

The Pandemic Became Political

What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic created on politics and the political culture in the United States?

by

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has overwhelmingly affected almost every aspect of public life. As the predominant topic in 2020, its impact has gone way beyond directly related fields such as public health. That includes long-term economic deficits, human and civil rights concerns, far-reaching injustice, and even domestic violence and abuse. All these effects can to a considerable extent be traced back to policies, and therefore to the politics behind them.

Throughout the pandemic, policymakers around the world have constantly had to evaluate the risk posed by the virus and adjust their weighty responses accordingly. In many democracies worldwide, this evaluation and response are often influenced by partisan prejudice, ideology, agenda, and political culture.

The pandemic and everything that came with it, however, have caused new impulses on politics and political cultures in systems across the world. In this essay, I will be examining those effects divided into various aspects and mostly on the specific example of the United States.

About the COVID-19 pandemic

In late 2019, the first cases of a new virus were identified in the city of Wuhan in the Chinese Hubei Province.¹ This novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2) and COVID-19, the disease associated with the virus², have since spread rapidly throughout the world.

Small droplets from the nose or mouth are the primary mode of transmission. The droplets are expelled when speaking, sneezing, or coughing, and they can be caught when standing too close to an infected person expelling droplets, or by touching objects and surfaces with droplets on it and then touching the face³.

According to the World Health Organization, the most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough, and tiredness. However, a wide range of other symptoms can also occur. In most cases, the symptoms are mild, and about 80% of the infected recover from COVID-19 without needing to be hospitalized. Serious cases however lead to breathing difficulties and require immediate medical attention. While everyone can develop serious illness when infected with the disease, older people and patients with certain pre-existing medical conditions are at higher risk.⁴

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020).

²European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020).

³World Health Organization (2020a).

⁴World Health Organization (2020a).

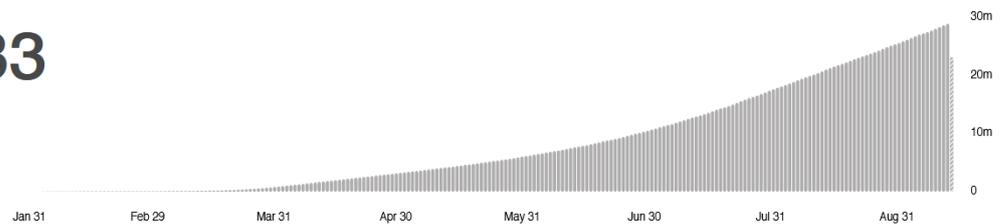
Table 1: Essential data on COVID-19 as of September 14, 2020

Country	Confirmed Cases	Deaths	Case fatality rate	Source
World	29,303,757	928,963	3.17%	JHU (2020)
United States	6,503,030	193,705	2.98%	CDC (2020)

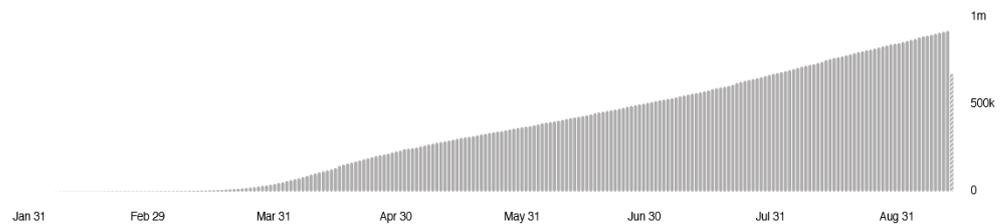
SARS-CoV-2 has rapidly spread around the world since its first outbreak in December 2019. As seen in Table 1, there have been about 29.3 million cases around the world which shows the scale of the pandemic.

Global Situation

29,119,433
confirmed cases



925,965
deaths



Source: World Health Organization
Data may be incomplete for the current day or week.

Figure 1: Cumulative cases and deaths throughout the pandemic.

Source: *World Health Organization (2020b)*

The pandemic started with a only few cases in the Wuhan area and then spread gradually in the world. The first cases outside mainland China were identified around January 20, 2020.⁵ The virus is relatively easily transmitted from human to human. It has therefore spread quickly and resulted in many deaths, as seen in Figure 1. Due to the nature of transmitted diseases, the virus spreads significantly faster the more people are infected. However, it must be noted that the majority of the confirmed cases have recovered by now and are not active anymore. Most countries have also drastically increased the number of tests they conduct, so more actual cases were not identified earlier in the pandemic than now.

Testing people who show symptoms of COVID-19 or had been exposed to a high risk of catching the virus are the core part for monitoring the pandemic and for setting countermeasures. Governments around the world have chosen different approaches to respond to the pandemic, both in the early phases and now. Basic measures to prevent the virus from spreading are mandating to keep a physical distance of about 1.5 meters or 6 feet from one another, to ban large gatherings, and to reduce social contact to as few people outside the

⁵D. B. Taylor (2020).

own household as possible. Most governments require people to wear masks covering their nose and mouth serving as a physical barrier for droplets. Mask mandates can reach from essentially only in mass transit vehicles in Denmark⁶, to all publicly accessible crowded or indoor places in German states like Berlin⁷, and up to everywhere outside one's residence in Spain⁸ and some areas in the U.S. such as the District of Columbia⁹. Stricter measures to contain the virus are lockdowns in different forms, for example, stay-at-home orders as seen in the U.S. state of California¹⁰, or a nationwide quarantine like in Italy¹¹.

Situation in the United States

The United States has more than ever been divided into "red and blue" – supporters of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 has upset liberals and moderates because of his drastic nationalist proposals, his anti-feminist, racist, anti-media stance, and his divisive, authoritarian rhetoric. These factors have started in his presidential bid but have been continuing throughout his presidency. The division of the American people seems to be constantly climaxing for approximately a year now. Starting with the impeachment trial Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives have initiated in late 2019 and having transitioned right into the 2020 presidential campaigns of the Republican incumbent President Donald Trump and the Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden. Both candidates have harshly criticized the other's personality and political stances and therefore fueled the division. The Trump administration is being accused of trying to rig the 2020 general election and to precautionary denounce its outcome at the same time.

Partisanship

Naturally, infectious diseases spread faster in more densely populated areas, where it is harder to keep a physical distance. These areas are more likely to be hit first by such diseases since a large proportion of international traveling concentrates in large cities. In the United States, the areas that have been hit hardest at the beginning - namely King County, WA¹², and later New York, NY¹³ - are major U.S. cities and centers of international traveling and business. The majority of both states - Washington and New York - traditionally leans towards Democrats in elections. Both states have Democratic governors – they are so-called *Blue States*, referring to the blue color that represents the Democratic Party. The same applies to the state of California that is currently the state with the most confirmed COVID-19 cases.¹⁴

⁶Danish Police (2020).

⁷The Governing Mayor of Berlin - Senate Chancellery (2020).

⁸Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Sanidad (2020).

⁹Government of the District of Columbia - Muriel Bowser, Mayor (2020).

¹⁰State of California - Executive Department (2020).

¹¹Romo and Poggioli (2020).

¹²Levenson (2020).

¹³Baker (2020).

¹⁴JHU (2020).

President Donald Trump has started campaigning for his presidential re-election bid even before the pandemic hit the United States. The president is known to make use of a rhetoric that harshly criticizes and blames his political opponents, even for matters that lie in the responsibility of the federal government. When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have had difficulties establishing a sufficient testing infrastructure early in the pandemic, the president blamed the administration of his predecessor Barack Obama even though Donald Trump had been in office for three years already. It would have been impossible for former president Obama to set up a testing system for a disease that was not even known back in his presidency.¹⁵

Following the outbreaks, U.S. states established rules and restrictions to contain the virus. The federal government pushed towards loosening the restrictions and reopening the economy. In that context, the president tweeted a series of calls to "liberate" Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia – states with Democratic governors who have imposed strict social distancing rules.¹⁶ These calls are vague but the least that should be interpreted into them is a try to expose Democratic governors who - in his opinion - deprive Americans of their freedom rather than protecting public health interests. However, extremist groups have understood the president's tweets as a call to armed protests against state restrictions.¹⁷

The divisive rhetoric and partisan stance are not exclusive to the president. The pandemic has brought up a wide range of topics that require quick action from lawmakers. Due to unprecedented employment shortages in the past few months in the U.S., one of them is economic relief. A core piece of the American stimulus plan has been the Economic Impact Payments. Besides other aids, a one-time \$1,200 stimulus check for Americans was passed in late March 2020.¹⁸ The U.S. Congress has since debated a second stimulus package but has not yet passed either one of the proposals. Republicans intend to keep the package small whereas Democrats demand significantly higher relief spendings.¹⁹ With many Americans unemployed and desperate for economic relief, President Trump now urged Republican lawmakers to pass a much more comprehensive stimulus package proposal while calling Democrats "heartless" and essentially blaming them for delaying and blocking relief for Americans.²⁰ Republicans use this rhetoric for their own political gain to appeal to Americans desperate for government support.

Above these specific examples of partisanship being divisive in the U.S. are the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Joe Biden as well as campaigns of candidates for Congress, state legislatures, and other political offices. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has enormous impacts on most aspects of life and is a present topic on all levels, different approaches concerning the pandemic serve as major platforms for candidates for offices from school

¹⁵Haberman and Weiland (2020).

¹⁶Shear and Mervosh (2020).

¹⁷Collins and Zadrozny (2020).

¹⁸Pramuk (2020).

¹⁹A. Taylor (2020).

²⁰Hansen (2020).

board officials to President of the United States. As Americans are exposed to campaigns for highly polarizing elections on all levels, fighting about how the pandemic needs to be approached and attacking each other, they are being more divided than in a regular election year.

The pandemic and the politicization of the matter have led to Americans even more than typically divided into the two political sides most present in the United States. The divisive rhetoric of the president and the current campaign set the tone. Popular news media such as MSNBC on the left or Fox News on the right further support this polarization by rather biased editorial practice.

War on Science

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only divided the American people further regarding partisan politics. Looking at how the proposed approaches and publicly stated views on the pandemic differ between Democrats and Republicans - and especially between Donald Trump and Joe Biden - it is quite obvious what the underlying strategies are.

President Trump has repeatedly stated false, misleading, or unproven claims regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February, the president suggested the virus would disappear, that it would go away like a miracle.²¹ He was downplaying the severity of the disease dramatically with this statement, implying any action to contain the virus would be optional as it would disappear either way. He knowingly conveyed a wrong impression of the virus.

Regarding medication, the president publicly stated multiple ideas for medicine that prevents or cures the disease. The most prominent one is the malaria drug Hydroxychloroquine: the president repeatedly defended the effectiveness of the drug in COVID-19 treatment for months. He claimed that he would personally take it. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and member of the White House Coronavirus task force, has denied that there was any scientific proof of the effectiveness of the medication against COVID-19. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration later published a warning to not use the drug to treat COVID-19 patients as serious health problems were reported.²²

In June, when the U.S. has already been the country with most confirmed cases, the president has indicated that there would only be so many COVID-19 cases because of the administration's testing strategy that Donald Trump described as "the greatest testing machine in history." He claimed that the extensive testing strategy would make the U.S. "look bad" and labeled testing as "overrated" – "If we stop testing right now, we'd have very few cases, actually."²³ Although reducing the testing capacity would lead to a lower number of confirmed cases, it would not lead to fewer actual cases. Testing is a core element to monitor the

²¹Collinson (2020).

²²BBC News (2020).

²³Panetta (2020).

course of the pandemic, to adjust hospitalization and treatment capacity, and to evaluate the effectiveness and proportionality of measures.

A very recent discovery has been made with the release of recordings of private interviews that the investigative journalist Bob Woodward conducted with President Trump throughout the past months. The tapes revealed that the president has been fully aware of the danger and deadliness the virus posed when he publicly emphasized that the pandemic would end in no time.²⁴ "I wanted to always play it down. I still like playing it down, because I don't want to create a panic," said the president in the private interview with Bob Woodward on March 19, 2020.²⁵

This shows that the president would much rather knowingly, repeatedly lie and endanger the state of public health in the United States than publicly telling an inconvenient truth that his supporters may not like. Instead of respecting science and listening to the administration's infectious disease experts and public health officials, President Trump simply takes a different standpoint and argues with no proof at all against scientists on their area of expertise.

His strategy did not work, there is no secured vaccine available yet, and Trump cannot back off from his stance because it has been politicized in the electoral campaigns. The Biden-Harris campaign proposes a pro-science plan, including evidence-based national guidance, a nationwide mask mandate, and establishing further testing sites.²⁶ It stands in stark contrast to Donald Trump's approach. Even if Joe Biden would win the presidential election on November 3, 2020, Donald Trump signaled his supporters that science might not be the only truth. What the president says matters.

Conspiracy theories

As governments around the world - including the U.S. federal and state governments - tightened COVID-19 preventive measures, announced mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, et cetera, first conspiracy theories came around.

Some of the most shared conspiracy theories about COVID-19 feature Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The private foundation focuses - among other topics - on enhancing healthcare around the world.²⁷ Because the foundation is a major player in global public health projects such as vaccine research, and Gates publicly predicted a massive pandemic a few years ago, many conspiracies are about him or the foundation. Most prominently, he is being accused of wanting microchip implants and of having tested vaccines in Africa and India that killed thousands of children.²⁸

The conspiracy group QAnon believes in a deep state with a group of elite leaders that secretly control the world. The conspiracy theory has quickly spread and became a catch-all

²⁴Samuels (2020).

²⁵Gangel, Herb, and Stuart (2020).

²⁶Joe Biden for President (2020).

²⁷Bill Melinda Gates Foundation (2020).

²⁸Wakefield (2020).

conspiracy that merged with several other conspiracy theories. QAnon supporters believe that the pandemic is a Chinese bioweapon with the support of the Democratic Party to stop the president's presidency by destroying the American economy, or that the pandemic is not actually as dangerous and deadly as officials say.²⁹

The fact that conspiracy theories like these two examples, theories with no evidence at all, could rise so rapidly, shows not only the effect of fake news and disinformation on social media. It also shows the effect of a U.S. government that does not side with science and evidence but instead sets an example for people to believe that everything can be true.

Conclusion

A partisan political landscape in the United States, a president who knowingly lies and does not rely on science, and many vague and unproven conspiracy theories – none of these factors are new. But the pandemic still had an extraordinary impact on how they manifest. There have only been few situations of comparable urgency and severity in recent history. The pandemic has shown how world leaders, how countries, how people responded to and coped with such an utterly serious situation.

So, what is the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has created on politics and the political culture in the United States?

For some Americans, it has reduced trust in science. For others, it has further reduced the confidence in President Trump and the Republican Party. It has divided an already divided nation even further, in a time when it needed mutual support and solidarity more than ever. It has shown what distrust towards science can lead to. It has highlighted what the problems with President Trump and his administration are.

Times of crisis reveal the true character of a person, of a nation, of a society.

²⁹Argentino (2020).

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