



Wilton Park

Provisional programme

How the COVID-19 pandemic has undermined global democracy by fostering distrust in democratic institutions

Tuesday 27 July 2021 | WP1964V

To be held online

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened a crisis for democracy around the world, providing cover for governments to disrupt elections, silence critics and the press, and undermine the accountability needed to protect human rights as well as public health. According to Freedom House, since the coronavirus outbreak began, the condition of democracy and human rights globally has worsened, with particularly sharp deterioration in struggling democracies and highly repressive states. Four problems were identified as the most acute during the COVID-19 pandemic: lack of government transparency and information on the coronavirus, corruption, lack of protection for vulnerable populations, and government abuses of power.

Perceived failure of governments to deal effectively with the pandemic has led to a breakdown in trust, alongside a lack of clarity about the unique responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments. Measures to cope with the pandemic – such as closing airports and borders, blocking goods at customs, declaring states of emergency and the centralization of all powers – would in normal times be seen as direct attacks on the most basic constitutional and democratic principles. Political leaders are responding to this crisis with an unprecedented set of measures aimed to curb the spread of the virus, protect public health and save the economy. Whilst such emergency powers can be justified to address the crisis, there is also a risk that they can negatively affect democracy, particularly where countries have gone so far as to restrict democratic liberties, through (1) enhanced surveillance powers, (2) suspension of rights, (3) control over information; and (4) delayed elections.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically transformed geopolitics and economics. Beyond the economic realm, democracy building will need to connect to the issues people care about most. One silver lining is the potential impetus to reinvigorate international support for democracy by ensuring connection to the issues people care about most, e.g. climate change.

Wilton Park will aim to bring together stakeholders from government, NGOs, civil society, academia and the private sector to identify measures for breaking the cycle of distrust and neglect to enable governments to reconnect positively with citizens and build democratic institutions that are worthy of trust, reflecting collective values that are capable of effectively responding to present and future challenges.

In partnership with:



DITCHLEY

Tuesday 27 July (BST UK time)

1645

Participants log on

1700-1705

Welcome and introduction

Tom Cargill,
Chief Executive, Wilton Park

Nick Linfield
Head, Policy; Programme Director, Wilton Park

1705-1735

1. The impact of Covid-19 on global democracy

Four problems were identified as the most acute during the COVID-19 pandemic: lack of government transparency and information on the coronavirus, corruption, lack of protection for vulnerable populations, and government abuses of power. What has been the global impact of these and what are the relative significances of each?

Two speakers will give brief introductions to the topic before the subject is opened up to plenary debate.

Elisabeth Braw
Visiting Fellow, American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Washington, DC

Emily Mansfield
Principal Economist, Intelligence Unit, The Economist, London

1735-1805

2. Crisis in democracy - how to rebuild the trust

Covid amplified growing and persisting discontent from people all over the world, which has eroded the legitimacy of liberal democracy and political representation and provoked the widespread loss of trust in institutions. What are the opportunities now for democracy? What is necessary to rebuild the trust between civil society and institutions?

Two speakers will give brief introductions to the topic before the subject is opened up to plenary debate.

Nic Cheeseman
Professor, Democracy and International Development, University of Birmingham

Suzanne Spaulding
Senior Adviser, Homeland Security, International Security Programme, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, DC

1805-1815

3. Look forward and concluding remarks

Nick Linfield
Head, Policy; Programme Director, Wilton Park

This is a preview programme and as such may be subject to change.

Enquiries about participation and the programme to: Nick Linfield, Programme Director

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