Editorial
Democracy in a Global Emergency
Five Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: As countries around the world went into lockdown, we turned to 32 leading scholars working on different aspects of democracy and asked them what they think about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted democracy. In this article, we synthesize the reflections of these scholars and present five key insights about the prospects and challenges of enacting democracy both during and after the pandemic: (1) COVID-19 has had corrosive effects on already endangered democratic institutions, (2) COVID-19 has revealed alternative possibilities for democratic politics in the state of emergency, (3) COVID-19 has amplified the inequalities and injustices within democracies, (4) COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for institutional infrastructure for prolonged solidarity, and (5) COVID-19 has highlighted the predominance of the nation-state and its limitations. Collectively, these insights open up important normative and practical questions about what democracy should look like in the face of an emergency and what we might expect it to achieve under such circumstances.

Keywords: coronavirus, COVID, democracy, democratic theory, emergency, inequality, institutions, pandemic, virus

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge for contemporary democracies around the globe. It has led to the closure and transformation of parliaments and enabled governments to rule by decree. It has curtailed citizens' fundamental democratic rights to assemble and protest. It has generated an unparalleled multinational policy debate and stimulated myriad digital innovations in democratic practice. It has reshaped economies, welfare systems, and the informal networks by which we exchange with and support each other. Making sense of these immediate developments and asking what they mean for the theory and practice of democracy, and how they may reshape longer-term democratic horizons is now an urgent task for democracy scholarship.

The global spread of the virus has created a unique opportunity for shared learning around the world. Citizens, communities, and governments everywhere have been faced with the same urgent task of limiting the spread of COVID-19. This has led to diverse policy responses, including radical experiments with government action, from complete lockdowns in Italy and stringent quarantines in China to deliberate *in*action in Sweden and Brazil. These policy responses have been subject to detailed comparative research. Take Oxford's Blatavnik School of Government, for example, whose members have been documenting the nature of government responses to the COVID-19 virus in 150 countries and identifying common measures governments take such as school closings, new forms of social welfare provision, or contact tracing (see Hale et al. 2020). Media, traditional and digital, old and new, have also been engaged in a mass public comparative politics to scrutinize these interventions. There has rarely been a situation in which relative government performance can be measured in such a visceral way as the graphs of excess deaths that the *Financial Times* or the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center have, for instance, updated daily throughout the pandemic. The ways that governments, communities, and citizens have come together to make these decisions and take actions have been just as diverse as the responses themselves (Lupton 2020). Yet the implications and lessons of COVID-19 for democratic governance have received little attention beyond a simplistic narrative of democratic erosion and authoritarian drift. Is COVID-19 an emergency for democracy, globally? And, what lessons does the pandemic hold for doing democratic governance in an emergency? This special issue takes a comprehensive look.

As countries around the world went into lockdown, we turned to 32 leading scholars working on aspects of democracy for guidance and inspiration. We asked them what they thought the pandemic has meant for the theory and practice of democracy; what normative and practical questions it has raised for them, and what lessons we can learn by looking at how different real-existing/political democracies have been handling the pandemic. This special issue brings together a chorus of some of the most important voices in democratic thinking today, each offering analyses of what is presently transpiring for democracy around the globe, when this term is understood in its precision and multidimensionality. The scope of the insights is far-ranging; from neighborhood democracy to international relations, from civic action to executive power, and from inequality to solidarity. This introductory article attempts to distil five key lessons from the twenty articles that comprise the issue, also drawing-in other recent literature and our own observations and reflections. We hope it provides an overview of what is known about COVID-19 and

democracy, as well as pointing to promising directions for defending and renewing democratic imperatives in times of emergency.

Lesson 1: COVID-19 has had Corrosive Effects on Already Endangered Democratic Institutions

The politics of COVID-19 have understandably been conducted as 'emergency politics' (Honig 2009). What has been remarkable about this is the broad uniformity with which democracies around the world have embraced "the hour of the executive." Even in a country as apprehensive about untrammeled executive power as Germany, parliament quickly moved to subordinate itself, with seemingly no opposition from ideologically diverse parties or the public (see Merkel; Celermajer and Nassar, this issue). There is a risk that this state of emergency translates into a permanent erosion of democratic institutions (see Rapeli and Saikonnen, this issue; but also Landman and Splendore 2020 who are concerned with the future of elections). This risk is amplified by the fact that the pandemic is layered upon an existing crisis of democracy, in which there is already widespread public cynicism concerning the performance of democratic institutions, distrust of politicians and frustration with the messy compromises of democratic politics (see Gaskell and Stoker, this issue; Flinders 2020). Nevertheless, more insidious attempts at executive aggrandizement have not, so far, at least in Europe, been the norm. According to a study by the V-DEM Institute, only 4 of 28 European countries have violated any of a set of 8 liberal democratic norms during the state of emergency (Lürhmann et al. 2020). Neither has civil society lost its voice – the starkest example being the mass anti-racism protests that followed the killing of George Floyd in the US (as documented by Dean, this issue).

It is in places where democracy was already under threat that the pandemic has been used to accelerate democratic erosion. In Central and Eastern Europe (see Guasti, this issue) and Latin America (see Weiffen, this issue), the state of emergency has provided a means for attempts at longer-term expansion of executive power, inhibiting political opposition, and legislating beyond what is appropriate for responding to COVID-19. Hungary, for example, adopted an unlimited state of emergency that enables Prime Minister Victor Orban to rule by decree indefinitely, and El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele has used the crisis as cover to attack the Salvadorian Supreme Court and Legislature. New laws against spreading "misinformation" with long jail sentences (10 years in Bolivia and 5 years in Hungary, for example) have been passed, whose scope is

so sweeping that they seem primarily intended to intimidate opposition to government rather than sharpen the press's acuity and constrain hyperbole, hysteria, and other techniques for clicks. Hungarian and Polish governments have also used these new circumstances to immediately force legislation on highly contested matters of sexual politics such as the legal right to abortion in Poland. COVID-19 has also provided cover to delay, and perhaps eventually prevent, the resolution of democratic crises in Chile, Bolivia, and Venezuela, enabling incumbent administrations to consolidate their power in the meantime. The intentions of the incumbent executive toward the suspension of normal democratic politics is then an important mediating factor of the impact of COVID-19 on democracy. But it is not the only factor.

The reactions of other democratic actors to any attempts by the executive to expand its powers also play an important role. Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia all had illiberal populist leaders pre-pandemic. But where Hungary slid further into autocracy as a result of its COVID-19 response, the checks and balances of a free press, independent judiciary, parliamentary opposition, and an active civil society remained resilient enough in Slovakia and the Czech Republic to curb any excesses (Guasti, this issue). This provides hope and direction for our efforts to protect and even renew democracies during the crisis (Curato 2019). We need not give in to the generalized anxiety of an over-simplified media narrative of democracy's downfall (Muller 2020). There is little evidence as yet that the pandemic is eroding public attitudes toward democracy in established democracies (see Rapeli and Saikkonen, this issue). So, *vale* democracy in the time of this (to many, but not all) unfamiliar emergency? Not really. Our current political terrain is more complex and open-ended than that. If we fight hard, and get some luck, we may see through the burial rights for the shadowy procedures of non-democracy. Indeed, the evidence seems to support the likelihood that democracies will come out of this pandemic better than their rivals (Rapeli and Saikkonen, this issue).

Lesson 2: COVID-19 has Revealed Alternative Possibilities for Democratic Politics in the State of Emergency

Though COVID-19 has everywhere, it seems, been "the hour of the executive," this executive politics has been conditioned by the democratic systems in which it is embedded. The pandemic provided a test of how well these different systems have fared, which opens up a space to reflect on how democratic politics in an emergency should be conducted

in the future. This is a pressing challenge given the expected increased frequency of emergencies in an age of climate crisis (see, for example, Karlsson 2013; Eckersley 2017; Dryzek and Pickering 2018; Machin 2019; Hammond, Dryzek, and Pickering 2020; Pickering, Bäckstrand and Schlosberg 2020). Some executives have handled this crisis relatively well (Gaskell and Stoker, this issue), but many – notably the US, UK, Mexico, and Brazil – have proved to be slow, secretive, and indecisive, undermining the very grounds upon which states of emergency are declared. At the same time, other key democratic institutions – such as strong, independent, media oversight and civil societies defined by their compassion for those in dire straits – have proved flexible and resilient. There is thus space to consider whether emergency politics *has* to be conducted by executive fiat.

Emergency response has not historically always been seen as the domain of the executive – as Wolfgang Merkel argues (this issue), there have been just as strong claims that a state of emergency should be "the hour of parliament." Parliaments around the world have adapted themselves quickly to the new circumstances, introducing a mixture of videoconferencing, electronic, and/or proxy voting to enable them to keep carrying out their scrutiny function (Dixon 2020). When parliaments can continue to operate effectively, it is questionable how far normal democratic politics needs to be abandoned. COVID-19 is not a strategic actor, unlike a wartime foe, thus there is little need to abandon robust practices of transparency and accountability. Greater parliamentary involvement, and the more diverse representation of interests it brings, would also provide a bulwark against some of the inequities in policy responses to the coronavirus (see below). It is also important to be alert to the interactions between different geographical levels of government. Jennifer Gaskell and Gerry Stoker (this issue) for example reveal that states, such as Switzerland, with strong governments at each level of intra-national governance appear to be most successful in limiting the virus' spread. This points to the necessity to strengthen local government capacity where it is weak to deal with future emergencies, rather than centralizing emergency response in the national executive – a technique that holds a poorer track record as regards public health.

Civil society and the public sphere have also proved their worth in a crisis. After all, it was not the Chinese government that alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) to the threat of COVID-19 but a nongovernmental organization that had noticed the posts of concerned Chinese citizens on social media (Meek 2020). The public sphere has also remained a powerful informal check on government action, pushing back against incompetence and exclusions. Clamor from the media and the public

managed to drive a UK government pursuing a damaging herd immunity policy into declaring a lockdown. Anti-racist protests have challenged some governments' lack of care for people of color facing elevated risk from COVID-19 (Dean, this issue). Innovative participatory or deliberative processes, like the French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat and the UK Climate Assembly, quickly and successfully switched to operating online, and new processes to deliberate about responses to the virus were rapidly set-up (e.g., McKeown et al. 2020). In addition, informal networks of care flourished, providing integral relief to those most affected, more quickly and effectively than centralized initiatives (see Rosenblum, this issue). These positive examples demonstrate the importance of imagining the possibilities for citizen and civil society engagement in future emergency politics. As Danielle Celermajer and Dalia Nassar (this issue) argue, opportunities for robust political participation should be protected. To render the population as passive recipients of executive decree would only lead to more injustices and failure.

Lesson 3: COVID-19 has Amplified the Inequalities and Injustices within Democracies

COVID-19 has not only laid bare the gross inequalities within our societies, it has intensified them (Nolan 2020; King et al. 2020). First, because the virus itself is well-adapted to exacerbating these inequalities—it, for example, spreads more quickly among those who are poorly housed and kills more of those with existing poor health. Second, because the policy response to COVID-19 has too often exacerbated these inequalities, with existing democratic exclusions operating to produce policies that further protect the already protected and further expose those who are vulnerable. As such, the response to the pandemic has reinforced gender, racial, intergenerational, economic, and health inequalities (see: Honig; Dean; Rollo; Scauso et al., all this issue).

This intensification effect has been particularly stark in the case of people with existing health conditions and/or disabilities, with discrimination often explicitly codified into healthcare rationing policies (Solomon, Wynia, and Gostin 2020; Armitage and Nellums 2020). Ableist discourses and responses are apparent almost uniformly across the world in both prevention measures and treatment decisions (Abrams and Abbott 2020; also see, Kittay 2020). Explicit and implicit treatment decisions deemed people with disabilities as less worthy of the limited resources available. From calls for *herd immunity* (e.g., Sweden) to *intelligent triage* (e.g., USA) and *do not resuscitate* orders for people with

disabilities (e.g., England), such measures codified ableism in our responses to the pandemic and established some citizens as less deserving of their right to life and dignity (see, Bledsoe et. al. 2020; Savin and Guidry-Grimes 2020).

This points to an important limitation of emergency politics practiced as executive politics, and the reduction in pluralist perspective taking that accompanies it. Too often the response to COVID-19 has been constructed to suit the needs of an archetypal citizen, conceived in terms of the politically dominant group, and neglected or misunderstood the needs of those who do not fit this mold. Such responses undermine the political equality that is an essential condition of democracy. Addressing these inequalities and injustices therefore requires addressing the democratic exclusions that have pervaded the emergency politics of COVID-19. Kim Rubenstein, Trish Bergin, and Pia Rowe (this issue) demonstrate, for instance, that it is little surprise that the burdens of responses to COVID-19 have disproportionately fallen on women, when so few women are represented in leadership roles of the policy task forces formulating these responses. Similarly, it is no surprise that "lockdown" policies have had the most detrimental effects for the most precariously employed and housed, when, again, these people have little representation among those making the policies. Inclusion of more diverse perspectives in processes of policy-making is one way to tackle these inequalities, but the articles in this special issue suggest myriad other ideas too—from policy level initiatives, such as rent jubilees (Honig, this issue) and revised medical innovation policies (Parthasarathy, this issue), to radical systems-level changes to democratize the economy in order to give people financial stability and control over their lives (Dean; Haagh, this issue).

Lesson 4: COVID-19 has Demonstrated the Need for Institutional Infrastructure for Prolonged Solidarity

COVID-19 has foregrounded the question of how we care for each other. There was hope that the pandemic would reveal our shared humanity through shared vulnerability to this global threat. And early good news stories of neighborhoods rallying to support those who had to self-isolate, as well as people using lockdown to raise money for health and care institutions, seemed to confirm these hopes for renewed solidarity. However, as Barbara Prainsack shows (this issue), these informal, interpersonal forms of solidarity can be quite fragile. Her weekly Austrian panel survey found that early expressions of solidarity waned, replaced with

the physical and psychological exhaustion of the pandemic, and increasing "us versus them" thinking. Voluntary, interpersonal solidarity can be important in the first responses to a crisis because our neighbors can respond immediately, flexibly, drawing on stores of local knowledge that formal institutions do not possess (see Rosenblum, this issue). However, to sustain this kind of action over a prolonged period requires support, so it is conditioned by our institutions and our politics.

We therefore must ask whether the conditions are present that make sustained solidarity possible. The messages that politicians convey about our duty to one another have an impact—do we lockdown because of a shared vulnerability, or to protect the vulnerable, for example (Prainsack, this issue)? They also condition who we feel a duty of solidarity toward. Peter Levine (this issue), argues we should remain vigilant of the ways in which communities may choose to set up new or reinforce already existing barriers to those they consider to be outsiders. "Should 'our' hospitals treat 'them'?" became not only a question between nations but also between local boundaries within them (Bhardwaj 2020). Hyper-partisan political articulations of the crisis also flow through social relationships curtailing the bases of solidarity. Nancy Rosenblum (this issue), for example, argues that the hyper-partisanship of US politics undermined the disregard for political differences that makes possible the easy reciprocity of neighborly relations. Neighbors could not come together with a shared meaning of the pandemic, but instead confronted one another with mutually incomprehensible perspectives.

It is not only our democratic politics that intersect with the possibilities for solidarity, but also our social institutions. It is easier to protect others by staying away from work when you know that welfare institutions will support you to do so, for instance. Solidaristic institutional structures that provide people with the resilience in a crisis to support others are key to maintaining that support (Prainsack; Haagh, this issue). However, COVID-19 arrived on the back of a decade of austerity that eroded the institutional bases of solidarity. Welfare systems became increasingly miserly, conditional, and punitive. Civil society organizations, increasingly reliant on wealthy donors and government contracts, have also been hard hit by the financial crisis and the pandemic (see Levine, this issue). The economic stimulus packages, already begun in many places, are an opportunity to build stability and resilience back into our social and economic relations, reversing the growing precarity of recent years, and preparing the groundwork for the solidarity that will sustain us for the next crisis. However, there is a risk that COVID-19 rescue economics will, in time, prove to be an excuse for a next round of austerity.

Lesson 5: COVID-19 has Highlighted the Predominance of the Nation State and its Limitations

Though COVID-19 is a global problem, the primary actors in the policy response have been nation-states. As David Owen (this issue) notes, the answer to the question of "who is responsible to whom with regard to the pandemic?" was unequivocally that the nation-state is responsible for its citizens. National borders were almost universally closed and absentee citizens were brought back "home." Even within the EU's supposedly borderless Schengen zone, national borders were reasserted, violating quasi-constitutional protections to free movement of goods, services, and persons on dubious legal grounds (see Guérot and Hunklinger, this issue). Though there have been small acts of solidarity between nations – such as donations of equipment and services – the norm has been for national responses that prioritize national populations, with little international collaboration. The virus itself has been cast in nationalist terms, with the attempts of Donald Trump and others to label it the "Chinese Virus." The pandemic has thus proved to be "the hour of the nation-state" (or "the revival of territory" as Casaglia et al. 2020 assert), just as much as it has been "the hour of the executive."

The very predominance of the nation-state has, however, demonstrated its limitations in dealing with a global problem in a globalized world. There is the question of what happens to those who live in the spaces between and across states – the refugees stuck at the closed borders, the families separated by them and the migrant workers (see: Abbas, Owen, this issue)? These people have largely been an afterthought. In addition, a pandemic that pays no heed to national borders is unlikely to be permanently eradicated within a nation by its own efforts alone as striving for this would almost certainly require a fortress mentality premised on brutal policies of exclusion that would do irreparable harm to those both inside and outside the nation-state as fortress. COVID-19 accordingly draws attention to the interdependencies between democracies in securing public health. Successfully controlling or eradicating the virus is, by this logic, best achieved through global collaboration. However, attempts at transnational collaborations have, so far, resulted in limited successes.

The global coordinating role of the WHO has rubbed up against tensions of national power politics, so much so that the US has withdrawn its support and funding based on accusations that the WHO was not critical enough of China. Attempts within the EU to develop a joint economic recovery package have until now been stymied by some Northern European countries' reticence to assist their more affected neighbors (see Guérot

and Hunklinger, this issue). The early successes of Asian countries in controlling the virus were refracted through an Orientalist lens. They were ascribed to the governments' authoritarianism and the populations' conformity, rather than any expertise garnered from experience of managing previous outbreaks of similar respiratory conditions like SARS and MERS (Scauso et al., this issue). Even the modest goal of international learning has thus been rather limited. There remains much to do to develop the international solidarity necessary to more effectively and equitably deal with a global pandemic. Still, there were some promising signs. Marcos Scauso et al. (this issue) point to the ways that China and Japan overcame historical enmity to build official and civil society bridges of solidarity during the pandemic. Ulrike Guérot and Michael Hunklinger (this issue) highlight how the EU has responded to previous crises by "institutionalizing solidarity" through further communitization. And Milja Kurki (this issue) argues that the coronavirus presents an opportunity to reimagine a more capacious international order that engages with the importance of non-humans in planetary politics.

Conclusion

These five lessons distilled from 20 articles by 32 authors from around the world portray the complexity of democratic politics in a time of emergency. They point to the potentially corrosive effects of emergency politics on democratic institutions as well as the alternative possibilities for strengthening democratic politics. They show how COVID-19 has both amplified existing inequalities and injustices and highlighted the intersecting bases necessary for prolonged solidarity. Finally, as our contributors demonstrate, pandemic politics has thrown into sharp contrast the predominance as well as the limitations of the nation-state.

These articles open up the question of how democracy should function in an emergency, both at the precipice and experience of global catastrophe and myriad but related local calamities. The unanimity with which, as COVID-19 hit, democratic regimes slipped into executive politics, suggests that there is some rough consensus or common sense in favor of this mode of emergency democracy—as long as there is promise or guarantee of a "return to normality," the temporary suspension of many democratic activities is acceptable when we are faced with disastrous, deadly, threat. Yet, when we probe deeper, we find that this apparent consensus unravels. Even democracies that have been more successful at suppressing the virus, such as Germany, have been criticized for their lack of transparency and clarity in decision-making. In addition,

there are a number of democracies that have clearly demonstrated that democracy in executive mode can be both ponderous and inept. And in a few cases it has provided an opportunity for democratic erosion. Even if the expansion of executive power is an appropriate response to an emergency, it still raises a number of vital questions: what are the limits of that power, and how much influence should parliaments, public spheres, and citizens continue to exert? Moreover, we may consider whether expansion of executive power is an appropriate response at all. If epistemic democrats are correct in their assertions that democracies produce better policies, then it is strange, illogical even, that we abandon these strengths in favor of a more authoritarian mode of policy-making as soon as our greatest challenges arrive. The task for democratic theorists, then, is to develop alternative propositions for democracy under the conditions of emergency, so as to avoid the injustices and policy failures that have in many places characterized this pandemic when the next crisis comes.

What the varied articles in this special issue collectively demonstrate is the breadth of this task. Understanding democracy in a pandemic is not just about articulating the relationships between national-level executives, their interactions with parliament and the laws they pass. It concerns all of the ways that we come together to make decisions and take collective actions. There is a chain of interactions that runs from the everyday democracy of the neighborhood to the international relations between states. It is a dynamic interplay between many modes of democratic practice across all of politics' spatial dimensions. Political institutions are only one part of this picture. We need, for example, to also understand the specific ways that arbitrary power prevents people from taking control of their lives and keeping themselves and others safe. Economic and social relations have, too, proved to be just as important in providing stability and solidarity or inducing precarity and division. It is, therefore, no coincidence that during a pandemic in which employers have taken liberties with the health and lives of their employees, there has been a renewed focus on the importance of workplace democracy (see, for example, Fraser et al. 2020). Similarly, it is no coincidence that there has been a raft of new social policies that have attempted to reverse, although in most cases only temporarily, the slide toward the increased precarity of the last decade.

COVID-19 has shown the inextricable connection of the political, the economic and the social. Democratic theorists can use this. It is an object-lesson in the need to struggle for the full democratization of our political, social, and economic relations, from street-level to global-level. Articulating how democracy should function in the febrile atmosphere of a pandemic is an opportunity to strengthen it in both theory and practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank each of the participants in this special issue. We are living in profoundly difficult times, shot through with chronic lines of severe uncertainty. Therefore for 32 scholars, around the world, and we five authors in this introductory article, to come together in an international chorus of voices is truly a remarkable outcome. We also wish to acknowledge those who were unable to contribute at this time due to these very strains and upheavals; it is a privilege, now, and a hard-fought ground, to have the space and time required for such work.

We also wish to thank *Democratic Theory*'s publisher, Berghahn, for their positive response to our initial pitch of a special issue on the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on democracy. Normally editors do not seek clearance on matters like these but we (a) wanted to publish this issue six months in advance of its usual time and (b) ensure it is free to access until at least the end of 2020. Not only did Berghahn say yes, they said it with great support and encouragement. Thank you!

The idea for this special issue came to mind, initially, due to the number of passionate outcries from our colleagues – many of them senior, leading, and long-established professors in our field of democratic theory. We wanted to offer a channel so that some of this rage, lament, critical force, and strategic seizure of progressive moments could land in a peer-reviewed, academic, specialist forum. This, we hope, will generate pause for thought, inspiration, questioning, and debate among readers – contributing to an ongoing dialogue that is far from complete. If you would like to comment on an article or on the issue as a whole, please write to the editors, Emily Beausoleil and Jean-Paul Gagnon, and we will make space for your voice in a future issue.

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