How Will the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect Democracy?

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Abstract: In this commentary, we discuss some possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in both established and newer democracies. We expect that the pandemic will not have grave long-term effects on established democracies. We assess the future of democracy after COVID-19 in terms of immediate effects on current democratic leaders, and speculate on the long-term effects on support for democratic institutions and principles. We also discuss possible implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global trends in democratic backsliding. We predict that, in the short term, the repercussions of the pandemic can aggravate the situation in countries that are already experiencing democratic erosion. However, the long term economic effects of the pandemic may be more detrimental to non-democratic governance.

Keywords: coronavirus, covid, democracy, democratic backsliding, electoral democracy, future of democracy

Introduction

Democracy, understood as electoral democracy based on representation, was not at its strongest when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The Freedom House organization, which has monitored global democracy for decades, reported in 2020 that democracy has declined in the world for 14 years in a row, and the decline has occurred in many different parts of the world, in both established and more fragile democratic systems. The V-Dem Institute’s 2020 Democracy Report found that democracies no longer constitute the majority of the world’s political regimes for the first time in two decades (Lührmann, Maerz et al. 2020). The longevity of the declining trend in democracy is a cause for concern in the face of a global pandemic. If autocracy is gaining ground and democracy is backsliding even in old and robust democracies, how will the pandemic affect the already uncertain future of democracy?

In this commentary, we address the issue by discussing some possible scenarios in established and newer democracies, respectively, because it
is likely that the degree of democratic consolidation will be decisive for how democracies can weather the storm. We predict that the COVID-19 pandemic will not have grave long-term effects on established democracies that are characterized by several decades of uninterrupted democratic rule with genuinely open competition for political power. Most of the affluent, industrial Western nations belong to this category. We assess the future of democracy after COVID-19 in terms of immediate effects on current democratic leaders, and speculate on the long-term effects on support for democratic institutions and principles.

However, we expect that the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic may seriously aggravate the situation in countries where democracy is already eroding, such as Hungary and Poland. We predict that, in the more immediate term, emergency situations associated with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic can exacerbate the concentration of power on the executive in already backsliding countries. Yet, we speculate that the long-term economic effects of the pandemic may undermine the incumbents’ grip on power in autocratizing regimes.

**Impact on Established Democracies**

It is widely held that during (military) crises people “rally round the flag,” that is, elected leaders gain more popular support than they had under normal circumstances (Mueller 1970). Several empirical analyses suggest support for the contention, as long as the crisis or threat is severe enough (Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Two explanations have been offered. First, due to a surge in patriotic sentiment, people gather round the nation’s front figure(s) as they look for security in the face of external threat. Second, the relative silence of political opposition and reduced partisan animosity creates a fundamental change in the information landscape, leading the public to follow the example (Murray 2017).

The COVID-19 case undoubtedly counts as severe enough and evidence is already cumulating. Using survey data, Blais et al. (2020) find substantial increases in support for current leaders in several Western democracies. Australia is a case in point, where the previously unpopular Prime Minister Scott Morrison has seen a massive 25 percentage point increase in job approval between January and June 2020 (EssentialResearch 2020). In a tougher test of the hypothesis, the parliamentary election in South Korea in April was a resounding victory for the office-holders, suggesting that the COVID-19 bump in political support is very concrete. However, Amat et al. (2020) demonstrate that instead of only backing up the current leadership, demands for more expert-led
decision-making grew significantly louder in Spain as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Spanish case leads to the more pressing question of whether COVID-19 could have more fundamental consequences for attitudes toward democracy and its institutions. Could the pandemic undermine the legitimacy of representative democracy—or strengthen it? Despite the undeniable signs of some degree of democratic malaise in established democracies, mass-level support for democracy remains, historically speaking, high. Moreover, several decades of research has shown that the most basic political attitudes, such as political interest and trust, are quite stable at the individual level, suggesting that established democracies are unlikely to lose much of their diffuse support among the public.

Blais et al. (2020) find small increases in trust in government and satisfaction with democracy, while political interest and left/right self-identification remain stable. Relying on similar data from Canada, Harell (2020) also finds a surge in trust in government as well as decreased partisan tension. It therefore seems that the COVID-19 effect goes beyond verbal expressions of leadership support, extending to political trust and satisfaction levels.

But whether such effects are durable remains an open question. Previous research suggests only short-term impacts in trust levels and no consequences whatsoever for the more crucial factors such as party identification (e.g. Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Looking at the period between the two world wars, which was riddled with economic crises that followed one another, Cornell et al. (2020) conclude that the political institutions in established democracies were almost without exception able to maintain their stability and survive under harsh conditions. Hence, there is little to suggest that COVID-19 would deal a devastating—let alone lasting—blow to the institutions of old Western democracies.

**Impact on Democratic Backsliding**

Democratic forms of government became the global norm at the end of the Cold War and most formerly autocratic states adopted (at least *de jure*) democratic institutions. Some of these new democracies have consolidated, but others have reverted to more authoritarian types of government. These autocratizing trends have intensified during the last decade and, according to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), we are now witnessing a “third wave of autocratization” globally. Keane (2020) refers to these worrying trends as the rise of “New Despotism” in the world. While the previous waves of autocratization were dominated by abrupt events, such
as military coups, the modal type of democratic breakdown in today’s world is the gradual erosion of democratic institutions by democratically elected incumbents (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Svolik 2019). Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) have estimated that such cases make up 68 percent of contemporary instances of autocratization.

Most democratic breakdowns in today’s world thus result from what Svolik (2019) has termed “executive takeovers,” whereby democratically elected incumbents seek to undermine political opposition by implementing a series of discrete actions that gradually dismantle the democratic checks on the executive (Bermeo 2016). These measures are usually enacted following a democratic and constitutional procedure, and none of the actions are likely to threaten democracy in isolation (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Luo and Przeworski 2019; Svolik 2019). Yet, the cumulative effect of these measures leads to a situation where the opposition’s ability to challenge the incumbent is seriously undermined (Bermeo 2016; Luo and Przeworski 2016). In such “electoral authoritarian regimes” (Schedler 2013) the incumbent regime controls most of the levers of state power despite nominally functioning democratic institutions.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic requires governments to undertake a series of emergency measures that may temporarily remove some democratic checks and balances and suspend civil rights. Yet, precisely because many of the actions advancing “executive takeovers” are framed as legitimate measures to address some urgent public matter (see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) there is a risk that emergency measures enacted under the COVID-19 pandemic will be used inappropriately to further dismantle checks on the executive (on this, see also Lührmann, Edgell et al. 2020). Indeed, a recent study by Lührmann and Rooney (2020) finds that “democracies are 75 percent more likely to erode under a state of emergency than without” (p. 3). There have been worrying trends in already autocratizing regimes. Hungary’s Prime Minister Orbán has been granted extensive emergency powers with which he “can suspend existing laws and rule by decree for an indefinite period” (Kelemen 2020). There is a great danger that these sweeping powers will aggravate the existing trend of executive domination in Hungary, even if some of the emergency measures will be overturned when the pandemic situation eases. The V-Dem Institute has estimated that 48 countries in the world are at a “high risk” of democratic backsliding as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lührmann, Edgell et al. 2020).

Autocratic incumbents also often use “strategic manipulation of elections” to prevent the opposition from having a fair chance to compete (Bermeo, 2016; Schedler, 2013). The public health risks associated with the pandemic have led to several countries postponing elections. While such
actions can be justified on the grounds of public health protection and ensuring equal campaigning opportunities, there is a risk that electoral delays are being used in a strategic manner to advantage the incumbents (on this, see, for example, Repucci 2020). The pandemic situation also means that the incumbents’ media presence is greatly increased and the opposition will have even more difficulties in communicating its message to voters (on the situation in Poland, see Markowski and Tworzecki 2020). Furthermore, the emergency measures enacted in electoral autocracies such as Hungary and Russia have involved harsh media restrictions that in effect stifle any criticism of the government.

Yet, the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may be problematic for many electoral authoritarian leaders. The electoral advantage of many contemporary authoritarian incumbents rests not only on the elimination of a viable opposition but also on the provision of economic benefits to a part of the electorate (on this, see, for example, Markowski and Tworzecki 2020; Svolik 2019). The grave public health and economic consequences of the pandemic may seriously dent the “performance legitimacy” of these regimes, and can undermine the regimes’ ability to fund generous social welfare schemes and to distribute targeted benefits to its supporters. Therefore, the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may be rather destabilizing to contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes, especially if they have to face electoral challenges while the socio-economic effects of the pandemic are still ongoing.

Concluding Remarks

As far as established democracies go, both previous scholarship and preliminary analyses of the impact of COVID-19 suggest 1) significant but short-lived popularity bumps for current political leaders, 2) small and positive yet fleeting effects on attitudes such as political trust, and 3) zero impact on party identification or other factors, which might cause permanent political realignments. In sum, the bulk of the evidence points toward effects that are visible only on the surface, but not in the foundations of Western democracy. Even before, when established democracies have been tested, they have endured.

It is true that democracies have not been tested by pandemics or similar events in the contemporary media landscape, where public opinion can be manipulated through effective spreading of disinformation. Indeed, many observers have characterized the COVID-19 crisis as also being the biggest disinformation crisis we have ever faced. We are perhaps still temporally too close to seeing the possible impacts on established
democracies. The crisis is still ongoing so we do not know how democratic publics will eventually evaluate the quality of the democratic response by their governments. It does not seem totally unlikely that major policy failures might profoundly impact popular perceptions of democratic institutions. Moreover, even if public attitudes and voting patterns remain largely stable, COVID-19 could have major consequences for future policy-making. Not only is it likely that old democracies will pay more attention to public health issues, but democratic processes are also probably going to be affected. As findings from Spain already indicate, a long-term repercussion could be that experts are given a stronger voice in policy-making, pushing representative democracy a notch toward a more technocratic model of democracy.

In terms of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracies already experiencing backsliding, the more immediate and the long-term effects are likely to diverge. The emergency measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic can provide autocratic incumbents with further tools to eradicate the constraints to their rule in the short term. Yet, the predicted economic fall-out may seriously hamper the “performance legitimacy” and the distribution of economic benefits that these regimes’ electoral popularity partially rest on. Consequently, for electoral authoritarian regimes, the long-term impact of COVID-19 could be very negative.

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