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A Comparative Exploration

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# 1 Uncertainty as a Multi-Dimensional Concept

## A Brief Summary of the Argument<sup>1</sup>

As I write this manuscript in the early stages of a coronavirus pandemic, I stare at the face of uncertainty. I am very uncertain as to whether I should make an international trip. According to one classical definition of uncertainty, I experience the “inability to assign probabilities to the likelihood of future events” (Stevens 2014, p. 432). I am uncertain about the probability of negative consequences, if I decide to take the trip. At that point, the probability of catching the virus constitutes the ultimate “state of uncertainty as existing for an event when no numerical probability of the event occurring can be assigned” (Knight 1920 cited in Cyert and DeGroot 1987, p. 3). The very existence of two very stark, mutually opposed scenarios, to travel or not to travel in the midst of a ranging pandemic, and the inability to assign precise probabilities to either of them, creates a high degree of uncertainty. Having a choice is very unsettling, but having an ill-defined choice is even more unnerving. This relatively simple scenario multiplied itself endlessly during the pandemic as people asked themselves whether they should cancel their vacation plans, whether they should go to the shops and whether they should send their children to school. Suddenly, the whole planet was overwhelmed by uncertainty – and that is by no means an uncertain statement.

The pandemic brought with itself the concept of uncertainty defined as “heightened unpredictability” not only in terms of personal choices. Uncertainty was also unleashed as the belief in the power of science to predict the rise and spread of the pandemic was shattered. Before the eyes of the public, epidemiologists argued, disagreed, sometimes even contradicted their own past statements about the deadliness of the virus, its infectiousness, whether

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1 I thank Laurence Whitehead and John Keane for their invaluable feedback on the first chapter. I thank Christopher Harding for his excellent research assistance with the bibliography for the entire book.

wearing face masks was beneficial and how long the virus survives on metal surfaces. The idea that science is not an unambiguously reliable source of guidance augmented the sense of uncertainty. As doubt was cast on the precision of scientific knowledge, it became clear that the utilisation of scientific knowledge in politics and public policy was, to a degree, subjective and political, and therefore it was rife with uncertainties as well. A rift between science as a monolithic body and scientists as a heterogeneous community was laid bare. It became clear that politicians handpicked the scientists, whose advice they wanted to follow, thus undermining the belief that “science-based” policy is unequivocal. This realisation did not decrease uncertainty either.

While 2020 was the year when the notion of uncertainty reasserted its powerful grip, it was by far not the only instance when uncertainty reigned supreme. The pandemic heightened the importance of studying uncertainty, but it did not create uncertainty per se. It created the urgent necessity to talk about uncertainty. But the questions have been long overdue, long before the pandemic made its point. Here are some of them: is uncertainty borne out of people’s inability to imagine such a powerful exogenous shock to the world? Does uncertainty stem from newness, in the sense that scientists by default do not have enough data to gauge the nature and the extent of a new phenomenon and a new threat? Or is uncertainty related to the lack of sophisticated methodology to assess the already available data? Alternatively, is uncertainty so endemic, systemic and pivotal that no matter how much data is available, there will still be a large, unfathomable margin of error in any prediction? Finally, could uncertainty be fueled by the diverse and often conflicting reporting of an event in the media? These are only a small number of the questions that the present book raises.

The book provides a comprehensive and methodological understanding of uncertainty in politics, but it relates it to uncertainty in many disciplinary fields. This introductory chapter builds upon the accumulated inter-disciplinary knowledge to create a framework for studying political uncertainty in particular. To do so, it performs a comprehensive overview, which critically analyses the sources, types, definitions and the measurements of uncertainty.