



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

Can the Coronavirus Heal Polarization?

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As the coronavirus ravages lives and economies, it is also pressing at the seams of societies. Severe [political polarization](#) has already been tearing apart many democracies, from India and Poland to Turkey and the United States. In responding to the virus, will polarized countries accelerate the winner-take-all battles that are undermining democratic norms, politicizing nonpartisan institutions, and exacerbating intolerance, or will they strive for greater unity?

The early signs in many divided countries are worrisome. In Hindu-majority India, some news outlets [blamed Muslims](#) for COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, after an initial outbreak was traced to an Islamic missionary event. Meanwhile, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's rejection of the gravity of the pandemic has sharpened the country's [ideological divisions](#). Bolsonaro has energized his core supporters while alienating large swaths of the country concerned with the rising infection rate, including most governors, congressional leaders, and even his own health minister (whom he [fired](#) in mid April). The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently published "Polarization

and the Pandemic," a [collection](#) of case studies that examines ten countries to highlight the global dangers.

In the United States, Wisconsinites had to [risk infection to vote](#) after Republicans and Democrats fought a brutally contested state primary all the way to the Supreme Court, and President Donald Trump [called for](#) "liberating" Democratic states "under siege" from social distancing measures. Polls from early March 2020 showed partisanship was the [biggest predictor](#) of Americans' behavior and perceptions of the coronavirus threat, and the [map of countermeasures](#) that various states enacted initially broke down strikingly by Republican and Democratic leadership.

Yet there is another possibility. Can a common enemy in the form of a global pandemic bring polarized democracies together? Are there ways for leaders and citizens to seize this window of opportunity and emerge more united? Decades of psychological research and historical studies of past crises suggest more positive paths forward for polarized societies.



THE CASE FOR UNITY

First, the good news. In the United States, divisions in how Republicans and Democrats are treating the virus have lessened. A [poll](#) by More in Common and YouGov in late March found that 90 percent of Americans feel “we are all in this together,” and 82 percent believe “we have more in common than what divides us”—numbers that have grown substantially over the last year within every shade of partisan belief. More Americans believe they can count on one another and report greater worries about the “American people’s health” than about the health of their own families.

These trends mirror public reactions to prolonged disasters elsewhere. For example, the enormous March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan’s northeastern coast and triggered a nuclear disaster at Fukushima took place during a period of deeply divided government, which had led to the [electoral defeat or resignation](#) of four prime ministers in four years. Weeks later, with roughly [18,500 people dead or missing](#), a majority of the public [believed](#) Japan would become a stronger nation as a result of the disaster. In the face of an existential threat, human instinct brought people together.

Enduring political patterns are most susceptible to being disrupted by a major shock. New social and political alignments can emerge after natural disasters, pandemics, or even the deaths of leaders. The 2005 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia, which left 132,000 people dead or missing and 500,000 homeless, [helped generate](#) the political will among armed separatists and the government to reach a peace deal after a twenty-nine-year insurgency.

Psychology explains how this kind of change happens at the individual level. People naturally categorize the world into ingroups and outgroups. However, certain events can trigger them to broaden the definition of

their ingroup to include outgroups, creating a more expansive identity that in turn produces more positive feelings toward people formerly viewed as adversaries or outsiders.

Events that create a common enemy, like wars or terrorist attacks, are classic catalysts for recategorization, and [national leaders](#) often use their platforms to hasten the process of galvanizing public opinion behind a national response. There are [three common methods](#) of encouraging social recategorization: (1) fostering cooperative action toward common goals; (2) speaking about both groups in an egalitarian, rather than partisan or discriminatory, way; and (3) appealing to a superordinate identity that encompasses both groups, such as a national identity.

A national public health and economic crisis like COVID-19 creates openings for each of these [psychological pathways](#), even in polarized contexts. For example, South Korea, which has mounted a highly successful campaign to contain its outbreak, has also faced a long-standing right-left cultural divide between citizens who credit past authoritarian rule for its economic growth and those who prize liberalism and rights. The bitterness between the camps is so serious that the Korean Medical Association, led by a [far-right partisan](#), forced the left-wing government’s medical advisory panel to disband amid the pandemic. Yet President Moon Jae-in has appealed to a broader national identity and cooperative social norms. On March 1, the anniversary of the start of Korea’s independence movement and resistance to Japanese colonial rule in 1919, Moon [repurposed his address](#) to call for trust and unity in the face of the disease, even though it was confined at the time to a single metropolitan area.

Similarly, in South Africa—which was one of the most polarized countries in the world under apartheid and remains bitterly divided by race and class today—President Cyril Ramaphosa launched a campaign to

unify the country in striving to flatten the curve of the pandemic's infection rate. He also announced a public-private [Solidarity Fund](#) to provide healthcare supplies and humanitarian assistance. Ramaphosa seeded the fund with 150 million rand (roughly \$8.1 million) from the government and [cut his salary](#) and those of his ministers by one-third to emphasize shared sacrifice and a new government probity. Within two weeks, the Solidarity Fund had garnered 2 billion rand (about \$110.3 million) in [donations](#) from individuals and businesses across the country.

While it is critical for leaders to set norms and forge unified national identities, cooperative behavior also depends on interpersonal trust. Trust acts as a society's immune system; it lets people come together to address their problems themselves, giving them a [sense of agency](#) known as collective efficacy. Communities faced with a common threat can do quite a bit to build collective efficacy among their immediate family members and close contacts. Residents of [Mexico City](#) famously emerged from behind walled compounds to help each other after the 1985 earthquake, when the government failed to provide meaningful assistance. Similarly, during [Brazil's](#) coronavirus outbreak, poor residents of favelas have stepped into the void left by a state that governs for only part of its population.

To build trust across adversarial groups, however, effective governance is crucial. When citizens trust their government to enforce the rules and deliver equitable services, they can stop clawing to get whatever they can for themselves and begin to trust fellow citizens in disparate communities. Particularly in a time of crisis, citizens' trust in government can trigger a virtuous cycle of voluntary compliance with government directives, reduced competition with other groups for scarce resources, and national pride. In South Korea, for instance, despite ongoing partisan differences over the coronavirus response, the government's transparency has augmented [public trust](#) already on the upswing and

helped [prevent hoarding](#), prejudice, and other antisocial behaviors. Approval ratings for Moon's response have soared, smoothing the path to a landslide victory for his party in April's National Assembly elections.

THE LIKELIHOOD OF DIVISION

But the bad news must also be confronted. A global pandemic may seem the perfect common enemy to build national solidarity because of the existential threat it poses to physical health, economic well-being, and national psyches. However, relevant psychological literature suggests that people may react differently to a disease than to human enemies. Disgust and fear of infection lead people to favor contact with those who are familiar and trigger [prejudice](#) toward so-called outsiders (including fellow citizens who are members of minority groups).

Thus, the bubonic plague [unleashed pogroms](#) against thousands of Jews in medieval Europe, outbreaks of cholera in early twentieth-century San Francisco led to anti-Chinese discrimination, and the 2014 [Ebola crisis](#) heightened prejudice against Africans. Today, the desire to identify culprits for a public health disaster has already led to global increases in [hate crimes](#) and xenophobia.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 is also causing a global economic crisis. In developing countries, sudden [economic downturns](#) and disaster-induced [resource scarcity](#) are both highly correlated with conflict. In democratic advanced economies, such trials have historically led voters to support [extremist parties](#), particularly on the far right. After the Great Depression, the Great Recession, and more country-specific downturns, parties embracing divisive and nativist rhetoric emerged in many democratic advanced economies. These parties typically have argued for more resources for their group and fewer for others, such as racial, ethnic, or religious



minorities—augmenting partisan and identity-based fissures. Voters may be pushed to extremes by the market interventions needed to grapple with critical shortages in a shrinking economy. Such interventions will likely propel contradictory demands for both less action and more redistribution from different sides of the political spectrum and foment anger at real and perceived corruption, as occurred in [Weimar Germany](#).

Divisiveness is likely to be exacerbated in highly unequal countries like the United States, where the virus affects groups differently, particularly when those identities cluster along partisan lines. While viruses may be blind to such dividing lines, healthcare systems and low-wage jobs are not. In authoritarian countries like Singapore and the Persian Gulf states, communities of migrant laborers are being disproportionately affected, but as noncitizens they have little say in policy decisions. In the United States, these inequities intersect with politics. [African Americans](#), [Latinos](#), and the [poor](#) are getting hit the hardest by both coronavirus-related [deaths](#) and [layoffs](#). They are also groups that trend Democratic, as do the urban areas that have been disproportionately ravaged by the disease so far.

Meanwhile, Republican politicians who claim the cure may be worse than the disease have a point—for their own constituents at least. Stay-at-home orders and business shutdowns [may exacerbate](#) the “diseases of despair” such as suicide and alcoholism that are already causing rising mortality among rural white Americans who trend more conservative. These differentiated experiences of the outbreak [reinforce the notion](#) that there are two pandemics taking place in two Americas.

In such environments, politicians seeking to foster positive norms and more cooperative behavior are rowing against the current—particularly when citizens have little trust in the government, making them less likely to comply with its plan of action. Their trust in

each other will determine the degree to which they share burdens and resources to help everyone better manage the situation, rather than helping themselves at the expense of the common good. Not only do Americans have [historically low levels of trust](#) in government and national politicians, but they are also [quite skeptical](#) of one another. Though recent polling suggests trust levels [may be rising](#) amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the United States and other polarized, low-trust societies will have more difficulty pulling together.

Distrust manifests in many concrete ways. When people feel government officials are [not upholding the rules](#), they are more likely to enforce those rules themselves and look after their own interests by any means necessary. In some countries, that means [hoarding](#), [black markets](#), and [organized crime](#) (crime syndicates already appear to be engaging in transnational sales of [fake medical supplies](#) and other scarce goods). In other societies, this distrust may take the form of vigilante violence or mass flouting of social distancing rules.

Divisive politicians can bring out the worst of these fissures. In countries where governments are perceived as handling the coronavirus poorly, politicians may capitalize on legitimate public frustration at the deaths, isolation, and economic fallout to improve their own political fortunes by further polarizing voters.

PULLING TOGETHER IS POSSIBLE

Many polarized societies are following the easier path of doubling down on their divisions. Yet the status quo is not inevitable. It is possible to build greater unity through concerted action from all segments of society—politicians, security services, the media, and average citizens. Governments have to enforce public health policies while taking extra care with distrustful citizens to avoid public defiance or police brutality.

Citizens have to swallow their skepticism of social distancing directives from governments that have not always shown they have their best interests at heart. Politicians must lead inclusively and set expectations for cooperative social norms across groups, as much as their own base may seek preferential treatment or push to ignore the needs of others.

The cases of South Africa and South Korea show how such reframing can be done in the toughest of circumstances. Australia, which has also seen rising levels of [political polarization](#) over the last two decades, has convened a [national cabinet](#) of elected officials from across the country and from different political parties for the first time since 1945. Those leaders are working together to coordinate a national COVID-19 response.

Even in the United States, change may be under way, though largely within communities and state governments rather than at the national level. Partisan differences in perception of the disease appear to have eroded as the coronavirus makes inroads in [rural America](#) and as disruptions from school closures to canceled sporting events are felt across the country. Some conservative media outlets have altered the tone of their coverage, prompting residents of red states to [seek out more information](#) about the virus.

Glimmers of bipartisan cooperation are visible at the state level. Louisiana's Republican attorney general presented the state's Democratic governor with [a gift of a mask](#) emblazoned with the Louisiana state seal, pledging to set aside their bitter political rivalry to confront the state's rising number of cases. On Capitol Hill, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the largest federal stimulus in U.S. history, garnered [unprecedented bipartisan support](#) and passed with a vote of 96–0 in the Senate, among the nation's most polarized institutions. Across the country, regional alliances—including a bipartisan group of

seven Midwestern governors—are [collaborating](#) on plans to resume business activity and revise public health guidelines.

Average Americans, too, are modeling acts of service and regenerating civic bonds that had broken down in recent decades. In response to a call from New York for medical support, 25,000 volunteers stepped up from around the country. Over 650 mutual aid networks, covering almost every state, are organizing deliveries of food and other supplies to vulnerable community members and cooperating across state lines to share strategies and online organizational infrastructure. These efforts to foster solidarity help create a sense of identity that is not about bridging partisan divides but about minimizing their importance in favor of a national, or even simply human, identity.

CAN IT LAST?

Will the transient unity that some polarized countries achieve in fighting the coronavirus translate into lasting political change? During events like the Black Death and World Wars I and II, the loss of millions of working-age adults created labor scarcities that had an equalizing effect, ushering in new political structures such as the decline of feudalism, the expansion of the working-class vote, and the creation of social safety nets like the United Kingdom's National Health Service. These more inclusive political and economic structures allowed groups to work out their differences by democratic means.

Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic does not fit this pattern. Its effects on mortality and economies are both likely to increase inequality, while the demands of fighting the virus are increasing the centralization of power. Passing policies to lessen inequality through polarized political structures is hard, and that task is



likely to become harder during an economic downturn, when the pie is contracting for all. While some countries' leaders are striving for unity, many are moving in the opposite direction. Trump, for example, continues to use polarizing rhetoric to reward supporters and punish perceived political enemies.

The United States has two possible, if unlikely, pathways to a less polarized future. The first follows from the national interdependence and cooperation highlighted by the crisis, as well as the importance of sound governance and public policy. Americans of both parties are rewarding effective governors of the opposing political party, whose [approval ratings](#) have increased by as much as thirty percentage points during the crisis. Democrat Andy Beshear of Kentucky, elected with a 5,000 vote margin, is now basking in an [81 percent approval rating](#), and Republican Larry Hogan of Maryland is enjoying an even higher [84 percent rating](#). Meanwhile, divisive governors such as Ron DeSantis of Florida languish about thirty points lower. If voters also reward good governance rather than polarizing rhetoric at the ballot box, polarizing strategies may become less attractive to the politicians who exploit them. [Voting out divisive politicians](#) helped end the United States' last bout with extreme polarization in the Gilded Age, though today's party primaries, which are dominated by the most ardent partisans, make this path more difficult.

A second path requires change among political elites. To orchestrate an effective crisis response, some politicians may have to abandon extreme positions and compromise with their adversaries. Pursuing bipartisan solutions that deliver meaningful results to people in dire circumstances may help to normalize cooperative policymaking. The multiple emergency aid bills passed with enormous bipartisan consensus, the Republicans

asking Trump to tone down his [divisive rhetoric](#), and governors working across party lines suggest that some leaders are beginning to do so.

The special sense of unity that blossoms in an emergency may be unlikely to endure, but a shock of this magnitude creates openings for long-term change, however narrow. As people transition out of social distancing into a more permissive environment, they will have to continue to cooperate with one another and with government officials. Moreover, the exposure of weaknesses in healthcare systems, social safety nets, and economies could create a window of opportunity to regenerate the social compact in unequal, polarized countries. While the chances are slim, individuals can make a difference. Voters and politicians who choose an inclusive approach to recovery that balances social and economic needs could allow the United States and other polarized countries to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis more resilient and united.

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NOTES

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