronavirus website undergoing maintenance
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-23/additional-cases-and-deaths-confirmed-iowa-states-coronavirus-website>

Governor Kim Reynolds (24.05.2020): Additional cases and deaths confirmed in Iowa, state's coronavirus website undergoing maintenance
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-24/additional-cases-and-deaths-confirmed-iowa-states-coronavirus-website>

Governor Kim Reynolds (26.05.2020): Gov. Reynolds signs new proclamation continuing the State Public Health Emergency Declaration
<https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2020-05-26/gov-reynolds-signs-new-proclamation-continuing-state-public-health>

Appendix 2: overview of coding results

No.	Code label	Description of code	Example quote	No. of coded segments by state
1.	Mechanical causal story	Unguided actions with intended consequences, indirect human influence. Mentions of systemic issues or processes that are described as having a predetermined or automatic nature, references to non-human intervening factors in human systems, “god”, “prayer”, “prevent the spread”	“And in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, I can think of no better time to pray for our country, our state, and for one another. I certainly believe that prayer changes things. As your governor, I ask you to join me in praying for our state.” (07.05.2020: Gov. Ivey Delivers National Day of Prayer Message)	Alabama: 8 Iowa: 0 Total: 8
2.	Accidental causal story	Unguided actions with unintended consequences, no human influence. Events that are framed as beyond human control or as unexpected occurrences, “disaster”, “pandemic”, “unavoidable”, “risk”, “vulnerable”	“... the number of cases that have now tested positive in Alabama just during the past few days is a good reminder that this disease is having a profound effect on the entire world. No one is immune from its impact...” (20.03.2020: Gov. Ivey Encourages Alabamians Amid Coronavirus Pandemic)	Alabama: 20 Iowa: 17 Total: 37
3.	Intentional causal story	Purposeful actions with intended consequences, direct human action. Deliberate actions or policies that are described as intended to produce specific outcomes, “measures”, “decisions”, “purpose”, “caution”, “precaution”, “mitigate”, “effort”, “work”	“These measures taken by the Alabama Department of Public Health are out of an abundance of caution in order to contain the area where the most cases of the COVID-19 are present.” (17.03.2020: Governor Ivey Issues Statement on Updated Public Health Precautionary Guidelines)	Alabama: 45 Iowa: 39 Total: 84
4.	Inadvertent causal story	Purposeful actions with unintended consequences, indirect human action. Mentions of unintended consequences resulting from deliberate actions, “mistake”, “accident”, “try”, “attempt”, “failed”	“And while your leaders are called on to make important decisions dealing with a virus that we didn't even know existed three months ago, we're going to make some mistakes along the way. My hope and prayer is that we will get it right more than we will get it wrong.” (20.03.2020: Gov. Ivey Encourages Alabamians Amid Coronavirus Pandemic)	Alabama: 6 Iowa: 0 Total: 6

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