



Wilton Park



Report

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

Tuesday 27 July 2021 | WP1964V

In partnership with:



DITCHLEY



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

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**In partnership with: The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands, the Ditchley Foundation at Ditchley Park**

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.

Four problems have been 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.

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 brought 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.

### Key points

- the pandemic is increasingly seen as having exacerbated challenges already undermining global democracy and democratic institutions.
- it is crucial to identify risk factors amplified by Covid-19 and threatening trust in global democracy, in order to mitigate their consequences effectively.
- Covid-19 disinformation has thrived in the environment of unfamiliarity with

global pandemics, a lack of transparency from governments and confusion regarding the threat posed, sustained by unclear or incomplete government messaging and hostile actors, and by citizens across the world sharing inaccurate information.

- There is a need to hold state powers to account by focussing on the extent to which governments making a conscious or unconscious overreach of power.
- Democratic institutions need to be seen to demonstrate that democracy is a viable and attractive form of government, with an increased focus on socio-economic issues, equitable recovery packages and informed approaches.
- New approaches to clear, trustworthy communication between state and citizen are much needed; in some cases these are already being developed and adopted to success.
- Actors wishing to foster greater trust in democracy will need to be clear about what exactly the pandemic has exacerbated. Whilst not everything in the immediate future will be about Covid-19, activities will inevitably be conducted in an environment shaped by it.

## Summary of discussions

1. Though ongoing, the pandemic is increasingly being regarded as having supercharged challenges already undermining global democracy and democratic institutions. Perceived state inconsistencies and fumbling of measures, economic declines, and cuts to overseas endeavours have made examples of democratic governments in the world seem less impressive, spurring negative perceptions.
2. There is evidence to suggest that some hybrid and authoritarian regimes have emerged with higher levels of government trust, whilst democracy is increasingly likely to be seen as irrevocably broken and incapable of change. For those who would seek to undermine democracies and their institutions, this presents opportunity; it is crucial that we begin to identify risk factors amplified by Covid-19 and threatening trust in global democracy, so that we are able to mitigate their consequences effectively.
3. We are inherently in a difficult place for democracy now because the problems that we face cannot be solved in an election cycle. All that those against democratic systems have to do to sow doubt is to raise questions and point out a lack of tangible results. As such, Covid-19 disinformation is an incredibly potent issue. It has thrived in the environment of our near universal newness to global pandemics, the opaque surrounds from which it came and lack of transparency from governments regarding it, and confusion regarding the threat posed by this disease. It is sustained not only by unclear or incomplete government messaging and hostile actors, but by citizens across the world – the opportunities to share inaccurate information are rife.
4. Governments have sought to strike tough balances between enforcement and convincing, public health, economies, and personal freedoms. Coercive and sometimes brutal measures were adopted by some, and processes of due diligence and transparency were at times diminished. Media freedoms in many places have been curtailed, and critics of political regimes silenced citing 'states of emergency'. It is crucial that to continue to hold state powers accountable, we ask: to what extent are governments making a conscious or unconscious overreach of power in this period?
5. To restore people's faith in democracy, and to help them battle disinformation, they need to be empowered to be agents of change. This requires greater access to participation and education. A global compact is needed on what are the fundamental values and concepts that the next generation needs to have and grow up with to take on the changes in the world, with emphasis upon teaching critical thinking.

6. Many people feel left behind under democracies, with pre-existing states of inequality, vulnerabilities and discontent amplified in recent months. Democratic institutions need to be seen to be delivering at home to demonstrate that democracy is a viable and attractive form of government. They need to elevate their focus on socio-economic issues, with equitable recovery packages and informed approaches using disaggregated data. Preparedness in political infrastructures to protect elections and the right to vote must be improved. New means and mediums of clear and trustworthy communication between state and citizen are much needed and are in some cases already being developed and adopted to success.
7. There are some positive indicators. Healthy mistrust of governance is the basis of democracy – and whilst it has highlighted some weaker aspects of democracies, the pandemic has seen a rise in public engagement with decision making, a vital element of any strong democratic government. Going forwards, actors wishing to foster greater trust in democracy will need to be clear about what has been exacerbated by this pandemic. Not everything in the immediate future will be about Covid-19, but matters will play out in an environment shaped by it.

**Jenny Easton and Nick Linfield**

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