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HOW A PANDEMIC BECAME A DISASTER FOR DEMOCRACY

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the democratic decline, already an ongoing issue before the crisis began. Pandemic management and the actions of leaders vis-a-vis a chance for increased power has led to a decrease in the public's trust of governments, the cornerstone of legitimacy in a democracy.

Key points

- The pandemic has led to certain limitations on personal freedoms in democracies, but in many cases, this was worsened by the actions of incumbent leaders who took advantage of the chance to consolidate their power.
- Building trust will be key to stabilizing and strengthening the foundations of democracy, along with addressing the issues which detract from it such as inequality.

The ongoing pandemic is much more than a sanitary crisis. It has a broad scope, affecting the economic, social, human, and political spheres. Prior to the pandemic, democracies were increasingly characterized by growing polarization, and issues such as populism and nationalism which divided states and impacted democratic institutions. The destabilizing effects of the pandemic proved to be a further hit to democratic growth as states scrambled to implement measures to contain the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, their actions, along with other consequences of the pandemic, often had the negative repercussions of curtailing trust in governments along the way.

Democracy

To fully grasp the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on democratic systems, democracy itself must be understood along with the institutions which comprise it. The word has a variety of definitions, but at its core stems from the Greek words *demos* and *kratos*, which translate to people and power, respectively. This is the basis of democracy in its most rudimentary form: power of the people. Practically, however, this translates to a government that should be representing and working based on the interest of the people. Democracies all function a bit differently but usually share common institutions, procedures, and values. Voting, democratically elected officials, separation of powers in a functioning government, active civil society, the strive for equality, and the protection of individual rights and certain freedoms such as speech are a few of these commonalities (“Democracy”, n.d.). These shared traits can also be utilized as indices to measure and compare democracies, irrespective of their differences.

Democratic trends pre-pandemic

Even before the pandemic changed the course of global governance in early 2020, the strength and quality of democracies across the world had already been declining for fourteen years, according to the Freedom House Index (“New Report: The global decline in democracy has accelerated”, 2021). This decline can be attributed to certain anti-democratic trends which had been taking root in many states, even those with historically high democratic scores. One identifiable trend is the rise of populism. Populism is an approach that distinguishes between the political and other elites, and the people. The people feel their issues and concerns are disregarded by these elites; often following crises such as economic issues or mass migration resulting in government distrust (Molloy, 2018). Populists have grown in popularity in the U.S., India, and across Europe where populist parties have received three times more votes over the past two decades (Rice-Oxley & Kalia, 2018). Although populism is not inherently anti-democratic, populist governments tend to undermine the rights of minorities and the structure of democratic institutions leading to a quadruple increase in the chance of democratic backsliding under populist leadership (Kyle & Mounk, 2018).

Often populism, although different, is interlinked with the rise of nationalism, as it is driven by many of the same woes and leads to similar concerns. Nationalism, as well as populism, is what led to Brexit, “America First” rhetoric, and the rise of far-right parties in central and eastern European states such as Poland and Hungary which go against the grain of modern democratic norms and values. Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban worked particularly diligently to eradicate opposition and limits on his power, and to control media and the legal system, creating what he calls an illiberal democracy (Kelemen, 2019). In general, across Europe, there had already been a growing trend to increasingly stray from the traditional moderate parties in favor of extreme, often far-right, nationalist parties such as AfD in Germany, the National Rally in France, and the Lega Party in Italy

(Bremmer, 2018). This shift from moderate to extreme subsequently outlines the growing polarization in democracies globally.

Profiting off this polarization is social media and the actors which manipulate it to their benefit. Since the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, social media has been identified as a tool for foreign governments to interfere in domestic politics. Russia and China have been recognized as particularly threatening perpetrators for installing their desired narrative and destabilizing democratic order. Often the discussion is around the actions of foreign actors, but it should not be forgotten these companies such as Facebook and Twitter also have the power to censor the news. Therefore, these private businesses which distribute much of the world's information hold a significant grip over democracy depending on how they choose to utilize this power. Often deciding what to censor or not is done hastily and haphazardly, leading to critiques as large as the accusation that Facebook helped create the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar (Fisher, 2018).

These issues are not only threats that bring states away from democracy, but they also tend to lead to less cooperation and participation in multilateral institutions. This decreased cooperation is an issue when tackling global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic which from 2020 on has been at the forefront of problems states are facing. Since the start of the pandemic, states have closed their borders, health systems have been overwhelmed and collapsed, there have been shortages and deep disruptions in supply chains, and the global economy as a whole has taken a plunge. It has been an unprecedented time, filled with grief and looming uncertainty. Along with all these issues, the crisis has also taken its toll on democracy.

Areas where the pandemic challenged democracy

Protests

A crisis as large as the pandemic required governments to exert more control over their citizens than would typically be the case, often following a declared state of emergency. In many cases, governments imposed measures in attempts to contain the spread of the contagious virus. However, this was also a prime opportunity for certain leaders to use the pandemic regulations as an excuse to further agendas or consolidate power. In places like Russia, lockdown measures were an opportune time to violently crackdown on any protesters under the pretext of the violation of these measures. During protests against the imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny through the winter of 2021, over 1,600 protesters were arrested ("Russia: Arbitrary Detentions at Pro-Navalny Protests", 2021). Actions against protests did not only occur in authoritarian states, however. In France for example, protest bans persisted even after restrictions had eased, allowing people to meet in shopping malls, restaurants, amusement parks, etc. When protests did occur, they were met with tear gas, there were reports of police violence, and even volunteer medics were detained by the police without cause ("Unjustified Ban on Protests During Pandemic; Charlie Hebdo Faces Attack Again", 2020).

Media

Limiting freedom of expression has not only taken place physically but also in the digital space. After Victor Orban passed a state of emergency in Hungary, publishing what was deemed to be fake news meant a possible five years in prison (Mudde, 2020). Although this was done under the excuse to limit fake news on the virus, this sweeping power poses a serious threat to the already restricted

independent media in the country. In Poland, there have been similar issues. In Polish news, the emphasis is placed on the successes of the current government in the face of the pandemic, emphasizing previous failures of the opposition. Meanwhile, only independent media reports the critical issues in the country and the true state of the healthcare system. This independent media is subsequently being limited by the government, particularly through an onslaught of lawsuits (Speier, 2021).

Militarization

The issues and democratic backsliding which occurred as a result of exploiting pandemic measures to justify consolidating power can partially be attributed to governments' normalizing a realist reaction to the virus. As cases, as well as concern among the public and political leaders grew, democratic incumbents began to declare their states to be "at war" with the virus (Serhan, 2020). From president Macron's announcement "we are at war" while declaring a state of emergency (and postponing elections), and President Trump labeling himself as a wartime president, leaders launched a trend of utilizing military language for a sanitary crisis. The issue with this is the severity of the term war and what it implies. When a nation is at war, history has shown that leaders may act with a sense of less accountability or scrutiny being protected under the pretext that their actions are in the interest of national security. War allows and often requires an increase in secrecy and a decrease in transparency. This is not what is required to fight a virus.

On the contrary, "combatting" COVID-19 means sharing as much relevant information and knowledge as possible, so people are better prepared. It also means governments must be transparent on why they are implementing all regulations and measures in relation to limiting the spread of COVID-19, especially considering many pandemic decrees had limited parliamentary input (Russack, 2021). They should be proportionate and appropriate. Governments certainly should not feel they have sweeping powers. Beyond granting leaders the sense they can act with unchecked authority, utilizing war rhetoric is also more likely to cause a sense of panic and increase in fear which has negative effects on society overall (Serhan, 2020).

Elections

Some of the threats to democracy that have been deepened since the COVID-19 outbreak are unfortunate symptoms of the pandemic, not necessarily due to the malintent of governments and political leaders. Voting is a process that is integral to a properly functioning democracy which requires free and fair elections. COVID-19 restrictions, as they limited social gatherings and interactions created new barriers to carrying out such elections. By June 2020, close to 100 elections had been delayed, stifling the democratic system, and in some cases allowing leaders with authoritarian tendencies extended time to concentrate their power (Quarcoo, 2020). In terms of elections that have been held despite the pandemic, they were consistently marked by lower rates of voter turnout (Picchio & Santolini, 2021). When an election has low participation, this can create the perception of a less legitimate government being elected as a smaller portion of the population was represented, which can lead to distrust. In addition to this, traditional Election Observation Missions (EOMs), which serve as external verification that a state is holding free and fair elections, had to be limited. In fears of virus transmission, these missions were smaller, and less thorough or frequent (Asplund et al., 2021). Lack of international observation allows more room for fraudulent elections, and subsequent illegitimate leaders and governments.

Inequality

The virus alongside effects of pandemic regulations have exacerbated another crisis: rising inequality. While the pandemic has been detrimental to those already in poverty, the richest have seen their wealth grow, widening the economic gap to a degree that could take a decade to recover from (Berkhout et al., 2021). The less wealthy who have smaller chances of possessing proper healthcare are also more likely to contract the virus, considering social distancing is a luxury many can not afford, and have fewer jobs that allow them to work from home. Racial and ethnic minorities were found to be at a consistent disadvantage due to preexisting inequalities, as well as women who bore more responsibilities as children stayed at home (Stok, Bal, Yerkes, & B.F. de Wit, 2021). These socio-economic inequalities often translate to political inequalities, resulting in a lack of opportunity for participation and subsequent representation. Inequality also fosters dissatisfaction of incumbent governments and over time erodes trust in the democratic system (Lindberg, 2019).

Resulting distrust

As a result of these actions and issues, an annual study by the Edelman firm titled the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer found that public trust in governments has continued to decrease in many countries across the world, to such a level that people now trust businesses more than governments. In central and eastern Europe, there is an unsurprising growing distrust in politicians, but this is also the case in western European states, including France, Italy, and Greece (Russack, 2021). In a democratic system, trust is key. Trust is the necessary cornerstone to the legitimacy of a government, and it makes people more likely to follow the regulations they put in place ("Trust in Government", n.d.). In order for people to be more trusting of governments, they must feel they are acting with their best interests in mind and have confidence in their actions.

This growing distrust is a roadblock when trying to encourage people to follow pandemic regulations, but it has also proven problematic for vaccination campaigns. In order to attempt to move past this pandemic, and the many restrictions it imposes, vaccines are our best and only option, yet many individuals are wary. Wariness was found to be higher in countries with more government distrust (Mageit, 2021). Unfortunately, this creates a cycle, as lower vaccination rates mean more cases, and the subsequent perception of pandemic mismanagement, which decreases trust. Part of this caution can also be attributed to "fake news" being spread on social media in relation to the virus and vaccine. As people are less likely to trust politicians and official health institutions, they are more likely to turn to the vast amounts of unverified information circulating the internet.

Distrust in incumbents and political elites is also precisely what causes increased support for populist leaders, which, as mentioned, has been a threat to democracy since before the start of the pandemic. Populist rhetoric creates a firm line between political elites and the people, often stating that traditional politicians do not have the interest of the people in mind. COVID-19 mismanagement and power abuses would be prime material for future populist arguments. That is why politicians must utilize the communal hurdle of COVID-19 as a chance to unite populations to limit further polarization and extremism. During an international pandemic, it is more productive to address it collectively in a time where no one is truly safe from the virus until everyone is.

Recommendations

- Moving forward, it must be a priority for all democratic states to increase citizens' trust in their governments. This effort can have multiple approaches: governments should focus on fostering public engagement and supporting grassroots movements, as well as ensuring their actions are more transparent.
- Governments, as well as the EU, should be honest in where they have failed during this pandemic and acknowledge criticism. Honesty can help gain trust and ensure citizens this reflection means better preparation for the future.
- As the pandemic persists, regulations must always be justified and proportionate. Governments should have arguable grounds for why they are implementing each measure. Restrictions that limit more basic freedoms should have a set time frame. This should also be the case for declared states of emergency which allow the executive increased powers.
- Separation of powers is a crucial aspect to maintaining strong democracies. Therefore, it is necessary to limit (when time allows) ruling by decree, allowing for parliamentary input.
- The pandemic is a chance for incumbents to emphasize a common purpose and the necessity for unity and solidarity without utilizing militarized language. Applying more humane, empathetic language may be more appropriate. Such language may better foster cooperation and stresses how we can help each other to prevent further loss of life.
- The EU needs to continue to seriously consider efficient mechanisms to address democratic backsliding for member states such as Poland and Hungary. In extreme cases being able to expel a member state should also be an option. Even if it is not utilized, it may provide an incentive for these states to take greater consideration of their actions. Allowing these states to undermine the core values of the union discredits the EU as a whole and could set an undesirable example for current and future member states.
- Western Democracies cannot trust companies such as Facebook to fact-check or counter disinformation. The EU, as well as individual countries, should continue to develop coordinated plans. Funding civil society to monitor these threats is also an important tool that could be further employed.
- Economic recovery plans following COVID-19 must address existing inequalities, the absence of which could worsen inequalities in the future. Tax distribution should be fair, and a progressive wealth tax should be targeted especially towards those who saw exponential growth during the pandemic. Funding from this tax should be used to invest in public services, such as healthcare, education, and regional development, ensuring big cities are not the sole benefactors.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in governments across the world increasing their typical range of powers to implement restrictions in the effort of containing the spread of the virus to save lives. Unfortunately, some leaders have taken advantage of the pandemic to consolidate their power, and act in their own interest rather than the people's. As a result, the trials that democracy was facing before the outbreak have been exacerbated. Many leaders turned away from the values of democracy at the cost of their citizens, inequality is rising and there is low voter turnout and participation. This democratic backsliding has worsened a monumental threat to the legitimacy of democracy: lack of public trust in government. This is an issue which should be a prime concern for democratic institutions going forward.

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