

# Do Elections Facilitate the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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## Abstract

Many countries around the world held elections during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the topic of how the virus affected elections has been widely researched, the reversed question of how elections impact the way leaders respond to the pandemic has not drawn enough attention. This article aims to analyze whether elections facilitate or impede the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. By looking at both advantages and disadvantages, the paper finds that although elections can be efficient tools to keep politicians in check and can give incumbents who seek re-election higher incentives to provide an efficient response, elections can also foster increased polarization, political opportunism, and disinformation, weakening citizens' trust in authorities and endangering the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *Covid-19, Elections, Impact, Pandemic*

## Introduction

Recently, the topic of how the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting elections, in terms of whether they could be held, the way they are conducted, but also relative to voters' intentions and elections results, has been predominantly analyzed by scholars. However, the reversed question of how elections and the subsequent electoral campaign impact the ongoing battle against the Covid-19 pandemic has not been so closely investigated. Free and fair elections have an enormous importance in the democratic system, and it is worth examining their effect on how the virus is tackled and to what extent their organization poses a challenge to the efficiency of the governmental intervention. Thus, this paper explores whether the electoral process in countries where 2020 has been an electoral year facilitates or impedes the fight against the pandemic, looking at the benefits and disadvantages that this democratic process can have upon the efficiency of countries' response towards Covid-19.

Even though this paper will also discuss ways in which elections could hinder the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, it does not suggest that elections or electoral campaigns should be cancelled. Although elections can be postponed due to health concerns, with many countries resorting to such measures, they can only be so for a while, as to ensure citizens' safety. Holding regular elections is essential for democratic accountability and for electoral democracies more broadly. Moreover, discussing whether the combination of a pandemic year with an electoral year means that countries have an advantage or a disadvantage on how the pandemic is tackled is not only a matter of assessing the good or bad luck countries had to match the pandemic year of 2020 with their electoral cycle. Most importantly, the paper wishes to foster a discussion about ways in which potential disadvantages brought about by holding elections during a pandemic could be minimized and advantages could be maximized.

This paper will unfold as follows: First, it will discuss the reasons why elections could facilitate the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, it will seek to analyze the negative impact that the electoral process could have upon the response towards Covid-19. The last section will conclude with the main takeaways of the discussion.

## Why elections could facilitate the fight against Covid-19

The first and most important advantage of holding elections in the midst of a pandemic is naturally related to **officials' accountability**. Through elections, citizens can give their opinion on how the incumbents have tackled the virus so far and can choose to "punish" or "reward" them through voting, by keeping them in power or ousting them. This

refers to the retrospective voting mechanism<sup>1</sup>, according to which elections are primarily a referendum on the incumbents: before judging the alternative, the voters must make a judgement on whether they are, overall, better off compared to the previous election. In countries without an electoral year, it can be harder for citizens to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in large numbers and decide the trajectory of the response against Covid-19. For example, the general election that took place in New Zealand in October 2020 translated into a landslide victory for the incumbent party, with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern being re-elected and her national and international image boosted<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, many praised the Prime Minister's leadership style and the way the New Zealand government handled the pandemic, with the Labor party reaching 55 percent approval, while the opposition National Party had dropped to 29 percent, being their lowest rating in more than a decade<sup>3</sup>. At the beginning of the year, polls predicted the election as being a tight one, with the opposition National Party holding a small lead, but their approval rating has steadily grown during the crisis<sup>4</sup>.

Some may argue that this is due to the rally-round-the-flag effect<sup>5</sup>, when during a crisis, incumbents see a rise in their popularity. In fact, studies showed that different leaders, be they liberals or populists, have seen their support increasing<sup>6</sup>. However, Brett Meyer has analyzed populist leaders' responses to Covid-19 and found interesting conclusions regarding voters' support<sup>7</sup>. According to him, populists who have downplayed the crisis, like Donald Trump, have faced public disapproval for their actions, but populists taking a serious response, regardless of their liberal or illiberal approach, like Viktor Orban and Giuseppe Conte, have seen their poll numbers increase. The presidential elections in the United States are an illustrative example for this point. With the highest voter turnout in over a century, Americans decided not to re-elect President Trump, with previous polls showing that only about a third of Americans approved of Trump's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>8</sup>. Also, a study by Baccini et al. finds that Trump would have likely won re-election if Covid-19 cases had been 5 percent lower<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, "Retrospective Voting Reconsidered", *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (1)/2013: 285-306; Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Stoakes and Miriam Berger, „Jacinda Ardern rolls to reelection in New Zealand amid global praise for pandemic battle”, *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/jacinda-ardern-new-zealand-election/2020/10/17/89a8d21a-0931-11eb-8719-0df159d14794\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/jacinda-ardern-new-zealand-election/2020/10/17/89a8d21a-0931-11eb-8719-0df159d14794_story.html) (accessed November 10, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Charles Anderson, „Jacinda Ardern and her government soar in popularity during coronavirus crisis”, *The Guardian*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/01/jacinda-ardern-and-her-government-soar-in-popularity-during-coronavirus-crisis> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Brockett, „New Zealand's Ardern Faces Tight Election Battle, Poll Shows”, *Bloomberg*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-13/new-zealand-s-ardern-faces-tight-election-battle-poll-shows> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> John E. Mueller, "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson", *The American Political Science Review* 64 (1), 1970: 18-34

<sup>6</sup> For example: Damien Bol, Marco Giani, André Blais, and Peter J. Loewen, "The Effect of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Political Support: Some Good News for Democracy?", *European Journal of Political Research*, May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12401>

<sup>7</sup> Brett Meyer, "Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to Covid-19", *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, August 17, 2020, <https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Julie Pace and Hannah Fingerhut, "AP-NORC poll: US course at record low, Trump sinks on virus", *AP News*, July 26, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-elections-joe-biden-politics-campaigns-43a096bc2bcf376de04b696c5143ee99> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Leonardo Baccini, Abel Brodeur and Stephen Weymouth, Stephen, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election", *GLO Discussion Paper*, No. 710, Leibniz Information Centre for Economics, November 9, 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/225990> (accessed November 10, 2020).

Another advantage of holding elections during a crisis is that politicians have **higher incentives to provide a better response and promote better solutions** to the pandemic because they know that their policies concerning this major health and economic crisis will prove decisive when voters cast their ballots. Some may argue that exactly because of how significant these policies are, politicians may avoid unpopular measures which are needed to be able to control the spread of the virus and the economic consequences. This is consistent with the argument about voter myopia<sup>10</sup>: the voters based their decision on the short-term, incentivizing politicians to act strategically and focus their policies and interventions so that they produce significant effect in the election year; nonetheless, the nature of the pandemic, the relatively exogenous nature of the shock, means that carefully staged policy interventions were less likely. Thus, the present crisis does not allow for delayed actions, and if officials fail to take the necessary measures, the result can be seen in a matter of days or weeks in infection numbers and lost lives. In fact, especially during the first wave, citizens seemed to prefer more drastic measures which protected their health. For example, Amat et al. convincingly demonstrate how the Covid-19 outbreak in Spain made citizens more willing to sacrifice civil liberties to fight the pandemic, as well as more supportive of a strong leadership<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, in countries where there has been a provisional government, elections can put an end to interim mandates and thus, **provide more stability**, which is needed for a centralized, decisive strategy against the coronavirus.

Moreover, as the Covid-19 pandemic transformed our normal interactions into a health concern and social distancing has become a fundamental measure in the fight against the virus, **digitalization within electoral systems**, as in many other spheres, has been carried out (although this also led to accusations of voter fraud and the proliferation of conspiracy theories, as we saw in the recent US presidential elections). This way, many countries managed to introduce innovative ways to hold the elections whilst minimizing the impact on public health by using digital tools. This way, officials can be kept accountable and people can democratically express their views, whilst reducing the costs of voting which are now higher due to the health risks of going to the polling stations. In a way, the pandemic can be conceived as a catalyst for improving the management of electoral processes (e.g., vote by mail, early vote, electronic voting), by integrating technological advances made elsewhere.

There has been a great debate of whether and when elections can be postponed. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, from 21<sup>st</sup> of February until 8<sup>th</sup> of November, at least 73 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and subnational elections due to Covid-19, out of which at least 39 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums<sup>12</sup>. Even if elections are postponed, the pandemic will not be over soon, so **politicians will eventually be held accountable** for their actions. Moreover, as the returning to normal can take years and polarization over the best courses of action increases, countries will have to seriously think about organizing an election even in the context of a pandemic. However, political leaders might use this opportunity to try and manipulate the election date for when this might be more favorable to them, thus raising questions of legitimacy and democracy.

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Wlezien, “The Myopic Voter? The Economy and US Presidential Elections”, *Electoral Studies* 39 (September)/2015, pp. 195-204.

<sup>11</sup> Francesc Amat, Andreu Arenas, Albert Falcó-Gimeno and Jordi Muñoz, “Pandemics meet democracy. Experimental evidence from the COVID-19 crisis in Spain”, Working Paper, *SocArXiv*, April 6, 2020, doi:10.31235/osf.io/dkusw (accessed November 10, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, “Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections,” March 18, 2020 <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections> (accessed November 10, 2020).

## Why elections could impede the fight against Covid-19

The most obvious reason in terms of why elections can be detrimental to the fight against Covid-19 is that, if held in the traditional way, elections pose a big risk to voters' health who gather to the polls on election day (however, we currently lack a good assessment of this risk and some are even arguing in some countries, such as Romania, that this risk is quite minimal). In addition to that, the costs of running an election and an electoral campaign can be quite high, especially when countries could use more resources in combating the pandemic. However, there are other reasons for which elections during Covid-19 can hinder the efficiency of the response against the pandemic.

The book "Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization," contours very well how the severe political polarization has increasingly afflicted democracies throughout the world, producing the erosion of democratic norms and rising societal anger<sup>13</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a fertile ground for leaders in politically polarized countries to divide the population even further. A study by Carothers and O'Donohue<sup>14</sup>, the authors of the previously mentioned book, on ten case studies, finds that the 2020 global crisis created opportunity windows for political and societal actors to bridge existing divides, or to reinforce polarization. In most cases, however, "the pandemic has amplified the already dangerous effects of polarization, with serious ramifications for public health, democratic governance, and social cohesion"<sup>15</sup>. Even more, **elections represent a propitious time when leaders and their electoral campaigning efforts concentrate not towards national unity, but to further divide the society for their own partisan gains**. This increased polarization can have many damaging effects on democracy and societies, but in this context, it can specifically have harming effects on the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic – the cost of disunity can be measured in lost lives and jobs. Several studies<sup>16</sup> show that political polarization has a considerable impact on the willingness of people to comply with social distancing directives during the pandemic. For example, citizens comply less with measures against Covid-19 if their local leaders are from the opposite party, or they choose not to wear a face mask because their preferred political figure does so, regardless of experts' advice. Therefore, in some countries, elections can impede an efficient response against the Covid-19 pandemic due to their polarizing effects.

Due to the polarizing discourse and the blame-game taking place in the political arena, which predominates even more in the context of an electoral campaign, **citizens have started to lose their trust in authorities**. Repeated polls during the pandemic have shown a

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue (eds.), *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, Brookings Institution Press, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, "Polarization and the Pandemic", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 28, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/28/polarization-and-pandemic-pub-81638> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Idem.

<sup>16</sup> Kirsten Cornelson and Boriana Miloucheva, "Political polarization, social fragmentation, and cooperation during a pandemic," *Working Paper* 663, University of Toronto, Department of Economics, April 07, 2020, <https://www.economics.utoronto.ca/public/workingPapers/tecipa-663.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2020); Christos Makridis and Jonathan T. Rothwell, "The Real Cost of Political Polarization: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic," June 29, 2020, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3638373>; Kirsten Cornelson and Boriana Miloucheva, "Political polarization and cooperation during a Pandemic", May 30, 2020, [https://covid.economics.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-05-30-WP\\_Political-polarization-and-cooperation-during-a-pandemic.pdf](https://covid.economics.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-05-30-WP_Political-polarization-and-cooperation-during-a-pandemic.pdf); Maria Milosh, Marcus Painter, Konstantin Sonin, David Van Dijke and Austin L. Wright, "Unmasking Partisanship: How Polarization Influences Public Responses to Collective Risk," University of Chicago, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics, Working Paper No. 2020-102, September 21, 2020, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3664779> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3664779> (accessed November 10, 2020)

drop in the public approval and trust in governments. For example, a Kantar study<sup>17</sup> concludes that across the G7 countries, less than half of the people approved of their government's response to the pandemic in June, with higher percentages being recorded in previous months. The biggest drop was recorded in Britain. The literature on this topic generally suggests that trust between governors and the governed is essential to facilitating good governance, as it increases law compliance. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bavel et al.<sup>18</sup> indicate that greater trust in government leads to more compliance with health policies and social distancing measures. As a result, elections and electoral campaigning can create an environment which decreases people's trust in authorities, further hindering the fight against the coronavirus. Moreover, even though the electoral system would provide a mechanism to keep politicians in check and vote the rotten apples out, **it can also give way to anti-establishment figures**. For example, Nigel Farage and his allies have relaunched their political party, now called the Reform UK party, encouraging people to protest against lockdown measures, in an attempt to restore their political relevance and taking advantage of citizens' unhappiness with the current governance<sup>19</sup>.

Another negative aspect brought by elections vis-a-vis the response to the Covid-19 pandemic is that the medical crisis and medical aspects that every country confronts become political. In the beginning of the pandemic, the World Health Organization's Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged unity and not **"politicization" of the virus**, referring further to leaders who use the Covid-19 crisis to "score political points"<sup>20</sup>. Unfortunately, the coronavirus outbreak and the associated crises are very complex, and political leaders have to decide on a strategy. This strategy can depend more or less on experts' advice, but even if some leaders do consider specialized opinions, the complexity of the situation requires weighting the benefits and costs of health and economic measures, revealing the priorities and values of a country. Ultimately, the decisions are taken at a political level, and many leaders do not only weigh in what benefits or disadvantages different policies have on citizens' lives, but they also bring their own political interests in this already complicated equation. Moreover, with the recent rise of populists, the credibility of experts has suffered a blow in recent years. The incentive to use the pandemic to score political points increases particularly if elections are around the corner. Moreover, holding an election during these turbulent times often implies that handling the pandemic, with its health and economic consequences, becomes one of the most important dimensions that citizens base their vote upon. This increases political leaders' incentives to politicize the Covid-19 pandemic, and it can also lead to myopic policymaking, with other important issues being held up. Another aspect to consider is that, in order to avoid electoral punishment, leaders can postpone unpopular, but necessary measures, with the effect that the fight against the pandemic will be of secondary importance.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, there has been a clash between political leaders and medical experts on various strategies addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. Sometimes out in the open, groups of doctors, health advisers or experts from the medical

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<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Rivière and Dr Michelle Harrison, "Drop in the public approval and trust of G7 governments," *Kantar*, June 04, 2020, <https://www.kantar.com/inspiration/politics/public-approval-and-trust-in-government-falls-in-G7-and-plummets-in-UK> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Jay J. Van Bavel, Katherine Baicker, Paulo S. Boggio et al., "Using Social and Behavioural Science to Support COVID-19 Pandemic Response", *Nature Human Behaviour* 4: 460-471, April 30, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Sabbagh and Nazia Parveen, "Farage party's relaunch marked with low-key anti-lockdown protest", *The Guardian*, November 08, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/nov/08/nigel-farage-reform-party-relaunch-marked-low-key-anti-lockdown-protest> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> BBC News, "Coronavirus: WHO chief urges end to 'politicisation' of virus", April 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-52224183> (accessed November 10, 2020).

field disagreed with what politicians declared or decided, such as in the US<sup>21</sup>, the UK<sup>22</sup>, Ireland<sup>23</sup> and many other states. This has opened an opportunity window for health workers to enter into politics and put forward their candidacies, thinking they could produce a beneficial change. For example, in Brazil (Romania is another example), there has been a surge in doctors running for office during the Covid-19 crisis, in an effort to counter Bolsonaro's approach on coronavirus<sup>24</sup>. However, before the elections and during the electoral campaign, parties try to improve their image and gain more support. With people losing their trust in them and arguing that political leaders do not take into consideration scientific advice, some **parties resorted to enrolling medical experts**, as they might be particularly well-suited to win back hearts, minds, and votes. However, this political opportunism is not likely to foster an efficient response against the Covid-19 pandemic and medical experts might lose their credibility this way.

Last but not least, another aspect which should be taken into consideration is disinformation. Even before calling Covid-19 a pandemic, the World Health Organization has called an "infodemic", with fake news spreading faster than the virus and being as dangerous<sup>25</sup>. Combating disinformation on this topic has become a salient task in the fight against coronavirus. However, **elections are perfect disinformation opportunities**, and various entities, be them domestic or external, usually wish to distort information for electoral purposes. Holding elections in the midst of the pandemic makes the task of fighting with fake news even more daunting, especially if political leaders are themselves using disinformation as a tool to gain more support. The research for a potential vaccine has re-energized the anti-vaccination movement that has been gaining ground for years.

## Conclusion

A country's pandemic response is tied to its politics. Like all other crises, the Covid-19 situation presented elected officials with the opportunity to shine or to disappoint. Having elections during the pandemic gives people the chance to express their views on how the leadership is handling the fight against Covid-19, and so they could theoretically change the strategy if they consider necessary. Furthermore, with an election coming close, politicians have more incentives to provide an adequate response and give their best. Oftentimes, elections also bring political stability and can thus ensure a more efficient and coherent path when dealing with a crisis. Turbulent times almost always foster innovation, and with elections coming close, many countries have adopted digital tools within their voting systems to ensure that democracy is preserved, the government is legitimate, and citizens' health and wellbeing is taken care of.

However, the urgency that is injected in the way politicians who are seeking re-election act does not always provide the incentives to do what is best for citizens, but to act

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Pengelly, "A whole lot of hurt': Fauci angers Trump White House with dark Covid outlook", *The Guardian*, November 01, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/01/anthony-fauci-washington-post-covid-donald-trump> (accessed November 10, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Reuters Staff, "Doctors criticise UK government over coronavirus protection shortages", *Reuters*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-britain-idUSL8N2C605A> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Shawn Pogatchnik, "Doctors vs. politicians: Ireland's coronavirus tensions spill out into the open", *Politico*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/doctors-vs-politicians-irelands-coronavirus-tensions-spill-out-into-the-open/> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Ana Ionova, "Brazil doctors run for office as country battles COVID-19 crisis", November 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/11/13/brazil-doctors-run-for-office-as-country-battles-covid-19-crisis> (accessed November 10, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Twitter post, World Health Organization, February 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/who/status/1228683949796470784?lang=en> (accessed November 10).

opportunistically in order to gain political support. Therefore, incumbents might increase polarization, divide the society, and try to score political points on the back of the pandemic. They could also manipulate elections dates for whenever these might suit them more.

Election years remind people of their partisan commitments and the societal tension usually increases. With matters of health being politicized, as they have been during the Covid-19 crisis, citizens lose their trust in one another and in authorities, which impedes good governance and can also make way for anti-establishment figures. To earn their trust back, some parties resort to enrolling medical experts who can improve politicians' image and win votes back. However, this damages the efficiency of the crisis' response and the trust people have in medical experts. Moreover, as it usually happens, before elections and during the electoral campaign there is a surge in disinformation efforts to sway public opinion, but this time, distorting information does not only lead to changing electoral outcomes, but it also massively impacts public health.

Therefore, having elections during the Covid-19 pandemic has advantages as well as disadvantages. This short analysis hopefully sheds more light into how elections can impact the response towards the virus. As important as free and fair elections are in democratic countries, during the pandemic, they can impede rather than facilitate the fight against the virus. Thus, in states when the pandemic matched with their electoral year, it is extremely important that both citizens and policymakers are aware of these negative consequences and make efforts to minimize them. Organizing an election during these turbulent times should be based on weighing both the advantages and challenges, in order to make an informed decision.

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