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German and US Pro-Social Behavior in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Global

Climate Change: A Comparison

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Comparing German and US Pro-Social Behavior in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and

Global Climate Change

In 2023 Germany adopted some of the most aggressive pro-environment legislation in the

world. The German government's website: *Bundesregierung.de,* details explicit steps to achieve

a sustainable future. Germany's regulations are based on the United Nations "2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development," a program of 17 steps adopted in 2015 that intends to curb climate

change and simultaneously support vulnerable populations across the globe. Germany codified

each of the steps into its own laws, a bold action that the US has failed to recreate

(Nachhaltigkeitspolitik). Part of the trouble of any climate policy is the demand on the consumer:

individual actions that collectively add up to a big change. For consumer waste to be recycled,

consumers must clean and collect their waste, separate and deposit it into bins, and deliver the

bins to be recycled. In the United States, this seems to many like a task only for the most

eco-active of citizens. But in Germany, recycling is the law. German politicians have convinced

their electorate that collaboration on sustainability isn't just good, but necessary.

In 2020, Germany faced another politically divisive, financially challenging emergency

with global implications that required collective action of individual citizens: the COVID-19

pandemic. After reporting their first cases in January 2020, Germany faced relatively few deaths

and a comparatively low fatality rate (Sjölander-Lindqvist 3). Were German citizens naturally

immune to the virus? Was the government fast to mobilize against this cause? Or is there

something inherent in the German culture that motivates individual sacrifice for the public good?

In this paper, I will compare the climate change crisis and the COVID-19 crisis, analyzing the

response of the German government and the German population. I will use previously collected

qualitative data to measure social consciousness among Germans. I will also analyze government

messages about both crises. Finally, I will compare the attitude of the German people and government, to the people and government of the United States. By analyzing the attitudes, messages, and plans created around these crises, I will prove that the United States can learn much from Germany. Germany's response to the coronavirus indicated that they are a socially conscious population motivated by a bottom-up government structure that is well-prepared for environmental crises, providing a model for the United States to follow.

1. Pro-social behavior and cultural attitude

The specific behavior of self-sacrifice for the good of one's neighbors is known as "prosocial behavior" by social scientists. Prosocial behavior is a broad concept, which encompasses an individual's tendencies, the relationships between individuals, and the behavior of an entire culture. The third category, labeled macro-prosocial behavior, is the subject of this paper. In a 2023 study of 32 nations, it was found that highly prosocial countries also showed higher levels of happiness. Across cultural boundaries, individuals who acted prosocially were happier, Germany among them (Chen 3). Authors Hellman, Dorrough, and Göckner studied prosocial behavior in Germany through two studies conducted during the pandemic. The authors specifically studied the increase or decrease in prosocial behavior after a statement by politicians. They also named qualities in both the giver and recipient of a prosocial action.

The authors found that during crises, prosociality is likely to increase. People are likely to respond to a need in their community, even at their own risk. In this process, the authors named "perceived vulnerability to COVID-19" as one characteristic of the recipient, and "perceived responsibility" as one characteristic of the giver (Hellman 7). People perceived as responsible by the participants were people like politicians, although participants often rated themselves highly responsible, sometimes more so than control groups (Hellman 7). This study is the most recent

indicator that Germans are a significantly pro-social society. Another important finding from that study is that assigning politicians as responsible did not decrease but instead increased individuals' prosocial behavior. Despite previous studies indicating that communities are likely to diffuse responsibility, the authors found that German individuals held themselves just as responsible as their elected officials. The more people think politicians, as their elected representatives, should assume responsibility to help, the more responsible they feel themselves, and the more they take action (Hellman 8). This is also true to an extent of US populations, according to a similar study also conducted during the pandemic (Abel 7). This indicates that for future crises, people are likely to view politicians as role models and take personal responsibility.

After establishing that Germany is a prosocial country, categorizing different types of prosocial actions can further the understanding of the origins of this behavior. A study of prosocial behavior in Germany developed the overarching attitude into two themes: A personal mindset, containing image consciousness, social cohesion, considering consequences, and rule-following, and a business owner's mindset, containing legality and compliance (Zimmerman 1347). For this study, researchers compared Germany to Switzerland. A second study, a communication analysis of pandemic messaging from the governments of Italy, Sweden, and Spain, rounds out this comparison. Few established sources compare strictly the United States and German communication styles. By comparing Germany to countries similar in location and economic and social public policy, Americans can gain a holistic understanding of the uniqueness of German behavior.

The first study established Germany as a logical, rules-oriented nation. This is consistent with the stereotypes Americans listed about Germans in the introduction to this paper. The study indicated specifically that, "Swiss participants tended to value personal responsibility and risk

assessment more than German participants and, by contrast, German participants tended to focus more on rule-following out of principle and references to discipline" (Zimmerman 1349). The study also emphasized that Germans were more oriented towards long-term solutions and personal restraint than their Swiss neighbors. This is important because environmental issues require personal sacrifices and are unlikely to show immediate results.

Comparison to other countries can also highlight the roots of social ideas, unlike internal comparisons that can only indicate current trends. One can not discuss Germany's social mindset without addressing its current public image. Especially to the European-immigrant-filled United States, Germany's reputation is still tarnished by the actions of the Nazi government during the 1930s and 40s. Eighty years later, the German government and population are vocally anti-nationalism and have removed nationalist rhetoric from their daily lives. This is a stark contrast to the very nationalist United States culture (Abel and Brown 5). The contrast between nationalist and non-nationalist rhetoric has a direct impact on the perceived origin of prosocial behavior.

The second comparison study, by researchers of all origins, found the following, that, "Where in Italy and to some extent Spain they talk about nationalism and the love of country as a motivation for individual action, this is not highlighted in the Swedish and German speeches" (Sjölander-Lindqvist 11). Not motivated by nationalism, or by risk assessment, what motivates the German population is hard to name. The German Congress gives some indication, with the final lines on their page about sustainable programs: "Everyone has a part to play when it comes to sustainability. Decisions on sustainability are made by investors, producers, and consumers, whereby it is not about an ethic of sacrifice" (Bundesregierung). We see here the two mindsets: a personal mindset, and a business owner's mindset.

The personal mindset can be divided into several subcategories: image consciousness, social cohesion, rule-following, and considering consequences. The first, image consciousness, reflects the broader German publicity trouble. A study of the "Swabian" region of Germany, known colloquially as a particularly fastidious population, interviewed small business owners about their environmental procedures. Distance from past prejudices and antiquated systems are attractive to business owners because of the potential to attract new customers and new employees.

> "parts of society now show relatively high awareness of environmental issues and it is reasonable to assume that even potential employees consider such issues, at least to a certain extent… environmental activities may be rooted in the belief of contributing to the well-being of employees in the present setting and this can be seen as a reinforcement of moral identity" (Kraus 24).

Younger employees are likely to take jobs with companies who take on sustainable practices because it is deemed culturally positive to do so. Image consciousness keeps businesses in check when other motivations fall short.

Social cohesion and rule-following are two similar motivations for compliance that were found in both Germany and Switzerland during the pandemic. These motivations, more than any, indicate similarity with the United States during the pandemic years (Abel 5). Social cohesion requires comparison to others, and responses to the study used language like "irresponsible and egoistic" to describe people who did not wear masks or isolate. Others stated that they complied because they wanted to set a good example for others (Zimmerman 1345). Another commonality between the United States and Germany was sympathy for workers "on the front lines" fighting the virus, such as healthcare workers (Zimmerman 1346). Rule following, the third aspect of

personal mindset, is relatively straightforward. Even in contentious Germany, pandemic-prevention measures were mostly followed because they were enforceable rules. German political resistance to the pandemic, discussed later in this paper, was still prevalent. A scientifically-minded nation often requires reminding of the reasons behind these rules.

The final facet of personal mindset pro-social behavior, considering consequences, was studied extensively during the pandemic. Considering the consequences of masking, social distancing, and sanitization were easy when the news was filled with death tolls and hospitalization counts. The desire to ease restrictions was high in all nations, but it was understood in Germany that the best way out of the pandemic was through it. High unemployment and rising debt were concerns, but respondents generally believed the consequences were heavy enough to outweigh the cost. One participant, "noted that it was not yet possible to go 'full throttle' economically and return to business as normal when the threat of a second-wave loomed" (Zimmerman 1347). Prosocial behavior has many origins within the personal mindset. Image consciousness, social cohesion, rule-following, and considering consequences were all aspects found to be high-ranked individual behaviors in German society. For businesses, these reasons take on different characteristics.

The business owner's mindset takes the outlook of cost and consequences to an even higher height. As the serious nature of the pandemic became apparent, the German government addressed much of its messaging to its business owners. Then-Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, addressed, "how not only individuals, but also how local communities had to be responsible and aware of the highly precarious situation caused by the virus" (Sjölander-Lindqvist 5). For the rules-oriented German culture, the main motivator of environmental action by businesses is legality. Personal orientations towards prosocial behavior,

which became apparent during the pandemic, translate into business practices towards sustainability. Germany enforces a high standard of sustainability on its businesses, and the overall business mindset towards sustainability in Germany can be conclusively deemed positive. Beyond legality, financial sustainability and environmental sustainability go hand in hand. In Baden-Würtenberg, Germany, "tangible environmental aspects were seen by participants largely as a business issue, since engagement in this area mostly involves practices that also lead to higher efficiency, lower costs and so on" (Kraus 35). During the pandemic, Germans were likely to make sacrifices to their businesses and to the national economy to help their neighbors. When faced with environmental concerns, Germans were even more likely to act selflessly.

In the aforementioned Swabian study, the researchers noted a specific concern that businesses only engaged in sustainability as far as their narrow profit margins allowed, citing "limited space for engaging in 'green' tangible sustainability beyond legal obligations." For small businesses this concern makes sense. Beyond profit, when one person or small group owns and manages a business, there is limited capacity and "mental space" for inventive sustainable efforts. Here, the German population seems to acknowledge their limits. Small businesses believe it is the government's responsibility, not their own, to push the envelope in sustainability. (Kraus 23). Still, the study suggested a willingness to follow new environmental action when asked to.

2. Government organization and messaging

After understanding the cultural perspective of German people toward the pandemic and the environment, the next step for environmentalists in the United States is to analyze the similarities and differences between the German government's messaging and the United States' messaging. While the research comparing the United States and German prosocial behavior

during the pandemic is limited, there is abundant scholarship comparing the environmental policies of the two nations. There is also abundant scholarship comparing Germany to other European countries on matters of environmental policy. By putting the mass communication of the German government in context to other nations, we can analyze the effectiveness of their crisis policy. At the beginning of the pandemic, then-chancellor Angela Merkel addressed the nation. She said, "There are also measures (said to be necessary) to be taken on a governmental or state level, but these are focused on mitigating the consequences of the response to the coronavirus, to keep the economy running, and to keep the functions of the state intact" (Sjölander-Lindqvist 5). In this sentence, Merkel emphasizes the key factors that both help and hinder the government's crisis communication: decentralized government structure, appeals to financial concerns, and practical appeals.

In 2020, a multinational team of political scientists began analyzing the government structure of different EU nations, and how that structure impacted COVID response across Europe. The authors advocate in the paper for a synchronistic response to crises. Their research helps to contextualize Germany on a larger scale by first identifying Germany as a bottom-up, negotiated federal state and next, by complimenting its response. They first identify the waves in which the pandemic "hit" European countries, placing Germany in the third wave (in comparison to Italy in the first wave). This advance warning was very necessary for the German parliament, which did not officially declare an emergency until the end of March. By then, the peak of the crisis in Germany was nearly over. The authors explain, "In France and Italy, centralized risk management procedures and structures were activated only after numbers became 'visible', whereas in Germany no such centralized structures were available and the establishment of crisis task forces had to go bottom-up" (Bouckaert 9). Dramatic images from Italy's crisis made an

impact on people in Germany, and the authors complement the sudden unity of the German

regional or "Länder" governments:

> "there was initially a regional logic, defined in some regions, which then
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> resulted in a national political co-ordination, which then became a national
>
> or coordinated strategy of resource allocation and what regions should do
>
> at an operational level. Whereas in Germany, the crisis-related agenda
>
> setting and problem-solving started at the local level with functionally
>
> strong local public health services and the Länder being responsible for
>
> pandemic crisis management, in France and Italy the central state was the
>
> key actor while local and regional governments played a more or less
>
> subordinate role. (Bouckaert 15)

The authors go on to coin the term "Coronationalism" to describe countries that were unified

under the pandemic. They indirectly reference pro-social behaviors, calling it, "The continental

European culture of supporting and trusting the State." Immediately after declaring the

emergency, support for the government was high, 87% (Bouckaert 14). However, coronationalim

has its downfalls. Support of the German government quickly shrank to 64% by the beginning of

May 2020. For the greater goals of the European Union, the differences between each European

nation's responses mean that the total response was not as strong as it could have been.

      The lessons learned from the early days of the pandemic can be applied to lessons of

climate change. While the coronavirus has now diminished, the "peak" of climate change

destruction has only just begun to "hit." The unity of Coronavirus can thus be seen as a

micro-model of climate change, with a sped-up timeline and higher immediate stakes. Although

Germany's decentralized model for handling the pandemic was criticized, the eventual unity of

the Länder governments bodes well for the country's climate change response.

      Finally, we return to the issue of climate change. Both Germany and the United States

ratified the Paris Agreement in December 2015. Author Daniel Rasch of the American-German

Institute in Germany analyzes the reason that Germany has stayed consistent in its policy, while

the United States opted out of the Paris Agreement, effective in November 2020 under President

Trump, then opted in again under President Biden in February 2021. He identifies the network of

lobbyists in the US as the major reason for inconsistent policy. Rasch begins, "In Germany, most

legislation is introduced by the government, not the parliament. The ministries prepare bills,

which are then discussed, changed, and decided on by the German parliament" (Rasch). For

Americans, this may seem like a strange system. In the United States, Congress is the center of

legislative decision-making, and lobbyists must demand a stake in the conversation with the

federal government. The result is that the United States has a much more pluralistic government

than Germany, with diverse, interconnected lobbying systems.

      In Germany, actors for climate change are close to the center of government. There are a

few stakeholders: "the Federal Association of the Energy and Water Industry (*Bundesverband

der Energie-und Wasserwirtschaft e.V.*) as an interest group, the state-owned company *Deutsche

Energie-Agentur GmbH*, and the Environmental Action Germany (*Deutsche Umwelthilfe*) as an

NGO. State and regional level actors are of a certain importance (11 percent), but local

stakeholders are rarely present (one percent)" (Rasch). These stakeholders share a similar

percentage of representatives in the German government as US stakeholders do. (11.44 percent

in Germany and 13.69 percent in the United States). However, in the United States, local

shareholders are more active. The reason local shareholders compete more in the United States is

that local governments must compete for federal funds. The success of local entities in receiving these funds determines the success of the program.

Rasch further criticizes the US climate policymaking by diving inside the US Congress. The division of policymaking is perhaps the most significant reason for insufficient climate change action by the US government. Thirty committees handle aspects of climate policy in the US Congress. In Germany, only five ministries do. Rasch makes an interesting concession in his criticism, that the United States has a larger scope of issues to compound than the German government. Native American affairs and the connection between climate change and the U.S. Armed Forces both complicate the issue of climate change in ways that are inconsequential from a German perspective.

Of course, the German government is not always as effective as it might appear. The aforementioned multinational analysis notes an intergovernmental communication struggle that became apparent during the pandemic. In the German pandemic response system, "The Federal Minister of Health pledges for the Länder for compliance and the Chancellor pushes for coordinated measures but is not in the position to impose them to the Länder." There are 16 Länder, which must, by themselves, coordinate horizontally. Then, they vertically involve the federal government (Bouckaert 16). COVID policies are an example of some of the most ineffective policymaking in recent German history. The environmental policies, which are often heralded for being international standards, are often not Germany's policies at all. Rasch explains that regulations (such as those for wind power) are impressed upon Germany by the EU. In these cases, Germany cannot and does not consult with its stakeholders, leaving some locals dissatisfied.

To conclude the analysis of the effectiveness of mass communication, we return to the address given by Angela Merkel. A team of six European communication scholars analyzed public addresses from several government figures. Merkel was identified as one of the most effective communicators. As she combines logic with emotional appeals, she addresses some of the public's largest concerns: isolation and threats to democracy. Moderate conservative Merkel faced criticism from the right and left during her term as chancellor, and she took the opportunity to name concerns that German Nationalists proposed to her (Noack). She framed the pandemic as temporary, and a time for unity. The authors congratulate her as, "consistent in returning to the concept of democracy, a consistency that becomes obvious when she notes that the lockdown has consequences for the democratic self-image of the nation." (Sjölander-Lindqvist 4). After addressing her political opponents, Merkel begins to tug at the heartstrings of those already on her side.

Personalization of the crisis and war metaphors are Merkel's other two most effective strategies. She states, "...it's not only about abstract, statistical numbers, this is about a dad, a grandfather...or a mom, a grandmother…" (Sjölander-Lindqvist 6) By combining the emotional with the political, Merkel appeals directly to her citizenry, already found to be a pro-social people. The final way Merkel channeled the energy of the German people into a pro-regulation population is through a war metaphor. The researchers summarize her insistence: "that the situation for the country is severe and that not since World War II has Germany—as a democratic state—had to meet a greater challenge; it must be met as a united country: 'We are a democracy. We do not live under coercion, but by shared knowledge and participation. It is a historical task and only possible to achieve together.'" (Sjölander-Lindqvist 6). Merkel dares to dip into taboo history for the sake of igniting pro-social behavior, and she succeeds.

Wartime messages were not uncommon during the pandemic. Communications researcher Benjamin Bates compiled many addresses that US President Donald Trump gave about the pandemic. During the pandemic, President Trump positioned himself as a "wartime" president. Each of his addresses panders to the "soldiers" the "home front" and "the enemy." However, Bates argues that this metaphor is, unlike Merkel's, ineffective. Bates further argues that Trump ineffectively led the United States press to the same metaphor, resulting in a confusing message for Americans. Bates explains the profound effect Trump had on not only the United States, but the world:

> Naming SARS-CoV2 a Chinese virus also distracts attention from a shared ENEMY to reinforce divisions between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Trump's rhetoric creates a tension between a reality that could benefit from international collaboration and cooperation and a metaphor that emphasizes isolationism and unilateralism. And, in doing so, Trump's rhetoric undermines effective international policy responses to the threat of COVID-19. By transforming healthcare workers, first responders, and delivery persons into SOLDIERS, Trump turns healing and helping and support professions into militarized ones. This transformation injures the professional ethos of these professions and moves them from serving a civilian population into being part of a larger war machine. (Bates 11).

Although the president of the United States is the "commander-in-chief" of the US armed forces, his real role is to be the face of the nation. Trump is considered a negative role model because of his inappropriate handling of the pandemic, and was therefore ineffective in motivating pro-social behavior (Abel 7). The inconsistencies in Trump's messages lead to ineffective

communication across the board. In his one term as president, Trump further split the US political spectrum, instead of uniting it. The warlike, inflexible stance Trump took against the pandemic is similar to his stance on climate change, in that it was ineffective.

Germany and the United States are very different countries, but as world leaders, they have a responsibility to work together in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic taught Germany a lesson in inter-state unity and quick mobilization. Germany rose above its European peers in approval rating from its people not by having the fastest response, but by effective communication. With confidence in its people, Germany was able to push the needle forward on climate change policy even as the pandemic continued. In the meantime, complex lobbying systems and ineffective communication from President Trump left the United States lacking in environmental action.

3. Conclusion

Environmentalists in the United States have struggled to motivate an individualistic nation to work toward the collective good. By analyzing both The United States and Germany's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, US environmentalists can see a path forward for motivating sustainable action. This paper contributes to the scholarship around pro-social behavior by combining interpersonal research with mass communication research. This work also contributes to intercultural communications scholarship by viewing German communication patterns through an American lens. Germany's public has significantly high levels of participation in climate crisis prevention, and average to high levels of participation in COVID prevention measures. Germany's response to the coronavirus indicated that they are a socially conscious population motivated by a government structure that is well-prepared for environmental crises.

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