



Protecting democracy during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose a deep threat to public health and the economy worldwide. It also threatens, however, fundamental aspects of our broader political, social and cultural practices, including democratic practices and well-established civil liberties.

As opposed to other forms of government, democratic life depends heavily on the ability to assemble, to vote, and to deliberate in public, all of which are made harder in the pandemic. It also depends on more informal, everyday cultural practices, including the exchanges of opinions between strangers in public settings, like schools, universities and libraries, and the shared community experiences that build social solidarity, stretching from public ceremonies to mass sporting activities.

All of these practices are threatened by the pandemic. The need for decisive, even sweeping top-down action from the world's leaders, has undermined the usual practices of deliberation and accountability. Similarly, the need to maintain radical measures such as social distancing has undermined the possibilities of people coming together, whether in Parliamentary session or on the streets. The necessity of our response to the pandemic, therefore, endangers what we hold dear in a democratic society—namely, a healthy, but free and equal society guided by care and concern for all its members.

We live, then, in unsettled and unsettling times. All societies, but especially democratic ones are being tested during this moment. For democratic societies, the question that confronts them is how to retain the values of freedom and equality under emergency conditions. That leads to these key questions:

How can we build and strengthen our democratic practice during a pandemic?

What are the indicators that our democracy is healthy and the warning signs that it is weakened?

And while swift and far-reaching top-down action is required to address the public health crisis, how and when can citizens generate potent networks across society to hold leaders to account?

The Sydney Policy Lab recently put these questions to a group of internationally respected experts in democracy, asking what they thought that citizens themselves need to be able to do to uphold democracy and what government and other institutions have to do in order to let citizens play their part. In this brief policy paper, we distil their thoughts and present the five key indicators of democratic health during COVID-19.

As with the Lab's previous contributions, we put these experts' views forward not in the sense of offering a single prescription but rather in the hope that they can both guide the reflection of those confronted with the need to make immediate decisions and stimulate widespread discussion about the best way in which to take Australia forward in the longer term.

Five indicators of democratic health during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. **Attending to inequality:** In one sense, the pandemic is a moment of solidarity. As the television commercials have it, we are “all in it together”, in the sense of being at physical risk of infection and needing to abide by many stringent restrictions on personal behaviour. Nonetheless, some people are experiencing much more severe hardship than others. For some, the current lockdown laws impose relatively little sacrifice, but many are struggling economically and psychologically with the limitations. Workers on short-term casual contracts and temporary migrants; those

with disabilities or chronic illnesses; those in prisons and youth detention; households that ordinarily make ends meet on tight budgets and those who find their attentional resources exhausted by simultaneously home-schooling children and working; those in essential roles who have not had access to adequate personal protective equipment; and those for whom home is a frightening and dangerous place. A core feature that separates a democratic response to the pandemic from a non-democratic one is a willingness openly to acknowledge these inequalities and to strive for ways to compensate for them. We thus measure the health of democratic societies not only by their ability to intervene in our lives while respecting our freedom and equality, but also by their willingness to thoughtfully address the unequal consequences of our shared lives.

2. **Generating social trust:** Trust is both the invisible institution that holds democracies together and an essential precondition for public health. The public health rules and restrictions currently in place in democratic nations around the world only work if people are willing to trust governing authorities and act on their advice. Policing by itself cannot defeat a pandemic. Furthermore, if restrictions need to be partially reinstated multiple times in response to new waves of the virus, public preparedness to comply with directives will partly hinge on their judgments about how decisions were made the first time. For these reasons, experts and decision-makers must attend closely to any potential corrosion of trust. Trust should never be assumed, but it is generated through action. To increase public trust in this unprecedented situation requires transparency and humility on the part of experts and decision-makers, evidenced in honesty about assumptions and uncertainty, openness to disagreements, criticism and debate, and willingness to take up the insights of citizens. This in part means providing open access to complex debates between different scientists offering advice to the government. It also means ensuring transparent governance of apps, availability of open source code, and strong privacy protections.
3. **Supporting social relationships:** One of the most promising elements of the pandemic globally has been the immense growth of socially networked mutual aid groups, many of which are using digital tools to enable people to meet and care for each other in neighbourhood interactions powerfully. Some even suggest that a “kindness pandemic” has taken hold, as neighbours who had never met find cause to make introductions, and able-bodied and healthy community members deliver food to the elderly and those reliant on services. In some places, our relationships with key “essential workers”, such as health workers, cleaners and teachers, are also being reshaped, as we can now see the undeniable social value of their work, which may have been easier to overlook before the pandemic. All of these gains are, however, fragile, often depending on under-resourced volunteers or on a charity sector that is severely strained by the economic consequences of the pandemic. It is vital, therefore, that governing authorities, philanthropists, businesses and the better-resourced parts of civil society provide the necessary support to enable these efforts of mutual aid to continue and to thrive so they can help to shape a healthier democratic culture following the pandemic.

4. **Enabling and respecting opposition:** Healthy democracies are not afraid of contentious debate. Although consensus between citizens and between citizens and institutions is important, it must continue to be paired with the more adversarial features of democratic life. Vigilance, argument and occasionally sharp debate ensure accountability and safeguard against the domination of any single group. As this pandemic opens the door to wide-ranging top-down surveillance and power, finding ways of ensuring that political argument continues unabated is essential. Citizens should also resist the tendency to defer to a singular view from experts and authorities, and the media institutions—and algorithms—that serve us this news should be supported to be open and diverse. Internal disagreements among scientists, for example, have not functioned so far as an invitation to the wider public to engage in respectful and broad-based deliberation about the choices and trade-offs we must make that cannot be reduced to scientific judgment.
5. **Healthier democracy for the future:** As different countries begin the slow transition out of lockdown and towards an uncertain future, the pandemic prompts us to ask what it is that underpins a democratic society in the longer term. Too often democracy is simply seen as a surrogate phrase for government. Now more than ever, the participatory, associational and popular nature of democracy must be nurtured and supported. There are some early indications of what underpins democracy as the devastating costs and surprising offshoots of the pandemic unfold. Two issues seem of particular concern. First, the shutdown of community gathering places is a reminder of the important democratic function of shared public space. The question now is of how those places—town squares, parks, libraries, museums, university campuses—can be reimagined in a way that allows for citizen community building and democratic politics at the same time as enabling potentially long-term social distancing. Second, the profoundly inequalitarian impact of societal lockdowns is a reminder that groups and associations that have often found it difficult to have their voice heard may find it even more so when online provision of services or education replaces person-to-person delivery. The question of what can be done to ensure that these groups and civic organisations do not disappear entirely from view but remain able to assert themselves in public policymaking thus becomes particularly important. The pandemic has and will continue to make clear what we need for democracy to be durable, and decision-makers and citizens alike should be open to these lessons.

Applying these ideas

None of the themes above are designed to generate specific, individual policy responses. They are intended instead to act as a set of criteria by which proposals for such responses can be judged and debate initiated.

This document has been prepared with the help of University of Sydney experts brought together by the Sydney Policy Lab, including Dr Frances Flanagan, Dr Amanda Tattersall and Professor Marc Stears, supported by Professor Melvin Rogers at Brown University. These experts are available to assist policymakers, community leaders and others with these discussions and eager to play a part. Please contact us at policy.lab@sydney.edu.au for more information.

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