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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

What Americans think about President Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who happen. I'm Fred Dews. In this special edition of the podcast, I talk with Brookings Senior Fellows Bill Galston and Elaine Kamarck about President Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, his administration's response and public opinion on that response. Also, what effect will the crisis and response to it have on the election in November?

Galston is the Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies, and Kamarck is the founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings.

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And now on with the interview. Well, Bill and Elaine, I want to welcome you both back to the virtual Brookings Cafeteria.

KAMARCK: Thank you for having us.

GALSTON: Well, good to be here.

DEWS: Bill, let me direct this to you first, but of course, Elaine, feel free to jump in as well. In the immediate aftermath of past major events like 9/11 or U.S. hostages being taken in Tehran or the start of the Gulf War in '91--you could think of a whole list of major national or global events--we tend to see public approval of the president soar. Has that happens so far in the case of the Trump administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic?

GALSTON: Well, it's been quite interesting to observe what has happened in this case. Initially, there was evidence of a "rally around the flag" phenomenon, although it was much more muted than in previous national crises. And as I assess the data, it probably peaked in the third week of March. But since then, the American people, I think, have taken the measure of the president's response, the administration's response, and as they've absorbed it, they have been less and less impressed. And the president's approval in the handling of the COVID-19 crisis has declined pretty steadily over the past three weeks. He's now basically back to where he was before this began,

which is I think not good news for him.

DEWS: Not good news in the sense of his electoral prospects in November?

GALSTON: Well, not only that, but his ability to lead forcefully, particularly if there's conflict. And let me give you an example. He tweeted earlier this week that he was the ultimate authority determining when and how the economy of the United States would re-open. The view that he has that authority is not widely shared. Most constitutional experts believe that the ultimate say belongs with the governors, that the states are not just subordinate jurisdictions of the federal government in the way that cities are subordinate jurisdictions of the states. The states have independent constitutional standing. And the president, to be blunt, cannot simply order the governor of a state to reopen the shops and the plants. And the fact that the president's standing is not particularly high in this crisis suggests that if there is a conflict in public opinion or as a matter of law, he will have a harder time prevailing than he would if his approval were sky high.

DEWS: We'll get to the politics of it in a few minutes. But I do want to follow up on particular point, Bill, and that's, is there a difference in the way the public reacts to a president's handling of a policy crisis versus a natural event like a hurricane or even a pandemic, something that comes out of nature rather than a policy failure?

GALSTON: Well, sure, there's a difference because no right-minded citizen would blame an elected official for an act of God, but elected officials are held responsible for two other things. The first is immediate, namely, what is the speed and the quality and the precision of the response? And secondly, and this usually sets in a little bit later, how well prepared for the act of God was the government where the right people in place to deal with it? I think we all remember Katrina and George W. Bush's famous "heck of a job, Brownie," when it was clear that said Brownie was exactly the wrong person for the job at that time. And so, yeah, there is a difference. But I think the similarities are more important than the differences.

DEWS: So, Elaine, let me turn to you now and maybe you can put this in the context of your book that you published a few years ago, "Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again,"

about which you and I had done a podcast interview. And I want to ask first about Donald Trump during his campaign. Since then, he's claimed that his experience as a businessman would enable him to run the government and run it well. And a lot of people think that running the government isn't much different than running a business. So, what, Elaine, is your reaction to that assertion?

KAMARCK: Well, let me talk about this at different levels of government, okay? So, if you have run a car rental agency, quite large, you are probably very, very competent to lead the Army's motor pool. Because the motor pool of the Army does essentially what Avis does: makes sure that there are cars ready, cleaned and mechanically in good shape and ready to go at all times. Okay?

So there are many aspects of the government, operational aspects, that have their analogs in the private sector. And those pieces of the government actually can also benefit from the private sector. The White House is not an operational unit at all. Far from it. In fact, the White House is much more like a massive holding company that has in it many, many, many different components with different capabilities, different expertise and different operational skill. And you have to have some familiarity with this holding company in order, frankly, to be president.

In the book I wrote about both Bush and Obama and how many of their failures stemmed from their not understanding the capabilities or the problems of the federal government. Suddenly with Donald Trump, we have those issues magnified to an extent that frankly, when I was writing the book, I never thought I would see. It is very clear that he does not know how to run the federal government. And he does not know how to access the talent in the federal government.

And I'll give you a small example. No one expects the president of the United States to get elected and come into office and on the first day know that the Food and Drug Administration has an executive use authorization in a statute, which is what has been used now repeatedly to get the testing up and going very, very quickly. Of course, we don't expect the president to know that. What we do expect the president to do, however, is to create a White House operation that enables him to have at any point in time access to all the intricacies of the federal government and its operational capacities. And that is something that this president not only did not have, but in fact, he abandoned

when he let the unit in the National Security Council that was tasked with thinking about pandemics go. So that means that what you see here and frankly--we saw it in Katrina as well with FEMA, we saw it in the Obama administration with how the Veterans Affairs scandals in the health system crept up on him and overwhelmed him--what you see here is a president kind of being surprised and discovering the capacities of the federal government kind of on the fly. And that has been most notable with the emergency use authorization of FDA and with his very halting use and invocation of the Defense Production Act.

DEWS: I want to follow up on that issue of the National Security Council unit, because President Trump did respond to that obliquely by saying something to the effect of, well, the experts are still out there whenever they are, and we didn't need them sitting around paying them to sit around. We'll just go ahead and call them when we need them. But they weren't physically working in the White House anymore.

KAMARCK: Right. And what the president did when he let go of this was he lacked the capability of calling into the Oval Office one or two or three or four people who could sit down in front of him and say, we have been thinking about pandemics for the last three years. We have been researching pandemics in other countries. Here's what the United States government can do in the case of a pandemic. It was very clear he did not understand the full capacities at his disposal on day one and it cost precious time.

It is very, very similar to the way George Bush did not understand the capabilities of the new DHS, Department of Homeland Security that he has created, and the operations of FEMA when he was confronted with Katrina. And in all of these emergencies, whether it's a natural disaster, a pandemic, an attack, whatever it is, time is of the essence. And so we watch this learning curve painfully, painfully slow with this president as they found experts, learned about things that they didn't know about, and then made policy with all the time wasting days and weeks.

DEWS: We have seen on a daily basis now these press conferences in the evening that the president chairs, and he does include some of the nation's top public health experts. Obviously, Dr.

Fauci, Dr. Birx, sometimes the surgeon general weighs in, and we sometimes see the surgeon general on TV with a public service announcement. But we also see this other rotating cast of characters at the podium, including Jared Kushner, the guy who sells pillows.

KAMARCK: Yes.

DEWS: Sometimes it seems like he is trying to put the experts forward, but sometimes it seems like he's putting on another form of his campaign rally that he's not able to have in the big stadium.

KAMARCK: Well, what is unique about this president, more unique than any other president, Democrat and Republican, is his inability to stick to the script. So, he cannot resist turning briefings on the most serious of life and death issues into explanations of his own failures, attacks on his enemies, attacks on the governors, attacks on the Democrats, blaming his slow response on impeachment. I mean, this has been par for the course. We have always known the president does this. He's been doing this for three years. What's different now is that a lot of Americans are stuck at home sitting in their houses watching a lot more news than they usually do. And they're watching this unfold in real time. And as Bill began this podcast with the weakness of his numbers for handling this, I think they're only going to get weaker just because the president simply cannot control himself and cannot stick to a script or stick to a serious tone.

DEWS: Bill, let me go back to you then with some more insights from you on Americans' views of what's going on. At the end of March, you cited some polling data that showed that a majority of the American public agreed with the various strict measures to combat coronavirus that governors and county leaders and city leaders have put out there, including maintaining distance, avoiding restaurants and bars, stocking up on supplies, canceling travel and so on. In the couple of weeks since those polls were taken, how have Americans' attitudes changed about these kinds of measures?

GALSTON: Yes, they have changed. They changed by becoming even more supportive of these measures. And before getting to the bottom line, let me explain why. In the most recent

surveys released just last week, seven in 10 Americans said that they thought the COVID-19 situation was getting worse rather than better. Eighty-five percent of Americans said that they were worried about getting the disease. Seventy-five percent are worried about being hospitalized because of the disease. And remarkably, although only about one-and-a-half percent of Americans have been diagnosed with the disease, three in 10 Americans personally know someone with the disease. That's the way social networks work. So, this is not a distant phenomenon for Americans.

So what's the bottom line? Well, in addition to all of the other measures at the state level, all of which they continue to approve, an astounding 81 percent endorse a national stay at home order. National. As I indicated before. I don't think the president has the ability, the constitutional power, issue such an order. But it says something about the thinking of Americans that they are willing to endorse such a drastic measure.

Here's another indicator. Of the 50 governors, 42 have issued forms of stay at home orders. This is up substantially from just three weeks ago. Governors are in close contact with local officials in their states, with conditions on the ground, and with public opinion. And of all the public officials other than Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx, the nation's governors receive the highest ratings for the quality of their response to COVID-19. So, I think that is additional evidence that the American people, for whatever reason, are strongly supportive of the measures that have been taken and continued.

DEWS: Let me also ask you this, Bill, and this is starting to pivot to looking ahead--there's looking ahead to the election, which I want to save for last--but there's actually looking ahead to preparing for the next pandemic, the next big crisis. And then, Elaine, of course, this goes to governance as well. Bill, in a recent piece on the Brookings website, you wrote that "the immediate effects of COVID-19 are bad enough. Failing to learn from it would be criminal negligence, which future generations won't forgive us." How are we, how is our government to learn what the mistakes were and how did the better act is next?

GALSTON: Well, the good news is that the mistakes have been so glaring and so obvious

that it's hard not to notice them for what they are. Let's just start with the most obvious one. We have managed to maintain the Strategic Petroleum Reserve at full or nearly full status for decades. But despite an endless series of government reports and [groups] and task forces going back more than two decades, which I've located and read, repeated pleas to restock and improve the management of what I'll call our strategic healthcare reserve went unheeded by a series of administrations, both Democrat and Republican. And I don't think that will ever be allowed to happen again. Or if it is, it would fall squarely under the heading of the criminal negligence. I use that phrase carefully that would characterize our failure to respond.

And we learned all sorts of lessons about coordinating mechanisms that have failed. We are learning all sorts of lessons about the underexplored relationship between the federal government and the states in times of emergency. I alluded earlier to the fact that at least this president believes he has the authority that the nation's 50 governors believe they have the authority to do. So, there's going to have to be what the military calls an after action report on this whole event. I have recommended the appointment of a 9/11-style commission, not principally staffed with current elected officials, but organized in such a way that the members of the commission will have clout and credibility, their report will be taken seriously, and something that wasn't done with the 9/11 Commission, create a mechanism within the enabling legislation to assure that the recommendations of the commission are followed in real time. That's the only way we're going to be able to learn all of the lessons and to implement the necessary reforms.

DEWS: Well, let's look ahead in another way, and that's politics. Obviously, the presidential election is in November, about seven months away. What events are both of you watching now that you think will be on voters' minds in November? And corollary to that, to what extent do you think that the coronavirus pandemic has already become and will continue to be a new political faultline in the American body politic?

KAMARCK: Well, I think it's going to be a big story in November in just so many ways. Right now, the governors, including some Republican governors, are working hard to get ready for

voting in November. That's the first challenge in front of everyone. It's making sure that everyone can vote safely. President Trump again spoke inaccurately when he said that he's not for remote voting of any sort because there's lots of fraud in it. There's no evidence of fraud in vote by mail options. And in fact, if anything, they are safer and more less corrupt than voting in machines just because it is harder to hack the ballots. And you have actual paper ballots that can be kept and recounted. So, the first battle, so to speak, that's being waged here is to make sure that everybody can vote.

This is not rocket science, right? We know exactly what to do. And the good news is that already as of our last election in 2018, only 62 percent of the voters voted in person. In other words, 38 percent are already voting remotely either in the early voting option, absentee ballots or in a vote by mail state. So, the trendline has been going away from in-person voting for the 21st century, for most of the 21st century. That would continue regardless of whether or not the virus was still a threat.

But I think we have to assume that the virus will still be a threat and there will be people in November who are afraid to go out and vote. And to the extent that the remote voting options can be increased their capacity, I think we're going to have a very healthy election, probably with a very big turnout.

Now, it is inconceivable that the president's behavior in this crisis, no matter what you think of it, it is inconceivable that this will not be the major issue in the fall. And in fact, we saw in Hurricane Katrina, which happened in President Bush's second term, not his first term, but we saw his approval ratings take a dive after Hurricane Katrina. And the important thing is they never recovered. He went on to lose the House of Representatives in the 2006 midterm elections. And, of course, the Republicans did not win in 2008. So, we know that these major events and the presidential response to it have an enormous impact on the election. I think it's absolutely clear that this will be the defining event of the election.

DEWS: Bill, can you comment on this, and it's an emerging trend, that the coronavirus

pandemic is itself becoming politicized? It seems to be a new political fault line in American politics.

GALSTON: That's true to some extent, although in many of the public reactions, especially to specific measures that the government takes or doesn't take, the American people have been far more united and bipartisan than has been the case for most other issues for many years. When you get majorities that 75 or 80 or 85 percent saying the same thing, then by definition that is going to be strongly bipartisan because otherwise in a divided country doesn't get numbers that high. And if you look at the breakdowns of the statistics, they confirm this.

It is only when the issue turns away from specific policies and towards the assessment of the president's behavior that partisan splits begin to reemerge. Now, to be fair, there's a gradation here. And Republicans tend to think that it will be safe to go back to work to a greater extent than Democrats do. But I really do think that in the main, this has been more of a unifying event, not a polarizing event. And why not? The virus is not selecting for Democrats or Republicans or Independents. It is an equal opportunity killer. And I think most Americans are perfectly aware of that.

Here's the question that interests me. Ever since the Great Depression of the early 1930s, presidents have been held responsible for the performance of the economy, which frequently they get credit that they don't deserve and blame that they don't deserve. The economy will certainly not be in the kind of shape in November that the president and his political advisers thought it would be as recently as February. And if the president is held responsible for the fact that unemployment is still very high, that growth may be modest if there's any growth at all, then, of course, the election is bound to go very badly for him. If the American people are willing to draw a distinction between the condition of the economy and the behavior of the president, then it is possible that Mr. Trump will not be punished as badly as he would be otherwise.

But if I were a betting man, I would think that the poor state of the economy would be folded into whatever the general approval or disapproval of his handling of the virus might be.

KAMARCK: I would just say that as the reporting digs in to when was the White House notified, the old question that goes back to Watergate—what did the president know and when did he know it?—as the press dig into that question, there has been a steady drumbeat of embarrassing stories showing essentially a president who was not interested in intelligence briefings, a president not particularly interested in his National Security Council, not particularly interested in hearing from his HHS secretary and on and on and on. Those things are damaging because they go to the central question of the president's competence. Americans have these unwieldy expectations of the president. They expect the president to know everything all the time and be responsible for everything all the time. Presidents are always angry about this because, frankly, they're always surprised by stuff that happens. And yet an effective organization of the Executive Office of the President means that it can help enormously a president not be surprised and it can help the president look to be on top of things at least more quickly than President Trump was.

And these stories are coming at a fairly rapid clip. And I suspect there will be more and more of them, I suspect some journalist is writing one of these rapid books on Trump's handling of the virus. I mean, these things are going to be out there and combined with the poor economy that Bill talked about and the fact that the president has never had very high approval ratings, I think that he's in danger of seeing his approval ratings slip even further. And that is not good news for November.

GALSTON: Let me just add one data point to that. I think Elaine is absolutely right about the pace of the president's response. The last time I checked, which was pretty recently, about six in 10 Americans believed that the president had waited too long to respond. It's hard to believe that reporting will not reinforce that sentiment, which is already very widespread.

DEWS: Bill Galston, Elaine Kamarck, I want to thank you both for sharing your time and expertise with me today. I wish we could have done this in person, but I'm glad that we had the chance to talk.

GALSTON: Thanks, Fred.

KAMARCK: Thanks for having us.

DEWS: To get more content from Brookings experts about coronavirus, including Elaine's and Bill's analyses, visit our website, brookings.edu/COVID19.

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