



Comparative Politics of the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

From testing the resilience of countries with different political regimes and religious cultural traditions to the possibility of bringing world peace and economic equality, the world-historical significance and potential consequences of the coronavirus pandemic are topics of considerable speculation from a comparative perspective. The political, economic and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic are numerous and still unfolding. Much of the analyses depend on which countries will survive the pandemic with comparatively fewer fatalities per capita and a smaller contraction of their economies. Such economic and demographic outcomes will likely facilitate or perhaps accelerate wider domestic political and societal, but also international transformations.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, comparative politics, state capacity, healthcare systems

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Introduction

If we take March 12th, 2020, the day the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to be a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020), we have entered the fourth month of what appears to be the first globally experienced pandemic that has been captured and covered, almost synchronously, around the world. This is certainly not the first, and unfortunately extremely unlikely to be the last, deadly pandemic in human history. As of June 25th, 2020, the coronavirus pandemic is reported to have killed approximately 483,000 people around the world (Times Leader, 2020). From the Black Death of the 14th century to the Spanish Flu of the 20th century (Şeker et al., 2020), many other historic pandemics killed far larger a proportion of the world's population than the coronavirus is likely to kill.

There are nonetheless several peculiarities of the coronavirus pandemic, which might lead to greater transformations in domestic and international politics than those triggered by previous pandemics in the modern age such as HIV/AIDS or the Spanish Flu. The most immediate difference is the instantaneous global media coverage and the concomitant battle for interpreting the unfolding of the pandemic. Not a day passes without speculation about grandiose political and world-historical transformations the pandemic might trigger, although commentators differ greatly on what those transformations might be.

Democracy or Authoritarianism?

Among the first questions many observers asked following the recognition of the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic is captured in one of the numerous comparative research projects that took off almost simultaneously with the pandemic: “Will democracy doom us or save us?” (Binghamton University,

2020). The question as to whether democratic or authoritarian regimes are more successful in dealing with disasters has attracted significant attention from scholars over many decades. In fact, the claim that democracies are far better in fighting disasters (Smith & Flores, 2010) ranging from earthquakes to epidemics (Economist, 2020a) is very commonly accepted, and thus this argument quickly resurfaced (Berengaut, 2020) in the discussions around the coronavirus pandemic. Some may, and already do, view the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to test the hypothesized linkage between democracy and disaster prevention around the world. Despite the purported advantage of democracies against autocracies, however, some observers also feared and speculated that the coronavirus pandemic might erode democratic regimes (Bieber, 2020) including in the United States (Diamond, 2020).

There is also the opposite, albeit less popular, argument that authoritarian regimes might be more successful in fighting natural as well as man-made disasters, including climate change (Economist, 2019). The purported success of the highly authoritarian, if not totalitarian, Chinese regime in fighting coronavirus, which the regime actively employed in a global public relations campaign (Chia, 2020), worried Western democracies, triggering publications and research projects meant to investigate whether “authoritarian or democratic countries handle pandemics better.” (Kleinfeld, 2020). There is also research suggesting that some natural disasters, such as major storms, “deteriorate democratic conditions” and create “oppressive governments,” (Transform, 2019) but there is also preliminary research that suggests the opposite (Gingerich & Vogler, 2020). Finally, there is also a more convincing claim that disease epidemics often lower economic inequality across history (Scheidel, 2018), which might also support a more consensual form of government to the extent that lower inequality increases the bargaining power of the average citizen. Without passing any judgment on whether the evidence amassed on either side is conclusive or not, it is fair to say that there is no consensus on the answer to this question as of yet.

At this early stage of the pandemic, there is no discernible pattern of a democratic or authoritarian advantage in terms of cross-national fatality figures linked to the coronavirus. For example, among the four countries that were hit hardest in the first wave of the pandemic in March 2020, two of them are undoubtedly authoritarian polities (China and Iran), whereas the other two are almost universally considered to be consolidated democracies (Italy and Spain). Moreover, among these four, the democratic countries reportedly had much higher fatality rates per capita than the non-democratic ones, although there is reason to suspect that China (Arciga, 2020; BBC, 2020; Hanson et al., 2020) and Iran (Wood, 2020) may have deliberately reported lower than actual fatality figures, with two studies arguing that the coronavirus cases in China may have been four times (Davidson and Beaumont, 2020) or thirty-seven times (Hanson et al., 2020) official figure, suggesting a magnitude of falsification that is not possible in an even minimally open or semi-democratic country with a competitive political regime.

State Capacity and Healthcare Systems

Beyond the popular debate over the effect of regime type in disaster management, the coronavirus pandemic is likely to rekindle another long-lasting, albeit a somewhat more academic and technocratic debate on the measurement and impact of state capacity. For many decades now, some have argued that what matters more in explaining the variation in states' ability to achieve their goals is not their regime type but their infrastructural capacity and institutional design. Samuel Huntington's famous book, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Huntington, 1968), published more than fifty years ago at the height of the Cold War, begins with the following crisp statement: "The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government." There are many debates and disagreements about how exactly one can measure state capacity. "State capacity is a quality conspicuous both in its absence and presence but difficult to define," as Cullen Hendrix stated in his work on different measurements of state capacity, including no less than "15 different operationalisations of state capacity" (Hendrix, 2010). For example, [the] ability to successfully collect taxes (e.g., tax revenue as a percentage of GDP) and the ability to conscript soldiers are among the common measurements of state capacity.

It might be considered common sense to think that greater state capacity would result in a more effective fight against the coronavirus pandemic. However, even if true, this proposition alone hardly provides a clear-cut measurement of state capacity. Relatedly, which dimension of state capacity makes the most difference in fighting an epidemic is unclear. Does the existence of a large conscript army, one of the common proxy measurements for military capacity, and/or the success in collecting a larger share of taxes matter more in fighting the coronavirus? With the exception of healthcare capacity, which I briefly discuss below, there is no definitive answer regarding whether and which other dimensions of state capacity would make a remarkable difference in fighting the coronavirus pandemic, let alone a clear recipe for augmenting relevant aspects of state capacity.

Healthcare systems are readily recognised as one of the most important aspects of state capacity as it relates to anti-coronavirus efforts (Cherkaoui, 2020). The cross-national variation in terms of capacity, ownership, provision, and regulation of healthcare around the world, including in the advanced industrialised Western polities most affected by the pandemic, namely, France, Italy, Spain, and the United States, is significant. As critically reviewed by Tarek Cherkaoui (2020), this variation is not primarily a result of variation in healthcare expenditure. For example, the United States spent more than three times as much on health per capita (\$10,586) than Spain (\$3,323) in 2018, and yet both Spain and the United States had 2.4 acute care hospital beds per 1,000 people in 2017. In short, spending vastly more money on health per capita does not necessarily guarantee higher healthcare capacity. Some countries provide healthcare benefits primarily or exclusively through public health care systems, whereas some provide them primarily through

private insurance schemes, and yet many others offer a combination of public and private healthcare schemes. Then there are the institutional legacies of the past such as the “network of health centres formed by the Soviet Union in the 1920s” to fight the bubonic plague, which may now support efforts to fight the coronavirus in about half a dozen post-Soviet states including Russia, as reported by the New York Times (Kramer, 2020). In short, the coronavirus pandemic provides a global test of the comparative advantages, disadvantages, and efficacy of various private and public healthcare systems. Nonetheless, state capacity and healthcare infrastructure are not the only factors that factor into the struggle against the coronavirus; societal norms and hygiene practices may also play an important role.

Do Confucian, Islamic, or Scandinavian norms help in the fight against coronavirus?

What if rather than, or at least in addition to, state capacity and more specifically healthcare infrastructure, other societal features provide a comparative advantage to some countries over others in their fight against the coronavirus? For example, South Korea is widely praised as being among the most successful countries in containing the spread of coronavirus early on, and minimising coronavirus related fatalities as a result (McCurry, 2020). Similarly, Vietnam is often cited and discussed as another success story in terms of its response to the coronavirus pandemic (Vu & Tran, 2020). Likewise, Taiwan’s success has been recognised and arguably advanced because of its geopolitical and symbolic significance as the democratic alternative to Beijing’s public relations campaign presenting itself as a model for fighting the pandemic (Kim, 2020). In addition to these three, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, each with a different political system, have all been discussed as success stories, prompting many reporters to ask what lessons can be drawn from the East Asian experience in containing the coronavirus (Martin & Khan, 2020).

The perception and/or reality of East Asian countries’ success in fighting coronavirus, regardless of their very different political and economic systems and geopolitical orientations, led some observers to suggest differences in cultural and religious traditions, specifically Confucianism, that purportedly gave East Asian countries an advantage over Western countries.

“Lee Sung-Yoon, an international relations professor at Tufts University, said traditions of Confucianism in countries like China, South Korea, and Singapore gave ‘the paternalistic state a freer hand in exercising authority’ during an emergency... Mr Lee said the use of tracking bracelets to enforce the coronavirus quarantine in Hong Kong and South Korea would likely not be tolerated in Italy or Sweden.” (Zhou, 2020).

In various early comparisons of East (Asia) versus Western Europe, the “Confucian emphasis on respect for authority [and] social stability” was noted

(Martin and Walker, 2020), and Bruno Maçães (2020) suggested in this vein that one witnesses “the clash of civilizations” in East Asian and Western reactions to the coronavirus pandemic. More specifically, after identifying “Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea” as “the most successful societies in tackling COVID-19 through social distancing and similar suppression measures,” Greg Sheridan (2020) singles out the Western tradition of “civil disobedience” as the main cultural factor underlying alleged Western failure in combatting the coronavirus. *The Economist* (2020b) likewise identified “privacy” as “the EU’s unofficial religion,” which it argued is now being challenged by governmental measures against the pandemic. However, many others strongly disagree with the claim that Confucian religious-cultural values, such as obedience to authority, are responsible for the purported success of East Asia in containing the pandemic (Leonard, 2020; Park, 2020).

There is also a popular version of the religious-cultural values argument among Muslims, although less noted in the Western media. American Muslim academic and activist Khaled Beydoun (2020) tweeted that “the whole world is imposing ‘Sharia Law’ without even knowing it” in response to various measures taken to fight against the pandemic, such as “continual washing of hands, zero-interest loans, limited touching, use of bidets, helping the poor financially.” Likewise, in response to an Islamophobic tweet about the dangers of Muslim immigration to the United States, Johana Bhuiyan (2020) of the *Los Angeles Times* noted that “everyone’s washing their hands five times a day”, “covering their face”, “not shaking hands,” and “avoiding bars” to protect against the coronavirus, and quipped that “you’re all Muslim” in a tweet that got more than 35 thousand retweets and 180 thousand likes. In a similar vein, Craig Considine (2020) wrote in *Newsweek*: “Do you know who else suggested good hygiene and quarantining during a pandemic? Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, over 1,300 years ago.”

Other practices common amongst Muslims, such as not entering the house with your shoes on, became more widespread and/or recommended as a protective measure (Kızılkaya, 2020). Also, practices that are specific to some Muslim countries such as the use of Ottoman-era colognes as hand sanitizers have been noted for their role in the fight against coronavirus (Scatena, 2020). Given these developments, Murat Sofuoğlu (2020) of TRT World summarized the hopeful mood among many Muslims by asking whether “Islam’s emphasis on hygiene make a difference in a pandemic.” At the same time, some other observers, such as Ozan Demircan (2020) of Germany’s *Handelsblatt* suggested more recent phenomena such as digitalisation, online shopping, and social media usage to explain why Turks have been rather successful in “social distancing.”

Confucian values and Islamic hygiene were not the only religious-cultural norms that have been emphasised as providing an advantage in fighting against the coronavirus pandemic. Scandinavian, more specifically Swedish, norms were also suggested as already providing the necessary “social distancing”

recommended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Swedish journalist Lisa Bjurwald (2020) wrote in this vein: “skype-based relationships? No hugging? For Swedes, that’s not social distancing. That’s just life.” As such, Bjurwald maintained, “we were practising the coronavirus lifestyle long before the virus hit.” Such a coronavirus-compatible Swedish lifestyle is at least in part a result of Sweden’s large territory, low population density, and dispersed settlement, as Bjurwald noted, and all of these factors, cultural, demographic, and geographic, may have played a role in Sweden not adopting as strict political-administrative measures to enforce social isolation as some other European countries. On the other hand, the fact that Sweden recorded a much higher infection and death rate per capita than all of its Nordic neighbors so far can be interpreted as preliminary evidence disconfirming the alleged advantage of the Swedish way of life in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. In short, many commentators made arguments suggesting that Confucian, Islamic, and/or Scandinavian (perhaps more generally Lutheran) cultural values and lifestyle may provide advantages in fighting the coronavirus. Similar to the arguments based on political regime type, state capacity, and healthcare systems mentioned above, only time will tell whether any of these religious-cultural arguments will be confirmed or disconfirmed as the cross-national variation in coronavirus-related fatalities takes shape in the coming months.

Social Distancing, Herd Immunity, or Local and National Quarantines?

Countries cannot radically overhaul their healthcare systems or state capacity overnight, let alone change their religious and cultural traditions, while facing an ongoing pandemic. That is why much of the heated discussion once the pandemic was well underway focused on the ideal policy response(s) governments should adopt to effectively contain the infection and minimise fatalities.

In a popular op-ed and simulation that appeared in the *Washington Post* and contributed to the global popularity of the epidemic-related idiom, “flatten the curve,” Harry Stevens (2020) argued that among four different potential approaches to the coronavirus pandemic, which he labelled as a free-for-all, attempted quarantine, moderate distancing, and extensive distancing, the two forms of social distancing appear to be the more successful in simulations, with “extensive [social] distancing” being the best method in limiting the number and peak of the infections.

In the critical early days of the epidemic, however, many policy-makers in the Western and especially the Anglo-American world, most notably and explicitly in the United Kingdom, seemed to advocate a policy that came to be known as “herd immunity.” The policy aiming to reach “herd immunity” as soon as possible most closely resembles the “free-for-all” scenario in Harry Stevens’ simulations mentioned above. The discussion of this approach was widely

criticised as a major health policy debacle (Yong, 2020), and the UK government was later reported to have backed off from this plan (O’Grady, 2020).

Another policy option that became rapidly popular, if not hegemonic as the coronavirus spread exponentially in many parts of the world, has been quarantines of various scales, also known as “lockdowns,” ranging from very local to regional to national. Local or regional quarantines have been implemented in several places early on, most notably in Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province on January 23, 2020 (Wikipedia, 2020a). Italy also imposed local lockdowns in late February 2020 “covering eleven municipalities of the province of Lodi in Lombardy, and affecting around 50,000 people.” (Wikipedia, 2020b) However, by March 8th, much of Northern Italy was placed under a lockdown affecting approximately 16 million people, and within two days after that, a national quarantine was announced, the first of its kind at the national level during the coronavirus pandemic (Wikipedia, 2020c).

The relative merits and demerits of different approaches and policies have been the topic of the most heated debates. While lockdowns and extensive measures of social distancing appear to have slowed the increase in the rate of fatalities and hence helped to “flatten the curve” almost everywhere they were implemented, critics of lockdowns or extreme measures of social distancing argue that the economic downturn that such measures will lead to is likely to result in as many, if not more fatalities, than the coronavirus pandemic otherwise would in some of these countries. Many policy-makers, who are obliged to take both sets of considerations very seriously, have sought to balance these risks by imposing the optimal amount of quarantines and social distancing measures while simultaneously allowing as much economic activity (production, consumption, distribution, etc.) as possible.

After the Deluge

Many commentators speculate that the coronavirus pandemic will trigger momentous political, economic, and social transformations, although they differ vastly on the direction and content of what those transformations might be. However, more comparative historical oriented scholars have already provided some useful patterns. One such pattern noted above is the tendency of epidemics to lower economic inequality (Scheidel, 2018), in part by making capable workforce scarcer, and hence increasing the bargaining power of employees against employers. On another positive note, based on historical patterns, Barry Posen argues that in general, “sickness slows the march to war” among all parties involved and it is very much possible “that the coronavirus crisis will last long enough to change the world in important ways, some of which will likely dampen the appetite for conflict for some time—perhaps up to five or ten years.” (Posen, 2020) Thus, adopting these optimistic interpretations of the likely consequences of the pandemic, after the deluge, the survivors may reasonably expect to live in a more equal and peaceful world.

It would be reasonable to assume that a significant increase in the bargaining power of workers and ordinary citizens would be accompanied by a more vocal demand for free and universal healthcare provision in countries where this does not already exist. However, all good things do not necessarily go together, and it is not possible to know whether free and universal healthcare provision would be a benefit provided as part of a responsive democratic political platform or a benefit accompanied by an increasingly intrusive authoritarian state.

The aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic might also witness an increased demand for residential dispersion away from overcrowded urban city centres, especially in East Asia, Western Europe, and North America, which have had some of the highest rates of fatalities. Residential dispersion in and of itself might not necessarily be a negative development, however, if it is accompanied by more voluntary isolation, such a trend may lead to a further decline of civil society and social capital, which was already very low in some regions (Howard, 2003) and/or declining for decades in others (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic may exacerbate centuries-old religious, sectarian, and racial exclusions that have been central to the political, economic, and cultural order in Europe and the Americas (Aktürk, 2020). Another common societal pattern following pandemics in history has been the rise of messianic and millenarian sects, which include religious-spiritual cults but also secular revolutionary movements (Slezkine, 2017).

There are also more specific geopolitical developments that were already underway, which the coronavirus pandemic might accelerate. One such development concerns the future of the European Union, and the other concerns the future of China, both developments being critical to the future structure of the international system and balance of power. In the view of some scholars, such as Wolfgang Streeck (2019), the European Union was already “a liberal empire [that] is about to fall” due to Brexit. If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has augmented demands for exiting the European Union in the member states hardest hit by the disease. Italy is a prime example of this phenomenon. According to Elis Gjevori (2020), a “new poll in Italy already shows the political impact the coronavirus is having on Italy and their relationship with the EU with 88 per cent saying that the ‘EU is not helping us’,” and “Germany and France are condemned by other EU member states for blocking the export of medical supplies, raising alarm among smaller countries hit by coronavirus” (Wynne, 2020). In short, many among the elites and the masses perceive the unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic as a test for European solidarity that EU member states have failed.

The coronavirus pandemic is widely expected to have significant economic repercussions as well. If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has augmented fears in the West of a coming Chinese hegemony. In this vein, David Wallace-Wells (2020) asked whether the coronavirus is “ushering in a Chinese future” while Patrick Wintour (2020), the Diplomatic Editor of the *Guardian* while discussing the “winners and losers in new world order” shaped by the

pandemic, similarly worried about “state responses to the virus shifting the balance of power between China and the West.” From a more strictly economic point of view, David Kelly, Chief Global Strategist at JP Morgan Asset Management, claimed that “the overall outlook for East Asia is quite good relative to other regions of the world... in economic terms and probably in market terms in the second half of 2020” compared to “other regions slammed by the coronavirus.” (Huang, 2020) There certainly was an anticipation of China’s rise to regional if not global hegemony among many analysts before the coronavirus (Mearsheimer, 2001; Mearsheimer, 2018), but the pandemic seems to have triggered a more open discussion of this prospective. However, the fact that the pandemic began in China, leading to accusations by many leading figures around the world that China failed to alert other countries in time or prevent international flights from Hubei to prevent the global spread of the coronavirus, might have significantly eroded any soft power China had accumulated over the years.

The political, economic, and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic are numerous and still unfolding. Much depends on which countries will survive the pandemic with comparatively fewer fatalities per capita and a smaller contraction of their economies. Such economic and demographic outcomes will likely facilitate or perhaps accelerate wider domestic political, societal, and international transformations.

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