

Let the Scientists Speak

How CDC Experts Have Been Sidelined during the COVID-19 Pandemic

HIGHLIGHTS

Compared with epidemics that occurred during previous administrations, scientists in the Trump administration have given proportionally fewer press briefings about COVID-19, have spoken much less of the time during press briefings than the president, and have even been prevented from speaking publicly. And as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—the agency that should be leading the fight against COVID-19—has gone silent since early March, the president has been speaking about the disease more. The public deserves to hear the most up-to-date information science has to offer, not harmful misinformation from political officials.

In the midst of an epidemic, we all deserve to hear timely, accurate information directly from experts on how to protect our health and safety. But since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, communications from experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have largely taken a back seat to administration officials with no scientific or public health expertise.

Moreover, the White House has spread misinformation on the epidemic's severity and potential solutions, hindering the public's access to reliable science-based guidance (McCarthy 2020). Since early March 2020, public access to CDC experts' advice on COVID-19 has been largely absent, and scientists have been censored (Sun 2020). For example:

- Since February 27, all federal scientists' public communications on COVID-19 have been required to undergo a White House clearance check (Shear and Haberman 2020b).
- Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has had to cancel five Sunday talk show appearances, avoid appearing on CNN, and decline to testify in a House committee hearing (Concha 2020; Wilkie 2020; Snell 2020).
- Dozens of top-level White House meetings on COVID-19 were classified, barring experts from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from even entering the room (Roston and Taylor 2020).



During a White House Coronavirus Task Force briefing on April 10, President Trump speaks while Drs. Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx listen in the background. Despite having a wealth of scientific knowledge, federal scientists have spoken far less than political officials like the president on the COVID-19 crisis.

Compared with health crises during previous administrations, the public is hearing less from the CDC and more from political leaders.

- When CDC experts submitted a plan recommending that elderly and physically fragile Americans avoid flying on commercial airlines during the epidemic, senior administration officials ordered these recommendations removed (Stobbe 2020).
- Dr. Rick Bright, a vaccine expert, was reassigned and demoted from his job at the HHS for challenging administration misinformation about two drugs touted as possible treatments for COVID-19 (Shear and Haberman 2020a).
- The White House blocked the CDC from publishing a report that would guide local authorities on how and when to open their economies, allegedly telling CDC experts that the report “would never see the light of day” (Dearen and Stobbe 2020).

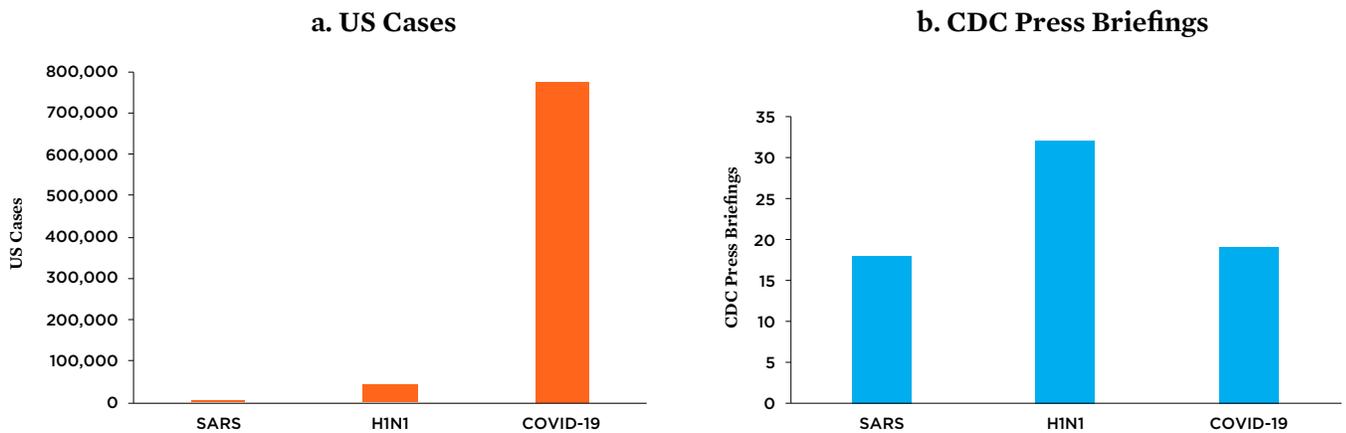
Compared with health crises during previous administrations, the public is hearing less from the CDC and more from

political leaders. From severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) to Ebola to H1N1 influenza (swine flu), the public typically heard first and most from knowledgeable experts, but during the COVID-19 crisis, it has largely been denied this same level of access to science-based information.

The Public Is Hearing Less from the CDC ...

- Press briefings are a key way for the CDC to communicate with the public, offering journalists direct access to scientific and public health experts—which is crucial during a novel epidemic like COVID-19.
- Many federal agencies have taken their media policies offline during the Trump administration, including two CDC policies (“Release of Information to News Media” and “Clearance of Information Products Disseminated Outside CDC for Public Use”) that can no longer be found on its website. This prevents the public and journalists from understanding what government scientists have learned from their research.
- During the first 13 weeks of each epidemic, more than 17 times as many people in the United States were diagnosed with COVID-19 as H1N1 influenza, and 97,000 times as many as SARS. However, during that same time period, the CDC held about two-thirds as many press briefings about COVID-19 as it did about H1N1 influenza, and almost the same number of briefings as SARS—even though SARS affected only eight people (Figure 1).

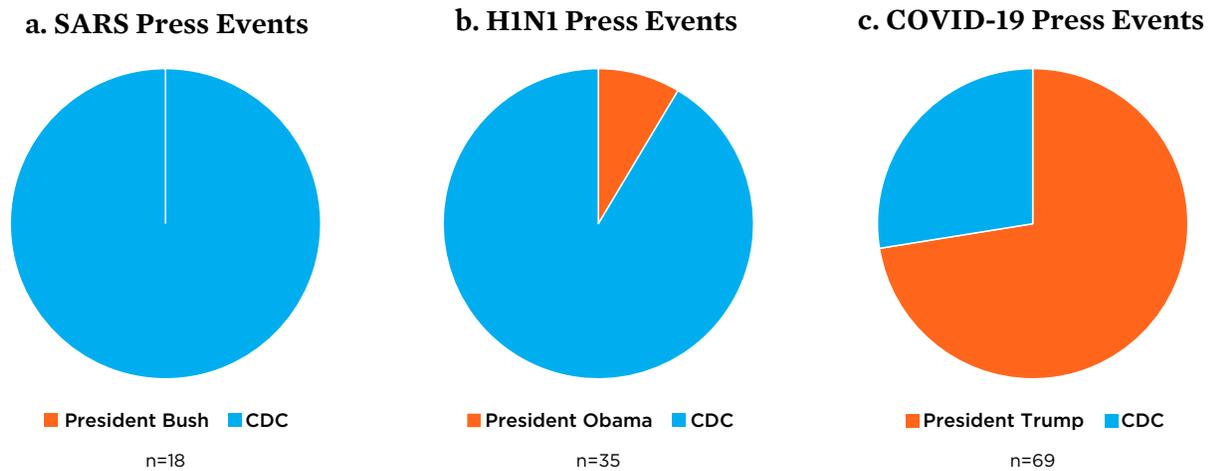
FIGURE 1. CDC Public Communication and Reported US Cases of SARS, H1N1, and COVID-19



Although COVID-19 infected far more people (776,093 people in the United States) than SARS (8) or H1N1 influenza (43,771) during the first 13 weeks of these epidemics (Figure 1a), the number of CDC press briefings held on COVID-19 is on par with that of SARS (Figure 1b).

Notes: The number of human cases presented here were reported in real time by the CDC during the first 13 weeks of each epidemic. Press briefings were in-person or telephone events organized by the CDC during the same 13-week period that allowed reporters to hear from and ask questions of CDC experts.

FIGURE 2. Presidential and CDC Press Events Held During Epidemics



During the first 13 weeks of the SARS (Figure 2a) and H1N1 (Figure 2b) epidemics, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, respectively, held few press events and allowed the CDC to play a more central role in informing the public. President Trump reversed this trend by dominating public communication on COVID-19 during the first 13 weeks of the epidemic (Figure 2c), at the expense of communication from CDC experts.

Notes: Only press events whose primary purpose was to inform the public about the epidemic are counted here. CDC press events were defined as in Figure 1; presidential press events were those in which the president himself spoke. See online appendix for further information.

... And More from Political Officials

- While the president has an important role to play in communicating to the nation during public health crises, it is historically rare for a president of either major political party to be the primary messenger during an epidemic. Typically, most crisis communications come instead from the CDC.
- However, the Trump White House has provided less access to CDC experts on COVID-19 than its predecessors did on previous epidemics. Under President George W. Bush, the CDC led all communications on SARS, and the Obama White House had held only three events on H1N1 influenza at a similar point during that epidemic. The Trump administration has held almost three times as many press events on COVID-19 as the CDC (Figure 2).

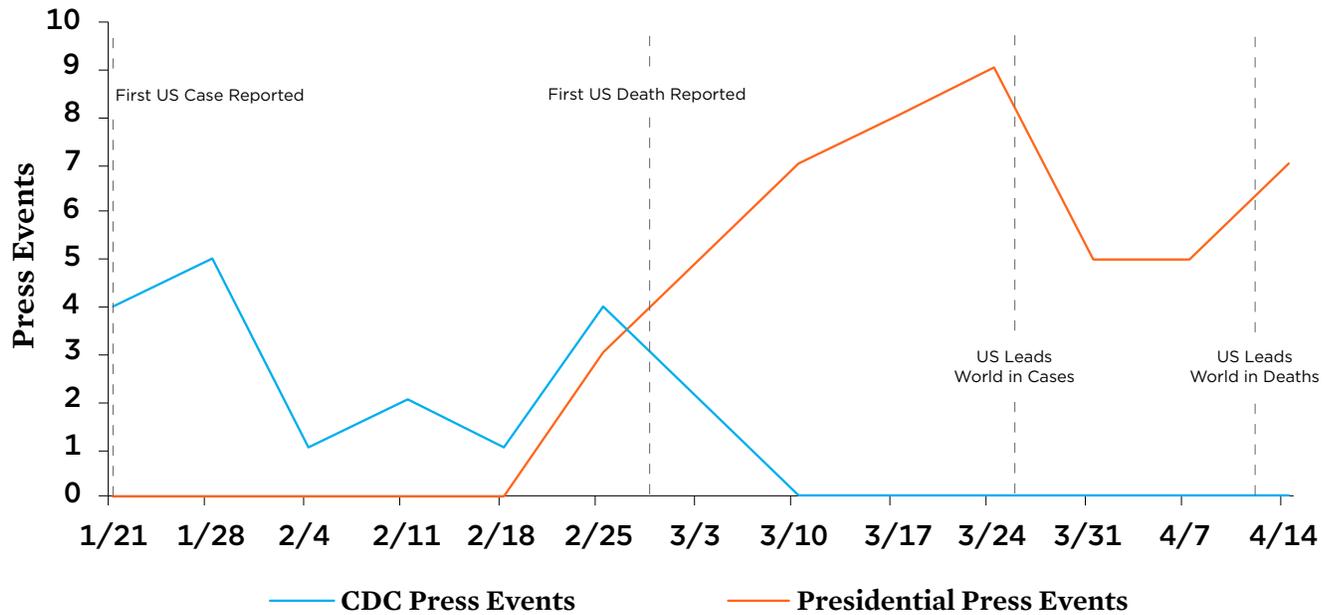
- During health crises, presidential press events should be led by, or prominently feature, experts who can communicate the latest science directly to the press and public. However, according to a *Washington Post* analysis, President Trump spoke 63 percent of the time during press briefings between mid-March and mid-April. In contrast, Drs. Deborah Birx, White House coronavirus response coordinator, and Anthony Fauci spoke only 10 and 5 percent of the time, respectively (Parker et al. 2020).
- Moreover, President Trump has shared harmful misinformation during these press events, as when he claimed that COVID-19 can be treated with hydroxychloroquine, a potentially dangerous drug that has not been proven effective, or when he mused about treatment via “injection” of disinfectants into the body (Facher 2020; Kelland and Raphael Satter 2020).

The President’s Communications Spiked as the CDC’s Plummeted

- Aside from a two-week period in late February and early March, the CDC has fallen silent since President Trump began holding COVID-19 press events (Figure 3, p. 4).

The Trump administration has held almost three times as many press events on COVID-19 as the CDC.

FIGURE 3. Presidential and CDC Press Events on COVID-19 Epidemic



In the first several weeks of the COVID-19 epidemic, the CDC’s press briefings were a central component of the federal response. In February, the number of CDC press events began to decline and White House events accelerated, even as US cases and deaths climbed. As of early May the CDC had not held a press event in two months.

Notes: The start date of the US epidemic is considered January 21, 2020, when the first US case was reported and the CDC opened its Emergency Operations Center. The first US death was reported on February 29; the United States led the world in cases on March 26 and in deaths on April 12.

Communication between Government Scientists and the Public Must Be Restored

Despite the severity of the COVID-19 epidemic, the public has heard less from top federal scientists at the CDC compared with previous epidemics. The resulting lack of up-to-date scientific information directly threatens public health and safety. The Trump administration must reverse its current approach and provide unfettered access to government experts during this epidemic and beyond.

In the longer term, scientific integrity policies and practices at the CDC and other federal agencies must be strengthened to ensure its experts can freely conduct and communicate science that serves the public interest.

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