



COVID-19 And the Politics of Expertise

Q&A with Jeremy Shiffman, Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of Global Health Policy,
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Has regime type been a major influence on the effectiveness of national responses to the pandemic? Have countries with authoritarian political systems been able to mount stronger responses than those with democratic systems?

Regime type does not provide a strong explanation for divergence in the effectiveness of national responses. Some democratic countries have performed well: New Zealand, Taiwan and Korea, for instance. Others have performed poorly, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Some countries with more autocratic systems have performed well, at least initially: Singapore for instance. Preliminary evidence suggests Vietnam also has so far effectively contained the virus. By contrast, China's initial response was weak: its national leadership covered up the outbreak in Wuhan, thereby missing a potential opportunity to prevent the virus' global spread.

Prior preparation for pandemics, health systems capacity and respect by national leaders and citizens for epidemiological and medical expertise seem to be more influential factors than regime type in shaping the effectiveness of national responses. Another likely factor is

historical precedent. Taiwan faced SARS in 2003. Korea faced MERS in 2015. These experiences prompted their governments to prepare for potential new outbreaks. Other countries that have not faced severe infectious disease outbreaks recently were not geared up to take threats as seriously.

How have claims to expertise shaped national responses to the pandemic?

The pandemic has given rise to interesting dynamics pertaining to the politics of expertise—the question of who knows, and who claims to know, what public policy responses are needed. People are coming out of the woodwork to speak up on what to do. I am not convinced this has been a good development, because it crowds out the space for the Anthony Fauci's of the world—the ones with the requisite expertise—to be heard. One of the most egregious examples of crowding out is Brazil, where President Bolsonaro has consistently downplayed the seriousness of the epidemic. He fired his popular health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who had called for sensible policies, including social distancing. Fortunately, many Brazilian state governors have defied Bolsonaro and are enacting policies that accord with guidance by epidemiologists. Another egregious example of



false claims to expertise, of course, is President Trump, who made the dangerous assertion that people might try drinking disinfectants to kill the virus, prompting several individuals to attempt to do so.

What are the implications of COVID-19 for future pandemic preparedness?

The world is stuck in a dangerous cycle of crisis and complacency with respect to pandemics. Many governments jump into action when pandemics arise, then neglect to prepare for the next pandemic. COVID-19 is not likely to be the last crisis of its kind: we need to be ready when the next pandemic hits. Doing so will require establishing better mechanisms for cross-national surveillance and collaboration, including shoring up the capacity of the World Health Organization, which is chronically underfunded.

Do you see any neglected lessons with respect to COVID-19?

The devastating public health and economic effects of the pandemic have led many people to lose sight of the fact that COVID-19 is hardly the only global health problem we face. Weak national health systems, mental illnesses, injuries, newborn mortality and antimicrobial resistance are among the many neglected health problems that cause enormous suffering and fail to get the attention they deserve. Moreover, COVID-19 has hampered our capacity to address these and other global health issues. For instance, in many countries routine immunization for vaccine-preventable diseases among children, such as measles and polio, has been disrupted. Even as we address COVID-19, we cannot neglect these other pressing global health problems. ●

