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Democracy, authoritarianism and crises

In theory, democracy should provide advantages in dealing with crises. But Covid-19 has shown that's not always the case

An old adage has it that crises don't make a person, but rather reveal what s/he is made of. The same applies to political systems: during times of crisis, their underlying strengths and weaknesses are laid bare. When the coronavirus crisis began, there was much discussion of how it revealed the underlying weaknesses of Chinese authoritarianism.

Faulty bottom-up and top-down information flows in China hindered an early understanding of the nature and depth of the crisis. Local officials in Wuhan prioritised maintaining favour with party elites over protecting the health and wellbeing of their citizens, contributing to cover-ups which sent the catastrophe 'careening outward'. The Beijing regime'sbureaucratic nature and reliance on 'performance legitimacy' — in return for giving up their freedom, citizens are promised effective government — created incentives for it to suppress, rather than deal openly with, bad news and difficult challenges.

That such flawed government decision-making and elite infighting helped turn Iran into the next epicentre of the pandemic reinforced a narrative of authoritarian weakness in the face of crisis. But as the pandemic spread, more than the frailties of authoritarian regimes were unveiled.

In theory, inherent features of democracy — a free press and information flows, politicians, parties and governments responsive to citizens and trusted by them, officials and bureaucrats appointed on the basis of merit rather than connections — should provide advantages in dealing with crises. But the coronavirus has made clear how divorced the theory and practice of democracy have, in some cases, become.

Divergent paths

Over the past years, democratic countries have followed widely divergent paths. In some, democracy has remained resilient. Such countries have been able to exploit democracy's inherent strengths in responding to the crisis. In others, democratic norms and institutions have degraded to the point where democracy's theoretical strengths are nowhere in evidence.

In the former category, for example, are the Nordic countries. Experts consistently rate these countries' democracies as strong, while their citizens' satisfaction with democracy and levels of social trust remain very high. The responses of the region's governments and societies to the crisis clearly reflect these features.

In Denmark, the minority social-democrat government rapidly negotiated a crisis package with trade unions, employer organisations and other political parties, which paired a 'domestic lockdown' to limit the spread of the virus with radical measures to protect citizens and businesses from the worst effects of the downturn inevitably accompanying it. Among these measures are promises to cover at least 75 per cent of the salaries of company employees who would otherwise be fired and loans, tax delays and other help for businesses that keep workers on the rolls.

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The goal of such policies is to make it easier to jumpstart the economy in a few months when the crisis is hopefully over, by avoiding bankruptcies and making it smoother for businesses to restart activity, since they won't have to expend effort rehiring workers. When announcing the unprecedented scope and cost of the Danish crisis package, the finance minister said 'there was no ceiling' on what the government would do to protect the country. That it was the government's job to protect Danish society and the economy was not questioned.

Social responsibility

Sweden, meanwhile, initially responded to the crisis with a less severe lockdown, relying instead on citizens' sense of social responsibility and solidarity to win compliance with restrictions on behaviour. The prime minister, Stefan Löfven, gave an unprecedented speech to the nation, where he appealed to Swedes to 'take responsibility for themselves, their

fellow citizens and their country', to trust government authorities to take whatever measures were necessary to protect them and to have faith in the ability of their 'strong society' to weather the crisis.

Such appeals only make sense in a country where citizens have a high degree of trust in each other and political institutions. For better or worse, observers have commented on the relative calmness with which Swedish citizens and politicians have thus far handled the crisis.

On the policy front, the Swedish government also quickly announced measures to help citizens and businesses through the crisis, including covering workers' salaries to avoid layoffs, providing loans, tax holidays and more. As in Denmark, the minority social-democrat government's ability to pass such policies and its general response to the evolving crisis has been facilitated by the willingness of opposition parties to co-operate in parliament. In Sweden, as in Denmark, the idea that it is the government's job to protect society and the economy is uncontroversial.

Significant decay

At the opposite end of the political spectrum from the Nordic countries lies the United States. Experts agree that over past years American democracy has experienced significant decay, while citizen satisfaction with democracy, as well as trust in each other and political institutions, has declined immensely. The responses of the US government to the crisis clearly reflect these features.

One of the most striking aspects of the initial American response was the deep divergence between elites and citizens over basic facts. Initially, many Republican politicians and much of the right-wing media portrayed the crisis as a 'hoax', and the 'hysteria' about it a left-wing conspiracy to 'destabilise the country and destroy' Donald Trump. One prime-time host on Fox told viewers that concerns about the coronavirus were 'yet another attempt to impeach the president'.

Relatedly, scientific experts' warnings about the crisis were dismissed by Republican and other right-wing elites, as untrustworthy and even part of a 'deep-state plot' to hurt the president. Initially, Trump essentially endorsed these views, referring to experts' warnings as a 'hoax' designed to weaken him.

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Such claims filtered down to, and were reflected among, citizens. Republican poll respondents took a very different view of the situation than Democrat supporters and were significantly less

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likely to view the coronavirus as a serious threat.

This initial divergence in views meant that the Trump administration, as well as other Republican politicians, faced less pressure to act rapidly or robustly. Although over time Republicans have come to take the situation more seriously, as was the case in China and elsewhere, the government's failure to respond quickly had serious consequences.

Widespread mistrust

Also hindering such a response was widespread mistrust, particularly among Republicans, of government and political institutions more generally. The former president Ronald Reagan (in)famously said that the nine most terrifying words in the English language were 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'. As one commentator noted, 'the line never failed to get a laugh from Republicans. If government would just get out of the way, we would all be freer and everything would work better.'

The mistrust of government propounded by Reagan has been taken up with increasing fervour by his successors. But particularly amid a crisis, such a view seems patently ridiculous. As many have noted, it is hard to be a libertarian during a pandemic.

Even before the crisis hit, mistrust of 'big government' led the Trump administration to weaken the federal bureaucracy. Since Trump's election in 2016 the budgets of many government agencies have been cut and many positions have gone unfilled. Where they have been filled, a loyalty test has increasingly replaced expertise as the key criterion for appointment.

But it isn't just the government's capacity to respond to challenges that has decayed. The willingness of Trump and Republicans even to recognise the need for government action is also lacking. They have used mistrust of 'big government' — and more generally a rejection of the idea that it is the government's job to protect society and the economy—as an excuse to reject policies that even conservatives in other countries accept as necessary.

Avoiding intervention

Only last Friday did Trump decide to invoke his presidential authority, under the Defense Production Act, to force private businesses to produce products necessary to save lives. Businesses and conservative interests had lobbied against such a move, prioritising the avoidance of direct government intervention over the needs of American citizens.

The result is healthcare workers who lack masks and other basic protective gear and a severe shortage of tests, ventilators and other equipment necessary to deal with the widening catastrophe. Recently in my home city of New York, one of the richest in the world, we have been treated to stories of nurses in hospitals forced to wear waste-disposal bags as protection.

In short, what the US makes clear is that many of the features of democracy which *should* make it better equipped to deal with crises have withered significantly. Without them the most affluent, most technologically advanced country in the world is floundering. And when it comes to dealing with major challenges — much less crises — even a vibrant civil society or a dynamic private sector cannot substitute for well-functioning, responsive government.

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