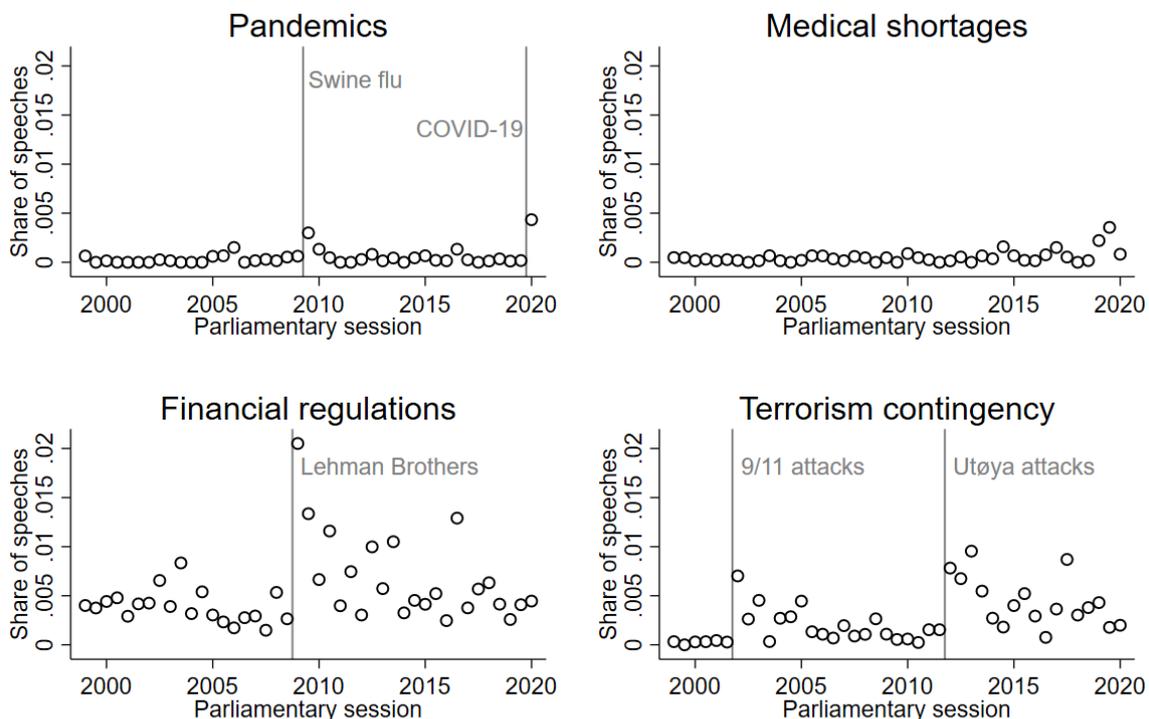


# Does it take a crisis to wake politicians up?<sup>1</sup>

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More than one year ago, the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DSB) published a report describing scenarios with high likelihood and severe consequences for life and health; pandemics and medical shortages.<sup>2</sup> We have analysed text from 233,000 speeches in the Norwegian parliament in the years 1999-2020 to examine whether politicians have prioritised crisis preparations. The result is distressing. The word *pandemic* is only used in 81 parliamentary speeches (0.04 per cent) between 1999 and 2019, in spite of a pandemic being reiterated as a likely scenario for several years. Concerningly, the majority of the speeches containing the word were given *after* the Swine Flu outbreak in 2009. In the current parliamentary session, which started not long before the COVID-19 outbreak, the parliamentary discussion of pandemics reemerged (see figure).



Source: Jon H. Fiva and Oda Nedregård (Norwegian Business School), Aftenposten April 15, 2020.

Note: The figure displays the share of speeches where the term(s) given in the title of each sub-panel are mentioned in the Storting debate (pandemi; legemiddel AND mangel; finans AND regulering; terror AND beredskap). Each parliamentary session is divided in two: October 1 - March 31 and April 1 - September 30.

The report by DSB states that the occurrences of medical shortages have increased ten-fold in the last decade. This is not mirrored in the political debate. It seems that Norwegian politicians have paid little attention to this potential threat, at least up until 2019. The same tendencies can be seen for nuclear disasters and rockslides, which are other concerns highlighted by DSB.

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published by Aftenposten, April 15, 2020 ([link](#)).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dsb.no/rapporter-og-evalueringer/analyser-av-krisesenarioer-2019/>

The parliamentary discussion of *financial regulations* increased substantially in the aftermath of the financial crisis. This is clearly visible in our figure, which uses the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 to indicate the start of this crisis. In 2018-2019, the parliamentary discussions of financial regulations have returned to pre-crisis levels. Problem solved? Regulation and supervision of the financial sector are also important in economic upturns, as it can help us avoid future crises.

Lack of political preparation is also apparent for *terror*. The political debates discussing the topic increased dramatically after the terror attack at Utøya in July 2011, before returning to more or less the same levels as before the tragedy struck Norway. Similarly, the terror attack in the United States, September 11th 2001, is also clearly visible in the Norwegian speech data.

These patterns suggest that politicians are inclined to prioritise contingency planning *after* a crisis, but, ironically, not before. Still, incumbents tend to become more popular in times of distress. The coalition government in Norway was reelected after the financial crisis in 2008. Similarly, the incumbent Labour Party experienced its best election result since 1987 in the local election after the terror attack at Utøya in 2011. Recent polls reveal the same trends in support for the current Conservative government after the manifestation of the Corona crisis. Only six per cent think that the government has handled the situation poorly.<sup>3</sup>

Studies from the United States show that voters reward the incumbent presidential party for delivering disaster relief spending, but not for investing in disaster preparedness spending (Healy and Malhotra, 2009).<sup>4</sup> It seems like politicians are less concerned about investment in civil protection in the absence of crisis, perhaps because (lack of) adequate contingency planning may only become apparent during a crisis (pandemic), or in the absence of a crisis (terror). As a result, we could end up underinvesting in civil protection, as contingency planning works poorly as a means to mobilise voters.

How can we as a society be prepared for future crises if emergency planning is of limited concern to voters and politicians? The media has traditionally played an important role as the politicians' guard dog. However, reduction in press support and the emergence of alternative commercial arenas, such as social media, are making the media increasingly vulnerable to populist attitudes. Investigative journalism has taken a large hit from this development. Consequently, we are increasingly reliant on independent institutions with clear mandates that are not restricted to the same degree by the public's support. Examples of such institutions are public directorates working to ensure public health, civil protection, and emergency planning.

The public administration is often criticized by voters and politicians. Concurrently, a well-functioning bureaucracy is crucial to promote political stability and decision-making. Independent financing and jobs that are not dependent on the public's ever-changing

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/vQ7lmb/ema-hylles-for-krisehaandtering-i-ny-meningsmaaling>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/mvopic-voters-and-natural-disaster-policy/039708A3223EC114365ADF56F1D26423>

attention allow the civil servants to work quietly with measures that we all benefit from when crises hit. It is an ungrateful, but important job.

The important role the public administration plays in public decision-making has become increasingly visible the previous weeks. In Norway, as in many other countries, the incumbents have been entirely dependent on the knowledge that civil servants have acquired in the years whilst health emergency contingency has been of little interest to voters and politicians. Simultaneously, the lack of political preparedness is becoming progressively clear. The Norwegian health service is reporting significant shortages of infection control equipment. Medical experts write that contingency is at an all-time low.<sup>5</sup>

What can we expect from the time to come, given what we have seen for previous crises? We are living in an age with an integrated financial system, much travelling, and import dependence. Consequently, we are in the coming decades increasingly likely to face crises that spread quickly across borders. As long as politicians are not rewarded by voters for emergency preparedness, we have to rely on the work put down by public directorates, institutes, and bureaucrats when crises hit. At the same time it is tempting to ask how the situation would have been if politicians listened more to the experts in the public administration in normal times. It is nice to talk about health emergency contingency during a pandemic, but even better to do it before.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/3JbEb0/helsevesenets-beredskap-er-paa-et-lavmaal-sven-erik-gisvold>