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Executive hour or political competition in times of crisis?—An analysis of public crisis reporting on the COVID-19 lockdowns in Germany

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Abstract

While much work has looked at how governments responded to the Corona pandemic, little consideration has been given to how the crisis affected party competition and what positions political actors took during this period. How were political actors' positions on COVID-19 portrayed in daily newspapers? And how can we explain these patterns? To answer these questions, this article examines the discourse surrounding both German lockdown decisions by analyzing the public coverage of two German daily newspapers. By means of discourse network analysis, the most central actors of the public discourse are revealed at first. Second, relevant factors influencing the discourse centrality of political actors are analyzed. Therefore, a linear regression is performed to identify party-political factors that have a significant influence on political actors' discourse centrality. Participation in the executive branch in the Länder and federal level as well as having candidate status emerge as central factors influencing discourse centrality.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Crises are considered an absolute stress test for political and administrative leadership as well as society. Their complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and urgency shake long-held beliefs and disrupt routines that are taken for granted in normal times without replacing them with something new.[1] During the COVID-19 pandemic, daily life was shut down in most countries by lockdown orders. Considering these interventions in freedom rights as core elements of democracies, generating public legitimacy through crisis communication played an important role as a core characteristic of crisis management.[2] Hence, most recent research on the legitimization and framing of Corona lockdowns has focused on the different frames used to legitimize the policies both in media and political discourse.[3] However, crises are not only moments where politicians need to legitimize far-reaching decisions. Indeed, they also allow political actors to act strategically in party competition and to take advantage of the exceptional situation to position themselves in public discourse.[4] Existing research has shown for instance that past crises like the Eurozone crisis or the migration crisis were strongly politicized and therefore used by political actors as opportunities for change and to gain political capital.[5] While the literature attests crises to have a huge potential for agenda-setting effects and blame management,[6] we do not know yet to what extent the results of such behavior by political actors may become visible when we inspect media data. Given that COVID-19 encompasses almost all spheres of life and has generated high electoral pressure, it is conceivable that actors have used the pandemic to gain visibility.

Therefore, drawing on data from public media, this paper studies how and which political actors are more visible in the media discourse on the coronavirus pandemic and which institutional factors of the German multilevel system have influenced their visibility and centrality in public discourse. Considering the idiopathic nature of the situation as well as the restrictions on civil liberties, the relevance of researching the public debate with its central actors is high.

As a particularly interesting case to study this research question, the article looks at the multilevel system of Germany, in which a multitude of regional to federal actors needed to develop proposals for solutions as well as to reach binding joint results within a very short period of time in a crisis. Hence, there were many possibilities for political actors from the federal and state (*Länder*) levels to use this situation to position themselves in party competition. Compared to many other countries, the first lockdown in Germany was decided rather late (March 22, 2020), but soon triggered sharp debates that led to social resistance (the so-called *Querdenker* movement). If the lockdown decisions have been used as a political issue to drive political competition, particularly interesting results in the case of Germany can be expected: party-political aspects such as upcoming election dates, government constellations at the federal and state levels and intra- as well as inter-party competition, can be assumed to play an important role. For example, individual *Länder* (or even the federal government) may have sought to gain legitimacy or to increase their own (fiscal, jurisdictional) resources.[7] As the super-election year of 2021 approached, with several state elections and the federal election

scheduled, the competition between the parties and their need for mutual demarcation to distinguish themselves from one another increased. This also applied, and in particular, to the controversial decisions affecting infection control. In addition to all these points, personal and regional interests also had to be balanced against the background of the infection rate and the current incidence.

Methodologically, I study the research question by means of a discourse network analysis that draws on an original data set of hand-coded material from two German newspapers (698 articles in total). This approach allows me to identify how central political actors are in the communication. The actor's centrality then serves as the dependent variable in the second part of the analysis, which examines which variables (such as the participation of a politician in the executive) are related to their discourse centrality.

By answering these questions, the article makes a relevant contribution in three respects: (1) It presents the principal political actors that dominated the public discourse surrounding the Corona lockdowns in Germany. (2) It identifies a number of important political and institutional variables relevant in Germany's multi-level system that are associated with the centrality of political actors in the discourse. (3) It provides interesting evidence for strategic behavior in multilevel systems. The analysis shows that participation in the executive branch at the federal or Länder level as well as having *candidate status* (such as candidacy for chancellor or party chairmanship[8]) are most strongly related to holding a central position in the network. On a more general level, the article fills an important research gap in political science by giving general insights into the functional logic of crisis communication during prolonged periods of crisis in Germany's multilevel system. In addition, the results also allow first conclusions to be drawn about party competition and political communication triggered by crises in other federal systems, in which political competition takes place on multiple levels.

The article is structured in two main parts: The first descriptive part of the article examines in an explorative way the structure of the discourse and identifies its central political actors. It enables us to measure the centrality of political actors in the corona discourse. This centrality measure then forms the dependent variable of the subsequent analysis in the second part of the article, which examines explanations for the structure and the different centralities of political actors within the discourse. For this purpose, central hypotheses are derived from existing findings on crisis management and political competition in Germany's federal multilevel system. After a brief explanation of the independent variables, linear regression is used to analyze statistically influential factors on discourse centrality. The article concludes with a summary of the key findings and an outlook on future research opportunities.

2 | DESCRIPTION: WHO DOMINATES THE DISCOURSE ABOUT CORONA?

To answer the central research question, it is necessary in the first step to measure our dependent variable, namely, the centrality of political actors in the discourse about COVID-19. To examine the central actors, a Discourse Network Analysis[9] of the public discourse in two of Germany's highest-circulation newspapers is conducted. Newspaper articles served as the source of analysis, as they allowed me to capture most statements from nearly all stakeholder groups regarding Corona lockdowns in public discourse.[10] Like all media, newspaper articles are not entirely free of bias. Thus, the analysis of newspaper articles must be evaluated against the background that not only political actors are the decisive forces in public reporting, but that

the media themselves also exercise a selection function. Nevertheless, in terms of the medialization of politics, it can be assumed that political actors know how they should position themselves publicly and formulate statements to get into the print media. This is why newspaper articles are also the preferred data source in academia when it comes to tapping into discourse networks. This chapter provides a detailed overview of how the data set was obtained before going into more detail about the methodology and procedure for discourse network analysis (DNA).

2.1 | Data

The period of investigation runs from March 8, 2020, until April 5, 2020, and December 23, 2020, until January 20, 2021. This study period was chosen because it allows us to examine the public discussion surrounding the two Lockdown resolutions over a period of 1 month each. Since the first Lockdown resolution was made public on March 16, 2020, and the second Lockdown resolution on January 6, 2021, we look at the media coverage 2 weeks before and 2 weeks after both decisions. In addition, the months of March 2020 and January 2021 saw the most newspaper articles published on the subject of Corona and Lockdown, which is why it can be assumed that the data is particularly rich.[11] The data set consists of a total of 697 newspaper articles that have been published in one of Germany's highest circulation quality print media "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" and Germany's highest circulation tabloid newspaper "BILD Zeitung".[12] These two newspapers were selected to cover as broad a spectrum of public discussion as possible.[13] To avoid bias, not only was one of the highest-circulation high-quality print newspapers chosen, but also the highest-circulation tabloid newspaper. In this way, it can be expected that the argumentation can be analyzed comprehensively. All articles were researched via Dow Jones Factiva and the FAZ archive. The search was targeted for articles with a length of more than 750 words and Corona Lockdowns as the main topic.[14] All articles in the data set whose main topic was lockdown measures in other countries that did not contain direct or indirect statements by any actors but journalists/editors or that were written podcasts for the online archive of the newspaper were excluded from the analysis.

2.2 | Method: Discourse network analysis

A suitable method for analyzing which actors and topics determine public discourse is DNA.[15] Since political discourses are complex phenomena that arise from various interdependencies, DNA is particularly appropriate with regard to our research question about the most central actors. Empirical DNA is based on a combination of category-based content analysis and network analysis. There are two different types of networks: one-mode networks and two-mode networks. In the case of one-mode networks, only actors are bound as nodes and the edges symbolize their connection via identically used categories. Different measures can be calculated for networks as a whole and for the individual nodes. The most relevant measure for our question is the centrality of individual nodes as a measure of the importance of individual actors in the discourse. The simplest centrality measure is degree centrality, which indicates the number of edges of a node and is used in the context of this analysis.[16]

For performing the qualitative content analysis of the newspaper articles, *Discourse Network Analyzer* was used.[17] In this context, one statement[18] of an actor in an article was defined as

one unit of analysis. All statements have been coded by the author for four variables: The name of the corresponding actor, the classification of the actor,[19] the concept being addressed by the actor, and a dummy variable indicating either an agreement or disagreement with the mentioned concept.[20] In total, 120 concepts, which have been developed inductively on the coded material, have been coded and summarized in the end into 11 main categories. A total of 974 statements were coded, of which 504 were from the BILD and 470 from the FAZ. The total number of coded statements is therefore distributed almost equally between the two newspaper sources. The quality of the coding was tested for intracoder reliability using 30% of the coded material. The Cohen kappa coefficient calculated here was 0.83 and can thus be classified as "almost perfect" according to Fleiss[21] and Landis & Koch.[22] While a detailed overview of all coded concepts and their composition into main concepts can be found in Supporting Information S1: Appendix A3, Figure 1 provides an initial overview of the frequencies of codes in the main categories.

In a second step, *Discourse Network Analyzer* was used to convert the structural data into a weighted actor x actor network (one-mode network). The tie weight between two actors was calculated as the number of concepts, both actors referred to (*'ignore' transformation*).[23] The network was then imported into the network visualization software *visone*,[24] in which actors and their connections to each other were mapped visually. Actors in the networks are represented as nodes, while the connections between the actors (which are traditionally mapped as edges) have not been mapped for better readability and overview of the networks. The different party affiliations of the actors were highlighted using different colors while actors of the federal government and actors of the state governments are additionally represented by different geometric shapes.[25] The size of the nodes is mapped according to the frequency with which an actor appears in the discourse (the more frequently an actor appears in the discourse, the larger its node in the network). The centrality value of all actors in the network was calculated using "degree centrality," which assigns an importance score based on the number of links held by each node.[26] Due to the ignore transformation, degree centrality means in the context of this analysis, that the more frequently an actor refers to concepts that are also used by many other
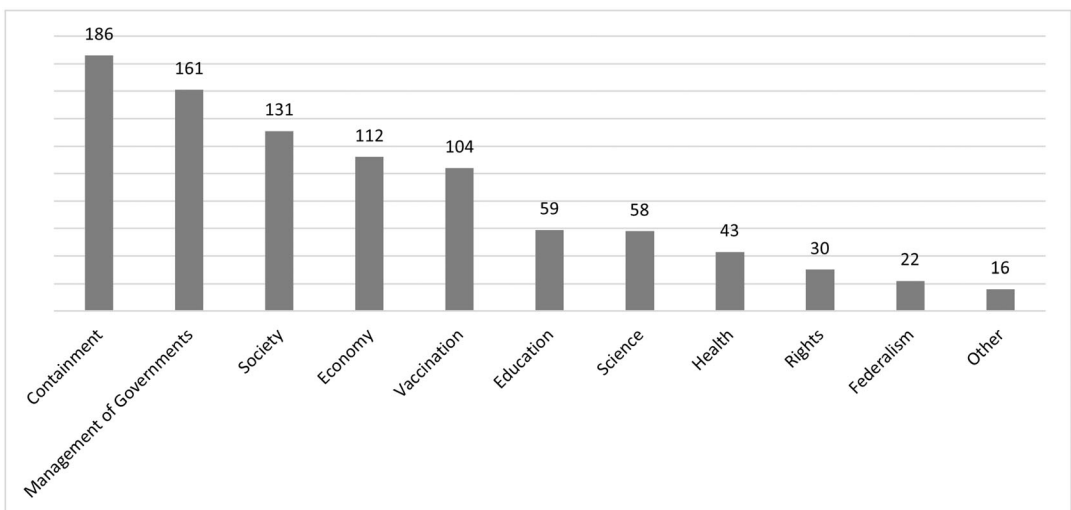

FIGURE 1 Frequency of all coded main categories.

actors in the discourse, the more central the actor becomes to the network. Since the core of the analysis is not about analyzing discourse coalitions or the stance of certain political actors for or against a concept, the agreement or disagreement of concepts is not relevant here. More important is the question of which actors express themselves most frequently in the discourse and on topics that many other actors also take up.

In a final step, for better visualization and readability, a degree centrality threshold of the nodes was defined exploratively.[27] In this way, complex networks can be reduced to clearly arranged networks that only show relevant actors, but not single entries that play a minor role in the discourse.[28]
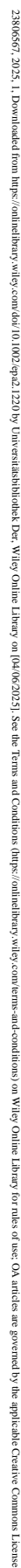
Finally, to check for bias between the two newspapers, which appeal to completely different audiences, separate networks were created for FAZ and BILD. Broadly, they showed key players and concepts in line with the complete network.[29]

2.3 | Presentation of the obtained discourse networks

To get a first idea of the discourse structure around the Corona lockdown decisions, an extensive one-mode network with all political actors is generated. The analysis is guided by the following questions: Which actors can be found in the overall network? Which political organizations do these actors belong to? Which of these actors prove to be particularly important for the discourse? By answering these questions, initial conclusions can be drawn as to which actors have had a particular influence on the discourse and which patterns regarding their party affiliation or function in the political system emerge.

The overall one-mode network is shown in Figure 2 and maps the centralities of all political actors. The centrality layout makes it possible to identify the actors most central to the discourse at a glance: The most central players are at the center of the network. The further away from the center actors are positioned, the less central they are to the network. The light blue circles are gradations of the centrality values in the network, which make it even easier to interpret the positioning of the actors. While the circle in the center has a value of 3.5 (high degree centrality), the outermost circle has a value of 0.04 (low degree centrality). The size of the nodes is in turn determined by the frequency with which an actor appears in the discourse. Frequency is not the same as centrality in that actors can appear frequently, but may always emphasize concepts to which only a few other actors refer and which therefore only play a subordinate role in the discourse. These actors then have a greater frequency, but possibly a lower centrality than other actors who appear less frequently but emphasize more significant concepts. This is why there are a few actors who, despite their lower centrality, are mapped with larger nodes (e.g., Christian Lindner, Julia Klöckner) and, conversely, actors who, despite their greater centrality, are mapped in smaller nodes (e.g., MP Baden-Württemberg, MP Rhineland-Palatinate).

With regard to the stakeholders represented in the network, it can be stated that these are primarily members of the federal government (e.g., Olaf Scholz as the then Federal Minister of Finance, Jens Spahn as the then Federal Health Minister) as well as Länder governments (e.g., MP Bavaria, Ministry of Education RLP, Ministry of Social Affairs Hamburg). In addition, there are several actors who do not belong to any government but come from the governing parties at the federal level CDU, CSU, or SPD (e.g., Carsten Linnemann, Karl Lauterbach, Siemtje Möller, Hans Michelbach). It is striking that only a few players from the opposition parties are represented in the network. Although it would be going too far at this point to discuss the

FIGURE 2   One-mode network of the discourse surrounding Corona Lockdown 1 and 2 with all political actors.[49]

government constellations of all Länder, it can be said that only a minority of actors represented in the network come from the opposition parties at both federal and Länder levels (e.g., Amira Mohamed, Katrin Göring-Eckardt). It is true that the management of the coronavirus pandemic was an extraordinarily risky situation that required rapid action, which had to be achieved primarily through executive negotiation. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable finding that, for example, politicians of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) are almost not represented in the network. It could be assumed that this party in particular, which belongs to the right-wing populist spectrum and has often acted as a self-appointed *guardian of order* in the past, sees the lockdown decisions and the associated restrictions on fundamental rights as a major problem.[30] In contrast, only two AfD politicians, Alexander Gauland and Sebastian Münzenmeier, can be found in the network, both of whom tend to be on the periphery and are therefore less central. This finding is also exciting in that Heinze and Weisskircher's analysis[31] has shown that the AfD is very frequently mentioned in the media reports of WELT and taz on the topic of Corona street protests. On the one hand, this could indicate media-specific differences between the four

newspapers. On the other hand, it could also show that the AfD tends to focus on specific topics and is less represented in thematically broader data sets.

Going into more detail, the most central players can be identified at the center of the network. The five key players in the network include the Minister President of Bavaria (Markus Söder, CSU, Degree Centrality 3.505), Angela Merkel (Federal Chancellor, CDU, Degree Centrality 2.872), Jens Spahn (Federal Minister of Health, CDU, Degree Centrality 2.745), the Minister President of Saxony (Michael Kretschmer, CDU, Degree Centrality 2.66), and the Mayor of Hamburg (Peter Tschentscher, SPD). Among the latter, the Minister Presidents of various Länder (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Thuringia, Saarland, North Rhine Westphalia, and so on) prove to be particularly central in this network too, while other members of Länder parliaments or Länder governments tend to be underrepresented and appear on the periphery of the network, if at all.

In summary, through the analysis of the discourse network, it can be concluded that the discourse surrounding both Corona lockdowns in Germany was one primarily shaped by political actors of the governing parties CDU, CSU, and SPD as well as Federal Ministers and Minister Presidents of the Länder. As we can recognize strong differences in the centralities of the various players, it can be assumed that some players have positioned themselves more strongly on the topic of corona lockdowns than others. Initial conclusions can be drawn about the special position of Minister Presidents and members of the federal government.

3 | THEORY: GAINING POLITICAL VISIBILITY IN HARD TIMES—EXPLANATIONS FOR THE STRUCTURE OF DISCOURSE

The first part of this article has laid out the structures of the discourse surrounding Corona lockdowns and shown which actors and issues were of particular relevance. As the previous DNA has shown, the Corona lockdowns appear to have been used as a political issue by political actors to engage in political competition and gain political visibility. The question that has remained unanswered in this process, however, is how the structures of public discourse can be explained. In the second part of this article, the question therefore is, what factors determine the extent to which certain political actors enter the arena of political contest and make public statements about Corona lockdowns. This question will be explored in the following section by outlining the effects of COVID-19 on Germany's political system, which can be drawn from past research on crisis management. Besides that, the dynamics and peculiarities that arise from the federal structure of the German system, where the party system and thus the competition between political parties and political actors is characterized by the existence of several political levels are also looked at. This results in some key assumptions regarding the research question, which ultimately leads to the hypotheses.

3.1 | Crises as "the hour of executive"

In Germany's federal state, executive power is distributed between the federal government and the 16 Länder governments. Whereas the federal level is primarily in charge of policy formulation, the Länder are mainly responsible for policy implementation, which is often characterized by the term *administrative federalism*.[32] The Länder, which themselves have only

limited legislative powers, nevertheless enjoy a high degree of autonomy since they are not subject to any hierarchical control or supervision by the federal government.[33] For the passing of laws in the Bundesrat as well as their implementation in the sense of providing 'equivalent' living conditions (Art. 72(2) of the Basic Law), German federalism relies on a high degree of vertical as well as horizontal cooperation.[34] Almost all formal and informal modes of collaboration provide for the involvement of the state executives, which is one of the reasons why German federalism is also characterized as a strong executive federalism in international comparison.[35]

With the coronavirus pandemic, these characteristics of German executive federalism came up against an unprecedented nationwide threat situation that put governments under immense pressure: High uncertainty and the urgency to react quickly created strong incentives to concentrate power on the national executive. It is well known from past research that times of crises lead to executive dominance, as political leaders need to make generally binding decisions as quickly and effectively as possible to protect the population.[36] While in general, German federalism can be classified as highly centralized in international comparison,[37] this is less the case for the area of pandemic management. Under the *Infection Control Act* (*IfSG*),[38] measures to contain epidemic situations at the onset of the Corona pandemic were primarily in the hands of the *Länder*: provisions on assembly rights, curfews, restaurant laws, as well as the closure of stores, schools, and universities. The federal government, on the other hand, was only responsible for enforcing border closures and entry regulations.[39] To bring these disparate responsibilities together and achieve, as far as possible, the same conditions nationwide, the "peak council"—the Conference of Premiers (*MPK*)—had a special role to play in the management of COVID-19.[40] While the MPK also plays an important role in horizontal coordination in the German multi-level system in normal times, during the coronavirus pandemic it has become the interface for trend-setting decisions. As Hegele and Schnabel[41] showed, especially during the lockdown phases, the chancellor and the Minister Presidents of the *Länder* held weekly meetings as part of the *MPK* and thereby coordinated their crisis management. They agreed to limit gatherings and events; to restrict contact; to impose self-quarantine on travelers; and to close bars, restaurants, and shops. Consequently, decision-making during COVID-19 was rather decentralized and coordinated between the *Länder* executives and the executives at the federal level. It is expected that this prominent role in pandemic management should also be reflected in crisis communication as well as public reporting. Therefore, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1. (Executive Dominance Hypothesis): The discourse networks are primarily dominated by actors in the executive branch.

3.2 | Electoral cycle and intra-party competition in times of COVID-19

German federalism is characterized in particular by decentralized and highly cooperative functional logic. Numerous research papers have examined the resulting peculiarities for political practice. The various conditions and interdependencies of party competition in the German federal state are one of the core topics that has repeatedly received a great deal of attention. In particular, the increasing fragmentation and polarization of the party landscape in Germany gives rise to increasingly complex dynamics that can be traced back to the federal

structure in Germany. One of these dynamics is considered to be the elections held at different intervals at the federal level as well as in the *Länder*. Those different election cycles and the resulting large number of election dates have several effects on party competition in Germany: On the one hand, the frequent election dates may lead to a change in the majority ratios in the Bundesrat, which in turn may again have federal policy implications.[42] On the other hand, there is a kind of permanent election campaign in the states, which can also have an impact on federal politics. It has been shown in the past, for example, that the proximity to a national election influences the content of the election campaign as well as the results of second-order elections.[43]

Under the premise that actors have used the Corona lockdowns as a political topic to position themselves in the public discourse and thereby also gain votes, it can be expected that actors in states that run up to an upcoming election date are more central to the overall discourse than actors in *Länder*, that are far from their next election date. The closer an election date gets; the greater actors' incentive is to make themselves strong in the discourse by using the highly significant issue of Corona lockdowns politically to convince voters of their own commitment. Shortly after the period of investigation, elections took place in Baden Württemberg (March 2021) and Rhineland Palatinate (March 2021). As a result, it could already be seen in the descriptions of the discourse networks that actors such as the Minister President of Rhineland-Palatinate, Malu Dreyer (SPD), but also the Minister President of Baden Wurttemberg, Winfried Kretschmann (Greens) as well as the minister of education of Baden-Württemberg, Susanne Eisenmann (CDU) take on relatively central positions. These observations reinforce our assumption that the electoral cycle has an impact on discourse centrality. Consequently, the second hypothesis, **H2**, is formulated:

> **Hypothesis 2.** (Electoral Cycle Hypothesis): Actors that are close to their election date are more central to the overall discourse network.

Besides this inter-party competition, which is particularly pronounced during upcoming election dates, ideological cleavages can also occur within one party. During the period of investigation, there were fights for the party chairmanship as well as the chancellor's candidacy in the CDU, CSU, SPD, and Green Party. After 18 years of party leadership in the CDU, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced her resignation from politics and thus also for the party chair and the chancellor candidacy in 2018. After many intraparty disputes, there was also a great deal of disunity within the CDU/CSU at the beginning of the Corona pandemic up to the Bundestag elections in September 2021, which led to tensions and disputes between politicians such as Friedrich Merz, Markus Söder, Armin Laschet, and others. Especially between Söder (CSU) and Laschet (CDU), who at the time were themselves Minister Presidents in Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia, disputes sparked frequently. But discussions also took place within the ranks of the Greens and SPD about who would win the race for the party chairmanship and the chancellorship. In this respect, the pandemic management and the apparently politicized discourse surrounding Corona lockdowns were also characterized by inner-party power struggles and negotiation processes. It can therefore be expected that actors who were exposed to strong intraparty competition sought to gain political profile by taking particularly frequent public positions on Corona lockdowns, to make their opinions heard in the discourse and become more central to the discourse. This results in the third and final hypothesis, **H3**:

Hypothesis 3. (Intraparty Competition Hypothesis): Actors who are exposed to strong intraparty competition are more central to the overall discourse network.

4 | ANALYSIS: GAINING POLITICAL VISIBILITY IN HARD TIMES: EXPLANATIONS FOR THE STRUCTURE OF DISCOURSE

4.1 | Research design

To test the hypotheses stated in the earlier section, the second methodological part uses linear regression analysis to test the statistical relationship of the dependent variables on the independent variable, which is discourse centrality.[44] As explained earlier, the indicator for discourse centrality of an actor is its degree centrality measure from the network previously presented.

A total of seven main models were calculated, in which we tested all theoretically relevant variables reflected in the hypotheses. These included participation in the *executive* branch of the federal or Länder government, holding *candidate status* and the *election date*. In addition, the affiliation to the government or opposition in the respective Länder parliament or Bundestag, the membership of one of the governing parties as well as dummy variables of the Länder served as control variables. In further models (reported in Supporting Information S1: Appendix A1), dummy variables of party membership were also tested, to see, whether "parties matter" and therefore party political ideologies have an impact on centrality in discourse. Furthermore, since some authors have shown[45] that pandemic-related factors must be taken into account when explaining developments around COVID-19, a control variable for incidence[46] has also been included. Varying degrees in terms of problem pressure might explain why some actors spoke out more frequently on Corona lockdowns than others: the higher the number of COVID-19 infections, the more restrictions need to be implemented and the more actors position themselves on this topic in public discourse. Therefore, incidence was included as a control variable in regression model 3.

To prevent multicollinearity, not all variables were included in all models at the same time. The inclusion of dummy variables was also omitted in some models to rule out over-specification by the control variables. All regressions were estimated using Heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors.[47] Table 1 shows the measurements and descriptives of each independent variable.

4.2 | Results—Why are some political actors more central to the discourse than others?

The second research question of whether and, if so, how the different centrality values of the political actors in the public discourse about the Corona lockdowns can be statistically explained is answered in the next section. For this, Table 2 shows the results of the linear regression model, which are then tied back to the theoretical expectations.

Our first hypothesis, which assumed strong executive dominance at the state and federal levels, is supported by all regression models. Thus, the participation of an actor in the executive branch of both the federal government as well as the respective *Land* increases its centrality in

TABLE 1 Measurement and descriptive statistics of the independent variables in the study.

Independent variables	Measurement	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
Exe_Fed	0 = No member of federal executive 1 = Member of federal executive	0.15	0.36	0.00	1.00
Exe_Land	0 = No member of Länder executive 1 = Member of Länder executive	0.41	0.49	0.00	1.00
Gov_Fed	0 = Federal opposition member 1 = Federal government member	0.33	0.47	0.00	1.00
Gov_Land	0 = Länder opposition member 1 = Länder government member	0.39	0.49	0.00	1.00
Incidence	Mean of 7-day incidence during the study period in the actor's respective state or at the federal level for members of the Bundestag.	648.88	142.34	397.51	1187.20
GovParty	0 = No member of governing party on federal level (CDU, CSU or SPD) 1 = Member of governing party on federal level (CDU, CSU, or SPD)	0.75	0.44	0.00	1.00
CandStat	0 = No candidate status 1 = Either candidate for party chair or chancellor candidacy	0.06	0.24	0.00	1.00
Ele_Date	Days until the next election date, mean value in the study period	587.77	355.12	39.00	1534.00

the discourse significantly. It should be noted that in Models 1, 5, and 6 the effect of participation in the executive branch at the *Länder* level is even stronger than the effect at the federal level. On the one hand, this result can be explained by the fact that the Infection Control Act, before its amendment in the form of the federal emergency brake, gave the *Länder* a major responsibility for pandemic management. On the other hand, the Minister Presidents in particular were also given great importance through the Conference of Minister Presidents, whose special role during COVID-19 has already been highlighted in various works and has apparently also been reflected in the public discourse.

The second hypothesis, which referred to the election cycles in the federal state and the *Länder*, is not supported on the basis of the regression models. While we do see a significant coefficient in Model 2, the additional Model 4 (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix A1) shows no statistically significant relationship. Therefore, despite initial assumptions from the discourse networks previously presented and analyzed, in which some actors from Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wurttemberg appeared central, no clear statement can be made in this regard based on the regression models.

The third hypothesis, which is related to intraparty competition, is again supported by Models 5 and 6 as well as the additional models (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix A1)

TABLE 2 Linear regression model for party-political and system-relevant effects as well as pandemic-related factors (DV: Discourse centrality).[a]

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(Intercept)	0.663***	1.751***	0.330	0.618***	0.598***	0.568***	0.532***
	(6.604)	(2.650)	(1.058)	(4.246)	(5.630)	(5.190)	(3.989)
Exe_Fed	0.604**	0.603**	0.654**		0.540**	0.567***	
	(2.140)	(2.125)	(2.555)		(2.018)	(2.682)	
Exe_Land	0.621***	0.602***	0.533***		0.628***	0.582***	
	(3.429)	(3.275)	(3.672)		(3.500)	(3.772)	
Ele_Date		−0.003*					
		(−1.666)					
Incidence			0.000				
			(0.975)				
Gov_Fed				0.365*			
				(1.742)			
Gov_Land				0.693***			
				(4.069)			
CandStat					0.687**	0.704**	
					(2.319)	(2.260)	
GovParty							0.437***
							(3.169)
DBerlin	−0.521**	−0.509**		−0.528**	−0.462**		−0.258
	(−2.264)	(−2.188)		(−2.138)	(−1.993)		(−1.123)
DHesse	−0.390*	1.602		−0.387	−0.330		−0.216
	(−1.708)	(1.318)		(−1.562)	(−1.429)		(−0.798)
DSchlesHol	−0.189	0.336		−0.197	−0.130		0.011
	(−0.799)	(0.803)		(−0.760)	(−0.543)		(0.046)
DNRW	−0.209	0.423		−0.225	−0.150		0.149
	(−0.737)	(0.892)		(−0.745)	(−0.527)		(0.570)
DLowSaxony	0.040	1.059		0.048	0.101		0.155
	(0.146)	(1.579)		(0.165)	(0.364)		(0.558)
DBaWü	0.640**	0.129		0.637**	0.700**		1.040***
	(2.329)	(0.315)		(2.041)	(2.513)		(5.552)
DBavaria	0.321	2.321		0.293	0.379		0.782
	(0.355)	(1.540)		(0.323)	(0.417)		(0.913)
DHamburg	0.025	−0.612		−0.003	0.083		0.341
	(0.041)	(−1.338)		(−0.004)	(0.134)		(0.579)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
DRLP	−0.242	−0.748*		−0.039	−0.185		0.219
	(−0.803)	(−1.745)		(−0.179)	(−0.611)		(1.268)
DSaxony	−0.162	2.711		−0.166	−0.102		0.092
	(−0.235)	(1.467)		(−0.241)	(−0.147)		(0.125)
DBrandenburg	−0.566**	2.313		−0.594**	−0.508**		−0.032
	(−2.624)	(1.327)		(−2.541)	(−2.358)		(−0.210)
DBremen	−1.009***	0.598		−1.037***	−0.952***		−0.694***
	(−4.779)	(0.604)		(−4.518)	(−4.510)		(−5.108)
DThuringia	0.188	3.207*		0.196	0.249		0.630
	(0.306)	(1.672)		(0.329)	(0.404)		(0.742)
DMeckPomm	1.039***	1.057***		1.011***	1.096***		1.355***
	(5.060)	(5.093)		(4.510)	(5.348)		(10.707)
DSaarland	0.870***	1.374***		0.842***	0.927***		1.186***
	(4.237)	(3.736)		(3.756)	(4.524)		(9.372)
DSaxonyAnh	0.110	−0.171		0.082	0.167		0.425***
	(0.534)	(−0.644)		(0.365)	(0.816)		(3.363)
Num.Obs.	103	103	103	103	103	103	103

*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

[a]Further statistical tests: The variance inflation factor (VIF) was calculated for the models, which showed no correlation between the independent variables. Furthermore, the Breusch–Pagan test was performed, which yielded a value of 0.0442. The null hypothesis of homoscedasticity was therefore rejected. In addition, all parameters were estimated with robust standard errors (HC4), see Andrew F. Hayes and Li Cai, "Using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators in OLS regression: An introduction and software implementation," *Behavior Research Methods* 39/4 (2007).

of the regression analysis. Thus, it can be stated that holding a candidate status also has a strong significant effect on discourse centrality.

Looking at the various control variables, Model 3 shows that incidence has no significant effect on discourse centrality. However, Model 4 shows that members of government at Länder level in particular have a significant and relatively strong effect on discourse centrality, which again supports our first hypothesis on Länder level. A smaller and less significant effect is also shown for members of the federal government. This finding suggests that oppositions at Länder level were hardly involved or heard in the political discourse on the topic of Corona lockdowns. It can be assumed that the Länder governments were much stronger in discussing and managing the pandemic than their parliaments. This indicates an underrepresentation of the Länder parliaments compared to the Länder governments, which has already been discussed more frequently in the context of German federalism. This is less evident at the federal level. Furthermore, Model 7 shows that party membership in the governing parties at the federal level has a strong effect on discourse centrality. However, this finding is hardly surprising, as at least one of the governing parties at the federal level was involved in all Länder governments.

Except Baden Württemberg (Greens) and Thuringia (Left), all Minister Presidents came from one of these parties.

In summary, the results of the regression analysis provide strong support for hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 3. Political actors who belong to the executive at the federal or Länder level and actors who have candidate status prove to be more central in the discourse on Corona lockdowns. In addition, the results suggest that incidence has no influence on discourse centrality. Furthermore, it became apparent that, particularly at Länder level, actors from the governing parties were even more extensively covered in the media than actors from opposition parties. This suggests a generally weaker position of the Länder parliaments and especially their opposition compared to Länder executives.[48]

5 | CONCLUSIONS

The analysis allows several conclusions to be drawn about crisis discourse and, moreover, the management of the Corona pandemic with respect to the two lockdown resolutions in Germany. The central research question of which actors prove to be central in communicating the two lockdown decisions in Germany and what factors influence their discourse centrality can therefore be answered as follows. First, the DNA showed that although the corona lockdown decisions were guided by the opinions and recommendations of many scientists, political actors were covered in public media the most extensively. The question of the factors that significantly influence the discourse centrality of the political actors could be answered with linear regression analysis in such a way that a strong and statistically robust association between a political actor's discourse centrality and their participation in the federal and state executive branch could be shown. The larger effect of membership in state executives suggests that executive dominance has had an even greater impact on state actors than federal actors in the wake of the Corona crisis management. These findings again highlight the importance of the federal system in Germany for pandemic management and are in line with previous work on Corona management, which has attributed particular importance to the Conference of Minister Presidents and thus also to the heads of the Länder. Furthermore, the linear regression analysis also showed a strong association between political actor's discourse centrality and their membership of government at the federal and especially Länder level. This shows that political competition was characterized less by a dualism between government and opposition and more by competition between the different executives and members of the governing parties at the federal and state levels. Besides that, actors with a strong incentive for intraparty competition occupy a special position in the discourse network. A significant effect on the discourse centrality could also be demonstrated for having candidate status.

In sum, this article has provided first important insights into the functional logic of crisis communication during COVID-19 in the first pandemic year in Germany. Several factors influencing the discourse centrality of political actors were identified. This study therefore also allows initial conclusions to be drawn about crisis communication and crisis management in other federal systems. The present results suggest that party competition in multilevel systems also takes place at several levels during times of crisis and is used for positioning in the public sphere. The results of this study can therefore be applied primarily to other federal systems with electoral offices at different levels, whereby a comparative country study would be of great interest for future investigations. In addition, it would also be relevant to investigate whether

and to what extent changes to the here-identified effects on discourse centrality can be observed over the course of the pandemic in Germany. Particularly since there have been significant changes in pandemic management in the spring of 2021 with the amendment of the Infection Protection Act - the so-called Federal Emergency Brake. The results of this study should also be examined more closely against the background of agency and rhetorical skill in further studies. The choice of newspaper articles as a source of analysis suggests that trained journalists such as Markus Söder might have had a strategic advantage.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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ENDNOTES

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[2] Toddi A. Steelman et al., 'What information do people use, trust, and find useful during a disaster? Evidence from five large wildfires', *Natural Hazards* 76/1 (2015); Arnd J. Garth (ed.), *Krisenmanagement und Kommunikation: Das Wort ist ein Schwert - die Wahrheit ein Schild*, 1. Auflage (Wiesbaden: Gabler, 2008); *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication*, LEA's communication series (Mahwah, N.J., London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003), available from http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0709/2003052859-d.html.

[3] Sarah-Michelle Nienhaus, 'Framing the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparison of Political and Media Framing During the First Three Waves in Germany', *German Politics* (2023); Iris Reus, 'Die mediale Darstellung des Föderalismus während der Corona-Pandemie – Eine Auswertung von Positionen, Konnotationen und Bewertungen in deutschen Tageszeitungen', *dms – der moderne staat – Zeitschrift für Public Policy, Recht und Management* 14/2-2021 (2021); Sonja Blum and Johanna Kuhlmann, 'Wir sind Helden. Sozialpolitische Maßnahmen und politische Kommunikation in der Corona-Pandemie', *dms – der moderne staat – Zeitschrift für Public Policy, Recht und Management* 14/2-2021 (2021).

[4] In the context of this study, the term "positioning" refers less to a clearly active process in which a politician positions himself, but rather to a position that we see when analyzing statements of these actors in the media. Although this can also result from media logic, we know from existing research that political actors do actively use the media to position themselves in the public sphere. See, among other Peter van Aelst and Stefaan Walgrave (eds), *How political actors use the media: A functional analysis of the medias role in politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[5] Julia Simon, 'The crisis discourse's blind spot: EU-level politicization and the endogenization of the migration crisis', *Journal of European Integration* 45/5 (2023); Anna-Lena Högenauer, 'The Politicization of the European Central Bank and the Bundestag', *Politics and Governance* 7/3 (2019); Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart and Allan McConnell, 'Crisis exploitation: political and policy impacts of framing contests', *Journal of European Public Policy* 16/1 (2009).

[6] Christopher Hood et al., 'Testing times: Exploring staged responses and the impact of blame management strategies in two examination fiasco cases', *European Journal of Political Research* 48/6 (2009); Thomas A. Birkland, *Lessons of disaster: Policy change after catastrophic events*, 1st print, American governance and public policy series (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

[7] Sabine Kropp, Christoph Nguyen and Antonios Souris, 'Zusammenhalt im Bundesstaat? Bundesfreundliche und opportunistische Argumentationsstrategien in der Pandemie', *dms – der moderne staat – Zeitschrift für Public Policy, Recht und Management* 15/1-2022 (2022), p.22.

[8] In detail, the candidate status applies to the following coded politicians: Annalena Baerbock, Dietmar Bartsch, Saskia Esken, Robert Habeck, Lars Klingbeil, Armin Laschet, Christian Lindner, Friedrich Merz, Norbert Röttgen, Olaf Scholz, Markus Söder, Jens Spahn, Alice Weidel.

[9] Frank Janning et al., 'Diskursnetzwerkanalyse. Überlegungen zur Theoriebildung und Methodik', in Volker Schneider and Frank Janning (eds), *Politiknetzwerke: Modelle, Anwendungen und Visualisierungen*, 1. Aufl., Lehrbuch (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009).

[10] A conscious decision was made not to analyze tweets, as these only yield a small amount of content due to their brevity and are also received by a smaller mass of people in Germany. The selected daily newspapers cover a broader spectrum of readers in their print and online editions. The analysis of these newspaper articles must be evaluated against the background that not only political actors are the decisive forces, but that the media themselves also exercise a selection function. Nevertheless, in terms of the medialization of politics, it can be assumed that political actors know how they should position themselves publicly and formulate statements to get into the print media. The analysis of parliamentary debates was also out of the question due to the small amount of data in the periods under investigation. In addition, it is also known from existing research that the patterns of argumentation in parliamentary debates and newspaper articles on Corona are very similar (Nienhaus, 'Framing the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparison of Political and Media Framing During the First Three Waves in Germany').

[11] See online archive BILD and FAZ for the period 2020-2022.

[12] Allensbacher Markt- und Werbeträgeranalysen, AWA 2020

[13] Both newspapers tend to belong to the center-right spectrum. One could also have chosen a right-wing and a left-wing daily newspaper. However, the discourse surrounding the lockdowns was characterized less by a left-right dimension than by opposition to the system. Therefore, the comparison of quality newspapers and tabloids was more important to us. The selection of newspapers was further restricted by their availability as daily newspapers.

[14] The exact search string for researching the articles was "(Corona* or COVID*) and (Lockdown* or Schliess* or Shutdown*) and (Regier* or Politi* or Opposition* or Minister* or Parlament*) and wc>750".

[15] Philip Leifeld, 'Polarization of coalitions in an agent-based model of political discourse', *Computational Social Networks* 1/1 (2014); Christina H. Buckton et al., 'A discourse network analysis of UK newspaper coverage of the "sugar tax" debate before and after the announcement of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy', *BMC public health* 19/1 (2019); Gillian Fergie et al., 'Mapping discourse coalitions in the minimum unit pricing for alcohol debate: a discourse network analysis of UK newspaper coverage', *Addiction (Abingdon, England)* 114/4 (2019).

[16] Allan Muller, 'Using Discourse Network Analysis to Measure Discourse Coalitions: Towards a Formal Analysis of Political Discourse', *World Political Science* 11/2 (2015), p.390.

[17] Discourse Network Analyzer is a freeware computer program that allows the qualitative coding of articles and prepares the data for network analysis and visualizations.

[18] In terms of DNA, a statement is understood to be a text portion in which an actor reveals his or her policy preferences in the text. (Philip Leifeld and Sebastian Haunss, 'Political discourse networks and the conflict over software patents in Europe', *European Journal of Political Research* 51/3 (2012)).

[19] The classification was made into different groups, such as Virologists, Scientists, Physicians, Members of the Federal Government, Corresponding Party Membership, etc. Ultimately, only the codes of the political actors were used in this study.

[20] The codebook in the appendix provides information on the various categories and the understanding of agreement and disagreement with them.

[21] Joseph L. Fleiss, Bruce Levin and Myunghee C. Paik, *Statistical Methods for Rates and Proportions* (Wiley, 2003).

[22] J. R. Landis and Gary G. Koch, 'The Measurement of Observer Agreement for Categorical Data', *Biometrics* 33/1 (1977).

[23] *'Ignore' transformation* measures the number of identical concepts that two actors use – without any distinction between a positive or negative stance on them. It was chosen instead of *'congruence', 'conflict', or 'subtract' transformation*, since neither competitive coalitions nor the personal attitudes of the actors were of interest, but rather the frequency of their occurrence in the discourse. See Philip Leifeld, 'Discourse network analysis: policy debates as dynamic networks', in Jennifer N. Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery and Mark Lubell (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.308.

[24] Available at: http://www.visone.info/ (accessed July 2023).

[25] For detailed information, see the description of Figure 2.

[26] Muller, 'Using Discourse Network Analysis to Measure Discourse Coalitions: Towards a Formal Analysis of Political Discourse', p.390.

[27] Philip Leifeld, 'Discourse network analysis: policy debates as dynamic networks', in pp.315–16.

[28] These thresholds were only used to provide a clear overview of the networks. The degree centrality of all actors contained in the data set was calculated and used for further analysis; actors with a very low centrality value are simply not shown graphically.

[29] These networks can be found in the Supporting Information S1: Appendix A4.

[30] Katja Demler, 'Im Schatten von Covid-19: Thematisierungsstrategien der Parteien in der Bundestagswahl 2021', *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 53/2 (2022), p.303.

[31] Anna-Sophie Heinze and Manès Weisskircher, 'How Political Parties Respond to Pariah Street Protest: The Case of Anti-Corona Mobilization in Germany', *German Politics* 32/3 (2023).

[32] Nathalie Behnke and Sabine Kropp, 'Administrative Federalism', in Sabine Kuhlmann et al. (eds), *Public Administration in Germany*, Governance and Public Management (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021); Sean Mueller and Alan Fenna, 'Dual versus Administrative Federalism: Origins and Evolution of Two Models', *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 52/4 (2022); Gerhard Lehmbruch, 'Föderalismus als entwicklungsgeschichtlich geronnene Verteilungsentscheidungen', in Hans-Georg Wehling (ed.), *Die deutschen Länder* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2000).

[33] Nathalie Behnke, 'Germany: cooperation and executive dominance', in John Kincaid and J. Leckrone (eds), *Teaching Federalism* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), p.222.

[34] This is why German federalism is also referred to as *cooperative federalism*. See: Sabine Kropp, *Kooperativer Föderalismus und Politikverflechtung*, 1. Aufl., Lehrbuch 7 (Wiesbaden: VS Verl. für Sozialwiss, 2010).

[35] Matthias Niedobitek, 'The German Bundesrat and Executive Federalism', *Perspectives on Federalism* 10/2 (2018), p.209; Philipp Dann, *Parlamente im Exekutivföderalismus: Eine Studie zum Verhältnis von föderaler Ordnung und parlamentarischer Demokratie in der Europäischen Union*, Beiträge zum ausländischen

öffentlichen Recht und Völkerrecht 166 (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2004); Zugl.: Frankfurt a.M., Univ., Diss., 2002-2003.

[36] Arjen Boin et al., *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*, Second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[37] André Kaiser and Stephan Vogel, 'Centralization/Centralization in Germany, 1949–2010', *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 49/1 (2019).

[38] In German "Infektionsschutzgesetz": Federal law against dangerous or communicable diseases in humans and regulates the necessary cooperation and collaboration of federal, *Länder* and local authorities as well as physicians, veterinarians, hospitals, scientific institutions, and other stakeholders.

[39] The *IfSG* was amended several times in the course of the pandemic. However, this is negligible in the context of this study, as the most significant amendment took place after the period under review. In April 2021, the so-called *Federal Emergency Brake* ("Bundesnotbremse") was passed, which allowed the federal government to take additional measures if the incidence was stable at more than 100 infections per 100,000 inhabitants in a county or a city without a county.

[40] Christian Person, Nathalie Behnke, and Till Jürgens, 'Effects of Territorial Party Politics on Horizontal Coordination among the German Länder – An Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic Management in Germany', *German Politics* (2023); Sabine Kuhlmann and Jochen Franzke, 'Multi-level responses to COVID-19: crisis coordination in Germany from an intergovernmental perspective', *Local Government Studies* 48/2 (2022); Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, 'Federalism in a Time of Plague: How Federal Systems Cope With Pandemic', *The American Review of Public Administration* 50/6-7 (2020).

[41] Yvonne Hegele and Johanna Schnabel, 'Federalism and the management of the COVID-19 crisis: centralization, decentralization, and (non-)coordination', *West European Politics* 44/5-6 (2021).

[42] Thomas Bräuninger et al., 'Parteienwettbewerb in Mehrebenensystemen', in Jochen Mueller et al. (eds), *Parteienwettbewerb in den deutschen Bundesländern*, 2., vollständig überarbeitete Auflage (Wiesbaden, Heidelberg: Springer VS, 2020), p.8.

[43] Ibid., p.20.

[44] Specific regression techniques for network data, such as QAP regression, were not used in this analysis, as it does not deal with the statistical relationships between reciprocity and centrality. In other words, no statements are to be made from one matrix to the next. For the application of linear and multiple regression models in relation to centrality values in networks, see also: Tamara V. Young, Yuling Wang, and Wayne D. Lewis, 'Explaining How Political Actors Gain Strategic Positions', *Educational Policy* 30/6 (2016).

[45] Sarah Engler et al., 'Democracy in times of the pandemic: explaining the variation of COVID-19 policies across European democracies', *West European Politics* 44/5-6 (2021); Sylvia Kritzinger et al., "Rally round the flag': the COVID-19 crisis and trust in the national government', *West European Politics* 44/5-6 (2021); Arndt Leininger and Max Schaub, *Voting at the dawn of a global pandemic* (2020).

[46] Here, the 7-day incidence of the respective Land or the entire state (for federal actors) was measured as the mean over the study period. Data set used: https://www.corona-in-zahlen.de/bundeslaender/ (accessed 05 Jul 2023).

[47] J. S. Long and Laurie H. Ervin, 'Using Heteroscedasticity Consistent Standard Errors in the Linear Regression Model', *The American Statistician* 54/3 (2000).

[48] The state executives themselves are of course also part of the state parliaments. The regression findings merely emphasize their prominent role in the media coverage.

[49] Reading aid: This is a centrality representation. The more central the nodes, the more central the actor for the discourse network. The larger a node is, the more frequent it is coded. Octagons represent the actors belonging to the federal government. Triangles represent the actors belonging to the state governments. The different colors represent the different parties according to the legend.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.