

Pandemic as Campaign Stage: On Trump's Handling of Covid-19 in the United States

From the very beginning, US President Donald Trump was nonchalant about the coronavirus' impact on Americans. A week before the first major spike in that country, [he told reporters](#), 'It goes away. It's going away. We want it to go away with very, very few deaths.'

He [made similar pronouncements](#) as deaths peaked in mid-April at over 2700 per day, suggesting, 'It's also possible it doesn't come back at all.' But come back it did. By December, deaths per day were at an all-time high, as were new cases, and the US's 19.4 million cases accounted for [nearly a quarter of the global total](#) – twice the number of cases as in the second most affected country, India, which of course has 4 times the population of the US.

Even before the virus hit, the Trump administration took a classically American laissez-faire approach, [disbanding the White House pandemic response team](#) in May 2018 and as if prophets in reverse, [eliminating the Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) epidemiologist embedded in China's disease control agency. After [running a simulation](#) of a pandemic scenario in 2019, the administration [rejected its findings](#) – namely, that the US lacked adequate ICU beds, ventilators, and personal protective equipment, and more broadly, that the country's public health infrastructure was underfunded. Instead, Trump took the opposite tack, which culminated in his [summer pronouncement](#) that the US would withdraw (and withhold funding) from the World Health Organization.

The administration's strategy was, in retrospect, the world's most deadly instance of the so-called herd immunity approach, only partially mitigated by states and municipalities implementing various public health measures, including mandatory mask orders, restaurant and bar shutdowns, and moving schools and universities to online-only or hybrid instruction. In other words, most public health measures, implemented at the state level, served to moderate the effects of Trump's hands-off approach.

A word is in order on the term 'herd immunity', which tends to be used in two distinct but related ways. In its first iteration, it describes the general condition under which [50-80%](#) of the population achieves immunity, a threshold beyond which the virus can no longer effectively spread. Whether realized through vaccination, or else antibodies developed after recovery from infection, at some point all countries will achieve herd immunity.

But this is not how it tends to be deployed in the current conversation. A second meaning of herd immunity is a straightforwardly laissez-faire approach, typically favored by libertarians

wary of any government intervention whatsoever. The idea is to quarantine the vulnerable – the elderly, the immunocompromised – while actually encouraging the spread of the virus in able-bodied people. By accelerating the pace of its transmission, the threshold required for herd immunity will be reached sooner, allowing vulnerable populations to safely return to social life.

The problem is that advocates of the latter approach have willfully conflated it with the former, which is not an approach as such at all, but an epidemiological state. So, for example, Harvard's Martin Kulldorff, a primary author of the [Koch brothers-funded](#) Great Barrington Declaration, feigned astonishment that anyone would oppose the herd immunity strategy – which, he [told an interviewer](#), 'is a scientifically proven phenomenon just like gravity'. But of course, it is not a fact, but a strategy. Its proponents suggest that lockdowns produce sufficient collateral damage so as to negate any public health benefits – deferred cancer and cardiovascular screenings, mental health issues, escalating rates of domestic violence, and so forth.

Trump, however, has managed to sidestep this debate altogether. While he has in practice pursued a herd immunity approach, he has done so for different reasons than those espoused by libertarians. As the virus peaked for the first time in late March, [he tweeted](#), 'WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF.' The US had just seen its largest one-week spike in unemployment since the Great Depression, and panicked shoppers stripped store shelves of toilet paper, flour and chicken, producing [shortages of all three](#).

Trump repeatedly associated people's sudden hardships – an unemployment rate approaching 15%, an eviction spike, working parents suddenly having to deal with their young children being home from school – with states' various attempts to control the virus. He pushed for 'reopening' the economy, claiming to speak in the interest of struggling families, while framing state-level Democratic administrations – those controlled by the opposition party – as devastating working-class people with their lockdowns.

'We've never closed down the country for the flu,' [Trump declared](#) to reporters in late March. 'So you say to yourself, what is this all about?' As the death toll approached 50,000 in late April, [he proclaimed](#), 'You see states are starting to open up now, and it's very exciting to see.' As it exceeded 150,000, [he demanded](#), 'OPEN THE SCHOOLS!!!'

In May, he enthusiastically [tweeted his support](#) for anti-lockdown protests across the South and Midwest, which soon picked up steam in the majority of states – though most of them remained rather tiny. At the largest of the protests, in Michigan in mid-April, 3000 protesters [engaged in civil disobedience](#), blocking the roads around the capitol building. But more typical were the few hundred protesters that [stormed the Michigan Capitol](#) wielding [semiautomatic assault rifles](#). In states where open carry is legal, military-grade firearms became a fixture – one protester brought an [AT-4 Anti-Tank Rocket Launcher](#) to a rally in North Carolina, carrying it into a Subway for lunch in a [widely shared photo](#). Meanwhile, dozens of AR-15s were [on display in Virginia's capital](#), as protesters held a dual-purpose gun rights/reopen [rally](#) in July.

Of course, the anti-lockdown discourse assumed a particularly American guise, with all public health measures framed as infringing upon people's basic civil rights – above all, the freedoms of assembly and expression. The Trump administration enthusiastically encouraged this depiction, celebrating the protesters as civil rights crusaders and reducing mask-wearing to a merely symbolic act. Even after he returned to the White House sick with the coronavirus, he [greeted the public maskless](#) from a balcony. [Over 130 secret service agents](#) were subsequently infected, as were the White House security director, Trump's chief of staff, his press secretary, members of his legal team, immediate family members [and dozens of others](#). Weeks later, Trump insisted on [holding a series of White House holiday parties](#) indoors, even as the death toll approached 300,000. [No masks were required](#).

For Trump, wearing a mask remains a sign of weakness. Just over a month before the November election, [he mocked his opponent](#) Joe Biden for always wearing masks in public appearances: 'I don't wear a mask like him. Every time you see him, he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet away from him and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen.' He repeatedly tied mask-wearing to [Biden's deficient masculinity](#), a point which was quickly taken up by his most prominent followers. Conservative pundit Tomi Lahren, for example, [joked that Biden](#) 'might as well carry a purse with that mask.' And so defiantly appearing maskless in public became a way to signal support for the President.

'I think wearing a face mask as I greet presidents, prime ministers, dictators, kings, queens, I don't know, somehow I don't see it for myself,' [Trump told reporters](#) at the White House, 'I just don't. Maybe I'll change my mind.'

Or [as he put it at a White House press briefing](#), 'The CDC is advising the use of nonmedical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So it's voluntary. You don't have to do it. They suggested for a period of time, but this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it.' It was as if he were actively discouraging his followers from abiding by CDC guidelines.

But why? What benefit could Trump possibly reap from flagrantly contravening every bit of public health guidance from his own government agencies? In early November, Trump supporters voted in [far larger numbers](#) than polls suggested they would, producing countless post-election reflections calling the results [mind-boggling](#), [perplexing](#), and so forth.

In fact, Trump's support [actually increased](#) in more than two-thirds of the 100 counties with the highest per capita death rates. And two weeks before the election, [less than a quarter](#) of Trump supporters viewed the coronavirus outbreak as a 'very important' issue. How is it that his disastrous handling of the pandemic barely dented his support, leading ([once again!](#)) to an election outcome far closer than pollsters had predicted?

I want to suggest two reasons for Trump's apparent immunity. First, this framing is consonant with the rest of his campaign rhetoric, both in 2020 and 2016. The swamp in his slogan [Drain The Swamp](#) is less about actually stamping out corruption than launching a [war against](#)

[expertise](#). Any specialized experts, whether economists, politicians, intelligence operatives, government scientists, or in this case epidemiologists, are marked as representing elite interests.

In the past, Trump has lashed out against technocratic justifications for [free trade agreements](#) (endorsed by economists and both parties) and [imperialist wars in the Western Asia](#) (endorsed by both parties and the corporate press), among other things. But he reserves particularly virulent disdain for scientists, who he frames as protecting elite interests against the needs of ‘the people’. [Weber’s remark](#) about ‘educational certificates...result[ing] in a privileged “caste”’ rings accurate for Trump, who represents qualification as inherently elitist. Hence [his intimation](#) that ‘our doctors get more money if someone dies from Covid. You know that, right?’

For Trump, knowledge is rooted in experience rather than education. Questioned about his climate-change denialism, [he responded](#), ‘I have a natural instinct for science.’ Likewise, on his administration’s coronavirus response, [he told top CDC scientists](#), ‘I like this stuff. I really get it. People are surprised that I understand it. Every one of these doctors said, “How do you know so much about this?” Maybe I have a natural ability.’ Correct knowledge comes from common sense, Trump regularly insists, not from smug scientists in universities and government positions who remain aloof from the rest of the country.

This explains his contempt for climate scientists who urge us to take global heating seriously. ‘I don’t think science knows, actually,’ [Trump said](#) with a smirk, as California’s Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot pleaded with him to address his state’s proliferating wildfires. In Trump’s formulation, the problem is not climate change as such, but policy responses to climate change, which, he insists, invoke [a hoax](#) as pretext for elite policy changes, which [kill jobs in mining and industry](#). We might think of this as a partisan reformulation of Naomi Klein’s [shock doctrine](#): Democrats consistently exploit crises to force through liberal policies.

The same is true for the coronavirus, which Trump quickly dismissed as the Democrats’ [new hoax](#). Five months later, Trump’s Press Secretary Kaleigh McEnany was still downplaying the virus – even as the death toll exceeded 130,000 – accusing the Democrats of capitalizing upon working people’s misfortune: ‘when we use science, we have to use it in a way that is not political,’ [she admonished](#). Democratic state and city governments, the argument goes, only implement various public health measures in order to exaggerate the toll of the virus. It is a straightforward plan to embarrass the Trump administration and score political points in the runup to the November election.

Those who suffer most, Trump insists, are workers, ejected from employment by the millions – [largely in restaurants and retail](#). This explains his disdain for his administration’s own public health officials. ‘People are tired of Covid. People are saying, “Whatever, just leave us alone.” People are tired of hearing [Dr. Anthony] Fauci [director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984] and all these idiots,’ [Trump told](#) his campaign staff and the press. [As in the case of climate change](#), Trump places the blame not on the problem itself,

which he consistently downplays, but on the response to the problem, which he describes as antagonistic to 'the people', with whom Trump identifies himself.

This identification with the people leads us to the second reason Trump was relatively unscathed by his bungling of the coronavirus response: he successfully articulated a choice between health and employment, the latter of which posed an immediate threat to the livelihood of his base. Health initially posed less of a danger, as the geography of the virus' first wave tended toward large urban areas, which remain overwhelmingly Democratic. [Rural and exurban areas](#), by contrast, were only affected later on, giving Trump's narrative months to sink its roots into the popular psyche.

And rather than workers, this appeal was largely to small business owners, among whom Trump's [approval rating is the highest](#) of any class fraction. In fact, Trump's most [consistent support base](#) came from households making between USD100,000 and USD200,000, often used as a proxy for the [petite bourgeoisie](#). Of course, the highly educated segments of this class – what [Poulantzas called](#) the new petite bourgeoisie – were quite hostile to Trump; but the less educated fractions, such as small business owners and the self-employed, tended to buy Trump's narrative about the [cure being worse than the problem itself](#).

It is no wonder then that the force behind the reopen protests came from organized small business owners, who quickly incorporated public health restrictions into a standard narrative of job-killing [government overreach](#). Teaming up with [conspiracy theorists](#) and [armed militia members](#), they created something of a feedback loop. Drawing upon Trump's framing, small business owners organized reopen protests across the country. These were given a signal boost by Trump, who [called for the liberation](#) of Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia, explicitly tying the fight for reopening to the struggle against gun control – both of which, he insisted, were examples of Democratic local governments attempting to undermine the constitutionally guaranteed rights of Republican voters.

While in the end, Trump failed to win reelection, most polls (again!) missed the extent of his support: turnout was up on both sides, and in a number of key locations [including Texas](#), he actually outperformed Biden. But where Trump was successful was in entrenching a narrative of Republicans in general and himself in particular as bodyguard of the people, against a repressive lockdown regime favored by Democrats. Of course, the US has had nothing approximating a real lockdown, as [states lack the legal ability](#) to enforce a large-scale quarantine in any meaningful way. A few states have begun to implement [curfews](#), and others have temporarily banned [indoor dining](#), [closed bars](#), and [limited the size of gatherings](#), but this has not been enforced in anything approximating the way, say, the current lockdown is being enforced in the [UK](#), let alone the repression unleashed in [South Africa](#), [India](#), [Nigeria](#), [China](#), and elsewhere.

This spectre of an authoritarian lockdown – backed by an alliance of scientists, journalists and Democrats – is central to the image Trump wants to project of himself as [protectionist](#), which is

in turn crucial to maintaining his support base among the small business owners and the self-employed.

The fact that brutal state repression is far [more likely](#) to be visited upon black, latinx, and indigenous residents is conveniently spirited away from this narrative, although worldwide, it has unsurprisingly been the most vulnerable populations who have suffered most, both in terms of exposure to the virus and the economic effects of government responses. As the director of the American Civil Liberties Union [put it](#), 'We thought maybe police would slow down their killing of people during the pandemic. We were wrong.'

What then to make of the government's response? While the US is not alone in pursuing a so-called herd immunity approach – the UK and Sweden immediately come to mind – nowhere has a head of state been as openly hostile to their own scientific and public health advisors as Trump. As with all crises, manufactured or otherwise, he views the pandemic through the lens of campaign strategy. Covid-19 represents a final phase. The key for him has not been to actually mitigate the virus' disastrous effects, but to focus on framing, pinning blame on his Democratic rivals and alleging an elaborate conspiracy against him.

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