

Five Lessons for Democracy From the Covid-19 Pandemic

An international evaluation of democracy in crises

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Who could have guessed, even one year ago, that America's **postal service** would be central to the US Presidential Election? That political party conventions would become online events? Or that protests could be suppressed in the name of biosecurity and protesters **could be fined** for *not* wearing face masks?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had myriad unpredictable impacts on democratic institutions around the world.

We need to understand these changes and how they impact the way we think about and enact democracy. But there have been few systematic attempts to examine the implications of the pandemic for democracy, beyond an overly simplistic concern about **rising authoritarianism**.

So, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world went into lockdown, we reached out to 32 scholars working on different aspects of democracy. We asked them how the pandemic is affecting democracy and democratic institutions. This exchange culminated in a twenty-article special issue of the academic journal *Democratic Theory*.

Here are five lessons we learned from their answers to that question:

Lesson 1: *COVID-19 has had corrosive effects on already endangered democratic institutions.*

The politics of COVID-19 have, the world over, been conducted as ‘**emergency politics**.’ Parliaments have subordinated themselves to **rule by government decree** to hasten decision-making. In places where democracy was already threatened by executive power grabs, COVID-19 has provided a convenient excuse to accelerate the erosion of democratic oversight of government.

As **Petra Guasti writes** about the declaration of an indefinite state of emergency in Hungary, “[t]he effects of the law are chilling—the rule by decree is the ultimate form of executive aggrandizement.” COVID-19 has also provided cover to delay, and perhaps eventually prevent, the resolution of democratic crises in Israel, Chile, Bolivia, and Venezuela, enabling incumbent administrations to **consolidate their power**.

Nevertheless, there is **little to suggest** the pandemic is a general threat to democracy everywhere. The majority of European democracies **have not violated** liberal democratic norms during the state of emergency and there is little evidence of any erosion of public support for democracy in established democracies. Moreover, civil society has not lost its voice and has successfully challenged executive overreach.

So, whilst COVID-19 has accelerated the erosion of already endangered institutions, it has also demonstrated this is not inevitable. It is conditioned by both the intentions of the incumbent executive and the response from other democratic actors and institutions.

Lesson 2: *COVID-19 has revealed alternative possibilities for democratic politics in the state of emergency.*

The universal turn to unhindered executive decision-making suggests normal democratic politics are not built for times of emergency. Yet the pandemic has demonstrated the fallacy of this assumption. While some executives **have handled this crisis relatively well**, others—notably the United States, United Kingdom, Mexico, and Brazil—have been slow and indecisive, undermining the very justification for emergency rule by the executive.

At the same time, other liberal democratic institutions—parliaments, media and

At the same time, other key democratic institutions—parliaments, media and civil society—have proven flexible, resilient, and resourceful. This raises the question of whether emergency politics *has* to be conducted by executive fiat. When parliaments and civil society continue to operate effectively, it is questionable how far normal democratic politics needs to be abandoned.

COVID-19 is not a strategic actor, unlike a wartime foe, thus there is little need to abandon robust practices of transparency and accountability. In addition, if democracies make better policy, as epistemic democrats argue, then it is strange, illogical even, that we abandon these strengths in favor of a more authoritarian mode of policy-making as soon as our greatest challenges arrive.

As **Wolfgang Merkel** argues, we should fight against executive rule coming to be seen as “the new normal”: “we cannot rule out recurring pandemic infection waves or other deep crisis, such as climate change [...] This means that the safeguarding of public health from pandemics could lead the government time and again to suspend basic rights and govern in emergency mode. And: why not govern the climate crisis in an emergency mode as well? The critical democratic citizen is in high demand in post-corona democracies.”

The pandemic has demonstrated both the need and the possibilities for a more democratic emergency politics, one that protects democratic oversight and opportunities for diverse interests **to influence policy-making**. This would help avoid the **injustices or policy failures** that have in many places characterized this pandemic when the next crisis arrives.

Lesson 3: *COVID-19 has amplified the inequalities and injustices within democracies.*

The virus has not only laid bare the gross inequalities within our societies, it has intensified them. There is ample evidence showing that the virus itself spreads more quickly among those who are poorly housed, kills more of those with existing poor health, and hits hardest the most precariously employed. As **Bonnie Honig** writes:

“The very word “quarantine” has the power to remind us that as a democracy we should do better, by attending not just to the virus but to the disease of a polity in which, fifty years after the Fair Housing Act, we have yet to secure for everyone a right to housing and in which some of those who do have housing are not secure in their homes.”

Policy responses to COVID-19 too often protect the already protected and further expose **those who are vulnerable**. This points to an important limitation of emergency politics practiced as executive politics: the **reduction in pluralist perspective taking** that accompanies it.

Those **most affected by the pandemic** have had little voice in determining responses to it. Instead this response has frequently been constructed to suit the needs of politically dominant groups, taken **for the archetypal citizen**, and neglected or misunderstood the needs of those who do not fit this mold. This has reinforced **gender, racial, intergenerational, economic, and health inequalities**,

undermining the political equality that is an essential condition of democracy. It has inevitably provoked protest. As **Jodi Dean witnessed** during the anti-racist protests in the US, COVID-19 layered upon police violence created a situation for black, brown, and indigenous people where “between the virus and the economy, there was nothing left to lose. And there is a world to win.”

Lesson 4: *COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for institutional infrastructure for prolonged solidarity.*

Contrary to initial hopes, COVID-19 has shown that a pandemic **does not produce** long-term solidarity by itself. Whilst remarkable and heart-warming stories of person-to-person solidarity have been reported since the COVID-19 virus began its spread in the world, **Barbara Prainsack reminds** us that, “focusing only on solidarity at this level risks ignoring more important systemic and structural factors. We need to address the causes of inequality and strengthen solidaristic institutions” now, ahead of later waves of infection.

Solidaristic institutional structures that provide people with the resilience in a crisis to support others are key to maintaining that support. It is easier to protect others by staying away from work when you know that welfare institutions will support you to do so.

However, COVID-19 arrived on the back of a decade of austerity that **eroded the institutional bases of solidarity**. Welfare systems became increasingly miserly, conditional, and punitive. Civil society organizations, increasingly reliant on wealthy donors and government contracts, have also been hard hit by the financial crisis and the pandemic.

The economic stimulus packages, already begun in many places, are an opportunity to build stability and resilience back into our social and economic relations, reversing the growing precarity of recent years, and preparing the groundwork for the solidarity that will sustain us for the next crisis. “We can surmise,” as **Louise Haagh does**, “that post-COVID-19 planning ought to feature not just stimulus but a new appreciation of stability in core institutions—those which frame our sense of autonomy and permanence in work, care, education, and basic economic security—to enable humanist justice and effective government.”

Lesson 5: *COVID-19 has highlighted the predominance of the nation-state and its limitations.*

Though COVID-19 is a global problem, the primary actors in the policy response have been **nation-states**. National borders were almost universally closed and absentee citizens were brought back “home.” Even within the EU’s supposedly borderless Schengen zone, **national borders were reasserted**, violating quasi-constitutional protections to free movement of goods, services, and persons on dubious legal grounds.

The norm has been for national responses that prioritize national populations, **with little international collaboration**.

Yet, the very predominance of the nation-state has demonstrated its limitations in dealing with a global problem in a globalized world, particularly for those who live between and across state lines. A pandemic that pays no heed to national borders cannot be permanently eradicated within a nation by its own efforts alone. **David Owen makes it clear:**

“COVID-19 is, among other things, a lens through which we can be brought to recognize not only the presence of inequalities within and across borders, but the dangers of such inequalities in a world of globalized interdependency—in a world striving, perhaps, for global democracy.”

The virus accordingly draws attention to the interdependencies between democracies in securing public health. Successfully controlling or eradicating the virus is, by this logic, best achieved through transnational collaboration.

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Together these five lessons show us what to avoid and what to cultivate for democracy in times of emergency. They also demonstrate the breadth of this task.

Understanding democracy in a pandemic is not just about articulating the relationships between national-level executives, their interactions with parliaments and the laws they pass. It concerns all of the ways we come together to make decisions and undertake collective actions.

There is a chain of interactions running from the everyday democracy of the neighborhood to the international relations between states. Political institutions are only one part of this picture. Economic and social relations have proved to be just as important in providing stability and solidarity or inducing precarity and division.

The pandemic is an object lesson in the need to struggle for further democratization of our political, social, and economic relations, from the street to the world.

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