

DEMOCRACY AFTER CORONAVIRUS: FIVE CHALLENGES FOR THE 2020s

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2020 will forever be the year of coronavirus, a cataclysmic event in slow motion that has disrupted people's lives and disseminated a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability comparable only to times of war.

Pressed by the fast pace of infections while fearing massively disruptive economic impact, political leaders around the world faced the challenge of acting quickly in a fog of scientific uncertainty, leading them to impose (or not impose) lockdown measures limiting personal freedom and democratic participation.

The democratic model has long been under stress, with the rise of homegrown populist and nationalist movements, and external geopolitical threats from resilient authoritarian actors. But COVID-19 created a new kind of stress test, bringing into question globalization, democratic decisionmaking, the reliability of science and information, and ultimately the ability of the democratic model to cope with devastating events.

In this regard, this paper argues that there are five main challenges for democracies after coronavirus: protecting the safety and integrity of elections, finding the right place for expertise, coping with resurgent populism and nationalism, countering homegrown and foreign disinformation, and defending the democratic model. After delineating these challenges, it offers policy recommendations for democratic resilience in the 2020s.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with a threat of epic scale, countries have adopted radical and previously unthinkable policies to counter the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Strict confinement orders have been issued. Governments are developing bold recovery packages that transcend the old Washington consensus through massive government spending and reliance on debt. International cooperation is underway to produce and distribute treatments and vaccines.

Yet the COVID-19 era has also put pressure on many democratic tenets. Personal and civil liberties — such as freedom of movement, freedom of enterprise, and freedom of assembly — have been severely restricted. Democratic life has also been curtailed, including through the postponement of elections and suspension of parliamentary work.

Over the past decade, the strength and resilience of democracies had already been put to the test. Internally, democracies were battling growing inequalities, the rise of populist and nationalist

forces, and disruptive technologies, all in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis. Externally, they were faced with increasing economic, technological, and geopolitical challenges from resilient authoritarian powers. Many of these challenges were magnified by the COVID-19 crisis. To contain the outbreak, countries sealed themselves off with protectionist measures. Pre-existing social and economic inequalities have been exacerbated. Disinformation flourished over scientific uncertainty regarding the virus and its treatments. Digital surveillance that impinges on civil liberties has been employed to track the spread of the coronavirus and prevent future outbreaks. Popular dissatisfaction with crisis management has fueled anti-establishment sentiments.

It is far too early to predict the toll that the virus and policy decisions to counter its spread will take on our democratic life. But the first half of 2020 already sheds light on some of the most pressing challenges to democracies in a world reshaped by COVID-19. Five particularly salient ones are: protecting the safety and integrity of elections, finding the right place for expertise, coping with resurgent populism and nationalism, countering homegrown and foreign disinformation, and defending the democratic model.

PROTECTING THE SAFETY AND INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS

While Europe and the world were on lockdown, elections have been modified, postponed, and canceled in light of the health risk posed by the pandemic.¹ Italy's spring regional elections were postponed until fall.² In the United Kingdom, local and mayoral elections set to take place in May were pushed back a year.³ In the United States, 16 states and one territory (Puerto Rico) postponed their primary elections — some several times.⁴

Those who went ahead with voting faced criticism. In France, the government decided to maintain the first round of municipal elections on March 15, even though the virus was already taking a toll.

This led to low turnout (abstention climbed almost 20 points since 2014 to a record 55.4% in 2020) and a heavy political penalty for the government.⁵ Two days after voters went to the polls, the country entered a lockdown. The second round finally took place on June 28, registering once again record abstention (only 41.6% participation), reflective of both a political crisis but also of high fears of the pandemic.⁶

But postponement does not suffice. The prospect of recurring waves of COVID-19 forces a discussion on alternative modes of voting. Voting by internet is not yet considered safe; meanwhile national and local authorities remain reluctant to deploy a vote-by-mail system due to uncertainty about the pandemic wave. Nonetheless, in the German state of Bavaria, the increase in turnout for the March 15 municipal elections (58.5% participation, which was up by 3.5 points compared to 2014) was credited to a higher percentage of voters sending in postal ballots.⁷ The second round was held entirely by mail. Conversely, in Poland, presidential elections scheduled for May 10 were postponed at the last minute, ostensibly due to concerns over the untested mail-in ballot system.⁸

The U.S. general elections in November will be a major test of American democracy's health. Although postal ballots could help reduce the public health risk at the time of voting, some Republicans, following President Donald Trump's inclination, oppose them, claiming they would increase voter fraud. While some states eased rules to allow more voters to cast an absentee ballot in primaries this spring and in November,⁹ Trump threatened to withhold federal funding from Michigan and Nevada for efforts to expand postal voting, and has declined to approve emergency funding for the U.S. Postal Service.¹⁰ Similarly, Republicans in Wisconsin blocked efforts to delay the April 7 primary.¹¹ Although 10 states held primaries on June 2, many voters did not receive ballots in time, leading to delayed results.¹² As for November 2020, a suboptimal and underfunded mail-in voting option may result in delayed results for the

general elections, further weakening the legitimacy of a process already damaged by the incumbent president's public criticism.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has called into question many aspects of electoral and political life beyond the act of voting. Campaigns and conventions have been forced to go virtual, limiting traditional canvassing efforts and in-person rallies.¹³ Given the public health emergency and physical risk of convening parliaments as usual, opportunity for political debate has been severely curtailed. Democracies around the world (such as the U.K.,¹⁴ France,¹⁵ Spain,¹⁶ Canada,¹⁷ and New Zealand¹⁸) suspended debates on non-emergency-related legislation or temporarily suspended their parliaments entirely at the height of the pandemic. At the time of reopening, several imposed strict social distancing, or moved operations online, including online hearings by the U.S. House of Representatives.¹⁹

A core function of democratic, electoral and parliamentary life is struggling to find ways to adapt its governance to the new realities of confinement and social distancing. Trusted nonpartisan processes must be reinvented and re-socialized, an especially daunting task in polarized democracies such as the United States.

FINDING THE RIGHT PLACE FOR EXPERTISE

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed doctors, epidemiologists, and other scientists at the center of crisis response. This comes as a sharp departure from the post-financial crisis environment, when

populist movements vilified the role played by experts and technocrats in politics, portraying it as an expropriation of citizens' sovereignty and participation in decisionmaking. Today, in the United States, Europe, and beyond, doctors and public health experts are frequent fixtures at government press conferences and on news programs. Many, including Germany's Christian Drosten, France's Jérôme Salomon, Italy's Walter Ricciardi, and the United States' Anthony Fauci, have become household names.

Faced with the difficult task of making life-and-death health decisions in an era of high uncertainty given the novelty of the virus, most governments set up teams of health advisors whose counsel partly shielded them from criticism. The executive decisions of French President Emmanuel Macron's government, for instance, have been informed by a "scientific council,"²⁰ as have the decisions of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's.

Countries who relied on science early on produced good results and received international praise. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel, a chemist by training, has been widely lauded for her level-headed, evidence and expertise-informed handling of the crisis.²¹ Similarly, Greece has been widely praised for its "textbook crisis management,"²² due at least in part to the government's prioritization of science. New Zealand followed a similar path.²³

Expertise, however, is not immune to criticism. Trust in scientists erodes when they contradict each other or themselves. After advocating "herd immunity,"²⁴ the United Kingdom's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) — activated to provide scientific and technical advice to Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Cabinet — came under heavy criticism.²⁵ Sweden's unique no-lockdown model has come at a reputational cost for the Scandinavian country, and has limited travel options for its citizens.²⁶ French doctor Didier Raoult provoked a global controversy by proposing that the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine could effectively treat coronavirus — a hypothesis that became a political belief for some.²⁷ After a World

Health Organization (WHO) official suggested that virus transmission by asymptomatic people was “very rare,” the organization later rolled the claim back due to the number of unknowns.²⁸

In the United States, where a patchwork and blustery response to the pandemic has resulted in over five million cases and 165,000 deaths to date,²⁹ science and expertise is at the heart of the political debate. After Trump suggested injecting disinfectants as a potential treatment,³⁰ he was met with a swift and forceful rebuttal from healthcare professionals.³¹ Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, later deplored the existence of an “anti-science bias” in the United States.³²

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As medical science continues to investigate the new virus, governments are left to take political decisions with limited hard evidence. In France, Macron pushed to reopen schools and daycares as early as May 11, while his scientific council recommended to wait until September.³³ The decision was initially met with outrage, but, after infections in France remained low, public anger subsided.³⁴ Similarly, Trump is pushing for a reopening of schools in September, a difficult endeavor under Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. Going forward, democracies will have to strike a balance between scientific expertise and political sensitivities, a skill that will prove useful beyond the current pandemic in addressing the climate crisis.

COPING WITH RESURGENT POPULISM AND NATIONALISM

After COVID-19 hit, left-leaning populist parties significantly toned down their anti-establishment stances. Aside from actively questioning the role of experts in guiding executive decisionmaking, under

these *force majeure* circumstances, the Five Star Movement in Italy,³⁵ or Syriza³⁶ in Greece set aside their Euroskepticism to seek financial support from the European Union for domestic policies. Similarly, in Spain, Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias of the generally anti-EU Podemos called for the EU to establish a basic income for every citizen.³⁷

Right-wing nationalists, however, doubled down on their anti-immigration narratives and distrust towards international cooperation. European countries hesitated to close borders within the Schengen Area in the early stages of the pandemic, leading Marine Le Pen of the National Rally (RN) in France to refer to a “religion of borderlessness” endangering the French people.³⁸ Likewise, Italy’s League³⁹ and the Alternative for Germany (AfD)⁴⁰ celebrated the closure of borders to halt the spread of COVID-19 and urged the government to take tougher stances against illegal immigration and asylum seekers. In the United States, Trump unilaterally announced a travel ban from Europe,⁴¹ withdrew the U.S. from the WHO,⁴² pushed forward executive orders⁴³ restricting immigration, and repeatedly blamed China for the severity of the crisis.

At the moment, populist and nationalist are not an immediate threat, as in many countries the rally-around-the-flag effect resulted in wide support for incumbent governments. Yet, the conditions that led to the rise of these parties in the wake of the global financial crisis — including economic difficulties and migration flows resulting from political instability in the Mediterranean⁴⁴ — have stayed the same or accelerated.

If international (and European) cooperation on economic recovery fails to address rising inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19, populist parties will soon abandon their more moderate stances and role in decisionmaking. Nationalist parties, for their part, will take advantage of citizens’ vulnerabilities and insecurities, using immigrants as scapegoats and exploiting their role as opposition parties unburdened by national crisis management.

With lockdown measures limiting avenues for political participation, anti-establishment sentiment could grow deeper out of disconnection from politics. Without a shared approach enhancing citizens' participation in the development of recovery efforts, democracies will be vulnerable to a renewed, likely even more pernicious wave of populism and nationalism, particularly susceptible to foreign interference.

COUNTERING HOMEGROWN AND FOREIGN DISINFORMATION

From the very beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an “infodemic.” Overwhelmed by uncertainty and confined in their homes, people obsessively searched for information. At the same time, malign actors multiplied the production of fake news, conspiracy theories, and manipulated information on an ad hoc basis.⁴⁵ Among them, Russia and China exploited the chaos induced by COVID-19 to promote their geopolitical interests and continue to destabilize Western democracies.⁴⁶ In line with operations conducted since the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russian disinformation has highlighted the fractures in and incapability of Western democracies to efficiently manage the global pandemic. Aside from publicizing Russian humanitarian support to Serbia, Belarus, and Italy, Russia has amplified Chinese efforts in spreading conspiracy theories and fake news on the origin of the virus, based on anti-establishment, anti-European, and anti-immigration messages.⁴⁷ China has manipulated information on the shipment of face masks and medical equipment to promote its role as a global leader in the fight against COVID-19. Simultaneously, it has suppressed narratives about its responsibility in failing to contain the outbreak in Wuhan. Inspired by the Russian playbook, China's disinformation relied on diplomatic channels echoing state-owned media to depict China as a humanitarian superpower and defend Beijing from international accusations.⁴⁸

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The hyper-politicization of COVID-19, combined with the devastating consequences of lockdown measures, has also created a fertile breeding ground for domestic disinformation activities. The “Plandemic” video in the United States,⁴⁹ French *moutons enragés*,⁵⁰ and Italian Orange Vests⁵¹ (along with neo-fascist CasaPound) all maintain that the virus was a scam — some blame political elites, others blame 5G technology — and all complain about the lockdown measures imposed by the government. At the same time, false information also came from top-level officials who downplayed the danger of COVID-19, or by mainstream media like the U.S. conservative media outlet Fox News, which minimized the disease's mortality rate.⁵²

In the months ahead, amid not only a global pandemic but also a global recession, disinformation operations will only grow. Tech companies have already begun to take significant steps to block accounts and trolls spreading disinformation about the coronavirus. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, for instance, removed posts by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro praising hydroxychloroquine as a remedy against COVID-19 and encouraging the end of social distancing.⁵³ Twitter added a fact-checking link to a Trump tweet denouncing mail-in voting.⁵⁴ Moving forward, the big question will be how to cope with and ensure resilience against disinformation operations.

DEFENDING THE DEMOCRATIC MODEL

In a moment of high uncertainty, where decisions must be made quickly and often at the expense of political debate, one might be tempted to argue that authoritarian regimes would be better equipped to provide immediate and operational response. Indeed, China's COVID-19 response, which included

aggressive surveillance and lockdown measures, received praise from the WHO and Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries. Meanwhile the virus has become a divisive political issue in the United States, where the federal, state, and local authorities have all too often undermined each other's responses.

Evidence suggests, however, that political regimes are not good predictors of pandemic management. Some democracies, among them Australia, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, and South Korea among others were fairly successful in containing the virus and limiting deaths. Others, like the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Mexico, and India have not performed as well. Amongst authoritarian regimes, China and Vietnam contained the spread of COVID-19, while Turkey⁵⁵ and Russia⁵⁶ have largely failed to do so.

By and large, in spite of restrictions on civil liberties, democracies resisted the COVID-19 stress test.

As coronavirus has led to abrupt disruptions in democratic and electoral life, some governments seized the opportunity to disproportionately extend state power. In Hungary, the passing of an “enabling act” extended the government’s emergency powers, in particular by criminalizing “fearmongering” in order to silence the opposition and authorizing national security agencies access to state-run and municipal databases.⁵⁷ In Turkey, experts and academics need special permissions from an advisory council whose members have been sworn to secrecy in order to access COVID-19 data.⁵⁸ And in Moscow, tens of thousands of cameras with facial-recognition features were supposedly installed to track contagion, but risk remaining in place even beyond the pandemic.⁵⁹ In Israel, the Knesset authorized the domestic security agency (Shin Bet) to support contact tracing at the request of the prime minister.⁶⁰

But by and large, in spite of restrictions on civil liberties, democracies resisted the COVID-19 stress test. After a struggle between state and federal authorities, German federalism allowed for effective state-specific responses to the pandemic. In France and Italy, opposition parties played a key role in overseeing and critically addressing the choices of the governments both in lockdowns and reopening. The U.K. was able to ensure democratic continuity even after Prime Minister Boris Johnson was diagnosed with COVID-19 and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab was forced to fill in for him temporarily.⁶¹ South Korea has offered an outstanding example of the use of contact-tracing apps while protecting democracy and personal data.⁶²

Yet, the challenges posed by the need for mass surveillance, economic crisis, and potential second or third waves of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that the resilience of democratic regimes cannot be taken for granted.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

With some notable exceptions, such as the United States, democracies across Europe and North America are leaving the “acute crisis” phase of the COVID-19 pandemic behind for now and are learning to live with COVID-19. In order to protect a safe and fruitful democratic life, however, emergency measures will have to be replaced with durable solutions.

Democracies must heavily invest in new and safe voting procedures. Voting is the most important channel for citizen participation in political decisionmaking. To prepare for a second COVID-19 wave or for a future pandemic, having easier and safer channels for voting, whether by mail or online, is a prerequisite to ensure citizen engagement and robust turnout.

Democracies must find the right place for experts in politics. For the most part, political leaders have turned to experts to inform their decisions on lockdowns and reopenings. As we enter the phase

of long-term COVID-19 management, democracies need to designate a delineated place for experts in policymaking, allowing expertise to enlighten political decisions but protecting them from endorsing political responsibility. It could take the form of scientific expert groups at the national level, and international multilateral expert groups (similar to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) at the global level.

Democracies must promote citizen engagement. To prevent a second nationalist and anti-establishment wave in response to months of restrictions on individual freedoms, states should make a broader effort to promote citizens' participation through virtual or in-person platforms for dialogue between citizens and their representatives. Direct democracy initiatives such as citizen-led councils, citizen-led referendums or online consultations would help mitigate feelings of powerlessness and isolation. Similarly, as global challenges such as COVID-19 or climate change are tackled primarily at the global level, citizens must be included in and informed of the deliverables of multilateral institutions.

Democracies must protect information. The proliferation of homegrown and foreign sources of fake news engenders distrust toward democratic institutions and disruptive behavior that is particularly harmful during a pandemic. Democracies should work together to foster an ecosystem of reliable information, in partnership with tech companies, governments, and civil society. Corporate social responsibility standards on information must be promoted to encourage self-regulating practices by social media. Such actions can help to reduce homegrown threats and shrink the space for foreign disinformation activities.

Democracies must advertise democracy. Without emulating propaganda methods typical of authoritarian regimes, democracies should support literacy on democratic decisionmaking on both local and national level and on the values that guide public service and democratic processes, while strengthening anti-corruption efforts. As the democratic model has long been taken for granted, states should make a greater effort to raise individual awareness of democratic freedoms and civic responsibilities, and encourage impactful participation.

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